HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT LIES IN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The basis for all civic morality and personal piety lies in the words of revelation granted to Israel at Mount Sinai and recorded for us in the Torah in this week's parsha. It is difficult to imagine any sort of human progress or civilization absent the Ten Commandments and its value system. Monotheism, respect for parents and authority, protection of person and property, the importance of a day of rest and spiritual serenity, truthfulness and justice, are all the bases of human existence and progress.

We are aware even today, millennia later, that these necessary ideas for human achievement are still not universally accepted. Crime, murder, and immorality of all sorts still rule much of human society. Perhaps that is one understanding of the dire statement of the rabbis in Avot that there is a heavenly voice that emanates daily from Sinai that states: "Woe to My creatures due to their abuse and insult of Torah!"

These basic rules of life that are so clearly and logically self-evident in their wisdom and essence are nevertheless observed more in their breach than in their true observance. One look at any daily newspaper anywhere around the globe will confirm this sad assessment of human affairs in our current world.

We are a long way from assimilating the ideas of Sinai into our lives even after thirty three hundred years of their existence as the basic building blocks of human civilization. Sadly, the evil nature of humans remains somehow paramount in our society.

But the Torah bids us to combat this inherent individual evil nature within us. We have to begin with ourselves. It is related that a great sage once stated in his elderly years: "When I was young I attempted to rectify everything that was wrong in the world. As I grew older I realized that this task was beyond my abilities, so I concentrated on my community. After time I realized that this was also beyond my abilities, so I now concentrated on my family and my descendants. Sadly, I realized that this was also not given to me rectify easily. So now I have decided to concentrate on myself - my own self-discipline and improvement."

The Torah always speaks to us in personal terms, as individuals who are held responsible for our actions and omissions. The Ten Commandments are therefore written to us directly, in second person, and not merely as nice moral generalities. They are commandments and not just advice that can be accepted or rejected.

The Talmud and Halacha have defined for us each of these commandments in a legal and technical

manner. Jewish tradition, customs and mores have expanded on these legal details and fleshed out for us a moral code for daily, practical human behavior.

It is only in this broader moral context that we can understand the commandment "not to covet." It may be unenforceable legally in a court of law by itself unless one has actually stolen because of it but the moral implications of the commandment should be clear to all. Fortunate are we to whom such a Torah and moral value system was given.

Shabat shalom

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