

THE BIG TEN (COMMANDMENTS): A RELIGIOUS PERSON'S GUIDE FOR ATHEISTS.

Dvar Torah For Shavuot Day 1 5781

When you hear the phrase, "The Big Ten," what immediately comes to your mind?

The phrase, "The Big Ten", is to my mind, one of the most interesting examples of an American figure of speech whose dual references can be amusing, confusing or both, as I found out one Shabbat morning a decade ago. I had just finished delivering a sermon about "the Big Ten," my allusion to the biblical Ten Commandments that seemed obvious enough to me.

"Damn good sermon," I arrogantly mused to myself, as I waited for the compliments. I waited a very long time that day, unsure as to why no one would even acknowledge what I had said about the supreme importance of the Ten Commandments to society's survival. As I wondered about this, one of the former presidents of my synagogue approached me with that classically kind smile on his lips that always means, "Rabbi, we love you, but you may have missed the boat."

"Rabbi, congratulations!", he began. "Very interesting sermon you delivered!"

"Thank you!", I responded gratefully. "What about it did you find most interesting?"

“Well, it was a well-done piece on the Ten Commandments... but I kept waiting for you to explain its connection with college football.”

A slightly anxious sweat formed on my back. “What do you mean?” I asked in sort of a whine.

“Dan, did you not know that “the Big Ten” refers to the most prestigious collegiate football conference in American sports, the gold standard of division I athletics?”

I did not know that, and frankly, I do not care, as I football does not interest me. Still, many other Americans do care, and I suspect that still many more, religious football fans particularly, blur the lines of meaning between references to scripture and scrimmage line all the time. Such is the pliability of language in different contexts.

Midrash, the Jewish tradition of Biblical interpretation, is founded upon such linguistic pliability in our quest for religious and moral meaning. It reads the Ten Commandments as God’s founding statement about what we call in Hebrew, *berit*: the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The conceptual frame enveloping these rules of individual and collective life is a constant, ongoing tension between the first rule, “I am the Lord your God Who took you out of Egyptian slavery to be your new Master,” and the last rule, “Do not covet that which is your

neighbor's." The individual and the community are challenged every day to choose between placing God and placing our covetous, grasping desires for mastery at the center of our existence. The eight rules sandwiched between these two framing statements list the concrete ways in which we discipline ourselves to make God that center.

This is but one of many ways that Jewish tradition frames and lends deeper meaning to the Big Ten Commandments. As diverse and creative as all the traditional approaches are, they are united in one purpose: to identify God, not humans or humanity, as the Boss. The first word of the Big Ten, *Anokhi*, "I" opens God's preamble: "I, God, am the Master, not you, and not your desires for power and possession." The God-centered purpose of these commandments and this covenant (which later became centerpieces of Christianity and Islam) could not be clearer.

That clarity can be a millstone around the necks of many people for whom God is not a living, thriving Presence, but a mere cultural commonplace divested of meaning for atheists and agnostics. Even people who believe in God often find this theological underpinning to the Ten Commandments distracting, because it diverts their attention toward questions about the nature of God's existence, faith and

doubt, and the disturbing matter of motivation for following the Big Ten in the first place: If the God Who commanded these laws didn't actually exist, would we be allowed to violate them?

I firmly believe in and have a relationship with God. However, to paraphrase one of my teachers, if you proved to me tomorrow that God doesn't exist, would that mean I would now violate God's laws and vision for society? I don't believe I would, and here is why. Above I spoke about the pliability of language, how words lend and bend themselves to new meanings in new contexts. Let's imagine coming to the Ten Commandments seeking a vision of a better society than the one we have, yet with no formal faith or belief in God. We need look no further than, literally, the first and last words.

In its initial context, the first word, *Anohki*, "I" or "I am" is God's calling card, announcing God as the Redeemer from Egypt and the Initiator of the covenant. Now, following the great midrashic tradition of Judaism, let's isolate that one word. Taken radically out of context, *Anokhi* could refer not to God, but to the individual human being, each one of us as a precious singularity, yet at times alone and isolated in our narcissistic self-aggrandizement, fully invested in the world revolving around *us*. This context of the word *Anokhi* is given its darkest expression by the

biblical character, Cain, who spurns all responsibility for his murdered brother, Abel, when he asks God, “*Ha-shomer ahi **anokhi**?*”, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

In its initial context, the last word, *rei-ekha*, “your kinsman or neighbor”, refers to our fellow human being’s household which we are forbidden from coveting. Now, let’s isolate *that* one word. Taken out of context, *rei-ekha* can refer simply to any person in front of us at any time in any place, a simple yet forceful reminder that the world does *not* revolve around us. This context of the word *rei-ekha* is given its fullest relational expression by the golden rule of the Torah found in Leviticus 19:18: “*V’ahavta l’**rei-akha** kamocho*, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Seen this way, *Anokhi* and *rei-ekha* are far more than first and last words. They present a new, meaningful frame for thinking about the dynamic tension between self and other, the individual and the community, fulfilling personal needs and caring for one’s fellow human beings. Throw this dynamic out of balance one way and society descends into the ruthlessness of every person for him or herself. Throw it out of balance the other way and the individual is obliterated by the collective, be it a family, a community, a populist mob, or the state. In balance, this dynamic becomes a fragile but elegant dance of relationships that promote human dignity and well-being at every level. God can and should play a central role in this

quest for balance, and I for one firmly believe that it is God who initially opened humanity's eyes to this vision of society as it should be. But that does not mean that all of us -believers and atheists alike – don't have a common stake in, and language for, pursuing this vision.

The Ten Commandments have resisted the wear and tear of time and radical cultural change because they are broad enough to address the basic human need for relationships and communities informed by justice, mercy, and good boundaries. In a sense, God mercifully created these rules to be theologically fool proof, so that even a person who doesn't believe in God would still live according to them as if he or she *did* believe. Some of us will hear God's voice, as it were, roaring daily from Mount Sinai with what Rabbi Abraham Heschel called the divine *no*. Some of us will hear *no* such voice at all. *No* matter. These two words of the Ten Commandments, and all the words between them, still call all of us to take perspective on what human existence often is and to embrace a vision of what it could be.

Chag sameach.

