What Makes Our Laws “Jewish”?

How Laws Help Us See Who We Are

by

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Rules are everywhere. In every society, culture, family and group. What is the difference between baseball and football? Rules. From the ancient Laws of Hammurabi to English Common Law which, though not codified, has governed Britain since the twelfth century, laws have defined each society and culture on earth.

Every people who ever existed has had rules and laws, yet it is Jews who have been most associated with them. And not unfairly. After all, we are a people not simply contained by our laws but *unified* by our laws, our *mitzvot*.

Jewish laws.

But if everyone has rules and laws, many of them the same – don’t kill, steal, or commit adultery, teach honor for parents – what makes our Torah, our law, unique? There is a powerful distinction and it is centered on the first and last commandments, commandments that define not *just* rules of behavior but something deeper, something more.

The first commandment tells us to believe in God, to know Him and to be cognizant of His everlasting presence. This commandment *is the reason* for the other laws. As stated elsewhere in Torah, we are taught to “Be Holy for I am Holy”. That is, our behavior is patterned on God. We follow our laws not because of the power of the state enforcing them, but because a loving God instructed us to. And the final commandment? This forbids us from coveting, from being “envious of a neighbor’s house, wife, slave, maid, ox, donkey, or anything else that is a neighbor’s.” In other words, what it means for us to *be* holy.

These two *dibrot*, the first and last, are *mitzvot* relating not to action but to thought. As such, these are more than mere societal laws; they are *Jewish* laws. They also give lie to the observation – too often the *accusation* – that Jews are a legalistic people, only concerned with rules. Hardly! Judaism is a unified organism of philosophical-theological truths and legal obligations. Therefore, Rambam opened his *Yad-Hachazakah* with the Halachic principle that. “the basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realize that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being.”

The First Commandment is not a demand for blind faith but a call to know, study, reflect, and discover God. This precept,” states the *Chinuch,* “is the great principle of the Torah, on which all depends.”

Without God, the revealer of Torah, rules are arbitrary, and life is no more than a game rather than the holy enterprise we know it to be.

The Ten Commandments, therefore, is founded not so much on rules governing appropriate or inappropriate behavior but on *thought* and *intent*. So too, it concludes with a focus on *thought* and the way *to fulfill that intent* – by not coveting. These two *mitzvot* are the parameters of our “charge” as a nation. We are a people of *believing* souls, not simply of participating beings.

On the one hand, we are to use our power of intellect to reach our level of belief in God but, on the other hand, we are prohibited from using our thinking capacities to attain or gain that which is not ours. Not only is it prohibited to make any attempt to obtain something which belongs to another through coercion or even through payment, it is even forbidden *to desire* in one’s heart the possessions of another. The body of Jewish law, then, is couched on both sides with the spirit and soul of Jewish belief and thought. A true Jew not only *acts* and behaves Jewishlybut he also *thinks* Jewishly as well.

It is that *intention* that makes Jewish law “Jewish”.

And yet…

While one can be motivated to think proactively – *about –*something, it is not so plain how it is possible to *not* think about something, to *not* desire

Actions can be restrained but can the desire behind that action be legislated? Ironically, or insightfully, it is *this* prohibition against coveting which most clearly characterizes the Jewish aspect of the Ten Commandments.

No mortal ruler or government can dictate policies regarding thoughts and reflections. Only God can command, “thou shalt not covet,” for He knows man’s most intimate thoughts. Furthermore, the very same individual who can direct his thoughts and beliefs towards God can also direct and channel his thoughts to think honestly, and more importantly, to think in permissible and practical terms. The *Ktav V’Hakabalah* tells us that the Torah intends us to use all our thinking capacities in the pursuit of God. To love God with all our powers means to use our minds exclusively for that which God would approve and condone. Otherwise, we are using part of our intellect for the not Godly, and therefore unattainable. In other words, Judaism teaches that a person may not contemplate or desire that which he may not attain or that which is forbidden to attain. The Ibn Ezra quotes the famous Meshalim, “Would the rational, normal, poor farmer contem­plate or think of physically relating with the beautiful, stunning princess? It is impossible, therefore unthinkable. Would the ra­tional, normal, poor farmer contemplate or think of growing wings to fly in the heavens? It is impossible, therefore unthinkable. The poor farmer would not, nay, could not, think of the beautiful princess…”

As Shira Smiles writes in her essay, “Freeing Yourself from Jealousy” on *Aish.com*, “We only long for things that we perceive as within the scope of personal possibility. Recognize this human phenomenon: Our desires remain within the boundaries of our self-perception and, therefore, place limitations on jealousy.

“Our desires are determined by our view of ourselves and the world. If this is true, then we do have ultimate control over our desires.”

The same individual who is trained not to murder, steal, or commit adultery can be trained not to covet. Whatever is not yours, the Torah says, you can’t have. Therefore, don’t desire it, or even think about it. “Why? Because your mind is filled with God, with honesty, with decency, with integrity, and there is no more room to add to that mind, just as there is no more room to add to an overflowing cup. The mind and heart filled with God and His truths respond naturally and logically to the prohibition not to covet.”

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Rav Soloveitchik *zt’l* observed that every morning we recite three *brachos* of identity, taking note of who we are. God placed our souls into our bodies, determining for us our religion, our gender, our social standing. God determined our identity. We praise Him as the One “*she’asa li kol tzarki*”, who made everything required for me to realize my potential. In our blessings, we see ourselves in God’s image. If we look to God, we see ourselves as reflections of the divine, free of the desire for more.

A Chasidic master once said that “not to covet”is not merely a prohibition; it is also a promise. Even more, let us call it a “fulfillment”. He who is able and desirous to think in Godly terms, who reaches the level of identifying with His values and standards, such a person *will never* covet. It is a matter of perspective – do you look at God or at yourself? To look primarily at oneself is to always want more, to covet. But to look at God and measure a life by His standards? Such a life will be satisfied and content.

In her article, Mrs. Smiles likens each person’s God-given talents and possessions unique to that person to achieve a life purpose. Each person has a unique, “custom-designed box of tools” in order to fulfill that purpose.

“If there is something we lack,” she writes. “We must not need it.”

To covet, or to be jealous of what someone else has is, in her telling, like wanting someone else’s prescription glasses. Wanting – and even getting them – will not help us see any better. Indeed, they will likely make us see even worse!

If God is in our vision, we learn to see that which is important and do not look elsewhere for meaning, purpose or worth.

There was a boy who dwelled in the mountains. Looking across the valley, he found himself fascinated by a house on the opposite side of the valley. Each evening its windows were sheets of shining gold. Drawn to this seeming treasure, he made his way across the valley toward the house. But the path was difficult. Exhausted, he lay down and slept.

Early the next morning he hurried to the house. Instead of finding sheets of gold, he discovered that the windows were but ordinary glass. Disappointed and bitter, he turned toward home, but then stopped in surprise. Across the valley, he saw his own home, and it was agleam with windows of gold!