



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

IN THE SEDRA¹ MOSES SPEAKS IN AN INSPIRING AND encouraging way to the people who were about to enter the Land of Israel. He describes how, forty years earlier, they had received the Torah from G-d at Mount Sinai. The Sedra therefore includes the text of the Ten Commandments². Everyone stands up when this is read in the Synagogue. Each word of the Torah is holy, but the Ten Commandments have special importance, for they were communicated by G-d directly to every single Jew.

Direct communication from G-d is a very intense experience. Normally only a Prophet hears the voice of G-d and sees Divine visions. A Prophet has achieved such inner purity and self-mastery that he is able to bear this contact with the Infinite. In the case of the Jewish people gathered at Mount Sinai, the experience was too intense. They said "If we go on hearing the voice of G-d, we will die" (Deut. 5:22). They asked Moses to stand in their place. "You go near and hear all that G-d says, and then tell us." (v.24)

Rashi, based on the traditions of the Oral Law, informs us that Moses was very disappointed at this. He had wanted that every single Jew, man and woman, should enjoy the same closeness with G-d as a Prophet. His aim had been that we should all learn Torah directly from G-d.

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Thousands of years later, we can ask ourselves: what is our view? What are we looking for in the teachings of Judaism? A set of reasonable, up-to-date instructions which will provide a well-organised lifestyle? Yes, one might say. A gateway to the infinite holiness of the Divine, with the task to reveal that holiness in the world? Well, perhaps...

The Sages tell us that while we did not achieve this spiritual goal in the time of Moses, this is in fact the direction of our development. The process of Exile is intended to purify us and prepare us for this kind of Divine revelation. This time, we are assured, we will not be frightened. We will feel direct intimacy with G-d as our true reality. For then, in the time of the Messiah, as Isaiah puts it (11:9), the world will be filled with knowledge of G-d, as the waters cover the sea.

FROM GLOOM TO REJOICING

The gloomiest day in the Jewish calendar is the 9th of Av, which was the past Tuesday, 9 August. This was the climax of a three week period of mourning, when no weddings could be celebrated. The fast of Av commemorates the destruction of both first and the second Temples, and many other disasters.

By contrast, the Talmud tells us that one of the most joyful days in the Jewish year is the 15th of Av, which is the coming Monday. In ancient Jerusalem on this day young marriageable girls would wear white dresses and dance in the vineyards and, say the Sages, many betrothals would be arranged.

The betrothals on the human plane express the renewed closeness between the Jewish people and G-d which is felt on this day, after the sense of separation during the previous period of mourning. Chassidic teachings tell us that the intensity of the separation of the 9th of Av leads to a correspond-ingly intense joyousness in the union of the 15th of Av³. So this Shabbat we look forward to a day of true joy...

1. Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11. 2. Deut. 5:6-18. 3. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.4 pp.1336-7.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care

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SEDRA VA-ETCHANAN

THE EGYPTIAN "I"

Rachel was curled up in one of her favourite places - a huge old hollow tree trunk behind her family's holiday cottage, which had a narrow opening facing the open sea. She was reading a book about the Sedra which she had to read over the summer holidays. Her teacher had explained to them that even though there was no school, learning Torah never stops, and to this end she had given them certain tasks to do, this being one of them.

She had got to the part in the Sedra that repeats the Ten Commandments. Suddenly she was struck by something. The first words of the Ten Commandments are "Anochi Hashem", "I am G-d". She remembered that these words were engraved on top of the Ark in her synagogue at home. Rachel had been learning Hebrew at school, and she knew the word for "I" is Ani. Why, she wondered, did it say "Anochi"? Shouldn't it say "Ani"?

When she asked her father this question later on that day, while they were visiting a magnificent waterfall, her father gave her a good answer. He explained that the Sages tell us that Anochi was actually an Egyptian word. The fact that this word - the first word in the Ten Commandments, is in Egyptian, teaches us something important. Rachel wondered what that might be.

“Why do you think we were created?” her father asked her.

“Well, isn't the main reason that we can serve G-d, and also to make this world a place for G-d to dwell in?” Rachel said.

“Yes, that's true. But look at us now - we're not praying, or doing any Mitzvot - we're just having a good time, going to see a waterfall. There is a part of us which is like an ancient Egyptian, which just wants to enjoy itself. But we have to try to make this part of us holy as well, So even though we feel are just having a good time, we have *to try* to make that into an opportunity to serve G-d.”

“How?” Rachel was puzzled.

“Well, the Torah has given us lots of different laws about how and when to do things - for example eating: what we should and should not eat. When we keep these laws properly, here on holiday in the countryside, we are serving G-d. So we are making our holiday activities - which the Egyptian Anochi inside us enjoys - into something holy”.

“Do you mean,” asked Rachel, “that we are making the ancient Egyptian inside us more... more...” She groped for the word.

“More holy?” suggested her father.

“More spiritual, “ said Rachel “More Jewish. More able to appreciate the way G-d created this beautiful world”.

Silently, father and daughter gazed at the waterfall, a true expression of the greatness of G-d.

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