



JEWISH TREATS

The Ten Commandments



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The Ten Commandments

The holiday of Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai more than 3,300 years ago. As written in Exodus 20, on that day (the 6th day of Sivan), the Divine voice proclaimed what is commonly referred to as the “Ten Commandments.” In Hebrew, they are called the Aseret Hadibrot, the “Ten Statements.” The rest of the Torah was transmitted directly to Moses alone, who taught it to the Israelites.

On Shavuot night, it is customary for people to stay up the entire night (first night only where two days of Shavuot are observed*) studying Torah. To help you celebrate by studying Torah over the holiday, Jewish Treats and NJOP have prepared this eBook about the Ten Commandments, just for you.

If you plan on using this eBook on the holiday of Shavuot, we ask that you please honor the holiday by printing out the material before the holiday.

*The holiday is observed for 1 day in Israel, 2 outside of Israel.

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In Memory Of

My Abba: Aaron ben Yisrael,
My Ima: Mariam bat Schmuel,
My Grandparents:
Bertha and Schmuel Halpert
Fannie and Yisrael Siegel

May their neshamot be elevated
in Gan Eden, and may they be
a bracha for Am Yisrael.

The First Commandment

"I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

How, many have asked, is this a commandment? There is no active directive here, as there is in all of the other commandments. So, why is this considered a commandment rather than God's introduction? Furthermore, why is it necessary for God to clarify to the Jewish people who He is... "Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage"?

Let's take the second question first...Why does God need to identify Himself? Actually God isn't defining who He is but rather defining His relationship to the Jewish people. One could read the sentence with slightly different punctuation: "I am the Lord. Your God, Who brought you out..." First, God identifies Himself, then He clarifies His relationship to the Jewish nation. The sages compare the giving of the Torah at Sinai to a wedding ceremony. God, the groom, reminds the bride, the Israelite nation, of the gift He has already given them--their freedom.

Questions to ponder:

Can belief be commanded?

What reason do we have for fulfilling the Torah's commandments?

The first question still stands, however: Why is this considered a commandment?

It is human nature to want to know why we do things. In this first commandment, God answers the "why" question. All that which He is about to set forth, all of the different laws that the Jewish people are expected to fulfill, are because "I am the Lord your God." In the vast canon of Jewish law, there are many mitzvot that, intuitively, make sense, such as do not murder. There are others for which the Torah provides an explanation, such as eating matzah to help us remember the matzah eaten at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. But there are also mitzvot the reason for which we are unable to fathom, but we observe them nevertheless, because "I am the Lord your God."

The First Commandment is not a commandment to have faith. Faith implies uncertainty. "I am the Lord your God" is a statement of fact, upon which all of the other mitzvot are based.

The Second Commandment

“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any manner of likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children of the third and fourth generation of those that hate Me; and showing mercy unto the thousandth generation of those that love Me and keep My commandments.”



Prohibiting the worship of any other god seems like an obvious next step after the First Commandment. Herein, God is very specific, detailing both ambiguous worship (unseen other gods) and the worship of any natural part of the universe (in heaven above, earth below or in the water--i.e. sun, moon, stars, etc). Since the worship of idols, according to the Midrash, stemmed from people thinking of the sun or thunder as more approachable servants of God, these details are important.

Question to ponder:

Why does the Second Commandment specify the different methods of idol worship?

The prohibition of worshiping anything but God falls naturally into the Ten Commandments. So why does a seeming explanation (“For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting...”) follow? The second half of the Second Commandment conveys the seriousness of this transgression. Because God loves the Jewish people, He notifies them of the dire consequences of idol worship; that it doesn’t just affect one person, but impacts on many generations.

The Third Commandment

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain.”

What exactly does it mean to take God’s name in vain? At its most basic, it means uttering an oath in God’s name that will not be kept.

Think back to the story of creation: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth....and God said “Let there be light, and there was light...” (Genesis 1:3, 4). Creation came about through the power of God’s speech, underscoring the power of words. So, when a person swears that they will do something (or not do something), they have made a real and true commitment. If one then swears in God’s name, one is sanctifying his/her words and, in metaphoric terms, cosigning God into the oath. While the commandment only prohibits swearing in God’s name, it is considered an important and commendable act to avoid oath-taking completely (lest one violate the oath).

Question to ponder:

Why is the proper use of God’s name considered important?



The second half of the commandment relates to the frivolous use of God’s name. While the application of this prohibition pertains only to the actual Hebrew names of God, the sensitivity to the language one uses is still important. When talking about topics of Jewish life, it is understandable that one would bring up God’s name. But, sometimes a person uses words without thinking...for instance the casual expression, “Oh God!” (Try “Oh my Gosh,” instead!)

The Fourth Commandment

"Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your creative work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any manner of creative work-- you, your son, your daughter, your man-servant, your maid-servant, your cattle, and your stranger that is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath Day, and hallowed it."

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"Guard the Sabbath Day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded. Pursue all your labor for six days, and do all your creative work. But the seventh day is Shabbat for the Lord your God; Do no creative work--not you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox or donkey or any of your cattle, nor the stranger who resides within your gates, in order that your male and female servants shall rest, as you rest. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God took you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; Therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Day of Shabbat."

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments. The first set of commandments (Exodus 20) were destroyed by Moses when he found the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). After God forgave the people, Moses returned to the summit of Mount Sinai and received a second set of the Ten Commandments that are written out in Deuteronomy 5. The Midrash notes, however, that when God proclaimed the Fourth Commandment, the two versions were announced simultaneously.

The Fourth Commandment

Remember the Sabbath Day

Guard the Sabbath Day

The dual nature of the Fourth Commandment reflects the importance of Shabbat in Jewish life. The observance of Shabbat affects more than just our relationship with time and the physical world. It also affects our interactions with other people. More importantly, it colors the way we relate to God.

The Torah states that we must remember the Sabbath day (*zachor*) because “in six days God created the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day He rested.” To actively remember Shabbat, Jews recite kiddush and sanctify the wine, bless the challah, light the candles and make Shabbat the focal point of their week. In this way some of the Divine power of creation is brought into our lives.

On the other hand, the Torah states that we must guard the Sabbath day (*shamor*) because “you were a slave in Egypt, and God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.” Guarding refers to abstaining from creative activities, and ensures that the day remains holy. Refraining from creative work reminds us that God gave us our freedom in order that we might serve Him.

Both by refraining from creative work and by wearing nice clothing, drinking wine at kiddush, eating a full sit-down meal, inviting guests, etc., Jews around the world transform the seventh day into Shabbat on a weekly basis.

Questions to ponder:

Why are the positive acts of Shabbat (candle lighting, kiddush, etc.) acts of remembering?

How does refraining from creative acts, such as planting, help people emulate God?



The Fifth Commandment

“Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God gives you.”

The popular understanding of the commandment to honor one’s parents (probably one of the most oft-repeated phrases from the Torah by the vast majority of parents) requires a person to speak politely to his/her parents and to fulfill any of their reasonable requests. However, it also has other far-reaching ramifications. For instance, one is not permitted to call his or her parents by their first names, sit in a parent’s particular chair or contradict a parent (especially in front of others, unless they specifically tell the child to do so).

Question to ponder:

The previous four commandments are all related to God. How does honoring your father and mother connect to the previous commandments?

“Honor your father and mother” may appear to be out of place among the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments regulate the Jewish people’s relationship with God (Shabbat is a time to bond with the Divine). The second five create a basic civil code. The fifth commandment is a bridge. In honoring one’s parents, one also honors God, since, according to the Talmud Niddah 31a, God is the third partner in the creation of a child. At the same time, learning to respect one’s parents (and grandparents and, more generally, elders) is a critical element in the development of a refined, law abiding human being.

It is important to note, however, that the Fifth Commandment does not demand unquestioning obedience. If parents asks children to transgress Torah law, for instance

theft, one must and should, disobey. However, even if one’s parents are cruel or abusive, one owes them the bare minimum of fulfilling the mitzvah...food, shelter, clothing and transportation in recognition of the gift of life that they have given the child.



The Sixth Commandment

"You shall not murder."

*The discussion below presents the law as it applied in the days of when the Sanhedrin (the ancient Supreme Court of Israel) governed the Jewish people according to Torah law.

Of all the commandments, "You shall not murder" seems to be the most obvious of rules. Almost every civil code prohibits the lawless taking of life.

The Jewish perspective on the sanctity of life can provide an interesting insight to this terrible crime. According to Jewish law, a person coming into contact with a dead human body becomes *tamei*, ritually impure, because he/she has encountered an object that has lost its Divine spark. If merely encountering a dead body can affect a person, how much more impure is a person who removes another's life?

While the commandment not to murder applies to both murder and manslaughter, the consequences are not the same. In the case of an accidental death, the killer is sent to live in a special City of Refuge (where the victim's relatives could not take revenge). Murder, however, is a capital crime.

The injunction against taking a life is as important for those whose role it is to uphold the law, as it is for all other people. Capital cases are few and far between in Judaism due to very precise requirements that make up the rules of evidence. Murder is defined as the intentional, illegal taking of life. One can certainly surmise from evidence that someone had intent to kill. However, according to Torah law, a person can only be held responsible for murder if he/she is warned beforehand, thus insuring that the killing was deliberate. Additionally, the murder must actually be witnessed by two proper witnesses who had previously warned the perpetrator against the action.

Questions to ponder:

Does this prohibition include manslaughter (accidental) or does it only apply to murder?

Why is capital punishment, frequently mentioned in the Torah, permitted?

The Seventh Commandment

"You shall not commit adultery."

Although adultery may be illegal in many U.S. states, violators of those laws are rarely prosecuted. In western society in the 21st century, an attitude of "privacy" prevails in matters of the bedroom. Whether society wishes to turn a blind eye or not, adultery is, from a Torah perspective, as serious a crime as murder.

Question to ponder:

Is the prohibition against relations with a married woman sexist?

An honest discussion of the Seventh Commandment must include the fact that the Torah prohibition is better defined as "a man shall not have relations with a married woman." Looking beyond our 21st century sensitivities, one sees the practicality of this prohibition. Marriage is an agreement between husband and wife to build a family together. Upon the birth of a child, except under extreme circumstance, everyone knows the mother. Paternity, however, is based on the believed faithfulness of the mother. Every child is entitled to know who his biological father and mother are. If a woman has more than one partner, determining the true father would be impossible (at least before DNA testing).

Beyond practical matters, however, adultery violates the sanctity of marriage. For this reason, the rabbis also came to decree the reverse prohibition (banning married men from extramarital relations, although this is not a capital crime).

Many commentators divide the Ten Commandments into two sets: the first five relate to the relationship between human beings and God and the second five relate to interpersonal relationships. When the two sets are compared side-by-side, "You shall not commit adultery" aligns with the prohibition against worshiping other gods. The relationship of the Jewish people to God is often compared to that of a bride and groom...and just as it is expected that God and the Jewish people will remain faithful to each other, so too must a husband and wife.

The Eighth Commandment

“You shall not steal.”

At first, the prohibition of *lo tignohv*, do not steal, appears obvious. Every civil code prohibits theft. But when looked at in context, two perplexing questions arise. First, in both syntax and placement, the Eighth Commandment appears to be of equal measure to not killing, not committing adultery and not giving false testimony--all three of which can be capital offenses.

What object, however, could be so valuable that its theft could equal to the price of a person's life? (And remember, Torah law goes to great lengths to avoid actually carrying out capital punishment.) Additionally, if the Eighth Commandment prohibits simply stealing, then what is the purpose of the Tenth Commandment, which prohibits coveting, but is only truly violated if one actually acts to obtain the coveted item illegally?

Questions such as these, along with a subtle analysis of the language, lead the sages to understand that this particular injunction is actually intended to mean “thou shalt not kidnap,” a capital crime. (However, other verses in the Torah, and the very detailed civil code of the oral law, make it clear that ALL theft is prohibited. It just isn't a capital crime.)

What is so serious about the act of kidnaping that it merits inclusion in the Ten Commandments? Central to God's creation of humankind is His gift of free-will. Slavery is permitted in the Torah because the slave becomes a slave through his own actions (stealing, enemy in war). When a person steals another person, however, the victim unjustly loses the important human element of freedom (especially since kidnap victims in ancient times were often sold into slavery).

Question to ponder:

In what situation might stealing be considered a capital offense?



The Ninth Commandment

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

In order to understand the gravity of the Ninth Commandment, one must first understand the important role of witnesses in the Jewish court system. According to Jewish law, a person can only be deemed guilty of a wrongdoing if he/she were warned against his/her action by two reliable witnesses. Because of the weight given to the witness' testimony in the court system, a person might be convicted based solely on the witness' testimony. Thus, witnesses hold the defendant's life in their hands.

Question to ponder:

How is the prohibition of perjury different than that of swearing falsely using God's name?

In many ways, the Ninth Commandment reflects concepts already set forth in some of the previous commandments. For instance, the Third Commandment (not to swear in God's name in vain) emphasizes the power of words, a lesson that can certainly be drawn from this prohibition as well. The Sixth Commandment, prohibiting murder, is also related to this commandment in that one who bears false witness could also violate the earlier prohibition by causing a person to be unjustly executed.

The crime of bearing false witness can have very serious ramifications. In the case where a second set of witnesses testify that the first set of witnesses could not possibly be giving truthful testimony (e.g. they were together someplace else with the second set of witnesses), the punishment that would have been meted out to the defendant is given to the false witnesses. Thus, if it was falsely claimed in court that a defendant had abducted and sold a passing stranger as a slave, the witnesses would receive the capital punishment of strangulation in the defendant's stead.



The Tenth Commandment

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maid-servant, his ox, his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's.”

The final commandment of the Ten Commandments prohibits coveting either the wife or the possessions of one's fellow. While each of the Ten Commandments is independent of the others, one cannot help but think of them as having equal weight. Can wanting my neighbor's car be as wrong as killing someone?

Question to ponder:

How can the Torah prohibit thoughts and desires?

Actually, it can. After all, what is the usual emotional source of murder, adultery, theft or perjury? Adultery and theft are obviously connected; murder and perjury are often rooted in a desire to hurt another person because they have something (honor, a job, etc.) that another wants. Viewed in this light, one can understand the seriousness of this prohibition.

Two Hebrew words are used in the Torah to describe “coveting” : “*tachmohd*” and “*tit'aveh*.” The primary word used, “*tachmohd*,” (found in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) actually means to covet something so much that it leads to action. Thus, this is a prohibition against obtaining an object by means of force or pressure. One may not offer someone an excessive amount of money to sell something that they don't really want to sell.



The other word, “*tit'aveh*,” is only found in Deuteronomy 5 (not in Exodus 20). “*Tit'aveh*” is a less severe form of coveting - call it having a desire for something. When one is busy focusing on what someone else has, one loses sight of “I am the Lord your God” and forgets that God runs the world and decides exactly what belongs to whom.

From The Jewish Treats Archive:

The First Ten (5/18/2010)

The Biblical narrative states that God brought the Israelites to Mount Sinai and spoke the Ten Commandments, beginning with "I am the Lord your God!" Some commentators argue that the people were so intimidated by God's voice, that they could only tolerate hearing the first two commandments as they rang out from the heavens. The people then beseeched Moses to intercede and deliver the remaining eight commandments. Moses then ascended Mount Sinai and did not return to the Israelites for 40 days.

Ten Commandments...forty days? Obviously, something more than Moses reviewing Ten Commandments was happening on that mountaintop. Tradition tells us that during the time Moses remained on Mount Sinai he received all of the written and oral Torah.

Moses was uniquely endowed and capable of learning all of halacha (Jewish law), as well as the methods of deriving halacha, in just over a month. However, it was not possible to teach what he learned to the entire nation in less than 40 years

God therefore began with the Ten Commandments, which could be understood and followed on a simple as well as a complex level. For example, honoring one's mother and father (#5), on the simple level, means giving respect to one's parents. When studied further, however, one discovers that this commandment is also about gratitude to God, the ultimate Creator.

Thus, the Ten Commandments are seen as the cornerstone of the Torah, containing both the religious ("I am the Lord your God") and legal elements ("Do not steal") of the Torah.

Two Pillars of Five (2/19/2009)

Jewish law, and thus Jewish life, rests on two pillars, the mitzvot between a person and God and the mitzvot between one person and another. These two pillars of law are laid out in the Ten Commandments.

According to the sages, the first five commandments concern one's relationship with God. The second five are concerned with interpersonal relationships. Strikingly enough, these two sets of five parallel each other:

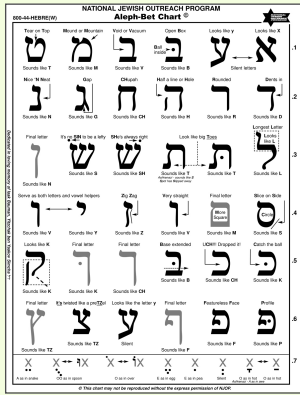
1) I am the Lord your God and 6) Do not murder: When someone murders another person, the perpetrator, in effect, denies that the victim is created *b'tzelem Eh-lokim*, made in the image of G-d. A murderer assumes that there is no higher power who will either punish him/her or who will punish the person whom he/she feels has wronged him/her.

2) You shall have no idols and 7) Do not commit adultery: Just as adultery is being unfaithful to one's spouse, worshiping idols is tantamount to being unfaithful to God.

3) Do not make a false oath and 8) Do not steal: One who swears falsely in God's name distorts the trust that people place in God to uphold justice. One who steals distorts the trust another person puts in him/her.

4) Sanctify the Sabbath and 9) Do not bear false witness: By sanctifying the Sabbath day, one bears testimony that God created the world and redeemed the Jews from Egypt. Violating the Sabbath denies both.

5) Honor your mother and father and 10) Do not covet your neighbor's possessions: By honoring our parents, we recognize God as our Creator, thereby honoring Him as well. When we covet our neighbor's possessions we deny God as the Ruler of the world and believe that we have been denied something that we deserve.



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