

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Yitro

Why is it so Challenging to Keep the Tenth Commandment?

What is the Root of the Negative Emotion of Envy?

I have always struggled with the Tenth Commandment describing the mitzvah not to covet anything that belongs to others. Whereas the mitzvot which require external actions are relatively easier for me to keep, the internal mitzvot that relate to the feelings of our heart seems so much more challenging to implement. Although I grew up in a very permissive Danish society where nudism is rampant, it wasn't difficult for me to change my wardrobe overnight to keep the laws of modesty in apparel. Yet after being Torah observant for more than 43 years, I still struggle with the Tenth commandment. Many others - even great tzaddikim - share this struggle and that's why our Temple in Jerusalem hasn't yet been rebuilt. Coveting is to wrongfully desire what others have or can do. The definition of 'coveting' is to have a self-desire for, lust after, or set the heart upon. It encompasses many negative self-focused mindsets and emotions, including jealousy, envy, lusting, entitlement, resentment, and anger which are at the root of all sins. When we covet, we are self-focused instead of G-d-focused. Coveting begins with a negative thought or emotion put into a simple question or statement such as, "I wish I looked like her;" or "Why is my friend busy dating while I hardly get any suggestions?" etc. To overcome coveting we must go deeper to discover its root. I find the insight "Envy is the result of a feeling of inferiority" (*Orchot Tzaddikim* 14:5), very eye-opening or should I say heart opening. It seems like the inferiority complex is the cause of so many negative traits. I can testify that most of my work in spiritual healing consists of strengthening the self-image of the women I treat. Somehow, we are all affected by ancestral antisemitic traumas of hatred, finger-pointing, pogroms, persecution, and plundering, which all contribute to feelings of inferiority. When we don't feel good about ourselves, we become vulnerable to various compulsions to fill the lacks and the emptiness in our hearts. We could add 'coveting' to the list of compulsive eating, shopping, drinking, sexual addiction, etc. I truly believe that repairing envy is a vital component in the last stage of bringing about the geulah (redemption). We must completely eradicate coveting from our hearts to develop unconditional love which is the catalyst for the rebuilding of our desired Temple.

Is it Possible to Maintain an Attitude of Gratitude and Still Be Envious of Others?

Is it possible to maintain an attitude of gratitude and still be envious of others? My immediate reaction to this question is "Of course. I'm a pretty grateful person - I even chose to write a blog about gratitude through every single Torah portion of the year! After a bit more introspection, it became clear that having an attitude of gratitude is being grateful for what you do have, not jealous of or upset about what you don't have. In that case, if we are truly grateful for our lot in life, there is no place for envy and jealousy. This implies that if I still feel a tinge of jealousy at other more successful teachers included in worthy summits where I'm not invited to present, or at people who seem so much more successful in growing beautiful, flowers fruits and vegetables, etc., then I am still far from having internalized the attitude of gratitude fully.

All this made me realize that showing appreciation and saying "thank you" is only the tip of the iceberg of developing true inner gratitude. I still have way to go to learn to practice what I preach! Moreover, if I entertain even a trace of envy, where is my trust in Hashem? "If one envies another's beauty, strength, or wealth, then he is unhappy with what the Creator has decreed for him. This is similar to a servant who complains concerning the deeds of his master and is not pleased with his

master's matters. Such a person is not a faithful servant. All the more so, ought he not to complain against the Creator, for all His deeds are righteous and proper, and one ought never to dispute them" (*Orchot Tzaddikim* 14:5). Every morning, we Jews recite Modeh Ani, Thankful Am I, for all that G-d has done for us and given us. Yet how many of us truly reflect on this and take the time to truly think about all the gifts in our lives? How many of us are actually feeling that thankfulness?

The Tenth Commandment – A Manifestation of the Free Will to the Highest Degree

ספר שמות פרק כ פסוק יד לא תחמד בית רעה לא תחמד אשת רעה ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמרו וכל אשר לרעה:

“You shall not covet your fellow’s house. You shall not covet your fellow’s wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or all that belongs to your fellow” (*Shemot* 20:14).

Rabbi Yitzchak Silberstein explains that when the Torah lists all of man’s possessions, we learn that “you shall not covet all that belongs to your fellow.” This teaches us that when you envy your fellow man, the “all or nothing” principle must apply. “If you are not ready to accept someone else’s misery, then you should not be desirous of having his good fortune” (*Aleinu Leshabe’ach* vol 1). Similarly, Rabbi Abraham Twersky, z”l, recounts the well-known saying that if everyone’s circumstances were put in a bundle and the bundles all put in a pile with everyone free to choose the bundle they wanted, everyone would end up choosing their own. It is known that coveting something is a matter for the heart. The principal warning contained in this mitzvah is to train ourselves to completely renounce all hope of ever acquiring things belonging to another person, be it real estate, livestock, inert objects, etc. We must not even think of these and wish for them in our heart. Rambam teaches us that the tenth commandment is a demonstration of our free will. Not only do we have choices concerning our actions, we moreover, have choices internally, in our thoughts and emotions. A person rules his heart and can guide it as he wants. Thus, the mitzvah not to covet becomes a statement of our greatest freedom (*Sefer HaMitzvot, Negative Mitzvah* 265).

Realizing that the Belongings of Others Are Damaging to Us

“Comparison is the thief of joy,” (President Teddy Roosevelt). Since biblical times we have struggled with the problem of comparison. This is what caused Korah’s strife, and the downfall of the otherwise righteous King Shaul, and this is what caused the destruction of the Second Temple. “Everyone tries to keep up with his neighbor. 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.” Concerning this matter, King Solomon hinted: “I considered all the toil and all the excellence of work, which is a person’s envy of his friend; this too is vanity and frustration” (*Kohelet* 4:4); (*Orchot Tzaddikim* 14:2). I’m working on completely stopping comparing myself with others through feeling truly good about myself and my role in the world, as it has become clear to me that if we covet something that is not appropriate for us to have, we will – G-d forbid – wind up losing even what was appropriate for us to own (Based on *Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 9b). The clue to stop coveting is to integrate deeply that what Hashem has metered out to us in this life, be it possessions, capabilities, or successes are part of our extended soul portion and what He has not granted us in this life, wouldn’t resonate with the sparks of our soul, and therefore only bring us damage. Thus, the person who covets what belongs to others becomes cursed. We learn this from the serpent who seduced Chava. It wanted to replace Adam as Chava’s husband and instead, it wound up having to crawl on its belly and eat dust. Everyone has a portion designated for

him by G-d, and each individual is privileged to receive what is coming to him. The principle is: No person may touch that which is prepared for another. One reign does not overlap with another and deducts from the time allotted it even a hairbreadth (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38b). When we trust completely in the goodness and fairness of the Creator of all, we learn to understand how He determines our share of goods based on what truly serves us to fulfill the mission for which we have been sent into this world.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of *Parashat Yitro* – Overcoming Coveting Through Gratitude

The tenth commandment asks us to overcome a basic, fundamental trait that even the most pious among us would likely struggle with. It is a commandment that requires us to control our thoughts and feelings. Rabbi Moshe M. Lieber goes so far as saying that this prohibition “seems unreasonable” (The Torah Treasury, 2002). Many of our sages have struggled with this commandment, offering several interpretations. According to Ibn Ezra, this prohibition is an act of *emunah*. He relates the parable of a lowly peasant who never aspires to marry a princess, someone entirely outside his world, his existence, but rather would set his sights on a young village woman of similar standing. Though these social barriers no longer exist, the message holds.

- **View What G-d Hasn't Given You as Forbidden** – Truly understand and accept in your heart that G-d has given you exactly what you need. Whatever He gave someone else He didn't give you because it would be damaging for you. Therefore, decide in your heart never to want what others have. Remind yourself of this any time you feel a trace of desire for something belonging to others.

- **“Who is Rich? He Who Rejoices in His Lot” (*Tehillim 128:2*)** – Recall this truth at moment when your life is turned upside down and nothing feels right. If you are overcome with feelings of unfairness and envy of those who have all the things that you are lacking or can do all the things you are unable to do, recite this Torah verse over and over to yourself. Keep repeating and breathing it's message into your heart.

- **Train Yourself to Believe that G-d has Given you Everything you Need** – When you find your mind drifting to the realm of what you don't have, make a conscious effort to think about what you do have. Do this every single time you feel those pangs of envy. If you refuse to let your mind dwell but focus instead on what makes you special and great, you'll start realizing that Hashem gave you everything you need right now.

- **Focus on Your Talents and Assets** – Now that you've stopped comparing yourself to other people, focus on what you have going for you. Channel your energy into your good qualities, so you become better and better at what you do and who you are. When you're focused on perfecting that guitar song or writing an amazing blog, there isn't time to worry about the accomplishments of others. Realize that not everyone has what you have – your talents and assets might even be the source of others' envy.