

REVISITING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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We can learn a lot about the Ten Commandments just by the visual image that pops off the page. What's the difference between the first five Commandments on the left and the second five Commandments on the right? The second five Commandments contain far fewer words. Far fewer words means there is less need to explain them, less need to justify them.

Let's learn Torah together. In honor of the upcoming festival of Shavuot, I'd like to revisit the Ten Commandments. We can learn a lot about the Ten Commandments just by the visual image that pops off the page. What's the difference between the first five Commandments on the left and the second five Commandments on the right?

Yes, the second five Commandments contain far fewer words. Far fewer words means there is less need to explain them, less need to justify them. Let's take a closer look at Commandments six through ten. What would you say is the common denominator among them? To what broad category do all five belong?

Yes, Commandments six through ten deal with interpersonal human relationships, the way one human being treats another. Why did these commandments require less justification? They are the fundamental rules of a civilized society. Everyone gets why you shouldn't murder or steal and so forth.

Now let's look at the first five Commandments. What would you say is the common denominator here? To what broad category do these five belong? Yes, they deal with the relationship between God and humanity. And all these words of justification tell us that people did not get them at first. They were new ideas, they required explanation.

For example, the second Commandment is the prohibition of idolatry and the exclusive worship of one God. Why did this require so much justification? In antiquity, most people worshipped many gods. The concept of worshipping only one god and the prohibition of physical images of God were revolutionary and radical new ideas of Israelite religion!

Now let's look at the fourth Commandment, the observance of Shabbat. As we have learned, the extensive justification tells us that this too must have been another radical new idea of Israelite religion. What was so revolutionary about it? Yes, the concept that everyone gets to rest was unheard of in the ancient world. You mean even my slave gets

to rest? Israelite religion says yes! There is no doubt in my mind that the concept of Shabbat is Judaism's greatest contribution to the world!

Let's take a closer look at the fifth Commandment: honor your father and mother. First of all, on closer inspection, some argue that this commandment doesn't belong in the category of Commandments between God and humanity but rather with the Commandments about interpersonal human relationships. How might we understand it so that it belongs among the first four Commandments? Like God, your parents created you. There are two things that are very surprising about this Commandment. Who can tell me one? In the ancient world, the commandment to honor a parent required justification. It was not obvious to someone living in the ancient world. Notice also the commandment does not say "love" your mother and father but only "honor." Why doesn't it say love? Love is not something that can be commanded. Love can only be earned!

Are the Ten Commandments still relevant and meaningful today? Which of the Ten Commandments do you think is the most important commandment for the 21st century? If you had the authority to add an 11th Commandment for the 21st century, what would it be?

I hope everyone leaves here tonight with a better understanding and appreciation of the Ten Commandments, and I hope you will be here on *erev* Shavuot, Tuesday evening, May 18, 7:00pm, to receive for yourself the Torah from Mount Sinai at Temple Sinai.