



## Parshat Yitro

By Rabbi David Silverberg

Parashat Yitro tells of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, God's revelation to *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai and the declaration of the Ten Commandments. Maimonides, in one his most famous and strongly-worded responsa (46), fiercely denounces the practice observed in many communities to stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments in the synagogue. This gesture, he contends, suggests a degree of additional importance to these laws over the other *mitzvot* of the Torah, as though they apply with a greater level of obligation and severity than the rest of the Torah's commands. Maimonides draws our attention to the Gemara's comment in Masekhet Berakhot (12a) that the Sages forbade the institutionalized, daily recitation of the Ten Commandments due to *tir'omet ha-minim* – the allegations of the heretics that God requires the observance of only these commands. This account, Maimonides writes, suffices to reflect the Sages' insistence that we avoid any indication of ascribing special status to the Ten Commandments. As such, congregations must not make a point of standing during the reading of this section during the synagogue Torah reading.

Despite Maimonides' fierce opposition, this practice remains prevalent among many (or perhaps most) Ashkenazic congregations. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik suggested reconciling this custom with Maimonides' view by distinguishing between two kinds of readings. The section of the Ten Commandments is unique in that it features two different series of *te'amim*, or cantillation, known as the *ta'am tachton* and *ta'am elyon*. The *ta'am tachton* system arranges the cantillation and sentence breaks in a manner resembling all other sections in the Torah. The *ta'am elyon* arrangement, by contrast, results in each of the Ten Commandments occupying no more and no less than a single verse (the exception being the first two commandments, an issue that relates to the general question of the relationship between these two commandments). In some cases, as with regard to the fourth commandment (Shabbat observance), the effect is an unusually long verse; in other instances, such as the sixth through eighth commandments, the verse becomes exceptionally short – consisting of only two words. Different customs exist as to when the different cantillation systems are used, as documented by the *Magen Avraham* (494).

Rav Soloveitchik perceived these two systems as reflective of different experiences. When a congregation conducts the reading with the *ta'am tachton*, whereby the section of the Ten Commandments is read in a similar fashion to the standard Torah reading, this section is read just as other portions are read throughout the year. The *ta'am elyon*, however, which follows the structure in which the commandments were transmitted at Sinai, is used when we endeavor to relive, rather than recall, the event of the Revelation. When we employ this arrangement, we are recreating the moment of

*Ma'amad Har Sinai*, and not merely telling of this historical event. As such, it is perhaps appropriate to stand for this reading just as our ancestors stood in awe as they beheld the divine revelation. Our standing thus serves not as an expression of any special status ascribed to the commandments, but rather as part of our desire to collectively relive, recreate and re-experience the moment of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*.

Possibly, Rav Soloveitchik suggested, Maimonides' practice was to employ the *ta'am tachton* system, and for this reason he objected as strongly as he did to standing during the reading of the Decalogue. If we are simply recalling the events, then it is indeed inappropriate to afford greater honor to this section of the Torah. Once, however, we read with the *ta'am elyon*, in an effort to relive the experience of *Matan Torah*, it indeed becomes proper to stand in commemoration of the awe and dread that seized our ancestors as they stood at Sinai.

(For further discussion of this subject, see Rabbi Mordechai Kornfeld's essay at [www.dafyomi.co.il/parsha/archives/yitro.htm](http://www.dafyomi.co.il/parsha/archives/yitro.htm).)