

Whither the Ten Commandments?

This week's Torah portion, *Yitro*, is considered by many as the most important one in the Torah, because it contains the Ten Commandments. Now, most people think these are the most important commandments in Judaism. But the Torah does not say so. Indeed, Judaism does not rank the commandments. The Mishna says:

Be as scrupulous in observing a minor commandment as a major commandment, because you do not know the value of each commandment. [Pirkei Avot 2:1]

Nevertheless the Ten Commandments are considered to be of more immediate relevance than the other 603, perhaps because they affect our daily lives so directly. Jewish law says that we may break any commandment to save a life, except for three of the Ten Commandments: The ones against idolatry, adultery and murder. This is called *pikuach nefesh*. [Sanhedrin 74a-b]

I'd like to begin with a particularly revealing story from the Talmud. It seems that when God wanted to give the Torah to Israel at Sinai, the angels in heaven opposed it. Here is the story:

R. Yehoshua b. Levi also said: When Moses ascended on high, the ministering angels spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He,
-"Master of the Universe! What is a human being doing among us?"
-[God] answered: "He has come to receive the Torah."
-The angels said to God, "That secret treasure, which you have hidden for 974 generations before the world was created, you wish to give it to flesh and blood! 'What is man, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man, that You take notice of him?.. Place Your glory [the Torah] upon the Heavens!'" [Psalms 8:2-5]
-The Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses, "Answer them!"
-Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, I am afraid they will consume me with the [fiery] breath of their mouths."
-God said to Moses, "Hold on to the Throne of Glory [for protection] and answer them."...
-Moses said to the angels,

- "...I am the Lord Your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt"... Did YOU go down to Egypt? Were YOU enslaved to Pharaoh?...

- 'You shall have no other gods'. Do YOU live among idolaters?

- 'Remember Shabbat, to keep it holy.' Do YOU work, that you need to rest?...

- 'You shall not swear falsely'... Do YOU engage in business?..

- 'Honor your father and your mother'. Do YOU have fathers and mothers?..

- 'You shall not murder. You shalt not commit adultery. You shall not steal.' Is there jealousy among you? Do you have an Evil Inclination to tempt you]?"...

Immediately the angels conceded... and each one was moved to befriend Moses and transmit something to him... Even the Angel of Death confided his secret to him... [Shabbat 88b]

So evidently Moses hit the nail on the head. His point was: You angels are already perfect. You live in an environment where you cannot possibly transgress anything. You have no free will. You are God's messengers, programmed for specific missions among the humans. You have no merit, because you cannot possibly choose to do wrong. But we humans are the ones who earn merit, because we live in an environment where we have to fight off many temptations.

- We are tempted to steal the things we want but don't have.
- We are tempted to kill the people who stand in our way.
- We are tempted to carry on multiple romances and follow our primitive instincts.
- We are tempted to follow the attractive and colorful idolatrous religions of the people around us.
- We feel the pain of persecution in every single generation.
- We have to endure hunger, disease, and natural disasters.
- We have to earn everything that we get.
- We have the free will to follow our Evil Inclination, our *yetser hara'*, and go down the wrong path, and we earn merit by declining to do so. God said in the Torah, "I have given you a choice." [Deut. 30:15] YOU angels don't have a choice.

So the price of our free will is that we have multiple challenges that the perfect angels don't have. And yet, paradoxically, our Evil Inclination, is not without its advantages. The Midrash says:

Nachman said, in R. Samuel's name: Without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family and engage in work.

Thus said [King] Solomon [in Ecclesiastes]: 'And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor' (Eccl. 4:4) [Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

So the driving force behind our successes is not necessarily impulses to be proud of. But without these [bad] impulses, there are no [good] successes. So it is no surprise that the Talmud says:

Abaye said: The greater the man, the greater his Evil Inclination [Sukkah 52a]

Now we know why the great are great. A human being sure is a complicated device!

The Midrash even tells us that we complained to God about our free will and asked for it to be removed:

-Israel complained: "If a potter leaves a pebble in the clay, and the jar leaks, is the potter not responsible? You have left the Evil Inclination in us. Remove it, and we will do Your will!"

-God replied, "This I will do in the time to come. [I.e., in the afterlife.]"

[Exodus Rabbah 46.4]

So after death we become perfect beings, like angels. Life becomes purely spiritual. It takes on a very different form. The Talmud tells us we cannot conceive of it and cannot appreciate it from where we are today:

There are no bodies... in the World to Come... There is no eating or drinking there, nor anything which the human body needs in this world. Nor any of the bodily events in this world, such as sitting, standing, sleep, death, distress, laughter, and so forth... There is no eating or drinking or procreation.. There is no way for us in this world to know or comprehend the great goodness which the soul experiences in the World to Come, for in this world we know only of material pleasures, and it is these we desire. [Berakhot 17a; Rambam, Yad, Teshuvah 8]

The Mishna puts the Jewish emphasis on both this world and the next in somewhat paradoxical terms:

[Rabbi Yaakov said:] Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world, '*olam ha-zeh*', than the whole life in the world to come, '*olam ha-bah*'; yet better is one hour of blissfulness of spirit in the world to come than the whole life in this world." [Pirkei Avot 4:22]

Jewish mystics have an original interpretation of the conversation between God, Moses and the angels. Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzera, the 19th century Moroccan sage, asks: What were the angels thinking?

Surely they knew that the Torah is made up of practical mitzvot, not applicable to angels! The answer is that the angels wanted to divide the Torah in two, with the practical part given to man and the mystical part remaining with the angels. But no, the two parts belong together. Just as the human body clothes the soul, so the practical side of the Torah clothes the mystical side. And, just as the soul needs the body in order to function, so the mystical part of the Torah needs the practical side.

(In other words, this world and the next are to be considered a single unit.)

Back to the commandments. Tradition tells us that the Torah does not command anything most of us would do naturally. It does not command us to feed ourselves, to feed our children, or to dress warmly in the cold. It does not command women to have children. It only commands us to do things we would NOT do naturally. The commandments were given in our own interest. The Talmud says:

God created the Evil Inclination, but He also created its antidote, the Torah. [Kiddushin 30b]

The Torah also does not command us to do anything we cannot do. The Torah itself says, “The Torah is not in heaven -- *lo ba-shamayim hi*”:

For this commandment, which I command you today, is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us, to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. [Deut. 30:11-14]

What do we conclude? We have many challenges here on earth. We are asked to take them on, and take our directions from our guidebook, the Torah. It is not an easy task, but it is a pleasant one, with the proper attitude. Some people like to say, “*Schwer zu sein ein Yid* -- It's tough to be a Jew”. May we also learn to say that it is also rewarding and conducive to a most productive life.

Shabbat shalom.