

Open the Gates

Giving of the Torah

When all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."
(Exodus 20:18-19)

Whose voice did we hear at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai? The voice of Moses or the voice of God?

Exodus 20:1 tells us that "God spoke all these words," before listing the ten commandments. So it seems straightforward that at Mount Sinai we heard all the Ten Commandments in God's voice. And this is the interpretation of some of the commentators. On the other hand, that introductory sentence, "God spoke all these words," could be a quote from Moses. Perhaps Moses was telling the people, "God spoke all these words," meaning that God already gave him the Ten Commandments and now he is relating God's words to them. After all, Deuteronomy 33:4 tells us, *torah tzivah lanu Moshe*: Moses commanded us the Torah.

Of course, there are not just ten commandments. How many commandments are there? 613. That includes 248 positive commandments, those are "thou shalt" commandments, and 365 negative, "thou shalt not" commandments. A total of 613 commandments.

Hebrew words have numerical values, and they can be very significant. What do you think is the numerical value of the word "Torah"? Let's figure it out. Torah is spelled tav, vav, resh, hey. It starts with tav, that's 400. Then vav, that's six, so 406. Then resh, that's 200, so 606. Then hey, which is five, so 611. Ah so close to 613, and so unsatisfying!

But the sages see significance in this. They explain¹ that Torah is 611. "*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*." Moses commanded us 611 commandments. But the other two, which are actually the first two, God spoke to us directly.

You'll notice that the first two commandments are in the first person. God refers to himself as "I" and "Me." The first commandment is, "I am the Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." And the second is "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3)

But from the third commandment on, "You shall not take the name of the Hashem your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7) it starts to use the third person. God is no longer called "I" and "me," but now he is called "he" and "him." This supports the idea that we heard God himself speak those first two commandments, but Moses picked it up from there, because we told him, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

¹ Makkot 23b-24a

But wait, you might be saying. The first commandment is, "I am the Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"? That doesn't sound like a commandment, it sounds like a statement, an introduction.

For that matter, it's a very strange way for God to introduce himself. Why didn't he say, "I am Hashem, who created the universe and created you." He's the God of everything! Why narrow in on that one historical event? It's like me introducing myself, "Hi, I'm the guy who does Mrs. Eby's taxes." It's not technically incorrect, but it's certainly leaving some critical context out.

We can answer the first question right away. "I am Hashem your God" does not sound much like a commandment, but it is. It is the commandment to believe. The second commandment, "you shall have no other gods," is a ban on idolatry, and it is the flipside to the first commandment. These two commandments are the prototype of all commandments, because every time you fulfill a commandment, you declare your faith in God and your rejection of all other powers.

A related commandment is what we say in the Shema: "Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One" (Deut. 6:4). It is a commandment to believe that Hashem is One. The command is "Shema: hear."

When the Israelites received the covenant at Mount Sinai, they enthusiastically responded, "na'aseh venishma": "we will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7). What a strange order: First they will do, and then they will hear? It is commendable that they were willing to obey even without understanding first. Is "we will do and we will hear" the proper order? Perhaps we should start our journey with "we will do." We keep the practical commandments, and perhaps only later "we will hear," meaning we will develop a belief that God is one.

But despite their enthusiasm, that's not the order God established. The first two commandments are the commandments of faith. They are spoken in Hashem's own voice, and they belong at the top of the list.

But we are still left with the question, why didn't God introduce himself as "I am Hashem who created the universe and created you"? Why did he identify himself with the exodus from Egypt?

Review: Spiritual Progress

A few weeks ago, during the counting of the omer, I introduced you to a passage from 2 Peter chapter 1, in which Peter outlines a process of spiritual growth. Here's the list once again, from 2 Peter 1:5-7:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. (2 Peter 1:5-7)

In verse 11, he describes this process as providing an entrance into the eternal kingdom. That's a big deal, the kingdom is the highest priority of a disciple of our Master Yeshua. So this list is remarkably useful; it's like a roadmap helping us disciples achieve our ultimate goal. It's like a ladder with seven rungs.

We noted in our previous discussion that this list begins with faith. But faith is not one of the seven steps. It's the starting line. It's what qualifies a person to even begin the process. Peter brought up the

idea of faith in the opening line of this letter. He addressed the letter “to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of God.”

We asked the question before: how do you “obtain” faith? And what does it mean for faith to be “by the righteousness of God”? I explained the connection to Genesis 15:6, where it says of Abraham, “He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” The word for righteousness is tzedakah, which can also mean “a charitable gift.” We can thus read this verse from Genesis to mean that Abraham considered his faith to be a charitable gift he received from God. This explains what Peter meant when he addressed his letter to those who obtained faith by the righteousness, that is, by the tzedakah or charity of God.

Faith is where we begin our journey. Our life is a pilgrimage. These seven steps are lights along the way, or waypoints on our path. They are thresholds for us to cross as we move closer to devekus, unity with Hashem.

Earlier I also shared with you the concept of mussar, an area of Jewish teaching that focuses on personal improvement and spiritual growth. I hope you’ve made some steps in preparation for Shavuot. I brought up the concept of “middot,” that is, character traits that we identify and work on, just as you might use certain exercises in a workout program to isolate and focus on a specific muscle or body part.

Mussar literature often divides up its steps into “gates.” Imagine a city built on a mountain, constructed like a target with walls ringing each section as you ascend closer to and closer to the top of the mountain. That’s exactly how the Temple was built. Each time you ascend to the next level, moving inward and upward, you also cross through a gate.

One important book of mussar is named Duties of the Heart, by Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda. This book lays out a program of 10 “gates.” Just as Peter’s list begins with faith and ends with love, Duties of the Heart begins with faith in the unity of Hashem and ends with love of Hashem.

When I hear the phrase “Entrance to the Eternal Kingdom,” it makes me think of Psalm 24, especially the verse that says, “Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.” A better translation of “ancient doors” in this verse is “eternal entrances.” I find it likely that Peter had this Psalm in mind when he described his program as the “entrance to the eternal kingdom.”

Psalm 24 describes a type of pilgrimage. It asks the question, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?” The answer is “not everyone.” It takes clean hands, a pure heart, and proper speech.

Peter’s ladder has seven steps, and that’s not surprising in a Jewish context. Have you ever heard of the “seven heavens”? The sages use the scriptures to identify seven heavens, or seven layers of heaven, one above the other. A midrash called Sifrei on Deuteronomy² comments on a verse where Moses tells the Israelites that they are “like the stars of the heavens” (Deuteronomy 1:10). This midrash explains that in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden, there are seven castes or ranks of righteous people. And the two highest levels of the righteous it identifies with Psalm 24: those who “ascend the hill of the LORD” and

² Sifrei Devarim 10:1

those who “stand in his holy place.” In a similar way, the Rambam³ identifies the terms “hill of the LORD” and “holy place” as euphemisms for the World to Come.

This is a great reminder that what people call “salvation” or “eternal security” is not all that matters. The kingdom is not a place of equality. Our master told us to “store up treasures in heaven” implying that this life is your opportunity to invest in your future life. He did not say in the kingdom there will be neither last nor first; he promised that those who are last in this world will be first in the Kingdom. He indicated that some in the Kingdom will be called “great”, and some will be called “least.” Yeshua referred to our journey as “the narrow path.” Not only is it narrow, but it is also a path. We are headed somewhere, not just in a holding pattern until God gets around to beaming us up. Our progress depends on our choices in this life, and that’s exactly what this life is for.

In 2 Peter 1:9, Peter tells us the importance of this list. He says, “For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.” In other words, this list is a roadmap that provides clarity about our big picture. It brings guidance to a person who has already been cleansed from former sins, which means you and me.

Then in verse 12 Peter explains that these are not mysterious concepts. He said, “Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.” In other words, the entrance to the eternal kingdom is not a scavenger hunt with obscure clues. It’s not a spell book with strange and exotic procedures. It’s straight-up Torah values and ideas you have already heard. But he says, I’m not going to stop reminding you. It’s one thing to “know” in your head, but we are aiming to achieve a level where these concepts gain a constant presence in our conscious minds, so that they impact our day to day lives. This requires meditation, rehearsal, intentionality, and self-accounting.

There is one more important factor we must learn from this list. Turn back to verse 8. He says, “For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Master Yeshua the Messiah.” Notice how he says, “yours and increasing.” The path and ladder imagery that I presented before may give you the false impression that that these qualities must appear in an exact order. That you can’t move to step two until you’ve mastered step one. That’s not true. In fact, we aim to climb this ladder every day, building on our faith with all seven steps, and day by day, we seek to improve each one of these dimensions of our spiritual lives. Don’t feel like you must master one step before proceeding to the next.

Emunah and Belief

But this list does have one important aspect of sequence, and that is the starting point. Faith. It may not be one of the steps, but as the starting point, it is important to analyze and understand. The Greek word in this letter for “faith” is *pistis*, the standard Greek representation of the Hebrew word *Emunah*.

Emunah is not the same thing as “belief.” Belief means that you hold a fact to be true. It simply means to agree with a premise. But *Emunah* is not just belief, it means faith, or faithfulness. It encapsulates fidelity, trust, reliance, trustworthiness, loyalty, and allegiance. *Emunah* is something that God has with

³ MT Hilchot Teshuvah 8:4

us, and not just that we have with him. Now clearly, “belief” is a prerequisite, since if you don’t even acknowledge that something exists or is true, there is no way for you to maintain faithfulness to it.

The book of Hebrews gives an introduction to the concept of Emunah, in this familiar passage from the beginning of Hebrews 11:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Hebrews 11:1-3)

In what sense is faith the “assurance of things hoped for”? Does that define faith as just accepting doctrinal statements as true even though they cannot be proved? We will get to that in a little bit, but in any case, the passage tells us that our faith leads us to accept that God alone, by his word, caused the existence of the entire universe.

The Rambam enumerated the 613 commandments, and nobody can quite explain why he put them in the order that he did, but I find it interesting that he began with the commandments to believe in Hashem and to know his unity. Let me read to you how the Chofetz Chaim expressed these commandments, in his book, the Concise Book of Mitzvot:

1. It is a positive commandment to believe that there is a God in existence as Scripture states, I am Hashem your God, etc. (Shemot 20:2); and He—be he blessed and exalted—brought all existing entities into being, and all the worlds, by His power and blessed wish. It is He who watches over everything. This is the foundation of our faith, and whoever does not believe this denies the very main principle [the one and only God], and he has no share or right among the Jewish people. We are duty-bound to be ready to give our life and our might and main for this belief. The main thing, though, is to fix firmly in one's heart and soul that this is the truth, and nothing other than this is possible. This applies at every occasion and moment, for both man and woman.

People often point out that Judaism is more focused on action and peoplehood than doctrines. Nonetheless, belief in God is non-negotiable, and any Jewish movements that would eliminate that requirement exclude themselves from Jewish categories. And yet, simply believing that a god of some kind exists still falls short of the requirement. As I brought up before, we must obey what Yeshua called the “first commandment,” and that is the Shema. The Chofetz Chaim explains:

2. It is a positive commandment to know the unity of the blessed God, to believe with complete faith that He is one, without any partner or associate as Scripture states, Hear, O Israel: Hashem our God, Hashem is one (Devarim 6:4). This is a main principle of our faith; after the first knowledge that there is a God in existence [§1] it is necessary to believe with complete faith that He is simply, utterly one in the utmost degree of unity; He is not a physical being; no concepts about a physical being can apply to Him; nothing that can affect a physical being can affect Him; there is none second [like] to Him; and without Him there is no God. We are duty-bound to bear this belief in mind at every occasion and moment both man and woman.

What the oneness of God means is that everything in our physical experience is a creation and not the creator. God invented the idea of physical things, the idea of space and time and matter. The idea of math and physics and logic. The idea of having ideas or existing. None of those things precedes or can define God. And while he uses our physical world and our perceptions to interact with us, we have to bear in mind that his oneness transcends all those experiences.

Emunah and Providence

But belief alone still does not constitute faith in the biblical sense. I guarantee that there were no atheists at the foot of Mount Sinai. There must be more to “I am Hashem your God” than “Thou shalt accept that I exist.”

To help us understand the fundamental idea of Emunah, let’s look at a source called Kad Kemach by Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher. This work is a bit like an encyclopedia of mussar and Jewish thought, dating to about the 14th century. His very [first entry](#), and that might just be because it’s alphabetical, is Emunah. He begins by quoting Isaiah 26:2:

“Open the gates and let the righteous nation that keeps faith enter” (Isaiah 26:2).

The essence of Torah and the commandments is faith. For one who lacks faith, it would be better had they not been created. This commandment is dependent upon the heart, and it is that one must believe that the world has a singular Creator, who oversees the lowly world, including humanity as a whole and each individual in particular.

Did you pick up on what Rabbenu Bachya added? It’s not just that God exists and is One, but that he oversees the lowly world, including all humanity and every single human. He continues:

This belief serves to dispel the hearts of those who deny, sin against, and rebel against the blessed Holy One, proclaiming that divine providence does not extend any lower than the moon’s orbit.

Rabbenu Bachya is contrasting between true faith and the false idea that God exists but does not involve himself with humanity. The moon is the closest celestial body, so it defines the border between heaven and earth, and these deniers claim that God never crosses that boundary to interact with humanity. Rabbenu Bachya continues:

This was the opinion of Job when suffering befell him, and his friend Eliphaz then said to him (Job 22:13-15):

But you say, 'What does God know? Can he judge through the deep darkness? Thick clouds veil him, so that he does not see, and he walks on the vault of heaven.' Will you keep to the old way that wicked men have trod? (Job 22:13-15)

Thus, the prophets constantly remind us of divine providence, explaining it clearly. This is what the prophet Jeremiah explained (Jeremiah 32:19):

[Hashem is] great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds. (Jeremiah 32:19)

According to Rabbenu Bachya, belief that God exists is not enough. The essence of Emunah is to believe that God involves himself with humanity, ultimately rewarding righteousness and punishing wickedness. This is a major theme of the Bible: that while it might seem like the righteous go unrewarded and the wicked go unpunished, this is an illusion. Faith requires you to believe that God directly involves himself, paying each person the wages of his actions, both good and bad.

In Matthew 16:27, Yeshua promises: "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

Paul explains that at the day of wrath, "[Hashem] will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury." (Rom. 2:6-8 ESV)

I could go on and on with examples from both the Tanach and the New Testament, but the bottom line is that our faith requires us to acknowledge that God rewards good works and punishes wickedness. People talk about salvation through faith and not by works, but ironically, the biblical definition of faith is belief that God will repay you for your works. That it is worthwhile for you to serve him because there is a reward.

And so, our book of Hebrews continues its definition of faith by teaching in Hebrews 11:6:

Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

And thus, this is what Hebrews means by "the assurance of things not seen." What is not seen right now is the reward of the righteous. Faith requires us to trust that God is a faithful employer and will pay the wages for our work.

Now we can understand why God introduced himself as "who brought you out of Egypt." God didn't need to tell us that he existed. He is telling us that he is intimately involved in this world and in our lives.

The Sefat Emet, a Chasidic commentator, explains that the redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt was a greater act than that of creation itself. It's nice to know our backstory, but the fact that a God created us does not provide us with any more assurance about how our lives will pan out. But through the Exodus God proved that he not only created the universe, but he involves himself in it and cares deeply about each one of us.

According to the Sefat Emet, this plays into understanding the oneness of Hashem. Yes, God transcends everything in nature, but because Hashem is one, every detail of the universe is a direct result of God's continual renewal of creation at every moment. The Exodus is one example.

The Sefat Emet explains that even though the Israelites said "na'aseh venishma": we will do first, and then we will hear, God recognized they would not be able to sustain this approach. Instead, we must first accept upon themselves the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven, like we do when we say the Shema, and only then can we move on to the yoke of the mitzvot, and the second paragraph of the Shema that says, "It will be if you listen carefully."

Faith in God's intervention is the basis for our faith in the Messiah. When God said, "I am the LORD who took you out from Egypt," he identified himself as the God who redeems. That is why in the first blessing of the Amidah, we establish our faith in Hashem, our God and the God of our Fathers, who brings a redeemer to their children's children. Faith means aligning with this purpose of Hashem, to be willing participants in redemption.

There are some movements that identify themselves as a type of Judaism, but deny that Hashem plays a direct role in revelation and in redemption. They deny that a Messiah will ever come. This stands in direct opposition to faith as defined in the Hebrew scriptures. And in our Messianic tradition, we have a statement from Paul in Romans 10:4 that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes." This does not mean that righteousness used to come by keeping the Torah, but Jesus ended that. No, that is, Messiah and redemption is the end goal, the whole point of the Torah. You can't say, I want the Torah and commandments, but I don't want the Messiah and redemption. This is the error Paul is confronting in Romans 9 and 10. The Messiah is the point of the Torah. It means that God intervenes in the human story. It is not "I am Hashem your God who created the world." It is "I am Hashem your God who took you out from Egypt." I redeem. I intervene. The Torah is aiming at target: the redemption of humanity. And Messiah is how that happens.

Faith is a Process

Faith is not a binary state, something you either have or you don't. It's a process. Yeshua referred to some of his disciples as "you of little faith," and he recommended that they have faith "like a mustard seed"—faith that grows and develops from something small into something prolific and expansive. Every experience we have, every test we endure, is an opportunity for faith to grow and develop. This is the process that God took Abraham through, one test after another.

That means that even if you have emunah, chances are there is room for it to grow. Having perfect emunah would not just mean recognizing God's existence but having awareness of his involvement with every detail in every moment of your life. Such faith would produce intense fear of God and profound love of God to the point that the thought of sin would never cross your mind. That is why faith is so foundational.

Torah Tzivah lanu Moshe: Moses taught us the Torah. 613 in the voice of Moses, and two commandments of faith in the voice of Hashem himself. The Gemara goes on to tell us that King David boiled those 613 commandments down to 11. Isaiah summarized them in six. Micah distilled them down to three. And the prophet Habakkuk encapsulated all 613 in one statement: "The righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

If emunah is the foundation for our spiritual growth, then increasing our emunah gives us a larger base from which to build upward. How do you increase your emunah? People go about this the wrong way. It's not about apologetics proving the Bible correct. It's not about philosophical exercises that logically deduce the existence of a creator. Those tactics have their place, and they may even strengthen your belief, but not your emunah. Remember, the essence of emunah is expressed in the first commandment: "I am Hashem your God who took you out from Egypt." To increase your emunah, you must increase your awareness that Hashem is here with you right now and at every moment.

Here are some practical strategies to help with this:

First, express gratitude. Give Hashem explicit verbal credit when he comes through for you, in the small things as well as in the big things. Say your brachos, every time you have something to eat, or after you go to the bathroom. Pause, concentrate, and say the bracha with clear, deliberate words and with controlled and intentional thought. Recognize that everything you have comes from him, your success, your health, your intelligence, even your faith is tzedakah from Hashem. Thank him for it.

A second way to build emunah is to reflect. At the end of your day, before you say the bedtime Shema, take a few minutes to review and think back on the events that took place. Try to see those events from Hashem's perspective, as a loving father who wants nothing more than to see you succeed and grow. Before you light Shabbat candles, reflect on your week and the ways that Hashem came through for you when you needed him. Pause, take time, and reflect.

The third method for building emunah is the most important. Talk to Hashem. It's one thing to pray the Amidah three times a day, to enter a dedicated prayer space and say the Shema morning and evening, to recite Psalms. Those are important, but to build your emunah, you have to just talk to him. Acknowledge his presence not just at those high points, but throughout your daily routine. Tell him how you are feeling, what concerns you have, how much you appreciate him, what you are curious about. Even the littlest of things. Set aside time for dedicated solitary conversational meditation, also known as hisbodedus, but even in the hustle and bustle, keep the communication open. If people look at you funny in the grocery store, just touch your earbuds and lean into it. We have it easier today than ever before. Psalm 16 says, "I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand (!), I shall not be shaken."

On this holy and auspicious day of the Festival of Shavuot, I want to bless you in the holy name of our Master Yeshua, the King of Israel and the agent of God's redemption. Just as today is the day of the revelation at Mount Sinai, when God forced heaven to unite itself with the earth, he should reveal himself in your heart, and may the verse be fulfilled in you that says, "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isa. 57:15 ESV) Chag Sameach.