YITRO: What Do You See When You See The Pyramids?

In preparation for the **Parashah** that we will read tomorrow morning—**Yitro**—which describes the celebration of the Covenant between God and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai (*Ma'amad Har Sinai*), and the presentation of the Ten Commandments as part of that covenant, we are analyzing the **First Commandment**:

> *"I am HaShem, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery."*

Yesterday we explained the first part of this verse. We noted that this commandment consists of accepting God as our Sovereign (*Elohim*) and reminds us of our commitment to conduct our lives according to His laws. We also clarified that, in Judaism, faith in God cannot be reduced to a verbal declaration; rather, it is expressed primarily through what we **do** about God—recognizing Him, loving Him, and obeying Him.

Today we will examine the second part of the verse:

> *"I am your God… who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery."*

God does not introduce Himself as *"the Creator of heaven and earth,"* but rather as the One *"who brought us out of Egypt."*

Why?

CREATOR OR LIBERATOR?

First of all, by mentioning *Egypt*, it becomes clear that these

Commandments are **not of universal scope**, but are directed specifically to the people who suffered slavery and were miraculously redeemed from it.

At this point, it is worth clarifying a common misconception. Many people assume that the Ten Commandments constitute a universal legal code. However, from a formal and technical perspective, the Bible identifies the **Seven Noahide Laws** as the universal moral code for all humanity. Four (or five) of those laws closely resemble commandments found in the Ten Commandments—prohibitions against murder, theft, idolatry, adultery and incest, and blasphemy.

This distinction becomes clearer when we consider historical context. The Seven Laws are associated with the covenant God made with Noah and his descendants—*all humankind*—after the Flood. The Ten Commandments, by contrast, are presented within the framework of a covenant with a **specific nation**, Israel, which formally commits itself not to ten laws, but to **613 commandments**.

OUT OF PHARAOH'S JURISDICTION

There may be another reason why God introduces Himself as the One who brought Israel out of Egypt rather than as the Creator of the world.

This covenant takes place only seven weeks after the Exodus—less than two months after leaving Egypt. The Jewish people had lived for generations under Pharaoh's rule. Pharaoh and his officers were the only authority they had ever known.

God reminds them that their situation has fundamentally changed. They are no longer in Egypt, no longer under Pharaoh's jurisdiction.

“You do not have to obey him anymore. You are *out of Egypt*—in the desert, in no man’s land—now under Divine authority.”

To fully grasp the contrast between God and Pharaoh in this verse, we must remember that Pharaoh ruled through coercion, forcing his Jewish subjects to serve him. God, by contrast, **offers** the Jewish people a covenant—freely entered into—based on mutual responsibilities and commitments.

In this way, the Torah indirectly but unmistakably condemns slavery, tyranny, and the arrogance of those who impose their will by force upon others.

SELECTIVE MEMORY

Finally, let us consider why the verse explicitly describes Egypt as *“the house of slavery.”*

Even today, for many people—especially those who do not live in the Middle East—*Egypt* evokes images of grandeur and fascination: Giza and its pyramids, the Valley of the Kings, Tutankhamun, the Nile. At the time of the Torah, Egypt was already famous for its splendor, wealth, architectural achievements, and imperial power. It was the world’s superpower.

The Torah warns us against romanticizing Egypt.
“Remember,” it says, “that in that beautiful land you were slaves.”

The Greek historian **Herodotus** records that around 600 BCE—some 800 years after Moshe—a Pharaoh undertook massive construction projects. Herodotus reports that **120,000 slaves died** during that endeavor. We have no historical record of how many Jews died building for Pharaoh in Moshe’s time (although a well-known Midrash relates that when bricks were lacking, the

Egyptians used the bodies of Jewish children).

By describing Egypt as *“the house of slavery,”* the Torah guards us against selective memory. It teaches us that when we admire the pyramids, we must not forget the human cost at which they were built.