Religion True and False: Thoughts for Parashat Yitro

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Yitro

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A prevalent custom in Ashkenazic synagogues is for the congregation to stand when the Ten Commandments are read from the Torah. This is a symbolic re-enactment of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, when the Israelites stood below the mountain. Among Sephardim, the widespread custom is to remain seated during the reading of the Torah, including during the recitation of the Ten Commandments. This custom is based on the notion that all the Torah—from beginning to end—is holy. To stand only for the Ten Commandments might imply that only the Ten Commandments were given by God. (The Sephardic sages did not require standing for all Torah readings, since this would be a terrible imposition on the public.)

During the 18th century, a question was asked of Rabbi Eliyahu Israel, a scholar born in Rhodes who was serving as rabbi in Alexandria. The responsum is included in Rabbi Israel's book Kol Eliyahu, no. 5. The question was: may a person be stringent with himself and stand for the Ten Commandments in a congregation where the custom was to remain seated? Rabbi Israel responded: "It is obvious that one is not permitted to do so because it appears presumptuous [mehzei ke-yuhara]....Moreover someone who does so [stands] in the presence of Talmidei Hakhamim greater than he, is deserving of excommunication [nidui]." If a self-righteous person stands while others are seated, this gives the impression that only he is truly scrupulous about honoring the Torah, while the rest of the congregation are less pious.

What was in the minds of the individuals who stood for the Ten Commandments in a synagogue where the custom was to remain seated? They probably thought they were demonstrating honor to the Torah. Yet, Rabbi Israel penetrates to the inner motivations of these people: they viewed themselves as holier than the rest of the congregants. In the inner recesses of their souls, they took pride in their

show of piety in contrast to the behavior of others. But this sense of pride and pretentiousness is repugnant. One should not defy the proper and well-established custom of a congregation, but should rather follow the prevailing custom. To call attention to one's supposed piety is an act of impiety. It is rude and disrespectful, as well as presumptuously self-righteous.

There is a thin line between genuine and counterfeit religiosity. One may show external gestures of piety and yet be religiously inauthentic. Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his classic ethical text, Pele Yoetz, points out that one should strive to serve God humbly. If one wishes to adopt a practice that the law does not require, one should do so privately. One should not follow religious stringencies in public if the rabbis and members of the community do not observe these stringencies. God knows our inner thoughts, our real intentions.

Our goal must be to achieve the highest level of purity in our service to God, to direct our deeds for the sake of Heaven. We need to be absolutely honest with ourselves, constantly cutting through our own rationalizations. Our judgment is easily clouded by self-delusion and feelings of self-contentment. We should be most concerned with real piety, not with external gestures of piety.

Angel for Shabbat