

**“Maimonides 613 Series”**  
**The Ten Commandments:**  
**Second Commandment: Idol Worship**

**Exodus 20:3**

לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלַּיִנִּי

“You shall not have the gods of others in My presence”

**Maimonides Negative Commandment #1**

The first prohibition is that we are forbidden from entertaining the thought that there is any deity other than G-d. The source of this prohibition is G-d's 'statement', "Do not have any other gods before me."

**Stone Idols, Starry Idols**

A story is told in the Talmud: the Sages living in Rome were asked, “If G-d truly despises idolatry, why doesn't He destroy all the idols?” The Sages replied, “If the idolaters only served inanimate objects, like stones and wood, He would have destroyed them. But they also serve cosmic bodies, like the sun and the moon. G-d will not destroy those bodies on behalf of the fools who worship them.” The idolaters said, “If that is the case, let G-d only destroy those idols made of stone and wood and allow the idols like the sun and moon to exist.” The Sages answered, “If G-d destroyed only those idols, those who worship the sun and moon would say, 'Look! Our idols are truly gods and stronger than yours!’”

***Pshat* – The Surface Level**

How can we call an idol a “god” - even an “other god”? Regarding the Second Commandment, Rashi teaches that the terminology refers to the fact that others consider them to be gods, even though they have no G-dly qualities whatsoever. He gives a second interpretation--that these idols are “strange and foreign gods,” meaning that they neither know their worshippers nor answer their prayers because they have no power to answer. In contrast, when a person calls upon the true G-d, their prayers are answered, like when the Jews prayed at the Sea of Reeds and it was split for them.

The Alter Rebbe gives yet another interpretation in the Tanya: the Hebrew word for “other”, *acher*, is related to the word *achorayim*, “hinder part”, which refers to the external level of G-d's Will. Every single thing in the world comes from G-d's energy

and vitality. So why do idols exist? G-d only allows them to exist through the hind part of His Will. This is likened to being compelled to give something to your enemy; when you do so, you throw it over your shoulder and turn your face away. G-d does not really desire idols, but He creates them for the sake of free choice.

### ***Remez– The Level of Hints***

On the Level of Hints, this commandment can be interpreted not *just* as a commandment, but as a promise, as it is stated in the future tense. G-d is promising us that the time will come when the world will not have any other gods. About the times of Moshiach, it is written that G-d will remove the powers of impurity from the world and the foreign gods from the face of the earth.

In *Midrash Tehillim*, it says that in the future, G-d will breathe life and spirit into the idols. Then the idols will bow down to G-d. After that they will rise and turn to those who worshipped them, saying, “Woe, woe unto you who spurned the Creator of the Universe and bowed to lifeless forms!”

### ***Drush – The Halachic Level***

The Rambam, in *Sefer haMitzvos*, lists the very first negative commandment as, “Do not even entertain the thought that there is any deity other than G-d.” He quotes the Gemara, which says that on Sinai, G-d gave all 613 commandments, not just ten. He taught Moshe every single one over the course of forty days. How do we know it was 613 commandments? The word “Torah” has the numerical value of 611. We add to that two more, the First and Second Commandments, which G-d Himself spoke. Why did G-d only speak these two commandments? The Alter Rebbe writes in the Tanya that the First Commandment, “I am the Lord your G-d,” is the source and basis of all 248 positive commandments. The Second Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” is the source of all 365 negative commandments. Every time a person violates a negative commandment, it is like idol worship – the person is saying their actions are more important to them than G-d.

### ***Sod – The Level of Secrets***

The Shaloh haKadosh asks in his commentary on the Torah, why does G-d stipulate, “You shall have no other gods before Me *as long as I live?*” We do not find this stipulation with any other mitzvah. The Shaloh says that we can understand this by understanding the history of idolatry. Rambam says in the Laws of Idolatry, that idolatry came into the world in the early days of Enosh. The people reasoned that since G-d

created the sun and moon, and they fulfill His Will and provide us with warmth and guidance, we should acknowledge and thank them for all the good they do for us. This is similar to the concept of a minister, who is appointed by the king to take care of a city. The citizens don't only thank the king, they also thank the ministers for doing the king's will. Eventually, they went on to say that the sun and moon were themselves gods.

The Shaloh explains that G-d is different from all other kings. Kings of flesh and blood cannot be in all places at all times, and therefore they need ministers to represent them, ministers who choose to do their will. G-d, however, is omnipresent. He does not need ministers – no sun, no moon, no angels – to represent Him. The sun and moon are simply the hatchet in the hand of the woodcutter, without the ability to choose whether or not to do their job. Just as we do not thank the hammer for banging in the nail or the hatchet for felling the tree, neither do we thank the sun and moon. We thank G-d Himself. This is why, the Shaloh concludes, G-d says, “...as long as I live.” G-d lives eternally – He was, is, and always will be. He is eternal, and therefore we bow down only to Him.

There is another belief that G-d *can* do everything, but because He is infinite and all-powerful, beyond time and space, He instead creates spirits and mediums like the sun and moon to take care of the lower realms. Why would He lower Himself to deal with the nitty-gritty details of humans? The Second Commandment teaches us that this is untrue – G-d Himself loves, cares for, and is concerned about the welfare of every human being, every animal, and every creation. He Himself provides for all our needs. Therefore, there is no reason to bow down to anything else – G-d takes care of all.

### ***Chassidus – The Deepest Level***

On the verse preceding the Ten Commandments, “And G-d spoke all these words,” the Mechilta says that G-d spoke all Ten Commandments in one single word. If this is so, why does the Torah need to enumerate every commandment separately? The answer: because we, as humans, cannot understand all ten compacted into one word, so each is spelled out for us. There is a similar verse in Tehillim that says, “G-d said one word and we heard two things.” According to this view, G-d said the First and Second Commandments at once. Why? If man needs to learn from G-d, and cannot understand multiple things said at once, what is G-d’s purpose in saying all of the Ten Commandments at once, or the first two together?

The Answer is: G-d is the Giver; G-d is One. Therefore, everything He says, does, and creates is one. The concept of oneness, however, is only applicable when we refer to the point-of-view of the Giver. The receivers, on the other hand, are finite and dual in nature; we cannot internalize this oneness. G-d therefore says, “I am the Lord your G-d” and “You shall have no other gods before me” as two separate statements because we, as humans, need to divide them into two groups – positive and negative. When a person performs a positive commandment, such as eating matzah on Pesach, he or she brings a new light and new blessing into the world. A negative commandment has a different effect on the world: when a person desires to steal or to eat *treif*, and resists this desire, at the moment a person chooses not to violate the negative mitzvah, G-d destroys the negative powers in the world. When we negate the violation of a negative commandment, impurity is negated in the world.

At first glance, each type of mitzvah seems to have a different function, yet G-d said them together. Why? Because positive and negative commandments are truly one. When you perform a positive commandment, you bring light into the world; when you obey a negative commandment, you bring an even greater light into the world, a light so powerful that one can only harness it by *not doing*. Both positive and negative commandments have the effect of illuminating creation; both are about G-d bringing his light into the world. That is why G-d said one utterance that encapsulated both types of commandments.

This concept answers another question: when Moshiach comes, the Torah will continue to be in effect just as it is now. But we also know that when Moshiach comes, G-d will remove impurity from the world, and there will be no evil. No sin, no death, no war. If evil will be eradicated, what will the purpose of the 365 negative commandments be? The answer: because, as we said above, even when it comes to negative commandments, the purpose is to elicit a positive light. Therefore the purpose of the First and Second Commandments being said together is to remind us that everything is one. Whether performing a positive or negative commandment, we have only one thought in mind – to bring light into this world.

The word *mitzvah* is related to the word *tzavta*, which means “to bind together.” Whether we are actively performing a mitzvah – lighting Shabbos candles, putting on tefillin – or *not doing*, refraining from violating a prohibition, we are connecting and binding ourselves to G-d. May we merit to see this ultimate oneness revealed to our fleshly eyes immediately, with the coming of Moshiach, amen!