

“The Ten Commandments/613 Mitzvot”
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Opening Words

Rachel Teates

The Commandments that we hear about most often are the Ten Commandments in the Judeo-Christian tradition. So I thought it would be interesting to see if any other traditions had their own sets of commandments. I found two right off the bat, Buddhism and Islam. Some of these may sound familiar.

The Bodhisattva vows as found in Buddhism are as such:

- Do not kill any living creature.
- Do not steal.
- Do not engage in any form of sexual misconduct.
- Do not lie or use false speech.
- Do not consume or distribute intoxicants.
- Do not discuss the faults and misdeeds that occur by any Buddhist.
- Do not be stingy or abusive towards those in need.
- Do not harbor anger or resentment or encourage others to be angry.
- Do not criticize or slander the Three Jewels.

Islam also has its form of the commandments, which again, may sound familiar:

- There is no other God besides God.
- Do not worship idols.
- Do not take Allah’s name in vain.
- Drop all business during the Congregational Prayer.
- Honor your parents.
- Anyone who murders any person who has not committed murder or horrendous crimes, it shall be as if he murdered all the people.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not withhold testimony by concealing what you have witnessed.
- Do not covet what was bestowed upon any other people.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t have a set of specific commandments that we follow. We can always heed some of the commandments I’ve listed, not because they were handed down by an ancient text or a Supreme Being, but because they are morally and ethically right. As we contemplate today’s service, let us lift up the commandments we might use in our own life, whether personal or ancient. Come, let us worship together.

First Reading

...And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Go unto the people, and sanctify them to-day and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments, and be ready against the third day; for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai...

...And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount...

And God spoke all these words saying:

I am the LORD thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto, thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down unto them, nor serve them; for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, ...

...Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the LORD thy God, in it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

Thou shalt not murder.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.

And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses: 'Speak thou with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.'

Sermon

Julie Ham

Many of you know that I've been a member of UUCV's Social Action Council for many years.

As one of our first community projects, we co-sponsored a forum about school prayer. There were two speakers: a lawyer supporting the separation of church and state; and a Christian gentleman advocating for school prayer. Several times during the discussion, the gentleman stated that taking prayer and the Ten Commandments out of the classroom had caused all of society's problems.

At one point, the lawyer said, “I'm not familiar with the Ten Commandments. What are they?”

And the gentleman stated that he wasn't really sure, but that they were very important.

We've all seen stories of Christian groups rallying to protect a Ten Commandments display — an endeavor that loses much of its dramatic intensity when you consider that thousands of such displays in town squares across our country were put there, not to enshrine religious or moral values, but to promote Cecil B. DeMille's movie, *The Ten Commandments*.

But that Christian gentleman was correct when he said the Ten Commandments are important. Important enough to be listed twice in the Torah, or Hebrew Scriptures; in Exodus Chapter 20 and Deuteronomy, Chapter 5. Important enough for G-d to speak, giving them directly to the newly-freed slaves cowering at the base of Mount Sinai.

But the Ten Commandments were not a radical, new concept; not even to those standing beneath that mountain. There are several known codes of ethics that pre-date the Hebrew commandments. The Code of Ur-Nammu dated around 2050 BCE, pre-dates the better-known Code of Hammurabi, which is dated from 1790 BCE, almost 500 years before the Ten Commandments.

As Rachel mentioned earlier, codes of ethics are part of our human history. Even our primitive human ancestors had rules about gathering and sharing food, as well as other cooperative efforts to ensure the survival of the clan.

So what makes these Ten Commandments so special?

The codes of Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi were given to their people by kings, who in those days were often considered representatives or even descendants of the local, pagan god.

The Ten Commandments were given to the people directly from G-d. And the Ten Commandments are only the beginning. In Jewish tradition, there are 613 commandments or mitzvot; 365 negative and 248 positive. Or more simply 365 “don'ts” and 248 “do's.”

The commandments were given to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, two months after they left Egypt. In their new-found freedom, they needed guidance to create their own culture and society. The 613 mitzvot include rules for the daily family, business and worship life of the community.

For instance, a male Hebrew slave would serve for six years, then be set free, unless his master had given him a wife. Then if he wanted to stay with his wife and family, he would remain a slave for life. Female slaves were provided similar protections as wives and daughters, who at this time in history were also considered to be possessions of their fathers and husbands; they all had rights under the mitzvot.

Another example: if an ox gored a person, the ox would be destroyed, but its owner would not be punished, unless he knew the ox had a habit of goring. Then the owner would be punished, based on who the ox had gored, and whether they were injured or killed. The mitzvot allow for mitigating circumstances in the administration of justice.

There are some joyful mitzvot, too. Observing the holidays of Passover, Shavout, Rosh HaShannah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot are all mitzvot. Celebrating the blessings of life

is also a commandment, a concept not generally found in most codes of ethics.

Discussing and teaching the Torah is also a commandment. So in giving the sermon this morning, I am also fulfilling a mitzvah.

The 613 commandments are the foundation of G-d's covenant with the Hebrew people, as well as a rather enlightened blueprint for a just and peaceful society. In fact, some Jewish prayers include hopes for a day when all mankind might abide by these mitzvot, and in doing so bring Paradise back to this world.

Christianity has traditionally disavowed this covenant, even though the Hebrew Scriptures remain part of the Christian Bible, as the “Old Testament.”

And conservative Christians have often used Hebrew Scripture passages to support their views on social or political issues. We often hear the “eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth” quote in support of the death penalty. But this phrase comes at the end of this passage from Exodus, Chapter 21:

“When men fight and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined according as the woman's husband may exact from him the payment to be based on reckoning. But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise.”

Since this paragraph is about making restitution, it seems likely that the “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” phrase is also about paying for damages.

And when I read the Code of Ur-Nammu, I found these very specific rules:

- If a man knocks out the eye of another man, he shall weight out one half a mina of silver.
- If a man has cut off another man's foot, he is to pay ten shekels.
- If a man knocks out the tooth of another man, he shall pay two shekels of silver.

So we have evidence that this system of “reckoning” and restitution was well-established in the Middle East when the Jews stood at the base of Mount Sinai. We can lose as much by taking things out of context as we can lose in translation.

And that especially includes historical context as an important part of translation and interpretation. Most of us no longer have to worry about seeking damages after our slave is gored by an ox, but these basic concepts of justice can still be applied to our social, political and business dealings today.

Which brings me to the one commandment that's been on my mind in recent weeks, as I've watched the consequences of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. One commandment, given long before Sinai, in the Garden of Eden: “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it...”

This verse has been used by those who deny environmental concerns in order to support the continued exploitation and pollution of our home planet and its resources.

But we must remember that the mitzvot were written for the Israelites at the base of

Sinai some 4 thousand years ago, who lived in a world that was still very much a wilderness. They were a small nation, in the midst of other, not always friendly, nations. Tilling and planting a plot of land was long, arduous work. And irrigation in many areas of the Middle East added to these challenges. Humankind with hand tools and manual labor could do little more than tame small parts of the wilderness through agriculture and animal husbandry to ensure its own survival. Nature still had the upper hand.

And despite these challenges of growing food, there is a mitzvah stating that every seven years the land should be allowed to remain fallow and rest, a Shabbat for the soil. A green idea if I ever heard one.

There are also other agricultural mitzvot about leaving some crops behind in the fields to be gleaned by the poor. These commandments caution against greed, and remind us to remember the needs of the community. Conservation and sustainability, as well as honesty, charity and fair-dealing, are all mitzvot.

While disavowing the Torah and Covenant, Christianity has embraced the Ten Commandments; which is basically just a list of “don'ts.” They are some very important don'ts, but is it really enough to just *not* do bad things? Some might say, yes, as long as you believe Jesus is your personal savior.

Yet when one of the apostles asked Jesus “What is the most important commandment?” he answered, “ Adonai Eloheinu; Adonai Echad, “The Lord our G-d, the Lord is One.” which is from the first line of the Shema, a daily Jewish prayer.

Jesus added that the second most important commandment was to “love your neighbor as you love yourself” which echoes the sentiment of a number of other mitzvot.

Some of the Christian scriptures say that Jesus declared the laws of the Torah to be null and void. Today, of course, we know that the gospels and other writings were written many decades, or even centuries after Jesus' ministry. We also know that many early Christian writings were heavily influenced by the Roman Gentile followers of Jesus, who adapted their own customs to their new-found faith, and may have been uncomfortable with some of the requirements of Jewish law.

But Jesus' ministry of preaching, and healing, as well as brief passages about his daily life, show his faith in, and adherence to, the 613 commandments. And rather than disavowing the mitzvot, he often challenged his followers to not just obey the commandments as religious practice and duty; but to live their faith with intention, to serve others, to work to re-establish G-d's kingdom here on earth.

And the Kingdom of G-d is at hand.

Thanks in part to the discovery of ancient religious texts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls; scholars, including Christian ministers and theologians, are exploring the history and teachings of the early Church. The book, *Saving Paradise*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, is just one example of a growing library of books concerning Jesus and his early followers, and what they believed.

And as the authors and their readers embrace these born-again lessons of hope and healing; those who leave behind the orthodox expectancy of contemporary Christianity, will rediscover Paradise.

And since the roots of the early Church are in Judaism, the 613 mitzvot are part of those lessons. The Commandments remind us that each of us can choose to bring a bit more justice and healing to our often troubled world,

The Kingdom is in our hands. And the 613 commandments are the key.

You might even say that they're the keys to the gates of Paradise.

And every day, we all have the opportunity to open those gates just a little bit wider.

Closing Words

Sinai was only the beginning. The Torah has never ceased to grow. In every age it has been purified and enlarged. It has a permanent core and an expanding periphery. It expands as the horizon of our vision grows.

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