

The Ten Commandments or Ten Sayings are the first of the 613 commandments that Jews believe God gave to the Jewish people through Moses on Mount Sinai. In Judaism they are called either Aseret ha-D'ibrot (the Ten Sayings) or Aseret ha-D'varim (the Ten Principles). They are to be found in Exodus 20:2-14 and are repeated in Deuteronomy 5:7-21. According to Jewish tradition they are numbered in the following way:

1. I am the Eternal God who brought you out of the land of Egypt
2. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make a graven image
3. You shall not use the name of God in vain
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy
5. Honour your father and your mother
6. You shall not kill
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness
10. You shall not covet

These are the principles that serve as the foundation for all of the other 603 mitzvot that God gave to the Jews.

The Torah recounts that the Ten Statements were carved on two stone tablets, and it is clear that they can be divided into two categories: the first five setting out what is expected regarding a person's relationship with God; and the second five setting out the expectations regarding a person's relationship with others.

Both categories are considered to hold equal status with duties to God being just as important as duties to other people. However, if a Jew has to make a choice between serving God, or, helping another person, then the obligation to the person should take precedence. The Talmud gives an example by way of a story of a man who ignored the cries for help of a drowning man because he did not want to interrupt his prayers. The moral of this story is that it is much more important to help other people when they call upon us, as God will never need our help.

Neither rewards nor punishments are provided for in the commandments; neither is there a justification of each one in the sense that they do not say 'Do not kill because ...' The general nature of the Ten Commandments, and the lack of reference to sanctions means that they are more aptly characterised as ethical or moral exhortations than as laws. Their aim is to bring the world, through Judaism, to ethical monotheism, with the primary demand being to treat fellow human beings decently. The Ten Sayings thus serve as the foundation for all the other mitzvot of Jewish religious life, and provide the template for religious practice.

According to rabbinic tradition, the Aseret ha-D'ibrot are not individual commandments, but are categories into which each of the 613 mitzvot can be placed under one of the ten classifications. Indeed, it has been suggested that the Ten Sayings serve as an outline for the Torah. In this context it is perhaps easier to think of each one as a subject heading, since many other mitzvot can be listed under them.