



## בְּמַעֲלֵה עֶשְׂרַת הַדִּבְרוֹת Ascending the Ten Commandments

### ■ Navot's Vineyard

What would the world look like without the Ten Commandments? We can begin to try to fathom this scenario by taking a look at the sad story of Navot the Jezreelite, who was murdered for his vineyard by Israel's King Ahab.

The story teaches us that the Commandments are not a random assortment of precepts, but rather an integrated group linked together in an organized fashion – and as such, its prohibitions are an acute manifestation of the famous Rabbinic saying *averah goreret averah*, “one sin brings on another sin.” It also helps us understand the counter-expression *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, “one good deed brings on another good deed,” as we will see.

The story begins when King Ahab turns to Navot and makes him “an offer he can't refuse:”

תָּנָה לִי אֶת כְּרָמִי... וְאֶתְנָה לְךָ תַּחֲתָיו כְּרָם טוֹב מִמְּנִי.  
אִם טוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶתְנָה לְךָ כֶּסֶף מְחִיר זֶה.

*Give me your vineyard... and I will give you a better vineyard  
in exchange. Or, if you wish, I will pay you  
its worth in silver.* (Kings I 21,2)

Ahab covets Navot's vineyard, and makes a seemingly fair offer: Either an even better vineyard, or silver in “cash.” For Ahab, this vineyard is simply a business opportunity, but for Navot, it is much more. He explains to the king why he must refuse his offer:

חֲלִילָה לִי מִה' מִתְּתִי אֶת נַחֲלַת אֲבוֹתַי לְךָ.  
*Heaven forbid that I should give up  
my forefathers' inheritance to you.* (verse 3)

Navot adheres to the value of preserving the legacy of his fathers that has been passed down in his family from generation to generation. He realizes its importance in creating family contiguity, linking the later generations with the earlier ones. This is a supreme value, one which cannot be assessed in monetary worth.

But Ahab was frustrated and embittered by Navot's rejection of his offer. Though he knew in his heart that Navot was justified, still, his royal honor was insulted. The evil Queen Jezebel refused to accept Navot's no for an answer, and promised her husband, "*Let your heart be merry; I will give you Navot's vineyard*" (verse 7). The wicked queen then schemed up a dark plot to get rid of Navot and confiscate his property, hiring false witnesses to say that Navot had cursed both G-d and the king. Her plot succeeded: the local court convicted the poor farmer, and he was stoned to death. When King Ahab heard that Navot was dead, he rushed to take his vineyard, in accordance with the law stating that the property of one who is put to death by the king's offices automatically belongs to the king.

However, to Ahab's surprise, he then encountered Eliyahu HaNavi (Elijah the Prophet), whom Hashem had sent with a grave and foreboding prophecy of punishment:

... לַה אָמַר ה', הֲרִצְחָתָּ וְגַם יִרְשָׁתָּ?! ...  
 בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר לָקְדוּ הַכְּלָבִים אֶת דַּם נָבוֹת, יִלְקוּ הַכְּלָבִים אֶת דַּמְךָ גַּם אֶתָּה.  
*G-d has said: Have you both murdered and inherited the  
 victim?! ... Where dogs licked Navot's blood,  
 they will lick your blood as well.* (verse 19)

### ■ **Thou Shalt not Covet**

We know that the Ten Commandments were miraculously engraved on the two Tablets of the Covenant. The Medrash Psikta Rabbati draws a parallel between the five commandments that are written on the right-hand tablet, and the five on the left-hand one. The fifth and tenth commandments - "*Honor your father and mother*" and "*Do not covet*" - are precisely opposite each other, and therefore correspond with each other. It is precisely in this very grave story of Ahab and Navot that the connection between them is made crystal-clear.

King Ahab covets Navot's vineyard for himself, thus violating the tenth commandment. Opposite him stands Navot, who has no use for another

vineyard or its worth in silver – because for him, commandment #5, that of honoring parents, is of much greater value. The land is his family legacy that has passed down through the generations, and he wants to ensure that it continues to remain the family symbol. Navot cannot conceive of giving up such a precious asset, even at the expense of a sharp clash with the king.

The story of this murder is a perfect example of *averah goreret averah*, “one sin brings on another sin.” King Ahab first trampled on the ban against coveting the property of another, the tenth commandment, and this led the way to hiring the false witnesses against Navot, thus violating the ninth commandment, “*Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.*”

From here, it was but a short distance to the violation of commandment #6, “*You shall not murder,*” i.e., the stoning to death of Navot without justification. Next to be broken was the seventh commandment, “*Do not steal,*” when Ahab and Jezebel took the vineyard for themselves. This brought about the next step, where the false witnesses violated the fourth commandment, “*Do not take the Name of Hashem your G-d idly*” – for when they testified about the “curse” that they allegedly heard, they were required to say the exact Name of G-d that was supposedly uttered. Since they were lying, the Name of G-d that they pronounced was uttered profanely.

Finally, of course, the first commandment – “*I am the L-rd your G-d*” – was also totally trampled by the king and queen. For if one knows that G-d is watching and is aware of everything he does, how is it possible to perpetrate such a crime in secret, as if G-d does not see?!

### ■ **The Ladder of the Commandments**

We have seen a correspondence between the fifth and tenth Commandments, both of which are last on their respective Tablets. Do we see a similar relationship between the other pairs? We most certainly do:

The first commandments on each Tablet - “*I am the L-rd your G-d*” and “*Do not murder*” - correspond as follows: One for whom the reality of G-d as King of the Universe is imbued deep in his consciousness, would never stoop to actually murdering another human being. A murderer’s heart is hollow of the understanding of G-d’s constant presence and supervision. In addition, since everyone bears within himself a Divine mission, taking another’s life is a great blow at the manifestation of “*I am the L-rd your G-d*” inherent in the victim’s being.

The next pair is “*Do not have false gods*” and “*Do not commit adultery*.” One who follows false gods thus betrays the covenant between G-d and Israel, just as an adulterer betrays his spouse and the covenant of marriage.

“*Do not take G-d’s Name in vain*” corresponds with the prohibition of “*Do not steal*.” One who robs from another will not hesitate to swear falsely in court to ensure that he is not convicted.

“*Remember the Sabbath day*” lines up with “*Do not bear false witness*,” for the entire essence of the Sabbath is testimony and affirmation of the fact that G-d created the heavens and the earth. Desecrating the Sabbath is akin to bearing false testimony against the Creator.

Finally, “*Honor your father and mother*” and “*Do not covet*” are a match, as we saw in the story of Navot. One who understands the value of family legacy realizes that only what is actually his, belongs to him; he will never come to covet the property of someone else.

The series of sins committed by King Ahab began with the last commandment, “*Do not covet*,” and then proceeded backwards, to the sin of murder and ultimately to a violation of the first commandment, belief in G-d. In this light, we may ask: When we come to implement the Ten Commandments in practice, what is the best way to approach them? Should we follow the order as written in the Torah, from “*I am the L-rd your G-d*” (#1) to “*Do not covet*” (#10)? Or perhaps we must work in the other direction: first on not coveting, and then on not bearing false witness, and only in the end reach a full understanding of the first commandment, “*I am the L-rd your G-d*”?

### ■ In General, in Particular

The answer to this question is not simple. Let us consider the order of the passages of the Kriat Shma, and consult the Mishna in Tractate B’rachot (2,2). The Mishna asks why the passage of *Shma/V’Ahavta* is recited before that of *V’haya im Shamo’a*. It answers that one must first accept upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and only afterwards accept the yoke of the Torah’s commandments.

This means that the very foundation of Torah fulfillment must be one’s distinct conception of belief in the Creator of the World and the Giver of the Torah. We must patently understand that He well knows the soul of man and its strengths, and that He assigns appropriate commandments and guidelines

for the total benefit of man and the world. Only once this perception is well-founded, can another level be built atop it – namely, the acceptance of the yoke of mitzvot. In this way, every mitzvah receives a special and unique significance, yielding life, peace and an everlasting edifice.

This order is from the *klal* to the *prat*, that is, from the general to the particular – and so is the order of the Ten Commandments in the Torah: They begin with the general acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven, and then gradually lead up to the more practical Commandments, culminating with that which totally cleanses the soul of all poisonous thoughts: “*Do not covet.*”

Yet King David, in his Book of Psalms, guides us in precisely the opposite direction:

סוּר מִרָע וְעֲשֵׂה טוֹב...

*Turn away from evil, and do good...* (34,15)

The message here is first to rid ourselves of the bad, and then we can begin to collect good deeds. According to this method, we must begin with the last of the Ten Commandments, “*Do not covet,*” and then continue with “*Do not steal,*” before reaching “*Honor your parents,*” “*Remember the Sabbath,*” and of course, “*I am G-d.*”

Chazal, our Sages of blessed memory, expressed this succinctly by teaching: דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה, *derekh erez kadmah laTorah*, which can be explained as, “common courtesy and normative behavior precede Torah.” We cannot pour the pure contents of the Living and True Torah into an unsuitable vessel, and Torah cannot be taught to a person who has not yet shed his ugly behavior that stems from a lack of basic *derekh erez*.

What, then, is the correct path for us to follow? Must we begin with the most general, or with the most specific?

#### ■ **In G-d’s Shadow: B’Tzel E-l**

The above-mentioned contradiction between Psalms and Kriat Shma finds its expression in the Mishna (Pirkei Avot 3,17), which states:

“If there is no Torah, there is no derekh erez,  
and if there is no derekh erez, there is no Torah.”

How is it possible to implement this Mishna? Whether we engage first in Torah, or in *derekh erez*, the Mishna says neither way will work, because we don’t have the other one!

To resolve this quandary, let us look at the Torah's story of the construction of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle that served the Children of Israel as a portable mini-Beit Mikdash in the desert. When Moshe Rabbeinu gave Betzalel the instructions for building it, he began with the Ark of the Covenant (Sh'mot 25,10), followed by the Menorah and the other vessels, and only much later (26,1) was the command given to build the Mishkan itself.

The Gemara (B'rachot 55a) tells us that Betzalel asked Moshe a straightforward question: "If I build the Ark first, as you said, where then shall I place it? Perhaps what G-d actually told you was that the Mishkan should be built first, and then the Ark and the other vessels?"

Moshe was impressed: "You are right! How did you know? Perhaps you were in the 'shadow of G-d,' in accordance with your name *b'tzel E-l*, and that's how you knew?"

Let us analyze and compare the two different viewpoints. Moshe, who wished to build the Ark first, sees the long-range vision: The Ark of the Covenant, containing the Tablets of the Law, is the ultimate reason and purpose for the entire Mishkan. In his vision, he already sees the Divine voice emanating from between the wings of the Cherubim atop the Ark. *"He would hear the Voice speaking to him atop the curtain on the Ark of Testimony from between the Cherubim"* (Bamidbar 7,89). The Mishkan, on the other hand, is only a place to store the Ark and its Tablets. This is why Moshe mentions the Ark as the first to be built, for it is even more important than the Mishkan itself.

Betzalel ben Uri, on the other hand, is in charge of actually executing the project. He wants to know the most efficient manner in which to build; he needs the infrastructures to be ready in time for the items that are to be contained within. The command to build the Mishkan must be fulfilled first, and the vessels can be prepared afterwards.

In sum, the difference between Moshe and Betzalel is like that between an object on which light shines and its shadow. Hashem's light shines directly on Moshe, and he himself is illuminated, while Betzalel, whose name means "in the shadow of G-d," cannot be "seen," but merely leads to the source of the light. We will see how this difference is manifest in their respective positions.

We recall that the Mishna discussed both Torah and *Derekh Eretz*. One part of the Mishna gave precedence to the "goal" – representing Moshe's



values-based approach – while the other part of the Mishna emphasized the importance of the “means,” in accordance with Betzalel’s utilitarian thinking.

How are we to know which is the means and which is the end? We look at the end of the above-quoted Mishna:

**“If there is no flour, there is no Torah,  
and if there is no Torah, there is no flour.”**

This passage begins with Betzalel’s practical approach, and ends with the values of Moshe. That is, if basic conditions for life are missing, there can be no study of Torah. But if the ultimate goal is missing, namely, the fulfillment of Torah, there is no point to having the basic elements of life.

We see that the first one in the pair is the “means,” i.e., the flour, and the second one is the “end-all objective,” namely, Torah. The same, then, is true for the first passage of the Mishna: The Torah, mentioned first, is the means by which to achieve the second-mentioned item: *Derekh Eretz*, the ultimate goal. That is, if we do not study Hashem’s Torah, we will never attain *Derekh Eretz* – the building of a pleasant world in which people live in peace and harmony with each other based on the principles of Divine Justice.

Our Mishna learned this approach from Moshe Rabbeinu. When the Wise Son of the Haggadah asks the purpose of the Torah’s mitzvot, Moshe responds: “*G-d commanded us to fulfill all these statutes [and] to fear Hashem our G-d, for our own benefit forever, to have us live as this day*” (D’varim 6,24). That is, the purpose of the Torah is to benefit us and give us, and the entire world, true life.

But the Mishna continues: “Without *Derekh Eretz* there is no Torah” – meaning that if the ultimate objective is not to reach *Derekh Eretz*, then what purpose is there in learning Torah? This is what Rava, the great Babyonian Talmudic sage, taught us in the Gemara: “The purpose of wisdom is *teshuvah* (repentance) and good deeds – so that a person shall not study Torah while at the same time abandoning his parents and teachers and those who are greater than him.” (B’rachot, p. 17a)

In this light we must understand the “direction” of the Ten Commandments as well. Hashem lists them in the order promoted by Moshe, starting off His relationship with us by listing the overall and ultimate goal: “*I am the L-rd your G-d. You, Bnei Yisrael, have declared that you accept My G-dliness upon you, and I, for My part, commit to be with you and guide you.*” This

sanctified objective obligates us to follow, and gives meaning to, the other Commandments, one after another, from the beginning to the end. We are instructed to understand our obligations on the theoretical level, from the sublime to the most particular.

But when it comes to the practical level of actually implementing this grandiose program, we find that we must begin at the end, as King David taught: “*Turn away from evil, and do good.*” We must first learn “*not to covet;*” we must accustom ourselves, gradually, to stay away from jealousy, greed, materialism, and pain at the good fortune of others. Once we build this solid foundation, we can continue onwards to each of the other Commandments, from the end to the beginning.

The Torah’s admonition “*Do not covet*” guides us to reduce our selfishness to a minimum. We begin to realize that we are not the center of all. Instead, the recognition and awareness of G-d, the King of the Universe and the G-d of Israel, will gradually fill our consciousness – and He will then become the center of our lives.

