

What Is Your One Commandment?
Parashat Va'etchanan, 5777
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If I were to ask you how many *mitzvot* (commandments) appear in Torah, what would you say? Most people have some notion that our tradition maintains that there are 613 commandments given throughout the Torah. You can actually find lists of each and every one of these *mitzvot* in the Talmud and other rabbinic texts.

I say "lists of *mitzvot*" and not THE list because there are multiple lists which disagree on the order of the *mitzvot*. Rabbis dispute whether a commandment that appears more than once, or that seems to have multiple parts, counts as multiple *mitzvot*, or whether it is only one. But every one of these lists adds up to 613 *mitzvot*.

The question arises, however, whether completing, or even attempting to fulfill, each of these *mitzvot* is a realistic goal. How many of us can say we have fulfilled all of these commandments, or that it is even a goal on our radars? To give you a better sense of the scope of the commandments within the Jewish tradition, I brought a few numbers:

- Of the 613 *mitzvot*, 248 are positive commandments (do's) and 365 are negative commandments (don't's).**
- Of the 613 commandments, only 411 do not require the Temple in order for people to actually do them (202, or about a third, do);**
- Of these 411, only 369 commandments are applicable today (42 pertain to slaves, kings, nazirs, etc.);**
- Of these 369, only 270 apply always, regardless of circumstances (99 require special circumstances, e.g.: "don't be late in fulfilling a vow" applies only if you make a vow; likewise, parapet around roof applies only if you have a usable roof or own a home, etc.)**
- Of these 270, only 244 apply outside Israel. (26 apply only in Israel.)**

So, for most Jews living around the world today, including all of us here in St. Louis, only 244, or 40%, of the *mitzvot* apply to each of us all the time. Some of you may be surprised that we cannot all pursue 613 commandments, but most of us have a sense that some of these *mitzvot* are more critical or central than others, whether to us, to our families and communities, or to the world as a whole. In this week's parashah, Va'etchanan, we are reminded of the עשרת הדיברות, the Ten Commandments, which are held up as central moral tenants both within the Jewish tradition and in other cultures as well.

The idea, therefore, that 613 commandments can be reduced to a manageable few seems well in line with our traditional understanding. In fact, even the rabbis of the Talmud sought to distill

the essence of the system of *mitzvot* to a few tenets that everyone could understand and live by, as they discuss in Tractate Makkot (23b-24a):

*[King] David came and reduced the [613 commandments] to **eleven [principles]**, as it is written [in Psalm 15]: A Psalm of David. Lord, who shall abide in your tent? Who shall dwell in your holy mountain? (1) He who walks uprightly, (2) and does what is right, (3) and speaks the truth in his heart. (4) He who does not slander with his tongue, (5) nor does evil to his neighbor, (6) nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor. (7) In whose eyes a vile person is despised; (8) but he honors those who fear the Lord. (9) He who swears to his own hurt, and does not change. (10) He who does not put out his money at interest, (11) nor takes a bribe against the innocent. 3 He who does these things shall never be moved... [Psalms 15]*

*[The prophet] Isaiah came and reduced them to **six [principles]**, as it is written: (1) He who walks righteously, (2) and speaks uprightly; (3) he who despises the gain of oppression, (4) he who shakes his hands from holding bribes, (5) he who stops his ears from hearing of blood, (6) and shuts his eyes from seeing evil; He shall dwell on high... [Isaiah 33:15-16]*

*[The prophet] Micah came and reduced them to **three [principles]**, as it is written: It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: (1) only to do justice, (2) and to love mercy, (3) and to walk humbly with your God... [Micah 6:8]*

*Again came [the prophet] Isaiah and reduced them to **two [principles]**, as it is said: Thus says the Lord, (1) Keep justice, (2) and do righteousness... [Isa. 56:1]*

*[The prophet] Amos came and reduced them to **one [principle]**, as it is said: For thus says the Lord to the House of Israel, (1) Seek me, and you shall live... [Amos 5:4]*

*But it is [the prophet] Habakuk who came and based them all on **one [principle]**, as it is said: (1) But the righteous shall live by his faith. [Habakuk 2:4]*

One principle, one commandment. The rabbis use our own Biblical leaders and prophets to distill the Jewish faith and tradition down to just one guiding principle. It got me thinking: What is your One Commandment? If you had to make a rule for you to live by, one unbreakable idea, one un-crossable line, what would that be?

I can't answer that question for you. It is something for every one of us to mull over and create for ourselves. I'm not even sure I have a great answer for my own life. But that is the challenge before us today, as it is every day. To walk a spiritual and ethical path through life is to constantly delve deeper into our own minds and lives and hearts to distill meaning from our day to day experiences. Without boundaries or guiding principles, we would be lost in a sea of moment without import, or experiences with no heart and no value.

As we move through this Shabbat, and into the week ahead and the years of our lives, ask yourselves, “What is my One Commandment?” And then be patient, be open, and listen carefully for that still small voice inside you to whisper an answer.

Shabbat Shalom.