

What is coveting, and what's wrong with it?

Is coveting a feeling or an action?

1) In the book of Exodus it says, *Do not covet [lo tachmod] your neighbor's house; do not covet your neighbor's wife or male or female servant, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's* (Ex. 20:14). Later, in Deuteronomy (in the restatement of the Ten Commandments), it says *Do not covet your neighbor's wife; and do not crave [lo titaveh] you neighbor's house, or his field, or his male or female servant, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's* (Deut. 5:18). This indicates that both "crave" and "covet" are culpable actions. From where do we learn that if a person craves, it will lead to coveting? Because it says *do not covet – do not crave*. Where do we learn that if a person covets, it leads to theft? As it is written, *They will covet fields and rob* (Micah 2:2). Craving, *ta'avah*, is in the heart, as it is written, *Your soul will have the craving to eat meat* (Deut. 12:20), and coveting, *chimud*, has to do with action, as it is written, *You shall not covet the silver and gold upon them [their idols] and take it for yourself* (Deut. 7:25). (*Mekhilta*, early rabbinic midrash)

2) Whoever covets her fellow's servant, house, utensils, or any saleable article of his, pressuring him until he agrees to part with it, even though she pays him well for it, has violated the negative *mitzvah* of "Do not covet." ...She is not liable on this count until she actually takes possession of the article she coveted. This is the force of the text *You shall not covet the silver and gold upon them and take it for yourself*—implying coveting in action. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 12th c.)

3) Negative *mitzvah* no. 158: One version of the Ten Commandments reads *lo tachmod* ["do not covet"] and the other *lo titaveh* ["do not crave"], but both mean the same thing. (*Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, 13th c.)

4) It is known that coveting something is a matter of the heart. The essence of this *mitzvah* is that one must train oneself to absolutely renounce all hope of ever acquiring things belonging to another person, be it real estate, livestock, inert objects, etc. One must not even think of these and wish for them in one's heart. Were one to covet them one would ultimately commit murder in order to own them oneself. ..Concerning this the Talmud comments that "if someone covets something that is not appropriate for him to have, he will wind up losing even what was appropriate for him to own" ...Still, there are occasions when coveting is a character trait which is permitted. Coveting the opportunity to perform certain *mitzvot* of the Torah is not only permissible but is praiseworthy. (Bachya ben Asher, 13th-14th c.)

(over)

Coveting & the full heart

5) *Do not covet your neighbor's house; do not covet your neighbor's spouse, or servant, ox or donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's:* Many wonder about this commandment – how is it possible for a person not to desire, in their heart, something that is so appealing to the eyes, when the heart desires (covets) of its own accord, according to its nature, against a person's will?

It seems, as is written in one of the commentaries on the verse “And you shall love YHVH your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6: 5), that the text would not have been missing anything if it were written “And you shall love YHVH your God with your heart”; why do we need “with all your heart”? The intention is that your heart should be full with the love of YHVH. That is, there should be in your heart only love of YHVH—and not both love of God and worldly desire. For if your heart is filled to its brim with love of YHVH, it is impossible that you should covet any of the delights of this world, for there will be no room in the heart to crave anything outside of God. Like a cup that is full, and is not able to receive one more drop.

(Hak'tav VebaKabbalah, 19th c., as adapted in Itturei Torah)