The first Commandment, it would seem, is hardly a commandment at all! Unlike all the other commandments – which contain either a Do or a Don’t – Anochi Hashem Elokecha is a blunt statement of fact: I, Hashem, am your G-d.

An essential truth is being presented here, even before the enumeration of the Do’s and Don’ts: All the mitzvot which follow – not just the other nine in this list, but every one of the 613 mitzvot, which, by tradition, are contained within the Aseret HaDibrot – emanate from a Supreme and Divine source, G-d, who has the power to both dictate and enforce them. Without this ‘preamble,’ we might mistakenly consider these rules as the “10 Suggestions,” rather than immutable, eternal, mandatory foundation-stones of our belief system.

It is, leHavdil, akin to the policeman who first shows his badge and establishes his credentials prior to stating or administering the law.

This truth is reinforced and amplified by the adjoining statement that G-d took us out of Egypt, indicating that G-d accompanies us throughout history, and intervenes if and when the occasion is called for. Had He stated it was He who created the universe, we might have mistakenly thought that nature and history were set into motion at the beginning of time and left on their own to play out, in a sense leaving humanity to its own devices. Instead, we are assured that human events are inextricably interwoven with the Divine will, vigilant and transcendent, activated at the Almighty’s discretion.

All this is embodied within the name Anochi, and illustrated with a dramatic Midrash.

When Kayin kills Hevel, he is confronted by G-d and castigated for his crime. Hevel, however, plea-bargains. “HaShomer achi Anochi,” he says. Though usually understood as a question, it can also be interpreted as a statement. “The guardian of my brother – and indeed, of all life – is Anochi!” argued Kayin. “If Hevel is dead, then clearly You, Anochi, the arbiter of all Creation, wanted it to be that way!”

Of course, though G-d-Anochi does indeed have sway over life and death, He also grants freedom of choice to humanity, a freedom which Kayin abused, and ultimately must atone for.

But why the somewhat unusual term, Anochi? Would not Ani have served the same purpose? What does this particular name imply?

Numerous commentators have addressed this question. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says that Anochi connotes love; i.e. all of the dibrot are for the benefit of Am Yisrael and demonstrate G-d’s unending affection for His people. Rav Nechemia, however, states that Anochi is a statement of power and authority, as in Isaiah 45:12: “I, Anochi, made the Earth and placed Mankind upon it, My hands spread out the Heavens and brought the planets into existence.” Others see Anochi in terms of fear and trepidation, citing the story of the bechora, the birthright, wherein Ya’akov – disguised as Eisav and fearful of being found out – says, “Anochi Eisav bechorecha,” whereas Eisav merely states, “Ani Eisav.” Lekach Tov connects Anochi to G-d’s ability to forgive us when we err and comfort us when we suffer, as well as assuring us of Divine assistance, as in Bereishit 46:4: “Anochi will descend with you to Egypt and Anochi will bring you back up.” Lekach Tov sums up all this when he quotes Jeremiah 29:23: “I, Anochi, am the One who knows, and I bear witness.”

In short, G-d is watching.

1 “Anochi, Anochi hu menachemchem,” Isaiah 51:12.

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