

מאמרי תורה – Torah Talk



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Parashat Yitro
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פרשת יתרו
י"ח בשבט תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 18:1-20:23

In this *parasha*, Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, suggests a system for establishing lower courts to settle disputes; and Hashem articulates the *Aseret HaDibrot* (Ten Commandments) to the *Bnei Yisrael* amidst fire, smoke, and sounds of the *shofar*.

We often translate *Aseret HaDibrot* as "The Ten Commandments," as I did above, but they are not really Ten Commandments – *Dibrot* actually means "sayings," so they are "The Ten Sayings." This is an important distinction because some Western religious cultures, including some denominations of Christianity, do believe that they are Ten Commandments. We can see many fascinating distinctions between the world views of some Jewish and Christian scholars in the way they divide the *Dibrot*. These are not just bookkeeping differences, but philosophical ones.

Here are the *Aseret HaDibrot* as they appear in chapter 20, numbered according to the Jewish tradition:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים, אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאֹמֶר.	And God spoke all these words, saying:
1 אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים :	1 I am Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
2 לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, עַל-פָּנָי. לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל, וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה, אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל, וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת--וְאֲשֶׁר בְּמַיִם, מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ. לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם, וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם: כִּי אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֶל-לֹקְנָא--פֶּקֶד עֹן אֲבֹת עַל-בְּנֵי עַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים, לְשָׁנָאִי. וְעַשֶׂה חֶסֶד, לְאֲלֹפִים--לְאֹהֲבֵי, וּלְשִׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי.	2 You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them, nor serve them; for I, Hashem your God, am a jealous God, visiting the sin of the parents upon the children until the third and fourth generation of

	them that hate Me; and showing mercy to the thousandth generation of them that love Me and keep My commandments.
3 לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם-ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ, לְשׁוּא : כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה ה', אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׂא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוּא.	3 You shall not take the name of Hashem your God in vain; for Hashem will not hold one that takes His name in vain guiltless.
4 זָכוֹר אֶת-יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, לְקַדְּשׁוֹ. שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד, וַעֲשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתֶּךָ וַיּוֹם, הַשְּׁבִיעִי--שַׁבָּת, לַה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ : לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתֶּךָ, עַבְדֶּךָ וְאַמְתֶּךָ וּבְהֵמְתֶךָ, וְגֵרְךָ, אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ. כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה ה' אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ, אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם, וַיִּנַּח, בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי ; עַל-כֵּן, בֵּרַךְ ה' אֶת-יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת--וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ.	4 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days will you labor, and do your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to Hashem your God, in it you shall not do any manner of work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates; for in six days Hashem made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; therefore Hashem blessed the sabbath day, and made it holy.
5 כְּבֹד אֶת-אָבִיךָ, וְאֶת-אִמֶּךָ--לְמַעַן, יֵאָרְכוּן יָמֶיךָ, עַל הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר-ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ.	5 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which Hashem your God gives you.
6 לֹא תִרְצַח	6 You shall not murder.
7 לֹא תִנְאַף	7 You shall not commit adultery.
8 לֹא תִגְנוֹב	8 You shall not steal.
9 לֹא-תִעֲנֶה בְרַעַף עַד שֹׁקֵר.	9 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10 לֹא תַחְמֹד, בֵּית רֵעֶךָ ; לֹא-תַחְמֹד אִשְׁתֵּי רֵעֶךָ, וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאַמְתּוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ, וְכֹל, אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ.	10 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor any thing that is your neighbor's.

In comparison, here are the Ten Commandments numbered according to St. Augustine (Augustine of Hippo was a Christian theologian and philosopher from the Roman province of Africa who lived in the 4th to 5th Century CE, and whose writings influenced the development of Western Christianity and philosophy):

1. I am the Lord your God and you shall not have any strange gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.
4. Honor your Father and Mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Where the Jewish tradition separates the first two statements – “I am the Lord your God” and “You shall have no other gods before me,” St. Augustine combines them. This indicates that in Augustine's view, the concept of “I am the Lord your God” is only relevant in the context of the idea that we should serve no other gods.

In contrast, Rambam [11th Century Egypt/Spain] states explicitly at the beginning of *Sefer HaMitzvot*, the Book of the Commandments, that “I am Hashem your God” (that is, an absolute belief in the Divinity and Unity of God) is the first and most important of the commandments, and is an idea that stands on its own as a critical statement in Jewish faith. In his view, belief in God is the most important commandment, and is the main reason one would then go on to observe the rest of the commandments – that is, because they were given by God, in whom you just professed absolute belief. This difference between St. Augustine's and Rambam's interpretations changes the whole tenor of the *Aseret HaDibrot*.

In addition, a number of ancient Jewish sources remark on the transition between different categories of commandments. First come the commandments relating only to God (numbers two through four if we approach the first of the *Dibrot* as a statement), then the fifth commandment of honoring one's parents (which is seen as the bridge between the first tablet and the second tablet), followed by the last five commandments, all of which are between person and person. In Jewish thought the two sides of the tablets contain two diverse sets of laws, and there is a clear distinction between ritual law and interpersonal law.

In contrast, the differentiation mentioned above doesn't work if we number the *Dibrot* according to St. Augustine's system. His understanding of the *Dibrot* does not make distinctions between categories of commandments; the tablets are viewed as containing ten distinct laws, not two sets of thematically similar laws.

One final difference is that St. Augustine's numbering of the *Dibrot* lists two separate commandments about coveting (that is, yearning for something so deeply that we commit acts to obtain the desired object): coveting someone's wife, and coveting someone's material possessions. In contrast, the Jewish numbering system

combines them into a single commandment. Judaism views the strong, negative emotion of coveting as being one thing, whether the object of desire is animate or inanimate.

Examining the *Aseret HaDibrot* is an excellent way to explore some of the many fascinating differences between the world views of Jewish and Christian scholars.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Which of the *Aseret HaDibrot* do you think is most important? Why?
- Which might be the most difficult to fulfill? Why?
- Can you think of other differences between the Jewish and Christian traditions?