

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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**The Tenth Commandment: "You Shall Not Covet"**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

What is the reason for the prohibition "You shall not covet ... nor shall you desire..." that comes to limit man's thoughts and feelings even when they do not find external, practical expression? We shall present here three different understandings of the reason for this prohibition. As in many other instances where we deal with the rationale of various mitzvot, there is no need to choose among them, since the different perceptions are not contradictory but rather complementary.

**A. RAMBAM: DISTANCING ONE FROM THEFT AND MURDER**

The Rambam (Hilkhos Gezeila Va-aveida 1:11) writes:

"Desire leads to coveting, and coveting leads to stealing. For if the owner (of the coveted object) does not wish to sell, even though he is offered a good price and is entreated to accept, the person (who covets the object) will come to steal it, as it is written (*Mikha 2:2*), 'They covet fields and (then) steal them.' And if the owner approaches him with a view to reclaiming his money or preventing the theft, then he will come to murder. Go and learn from the example of Achav and Navot."

Thus, the prohibition of "You shall not covet" is a fence or boundary keeping us at a safe distance from the very serious sins that may result from it and that may cause very serious harm to others: theft, adultery, and – most serious of all – even murder.

The difficulty that arises from this explanation is that it makes one of the Ten Commandments into an auxiliary to the commandments that precede it - "You shall not murder," "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not steal." If we understand this commandment as a "fence" guarding other grave sins, then the prohibition of coveting loses its own independent significance. However, its status as one of the Ten Commandments would seem to indicate that it does, in fact, have its own fundamental and independent significance.

**B. PROTECTION FROM THE HARM CAUSED BY SOMEONE COVETING YOUR PROPERTY**

We can also explain that coveting "all that belongs to your neighbor" – his wife, his house or his property, even if this feeling is concealed in the heart of the coveter and not at all distinguishable in his actions – is itself regarded by the Torah as damaging to the neighbor. (See, e.g., Cassuto's comments

to this verse.) The opening passages of Bava Batra teach us that a person can even harm his neighbor with his eyes - "Damage caused by looking is also regarded as damage" - and this is prohibited. If two people share the same courtyard, each can force his neighbor to build a wall in the middle in order that neither will see the other while he is busy in his half.

The Torah's prohibition against coveting teaches us that a person may harm his neighbor even through mere thought. His desire for "whatever belongs to your neighbor" represents a sort of spiritual "encroaching upon boundaries," and although the damage is not visible, it is even more serious than regular damage caused by the eyes. It cannot be measured in financial terms, nor can the coveter be sued in a court, but it is prohibited here in the last of the Ten Commandments.

**C. PHILO: PROTECTING THE COVETER FROM BAD CHARACTER TRAITS**

The two previous reasons mentioned for the prohibition of coveting both explain it as being meant to protect the "neighbor" from possible harm being caused to his property by the "coveter" – either real damage that may come about as a result of the coveting, or hidden damage that exists in the desire itself. According to these explanations, the prohibition represents a direct continuation of the previous commandments, either by serving as a "fence" to prevent their transgression or by raising the level of the demand which is prohibited.

The introverted nature of the prohibition against coveting – the limitation that it places on a person's internal, emotional world – gives rise to another possible explanation: this prohibition is meant to educate the coveter himself, and to bring him to a level of spiritual purity, free of forbidden desires. It is not the "neighbor" that the Torah means to protect here – for what harm is there in someone else's covetous thoughts (especially since there are people who actually wish to arouse the envy of their neighbors)? Rather, it is the coveter himself that the commandment comes to protect, for "Jealousy and desire and honor remove a person from this world" (*Avot 4:21*).

It is in this vein that the first-century thinker Philo of Alexandria interprets the tenth commandment in his treatise, "On the Decalogue." This short work serves as an introduction to Philo's four books, "On the Special Laws," in which he categorizes all the mitzvot of the Torah as details of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are principles and the rest of the mitzvot are detailed applications of these principles.

Philo presents the commandment "You shall not covet" as a central pillar of the Torah's moral instruction. He opens by addressing the individual aspect of this command, attending to the spiritual education and elevation of the person himself, but concludes by elaborating on its social significance: the family, the land and all of mankind can ultimately be destroyed as a

result of failure to suppress desires for various pleasures. The command "You shall not covet" therefore has the potential to save the world.

Philo was also aware of the aspect of social morality contained in the formulation of this command, and therefore he devotes his conclusion to the SOCIAL damage caused by unbridled desire. His broad elaboration of the significance of the tenth commandment arises specifically from the significance that he gives to the Ten Commandments as GENERAL RULES or principles that serve as categories for the mitzvot of the Torah.

#### D. IBN EZRA: "HOW CAN ANY PERSON NOT COVET A BEAUTIFUL THING IN HIS HEART?"

We shall devote the following section to a discussion of a problem addressed in several places by the Ibn Ezra: can a person actually be commanded not to covet that which his heart desires? Can there be any control over thought and feeling, preventing a person from desiring something that belongs to his neighbor?

This question arises in both psychological and philosophical terms. First, can a person prevent his heart from coveting? Second, is there a sin in mere thought? These questions are connected: if a person cannot stop himself from coveting, then it cannot be considered sinful.

Regarding the philosophical question, the Ibn Ezra writes in his commentary on this commandment in Sefer Devarim:

"There are many proofs [that reward and punishment apply to thoughts and not just actions], and I shall not elaborate, but only refer them: ([Mishlei 6:18](#)) 'A heart that invents wicked thoughts...;' ([Divrei Ha-Yamim II 6:8](#)) 'You have performed good, for it was in your heart,' ([Tehillim 125:4](#)) 'Perform good, O Lord, to those who are good and to those who are upright in their hearts.' And Moshe states at the end (of the Torah, [Devarim 30:14](#)): '...in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it.' THE MAIN PURPOSE OF ALL THE COMMANDMENTS IS TO STRAIGHTEN THE HEART ... and this is evident from the fact that we distinguish between one who sinned intentionally and one who sinned in error."

In his explanation of the command "You shall not covet" in our parasha, the Ibn Ezra answers the psychological question:

"Now I shall present a parable: Know that a peasant who is of sound mind, and who sees a princess who is beautiful, will not covet her in his heart, to lie with her, for he knows that it is impossible. Do not consider this peasant to be like a madman, who would desire wings to fly to heaven, even though it is impossible. Likewise, a person does not desire to lie with his mother, although she may be beautiful, for

he has been accustomed since his youth to know that she is forbidden to him.

In the same way, an intelligent person must know that he will see a beautiful woman or wealth as a result of his wisdom or knowledge, but only if God allots it to him... and therefore an intelligent person does not desire it or covet it. When he knows that God has forbidden his neighbor's wife to him, then she is more elevated in his eyes than the princess in the eyes of the peasant. And so he is satisfied with his portion and does not allow his heart to covet and desire something that is not his, for he knows that God does not wish to give it to him; he cannot take it by force or by his thoughts or schemes. He has faith in his Creator, that He will provide for him and do what is good in His eyes."

Although the social stratification of the peasant and the princess no longer exists, Ibn Ezra's message remains clear, and we can reformulate his parable in such a way as to make it relevant to our times. The religious consciousness that a person CHOOSES is what dictates the way he relates to the world around him. The proper religious attitude of a person who believes in God's providence causes him not to covet his neighbor's wife or property at all, for he knows that they are forbidden to him BY GOD. The psychological question can therefore be answered as follows: by means of self-education towards the proper religious consciousness and attitude, a person can look at "anything that is pleasant to his eyes" without such things arousing in him the desire to attain them.

From the Ibn Ezra's answer, we learn that he sees the prohibition not in terms of damage caused to the "neighbor," but rather as a RELIGIOUS prohibition. In effect, it says, "Do not covet that which God has forbidden to you or does not wish to give you. Rather, be satisfied with what you have, with the knowledge that this is the lot that God has assigned you." For this reason the Ibn Ezra emphasizes that "GOD has forbidden" his neighbor's wife to him, and that "GOD did not wish to give him" his neighbor's property.

There is a clear similarity between the reasoning of the Ibn Ezra and that of Philo. Both maintain that this mitzva is meant principally to protect THE PERSON TO WHOM IT IS ADDRESSED from the harm of desiring and coveting something that is outside of his reach, and that the object of the prohibition is "all that belongs to your neighbor" – because it is the very ownership of the object by someone else that makes the desire for it a desire for the unattainable. It is an illegitimate, prohibited desire.

The difference between the Ibn Ezra and Philo lies in understanding which sphere is the Torah protecting from this prohibited desire. According to Philo, the desire for the unattainable harms – first and foremost – the person's own soul, damaging his spiritual health, but it also harms the fabric of society. The Ibn Ezra, in contrast, perceives the desire for the unattainable primarily as a religious sin and an expression of defective faith. The command, "You shall not covet" is therefore

a call to a person to work on his religious consciousness, as the Seforno teaches (based on the Ibn Ezra):

"'You shall not covet' – you should regard the thing as completely out of the question, for a person by nature does not covet something that is out of the question."

#### F. "THE WICKED ARE RULED BY THEIR HEARTS, BUT THE RIGHTEOUS RULE THEIR HEARTS"

The Ibn Ezra's answer to the psychological question of how one can control his emotions and prevent himself from coveting is suitable for one who poses it in theoretical terms. A person, insists the Ibn Ezra, must develop the correct religious consciousness, to the point where "the thing becomes completely out of the question for you."

But the Ibn Ezra's answer does not solve the problem for a person who encounters the prohibition in his experience of life, finding himself desiring something that belongs to someone else. He poses his question not on the theoretical level, but rather as a most difficult existential problem: "How can I not desire THIS beautiful object in my heart?" In this case, there is no time to develop a proper religious consciousness that would prevent any desire for something that belongs to someone else. The question is burning in the heart of the coveter, and whatever he has not achieved thus far in his self-education will not be attained in a moment. What, then, can he do?

The Sefer Ha-chinukh (mitzva 416) addresses this question – an important one from an educational, practical point of view. He justly feels that a clarification of this question touches on a fundamental principle, one of the foundations of the Torah and mitzvot: the principle of free will. He expresses himself with great force and inner conviction:

"Do not wonder and ask: But how can it be in one's power to restrain his heart from longing for riches that he may see in his fellow man's possession, when he himself is lacking them all? How can a prohibition be given in the Torah about something which man cannot possibly obey?"

This matter is not so; none but wicked fools and sinners would speak so. For it is indeed in one's power to restrain himself, his thoughts and his longings, from whatever he wishes. It lies within his free choice and his decision to repel his desire or draw it near, with regard to all matters, as he wishes; he rules his heart and can guide it as he wants.

No human thought - whether it be small or great, good or evil - is hidden to God, before Whom all secrets are known, Who seeks out the concealed recesses, Who sees all a person's secret thoughts; nothing is hidden from His eyes. He punishes those who

transgress His will IN THEIR HEARTS, and performs kindness until the thousandth generation to those who love Him and devote themselves to His service IN THEIR HEARTS. For there is nothing so good for a man as a good, pure thought, since that is the beginning of all good deeds and their end. And this, it seems, is the significance of the 'good heart' which the Sages praise in Avot (2:9)."

The Sefer Ha-chinukh declares man's great freedom. He has free choice not only in relation to the actions that he performs, but also in relation to his thoughts and emotions. A person's inner world lies within his own power. "He rules his heart and can guide it as he wants." This truth applies to every situation in which a person faces the test of an inclination towards coveting, or any other inclination: he may remove the desire from his heart and refrain from transgressing "You shall not covet."

The same idea that is expressed in a midrash (Bereishit Rabba 67:8), which distinguishes between two expressions that appear in the Torah with relation to two types of people:

"The wicked are ruled by their hearts:

(Tehillim 14:1) 'Naval said in his heart...'

(Bereishit 27:41) 'And Esav said in his heart...'

(Melakhim I 12:26) 'And Yerav'am said in his heart'

But the righteous rule their hearts:

(Shemuel I 1:13) 'And Channa was speaking to her heart...'

(ibid. 27:1) 'And David said to his heart...'

(Daniel 1:8) 'And Daniel decided in his heart...'

These latter are similar to the Creator, concerning Whom it is written (Bereishit 8:21), 'And God said to His heart...'"

Translated by Kaeren Fish.

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