

Beth El-Keser Israel

Yitro, 2009

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Shabbat Shalom!

From the 20th chapter of Exodus, these words:

Adonai spoke all these words, saying: I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: you shall have no other gods besides Me.

And so begins the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, the ten Words. Ah, yes! The Decalogue! These words were an indelible part of my childhood, maybe yours. I remember well being taught these Ten Commandments --- age 5, 6 at the latest. Remember the disconnect? Who were they talking to? “Do not kill!” Me? Murder? Please. How about lying? Never went there. Not at age 5. My mother knew me too well --- would never fly. And steal? Out of the question. Mom would know just by looking at me, and I didn’t want anyone else’s toys anyway. And then there was the one about honoring your father and mother. What was this about? My mother was my whole life. To be warned

to always love her made no sense at all. And those other commandments? Just the words were beyond me: graven images, covet, adultery. No clue. But you get the picture. Later I wondered just how common these things might have been in ancient Israel. Stealing, murder, sleeping around. In a close, tribal society, it is hard to imagine much of this going on. And yet here we have it, in the most declarative, succinct expression possible. Of course, there are reasons for this --- and a lot more to these Words than our young minds could comprehend. This morning I hope to show how these Words, taken in their entirety, were cherished and celebrated; considered as sustaining, accessible, and empowering. There was no thought of judgment or burden or threat. Ancient Israel understood these words as gracious gift, as divine invitation, indeed as comfort, coming from the security of knowing just where the boundaries lie and who stands the watch. These words, the texts will suggest, might even be thought of as Adonai's Divine Embrace, claiming the people Israel for His own. But I get ahead.

It must be said, first and foremost, that the proclamation of these Words over Israel put her election into effect. Thus the speaking of commandment, the establishment of obligation, is none other than the establishment of Covenant.

The proclamation of Adonai's sovereign rights and of his Divine Will for justice is like a boundary drawn around Israel; it establishes her identity as Adonai's own. Furthermore, we find in chapter 31 of Deuteronomy that Moses instructed Israel to:

Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Booths, when Israel comes to appear before Adonai your God in the place that he will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people together --- men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities --- that they may hear and so learn to revere Adonai your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching. Their children too who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere Adonai your God as long as they live in the land... (verses 10 – 13)

This means that the public proclamation of these Words established Israel's identity as Adonai's own, accomplishing her conveyance to Adonai Himself. And this event was celebrated at a Covenant festival every seven years at

Shechem. That the Decalogue was the climax of this solemn event shows how ardently Israel looked upon the bestowal of these Words. Moreover, this Covenant was seen and celebrated as contemporary; recital and affirmation continued time after time, generation by generation. Israel saw their proclamation as event, as saving event. The picture you get is totally devoid of anything spiritual or nostalgic. We have an historical event recalled and relived. These words were a concrete reality that, in celebration every seven years, retained undiminished importance for each succeeding generation. It should be apparent, as well, that this event in no way intended to sketch anything like a legal code. These Words were not laws in any usual sense. There are no penalties or consequences; nor are there qualifiers, such as “do this because,” as is common with other legal writing. There are no accompanying blessings or curses. Nor do they contain maximum demands of Adonai, no attempt is made to be comprehensive. We have here just the opposite: the words expressed, in the negative, only that which is absolutely displeasing to Adonai. Indeed, it appears that what we have in the Decalogue is not so much “law,” but rather precepts that are the final result of quite considerable pastoral and theological reflection. For these Words had a past life, and were drawn up by priests as a deliberate selection from a much broader

store of legal collections. They seem to owe their existence to an effort to outline Adonai's whole will for Israel in the most succinct, most precise form possible. Israel worked for a long time on these Words before they became so universal, and so concise, as to be capable of expressing the whole will of Adonai for His people. It is, furthermore, most remarkable that at this moment of her identification as Adonai's own, Israel was not raised into a special state of existence. There are no sacral distinctions made. In a quite elementary fashion, these words watch over women and men in their day-to-day lives, and in all that being human entails.

For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand
as is Adonai our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what
great nation has laws and rules as “perfect” as all this
Teaching that I set before you this day?

That's Moses in Deuteronomy 4 (verses 7-8)

One of the most sublime epithets Israel used about these Words is *zedek*, translated here in our Etz Hayim as “perfect,” but better rendered as righteous.

That is, in revealing them, Adonai provided definitive evidence of His loyalty to this relationship with Israel. Again and again it comes up.

In the wisdom Psalm 19:

The judgments of Adonai are *zedek* altogether, more desirable than gold...(verse 10-11a)

Another wisdom Psalm, 119:

I will praise you with a sincere heart as I learn your righteous rules. (verse 7)

And later:

You are righteous, Adonai; You have ordained righteous decrees. (verse 137-8)

Indeed, throughout Psalm 119, that incomparable paean to Adonai's ways, statutes, judgements, testimonies, rules, decrees, and ordinances, there is nothing authoritarian, nothing adversarial; there is no sense of judgement and its accompanying apprehension. Rather, we find only thankfulness, only celebration. Later, in the Prophets, Israel encountered the law as judge and destroyer. We could spend much time profitably exploring *zedekah*. It means righteousness, but it is used in our Scriptures especially as the standard for relationships --- all the relationships of human life, not just those among men

and women. It is the standard of man's relationship to the animals, and the environment. *Zedekah* is the highest value in life --- that on which all properly ordered life rests. So when Israel described these words as *zedekah*, she was saying they denoted, first of all, a relationship; that they describe and define and create a relationship. If you will, just notice how far from this reality is the notion that they somehow establish an absolute ethical norm? This is stunning: the entire Western world has seen the "The Ten Commandments" as an absolute ethical norm for most of the last 2,000 years. We are all heirs to this misconception: and we are the poorer for it. It must be pointed out, therefore, that the sometime translation of *zedekah* as "justice" must be very circumspect indeed. The idea of *zedekah* as justice comes, believe it or not, from the Vulgate Bible, and St Jerome's rendering of *zedekah* as *iustitia*. That in the early 400's CE. The idea we have in the West of justice, law and legality, with absolute claims and irrevocable demands --- this idea is ubiquitous. But it is NOT AT ALL what our Decalogue is about. Here we are talking relationship and righteousness, not justice and rectitude. The story Israel tells of her life with Adonai is one of a devoted and thankful, if complex, relationship. A relationship characterized by nurture, protection, gratitude, and *zedekah*. It was never characterized by adherence to an absolute

norm. But it has come across that way, hasn't it? Look at it another way: conduct loyal to any relationship involves much more than correctness; it involves understanding and kindness, compassion and compromise, loyalty and devotion. Zephaniah speaks of Adonai's presence in their midst as *zedekah* saying, "every morning He gives His decision, His *zedekah* like the light which does not fail." (Zephaniah 3:5) What an image! This righteousness, this relationship, this *zedek*, is a gift: ever-present, like light itself!

In line with all of this, as time went on, the place where Israel encountered these ten Words became more and more the hearts of women and men. Adonai sought obedience, to be sure, but obedience that was eager and grateful, wholehearted obedience, obedience from the heart. Deuteronomy, in the North, well beyond the heyday of the Judean monarchy, in the aftermath of the Prophetic Revolution, struck an entirely new chord. Chapter 30, verse 14, is familiar to us all:

The Word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

The Divine Words are now close by, easy to fulfil, there to be enjoyed, even to the point of being delicious. In this movement from obligation as a

matter of principle, to obligation as a matter of desire, we come to another example of how these Words had a prior life. Eight of our Words are negative, but two, originally negative (Deuteronomy 27:16), are now expressed as positive: keeping Shabbat and honoring parents. The same process is found as the older, negative formulations move to the positive in Leviticus 19, verse 18. Listen carefully and watch the thinking progress:

You shall not avenge yourself nor bear a grudge; for you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The sense is inescapable that we have here a process, as Israel's ear was beginning to sharpen --- hearing behind the negative requirement "You shall not avenge yourself," a constructive, more viable significance: "for you shall love your neighbor as yourself." No longer may men and women act just on principle. Henceforth, obedience is to be a matter of the heart.

This example shows us another aspect of how Israel regarded Adonai's Covenant Will for her: that it adapted and changed, inspiring each generation to formulate it's own sense of things. The same Words were recited, but they came to have expanded meaning. Far from being rigid and static, Israel regarded these Words as contemporary, as an event in which

Adonai confronted every generation in it's own time, requiring from each it's own response. Deuteronomy, itself, is the grandest example. This is a collection of Levitical sermons, assembled in the Northern Kingdom well after David and Solomon, amid political turbulence and disintegration, when no part of life remotely resembled the early days when Adonai first spoke. These sermons summon Israel to a new, different, inner motivation for observing Adonai's ordinances: love Adonai and be thankful for this path to obedience.

Moving on another 400 or 500 years, we find further appreciation for these defining Words in the post-exilic Wisdom psalms. Looking at only two, 1 and 119, we find celebrated themes already begun in Deuteronomy: women and men are to keep these Words close to their hearts as objects of enjoyment and great value. They are to be present and available day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. In these psalms the revelation of Adonai's will for mankind is no longer an occasion for festival remembrance. Now it becomes personal, even intimate. Now Adonai's Words have become the object of both unceasing meditation, and unceasing joy! Just listen:

Blest is the man.... whose delight is in the law of
Adonai; and in his law he will occupy himself day and
night. (Ps 1 verses 1a – 2)

With my whole heart I have sought you, and not
deviated from your commandments. (Ps 119 verse 10)

Your Word I have hid within my heart. (Ps 119 verse
11a)

I will run the way of your commandments, for you have
set my heart free. (Ps 119 verse 32)

My hands I will lift up to your commandments, which I
love. (Ps 119 verse 48a)

At midnight I will rise to do *todah* (to give thanks),
because of your righteous judgements. (Ps 119 verse
62)

How sweet are your Words in my throat, sweeter than
honey in my mouth. (Ps 119 verse 103)

The picture is one of all life permeated with the contemplation of Adonai's Words; suffused with gratitude for His decisions. There is no thought at all of falling short; not the slightest consideration of recompense; no anxious awareness of failure. No liability at all. All we have is delight, joyful appreciation, and confidence.

Of course, the story doesn't end there. Things did not go as planned for our priestly writers and their cosmopolitan wisdom scholars, as they struggled to find an identity and a common purpose in the centuries following the exile. In time, the ancient Near East was politically fragmented and unstable; and the religious situation, likewise, became fluid and sectarian. As the third century gave way to the second, and so on; as people became divided and isolated, Israel's view of these Words became, as you might expect, more crystallized, approaching the dogmatic. That is what happens when one's security is in question. The ten Words gradually came to be seen in more

absolute terms; spoken once for all, a closed book. The idea of the saving, embracing ordinance, joining a people to their God, an object of wonder and celebration, yielded to a strictness of observance and a proliferation of legal texts. Deuteronomy, centuries before, in reducing all pronouncements to the one fundamental of cherishing Adonai above all (Deuteronomy 6 verse 4) looks rather laid back by contrast. Likewise, the Wisdom psalms, on the very cusp of this crystallization, may be read as the last, perhaps even the finest, expression of Israel's long, exuberant engagement with these Words and their Divine Voice.

This would be a good place to stop. But I must ask your indulgence for just a couple of observations.

First, today, in Exodus 20, we interrupt the narrative, the grand stories of Israel's origins. The Patriarchs and tribal traditions, which open the Torah, are now behind us and we turn to the commandments and the giving of the law to Moses. We will not return to the narrative until we have finished Exodus, the whole of Leviticus, and on into the tenth chapter of Numbers. Portions of what we now begin will provide some of the most boring reading imaginable. And some of it appears to be a preoccupation with ritual and

practice as a means and an end in themselves. But that would miss the whole point of what is being said and done. To see it like that would be a complete distortion of the purpose for which these rules and regulations, governing life and cult, were written down. These legal writings, and the much older collections from which they came, were not meant to be inspirational or devotional in any way. There is a grand vision underlying this entire minutia regarding life and ritual. These writings were meant to be a tangible blueprint, based on ancient custom, of the way Israel was to maintain herself in obedience and in holiness. For only in that holiness would she be fitted for the worship of the One, True and Holy God. This worship was now her new calling in ways it had never been before. Her previous *raison d'être*, as an empire and as a nation state, had come bitterly to an end. Something else had to be found to justify and validate her life. Along the way, old dreams needed to be discarded, old theologies reformulated, and, to be sure, old scores settled. It is a wholly and radically new conception of who the people Israel was to be. It may look like minutia, but it is, in fact, a grand vision giving purpose to Israel's present reality, and on into the future. So go ahead and yawn, be bored, fidget, come late. It's even OK to read little books tucked into your *Etz Hayim*.

But by all means ask, “What were they thinking?” “What were they thinking?” They were thinking nothing less than what it would take for a people to be faithful to their Covenant relationship. No longer were the old answers of King and Temple available, when court and cult and empire provided her with an identity. These answers were long gone and new ways had to be found for Israel to be herself and to be faithful. Next week we jump right in with the Book of the Covenant, another old legal collection. It may help to bear in mind that this collection, though it comes hard on the heels of Sinai and the Decalogue, has nothing at all with the Sinai event. It comes from an altogether different tradition.

Second, for those of you who thought that a drash on the Decalogue could not possibly be about anything but ethics, I hope you have been pleasantly surprised. Ethics are here, of course. But the focus on ethics held sway for so long, so tenaciously, and so corrosively, that the correction I have tried to convey today deserves our attention all the more. Can anything be said, briefly, about ethics? Sure. What these ten Words demand is, very simply, that no man or woman may act at any time, in any way, to exploit another human being. Adonai’s sovereignty precludes it absolutely. For example, anybody seeing Biblical support today, or in the past, for racism, for slavery,

or for sexual bias or orientation discrimination (we may recall a host of fundamentalists of every stripe, as well as St Paul and Maimonides, even some Biblical writers themselves) has simply misread the text, and missed the whole point. Or anybody seeing support for oppression or cruelty, torture or intrusion, however temporary or expedient, likewise. The ethics are here; but the beauty, and import for us, lie elsewhere.

Third, although somewhat anachronistic in 2009, I hope it has become clear from what we have covered, that it is no longer tenable on any grounds, to characterise the Hebrew Scriptures or Judaism as legalistic or as fostering a “legal piety.” Much ink, indeed much blood, has been spilled over the centuries on this “law vs spirit” issue. While the force of it has abated somewhat, the scandals of the past are appalling. We need to read these texts together. And it should come as no surprise that while the Church was grievously misreading the Hebrew Scriptures, it was, all the while, just as grievously misreading its own, especially the letters of Paul. There is a lot to do.

Lastly, I can now say how deeply grateful I am for this opportunity, and willingly acknowledge how much fun I have had. But I must recall for you that much of what I have tried to say about Israel’s view of these Words as

the defining expression of Adonai's whole will for Israel, celebrated through thick and thin as Adonai's life giving embrace, all this we have heard before, in simpler words, right here. It was maybe two years ago, our Rabbi spoke meaningfully on the essence of Torah. In the end, you may recall, Jon-Jay concluded: "Torah is comfort." Amen

Shabbat Shalom