

The Ten Commandments

It is a great honour and a privilege that I can speak to you here in the Synagogue. I have no authority to interpret the Torah, nor to instruct others, nor to speak on behalf of other Christians. I can speak only for myself alone.

But I am talking to you because I believe dialogue is important, especially between different faiths, because it is by sharing our thoughts that we come together, and because I greatly value the word.

Congratulations, Mazel Tov for young Joshua who has his Bar Mizwa today and for his family. I would be glad to see you join diplomacy one day, Joshua.

Jews, Christians and Moslems have in common that they see themselves as placed under the Law of God. This Law cannot be changed according to human wishes, because God cannot be changed, because He is eternal and all-powerful.

The Law of God accepts nothing arbitrary – while human rule and exercise of power is variable and egoistic, God gives laws which bind all. No one: neither king nor servant are exempt.

Equality before the Law also implies recognition of human freedom, because before God human beings are free. They are free because after the Fall in Paradise they had to distinguish between good and evil – and they are also free to do evil. Only through this freedom does the decision to be good gain its value.

Kant has clearly shown that forced goodness has no merit. The categorical imperative says: act in such a way that the maxims of your action can at all times be the law for all. Thus the Law of God and the freedom and responsibility of Man are closely bound together.

For this reason, dispute over the role of the Law is as old as the Abrahamic religions. The development of our modern legal systems are unthinkable without the reference to the Law of God, natural law and the ongoing debate what are the best rules for mankind. This is true for Judaism, for Christianity as well as for Islam.

Again and again there have been fundamentalists who have wanted to put human interpretation of the Law in place of the Law itself; there have been fanatics who presumed to judge others even where only God can judge, who demanded too much of themselves and of others. The Russian author Skoworoda said: he who demands too much of himself cannot be happy: “The tortoise noticed the mistake when it began to fly.”

It is interesting that both in Christianity and in Judaism the many rules are subordinated to the fundamental Law of loving God and one's fellow-man. I think this is very important – because without love, the law is empty. The terrorist who presumes to murder for his religion puts himself in the place of God, to whom alone life and death belong. One who sins thus becomes an instrument of evil.

Hermann Cohen, in his great work *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, has clearly shown that the law represents the recognition of reason, of rationality. Man must not disregard the reason given to him by God.

In Egypt, the Israelites were oppressed by the laws of Pharaoh. These were the laws of above and below, of rule and slavery. Power had precedence over justice.

When the People of Israel gathers at the Mountain, it is on a long journey. The people are complaining. After weeks of wandering around in the wilderness, they want to know where they are going. They give way to their feelings, they no longer hear the words of their leader Moses. They have lost faith in God.

But then God Himself took up the law into his own hand and gave Moses the tablets of the Law. And the people were themselves responsible for accepting the Law. Thus it is an act of human dignity to be subject together to the Law of God and not the arbitrary human despotism of Pharaoh.

The first Commandment is: **“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”**

This means:

1. A God who intervenes, who makes history, who has led out of Egypt.
2. A God who is known, whom the forefathers have already worshipped.
3. An only God, who tolerates no other gods.

Here the Torah goes very far: this is not a question of individual understanding of God; the whole People of Israel is bound to monotheism.

The Egyptians found their gods in many different forms, as cats or ibises, as humans or animals. But that is idolatry, because God does not need such images.

We all know the story of the Golden Calf.

How many other golden calfs do we have today?

Mammon, the idols, the stars and starlets, the supersportsmen, wealth and glamour, political ideologies. The media and society dance round many golden calves.

Let us hear the call: do not dance around the golden calf, but let Israel hear to the One God.

When Moses breaks the tablets, he is despairing over the lack of faith, over the fall of the people from its God. Do not we too sometimes despair over our fellow human-beings – when they are unreasonable, when they do not obey the rules?

But God does not pause over Moses' despair. God gives the Law even to the disobedient. No one can violate the Law and then say he did not know it. The Law is innate in our conscience and at the same time it is written explicitly in the Ten Commandments.

“Do not make an image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above.”

Not just golden calves or Egyptian idols – other images or sculptures too cannot hold God.

Today we live in a world of images.

In the Christian churches there have again and again been phases when images have been worshipped and other phases when they were destroyed. But today in daily life, in our media, the image is often confused with the truth, the image counts more than a thousand words. Yet it is language, the Word, which emphasises the dignity of Man more than any image. Language is part of the animal rationale, whereas the image speaks to the emotions.

When we travel, we bring back hundreds of images – many people see more on their travels through the lens of a camera than with their own eyes, and look still less into the soul, because the image, unlike the word, remains on the surface. I enjoy taking photographs, but a conversation with somebody – especially somebody from a different tradition or faith - is more enriching than a thousand photos.

But this is not just about material images. It is also about the image we make of God in our imagination. It is human presumption to try to hold the greatness of God – and it is important to be aware of the inadequacy of every image of God and thus also of every image of the world.

It is this sense of humility which should make us modest and thus tolerant towards others who do not share our belief, our image of God. Tolerance does not mean accepting other gods, but it does mean that in the search for God we also respect the path of others.

“Do not swear falsely by the name of the Lord.”

How often God is called upon to reinforce human concerns. So it is important not to swear about superficial or insignificant things. The seriousness of the oath demands truth and honesty, because God knows all things, and sees into hearts.

This also means that an oath to something evil is itself part of the evil and cannot bind. When a group of German officers came to the conclusion that only Hitler’s death could save Germany, they held a long debate over whether they could break the oath they had sworn to Hitler. Today such thoughts seem to us absurd. How can an oath sworn to a criminal be binding? The sin began when the oath was sworn!

And so it is with evil ideologies: the sin starts with binding oneself to the evil – if you start with anti-semitism you may end up with murder, if you start binding you to extremists you may not find the way out of the evil again.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

On this Sabbath – for Moslems Friday, and for Christians Sunday – we should rest. That does not mean doing nothing – but rather thinking, reflecting, collecting ourselves and being aware of the human condition. Making the day holy by focusing ourselves on what is Higher, on what does not belong to everyday.

How often we feel we are on a treadmill, our routines are consuming us and we are sinking under meaningless activity. No psychoanalysis, no modern gurus can compare with that simple and so effective law that we rest on every seventh day, to reflect on the meaning of our activities, to go into ourselves and leave behind damaging distractions.

“Honour your father and your mother”

This is a principle which binds together all societies, from China to America, from Africa to Europe. The rebellion of the young against the old, which was already deplored in ancient Egypt, should not get out of control.

Today we are experiencing a rapid change in the role of the family, the patchwork family is becoming more and more common, the classic family, let alone the traditional family

embracing generations, is seen as old-fashioned. Yet we need to ask ourselves, is it old-fashioned if partners remain true to each other all their lives? Is it right that we no longer use the experience and knowledge of the old? Can social insurance replace the honour due to parents? Certainly not.

“Do not murder”

Luther translated: “You shall not kill.” Many have seen this as meaning that killing in war or the death penalty are contrary to God’s commandment. Thus this Commandment has been vigorously debated for centuries – and the debate on just war goes on in all three abrahamic faiths. The point here is not to take God’s law into our own hands. Anyone who kills without legitimate justification is a murderer.

But what justification can there be? Under the law of love, nothing can justify taking the decision on life and death out of God’s hands. Thus this Commandment is closely related to the First Commandment: anyone who seeks to have power of life and death over another human being is putting himself in the place of God. In this way Reason, this gift of God to his creatures, demands a very strict interpretation of the Commandment not to kill.

“Do not commit adultery”

Protection of the married woman has been very important in every society. Today many no longer understand what that means. The sexual revolution has freed us from much bigotry, but it has also opened the door to lack of restraint. I believe this Commandment continues to have great relevance. We should understand it in the sense that we must not break into the relationship of others to one another.

“Do not steal”

Do not take what belongs to others. The Talmud relates this at one point to kidnapping. Today this interpretation is more relevant than ever, because there continue to be people who see kidnapping as a legitimate means of acquisition or enforcing justice. This includes so different groups like guerilleros, some tribal societies and pirates. Even states are sometimes involved. But injustice cannot create justice. Stealing people is even worse than stealing things, but neither can be tolerated by a society.

“Do not bear false witness.”

This applied, of course, especially in legal matters – but in other respects too, lies and slander are an instrument of evil. And if the lie once penetrates life, it is like poison, because nothing can be relied on any more, there is no longer any firm ground, and even facts become uncertain. The bonds between human beings need truthfulness. Kant was so rigorous that he believed one should not even lie to a robber. I think Kant went a bit too far on this. But it is very dangerous to allow exceptions here; whether one is allowed to lie to so-called “unbelievers” or to the so-called “class enemy” - in the end no one can any longer distinguish between truth and untruth. And this erodes the very basis of society.

“Do not covet your neighbour’s wife.” and other goods.

God gives and takes – someone who is consumed by envy is acting against God. That does not mean that everyone should not support greater justice, including material justice. Often criticism of social injustice is dismissed on the grounds that it is inspired by envy. That is making things too easy for ourselves. But there is a difference between expressing one's own desires and trying to help others.

But it is not just a question of envy here. Maimonides distinguished the formulation in the Book of Exodus (you shall not covet) from that of Deuteronomy (you shall not desire). The latter is also directed against the emergence of ever more new needs not really needed. Everything my neighbour has, I too must have – so I desire it and buy it. That is a great force driving our consumer society. A force which contradicts God's Law.

The Ten Commandments are expressed in simple language. And for this very reason they are of such great importance for every one of us, from whatever standpoint we consider them.

They are not abstract, but clear and plain. After millennia, they provide scope for human interpretations, none of which can claim sole validity. But their own plain validity is unaffected by this. As Hermann Cohen said: in ethics, the ego of man becomes the "I" of humanity. In the Ten Commandments we draw upon one of the earliest sources of ethics.

In these days we remember the Holocaust.

Hermann Cohen says in the book I cited before: "The history of the Jewish people is a permanent reproach to the other peoples." - He said this before the Holocaust happened.

The German people have a great responsibility to keep the remembrance of this outrageous crime alive and to do everything that this cannot be repeated.

The Ten Commandments are the original Law – all of them were broken by Nazi Germany.

Let us bring the three Faiths and including others together for a better future.

I bow my head in honour of those who were persecuted and murdered.