

**Yitro 5769/2009: "Exodus and Relational Authority"**  
(c) Rabbi Menachem Creditor

It is striking to note the number of times God, during the first few Torah portions of Exodus, concludes and justifies a command with the words "Ani Adonai / I am God." Having God acknowledged by Egypt (see Ex. 7:5, 14:4,18) and by the Israelites (see Ex. 6:7, 10:2) seems exceedingly important, perhaps as the very goal of our entire redemption.

In our Parasha the very first of the Ten Commandments is a reassertion of the very same notion: "I, Adonai, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (Ex. 20:2)"

Why is God's being known the focus of so much text, the conclusion of so many mitzvot/commandments and the very first of the Sinaitic Commandments?

\*\*\*\*\*

There are times, when sending a child for a nap, in response to their protestation of not being tired, parents relive this text, saying something like "I'm not asking if you're tired. You're taking a nap because I am your father/mother." There are ample opportunities for exerting this kind of authority. But is it healthy?

In cases where a child fears their parent, the instruction/command asserted relationship is not "mutually shared interest," but rather a power play where the more powerful [person sets the agenda under threat of punishment. It is all too easy to slip into that parenting mode, to exercise coercion by overwhelming a child with the great power of being a "grown-up." It is all too easy to see - and therefore dismiss - the God of the Torah as an ancient concept of the Overpowering Cosmic Parent. This is power imbalance at the very least, and abuse at the very worst. Within this framework the child is made to feel helpless in the face of their parent. This is not a healthy parenting practice, nor is it a healthy theology.

Vicki Jackson, in a wonderful essay entitled "Transitional Discourse, Relational Authority, and the U.S. Court: Gender Equality," has a relevant comment:

"[There do exist] nonhierarchical judicial relationships experienced as shared locations of the authority to interpret the law... [T]here are mutually shared interests in defining the content of national, transnational and international norms... [This is a] persuasive rather than coercive authority. (p. 280-281)"

In other words, instead of interpreting the text as portraying God puffing up a Divine Chest and saying "Do you know with Whom you're dealing? Do what I say or else!" we might choose to see God's repeated Self-identification as declaration of relationship with the hope to persuade.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the case of committed adults in relationship, power struggle is also important to identify and address. Loving partners in healthy relationship do not control each other. Overpowering a partner is all too often a reality, a situation we know today as "Domestic Violence," an evil present in every community - Jewish included. The theology behind this disease is in dire need of reevaluation and its manifestations demand serious response.

What then is the alternative? Can the way we understand God in the book of Exodus influence the way we utilize power in our own human relationships?

One conceptual blessing of the feminist movement is the "Equal Power Relationship", a situation in which neither partner has clear power over the other, in which partners in relationship, be they parent/child, spouses, and I suggest even God/human, each carry relational power. An Equal Power Relationship is one which never subjects one partner to the will of the other. If one partner's opinion sways the other, it is based on mutual interest, on honest and healthy relationship.

Ultimately, Jackson's essay points out that relational authority (also called "persuasive authority") allows judicial courts to consider "materials that are not binding within the positive hierarchy of controlling legal norms. (p. 287)" Whereas civil law is also an Equal Power Relationship, both parties (adversaries) are forced into powerlessness before a judge/jury in order resolve a dispute, while a system of Relational Authority demands the parties involved achieve a solution of mutual interest.

Jackson quotes McGill Law Professor H. Patrick Glenn, who suggests that Persuasive Authority is an "authority which attracts adherence as opposed to obliging it" and which is consulted primarily because of its persuasiveness, in a quest to find better answers or solutions to legal issues. (ibid.)"

In a framework of Relational Authority the outcome is not more important than the sustained relationship.

\*\*\*\*\*

Therefore we ask: Must the human experience of the Torah's command necessarily be motivated by fear? Or might modern readers experience the Torah's assertion of "I am God" as a Divine Desire for relationship? Might adult relationships, based on a theology of relational authority, render both partners equally powerful? And, perhaps most elusive, might a healthy parenting methodology be learned from a Cosmic Parent who invokes relationship as the basis of command? In other words, can command be seen as testimony to God's commitment to being in relationship with humanity?

Antigonus of Socho is quoting as having taught:

"Do not be like servants who serve their master for the purpose of receiving a reward, but rather be like servants who serve their master not for the purpose of receiving a reward; let the awe of Heaven be upon you. (Pirkei Avot 1:3)"

Hold onto that teaching as you read this verse:

"I beseech You, Adonai, for I am Your servant. I am Your servant, Your handmaiden's son. You have freed my bonds. (Ps. 116:16)"

It is possible - it is sublime, to be a servant in this sense. It is not submission to be in relationship with the Divine. It is exaltation, a purposefulness waiting to be experienced in every mitzvah/command. We should not be motivated nor motivate others through a coercive system of punishment and reward. Rather, through healthy relationship with God we are truly free. That is the blessing of knowing God, of being bound with the sacred.

As the Indigo Girls sing: "The closer I am bound in love to you, the closer I am to free."

May we be so blessed.

---

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

-- [www.netivotshalom.org](http://www.netivotshalom.org)

-- [www.shefanetwork.org](http://www.shefanetwork.org)

-- [menachemcreditor.org](http://menachemcreditor.org)

To join Rabbi Creditor's email list, send a blank email to [thetisch-subscribe@yahogroups.com](mailto:thetisch-subscribe@yahogroups.com).