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REVEALED YET CONCEALED: THE MEANING OF ASERET HA-DIBROT

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Although the practice is not without its detractors (see Rambam's classic [responsum](#)), it is common practice to stand during the public reading of the Ten Commandments, or *Aseret ha-Dibrot*.

This popular *minhag* notwithstanding, the degree of prominence that should be attributed to the Ten Commandments has long been a subject of controversy. Although the Mishnah ([Tamid 5:1](#)) states that the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* were recited every day in the Temple, this practice was later abolished because of "claims of heretics," who, according to the *Yerushalmi* in *Berakhot* ([9b](#)), asserted that "these [commandments] alone were given to Moses at Sinai." The heretics' identity is a point of contention among scholars, but it is clear that the Sages were concerned that people were assigning undue stature to these ten *dibrot* and the many *mitzvot* they contain.¹

[Scholars have also theorized](#) that the very term *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, which is different than the language "*aseret ha-devarim*" used in the Torah (Devarim [4:13](#), [10:4](#)), was invented by the Sages to dispel any notion that these are the most important commandments. *Aseret ha-devarim* literally means "ten statements," but can also be understood as ten commandments; perhaps, one might erroneously think, uniquely important commandments. *Dibrot*, on the other hand, is not the plural of *davar*, a thing, but of *diber*, speech. What is more, *diber*, which appears only once in *Tanakh* as a noun, connotes not just any

¹ Some have suggested that Christians taught that God requires one to observe only a portion of the Ten Commandments and a few other matters ([Luke 18:20](#), [Mark 10:19](#)). There is also a fascinating [midrash](#) that attributes to Korah the view that only the Ten Commandments are divine. Also of note, the first-century Jewish writer Philo placed great emphasis on the Ten Commandments, considering them general categories under which all the other commandments could be placed. For further study, see Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Decalogue in Jewish Worship" and Yehoshua Amir, "The Decalogue According to Philo," in [The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition](#), Ben-Zion Segal and Gershon Levi, eds. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990).

kind of speech, but specifically revelatory speech. When Yirmiyahu contends that the words of the false prophets have not been revealed to them by God, he protests that "*ve-hadiber* (and the word [of God] is not in them)" (Yirmiyahu [5:13](#)). Thus, the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* are "ten divine utterances" that were spoken by God to the Children of Israel as part of the revelatory experience at Sinai. Unlike the other *mitzvot*, God revealed them to all of Israel in a transcendental encounter.

There is no doubt that the *mitzvot* contained in the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* are important. It is for this reason that God chose to reveal them, and not any other statements, to the entire nation. Yet there remains a danger that the Sinai experience might make them appear overly important. Perhaps that is why the Sages chose to use the term *dibrot* instead of *devarim*: to emphasize that their uniqueness lies primarily not in their content, but in the manner in which they were transmitted. They are central principles of the Torah, and that is why they were revealed, but their unique status ought not to diminish the need to observe the other commandments.

Moreover, a close reading of a talmudic discussion toward the end of *Makkot* ([23b-24a](#)) supports the contention that the Sages intentionally avoided emphasizing the importance of the commandments in the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, instead focusing on their unique manner of transmission:

R. Simlai preached: "Six hundred thirteen precepts were communicated to Moshe: three hundred sixty-five negative precepts, corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and two hundred forty-eight positive precepts, corresponding to the number of the members of a man's body." Said R. Hamnuna: "What is the text for this? 'Moses commanded us Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob,' 'Torah' being in letter-value equal to six hundred eleven; 'I am' and 'Thou shalt have no [other gods],' which we heard from the mouth of the Might [Divine]."

David came and reduced them to eleven [principles], . . . Isaiah came and reduced them to six . . . Micah came and reduced them to three . . . Again came Isaiah and reduced them to two . . . Amos came and reduced them to one . . . To this R. Nahman b. Isaac demurred . . . But it is

Habakuk who came and based them all on one [principle], as it is said, 'But the righteous shall live by his faith.'

The *Aseret ha-Dibrot* are conspicuously absent among the principles to which the 613 commandments can be reduced. In fact, elsewhere the Sages stress the opposite, namely that the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* are encapsulated in other Torah passages. [Yerushalmi Berakhot](#) states that the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* are referenced in the *Shema*; [Midrash Tanhuma](#) says they are embedded in the commandments at the beginning of *Parshat Kedoshim*. As noted above, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the Sages did not want to present the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* as principles embodying the whole Torah for fear that their prominence might diminish the luster of the other commandments.² Yet the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* are not entirely absent from the passage in *Makkot*. R. Hamnuna states that the *gematria*, or numerical value, of the word "Torah" is 611. In order to reach R. Simlai's count of 613, one must also include "*Anokhi*" and "*Lo yiheyeh lekha*," which were heard from God directly (*mi-pi ha-gevurah*). *Anokhi* and *Lo yiheyeh lekha* are, of course, the first two of the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*. The Talmud thus emphasizes that although these two commandments are part and parcel of the 613 *mitzvot*, they are still different, not because they are more important, but because they were spoken directly by God to the people.³ Paralleling the shift from *devarim* to *dibrot*, the talmudic discussion shifts the focus from content to speech. *Anokhi* and *Lo yiheyeh lekha* are two commandments among many, but they are unique because the nation heard them directly from the mouth of God.

Further, the term *dibrot*, or the singular form often used by the Sages, *dibur*, often captures not just the revelatory aspect of divine speech but also its ineffability. The *Bavli in Rosh Hashanah (27a)* states, "[The commandments] *Zakhor* and *Shamor* were said in one utterance (*be-dibur ehad*), what the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear." The [Mekhilta \(Yitro 20:1\)](#) similarly writes that God spoke all Ten Commandments "in one utterance (*be-dibur ehad*), which is impossible for a flesh and blood creature to do." In these passages, the Sages declare that all ten commandments were spoken

² Rabbinic literature is, unsurprisingly, not entirely uniform on this point. The *Yerushalmi (Shekalim 25b)* states, "Just as at sea there are huge waves, with a host of little waves between them, so are there Ten Commandments, with a host of refinements and particular commandments of the Torah between them." This statement reserves a special place for the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*. The [Mekhilta \(Yitro 20:2\)](#) raises the possibility that the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* should have been placed at the very beginning of the Torah. Some later writers also assigned special prominence to the Ten Commandments. Rav Saadiah Gaon, for example, wrote liturgical works for *Shavuot* that subsume each of the 613 commandments under one of the Ten Commandments. And some, based on the ruling of Rav Yosef Karo, continue to recite the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* every day, albeit privately, not publicly. Maharshel even advocated for their public recitation before *Barukh she-Amar*. We see that in different places and times, communities and individuals have struck different balances in determining the proper role and place of the Ten Commandments. See Urbach, *ibid.*, pp. 182-84; and Rabbi David Golinkin, "[Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments?](#)" Still, I have followed what I believe to be the primary thrust of rabbinic literature.

³ In [Shir Hashirim Rabbah](#), the Rabbis debate whether the people only heard the first two commandments directly from God, or whether all ten were part of the national revelation.

simultaneously, a manner of speech of which only God is capable. By invoking the word *dibur* in terms of ineffability, while the highly similar word *diber* in *Yirmiyahu* connotes an encounter with God, the Sages seem to suggest that divine speech possesses two almost contradictory aspects. Even as it is uniquely revelatory and transparent, it is also uniquely inhuman and inscrutable. God's speech conceals as much as it reveals. (See also Rambam, [Guide to the Perplexed, II:33](#)).

Indeed, the Torah's account of Sinai drives home this point. It recounts an awe-inspiring theophany, yet some basic details of the experience are shrouded in mystery. Did the people hear any commandments directly from God? The story in *Shemot* is not at all clear. We read, "Moshe spoke, and God answered with a voice" ([Shemot 19:19](#)). What does that mean? "The people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the shofar, and the mountain smoking," but in their terror, they retreated and asked Moses to intercede (*ibid.*, [20:15-18](#)). It almost sounds like they backed out before they heard God speak. The Torah's account in *Devarim* is clearer, and largely suggests that the nation heard all Ten Commandments directly from God (*Devarim 5:19-28*). And yet, *Devarim 5:5* again suggests that Moshe served as some sort of intermediary during the event.

Perhaps the rabbinic passages explored above speak to this confusion. On the one hand, the Sages preserve direct revelation by stressing that Israel heard at least two commandments, but on the other, they acknowledge the text's ambiguity by suggesting that perhaps the people heard no more than two; and that, in any event, what they heard was *be-dibur ehad*—an utterance radically different than human speech. Revelation, divine in its nature, is not entirely comprehensible in human terms.

Perhaps, then, when we stand for the Ten Commandments, we are meant to be reminded of Sinai's paradox: sometimes it is when God is closest that He is also most difficult to understand.

THE REWARD FOR HONORING OUR PARENTS

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The text of the fifth commandment, in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 (read this Shabbat in synagogues throughout the world), is puzzling. Uniquely among the other nine "sayings" that comprise the Decalogue, the Torah informs us that those who honor their parents will earn a reward. Yet the reward itself is hard to figure. At first glance, it is long life. But what's the connection between long life and honoring one's parents? The plot thickens when we realize that the reward may not be so simple. To see why, let's compare the reward for observing the commandment of *shiluah ha-ken*, shooing a mother bird before taking the eggs or chicks from its nest, with that for honoring one's father and mother:

[Shooing the Mother Bird \(Deuteronomy 22:7\)](#):

"So that it will be good for you and your days will be extended."

Honoring Your Father and Mother (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16):

“So that your days will be extended (and so that it will be good for you),⁴ on the earth that the Lord your God is giving you.”

The final seven words (eleven in English) of the reward for honoring parents seem extraneous. If the Torah is promising a long (and good) life, it could have said so with the same language as the commandment to shoo the mother bird. Why does it need to add that this (good) long life will take place on the “earth that God is giving” us? Where else would the life take place, if not on earth? (There were no space stations then.) Why is this necessary?

I would like to suggest an approach to this puzzle that builds on a comment of R. Ovadia Seforno (Italy, 1475-1550). This approach is informed by [the idea](#) that “much of Deuteronomy is an exercise in ‘complementary reapplication,’” “whereby Moses provides a different perspective on earlier issues and events - one that is geared to an audience who are soon to be entering the land to settle and conquer it without the benefit of his leadership and God’s constant presence and providence.”⁵ The twist in this case is that Moses seems at the same time to be providing commentary on the wording in Exodus and to be shifting its framing so that it speaks to the needs of his fortieth-year audience. In particular, this framing aligns with an emphasis on parents’ role in complementing national institutions to transmit the covenant, and with a broader model of national parenthood that includes Israel’s forefathers as well as God and Moses.

Reward: Protection from Exile

Let’s begin by noting Seforno’s explanation for why Exodus 20:12 (and Deuteronomy 5:16) goes out of its way to mention the “earth” as the place where “extended days” will take place:

על האדמה. בשמירתם תזכה לזה שאותו אורך ימים שאמרתי תקנהו בשבתך על האדמה שלא תגלה ממנה.

“On the earth.” In their observance [of this commandment], you will merit that the extended days I referred to, you will acquire it by dwelling on the earth, in that you will not be exiled from it.⁶

In short, Seforno is suggesting that there is more to the reward for honoring our parents than “long life”: it also includes *preventing national exile from the land of Israel*.

⁴ Words in parentheses appear only in the Deuteronomy version.

⁵ Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, “Three in One: Creation, Exodus, and Equality.” *Lehrhaus*, August 3, 2017. Accessible at <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/three-in-one-creation-Exodus-and-equality/>.

⁶ Exodus 20:12, ad loc. As far as I know, Seforno does not expand on the idea that the reward is that Israel “will not be exiled from the Land” anywhere else, nor does he develop the connection between this interpretation of the reward and Deuteronomy’s explanation of what it means to honor your parents. Note finally that Seforno suggests that this reward applies to all five of the commandments on the first side of the two tablets. This is also in keeping with the approach developed here, as it reflects the idea that honoring one’s parents works hand in hand with recognizing and obeying God.

Seforno’s reading might seem to be a stretch were we to rely on the chapters of Genesis and Exodus leading up to the Decalogue, where the term “earth” is only once used to refer to the Land of Israel ([Genesis 28:15](#)), and otherwise tends to mean matter on the earth’s surface. But if we read the fifth commandment in the context of Deuteronomy, Seforno’s interpretation is straightforward. Moses invokes the concept of “extended days” repeatedly in the speeches that surround his review of the Decalogue. And in each case, he indicates that the Children of Israel’s ability to maintain their hold on the Land will depend on their continued commitment to the covenant. Here is the first such statement, in two pairs of verses that constitute the bookends of the climax of Moses’ preamble, leading into his recounting of the Decalogue (key words bolded):

4:25: When you have children and grandchildren, and have been established in the land for a long time, you might become decadent and make a statue of some image, committing an evil act in the eyes of God your Lord and making Him angry. **4:26: I call heaven and earth as witnesses for you today that you will then quickly perish from the Land** that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy. **You will not remain there very long, since you will be utterly destroyed.**

4:39: Realize it today and ponder it in your heart: God is the Supreme Being in heaven above and on the earth beneath - there is no other. 4:40 Keep His decrees and commandments that I am presenting to you today, so that He will be good to you and your children after you. Then you will endure for a long time in the Land that God your Lord is giving you for all time.⁷

In verse 26 and especially verse 40, we see almost exactly the same language as in the fifth commandment, and the meaning is very clear: Israel’s failure to abide by the covenant will lead it to miss out on the benefits of living on the Land, and ultimately to lose its hold on the Land and be cast into exile. Note also how the term “אדמה” or “earth” is used interchangeably with “ארץ” or “land [of Israel]” here, and that reward and punishment are cast in terms of intergenerational disruption.

Not only does Moses deploy this “fifth commandment language” to refer to Israel’s hold on the Land in this lead-in to his review of the Decalogue, but he also does it repeatedly throughout Deuteronomy. There are no fewer than six additional such instances:

- In [5:29-30](#), when describing the reward for fulfilling the commandments as Israel maintains its hold on the Land for many years; mixed in here is the theme that the Torah is the path of “life,” which becomes a dominant theme in Deuteronomy;
- In [11:8-9](#), at the climax of the passage (starting in 10:12) in which Moses defines the relationship between God and Israel, spelling out what God wants from Israel;
- In [25:15](#), at the climax of the series of social laws that will distinguish Israelite morality from that of the current residents of the Land;

⁷ Trans. R. Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*. Note that this selection is the traditional Torah reading for *Tishah be-Av*, which is fitting for a day that marks the tragedy of exile.

- In [30:15-20](#), which is the climactic statement warning Israel what will come if they do not keep the covenant, and encouraging them to choose life;
- In [31:10-31:13](#), which is the climax of the *mitzvah* of *hakhel*, the requirement to read the book of Deuteronomy in front of the people following every Sabbatical year on the holiday of Sukkot;
- In [32:47](#), which is the coda to the teaching of the song of *Haazinu*, and which echoes the same theme of the covenant as the source of life.

This evidence is overwhelming: while each of the seven passages cited above provides a somewhat different take on this theme, what is consistent is that the reward of “long” (and good) “days” on the Land is a *national reward for keeping the covenant*.

Link between Honoring our Parents and National Exile

It would seem then that Moses understands the fifth commandment as Seforno does. But this merely leads us to rework our original question: *Why is protection from exile an appropriate reward for honoring our parents?*

I’d like to propose a twofold answer: (a) Deuteronomy gives parents a special role in ensuring that commitment to the covenant continues from one generation to the next; and (b) Deuteronomy’s conception of parenthood extends beyond biological parenthood to include national parenthood, both in the form of the forefathers and God (and perhaps Moses).

With regard to the special role for biological parents, consider the four occasions in the “*mitzvah*” section of Moses’ main speech - which includes the recounting of the Decalogue and the text of the Shema testament of faith and commandment to love God⁸ - where Moses describes this role:

- In [4:9-10](#), parents are given the task of “teach[ing] your children and your children’s children [about the] day you stood before the God your Lord at Horeb.”
- In [6:7](#), we find the famous words of the Shema, “ושנתם ולבניך,” that parents must “repeat” “these words” to their children.
- In [6:20-22](#), a parent is instructed that when his child asks about the meaning of “these laws and statutes,” he should tell him the story of the Exodus.⁹
- In [11:19](#), at the climax of this speech, we find the injunction of the second paragraph of the Shema, that parents must teach “my words” to their sons.

A review of these passages indicates that parents are assigned a special role in inculcating belief in God, the importance of observing the commandments, and the memory of God’s revelation and supernatural benefaction to Israel. It is instructive to put this role in

⁸ For an insightful organization of Deuteronomy, see R. Menachem Leibtag, “*Sefer Devarim – Introduction*,” accessible online at <http://tanach.org/dvrint.htm>.

⁹ This is the question attributed to the wise son in the Haggadah, and the answer of “We were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt” is the beginning of the *Maggid* section. This also echoes the parental role first described in Exodus, associated with the other three sons (see Exodus 10:2, 12:26, 13:8, and 13:14).

context. As noted above, in Deuteronomy, Moses introduces several important national institutions for reinforcing the covenant. These include the aforementioned *hakhel* ceremony, song of *Haazinu*, public declaration of the blessings and curses on Mounts Gerizim and Eival, and requirement that each Israelite king commission the writing of a “book of the Torah” to be read repeatedly ([17:18-20](#)). Considered on their own, such institutions suggest an intergenerational transmission process that does not rely on parents. And perhaps for good reason: each set of parents will naturally relate the tradition in a somewhat different way, incurring some risk that the message will be garbled. By instead emphasizing the parental role *together* with national institutions, Moses is teaching that parental guidance is essential for reinforcing public teachings and perhaps for carrying on distinctive family (and tribal) traditions within the larger national tent. National institutions and families are meant to work together to reinforce commitment to the covenant, and thereby to help Israel earn its hold on the Land and enjoy its fruits.¹⁰

The very manner by which Moses reviews the theophany of Sinai, including his recounting of the Decalogue ([Deuteronomy 4-5](#)), helps to dramatize the complementarity between parental and national modes of transmission. Given that the vast majority of those assembled in the Plains of Moab in the fortieth year were either small children or unborn at Sinai, it is very odd that Moses speaks to them as if they were there. What’s more, Moses describes a supernatural experience that the text indicates could not be processed through normal sensory perception. Moses is thus undertaking a significant risk: his description of events might be challenged by members of his audience who will say either that they weren’t at Sinai and thus cannot vouch for his version of events, or that it was described differently to them by their parents. Implicitly, however, Moses is confident that no such challenge will be mounted; and indeed, none is recorded. This would seem to reflect the success of the parents of those assembled in faithfully transmitting the experience of Sinai such that it would cohere with the narrative shared collectively by Moses.¹¹ To properly observe the fifth commandment, then, these children need to relay the experience of Sinai to their children just as their own parents had done. This maintains the covenant and makes them deserving of the land.

National Parenthood

The link between this reward and honoring one’s parents is further reinforced when we consider the importance of the two forms of

¹⁰ Thanks to R. Tzvi Sinensky for pointing out that Abravanel stresses that the fifth commandment is on the first side of the tablets (commandments between God and man) because the ultimate purpose of honoring one’s parents is to ensure the transmission of the tradition.

¹¹ Attentive readers may note that I am essentially advancing the thesis that Moses was employing a version of the “Kuzari Principle” whereby testimony to mass revelation will not be believed unless it is backed up by the mass of eyewitnesses. The key is that Moses’ message - that there had been a mass revelation, with particular details - would ordinarily be hard for anyone to accept. But for those assembled at the Plains of Moab, not only does Moses’ message cohere with what their parents told them, but by looking around the encampment, everyone can apparently see that everyone received the same message from their own parents. This would seem to be impossible were the mass experience of theophany false.

national parenthood that Moses emphasizes in Deuteronomy: Israel's forefathers and God/Moses.

It may seem obvious, but it is no less fundamental, that the most common reference to "father" in the Torah is not to biological fathers but the forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹² Similarly, the most common reference to "children of" occurs in reference to "children of Israel." This idiom is nowhere more prevalent than in Deuteronomy. By my count, Deuteronomy refers twenty-five times to the Land as that which has been promised to the forefathers. Moses repeatedly emphasizes that the generations of the wilderness have done nothing to deserve the Land but that their claim to the Land derives solely from the merit of their forefathers whom God loves and to whom the Land was promised (see especially [4:31-37](#)). Finally, this idea is institutionalized via the *mikra bikkurim* ([26:5-9](#)) declaration made by farmers when bringing the first fruit to Jerusalem. Regardless of how one translates the opening phrase of ארמי אבד אבי, the statement is clearly referring to a forefather (either Jacob or Abraham) and identifying him as the farmer's "father." Thus we see that the act of honoring one's forefather relates directly to enjoying the land's bounty.

Israel's other national parents are God and Moses. God is referred to as Israel's father in four separate occasions in Deuteronomy (echoing the first such occasion, in [Exodus 4:22](#)), the first two occasions as simile and the second two as metaphor:

- In [1:31](#), God is described as carrying Israel through the wilderness much as a man carries his son.
- In [8:5](#), the experience of the manna in the wilderness (described as involving cycles of starvation and nourishment) is characterized as a training period akin to the way a man trains or disciplines his son.
- In [14:1-2](#), Israel is told explicitly that they "are sons to God" and "a holy nation," and therefore they should not maim or shave their eyebrows "for the dead."
- In the song of *Haazinu*, God is referred to as Israel's father (and "possessor") and Israel as a wayward son (see [32:5-6](#); see also [32:19-20](#)).

Further, if God is in some sense Israel's father, Moses is Israel's mother. At a key juncture, Moses expresses exasperation: "Did I become pregnant with this nation, did I give birth to it, [such] that you tell me, 'You must carry it in your bosom the way a nurse carries a suckling child on the Land that you promised to their fathers ([Numbers 11:12](#))?'" Although Moses denies his role as the Jewish people's mother, it is highly plausible that this is precisely where he has fallen short in his leadership. Indeed, reinforcing this reading, a number of *midrashim* refer to Moses as the Jews' mother (see *Torah Sheleimah Bamidbar* 11:90-91).¹³ Strikingly, the words "on the Land

¹² The emphasis on the forefathers without mention of the foremothers obviously grates on the modern reader. It is possible to suggest that Moses (and God) are abiding by contemporary conventions, and that their presentation of the narratives of Genesis will suggest to later generations that the foremothers played critical roles in founding the nation as well. Such an interpretation can be read as apologetics of course. It is worth noting, however, that the fifth commandment (and associated commandments) puts father and mother on equal footing.

¹³ My thanks to Ms. Davida Kollmar for pressing me to refine my thinking on Moses' role as mother.

of their fathers" are extraneous here, just as they are in the fifth commandment. But there is good news: Moses is not Israel's sole parent. In Numbers, God responds to Moses' exasperation by sharing the leadership burden with the elders (see [11:17](#)), and leadership succession is worked out over the rest of the book. And while Moses may begin Deuteronomy with a review of his frustrations with his children, he describes God's parenthood as constant and beneficent, as seen above.

Conclusion: Why the Emphasis (in Deuteronomy) on God's Command?

We have thus demonstrated how the reward of a sustained national hold on the Land is quite appropriate given the conception of parenthood advanced in Deuteronomy, one that pertains to the transmission of the covenant at three levels: biological parenthood (complementing national institutions), forefathers, and human and divine leaders. Moreover, once we think about parenthood in this way, the reward of protection from exile seems more like a natural consequence than supernatural justice. How could Israel expect to maintain its hold on the land if it did not honor its parents in these ways?

I close by noting an additional reason this approach is appealing: it helps resolve the second important puzzle pertaining to the wording of the fifth commandment, one that also applies to the fourth:¹⁴ Why are the fourth and fifth commandments (Remember/Keep the Sabbath day and Honor your father and mother) followed by the phrase "as the Lord your God commanded you" in Deuteronomy but not in Exodus?

A theory advanced by Netziv (R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, Lithuania, 1816-1893) in his commentary *Ha-emek Davar* provides an essential piece to this puzzle. Netziv argues that this phrase is emphasized specifically in the fifth commandment because otherwise one might have thought, as with commandments six-ten, that the basis for this command lies in human reason (about social relationships). The addition of "as God commanded you" indicates that honoring one's parents is not as straightforward as that, but that one must observe this commandment specifically as God has directed us - i.e., as a way of fulfilling the covenant.

Netziv's theory needs two additional elements before it can explain why the phrase "as God commanded you" is particularly appropriate in the fortieth-year version of the fifth commandment. One element is the recognition that, [as I have discussed](#) in an earlier *Lehrhaus* essay, the seven-day week was a radical innovation at the time of manna but would have been fully institutionalized after forty years of living according to its (manna-based) rhythms. I also discussed how this shift can explain why the emphasis in Exodus is on *remembering* the Shabbat but on *keeping* the Shabbat in Deuteronomy, and why Exodus describes Shabbat as a blessing rooted in Creation, whereas Deuteronomy describes Shabbat as an institution for furthering the experience of equality recalling the Exodus from Egypt.

¹⁴ A more minor puzzle is why "and so it will be good to you" is added in Deuteronomy. Given the various parallels in Deuteronomy, this seems consistent with the second generation's new focus on soon having to live off the land (rather than the manna and water provided by God).

In short, each version places emphasis on elements that are most at risk. In Exodus, it is important to root Shabbat in creation because this was a novel idea, and it was important to institutionalize the radically new practice of the seven-day week; by contrast, there was no need to emphasize the connection to the Exodus or the experience of radical equality embedded in the Shabbat: the recently-freed slaves fully appreciated this when they had experienced their first *Shabbatot*, and how different this was from Egyptian bondage. By contrast, Moses in Deuteronomy can rely on forty years of teaching about creation, whereas the salience of radical equality and memory of the Exodus had likely faded. Moreover, extending Netziv's logic, whereas the rationale for the Sabbath and the week would have been foreign to the generation of the Exodus, the next generation would have begun to appreciate the ethical and social benefits of the Sabbath and week. They might now begin to think they could interpret the commandment without the Torah's guidance. It would thus make sense to emphasize that the Sabbath must be *observed as God commanded*.

This logic can be applied back to the fifth commandment. Like the fourth, its meaning would have changed by the fortieth year, thus requiring special emphasis on the fact that it must be observed as God dictated and not according to reason. Note first that as in the case of the Shabbat/week, there was a sense in which honoring one's parents indeed would have been new. In particular, parental authority would have been severely undermined by the forced labor that Israel had to endure for generations. There is nothing that threatens respect for parents more than a child's sense that the parent is powerless to address his or her needs. Moreover, the Exodus itself might not have helped to reestablish parental authority. One available interpretation for the generation of the Exodus is that they must be superior to their parents; after all, it was their generation that merited redemption, while their parents' generation had not. Accordingly, placing special emphasis on God as the ultimate source of the commandment could have undermined parental authority.¹⁵

While the foregoing interpretation is a bit speculative, I think it is less speculative to note that it would have been particularly important to emphasize in the fortieth year that the fifth commandment is "between man and God." Israel was now at the banks of the Jordan and about to settle the Land. It was set to leave the supernatural environment in which God provided for their every need - much as a parent provides for a small child (see citations above). In this new environment, the importance of biological parents would become clearer, whereas God's role as father and benefactor would become less clear. And so it follows that the divine source for the fifth commandment now becomes important to emphasize. Accordingly, it is in Deuteronomy where the full nature of the fifth commandment is laid out most fully. It is not one that rejects the traditional parental role but enhances its significance by embedding it in a larger national mission.

¹⁵ We are familiar with such tensions today, as described in detail in Haym Soloveitchik's classic essay "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," available online at <http://www.lookstein.org/links/orthodoxy.htm>.

A LONG-FORGOTTEN JEWISH REMEDY FOR THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

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The news of the spreading new coronavirus is worrying. Borders have been closed, flights cancelled, and travelers from China quarantined. Currently, the best medical advice is the same we have given for decades to combat seasonal influenza: cover your face when you sneeze, wash your hands, and stay at home if you don't feel well.

In the last century there was, however, a particularly Jewish response to a life-threatening epidemic. It was known in Yiddish as the *Shvartze Chassaneh*, the Black Wedding, and took place in response to the terrible waves of cholera, typhus, and influenza that ravaged the Jews of Eastern Europe, Israel, and North America.

The ceremony was simple: a man and women, each unmarried and either impoverished, orphaned, or disabled (sometimes all three) were married together as husband and wife under a *huppah* - in a cemetery. The couple's new home was established with donations by the community. With this act of group *hesed*, it was hoped that the plague would be averted.

For example, one such ceremony took place 101 years ago, as the Jews of Philadelphia gathered in a cemetery with the goal of defeating the deadly influenza outbreak. By the time it was finally over, the Great Flu Pandemic of 1918-1919 claimed 50-100 million lives worldwide. In the U.S. over 670,000 people died, and the dead were piling up in the city of Philadelphia.¹⁶ And so the Jews there celebrated a Black Wedding.

According to newspaper reports, they chose Fanny Jacobs and Harold Rosenberg as their bride and groom. The two were married at the "first line of graves in the Jewish cemetery" near Cobbs Creek at 3pm on Friday October 25, 1918. More than a thousand Jews watched as Rabbi Lipschutz officiated at the *huppah*. "And when amid their stark surroundings," the report continued, "the couple were pronounced

man and wife, the orthodox among the spectators filed solemnly past the couple and made them presents of money in sums from ten cents to a hundred dollars, according to the means and circumstances of the donor, until more than \$1,000 had been given."¹⁷

The Jewish community had chosen this intervention so that "the attention of God would be called to the affliction of their fellows if the most humble man and woman among them should join in marriage in the presence of the dead." An odd choice for today perhaps, but not as odd as it might seem given the reality of life during the Great Flu Pandemic. Today we know that influenza is caused by a virus, but in 1918 viruses had not been discovered. We now know that influenza is transmitted by droplets; back then, there was no such notion. We now have antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial pneumonias, but these would not be discovered for another three decades. A century ago there were many theories as to the cause of influenza, whose very name points to its presumed etiology.

¹⁶ Jeremy Brown. *Influenza: The Hundred-Year Hunt to Cure the Deadliest Disease in History*. Simon and Schuster 2018.

¹⁷ *Public Ledger of Philadelphia*, October 21, 1918.

It comes from the Italian word meaning *influence*, because it was believed that the disease was caused by an inauspicious alignment of the planets. There were other suggestions too. The famous seventeenth-century English physician Thomas Sydenham believed these epidemics were related to heavy rains that filled the blood with “crude and watery particles.”¹⁸ Following a devastating outbreak of influenza in the winter of 1889 there were rumors that the epidemic had been brought to Britain by imported Russian oats, which were eaten by horses who then spread the infection into the human population. Other theories of origin included rotting animal carcasses, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and effluvia discharged into the air from the bowels of the earth.

In truth, no one had a clue what caused influenza, and without an obvious etiology, people suggested all kinds of cures. Some used organic remedies: burning orange peels or dicing onions to sterilize the room. Others recommended a tea-spoonful of Friar’s balsam, a small handful of eucalyptus leaves, or tonics containing quinine. (Grove’s Tasteless Chill Tonic was especially popular, and made the Grove family fantastically rich). All physicians prescribed laxatives for their patients, and most suggested alcohol. “There is no finer pick-me-up after an attack of influenza,” wrote one American physician, “than good ‘fiz.’” Britain’s Chief Medical Officer suggested half a bottle of light wine daily.

Some physicians resorted to bloodletting, the practice of draining the body of blood, and therefore, in theory, of toxins and disease. It had been a mainstream medical practice for more than two thousand years. The procedure is frequently described in the Talmud, which mandated a blessing to be made before it was undertaken. In 1918 British doctors had performed bloodletting on ailing servicemen. They claimed it had worked, and published their experience in the *British Medical Journal*. We look back in horror, but at the time it was cutting-edge science.

Regardless of whether they believed in the treatments they were prescribing, physicians certainly understood the importance of maintaining morale in the face of the pandemic. “It is our duty,” said Chicago’s health commissioner that winter, “to keep the people from fear. Worry kills more people than the epidemic. For my part, let them wear a rabbit’s foot on a gold watch chain if they want it, and if it will help them to get rid of the physiological action of fear.”¹⁹ Which is precisely what the Jews of Philadelphia did on that cold October afternoon. But instead of carrying a rabbit’s foot, they made their way to the Cobbs Hill cemetery.

Although its origins are entirely unknown, the Black Wedding had been imported from Eastern Europe, where it had been practiced since the eighteenth century. The earliest recorded Black Wedding was performed in 1785 in the presence of one of the great founders of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk. It took place in response to an outbreak of cholera. The bride was a thirty-six-year-old villager and the groom a thirty-year-old water carrier, and despite their humble situation, the wedding was attended by other Hasidic leaders including the famed Seer of Lublin.²⁰

Black Weddings took place in both Safed and Jerusalem in 1865 following another natural disaster: a massive plague of locusts that had destroyed the crops and resulted in the deaths of many

¹⁸ Brown, *Influenza*, 32.

¹⁹ G. M. Price, “Influenza—Destroyer and Teacher,” *Survey* 1918. 41 (12): 367–369.

²⁰ Avraham Chayim Michelson, *Ohel Elimelech*. Przemysl 1910, 66.

hundreds. An eyewitness account reported that “the leaders of that holy city took boys and girls who were orphans and married them off to each other. The *huppot* were in a cemetery between the graves of our teacher the Ari z”l [Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi] and the Beit Yosef [Rabbi Yosef Karo]. For this was a tradition that they had, and thanks to God who removed this deathly outbreak from among them.”²¹ The wedding in Jerusalem took place on the Mount of Olives, “was attended by many, and was a very joyous occasion.”²² There are newspaper reports of similar ceremonies in Berdichev in northern Ukraine in 1866, Opatow, Poland in 1892, and in the small Ukrainian village of Olyka, which suffered from a typhus epidemic, as human and animal corpses were left unburied on the battlefields of World War I.

The Black Wedding in Philadelphia during the Great Influenza Pandemic was not unique to the United States. Two weeks later, on Monday, November 11, the ceremony was performed in Winnipeg, Canada. Under the headline “Hebrews Hold ‘Wedding of Death’ to Halt Flu,” a local newspaper reported that the elaborate wedding had been planned for more than a month. “At one end of the cemetery a quorum of ten Jews conducted a funeral. At the other, 1,000 Gentiles and Jews witnessed the wedding... Harry Fleckman and Dora Wisman were contracting parties at the wedding. Rabbis Khanovitch and Gorodsky officiated.”²³ And *Odesskiye Novosti*, a Ukrainian newspaper, described a Black Wedding that had been arranged “in order to contain the two epidemics raging in Odessa – the Spanish flu and cholera.”²⁴

In the early nineteenth century and in response to their own outbreaks of cholera, towns from Massachusetts to Kentucky had observed a public day of fasting and prayer “by designation of the civil authorities.”²⁵ With no notion as to the cause of the illness, no way to prevent its spread, and no medications to alleviate the suffering, it is little wonder that the Jewish communities turned to folk medicine and married off poor orphans in a Black Wedding. For really, what else was there to do?

As we wait to see how far the current coronavirus outbreak spreads before it eventually sputters out (for, like all other infectious diseases, from cholera to plague, it surely will), we should pause and reflect on our good fortune. We now understand the etiology and can often conquer those diseases that were mysterious and life-threatening to our great-grandparents. Vaccines, public-health interventions, and antimicrobial drugs generally keep us safe. And, in the face of an epidemic, we no longer need to gather at the local cemetery to marry off a destitute couple and invoke God’s mercy.

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²¹ Moshe Nussbam, *Sefer Sha’arei Yerushalayim*. Warsaw, Shmuel Earglbrand, 1868, 39b.

²² Eliyahu Porush, *Zikhronot Rishonim*, Jerusalem, 1963.

²³ *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, November 11, 1918.

²⁴ *Odesskiye Novosti*, October 2, 1918.

²⁵ *The American Quarterly Register*, November 1832. Vol. 5(2), 97.