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FROM THE TEACHINGS OF
THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE ז"ל



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- SHAVUOS -

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ADAPTED BY
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וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר (שמות כ, א)

G-d spoke all these words, to say. (Shemos 20:1)

The Correct Response

The Midrash¹ explains that the word לאמר—“to say,” in the verse that introduces the Ten Commandments, is not an instruction to repeat what is being said, as לאמר generally indicates. Rather, in this instance, לאמר means, “to respond,” i.e., Bnei Yisrael responded to G-d after each of the Ten Commandments. The subject of their response, however, is a matter of debate. According to Rabbi Akiva, they responded “Yes!” to both the positive commands and the prohibitions, indicating their willingness to comply with whatever G-d demanded. Rabbi Yishmael disagrees and says that replied “Yes!” to the positive mitzvos, indicating their willingness to fulfill those commandments, and “No!” to the prohibitions, indicating that they would refrain from what is forbidden.

This debate is, in essence, a commentary on the nature of the mitzvos and what our primary focus in their fulfillment must be. Should our emphasis in the observance of a mitzvah be on experiencing its unique message and effect on our lives and on the world? Or on the common theme shared by all the mitzvos—simply, that their observance fulfills the will of G-d?

Rabbi Yishmael believes that the ultimate purpose of a mitzvah’s observance is the refinement of the individual (and the world) that each mitzvah causes. He therefore asserts that as the Jewish people heard each commandment, they sensed its unique purpose and effect. In line with their experience, their responses alternated between “Yes!” expressing their excitement to implement the positive mitzvos in their lives, and “No!” voicing their aversion to the wrongness of the prohibitions.

Rabbi Akiva, in contrast, maintains that the highest form of worship is the transcendence that can be experienced through mitzvos. This is found equally in refraining from transgression as it is in fulfilling the positive commands; they

1. Mechilta on Shemos 20:1.

are all opportunities to surrender ourselves to G-d and His will. Rabbi Akiva therefore asserts that the Jewish people at Sinai experienced this transcendent nature of mitzvos, and appropriately responded a uniform, affirmative “Yes!” to all ten commandments.

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 6, pp. 124-125*



אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ . . . לֹא תִרְצָח (שמות כ, ב-ג)

I am Hashem, your G-d... Do not murder! (Shemos 20:2-13)

Not Too Low, Not Too High

The Midrash (Tanchuma, Va'eira 19) describes the G-dly revelation at Sinai as the “annulment of the decree” that separated the heavenly and the earthly.

This may be compared to a king who had decreed that the people of Rome should not migrate to Syria and that the people of Syria should not migrate to Rome. And similarly, G-d decreed when he created the world: The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; and the earth He hath given to the children of men.² However, when He decided to give the Torah, He abrogated the first decrees and declared: Let those below ascend on high and those on high descend below.

The idea of fusing of the heavenly and the earthly is also hinted to in the Ten Commandments, where we find two extremes among the commandments that we heard at the awesome Divine revelation at Sinai.

On one hand, the first two commandments instruct us in the most “heavenly” and sublime doctrines of Jewish faith and thought: the truth of G-d’s existence, His presence in the world, and the nature of His singular oneness within the creation. On the other hand, we have commandments addressing the most base and “earthly” of human impulses—i.e., we are warned not to kill or steal.

The incorporation of both extremes in the Ten Commandments alludes to a

2. Tehillim 135:6

practical application of the Divine charge to “those below” to “ascend on high.” Even if you are so morally weak that G-d Himself must thunderously warn you, “Do not murder!” do not surrender yourself to being lowly. At the very same time, you are instructed and empowered by G-d Himself to contemplate, know, and identify with the loftiest mysteries of the essence of the Divine, “I am Hashem, your G-d.”

--*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 3, p. 890*



אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (שמות ב, ה)

I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt. (*Shemos 20:2*)

The Egyptian Me

Our Sages teach that the Ten Commandments given at Mount Sinai represent the sum total of the entire Torah; all 613 mitzvos are incorporated within these ten. In fact, the Tanya (Chapter 20) explains that all mitzvos are, in effect, a means of fulfilling the first two commandments. Taking this a step further, the Zohar states that the entire Torah is contained within the very first word, אני —“I,” with which G-d introduced Himself simply as “I,” making known His unfathomable essence that transcends any name.

Astonishingly, according to the Midrash (Tanchuma, Yisro), the word אני is actually Egyptian! (The more common Hebrew word for “I” in the Torah is אני.) According to this Midrash, the most important word in G-d’s communication to mankind was spoken in Egyptian—the parlance of the most debased society of its time, “the shame of the earth” (see Bereishis 42:9).

By using an Egyptian word here, G-d communicated the purpose for which the entire Torah was given: not merely to give depth to our spiritual lives, but to draw G-dly purpose and holiness into the lowest and most mundane aspects

of life as well. The opening word of the Ten Commandments is therefore not in Hebrew, the holy tongue, but in a language utterly removed from holiness, Egyptian.

Similarly, the Talmud³ relates that Moshe refuted the angels' claims to the Torah by asking them, "Did you, too, descend into Egypt?" Moshe emphasized this detail because the descent into lowly "Egypt," and the struggle to refine the mundane parts of our lives, is the entire purpose for which the Torah was given. It is this "descent into Egypt," our endeavors to reveal G-dliness even in places that are not yet environments of holiness, that connects us with אֱנוֹכִי—G-d's very essence that was revealed at the giving of the Torah.

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 3, pp. 892-895*



לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (שמות כ, ג)

You shall not have other gods. (*Shemos 20:3*)

Outside Influences

The Talmud⁴ relates that the angels protested G-d giving the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, insisting that G-d's wisdom must not be shared with mortals of flesh and blood. In response, Moshe demonstrated that only human beings could fulfill the Torah's positive commands, and only mortal man—not perfect angels—required the Torah's prohibitive warnings.

Moshe retorted to the angels (among other points):

“What is written in it? ‘You shall not have other gods;’ do you dwell among the nations that engage in idolatry?”

“What else is written therein? ‘Remember the Shabbos day, to keep it holy;’ do you then perform work that you need to rest?”

3. Shabbos 88b.

4. Shabbos 88b.

“What else is written therein? ‘Honor your father and mother;’ do you have fathers and mothers?”

“What else is written therein? ‘You shall not murder, you shalt not commit adultery, you shall not steal;’ is there jealousy among you? Is there evil inclination among you?”

In addition to successfully making the case that the Torah should be given to the Jewish people, a careful examination of Moshe’s arguments teaches us about the remarkable character of a Jew as reflected in his struggles.

The Jewish body is holy, chosen by G-d to be a member of His nation (see Tanya, Chapter 49). Thus, despite its physical neediness, it does not directly conflict with the ideals of the Divine soul. Moshe therefore refers to the body in a positive sense; only a physical human being can fulfill the commandments to honor one’s parents, observe Shabbos, and the like.

In contrast, when speaking of the prohibitions, “You shall not murder, you shalt not commit adultery, you shall not steal,” Moshe attributes their relevance not to bodily temptation but to the yetzer hara—“Is there evil inclination among you?” Meaning, that the possibility of transgressing these prohibitions is not innate to the Jew’s physical body; rather, it stems from a secondary source.

But even the Jew’s yetzer hara has limits. Therefore, regarding the Torah’s prohibition of idolatry, Moshe mentions neither the physical body nor the lust of the yetzer hara. Instead, he challenged the angels, “Do you dwell among the nations that engage in idol-worship?” If not for outside influences, Moshe reasoned, the Torah’s warning against idolatry would be as superfluous for a Jew as it is for an angel.

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 8, pp. 17-19*



וְכָל הָעָם רָאִים אֶת הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת הַלְּפִידִם וְאֶת קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר
 וְאֶת הַהָר עָשָׁן וַיִּרְא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיִּעַמְדוּ מֵרָחֵק (שמות כ, טו)

And all the people saw the sounds and the flames, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain; and the people saw and trembled, and they stood from afar. (Shemos 20:15)

Are You Seeing Things?

Judging by the Torah’s depiction of Bnei Yisrael’s experience at Mount Sinai, it seems that their senses were confused. Instead of *hearing* the sounds of the shofar and the voice of G-d, “all the people *saw* the sounds.” “They saw the audible, and heard the visible!” as Rabbi Akiva remarks in the Midrash.

What is the significance of this strange and supernatural occurrence?

We have all heard that “seeing is believing,” but truthfully it is much more than that. Seeing something makes us certain of its existence; we don’t believe that what we have witnessed is true, we know it is.

In contrast, what we hear does not affect us as profoundly. Despite having heard something, there remains room in the mind to doubt whether it really took place. This applies even more to things we “hear about” and discover only conceptually.

Now, generally, we perceive G-dliness conceptually at best. We believe the ideas to be true, but they are not part of our empirical and observed reality as humans. At Sinai, however, what is normally only “audible” became visible and absolute. When G-d revealed Himself to every Jew with the words, “I am G-d, your G-d,” His existence became unquestionable. “They saw the audible”—the Jews saw G-dliness and perceived it with the certainty normally reserved for the visible reality of the physical world. Concurrently, with the revelation of the truest form of existence, the Creator Himself, the “obviousness” and substantiality of the created reality became less of a given; “They heard the visible”—what is normally “visible” became conceptual and abstract.

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 6, pp. 119-122*



מה אבותיכם לא נכנסו לברית אלא במילה וטבילה והרצאת דם אף
הם לא יכנסו לברית אלא במילה וטבילה והרצאת דמים (בריות ט,א)

***Just as your ancestors entered the covenant only through
circumcision, immersion, and the sprinkling of sacrificial
blood [on the altar], so too they may enter the covenant
only through circumcision and immersion and the sprin-
kling of sacrificial blood.*** (Talmud, Kerisos 9a)

Which is The Final Step?

In preparation for receiving the Torah and entering their eternal covenant with G-d, Bnei Yisrael completed what the Talmud identifies as a conversion process, the likes of which are also required of all future converts to the Jewish faith. Included in the process were circumcision (which they underwent before leaving Egypt), offering a sacrifice, and immersion in a mikvah, as derived by the Talmud from the passages in Shemos, Chapter 24. The latter two took place, according to some opinions,⁵ on the very morning of the Giving of the Torah, the day on which they would hear the Ten Commandments from G-d Himself.

This presents somewhat of a difficulty; according to the Talmud, the Torah was given on Shabbos, and a convert's immersion may not take place on Shabbos!⁶ Upon immersion, the convert is established as a new person, as it were; immersing a convert would therefore appear similar to completing a vessel for use, which is prohibited on Shabbos.⁷ Could it be that the Jewish people entered the covenant with G-d through an act that was, on some level, contrary to Torah law?

5. See Midrash Lekach Tov on Yisro 19:10; cf. Mechilta ad loc.

6. Mishneh Torah, Hil. Issurei Biah 13:6; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 268:4.

7. In addition, a conversion can only be effectuated by a court, and court proceedings are likewise prohibited on Shabbos, Mishneh Torah, *ibid*.

Upon deeper consideration, however, the results of the immersion on the day of the Giving of the Torah cannot be equated with the results of a typical conversion, and therefore would not be prohibited.

The essence of becoming a Jew is the convert's outright commitment to observe the Torah's laws.⁸ In usual circumstances, after accepting to observe the mitzvos, the convert immerses in the mikvah and completes the conversion and change of status. As above, that immersion which results in the convert's change of status is an act that we may not do on Shabbos.

At the Giving of the Torah, however, the immersion came before the acceptance of mitzvos (according to the opinion in discussion). Granted, our patriarchs and matriarchs observed mitzvos voluntarily; similarly, Moshe had already instructed Bnei Yisrael in *some* of the mitzvos. These cannot compare, however, to their sense of the full extent of the Torah's importance and severity as they experienced it when they heard the Ten Commandments from G-d Himself. Only then, could their acceptance of the Torah be reckoned as being with the full understanding of the weightiness of this decision!

Thus, their immersion in the morning prior was permissible, as it was merely a step in the conversion process, but not the act that established their new status. Upon hearing the Ten Commandments from G-d, however, they achieved full acceptance of the mitzvos, and their status changed. Thus, their conversion on Shabbos was completed not by an act that they performed, but by an act of G-d.

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 33, pp. 26-32*



8. Even more so than the immersion, which is merely a part of the conversion "process".

את הדברים האלה דבר ה' אל כל קהלכם...
 קול גדול ולא יסף (דברים ה, יט)

G-d spoke these words to your entire assembly . . . With a great voice, which did not cease. (Devarim 5:19)

One Voice for All

The Ten Commandments were proclaimed by G-d in what is described by the verse as “a great voice, which did not cease.” The Midrash⁹ interprets the greatness referred to here as not merely a measure of the sound’s loudness and amplitude, but of the sound’s complexity and diversity—“One voice . . . was divided into seventy languages.”

Why was it necessary that the voice of G-d, speaking the Torah to the Jewish people in the Holy Tongue, transmute into the languages of the other seventy nations?

In doing so, G-d demonstrated that the sanctity and G-dliness present in the Torah’s teachings and 613 laws for the Jewish people extends also to the Torah’s seven laws for all of humankind.

As Jews, we are obligated to not only observe the Torah ourselves, but also to endeavor that all of humankind observe seven universal commandments (and the laws that derive from them.) Namely, they are the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, adultery and other immorality, eating flesh torn from a living animal, as well as the obligation to establish courts where justice will be pursued and these laws enforced.

It might seem that the observance of the seven laws by non-Jews and our duty to promote them is incidental to the Torah “itself” that Bnei Yisrael received from G-d at Mount Sinai, and non-essential to the Torah we received from G-d.

Therefore, the very voice of G-d at Sinai therefore extended to the languages

9. Shemos Rabbah 28:4.

of all the nations, because the Torah’s message for all the nations, namely, the Seven Noachide Laws, are indeed part and parcel of the great voice of the Giving of the Torah.

This understanding is, in fact, critical to the observance of the seven laws by the non-Jews, and to the Jewish people’s mandate to bring the nations to their observance. As Maimonides’ rules, the nations of the world must accept and perform the seven laws “not because they are convinced of their rationality,” but because they believe that “G-d commanded them in the Torah, and informed us through Moshe that all of humanity is commanded to observe them.”¹⁰

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 4, pp. 1092-1094*



וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהִיט הַבְּקָר וַיְהִי קוֹלֹת וּבְרָקִים .
וַיִּחַרְדוּ כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה (שמות יט, טז)

And it came to pass on the third day as morning dawned, there was thunder and lightning... and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered. (*Shemos 19:16*)

Shock and Awe

Why was the Giving of the Torah accompanied by thunder and lightning? If it was to drive home the awesomeness of the moment, surely the fright caused by the thunder and lightning paled in comparison to the profound sense of awe that Bnei Yisrael experienced from the revelation of G-d Himself!

Rather, the dramatic physical storm that accompanied the Giving of the Torah reflected the earth-shattering *spiritual* discovery that Bnei Yisrael and the world at large experienced at that historic moment.

10. Mishneh Torah, Hil. Melachim 8:11

The Midrash¹¹ describes G-d's revelation at Sinai as the “annulment of the decree” that separated “the higher realms and the lower realms”—i.e., the divide separating the spiritual reality and the physical world that derives from it was breached.

Until the revelation at Sinai, the “truth” of the physical reality appeared unquestionable. At the Giving of the Torah, that perception was shattered. We were shown—and given the eternal ability to recognize—that the truth of all existence is not its tangible matter, but its derivation from G-d, the One and only true Being, Who continually generates its existence.

Imagine the shock and inner upheaval of a person who discovers that everything he thought he knew until now was a gross distortion of the truth, that reality is in fact the complete opposite of what he perceived it to be. Such was the blow that the G-dly revelation at Sinai dealt to the world's consciousness.

Accordingly, the thunder and lightning at the giving of the Torah were merely the physical reflection of the spiritual storm that swept over and shocked all of existence at that incredible juncture.

—*Likkutei Sichos, vol. 33, pp. 23-24*



וַיִּתְנַצְּבוּ בְּתַהֲתֵי־הַהָר (שמות יט, יז)

And they stood at the bottom of the mountain. (*Shemos 19:17*)

Redoing the Giving of the Torah

The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, of righ-

11. Tanchuma, Va'eira 15.

teous memory, would bless people before the holiday of Shavuos, “to receive the Torah *b’simcha uv’pnimiyus*, joyfully and internally.”

What is the meaning of this blessing?

When the Torah was first given, both of these qualities, “joyfully and internally,” were somewhat lacking.

The giving of the Torah was initiated by G-d; the Jewish people’s association with the Torah did not originate from them. As a result, at that time, their relationship with the Torah was not yet “internalized.”

Furthermore, the Talmud interprets the verse, “and they [Bnei Yisrael] stood at the bottom of the mountain,” to mean not at the foot of the mountain, but underneath it! “G-d raised Mount Sinai over Bnei Yisrael and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, fine. But if not, you will be summarily buried beneath this mountain.’”¹² Considering these circumstances, their acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai can hardly be considered willing, joyful and enthusiastic. In fact, the Talmud declares that the coercion “furnished a strong disclaimer against the acceptance of the Torah” until the Jews reaccepted the Torah willingly after the Purim miracle, almost one thousand years later.

This then is the significance of the blessing that we should receive the Torah *b’simcha uv’pnimiyus*: When we re-experience the Giving of the Torah this Shavuos, may we accept the Torah willingly and happily, which in turn will enable us to truly absorb and internalize its message.

--*Toras Menachem*, vol. 3, pp. 142-143



12. Shabbos 88a.



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