

The Big Ten: Always Timely

- David Gutterman.

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The slopes in Italy and the slopes of Sinai - connection? With all due respect to our landsman, Sasha Cohen and the fact that 'slalom' is almost the Hebrew word for peace, I find a more compelling connection.

Perhaps the central motif of this week's Torah reading is the dissemination of, and receiving of the Aseret HaDibrot - the so called Ten Commandments. Did you know that the Ten Commandment symbol, that is to say, the two tablets with the arched top which is displayed rather prominently and saliently on every synagogue in the world - first appears as a Jewish symbol on a synagogue in Italy in the 15th century?!

Indeed, for several centuries before this, the so-called Ten Commandment tablets were only adopted by Christians as a symbol of Jews. It was King Henry II in England (reigned: 1216 - 1272) who mandated that his Jewish subjects wear "two rectangular tablets of cloth (i.e. what we call today, the Ten Commandment tablets) on their upper garments when they walked or rode in and out of the city." His successor, Edward I was more exacting. In 1275 he decreed: "Any Jew from seven years old and beyond, must wear on their upper garment two yellow woven pieces of cloth in the shape of the Tablets; six fingerbreadths in length and three fingerbreadths in width."

We might have been a tad late in utilizing the Tablets as a quintessential symbol - but no one can argue that these Master Statements were the great gift of the Jews to humanity. As the secular courts argue over the propriety of their placement on their walls, we argue that they need to be fully placed and engraved on the walls of our hearts and on the actions of us all.

Let's be sensitive and sensitized to the fact that the Jewish version of the 'Big Ten' - as a rebbe of mine once termed them - is slightly different than the several Christian versions. Normative Jewish law and opinion has come down on the side that declares: "Anokhi Hashem Elokekha, I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" as the first of the ten. If, indeed, these are statements that command a response or an action, as many have argued, one can very well ask the question: What is being commanded with this statement?

Maimonides finds this to be the central locus for the mitzva - yes, the commandment for belief - belief that G-d is not just omnipotent but caring and providential, as well. I suppose that to command theological thought or content-of-creed is a justified project for any religion - but it is difficult nonetheless. For those who prefer to stay with the motif of command-as-action, might I be so bold as to suggest the following.

Notice that G-d does not self identify as, I am G-d who created heaven and earth. This arguably

would have been the most compelling and cogent way for G-d to have established and presented His credentials. After all, this feat of creation is not given to replication or duplication by finite man. Yet, G-d identifies not as creator, but as liberator. Why so?

By G-d identifying with the powerless over the powerful, with the humbled over the haughty, with freedom over slavery, redemption over subjugation - both on the macro and micro level, so to speak (pay attention to the verse, G-d brought us out of "land of Egypt" (macro) and also from the "house of bondage" (micro)), we, too, must self identify. Perhaps the command-action is simply this: Act in such a way where your life reflects and refracts these values. It's not enough to merely profess belief - one must project belief.

The "Big Ten" - hang on our wall and in our hearts - they are as timely and urgent today as when they were given and received on the slopes of Sinai 3,318 years ago.

Shabbat Shalom,
David