

Lesson 14 – Structure of the Ten Commandments

Background: The Ten Commandments are the central tenants from which all of Judaism flows. As we will see, the rest of Moshe's second speech is an elaboration of the ten commandments.

Objective: For students to have a good working understanding of the structure of the Ten Commandments including their break down and order. Since this is the only part of Tanakh with two sets of Ta'amim (Trop), this is a good opportunity to discuss the origin and function of Ta'amim in general and their doubled appearance here as they relate to the structure of the Ten Commandments.

Activity:

1. Explain that there are two sets of Ta'amim for the Ten Commandments: טעם עליון and טעם תחתון. (For an overview of the Ta'amim see Encyclopedia Judaica s.v. "Masoretic Accents" and "Masora.") Chumashim usually print טעם תחתון and place another copy of these pesukim with טעם עליון in the back of the Chumash. Help students locate both sets of Ta'amim in their Tanakhs/Chumashim or photocopy it for them. Explain the different customs about which one we read in synagogue. Sepharadim always read with טעם עליון; Ashkenazim use טעם תחתון when reading parashat hashvuah but טעם עליון on Shavuot.
2. Break class into small groups and ask them to analyze and compare the two sets of Ta'amim. They should try to answer these questions:

Which set of Ta'amim makes more sense?
What is the purpose of the Ta'amim?
How do you break down the pesukim into ten commandments?

טעם תחתון follows the usual system of Ta'amim which try to break the words up into logical sentences of standard length. טעם עליון breaks up the words so that each commandment, whether long or short, takes up exactly one pasuk (except the first two which are combined into one *pasuk* following the famous midrash that those two were spoken directly by Hashem).

3. Stay in small groups and list the ten commandments using one or two words for each. Students should try to figure if they are in any particular order and what logic governs their arrangement.

As is well known, the first four are between man and God, the last five are between man and man, and the fifth acts as kind of transition between the two. Like God, parents are responsible for your creation and are figures of higher authority. At the same time they are also human. Within these two halves, logic moves from most severe to least severe. Belief that God exists is the most fundamental concept. The prohibition of idolatry is just a corollary to that belief. False swearing and the Sabbath are ritual acts that are directly implied by belief in one God whose name is holy and who created the world. Within the second half, murder is the ultimate sin. Adultery is less severe but still an irrevocable act. Stealing is unjust but can be returned. Acting as a false witness can pervert justice for those in a court case but is more indirect than stealing yourself. Finally, jealousy is not so much an act but a mindset which can lead to evil deeds but which, by itself, does not cause measurable harm.