

## **Parashat Yitro**

**Seaside Jewish Community, January 21, 2022**

**Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan**

The earth shook and the sound and light effects were awesome, as our people stood at Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, featured in this week's Torah portion, Yitro. In fact, tradition tells us that we should each feel that we were standing there at Sinai and every Jew who would ever be, by birth or by choice, was there with us, along with a mixed multitude of our fellow travelers.

But the nature of that revelation has been debated down through the centuries.

Jewish tradition doesn't even call them the Ten Commandments, but Aseret HaDibrot (The Ten Sayings or the Ten Utterances).

First of all, it's not quite clear that they are all commandments. "I am YHWH your God," is that a law? Is it commanding us to believe? Or is it just an introduction of the lawgiver?

Also, unlike many other laws in the Torah, these ten laws are conveyed in an apodictic style. There are no punishments or consequences stated for failing to observe them. According to Prof. Nachum Sarna, many of the civil laws listed here were already universal in the ancient Near East. But here they are conveyed in a somewhat different style. They are presented as the basis of our covenant, our Brit, with God. These BIG TEN rules to respect God, keep the Sabbath, honor parents and live a moral, non-violent life flow naturally from the experiences of the Exodus and Revelation. We uphold them, not out of fear of punishment, but because we feel a sense of divine imperative to do so.

Tonight I would like to focus on the fourth commandment, to remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Pause and consider: resting once a week is listed right up there with "thou shalt not murder" and "thou shalt not steal." It's that important in our tradition, and we probably need it now more than ever.

The first word in the fourth commandment is “Zachor,” remember. Remembrance is very important in Judaism. As I mentioned at my first Shabbat at Seaside, the teaching of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *memory* is much more than mere *history*. Memory is intrinsic to Jewish identity. But what does memory have to do with Shabbat?

In the Bible, “remember,” doesn’t mean just “bring to mind,” but to “commemorate,” or “memorialize.” So rabbinic law says that we remember Shabbat by doing the positive commandments and traditions of Shabbat, and specifically when we say the Kiddush on Friday night, reminding ourselves of God’s creative and redemptive power in our world and lives.

Beyond the 10 Commandments, the Torah used the word “Zachor” in six different episodes, and so our sages saw those as six commandments to remember or commemorate. A list of the six is found in many Orthodox prayer books.

*Write in the Chat: What do you think it's important to remember as Jews?*

I would like to look at two of these remembrances tonight:

*Zachor et Amalek* (in the book of Deuteronomy): Remember Amalek, a merciless tribe who attacked our people in the desert as we escaped from slavery. The villainous Haman from the Purim story was said to be a descendent of Amalek, and so the Shabbat before Purim we remember the cruelty of Amalek by reading an extra Torah Aliyah about him. That observance will be coming up soon, as we prepare to celebrate Purim in a few weeks.

By contrast, *Zachor at Ha-Shabbat*, remember Shabbat is something that we do not just once a year, but every week. Shabbat is more than just a day off. Shabbat represents the spiritual and moral message of Judaism: of rest and dignity for all people, a vision of the world perfected.

As we learned on Tu Bishvat, there are larger cycles of Shabbat. Shmitta and Jubilee. The land must have rest every seven years and human dignity must be restored. This is the Torah’s most majestic vision of environmental and social repair.

I recall the teaching of a childhood and adult mentor, Rabbi Aryeh Scheinberg, who recently passed on. He taught that yes, we are commanded to remember Amalek but we should really be motivated by Remember Shabbat.

Amalek is more than just an episode in the Torah or another name for Haman. Over time, the memory of Amalek came to represent antisemitism and baseless hatred. Remembering Amalek means that we never forget the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jewish people. For many Jews of the past couple of generations, that has been one of the rally cries of Jewish history. The Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim said that the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment is not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory by ceasing to be Jewish. So many felt that being Jewish was an act of defiance to our enemies.

But Rabbi Scheinberg said that is not enough of a reason to be Jewish. Yes, we are commanded to remember Amalek. And today, in 2022, we have to be aware of rising antisemitism and work to combat it. We saw that once again this week with the events in Colleyville, Texas. We can't afford to forget that some people will always hate us just for being Jewish. But if that's our main motivation as Jews, our Judaism would be pretty sad and anxious.

Rather, Rabbi Scheinberg said, we should focus on that other remembrance, from this week's Torah portion: Remember Shabbat, the centerpiece of Jewish life, and all it represents. Remember and live by the beauty and power of our tradition. Remember and share the Shabbat and Sabbatical and Jubilee messages of social justice and environmental healing. Remember them by bringing them to life. It is my prayer that we will do that together and make our Jewish lives thriving and joyful in the months and years to come.