

**Sat6 Feb1999
The TenCommandments
Congregation AdatReyim
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A Short Discussion on the 10 Commandments

"Yitro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law ..."

So begins this week's parsha, the portion that describes the revelation at Mount Sinai and presents the first list of what is known as the Ten Commandments. Jewish tradition has Israel at Mount Sinai accept the yoke of the Torah, 613 mitzvot. Why do these 10 receive more of our attention than the other 603?

Congregations rise when the Ten Commandments are read during the Torah service, a mark of respect accorded only one other Torah passage, the Song at the Sea. Jews and Christians unquestionably accept these commandments as rules to live by, as well as do many others who are neither Jewish or Christian. Other ethical codes have been proposed, but the "Ten Words" (as the Torah refers to them¹) seems to have an honored place. These particular words, and the story behind Israel's receiving them, inspired Cecil B DeMille in 1956 to remake his popular 1923 movie with such stars as Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, and Edward G. Robinson. On the other hand, as far as I know, there has never been a movie entitled "Kant's Categorical Imperative" or "The Golden Rule." To the general public, this guide to living is unique.

The renowned 12th century Jewish biblical scholar Ibn Ezra² felt the 10 words presents to the serious bible reader many difficult questions. In the short time I have, I can only indicate some of these difficulties. Please turn to Chapter 20 of Exodus and follow as I read the passage containing the 10 commandments. Keep your Chumash open after I complete the reading, since you will probably wish to refer to the text as I speak.

(READ EXODUS 20:1-14)

The Ten Commandments occur twice in the Torah, the second time in Chapter 5 of The Book of Deuteronomy. One probably expects both reports of the divine revelations to be identical. They are not. There are slight differences in them. Explaining these differences and commenting on what each version is saying that the other is not is the first problem for the scholar.

What are the commandments given in the passage we just read? Unfortunately, the text does not number the commandments and different people have counted the commandments in different ways.

The prevailing Jewish division is as follows:

<u>Commandment Number</u>	<u>Verse Number</u>
1	2
2	3 through 6
3	7
4	8 through 10
5	12
6	13
7	13
8	13
9	13
10	14

There are other categorizations. For example, the 15th century Spanish commentator Don Isaac Abravanel takes a minority Jewish view¹ and considers Exodus 20:2 not as one of the commandments but as preamble to the commandments. Certainly, Exodus 20:2 doesn't sound like a commandment. It is formulated neither as a general principle nor as an impersonal law. Thus, there is no universal agreement as to where the Decalogue⁴ starts. In fact, the minority Jewish view is the predominant view among Christian denominations.

Jewish tradition is that verses 4 through 6 are part of the Second Commandment -- which begins with verse three. Verses 4-6 explain what it means not to have other gods "al panai" (literally, "upon/to My face"). The Catholic and Lutheran tradition is that these verses, verses 3 through 6, comprise the First Commandment. Most Protestants, on the other hand, think of verse 3 as Commandment One and verses 4 through 6 as Commandment Two. As you can tell, it is difficult to tell which commandment is which without a score card.

Grammarians have problems with the commandments as well. For example, God uses the first person singular at first but switches to third person singular with Commandment Three. The Hebrew at times is ambiguous. For example, it is not clear in the Hebrew of verse two which is the noun phrase and which the verb phrase. The meaning of the verse shifts subtly depending on how one assigns these attributes.

The commandments are grouped in various ways. Some groupings are as follows:

The first 4 commandments deal with man's relationship to the Divine, the remaining six commandments with man's relationship to man.

The first 5 commandments mention God, the last five commandments do not mention God.

The first and last commandments concern a person's thoughts and feelings, the middle eight commandments are concerned with a person's actions.

The number of ways the Ten Commandments have been grouped is probably exceeded only by the number of ways the ten plagues inflicted on Egypt have been grouped.

I began this talk asking whether the Ten Commandments deserve the honored place it has over the other mitzvot in the Torah. Many of our sages, including Rashi and Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi,⁵ felt they do. Who am I to disagree?

END NOTES

¹ Exodus 34:28, Deut 4:13, Deut 10:4.

² Ibn Ezra's dates were 1092 - 1164. Some traditions say he was murdered by Crusaders.

³ Philo, Josephus, and Chasida b. Avraham Crescas are other well-known Jewish thinkers with a similar opinion. Many Christian thinkers, including Saint Augustine, are also of this opinion.

⁴ The term Decalogue first appeared about 200 C.E. when it was used by the early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria. See Plaut's discussion of the Decalogue in his commentary, "The Torah," page 531.

⁵ Both Rashi and HaLevi felt (to simplify their position) that all the mitzvot were encapsulated by the Ten Commandments. See Rashi's commentary on Exodus 24:12 and HaLevi's The Kuzari I,8.