

# The Tenth Commandment – “Thou Shalt Not Covet”

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Based on materials collected for a workshop at the Cape Cod Retreat of the National Havurah Committee in December 2011

Although everyone knows and understands the import of the tenth commandment, the question of how to interpret it in everyday circumstances is not all completely clear. For example, suppose that you like the red sweater that I am wearing, and in fact would like to have it, when does your desire for my sweater cross over into the realm of the tenth commandment? May you offer me \$100 for the sweater? If that comes under the prohibition of coveting, then perhaps the tenth commandment can reasonably be interpreted to prohibit all commercial transactions.

We will come back to such issues later. We first consider the text of the commandment. As you recall, the Ten Commandments appears twice in the Bible, first when they are given at Sinai (Exodus 20) and then again when, before his death, Moses summarizes the event for the next generation (Deuteronomy 5).

**EXODUS 20:14** You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

לֹא תַחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא-תַחְמַד אִשְׁתֵּךָ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְשׂוֹרְךָ וְחֹמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ

**DEUTERONOMY 5:18** You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not crave your neighbor's house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

וְלֹא תַחְמַד אִשְׁתֵּךָ רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תִתְאַוֶּה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ שׂוֹרְךָ וְחֹמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ

Looking at these two texts, we see both similarities and differences. In fact, the texts are almost identical, although there are three differences:

- In Exodus, the initial statement prohibits the coveting of a person's house, whereas in Deuteronomy, the initial statement prohibits the coveting of a person's wife.
- In the second statement in Deuteronomy, a new verb (titaveh – crave) is introduced instead of the verb that is used twice in Exodus (tachmod – covet).
- The prohibition is extended in Deuteronomy to include a person's field.

It might be that in Exodus the initial statement is intended to be inclusive – that is, the initial statement says “don't covet anything in your neighbor's household” and then the second statement provides the details – “that is, don't covet his wife, his servants, his animals.” On the other hand, the commandment in Deuteronomy clearly recognizes that coveting your neighbor's wife is in a different category than coveting your neighbor's other possessions, although the Bible generally regards wives as possessions. Perhaps the different verb signals that change in category.

You might expect that the word “titaveh – crave” would be used in reference to your neighbor's wife, and “tachmod – covet” would be used in reference to your neighbor's possessions but, paradoxically, that's not the case. The King James version of Bible, however, translates this verse from Deuteronomy as

if the verbs were actually reversed: “Neither shalt thou desire your neighbor’s wife, neither shalt thou covet you neighbor’s ...” Perhaps the translators had a different version of the Torah scroll than what is now the standard one.

The inclusion of “field” perhaps reflects the passage of time and replacement of the previous generation. Now that the Israelites are about to cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan and possess land – and become transformed from herders to farmers – coveting of a neighbor’s field becomes a matter of concern.

We will next look at the language of the two verses – the words that are used to describe the forbidden behavior. But first a few notes about the texts:

- The spaces after the fourth Hebrew word (in both texts) reflect the space that occurs in the Torah scroll. There is clearly a pause between the initial four words and the subsequent words. However, in the Bible the subsequent words are not considered a separate verse. In the Christian version of the bible, the two statements are separate verses.
- In the Catholic enumeration of the Ten Commandments, the two statements are separate commandments, and the first and second commandments are combined into a single commandment.
- In the Christian version of the bible, Exodus 20:14 is considered Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:18 is considered Deuteronomy 5:21.
- Although the language of the Tenth Commandment is clearly addressed to males, since the coveting of your neighbor’s husband is not explicitly prohibited, the same is true of all of the commandments, since the pronouns used are generally male. However, it has always been understood that all of the commandments, including that against coveting, apply to women as well.
- The word “covet” in English apparently entered the English language from French in about the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and is likely derived from the Latin “cupiditas” which means passionate desire.

The Hebrew word translated as “covet” is “tachmod,” a verb form of the adjective “chamad.” The adjective is used to refer both to the land of Israel (“*eret chemdah tovah* – a good and desirable land”) and the Shabbat (“*chemdat yamim oto karata* – You called it the most desirable of days”) and in both cases clearly means “desirable.” (It is interesting that in both English and in Hebrew, the root form for “desire” gives rise to an adjective and a verb that have different connotations – i.e., even though the word “desire” often has negative connotations, “desirable” generally does not.)

Three verses where the verb form of “chamad” appears are:

**Exodus 34:24 – When I drive out the nations from near you and expand your borders, no one will “chamad” the land when you go on pilgrimage three times a year to be in the presence of Adonai your God.**

כִּי-אֹרִישׁ גּוֹיִם מִפְּנֵיךָ וְהִרְחַבְתִּי אֶת-גְּבוּלְךָ וְלֹא-יִחַמְדוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אֶרְצְךָ בְּעֵלְתָּךְ  
לְרֹאוֹת אֶת-פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה .

In Exodus 32:24, God reassures the people that the tribes they dispossessed will not come back and recapture the land when the Israelites take their thrice-annual pilgrimages to worship God at the central tabernacle. Thus “chamad” clearly does not mean that the nations will not “desire” the land, but rather that they will not “take” the land away. So “chamad” does not simply involve desire, but presumes action on that desire.

**Deuteronomy 7:25 – You shall burn the statues of their gods in fire. You shall not “chamad” the silver or gold that is on them and take them for yourselves; you will be called to account for your actions, for that is an abomination to Adonai your God.**

פְּסִילֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם תִּשְׂרְפוּן בְּאֵשׁ לֹא-תַחַמַּד כֹּסֶף וְזָהָב עֲלֵיהֶם וְלִקְחַתָּ לָךְ פֶּן תִּזְקַשׁ  
בּוֹ כִּי תֹעֲבֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא .

This meaning of “chamad,” as desire leading to action, is reinforced in Deuteronomy 7:25. Thus one might conclude, with the author of the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGG9uM8l1GE> that “covet” means “take.” However, this text makes clear that “chamad – covet” is a precursor to “lakach – take,” not its equivalent. We see that also in the next passage.

**Micah 2:1-2 – Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practice it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage.**

וְחַמְדוֹ שָׂדוֹת וְגִזְלוֹ וּבְתִים וְנִשְׂאוֹ וְעִשְׂקוֹ גָּבַר וּבֵיתוֹ וְאִישׁ וְנַחֲלָתוֹ.

For Micah, the concern is not with the coveting that you or I might do, but the coveting that takes place by those in power, who have the ability to carry out their coveting on a grand scale – as David took the wife of Uriel and the vineyard of Navot. Coveting for him is a manifestation of greed on the part of those who have ... yet want more.

The conclusion that coveting is “taking” is also problematic because there already is another commandment that prohibits theft – “thou shalt not steal.” So what does “chamad” really mean, and what does the Tenth Commandment really prohibit? Let’s look at a few texts.

#### **1. Discussion of Exodus 20:14 in Sefer HaChinuch (13<sup>th</sup> century), following Maimonides:**

**That it should not enter our thoughts to devise strategies to obtain for ourselves something that is not ours but belongs to someone else.**

**For the sages, may their memory be a blessing, proved from another verse that the prohibition of "Thou shalt not covet" is not completely violated until some deed is actually done.**

**And even if he paid an appropriate amount for the item, he has still violated the prohibition if he obtained it by duress.**

From this passage, we learn that simply desiring something is not a violation of the Tenth Commandment, so if you simply desire my red sweater, you are not guilty of “coveting.” And if you find and wear the exact same sweater, you might be guilty of poor taste, but not of “coveting.”

At the other extreme, if you actually take my sweater, then you are guilty of both theft and coveting. Even if you only plan to get my sweater – that is, devise a strategy to get my sweater – you are guilty of coveting. Apparently, however, if it just enters your thoughts to devise such a strategy, that does not rise to the level of “covet” because you have not done an actual deed.

However, the anonymous author of Sefer Hachinuch claims that even though contemplating devising a strategy is not “coveting,” it should be avoided. Clearly there is a continuum between liking something, desiring it, hoping to get it, wanting to get it, thinking about getting it, planning to get it, and getting it; somewhere in that continuum, one steps over the line from permitted to prohibited (i.e., “coveting”), and one must therefore avoid getting too close to that line.

The following passage describes one way in which people are impelled over that line.

#### **2. From Orchot Tzaddikim (15<sup>th</sup> century)**

**For we see that among men each one tries to keep up with his neighbor. For when he sees that his neighbor acquires food or clothes, or a home or amasses money, then he too endeavors to attain the same, thinking "My fellow has all this; I must also have it." And concerning this matter, Solomon hinted: "Again, I considered all labor and all excelling in work, that it is a man's rivalry with his neighbor" (Eccl. 4:4) Now any person who has this quality strongly within himself is very despicable, because this jealousy will bring to coveting; for when a person does not pay attention to what his companion acquires, he does not covet.**

"Keeping up with the Joneses" is clearly not a new phenomenon, and the author's advice is simple: "Don't do it. Don't pay attention to what others have, and you won't be led over the line into coveting." The following passage describes another reason why people cross that line.

### **3. Discussion of Deuteronomy 5:18 in Sefer HaChinuch**

**That we should not be obsessed with desire for something that belongs to someone else, since this obsession will be a reason to devise a strategy to take it from him even though he does not wish to sell it -- either by a sale, or by barter, or, if nothing else works, by force ...**

In this passage a new term is introduced, "obsessed." It is likely introduced here rather than in the discussion of Exodus 5:20 because the new term "titavveh" is introduced in the Hebrew of the Tenth Commandment in Deuteronomy. Whereas the root of "tachmod" is the adjective "desirable," the root of "titavveh" is the verb "desire," and so there may be a change of emphasis from "don't plot to get what you want" to "don't get obsessed with what you want."

In the continuum described above, "being obsessed" is perhaps on a par with "thinking about"; although one is more an emotional state and the other more a rational state, the next step from each is "devising a strategy." So either one can bring a person dangerously close to the point of "coveting".

It should be noted that, although not stated explicitly, it is certainly permissible for you to ask me to give or sell the sweater to you, that is, for you to attempt to get the sweater by a commercial transaction. If I refuse to sell it for the price you offer, you are free to offer more and more money, in the hope that I will ultimately sell it to you. But if I refuse to sell it you, if I decide that my sweater is indeed priceless, then you have no recourse. You cannot say to me "I am giving you \$1000, ten times the going price of such sweater, and I expect you to deliver the sweater to me, if you know what's good for you." That is coveting and possibly worse, if you carry out your threat.

It should also be noted that coveting only applied to a desire for something that "belongs to someone else." Desiring the doggie in the window (or the expensive car in the TV ad) is not coveting, since the doggie is clearly for sale, even though the desire may be unattainable.

Let us look at how another authority addresses the issue of coveting.

### **4. Discussion in Ibn Ezra's (12<sup>th</sup> century) commentary on the Torah.**

**The word "hamad" in the holy language can be translated in two ways:**

**(1) Theft and taking by force or duress, as in the verse "And no one will covet your land." For if we did not translate it this way, then the verse would be saying that the land is bad, something the Torah certainly would not be saying.**

**(2) Desire in the heart, which is not translated into action ...**

**For in this book [Deuteronomy] which explains the Torah, instead of saying "Thou shalt not covet" (using the word "hamad"), Moses said "Thou shalt not desire" (using the word "ta'avah") – because many said that there is no sin in the thoughts of one's heart, and there is no reward or punishment for such thoughts.**

**And that is why Moses (at the end of Deuteronomy) says that it is "in your mouth and in your heart to do it". And thus the core of the mitzvot is to straighten one's heart.**

Well, now, this position is a radical departure from the position of Sefer HaChinuch and Maimonides. Whereas they believed that violation of the Tenth Commandment requires some action and claimed that the sages proved that from another verse, Ibn Ezra argues that actions are not necessary for a violation of the Tenth Commandment, that even covetous thoughts can be considered sinful, and punishment may be appropriate.

Moreover, Ibn Ezra argues, the early Israelites apparently believed that some action was prerequisite to a violation of the Tenth Commandment, and the change in language from Exodus to Deuteronomy set them straight on that point.

Can one legislate thoughts and feelings? Evidently, Ibn Ezra believes that one can control one's thoughts and feelings and therefore one's legislation can assume that possibility of self-control.

Even the author of Sefer HaChinuch apparently believes one can control one's thoughts and feelings,

because in the passages cited above, he begins “it should not enter our thoughts ...” and “we should not be obsessed ...”. Indeed elsewhere in Sefer HaChinuch, he notes

#### **5. From Sefer HaChinuch.**

**“You shouldn’t say “How can you control your heart from desiring?” For it is possible for a person to control his thoughts and desires to the extent that he wishes ... .”**

However, he apparently doesn’t believe that thoughts and feelings alone can be considered violations of the Tenth Commandment.

An important source for this perspective is the following statement from the Mishnah (2<sup>nd</sup> century).

#### **6. Ethics of the Fathers, Mishnah Avot 4:1**

**Ben Zoma said: Who is mighty? The one who controls his passions, as it is said (Proverbs) “Better is the one who is slow to anger than the mighty, the one who rules his spirit than the one who captures a city.”**

It is therefore possible, according to this perspective, to control or modify one’s thoughts and feelings, and indeed, according to Ibn Ezra, “the core of the mitzvot is to straighten one’s heart.” That is, by following the commandments of the Torah, you will be able to correct your thoughts and feelings, both of which, according to the medieval perspective, emanate from your heart.

You may remember that many years ago President Jimmy Carter was excoriated when he announced that he had “lusted in his heart.” Is that a sin? It depends on whom you ask.

#### **7. Commentary in Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform) Bible (Plaut, ed.)**

**The commandment, directed as it is to the heart, is primarily a warning that greed unchecked will likely lead to actual transgression. The intent of the command became an issue in the Christian church. Was inward desire to be reckoned as a sin (for which forgiveness needed to be asked) even if it did not lead to any outward act? Pope Pius V, in a rare act of official interpretation by the Church of a biblical text, ruled in 1567 that it was not. Only overt action was to be considered sinful, but not the mere desire.**

Had Jimmy Carter been Catholic, his “lust” would not have been a sin, but unfortunately he isn’t ... and so he took a lot of heat for this statement ... and, according to many, will take a lot more heat in years to come. This excoriation is based on Jesus’ interpretation of the text of the Ten Commandments as prohibiting desires and not just actions, as recorded in Matthew 5: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder,’ and ‘anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment... You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” I don’t know of any Jewish authority who comes to such a conclusion.

It is interesting that the texts we have examined thus far all focus on coveting one’s neighbor’s possessions, and not on his wife ... which, in the popular mind, is the main kind of coveting prohibited by the Tenth Commandment, and not the coveting of red sweaters. Here is a text that addresses this issue:

#### **8. From Ibn Ezra**

**Many people wonder about this mitzvah! How can there be a person who does not covet something that is beautiful in his heart -- or anything that is appealing to his eyes!**

**I will give you a parable. A peasant, who is properly trained, if he sees a beautiful princess, he will not covet her in his heart that he may have her. For he knows that that is impossible. It would be as crazy as if he were to desire wings and the ability to fly! Similarly, a person does not desire his mother even if she is beautiful. For he is trained from youth to know that she is forbidden to him.**

**So a wise person will not desire or covet. And he should know that his neighbor's wife has been prohibited to him more than the princess to the peasant – and therefore he should be happy with his portion, and not even think to covet or desire that which is not his. For he should know that God did not want to give this to him. And he may not take it by force or by plots. Therefore, he should**

**trust his Creator to sustain him, and do what is good in His eyes.**

As was claimed in the previous citation by Ibn Ezra, we have the capacity to control our thoughts and feelings, and that should apply just as well to sexual desires as to material desires. These texts do not spell out what kinds of plots are prohibited; one Christian commentator (Adam Clarke, 19<sup>th</sup> century) points out that "He breaks this command ... who lusts after his neighbor's wife, and endeavors to ingratiate himself into her affections, and to lessen her husband in her esteem."

The passage from Ibn Ezra introduces another important idea, that wanting something, that expressing dissatisfaction with the way things are is itself sinful, for it expresses dissatisfaction with what God has provided. The Mishnah cited earlier provides justification for this perspective.

#### **9. Ethics of the Fathers, Mishnah Avot 4:1**

**Ben Zoma said: Who is wealthy? The one who is happy in his portion, as it is said (Psalms) "when you eat of the labor of your hands, happy are you and it is well with you."**

From this perspective, we should be happy with what we have, with what God has given us, and should not even think of wanting something we lack because that would be an expression of disloyalty to God. Interestingly enough, that is not the final word.

#### **10. Bereishit Rabbah 9:7**

**Were it not for the evil inclination, the world would not stand. A man would not plant a vineyard, or marry a wife, or build a home. For all these matters come about because one man envies his companion. Moreover, if he builds a house, then another person will have it in mind to do likewise, and thus it is concerning a wife.**

This passage from the Talmudic period makes it very clear that wanting what we lack is in fact what makes change happen in our lives, that all of our accomplishments, all of our successes, are at least in part due to our having and following our "evil" inclination. Thus, "being happy with one's portion" has a negative side to it – it can lead us to an undesirable passivity – failing to create and support a family, for example – which is bad not only for ourselves but for our community.

Note that none of the desires or actions described in the passage – planting a vineyard, marrying a wife, building a home, planting a vineyard – is coveting, for you are not desirous of something that belongs to someone else.

This brings us to a conundrum. On the one hand, we should not desire things that are not ours, because that will lead us along a path to coveting and because they indicate lack of faith in God and acceptance of God's will for us. On the other hand, if we don't desire things that are not ours, we consign ourselves to a life of passivity. Here is how the anonymous author of a 15<sup>th</sup> century book of ethical teachings solves the conundrum, cleverly using a verse from the Bible.

#### **11. From Orchot Tsaddikim (15<sup>th</sup> century)**

**The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: "Be jealous for my sake!"**

**For were it not for the evil inclination, the world would not stand. A man would not plant a vineyard, or marry a wife, or build a home [paraphrasing the Talmud]. For all these matters come about because one man envies his companion. Moreover, if he builds a house, then another person will have it in mind to do likewise, and thus it is concerning a wife.**

**Since the perpetuation of the world thus depends on envy, let him dedicate all these envious qualities to God. If he builds a house, let him build in it room for the study of Torah, a gathering place for the wise, a place where guests are welcomed, and a place where he does kindness to others.**

We thus learn that the verse quoted at the beginning means that we should use our envy to do God's will rather than our own, that we should use our jealousy constructively. We should be aware that we are envious by our very nature, and that that envy can have positive features as well as negative features, positive outcomes as well as negative outcomes. So we should be aware that we are envious by our very nature and should be on our guard to use our envy to carry out God's will and not just to further

our own selfish desires. (Oddly enough, the verse quoted at the beginning is not a quote from the Bible but is apparently made up by the author of Orchot Tsaddikim! A similar phrase does occur in the Bible when God praises Pinchas for being jealous, or perhaps zealous, on God's behalf – Numbers 25:11.)

The following text speaks of the consequences of coveting.

## **12. Talmud Sotah 9A**

**Whoever casts his eye on what is not his, what he seeks is not given to him, and what he has is taken from him.**

**And thus we find with the primordial snake who cast his eye on what was not fit for him; what he sought was not given him and what he had was taken from him.**

**The holy one said: "I intended that he should be the king of the beasts (Rashi: For God made him wisest of the beasts – cf. Gen. 3:1.) and now may he be cursed among all beasts. I intended that he should walk erect, and now he will crawl on his belly; I intended that he would eat the same food as humans, now let him eat dust. He intended to kill Adam and to marry Eve, now hatred will exist between him and the woman, and between his children and her children."**

You probably did not know that the serpent coveted Eve. That's one of the Bible stories that is not discussed in Hebrew school. And how do we know that this is the case. Here is Rashi's explanation: "He cast his eyes on Eve and came into her, as it is written "The serpent seduced me ... ", language with sexual overtones."

## **13. The Wizard of Id, by Brant Parker and Johnny Hart**

**In the first panel of this cartoon, two monk-like figures complete work on a signboard that says "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." In the second panel, one says to the other "Boy, I wish we had a signboard like that at our church."**

The irony is of course that the speaker in the second panel seems to be coveting the sign. But the speaker has no intent of taking the sign and moving it to his own church. He doesn't even say that he wishes his church had *that* signboard ... only a signboard like that. The authors of our texts might suggest adding a third panel to the cartoon in which the first figure says to the second figure "Why don't we make one for your church as well?"

### **Summary:**

- a. What is forbidden under the Tenth Commandment is making plans to take something that belongs to someone else. The actual taking of it is forbidden under the commandments against theft and adultery.
- b. Since one can easily cross the line from liking something to wanting it to coveting it, it is also forbidden to obsessively desire or contemplate taking something that belongs to someone else.
- c. By following the path of the Torah, we can control our desires because we can give priority to God's will over our own will and recognize that God does not want us to have things that do not belong to us.
- d. On the other hand, suppression of all desire is bad both for ourselves and for the world, since desire motivates us to take actions which have positive consequences for ourselves and the world.