

# What Could be More Important Than the Ten Commandments?

For Yom Kippur Morning  
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In one of the most famous stories about the great Rabbi Hillel, a potential Jew by choice asks him to define the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, that is, briefly. Rabbi Hillel answered, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. The rest is commentary – now go and study.”

Now suppose someone came up to you and said, “Please tell me the essential principles of Judaism.” What would be your answer? No doubt some of us would begin by citing the Ten Commandments.

It is interesting to know that the recitation of the Ten Commandments was included in the daily prayer service in ancient times. However, our Rabbis discontinued the practice. They found that the people were becoming so focused on the Ten Commandments, they were forgetting about the other six hundred and three.

Of course, the Rabbis revered the Ten Commandments. But they also understood that the Ten Commandments did not capture everything God wants, everything Judaism believes in or stands for. The Rabbis knew that other commandments were needed to nurture self-control and self-discipline. They knew other Mitzvot were necessary to make a better and more just world. Isn't it noteworthy that we do not read the Ten Commandments on either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?

So what sacred text could be more significant than the Ten Commandments? What other text contains most of the Torah's essential principles?

I'm so glad you asked.

There is an alternative text that has always held an exalted place in Jewish tradition. The founding fathers of Reform Judaism certainly were aware of this when they replaced the traditional Torah reading for Yom Kippur afternoon with Leviticus, chapter 19, also known as the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code is more crucial to understanding Judaism than the Ten Commandments. That being the case, shouldn't we take a closer look at Leviticus 19 and find out why?

So please turn to page 453 in your machzor. Let's learn Torah together. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons why our Rabbis placed the Holiness Code on a par with the Ten

Commandments is because the Ten Commandments are included within it. For example, we read in the second paragraph, “Revere your mother and your father, each one of you, and keep my Sabbaths: I, the Lord, am your God. Do not turn to idols, nor make for yourselves molten gods: I, Adonai, am your God.” Of course, these sound very familiar. They are three of the Ten Commandments. I could show you where the other seven can be found in the Holiness Code. But since we don’t have the time, I hope you will trust me when I say they are there.

But the Holiness Code does more than reiterate the Ten Commandments. It goes beyond them. In the very first paragraph on page 453 we read, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

God wants everyone to pursue a life of *kedushah*, of holiness. But what does “holiness” mean? How shall we define it? The rest of the commandments in the Holiness Code provide us with the answer.

As you can see from a quick read of pages 453 and 455, the Holiness Code is preoccupied with interpersonal ethics. Feed the poor and the hungry. Pay your employees on time. Do not stand idly by when your neighbor’s blood is being shed. Do not seek vengeance or bear a grudge. Show reverence to the elderly. Be honest in all your business practices. Do not oppress the stranger in your midst. Love your neighbor as yourself. God wants every human being to be the most morally sensitive and concerned person you can possibly be.

So what, then, is *kedushah*? *Kedushah* is the pursuit of all that God holds dear. Holiness is the pursuit of moral excellence, moral perfection in daily, everyday life. This explains why we stand on our toes at every morning prayer service when we sing *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* – Holy, holy, holy. We lift ourselves up physically, spiritually, and morally. The ritual teaches us that *kedushah*, holiness, is the act of lifting ourselves up to a higher moral plane.

Why is the Holiness Code so important for us to know?

The Holiness Code teaches us that God cares about everyone. And God wants us to create a model society that takes care of everyone -- especially the most powerless and the most vulnerable among us, including the poor, the stranger, the children, and the elderly. The Holiness Code teaches us that it matters to God how you treat your fellow human being. God isn’t interested in just ritual matters. God cares how you conduct yourself in business. God cares how you treat your employees and your customers. It matters to God if you keep grudges. It matters to God if you take advantage of or exploit another human being.

The Holiness Code teaches us that being moral and being religious are one and the same. Rabbi Harold Kushner describes going into a religious school classroom and asking the children to draw a picture of doing something religious. Rabbi Kushner observes, “I would get a lot of pictures of men carrying Torah scrolls or women saying prayers over

their Shabbat candles. I would always be disappointed at their narrow understanding of what it means to be religious. It never occurred to Judaism to confine God to the synagogue, to limit the impact of religion to rituals.”

In other words, you can be moral without being religious. But you cannot be religious without being moral. The Holiness Code stresses the primacy and the centrality of ethics within religion. The Holiness Code teaches us that holiness cannot be pursued within your church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. No, it cannot. It can only be achieved in the real world. The Holiness Code teaches us that how you conduct yourself outside your house of worship is more important than how you conduct yourself inside it.

The principles and values of the Holiness Code are particularly important for us to hear right now. According to the National Conference on Citizenship, seventy two percent of Americans are devoting less time to volunteerism and other civic activities. Charitable giving is way down. Non-profit causes, food pantries, and soup kitchens are hurting.

The Holiness Code teaches us that now is not the time to turn inwards. Economic recession does not put on hold the work of *tikkun olam* -- making a better world for all, of justice, compassion, and peace. Now is the time to turn outwards. And so, I implore you to keep up your civic volunteerism. I implore you to continue your philanthropic and charitable giving. Our Rabbis said it so beautifully: *Lo alechah hamelakhah ligmor. Velo atah ben chorin lehivatel memenah.* “It is not your obligation to complete God’s work. But you are not allowed to neglect it either.”

Now let me come closer to home. Now is also the time to be mindful of the recession’s impact on the financial health of our cherished congregation. You need to know where we are. This past spring, our lay leadership significantly reduced spending in order to balance the Temple’s budget. It was a very painful process and it was absolutely necessary. All Temple staff agreed to cuts in their compensation. The Temple is now closed on Thursdays to reduce operating costs. But the mortgage on this gorgeous facility of ours still needs to be paid. In a few moments, our president, Heidi Katz, will give you more details about where we are. But this, as your Rabbi, I must say: now is the time for every synagogue member to come together as one in financial support of your Temple Sinai.

This week, each of you will receive a letter asking for your participation in the New Year Appeal, our congregation’s biggest and most important annual fundraising activity. Our goal is \$140,000 and we are going to need every single penny of it. This means we need your participation in the New Year Appeal more than ever. Please be as generous as you can. And if you possess the resources to be extra generous, please help. This is a time of serious financial need for our congregation.

In light of all I’ve just said, I implore you to come out for Monte Carlo Night, Temple’s fall fundraiser, on Saturday evening, October 17. In order to reach our fundraising goal of \$5,000, we need a minimum of 160 people to attend. Please RSVP tomorrow and join us for an evening of fundraising, socializing, and community-building.

Permit me to conclude with this final thought. The Ten Commandments teach us the most grand and profound principles of civilized society. Yes, they do. But the Holiness Cods teaches us that holiness is to be found only in the details. There is holiness when we turn ourselves outwards to see the world and its infinite needs. There is holiness when we offer to volunteer, even though we are busy. There is holiness when we give charity, even though things are tight. There is holiness when we share our wealth through philanthropy. There is holiness when you support your Temple when it really needs you.