

THE DECALOGUE AND THE IDENTITY OF GOD

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/uncategorized/2013/06/the-decalogue-and-the-identity-of-god/>

The Orthodox Jew discovers a fascinating intellectual anomaly: a non-rabbinic Jew who approaches the Bible with deep reverence.

June 19, 2013 | Meir Soloveichik

About the author: Meir Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York and director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

This is a response to *The Ten Commandments*, originally published in *Mosaic* in June 2013

In Leon Kass, author of the magisterial *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*, the Orthodox Jew discovers a fascinating intellectual anomaly. On the one hand, unlike many traditionalist Jews, Kass believes that the Bible can be read and understood on its own, as a self-contained text without the mediation of the rabbinic tradition. On the other hand, unlike many non-rabbinic Jewish readers, Kass approaches the Bible with a deep reverence for the ideas contained in it.

This combination can produce brilliant insights that complement the rabbinic reading and that have forever changed my own appreciation of many a biblical passage—even if, at other times, Kass’s approach (for example, in his reading of the figure of Joseph) is one that, in my opinion, no Orthodox Jew can accept. All in all, to read Kass on any subject—classical or contemporary—is an extraordinary experience, and *The Beginning of Wisdom* will stand, I believe, as one of the great works of Jewish thought of our age.

It is therefore with no small excitement that I approached Leon Kass’s “The Ten Commandments.” Here, too, I have found a treasure trove of insights that will continue to enhance my understanding and observance of these commandments. Yet, upon reflection, I wonder whether Kass may not have missed the most important message of these world-famous statements—this time, ironically, because he has not read the Bible literally *enough*.

Let me begin with Kass’s description of God’s opening announcement:

If the identity of the audience [i.e., the children of Israel] is unspecified, that of the speaker is plain: “I [the] Lord am thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

Unfortunately, the translation here is an obstacle to understanding. God never, ever, introduces Himself as “the Lord.” At Sinai, the Almighty introduces Himself to Israel by means of His personal name, a name that Jews have long since ceased to pronounce but that is spelled with the Hebrew letters *yod heh vav heh* or, in their English equivalents, YHVH. So understood, God’s opening salvo on Sinai is most accurately rendered in English as “I am YHVH your God, Who freed you from the land of Egypt.”

To the philosophical reader of the Bible, the point must be shocking. God is telling all Israel that just as human beings have personal names, so, too, does the omnipotent master and creator of the universe. “The God of Israel,” as Michael Wyschogrod puts it, “is not just a Thou. *The God of Israel has a proper name.* There is no fact in Jewish theology more significant than this.”

A little later on, Kass links the prohibition on taking the Lord’s name in vain to the idea that God is a Being who *cannot* be named:

Called by God from out of the burning bush, Moses, in the guise of asking what to respond when the Israelites inquire who sent him, seeks to know God’s name. The profoundly mysterious non-answer he receives—*ehyeh asher ehyeh*, I will be what I will be, or I am that I am—is in fact a rebuke: the Lord is not to be known or captured in any simple act of naming.

Yet, at Sinai, not only does God introduce Himself in an act of personal naming, but that name does in fact capture His essence, if in a way so profound that those who heard it are forbidden ever to use it in vain. If Jews traditionally have been loath to pronounce this “ineffable” name at all, but instead surround it with “endless mystery,” as Wyschogrod writes, that is precisely because it “celebrate[s] the most terrible of all recognitions, the personality of God.”

In Hebrew, Kass rightly notes, the Decalogue is never referred to as the “Ten Commandments” but rather as the “Ten Sayings.” The emphasis in Jewish tradition falls not on their being commanded but on their being *said*: unlike any other revelation in history, what is involved here is the most intimate encounter between a people and God in human history. In the rabbinic understanding, God’s opening salvo, “I am YHVH,” is not first and foremost a philosophical proof for God’s existence (à la Maimonides) or a preamble to the legal constitution that is the Torah (as Kass suggests). Rather, the two tablets containing the Decalogue comprise a betrothal document between Divine Groom and mortal bride. In this deeply personal moment, the omnipresent God who cannot be contained enters the finite space of Sinai to address the children of His beloved Abraham.

If you ever wondered why idolatry is so emphatically condemned by the Decalogue, the answer is that this sin of sins constitutes not only a denial of monotheism but also, as the biblical prophets remind us again and again, the adulterous betrayal by Israel of her Husband.

Does it violate divine dignity to suggest that the Almighty descended upon Sinai not as a monarch meets his subjects but as a groom greets his bride? Is it outrageous to suggest that the words addressed in the divine voice to a people of flesh and blood were first and foremost a

declaration not of law but of love? It would indeed be outrageous, except that the Almighty Himself confirms it:

Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live? . . . Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt; to drive out nations from before thee greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance, as it is this day. (Deuteronomy 4: 33-38)

According to the Talmud, the Decalogue used to be recited along with the *Sh'ma* in the morning prayers, but it was removed when (the rabbis inform us) some began to assert wrongly that it represented the divine law in a more permanent way than the rest of the Torah. As for the monotheistic summons of the *Sh'ma*—"Hear, O Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH alone"—this, along with the Ten Commandments, constitutes the most widely known text in the Hebrew Bible. The paragraph of blessing immediately preceding the *Sh'ma* opens with a proclamation—"with an eternal love hast Thou hast loved us"—and concludes by invoking God as the One who "loves His people Israel." The power and message of the Decalogue has changed the world, but at the heart of the story there still stands the love of Him who has sustained his people Israel throughout the centuries.

Does any of this detract from Leon Kass's incisive exegesis of the tenets comprising the Decalogue—in particular, his truly brilliant reading of the Sabbath commandment and of the obligation to honor one's parents? Not at all. But from the point of view of Jewish theology, I believe Kass's reading would only be strengthened by taking into account the role that covenantal love plays in the opening declaration of the Decalogue and its place in the self-understanding of countless Jewish generations.

Meir Soloveichik, the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, has recently been appointed Rabbi of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel.