

Shavuot 5775

There's a programme on the box called Britain's got talent. You've probably all seen it. Basically it's a big talent show and you come onto the stage with four judges and 1000 people in the audience. If you're liked by the way that you perform in the next 5 minutes and you're not beeped out by the judges, then you get into the next round. A major factor of your success is the reaction of the audience; if they all get up from their seats and give you a standing ovation then you're very likely to get into the next round.

The main Torah reading for Shavuot is from Yitro which speaks about the preparation to and the Giving of the Torah at Mt Sinai.

Our custom is that when it comes to the reading of the Decalogue; the Ten Commandments we stand. The reason is because here we have this most memorable event in history and we do not want it to go by without giving it the respect it deserves. So we stand. We give it a standing ovation. Also, when the Torah was given, the Children of Israel stood at the foot of the Mountain, so, reminiscent of that momentous event we stand, as did our ancestors.

No problem with that, you might have thought. However, in a responsum from Maimonides, he says that you shouldn't stand for the Decalogue. Au contraire; he says that you should really sit when it is recited.

Why did he have that view?

In the Mishnah in Tamid it is recorded that in the Temple times the Ten Commandments were recited every day as part of our prayers. In other words, in the morning section after Barchu before Shema, the Ten Commandments were added as part of the structure of the prayer.

Why was this done? Because, they wanted to impress on everybody the importance of the Ten Commandments and how fundamental they are to following Judaism.

However, it is also recorded that this custom was discontinued after the destruction of the Temple. Indeed the practice of reciting the Decalogue publicly in the Synagogue as part of the order of our prayers was completely outlawed.

Why was this? Because there were sects of heretical Jews who said that they only believed in the Ten Commandments, but the other 603 commandments out of the 613 are no longer relevant. So in order that the Jews at the time not make that mistake, our Rabbis expunged the reading of the Decalogue as part of the daily liturgy.

So now we understand Maimonides. If all the precepts of the Torah are equally important then we shouldn't have to stand specifically for the Ten Commandments because these words are just as valid as any of the other words of the Torah. If however, you differentiate and say that you stand for this part but not for others you are making a statement that these specific words are important but others not. Better, says Maimonides not to stand at all, and then you keep yourself out of hot water.

The dominant view does not follow Maimonides in this instance, and we stand when we read the Decalogue. So the question isAre we not conscious of the fears of Maimonides who says that putting too much emphasis on these ten and standing could be interpreted to mean that we believe only in the Ten commandments and not the others.?

The answer is that the view that there were only 10 commandments in the Torah and the rest of the mitzvot are no longer applicable is no longer a popular one and therefore we stand for the Ten Commandments reminiscent of how when the Torah was given.

I think there is a message here important to all of us.... there are no short cuts in Torah. What do I mean by this?

There are those to whom I speak and they try to reduce the level of obligation of the Torah-“its o.k. Rabbi I keep the ten commandments.” Or they reduce the Torah to one mitzvah -Love your neighbour as yourself. I’ve even been quoted to on the famous dictum of Hillel who said when approached by a potential convert who wanted to learn the entire Torah whilst standing on one foot the following: Don’t do unto others what you would not want done to yourself- “So Rabbi that’s the entire Torah and I don’t need to do any more.”

But they didn’t read it properly... They forget the next part of the statement four words- veidach perusha- zil gamor- the rest is commentary – now go and learn.

Yes- how you treat your fellow is fundamental to Judaism but also is the need to study and learn more.

As our Rabbis say “Great is the study of Torah that brings one to action.”

Have a Happy Shavuot