



Aseret Hadiberot -

The Ten Commandments

וַיִּתֵּן אֱלֹהֵי-מֹשֶׁה כְּכֹל-אֲשֶׁר לָדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי שְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת
לַחַת אֶבֶן פְּתוּכִים בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים:

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. – Ex. 31:18



The Ten Commandments are a special set of moral imperatives (laws) that the LORD Himself wrote on two stone tablets (*luchot*) that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai (Ex. 31:18). In the Scriptures these laws are called the *aseret hadevarim*, the “ten words” or “ten utterances” (see Ex. 34:28, Deut. 4:13 and Deut. 10:4). In rabbinical writings, they are usually referred to as *Aseret haDiberot*, and in Christian theological writings they are called the Decalogue (from the Greek words *deca* [10] and *logoi* [words]).

Background from the Torah

As recorded in the Torah, the Exodus from Egypt occurred in the middle of the month of Nisan, immediately following the first Passover. The Israelites journeyed for 44 days until the third new moon (i.e., the 1st day of the month of Sivan [Ex. 19:1]), when they encamped opposite Mount Sinai, the place where Moses was initially commissioned. Moses then ascended the mountain and the LORD commanded him to tell the leaders that if they would obey the LORD and keep His covenant, then they would be the LORD’s “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). After delivering this message, the people responded by proclaiming, *kol asher diber Adonai na’aseh* (“all that the LORD has spoken, we shall do”). Moses then returned to the mountain and was told to command the people to sanctify themselves before the LORD descended upon the mountain in three days. The people were to abstain from worldly comforts and not so much as touch (under penalty of death) the boundaries of the mountain. “Be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.”

On the morning of the third day (which actually was the sixth of Sivan, 49 days after the Exodus, and later commemorated as Shavu’ot [Talmud, Shabbat 86b]), the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, where the LORD descended amidst thunder, lightning, billowing smoke, fire, and the voluminous blast of the shofar. Moses then ascended, but the LORD told him to go back down and warn the people - including the priests - not to set foot on the mountain lest they be consumed by the wrath of God.



The LORD then began reciting the Ten Commandments to the people, so that all the Israelites heard. However, the terrified Israelites began beseeching Moses to be their mediator lest they die before the Presence of God (the Rambam says that after the second commandment was heard, the people began falling back in fear). The people then stood far off, while Moses alone drew near to the thick darkness where God was (Ex. 20:18-21).

As mediator of the covenant, Moses next reported to the Israelites all the words of the LORD and all of the *mishpatim*, and the people responded in unison, *kol hadevarim asher diber Adonai na'eseh*: "all the words which the LORD has said we will do" (Ex. 24:3). He then wrote down the words of the covenant (*sefer habrit*), built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai with twelve pillars (one for each tribe of Israel), and ordered sacrifices to the LORD to be made. He then took the sacrificial blood from the offerings, threw half upon the altar, and read the covenant to the people. The people ratified the covenant with the words *kol asher diber Adonai na'aseh v'nishma*: "all that the LORD says we will do and obey" (Ex. 24:7b). Upon hearing their ratification, Moses took the other half of the sacrificial blood and threw it on the people saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Next, Moses and 70 of the elders of Israel ascended Mount Sinai to eat a "covenant affirmation meal" between Israel and the LORD. It was there that the elders beheld the awesome glory of *Elohei Yisrael* (the God of Israel), under whose feet was "a pavement of sapphires, like the very heaven for clearness." (Ex. 24:9-10).

After returning from the mountain with the elders, the LORD commanded Moses to go back up to receive *luchot ha'even* (the tablets of stone) inscribed with the Ten Commandments and to learn the other laws of the Torah (Ex. 24:12), including the instructions for creating the *mishkan* (tabernacle). Moses re-ascended the mountain, which was still covered by a shining cloud of fire. On the seventh day there, he heard the Voice of the LORD calling to him from the midst of the cloud of glory, and then entered into the Presence of the LORD. He remained on the mountain for a total of 40 days and 40 nights while the Israelites waited for him at the camp down below.

Midrash about the Tablets

According to Jewish midrash, the tablets of stone were made of blue sapphire as a symbol of the heavens and God's throne, written by the "finger of God" (Ex. 31:18). The Hebrew letters were said to be bored fully through the stone (Ex. 32:15), which was a miracle, since the inner part of some of the Hebrew letters (such as Samekh and the final Mem) "floated" in place. Moreover, even though the letters were bored fully through the stone, both sides appeared normally (that is, the "back" of the tablet looked identical to the front - Shabbos 104a).



Ashurit



Jewish tradition claims that the Hebrew script used was *Ketav Ashurit* (the classical Hebrew script used in the Scriptures today), and not the older *Ketav Ivri* (which was later written (by God) on the second set of tablets that Moses hewed after he broke the original set - see below). Another midrash says that the tablets "carried their own weight," enabling Moses to carry them down the mountain.

The Sin of the Golden Calf

Before Moses reappeared from the mountain top, however, the people talked Aaron into making a molten calf (*egel maseikhah*) which they began to worship (Ex. 32:1-6). The LORD told Moses of their idolatry and threatened to destroy the Israelites, but Moses interceded on their behalf.



As he rushed down the mountain, with the tablets in hand, he saw the people dancing about the idol. The tablets then became heavy and were smashed to the ground (Ex. 32:19). Moses then destroyed the molten calf and led the Levites in slaying 3,000 of the ringleaders. The next day he returned to God and said: "If You do not forgive them, blot me out from the book that You have written." Despite Moses' intercession, God sent a plague upon the Israelites.

Some time later, Moses was told to prepare a new set of tablets in order to once again ascend the mountain, where God would graciously reinstate the covenant. This second set of tablets was carved from sapphire by Moses himself (instead of by God) as an atonement for Israel's sin with the Golden Calf.

According to some Rabbinic traditions, Moses carved the new tablets during the month of Elul, during his second 40 days upon Mt Sinai. According to this tradition, Moses ascended on Rosh Chodesh Elul and descended on the 10th of Tishri, at the end of Yom Kippur, when repentance and restoration of the people was complete. The month of Elul therefore represents the time of national sin and the forgiveness obtained by means of teshuvah (repentance) before the LORD.

According to the Talmud, the script God wrote the Ten Commandments was in ketav Ivri (the older script), instead of ketav Ashurit (the divine script that was later restored by Ezra to Israel). The *Talmud Yerushalmi* explains that it was the Ayin that was miraculously suspended in the tablets, rather than the final Mem and Samekh.



Ivrit

Rashi wrote concerning these events:

On the 6th of Sivan, Moses went up onto the mountain.... On the 17th of Tammuz the Tablets were broken (*1st* 40 days). On the 18th he burned the [Golden] Calf and judged the transgressors. On the 19th he went up for forty days and pleaded for mercy (*2nd* 40 days). On the 1st of Elul he went up to receive the Second Tablets, and was there for forty days (*3rd* 40 days). On the 10th of Tishrei God restored His goodwill with the Jewish people gladly and wholeheartedly, saying to Moses "I have forgiven, as you ask", and gave him the Second Tablets.



This traditional understanding of the timing of these events explains why:

- The festival of Shavu'ot (Pentecost) is celebrated as *Z'man Mattan Torateinu* - the time commemorating the giving of the Torah
- The 17th of Tammuz is observed as a time of national tragedy
- The month of Elul is a time of *selichot*
- The 10th of Tishri marks the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).

The Ten Commandments

Traditional Judaism teaches that the first tablet, containing the first five “words” or commandments, identifies our duties regarding our relationship with the LORD, while the second tablet, containing the last five commandments, identifies our duties regarding our relationship with other people:



I am Adonai thy God.



You shall not murder.



Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.



You shall not commit adultery.



You shall not take the Name of Adonai thy God in vain.



You shall not steal.



Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy.



You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.



Honor your father and mother.



You shall not covet...

Note that Jewish exegesis divides the commandments listed in Exodus 20 (and Deut 5) one way, Catholic tradition divides it another, while Protestant tradition yet another (see the table at the bottom of the page.) I follow the traditional Jewish ordering of the commandments.

Torah and the Ten Commandments

According to Jewish rabbinical tradition, the Ten Commandments comprise a “distilled” subset of the complete Torah (written and oral), which was revealed to Moses at Sinai. The *mishpatim* - the contents of *sefer habrit* - actually are an elaboration or “unpacking” of the contents of the Ten Commandments. In other words, all of the various commandments found in the Torah can be categorized under one of these ten main categories. For example, the commandment not to do work on the Sabbath day falls within the category of the Fourth Commandment; the commandment to preserve life (*pekuah nefesh*) falls under the category of the Sixth Commandment, and so on. In this way, Jewish tradition traces back all of the various commandments of the Torah to the most fundamental laws as revealed in the Ten Commandments.



Indeed, the Jewish sages maintain that though the LORD gave 613 commandments (Taryag mitzvot) to the Jewish people, each of which is deemed important, though each might not be applicable to every Jew (for example, laws that concern women or Temple rituals do not apply to men or non-Levites, respectively), all can be reduced to the principles found in the Ten Commandments.

Interestingly enough, the Scriptures themselves tend to distill the various commandments of Torah to more general principles that are fewer and fewer in number. For example, in *Makkot 23b-24a* a discussion goes from 1) an enumeration of the 613 commandments identified in the Torah to 2) David's reduction of the number to 11 (Psalm 15), to 3) Isaiah's reduction of the number to six (Isaiah 33:15-16); to 4) Micah's reduction to three (Micah 6:8); to 5) Isaiah's further reduction to two (Isaiah 56:1); to 6) the one essential commandment given by Habakkuk ("But the righteous shall live by his faith" - Habakkuk 2:4). (It is enlightening to see how Rabbi Sha'ul (Paul) likewise distilled the various *mitzvot* to this same principle of faith (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38).)

The Greatest Commandment

In the early Temple period, the Ten Commandments were recited immediately before the Shema as part of the *seder* (order) of worship, and this seems to be right, since the Shema encapsulates all of commandments to be the duty to love.

Jesus agreed, and likewise stated that the requirements of God's Torah is found in the practice of love:

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt 22:40)

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matt 7:12).

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." (Luke 10: 26-29)



Apostolic authority in the New Testament writings likewise confirms this:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. (1 John 3:11)

For this reason, I have included the **Greatest Commandment** as part of this section on the Ten Commandments.

The Anniversary of the Giving of the Torah

The Talmudic sages identified Shavu'ot as *Z'man Mattan Torateinu*, a time that commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. According to these sages, Passover remembers the slaying of the Passover Lamb, the first day of Unleavened Bread remembers the Exodus from Egypt, the seventh day of Unleavened Bread remembers the crossing of the Red Sea, the counting of the omer recalls the days before the giving of the Torah at Sinai, which occurred on Sivan 6, 50 days after the Exodus. Therefore Shavu'ot is celebrated as the anniversary of the giving of the Torah.

Since every Jew was said to be "present" at Sinai when the covenant was given, on Shavu'ot, Jews reaffirm their commitment to the Mosaic covenant and the Jewish way of life. During synagogue services, the Ten Commandments are recited and everyone ratifies them with *kol asher-dibber Adonai na'aseh v'nishmah* (Ex. 24:7b):

כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע

and we we will Adonai that He spoke all
will obey do

Since children are considered a heritage of the LORD, it is common for Jewish confirmation ceremonies to be held at the synagogue. At this time, young adults recommit themselves to *Talmud Torah* (the study of Torah) and the decision to live as a Jew.

Megillat Rut, the Book of Ruth, is read in the synagogue at this time, since the events recounted took place during the time of the barley harvest, and Ruth is a picture of willing acceptance of a Jewish lifestyle (Ruth was a Moabitess, a non-Jew who converted to the Jewish faith). According to the Talmud, King David, Ruth's great grandson, died on Shavu'ot.



The Anniversary of the birth of the Church

In ancient Israel, Shavu'ot was both an agricultural festival as well as the time commemorating *Mattan Torah*, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Historically, as one of the three pilgrimage festivals, Jews from all over the world would come to Jerusalem to celebrate and reaffirm their commitment to the covenant of Moses.

And such was the custom when God delivered the Substance of which the festival of Shavu'ot was merely a "type and a shadow." For the Brit Chadashah reveals that Shavu'ot is the climax of God's plan for our deliverance through Yeshua, the true Lamb of God (*Seh Elohim*). The countdown to Shavu'ot represents the giving of the anticipated New Covenant to mankind, since it was on this very day that the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit) was given to form the Church of God.

With a touch of divine irony, on the very day that Jews from around the world gathered in Jerusalem to reaffirm their commitment to the covenant of Moses, the Holy Spirit descended upon Israel to offer the promise of the New Covenant to all who will believe (*see Acts 2:1-42*). This new covenant makes Torah a matter of the heart, written by the God's Spirit, and yielding a life fruitful in the praise of God.

Just as the resurrection of Yeshua represents the Firstfruits of those who have died (1 Cor 15:20) and fulfills the prophetic ritual of the waving of the omer on the festival of First Fruits, so the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church fulfills the wave offering of the wheat loaves on the day of Shavu'ot.

וְעַתָּה הַמָּשִׁיחַ הֵנּוּ קָם מִן הַמֵּתִים רֵאשִׁית הַבְּכוֹרִים מִן יְשׁוּעַי הַמּוֹת

Shavu'ot marks the day when God entered into relationship with His original covenant people, the Jews. During the first Shavu'ot at Sinai, God instituted the Mosaic covenant and gave the Torah in written form, but during the Shavu'ot after the resurrection of Yeshua, God established the New Covenant when He wrote the Torah on the hearts of Yeshua's followers.

- Shavuot at Mt. Sinai is sometimes considered the day on which Judaism was born. Shavu'ot in Jerusalem (Mount Zion) is the day on which the church was born when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the followers of the Mashiach.
- At Mount Sinai the Ten Commandments were written on tablets of stone by the "finger of God" (Exodus 31:18), but at Mount Zion, the Torah is written on tables of the heart by the Spirit of God (2 Cor 3:3; Hebrews 8:10).
- Just as the Israelites were affirmed as God's chosen people on Shavu'ot with the giving of the Torah, so the Church was affirmed as God's chosen people at Shavu'ot after the Mashiach's ascension into heaven as the Mediator of a Better Covenant, based on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). The 3,000 that were added to the church that day were firstfruits of the redeemed people of God.



- In the Jewish tradition, Shavu'ot is compared to a wedding, for it was on Shavuot that the covenant between God and the Jewish People was sealed at Mount Sinai. The church is called *Kallat Mashiach* - the Bride of Messiah (Rev 21:2,9), and we eagerly await the marriage supper to come (Rev 19:9).

Table 1: The Ten Commandments Compared

	Jewish	Catholic	Protestant
I	I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of the land of Egypt.	I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not have other gods besides me.	You shall have no other gods but me.
II	You shall have no other gods but me.	You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.	You shall not make unto you any graven images.
III	You shall not take the name of the Lord your G-d in vain.	Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.	You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
IV	You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.	Honor your father and your mother.	You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.
V	Honor your mother and father.	You shall not kill.	Honor your mother and father.
VI	You shall not murder.	You shall not commit adultery.	You shall not murder.
VII	You shall not commit adultery.	You shall not steal.	You shall not commit adultery.
VIII	You shall not steal.	You shall not bear false witness.	You shall not steal.
IX	You shall not bear false witness.	You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.	You shall not bear false witness.
X	You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.	You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.	You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Addendum:

Duplicate Tablets of the Covenant?

In the *Mekhilta* (an early midrashic collection on Exodus, pseudonymously ascribed to Rabbi Ishmael, 90-135 AD), Rabbi Chanina ben Gamaliel is quoted as saying: "How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on the other. 'I am the Lord' was written across from 'You shall not murder'... but the Sages say ten [were written] on one tablet and ten [were written] on the other."

The earlier opinion of the Sages (i.e., pre-Mishnah interpreters) implies that the Ten Commandments were given in duplicate form, a practice similar (but not identical) to other ancient Near Eastern covenants made between kings and their vassals (e.g., Hittite suzerainty covenants that include a Preamble, Historical Prologue, Stipulations, Curses and Blessings, a ratifying meal, etc.). Unlike the Hittites, however, the covenant made with Israel was made with God acting as King, and the cultural conventions of the era were adopted to get define His covenant with Israel. Since there were no other divine mediators/witnesses to this covenant, both tablets (i.e., copies of the contract) were



deposited in the Holy Ark (and later at the Temple) to represent the terms of the agreement for both parties (this is unlike other suzerainty treaties that gave one copy to the king and the other copy to the vassal who would store it in a pagan temple to be publicly read on occasion).

Both of these two views (i.e., 5 on each / 10 on each) are maintained in the major midrashic compilation on Exodus (Midrash Rabbah), though most synagogue artwork represents the later view that the two tablets each had five commandments written upon them. So Jewish tradition accommodates both views, though the earlier view is more likely historically accurate.

Note: For more information or to hear the Hebrew audio of the Ten Commandments, see www.hebrew4christians.com.