

Rules for the Road

Exodus 20:1-17

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It's been a tough time for the Israelites.

They have fled Egypt, and now they are in the wilderness.

As Rabbi Dan Levin says:

They had nearly revolted against their leader when water became scarce,
losing faith in him and in the God who brought them out from Egypt.

They cannot make decisions for themselves,
cope with their freedom,

or look to each other for advice and support.

Each and every one saw himself/herself as alone against the world;

Moses too sees himself alone—separated from his wife and children.

Things are grim.

At this point, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, helps Moses understand that he cannot lead alone.

He convinces Moses that other people can hear God, too.

And as soon as Moses enlarges the circle of leadership,
relationships change among the people.

They stop seeing themselves as separate from each other.

They begin to work together, and support each other.

When this happens,

They begin to work together as a community --

men, women, and children --

and it is only at this point that God appears.

In that moment of meeting, the community is given the Torah,

the Word of God,

and this includes all 613 mitzvot, including the 10 we hear today.

We call these "commandments,"

but a truer translation of the word mitzvot is:

"ways to be like God"

or

"ways to be holy."

These are the ways human beings grow

into their fullness

as persons made in the image and likeness of God.

And all of the 613 mitzvot

including the "10 commandments"

are null and void if someone's life is at stake.

Yes, you are required to break the law to save someone's life,

just as Jesus pointed out during his ministry!

Now each of these mitzvot, or commandments, or ways to be like God/holy
“rests on the same foundation –
that holiness is to be found in loving our neighbor as ourselves.” (Levin)
Through each of these
God provides us with ways “to reach out with our hearts and souls with love,
and seek to repair all the brokenness that keeps us apart.” (Levin)
We grow in holiness, and in relationship with God
by building relationships with each other
and with strangers, animals, and all of creation.
So the Torah has 613 guidelines:
for relationships within our communities
for providing hospitality to strangers
(that’s so important it’s stated 36 times!)
for serving the poor
for mercifully killing the animals we eat (kashrut/kosher)
for treating the earth God created with respect.
This is the purpose of the 10 mitzvot/commandments
that are at the heart of all 613 mitzvot/commandments.

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf compares the mitzvot, or commandments, to jewels.
He says:

I try to walk the road of [faith].
Embedded in that road there are many jewels.
One is marked “Sabbath” . . .
and one “Honor Your Parents”
and one “You Shall Be Holy.”
There are at least 613 of them
and they are different shapes and sizes and weights.
Some are light and easy for me to pick up, and I pick them up.
Some are too deeply embedded for me, so far at least,
though I get a little stronger
by trying to extricate the jewels as I walk the road.
Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up.
I believe that God expects me to keep on walking [this road of faith]
and to carry away whatever I can of its commandments.
I do not believe that God expects me to lift what I cannot,
nor may I condemn my fellow [human being]
who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can.

Isn’t that a beautiful way of seeing these commandments?

So often Christians refer to the Jewish Scriptures as a bunch of “old laws.”

This misses the point.

The Torah is the Way --
the same “Way” we hear about in the Gospels

The Torah is the Word of God --
the same Word we hear about in the Gospels.

Jesus lived into and fulfilled this Word,
this way of being in relationship
with God, with people, and with all of creation.

Now it is not surprising
that the Israelites would need laws
to form the parameters of their community.
After all, they had been slaves in Egypt
and here they were
smack dab in the middle of the wilderness
without even the rules of slavery to guide them.
They needed a way to be organized as a community.

When you think about it, this is not strange at all.

For example, when the Pilgrims came to America
Pastor John Robinson sent a long letter with them
in which he outlined a plan
for setting up a new government.
This became the basis for the Mayflower Compact
which was signed on board the *Mayflower* at Cape Cod
on November 11, 1620.
This compact, or constitution,
served as a guide for the Plymouth Colony for over 70 years,
until Plymouth was merged
into the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692
by order of King William III.

By 1623, Plymouth Colony had laws and a court.

The court records show how the Pilgrims took the Scriptures,
Including the 10 mitzvot/commandment,
and English law
And used these to create laws
that would support their moral and religious values.
They determined the fines and punishments for misdemeanor crimes
And they decided on a list of 5 capital crimes
for which a person could be executed.

Some examples of the Plymouth code of laws include:

Cursing God -- Three hours in the public stocks
Lying in public -- Fine of 10 shillings; if can't pay, then 2 hours in the stocks
Stealing -- Repay double the value of what was stolen, or be publicly whipped
Tearing down or burning someone's fence -- Rebuild the fence, plus a 50 shilling
fine for first offense, 5 pound fine for second offense
Smoking -- a 12 pence fine for first offense of smoking in any street, barn,
outhouse or highway; 2 shillings for a second offense
Harboring a Quaker -- 20 shillings per week, after being warned

Whether it was the Israelites, the Pilgrims, or all of us gathered here today,
we need a moral compass for our everyday life together.
And for thousands of years,
the words we heard today
have served as that compass for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities.

The first four deal directly with the relationship between God and humans:
I am the Lord Your God
You shall have no other gods before me
You shall not use God's name in vain
Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy

It makes sense that the rest have to do with relationships between human beings,
because all humans are made in God's image:
Honor your father and mother
You shall not murder
You shall not commit adultery
You shall not steal
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
You shall not covet

Each of these is an act of loving God
because loving God is always connected
with the way we love other human beings.

When our local synagogue redesigned its sanctuary
they made wonderful, simple banners of the 10 Mitzvot/Commandments.
To close today,
I would like to share the way that community summarized each of the 10:

I am the Lord Your God – Still Small Voice
You shall have no other gods before me – One God
You shall not use God's name in vain – Speak With Love
Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy – We Belong to God
Honor your father and mother – Honor Life-Givers
You shall not murder – Cherish Life
You shall not commit adultery – Treasure Covenants
You shall not steal – Claim Only Your Own

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor – Profess Only Truth

You shall not covet – Honor boundaries

These are the ways each of us is called to grow
into our fullness

as persons who are made in the image and likeness of God.

These are our rules for the road!

Amen.

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Text:

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do

any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The Mayflower Compact

In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord, King James, by the Grace of God, of England, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, e&. Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid; And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the General good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In Witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord, King James of England, France and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini, 1620.