



# 5 ways

to describe the Mt Sinai experience

Interpretation of the text surrounding the ‘Ten Commandments’ is vital to grasping the centrality of the Torah to Judaism and how it is viewed as God’s great gift of love and liberation. Let’s hear from the medieval Torah scholar Rashi, and others in the tradition:

## 1. Unifying.

*‘Israel encamped there’* (Exod.19:2). Rashi notes that the Hebrew verb for ‘encamped’ is in the singular form, indicating that by the time they reach Mt Sinai the people are of one mind and heart. The Torah remains the basis for uniting the Jewish people, whatever their internal differences and struggles.

## 2. Liberating.

*‘The blare of the horn grew louder and louder’* (19:19). According to the Zohar (from Jewish mystical tradition) the horn/*shofar*, which in the bible is used to announce the release of slaves, here announces the Torah’s message of freedom. Note how the Sinai event builds upon the Exodus event.

## 3. Immediate.

*‘You have seen..how I bore you on eagles’ wings’* (19:4). Rashi notes that the Israelites’ knowledge of God arises from first-hand encounters of God’s action in their lives.

## 4. Loving.

*‘Moses led the people out of the camp toward God’* (19:17). Says Rashi, as Israel went out toward God, the Divine Presence *‘went out towards them like a bridegroom who goes out to greet his bride.’*

## 5. Intimate.

Likewise, the Talmud connects the Sinai revelation with the day of the Sabbath since this is the day of intimate union—for wives and husbands, and for human beings and their Creator.

# Light of Torah

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## Why reflect on Torah?

This week’s Torah portion tells the story of the ‘Ten Commandments.’ In fact the Hebrew word for ‘commandment’ is not used at this point in the text. Ten ‘Words’ or Ten ‘Statements’ is a closer translation, hence the alternative title: ‘Decalogue.’

Moses’ reception of the Decalogue on Mt Sinai, in the sight and hearing of the whole people gathered, is a powerful biblical scene. It is a defining moment for the Israelites whose corporate experience of this revelation leads to a deepened sense of being called by God as a people. The liberation of the exodus is now encoded as a way of life. The Lord of creation is now understood to be the Lord of history. Israel’s identity is built on this ‘giving of the Torah’ (*Torah*: God’s ‘teaching, instruction, law’). Of course, God’s gift of Torah is understood to include much more than ten statements; in the Jewish view it encapsulates the entire corpus of Jewish sacred writings, biblical and extra-biblical (Written and Oral Traditions).

By exploring the Mt Sinai event through the eyes of the Jewish sages, as Christians we can better grasp this foundational text in our own tradition, and why Jesus is referred to as ‘Living Word/Living Torah’.

Exodus 18:1—20:23

*Yitro*: Jethro



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 18:1–20:23

Our Torah portion opens with the visit of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who influences Moses' leadership practices.

It then moves to the giving of the Law—the Torah ('instruction')—on Mt Sinai. There, in the presence of the whole community, God reveals the divine teaching that welds the God-Israel relationship into an everlasting covenant. The Torah describes this moment as theophany; God who is beyond all things draws his people into the Divine Presence in a radically new way.

## Tasting Torah

*"Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Eternal had come down upon it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder."*

(Exodus 19:18-19)

Read Exodus 19 which describes the steps leading up to the giving of the Torah. Note the amount of preparation involved, the public gathering, the dramatic sights and sounds, the awe of the people, the solemnity of Moses' approach... Before the Lord actually speaks the 'Ten Commandments' what is the Torah trying to tell us about this moment? Ponder this with a friend in *havrutah*.

## Touching Torah

As the sages explore this event they note that the text speaks of fire, smoke, cloud and thunder before and after the Decalogue, but there is no mention of extraordinary signs during the Decalogue itself. Says the Midrash, when God speaks the earth falls silent:

*"When God gave the Torah, no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, the Seraphim did not say 'Holy Holy,' the sea did not roar... The whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the Voice went forth."*<sup>1</sup>

In and beyond the celestial drama the sages detect an exquisite thread of loving intimacy as God draws close to his people in an unprecedented way. It's not just 'what' is said in the celebrated Ten Words, it is 'how'. Even silence can be interpreted.

## Depthing Torah

So convinced were the sages of the radical depths of the relationship forged between God and Israel via the gift of Torah that in the Midrash the angels are appalled at the idea!

*"When Moses ascended to heaven, the angels complained... 'What is a mere mortal doing here in our midst?' God replied, 'He has come to receive the Torah.' The angels replied... 'It is fitting that you give Torah to us in heaven. Why? Because we are holy and pure and it is pure and holy... far better that it remain with us.' The angels contended with the Holy One on this matter, and when the tablets were broken by Moses, they rejoiced and said, Now the Torah will be restored to us."*<sup>2</sup>

Abraham Heschel<sup>3</sup> observes that in traditional Jewish interpretations one finds Torah's heavenly essence personified: thus Torah is God's darling daughter whose splendor never wanes, even after she departs from the divine domain to be among mortals. While not to be equated with Christian doctrine of Incarnation, Christians will note a certain resonance here with their own belief in the divine Son. Heschel himself remarks on this "as a striking example of similarity-with-difference between Judaism and Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

## Doing Torah

Continue to ponder this powerful divine-human encounter as described in Exodus and interpreted by the sages (see overleaf). How does it enrich and challenge your own Christian view of the Ten Commandments?



## Deeper still...

An added challenge for seasoned Light of Torah readers and their havrutah partners: Ponder this...

If, as the sages hold, the Decalogue is not an isolated teaching but part of a great, integrated schema of divine teachings ('Torah'), why is it given 'special treatment' in the bible? Why does it appear to be 'set apart' from all the other commandments (hence we readily refer to 'the Ten Commandments')?

Enjoy the thrill of the question, and the debate!

1. Exodus Rabbah 29:9
2. Midrash on Psalms 8:2
3. Heschel, 20th c. Jewish theologian.
4. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 323.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 1995, 1999); Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, (NY, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1994). Scripture: JPS.