

Weekly Teaching

January 25, 2019

The last of the 10 Commandments is the prohibition against coveting the property of one's neighbor.

In the 13th century, a book was published anonymously called the *Sefer Ha-Chinuch* (The Book of Education).

Within this rabbinic work, each of the 613 Commandments is systematically explained.

The *Sefer Ha-Chinuch* is explicit when it asserts that no one should question how God can command an individual to control their emotions:

- *In truth, it is in the hand of every individual to control himself and his thoughts and his desires from everything that he wants, and it is within his ability and mindset to distance himself from, or draw closer to those yearnings according to his will. His heart is in his hands!*

This stance becomes the normative belief for Rabbinic Judaism.

We hold that every person has the ability to harness their desires and control their emotions.

The prohibition against coveting is a reminder that if we fail in this regard, then there can be significant, and often destructive, consequences.

The mitzvah is to teach "emotional regulation".

The best time to begin this teaching is when children are young.

Children begin to form the foundation of their moral beliefs starting at three years old.

Emotional regulation is the key to learning how to act morally upon the beliefs held.

I was once at a barber shop and a clergy friend of mine was there with his two young sons. He had given his youngest son, about four years old, his phone so as to watch a video while he received his haircut.

Soon afterwards, the older brother by two years went over and simply took the phone from his brother. The younger brother wailed, and my friend had to intervene.

He calmly said to the older brother, "Why did you take the phone from your brother?"

An honest answer was offered, "Because I wanted it."

My friend took a breath, or two, and then said, "But, that wasn't very nice."

The older brother then said, "But, I wanted it."

Of course, the next words were: "Would you like something taken from you just because someone else wanted it?"

The son said hesitantly, "No."

The father replied, "So, why would you do that to your brother?"

The older brother responded: “Because I didn’t think about that when I took it.”

The older brother then returned the phone to his younger brother, and they both watched the video together.

The two boys learned a lesson that every parent, and teacher, needs to continually reinforce.

Without learning to effectively navigate the difficulties that come with emotional regulation, the result is highly problematic. The negative emotion of “I want” or “I covet” unchecked leads to bad acts.

What is so important to teach children at a young age needs to be continually reinforced with us adults.

Society creates laws, but there is no policeman watching us 24 hours a day.

We feel the power of coveting—and unchecked, we can make very bad decisions.

The sin of coveting leads to theft: theft of property, and the theft of both physical and emotional fidelity.

When we want something, we have to slow ourselves down and ask two questions:

- Is what I want appropriate?
- If it is appropriate, what is/are the right way(s) by which I go about to procure what I want?

God wired us to want things and there is nothing wrong with this hard wiring.

But the hard-wiring comes along with the Torahitic operating system by which we are to effectively control our impulses.

Our success in this endeavor often begins with the mitzvah of empathy.

Shabbat Shalom,

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