

YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)

Honor thy ... SELF!

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

We're all familiar with the two Tablets of the Ten Commandments. You know, those tall stone tablets, rounded at the top that show up on Jewish illustrations everywhere. Well, it seems that all those artists got the picture wrong. The Tablets, each a cubit (somewhere between 18 and twenty-four inches) high, a cubit wide, and a half-cubit thick, were made of sapphire. They were not rounded. Held together they would form a perfect cube.

Each Tablet was engraved with five of the Ten Commandments. It has been pointed out that the Commandments on the first Tablet deal with man's relationship with G-d, while the second Tablet addresses his relationship his fellow man.

An examination of second tablets seems to agree with that explanation. The prohibitions of 6) murder, 7) adultery, 8) kidnapping, (the Eighth Commandment is not a ban on stealing – that prohibition is in Leviticus, 19:11 – but that's a Torah Talk for some other day.) 9) bearing false witness, and 10) coveting what your neighbor has are all Mitzvahs that govern getting along with other humans.

Most of the first Tablet appears to work as well. 1) Belief in G-d, prohibitions of 2) idol worship and 3) swearing falsely in G-d's name, and 4) observing the Sabbath are all Mitzvahs that tell us how to properly respect our Creator.

So, the explanation of "G-d-Mitzvahs" on Tablet #1 and "Humanity-Mitzvahs" on Tablet #2 is at least 90% accurate. Where we run into trouble is at Commandment #5 – *Honor your father and your mother*. The last time I checked, parents are human beings (although some teenagers might tend to disagree!) What are parents doing on G-d's Tablet?! Shouldn't the Mitzvah of honoring one's parents fall in the category of Mitzvahs between fellow human beings?

The answer is obvious. Our Sages tell us that there are three partners in the creation of a human being. While one's human parents are the physical creators of a child, it is G-d who provides the soul that gives life and spirituality to an otherwise lifeless clump of DNA. One might be tempted to honor only G-d as the REAL Creator. (And, of course, the need to honor one's parents does not override his obligation to honor G-d. If a parent tells a child to violate the Torah, the Torah exempts him from obeying the parent's command. It is the approximate equivalent of a sergeant telling a private to disobey the General. Perhaps that's why honoring one's parents is the LAST of the first five!) The Torah tells us that by honoring our parents, we are honoring G-d as well.

The G-d/parent correlation assists us in relating to both. We refer to G-d in human terms. He is “our Father, our King...” Did you ever wonder what G-d’s voice sounds like? Is it high-pitched or low? Is He a bass or a tenor? Well, apparently, G-d uses different voices when speaking to different prophets. The voice Moses heard at the Burning Bush was that of Amram, his father! I guess if you and I were prophets, you would hear your Dad, and I would hear mine!

Seeing G-d as a father assists us in realizing that the all-powerful Master of the World loves us dearly. It helps us to see that even when He does something that we don’t understand, it is done with love and compassion. It is something that our Father, in His Infinite Wisdom knows to be in our best interest. (See "Divine Patience and Human Acceptance".)

It also allows us to see our parents in the proper light. Our parents are G-d’s partners in bringing us into the world. He would not have made them His partners had He not given them the Divine inspiration and wisdom they would need to guide us. If our parents tell us something, we should not be too quick to dismiss them. (For those times when our parents seem NOT to demonstrate such Divine inspiration, see three paragraphs above, and one paragraph below.)

It also sends an important message to us as parents. You are G-d’s partner in raising your child. G-d is relying on you to do your job. You are not your child’s friend. You are his guide. You are your child’s mentor; you are her rabbi. Take the job seriously. Your child is looking for you for guidance. (Whether he admits it or not!) Don’t let him or her down. Don’t let HIM down. You can be a good role model. You MUST be a good role model. After all, you’ve been given top billing on the Tablets. You represent your Divine Partner.

And, one more thing, moms and dads. Are you scared, frustrated, at your wits’ end? Are you overwhelmed by your parental responsibilities, and unsure what to do next?

Ask your Partner for help. He knows how to assist you. He’s been in this business for quite a while.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz