



Lecture # 14 Part 1

The Ten Commandments, The Laws Governing Man's Duty To Others (Part 10):

Commandment Ten Concerns Man's Desires and Security— Never Covet, Exodus 20:17

The Tenth Commandment Against Covetousness

“Lo tahmod bet re'ekha lo tahmod eshet re'ekha veavdo vaam-ato veshoro vahamoro vekhol asher lere'ekha” (Exodus 20:14) “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.”

Exodus 20:17 (BHS)

¹⁷ “לֹא תִחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא תִחְמַד אִשֶּׁת רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדוֹ וְאִמְתּוֹ וְשׁוֹר וְחֲמֹר וְכָל אֲשֶׁר
פִּי לְרֵעֶךָ: פ”

“Lo tahmod bet re'ekha lo tahmod eshet re'ekha veavdo vaam-ato veshoro vahamoro vekhol asher lere'ekha”

Exodus 20:17 (KJV)

¹⁷ “**Thou shalt not covet** thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.”

Exodus 20:17 (NASB)

¹⁷ “**You shall not covet** your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Buber has suggested that this injunction “sets the seal of God on the Decalogue,” because it differs in a unique way from the other commandments with regard to social life. It deals with an attitude, envy, “which destroys the inner connection of the Community even when it does not transform itself into actual action; and which indeed, precisely on account of its passive or semi-passive persistence, may become a consuming disease of a special kind in the body politic, an attitude of one man to another which leads to a decomposition of the very tissues of Society.”⁴⁵³

As **Hirsch** put it, “a human legislator could ordain prohibitions against murder, adultery, abduction and theft, and false testimony, but only an omniscient God could legislate against what one might have in his heart and mind.”⁴⁵⁴ The question, however, is whether a person can resist the desire for what he sees with his own eyes as desirable, even if he desists from responding to the temptation to act upon it. How can one look at his neighbor, who possesses in abundance what he does not have at all, and remain completely indifferent, without coveting some part of it, and how can the Torah demand this of one?



Lecture # 14 Part 1

According to one anonymous opinion “this question can only be raised by someone who is either a fool or one governed by his desires and passions, for in truth man is intrinsically capable of restraining himself, his thoughts, and desires from anything, having the capacity to distance himself or draw near to a thing as he chooses.”⁴⁵⁵

Ibn Ezra suggested “that the key to abiding by this prohibition is the matter of proper conditioning from childhood, something implied but not posited by the biblical text.” Setting aside deviant personalities from consideration, it has been pointed out that men do not normally covet their mothers even though they may be beautiful and highly desirous to other men, because they are conditioned from early childhood not to think about their mothers as sex objects. The implication, therefore, is that similar conditioning is necessary with regard to that which belongs to someone else, a requirement that places a heavy educational burden on one’s parents.

“However, once the idea that such coveting defies the divine order of things, the intelligent person will cease to covet that which God has granted to another, just as the sane person will not covet the bird’s ability to fly given that he has no wings.”⁴⁵⁶

In this regard, **Mecklenburg** suggested “that the injunction is only problematic for one who is not thoroughly imbued with the love of God, just as in the case of a cup filled to the brim, the desire to add more simply does not exist.”⁴⁵⁷

Alternatively, **Soloveichik** suggested “that the directive is aimed at those imbued with the fear of God, for whom the prohibition will cause covetousness to disappear.”⁴⁵⁸

Moralists have considered covetousness as the root from which most crimes emerge, as **Asher ben Jehiel** wrote, “The first of all fences against wronging thy fellow man is the avoidance of covetousness.”⁴⁵⁹

It will be noted that in the repetition of the Decalogue, the tenth commandment is given as “**You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor**” ([Deuteronomy 5:21 \(NASB\)](#)).

In this version, “**coveting**” is augmented by a prohibition against even “**desiring**” anything that belongs to another, thus seeming to draw a distinction between the two, which is a matter of scholarly contention, some arguing that the terms are synonymous, others that they imply different things.

According to **Maimonides**, the principal protagonist of the view that there is a distinction between the two terms, by the prohibition against coveting “we are forbidden to occupy our minds with schemes to acquire what belongs to another, even if we buy it and pay its full price. Any action of this kind is an infringement” of the commandment.”⁴⁶⁰

Lecture # 14 Part 1

Coveting, from the standpoint of rabbinic law, is summarized as the situation in which one desires something that belongs to another to the extent that “he subjects the other to vexation and pesters him until he is allowed to buy it from him,” even if he does so at an inflated price.