

Light Insight

The Human Jungle

Why were the Ten Commandments given on two tablets of stone? Why wasn't one enough?

There's a difference between the five on the first tablet and the five on the second tablet. A quick examination of the verses detailing the first five show that each one is more than just a simple explanation of the commandment. Included with each commandment on the first tablet is the explicit reward for keeping them and/or the punishment for failing to keep them. The second five commandments, on the second tablet, are stated without mention of reward and punishment. Three out of five of them are just two words long, such as: "Don't kill." What's the difference?

The first five are commandments regarding a person honoring the Creator: Believing in G-d, not making idols, not using G-d's name for no purpose, observing the Shabbat. These first commandments are accompanied by

descriptions of reward and punishment, in order to clarify for us the obligation of upholding them and the benefit of doing so, which would otherwise be unknown to us.

The second group of commandments are all for the benefit of people. The prohibitions against murder, kidnapping, adultery and false testimony are fundamental to the harmonious operation of society. When they are followed, their mere performance results in a life of peace, i.e. reward is intrinsic to their performance. Similarly, failure to observe the commandments between man and fellow man creates a society which is little more than a jungle — a punishment in itself.

Wining And Dining

‘Remember the day of Shabbos to sanctify it... Because six days G-d made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day..." (The Fourth

Commandment)

Once upon a time, a prince was captured by his father's enemies. After a long time, the king managed to get a secret message to the prince encouraging him not to give up, and to retain his princely manner even amidst the wolves of prey among whom the prince was forced to live. Soon, the message said, the king would obtain his son's release, either through war or peaceful means.

The prince was overjoyed and wished to celebrate, but he could not, of course, reveal the secret of his joy. Therefore, he invited his lowly companions to the local inn and ordered drinks for everyone. They celebrated because of the wine and liquor, while the prince celebrated because of his father's letter.

Similarly on Shabbos, our bodies feast with the good food and drink, but our souls are really the ones with reason to celebrate. We indulge a little in a fine candle-lit meal, a glass of wine, maybe a nap... but the main celebration is the spiritual festivity of recognizing the dominion of our Creator.

T H E O H R S O M A Y A C H H O M E P A G E

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ETHICS of the FATHERS

*“The Torah is acquired through forty-eight attributes...
(number 46) making his rabbi wise...”*

In order for a student to have a real interest in learning from a rabbi he must respect him as a wise and knowledgeable teacher. Without a healthy respect for a teacher, the student will not learn what the teacher has to offer him. One important way to acquire Torah, therefore, is by “making his rabbi wise” — considering

him wise and worth learning from.

Another perspective of this mishnah is based on a confession made by one of the Sages of the Talmud. He admitted that he learned more from his students than he did from his teachers or his peers. A student who challenges his rabbi with questions stimulates him to answer and opens up an opportunity for increased wisdom on the part of the teacher. In turn, the stimulation the student provides by challenging his rabbi enables the student to acquire the Torah wisdom he seeks also.

Response Line

Snipping Whippersnappers

Elazar wrote:

I am looking for source material about the Jewish tradition of the ‘upsherin’ or cutting a boy’s hair at three years old. Where does the term ‘upsherin’ originate from, and what does it involve?

Dear Elazar,

‘Upsherin’ is a Yiddish word that means ‘cutting off.’ Cutting a boy’s hair at age three is a wide-spread Jewish custom. Three is also when a boy usually starts wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit, if he doesn’t already wear them.

By age three, a child usually understands enough to begin learning about the commandments. The first haircut is a way to teach the child about the prohibition against too closely cropping the hair on the sides of the head.

On a deeper level, the custom to wait until age three to begin cutting

all fruits which grow during the first three years are ‘*orlah*’ — off-limits.

The Torah is the Tree of Life. Just as a tree is off-limits in its first three years, so too, the Torah is ‘off-limits’ to a child until age three, due to the child’s limited understanding. At three, when the child’s understanding has developed, then his parents can start teaching him the Torah and he can start doing some of its commandments. He finally gets to taste the sweet fruits from the Tree of Life.

Some people honor the first haircut with a festive celebration. They express thanks to G-d for allowing them to teach Torah to their child. Many are accustomed to take their child to a great Torah scholar who cuts the first snip. Not everyone has this custom, however. I found this out when my son was about to turn three, and I approached a renowned Jerusalem rabbi, asking if he would like to take the first snip. “*Ani lo*

a child’s hair is rooted in the mitzvah of ‘*orlah*.’ The Torah says if you plant a tree,

sapar,” he said — “I’m not a barber.”

Some people weigh the cut hair and give that weight in gold or silver to charity, especially a charity which promotes Torah study.

After everyone takes a snip, the child is usually taken to a barber to finish the job.

Which reminds me of a story... A man and little boy walk into a barber shop together. “Billy,” says the man, “I’ll get my hair cut first, and then it will be your turn.” The man sits down in the barber’s chair and gets his hair cut.

Then the man stands up, picks up the little boy and sets him down in the barber’s chair. “Make it nice and short,” says the man to the barber. Then to the little boy he says, “Billy, you sit real still while the barber cuts your hair. I’m going next door to the pharmacy for a few minutes.”

When the barber finishes cutting the boy’s hair, he says, “Little boy, shouldn’t your father be back by now?”

“That’s not my father,” says the little boy. “He’s just some nice man who said, ‘Come with me little boy, and we’ll both get a free haircut’.”