YITRO: Serving God or Using God?

DUTIES OF THE BRAIN

This Shabbat we will read the Parasha Yitro, which contains the Ten Commandments, a subject of inexhaustible depth.

One example. The First commandment is the most difficult to understand as a commandment, because it is not formulated as an order. It does not specify any action that we should perform. And it does not start with the words "You Shall Not…", such as "You Shall Not Kill". It seems to be, rather, an introduction to what is about to come. "I am HaShem your God, who delivered you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves."

Following Maimonides, it is usually explained that this commandment expresses our duty to "believe" in God. And it should not be a surprise that the Tora commands about something that is related to "thoughts" and feelings and not to action. Think of the last of the Ten Commandment, the prohibition to envy, that also refers to an emotion that we must control, a virtual reprogramming of our brain.

TO BELIEVE IS TO DO

Once we understand that this commandment is not commanding any "action" let's review again what its content is. According to Maimonides (see here) believing in God means to "know that God is our Eloqim," that is, to accept God as the Supreme Authority that we must obey. This commandment teaches us that it is God, and not humans, who defines what is right and what is wrong. Knowing that He is our Lawgiver implies that we should follow His guidance in our behavior and choices. There is a very important difference between the popular definition of "believing in God" and the Jewish definition of "accepting His authority". As Jordan B. Peterson explains, when journalists repeatedly ask him if he believes in God: the

simple verbal statement “I do believe in God” or “I do not believe” is practically irrelevant. Why? Because it is possible to “declare our faith in God” while referring to an imaginary “god” in our mind, and not to the God of the Bible. Let me explain: Imagine someone that believes in God but ignores His Commandments. Ignores or does not care to follow His laws and guidance. This individual actually believes in a God “for emergencies only”. Is that considered a real “faith” in the God of the Tora?

Is that the God of the Tora? Can this be considered real “faith”?

REREADING THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

Too many superstitious people of all religions (including ours!) profess this type of belief in a god that serves you but that we don’t need to obey. Perhaps that is why in His “official presentation” to His people in Mount Sinai, i.e., the First Commandment, God introduces Himself first as “Eloqekha”, “Your Authority”, :”Your Sovereign”, who demands certain behavior, guides you, and rewards the righteous and punishes the sinners. It is true that apart from being “Eloqekha” our Legislator and Sovereign, God is also our redeemer: the First Commandment mentions that He saved us from the Egyptian slavery!

But the main message of the First Commandments is about obedience, not prayer. It focuses on accepting God as our Authority. And it was formulated in this way perhaps to avoid that type of immature relationship in which God only exists to solve my problems.

“Serving” God is not like serving idols. Pagan gods demands nothing from your personal conduct. Idols do not care what you do with your life. They do not expect from you obedience but tributes. Because they do not care about you. They just use you. And they let you to use them when you need it. The relationship between pagan gods and pagans is strictly a *quid pro quo* relationship.

GOD AS A PARENT

But HaShem does not ask anything from us in return for His good advice. Te entire relationship between God and us is not a relationship of convenience but a relationship of love. We obey Him because we trust that Him. Our relationship with God is like the relationship between children and parents. I completely trust that whatever God asks me to do or not to do is ultimately for my own good. The ultimate expression of faith, of believing in God consists in acting in a way that is consistent with His existence. It is what I “do” what expresses my faith (or my lack of faith), more than what I say or believe.