

“*Eikev*: The Decalogue: Battleground of Jewish and Christian theology.

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

WHY DID MOSES HAVE TO REPEAT THE DECALOGUE?

In the sidrah *Eikev*, Moses continues his description of the dramatic events surrounding the giving of the first set of the Tablets of Stone containing the Ten Commandments (also referred to by the term ‘Decalogue,’ derived from the Greek translation (*deka logous*) of the Hebrew *aseret ha-devarim*, ‘The Ten Words’ (Ex. 34:28).)

One may wonder why Moses saw the need to repeat the Decalogue in full in the course of this final speech to Israel (see Dt. 5:6-18), given that the original Sinaitic experience – with its accompaniment of thunder and lightning atop the smoking, quaking, mountain, the ear-piercing blare of the shofar’s notes getting louder and louder, and the sound of Moses uttering each commandment together with God emitting a sort of thunderous responsive blast (Ex. 19:18-19) – must have been indelibly seared on the people’s consciousness. Indeed, If, already on the third day of Israel’s mere preparation to receive the Torah, they were already trembling at that awesome manifestation of the forces of nature (see v.16), we can readily imagine what mental state they were in by the time the Decalogue was announced some three days later.

Thus, at hearing the first two commandments issuing forth from the divine, they could take it no more:

When the people witnessed it, they fell back and stood at a distance. “You speak to us,” they said to Moses, “and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:15-16).

The sages link the people's plea for Moses to take over the utterance of the rest of the commandments to the fact that the first two commandments are expressed in the first person singular ("*I am the Lord your God...*" "*For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.*"), whereas the remaining eight, spoken by Moses, refer to God in the 3rd person ("*Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not absolve those that take His name in vain*" (20:7).)

On the phrase, *they fell back at a distance*, the Midrash states, 'They fled in panic a distance of 12 *mil.*' This is approximately our 12 km and gives us an idea of the trauma that tradition attributes to the people, as reflected in the narrative.

What we know from modern Psychology about the repression of trauma may explain why Moses felt it necessary to repeat the full text of the Decalogue to the Israelites notwithstanding that that should have been uppermost in the minds of them all as *the* most important statement of the word of God to the nation.

However,

Repressed memory occurs when trauma is too severe to be kept in conscious memory and is removed by repression, dissociation, or both. At some later time, it may be recalled, often under innocuous circumstances, and reappear in conscious memory.²

Based on the Exodus account of the Israelites' traumatized state of mind, we may assume that they would hardly have taken in, let alone internalized at that time, the words of the Decalogue. Indeed, such a trauma would have had the opposite effect of blocking out their memory of it even after Moses took over the relaying of its contents. This, we suggest, might account for the fact that he found it necessary to reinforce the Decalogue in full in his final speech some forty years after it was first revealed.

TALMUDIC POLEMIC AND THE DECALOGUE

1st century CE Judea was awash with competing sects, cults, faiths, and philosophies, much like the situation today. Few Jews, other than those who had studied to an advanced level in yeshivot, had any concept of what we might call ‘Orthodoxy’ or consensus religious belief. Indeed, that concept was almost an anachronism. Read any page of Mishnah or Talmud and the differences of opinion among the leading sages on fundamental matters of halachic practice, let alone on abstruse theological concepts, are inescapable. We even find a sardonic Talmudic reference to ‘seven kinds of pseudo-pietist Pharisees.’³

This resulted in a situation wherein even the gentle sage, Hillel, was once heard to denounce the gullible, uneducated masses, pejoratively dubbed *ammei ha’aretz* (literally, ‘peasants,’ ‘ignoramus,’ or ‘provincials’)⁴ by the Talmudic intellectuals. He states, ‘An uncouth person (*boor*) cannot be sin-fearing, nor can an ignoramus (*am ha’aretz*) be pious.’⁵

His statement was true to the extent that the latter were particularly vulnerable to accepting at face value the plethora of pseudo-teachings, texts, and ideas, emanating from those most unreliable sources, especially from early Christian missionaries and other dissidents who were to be found on almost every street corner of Jerusalem and other towns. They also infiltrated the synagogues and lecture halls where they were eager to engage the rabbis and students in debate in the hope of bettering them, slighting Judaism, spreading their sectarian doctrines, and possibly winning converts.

It should not be forgotten that Paul’s various letters, to the Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, and Thessalonians – and subsequently incorporated into the New Testament - were all sent

to places of dense Jewish population to ensure the greatest success for their missionary objective.

So how did the sages counter such erroneous ideas? Since the Roman occupation of 63 BCE and the loss of Jewish autonomy, the Sanhedrin had to surrender to Rome its authority to inflict corporal or capital punishments on those guilty of religious or other transgressions. To compensate, the sages employed the word rather than the sword in their battle against defectors and those who rejected Torah's laws. Defeating them in debate, and exposing the flimsiness of their arguments and the distortions underlying their forced interpretations of biblical verses, was regarded as the most effective way to discredit them in the eyes of both the *ammei ha'aretz* as well as their own adherents.

Polemic was their preferred tools. This involved overemphasizing the authenticity and importance of the many religious traditions that the sectarians rejected. The case of the Decalogue represents one surprising example of this approach.

The Mishnah states that the Decalogue was originally recited before the three paragraphs of the *Shema* as part of daily morning prayer in the Temple,⁶ but was removed, 'on account of the insinuations of the heretics' (*mipnei tar'omet ha-minim*). The *minim* in question were the Pauline Christians who claimed that the entire Torah was mediated through Moses, a mere human agency, and was now replaced by a new dispensation in the form of The New Testament. Only the Decalogue they acknowledged as divinely authoritative and binding.

To rebut that dangerous belief the rabbis went to the extreme of demoting the Decalogue by

removing it from the statutory daily service, demonstrating thereby that the entire Torah, having also emanated from Sinai, was equally binding and that the Decalogue was not to be placed in a uniquely authoritative or sacred category as the Christians had done.

We might regard it as mystifying, however, that the sages were prepared to take such extreme action even in the cause of neutralizing the theological arguments of those they perceived as heretics. Their justification, however, was that Christianity – with its missionary summons to Jews far and wide to shed all their religious beliefs and practices and to gain salvation through faith in Jesus alone – was proving most attractive. They believed that they were not having to deal merely with the passing allure of some new-fangled cult or mystery religion, but rather with an attempt to eradicate Judaism.

The fear of Christianity's appeal also went hand in hand with its concerted effort to ingratiate its communities with the Roman occupation by dissociating themselves from the various Jewish uprisings, for which reason, according to the 4th-century Christian historian Eusebius, they fled to the city of Pella in the Jordan valley where they built their first church.⁷ They gambled – wisely, as it turned out – on the possibility that Christianity might, in time, win Rome's patronage and protection.

The Rabbinic authorities therefore felt the strongest need to send clear direction, especially to the uneducated masses, that the theology that was being promoted and the arguments marshaled by those messianic dissidents were preposterous and not to be countenanced. So, to counter all that, they even felt justified in removing the Decalogue from the liturgy.

THE FOUR-STROKED *SHIN*

Our final example (among the many) of efforts to combat sectarianism relates to the employment of the letter *shin* as represented on the outer side of the leather box that houses the head tefillin. This Hebrew letter, as we know, comprises three perpendicular strokes, and is so represented in an embossed form on the right-hand side of the wearer's head tefillin. However, if we look to its left side, we encounter the same letter *shin*, but endowed, uniquely, with four strokes. (If you don't believe me, check it out tomorrow morning!).

This prescription is not mentioned in the Talmud but is recorded for the first time in a work on the laws of tefillin entitled *Shimusha Rabba* (circa 10th cent.). No authoritative explanation for that *shin* – let alone for its four-stroked version – is offered, though some fanciful explanations have, inevitably, been proposed. We regard it as intrinsically connected to the Talmudic sources quoted above relating that originally the morning prayers included the Decalogue followed by the *Shema*, and that the former was removed in response to the 'insinuations' of the early Christians.

The Nash Papyrus,⁸ dating back to the 2nd century BCE, contains the Decalogue followed by the *Shema* and is regarded by scholars as a tefillin text from the period before the Decalogue was withdrawn from liturgical recitation. Significantly, among the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran were also tefillin containing the Decalogue; and we may assume that the latter was included in all tefillin before its withdrawal, together with that of the Decalogue, as a response to the Christian inflation of its holiness to the exclusion of the rest of the Torah.

We can now explain how the tradition arose to display a four-stroked shin on the left side of the head tefillin. This would have been another way of visually emphasizing the Pharisaic ban on the inclusion of the Decalogue which, together with the other four biblical passages,⁹ had originally comprised a total of five paragraphs. The four-stroked *shin* sent the clearly seen message that there were to be only *four* passages to be included in the tefillin, and not five with the addition of the Decalogue as the early sectarians insisted.

The *shin* was employed, therefore, to emphasize the fact that the very first letter of the four tefillin paragraphs was to be the *shin* of *Shema Yisrael*, not the *alif* of the first word of the Decalogue, *Anokhi Hashem Elohecha*.

NOTES

1. See *Rashi* on Ex. 20:15.
2. See [www.repressed memory](http://www.repressedmemory.com), Accessed 18/08/2024.
3. Tal. *Sota* 22b. See also, <https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/rabbis-seven-types-pharisees-talmud>. Accessed 21/08/2024.
4. For a discussion of the term *am ha'aretz*, See L. Finkelstein, *The Pharisees* (Philad: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), I, p.24ff.; II, pp.754-761.
5. See Mish. *Avot* 2:6.
6. Mish. *Tamid* 5:1; *Ta'anit* 2:2; Tal. *Ber.* 12a.
7. See *Eusebius, History of the Church*, 3.5.3.
8. The Nash Papyrus, housed in the Cambridge University Library, takes its name after the archaeologist, W.L. Nash, who discovered it in Egypt in 1898. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was the oldest known manuscript containing a text from the Hebrew Bible.

9. The four biblical passages included in our tefillin are *Shema* (Deut.6:4-9), *Vehayah im shamo'a* (Deut. 11:13-21), *Kadesh* (Ex. 13:1-10), and *Vehayah ki yevi'acha*.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey