

עֲשֵׂרַת הַדְּבָרִים

Word Number Nine – לֹא תַעֲנֶה

THE NINTH WORD IS: *lo ta'aneh*

“You shall not bear false witness”

The ninth word of the Ten Words is: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). This commandment is the basis for justice within the community. If a group of people consistently disregards this commandment, there will be no way for justice to prevail.

We’ve all experienced what it is like to have someone bear a false witness against us. It is the worst kind of *leshon hara*, “evil speech” or “gossip,” because it not only makes us look bad to others, it also may cause us harm legally. For if a false witness is made against us before the judges, we may be punished for something we did not do.

What would cause a person to “bear false witness?” First, bearing a false witness may come from hatred. When a person has hatred in his heart for another person, he may bear a false witness against him in hopes of hurting him or causing him trouble. In this case, bearing a false witness is like murder, for Yeshua taught us that if we hate our brother, we have engaged in murder:

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.” Matt. 5:21–22

Secondly, a person could bear a false witness because he does not have all of the facts. When we say that we know something to have happened, but we actually did not see it happen with our own eyes, or we only have heard that it happened from someone else, we may not have all of the facts, or we might be wrong. Even if we think it might have happened, to give testimony before the judges without knowing for sure could cause us to bear a false witness. Therefore, if we give testimony to someone who is making the decision about what a person has done, we must make sure we are a first hand witness. If we only *think* something has happened, or if we have only *heard* that something has happened without actually seeing it ourselves, we cannot present ourselves as a witness.

Thirdly, if the matter in question is something that may bring a capital punishment upon the person who is appearing before the judges, we must be certain that our witness can be verified by a second witness. That second witness may be physical evidence or it may be a second person who comes forward as a witness. But if there is only circumstantial evidence, we are not allowed to testify against a person who is charged with a crime that would draw the death penalty.

Fourthly, we may break this commandment if we remain silent when our testimony would either prove the accused innocent or guilty. If we are a witness to the truth, we cannot remain silent. Thus, we must speak the truth against the guilty, and we must strive to guard the reputation of the innocent. In this way we honor God by keeping His commandments.

