

This week we arrive at revelation. Only last week, we read about leaving Egypt, the crossing of the sea. And already, we find ourselves at the base of Mt. Sinai, told to prepare ourselves to receive revelation. When things change, they change quickly!

Of course, this too is still the beginning of the journey. The leaving, the receiving: these experiences will only fully develop their meaning over the course of forty years of wandering through the wilderness. Those forty years of wandering and questioning and struggling and meaning making are still to come. Truth to tell, it was more than forty years, and we are still living in that time of wandering, of learning to be liberated.

But this parasha, the Torah portion Yitro, is the moment when we receive the basis for all future meaning making, when the whole people assemble at the foot of the mountain and experience for themselves the presence of the Divine. Late, the people become frightened by the intensity of the experience; they ask Moses to mediate all future revelation, receiving it himself and then sharing it with them.

But those few verses, which we will read in Hebrew tomorrow, known collectively as the 10 Commandments, (though the number is actually fuzzier than that- depending how you count, it could be considered eleven or twelve), are the verses that we are taught that all of us, all Jews who ever lived, received directly.

Tonight I want to examine the first commandment, or possibly the first two commandments, depending how you count. Anokhi Adonai elohecha, asher hotziticha me'erezt mitzrayim, mibeit avadim. Lo yihyeh l'cha elohim acherim al panai. "I am Hashem your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. There shall not be for you any other Gods in my presence."

Many people struggle with these lines. Is the first sentence a commandment, or an introduction? Is God acknowledging the existence of other gods, or only the human propensity to idolatry? What does idolatry even mean?

Especially nowadays, as so many Jews enjoy experimenting with earth-based spirituality or Buddhism, the commandment against idolatry can feel provincial or even alarming. And as Max noticed in his exploration of the torah portion, with the demand for exclusive worship, God looks frankly “status obsessed.”

So assuming we don’t want to interpret this commandment as meaning that there’s only one legitimate modality for worshipping God, what does it teach us?

Well, let’s look at this first statement. It often gets translated as “I am the Lord your God,” and there’s a problem right there. “The Lord” is an appropriate translation of the Hebrew word “Adonai,” but we often forget that the word “Adonai” is actually a filler for the unpronounceable name of God, the yud-heh-vav-heh, which is a jumbled combination of the various conjugations of the Hebrew verb, “to be”. In Hebrew, the word “was”, is “heh-yud-heh”, “is” is “heh-vav-heh” and will be” is “yud-heh-yud-heh”. So a much more accurate translation of the name of is something like, “was/is/will be”. Not a lordly figure, but a verb, connoting both constancy and evolution.

If you are not convinced, there is more evidence: Back in Exodus Chapter 3, when Moses encounters God at the burning bush, he asks, “When I go to the Israelites, and they ask, “What is God’s name?” What should I tell them?” The answer God gives is the phrase, “Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh,” which the movie *The Ten Commandments* so memorably renders as “**I am that I am.**” These words, however, are in the future tense: “I will be as I will be.”

In answer to “what’s your name?” God essentially says, “Don’t even try it. Don’t fence me in. I am ever becoming, always potential for something different. I will be what I will be.”

So our introductory statement, our first commandment actually reads, “I was/is/will be, the evolving unpredictable process, am your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery.” If God can’t be pinned down, if God is ever-evolving, the reference to Egypt provides an important hint: the God process is not just random. It is the process that leads from slavery to redemption.

The first thing we learn in Torah about what it means to be human is from the very first Chapter of Genesis: that humans - all humans - are made in the divine image. What this means could be a subject of a whole other sermon, but I mention it now, because the expansive name of God, this ever-evolving process, is according to Torah, embedded in all of us. And we are told that nothing less than that understanding is “your God,” which led you out of Egypt.

And understanding that, the prohibition against idolatry becomes clearer. If the God we are to worship is the undefinable process within each of us that leads to redemption, then idolatry is what gets in the way of that, anything that clouds our understanding of God as ever-evolving towards redemption, and as imprinted within each human life.

I am certainly not the first to think this. The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote over 90 years ago: “Names change but idolatry continues. Culture, civilization, people, state, nation, race, art, science, economy and class - here you have what is certainly an abbreviated and incomplete list of the pantheon of our contemporary gods. Who will deny their existence?”

“No idolator has ever worshipped his gods with greater devotion and faith than that displayed by modern man towards his gods. . . A continual battle has been going on to this very day in the mind of man between the worship of the One and the many. Its outcome is never certain.”

It is cliché to say that idolatry of today is money, or a healthy economy, or the state. And money, a healthy economy, and the state are not inherently problematic structures. But as commentator Nechama Leibowitz puts it: “idolatry may be defined as the transformation of means, even perfectly legitimate ones, into ends themselves.” If we hold that the ultimate expression of a devotional life is that process towards redemption, that each of us is an image God ultimately pulled towards that, then we can use money, or a healthy economy, or the state to work for redemption for us all, and to do so is in the service of that most mysterious name of God. When money, or the economy, or the state become the end goals, and human lives are sacrificed towards those ends - that is when we must talk of idolatry.

It’s not a question that liberal Jews often ask ourselves, but in this moment, at the foot of the mountain, I want to ask it: With the definitions I have offered you tonight: What can we do to remove idolatry from our behavior? What can we do to remove idolatry from our communities? Where do we confuse means with ends, and how can we correct ourselves? How can we orient ourselves towards the highest name of God?

Remember, those are the questions with which we must wrestle through the wilderness.

Shabbat shalom.