

THE YOKE OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Does the first *mitzvah* (מצוה)—commandment given at Mount Sinai have special significance, so that we ought not to read it too quickly or without the fullest comprehension of its implications?

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

The Hebrew of that first *mitzvah* reads: *Anochi Adoshem Elohecha* (אנכי ה' אלהיך). (Exodus 20:2)

But what does it mean?

We know that the two forms of “I”—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. Thus the very first word spoken to us puts us on notice that we are to have a special, exclusive relationship with God.

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

But what does it mean for us to say, “I accept this *mitzvah*—Adonai is to be my God”?

The Sages teach us that the sine qua non of the acceptance of God is the embracing of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* (קבלת עול מלכות שמים). Literally, that we “accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.” So the basis of our relationship with this God is not to be how we feel about God or what we want from God, but on what God wants from us.

Thus this first commandment at Mount Sinai is not, as is so often proposed by other religions, that we believe in the *existence* of God. Torah 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 masterminding the world is beyond question for us. The question is whether we’re going to make this God *our* God.

If this God is our God, then we acknowledge that all existence—us and everything else—is not only God’s creation, but also the constant object of God’s “consciousness,” regardless of what we understand with our limited intelligence. Everything we have—our lives, those we love, other forms of life that sustain us, and the natural beauty that surrounds us—are God’s creation and recreation.

If we believe all this to be true, then the opportunity to show our allegiance to the will of God—accepting the yoke of God’s kingdom—may be

understood as a gracious gift. The import of *kabbalat ol malchut shemayim* is not just for each of us individually, but for us together, as a people. If we accept the *mitzvah* of making this God our God, not just symbolically or rhetorically, then we must also accept the rule of this Sovereign. However, to be in this harness, to take upon ourselves this yoke, is not to be enslaved, but to be enabled, given the opportunity to make all life flourish.

This yoke marks the boundary between moral immaturity and moral maturation. In our youth we want to try everything; we typically feel no necessity to produce anything of lasting value; we give almost undivided attention to satisfying the selfish desires of our senses. So we resent anything or anyone that limits our choices, which—without restraint—have the certain effect of degrading our bodies, our minds, and ultimately our spirits. Most of us have “been there, done that.” But with age and learning comes moral maturity, the wisdom to know that by accepting some limits, we become free to choose consistently that which will uplift our bodies, our minds, and our spirits.

What is our incentive for making this one God our God, and accepting the yoke of His kingdom?

The second half of this first commandment from Mount Sinai reads: “. . . Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves” (הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים). We should keep in mind that 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 our people’s future potential for bringing goodness into the world, and all that imperils that future, is in our hands. Our acceptance of God as our God, and our acceptance of God’s sovereignty—the yoke of the kingdom of heaven—is reminiscent of the sacrifice of a bullock in the Temple. For the one who brought the animal, the bull represented a commitment to re-dedicate himself and his life as a “worker in God’s fields.”

If we muster up such dedication in our own time, we can do our part to plow a flourishing future for ourselves, for the Jewish people, and for all humankind to whom we may be a light.

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