

Love of G-d and Material Desire

By Jonathan Neril, Parshat Yitro

Parshat Yitro is dedicated by Aryeh Moshe Mellman. "I dedicate this parsha to my grandfathers for whom I am named, Morris (Moshe) Warach and Louis (Leib) Shapiro, z"l."

The Ten Commandments given in this week's Torah portion *Yitro* culminate with the command not to covet: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor."¹ The 19th century Torah commentator Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg explores this commandment, and in so doing offers a Jewish approach to spiritual living and material consumption.² He relates this verse to another command that "you shall love the Eternal One your G-d with all your heart."³ He asks, why did the Torah state: "And you shall love the Eternal One your G-d with *all* your heart?" Would it not have been sufficient to write simply "You shall love G-d... *with* your heart"? What is the significance of the insertion of 'all'?

Rabbi Mecklenburg explains that the Torah emphasizes loving G-d with *all* of one's heart to teach that a person should be *totally* committed to serving G-d, and not split between love of the Eternal and love of physical pleasures. When a person is wholly in love with the Infinite One, that person will not feel an attraction to material indulgence. Rabbi Mecklenburg uses the metaphor of a cup, filled to the brim, with no room for anything else. So too a person full of love of G-d has no room for pure physicality. Such individuals feel so satiated in their core that their desire to gratify themselves from the physical world totally evaporates. Why indulge one's physical urge when one can experience spiritual bliss with the Creator of the Universe?

Just as love of G-d keeps physical lusting at bay, so too filling one's cup with connection to G-d can prevent over-attachment to physical pleasures. That's why in our Torah portion, G-d ends the Ten Commandments with "Do not covet." How can one stand before G-d in love after indulging in the most base physical desires—for comfort, money, food, and sexual pleasure? In addition, if a person prefers to indulge in the next available pleasure, they will have little patience for the spiritual work and sacrifice that often only bring satisfaction after much time and commitment. According to such a world-view, it just isn't worth it to work hard for delayed spiritual rewards when one can have tangible pleasure, right here, right now.

Rabbi Mecklenburg's teaching is not only relevant for an unabashed hedonist, but also for someone who works to be close to G-d while enjoying a range of modern consumer products—an I-Pod, a nice stereo, a fancy restaurant meal, the latest designer clothes. His teachings do not seem to say that a Divine-aware life demands living like an ascetic or in poverty. Rather, a Jew should consume as a *means* to serving G-d. Such a person might live more modestly than an average American, while definitely living comfortably and meeting their basic material needs. Rabbi Mecklenburg faults consumption as an end in itself, or as a means to self-gratification, which inevitably displaces the space in the cup for G-d's presence. When people use the physical world as a means to serve G-d, they will almost certainly consume less because they will realize what their true needs are.

When Rabbi Mecklenburg speaks about coveting, he is addressing Jews living in a pre-industrial, pre-modern, pre-consumer society. To Jews living in the first 3000 years of Jewish history, one might covet their neighbor's two-room house, donkey or field—examples the Torah itself uses. Yet we live in a radically different time: modern, consumer-oriented and highly technological. We live in a materialistic world where coveting has become second nature, and in this material world, instead of coveting a donkey or a field, today we covet I-Phones and Jaguars, cruise-ship vacations and second homes.

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Closeness to G-d isn't the only thing that may be lost when a person covets the physical. Rabbi Elchanan Samet of Yeshivat Har Etzion (Israel, contemporary) explains that in the view of Philo, a Greco-Jewish philosopher in first century Alexandria, "The family, the land and all of humankind can ultimately be destroyed as a result of failure to suppress desires for various pleasures."⁴ What effect does one person's individual consumption have on the world at large? A recent study researched how many acres of biologically productive space the average US citizen uses per year, in terms of their food, water, energy, and other consumption. That is, how much land is necessary to support the lifestyle of one American? The estimate? Over one hundred and eight acres. How many acres is the earth believed to be able to produce for each of the 6.5 billion people in the world? Fifteen acres.⁵ That means the average US citizen consumes over seven times what the earth can sustain. Multiply this by hundreds of millions of people and you can see how overconsumption is taking an environmental toll on the planet. Air and water pollution. Extinction of species. A consensus of international scientists—i.e. the mainstream in science—state that human-caused global climate change is likely to bring on more severe storms, floods, and droughts, with major impacts on human societies.⁶

The Midrash states that G-d "caused [Israel] to hear the Ten Commandments since they are the core of the Torah and essence of the *mitzvot*, and they end with the commandment 'Do not covet,' since all of them depend on [this commandment], to hint that for anyone who fulfills this commandment, it is as if they fulfill the entire Torah."⁷ "Do not covet" is not a little addendum tacked on to the end of the Ten Commandments, but one of the central messages of Divine revelation. Finding spiritual satisfaction in the service of the Divine is an important means of weaning oneself from a life of physicality. The commands "Love G-d with all your heart"³ and "Do not covet" thus offer an alternative to a high consumption, unsustainable future. We can begin to repair the world by improving ourselves. G-d offers no better way to do that than by filling our hearts with the love and light of the Divine.

Suggested Action Items:

Think about what fills your metaphorical cup, and whether you want to keep everything inside it. Identify one thing that planned to buy but do not need, and replace it with something that will bring you closer to G-d.

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¹ Exodus 20:14, translation by *Judaica Press*, available at www.chabad.org

² Rabbi Mecklenberg discusses this in his book *HaKetav VebaKabala* on Parshat Yitro, written in 19th century Prussia. Translation by the author.

³ Deuteronomy 6:5. Translation by the author.

⁴ Rav Elchanan Samet, *The Tenth Commandment: "You Shall Not Covet,"* translated by Karen Fish. Available at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.63/17yitro.htm>

⁵ See <http://www.ecologicalfootprint.org/result.php?cnt=USA>, which states that "ecological footprints provide a way to systematically measure the area of the Earth needed to sustain a nation's annual consumption patterns. Food, fossil fuels, paper, and every other good or service generates a footprint." More information about the methodology for calculating a footprint and the earth's project biocapacity is available at <http://www.ecologicalfootprint.org/FAQ.html>

⁶ See the most recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, available at www.ipcc.ch, in particular the AR4 Synthesis Report, released on November 17th, 2007

⁷ "Midrash Melech Moshiah," in *Beit HaMidrash*, ed. Jellenik, quoted in *Torah Shelema* p. 124, Parshat Yitro #405. Translation by the author.