



This week we arrive at the defining portion of the Torah, Parashat Yitro, which contains the giving and receiving of the Ten Commandments. Our master narrative does not *only* focus on the redemption from Egypt and the survival of the Jewish people. The master Jewish narrative *also* focuses on what comes *from* our redemption, namely, an experience of

revelation and the receiving of Torah: the blueprint for communal living and the interests of all humanity

The Torah imagines that God declared that the people shall be *mamlechet cohanim v'goy kadosh* – a nation of priests and a holy people. That phrase, *goy kadosh* appears nowhere else in the bible, and fuses the secular notion of peoplehood with the sacral notion of holiness, that which Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan called the sacred vocation of the Jewish people, to act in the service of the divine.

The collective responsibility of the Jewish people involves ethical monotheism, shunning idolatry, respecting the presence of God, honoring the need to rest from our labors, respecting our parents, protecting human life, establishing faithful relationships, respecting the property of others, living, and acting with integrity, and avoiding jealousy.

Amid *seeing the thunder and lightning* (Ex. 20:16), the people experience a profound awareness of their surroundings, and declare later that “*they* will do, and *they* will listen.” The use of the plural is meant to suggest that the receiving of Torah was understood as a *collective divine gift*.

These commandments fortify later biblical and rabbinic laws that require us to care about what makes the Jewish people unique, *and* to care how our behavior towards others must reflect our relationship with the Divine.

In the creation of a just society, *all people* must take upon themselves the burden and the responsibility of following laws that seek to protect everyone. The Ten Commandments challenge us to comply, reject, or cope with their meaning *in community*, lest we wear ourselves out in an isolated struggle to understand the fundamental quandaries of human life.

As the hours ticked by on Saturday and the rabbi and 3 congregants of Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas continued to be held hostage at gunpoint, I felt an extraordinary bond with Jewish communities across the globe. In waiting, I felt the connective tissue strengthened not only by the terror I imagined we shared, but the sacred vocation outlined by these commandments of what it is to be a Jew in the 21st century.

May our communities continue to be places where the Divine “comes and blesses” the inhabitants.

