

APPRECIATING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

This week's Torah portion once again presents the Ten Commandments, the last of which forbids coveting a friend's possessions. We are instructed not to desire other people's wives, houses, fields, slaves, animals or any of their belongings. We can easily appreciate a commandment not to act upon our desires and take things that do not belong to us, but how are we, as mere human beings, expected not to even want them? Is desire not a natural tendency? Furthermore, the Torah teaches us, regarding acts that are forbidden, that one is not held accountable for his desires until he acts upon them. How is it that here the Torah expressly forbids a desire?

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-c.1164, composed classic commentary on entire Bible, famous for its grammatical and linguistic analysis) explains with a parable that one should look at desirable things the way in which a peasant views the daughter of the king. She may contain all the attributes he wants in a wife, but he cannot reasonably expect to marry her anymore than he can expect to grow wings and fly. His desire for her is, therefore, pacified by the reality of his situation. Similarly, explains Rabbi Ibn Ezra, G-d allots each person his portion for the year on Rosh Hashanah. For someone to covet what belongs to another is therefore pointless, because if Hashem chose not to apportion this item to him then it cannot be his anymore than he can grow wings and fly.

Another approach to controlling ones cravings is illustrated in the allegory of the very wealthy king who was also very righteous and pious. One day an old friend asked him, "How is it that despite your wealth and honor you maintain your righteousness? Are you not drawn by the lures of alcohol and other worldly pleasures like everybody else?" The king suddenly became incensed and instructed one of his servants to fill up a cup with wine, and have his friend carry it through all the streets of the city. If even one drop spilled from the cup the friend should be hung. Carefully the man carried the cup through the streets and managed not to spill. When he returned, the king asked him if, as he was walking through the streets, he was drawn to bars, restaurants, and other worldly pleasures. The old friend responded that he was too afraid of spilling to even be distracted by those petty pursuits. Similarly, the king explained, that when he walks through the streets he fears the One Above, focused only what He wants, and is not drawn by external distractions.

Ultimately, when Hashem charges us to not covet our neighbor's possessions He is really reminding us of His dominion and control over the physical world. When we realize that our friend's belongings are entirely out of our realm, divinely ordained not to be ours, our desire to have them disappears. With the concurrent appreciation that all we DO have is a blessing showered upon us by Hashem

out of his boundless love and compassion for us, we will find joy and satisfaction in our good fortune, as Ben Zoma taught in the Pirkei Avos/Ethics of our Fathers (4:1), "Who is truly wealthy? He who is happy with portion."

Have a Good Shabbos!

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