

עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים

The Ten Words

THE TEN WORDS are usually called the “Ten Commandments,” but in the Torah, the actual Hebrew says “ten words” or “ten things.” This means that the list of ten words is meant to be understood as a kind of “table of contents” for the whole Torah—a kind of “abbreviated list” that helps us remember the teaching God has given us to live by.



Our teacher, Moshe, was instructed by God to take two stone tablets with him as he ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah from God. We usually think of these two stone tablets like the picture here. But in reality, they were most likely very different. First, they were probably much smaller than we think. Many stone tablets have been found in archaeological digs that measure 6 inches square and smaller. Secondly, we often think that God wrote five of the words on one tablet, and the remaining five on the second tablet of stone. But more than likely, He wrote all ten words on both stones. In other words, He made two copies. This was standard procedure in covenant making: one copy was made to be deposited in the royal archives as an official witness of the covenant, and the other copy was given to the Vassal (lesser king) so that he could remember and do the things that the covenant required. In fact, that’s exactly what Moshe did: one copy was put in the Ark of the Covenant and resided before the LORD in the Tabernacle, the dwelling of the Great King. The other copy was probably retained by Moshe so that he could refer to it as he lead Israel (who fulfilled the role of the Vassal in this covenant arrangement). When Israel finally had Kings ruling over her, it was the requirement that the King have his own copy of the Torah, fulfilling the role of the leader of Israel even as Moshe did originally.

There is a question how the Ten Words should be numbered: what is the First Word? Since the Christian Church viewed the Ten as commandments, they did not consider the first line, “I am HaShem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” as part of the Ten. But the Synagogue always considered this to be the First Word, identifying HaShem and His relationship to Israel, as the foundation for why the remaining Words should be obeyed. Since HaShem is the One who redeemed us from Egypt and from the slavery we were under there, then He is our Master and King, and we are obligated to do what He says. But even more than that, since He has redeemed us at great cost to Himself, we have come so to love Him that we are more than willing to following Him and do what He commands.