

Thoughts for V'etchanan

Corona Diary #13: Covid 19 and Coveting

Moshe Taragin

Most mitzvot mandate our behavior - which actions are obligated and which are banned. The second more challenging set of mitzvot regulate our thought and our belief system: which ideas are we meant to subscribe to, and which views are heretical. Though "mental mitzvot" are more complex and complicated, they are still reasonably attainable. Ideas can be studied and assimilated and the thought-system of a Jew can be outlined by the Torah. The third set of mitzvot- those which govern human emotions- are clearly the most challenging; the Torah actually maps which emotions are obligated such as love and fear for G-d. Likewise the Torah prohibits the emotion of covetousness; the final Commandment – Lo Tachmod- prohibits coveting the possessions or the wife of another.

Assuredly, the halachik parameters of this prohibition are quite limiting- it is extremely rare to be in actual violation of this prohibition. Technically, the prohibition only bans 'acting' upon our desires but not internal coveting which is never implemented. If desire doesn't translate into, at the very least, an attempt to extract the coveted home or secure the desired woman, the legal prohibition hasn't been violated.

Secondly, the strict prohibition would only obtain to "unique objects" such as a home or a wife. In these instances, the person's desire comes at the cost of the "current" husband who must be somehow displaced so that desire can be fulfilled. My desire for another person's home can only be realized if that person is relocated. Unbridled coveting is based upon the assumption that the current husband or resident is somehow

less deserving of the home or of a particular wife than the person who covets. In a world of mass produced goods, the strict prohibition of Lo Tachmod rarely applies, since the person who covets can easily satiate their envy by purchasing a similar item without depriving the original owner. My envy for a sports car doesn't come at the cost of the current owner's license and therefore, strictly, I haven't violated the legal prohibition of Lo Tachmod. From a strictly halachik standpoint, Lo Tachmod only applies to unique items and only when efforts were exerted to dislodge the current owner or husband.

Though the strict legal prohibition may be quite limited, the spirit of this prohibition applies more generally and is especially relevant in the modern era. Capitalism has become a game-changer in the struggle to regulate our covetousness. We may not often broach the actual prohibition of Lo Tachmod, but we certainly struggle with the temptation to acquire and with a thirst for shopping and purchasing. The modern world has empowered most of us with greater buying power than past generations possessed. Mechanization and the dizzying technological revolution have fed our desire to acquire the latest and greatest models. A world of throwaway goods and of easy "replaceability" has bred a culture of disposability and constant turnover of the objects. Efficient supply chains and delivery systems have facilitated the quick and effortless acquisition of our desired objects. It is ironic but instructional, that Amazon began as an online seller of books aiming to deliver ideas to the human imagination. This behemoth has now morphed into the largest global marketplace delivering electronics, clothing, food and housewares with unimagined ease (Yes, I am an Amazon Prime member). We may not violate the actual prohibition of Lo Tachmod, but we all struggle with

the religious and moral challenges within the culture of "acquisitiveness".

Battling this potentially hazardous trend requires first understanding it. Sometimes, our outsized consumerism is merely a form of addiction; like any addiction it offers an escape from the difficulties or drudgeries of daily life into a fantasy world of blurred reality. Many feel a rush when a package arrives, and that rush or thrill can distract us – momentarily- from our heavy responsibilities or our painful frustrations. Behavioral therapists have coined this disorder BDS- or "Buying Shopping Disorder" and on-line shopping has exacerbated this addiction. Like other addictions, a compulsive desire to acquire goods can destabilize our day-to-day experience as well as damage our personal relationships.

In most cases however, our consumerism doesn't attain levels of harmful addiction. More often our "desire to acquire" is wedded to lofty and valuable character traits. Ambition and a general desire to improve our current condition is vital to a meaningful lifestyle. To fulfill these healthy and worthy ambitions we often purchase the objects we deem necessary to enable our general welfare and enable our advancement. These items- we believe- will enhance our personal prosperity, free us from menial labor and increase our general productivity. Just as our purchase of essentials such as food is vital to our basic survival, similarly, our acquisition of the "tools of improvement " is crucial to assist us in the fulfillment of our dreams and the attainment of our personal goals.

However, a healthy moral life is based upon a careful calibration of our desire to improve or change our reality, with a healthy acceptance of our situation and the ability to excel

within our current framework. The oft-cited Mishnah in Pirkei Avot attributes inner bliss to our ability to sense contentment with our "lot in life" and the 'chelek' or portion we have been allocated. This inner contentment must extend to our financial condition, our personal and professional lives and, yes, even our "religious portion" or our religious roles. Very often, over-ambitious people suffer from terminal restlessness and cannot ever sense the inner tranquility so vital to healthy emotional life. Ultimately, this inner disquiet or the "uneasiness born of over-ambition" is the more threatening danger of extreme immersion in the modern consumerist culture. Healthy life demands the fostering of ambition, but also the careful calibration of that ambition with acceptance of our framework and of our circumstances.

This current medical crisis has, in many ways, exposed the importance of this calibration between ambition and contentment. Firstly, the flimsiness of our consumerist culture has been unmasked and we now realize how terribly fragile the entire supply chain truly is, and how quickly it can be disrupted. It is more obvious than ever that the objects of our cravings will not always be quickly or easily obtainable. Additionally, we are likely veering toward a financial slowdown (at best) and we all sense that our purchasing power will be diminished, forcing us to contract our consumerist tendencies.

Beyond these practical changes, the Corona experience is also teaching us about "accepting our reality" and excelling within that reality, as opposed to altering or improving our reality. As much as we desire a return to a normal world – it appears that the "familiar" "normal" reality is still, at the very least, a few long months away. We cannot easily remodel our current framework but we can learn to thrive within that framework. Will these tools of life help us better balance personal ambition

and inner contentment when this crisis blows over? Will this experience dampen our consumerist passions or, at least, help us regulate them more carefully? Will the lessening interest in consumerism liberate our imaginations to pursue matters of greater spiritual weight? Will we invert the "Amazon effect" and begin to pursue ideas and religious experience rather than goods and items?