

Which is the Greatest Commandment?

Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34a

Tuesday the twelfth of Nisan

DIG: How can God be One and yet be Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Doesn't it make YHVH three? What is antimony? Why are these two commandments the greatest? How was this Pharisee's attitude any different than many others who questioned the Lord (Mark 11:28, 12:13-14, 12:18-19)? What does the Master's response to this man teach you about Jesus? What does his response teach you about **the Kingdom of God**?

REFLECT: In the three possibilities of love relationships (with **God**, with neighbors and self), where are you the strongest? The weakest? What have you found that helps love to grow in each area? Who do you pray for that is **not far from the Kingdom**?

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Herodians and the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together to devise their own rabbinic challenge to the Nazarene in the Court of the Gentiles. It was still **Tuesday, the twelfth of Nisan** (see Ix - **The Examination of the Lamb**), and one of them, an expert in the Torah, tested Messiah with this question. It was obvious that this group of **Pharisees**, like the others, wanted to trap Yeshua into somehow incriminating **Himself**. Their thinking was that by trapping Him, they could perhaps discredit His messianic claims. Rabbi, he said, which is the greatest *mitzvot*, literally *commandments*, but here better understood as *central principles*, in the Torah (**Matthew 22:34-36; Mark 12:28**)? Nothing could be more important in a discussion between two rabbis. But how would the supposed expert in the Torah entrap the Author of the Torah?

The question had undoubtedly been discussed countless times in the rabbinical school (Hebrew *yeshiva*), with a variety of opinions. The rabbis looked at this question in countless ways, taking into account the concept of lighter and heavier commandments. **An interesting quote from the Talmud gives us some insight. 613 commandments were addressed to Moshe - 365 prohibitions corresponding the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive commands corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. David came and reduced them to 11 principles, which are enumerated in Psalm 15. Isaiah came and reduced them to 6, as it is said: He that walks righteously, and speaks uprightly; he that despises the gain of oppressions, that shakes hands from holding bribes, that stops his ears from hearing the blood, and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil (Isaiah 33:15). Micah came and reduced them to 3, as it is written: What does the LORD**

require of you, but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)? Isaiah **subsequently reduced them to 2, as it is said:** Thus says the LORD, keep justice and do righteousness (Isaiah 56:1). **Lastly came Habakkuk and reduced them to one, as it is said:** The righteous shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4) (**Tractate Makkot 24a**).¹²⁹¹

It was no coincidence that Rabbi Sha'ul would later answer the same question this way: For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it was written: “The righteous will live by faith” (Rom 1:17). Living by faith, foreign by most today, has always been a central principle of Judaism. Little did those Pharisees realize that they were standing face to face with the author of the Torah! The Master teacher's answer focused on the most central prayer in the liturgy. **The most important one, answered Jesus: is this, Sh'ma Yisrael ADONAI Eloheniu, ADONAI echad (Deut 6:4), or Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one (Mark 12:29).** YHVH is mentioned three times, and echad is used, which often means a multiple unity (like “one” cluster of grapes, or “one” bundle of sticks), instead of yachid, which excludes multiple oneness. Here the TaNaKh gives us a remez, or a hint of the Trinity.

Moshe also gave us a hint of a plurality of the Godhead when he wrote: Let us make man (Genesis 1:26a). The plural pronoun, us, is significant because it points to the Trinity. It does not prove the Trinity, but it clearly opens the door to plurality within the Godhead, aside from the word Elohim. **The rabbis teach that Moses was referring to God and His angels.** Isaiah 48:16b also gives us an example of the Trinity. And now Adonai ELOHIM [God the Father] has sent Me [God the Son], with His Spirit [God the Holy Spirit] (also see Isaiah 42:1, 61:1, 63:7-14). There are only three Persons that are ever called God in the TaNaKh. And nowhere does the B'rit Chadashah say that God is three, but Jesus quoting the Sh'ma says God is one, unique, and the only God there is. This is antimony. Two things that seem to be in opposition to each other, but both are true. God is three. God is one.¹²⁹²

Since the Sh'ma is a declaration of our faith in God, Messiah addresses the commandment that immediately follows: Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). Love is the central theme of the whole Bible, and HaShem has revealed His love to Isra'el and the entire world by sending His Son, the Meshiach. We are not commanded, or forced, to love God. We have been given the free will to accept or reject Him. We can say “no” to God and make it stick! But if we do chose to love Him, our love is merely a response to His loving us. Yochanan said it this way: We ourselves love now because He loved us first (First John 4:19 CJB).

Love (Hebrew: *ahab*), refers primarily to an act of the mind and the will, the determined care for the welfare of something or someone. It might well include strong emotion, but its distinguishing characteristics were the dedication and commitment of choice. It is the love that recognizes and chooses to follow that which is righteous, noble, and true, regardless of what one's feelings in the matter might be. It is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word *agapo* in the New Covenant (see my commentary on **Jeremiah Eo - The Days are Coming, declares the LORD, When I Will Make a New Covenant with the People of Isra'el**), which is the verb of intelligent, purposeful, and committed **love** that is an act of the will.

Therefore, **Jesus** says: **Love ADONAI your God with all your heart**. The Jewish concept of **heart** refers to the core of one's being. The book of **Proverbs** counsels: **Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23)**.

And with all your soul (Hebrew: *nefesh*). The term **soul** is the closest to what we would call emotion and is the word **Yeshua** used when **He** cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane: **My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death (Mattityahu 26:38a)**.

With all your mind. The Hebrew term is used here in the sense of intellectual, willful vigor and determination, carrying both the meaning of mental endeavor and strength.

And with all your strength (Hebrew: *meod*), meaning *with all that we have*. This indicates comprehensiveness. We are to **love ADONAI** our **God** with every part of our being. Genuine **love** for **ADONAI** is intelligent (you don't have to check your brain at the door), feeling, willing and serving. **This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38 CJB; Mark 12:30b)**, which describes what our relationship with **YHVH** should be like.

Mine deep enough in every heart and you'll find it: a longing for meaning, a quest for purpose. As surely as a child breathes, he will someday wonder, "What's my purpose in life?"

Some search for meaning in a career. "My purpose is to be a dentist." Fine vocation but hardly a justification for existence. They opt to be a human "doing" rather than a human "being." Who they are is what they do; consequently they do a lot. They work many hours because if they don't work, they don't have an identity.

For others, who they are is what they have. They find meaning in a new car or a new house or new clothes. These people are great for the economy and rough on the budget because they are always seeking meaning in something they own . . . Some try sports, entertainment, cults, sex, you name it.

All mirages in the desert of purpose . . .

Shouldn't we face the truth?

If we don't acknowledge **God**, we are driftwood in the world.¹²⁹³

And then **Yeshua** pointed out that there is a **second** commandment that **is similar to it: "Love your neighbor as yourself"** (Leviticus 19:18; Mattityahu 22:39), which describes what our relationship with mankind should be like. **But nothing was so simple to the rabbis, so they questioned the meaning of neighbor in the Torah. Who exactly qualified as your neighbor? Is it one close to you, or any fellow Jew?**

Jesus answered this issue in another discussion where **He** told **the parable of the Good Samaritan** (see **Gw - The Parable of the Good Samaritan**). There, **Messiah** stressed that anyone, even someone outside your community like a Samaritan, is our **neighbor** in the eyes of **ADONAI**. All of us, all humanity, are created in **the image of God**. **Jesus'** answer includes our entire existence in the present world and in the world to come. **Love YHVH** and **love all** humanity, even as you **love yourself**.¹²⁹⁴

The answer of **the Rabbi** from the despised village of Nazareth was short and to the point. **There is no commandment greater than these. All the Torah and the Prophets hang on these two commandments** (Matthew 22:40; Mark 12:31). The basic requirements of both Judaism and Christianity are summed up in the same dual command to **love God** and to **love** one's **neighbor**. Everything else that **God** required of the righteous of the TaNaKh was based **on these two commandments**.¹²⁹⁵ **The Pharisees** stood in utter silence. How could anyone argue with that?

The **Halacha** specialist could do nothing more than agree with **Christ's** statement. "Well said, Rabbi," the man replied. "You are right in saying that **God is One** and there is no other but Him. To love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:32-33). For a moment, the light of **God's** Word seemed to pierce the darkness of his soul.

When **Jesus** saw that he had answered wisely, **He** said to him: **You are not far from the kingdom of God** (Mark 12:34a). It is interesting to compare the rich young ruler (see **II - The Rich Young Ruler**) and this **expert in the Torah**. In both cases something was missing for them to step over the line from intellectual assent to faith (see my commentary on **Hebrews**). If wealth was the stumbling block for the former, pride of intellect may have been fatal in the latter. I have known people of both persuasions.

Tuesday of the Holy Week was the main **day of examination** by the nation of Isra'el and her religious leaders to see if **Yeshua** was without defect or blemish. That third day of **the Lord's** teaching produced the richest and most fruitful day of the week.¹²⁹⁶