

# SERVING GOD OUT OF GRATITUDE

SHUBERT SPERO

There is much discussion as to the function of the first sentence on the Tablets of the Covenant commonly called the Ten Commandments or, more accurately, the Ten Words [*aseret hadibrot*]: *'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage'* (Ex. 20:2).

It does not appear to be an imperative, but rather a sort of general introduction. It is a first-person singular identification of the senior participant in the Covenant as "**your** God," one who has a special relationship with Israel as reflected in the fact that He "brought you out" of Egyptian slavery. However, it actually does more than that. It establishes an additional basis for Israel's **duty** to obey the Commandments. There is, of course, the formal one that, having agreed to the terms of the Covenant, the people are obliged to carry them out subject to the schedule of penalties that accompany the Covenant (Lev. 22). In this sentence we have the insight that the preferred basis for man's relationship to God, both of the individual and the nation, is not a legal one enforced by sanctions but a moral one of gratitude for benefits received (in this case liberation from bondage) which in time may grow into a disinterested love for God as absolute Good and source of all values.

This was expressed by the rabbis in the following midrash (Mechilta on Ex. 20:2):

Why were the Ten Words not given at the beginning of the Torah? This may be compared to one who enters a country and says to the people: "I would rule over you" (be your King). They reply: "Have you ever done anything for us that you should rule over us? What did he do? He built for them a defensive wall, brought in water, led them in battle. Then he said to them: I would be King over you." They replied: "Yes, yes." So it was with the Almighty and Israel.

*Shubert Spero was ordained at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. He has a B.S. from CCNY, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University. He is the Irving Stone Professor of Jewish Thought at Bar Ilan University. He is the author of Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition, God in All Seasons, and Holocaust and Return to Zion: A Study in Jewish Philosophy of History.*

Only after Israel experienced God's goodness could it be expected that they would accept His rule.

There are two important philosophical principles to be derived from this rabbinic teaching. The first is that acknowledgments of the fact of God's existence and of the authenticity of His commands do not, of and by themselves, obligate the individual to their observance. On its face, this appears to be counter-intuitive. After all, if I am convinced of God's existence and I have been made aware of His commands, is it not obvious that I should want to carry them out? Perhaps, but then we must examine the motivation. Is it out of awe, reverence, or simply fear? The rabbis here seem to have anticipated a truth that the philosophic world would first realize in the 18th century as the result of the work of David Hume;<sup>1</sup> namely, that no conclusion as to what **ought** to be done may be logically deduced from propositions that state what **is** the case. This insight continues to trouble all ethical theorists who attempt to base their prescriptive teachings on empirical considerations. To this day, philosophy is at a loss to find the source of the moral ought, the sense of duty which so many of us feel intuitively.

The second principle reflected in this midrash is that the moral principle of gratitude, that receiving unearned benefits imposes some sort of a "debt" upon the recipient towards the donor, is a self-evident one. That is, that this is neither a learned response nor a product of culture, but is in some sense a "given," an intuition. While this idea is indeed implicit in the midrash (since it assumes that the people will now all respond positively in gratitude to the King for all He has done for them), it can be shown to be the basis of the entire ethical theory of the Bible. For how else to explain the condemnation of Cain for killing his brother, or the destruction of the generation of the Flood for their "corruption" when they never seem to have been warned that these acts were "evil," morally wrong and should not be done?

We are, therefore, constrained to say that one of the consequences of being formed in the "image of God" was that humankind are to be endowed with some innate moral sense which enables them to distinguish between the moral good and the moral evil. Hence, returning now to Exodus 20:2, once God reveals Himself as the One who liberated Israel from the evils of slavery, they became obligated to Him by the self-evident principle of gratitude.

As indeed the constant refrain throughout biblical psalmody proclaims: *Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His loving kindness [hasdo] endures for ever* (Ps. 136). The latter part of this verse seems somewhat redundant. After all, since God is **forever**, by definition, it follows that all that is part of Him must likewise be **forever** including His *hesed*. A very insightful interpretation has been suggested.<sup>2</sup> The very act of creation must be seen as an act of loving kindness [*hesed*] on the part of God Who lacks nothing. He brings into existence something that is described as "very good" because to be good includes doing good for others.<sup>3</sup> But in order to ensure that *hesed* will continue forever in His universe, God endows man with a sense of gratitude. That is, that to be the recipient of good is to incur a moral obligation to benefit the benefactor. Once there is general agreement that one good turn deserves another, chains of self-perpetuating acts of kindness are set in motion. Hence *Give thanks to the Lord for He is good*, so good in fact that He has arranged that His original *hesed* in creating the world, will go on "forever [*le'olam*]"<sup>4</sup> as men and women created in His image respond to acts of kindness with reciprocal gestures of *hesed*.

However, there are several "loopholes" implicit in this line of reasoning which would have us serve God out of a sense of gratitude for all He has done for us as individuals and particularly for the people of Israel as reiterated throughout the books of the prophets.

The first is exemplified by the very generation that experienced at first hand the goodness of God, in that it was they themselves who were liberated from slavery. Yet they found reason to complain, to disobey, and even to rebel. A close examination of the relevant texts reveals the following psychological process: At no time do the people actually deny the principle itself, that the receipt of a good obligates the recipient to the donor. The problem is that sometimes the recipient simply does not recognize what was received as a good.

We find an example of this soon after the Israelites leave Egypt, when they discover that Pharaoh's chariots are in hot pursuit and they find their way forward blocked by the sea. We read:

*And they said to Moses: 'Why have you dealt with us in this way to bring us forth out of Egypt? Is this not what we spoke to you in Egypt saying, Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians. For it*

*were better for us . . . than that we die in the wilderness'* (Ex. 14:11-13).

Shortly thereafter when there is a shortage of food, the people remember Egypt not for its hardship but *when we sat by the fleshpots, when we did eat bread to the full . . .* (Ex. 16:3). All this might be excused as the natural reaction of a passive, cared-for group to unfamiliar dangers and shortages of staples. Yet a full two years later we read that the people started lusting for meat and murmured, *'We remember the fish we were wont to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons and the leeks and onions and garlic, but now there is nothing at all'* (Num. 11:5-6). A low point is reached when Dathan and Abiram dare to refer to Egypt, the erstwhile house of bondage, by the very special name given by God to the Promised Land: *'You have brought us up out of a land with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness'* (16:13). The "good" that God had presumably wrought had turned, in the minds of the people, into its very opposite. Gone, therefore, were the bases for gratitude!

There is another weak link in the chain which is supposed to lead from acknowledgement of benefits received and a subsequent feeling of gratitude to an expression of thanks. It sometimes surfaces in a situation in which, while **what** has occurred is indeed seen as a great and glorious good, it is not clear **who** is responsible for the good, **who** is my benefactor, **whom** am I to thank. That this should occur in connection with giving thanks to God should not be a surprise, for many are the good things in life which we take for granted and do not connect to the Creator. This was the bitter lament of Moses that God's works in history are often not recognized as such. *'Lest they shall say, Our hand is held high and it is not the Lord that has done all this'* (Deut. 32:27). Throughout history it has been primarily the wondrous and the marvelous, the unusual and the unexplainable, the miraculous and the implausible, that has led people to see therein the Hand of God. We are prepared to acknowledge that "this is the Lord's doing" only *when it is marvelous in our eyes* (Ps. 118:23).

Yet, it would appear that even in the age of miracles, Moses had to contend with doubts as to whether the *signs and wonders* the people had experienced were indeed the work of God! It would appear that Moses' frequent use of his staff in the performance of these wonders led some to believe that it was the man, Moses, with his magic staff that was the power that brought the plagues

upon Egypt and split the sea. This may explain the severe anger of God in the incident at the *waters of Meribah* (Num. 20:1-13), when Moses smote the rock with his staff rather than speak to it. God's intention in instructing Moses to **speak** to the rock was to demonstrate that the power of Moses emanated not from the staff but from being the agent of God. That this was a serious problem may be gathered from Moses' statement made before he performed his dramatic punitive super-miracle in the incident of the rebellion of Korah: *'By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works and that I have not done them of my own mind'* (16:28).

With this in mind, we can better appreciate the small (five verses) but most significant Psalm of Thanksgiving (Ps. 100), which bids us to *serve the Lord with gladness and come before His Presence with song* (100:2). The cognitive core of the Psalm is the following:

*Know you that the Lord, He is God*

*It is He that has made us and we are His* [lo anachnu]

*His people and the flock of His pasture* (100:3)

Here the psalmist has recourse to the principle we have been expounding. We owe God our thanksgiving and service because "He has made us" – **He** is the source of our existence which we deem good and therefore "we are **His**" in a proprietary sense. Interestingly, the tradition has preserved here an alternative reading. In place of "וְלוֹ [velo] anachnu [we are His]," read "וְלוֹא [velo] anachnu [and not ourselves]." That is, "**He** made us" and we are not responsible for our existence. We are not self-made creatures. Thus, having foreclosed a possible escape clause, we can only conclude: *Give thanks to **Him** and bless **His** name* (100:4) for He is our benefactor. And the Psalm ends appropriately: *For the Lord is good*, and by implanting within us the capacity and urge to express gratitude has ensured that *His kindness endures forever* (100:5).

#### NOTES

1. David Hume (1711-1776), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Books II and III.
2. I. Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchok*, Volume on Rosh Hashana (New York: Gur Aryeh, 1974) Essay I.
3. Psalms 89:3, *olam hesed yebaneh*, which can be translated: "a world based on *hesed* will be built."
4. The term *le'olam* while generally translated "forever," that is, a temporal dimension, contains the word *Olam*, a geographical-spatial term. So that *le'olam hasdo* can be translated as "His

kindness is world-wide," or "encompassing the cosmos." Notice also the attribute given to God of *rav hesed* (Ex. 34:6), "abundant in kindness," a quantitative measure; that is, He has provided for its continuing increase.