

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: An Exercise in *Bayt Midrash* Study

No additional texts or material are needed, though It would be useful to have a videotape of Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, but do not use it until the very end of the exercise.

These instructions are for the facilitator only.  
Do not refer to texts A or B until instructed to do so,

Writing is not permitted at any time in this exercise. Everything is to be done orally.

1. *Bayt Midrash* study is done best in pairs, or in groups of three or four. Pairs will be best for this exercise. Ask those present to choose as study partners someone they might not know very well, but would like to meet, or come to know better.
2. Ask each study pair to construct a list of the Ten Commandments in the order in which they were given. Each pair may develop only one list. This may require some discussion and negotiation. Should one pair overhear the deliberations of another pair and engage in argument with them, that's all part of the process.
3. After a few minutes, reassemble. Invite each pair to share its list. Develop a consensus list. Argue it together until a substantial majority agrees. The group is to present one list before referring to Text A.
4. Text A is a list of the Ten Commandments according to Jewish tradition. Read Text A aloud and compare it to the consensus list. Review the correct order of the commandments until each study pair feels competent that it knows them. Invite each pair to review the order of the commandments until it is certain that all will remember it.
5. Pose this problem: We know that there are 10 commandments. We know the order of the commandments. We know that there are 2 tablets. We are not, however, told how many commandments are on each tablet! It need not be 5 and 5. It could be 1 and 9, 2 and 8, etc. Each pair is asked to decide how many commandments are on each tablet and defend its decision. The commandments must remain in their proper order.
6. After adequate time for deliberation, reassemble and review the various decisions. It is not necessary to reach a consensus. There is no correct answer. But much can be learned from the process of this study. Refer if you like to Text B which is a summary of what other havurot have learned before you.

## TEXT A

These are the Ten Commandments according to Jewish Tradition.

Do NOT distribute this text to the participants!

1. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of bondage.
2. You shall have no other gods before me. Don't make any images and don't bow down to false gods.
3. Don't take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Don't misuse it.
4. Remember to keep the Sabbath. Observe the Sabbath.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Don't murder.
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't give false evidence.
10. Don't covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

## TEXT B

These are some of the conclusions that other havurot have reached concerning the division of the commandments.

Do NOT distribute this text to the participants!

1 & 9: There are some who separate the first commandment from the last nine. The first is the fundamental commandment, to know that there is a God and that God is in relationship with you. "I am the Lord YOUR God." The last nine commandments are just commentary.

2 & 8: There are some who separate the first two from the rest. The first two are written in the first person - "I" and "me". The rest are all "you". There is a tradition that the children of Israel at Sinai heard only these first two and were afraid to hear any more. Moses heard the rest and reported them to the multitude.

4 & 6: There are some who separate the first four from the last six. The first four pertain to the relationship between God and humankind. The last six pertain to relationships between people.

5 & 5: There are some who separate between the first five and the last five. Some say that's the way it is in the movies, or the way it's written on the tablets above the aron ha-kodesh or on the wall in front of the synagogue where they grew up, so it has to be right. Others say that the first five are about the relationship between God and humankind and the last five about the relationship between people.

Difficulty: How can 4 & 6 and 5 & 5 both use the same argument: relationships between God and humankind on the first tablet, relationships between people on the second? The difficulty lies in the understanding of the 5th commandment. How might honoring one's parents be considered in category of relationship of God to humankind?

If energy permits, and you have not discussed this already, you might revert to *Bayt Midrash* study and consider the question.

One havurah has presented the following explanation:

The first tablet concerns God's rights, and the second civil rights.

Civil rights are listed in order of importance.

1. A person has a right to life. Don't murder.
2. A person has a right to family. Don't commit adultery.
3. A person has a right to property. Don't steal.
4. Not only are you not to violate these commandments by direct action, you are not to violate them indirectly by bearing false witness, i.e. accusing a person falsely of a capital crime, or of adultery, or bringing a false suit for damages.
5. You are not even to set your heart on violating any of these commandments.

God's rights are listed as follows:

1. I have an ongoing relationship with you.
2. There shall be nothing between Me and you in that relationship.
3. My name shall not be misused so as distort that relationship.
4. I have a special day devoted to that relationship.
5. The relationship is modeled after that of a parent and child. Just as the parent/child relationship develops as the child matures, so the relationship between you and Me develops as you mature.

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A last word. "Ten Commandments", Cecil B. DeMille's movie. If you have the videotape available, fast forward to the last few minutes and watch the fireballs that represent God's finger carve out the commandments on the two tablets of stone. How many commandments are on each tablet?