



Shabbat Shalom

Vaetchanan

Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11

For the reading of the Ten Commandments, the entire synagogue rises from their seats to relive that incredible experience at Mt. Sinai so many centuries ago.

Tisha B'Av (the 9th of Av Fast Day) is over and we look ahead. There is a spirit of optimism in the air, regardless of anything else that may be happening in the news or elsewhere. After the weekly Torah portion, we read Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins with the words "Comfort, comfort my people." And we, indeed, feel comforted.

The Torah portion is uplifting as well. For in this week's portion, we read the Ten Commandments, as repeated by Moses in Deuteronomy. For this section of the Torah reading the entire congregation stands, as if to relive that incredible experience at Mt. Sinai so many centuries ago.

Much has been said about the differences between the wording in both versions of the Ten Commandments – this one and the one that is recorded in Exodus 20. I would like to focus on one difference and an ancient traditional interpretation that guides so much of what we do to this day.

The commandment regarding the Sabbath, Shabbat, begins in Exodus 20:8 with the words: "*Remember the Sabbath day.*" In Deuteronomy, the verse reads: "*Observe the Sabbath day.*" The Midrash states that both of these first words, "Observe" and "Remember", were actually uttered by God simultaneously, but the human ear is incapable of hearing this. Therefore, as Moses repeats the commandments, he says each word separately, once in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy.

Our sages carried this idea further and explained the inherent difference between these two words. Remember is a positive word and in fact refers to all those acts that we do on the Sabbath day to remind us of the meaning of the day. Foremost among these is the Kiddush ceremony. Friday night and Saturday noon, we say a special blessing on a cup of wine before beginning the festive meal. The actual blessing is preceded by reciting Scripture. In the evening, we recite Genesis 2:1-3. The following day, we recite the verses regarding the Sabbath from the Ten Commandments in Exodus. Through the Kiddush we sanctify the day and remind ourselves of its significance.

The word "observe" and particularly the Hebrew "Shamor" implies a negative – preserve the day, watch it, so that it not be desecrated. It is this word that reminds us of the commandments to refrain from work (Deuteronomy 5:14), to refrain from cooking (Exodus 35:3) and so many other commandments.

But the fact that these words were said together, that both messages were communicated by God to His people in the Ten Commandments indicates that both are essential to the observance of the Shabbat. On the one hand, we refrain from doing so many of our normal everyday activities. If this were all that Shabbat was about, it would end up being a day of restrictions, of "don'ts" and "better not's". But it is also a day of remembrance of God as the creator, and of the special day He has given to us to celebrate. By the same token, just remembering is not enough either. Without setting ourselves apart from our business concerns, we cannot possibly create the atmosphere necessary for the remembrance.