

Revisiting the Ten Commandments

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I KNOW THIS DOESN'T SOUND GOOD COMING FROM a rabbi — but for quite a while now I have found the Ten Commandments rather disappointing. Not that I disagree with them, necessarily. But I just don't find them, well, awe-inspiring, stimulating, instructive.

And I don't think I'm alone in this. Most of the time we Jews just don't think much about the Ten C's — unless someone threatens to post them in a Kentucky courthouse. Then we realize, once again, that Jews count the Ten Commandments differently from Catholics, who count them differently from Protestants and differently again from the Orthodox Church.

One of the problems is that no one quite knows what to do with the opening line: *I am the Lord Your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...* I mean, what is that? Is it an introduction? A commandment? A pointed reminder that “you owe me?”

Some of the commandments are so predictable that I find myself thinking: Did we need God to come down to Mount Sinai to tell us that? I mean, Do Not Murder — well, of course! And what about Remember the Sabbath? It's a lovely weekly ritual, but does it really belong in the top ten ethical precepts? And how about Don't Take God's Name in Vain — it seems fairly quaint, even if we can presume to know what it meant to the ancients, with their complicated sets of curses and oaths. What does it mean to us now?

The final few lines are equally puzzling — Do Not Covet your neighbor's wife, servants, ox, ass, or anything else of his. Shouldn't lusting after your neighbor's wife be set apart from envying his domestic livestock and other things? And doesn't Judaism pride itself on not legislating feelings? And, any-

way, didn't we already cover that territory in Do Not Steal and Do Not Commit Adultery? Why use up another commandment on coveting? After all, we're talking only ten

Of course, there have been centuries of commentary on the Ten Commandments and the issues they raise. For my part, I've often felt that the problem with the Ten Commandments is that they seem so random. Why these and not others? Surely there are many important mitzvot left out that could easily replace some of the ones that made the list. For the last few years, I've led workshops with both adults and children, asking them to sort through a sample of traditional Jewish teachings and come up with a set of ten commandments that resonate with them personally. I haven't yet found anyone interested in keeping all of the original ten, which confirms my suspicions. But I've been impressed with the intensity with which people in these workshops deliberate on the teachings before them in an effort to arrive at a more meaningful list. There's a strong interest, I think, in defining a core set of values that speak to our modern age from out of our ancient past. .

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All of this is on my mind as we approach the holiday of Shavuot, when the Israelites received the two tablets at Mount Sinai. I've been inspired to take another look at the Big Ten by Rabbi Arthur Green's marvelous treatment of them in his most recent book, *Radical Judaism*. Green reinterprets the commandments so that they apply primarily to teachers in the Jewish community. Thus, for example, his third commandment, *Do not raise up the name of YHWH your God in vain*, translates, in part, into: "Do not preach things you do not believe. Do not lie, even to yourself..."

But I'm looking for a more universal understanding of the Ten Commandments, not just for teachers but for all of us. As I think about Sinai, I go back to the description in Exodus of the fire and thunder when the Ten Commandments were given. My favorite midrash, the Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibrot from eleventh century Iraq, imagines the Children of Israel being so overwhelmed by hearing the divine speech that they were knocked back on their feet twelve *parasangs*, their souls departing their bodies. So what did the

Holy One do? The midrash tells us: God sent along two angels to each and every Israelite, one to lay a hand upon the heart to keep body and soul together, and the other to lift up the head of each Israelite to behold God.

It's a beautiful image, especially if you like angels. But set aside the angels for a moment, and notice that the midrash is keying in on the life-and-death quality of Sinai. This is where the Israelites came face to face with Ultimate Reality, with the life force that keeps body and soul together, as well as the fear that drives them apart. Israel's acceptance of the Ten Commandments is a great YES to the power of the life force coursing through its midst. And the life force that pulses through each of us from Sinai down to this day is the same life force that nudges us towards the good and away from the harmful. The Ten Commandments are but a single, integral teaching on the care and handling of that precious life force whose *mysterium tremendum* we experienced at Sinai.

The first set of commandments offer five ways to *preserve and enhance the life force*:

1. *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...*
The life force that we call God demands your freedom, and demands that you work for the freedom of all human beings.
2. *You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth...* This Earth is wholly interconnected — heavens, earth, waters. Understand it as a complete whole. Do not imagine you can split off any piece of this life force in an effort to control it.
3. *Do not take the name of the Lord in vain...* Each human being is part of the Great Name that lives eternally; each person is made in the image of the divine. Lift up the dignity of living creatures around you.
4. *Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy...* Rest, renewal, and restoration allow the precious life force to flow free, to renew and replenish itself within us. Honor time; it is our greatest gift.
5. *Honor your father and mother...* because the life force is transmitted from parents to children. You have received it, so honor its source, and treat your own children with love and respect so that one day they will honor you as their parents.

The second set of commandments teach us five ways to *avoid destroying the life force* by respecting the boundaries between yourself and others:

6. *Do not murder.* Do not destroy the life force within others, and therefore do not do violence to other people — no rape, abuse, torture, assault of any kind.
7. *Do not commit adultery.* Do not damage the life force that abides in sacred relationships.
8. *Do not steal.* Do not diminish others, as Art Green has taught, in their minds or in your own mind, by stealing their property, freedom, or thoughts.
9. *Do not bear false witness...* With your words you can betray people's trust, undermine judicial institutions, and erode the sense of justice and fairness that sustains our communities. Don't.
10. *Do not covet/take your neighbor's wife...* Do not take what is not yours, even in your mind or intention. Jealousy corrodes the life force and diminishes you while over-elevating others. You cannot live a full and joyful life when your eyes and desire are on someone else's life. Live the life you have received.

Perhaps these two sets of five commandments are also a living reminder of the angels sent to each Israelite. Recall: one angel was sent to keep body and soul together. This is the task of the second set of five commandments, which not only keeps us from harming ourselves and others, but also sets our civil society on a sound footing. The other angel had a loftier goal — to lift up our heads that we may behold our God. That is the task of the first set of five commandments, which places us in lasting harmony with our history and our earth, with God and with time, with generations past and yet to follow.

