

Dear Rabbi,

In a recent column you explained the commandment to "not covet" as a path to control jealousy. You agreed, however, that you can't be expected to not be jealous to begin with, and the mitzvah gives guidelines to deal with that jealousy. My question is, by then it's too late! If you were already jealous for a period of time, until you worked on it you already transgressed the commandment?!

Mel J.

Dear Mel,

In general, prohibitions in the Torah apply only to actions, not emotions or feelings. Although the spirit of the law may be to control and properly direct our emotions, the letter of the law only applies to actions.

In this case, two separate terminologies are used in the ten commandments, "Lo Sachmod" or do not covet, and 'Llo Sisaveh" or don't desire lustfully, the possessions of you neighbor (Devarim/Deut. 5:18).

The second prohibition applies to one who desires another's belongings, and makes concrete plans to obtain them. This would apply even if you were not successful in obtaining the object, since actual plans were made. (Code of Jewish Law, Ch. M 359:10).

Lo Sachmod is a related prohibition. When a person takes action and pressures the owner to give or sell the item he desires, he violates "do not covet". Although the seller ultimately agrees to sell the item, if he was coerced or pressured into making the sale, Lo Sachmod has been violated. (Although there are diverse opinions concerning pressure with payment, we are stringent with such an important mitzvah as this).

The prohibition applies both when the buyer pressures the owner directly, or has other people apply the pressure on his behalf.

Items for sale generally don't fall into this category. Asking once or twice to purchase an item not for sale is also acceptable, without applying pressure.

A developer requires a particular parcel of land to complete a development. If the owner indicates that he is not interested in selling, and the developer pressures him to sell, the developer has violated the prohibition of Lo Sachmod.

This is an example of a mitzvah which is to ultimately refine our emotions and feelings, but has concrete guidelines in Jewish law to make this mitzvah actionable. Although the Al-mighty wants our hearts, our key responsibility is in the realm of actions.

For more guidelines and examples, see "Business Halachah" (Artscroll Pub pp. 99-104).