You shall have no other gods before Me, you shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the Earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them…"

As we know, the very first dibur of the Aseret HaDibrot declares that “I am the L-rd your G-d.” Having established that, it seems superfluous to elaborate. If we truly believe in G-d, why would we contemplate other gods?

Towards the end of Sefer Yehoshua, the retiring leader seems to be giving the nation a choice. Extraordinarily, Yehoshua appears to be offering them a ‘way out’ of their covenant with G-d:

“And now fear the L-rd, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth; and remove the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt, and serve the L-rd. And if it displeases you to serve the L-rd, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods that your fathers served on the other side of the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell, but as for me and my household, we shall serve the L-rd.” (Yehoshua 24:14-15)

Yehoshua himself clearly states what he intends to do, but the people must apparently decide for themselves.

Yehoshua’s words are particularly challenging in light of verses to the contrary: “Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; but with him that stands here with us this day before the L-rd our G-d, and also with him that is not here with us this day” (Devarim 29:13-14).

“But what enters your mind shall not come about, what you say, ‘Let us be like the nations, like the families of the lands, to serve wood and stone.’ As I live, says the L-rd G-d, surely with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with poured out fury, will I reign over you And I shall take you out of the peoples, and I shall gather you from the lands in which you were scattered, with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with poured out fury” (Yechezkel 20:32-34).

Both the above are unequivocal in stressing the eternal covenant between Am Yisrael and the Almighty. So how are we to understand the words of Yehoshua to the masses?

Both Malbim and Alshich suggest that indeed Yehoshua was not offering the nation a ‘way out.’ Our covenant with the Almighty is unquestionably eternal.

What disturbed Yehoshua was the popular notion that one can live in two worlds simultaneously. He pleads for truth and sincerity while implying that the people at the time, despite publicly declaring allegiance to G-d, still worshipped idols privately.

In his final words to the nation, Yehoshua is emphasizing the need for “Real Judaism.” This does not mean detaching kodesh from chol, it actually requires bringing kodesh into chol. We need to be part of this world, but we need to do so through the ways of the Torah. In an ideal scenario there is no kodesh and chol; one who is driven by their belief in G-d will perform everything in a Jewish way, mitzvot and mundane matters alike.

With this in mind, let us return to our initial question. The first Commandment declares that the L-rd G-d brought us out of Egypt. The second Commandment is there to elaborate – to explain how we must transform that belief into reality through true commitment. There can be no other gods, for nothing can take precedence over our religious beliefs. If we are to live our Judaism to the full, we will need to internalize that we cannot live in two worlds simultaneously.

This message is underlined somewhat by the words that follow, beautifully explained by my rabbi and mentor, Rabbi Yitzchak Bernstein z”l: אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל – in Heaven above – in matters of Heaven, aspire, dream, never be content. אֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַָּחַת – in the Earth beneath, in matters of this world, be content with what you have, do what you need to do, in order to to reach the Heaven above.

This is our mandate to live Jewish life to the full.