

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AS POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

LEO MICHEL ABRAMI

When we examine the Ten Commandments [*aseret ha-dibrot*] as we find them in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5, we are puzzled by the fact that instead of a list of ten positive principles, seven of them are prohibitions which begin with the words *you shall not*. One might have expected a solemn declaration of religious and ethical principles to contain positive affirmations rather than negative ones like *you shall not murder* or *you shall not commit adultery*.

We know that legislators have always made a distinction between fundamental principles, as we find them in the constitution of democratic nations, and their legal and practical applications as we find them included in codes of jurisprudence. In a similar way, the Torah makes a distinction between positive precepts which contain basic affirmations [*mitzvot aseh*] and negative rules of conduct [*mitzvot lo ta-aseh*] whose purpose it is to make sure that we do not transgress the basic principle.

If we examine the Commandments, we may soon recognize that behind every one of the prohibitions is an underlying sublime affirmation of a basic principle of religion and morality. As in any code of jurisprudence, the practical rule is meant to safeguard the positive affirmation which inspired it.

Looking at the prohibitions of the second tablet, those which contain the *mitzvot bein adam le-h'avelo* [ethical imperatives toward our neighbor], we may recognize the positive affirmations from which they are derived.

You shall not murder is meant to enforce the principle "You must respect the sanctity of human life" which is an ethical principle of cardinal importance. The Sixth Commandment is thus teaching us that the best way of respecting the lives of our fellow human beings is to make sure that no one will attempt to take them away by violence.

You shall not commit adultery is derived from the principle which might have been expressed as "Respect the integrity of the family institution." The

Leo Abrami is a semi-retired rabbi who resides in Phoenix, Arizona. He teaches at the Jewish Studies Institute of the Phoenix Bureau of Jewish Education and the Arizona Institute of Logotherapy. He is the author of two recent books, Evading the Nazis, the Story of a Hidden Child in Normandy and The Adventures of Rabbi Arie (2009).

person who commits adultery is showing utter disrespect for the basic law of marriage.

You shall not steal corresponds to the fundamental principle which might be expressed as "You must respect the right of people to enjoy what belongs to them."

You shall not bear false witness is the application of a basic principle which might have stated "You must respect truth in human relations."

You shall not covet is a rule of personal ethics which flows from the principle which might have been worded as "You must find happiness within the confines of the human gifts which were allotted to you."

Even though it does not have a direct impact on the welfare of our fellow human beings, this last commandment has the potential to do so. The person who covets what belongs to someone else may be led to lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, and even murder a person in order to satisfy his sinful desire. If people were to observe scrupulously this last commandment of the Decalogue, there would be no need anymore for the four which precede it. For that reason, this last precept might have been stated at the top of the list of the ethical commandments.

Concerning the affirmations of the first tablet, which concern primarily our relationship to God, the *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom* [religious obligations to God], the same method of interpretation can be applied, though the Fifth Commandment (*honor your father and mother*) may also belong to the ethical commandments of the second tablet.

I am the Lord your God is an affirmative declaration of the dominion of the Almighty over the universe and His authority as the Lawgiver. Maimonides (Sefer Hamitzvot, Positive Commandment 1) stated that this commandment implies that we must accept the sovereignty of God, that He has created everything that exists, and that He watches over the destinies of all His creatures. This commandment is actually formulated in an affirmative way.

You shall have no other gods implies that God is unique and the only God. To worship other divinities would mean that we reject the imperative character of the first affirmation. No dualistic, trinitarian, or polytheistic doctrine is compatible with the belief in the absolute unity of God. Therefore, by stating that we should have *no other gods* we are being warned against religious beliefs which are based on a metaphysical duality like that of the ancient Per-

sians. The belief in a heavenly force opposing God, referred to as Satan in Christianity and Islam, and the power of evil in Gnosticism, are remnants of this tenet of Persian religion. The doctrines of the trinity or quadrinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Virgin Mary) are just as incompatible with authentic monotheism.

You shall not take the name of God in vain enjoins us to show the utmost respect and reverence for God and the uses we make of His name. In other terms, we must show reverence not only in our worship but also in our language because a verbal expression is an expression of our true belief.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy is a positive commandment but its corollary states that in order to "remember" the seventh day, we must abstain from working on this day – *You shall not do any kind of work*. There are thus two facets to the same Commandment: We must rest on the seventh day, so that we might acknowledge it as the sign of the Covenant between God and Israel.

Honor your father and your mother is a positive commandment, which could be part of the moral commandments of the second tablet. However, our sages (Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 30b-31a) suggested that the words father and mother could be regarded as an allegorical reference to God, who is like the supreme Father and Mother of all humanity and this would justify the inclusion of this precept with the Commandments of the first tablet, which are concerned with our relation to God. Fundamental affirmations are thus implied in each one of the Commandments whether they are expressed in a positive or negative form.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) (Commentary to Leviticus 19:2) has aptly remarked that we find references to the Ten Commandments in Leviticus 19, often called the Code of Holiness. In this chapter, however, the Torah clearly states the ultimate purposes of these Commandments. The first one is expressed in the sublime injunction *You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy* (Lev. 19:2) and the second one in the *Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord* (v. 18), which is restated in a more explicit way some 15 verses further: *You shall love him [the stranger] as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God* (19:34). We thus have a complete picture of the spiritual and ethical teachings of the Torah. At the bottom of this system, we have *you shall not murder* but the ideal goal is *love your*

fellow as yourself. Leon Ashkenasi (Manitov) (1922-1996) aptly remarked: "It is in this dichotomy between 'love your neighbor' and 'do not murder' that we, humans, exercise our freedom and responsibility."

The moral limit that we must not transgress is well expressed in the aphorism of the sage Hillel: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow" (T.B. Shabbat 31a). We must start with this basic rule of conduct which has often been labeled "the silver rule." We must then try to attain the highest expression of "the golden rule" of morality by loving our neighbor. Several sociologists have seen in Hillel's rule the basic principle of the notion of human rights. Before we can love our fellow human beings, we must learn to respect them and not harm them. That is why the Decalogue had to be formulated the way it is, with prohibitions to guarantee the basic rights of others, and Leviticus 19 had to state the ultimate spiritual and ethical goals of the Torah.

This explains why the Ten Commandments were originally included in the *mezuzot* and the *tefillin*. Several scrolls found among the Dead Sea Scrolls testify to this custom. The Decalogue were also recited at the end of every service in the synagogue in many communities and one may still find them at the end of most traditional prayer books.

The talmudic sages (Talmud Bavli Berachot 12a) were compelled to change this custom, however, because several heretical sects were preaching that the observance of the Decalogue was sufficient and that one did not have to obey the other commandments. Among those sectarians were probably included some of the early Christians. The Decalogue should therefore not be regarded as a list of practical rules of moral conduct, but as the most remarkable Declaration of Principles contained in the Torah.