

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Yisro

The Tenth Commandment

At the center of our parsha is the Revelation at Sinai and the *Asres Hadibros* – the Ten Commandments – presented to us by Hashem on that occasion. The tenth of the commandments is: *Lo Tachmod* – do not covet your fellow’s house, wife etc.¹

Of Villagers and Princesses – Vision and Thought

Probably the most famous question regarding this commandment is raised by the Ibn Ezra: How can the Torah tell me not to desire something? If my neighbor has a nice house or wife etc., it is only natural for me to desire them! Granted, in terms of acting on this thought, the Torah can instruct me not to take these items from him, but the thought itself is surely in a realm that is beyond a person’s control, no?

Actually, says the Ibn Ezra, no.

Many of the things we think or feel are shaped by the way we see things. Let us take as a parable a common villager who sees a beautiful princess; he may admire her beauty, but the notion of “I would like her for myself” does not even cross his mind. Why not? Because it is clear to him that it could never happen. We see that one’s vision of things can indeed prevent even a thought from entering his mind. Likewise, says the Ibn Ezra, if it is fundamentally clear to a person that what his fellow has is what has been ordained for them by Heaven, which means Hashem has decided that it is for them and not for him, the notion of obtaining it will be as removed from his consciousness as the princess from the villager.

In addition to answering his basic question, this idea of the Ibn Ezra gives us profound insight regarding the entire commandment of *Lo Tachmod*. As we know, mitzvos are divided into two categories: *bein adam laMakom* and *bein adam le’chaveiro* – between man and God and between man and his fellow man. Now,

¹ Shemos 20: 14.

the prohibition against coveting one's fellow's property would surely appear to fit squarely within the second category, and to a certain degree it definitely does. Yet at the same time, *the perspective which enables its fulfillment* derives specifically from an idea that lies in the realm between man and God!

Additionally, although *Lo Tachmod* is stated in the negative (“Do not covet”), which generally identifies the prohibited entity as the focus of the command, in this case, the way to fulfill the command is actually positive. For ultimately, the commandment is not “Do not think or feel that,” but rather, “Develop a perspective whereby such a thought will not enter your mind.”²

Lo Tachmod: In Thought or Deed?

The above discussion of the Ibn Ezra touches on a most basic question regarding the prohibition of *Lo Tachmod*: What exactly is it prohibiting? It is clear from his question that the Ibn Ezra identifies the prohibition as pertaining to the realm of thoughts and feelings regarding someone else's things. However, when we consult the words of the Rambam in this matter, we see that he does not share this view of the mitzvah. He writes:

*Anyone who covets... anything item belonging to his fellow that he could acquire from him and pressured him until he actually acquired it, even if he paid the person a large sum of money, he has violated a negative commandment, as it says “Do not covet”... and one does not violate this prohibition **until he has acquired the item that he coveted.***³

Evidently, for the Rambam, the prohibition of *Lo Tachmod* pertains to the *realm of action*, not of thought. And indeed, this is the position adopted by the Shulchan Aruch.⁴ We will appreciate that according to this approach, the Ibn Ezra's question concerning the Torah prohibiting a thought does not even appear to begin, for it turns out that the Torah did not actually forbid the initial thought!

² It is important to note that although coveting is closely associated with jealousy, it specifically relates to desiring the object that belongs to someone else. Often, a feeling of jealousy over someone else's possessions will motivate a person to obtain a similar item for himself. This is commonly known as “Keeping up with the Joneses”, and while it can often be very costly and fretful, it is not *Lo Tachmod*. *Lo Tachmod* is about seeking to obtain Mr Jones' house and wife etc. for oneself.

³ Hilchos Gezeilah 1:9.

⁴ Choshen Mishpat 359:10.

However, if we just give it a little time and patience, it is possible that the Ibn Ezra's question will find expression even within the Rambam's approach. In Parshas Va'eschanan, we have a second presentation of the Ten Commandments (paralleling the second set of *Luchos*). In the tenth commandment there it states: "וְלֹא תִתְאָוֶה... וְלֹא תִחְמֹד – Do not covet... and do not desire (your fellow's house etc.)."⁵ We see that in addition to prohibiting coveting one's fellow's possession, the Torah also prohibits desiring them.⁶ Now, while "coveting" can be explained as pertaining to the realm of action, "desire" clearly relates to thought! This means that, ultimately, the question of the Ibn Ezra will need to be addressed by all opinions – if not in relation to *Lo Tachmod* as found in our parsha, then in relation to *Lo Tisaveh* later on in Parshas Va'eschanan.⁷

In the Midrash

A very beautiful perspective on the basis for the commandment of *Lo Tachmod* is found in the words of the Sages themselves. The Midrash in Parshas Kedoshim⁸ explains that the opening verses of that parsha parallel the Ten Commandments. Some of these parallels are immediately apparent: both contain references to keeping Shabbos, respecting parents, belief on Hashem and avoiding idol-worship. But what about *Lo Tachmod*? Which verse in Kedoshim parallels that commandment? The answer, says the Midrash, is the verse which states: "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִיךָ כָמוֹךָ – Love your neighbor as yourself!"⁹

This is a most profound and elevating statement. The Midrash is informing us that, ultimately, the background to the Torah commanding us not to covet someone else's possessions is not just to be content ourselves with what we have, but *to be happy for them* with what they have! The goal of the Mitzvah is not for one to remove his fellow's possessions from his thoughts; it is to bring his fellow together with his possessions into his heart and to rejoice in his success.

⁵ Devarim 5:18.

⁶ Indeed, the Rambam in his Sefer Hamitzvos codifies these as two separate prohibitions in his list of the 613 mitzvos (negative mitzvos 265 and 266).

⁷ A close reading of the Rambam, however, might reveal that even the prohibition of *Lo Tisaveh* does not relate to the actual desire for that object. He writes (Hilchos Gezeilah 1:10): "Anyone who desires his fellow's house, wife, etc. As soon as he has thought in his heart how he might acquire this object and he is taken in by the idea, he has violated a negative mitzvah, as it says, 'Lo Tisaveh.'" It appears that even *Lo Tisaveh* is not violated by the initial thought, but by developing it into a plan to acquire the object. Perhaps the basis for this formulation is that fact that the prohibition is phrased in the reflexive form "וְלֹא תִתְאָוֶה", and not simply "וְלֹא תִאָוֶה" (compare Devarim 12:20). This form denotes not merely *having* the thought, but *developing* it into a strategy.

⁸ Vayikra Rabbah 24:5.

⁹ Vayikra 19:18.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos¹⁰ states: “איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו – Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion.” The simple reading of this Mishnah is that it refers to someone who is content and happy with what he owns; for wealth is not a function of the amount of money one has amassed, but of one’s perspective regarding that wealth. However, the Kotzker Rebbe would explain the Mishnah as saying: Who is rich? A person who can regard *his fellow* and be שמח בחלקו – happy with *his* portion! One who can see someone else’s prosperity and be happy on his behalf is truly rich.

¹⁰ 4:1.