THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: A Mitsva or a preamble?

Today we begin to analyze the first of the Ten Commandments. As we shall see, understanding what this commandment is saying is not easy. Why? Mainly because the First Commandment is not formulated in the imperative mode. Thus the Tora says: *"I am HaShem your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves."* Here, seemingly, there is NO specific order as in the case for example of "You Shall Not Kill". The First Commandment does not tell us that we have to do something or avoid doing anything …

Therefore, the first question we need to address: is this Commandment a Biblical precept, an order we must follow, or is it just a preamble to the other commandments, that is: the way the Creator presents Himself to the people of Israel before pronouncing His commandments.

Through history, rabbis debated at length about the nature of the First Commandment. For Maimonides, for example, despite not being formulated in the imperative mode, the First Commandment expresses a command to follow; roughly: to "believe in God."

For other rabbis, such as Nahmanides or Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, the First Commandment does not express a specific order to follow. Rabbi Crescas writes in his book "Or HaShem" that there cannot be a commandment that requires us to believe in the existence of God. Recognizing God's existence cannot be a "law" but a "philosophical" prerequisite for all other commandments. Therefore, he explains, the First Commandment, which emphasizes the existence of God, is just as a preamble to all other commandments which are presented below, is not a commandment itself. It is similar to "We the People…" in the American constitution.

Now we will try to understand HaRambam, Maimonides' opinion on this subject. As a rule, Maimonides would not move an iota from what the Gemara says. And the Gemara in Masekhet Makot explains that of the 613 precepts of the Tora, 611 were given through Moshe Rabbenu, and the remaining two were transmitted "directly" by HaShem. And those two precepts transmitted by

HaShem are the First and the Second Commandment (□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□)! This is also evident from the fact that only the first two Commandments were expressed in the first person singular ("*I am*HaShem your God" … "You shall have no other gods *before Me*") while from the Third Commandment, Moshe addresses the people of Israel, and refers to HaShem in the third person (the biblical text says, "You shall not take the *name of God* in vain" and it does not say "You shall not take *My name* in vain"). According to this Talmudic text, the first commandment is indeed a Mitsva, a Biblical precept, not a preamble. And so, in his famous book Sefer haMitsvot, a book that presents the 613 precepts of the Tora, Maimonides mentions the First Commandment as the Number One Mitsva of the Tora.

Following this view, our next question is: What is specifically the order, the precept, that we are commanded to follow and fulfill in this commandment that says: "I am HaShem your God"?

We will examine this point BH tomorrow.