



Ten Divided by Two Need Not Equal Five

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Many of us have seen the famous scene in Mel Brook's comedy "History of the World" where Moshe says "I give you these 15... 10 commandments", as he is carrying down three tablets, only to drop one. On many Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark) curtains or doors, we see pictures of the 10 commandments. In most depictions there are two tablets with five commandments on each tablet.

Nowhere in the Torah does it tell us that the tablets contained five commandments each. Why then do we assume that it is five and five? Why not six and four? Seven and three? Eight and two? Or even, nine and one?

How do each of us see the organization of the commandments?

In order to better determine how many were on each tablet, we must first understand each commandment. And as any Jewish educator does, I answer questions with more questions.

1. אנכי ה'

I am the Lord, your God who took you out from the land of Egypt.

I often look at this commandment and try to understand what is actually being commanded. There is no "Do this" or "Don't do this". Perhaps this a command of acknowledgement. Before I can go on with the other commands, I must realize that there is a God and what he is capable of. Maybe the "took you out from the land of Egypt" part is a reminder to me that "hey, you could still be a slave. Look what I did for you. Now it's your time to do something for me."

2. לא יהיה לך

You shall have no other gods/idols before me.

Does watching **American Idol** count? What about idolizing sports figures? If I have a picture of God in my mind, am I breaking this commandment?

3. לא תשא

You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain.

Which of his 70+ names are we talking about? All of them? Can I write God, or does it have to be G-d? Many commentators have taken this commandment to mean that there should be no wasted mention of God's name.

4. זכור את יום השבת

Remember the *Shabbat* day and keep it holy.

Remembering is easy – Friday at sundown until Saturday when there are three stars in the sky. There, I remember it. What does keep it mean? Do I have to do something special to mark it? Do I have to lock it away somewhere to keep it safe? Can I not share it with other people (after all, keep means for me)?

5. כבד את אביך ואת אמך

Honor your Father and your Mother.

All the time? Strike me down right now. I was a teenager once. What does the word honor really mean anyway? The Hebrew is directly related to the word Kaved (in fact, just changing the vowels changes the meaning). Kaved means heavy. Is it supposed to be a burden to honor?

6. לא תרצח

You shall not murder.

Gotcha – this one is easy right? What about bugs? What about gossiping about someone – doesn't that slowly kill them? This one is trickier than it seems.

7. לא תנאף

You shall not commit adultery.

Can adultery be any type of cheating?

8. לא תגנב

You shall not steal.

Doesn't matter the amount, doesn't matter the item – need not be physical. When you fall in love, do you steal the heart of your soul-mate?

9. לא תענה

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Also known as don't lie. Do not give testimony that is not true that may convict someone.

10. לא תחמד

You shall not want what your neighbor has.

It would be a great world if we all had what we wanted and were all happy with what we have. But, working towards making things even better is a necessity of life – it is the antithesis of complacency. Perhaps it is ok to want, but not ok to try and take it away from him.

Now that we understand (or question even more) each of the commandments, how shall they be organized?

I asked my students the other day during Middle School T'fillah (prayer) – “How many commandments do you think were on each tablet?” I like to challenge the students to think outside of the box. I got a variety of answers. The three that were the most often repeated were; nine and one; six and four and five and five.

The explanations that I received were fascinating. One student remarked that first we must have belief in God and that commandment stands on its own, because if we don't believe in a higher power then the other nine are meaningless.

Another student said six and four. The first four define our relationship with God, three with his name, four with his creation. These four describe how we honor God. The next six deal with our relationship with human beings. This is the *beyn adam l'makom* (between man and God) and *beyn adam l'adam* (between man and man) philosophy.

Most of the group went with the traditional approach – five and five. Many of the students spoke of symmetry. They needed to be equal. One stone could not be more important than the other. To some – five and five represented the *beyn adam l'makom* (between man and God) and *beyn adam l'adam* (between man and man) philosophy. They had the same argument as the six and four group, but felt that “honoring your mother and father” was another way of honoring God. In many of our prayers God is referred to as Avinu, our father. Why not in this case also? Why can't “honor your father and mother” have implied into it an honoring of God who gave us life (like our mother) and who we refer to in prayer in both male and female terminology?

The answer is simple. The answer is a YES. Yes, it was nine and one. Yes, it was six and four. And, yes, it was five and five. It is all in how we look at it. It is up to us to decide how things are divided. There are blank spaces in the Torah to allow us to fill them in with our ideas.

As we listen to the 10 Commandments read in our synagogues this week, let's not forget we are Torah.

AS A FAMILY:

As an exercise, answer these questions

- Divide the Commandments?
- How do each of you follow/neglect the commandment?
- What would happen if society as a whole followed/did not follow one/all of these commandments?
- What is distinctly Jewish about these commandments? Are they distinctly Jewish?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. Who is Yitro?
2. What advice does Yitro bring to Moshe?
3. What does Moshe do with the advice?
4. How do the Jewish people respond to God at the foot of Mt. Sinai?
5. How do the Jews prepare for Revelation?
6. How did they react to Revelation?
7. What additional laws does God give the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai?