

**The Ten Commandments:  
How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life**

**by David Hazony**

**Reader's Guide**

**Questions for Discussion**

**Introduction**

Hazony points out that according to polls, 90% of Americans have a strong opinion about whether the Ten Commandments should be posted in front of a courthouse, but only 40% can name more than 4 of them. This suggests that they've become more of a symbol than a teaching. What do they symbolize in our world today? Have people misunderstood what they were originally meant to teach?

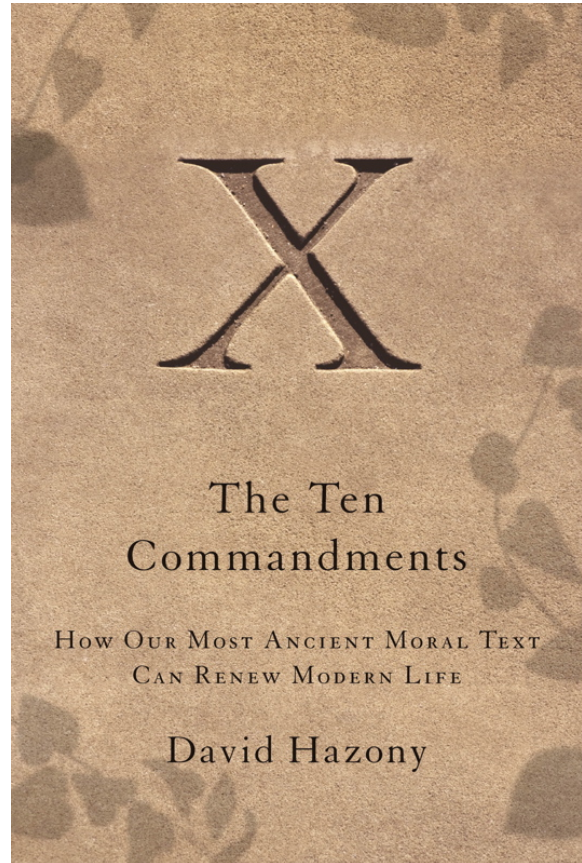
Are the Ten Commandments just arbitrary laws, or do they stand for bigger ideals? Is there something that connects them? What kind of world is created when people follow them?

Hazony claims that the *story* of how the Ten Commandments were given can teach us something about their contents as well. How do the stories of the revelation at Sinai and the Golden Calf help us understand their deeper message?

**Chapter 1: I am the Lord your God (Redemption)**

In the First Commandment, God tells us he is "our" God. What does it mean to have a God? Hazony distinguishes between worshipping God and viewing him as an ideal example for our behavior. Is it possible for God to be "yours" even if you don't believe in him?

Of all the ways that God could have introduced himself, why does he focus on the Exodus – "who took you out of Egypt"? What does that say about the example God



wishes to set for us? Hazony describes this example using the word “redemption.” What is the spirit of redemption, and how is it different from the “spirit of reason” that we have inherited from the ancient Greeks? How has this ideal of redemption affected Western culture? What are a few examples of how our society could be a more “redemptive” one?

## **Chapter 2: Idolatry (Morality)**

What’s so bad about worshipping idols? People often talk about the Bible’s “monotheistic” revolution, as if the worst thing about idols is that there are lots of them, while God is One. However, the most famous example of idol-worship in the Bible is the story of the Golden Calf—and there was only one of those, too. What was wrong with the Golden Calf, and how was it different from God?

Hazony claims that the biggest problem with idolatry is that it ruins the idea of a higher morality. What are the things that distract us from living moral lives? Can you think of examples in your own life when the attractions of power, beauty, or the works of our hands distort our understanding of right and wrong?

What are some examples of how idolatry continues to affect our modern culture and politics? What can you do to fight it?

## **Chapter 3: False Oaths (Integrity)**

Many people think the Third Commandment, *You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain*, is about uttering the name of God. But Hazony argues it’s really about honesty and integrity. How does he arrive at this conclusion?

Hazony opens the chapter with a story about his experience selling time-share condominiums as a teenager. Do you have similar stories where your job made you feel like you had to sacrifice your honesty and integrity?

What are the most important biblical stories about integrity? Hazony divides them into three types: integrity about the present, about the past, and about the future. Can you share personal stories that exemplify each kind of integrity?

## **Chapter 4: Sabbath (The Self)**

The Bible tells us to keep the Sabbath, because God rested on the Seventh Day of Creation. But why did he rest? And what does this tell us about the purpose of keeping the Sabbath?

Why is it important to invest time for ourselves? Doesn’t that make us selfish?

Hazony quotes the ancient rabbis saying that the Sabbath was created “only for Torah study.” What did they mean by Torah study? How can we use this lesson to teach us ways to spend our time on the Sabbath?

The second version of the Ten Commandments, which appears in Deuteronomy 5, is almost identical to the first, except for the Fourth Commandment. There, instead of the Sabbath being described as an imitation of God’s resting on the Seventh Day, it’s described as a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt. How does the Sabbath recall the exodus, and what can we learn from the two different reasons given for the Sabbath?

### **Chapter 5: Honoring your Parents (Wisdom)**

Why is it important to honor our parents? How is “honoring” them different from obeying them?

How does the Bible’s approach to wisdom differ from other ideas of wisdom that we have received from the ancient world? What is human wisdom, and how do you know when you meet someone who is wise? What can you do to gain more wisdom of this kind? And why does Hazony believe this is the true meaning of the Fifth Commandment?

Many people have one parent that they’re not proud of, parents who have been neglectful or even abusive, and find it really difficult to honor them. What do we gain from trying to find reasons to honor a “bad” parent? Is it possible for the child of a thief or killer to honor his parent? Should one try?

### **Chapter 6: Murder (Life)**

The King James Version famously translates the Sixth Commandment as “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” But Hazony points out that a more accurate reading of the Hebrew renders “You shall not murder.” Is there a difference between prohibiting killing and murder? Can you give some examples of killing that isn’t murder, and explain why it would be important to how you read the Sixth Commandment?

Hazony draws a difference between sanctifying life and valuing it. What are some examples of cases where we’re better off valuing life rather than sanctifying it?

Many ancient traditions tell us to affirm the life of the spirit, and to reject the life of the body. Is it possible for human beings to forget about this world and embrace the next? Can you think of examples where people hurt or neglect others because of their quest for life in another world?

## **Chapter 7: Adultery (Love)**

Hazony claims that the purpose of marriage is enshrining a relationship of romantic love. Do you agree with this? What other purposes could marriage have, and how do they affect how we understand the Seventh Commandment?

What does the Old Testament have to say about romantic love? Can you name a few biblical stories where romantic love played an important, positive role in the Israelite nation's history?

What is really wrong with adultery? For some, it is the personal betrayal, like treason to your country or swindling your best friend. For others, it is a violation of a sacred oath, a sin to God. For others, the problem is the instability of families and the negative impact that has on society. Explain your own thoughts on what makes adultery so problematic as to be one of the Ten Commandments.

The problem of loveless marriages has become more and more prominent as our modern world changes its conception of marriage. Although it's always best for a couple to rediscover the love that brought them together, unfortunately many loveless marriages end up in divorce, infidelity, abuse, or a long-term arrangement of mutual alienation, often for the sake of the children. What is really in the children's best interest? And should that be the deciding factor in every case?

## **Chapter 8: Stealing (Freedom)**

What does it mean to own something? Why do we feel violated when someone breaks into our home?

Hazony talks about private property as the first time we learn about expanding ourselves to include something else. What does it mean to "expand" yourself? How is the world made better when people expand themselves to include others? Can you think of an example in your own life when someone helped you by expanding themselves to include you?

Hazony writes about two different approaches to charitable giving—one based on self-denial, another based on self-expansion. Can you think of ways that these two different approaches will result in different kinds of philanthropy? Is it better to take care of the poor in your own community or in a far-off country? Describe the difference in how you feel in each case.

## **Chapter 9: False Witness (Community)**

Why does Hazony insist that the Ninth Commandment isn't really about lying, but rather about community?

Hazony writes that there are two core foundations of communal life—foundations that the False Witness destroys. One is “reputation,” or the mutual regard and trust we have for one another; the biggest threats to it are gossip, recrimination, jealousy, and spite. The other are the communities institutions, such as our courts, our police, and our schools. Can you name examples of threats to your own community? Can you give examples of how a single individual helped heal your community, either through building the spirit of trust, or through fixing its institutions?

Many of us today don't feel like we need communities in the old sense of the word. How has technology changed our sense of community? Do we still need it at all?

### **Chapter 10: Coveting (Inner Peace)**

Why do we covet things? Can you think of times when you wanted something so bad that it distorted your sense of right and wrong?

Hazony's discussion on insecurity focuses on two big sins depicted in the Bible: The sin of Cain, and the Sin of the Spies. On the face of it, these two stories have little to do with each other: One is about a man murdering his brother, the other about the Israelites' refusing to enter the Promised Land out of fear of war. What do these two stories have in common? Why is wandering until death an appropriate punishment for insecurity?

All of us have insecurities. When does an insecurity become sinful?

### **Further Questions**

Discuss Hazony's writing style. How does he use biblical and rabbinic stories to explore the purpose of each of the commandments. How do ancient parables and sayings affect our daily lives? And why do we need them when the Bible gives us clear rules for how to live our lives?

One question that bothers a lot of people is who wrote the Ten Commandments. Classical Christianity and Judaism teach that God wrote them, on the two tablets he gave Moses on Mount Sinai, whereas some modern scholars believe they were written hundreds of years later. Mark Twain once said that “If Moses did not write the Ten Commandments, then they were written by another fellow of the same name.” Discuss whether and why it matters who wrote the Ten Commandments, and whether they are meaningful as ancient wisdom, or require the faith-based authority of God and Moses to have meaning in our lives and in society as a whole.

In his Afterword, Hazony talks about the imperfections of humanity, and how the biblical approach embraces those imperfections rather than denying them. Is it

possible to accept the flaws of our friends and neighbors while still believing in a moral ideal? Give a few examples from your own life about struggling between acceptance of another person's moral failings and maintaining a respect and redemptive attitude towards them.

### **A Conversation with David Hazony**

#### **Q: How did you come to write a book about the Ten Commandments?**

A: My parents immigrated to the U.S. from Israel in the 1960s, and I grew up in a Hebrew-speaking home, where the Old Testament was a crucial part of our cultural identity. When I was in my twenties, I felt a need to deepen that identity by reading through the whole Bible in the original Hebrew. It took about three years, with the help of an English translation. Because America is a country rich in religious expression, I was really surprised to discover that the ancient Hebrew writings seemed to contain a whole outlook on life that had somehow been lost in the translation to American culture, both Jewish and Christian. Instead of seeing the cold, harsh, law-enforcing "Old-Testament God" that everyone spoke of, I saw a teaching of this-worldly love, a vibrant dream of redemption that begins with taking responsibility for our lives and communities—something that is less about which faith you choose than about the way you look at what it means to be human. Then a few years ago, a friend suggested that the key to all of it lay in reading the Ten Commandments not just as laws but as core values that spell out this whole outlook. Thus the project was born.

#### **Q: You write that the Ten Commandments offer a look at the "Spirit of Redemption" which you say is one of the pillars of Western life. What is the Spirit of Redemption, and how does it differ from other aspects of modern life?**

We Westerners have inherited two powerful, complementary spirits from the ancient world that make us who we are. From the Greeks we received the Spirit of Reason, which teaches us to tolerate different opinions, to guarantee freedoms, because only in a free and flowing discourse can we advance ourselves in science, in politics, and in economics. But none of this really gives us the inner motivation to get up each morning and make the world better, to fight evil and militate our pride, strength, and love for the good. For that we need the Spirit of Redemption, which comes from ancient Israel. This is why all the great movements for political change—like the American Revolution, the Civil War, or the Civil Rights movement—cited the story of Moses and the Exodus as a core inspiration. The Spirit of Redemption teaches us to love first of all ourselves with a fiery love that moves us to act—a bush that burns but is not consumed—and to expand that love to include others, beginning with our families and friends, extending to our communities and nations, and ultimately to the whole world.

**Q: The Ten Commandments aren't just rules, there's also a story behind them. How does the story of the Ten Commandments reflect the values they contain?**

A: The crucial moment of the story is when Moses smashes the tablets – an act he did on his own, contrary to all logic and intuition, and without being told to do so by God. He did it because he knew that if the people were worshipping the Golden Calf, they wouldn't be able to understand the deepest message of the Ten Commandments. Idolatry is about giving up on your independence of judgment and self-motivation, instead being dragged into the thrall of beauty, or power, or wealth, while the central message of the Ten Commandments is that each of us can be an independent, redeeming person, like the great shepherd-figures of the Bible, acting on our own to better the world. Smashing the tablets was a human act to save a human situation, and in this sense it embodied the whole point of the Ten Commandments. If God had intervened at that moment, we wouldn't have learned the real lesson. That's why the rabbis teach that the second set of tablets, which replaced the ones he smashed, weren't carved out by God but by Moses himself. Even though the words were the same, without direct human involvement they can't have the meaning and impact that they are meant to have.

**Q: In your book you make the unusual claim that the Ten Commandments aren't really a religious text, in that they talk more about our obligations as human beings than about mystical realms or heaven and hell. But how do you account for the First Commandment, which says "I am the Lord your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves"?**

Over and over again, the Bible tells us to imitate God—to "walk in his ways" and to be "holy" because God is holy. But "God" means so many different things, and it's not at all clear what we're supposed to imitate: His omnipotence? His wisdom? His anger and mercy? The truth is that God could have introduced himself a million different ways in the First Commandment—as the Creator of the Universe, or as the Absolute, perfect Being. Instead, the First Commandment tells us that in imitating God, we should look at his greatest act of redemption, the exodus from Egypt, where he intervened in world history to end injustice and bring freedom and prosperity. So the First Commandment is not really about worship or ritual or even faith, but about establishing the redemptive model: Just as God is a redeemer, so too are we obligated to engage in the human world, to make it better.

**Q: What are a few examples of how the Ten Commandments embody the redemptive spirit?**

A: Every one of the Ten Commandments gives us another building block in the Spirit of Redemption.

- The **Fourth Commandment** tells us to keep the Sabbath—which means first of all bringing all our creative effort to a halt, so that we can exist separately from them, investing in our own hearts and minds and relationships. The

ancient rabbis taught that the Sabbath was given so that we could study the Torah—which for them meant deepening ourselves as moral, wise, loving people in any way they could. If you don't have a rich inner self, you have little to give to others.

- The **Sixth Commandment** tells us not to murder, establishing human life as a core biblical value. But what do we mean by life? The Bible sees life not just as a sacred, mystical, holy thing, but as a total real-world concept embracing our bodies and souls together. Health and physical pleasure are an essential element of the Israelite concept of life.
- The **Eighth Commandment**, “you shall not steal,” establishes the importance of making room for others in our redemptive efforts. Property is the most basic way that we relate to our world as something we can improve and fix—and it teaches us to expand in love and concern beyond ourselves. When we steal, we violate other people, not just their stuff, but their very sense of self.
- The **Tenth Commandment**, “you shall not covet,” is both mundane and incredibly profound. It teaches that insecurity is the sin behind other sins, that nothing is more antithetical to the redemptive effort than the deflation of spirit that comes with insecurity. All over the Bible, the worst stories of sin begin with insecurity. To be a redeemer, you need a powerful inner peace, a real belief in who you are.

**Q: After growing up in the United States, you moved to Israel. How did living in the middle east contribute to your understanding of what the Ten Commandments can offer modern life?**

Anyone who really wants to appreciate what the West has created should spend a few years on its borders. You start to see how unique and special our way of life is, and to look much harder at the things that make it that way. So many people like to complain about Western individualism, that it makes us selfish. Maybe that's sometimes true, but from what I've seen, the opposite is true as well: That individualism encourages us to value, respect, and protect others in a way that tribal or collectivist ideologies don't, and the result is that we are much more likely to cherish every single human life. That's why everywhere in the world, you'll find volunteers from Western countries who've decided to lend a hand.

Coming face-to-face with modern terrorism, and the culture of death that promotes it, taught me that when good people have no earthly power, evil will reign in our world. And that any definition of “good” that systematically teaches us to cut ourselves off from the world, to ignore politics and economics and even military affairs, cannot be right, for it hands all these realms over to people who will kill and oppress others to aggrandize their wealth and glory. For we were not put on this earth to watch evil destroy humanity, but to fight it off and build something much better in its place.



### Ten Ideals for Our World

*The chart below traces the ten great ideals discussed in David Hazony's The Ten Commandments*

<b>Commandment</b>	<b>Ideal</b>
<b>1. I am the Lord Your God who took you out of Egypt</b>	<b>Redemption</b>
<b>2. You shall not have other gods or make graven images</b>	<b>Morality</b>
<b>3. You shall not take the Lord's name in vain</b>	<b>Integrity</b>
<b>4. Honor the Sabbath to keep it holy</b>	<b>Self</b>
<b>5. Honor your father and your mother</b>	<b>Wisdom</b>
<b>6. You shall not murder</b>	<b>Life</b>
<b>7. You shall not commit adultery</b>	<b>Love</b>
<b>8. You shall not steal</b>	<b>Freedom</b>
<b>9. You shall not bear false witness</b>	<b>Community</b>
<b>10. You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor's</b>	<b>Inner Peace</b>

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

### How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life

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**Combining a fresh reading** of the Old Testament's most riveting stories and ancient rabbinic legends with a fearless exploration of what ails society today, David Hazony shows that the Ten Commandments are not just a set of obscure laws but encapsulate a deeply valuable approach to life.

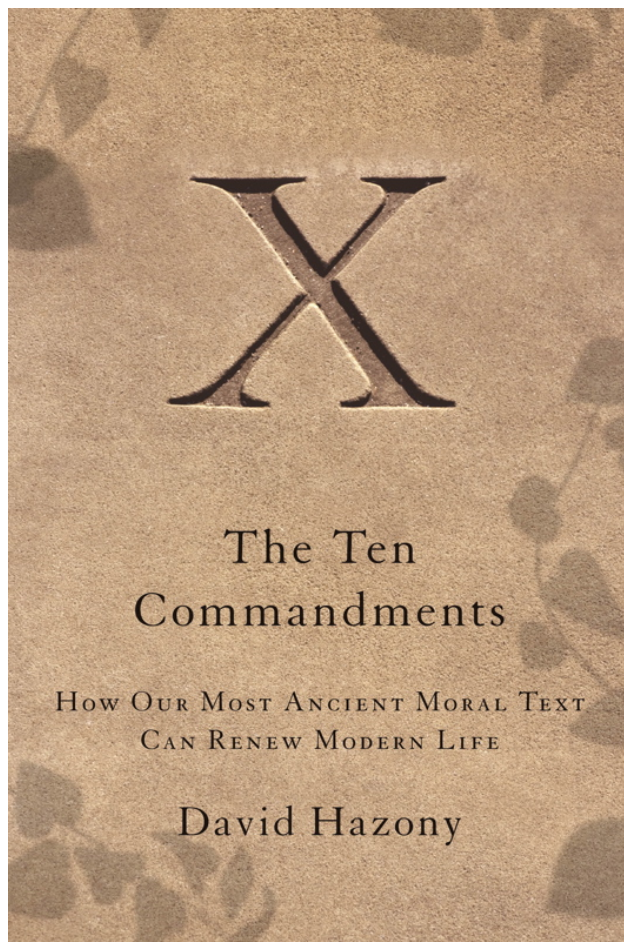
*The Ten Commandments* begins with a daring claim: Although they have become a universally recognizable symbol of biblically based religion, they are not, strictly speaking, a religious text. Rather than making a statement about faith or mystical realms inaccessible to reason, they contain a coherent prescription for how to make a better world. At their core stands what Hazony calls the "spirit of redemption," which he describes as one of the two basic spiritual components of Western civilization. While the Greeks gave us the "spirit of reason," teaching that we should be free to explore and express our views, the spirit of redemption teaches that every individual can, and should, act to improve the world. This spirit reached us from ancient Israel, in the form of the Hebrew Bible, and has stood at the heart of the most important social movements in our history.

Going through the commandments one by one, Hazony shows how each represents a poignant declaration about honesty, the self, life, love, freedom, community, and inner peace. Each commandment, we discover, adds another piece to the puzzle of how the redemptive spirit may enter our lives and help us become more caring, world-changing individuals.

**David Hazony** is an American-born writer based in Jerusalem. His writings have appeared in *The New Republic*, the *Forward*, *Commentary*, *Moment*, *The Jewish Chronicle*, *The New York Sun*, *Policy Review*, the *Jerusalem Post*, and others. He blogs regularly at Contentions, the blog of *Commentary Magazine*. From 2004-2007, Hazony served as editor-in-chief of *Azure*, the quarterly journal of Jewish public thought published by the Shalem Center. A doctoral student in Jewish Philosophy at the Hebrew University, he has focused his research on the thought of Eliezer Berkovits, and edited two volumes of Berkovits' writings. Hazony also



translated Emuna Elon's novel *If You Awaken Love*, which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in 2007.



"Hazony's redemptive—and optimistic—book provides a religious roadmap for all of us, God-seeking or not." —*The Daily Beast*

"A book of truth and beauty." —*Yossi Klein Halevi*

"One of the greatest of Jewish literary arts is that of spinning brilliant and relevant disquisitions out of terse ancient texts, and David Hazony is a master at it." —*Judith Shulevitz*

"A book of genuine wisdom." —*Rabbi David Ellenson*

"An impressive vision of how to attain the good society."  
—*Publishers Weekly*

"A humane moral vision that will sustain redemptive action in an oppressive world." —*Booklist (Starred Review)*

"Hazony is particularly effective in drawing out the wider implications of the commandments... a thoughtful and helpful book." —*Library Journal*

"Hazony reveals the meanings that lie beneath these ten seemingly simple statements." —*Jewish Book World*

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