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### THE FIRST WORD ANOKHI IS IN EGYPTIAN

**T**HE TEN COMMANDMENTS ARE THE CLIMAX OF THE SEDRA<sup>1</sup> and, in many ways, of the entire Torah. But the Midrash<sup>2</sup> makes a surprising statement: it says that the first word of the Ten Commandments, Anokhi, meaning “I”, is in the Egyptian language. What does this mean?

The Ten Commandments are the summary of the entire Torah. Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942) the head of the great Torah Academy in Sura, Babylon, explained that they hint at each of the 613 Commandments of Jewish teaching<sup>3</sup>. Further, the first two of the Ten Commandments have a further level of significance: the first, “I am the L-rd your G-d, who took you out of the Land of Egypt” is described as the source of all the Positive Mitzvot, and the second, which warns against idolatry, is the source of all the Negative Mitzvot<sup>4</sup>.

The first Command is obviously the basic statement of our special relationship with G-d, encapsulating the idea of our being the chosen people, who were rescued by G-d from our plight in Egypt. Chassidic teachings add that the first word, Anokhi, meaning “I”, refers to G-d Himself in His infinitely sacred Essence, who is communicating with us<sup>5</sup>.

All this makes the idea that this first word Anokhi is ancient Egyptian very intriguing. Hebrew is the Sacred Language; among the

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ancient languages of the Gentiles, Egyptian, the language of our oppressors, might be considered among the lowest. We would expect the very first word of the Ten Commandments to be in the most sacred language, not in the most profane.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this tells us something about the nature of Torah and of being a Jew. G-d does not want to relate to us only on the sacred, spiritual level of our lives, represented by Hebrew, the holy language. He wants to reach the earthly 'Egyptian' dimension as well.

Torah study and prayer could be considered sacred aspects of our lives. But there are Jewish teachings, Mitzvot, about almost every aspect of our activities, including the most basic. The Mitzvot connect us to G-d on every level of our being, including our 'Egyptian' dimension.

Further, a beautiful ideal is that we should seek to connect with the Divine particularly in the most mundane aspects of our lives, as expressed in the phrase "In all your ways know Him (G-d)"<sup>6</sup>. This means that even when one is not carrying out a Mitzva, when one is in the midst of a completely "everyday" activity, there should still be a sense of connection with the Divine. The Essence of the Divine seeks to connect with us not only in our 'sacred' aspects but also in the most mundane.

In this way we elevate our "Egyptian", mundane and even profane self, and also the world around us. The role of the Jew in the world is to connect worldliness with G-dliness, because ultimately, everything can be connected with G-d. This is also the route for us, as a people and as individuals, to bond with the Essence of the Divine, the "I" beyond any Name, the Source of the Torah and of all Being. Through this we make the world, including "Egypt", a dwelling for G-d, fulfilling the purpose of Creation<sup>7</sup>.

1. Exodus chapters 18-20. 2. Yalkut Shimoni to Exodus 20:2, sec.286. 3. See Rashi to Exodus 24:12. 4. See Tanya I ch.20, based on Zohar II 90b-91a. 5. Likkutei Torah, Pinchas, 80b. 6. Proverbs 3:6. 7. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.3, pp.892-5.

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### SEDRA YITRO

#### **MAKING CHOCOLATE HOLY**

As Michael opened his locker, some books came tumbling down. He automatically picked up his Prayer Book, gave it a little kiss, and then moved on to pick up the rest. He didn't even realize he was doing it, let alone think about why – it was simply habit.

“Good morning boys.” Rabbi Levy’s voice rose above the sound as the class shuffled to their seats to begin their Jewish Studies class.

“So,” he began, “ever wonder why when a Prayer Book, or any other holy book, falls on the floor, we kiss it?” Michael’s ears perked up. Hadn’t he done that just seconds before?

“Or why we treat the Torah Scroll with such honour and care? Do you know that if a Torah Scroll falls down, we have to fast? I mean come on, if you think about it, it’s only some parchment and ink, and a Prayer Book is basically just paper. Why all the fuss?”

“But, but it’s holy,” some boys murmured.

“Ok. So it’s holy. But why is it holy? Tell me - if a random piece of parchment fell onto the floor together with a jar of ink, would it be so serious that people would fast?”

“No,” the boys laughed.

“So why is it so different with a Torah Scroll? Are you telling me that if the ink is put on the parchment in a certain way – to form certain letters, it becomes holy? Surely, the ink is still ink and the parchment’s still parchment?”

"I dunno..." Michael thought about it. His teacher had a point – it's still just a physical object, so why does it make a difference.

"Okay. So in this week's Sedra called Yitro, G-d gave the Jews the Torah on Mount Sinai. Now one of the things that the giving of the Torah accomplished was that physical and spiritual could connect. Before the giving of the Torah, there was no such thing as something like a piece of parchment becoming holy – parchment was parchment, wood was wood and that was that. But when G-d gave the Torah, he gave us the ability to change something from just a piece of parchment and ink into a holy Torah Scroll."

The boys were silent, as they thought about what Rabbi Levy said.

Suddenly Michael's hand shot up. "So is that why so many commandments involve physical things?" he asked. "Like boys putting on Tefilin and girls lighting Shabbat candles?"

"Indeed it is," Rabbi Levy smiled. "In fact, to a lesser extent, anything that you use for a holy purpose itself becomes part of the sacred action. For instance, now we're all learning Torah which is obviously holy, so the chairs that we're using to sit on whilst learning Torah have become, in a sense, special too."

"Cool!" The boys looked around the room. So many things were being made holy just right now!

"Think about what power you have. You can make so many ordinary things special just by doing what's right and following in the ways of the Torah. Before the giving of the Torah this wasn't possible, but now it is."

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As Michael stopped to buy a chocolate bar after school, it wasn't just the taste he was thinking about, but also about how much he was accomplishing just by making a blessing on it, making it special. *And* it tasted good...

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