

# Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

## Parshat Yitro

### MAIMONIDES ON THE COMMANDMENT TO BELIEVE IN GOD

*Rabbi Alec Goldstein*

**20:2. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.** — [It is a positive commandment] to believe in God, which is that we believe that there is a source and cause of existence who brought into being all that exists, as He, may He be exalted, said, “I am the Lord your God...” (Exod. 20:2, Deut. 5:6). At the end of tractate *Makkot*, the Sages said, “613 commandments were spoken to Moses at Sinai. How do we know this? From the verse, ‘Moses commanded us the Torah’” (Deut. 33:4) (*Makkot* 23b-24a). That is to say the count of the commandments is equal to the numerical value of the word *Torah*.<sup>106</sup> But then it is asked, “But is this case? The numerical value of *Torah* is only 611!” The answer is, “They heard two commandments, ‘I am the Lord your God’ and ‘Do not have any other gods,’ directly from the Almighty.” This clarifies that “I am the Lord your God” is included in the 613 commandments, and this is a commandment to believe, as we have explained (*ShM*, Pos. 1).

Nahmanides agrees that this verse constitutes a commandment (see his comments on the current verse, as well as his gloss on *ShM*, Neg. 5), but for him the commandment isn’t just to believe in God but to accept the yoke of God’s kingship (*kabbalat malkhuto*). But before doing, Nahmanides has a lengthy discourse on the position of the Behag (see his gloss on *ShM*, Pos. 1). Simon Kayyara (the Behag) did not count belief in God as a commandment, because the Behag only counted commandments that required us to do something (mandatory), or prohibited us from doing something (forbidden). However, to believe in God necessitates neither action nor forbearance; rather belief in God is the preamble to observing the commandments. Similarly, Crescas and Abarbanel do not count this verse as a commandment.

Rabbi J. David Bleich explains the position of the Behag as follows: “As Bertrand Russell stated in formulating his Theory of Types, a statement about a class cannot itself be a

member of that class. God, a commander, stands outside the system of commandments and constitutes the authority by which commandments must be accepted. Commandments are binding because they are decreed by God. But logically prior to a system of commandments is the principle that God’s decrees must be obeyed. A commandment to that effect is not self-validating” (Rabbi J. David Bleich, *The Philosophical Quest*, p. 111).

Even if this is a commandment, following Maimonides, Nehama Leibowitz adds, “Whether we take the first verse of the Decalogue to be a commandment... or merely a preamble... one thing is clear. It is not formulated as a principle as in: ‘You shall know this day that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and the earth beneath; there is none else.’ It is not stated as an impersonal law as in, ‘He who sacrifices to the gods except to the Lord alone shall be utterly destroyed’ (Exod. 22:23). It take the form of a personal proclamation, a manifesto of Divine revelation: ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.’” Ultimately, Maimonides and Nahmanides both count this is a commandment, and the simple reading of the Talmud is that this verse is a commandment, the rationale being as follows: Rav Simlai derives the number 613 from the fact that the alphanumeric

### ONKELOS CORNER

*Rabbi Jack Abramowitz*

15. Hashem said to Moshe, “I have accepted your prayer. Speak with the children of Israel and they will travel. (Shemot 14:15)

The Torah says *mah titzak elai*, which Onkelos translates as *kabelit tzelotach malel*, as “I have accepted your prayer” as opposed to “Why do you cry out to Me?”

— *Adapted from The Complete Targum Onkelos*

value of the word Torah is 611; add the verses “I am the Lord” and “You shall have no other gods” to 611 and the result is 613. Thus these two verses are by definition included in the count of 613.

## JETHRO CONTRASTED TO OTHER BIBLICAL CHARACTERS

*Rabbi Dr. Abba Engelberg*

### Jethro’s Weakness

“And you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). How can one spread the word of G-d? One might suggest that this be done by traversing the world, knocking on doors, and discussing faith in G-d. That is exactly what Jethro intended to do, so why did Moses try to dissuade him (Num. 10:31)? The answer is that it is more likely that messengers would assimilate among the Gentiles than that they would influence the world’s inhabitants. The alternative, and this is what the Torah proposes, is to develop an exemplary country that would serve as a model for imitation by the rest of the world. In modern terms, Jethro could be described as religious (*dati*), but not nationalistic (*leumi*).

### Dathan and Abiram

The Children of Israel travelled toward the Red Sea and through the desert. This was meant to to mislead Pharaoh into thinking that he could overcome the Hebrews. In the words of the text: “And Pharaoh will say to the Children of Israel: They are entangled in the land” (Exod. 14:3). How could Pharaoh speak to the Children of Israel after they escaped? Targum Yonatan adopts a Midrashic approach and explains that, “And Pharaoh will say to Dathan and Abiram, of the Children of Israel who had remained in Egypt.”

R. Yehuda Nachshoni (*Hagut be-Parshiyot ha-Torah*, p. 268) asks the following question: If Dathan and Abiram did not want to leave Egypt, why were they not among the wicked Israelites who died during the plague of darkness, in accordance with Rashi’s comment that only one out of five left Egypt, and four out of five died during the plague of darkness? The answer given is that as a result of Moses telling Pharaoh, “We will make a three-day journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our G-d” (Exod. 8:23), the Egyptian neighbors assumed that they would be returning shortly.

Moses revealed to his close associates the secret that they were in fact leaving for good. Dathan and Abiram were eager to be counted among the Children of Israel, and that is exactly what the wicked people who died in the plague of darkness did not want. When they understood that the Israelites were fleeing on a permanent basis, they realized that deep down they wished to join them. One could describe them as nationalistic (*leumi*) but not religious (*dati*).

### Ruth the Moabite

Rashi considered Jethro to be a righteous person who abandoned idolatry and converted himself as well as others. However, he did not wish to completely assimilate into the Israelite nation, and was thus described as being *dati* but not *leumi*, as opposed to Dathan and Abiram, who were the opposite.

The person who combined both positive elements, religion and nationalism, was Ruth the Moabite. Ruth instinctively understood the tight coupling of the Torah of Israel with the Land of Israel, and educated her offspring accordingly. On the basis of her perceptiveness, she merited that from her family line the kingdom of Israel was established—by her great-grandson David, who said, when he was coerced to leave Israel: “for they have driven me out this day from cleaving to the inheritance of the Lord, saying: Go, serve other gods” (1 Sam. 26:19). King David, like Ruth, understood that residence in the Diaspora could potentially initiate a process leading to idol-worship.

## SHADAL ON THE BOOK OF SHEMOT

*Daniel A. Klein*

**20:3. “Do not have other gods to My face.** — But why was the Holy One, blessed is He, so insistent as to the belief in His Oneness? Why should He care if we were to worship others besides Him? Does idol worship cause harm to civil society?

One who believes in many gods, that is, one who accepts as divine the forces of nature, each one apart from the other, or some created beings, whichever they may be, will inevitably have one or more gods that are evil by nature, or that have some imperfection or diminution. This will result in his inclination toward evil or imperfection, as he will think that in so doing, he will find favor with such-and-such a god whose ways are so. This is known from experience, as anyone knows who has read the annals of the ancient peoples and their customs.