THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: What Does It Say?

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I, God, am your Sovereign, the One who rescued you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves
Exodus 20: 1

COMMANDMENT OR PREAMBLE?
The First Commandment sounds a bit ambiguous. Why? Because unlike the other nine commandments it is not formulated in the imperative mode, as an order or a precept. It seems more like a presentation. God tells His people (according to the traditional translation): *“I [am] HaShem, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves.”* This text does not seem to indicate something we have to do or stop doing, as in the case of “Honor your parents”, “Do not steal” or “Do not kill.” It is not transmitting a direct order.
That is why the Rabbis have long debated the nature of this commandment. For some, the first commandment does not express a specific precept but a preamble: God introduces Himself to the people before reveling them the commandments.
Other rabbis, such as Maimonides, argue that the First Commandment indicates a specific precept, despite not being formulated in the imperative mode. We will try to understand it, then, the way this famous Rabbi explained it.

HOW MANY COMMANDMENTS ARE THERE?
In the Talmudic tractate of Makot the Rabbis explained that there are 613 precepts in the Tora. 611 of them were transmitted to the people of Israel through Moshe (Moses), while the remaining two were transmitted “directly” by HaShem (God) to the Jewish people. And those two precepts are: the

First and the Second commandment (□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□). What reveals that these two commandments were transmitted "directly" by God is that these are the only ones formulated in the first person of the singular: "*I am* HaShem your God", "There will be no other gods for you *before Me*." From the Third Commandment it is Moshe who addresses the people of Israel, and the reference to God is in the third person: "You shall not carry *the Name of God* in vain," instead of "You shall not carry *My Name* in vain". According to this Talmudic text, the First Commandment is not a mere preamble, but a formal biblical precept. In his famous book Sefer haMitsvot, the work that presents the 613 precepts of the Tora, Maimonides mentions the First Commandment as the first law (Mitsva) of the Tora.
Following this idea our next question will be: What is the specific order that this commandment is expressing when it says "I am HaShem your God"?

THE FIRST DECLARATION OF FAITH?
Traditionally it is assumed that the First Commandment, viewed as a precept, expresses only our duty to "believe in the existence" of God. I want to offer another interpretation. Adding one additional element, very relevant to our days.
But first, let's recall that the belief in the existence of God can be seen as an idea *implied* in this text: when transmitting the Ten Commandments God is addressing the people of Israel in the first person! Is it necessary, then, that while God is revealing Himself to His people, He commands them to believe in His existence?
And one more thing.
There is an explicit biblical reference that states that the Jewish people had already assimilated collectively the idea of "belief in God". The Tora says that when the Red Sea opened for the children of Israel to pass and then it closed over the Egyptians, Jews finally experienced a real belief in God's existence (that is, emuna).
□ □□□□□. And God saved Israel on that day from the Egyptians.

And Israel saw the Egyptians dead by the sea. And [when the people of] Israel perceived the great portent that God had made against the Egyptians, the people feared God, and [then the people] believed in God and in Moses his servant ” EXODUS 14: 30-31.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FREEDOM

Seeing the lifeless bodies of their powerful oppressors on the seashore, the Jewish people were also able to free themselves from the psychological intimidation implanted in their minds by the Egyptian guards and soldiers, who until then decided, as if they were gods, which Jew would live and which Jew would die. When they saw that their Egyptian masters were mere mortals, the Children of Israel freed themselves from the “mental intimidation of the Egyptians” and reagin the possibility to fearing God and believing in Him.

Coming back to the First Commandment, what we just explained would confirm that “belief” in God was already part of the new mental reality of the Jews *before* receiving the Ten Commandments. And if “belief” in God had already been assimilated, what was the First Commandment teach them?

To be continued…