

## PARSHAT YITRO 2020 – SOURCE SHEET IBN EZRA ON THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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### WITH THANKS TO RABBI DR. MARTY LOCKSHIN

The Ten Commandments as recorded in Parshat Va'etchanan (Deut. 5:6–17) is different to the record of the Ten Commandments found in Parshat Yitro (Ex. 20:1–13), both in terms of small differences and also more substantive differences. The most detailed treatment of the differences between the two versions is presented by the medieval Torah commentator Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167). He begins with a list of all the differences, including those that appear trivial, but which are nevertheless present.

יש שאלות קשות בפרשה הזאת. אמרו רבים כי השנים הדברים לבדם אמר השם. ועדותם שכתוב בדבור ראשון 'אנכי ה' אלהיך' ובשניה 'כי אנכי ה' אלהיך אל קנאי', ובשלישי כתוב 'את השם ה' אלהיך' וגם 'את אשר ישא את שמו לשוא' ולא אמר שמי, וברביעי 'כי ששת ימים עשה ה'', 'על כן ברך ה'', ובחמישי אמר 'אשר ה' אלהיך נותן לך. ויש לשאול איך יספר דבור אנכי בעשרת הדברים כי הוא המצוה והנה איננו מצות עשה ולא מצות לא תעשה. ושאלות קשות מאלה.

והנה אנחנו קראנו זו הפרשה שהיא פרשת וישמע יתרו ראשונה, ופרשת ואתחנן שניה. והנה ראינו כי מתחלת אנכי ועד סוף 'את אשר ישא את שמו לשוא' אין שני בין שתי הפרשיות. ומתחלת 'זכור' עד סוף עשרת הדברים שני בכל מקום. בראשונה 'זכור' ובשנית 'שמור'. גם שם באחרונה תוספת 'כאשר צוך ה' אלהיך'. בראשונה 'ובהמתך' ובשניה תוספת 'ושורך וחמורך'. והקשה מכל אלה כי בראשונה כתוב טעם שבת: 'כי ששת ימים עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ', ואמר עוד 'על כן ברך ה' את יום השבת'. ואלה הפסוקים אינם כתובים בשנית רק טעם אחר: 'וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים' ואמר באחרונה 'על כן צוך ה' אלהיך לעשות את יום השבת'. בראשונה כתוב שכר כבוד אב ואם שהוא 'למען יאריכון ימך' וכן בשני, רק הוסיף 'ולמען ייטב לך' גם הוסיף בכבוד אב ואם 'כאשר צוך ה' אלהיך'. בראשונה כתוב 'לא תרצח', 'לא תנאף', 'לא תגנוב', 'לא תענה'. בשניה כתוב 'לא תרצח', 'לא תנאף', 'לא תגנוב', 'לא תענה'. בראשונה כתוב 'עד שקר' ובשנית 'עד שוא'. בראשונה כתוב 'לא תחמוד בית רעך לא תחמד אשת רעך ולא תתאוה בית רעך'. בראשונה אין כתוב 'שדהו' ובשנית כתוב 'שדהו'. בראשונה 'עבדו ואמתו' קודם 'שורו וחמורו' ובשנית 'שורו וחמורו' לפני 'עבדו ואמתו'. בראשונה כתוב 'וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה לאמר' ובשנית 'את הדברים האלה דבר ה' אל כל קהלכם'.

In the first instance Ibn Ezra presents us with the traditional Rabbinic solution, an exercise in Talmudic apologetics, which he then dismisses as absurd, for a number of reasons, although he does not offer any answer as to why the sages of the Talmud would have resorted to absurdities in order to reconcile these two texts.

וכאשר חפשנו בדברי חזל מה אמרו על ככה, מצאנו שאמרו **זכור ושמור בדבור אחד נאמרו**. וזה הדבור קשה מכל הקושיות שהיו לנו כאשר אפרש. וחלילה חלילה, שאומר שלא דברו נכונה, כי דעתנו נקלה כנגד דעתם. רק אנשי דורינו יחשבו כי דבריהם כמשמעם, ואינו כן, כאשר אפרש בסוף, אחר שאזכיר הקושיות.

*“When we examined the words of the ancient rabbis to see how they related to this issue, we found that they said: “זכור’ and ‘שמור’ were said together” [Rosh Hashana 27a]. This suggestion is even more difficult than all the problems that I listed above, as I shall explain. God forbid, God forbid, that I would say that the rabbis spoke incorrectly! Our minds are nothing compared to theirs! But the people of our generation insist on taking their comments literally, when that is not the case, as I shall explain at the end, after I have explained all the difficulties [that arise if we take this statement literally].*

Ibn Ezra lists no less than a dozen reasons as to why it makes no sense to take this statement of Chazal literally, and apply it across the board to both texts – which would mean that everything in both texts was ‘miraculously’ said by God simultaneously when he spoke out the commandments.

Here are some of Ibn Ezra’s arguments:

### **1. Why not both words?**

למה לא נכתב בראשונה : זכור ושמור, גם כן בשנית.

[If the words were actually both pronounced at the same time,] why does the text not read “זכור ושמור” both in Yitro and in Va’etchanan?

### **2. The Shabbat laws have different rationales**

יותר יש לתמוה : איך נאמרו במעשה נס פסוקים רבים בבת אחת, ואין טעמם שוה, משתי מלות שטעמם אחד, שוה, שתהיינה נאמרות בבת אחת.

Instead of the rabbis addressing the issue of “זכור” and “שמור” – two words that basically mean the same thing – and saying that they were said at the same time, it would have made more sense for them to ask how whole verses that do not have the same meaning as each other were miraculously said simultaneously.

### **3. God ‘quotes’ himself in the third person?**

ואיך יאמר השם : כאשר צוך יי אלהיך

And how could God say [in the third person] “as Hashem your God has commanded you”?

### **4. Missing phrases cannot be said at the same time**

והנה אין כתוב בראשונה : למען ייטב לך, אם כן, אמר זה ולא אמר זה.

In Yitro, the phrase “that you may live long” [which is said in Va’etchanan] is missing. This would imply that God both said and did not say this phrase simultaneously. How does that make any sense?

## 5. How could the Israelites understand two things at the same time?

ואם אמרנו אין דבור השם כדבור כל אדם, הנה איך הבינו כל ישראל דבור השם. כי האדם, אם ישמע זכור ושמור בבת אחת, לא יבין לא זה ולא זה.

Even if we say that [God is capable of saying two things at the same time] since God's speech is not like human speech, still, how did all the Israelites understand God's speech? A person who hears both זכור and שמור pronounced at the same time won't understand either word.

***As a result of these questions Ibn Ezra simply dismisses the idea that God said both versions of the Ten Commandments simultaneously, and instead proceeds to explain the existence of two versions of the Ten Commandments in a different way.***

### Ibn Ezra's Resolution, Part 1: Moses Explains God's Words

***Ibn Ezra's explanation of the differences between the two versions of the Ten Commandments can be divided into two parts: the ones that reflect different content and the ones that reflect trivial wording changes. As far as Ibn Ezra is concerned, the Ten Commandments in Exodus represents God's precise words:***

עשרת הדברים הכתובים בפרשה הזאת הם דברי השם בלי תוספת ומגרעת, והם לבדם הכתובים על לוחות הברית.

The Decalogue as it appears in this portion (Yitro, Ex. 20) represents the words of God with no additions or deletions. Only they [and not the words found in Va'etchanan] were found on the tablets of the covenant [which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai].

***But 40 years later, when Moses retold their history to the Israelites in Sefer Devarim, he deliberately reworded some of the commandments in the Ten Commandments to make them easier to understand. In fact, as Ibn Ezra explains, rephrasing words spoken someone else is perfectly normal, and very common. For example, he compares what Isaac says to Esau and how Rebekah reports it:***

***What Isaac actually said to Esau was (Gen. 27:4): – בְּעִבּוֹר תְּבָרְכֵךְ נַפְשִׁי בְטוֹרָם אָמוֹת – “so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die”, while Rebekah's report worded it differently (Gen 27:7): – וַאֲבָרְכֶכָה לְפָנַי ה' לְפָנַי מוֹתִי: – “that I may bless you before God before I die”. Ibn Ezra suggests that Rebekah added the words “before God” in order to impress upon Jacob the importance of this blessing. But even if Isaac had not said it, he obviously also felt that the blessing would be with God's approval.***

***Similarly, Moses added a different explanation of the Sabbath commandment in Va'etchanan. With the words “as God your God commanded you”, Moses alluded to the reason for Sabbath observance found in the Ten Commandments in Yitro, namely that God had rested on the seventh day after six days of creation. But at the same time, Moses realized that it wasn't clear why slaves were forbidden to do work on the Sabbath. For that reason, Moses added the explanation in Deuteronomy (5:15), “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.”***

## Ibn Ezra's Resolution Part 2: Words Don't Matter

***Ibn Ezra's theory about Moses' changes cannot explain most of the differences between the language of the Ten Commandments in Yitro and in Va'etchanan. What purpose could Moses have, for example, in changing the word "and his ox" to "his ox"? Ibn Ezra reluctantly explains that only because of his contemporaries' mistaken notions he is compelled to explain something that he would rather not:***

ולא אוכל לפרש לך כל אלה עד שאפרש לך מוסד לדרך לשון הקדש. והשם הוא עדי, יודע סודי, כי לולי שהוצרכתי לפרש אלו הקושיות, הייתי מחריש.

I am unable to resolve all these difficulties until I provide you with an introduction as to how Hebrew works. God is my witness, He knows my hidden thoughts: If I didn't have to explain these difficulties, I would remain silent.

***Referring to himself in third person, ibn Ezra proudly adds: אמר אברהם המחבר, "here is what Abraham the author says":***

משפט אנשי לשון הקדש שפעם יבארו דבורם באר היטיב, ופעם יאמרו הצורך במלות קצרות, שיוכל השומע להבין טעמם

The standard pattern of people who use Hebrew is that sometimes they explain their words at length, but sometimes they say what they have to say with less words, just enough so that the listener understands their meaning.

***This assertion—that Hebrew speakers sometimes express an idea at length and sometimes in few words—appears inconsequential, especially after the grand build-up. In the continuation of this comment, ibn Ezra expands his principle, applying it to speakers and writers of other languages:***

משפט החכמים בכל לשון שישמרו הטעמים, ואינם חוששים משנוי המלות, אחר שהם שוות בטעמים

The practice of wise people in any language is that they preserve the meaning [of any speech or text] and are unconcerned about changes in wording as long as the meaning stays the same.

***What makes ibn Ezra's comment radical is that he applies this idea to Moses in the Torah, even though Moses is passing on the words of God. This is in stark contrast to the Midrashic method, predominant among Ibn Ezra's predecessors and contemporaries, which is based almost obsessively on very close readings of the language of the Torah, and which assumes that the default is that whenever the Torah can express an idea in fewer words, it does so. When superfluous words are found written in a biblical verse, the rabbis see them as the source for a new law or principle. Much of the discussion of biblical verses in the Talmud and the classical Midrashim is predicated on this assumption.***

***Ibn Ezra also belittles another aspect of the Midrashic method - the willingness to ascribe meaning to orthography (the conventional spelling system of a language), specifically whether a word is or is not written with the letter vav serving as a marker of the vowel 'o' or 'oo'.***

והנה בני הדור יבקשו טעם גם למלא גם לחסר. ואילו היו מבקשים טעם לאחד מהם, שהמנהג היה לכתב הכל על דרך אחד, הייתי מחריש... דע כי הטעמים הם שמורות לא המלות

In our generation, people ascribe meaning both to extra-lettered spelling and to the missing-lettered spelling. If they only ascribed meaning to one of them, and saw the other one as the default, I would remain silent... Know that meaning must be preserved, but not wording.

***In other words, as long as Moses conveyed the message of the Ten Commandments accurately, any stylistic changes that he made in the text are inconsequential, and an intelligent reader should not pay any attention to them.***

### **Postscript – One Difference Too Many?**

***One of the differences Ibn Ezra notes in the final commandment is more than a little surprising, because, as it turns out, the difference doesn't exist in our text of the Torah!***

בראשונה עבדו ואמתו קודם שורו וחמורו, ובשנית שורו וחמורו לפני עבדו ואמתו.

The first version lists [not coveting your neighbor's] "male or female slave" before "his ox or his donkey," but the second version lists "his ox or his donkey" before "his male or female slave."

***But the order of items in the final verse of the Ten Commandments is the same both in Yitro and in Va'etchanan in the Torah: (ו)שורו וחמורו — his male and female slave, his ox or his donkey.***

***The supercommentators on Ibn Ezra are all very puzzled by this. The controversial Yehudah Leib Krinski ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehuda\\_Leib\\_Krinsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehuda_Leib_Krinsky)) quotes a number of 19th-century scholars who were convinced that Ibn Ezra could not have made such an error. Some of them propose the unsatisfying explanation that the Ibn Ezra commentary we have was not really written by Ibn Ezra but was collected and edited by his students. They felt that attributing such an error to a student was legitimate, but the master should not be suspected of such carelessness.***

***Asher Weiser (1904–1982) calls Ibn Ezra's misstatement a טעות מצערת—an 'unfortunate error', but also points out that this is not the only time that Ibn Ezra misquotes a biblical verse. In fact, almost all medieval Bible commentators misquote biblical verses from time to time, sometimes because they were quoting from memory and sometimes because they were using biblical texts that differed from ours.***