

## Parshas Yisro - 5781

The last of the *aseres hadibros* is the prohibition of לא תחמוד – coveting another person’s possessions. As far as prohibitions go, this one is somewhat unique. If the Torah prohibits eating a double bacon cheeseburger, the specific command addresses a behavior that one may not do. That generally is the way prohibitions work. They are restrictions against specific behaviors and actions. The prohibition against coveting, however, is unique in that it seems to address a feeling rather than a behavior. A more difficult question is that when prohibitions restrict behaviors, I exercise self-control to refrain from eating the double bacon cheeseburger that I desire to eat. But how do I refrain from the desire. Is it possible to simply turn off the desire? If I see someone’s new house, new car, new dress or new kitchen, how do I control my feelings of jealousy? Feelings just come and we do not have much control over them. Its when the feeling expresses itself in action that we run into an issue but how can the Torah prohibit us from feeling a particular way? As the saying goes, the difference between those who are insane and those who are not insane is that those who are insane say what they are thinking. In other words, we have no control over the thoughts that pop into our mind, we only control what we do with those thoughts. How then could the Torah prohibit feeling jealous?

The Ibn Ezra famously offers a parable designed to help facilitate gaining control over one’s thoughts. Ibn Ezra notes that although a poor peasant may covet his neighbor’s home, cow or farm, he does not have feelings of jealousy towards the possessions of the king or the queen. It is so outside of his league that he does not become jealous over the king’s possessions. Accordingly, the Torah’s prohibition against jealousy is to create a frame of reference. Just like one does not feel jealousy towards the king, so too, one should look at a neighbor’s possessions as though they are so outside of your league, that feelings of jealousy do not even begin. If Hashem wanted you to have that new house, car or kitchen He would have provided it for you. Although the prohibition remains within the realm of thought rather than action, with proper training one can exercise control over such thinking and this is the intent of the prohibition.

The Bais HaLevi offers another explanation for the prohibition. He offers the following parable. Someone desires a particular thing and has a burning desire to fulfill that desire. Let us use as an example someone who yearns for a double bacon cheeseburger. His *yetzer hora* to eat it burns inside and the person sets out towards the restaurant to purchase the burger. What separates him and his coveted double bacon cheeseburger is a river that has a layer of ice over it. As he is running across the frozen river, the ice cracks beneath him. In that split second, he becomes deathly frightened that the ice will crack further and he will fall into the icy waters. In that same split second that he fears

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for his life, his desire for the double bacon cheeseburger suddenly disappears. Hashem created people in a way that as soon as fear enters the brain and fight or flight kicks in, all of his desires and thoughts about pursuing transgressions, immediately disappear. The application of the parable is that once the Torah prohibits coveting someone else's possessions, one should be fearful of violating the Biblical prohibition. The fear of violating the prohibition should preclude him from desiring something in the same manner of someone who is running to the restaurant and the ice cracks beneath his feet.

The Bais HaLevi continues by noting that people rationalize their transgressions by claiming that their *yetzer hora* overwhelmed them. However, this is not a good excuse, because if one had a proper perspective on the severity of sin and how spiritually dangerous transgressions are, the desire for such things would never arise. The truth is, explains the Bais HaLevi, the *yetzer hora* is not so strong and we give it too much credit because with a small fear, the yearning and desire for sin disappear.

The *aseres hadibros* are supposed to capture the essence of the Torah. According to many commentators, the entirety of Torah is contained within the *aseres hadibros*. They address the most fundamental aspects of Judaism. Belief in Hashem, Shabbos, murder, adultery. These are some pretty weighty, important and essential topics. Coveting, however seems out of place. It doesn't seem to capture the importance or weightiness of the other topics. It shows that the person has not yet developed his character fully but why is it so essential that it is included in the *aseres hadibros*?

The answer to this is that the prohibition against coveting is, in fact, one of the most essential prohibitions. More than other prohibitions that simply prohibit a particular action or behavior, the prohibition against coveting facilitates formulating a perspective that will impact one's overall perspective on Torah and how one looks at others and their things. According to the Ibn Ezra, the prohibition trains us to look at the world from a *bitachon* perspective. If Hashem wanted me to have this item, He would provide it. If I do not have it, that means it is not for me. With that perspective, feelings of jealousy melt away (trying to maintain warm thoughts in the cold 😊). I can be happy when I see others with good things and I do not have to feel resentful and covet what they have because I am confident that Hashem has given me everything that I need.

The second point is to realize that the *yester hora's* efforts to tempt us to sin occur, specifically, when sin does not seem so bad. If we look at the sin and rationalize, "It is probably not such a bad thing," "If I commit the sin once, what negative impact will that actually have?" we are in danger of sinning. Once it seems reasonable to sin, we can be easily tempted to sin. If we perceive sin as something dangerous, the temptation

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disappears and what seemed so attractive and so tempting, loses its allure and our interest in pursuing it wanes. In fact, there are commentators who maintain that just like the *aseres hadibros* contain the rest of the *mitzvos* of the Torah, so too, within the *aseres hadibros* the last prohibition against coveting contains the essence of the other nine *dibros*.

**By Charlene and Bob Appleson, in memory of Charlene's  
mother Marcella Weisberg, Masha bat David, A"H**

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