

“Ahseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”

Part One: What are the Ten Commandments Anyway?

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- *You shall have no other gods before Yahweh.*
- *You shall not make for yourself an idol.*
- *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.*
- *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.*
- *Honor your father and mother.*
- *You shall not murder.*
- *You shall not commit adultery.*
- *You shall not steal.*
- *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*
- *You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

(A paraphrase of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17)

The hard-working parents of the PTA held fundraisers all year long: bake sales, the fall festival, the spring fling, and more. By the end of the year they had raised close to twenty thousand dollars to help their school. This particular elementary school, like so many in our country, was a Title One school, which meant that a majority of its students lived under the federal poverty line. There were children who needed properly fitting shoes. There were many without insurance who needed medical, dental care, or eye glasses. The school itself needed so much: the library was short of books, more playground equipment was needed and some was even unsafe, some air conditioning units were out, black mold was discovered, there were not enough computers for the kids, there were no art or music teachers. Yet, when the parents decided how to spend the money, they voted to buy expensive framed copies of the Ten Commandments for each of the classrooms and school offices.

This was a time when there was a heated debate in our country about the legality of public displays of the Ten Commandments, with some cases reaching the Supreme Court. On June 27, 2005, in a pair of 5-4 rulings, the Supreme Court ruled that a giant 6-foot red granite monolith of the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the state capitol in Texas was proper since it was just one of 17 sculptures, but the simple framed paper copies of the Ten Commandments that were displayed on the courthouse walls in McCreary and Pulaski Counties in Kentucky were not permissible. (David Stout, "Ten Commandments Split Court," *NY Times*, June 28, 2005)

In spite of such highly publicized legal debates about whether these constitute a violation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, there may be as many as 4,000 public displays of the Ten Commandments in the United States, including at the Supreme Court and Library of Congress.¹ What is so ironic is that, back in 2004/05 when the Supreme Court was considering the legality of the displays of the Ten Commandments at the state capitol in Texas and the two courthouses in KY, almost 80% of Americans were against the idea of removing these displays (a 2004 Barna poll), even though, ironically, only 10% of Americans even could list more than four of the ten commandments (survey by Polltronics the day after the Supreme Court's June 2005 decision)! How many of the Ten Commandments do you know?

What are these so-called "Ten Commandments" that have pushed such buttons and provoked such controversy, even at the level of the Supreme Court? To understand something about them we need to travel back about 3,500 years to 1446 BCE and take our place among a frayed, exhausted, frightened, and often complaining Hebrew tribe,

who are traveling through a hot and desolate and sometimes dangerous desert to a place that has been held out to them as the “Promised Land.” For generations they had suffered as slaves, building the economy of Egypt on their bare backs through hard physical labor as they worked on infrastructure and bold construction projects, subjected to the capricious whim of Pharaohs, who suppressed and beat them, and even took their children from them.

In the biblical story of the Exodus, we learn that they had escaped from slavery by the skin of their teeth and were being led by a shepherd named Moses, who distinguished himself because he received direct teachings from a God who was very different than the other gods worshipped at that time. The God Moses encountered used this dynamic identifying term: “I am who I am.” Not a static noun but a dynamic presence, whose essence was described by these comforting words from Exodus 34:6, which are repeated in similar forms in other places in scripture: *“The Lord ... the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”* I find this to be one of the most profound and beautiful descriptions of God in any faith tradition!

Moses’ struggling little group lacked an **external compass** or map telling them how to get to the Promised Land. The longstanding joke is that it took them 40 years to get there because Moses refused to listen to his wife’s suggestion that he ask for directions! Most importantly, though, they also lacked an **internal compass** providing ethical and spiritual principles out of which they should live their lives both as individuals and as a community.

Written laws were only beginning to emerge in the world at that time as people suffered under the whim of the rulers, who could change laws on the spur of the moment. One morning you might get up and the law would be: you owe a fifth of your crops to the king and if you did not give them you would be thrown into jail for a month. The next day it might be: you owe a fourth of your crops to the king and if you don’t give them you will be thrown in jail for a year. Can you imagine what it would be like to live under these circumstances where laws were not codified or written down? They were often arbitrary, leaving people feeling totally helpless and at the mercy of self-serving, corrupt rulers.

And then something revolutionary happened that was civilization changing! In around 1754 BCE, Hammurabi, the king of Babylon (present day Iraq), who reigned from 1792 to 1750 BCE, inscribed 282 laws on a black stone pillar more than 14 feet high so that

everyone could see what they were. At the top of the monument is Hammurabi, standing, receiving the law from the seated Shamash, the Babylonian god of justice. (Sound familiar?) Below are columns of chiseled cuneiform script containing 282 laws that related to things like trade, theft, liability, slavery and the status of slaves as property, the duties of workers, fraud, slander, divorce, adultery, perjury, and more. Most are written in an “if ... then” format where a specific situation is outlined, followed by a corresponding punishment. It contains the most famous example of the ancient law of “lex talionis” (law of retribution) or an “eye for an eye” and a “tooth for a tooth” that even Jesus referred to (Matthew 5:38-42).²

There were different standards of justice contingent upon which of the three social classes in Babylonian society both the lawbreaker and the victim belonged to: the propertied class, freedmen, and slaves. Men and women also were treated differently. Men, for example, received a light sentence for adultery, while women were put to death for doing so. While the punishments were often extremely harsh, Hammurabi’s Code was surprisingly ahead of its time in some areas such as property rights, the prohibition of incest, and even divorce. It contains the first known instance of the “presumption of innocence.” Additionally, it mandates a minimum wage for workers!

Importantly, this was one of the first times in history that people could see exactly what the laws were and the repercussions if they did not follow them. Additionally, Hammurabi vowed to lead justly by them. We should not underestimate what a huge step forward this was in the history of public jurisprudence. What we should remember about them, however, is that they related to how people were to order their **external lives**. They were the laws of the commonwealth, not principles designed to guide the human heart.

Three hundred and fifty years after Hammurabi, when Moses led his struggling group of people through the desert, another huge leap forward was made. The story from the book of Exodus tells us that, three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites set up camp at the foot of Mount Sinai where God had earlier spoken to Moses in a burning bush. So it was a kind of homecoming for Moses. Once again God “called a meeting” with Moses. He was to go up to the top of Mt. Sinai at the appointed time where God would speak to him. The scripture says that ***“on the morning of the third day ... Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.”*** (Exodus 19: 16, 18-19).

During this dramatic meeting with God, Moses was instructed on the principles by which the Israelites were to lead their lives. When Moses returned from the mountain he had with him what are popularly known as the “Ten Commandments.” They were engraved on two stone tablets, with five commandments on each stone. These, in brief form, are what are known as the Ten Commandments:

- You shall have no other gods before Yahweh.
- You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.
- Honor your father and mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

There is an important part of the story that our Jewish relatives emphasize about God’s giving of the Ten Commandments that I have never heard Christians mention, which is foundational to this sermon series. It relates to what is said in Exodus 19:7: *So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him.*⁸ *The people all answered as one: “Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.”* (cf. Exodus 24:3, Exodus 24:7)

The contemporary Jewish rabbi Naomi Levy points out in her book *Einstein and the Rabbi* (which we read in “Head and Heart”) that:

“The Book of Exodus describes the famous revelation that took place when Moses stood on the top of Mount Sinai and God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments. It was at Sinai that they received the divine teaching from above. But at Sinai they also experienced something from below that they had never known before. What was that second revelation? At Sinai when God entrusted the children of Israel with the Ten Commandments, they responded, ‘We will do it and we will listen and understand’ [her translation of ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.’]. When the people spoke those words, the rabbis explain that God was taken by surprise. In astonishment God asked, ‘Who revealed to my children the secret of the Upper World?’

... So what secret of the Upper World did the people uncover that so surprised God? What is so amazing about saying, 'We will do it and we will listen and understand?' The rational mind has trouble with the order of those words. Normally, we want to first listen and understand, then, if it makes sense and seems valuable, we decide to do it. What is so holy about doing something before you even know why? How is that the secret of the Upper World? We come into the world with physical instincts. ... No one has to teach us to eat when we're hungry or tell a baby to cry when it's uncomfortable. Just as the body has a knowing, there are spiritual instincts that are so subtle that we don't know how to access them. That's why the rational mind says, 'First explain it to me, then I'll decide whether to do it or not.'

But in high holy matters there is a knowing that the soul possesses, and that knowing is so clear. When the soul knows, it immediately says, 'Count me in.' I'm not talking about impulsive or risky behavior. We take those dangerous leaps when we listen to the body's desires or the ego's ambitions without first consulting the soul. Here I am describing those sacred moments when the soul can sense what is right for you. It doesn't need to know more than that.

That is the second revelation the Children of Israel received at Sinai. It was a self-revelation, the Torah within. The secret of the Upper World is the voice planted already inside you that knows instinctively what is good, what is true, and what God wants from you." (Naomi Levy, *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul* [NY: Flatiron, 2017], pp. 175-177.) And they knew these commandments to be good and true at a deep soul level.

What we call the "Ten Commandments" differ in kind and purpose from the Code of Hammurabi. They do not tell us what a king or political leader decrees but rather what God hopes and desires for and from us. The Ten Commandments were not meant to be argued in a court of law. In fact, most of the items defined in the 10 commandments were not even legally enforceable. Furthermore, did you know that there is only one place where the new instructions that Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai are even referred to as 'commandments' (Exodus 34)? The term "Ten Commandments" was a mistranslation first from Hebrew into Greek and then from Greek into English. The original Hebrew term *Ahseret ha-Debrot* literally means "The Ten Words" or "The Ten Divine Sayings" (the Decalogue) or the "Ten Utterances." Rabbi Rami Shapiro, whom I count along with Cynthia Bourgeault as the one of the greatest spiritual teachers of our times, calls these ethical ideals the "ten vows" that we are called to live out concretely in our everyday lives (*Minyan: Ten Principles for Living a Life of Integrity* [NY: Bell Tower, 1997], pp. 45-53).

I admit that when I was a young Christian, I believed that the so-called Ten Commandments contained a simple list of legalistic do's and don'ts. Over time, as I have come to understand them as foundational spiritual principles, I realize their power and potential to transform our lives from the inside out. Indeed, they are the internal laws of the heart that provide the spiritual guidelines and moral compass that enable us to lead lives of higher purpose and deeper meaning. They inspire us to develop into our very best selves so that the light within us can shine brightly in a world that often is filled with darkness. Of course, this isn't always easy! For example, Dr. Rowland Shepard has stated: "Maybe the Ten Commandments are misnamed. They ought to be called the ten hardest things we try to do in life—honoring our parents, dealing with adultery, attempting to get off the treadmill for one day each week, and not feeling jealous about what other people have. These topics aren't ancient history—they are the core issues that most of us struggle with in our personal lives." (cited in Leonard Felder, *The Ten Challenges* [Salem, WI: Sheffield, 1997], p. 2)

Leonard Felder has said that several years after he had become a practicing psychologist, he realized that the issues raised by each of the Ten Commandments contain ten of the most essential challenges we face in our lives. In his book on this topic, he lists them as follows: How do you decide what you believe about God? How do you make sure you don't get distracted or trapped by addictions and other seductive habits, like workaholicism, that can become false idols? How do you deal with self-righteousness and anger? How do you unhook from the stresses of life and find a way to reconnect with people you care about and with a sense of inner peace? How do you honor a parent who has been difficult or abusive? How do you respond when you or your loved one feels attracted to someone else? How can you accomplish what you want in life while still maintaining your integrity? How do you make sure you don't hurt people by lying, gossiping or saying hurtful things? How do you stop wanting what other people have or wishing you could be like someone else? (Felder, *The Ten Challenges*, pp. 2-3)

Only the courts can decide whether it is legal to display the 10 commandments in public places, but you can decide whether you would like to accept the challenge of deepening into and accepting the profound gifts offered by each of the ten divine sayings that God gave to Moses, believing that they awaken within us the capacity for greater human decency, kindness, righteousness, justice, goodness, compassion, generosity, and integrity as they teach us about the importance of prioritizing our relationship with God, balancing work and play, the necessity of honesty, fidelity, the sanctity of all of life, the importance of healthy relationships, and the goodness of living in human community.

These are all things we so desperately need in our world at this time as they provide a sacred compass, putting into language how we are to relate properly to God, self, and neighbor. I encourage you to join me as, over the next few months, we unpack the great spiritual treasures contained in each of the ten sacred words.

Closing Prayer: Let us pray using the words from Psalm 19:7-10 (NRSV)

“The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
The decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
The precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
The ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.”

I pray that we might all deepen into and receive the many spiritual gifts you have for us as we learn more about the ten sacred words that you gave to Moses long ago as we become more and more the people you created us to be. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

NOTES

¹ For more information about the displaying the Ten Commandments in public places see:
<http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com/Products/TC0022/should-the-ten-commandments-be-displayed-in-public.aspx>

² Law #196 of the Hammurabi Code: *"If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If one break a man's bone, they shall break his bone. If one destroy the eye of a freeman or break the bone of a freeman he shall pay one gold mina. If one destroy the eye of a man's slave or break a bone of a man's slave he shall pay one-half his price."*