

Ki Tavo 5785

September 13, 2025

20 Elul

Naming of Noa Werbelow, Bnei Mitzvah of Mayer Solomon-Strauss and Tess Harrison, first day of Yachad

Mayer and Tess, what thought-provoking divrei Torah. Mayer, you asked, what does it mean to “have a heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear?” And Tess you asked, if the commandments are things that Gd rewards you for following and punishes you for not following, is that a cult? Is it the exercise of a dictatorial kind of power? What about freedom?

Mayer, you decided with the help of Rabbi Green and commentary from our tradition, that having a heart to know and eyes to see and ears to hear means being able to recognize the big picture, and that this is something that usually takes time. It’s often when we’re looking back that we have perspective and a greater understanding of what we lived through and also can be grateful for the people in our lives who supported us through it.

And Tess, you decided with the guidance of rabbis ancient and modern, that the commandments are not about removing freedom, but about providing structure and limitations for our freedom, in particular structure that promotes relationships with one another and with G-d, so that we can use our freedom in a way that doesn’t cause harm to others or ourselves.

I agree with both of you, and I’m thinking about the moment in which you are speaking these words. We are ten days away from Rosh Hashanah, and this is the period in the Jewish calendar most dedicated to reflection on our lives and our behavior. And we are living in a time in this country in which people are increasingly using violence against one another in the name of freedom, and a time in which the threat of coercion by our government is growing, as it grabs immigrants off the streets and threatens to send troops into our cities.

I read a really wonderful commentary on this portion by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Rabbi Sacks, who was the chief rabbi of Great Britain until he died in 2020, gets into the etymology of the verb “to command.” In English, a commandment is

something you obey, but it turns out that there is no word in biblical Hebrew that means “to obey.” In fact, Rabbi Sacks relates something I did not know, which is that when Hebrew was revived as a spoken language in the 19th century they had to borrow a word from Aramaic, *letsayet*, to mean “obey.” So whenever you see “obey” in the Torah commentary, the translation is not accurate. The word “command” or “commandment” didn’t mean something you obey. The response to a commandment in the Torah is, in Hebrew, the word *Shema*. *Shema* means to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to be willing to obey, and to respond with action. Sacks says, “The very fact that it carries all of these meanings suggests that in the Torah there is no concept of blind obedience.... That is not how the Torah conceives of the relationship between G-d and us. G-d, who created us in G-d’s own image, giving us the freedom and power to think, wants us to understand [the commandments].”

In other words, in the Torah, G-d is making the case to us that we should want to follow the commandments. As you said, Tess, the commandments are meant to be the structure to create a just and free society, to respect human dignity, and to create harmony between people. We can always choose not to listen to them, not to hear, not to pay attention, not to understand, not to be willing to obey, not to respond with our actions. Commandedness is actually voluntary. But what G-d is saying is you should want to live this way. Sure, it takes self-discipline and sometimes sacrifice – because you can’t always get everything you want in the moment. But if you do this, if you choose to self-limit your freedom to only take actions that promote fairness and dignity among human beings, you will experience blessings. G-d is calling us, saying please, use your capacity for reason, use your capacity for restraint and discernment, to make good choices with your lives. The blessings and the curses that are described are simply inherent in the actions themselves. All of our actions either promote life and its flourishing, or degrade life and reduce it.

Certainly, political violence is a total contradiction to the commandments of Torah, and so is government coercion. Torah designs a system, now known as the judiciary, by which disputes can be adjudicated using words. Politics is meant to be the way that a diverse society can manage disagreements and make decisions without violence. In addition, no person, regardless of their position, is supposed to force another person to obey. Even G-d restrains G-d’s own power

to appeal to us to follow the commandments, instead of forcing us. This is essential to the dignity and freedom inalienably held by every human being.

For at least 2,000 years, the Jewish people have believed that arguing with one another can actually be constructive. We call it *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven. This is an argument in which both sides treat the other with respect and in accordance with the word Shema are trying to listen and to understand – an argument in which the mutual goal is truth. Our Sages Hillel and Rabbi demonstrated that such an argument sharpens the thinking of both parties and advances everyone's learning. This is a model for how to be in a highly polarized time – to assume you don't have all the answers, to argue with respect for the other, and to listen and try to understand.

This summer we decided here at CBE to pursue a long-term dialogue with a church somewhere in America in which many congregants might describe themselves as MAGA, and who might want to get to know some liberal Brooklyn Jews for the purposes of listening and understanding each other a little bit more. We are looking for that church, for that right partner, now. If you have a relationship with someone among your family or friends who belongs to such a community in what we think of as a “red” state, we'd love your ideas.

We're living in a confusing and highly polarized time, a time when it's difficult to see the big picture while we're in it. According to your teaching, Mayer, one thing that might help us is to imagine some day when we look back at this time, when history tells the story of this time, how will we want to have behaved? Who will we want to have been?

We might think “There's nothing I can do.” “I'm just a kid. Or I'm just an average person. It's all so much bigger than me.” But what this parasha and the Torah are saying fundamentally is that your actions matter. No matter how small you are, or how small any moment seems, every action matters. The world is always in a precarious balance, and everything we do matters.

Given that this period of Elul, this month before Rosh Hashanah, is dedicated to an examination of our words and our actions, it's an ideal time to be asking questions you asked today, Mayer and Tess. Am I showing gratitude and using loving words toward the people I love? Am I showing respect and kindness

toward the people I don't know or don't agree with? Am I listening? Am I living with honesty and integrity? Am I seeking opportunities to care for someone who is vulnerable right now? Am I using my freedom in ways I'm proud of, in ways that makes the world a little less frightening for someone else, a little more fair, a little more loving?

Let's ask these questions for real. Let's answer these questions with our words and our deeds. Let's have a heart to know and eyes to see and ears to hear, and let's make the difference we can make with our own lives.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah.