עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
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Jethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt. [2]So Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after she had been sent home, [3]and her two sons—of whom one was named Gershom, that is to say, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land"; [4]and the other was named Eliezer, meaning, "The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Phar-

יח וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן
מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי־הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת־
יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם׃ [2] וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה
אֶת־צִפֹּרָה אֵשֶׁת מֹשֶׁה אַחַר שִׁלּוּחֶיהָ׃
[3] וְאֵת שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָד גֵּרְשֹׁם
כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נָכְרִיָּה׃ [4] וְשֵׁם
הָאֶחָד אֱלִיעֶזֶר כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי

JETHRO'S VISIT AND THE ORGANIZATION OF THE JUDICIARY (18:1–27)

A principle of traditional exegesis states that the Torah occasionally departs from chronologic order so as to make a special point (see, for example, Rashi on Num. 9:1). Jethro's visit must have taken place after the revelation at Mount Sinai—which is not described until chapter 20. Moses and the Israelites are described here (v. 5) encamped "at the mountain of God," i.e., Mount Sinai, but we read about their arrival at Sinai in 19:1–2. We read here (v. 12) that Jethro brings a burnt offering and sacrifices, but the altar for them was not built until after the revelation. The present passage is placed here to highlight Jethro's role in the creation of the Israelite judiciary.

THE ARRIVAL OF JETHRO (vv. 1–12)

2. after she had been sent home We are treated to a fleeting glimpse into the leader Moses' domestic life.

This *parashah* can be seen as "the hinge of the Torah," containing the pivotal event in the history of the Israelite people and indeed of all humanity. Through the revelation at Sinai, Israel is transformed from a band of freed slaves to a nation covenanted to God. The *parashah* describes the moment when God reached down to reveal the Torah to humanity or, more specifically, to the Israelites, that they might live by it and thereby reveal it to the rest of the world. A Rabbinic tradition has it that God created the world so that Israel would emerge as a model nation and all humanity would learn from their example (see Sifrei Deut. 346). Had Israel not accepted the Torah, the universe would have ceased to exist. That is, what purpose would there be to the world if the descendants of Abraham did not follow God's ways?

CHAPTER 18

1. Jethro . . . heard The Sages understand that the Torah reports this event right after the encounter with Amalek (Exod. 17:8ff.) to assure us that not all gentiles are wicked enemies of Israel. Although there are Amaleks, there are also Jethros (Ibn Ezra). The name of Jethro is perpetually linked with the reading that includes the giving of the Decalogue. We are a people who long remember the goodness of righteous gentiles. What did Jethro hear that moved him to associate himself with the people Israel? Some say he heard about their suffering in Egypt and was moved by pity. Some say he heard of their triumph over Pharaoh's army and wanted to associate himself with a victorious people. Others say he heard that the Israelites were on their way to a rendezvous with God, that they were destined to be a special people, and he wanted to share in their destiny (Mekh. Amalek 3:1). Did not everyone hear what Jethro heard? Yes, but some people hear and do not really hear.

all that God had done for Moses and for Israel Moses is named separately because he experienced the Exodus differently than did the rest of the Israelites. For them, it was liberation from slavery. For Moses, it was an opportunity to serve God (Elimelekh of Lyzhansk).

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aoh." [5]Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. [6]He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." [7]Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.

[8]Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. [9]And Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness that the LORD had shown Israel when He delivered them from the Egyptians. [10]"Blessed be the LORD," Jethro said, "who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. [11]Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, yes, by the result of their very schemes against [the people]." [12]And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and

וַיַּצִּלֵנִי מֵחֶרֶב פַּרְעֹה׃ 5 וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן
מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר
אֲשֶׁר־הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹהִים׃
6 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי חֹתְנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא
אֵלֶיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּהּ׃ 7 וַיֵּצֵא
מֹשֶׁה לִקְרַאת חֹתְנוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשַּׁק־
לוֹ וַיִּשְׁאֲלוּ אִישׁ־לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ
הָאֹהֱלָה׃
8 וַיְסַפֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹתְנוֹ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
יְהוָה לְפַרְעֹה וּלְמִצְרַיִם עַל אודֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֵת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מְצָאָתַם בַּדֶּרֶךְ
וַיַּצִּלֵם יְהוָה׃ 9 וַיִּחַדְּ יִתְרוֹ עַל כָּל־הַטּוּבָה
אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הִצִּילוֹ
מִיַּד מִצְרָיִם׃ 10 וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה
אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד
פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶת־הָעָם מִתַּחַת
יַד־מִצְרָיִם׃ 11 עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־גָדוֹל יְהוָה
מִכָּל־הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי בַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר זָדוּ
עֲלֵיהֶם׃ 12 וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה עֹלָה
וּזְבָחִים לֵאלֹהִים וַיָּבֹא אַהֲרֹן וְכֹל | זִקְנֵי

6. He sent word Literally, "He said." Jethro no doubt announced his arrival through a messenger.

7. Moses and Jethro engage in the formal civilities customary in the East.

10. Blessed be the LORD It is not uncommon in the Bible for a non-Israelite to invoke God as *YHVH* when dealing with Israelites (see 10:10). God in the Hebrew Bible is God for all people.

11. Now I know For Jethro, the divine superiority of *YHVH* has now been demonstrated through the disaster suffered by the Egyptians. The phrase appears elsewhere as a confirmation of faith (Josh. 2:9; 2 Kings 5:15).

yes . . . against [the people] Most traditional Jewish commentators have understood this clause as an incomplete statement, its conclusion to be supplied by the imagination. Usually it is taken to mean that the Egyptians were punished measure for measure. They perished by drowning—the fate they had devised for the Israelites.

12. In the ancient Near East, the parties to treaties or pacts often participated in a solemn meal as part of the ratification ceremony (see 24:11).

a burnt offering and sacrifices These are the two main types of sacrifice offered in ancient Israel. The first, *olah,* was wholly consumed by fire on the altar as a tribute to God; the second, *zevaḥ,* was partially offered up, and the major portion eaten at a festive meal. Here they are offered to

6. with your wife and her two sons Moses had sent them away, perhaps out of concern for their safety, perhaps to enable him to concentrate fully on his mission (Arama). In the text, however, Moses now seems to be ignoring his own family and relating to his father-in-law Jethro only as one dignitary to another. As sometimes happens with leaders, have his official duties caused him to neglect his family and to lose his capacity for intimacy?

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sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law.

13Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. 14But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" 15Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God."

17But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; 18you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, 20and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to fol-

יִשְׂרָאֵל לֶאֱכָל־לֶחֶם עִם־חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי
הָאֱלֹהִים׃

שני 13 וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיֵּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה לִשְׁפֹּט אֶת־
הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֹד הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה מִן־הַבֹּקֶר
עַד־הָעָרֶב׃ 14 וַיַּרְא חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל־
אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה לָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מָה־הַדָּבָר
הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה לָעָם מַדּוּעַ אַתָּה
יוֹשֵׁב לְבַדֶּךָ וְכָל־הָעָם נִצָּב עָלֶיךָ מִן־בֹּקֶר
עַד־עָרֶב׃ 15 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹתְנוֹ כִּי־יָבֹא
אֵלַי הָעָם לִדְרֹשׁ אֱלֹהִים׃ 16 כִּי־יִהְיֶה
לָהֶם דָּבָר בָּא אֵלַי וְשָׁפַטְתִּי בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין
רֵעֵהוּ וְהוֹדַעְתִּי אֶת־חֻקֵּי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־
תּוֹרֹתָיו׃
17 וַיֹּאמֶר חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו לֹא־טוֹב הַדָּבָר
אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה׃ 18 נָבֹל תִּבֹּל גַּם־אַתָּה
גַּם־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ כִּי־כָבֵד מִמְּךָ
הַדָּבָר לֹא־תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדֶּךָ׃ 19 עַתָּה
שְׁמַע בְּקֹלִי אִיעָצְךָ וִיהִי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ
הֱיֵה אַתָּה לָעָם מוּל הָאֱלֹהִים וְהֵבֵאתָ
אַתָּה אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים׃
20 וְהִזְהַרְתָּה אֶתְהֶם אֶת־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־
הַתּוֹרֹת וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם אֶת־הַדֶּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ

Elohim, the generic name for God, rather than to *YHVH*, the specific name of God revealed to Israel. This indicates that although Jethro made obeisance to the Deity he did not join the Israelites in their worship of *YHVH*.

ORGANIZATION OF THE JUDICIARY (vv. 13–27)

The new Israelite judicial system is shaped by a Midianite priest, who draws its personnel "from among all the people" (v. 21). The elders, who usually exercise judicial functions in a tribal-patriarchal society, are not mentioned. Tribal divisions are also ignored. Moses will act as the supreme judicial authority, mediating the will of God.

15. to inquire of God That is, to seek divine guidance in a situation for which human wisdom has exhausted itself.

18. The inefficiency of the system is bound to have a debilitating effect on Moses and on the public.

13. Note that while the Israelites learn about holiness from God, they do not hesitate to learn science, civics, and commerce from their gentile neighbors. As the sage Ben Zoma said, "Who is wise? One who learns from all people" (M Avot 4:1).

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בָּהּ וְאֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן׃ 21 וְאַתָּה
תֶחֱזֶה מִכָּל־הָעָם אַנְשֵׁי־חַיִל יִרְאֵי
אֱלֹהִים אַנְשֵׁי אֱמֶת שֹׂנְאֵי בָצַע וְשַׂמְתָּ
עֲלֵהֶם שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים׃ שָׂרֵי מֵאוֹת שָׂרֵי
חֲמִשִּׁים וְשָׂרֵי עֲשָׂרֹת׃ 22 וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת־
הָעָם בְּכָל־עֵת וְהָיָה כָּל־הַדָּבָר הַגָּדֹל
יָבִיאוּ אֵלֶיךָ וְכָל־הַדָּבָר הַקָּטֹן יִשְׁפְּטוּ־הֵם
וְהָקֵל מֵעָלֶיךָ וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתָּךְ׃ 23 אִם אֶת־
הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה תַּעֲשֶׂה וְצִוְּךָ אֱלֹהִים וְיָכָלְתָּ
עֲמֹד וְגַם כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עַל־מְקֹמוֹ יָבֹא
בְשָׁלוֹם׃
שלישי 24 וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל חֹתְנוֹ וַיַּעַשׂ כֹּל
אֲשֶׁר אָמָר׃ 25 וַיִּבְחַר מֹשֶׁה אַנְשֵׁי־חַיִל
מִכָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם רָאשִׁים עַל־הָעָם
שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים׃ שָׂרֵי מֵאוֹת שָׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים
וְשָׂרֵי עֲשָׂרֹת׃ 26 וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת־הָעָם בְּכָל־
עֵת אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַקָּשֶׁה יְבִיאוּן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
וְכָל־הַדָּבָר הַקָּטֹן יִשְׁפּוּטוּ הֵם׃ 27 וַיְשַׁלַּח
רביעי מֹשֶׁה אֶת־חֹתְנוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ לוֹ אֶל־אַרְצוֹ׃ פ

low. 21You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and 22let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. 23If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied."

24Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said. 25Moses chose capable men out of all Israel, and appointed them heads over the people—chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens; 26and they judged the people at all times: the difficult matters they would bring to Moses, and all the minor matters they would decide themselves. 27Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way to his own land.

21. Jethro defines the ideal social, spiritual, and moral qualifications for judges—those necessary to create and maintain a healthy and just legal order.

chiefs of thousands The Israelites frequently are depicted in the Torah as an army marching out of Egypt and proceeding in military formation through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

22. at all times The new judiciary is to be a permanent, professional institution.

every major dispute In verse 26 this is defined as "the difficult matters." To act as supreme judge traditionally was the prerogative of the leader or the king.

23. will go home unwearied In contrast to the description in verse 18.

24. Moses heeded his father-in-law Early Israelites apparently lived under a system of common law that was prevalent among their neighbors, elements of which were later incorporated into the Torah as divine legislation.

21. capable men Men of sufficient wealth that they will be immune to bribes or financial considerations (Rashi).

who fear God Doing what is right in God's sight will be more important for them than popularity among their neighbors (Ibn Ezra). Ibn Ezra notes, however, that when Moses actually chooses these men, the text describes them as "capable," without referring to their fearing God (v. 25). Only God—not any human being—can know who is truly God-fearing.

HALAKHAH L'MA·ASEH

18:22. let them judge the people at all times See *D'rash* to Deut. 17:9.

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19 On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. [2]Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, [3]and Moses went up to God.

רביעי **יט** בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי־
יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ
מִדְבַּר סִינָי׃ [2] וַיִּסְעוּ מֵרְפִידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ
מִדְבַּר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיִּחַן־שָׁם
יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר׃ [3] וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־

THE COVENANT AT SINAI (19:1–20:23)

The arrival at Sinai inaugurates the final stage in the process of forging Israel's national identity and spiritual destiny. The great communal encounter with God gave ultimate meaning to the shared experiences of bondage and liberation. Henceforth, the people Israel are in a covenantal relationship with God, inextricably bound to Him by a treaty (*b'rit*).

NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION (19:1–3b)

1. On the third new moon . . . on that very day The more precise definition, "on that very day," shows that the word *ḥodesh*, which later came to mean "month," is here used in its original sense of "new moon."

2. Rephidim See Comment to 17:1.

mountain The one selected to be the site of the revelation.

ISRAEL'S DESTINY DEFINED (vv. 3c–6)

Written in poetic prose, these verses express the essence of the covenant idea. Israel is chosen to

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CHAPTER 19

1. On the third new moon The Sages, noting that the zodiacal sign for the third month (*Sivan*) is Gemini, the twins, take it as symbolizing the equal importance of the written Torah and the oral Torah. According to another interpretation, this teaches us that should Jacob's twin brother, Esau, change his wicked ways and come to accept the Torah, he would be welcomed (PdRK). We may find it strange that the Sages refer to the signs of the zodiac. They were often used in synagogue decorations, for homiletic purposes, and possibly in poetry. (Some find traces of them in Jacob's blessing of his 12 sons in Gen. 49.) For example, Libra (the scales) is the sign for the High Holy Day season. (The signs of the zodiac are never used by the Sages to predict the future, nor do the Sages attribute to them any power to shape people's destiny.)

Why was the Torah not given as soon as the Israelites left Egypt? The Midrash compares the situation to that of a child who had fallen gravely ill. His father gave him several weeks to recuperate and only then did he let him return to school. So, too, when Israel went out of Egypt some Israelites had been disabled by the experience of slavery. God said, "I will wait until they are healed and then I will give them the Torah" (Tanḥ.). Levi Yitzḥak of Berdichev sees it slightly differently. Had Israel received the Torah immediately after the Exodus and the parting of the sea, it would have seemed that they accepted it out of gratitude for the miracles God had wrought for them. Instead, God waited until the effect of the miracles had worn off and they began to complain. Then their acceptance of the Torah was a completely voluntary act of commitment.

on that very day The Hebrew here literally means "on this day" (*ba-yom ha-zeh*), as if to suggest that on any day when a Jew accepts the obligations of the Torah, it is as if he or she were there that day, standing at Sinai and hearing the voice of God. Rashi takes the words to mean that every time a Jew reads the Torah, it should be as if for the first time. Heschel distinguishes between the giving of the Torah (*mattan Torah*), which was a one-time event in the Sinai wilderness, and the acceptance of the Torah as an authoritative voice in our lives, which can take place at any time. When a person of non-Jewish origin joins the Jewish people and accepts the Torah, it is as if he or she personally had been standing at Sinai.

2. wilderness According to rabbinic tradition, the Torah was given in the wilderness because it is free of distractions that might tempt the newly freed slaves, and to emphasize that

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The LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: [4]'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. [5]Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, [6]but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."

הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה מִן־הָהָר
לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתַגִּיד לִבְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ 4 אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי
לְמִצְרָיִם וָאֶשָּׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל־כַּנְפֵי נְשָׁרִים
וָאָבִא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי׃ 5 וְעַתָּה אִם־שָׁמוֹעַ
תִּשְׁמְעוּ בְּקֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי
וְהְיִיתֶם לִי סְגֻלָּה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי
כָּל־הָאָרֶץ׃ 6 וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מַמְלֶכֶת
כֹּהֲנִים וגוי קָדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר
חמישי תְּדַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

enter into a unique relationship with God, which imposes obligations and responsibilities.

4. on eagles' wings The image projects both God's power and love (see Deut. 32:10–11). The king of the birds, the eagle, impressed the biblical writers with the prodigious expanse of its outstretched wings, its way of protectively carrying its young on its back, and its ability to soar to great heights at considerable speed and to fly long distances.

to Me That I should be your God (Rashbam).

5. My covenant This is the first mention of the Covenant in the Exodus narrative. The stipulations are soon to be set forth.

My treasured possession The Hebrew word *s'gullah* originally denoted valued property to which one has exclusive right of possession. The biblical description of Israel as God's *s'gullah* or *am s'gullah* ("treasured people," Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 26:18–19), expresses God's special covenantal relationship with the Israelites and His love for them as His people. Here it is stated conditionally; in Deuteronomy it is presented as an established fact.

6. This statement further defines the implications of being God's "treasured people." National sovereignty, here expressed by "kingdom," is indispensable for the proper fulfillment of Israel's mission. Without it, the nation becomes the passive tool of historical forces beyond its control. At the same time, the priest's place and function within society must serve as the ideal model for Israel's self-understanding of its role among the nations. The priest is set apart by a distinctive way of life consecrated to the service of God and dedicated to ministering to the needs of the people. Striving for holiness as a people is to be the hallmark of Israel's existence.

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the Torah is accessible to all who would claim it and live by it. Might it be that the noises of modern life make it hard for us to hear the divine message that God is constantly trying to communicate to us?

Israel encamped there Until now, all the verbs referring to Israel have been plural: "they journeyed," "they entered." Here, for the first time, the Hebrew verb for "encamped" is singular, suggesting that only when they transcended their differences and quarrels to become one people were they fit to receive the Torah (Rashi).

3. house of Jacob The Midrash interprets this as referring to wives, traditionally the keepers of the home. They, more than their husbands, will determine whether the spirit of Sinai fills their home (Exod. R. 28:2).

4. on eagles' wings God supports and sustains people who are too weak or weary to carry on by themselves. When the isolated Jews of Yemen, most of whom had never seen an airplane, were flown to the modern state of Israel, many of them understood the airplane flight to be a fulfilment of this verse.

5–6. Indeed all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation God, as Creator of the world, cares for all people. Israel has no monopoly on God. Israel, however, does have a special relationship to God. This is true not only when the rest of the world is pagan but will also be true in the future, even after all the nations will have turned to God. The notion that the people Israel have been chosen is not a claim of superiority. The Bible never hesitates to chronicle and condemn the Israelites' shortcomings and God's disappointment with them. To speak of

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חמישי 7 וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיָּשֶׂם
לִפְנֵיהֶם אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר
צִוָּהוּ יְהוָה׃ 8 וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל־הָעָם יַחְדָּו
וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וַיָּשֶׁב
מֹשֶׁה אֶת־דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֶל־יְהוָה׃ 9 וַיֹּאמֶר
יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַב
הֶעָנָן בַּעֲבוּר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְּרִי עִמָּךְ
וְגַם־בְּךָ יַאֲמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם וַיַּגֵּד מֹשֶׁה אֶת־
דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֶל־יְהוָה׃ 10 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְקִדַּשְׁתָּם הַיּוֹם

7 Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the LORD had commanded him. 8 All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the LORD. 9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." Then Moses reported the people's words to the LORD, 10 and the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomor-

THE POPULAR RESPONSE (vv. 7–8)

Moses conveys the divine message through the agency of the elders (See Comment to 3:16).

8. we will do The first of three affirmations of Israel's acceptance of the Covenant, this phrase is repeated at Exod. 24:3 and again with the climactic "we will faithfully do" at Exod. 24:7.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE THEOPHANY (vv. 9–25)

The preparations for the theophany (the appearance of God), which begin at once, include authentication of the role of Moses; purification—involving sexual abstinence and, most likely, bathing and laundering of clothes—and repeated warnings against encroachment on the sacred domain of the mountain. The divine revelation is presented in a way that dramatizes the overwhelming confusion the event must have produced in the minds of those present.

9. This passage may well allude to the declaration in 3:12 that the Sinai experience will be the ultimate validation of Moses' leadership.

a thick cloud See Comment to 13:21–22.

Then Moses reported This phrase refers not to what immediately precedes it but to the quote in verse 8.

10. to stay pure This is defined in verse 15. It most likely includes bathing, which is taken for granted.

Israel as God's Chosen People is a historical truth (it is through Israel that the Bible and the notion of ethical monotheism came into the world) and an assertion of divine power to select any people as the bearers of that revelation. An additional dimension in the notion of chosenness is that God's Torah belongs to an entire people, not only to professional clergy or an intellectual elite.

8. One tradition describes God as compelled to lift the mountain over their heads, threatening to crush them with it unless they accept the Torah (BT Shab. 88a). Another rabbinic tradition has Israel responding enthusiastically to God's demands. It sees the event as a wedding, with the uplifted mountain serving as the marriage canopy (*ḥuppah*). Yet another pictures God offering the Torah to the other nations (to forestall any charges of favoritism toward Israel), only to have them reject it when they learn of its demands. Only Israel is prepared to accept it. The divergence of traditional views may reflect an ambivalence toward the Torah's demands or the reality of their experiences later in history. The varying *midrashim* may reflect the truth that the *mitzvot* are both a joy and a burden. The prophets Hosea and Jeremiah look back on the wilderness years as a honeymoon period, the golden age when Israel was close to God and trusted God. The Torah's own account in subsequent chapters shows Israel as repeatedly rebellious and complaining.

10. warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow It is easy to be pure while standing at Sinai. Will the people be able to maintain that sense of purity tomorrow, when they return to the challenge of living in the world? An ancient rabbi taught: Not only literally tomorrow but in the distant future, Israel will be purified by this encounter with God.

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וּמָחָר וְכִבְּסוּ שִׂמְלֹתָם׃ 11 וְהָיוּ נְכֹנִים
לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי | בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד
יְהוָה לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם עַל־הַר סִינָי׃
12 וְהִגְבַּלְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לֵאמֹר
הִשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בָּהָר וּנְגֹעַ בְּקָצֵהוּ
כָּל־הַנֹּגֵעַ בָּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת׃ 13 לֹא־תִגַּע בּוֹ
יָד כִּי־סָקוֹל יִסָּקֵל אוֹ־יָרֹה יִיָּרֶה אִם־
בְּהֵמָה אִם־אִישׁ לֹא יִחְיֶה בִּמְשֹׁךְ הַיֹּבֵל
הֵמָּה יַעֲלוּ בָהָר׃

14 וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה מִן־הָהָר אֶל־הָעָם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ
אֶת־הָעָם וַיְכַבְּסוּ שִׂמְלֹתָם׃ 15 וַיֹּאמֶר
אֶל־הָעָם הֱיוּ נְכֹנִים לִשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים אַל־
תִּגְּשׁוּ אֶל־אִשָּׁה׃

16 וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בִּהְיֹת הַבֹּקֶר
וַיְהִי קֹלֹת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל־הָהָר

row. Let them wash their clothes. 11Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. 12You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death: 13no hand shall touch him, but he shall be either stoned or shot; beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain."

14Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes. 15And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman."

16On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud

11. third day In biblical consciousness, a three-day period has special significance. As with Abraham at the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:4), three days of preparation and self-restraint allow time for sober reflection, so that acceptance of the Covenant can be considered an unqualified act of free will. According to Jewish tradition, the third day fell on the sixth of *Sivan* and is identified with the harvest festival of *Shavuot*, which consequently came to commemorate the giving of the Torah (see Rashi).

will come down This fairly frequent figurative depiction of God's action in terms of human motion expresses at one and the same time God's infinite transcendence and personal, intimate involvement with humanity.

12. shall be put to death By human agency, as verse 13 makes clear.

13. no hand shall touch him The trespasser, who has intruded on sacred domain, shall not be seized, because this itself would bring another person to violate the restriction. He shall be executed when he is beyond the limits of the mountain.

ram's horn The Hebrew word *yovel* seems originally to have meant a sheep or a ram, as in Josh. 6:4,5. The word came to be restricted to the horn. *Yovel* lies behind the word "jubilee," which was inaugurated by a sounding of the ram's horn (Lev. 25:9).

they may go up Sinai possesses no inherent or "natural" holiness, nor does it acquire such by virtue of the theophany. Its sanctity and hence untouchability do not outlast the limited duration of the event.

15. do not go near a woman This refers to sexual contact, which would render men ritually unfit for an encounter with God. It is here implied, although not spelled out, that women were to comport themselves similarly (see Lev. 15:18).

16–19. Violent atmospheric disturbances are said to precede and accompany the theophany. The Bible frequently portrays upheavals of

15. do not go near a woman According to God's instructions, all the people, women as well as men, were to be present for the revelation at Sinai. Moses confuses that invitation by adding this prohibition; here, as in the incident of striking the rock at Meribah (Num. 20), he takes liberties in transmitting God's word. We might learn from this verse that, despite Judaism's emphasis on family and congregation as settings for fashioning holiness, sometimes we need distance from others, even from those with whom we are most intimate, to find God.

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וְקֹל שֹׁפָר חָזָק מְאֹד וַיֶּחֱרַד כָּל־הָעָם
אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה׃ 17 וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם
לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְּבוּ
בְּתַחְתִּית הָהָר׃
18 וְהַר סִינַי עָשַׁן כֻּלּוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו
יְהוָה בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׁנוֹ כְּעֵשֶׁן הַכִּבְשָׁן
וַיֶּחֱרַד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד׃ 19 וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר
הוֹלֵךְ וְחָזֵק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים
ששי יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְקוֹל׃ 20 וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה עַל־הַר סִינַי
אֶל־רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל־
רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה׃ 21 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רֵד הָעֵד בָּעָם פֶּן־יֶהֶרְסוּ אֶל־
יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת וְנָפַל מִמֶּנּוּ רָב׃ 22 וְגַם
הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנִּגָּשִׁים אֶל־יְהוָה יִתְקַדָּשׁוּ פֶּן־

upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

18Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. 19The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. 20The LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. 21The LORD said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. 22The priests also, who come near the LORD, must stay pure, lest the

nature in association with the self-manifestation of God. Apart from the present context, however, such imagery is always confined to poetic or prophetic texts. Here, the vivid, majestic, and terrifying depiction that draws its inspiration from natural phenomena, such as the storm, volcano, and earthquake, is meant to convey the awe-inspiring effect of the event on those who experienced it. The Elijah story in 1 Kings (19:12) emphasizes, however, that God manifests Himself in a "still, small voice," not in lightning and thunder.

17. toward God Toward the site of the theophany.

foot of the mountain The lowest part, on the level ground.

19. horn Hebrew for "horn" here is *shofar*, not *yovel* as in verse 13. The blasts of thunder are imagined as a celestial fanfare, heralding the arrival of the King.

20. Moses He alone is privileged to ascend to the top.

22. priests According to chapters 28 and 29, the priesthood was not established among the Israelites until after the Sinaitic revelation, which would make this, like their mention in verse 24, an anachronism. Many modern scholars believe that these verses reflect a different strand of tradition about the origins of the priestly institution. Jewish commentators have understood "priests" here as referring to firstborn males, who functioned as priests until they were replaced by the

17. out of the camp toward God At times we must leave the familiar places and habits with which we have grown comfortable, as Abraham did at the beginning of Israelite history, to grow to be the people we are capable of becoming.

19. blare of the horn grew louder Ordinarily, sounds grow more faint with time. The words spoken at Sinai, however, echo as loudly today as when they were spoken more than 3000 years ago.

21. lest many of them perish The Israelites, who had seen God smite the Egyptians with 10 plagues and again at the sea, had learned to see God as an awesome, terrifying power. Here, and elsewhere in the Torah, we read about the danger of approaching God carelessly. (See Exod. 20:16, the warning to the priests in Exod. 28:35, and the account of the death of Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 10:2.) If we today are less inclined to see God as dangerous or to see sudden deaths as "acts of God," punishments for violating the sanctity of God's precincts, do we lose some sense of God's awesome holiness in the process?

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יִפְרֹץ בָּהֶם יְהוָה׃ 23 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־
יְהוָה לֹא־יוּכַל הָעָם לַעֲלֹת אֶל־הַר סִינָי
כִּי־אַתָּה הַעֵדֹתָה בָּנוּ לֵאמֹר הַגְבֵּל אֶת־
הָהָר וְקִדַּשְׁתּוֹ׃ 24 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה לֶךְ־
רֵד וְעָלִיתָ אַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ וְהַכֹּהֲנִים
וְהָעָם אַל־יֶהֶרְסוּ לַעֲלֹת אֶל־יְהוָה פֶּן־
יִפְרָץ־בָּם׃ 25 וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲלֵהֶם׃ ס

Lord break out against them." 23But Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.'" 24So the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them." 25And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

20 God spoke all these words, saying:

כ וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה לֵאמֹר׃ ס

family of Aaron, as recounted in Num. 3:12 and 8:16–18.

break out The verb, with God as the subject, connotes a visitation that is sudden, violent, and destructive, indicating the extreme care with which God's holiness must be approached even by the priests who serve Him.

THE DECALOGUE (20:1–14)

The title: The present passage carries no designation for this document. The popular English title "The Ten Commandments" is derived from the traditional, although inaccurate, English rendering of the Hebrew phrase *"aseret ha-d'varim,"* which appears in Exod. 34:28 and Deut. 4:13 and 10:4. In fact, the term "commandment" (*mitzvah,* pl. *mitzvot*) is not employed in the present context. The Hebrew, which means "The Ten Words/Statements/Pronouncements," was translated literally into Greek by the Jews of ancient Alexandria in Egypt as *deka logoi.* This gave rise to the more accurate English alternative "Decalogue." In Rabbinic texts, and generally in Hebrew down to modern times, the common designation is *aseret ha-dibrot.*

The tablets of stone: Several biblical passages (including Exod. 24:12; 32:15) testify to the inscribing of the Decalogue on two stone tablets. The practice of recording covenants on tablets was well rooted in the biblical world, as was the custom of depositing the document in a sanctuary (referred to as "Ark" in Exod. 25:16). Why two tablets were needed for the Decalogue is unclear; nor

24. Go down, and come back The path to God is rarely a steady climb upward. We climb, we fall back, and we climb higher again.

25. Moses went down to the people He went down to be included with them in accepting the Torah (*Kol Dodi*).

CHAPTER 20

1–14. What is unique about the Decalogue? Other ancient societies had laws against murder, theft, and adultery, but they invariably were phrased as conditional: "if . . . then." If someone murders another, this is the punishment. The statements in the Decalogue were unique in being phrased as absolutes: "You shall not." These things are not only illegal; they are wrong. They not only disrupt society; they violate universal principles. Furthermore, the Decalogue enshrines a fundamental principle of Judaism: How we treat one another is of concern to God.

What did the Israelites actually hear at Sinai? Some say they heard God proclaim all 10 of the utterances. Others say that God spoke only the first 2, declared in the divine "I," and that Moses added the remaining 8 in which God is referred to in the third person. One Hasidic master taught that the Israelites heard only the first letter of the first word (the *alef* in *anokhi,* which is a silent letter) and intuitively understood the rest (Menaḥem Mendel of Rymanov). That is, having encountered God in such a real and direct way, they understood the rightness and wrongness of certain modes of behavior without the need for words to be spoken. What God said is clear, how God com-

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2 I the LORD am your God who brought you

2 *אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ

vv. 2–16. נדפס בטעם תחתון בלבד והוא למערבאי, והפסוקים ממוספרים לפי מהדורת לעטעריס. נדפס בטעם עליון בסוף התורה

do we know the arrangement of the text on the tablets. The most common understanding of the Sages assumes that five declarations were incised on each tablet (as attested by Philo and later *midrashim*). In the Jerusalem Talmud there is a tradition, given as the majority view, that each tablet contained the entire Decalogue. Saadia, among others, maintained that the two tablets featured the variant versions found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, respectively.

The internal division: Context, style, and language suggest a basic division of the Decalogue into two distinct groups of commandments. The first group governs relations between God and the individual Israelite; the second regulates human relationships. The first group is characterized by the fivefold use of the phrase "the LORD your God"; the second contains no reference to God. The first group features obligations unique to the religion of Israel. The second group, consisting entirely of prohibitions, is of universal application with numerous parallels in other literature of the ancient world. Only in Israel, however, are these injunctions presented as divine in origin. It is striking that the document opens with "the LORD your God" and closes with "your neighbor."

Tradition provides two versions of the Decalogue's cantillation and verse division. (Thus the verses from 13 on are numbered differently in various editions of the Bible.) The version known as the "lower notes" is presented here; for the "upper notes," which are used in many synagogues on certain occasions, see p. 1509.

1. This introductory statement is unique in the Torah, for it does not indicate to whom the divine declaration is addressed—the individual Israelite or the entire community. On the one hand, it is "all the people" as a corporate entity who enter into the covenantal relationship with God. On the other hand, it is each individual as a member of the community who is addressed, as shown by the consistent use in Hebrew of the second person singular.

2. I the LORD am your God This type of royal formula occurs in "the historical prologue" of the ancient Near Eastern treaty form (see Comment to 3:6). Here it not only identifies the unimpeachable sovereign authority behind the ensuing pronouncements but emphasizes that the demands of the Decalogue have their source and sanction in the divine will, not in human wisdom. Hence they remain eternally valid and unaffected by temporal considerations. This is regarded as the first of the 10 divine pronouncements by most Jewish commentators, in contrast to the Christian perspective, which sees it exclusively as an introductory verse. See Comment to Deut. 5:6.

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municated it to human beings remains a mystery. Many of us have had the experience of meeting someone in whose presence we found ourselves incapable of lying or gossiping, or someone whose very presence conveyed a message of compassion or courage. Perhaps coming into the presence of God at Sinai was an intensified experience of that sort. What God said will be the content of the rest of the Torah and generations of commentaries; that God communicated the divine will to human beings is a foundation stone of Judaism. Rosenzweig suggests that the single word actually spoken by God was the first word—*anokhi* ("I am"). From God's affirmation of existence and presence, all else flowed.

2. I the LORD am your God The Hebrew for "your" here is singular, for God is revealed to each of us according to our own capacity to respond: "your own God" (PdRK 12). It also teaches that at Sinai each Israelite felt personally addressed by God (Tanh. B. Yitro 17).

Is this a commandment to believe in God? Maimonides holds that it is: "The first *mitzvah* is that [we] believe in God's existence, that there is a cause and motive force behind all that exists" (*Seifer Ha-Mitzvot* 1). Others disagree. Abravanel takes this first utterance as "a preface to subsequent injunctions, a declaration making known to the Israelites who was addressing them." Ḥasdai Crescas insists that a commandment can apply only to matters of free will and free choice; matters of belief cannot be commanded. The rabbis of the Talmud see this as a summons to Israel to "accept the yoke of God's sovereignty," to recognize God as the Supreme Authority. Only when they have done that can God give them laws and decrees. We re-enact this acceptance in the daily recitation of the *Sh'ma*.

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מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים 3*לֹא־יִהְיֶה
לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פָּנָי׃
4 לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לְּךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר
בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וַאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת
וַאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ׃ 5 לֹא־
תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תָעָבְדֵם כִּי
אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֹקֵד עֲוֹן

v. 3. למערבאי לא נחשב פסוק נפרד

out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: 3You shall have no other gods besides Me.

4You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the

3–6. Rabbinic tradition generally treats these verses as a single unit.

You shall have no other gods besides Me The God of Israel demands uncompromising and exclusive loyalty, because He has redeemed them to serve Him.

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image Later thinkers took this revolutionary Israelite concept to mean that God is wholly separate from the world of His creation and wholly other than what the human mind can conceive or the human imagination depict. Therefore, any material representation of divinity is forbidden. This does not prohibit artistic representation, only the use of images for worship.

an impassioned God The Hebrew word *kanna* is rendered here in its primitive sense, as "impassioned," referring to a zealous God emotionally involved in human affairs, who holds people accountable for their acts, capable of anger as well as compassion. The traditional translation, "a jealous God," understands the marriage bond

God is here proclaimed not as the God of Creation who made the world, but as the God of history who directed the Exodus. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, Creation was an abstract principle; the Exodus was the event that shaped their lives. Isaak Heinemann paraphrases the poet-philosopher Judah ha-Levi: "God as First Cause is a God reached by intellectual speculation, a God of metaphysics. But a God who acts in history, a God who frees the enslaved, is a God for whom the soul yearns." "Judaism is an elaborate way of relating to God as the Source of all existence and the provider of ultimate meaning. Nothing could be more fatuous than the all-too-common notion that observance is possible without faith. Hence the Decalogue begins with an affirmation of God's reality" (Schorsch).

out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage For some, Egypt was the house of culture, science, and mathematics. For God and God's people, however, it was the house of bondage. Cultural and scientific accomplishments cannot make up for a nation's treating some of its people as less than human. "If freedom and culture cannot coexist, we should bid farewell to culture for the sake of freedom" (B. Jacob).

3. You shall have no other gods besides Me Some take the words translated as "besides Me" (*al panai*) to mean "in addition to" not only "in place of." It is forbidden to worship idols along with God. Arama takes this passage not as a prohibition but as a promise: As long as you have Me, you will not need any others.

4. You shall not make for yourself God is not merely invisible, i.e., possessing a shape that we cannot see. God has no physical form. It is only our limited human imagination that drives us to think of God as a heavenly being with bodily parts. To picture God is to limit God: male not female, old not young, of one specific race and skin color. Heschel suggests that we may not make an image of God because we ourselves bear the divine image in this world. We alone are God's agents, not any idol we might fashion. A homiletic interpretation of the same words comes to a contrasting conclusion: "You shall not make yourself into an idol, and come to believe that you are God."

5. visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children Children do benefit from, and suffer from, the choices of their parents when it comes to health, wealth, educational opportunities, and the fate of being born in a peaceful rather than in a war-torn land. Children are shaped by habits learned in their families of origin as to how they handle stress, quarrels, eat-

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אָבֹת עַל־בָּנִים עַל־שִׁלֵּשִׁים וְעַל־רִבֵּעִים
לְשֹׂנְאָי׃ 6 וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לַאֲלָפִים לְאֹהֲבַי
וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָי׃ ס
7 לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַשָּׁוְא
כִּי לֹא יְנַקֶּה יְהוָה אֵת אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא אֶת־
שְׁמוֹ לַשָּׁוְא׃ פ

parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, 6but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

7You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

to be the implied metaphor for the covenant between God and the people Israel. God demands exclusive loyalty from His people. According to this interpretation, His reaction to their infidelity is expressed in terms of human jealousy. Whether one renders *kanna* as "jealous" or "impassioned," the term emphasizes that God is not indifferent to His creatures. God's anger or wrath usually is directed to those who flout His will, but at times it blazes forth against those who infringe on His holy domain. Most often, it serves to punish those who violate the moral world order or their covenantal responsibilities.

visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children Society is collectively responsible for its actions, and the individual is accountable for behavior that affects the life of the community. Conduct inevitably has an effect on succeeding generations. The doctrine that God visits the guilt of the parents on later generations was later modified by Jeremiah (31:29–30): "They shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are blunted.' But every one shall die for his own sins: whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted." His contemporary Ezekiel (18:2ff.) also felt compelled to deny cross-generational punishment. It is important to note that the statement concerning extension of punishment to later generations (see also Exod. 34:7) was never the concern of administering justice in Israel's legal system. Vicarious punishment is outlawed explicitly in Deut. 24:16.

who reject Me This phrase may modify "parents" or "children" or both.

thousandth generation God's boundless beneficence and the limited extent of punishment were emphasized by the Sages.

7. The Third Commandment deals with abuse of the divine name.

swear Literally, "lift up" (on your lips), "to utter" the divine name.

falsely Hebrew: *la-shav,* which can mean this as well as "for nothing, in vain." The ambiguity broadens the prohibition and allows for the proscription of both perjury (by the principals in a lawsuit, swearing falsely) and unnecessary or frivolous use of the divine name.

will not clear God will not allow the deed to go unpunished even though it may go undetected or not be actionable in a human court of law.

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ing, and drinking. The Talmud interprets this verse to suggest that children who know that their parents are doing wrong but nonetheless choose to follow their example are held responsible for that choice (BT Ber. 7a). A modern writer understands the Hebrew verb *poked* ("visiting") as in Gen. 21:1 ("to take note"), reading the verse as "God takes note of the sins that parents inflict on their children"—and deals leniently with the children.

7. You shall not swear falsely You shall not resort to using God's name to make your lies more plausible. "If one does not keep one's word, that is tantamount to repudiating the name of God" (Ibn Ezra). It is especially important for a religiously committed Jew not to bring God's name into disrepute by false dealings. Some scholars interpret this verse to prohibit linking God's name to anything false, such as sorcery or fortune-telling.

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20:7. swear falsely The tradition demands that we neither swear falsely in court nor use God's name in vain. We, therefore, refrain from using the traditional names for God in secular writings or conversation, much less in voicing profanities. However, the English word "God" is not God's name or an English translation of it, but rather a description of God's role in our lives, as in the traditional formula for blessings, "Praised are you, LORD [God's name], our God, Sovereign of the universe." The CJLS has, therefore, ruled that Jews need not hyphenate the word "God."

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8 זָכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ׃ 9 שֵׁשֶׁת
יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלַאכְתֶּךָ׃ 10 וְיוֹם

8Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.
9Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

8. The Fourth Commandment establishes *Shabbat* as a fixed weekly institution. With the Creation as its rationale (verse 11, reiterated in Exod. 31:13–17), the seventh day of each week is invested with special blessing and holiness. It is an integral part of the divinely ordained cosmic order and exists independent of human effort. For this reason it is described (verse 10) as "a sabbath of the LORD your God." There is nothing analogous to the Israelite *Shabbat* in the entire ancient Near Eastern world, where seven-day units of time were well known. *Shabbat* is the sole exception to the otherwise universal practice of basing all the major units of time—months and seasons as well as years—on the phases of the moon and the solar cycle. *Shabbat,* in other words, is completely dissociated from the movement of celestial bodies. This singularity, together with Creation as the basis for the institution, expresses the quintessential idea of Israel's monotheism: God is entirely outside of and sovereign over nature.

Remember Hebrew: *zakhor.* See Comment to 2:24. The narrative about the manna (Exod. 16:5,22–30) presupposes the existence of *Shabbat* as an institution before the Sinaitic revelation.

keep it holy Its intrinsic sacred character derives from God. Texts like Hos. 2:13 and Isa. 58:13–14 show that already in biblical times *Shabbat* was a day of rejoicing and delight.

8. Remember the sabbath day The commandment here calls on us to "remember" *Shabbat* in imitating God's rest; God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. The wording of this commandment in Deut. 5:12 tells us to "keep" *Shabbat* as a weekly celebration of the fact that we are not slaves (Deut. 5:15); only free people own their own time and can choose to stop laboring. According to a *midrash* recalled in the Friday-night hymn *"L'khah Dodi,"* God at Sinai did what no human being can do: utter two distinct words ("remember" and "keep") at the same time. "Remember" is seen as a positive command to do things that make *Shabbat* special. "Keep" is a negative command to refrain from work and other activities that mar *Shabbat*. Israel of Modzhitz spoke of two modes of *Shabbat* observance: being and doing. The first is passive (not working, not making physical changes in the world). The second is active (praying, studying, spending time with family). One of the Sages strove each day of the week to fulfill the command to remember *Shabbat;* whenever he would find a particularly fine object or special food, he would put it aside for *Shabbat* (BT Betz. 16a). Those whose circumstances make it impossible to keep *Shabbat* as they would like to, should at least find ways to remind themselves that it is *Shabbat*.

9. Six days you shall labor Certain activity is as much a religious duty as resting on *Shabbat*. We are enjoined to labor over this world, to change it and to improve it. Idleness is a waste of the talents with which God has blessed us. Work, however, too often leads to economic competitiveness in which we see other people as rivals, obstacles to our success. *Shabbat* comes as a truce in those economic struggles. The rabbis of the talmudic period formulated rules governing *Shabbat* in systematic fashion. They were guided by the close proximity in the Torah of the prohibition of work on *Shabbat* and the instructions for building the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–17, 35:1ff.). Acts that were essential in constructing the tabernacle are termed "principal" categories (*avot*); 39 such acts forbidden on *Shabbat* are listed in M Shab. 7:2. Other subcategories, analogous but not essential in constructing the tabernacle, are called "derivatives" (*toladot*). Elsewhere in the Bible, certain types of work are specified as off limits: "leaving one's place" (walking beyond a certain distance), agricultural activities, kindling fire, gathering wood, conducting business, carrying burdens, tread-

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20:8. Remember The Sages deduce from this verse the requirement to say *Kiddush* both Friday evening and during the day on Saturday as a way of marking and thus remembering the *Shabbat* (BT Pes. 106a). Maimonides (MT *Shabbat* 29:1) links it also to *Havdalah*, to end *Shabbat* and thereby distinguish it from the rest of the week (see Lev. 23:3; and especially Deut. 5:12). The Sages also deduce from this verse that rather than calling each day of the week by its own independent name, we should refer to each day by its number in the week before *Shabbat*—i.e., Sunday is the first day in [the week before] *Shabbat*, Monday the second day, and so on—so that the very names of the days remind us of *Shabbat* (Mekh.).

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הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה
כָל־מְלָאכָה אַתָּה | וּבִנְךָ־וּבִתֶּךָ עַבְדְּךָ
וַאֲמָתְךָ וּבְהֶמְתֶּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ׃
11 כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־
אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ
יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ׃ ס
12 כַּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמֶּךָ לְמַעַן

[10]but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. [11]For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

[12]Honor your father and your mother, that

10. work The definition of prohibited labor (*m'lakhah*), which limits the commandment explicitly to Creation (Gen. 2:2), is not given here.

you . . . the stranger By proscribing work and creativity on the seventh day, and by ordering that nature be kept inviolate one day a week, the Torah places a limit on human autonomy and restores nature to its original state of pure freedom. Human liberty is immeasurably enhanced, human equality is strengthened, and the cause of social justice is promoted by legislating the inalienable right of every human being, irrespective of social class, and of draft animals as well, to 24 hours of complete rest every seven days. Appropriately, the list in this verse enumerates seven categories of God's creatures who benefit from rest on the seventh day. The "you" of the commandment includes both husbands and wives.

12. The Fifth Commandment forms a transition from the first to the second group of divine declarations, because it incorporates both religious and social dimensions. It shares with the preceding commandment the formula "the LORD your God." Also, the relationship of the people Israel to God is often expressed metaphorically in filial terms, and the same verbs of "honoring" and "revering" are used to express proper human attitudes to both God and parents. In fact, the Torah explicitly requires "respect" only in relation to God and parents. An offender in either instance is liable to the extreme penalty. The parallels point out the importance the Torah assigns to the integrity of the family, which can help ensure the stability of society as well as generational continuity.

father . . . mother The command, directed equally to son and daughter irrespective of age, holds for both parents.

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ing the winepress, and loading asses. All *Shabbat* prohibitions are suspended when human life is at risk. In such a situation it is a religious duty to violate them to save a life (*pikku·aḥ nefesh*). This principle is grounded in Lev. 18:5: "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD."

and do all your work What if we cannot finish all our work by sundown on Friday? Then we should keep *Shabbat* as if we had completed it. Do not mar *Shabbat* by worrying about unfinished business (Rashi).

12. Honor your father and your mother Honoring parents is a way of honoring God, the ultimate source of all life and care. Lev. 19:3 reverses the order in commanding us to fear (i.e., revere) our parents, listing the mother first. The Talmud suggests that the Torah is seeking to balance the natural impulse to honor one's mother and fear one's father (BT Kid. 30b). Some societies and religious movements teach that people can be truly themselves only if they reject their parents. In Judaism, to reject one's parents is to reject all of one's ancestors and pretend that one has no past. It verges on rejecting the ultimate parent, God, from whom all life flows. Thus, although

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HALAKHAH L'MA·ASEH

20:10. your son or daughter See Comment on 23:12.

20:12. Honor your father and your mother Honoring parents includes arranging necessary physical and financial assistance (BT Kid. 31a–b). Children are not required or permitted to violate Jewish law to conform to parental wishes (BT Yev. 5b), but children should always balance their Jewish commitments to other *mitzvot* with honor and respect for their parents. See also Comments on Lev. 19:3; Deut. 21:18–21.

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you may long endure on the land that the LORD your God is assigning to you.

13You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

יַאֲרִכֻן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ׃ ס

13*לֹא תִרְצָח ס

לֹא תִנְאָף ס

v. 13. למערבאי פיסקא באמצע פסוק שלוש פעמים

long endure Respect for parents is regarded as vital for preservation of the social fabric. Dishonoring parents imperils the well-being of society and survival of the people Israel in the Land.

13. You shall not murder The stem of the word translated as "murder" (רצח) applies only to illegal killing. Unlike other verbs for the taking of life, it is never used in the administration of justice or for killing in war. The rationale for this prohibition is found in Gen. 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, / By man shall his blood be shed; / For in His image / Did God make man." In practice, at least in Second Temple times, imposition of the death penalty was a rare occurrence.

You shall not commit adultery The definition of adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between a married or engaged woman and a man who is not her lawful husband. Because adultery is treated as both a public wrong and an offense against God, a husband has no legal power to pardon his faithless wife or her paramour. The gravity of adultery in Israelite law may be gauged both by its place in the Decalogue—between murder and theft—and by the extreme severity of the penalty.

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a convert to Judaism is technically considered a new person with no past (lest he or she be embarrassed by past years of idol worship or unseemly behavior), most authorities would direct the convert to continue to honor his or her parents.

long endure Perhaps the intention here is that we will be able to look forward to a long life and not dread growing old, because we will have fashioned a society in which the elderly are honored and respected. The commandment is not addressed to children, telling them to heed their parents, but to adults, enjoining them to continue to honor their elderly parents even when there is no biologic need to. The Sages interpret this verse not to command feelings of affection but to command behavior. We are obliged to support and maintain our parents and to avoid shaming them. "Now that I have commanded you to acknowledge that I am the Creator of all, and to honor parents because they have joined Me in an act of creating life, guard against destroying the work of My hands in acts of murder" (Maimonides). Four things above all must be protected so that the community may stand firm: life, marriage, property and social honor (Buber).

13. You shall not murder The Hebrew text does not state "you shall not kill" (*lo taharog*) but "you shall not murder" (*lo tirtzaḥ*). The Sages understand "bloodshed" to include embarrassing a fellow human being in public so that the blood drains from his or her face, not providing safety for travelers, and causing anyone the loss of his or her livelihood. "One may murder with the hand or with the tongue, by talebearing or by character assassination. One may murder also by carelessness, by indifference, by the failure to save human life when it is in your power to do so" (Ibn Ezra).

You shall not commit adultery For the Torah, marriage is not only a private sexual or economic arrangement between two individuals. It is a holy covenant (*kiddushin*). Buber taught that "God is found in relationships." God is present when two people pledge themselves to each other; God is present in a home sustained by marital love. The Midrash suggests that

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HALAKHAH L'MA·ASEH

20:13. adultery Until a man gives a Jewish writ of divorce (a *get*) to his wife, Jewish law considers both of them to be married, even if they are divorced under civil law. Although the Torah allowed polygamy, Rabbeinu Gershom (ca. 1000 C.E.) forbade it. We view marriage today as a monogamous relationship built on mutual trust, and so sex outside the marriage by either partner is forbidden by Jewish law and/or by Jewish moral norms. See Comment on Deut. 22:28–29.

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לֹא תִגְנֹֽב׃ ס

לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בְרֵעֲךָ עֵד שָֽׁקֶר׃ ס

14 לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא־תַחְמֹד אֵשֶׁת
רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וַחֲמֹרוֹ וְכֹל
שביעי אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ׃ פ

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

14You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

You shall not steal The precise application of this Eighth Commandment is complicated by the obvious lack of specifics. The Hebrew verb גנב may cover theft of property as well as kidnaping (Rashbam).

You shall not bear false witness This is not the same as "swearing falsely" in verse 7, for witnesses did not always testify under oath in ancient Israel. The prohibition here refers to judicial proceedings.

14. You shall not covet The meaning of this commandment has been a matter of dispute. Does it refer to a private mental state or only to acts directed toward acquiring the coveted object?

house The Hebrew word *bayit* here, as frequently elsewhere, means "household."

God's presence is diminished by infidelity, implying perhaps that the spiritual integrity of a marital relationship is diluted when a third party intrudes (Lev. R. 23:12, end). Hosea, a prophet of the 8th century B.C.E., described God's relationship to the people Israel in terms of a marriage bond, comparing God's pain over Israel's chasing after false gods to the sense of betrayal felt by a human being confronting the infidelity of his or her partner.

You shall not steal Rashi and other commentators understand this commandment to refer to kidnaping, stealing a person. They understand the last prohibition of the Decalogue to refer to stealing property. Later rabbinic interpretations clarify the notion of theft to include borrowing an object without permission, even with the intention of returning it, and keeping a lost object when you suspect that, with some effort, you could locate the rightful owner. Does the Torah compare the sanctity of private property to that of marriage or life itself? Perhaps the intent of this commandment is to avoid dividing society into two hostile camps—the very rich and the destitute—which might drive some of the poor to rebel against this economic inequity by striking at the property of others. In such a social order no one, however wealthy or prominent, would feel secure.

You shall not bear false witness Alshekh interprets this to mean "you shall not testify falsely on behalf of your neighbor," even to help an honest person win a case in which he lacks witnesses.

14. You shall not covet Many commentators are troubled by the apparent prohibition of a feeling, when the general pattern of the Torah is to command behavior, not thought. Can we control our feelings or are we responsible only for our actions? Some (e.g., Rashi) resolve the issue by taking the 8th commandment to apply to kidnaping and the 10th to stealing property. The same verb occurs in Exod. 34:24, assuring the Israelites of the security of their homes when they go on pilgrimage at festival time. There, it makes more sense to take it to mean "no one will confiscate your house" while you are away rather than "no one will covet it." Others (Maimonides) understand this commandment to prohibit action that could be the result of coveting, such as pressuring a person to sell you something you desire. But the majority understand it to apply to covetous thoughts. It may be difficult to control our emotions, but we may never excuse our behavior by claiming that our emotions overcame us so that we could not help doing what we did.

Some see a symmetrical arrangement in the entire passage. The Decalogue begins with an abstract principle concerning thought ("I the LORD am your God"), proceeds to prohibit verbal utterances (swearing falsely) and then focuses on deeds (*Shabbat;* honoring parents; re-

HALAKHAH L'MA·ASEH

20:14. covet This verse prohibits longing only for anything we cannot obtain honestly and legally (BT BM 5b).

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15 All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 16 "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." 17 Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." 18 So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

שביעי 15 וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־
הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת־הָהָר עָשֵׁן
וַיַּרְא הָעָם וַיָּנֻעוּ וַיַּעַמְדוּ מֵרָחֹק׃
16 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אַתָּה עִמָּנוּ
וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל־יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן־
נָמוּת׃ 17 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אַל־
תִּירָאוּ כִּי לְבַעֲבוּר נַסּוֹת אֶתְכֶם בָּא
הָאֱלֹהִים וּבַעֲבוּר תִּהְיֶה יִרְאָתוֹ עַל־
פְּנֵיכֶם לְבִלְתִּי תֶחֱטָאוּ׃ 18 וַיַּעֲמֹד הָעָם
מֵרָחֹק וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל־הָעֲרָפֶל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם
הָאֱלֹהִים׃ פ

19 The LORD said to Moses:

Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: 20 With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. 21 Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your

מפטיר 19 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם
כִּי מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם דִּבַּרְתִּי עִמָּכֶם׃ 20 לֹא
תַעֲשׂוּן אִתִּי אֱלֹהֵי כֶסֶף וֵאלֹהֵי זָהָב לֹא
תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם׃ 21 מִזְבַּח אֲדָמָה תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי
וְזָבַחְתָּ עָלָיו אֶת־עֹלֹתֶיךָ וְאֶת־שְׁלָמֶיךָ

THE PEOPLE'S REACTION (vv. 15–16)

15. witnessed The Hebrew verbal stem ראה (literally, "to see") here encompasses sound. The figurative language serves to indicate the profound awareness among the assembled throng of the overpowering majesty and mystery of God's self-manifestation. This experience cannot be described adequately by ordinary language applied to the senses.

18. thick cloud Hebrew: *arafel*. The dense, dark cloud poetically expresses God's mysteriously perceptible yet unseen Presence.

THE REGULATION OF WORSHIP (vv. 19–23)

These verses continue the narrative by featuring the instructions that Moses received as he "approached the thick cloud." They also serve to introduce the laws that follow in *Mishpatim*.

21. altar of earth This is an altar made by heaping up a mound of earth in an open field.

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fraining from murder, adultery, and theft) before returning to the improper use of words (bearing false witness) and concluding with abstract thought (coveting). One Hasidic preacher takes this last commandment not as a prohibition but as a promise and reward: if you live by the first 9 commandments, you will have no reason to covet what anyone else possesses (Yeḥiel Michael of Zolochev).

15. All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning The text reads literally, "they *saw* the thunder . . . and the blare of the horn." The experience of Revelation was so uniquely intense and overwhelming that the senses overflowed their normal bounds. People felt that they were seeing sounds and hearing visions.

16. lest we die With the exception of rare individuals, human beings cannot endure direct contact with God. Thus every religion strives to mediate God's Presence. Through ritual, through study, through the performance of *mitzvot*, and through our encounters with people who embody what God stands for, we are able to "meet" God.

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אֶת־צֹאנְךָ וְאֶת־בְּקָרֶךָ בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
אַזְכִּיר אֶת־שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ׃
22 וְאִם־מִזְבַּח אֲבָנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי לֹא־
תִבְנֶה אֶתְהֶן גָּזִית כִּי חַרְבְּךָ הֵנַפְתָּ עָלֶיהָ
וַתְּחַלְּלֶהָ׃ 23 וְלֹא־תַעֲלֶה בְמַעֲלֹת עַל־
מִזְבְּחִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגָּלֶה עֶרְוָתְךָ עָלָיו׃ פ

sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. 22And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them. 23Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it.

in every place The word for "place" (*makom*) most likely means here "sacred site," a site rendered sacred by an altar to God, as in Gen. 12:7. This implies approval of numerous altars scattered throughout the land, in contrast with later laws in Deuteronomy that insist that all sacrificial worship take place exclusively in one official national-religious center.

22. This prohibition against hewn masonry is incorporated in Deut. 27:5–6 regarding instructions for the altar to be erected on Mount Ebal, which Joshua later strictly enforced (Josh. 8:30–31). In the construction of Solomon's Temple, "only finished stones cut at the quarry were used, so that no hammer or axe or any iron tool was heard in the House while it was being built" (1 Kings 6:7). Many centuries later, when Judah the Maccabee built a new altar after the liberation of Jerusalem, he was careful to use only uncut stones. Josephus, describing Herod's Temple, likewise reports that no iron was used in the construction of its altar.

tool Undefined here; Deut. 27:5 and 1 Kings 6:7 specify iron.

23. The instructions here must be directed to a layman at a private altar, because the uniform of the priests included linen breeches that covered their nakedness. This contrasts with many scenes in ancient Near Eastern art that depict priests officiating in the nude.

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21. in every place A sense of God's presence is not limited to Mount Sinai. Wherever we turn our homes, schools, offices, and synagogues into places where God's name is invoked, God promises to be with us and bless us. The remainder of the Book of Exodus, and virtually the rest of the Torah, can be seen as a commentary on and expansion of the Sinai experience. An entire people has been addressed by God. Their lives and the lives of their descendants, their every daily moment, will henceforth be shaped by that encounter.

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הפטרת יתרו

HAFTARAH FOR YITRO

ISAIAH 6:1–7:6, 9:5–6 (*Ashk'nazim*)
ISAIAH 6:1–13 (*S'fardim*)

The first part of this *haftarah* (6:1–13) takes place in the year of King Uzziah's death (733–732 B.C.E.). The second part (7:1–6) occurs during the regency of his successor King Ahaz, when an alliance between Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel threatened Jerusalem in the south. The reading concludes with a depiction of a royal figure who will rule in peace and justice (9:5–6).

The *haftarah* opens with Isaiah's commission to prophecy. He presumably is standing in the Temple courts when he experiences an ecstatic vision of God. At that moment, Isaiah is struck with a terrifying sense of impurity. Only after his mouth is purified by a heavenly coal does he return to his people to prophesy.

A common pattern shapes the structure and components of divine commissions of prophets (see Exod. 3:2–4,9–12, 4:10–12; Jer. 1:4–10; Ezek. 1:1–3:3). All of them are put to a divinely ordained task. Their expressions of awe and unworthiness underscore that the initiative comes from God. When we examine both Isaiah's and Ezekiel's throne visions, we see that neither event was induced by mystical preparations, but was unexpected. Likewise, neither vision serves as a mystical experience for its own sake, but functions as a prelude to God's commission of the prophet.

Isaiah's vision differs in one aspect: His commission occurs within both the earthly and the divine Temple. Indeed, the prophet experiences being raised into the heavenly court as a participant. Such heavenly ascensions for the sake of Israel's destiny became common in postbiblical literature.

A standard feature of prophetic commissions is God's promise of support. The messenger is told: "Do not be afraid" (*al tira,* cf. Jer. 1:8; Ezek. 2:6). Isaiah uses the same language when he tells Ahaz (in God's name) not to be terrorized by the alliance between Syria and Ephraim (Isa. 7:4). The trust expressed here is an important part of Isaiah's theology. He repeatedly contrasts spiritual truth with military might.

RELATION OF THE *HAFTARAH* TO THE *PARASHAH*

Thematic and verbal parallels connect the two readings. The *parashah* (Exod. 18–20) presents a blueprint for justice and judgment as well as a revelation of God's instruction to the entire nation (Exod. 19–20). The *haftarah* echoes these themes in more personal terms. Isaiah first receives a vision of God's majesty, and instruction to the people and its leader (Isa. 6:1–7:6). This is followed by the promise of a new era of national justice, to be inaugurated by a wondrous king. These two biblical passages are at two historical poles: the past time of the origin of the Covenant and the future time of messianic justice. What Moses inaugurates, the prophet Isaiah can only envisage: a kingdom of justice under God. What is more, the Covenant people, bidden to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6), have failed their task. They are now impure. Only in the future, after their punishment and purgation (Isa. 6:5,11–13), can they become a "holy seed." Then the ancient Covenant will be carried on by a remnant.

The two passages are intimately intertwined by language and imagery. Compare, for example, "wings of eagles" (*kanfei n'sharim*) and "holy nation" (*goy kadosh*) in Exod. 19:5–6 with "wings" (*k'nafayim*) and "holy" (*kadosh*) in Isaiah 6:2–3 as well as "smoke" (*ashan*) in both Exod. 19:18 and Isa. 6:4. Through shared vocabulary and imagery, the prophet Isaiah emerges as the historical disciple of Moses, first teacher of the divine cov-

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enant. Like Moses, Isaiah is overawed by the revelation of God. He stands firm before the vision, however, and is brought to the depths of his own unworthiness. His confession of unfitness leads to heavenly purification, readying him to serve his people. But their spiritual life has been dulled, and the prophet must acknowledge their failure. Only disaster and miraculous survival will generate the holy potential of the people. Can the holy seed again become a holy nation, or is it destined to remain but a trace of its sacred past? This is the silent question put before each reader of the *haftarah,* when Isaiah's prophecy is recited.

6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. 2Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly.

3And one would call to the other,
"Holy, holy, holy!
The LORD of Hosts!
His presence fills all the earth!"

4The doorposts would shake at the sound of the one who called, and the House kept filling with smoke. 5I cried,

ו בִּשְׁנַת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֻזִּיָּהוּ וָאֶרְאֶה
אֶת־אֲדֹנָי יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנִשָּׂא וְשׁוּלָיו
מְלֵאִים אֶת־הַהֵיכָל׃ 2 שְׂרָפִים עֹמְדִים |
מִמַּעַל לוֹ שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם לְאֶחָד
בִּשְׁתַּיִם | יְכַסֶּה פָנָיו וּבִשְׁתַּיִם יְכַסֶּה רַגְלָיו
וּבִשְׁתַּיִם יְעוֹפֵף׃

3 וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה וְאָמַר
קָדוֹשׁ | קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ
יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
מְלֹא כָל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ׃

4 וַיָּנֻעוּ אַמּוֹת הַסִּפִּים מִקּוֹל הַקּוֹרֵא
וְהַבַּיִת יִמָּלֵא עָשָׁן׃ 5 וָאֹמַר

Isaiah 6:2. Seraphs stood in attendance Isaiah's vision resembles other scenes of God's heavenly enthronement amid a retinue of heavenly beings (1 Kings 22:19–23; Daniel 7:9–14).

3. And one would call to the other, / "Holy, holy, holy!" The translation suggests that each of the six seraphs enacted a threefold sanctification, although it is unclear whether they did so successively or in unison. Rashi observes that the calling is a mutual angelic invitation to sanctify God, performed in unison. Viewing and hearing this angelic sanctification was often deemed a climax of ancient mystical experience (see 1 Enoch 90:40).

Jewish tradition has adapted the sanctification in Isa. 6:3 to the formal liturgy (where it is called *K'dushah*). It is recited as part of the *Amidah* prayer and in other parts of the liturgy. Talmudic *midrash* claims that recitation of *K'dushah* by a congregation on earth parallels the praise of the angelic host. The Sages also stress that the human recitation precedes the angelic one and that this leads to the coronation of God who ascends the highest throne in heaven. The visionary experience of Isaiah thus has become a communal ritual, uniting heaven and earth in a chorale of divine praise.

His presence fills all the earth The Hebrew word *kavod* (presence)—sometimes translated as "glory"—refers to the manifestation of the divine glory on earth (Lev. 10:3; Isa. 40:5). God's *kavod* is often described anthropomorphically, as in the visionary experiences of Moses (Exod. 33:22–23) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:28). The medieval philosophers intensely discussed how God, utterly beyond any anthropomorphic conception, could become manifest in such terms on earth. In mystical sources, such images were repeatedly depicted and often provided the basis for bold theological assertions. The "Hymn of Glory" (*Shir ha-Kavod*), recited during *Shabbat* services, articulates the tension between figurative human depiction of God and His absolute transcendence of all such forms.

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אוֹי־לִי כִּי־נִדְמֵיתִי
כִּי אִישׁ טְמֵא־שְׂפָתַיִם אָנֹכִי
וּבְתוֹךְ עַם־טְמֵא שְׂפָתַיִם
אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב
כִּי אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
רָאוּ עֵינָי׃

"Woe is me; I am lost!
For I am a man of impure lips
And I live among a people
Of impure lips;
Yet my own eyes have beheld
The King LORD of Hosts."

6 וַיָּעָף אֵלַי אֶחָד מִן־הַשְּׂרָפִים וּבְיָדוֹ
רִצְפָּה בְּמֶלְקָחַיִם לָקַח מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ׃
7 וַיַּגַּע עַל־פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר

6Then one of the seraphs flew over to me with a live coal, which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7He touched it to my lips and declared,

הִנֵּה נָגַע זֶה עַל־שְׂפָתֶיךָ
וְסָר עֲוֹנֶךָ
וְחַטָּאתְךָ תְּכֻפָּר׃

"Now that this has touched your lips,
Your guilt shall depart
And your sin be purged away."

8 וָאֶשְׁמַע אֶת־קוֹל אֲדֹנָי אֹמֵר אֶת־מִי
אֶשְׁלַח וּמִי יֵלֶךְ־לָנוּ וָאֹמַר הִנְנִי שְׁלָחֵנִי׃
9 וַיֹּאמֶר לֵךְ וְאָמַרְתָּ לָעָם הַזֶּה
שִׁמְעוּ שָׁמוֹעַ וְאַל־תָּבִינוּ
וּרְאוּ רָאוֹ וְאַל־תֵּדָעוּ׃
10 הַשְׁמֵן לֵב־הָעָם הַזֶּה
וְאָזְנָיו הַכְבֵּד
וְעֵינָיו הָשַׁע
פֶּן־יִרְאֶה בְעֵינָיו
וּבְאָזְנָיו יִשְׁמָע
וּלְבָבוֹ יָבִין
וְשָׁב וְרָפָא לוֹ׃

8Then I heard the voice of my Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me." 9And He said, "Go, say to that people:

'Hear, indeed, but do not understand;
See, indeed, but do not grasp.'
10Dull that people's mind,
Stop its ears,
And seal its eyes—
Lest, seeing with its eyes
And hearing with its ears,
It also grasp with its mind,
And repent and save itself."

11 וָאֹמַר עַד־מָתַי אֲדֹנָי וַיֹּאמֶר
עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־שָׁאוּ עָרִים מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב
וּבָתִּים מֵאֵין אָדָם

11I asked, "How long, my Lord?" And He replied:

"Till towns lie waste without inhabitants
And houses without people,

9. Hear, indeed, but do not understand Isaiah's message is difficult, both stylistically and theologically. One interpretation suggests that the prophet was instructed to speak in such a way that the people would reject his message, thus ensuring divine punishment. In this reading, his word is designed explicitly to prevent repentance (v. 10). Alternatively, this passage can be read as a psychological description: "Hear, though you do not understand" (Rashi, Radak). Thus, although the people may hear, they have become too indifferent to respond to the divine word. In either reading, the people's inability to see or hear contrasts sharply with the prophet's clear vision.

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And the ground lies waste and desolate—
12For the LORD will banish the population—
And deserted sites are many
In the midst of the land.
13"But while a tenth part yet remains in it, it shall repent. It shall be ravaged like the terebinth and the oak, of which stumps are left even when they are felled: its stump shall be a holy seed."

וְהָאֲדָמָה תִּשָּׁאֶה שְׁמָמָה׃
12 וְרִחַק יְהוָה אֶת־הָאָדָם
וְרַבָּה הָעֲזוּבָה
בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ׃
13 וְעוֹד בָּהּ עֲשִׂרִיָּה וְשָׁבָה וְהָיְתָה לְבָעֵר
כְּאֵלָה וְכָאַלּוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁלֶּכֶת מַצֶּבֶת בָּם*
זֶרַע קֹדֶשׁ מַצַּבְתָּהּ׃ פ

7 In the reign of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel marched upon Jerusalem to attack it; but they were not able to attack it.
2Now, when it was reported to the House of David that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, their hearts and the hearts of their people trembled as trees of the forest sway before a wind. 3But the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out with your son Shear-jashub to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the Upper Pool, by the road of the Fuller's Field. 4And say to him: Be firm and be calm. Do not be afraid and do not lose heart on account of those two smoking stubs of firebrands, on account of the raging of Rezin and his Arameans and the son of Remaliah. 5Because the Arameans—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—have plotted against you, saying, 6'We will march against Judah and invade and conquer it, and we will set up as king in it the son of Tabeel,'

ז וַיְהִי בִּימֵי אָחָז בֶּן־יוֹתָם בֶּן־עֻזִּיָּהוּ
מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה עָלָה רְצִין מֶלֶךְ־אֲרָם
וּפֶקַח בֶּן־רְמַלְיָהוּ מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל יְרוּשָׁלִַם
לַמִּלְחָמָה עָלֶיהָ וְלֹא יָכֹל לְהִלָּחֵם
עָלֶיהָ׃
2 וַיֻּגַּד לְבֵית דָּוִד לֵאמֹר נָחָה אֲרָם עַל־
אֶפְרָיִם וַיָּנַע לְבָבוֹ וּלְבַב עַמּוֹ כְּנוֹעַ עֲצֵי־
יָעַר מִפְּנֵי־רוּחַ׃ 3 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־
יְשַׁעְיָהוּ צֵא־נָא לִקְרַאת אָחָז אַתָּה וּשְׁאָר
יָשׁוּב בְּנֶךָ אֶל־קְצֵה תְּעָלַת הַבְּרֵכָה
הָעֶלְיוֹנָה אֶל־מְסִלַּת שְׂדֵה כוֹבֵס׃
4 וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו הִשָּׁמֵר וְהַשְׁקֵט אַל־תִּירָא
וּלְבָבְךָ אַל־יֵרַךְ מִשְּׁנֵי זַנְבוֹת הָאוּדִים
הָעֲשֵׁנִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּחֲרִי־אַף רְצִין וַאֲרָם
וּבֶן־רְמַלְיָהוּ׃ 5 יַעַן כִּי־יָעַץ עָלֶיךָ אֲרָם
רָעָה אֶפְרַיִם וּבֶן־רְמַלְיָהוּ לֵאמֹר׃ 6 נַעֲלֶה
בִּיהוּדָה וּנְקִיצֶנָּה וְנַבְקִעֶנָּה אֵלֵינוּ וְנַמְלִיךְ
מֶלֶךְ בְּתוֹכָהּ אֵת בֶּן־טָבְאַל׃ ס

9 5Surely a child has been born to us,
A son has been given us.

ט 5 כִּי־יֶלֶד יֻלַּד־לָנוּ
בֵּן נִתַּן־לָנוּ

v. 13. סבירין ומטעין "בה"

13. a tenth part There will be repentance only for a small remnant, who are like a ravaged tree whose stump produces new growth. The 10th part will become a holy seed.

Isaiah 9:5. Surely Hebrew: *ki,* usually translated by "for," as in its original setting in Isaiah. Rendering *ki* as "surely" shows how this *haftarah* connects its two passages; it juxtaposes the plot-

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And authority has settled on his shoulders.
He has been named
"The Mighty God is planning grace;
The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler"—
6In token of abundant authority
And of peace without limit
Upon David's throne and kingdom,
That it may be firmly established
In justice and in equity
Now and evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of Hosts
Shall bring this to pass.

וַתְּהִי הַמִּשְׂרָה עַל־שִׁכְמוֹ
וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ
פֶּלֶא יוֹעֵץ אֵל גִּבּוֹר
אֲבִיעַד שַׂר־שָׁלוֹם׃
6 לסרבה לְמַרְבֵּה הַמִּשְׂרָה
וּלְשָׁלוֹם אֵין־קֵץ
עַל־כִּסֵּא דָוִד וְעַל־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ
לְהָכִין אֹתָהּ וּלְסַעֲדָהּ
בְּמִשְׁפָּט וּבִצְדָקָה
מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם
קִנְאַת יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
תַּעֲשֶׂה־זֹּאת׃ ס

ters' royal pretender (7:5–6) to a future messianic king picked by God (9:5–6).

The Mighty God is planning grace The first in a series of royal titles, similar to others in the ancient Near East (as found in modern times by archaeologists). For Rashi and Radak, this initial title refers to God, but Ibn Ezra understands it as the title of the powerful messianic king.

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