

DO NOT COVET AND DO NOT DESIRE PART 6

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

We noted in an earlier article, that the prohibition of 'Do Not Covet' refers specifically to not trying to attain someone else's item. However, it is not prohibited to want the same item as his friend, and to try to acquire it for himself. For example, if Brian owns a laptop computer, Dave is allowed to try to buy the same make of laptop for himself. However, Dave is not permitted to pressure Brian into selling his very own laptop to Dave. Why is it considered so bad to desire someone else's item in particular?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to understand the possible motivations for acquiring physical property. A person may want possessions simply because they offer a certain benefit to him. For example, a person may want a large house because he has a big family and needs a certain number of bedrooms to provide enough space for his family. However, a person may desire possessions for a very different reason. He may judge his sense of value on the basis of his acquisitions. He may see property ownership as a measure of a person's success in life. Accordingly, if he sees that his friend owns a large house, he will feel that his friend is 'beating' him in an unspoken competition for possessions. This will engender feelings of jealousy which he will want to assuage. The best way of doing this is to acquire his friend's very house. In this way, the large house, which was the source of his feeling of inferiority, would now engender in him feelings of superiority.

We can now understand why the desire for someone else's specific item is considered so negative. It is driven by an attitude that is totally foreign to Torah values. This is an attitude that stresses the value of a person according to his material possessions. The only measure of one's success in this area, is how much he owns in comparison to other people. Accordingly, a person who lives with this value system will constantly desire to acquire other people's possessions so that he can 'overtake' them in the relentless battle to see who can own the most 'toys'.

The Torah approach is diametrically opposed to this attitude. The Torah ascribes no importance to material ownership in appraising the value of a person^[1]. All people are of infinite value because they are made in the Image of G-d. Moreover, the only acquisitions that are important and lasting are those of the spiritual kind. The wealthiest person in the world will lose all his possessions when he dies, they are only temporary acquaintances. The only 'possessions' that accompany a person to the Next World, are the Mitzvos and good deeds that a person performed in this world. When a person recognizes this truth, he will find no desire to want the possessions of his fellow man.

1. To see more on this topic, email me on: Gefen123@smile.net.il, and I will send you an essay on Parshas Vayeishev that discusses this issue in more depth.
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