

“Ahseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”
Part Two: The First Spiritual Principle ~ Getting your Priorities Straight

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Exodus 20:1-3 ~ “Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.”



Marc Chagall, Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments, 1958

I want to share a love story this morning. Once upon a time beyond time and a space beyond space there was a dynamic God who was all alone. This God's essence was a love that was so strong, so brilliant, so tender, so generous, so extravagant that God was compelled to express it. The problem was that for this love truly to be complete it needed not only to give love but also to receive it. So this love overflowed outward from the heart of God and manifest itself through creative acts. As God spoke out the fierce love that was in God's heart a universe was created that was filled with the galaxies and solar systems, planets including one known as earth, sky, waters, day, night, time, vegetation, animals, and human beings. This creative manifestation of love was not a one time thing but continues and pulsates eternally. All we see around us was created in love and is intended to be the arena in which God could love and be loved in return.

The universe was magnificent with brilliant colors, sights, smells, textures, sunrises, sunsets, oceans teeming with fish, skies filled with birds, an abundance of plant life to satisfy the palette and delight the senses, dinosaurs, insects (not sure why God created mosquitoes?), all kinds of animals. But of all the magnificent things that God created, it was human beings who had souls most like God because they were able to love, reason, and choose. Because of these qualities, human beings were uniquely gifted to respond to the love of their Creator by freely accepting that God loved them and then by loving God in return. They were to be two hearts joined in one. This is what is known of as the "first love."

This first love is the unconditional and unlimited love that God has for us. We come into the world as individuals whom God called into being, whom God intended to live healthily and joyfully upon earth, and whom God deeply loves and cherishes. As Psalm 139:13-14 so beautifully says:

For it was you who formed my inward parts;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Each of us is God's Beloved. Scripture tells us that we are called by name, molded in the depths of the earth, knit together in our mother's womb, carved in the palms of God's hand, the apple of God's eye, hidden in the shadows of God's wings. Wherever we go, God goes with us. We belong to God.

God is our first love and should always be our priority. Yet beyond this first original love, there is also a second love. This second love is the love we receive from our parents and family members, spouses, children, friends, co-workers, neighbors. This second love can disappoint us because, behind its many expressions, there is always the possibility of rejection and betrayal. This second love can lead us off course. When our second love relationships are not guided by our first love, our priorities go astray.

Therefore, the foundational first spiritual principle guiding our life must be **“you shall have no other gods before me.”** While God might be described in many ways in different historical epochs and traditions, there is only one God, who created the heavens and the earth, who sustains us with every breath we take, who is the energy holding the universe together, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and who also is the personal presence who has taken up residence in our souls, the *Shekhinah* (the indwelling Presence of God), which in the Christian tradition we call the Holy Spirit. This is the God of the universe, of Creation, the Exodus, of the Prophets, of the Wisdom Literature, of Bethlehem, of Galilee, of Calvary, of the empty tomb, of the day of Pentecost, of all that has happened subsequently. This is the God who is present with us in this time of global pandemic, of economic distress, of polarization. This is the God whose love will never let us go! As the Apostle Paul so beautifully reminds us: ³⁸ ***For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)***

Three thousand five hundred years ago, a struggling and weary group of Israelites were wandering through the desert under their leader Moses. They had amnesia. They had forgotten the God who had created them, who only three months earlier had freed them from slavery in Egypt, and the Hebrew scriptures say they had turned to false gods like the Canaanite Baal. They had forgotten their first great love. They were caught up in their second loves and the jealousy and bickering and betrayals that went along with them. As I said, they had amnesia. They were lost. They were wandering in the desert and, more importantly, they were wandering in their minds and souls. They had lost their spiritual compass.

J. Ellsworth Kalas says that “Priority is another name for God. When we draw up our little list of the things that matter most, that which we designate Number One is god” (*The Ten Commandments from the Back Side*, p. 18) Our false gods are all the things and priorities that take our eyes off God.

There are many false gods. They are what we love, seek, serve, and what we allow to control us. They are what we focus on. Our false gods are not so much false perceptions of god but are things like clinging onto possessions, money, status, success, position. We can get sucked into the virtual world to the extent that it becomes more real to us than the actual world of time and space we live in. Staying busy and feeling accomplished can be a false god. There can be the second love relationships with others that keep us from our first love. We allow others to determine our sense of worth and determine our path. We dampen or avoid our pain and loneliness through alcohol, drugs, sex, and creature comforts. We can get seduced by the need to feel relevant, to be spectacular, to be popular, to be powerful (on this see Henri J.M. Nouwen's brilliant book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*). These can all be false gods that prevent us from having our spiritual compass directed toward God's call in our lives to be everything God created us uniquely to be and to grow in our first love relationship. They prevent us from hearing God clearly.

Now God could have abandoned the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. But God loved them too much to allow that to happen. So God called Moses up to Mt. Sinai for a long talk. At this meeting God explained to Moses the ten spiritual principles by which the Israelites were to live their lives. When we want to make some important points, when we want someone really to hear what we have to say, we often preface our remarks, don't we? So before God gave them what have come to be known as the Ten Commandments that could be counted off on one's ten fingers, perhaps better known as the ten vows, or the ten words, or the ten spiritual principles for living, God prefaced his remarks to set the stage for what was to come. God wanted to prepare their hearts so that they would listen more carefully for what was to follow.

It is interesting to me that the Jewish people order their commandments differently than Christians. Christians believe that the first commandment is ***"to have no other gods before me."*** The Jews, on the other hand, believe that God's preface or prologue is the first commandment, which reads: ***"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of [Mitzrayim] Egypt, out of the land of slavery"*** (Exodus 20:2). *Mitzrayim* has two meanings. It can either mean the actual physical geographical location of Egypt that the Israelites escaped from on their journey to the Promised Land. But it also can mean the narrow places in life. A literal translation is ***"I am HaShem, the One who is and will always be your God, who can bring you out of the narrow way of seeing things, out of your enslavements and worries."***

In other words, *Mitzrayim* can be all of those places in life where we feel restricted, constricted, limited, narrowed, and prevented from becoming everything we can be. All the ways we feel stuck.

Imagine yourself wandering through the Sinai desert, exhausted and confused. Geographically and emotionally and spiritually lost and bereft. Your leader Moses has been unavailable for forty days. You have time to think back on the many years of slavery in Egypt. You reflect on the many places even your spirit seems enslaved, where there is a lack of spaciousness and your life feels narrow and constricted. Where you feel stagnant and stuck. You are filled with anxiety and worry. Where will your next meal come from when the economy is in a downward spiral and you are furloughed or have lost your job? What will happen when the enhanced unemployment benefits come to an end that have sustained your family through this difficult time? How will you pay your rent or mortgage now that the rent deferment has ended? What if you or a loved one contracts Covid-19? Should you send your child back to school? If you are a teacher, should you even agree to go back into the classroom?

You are a slave to your emotions. You live in a state of heightened anxiety as your monkey mind jumps from one real or imagined concern to another. You have insomnia as you toss and turn at night. You are enslaved by resentments, jealousies, anger, bitterness, and especially fear. You are trapped by certain habits and ways of doing things. Perhaps you are imprisoned by addictions. Or you seek to bypass your misery by losing yourself in the company of others, so you don't have to face your own loneliness and pain? There is something known as spiritual bypassing too. And then down Moses comes from the mountain carrying two stone tablets and he says that he has a message from God. And the message begins by asking you to think back and **REMEMBER!**

Joan Chittister, who calls this first commandment “the law of reflection,” says that “the power of the commandment lies in the fact that it calls us back to remember what is really ultimate, really important in our lives” (*The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart* [Marykoll: Orbis, 2006], p. 15). In other words, the first spiritual principle takes its starting point from remembering who God is and what God has done. All of the other commandments flow from this. Indeed, I don't even think we can be successful in living out the other commandments or spiritual principles if we don't get this one right.

God prefaces God's remarks by saying: REMEMBER WHO I AM! First of all, ***"I am the Lord YOUR God ..."*** Note the word YOUR! It is singular. Not the plural you like "I am the Lord y'all's God" or as they would have said in Sparta, TN, "I am the Lord of you'uns God." Rather "I am the Lord YOUR (singular) God." These words were not just spoken to Moses and the people who stood at Mt. Sinai but they are addressed to each one of us individually. They were not intended just for one nation, but for all peoples everywhere, and for all generations, not just those who were alive during the Exodus from Egypt.

REMEMBER WHO I AM! ***"I am the Lord your God ..."*** What is God's character? A much repeated characterization of God in the Hebrew scriptures contains the following beautiful description: ***"I am a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"*** (Exodus 34:6, cf. Ps 86:5, 15; Ps. 103:8; Ps. 145:8, Neh 9:31; Num 14:16, Jonah 4:2). When I am giving you these ten commandments, these ten words, I want you to **remember** who they are coming from. They are not coming from a dictator, a jail keeper, a God full of vengeance and wrath but one who loves you and cares about you. One whose heart is filled with mercy, grace, steadfast love, faithfulness, who is slow to anger.

REMEMBER WHO I AM! ***"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Mitzrayim, out of the land of slavery."*** I am not a remote God, a spiritual principle, a mere idea. I am not a God who created the world and then withdrew, leaving it to its own devices. I am the God who has been active in your lives. "I am HaShem who has helped you in the past and who cares about your freedom." I brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I came through for you! I was there for you! I want your life to be full and free and abundant. And I want to be there for you in the future. I love you. I care about the narrow places in your lives, the Egypts, the Mitzrayim. I am the one who can guide you through all the narrow, confining, restricting, dangerous places in your life into promised land of true, spacious internal freedom where you will fully realize that you are my Beloved Child, eternally surrounded by the love that will never, ever let you go.

The First Commandment or foundational spiritual principle by which we should live out our lives tells us that ***"You shall have no other gods before me."*** It can lead to our transformation when we "examine again and again what it is that we have put before God in our lives, and what we have made our gods instead (Chittister, p. 19) This is the challenge to get our priorities straight.

This is the commandment, the word, the spiritual principle that decides the priorities and orientation of our whole lives, without which the other commandments are not even really possible. The power of this commandment lies in the fact that it calls us back to remember what is really ultimate, really important in life. Is God, as the great theologian Paul Tillich said, our ultimate concern?

And this commandment begs the question: “Will you be mine?”

God asks us “will you have other gods before me?”

“Will you be mine?”

If you take this first commandment seriously, making it the foundational spiritual principle of your life, you will grow into being able to say without hesitation: You, God, are my first love, my priority, the guiding principle in my life, my polar star, the divine presence deep in my soul. You are the power I draw on when I am weak. You are the still, small voice that encourages, comforts, challenges, and convicts by speaking out words of love, hope, and encouragement deep beneath the surface, silencing all the false voices of fear, greed, envy, and power that clamor to be heard and seduce us. You are the one who is and will always be my God, who has helped me in the past through the many narrow places in my life and who cares about my present and my future. I will daily strive to have no other God before you and to be guided by your voice rather than the other voices (both internal and external) that clamor for my attention in this world!

Closing Prayer: You are the Lord my God. May I fine tune my spiritual compass through spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, worship, devotional reading, and conversations with others who are seeking to grow in their first love relationship with you, God, remember all the ways you are present in my life as I seek to always have no other gods before you. Amen.