

Moses and the Ten Thousand Commandments

By Jack English

This is the true story of the conversation between God and Moses on Mount Sinai as told by Aaron, his Chief of staff.

“Moses,” Aaron says, “you have to lay down the law. We can’t control these people unless you lay down the law.”

Moses kicked a rock stirring up a cloud of dust. “I’m just so sick of trying to keep them together. I got ‘em out of Egypt... well, me and God and I’m trying to find someplace safe for them to settle and all they want to do is party.”

“Talk to them. Lay down the law,” Aaron said.

“I’m going for a walk,” Moses said. “Maybe there are cooler breezes up there.” He pointed up the slope of Mt. Sinai.

“You want me to come?” Aaron asked.

“No... I just need some alone time, some time to think.” And, with that Moses trudged up the side of the mountain.

~

Four hours later, he was high enough to see out over the plains. He paused to take a mouthful of water from a goatskin flask when he heard something in the wind.

“Moses”

“Who is there?”

“Moses, you are almost there. Keep climbing.”

“Who is it? Aaron, is that you?”

The voice didn’t answer.

Must be the wind, he said to himself and started back down the mountain.

“Moses!” the voice was much louder. “Keep climbing. You are almost there.”

“Where?”

“Must everything be an argument with you? Keep climbing.”

The slope of the mountain got much steeper and he had to climb over and around rocks the size of camels. *I'll climb a little while longer*, he thought, *then head back down.*

“Just keep going,” the voice said.

An hour later, he pulled himself up onto a flat area big enough to pitch a couple of tents. The mountain loomed high above him. He took another mouthful of water and sat on a rock.

“Moses, I'm glad you came.”

“Who said that?”

“It is I, the Lord your God.”

And that is when Moses noticed a flat rectangular wall, taller than he was, and wide enough that he and Aaron could lie head to toe across its width.

“Moses,” the voice said.

The sound seemed to come from the wall. He touched it and it was perfectly smooth. He could see the stones and the cracks between them, but the surface was smooth to the touch.

“Who is this really?” Moses asked.

“I delivered you from Egypt and led you through the desert and you still don't know who I am. And you wonder why my people are so hard to control.”

The image on the wall abruptly changed to that of the pyramids.

Moses stumbled back and started to climb back down the mountain.

“Fear not, Moses. No harm will come to you. But there is much work to do. You must lead my people to the promised land.”

The image changed from pyramids to a stream flowing past bushes at the foot of a forest. Smooth, round stones were visible at the bottom of the cool clear water.

Moses reached toward the water and expected it to feel wet, but he felt the same smooth surface he had when he tried to feel the stones in the wall.

“What magic is this?”

“It's not magic,” God said. “It's a display.”

“A display?”

“It's a tool. In a hundred and thirty, or a hundred and forty generations everybody will have one of these.”

“The bushes are so bright,” Moses ran his hand over the image, “it's almost like they are burning.”

“Color enhancement. People do it all the time. Listen, Moses, I brought you here to talk business. You’ve got to get my people under control before they wander off and get themselves killed.”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” Moses said.

“I know,” God said. “I want to give you two laws. First, love God with all your heart and second love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You call that law? What kind of law is that?” Moses threw his arms toward the sky in exasperation. “We need some real law, ten or twenty thousand commandments. Look God, no offense, but I grew up in Egypt. If there’s one thing they know, it’s how to write laws. They have room full of laws stacked this high.” Moses stood on his tiptoes, his fingers reaching as high as he could.

“Why do you want so many laws?”

“You promised Abraham you would raise up a great nation from his seed, didn’t you? How are you going to run a great nation with only two laws? Who knows what kind of mischief your people are going to get into? I need a really thick book of laws so when something new comes up, I can reach in and grab a law to whack’em!”

“Ten thousand laws are way too many.”

Moses reached down and grabbed a handful of sand. “How about one law for each grain of sand?”

“This is going to take longer than I thought,” God said. “Would you be satisfied with three laws?”

“What are they?”

“First, a Hebrew may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. Second, a Hebrew must obey orders given by one of my priests except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. Third, a Hebrew must protect his or her own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.”

“I don’t know,” Moses said. “That sounds a little mechanical. I don’t think I can sell it.”

“Are you hungry?” God asked.

“A little.”

“Reach into the white box next to the display. I prepared something for you.”

Moses retrieved two pieces of bread with something stuffed between them. He bit into it. “Wow! This is great! What is it?”

“Chicken salad.”

“Is this what you eat?”

“Once in a while,” God said.

“What is it made of?”

“Chicken obviously, and scallions, some herbs -- tarragon or fresh dill, maybe some finely chopped parsley, and mayo.”

“Mayo?”

“Mayonnaise.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s something invented by the French.

“Who are the French?”

“Explaining the French will take a lot longer than we have. But, in a few thousand years, our people are going to be famous for chicken salad and they are going to dispense this wonderful food at places called delis.”

“Are all my people... your people going to get chicken salad?”

“Everyone is going to get it,” God said.

“Even the Egyptians?”

“Even the Egyptians.”

“Even the Babylonians?”

“Even the Babylonians.”

“And the French?”

“Them too. Anyone who asks nicely can have chicken salad.”

“I’m going to need more laws to regulate this chicken salad stuff,” Moses said.

“You don’t need laws to regulate chicken salad. People will figure it out for themselves,” God said. “Let’s put laws aside for a while and talk about what else we need to keep my people together and safe.”

“We need hats,” Moses said. “We need really big hats. You can’t have a serious religion without big hats.”

“Well, I don’t know about the hats,” God said. “I was thinking about something simple, something that just covers the crown of your head.”

“No! No!” Moses said, “We need really big hats. Have you seen the head-dresses the Egyptians wear? They’re huge. And the Babylonians have big elaborate head-dresses to show how important they are. Without big hats, no one will take us seriously.”

“Let’s put aside the discussion of hats. Maybe we should go back to the laws for a few minutes.”

“I don’t know why you don’t want to discuss hats. Are you new at this god thing? I mean, how long have you been in the business?”

“Since the beginning,” God said. “So back to the laws...”

“If ten thousand is too many, give me a thousand laws, a thousand should be enough to make people feel guilty,” Moses said.

“Why do you want people to feel guilty?”

“Think about it. If they are fat and happy and don’t feel guilty, they won’t need religion, will they?” Moses said. “We’ve got to tell them they are miserable, unworthy wretches who need to beg for forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness for what?”

“For breaking the law... your law... God’s law.”

“And that’s why you want a lot of laws... so, if you look hard enough you can find a law they’ve broken.”

“You got it,” Moses said.

“And then they’ll have to come to you to atone for the sin of breaking the law,” God said.

“Sin? Sin, I like it. It’s short and punchy. I guess it means, they’ve broken a law... And, if we have enough laws, they’re bound to break them whether they mean to or not. That will make them feel miserable, and rotten and guilty. That’s why we need a lot of laws”

“I’m not sure I like the idea of controlling people with guilt,” God said. “We should encourage people to do the right thing with love and kindness.”

“It’ll never work. It didn’t work with the Egyptians; it hasn’t worked with the Babylonians and it won’t work with my... your people.”

The image of a stream and bushes and woods faded from the display and was replaced by thunder-clouds over a field. There was a flash of lighting followed by a long, low rumble of thunder. Then God yawned and wispy purple clouds hung in a vanilla sky. The sun slipped out of sight and the first few stars shined overhead.

“Moses,” God said, “did you ever wonder where you came from?”

“I came from Egypt,” Moses said.

“I mean before that.”

“There was no before that. I was born there,” Moses shrugged. “What? Is that a bad thing?”

“I mean, did you ever look up at the night sky and wonder about all those stars and where they came from? Did you ever look around at the mountains and fields and deserts and sea and wonder where they came from? Did you ever wonder

where plants and animals and birds came from? Did you ever wonder where people came from?”

“No. I wonder where we are going. And I wonder how I can keep my... your people under control, but...” Moses swept his arm toward the stars above and the mountains below, “I never worried about where all this came from.”

“People are going to wonder where the stars, the mountains and everything else came from. And, they’re going to look to you, Moses, for answers.”

“Me? What do I know about stars and mountains? That’s all the province of mystics, sages and soothsayers. I’m a practical guy. Negotiate with the Egyptians, hit ’em with some plagues and then get the flock out of town.”

“If you can’t provide people with answers, they’ll look elsewhere,” God said.

“So?”

“Do you really want your people... my people looking to someone other than you for answers?”

“No, I guess not. Maybe you better lay it on me. What? Were the stars coughed up by a giant frog or something?”

“Not exactly,” God said.

“Where they spit out by a giant turtle? A bird flew across the sky and the tips of its wings created the stars. Am I right, or am I right?”

Moses was hit by a gust of wind and the ground swayed under his feet. It was God sighing.

“Moses, listen. In a thousand years, the Greeks are going to come up with the notion of an atom.”

“Who are the Greeks?” Moses asked.

“Never mind. The important thing is their idea. If you take something, a rock, a piece of cloth, a piece of pottery and you cut it into smaller and smaller pieces, you will eventually get down to some basic thing that you can’t cut any more. That basic thing is an atom.”

“Everything you see around you in the sky and in the mountains and on the land and in the sea, are all made up of different kinds of atoms joined in different ways. Understand?”

“So, everything is made up of... earth and water and sky atoms? What about fire? What is that made of?” Moses asked.

“Fire is made up of atoms too, but what you see as light and feel as heat is energy given off when atoms combine with one another in different ways.”

Moses sat on a rock and thought about it for a few minutes. Then he said, “So where did the atoms come from? Where they spit up by a giant frog or did they leak from the fur of a sacred cat or something?”

“Actually,” God said, “that’s a very good question. Before I answer that question, have something else to eat. Reach into the top shelf of that little white box again. There should be a soft, cool, triangle-shaped something in there. Take a bite of it and tell me what you think.”

Moses opened the door to the box and reached in. He pulled out a soft, cool, pale triangle and cautiously broke off a corner and put it in his mouth. It was like nothing he had ever eaten before. He took a big bite and let it dissolve in his mouth. His eyes closed from the pleasure of the taste. Finally, when he swallowed it, he said, “Wow! What was that?”

“It’s called cheesecake,” God said.

“That is the most incredible thing I have ever tasted,” Moses said.

“Thought you’d like it.”

“And all this is made up of atoms?”

“Definitely.”

“How about the chicken salad?”

“That too.”

“And the rocks?”

“Also made of atoms.”

“Then why don’t rocks taste good?”

“Different atoms. There are lots of different types of atoms and they are put together in different ways. Sometimes you get rocks, sometimes cheesecake.”

Moses finished his cheesecake and licked his fingers. “I just can’t get over this, you have a magic box that makes food and...”

“Hold on, Moses. The box doesn’t make the food, I make the food. The box just keeps it cold. It’s called a refrigerator.”

“Wow! A magic box that keeps food cold.”

“It’s not magic,” God said. “It’s thermodynamics, heat flow and...”

“I don’t understand a thing you are saying. The only thing I got was that it’s all atoms, the food, the box and the rocks.”

“Alright,” God said, “let’s build on that.”

“But that doesn’t answer the question of where the atoms came from and why there are rock atoms, cheesecake atoms, refrigerator atoms.”

“Let’s start at the beginning...” God said.

“The beginning of what? The Nile flood? The harvest? What?”

“The beginning of everything. I started it all with what people thirty-five hundred years from now will call the big bang. A sort of explosion. And darkness was on the face of the deep because you only get light when the electrons in the outer shell of atoms collapse down toward the nucleus.”

“What’s an electron?” Moses asked.

“We’ll come back to that,” God said. “So, for a long time, this explosion was so hot that atoms couldn’t form and without atoms there was no light. And all this stuff, all the parts of atoms and space itself was spreading out at an incredible speed. Finally, it cooled enough for atoms to capture electrons. And just before the first electrons were captured by atoms I said, “Let there be light!” And, there was light. I don’t know why I said it. There was no one around to hear me say it. I just thought it was the kind of thing you want to tell your children about.”

“Your children? Who are your children?”

“You are one of my children, Moses. Our people down on the plains are my children. The Egyptians are my children, the Babylonians are my children. All people everywhere are my children. But, like children, you don’t always listen.”

“So, you created the universe?” Moses asked.

“None other,” God said.

“And then what happened?”

“Some of the atoms clumped together from gravity...”

“What’s gravity?” Moses asked.

“It’s what keeps you from floating up to the sky. Anyway, when enough atoms get together, they form stars... the sun is a star. All the stars you see in the night sky are suns for other worlds.”

“Wow! If there are that many worlds, there must be a lot of people in the sky!” Moses said. “I hope they are not all Egyptians.”

“Let’s put aside the idea of people in the sky for a minute. I wouldn’t tell anyone else about that. Let’s just keep that a secret for now.”

“Got it!” Moses winked at the display.

“You know how you put a lot of ingredients in a bowl and you stir them up and then you bake them and you get bread?”

“Yeah.”

“Stars take some atoms and bake them into bigger atoms. That’s one of the reasons there are so many kinds of atoms. Again, in about thirty-five hundred years some smart ass is going to call it Cosmology. But I’m letting you in on it now.”

“Anyway, some of the stars exploded and sent the new atoms out into space and gravity pulled them together and that formed new suns and new worlds like this one. Understand?”

Moses sat on a rock holding his head between his hands for a long time. Finally, he said, “It’s a lot to take in.”

“I know,” God said.

“Then what happened?”

“Then I started working on this world, your world. At first, it was a big molten mess. I had to let it cool. Then I had to bring in water and separate the land from the water. Then I had to create all the plants. You have no idea how many plants it took to get this world going. I had to start with algae and cyanobacteria.”

“What?”

“They produce oxygen... they help create the air you breathe. Then there was grass and shrubs for the animals, grains for food, and on and on. It took forever to get the plants right. Then there were the animals, what a pain in the... never mind. I tried all kinds of fish and other sea creatures. Did you every have a pet starfish?”

“No.”

“They’re not much fun, let me tell you. Whales are a lot better. I like whales. But, you know, I was getting bored of watching them swim around and sing to each other. And, they mostly ignored me. So, then I tried some land animals. Small ones, large ones, scaly ones, furry ones. You should have seen all the types I tried. Some of them didn’t work out so they were replaced by better ones. I tried a lot of different things. Some smarty pants in the future is going to call it evolution. But honestly, it was just a lot of trial and error. Then for a while, I was into making really big animals. Some guy in England, an island up north, is going to call them dinosaurs. Boy, some of them were really nasty. I made one that was four times taller than you. It could swallow an ox whole.”

“Wow! That’s scary. What did you call it?”

“I called it Bruce, but years from now, when they dig up its bones, they’ll call it a T-Rex. But after a while, I got tired of all their biting and fighting so I decided to start again.”

“How did you do that?”

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not proud of it, but I whacked your world with a big rock, a rock bigger than this mountain. You know what happens when you step on a bug, right? Well, it was pretty much the same thing, but with a lot of fire and smoke and... Well, I just started over.”

“After a while, I started to make some pretty neat animals. But I wanted somebody to talk to so, eventually, I created you, well not you personally, but mankind, men and women. I did a lot of rough drafts of people, Australopithecines, Neanderthals, and so forth before I came up with Homo sapiens.”

“Homo what?”

“People like you. Let’s just say I had to try a lot of things before I got people the way I wanted them. I called my best prototypes Adam and Eve. I gave them everything on the earth. But, just like my people down in the valley, they wouldn’t listen, so I got bored and left for a while. When I came back there were millions of them. They really knew how to get busy, if you know what I mean.”

“How long did all this take?” Moses asked.

“How do you measure time?” God asked.

“Well... when the Nile floods that’s the beginning of a new planting season, so I guess we measure time by planting seasons. So how many planting seasons did it take to do all that stuff?”

“From the beginning to now, a little over twelve billion years... planting seasons.”

“What’s a billion? I never heard of it.”

There was another gentle breeze and the ground shifted under Moses’s feet as God sighed again. “Think of all the sand in Egypt. If each grain of sand were a planting season, you would have a rough idea of what twelve billion years... seasons was.”

“Wow! That’s a long time. I just can’t get my head around that much time. Then what happened?”

“Then I tried to work out something with a guy named Abraham. He was a little stiff, but he had a good heart, so I figured I could work with him. I promised to create a great nation from his seed.”

“And?”

“I took a little vacation and when I came back, I found that you and the rest of Abraham’s people were Egyptian slaves. Some great nation! So, I thought it was time to step in and make a course correction. Does that make sense?”

“Got any more chicken salad?” Moses asked.

“Should be some in the refrigerator,” God said.

Moses sat and ate and checked his goatskin flask. It was empty. “I could use some water.”

“Moses, would it hurt you to say, please?”

“May I please have some water?”

A large image of a hand pointing to the right appeared on the display. “Moses, walk around that rock and tell me what you see.”

Moses stood up, dusted off his pants and walked in the direction the hand was pointing. A spring, of pure, clear water bubbled out of the rock face and ran down the side of the mountain.

“Wow! This is good water,” Moses said, and he drank and he drank. “May I take some?”

“Sure, fill your goatskin. Then let’s get back to business.”

Moses returned to face the display. “Now what?”

“I want to tell you about deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA, it’s the recipe for making every living thing. It’s a self-replicating recipe too. It’s the main constituent of chromosomes.”

Moses threw his hands in the air. “Enough! I don’t understand a word you’re saying. I just can’t get my head around all this stuff. I got the idea of atoms, but that’s it.”

“Too much?” God asked.

“Way too much,” Moses turned away from the display and held his head in his hands.

God and Moses were quiet for a long time, then Moses said, “Why don’t you show yourself? People will want to know what God looks like. I want to know what you look like.”

“Tricky. If I reveal my true self, it might be so frightening that you will be afraid of me and want to avoid me. And, if I reveal myself as too meek and mild, you won’t respect or fear me. And, things could get worse from there.”

“How worse?” Moses asked.

“Suppose I revealed myself and you thought, he reminds me of my Uncle Leo. I’d lose all respect. No, better you should never see the face of God. Is there anything else you’d like to ask before I leave?”

“Leave, where are you going?”

“I’m... needed elsewhere. What? You think you’re so special I only talk to you? So, is there anything else?”

“We haven’t settled the business of the laws. Give me five hundred laws and we’re done,” Moses said.

“I’ll give you ten laws. Let’s call them Commandments, which will make them seem more important.”

“Alright, if ten is all I can get, I’ll take ten. Do you have parchment, or sheepskin or something for me to write on?” Moses asked.

“I’m going to carve these Commandments into stone. That way they’ll look official. Name all the names of the people who followed you out of Egypt and that should be enough time to make your stone tablets.”

“I don’t know all their names.”

“Just recite the names of the people you know.”

Moses started naming names and after a short time, God said, “All done, Moses. Look in that black box at the other end of the display. I wrote your Commandants on two tablets.”

Moses picked up the two tablets and read them. “These are a bit ordinary, aren’t they? I could have come up with these myself.”

“But you didn’t. I did,” God said. “Any other questions?”

“I don’t see any hammer or chisel marks, and I didn’t hear any hammering. How did you make these?”

“If I said, 3-D printer, would that mean anything to you?”

“Nope.”

“Then say I used my finger to carve the stones. O.K.?”

“Sure. I can sell that,” Moses said. “Well, it’s been great talking to you, but I better get back to camp before my... your people do something stupid.”

“I have to tell you, Moses, I got a lot further with you than I did with Adam and Eve or with Abraham, but we’ve got a long way to go. So long Moses, it’s been a trip.”

And with that, Moses started climbing back down Mt. Sinai.

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Aaron saw Moses at the foot of Mt. Sinai and ran toward him. “Moses! Moses! Are you, alright? Where have you been? What have you been doing?”

“I’m fine. Why all the concern?”

“You’ve been gone forty days and forty nights,” Aaron said. “We saw all kinds of smoke and heard all kinds of rumbling from the mountain and we thought you were dead. We were just about to pack up and move on.”

Moses put his hand on Aaron’s shoulder and said, “You won’t believe this, but I was talking to God.”

“No way!”

“Way.”

“What did he look like?”

“He... didn’t show himself. He talked to me through a...” Moses spread his arms as wide as he could, and then reached up as high as he could. “It was sort of a wall... I forget what he called it, but there were paintings on it.”

“Paintings of what? Aaron asked.

“Sky and fields and trees and streams and bushes. But they kept changing.”

“That isn’t possible,” Aaron said. “Paintings that change? Let’s not tell the boys about that. They’ll think you are a few stone blocks short of a pyramid.”

“I’m telling you what I saw,” Moses said. “The paintings were so bright, it looked like they were burning.”

“What were the paintings again?”

“There was sky and fields and trees and bushes.”

“So, God spoke to you through a... burning bush.”

“Yeah, sorta.”

“Did the bush burn up?”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Got it. This is going to be huge! ‘Moses and the burning bush.’ What else did he say?”

“He told me all kinds of unbelievable things, most of which I didn’t understand.”

“You know, when I heard all that commotion on the mountain, the smoke and rumbling and everything I told people it was God speaking,” Aaron said, “But, Murray and Sid and the boys said it was just thunder and lightning. And, how come it took so long?”

“It didn’t seem like forty days and forty nights. It seemed like a day. And he told me all kinds of fantastic things.”

“Like what?”

“Like where rocks and mountains and stars come from. And he talked about a creature called Bruce that could swallow an ox whole. And he gave me these Commandments.” Moses reached into the deep side pockets of his robe and pulled out two tablets.”

Aaron read the Commandments. “Only ten? You could only get Ten Commandments? I thought we agreed we needed thousands of laws.”

“I asked God for ten thousand Commandments, but he said it was too many.”

“I’m a little disappointed,” Aaron said. “I could have written these. I would have thought God’s law would be more...”

“Complicated?”

“Exactly!”

“We’ll whip up some more laws later. Who will know?” Moses asked.

“So, dish. What else did he say?”

“Well, he said in the beginning, he created the heaven and earth. And everything was void and without form. And he said, let there be light, and there was light. And he talked about atoms.”

“Adams?”

“Yeah, stuff like that. It was all very mystical. We’ll write it up.”

Aaron stepped in front of Moses and put a hand on his shoulder. “Moses, you know I love you like a brother and I respect you as a leader but talking to God and having him tell you all these things... I just can’t get my head around it. How can I know it’s true? How can I know it isn’t just some dream you had? It’s going to be hard to convince Murray and Sid and the others you spent forty days talking to God. They are going to want proof.”

“You want proof?” Moses said. “Taste this.” He reached into his robe and brought out bread stuffed with something.

Aaron bit into it. “Wow! This is great! What is it?”

“Chicken salad.”

“You convinced me!” Aaron said.

“That’s nothing. You should try cheesecake!”

THE END

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