

TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, February 15, 2017

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most well-known and influential passages of the Hebrew Bible are the Aseret HaDibrot, translated alternatively as the Ten Commandments or the Ten Sayings (since they do not all read as commandments). This afternoon, we will explore their two versions in the Torah (in Exodus and in Deuteronomy), and how they can be understood in the larger contexts of Tanach (the Hebrew Scriptures), prayer, Jewish law, and the greater world, particularly in public spaces.

AS THEY APPEAR IN EXODUS

Exodus 20:1-14

א וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר: ס ב אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים: ג לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פְּנֵי: ד לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: ה לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַדֹּשׁ עֹן אָבֹת עַל־בְּנֵים עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רְבַעִים לְשָׁנָאָּ: ו וְעָשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים לְאֹהֲבָיו וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָי: ז לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוּא: ח זָכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: ט שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ: י וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלֶאכֶה אֲתָהּ | וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתֶּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתֶּךָ וּבַהֶמְתָּךְ וּגְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: יא כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בִּרְבֹּךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ: יב כִּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָרְכֻךָ וְיִמְיָךְ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ: יג לֹא תִרְצַח ס לֹא תִנְאֹף ס לֹא תִגְנוֹב ס לֹא תַעֲנֶנֶה בְרַעַף עַד שֶׁקֶר: יד לֹא תַחַמֵּד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ ס לֹא־תַחַמֵּד אֶשֶׁת רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדוֹ וְאִמְתוֹ וְשׁוֹר׃ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ: פ

1 God spoke all these words, saying:

2 I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

3 You shall have no other gods besides Me.

4 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. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, 6 but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

7 You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

8 Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

12 Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you.

13 You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

14 You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

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DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

1. Why is it not technically accurate to call these “the Ten Commandments”? Which are not commandments?
2. On this reading of the “Big Ten” as they appear in Exodus, did you notice anything that you had not paid attention to before? Did any commandment in particular leap out for you?
3. According to Jewish tradition, there are 613 mitzvot (commandments) that have been derived from the Torah. A couple hundred of them can no longer be performed, because they deal with the service in the Bet Hamikdash - the holy Temple - the second of which fell to the Romans in 70 CE. So, with well over 300 mitzvot that we are still capable of and obligated to perform, why are these ten emphasized?
4. What place do the Ten Commandments play in Christian religion? (This is me asking you, by the way!) Is there any variation in that role between Christian denominations?
5. Why have some people wanted to have them displayed in public places, like courthouses?
6. Note the highlighted commandment - what is the reason attached to the observance of the Sabbath? This chapter comes not long after the recount of the liberation from slavery and the exodus from Egypt - wouldn't that have been a better “reason”? See the next iteration, from Deuteronomy. Why do you think Creation is recalled here instead of there?
7. The Aseret HaDibrot used to be included as part of the Shacharit service (said in the morning), but was dropped because of the fear that they alone, not the full 613, would be enshrined. They are read publicly when they appear in the Torah readings, at which times the congregation is asked to rise, so as to imitate and reenact the entire people standing at Mount Sinai receiving the Torah.
8. There is an understanding that these ten sayings or commandments represent rubrics under which all of the other commandments fall.

AS THEY APPEAR IN DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy 5:6-18

וְאֵנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּיַת עַבְדִּים: ז' לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי: ח לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל כְּלִי-תְמוּלָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמֶּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: ט לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַדְשׁ פֶּקֶד עֹן אָבוֹת עַל-בְּנֵים וְעַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים לְשָׁנָאֵי: י וְעַשֵׂה חֶסֶד לְאֶלְפִים לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי [מִצְוֹתַי]: ס יֵא לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה יְהוָה אֶת אִשְׁרֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוּא: ס יב שְׁמֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְשׁוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: יג שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתְּךָ: יד וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלַאכָה אַתָּה | וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתְךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְשׂוֹרְךָ וְחִמְרְךָ וְכָל-בְּהֵמְתְּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ כָּמוֹךָ: טו וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עַבְדִּי הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצִיאֲךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה עַל-כֵּן צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: ס טז כִּבְדֹּד אֶת-אֲבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְמַעַן | אַרְיִכּוּ יְמֵיךָ וְלִמְעַן יֵיטֵב לְךָ עַל הַאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ: ס יז לֹא תִרְצַח ס וְלֹא תִנְאַף ס וְלֹא תִגְזֹב ס וְלֹא-תַעֲנֶנֶה בְּרַעַף עַד שְׁוֹא: ס יח וְלֹא תִחְמַד אֶת-רֵעֶךָ ס וְלֹא תִתְאַוֶּה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמְתּוֹ שׂוֹרְוֹ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ: ס

- 6 I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:
- 7 You shall have no other gods beside Me. 8 You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters below the earth. 9 You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third

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and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, **10** but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

11 You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by His name. **12** Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. **13** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **14** but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. **15** Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day. **16** Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may long endure, and that you may fare well, in the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you. **17** You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. **18** You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not crave your neighbor's house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

1. On this reading of the commandments from Deuteronomy, did anything strike you differently than it did in the Exodus reading?
2. We've already noted the different reason attached to Sabbath observance in this iteration - considering the explanation given, which presents G-d as Liberator, why might the commandment been given this way at this point in the development of the Israelites? (Where were they about to go, what were they about to do?) Which for you is the more compelling reason?
3. Having read both iterations, we can begin to sort the commandments into those between us and G-d (the first ones) and those between us and our fellow people (the later ones). But where would you make the split? Which commandment lives in both camps?

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

For such an ancient text, the Ten Commandments have certainly been in the news a lot in contemporary times! As late as two days ago, a simple Internet search yielded the following from KOB4.com in Albuquerque, NM: "A city in the Four Corners will continue its legal battle over a Ten Commandments monument. The Bloomfield City Council on Monday unanimously voted to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court over a ruling that the commandments must come down. Last week, the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals denied a petition to rehear the case after a lower court's decision about the monument. There was no word when the petition will be heard." In addition, numerous websites report the start of a new archaeological project on a hill in Jerusalem to find the Ark of the Covenant, which the Torah says contains the tablets of the Law, upon which were inscribed the Ten Commandments.

I believe that it is what the commandments teach rather than the ancient physical artifacts themselves, if they truly exist, that is important. The Ten Commandments are the fundamental, shared law of both Judaism and Christianity, and form one significant basis of

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Western civilization. The controversy over placing a replica of them in public spaces is based on the belief that their presence implies a religious stance that not all share, thus violating the First Amendment ban against Congress “respecting an establishment of religion.” It is the same law that is meant to prevent students of other faiths, or no faith at all, from having parochial religious prayers and rites thrust upon them. The Supreme Court has generally upheld the ban on displaying the Ten Commandments in courthouses, public schools, whenever the issue has come before them:

*In the majority of cases considering official posting of the Ten Commandments, the Court has extended this prohibition. In its 1980 (*Stone v. Graham*) decision striking down a Kentucky law requiring that a copy of the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom, the Court said:

- *The pre-eminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious in nature. The Ten Commandments are undeniably a sacred text in the Jewish and Christian faiths, and no legislative recitation of a supposed secular purpose can blind us to that fact. The Commandments do not confine themselves to arguably secular matters, such as honoring one's parents, killing or murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and covetousness. Rather, the first part of the Commandments concerns the religious duties of believers: worshipping the Lord God alone, avoiding idolatry, not using the Lord's name in vain, and observing the Sabbath Day.*

*From archive.adl.org

I agree with the ADL and many other groups that the Ten Commandments do not belong in the public sphere. I've noticed that the text is never displayed on these monuments, only some symbols representing the number of the commandments (Hebrew letters representing 1 through 10, or more frequently, Roman numerals) - without the text, the tablets are empty and essentially meaningless. If the text were to be displayed, such as on posters in public schools, these words, especially of the first five commandments, would not represent a shared truth for all and might even be seen as a source of oppression. In addition, there is no one standard translation shared by all Christians, let alone one shared by both Christians and Jews. And finally, so as to prevent schools, courthouses, etc., from becoming public bulletin boards crowded by the legitimate statements of beliefs by any and all groups, as the First Amendment would seem to allow, I believe that the Ten Commandments should not be displayed except in our private religious institutions.

What are your thoughts on the subject?