

This is taken from Seyder Tkhines by Devra Kay – Tkhines were Yiddish devotionals, often poetic, written by men and women but intended for use by women who didn't have access to Hebrew as men did. They are a fascinating insight into women's lives and prayers from the 17th -19th Centuries in Yiddish speaking lands.



A song of the Ten Commandments

Sheyndele

This song about the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai was published in 1686, most likely in Prague. Like Rivke's song, this too, seems likely to have been performed by a *firzogerin* for a group of women, as it possesses many of the devices found in oral literature. It is in rhyme and related by a narrator who links the verses with phrases such as "Yes, you will hear more," "I will tell you, so you will know," and "Only hear how it continued." The recitation of the Ten Commandments and the biblical account is interlaced with additional awesome tales and legends.

I will begin by praising God
Who created us all.
I will begin with the Ten Commandments
Which God, Blessed be He,
Gave to us by the hand of Moses.

All of us stood at Mount Sinai,
Each individual, young and old, big and small
Was terrified by His wonder
As the *Shkibne*⁶ showed himself on the mountain.

Listen well, Israel, to what I say
Make yourself holy for three whole days
Do not approach Mount Sinai
If you wish to have sight of the Holy *Shkibne*.

Mount Sinai will rise high above the earth.
The *Shkibne* will be on high with Moses,
While all Israel remain on the ground below.
Only listen to the wonders that occurred.

Only listen to what happened to the pregnant women,
The babies called out from their mother's bodies,
"It will be done," so beautiful and fine,
"We will receive the beloved Torah."

How quickly our beloved Lord God began
The first word of the Ten Commandments
Anoki,⁷ it is I,
I am your only God
Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

In their terror they could not remain where they stood,
As their souls swiftly fled from them.
Just as swiftly, the beloved Torah commanded
That their souls be restored to their bodies.

God forbid you should turn to any other god.
"If you do not believe in Me, early and late,
Almighty God will judge you sternly,
And He will punish you to the fourth generation."

He will favor and reward for two thousand generations
Those who observe His beloved Holy Torah,

And lovingly keep His Ten Commandments
That He wrote in His Torah.

Yes, you shall hear more.
You shall swear no false oaths,
The Holy Name then commanded,
And do not make graven images,
Or you will for ever wander around the world.

Do not take My Name, the Name of God, in vain,
For it is certain that if you do,
It will be as if you have renounced God
Who created Heaven and earth.

Another thing I wish to say to you:
Observe the beloved *Shabbos*
And honor its great holiness
So you are certain to live for ever.

You shall ply your trade for six days
And then on the seventh day
You shall rest,
As shall your son and daughter
And your maid and servant
And all your animals.

God created Heaven and earth in six days,
And on the seventh day He rested.
Therefore on *Shabbos*
We must rejoice.

Set aside business matters,
And eat and drink and read the Torah with great joy,
For *Shabbos* is a foretaste of the world to come,
And how soon Elijah the prophet will come to you.

God issued His Commandments solemnly.
Honor your father and mother diligently,
And your days will be lengthened,
And you will live forever with God in Heaven.
And the Holy Name desires that you also respect
and honor
Your elder brother and your stepmother.

You must spill no blood
 Or the Holy Name will punish you
 And you will be known as a murderer
 Entirely shamed among men.
 You must not commit adultery,
 A strange man with a strange woman
 For God considers this sin so great
 That the souls of those who commit this sin
 Will become evil spirits.
 If you steal money or belongings from another,
 God will pay you in the other world,
 While in this world you will be dishonored,
 For word travels to every land.
 You must never speak false witness,
 For it is as if, God forbid, you had hit your friend,
 And taken away all his money and luck,
 And you must never stand in your neighbor's blood.
 It is in the beloved and holy Torah,
 Which God has written himself,
 That you shall not desire your neighbor's house or
 his wife.
 Or anything else that belongs to him.
 In words so solemn and profound,
 Six hundred and thirteen commandments are
 commanded,
 And are all written in the Ten Commandments,
 Given to us by Almighty God.
 I will tell you, so you will know,
 How Moses, the holy man
 Went up into the clouds
 And soon came to the Heavenly Throne,
 When a holy angel barred his way.
 Yes, you will know, for I shall tell you.
 Not everyone may approach His Name,
 For twelve thousand angels guard him from below,
 And this angel was eager to dismiss the pious Moses.

But the saintly Moses pronounced a holy name
 That he had learned when he saw the burning bush
 Which made the angel spring twelve thousand miles in a
 puff of smoke
 And Moses knew that he could go on.
 But his way was barred by another angel,
 Who struck Moses' heart with terror,
 But Moses pronounced a very great name
 And thus overpowered the angel.
 Only hear how it continued.
 With the greatest joy, the angel
 Led Moses up to the Seat of Mercy
 Where he was addressed
 By our beloved Lord God.
 Listen, young and old,
 And hear how it is written in our Holy Books,
 How our beloved Lord God likened himself to a
 bridegroom,
 Handsome and fine,
 And all Israel became His bride.
 This is how the *Kesube*⁸ was written
 And Moses was its scribe at God's command,
 And as Moses received God's Commandments,
 His face lit up like the shining sun.
 Rich God in Heaven and on the earth,
 You are the God we love.
 You brought us out of the land of Egypt,
 And gave us Your beloved Torah.
 "Hear, Oh Israel," began the Eternal God,
 "The Lord our God, the Lord is One,"
 All Israel answered.
 Moses immediately responded:
 "Blessed is the name of his glorious kingdom forever
 and ever."⁹
 That holy mountain, Sinai, was bedecked with fine jewels
 And with rich vegetation and delicious food.

The blowing of the shofar was heard clear and strong
 Just as Isaac once heard it.
 God solemnly bestowed His Commandments
 Because he created the world for the Torah.
 Our beloved Lord God has helped us many times,
 So take God's wonder to heart
 And speak of it night and day.
 The wonder of our Lord God
 Will grow ever stronger,
 And at the moment when we become worthy,
 God, Blessed be He, will let us enter the Holy Land
 In our days,
 So let us say
 Amen.

We all stood together

Merle Feld

My brother and I were at Sinai
He kept a journal
of what he saw
of what he heard
of what it all meant to him
I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there
It seems like every time I want to write
I can't
I'm always holding a baby
one of my own
or one for a friend
always holding a baby
so my hands are never free
to write things down
And then
As time passes
The particulars
The hard data
The who what when where why
Slip away from me
And all I'm left with is
The feeling
But feelings are just sounds
The vowel barking of a mute
My brother is so sure of what he heard
After all he's got a record of it
Consonant after consonant after consonant
If we remembered it together
We could recreate holy time
Sparks flying

God of Mercy

Kadya Molodovsky, transl. Irving Howe

O God of Mercy
For the time being
Choose another people.
We are tired of death, tired of corpses,
We have no more prayers.
For the time being
Choose another people.
We have run out of blood
For victims,
Our houses have been turned into desert,
The earth lacks space for our tombstones,
There are no more lamentations
Nor songs of woe
In the ancient texts.

God of Mercy,
Sanctify another land,
Another Sinai.
We have covered every field and stone
With ashes and holiness.
With our crones
With our young
With our infants
We have paid for each letter in your Commandments.

God of Merc
Lift up your fiery brow,
Look on the peoples of the world,
Let them have the prophecies and Holy Days
Who mumble your words in every tongue.
Teach them the Deeds
And the ways of temptation.

God of Mercy
To us give rough clothing
Of shepherds who tend sheep
Of blacksmiths at the hammer
Of washerwomen, cattle slaughterers
And lower still.
And O God of Mercy
Grant us one more blessing—
Take back the divine glory of our genius.

When We Stood at Sinai

When we stood at Sinai we promised:
"We will hear and we will obey."

Now we stand at Auschwitz and we promise: "We
will remember human deeds and we will seek under-
standing."

At Sinai we heard the revelation of God who spoke to
Moses and to us.

At Auschwitz we seek the revelation of God who is silent
and hidden.

We will cherish the memory of those who died as
martyrs, and the memory of those who died resisting,
and especially of those who died in terror.

We mourn our dead, our twice dead, dead once in the
gas chambers, dead again in the dripping chambers of our
hearts.

We will listen to the testimony of every witness, we
will search among the books and the documents,
among the very stones of Europe and Israel.

To find again the sparks of holiness, the undying sparks of
the Jewish spirit.

Mourning our dead, we cannot be silent. Mourning
them, we are forced into the jaws of politics, into the
canine teeth of empire.

Mourning them, we make ourselves responsible for
history, for we believe that the kingdom of God depends
on human deeds.

We affirm our belief that we can choose life, as Moses
told us. We affirm our belief that we can choose
freedom, as America promises us.

We affirm our belief that our mourning and our remember-
ing will strengthen our work for peace and justice, even in
the face of Auschwitz.

We affirm our belief that we can hear, we can under-
stand, and we can act, as we repeat the words we said
at Sinai: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai
Ehad!*

Mt. Sinai from Within

Charlie

I've come to know
that hope is liquid—
internal rivulets joining with others,
gushing out to sea—
an whole ocean of possibilities
rounding just beyond the horizon,
spherical as the moon
and just as lustrous.

I've come to know
that faith is the banks it rides in,
from its pristine source,
to its muddied delta streams.

I ask you,
have you followed your river's course upstream,
removed your shoes,
crawled on hands and knees?
And there on the summit of your own Mt. Sinai,
have you knelt before the burning bush
and dared to question its Reality?

Glacial truth monumental!
Burning solid crystal whole!
Drink the untouchable melting light.
Cup the inculpable. Sip the insuperable.
Bathe on the banks of the fountain of truth.
Wrap yourself in the warmth of new-found religion.

And for those of you who have,
I ask you,
when was it that
that wrap of faith you used to ward off chills,
shield you from storms,
shroud those who died—
when was it,
it became mere cloth—
a scarf to match your eyes?

http://www.authorsden.com/categories/poetry_top.asp?id=277106&catid=76

Aaron at Sinai

Leo Haber

(And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him: "Up, make us a god!..." And Aaron said unto them: "Break off the golden rings! ..." and [he] made it a molten calf....
[Exodus XLI, 1,2,4.])

I, Aaron, heir to a thousand curses, both of Pharaoh
who would declare me the source of my brother's words and magic
and of our own coarse people who would have me
contrive for them bird or calf,
half-sure he will never come down this day alive--I
say that they underestimate this man.

Not by his words or deeds am I driven to accept his God,
but by his accomplishments.
That this shy, weak-kneed, inept man,
heavy of speech, hot-tempered, meekly humorless,
who would prefer to play husband to his Egyptian mistress,
could build a nation of this heady, bold breed
over the ashes of the dying, ignorant old world
is indeed testimony of a higher excellence.
I, Aaron, who spoke his slow words
and worked his wild miracles,
know he will come down with the new world piled on his shoulders.

Now I stand between the golden calf and the mountain,
adjudged the greater man by the people,
the fountain of all magic,
waiting lamely for the lesser man who is my brother
and my only road to fame.
I stand between the strife of gold and God,
shuttling between the two.
It is a hard, but inevitable life for any good Jew.

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Aaron+at+Sinai.-a0148003950>

The Latest Decalogue

Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861) (Christian poet)

Thou shalt have one God only; who
Would tax himself to worship two?
God's image nowhere shalt thou see,
Save haply in the currency:
Swear not at all; since for thy curse
Thine enemy is not the worse:
At church on Sunday to attend
Will help to keep the world thy friend:
Honor thy parents; that is, all
From whom promotion may befall:
Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive
Officiously to keep alive:
Adultery it is not fit
Or safe, for women, to commit:
Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat,
When 'tis so lucrative to cheat:
False witness not to bear be strict;
And cautious, ere you contradict.
Thou shalt not covet; but tradition
Sanctions the keenest competition.

The Revelation

Adam Kaye, May 2003

The still, small voice was looking for itself
She knew from the prophecy that there was
To be a still, small voice up on the mountain.

The climb to the top was difficult
The people, the boundaries
All making access to the mountain
So difficult.
But the prize, so great.
To be *the* sound heard by the
Whole Jewish people,
The people that surround
This beautiful mountain. (cont..)

The prophet had told me that
After the wind and the rocks
And the earthquake and the fire
That my still, small voice would be heard.

So I tried to get through the boundary,
Avoiding the other women
As I had been told to.
Then on the third day
In the morning
I awoke before all the others
And climbed to the peak so
I could be there to be
The sound on the top of the mountain.

And yet,
There was no space for me,
The still, small voice.
The only sounds I heard were everything
I am not;
Thunder,
Lightning
And the shofar
Screaming out loud from the heavy cloud.

So I descended
Looking for someone to help me,
To hear me, to listen,
To tell me that there had been a mistake.

There wasn't.
And I am still looking for an
Opportunity on this mountain of God
To show that there can be a
Still, small voice amongst the people.