

There has been much debate among our sages, ancient, medieval and modern about the content of the first commandment, 'I am Adonai Your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the house of bondage.' It sounds like a statement and not like a commandment. In fact, a 14th century commentator from Spain, *Hasdai ben Avraham Crescas* tells us, 'The very character of the term *mitzvah* indicates...that it can only apply to matters governed by free will and choice. But faith in the existence of God is one of those things which are not governed by free will and choice. Consequently the term *mitzvah* cannot apply.'

On the one hand this seems pretty obvious. Nobody can force us to believe in anything, especially not in something as personal as God.

But Rambam, 12th century Spain and Ramban, 13th century Spain, both tell us that this is the first and most important commandment.

First Rambam: 'The first *mitzvah* is that [God] commanded us to believe in the Deity, that is, that we believe that there is a cause and motive force behind all existing things. This idea is expressed in the statement: 'I am Adonai your God.'" [Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvah 1]

He also links the first commandment to the second one. "And whomsoever it enters his mind to think there is any other god, transgresses thereby a negative precept, as it is said: 'Thou shall have no other gods before Me,' and repudiates a fundamental principle, since this is the most important principle on which everything depends." [Mishna Torah, Yesodei HaTorah I, 6]

Doing the first positive *mitzvah* precludes us from transgressing the second negative one. This makes sense. If we give credit to some other god or gods or anything else even science, for created the world, we are in reality worshiping them. So first the first *mitzvah* is counted as a *mitzvah* because it is so fundamental to our understanding of how the world was created. And second, following it prevents us from transgressing another *mitzvah*.

Ramban also links the first and second commandments together. Why do we have this second commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before Me,' he asks. Because, he responds, we have the first commandment, 'I am Adonai Your God.'

To explain this circular thinking, he tells us a parable from the *Mekhila, midrashim* on the book of Exodus: "A king invaded a country and his attendants said to him, 'Issue decrees to us.' He, however refused saying: 'No! When you have accepted my sovereignty, I will issue decrees to you for if you do not accept my sovereignty, how will you carry out my decrees?'

Similarly, God said to Israel: 'I am the Eternal thy God, you shall have no other gods. I am He Whose sovereignty you have accepted in Egypt.' And when they said to Him: 'Yes,' [He continued] 'Now just as you have accepted My sovereignty, so you must also accept My decrees.'"

Ramban goes on to explain, 'Since you have accepted upon yourselves and have admitted that I am the Eternal and that I am your God from the [time that you were yet in the] land of Egypt, then accept all my commandments.'

Neither of these men sound very convincing to me. They seem to be trying too hard to make the first statement by God into a commandment. They have not convinced me to change my thinking: that it's not possible to force ourselves or anyone else to believe something they do not naturally believe.

But I was impressed by the reasoning of modern day Rabbi Eugene Borovitz. He reminds us that whether we claim to have faith in God or not, we probably spend more time praying to God so that he will heal the people we love than we do asking for God to tell us who He is. We seem to ask God for things even though we are not convinced that He exists or have never experienced His existence.

But then we look at the entire first mitzvah. 'I am Adonai your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of bondage.' We might wonder why it doesn't say, 'I am Adonai your God who created the heavens and earth and put humans on it. Instead it reminded the Israelites who had been freed from bondage only a few months before receiving the commandments that Adonai was their God and not anyone or anything else.

He was the One who performed the miracles that allowed them to be freed. He was reminding them that they already had a relationship with Him. He was not a new Being who has just emerged. Just as they believed in Him when He performed the miracles, they could continue to believe in Him now that they are free. They did not have to acquaint themselves with a new God. There may have been some comfort for the Israelites in hearing this statement as it began the rest of the commandments.

Does it really matter whether this statement is a commandment or not? In some ways it doesn't at all. Since we practice a religion of actions, we do the mitzvot whether we 'believe' in God or not. They are the basis of our religion and we do not question that at all.

But if we skip over the first commandment, the one that tells us the origin for the rest of them; if we do not believe that they were given to us by a holy being, why do them at all?

The first commandment is then needed to let us know where the rest of the commandments came from. Even if we do not believe in God or not believe in the God portrayed in our Torah as able to speak and touch and move like a human, we do believe in the holiness of our religion and precepts that we given to us.

Therefore, just as we practice the mitzvot of action: lighting *Shabbat* and *Hanukkah* candles; blessing the wine as we begin each holiday; giving *tzedakah* to the poor and needy, we also practice the first *mitzvah*: believing in and bringing ourselves close to Adonai who redeemed us from slavery. The more we believe and the closer we move toward God, the more liberated from all our forms of slavery we become.

Shabbat Shalom.