

Lesson 15 – The Ten Commandments

Objective: For students to think about the meaning and relevance of each commandment so that they can apply them to their own lives. This is an important exercise in itself and also serves as a good introduction to the rest of Sefer Debarim which will continue to elaborate on each commandment.

Activity:

Go through each commandment and discuss the following:

What is the definition of this commandment? How does one fulfill it? What are some situations in our daily lives in which this commandment applies? What can we do to improve observance of it?

Have someone read the first commandment. Write these question on the board and have students write up answer for them. After they have thought about open the floor for discussion. Repeat this process for each commandment.

Discussion Points:

1. After trying to do the assignment for the first commandment, students will quickly realize the difficulty here. The first commandment does not actually command anything. The first commandments requires not action but belief. Philosophers have asked, how can one be commanded to believe something? You can do something, whether you understand it or not, but how can you force yourself to believe something? In fact, Hasdai Crescas and Abarbanel say that pasuk 6 is only an introduction to the ten commandments and is not itself a Mitzvah (See quotations in Nehama Leibowitz, Yitro 2). Rambam, however, disagrees and does count this as a Mitzvah. Rambam says that one can come to knowledge of God by looking at nature and through philosophic speculation. See how Rambam defines this Mitzvah. Rambam prescribes a step by step guide of how to come to love and fear God.

How would Crescas and Abarbanel count the ten commandments if they don't include the first?

(The second commandment can be split into two: 6a about believing in other gods, and 7-9 about creating and worshipping idols.)

The First “Commandment”

אַנְכִי יְדֹד אֶ-לֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים

1. Hasdai Crescas (Spain, 1340-1410)

He who includes among the list of positive precepts belief in the existence of God falls into a common error. The very character of the term Mitzvah indicated, by definition, that it can only apply to matters governed by freewill and choice. But faith in the existence of God is one of those things which are not governed by free will and choice. Consequently the term Mitzvah can not apply to it.

2. Abarbanel (Spain, 1437-1508)

The phrase “I am the Lord your God...” does not constitute a commandment neither dogmatic nor practical, but is merely a preface to the subsequent commandments and injunctions, a declaration making known to Bnei Yisrael Who was addressing them.

3. Rambam, Mishneh Torah Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 1:1,6; 2:10

The most fundamental of fundamentals and the pillar of all sciences is to know that there is a first being bringing into existence all existing things, and that all that exists on heaven and earth and between them exists only through the truth of His existence...

The knowledge of this concept constitutes a positive precept, as it is said: “I am the Lord your God” (Deut 5:6)...

And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name; even as David said, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps 42:3). And when he ponders these matters, he will recoil frightened, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. And so David said, “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, what is man that You are mindful of him?” (Ps 8:4-5)...Observe the Universe and then you will realize Him who spoke and the world was.

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2. The second commandment forbids creating and worshipping idols. Idol worship is now almost extinct and it is hard for us to imagine what it was like. Why do you think someone would worship idols and create mythologies about many different gods? (They did this partly to explain the world around them, but modern science has filled this void for us.) They did this also because they needed an escape for the problems of everyday life. They sought control over the forces of nature through magic, which didn't work but perhaps at least made them feel like they had some control over their lives. (Some people still read their horoscopes and go to fortunetellers.) What do people turn to nowadays to get away from their problems? What has replaced idols in our times? Perhaps drugs, alcohol, gambling...

You can also think of idolatry as anything that distracts you from God and Mitzvot, like materialism (See Isaac Arama). The Talmud compares many different sins to idolatry such as not giving charity, honoring the wicked, leaving Israel, destroying property, obeying one's desires, not celebrating holidays, haughtiness, lying, and anger. What do all of these have in common? (A lack of proper focus on what's important, a lack of awareness of the Torah's values, placing our own desires above worshipping Hashem.)

The Second Commandment

לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני: לא תעשה לך פסל כל תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ: לא תשתחוו להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי ד' וד' אלהיך אל קנא פקד עון אבות על בנים ועל שלשים ועל רבעים לשנאי: ועשה חסד לאֵלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי:

1. תוספתא מסכת פאה פרק ד הלכה כ
אמי ר' יהושע בן קרחא מניין שכל המעלים עיניו מן הצדקה **כאילו עובד ע"ז** שני רק השמר לך פן יהיה דבר עם לבבך בליעל לאמר ולהלן הוא או יצאו אנשים בני בליעל מה בליעל האמור להלן ע"ז אף בליעל האמור כאן ע"ז

2. תוספתא מסכת עבודה זרה פרק ו הלכה טז
דבר אחר כצורו אבן במרגמה כשם שזורק אבן למרקוליס הרי זה עובד עבודה זרה כך כל המכבד את הרשע הרי הוא **כאילו עובד עבודה זרה**:

3. תוספתא מסכת עבודה זרה פרק ד הלכה ה
כל המניח את הארץ בשעת שלום ויוצא לחוצה לארץ **כאילו עובד עבודה זרה**

4. אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא ב פרק ד ד"ה והעמידו תלמידים
המשבר את כליו והקורע את בגדיו **כאילו עובד ע"ז** שהיום אומר לו יצרו שבר את כלך וקרע כסותך ולמחר הוא אומר לו לך ועבוד ע"ז והוא שומע לו:

5. תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת נדרים פרק ט דף מא טור ב /ה"א
אמר רבי ינאי כל השומע ליצרו **כאילו עובד עבודה זרה** מאי טעמא לא יהיה בך אל זר ולא תשתחוה לאל נכר זר שבקרבך אל תמליכהו עליך

6. תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף קיח עמוד א
ואמר רב ששת משום רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: כל המבזה את המועדות - **כאילו עובד עבודה זרה**, שנאמר (שמות לד) אלהי מסכה לא תעשה לך וכתוב בתריה את חג המצות תשמר.

7. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף ד עמוד ב
א"ר יוחנן משום ר"ש בן יוחי: כל אדם שיש בו גסות הרוח - **כאילו עובד עבודת כוכבים**, כתיב הכא (משלי טז) תועבת ה' כל גבה לב, וכתוב התם: (דברים ז) ולא תביא תועבה אל ביתך.

8. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צב עמוד א
ויאמר רבי אלעזר: כל המחליף בדיבורו - **כאילו עובד עבודה זרה**, כתיב הכא (בראשית כ"ז) והיית בעיניו כמתעתע, וכתוב התם (ירמיהו י') הבל המה מעשה תעתעים.

9. אוצר המדרשים (אייזנשטיין) עמוד רע ד"ה פרק חמשה עשר
כל הכועס **כאילו עובד ע"ז**, שכך היא אומנתו של יצר הרע היום אומר לך עשה כך ולמחר יאמר לך עבוד ע"ז.

10. Isaac Arama (Spain, 1420-1494)

Under the category of idolatry we must include a form which is particularly virulent today – the devoting of all energies and thoughts to the accumulation of wealth and achievement of worldly success. These are the mighty gods on which they rely, to which they pay allegiance and for which they repudiate the Lord on high and forsake His Torah, leaving it deserted and forlorn in a remote corner. This is the very essence of idolatry.

[L15 Perek 5 - Second Commandment – Source Sheet.doc](#)

3. The third commandment, in peshat, applies to swearing with God's name. The Rabbis have extended it to saying God's name anytime outside the context of learning or prayer. (See Hakham Ovadia Yosef in יחזקאל דעת ג:יג who recommends saying Hashem's name when quoting pesukim.) What is the reason for this law? If something is very special then you only use it on special occasions (like sterling silverware, lehavdil). By not pronouncing God's name we recognize that He is holy and that we can not fully understand His nature.

4. *Why keep Shabbat?* This is the only one of the ten commandments for which the Torah spells out the reason (or goal). Look up the reason in Debarim and compare it with the reason given in Shemot. Which one do you relate to more, the cosmic (to commemorate creation) or the social justice (so that all people and animals can rest from work)? What does this teach us about the dignity of all living beings? How should we treat employees, housekeepers, or younger siblings?

5. A. *Why should we honor our parents?* See Sefer haHinuch. B. *What is included in honor? How does one fulfill it? The Gemara gives a list, but is it supposed to be exhaustive?* C. *Is there ever a time when one does not have to listen to what they say? What if honoring our parents will make us lose money or be ashamed?* See stories in Bavli Kiddushin 31a-b. *What if we sincerely and thoughtfully disagree with our parents' opinions or decisions? Does it matter how old we are or what kind of issue it is? How can we maintain honor even when we do disagree or argue with our parents?* (Just because you disagree doesn't mean honor goes out the window. You must show respect even while arguing. Your parents want what's best for you. If you disagree about a life-decision, be patient and explain to them the reason for your choice. They may eventually see your point of view, and by talking to them you just might also learn something from their wisdom.)

The Fifth Commandment

כְּבֹד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ יְיָ אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ
לִמְעַן יֵאָרִיכוּ יָמֶיךָ וְיִלְמְעוּ יְיָטֵב לְךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר יְיָ צִוְּךָ לֵ-לַחֵיךָ נָתַן לְךָ :

A. The Reason:

Sefer haHinuch, Mitzvah 33

משרשי מצוה זו, שראוי לו לאדם שיכיר ויגמול חסד למו שעשה עמו טובה, ולא יהיה נבל ומתנכר וכפוי טובה, שזו מידה רעה ומאוסה בתכלית לפני אלהים ואנשים. ושיתן אל לבו כי האב והאם הם סיבת הייתו בעולם, ועל כן באמת ראוי לו לעשות להם כל כבוד וכל תועלת שיוכל, כי הם הביאוהו לעולם, גם יגעו בו כמה יגיעות בקטנותו.

The source of this commandment is that it is proper for one to recognize and show kindness to whoever has done him a favor and one should not be an ingrate for that is a bad and very disgusting trait before God and men. One should take to heart that his father and mother are the cause of his being in the world and because of that it is truly fitting for him to give any honor and help that he can for they brought him into the world and toiled for him many times during his childhood.

B. The Definition – Bavli Kiddushin 31b

Our Rabbis taught: What is 'fear' and what is 'honor'? 'Fear' means that he [the son] must neither stand in his [the father's] place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him. 'Honor' means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, lead him in and out.

C. The Limits – Bavli Kiddushin 31a-b

1. Money - It was propounded of R. 'Ulla: How far does the honor of parents [extend]? — He replied: Go forth and see what a certain heathen, Dama son of Nethinah by name, did in Askelon. The Sages once desired merchandise from him, in which there was six-hundred-thousand [gold denarii] profit, but the key was lying under his father, and so he did not trouble him. Rab Judah said in Samuel's name: R. Eliezer was asked: How far does the honour of parents [extend]? — Said he, Go forth and see what a certain heathen, Dama son of Nethinah by name, did in Askelon. The Sages sought jewels for the ephod, at a profit of six-hundred-thousand [gold denarii] — R. Kahana taught: at a profit of eight-hundred-thousand — but as the key was lying under his father's pillow, he did not trouble him. The following year the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him his reward. A red heifer was born to him in his herd. When the Sages of Israel went to him [to buy it], he said to them, 'I know you, that [even] if I asked you for all the money in the world you would pay me. But I ask of you only the money which I lost through my father's honor.'

2. Embarrassment - When R. Dimi came, he said: He [Dama son of Nethinah] was once wearing a gold embroidered silken cloak and sitting among Roman nobles, when his mother came, tore it off from him, struck him on the head, and spat in his face, yet he did not shame her.

3. Physical Work - R. Tarfon had a mother for whom, whenever she wished to mount into bed, he would bend down to let her ascend; (and when she wished to descend, she stepped down upon him). He went and boasted thereof in the school. Said they to him, 'You have not yet reached half the honour [due]: has she then thrown a purse before you into the sea without your shaming her?'

When R. Joseph heard his mother's footsteps he would say: 'I will arise before the approaching Shechinah.'

6. We don't go around killing people so this one seems not to be so relevant. However, this commandment does have many corollaries. For example, if we don't save someone's life when we have the opportunity, although we are not guilty of murder, we do share responsibility (Vayikra 19:16). Our taxes do help needy, sick, and starving people around the world. But that help doesn't get to everyone. Part of this commandment may be to learn about poor countries around the world and support foreign policy which addresses their needs.

Another corollary involves actions that the Gemara compares with murder such as not visiting the sick, not borrowing or lending money, and embarrassing others.

The Sixth Commandment

לא תרצח

1. תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדרים דף מ עמוד א
יצא ר' עקיבא ודרש: כל מי שאין מבקר חולים - כאילו שופך דמים. כי אתא רב דימי אמר: כל המבקר את החולה - גורם לו שיחיה, וכל שאינו מבקר את החולה - גורם לו שימות.
2. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף מו עמוד ב
אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי מאיר: כל שאינו מלוה ומתלוה - כאילו שופך דמים
3. תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נח עמוד ב
תני תנא קמיה דרב נחמן בר יצחק: כל המלבין פני חבריו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים. - אמר ליה: שפיר קא אמרת, דחזינא ליה דאזיל סומקא ואתי חורא.
4. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף לה עמוד א
אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי יצחק: כל תענית שמלינין בו את הצדקה - כאילו שופך דמים
5. מדרש משלי (בובר) פרשה א ד"ה [טז] כי רגליהם
ללמדך שכל מי שעובד ע"ז כאילו שופך דם.
6. אוצר המדרשים (איזונושטיין) עמוד רע ד"ה פרק תשעה עשר
לעולם ישתדל אדם לכסות סוד חבריו ואל יגלהו שכל המגלה סוד כאילו שופך דמים שנאמר לא תלך רכיל בעמך ולא תעמד על דם רעך

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7. While high school students are not yet confronted with adultery per se, they are constantly being tested regarding sexual conduct. Have a discussion about the problems of premarital sex, the laws of Negiah, pornography, and modesty. Judaism defines clear boundaries between proper and improper sexual relationships. Talk about why those boundaries are so important.

8. Most of us probably don't even know any outright shoplifters, robbers, or muggers. But there are other ways in which we take what doesn't belong to us. For example, keeping a found item, keeping extra change from a cashier, downloading software or songs that are copyright protected, copying from a book without giving a citation, damaging school or public property, etc.

9. We are not often called to testify in court, but we do often cast judgments about others in our everyday conversation. A false or degrading comment can cause real harm to others. See Abarbanel and Avraham ben haRambam.

10. This commandment is exceptional because it does not proscribe an action but an emotion. *Do we have control over our emotions?* Most people in America would probably say that desires, especially for sex, are natural and uncontrollable. But Ibn Ezra presents a different view.

The Ninth Commandment

וְלֹא תַעֲנֶה בְּרֵעֲךָ עַד שָׂוְא :

Abarbanel

This includes, besides bearing false witness, one who mocks his fellowman, slanders and denigrates him, insults him publicly, and the like.

Avraham ben haRambam

These ten commandments which contain the roots of the whole Torah mirror all the 613 precepts...from the ninth commandment *lo ta'aneh* branch out the prohibition of falsehood, the admonition to tell the truth, not to pervert justice, to respect persons, not to take bribes, to appoint judges, the laws of testimony and so on.

The Tenth Commandment

וְלֹא תַחְמֹד אִשֶּׁת רֵעֲךָ
וְלֹא תַתְאָוֶה בֵּית רֵעֲךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ שׂוֹרוֹ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֲךָ :

Ibn Ezra

Many people will be puzzled by this command (not to covet). Is it conceivable that there should exist a man who does not at some time or another covet a beautiful object...? Let me now give you a parable. A country yokel in his right senses will not covet in his heart to possess a beautiful princess since he knows that this is impossible just the same as he will not seriously desire to have wings like a bird. For this reason, the thinking person will neither desire nor covet. Since he know that the Almighty has forbidden him his neighbor's wife, such a course of action will be even further from his mind than from that of the country yokel in regard to the princess. He will therefore rejoice in his portion and not turn his attention to coveting and desiring things not belonging to him. Knowing that the Almighty does not wish to give it to him, he will realize that he can not take it by force or through his designs.

[L15 Perek 5 - Ninth & Tenth Commandments - Source Sheet.doc](#)

We see from this exercise how the Ten Commandments are relevant to our everyday lives because they have so many corollaries. The Rabbis have taught that all 613 commandments can be derived from the Ten Commandments. We will see that the rest of Sefer Debarim is in fact an expansion of the Ten Commandments.