

# The Ten Commandments for Gamechangers

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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)

When we set out to change the game – be it strategic change, innovation, transformation or even revolution – we 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, humanware, re-engineering, population ecology, adaptive learning., 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, 40 years in the wilderness, and the quest for the Promised Land.

The story goes that God searched for 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.” 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 a roadmap for changing the game – any game.

How so? Let’s take a look.

**Commandment One** says, “*I am Lord your God who took you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” Gamechangers start with themselves, freeing themselves from limiting mindsets. The Hebrew word for ancient “Egypt” is *mitzraim*, literally “the narrows” or constraints.

From Nero to Hitler to Kenneth Lay of Enron, leaders lacking self-awareness wrought havoc. First check your own assumptions. Are you enslaved by outdated beliefs or

blind-spots? Are you a victim reacting to circumstances, or a proactive author of your destiny?

**Commandment Two:** “*You shall have no Idols.*” Gamechangers don’t follow false gods or external expectations, but their own, authentic vision. Money, power or fame are not ends, only means. 18<sup>th</sup>-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?’” It’s incumbent on each of us to reveal our unique purpose and create something unprecedented.

As Proverbs says, “Where there is no vision, people perish.” Without a future, you and those around you die, if not physically, then at least as stakeholders. Gamechangers need to see the future before others do. But few spend enough time or resources on co-creating the future; they are consumed by running the present – which is based 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 a 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, which soon became 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.

**Commandment Three,** “*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 brings about the reality we speak. Our words are either bricks that build, or weapons that destroy. Gamechangers 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. 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 crucial dimension: 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.

**Commandment Four**, “*Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it,*” is about taking time out to reflect on what’s essential. In the barrage of e-mails, meetings, decisions we lose our center or go under unless we stop periodically.

Stillness has been the hallmark of the most distinguished gamechangers, from Churchill to Mandela, from Gandhi to Gates (who regularly goes off the grid for “think weeks”). 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 compass.

**Commandment Five** 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 you appreciate gives you power.

Appreciation is crucial in a world of highly mobile knowledge workers whose intellectual capital goes home with them every night (if they’re not already working from home); they will jump ship the moment they feel you don’t care enough. The more you appreciate people and what they bring to the table, the more they *will* bring to the table.

In **Commandment Six**, “*You shall not kill,*” gamechangers regulate their anger and frustration – when you’re fed up with the status quo, things can get quite emotional – and channel their emotions into productive energy.

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

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

But your greatest power as a gamechanger does not come from your authority, title, popularity or resources; it comes from your integrity. Judaism is 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 your values.

**Commandment Eight** is, “*You shall not steal.*” The prohibition against stealing seems trivial: so what? But true gamechangers break the myth that underlies stealing: “Not Enough.” If you stop focusing on what you don’t have and don’t really need, you can leverage what you *do* have.

*Tzedakah* (righteous giving) is perhaps the highest commandment that integrates all others. As Churchill put it, “You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give.” Some cultures define wealth not by how much money you have (or

hoard), but by how much flows through you. When you give, you experience that you are, have, and do enough.

**Commandment Nine** is, “*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*” But when things don’t go as planned, we bear false witness: We hide the breakdown, feel shame, blame others, or worst of all, reduce the challenge. Instead of facing the facts, 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 Jobs were unafraid of bad news. What makes gamechangers 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”). Breakthrough innovations – Post-Its, Viagra, the Internet, civil rights – were each a phoenix arising from the ashes of a breakdown.

Finally, in **Commandment Ten**, “*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 gamechangers understand people and see the world from their vantage point. With outsourcing, offshoring and virtual teams, standing in the shoes of alliance partners, negotiating opponents, even competitors or enemies, has become an indispensable competence.

The Hebrew word for life is *chayim*, a plural term. Life is not individual; it happens only together. We’re all interdependent; nothing you’ve done is your 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, I keep four, she the other six!” But the Ten Commandments are a holograph: For sustainable game-change, we must strive to live up to them all. Frankly, our common future depends on it.

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

I invite you to assess yourself. Properly harnessed, each of the Ten Commandments provides tools for 21st-century gamechangers. Rate your competencies (1=non-existent, 2=weak, 3=fair, 4=competent, 5=masterful). Be honest with yourself: neither negative nor boastful. It is not about looking good.

#### **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
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**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, 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
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## 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, 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)
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