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# LEHRHAUS

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## YITRO

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LO TAHMOD AND LO TIT’AVVEH: AN INSIGHT BASED ON THE HITPA’EL

**MITCHELL FIRST** is a lawyer and author of several books, including *Esther Unmasked: Solving Eleven Mysteries of the Jewish Holidays and Liturgy* (2015) and *Links to Our Legacy: Insights into Hebrew, History, and Liturgy* (2021).

The Ten Commandments are found in both *Parashat Yitro* and *Parashat Va’ethanan*, but there are differences between the two versions. One major difference occurs in the tenth commandment. In *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 20:14), this commandment uses the language of *lo tahmod* throughout the verse, while in *Parashat Va’ethanan* (Deuteronomy 5:18) the phrase *lo tahmod* is used vis-à-vis one’s neighbor’s wife, but *lo tit’avveh* vis-à-vis the rest (house, field, servants, etc.). What is the difference between these two verbs?

A well-known suggestion for a distinction is found in *Midrash Ha-Gadol* to *Yitro*. The suggestion there is that *ta’avah* is *be-lev* (with the heart), while *himmud* is *be-ma’aseh* (with deed).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi D. Z. Hoffmann included this passage in his edition of *Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai*, published in 1905. This led Nehama Leibowitz (see next note) to cite the passage as deriving from this work. But *Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai* is an ancient work that was lost and had to be reconstructed

This distinction is adopted by Rambam and many others. Regarding Rambam, see, for example, his statements in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Negative Precept 265: “This means therefore that once you let yourself covet in your mind a desirable object that you have seen in your friend’s house you have violated the precept of *lo tit’avveh*. If your passion for the object becomes so intense that you take steps to acquire possession of it, pressing him to sell it and exchange it for something better or more valuable—once you have bought out the unwilling purchaser you have violated both prohibitions.”<sup>2</sup> See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Gezeilah Va-Aveidah* 1:9-10.

from quotations. Scholars now realize that Hoffmann was overly reliant on *Midrash Ha-Gadol* in his reconstruction. The later and more conservative reconstruction by J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, published in 1955, did not include the above passage.

The standard *Mekhilta* today is referred to as *Mekhilta of R. Yishmael*. There is a similar but more limited statement there in *Parashat Yitro*, end of section 8.

<sup>2</sup> Translation taken from Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot (Exodus)*, Part I, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976), 342-351, at p. 345. The Hebrew edition of this Leibowitz article assigned the passage to *Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai*. (The English translation merely cited “Mekhilta.”)

But I would like to present a different distinction between *lo tahmod* and *lo tit'avveh*.<sup>3</sup> It has been made by several interpreters, but I would like to present it in the name of Benno Jacob, a Reform rabbi and Bible scholar in late nineteenth-early twentieth-century Germany.<sup>4</sup> He offers it in his article “The Decalogue,” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 14, New Series (1923).<sup>5</sup> I present it in his name because, to my knowledge, he is the only one who focuses on the importance of *lo tit'avveh* being in the *hitpa'el* grammatical form.

Jacob observes that the root *h.m.d.* is quite often used in connection with words like *ra'ah*, *mar'eh*, and *ayin*. He cites Genesis 2:9, Joshua 7:21, Isaiah 53:2, I Kings 20:6, Ezekiel 24:16 and 24:25, and Lamentations 2:4. From these verses, we can deduce that in the case of *h.m.d.* the desire for something arises as a result of inspection.

Then he explains that the desire reflected in *a.v.h.* is different. “The difference is this[,] that the occasion for **תמנ** is inspection, [but] for **תוה** imagination, the reference being therefore to imagined estates and pleasures...”<sup>6</sup> The body part doing the *a.v.h.* is

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, some believe no deed is required for *himmud* and view both prohibitions as equivalent. See, e.g., Rashi to Deuteronomy 5:18; *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, Negative Precept 158; and Umberto Cassuto to Exodus 20:14. Others view the prohibition of *lo tahmod* as including both one who takes steps to obtain the object and one who merely desires it. See *Da'at Mikra* to Exodus 20:14, n. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Nehama Leibowitz often quotes Jacob. See Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), 38. Angel writes that Leibowitz appreciated that Jacob and certain other non-Orthodox scholars “were attentive to the finer literary qualities of the biblical text, attributing significance to each word of the Torah.”

<sup>5</sup> The article spans pages 141-187. His discussion of the tenth commandment starts on p. 166.

usually the *nefesh*, not the eyes. Here he cites Deuteronomy 12:15, 12:20, 14:26, and 18:6 and many verses from *Nakh*.<sup>7</sup>

Then he makes his crucial observation that *a.v.h.* is often expressed in the *hitpa'el*, as in the tenth commandment.

Why should that be? Many of us have looked at that tenth commandment multiple times and wondered about *h.m.d.* versus *a.v.h.*, but typically we have forgotten to notice that *a.v.h.* is in the *hitpa'el*. The command is not *lo te'avveh* but *lo tit'avveh*. What is the import of this *hitpa'el* form?

One source I have seen counts 984 instances of the *hitpa'el* in *Tanakh*.<sup>8</sup> A large percentage, perhaps a majority, of these times, the *hitpa'el* is a reflexive form, meaning that it indicates that a person is doing something to himself. Let us make the

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<sup>6</sup> Others who make the distinction that Jacob makes include Malbim (1809-1879) to Exodus 20:13 (and see also his commentary to Genesis 3:6) and R. Solomon Wertheimer. Wertheimer (d. 1935) writes: “*Ta'avah* refers to the human desire without benefit of visual contact. *Himmud* is the stimulation of desire by visual contact...” See his work on biblical synonyms: *Be'ur Shemot Ha-Nirdafim She-Ba-Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Sinai, 1924) (translation taken from the Leibowitz article; see note 2 above). Leibowitz also discusses the similar view of Jacob. But when she does so she greatly shortens his discussion and does not mention his observation about the *hitpa'el*. That is what motivated me to write this article.

<sup>7</sup> He admits the exception of Genesis 3:6 where *ta'avah* is used in connection with *einayim*. He suggests that the meaning here is that whoever saw or heard about the Tree once would say to himself: I wish I could see it again and again!

<sup>8</sup> Others count fewer. I have seen references to 946, 780, and “over 825.” Due to the ambiguous nature of certain word forms, counting instances of *hitpa'el* in *Tanakh* is not an exact science.

reasonable assumption that this is its function here.<sup>9</sup>

So what is the import of the *hitpa'el* of *a.v.h.*? Jacob explains. It means “to nourish in one’s heart the desire for something, through a vivid presentation in one’s fantasy...” Now we understand! *A.v.h.* means you have a desire for something that is not initially based on a visual inspection of it. Rather, **you are actively building up your desire** for something that you have not seen (or at least, it is not in front of you at the time). That is why the *hitpa'el* is used.

A perfect example of *a.v.h.* being used in this manner is found in Numbers 11:4-5. In verse 5, the people cry out: “We remember the fish that we used to eat in Egypt for free...” The previous verse had described the background with the phrase *hit'avvu ta'avah*, and later in verse 11:34 the people are described as *ha-mit'avvim*. The events are alluded to again in Psalms 106:14: *va-yit'avvu ta'avah*.

Another example of *a.v.h.* in the *hitpa'el* is in Amos 5:18. Here the reference is to *ha-mit'avvim et Yom Hashem*. No one has ever seen *Yom Hashem* before.

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes it has other functions. For example, sometimes *hitpa'el* expresses a continuing action. Other times, it expresses a request for someone else to do something to you. I have discussed the *hitpa'el* extensively in my article on the word *hitpallel* in my [Roots and Rituals](#) (New York: Kodesh Press, 2018) and in my earlier article at [seforim.blogspot.com on Aug. 29, 2016](#). In the case of *hitpallel*, I argued that it denotes a request for someone to intervene on your behalf. I disagreed with the common understanding of *hitpallel* as an individual acting upon himself (e.g., judging himself). Another case like *hitpallel* where the *hitpa'el* serves the function of requesting that another act on you is the case of *hithannen*. Here, one is asking another to show favor.

We can understand that this is a dramatic day and something that people would be working themselves up for.

Finally, another example is II Samuel 23:15. Here we have *va-yit'avveh David*, followed by: “Who will give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate?” The well was not in his sight. The comment in the Soncino edition explains that he had “a sudden longing for the water he used to drink in his boyhood.”<sup>10</sup> David is here using his imagination and conjuring up his fond memories of drinking water from this well.

(The root *a.v.h.* is not always in the *hitpa'el*, but other examples of *a.v.h.* in the *hitpa'el* are found in Psalms 45:12, Jeremiah 17:16, Proverbs 13:4, 21:26, 23:3, 23:6, and 24:1, and Ecclesiastes 6:2. Most of these verses provide too little detail to warrant discussion.)

Jacob concludes by calling *h.m.d.* “the covetous observation” and *a.v.h.* “the imaginary desire.”

Finally, integrally related to the above interpretations of *h.m.d.* and *a.v.h.* is Jacobs’ expansive approach to parallelism. He believes that it is wrong for us to be overly narrow and apply *h.m.d.* only to one’s neighbor’s wife and *a.v.h.* only to the other items listed in the verse. Admittedly, *h.m.d.* is mentioned in *Parashat Va’ethanan* only in connection with the neighbor’s wife, and *a.v.h.* is mentioned only in connection with the other items. But even if we can suggest a reason for the Torah’s verb choice for each item, he argues for an expansive approach to parallelism which would allow us to apply the prohibition of each verb to *all*

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<sup>10</sup> See also the similar comments of Malbim.

items.

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I would like to end on a homiletical note. Long ago, at an event sponsored by an organization promoting *aliyah*, I heard the following *Devar Torah*. The land of Israel is called *eretz hemdah* in *birkat ha-mazon*, based on the use of the phrase in Jeremiah 3:19, Zechariah 7:14, and Psalms 106:24. Let us assume that we follow *Midrash Ha-Gadol* and Rambam on the distinction between *lo tahmod* and *lo tit'avveh*, such that one has not violated *lo tahmod* unless one has come into possession of the object. This would imply that the desire alone to live in Israel does not make it *eretz hemdah*. One has to actually live there in order to bring this description to fruition!<sup>11</sup>

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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

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman for reviewing and improving this article.

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.<sup>1</sup>

[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 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

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<sup>11</sup> 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).

“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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 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

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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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. Maharshal 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.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

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 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.

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