

Obligation as the Human Condition

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Source Sheet by Mara Benjamin

Exodus 7:26

(26) The LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: **Let My people go that they may worship** [ו.ד.ב.] Me.’

שמות ז':כ"ו

(כו) ויאמר ה' אל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר ה' שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי:

Exodus 19:3-8

(3) ... The LORD called to him [Moses] from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: (4) ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. (5) Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, (6) but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.” (7) Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the LORD had commanded him. (8) All the people answered as one, saying, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the people’s words to the LORD.

שמות י"ט:ג'-ח'

(ג) ... וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן-הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ד) אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל-כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבִיא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי: (ה) וַעֲתָה אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי וְהִיִּתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים כִּי-לִי כָּל-הָאָרֶץ: (ו) וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קֳדוֹשׁ אֲלֵה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ז) וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיִּשָּׂם לִפְנֵיהֶם אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ ה': (ח) וַיַּעֲנוּ כָּל-הָעָם וַיִּחַדְּדוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וַיִּשָּׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבַרֵי הָעָם אֶל-ה':

Shabbat 88a

They stood at the foot of [literally, "under"] the mount (Exodus 19:17):

שבת פ"ח א

Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: this teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, good; if not, there will be your grave. Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said: From here there is a substantial claim against Torah! Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: "They ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them" (Esther 9:27): They ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר אמר רב אבדימי
בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקדוש
ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר
להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב
ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם אמר רב
אחא בר יעקב מכאן מודעא רבה
לאורייתא אמר רבא אף על פי כן הדור
קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש דכתיב קימו
וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר

Deuteronomy 29:13-14

(13) I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, (14) but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the LORD our God and with those who are not with us here this day.

דברים כ"ט:י"ג-י"ד
(יג) וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי כִּירַת
אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת: (יד)
כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹו פֹה עִמָּנוּ עִמְד הַיּוֹם
לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה
עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Thomas Jefferson, U.S. Declaration of Independence

The principal word in Jewish law, which occupies a place equivalent in evocative force to the American legal system's "rights" is the word *mitzvah*, which literally means commandment, but has a general meaning closer to "incumbent obligation."

Robert Cover (legal theorist)

Children are the last binding obligation in a culture that asks for almost no other permanent commitments at all.

Jennifer Senior, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*

