THE THIRD COMMANDMENT: On being an observant Jew

לא תשא את שם יי אלהיך לשוא, כי לא ינקה יי את אשר ישא את שמו לשוא

“You shall take (carry, invoke) the name of HaShem your God in vain, for HaShem will not forgive anyone who takes His name in vain.”

The Third Commandment is perhaps the least known of all of the Ten. First, we will expose the traditional explanation of this commandment and then, based on an article by Rabbi Amar, we will explore the Third Commandment from a different perspective.

1. **TO INVOKE:** The third of the Ten Commandments “LO TISA” refers to the prohibition of swearing in God’s name falsely or unnecessarily (*shebu’at shav*). Jewish tradition understands the word “TISA” in this context as invoking, “you shall not invoke the name of God in vain” (in other contexts the word TISA or NOSE can be translated as “taking”, “carrying”, etc.). According to Maimonides, the prohibition on invoking the name of HaShem also extends to reciting a blessing, berakha, in vain. Why? Because a *shebu’a*, an oath, is basically a statement. The affirmation of a belief or a fact. A ritual blessing, when we say a berakha before eating, for example, is also a statement. We affirm an idea or a belief about HaShem pronouncing his name. For example, when I say the blessing “Bore feri ha’ets” I’m not saying “Thank God for this fruit,” I’m saying, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe, (that YOU are the) Creator of the fruit of the tree “. In other words, I am stating, acknowledging that HaShem is the creator of this fruit. Therefore, if I pronounce this or another similar statement unnecessarily, “invoking the name of God in vain,” it would be considered as transgressing the third commandment. This is by the way, the origin of the Halachic principle: “Safeq berakhot lehaqel” in a situation

where I’m not sure if I should or should not say a berakha, the right thing is to abstain, to not risk saying a berakha unnecessarily (lebatala) and transgress the third commandment “LO TISA”.

2. **TO CARRY:** Rabbi Shlomo Amar, today Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, exposes this commandment in a different way. He explains the prohibition of LO TISA as a warning not to “carry” the name of God in vain or falsely, pretending to be more religious or pious than I am. The Midrash brings the story of a Jewish merchant who traveled from city to city. Once, he came to a town on a Friday carrying a lot of money with him. What did he do? He went to the synagogue and saw a man praying and wearing the Tefillin on his head. Without much hesitation, he gave the money to the man and asked him to take care of it until the end of Shabbat. When Shabbat ended, the merchant went to the house of this man to withdraw his money. But to his surprise, the man deceived him and told him that he had never seen him and that he never received any money from him… The merchant went to the synagogue and prayed. And in his prayer, he said to God: “Master of the world, when I saw that man in the Synagogue, I did not trust him, as I never before saw him before, I trusted *YOUR name that he was carrying in his head* [in his Tefillin] “. The story has a happy ending. Eliyahu Hanabi revealed to the merchant in his dreams a secret code-word that allowed him access to the property of the thief and he recovered his money.
The Hakhamim brought the case of this man who pretended to be pious as an illustration of the third commandment: “You shall not “carry” the name of God in vain,” falsely, for you on personal benefit. Carrying the name of HaShem, in this case through the tefillin that man wore on his head (and I believe the same idea could be applied to a Kippa or any other symbol that identifies me as an observant Jew) implies a tremendous responsibility that we should be very careful to honor. And if □”□ we behave inappropriately, betraying the name of HaShem that we carry with us, we will be transgressing the commandment that explicitly says: “… for HaShem will not forgive anyone who takes His name in vain.”
.