

Parashat Yitro

A Singular Moment

When the Almighty addresses the entire Jewish people directly, without any intermediary, for the first and only time, He does so in notable fashion. Generally speaking, when God addresses the entire nation via Moshe, plural language is used. To take a familiar example, at the end of the third paragraph of *Shema* God says, “I am the Lord your (pl.) God” (אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם) (Numbers 15:41), with a plural suffix for “your” (-כֶם). The Ten Commandments begin the very same way with one exception: “I am the Lord your (sg.) God” (אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ) (Exodus 20:2) has a singular suffix for “your” (-ךָ). Further accentuating this irregularity is the reversion to the plural in the immediately following verses. Why does God begin His direct address to the Jewish people in the singular?

Ramban: Speaking to Every Individual

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik began by quoting the Ramban:

In order to warn each individual that if he will transgress or violate the mitzvot, he will be punished, God addressed Himself to each individual separately, and not to the community as a collective, as a group, as a conglomerate. Each individual separately was commanded and instructed, so that they should not be misled into thinking that God will deal with the group, and the individual will be saved with them.¹

The Rav elaborated:

If God should ask an individual to account for his deeds, the individual should not respond that God could not have expected him to be the only *shomer shabbat* (Sabbath-observant) person in a community of ten thousand Jews... “Why did You want me to be the exception to the rule? After all you stated, *acharei rabim lehatot*, the majority rules; the majority determines policies.”²

There is no excuse for not obeying the Torah. One can never justify one’s non-observance by appealing to active peer pressure or the desire to fit in. God spoke with each person individually, so each of us must observe the Torah regardless of what other members of society may do.

The Rav keenly observed that the opening line of the Decalogue echoes an earlier verse in Genesis: “I am the Lord, who took you out of Ur Kasdim, to give you this land to inherit it” (Genesis 15:7). He explained:

The phrase is formulated in the singular... because God makes a separate covenant with every Jew individually. Avraham was one person, so the plural could not be used in his case. Later, however, when six hundred thousand Jews stood at the foot of the mountain and shouted *na’aseh ve-nishma*, “we shall do and we shall listen” (Exodus 24:7), God made a covenant not with the community, not with the crowd, but

¹ Ramban on Exodus 20:2 quoted in Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 12:112.

² Ibid., 12:120.

with each and every Jew separately, just as He had with Avraham centuries before. The Ten Commandments are a confrontation not with six hundred thousand Jews collectively but with each of them individually.³

Although this personal covenant prevents the individual sinner from hiding amongst the faceless masses, God's compassion has made it possible throughout Jewish history for the masses to take shelter in the shadow of a few great men and women. In certain times of crisis almost the entire Jewish people, under severe duress and faced with impending catastrophe, were ready to give up. It was a handful of saintly individuals, who refused to break this personal covenant with God and rose to meet the challenge, that kept the entire Jewish people afloat.

At the end of the *tochachah*, the long admonitory chapter in *Parashat Bechukotai*, we read: "Nevertheless, when they are in the lands of their enemies I shall neither detest them nor spurn them so as to wipe them out and to negate My covenant with them" (Leviticus 26:44). The Sages expounded:

"I shall not detest them"—in the time of the Chaldeans, for I provided them Daniel, Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah;

"nor spurn them"—in the time of the Greeks, for I provided them Shimon ha-Tzaddik, and the Chashmonai and his sons, and Matityahu the High Priest;

"so as to wipe them out"—in the time of Haman, for I provided them Mordechai and Esther;

"and to negate My covenant with them"—in the time of the Persians, for I provided them the house of Rabbi [Yehudah ha-Nasi] and the sages of the generations.⁴

The Rav quoted this passage and highlighted the actions of Esther, who risked her life by appearing before the king unbidden and went on to save her people. The return to Zion that preceded the building of the Second Temple was likewise a movement driven by a few committed and driven individuals: Zerubavel, Ezra, and Nechemiah. In the words of the Rav, "One individual's tenacity, firmness and commitment may change the destiny of the entire community."⁵ God affirmed this by making a covenant with each and every Jew.

Rashi: Offering a Way Out

Why did He use the singular "your God" (אֱלֹהֶיךָ)? To afford Moshe the opportunity to defend the people for the golden calf. And that is why Moshe said, "Why, God, does Your anger flare against your people" (Exodus 32:11)? You did not command them "You shall not have other gods" (Exodus 20:2), but me alone.⁶

³ Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 145. Rabbi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik asked why, if the Ten Commandments were given to every Jew individually, did the people not accept it in the singular, *a'aseh ve-eshma*, "I shall do and I shall listen"? He answered that not only did they accept to perform and study the Torah, but they took it upon themselves to ensure that all Jews would do so. This collective responsibility is the reason for the plural. See *Beit ha-Levi, Mishpatim*.

⁴ *Megilah* 11a.

⁵ Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 12:123.

⁶ Rashi on Exodus 20:2, s.v. אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים.

In this way does Rashi answer our question. In his rendering, in *Parashat Ki Tisa* Moshe does not rely on God's mercy but mounts a defense that holds theological water. The Jewish people can be forgiven because God did not use the plural and could be understood as addressing Moshe alone. Contrary to what many believe, grammar matters.

The Rav claimed that this explains why Moshe broke the two tablets. It was not an act of losing self-control that might foreshadow later difficulties with anger management, but a deliberate act. The tablets embodied the contract that betrothed God, so to speak, to His people. Moshe was God's agent meant to deliver the contract to the Israelites. The statement "I am the Lord your God... you shall not have other gods" would only become binding once the tablets had been delivered and the betrothal effected. In order to minimize the sin and the breach of contract it would have represented, Moshe rescinded the betrothal by breaking the tablets.⁷

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explained that God revealed Himself in the first commandment as the One who took the Israelites "out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2), because the expression connotes that the Jewish people were born into slavery and never tasted freedom.⁸ God recognized that they had been raised in the sinful and vulgar environment of pagans and could not be expected to fully observe the Ten Commandments right away. He knew that He could not make instant monotheists out of a people enslaved to idolaters for two hundred years, so He addressed Moshe alone. Moshe would slowly educate and instruct the people to the point when the Ten Commandments would become binding.⁹

Halevi: Establishing a Singular Relationship

A third take views the lone addressee of the first commandment as the entire Jewish people as a singular unit. The relationship forged at Sinai represented a unique bond between the Almighty and the Jewish people that has no parallel among the other nations of the world. The fact that God introduces Himself as the One "who redeemed you from Egypt" rather than the One who created the universe emphasizes the covenantal relationship that joins the Israelites and God, as the great poet and philosopher Rabbi Yehudah Halevi articulated in his *Kuzari*. For all the other nations, God only maintains a universal relationship.¹⁰

The difference between the two is significant and consequential. The Rav characterized it as follows:

From a metaphysical viewpoint, there is a difference between the universal relationship and the singular relationship. Within creation, God is the ruler, God is the master, God is the law maker, God is the architect. Within the covenantal community, God is not only the creator and ruler but also teacher, comrade, friend, and counselor.¹¹

⁷ Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 12:126–128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12:131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12:128.

¹⁰ *Kuzari*, 1:25.

¹¹ Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 5:48.

He finds this idea captured beautifully by a rabbinic teaching, in which God's self-description in the first commandment, "who took you out of Egypt" (אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם), is construed as "who was taken out of Egypt with you" (אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אִתְּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם).¹²

The covenantal relationship is a mutual one. God specifically chose the Jewish people when he could have chosen any other nation. By using the singular, he underscores our singularity and the uniqueness of the relationship. In this connection the Rav would quote the Ramban, who throughout his Torah commentary teaches that God's presence in Jewish history utterly differs from His presence in universal history. In one noteworthy example, he describes how all the nations are under the influence of the zodiacal constellations or have a designated ministering angel, whereas God oversees the nation of Israel personally and directly.¹³

Exploring the Rav's Insight

There is a custom to stand when the Ten Commandments are read publicly on Shabbat. The Rambam opposed this on the grounds that heretics privileged some parts of the Torah, like the Decalogue, over others, which is why the Talmud stopped the practice of reading the Decalogue daily.¹⁴ Why, the Rav wondered, is this still a custom, and is the Rambam's ruling taken lightly?

The Rav theorized that our custom does not contradict the Rambam's position, because the reading of the Decalogue on Shabbat morning is no regular Torah reading. Usually, the Torah is read as a way to learn and review the *parashah*. When we read the Ten Commandments, however, we read the text according to the parsing known as *ta'am elyon*, the higher cantillation. In this breakdown of the commandments, the usual division into verses is ignored, and the cantillation marks are arranged to fit the very long "sentences." The reading is meant to simulate the manner in which the Torah was given at Sinai. If the purpose of this Torah reading is to recreate the experience at Sinai, then standing out of respect, awe, fear is certainly warranted. Our custom is to read the Ten Commandments this way on all three occasions that they are read (*Parashat Yitro*, *Parashat Va'etchanan*, and Shavuot). When the Rambam forbade standing for the Ten Commandments, he was referring only to when it is read in *ta'am tachton*, the lower cantillation, with the usual verse breaks, the same way the Torah is read publicly on every other Shabbat.¹⁵

When we hear the Ten Commandments being chanted, we are supposed to imagine that we are at Sinai and beholding God's revelation directly. God is speaking to each of us individually. He is patient and understanding about our gradual process of learning and internalizing the Torah's teachings. God's intimate relationship with His chosen people is unlike the relationship He shares with any other nation. These are all concepts and feelings to bear in mind and heart as we stand for this special moment and reaccept the word of God.

¹² Ibid., 5:46.

¹³ Ramban on Leviticus 18:25.

¹⁴ *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, §263, and see *Berachot* 12a.

¹⁵ Ziegler, *Halakhic Positions*, 1:111.