

**Session 4 – November 5 (Beth El Library)**

Continue discussion of Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur*

Handouts:

The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqraot Gedolot – Shemot/Exodus (Ed. and Tr. M. Carasik) (JPS 2005) pp. 155-158

Y. HaLevi, The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith (English tr. D. Korobkin) (J. Aronson 1998), pp. 98 - 101

Optional Reading:

Plato, Phaedrus (tr. Hackforth), in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), Plato, The Collected Dialogues (Princeton 1989), pp. 496 - 502

G.W. Leibniz, Monadology (tr. N. Rescher 1992)

NJPS lest He break out against them.” 25And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them. OJPS LORD, lest He break forth upon them.” 25So Moses went down unto the people, and told them.

20 God spoke all these words, saying:

RASHI 25 And spoke to them. This warning.

20:1 God spoke. The word *elohim*, translated here as “God,” represents Him in His aspect as judge (which this word can also mean in Hebrew). Since there are some things in the Torah for which one receives a reward for doing them but no punishment for not doing them, one might think the Ten Commandments falls into this category as well. Thus He spoke to them as “God,” a judge who can punish, rather than as “the Lord” who spoke with Moses in ch. 19. All these words. This teaches that He spoke all of the Ten Commandments in a single utterance, something no human could do. Why then are only “I the LORD” (v. 2) and “You shall have no other gods besides Me” (v. 3) in the first person? Each utterance was subsequently spoken separately. Saying. Literally, “to say.” This teaches that God spoke them in such a way as to have the Israelites answer each positive commandment with “Yes” and each prohibition with “No.”

יְפָרֵץ-בָּם: 25 וַיֵּרַד מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם וַיְאָמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: ס

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר: ס

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + How exactly did Israel receive the Ten Commandments when “God spoke all these words” (v. 1)? + Why are they called the “Ten” Commandments, when one counts at least 13 commandments or over 15 different sayings included in them? + Why is there such a mixture of positive and negative commandments? + Why is one punished in such different ways for violating the different commandments? + Why are the commandments written in this order? + Why are the five commandments from the second tablet, dealing with human relations, more important than, e.g., “You shall not defraud your fellow” (Lev. 19:13) or “Love your fellow as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), which are not included in the Ten Commandments? + Why are some commandments explained and some not? + Why do some commandments threaten punishment and others not?

20 And God spoke all these words, saying:

RASHBAM 25 Moses went down to the people and spoke to them. Literally, “And said to them”—“the commandment about the bounds begins as of now.”

IBN EZRA 25 Moses went down to the people and spoke to them. He warned them and the priests not to break through to gaze. The text does not mention that Moses and Aaron went back up, for this was not necessary. Since God told him they should come back up, we know that they did. As Moses reminds the Israelites later, “I stood between the LORD and you at that time” (Deut. 5:5). As soon as they did so, God began to speak.

20:1 God spoke all these words, saying. According to all the commentators, “I the LORD am your God” (v. 2) is the first commandment and “You shall have no other gods” (v. 3) is the second. I shall reveal my own opinion on the matter in my comment to Deut. 5:16. [K] The commandments are

all negative ones except for the first and the fifth (“Honor your father and your mother,” v. 12). For the essence of the fourth, Sabbath commandment is “you shall not do any work” (v. 10). “I the LORD” is the root of all the commandments. Faith in God’s existence must be in one’s heart. “You shall have no other gods” comes second, for one who has another god besides God essentially acknowledges that God exists, albeit in association with another god. Thus the first commandment is the essential one on which the subsequent nine are contingent. [L] like the “1” of mathematics. The third commandment, “You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God” (v. 7), comes next; it is at almost the same level as the second commandment. This contradicts the ideas of the sages of India, who say that God does not know particular details about the world. For if the swearer knew that God heard him, he would be afraid to swear falsely. The fourth commandment is that of resting on the seventh day, and this is near the level of the commandment against swearing falsely in God’s name. Its point is to contradict the ideas of the Greek sages, who say that God is continuously creating; anyone who works on the Sabbath is essentially denying the one-time creation described in Genesis. The fifth commandment is honoring one’s parents. For their honor is dependent on the honor of heaven, since the parents engendered the child through the power given them by God. They fed and clothed him as well, and it is a notion intrinsically planted in the heart that we ought to be good to those who have been good to us. Thus God is mentioned in all five of these commandments and not in the next five. For the first five deal with matters between man and the Creator.

The next five commandments deal with matters between one person and another, starting with the commandment against murder, the destruction of the body. Then comes the commandment against adultery, violence against the body; then stealing, involving property that is external to the body; then bearing false witness, involving speech; then coveting, involving thought, which is the least grievous of them. All the subsidiary commandments deriving from these 10 are thoroughly explained in the Mishnah, Talmud, and Tosafot. Saadia too catalogued all the commandments under these 10 of the covenant. But let me tell you allusively that the least of the matters involving man’s faith in the Creator is more significant than anything involving man and one of his fellow creatures. For all created things must die; the only difference between permitted and forbidden sex is that the former need not be hidden; money has wings; there is no man who does not sin with his tongue by adding to or subtracting from the truth; and every heart covets and desires except for the hearts of the faithful. [M]

[K] Christians generally take v. 2 as an introduction and split either vv. 3-6 or v. 14 into two commandments. In his comment to Deut. 5:16, Ibn Ezra follows the latter view. In the long commentary, however, he introduces the Ten Commandments with an extended essay in which he accepts the traditional Jewish view. [L] Ibn Ezra is likening the Ten Commandments to Aristotle’s “ten categories,” of which the first is the essence of a thing and the other nine are various “accidental” qualities. [M] So violating one of the latter five commandments is not as great a deviation from the ordinary course of events as violating one of the former five. We omit a section from the short commentary that essentially recaps what has just been said.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 25 Spoke to them. Literally, “said to them”—that only he and Aaron had permission to go up to the Lord (Hizkuni). So you know that Moses was at the foot of the mountain, with the people, when the Ten Commandments were given (Abarbanel).

20:1 God spoke. This phrase also occurs only in 6:2 and Gen. 8:15 (Masorah). The late R. Joseph Kara explained the rabbinic saying that the Israelites heard only the first two commandments directly from God as being based on the fact that only they are spoken in the first person (Bekhor Shor). Not “God spoke ... saying” but “God spoke ... to say.” God spoke all of these words to Himself, like (as it were) a man who is arranging his thoughts in order to say them to others. “He measured it and probed it, and He said to man....” (Job 28:27-28). One should think a thing over two or three times before saying it in public (Hizkuni). All these words. As Rashi explains, God said all of the commandments simultaneously—but Israel could not understand them; then He uttered the first two individually, the people grew frightened, and Moses uttered the rest of the commandments individually (Hizkuni).

NJPS to the LORD 22The priests also, w lest the LORD break LORD, “The people Mount Sinai, for Y ‘Set bounds about sanctify it.” 21So th “Go down, and con Aaron; but let not th break through to co

RASHI apart, e.g those who separate th where people are sit position. Lest many if only a single one c that would be too m

22 The priests al who perform God’s s near the LORD. To they should not pre tance and go up. M “are summoned” to them. It is this verb means here is, “lest

23 The people already been warnec permission.

24 Go down. V something, and agai might read the versc priests.” [P] Repeat relegated to separate the priests. But let r

[O] At this point in the sto the Masoretic punctuation, is no obvious reason to dist

NAHMANIDES Lord that they bring

fact that they were t Behind them were tl be commanded; the (Deut. 29:9-10), [I] Moses—for the two

23 The people in a book of Persia until he commands in v. 24, “The LORD (v. 21). Moses did n not “to gaze”? So G told him, “Go dowr actual moment cam

24 Come back. you to speak to then The people needed

[I] Where the groups are command that permits Mo

ADDITIONAL CO “priests,” for none such (Gersonides).

24 Go down. / Shor). Seeing that M This has nothing to

**NJPS** <sup>2</sup>I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: <sup>3</sup>You shall have no other gods besides Me.

**OJPS** <sup>2</sup>I am the LORD thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. <sup>3</sup>Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.

**R** <sup>i</sup> **2 Your God.** "Your" is in the singular in Hebrew, and why? To give Moses something to use in Israel's defense when they made the Golden Calf. He said, "Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people" (32:11). You did not command them not to have other gods, you commanded it to me alone. **Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.** That alone is enough for you to be enslaved to Me. Another reading: He had to identify Himself because He appeared at the sea as a warrior, but here as an old man, full of mercy. "Though I have changed My appearance, I don't want you to think that there are two powers in heaven. I am the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt and saved you at the sea." Another reading: "Thunder" of v. 15 is literally "voices." Though you heard so many voices, coming from every direction, don't think that there are many divine powers. **From the house of bondage.** From the house of Pharaoh, to whom you were slaves. Or perhaps it means what the Hebrew literally says, "from the house of slaves," and that the Israelites were the slaves of slaves? No, "the LORD ... rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:8). They were not the slaves of slaves, but of the king.

**3 You shall have no other gods.** I might take v. 4 to mean merely that they cannot make idols in the future; from this verse I know that ones that already exist must be

**NAHMANIDES 20:2 I the LORD am your God.** This is a positive commandment, both teaching and commanding them that they must know and believe that the Lord exists and that He is their God. He preexists everything, and everything comes from Him by His will and His power, and He is the God whom they must serve. **Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.** His bringing them out of Egypt teaches about His existence and His will, for we came out of Egypt through His knowledge and His providence. It also teaches about creation, for if the world had existed for all eternity, nature could not be changed and miracles would be impossible. It also teaches about His unlimited power, which teaches about His unity: "In order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world" (9:14). Those who came out of Egypt are the ones who know and can testify to all these things. **The house of bondage.** For they had been Pharaoh's captives. This reminds them that now it is the great, glorious, and awesome Lord whom they are obligated to serve as their God, for He redeemed them from Egyptian slavery: "For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God" (Lev. 25:55).

I have already alluded in my comment to 19:20 to the True reason for the use of the two holy names. In rabbinic tradition this commandment is called "accepting the sovereignty of heaven." For "the LORD" and "your God" are the qualities of a king with regard to his people. That is why the Mekilta opens its discussion by asking, "What is the justification for 'You shall have no other gods besides Me'? It is 'I the LORD am your God.' A parable: A king once entered a certain province. His courtiers said to him, 'Issue decrees for us to obey.' He replied, 'No. When you accept my sovereignty over you, then I will issue decrees for you. For if you do not accept my sovereignty, what will make you follow my decrees?' That is what God said to Israel. "I the LORD am your God"—I am the one whose sovereignty you accepted when you were in Egypt.' They replied, 'Yes.' 'Now that you have accepted My sovereignty, you must accept My decrees.'" That is to say, having acknowledged that I am the Lord and that I have been your God since Egypt—now, accept all My commandments. Note that—unlike the way He began His address to them, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians" (19:4), [M] where "you" is in the plural—all the commandments are given in the singular, to the individual "you," to warn them that each and every one of them will be individually punished for violating the commandments. They should not think that God will judge them as a group and that each individual will be saved along with the majority. Moses will explain this to them at the end of the Torah, in Deut. 29:17-19.

**3 You shall have no other gods besides Me.** Rashi's comment (based on the Mekilta) that this statement demands the destruction of idols that already exist would make this a separate commandment from v. 5, which carries a more severe punishment. But would this less severe prohibition against owning idols be included here, before the prohibition of idol worship? In any case, this interpretation is the

[M] In the version that we have, Nahmanides says He "began" with "You yourselves saw" from v. 19. The two verses begin with the same Hebrew words, so this is probably a copyist's error.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 2 I the LORD am your God.** "Your" is singular. Just as an image can be made so that everyone thinks the eyes are looking directly at him, so too when God spoke, everyone thought He was talking directly to him. After all, if the taste of manna could have the taste best liked by every individual, how much more so God's word (Hizkuni). Do not think that our Sages are unanimous in their opinion of this utterance. I, for one, am not too shy to say that it is not a commandment, but an introduction to the commandments (Abarbanel). **Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.** God might have told them, "I the LORD am your God who created you," but they could have answered, "You created everyone! Why put the burden of Your Torah on us?" (Bekhor Shor). Judah Halevi asked Ibn Ezra why this does not say "who created heaven and earth." He himself had already provided the answer in the *Kuzari*: God wanted to identify Himself to them by an instance that they had seen with their own eyes (Abarbanel).

**3 Other gods.** Rabbi Eliezer says, They are "other" gods because, whatever substance they are made of, if necessary they can always

2 \*אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים \*לֹא-יְהִי לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי

2-16. נרפס טעם התחלתן בלבד והוא למערבאי, והפסוקים נספר לפי מהדורת לעטעריס למערבאי לא נספר בסכום הפסוקים 3.

**ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS** ♦ What is the meaning of the first commandment, "I the LORD am your God" (v. 2)? ♦ Why do some of the first five commandments mention "the LORD" and some "the LORD your God," while none of the last five mention God at all?

**RASHBAM 20:3 You shall have no other gods besides Me.** For I alone brought you out of Egypt.

**IBN EZRA 2 I.** It is He whom one must know, love, and cleave to, be ever mindful of His presence, and the fear of Him must never leave one. **Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.** Judah Halevi (may he rest in peace) once asked me why God did not say here, "Who created heaven and earth, and who created you." My reply (in brief) was that "I the LORD" was enough for the enlightened; but the unenlightened needed tangible proof of why they should serve Him. **The house of bondage.** For you were like a slave living in a house of slavery. Compare Lev. 26:13, "I the LORD am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more."

**3 You shall have no other gods.** One must not believe those who say that God has given the Angel of the Presence [N] power over the world, nor make images to channel the power of the constellations. Negative commandments always involve the

[N] This term refers to a being who some thought ruled the world in God's stead, preventing Him from having to (as it were) "get His hands dirty" with the material aspect of existence.

is thus comparing these [people and places] to the heavens—about which it says, ‘He resides in the heavens’<sup>284</sup>—in that God’s light was manifest in these just as it is manifest in the heavens. [Even though He could emanate His light everywhere,] God only emanates His light upon those who are suitable to receive the light.<sup>285</sup> This emanation is called God’s ‘love.’<sup>286</sup> This is the meaning of the liturgy that was instituted in the prayer ‘With an everlasting love have you loved us . . . [Our Father, our King, for the sake of our forefathers who trusted You, may You grant to us and teach us].’<sup>287</sup> We are obliged to believe and verbalize this doctrine, so that we may impress upon our hearts that this [closeness we enjoy] was initiated by God, not by us.

[9] “As an analogy, when we speak of creation, we do not say that a living creature created itself; rather, God formed and rectified it upon seeing matter that was suitable for receiving life. Similarly, [we were not the impetus for God taking us out of Egypt and choosing us; rather,] God initiated our leaving Egypt, so that we could be His elite nation and He could be our King. Scripture states this in several places, such as, ‘I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of Egypt in order to be a God for you,’<sup>288</sup> and ‘Israel, through whom I shall be glorified.’”<sup>289</sup>

51 The Kuzari said: “This last Scripture has certainly departed greatly from the way we would expect God to be described. This flowery prose seems to have taken liberties with God’s honor in suggesting that God glorifies Himself through human beings.”

52 The Rabbi asked: “Would it have been any easier for you to accept if [Scripture had written that] God is glorified through the sun?”

53 The Kuzari said: “Yes, because of its exalted role. The sun comes second only to God in causing the world to function. It is because of the sun that daytime and nighttime, days and seasons are organized. Minerals, plants, and living creatures exist because of it, and it is only through

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284. *Ibid.*, 123:1.

285. Our forefathers are thus known as the “chariot” for God’s Divine Presence on this world. See *Bereishith Rabbah* 47:6.

286. See Deuteronomy 10:15.

287. This is the blessing recited in the morning prayers immediately before the *Shema*.

288. Numbers 14:41.

289. Isaiah 49:3.

the sun's bright light that objects are visible. How, then, could its existence *not* be a source of glory for its Maker from man's perspective?"

54 [1] The Rabbi said: "Is not the light of the heart finer and more exalted than the visible light [of the sun]? All people were blind and wandered aimlessly before the advent of the Jewish nation, with the exception of those individuals previously mentioned.<sup>290</sup> During this time, one nation believed that there is no Creator. [They stated that every component of the universe is equal and static, so that] no component is any more prone to having been created than having created others. Thus, everything has always existed as it is now.<sup>291</sup> Another nation believed that the earth was here first and created everything else, and so they worshiped the earth.<sup>292</sup> Others erred in believing that all light and other powerful and wondrous phenomena are a product of fire, and fire is therefore worthy of being worshiped.<sup>293</sup> Fire, they believed, is the basic ingredient of the soul. Another nation worshiped other strange gods, such as the sun, moon, stars, and the signs of the zodiac.<sup>294</sup> Another nation worshiped their kings<sup>295</sup> and wise men.<sup>296</sup> All of these nations agreed that no miracle that departed from nature and normalcy could ever occur.

[2] "[These fallacious beliefs evolved] until the days of the philosophers, who, because of their careful investigations and clear thinking, admitted that there exists a Prime Cause,<sup>297</sup> which is unlike anything else. Their intellectual reasoning, however, caused them to deviate and conclude that this Prime Cause has nothing to do with this world, let alone with any component of this world. It is too exalted to be mindful of what is going on here, they reasoned, and would certainly never introduce any miraculous phenomenon into the world.

[3] "[The darkness continued] until this community [of Israel] was purified. They were then suited for having the [Divine] light rest upon them and having wondrous miracles performed and nature altered for

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290. 1:47 and 1:95.

291. See 5:8.

292. See M.T., *Avodath Kochavim* 1:2.

293. See T.B., *Ta'anith* 5b, which attributes fire-worship to the Kuthim.

294. See Deuteronomy 4:19 and Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *asher chalak*.

295. Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar were thus worshiped. See *Shemoth Rabbah* 9:8 and T.B., *Megillah* 12a.

296. Daniel was thus worshiped. See Daniel 2:46.

297. See 1:1.

them. [Through these miracles], it became visibly evident that the world has a Ruler, Guardian, Organizer, and Creator, and that He knows all the matters of this world—small and big alike—and that He rewards good and punishes evil. This community was therefore the cause for people's hearts being rectified. All the nations that arose after them cannot divorce themselves from the foundation that Israel provided. The result is that today the entire world acknowledges the creation of the universe and that the Creator came before anything else. Their proof to this is the Jewish people and their history—both the special rewards they received [when they were righteous] and the punishments they received [when they sinned].”

55 The Kuzari said: “This is a source of great pride for the Jewish people, and you have provided a fascinating explanation. Indeed, [the fact that God became renowned to the entire world through Israel is borne in Scripture, as] it says, ‘[Who divided the waters before them,] to make for Himself an eternal name,<sup>298</sup> ‘[You took Your nation out of Egypt with a mighty hand,] and made for Yourself a name that You have to this day,<sup>299</sup> and ‘[to make you higher than all the other nations that He has made], for praise, for a name and for glory.’<sup>300</sup>”

56 [1] The Rabbi said: “See how greatly King David praised the Torah. He began with a discussion of the sun in the psalm ‘The heavens relate God’s glory.’<sup>301</sup> He recounted the sun’s encompassing light, its purity, its straight course, and its visible beauty. Immediately afterwards, he stated that ‘God’s Torah is pure and revives the soul,’<sup>302</sup> and so on. It was as if he was saying, ‘Do not be amazed by these descriptions [of the sun], for the Torah is even brighter, more pervasive and ubiquitous, more beneficial, and loftier.’

[2] “Were it not for the Jewish people, the Torah would not have been given. Furthermore, Israel’s lofty status was not in Moses’ merit;

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298. Isaiah 63:12.

299. Daniel 9:15, Nehemiah 9:10.

300. Deuteronomy 26:19.

301. Psalms 19. Regarding the sun, the psalm states, “God made a tent for the sun in the heavens. And the sun is like a groom leaving his wedding canopy, rejoicing like a mighty hero to run its course. One end of the heavens is its origin, its course runs to the other end, and nothing is hidden from its heat.”

302. *Ibid.*, 19:8.

to the contrary, Moses' status was in the merit of Israel. God's 'love'<sup>303</sup> could not emanate without a multitude of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [present to receive it]. God merely chose Moses as the vehicle to bring His goodness to the people.<sup>304</sup> We are therefore not called the 'nation of Moses,' but rather the 'nation of God', as it says, 'These are the people of God,'<sup>305</sup> and 'the people of the God of Abraham.'<sup>306</sup>

[3] "[Let us return to our discussion of the ascetic practices of other religions.] Genuine Divine service cannot be gauged by fancy words, or by the lifting of eyebrows heavenward, or by the rolling back of the eyes, or by an increase in supplications and prayers, or by any other gesture or utterance that is not followed by action. Rather, genuine sentiments can only be gauged by deeds that are inherently difficult for one to perform, but that one nevertheless does with great desire and love, such as making a pilgrimage to a designated location three times a year.<sup>307</sup> Also, by deeds that seem to involve great expenditures and sacrifice, yet that the individual does with great happiness and joy.

[4] "Included in these deeds are: tithing the first<sup>308</sup> and second<sup>309</sup> tithes and the poor man's tithes,<sup>310</sup> bringing the obligatory festival offerings,<sup>311</sup> leaving our lands fallow during the Sabbatical and Jubilee years,<sup>312</sup> making expenditures for the Sabbath and festivals, abstaining from work during those times, donating the first fruits,<sup>313</sup> the firstborn animals,<sup>314</sup> the shearing tithes,<sup>315</sup> the dough tithes,<sup>316</sup> and other priestly gifts. These, in addition to the voluntary Temple offerings, and the offerings that one must bring for both intentional and unintentional sins, peace offerings, and all those offerings that one must bring after having

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303. As discussed in par. 50.

304. See T.B., *Berakot* 32a.

305. Ezekiel 36:20.

306. Psalms 47:10.

307. See Exodus 34:23-24.

308. Numbers 18:21.

309. Deuteronomy 14:22.

310. *Ibid.*, 14:28.

311. *Ibid.*, 16:16. See *Mishnah Chagigah*, chap. 1.

312. Leviticus 25.

313. Deuteronomy 26.

314. *Ibid.*, 15:19.

315. *Ibid.*, 18:4. See *Mishnah Chullin*, chap. 11.

316. Numbers 15:20.