

Who Has Time for Instant Gratification?

Twice a year the Ten Commandments are chanted from the Torah scroll in the synagogue, once in the Book of Exodus (during the winter) and today in Deuteronomy. They aren't actually called the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, but rather the Ten Pronouncements would be a more accurate translation. The closest word for "Commandment" in Hebrew is *Mitzvah* which also has the connotation of "a good deed" and there are 613 specific ones in the Jewish tradition.

Half of the Ten Commandments relate to humans' relationship with the Divine and the other half relate to humans' relationship with other humans. I'd like to focus on humans' relationship to other humans in this column today.

If one follows the news at all these days, it's quite apparent that we're living in quite tumultuous times. To a certain degree, especially in the realm of politics, our country is more polarized than at any other time in recent memory. People's tolerance for opinions that are unlike their own seems to be decreasing more and more. The current election campaign has been particularly contentious and divisive. None of this is news. Things have been moving in the direction of increasing intolerance over the last few decades. The concept of compromise seems to be less prevalent these days too. Not that many years ago people reached across the aisle much more in Congress than they seem to nowadays.

The ability to respectfully listen to someone with whom we strongly disagree is crucial to being able to establish harmony in our society, in our community, in our families, and with our neighbors and friends. Are we losing sight this value?

Technological progress creates change and the rapidity of change has increased dramatically over the decades. Life in so many ways is unimaginably more comfortable and convenient than ever before. Let's take the example of information gathering. When I was growing up and wanted to find something out I might go to a library or a bookstore to look up the information or to acquire a book on the subject. Nowadays computers, smart phones, etc. are so prevalent that people are very used to being able to seek out information almost instantaneously. Of course with access to the internet being so effortless you can't always be certain of the

accuracy of the information you're finding online. The internet can be a great source of both information and of misinformation. When we had to rely on books to acquire a lot of information, publishers were the gatekeepers determining who was sufficiently knowledgeable to disseminate information. Of course it wasn't a foolproof system and certainly a lot of misinformation and biased information circulated, but nowadays there are practically no gatekeepers to stop the broadcasting of gross deception across the worldwide web. On the one hand, it's amazing how much you can find via an online search engine, and how quickly, but on the other hand the power of this media to do damage is great.

I've begun to wonder whether all of the technological change that has made our lives so much more convenient than ever before is also creating an environment of intolerance. Back to the example of computers. When people were first using home computers they were very slow compared to what's available today. Yet people were patient and pleased because it was such a dramatic advance over what they had been used to up until then. Nowadays, with computers so much faster than they used to be not that many years ago, the kind of time waiting for your computer to access the information you're seeking that we once took for granted becomes aggravating. With such instant gratification available, have people lost the ability to delay gratification?

It's been my experience that many of the things most worth attaining require time, effort, patience, and persistence. I'm sure you've heard the expression that "genius is ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration. Having to make an effort to achieve or attain something affects us internally in a way that's more important than the external end result that we might have been initially pursuing. That's why I'm wondering how close the connection is between the evident increasing lack of tolerance we're witnessing these days and the prevalence of increasing convenience in our material lives.

Things may indeed be much more easily attained in our material lives nowadays than ever before, but I believe that our inner lives, our spiritual lives, still require a lifelong cultivation. It strikes me that the desire for instant gratification in our material lives and the increasing ability to attain it makes us much less patient in putting the necessary time and effort into our spiritual lives. How often have we seen people come to a class in some sort of spiritual discipline and expect instant "enlightenment"? Close relationships require consistent care and

attention, acquiring knowledge takes years of effort, endeavors that seek depth require time, hard work and patience. Tolerance and compromise are essential for achieving harmony and progress in a society. The atmosphere in society (especially in politics) today in which one side tries to pressure or bully the other into bowing to their desires is a poor model for a harmonious community or nation. Just as the Ten Commandments contain precepts pertaining to a person's relationship both to the Divine and to one's neighbor, so it would be a healthy turn for our society today if we remembered that our personal desires cannot be the be-all and end-all. We must keep in mind the greater good of the whole nation, our "neighbors" with whom we live.