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INSPIRE

YISRO
24TH SHEVAT -6 FEB 2021

BUT DOES IT SPEAK TO YOU?

By Rabbi Yossi Goldman

The locomotive was making its first appearance in a little town of old. No one had ever seen a horseless carriage before. Every one of the townspeople gathered at the new station to witness history in the making. The gun was fired and with a flourish of huffing and puffing the locomotive roared out of the station. Well… the engine that is. Unfortunately, the shlemiel whose job it was to hitch the other cars to the engine had forgotten to do so, and the long train of carriages were left behind in a trail of smoke.

Sometimes, the most meticulously laid plans—a business strategy, a football game plan, or even (perish the thought), a synagogue resolution made on Yom Kippur—fail to come to fruition—all because we neglected to hitch the engine to the train…

The introduction to the Ten Commandments we will read in this week's Parshah is, And G-d spoke all these words, to say… In Hebrew, leimor. Now, when the Torah uses the word leimor, "to say," it is usually because G-d is telling Moses something important which Moses in turn should pass on and tell the Children of Israel. So the word leimor makes perfect sense. He said it to him to say it to them. But here we have a problem. You see, every Jew was present at Sinai, and according to the mystics, that includes even the unborn souls of future generations. So there was no need for Moses to pass on anything to anyone. All the Jews heard the Ten Commandments directly from G-d. So why the word leimor? To say to whom?

Rabbi DovBer, the great Maggid of Mezeritch, explained that here the word leimor means to speak to you. That these words should not remain mere words, but should resonate and say something meaningful to you personally. They should be said and heard so that they continue to reverberate forever after in your minds, heart and deeds. The Ten Commandments must not remain an abstract idea, an unhitched engine, a nice philosophy or an interesting cultural practice - something of no more significance to yourself than the rituals of ancient Incas of Peru. The Ten Commandments must be relevant enough to make a difference in our lives; otherwise, whom did G-d say them to and whatever for?

The Talmud describes a thief who prays to G-d for success before breaking in to commit a burglary. The epitome of hypocrisy—G-d told you, "You shall not steal," and you have the audacity to ask Him to help you succeed in defying His wishes? This has got to be the ultimate chutzpah! How do we get a handle on this Talmudic thief's hypocrisy? The answer is that this thief, too, is a believer, but his faith is superficial and doesn't permeate his being sufficient to influence his behaviour. Deep down he has faith but he remains a religious goniff!

They tell the story of a rabbi who was in his study when in walked Berl, the town pickpocket. "Rabbi, I was walking down the street and found this wallet lying on the ground. I know that to return a lost article is a mitzvah of the Torah, so I brought it in. Perhaps you can make an announcement in Shul and find the rightful owner." The rabbi sees there is a fair amount of cash in the wallet. He is so inspired at Berl's change of heart that he embraces him and congratulates him on his reformation. Later, the rabbi notices that the gold watch he had in his jacket pocket is missing. He calls Berl and asks him if perchance he may have inadvertently taken his watch. Berl confesses. "I don't understand you Berl. You find a wallet full of cash in the street and you return it, and then you go and steal my gold watch?

Berl answers, "Rabbi, a mitzvah is a mitzvah, but business is business."

We all believe and we all want to do mitzvahs, big and small. The trick is to translate our inner piety into outer practice. What does my faith do for me? Does it speak to me? How does it transform my behaviour, my life? Does it make any tangible difference in my everyday behaviour? The Torah must not remain a theory on the drawing board. The Ten Commandments do indeed speak to us. The question is, are we listening?

TO THANK BEFORE WE THINK

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Shabbat Times
Candle Lighting 4:40pm
Shabbos ends 5:49pm

The Ten Commandments are the most famous religious-and-moral code in history. Until recently they adorned American courtrooms. They still adorn most synagogue arks. Rembrandt gave them their classic artistic expression in his portrait of Moses, about to break the tablets on seeing the golden calf. John Rogers Herbert's massive painting of Moses bringing down the tablets of law dominates the main committee room of the House of Lords. The twin tablets with their ten commands are the enduring symbol of eternal law under the sovereignty of G d.

It is worth remembering, of course, that the "ten commandments" are not Ten Commandments. The Torah calls them aseret hadevarim, and tradition terms them aseret hadibrot, meaning "the ten words or utterances." We can understand this better in the light of documentary discoveries in the twentieth century, especially Hittite covenants or "suzerainty treaties" dating back to 1400-1200 BCE, that is, around the time of Moses and the exodus. These treaties often contained a twofold statement of the laws laid down in the treaty, first in general outline, then in specific detail. That is precisely the relationship between the "ten utterances" and the detailed commands of Parshat Mishpatim. The former are the general outline, the basic principles of the law.

Usually they are portrayed, graphically and substantively, as two sets of five, the first dealing with relationships between us and G d (including honoring our parents since they like G d brought us into being), the second with the relations between us and our fellow humans.

However, it also makes sense to see them as three groups of three. The first three (one G d, no other G d, do not take G d's name in vain) are about G d, the Author and Authority of the laws. The second set (keep Shabbat, honor parents, do not murder) are about createdness. Shabbat reminds us of the birth of the universe. Our parents brought us into being. Murder is forbidden because we are all created in G d's image. The third three (don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness) are about the basic institutions of society: the sanctity of marriage, the integrity of private property, and the administration of justice. Lose any of these and freedom begins to crumble.

This structure serves to emphasize what a strange command the tenth is: "Do not be envious of your neighbor's house. Do not be envious of your neighbor's wife, his slave, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbor's." At least on the surface this is different from all the other rules, which involve speech or action. Envy, covetousness, desiring what someone else has, is an emotion, not a thought, a word or a deed. And surely we can't help our emotions. They used to be called the "passions," precisely because we are passive in relation to them. So how can envy be forbidden at all? Surely it only makes sense to command or forbid matters that are within our control. In any case, why should the occasional spasm of envy matter if it does not lead to anything harmful to other people?

Here, it seems to me, the Torah is conveying a series of fundamental truths we forget at our peril. First, as we have been reminded by cognitive behavioural therapy, what we believe affects what we feel. Narcissists, for instance, are quick to take offence because they think other people are talking about or "dissing" (disrespecting) them, whereas often other people aren't interested in us at all. Their belief is false, but that does not stop them feeling angry and resentful.

Second, envy is one of the prime drivers of violence in society. It is what led Iago to mislead Othello with tragic consequences. Closer to home it is what led Cain to murder Abel. It is what led Abraham and then Isaac to fear for their lives when famine forced them temporarily to leave home. They believe that, married as they are to attractive women, the local ruler will kill them so that they can take their wives into their harem.

Most poignantly, envy lay at the heart of the hatred of the brothers for Joseph. They resented his special treatment at the hands of their father, the richly embroidered cloak he wore, and his dreams of becoming the ruler of them all. That is what led them to contemplate killing him and eventually to sell him as a slave.

Rene Girard, in his classic Violence and the Sacred, says that the most basic cause of violence is mimetic desire, that is, the desire to have what someone else has, which is ultimately the desire to be what someone else is. Envy can lead to breaking many of the other commands: it can move people to adultery, theft, false testimony and even murder.

Jews have especial reason to fear envy. It surely played a part in the existence of anti-semitism throughout the centuries. Non-Jews envied Jews their ability to prosper in adversity – the strange phenomenon we noted in Parshat Shemot that "the more they afflicted them the more they grew and the more they spread." They also and especially envied them their sense of chosenness (despite the fact that virtually every other nation in history has seen itself as chosen). It is absolutely essential that we, as Jews, should conduct ourselves with an extra measure of humility and modesty.

So the prohibition of envy is not odd at all. It is the most basic force undermining the social harmony and order that are the aim of the Ten Commandments as a whole. Not only though do they forbid it; they also help us rise above it. It is precisely the first three commands, reminding us of G d's presence in history and our lives, and the second three, reminding us of our createdness, that help us rise above envy.

We are here because G d wanted us to be. We have what G d wanted us to have. Why then should we seek what others have? If what matters most in our lives is how we appear in the eyes of G d, why should we want anything else merely because someone else has it? It is when we stop defining ourselves in relation to G d and start defining ourselves in relation to other people that competition, strife, covetousness and envy enter our minds, and they lead only to unhappiness.

If your new car makes me envious, I may be motivated to buy a more expensive model that I never needed in the first place, which will give me satisfaction for a few days until I discover another neighbor who has an even more costly vehicle, and so it goes. Should I succeed in satisfying my own envy, I will do so only at the cost of provoking yours, in a cycle of conspicuous consumption that has no natural end. Hence the bumper-sticker: "He who has the most toys when he dies, wins." The operative word here is "toys," for this is the ethic of the kindergarten, and it should have no place in a mature life.

The antidote to envy is gratitude. "Who is rich?" asked Ben Zoma, and replied, "One who rejoices in what he has." There is a beautiful Jewish practice that, done daily, is life-transforming. The first words we say on waking are Modeh ani lefanekha, "I thank you, living and eternal King." We thank before we think.

Judaism is gratitude with attitude. Cured of letting other people's happiness diminish our own, we release a wave of positive energy allowing us to celebrate what we have instead of thinking about what other people have, and to be what we are

PARSHA SUMMARY

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah . G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

This week's haftorah discusses Isaiah's vision of the Heavenly Chariot (the Merkavah), a revelation that was experienced by all the Israelites when G-d spoke the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai—an event recounted in this week's Torah reading. Isaiah perceives G-d sitting on a throne surrounded by angels. Isaiah vividly describes the angels and their behaviour (in anthropomorphic terms). During the course of this vision, Isaiah volunteers to be G-d's emissary to transmit His message to the Israelites. He is immediately given a depressing prophecy regarding the exile the nation will suffer as punishment for their many sins—and the Land of Israel will be left empty and desolate, though there will be left a "trunk" of the Jewish people that eventually will regrow.

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Green, Gillian mother Abrahams, Nita Faigel bas Dovid Saturday 06/02/2021 Shevat 24, 5781
Capal, Barry mother Capal, Nita Chaya Sarah bas Binyamin Monday 08/02/2021 Shevat 26, 5781
Conway, Connie father Levart, Leonard (Len) Eliezer ben Yaakov Monday 08/02/2021 Shevat 26, 5781
Leigh, Ruth brother Moss, Sidney Yashiya ben Yisroel Zeff Tuesday 09/02/2021 Shevat 27, 5781
Leigh, Phillip father Shafran, Joseph Yosef ben Zaylig Tuesday 09/02/2021 Shevat 27, 5781
Tancer, Jack father Tancer, Leonard Tuesday 09/02/2021 Shevat 27, 5781
Capal, Barry father Capal, Norman Nachman ben Beryl HaLevi Thursday 11/02/2021 Shevat 29, 5781

JEWISH HUMOUR

Moishe was reading his newspaper in the kitchen when his wife Miriam joined him at the table wearing a mask."I'm glad to see you taking COVID seriously honey," Moishe said, "But it's just the two of us here and we're inside the house.""Oh, this?" Miriam replied pointing to her mask. "This isn't for COVID. It's so I'll stop eating."

Rabbi Grunberg was having a Zoom meeting with his congregation who were itching to get back into shul."Come on Rabbi," said the shul president. "Is Coronavirus really that serious?"Rabbi Grunberg thought for a moment and responded, "Listen, shuls and casinos are closed. When heaven and hell agree on the same thing it's probably pretty serious."

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

Mr. and Mrs. Mustard have six daughters and each daughter has one brother. How many people are in the Mustard family?

Answer for last week by

icicles

STORY TIME

Reb Yerucham was never much of a breadwinner. Instead, he devoted all his time to Torah-study and prayer while his wife, Leah went to the marketplace to conduct business. She would make small purchases which she would, in turn, sell to her neighbours at a small profit. The arrangement worked well, for although they never had much, they both felt very privileged to be able to serve G-d by devoting themselves to His Torah.In the winter, though, when the roads were blocked with snow and ice, and the farmers couldn't make it into the market, Leah didn't fare so well. She was forced to sustain her family on the few coins she had managed to squirrel away during the previous months. Every time she had to dip into her meagre "capital" her heart fell. When only a few pennies remained, she decided it was time to go to her husband. "Yerucham, what are we going to do? How are we going to feed our children?"Reb Yerucham lifted his eyes from his tome and replied, "Have faith. Our Heavenly Father has never forsaken us before, and will not forsake us now...""What good is faith on an empty stomach!" the poor woman said bitterly. "I can't bear to see my children starving! What am I to say to them when they cry for bread tomorrow morning?""Don't worry now - till tomorrow morning there is ample time for G-d to provide for our needs. Put your trust in Him, Leah; He won't forsake us." Poor Leah left the room very troubled, but a little comforted by her husband's assurances.Reb Yerucham went outside, and as he was about to come back in, he spotted something lying in the mud. He picked it up and brought it into the house. He washed it, and sure enough, it was a silver coin!Now, his wife would be happy and they would be able to manage a little longer. But then another thought passed through his mind, "If G-d had wanted to send them sustenance, couldn't He find a better way than throwing him a muddy coin? No, He doesn't want me to accept it this way; He is only testing our faith in Him."So Yerucham decided that in the morning he would put the coin into the tzedaka (charity) box. Yerucham became so engrossed in his study that he was startled by his wife's cry of joy when she spied the silver coin on his table. "Don't get too excited; it's not ours!" he said quickly."What do you mean?""I have already donated it to charity."Looking into his wife's shocked eyes which were already filling the tears, he continued explaining, "Imagine if I were to give you a present and throw it into the garbage heap, saying, 'Go pick it up, dear.' You wouldn't want it anymore. Well, I believe that G-d has sent this coin to us as a test of our faith in His readiness to provide for us. Be strong in your faith, and you will see that I'll be proven right."Leah walked out of the room, shaking her head. She knew that her husband was a scholar and a saintly man, but there was not one morsel of food in the house. Meanwhile, Reb Yerucham sat by the light of a candle studying into the wee hours.Late that night two tired merchants were travelling through one of the persistent snowstorms that had enclosed the little hamlet. Exhausted, they saw a faint glimmer of a candle in the pitch, black darkness. They knocked on Reb Yerucham's door asking for accommodation. He agreed, but very apologetically since he had very little to offer them. The men were just happy to have a place to sleep. They spread out their bountiful food supplies on the table and invited their hosts to join them in a feast fit for a king.During the meal, the conversation took a scholarly turn and the merchants saw that their host was no country bumpkin, but a very learned and wise man. One of the merchants turned to his companion and said, "Why should we trouble ourselves to travel all the way to Lemberg to mediate our dispute when we have a great scholar right here.""Yes, I agree," said the second, and he proceeded to explain."We are not only partners, but also close friends, but we have a disagreement which we want to present before a great rabbi. We were about to continue to Lemberg, but we feel that you are a person very qualified to judge the problem, and G-d has brought us to your door. We will be happy to pay you the same amount we would have paid the Rabbi of Lemberg."Reb Yerucham didn't usually involve himself in judgements or arbitrations, but under the circumstances, since the two men were so anxious to settle in a peaceful fashion, he agreed to take up their case.The following morning, Yerucham and his guests made their way to the synagogue for the morning prayers. Yerucham slipped the silver coin into the charity box, thanking G-d for not forsaking him and his family in their hour of need, and sending him generous sustenance in an honorable and worthy manner.

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

Learning means to teach; teaching means to learn. Immediately upon learning, you must teach. As you teach, you must earn. When you study, even if you have no one to teach, study as though you were preparing a class. Then it will be real learning, and certainly, you will merit to teach it.