

THE GRAMMAR OF GOD

*A Journey into the Words
and Worlds of the Bible*

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SPIEGEL & GRAU / NEW YORK

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יְהוָה

1 The ten Commandments. 18 The people are afraid. 20 Moses comforteth them. 22 Idolatrie is forbidden. 24 Of what sort the Altar should be.

- 1 And God spake all these words, saying,
- 2 I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
- 3 Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.
- 4 Thou shalt not make vnto thee any grauen Image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heauen aboue, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water vnder the earth.
- 5 Thou shalt not bow downe thy selfe to them, nor serue them: For I the Lord thy God am a ieaious God, visiting the iniquitie of the fathers vpon the children, vnto the thirde and fourth generation of them that hate me:
- 6 And shewing mercy vnto thousands of them that loue mee, and keepe my Commandments.
- 7 Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vaine: for the Lord will not holde him guiltlesse, that taketh his Name in vaine.
- 8 Remember the Sabbath day, to keepe it holy.
- 9 Sixe dayes shalt thou labour, and doe all thy worke:
- 10 But the seuenth day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not doe any worke, thou, nor thy sonne, nor thy daughter, thy man seruant, nor thy mayd seruant, nor thy cattell, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:
- 11 For in sixe dayes the Lord made heauen and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seuenth day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and halowed it.
- 12 Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy dayes may bee long vpon the land, which the Lord thy God giueth thee.

- 13 Thou shalt not kill.
 14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.
 15 Thou shalt not steale.
 16 Thou shalt not beare false witnes against thy neighbour.
 17 Thou shalt not couet thy neighbours house, thou shalt not couet thy neighbours wife, nor his man seruant, nor his maid seruant, nor his oxe, nor his asse, nor any thing that is thy neighbours.
 18 And all the people saw the thundrings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountaine smoking: and when the people saw it, they remooued, and stood a farre off.
 19 And they saide vnto Moses, Speake thou with vs, and wee will heare: But let not God speake with vs, lest we die.
 20 And Moses said vnto the people, Feare not: for God is come to prouoe you, and that his feare may bee before your faces, that ye sinne not.
 21 And the people stood afarre off, and Moses drew neere vnto the thicke darkenes, where God was.
 22 And the Lord said vnto Moses, Thus thou shalt say vnto the children of Israel, Yee haue seene that I haue talked with you from heauen.
 23 Ye shall not make with me gods of siluer, neither shall ye make vnto you gods of gold.
 24 An Altar of earth thou shalt make vnto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheepe, and thine oxen: In all places where I record my Name, I will come vnto thee, and I will blesse thee.
 25 And if thou wilt make mee an Altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewen stone: for if thou lift vp thy tooles vpon it, thou hast polluted it.

26 Neither shalt thou goe vp by steps vnto mine Altar, that thy nakednesse be not discovered thereon.

Exodus 20:1-26, King James Bible (1611)

“MOSAIC LAW CAN BE HARSH,” MARILYNNE ROBINSON SAID to the class one day, and I looked up in surprise. First of all—what was “Mosaic law”?

Jewish law, as practiced today, comes from the Mishna and the Talmud, written by rabbis who lived many centuries after Moses. The laws codified by the Mishna, themselves the result of about two hundred years of debate, are further enveloped by volumes of discussion and argument, written down in the Talmud. The Talmud is part of what is called *Torah sh'be'al peh*, or Oral Law. The law in the Torah itself is not considered the final word; instead, Orthodox Jews accept both the Torah law, or written law, and the Oral Law. Without the commentary of the rabbis, perhaps parts of “Mosaic law” do seem harsh. But no one who grew up immersed in Jewish text understands “an eye for an eye” to mean an actual eye for an actual eye. Instead, the idea is to take something equivalent to the harm, which generally means a monetary punishment.

But the whole mention of “Mosaic law” and its “harshness” makes me think that reading the Bible in translation is not just a matter of language. The Hebrew Bible is a lived text, and in the community I grew up in, it was never read alone. Instead, the Bible is part of a constellation of texts; Jewish law, too, comes not

only from the Bible itself, but from the various texts *discussing* what the Bible actually means. Conversation, then, is an integral part of law, even to Jews who believe the Bible is the word of God dictated to Moses.

While I am thinking about this issue, I go back to my high school to hear an alumnus, who is now a law professor, give a talk on what makes Jewish law different from other types of law. He points out that in Roman law, the emperor decided what was right. In British law, the king decided what was right. But in Jewish law, the king is not allowed into the court of law; there is a barrier between law and power. Beyond that, the power to decide exactly what a law means is given to human beings, so Jewish law is necessarily flawed, being human, and not a thing of God. It is something that people discuss. The professor also says that he views the weekly reading of the Torah as a weekly reading of the law, so that every listener can familiarize himself with the law instead of just the judges. It all sounds very public to me. And if a system of law is regularly read out loud so that all listeners can learn about it, that strikes me as compassionate.

WHY, THEN, DID I KEEP hearing friends and classmates refer to Jewish law as "tough" or "harsh"? Did this view come from an actual reading of the text, or was it the result of a centuries-old perception tainted by bias? Part of this disparity in impressions is that the Torah is lived, not just read, and that it is read in conjunction with other texts, but it is also a problem of translation. Some of the language describing Jewish law is misleading, and even incorrect.

Consider the word "commandment" itself. The phrase *aseret hadibrot*, which means "the ten sayings," is what the Ten Com-

mandments are called by the rabbis, the authors of the Talmud—known as *chazal*, an acronym for *chachmeinu zichronam livracha*, or "our sages of blessed memory." This term, *aseret hadibrot*, appears in many rabbinical texts. The singular form of *dibrot* is *diber*, but here, too, there is a popular mistake. Nearly everyone calls a single saying a *dibra*, not a *diber*. The reason for the error is that in Hebrew, most singular masculine nouns are masculine in the plural, but there are exceptions; here, the masculine singular gets a feminine-looking plural. Though the word *dibra* is commonplace, it does not appear in Hebrew dictionaries—because the word *dibra* does not exist.

The Hebrew Bible itself refers to the Ten Commandments simply as *aseret ha'dvarim*—"ten sayings" or "ten statements" or "ten things." This phrase is used in Exodus 34:28 as well as in Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4. The Hebrew word *dvarim* means "words" or "things"—not "commandments." The phrase "the Ten Commandments" appears nowhere in the Hebrew.

Paging through various Bibles, I could see how a reader might imagine that the title "The Ten Commandments" appears in the biblical text itself. Though there is no title at all in the Hebrew, some translations, like the 1611 King James Bible, include "The Ten Commandments" as a heading. The Geneva Bible seems to be the first Bible to use the phrase "the tenne commandments," an idea that is then preserved in the King James Version. Tyndale's Bible refers to "the ten verses," which is closer to the Hebrew's "ten sayings." And interestingly, the spot where the King James Bible says the Ten Commandments begin is actually at commandment number two in Jewish tradition.

In Hebrew, the section known as "the Ten Commandments" starts with the words *vayedaber elohim*, "and God said," or "and

God talked." This concept of talking, saying, conversing, is part of how I hear the commandments.

"THE TEN" APPEAR IN THEIR entirety twice in the Hebrew Bible—once in Exodus 20 and once in Deuteronomy 5. There are slight variations between the two versions. Ibn Ezra, the twelfth-century commentator, writes that every word has a body and a soul, and that while these two versions may have different bodies, they have the same soul. One prominent difference is the reason given for keeping the Sabbath; the Exodus version says it is to remember creation, when God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, while the Deuteronomy version says it is to commemorate the exodus from Egypt. Beyond this clear difference, there are differences of opinion between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews on what count as "the ten," and there are further differences between thinkers in each of these traditions.

THE DEBATE ON HOW TO read the ten—and what counts as a *dibra*, or saying—is at least two thousand years old. The first and perhaps most famous point of contention involves whether the words *anochi adonai*, or "I am God," count as one of the ten sayings.

Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E.–c. 50 C.E.) saw "I am God" and "Thou shalt not have other gods before me" as one commandment. He considered the two sayings on covetousness as one commandment. The traditional view of *chazal*, or our sages of blessed memory (found in *Mechilta*, *Yitro*, *parasha bey*) is that "I am God" is a stand-alone commandment. The traditional Jewish version counts verses 1 and 2 as the first *dibra* and combines verses 3 through 6 as the second. So the sages generally disagree with

Philo on the opening of the ten, but they generally agree that the prohibition against covetousness should be read as one saying.

The words *anochi adonai*, or "I am God," have inspired plenty of fiery commentary over the centuries. Many commentators have noted that it is the only *dibra* that is not written in the imperative. Again and again, the Hebrew commentators zero in on grammar. Then they move on to ways of reading. Nechama Leibowitz (1905–1997), the famous teacher of the Bible, compiled several of these approaches in her book on Exodus, *New Investigations into the Book of Exodus*, published in 1969. Nechama, as she was universally known, traces nearly a thousand years of discussion of the issue of "I am God." She quotes Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), a Portuguese Jewish statesman and financier who was also a well-known biblical commentator, who says *anochi*, or "I am," is not a mitzvah—it is not a commandment of belief or action. Instead, Abarbanel says, it is an introduction. It tells the reader who is speaking. Similarly, the Spanish philosopher Rabbi Hasdai ben Judah Crescas (1340–1410) says that anyone who counts "I am God" as one of the positive *mitzvot*—meaning one of the "thou shalt" commandments—has made a famous error. Crescas says that *mitzvot*, or deeds—of which there are 613 included in the Torah, both "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not"—are only things that a person has a choice about; in other words, according to Crescas, "I am God" cannot be a commandment because a person cannot choose to believe.

But then there is the towering figure of the Rambam, Maimonides, who not only believed that "I am God" is a *mitzvah*, a "thou shalt" commandment, but also counted it as a *dibra*, as one of the ten sayings. Maimonides saw the belief in God, and in particular in one God, as the basis of everything.

In his famous volume *Sefer HaMitzvot*, he lists and discusses

each of the *mitzvot*—obligatory deeds as well as prohibited deeds mentioned in the Torah.

The very first deed in his "obligatory deeds" section is belief in God. His sources for it are the two mentions of the *dibrot* in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The first prohibited deed in the "Thou shalt not" section is believing in other gods. For Maimonides, "I am God" and "Thou shalt not have other Gods before me" are the very essence of Judaism.

Ibn Ezra sees the first and second *dibrot* as linked; he understands "I am God" as the subject and "thou shalt not" as the predicate.

AUGUSTINE'S VERSION, DATING FROM THE fifth century, begins with what Judaism traditionally considers the second commandment: "Do not have other gods." To my ear, beginning with a negative—"Thou shalt not have other gods before me"—sounds harsher and more fearsome than the simple, two-word introduction: *amochi adonai*, or "I am God." Perhaps Augustine, who was not always a man of faith and who felt compelled to detail his transgressions in *The Confessions*, one of the earliest surviving autobiographies, was comfortable with the idea of a God who begins with what *not* to do—what *not* to worship.

Martin Luther, in his *Small Catechism*, published in 1529 and intended for the education of children, expresses the First Commandment this way:

Thou shalt have no other gods.

What does this mean?—Answer.

We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

The Second Commandment is recorded as:

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain.
What does this mean?—Answer.

We should fear and love God that we may not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

What strikes me most in Luther's version of the First and Second Commandments is the word "fear." However the commandments are introduced, whether to children or adults, the introduction matters because it helps the reader imagine the character of God. Consider the possibilities: Is God a God who announces himself, who simply lays out who He is, for the listener's understanding, or someone who starts out stern and clear, with a prohibition against competition—"Thou shalt not have other gods before me?" It is a choice, too, between beginning with a positive commandment and a negative one.

When I looked at the heading "The Ten Commandments" in one of my Bibles, followed by "Thou shalt not have other gods before me," I began to understand the comment "Mosaic law can be harsh." But something else gnawed at me. If the word "commandment" is a bit of a stretch, and if "the ten"—the number and substance—are a matter of debate among faiths and thinkers, then why does the phrase "the Ten Commandments" seem so solid and indisputable? Though stone or bronze depictions of the tablets Moses was given are part of the décor of many synagogues, not to mention churches and civic institutions around the world, the truth is that their layout and arrangement are not a matter of 100 percent agreement among Jewish rabbis and think-

ers. After all, the Hebrew Bible itself contains two different versions.

The rabbis also have differing ideas on the internal order of the ten. Nachmanides explains that the first five are about the relationship between man and God, while the second five are about the relationship of man to man. Ibn Ezra's reading of the order is more nuanced and complicated. To Ibn Ezra, the division is not the traditional two-part man-God divide, but rather a three-part progression of what makes a human being: heart and mind, speech, and action. The sayings begin with the heart and mind; one must believe in his heart that there is a God. Then they move on to speech—what not to say—and then to action, or how to treat fellow humans. But then in the last five, the order reverses. It is action, then speech, then heart and mind. To Ibn Ezra, then, the order of the *dibrot* has a resonance, and when all are obeyed, they form a portrait of the ideal religious individual, someone whose heart, mind, tongue, and actions all work together.

I was charmed by the way Ibn Ezra writes of his friend, the great medieval poet Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, coming to him with a question about the *dibrot*. The question of what the sayings and their order meant stumped the great minds of the medieval era—so that one giant had to visit another for insight. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's question to Ibn Ezra is: Why does God introduce himself as the God who took you out of Egypt, and not as the God who created the heavens and the earth, and who made you?

This question is about the great themes of the Bible—creation and exodus, birth and freedom, or perhaps birth and rebirth—but it is also about the character of God and the makeup of man. Ibn Ezra's answer is that the degree of belief that people have in their hearts is not equal. For those who truly understand, "I am God"

is sufficient. But for those who don't understand, "who took you out of Egypt" is necessary. Those people need an answer to the heretics who approach them about the existence of God. When God performed the miracles in Egypt, everyone saw—the wise and the unwise.

The dialogue between the two great minds is long and often meandering, but what intrigues me most is that both men were interested above all in how the *aseret hadibrot* are presented. Their question is not "Is belief in God a law?" but "Why is God introduced in this way and not another?"

The more I looked at Bibles in translation, the more I, too, became fascinated by presentation. Layout is not simply a matter of punctuation and versification; it also helps frame the understanding of a complicated idea like belief in God, or a law like the prohibition against murder. The Jewish commentators are often very interested in the idea of *smichut*, or what is attached to what; they are therefore interested in which "commandments" are placed next to the murder prohibition. Because many translations alter the Hebrew Bible's versification of the commandments, they also remove this sense of "neighbors in a sentence." By changing the look of the neighborhood of the Ten Commandments, many translations relocate key laws, which affects their tone and perhaps their meaning.

IN HEBREW, FOUR KEY "COMMANDMENTS" are crammed into one verse in Exodus 20:13. But in the 1611 King James Bible, they have more space, with four verses, not one. Each of the four commandments gets star billing, as if each were a lone pole on a prairie of white space:

- 13 Thou shalt not kill.
 14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.
 15 Thou shalt not steal.
 16 Thou shalt not beare false witnes against thy neighbour.

Reading in my sunroom in an increasingly cold Iowa City, I am shocked by the separation of these powerful statements. But in class, no one around me understands how much of a departure this layout is from the Hebrew. As we read these sections out loud, no one is asking questions about the Ten Commandments, which apparently everyone has seen before, and certainly not about their layout. No one in class questions the relationship between murder, adultery, and theft. Because these three are no longer yoked together in the same verse, it is difficult to imagine why a classmate would even ask such a question. But this is the question that the great medieval commentator Rashi raises. He wants to know what these commandments—crammed into one line in the Hebrew Bible—have in common.

The *dibra* says *lo tirtzach*, “do not murder.” There is a difference between “to kill” and “to murder” in Hebrew; the word *laharog* means to kill, whereas *lirtzach* is to murder. The choice in translation to render “murder” as “kill” in English, as is done in the King James and many other translations that are influenced by it, misstates the legal position of the Hebrew Bible. In various places, the Bible clearly states that in some cases, killing is okay. For instance, if a family member is killed, a relative may kill the killer; if a man comes upon you with the intent to kill you, self-defense is fine. Killing in wartime is sanctioned, and often encouraged. Not so murder.

The next commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” is also only two words: *lo tin’af*. Rashi comments that adultery

refers to adultery with a married woman. He quotes Leviticus 20:10, which states that if a married woman commits adultery, she and her lover will both be put to death. “And a man who commits adultery with [another] man’s wife, committing adultery with the wife of his fellow the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death,” as the Judaica Press translates.

Rashi, once again, is interested in placement. Why is adultery adjacent to murder? Is all adultery truly on a par with murder? Here, Rashi provides only the answer “adultery with a married woman.” It is the reader’s task, as always with Rashi, to figure out the question. In this case, the question presumably is, What sort of adultery? Rashi reaches his married-woman conclusion for two reasons: first, he compares it to another place in the Bible, where it is stated that he who sleeps with a married woman will be killed, and second, Rashi is busy scouring for links between murder and adultery, because he, like many Jewish commentators, believes in the *klal*, or reading rule, of *smichut*: that words and ideas that are neighbors are often situated near each other for a reason. Both murder and adultery with a married woman are punishable by death in a Jewish court of law, and it is this fact that connects them in Rashi’s mind. The link here is the punishment.

Next, Rashi addresses “Thou shalt not steal.” He says that theft here is a theft of souls: kidnapping. Rashi points out that there is a previous prohibition of theft in Leviticus 19:11, so this must refer to a different kind of theft. Then he doubles back and wonders whether perhaps here, in the *aseret badibrot*, the text refers to stealing money, and Leviticus refers to kidnapping. But he knocks this argument down by saying that we must read in context. He concludes that just as the previous two commandments—prohibiting murder and adultery—specify transgressions that demand capital punishment, so, too, theft here must be a capital

offense. This discussion appears in the Talmud in Sanhedrin 86a, and Rashi's thinking follows the same lines.

Interestingly, Rashi does not discuss the fourth of the commandments crammed into the same line: "Thou shalt not bear false witness." But perhaps that is because Deuteronomy 19:16-19 has more to say on it. Here is the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation of that passage:

If an unrighteous witness rise up against any man to bear perverted witness against him;

then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before God, before the priests and the judges that shall be in those days.

And the judges shall inquire diligently; and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother;

then shall ye do unto him, as he had purposed to do unto his brother; so shalt thou put away the evil from the midst of thee.

This passage describes the problem of an *ed zomem*, or a scheming witness. A witness who says that person A did crime A, resulting in punishment B, and who is then found not to have been at the scene of the crime, will get punishment B himself, even if crime A truly was committed by person A—that is how serious false testimony is considered to be. Interestingly, the topic of false witness has obsessed many literary writers; I remember being utterly mesmerized by William Faulkner's "Dry September," a short story about a false accusation of rape. Bernard Malamud's

The Fiver is a novel about a man jailed on false accusations. Jewish law is concerned with preventing such tragedy, and it metes out severe punishment to those who accuse falsely.

However, it is important to understand that there is a difference between law and actual practice. According to Mishna Makkot 1:10, "A Sanhedrin [Jewish high court] that puts a man to death once in seven years is called a murderous one. R. Eleazar ben Azariah says 'Or even once in seventy years.' R. Tarfon and R. Akiva said, 'If we had been in the Sanhedrin no death sentence would ever have been passed.'" So perhaps Jewish law is more talk than harsh punishment. Because there is so much discussion, doubt often ensues.

WHILE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS HAVE engendered much discussion over the centuries, what is not in doubt is the centrality of two plainly stated ideas: the importance of respecting one's parents and the necessity of keeping the Sabbath. In both the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions, those two *dibrot* are neighbors, located smack in the middle of the ten. One commentator even says that the reason for the prominent location of respecting parents is that to honor parents is both a commandment that honors God and one that honors man. Perhaps this is because Shabbat, with its prohibition of work, provides the time—indeed, legislates the time—to talk about the Torah with parents.

Once on Shabbat, when the snow reached all the way to the living room window, I told Abba—my father—that I was learning the *aseret hadibrot*, or the ten sayings, in school. I then proudly discussed the command *lo tachmod*—"Do not covet." I was so pleased that I had noticed the word for cute, *chamud*, hidden inside the word for covet. Finally, I thought, now that I was ten and firmly

in the double digits, I was beginning to understand the Bible as my parents did.

"I don't understand that *dibra*," my father said, practically growling. "I never understood it. In fact, I'm not the slightest bit interested in Mrs. L."—and he nodded toward the snow-covered house of an older, padded, rather unglamorous neighbor, also a mother of children and, like all the others, an overworked religious woman in a wig. "Why should I be jealous of anyone? It's ridiculous.

"Frankly," he continued, as I realized I had brought up a topic he must have thought about a lot, "I can't understand why that *dibra* is included."

I AM OFTEN REMINDED OF my father's bafflement at that commandment as I walk through the hot, often jealousy-crazed world of the arts. When I hear friends complain that they have not won a prize, or a contract, or when I read a story of wild jealousy gone violently wrong, I think of my father.

My father simply does not believe in jealousy. He cannot even imagine it, cannot understand the news stories of a wife killing a husband's mistress, or a man cheating in the first place, or any of the varieties of jealous anger. He scoffs at the fire of it, how it burns all the vegetation nearby, how it boils and spills and consumes. And sometimes I think that Shabbat itself, which the sixteenth-century poet Rabbi Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz called *mekor habracha*—the source of blessing—is the antidote to jealousy, to the temptation to compare and find things less than favorable.

I got to know my father during Shabbat. Perhaps that is why, in the *aseret hadibrot*, honoring our parents and keeping Shab-

bat are neighbors: because time allows us to know, and honor, our own family. Respecting a person requires time. Moreover, and more deeply, the day in which I got to know my father—Shabbat—allowed me to love what I have. Like my father, I am lucky not to be a victim of jealousy. And so, over years of twenty-five-hour stretches, Shabbat let me see my world and try to approve of it. It let me see Abba, a man few people understand.

Of course I saw him during the week: for dinner, for breakfast, a big tall man with a beard, who ate a lot and sometimes sang. When he got angry, he yelled, rather loudly. He was one of the only fathers who came to all our school plays, who saw me get my very first *siddur*—prayer book—and my very first Chumash—my first Bible. As I stood on the stage to receive them, I saw him seated on the low bench about six inches off the floor with the four-year-olds. He sat there so he could take my picture up close. He had taken half the day off work to see me get a book.

On Sundays he was home, too, but he always had projects: the gutters, the lawn, the washing machine. Sometimes he left papers around the house with numbers and letters scrawled on them. Something plus something, *x* and *y* and *z* and an equal sign. Shabbat was the only time that he was in my sight, not writing and not doing, for all three meals and all the hours in between. I think that in that long expanse, in the Shabbats and all the hours in them, I met him.

Like a parent who ages, who softens, who comes to understand, Shabbat changes with the seasons. It starts with the setting of the sun and ends only after three stars can be seen in the sky the following evening. In the winter, Shabbat is short, energetic, young. The day moves fast. In the summer, like all summer days, it is lazy, long, almost endless. The stars are slow to arrive, showing up around nine p.m. in mid-May, later as the summer yawns

on. Shabbat is the one day of the week when I know I will see light become twilight, will watch it happen slowly, second by second, since the workweek cannot begin until the stars arrive.

When I am home, my father and I often take a walk, sometime in the very late afternoon. The great wars of my high school years over mess and disorganization and lateness are over. My father and I have already argued through it all. We have surprised each other, many times.

"I don't know what your system is," my father called to tell me one day, after I had completed a master's degree in poetry in Boston, moved to a new apartment, and found freelance clients. For years he had been upset that I had what he called "no system," that I worked only on what I wanted to work on, and only when I wanted to. "But I have to say, you get a lot done."

That was it, a truce. A compliment.

We were finally not just father and daughter, but friends.

THE BIBLE'S *DIBRA* ABOUT PARENTS has a strange word choice. We are not commanded to love our parents, or even to like them. The Hebrew is *kabed et aveecha ve'et eemacha*. The word *kabed* is an imperative verb, and it is related to the noun *kaved*, or heavy. There should be some heft to the way we feel about our parents.

"Treat your father and mother with heft." The verb *kabed* is frequently translated as "honor," an accurate translation, and maybe honor has a heft to it. But the root, *kbd*, should not be ignored. The idea is to treat your parents with heavy consideration, to make sure they have a serious place in your life.

The commandment regarding the Sabbath is similar. It is not to love the Sabbath, or even to like it, but to keep it. What Shab-

bat is about is a commandment to respect time—to let time also have a prime place in your life.

When I walk with my father on Shabbat, I think of both these things. On trips home from Iowa during school breaks, my father and I often take Shabbat walks. We leave the house together in the hot sun and return in the blue grayness of the in-between. On my last visit home, for instance, we walked down our block, once all old pear trees and single-family homes, now two- and three- and four-family dwellings, the yards bursting with children, the trees sometimes removed to make room. Building codes give way when votes and offices are at stake, and real estate prices make everyone a little crazy, a little woozy, a little more willing to overlook the conversion of a garage into an apartment. By now, almost everyone has an apartment in their former garage. My father, always the mathematician, noted the increasing number of garbage bags.

"I would not like to be a garbage man on this block," he said. I laughed. It's an old joke. This block would be the worst block in the world to be a garbageman. After Shabbat, after the holidays, and worse—this year, after Shabbat plus the holidays' three-day fest, the number of bags will be staggering.

And yet I know my father is happy when he takes out a lot of garbage. When the other kids are home and I am in Iowa, he calls to tell me how much orange juice he bought, how much milk, how many garbage bags he had to set out, instead of the one he now sets out because only he and my mother are in the house.

We are still staring at the large number of garbage bags when two Chassidic women, in stockings with seams up the back, their hair in shining wigs and their necks graced by modest pearls, pass by. They look away from my father.

"*Gut Shabbos*," I say, in Yiddish.

Neither woman answers. Women won't speak to my father, because he is a man. They sometimes don't answer me for other reasons: because they can't figure out why I'm dressed so casually, sneakers and a skirt, or because I'm not Chassidic, not exactly one of them.

A few seconds later, some young men pass by. They quickly look away from me, focusing on the trees across the street. I am used to this. Men around here won't look me in the eye, won't look at me at all. They'll put up a curtain down the middle of a bus to avoid catching a glimpse of me. If the curtain falls, the casualty of a bus suddenly stopping short, they rush to put it back up.

My father is trying to explain how happy he is with his latest paper, "Allocation Rules for Adaptive Repeated Measurements Designs." I nod. I like the sound of his specialty—*optimal experimental design*—even if I can't follow the detailed theories, the dreamy calculations of pure math and statistics, the hope of creating the best possible experiment. His previous paper was also about optimal experiments and efficiency, two universes that I do not walk in.

We walk downhill, past a house that has been converted into a synagogue. And past another house that has been converted into a synagogue. Make your house into a shul or a *beit midrash*, a place of learning, and you won't pay taxes. It's a popular choice, unless you are the neighbor dealing with the traffic and the parking problems and the noise, and never the beneficiary of the government's largesse. Sometimes the house is gone entirely, and in the space where once there was a modest four-bedroom house there is now an immense, towering synagogue. That's what there is now, on Francis, the next street.

My father reads me the Yiddish inscription on the walls of the building. We both notice that there are new signs: parking

signs, and signs that say PLEASE DON'T BLOCK THE MAILBOX AFTER TEN A.M. We are both pleased by these small signs, some attempt, finally, at politeness, some concern for others.

The next street is Ronald Drive, where the houses have curved roofs meant to mimic the roofs of houses in China. There are new sidewalks, because of all the people who walk on Shabbat. The sidewalks are packed; the crowds make it feel like a miniature Manhattan. Most people say "*Gut Shabbos*" to one another, but no one talks to us.

Only in a town as committed to exclusion as our town—exclusion from the rest of the world, and from the rest of the Jewish world—could a person as friendly as my father have so few friends. He talks to supermarket cashiers. He has what he calls "pleasant and informative" conversations with the Internal Revenue Service. And I—a person approached constantly by strangers, whose job it is to interview, to make others comfortable—only here, in this town, does no one ever speak with me.

Maybe because we lived here, isolated among the crowds, among all the little Chassidic sects and all the individual rabbis, we learned to know one another. Only after leaving home and living in many faraway places do I understand what my mother said about her father—my grandfather Saba Shmuel.

"I always knew he was my friend," she said.

There is also what my father said about meeting that same man, my mother's father, for the first time. "He had so much respect for his daughter," Abba said, "I just couldn't believe it. I had never seen a father like that."

PERHAPS A RELATED THOUGH UNWRITTEN aspect of the command to honor parents is an implied message about how to treat chil-

dren. How is a child supposed to know how to honor? The Bible does not offer details, but maybe it is the parent's job to model respect. I got to see what my father did not see as a boy: respect the other way, father to child. And like my mother, who grew up with an unusual man as a father, I am honored to have a man like my father as my friend. Maybe that is the deeper side of the command to honor your father and your mother, to me the most mysterious of the Ten Commandments.

My father and I walk slowly down the hill, toward Suzanne Lake. The sidewalks are so full of people that hundreds of them are walking in the street, where, of course, there are no cars on Shabbat. I notice the old metal sign: KEEP OUR COMMUNITY CLEAN. It is meant to discourage throwing diapers and potato chip bags into the lake, but I know that if they could, some of the neighbors would clean us out, too. We, too, would be floating in the lake.

"What are you doing here?" neighbors say to my parents. I know, watching the crowds watch us, that everyone around us is wondering that again. The neighbors are not shy about their wishes for us. Once, my parents got a flurry of phone calls. Someone had taken out an ad in a local Yiddish newspaper that said "The Kushners"—it listed our address—"are selling their house." My parents weren't selling. As for who placed the ad, we still don't know, and I am 100 percent certain that my father does not care. Gossip is as incomprehensible to him as jealousy.

With the snafu over the ad, my father taught me what he has always taught me: how to ignore the disapproval of the world, no matter how loud it is. He taught me how to listen to myself, and how to hear that same thing in other people and places: the quiet beating of the individual heart.

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AT SUZANNE LAKE, WHICH HAS been part of my life for so long that it feels like an extension of my body, my father and I check on the progress of the white duck. There are lots of gray ducks, and black-feathered ducks, but only one white one. My father is excessively concerned with the white duck's social life.

"I wonder if he has made a friend," he says.

Usually we come here to watch the white duck swimming alone. The other ducks group together: dozens of them. Sometimes my father waves his arms at the white duck, and I have even heard him talk to the duck, in what he believes are duck sounds. The duck, to my surprise, always seems calm and pleased to be spoken to by a human.

This time, the white duck is not there.

My father is horribly disappointed. I am sad that this particular Shabbat walk to the lake has not turned out well. The walk to the lake, familiar as it is, is the major kind of traveling I have done with my father, the major kind of traveling he does, period. Abba's sudden trip to Israel—the year after the Six-Day War—is the only story I have ever heard of his actually volunteering to travel. Unlike my mother, who will go anywhere, just as she will learn any language, from any ancient land, my father has definite boundaries, things he will not do. Today, he drives across the country to visit his children instead of taking a plane; he regularly declines invitations to speak at conferences if they are even an hour or so away. When he flew to Israel, he avoided stopovers in Europe. He will not, he says, accidentally support a soda merchant who once had a hand in genocide. The last thing he wants is to have to buy a soda in the airport.

My father likes to say he is not like me, his daughter who wrote a travel column during wartime in Israel, who will go anywhere for a story. He is not like his other daughter, my sister, who

for years jetted around the country for consulting jobs. But I suppose my father's borders—where he will go, and especially where he will absolutely not go—are rooted in hope, a higher standard, a certain kind of belief.

For thirty years he has worked as a research scientist at an institute twenty minutes from home. Five days a week, my father comes up with advanced mathematical solutions—mathematical dreams, or maybe mathematical utopias—for the experiments of the future. He comes up with concepts like the Kushner Theorem, the subject of part of a course at the University of Illinois, which a French scientist recently referred to as the Théorème de Kushner. It was because of his love of theorems that we ended up in this town. Because jobs that require mathematical skills are hard to find, and my father wanted one. Because Monsey was the closest Jewish community, the kind of place with a school in which we could learn to read the Bible. Because my father, from the beginning, stood for doing what you love, even if the money is not great and the circumstances not perfect. So for many years, my parents raised five kids on one salary—a government scientist's salary. And so my father showed us what I believe he believes: work is the reward of work, just as rest is the reward of rest.

THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT are rewarded in this world, the rabbi's teach in *Pirkei Avot*, or *Ethics of the Fathers*, and these are the things for which a person gets the principal in this world. But the interest comes in the next world.

I sometimes wish that I believed without a doubt in the idea and ultimate power of God, the way so many of the people I have known believed. If I believed in that way, I would most likely believe in reward. I would most likely believe in a next world. In-

stead, I think the reward of living a just life is a just life. The reward of a father, I suppose, is to be a father. The reward of a daughter, I know, is to be a daughter.

The reward of reading is the experience of reading. And perhaps the reward of keeping the laws is just that, even though violation of those laws is not punishable in a clear way by a sitting court, the way, say, theft in New York City is clearly punishable by a local judge. Instead, Judaism expects a person to repent, to change on the inside, to develop an internal sense of justice. This is the opposite of the harshness some readers hear in the Bible; it is a call for personal responsibility. What Jewish law asks for can be heard in the verb *vayedaber*; “and he talked,” the verb that opens the *asevet hadibrot*, the ten sayings that are translated as the Ten Commandments. It can be heard in the simple introduction—*Ani adonai*, I am God, which perhaps requires the listener to wonder who he is or who she is. How would I introduce myself to God, if I had to?

What Jewish law wants is an ongoing conversation between man and God, and between man and man—but most of all, between man and himself. It's not a command, exactly, but a conversation: an inner song, full of melody and refrain, sometimes heard only by what Rabbi Soloveitchik so movingly called the lonely man of faith.