

Beyond Commandments

This week's Torah portion, *Va'etchanan* (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11), contains two of the best known and influential passages: the Ten Commandments and the *Sh'ma*. The *Sh'ma*, which includes the *ve'ahavta* (6:4-9), expresses the cornerstone of Jewish faith; one God, *Adonai*, Creator of all life, who commands us simply to love:

"Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

⁵ You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut 6:4-5)

These words we recite every evening as we go to bed and every morning as we rise up. These words which are written on parchment and placed on the doorposts of our homes and bedrooms declare a unity of life and our obligation to love. But can we be commanded to love? Maimonides explains that loving God comes from contemplating and reflecting on the magnificence of creation and realizing that we are a beloved part of that creation (Mishneh Torah, *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2.1). And we express that love through our compassionate, respectful and reverential actions and interactions with each other and all of creation.

Similarly, the Ten Commandments concludes with a commandment for us not to covet or crave our neighbor's possessions. Can we really be commanded not to covet or crave? Actions can be regulated by laws and social constructs, but feelings are beyond rules and regulations.

Nevertheless, consider this teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one's own pettiness. Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty. Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things. This is our constant problem - how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent. In a moment of eternity, while the taste of redemption was still fresh to the former slaves, the people of Israel were given the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments. In its beginning and end, the Decalogue deals with the liberty of man. The first Word - I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage - reminds him that his outer liberty was given to him by God, and the tenth Word - Thou shalt not covet! -reminds him that he himself must achieve his inner liberty.

(The Sabbath, 1951, pp. 89-90.)

Heschel teaches that the commandment not to covet is a reminder that true freedom is when we have control over our own actions and attitudes.

This is Shabbat *Nachamu*, the Sabbath of comforting which comes after the sadness of *Tisha b'Av*. After a loss, after disappointments, and most certainly during times like these when frustration and isolation can threaten our sense of well-being, let us find comfort in the Torah's exalted instruction to love and to reassert the personal liberty that comes from our free-will. Circumstances may be beyond our control. However, the power to love and the blessings of a positive and generous spirit are in our hands.

Shabbat Shalom,

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