

# Shavuot: Learning to Say No

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**By Rav Elyakim Krumbein**

Translated by David Strauss

When studying the Biblical text, one common tool used to uncover the intention of the verses is locating the “keyword” for a particular section. Can we identify a keyword for the Ten Commandments that stand at the heart of the Sinaitic covenant? It seems to me that the most striking candidate is the Hebrew word “Lo,” “You shall not.” However, the dominant presence of this little word is liable to make us a bit uncomfortable.

From ancient times, the Jewish tradition has been criticized for fostering an authoritarian and patriarchal atmosphere through its great number of negative commandments. The phrase “You shall not” has a very bad reputation in our world. It calls for limitation and restraint. It is uttered by an authority who issues commands, and is directed at a person who is free, spontaneous, impulsive and fun-loving, who follows the desires of his heart and soul without causing harm to his fellow man. All of the good and beautiful of liberated man, all the freedom of spirit, comes up against the concrete walls of the law. You are not to do as you please, you are not to go where you wish. “You shall not” is the weapon of bureaucrats, of inspectors, of action and thought police, who have nothing to do in life but to impose restrictions upon the lives of others, this being the source of their power and the secret of their control.

How pleasant, on the other hand, it is to say and hear non-stop the word, “*Ken*, Yes.” “Yes” heralds openness, niceness, and lack of impingement. It signals acceptance of the other and it bestows legitimacy. Everything is kosher, everything is positive, there is room for everything, and everyone is entitled to attention and love. Every idea is worthy of execution, every idea of realization, and every aspiration of achievement. Why annoy, why confine? Why the pressure? Open yourself! Make room, make way, say “Yes”!

It seems to me that the message behind all these negative commandments – in the Torah in general and in the Ten Commandments in particular – may be found in the last Commandment, the strange prohibition of “You shall not covet,” which is so different from all the other nine Commandments. All the other nine Commandments relate to the foundations of faith and society, to the very basis of the spiritual existence of the people of Israel. Why did God see fit to include among them this minor teaching regarding good character traits? If the goal is improvement of the heart,

surely many other commandments could have been included here: the prohibition to hate one's brother in one's heart, to take revenge, and the like. Why specifically "You shall not covet"?

The answer is that the Torah wishes to raise the curtain and reveal its general understanding of the idea of "Lo," "You shall not" or "No." In addition to teaching us to accept authority, it expects us to try to emulate our Maker, and learn to say "No." It intimates that all those who are enslaved to saying "Yes," and for whom the very idea of "No" is foreign to their nature, are the prisoners of a tragic self-illusion.

What is that illusion? It is the idea that one can truly be "nice" about everything, and that reality allows for a sweeping "Yes," that everything is right, and there is nothing wrong. In the real world, it is clear that this is not the situation, and this is proven by that covetous person who covets another person's wife, house or possessions. If one occupies himself with obsessive jealousy about the good fortune of others, does he not – unconsciously but absolutely clearly – negate himself, his own achievements and merits? Does he not proclaim one big "No" about himself, saying as it were: "Whatever I have is not worth anything, and so my soul will not rest until I have taken that which belongs to my fellow"?

This prohibition of "You shall not covet" comes not only to teach us about itself, but rather to teach an important principle about life and the nature of man. Like it or not, we are "budgeted." At any given moment in our lives, we are limited in our abilities to dedicate attention, time, energy, and the rest of our resources to many different objectives. And so we can never say "Yes," without at the same time saying "No" to something else. Watching television may be a nice thing to do, and it is possible that the program has value, but on the other hand, I cannot at the same time learn a page of Gemara or pay attention to my child. We see then that the choice is not between "Yes" and "No." There is only one choice: To what do I say "Yes," and to what, consequently, do I choose to say "No."

The foundation of all the Ten Commandments is the "*Anokh*", the "I," at the beginning. This "I" is what gives force to all the prohibitions. Someone who says "Yes," in a place where he should say "No," undermines the "I." For example, if honesty and integrity are important principles in a person's life, and his business partner proposes a way to cheat his customers in some small way, saying, "But surely everyone does it" – the suggestion is enticing, but if he accepts it, he will at the same time be denying himself and his values. Succumbing to the seduction is an act of self-weakening. Saying "No" is act of self-confirmation.

This fact also affects the *experience* of saying "No." There are all kinds of situations and ways in which people refuse something. A person can refuse out of fear, out of a desire to avoid confrontation, out of despair or out of fatigue. But there is a "No" that charges a person's batteries and connects him to his inner engine. He can feel the blood streaming through his veins, his feet becoming

lighter, and his chest expanding. A person can say “No,” and thereby stand on his own, on what he thinks is true.

The *Ba'al ha-Tanya* uses this insight when he discusses the ways to overcome the seductions of one's evil inclination (chapter 25):

This, then, is the meaning of the Scriptural text, “But the thing is very nigh unto you...” (*Devarim* 30:14), for at any time and moment a person is capable and free to rid himself of the spirit of folly and forgetfulness, and to recollect and awaken his love of the One God which is certainly latent in his heart, without any doubt... Included therein is also fear, that is, the dread of separation in any wise from His blessed unity and oneness, even at the price of life itself and without reason and logic, but purely by virtue of one's divine nature. All the more so where it involves merely the suppression of one's appetites, which is easier than the pangs of death. This thing, i.e., repressing his evil inclination, is easier by far... It is very easy for a person to restrain and subjugate his nature when he considers deeply that to conquer his nature in all the above, and more, and even to do the very opposite, is by far less painful than the pangs of death — may God preserve us! Yet he would have accepted the pangs of death — preserve us God — lovingly and willingly, only not to be parted from His blessed unity and oneness even for a moment by an act of idolatry, God forbid. All the more lovingly and willingly must he accept upon himself to cleave unto Him forever.

Were you to stand, says the *Ba'al ha-Tanya*, before the absolute choice: Are you with God, or against Him — it is clear to you what you would do. You would refuse to bow down to idols even at the cost of your life. It is always possible to connect oneself to that strength and thus push aside all seductions and enticements.

And then something amazing reveals itself. A person who is totally faithful to himself realizes that he yearns and thirsts for all those “No's” cast upon him by his Creator. He sees in himself that that which defines his most basic essence and desire is the desire to serve the Master of the universe. For this he lives, and this he will never give up. For the sake of serving God he will stand up to all the scoffers, and he will be bold as a leopard and strong as a lion. He understands that rebelling against the kingdom of God bears in vain the name “self-realization,” and all the lofty declarations are nothing more than posturing. The essence of casting off the yoke of God's kingdom is spinelessly being carried away by trends, by things that have no substance.<sup>[1]</sup> The holy path is the very opposite. The Torah states: “They are my slaves, whom I have brought out of the land of Egypt” (*Vayikra* 25:42). And almost in the same breath: “And I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you walk upright” (*ibid.* 26:13).

If, in light of this insight, we go back to that spontaneous and free-spirited person, for whom we felt sorry when he encountered all those “No’s” of morality and the commandments – he will look a little different. He will still seem wretched, but not because his craving for freedom is not satisfied, but because he sees it as a principle – an ideology – to be open to every possible turn that he encounters along the way. He will fight for his right to live a life of chance, and erase and forget all that is eternal and permanent. His soul is not large enough to understand freedom in the sense that the Torah sees it: “Engraved upon the tablets’ – Read not *charut* [meaning ‘engraved’], but rather *cherut* [meaning ‘freedom’], for none can be considered free except those who occupy themselves with the study of the Torah” (*Avot* 6:2).

The ability to say no with all one’s heart and all one’s soul, with beaming inner serenity, full of grace and felicity – this is the lot of free people, who are people of Torah.

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[1] On this point, see also the Piaseczno Rebbe, "*Chovat ha-Talmidim*, chapter 7.