

**What About the Other 603?**  
**Rosh HaShanah Morning**  
Rabbi Gary Pokras

Two years from now, we will celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our magnificent sanctuary. When it was built, this space represented a new start for our congregation, and every detail of its construction was carefully considered. The result is compelling not only for its beauty and its ability to inspire, but for the values represented by it in art and architecture. I know of no other place like it anywhere in the world.

In every sanctuary, we surround ourselves with symbols and objects to inspire us to live rightly, and to stay true to our tradition. But here we have some unusual and special additions, such as Ben Shahn's stained glass masterpiece framed by the immense tablets behind me. I sure would hate to carry those down the mountain!

These behemoths were created to inspire awe: awe for our tradition, awe for the law and awe for the Creator. The Ten Commandments, perhaps more than any other passage in the Torah, guide and even define us as a Jewish community. Ben Shahn crafted these particular tablets to look larger than life, because for us, they really are larger than life. Hear the words of the Eternal!:

*I, the Eternal, am your God who led you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.  
You shall have no other gods besides Me.  
You shall not invoke the name of your Eternal God with malice.  
Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.  
Honor your father and your mother.  
You shall not murder.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.  
You shall not covet.<sup>1</sup>*

These are the watchwords of our faith and this sanctuary is specifically designed to remind us to of our connection to them. Yet, these Ten Commandments do not stand alone. Altogether there are 613 commandments in the Torah, – and that is what brings us to our topic this morning.

As many of you know, I decided four years ago to auction off total control of one of my High Holy Day sermon topics to the highest bidder every year during our Summer Celebration. It's a rather scary thing for me to do, but my hope was that a topic would be suggested that I never would have considered on my own, that at least one person in the congregation found interesting. This morning I would like to share the fourth sermon in the series, and I just want to say that if you like it, I

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 20:2-14 (abridged)

would like to take credit for writing it. If you don't like it, Larry Rubin won the auction. That's spelled R-u-b-i-n. He made me do it and he's sitting right over there!

So what is this morning's topic? It is actually a question, and it has a lot to do with those tablets behind me. The topic is: What about the other 603?

We don't talk about the other commandments nearly as much as the big Ten. Why not?

Well today we are going to, and because there are so many of them, I think it is a good thing that we were able to start the service early this year. We have already reviewed the first Ten, so let's pick up where we left off:

Number Eleven ...

Just kidding. It turns out, that while there are 613 Commandments in the Torah, 342 of them have to do with the Temple cult, and sacrifices, and priestly purity laws and the like – and since there is no longer a Temple in Jerusalem, we are not capable of observing them. So that leaves 271 commandments. But wait, 26 of the remaining 271 are not binding here in Buffalo because they can only be observed while one is physically in Israel. So really, the topic of this sermon needs to be changed to “what about the other 235?” That's much more doable, so ...

Number 11 ...

What! Where's your sense of humor?

Larry's question really speaks to how do we live as Jews? To what extent do we see ourselves bound by the commandments?

Let's begin with an observation: there are lots of ways to think about the commandments. The most classic rabbinic approach is to divide them between positive and negative commandments, positive meaning 'do this' and negative meaning 'don't do that.' Another, more contemporary approach posits that the 10 Commandments are themselves 10 rubrics, and that all of the other 603 fall within one of them. However, to answer Larry's question, I think we need a different approach. The commandments are grouped into three families. The first family is called *mishpatim* (“laws”) and contains all of those commandments that seem obviously necessary and ethical, such as “don't murder.” The second category is called *edot*, which means “testimonies.” These commandments testify to our religious commitment to God, such as “observe the Sabbath.” The third group is called *Chukim* (“ordinances.”) These are commandments that do not seem to make sense on the surface, but we accept as manifestations of God's will that are beyond human comprehension. For example, there is a commandment not to mix wool and linen in the same article of clothing.

Now, if we are Orthodox, then we are bound by all three categories of the law. In the Orthodox world there is no other possibility because they accept the traditional statement that Torah comes directly from God, Who dictated it to Moses, who transmitted it without error to the people. If Torah is truly the word of God, then it must be binding *in toto*.

However, outside of the Orthodox world, the origin of Torah has been questioned. The prevalent theory is that Torah was inspired by God, but it was written by men. If that is true, then it is not infallible, and we have a wider range of interpretation available to us. So, if we are Conservative, we are bound by all three categories of the law, except those that specifically seem to go against our ethics as we understand them today. Laws that don't make sense on the surface are observed because of their historical value, so long as they do not conflict with our ethical understandings. In a Reconstructionist synagogue, how we observe Judaism is determined by democratic process, and can differ dramatically from synagogue to synagogue. And within Reform Judaism, well, that's not so easy. One hundred years ago, the Reform movement had clarity on the issue: only universal ethical commandments were binding. The earliest Reformers went even farther: all other commandments not only were not required, but should not be observed. Our focus moved from Torah to the Prophets, and we proudly proclaimed what we perceived to be the universal truths of Judaism.

However, over time, we have come to understand that there is more to religion than ethics. As a founding congregation of the Reform Movement, TBZ has experienced the evolution of our movement. For example, the wearing of a kippah or a tallit used to be forbidden here, while the introduction of musical instruments for worship services (which is forbidden by rabbinic tradition) was and still is embraced. But these are external manifestations of a much deeper process that stems from the question: What about the other 603?

To better explore that question, I'd like to first ask another, and I'd like you to raise your hand if, for you, the answer is yes. Do you know anyone, or have you ever heard anyone who says: "I'm not very religious, but I am spiritual?"

Great. Now let's refine the question. Do you see yourself as more spiritual than religious? Please raise your hand if the answer is yes.

Right here, this is the difficulty we face as a movement, and it speaks directly to Larry's question about the other 603 commandments. To be more precise, what is it that causes so many of us to separate our spirituality from our religion? What is it about 'religion' that we don't accept?

I think it has to do with how connected, or rather, disconnected we feel. When we feel spiritual, we feel somehow connected to that which is beyond us: the world, the universe, God, each other. Many of us feel disconnected today because we don't accept the concept of God that we think religion requires, or we think of religion as a

divisive and even dangerous force in the world, and find daily confirmation of just that in the headlines. That said, religion is what we, what people make of it, and we should not let others, and especially not extremists, define what it is for us. Religion is a system designed to facilitate our spiritual connections, and our tradition focuses on the connections we have with each other (ethics) and the connections we have with God (covenant). Our historical challenge is how to maintain our religious connections over time, as cultures and civilizations change, and we along with them.

The Reform Movement is a perfect example. It was created as a child of the Modern Era, a time when rationalism and universalism reigned supreme. Modern Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries lost their connection to traditional Judaism because it was not Modern enough. Yet, at the same time, they felt a strong connection to their Jewish identity and so could not create something entirely new. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Reform Judaism spoke clearly to those Jews who wanted to leave behind what they considered to be the historical provincialism of our people. The United States in particular offered a new beginning, a place of freedom and opportunity and we wanted to be a part of it. We saw ourselves as Americans of the Hebrew persuasion, rather than Jews who happened to live in America. So we built synagogues based on the prevalent church model, with a *bimah* in the front, and fixed pews for the congregation, and some even installed pipe organs and beautiful stained glass windows. These magnificent buildings proclaimed to our neighbors and to ourselves that we belong here, that we are no different from other Americans and that we are here to stay.

Within our synagogues, the Reform movement did away with anything that made us exotic and different. We focused instead on the universal truths that we share, most specifically, with our Christian neighbors. All of this while still staying true to our own theology of One God. Anything that separated us from the community, or made us seem strange in the eyes of Modernity, was excised. For example, the *kippah* was forbidden, and clergy adopted robes and very thin *tallitot* that look like the ritual scarves many Christian clergy wear when they lead services. This white robe that I wear right now is a perfect example. There is nothing Jewish about it! Rather, it is a reflection of our historical desire to fit in, and that is the way we felt connected.

We did away with the laws of *kashrut*, proclaiming that they were not rational and that keeping kosher separated us from the larger community. In fact, we did away with many of the other 603 commandments, and even dared to tinker with one of the Ten! Although I don't know if it happened at TBZ, many Reform congregations around the turn of the last century, moved Shabbat from Saturday to Sunday, so that we might fit in with the general flow of time of our larger society. There is no purely rational explanation for calling Saturday the seventh day as opposed to Sunday, and so the switch was made. And yet ...

In the end, and despite the rational arguments in favor of moving Shabbat to Sunday, and the practical benefits to us as Americans that resulted, we could not handle the change. The lesson here is important: we can be rational and also

religious, but there is more to religion than just reason – otherwise Judaism would merely be a philosophy instead of what it really is.

I believe that while each generation does its best to live up to the highest standards of our tradition, people change over time, and what may have connected one generation, pushes away another. What that means, is that in this house, there must be room for more than one approach, more than one way for us to find our connections. That is why, for example, we remain committed to offering different worship options throughout the year.

Regardless of our preferences, our expressions of prayer are based on how we understand the commandments. Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, or whatever, Torah is the common denominator, the thread that links us together. When we observe commandments, we become more and more connected to our tradition, and when we ignore them we become less so. I believe that today, so many of us say we are spiritual but not religious because we have weakened or in some cases lost our connection with Judaism. It is not enough, if we want to be spiritually rooted, for us to say of the commandments, “I don’t have to do this or that because I am Reform.” For me, that is a cop out, an act of spiritual laziness. It is the same thing we do when we rationalize our behavior so as not to learn from our mistakes and in so doing waste the opportunity this day brings to us every year. Just as rabbis have re-examined our relationship with Torah for generations, we can do the same. We may not observe all 613, but we should study them, wrestle with them, learn from them. They are reminders, personal mirrors in which we can look to see the truth of how we are doing.

For example, I try very hard to observe the commandment not to commit gossip. The rabbis teach that gossip can kill the only thing that survives us, our reputations, and therefore it is like murder. In observing this commandment, I am constantly reminded about the power of my words, and how even hearing gossip impacts me in negative ways. After all, the rabbis teach that even if we only believe half of what we hear, we still believe half of what we hear. How I look at another human being is colored, despite my conscious efforts otherwise, by what I hear spoken about them, regardless of whether or not it is true.

Then there are commandments that I do not observe, such as the one to take my rebellious children out to be stoned. I cannot imagine following this commandment, but I can learn from it about the importance of teaching my children to respect the values of our tradition. In a sense, if I raise my children to be wayward, then what will happen to them in life? The community will certainly not stone them, but they could wind up leading lives of isolation and bitterness, a spiritual living death of sorts.

Finally, there are commandments which I cannot understand. No matter how hard I try, I cannot wrap my mind around the handful of commandments that seem to go against everything else that I have learned from our tradition. For example, there is

the commandment to commit genocide against some Canaanite tribes. It would be so easy if I could just say that these parts must be from people rather than from God. Then I could just ignore them. But I can't. Does the theory that people wrote the Torah trump the tradition which says it comes directly from God? Personally, I cannot say, and so I bounce back and forth between the two like a ping pong ball. I cannot simply dismiss anything that is in Torah, and I am left with a terrible struggle to make sense, to try to learn something from those passages. For me, these laws have become lessons in humility. They teach me that no matter how much I think I know and understand, there is that much more which remains beyond me. It teaches me to be careful in my own judgments about the text, and about how we allow it (or not) to influence our lives. It teaches me to avoid making assumptions about the commandments that I think I understand, and rather to keep my mind and heart open.

So where does that leave us? With a choice. It is as if God speaks directly to us, saying, "Go ahead. Try it. Test Me! See what happens when you learn more Torah, and when you make Torah more a part of your lives. See how this tradition can actually give you what you need to grow spiritually and find fulfillment. Go ahead!"

We really have nothing to lose, but oh so much to gain.