



The Trouble With Desire

R. David Kasher – kasher@hadar.org

Parashat Yitro 5784

The last of the Ten Commandments is distinct from the rest in several ways. Structurally, it is in the second five, but it stands out from the others. After the clipped language of six through nine, all fitting into one verse (“do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness against your neighbor”), this last one suddenly takes up a whole verse to itself:

שמות כ"ד

לֹא תַחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ¹ לֹא תַחְמַד אִשְׁתּוֹ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרֹו וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ.

Exodus 20:14

Do not covet your neighbor’s house. **Do not covet** your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The verse itself is a strange construction. It looks at first as if it will continue the clipped style from the previous commandments: “Do not covet your neighbor’s house.” Then there is a break in the text (*parashah setumah*) mid-verse, as if the Torah were pausing to consider

¹ This gap is in the Torah itself; see below.



something, and then restarting, beginning again with the same language: “Do not covet,” and then a list of six more things not to covet. Finally, as if the list suddenly proved insufficient, the verse ends with a catch-all: “or anything that belongs to him.”

When we compare this formulation to the slightly different wording of the Ten Commandments when they are repeated by Moshe in Deuteronomy, we find some additional features. The order of coveted objects is slightly different (his wife and his house have switched places), and there is one additional item on the list (his field). Most notably, there is an extra verb that appears after another *parashah setumah* break in the text:

דברים ה:יח

וְלֹא תִחְמַד אֶשֶׁת רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תִתְאַוֶּה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ שׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ

Deuteronomy 5:18

Do not covet your neighbor’s wife. **Do not become tempted by** your neighbor’s house, or his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that belongs to him.

The second instance of “do not covet” (*lo tahmod*) in the original commandment now appears as “do not become tempted” (*lo titaveh*)—a reflexive verb whose root, א.ו.ה, is another word for desire, sometimes translated as “appetite,” “hunger,” or “temptation.” Are these just two ways of saying the same thing? Or do we now have two acts that are forbidden?

In Sefer HaMitzvot, the Rambam counts these two verbs as two separate prohibitions.² He explains more fully later in the Mishneh Torah (Hilkhoh Gezeilah ve-Aveidah 1:9-10). To commit an actual act of *himmud* (coveting), one must actively (and successfully) pressure someone

² Sefer HaMitzvot, Negative Commandments #265 & #266. שלא תחמוד, he derives from Exodus 20:14, and שלא שלא, from Deuteronomy 5:18. This understanding is drawn from the Melkhilta Massekhta de-va-Hodesh 8.



into giving or selling the desired object: “חמוד שיש בו מעשה” - coveting requires an action.” To transgress the act of “becoming tempted” on the other hand, simply requires internally desiring something that belongs to someone else: “ואין תאוה אלא בלב בלבד” - temptation takes place in the heart alone.”

Why, then, are both of these “desire” verbs woven together into the Tenth Commandment, and what state of trouble are they warning us against?

To understand that, we would do well to turn back to the Garden of Eden narrative, where both of these roots appear for the first time—and both in reference to trees. In chapter 2 of Genesis, just after Adam is formed from the earth, we are told:

בראשית ב:ט

וַיִּצְמַח ה' אֱלֹקִים מִן הָאֲדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נְחֻמָּד לְמַרְאֶה וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע.

Genesis 2:9

The Eternal God sprouted up from the ground **every tree that was desirable** to the sight and good for food, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Here, the term for desirable, *nehmad*—which shares the נ.ח.מ.ד root with our word for “covet”—applies to the general category of trees (כל עץ). That description seems to extend also to the two notable trees mentioned afterwards: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge.³ Seven verses further, however, an explicit distinction is made between the general category and that last tree:

³ The grammar of the verse is ambiguous, and could be read to mean that every **other** tree was good for food and desirable to the eyes. However, because the Tree of Knowledge is later described as “a tree that was good for food” (and is, in fact, edible), I am assuming that it possessed that quality from the start.



בראשית ב:טז-יז

מכל עץ הגן אכל תאכל. ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו.

Genesis 2:16-17

From **every tree** of the garden you may eat, but from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, do not eat from it.

“Every tree (*kol etz*)” is permitted, just as “every tree was desirable” (*kol etz nehmad*). That suggests that things can be inherently desirable without being forbidden. Desire itself is not the problem.

The trouble with desire begins in the next chapter of Genesis, when the snake enters the picture and begins trying to convince the newly formed Woman to eat from the forbidden tree. When she explains that God has warned against eating from this particular tree, the snake brushes aside her concerns and lures her with promises of enlightenment. This tree, he says, will open her eyes and provide her with God-like knowledge. With those suggestions in mind, the Woman takes another look. In her vision of the tree, the word *nehmad* appears for the second time, but now it is preceded by the first appearance of that other language for desire (א.ו.ה):

בראשית ג:ו

וַיִּרְא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לִמְאֹכַל וְכִי תֹאֲוָה הוּא לְעֵינֶיהָ וְנִחְמָד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׁכִּיל וְתִקַּח מִפְּרִיו וְתֹאכַל וְתִתֵּן גַּם לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּה וַיֹּאכַל.

Genesis 3:6

The Woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was **a temptation** (*ta'avah*) **for the eyes, and was desirable** (*nehmad*) **for understanding**. So she took from its fruit and ate, and she gave also to her Man, who was with her, and he ate.



This description of this tree shares some phrases with the general category of trees we saw above. But with some new terms added and shuffled around, we are being invited to note the contrast, a shift in perception.

Immediately, the emphasis is on the visual experience. The Woman “saw”—not tasted—that the tree was “good for food.” As she set her gaze upon it, it then became a temptation (*ta'avah*) “for her eyes.” *Ta'avah* is a word that will later be used in Tanakh to describe a hunger for food—but here it is the eyes that hunger to see more. What was initially merely admired has now become difficult to resist.

Now, that original word for “desirable” (*nehmad*) appears again, but it has shifted to describe not just the visual beauty that “all trees” have, but the unique properties of **this** tree. These are properties she cannot see, but can imagine based on what she has been told. The phrase is, “desirable for understanding (*lit.* to comprehend, *lehaskil*),” a word that refers to the work of the *sekhel*, the cognitive function. This expression of desire is fixated on a specific thing—the one thing that is forbidden—and it is a desire to gain more intimate knowledge of that thing—in part because it is forbidden.

Having arrived at that sort of desire, “she took its fruit, and ate it.” So far, everything in the verse has been “in the heart alone.” Now, however, an action (מעשה) has been taken, and a transgression committed. The path of desire ran from eye to the mind, and from the mind to the deed.

The Rambam, back in the Mishneh Torah, describes a remarkably parallel movement in the laws of theft:



הַתְּאֵוָה מְבִיאָה לִידֵי חַמּוּד וְהַחַמּוּד מְבִיא לִידֵי גְזֵל.

Temptation (*ta'avah*), brings one to coveting (*himmud*), and coveting brings one to theft (*gezel*).

His use of this terminology holds up well across texts. He is clearly referring here to the various components of the Tenth Commandment. But he could just as easily be describing the first humans, the first temptations, and the first theft.

The Tenth Commandment itself, in summoning these two verbs from the Garden of Eden, is surely hearkening back to those first human encounters with desire. The language of ת.מ.ח (coveting), here in Parashat Yitro, takes us back to the first usages of this root, and reminds us that desire is not inherently bad. The world is full of desire. But a particular kind of obsessive desire, fixated on one object, can eventually lead to trouble. The “coveter” in the scenario described in the commandment begins—like his foremother once did—by looking. He is gazing over at a neighbor’s house... “*Nice house...*” A pause—and a break in the verse—as he stares, and his mind begins to turn. Then his gaze drifts over to his neighbor’s wife “*...Interesting...*” Who else and what else is over there? He surveys the property. Soon he is becoming overly interested. The need to know more, to consume or possess what is not his, overtakes him, and before long, he cannot resist, and he will reach out and take—violating any other commandment that stands in his way.

When Moshe then restates the Tenth Commandment in Deuteronomy, he adds an extra verb, another reference to that scene in the Garden of Eden, moving the problematic moment a step backwards in the progression the Rambam mapped out for us: from *himmud* to *ta'avah*,



from action to thought.⁴ He wants to emphasize to the Children of Israel that the trouble with desire begins before one ever considers taking action. It is the rumination of the heart, the willing indulgence in temptation, that sets off a chain reaction that eventually leads to an act of transgression.

Moshe knows this pattern well, having witnessed the people indulge temptation many times in their journey through the desert. Indeed, the only place we have seen the word *ta'avah* appear between Genesis and Deuteronomy is once in the Book of Numbers, when, we are told, the people “הִתְאַוּהוּ תְּאֻוָּה - became tempted by temptation,” and soon began to fantasize about the “fruits” of Egypt, the cucumbers and melons (Numbers 11:4-5). Soon they are calling for a return to Egypt, provoking God into punishing them with a deadly plague. After a mass burial, they depart from the site, naming it, in memory of their failure, “קְבֵרוֹת הַתְּאֻוָּה - the Graves of Temptation.”

Now that their journey has come to an end, and Moshe prepares to give the people all the laws that will help them build a new society on the other side of the Jordan River, he is thinking about that tragedy in the desert, and also about the tragedy in the garden. He wants to remind these people—as the Tenth Commandment is there to remind us all—that prohibitions alone will not be enough to keep them safe. They will also need to attend carefully to the complex workings of the human heart.

⁴ In reading the second version of the commandment as Moshe’s commentary on the first, I am following the “straightforward understanding” (דרך הפשט) approach of Nahmanides, who reads the differences in the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy as Moshe’s further explanations of the original commandments as they were stated in Exodus (see his comments on Deuteronomy 5:12). That is (as he notes) distinct from the approach given in the Talmud (Shavuot 20b), that both versions were said “בדבור אחד - in one utterance.”

