

# The Ten Commandments

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This monograph focuses on the Ten Commandments (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת -- *aseret ha-dibrot*). After some general introductory remarks, each one of them is discussed in detail in light of the Jewish tradition.

## Biblical text of the Ten Commandments

[Exodus 20:1-14]



וידבר אלהים את כל־הדברים האלה לאמר:  
God spoke all these words, saying:

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדַי:  
1 - I, the Lord, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.

לֹא יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלִּי:  
2 - You shall have no other gods besides Me.

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם וּמַמְלָכָה וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת הָאָרֶץ  
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.

וְעַל־רַבָּעִים לִשְׁנָאִי:  
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, וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים לְאֹהֲבָי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי:  
but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

לֹא תִשָּׁא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁוְא כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׁא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשָׁוְא:  
3 - 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.

זְכוֹר אֶת־יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקֹדֶשׁ׃

**4 - Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.**

שֵׁשׁ יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלֶאכֶתְךָ׃

Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

וְיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת׃ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה אַתָּה ׀ וּבִנְךָ־יִבְרָכְךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וּבְהֶמְתְּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ׃

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.

כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ׃

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.

כִּבְדּוּ אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכוּךָ וְיִשְׁלַח לְפָנֶיךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ׃

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

לֹא תִרְצַח׃ (ס) לֹא תִנָּאֶף׃ (ס) לֹא תַגְזֹב׃ (ס) לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בְּרַעְיוֹ עַד שֹׁקֶר׃

**6-7-8-9 - You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא־תַחְמֹד אִשְׁתּוֹ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְשִׁפְתּוֹ וְחֻמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ׃

**10 - 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.**

## About the Ten Commandments

Commandments 1-5 cover the relationship between people and God.

(Respect for parents naturally follows from respect for God.)

Commandments 6-10 cover the relationships between people.

The Midrash teaches that there is a correlation between the five commandments opposite each other on each of the two tablets:

- 1 and 6: Everyone is created in the image of God, so murder is an affront to God;
- 2 and 7: Idolatry is faithlessness to God and adultery is faithlessness to spouse;
- 3 and 8: Stealing leads to a false oath;
- 4 and 9: The Shabbat violator testifies falsely that God did not create the world in six days and rest on the seventh,
- 5 and 10: The man who covets his fellow's wife will father a child who honors the wrong father or curses his real father. [Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 20:14]

The Midrash discusses why the Ten Commandments are not at the beginning of the Torah:

Why were the Ten Commandments not said at the beginning of the Torah? The Rabbis gave a parable. To what may this be compared? To the following: A king who entered a province said to the people, "May I be your king?" But the people said to him, "Have you done anything good to us that you should rule over us?" What did he do then? He built the city wall for them, he brought in the water supply for them, and he fought their battles. Then when he said to them "May I be your king?" they said "Yes".

Likewise, God. He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down the manna for them, brought up the well for them, brought the quails for them, fought against Amalek for them. Then He said to them, "I am to be your king". And they said to him, "Yes, yes".

[Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 20:2]

In other words, do something for me first before issuing commandments!

Why are the Ten Commandments not in the liturgy? They were, up until the third century, then they were removed because some said they are all that matters in the Torah. The Talmud explains:

Rav Matana and Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: It would be proper to read the Ten Commandments every day. And why don't we? Because of the zeal of the heretics, lest they say: "These alone were given to Moses at Sinai." [Berakhot Y

1:3c] [The recitation of the Ten Commandments] was already abolished because of the murmuring of the heretics. [Berakhot 12a]

These “heretics” may have been Christians, Gnostics, Samaritans, Hellenizers (like Philo), etc. Maimonides said:

[Some] think that the Torah contains different levels, and some parts are better than others, and this is very bad....

Many attempts to restore them failed. [Berakhot 12a] Rabbi Moses Isserles, from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, ruled that an individual may recite them, but not in public. They are read publicly only three times a year: Twice in the weekly Torah readings for portions Yitro and Va’etchanan and once on the first day of Shavuot.

Moses received two tablets of “stone” from God inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Jewish tradition is that the “stone” in question was sapphire. [Midrash Tanhuma 3:9:29; Leviticus Rabbah 32:2]

-Only 3 of the 10 commandments are enforced by law in the US: No murdering, stealing, or bearing false witness. You may be an atheist, a blasphemer, an idolater, a workaholic, an adulterer; and you may ignore your parents and covet whatever you want without legal penalties.

# 1 - I Am the Lord Your God

In the Jewish tradition, the first of the Ten Commandments is:

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. [Exodus 20:2, Deuteronomy 5:6]

How is this statement a “commandment”? What, exactly, is being commanded here? This question has puzzled many commentators. Let us speculate on possible answers.

It seems to command the belief that God exists. But Judaism does not mandate belief. The Rambam, from 12<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt, believed it did, and so did the Ramban, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Catalonia, but other luminaries disagree. In the Midrash, we read:

It is written [in Jeremiah:] “They have forsaken Me and have not kept My law” [Jer. 16:11]. [This means that God said:] I wish they had forsaken Me but still kept My law, because by occupying themselves with it, the light which it contains would have led them back to the right path. [Lam. R., Prologue II; see also Chagigah Y 1:7]

This means: Perform the action commandments now and don’t worry about belief. Belief will come later of its own accord.

The Number 1 commandment in the Rambam’s list of 613 commandments, which is the list most often used [Rambam, Sefer Hamitzvot (Ketar el Fara'id)], is “To know that God exists.” But there are other lists. The Talmud does not specify *what* the 613 commandments are. So no “list” can have any practical consequences.

The list compiled by the Bahag, of 8<sup>th</sup>-century Babylonia, a Gaon, does not contain it. Others who did not accept belief as a commandment are Hasdai Crescas, of 14<sup>th</sup>-century Catalonia; the Tashbetz, Isaac Abravanel, and Joseph Albo, all of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Spain.

The *fact* is that you can't make yourself believe.

Some say “I am the Lord your God” is not a commandment and must not be counted as such. If God had wanted it to be a commandment, He would have said: “You must believe that I am the Lord your God.” Others see it

as an implicit threat: “You must do the following or there will be consequences.”

Here are possible explanations of the commandment:

First, in order to follow commandments, you must first have faith in the authority behind these commandments, whence “I am the Lord your God”. Moreover, it does not really refer to faith, or belief (*emunah*), but *trust* in a benevolent higher power that loves us and guides us. Faith is specific, trust is diffuse.

Another view is that this is indeed an action commandment. You may believe what you want, but you may not say or preach out loud that there is no God. A stronger version is: You must say or preach that God does exist. These are actions, and you can control them.

Then there is the literal interpretation. The full quote is: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” This means: I am the same God who took you out of Egypt, and I am back to issue commandments. In other words, even if you still believe there are other gods, believe at least in this continuity. The Midrash adds:

[The situation] can be compared to a princess who has been taken captive by robbers, and was delivered by a king who later wished to marry her... She said: “What dowry do you give me?” He replied ... “I rescued you from the robbers. That is sufficient.” [Exodus Rabbah 29:1-9]

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Lithuanian rabbi, said that he commandment is to work on ourselves to remove the obstacles that cause us to deny God's existence.

In the Midrash, Rabbi Tobiah ben Yitzhaq understands it as follows: I brought you out of the land of Egypt on the condition that you acknowledge Me as your God. [Exodus Rabbah 29:1-9]

Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai, the mystic, understands “*your* God” as follows: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: “I am God over all earth's creatures, yet I have associated My name only with you; for I am not called ‘the god of idolaters’ but ‘the God of Israel’.” [Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 12:5]

Finally, any list of the 613 commandments is subjective to some extent. One could lump “I am the Lord Your God” and “You will have no other God before me” and make it the first commandment, with “No idolatry” being the second. Some Christians do that. The two are different. The first says, for example, that you must reject dualism – that there are two gods, one good and one evil, both invisible. The second says not to worship idols of wood and stone.

In the end, whatever interpretation is chosen will not change the practice of Judaism, and that is what truly matters.



## 2 - No Idolatry

The second of the Ten Commandments is:

לֹא יִהְיֶה-לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלִּי־פָנֶי

You shall have no other gods besides Me.

In the Torah, Moses gives the Israelites the following instructions, as commanded by God:

[When you encounter the idolaters], you shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their holy trees with fire, cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name from that place... [Deuteronomy 12:3]

Wow. Looks like God does not like idolatry one bit! The Talmud elaborates on this passage by saying that idols must not only be destroyed, but completely eradicated, that every trace of them must be removed. [Avoda Zara 45b] Elsewhere, the Talmud says that to abstain from idolatry is “equivalent to fulfilling all [other] commandments in the Torah”. [Horayot 8a] So, to be a fully observant Jew, all you have to do is refrain from worshipping idols! In fact, the Talmud adds: “Whoever rejects idolatry is called a Jew.” [Megillah 13a, b] If one had to sum up Judaism with one line, it would be the *Shema: HaShem Echad*, “The Lord is One”. [Deut. 6:4]

In the Ten Commandments, even before God tells us not to steal, not to murder, not to commit adultery, even before God tells us about Shabbat and honoring our parents, God tells us:

You shall have no other god beside me... You shall not make for yourself a graven image. [Exodus 20:3]

This comes before everything else. Moreover, Jews are allowed to break all commandments in order to save a life: All, that is, except three: The ones against idolatry, sexual immorality and murder; and idolatry is listed first. [Pes. 25a-b] Better dead than an idolater.

It's fair to ask the question: Why? What is so bad about idolatry that it outranks all other forms of bad behavior? After all, isn't idolatry just a matter of personal belief, rather than concrete action, and Judaism places action before belief? Isn't idolatry just making statues of wood or stone and worshipping them as if they had tremendous power over you? How can that be harmful, in and of itself? After all, we are not even talking about the

dubious practices that came with idol worship back in biblical times: the human sacrifices, the sexual orgies, the mutilations, the trampling of human rights, the murder and stealing as accepted ways of getting what you want, the treating of women as objects, the law of the jungle, etc, etc. We are talking about rejecting idolatry itself, regardless of what practices come with it.

So we wonder: Can't idolatry coexist with the rejection of all abominable practices? At first blush it seems that it can. Can't Judaism say "no murder, no stealing, no adultery, kashrut, Shabbat, etc.", but allow idolatry? In theory it could. Buddhism is frequently advertised as a pacifist, nonviolent religion, with most teachings consistent with Judaism, yet it's clearly idolatrous. Hinduism has as many as 330 million gods, yet still has many teachings in common with Judaism.

Gentiles have frequently charged that the God of the Jewish Bible is a jealous god, an angry god, a vengeful god, a god who does not tolerate competition. That is nonsense. Judaism takes the position that everything God enjoins us to do is ultimately for our own good. So we have to ask ourselves: Where is our own good in staying away from idolatry?

First, we must understand that Judaism was intended to be a completely new beginning. This is unique in the history of religion. Usually new religions try to emphasize continuity with the old, in order to gain new members more easily. For example:

- Christianity said, "We accept everything in the Jewish Bible as holy, but God has given us his latest update through Jesus."
- Islam said, "Moses and Jesus were holy men and true prophets and all that they said was true, but God has given us his latest update through Mohammed."
- Then the Mormons, the Baha'is, the Moonists and many other groups said, "Moses and Jesus and Mohammed were holy men and true prophets and everything they said was true, but God has now given us his latest update, through this new prophet."

It's called co-option, and it works. Once you are in, of course, you notice that only lip service is paid to the religious figures of the past. You end up studying and following mostly the "latest update" and the prophet that came with it.

But Judaism, alone, did not co-opt. It wanted a completely new beginning. In order to achieve that, Judaism had to make a complete break with all existing religions. And what did they all have in common? Idolatry. So idolatry had to go.

So, was idolatry canned *just* because all others were doing it, and we wanted something entirely new? No. Idolatry is *intrinsically* bad, but in subtle ways. Let me offer a modern perspective on why.

First, by saying “no graven images”, God forced us into abstract thinking. This was a great leap forward. If you can't visualize, you have to use the little grey cells, and that's bound to have interesting and original results. And if history has bestowed any blessing on us Jews, one of them is certainly originality, which comes from thinking.

Second, by saying “I am the only god”, God made us unify our thinking. God forced us into a spirit of synthesis, into accepting that two things that look very different may have the same origin. After all, it is not monotheism but polytheism that comes naturally to the mind, as history has shown. When you see good and evil in the world, it is natural to conclude that there is a god of good and a god of evil, struggling for control. Sometimes one is ahead, sometimes the other is ahead, and that explains why there are good times and bad times. In early history, it was natural to believe there is a god for every aspect of the human experience: A god of war, a goddess of love, a god of the sea, a goddess of agriculture, etc. Lots of gods, each with its own individual territory, and no territory uncovered. What Judaism did was force us to accept that these very different things all had the same source. In the Book of Isaiah, God says,

I am the Lord, and there is no one else. There is no god beside me. [Isaiah 45:5]  
I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things. [Isaiah 45:7]

As we internalize the notion that God is One, we synthesize, we unify, we simplify, and our minds try to see hidden connections that point to common origins. In so doing, we help make great progress in the human adventure.

As a physicist, I have obvious examples:

First, matter and energy are two very different things, but Einstein, using the Jewish way of thinking, dared to say that they are really the same thing.

Second, there are four fundamental forces in the universe: gravity, electromagnetism, and the two nuclear forces. Everything we see can be traced back to the action of one of these forces. Each force is responsible for a different set of observations. You might say, “So that's it, then; what's the problem? Can't we leave well-enough alone?” No. Physicists are not happy. Something inside them tells them that this picture cannot be the final one. So they try, desperately, passionately, irrationally, to unify these four forces into a single one. They call it the “Unified Field Theory”, a single principle from which the four forces would logically flow, and which would describe all known observations. Einstein spent the last thirty years of his life looking for this principle. In 1979, three physicists got the Nobel Prize for unifying two of the four forces. Legions of physicists are engaged in this massive effort. And when they find that basic theory, you can be sure something new and exciting will come out of it: It will *not* be just masking tape to tie the four forces together.

What is the deep faith that moves these scientists? *HaShem Echad* -- God is One. The ancient profession of faith of the Jew is telling them, “There must be ultimate unity and simplicity in the laws of nature. What seems complicated must derive from a simple principle. We must reach for higher and higher levels of understanding, and find that each level has fewer building blocks than the previous one, until we reach the top of the pyramid, and find that it contains only one block.” It does not matter that, for the most part, these scientists are secular and irreligious: The attitudes encouraged by religions have their influence way outside the sphere of religion.

Also, with many gods, you can shop for the god that suits you best, or even manufacture one, which leads to a “relative morality” that allows anything you want.

So there you have it. “No idolatry” is not an off-the-wall commandment from a selfish god. Even the most secular Jew among us owes the essence of his Jewish identity to that simple commandment, even if he does not recognize it.

Now, needless to say, we Jews follow that commandment because God told us so, not because we found a good rationale. Still, it's satisfying to find good reasons. Rabbi Akiva tells us in the Talmud that it's even a

mitzvah to look for these reasons. [Eruvin 54b] It's always good to question, even the big-ticket items, and we Jews certainly specialize in that.

As we saw, idolatry was the bogeyman of the Talmud. But it is not a problem among Jews today. The Midrash tells us that Israel lost its appetite for idolatry when they returned from captivity in Babylon. [Song of Songs R. 7:14] But modern rabbis have found new interpretations of the word "idolatry". We sometimes hear that the pursuit of material possessions is worship of wealth; that objects of sentimental value, such as items that belonged to a loved one, is worship of objects; that viewing certain ideas as absolute and not subject to inquiry is worship of ideas, or idolatry of the mind; that nationalism is worship of country; that egocentrism is worship of self; that astrology is worship of the stars; that love of another human being is worship of a person; that love of pets is worship of animals; that excessive family pride is worship of ancestors; and so on. This leads us to ask the question: Are we going overboard here? Is anything you care one whit about, idolatry? Is the only way to observe the commandment against idolatry not to care about anything? Surely not.

I'll leave this question open for now. But as we question left and right, we must have faith in one simple thing: Whatever our tradition tells us to do is ultimately for our own good. For Judaism to endure, we must continue to have that simple faith.

# The rise and fall of idolatry in Judaism

As soon as Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Torah, the Israelites melt their gold and fashion it into an idol, a Golden Calf, going so far as to say:

אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלֹךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt! [Exodus 32:4]

It did not take the Jews long to lapse into idolatry, and they would cling to it tenaciously and enthusiastically for the next thousand years. Let me describe this process, then present you with a historical mystery, and propose some ways to resolve it.

With their first taste of freedom, the Jews rushed to worship the Golden Calf. [Ex. 32:1–8] Over and over again they rebelled against God and huge numbers worshiped idols for 1,000 years. The prophets' main job was to bring them back to the fold. Sometimes this idol worship was accompanied by child sacrifice [2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35] and sacred prostitution [1 Kings 14:24; 2 Kings 23:7; Ezek. 16:17, 23:5ff; Hos. 4:14-15]. Even King Solomon, that wisest of kings, fell prey to it in his old age.

The worst offender was King Menasheh of Judah, the longest-reigning Jewish monarch. In his 55-year reign, in the 7<sup>th</sup>-century BCE [697-642 BCE], he practiced, sponsored and encouraged idolatry on a large scale, built idolatrous shrines, turned the Holy Temple into a pagan site [2 Kings 21], killed many priests and prophets, including the prophet Isaiah, and outlawed study of Torah [Ezekiel 8–11, 16:17, 20, 23]. He repented before dying, but inflicted severe damage on the spirit of Israel.

Why did he do it? The Talmud records an episode where King Menasheh appears to Rav Ashi in a dream. Rav Ashi, one of the greatest luminaries of the Talmud, lived more than 1,000 years after King Menasheh. The king engages the rabbi in a discussion of Jewish law, and shows himself to be not only well-versed in Torah but also superior to the rabbi! Rav Ashi asks him: If you are so wise, why did you worship idols? King Menasheh replies:

If you had been there [and lived in my time], you would have [done the same and] lifted the hems of your robes to run behind me [to worship idols also].

[Sanhedrin 102b]



Evidently, then, idolatry was a craving, an organic need, an addiction, an overwhelming desire. An analogy would be the sex drive: If God were to appear and tell us “No more sex”, people would continue to do it anyway. The urge for idolatry was that strong, and could not be easily silenced. Everybody was doing it in those days, and society at large has a big impact on our behavior. If even wise kings can be enticed to worship idols, how can the rest of us resist?

Now, here is the mystery. After the First Temple was destroyed, the Jews were exiled to Babylon. Seventy years later, they were allowed to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. After their return, they lost all desire for idolatry! Idolatry disappeared from Judaism, suddenly and completely, and has remained absent for the next 2,500 years, to this day. This is the mystery: Why did the Jews abandon idolatry cold turkey after the return from Babylon?

Before we proceed, let us make something clear. Idolatry is the worship of living entities or inanimate objects, in the belief that they have the power to grant benefits. That is all it means in the Jewish tradition. Some modern thinkers have expanded the definition of idolatry to include the love of money, the love of specific people, of a cause, of a hobby, etc. One sometimes gets the feeling that they call “idolatry” anything that you care one whit about. So, in that view, the only way to observe the commandment against idolatry is not to care at all about anything. That cannot be, so we will remain with the original definition of idolatry.

The Talmud explains the mystery in a very colorful way: The Jews “captured the demon” responsible for idolatry and destroyed it. They were about to do the same for the “demon” responsible for sex, but didn't because sex is needed for procreation. Here is the story:

[After the return from Babylonian captivity, the Men of the Great Assembly said:] Woe, woe! It is [the evil desire for idolatry] who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burned the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! You [God] have surely given him to us so that we may receive reward [by resisting him.] We do not want either him or reward through him! ... [So the evil desire for idolatry] was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion... They said: How shall we act? Perhaps, God forbid, Heaven may have mercy upon him! ... The prophet said to them: Cast him into a pot made of lead and close its opening with lead, because lead absorbs the voice... [They did so and he died.]

They said... Let us [also] pray for mercy for the Evil Inclination. They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. [The prophet] said to them: Realize that if you kill him [also], the world goes down. They imprisoned him for three days [to see what would happen], then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. [The Evil Inclination is responsible for sex, which is required for reproduction.] They said: What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy [allow him to live, but not to tempt us]? They do not grant half-measures in heaven. They put out his eyes and let him go. This helped inasmuch as he no longer entices men to commit incest. [Yoma 69b]

The Midrash sums it up as follows:

Rabbi Hunia said in the name of Rabbi Dosa bar Tebeth: God created two evil inclinations in His world, the inclination to idolatry and the inclination to [sexual immorality]. The inclination to idolatry has already been uprooted [from the Jewish people]. The inclination to [sexual immorality, however,] still exists... [Song of Songs Rabbah 7:14]

Actually, there is more. After Babylon, the Jews did not just ignore idolatry; they were willing to die rather than be forced to worship idols! The Maccabean revolt, which we remember every year at Hanukkah time, is a perfect example.

The Talmud's colorful explanation will not satisfy everybody. So let's speculate: Why did idolatry disappear among the Jews so suddenly and so completely?

Some say that God made it happen. He foretold it through the prophet Jeremiah:

And these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to... all the people... who were carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel... After seventy years are fulfilled at Babylon I will... [let] you return to this place... Then you shall... pray to Me and I will listen to you. And you shall seek Me and find me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart. And I will allow Myself to be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore you from your captivity. [Jeremiah 29:1-14]

The counterpoint is that a prophecy does not explain everything, because there is such a thing as free will.



Another possibility is that, after having experienced the destruction of the Temple and the Exile, the Jews realized that the prophets were right: If they worshiped any “god” but God, they were doomed. This is a rational explanation, but reason is not what rules passions.

Some will say this is just normal evolution. The rest of the world has also been slowly moving away from idolatry. Yes, but not as suddenly as the Jews did.

Another possibility is that the experience of captivity in Babylon cured them of the desire for idolatry. But then we remember that slavery in Egypt did not. Where is the difference? Some will say they did not have the Torah in Egypt.

Another possibility is that they wanted to assimilate in the world around them. The counterpoint is that the rest of world (the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans) was still idolatrous. The Midrash says:

If the names of all the idols were listed, all the donkeys in the world would not suffice to carry them. [Sifre Devarim 43]

Many Jews indeed wanted to assimilate, but not by worshiping idols. Those who were Hellenized or Romanized loved the foreign cultures and the philosophy, but not the idolatry.

One can argue that the Jews saw the bad effects of idolatry around them in Babylon. In fact, quite the opposite happened. Babylon prospered and they prospered along with it. Most did not return to Judea when King Cyrus allowed them. Yet they did not turn to idolatry. They established Judaism in exile, and wrote the authoritative Babylonian Talmud.

I have an explanation, which I consider to be the most likely. During the thousand years of idolatry, the Jews were essentially free and masters of their own house. They felt they could indulge in whatever appealed to them, as free people do. Those who found idolatrous rites colorful and attractive felt free to indulge in them. But for the next 2,500 years, the Jews were subjugated or persecuted – by the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians, the Muslims, etc. They felt they *had* to keep their own traditions and not adopt any of the customs of the hated overlords, as an act of rebellion. They were even willing to die rather than be forced to indulge in idolatry or reject their traditions.

A point in support of this theory is that, now that most Jews are free, especially in the US, and not constrained in their spiritual choices, many are abandoning Judaism. This leads one to ask the question: Does antisemitism have a big role to play in preserving Judaism? A depressing thought...

### 3 - No Blasphemy

The third of the Ten Commandments prohibits blasphemy:

לֹא תִשָּׁא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן

You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God.

In the Torah, we read the following story:

Now, the son of an Israelite woman... [and] an Egyptian man... quarreled... with an Israelite man..., pronounced the [Divine] Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses [and]... placed him in the guardhouse, [until] the word of the Lord specified his sentence.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and all who heard [his blasphemy] shall lean their hands on his head. And the entire community shall stone him. And to the children of Israel, you shall speak, saying: Any man who blasphemes his God shall bear his sin. And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him; both the stranger and he who is born in the land, when he blasphemes the name of the Lord, shall be put to death." [Lev. 24: 10-16]

Blasphemy is a capital crime for gentiles also: Its prohibition is one of the seven Noahide laws, which are binding on all humankind, not only on Jews. [Sanhedrin 56a-60a]

Why is "No blasphemy" so major a commandment?

Let us begin by defining blasphemy. Blasphemy is disrespectful or irreverent use of God's name, with or without intention to pray or speak of holy matters. The Hebrew word is *gidduf*, but frequently *Birkat HaShem* is used. Literally, it means "the blessing of God", where "blessing" is understood as a euphemism for "cursing".

As we saw above, the Torah says that the punishment for blasphemy is death by stoning, but later commentaries have considerably softened the penalty. First, the Mishna says that the death penalty applies only if one specific name of God is used, namely "HaShem", that is, the Tetragrammaton, and not another. Also, there must be at least two witnesses:

The blasphemer is punished only if he utters the [divine] name [HaShem].

Rabbi Yehoshua bar Karha said: The whole day [of the trial] the witnesses are examined by means of a substitute for HaShem, [for example] Yosei. [This was

because Yosei also has four letters like HaShem, and its gematria is 81, the same as that for Elokim, another name of God.]

When the trial is finished, the accused is not executed on this evidence, but all persons are removed [from the court], and the chief witness is told, "State literally what you heard". When he does so, [using HaShem], the judges then arise and rend their garments, which are not to be sewn back. The second witness states "I too have heard as he said" [but not uttering HaShem], and the third says: "I too heard as he said." [Sanhedrin 7:5]

As a matter of fact, the correct pronunciation of God's name HaShem has been lost for over two millennia, so no one can technically blaspheme today. There is no record of trials for blasphemy since that time.

Second, the Talmud states that for any other name of God, only corporal punishment is applied. [Sanhedrin 56a] Also, *teshuva*, or repentance, is possible for blasphemy. The Rambam adds that blasphemy includes the erasure of God's name (for example, on paper).

Third, today's penalty for blasphemy is *cherem* – shunning by the community. The *Shulchan Arukh*, the Code of Jewish law, also states that whoever hears blasphemy, whether with HaShem or any other name [of God], in any language, from a Jew, must rend his garment. [YD 340:37]

Now, in the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva says that one is allowed, even enjoined, to speculate on the reasons behind the commandments (*taamei ha-mitzvot*). [Eruvin 54b]. Provided, of course, that one observes the commandments regardless of the conclusions reached. So let us speculate on the reasons why blasphemy is not allowed:

- First, it demeans the authority of God. Refraining from mocking the ultimate authority is one way to preserve respect for the Torah, even if one is lax in following its commandments.
- Second, even though blasphemy does not harm God Himself, it hurts believers, and their feelings must be taken into account.
- Third, their feelings may be so strong that offensive words may spur them to commit acts of violence, and that is very much to be avoided.
- Fourth, it burns our bridges to believers.

But, on the other hand, there is the issue of freedom of speech, so important to the Western, democratic way of life. Blasphemy, along with six others of the Ten Commandments, is not punishable by secular law in the United States. Banning blasphemy vetoes us saying anything that

others find holy, even if we do not consider it holy. Blasphemers may even think they are doing a service to society by speaking out and calling into question other people's beliefs, thereby stimulating healthy discussion. Truth, after all should be able to withstand even the most intense scrutiny. But the issue is: Does this questioning have to include insulting language?

The discussion continues.

## 4 - Shabbat

The fourth of the Ten Commandments is:

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלַאכְתְּךָ  
וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה

Six days shall you labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work. [Ex 20:9-10]

Let us begin by concentrating on the first part, “Six days shall you labor, and do all your work -- *sheshet yamim ta'avod, ve'asita kol melakhtecha*”. Is “Six days shall you labor” a positive commandment? Do you *have* to work six days a week?

Note that it says “shall”, not “may”, so it appears to be an obligation, not an option. Indeed, if it is not a commandment, why doesn't the Torah just say “Do not do any work on the seventh day”? Why mention the six days at all? Are we at liberty to “rest” for more than one day a week? This question is of acute interest to me personally since I retired: I would like to know if I am breaking any commandments by not being gainfully employed!  
☺

First, let us examine the wording of the injunction:

-In Exodus 20, in our portion, it says “Six days shall you labor, and do all your work”. It is repeated in Exodus 34 [Ex. 34:21] and Deuteronomy 5 [Deut 5:13].

-In Exodus 31 and Leviticus 23, the passive voice is used: “In six days work will be done -- *Sheshet yamim ya'aseh melachah*” [Ex 31:15, Lev 23:3]. This is repeated in Exodus 35, but there the correct feminine form *te'aseh* is used, as *melacha* is feminine. [Ex 35:2]

Needless to say, work is very important in the Jewish tradition. The Mishnah says simply:

אָהב עֵת הַמְּלָאכָה -- *Ehov et hamlachah* -- Love work. [Pirkei Avot 1:10]

The Talmud expands on this notion:

Shema'ya says, "Love work..." Love work? How? ... A man should love work and not hate work, and just as the Torah was given in a covenant, so too work was given in a covenant, as it says:

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is a Shabbat to the Lord your God. [Exodus 20:9]

[This raises the question: Does the verse imply that Shabbat is a *reward* for work?]

Rabbi Akiva says: Sometimes a man does work and is saved from death and other times he does not do work and incurs the death penalty from God. How? If a man sat all week and did no work, and therefore had nothing to eat, and he had money that had been dedicated to the Temple in his possession, and used it to purchase food and ate, he is liable to the death penalty from God [that is, God will end his life, but he cannot be executed.] But, if he worked all week building the Temple, even though he was paid out of Temple funds, and he took from them [and purchased food] and ate, he is saved from death. [That is, he did nothing wrong.]

Rabbi Dostai said: How can it happen that one who did no work all the six days shall finally be compelled to labor all seven days? Strange as this appears, it may happen. For instance, a man who did no work during the week, Friday comes and he has nothing to eat. He starts to look for work, but is seized by conscription officers, who, holding him by an iron chain, compel him to make up on Shabbat for what he neglected during the six days.

Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar said: Even Adam the First tasted nothing before he performed some work, as it is written:

And put him into the Garden of Eden, to till it and to keep it. [Gen. 2:15]

And afterward he was commanded:

Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat. [Gen. 2:16]

Rabbi Tarphon said: Even the Holy One, blessed be He, did not rest His Shekhina [his Divine Presence] in the midst of Israel before they performed some work, as it is written:

And they shall make me a sanctuary; and [then] I will dwell in the midst of them. [Ex. 25:9]

Rabbi Yehudah Ben Beteira says, "Someone who has no work to do, what should he do? If he has a desolate courtyard or a desolate field, he should go and busy himself in it, as it is written, "Six days you will labor and do all your work." What is taught by, "and do all your work"? To include someone that has desolate courtyards or desolate fields, he should go and busy himself. Rabbi Tarfon says, "A man only dies due to being idle [in Hebrew, *batala*], as it is written:

And he expired and was gathered to his people. [Genesis 49:33]

[Question: Does this imply that weak old people die because they can't work?]

[Avot D'Rabbi Natan 11:1]

Maimonides, 11<sup>th</sup>-century Egyptian sage, wrote that:

Anyone... who makes up his mind to study Torah and not work, but live on charity, profanes the name of God, disgraces the Torah, obscures the light of religion, causes harm to himself, and deprives himself of life in the future world; for it is forbidden to derive temporal advantage from the words of the Torah. The sages said: "Whoever makes selfish use of the teachings of the Torah takes his own life." They further told us: "Do not make of them a crown with which to magnify yourself, nor a spade with which to dig." They urged us strongly moreover: "Love work, and hate arrogance." "All Torah study which is not combined with some work must at length fail and occasion sin" [Pirkei Avot 2:2]. The end of such a person will be that he will rob his fellow man.

Anyone who maintains himself by the work of his hands possesses a great virtue, a virtue of the early saints, whereby he will attain all the glory and happiness of both this and the future world, as it is written [by the psalmist]:

When you eat the fruit of the labor of your hands, you shall be happy and it shall be well with you. [Psalms 128:2]

"You shall be happy" means in this world, "and it shall be well with you" means in the future world, which will be altogether good.

[Rambam, The Laws of Torah Study, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ha-mada (Book of Knowledge 10-11)]

As a result, the rabbis of the Talmud used to work for a living. Sephardic rabbis still do. But modern Western rabbis live just on being rabbis. In Israel, lots of scholars survive on charity alone, and this is a source of friction. Here are some examples of ancient rabbinic professions:

Hillel was a woodchopper and welldigger.

Shammai was a builder, a contractor.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was a businessman.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah was a blacksmith.

Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Chananel were scribes.

Rabbi Chanina sold bees' honey.

Rabbi Chiyya the Elder, Rabbi Shimon ben Rabbi, and Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel traded silk at Tyre. [Gen. R. 77:2]

Rabbi Yochanan HaSandlar was a shoemaker.

Rabbi Yehudah the Baker was... guess what.

Rabbi Yosi ben Chalafta was a tanner.

Rabbi Yehudah ben Isaiah was known as "the perfume-maker". The Talmud says:

The world cannot exist without a perfume-maker and without a tanner. Happy is he whose craft is that of a perfume-maker, and woe to him who is a tanner by trade. [Kiddushin 82b]

Rabbi Shimon P'kuli was a cotton dealer.

Rabbi Shmuel ben Shilas was a schoolteacher.



Rabbi Safra and Rabbi Dimi of Nehardea were merchants.  
Rabbi Abba bar Zavina was a tailor.  
Rabbi Yosef bar Chiya and Rabbi Yannai owned vineyards.  
Rabbi Huna was a farmer and raised cattle.  
Rabbi Chisda and Rabbi Papa were beer brewers.  
Abba Chilkiyah was a field laborer.  
Abba Shaul was a gravedigger.  
Abba Hoshiya was a launderer and stomped olives with Rabbi Chiyya the Elder  
Karna was a wine smeller. He determined how long wine could last before going bad.  
Rabbi Chiya bar Yosef was in the salt business.  
Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Zadoq and Rabbi Shaul ben Botnit were storekeepers in Jerusalem.  
Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah sold oil and wine.  
Abba Bar Abba was a silk merchant; and  
His son (Mar) Shmuel was a physician.  
Many were in the textile industry (Bavot).  
Some had inherited wealth.

Among the later rabbis:

Rashi was a vintner. He grew vineyards and made wine.  
The Rambam and the Ramban were both physicians.

The Mechilta introduces the notion that, if Jews are observant, God or others will do their work:

One verse says, "Six days work will be done" [passive voice] and another says, "Six days you will work and do all your labor" [active voice]. How can both be true?

It means that in a time that Israel is doing the will of God, their work will be done by others, as it says "work will be done." And so too it says in Isaiah:

And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and tend your vineyards. But you shall be named the Priests of the Lord. Men shall call you the Ministers of our God. You shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. [Isaiah 61:5]

And when they don't do the will of God, they will do their work themselves, as it says, "And you will do all your work." [Mechilta at Ki Tisa]

This quote is used by some Orthodox Jews to justify studying Torah all the time and doing no work. So the question arises: Is work a religious obligation or a punishment, or necessary evil, for not being observant enough?

Chabad teaches that the passive voice means that *God* is doing the work for you if you are observant, even though you are doing it yourself.

Sforno says:

You shall succeed in your six days of work [only] when you observe Shabbat on the seventh. [Sforno on Ex. 34:21]

Rashi asks: Can you *really* “do all your work” in six days? Of course not. It means that when Shabbat arrives you should “feel” as if all your work were finished, even though it is not. So Shabbat is not only deed but also attitude. You should feel as much at ease as if you had done all your work.

What we have not done yet is define exactly what is meant by “work”. It turns out the Talmud defines “work” very narrowly. Work consists of any of 39 activities (*melachot* in Hebrew) that become prohibited on Shabbat, because they were the activities required to build the Tabernacle [Shabbat 73a]. They are:

- |                  |                     |
|------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Carrying      | 21. Sifting         |
| 2. Burning       | 22. Grinding        |
| 3. Extinguishing | 23. Kneading        |
| 4. Finishing     | 24. Combing         |
| 5. Writing       | 25. Spinning        |
| 6. Erasing       | 26. Dyeing          |
| 7. Cooking       | 27. Chain-stitching |
| 8. Washing       | 28. Warping         |
| 9. Sewing        | 29. Weaving         |
| 10. Tearing      | 30. Unraveling      |
| 11. Knotting     | 31. Building        |
| 12. Untying      | 32. Demolishing     |
| 13. Shaping      | 33. Trapping        |
| 14. Plowing      | 34. Shearing        |
| 15. Planting     | 35. Slaughtering    |
| 16. Reaping      | 36. Skinning        |
| 17. Harvesting   | 37. Tanning         |
| 18. Threshing    | 38. Smoothing, and  |
| 19. Winnowing    | 39. Marking         |
| 20. Selecting    |                     |

So the commandment to “work” the rest of the week can be fulfilled by engaging in any one of them and no more. You could fulfill that “commandment” by signing your name on the first day, flipping a light switch on the second day, driving around the block on the third day, etc.

So interpreting “Six days shall you labor” as a positive commandment would not accomplish anything really significant. Also, work provides contrast. To appreciate rest properly, you have to work the rest of the time. So the focus of the verse is on Shabbat. Its real meaning is: “*If* you work for six days, *then* you will really appreciate resting on the seventh”.

So, is “Six days shall you labor and do all your work” a commandment? No. The Sages do not list it among the 613 mitzvot. It is simply a prelude to the real commandment, to refrain from work on the seventh day.

## 5 - Honor Your Father and Your Mother

The fifth of the Ten Commandments is:

כִּבֵּד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמֶּךָ

*Kabed et avicha ve-et immecha.*

Honor your father and your mother,  
so that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God gives  
you. [Exodus 20:12]

This commandment, called *Kibbud Av V'Em*, is repeated three times in the Torah. The second version, in Leviticus, is:

אִישׁ אִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו תִּירָא -- *Ish immo v'aviv tira-u.*

It is usually translated as:

Every man shall revere his mother and his father. [Leviticus 19:3]

Note that the preferred translation is “revere” or “be in awe of”, not “fear”.

The third version, in Deuteronomy, is:

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you,  
so that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land  
the Lord your God gives you. [Deut. 5:16]

Note that when it comes to honoring, the father is mentioned first, but when it comes to revering, the mother is mentioned first. Why? The Mishnah explains:

You might think... the honor due to the father exceeds the honor due to the mother, [but] the Torah stated [later], “Every man shall revere his mother and his father” to teach that both are equal. [K'ritot 6:9 - 28a; Genesis R. 1:15]

The Talmud is a bit more specific:

It was taught that Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] said:

...A son honors his mother more than his father, because she sways him with her words. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, placed the honor of the father before that of the mother...

A son reveres his father more than his mother, because he teaches him Torah. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, mentioned the reverence of the mother before that of the father. [Kiddushin 30b-31a]

The Torah also says that one must not hit [Ex. 21:15], curse [Ex. 21:17], or dishonor [Deut. 27:16] one's parents. Maimonides believed these injunctions are so important that he chose to count them as three separate commandments. [Sefer Hamitzvot 2:218,219,195; Hilkhhot Mamrim 5ff]

Let us now proceed to analyze this commandment, so we can better understand it. Several questions come to mind:

- Why honor parents, especially if they haven't been good to you?
- Who must honor parents?
- How important is that commandment?
- What's my reward if I honor parents?
- What does it mean to "honor" and "revere" your parents?
- How far must that honoring extend?
- Who are good examples of honoring parents?

First, why honor parents? Two reasons: Gratitude and self-interest. The Sefer HaChinuch, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, covers gratitude:

One should appreciate the fact that his parents are the source of his very existence in this world, and it is therefore appropriate for him to act as respectfully and beneficially as he can. Besides having brought him into the world, they also expended tremendous effort in raising him as a child. [Sefer HaChinuch 33]

And Saadia Gaon, from 10<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt, covers self-interest:

If you take care of your parents, your children will take care of you in your old age, and you will live longer!

Why is the commandment necessary? After all, the Torah does not command us to do what we would do naturally. But is it natural to want to honor parents? Contemporary American Rabbi Yissachar Frand thinks not:

Honoring parents...goes against human nature. It requires us to acknowledge all they've done for us and show gratitude. It requires us to admit that we needed them, that we could not have done it ourselves. This is a difficult thing for the human ego. The ego would have us view ourselves as independent, self-sufficient and invincible. We can bring ourselves to thank strangers who do small things for us now and then, because this does not really affect our egotistical self-image. But when it comes to our parents, if we admit they did anything, we also have to admit they did everything for us. Our egos do not allow us to say, "I owe you everything." This, then, is [as the Talmud puts it] the "most difficult of the difficult" mitzvot. [Rabbi Yissachar Frand on Ki Tetze]

Also, many children (perhaps most) grow up to rebel against their parents, which does not set the stage for honoring them.

What if my parents have not been good to me? Answer: You must honor your parents even if they have not taken good care of their children, because the Torah says:

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you. [Deut. 5:16]

It implies this may be a *chok*, that is, a commandment whose rationale escapes us. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern Europe, writes:

Even if your father and mother abandoned you and did not raise you, you should still honor them “as the Lord your God has commanded you.” [Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern Europe, Meshech Chochma on Deut. 5:16]

Why? For several reasons. They transmitted the Tradition to us. Even if not, they transmitted the knowledge that we are Jewish, thereby giving us the impetus to discover the Tradition on our own, knowing that we belong. And even if not that, they gave us life: That alone is sufficient reason.

Who must honor parents? Obviously, everybody. But the question is not trivial:

-What if the children are adopted? Then, they are exempt. The Talmud says:

Rabbi Aha ben Yaakov raised his daughter's son, Rabbi Yaakov. When he grew up, [the grandfather] said to him: “Give me some water to drink”. He replied: “I am not your son.” [Sotah 49a]

-Also, converts are exempt: Prior family ties are not recognized.

-Non-Jews are also exempt: Honoring parents is not one of the seven Noahide laws, which are binding on all mankind. So, if the biological parents are not Jewish, they do not have to be honored.

Nevertheless, there is still a moral obligation. The Talmud says:

If anyone brings up an orphan boy or girl in his house, Scripture accounts it as if he had begotten him. [Megillah 13a]

The Midrash adds:

He who brings up children is called the father, not he who gives birth. [Ex. R. 46:5]

Contemporary Rav Moshe Feinstein says:

A convert must not curse his non-Jewish father or hit him, or disgrace him... but should treat his parents with... honor. [Rav Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe YD 2:130]

The Maharal says that non-Jews should honor their parents more than most Jews, because two non-Jews are paragons of honoring parents, as we shall discuss later.

Are adopted children obligated to search for their biological parents so they can honor them? I do not know the answer.

How important is that commandment? The Mishnah goes so far as to say that the Torah compares the honor and reverence due to father and mother to the honor and reverence due to God Himself. [Peah Y 1:1, 6b] A contemporary rabbi adds:

Even if one were to honor father and mother as he would a king and queen, he would still not fulfill his obligation, since the Torah compares their honor to the honor due to God Himself. Therefore, one should imagine how he would feel if God were to show up at his doorstep. With what trepidation would he receive Him! One should honor parents with that same attitude. [Shmuel Houminer, 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jerusalem , Eved Hamelech]

Note that the first five of the Ten Commandments address obligations to God, whereas the second five address duties towards individuals. Why is honoring parents among the first five? Because by honoring parents we also honor God.

That commandment is one of only two commandments for which long life is promised. The other is to shoo away the mother bird before taking her eggs or her young (שילוח הקן -- *Shiluach HaKen*). [Deut. 22:6] The Mishnah also elevates this commandment:

The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring father and mother, practicing charity, and making peace between a man and his friend; but the study of Torah is equal to them all. [Peah 1:1, Shabbat 127a]

Now, let us tackle the all-important practical question. What does it actually mean, to “honor” and “revere” your parents?

First and most importantly, it does not mean “Obey your parents”. This is especially true if they tell you to go against the Torah. The Midrash explains:

It might be supposed that even if his father tells him: “Slaughter or cook for me on Shabbat”, he must obey. The Torah therefore explicitly states [in the same verse]:

Every man shall revere his mother and his father, and keep my Sabbaths. I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19:3].

This implies [that...] if [any] mortal rages against you to make you transgress the commandments of the Torah, do not be cowed by his anger into following his counsel. [Numbers R. 14:6]

The Talmud confirms:

-One might have assumed that honoring father and mother supersedes Shabbat [but the rest of the verse shows that it is not so.] [Yevamot 5b]

-[Also,] Torah study is greater than the mitzvah of honoring parents. [Megillah 16b]

In the same vein, the Zohar says:

Rabbi Yosei said: Reverence of mother and father is put next to keeping Shabbat [because] it is all one: He who reveres one keeps the other. [Zohar, Vayikra 3:81b]

The Rambam summarizes:



A child must not listen to a parent asking him to transgress a commandment of the Torah or of the rabbis. [Rambam, Hilchot Mamrim 6:12]

Later rabbis even added: Even if the parents' request does not contradict the Torah, you don't have to obey:

19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian rabbi Eisenstadt said:

If someone wants to pray in a synagogue where [the congregation] prays with more devotion, and his mother protests, he does not have to listen to his mother. [Rabbi Eisenstadt, Pitchei Teshuva, Yoreh Deah 240:22]

The Rema, commenting on the Shulḥan Arukh, said:

If the father protests against the son marrying a specific woman that he wishes [to marry], the son does not have to listen to his father. [Rema on Shulḥan Arukh Yoreh Deah 240:25]

To which Chaim Hezekiah Medini, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jerusalem rabbi, adds:

But if she is not Jewish, or not moral, or not religious, he must listen to his father. [Chaim Hezekiah Medini, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jerusalem rabbi, Sdei Chemed, Ma'arechet Caf 147]

Contemporary rabbi Moshe Lieber comments:

Many rabbis say that the mitzvah to dwell in Israel overrides the obligation to honor parents. Some disagree. [Rabbi Moshe Lieber, The Fifth Commandment, p 131]

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Braun comments:

If a parent asks a son to shave his beard, he need not listen. If a parent tells a child not to speak to a certain person, the child need not obey. [Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 240:16]. [Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Braun, She'arim Metzuyyanim Bahalakhah 143]

What is the difference between “honor” and “revere” your parents? The Talmud answers:

“Honor” means you must give them food, drink, clothing; and help them in and out. “Revere” means you must neither stand nor sit in their place, nor contradict them, nor tip the scales against them. [Kiddushin 31b]

Rashi explains:

If the father is in dispute with another scholar, the son must not side with his opponent... He must not even say: I agree with my father. This holds only in the father's presence, otherwise he may state his view freely. Even then, he should avoid mentioning his father's name when refuting his view, if possible.

Also, no financial loss need be incurred in helping parents. The Talmud explains:

At whose expense [must the parents be helped]?

Rav Yehudah said: The son's.

Rabbi Naḥman ben Oshaia said: The father's.

The Rabbis [ruled:] At the father's expense.

An objection is raised: It is said: “Honor your father and your mother”, and it is also said: “Honor the Lord with your substance.” [Proverbs 3:9] Just as the latter means at personal cost, so does the former. But if you say: At the father's



[expense], how does it affect [the son]? [What personal loss is there?] Loss of time. [Kiddushin 32a]

The law, summarized in the Shulḥan Arukh, is:

The son provides food and drink from the resources of the father and mother. That is, he is not required to pay for serving his parents. However, he is obligated to honor his parents through his physical presence even if by doing so he will miss work...But if the son himself does not have [enough food for one day], he is not obligated to miss work and end up a beggar. [Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 240:5]

A joke illustrates the requirement to visit parents:

A man goes to his rabbi and says, “Rabbi, my parents insist that I go visit them. But they live on the other coast, and I have a very demanding job that keeps me busy six days a week, and I have little time for a social life. Besides, I call them regularly, and send them things. So tell me, rabbi: Do I *have* to fly out to see my parents?”

The rabbi replies: “No. You can walk.”

Rabbenu Yonah, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Catalonia, adds that you must gratify your parents:

The main way to honor parents is to gratify them, through words or deeds. [Rabbenu Yonah, Iggeret Ha-Teshuvah 3:70]

You must also be sincere in honoring parents. Sefer Charedim says:

Honoring father and mother applies to feelings and emotions as well as actions. If one displays honor for parents only in superficial speech and deed, without heartfelt concern, he shows that in reality he considers them lowly and honors them only “because God says so.” Rather, he must see them as truly great and honorable people. This is the main aspect of honoring parents. Once one has developed this attitude, it will be easy to honor them sincerely in both speech and action. [Sefer Charedim 1:35]

You must also look for your parents’ qualities and achievements. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says:

True fulfillment of honoring parents is only possible if you feel real respect and admiration toward them. You must therefore find areas or character traits in which they excel. If you do not cultivate a deep feeling of esteem for them, even if you go through all external motions of acting respectfully, you have not fulfilled the Torah’s goal at all. [Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, Sichot Mussar, p 158]

The Shulḥan Arukh says that you must not call your parents by their first names. [Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 240:2]

You must remember that the word *Kavod* is dignity, not just honor. Just feeding and clothing parents is not honor, but only charity.

You must also remember your parents after they die. This includes saying Kaddish, following mourning rites, remembering their teachings and merits, and mentioning them often for the good.

Now, how far must the honoring of one's parents extend? There is no easy answer. In fact, the Mishnah says that it is the most difficult mitzvah:

Rabbi Ba bar Kahana said: The Torah put the most minor of minor commandments on the same level as the most major of major commandments. The easiest is sending away the mother bird, and the most difficult is honoring father and mother. And with regard to each, it is written [in the Torah]: "So that you may live long." [Peah Y 1:1, 7a]

The Talmud adds that this "bracketing" implies that all mitzvot get at least this reward:

A man may not take the mother bird along with the young... If in respect of so light a precept... the Torah said, "that it may be well with you", and "that you may prolong your days", how much more [must the reward be] for observing the more difficult precepts of the Torah! [Hullin 142a]

In the Midrash, Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai concludes clearly:

The most difficult of all mitzvot is "Honor your father and your mother". [Tanḥuma, Ekev 2]

In fact, it is practically impossible to fully perform the mitzvah of honoring parents. The Talmud says:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: *Ashrei mi she-lo raah chama-an* -- Happy is he who has not seen [his parents]. Rabbi Yoḥanan's father died when his mother conceived him, and his mother died when he was born; and likewise for Abaye. [Kiddushin 31b]

Rashi explains:

Only one who never saw his parents can be considered not to have violated the commandment of honoring parents, [the most difficult one].

For this reason, no blessing is said before honoring parents. Rabbi Chaim Hezekiah Medini, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jerusalem, writes:

No blessing is recited for fulfilling this mitzvah, because you never know if you have fulfilled it properly. [And saying a blessing in vain is prohibited.] [Sdei Chemed v6, Berakhot 1:16]

The Mishna adds that you can never do enough for your parents:

Rabbi Tarfon's mother... took a walk [and her shoes tore]. He went and placed his two hands under her feet, and she walked on them until she reached her bed.

One time, [Rabbi Tarfon] became ill, and the Sages came to visit him. His mother said to them, "Pray for my son, for he treats me with exceptional honor." They said to her, "What does he do for you?", and she relayed this incident to them. They said to her, "Even if he were to do that thousands upon thousands [of times], he still would not have achieved half of the honor the Torah requires." [Peah Y 3b]

It is important that you honor your parents personally. The Talmud says: Rabbi Avahu said, "My son Avimi is an example of one who has fulfilled the mitzvah of honoring [one's parents]." Avimi had five children who were ordained [as rabbis] while his father was still alive. Yet, when Rabbi Avahu came [to visit] and called out at the door, Avimi himself hurried and went to open it for him saying, "Yes, yes!" [I am coming to open the door] until he reached there. One day [Rabbi Avahu] said, "Bring me a drink of water." He [Avimi] brought him [water and found him] sleeping. He stood over him [and waited] until he awoke. [Kiddushin 31b]

The Mishnah says that you must honor your parents willingly and cheerfully.

One can feed his father birds of delicacy and be punished; one can make his father grind with a millstone and be rewarded.

-How can one feed his father birds of delicacy and be punished?

Once there was a son who always fed his father birds of delicacy. The father asked his son how he could afford to do so. The son answered him, "Old man! What do you care? Chew and eat! Even dogs eat quietly."

-How can one make his father grind with a millstone and be rewarded?

A man who worked at a mill had an elderly father. One day the king drafted the father for forced labor. The man told his father: "Father, you work here on the millstone and I will go in your place, so that if I incur ridicule and lashes, better me than you." [Peah Y 1:1]

However, the Shulhan Arukh has a word of admonition for parents. Parents should just teach children the importance of the commandment, but may not demand the honor due them:

It is forbidden to burden your children by being particular about them honoring you. [This is so that] you will not pose a stumbling block before them, rather you should forego [your honor] and close your eyes to their actions... [Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 240:19]

The Talmud says that parents may be rebuked, but very gently:

Rabbi Eliezer was asked: "How far does the honor of parents [extend]?"

If your father is transgressing a precept of the Torah, you must not say to him, "Father, you are transgressing a precept of the Torah", but... "Father, such and such a verse is written in the Torah." [Kiddushin 32a]

Does the commandment to honor parents take precedence over other commandments? The Talmud answers: Not always:

Eleazar ben Mathia said: If my father orders me, "Give me a drink of water", while I have a commandment to perform, I disregard my father's honor and perform the commandment... [But] Issi ben Yehudah maintained: If the commandment can be performed by others, it should be performed by others, while he should bestir himself for his father's honor.

Rabbi Mattena said: The law agrees with Issi ben Yehudah. [Kiddushin 32a]

Who are good examples of honoring parents, in our tradition? Believe it or not, it turns out the best examples are... an idolatrous Gentile and a "bad guy"!

The Mishna tells us about Damah ben Netinah, a Gentile:

Rabbi Abbahu said: Rabbi Eliezer the Great was asked by his disciples: "Can you give a [good] example of honoring parents?" He replied: "Go and see what [the idolatrous Gentile] Damah ben Netinah of Askelon did. His mother was mentally ill and used to slap him in front of his colleagues, and all he would say was, 'Mother, it is enough!'"

Once the Sages came to him... to buy... a precious stone for... the vestments of the [High] Priest, and they agreed... on a price of 1,000 golden pieces. He entered the house and found his father asleep with his leg stretched out on the chest containing the stone. He would not trouble him and came out empty-handed... The Sages thought he wanted a higher price, and raised their offer to 10,000 golden pieces. When his father awoke, Dama entered and brought out the stone. The Sages wished to give him 10,000 golden pieces, but he exclaimed: "Heaven forbid! I will not make a profit out of honoring my parents. I will only take the price we agreed, 1,000 golden pieces."

And what reward did the Holy One, blessed be He, give him? Our Rabbis report that in the very same year his cow gave birth to a red heifer, which he sold for more than 10,000 golden pieces. See how great the merit of honoring father and mother is? [Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:15; also Peah Y 5b-6a]

The Torah tells us that Esau, Jacob's evil twin brother, was very solicitous towards his father Isaac. The Midrash says:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel said: No son has ever honored his parents as I have done, and yet I find that Esau honored his father even more than I. How? [He] said: I usually waited on my father dressed in soiled clothes, but when I went out into the street I discarded these clothes and put on instead handsome clothes. Not so Esau. The clothes in which he was dressed when attending on his father were his best... Hence you learn that Esau was most scrupulous in honoring his parents. [Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:15]

The Zohar concludes:

There was not a man in the world who showed as much honor to his father as Esau did, and this is what gave him dominion in this world. [The Romans were Esau's descendants.] [Zohar, Bereshit 1:146b]

***Honor your father and your mother.***

## 6 - No Murder

The sixth of the Ten Commandments is:

לֹא תִרְצַח:

You shall not murder. [Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17]

The penalty for murder is death. “No murder” is one of the three commandments that cannot be broken even to save a life (the other two being “No idolatry” and “No adultery”). This is the doctrine of *piku’ach nefesh*.

What is murder? The Hebrew has sometimes been mistranslated as “You shall not kill”. This cannot be correct because Judaism allows killing in self-defense, if there is no other way to stop the attacker, [Sanhedrin 72a] allows executing people sentenced to death by a court, allows killing enemy soldiers in battle, and allows killing animals for food.

Murder is intentionally taking someone’s life in circumstances that do not allow killing.

Ibn Ezra (12<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim Spain) says you are also guilty of murder when someone dies as a result of your false testimony, your gossip, your intentional bad counsel, or your withholding information that can save him from death.

Chizkuni, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century France, confirms:

The absence of any qualifying adjectives or adverbs means that murder by hand, by tool, or even by silence is equally forbidden.

Thus, you could be guilty of murder if you know that someone is about to be murdered and do not warn him.

What is not murder? Someone who killed inadvertently is not guilty of murder, and must seek asylum in a city of refuge, to avoid revenge killing by the family of the victim, and remain there until the death of the High Priest.

Someone who kills a “pursuer” is not a murderer but is praiseworthy. A “pursuer” (in Hebrew, *rodef*) is someone who is “pursuing” another with the

intention to murder him. Any bystander is allowed to kill him if he refuses to stop after being warned. The Talmud says:

[One must kill] someone who pursues his fellow to kill him [*rodef achar chavero le-horgo*]. [Sanhedrin 73a]

## 7 - No Adultery

The seventh of the Ten Commandments is:

לֹא תִנְאֹף

*Lo Tin'af*

You shall not commit adultery. [Exodus 20:13]

Adultery is when a married woman has sexual relations with a man who is not her husband. Whether the man is married or not is not an issue because the Torah allows men to have more than one wife. The Torah penalty is death by strangulation for both, not stoning. [Sanhedrin 11:1]

The Talmud made proof of adultery extremely difficult to obtain, requiring two independent and observant eyewitnesses to the act, and warning of the defendants of the consequences immediately before they perform the act. Therefore, the death penalty is no longer applied. However, the husband of the adulteress must divorce her and she loses all property rights in her ketubah; she and the adulterer may not marry each other; [Sotah 26b] and any children they have together are bastards (*mamzerim*), and can only marry other bastards.

The Talmud tells us that we may break all commandments to save a life, except those against idolatry, murder and sexual immorality (*Gilui Arayot*). [Sanhedrin 74a] The latter includes many things besides adultery: incest, bestiality, homosexuality, etc. Why, then, is the 7th commandment restricted to adultery?

Some commentators, such as Ibn Ezra and Sforno, say that the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment includes *all* prohibited sex acts. But this leaves open the question of why different words are used to describe them? (*Ni'uf* vs. *Gilui Arayot*) There is one difference, though: An adulterer has relations with a woman he could have relations with if she got a divorce. The other sexual sins are having relations with one you cannot ever have relations with.

Also, the Mishnah [Avot 2:1] says that we do not know the value of each commandment, and implies they must be treated as if they had equal value. The big three and the big ten are generally treated as the most important. So one expect the 3 to be included in the 10, but they are not exactly.



In a related vein, the Torah says that a husband suspecting his wife of adultery can force her to go through the ordeal of Sotah. If she dies, she is deemed guilty; if not, she is deemed innocent. [Numbers 5:11-31]. However, in the Mishnah, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai put the procedure on indefinite hold on the grounds that many husbands were not faithful either. [Sotah 9:9]

## 8 - No Stealing

The eighth of the Ten Commandments is:

לֹא תִגְנוֹב: -- *Lo tignov* -- You shall not steal. [Ex. 20:13]

Let us begin with a joke:

The doctor hopes you get sick. The dentist hopes your teeth decay. The lawyer hopes you run into legal problems. The policeman hopes you become a criminal. The mechanic hopes your car breaks down. The plumber hopes your toilet overflows. The landlord hopes you can never afford to buy a house. The military hopes your country is threatened by evil empires. The undertaker hopes you die soon. Only the thief wishes you great prosperity and sound sleep. At last, someone who cares!

Now let us get serious. The Torah says: “You shall not steal.” But what does “stealing” mean? It could mean either “Don't take another's private property, material or intellectual” or “Don't kidnap another person” (for ransom, for enslavement, or for selling as slave).

Jewish tradition interprets it as the latter. Here is why. The 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabbi Yishmael's 13 rules of hermeneutics (how to interpret the Torah) is: When a verse is ambiguous, deduce its meaning from the context. Now, around it are commandments that carry the death penalty. The full verse is:

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. [Exodus 20:13]

Indeed, the false witness gets the penalty reserved for the defendant.

So “You shall not steal” must refer to something that carries the death penalty. Stealing property doesn't, but kidnapping does, as the Torah says later:

And he who steals a man, and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death. [Ex. 21:16]

The commandment “Don't take another's private property” comes later, in Leviticus:

You shall not steal [*Lo tignovu* -- plural], nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another... [Lev 19:11]

You shall not defraud your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of he who is hired shall not remain with you all night until the morning. [Lev 19:13]

The context is clearly theft of money or possessions.

Here is the Talmud text on this interpretation: [Sanhedrin 86a]

From where do we know that the Torah warns us against kidnapping?

Rabbi Yoshiyah said: From the verse [in Exodus] "You will not steal." [Ex 20:13]

Rabbi Yohanan said: From the verse [in Leviticus] "They shall not be sold as slaves." [Lev 25:42]

Now, there is no dispute. One Master states the prohibition against kidnapping itself, and the other the prohibition against selling the kidnapped person.

Our Rabbis taught: [The Torah says in Exodus] "You will not steal" [Ex 20:13]. This refers to kidnapping -- the stealing of human beings.

You say, the Torah refers to the stealing of human beings; but perhaps it is not so, perhaps it speaks of the theft of property [or money]? I will tell you: Go and learn from the 13 principles whereby the Torah is interpreted, [one of which is that] a law is interpreted according to its context. What does the Torah speak of in that verse? Of crimes that carry capital punishment. Hence, this too refers to a crime that carries capital punishment.

[The Rabbis taught in] another Baraita: [The Torah says in Leviticus] "You [all] shall not steal". [Lev 19:13] The Torah [there] refers to theft of property.

You say so, but perhaps it is not so, perhaps the Torah refers to the theft of human beings? I will tell you: Go and learn from the 13 principles whereby the Torah is interpreted, [one of which is that] a law is interpreted according to its context. What does the Torah speak of in these verses? It speaks of matters of money. Therefore, this, too, refers to matters of money.

Maimonides' list of the 613 commandments includes eight against stealing property:

467. Don't steal [*Lo tignovu* -- plural]. [Leviticus 19:11]

468. The court must implement punitive measures against the thief  
.[Exodus 21:37]

469. Ensure your scales, weights and measures are accurate. [Leviticus 19:36]

472. Don't move a boundary marker to steal someone's property.  
[Deuteronomy 19:14]

474. Don't withhold wages or fail to repay a debt. [Leviticus 19:13]

475. Don't covet and scheme to acquire another's possession. [Exodus 20:14]

477. Return the robbed object or its value. [Leviticus 5:23]

479. Return the lost object. [Deuteronomy 22:1]

The Sages took stealing property very seriously. Here are ten rules:

**First**, there is no petty theft:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: When a person robs his fellow even of the value of a penny, it is as though he had taken his life away from him, as it is said [in Proverbs]:

כִּן אֲרֻחֹת כָּל-בֹּצֵעַ בֹּצֵעַ אֶת-נַפְשׁ בְּעָלָיו יָקָח:

Such is the fate of all who pursue unjust gain. It takes the life [soul] of its [lawful] owner. [Proverbs 1:19]

[Bava Kamma 119a]

This is a very strong statement, made for emphasis.

**Second**, it is theft even if you think the object belongs to you. An example is Rabbi Huna's story:

Once, four hundred jars of wine belonging to Rav Huna turned sour. The sages came to visit him and said, "Let the master examine his [past] actions."

He asked them, "Am I suspect in your eyes? [Do you believe what happened to me is punishment?]"

They replied, "Is the Holy One suspect of imposing judgment without justice?"

He said to them, "If anyone has heard something against me, let him speak up."

They replied, "We have heard that the master does not give his tenant his [lawful share of] vine shoots."

Rav Huna replied, "Does he leave any of them for me? He steals them all!"

They said to him, "That is exactly what the proverb says: Even if you steal [what is your own] from a thief, you are also a bit of a thief."

He said to them, "From now on, I pledge myself to give them to him."

Some say that, then and there, the vinegar turned back into wine. [Berakhot 5b]

**Third**, theft is theft, whether the victim is Jewish or not:

The Sages said: A person should keep away from dishonesty in dealing, whether with Jew or Gentile; indeed with anyone in the marketplace. Besides, a person who steals from a Gentile will in the end steal from a Jew; a person who cheats a Gentile will in the end cheat a Jew; a person who swears [falsely] to a Gentile will in the end swear [falsely] to a Jew; a person who acts deceitfully toward a Gentile will in the end act deceitfully toward a Jew....." [Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu]

All agree that it is biblically forbidden to steal from a non-Jew.

**Fourth**, the penalty for theft varies. In some cases, the value of restitution must exceed the value of the stolen item. The Torah says:

When a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox, and four sheep for the sheep... But if what he stole, whether ox or ass or sheep, is found alive in his possession, he shall pay double. [Ex. 21:37, 22:3]

**Fifth**, if you catch a thief in the act, you may kill him only if you are certain he would try to kill you if caught. [Exodus 21:37-22:1] The Talmud adds that in

their day the expectation was that the thief *would* try to kill you. [Sanhedrin 72a]  
Today, that may not be so, so killing him automatically is considered murder. [Maimonides, Laws of Theft 9:10-12]

**Sixth**, stealing something with the intention of returning it soon is still theft. The Talmud says it is prohibited even if you intend to repay twice the value of what was stolen. [Bava Metzia 61b; Shulḥan Arukh Harav, Laws of Theft 1]

**Seventh**, do not buy stolen goods. [Bava Kamma 118b-119b]

**Eighth**, at work, do not use employer's property or time for yourself without his permission.

**Ninth**, intellectual theft is also theft. Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz, from 17th-century Germany, writes:

One should repeat Torah ideas in the name of the person who originally said them, for the theft of such ideas is worse than the theft of money. The soul of a Jew and the Torah are one, thus stealing Torah ideas is tantamount to wounding the soul. How great is the sin of one who repeats an explanation of a verse, or something else he has heard and does not mention the name of the person who originally said it or wrote it. [Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz, in Shelah HaKadosh 183]

Indeed, the ancient Sources are scrupulous about giving credit for insights. The Talmud says twice:

He who reports a saying in the name of its author brings deliverance to the world. [Megillah 15a; Hullin 104b]

This leads to cases where attribution can take longer than the teaching itself. Here is a Talmud quote involving eight levels of attribution:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Zebid said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhaq ben Tabla, who said it in the name of Rabbi Hiyya Areka, who belonged to the school of Rabbi Aha, who said it in the name of Rabbi Zera, who said it in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, who said it in the name of Rabbi Hanania, who said it in the name of Rabbi Mi'asha, on the authority of Rabbi Yehudah ben Il'ai: [quote follows] [Nedarim 8b]

**Tenth**, the Talmud even adds creative interpretations of stealing:

- One who does not respond to a greeting is called a robber. [Berakhot 6b]
  - If a person derives benefit from this world without saying a blessing, it is as if he stole from God and the community of Israel. [Berakhot 35b]
  - Stealing as a joke is prohibited, even with every intention of returning the item. [Bava Metzia 61b]
- Maimonides writes:

It is forbidden to steal in jest, or to steal with the intention of returning the object or paying for it... lest one becomes addicted to stealing. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Theft 1:2]

However, if the stolen item is returned before the victim is aware of the theft, the thief does not have to inform the victim. [Shulḥan Arukh Choshen Mishpat 355:1] Also, it is not considered theft if the owner does not mind. For example, a tailor may take leftovers after making clothes, or a carpenter may take the sawdust after making furniture. [Bava Kamma 119a; Shulḥan Arukh Harav, Laws of Theft 1] Someone who depends on charity may (and must) himself give charity. [Tosefta, Bava Kamma 11:4]

Now, if you or your loved ones are starving, are you allowed to steal food from those who have more than they need?

On the face of it, yes, of course: *Pikuach nefesh* says you can break any commandment to save a life, except the commandments against idolatry, sexual immorality and murder. Stealing is not on that list. Yet I asked that question to more than one rabbi over the years and they always managed to squirm out of it without giving me a firm answer. Rabbis are reluctant to give permission to harm somebody else.

The Talmud addresses the issue in a roundabout way:

There were stacks of barley belonging to Jews in which the Philistines were hiding, and [King David wanted to burn down the stacks to kill the Philistines and save his own life.] He raised the dilemma: What is [the law?] [Is it permitted] to save oneself [by destroying] somebody else's property?

They sent [the following answer] to him: It is prohibited to save oneself by destroying somebody else's property. But you are king, and a king may breach the fence [of an individual] in order to form a path for himself, and none may protest his [action because he is the king]...

[What if he intends to pay back the owner later? The Sages of Bethlehem] sent [the following reply] to him: [It says in Ezekiel] "If the wicked... gives back what he has taken by robbery ... [he shall surely live, he shall not die]."[Ezekiel 33:15] [This verse teaches that] even though [the robber] repays the value of the stolen item, he is nevertheless considered to be wicked, and is described as such in the verse... [Bava Kamma 60b]

Tosafot and the Rosh interpret this passage as merely requiring payment if one was forced to damage property, even though the damaging was allowed.

This passage discusses saving your *own* life with someone else's property. [מציל עצמו בממון חבירו] Indeed, if you save your own life, you must pay for the damages. But elsewhere the Talmud says that if you save another person's

life, you do not have to pay for the damages. [Bava Kamma 116b] The concern is that you may decide not to save someone else's life if you had to pay for any damages done in the process. This is obviously not a concern when saving your own life.

Some contemporary rabbis say that if someone owes you money and you need that money to survive, then you may steal it from him.

Finally, the Talmud informs us that, sadly, stealing is very common:

Rav Yehudah says that Rav says: Most people steal, a minority sins with regard to sexual matters, and everyone sins with malicious speech. [Bava Batra 165a]

But the Rashbam softens this by saying that it doesn't mean that most people steal outright (as in shoplifting), but rather steal when they think it's their due, especially in business.

What can we conclude except by saying: "Thou shalt not steal"?



## 9 - No Bearing False Witness

The ninth of the Ten Commandments is:

לֹא־תִעֲנֶה בְּרֵעֶךָ עֵד שָׁקֶר:

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. [Exodus 20:13]

This means committing perjury in court when testifying against a defendant. Sforno says that this includes spreading slander to defame someone and ruin his reputation.

The exposed false witness receives the same penalty the defendant would have received if found guilty: Monetary loss, death, etc. The Torah says:

If a man appears against another to testify maliciously and gives false testimony against him, you shall do to him as he conspired to do to his brother. So you shall remove the evil from your midst. [Deut. 19:16–19]

The false witness is never again allowed to bear witness. [Sanh. 27a] The Midrash says:

He who bears false witness against his neighbor commits as serious a sin as if he had borne false witness against God, saying that God did not create the world. [Mehilta on Exodus 20:13]

A man who hires a false witness to testify for him is punishable only by God. [Shulḥan Arukh, ḤM 32:2; Rema]

A man may not testify on what he has heard other people telling him. If he does he is considered a false witness. [Rambam, Yad, Edut 17:1,5]

False witnesses are discussed in detail in Tractate Makkot in the Talmud.

## 10 - No Coveting

The last of the Ten Commandments is “You shall not covet”.

What does it mean? What exactly is being commanded here? How can you prevent yourself from having certain feelings, certain thoughts? Aren't they beyond your control? And isn't Judaism a religion of action, not of feelings or beliefs? An entire industry, the advertising industry, exists only to get us to covet things we don't have. Is it sinful -- lock, stock and barrel?

Let's explore what our Sages have said on the matter. First, let us quote the Torah text. The first version, in Exodus, is:

לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ  
לֹא-תַחְמֹד אִשְׁת רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ וְשׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לרֵעֶךָ:  
*Lo tachmod bet re-ekha. Lo tachmod eshet re-ekha, ve-avdo, ve-amato, ve-shoro, va-chamoro, vechol asher lere-ekha.*

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is your neighbor's. [Exodus 20:14]

The second version, in Deuteronomy, is:

וְלֹא תַחְמֹד אִשְׁת רֵעֶךָ  
וְלֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ שׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לרֵעֶךָ:  
*V'lo tachmod eshet re-ekha. V'lo tit'avveh bet re-ekha, sadehu ve-avdo, va-amato, shoro, va-chamoro, vechol asher lere-ekha.*

And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor shall you desire your neighbor's house, or his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is your neighbor's. [Deuteronomy 5:18]

Note the differences in phrasing. Exodus talks about “coveting” your neighbor's house, then his wife, then other things. Deuteronomy talks about “coveting” your neighbor's wife first, then “desiring” his house and other things. A different verb is used, so there must be a difference. What is that difference? The Talmud holds that “coveting” is a longing that leads to wrongdoing, whereas “desiring” is a matter of the heart only. [Bava Metzia 5b; also Zohar on Devarim, 3, p 261a; and Rambam, Sefer ha-Mitzvot]

Maimonides writes in his *Mishneh Torah*:

When you desire a neighbor's object and pressure him heavily until he gives it to you, even if your pressure was friendly and even if you pay handsomely for it, you have violated the prohibition. [Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Gezeilah v'Avedah 1:9–11]

So, in the Rambam's view, even pressure to sell is reprehensible. For example, you must not tell your neighbor, who did not put his house on the market, "I want your house so badly I will pay you twice its market value for it." You must not tell a poverty-stricken husband, "Divorce your wife so I can marry her. I'll give you a million dollars and she will live like a queen."

And what about threatening them with reprisals if they don't do as you say? Obviously, that's even more forbidden. Nevertheless, the Talmud says:

If a man agrees to sell something through fear of physical violence, the sale is nonetheless valid. [Bava Batra 47b]

This ruling is motivated by practicality. Without it, a lot of legal sales could be questioned.

The Rambam also writes:

Desire leads to coveting, and coveting leads to stealing. For if the owner (of the coveted object) does not wish to sell, even though he is offered a good price and is entreated to accept, the person who covets the object will come to steal it, as it is written [in the Book of Micah]:

They covet fields and (then) steal them. [Micah 2:2]

And if the owner approaches him with a view to reclaiming his money or preventing the theft, then he will come to murder.

[Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Gezeilah v'Avedah 1:11]

So the Rambam views "Do not covet" as a protective fence that avoids a cascade of infractions. For example, coveting your neighbor's wife might lead to causing the death of her husband, as in the case of David and Bathsheba. If the adultery is not known and leads to a child, then the father is misidentified and the child does not get to inherit from his real father, which is a form of theft. The child does not get to honor his real father, which breaks another commandment. If the adultery is known, the child is tagged as a bastard, and may marry only another bastard. If he can't find one, he cannot marry, which means fewer Jews to observe Shabbat and commandments.

The Talmud states:

Envy, lust and seeking honor remove a person from this world. [Avot 4:21]

This implies that the commandment seeks to protect not only the neighbor but also the coveter, allowing him to elevate himself and earn a share in the World to Come.

But all this does not explain how we can prevent ourselves from coveting.

First of all, the Talmud makes clear that, while coveting is forbidden, there is no punishment for it:

[There is no punishment for mere evil intention], for it is said [in the Book of Psalms]:

If I saw iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not hear. [Ps. 66:18]...

[If evil] intention does not [lead to action], the Holy One, blessed be He, does not [punish it]. [Kiddushin 40a]

Second, the Talmud describes one way we can go about not coveting: Taking action not to look into our neighbors' affairs. It says that if two people share the same courtyard, each can force his neighbor to build a wall in the middle so neither can look into the other's half. [Bava Batra 2a]

The Talmud even goes beyond that, asserting that

Damage caused by looking is also damage. [Bava Batra 2b]

This implies that the neighbor is somehow harmed by mere thought.

So coveting is damaging to the neighbor even if no action results from it.

How so? Mere thoughts can harm? Mind over matter? This is known as '*ayin hara*', the evil eye.

Ibn Ezra, 12<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish commentator, holds that it's all a matter of training children since their youth, and *there* is the implied action behind the commandment. He notes that a person does not desire to lie with his mother, although she may be beautiful, because he has been trained since his youth to know that she is forbidden to him. He does not desire non-kosher meat just as we Westerners do not desire snake meat or fried ants: It's a psychological result of our upbringing. Proper education can regulate improper coveting. As it says in the Book of Proverbs,

Train a child in the way that he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it. [Prov. 22:6]

Note that the Talmud says that for every thing God has forbidden, He has created an equivalent that is permitted. [Chullin 109b] For example, if you have a lust for blood, you may not become a murderer, but you may become a butcher or a surgeon.

But this comment applies only to things God said you cannot have, such as *your neighbor's* possessions. It does not apply to the possessions themselves in the abstract. For example, if your neighbor has a beautiful house, there is nothing wrong with you desiring to own a similar house and working hard to earn it. Otherwise, how would you ever acquire anything if you did not desire it first? The prohibition is against wanting your neighbor's house *specifically*.

And even if one wishes to fault the desire itself, our tradition says that all achievements can be traced to envy, coveting or jealousy. The Midrash says:

Without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. As [King] Solomon said [in Ecclesiastes]:

And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor. [Eccl. 4:4]

[Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

Nevertheless, the *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, an anonymous 13<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish commentary on the commandments, simply denies that it is impossible to regulate one's desires:

Do not wonder and ask: But how can it be in one's power to restrain his heart from longing for riches that he may see in his fellow man's possession, when he himself is lacking them all? How can a prohibition be given in the Torah about something which man cannot possibly obey? This matter is not so... for it is indeed in one's power to restrain himself, his thoughts and his longings, from whatever he wishes. [Sefer Ha-chinukh, Mitzvah 416]

In the same vein, the Midrash says:

The wicked are ruled by their hearts. [As it says in the Tanach]:

Naval said in his heart [Ps. 14:1];

And Esau said in his heart [Gen. 27:41];

And Jeroboam said in his heart [1 Kings 12:26];

Now Haman said in his heart [Est. 6:6].

But the righteous rule their hearts. [As it says in the Tanach]:

And Chana was speaking to her heart [1 Sam. 1:13];

And [King] David said to his heart [1 Sam 27:1];

And Daniel decided in his heart [Dan. 1:8].

The [righteous] are [therefore] similar to the Creator, concerning Whom it is written [in Genesis]:

And God said to His heart. [Gen. 8:21]

[Genesis Rabbah 67:6]

So righteous people rule their hearts, rather than are ruled by them.

Another point is that if we wasted time wishing for what we *don't* have, we would not spend as much time appreciating what we *do* have, and may even lose it. The Talmud confirms:

Whoever sets his eyes on what is not his, loses also what is his. [Sotah 9a]

So there you have it. Coveting what you can't have is bad for you, but you will not be punished for it, unless it leads to prohibited action, which it frequently does. Desiring something and working diligently to earn it is perfectly acceptable. You can prevent yourself from coveting by not looking into your neighbor's affairs. You can prevent children from coveting if you train them early to understand that some things are off-limits. It can be done.