

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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Epilogue
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Immediately after the giving of *asseret hadibrot*, and the oft-disputed conversation between Moshe and the Jews concerning how directly God should speak to them (20,15-18; see Ramban 20,15), we find what clearly is God's immediate message to the people in the aftermath of the Sinai experience:

God spoke to Moshe: Say thus to the Israelites: You have seen that I have spoken to you from the heaven. Do not make with Me, gods of silver and gods of gold do not make for yourselves.

An earthen altar shall you make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your peace-offerings, your sheep and cattle; In every place that I pronounce My name, I shall come to you and bless you.

But when (lit. "if") you make Me an altar of stone, do not build it with hewn stones, for you would have wielded your sword over it and desecrated it.

And you shall not ascend My altar on steps, so that your nakedness not be uncovered on it. (20,19-23)

The opening verse makes it clear that this short section contains the immediate epilogue to *asseret hadibrot*. It seems as though the four commands that follow - idolatry, the earthen altar, the prohibition of cutting the stones of the stone altar, and the prohibition of stairs to ascend the altar - are introduced as somehow being engendered by "you have seen that I have spoken to you from the heaven." The question is - why? What is the connection between these verses and the experience of witnessing the revelation of Sinai?

A. Do Not Make With Me...

The first verse has a puzzling construction. Because the last seven words (in the Hebrew) form a complete phrase - "gods of silver and gods of gold do not make for yourselves" - the cantillation notes set off the first three words - "lo taasun itti" - as a separate phrase. But the phrase, "do not make with Me" seems to be incomplete, requiring an object; namely, "gods of silver and gods of gold." For this reason, the Mekhilta derives an independent prohibition of fashioning images of the celestial bodies or of angels, reading, "do not make with Me" to mean "do not make anything that resembles those objects that are with Me in the heavens." In terms of *pshat*, the Ramban offers two suggestions: either to split the verse in a different manner than the masoretic cantillation, reading "Do not make with Me gods of silver, AND gods of gold do not make for yourselves;" or to understand the two verbs "make" (*taasun-taasu*) in different manners - Do not make (i.e., believe) in any gods besides Me; and do not make (i.e., fashion) gods of silver or gold). The first suggestion seems to require redundancy, while the second still leaves the first phrase without an explicit direct object (though it solves the problem of redundancy).

The Netziv raises a different question. Why is God, in His first message to the Jews after *asseret hadibrot*, and in direct response to the experience of "having seen that I spoke to you from the heavens," commanding the prohibition of idolatry when that was a direct and explicit prohibition in *asseret hadibrot* itself? It is true that the Torah repeats the prohibition of idolatry many times, but this speech of God does not seem to be the place for repetition. God is telling them to draw a lesson from the experience of having seen Him speak to them (including the prohibition of idolatry in the second *dibbur*) from the heaven. To say that having heard Him tell them not to worship other gods or to make idols, they therefore should not worship other gods or make them, seems absurd. What is the point of this prohibition, and how is it connected to the experience of seeing God speak directly *asseret hadibrot*?

The Netziv answers that the prohibition here is not pure idolatry; that is, the worship of other gods than HaShem, but rather syncretism, the worship of other gods together with HaShem. The basis for syncretism is a natural tendency of people to seek intermediaries between themselves and the Absolute, the infinite, transcendent, Almighty, who is beyond all imaginable relation. God, the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, is too awesome, too august, for the individual feel comfortable with, and he therefore turns to lesser, but more manageable powers to intercede between himself and the "King of the King of Kings." Turning to "gods of silver and gods of gold" is not necessarily an act of abandonment of God, in the eyes of the syncretist. He still believes that he honors God above all others. He just needs help in bridging what appears to him - not unjustifiably - to be an infinite gap.

Many readers will be familiar with the Ramban's explanation of the golden calf episode along these lines (see Ramban, [Shemot 32.1](#)). Indeed, the verses at the beginning of that episode point clearly in this direction.

And the people saw that Moshe was late in descending the mountain, and the people gathered about Aharon and said to him: Arise and make for us a GOD WHO WILL GO BEFORE US, for this man Moshe who TOOK US OUT OF EGYPT, we do not know what has befallen him.

The calf was meant to replace MOSHE, not replace God. In their minds, the calf is a "god who will go before us;" in other words, who will be engaged in the day-to-day affairs of the people, helping them right in their midst, a role which they do not believe is appropriate for the Supreme God. As I pointed out last week, the belief that Moshe is responsible for their path in the desert is one of the causes of the complaint which leads to the manna. Apparently, Moshe's hope that the experience of the manna would cure this misconception was not realized. In fact, we can trace this insistence of the Jews that Moshe is the immediate cause of the welfare throughout the complaints and rebellions of Sefer Bamidbar - but we will have to leave that unproven for now.

[It is worth noting that this sort of desire to place intermediaries between oneself and the Supreme God is not merely an aberration of ancient times, when idolatry was rife. One of the most popular religions in the western world has many sects, which worship intermediary saints and figures as intermediate powers beneath God. This belief, called "shituf" in halakha, is the focus of the halakhic discussion concerning the status of Christianity. It should be readily apparent to most readers that syncretistic tendencies exist within some portions of the modern Jewish community as well, with certain human figures achieving supernatural status and serving, to some extent, as intermediaries. The reason is that the need for such intermediaries is rooted deep in human psychology and the nature of the God-man relationship. The repeated injunctions in the Torah against "shituf," and the protracted struggle in the desert and later (for instance, Eliyahu's cry, "how long will you hop about on two branches,?" Melakhim I 18,21) with the syncretistic tendency demonstrate how deep the roots of this error lie.]

To return to our parasha, the meaning is clear. In aseret hadibrot, God had prohibited idolatry and the worship of other gods. But He knows that even though the Jews have accepted these mitzvot, the tendency to try and reconcile the worship of God with reliance on powers that can be seen and felt, held in the hands, is too powerful to be merely by fiat. The EXPERIENCE of the revelation at Sinai, and not only the contents of the revelation, however, can serve, hopefully, as a defense. For "You have seen that I have spoken to you from the heaven." The Jews have experienced the inconceivable, that the Supreme King of Kings has directly appeared and spoken to them, with no intermediary, not even Moshe. THEREFORE, remember that you should "make nothing WITH ME," no other god or power or man or whatever you will decide on, that should serve together with God as the object of their hopes, worship, and prayers. It is true that at this point Moshe alone is going to ascend the mountain to bring the Torah. "And Moshe entered the mists where God was." But, God immediately reminds them, you yourselves have heard the voice of God, so do not mistakenly think that the word of God is given only to Moshe.

It is necessary for us to remind ourselves just how revolutionary the revelation of Sinai is. The world, ancient as well as modern, is full of religions and sects, which purport to impart the word of God. But every religion that the Jews could have heard of resorted to select initiates, oracles, magic, divination, priests, or other esoteria to divine the word. That God would speak directly to the entire people, who can apprehend the word, was unparalleled. In fact, as R. Yehuda HaLevi pointed out in the Kuzari, it is still unparalleled. Judaism is the only religion where the word of God was given publicly to all, where man can hear God's word without going through any intermediary. The revelation at Sinai is unique, and carries a unique message.

This verse is God's explanation and explication, not of the individual ten commandments, but of the experience itself of having stood at the foot of the mountain and heard the voice of God. For this purpose, it does not make a difference what God said; the important point is that God, from THE HEAVEN, from the infinite distance of the celestial realm, spoke directly with the Jews on the ground. The Torah is the bridge between infinity and mortality, and there is no need for any intermediary. In the Mekhilta, R. Akiva expresses this idea of

Sinai as the ultimate bridge between God and man, between heaven and earth.

R. Akiva Says: Our verse states, "I have spoken to you from heaven," and another verse states, "and God DESCENDED on Mount Sinai" (19,20). This teaches us that God bent the upper heavens unto the summit of the mountain and spoke to them from the heavens.

We now understand the unusual syntax of the verse. The Torah equates syncretism with idolatry, even though there is in actuality an important difference. The same thing takes place after the golden calf episode, where the Torah accuses the Jews of idolatry. Our verse spans the gulf between the prohibition of syncretism and actual idolatry by running one into the other. "Do not make with Me... gods of silver and gods of gold do not make FOR YOURSELF." Anything you make to be with Me, to join God in a community of gods, lesser and higher, silver and gold, is for yourself, is a graven image and an idol. The syntax, with its single object for two verbs and two phrases, seems flawed. The Torah is saying that there is no (halakhic) difference between real idolatry, as practiced in Egypt, and any attempt to bridge the gap between Man and God with other semi-divine beings.

The next three commandments, all of which relate to the altar, should be understood in this context.

B. The Earthen Altar

An earthen altar shall you make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your peace-offerings, your sheep and cattle; In every place that I pronounce My name, I shall come to you and bless you.

The altar is the converse of the word of God. Man speaks to God and worships Him, and only Him. The Torah states that the altar should be of earth. R. Yishmael explains that this means the altar should be resting on the ground and not supported by pillars (Mekhilta). There are several other explanations for the practical implications of this verse (see Rashi). The point, in any event, is clear. The altar is rooted in the ground, in earth. It is part of the natural world, because the natural world can connect to God, the Most High. In fact, in EVERY PLACE that God's name is uttered, He will COME TO YOU, all the way from heaven to the human individual, and bless you.

The Midrash Tanchuma puts it this way: Why from earth? For Man was created from earth and he is called Adam because he comes from earth (adama).

C. Hewn Stones

If you make a stone altar, you must not cut the stones, "for you would have wielded your sword over it and desecrated it." Rashi quotes the beautiful midrash, which explains the prohibition based on the contrariety of the altar of peace and weapons of death. This correctly perceives the hint implicit in the word "sword" (cherev) rather than the more appropriate "ax" or the like as an instrument of hewing stone. I would like to suggest a pshat interpretation, in the context I have been explaining. If you make a stone altar (which in fact you are commanded to do in the Temple), you should still use natural

stones, undressed and unadorned. This is the stone equivalent of the earth in the mishkan altar. You simply take elements from the ground and it becomes an altar, without any esoteric method of construction. On the contrary, if you use a tool to fashion it, it is desecrated.

D. Steps

Do not ascend the altar on steps, so that you not uncover your nakedness on it. This is interpreted by the halakha as a requirement that the ascent to the altar be with a ramp and not with steps. First of all, this verse emphasizes that the altar is something that is ascended, which is not obvious. I imagine in the minds of most readers, an altar is only waist high, and there is no need to ascend it. The altar of the Temple was, in fact, 10 cubits high (approximately 17 feet), but there is no way to know this from the verses. Our verse is reminding us that one ascends on the altar; i.e., it is a means of reaching heaven, just as Sinai was God, from heaven, reaching all the way down to the earth. Since it is not merely an act of worship, of obligation, but one of ascent and transcendence, care must be taken to preserve purity and holiness.

This short speech of God, the epilogue of asseret hadibrot, is dedicated to one theme. Sinai has changed the rules of engagement between Man and God. God has spoken directly to man; man can reach out directly to God. This is both opportunity and responsibility. It can be a great comfort and also a source of terror. Man can embrace it or seek to hide from its implications. A great many of the incidents in the desert revolve around this tension and God's insistence that the Jews not avoid the direct encounter.