

Dear Rabbi Fried,

I have trouble understanding the tenth commandment "thou shalt not covet". It seems to be an injunction forbidding jealousy. How can jealousy, a normal human emotion, be forbidden?

Clyde R.

Dear Clyde,

One of the classical commentaries, R' Avraham Ibn Ezra, provides insight to answer your question. He explains that we are only jealous of, or covet, something that we believe could actually become ours. When we see a friend, colleague or coworker achieve a heightened level of financial success, we may be overcome by jealousy. When we observe, however, a king of royal lineage basking in the splendor of his riches, we don't feel envious. Why this discrepancy?

The difference is clear. We recognize we are not kings. We were not born into royal families, and do not yearn for things we know could not possibly become ours. We might, however, be envious of our neighbor who we believe is no more capable than ourselves.

"Lo Sachmod", "Do not covet..." teaches us a profound lesson in G-d's involvement in our lives and livelihoods. The Al-mighty has provided each person with his or her needs. What is appropriate for one is not necessarily fitting for another. What belongs to another is as much out of reach as if your friend was royalty.

I think this explanation is inherent within the verse itself. The commandment to not covet our friends ox and donkey is uttered in the same breath that we may not covet his wife. This is hinting to us that just as his wife is completely off limits to me, (that's his royalty), so too the rest of his possessions are to be viewed as completely out of reach. Consequently, you will not covet those belongings.

You see that this mitzvah doesn't command us to quash our emotions. It rather gives us a direction in life which enables us to control our emotions. All natural emotions have a place, otherwise they would not have been created within us. Our job, as Jews, is to control our emotions, utilizing them when appropriate, remaining above them when inappropriate.

At times you and I will be faced with the natural emotional challenge of jealousy. At that time we need to focus on the above lesson, and we can regain our control.

I was always amazed by my father, ob'm, at the way he expressed joy at the financial successes of others, although he only made a modest income. My understanding was that my father, as a holocaust survivor, maintained his joy by simply being alive and enjoying the simple pleasures he was blessed with. This enabled him to not only not covet what others had, but even to fully join in the joy of others in their successes, a joy untainted by the desire of it coming to himself.