

Ten Commandments

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

If one had to think of Judaism's major contribution to the world, one might think of the Ten Commandments. Everyone seems to approve of them (until they look to see what they really say). In one way, they play a far more significant role in Christian life than they do in Judaism. These "Ten" appear all over the world in sculpture, art, and indeed in or around many American law courts. The Supreme Court in the USA has intervened over the issue of whether courts in parts of America can display the Ten Commandments or not. One often sees images of the Two Tablets of Stone in synagogues. But there is no requirement for their display, in courts or anywhere else. How did this strange situation come about?

The Ten Commandments represent the core of the Sinai Revelation. It is without doubt the earliest formulation of a concise legal code. Early collections of laws were just that, collections. No attempt to list a core. In the Bible and in current Hebrew, they are called *Aseret HaDevarim* (Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 4 & 10) or *Aseret HaDibrot*. The Ten Statements or, you might say, "Principles", rather than commandments. In fact, in later Jewish compilations and categorizations of biblical laws, the commandments that are deduced from them amount to 17, depending on which authority you prefer.

According to the Talmud these Ten Principles were recited in the Temple. The Temple was not a synagogue, and formal prayer services were not held there. After the destruction, there was a move to include the Ten in the formal prayers, sometime around the first century BCE. But the rabbinic authorities of the time blocked it "because of the *Minim*", as a reaction to heretics or sectarians who claimed that only the Ten were given on Sinai and that all the rest were less important. As indeed Christianity and Islam did, maintaining that all the rest of the biblical (and rabbinic) laws were dispensable.

Who were these heretics or sectarians? Rashi, the great commentator (Brachot 12a) says they were ignorant ones who said that the remainder of the Torah was not so important. In fact, he had said it referred to Christians; but the Church censored the original.

The fact is that if the Ten Commandments were intended as laws, they would be rather vague and even unhelpful. Which, of course, is why Judaism has always referred to them as the *Aseret HaDibrot*, statements of principles, rather than commands. When the text says *Lo Tirtzach* it should be translated "Do not Murder". If it meant "Thou Shalt Not Kill", why would the Bible elsewhere tell us that we should kill—either Canaanites or others who come to attack us? Can it not make up its mind? And if the text requires us to replace "kill" with "murder", then why is there no distinction stipulated between culpable homicide and manslaughter? The Bible itself makes this distinction when it talks about cities of refuge for accidental homicide.

And does "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery" literally only mean adultery? What

about all other forbidden relations, such as incest? Are they included too or not? The other biblical term we use to refer to forbidden marital relations *Gilui Ajarot*—literally uncovering what should be covered—would be much more appropriate, if less catchy and concise. And is coveting one's neighbor's ox a separate command from coveting one's neighbor's ass or wife? Or do they all come under the same heading? And what is coveting? A strange word we rarely use nowadays. If it just means envying someone else's property, that is not a punishable offense. Only acting on a thought is punishable, not thoughts themselves. Though thoughts are indeed often bad and destructive, moral offenses.

To make life even more complicated, there are two versions in the Bible of the same "Ten". One we have mentioned comes in Exodus 20:2-14, and then another version appears in Chapter 5 of Deuteronomy, verses 6-18. Why do they have different verse counts? Which version are we to take as the actual "Ten", given the differences? It is all the more complicated since the chapters and verses we use in our Bible are not of Jewish origin. They are Christian. Those markings and divisions are not given in the Masoretic text, only "open" and "closed" paragraphs and the notes for singing the words.

There are minor differences in text and law between the two versions. But they can be quite significant, such as in the reasons given for keeping Shabbat. The first reason given is "creation" and the second is "slavery". They may well amount to the same thing. In this world that God created we should be free to ensure a spiritual dimension in days off work. The seventh day is freedom from slavery. But then what is meant by work? And why in one version are we commanded to remember the Shabbat and in the other to keep it? Yes, they do complement each other, and we sing on Friday Night in *Leha Dodi* that they were given simultaneously.

It's all well and good to say that both versions were given by the Almighty simultaneously to Moses, but we ordinary, limited mortals of lesser inspiration and indirect contact can only take in one version at a time. What this all means is that even Biblical texts are read and understood through the varying filters of different religious experiences, traditions, and dogma.

Within Judaism itself the "Ten" remain complex. According to tradition, the Two Tablets of the Covenant which Moses brought down off the mountain, both the second whole set and the original broken bits, were kept in the Ark in the Holy of Holies in the First Temple, and they were read regularly in the Temple. After the exile they were not read in synagogues every day because, as the Jerusalem Talmud says, otherwise people might think these ten were more important than the rest of the Torah. But why was this not a problem during Temple times? I guess here we come back to the challenge to rabbinic interpretation after the destruction of the Second Temple and the existential struggle with the rise of Christianity, Karaism, and then Islam.

This challenge of the *Aseret HaDibrot* has continued in Jewish tradition over whether one should stand or sit when they are read in the synagogue from the Torah during the annual cycle. If one stands, it might mislead people into thinking they were more special or more Divine than the rest of the Torah.

But if one sits while they were read, one would not be according the same respect given them by the Children of Israel, who stood while the Sinai Revelation and the Tablets of Stone were given (Exodus 20:15). To this day different communities have different customs on this issue.

In one way the issue here is a very modern one. There is a tendency to think the ten alone are the essential rules and all the others are secondary. This is precisely what has happened in many circles both within Judaism and without. We like to reduce everything to small, concise soundbites. We like distillations of wisdom without having to wade through serious books or to study too hard. We like Cliff notes and SparkNotes and simple slogans. We like facile, ersatz Kabbalah instead of the real thing. So it is with Torah. Many Jews like to reduce the number of obligations, anyway. Treating the *Aseret HaDibrot* or, if you prefer, the Ten Commandments as a similar kind of substitute is precisely what the rabbis objected to. They knew that Jewish law was the secret of their success and survival, and Jewish Law is much more than the basics.

Many people say, "I keep the Ten Commandments, and that's enough for me." But the fact is that they probably do not even keep half of them. If that is true of just ten, then how much more so of all the others that are crucial parts of our tradition. If we only pass on the least, how can we expect more of our kids? The lower you set the bar, the less you have to try!