



5 ways to read the Decalogue

The Ten Commandments is not a list of dry rules; it is the gift of a loving God who frees us! The Jewish people understand this latter point deeply. They remind us not to rush into the Decalogue without pondering the opening verses (20:1-2)... *I am your God who saved you from a terrible slavery.... I bring you freedom, and now here is how to live in that freedom...*

1. Ponder the opening statement about how God has saved his people before proceeding further with the Decalogue. Ponder also 19:4-6 where God describes the Israelites as 'my treasured possession.' Note the tender image of being borne on eagles' wings.

2. Reflect on what this liberation would have meant for the people gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. Note too the brilliance of being given an ethical 'roadmap' at this stage in their journey. It is one thing to be freed; it is another to keep living that life of freedom.

3. Walk through the commandments, noting the way each contributes to a life of harmonious social relations and hence to an experience of liberation.

4. Identify the two categories of commands: those concerning love of God (20:1-11) and those concerning love of neighbor (20:12-17). Think about how one category affects the other.

5. Notice especially the command to keep the sabbath rest. Does this sound like a harsh God; a God who commands us to take 'time out' for rest and renewal?!



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions.

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 18:1—20:23

Yitro: Jethro

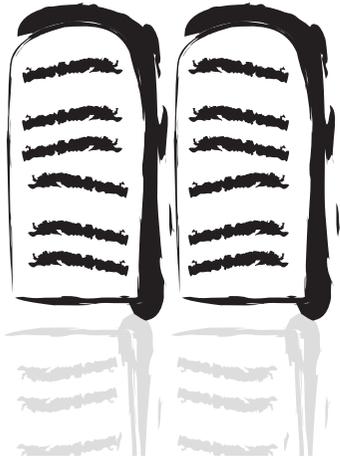
Why reflect on Torah?

"Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham."

(Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*, 4)

Nostra Aetate, 4—the teaching of Vatican II regarding the Church's relationship with the Jewish people—was a watershed moment in interfaith relations. By this document the Church finally, and at the highest level of its teaching authority, put an end to the 'teaching of contempt.' The 'teaching of contempt' is a phrase coined by French historian Jules Isaac to describe an erroneous view permeating Christianity for centuries, namely that Judaism was obsolete and that the Church had replaced the Jews as God's chosen people.

While we live in much happier times, this major shift in our Christian perspective requires continued articulation in grassroots forums. This *Light of Torah* series makes its contribution by inviting parishioners into an experience of biblical reflection which draws from the interpretative brilliance and creative insights of Judaism.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 18:1—20:23

This week's Torah portion offers an opportunity to explore afresh a passage (Exodus 20:1-17) which is lodged in most Catholic memories as the 'Ten Commandments.' Actually, the Hebrew word for 'commandment' (*mitzvah*) is not used here. A more accurate translation would be 'Ten Words.' Translated into Greek, this becomes *deka logoi* which in English becomes 'Decalogue.'

Tasting Torah

Read the Decalogue in Exodus 20:1-17. Read also the scenes which introduce and conclude the Decalogue: 19:18-25 and 20:18-21. Note the drama that surrounds these 'Ten Words'... a smoking, trembling Mount Sinai afire with the Lord's presence... thunder and lightning... a blaring horn... awestruck people held at a safe distance as the prophet Moses goes forward to meet God...

We are left in no doubt that the utterances are those of the all-powerful God of Israel! This is theophany. God's self-revelation take place.

Touching Torah

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2).

Much discussion has taken place among Jewish commentators as to whether verse 2 constitutes a commandment in itself or is simply an introductory phrase. It is certainly a power-packed statement. Before any directive about what we ought do, it tells us *what God has done* for his people. Says Benno Jacob:¹ "By *anokhi* ['I am'] he referred to the *person* of God. He was not an impersonal idea one speaks about or believes in but the living God directing his 'I' to the 'Thou.'"

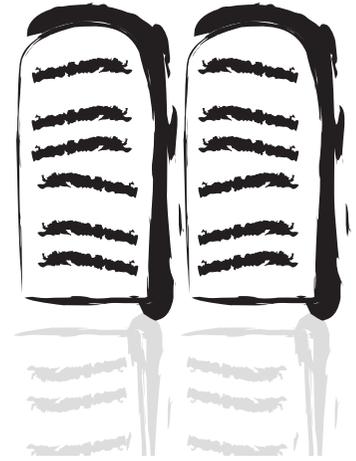
Ponder the meaning of verse 2 and its relationship to all the commandments that follow. What thoughts and insights emerge?

Depthing Torah

Verse 2 makes clear that the Decalogue is situated in the memory of the Exodus event. As Christian scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, "*The God who commands is the God who delivers.*"² This list of rules cannot be reduced to a simple transfer of power from one monarch (Pharaoh) to another (God). Rather, it signifies a complete overturn of the previous social order in Egypt for a radically new order based on the Lord God's care for his people. Liberation from Egypt is not a one-off event, but the beginning of a way of life. This lifestyle is grounded in the living God who is beyond any possibility of exploitation by a humanly devised system or image. It ensures exodus-like social relationships where life, personal dignity and property are protected, and so it is concerned for the most vulnerable in society. It includes the gift of sabbath rest, in sharp contrast to Pharaoh's regime of frenetic production and consumption. In just 17 verses, God outlines a communal vision by which divine revelation is incarnated in history and becomes recognizable by others.

Doing Torah

Who taught you the 'Ten Commandments'? In what way has your understanding of them matured during your life? What insight do you take from today's discussion, and how can it help you to live your life as a Christian?



Faith & Life

A parishioner's reflection:

At some point as a child it dawned on me that God's laws were a bit like my parents' love. Sometimes their rules seemed to spoil my fun, but for a protective reason... ('Don't put your finger in the power-socket, you'll get electrocuted!') From this point in my life, the Ten Commandments began to make sense.

1. German-Jewish bible scholar (d. 1955). See Leibowitz, 307.

2. *Theology of the Old Testament*, 184.

Bibliography: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, 1997); Larsson, *Bound for Freedom* (Mass., 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1991). Scripture: NRSV.