

How to Divide the Ten Commandments

By Rav Alex Israel

Parashat Yitro describes the revelation at Mt. Sinai. It is a most overwhelming spectacle. The entire Jewish people are gathered around the mountain. Fire, thunder and lightning envelop the summit. It is on that occasion that we heard God speak to us directly: "God spoke to you face to face on the mountain, out of the midst of fire" ([Devarim 5:4](#)). As a national event, this "revelation" would never be repeated. What exactly did we hear? What did God say to us on that auspicious occasion? The Torah reports that we heard the famous Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are maybe the best-known of all Jewish laws. They are perceived widely as a universal code of ethics. Within Judaism, they are one of the most prominent symbols of the faith, with the two tablets of stone engraved with the Ten Commandments adorning synagogues and other Jewish ritual objects. Clearly, the decalogue has a very central role. In this article, I would like to investigate certain aspects of this group of laws, namely, their unusual format and their unique message.

TWO TABLETS - TWO SECTIONS

The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Torah; once in Shemot chapter 20 and again in Devarim chapter 5. They consist of the following commands:

1. Belief in God
2. The exclusion of belief in and service of other gods
3. Not to use the Divine name in an improper manner

4. Shabbat
5. Respect for parents
6. Not to murder
7. Not to commit adultery
8. Not to steal
9. False testimony in court
10. Not to covet the property or spouse of another person.

How does this list of laws hang together? What point is God making by choosing these laws in particular? What is its inner logic? The traditional Jewish division is to divide the ten into two lists of five. The division into two lists allows for the commandments to be split between the two tablets of stone.

"The Lord spoke these words ... to your whole congregation at the mountain ... He inscribed them on two tablets of stone." ([Devarim 5:19](#))

Each list of five has a different theme. In the Ramban's concise definition (20:12):

"Of these Ten Commandments, five are for the honor of the Creator, and five are for the good of mankind."

For children brought up in a Jewish educational system this is the most elementary way to see the Ten Commandments, but when one thinks about it there are certain problems with this symmetrical division.

First, look into the Torah text and you will see that the first five commandments are lengthy and take up thirteen verses. In contrast, the last five are short statements which are concisely contained in two simple verses. This division is anything but symmetrical. One list is six times the length of the other! If they were to be written on two tablets, then one tablet would have to be far larger than the other, or the print much smaller. At any rate, they do not match at all. The five/five division has a certain imbalance to it. (Although this does not invalidate this method of dividing the commandments, it requires us to work harder in justifying this way of structuring this list of ten commandments.)

Secondly, as we have seen, this division rests on a THEMATIC basis. The two lists of five commands are two sides of the religion according to the Ramban. The decalogue divides into themes - five Godly laws and five social laws (bein adam la-Makom and bein adam le-chavero). But this thematic division is not entirely clear, for there would seem to be certain inconsistencies. In the first five - the God section - we have the command of respect for parents. Is this really a command directed to "the honor of the Creator?" This would seem to be a social law more than a command of belief! So does the thematic approach work?

FIVE AND FIVE: STYLISTIC DIFFERENCES

The five/five division works both at a TEXTUAL level and as regards THEME or CONTENT. Let us explain. We mentioned the disparate sizes of the first five in comparison with the last five. But there are other textual differences. When we compare them in the Torah text, we realize that each section has a very different style.

The first five commandments have a consistent STRUCTURE which leads us to believe that they are a "set." In these commandments, each command is composed of two adjoining sections. The first section describes the command, and the second gives it a rationale or an incentive. Another hallmark of each of the first five commandments is that they contain the

same name of God: "The Lord your God" (Hashem Elokekha). Both these elements are absent from the last five commandments. Let us examine the evidence.

1. "I am the Lord your God" gives us the command of faith, but we add a rationale to our commitment to God - "WHO took you out from the Land of Egypt."
2. "You shall not make for yourself an idol ... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." This is the command. But then - "FOR I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, etc."
3. Command: "You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God." Incentive - "FOR the Lord will not acquit one who swears falsely..."
4. "Remember the Shabbat day ... of the Lord your God ... FOR in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea and ... rested on the seventh day." Once again, a command followed by a rationale.

And so it continues in the fifth commandment. In contrast, the second "five" are short statements which mention neither a rationale nor the name of God. In this section, only the "command" statement is present. From the structure of these laws, we can conclude that the first "five" are a set and that the two tablets contained five commandments each, despite the variance in the length of text.

CREATING MAN: PARENTS AND GOD

But what of our THEMATIC inconsistency? Why is the command to honor parents located in the section that deals with belief and God? The Ramban answers this question. He claims that it is correct to include it in the first section, "for as I have commanded you in My honor, so I command you in the honor of My partners in creation." The Sefer Ha-chinukh (mitzva 33) elaborates:

"It is correct for a person to recognize and repay, in some measure, the good which has been offered to him ... A person should realize that his father and mother are the cause of his existence in this world; therefore it is appropriate that he render them all the honor and do them all the service he can. For they brought him into the world and labored greatly on his behalf ... Once a person has adopted and internalized this trait, he will rise higher to a recognition and appreciation of the goodness of God. It is He who is the cause of one's existence and the cause of all one's ancestors all the way back to Adam. He brought him into the world ... perfected his body ... gave him intelligence ..."

Respect for parents is a commandment which naturally leads us to revere God. If respect for parents is based on the enormous unrepayable debt that we owe them - for our very existence, for all their worry and care - then we owe God all of that and more. The command of reverence for parents sits well in the first section. It relates more to God than to man.

ONE INSEPARABLE WHOLE

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch has even stronger words to say as regards the THEMATIC unity of this division of the Ten Commandments. He explains and gives meaning to the contents of each section by describing a flow of ideas which pulses throughout these two lists, uniting them in a single idea. He writes:

"The demand for the recognition of GOD begins with a demand for the mind (Commandments #1 and #2: Belief, etc.) but it is not satisfied with mere spirit; it demands the expression of this spirit in letter, in control of the word (#3: taking God's name in vain), of activities (#4: Shabbat) and of the family (#5). The SOCIAL LAWS begin with a demand for letter, for control of deed and words (murder, adultery, stealing, false

witness), but are not satisfied with letter only, demand control of spirit and feeling (#10: Do not covet).

"This expresses the important idea: All 'religion,' also called 'honoring God in spirit,' is worthless if the thought, the idea of God, is not strong enough to exercise its power practically in the control of our words and doings of our family and social life. Our deeds, our way of life, must first prove that our 'religion,' our 'honoring of God,' is genuine. And on the other hand, all social virtue is worthless and crumbles at the first test, as long as it aims at letter, at outward correctness, is satisfied with being considered righteous and honest in the eyes of fellow men, but refuses inner loyalty, does not depend on ... that pure inner conscience that only God sees and God judges, and which has its root and ... nourishment only in quiet but constant looking up to God.

"All spirit must be developed into letter, into act. All letter, all acts, must have their source in spirit. That is the inspiration that hovers over these fundamental ideas of God's Torah and fuses the two tablets, the 'religious' and the 'social,' into one inseparable whole."

So in each section we have a progression - the Godly section: ideas-words-actions; the social laws: actions-words-ideas. In the first section, God is reflected in belief, and in the second section, God is reflected in conscience. The two sides of the decalogue are mirror images of each other. They reflect identical values, from different vantage points. The decalogue is a carefully balanced collection of laws. It testifies to Judaism's pragmatic approach to the world, aiming to legislate for human beings who function in the complicated world in which we live. But it insists that our lives be permeated by God and a sense of conscience (yir'at shamayim).

GOD OR MOSHE?

But this division does not exhaust our examination of the structure of the commandments, for there is a fundamental division that we have not yet mentioned. A strange transition occurs between the second and third commandments. The commandments switch their grammatical form, as if the narrator has changed. The text of the commandments switches from first person to third person form. Let us take a look:

"And God spoke all these words, saying:

(1) I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt ...

(2) You shall have no other gods beside ME ... You shall not bow down to them or serve them for I am an impassioned God ... showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love ME and keep MY commandments.

(3) You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit ...

(4) ... for in six days, the Lord made heaven and earth ..."

The first two commandments appear as if God Himself is talking: they are written in the first person. God tells us how he shows favor to those who "love ME." He tells us how "I ... took you out of ... Egypt." But then, in the third commandment and subsequently, God is referred to in the third person. What is the cause of this dramatic shift within the ten commandments? Did God not tell us ALL of the commandments? Did God speak only the first TWO? If so, who said the other eight commandments? And why did God not complete the entire group of ten?

The Talmud ([Makkot 24a](#)) helps us to begin to understand of this issue when it posits that God Himself uttered only the first two commandments and that Moshe was responsible for transmitting

the others. Why were the Ten Commandments divided in this way?

FEAR OF GOD

Rashi turns to the passage which immediately follows the Ten Commandments. There we read:

"The people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blaring sound of the shofar and the mountain smoking, and when the people saw it they fell back and stood at a distance. 'You speak to us,' they said to Moshe, 'and we will obey; but let not God speak to us lest we die.' Moshe answered the people, 'Be not afraid; for God has come only to raise you high and to ensure that your fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray.' So the people remained at a distance, while Moshe approached the thick cloud." (20:15-18)

The experience of Divine revelation was too overwhelming for the people. They thought they would die if they heard God communicate with them - "For what living mortal has ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and live?" ([Devarim 5:23](#)). The midrash animates this story by describing how the people ran and ran, fleeing from the mountain.

But when did this happen? Before the Ten Commandments? Afterwards? Rashi proposes that this actually happened in the middle. After two commandments, the people fled; they could not bear the intensity of the spectacle before them. Moshe managed to convince them to continue, but they agreed only on one condition - that Moshe would speak to them, acting as mediator between them and God. They did not want to hear God directly.

This explains why the first two commandments are from God and the other eight via Moshe. It was not planned this way, but the reaction of the people made it a necessity. God dictates the

last eight commandments to Moshe and amplifies His voice (see 19:19 and Rashi there) but the people hear God in only the first two commandments.

CLOSENESS

But this is not the impression that we get from the lead-up to the revelation. In the three-day mobilization for this momentous event, a barrier has to be set up encircling the mountain so that no person may ascend. This indicates that we expect the people to try to ascend the mountain. People are clamoring at the foot of the mountain. They want to connect with their God.

Furthermore, we see the following exchange between God and the people:

"And the Lord said to Moshe, 'I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that people may hear when I speak to you...' Then Moshe reported the people's words to the Lord." (19:9-10)

Originally, the plan would seem to have been God talking to Moshe and the people listening on. Instead, God talks to them directly. Why? Because of the message sent by the people to God. According to Rashi, the people tell God: "Our true desire is to see our King!"

There is a genuine heartfelt desire on the part of the people to feel a closeness with God. They want to see Him, to experience Him firsthand, to run up the mountain and approach Him in person.

What happens? Why did the people get scared? Apparently, the intensity, the lightning and thunder, the general feeling of God's presence with all His power, was too overwhelming for them to bear. They had to move into reverse. They ran away because God's presence was too overpowering an experience for them. They genuinely desired His closeness but in the final account, it proved too much for them.

LOVE AND FEAR

This change of pace which, according to Rashi, occurs in the midst of the revelation - between the second and third commandments - represents two very important Jewish modes of religiosity. We sometimes talk of love of God, an attractive force which draws us close to God. It is a feeling that we often experience when we feel a profound attraction to religion and to God. Our love of God expresses itself in our genuine identification with God's law and its values. When we earnestly identify with and enthuse in our Torah and mitzvot, we experience this sense of love of God.

On the other hand, however, is the concept of fear of God. However much we may desire to come closer to God, when we truly perceive His greatness and overwhelming power, we experience a feeling of intense humility, inadequacy and even fear. We stand in awe of God, stripped of any pretenses. We are in the presence of the Ultimate Being. We experience this when religion becomes frightening. Maybe we experience this "fear" too when Judaism as a whole looms large as an unmasterable burden.

The revelation at Sinai is THE encounter with God. It is there that we begin a covenant which has lasted to this day. It would make sense if that covenant were a true reflection of the realities of faith. In our relationships with God we experience something of a dialectic between the love and fear of God. At times we experience a fear, an apprehension about religion, and we run away, only to look back from a distance. At times we are attracted to God and all that is holy. We wish only to bask in the light of the Divine and connect with His path.

This existential reality is also the story of the Revelation at Sinai. On one hand, there is a barrier to retain the excited crowds, there are demands to "see" God, to experience Him in a direct way. And then, there is the fright of His enormous power.

Which way will we accept Torah? That is up to us. Will we relate to God in the first person or in the third person? Both options are possible - up close and at a distance. Maybe for us, in our lives, we have to aim at combining both sides - keeping both the magnitude of God in mind, while at the same time, wanting to gain a closeness to Him.

Visit our website: <http://vbm-torah.org>