

## Introduction

### The Ten Commandments

The *aseret hadevarim* (literally “ten words”), commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments, is unquestionably one of the best-known texts of the Western world. As a fundamental code of behavior in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments principally proscribe behavior: *don't* worship other gods, *don't* abuse God's name, *don't* kill, murder or lie under oath, and prescribe other behavior: remember (observe) the Sabbath, honor parents. The term *aseret hadevarim* is the original biblical formulation while the current Hebrew nomenclature, *aseret hadibrot*, first appears in the Talmud.

For two thousand years, the representation of the two tablets, with the first words of each commandment (five to a side) remains one of the most employed and recognizable of all religious symbols. The image of the tablets is incorporated into the interior design of many synagogues (and other houses of worship), usually on or near the *aron*. However, attempts by the [mostly] Christian right to display the Ten Commandments in public spaces have generated a great deal of controversy about the principle of the separation of church and state.

The text of the Ten Commandments appears twice in the Torah, first in Exodus 20:1-14 and then again in Deuteronomy 5:6-18. For the most part, the texts are nearly identical. The ten statements, mostly framed in the negative, are regarded by some scholars as the prologue to the much more detailed Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21:1-24:18) that follows.

There are several points to be made, as well, about the categorization and division of the Ten Commandments.

- One to five all mention God's name. Each command relates to the individual's relationship with God.
- In six through ten, there is no mention of God, but each refers, instead, to relations between individuals.
- The division of the commandments is not certain. There is, in particular, much disagreement about the division of the first and second commandments. (This will be addressed in the specific sessions.)

Another interesting fact is that, despite its centrality to Jewish tradition, there is no trace of the Ten Commandments in the daily liturgy. We know that during the Second Temple period, people recited the Ten Commandments along with the three paragraphs of the *Shema* as part of daily prayer. The Talmud reports that once the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis did not include the recitation of the Ten Commandments in the synagogue liturgy. The reason, they suggested, is that people should not believe that it was the only law revealed at Sinai.

Despite the very elusive language of many of the commandments, which has necessitated interpretation and re-interpretation, they have stood the test of time. As we study this unit together, we can take comfort in the thought that the moral and religious values embraced by our ancestors continue to guide us in our lives today.

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

### (Exodus 20:2-14)

1. I the Lord am your god who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (verse 2) [You shall have no other gods besides Me (verse 3)]
2. You shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured imaged, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. 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, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments. (verses 3-6)
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. (verse 7)
4. Remember the *sabbath* day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 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. 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. (verses 8-11)
5. Honor your father and your mother that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you. (verse 12)
6. You shall not murder. (verse 13a)
7. You shall not commit adultery. (verse 13b)
8. You shall not steal. (verse 13c)
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (verse 13d)
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. (verse 14)

(from the JPS *Tanakh*)

## The First Commandment

**Leader:** *Since the Torah does not indicate how the Ten Commandments are to be divided, there has been much debate over the past two thousand years about the grouping, especially of the first two commandments.*

Traditional rabbinic sources view this as the first commandment:

*I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (Exodus 20:2)*

There are alternative groupings, however, by the ancient authors Philo Judaeus (*De decalogo*) and Josephus (*Antiquities III*), as well as by many contemporary scholars that read:

*I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods beside me." (Exodus 20:2-3)*

[**Note to leader:** There is a lot of material here, so you will most likely have to select which questions you want to discuss.]

### Discussion

1. Regardless of the division of the first commandment, what are the key ideas expressed in this statement?

- *God's authority is established because of the deliverance from Egypt.*
- *The religion of Israel is historical, anchored in specific experience (time and place)*

2. The exodus from Egypt is a recurring motif in Jewish liturgy throughout the year. Where and when do we recall the deliverance from Egypt?

- *All of the Passover liturgy (every year in the month of Nissan)*
- *The kiddush for shabbat and haggim [zekher li-tziat mitzraim] (every week and holiday)*
- *The third paragraph of the Shema, Numbers 15:41: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of Egypt." (every day)*

3. What does following *midrash* suggest about the establishment of God's authority?

"Why weren't the Ten Commandments put at the very beginning of the Torah? Here is a parable: It can be likened to a conqueror who enters a province and says to its inhabitants, 'Let me govern you' to which they respond, 'What good have you done for us that we should accept your rule?' So what did he do? He built them a wall, brought them water and conducted

their wars. Thus when he said again 'Let me govern you' they readily agreed. Similarly, God redeemed Israel from Egypt, split the sea, delivered manna, provided water, stuffed them with quail and fought Amalek. Only then did He say, 'Let me govern you' and only then did they respond affirmatively."

(Mekhilta de R. Yishmael)

- *Redemption from Egypt and the sojourn in the desert is a necessary prelude to Israel's acceptance of the law given at Sinai.*

**Discussion Question:** In the New Year season we affirm God's kingship over Israel. What is the relationship between these two statements?

*I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (You shall have no other gods but me) [First commandment]*

*And the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one and His name one. [Malkhuyot from the Rosh Hashanah liturgy]*

- *The first commandment establishes God's authority, based upon the deliverance from Egypt.*
- *The Rosh Hashanah liturgy commemorates the first day of the new year. The Mishnah recognizes Rosh Hashanah as the "birthday" of kings (i.e. God)*
- *They both emphasize God's authority and kingship – and God's acceptance above all other gods.*

## The Second Commandment

*[You shall have no other gods besides Me.] 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. 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, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*  
(Exodus 20:3-6)

As we saw with the first commandment, the division of the biblical verses containing the Ten Commandments is subject to interpretation. Where does verse 20:3, “*You shall have no other gods besides Me*” belong, in the first or second commandment?

Traditional sources maintain that it is part of the first commandment, but there are also advocates for its inclusion as part of the second commandment.

### Discussion

There are a number of religious concepts embedded in the second commandment. What are they?

- *Israel shall worship only the Lord God*
- *Israel shall not make idols*
- *Israel shall not worship or serve (make sacrifices to) idols*
- *Violators will be punished into future generations; followers will be rewarded*

[Note to Leader: There are several discussion topics in this session. You will most likely want to pick *one*.]

### Topic I: Prohibition Against Images

**Leader:** *The notion that the second commandment prohibits images has been the subject of diverse (and often-conflicting) interpretations throughout Jewish history. But because of extensive archaeological discoveries in Israel over the past quarter century, we now know that the Jews of the Greco-Roman world often employed figural art, even pagan imagery in the creation of their synagogues.*

*On the other hand, we also recognize that Jews living under Islam (and in keeping with Islam's very strict prohibitions against representational art) used only geometric and non-figural images. In other words, the Jewish attitude about artistic images was influenced by the varied social and cultural environments in which Jews lived.*

1. Let's look at the mosaic floor of the Bet Alpha synagogue (6<sup>th</sup> century CE) in northern Israel. What images can you identify?

- *Top panel: aron, lions, menorot, lulav, etrog, shofar*

- *Middle panel: zodiac, the god Helios in the center, personification of the seasons on the four outside corners*
- *Bottom panel: the sacrifice of Isaac*



2. If this ancient synagogue has representational figures on its floor, what does this tell us about the prohibition against images?

- *The prohibition is not absolute, against any and all images*
- *The prohibition was against creating images for worship (idolatry)*
- *Images for decorative purposes are acceptable*

3. How might we interpret the use of the pagan zodiac in a synagogue?

- *It functions merely as a calendar*
- *It was a commonly used and recognizable image/decoration in Greco-Roman buildings*
- *The pagan symbolism is changed as it passes from the pagan to the Jewish context*

4. Can you think of contemporary examples of symbols changing their meaning from one venue or era to another?

- *Black at one time meant mourning, now it is the most popular color in fashion*
- *Earrings were only worn by women; now men wear them as well*
- *Tattoos were once worn only by sailors, now they are common among young people*
- *Blue jeans were once worn by farmers and considered a sign of poverty; now they are a status symbol*
- *Sneakers were worn exclusively for sports; now they are a sign of status*

## Topic II: Visiting the Iniquity on Future Generations

1. Do you think that it is morally acceptable for children to be punished for the sins of their parents?

2. This doctrine was later modified by the prophet Jeremiah. Let's read what he says:

*"They shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are blunted.' But every one shall die for his own sins; whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted."  
(Jeremiah 31:29-30)*

Why do you think this commandment is the only one that prescribes a punishment?

- *It can be interpreted merely as a reflection of family solidarity in a tribal society (all members are responsible for one another)*
- *Since idolatry was so prevalent and its presence undermined Israelite monotheism, it was the most severely punished*
- *It is literary hyperbole, and meant only to demonstrate the severity of the infraction*

3. If children are punished for the sins of their parents and grandparents, what does this say about atonement for sins on Yom Kippur and about individual responsibility?

## The Third Commandment

*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. (Exodus 20:7)*

The meaning of this commandment remains ambiguous, and leads to varying interpretations, some that are even questionable. But it unquestionably deals with the abuse of the divine name.

**Leader:** *It does not mean that we write G-d with a - rather than an o. God is not God's name. The four-letter name of God, translated as Lord, but pronounced as Adonai, is God's name. We do not write that out in Hebrew. The original meaning of this commandment most likely meant that we should not resort to using God's name to make lies more plausible, as in "I swear to God."*

### Topic I: The Use of God as Justification for Evil

1. What are ways in which the name of God is abused?

**Leader:** *Joseph Telushkin suggests that it is forbidden to use God to justify selfish and/or evil causes, like the Spanish Inquisition that persecuted and killed in the defense of God and truth.*

2. Let's read the statement by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Morris Raphall (Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, NY) citing the Hebrew Bible as justification for slavery. What is his argument?

The result to which the Bible view of slavery leads us is, first, that slavery has existed since the earliest time; second that slaveholding is no sin, and that slave property is expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments; third that the slave is a person, and has rights not conflicting with the lawful exercise of the rights of his owner. If our Northern fellow-citizens, content with following the word of G-d, [sic] would not insist on being "righteous overmuch," or denouncing "sin" which the Bible knows not, but which is plainly taught by the precepts of men—they would entertain more equity and less ill feeling towards their Southern brethren. (New York City, 1861)

- *Slavery is an ancient tradition (lends authority to it) The ten commandments make provisions for slave-holding (the fourth and tenth commandments)*
- *Slaves have rights in the Bible as well; they cannot be mistreated. Anti-slavery advocates are overly righteous and do not read the Bible correctly*



## Topic II: Jewish Behavior Reflects on God

1. Let's look at a 13<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic interpretation of this commandment.

Jews must...not lie to a Jew or non-Jew, and not mislead anyone in any matter...For if Jews cheat non-Jews, they will say, 'Look how God chose for His people a nation of thieves and deceivers'...Indeed, God dispersed us among the nations so that we could gather converts to Judaism, but if we behave deceitfully towards others, who will want to join us?

(Rabbi Moshe of Coucy, author of *Semag*, 13<sup>th</sup> C., France)

2. What is Rabbi Moshe of Coucy suggesting?

- *It is the fate of the minority to be judged according to its most notorious members*
- *This is an abuse of God's name: hillul hashem*
- *All Jews are representative of each other*
- *Our behavior reflects on God and Israel*

**Discussion Question:** Should we conduct our lives according to how our behavior reflects on other Jews?

## The Fourth Commandment

*Remember (zakhor) the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 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. 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. (Exodus 8-11)*

1. What are the key elements of this commandment?

- *The sabbath is to be remembered, i.e. observed*
- *People should toil for six days and then rest*
- *All members, human and animal, of the household should rest on the seventh day*
- *The Lord created the world in six days and rested on the seventh*
- *The Lord blessed and sanctified the sabbath*

2. A second version of the Ten Commandments appears in the book of Deuteronomy. While most of the statements are identical, there are some noteworthy differences, particularly in the fourth commandment.

*Observe (shamor) the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)*

3. How does the version of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy differ from that in Exodus?

- *It uses the term shamor (observe) ie celebrate, rather than zakhor (remember). The Hebrew verb shamar is used commonly for keeping a holiday and by fulfilling mitzvot. Zakhar, is usually meant as “remember to observe.”*
- *The reason for the observance is based upon the redemption from Egypt, not creation*
- *Servants are singled out for special treatment, to be able to rest as the masters do, reminding Israel that they, too, once were slaves*
- *There is no mention, at all, of the sabbath as God's respite from the act of creation*

4. What might account for the differences in the two versions?

5. The rabbis already recognized the inconsistency and devised a *midrash* (BT *Shevuot* 20b) that appears in the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Lekha Dodi* (the hymn sung on Friday night during *Kabbalat Shabbat*).

“Keep” and “remember,” both uttered as one (*shamor ve-zakhor be-dibbur ehad*)  
By our Creator, beyond comparison

(*Lekha Dodi*, paragraph 1)

6. God did at Sinai what no human being can do: utter two distinct words (*remember* and *keep*) simultaneously. What is the point of its placement in this hymn?

- *It calls to mind the fourth commandment about shabbat*
- *It reconciles the two versions, strengthening even more the sanctity of shabbat*
- *It emphasizes God the Creator (justification for shabbat in Exodus version)*
- *God can do what no human can do (speak two separate words at one time), again justifying God's superiority and authority*

**Discussion Question:** The late 19<sup>th</sup> century Zionist thinker, Ahad Ha'Am said:

“More than the Jews have kept the sabbath, the sabbath has kept the Jews.”

What did Ahad Ha'Am mean by this statement? Do you agree or disagree?

## The Fifth Commandment

*Honor your father and your mother that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you. (Exodus 20:12)*

The reverence for parents is so strong in Judaism that it is included as one of the Ten Commandments.

Let's look at two reflections of this from writings 1500 years apart.

Rabbi Eliezer was asked: 'How far is one to go in honoring one's father and mother?' He replied: 'Let us ask Dama ben Netina...'

One time the jasper stone representing the tribe of Benjamin [in the breastplate of the High Priest] was lost. The sages asked, 'Who has a precious stone like it?' and were told, 'Dama ben Netina has.'

They went to him and agreed on a purchase price of one hundred dinars.

He went upstairs because he wanted to fetch it for them, and found his father and mother asleep. Some say his father's feet were upon the box in which the jasper lay. Some say the key to the box was in his father's fingers.

He went to the sages and said, 'I cannot give it to you.' They said to one another, 'maybe he wants more money,' and decided among themselves to raise the price to a thousand dinars. When his father and mother awoke, he went up and brought the jasper down to the sages.

They were about to give him the larger sum they had decided on, but he said, 'What, shall I sell you the honor due to one's father and mother for money? I will not take any kind of profit as a reward for honoring my parents.'

*(Pesikta Rabbati, P 23/24)*

Esteemed Editor: I am a 'greenhorn,' only five weeks in the country and a jeweler by trade. I come from Russia, where I left a blind father and a stepmother. Before I left, my father asked me not to forget him. I promised that I would send him the first money I earned in America.

When I arrived in New York, I walked around for two weeks looking for a job. In the third week I was lucky, and found a job at which I earn eight dollars a week. I worked, I paid my landlady board, I bought a few things to wear, and I have a few dollars in my pocket.

Now I want you to advise me. Shall I send my father a few dollars for Passover, or should I keep the little money for myself? In this place the work will end soon and I may be left without a job. Your thankful reader, I.M.

*(From a Bintel Brief, New York, 1903)*

**Discussion Question:** What do these separate accounts convey about the meaning of honoring one's parents?

Leader's Copy

- *Responsibility to parents is not only to honor/respect in attitude, but also behavior*
- *Responsibility to parents is for the young as well as the older offspring*
- *It creates a society in which the elderly are cared for*

## The Sixth Commandment

*You shall not murder. (Exodus 20:13a)*

The biblical word *ratsab* often has been translated too broadly as “kill.” It should be translated, rather, as “murder.”

### Topic I: The Bible

Let's look at the following statements from the Bible that deal with killing or the death sentence.

*He who fatally strikes a man shall be put to death. (Exodus 22:12)*

*He who insults his father or his mother shall be put to death. (Exodus 22:17)*

*When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace. If it responds peaceably and lets you in, all the people present there shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not surrender to you, but would join battle with you, you shall lay siege to it; and when the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. (Deuteronomy 20:10-13)*

**Discussion Question:** How do these statements help us interpret the meaning of *ratsab*?

- *Capital punishment is both sanctioned and prescribed*
- *In some cases of even non-violent behavior, capital punishment may be applied*
- *War is sanctioned*

### Topic II – The Rabbis

We have seen that the Bible condones warfare, and even prescribes death as a punishment for a variety of crimes. But later, the rabbis applied more rigid standards for the death penalty. How do the following statements confirm this?

A Sanhedrin that carries out the death penalty once in seven years is designated destructive. Rabbi Eliezar ben Azariah says: ‘Once in seventy years.’ Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva say: ‘Had we been members of the Sanhedrin, no one would ever have received the death penalty.’ Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel says: ‘They would also have multiplied those who shed blood in Israel.’ (*Mishnah: Makkot 1:10*)

There is no [capital] punishment unless it is heeded by a warning.  
(*BT Sanhedrin: 56*)

- *Case 1: The application of the death penalty became more restrictive*
- *Case 2: If the death penalty were prescribed for a particular crime, the perpetrators needed to be warned before the act that their crime would result*

*in death. (The results of this restriction further undermined the authority's recourse to the death penalty.)*

### Topic III: Self Defense

What do these rabbinic examples tell us about self-preservation?

Two men are traveling together [in the desert], and one has a pitcher of water. If both drink the water, they will both die, but if only one drinks, he can reach civilization and survive. [What should the man with the water do?] Rabbi Ben Petura taught: 'It is better that both should drink and die, rather than one of them look on while his comrade dies.' But Rabbi Akiva came and taught, 'that your brother may live with you' (Leviticus 25:36) means [only he can live with you must you share the water, but in cases of conflict] your life takes precedence over his.' (BT, Bava Metzia 62a)

If someone comes to kill you, kill him first. (*Sanhedrin 72a*)

**Discussion Question:** How can this be understood within the context of the Holocaust?

## The Seventh Commandment

*You shall not commit adultery. (Exodus 20:13)*

In a polygamous society, the definition of adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between a married woman and a man who is not her lawful husband. Adultery was a private wrong committed against the husband, an infringement of his exclusive rights of possession.

### The Biblical View: *The Sotah*

The Bible describes an ordeal that is imposed on a woman suspected of infidelity by her husband.

*(Numbers 5: 11-31) If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her ...or if a fit of jealousy comes over one ...although she has not defiled herself.*

She is taken to the priest who administers a potion of sacral water, dust from the sanctuary floor and ink rubbed off an inscription of a curse against her behavior. He requires her to take an oath of her innocence and utters a curse that would take effect if she were guilty: "May the Lord make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly distend" [possibly a distended uterus or a miscarriage as a sign of infertility in the ancient world]. If nothing happens, "the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed."

"This is the ritual in cases of jealousy when a woman goes astray while married to her husband and defiles herself... The man shall be clear of guilt; but that woman shall suffer for her guilt."

What ideas emerge from this text about life in the ancient world and women's role in that society?

- *All blame is placed upon the woman.*
- *This procedure can be enacted, even if there is a suspicion of infidelity*
- *There is no punishment for the husband if his allegations are false*
- *The male partner (not her husband) is not forced to undergo a similar procedure.*
- *The process is that of an ordeal, in which proof of innocence or guilt is determined by the physical response of the accused to a potentially life-threatening procedure.*



*Leader: Many contemporary Bible scholars question whether this ordeal was actually ever carried out. Nevertheless, the message was clear: a woman is her husband's property. Only her behavior – and not that of her partner's – could be subject to this kind of punishment.*

*However, while married men had many less restrictions on their sexuality (including additional wives, concubines, prostitutes, unmarried women) other men's wives were strictly forbidden.*

### **The Rabbinic View**

While this ordeal was already in disuse (if it were ever more than theoretical) the rabbis continued to caution men about the temptation of the married woman.

Turn your eyes away from your neighbor's charming wife, lest you be caught in her net. Do not visit with her husband and share wine and strong drink with him. For through the form of a beautiful woman, many were destroyed. (BT Yevamot, 63b)

**Discussion Questions:** What does this talmudic comment convey about the rabbinic view of the married woman? Do you see (or not) a softening of the biblical view?

## The Eighth Commandment

*You shall not steal. (Exodus 20:13)*

The exact meaning of this commandment has been the source of much discussion, principally because it lacks any specifics. Consequently, various commentators understood it to mean different things: did it mean property (goods) or people (kidnapping)?

**Leader:** *Later rabbinic interpretation included such things as:*

- *Borrowing an object without permission (even intending to return it)*
- *Keeping a lost object when you think, with some effort, you might find the owner*
- *Stealing someone's ideas and passing them off as your own*

With so much prominence and public discussion about corporate greed, as Jews we find ourselves hoping (secretly) when a new name surfaces, "Please let him not be Jewish!"

How do we address this type of moral issue?

On this matter the rabbis made the following pronouncement:

How can a man bless God over bread, which he has made from stolen flour? His blessing would be a curse. (BT, Baba Kamma 94)

**Discussion Question:** What if stolen money were donated as an endowment for a pediatric cancer facility?

## The Ninth Commandment

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:13)*

While the literal and historical meaning of this commandment was about lying during a criminal procedure, it has now assumed a wider meaning about lying in general. This commandment is more applicable to us in our daily lives since few of us are called upon to testify in a court of law, but we are confronted daily with the prospect of speaking truth.

### Topic I: The Boy Who Cried Wolf

In a time-honored story about the dangers of lying, let's look at Aesop's fable about the shepherd boy:

The boy called out "Wolf, wolf!" and the villagers came out to help him. A few days afterward he tried the same trick, and again they came to his help. Shortly after this a wolf actually came, but this time the villagers thought the boy was deceiving them again and nobody came to his help.

Moral: A liar will not be believed even when he speaks the truth.

How does the storyteller regard the damage wrought by the lie?

- *There is the obvious sin of the initial lie/ falsehood.*
- *The credibility and moral fiber of the liar is undermined, such that he/she is never believed about anything*

### Topic II: Damage of Gossip

Let's look at how Jewish folk tradition regards the dangers of falsehood:

There was once a man who went around his village making slanderous comments about the rabbi. He finally realized the error of his ways and went to the rabbi to seek his forgiveness. The rabbi told him that he would forgive him if he followed his instructions to the letter: "Go home and cut up a feather pillow and scatter the feathers around the outside of his house." The man followed the rabbi's instructions and returned, asking if he was now forgiven.

The rabbi said: "You must first go home and gather all the feathers back into the pillow." The man responded, "I can't do that. It's an impossible task."

The rabbi responded: "Now do you understand that you have done irreparable damage to me as well? It is as impossible to undo the damage to my good name as it is to gather up all of the feathers."

**Discussion question:** Who of the characters in this story are affected by this lie (and how)?

## The Tenth Commandment

*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. (Exodus 20:14)*

The meaning of this commandment remains in dispute by Bible scholars. What exactly is the meaning of "covet" (*h-m-d*)? It seems to reflect an internal wish or desire rather than a specific act (such as stealing, lying, murdering, idolatry). Why would God impose restrictions on people's feelings when all of the other commandments are action-based? Can thoughts be punished?

### Topic I: The Rabbis

1. The rabbis certainly saw the problematic nature of this commandment.

**The difference between the wicked and the righteous is that the wicked are controlled by their hearts and the righteous have their hearts under control. (Genesis Rabbah 34:10)**

The rabbis ask the question:

**Who is mighty? One who conquers his evil impulse (*yitzro*). (Pirke Avot 4:1)**

2. What do the rabbis imply is the punishment for covetousness?

- *Moral deficiency*
- *Judgment by God (and others) that the individual lacks righteousness*

People in western civilization seems to regard coveting as a victimless crime, but there remains the prevailing view that while covetous thoughts might be harmless, they can lead to other problems.

The following passage from Shakespeare suggests a very strong view of covetous behavior? What are they?

Those that much covet  
are with gain so fond,  
for what they have not.  
That which they possess  
they scatter and unloose it from their bond,  
And so, by hoping more, thy have but less.

(William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, 1594)

- *They are greedy for more and more acquisitions*
- *They are ungrateful for what they have*
- *They are careless with what they have*

Leader's Copy

- *Their desire for more acquisitions results, in the final analysis, in their having less rather than more.*

Some of us might recall President Jimmy Carter's response to an interviewer who asked him if he had ever strayed from his marital commitment. His response: "*No, but I sinned in my heart.*" (circa 1977) Should thoughts be regarded as sin?