THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: What is the First Commandment really saying?

□□□□□‘ □ □□□□

Yesterday, we explained that the opening statement of the Ten Commandments *“I am HaShem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage”* (Ex. 20: 2) can be seen as an introduction to the 10 Commandments, or as an independent precept, a Mitsva. Following this second opinion, the Rambam’s, we must ask, what exactly is the particular obligation that this commandment is indicating us to do or to believe?

Traditionally, it is understood that this commandment expresses our duty to believe in the “existence” of God. Which, as we saw, was questioned by some rabbis who felt that our belief in God should not be the subject of a biblical “ordinance.”

There may be, however, a slightly deeper way of understanding this commandment which I believe will help us to understand it better, and it would make easier for us to harmonize between the two conflicting opinions.

To begin with, we must read carefully the brief but very precise words of the Rambam in Sefer HaMitsvot and in MT, Yesode HaTora 1: 5-6, which shows that Maimonides refers to the belief in God’s existence as an *‘iqar*, a principle of our faith, rather than as an “order” to fulfill. We, the Jewish people have acquired the knowledge of the existence of God, first, by our ancestors, who were eyewitnesses to the revelation of God at Mount Sinai. We “inherited” their experience, and we became “witnesses” of His existence. Based on this experience that we inherited, we also develop our own intellectual perception and our personal experience of God’s existence.

If so, if this command does not express the order to believe in the “existence” of God, what is this commanding ordering

us?
We should examine in depth two words. The first, is the verb "to be" in the present tense (I am) and the second, is the Hebrew word ELOQEJA (conventionally translated as "your God").

I AM

Let us read again the first three words of the First Commandment: "□□□□□ □ □□□□". Traditionally they are translated as "I am HaShem ELOQEJA (= your God)". But here we can identify an ambiguity. In Hebrew, the verb "to be" in the present tense is never written. The word "am" (=I am) in Hebrew, does not exist, it is rather implicit in the sentence. This, therefore, gives us some room to try a different translation, without straying at all from the literal meaning of this verse. Instead of "I *am* HaShem ELOQEJA" we could translate it as "I, HaShem, I *am* ELOQEJA".
What is the difference?
When understood as a commandment, "I *am* HaShem ELOQEJA" would seemingly indicate the obligation to believe in the existence of God. While "I, HaShem, *am* ELOQEJA" would be saying that HaShem, Whom we already know and believe in Him, He is our ELOQEJA. In this second reading, God's existence is a given, a known fact. And the obligation that follows here is to affirm and behave knowing that HaShem is our ELOQEJA.

ELOQEJA

Now, the million dollar question is what does "ELOQEJA" mean? The name Eloqim, usually translated as "God", actually means "Supreme and Sovereign Judge," in other words: the Highest Authority. Thus, this commandment would NOT be indicating our obligation to believe in the "existence" of God but to accept Him as the supreme authority which governs our lives; our Sovereign.
The difference between these two readings of the First Commandment may seem insignificant. But think about this: many people with liberal values might believe in the existence of a Creator, but might still be unwilling to accept Him as Someone they must obey. Saying that HaShem is our ELOQIM, is asserting that He has the authority to establish what is right and what is wrong.
To conclude, we could rephrase the first Commandment as follows: *"You must know that I, HaShem, I am your ELOQEJA, your Sovereign. I freed you from slavery in Egypt, and now you*

are no longer under the authority of Pharaoh. Now you are exclusively under MY jurisdiction.”