

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM



Produced by THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary
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3080 Broadway
New York, NY 10027*

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Illustrations of the tabernacle and its furnishings by Joe Sikora.*

*Composition by VARDA Graphics, Skokie, Illinois
Design by Adrienne Onderdonk Dudden
Manufactured in the United States of America*

09 10 10 9 8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bible. O.T. Pentateuch. Hebrew. 2001.

Etz Hayim: Torah and commentary / senior editor, David L. Lieber; literary editor, Jules Harlow; sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

p. cm.

Text of the Pentateuch in Hebrew and English; commentary in English.

Includes the haftarat and commentary on them, p'shat and d'rash commentaries, comments on Conservative halakhic practice, topical essays, and other material.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 0-8276-0712-1 ISBN-13: 978-0-8276-0712-5

1. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch—Commentaries. 2. Haftarat—Commentaries. 3. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch—Theology. 4. Conservative Judaism—Customs and practices. I. Lieber, David L. II. Harlow, Jules. III. United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. IV. Rabbinical Assembly. V. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch. English. Jewish Publication Society, 2001. VI. Title.

BS1222 .L54 2001

222'.1077—dc21

2001029757

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary
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19 On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. ²Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, ³and Moses went up to God.

יט רביעי
 בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי־
 יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ
 מִדְּבַר סִינַי: ²וַיִּסְעוּ מִרֶפְדִּים וַיָּבֹאוּ
 מִדְּבַר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַר וַיַּחֲנֶה־שָׁם
 יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר: ³וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־

THE COVENANT AT SINAI (19:1–20:23)

The arrival at Sinai inaugurates the final stage in the process of forging Israel's national identity and spiritual destiny. The great communal encounter with God gave ultimate meaning to the shared experiences of bondage and liberation. Henceforth, the people Israel are in a covenantal relationship with God, inextricably bound to Him by a treaty (*b'rit*).

NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION (19:1–3b)

1. *On the third new moon . . . on that very*

day The more precise definition, “on that very day,” shows that the word *hodesh*, which later came to mean “month,” is here used in its original sense of “new moon.”

2. Rephidim See Comment to 17:1.

mountain The one selected to be the site of the revelation.

ISRAEL'S DESTINY DEFINED (vv. 3c–6)

Written in poetic prose, these verses express the essence of the covenant idea. Israel is chosen to

CHAPTER 19

1. On the third new moon The Sages, noting that the zodiacal sign for the third month (*Sivan*) is Gemini, the twins, take it as symbolizing the equal importance of the written Torah and the oral Torah. According to another interpretation, this teaches us that should Jacob's twin brother, Esau, change his wicked ways and come to accept the Torah, he would be welcomed (PdRK). We may find it strange that the Sages refer to the signs of the zodiac. They were often used in synagogue decorations, for homiletic purposes, and possibly in poetry. (Some find traces of them in Jacob's blessing of his 12 sons in Gen. 49.) For example, Libra (the scales) is the sign for the High Holy Day season. (The signs of the zodiac are never used by the Sages to predict the future, nor do the Sages attribute to them any power to shape people's destiny.)

Why was the Torah not given as soon as the Israelites left Egypt? The Midrash compares the situation to that of a child who had fallen gravely ill. His father gave him several weeks to recuperate and only then did he let him return to school. So, too, when Israel went out of Egypt some Israelites had been disabled by the experience of slavery. God said, “I will wait until they are healed and then I will give them

the Torah” (Tanḥ.). Levi Yitzḥak of Berdichev sees it slightly differently. Had Israel received the Torah immediately after the Exodus and the parting of the sea, it would have seemed that they accepted it out of gratitude for the miracles God had wrought for them. Instead, God waited until the effect of the miracles had worn off and they began to complain. Then their acceptance of the Torah was a completely voluntary act of commitment.

on that very day The Hebrew here literally means “on this day” (*ba-yom ha-zeh*), as if to suggest that on any day when a Jew accepts the obligations of the Torah, it is as if he or she were there that day, standing at Sinai and hearing the voice of God. Rashi takes the words to mean that every time a Jew reads the Torah, it should be as if for the first time. Heschel distinguishes between the giving of the Torah (*mattan Torah*), which was a one-time event in the Sinai wilderness, and the acceptance of the Torah as an authoritative voice in our lives, which can take place at any time. When a person of non-Jewish origin joins the Jewish people and accepts the Torah, it is as if he or she personally had been standing at Sinai.

2. wilderness According to rabbinic tradition, the Torah was given in the wilderness because it is free of distractions that might tempt the newly freed slaves, and to emphasize that

The LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: ⁴‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. ⁵Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, ⁶but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

הַאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה מִן־הַהָר
לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל: ⁴ אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי
לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל־כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים
וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי: ⁵ וְעַתָּה אִם־שָׁמוּעַ
תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקִלִּי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי
וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי
כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: ⁶ וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיוּ־לִי מַמְלַכַת
כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר
חֲמִישִׁי תִדְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

enter into a unique relationship with God, which imposes obligations and responsibilities.

4. on eagles’ wings The image projects both God’s power and love (see Deut. 32:10–11). The king of the birds, the eagle, impressed the biblical writers with the prodigious expanse of its outstretched wings, its way of protectively carrying its young on its back, and its ability to soar to great heights at considerable speed and to fly long distances.

to Me That I should be your God (Rashbam).

5. My covenant This is the first mention of the Covenant in the Exodus narrative. The stipulations are soon to be set forth.

My treasured possession The Hebrew word *s’gullah* originally denoted valued property to which one has exclusive right of possession. The biblical description of Israel as God’s *s’gullah* or *am s’gullah* (“treasured people,” Deut. 7:6, 14:2,

26:18–19), expresses God’s special covenantal relationship with the Israelites and His love for them as His people. Here it is stated conditionally; in Deuteronomy it is presented as an established fact.

6. This statement further defines the implications of being God’s “treasured people.” National sovereignty, here expressed by “kingdom,” is indispensable for the proper fulfillment of Israel’s mission. Without it, the nation becomes the passive tool of historical forces beyond its control. At the same time, the priest’s place and function within society must serve as the ideal model for Israel’s self-understanding of its role among the nations. The priest is set apart by a distinctive way of life consecrated to the service of God and dedicated to ministering to the needs of the people. Striving for holiness as a people is to be the hallmark of Israel’s existence.

the Torah is accessible to all who would claim it and live by it. Might it be that the noises of modern life make it hard for us to hear the divine message that God is constantly trying to communicate to us?

Israel encamped there Until now, all the verbs referring to Israel have been plural: “they journeyed,” “they entered.” Here, for the first time, the Hebrew verb for “encamped” is singular, suggesting that only when they transcended their differences and quarrels to become one people were they fit to receive the Torah (Rashi).

3. house of Jacob The Midrash interprets this as referring to wives, traditionally the keepers of the home. They, more than their husbands, will determine whether the spirit of Sinai fills their home (Exod. R. 28:2).

4. on eagles’ wings God supports and sus-

tains people who are too weak or weary to carry on by themselves. When the isolated Jews of Yemen, most of whom had never seen an airplane, were flown to the modern state of Israel, many of them understood the airplane flight to be a fulfillment of this verse.

5–6. Indeed all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation God, as Creator of the world, cares for all people. Israel has no monopoly on God. Israel, however, does have a special relationship to God. This is true not only when the rest of the world is pagan but will also be true in the future, even after all the nations will have turned to God. The notion that the people Israel have been chosen is not a claim of superiority. The Bible never hesitates to chronicle and condemn the Israelites’ shortcomings and God’s disappointment with them. To speak of

⁷Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸All the people answered as one, saying, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the people’s words to the LORD. ⁹And the LORD said to Moses, “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.” Then Moses reported the people’s words to the LORD, ¹⁰and the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomor-

חמישי ⁷ וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמַע לְפָנֵיהֶם אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ יְהוָה: ⁸ וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל-הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֶל-יְהוָה: ⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אֲנִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַבֹּת הָעֲנָן בְּעֲבֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדִבְרֵי עֲמֹךָ וְגַם-בְּךָ יֵאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם וַיַּגֵּד מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הָעָם אֶל-יְהוָה: ¹⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל-הָעָם וְקִדְּשָׁתָם הַיּוֹם

THE POPULAR RESPONSE (vv. 7–8)

Moses conveys the divine message through the agency of the elders (See Comment to 3:16).

8. we will do The first of three affirmations of Israel’s acceptance of the Covenant, this phrase is repeated at Exod. 24:3 and again with the climactic “we will faithfully do” at Exod. 24:7.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE THEOPHANY (vv. 9–25)

The preparations for the theophany (the appearance of God), which begin at once, include authentication of the role of Moses; purification—involving sexual abstinence and, most likely,

bathing and laundering of clothes—and repeated warnings against encroachment on the sacred domain of the mountain. The divine revelation is presented in a way that dramatizes the overwhelming confusion the event must have produced in the minds of those present.

9. This passage may well allude to the declaration in 3:12 that the Sinai experience will be the ultimate validation of Moses’ leadership.

a thick cloud See Comment to 13:21–22.

Then Moses reported This phrase refers not to what immediately precedes it but to the quote in verse 8.

10. to stay pure This is defined in verse 15. It most likely includes bathing, which is taken for granted.

Israel as God’s Chosen People is a historical truth (it is through Israel that the Bible and the notion of ethical monotheism came into the world) and an assertion of divine power to select any people as the bearers of that revelation. An additional dimension in the notion of chosenness is that God’s Torah belongs to an entire people, not only to professional clergy or an intellectual elite.

8. One tradition describes God as compelled to lift the mountain over their heads, threatening to crush them with it unless they accept the Torah (BT Shab. 88a). Another rabbinic tradition has Israel responding enthusiastically to God’s demands. It sees the event as a wedding, with the uplifted mountain serving as the marriage canopy (*huppah*). Yet another pictures God offering the Torah to the other nations (to forestall any charges of favoritism toward Israel), only to have them reject it when

they learn of its demands. Only Israel is prepared to accept it. The divergence of traditional views may reflect an ambivalence toward the Torah’s demands or the reality of their experiences later in history. The varying *midrashim* may reflect the truth that the *mitzvot* are both a joy and a burden. The prophets Hosea and Jeremiah look back on the wilderness years as a honeymoon period, the golden age when Israel was close to God and trusted God. The Torah’s own account in subsequent chapters shows Israel as repeatedly rebellious and complaining.

10. warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow It is easy to be pure while standing at Sinai. Will the people be able to maintain that sense of purity tomorrow, when they return to the challenge of living in the world? An ancient rabbi taught: Not only literally tomorrow but in the distant future, Israel will be purified by this encounter with God.

row. Let them wash their clothes. ¹¹Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. ¹²You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, ‘Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death: ¹³no hand shall touch him, but he shall be either stoned or shot; beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.”

¹⁴Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman.”

¹⁶On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud

וּמַחֵר וְכַבֵּסוּ שְׂמַלְתֵּם: ¹¹וְהָיוּ נְכֻנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי אֶל בְּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד יְהוָה לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם עַל־הַר סִינַי: ¹²וְהִגַּבְלֹתָ אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לֵאמֹר הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עַל־וֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקַצְהוּ כָל־הַנֶּגַע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת: ¹³לֹא־תִגַּע בּוֹ יָד כִּי־יִסְקוּל יִסְקַל אוֹ־יִרְה יִרְה אִם־בְּהֵמָה אִם־אִישׁ לֹא יַחִיָּה בְּמִשְׁחָו הַיָּבֵל הַמָּה יַעֲלוּ בְּהָר:

¹⁴וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה מִן־הָהָר אֶל־הָעָם וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֶת־הָעָם וַיְכַבֵּסוּ שְׂמַלְתֵּם: ¹⁵וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָעָם הָיוּ נְכֻנִים לְשִׁלְשֶׁת יָמִים אַל־תִּגְשׁוּ אֶל־אִשָּׁה:

¹⁶וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּהֵיטֵל הַבְּקָר וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל־הָהָר

11. third day In biblical consciousness, a three-day period has special significance. As with Abraham at the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:4), three days of preparation and self-restraint allow time for sober reflection, so that acceptance of the Covenant can be considered an unqualified act of free will. According to Jewish tradition, the third day fell on the sixth of *Sivan* and is identified with the harvest festival of *Shavuot*, which consequently came to commemorate the giving of the Torah (see Rashi).

will come down This fairly frequent figurative depiction of God’s action in terms of human motion expresses at one and the same time God’s infinite transcendence and personal, intimate involvement with humanity.

12. shall be put to death By human agency, as verse 13 makes clear.

13. no hand shall touch him The trespasser, who has intruded on sacred domain, shall not be seized, because this itself would bring another per-

son to violate the restriction. He shall be executed when he is beyond the limits of the mountain.

ram’s horn The Hebrew word *yovel* seems originally to have meant a sheep or a ram, as in Josh. 6:4,5. The word came to be restricted to the horn. *Yovel* lies behind the word “jubilee,” which was inaugurated by a sounding of the ram’s horn (Lev. 25:9).

they may go up Sinai possesses no inherent or “natural” holiness, nor does it acquire such by virtue of the theophany. Its sanctity and hence un-touchability do not outlast the limited duration of the event.

15. do not go near a woman This refers to sexual contact, which would render men ritually unfit for an encounter with God. It is here implied, although not spelled out, that women were to comport themselves similarly (see Lev. 15:18).

16–19. Violent atmospheric disturbances are said to precede and accompany the theophany. The Bible frequently portrays upheavals of

15. do not go near a woman According to God’s instructions, all the people, women as well as men, were to be present for the revelation at Sinai. Moses confuses that invitation by adding this prohibition; here, as in the incident of striking the rock at Meribah (Num. 20), he

takes liberties in transmitting God’s word. We might learn from this verse that, despite Judaism’s emphasis on family and congregation as settings for fashioning holiness, sometimes we need distance from others, even from those with whom we are most intimate, to find God.

upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. ¹⁹The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. ²⁰The LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. ²¹The LORD said to Moses, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. ²²The priests also, who come near the LORD, must stay pure, lest the

וְקַל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרְד בְּלִי-הָעַם
אֲשֶׁר בְּמַחֲנֵה: ¹⁷ וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעַם
לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְבוּ
בְּתַחְתֵּית הָהָר:

¹⁸ וַהֲרַ סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו
יְהוָה בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עָשָׁנוּ בְּעֵשָׂן הַכִּבְשָׁן
וַיִּחַרְד כָּל-הָהָר מְאֹד: ¹⁹ וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר
הוֹלֵךְ וְחֲזָק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים
שָׁמַי יַעֲנֵנוּ בְּקוֹל: ²⁰ וַיֵּרַד יְהוָה עַל-הָרַ סִינַי
אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-
רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה: ²¹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה
אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רַד הָעַד בְּעַם פְּנֵי-יְהִרְסוּ אֶל-
יְהוָה לְרֵאוֹת וּנְפַל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב: ²² וְגַם
הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנִּגְשִׁים אֶל-יְהוָה יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ פָּנֶי-

nature in association with the self-manifestation of God. Apart from the present context, however, such imagery is always confined to poetic or prophetic texts. Here, the vivid, majestic, and terrifying depiction that draws its inspiration from natural phenomena, such as the storm, volcano, and earthquake, is meant to convey the awe-inspiring effect of the event on those who experienced it. The Elijah story in 1 Kings (19:12) emphasizes, however, that God manifests Himself in a “still, small voice,” not in lightning and thunder.

17. toward God Toward the site of the theophany.

foot of the mountain The lowest part, on the level ground.

19. horn Hebrew for “horn” here is *shofar*, not *yovel* as in verse 13. The blasts of thunder are imagined as a celestial fanfare, heralding the arrival of the King.

20. Moses He alone is privileged to ascend to the top.

22. priests According to chapters 28 and 29, the priesthood was not established among the Israelites until after the Sinaitic revelation, which would make this, like their mention in verse 24, an anachronism. Many modern scholars believe that these verses reflect a different strand of tradition about the origins of the priestly institution. Jewish commentators have understood “priests” here as referring to firstborn males, who functioned as priests until they were replaced by the

17. out of the camp toward God At times we must leave the familiar places and habits with which we have grown comfortable, as Abraham did at the beginning of Israelite history, to grow to be the people we are capable of becoming.

19. blare of the horn grew louder Ordinarily, sounds grow more faint with time. The words spoken at Sinai, however, echo as loudly today as when they were spoken more than 3000 years ago.

21. lest many of them perish The Israelites, who had seen God smite the Egyptians

with 10 plagues and again at the sea, had learned to see God as an awesome, terrifying power. Here, and elsewhere in the Torah, we read about the danger of approaching God carelessly. (See Exod. 20:16, the warning to the priests in Exod. 28:35, and the account of the death of Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 10:2.) If we today are less inclined to see God as dangerous or to see sudden deaths as “acts of God,” punishments for violating the sanctity of God’s precincts, do we lose some sense of God’s awesome holiness in the process?

LORD break out against them.”²³ But Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.’”²⁴ So the LORD said to him, “Go down, and come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest He break out against them.”²⁵ And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

יִפְרֹץ בָּהֶם יְהוָה: ²³ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-
יְהוָה לֹא-יִוָּכַל הָעָם לָעֲלֹת אֶל-הַר סִינַי
כִּי-אַתָּה הִעַדְתָּה בְּנוֹ לֵאמֹר הַגְבִּיל אֶת-
הַהָר וְקִדְשָׁתוֹ: ²⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה לְךָ-
רֵד וְעֲלִיתָ אִתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּךְ וְהַכֹּהֲנִים
וְהָעָם אֶל-יְהִרְסוּ לָעֲלֹת אֶל-יְהוָה פֶּן-
יִפְרֹץ-בָּם: ²⁵ וַיֵּרֵד מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲלֵהֶם: ס

20 God spoke all these words, saying:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה לְאֹמֶר: ס

family of Aaron, as recounted in Num. 3:12 and 8:16–18.

break out The verb, with God as the subject, connotes a visitation that is sudden, violent, and destructive, indicating the extreme care with which God’s holiness must be approached even by the priests who serve Him.

THE DECALOGUE (20:1–14)

The title: The present passage carries no designation for this document. The popular English title “The Ten Commandments” is derived from the traditional, although inaccurate, English rendering of the Hebrew phrase “*aseret ha-d’varim*,” which appears in Exod. 34:28 and Deut. 4:13 and 10:4. In fact, the term “commandment” (*mitz-*

vah, pl. *mitzvot*) is not employed in the present context. The Hebrew, which means “The Ten Words/Statements/Pronouncements,” was translated literally into Greek by the Jews of ancient Alexandria in Egypt as *deka logoi*. This gave rise to the more accurate English alternative “Decalogue.” In Rabbinic texts, and generally in Hebrew down to modern times, the common designation is *aseret ha-dibrot*.

The tablets of stone: Several biblical passages (including Exod. 24:12; 32:15) testify to the inscribing of the Decalogue on two stone tablets. The practice of recording covenants on tablets was well rooted in the biblical world, as was the custom of depositing the document in a sanctuary (referred to as “Ark” in Exod. 25:16). Why two tablets were needed for the Decalogue is unclear; nor

24. Go down, and come back The path to God is rarely a steady climb upward. We climb, we fall back, and we climb higher again.

25. Moses went down to the people He went down to be included with them in accepting the Torah (*Kol Dodi*).

CHAPTER 20

1–14. What is unique about the Decalogue? Other ancient societies had laws against murder, theft, and adultery, but they invariably were phrased as conditional: “if . . . then.” If someone murders another, this is the punishment. The statements in the Decalogue were unique in being phrased as absolutes: “You shall not.” These things are not only illegal; they are wrong. They not only disrupt society; they violate universal principles. Fur-

thermore, the Decalogue enshrines a fundamental principle of Judaism: How we treat one another is of concern to God.

What did the Israelites actually hear at Sinai? Some say they heard God proclaim all 10 of the utterances. Others say that God spoke only the first 2, declared in the divine “I,” and that Moses added the remaining 8 in which God is referred to in the third person. One Hasidic master taught that the Israelites heard only the first letter of the first word (the *alef* in *anokhi*, which is a silent letter) and intuitively understood the rest (Menaḥem Mendel of Rymanov). That is, having encountered God in such a real and direct way, they understood the rightness and wrongness of certain modes of behavior without the need for words to be spoken. What God said is clear, how God com-

2I the LORD am your God who brought you אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ*2

נדפס בטעם תחתון בלבד והוא למערבאי, והפסוקים ממוספרים לפי מהדורת לעטעריס. נדפס בטעם עליון בסוף התורה vv. 2-16.

do we know the arrangement of the text on the tablets. The most common understanding of the Sages assumes that five declarations were incised on each tablet (as attested by Philo and later *midrashim*). In the Jerusalem Talmud there is a tradition, given as the majority view, that each tablet contained the entire Decalogue. Saadia, among others, maintained that the two tablets featured the variant versions found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, respectively.

The internal division: Context, style, and language suggest a basic division of the Decalogue into two distinct groups of commandments. The first group governs relations between God and the individual Israelite; the second regulates human relationships. The first group is characterized by the fivefold use of the phrase “the LORD your God”; the second contains no reference to God. The first group features obligations unique to the religion of Israel. The second group, consisting entirely of prohibitions, is of universal application with numerous parallels in other literature of the ancient world. Only in Israel, however, are these injunctions presented as divine in origin. It is striking that the document opens with “the LORD your God” and closes with “your neighbor.”

Tradition provides two versions of the Decalogue’s cantillation and verse division. (Thus the

verses from 13 on are numbered differently in various editions of the Bible.) The version known as the “lower notes” is presented here; for the “upper notes,” which are used in many synagogues on certain occasions, see p. 1509.

1. This introductory statement is unique in the Torah, for it does not indicate to whom the divine declaration is addressed—the individual Israelite or the entire community. On the one hand, it is “all the people” as a corporate entity who enter into the covenantal relationship with God. On the other hand, it is each individual as a member of the community who is addressed, as shown by the consistent use in Hebrew of the second person singular.

2. I the LORD am your God This type of royal formula occurs in “the historical prologue” of the ancient Near Eastern treaty form (see Comment to 3:6). Here it not only identifies the unimpeachable sovereign authority behind the ensuing pronouncements but emphasizes that the demands of the Decalogue have their source and sanction in the divine will, not in human wisdom. Hence they remain eternally valid and unaffected by temporal considerations. This is regarded as the first of the 10 divine pronouncements by most Jewish commentators, in contrast to the Christian perspective, which sees it exclusively as an introductory verse. See Comment to Deut. 5:6.

municated it to human beings remains a mystery. Many of us have had the experience of meeting someone in whose presence we found ourselves incapable of lying or gossiping, or someone whose very presence conveyed a message of compassion or courage. Perhaps coming into the presence of God at Sinai was an intensified experience of that sort. What God said will be the content of the rest of the Torah and generations of commentaries; that God communicated the divine will to human beings is a foundation stone of Judaism. Rosenzweig suggests that the single word actually spoken by God was the first word—*anokhi* (“I am”). From God’s affirmation of existence and presence, all else flowed.

2. I the LORD am your God The Hebrew for “your” here is singular, for God is revealed to each of us according to our own capacity to respond: “your own God” (PdRK 12). It also

teaches that at Sinai each Israelite felt personally addressed by God (Tanh. B. Yitro 17).

Is this a commandment to believe in God? Maimonides holds that it is: “The first *mitzvah* is that [we] believe in God’s existence, that there is a cause and motive force behind all that exists” (*Seifer Ha-Mitzvot* 1). Others disagree. Abravanel takes this first utterance as “a preface to subsequent injunctions, a declaration making known to the Israelites who was addressing them.” Hasdai Crescas insists that a commandment can apply only to matters of free will and free choice; matters of belief cannot be commanded. The rabbis of the Talmud see this as a summons to Israel to “accept the yoke of God’s sovereignty,” to recognize God as the Supreme Authority. Only when they have done that can God give them laws and decrees. We re-enact this acceptance in the daily recitation of the *Sh’ma*.

out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

³You shall have no other gods besides Me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the

מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים *לֹא-יְהִיֶּה
 לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי;
 לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר
 בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת
 וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: ⁵לֹא-
 תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי
 אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קָנָא פֹקֵד עֵוֹן

v. 3. למערבאי לא נחשב פסוק נפרד

3–6. Rabbinic tradition generally treats these verses as a single unit.

You shall have no other gods besides Me The God of Israel demands uncompromising and exclusive loyalty, because He has redeemed them to serve Him.

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image Later thinkers took this revolutionary Israelite concept to mean that God is wholly separate from the world of His creation and wholly other than what the human mind can conceive

or the human imagination depict. Therefore, any material representation of divinity is forbidden. This does not prohibit artistic representation, only the use of images for worship.

an impassioned God The Hebrew word *kanna* is rendered here in its primitive sense, as “impassioned,” referring to a zealous God emotionally involved in human affairs, who holds people accountable for their acts, capable of anger as well as compassion. The traditional translation, “a jealous God,” understands the marriage bond

God is here proclaimed not as the God of Creation who made the world, but as the God of history who directed the Exodus. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, Creation was an abstract principle; the Exodus was the event that shaped their lives. Isaak Heinemann paraphrases the poet-philosopher Judah ha-Levi: “God as First Cause is a God reached by intellectual speculation, a God of metaphysics. But a God who acts in history, a God who frees the enslaved, is a God for whom the soul yearns.” “Judaism is an elaborate way of relating to God as the Source of all existence and the provider of ultimate meaning. Nothing could be more fatuous than the all-too-common notion that observance is possible without faith. Hence the Decalogue begins with an affirmation of God’s reality” (Schorsch).

out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage For some, Egypt was the house of culture, science, and mathematics. For God and God’s people, however, it was the house of bondage. Cultural and scientific accomplishments cannot make up for a nation’s treating some of its people as less than human. “If freedom and culture cannot coexist, we should bid farewell to culture for the sake of freedom” (B. Jacob).

3. *You shall have no other gods besides Me* Some take the words translated as “be-

sides Me” (*al panai*) to mean “in addition to” not only “in place of.” It is forbidden to worship idols along with God. Arama takes this passage not as a prohibition but as a promise: As long as you have Me, you will not need any others.

4. *You shall not make for yourself* God is not merely invisible, i.e., possessing a shape that we cannot see. God has no physical form. It is only our limited human imagination that drives us to think of God as a heavenly being with bodily parts. To picture God is to limit God: male not female, old not young, of one specific race and skin color. Heschel suggests that we may not make an image of God because we ourselves bear the divine image in this world. We alone are God’s agents, not any idol we might fashion. A homiletic interpretation of the same words comes to a contrasting conclusion: “You shall not make yourself into an idol, and come to believe that you are God.”

5. *visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children* Children do benefit from, and suffer from, the choices of their parents when it comes to health, wealth, educational opportunities, and the fate of being born in a peaceful rather than in a war-torn land. Children are shaped by habits learned in their families of origin as to how they handle stress, quarrels, eat-

parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, ⁶but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

⁷You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

to be the implied metaphor for the covenant between God and the people Israel. God demands exclusive loyalty from His people. According to this interpretation, His reaction to their infidelity is expressed in terms of human jealousy. Whether one renders *kanna* as “jealous” or “impassioned,” the term emphasizes that God is not indifferent to His creatures. God’s anger or wrath usually is directed to those who flout His will, but at times it blazes forth against those who infringe on His holy domain. Most often, it serves to punish those who violate the moral world order or their covenantal responsibilities.

visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children Society is collectively responsible for its actions, and the individual is accountable for behavior that affects the life of the community. Conduct inevitably has an effect on succeeding generations. The doctrine that God visits the guilt of the parents on later generations was later modified by Jeremiah (31:29–30): “They shall no longer say, ‘Parents have eaten sour grapes and children’s teeth are blunted.’ But every one shall die for his own sins: whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted.” His contemporary

אָבֹת עַל-בְּנֵיָם עַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים
לְשָׁנָאֵי: ⁶וְעִשָּׂה חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים לְאַהֲבֵי
וּלְשִׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי: ^ס
⁷לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׂוֹא
כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׂא אֶת-
שְׁמוֹ לְשׂוֹא: ^פ

Ezekiel (18:2ff.) also felt compelled to deny cross-generational punishment. It is important to note that the statement concerning extension of punishment to later generations (see also Exod. 34:7) was never the concern of administering justice in Israel’s legal system. Vicarious punishment is outlawed explicitly in Deut. 24:16.

who reject Me This phrase may modify “parents” or “children” or both.

thousandth generation God’s boundless beneficence and the limited extent of punishment were emphasized by the Sages.

⁷ The Third Commandment deals with abuse of the divine name.

swear Literally, “lift up” (on your lips), “to utter” the divine name.

falsely Hebrew: *la-shav*, which can mean this as well as “for nothing, in vain.” The ambiguity broadens the prohibition and allows for the prescription of both perjury (by the principals in a lawsuit, swearing falsely) and unnecessary or frivolous use of the divine name.

will not clear God will not allow the deed to go unpunished even though it may go undetected or not be actionable in a human court of law.

ing, and drinking. The Talmud interprets this verse to suggest that children who know that their parents are doing wrong but nonetheless choose to follow their example are held responsible for that choice (BT Ber. 7a). A modern writer understands the Hebrew verb *poked* (“visiting”) as in Gen. 21:1 (“to take note”), reading the verse as “God takes note of the sins that parents inflict on their children”—and deals leniently with the children.

7. You shall not swear falsely You shall not resort to using God’s name to make your lies more plausible. “If one does not keep one’s word, that is tantamount to repudiating the name of God” (Ibn Ezra). It is especially important for a religiously committed Jew not to bring God’s name into disrepute by false dealings. Some scholars interpret this verse to prohibit linking God’s name to anything false, such as sorcery or fortune-telling.

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

20:7. swear falsely The tradition demands that we neither swear falsely in court nor use God’s name in vain. We, therefore, refrain from using the traditional names for God in secular writings or conversation, much less in voicing profanities. However, the English word “God” is not God’s name or an English translation of it, but rather a description of God’s role in our lives, as in the traditional formula for blessings, “Praised are you, LORD [God’s name], our God, Sovereign of the universe.” The CJLS has, therefore, ruled that Jews need not hyphenate the word “God.”

⁸Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.

⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

זָכוֹר אֶת-יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: ⁹שֵׁשֶׁת
יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתֶּךָ: ¹⁰יּוֹם

8. The Fourth Commandment establishes *Shabbat* as a fixed weekly institution. With the Creation as its rationale (verse 11, reiterated in Exod. 31:13–17), the seventh day of each week is invested with special blessing and holiness. It is an integral part of the divinely ordained cosmic order and exists independent of human effort. For this reason it is described (verse 10) as “a sabbath of the LORD your God.” There is nothing analogous to the Israelite *Shabbat* in the entire ancient Near Eastern world, where seven-day units of time were well known. *Shabbat* is the sole exception to the otherwise universal practice of basing all the major units of time—months and seasons as well as years—on the phases of

the moon and the solar cycle. *Shabbat*, in other words, is completely dissociated from the movement of celestial bodies. This singularity, together with Creation as the basis for the institution, expresses the quintessential idea of Israel’s monotheism: God is entirely outside of and sovereign over nature.

Remember Hebrew: *zakhor*. See Comment to 2:24. The narrative about the manna (Exod. 16:5,22–30) presupposes the existence of *Shabbat* as an institution before the Sinaitic revelation.

keep it holy Its intrinsic sacred character derives from God. Texts like Hos. 2:13 and Isa. 58:13–14 show that already in biblical times *Shabbat* was a day of rejoicing and delight.

8. Remember the sabbath day The commandment here calls on us to “remember” *Shabbat* in imitating God’s rest; God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. The wording of this commandment in Deut. 5:12 tells us to “keep” *Shabbat* as a weekly celebration of the fact that we are not slaves (Deut. 5:15); only free people own their own time and can choose to stop laboring. According to a *midrash* recalled in the Friday-night hymn “*L’kha Dodi*,” God at Sinai did what no human being can do: utter two distinct words (“remember” and “keep”) at the same time. “Remember” is seen as a positive command to do things that make *Shabbat* special. “Keep” is a negative command to refrain from work and other activities that mar *Shabbat*. Israel of Modzhitz spoke of two modes of *Shabbat* observance: being and doing. The first is passive (not working, not making physical changes in the world). The second is active (praying, studying, spending time with family). One of the Sages strove each day of the week to fulfill the command to remember *Shabbat*; whenever he would find a particularly fine object or special food, he would put it aside for *Shabbat* (BT Betz. 16a). Those whose circumstances make it impossible to keep *Shabbat* as

they would like to, should at least find ways to remind themselves that it is *Shabbat*.

9. Six days you shall labor Certain activity is as much a religious duty as resting on *Shabbat*. We are enjoined to labor over this world, to change it and to improve it. Idleness is a waste of the talents with which God has blessed us. Work, however, too often leads to economic competitiveness in which we see other people as rivals, obstacles to our success. *Shabbat* comes as a truce in those economic struggles. The rabbis of the talmudic period formulated rules governing *Shabbat* in systematic fashion. They were guided by the close proximity in the Torah of the prohibition of work on *Shabbat* and the instructions for building the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–17, 35:1ff.). Acts that were essential in constructing the tabernacle are termed “principal” categories (*avot*); 39 such acts forbidden on *Shabbat* are listed in M Shab. 7:2. Other subcategories, analogous but not essential in constructing the tabernacle, are called “derivatives” (*toladot*). Elsewhere in the Bible, certain types of work are specified as off limits: “leaving one’s place” (walking beyond a certain distance), agricultural activities, kindling fire, gathering wood, conducting business, carrying burdens, tread-

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

20:8. Remember The Sages deduce from this verse the requirement to say *Kiddush* both Friday evening and during the day on Saturday as a way of marking and thus remembering the *Shabbat* (BT Pes. 106a). Maimonides (MT *Shabbat* 29:1) links it also to *Havdalah*, to end *Shabbat* and thereby distinguish it from the rest of the week (see Lev. 23:3; and especially Deut. 5:12). The Sages also deduce from this verse that rather than calling each day of the week by its own independent name, we should refer to each day by its number in the week before *Shabbat*—i.e., Sunday is the first day in [the week before] *Shabbat*, Monday the second day, and so on—so that the very names of the days remind us of *Shabbat* (Mekh.).

¹⁰but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, that

10. work The definition of prohibited labor (*m'lakhah*), which limits the commandment explicitly to Creation (Gen. 2:2), is not given here.

you . . . the stranger By proscribing work and creativity on the seventh day, and by ordering that nature be kept inviolate one day a week, the Torah places a limit on human autonomy and restores nature to its original state of pure freedom. Human liberty is immeasurably enhanced, human equality is strengthened, and the cause of social justice is promoted by legislating the inalienable right of every human being, irrespective of social class, and of draft animals as well, to 24 hours of complete rest every seven days. Appropriately, the list in this verse enumerates seven categories of God's creatures who benefit from rest on the seventh day. The "you" of the commandment includes both husbands and wives.

12. The Fifth Commandment forms a tran-

הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבַּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה
כָּל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה | וּבִנְךָ-וּבִתֶּךָ עַבְדְּךָ
וְאִמָּתְךָ וּבַהֲמֹתֶךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ:
כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-
אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ
יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ: ח
כַּבֵּד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְּךָ לְמַעַן

sition from the first to the second group of divine declarations, because it incorporates both religious and social dimensions. It shares with the preceding commandment the formula "the LORD your God." Also, the relationship of the people Israel to God is often expressed metaphorically in filial terms, and the same verbs of "honoring" and "revering" are used to express proper human attitudes to both God and parents. In fact, the Torah explicitly requires "respect" only in relation to God and parents. An offender in either instance is liable to the extreme penalty. The parallels point out the importance the Torah assigns to the integrity of the family, which can help ensure the stability of society as well as generational continuity.

father . . . mother The command, directed equally to son and daughter irrespective of age, holds for both parents.

ing the winepress, and loading asses. All *Shabbat* prohibitions are suspended when human life is at risk. In such a situation it is a religious duty to violate them to save a life (*pikku-ah nefesh*). This principle is grounded in Lev. 18:5: "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD."

and do all your work What if we cannot finish all our work by sundown on Friday? Then we should keep *Shabbat* as if we had completed it. Do not mar *Shabbat* by worrying about unfinished business (Rashi).

12. Honor your father and your mother

Honoring parents is a way of honoring God, the ultimate source of all life and care. Lev. 19:3 reverses the order in commanding us to fear (i.e., revere) our parents, listing the mother first. The Talmud suggests that the Torah is seeking to balance the natural impulse to honor one's mother and fear one's father (BT Kid. 30b). Some societies and religious movements teach that people can be truly themselves only if they reject their parents. In Judaism, to reject one's parents is to reject all of one's ancestors and pretend that one has no past. It verges on rejecting the ultimate parent, God, from whom all life flows. Thus, although

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

20:10. your son or daughter See Comment on 23:12.

20:12. Honor your father and your mother Honoring parents includes arranging necessary physical and financial assistance (BT Kid. 31a–b). Children are not required or permitted to violate Jewish law to conform to parental wishes (BT Yev. 5b), but children should always balance their Jewish commitments to other *mitzvot* with honor and respect for their parents. See also Comments on Lev. 19:3; Deut. 21:18–21.

you may long endure on the land that the LORD
your God is assigning to you.

¹³You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

יִאֲרְכֹן יְמֵיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ: ס
לֹא תִרְצַח ס
לֹא תִנְאֻף ס

v. 13. למערבאי פסקא באמצע פסוק שלוש פעמים

long endure Respect for parents is regarded as vital for preservation of the social fabric. Dishonoring parents imperils the well-being of society and survival of the people Israel in the Land.

13. You shall not murder The stem of the word translated as “murder” (רצח) applies only to illegal killing. Unlike other verbs for the taking of life, it is never used in the administration of justice or for killing in war. The rationale for this prohibition is found in Gen. 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, / By man shall his blood be shed; / For in His image / Did God make man.” In practice, at least in Second Temple times, im-

position of the death penalty was a rare occurrence.

You shall not commit adultery The definition of adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between a married or engaged woman and a man who is not her lawful husband. Because adultery is treated as both a public wrong and an offense against God, a husband has no legal power to pardon his faithless wife or her paramour. The gravity of adultery in Israelite law may be gauged both by its place in the Decalogue—between murder and theft—and by the extreme severity of the penalty.

a convert to Judaism is technically considered a new person with no past (lest he or she be embarrassed by past years of idol worship or unseemly behavior), most authorities would direct the convert to continue to honor his or her parents.

long endure Perhaps the intention here is that we will be able to look forward to a long life and not dread growing old, because we will have fashioned a society in which the elderly are honored and respected. The commandment is not addressed to children, telling them to heed their parents, but to adults, enjoining them to continue to honor their elderly parents even when there is no biologic need to. The Sages interpret this verse not to command feelings of affection but to command behavior. We are obliged to support and maintain our parents and to avoid shaming them. “Now that I have commanded you to acknowledge that I am the Creator of all, and to honor parents because they have joined Me in an act of creating life, guard against destroying the work of My hands in acts of murder” (Maimonides). Four things

above all must be protected so that the community may stand firm: life, marriage, property and social honor (Buber).

13. You shall not murder The Hebrew text does not state “you shall not kill” (*lo taharog*) but “you shall not murder” (*lo tirtzah*). The Sages understand “bloodshed” to include embarrassing a fellow human being in public so that the blood drains from his or her face, not providing safety for travelers, and causing anyone the loss of his or her livelihood. “One may murder with the hand or with the tongue, by talebearing or by character assassination. One may murder also by carelessness, by indifference, by the failure to save human life when it is in your power to do so” (Ibn Ezra).

You shall not commit adultery For the Torah, marriage is not only a private sexual or economic arrangement between two individuals. It is a holy covenant (*kiddushin*). Buber taught that “God is found in relationships.” God is present when two people pledge themselves to each other; God is present in a home sustained by marital love. The Midrash suggests that

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

20:13. adultery Until a man gives a Jewish writ of divorce (a *get*) to his wife, Jewish law considers both of them to be married, even if they are divorced under civil law. Although the Torah allowed polygamy, Rabbeinu Gershom (ca. 1000 C.E.) forbade it. We view marriage today as a monogamous relationship built on mutual trust, and so sex outside the marriage by either partner is forbidden by Jewish law and/or by Jewish moral norms. See Comment on Deut. 22:28–29.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁴You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

You shall not steal The precise application of this Eighth Commandment is complicated by the obvious lack of specifics. The Hebrew verb **גנב** may cover theft of property as well as kidnaping (Rashbam).

You shall not bear false witness This is not the same as “swearing falsely” in verse 7, for witnesses did not always testify under oath in ancient

Israel. The prohibition here refers to judicial proceedings.

14. You shall not covet The meaning of this commandment has been a matter of dispute. Does it refer to a private mental state or only to acts directed toward acquiring the coveted object?

house The Hebrew word *bayit* here, as frequently elsewhere, means “household.”

לֹא תִגְנוֹב ס
 לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בְרַעַף עַד שֶׁקֶר: ס
 לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רַעֲךָ לֹא־תַחְמֹד אִשְׁתְּ
 רַעֲךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׂוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכָל
 שְׂבִיעֵי אֲשֶׁר לְרַעֲךָ: פ

God's presence is diminished by infidelity, implying perhaps that the spiritual integrity of a marital relationship is diluted when a third party intrudes (Lev. R. 23:12, end). Hosea, a prophet of the 8th century B.C.E., described God's relationship to the people Israel in terms of a marriage bond, comparing God's pain over Israel's chasing after false gods to the sense of betrayal felt by a human being confronting the infidelity of his or her partner.

You shall not steal Rashi and other commentators understand this commandment to refer to kidnaping, stealing a person. They understand the last prohibition of the Decalogue to refer to stealing property. Later rabbinic interpretations clarify the notion of theft to include borrowing an object without permission, even with the intention of returning it, and keeping a lost object when you suspect that, with some effort, you could locate the rightful owner. Does the Torah compare the sanctity of private property to that of marriage or life itself? Perhaps the intent of this commandment is to avoid dividing society into two hostile camps—the very rich and the destitute—which might drive some of the poor to rebel against this economic inequity by striking at the property of others. In such a social order no one, however wealthy or prominent, would feel secure.

You shall not bear false witness Alshekh interprets this to mean “you shall not testify

falsely on behalf of your neighbor,” even to help an honest person win a case in which he lacks witnesses.

14. You shall not covet Many commentators are troubled by the apparent prohibition of a feeling, when the general pattern of the Torah is to command behavior, not thought. Can we control our feelings or are we responsible only for our actions? Some (e.g., Rashi) resolve the issue by taking the 8th commandment to apply to kidnaping and the 10th to stealing property. The same verb occurs in Exod. 34:24, assuring the Israelites of the security of their homes when they go on pilgrimage at festival time. There, it makes more sense to take it to mean “no one will confiscate your house” while you are away rather than “no one will covet it.” Others (Maimonides) understand this commandment to prohibit action that could be the result of coveting, such as pressuring a person to sell you something you desire. But the majority understand it to apply to covetous thoughts. It may be difficult to control our emotions, but we may never excuse our behavior by claiming that our emotions overcame us so that we could not help doing what we did.

Some see a symmetrical arrangement in the entire passage. The Decalogue begins with an abstract principle concerning thought (“I the LORD am your God”), proceeds to prohibit verbal utterances (swearing falsely) and then focuses on deeds (*Shabbat*; honoring parents; re-

¹⁵All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. ¹⁶“You speak to us,” they said to Moses, “and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.” ¹⁷Moses answered the people, “Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray.” ¹⁸So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

¹⁹The LORD said to Moses:

Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: ²⁰With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. ²¹Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your

שביעי ¹⁵ וְכָל-הָעָם רָאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-
הַלְפִידִם וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הַהָר עָשָׁן
וַיִּרְא הָעָם וַיִּזְעוּ וַיִּנָּעוּ וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ מֵרָחֵק:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר-אַתָּה עִמָּנוּ
וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל-יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן-
נָמוּת: ¹⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם אֱלֹהִים
תִּירְאוּ כִּי לִבְעֹבוֹר נִסּוּת אֶתְכֶם בָּא
הָאֱלֹהִים וּבְעֹבוֹר תִּהְיֶה יִרְאתוֹ עַל-
פְּנֵיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי תַחֲטְאוּ: ¹⁸ וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם
מֵרָחֵק וּמֹשֶׁה נָגַשׁ אֶל-הָעֶרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם
הָאֱלֹהִים: פ

מפטיר ¹⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה

כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם רֵאִיתֶם
כִּי מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם דִּבַּרְתִּי עִמָּכֶם: ²⁰ לֹא
תַעֲשׂוּן אֵתִי אֱלֹהִי כֶסֶף וְאֵלֹהִי זָהָב לֹא
תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם: ²¹ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲדָמָה תַעֲשׂוּ-לִי
וּזְבַחַת עָלָיו אֶת-עֹלֹתֶיךָ וְאֶת-שְׁלַמֶיךָ

THE PEOPLE'S REACTION (vv. 15–16)

15. witnessed The Hebrew verbal stem ראה (literally, “to see”) here encompasses sound. The figurative language serves to indicate the profound awareness among the assembled throng of the overpowering majesty and mystery of God’s self-manifestation. This experience cannot be described adequately by ordinary language applied to the senses.

18. thick cloud Hebrew: *arafel*. The dense,

dark cloud poetically expresses God’s mysteriously perceptible yet unseen Presence.

THE REGULATION OF WORSHIP

(vv. 19–23)

These verses continue the narrative by featuring the instructions that Moses received as he “approached the thick cloud.” They also serve to introduce the laws that follow in *Mishpatim*.

21. altar of earth This is an altar made by heaping up a mound of earth in an open field.

fraining from murder, adultery, and theft) before returning to the improper use of words (bearing false witness) and concluding with abstract thought (coveting). One Hasidic preacher takes this last commandment not as a prohibition but as a promise and reward: if you live by the first 9 commandments, you will have no reason to covet what anyone else possesses (Yeḥiel Michael of Zolochov).

15. All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning The text reads literally, “they saw the thunder . . . and the blare of the horn.” The

experience of Revelation was so uniquely intense and overwhelming that the senses overflowed their normal bounds. People felt that they were seeing sounds and hearing visions.

16. lest we die With the exception of rare individuals, human beings cannot endure direct contact with God. Thus every religion strives to mediate God’s Presence. Through ritual, through study, through the performance of *mitzvot*, and through our encounters with people who embody what God stands for, we are able to “meet” God.

sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. ²²And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them. ²³Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it.

in every place The word for “place” (*makom*) most likely means here “sacred site,” a site rendered sacred by an altar to God, as in Gen. 12:7. This implies approval of numerous altars scattered throughout the land, in contrast with later laws in Deuteronomy that insist that all sacrificial worship take place exclusively in one official national-religious center.

22. This prohibition against hewn masonry is incorporated in Deut. 27:5–6 regarding instructions for the altar to be erected on Mount Ebal, which Joshua later strictly enforced (Josh. 8:30–31). In the construction of Solomon’s Temple, “only finished stones cut at the quarry were used, so that no hammer or axe or any iron tool

אֶת־צֵאֲנֶךָ וְאֶת־בְּקָרְךָ בְּכֹל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
אֶזְכִּיר אֶת־שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ:
וְאִם־מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבַנִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי לֹא־
תִּבְנֶה אֹתוֹן גִּזִּית כִּי חֲרָבְךָ הַנִּפְתָּ עָלֶיךָ
וְתַחֲלָלְתָּ: ²³וְלֹא־תַעֲלֶה בְּמַעֲלֹת עַל־
מִזְבְּחֵי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגָּלֶה עֲרוֹתְךָ עָלָיו: פ

was heard in the House while it was being built” (1 Kings 6:7). Many centuries later, when Judah the Maccabee built a new altar after the liberation of Jerusalem, he was careful to use only uncut stones. Josephus, describing Herod’s Temple, likewise reports that no iron was used in the construction of its altar.

tool Undefined here; Deut. 27:5 and 1 Kings 6:7 specify iron.

23. The instructions here must be directed to a layman at a private altar, because the uniform of the priests included linen breeches that covered their nakedness. This contrasts with many scenes in ancient Near Eastern art that depict priests officiating in the nude.

21. in every place A sense of God’s presence is not limited to Mount Sinai. Wherever we turn our homes, schools, offices, and synagogues into places where God’s name is invoked, God promises to be with us and bless us. The remainder of the Book of Exodus, and

virtually the rest of the Torah, can be seen as a commentary on and expansion of the Sinai experience. An entire people has been addressed by God. Their lives and the lives of their descendants, their every daily moment, will henceforth be shaped by that encounter.

to the LORD,¹⁷ and on the fifteenth day of that month a festival. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days.¹⁸ The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.¹⁹ You shall present a gift, a burnt offering, to the LORD: two bulls of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs—see that they are without blemish.²⁰ The grain offering with them shall be of choice flour with oil mixed in: prepare three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram;²¹ and for each of the seven lambs prepare one-tenth of a measure.²² And there shall be one goat for a purification offering, to make expiation in your behalf.²³ You shall present these in addition to the morning portion of the regular burnt offering.²⁴ You shall offer the like daily for seven days as food, a gift of pleasing odor to the LORD; they shall be offered, with their libations, in addition to the regular burnt offering.²⁵ And the seventh day shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall not work at your occupations.

²⁶On the day of the first fruits, your Feast of Weeks, when you bring an offering of new grain to the LORD, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.²⁷ You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the LORD: two bulls of the herd, one ram, seven yearling lambs.²⁸ The grain offering with them shall be of choice flour with oil mixed

לְחֹדֶשׁ פֶּסַח לַיהוָה: ¹⁷ וּבַחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לְחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה חֵג שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִצֹּת יֹאכְל: ¹⁸ בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ כָּל־מִלֵּאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: ¹⁹ וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אִשָּׁה עֹלָה לַיהוָה פָּרִים בְּנֵי־בָקָר שְׁנַיִם וְאֵיל אֶחָד וּשְׁבַעַה כִּבְשִׁים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה תְּמִימִם יִהְיוּ לָכֶם: ²⁰ וּמִנְחֹתָם סֹלֶת בָּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֵשָׁה עֶשְׂרֹנִים לְפָר וּשְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרֹנִים לְאֵיל תַּעֲשׂוּ: ²¹ עֶשְׂרוֹן עֶשְׂרוֹן תַּעֲשֶׂה לַכֹּפֶשׁ הָאֶחָד לְשִׁבְעַת הַכֹּפְשִׁים: ²² וְשִׁעִיר חֲטָאֵת אֶחָד לְכִפָּר עֲלֵיכֶם: ²³ מִלֵּבֶד עֹלֹת הַבָּקָר אֲשֶׁר לְעֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד תַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת־אֵלֶּה: ²⁴ כָּאֵלֶּה תַּעֲשׂוּ לַיּוֹם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לֶחֶם אִשָּׁה רִיחַ־נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה עַל־עֹלֹת הַתָּמִיד יַעֲשֶׂה וְנִסְבּוּ: ²⁵ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מִלֵּאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: ²⁶ וּבַיּוֹם הַבְּכוּרִים בְּהִקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה בְּשִׁבְעַת־יָמֵיכֶם מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מִלֵּאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: ²⁷ וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עֹלָה לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה פָּרִים בְּנֵי־בָקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵיל אֶחָד וּשְׁבַעַה כִּבְשִׁים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה: ²⁸ וּמִנְחֹתָם סֹלֶת בָּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֵשָׁה עֶשְׂרֹנִים

even though it is a private sacrifice (see Exod. 12:1–11) indicates that by this time the two festivals had become fused.

17. festival Both the paschal sacrifice and the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread are observed at the sanctuary, precisely as instituted by Deut. 16:1–6.

18. occupations Hebrew: *m'lekhet avodah*; literally, “laborious work,” of the sort that is forbidden on the festivals. This is in contrast to “any work” (*kol m'lakhah*), which is forbidden on *Shabbat* and *Yom Kippur* (Num. 29:7; Lev. 23:3,28). The nonlaborious work permitted (by implication) on the festivals is not defined, except for the explicit permission to pre-

pare food on the first and last days of *Pesah* (Exod. 12:16).

FEAST OF WEEKS (vv. 26–31)

This festival, which marks the start of the wheat harvest, does not depend on the lunar calendar. It occurs seven weeks after the beginning of the barley harvest (Lev. 23:15–16). In this regard it is like *Shabbat*, which is also independent of the lunar calendar.

26. day of the first fruits This day is also called “the Feast of the Harvest” (*Hag ha-Katzir*) in Exod. 23:16, and “the Feast of Weeks” (*Hag [ha-]Shavu-ot*) in Exod. 34:22, Deut. 16:10,16, and 2 Chron. 8:13.

in, three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram, ²⁹and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs. ³⁰And there shall be one goat for expiation in your behalf. ³¹You shall present them—see that they are without blemish—with their libations, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its grain offering.

לֶפָר הָאֶחָד שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרִים לְאֵיל
הָאֶחָד: ²⁹עֶשְׂרוֹן עֶשְׂרוֹן לִכְבֹּשׁ הָאֶחָד
לְשִׁבְעַת הַכֹּבָשִׁים: ³⁰שְׁעִיר עֲזִים אֶחָד
לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם: ³¹מִלֶּבֶד עַל־תְּתִיבֵי
וּמִנְחָתוֹ תַעֲשׂוּ תְּמִימִם יְהִי־לָכֶם
וְנִסְפִיהֶם: פ

29 In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded. ²You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the LORD: one bull of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish. ³The grain offering with them—choice flour with oil mixed in—shall be: three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram, ⁴and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs. ⁵And there shall be one goat for a purification offering, to make expiation in your behalf—⁶in addition to the burnt offering of the new moon with its grain offering and the regular burnt offering with its grain offering, each with its libation as prescribed, gifts of pleasing odor to the LORD.

כט וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ
מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת
עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם:
²וַעֲשִׂיתֶם עֹלָה לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה פֶּר
בֶּן־בָּקָר אֶחָד אֵיל אֶחָד כֹּבָשִׁים בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה
שִׁבְעָה תְּמִימִם: ³וּמִנְחָתָם סֶלֶת בָּלוּלָה
בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֹשָׁה עֶשְׂרִים לֶפָר שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרִים
לְאֵיל: ⁴וְעֶשְׂרוֹן אֶחָד לִכְבֹּשׁ הָאֶחָד
לְשִׁבְעַת הַכֹּבָשִׁים: ⁵וְשְׁעִיר־עֲזִים אֶחָד
חֹטָאת לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם: ⁶מִלֶּבֶד עַל־תְּתִיבֵי
הַחֹדֶשׁ וּמִנְחָתָהּ וְעַל־תְּתִיבֵי וּמִנְחָתָהּ
וְנִסְפִיהֶם כַּמִּשְׁפָּט לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ אִשָּׁה
לַיהוָה: ס

⁷On the tenth day of the same seventh month

⁷וּבַעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה מִקְרָא־

FIRST DAY OF THE SEVENTH MONTH
(29:1–6)

The seventh new moon is to the ordinary new moon as the seventh day is to the ordinary day, thereby indicating how the sabbatical cycle was preserved in the lunar calendar. The seventh month is actually the beginning of the agricultural year, as is apparent from the oldest calendars of the Bible (see Exod. 23:16, 34:22). The Jewish religious calendar still preserves the first day of the seventh month as the beginning of the year: *Rosh ha-Shanah*, “The Head of the Year,” or New Year’s Day. The Bible neither mentions it by name nor describes any New Year festival.

1. a day when the horn is sounded Hebrew: *yom t’ru-ah*, “a day of acclaim,” probably the royal acclaim of God as King and Creator. The horn blowing on this day should not be confused with the prescription that horns should be blown on all festivals (10:10).

TENTH DAY OF THE SEVENTH MONTH
(vv. 7–11)

The day is known as *Yom ha-Kippurim*, “The Day of Purgation,” which refers to the purgation of the sanctuary following its year-long defilement by mortals. Thus the purgation rituals are entirely within the confines of the sanctuary

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

29:1. a day when the horn is sounded Maimonides cites this verse as the source for the commandment to listen to the *shofar* blasts on *Rosh ha-Shanah* (MT *Shofar* 1:1).

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary

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הַפְּטָרָה לַשַּׁבּוּעוֹת (יוֹם רֵאשׁוֹן)

HAFTARAH FOR SHAVU·OT, FIRST DAY

EZEKIEL 1:1–28, 3:12

In this *haftarah* Ezekiel reports his vision of the divine Glory in Babylon along the Chebar Canal, in July 593 B.C.E. This experience was part of his inauguration as a prophet, some five years after he had been deported from Judea with his fellow exiles. The awesome vision of God's appearance on a throne, supported by a spectacle of creatures amid fiery forms, overwhelmed Ezekiel, who flung himself down on his face. At that point the vision gives way to what he hears (v. 28). Rabbinic tradition provides the content of what Ezekiel heard by concluding the *haftarah* with a formal expression of praise from a later passage: "Blessed is the Presence of the LORD, in His place" (3:12).

Visions and accounts of God on His chariot or heavenly throne occur throughout the Hebrew Bible, in diverse genres and settings (see Exod. 24:9–11; 1 Kings 22:19–25; Isa. 6:1–3; Ps. 18:11–15; Dan. 7:9–10). They vary in solemnity and detail, as well as in function. Ezekiel's vision is by far the most detailed and most mysterious of them all. It is at once dazzling and daring in descriptive detail, conveying an awesome sense of God's majesty. Since antiquity, readers have taken the text as esoteric truth known only to a few and have tried to penetrate its eerie images. Others have sought to replicate its speculations. For such reasons, the use of Ezekiel's vision was subject to strict regulations.

Opinions have varied considerably regarding the liturgical use of this document, known as "The Chariot." In the Mishnah, the Sages state categorically that one may not recite the chariot vision as a *haftarah*; Judah the Patriarch, however, permitted it (Meg. 4:10). Some early Palestinian sages are said to have favored this chapter for the festival of *Shavu-ot*. This secondary opinion became predominant among the later Sages in Babylon (BT Meg. 31a). Still, both the untrained exposition of Ezek. 1 and any theological specula-

tion based on it were strongly discouraged (M Hag. 2:1), probably due to the expansion of its contents in mystical circles and the bold anthropomorphic reference to the divine Glory (vv. 27–28).

Fire, colors, and sound: The great chariot vision dazzles us kaleidoscopically, even on the written page. A fusion of experiences still strikes the reader, even as Ezekiel's own description fuses the visual with the audible and superimposes different perspectives and sensations. In part, this is why the text is so difficult to understand. The depiction repeats itself (cf. Ezek. 1:8–9, 11–12, 23–24). It moves back and forth like the gaze of the prophet, it is interrupted by qualifications and adjustments (vv. 13–14), and it confuses grammatical gender throughout (cf. vv. 13–17).

The figures of the vision are extraordinary and beyond adequate description. They are composites of form, lively with color, wraithlike and fiery. Yet description is the burden of the text. At the conclusion of this uncanny description of the revelation of the throne and the transcendent God's aspect, there is a remarkable reversal. God's word addresses the prophet (1:28). Indeed, as the sequel shows, this shift from human vision to divine address is a shift from Ezekiel's experience of the advent of God to his prophetic commission (Ezek. 2:1–3:11, not part of the *haftarah*). Personal ecstasy is thus not the goal; the visionary experience is neither an end in itself nor one initiated by contemplative techniques. Rather, the individual is confronted with a sudden experience that serves as the prelude to the announcement of a prophetic task. Such is the pattern found with Moses, who envisions the appearance of an angel of the Lord within a fiery bush and then is given his divine task (Exod. 3). This feature is also found with Isaiah, who envisions the Lord on His throne surrounded by divine beings and subsequently re-

ceives a commission to address the people Israel (Isa. 6).

Given this scriptural pattern, there is something “unbiblical” about the rabbinic decision to omit the divine directives found after the vision (Ezek. 2:1–3:11) and to conclude the *haftarah* with Ezek. 3:12. As a result, Ezekiel’s vision is no longer a prelude to prophecy but the first part of a twofold mystical experience, one that concludes with hearing the prayers of the divine host before the throne of God.

Nothing in the *haftarah* hints that Ezekiel’s “visions of God” (v. 1) begin a drama of prophetic commission (in contrast to the uninterrupted text of Ezekiel). Rather, the mystical experience is all that we have. Without God’s word (as presented in chapter 2), Ezekiel is the founding figure of ancient Jewish “Throne Mysticism,” not a biblical prophet.

RELATION OF THE *HAFTARAH* TO THE CALENDAR

An ancient teaching suggests that this prophetic portion is read on *Shavu-ot* because rabbinic tradition depicted the divine chariot descending on Mount Sinai at the time that the Torah depicted God descending on Sinai to make a covenant with all Israel. Accordingly, Ezekiel’s experience was not unique. To the contrary, the revelation at Sinai had already incorporated a profound mystical religious experience.

Ezekiel 1 thus reveals what even the most common Israelite saw at Mount Sinai on that awesome occasion. Its recitation on the first day of *Shavu-ot* calls to mind that wondrous event with glowing detail. Luminous beyond understanding, the vision in Ezek. 1:4–28 is a sight for the inner eye.

1 In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. (2)On the fifth day of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—(3)the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, by the Chebar Canal, in the land of the Chaldeans. And the hand of the LORD came upon him there.)

⁴I looked, and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north—a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber.

א וַיְהִי אִי בְּשָׁלְשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּרַבִּיעִי
בַּחֹמֶשֶׁת לַחֹדֶשׁ וַאֲנִי בְּתוֹךְ-הַגּוֹלָה עַל-
נְהַר-כְּבַר נִפְתָּחוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וַאֲרָאָה מֵרְאוֹת
אֱלֹהִים: ² בַּחֹמֶשֶׁת לַחֹדֶשׁ הִיא הַשָּׁנָה
הַחֲמִישִׁית לְגָלוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹיָכִין: ³ הָיָה
הָיָה דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי-יְחִזְקֵאל בֶּן-בוּזִי
הַכֹּהֵן בְּאֶרֶץ כַּשְׂדִּים עַל-נְהַר-כְּבַר וַתְּהִי
עָלַי שָׁם יַד-יְהוָה:
⁴ וַאֲרָא וְהִנֵּה רוּחַ סְעָרָה בָּאָה מִן-
הַצָּפוֹן עָנָן גָּדוֹל וְאֵשׁ מִתְּלַחֶתת וְנִגְהָ לּוֹ
סָבִיב וּמִתּוֹכָהּ בָּעֵין הַחֲשָׁמַל מִתּוֹךְ

Ezekiel 1:1. In the thirtieth year The date is obscure and has long puzzled interpreters, even though it is correlated in verse 2 with the 5th year of the exile of King Jehoiachin (593 B.C.E.). The Targum, presumably based on ancient tradition, suggests that the 30-year reference is arrived at by counting from the discovery of “a scroll of the Teaching” in the reign of Josiah (i.e., 622–621 B.C.E.; see 2 Kings 22).

3. Chaldeans Hebrew: *kasdim*. An Aramean group that penetrated southern Babylonia around the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. At

first subjugated to Assyria, they gained independence and took over the Babylonian kingship with a dynasty founded by Nabopolassar (in 625 B.C.E.), father of Nebuchadrezzar.

hand of the LORD Refers to an overwhelming prophetic experience.

4–5. The image of a divine advent in a chariot, on clouds, with flashing fire and a nimbus of light, is most commonly used in the Hebrew Bible in connection with God’s role as a warrior (see Ps. 18:8–15; Hab. 3:3–15).

⁵In the center of it were also the figures of four creatures. And this was their appearance:

They had the figures of human beings. ⁶However, each had four faces, and each of them had four wings; ⁷the legs of each were [fused into] a single rigid leg, and the feet of each were like a single calf's hoof; and their sparkle was like the luster of burnished bronze. ⁸They had human hands below their wings. The four of them had their faces and their wings on their four sides. ⁹Each one's wings touched those of the other. They did not turn when they moved; each could move in the direction of any of its faces.

¹⁰Each of them had a human face [at the front]; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right; each of the four had the face of an ox on the left; and each of the four had the face of an eagle [at the back]. ¹¹Such were their faces. As for their wings, they were separated: above, each had two touching those of the others, while the other two covered its body. ¹²And each could move in the direction of any of its faces; they went wherever the spirit impelled them to go, without turning when they moved.

¹³Such then was the appearance of the creatures. With them was something that looked like burning coals of fire. This fire, suggestive of torches, kept moving about among the creatures; the fire had a radiance, and lightning issued from the fire. ¹⁴Dashing to and fro [among] the creatures was something that looked like flares.

¹⁵As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures. ¹⁶As for the appearance and structure of the wheels, they gleamed like beryl. All four had the same form; the appearance and struc-

הָאֵשׁ: ⁵וּמִתּוֹכָהּ דְּמוֹת אַרְבַּע חַיּוֹת וְזֶה מֵרְאִיָּהוֹן

דְּמוֹת אָדָם לְהֵנָּה: ⁶וְאַרְבַּעַה פָּנִים לְאַחַת וְאַרְבַּע פְּנָפִים לְאַחַת לָהֶם: ⁷וְרַגְלֵיהֶם רֶגֶל יִשְׂרָה וְכַף רַגְלֵיהֶם כְּכַף רֶגֶל עֵגֶל וְנִצְצִים כְּעֵין נְחֹשֶׁת קָלֵל: ⁸וַיְדוּ וַיְדִי אָדָם מִתַּחַת כְּנַפְיָהֶם עַל אַרְבַּעַת רְבַעֵיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם וּכְנַפְיָהֶם לְאַרְבַּעַתָּם: ⁹חִבְרַת אִשָּׁה אֶל-אֲחוֹתָהּ כְּנַפְיָהֶם לֹא-יִסְבוּ בְּלִכְתָּן אִישׁ אֶל-עֵבֶר פָּנָיו יִלְכוּ: ¹⁰וְדְמוֹת פְּנֵיהֶם פְּנֵי אָדָם וּפְנֵי אַרְיֵה אֶל-הַיָּמִין לְאַרְבַּעַתָּם וּפְנֵי-שׁוֹר מִהַשְּׂמֹאל* לְאַרְבַּעַתָּן וּפְנֵי-נֶשֶׁר לְאַרְבַּעַתָּן: ¹¹וּפְנֵיהֶם וּכְנַפְיָהֶם פְּרָדוֹת מִלְמַעְלָה לְאִישׁ שְׁתֵּים חִבְרֹת אִישׁ וּשְׁתֵּים מְכֹסוֹת אֶת גּוֹיְתֵיהֶנָּה: ¹²וְאִישׁ אֶל-עֵבֶר פָּנָיו יִלְכוּ אֶל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה-שָׁמָּה הָרוּחַ לִלְכֹת יִלְכוּ לֹא יִסְבוּ בְּלִכְתָּן:

¹³וְדְמוֹת הַחַיּוֹת מֵרְאִיָּהֶם כְּגַחְלֵי-אֵשׁ בְּעֵרוֹת כְּמֵרְאֵה הַלְּפָדִים הִיא מִתְהַלֶּכֶת בֵּין הַחַיּוֹת וְנִגְהָ לְאֵשׁ וּמִן-הָאֵשׁ יוֹצֵא בְּרָק: ¹⁴וְהַחַיּוֹת רָצוּא וְשׁוֹב כְּמֵרְאֵה הַבֹּקֶק:

¹⁵וְאֵרָא הַחַיּוֹת וְהֵנָּה אוֹפָן אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ אֶצֶל הַחַיּוֹת לְאַרְבַּעַת פָּנָיו: ¹⁶מֵרְאֵה הָאוֹפָנִים וּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כְּעֵין תְּרַשִּׁישׁ וְדְמוֹת אֶחָד לְאַרְבַּעַתָּן וּמֵרְאִיָּהֶם וּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם

v. 10. מלא ר'

7. single rigid leg On the basis of this phrase, talmudic Sages ruled that one should stand with both feet fixed together during the *Amidah* (BT Ber. 10b), thus resembling the angels themselves (JT Ber. 1:1).

11. The four creatures symbolize earthly and

cosmic wholeness: unity amid multiplicity, like the four countenances themselves. The many faces further indicate divine omnipresence. Similarly, the many eyes on the wheeled disks (v. 18) suggest divine omniscience and providence.

ture of each was as of two wheels cutting through each other. ¹⁷And when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters; they did not veer when they moved. ¹⁸Their rims were tall and frightening, for the rims of all four were covered all over with eyes. ¹⁹And when the creatures moved forward, the wheels moved at their sides; and when the creatures were borne above the earth, the wheels were borne too. ²⁰Wherever the spirit impelled them to go, they went—wherever the spirit impelled them—and the wheels were borne alongside them; for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels. ²¹When those moved, these moved; and when those stood still, these stood still; and when those were borne above the earth, the wheels were borne alongside them—for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels.

²²Above the heads of the creatures was a form: an expanse, with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal, was spread out above their heads. ²³Under the expanse, each had one pair of wings extended toward those of the others; and each had another pair covering its body. ²⁴When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai, a tumult like the din of an army. When they stood still, they would let their wings droop. ²⁵From above the expanse over their heads came a sound. When they stood still, they would let their wings droop.

²⁶Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form. ²⁷From what appeared as his loins up, I saw a gleam as of amber—what looked like a fire encased in a frame; and from what appeared

בְּאֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה הָאוֹפָן בְּתוֹךְ הָאוֹפָן: ¹⁷ עַל-
אֲרְבַּעַת רְבַעֵיהֶן בְּלִכְתָּם יִלְכוּ לֹא יִסְבוּ
בְּלִכְתָּן: ¹⁸ וְגִבֵּיהֶן וְגִבֵּה לָהֶם וַיִּרְאֶה לָהֶם
וְגִבְתָּם מִלְּאֵת עֵינַיִם סָבִיב לְאֲרְבַּעַתָּן:
¹⁹ וּבְלִכְתְּ הַחַיּוֹת יִלְכוּ הָאוֹפָנַיִם אַצְלָם
וּבַהֲנִשָּׂא הַחַיּוֹת מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ יִנְשָׂאוּ
הָאוֹפָנַיִם: ²⁰ עַל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה-שָׁם הָרוּחַ
לְלִכְתְּ יִלְכוּ שָׁמָּה הָרוּחַ לְלִכְתְּ וְהָאוֹפָנַיִם
יִנְשָׂאוּ לְעַמְתָּם כִּי רוּחַ הַחַיָּה בְּאוֹפָנַיִם:
²¹ בְּלִכְתָּם יִלְכוּ וּבְעַמְדָם יַעֲמֻדוּ
וּבַהֲנִשָּׂאֵם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ יִנְשָׂאוּ הָאוֹפָנַיִם
לְעַמְתָּם כִּי רוּחַ הַחַיָּה בְּאוֹפָנַיִם:

²² וּדְמוּת עַל-רֵאשֵׁי הַחַיָּה רָקִיעַ בְּעֵין
הַקָּרַח הַנּוֹרָא נְטוּי עַל-רֵאשֵׁיהֶם
מִלְמַעְלָה: ²³ וְתַחַת הָרָקִיעַ כְּנַפְיֵיהֶם
יִשְׂרוֹת אִשָּׁה אֶל-אַחוּתָהּ לְאִישׁ שְׂתָיִם
מְכֻסוֹת לְהִנָּה וּלְאִישׁ שְׂתָיִם מְכֻסוֹת
לְהִנָּה אֶת גּוֹיֵתֵיהֶם: ²⁴ וְאִשְׁמַע אֶת-קוֹל
כְּנַפְיֵיהֶם כְּקוֹל מַיִם רַבִּים כְּקוֹל-שִׁדִּי
בְּלִכְתָּם קוֹל הַמְּלָה כְּקוֹל מַחְנֶה בְּעַמְדָם
תִּרְפִּינָה כְּנַפְיֵיהֶן: ²⁵ וַיְהִי-קוֹל מֵעַל
לְרָקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל-רֵאשֵׁם בְּעַמְדָם תִּרְפִּינָה
כְּנַפְיֵיהֶן:

²⁶ וּמִמַּעַל לְרָקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל-רֵאשֵׁם
כְּמִרְאֵה אֶבֶן-סַפִּיר דְמוּת כְּסָא וְעַל
דְמוּת הַכְּסָא דְמוּת כְּמִרְאֵה אָדָם עָלָיו
מִלְמַעְלָה: ²⁷ וְאָרָא אֲנִי בְּעֵין חֲשָׁמַל
כְּמִרְאֵה-אֵשׁ בַּיִת-לָהּ סָבִיב מִמִּרְאֵה

16. two wheels cutting through each other
Hebrew: *ha-ofan b'tokh ha-ofan*. Alternately, “a wheel within a wheel.” It is not clear whether this portrays two wheels intersecting crosswise (some-

how fixed into each other, at right angles) or concentric wheels, one inside the other.

24. sound of mighty waters May refer to the cosmic waters (see Ps. 93:4).

as his loins down, I saw what looked like fire. There was a radiance all about him. ²⁸Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the LORD. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face. And I heard the voice of someone speaking.

מִתְנַיִו וּלְמַעְלָה וּמִמְרָאָה מִתְנַיִו וּלְמַטָּה
רְאִיתִי בְּמִרְאֵה-אֵשׁ וְנִגְהָ לּוֹ סָבִיב:
כְּמִרְאֵה הַקֶּשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּעָנָן בְּיוֹם
הַגֹּשֶׁם כִּן מִרְאֵה הַנִּיגָה סָבִיב הוּא מִרְאֵה
דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה וְאֶרְאֶה וְאֶפְלַע עַל-פְּנֵי
וְאֶשְׁמַע קוֹל מְדַבֵּר: ס

3 ¹²Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: “Blessed is the Presence of the LORD, in His place!”

וְנִתְשָׁאֲנִי רוּחַ וְאֶשְׁמַע אַחֲרַי קוֹל
רַעַשׁ גָּדוֹל בְּרוּחַ כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה מִמְּקוֹמוֹ: י

28. Presence of the LORD Literally, “Glory [or: Majesty; *kavod*] of the LORD.” The divine *kavod* in the Bible is frequently associated with divine appearances, particularly in worship settings (see Exod. 24:17, 40:34–35; 1 Kings 8:11). It was experienced as a substantive presence, even occasionally anthropomorphic in appearance (Exod. 33:18–23). For philosophers like Saadia, the divine *kavod* was a “created form” made by God so “that the light would give His prophet the assurance of the authenticity of what has been revealed to him . . . and is called *Sh’khinah* by the sages.” Maimonides held a similar view, calling the *Sh’khinah* a “created light.” As such, the divine “Glory” was deemed essentially distinct from God. For medieval kabbalists, the *kavod* was a modality of God and a locus of speculative or meditative regard.

Ezekiel 3:12. Blessed is the Presence of the LORD, in His place Hebrew: *Barukh k’vod YHVH mi-m’komo*. In context, this phrase refers to something that the prophet heard. The Tar-

gum suggested that Ezekiel heard beings “praising and saying” the ensuing words of praise. Some scholars have suggested that the word “blessed” (*barukh*) is the result of a minor scribal error. According to this theory, the similar Hebrew letters *khaf* and *mem* were confused when the text was transcribed from an archaic script, resulting in *barukh* (blessed) instead of *b’rum* (when . . . ascended). Restored to its assumed original, Ezek. 3:12 would read: “Then the spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a roaring sound, when the Presence [*kavod*] of the Lord ascended from its place.” Such an image of an ascending chariot appears in Ezek. 10:15–19.

The angelic formalized praise, as translated here, has become a fixed part of the *K’dushah* (Sanctification) prayer, in which human worshipers sanctify the divine name (or exalt God) “just as” the holy angels do in the supernal heights. Thus, in the *K’dushah*, the threefold angelic praising recitation of “Holy” (Isa. 6:3) is followed by the words quoted in Ezek. 3:12.