

# Freedom and Commitment: In Memory of Professor Beno Gross

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This paper is devoted to the memory of Professor Beno Gross, one of the most important and compelling teachers that I have had the privilege to encounter over the years. The focus of the article is the roles of freedom and commitment in religious life as examined through the prism of the revelation at Sinai. The fundamentally dialectical personal covenant forged between the individual and God, as embodied in the expression to “accept the yoke of the commandments,” was born in the divine covenant forged at Sinai with a nation that accepted the Torah as binding. In the biblical narrative, the three *parshiyot* concerning this event portray it as one of free choice, but rabbinical tradition reflects two opposing approaches: on the one hand, it is portrayed as a coercive situation; on the other hand, as a moment of willing acceptance. My discussion presents five interpretive approaches to resolve this contradiction, with a variety of equations balancing coercion against free choice. Three of them perceive choice and coercion as complementary; on the fourth, coercion is implicit in acceptance; and on the fifth approach, the two are unrelated: the Torah was given in absolute freedom or absolute unfreedom. I contend that all five approaches are reflected in the consciousness of the religious individual and that each reveals a unique experiential facet.

a commandment was given to the generation of the wilderness and shows how that information makes sense of what seem to be conflicting verses.

2. The plain meaning of the verses is an essential reading that complements the interpretations in halakhic midrash. For many learners, discrepancies between the written Torah and oral traditions deduced from it seem to belie the concept of the Torah as a unified entity. In response, Rav Copperman sought to identify the particular function that links the *peshat* of a given biblical text to its readings in halakhic midrash. By defining some twelve function of that nature he was able to explain many apparent contradictions. The discussion concludes with an attempt to consider some of the reasons that R. Copperman’s interpretive approach did not gain wide popularity among the Torah learning community.

