

## “What I (Just) Learned in Kindergarten”

Parashat Yitro 5773

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On Thursday morning, I was invited to a most auspicious gathering. Now you know in this town there are many auspicious gatherings of great importance...where powerful people make decisions that affect the lives of millions. On Capitol Hill, at the White House, at the Supreme Court and at various departments of the Federal Government...important gatherings occur every single day! My invitation was to address a truly special, extraordinary group of people...people who will exercise great influence and determine our future for many years to come...people truly destined for greatness, who will make a difference in countless lives. My invitation was to visit with my six year old son Ezra's kindergarten class at the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy. What an impressive group of boys and girls they are, *and I'm not just saying that because my son is one of them!* I was invited to talk with them about being a rabbi, and to answer questions they had prepared, and that the teacher had transcribed on a list attached to her clip board. Now these kindergarteners are no slackers...After they tossed me a few soft ball questions like, *when did I first know I wanted to be a rabbi and what's my favorite part about being a rabbi*, they got down to business. For example, “How did Moses survive on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights? What did he eat? What did he drink?” Or “Why do we have to wait longer after eating meat than we do after eating dairy?” Or “Why can you eat *pareve* food with both milk and meat meals?” We had a really animated give-and-take it was really great fun. I think I answered all of their questions pretty well, and that I was a good representative of my vocation.

But there's one question that I wish I would have answered differently. One of these bright little kindergarteners wanted to know if the Ten Commandments were more special than the rest of the mitzvot in the Torah. As you well know, there are traditionally 613 mitzvot in the Torah, but the Ten that we read this morning tend to get the most press. Even the Torah itself suggests that the Ten Commandments were delivered with a degree of panache that was not the case for the other 603. Thunder and lightning, a mountaintop engulfed in smoke, the blaring sounds of the shofar, *vayechedrad kol ha-har me'od*...even the mountain itself trembled at the sound of God's voice!<sup>1</sup> This simply didn't happen every time it occurred to God to communicate another commandment to Moses. There does seem to be something special about those ten. Which raises another question: *Are some commandments more important than others?* That question has been the concern of our Sages since antiquity. At one time, the Ten Commandments were recited daily as part of the siddur and the regular prayer service. But the Talmud<sup>2</sup> informs us that this practice was terminated because of the murmurings of heretics. Those heretics were saying that the reason that Jews recite the Ten Commandments (but not the other 603) every day is

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:18

<sup>2</sup> BT Berakhot 12a

because only those ten were revealed to Moses at Sinai, but not the others. So the Sages, in an attempt to prove that all the commandments were of equal validity and authenticity removed the Ten Commandments from the prayer book so no one would regard them any differently than all the others.

But this issue is really not so clear cut. In fact in other places in the Talmud teaches, for example, that Torah study is more important than rebuilding the Temple,<sup>3</sup> or that hospitality to strangers is even more important than greeting the *Shechinah*.<sup>4</sup> Rav Assi said that *tzedakah* is more important than all the other mitzvot combined!<sup>5</sup> And we learn that if you have only enough for Shabbat candles or Hanukkah candles, that Shabbat candles come first.<sup>6</sup> And of course we know that most of the mitzvot must be abrogated in order to save human life. So doesn't all of this suggest that there is some hierarchy among the commandments?

On the other hand, the Midrash Tanchuma relates a parable of a king who wanted to plant an orchard, but he worried that the gardeners would only plant the most expensive trees, for which they would get paid the most money. The king therefore did not announce how much he would pay for any of the various trees he wanted to be planted, so that the workers would plant them all, and in the end he would have a beautiful variegated orchard. This midrash is meant to suggest that the Torah too is a mix of many different kinds of mitzvot...and while some may be more important than others, God does not divulge that to us so that our inner spiritual lives and our external commitments will be well balanced, diverse, and multi-faceted just like a magnificent orchard.

So back to my kindergarteners...What do I tell them? Are the Ten Commandments more special than the other mitzvot, or not? And if not, what about all the special attention given to the *Aseret Ha'dibrot*, and the events on Mt. Sinai? The truth is, I was stumped by these very sophisticated six year olds! I muttered on about how the Ten Commandments contain some of the most essential ingredients about Judaism. I told them the Midrash about how God went to all the different nations of the world, offering them His Torah and because each objected to one part or another, they rejected the offer. When the Jewish people were approached, our ancestors said, "We'll take it! *Na'aseh ve'nishma!* No questions asked!" The more I think about it though, there is something else I wished I had said...

I wish I would have told them that perhaps the most incredible thing about the Ten Commandments that makes them unlike all the other mitzvot in the Torah is that they were given to the Jewish people in the most public way. The *entire nation* was present and gathered together around that mountain. Every single person in the community: women and men, young and old, married and single, priest and peasant all heard those incredible words; all together they experienced that electrifying, exhilarating moment. I can't underscore what that means to me as a Jew, and what message that ought to mean to all of

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<sup>3</sup> BT Megilla 16b

<sup>4</sup> BT Shabbat 127a

<sup>5</sup> BT Bava Batra 9a

<sup>6</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 678:1

us. In so many other religions, the most precious revelations are reserved for single recipients. The founders of Christianity, Islam,<sup>7</sup> Hinduism,<sup>8</sup> Mormonism,<sup>9</sup> Buddhism<sup>10</sup> all achieved their wisdom, their nirvana, their enlightenment, their sacred scripture all alone...in a meditative state, in some far flung locale, or in some sort of mystical trance that no one else was privy to but that one individual. Only later was this precious revelation disseminated among disciples, followers, and believers. Yet in the most extraordinary moment of God reaching out to the Jewish people, what does our tradition teach? That it happened in a direct, public, unmediated conversation between God and the entire community. Do you know what that means? Do you understand the profound importance of that? It means that this Torah belongs to every single Jew without exception. That these teachings; these mitzvot are spoken lovingly, personally, and directly to every Jew. A beautiful midrash imagined that an angel brought the Ten Commandments to each and every member of the community, asking them individually if they accept them. When they responded 'yes,' the angel kissed each Israelite.<sup>11</sup> There is such an emphasis both in the Torah itself as well as rabbinic literature on just how personal the Sinai event was. "If you ask," writes Abraham Joshua Heschel, "What was it like when the people stood at Sinai hearing God's voice?" the answer will be: 'Like no other event in the history of man. There are countless legends, myths, reports, but none of them tells of a whole people witnessing an event such as Sinai.'"<sup>12</sup> This is the answer I wish I would have given those precious, thoughtful, inquisitive kindergarteners last week.

As we stand again at Sinai, if you will, on this Shabbat, when we have again heard those words as our ancestors did...the question remains: *What will your response to them be? Will you take these words to heart; Will you embrace their values and message in your life? Will an angel come and place a kiss on your lips because you said 'yes' to Torah?* I hope so...We all are granted the opportunity to embrace Torah every day...just like our ancestors: whether we are young or old, learned or at the beginning of our faith journey, Jew by birth or Jew by choice. Hopefully we can all find our place on the *derekh Torah*, the path of Torah; growing in learning, faith, and practice each and every day.

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<sup>7</sup> Muslims believe that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel and that he instructed scribes to write down these revelations

<sup>8</sup> The sacred Hindu text, Bhagavad Gita is reportedly a revelation to Pandava prince Arjuna from Lord Krishna

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Smith said that he was led to the golden plates (the source of the Book of Mormon) by an angel. Smith said the plates were found on a hill near his home in upstate New York (Manchester).

<sup>10</sup> The meditative state of the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree is what enabled him to achieve enlightenment, after which he established a monastic order

<sup>11</sup> Shir Ha'Shirim Rabbah 1:12-13

<sup>12</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. God In Search of Man, 1955, p. 189