

## Theme 2F: Religious concepts and religious life – Key moral principles: the importance of the Ten Sayings (Aseret ha-Dibrot) or Ten Commandments for Judaism

### Key words

**Aseret ha-Dibrot**

### Key concepts

The Ten Sayings are the first of the 613 commandments that Jews believe God gave to the Jewish people through Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:2-17 & Deuteronomy 5:7-21). They are the principles that serve as the foundation for all of the other 603 mitzvot and provide the template for religious practice.

There are not any rewards, punishments or justifications for each of the Ten Sayings which 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.

According to rabbinic tradition, the Ten Sayings are not individual commandments, but are categories into which each of the mitzvot can be placed under one of ten classifications. In other words, it is perhaps easier to think of each one as a subject heading, since many other mitzvot can be listed under them:

- i. Belief in God
- ii. Prohibition against improper worship
- iii. Prohibition against the taking of oaths
- iv. The observation of sacred times
- v. Respect for parents and teachers
- vi. Prohibition against harming another person
- vii. Prohibition against sexual immorality
- viii. Prohibition against theft
- ix. Prohibition against harming another person through speech
- x. Prohibition against coveting

### Key quotes

‘(The) Ten Commandments are an effective expression of fundamental religious and moral standards in ancient Israel ...’ (Anderson)

‘The uniqueness for the Ten Commandments lies in the fact that it was God who commanded them.’ (Boteach)

### Issues for analysis and evaluation

#### Key questions, arguments and debates

##### **Are the Ten Sayings an effective guide for ethical living?**

Perhaps we should only consider them within their historical context, as modern-day society presents so many more complicated ethical issues than those from the early days of the Jewish religion. However, if they are considered as ‘categories’ rather than ‘sayings’, they may still have relevance as a guide for ethical living as they cover things which still affect humanity. Nevertheless, in rabbinic understanding, they continue to provide a springboard for ethical deliberation and provide the template for further ethical instruction.

##### **To what extent do the Ten Sayings adequately summarise religious belief?**

Some might respond by saying that the Ten Sayings provide ethical guidance rather than acting as a summary of religious belief. However, the rabbinic’s tradition of perceiving the Ten Sayings as categories rather than individual commandments could lead some to regard them as the foundation for all the other mitzvot of Jewish life, thus providing the template for religious practice by reflecting the essence of Jewish beliefs. However, there are other sources within Judaism, such as the Shema, that appear to offer a more adequate summary of Jewish beliefs.