

The problem with the tenth commandment is that most modern consumer economies and the entire advertising industry are built on “coveting.” The whole purpose of TV and magazine commercials or billboards is to get us to “wish for longingly”—to covet that Mercedes or that cigarette. So does that make us all sinners? Rabbi Telushkin offers this wisdom: “It is not wrong to want more than you have. What is wrong is to want it at your neighbor’s expense. There’s no evil in desiring a Jaguar, only in wanting the one belonging to the person next door.”

BIBLICAL VOICES

And you are not to ascend my slaughter-site by ascending steps, that your nakedness not be laid-bare upon it. (Ex. 20:23 *Five Books of Moses*)

When you sell your daughter as a slave, do you have to give a warranty?

When they told you about the Ten Commandments, they didn’t mention that God didn’t want you looking under the priest’s skirt either? Moses got a great many laws from God. And more than a few of them need some explaining.

Witnessing God’s amazing sound and light show on top of Sinai—seeing the lightning and smoke, and hearing the thunder—the Israelites decided it would be better if Moses went up and talked to God one-on-one while they stood “at a distance.” So Moses drew near to the “thick darkness” where God was. Then God proceeded to give Moses a much longer list of laws. The Ten Commandments were only the beginning of the Law, the tip of a *Titanic*-sized iceberg at that. The commandments might be called the “Big Ten,” but the next few chapters in Exodus, referred to as the “Book of the Covenant,” along with the rest of the Torah, were devoted to an extensive set of laws that governed everything

from basic morality and religious behavior to a wide array of social guidelines for almost every aspect of an Israelite’s life.

The simple notion that Moses went up once, got the tablets, and came down has no relation to the far more complex story of the giving of the laws, as laid out in in Exodus. Moses goes up and down Sinai like a yo-yo, making eight trips that take several months to complete. In some places it says God wrote the laws, and in others, Moses wrote the laws. This is one more major section of the Bible where scholars have shown convincingly that at least three separate versions of the events at Mount Sinai—back to good old J, P, and E, those authors introduced back in the first section of this book—were woven together to get the somewhat jumbled version told in Exodus.

This is also a place where the Bible gets tricky for those who still want to take the Bible and biblical law literally. Jewish tradition identifies 613 Laws in the Torah. Many of them governed sacrificial rites no longer performed by Jews or Christians. In other words, most of us no longer believe that “worship” and the forgiveness of sins require cutting up small animals.

What follows is a small sampling of some of the many laws that Moses gave to the people of Israel in Exodus. They should remind modern readers that the Bible was composed a long time ago for a very different group of people. This is where people have to determine what is law appropriate to desert nomads four thousand years ago, and which are universal laws that transcend time and setting:

- “When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. . . . But if the slave declares, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out a free person,’ then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl.” (Ex. 21:2–6)

Here is a good example of the altered ethical and moral standards from biblical times to the present day. Many passages in the

Bible condone slavery, one reason it was justified by American Christian slaveholders. We can only consider slavery an inhumane and immoral institution, a very clear case of something that was acceptable in the time of Moses but is now considered reprehensible.

- “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people. . . . If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing or marital rights of the first wife.” (Ex. 21:7–10)

The connotation of this passage, confirmed elsewhere many times over, is that a woman in ancient Israel was approximately the equivalent of a slave. While there are people who still believe that this is the way things were meant to be between the sexes, that is no longer the majority view.

- “Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.” (Ex. 21:17)

The Hammurabi code, usually much more stern and containing many more death-penalty offenses, actually saw this law differently. For the same offense, Hammurabi said the person should lose a hand, not his life.

- “When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands. . . . If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” (Ex. 21:22–24)

This often misquoted passage meant that punishment and justice must be evenhanded and compensation should be equal to

the crime. It was meant to limit people from exacting vengeance out of proportion to the wrong that had been done to them.

- “When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner shall be put to death. . . . If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall pay to the slave owner thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.” (Ex. 21:28–33)

- “If someone leaves a pit open, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution, giving money to its owner, but keeping the dead animal.” (Ex. 21:33–34)

- “If a thief is found breaking in, and is beaten to death, no blood guilt is incurred; but if it happens after sunrise, blood guilt is incurred.” (Ex. 22:2–3)

To incur “blood guilt” meant to be considered a murderer. In other words, you could legally kill a thief in your home in the night; but in the light of day, one would presumably have other means of stopping a thief besides killing.

- “Nor put a curse upon a chieftain among your people.” (Ex. 22:27)

This law prohibits cursing the leader of one’s nation. Remember that when your taxes are due.

Following a section of “case law” dealing with making restitution for lost, damaged, or stolen sheep and other livestock, Exodus adds:

- “When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be

married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins." (Ex. 22:16-17)

- "You shall not permit a female sorcerer to live." (Ex. 22:18)
- "Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death." (Ex. 22:19)
- "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22:21)

These last four laws, rather incongruously grouped together, point up the vagaries of "obeying" the Bible. Obviously, modern folks have very different ideas about virginity, marriage, and bride-prices than Moses did. The women who offer advice on "Psychic Hot Lines" are annoying, but do you want to strap them into the electric chair? Bestiality is indeed icky to most of us. But a capital crime?

PLOT SUMMARY: THE GOLDEN CALF

Moses has been up and down the mountain once, and then goes back again, this time for forty days and nights. He is going to be given a very specific set of directions on how to build the sacred dwelling place for God, the Tabernacle designed to be portable so the Israelites can carry it with them, and the special Ark of the Covenant in which the tablets with the Ten Commandments are to be stored. But while Moses and God are sorting out the design plans and the laws, the people get impatient. They tell Aaron, the brother of Moses, to make them a new god. Aaron doesn't put up much of an argument and takes all the gold earrings and rings in the camp, melts them down, and casts them into a golden calf that the people dance around.

God is not happy about this and sends Moses down. He smashes the tablet containing the law and grinds the calf into dust. Then he spreads the dust on the water and makes the people drink it. God follows this with a plague on the camp. Moses asks

for the loyal to stand by him, and all the Levites rally to his side. They take out their swords and kill three thousand people.

For his role in this mischief, Aaron gets away scot-free, and his alibi is amusing: he tells Moses he threw the gold into the fire and the calf emerged! Moses apparently accepts his brother's explanation.

After this purge, Moses gets two more pieces of stone for new tablets. This gets a little tricky because God says he will write them. Then a few verses later God tells Moses to write the laws, which he does, bringing back the fresh set of commandments.

BIBLICAL VOICES

The Lord said to Moses, "Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." (Ex. 33:1-3)