

Va'etchanan

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week's reading includes the second version of the Ten Principles (misleadingly called the Ten Commandments). If you remember, Moshe came down from Sinai the first time, saw the Golden Calf, smashed the tablets of stone, and eventually went back up and received a second copy. This version differs in several relatively minor ways from the first. The principles are the same but there are interesting variations in the wording.

The most interesting one is that in the first version the instruction to keep Shabbat is phrased as "Remember" the Shabbat because God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. In the second version, read this week, the instruction is to "Keep" the Shabbat because we should remember that we were slaves in the land of Egypt. Why the differences?

One explanation of the two words "Keep" and "Remember" is to suggest that they were identical and meant the same thing. The word "Remember" should involve "keeping" and vice versa—otherwise what is the value of remembering? And indeed what is the value of keeping if not for a greater and Divine purpose?

But in truth there is a similar parallel between Creation and the Exodus. Creation implies that there are two levels to life—the active, working, material six days, which need to be combined with a spiritual dimension. The concept of withdrawal from society, not becoming dependent on the material alone, is essential for a balanced life, being part of the material world but having something more.

Slavery means being entirely at the beck and call of another human. It is another side of a material world, dominated by work and the absence of self-determination. Being free means that we are able to control more of our lives.

Of course we are all determined and controlled to some degree. But the measure of spirituality is the extent to which we can add another dimension and be fuller humans, precisely because we can combine work with spirituality.

So in fact both explanations add up to the same idea. Participate in society and be part of the material world, but try to add something more. Try to express freedom by living a fuller life. For that is what we were created for, the maximum self-expression, not just the physical.