

Parsha Ponders

Yisro | February 14, 2020 | 19 Shevat 5780

*The Fourteen Commandments*¹

לא-יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני: לא-תעשה לך פסל וכל-תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ: לא-תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי יקוק אלקיך קל קנא פקד עון אבת על-בנים על-שלשים ועל-רבעים לשנאי: ועשה חסד לאלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי

You shall not have other gods before Me. Do not make for yourselves any image that is in the sky from above, that is on the earth from below, and that is in the water below the earth. Don't prostrate before them nor serve them, for I am Hashem your G-d, a zealous G-d, who holds for My enemies the iniquity of the fathers on the children, for three and four generations. And who performs loving-kindness for a thousand [generations] for those who love Me and fulfill My commandments²

This week's *parsha* contains the epic revelation at Mount Sinai. Millions of Jews gathered to meet the G-d who took them out of Egypt in order to make them His nation. As part of this grand revelation, Hashem taught the Jews what is today known as the Ten Commandments. These commandments are essentially ten umbrella *mitzvos* in which you can categorize all the 613 *mitzvos*³. Classically, in Rabbinical literature they're referred to as the Ten Statements, or Ten Utterances. Each statement is its own idea, and the statements are separated in a *sefer Torah* by a noticeable space.

If we were to look at the Rambam's count of the 613 *mitzvos*, we would notice something strange. The second statement in the Ten Utterances is the prohibition against idol worship. The Rambam counts this as four *mitzvos*, not one⁴. He counts a prohibition against believing in a false idol⁵, producing statues or forms⁶, not to prostrate before an idol⁷, and not to worship an idol through ritual service⁸. This itself isn't strange, as we mentioned before that they are really ten statements, not ten commandments. We see another example of this, where the Rambam counts the fifth statement of *shabbos* as two *mitzvos*⁹. This shows that multiple *mitzvos* can be combined into one statement.

What is strange is that this doesn't seem to fit with how *Chazal* formulate the source for the number 613 *mitzvos*¹⁰. They teach us¹¹ that the verse tells us¹² that Moshe taught us the Torah. תורה has the numerical value of 611, as Moshe taught us 611 *mitzvos*. The other two were taught to us by G-d Himself. The first is the *mitzvah* of יקוק אלקיך, *emunah*, faith in Hashem. The second is the *mitzvah* of לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים, the prohibition against idol worship. According to this, Hashem only

¹ Based on [Meshech Chochmah](#) to [Exodus 20:3](#)

² [Ibid](#) v. 3-6

³ See [Rashi](#) to [Exodus 24:12](#), quoting [Rav Saadiah Gaon](#), that all the 613 *mitzvos* are included in the Ten Commandments. [Rav Saadiah Gaon](#) in his *Siddur* actually categorized all the 613, indicating which of the ten they fall under. See also [Ba'al HaTurim](#) to v. 14, quoting [Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16](#)

⁴ As do the [Sefer HaChinuch](#) and [Semag](#), as will be cited below

⁵ [Sefer HaMitzvos Lo Sa'aseh](#) § 1; [Sefer HaChinuch](#) § 26; [Semag Lavin](#) § 1

⁶ [Sefer HaMitzvos Lo Sa'aseh](#) § 2; [Sefer HaChinuch](#) § 27; [Semag Lavin](#) § 20

⁷ [Sefer HaMitzvos Lo Sa'aseh](#) § 5; [Sefer HaChinuch](#) § 28; [Semag Lavin](#) § 19

⁸ [Sefer HaMitzvos Lo Sa'aseh](#) § 6; [Sefer HaChinuch](#) § 29; [Semag Lavin](#) § 17

⁹ [זכור](#) as the *mitzvah* of *kiddush* ([Sefer HaMitzvos Aseh](#) § 155), and [לא תעשה מלאכה](#) as the prohibition against creative work on *shabbos* ([Ibid Lo Sa'aseh](#) § 320)

¹⁰ This is the [Ramban's](#) question on the Rambam (see [Hasagos HaRamban Lo Sa'aseh](#) § 5)

¹¹ [Makkos 23b](#)

¹² [Deuteronomy 33:4](#)

uttered one *mitzvah* against idol worship. If Hashem uttered four *mitzvos*, that would make 616 *mitzvos*¹³! How can we understand where the Rambam is coming from¹⁴?

We can discern the Rambam's opinion from what he writes in his philosophical work *Moreh Nevuchim*¹⁵, known as the Guide for the Perplexed¹⁶. What exactly did the Jews experience at Mount Sinai? What level of prophecy did they reach? It's clear that Moshe had a complete prophetic experience, and that he heard everything that Hashem related. However, the Rambam understands that the people were different. All they heard was the sound of Hashem's "voice". They couldn't actually make out the words. It was clear to them that it was Hashem speaking, but they couldn't hear the articulated letters and words. They had to ask Moshe for that.

How then did the Rambam understand that the people heard the *mitzvos* of אֱמוּנָה, *emunah*, and לֹא יִהְיֶה לָךְ, idol worship? What it means is the Sinai experience made two things crystal clear to the people: There is an omnipotent, all powerful G-d who took them out of Egypt. His existence makes it impossible for there to be any other force out there with its own independent power. This makes idol worship futile. They didn't hear these *mitzvos* explicitly, rather they intuited on their own a need for *emunah* in Hashem and a rejection of idol worship. It was clear to them that they had to believe in Hashem, and that they were forbidden from looking elsewhere for a deity¹⁷.

Now everything makes sense. Hashem pronounced Ten Utterances at Mount Sinai. These formed the generation categories for all the 613 *mitzvos*. The people only heard a general voice from Hashem, but couldn't make out the words. Moshe related to them what Hashem had said. It's not a problem to say that these Utterances themselves contained more than ten *mitzvos*. Indeed, the Rambam's opinion is that Hashem commanded them four *mitzvos* related to idol worship. Either way, it's clear that the Sinai experience left such a strong mark, that it's still noticeable up to this very day.

Good Shabbos

¹³ Due to this question, the Ramban doesn't count a separate *mitzvah* against prostrating to an idol or worshiping it through ritual service. He does count the *mitzvah* against producing statues or forms, but from a different verse (Leviticus 19:4)

¹⁴ The Meshech Chochmah says the validity of the Rambam's opinion is evident from many *sugyos* in the *gemarra*, but he doesn't clarify which ones he's referring to

¹⁵ Moreh Nevuchim 2:33

¹⁶ The Meshech Chochmah makes it very clear that his opinion is all of the Rambam's works are internally consistent, and anything he says in one can shed light on the other. This is in contradistinction to some other authorities, who disregard what the Rambam writes in Moreh Nevuchim in favor of Mishneh Torah. Some go even as far as challenging its authorship (see Rav Yaakov Emden's Mitpachas Seforim II 8:21), or claim that he wrote it only for that time

¹⁷ The Meshech Chochmah brings the Megillas Esther's resolution to the Ramban's question. He suggests that maybe the people just heard the words לֹא יִהְיֶה לָךְ, but the Torah records four *mitzvos* instead of one. The Meshech Chochmah rejects this, because it's clear that the entire second utterance was said by Hashem, as it's written in the first person, unlike the other eight. See Ramban to Exodus 20:7 s.v. לֹא תִשָּׂא