



I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD

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What is the first of the Ten Commandments?

It might seem like an odd question, but it's not. Jews and Christians give different answers. The reason is that what we know as "The Ten Commandments" is, in the original Hebrew, "The Ten Statements." And since the Hebrew is the original, we begin with the first statement, which all religions agree, is: "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This statement is so important that none of the other commandments make sense without it.

First, it asserts that God is giving these commandments. Not Moses and not any other human being. Second, God is the One who delivered you from slavery. Again, no human being did this, not even Moses. Therefore you have an obligation to me, God. And what is that obligation? That you live by the following nine commandments.

This is the beginning of what is known as ethical monotheism, the greatest world-changing innovation of the Hebrew Bible. It means two things. Ethical monotheism means that the one God – that's monotheism – is the source of ethics, of morality. Morality, an objective code of right and wrong, does not emanate from human opinion; it emanates from God, and therefore transcends human opinion. The other meaning of ethical monotheism is that what God most wants from us is that we treat other human beings morally. None of the Ten Commandments concern what humans must do "for" God; pre-Ten Commandments religions all believed that people must do a lot "for" their gods – for example, feed them and even sacrifice people to them.

But now, thanks to the Ten Commandments, mankind learned that what God wants is that we be good to our fellow human beings. Even the commandments concerning not having false gods and not carrying God's name in vain are ultimately about morality. The thing we can do "for" God is to treat all his other children decently. Every parent can relate to this. Parents – or at least healthy parents – have indescribable joy when they see their children act lovingly toward one another and indescribable pain when they see their children hurt one another. So, too, God, who is likened to our father in heaven, cares most about how we treat other human beings, all of whom are His children.

The third critical teaching of the First Statement – "I am the Lord your God who took you of Egypt, out of the House of bondage" – is the importance, and the meaning, of freedom.

Note that God is not saying in this introduction to the Ten Commandments that He created the world. It surely would have made a lot of sense for God to introduce the Ten Commandments

with the statement, “I am the Lord your God who created the world.” That is, after all, pretty impressive, and would make sense: “I created the world: You better listen to Me.” But no, the one thing God declares is that He took the Children of Israel out of slavery and into freedom. That’s how much God hates slavery and how important God considers freedom. The Founders of America based their entire view of America on this belief – that God wants us to be free. That is why the most iconic symbol of the American Revolution, the Liberty Bell, has only one sentence inscribed on it – a verse from the Hebrew Bible: “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof.”

But there is one other equally important lesson about freedom imparted by the opening statement of the Ten Commandments: what freedom means. The Giver of the Ten Commandments is, in effect, saying: “I took you out of slavery and into freedom, and these Ten Commandments are the way to make a free society. You cannot be a free people if you do whatever you want.” Freedom comes from moral self-control. There is no other way to achieve it.

And fourth and finally, by telling us that He liberated the Hebrew slaves, God made clear that He cares deeply about human beings. It is impressive to create the world. But what most matters is not only that there is a Creator, but that the Creator cares about His creation.

All of that is in the one statement with which the Ten Commandments begins.

I’m Dennis Prager.