

GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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PLOWING A FLOURISHING FUTURE

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The festival of Shavuot commemorates *Mattan Torah*, the giving and receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, which raises a question: Should we assume that the first *mitzvah* (commandment) that God gave at Mount Sinai has special significance?

We take our lesson on this question from the Torah commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888).

The Scripture reads: *Anochi Adoshem Elokecha*. . . (אנכי ה' אלקיך). (Exodus 20:2)

But what do these words mean?

We know that the two forms of “I” in Hebrew—that is, *ani* (אני) and *anochi* (אנכי)—convey different meanings. *Ani* calls our attention to the *speaker*, in contrast to the one spoken to. *Anochi*, the form used in our verse, places the speaker in intimate relationship to the one spoken to.

The tradition is that these first three words are *not* to be understood as a pronouncement, but as a *mitzvah*—again, a commandment. That is, they do not say, “I, Adoshem, am your God.” But, “I, Adoshem, am *to be* your God.”

But what exactly does it mean to say, I accept that *mitzvah* that Adoshem is to be my God?

The Sages teach that if we accept God, it implicitly entails a commitment to *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* (קבלת עול מלכות שמים). Literally, that we accept the “yoke of the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, the basis of our relationship with this God is *not* to be based on what *we* want from *God*, but on what *God* wants from *us*.

So this first commandment at Mount Sinai is not, as is so often maintained by other traditions, that we believe in the *existence* of God. Our tradition doesn’t demand a belief in the existence of God, because that’s a foregone conclusion. That there is but one, unique, all-powerful God, mastering the world, is beyond question for us. The question is whether we’re going to make this God *our* God, and whether we’re going to accept the commandments of this God as the behavioral imperatives for our day-to-day lives.

The import of this question takes us back to *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*—not just for each of us individually but for all of us together—as a

people. If we are to accept the *mitzvah* (commandment) of making this God our God, other than symbolically or rhetorically, then we are accepting the rule of this earthly kingdom’s Sovereign. If this God is our God, then we acknowledge that all existence—our own and everything beyond us—is not only God’s creation, but the constant object of God’s “consciousness,” however that may be understood by our inadequate intellects. Everything we have—our lives, those we love, the life that sustains us, and all the beauty that surrounds us—are God’s creation and constant recreation.

If we believe that to be true, then the opportunity to demonstrate our allegiance to the will of God—the yoke of God’s kingdom—should be understood as a gracious gift. To be in harness, to take upon oneself this yoke, is not to be enslaved, but to be given the opportunity to make life flourish. Because there is no harvest in this life, not individually or communally, without the dedication, discipline, and devotion in which we harness ourselves for the sake of worthwhile achievement.

What is our incentive for making this one God our God?

The second half of this first commandment from Sinai reads: “. . . Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out from the house of slaves” (הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים). This allusion to our phenomenal liberation from the superpower of the ancient world is emblematic of our whole history. It is undoubtedly because of our allegiance to this one God and the Torah of this God that our history, in its totality and in its particulars, becomes comprehensible.

Now our generation has inherited the legacy of that history. All of that history’s future potential for bringing goodness into the world, as well as all that imperils that future, is now in our hands.

Our acceptance of God as our God, and our acceptance of God’s sovereignty over us—the yoke of the kingdom of heaven—is reminiscent of the sacrifice of a bullock in the ancient Temple. For the one who brought the animal, the bull represented a commitment to rededicate himself and his life as a “worker in God’s fields.”

In choosing such dedication we can do our part congregational community, for the Jewish people,
to plow a flourishing future for ourselves, for our and for all to whom we may become a light.

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