



## Parades's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

### Yitro. Can we curb our desires?

We live in an exceedingly materialistic world. Advertising provokes us to purchase things that we hardly need.

We buy new clothes though we have a closet filled with perfectly good ones.

We frequently find ourselves measuring status by a person's watch, shoes, car, residence, or vacation, or we wish we had what "they" have.



It is for this reason that we could do with thinking a little about the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet." Covet means to "yearn to possess something belonging to someone else." (Oxford English Dictionary)

#### **Please raise this question and discuss:**

- Why is it wrong to "covet"? We're just speaking about fantasizing about something, not taking it (see below). What is wrong?
- Is it healthy to be a person who is always looking at what other people have, and desiring it?
- Why don't we like that?
- What could society be like, what could we be like, if we stopped "coveting"?
- Is "Do not covet" a mindset that is supported or frustrated by modern western lifestyle?

I think this should open a real discussion. But let us do some study for now, and hopefully, it will provide some further material for discussion. The command reads:

"You shall not covet your neighbour's house:  
You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his ox or donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour's" (Exodus 20:14).

The newspapers are filled with stories of people who ruined lives and the lives of their families by illicit material desire, affairs, and the like. We might know of stories within our circles. It is quite real.

**But CAN WE CONTROL OUR THOUGHTS?** Desire is something that wells up. Is it in our control? Ibn Ezra thinks we can:

Many people are surprised by this commandment: How is it possible for a person not to desire in his heart something beautiful, once the thing is attractive in his eyes?

Now let me offer you a parable: A village man who has an ordinary social sense, when he sees the beautiful daughter of the king, will not covet in his heart the opportunity to sleep with her, for he knows that this is not possible. Do not imagine that this village person is like a crazy person who desires to have wings like a bird to fly in the sky as if such a thing were possible.

It is akin to how a man does not desire to be sexually intimate with his mother, even if she is beautiful since he was trained from his youth to know that she is forbidden to him.

... For this reason, a wise person will not be jealous and will not covet. Since he knows that God has forbidden his neighbor's wife to him, thus she is more elevated in his eyes than the princess in the eyes of the peasant. And so he is satisfied with his portion and does not allow his heart to crave and desire something that is not his.

The Ibn Ezra is saying that you have to understand that something which belongs to another person, is out of bounds, it is impossible, beyond reach, just like you cannot fly.

**Please discuss:**

- Is the Ibn Ezra's method a good technique?
- Ibn Ezra is claiming that just like society has a taboo against incest, similarly we need to entrench a norm that something which is not ours.
- Is it possible to train our thoughts in this way?
- In a world of endless choice and ambition, do we have a more difficult task regarding this?

[Let me add that "Do not Covet" does not mean that if my neighbour has a Ferrari, I cannot desire a Ferrari. I cannot desire HIS Ferrari.]

Why is this law here at the close of the Ten Commandments? Possibly, it forms the ideological backbone of the previous four prohibitions in the Ten Commandments "Do not murder ... commit adultery ...steal ... false witness." One hardly will commit a crime like murder, robbery, or commit adultery or perjury without a motive. The source might well be envy, the desire to gain an advantage unlawfully. Before I steal, I covet. Before I have an affair, I desire that man or woman. So "Do not covet" is the moral and behavioural underpinning of the previous four commands. Rabbi Hirsch writes:

...All social virtue is worthless and crumbles at the first test, if it aims at the letter, at outward correctness, is satisfied with being considered righteous and honest in the eyes of fellow men, but refuses inner loyalty, does not depend on .... that pure inner conscience that only God sees and God judges.

There is a 2000-year-old Rabbinic debate as to whether "Do not Covet" is contravened by action, only when an object is illicitly obtained, or whether the desire itself is wrong. Maimonides tries to speak of both!

#10 A person does not violate this commandment until one takes the article coveted until **a deed accompanies coveting**.

#11: Craving leads to coveting and coveting leads to robbery, for if the owners do not want to sell the object despite the offer of large sums of money, and pressure by friends, the individual who craves the object might be moved to robbery, as in Micah 2:2 “They covet houses and seize them.” And if the owner stands up against them to save his property or to prevents the theft, **he will be moved to commit murder**. Take, for example, the case of Ahab and Navot. (Mishne Torah, Laws of robbery and theft ch.1)

WHAT DOES THIS DO TO US?

And yet, I am wondering, beyond the strict legal definitions, as to the inner thrust of this command, this virtue. Today we are not likely to rob our neighbour; to want the same lifestyle as them. “Do not covet” says to me – You have what you need. Don’t look around at others. Be satisfied with what you have. This sort of desire, or as Leon Kass calls it, “deformations of desire” leads us to under-appreciate what we have, and to seek things that, possibly, we should not. The simple act of continually wanting more can frequently be destructive to ourselves, to others and ecologically, to the world. It seems to me like a law that is more pertinent in our day.

Who is Mighty? - He who controls his desires.

Who is Wealthy – He who is happy with what he has.

... Happy - in this world

And good – in the next world. (Avot 4:1)

Shabbat Shalom!