

Living Rightly

It seems timely that we're reading from the Old Testament when war has broken out between Israel and Hamas. God's promise to Abraham and his descendants that they would be a great nation, God's call of Moses to deliver the people out of bondage in Egypt, and God's guidance and provision during the sojourn in the wilderness and their entrance into the promised land are foundational stories for Jews and for Christians. The belief that this land belongs to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob led to the creation of the nation of Israel 75 years ago. Since that time, Israel had continued to expand their territory and displace Palestinian people.

During the past week, several Anabaptist organizations have issued statements about the current violence. They are universal in their condemnation of the actions of both Hamas and the Israeli military. Two responses are printed in today's bulletin. Anabaptist World published an article on Friday titled "Anabaptist groups react to war in Israel, Gaza."¹ These are excerpts from the article.

A surprise attack by the militant group Hamas on Israel and the resulting military counteroffensive on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip prompted calls by Anabaptist organizations for diplomacy over military action as civilians on both sides of the conflict were killed and injured.

"While the Anabaptist-Mennonite community does not have church presence in Israeli and Palestinian territories, this is a land that pays homage to multiple faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam," wrote Mennonite World Conference President Henk Stenvers in an [Oct. 9 pastoral letter](#) for peace in the Holy Land. "As followers of the prince of peace, as people who do not put trust in earthly rulers, we refuse to take sides with political interests, but mourn with all who suffer." Stenvers lamented that the crisis quickly escalated with air raids, land battles, random killings, hostage kidnappings and war propaganda.

Hamas militants fired rockets and broke through Israeli barriers, killing more than 1,200 people in Israel and kidnapping many to the Gaza Strip, where more than 2 million Palestinians were already living with little access to electricity, food, fuel and hospital supplies. The area has been under a blockade by Israel and Egypt for more than 16 years, exacerbating tensions that have existed since the 1948 Nakba ("catastrophe") displaced more than 700,000 Palestinians to help establish the state of Israel.

The Mennonite Jewish Relations Working Group condemned the actions of both Hamas and the Israeli military that led to killing both Israeli and Palestinian civilians.

"Much of the coverage has depicted a dichotomy between Palestine and Israel," wrote the group in an Oct. 13 statement. "While we recognize the experiences of both to be different, we also recognize the fear is real on both sides. The pain is real on both sides. Both call this land home, and it is currently teeming with the blood of innocents and tears of both Israelis and Palestinians in the violence."

The group invited others to join in committing to humble learning across lines of faith that divide, remembering that many Palestinians and Israelis want to coexist and live with equal rights and freedoms.

The Mennonite Palestine/Israel Network similarly condemned violence both by Hamas and the Israeli military, calling on the international community to support a diplomatic solution that address the injustices that perpetuate violence. MennoPIN is an independent network that relates to Mennonite Church USA's Peace and Justice Support Network.

"MennoPIN likewise recognizes that the Hamas attack was not unprovoked," the group wrote in an [Oct. 10 statement](#). "For decades the people of Palestine have been oppressed by the violence and occupation of apartheid Israel against them with home demolitions, child detentions, separation walls, settler colonialism and violence, seizures of land and controls over water and food supplies.

¹ Timothy Huber, [Anabaptist groups react to war in Israel, Gaza | Anabaptist World](#)

“And Gaza has been an open-air prison where Israel controls how much water, electricity and food Gazans can have. The extreme measures taken by the recent Netanyahu ultra-right government have made life increasingly hostile for Palestinians.”

Mennonite Central Committee operates more than a dozen projects with partners in both Israel and Palestine and [is planning relief efforts to the crisis](#) with those partners.

“MCC’s work will build on previous responses to the ongoing conflict, including the distribution of food and bedding for those affected,” the organization [said in a statement](#) that noted lament and mourning for lives lost in Palestine and Israel. “We are also planning to offer trauma healing support and housing reconstruction.”

Community Peacemaker Teams called for ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in [an Oct. 9 statement](#), categorizing Hamas’ efforts as unprecedented resistance resulting from continuous human rights abuses as it continued its focus on accompanying partners in nonviolent resistance and advocacy.

“A large majority of the international community is calling for Hamas’ adherence to international law,” stated CPT, calling on the U.S. government to stop \$3 billion in annual military aid that is used to perpetuate occupation of Palestinian territory and cyclical violence. “CPT urges these governments to examine their hypocrisy of condemning Palestinian resistance to occupation while at the same time refusing to hold Israel accountable for the blatant flouting of international law through 75 years of occupation, apartheid and ethnic cleansing.”

Reports from the region continue to get worse. Life is practically unsustainable for Palestinians living in Gaza – no water, food, or electricity and forced evacuation for half the population, including many children.

I learned this week that one of my friends has two nephews in the Israeli military who have been sent to Gaza. She is greatly concerned for their safety.

It’s a horrific situation. It’s difficult to know what to say or do. Please pray with me:

God of justice and peace, God of all people,

We pray that violence will end in Gaza and Israel and that conciliation will begin.

We pray for the release and safe return of all hostages.

We pray for those who mourn. May they be surrounded by loved ones as they grieve.

We pray that peace workers, negotiators and government staff will put people’s lives and human dignity above political or military gains – that they will be a just, peaceful, and sustainable resolution to this violence.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. In the name of Jesus, Prince of Peace, Amen.

This fall we’ve been reading the foundational story of how God rescued the enslaved Israelites and led them through the wilderness on their way to the land promised to them. The second half of the book of Exodus opens as they arrive at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Here God invites them to enter into a covenant relationship. This is part of God’s promise to Abraham that God will somehow bless all nations through Abraham’s family.

In the covenant found at the beginning of Exodus 19, the Israelites find out what it means to be God’s people.² *You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation.*³

² This sermon draws from the Week Twelve Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](#); Spill the Beans, Pentecost 2a 2011 – Sunday 2 October 2011, [Home | Spill The Beans](#); The Bible Project: Exodus Part 2, [Overview: Exodus 19-40 - YouTube](#); Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 105: Covenant and Commandments — Pulpit Fiction](#); Working Preacher’s Narrative Lectionary, [#506: Covenant and Commandments - Oct. 9, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 405 Living the Ten Commandments \(Exodus 19:1-8 and 21:1-21\) \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, Commentary on Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17, [Commentary on Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); Timothy J. Geddert, *The Beginning of the Story: Understanding the Old Testament in the Story of Scripture*, Herald Press, 2023; and Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp.234-285.

³ Exodus 19:4-6, *Common English Bible*

Being a priestly kingdom means that God will be their king and they are to be the intercessors for everyone else. They are the agents through which God will bless all people. Priests aren't superior to other people. They just have a particular job to fulfill. God chooses Israel as a way to bless the world. They are chosen on behalf of all other people, not instead of all other people.

Being a holy nation means that they will be set apart from everyone else by obeying God's commandments instead of following all the gods that other people are following. God's laws, teaching, and justice will form and shape them so that they can become God's representatives and show all the other nations what God is truly like.

After the Israelites agree to do everything that the Lord has said, God's presence appears on the top of the mountain in the form of cloud and lightning and thunder. Moses goes up the mountain as their representative and receives the basic terms of how the Israelites and God are going to relate to each other. God's instructions on how to act as a priestly nation through which others are blessed begin with the Ten Commandments.

In our tradition, we treat Exodus 20:2 as a preamble – *I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*. The commandments then follow in verses 3-17. Other traditions use an alternate numbering system. Let's look at each commandment in a bit more detail.

1. *You must have no other gods before me.*⁴

The relationship between God and God's people forms the foundation for all the other commandments. Living in a way consistent with these commandments is evidence of the integrity of this relationship. This commandment reminds us that none of us is God. No human characteristic – color of skin, amount of wealth, gender identification, nationality – makes anyone equal to God.

2. *Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

The God of Israel is one God, God alone. This fact separates the Israelites from their neighbors who make images of and worship a multitude of gods. It's unlikely that any of us would worship a sculpture or a carving. This commandment warns us against displacing our worship of and loyalty to God with a person, material possessions, or some other human generated thing.

It's distressing to read that God would punish future generations for their ancestor's sins. Of course, we realize that people's actions affect the lives of those who come after them. This commandment reminds us that God is enormously compassionate. But that doesn't mean there isn't any judgement. God has both the capacity for graciousness and for judgement. The ratio is 1000 parts grace to 4 parts judgement.

3. *Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.*

We're probably more familiar with hearing this translated as "Do not take the Lord's name in vain." The interpretation we may be most familiar with is to not use God as a swear word. There are other ways to make wrongful use of God's name. This commandment warns against using the name of God for something that isn't "of" God. Be careful claiming that something is done in God's name. There are many instances where people use God's name for their own purposes or to justify their own sins rather than proclaiming the good news. Don't justify cruelty and injustice in the name of God. Don't invoke God flippantly. Call on God's name for things that are truly important to God.

It's disturbing to hear that God won't forgive anyone who uses God's name that way. This reminds us of the seriousness of this issue. Keep in mind, however, that God's grace greatly outweighs God's judgement.

⁴ Ten Commandments as written in Exodus 20:3-17, *Common English Bible*.

4. *Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

Some would say this is the most important commandment of the ten because it's the bridge that connects love of God to love of self and love of others. We keep the Sabbath in response to what God has done. Our relationship with God transforms our relationship with one another.

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath? What can you do? What should you do? What can't you do? When is the Sabbath? Is it Saturday or Sunday? Or is it your day off? This commandment reminds us that there's something inherent in the universe that requires rest. We need to step outside the world of constant productivity. It's important to pause and worship God. It's also important for us to take a break and care for ourselves and other relationships. Each one of us must figure out how that works best for us.

5. *Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

There could be a connection between this and the previous commandment. You keep the Sabbath because your value isn't tied up with what you produce. Productivity isn't a measure of someone's worth. So, honor those who are no longer productive. Be a people who takes care of the elders in your midst.

Honoring your father and your mother also provides a beginning point for love. If you can't love your family who are your closest people, then you don't have any chance of loving other people. In the case where it's impossible due to the nature of your given family, then it can begin in a chosen family.

The final five commandments are short, so I'll keep my comments brief on each of them. Taken as a group, they are a good baseline for forming community. In fact, these aren't unique to "faithful" people. They're the basic necessities of having a well-functioning society. The bottom line is respect. These rules call us to respect the integrity of another person.

6. *Do not kill.*

Respect life. Don't take life away from someone else.

7. *Do not commit adultery.*

Respect the commitment you make to a life partner. Respect the commitments other people have made to each other.

8. *Do not steal.*

Respect the belongings of someone else.

9. *Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.*

Don't manipulate justice to take away the rights of others.

10. *Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.*

It's human nature to look at other people, compare ourselves to them, and wish we had things that they have, including wishing for some of the relationships they have. This commandment is to respect people and the things that belong to them. Desiring or coveting prevents you from seeing and valuing your own worth rather than comparing it to others.

In addition, when you strongly desire for what your neighbor has, when you lust for it, that gets in the way of the thing you should strive for the most, your relationship with God. Nothing else should come between you and God.

After this list in Exodus 20 comes a collection of 52 additional commands which fill out the first ten in more detail. There are laws about Israel's worship, about social justice, about how they are to live together. Obeying these laws will shape Israel into a nation of justice and generosity that's different from the other nations.

Additional lists of requirements are found in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and in the prophets. Leviticus 19 contains some of the commandments found in Exodus 20 and also includes laws providing for the poor, protecting the handicapped, insuring justice without partiality, calling for love of neighbor, and protecting the stranger.

We continue to have many questions about the commandments. What exactly does each one mean? Why do we highlight some as more important than others and maybe even ignore one or more completely? How do these relate to the laws that follow in subsequent chapters? How did Jesus interpret and relate to them?

Jesus' instructions often go beyond the law. They are stricter than the law demands. We also find many stories of Jesus breaking laws that are of utmost importance to his religion. He breaks the Sabbath by healing people and feeding his disciples. He breaks written and unwritten rules by touching people who are sick, eating with people who are considered unworthy, and speaking to women who he should be avoiding.

For Jesus, the bottom line is relationship. According to Jesus, the two greatest commandments are: Love God with all your being and Love others as much as you love yourself.⁵ Although these are found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, not Exodus 20:3-17, they are an excellent summary of the Ten Commandment. Look at all the laws, instructions, and commandments with these two statements in mind. Is following a rule not enough to maintain a healthy relationship with God, with another person, or with yourself? Then go beyond it. What's right for someone else might be wrong for you. Is following a rule hindering your relationship with God, with another person, or with yourself? Then break it. What's wrong for someone else might be right for you.

It all comes down to valuing the integrity of relationships with God, with other people and within ourselves. In Exodus 20, the people have come out of slavery and need to find new ways be in relationship with each other. These laws help form them as a community.

God genuinely wants to be in relationship with us. How do these laws form us as a community? How does honoring God make it possible for us to be better people and in better relationships with others?

Most of the commandments in Exodus 20 are written as prohibitions. It's possible to read them as permission instead and sum them up in seven phrases.

We have:

1. Permission to choose God among the multiplicity of gods.
2. Permission to rest rather than to work as slaves.
3. Permission to celebrate our ancestry rather than be enslaved because of it.
4. Permission to value life rather than take it.
5. Permission to expect fidelity in our personal life as well as in spiritual life.
6. Permission to trust God will continue to provide rather than taking from others.
7. Permission to trust God to supply what we need rather than desiring what others have that we don't have.

I invite you to live in the joy and freedom that comes from living out these instructions rather than to be weighed down by them. I pray that we will be so shaped by God's laws, teaching, and justice that we will become God's representatives and show everyone what God is truly like.

May the God of the commandments, who gave the Israelites laws so that they might live in harmony with one another, show us how to live in peace, so that all may know of God's love. Amen.

⁵ Matthew 22:34-40.