

¹Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.

1. יִתְרוֹ—יִשְׁמַע *Jethro ... heard*. The present sidrah, which contains the

Ten Commandments, bears the name of Jethro, a former idolatrous Midianite priest. **This clearly demonstrates that the Torah does not belong solely to those of Jewish descent.** In fact, **it is the universal law, indirectly addressed to all men.** Jethro is the example par excellence of a pagan leader who, upon recognizing the futility of the heathen cults, embraced the law of Israel. The same theme is repeated on the festival of Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, when the story of the convert Ruth is read.

From the time of its giving, the Torah relates to the entire universe. The fact that the episode of Jethro follows the war with Amalek gives us a revealing example of the various ways in which the nations react to Israel's existence. The events of the Exodus terrified the inhabitants of Philistia, Edom, Moab and Canaan (15:15). Yet it was precisely these events that led the Amalekites to seek to exterminate Israel, even though they were related to Israel through Esau. In contrast, Jethro, a total stranger to the Jewish people, was so deeply impressed by the evidence of God's concern for Israel that he converted to Judaism. The Children of Israel were taught a valuable lesson regarding their relationship with the nations of the world. **The fierce hatred of some is counterbalanced by admiration from others,** and it is not always the kinsman who shows the greatest understanding.

Some of our Sages contend that Jethro's arrival occurred **after the Ten Commandments were given** (*Zevachim* [Sacrifices] 116a; *Avodah Zarah* [Strange Fire] 24b; *Mechilta*; *Ramban*). Nevertheless, the story of his conversion precedes this event, an indication that Jethro was drawn to Judaism by the previous historical events. As Rashi puts it, the most remarkable of these events were the crossing of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek.

The first attack against Israel by Amalek was not provoked for religious reasons, since the religious laws were only given later. Amalek sought to destroy Israel as soon as it became an independent nation; Jethro, on the other hand, was so convinced of the Divine revelation from these historical events, that there was no need to wait and hear the contents of the Law before cleaving to the God of Israel.

Thus Rashi remarks that Jethro joined Israel because of the crossing of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek assumes its full significance.

While the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea could conceivably have been interpreted as an act of harsh vengeance by some primitive gods, the defeat of Amalek could only be the rule of Divine justice, which punishes sinful oppressors and protects innocent victims. Divine power revealed in justice this was the basis of Jethro's belief.¹

a. Deuteronomy 31:9-13

⁹So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. ¹⁰Then Moses commanded them: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Feast of Tabernacles, ¹¹when **all Israel** comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. ¹²Assemble the people—men, women and children, **and the aliens living in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.** ¹³**Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."**

b. Isaiah 2:1

¹This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw **concerning Judah and Jerusalem:**

²In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and **all nations (*kol ha-goyim*) will stream to it.** ³**Many peoples (*a-mim [nations]*) will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."** **The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.** ⁴**He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.** They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. ⁵Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

c. Exodus Rabba 5:9; Tanhuma B. Shemot, 22.

At Sinai, when the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, He manifested marvels upon marvels for Israel with His voice. How so? As the Holy One spoke, the voice reverberated throughout the world. At first Israel heard the voice coming to them from the south, so they ran to the south to meet the voice there. It shifted to the north, so they ran to the north. Then it shifted to the east, so they ran to the east; but from the east it shifted to the west, so they ran to the west. Next it shifted to heaven. But when they raised their eyes to-

¹ Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), pp. 232-242.

ward heaven, it seemed to rise out of the earth. Hence Israel asked one another, "But wisdom, where shall it be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12).

"And all the people perceived the thunderings" (Exod. 20:15). Since there was only one voice, why "thunderings" in the plural? **Because God's voice mutated into seven voices, and the seven voices into seventy languages, so that all the nations might hear it.**

1) **The Torah is intended for all nations—it is not to remain Israel's sole prerogative.**

d. Isaiah 56:1-7

¹This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. **²Blessed is the man who does this**, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil."

³Let no **foreigner** (בֶּן־הַנֶּחָר—*ben ha-ne-char*) who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." ⁴For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—**⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters**; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. **⁶And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. **Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.**"**

a. בֶּן־הַנֶּחָר (*ben ha-ne-char*)—son of that which is foreign, or from a foreign land.

e. Zechariah 8:18-23

¹⁸Again the word of the LORD Almighty came to me. ¹⁹This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace."

²⁰This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, ²¹and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.' ²²And **many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.**" ²³This is what the LORD Al-

mighty says: **"In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"**

1) The fast of the "fourth" is on the **17th of Tammuz (*Shiva Assar b'Tammuz*)**. The walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Romans, in 69 CE, after a lengthy siege. (Three weeks later, after the Jews put up a valiant struggle, the Romans destroyed the 2nd-Temple on the 9th of Av.)

2) The fast of the "fifth" is on the **9th of Av (*Tisha b'Av*)**. It commemorates a list of catastrophes so severe it's clearly a day specially cursed by God.

3) The fast of the "seventh" is on the **10th of Tishrei (*Yom Kippur*)**—the holiest day of the year. It is the day on which we are closest to God and to the quintessence of our own souls.

4) The fast of the "tenth" is on the **10th of Tevet** (589 BCE) commemorates the day when the armies of the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem.

1) 30 months later—on 9 Tammuz (586 BCE)—the city walls were breached, and on 9 Av of that year, the 1st-Temple was destroyed.

f. Psalms 1:1-3

¹Blessed is **the man** who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. ²But **his delight is in the law of the LORD**, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

g. Psalms 119:1-2

Blessed **are they** whose ways are blameless, **who walk according to the law of the LORD**. ²Blessed **are they who keep his statutes** and seek him with all their heart.

h. Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸Then Yeshua came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and **make disciples of all nations ... ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

i. Romans 10:4

Messiah is the **culmination** (not as in "end" but "aim" or "goal") of the law so that there may be righteousness **for everyone** who believes.

CJB—For the goal at which the *Torah* aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts.

- 1) The Messiah provides righteousness to everyone by *his* faithfulness that would otherwise only be possible by one's *complete* observance of the Torah. **But if everyone is not judged by the Torah, what's the point!**

^{18:2}After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her ³and her two sons. One son was named Gershom, for Moses said, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land"; ⁴and the other was named Eliezer, for he said, "My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh." ⁵Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, **came to him in the wilderness**, where he was camped near the mountain of God.

1. אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר—*To the Wilderness*. Although we already know that the Israelites were in the Wilderness, the Torah stresses this in praise of Jethro. As Rashi explains, he was living in worldly comfort but his heart impelled him to go into the Wilderness, a desolate land, to listen to the words of Torah. This explanation can also be understood figuratively. **Every convert who leaves his religion to join the Jewish people goes into the wilderness—a land of solitude and isolation. But it is specifically in this solitude where he discovers the holy summits where the Divine spirit hovers.**

a. Mark 10:23-31

²³Yeshua looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Yeshua said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁷Yeshua looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." ²⁸Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!" ²⁹"Truly I tell you," Yeshua replied, **"no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.** ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

^{20:1}And God spoke all these words: ²"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery ...

1. אֱלֹהִים—*God spoke*. Rambam contends the physical action of the speech cannot be ascribed to Hashem. Thus, the Divine voice was a special creation, formulating Hashem's words so that human beings could hear Him (Guide to the Perplexed 1:65). This view is supported by Sa'adyah Gaon² and others. However, **several Sages disagree, arguing that no intermediate element existed at the Revelation on Sinai, not even a special creation** (see Toras Shlomo 16:213-221). They claim that the word אֲנֹכִי, I am (v. 2) indicates that the Commandments came directly from Hashem.

Rambam adds that the first two commandments, which according to the Talmud were uttered by Hashem Himself (Makkot [Lashes] 24a), were heard by the people as a mighty, but unintelligible sound. This Heavenly voice overwhelmed them to the depths of their souls. For the other eight commandments, the Heavenly voice was heard only by Moses, who repeated the commandments to the people in Hashem's name, like all the other Divine laws. Even so, throughout all of the commandments, the people saw the fire and the lightning, and they heard the sounds of thunder and the shofar (Guide to the Perplexed 2:33).

Ramban argues that **the Israelites heard all Ten Commandments directly from the Divine Voice**; however, Moses, whose perception was unparalleled, felt obliged to repeat the last eight commandments in his own words. In either case, the act of Revelation raised the people to a high level of spirituality. In that moment of cosmic awareness, they perceived the metaphysical (i.e., the reality that exist beyond the physical world and our immediate senses) world, the realm of the Infinite and the Absolute. This temporary prophetic state spread to every individual in Israel (Responsa Rashba³ 4:37). The Revelation was an undeniable demonstration to every Jew that prophecy does indeed exist. The voice of Hashem, which Israel perceived at Sinai amid the thunder, was permanently recorded in the depths of their soul, and remains there indelibly for all eternity. Consciously or not, no Jew can completely forget that Heavenly Voice because the souls of all Jews, even those of future generations, were present at Sinai (Shemos Rabbah, ch. 28).

2 Sa'adyah ben Yosef Gaon (882/892-942) was a prominent rabbi, gaon ("genius"), Jewish philosopher, and exegete who was active in the Abbasid Caliphate.

3 Shlomo ben Avraham ibn Aderet (1235-1310) was a medieval rabbi, halakhist, and Talmudist. He is widely known as the Rashba, the Hebrew acronym of his title and name: Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham.

2. אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאֶמֶר—*All these statements*. Rashi observes that this phrase implies that Hashem pronounced all the Ten Commandments in one utterance, an impossible feat for humans. Certainly, the human concept of speech is inappropriate in relation to the Divine Being, Who transcends time. Yet, Rashi's remark also suggests that **the Ten Commandments form a single entity**. The fundamental laws which are the basis of social life (such as prohibiting murder, adultery, and robbery [*better*, “kidnapping”]) were proclaimed together with the “religious” laws [such as prohibiting idolatry and mandating Sabbath observance]. In Judaic philosophy, both types of law are essential. Religion and social ethics blend together in a powerful unity.

The Torah itself never refers to the Ten Commandments as מִצְוֹת, *commandments*, but as דְּבָרִים, *statements* (Exo 34:28; Deu4:13 and 10:4). A commandment assumes the presence of those whom it addresses and relies upon their acceptance. Without followers the commandment is useless and becomes nothing more than a relic of the past. This is not true of the Ten Statements. **Whether they are obeyed or not, these laws remain as they were spoken. They endure as the words of Hashem, the expression of the one truth, Permanent and unchangeable. Even if the entire Jewish people were to stray from Hashem and His law, the words of the Ten Commandments would remain eternal and untouched by their desertion.** The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God shall stand forever (Isa 40:8).

a. Isaiah 40:28

²⁸Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is **the everlasting God**, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

1) עוֹלָם (*olam*)—*forever, ever, everlasting, evermore, perpetual, old, ancient, world, etc.*

2) αἰώνιος (*aionios*)—*without beginning, without end, that which always has been and always will be, never to cease, everlasting.*

a) Romans 6:23

²³For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is **eternal life** (חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָמִים [*cha-yei ha-olamim*]) in Messiah Yeshua our Lord.

b. Ezekiel 37:26

²⁶I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an **everlasting covenant**. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever.

1) עוֹלָם (*olam*), αἰώνιος (*aionios*)

2). Psalm 105:8-10

⁸He remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations, ⁹the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. ¹⁰He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an **everlasting covenant**.

a) עוֹלָם (*olam*), αἰώνιος (*aionios*)

c. Psalm 119:89, 152, 160

⁸⁹Your word, LORD, is **eternal**; it stands firm in the heavens ...

¹⁵²Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them **to last forever** ... ¹⁶⁰All your words are true; all your righteous laws are **eternal**.

1) עוֹלָם (*olam*), αἰώνιος (*aionios*)

d. Matthew 5:18 (Luke 16:17)

¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, **not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.**

e. Matthew 24:35 (cf. Mark 13:31)

³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but **my words will never pass away.**

f. 1Peter 1:25

... but the word of the Lord endures **forever**." And this is the word that was preached to you.

3. 2. אֲנִי—I *am*. The first three verses of the Ten Commandments establish the fundamental principle of the Jewish faith: **Hashem's existence, His unity, and His spirituality.**

The very first word of the Revelation proclaims the Supreme Being as a personal God. **The God of Israel is not an abstract force.** He is not called “nature” or “spirit” or “universal soul.” Not only is He the ultimate Source of all life and existence, but an active Force in human history as well. He is the Source of human conscience and human morality.

Maharal⁴ emphasizes the difference between the personal pronouns אֲנִי and אָנֹכִי, both are translated I. The latter presupposes the presence of (a person who takes part in a dialogue or conversation); I does not exist without you. By contrast, the pronoun אָנֹכִי used here to in-

4 Judah Loew ben Bezalel (c. 1515–1609), also known as the Maharal (“*Moreinu ha-Rav Loew*,” ‘Our Teacher, Rabbi Loew’), was an important Talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic, and philosopher.

introduce the Ten Commandments designates the Absolute Being, whose existence is indisputable and independent of any contingencies. The words *I am Hashem, your God* proclaim a definite reality; **Hashem is sovereign even if He is not acknowledged**. This also explains why according to Maharal these first words are not a commandment in itself, though they could have been construed as such, but rather are presented as an axiomatic (*i.e.*, self-evident *or* unquestionable) truth.

הי אֱלֹהֶיךָ—*HASHEM your God*. These two names describe Hashem's two characteristic traits. He is the Absolute Being **Who transcends both time and space**; Who is self-sufficient, and Who created the universe solely for the love of man. Yet, He is also the personal God, the Father and Judge of all human beings, and the Master over the destinies of nations and individuals. That the Creator of heaven and earth is also a personal God is considered to be Abraham's unique contribution to human religious understanding.