

**“Maimonides 613 Series”
The Ten Commandments**

First Commandment: To Know G-d

Exodus 20:2

אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים

I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage

Maimonides Positive commandment #1

The first mitzvah is to believe in the Divinity: to believe that there is a cause and a reason, which is the Maker of all creations. As The Exalted One has said: “I am the G-d, your G-d”

Revelation

In the Hebrew year 2448, over 3300 years ago, G-d revealed Himself to over 3 million Jews standing at the foot of Mount Sinai. When He spoke, the entire world heard; His voice had no echo, as it permeated all reality. There was no question in that generation if a person believed in G-d or not – you *knew* G-d, you *saw* G-d. The Talmud says that Jews are “believers, the children of believers” because the souls of every Jew that would ever be born and every convert that would ever convert, all stood together and witnessed the revelation at Sinai. Because of this, faith in G-d is inherent within us. What did G-d tell the world during this Revelation?

The First Commandment

The First Commandment is “I am the L-rd, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Why does G-d identify Himself as the One who took us out of Egypt? Why not as the Creator of the universe? Surely the creation of the universe is a far greater feat than the exodus from Egypt.

***Pshat* – The Surface Level**

Three answers to this question are given on the *pshat* level:

- 1) We did not witness creation, but we did witness the exodus from Egypt. Because of this, we owe it to G-d to believe in Him and follow His commandments.
- 2) Just as G-d delivered us from Egypt out of His great love for us, so, too, He gave us the commandments out of love – even those that seem difficult to keep or seem illogical. Each commandment is expressly for our benefit.

- 3) When G-d created the world, He created nature. When He took us out of Egypt, He broke the system of nature, and we saw this happen. Every day we must remember that G-d not only *created* the universe, but that He continues to create it *ex nihilo* every single moment, and can transcend nature at will. The fact that the First Commandment is given in the singular (“I am *your* [singular] G-d”), tells us that G-d cares about the welfare of each individual person, and therefore continues to bring us out of our personal Egypt--our constraints and challenges--every single day.

Remez – The Hinted-At Level

G-d's mentioning of the Exodus from Egypt in His First Commandment reassures us that just as He took us out of the Egyptian exile, so will He take us out of this final exile with the coming of Moshiach (may it be immediately!).

Drush – The Halachic Level

The first mitzvah listed in Rambam's *Sefer haMitzvot* is to believe in G-d. This commandment is the foundation of all other commandments. What does it mean to believe in G-d? To know that there is a First Cause, which makes all creatures and creations come into reality. This is the meaning of “I am the L-rd your G-d.”

How, though, can we be commanded to believe something? The Abarbanel teaches that the mitzvah is not simply to believe, because inherently we already do. He teaches that the mitzvah is to *know about G-d*. This concept is expounded upon in Rambam's later works. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam writes that the first mitzvah is to “to know G-d”, to meditate on Him. In Chapter 2 of *Laws of The Foundations of Torah*, he writes that when a person contemplates on the vast and wondrous nature of G-d's creations, on the massive size and complexities of the moon and stars and the galaxies, a person will come to see that there is nothing comparable to G-d's wisdom, and will immediately have a desire to cleave to Him.

This can further be achieved through the study of kabbalah and chassidus. The Arizal tells us that it is a mitzvah to reveal the hidden secrets of the Torah. This is implicated in Chapter One of *Laws of The Foundations of Torah*, where Rambam writes that “the foundation of all foundations and pillar of all pillars is to know that there is a First Cause of creation” - a foundation you do not readily see, a pillar you can plainly see. This first mitzvah to know G-d is not only the foundation of the mitzvot but also a pillar to affect all the mitzvot – i.e. when we do a mitzvah, we perform it not because we want to or we feel like it, but because we know that there is a G-d who desires our mitzvot.

A story of the Alter Rebbe illustrates this point: one year, when Yom Kippur fell on Shabbos, the Alter Rebbe's congregation was awaiting the return of their spiritual leader to begin the afternoon and *neilah* services. They waited and waited, but he did not come. A woman who lived on the edge of town had given birth earlier in the day, and her husband was not home to take care of her. The Alter Rebbe sensed her pain and the danger she and the baby were in, so he went to her home, chopped wood for the

fire, and cooked food for the new mother and her baby. The Alter Rebbe had tremendous, profound knowledge of G-d. He was known to enter a trance-state and cry out to G-d, “I don't want Your Lower Paradise, I don't even want Your Higher Paradise – I just want *You!*” Even though he was able to reach this level of unity with G-d, he did not remain aloof from the world. Meditating on G-d is only the foundation; this knowledge must be as a pillar and bring a person to action. It must inform and enrich all the mitzvot you do.

***Sod* – The Level of Secrets**

The Arizal asks why the First Commandment starts with the word *anochi* and not the standard word for “I”, *ani*. He answers that *anochi* is an acronym for a phrase meaning “I, My Soul, have written and given you the Torah.” Just as an artist signs his masterpiece, so *anochi* tells us that G-d crafted the Torah. Interestingly, the Gemara has already given this answer. What, then, is the Arizal's insight?

According to the Talmud alone, *anochi* means, “I am the Author of the Torah.” Kabbalah teaches that not only is He the Author, but that “[He] gave [His] Soul” in the Torah. If you want to be able to grasp the essence of G-d, if you want Him alone, you must study His Torah. The prophet says, “He who is thirsty, let him drink.” Why does he need to tell us this? Don't we all know to drink if we are thirsty? This statement means that if a person is thirsty for spirituality, they won't quench their thirst in cults or by meditation alone. They must drink from the waters of Torah.

***Chassidus* – The Fifth Level**

The Rebbe asks: why is *anochi* the first word of the Ten Commandments, when it is an Egyptian word? It is the holiest of all the commandments, the one which revealed G-d's essence in the world! Furthermore, why does it mention the exodus from Egypt when creation *ex nihilo* is a greater miracle?

The Rebbe answers: with this opening commandment, G-d is telling us the objective of Torah and Judaism. The power of Torah is the greatest power in all the Universe – even if a person is in Egypt, the darkest and most promiscuous of all lands, by learning Torah a person can transcend time and space. G-d says, “I will take you out of the muck, I will bring you to a place that is holy and beautiful and peaceful.” An Egyptian word is used because G-d is telling us that His Torah is not only for a holy land and a holy people – it is so powerful that it brings light, direction, and inspiration to even the lowest of all lands and peoples. *Anochi* begins the Ten Commandments because the objective and power of Torah is to permeate, not only the bright places, but the dark places. Even Egypt, which etymologically means constraints and limitation, should know G-d and be taken out of its darkness, to a place of expansiveness.

A Story

Reb Schmelke of Nikolsberg was asked, “You are so brilliant and so holy – why do you travel so far to visit your Rebbe, the Maggid?” Reb Schmelke answered, “In *Pirkei Avos*, it is written that one must

make for themselves a teacher, and it will remove all doubt.” What does this mean? Yisro was the father-in-law of Moshe. He came to visit Moshe in the desert after he heard about the splitting of the sea and Amalek's subsequent attack on the Israelites. He then came and converted. Why did these events make him convert? Amalek saw these miracles happen to the Jews and to Judaism, yet they attacked the Jews soon after the miracles. Yisro realized that a miracle is only an inspiration. It is a one-time high. If you don't stoke the fire, if you don't keep your commitment to G-d going, it dissipates. How do you keep the fire burning? You require a teacher for yourself from whom to learn kabbalah and chassidus. We then communicate and unify with G-d each day through our holy Torah. May we see G-d with our own fleshly eyes, with the coming of Moshiach, amen!

Wishing everyone a happy Shavuot, and may you receive the Torah internally with joy.