

Weekly Words of Torah

The Ten Commandments: Foundation for a Just Society: Parshat Yitro

Framing

This parsha describes the lead-up to the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. There are countless interpretations of those iconic 14 verses in chapter 20, and yet one way to frame the Ten Commandments is to think about them as laying the foundations for creating a just society.

Access Points

■ **Responsibility for our fellow man:** Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch has an interesting way of framing the Ten Commandments in his biblical commentary to Exodus 20:13. He describes how the first five commandments reinforce one another to help ensure recognition of God's dominion over the world (commandments 1-4) throughout the generations (hence #5, honoring one's parents). The second group of the commandments (commandments 6-10) are an instantiation of the implications of that divine dominion. How do we treat our fellow man if we were to move through the world believing that all humanity is a creation of the Master of the Universe? As Hirsch writes, "God endows your fellow man with the same rights with which he endowed you. All of that which is his - his life, his marriage, his freedom, his happiness, his honor, his possessions - has been sanctified unto him by God." And so, Hirsch derives from the structure and content of the Ten Commandments that the primary reason that we can not murder, destroy a marriage through adultery, deprive someone of their freedom, deprive them of honor through false testimony, etc., is because these terrible acts would be a denial of God's will in the world. It would be a rejection of the recognition that it is God who sanctifies and presides over all humankind. If the Ten Commandments are at the heart of the Jewish tradition and our values, then surely the notion that no one has the right to deny another of God's creations their freedom is also at the heart of Judaism.

■ **Thou shall not steal:** This line, commonly known as the eighth commandment (Ex 20:13), is interpreted by Rashi as a prohibition against stealing souls/humans (whereas a verse in Lev 19:11, which also prohibits stealing, refers to theft of property). Rashi strengthens his case for why he interprets this prohibition as being about kidnapping, by explaining that this commandment follows the prohibitions against murder and adultery - which are punishable by death; so too, kidnapping is punishable by death, but stealing material property is not. The act of taking someone from their community and family and denying them their freedom - as has been done to the captives in Gaza - this act is seen as so treacherous by the Torah that it is one of only several commandments that warrants the death penalty. The prohibition against kidnapping is so core to our tradition that it is included as one of the Ten Commandments.

Call to Action

Create a dramatic, creative, visually engaging image of the Ten Commandments, but swap out #8, "Thou shall not steal" for "Thou shall not kidnap." Share widely on social media.

Closing Intention

Remember that the Ten Commandments are a foundational text in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Kidnapping a person and denying them their freedom is not merely a Jewish prohibition, but rather a rejection of a core foundational value of Western civilization.