

The Torah portions starting with יתרו continuing through the end of the ספר שמות revolve around Gd presenting the Ten Commandments to the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. These Commandments represented the essence of the Torah forming the covenant between Gd and the people. According to Rabbeinu Saadiah Gaon, each of the 613 Commandments derive from one of the core ten. The acceptance of these Ten Commandments could be considered as a down payment on the acceptance of the rest of the Commandments, which would be revealed to them in detail over time. Immediately after the Ten Commandments are presented, Gd commanded Moses that the Priests may access the altar in the Tabernacle, and ultimately in the Temple, via a ramp and not by steps, for reasons of modesty. The next section in the Torah, משפטים, discusses interpersonal laws as well as torts and damages. משפטים concludes with the story of Moses offering sacrifices, sprinkling the people with water and blood and the famous pronouncement of נעשה ונשמע by the Jewish People. This is followed by the command to Moses to ascend the mountain to receive the laws in written form from Gd, followed by the command to build a Tabernacle followed by the various Commandments concerning dressing of the Priests and the sacrifices that were to be brought on a regular basis.

Where is the continuity of the narrative presented in the Torah? Building of the Tabernacle would appear to be the logical next step after being charged with the initial Commandments. In fact, as noted above, the first requirement after the Ten Commandments related to the altar which was a central part of the Tabernacle and ultimately the Temple. Why did the Torah interrupt the the narrative with the discussion of damages and torts in פרשת משפטים? A second question is, if the ceremony of the sacrifices and sprinkling of the people was so critical, why was it delayed till after the Commandments presented in פרשת משפטים? Why not mention this story immediately in context with the Ten Commandments?

The Gemara (Shabbos 31a) relates the story of the non-Jew who approached Shammai and asked, perhaps taunted, to be taught all of Torah while standing on one foot and after that he would convert to Judaism. Shammai removed the individual, as he rejected his request based on its apparent insincerity. One who makes such a request surely is acting out of mockery and contempt. This individual approached Hillel and made the same request. Unlike Shammai, Hillel replied that there is a single pre-requisite for converting to Judaism, acceptance of a critical

precept, דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור, that which you find offensive do not do to your friend. The rest of the Torah is an explication of this precept you can study the rest of your life after you sincerely convert. Where did Hillel find such a law or precedent regarding the process of conversion that would permit accepting a convert who simply acknowledges the precept of ואהבת לרעך כמוך? What about all the other intricate, detailed and important commandments a Jew must follow?

Perhaps the answer is that Hillel derived this idea from the original conversion that took place thousands of years before at Mount Sinai. The Jewish People underwent a mass conversion at Mount Sinai, attaining a new status as the עם סגולה, the treasured nation. The requirements for conversion that were established at the dawn of the Jewish nation were the acceptance of the 613 commandments, circumcision for a male, immersion in a מקוה, Mikvah, for both male and female and bringing a sacrifice to the temple. Prior to being declared full converts, the people had to accept upon themselves the obligation to fulfill Gd's Commandments. Before they could do that, they had to be taught what the Commandments entailed and required of them. There was no requirement to know each of the 613 precepts prior to conversion, a sample would suffice. (See Rambam who notes (הלכות איסורי ביאה 14:2) that we inform the prospective convert of the fundamental concepts of the faith and inform him of some of the commandments, including the obligations of שכחה ופאה.)

In addition to the Ten Commandments, the set of Commandments they were taught as a pre-requisite to consummating their conversion related to inter-personal relations. After all, they were recently freed slaves. Human nature might lead the enslaved individual who is freed after many years of slavery to assume the role of the tormentor, to exercise his newly acquired influence over those that might be less fortunate as was done unto him. The Torah tells us that such an attitude is antithetical to Judaism. If you want to convert to Judaism and follow its laws, you must first understand how to treat the less fortunate. You may acquire an עבד עברי, a Jewish servant, but you must make sure to treat him with dignity, for he is your brother. You may acquire a non-Jewish servant, but you must treat him with dignity as well. You must make sure to honor your parents and to treat the widow and orphan with empathy and respect. You must remember the Torah demands that

you disassociate yourself from the life style and ways of the Egyptians and Egyptian society, who showed contempt for the weak and less fortunate. They perverted inter-personal relationships to a degree that ignored the humanity of their fellow human being. A society that condones the drowning and murder of babies, even their own, is a society to shun. A society that knows no compassion or charity for others is the antithesis of Judaism. The society Gd intended for the Jews and a society like the Egyptians built are opposite sides of a coin. (See Maharal who discusses why the children of Jacob were enslaved specifically in Egypt in order to perfect their character in contrast to the depravity of Egyptian culture and society.)

Only after the children of Jacob understood and accepted this core set of commandments did Moses initiate the conversion process with the sacrifice and the sprinkling of the people detailed at the end of פרשת משפטים. Without full and proper acceptance of the commandments, specifically those that govern inter-personal relations, there would not have been a Jewish People and there would have been no need for a משכן. Only after that acceptance, did Gd instruct Moses about the complete set of laws regarding the building of the Tabernacle in the subsequent פרשת תרומה. This was the formula followed by Hillel and it has been the formula for conversion used by the Jewish People in subsequent generations.

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