

## Reclaiming The Ten Commandments for Our Age

Today, I want to talk about cats and dogs, Rabbis Stampfer and Isaak, and specifically how the Torah's image of a righteous society is expressed through the *Aseret Hadibrot*, the Ten Commandments.

Many of us are probably aware that the world's largest set of the *Aseret HaDibrot*, of the Ten Commandments, adorns the outer wall of Neveh Shalom. It is so large that pilots apparently have used the Ten Commandments to help them navigate into PDX.

How did it come to be that Portland, Oregon should possess the world's largest set of ten commandments? This town, far from being a Bible Belt, is known as the most "unchurched city in America." Additionally, while Portland has grown Jewishly, it was considerably smaller at the time. So a betting person would not have anticipated that SW Portland would eventually house such a large set.

The answer as to how this came to be is both simple and startling. When Rabbi Stampfer met with the architect, he had only one real request. People should know, looking at this building, that it was Jewish. Rabbi Stampfer wanted it to provide an instant story of identity, and even pride for the Jewish community.

This is somewhat shocking when you consider that until the 6 day war in 1967, we Jews often liked to keep our heads down and not draw too much attention to ourselves. Indeed, as I have pieced the history together, there was certainly robust discussion because a fair number of congregants didn't want to be conspicuous; it's pretty hard to hide

when you have the world's largest ten commandments advertising your presence.

Interestingly, that communal ambivalence replayed itself when the synagogue was being updated and expanded. The letters of the *aseret hadibrot*, of the ten commandments came down, and there were those who thought they should stay down. During that period of discussion, Rabbi Isaak would carry one of the letters around with him so that people would have a sense of it. Talk about getting up close and personal with the word of God! We of course all know how the decision ended up--most of us drove or walked by those letters this morning. I can't help but wonder--was it Rabbi Isaak's decision to carry a letter around that tipped the balance? Did our proximity with the letters allow our community to decide, yes, let's restore the Ten Commandments?

That's an important question, because the connection between our society and the *Aseret HaDibrot* has become more tenuous in recent years. The moral genius of these Ten Speech Utterances has become harder for us to see. Some of the reasons that this is so are tied to the culture wars of our country and our judicial understanding of separation of Church and State.

Yet there's more at play than a long ingrained Jewish custom of hiding, or the legal conflict between freedom of speech and freedom of religion which has pushed the 10 Commandments into the background.

Last year, we introduced a new way for people to strengthen our community's fiscal standing called the Rabbi's Circle. The front of the

initial invitation was in the shape of the Ten Commandments. When we vetted the invitation to get responses, a number of people didn't like it. The response I recall is that it felt oppressive. *Merely seeing* an image of the *aseret dibrot* made some people physically uncomfortable...

Now one way we can understand this discomfort is to recognize that we live in a time where individual choice is supreme; as a society, we just don't like being told what to do, or more specifically, we don't like being told what not to do. As we know, most of the Ten Commandments are phrased in the negative. Thou Shall Nots.

Even though we don't like being told what not to do, we actually are quite open to advice. The self-help section of bookstores remains one of the largest and best-selling print categories. We may not like being told what we must do or shouldn't do, but we'd all like some help to improve our lives.

So what if the Ten Commandments aren't commandments at all? The Hebrew, which I've been using repeatedly, is *aseret hadibrot--the Ten Speech Acts*. The word command is conspicuously missing. What if the purpose of these speech acts is to build a certain type of society and a certain positive experience of life for us, but we've had trouble grasping quite what they mean? What if they are the original self-help manual? How would that make a difference to us?

This thought occurred to me in late spring, when an animal behaviorist informed me that cats don't normally meow. Now believe me, I live with one, so this was news to me. In fact, it blew me away. There's *plenty* of meowing going on at the Kosak home. Here's what she

meant. Kittens meow, but as they grow up, they use a series of other sounds to communicate with other cats. Grown cats only meow to communicate with humans. They do so to get our attention. Wow.

I understand that. We adjust how we communicate so that we can best be heard by the listeners with whom we wish to communicate. Those of us who are parents do this constantly. A great manager consistently thinks about how to convey a message. Teachers need to present information in multiple ways so that different types of learners can hear and grasp the lesson. As the students age, information gets presented in newer, more robust ways. Cats meow so that we will pay sufficient attention to understand their needs because we don't speak each other's language.

This insight about meowing made such an impression, because over the past year, I have also learned more about how dogs create a highly detailed image of the world with their noses. When they smell the things dogs like to smell, they are learning about where someone has been, and what that part of the world is like. They are constructing an image of reality that looks completely different than ours. It's not better or worse than our image--that's only a useful measurement tool when you are engaged in the same game. It's just different. We can get premonitions of what it's like to be a dog or a cat, but our experiences will never quite line up, and that is where miscommunication can occur. Sometimes Misty meows, and I have absolutely no clue what she wants.

If there's such a difference between us and cats, imagine the gap between God and us. How could God communicate a message that would be heard throughout time without losing its relevance? Our

tradition wrestles with this question, asking whether the Torah is a book of God, written in human language, or a book of humanity written in divine language. One midrash offers that our Torah is a pale facsimile of the archetypal Torah, the one written in God's language that we are not privy to. On the other hand, Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, two important medieval theologians, believe the Torah was written not just in human language, but in a manner that would make sense to the masses who received it some three thousand years ago.

When we combine these two traditions, that the Torah is written in divine language, and that it is written in human language to be understood in its time, we arrive at a third normative Jewish notion. The Torah, through interpretation and our own growing understanding, is eternally relevant. That we are here today as a living community when all the nations and peoples who held power when we were a young people are gone emphasizes this. Whatever we may think of the Torah, and however it came to reach us--either in a single moment on Sinai as the traditionalists have it, or over time in different places as the Documentary Hypothesizers argue, we are still here, and the Torah is still speaking to us. That fits well with another traditional belief, that all of the Torah is contained within the *Aseret Dibrot*, like a very large but compressed computer document.

So with a clearer sense of cat's meowing, dog's sniffing, and our human efforts to understand the words of the Torah, what might the Ten Commandments mean in our time? How might we unzip this compressed moral code?

Today I will offer a brief overview and then spend a bit more time on the 10th Speech Act, the one that states, “You shall not covet you, etc.”

### **What is the Thrust of the 10 Commandments**

The *Aseret Hadibrot*, in my eyes, are designed to help us to live meaningful lives. They remind us that we are created in the divine image, and guide us to live generously by teaching us to experience our lives from a stance of sufficiency and respect. They are directed at letting us fully claim our short time by living as well as we can (through Shabbat for example).

### **Number One and Two**

The first speech act (and here there is disagreement on how to divide these early statements) states that “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out from the house of slavery.” The second speech act says to have no other Gods, no form of idolatry.

The human being is meant to be free from coercion and oppression. Slavery itself is the ultimate statement of scarcity--it says that I can only achieve my ends by stealing your freedom and your personhood from you.”

On a moral level, the Torah, through the *Aseret Hadibrot*, teaches us we are not at the center of the universe. Galileo taught the same lesson on a scientific level. Even so, we still act as though we are the center. We place our economic interests above the preservation of habitats that other creatures need. We place our economic interests in the West above those in other parts of the world--using up far more

than our share of resources. We buy products that strengthen a system of global sweatshops and slavery. When people act as though we are at the center, all of creation suffers.

To say that there is not just God, but a God who detests slavery, forces us to view other people and other creatures from a lens of freedom. It prevents us from rationalizing our morality to mesh with our interests. If we do not posit a God, history argues that we inevitably place ourselves in God's role. We've been rather cruel when we've given ourselves such power.

### **No Idolatry**

Idolatry is another example of putting the wrong thing in the center, because it mistakes a part for the whole. It privileges one part of creation over all of creation. Idolatry in both its ancient and modern forms, is the intellectual rationalization for oppression. The Nazi notion of the ubermensch, and of German superiority privileged one type of person over another, and allowed the Germans to claim that they were acting morally by killing those who were lesser.

### **Number Ten**

The tenth commandment, with its rejoinder that we should not covet anything that our neighbors possess--not their house or partner, seems tightly bound both with the first and second "speech act," that we just reviewed, and also with our topic last night on money.

So much of human discontent comes from how we compare ourselves to others. Certainly, we need a just society, so that the playing field is relatively even and fair. That said, the world will always produce

different outcomes. My field of vegetables may get infested while your field remains healthy. You may be brighter or more attractive or charismatic than I, and those unearned gifts may give you a leg up.

Difference is unavoidable. If we can learn to celebrate it, rather than feeling envy because of these differences, our lives will be happier.

Our classical commentators struggled with this tenth speech act, as they did any time it seems that the Torah is instructing us not to feel a certain way. Ibn Ezra was a twelfth century Spanish Jewish thinker. He says if you see something or someone beautiful, of course you will feel some level of desire. He then offers an interesting mental technique to overcome those feelings.

Writing primarily to men, he states that if a sensible peasant saw that the daughter of the king was very beautiful, his passions would never get engaged because he would know she is totally out of reach. Ibn Ezra is teaching us how to avoid the objectification that envy and desire create. He reminds us that there will always be a random element to how goods are distributed and urges us to practice acceptance and even detachment.

What the tenth utterance is instructing us is that we have a responsibility to develop our own techniques so that we either don't become envious in the first place, or so that we can learn to overcome those times when envy still arises.

It is clear that we need to do better as a society to equalize opportunities for all. But even in a perfect world, the outcomes will always be different. With all of the upset and rage that is tearing at our

country on both left and right, it might help if we took to heart the lesson of the tenth commandment. As a society, we seem unable to celebrate what we do have, and only covet what we lack.

There is a still deeper truth contained in this injunction not to covet. We need to live our own lives from a developed sense of integrity and self-worth. We need to honor the path we've taken in our own lives. Envy prevents us from feeling grateful for our lives.

You know, I grew up in a very wealthy suburb in Westchester, New York. I was fortunate to sit in honors classes with very bright classmates. What that meant, however, was that compared to most of my friends, the solid middle class life that my father the professor provided his children with was lacking. My friends' parents made more, and many of them through their own life choices ended up in highly lucrative industries.

For many years, that gap between my friends life and mine irked me. I felt less than, or a failure. But as I've matured, I have a much deeper appreciation as to how all of my experiences led me to this moment. I lived in a little cabin in New Mexico and got to write poetry full time for a couple of years. I worked as a chef for a decade and there learned what it means to be an artisan who took pride in my craft. I was able to start a small business, and do good work. When I tired of that, I was able to reinvent myself, and return to rabbinical school. I was able to fly across the country so that I could be present during the final weeks of my fathers life, who was taken by a painful battle with end-stage renal disease. I got to see that man who never seemed to covet anything face his death with dignity and courage. What's to envy? Life's been good to me so far.

So many of our failings, recounted in the Yom Kippur liturgy, stem from our discontent. Envy creates discontent and discontent leads us to be self-centered or cruel. Cruelty and self-absorption diminish the quality of our relationships. For almost all people, genuine happiness and contentment comes from our relationships.

We are here today to reflect on when we have damaged our relationships with God, with our friends and family, and with ourselves. We are here to change our focus so that we can live a little better. And so over the course of this coming year, I invite you to revisit the *Aseret Hadibrot*. Read a book about them. Discuss them over meals. Try to uncover their deeper meaning. See how they can enrich and improve our modern lives.

Perhaps to catch our ancestors' attention, the *Aseret HaDibrot* needed to be phrased as commands. We can see them for what they are: the compressed language, the divine meowings that teach us how to be committed, giving, individuals who can both strive for more and remain content. That's the message our building proclaims to the world. That's the message it reminds us every time we come here. We should be proud of this.

*Tzei ul'mad*. Keep practicing.