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# The Ten Commandments for 21st-Century Leaders

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*It is one thing to take the Jews out of Egypt.*

*It is quite another to take Egypt out of the Jews.*

Rabbi Menachem Mendel  
Morgensztern of Kotsk  
(the Kotsker Rebbe, 1787-1859)

*Abstract: Leadership is in crisis. In this age of a border-less economy and social networks, ethics violations and regulatory pressures, instant media and data leaks, the rules have changed. The days of the great leader-Winston Churchill or John F. Kennedy, Jack Welch or Sepp Blatter-may be numbered. The explosion of free markets worldwide, the unparalleled access to knowledge through the Internet, the democratization of regimes, and the flattening of organizational hierarchies give ordinary people the opportunity to express leadership like never before: We can now shape our destinies, and those of our organizations and societies, to an unprecedented extent. Democracy and the cyber age call for a new kind of leadership-but what kind? What does it mean to be a leader in the 21st century? In its search for the newest paradigm, the literature on ethical and effective leadership has largely ignored a timeless Judeo-Christian foundation: the Ten Commandments. Based on the book *The**

*Rabbi and the CEO: The Ten Commandments for 21st-Century Leaders, this article applies each of the Ten Commandments to leadership today, with surprising results. Far from being dusty and outdated, the Ten Commandments prove to be of cutting-edge relevance as a compass for today's leaders and managers of all stripes. Properly harnessed, each of the Ten Commandments provides both principled and practical tools for 21st-century game changers.*

*Keywords: applied ethics, leadership, management, ten commandments, Judeo-Christian, change.*

When leaders set out to change the game - be it strategic change, innovation, transformation or even revolution - they might be tempted by the latest change theories.

Since the 1950s, change models have come and gone. Unfreezing/refreezing, change agents, garbage in, garbage out, culture, human ware, reengineering, population ecology, adaptive learning<sup>1</sup> ... and the list goes on.

But the rules have changed. Under globalization, flattening organizations and the Internet, many change methods have proven obsolete in a dynamic world of uncertainty and black swans. Counter-intuitive as it sounds, we can learn from an age-old story of transformation: the exodus from Egypt, forty years in the wilderness, and the quest for the Promised Land.

The story goes that God searched whom to give the Ten Commandments to. One nation asked: "What does it say?" God said, "No adultery." They shrugged, "That's a bit steep." The next asked, "What's written here?" God said, "Do not steal." They said, "Fuhgetaboutit" (Brooklynese for "Forget about it"). God finally offered the Commandments to the Jews, who asked, "How much do they cost?" God said, "Nothing." The Jews said, "OK, we'll take ten."

Seriously, my work with clients of all stripes has shown, at least since the 2008 financial crisis: The Ten Commandments, far from dusty and irrelevant today, can serve as an ethical compass and an effective roadmap for changing the game-any game.

How so? Let us take a look.

The First Commandment says, "*I am Lord your God who took you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*"

Leaders start with themselves and their own self-knowledge, freeing themselves from limiting mindsets. The Hebrew word for ancient "Egypt" is *mitzraim*, meaning literally "the narrows" or constraints.

From Nero to Hitler to Kenneth Lay of Enron, leaders who lacked self-awareness, who did not check their own assumptions, wrought havoc. First, leaders must check their assumptions: Are they enslaved by outdated beliefs or blind spots? Do they see themselves as a victim reacting to circumstances, or as a proactive author of their destiny?

In the Second Commandment, "*You shall have no Idols,*" leaders do not follow false gods or external expectations, but their own, authentic vision. Money, power or fame is not ends, only means for a greater good or goal. The eighteenth-century Rabbi Zusya said famously, "In the world to come, I shall not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I shall be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"<sup>2</sup> It is incumbent on each of us to reveal our unique purpose and then create something unprecedented.

As Proverbs says, "Where there is no vision, people perish."<sup>3</sup> Without a future, you and those around you will die-if not physically, then at least as stakeholders in the common future. In Jewish thought, the rooster embodies the capacity to stand in the future; it is

the only animal that wakes up while it is still night. In that sense, the rooster is a symbol for leadership: It can see the light while others still live in darkness. Like the rooster, leaders must see the future before others do. The Talmud asks, "Who is wise?" and gives its own answer: "He who sees what is to be born."<sup>4</sup> But few spend enough time or resources on standing in the future; they are consumed by running the present-which is by necessity based on current circumstances and hence on the past.

One man who had a rude awakening from his idols was Alfred Nobel, who had amassed a fortune with war ammunition, including dynamite. When his brother died, one newspaper confused the two. So one morning, Nobel got a rare opportunity: to read his own obituary. It was not pretty. The article described him as the man responsible for killing more people than anyone, ever.

Nobel realized: The world would remember him for this death-laden legacy, and he was loath to leave such a legacy. He established the Nobel Prize, soon the ultimate honor in the fields of literature, science-and peace. Today Nobel's legacy is not chiefly his contribution to war and death, but to peace and life.

The Third Commandment, "*Don't use my name in vain,*" shows how to

lead through language. We tend to use words carelessly, in blame or slander, excuses or complaints. But the Hebrew word *davar* means both "speak" and "thing," so our language might well bring about the reality we speak. If we say, "I must go to work," the word "must" leaves us no choice and puts us into a prison of our own making. Our words are either bricks that build, or weapons that destroy. Leaders succeed or fail not primarily through technical skills or even strategic thinking, but by communicating effectively, which makes the difference between a vision achieved and a fiasco.

Communication is no one-way street. But one CEO, reminded of the importance of two-way communication, snapped: "*Of course I use two-way communication! I communicate to my people both verbally and in writing.*" He had no inkling of that other, crucial dimension of communication: listening.

According to tradition, God dictated the entire Torah to Moses, who listened carefully, then transcribed the dictation word for word. Powerful listening can lead to lasting accomplishments.

The Fourth Commandment, "*Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it,*" is about taking time out to reflect on what is essential and lasting. In the barrage of e-mails, meetings, and

decisions we will lose our center or go under-unless we step back from the action periodically.

Stillness has been the hallmark of the most distinguished leaders, from Churchill to Mandela, from Gandhi to Gates, who regularly goes off the grid for “think weeks.”<sup>5</sup> In a 24/7 world, the ancient institution of the Sabbath is one of the most ingenious solutions for the prevention of burnout and the adjustment of your moral compass.

The Fifth Commandment is, “*Honor your father and mother.*” We take so much for granted—our parents, the people with whom we work and live, and the small details pivotal to large accomplishments. But whatever (and whoever) leaders appreciate gives them power.

Appreciation has a dual meaning: “gaining in value” and “acknowledgment.” Appreciation is crucial in a world of highly mobile knowledge workers whose intellectual capital goes home with them every night (if they are not already telecommuting from home); they will jump ship the moment they feel the company does not care enough. The more leaders appreciate people and what they bring to the table, the more they *will* bring to the table.

In the Sixth Commandment, “*You shall not kill,*” leaders regulate their anger and frustration—when they face

tough circumstances or choices, things can get quite emotional—and channel their emotions into productive energy.

History is filled with dictators who killed to get their way. Many leaders today still use force or intimidation. But twelfth-century Maimonides said that if you treat a person out of anger, it is as if you killed them.<sup>6</sup> Unless you channel rage into positive action, you might lose credibility, friends and allies.

The Seventh Commandment is, “*You shall not commit adultery,*” which can be anything from sleeping around to selling out on our principles. In complex cyberspace and global markets, the temptation to get away with cheating, lying, or corruption is everywhere.

But a leader’s greatest power does not come from his or her authority, title, popularity or resources; it stems from the leader’s integrity. Judaism can be seen as an ethical decision-making system for seeing the difference between right and wrong, and even tackling right-vs.-right decisions or ethical dilemmas, by prioritizing values.

The Eighth Commandment is, “*You shall not steal.*” The prohibition against theft seems trivial: so what? But it may go deeper. True leaders break the myth that underlies stealing: “Not Enough” (not enough sleep, not

enough time, not enough power, and yes, not enough money). As the Zigarnik Effect has shown, the brain is constantly geared toward insufficiency.<sup>7</sup> But if leaders stop focusing on what they lack and do not really need, they can leverage the assets and opportunities they do already have.

What we think of as ours does not really belong to us; it has been entrusted to us for a lifetime, and sometimes not even for that long. So it might be better to define wealth, as some cultures do, not by how much money we have (or hoard) but by how much flows through us. As Churchill is widely quoted to have said, "You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give." When leaders give, they experience that they are, have, and do enough. *Tzedakah* (rightful giving) is perhaps the highest commandment that integrates all others.

The Ninth Commandment is, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" But when things don't go as planned, we all tend to bear false witness: we might hide the problem, feel shame, blame ourselves or others or the game itself, or worst of all, reduce the challenge. Instead of facing the facts (as Jack Welch put it), we make things-and not least ourselves-look better than they (and we) really are. Such false testimony is an entirely

human response-and entirely counter-productive.

Great leaders like Churchill or Welch were unafraid of bad news. What makes leaders invincible: Instead of being stymied, they harness breakdowns as raw material for breakthroughs (or as the Hasidic saying goes, "for every descent a greater ascent"<sup>8</sup>). Breakthrough innovations-Post-Its, the Internet, civil rights-were each a phoenix arising from the ashes of a breakdown.

Perhaps the most striking example of transforming a breakdown into a breakthrough was Pfizer as it sought to develop a new heart medicine. Trial tests of the drug Sildenafil in 1994 showed unwelcome and huge (forgive the pun) side effects: male patients who took the drug experienced increased blood flow to the penis. The drug acted by enhancing the smooth muscle relaxant effects of nitric oxide, a chemical that is normally released in response to sexual stimulation. Had Pfizer managers been ashamed, had they conspired to keep the malfunctions a secret, had they done nothing and waited, or had they wavered in their commitment to make a blockbuster drug, nothing would have happened. They would have merely fixed a problem and lost the company a lot of R&D money. But they made noise, and to make a long story short, out of

a breakdown-a malfunctioning heart drug-a breakthrough was born. The new drug posted \$1 billion in sales in its first year and became a household name: Viagra.

Finally, the Tenth Commandment, “*You shall not covet ... anything that is your neighbor’s*” , is the pinnacle, especially today. Envy is everywhere; we look at other people’s lives from the outside, and their grass often looks greener. But instead of being jealous of others’ possessions or successes, effective leaders understand people and see the world from their vantage point. With outsourcing, off shoring and virtual teams, standing in the shoes of alliance partners, negotiating opponents, competitors and even enemies, has become an indispensable competence. Already King David is thought to have said, “From my enemies I became wise.”<sup>9</sup>

The Hebrew word for life is *chayim*, a plural term. Life is not individual; it happens only together. We are all interdependent; nothing we have ever done is our accomplishment alone. Empathy is key to building championship teams. As Gandhi put

it, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”

A Rabbi asked a couple, “Are you keeping all Ten Commandments?” The husband snapped: “Of course we do, I keep four, my wife the other six!” But the Ten Commandments are a holograph: For sustainable growth, ethical and effective leaders strive to live up to them all. Frankly, our common future depends on it.

#### **Appendix: Self-Assessment-Leading with the 10 Commandments**

Dr. Zweifel’s clients-CEOs and senior officials of companies, government agencies and the military-have utilized the Self-Assessment tool below to assess and develop their competencies along the Ten Commandments. They rated their competencies (1=non-existent, 2=weak, 3=fair, 4=competent, 5=masterful) and had colleagues (superiors, peers and subordinates) rate them in a 360-degree feedback process.

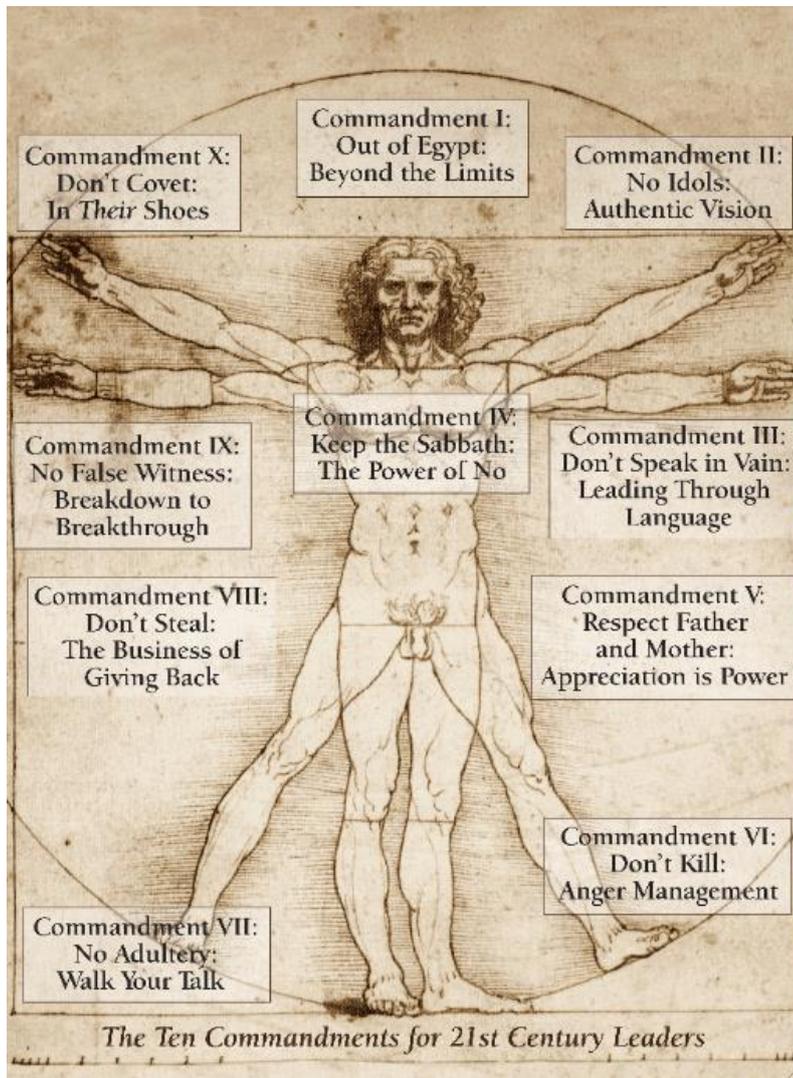


Fig. 1: The Ten Commandments and their application

**COMMANDMENT I:** *Out of Egypt*  
 > *Beyond the Limits*

- responsibility for the whole of your organization and mission; willingness to take charge;

- checking your own assumptions, blind spots, hidden motives, values; staying centered;
  - beginner's mind; remaining a student; openness to coaching
- Teaching ethical dilemmas.

**COMMANDMENT II: *No Idols > Authentic Vision***

- creating and articulating a future for people; inspiring others;
- bringing vision back when people have lost it in the day-to-day details;
- sustaining an environment of vision, momentum, and breakthrough.

**COMMANDMENT III: *Don't Speak In Vain > Leading Through Language***

- listening for distinctions (e.g., in running meetings); listening for openings, solutions;
- making powerful promises, requests (measurable, with deadlines);
- cultivating and deepening relationships;
- giving and receiving feedback effectively.

**COMMANDMENT IV: *Keep the Sabbath > The Power of No***

- being still; ability to step back; letting go of control;
- working from priorities; saying no to low-priority demands.

**COMMANDMENT V: *Respect Father and Mother > Appreciation is Power***

- appreciating what others bring;
- team skills (e.g., building consensus, alignment);

- coaching skills; effective empowerment of people;
- managing the details, not dropping anything out.

**COMMANDMENT VI: *Don't Kill > Anger Management***

- regulating your own emotions (e.g., anger, fear);
- understanding your own emotions.

**COMMANDMENT VII: *No Adultery > Walking Your Talk***

- maintaining clarity on your ethical values;
- matching your words and deeds; integrity;
- tackling ethical.

**COMMANDMENT VIII: *Don't Steal > The Business of Giving Back***

- contributing to others; always giving more than receiving;
- adding value to people and/or organizations.

**COMMANDMENT IX: *No False Witness: From Breakdown to Breakthrough***

- thinking strategically; identification of what is missing, of blockages;
- being powerful in the face of breakdowns; turning breakdowns into breakthroughs;

- never ever giving up; being fearless; undaunted by No.

**COMMANDMENT X: *Don't Covet***  
> *In Their Shoes*

- enrollment: utilizing and integrating people's existing agenda;
- managing cultural diversity; standing in the shoes of the other person;
- decoding another culture (organizational or national).

**Acknowledgment**

Thomas D. Zweifel is a strategy and performance expert, visiting professor at the University of St. Gallen and the author of seven books. He has partnered since 1984 with Fortune 500 companies, government and UN agencies, and the military on four continents to meet their strategic imperatives. From 1997 through 2013 he served as CEO of Swiss Consulting Group. Since 2001 he has taught Leadership at Columbia University and since 2004 at St. Gallen University. Strategies based on his seven books, including *Communicate or Die*, *Culture Clash 2*, *Strategy-In-Action* (with Edward J. Borey) and the award-winning *The Rabbi and the CEO* (with Aaron L. Raskin) are used by 30+ Fortune 500 companies. He lives in Zurich with his wife and their two daughters.

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