

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Yitro
January 22, 2022 *** 20 Shevat, 5782

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

[Yitro in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/36271/jewish/Yitro-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, hears of the great miracles which G-d performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the Israelite camp, bringing with him Moses' wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of magistrates and judges to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.

The children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do."

On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah . G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend.

G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to keep the Shabbat, honor their parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

[Hatarah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah discusses Isaiah's vision of the Heavenly Chariot (the merkavah), a revelation that was experienced by all the Israelites when G-d spoke the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai—an event recounted in this week's Torah reading.

Isaiah perceives G-d sitting on a throne surrounded by angels. Isaiah vividly describes the angels and their behavior (in anthropomorphic terms). During the course of this vision, Isaiah volunteers to be G-d's emissary to transmit His message to the Israelites. He is immediately given a depressing prophecy regarding the exile the nation will suffer as punishment for their many sins—and the Land of Israel will be left empty and desolate, though there will be left a "trunk" of

the Jewish people that eventually will regrow.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Structure of the Good Society (Yitro) by the Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l Legacy Trust

<https://rabbisacks.org/the-structure-of-the-good-society-yitro/>

In the House of Lords there is a special chamber used as, among other things, the place where new Peers are robed before their introduction into the House. When my predecessor Lord Jakobovits was introduced, the official robing him commented that he was the first Rabbi to be honoured in the Upper House. Lord Jakobovits replied, “No, I am the second.” “Who was the first?” asked the surprised official. The chamber is known as the Moses Room because of the large painting that dominates the room. It shows Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai. Lord Jakobovits pointed to this mural, indicating that Moses was the first Rabbi to ever be honoured in the House of Lords.

The Ten Commandments that appear in this week’s parsha have long held a special place not only in Judaism but also within the broader configuration of values we call the Judeo-Christian ethic. In the United States they were often to be found adorning American law courts, though their presence has been challenged, in some states successfully, on the grounds that they breach the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. They remain the supreme expression of the higher law to which all human law is bound.

Within Judaism, too, they have always held a special place. In Second Temple times they were recited in the daily prayers as part of the Shema, which then had four paragraphs rather than three.[1] It was only when sectarians began to claim that only these and not the other 603 commands came directly from God that the recitation was brought to an end.[2]

The text retained its hold on the Jewish mind none the less. Even though it was removed from daily communal prayers, it was preserved in the prayer book as a private meditation to be said after the formal service has been concluded. In most congregations, people stand when they are read as part of the Torah reading, despite the fact that Maimonides explicitly ruled against it.[3]

Yet their uniqueness is not straightforward. As moral principles, they were mostly not new. Almost all societies have had laws against murder, robbery and false testimony. There is some originality in the fact that they are apodictic, that is, simple statements of “You shall not,” as opposed to the casuistic form, “If ... then.” But they are only ten among a much larger body of 613 commandments. Nor are they even

described by the Torah itself as “Ten Commandments.” The Torah calls them the *asseret ha-devarim*, that is, “ten utterances.” Hence the Greek translation, Decalogue, meaning, “ten words.”

What makes them special is that they are simple and easy to memorise. That is because in Judaism, law is not intended for judges alone. The covenant at Sinai, in keeping with the profound egalitarianism at the heart of Torah, was made not as other covenants were in the ancient world, between kings. The Sinai covenant was made by God with the entire people. Hence the need for a simple statement of basic principles that everyone can remember and recite.

More than this, they establish for all time the parameters – the corporate culture, we could almost call it – of Jewish existence. To understand how, it is worth reflecting on their basic structure. There was a fundamental disagreement between Maimonides and Nahmanides on the status of the first sentence: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Maimonides, in line with the Talmud, held that this is in itself a command: to believe in God. Nahmanides held that it was not a command at all. It was a prologue or preamble to the commands.[4] Modern research on ancient Near Eastern covenant formulae tends to support Nahmanides.

The other fundamental question is how to divide them. Most depictions of the Ten Commandments divide them into two, because of the “two tablets of stone” (Deut 4:13) on which they were engraved. Roughly speaking, the first five are about the relationship between humans and God, the second five about the relationship between humans themselves. There is, however, another way of thinking about numerical structures in the Torah.

The seven days of Creation, for example, are structured as two sets of three followed by an all-embracing seventh. During the first three days God separated domains: light and dark, upper and lower waters, and sea and dry land. During the second three days He filled each with the appropriate objects and life forms: sun and moon, birds and fish, animals and man. The seventh day was set apart from the others as holy.

Likewise the Ten Plagues consist of three cycles of three followed by a stand-alone tenth. In each cycle of three, the first two were forewarned while the third struck without warning. In the first of each series, Pharaoh was warned in the morning (Ex. 7:16; 8:17; 9:13), in the second Moses was told to “come in before Pharaoh” (Ex. 7:26; 9:1; 10:1) in the palace, and so on. The tenth plague, unlike the rest, was announced at the very outset (Ex. 4:23). It was less a plague than a punishment. Similarly, it seems to me that the Ten Commandments are structured in three groups of three, with a tenth that is set apart from the rest. Thus understood, we

can see how they form the basic structure, the depth grammar, of Israel as a society bound by covenant to God as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:6)

The first three – no other gods, no graven images, and no taking of God’s name in vain – define the Jewish people as “one nation under God.” God is our ultimate sovereign. Therefore all other earthly rule is subject to the overarching imperatives linking Israel to God. Divine sovereignty transcends all other loyalties (no other gods besides Me). God is a living force, not an abstract power (no graven images). And sovereignty presupposes reverence (Do not take My name in vain).

The first three commands, through which the people declare their obedience and loyalty to God above all else, establish the single most important principle of a free society, namely the moral limits of power. Without this, the danger even in democracy is the tyranny of the majority, against which the best defence is the sovereignty of God.

The second three commands – the Sabbath, honouring parents, and the prohibition of murder – are all about the principle of the createdness of life. They establish limits to the idea of autonomy, namely that we are free to do whatever we like so long as it does not harm others. Shabbat is the day dedicated to seeing God as Creator and the universe as His creation. Hence, one day in seven, all human hierarchies are suspended and everyone, master, slave, employer, employee, even domestic animals, are free.

Honouring parents acknowledges our human createdness. It tells us that not everything that matters is the result of our choice, chief of which is the fact that we exist at all. Other people’s choices matter, not just our own. “Thou shall not murder” restates the central principle of the universal Noahide covenant that murder is not just a crime against man but a sin against God in whose image we are. So commands 4 to 7 form the basic jurisprudential principles of Jewish life. They tell us to remember where we came from if we are to be mindful of how to live.

The third three – against adultery, theft and bearing false witness – establish the basic institutions on which society depends. Marriage is sacred because it is the human bond closest in approximation to the covenant between us and God. Not only is marriage the human institution par excellence that depends on loyalty and fidelity. It is also the matrix of a free society. Alexis de Tocqueville put it best: “As long as family feeling is kept alive, the opponent of oppression is never alone.”[5] The prohibition against theft establishes the integrity of property. Whereas Jefferson defined as inalienable rights those of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” John Locke, closer in spirit to the Hebrew Bible, saw them as “life, liberty or possession.”[6] Tyrants abuse the property rights of the people, and the assault of

slavery against human dignity is that it deprives me of the ownership of the wealth I create.

The prohibition of false testimony is the precondition of justice. A just society needs more than a structure of laws, courts and enforcement agencies. As Judge Learned Hand said, “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.”[7] There is no freedom without justice, but there is no justice without each of us accepting individual and collective responsibility for “telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

Finally comes the stand-alone prohibition against envying your neighbour’s house, wife, slave, maid, ox, donkey, or anything else belonging to him or her. This seems odd if we think of the “ten words” as commands, but not if we think of them as the basic principles of a free society. The greatest challenge of any society is how to contain the universal, inevitable phenomenon of envy: the desire to have what belongs to someone else. Envy lies at the heart of violence.[8] It was envy that led Cain to murder Abel, made Abraham and Isaac fear for their life because they were married to beautiful women, led Joseph’s brothers to hate him and sell him into slavery. It is envy that leads to adultery, theft and false testimony, and it was envy of their neighbours that led the Israelites time and again to abandon God in favour of the pagan practices of the time.

Envy is the failure to understand the principle of creation as set out in Genesis 1, that everything has its place in the scheme of things. Each of us has our own task and our own blessings, and we are each loved and cherished by God. Live by these truths and there is order. Abandon them and there is chaos. Nothing is more pointless and destructive than to let someone else’s happiness diminish your own, which is what envy is and does. The antidote to envy is, as Ben Zoma famously said, “to rejoice in what we have” (Mishnah Avot 4:1) and not to worry about what we don’t yet have. Consumer societies are built on the creation and intensification of envy, which is why they lead to people having more and enjoying it less.

Thirty-three centuries after they were first given, the Ten Commandments remain the simplest, shortest guide to creation and maintenance of a good society. Many alternatives have been tried, and most have ended in tears. The wise aphorism remains true: When all else fails, read the instructions.

[1] See Mishnah Tamid 5:1, Brachot 12a. [2] We do not know who the sectarians were: they may have included early Christians. The argument was that only these were directly heard by the Israelites from God. The other commandments were given indirectly, through Moses (see Rashi to Brachot 12a). [3] Maimonides, Responsa, Blau Edition, Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1960, no. 263. [4] Maimonides, Sefer ha-Mitzvot, positive command 1;

Nahmanides, Glosses ad loc. [5] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, abridged with an introduction by Thomas Bender (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), I:340.

[6] The Two Treatises of Civil Government (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 136. [7] Learned Hand, “The Spirit of Liberty,” “‘I Am an American’ Day” ceremony (Central Park, New York City, May 21, 1944). [8] The best book on this subject is Helmut Schoeck’s Envy; A Theory of Social Behaviour, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.

Redemptive Relationship, Part 3: Articulating Commitment – Yitro 5782 by Rabbi Aviva Richman

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-collection/aviva-richmans-divrei-torah>

In the last few parashiyot, we have been exploring the Exodus as the story of how Israel and God fell in love through the lens of a midrash on the Song of Songs. The first formative moment was when we were still in Egypt, teaching us about those crucial moments of care and presence even while in the very midst of an oppressive context.¹ Then, we saw the reconciliation of children and parents at the Sea of Reeds, and how both generations discovered God and each other through their mutual relationships.² The final scene to explore is Israel and God at Sinai, which our tradition depicts as a kind of wedding where we entered into covenant.³ In this marriage metaphor, the Torah is an articulation of clear, specific commitments and obligations on both sides, analogous to a kind of ketubah or contract. While the use of this image is widespread, in fact there are deeply divergent pictures of what this wedding actually looked like. Some traditions depict Israel blindly agreeing to the relationship with God, even—especially—without knowing the detailed nature of all the commitments involved. Others show Israel as being totally informed of the details of what was expected, signing on only afterwards. Exploring these two different versions of Sinai allows us to surface the importance of informed, affirmative consent between two active subjects as the bedrock of any relationship of intimacy. At the same time, it reminds us that, in the closest and deepest relationships of our lives, we can never fully know what might be required of us.

Built on the same verse from Song of Songs as the other two versions of our love story, the midrash brings us to the “tzeil - shadow” of Sinai. It relates that we “blossomed like a lily” with “good deeds,” likely the mitzvot of the Torah. Finally, instead of “song” (as in the previous scenes), we erupted in the statement of “na’aseh ve-nishma - we will do and we will listen.”⁴ This statement is often understood as our willingness to accept the Torah even before we know what commitments it entails. Given the power dynamics of traditional marriage, the image this midrash may evoke is that of Israel as an idealized loyal and obedient bride.

Other midrashim in Shir HaShirim Rabbah show Israel with a more active

role. Another verse from later in the same chapter of Song of Songs is also interpreted through the Sinai experience:

Song of Songs 2:14

O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff, let me see your appearance, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is comely.

This verse, at first glance, evokes the bride as a passive object of desire and beauty, where the speaker, the male lover, admires his female lover's face. But when the *midrash* applies it to Sinai, putting it in God's mouth, it transforms the female object of beauty to an active participant—one who “sees,” not just one who is seen.

Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:37

R. Akiva interpreted the verse as applying to Israel when they stood before Mount Sinai.

“My dove in the cleft of the rock”—because they were sheltered in the cover of Sinai.

“Let me see [your appearance]”—as it says, “And all the people saw the thunder” (Exodus 20:15).

“Let me hear your voice”—this is the voice that was before the Ten Commandments, as it says, “All that God said we will do and we will hear” (Exodus 24:7).

In both the Song of Songs and Sinai, the sense of sight (Hebrew root ה.ר.א.) is central: the speaker is taken with the lover's “appearance” (מראיך), and the Israelites “saw” (רואים) the thunder (Exodus 20:15). But this same root for “sight” functions in totally different ways. At Sinai, the Israelites are not simply seen by God, they use their eyes to see God. By putting these two verses together, the midrash changes the meaning of “appearance” from passive to active, where God essentially says, “Let me see your seeing.” In this reading, God doesn't want to gaze on the passive Israel's face, but to see them returning the gaze, so to speak, in the theophany at Sinai. The relationship between us and God is not, therefore, a unidirectional, objectifying gaze from the powerful “male” groom towards the passive “female” bride, but instead a mutual gaze between the two lovers.

Yet, there is a dark side to this midrash. While initially it refers to Israel's gaze when God first appears at Sinai, and the optimistic statement “we will do” whatever this relationship involves, the midrash continues to refer to another act of sight and voice that takes place after God speaks at Sinai. There, Israel's “sight” and “speech” express fear and wanting to stay away from God.⁵ It is as though they didn't realize what they were getting into, and once they know more they would rather step back than step into relationship with God. This is the version of Sinai where Israel, swept up in the romance of the moment, jumps into the relationship without knowing its terms and what will be required of them, and then experiences

hesitation and fear.

In a totally different version of Sinai, we see that God made sure Israel knew exactly what they were signing onto beforehand.⁶ A messenger went to every individual sharing laws in the Torah in great detail, then asked explicitly for consent. Only after an individual consented to these details, the messenger asked explicitly, “Do you accept God?” This model is one of informed, affirmative consent—but certainly no less romantic. Coming to expound the verse “He kisses me from kisses of his mouth” (Song of Songs 1:2), the scene ends with the messenger giving a kiss after the offer has been fully accepted (or, in another version, God’s words themselves giving the kisses). The “kisses of God’s mouth” are the words of mitzvot. Reviewing the details of these utterances about commitments and obligations doesn’t “kill” the romance, but creates it.

Imagine how this plays out if you map it onto the interpersonal. The idea is that before asking “will you marry me” we need to detail the commitments that entails, and affirmatively consent. “Yes I will wash the dishes you leave in the sink. Yes I will pay the bills you would forget to pay.” The details of love are not taken for granted. It feels important to lift up the power of these two different models for intimate relationship, and to be aware of the limits of each. The latter model—where one takes the time and attention to articulate all of the commitments involved in a given relationship—may feel more responsible. Falling blindly in love without any sense of what commitments it entails, on the other hand, can be naive and damaging. The Rabbinic tradition that goes so far as to say that at Sinai we were coerced into accepting the Torah shows the extreme dangers of this model, that is not at all interested in determining whether someone knows or wants what is actually involved in entering a relationship (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88a).

On the other hand, the “informed, affirmative consent” model also has its limits. In many of the deepest relationships in our lives, we could never know in advance what kinds of demands this relationship will make on us. Being able to articulate all of the terms of the contract may sound comforting and responsible, but it is not always—and maybe not ever—possible in the relationships that require our full and ongoing presence. We should take Sinai as a model for both. It is absolutely necessary to articulate all that we already know about the commitments we expect or require. At the same time we have to realize that making this kind of leap into close relationship involves demands and presence that are both prior to and beyond these delineations. Maybe the redemptive work in a relationship is the very act of attempting to articulate the commitments we need and can give, and also being ready and present for the unknown.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ Part 1 on Parashat Bo, “When Nothing Seems to Change,” available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/redemptive-relationship-part-1>.

² Part 2 on Parashat BeShallah, “Leaving and Coming (Back) Home,” available here:

³ See, for example, Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8. ⁴ שיר השירים ב:א: דָּבַר אַחַר, אֲנִי חֲבַצְלֵת הַשָּׂרֹן, אֲנִי הִיא וְחַבִּיבָה אֲנִי, אֲנִי הִיא שְׁהֵייתִי חֲבִיבָה בְּצֵלוֹ שֶׁל סִינַי, וְלִשְׁעָה קָלָה הִרְטַבְתִּי מֵעֵשִׂים טוֹבִים כְּשׁוֹשְׁנָה בְיַדִּי וְלִבִּי, וְאִמְרַתִּי לְפָנָיו (שְׁמוֹת כד, ז): כֹּל אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע / **Shir Ha-Shirim 2:1**: Another interpretation: "I am a rose (*havatzelet*) of Sharon[, a lily of the valleys]." I am she, and beloved (*havivah*) am I; I am she who was beloved in the shadow (*tzillo*) of Sinai, and in a short time I bloomed with good deeds like "a lily" in my hand and my heart, and I said before Him: "All that God said we will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7). ⁵ שיר השירים רבה (וילנא) פרשה ב:לז: "כי קולך ערב" - זה קול ⁶ שלאחר הדברות, שנאמר "וישמע ה' את קול דבריכם וגו' הטיבו כל אשר דברו" (דברים ה:כה)... "ומראך נאוה" / **Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:37 (ctnd.)**: "For your voice is sweet"—this is the voice that was after the Ten Commandments, as it says, "God heard the voice of what you spoke... [and said:] 'all they have spoken is well'" (Deuteronomy 5:25)... "and your face is comely"—as it says, "When the people saw, they trembled and stood from afar" (Exodus 20:15).

שיר השירים רבה פרשה א:ב ⁶ שיר השירים רבה פרשה א:ב ד"א "ישקני מנשיקות פיהו" - אמר רבי יוחנן: מלאך היה מוציא הדיבור מלפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, על כל דיבור ודיבור, ומחזירו על כל אחד ואחד מישראל, ואומר לו: מקבל אתה עליך את הדיבור הזה? כך וכך דינין יש בו כך וכך עונשין יש בו כך וכך גזרות יש בו וכך מצות וכך קלים וחמורים יש בו, כך וכך מתן שכר יש בו. והיה אומר לו ישראל: הן, וחוזר ואומר לו: מקבל את אלהותו של הקדוש ברוך הוא? והוא אומר לו: הן והן, מיד היה נושקו על פיו.

ורבנין אמרין: הדיבור עצמו היה מחזר על כל אחד ואחד מישראל, ואומר לו: מקבלני את עליך? כך וכך מצות יש בי, כך וכך דינין יש בי, כך וכך עונשין יש בי, כך וכך גזרות יש בי, כך וכך מצות יש בי, כך וכך קלין וחמורין יש בי, כך וכך מתן שכר יש בי. והוא אומר: הן והן, מיד הדיבור נושקו על פיו - לאדקולאין בן הדימה (= לאו דוקא אלא כן הדימים) - ולמדו התורה הה"ד (דברים ד, ט) "פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך", דברים שראו עיניך איך היה עמך. **Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:2**

Another interpretation: "He will kiss me the kisses of his mouth"—said Rabbi Yohanan: A messenger would carry the Utterance (Dibbur) from before the Holy Blessed One, for each Utterance [of the Ten Commandments], and would go about everyone of Israel and say to them: Do you accept upon yourself this Utterance? It has in it these laws, these punishments, these decrees, these mitzvot, these leniencies and stringencies, and these rewards. And the Israelite would say to it: Yes. Then it would say to them: Do you accept the divinity of the Holy Blessed One? And they would say to it: Yes and yes. Immediately, it would kiss them on their mouth. But the Rabbis said: The Dibur itself would go about everyone of Israel and say to them: Do you accept me upon yourself? I have these mitzvot, these laws, these punishments, these decrees, these mitzvot (sic!), these leniencies and stringencies, and these rewards. They would say: Yes and yes. Immediately, the statement would kiss them upon their mouth—(this isn't meant literally but this is how God made it seem to them)—and taught them the Torah. This is what is written, "Lest you forget the devarim that your eyes saw" (Deuteronomy 4:9), that your eyes saw how the Dibur spoke with you.

[Parashat Yitro: Love of G-d and Material Desire by Rabbi Yonatan Neril](https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/19-parshat-yitro-love-of-g-d-and-material-desire?ss_source=sscampaigns&ss_campaign_id=61e8f9503943c66116436a7a&ss_email_id=61e94eda8372f87d6656a605&ss_campaign_name=%5BGrowTorah+Parsha%5D+Yitro%3A+Love+of+G-d&ss_campaign_sent_date=2022-01-20T12%3A00%3A49Z)

https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/19-parshat-yitro-love-of-g-d-and-material-desire?ss_source=sscampaigns&ss_campaign_id=61e8f9503943c66116436a7a&ss_email_id=61e94eda8372f87d6656a605&ss_campaign_name=%5BGrowTorah+Parsha%5D+Yitro%3A+Love+of+G-d&ss_campaign_sent_date=2022-01-20T12%3A00%3A49Z

The Ten Commandments, Aseret HaDibrot, given in Parshat Yitro culminate with the commandment not to covet: “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.”[1]

The Torah emphasizes not coveting what your neighbor has. The Torah does not say “do not covet a home,” but “do not covet your neighbor’s home.” Jealousy is being upset with a perceived lack, based on what others have.

It would seem easy to avoid coveting what others have, especially when we are grateful for what we do have. Yet many find themselves struggling with this commandment—wanting what others have, even though we know we shouldn’t. Why do people become jealous?

Rabbi Daniel Kohn, a contemporary teacher in Yerushalayim, notes that wanting what another has arises when a person loses sight of their actual needs. Given our path in life, there may be certain things we need and certain things we do not. Accordingly, the person then begins to desire things for the wrong reasons: because others have it, or because having ‘it’ will give him pleasure or a feeling of power or importance. Due to an occasional poor sense of what we need, some may compare themselves to others, and even judge their own value by how much they have.

The Ketav Vehakabalah, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg from the 19th century[2] relates the commandment not to covet to a mitzvat asei, “You shall love the Eternal One your Hashem with all your heart.”[3] He explains that the Torah emphasizes loving Hashem with all of one’s heart to teach that a person should be fully committed to Divine service, and not split between love of the Eternal and love of physical pleasures.

In other words, what the heart yearns for is intimacy for Hashem: a connection with a higher reality. When it does not get that, it covets things from the material world. These things cannot nourish the soul’s true hunger; it’s like drinking soda when the body needs a full, healthy meal. Accordingly, when we covet physical objects, each time we get one, we are not satisfied—we need another thing not long after buying the first one.

The Torah instructs us that to address an unhealthy materialistic lifestyle we should increase our spiritual connection to Hashem. In this way, spiritual satisfaction serves as a check against runaway consumerism.

The Ketav Vehakabalah’s teaching is relevant for someone who strives to be close to Hashem while enjoying a range of modern consumer products. His teachings do not seem to say that a Divine-aware life demands living like an ascetic or in poverty. Rather, a Jew should consume as a means to serve Hashem. Such a person might work to be a conscious consumer while still living comfortably and meeting their basic material needs. The Ketav Vehakabalah faults consumption as an end in itself, or as a means to self-gratification, which inevitably replaces space for

Hashem's presence. When people use the physical world as a means to serve Hashem, Rabbi Mecklenberg argues that they will almost certainly consume less because they will realize what their true needs are.

When The Ketav Vehakabalah speaks about coveting, he is addressing Jews living in a pre-industrial, pre-modern, pre-consumer society. To Jews living in the first 3000 years of Jewish history, one might covet their neighbor's two-room house, donkey or field—examples the Torah itself uses. Yet we live in a radically different time: modern, consumer-oriented and highly technological. We live in a materialistic world where coveting has become second nature to some. And in this material world, instead of coveting a donkey or a field, today we may covet technology and cars, vacations and second homes.

Our community's and country's consumption affects the environment. The United States' biocapacity—the productivity of its biological assets, including croplands, fishing grounds, forests and more—is much lower than its subsequent ecological footprint—the measurement of how fast we consume resources and generate waste. The last data from the Global Footprint Network is from 2017, where the US's biocapacity was 3.45 hectares, as opposed to its ecological footprint, at 8.04 hectares, data on par with the past decade of US consumption.[4] The average American's ecological footprint requires more than 3 earths to sustain. You can calculate your own personal ecological footprint at www.footprintcalculator.org. Though we are able to enjoy material wealth and the privileges it brings, we can also work to be conscious of what impact our material lifestyle has on the environment.

The Midrash states that Hashem “caused [Israel] to hear the Ten Commandments since they are the core of the Torah and essence of the mitzvot, and they end with the commandment ‘Do not covet,’ since all of them depend on [this commandment], to hint that for anyone who fulfills this commandment, it is as if they fulfill the entire Torah.”[5] Through fulfilling the tenth commandment we work on being satisfied with what we already have, thus aiding in reducing our ecological impact.

“Do not covet” is not a little addendum tacked on to the end of the Ten Commandments, but one of the central messages of Divine revelation. Finding spiritual satisfaction in the service of the Divine is an important means of weaning oneself from a life of physicality. The commandments “Love Hashem with all your heart” and “Do not covet” offer an alternative to a high consumption and an unsustainable future. We can begin to repair the world by seeing our ecological consumption through the lens of the Hashem's Torah. [1] Shemot 20:14, translation by Judaica Press, available [here](#). [2] Rabbi Mecklenberg discusses this in his book HaKetav VahaKabala on Parshat Yitro, written in 19th century Prussia. Translation by the author.

[3] Devarim 6:5 [4] <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/our-offerings/>

[5] “Midrash Melech Moshiach,” in Beit HaMidrash, ed. Jellenik, quoted in Torah Shelema p. 124, Parshat Yitro #405. Translation by the author.

Sitting Atop a Sundial by Ilana Kurshan

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11r5tMta1bLwrSfzXQt1r6riajgdtLeVE/view>

Our parashah contains the words of the Ten Commandments, which God speaks to Moses and the people of Israel from Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments are introduced by the verse, “God spoke all these words, saying” (20:1). The midrash comments on the seeming redundancy in this verse; why does the Torah need to specify that God spoke “all” these words? Wouldn’t it have been sufficient to say that God spoke these words? The rabbis understand that the additional word “all” comes to teach about God’s unique relationship to time, which has implications both for the way we understand the revelation at Sinai and for the way we experience life’s temporality.

According to one of the earliest midrashim on the book of Exodus, the Mekhilta, the Torah teaches that God spoke “all” these words to signify that God spoke all the Ten Commandments simultaneously, as one utterance (Mekhilta d’Shirata, 20:1). Unlike human beings, who can articulate only one syllable at a time, God can utter many words simultaneously, as if God’s speech transcends temporality. As a result, the Ten Commandments were not spoken at one particular moment, and were not addressed only to the Israelites who had left Egypt; rather, as the midrash in Exodus Rabbah (20:1) explains, all prophets received at Sinai the prophecies they would deliver in subsequent generations. The midrash quotes Isaiah, who says, “From the time that it was, there was I, and now the Lord God has sent me, accompanied by His spirit” (48:16). Isaiah received his prophecy in “the time that was” on Sinai, but only “now,” centuries later, has he been given permission to prophesy.

The midrash adds that it was not just the prophets, but also the sages of every generation, who received their wisdom on Sinai. Since God spoke “all these words” at once, in one timeless utterance, all the sages heard them as well, and thus their wisdom—which fills the Talmud and the midrash and countless subsequent commentaries—was spoken at Sinai as well (Exodus Rabbah 28:6). In this sense both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah were given at Sinai, and every new insight we have into God’s Torah is essentially the recollection of a teaching our souls once heard directly from God. The rabbis add that the words spoken at Sinai had no echo, which makes sense, since they did not unfold in time, but were spoken simultaneously to everyone who had been and would be created. Every soul received its share of Torah at Sinai, states the midrash, citing Moshe’s words to the people in Deuteronomy (29:14): “I make this covenant...not with you alone, but with those standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day.”

In further elaborating on the verse that introduces the Ten Commandments, the rabbis explain that it is not just God’s speech that transcends time, but all of God’s various activities. “Come and see that the ways of God are not like those of mortal

man,” declare the rabbis (Exodus Rabbah 28:5), invoking a common midrashic trope. Unlike a mortal king, who cannot “wage war and at the same time be a scribe and a teacher of little children,” God can simultaneously execute both the Exodus from Egypt (waging war against Pharaoh at the sea) and the revelation at Sinai (dictating and teaching Torah). God is not hampered or limited by time, but can speak and do everything all at once. Likewise, God can turn dust to man and man to dust in the same instant, which explains how life and death can take place simultaneously, and how one person might rejoice while another weeps bitterly (Exodus Rabbah 28:4). God, in other words, is the ultimate multi-tasker; before God can even get around to drafting a to-do list, God has already gotten it all done.

For the rabbis, God’s unique temporal capabilities attest to God’s intimate connection with humanity. God can hear the prayers and cries of all human beings simultaneously, regardless of where they are called out and why, as per the verse from Psalms, “O You that hears prayer, unto You does all flesh come” (Mekhilta d’Shirata 15:11). Furthermore, God can respond to all prayers instantaneously, as per Isaiah’s prophecy, “And it will be that before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear” (65:24). As Lynn Kaye notes in her book *Time in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge, 2018), “God’s temporal precision is an expression of ‘closeness,’ analogous to physical presence in the material world.” God can transcend time, but God is also closely in touch with mortal human beings who exist very much in time.

We might be tempted to wish that as human beings, we could emulate God’s temporal prowess. If only we could speak and do everything at the same time, how efficient we would all be! And yet as Mark Twain is credited as saying, “Time is what keeps everything from happening at once.” So much of the meaning in our lives is a product of our temporality. Our emotions are powerful because they are distinct from one another; if we always felt the same way, a wedding would not be a height of joy, nor would the loss of a loved one be an occasion for acute sadness. Likewise, if we always knew everything we’d ever know, we’d miss out on the pleasure of learning and discovery. Since we exist in time, the periods of our lives are distinct from one another: Shabbat feels different from the rest of the week, youth feels different from maturity, and a graduation is a moment of poignancy because it signifies the end of a stage of life that will never recur and the beginning of a future that is still uncertain. Unlike God, who is depicted in the midrash as sitting atop a sundial (Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 12:29), we human beings experience time casting its long shadow on our lives, and illuminating us with its radiance.

[Stumps and Seeds by Bex Stern Rosenblatt](#)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11r5tMta1bLwrSfzXQt1r6riaajgdtLeVE/view>

One of the recurrent themes in the Tanakh is the promise of regeneration after near

complete destruction. It's a necessary theme - we experience near total destruction over and over again. Not only do we have to believe that times will get better, times also do consistently get better before they get worse. This week's haftarah portrays that elegantly. We read this week of the call of Isaiah to be a prophet. It's strikingly similar to the call of many other prophets, including the call of Moses. They both protest, claiming to be unworthy and unsuited to the task before being reassured by God that God will be with them. But Moses and Isaiah are located on opposite ends of the destruction-regeneration spectrum. Moses leads the people out after near destruction. Isaiah prophesizes the coming terrible destruction to a people who are doomed not to heed his word.

The final image of the chapter is striking. We read, as translated by Robert Alter, "And the LORD shall drive man far away and abandonment grow in the midst of the land. And yet a tenth part shall be in it and turn back. And it shall be ravaged like a terebinth and an oak which though felled have a stump within them, the holy seed is its stump."

It's a typical image of regeneration following destruction. Israel is represented as a tree which has been cut down, only the stump remaining. Yet a tree can send up new trunks out of its felled stump, so long as the root system is intact. Likewise, Israel will create a new version of itself after the majority of the people have been wiped out. Another possible translation, as suggested by Rashi, presents an image of a tree casting away its leaves, with only the trunk left behind. In this image, destruction is more natural and also more positive. The holy seed is found through the necessary process of casting away the frivolous surroundings. Nothing good was harmed in the discovery of the holiness.

Shel Silverstein also created a striking image of a stump. In the finale of his book for children, *The Giving Tree*, after a tree who loves a boy has given him everything she had, nothing of the tree remains except for the stump. The boy, grown now to an old man, returns to the tree to sit and rest on the stump. "And the tree was happy." Here, there is no future, no next step. The boy and the tree have grown old together, reduced each other to nothing. And there is nothing more to give, nothing more to come from either of them. The stump, at least, is happy.

Perhaps, reading Isaiah and *The Giving Tree* in light of each other, we can make sense of both of them. The Giving Tree has given of herself so completely that she nearly ceases to exist. But there is an existence as a stump. Sometimes, it is when we are reduced past any point we thought was possible, that we discover what our essence is, that we can decide to be a holy seed.

Yahrtzeits

Elaine Berkenwald remembers her husband Stanley's father Charles Klughaupt on Monday January 24th (Shevat 22)

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her grandmother Rose Rosenfeld on Thursday January 27th
