



Lecture # 14 Part 2

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 אִשְׁת׃ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹר׃ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־
פ לְרֵעֶךָ׃”

“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.”

However, one does not violate this prohibition until he actually obtains that which he coveted. This qualification is based on another commandment, “**The graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves,** or you will be snared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 7:25 (NASB)).

The implication of this is that “the transgression of coveting is effected only when accompanied by action.”⁴⁶¹

However, **Maimonides** clearly felt that desire sets one on the slippery slope that leads to covetousness and perhaps even to serious crime. Thus, “if one sees a beautiful object in his brother's possession, and he sets his heart on it and desires it, he violates the prohibition “**you shalt not desire.**”

Deuteronomy 5:21 (NASB)

²¹ “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.”



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If his desire is not suppressed, “his love for the object will become stronger, until he devises some scheme to obtain it, and if he succeeds in this, he thereby breaks another Commandment, namely **“Thou shalt not covet”**; since by his persistence and his scheming he has acquired a thing which the owner did not want to sell. If, however, the owner, because of his love for the object, refuses to sell or exchange it, and the coveter because of his great craving for it proceeds to take it by force and compulsion,” he will also violate the commandment against stealing.⁴⁶²

Numerous commentators that consider the terms as synonymous have contested this view, and reject the notion that coveting is essentially innocuous until it is translated into action. Thus, **Moses of Coucy** pointed out that if one accepts the notion that they are distinct and that **“coveting”** is more serious than **“desiring”** because it implies action, then there is a serious problem with the biblical command, **“Neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor’s wife: neither shalt thou desire thy neighbor’s house.”**

According to the view that the terms have distinct implications, the text would be saying that whereas it is forbidden to desire another’s house, there is no prohibition against desiring another’s wife as long as the desire does not translate into coveting, a notion that is inconceivable. Indeed, the text itself may be considered evidence that the terms are synonymous.⁴⁶³

However, according to **Nehama Leibowitz**, “the weakness in this argument is that it suggests that the terms covet and desire are interchangeable, which is itself a dubious notion, since no two words in Hebrew have identical meanings in every respect even when used as synonyms.”⁴⁶⁴

For example, **Malbim** has argued that “covet” is a function of the senses, a matter of aesthetic appeal, whereas “desire” is a function of the emotions irrespective of aesthetics.⁴⁶⁵

However, **Isaac of Corbeil** suggested that for all practical purposes “the terms are synonymous, and that the prohibition does not apply only to active coveting but also to having the desire in one’s heart and mind. The distinction between the two being that even having a desire for what belongs to another, from the standpoint of law, is not actionable unless an attempt actually is made to realize the desire.”⁴⁶⁶

One sage taught: “[Length of] life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but [rather on] destiny.” The sage went on to illustrate his point by referring to two saintly sages, equal in merit, one of which lived to age ninety, the other succumbing at age forty, the household of the first being blessed with many wedding feasts, that of the other with an equal number of bereavements, the house of the first able to feed the highest quality bread to the dogs, the house of the other barely able to feed the humans in it.”⁴⁶⁷



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That is, man can aspire to or desire certain things, but success is not in his hands. If what he covets were destined to be his, they would be his and not another's. This is the reality of life and, in the opinion of the sages, the sooner a person learns this, the better.

The sages also read this commandment in its entirety as a syllogism which began with a general proposition, **"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house,"** "house" being understood here in its broader sense as **"household,"** followed by several specifics, the neighbor's wife, man-servant, maid-servant, ox, and ass, followed by a concluding general statement, anything that is thy neighbor's.

In accordance with one of the thirteen hermeneutic rules of biblical exegesis adopted by the sages, "we have a general statement followed by a specific statement and by another general statement, all of which must be interpreted as including only things similar to those mentioned in the specific statement. Now, in this case, the specific statement specifies things that one can buy and sell. Hence all things which one can buy and sell are to be included in the general statement."

Moreover, "just as the specific statement specifies things that can come into your possession only with the consent of the owner, so also in the general statement I can conclude only such things as can come into your possession only with the consent of the owner."⁴⁶⁸

Moses, evidently concerned about the "slippery slope" beginning with **"desire"** followed by **"coveting"**, and possibly ending by improperly acting on these through violence, undertook to rephrase the tenth commandment, in his reiteration of the Decalogue, as **"Neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor's wife: neither shalt thou desire thy neighbor's house,"** etc ([Deuteronomy 5:21](#)).