

As a child, it was always Air Jordans. As a teenager, it was a girlfriend. As a young adult, it was social status. As a still young-ish but different level adult, I would say it's financial security. These, among many others, are the things that I covet.

Almost always viewed negatively, coveting is one of the more natural emotions that we all feel. Often used interchangeably, jealousy and covetousness are different. Jealousy is externally directed. In a study from 2020 in the *Frontiers of Psychology*,

“Jealousy, refers to the anxiety of losing your

accomplishments, status, or partner to another person.

Jealousy factors in the feelings of external parties; envy is internal.”

Coveting usually happens with those in the same social sphere as us and centers around things that are tied into our social identity.

Jealousy, that's an emotion that we should aspire to root out. It may be futile but it's worth the effort. Coveting, at least in one of its forms, is an emotion worthy of investigation and potential growth.

This cuts against all of what we have ever heard. Coveting or envy, is one of the 7 deadly sins. Back in Exodus and now again this week in *Parshat Va'etchanan*, we hear a recounting of the 10 commandments and wouldn't you know it (Deuteronomy 5:18):

וְלֹא תִחְמַד אִשְׁתּוֹ רֵעֶךָ - וְלֹא תִתְאַוֶּה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ שְׂדֵהוּ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ שׂוֹרְוֹ

וְחִמְרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ:

You shall not **covet** your neighbor's wife. Likewise, none of you shall **crave** your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

We remember this. It's the last commandment! But back in Exodus it was all "*lo tahmod*" don't covet; here we have one "*lo tahmod*" and one "*lo titaveh*." What is the difference between these two concepts and how might it inform our conversation about "good" coveting?

You might not be shocked to learn that there are stark disagreements among commentators about which term means what. Maimonides in his teachings about how this commandment is made manifest into law² says that “*himud*,” is a feeling that translates into an action whereas “*taavah*,” is an internal thought or emotion. So in his eyes, the version of the 10 commandments that we read this week covers all bases, warning us against internal and external coveting.

Other opinions argue that they’re interchangeable terms with similar meanings. Spend less time parsing the text and more time working on coveting less. I don’t buy this. The Torah, ever laconic in its language, has to be using two different terms intentionally.

Professor Nechama Leibowitz, a brilliant Torah scholar and a favorite of mine offers a tantalizing read making the point that *himud* (the word used solely in Exodus) always connotes something physical, external, and that which the eye can see. *Taavah* (the word used in Deuteronomy) refers to the person who expresses the desire even for something that is not present and is not outward. It's only used in relation to the soul unlike the word *himud*.

Taken together, what we have here is a great explanation of why the Torah does what it does. In the Exodus version, reflecting a different time and context for the people, the Torah used one word for that perhaps was the expectation for the people. Then, as the lived experience played out and we get to Deuteronomy, God and Moses realized we need a little more nuance here.

The human experience is complex and we live in **the** world but also within our own internal world. So we get *himud* for our externals, maybe something more akin to jealousy, and then we get *taavah*, more of that internal coveting.

We also get this hint from the grammar difference between the words. Rabbi Benno Jacob, one of the more important Rabbis of contemporary Judaism in the 18/19th in Germany centuries notes that “*lo titaveh*,” the new word is in the reflexive form; this often connotes an act being performed on one’s own being. Jacob explains that it means

“to nourish in one’s heart the desire for something, through a vivid presentation in one’s fantasy...”

In this form, it means to actively build up your desire for the object.

Using this framework, it feels fairly convincing to me that the Torah itself in our *parshah* is breaking these two concepts down into an external and an internal dynamic. While the Torah is clear that both are to be avoided, viewed through the lens of modern psychology, we can also reapply the Torah's message and understand how to rid ourselves of the former while wielding the latter, that soul-desire of *taavah*.

There seem to be two forms of coveting. As Professor Gerrod Parrot argues, there is malicious envy and benign envy. The one to be avoided is the former. That's the one that breeds resentment toward another and pushes us to try to undermine them.

The latter, though he posits, pushes us to try to improve ourselves not at the expense of others. Because it's more internally rooted, that also means there's a mindfulness and introspection required of it.

Here are the suggestions offered to help wield this form of coveting positively:

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1. You've got to admit you have it. Pretending to be a perfect person who never falls prey to coveting is problematic. We all deal with it. The more you hide from it, the more it festers and turns into the malicious form. When you admit it, you can get curious about it. When you get curious about it, you can

understand where it comes from. When you understand where it comes from, you can use it.

2. When I say use it, I mean that constructively. Unpleasant emotions, like anxiety and, yes, envy, are functional, Yochi Cohen-Charash, a Professor at Baruch says. It alerts us to situations that need to change. Envy, for instance, warns us of “a situation in which we are [performing at] a lower level in things that are important for us.”

We are always looking for tools to better ourselves. We strive to eat more healthy foods. We exercise and move our bodies more.

Understanding our internal toolkit is just another method to do the same. You can use it as fuel in the same way we do for material items.

3. Finally, you can recalibrate the envy. We can accept the idea that we have a longing for something else while also trying to control what we have in the present. We have to act on it too. Simply paying attention to it and understanding it aren't enough because it won't have an outlet. It'll turn into malice. Ask questions that'll translate into action.

This is but one potential roadmap to working within our coveting. It's a combination of ancient and modern wisdom intersecting. The final piece to top it off comes from Chassidic Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov in the 18th century. He argues that not coveting comes at the end of the 10 commandments because it is a reward.

If you do your best to follow all the commandments that precede it, you will be more equipped to handle coveting. While he would argue that the reward is not having to deal with coveting, I would say the reward is the process of learning how to live with it, finding its roots, and reworking it for the betterment of yourself.

Shabbat Shalom!

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