

# The peasant and the princess

In parashat Yitro, we read the description of the most awesome event in human history: the giving of the Torah by God Himself. Fifty days after the people of Israel left Egypt, this incredible revelation of God's presence took place. The Torah and commandments given at Mount Sinai reveal the deepest secret to us: how to live a complete life.

The Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai, 10 commandments that are the core of the Jewish nation's covenant with God. At the end of this event, for 40 days and nights, God began to teach Moses all the commandments, laws, rules and lifestyle directives included in this covenant between God and His nation.

The 10th and final commandment of the Ten Commandments is perhaps the hardest to implement: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:14).

Following a series of commandments dealing with recognizing God's presence and the proper behavior between people comes a commandment that delves into man's most hidden desires and wishes: "You shall not covet!" Man is commanded not to feel the feeling of desiring something that isn't his, even if it is something very desirable.

This commandment sounds like one that only a select

few would be able to implement. Even those who believe in free will and in man's ability to control himself and his behavior still conceive of hidden urges and desires as instinctive, and therefore not subject to restraint.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra was a poet, philosopher, scientist and great biblical commentator in Spain of the 12th century. In explaining the tremendous significance of this commandment, he offered a wonderful parable:

"Many people are amazed at this commandment. They ask, how is it possible for a person not to covet in his heart all beautiful things that appear desirable to him? I will now give you a parable:

"Note that a peasant of sound mind who sees a beautiful princess will not entertain any covetous thoughts... for he knows that this is an impossibility. This peasant will not think like the insane who desire to sprout wings and fly to the sky, for it is impossible to do so....

"So must every intelligent person know that a person does not attain a beautiful woman or money because of his intelligence or wisdom, but only in accordance with what God has apportioned to him.... The intelligent person will therefore neither desire nor covet. Once he knows that God has prohibited his neighbor's wife to him, she will be more exalted in his eyes than the princess is in the eyes of the peasant. He will therefore be happy with his lot and will not allow his heart to covet and desire anything that is not his. For he knows that which

God did not want to give him... He will therefore trust in his Creator – that is, that his Creator will sustain him and do what is right in His sight" (Commentary of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, Exodus 20:14).

Ibn Ezra's parable is drawn from the world of class distinctions. A peasant meets a beautiful princess. Assuming he is of sound mind, he will not develop any desire for her, since he knows there is no chance for someone of his status to marry the princess. He does not desire the princess, just as he does not desire to have wings so he can fly in the sky.

The moral is just as wonderful as the parable and is relevant today as well. Our property and assets, our partners and the people we are privileged to have present in our lives, are all gifts from God. No matter how much we strive to attain something that God did not intend for us to have, we will not succeed, just as we will never grow wings.

In the commandment of "You shall not covet," God is asking us to adopt this worldview that sees everything we have as God-given. This will lead us to not coveting something that isn't ours.

The Torah given to us at Mount Sinai teaches us that man's desires and urges are not disconnected from his thoughts and way of life and are the direct result of how he sees the world. ■

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# Right and wrong

Psychologically we are predisposed to pay close attention to beginnings and endings.

Origin stories are often seen as the keys to people's lives. And psychological research has often shown that how something ends – whether an ordeal or a joyous occasion – has a greater impact than other features of the experience.

So what begins and ends the most significant event in the history of Israel?

God begins the Ten Commandments with "Anochi," "I am." There is a discussion among the commentators as to whether this constitutes a declaration or a commandment. Abarbanel, the great Spanish sage, declares that it is a preamble, making clear to the Israelites Who was speaking to them. Rambam, however, insists that it is a commandment, a mitzvah, the mitzvah of belief in one God.

The Israelites had seen God's wonders enacted in Egypt, but they had not "met" God. Now, at the moment of revelation, the voice which overawed them comes from the sky and creates the frame for everything that will follow.

The "I" of God is the opening of the Ten Commandments.

How does the revelation conclude? The last commandment concerns coveting. The final words are "that belong to your neighbor." Therefore, the first word is "I am," and the final word is "neighbor."

Without analyzing each of the commandments separately, we can understand something profound tracing the motion from God to neighbor. It is the movement, known to us in a very different sense, from the greatest generality to the most particular specific – rather like one of those shots that open a movie, moving from far above the earth and finally landing in someone's kitchen. We thought we were dwelling in the empyrean, and we find ourselves at the dinner table.

Several years ago, in my first debate with writer Christopher Hitchens, he made fun of the fact that Judaism believed that we could not know that murder is wrong until God came down at Sinai and told us so.

Of course, this is not at all the case. I pointed out that the Torah itself never

makes that assumption. Indeed, it is clear that Cain's killing Abel, long before the revelation at Sinai, is not only considered wrong, but Cain is assumed to know that it is wrong. No one believed that humanity was only waiting for the theophany to be told that one should not steal, or murder, or commit adultery.

If the Ten Commandments were not designed to tell us something new about morality, then what was the point? Perhaps we would not have observed Shabbat, but did the Jewish people need to be told that murder was forbidden?

We return to the first and last words, which begin with God and end with one another. The message is that these laws are woven into the fabric of the universe. They are the will of the Creator, not the arbitrary decision of a jurist or the law of social cohesion. The Ten Commandments are less content than context – these fundamental principles are the essential attributes of the world as designed by God. You can violate them, but you cannot change them.

In the pagan world people were con-

cerned if they offended the gods. In Homer it is the gods whose feelings must be managed. The Ten Commandments announce to Israel, and through them to humanity, that how one treats a neighbor is of concern to the Author of all.

The debate over objective versus subjective morality is ramified and never-ending. We are all aware that moral standards change, sometimes radically, in the course of history. We abhor things today – slavery, child labor – that were once considered normative. The natural result of human spiritual growth for many is to conclude that there is no standard, no "good or bad, but thinking makes it so," as Hamlet forlornly declares. The revelation at Sinai makes clear: there is a right and a wrong.

How we treat each other matters, and not only to one another, but also to the One who created us, for we are all children of God. ■

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# Mental enslavement

The Hebrews in Egypt during Moses's time, and the Jews in Europe during Herzl's time, failed to envision the path to freedom

The Hebrews in Egypt seemed to think they had only two options: serve Egypt or die in the desert.

They did not listen to Moses, "due to impatience of spirit and cruel bondage." We get a clarification of what this meant when they later tell Moses: "This is what we told you in Egypt, saying Let us alone, and we will serve Egypt. For it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert."

This became a mantra for the pro-return camp during 40 years in the desert: Do not have hallucinations – there are only two options. This is accompanied with cynicism: "Are there no graves in Egypt?" they ask Moses. The inability to recognize that there is a third alternative, freedom, is a symptom of enslavement: The failure to dream.

In the exodus from Europe, a similar pattern occurred. On February 14, 1896, Herzl published *The Jewish State*, telling the Jews that a path was paved for their return home to freedom.

Herzl, operating in a secular environment, post-prophecy, could certainly not say as Moses did: "The God of our fathers sent me to you" – he would have been ridiculed.

That was left to others. Upon reading Herzl's newly published book, Max Nordau, a world-renowned writer and philosopher of the time, made a clear determination: The book is a revelation! Nordau, who referred to Herzl as a prophet, was not alone.

Vienna's chief rabbi, Rabbi Moritz Güdemann, who told Herzl early on "you remind me of Moses," had his personal doubts about Zionism, but stressed to Herzl: "Remain as you are. Perhaps you are the one called by God."

And yet, just like in Moses's case, the enslaved Jews of Western Europe, impatient of spirit, failed to dream.

Some Jews asked Herzl if his book was meant to be a satire, while others ask if he had gone mad. One influential Jewish-owned newspaper, *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote: "Zionism is madness born of despera-



(Pictured: Strawberry Fields, New York City; Jeremy Beck/Unsplash)

tion. Enough with such hallucinations." The humor section of that newspaper played out Herzl's plans and showed the Maccabees running away in fear.

Indeed, the only two alternatives, according to the skeptics, were enslavement in antisemitic Europe or "death in the deserts of Palestine."

(Coincidentally, *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* was founded by Theodor Hertzka. In *The Jewish State*, Herzl contrasted Hertzka's utopia of a make-believe country called Freiland with his practical vision for a Jewish state. Hertzka was no longer the publisher of *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* at that time.)

### Remedy to an enslaved mindset – transformation!

The only way for the Hebrews of Egypt and the Jews of Europe to internalize that there was a third alternative – that of freedom – was through a grand transformation of Judaism.

That was Moses's big task. But this could not have been done overnight or through a three-day field trip of worship. Moses recognized that the Hebrews were only one of three stakeholders needed for the successful fulfillment of the transformation. The others were the Egyptians and the world's nations.

The Egyptians needed to go through the process to recognize the reign of the God of the Hebrews (the 10 plagues), and the world needed the parting of the sea to be in awe. Mostly, the Hebrews needed a process. Thus the 40 years in the desert, which Herzl referred to as "education through migration."

The grand transformation of Judaism was Herzl's big task, too. He, too, recognized that the stakeholders need time to recognize a transformation of such magnitude. Europeans, after centuries of anti-Jewish indoctrination, cannot just change in one day (or one century?). And the world needs something akin to the parting of the sea, to be in awe. That, according to Herzl, would be the innovations and ingenuity that would come out of the Jewish state. The Jewish state would be the necessity of the world, he predicted.

Mostly, the Jews needed to go through a prolonged process in order to internalize their new freedoms. And that is what Herzl was set to do when he launched Zionism in Basel in 1897: "We are laying the foundation for a building that will one day be a safe haven for the Jewish nation," he proclaimed. That "one day" did not occur in 1948, nor in Israel's first 70 years.

It takes time for transformations of such magnitude to settle, and there were insurmountable hurdles. Those hurdles are now removed, and the transformation that Herzl seeded is now ripe for recognition: Zionism is the return to Judaism. ■

The writer is author of *Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's transformation to Zionism, now available on Amazon and at Pomeranz Bookseller in Jerusalem, ahead of the official March 7 launch. For details: Judaism-Zionism.com*

### 'De-Mosesizing' of Judaism 1.0, and the 'Re-Herzling' of Judaism 3.0

Two phases of Judaism each began in one man's consciousness.

Judaism 1.0 started fully with Moses. God's initial revelation was only to him. Moses then brought the message to the people.

Similarly, Judaism 3.0 started with Herzl. Through a bizarre process that Herzl describes in his diaries, the ideas of Zionism came to him. He then brought the message to the people.

Just as in Moses's case, this was not simply about migration from Egypt/Europe to Canaan/Palestine; this was about the transformation of Judaism.

But the two adopted different strategies. The

process of de-Mosesizing Judaism was gradual.

Moses accepted Jethro's advice to enact a system of judges. God later instructed Moses to transfer priestly responsibilities to Aaron, and later to give executive powers to a council of 70 elders. (As discussed in a previous article, it is possible that not de-Mosesizing early-on contributed to the events of the Golden Calf.)

Herzl, on the other hand, tried to de-Herzelize Zionism from the get-go. He hoped to disengage from the cause once his book *The Jewish State* was published. He wanted to "delegate up" to the Rothschilds, but they refused, and hence Herzl took his message to the Jewish masses. In the Zionist Congress, he tried

to downplay his ubiquitous involvement, and in the Zionist newspaper *Die Welt*, he wrote articles under various pen names, giving the appearance of a movement that was bigger than just one person.

Today, while there certainly is a full recognition of the transformation that Moses seeded back then – for example, through the holiday of Passover – there has not yet been a recognition of the transformation that Herzl seeded, and hence there is a need to "re-Herzelize" Zionism, to delve into his teachings with rigor and depth as we do with those of Moses.

Indeed, we are only in the early days of Zionism – of Judaism 3.0.