

## ***What's in that Amazon Delivery Truck (and What's Not)***

Parashat Yitro

February 6, 2021; 24 Sh'vat 5781

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The other night we were watching the evening news--my wife is very loyal to ABC, so we were watching World News Tonight with David Muir—and the lead stories were all about the severe winter weather that was sweeping through much of the northeast, dumping many feet of snow on several states, causing crashes pileups on the roads and highways, all kinds of power outages and shut downs...and they showed a video clip, of all things, of an Amazon truck, you know those blue Utilitmaster delivery trucks with the Amazon logo on the side...well this one had gotten stuck in a snowbank, and the video showed five or six guys pushing that truck out as the driver revved the engine. I thought to myself, now that's a real emergency. If that Amazon truck can't make its deliveries on time, especially for the Amazon prime customers, then there is nothing much left to hope for in the world! I see the elation on my kid's faces when the Amazon truck pulls into our cul-de-sac...Will it stop at our house? Do they have something for me? In a world of lockdowns, and sheltering in place, and being homebound, the Amazon truck is a beacon of light on otherwise bleary days.

Amazon, which began 26 years ago as a book seller, and now sells almost anything you could imagine, has this way of subliminally convincing us that we could really have anything we want, almost whenever we want. Order in the next 30 minutes and receive it by tomorrow. Become a Prime member and get access to even more goods and services, not to mention faster delivery options. Now I am a Prime member! Often those blue Amazon trucks are delivering packages for me on our cul-de-sac! But I am very aware, especially when I get my credit card bill, of the perils of this temptation, and almost instant gratification.

Today's parasha of course contained the 10 Commandments, which some of our great Sages understood to be a condensed version of the entire 613 commandments. Somehow, the spirit of the entire Torah is infused in these ten immortal statements.

But today I want to focus on the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment, the one that is tickled by the lure of Amazon and seduction of getting almost anything we could desire with the click of a cursor. The Torah admonishes us "*Lo tachmod beit rei'echa, lo tachmod eishet rei'echa, ve'avdo, ve'amato, v'shoro, ve'chamoro, ve'chol asher le'rei'echa...*Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, or your neighbor's servants, or your neighbor's ox, or his ass, or his BMW, or anything, for that matter, that is your neighbor's..."

Now there's an obvious difference between the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment and most of the others...*Lo tirtzach*, do not commit murder, that's an action; *lo tignov*, do not steal, that's a prohibited act; *lo tin'af*, do not commit adultery, that is a specific illicit deed. But *Lo tachmod*? That's a feeling. Coveting is not a thing I can point to. How can the Torah command me not to admire something, or want something, or crave something, or wish I had something...? Almost nowhere else in the Torah are thoughts or feelings taboo, only actions. If I see the Amazon truck, how can I help myself from wishing it was stopping at my address and not my neighbor's?!

Many of the commentators were troubled with the idea that the Torah seems to be addressing a feeling versus and action. One of the most unique and beautiful aspects of Jewish theology is the distinction between thought and deed. Part of being human is to be bombarded by all kinds of temptations and inclinations—some positive, others negative—, but, as Ben Zoma reminds us, the definition of strength is being able to keep those temptations in check, to not allow them to lead us to destructive behavior. So what about not coveting? How can this allure be elevated to the level of a mitzvah, not to mention one of the top ten?

The Rambam expressed similar concerns about God prohibiting thoughts and feelings. He understood the prohibition of coveting to in fact refer to pressuring someone to sell you something, even if that person is going to pay you for it. The act of pressuring another person to sell you that item that you so badly want, that is the actual sin. But not all of our holy sages agreed with the Rambam. Some, like Ibn Ezra and Seforno supported the idea that God could indeed prohibit feelings. They argued that if cultivate the faith that whatever you have or don't have in this world is ultimately up to God, then you couldn't possibly covet anything because it isn't up to you anyway. I must admit that I am not so comfortable with that degree of determinism, so those explanations don't sit so well with me.

This week I had the sad, but sacred duty of burying two beloved, long-time members of our shul, one in her 80's the other, just short of her 64<sup>th</sup> birthday; one, essentially of old age, the other of esophageal cancer. People often ask me how I endure the emotional peaks and valleys of the rabbinate. The truth is, part of the way I deal with it is that for every valley, there is another peak. There is a balance between simchas and sadness that provides equilibrium and the "big picture" of our existence. But I have to tell you that while funerals are certainly very sad and emotional experiences, I am often so inspired to hear about and honor the life stories of those I bring to their final place of rest. That was certainly the case with these two congregants. I listened as grandchildren spoke in the most loving ways about the influence and impact their Nana had on them; how she knew all six of them as individuals, and played such a decisive role in their lives. How she lived to be surrounded by family, and had the opportunity not only to see six grandchildren in her lifetime but also five great grandchildren. In the case of the other, whose life was cut much to short, there was still a sense from her loved ones and friends that she lived more in those 63 and a half years than many other people live in many more than that. The reason I am sharing this with you today is that I came upon a commentary to the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment that I shared at these funerals. A commentary that touches me so deeply, and resonates so truly in my heart...

Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov lived in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century in a little town in eastern Ukraine. He was a disciple of the great Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism. Rabbi Yechiel Michel taught that if one lived a life of purpose, of meaning, of significance, of holiness, then one would never come to covet anything. If you keep the first nine commandments, he said, then the tenth is more like a reward than a commandment. If you live with such goodness and kindness, then your reward is that you won't desire anything more in life. When I thought of these two special women who I buried this week, I had the sense that, with the exception of more time in this world, there was nothing that either of them really wanted or coveted out of life. They "had it all." Meaningful work, loving spouses, adoring families, dear friends, strong connections to faith and community. When you have all that, what could you possibly covet?

It seems to me that the people who covet are not people who are deprived or who don't have anything of value. Some of the people who covet the most are the people who have the most! That's why the book of Ecclesiastes teaches "*ohev kesef lo yisbah kesef*," one who loves money never seems to have enough of it! No, people who covet just need to have their eyes examined. They have so much, they just can't see it. *Ve'ha-eir eineinu* we ask God before the *Sh'ma*, Open up our eyes...Allow us to see the many, many blessings in our lives. Allow us to be aware of how much we have; of our great wealth in the form of love, relationships, education, safety, freedom, opportunity, you name it! May we all realize that we are so blessed, so incredibly fortunate that there is nothing that we could possibly covet! Purpose and meaning in life does not get delivered in an Amazon truck. It's far too precious for that. Open up our eyes God so that we are able to see that all we could ever want or need, we already have.