

How can we not covet?

This week's Torah portion, *Va'etchanan*, includes the repetition of the Ten Commandments. The last of them is "You shall not covet".

What does it mean: "You shall not covet"? What exactly is being commanded here? How can you prevent yourself from having certain feelings, certain thoughts? Aren't they beyond your control? And isn't Judaism a religion of action, not of feelings or beliefs? An entire industry, the advertising industry, exists only to get us to covet things we don't have. Is it sinful; lock, stock and barrel?

Let's explore what our Sages have said on the matter. First, the Torah text. The first version, in Exodus, is:

Lo tachmod bet re-echa. Lo tachmod eshet re-echa, ve-avdo, ve-amato, ve-shoro, va-chamoro, vechol asher lere-echa

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is your neighbor's. [Ex 20:14]

The second version, in Deuteronomy, in our portion, is:

V'lo tachmod eshet re-echa. V'lo tit'avveh bet re-echa, sadehu ve-avdo, va-amato, shoro, va-chamoro, vechol asher lere-echa

And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor shall you desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is your neighbor's.

[Deut. 5:18]

Note the differences in phrasing. Exodus talks about "coveting" your neighbor's house, then his wife, then other things. Deuteronomy talks about "coveting" your neighbor's wife first, then "desiring" his house and other things. A different verb is used, so there must be a difference. What is that difference? The Talmud holds that "coveting" is a longing that leads to wrongdoing, whereas "desiring" is a matter of the heart only. [Bava Metzia 5b; also Zohar on Devarim, 3, p 261a; and Rambam, Sefer ha-Mitzvot].

The Rambam writes in his *Mishneh Torah*:

When you desire a neighbor's object and pressure him heavily until he gives it to you, even if your pressure was friendly and even if you pay handsomely for it, you have violated the prohibition. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Gezeilah v'Aveidah]

So, in the Rambam's view, even pressure to sell is reprehensible:

-You must not tell your neighbor, who did not put his house on the market, "I want your house so badly I will pay you twice its market value for it."

-You must not tell a poverty-stricken husband, "Divorce your wife so I can marry her. I'll give you a million dollars and she will live like a queen."

And what about threatening them with reprisals if they don't do as you say? Obviously, that's even more forbidden. Nevertheless, the Talmud says:

If a man agrees to sell something through fear of physical violence, the sale is nonetheless valid. [Baba Batra 47b]

This ruling is motivated by practicality. Without it, a lot of legal sales would be questioned.

The Rambam also 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 [in the Book of Micah]: "They covet fields and (then) steal them." [Micah 2:2]

And if the owner approaches him with a view to reclaiming his money or preventing the theft, then he will come to murder. [Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Gezeilah v'Aveidah 1:11]

So the Rambam views "Do not covet" as a protective fence that avoids a cascade of infractions. For example, coveting your neighbor's wife might lead to murder of her husband, as in the case of David and Bathsheba. If the adultery is not known and leads to a child, the father is misidentified, and the child does not get to inherit from his real father, which is a form of theft. The child does not get to honor his real father, which breaks another commandment. If the matter is known, the child is tagged as a bastard, and may marry only another bastard. If he can't find one, he cannot marry, which means fewer Jews to observe Shabbat and commandments.

The Talmud states that

Envy, lust and seeking honor remove a person from this world. [Avot 4:21]

This implies that the commandment seeks to protect not only the neighbor but also the coveter, allowing him to elevate himself and earn a share in the World to Come.

But all this does not explain how we can prevent ourselves from coveting.

First of all, the Talmud makes clear that, while coveting is forbidden, there is no punishment for it:

[There is no punishment for mere evil intention], for it is said [in the Book of Psalms]: "If I saw iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not hear." [Ps. 66:18]... [If evil] intention does not [lead to action], the Holy One, blessed be He, does not [punish it]. [Kiddushin 40a]

So we can relax about that.

Second, the Talmud describes one way we can go about not coveting: Taking action not to look into our neighbors' affairs. It says that if two people share the same courtyard, each can force his neighbor to build a wall in the middle so neither can look into the other's half. [Bava Batra 2a]

The Talmud even goes beyond that, asserting that

"Damage caused by looking is also damage" [Bava Batra 2b], implying that the neighbor is somehow harmed by mere thought. So coveting is damaging to the neighbor even if no action results from it. How so? Mere thoughts can harm? Mind over matter? This is known as the '*ayin hara*', the evil eye.

Ibn Ezra, the 12th-century Spanish commentator, holds that it's all a matter of training children since their youth, and THERE is the implied action behind the commandment. He writes that a person does not desire to lie with his mother, although she may be beautiful, because he has been trained since his youth to know that she is forbidden to him. He does not desire non-kosher meat just as we Westerners do not desire snake meat or fried ants: It's a psychological result of our training. Proper education can regulate improper coveting. As it says in the Book of Proverbs,

Train a child in the way that he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it. [Prov. 22:6]

Note that the Talmud says that for every thing God has forbidden, He has created an equivalent that is permitted. [Chullin 109b] For example, if you have a lust for blood, you may not become a murderer, but you may become a butcher or a surgeon.

But this comment applies only to things God said you cannot have, such as *your neighbor's* possessions. It does not apply to the possessions themselves in the abstract. For example, if your neighbor has a beautiful house, there is nothing wrong with you desiring to own a similar house and working hard to earn it. Otherwise, how would you ever acquire anything if you did not desire it first? The prohibition is against wanting your neighbor's house *specifically*.

And even if one wishes to fault the desire itself, our tradition says that all achievements can be traced to envy, coveting or jealousy. The Midrash says:

Without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. As [King] Solomon said [in Ecclesiastes]: "And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor." [Eccl. 4:4]
[Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

The *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, an anonymous 13th-century Spanish commentary on the commandments, simply denies that it is impossible to regulate one's desires:

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... for it is indeed in one's power to restrain himself, his thoughts and his longings, from whatever he wishes. [Sefer Ha-chinukh, Mitzvah 416]

In the same vein, the Midrash says:

The wicked are ruled by their hearts. [As it says in the Tanach], Naval said in his heart [Ps. 14:1]; And Esau said in his heart [Gen. 27:41]; And Jeroboam said in his heart [1Kings 12:26]; Now Haman said in his heart [Est. 6:6]
But the righteous rule their hearts: [As it says in the Tanach],

And Chana was speaking to her heart [1Sam. 1:13]; And [King] David said to his heart [1Sam 27:1]; And Daniel decided in his heart [Dan. 1:8]. The [righteous] are [therefore] similar to the Creator, concerning Whom it is written [in Genesis]: "And God said to His heart" [Gen. 8:21] [Genesis Rabbah 67:6]

So righteous people rule their hearts, rather than be ruled by them.

Another point is that if we wasted time wishing for what we *don't* have, we would not spend as much time appreciating what we *do* have, and may even lose it. The Talmud says:

Whoever sets his eyes on what is not his, loses also what is his.
[Sotah 9a]

So there you have it. Coveting what you can't have is bad for you, but you will not be punished for it, unless it leads to prohibited action, which it frequently does. Desiring something and working diligently to earn it is OK. You can prevent yourself from coveting by not looking into your neighbor's affairs. You can prevent children from coveting if you train them early to understand that some things are off-limits. It can be done.

Shabbat shalom.