

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Yitro

In this week's parsha, we finally arrive at Sinai. G-d teaches the nation the Ten Commandments, Moshe ascends the mountain to receive the Oral Tradition, and the eternal relationship between G-d and the Jews is irrevocably established. The rest is history.

The Ten Commandments are the most well-known mitzvot in the Torah, and that's a good thing. Each of the Ten Commandments contains fundamental principles that serve as the theological bedrock for many other biblical mitzvot. In fact, every mitzva in the Torah can be filed under one of the Ten Commandments (Bamidbar Rabba 13:16). Rabbenu Saadia Gaon, the Ramban, and others have authored lists of all 613 mitzvot divided up into these ten categories.

We would do well to familiarize ourselves with these basic Torah principles. Although we certainly can't take on all ten in this short essay, let's try to tackle one.

The last of the Ten Commandments is probably the most difficult and the least popular. "Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, his servant, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbor's" (Shemot 20:14). Easier said than done. However, the difficulty with this commandment goes far beyond the challenge of its observance.

Desire is a perfectly natural instinct, and it was G-d who put our instinct within us. How could He forbid us from feeling what we naturally feel? It is understandable that the Torah would forbid acting on such feelings. Indeed, adultery and theft are biblical crimes. Our actions can be under G-d's jurisdiction, but our feelings? How could there be laws about how we may or may not feel? Desire isn't a matter of human choice. Or is it?

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) explains this mitzvah with an extraordinary insight into human nature. Normal people only crave that which they imagine to be within reach. Things which are utterly unattainable just don't take hold of the minds of men. In the classic allegory of the Ibn Ezra, a farm boy does not fantasize about marrying the princess; he just fantasizes about the girl next door.



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Rabbi Avigdor Cyperstien illustrated the truth of the Ibn Ezra's words with a phenomenon that has been experienced by many observant Jews. It is an unfortunate reality that many Jews are addicted to smoking. We would expect this to pose a serious problem on Shabbat when lighting a fire is prohibited (Shemot 35:3). How could a smoker survive without a cigarette? However, even the heaviest of religious smokers manages to put the cigarette down and go cold turkey for the entire 25 hour Shabbat every single week. But the truly amazing thing is that it's not even a struggle. On Shabbat the urge to smoke is just not there. And the moment Shabbat ends the need for a cigarette returns with a vengeance. These smokers understand the Ibn Ezra well. When something is out of the question, then desire just dissipates.

The tenth commandment is saying that our desires are indeed within our control. If we desire that which is forbidden then that is an indication that on some level within our heart of hearts we still entertain the possibility of getting it. In the end, it is the earlier commandments of "Do not steal" and "Do not commit adultery" which enable us to observe the final commandment of "Do not covet."

The Beis HaLevi (Rabbi Yoseph Ber Soloveitchik, 1820- 1892) offers a different explanation of the tenth commandment, and he also uses an analogy to make his point.

Imagine a man whose greatest fantasy has finally come within reach. He is completely taken over by his passion and it's too late for any rational thinking. All he needs to do is cross a narrow bridge and it's all his. But as he runs across, he slips on an icy patch. His mind is immediately cleared of all desire as concern for his safety takes over. The power of fear is such that it can sober you up instantly.

The same can also be said for awe of G-d. When desire begins to do its work on the heart of a G-d-fearing person, it awakens a fear of transgressing the tenth commandment. That fear itself cleanses the mind of all forbidden desires. According to the Bais HaLevi, it is the power of the tenth commandment itself that enables us to observe it.

Shabbat Shalom!

