"*Va-etchanan*: The Decalogue: A paradigm for humanity"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen

At the end of his life, in the last year of Israel's wandering in the desert, Moses addresses Israel and reviewed all the events of the previous four decades. He also repeats the Ten Commandments that had been given to Israel shortly after they left Egypt, and which have contributed more to the development of an ordered society than any other religious text in history. For, at Sinai, we were given a moral constitution in the form of guidelines for the establishment of a society wherein man would be duty-bound to respect his neighbour's life, rights, and property, and to play his part in the achievement of the common good. Without that revelation at Sinai – and the message to the world that it sent out – the development of civilisation, as we understand it, would have been greatly delayed.

That is not an empty Jewish claim, but, I contend, an historical reality. We only have to consider the outlook of the ancient Greeks – whose ideas greatly influenced Roman society's thinking and behaviour - to appreciate how remote they were from the notion of the brotherhood of man.

Graeco-Roman philosophy and its perception of the world was rooted in the belief in 'mythos' as the core of reality. This meant that mythology in its entirety - the folklore that purported to describe the origins of the world, nature's elements, the gods (with all their loves, jealousies, and feuds) and their interaction with the human race, as well as the fantastical mythological creatures such as the half-man, half-horse, Centaurs, and the dead that inhabited the Elysian Fields - was accepted as incontrovertible historical fact. Human actions and fate, the Greeks believed, were directly influenced by the machinations, and

good- or ill- will of those forces. Myth was not viewed as fictitious. It and the course of history were, to their mind, intertwined.

The ramifications of this were clear. If human fate was determined not by the goodness or otherwise of our actions and the free expression of our will, but as fall-out from the interplay of some capricious and incomprehensible divinities, then our concerns would not be with ethical and moral behaviour and the improvement of our terrestrial world, but with a total preoccupation with the higher providers of our pleasure, to the exclusion of the needs and concerns of fellowman.

By the turn of the Common Era a disaffection with Greek polytheism had set in within a Roman society characterised by greater religious sophistication. This resulted in a recognition among many of the truth of monotheism, with a growing interest in the teachings of Judaism, leading, in turn, to large-scale proselytization of Roman pagans, especially among women. Some – who were dubbed *Sebomenoi* by the Greeks (In Rabbinic sources they are referred to as *Yirei HaShem,* 'God-fearers') - took on only a partial commitment to mitzvot, while those who embraced Judaism to the full were called *proselytoi* (Hebrew *gerim*). The early Christians were clearly influenced by the former to create their ethics-based religious system and to reject most of what they perceived as Judaism's legalism. (Against this background we can understand the force of the intercession for mercy, in the 13th Amidah blessing, on behalf of *gerei ha-tzedek*, 'the *righteous* converts' – as opposed to those whose commitment was less whole-hearted.)

The single code of law that even Christianity recognised as bearing the authority of heaven was the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, Ten Commandments or Decalogue. The rest of the Torah law they relegated to the status of 'man-made.' And it was the mass attraction of that brand of undemanding monotheism - which didn't call for any dramatic change of life-style on the part of the would-be convert - that, at the beginning of the 4th century CE, prompted the Emperor Constantine to declare Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. And, as the religion became disseminated across the globe, so did its moral, ethical, and cultural influence increase and its ability to change human behaviour.

Judaism has an important principle of *ha-karat ha-tov*, acknowledging the source of a teaching, and demonstrating gratitude for any benefit conferred. But Christianity has consistently fought shy of officially acknowledging Judaism as the source of its inspiration, the originator of its moral law, and the basis for its liturgy, rituals, festivals, a large proportion of its theological ideas, and the first of its two biblical 'Testaments'.

And hence our claim that, without that core revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, and its dual message of 'mitzvot applicable to God' and 'those applicable to man,' enshrined, for equal consideration, side-by-side on the Tablets of Stone – transmitted from Judaism to Christianity to the world - 'the development of civilisation, as we understand it, would have been greatly delayed.'

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The Torah thus taught the world the meaning of discipline, of curbing our appetites and passions, of accepting restraints on our freedom of will, on our behaviour and on what we can legitimately acquire; and that, no matter how desirable our neighbour's acquisitions may be, it is wrong to be envious or to contrive to secure them by force or subterfuge.

> *There was once a local newspaper that ran a competition to find out who was the most well-behaved, model, and exemplary citizen among its readership. One of the replies was from a man who boasted, "I don't smoke, drink, gamble or cheat on my wife; nor do I shirk any job I am given to do. I don't waste my time going to movies, clubs, or restaurants. I'm in bed early every night, awake bright and early every morning, and regularly attend religious services."*

In conclusion the man made the following observation:

> *"I've behaved like this for the last ten years. But just you wait till next year when they let me out of this hole!"*

There is a parallel here to the state of young adulthood. That man in prison behaved well because he had no other choice. He implied, however, that, once he had regained his freedom, he'd seize the opportunity to indulge to excess, to make up for all the things denied to him for so long. Understandably, he viewed the restrictions imposed on him as a punishment – which, in his situation, they were, indeed!

Children are also under the control of parents who discipline and lay down the law, certainly as regards social behaviour and moral and religious conduct. In loving parent-child relationships, however, children will not chaff at such impositions, and, as they develop, will come to appreciate that they were not punishments, but, rather, rules to ensure that they grow up to be law-abiding, disciplined, worthy and constructive members of society who can appreciate, and be appreciated by, those with whom they interact in all of life's multiple, often challenging, situations, and whose lives will, accordingly, be all the happier, richer, and more productive, for having learnt patience, control, and – ultimately - contentment.

Shabbat shalom,

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