

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Yitro
February 15, 2025 *** 17 Shevat, 5785

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

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

The name of the Parshah, "Yitro," means "Jethro" and it is found in Exodus 18:1. 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.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 6:1-13](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/472350/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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

This week's *haftarah* 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 Custom that Refused to Die by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l 5772](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/the-custom-that-refused-to-die/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/the-custom-that-refused-to-die/>

There’s an enthralling story about the Ten Commandments and the role they played in Jewish worship and the synagogue.

It begins with a little-known fact. There was a time when there were not three paragraphs in the prayer we call the Shema, but four. The Mishnah in Tamid (5:1) tells us that in Temple times the officiating priests would first recite the Ten Commandments and then the three paragraphs of the Shema.

We have several pieces of independent evidence for this. The first consists of four papyrus fragments acquired in Egypt in 1898 by the then secretary of the Society of Biblical Archaeology, W.L. Nash. Pieced together and located today in the Cambridge University Library, they are known as the Nash Papyrus. Dating from the second century BCE, they contain a version of the Ten Commandments, immediately followed by the Shema. Almost certainly the papyrus was used for prayer in a synagogue in Egypt before the birth of Christianity, at a time when the custom was to include all four paragraphs.

Tefillin from the Second Temple period, discovered in the Qumran caves along with the Dead Sea Scrolls, contained the Ten Commandments. Indeed a lengthy section of the halachic Midrash on Deuteronomy, the Sifri, is dedicated to proving that we should not include the Ten Commandments in the tefillin, which suggests that there were some Jews who did so, and the rabbis needed to be able to show that they were wrong.

We also have evidence from both the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli, Brachot 12a) and the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi Brachot 1:8) that there were communities in Israel and Babylon who sought to introduce the Ten Commandments into the prayers, and that the rabbis had to issue a ruling against doing so. There is even documentary evidence that the Jewish community in Fostat, near Cairo, kept a special scroll in the Ark called the Sefer al-Shir, which they took out after the conclusion of daily prayers and read from it the Ten Commandments.[1]

So the custom of including the Ten Commandments as part of the Shema was once widespread, but from a certain point in time it was systematically opposed by the Sages. Why did they object to it? Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud

say it was because of the “[claim of the sectarians.](#)”

Jewish sectarians – some identify them as a group of early Christians but there is no compelling evidence for this – argued that only the Ten Commandments were binding, because only they were received by the Israelites directly from God at Mount Sinai. The others were received through Moses, and this sect, or perhaps several of them, held that they did not come from God. They were Moses’ own invention, and therefore not binding.

There is a Midrash that gives us an idea of what the sectarians were saying. It places in the mouth of Korach and his followers, who rebelled against Moses, these words:

“[The whole congregation are holy. Are you \[Moses and Aaron\] the only ones who are holy? All of us were sanctified at Sinai . . . and when the Ten Commandments were given, there was no mention of challah or terumah or tithes or tzitzit. You made this all up yourself.](#)” Yalkut Shimoni Korach 752

So the rabbis were opposed to any custom that would give special prominence to the Ten Commandments since the sectarians were pointing to such customs as proof that even orthodox Jews treated them differently from the other commands. By removing them from the prayer book, the rabbis hoped to silence such claims.

But the story does not end there. So special were the Ten Commandments to Jews that they found their way back. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, author of the Tur (14th century) suggested that one should say them privately. Rabbi Joseph Karo argues that the ban only applies to reciting the Ten Commandments publicly during the service, so they could be said privately after the service. That is where you find them today in most siddurim – immediately after the morning service. Rabbi Shlomo Luria had the custom of reading the Ten Commandments at the beginning of prayer, before the start of Pesukei de-Zimra, the Verses of Praise.

That was not the end of the argument. Given that we do not say the Ten Commandments during public prayer, should we none the less give them special honour when we read them from the Torah, whether on Shavuot or in the weeks of Parshat Yitro and Vaetchanan? Should we stand when they are being read?

Maimonides found himself involved in a controversy over this question. Someone wrote him a letter telling the following story. He was a member of a synagogue where originally the custom was to stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments. Then a rabbi came and ruled otherwise, saying that it was wrong to stand for the same reason as it was forbidden to say the Ten Commandments during public prayer. It could be used by sectarians, heretics and others to claim that even the Jews themselves held that the Ten Commandments were more important than the other 603. So the community stopped standing. Years later

another rabbi came, this time from a community where the custom was to stand for the Ten Commandments. The new rabbi stood and told the congregation to do likewise. Some did. Some did not, since their previous rabbi had ruled against. Who was right?

Maimonides had no doubt. It was the previous rabbi, the one who had told them not to stand, who was in the right. His reasoning was correct also. Exactly the logic that barred it from the daily prayers should be applied to the reading of the Torah. It should be given no special prominence. The community should stay sitting. Thus ruled Maimonides, the greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages. However, sometimes even great rabbis have difficulty persuading communities to change. Then, as now, most communities – even those in Maimonides' Egypt – stood while the Ten Commandments were being read.

So despite strong attempts by the Sages, in the time of the Mishnah, Gemara, and later in the age of Maimonides, to ban any custom that gave special dignity to the Ten Commandments, whether as prayer or as biblical reading, Jews kept finding ways of doing so. They brought it back into daily prayer by saying it privately and outside the mandatory service, and they continued to stand while it was being read from the Torah despite Maimonides' ruling that they should not.

“Leave Israel alone,” said Hillel, “for even if they are not prophets, they are still the children of prophets.” Ordinary Jews had a passion for the Ten Commandments. They were the distilled essence of Judaism. They were heard directly by the people from the mouth of God himself. They were the basis of the covenant they made with God at Mount Sinai, calling on them to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Twice in the Torah they are described as the covenant itself:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. Ex 34:27-28

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you His covenant, the Ten Commandments, which He commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. Deut. 4:12-13

That is why they were originally said immediately prior to the Shema, and why despite their removal from the prayers Jews continued to say them – because their recital constituted a daily renewal of the covenant with God. That too is why Jews insisted on standing when they were being read from the Torah, because when they were being given, the Israelites “stood at the foot of the mountain” (Ex. 19:17). The Midrash says about the reading of the Ten Commandments on Shavuot:

“The Holy One blessed be He said to the Israelites: My children, read this passage every year and I will account it to you as if you were standing before Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah.” Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 12, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 204

Jews kept searching for ways of recreating that scene, by standing when they listened to it from the Torah and by saying it privately after the end of the morning prayers. Despite the fact that they knew their acts could be misconstrued by heretics, they were too attached to that great epiphany – the only time in history God spoke to an entire people – to treat it like any other passage in the Torah. The honour given to the Ten Commandments was the custom that refused to die.

[1] Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fāṭimid caliphs*, 1920, volume I, p. 221.

[Yitro: The Confusion of Revelation by Barry Holtz \(2019\)](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-confusion-of-revelation-2/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-confusion-of-revelation-2/>

We have now come to Parashat Yitro in our annual Torah reading cycle, arguably the most significant sedra in the Humash. While Parashat Bereishit has the mythic power of the creation stories and Parashat Beshallah includes the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt and the miraculous crossing of the Sea, it is in Yitro that we see the culmination of that crossing, for here in Parashat Yitro we read about our first connection to the Torah, the single most significant element of Judaism as it later evolved.

Because of that very significance it is a curious fact that the narrative that describes the revelation is anything but clear. Try, for example, to tell a child the story of what happened at Sinai and then compare your version to what we read in this week’s parashah. Yes, Moses went up the mountain and came down with, well, what exactly did he come down with? And when does that actually happen in the narrative? In fact the Tablets, “written by the finger of God,” are given to Moses a good deal later, in Parashat Ki Tissa (at the end of [Exodus 31](#)). In the meantime Moses has gone up and down the mountain a number of times, eventually staying there for the famous “forty days and forty nights” (found in [Exodus 24:18](#), at the end of next week’s parashah, Mishpatim).

It is in our parashah that we read of the thunder and lightning, and the loud blast of the shofar, the last being a particularly confusing detail. We can understand that in the biblical imagination thunder and lightning are in the provenance of the Deity. But isn’t the shofar a human “musical” instrument? Who is blowing that shofar? That very question may have been part of what made it a frightening experience for the Israelites—blasts from a mysterious horn, coupled with the smoke and the fire, while the whole mountain trembled violently ([Exod. 19:18](#)). This describes a

full-on volcanic eruption. Meanwhile, adding to the confusion, “the voice of the shofar grew louder and louder” (19:19). I have chosen to translate kol hashofar in this verse as “voice” rather than the conventional translation “sound of the shofar” because voice fits nicely with the second half of this same verse, which would read as a whole: “The voice of the shofar grew louder and louder; Moses would speak and God answered him with voice.”

From both a literary and theological point of view this parashah is deeply concerned with “voice.” Who speaks and what is spoken? How much is heard by the people? Early in the parashah God says to Moses, “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and trust you ever after” (19:9).

Here it appears that the people will be overhearing the conversation between God and Moses in order to validate Moses’s leadership. Almost immediately following this interchange, Moses leads the people out to the foot of the mountain to hear the Ten Commandments. Although “Ten Commandments” is a common phrase in English, it is not a term used in the Bible; the closest thing we get is the “aseret hadevarim” in [Exod. 34:28](#), meaning “The Ten Words” or “The Ten Utterances.” (Scholars often use the term “Decalogue,” based on the Greek formulation deka logoi—“ten words”—found in the ancient Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek.)

The Decalogue begins with a prefatory verse, “And God spoke all these words, saying” (20:1). And yet once again the structure of the narrative works against a linear retelling. After the Ten Utterances are completed, in the next verse we seem to switch back to a moment before the revelation—in verse 15 we read that the people were so frightened by the thunder, the lightning, and the shofar that they say to Moses, “You speak to us and we will obey and don’t let God speak to us, lest we die.” So did God speak “all these words” to the people or only some of them? Or did God speak “these words” to Moses who passed them on to the people?

Moses enters (or approaches) “the thick cloud where God was” (20:18). At which point God begins to give a set of instructions to Moses and that is the last that we hear of Moses until the beginning of Chapter 24 when we see him ascending the mountain. Even here it is unclear where this part of the story fits in an imagined timeline of the revelation narrative.

Why is the Torah so confusing as it tells what is arguably the most important story it has to tell—the giving of the Torah to Israel? Some years ago, the great Bible scholar Moshe Greenberg wrote about the Decalogue: “The attempts to reconcile these accounts internally and with each other are not convincing. The accounts apparently combine different versions of the event: (a) God spoke with Moses, and the people overheard; (b) He spoke with Moses and then Moses transmitted His

words to the people; (c) God spoke to the people directly” (“Decalogue,” Encyclopaedia Judaica). Is this complexity due to issues in transforming the various strands of tradition that had been handed down throughout the ages into the final product that we know as the Torah? Have we caught those worthy editors who fashioned the Torah napping?

I think not. I would suggest three explanations that make sense to me. First, I would offer a technical, editorial explanation. It is reasonable to imagine that those editors (or perhaps that single editor—we do not know) believed that the sources they had at their disposal were legitimate representations of a sacred event beyond normal human comprehension. These reports or reports of reports were all in some way to be valued as profound and sacred. Hence trying to “harmonize” the various versions would do harm to all the versions by leaving things out or putting things in. Hence the editors essentially gave the later generations all of these reports and left it up to us to make sense of them and take them seriously.

Second, I would suggest a theological approach. Such a point of view is well represented by the German Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss. Strauss, in an essay about Genesis, makes the following general comment: “The mysterious God is the last theme and highest theme of the Bible The Bible reflects in its literary form the inscrutable mystery of the ways of God which it would be impious even to attempt to comprehend” (“On the Interpretation of Genesis,” L’Homme 21). The scholar Jonathan Cohen explains that for Strauss the contradictions found in the Bible “will be left in place and not reconciled by the editors, since these very contradictions bear witness to the impossibility of talking about God without contradictions” (“Is the Bible a Jewish Book?,” The Journal of Religion 87).

Finally, I would add a literary explanation, one that I learned from my former colleague at JTS, Dr. Edward Greenstein. He suggested that the contradictions and confusions we find in reading Parashat Yitro are the brilliant rhetorical efforts of the biblical editors to help us, in some very small measure, participate in the enormous and overwhelming experience of the revelation reported in the Torah. The confusions and contradictions are intentionally placed there to replicate for us the confusion of B’nai Yisrael at the foot of the mountain. In the same way that the Passover Haggadah tells us that all of us were part of the Exodus from Egypt, Parashat Yitro suggests that we were all at Sinai as well. (*Barry Holtz is the Theodore and Florence Baumritter Professor of Jewish Education at JTS*)

[Parashat Yitro: Love of G-D and Material Desire](https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/19-parshat-yitro-love-of-g-d-and-material-desire)

<https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/19-parshat-yitro-love-of-g-d-and-material-desire>

The Aseret HaDibrot given in this week's parsha, 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 with Hashem: a connection with a higher reality. When it does not get this intimacy, 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, we are not satisfied even when we receive them—we need another thing not long after buying the first one.

The Torah instructs us that one way to address an unhealthy materialistic lifestyle is to 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, 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, cars, vacations, or 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. 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. (*Yonatan Neril is the founding director of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development*)

[1] Shemot 20:14, translation by Judaica Press, available here. [2] Rabbi Mecklenberg

discusses this in his book HaKetav VehaKabala 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.
