

Ten Principles

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is really misleading to call them the "Ten Commandments", because they are more like principles than specific commandments, and within the "ten" there are, according to different commentators, anything from 12 to 16 specific commands. That is why in Hebrew they called the Aseret HaDibrot or Devarim, the "Ten Statements". They are the foundations on which Torah has been, is, and will continue to be developed and expanded.

No other basic Code of Law has survived as long and has influenced so many different human beings throughout the world. All the major monotheist religions still take these basic ten rules as the foundation of their moral and ethical systems. Now if you ask most Jews, they will assert in full confidence that even if they ignore most of the religious obligations of the Torah, at least they keep the Ten Commandments. But is that really true?

We can all agree with the Big Three, Don't Murder, Don't Steal and Don't Commit Adultery. They emphasize respect for life, property and family. We can also accept the idea of not giving false evidence because otherwise no one could rely on any legal system. We might even agree that respecting one's parents is a fundamental without which there could be no structured family life.

But the law that says, 'Do not envy what others have'? Do we really pay any attention to that? And even if we don't actually try to remove what others have, we do envy all the time. Indeed the whole of the advertising business which surrounds us constantly is predicated on wanting what others have got! On not being satisfied.

And Keeping the Shabbat? Having a day that is different can have major psychological benefits. It gives your mind space, time to re-charge. It is a different kind of experience. To be free once a week, from all the mundane work and cultural pressures of society makes sense; to have a day for home and family, rather than for shopping and running around doing all the other things we do all week long, at the beck and call of our businesses, our cell phones and pressures. But the idea of going without our cars, TV, iPods even for 24 hours is unthinkable. It seems so primitive. So we ignore the law.

You see most of us we cannot even manage 5 of the commandments, let alone 10.