

אקדמות 

On the first day of Shavuot, Akdamut is chanted as part of the Torah service, before the first aliyah, as an introduction to the Torah reading.

Shavuot celebrates God's gift of Torah to the Jewish people. On Shavuot, the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, are the focus of the Torah reading and thus represent the entire Revelation of Torah. The first words of this special poem, AKDAMUT MILLIN (introductory words), describe the poem's purpose — to introduce the Words of the Ten Commandments.

Akdamut was written in Aramaic by Rabbi Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai in twelfth-century Germany.

אִקְדָּמוֹת מְלִין וְשָׁרְיוֹת שׁוֹתָא
 אִוְלָא שְׁקֵלְנָא הֶרְמֵן וְרִשׁוֹתָא.
 בְּבִי תִרִי וְתִלֵּת דְּאֶפְתָּח בְּנִקְשׁוֹתָא,
 בְּבִי דְּבִרִי וְטִרִי עֵדִי לְקִשְׁשׁוֹתָא.
 גְּבוּרִין עֲלָמִין לִיָּה וְלֹא סָפֵק פְּרִישׁוֹתָא,
 גְּוִיל אֱלוֹ רְקִיעֵי, קִנִּי כָּל-חוֹרְשׁוֹתָא.
 דִּיּו אֱלוֹ יָמֵי וְכָל מֵי כְּנִישׁוֹתָא,
 דִּירִי אֶרְעָא סְפָרִי וְרִשְׁמֵי רִשׁוֹתָא.
 הֶדֶר מְרִי שְׁמִיָּא וְשְׁלִיט בִּיבְשׁוֹתָא,
 הֶקֶם עֲלָמָא יְחִידָאֵי וְכִבְשִׁיהַּ בְּכִבְשׁוֹתָא.
 וּבְלָא לֹא שְׁכַלְלִיהַּ, וּבְלָא תִשְׁשׁוֹתָא,
 וּבְאֶתָּא קִלְיָלָא, דְּלִית בֵּיהַּ מִשְׁשׁוֹתָא.
 זְמִין כָּל עֲבִידְתֵּיהַּ בְּהָךְ יוֹמֵי שְׁתָּא,
 זְהוּר יְקָרִיָּה עֲלֵי, עֲלֵי כְּרִסְיָה דְּאֶשְׁתָּא.
 חֵיל אֶלְף אֶלְפִין וְרְבוּא לְשִׁמְשׁוֹתָא,
 חֲדָתִין נְבוֹט לְצַפְרִין, סְגִיָּאָה טְרִישׁוֹתָא.

In Talmudic times the Torah was read in Hebrew but was accompanied by a translation into the vernacular, Aramaic, in order to enable the listeners to understand it. This is still done in Yemenite synagogues. In most European countries this practice was abandoned since the Aramaic Targum, as it is called, was not understood either. In some places, however, the Targum was read on two special occasions: when reading the portions about the splitting of the Sea (at the conclusion of Pesah) and the Ten Commandments (on Shavuot). Rabbi Meir ben Isaac, a contemporary of Rashi who lived in Worms, was a great liturgical poet who wrote the Aramaic acrostic Akdamut as an introduction to the Aramaic reading of the ceremony at Mount Sinai. In addition to its poetic description of Revelation and its praise of the divine law, it contains a magnificent picture of the eventual triumph of Judaism and the end of exile.

The Ten Commandments are not “merely” the core of a moral code, designed for all mankind. They are not “merely” an enunciation of principles conveyed to the human intelligence. They are also the critical initial episode in the making of a people out of a rabble of slaves; that is to say, they are to the phenomenon of civilized peoplehood what Genesis is to the phenomenon of the world order. . . . That is, it thrust aside the fantastic and often revolting cosmogonies of the ancient world and, in incomparable language, left upon the human mind the impression that the world order crystallized at God’s command. So with the Ten Commandments. They assert that the force in the making of a civilized people is God’s will and that without His will there is *tohu va-vohu*, formlessness and the void.

The Ten Commandments — taken in their setting — asserted for the ancients that the source of civilization and morality is not to be sought in the conflicting intentions of a multiplicity of divinities; and they assert for the moderns that it is not to be sought in the relativisms of the anthropologists — not in the *elan vital* but in the *elan divin*. . . .

If one denaturalizes the theophany at Sinai into naturalistic terms, the Bible as a whole disintegrates. For the Bible is not simply a collection of dogmas and episodes; it is essentially the record of a dynamic unfolding of the spirit through the medium of history, that is through the substance of human events.

Nor are we to understand that, at Sinai, God suddenly interposed Himself to create a people. His interposition is continuous. At Sinai He revealed Himself. At Sinai, wherever it is located, at a certain point in time, whenever we date it, a people saw God; or, rather, as the record itself says, a people became overwhelmingly aware of Him — He is not to be seen. And this flash of awareness became an everlasting fixation. In this fixation the people has endured when all its early contemporaries, as well as other people who came upon the world scene subsequently, have disappeared.

Maurice Samuel

FOR SHAVUOT

AKDAMUT

Akdamut praises God as Creator of the world. It highlights the inadequacy of any mortal attempt at such praise. The angels join in groups to praise the Creator. Yet wondrous and respectful as angels are, the praise of the people Israel is far more precious to God because of Israel’s unique devotion to God on earth. The people Israel have been enticed to join others in idolatry, but they have withstood temptation, maintaining their loyalty to God and Jewish tradition, anticipating the time when they will enjoy the Shekhinah, the splendor of God’s presence. All of us, the poet concludes, will be able to merit and enjoy that splendor by fulfilling the “Ten Words” presented at Mount Sinai by the living God: The words that embody God’s gift of Torah, which we are about to hear in the Torah reading.

Before reading the ten divine commands,
O let me speak in awe two words, or three,
Of the One who wrought the world
And sustained it since time’s beginning.

At God’s command is infinite power,
Which words cannot define.
Were all the skies parchment,
And all the reeds pens, and all the oceans ink,
And all who dwell on earth scribes,
God’s grandeur could not be told.

Sovereign over the heavens above,
God reigns supreme on earth below.
God launched creation unaided
And contains it in the bounds of His law.

Without weariness God created,
Only by divine will, uttered in a gentle sound.
God wrought His works in six days,
Then established His glorious sovereignty
Over the life of the universe.

Myriads of angelic hosts serve God,
Divine messengers that propel life’s destiny.
They arise each morning to their calling.

טְפִי יְקִידִין שְׂרָפִין, כְּלוֹל גְּפִי שְׂתָא,
 טַעַם עַר יְתִיֵּהב לְהוֹן שְׂתִיקִין בְּאֲדָשְׂתָא,
 יְקַבְּלוֹן דִּין מִן דִּין שְׂוֵי דְלֵא בְּשִׂשְׂתָא,
 יְקַר מְלֵי כַל-אַרְעָא, לְתַלְתֵּי קְדָשְׂתָא,
 בְּקַל מִן קְדָם שְׂדֵי בְּקַל מִי נְפִישׁוּתָא,
 כְּרוּבִין קְבַל גְּלָגְלִין מְרוּמְמִין בְּאוּשְׂתָא,
 לְמַחְזֵי בְּאַנְפָא עֵין פּוֹת גִּירֵי קְשָׂתָא,
 לְכַל אַתְר דְּמִשְׁתַּלְחִין, זְרִיזִין בְּאַשְׂתָא,
 מְבָרְכִין בְּרִיָּה יְקַרְיָה בְּכַל-לְשׁוֹן לְחִישׁוּתָא,
 מְאַתְר בֵּית שְׂכִינְתָּהּ, דְּלֵא צְרִיָּה בְּחִישׁוּתָא,
 נְהִים בְּלִי-חַיִּל מְרוּמָא, מְקַלְסִין בְּחִישׁוּתָא,
 נְהִירָא מְלִכּוּתְיָהּ, לְדַר דְּרָא לְאַפְרָשְׂתָא,
 סְדִירָא בְּהוֹן קְדָשְׂתָא, וְכַד חֲלָפָא שְׂעִתָא,
 סִינְיָא דְלַעֲלָם, וְאוּף לֵא לְשַׁבְּעִתָא,
 עַדב יְקַר אַחְסַנְתִּיהָ חֲבִיבִין דְּבִקְבַעְתָּא,
 עֲבָדִין לִיהָ חֲטִיבָה בְּדִנְח וּשְׂקַעְתָּא,
 פְּרִישָׁן לְמִנְתִּיהָ, לְמַעַבַּד לִיהָ רַעוּתָא,
 פְּרִישׁוּתִיהָ שְׂבַחִיהָ יַחְוִין בְּשַׁעוּתָא,
 צְבִי וְחַמֵּד וְרַגְג דִּילְאִין בְּלַעוּתָא,
 צְלוּתְהוֹן בְּכִן מְקַבֵּל וְהִנְיָא בְּעוּתָא,
 קְטִירָא לְחַי עֲלָמָא בְּתַנָּא בְּשַׁבְּעִתָא,
 קְבַל יְקַר טוּטְפָתָא יְתִיבָא בְּקַבְּעוּתָא,
 רְשִׁימָא הִיא גּוּפָא בְּחַכְמַתָּא וּבְדַעְתָּא,
 רְבוּתְהוֹן דִּישְׂרָאֵל, קְרָאֵי בְּשַׁמְעָתָא,
 שְׂבַח רְבוֹן עֲלָמָא, אַמִּירָא דְכּוּתָא,
 שְׂפַר עָלֵי לְחַוּיָּהּ, בְּאַפִּי מְלַכּוּתָא,
 תַּאִין וּמִתְפַּנְשִׁין בְּחַזוּ אֲדוּתָא,
 תְּמַהִין וְשִׁילִין לָהּ בְּעַסְק אֲתוּתָא.

In every generation each of us should feel as if he or she had personally stood at Sinai and received the divine revelation.

We stand at Sinai to hear the divine command, each of us according to our ability to understand it. We take upon ourselves the obligation to observe the will of God.

All the people answered as one, saying, "All that Adonai has spoken we will do!" (Exodus 19:8).

We stand at Sinai to make a covenant with God. We take upon ourselves the obligations of being God's people.

"Now, then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples" (Exodus 19:5).

We stand at Sinai newly liberated from bondage, bondage to human masters and bondage to false ideals. We become instead the servants of the Holy One.

"I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

We stand at Sinai to accept the yoke of God's sovereignty upon ourselves. We abjure the worship of all false gods.

"You shall have no other gods beside Me" (Exodus 20:3).

We stand at Sinai to become a people, mutually responsible for one another, pledged to continue and renew the traditions of our ancestors.

"It is not with our ancestors that Adonai made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today" (Deuteronomy 5:3).

Mount Sinai was uprooted from its place and the people came and stood underneath it [as under a *huppah*], as it says, "You came forward and stood under the mountain" (Deuteronomy 4:11). This is stated in the Sacred Writings: "O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice" (Song of Songs 2:14) — this refers to the Ten Commandments.

Mekhilta Bahodesh 3

Accepting the Sovereignty of God

"I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

A parable. To what may this be compared? To a king who entered a city and said to the populace, "I shall rule over you." They replied, "What have you done for us that you should rule over us?" What did he do? He fortified the city, ensured their water supply, and waged war on their behalf. Then he said to them, "I shall rule over you," and they responded, "Yes, O yes!" Thus the Holy One brought Israel out of Egypt, split the Sea for them, supplied them with manna, created a well for them, and supplied them with quail. God waged war for them against Amalek. Only then did God say to them, "I shall rule over you," and they replied, "Yes, O yes!" *Mekhilta Bahodesh 5*

All the celestial beings join in a chorus of praise;
In unison they call to one another:
All the earth is full of the glory of the thrice Holy One.

In a mighty roar,
As the thundering noise of vast waters,
Moving amidst the heavenly spheres
Where the divine light glows brilliant,
The angelic hosts proclaim their words of adoration:

Praised be God's glory by every whispering lip
From the place of His abode which is everywhere.
All the celestial hosts roar their response in awe:
The splendor of God's dominion
is acclaimed from age to age.

Yet dearer to God than this
Is the song of the children of Israel,
Rising to Him morning and evening,
In free outpourings of adoration.

Chosen to be the faithful servants of God's will,
They continually rehearse God's praises,
Who summoned them in love
to pursue the labors of Torah,
And accepts their supplications and entreaties,
Which weave a crown of glory for the Almighty.

The Eternal cherishes their prayers
And keeps them ever before Him,
Thus declaring the greatness of Israel
Who reiterate that God is One.

Israel acclaim the glory of the Ruler of the universe,
And offers God homage before kings and princes.
They all gather and ask in wonder,
Who is this your beloved, O fair one,
For whom you brave the perils of the lion's den?

Why was the Torah not given in the Land of Israel? So that the nations of the world would not be able to say, "Since it was given in Israel's land we did not accept it. . . ." Therefore it was given in the wilderness — openly, publicly, in a place belonging to no one. *Mekhilta Bahodesh 5*

מִזֶּן וּמִזֶּן הוּא רְחִימָךְ, שְׁפִירָא בְּרוּתָא,
 אַרוּם בְּגִינְיָה סְפִית מְדוּר אַרְיִוּתָא.
 יִקְרָא וַיֵּאָה אַתָּה, אֵין תַּעֲרְבִי לְמִרוּתָא,
 רְעוּתְךָ נַעֲבִיד לִיךָ, בְּכָל-אַתְרוּתָא.
 בְּחֻמְתָּא מְתִיבְתָּא לְהוּן קֶצֶת לְהוֹדְעוּתָא,
 יִדְעָתוּן חֻמְיָן לִיָּה בְּאַשְׁתְּמוּדְעוּתָא.
 רְבוּתְכוֹן מַה חֲשִׁיבָא קָבֵל הָהִיא שְׁבַחְתָּא,
 רְבוּתָא דִּיעֵבֵד לִי, כִּד מְטִיא יִשׁוּעָתָא.
 בְּמִיתִי לִי נְהוּרָא, וְתַחֲפִי לְכוּן בְּהָתָא,
 יִקְרָה כִּד אַתְּגַלִּי בְּתַקְפָּא וּבְגִיּוּתָא.
 יִשְׁלַם גְּמִלְיָא לְסַנְיָי וְנִגְוָתָא,
 צְדֻקְתָּא לְעַם חֲבִיב וְסִגְיָא זְכוּתָא.
 חֲדוּ שְׁלָמָא בְּמִיתִיָּה וּמְנִי דְכִיתָא,
 קְרִיתָא דִּירוּשָׁלַם כִּד יְכַנֵּשׁ גְּלוּתָא.
 יִקְרִיָּה מְטִיל עֲלֵהּ בְּיוֹמֵי וְלִילוּתָא,
 גְּנוּנְיָה לְמַעֲבַד בֵּיה בְּתַשְׁבְּחוֹן כְּלִילְתָא.
 דִּזְהוּר עֲנִיָּא לְמִשְׁפַּר כִּילְתָא,
 לְפּוּמִיָּה דְעֵבְדְתָא עֲבִידִין מְטַלְלְתָא.
 בְּתַחֲתֵיקֵי דְהַב פִּיזָא וְשִׁבְעַ מַעְלָתָא
 תְּהִימִין צְדִיקֵי קָדָם רַב פְּעֻלְתָּא.
 וְרִיּוּהוּן דְּמִי לְשַׁבְעָא חֲדוּתָא,
 רְקִיעָא בְּזוּהֲרָה וְכוּכְבֵי זִיּוּתָא.
 הֲדָרָא דְלֹא אֲפֻשֵׁר לְמַפְרֵט בְּשִׁפּוּתָא,
 וְלֹא אֲשַׁתְּמַע וְחָמֵי נְבִיאָן, חֲזוּתָא.
 בְּלֹא שְׁלֵטָא בִּיָּה עֵין, בְּגוּ עֵין גְּנִיתָא,
 מְטִילִי בִי חֲנֻנָא לְבַהֲדֵי דְשְׁכִינְתָא.
 עֲלִיָּה רְמִזֵי דִין הוּא, בְּרַם בְּאַמְתְּנִיָּתָא,
 שְׁבַרְנָא לִיָּה בְּשִׁבְנֵן, תְּקוּף הַמְנוּתָא.

The events of Sinai are of supreme importance to us because they signify the making of the covenant between God and Israel, by which we became a people wedded to the Divine.

If one believes that communication is possible between God and humanity, if one believes that a covenant was made at Mount Sinai in which the people of Israel pledged to become a holy nation, a nation belonging exclusively to God and desiring to live according to God's will — the highest possible moral and ethical standards — then the events at Sinai and Shavuot, the holiday that commemorates those events, have tremendous significance.

The biblical account itself depicts these events as a covenant ceremony. One cannot prove that the event actually occurred as described, or even that it happened at all, but it would indeed be strange if this entire tradition had no basis whatsoever. The covenant is a reality of Israel's being, as is the way in which Israel understood that covenant.

We did indeed receive our Torah at Sinai, for Torah means God's instruction. We became aware of God at Sinai, overwhelmingly so. We accepted God's commanding presence and the terms of the covenant. That was the seed from which the Written Torah and the extensions of it we call the Oral Torah both sprang. To celebrate what happened at Sinai reaffirms the basis of our existence: the covenantal relationship with God and the striving to translate that covenant into study (Torah) and ways of living (mitzvot).

“The heavens belong to Adonai, but the earth He gave to human beings” (Psalm 115:16). Said Rabbi Yose: Neither Moses nor Elijah ever ascended to heaven, nor did God descend to earth. Rather it says: “And Adonai called Moses to the top of the mountain” (Exodus 19:20) — God said to Moses, “I shall call to you through the top of the mountain, and you shall ascend.” Mekhilta Bahodesh 4

**Accepting the Yoke
of the Commandments**

“You shall have no other gods beside Me” (Exodus 20:3).

A parable. A human king entered a city. His ministers said to him, “Proclaim your edicts to them.” He said to them, “No. When they accept my sovereignty, then I shall proclaim my edicts. For if they do not accept my sovereignty, will they obey my edicts?” Thus God said to Israel, “I, Adonai, am your God [and only then] You shall have no other gods beside Me — I am the One whose sovereignty you accepted in Egypt.” They said to God, “Yes, O yes.” [God then continued,] “As you have accepted My sovereignty upon yourselves, accept now My edicts — ‘You shall have no other gods beside Me.’”

Mekhilta Bahodesh 5

If you but join our fold,
We would cover you with splendor and glory;
In every land would we ratify your every wish.

A wise reply is Israel’s:
How can you know God with your foolish minds?
How compare the glories you bestow
With the glory that is God’s,
With the splendor of God’s deeds
In the hour of our deliverance,
When the light divine will shine on us,
While darkness covers your mocking multitudes,
When God will manifest His glorious might
And render His foes their due,
And triumph to the people
Abounding in virtue
Whom God has loved.

Joy unmarred will reign in hearts ennobled, pure.
Jerusalem will rise again;
Her exiled children will come back to her.
Day and night God will shed His glory on her,
And build in her anew His sacred shrine of praise.

The righteous will possess the reward for their service.
They will dwell before their Creator,
Arrayed on golden thrones,
With seven steps ascending,
Resplendent as the azure of the sky
And the brightness of the stars.

They will acclaim God:
It is God we trusted with faith unyielding
In the days of our captivity.
God will lead us forever,
Renewing us with the glee of youthful dancers.

.....

יִדְבַר לָן עֲלֵמִין עֲלֵמִין מִדְמוּתָא,
 מִנֵּת דִּילָן דִּמְלֻקָּמִין פֶּרֶשׁ בְּאַרְמוּתָא.
 טְלוּלָה דְלוּיָתָן וְתוֹר טוֹר רְמוּתָא,
 וְחַד בְּחַד כִּי סְבִיף וְעֵבֵד קְרִבוּתָא.
 בְּקִרְוֵהי מִנְגַח בְּהִמּוּת בְּרַבְרִבוּתָא,
 יִקְרִטֵעַ נוּן לְקַבְלִיָּה בְּצִיצוּי בְּגִבוּרָתָא.
 מְקָרֵב לֵיהּ בְּרִיָּה בְּחִרְבִּיָּה רְבִרְבָּתָא,
 אֲרִסְטוֹן לְצִדִּיקֵי יִתְקַן וְשְׁרוּתָא.
 מְסַחְרִין עֲלֵי תְכִי דְכִכְבֵּד וְגוּמְרָתָא,
 נְגִידִין קְמִיהוּן אֲפֶרְסָמוֹן נְהָרָתָא.
 וּמְתַפְנֵקִין וְרוּוּ בְכִסֵּי רֵוִיָּתָא,
 חֲמַר מֵרַת דְּמִבְרָא שִׁית נְטִיר בֵּי נְעוּתָא.
 זְבָאִין, כַּד שְׁמַעְתוּן שְׁבַח דָּא שִׁירָתָא,
 קְבִיעִין בְּן תְּהוּוֹן בְּהִנְהוּ חִבוּרָתָא.
 וְתִזְכּוּן דִּי תִיתְבוּן בְּעֵלָא דְרָתָא,
 אֲרִי תִצִּיתוּן לְמֵלוּי, דְנִפְקִין בְּהִדְרָתָא.
 מְרוּמָם הוּא אֱלֹהִין בְּקִנְיָא וּבְתִרְיָתָא,
 צְבִי וְאַתְרַעֵי בְּן וּמְסַר לָן אֲוִרִיָּתָא.

How were the Ten Commandments presented?
 There were five on each of the two tablets.

“I am Adonai your God” (Exodus 20:2) was written on one tablet and opposite it on the other was written “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13), indicating that one who sheds blood is considered to have diminished the Divine Image. A parable. A human king entered a city, and images of him were hung, likenesses were erected, and coins were struck [with his image]. After a while, they upset the images, broke the likenesses, and defaced the coins — diminishing the image of the king. Thus if one sheds blood, he is considered to have diminished the Divine Image, as it is said, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God was man created” (Genesis 9:6).

“You shall have no other gods beside Me” (Exodus 20:3) was written on one tablet and opposite it was written “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:13), indicating that one who worships idols is considered to have committed adultery in reference to God, as it is said: “You were like the adulterous wife who welcomes strangers instead of her husband” (Ezekiel 16:32).

“You shall not swear falsely” (Exodus 20:7) was written on one tablet and opposite it was written “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:13), indicating that if one steals he will eventually come to swear falsely, as it is said: “Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely?” (Jeremiah 7:9).

(continued on opposite page)

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8) was written on one tablet, and opposite it was written “You shall not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:13), indicating that if one desecrates the Sabbath it is as if he testifies before the One Who Spoke and the world came into being that God did not create the world in six days nor rest on the seventh. If one observes the Sabbath it is as if he gives testimony before the One Who Spoke and the world came into being that God did create the world in six days and rested on the seventh, as it is said: “My witnesses are you, declares Adonai” (Isaiah 43:10).

“Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12) was written on one tablet and opposite it was written “You shall not covet” (Exodus 20:14), indicating that if one covets, he will sire a son who will curse his own father and give honor to one who is not his father.

For this reason the Ten Commandments were presented five on one tablet and five on the other. This is the teaching of Rabbi Hananya ben Gamliel.

However the Sages say, “There were ten on each of the two tablets, as it is said: “Adonai spoke these words . . . He inscribed them on two tablets of stone” (Deuteronomy 5:19).

Mekhilta Bahodesh 7

We will possess the portion
 God set apart for us in ancient days.
 Leviathan and the wild ox of the mountains
 Will charge and contend with each other,
 The beast goring fiercely with its horns,
 The sea monster striking with its mighty fins.

But Adonai will make an end of them
 With His great sword,
 And prepare a banquet for the righteous.

They will sit at tables of precious stones,
 Rivers of balsam flowing before them;
 And they will drink the precious wine
 Stored for them from the first of days.

O you upright who have heard the song of God’s praise,
 May you ever be in the blessed circle of God’s faithful.

Through all eternity, exalted be Adonai
 Who conferred true love upon us
 By entrusting to us the Torah.

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