

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
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Parashat Yitro

Here's a little roadmap of what we're going to be talking about today: first a little philosophy, then we'll talk about the First Commandment, then a little Jewish philosophy, and then a story. So let's start with the philosophy.

What is Existentialism?

I also needed to look it up. This comes from Rabbi Neil Gillman's book *Sacred Fragments*, which we heard about last week from Rabbi Dr. Pamela Barmash.

Rabbi Gillman writes: "Life is serious and perilous. Death is the ultimate absurdity. I am largely alone. How to live, what to make of my life, what ultimate structure of meaning to adopt, is my decision to make. Only I can make that decision, and in making it, I am utterly alone. I have nothing on which to base myself, apart from my own, totally personal sense of who I am, what I hold dear, and how I want to conduct my life. The decision is risk-filled for what is at stake is my one-and-only life. No wonder I am anxious—not the kind of anxiety that I face before an exam, but a root or "existential" anxiety which stems simply from my being alive, and from which I will be freed only when I die" (*Sacred Fragments*, p. 166).

The implication of existentialism is that there is no system of values that comes from outside the individual that can have universal, objective validity.

A part of this pure existentialism is that if I am completely, existentially alone, then I cannot and do not see any other person as anything like myself. I see other people as things, as objects, because nothing is or can be like me; since I am unique.

But. Martin Buber was a Jewish existentialist philosopher who sought a path to overcome this existential loneliness and aloneness, and he found that in relationships that are not, as he put it, "I-It" relationships, but rather, "I-Thou," or as we would put it today, "I-You" relationships. In an I-Thou relationship, we, subjects, are able to see another as a subject. And God, for Buber, is the ultimate Thou, the ultimate one with whom to be in relationship.

So now let's think about the First Commandment. What is the First Commandment? "I am the Lord your God, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery."

As many scholars, including Richard Elliott Friedman observe, this is not a commandment. Rather, Friedman suggests, this is an introductory statement, which is common—stating the name of the one who is dictating the terms and stating the history of what this one has done for the recipient of these terms.

Additionally, most Christians don't see this as a commandment—they separate what we know as the Second Commandment, to make one more.

But let's make a Jewish case for how the First Commandment may actually be a commandment, and important.

The earliest Jewish interpretation, or midrash on Exodus, the *Mekhilta*, argues that after a person sees the face of a king and recognizes and accepts the king and his decrees, afterward, they can accept the decrees via a messenger too. That is to say, the First Commandment is a kind of introduction, of meeting God. And that encounter, that meeting, has an implicit commanding quality to it.

In fact, Franz Rosenzweig, a contemporary of Martin Buber's, and also an existentialist, describes relationship, every relationship, as having a commanding quality to it, implying an expectation.

Whereas Buber simply saw an I-Thou relationship as existing as relationship, Rosenzweig understood that kind of relationship as creating obligations. One cannot see another as a subject, as another human being, or as a God, without feeling some responsibility to that person.

For Rosenzweig, the remaining nine commandments might be the response that we have, the expectation that we intuit, in response to the reality of the First Commandment, of God's existence, of there being another I, in addition to me.

But there's a different way of thinking about those last nine commandments. Abraham Joshua Heschel, not an existential thinker, identifies mitzvot and halakha as the context for the experience of God. We experience God by and through doing mitzvot and living within halakha—they are tools for helping us feel that relationship. The remaining nine commandments then become ways to experience God, to make that first commandment true.

So, the First Commandment can be a call, answered by the next nine. Or the First Commandment can be aspiration, to be reached through the next nine.

I think also, the First Commandment can be a model. It's so hard to sit with another person, to sit in a room of people, and see each of them with the holiness and complexity that we know each of us possesses. God models that for us in the First Commandment. It's not commanded in a didactic way, but merely by God's presence we cannot but help to respond, or aspire to feel.

And now, a story, told by Rabbi Ed Feinstein.

A rabbi once asked his students, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?"

The students thought they grasped the importance of the question. There are, after all, prayers that can be recited and rites and rituals that can be performed, only at night. And there are prayers and rites and rituals that belong only to the day. It is therefore important to know when night has ended and day has begun. It is important to get the prayers and rites and rituals correct.

The brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbors, that when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I look from the fields and I see a house and I can tell that it's my house and not the house of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A third student offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A fourth student offered yet another answer: "Rabbi, when I see a flower and I can make out the colors of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that when night has ended and day has begun."

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face—until finally he shouted, "No! Not one of you understands!"

“You only divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor’s field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another; you separate one color from all the others. Is that all we can do—divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough? Isn’t the world split into enough fragments? Is that what the Torah is for? No my dear students, it’s not that way, not that way at all.”

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. One of them ventured, “Then Rabbi, tell us: How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?”

The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded: “When you look into the face of the person who is beside you and you can see that that person is created in the image of God and is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun.”<sup>1</sup>

May that day come soon for all of us.

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<sup>1</sup> “Day and Night” in Ed Feinstein, *Capturing the Moon*, pp. 54-55.