

Sat 1 August 2009
Vaeschanan
Congregation Adat Reyim
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Vaeschanan

Good Shabbos!

Parsha Vaeschanan is always read on Shabbos Nachamu -- the Shabbos after Tishah b'Av. In it Moses continues to speak to the people about Israel's unique relationship to God. Among the memorable passages in this portion is the repetition of the 10 commandments given at Mt. Sinai, the first part of the Shema, and the wise son's question in the Haggadah. I will speak today about the Ten Commandments.

If one compares the Ten Commandments read in today's parsha with the one found in Parsha Yitro (Shemot, Chapter 20), one will see they are not exactly the same. For those who adhere to what is called the Documentary Hypothesis, which states there were multiple sources to the text as we have it today, the differences are explained that the two versions were derived from two different sacred traditions. This explanation also has the advantage of explaining why the account in Exodus takes place at Mt. Sinai while in today's reading Moses talks about receiving the tablets at Mt. Horeb.

However, even if the Documentary Hypothesis is factual, in my opinion it leads to a dead end. Any divergence in our text may be explained away by saying that a poor editing job was performed when combining multiple traditions. On the other hand, by taking the traditional approach and seeing variations as purposeful, a fuller, richer, and more meaningful understanding may be discovered. According to the Talmud,¹ both versions of the Ten Commandments were uttered by Hashem simultaneously in a manner that transcends human understanding. I hope, in the next few minutes, to demonstrate that the Jewish tradition takes the difference in the two versions of the Ten Commandments seriously. Indeed, much study has been spent over the ages on these differences.

The First Commandment reads the same in both versions; in neither version is it in the form of a command.

The Second Commandment, when read in Exodus, has a vov prefix that is not found in the version in Deuteronomy. Likewise, the version in Deuteronomy has a vov prefix not found in the Exodus version. Exodus 20:3-6 and Deuteronomy 5:7-10 could be translated identically into English without changing either meaning. However, often the commandment in Exodus is translated slightly differently from how it is translated in Deuteronomy; for example, both the 1918 and the 1968 JPS translation, Aryeh Kaplan's translation, the Stone Chumash, the Hertz Chumash, and Professor Everett Fox's translation all contain subtle differences in the two versions.² I have not learned the reason for having the vov in Deuteronomy but not in Exodus. Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, a 13th century commentator, in his work Baal Haturim, does address the vov in Exodus that is not in Deuteronomy. Remember that the letter vov has the numeric value of six (6). According to R. Asher, the extra vov found in parsha Yitro alludes to the six types of images found in Deuteronomy 4:16-18 that we are not to fashion: 1) images in the form of a male; 2) the form of a female; 3) the form of any animal on the earth; 4) the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens; 5) the form of anything that creeps on the ground; and 6) the form of any fish that is in the waters under the earth. Since this list of forbidden images is specified by Moses immediately before he restates the Ten Commandments, the vov that is found in Exodus is not required in Deuteronomy.³

There are no differences in the wording of the Third Commandment between the versions of Yitro and Vaeschanan.

In contrast, the very first word of the Fourth Commandment differs in the two versions! In parsha Vaeschanan we are told to observe Shabbat, while in parsha Yitro we are told to remember Shabbat. Chazal states we remember when we perform acts to honor the Sabbath: light candles or have a fine meal. We observe the Sabbath when we abstain from performing any of the acts that fall into one of the 39 categories of labor. Every Friday evening, when we sing Lecha Dodi, we are reminded that both words were spoken together. Our Siddur translates the start of its opening verse as, "Keep and Remember in one Divine word, our people at Sinai God's command heard."

A second difference in the Fourth Commandment is that the version in today's reading contains the phrase "as Hashem has commanded." This phrase is not found in the Exodus version. Our tradition points out that this phrase would be extraneous in the Exodus narrative since Sinai occurred soon after Israel left the camp at Marah, which is where Israel first received the Sabbath laws. Yet a third difference in this Fourth Commandment concerns the rationale supplied. Most of the Ten Commandments' statements do not include a reason for obeying them. This is one that does. In Exodus the rationale is related to the creation story. We read: "For in six days Hashem made heaven and earth." In Deuteronomy the reason is related to our leaving Egypt: "...you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and Hashem, your God, has taken you out of there with a strong hand and outstretched arm..." Thus the Friday night Kiddush has both phrases: "as a reminder of the work of creation" and "a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt."

There are two phrases in the Fifth Commandment as given in Vaeschanan that do not occur in the Yitro version. The first phrase, "As Hashem has commanded," was unneeded in Exodus since this command too, according to the rabbis, was given at Marah shortly before the revelation at Sinai.⁴ The Talmud⁵ explains that the second phrase, which is "so that you fare well," is not in the Exodus version, since it would have been inappropriate to have the word "tov" (which means good) in the first set of tablets because the first set were destined to be destroyed.

Commandment Number Six prohibits murder; it reads the same in both Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Commandments Numbers Seven, Eight, and Nine read almost, but not quite, identically in the two versions. In Deuteronomy these three commandments begin with the letter vov, but the beginning vov is not found in the form given in Exodus. The Hertz Chumash⁶ comments that the commandments are connected by the conjunction "and," to indicate that all sins against one's fellow are equally wrong and that a person who breaks one of these commandments is likely to break another as well.

The version of Commandment Nine as found in Deuteronomy contains a difference in addition to its starting with a vov not found in the Exodus version. In Yitro we are told not to be a false witness, while in Vaeschanan Moses tells us not to be a vain witness. The commentaries explain that the term vain witness (the word used has the same Hebrew root used in the Third Commandment) is more inclusive than false witness. As explained in the Stone Chumash, even if the testimony will have no bearing on outcome, one must still be truthful.

The Tenth Commandment also differs in the two versions. In Deuteronomy, Moses lists one's neighbor's wife as not to be coveted first, while in Exodus it's one's neighbor's house that is first on the list. Rambam explains that Moses made the position change because Moses realized that a person's sensual desire is greater than the desire for additional property.⁷ A second difference is that in Exodus one is told not to covet all the items, while in Deuteronomy one's neighbor's wife is not to be coveted but the other items listed are not to be desired. Chezuni⁸ and Rambam explain that covet forbids taking action, but desire includes fantasizing a plot even though one knows the plot would not be carried out. I find this prohibition on feeling troubling. Certainly it does not conform to the general Torah pattern that commands behavior, not thought. The rabbis did understand that controlling one's feeling is not simple. Ben Zoma stated:⁹ "...who is strong? He who subdues his passions ..." Ibn Ezra sees desire as demonstrating a lack of faith in God. One who had complete faith in God would recognize that God gives property to individuals. To desire what is not yours is to question God's plan.¹⁰

A final difference in the two versions of the Tenth Commandment is the inclusion of the word "field" in the Deuteronomy list. "Field" is not listed in the Exodus version. The Baal Haturim attributes Moses with adding this when he repeats the Ten Commandments, since Israel is about to cross the Jordan into the land and will soon obtain ownership of fields.

May we each be like the wise son of the Passover Haggadah whose question is found in today's reading. When we notice apparent discrepancies we should still acknowledge that we are part of the people Israel and not let the discrepancies separate us from the larger community.

END NOTES

¹ Shevot 20b.

² a. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah, Maznaim Publishing Corporation, New York/Jerusalem, 1981.

b. The Stone Edition, The Chumash, ArtScroll Series Mesorah Publishing, Ltd., eleventh edition, sixth impression, September 2004.

c. The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, edited by Dr. J.J. Hertz, second edition, Soncino Press, 1997.

d. The Schocken Bible: Volume I, The Five Books of Moses, a new translation with introductions, commentary and notes by Everett Fox, Schocken Books, Inc., 1995.

Everett Fox is (according to the flyleaf) associate professor of Judaica and director of the Jewish studies program at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. His translation into English is rather different in approach from the other translations of which I am aware. Professor Fox writes in the preface to this work: "The translation therefore tries to mimic the particular rhetoric Hebrew whenever possible, preserving such devices as repetition, allusion, alliteration, [sic] and wordplay. It is intended to echo the Hebrew, and to lead the reader back to the sound structure and form of the original."

³ I thank Rabbi Yehuda Shurpin for giving me this reference in response to a query I made to the Chabad site "Ask the Rabbi."

⁴ See Exodus 15:25. The text in Parsha Beshalach is not specific, but from what happens at the next stop, Elim, it is reasonable to infer that the laws of Sabbath observance were among the decrees given at Marah.

⁵ Bava Kama 55a.

⁶ The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, op. cit. The comment is credited to Michael Frielander (1833-1910) in his work "The Jewish Religion."

⁷ This is a case of Moses' taking initiative without getting into trouble, unlike when he killed the taskmaster or struck the rock.

⁸ He was a 13th century commentator, probably French.

⁹ Pirke Avot IV:1.

¹⁰ Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra was born in Toledo, Spain, in 1092, and died in 1164 when he was killed by crusaders. He was a renowned Bible scholar, although poor. During his life he lost his wife and his children. His financial difficulties were so great that he wrote, "Were I to sell candles, the sun would never set; were I to sell shrouds, no one would ever die." His philosophy that all of one's possessions come from God must be one of the reasons he remained sane.