

The First Commandment

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)

Discussion

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

4. 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 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?

Topic I: Prohibition Against Images

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



2. If this ancient synagogue has representational figures on its floor, what does this tell us about the prohibition against images?
3. How might we interpret the use of the pagan zodiac in a synagogue?
4. Can you think of contemporary examples of symbols changing their meaning from one venue or era to another?

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?

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?

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.

Topic I: The Use of God as Justification for Evil

1. What are ways in which the name of God is abused?
2. Let's read the statement by the 19th 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)

Topic II: Jewish Behavior Reflects on God

1. Let's look at a 13th 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*, 13th C., France)
2. What is Rabbi Moshe of Coucy suggesting?

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?
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?
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 16th 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?

Discussion Question: The late 19th 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?

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*?

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*)

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?

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)?

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?

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?

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)

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?

Participant's Copy