

Yitro 5768 The Two Tablets

Shabbat Shalom.

This is the great moment, complete with blaring *shofarot* and thunder as sound effects and lightning as the visuals. We have just witnessed the Revelation; the covenant between God and the people Israel has been formalized.

B'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, are in the middle of nowhere, encamped at the base of an undistinguished desert mountain. And what is shared with them?

A set of rules that will become the *shnei luhot habrit* – the two tablets of the covenant. Our ark doors behind me suggest the shape of these two tablets that contained these basic building blocks of our society and of Judaism.

These are God's words, God's commands, God's revealing aspects of God's self, fragments of eternity.

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What are these laws? The Revelation?

One of the striking features of the Ten Commandments is that we visualize them and depict them in two columns – a distinct structural feature.

Take a look at this model made by Adrienne Winton and the Decalogue painted by Yekutiel Sofer in 1768 that you have as an insert in your Shofar bulletin.

Today, I would like to focus on the structure – and on some of the commandments as they connect to it.

One helpful way to understand them is to see each column as dealing with a different type of commandment. The first side (remember it's Hebrew so it goes from right to left) concerns itself with *mitzvot bein adam laMakom* – the commandments that govern all the relationships between ourselves and God. The second or left side relates to relationships between ourselves and other people: *mitzvot bein adam l'haveiro*, as our rabbis labeled them.



More of us probably feel more comfortable with the second column than with the first. These laws seem like essential elements in the social contract. Surely no God would permit wanton murder, adultery, stealing or lying.

Let's look more closely at some of them. Judaism acknowledges that there are rare occasions when we must kill; for example, self-defense or in defense of another who is about to be murdered. Killing, under severely limited guidelines may be allowed; murder, killing in other situations is prohibited.

“Lo ta'aneh v'rei'akha eid shaker – you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” is number nine. On the most basic level, this refers to testifying at a court case, but it extends to speaking the truth in every setting. Another interpretation outlaws misrepresenting one's self in a variety of ways, including cheating on an exam and the like. The rabbis in the Talmud teach us that *“Hotamo shel haKadosh Barukh Hu emet* – the Holy One's seal is truth” (JT Sanhedrin, 18a) and we should emulate God.

The final commandment states: *“Lo tahmod* – you shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbor.” The Torah reminds us if we allow jealousy to rule our lives, we are doomed always to be unhappy and to feel undervalued and unsuccessful. There is a progression on the left side – one who covets other things or people will be inclined to violate other commandments on the left side, to lie, steal, commit adultery and even murder. God urges us to be happy with who we are and what we have and not to always want more and more.

While the second side seems fairly obviously to relate to the commandments between ourselves and others, the first tablet is a little bit more complicated – does it in fact focus with our relationship with God alone?

Number one reads: *“Anokhi Adonai* – I am Adonai your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” Where the Christian tradition sees this as an introduction and not a separate commandment, our tradition maintains that this initial self-identifying formula that distinguishes God and the unique relationship between God and ourselves stands apart as its own pronouncement. We are instructed to believe in the existence of God Who guides creation, revelation and redemption – the three-fold strand that ties us to God.

The next two commandments are critical mitzvot dealing with our relationships with the Almighty. The second commandment, *“Lo yehiyeh lekha Elohim aheirim al panai* – you shall not have other gods beside me.” Unlike other ancient peoples, the Israelites were monotheists who worshipped the one true God of the universe.

Today, this law and others dealing with idolatry feel archaic, but they are not. We all have idols, and, if you will, other gods. While they might not be actual sculptured images, which are what the Torah here was probably referring to explicitly, they are real. We all replace ultimate values and God values with other things, be they money, power, fame, beauty, physicality, sexuality and all other false values we see on the internet,

television and other media. But these are not the true values. God represents true values; we must reject all the others as being false and aspire to live our lives to the highest moral, ethical and ritual standards. Through that ultimate value and that alone, we will live a meaningful life.

Following in the footsteps of numbers one and two, the third commandment states: “*Lo tisa* – you shall not swear falsely by the name of Adonai your God.” If Adonai is the Sovereign of the universe, then God’s name should be respected. We should not recite *brakhot*, blessings with God’s name without cause, nor do we discard texts with God’s name in Hebrew, instead we treat them with respect, burying them.

The fourth commandment reads: “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat lekodsho* – remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” Although Shabbat is a celebration in family and community, ultimately, Shabbat is for God. As the Torah says: “but the seventh day is a Sabbath of Adonai your God.” It is a day that is designated for us to focus on our relationship with God, through rest, through study, through prayer, to build our own spirituality we explore our relationship with the Almighty. This is a day devoted to God and ourselves. And it is through its sacred activities and not working that we can come that much closer to the divine. Our relationships with others through Shabbat lead us to appreciate God.

Shabbat reminds us how precious time is. Shabbat is *m’ein olam haba* – a taste of God’s eternity. Since God is beyond time, and Shabbat creates a new experience of time, Shabbat is a taste of heaven.

Finally, the fifth commandment, which according to my theory should be about our relationship between God and ourselves, but is it? It states: “*Kabeid et avikha v’et eimekha* – honor your father and your mother. Is honoring your father and mother really a powerful relationship with God or are our parents other people? Shouldn’t this commandment be on the other side?

On a simple level honoring parents is a fulfillment of a commandment between ourselves and other people, but on a deeper level there is another reading. While parents are clearly other people, they are also connected to God. First of all, they are the ones who bring us into this world as partners with God. Our Rabbis teach us that there are three participants in the creation of a child: two human partners and God. God is also a partner with parents in rearing every child.

Further, parents are responsible for inculcating the idea of God in a child. It is through parents that children can come to know God, to understand the divine on any level. Children need parents to bring the notion of God to life for them. The relationship between children and parents parallels the relationship between humans and God on some level.

The fifth commandment serves as the bridge commandment, connecting the first side of the Ten Commandments to the second side, linking the mitzvot that connect us to God with those that guide our relations with others.

The Torah loves structure. If commandment number five serves as the bridge, containing elements on both sides of these two tablets, might number six parallel it? It does. While not murdering seems to be an obvious commandment informing our behavior toward others, it also related to our bond with God.

The Torah teaches us that every single human being is of ultimate worth and in fact every human soul is created “*b’tzelem Elohim* – in the divine image.” Therefore to take a human life unjustly destroys something that was made in God’s image, reducing God’s image. Murder is such a profound wrong is that it ruptures one’s association with God on some level. And therefore commandment number six joins number five in linking these two types of behavior – the more secular, moral societal left side, and the more spiritual, religious right side.

A similar parallelism is also found in commandment two and seven – do not have other gods reflects: do not commit adultery. Both imply exclusive relationships – whether with another person or with the Almighty. We are commanded not to betray our partners, nor God and what God represents: ultimate values and eternity.

But this analysis actually proves that the dichotomy is false. The Ten Commandments are made up of both societal and religious laws, one sides feeds the other. Although many claim that we only need the left side, the Torah posts that we cannot live without its anchor, its root, the right tablet, the Almighty that stands behind everything.

Our relationship with God and all the mitzvot in our tradition that deal with God compel us to improve our relations with others. In fact, one can understand that Judaism’s greatest teaching is that there is a world full of people beyond ourselves that need to be treated appropriately. But our moral communities, in return, bring us back to God.

Avrom Menes (1897-1969), a graduate of the Mir Yeshiva, became a prominent secular Yiddishist. He was then shaken by the rise of Nazism in the 1930’s and came to believe that morality is strengthened by a religious foundation. In 1939, he advocated abolishing the distinction between religion and humanism, between *bein adam laMakom* and *bein adam l’haveiro*.

He wrote: “The mitzvot have the goal of realizing the essential commandment of the Torah: ‘And you shall love your neighbor as yourself’ – which is one and the same as ‘And you shall love Adonai Your God.’ For there is no distinction at all between love for humanity and love for God. The rest, as Hillel said, is commentary.”

When we truly feel God, when we truly sense the divine presence that opens us up to other people and reminds us of what truly is important, we can move beyond ourselves and to look for the face of another.

The one message of these two tablets, of these two sides of the Ten Commandments is critical: let us strive to weave God and elements of eternity in the fabric of our relationships.

Shabbat Shalom.