

## Parallel Thinking Part 5: The Torah's Mnemonic

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Claude E. Shannon, the forefather of Information Theory, described the general challenge of transferring a message from A to B as “reproducing at one point, either exactly or approximately, a message

selected at another point. In the presence of noise and interference, there are limits to the amount of information that can be reliably transmitted over a communications channel. Imagine trying to speak to a fellow guest at a simcha when the music is playing too loud. Most of us would either shout louder, or leave the room to have the conversation outside. Applied to Information Theory, these solutions are like increasing the amplitude of the signal (shouting louder) or reducing the noise (leaving the room).

Similarly, when revising for an exam, retaining a list of dry facts can be difficult. The ‘message’ is the list of facts, the ‘medium’ is time and the ‘noise’ is our fallible memories. Many schoolchildren will employ mnemonic devices to help remember lists. For example, many of us used ‘Richard of York gave battle in vain’ to remember the sequence of colours in the spectrum of visible light. However, the user must know what the mnemonic means; otherwise, in the example above, the only information transfer would relate to the 15th Century Duke of York!

The *Asseret HaDibrot*, commonly known as ‘the Ten Commandments’, but more accurately translated as ‘the Ten Statements’, are mentioned twice in the Torah, once in Shemot and once in Devarim. These statements were given by God to Moshe, written on two tablets of stone.

Given that the commandments listed in the *Asseret HaDibrot* anyway form part of the 613

commandments elucidated in the Torah, what was the purpose of singling out these ten statements and writing them on two tablets of stone?

Rashi (d. 1105) writes that the *Asseret HaDibrot* contain allusions to all of the 613 mitvot listed in the Torah. He adds that Rabbenu Sa’adiah Gaon (d. 942) composed poems listing all of the 613 commandments, linking each one back to one of the *Asseret HaDibrot* (see Rashi to Shemot 24:12). It may be beyond us to remember all 613 commandments, but, in line with Rabbenu Sa’adiah Gaon’s thinking, we can see the *Asseret HaDibrot* as a mnemonic for the entire Torah.

Rabbi Mordechai Yoffe (d. 1612) noted that while we no longer recite the *Asseret HaDibrot* as a part of our daily communal prayers, for fear that some may claim that there is no other Torah than the *Asseret HaDibrot*, one should recite them every day privately to build faith in God through remembering the revelation at Sinai

