



## THE UNIQUENESS OF the Aseret HaDibrot

The Rambam warns us against attributing any special sanctity to the *Aseret HaDibrot*, arguing that it is a fundamental tenet of our faith that every word in the Torah is sanctified. Yet the rational mind seeks to comprehend why these specific 10 *mitzvot* were given as a separate unit to the people of Israel. There must be a common denominator that links the 10 together and explains why these were transmitted as a ‘whole.’ One of the outstanding scholars of the last generation, Rabbi S. Y. Zevin,<sup>1</sup> argues that each one of the 10 – each for its own reason – represents some fundamental and unusual rule within the world of Halacha. While there is wisdom and depth to his presentation, one is left wanting; we seek to define one single principle that underlies all of the 10.

**6699** | **There must be a common denominator that links the 10 together.**

A second approach can be found in the principle formulated by Rav Saadia Gaon, quoted by Rashi at the end of *Parashat Mishpatim*: כל שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצוות בכלל עשרת הדברות הן. Rav Saadia Gaon authored his famous *Azharot* in which he subsumes all the *mitzvot* under the 10. We can say that each of the *Aseret HaDibrot* represents a root, a fundamental principle, and if one would

fulfill the 10, he would have accomplished all 613. While his approach is brilliant, one who studies the *Azharot* will find it difficult to be convinced that all the *mitzvot* can in fact be categorized under these 10 principles.

I am excited about an answer to our question that evolves from Rav Yosef Dov Soloveichik’s interpretation of an enigmatic statement of the *Mechilta*, quoted by Rashi in his commentary to the opening verse of the *Aseret HaDibrot* (Shemot 20:1):

וידבר אלקים. אין אלקים אלא דין, לפי שיש פרשיות בתורה שאם עשאן אדם מקבל שכר, ואם לאו אינו מקבל עליהם פריענות, וכול אף עשרת הדברות כן, תלמוד לומר וידבר אלקים – דין לפרע.

Which sections of the Torah fit this description of *Chazal* as containing commandments which ‘if one elects to fulfill them he will be duly rewarded, but if he decides not to perform them, he will suffer no punishment?’ Moreover, can this description apply to any of the *Aseret HaDibrot*?

The Rav explained that the key to unlock the mystery of this *Chazal* lies in the meaning of the particular Divine Name chosen to introduce the *Aseret HaDibrot*. The Name *Elokim* suggests two interrelated concepts: (a) G-d as the creator of the universe and (b) G-d’s role as a judge who metes out punishment. G-d as *Elokim* is the author of the natural order of the universe. The law of nature is inviolable. In this domain there is zero-tolerance. If a man jumps off a cliff, he

will perish. Just as *Elokim* legislates the laws of the natural order, so does *Elokim* legislate the moral laws that regulate human society. Here too, *Elokim* knows no tolerance. Violation of the moral law leads inevitably to disaster.

The *Aseret HaDibrot* are legislated by *Elokim*, the same *Elokim* that authored nature. Thus *Chazal* employ the description לפרע, meaning the seeds of destruction are inherent in the crime. While there are many *mitzvot* in the Torah for which the punishment for violation is left to the World to Come, this is not the case for the violations of the 10. Violation of the *Aseret HaDibrot* leads inevitably to disaster. To mention a few examples, one who disrespects his parents will not be honored by his children. Immorality leads to the breakdown of the family structure. Murder avenges itself upon the murderer. Idolatry destroys the religious makeup of society. Desecration of the Shabbat will result in a secular mode of living devoid of spiritual meaning.

Thus, the 10 represent the underlying fabric of man and his society, and are given by *Elokim* whose moral law, like His natural law, knows no toleration.

<sup>1</sup> *HaMoadim BeHalacha*, pp. 320-324.

Rabbi Azarya Berzon is the Rav and Rosh Kollel of the Emek Learning Center in Jerusalem, and has over 7,200 shiurim available online