

Engraved in Your Heart

Finding Personal Meaning in the 10 commandments

With Adina Landa

Question: If you were G-d, and you had the opportunity to briefly communicate your message to humankind, what would it be? What would you ask or require of humanity?

Write out your own short list or message that encapsulates the essence of what you want to say to humankind. Your list should express the purpose of Creation and our role in it, address the most important aspects of life, and be applicable in every era of human history.

What is Shavuot?

The Festival of Weeks:

Question: The Hebrew word "shavuot" means "weeks" and is also related to the word "oaths." What does the celebration of the Giving of the Torah have to do with either one of these meanings?

The Countdown to Mount Sinai

Text 1: Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:43:

Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah. In order to honor and elevate this day, we count the days from the previous festival until it [arrives], like someone who is waiting for a loved one to arrive counts the days by the hours. This is the reason for counting the omer from the day that we left Egypt until the day of the Giving of the Torah, as this was the ultimate purpose of leaving Egypt: "And I will bring them to Me" (Exodus 19:4)

The Seven Emotional Attributes

Chesed	Loving-kindness, benevolence
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Gevurah	Justice, discipline, restraint, awe
Tiferet	Beauty and harmony, compassion
Netzach	Endurance, fortitude, ambition
Hod	Humility, splendor
Yesod	Bonding, foundation
Malchut	Nobility, sovereignty, leadership

Customs of Shavuot:

1. All-night Torah study
2. Dairy Meal
3. Decorative Plants
4. The Book of Ruth
5. Hearing the "Big Ten"

Why these ten? Obligations or rights?

Text 2: Exodus 20:8-11:

I am the L-rd your G-d Who took you out from the land of Egypt
 You shall not recognize the gods of others
 You shall not take the Name of the L-rd your G-d in vain
 Remember the Shabbat day to make it holy
 Honor your father and your mother
 You shall not murder
 You shall not commit adultery
 You shall not steal
 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
 Your shall not covet

Question: What differences do you see between the list that we/you composed at the beginning of the lesson and the list that G-d proposed as the Ten commandments?

Question: Why do you think the Torah frames the central tenets of Judaism - and all of the commandments that stem from them - as a set of obligations rather than as a set of rights?

Question: Looking at the commandments as they are divided below, what would you say is the theme of each tablet?

The Organization of the Ten Commandments:

I am the L-rd your G-d Who took you out from the land of Egypt You shall not recognize the gods of others You shall not take the Name of the L-rd your G-d in vain Remember the Shabbat day to make it holy Honor your father and your mother	You shall not murder You shall not commit adultery You shall not steal You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor Your shall not covet
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Question: The Mitvot between us and others are also, ultimately, obligations we have to G-d. Why, then, should they remain on two separate tablets?

Commandments 1 and 6:

I am the L-rd your G-d Who took you out from the land of Egypt	You shall not murder
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Question: What link do you see between these commandments?

Text 3: Midrash, Mechilta de'Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, Bachodesh, ch. 8:

In what organizational scheme were the ten foundational principles of the Jewish people given? Five on one tablet, and five on the other tablet.

[On the first tablet] was written, "I am the L-rd your G-d," and corresponding to it, [on a second tablet, was written], "Do not murder." Scripture is telling us that the text ascribes culpability to anyone who commits murder for symbolically diminishing G-d's image [in the world].

Text 4: (same source as text 3)

What is this analogous to? To a king of flesh and blood who entered a country and erected portraits of himself, and made statues of himself, and minted coins with his image. Soon afterward, the people overturned his portraits, broke his statues, and invalidated his coins, thereby degrading the perception ("image") of the king. So, too, one who sheds blood impairs the image of the King, as it is written (Genesis 9:6): "One who spills a man's blood, [his blood shall be shed,] for in the image of G-d He made man."

Commandments 2 and 7:

You shall not recognize the gods of others	You shall not commit adultery
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Question: What link do you see between these two commandments?

Commandments 3 and 8:

You shall not take the Name of the L-rd your G-d in vain	You shall not steal
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Question: What link do you see between these two commandments?

Text 5: Leviticus 5:20-24:

And G-d spoke to Moses, saying: If a person sins, betraying G-d by falsely denying his fellow a deposit, or money given in hand, or an object taken by

robbery; or he withheld funds from his fellow; or he found a lost article and he denied it... then he shall return the article which he had robbed, or the funds which he had withheld, or the item which had been deposited with him, or the article which he had found ... and he shall pay it with its principal, adding its fifths to it. He shall give it to its rightful owner on the day [he repents for] his guilt.

Text 6: Rashi on the above verse:

Said Rabbi Akiva: Why does the Torah consider him to have committed “a betrayal against G-d”? ... Because in defrauding his fellow, he is also defrauding the Third Party to their dealings.

Commandments 4 and 9:

Remember the Shabbat day to make it holy	You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
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Question: What link do you see between these two commandments?

Text 7: Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it. Six days may you work and perform all your labor, but the seventh day is a Shabbat to the L-rd, your G-d. You shall perform no labor ... for in six days the L-rd made the heavens and the earth, the seas and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the L-rd blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it.

Text 8: Rabbi Yanki Tauber, “Life on the Witness Stand.”

A Jew proclaims - with his or her mouth when reciting the kiddush, and with every other organ, limb, and faculty that works during the first six days of the week and rests on Shabbat - that G-d did not make a world and just leave it there, a pile of matter floating through space. The work of creation - His and ours - is perpetual. It goes on and on, week after week after week. Every moment of time, G-d condenses spirit into matter. And every moment of time, we distill matter into spirit.

Commandments 5 and 10:

Honor your father and your mother	You shall not covet
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Question: What link do you see between these two commandments?

Text 9: Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 33:

When we [learn to honor our parents by] integrating into our natures the character trait of gratitude, we will also come to acknowledge and appreciate the goodness of G-d, Who is the cause of our existence, as well as the existence of our parents, all the way back to Adam. It is G-d Who caused us to enter this world; it is G-d Who provided our needs at every point of our lives; it is G-d Who established us emotionally and physically; it is G-d Who gave us an intellectual soul - without which we would be as lacking in intelligence as a horse or mule. We will then properly assess how careful and meticulous we should be in His service.

Summary Chart:

<u>Commandments between G-d and Man</u>	<u>Interpersonal Commandments</u>	<u>Underlying Principle</u>	<u>Practical Applications</u>
I am the L-rd your G-d	Do not kill	Acknowledge the truth of reality	Acknowledge G-d's existence. Respect human life. See others in the divine image. Never cause pain to another.
You shall have no other gods before Me.	Do not commit adultery	Do not pursue that which is not real.	Do not ascribe power or authority to anything other than G-d. Do not

			succumb to anger. Do not worship money, power, or prestige.
Do not take G-d's name in vain	Do not steal	Do not use reality falsely	Do not misuse people or their possessions. Respect others' ownership of their possessions. Respect G-d's ownership of the world (for example, recite a blessing over food before eating it; put a mezuzah on your doorpost to invite G-d into your home.)
Remember the Shabbat	Do not bear false witness	Testify to reality	Be a truthful person. Announce G-d's presence in the world. Be a role model. See the good in others and judge them favorably.
Honor your father and your mother	Do not covet	Trace everything back to its true Source	Make a habit out of being grateful. Respect your parents for having given you life. Express thanks and acknowledgement to G-d for everything He has given you.

Choose one commandment (or pair of commandments) from the chart above to work on in the next week.

Key Points:

1. Shavuot commemorates the day that G-d revealed Himself before more than three million Jews at Mount Sinai and gave the Torah to the Jewish people. This day is likened to the “marriage” between G-d and the Jewish people.
2. The word Shavuot literally means “weeks.” The holiday of Shavuot marks the completion of the seven-week counting period between Passover and Shavuot known as sefirot ha’omer, during which we spiritually prepare to “reaccept” the Torah on Shavuot.
3. Rather than being universalistic and abstract, the Ten Commandments are detailed and specific. Judaism teaches us that individual deeds and incremental steps are needed to bring about the bigger picture.
4. The Ten Commandments are framed as obligations, rather than as values or rights. This teaches us that G-d wants us to focus on our responsibilities as human beings and not on what is owed to us.
5. The Ten Commandments are split on two tablets - one with the commandments between us and G-d, and the other with the commandments between us and our fellow human beings. This separation teaches us that we must develop true love and compassion for others, rather than seeing them as a means to a relationship with G-d.
6. The Ten Commandments may be read not only vertically, but horizontally as well. Each pair of commandments reflects a fundamental aspect of Judaism. These basic ideas form the core of G-d's vision for the world and our role in it.
7. The fact that the engraving of the Ten Commandments bore through the tablets teaches us that Judaism is ingrained in our identity; it is not something that can be replaced or discarded, but our most essential definition of self.