

# PUSHING BOUNDARIES

## Study sheet for Parashat Yitro

### TEXT

*Exodus 19:12<sup>i</sup>*

וְהִגַּבְלָתָ אֶת הָעָם סָבִיב לְאֹמֶר  
הַשְּׁמָרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקַצְהוּ  
כָּל הַנִּגַּע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת:

You shall set boundaries for the people all about, saying: beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.

*Exodus 19:23<sup>ii</sup>*

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל יְהוָה לֹא יוּבַל הָעָם לָעֹלָה אֵל  
הָר סִינַי כִּי אָתָּה הִעַדְתָּה בְּנֹו לְאֹמֶר הַגִּבַּל אֵת  
הַהָר וְקִדְשָׁתוּ:

But Moses said to the Eternal One: “*The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set boundaries about the mountain and sanctify it.’*”

### SUBTEXT

*Ibn Ezra to Exodus 19:12<sup>iii</sup>*

והגבלת — תשים גבול בהר  
מסביב לעם, ואם אמר: „והגבלת  
את העם“ הגבול בהר, ואם אמר:  
„הגבל את ההר“ שוה הוא.  
והארכתי כל כך בעבור שאמר  
המשוגע, המהביל, שהפך בספרו  
דברי אלהים חיים.

*You shall set boundaries.* This means: set boundaries on the mountain, around the people. If God had said ‘set a boundary for the people’, that would mean to put it on the mountain. And if God had said ‘set a boundary on the mountain’, it would mean exactly the same. I am labouring this point because of what was said by that crazy man, full of hot air, who wrote a book presuming to amend the words of God.

<sup>i</sup> Based on NJPS translation

<sup>ii</sup> Based on NJPS translation

<sup>iii</sup> A mash-up of Ibn Ezra’s long and short commentaries to Exodus

## CONTEXT

### *Shadal, letter 84*

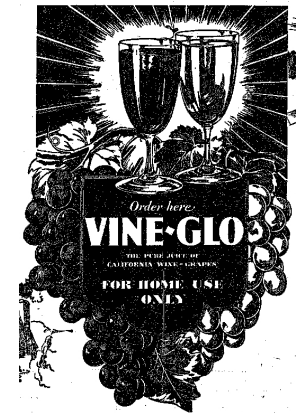
אולי היו הפירושים האלה נכונים  
בעיניו, ורצה לפרסמם גם חוץ  
מספרד, ולא מצא תחבולה אלא  
בעשותו עצמו כמרחיק אותם,  
ואולי התחכם ג"כ ליחס אותם פעם  
למשגע ומהביל ופעם למדקדק  
ולמפרש גדול, כדי לערבב דעת  
ההמון, והמשכילים לבדם יבינו.

It may be that Ibn Ezra actually agreed with the idea<sup>iv</sup> that there was a discrepancy in the biblical text, and wanted to publish it more widely. But the only way he could find to do so was to distance himself from it. He cunningly attributed the idea to a “*crazy man, full of hot air*” – but elsewhere<sup>v</sup> he referred to the same man as a great grammarian and commentator. In this way, he befuddled his detractors, while allowing the enlightened to see his true meaning.<sup>vi</sup>

## KIDDUSH

### *Professor Alice Louise Kassens<sup>vii</sup>*

During Prohibition in America, a company called Fruit Industries Inc. produced a ‘grape brick’ called Vine Glo. These grape bricks, or ‘raisin cakes’, were blocks of dried grapes, the sale of which did not violate Prohibition laws since they did not contain alcohol at the time of distribution and sale. To make it perfectly clear to consumers that Fruit Industries Inc. was not in the business of breaking the law by selling alcohol, a warning was included on each brick: “*After dissolving the brick in a gallon of water do not place the liquid in a jug away in the cupboard for twenty days, because then it would turn into wine.*” Consumers had their choice of eight varieties of Vine-Glo, including burgundy, sherry, and port.



<sup>iv</sup> Which Shadal suggests originated with Jonah ibn-Janach, a rabbi and scholar from the generation before Ibn Ezra.

<sup>v</sup> Eg Ibn Ezra to Genesis 3:8 and 19:15 and Daniel 1:1.

<sup>vi</sup> Shadal ultimately rejects this conjecture, suggesting instead that Ibn Ezra was simply playing to the gallery by slagging off ibn-Janach. But Shadal was well-known for his intense dislike of Ibn Ezra; see eg Israel Abrahams, “Samuel David Luzzatto as exegete (continued)”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 57:3 (1967), 179-199: 191-192.

<sup>vii</sup> Alice Louise Kassens, *Intemperate Spirits: economic adaptation during Prohibition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 61.

