Living Religions of the World

Experiential Journal Prompt: The Ten Commitments

In *Aseret ha-Dibrot: The “Ten Commandments,”* Tracey Rich explains some common misperceptions about the original “Ten Commandments.” First of all, the Commandments are divided into “ten” in different ways by different religious communities. Secondly, they are more properly translated as “Ten Sayings” or “Ten Statements.” Thirdly, they are not actual “Mitzvot” or “Commandments,” but rather the ten categories into which the 613 Mitzvot can be placed. For example, there is a mitzvah “not to embarrass a person” which falls under the category of “Thou shalt not murder.” Finally, a Mitzvah is not merely an ethical prohibition. It is more properly understood as an action that a person can do to make life sacred. In keeping with this last insight, let’s follow the lead of David Simon, the author of Ten Commitments: Translating Good Intentions Into Great Choices, and translate each of the Ten Commandments into Ten “Commitments.” Simons says:

“The first commandment in the Old Testament is "I am the Lord, thy God, who brought you out of the house of slavery." Although this is traditionally interpreted as reminding us that there is one true God, it's possible to see a deeper and perhaps more relevant spiritual message- that of freedom. Most people live in voluntary confinement, believing that the security they gain outweighs the freedom surrendered. But the desire for freedom is not relinquished so easily. Freedom to speak, to act, to love, and to find meaning in life are universal impulses expressed across time and culture. The first of the Ten Commandments proclaims that God freed his people from slavery. This is the essential message of spirituality- freedom from internally or externally imposed limitations, freedom from bondage. Most people mistakenly believe that external forces limit their happiness. "I am depressed because I'm stuck in an abusive marriage." “I have this ulcer because my boss is controlling." "My relationships repeatedly fail because my father abandoned me when I was young." We accept these limiting beliefs and engage in perpetual internal negotiations with these restrictive voices, never reaching agreement on the terms for our release. Common excuses I hear include: "As soon as my youngest child graduates high school, I'm leaving this toxic marriage," or "Once I'm vested in my pension plan, I am saying goodbye to this stagnant job” or “After I get through the holidays, I am going to start exercising."

Your assignment: Look up the Ten Commandments in a Torah or Bible or online (it doesn’t matter which version you use) and, in your journal, translate each of the commandments into a commitment, a positive action that could transform your life. These commitments do not have to have to be religious; they could reflect whatever personal values you have. Of course, this practice will not yield the 613 Mitzvot practiced by many Jewish people, but it may help us to get an idea of what it means to “do Mitzvot” or “make life holy,” as some of my Jewish friends say.