

## Ibn Ezra on the Ten Commandments:

### [Ibn Ezra](#)

THE FIRST STATEMENT: I AM THE LORD. Note that all of the commandments fall into one of the following two categories. One category consists of rational laws which God implanted into the minds of all intelligent human beings. There are many such commandments. The only one of the Ten Statements which does not fall into this category is the command to observe the Sabbath. Hence every intelligent human being of every nation and of every tongue assents to them, for they are implanted in the human mind by reason. There is nothing to add to them or to subtract from them. Abraham observed them along with additional precepts. God gave the Torah only to rational human beings. He who is without reason has no Torah. The second category that the precepts fall into is that of “hidden commandments,” that is, commandments for which the Torah does not reveal any reason. Far be it, far be it for one to even think that any of these commandments contradict reason. We must in all instances observe everything that God has commanded us, whether their secret has or has not been revealed to us. If we find that one of the commandments contradicts reason, then we should not take it at face value but must search for its meaning in the books of our wise men, of blessed memory, to find out whether it is a parable. If we do not find this recorded, then we must investigate and try to understand it with all of our strength. Perhaps we can explain it. If we cannot, then we must leave it as it is and admit that we do not know its meaning. *Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart* (Deut. 10:16) is an example of the aforementioned. Now did God command us to sadistically murder people? We know of a certainty that each one of the commandments that are not placed upon us by reason has a secret meaning to it, though it be hidden from us. The fact that in some instances Scripture gives the reason why they were commanded is proof of this. Thus Scripture tells us that the Sabbath is in memory of God’s creation of the world; and the festival of unleavened bread, *that thou mayest remember the day when thou earnest forth out of the land of Egypt* (Deut. 16:3). Scripture states, *Love ye therefore the stranger; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Deut. 10:19). Sowing with two kinds of seeds is prohibited, *lest the fullness of the seed...be forfeited* (Deut. 22:9). Scripture states, *Only he shall not multiply horses so that he does not cause the people to return to Egypt* (Deut. 17:16). It similarly gives the reason why *Neither shall he multiply wives to himself* (Deut. 17:17), namely, *that his heart turn not away* (*Ibid.*). The latter is not an independent commandment as Rabbi Simeon ben Kayyara states. Scripture similarly tells us the reason for *and he shall read therein*

(Deut. 17:19), namely, *that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren* (Deut. 17:20). We similarly find in the chapter dealing with the assembly, *and that they may learn* (Deut. 31:12). This is the case with many commandments. Hence every intelligent human being whose eyes have been opened by God can learn from the Torah the secret of all the commandments. There are three types of commandments, namely, commandments observed with one's heart, commandments observed by speech, and commandments observed by acts. The commandments observed with the heart are of two sorts, namely, positive and negative commandments. The positive commandments include: *Therefore thou shalt love the Lord thy God* (Deut. 11:1); *and to cleave unto him* (Deut. 11:22); *that thou mayest fear this glorious and awful Name* (Deut. 28:58); *but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself* (Lev. 19:18). The negative commandments include: *Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart* (Lev. 19:17.); *Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge* (Lev. 19:18). The commandments observed by speech also consist of positive and negative commandments. Among the positive commandments are: reading the *shema*, saying grace after meals, uttering the priestly benedictions, and making a confession [declaration] when one brings tithes. There are many such commandments. Among the negative precepts we find: *Thou shalt not bear false witness* (v. 13); *Thou shalt not revile God* (Ex. 22:27), and *Thou shalt not curse the deaf* (Lev. 19:14). The positive commandments and negative commandments observed through actions are legion. There is no reason to mention them. The commandments incumbent on the heart are the most important and the most prominent of the commandments. Many people think that with the exception of idol worship there are no sins connected to thought. The truth of the matter is that idol worship is worse than all the other mental sins put together. Can they not see that Scripture writes, *There are six things which the Lord hateth* (Prov. 6:16), and then goes on to say, *A heart that deviseth wicked thoughts* (Prov. 6:18). Scripture furthermore states: *thou didst well that was in thy heart* (II Chron. 6:8); *Do good, O Lord, unto the good, And to them that are upright in their hearts* (Ps. 125:4); *Let your heart therefore be whole with the Lord our God* (I Kings 8:61); *I the Lord search the heart* (Jer. 17:10); *but the Lord looketh on the heart* (I Sam. 16:7). Now the first statement is the basis of the nine that follow it. Its place is among the precepts of the heart. The first statement teaches that one should believe with an unwavering faith that this glorious God, whose name is written but not pronounced, is one's only God.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, who rests in glory, once asked me why God said, *I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt* rather than, *I am the Lord thy God who made heaven and earth and created you*? I answered the following. Know that people who believe in God the glorious are not on the same level of

faith. Many believe what they have heard; that is, they believe because their masters have told them so. Above them are those who believe because of what they have read in the Torah, which God gave to Moses. Now they would place their hands upon their mouths if a heretic were to come along and argue that God does not exist, for they do not possess the means to answer. Now a person whose heart has moved him to study the sciences, which are the steps that lead to the place of his desire, will see God's work in the metals, in the plants and living creatures, and in the human body itself. He will know the makeup of each organ according to the scientific explanations of how each organ functions. He will similarly know the reason for each organ's form. His heart will then aspire to learn the science of the spheres that are the Lord's works in the middle world, which is everlasting. He will learn when the sun or moon is eclipsed. He will know how the moon causes the sun to be eclipsed. He will know why the moon is eclipsed and what causes its eclipses. He will know these things and be able to prove them beyond a shadow of a doubt. The intelligent person will come to know God by learning the ways of God. Moses similarly stated, *show me now Thy ways, that I may know Thee* (Ex. 33:13). Now God the revered proclaimed, *I am the Lord thy God* in His first statement. Only one who is of great intellect can understand this. I have already explained in the Torah portion, *Ve-Eleh Shemot* that God alone is everlasting without any change and that there is none aside from Him that exists forever, and none aside from Him is *enthroned of old*, *Selah*, (Ps. 55:20). God alone maintains the uppermost world by His power. The middle world is maintained by God's power and by His holy angels, who are of the uppermost world. Ours, the lowest of the worlds, is maintained by God's power plus the power of the two higher worlds. Now the statement *I am the Lord* is sufficient for the intelligent of any nation. But only Israel believes that the sky and earth were made close to five thousand years ago. The nations of the world do not deny that God alone made sky and earth. They differ only in that they maintain that God continuously creates without beginning or end. Now the Lord performed signs and wonders in Egypt until Moses brought them out of there so that He would be their God. Moses similarly said, *Or hath God assayed to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation* (Deut. 4:34). The meaning of the latter is that God did for Israel what He did not do for any other nation. God created the middle world. He rules over the lowest of the worlds. Good or bad befalls every nation according to the arrangement of its star, for this is what God has apportioned to them. Now Israel was destined to continue in slavery according to the stars of its constellation. However, because of God's love of the patriarchs, the Lord used His power to bring forth signs in the lowest world which were not decreed by the powers of the middle world. God removed Israel from the rule of the constellations and made them the people of His very own inheritance. It is because of this that the ancients

say, "Israel has no star." I will yet explain this via parables in the Torah portion *Ki Tissa*. It was because of the signs that God performed in Egypt that Moses said, *Unto thee it was shown, that thou mightest know that the Lord, He is God; there is none else beside Him* (Deut. 4:35). Everyone, learned and nonlearned, adults and children, witnessed this. When recounting the events at the assembly at Sinai, Moses added that Israel heard God's voice. Thus, following the latter, Moses said, *Out of heaven He made thee to hear His voice, that He might instruct thee* (Deut. 4:36). At the very end Moses said that ultimate knowledge consists in the development of one's mind to the point where one is able to prove to himself that the Lord alone is God. Scripture therefore states, *know this day, and lay it to thy heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else* (Deut. 4:39). David similarly said, *And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve Him* (I Chron. 28:9). Knowledge is in the heart. It does not refer to confession with one's lips. Now it is for the intelligent that God said, *I am the Lord*. He added, *who brought thee out of the land of Egypt* (v. 2) so that the intelligent and the non-intelligent would understand. God added, *thy God*, meaning, you are obligated to serve me, that is, to be My servant and to be My people, and I will be your God, because *I...brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage* (*Ibid.*). The aforementioned was explained by Moses in the chapter that opens with the words *When thy son asketh* (Deut. 6:20). The meaning of the question is: why are we, more than any other nation, obligated to observe God's commandments? Have we not all one creator? Moses gave three answers. The first one is, *We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt* (Deut. 6:21) and God did all these good things for us. We are therefore obligated, even if we do not know the reason for His commandments, to observe everything that God commands us to do. The second one is, God did not decree the commandments to us because of His own needs but rather *for our good always* (Deut. 6:24). The third is, *And it shall be righteousness unto us*; that is, we will be righteous people and thus merit the world to come *if we observe to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as He hath commanded us* (Deut. 6:25). The philosophers have discovered that there are ten aspects relating to that which is corporeal. They are primary categories. There is nothing above them. The first pertains to a thing's essence. It is everlasting. The other nine are accidents. They depend on the first, are joined to it, and result from it. The first is like the number one in the number ten, for the entire sum came out of number one and all sums are found in it. One is the foundation. Now the first statement uttered by God the glorious includes all precepts directed at the heart, tongue, and human deeds. For one who does not believe in his heart that God exists has no commandments upon him. A person is obligated to mention God's name every moment, to honor Him. Everything a person does, he must do only for the glory of God. A person should not keep from

violating a negative precept except out of regard for God's glory. For example, a man who gives charity to the poor should not give it out of respect for the collector, nor so that people should praise him. For if this is the case, then a human being's status is more important in his eyes than the glory of God, who gave him wealth and abundance of money from which he can give charity and receive a reward from God. The same applies to one who trespasses in secret so that his sin will not become known to the king, or people see him and come to consider him a shameful person. One who thinks thus is insane, for it is written, *He that planted the ear, shall He not hear* (Ps. 94:9). Now God sees the hidden things. He sees what people cannot openly see. God knows each one's thoughts and his secrets. Now a person is afraid of the king who will die on the next day and not punish him, and does not fear the True King in whose hands is his soul in this world and in the next world.

The Gaon, Rabbi Saadiah composed *azharot*. He encompassed all the commandments in these Ten Statements. We find God's name in the first five statements. I have already explained that the first statement is the foundation upon which all the commandments rest. It is followed by *Thou shalt have no other gods*. The sin of the one who does not believe in God is greater than the sin of the one who worships idols. For there are many who believe in the Lord and offer sacrifices to idols, like those who offered to the queen of heaven, because they think that it can help them. As the verse says, *But since we let off to offer to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink-offerings unto her, we have wanted all things* (Jer. 44:18). Scripture also reads, *They feared the Lord, and served their own gods* (II Kings 17:33). We find the same with Naaman who said, *when I prostrate myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing* (II Kings 5:18). Now all of the above-mentioned believe in the Lord. However, they join another with Him. It is for this reason that the name of the revered God is written in this statement. God's name is also written in the third statement, for swearing falsely is less of a sin than idolatry. Nevertheless, one who does this publicly shames the Lord. It is possible that the violator acts in this manner out of anger or need, for he believes in his heart in God and does not worship any deity along with the Lord. The fourth statement tells us that the Lord rested on the seventh day. Thus he who does work on the Sabbath denies that God created the world. Now this sin is less severe than taking the name of the Lord in vain. The Lord's name is written in the fifth statement because parents are God's partners in the creation of a human being. If a person does not honor his parents, it is as if he is not honoring God. The five remaining statements deal with sins against a fellow human being. The first one is the most heinous, namely, causing the soul to separate from the body. This is followed by the rape of the body. Next comes,

Thou shalt not steal money. Afterwards comes stealing with the tongue. Next comes coveting with one's heart.