

The Ten Challenges

Kol Nidre 5771/2010

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Yom Kippur is called the Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. Whatever our theologies, we all come to Kol Nidre to reflect on our lives and to judge them by some standard or set of ideals we hold sacred. For us as Jews, the Ten Commandments are probably the most important measuring sticks by which we judge our lives. I have a cartoon on the door of my office of Moses holding the two tablets. On one side is written “Good Dog,” and on the other, “Bad Dog.” Don’t murder, steal, lie, covet or commit adultery. This is about as deep as we usually go in understanding what the Ten Commandments have to say about measuring our lives today. However there is a very stimulating book about the relevance of the Ten Commandments written, by Dr. Leonard Felder, a psychotherapist and practicing Jew. Its title is, The Ten Challenges: Spiritual Lesson from the Ten Commandments for Creating Meaning, Growth and Richness Every Day of Your Life. He notes that in Biblical Hebrew, they are called the Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Sayings. Only later in a bad translation from the Greek are they called the Ten Commandments. He suggests that “The Ten Challenges,” better describes the complex and important ongoing way that these ten core lessons, guide us through core spiritual, ethical and relational challenges throughout our lives. As I explore them, I’d like you to make a mental note of which ones apply to your life and what they have to say to your process of Yom Kippur self evaluation.

The First Commandment is, “I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of difficult straights, out of the land of Egypt.” Actually, it is not a commandment. According to Felder it is an invitation. It is a request from God for each of us to decide whether we believe in and want to be partners with the Infinite One. This is particularly hard for us Jews. According to the New York Times 97% of Americans believe in God, but only 30% of Jews do. Many of us carry around our

childhood images and understandings of the God we don't believe in. When I teach our B'nai Mitzvah families or my Adult Ed class on God, I ask how many believe in God? While only about a third express a belief in God, just about everyone describes times when they knew God's presence: for instance, at the birth of a child or watching the sunset. Many rabbinic commentaries say that at Mt. Sinai the Jewish People only heard the letter Aleph, the sound of breath. God in this way is pictured more like an energy that dwells among us or between us, or a deep internal sense of guidance. You might translate the first traditional commandment, "I am the One who is and will always be your God, who can bring you out of a narrow way of seeing things, out of your enslavements and worries." This is the first ongoing Challenge. Can we take our spirituality seriously? Can we hear the still small voice within? Can we join the spark of Divine light within us in partnership with God's caring presence, so we can face our troubles and make the world that is, into the world that ought to be?

Number Two: "Thou shalt not make any idol or bow down to it." When it comes to the Second Commandment, most people today think, "This does not really concern me." Felder reminds us that in the twelfth century, Jewish philosopher Bachya ben Joseph Ibn Pakuda wrote about idolatry that "people make their bellies into their gods, their fine clothes into their law, and their home maintenance into their ethics." Felder asks us to ask ourselves a few questions about the false gods we pursue and bow down to. Does perfectionism rule over you like a false god? Do people in your life lose out because you bow down to your job as a workaholic or to the new god, the Internet? Do you sometimes idolize people too much for their looks, status, or money? Felder says the Second Challenge, is to recognize unfulfilling paths and habits that we bow down to, that rule over aspects of our lives. Our Second Challenge is to live in a way that nurtures the Divine spark within us, and lets its light shine in fulfilling emotional and spiritual patterns in our lives.

We all know the Third Commandment is not to use God's name in vain. We should not use curse words like Damn, especially in conjunction with the word

God. Rashi, says the real meaning of this commandment is also refraining from swearing falsely, from making false promises. Truthfully, this Kol Nidre night, how many of us have broken the Third Commandment this past year with false or broken promises? Another interpretation of not taking God's name in vain was offered by the famous sixteenth century Moroccan Rabbi, Hayim ben Moses Attar. He wrote, "The essence of taking God's name in vain is to pretend to be more correct, more righteous, and more holy than in fact you really are." Today we call it acting holier-than-thou. "Over eight hundred years ago, Maimonides, took this explanation further regarding cursing someone out, saying, "Cursing is prohibited because... Jewish law seeks to keep the individual from acquiring the damaging habit of ventilating anger and frustration on others." The Third Commandment presents the Third Challenge: Can we avoid making false promises, using God's name in self-righteousness or hostile ways that are hurtful to others and would degrade the Divine spark in them or in us?

The Fourth Commandment is the only ritual prescribed in the Ten Commandments, "Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep It Holy." When I asked the teens in Hebrew High what they thought about not shopping on Saturdays, they said they wouldn't know what else to do. When I told them that it was a mitzvah for mates to make love on Shabbat and that's one thing people do other than shop, they got more interested. When we say, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," what is the "it" that we are supposed to be keeping holy on Shabbat. It is first of all our soul. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan wrote that on Shabbat, we are like an artist stepping back from the canvas of life, pausing to gain perspective and new energy for the art of living. The "it" could also be keeping holy the heart or mind or body through nourishing "it" on Shabbat. On Shabbat we are to spend time face to face with loved ones, friends and community. This is the way the cherubim, the angels above the ark were installed in the desert sanctuary of the Bible. Tradition says that it was solely there, between them face to face, that God's presence dwelled. Engrossed in electronic devices, how much are we present for others face to face? The Shabbat table is such a holy space

and time because it is face time. We take time to openly bless children or mates or friends by saying words of praise. We sanctify the mind through learning not just facts but wisdom. We do this by taking a look at something from the week's Torah portion and discussing how it relates to our lives. You can subscribe to my Ten Minutes of Torah or you can go on line to the Reform Judaism website to get a guide for discussing the parasha with children. Some people disconnect from tvs and electronic information devices on Shabbat and reconnect to restful and relaxing activities, like napping, reading and taking a walk. Rituals are an important part of the Shabbat experience. Kindling Sabbath candles in the home even if you are alone transforms the space into what the rabbis called a mikdash me-at, a small sanctuary. Taking moments before blessing the candles to think of and bless others who may be miles away or who are no longer with us in earthly life, deepens our soul's connection to loved ones. Pausing to share something you are grateful for from the past week before blessing the wine ends the week on a note of gratitude. Talking before the motzi, about the mitzvahs we may have done during the week that we feel good about, reminds us of our capacity for goodness, adding nobility to our lives. Communal worship, on Friday night and Saturday morning is the least observed of the Sabbath traditions by American Jews, including our congregation. Often you will say to me at a Friday night service, "You know I got home and I was tired and I started to turn on the tv but I decided to come to services instead. I'm really glad I did." The word for worship in Hebrew is Avodah, work-spiritual work. It is an effort, work to make it to services but it connects you to your community, to your deeper self, and to God in ways that make it worthwhile. At home and coming to Temple, the Fourth Challenge is, "On Shabbat can we carve out and fill sacred space and time with that which restores our relationships, our souls, our bodies, our minds, and our connection to our community and our God?"

The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother," is usually interpreted to mean that a child growing up should obey his or her parent or parents. The deeper meaning of this commandment comes when you become an adult. How

do you honor your father and mother and especially in their old age? In many ways this is the most difficult of all the commandments. I have often been asked, “How do you honor a parent with whom you have had disagreements? How do you juggle your aging parent’s needs with your own: your children’s, your spouse’s, your job’s?” Sometimes we discover the parent we never knew when we try to push through the relationship we have had as children to an adult to adult relationship. Someone recently upon the death of her mother told me that it was only in the last few years of her mother’s life that she really broke through the tension and struggle of their relationship and she was so glad that she did. Sometimes it is not possible and we need to set respectful but healthy boundaries. The obligation to provide honor or respect is not irrevocable. According to the Talmud, a parent can forfeit it by immoral or physically or emotionally abusive treatment of the child. The Talmud says that we are to provide food and clothing, not to sit in their place, and not to publicly contradict them. To not sit in their place means to help them maintain a sense of importance, independence and dignity as much as is possible. Often with the longer life spans typical today, parents have to have round the clock health care at home or move into care institutions. Children often feel guilty but the great sage Maimonides wrote, “If the condition of the parent has grown worse and the child is no longer able to endure the strain, the child may leave his father or mother and delegate others to give the parent proper care.” The Fifth Challenge that comes from the Fifth Commandment is honoring an adult parent, even into old age, when there’s been tension, or as parents live long and grow frail.

Number Six: Lo tizrach - “Thou shalt not murder.” According to the Interpreter’s Bible, this prohibition has been very successful in furthering the principle of the sanctity of life. It has had an effect on society’s general condemnation of murder based on religious, political or psychological reasoning such as suicide bombers or the murdering of doctors who perform abortions. Rabbi Ishmael in the 2nd century pointed out, “If you believe the First Commandment that there is a God who is revealed in creation in the human spirit, then the Sixth Commandment,

just opposite it on the other tablet, goes right along with it - don't destroy the Divine spirit that is in every human being." This commandment is the basis upon which the rabbis build an almost insurmountable procedural fence around capital punishment. With the Innocence Project that has proved many on death row have been wrongly convicted, the rabbi's resistance to capital punishment has proven wise. Not only should we not permit first degree murder; we must also not allow our judicial system to inflict it through judicial mistakes. The Talmud goes further into our daily lives. It contains several warnings that humiliating someone or using sneering words is the equivalent of murder. This is why the Talmud says, "The person who shames someone else in the presence of others is as if this person has shed blood." Rabbi Harold Schulweis, says, "It also means you are not to murder yourself. There are ways we choose death... eating at ourselves through the tortures of self-recrimination and guilt." Felder asks, "As a spouse or lover, do you say or do things that undermine your loved one's self-confidence? As a boss or supervisor, do you sometimes, exert too much control or inadvertently squash the creativity and good ideas of the people who work with you?" The Sixth Challenge calls on us not only not to murder an innocent person but also not to embarrass crush or bruise another's spirit.

The Seventh Commandment: Lo Tin Af. "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery." According to Felder, the Seventh Challenge is: "How to elevate your sexuality to greater sacredness and fulfillment." ...The Hebrew word for sex is yada, which means "to know." It doesn't mean to know someone briefly or superficially, but to know that person as a full human being, as a complete and wonderful soul mate." Felder says that the Seventh Challenge asks us, "What if you truly put your heart and soul into your primary relationship and treated your partner with as much attention, respect and excitement as you would treat someone you were courting or trying to seduce? What if you put so much creative thought and compassion into your relationship with this one special person that neither of you felt neglected or in need of something more?" Extra-marital sex, according to George Leonard often substitutes variety for real growth and change. Because

this commandment is often broken, millions of men and woman, in heterosexual or same sex relationships, have to work through feelings of betrayal and the breaking of trust. The road back for a couple after infidelity is long and arduous. Felder reminds us that the Seventh Challenge is giving time and energy to elevating your sexuality, in deepening and fulfilling ways. It is an investment in marital happiness, rather than trying to pick up the pieces of an affair, that results from not having done so.

The Eighth Commandment: “Lo tignov” - “Thou shalt not steal.” This commandment seems rather straight forward: You go up to a person, store, or home and take something without paying or that belongs to someone else. The rabbis saw much more in it. “Rashi describes it as a prohibition against stealing someone’s freedom. “In contemporary terms this might mean a supervisor who breathes down your neck and is extremely controlling or treats you like a servant; a possessive lover who gets demanding and dictatorial when his or her partner spends time with an old friend; a parent, lover, or friend who won’t let you have any time alone; an overbearing parent who refuses to let a grown child make decisions or have an independent life.” In the second century Rabbi Ishmael said that “the worst kind of thief is someone who uses deception to steal the good opinion of people.” When someone uses manipulation or deception to steal your trust; that is also a violation of this commandment. Some rabbis interpret the commandment as not to steal someone’s self worth. We do it by speaking derisively or sarcastically. Interrupting all the time, talking over someone we call, “stealing the floor.” Of course, the theft that is particularly prevalent today is plagiarism; what the rabbis call, *genivat daat*, stealing one’s mind, one’s ideas. Many students today find nothing wrong with presenting other people’s work they have gotten off the Internet without giving them credit. How many of us “steal the credit” in other ways as well?

Felder suggests we: (1) confront our own habits of being, deceptive or insensitive or stealing the limelight, (2) anticipate that doing the right thing may be unpopular such as not padding billable hours in a law firm, (3) Share a portion of

what you have with people who have less. The Torah tells us to leave the corners and gleanings for the poor. Right after, it says, “thou shalt not steal.” It teaches us, not all of what we earn do we own. Therefore we practice tzedakkah. And give credit where credit is due in writing and in all ways. The Eighth Challenge is not stealing in these more subtle ways, and living instead with integrity.

“One of the most misunderstood and overlooked of the commandments is the Ninth, which is usually translated, ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.’ The commandment might at first consideration seem to apply only to making false statements as a witness in a trial.” Felder says, a better translation of the Hebrew could be, “Don’t answer, respond or repeat against your neighbor.” This covers prohibition of harmful speech in a much wider way. It only takes five seconds for a person to spread some dishonest or exaggerated negative story about you and it might take five years or the rest of your life to regain the respect and trust you lost because of the gossip of colleagues, congregants, family, or neighbors. This commandment’s prohibition also includes not repeating information which is true but of a personal nature. The Talmud teaches that, “Gossip is like a three pronged tongue which injures the spirit of three people: the person about whom the gossip is said, the person who listens to it, and also the person who says it.” Felder suggests a good way to keep far from violating the Ninth Commandment is if you are about to say something personal about someone and it might be hurtful or invasive for that individual, ask yourself, “What is my intention here...to do good for that person or harm?” Recognize that the issue is not whether the gossip is true or false. It is, will your words likely produce harm or good? The Ninth Challenge is to use our words only to help, not to harm, only to heal not to hurt.

Finally, The Tenth Commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” addresses the prevalent desire for what we don’t have and our lack of appreciation for or dissatisfaction with what we do have. Covet is an interesting word. Lo tachmod means to yearn for something that you don’t have with so much longing that you feel you’ll never be complete or happy unless you satisfy this desire. What makes

not coveting so hard is that we live in a society which is based on constant promotion of covetous feelings. After all, isn't that what advertising is all about? Aren't we constantly subjected to messages from every print and electronic device that we aren't complete or content unless we have a particular car, big screen tv, or item of clothing? Aren't our kids constantly bombarded with the message that they won't be acceptable, popular or good looking enough if they don't have just the right expensive jeans, tennis shoes, or phone?

So how do we deal with coveting when it permeates everything? The first step is to name it and try to break its spell. In fact if we go back to the 2nd Challenge or Commandment about resisting idolatry, it can help bring us to our senses. Then going back to the First Commandment, or Challenge, we can remind ourselves that we are made in the Divine image and of special worth, regardless of our material possessions or social standing. Felder also suggests that we think of three good things each day with which we are blessed. This takes us back to my Rosh Hashanah sermon and the importance of living with gratitude. The Tenth Challenge is how to deal with jealousy and envy and how to feel good about what you do have and who you are while living in a covetous culture.

As we measure our lives tonight we ask ourselves, how are we doing with the ten fundamental challenges at the core of Judaism? How much are we open to an adult spirituality, which can find God's presence and responds to it with partnership in Tikkun Olam, in repairing the world? How are we doing with breaking free of the idols, the unfulfilling paths and habits that like false gods, we bow down to and that rule over us? How do we measure up to not only avoiding desecrating God's name by cursing, or breaking our promises, but also by refraining from nasty words hurled from anger, insecurity and self-righteousness? How are we doing with taking the Sabbath seriously to keep our souls, our relationships, bodies, our environment, our community whole and holy? Do we struggle to unhook weekly on Shabbat from our everyday pressures and connect with something profound, rejuvenating and restorative at home and in the synagogue? Have we been able to find ways to honor our parents, not only when

we are children but when we are adults? Can we find the balance between care for them and for children, mates, friends and ourselves? Have we helped them maintain their dignity even as they grow more frail and dependent? What are we doing to preserve the sacred value of a human life? Have we spoken out against the death penalty, worked for just courts and for gun control and dealing with gangs? What have we done or will we do to prevent the crushing of the spirit of another person, at work, in our families, our friendships and our synagogue? How do we rate the amount we are investing in relationships with our mates or significant others, the energy and attention, attunement and care that will elevate our sexuality to greater sacredness and fulfillment, avoiding the train wreck of infidelity. Have we and can we meet the challenge not only of not stealing other people's possessions, but also not stealing their self worth, their dignity, their ideas so that we live with integrity? How have we met the challenge of not only avoiding lying in court but also in our everyday lives of avoiding gossip and hurtful speech? Finally how in the last year have we met the challenge of avoiding coveting in this covetous culture, instead appreciating ourselves and what we have? These are the Ten Challenges, the ten bench marks of measurement at the core of our faith, as they relate to our everyday life. They are worthy of each of us asking on this Yom Din, on this night of judgment, regarding each one of them, "How do I measure up?"

Quotes in this sermon are from the [The Ten Challenges](#) by Dr. Leonard Felder