

PARASHAS YISRO

Last But Not Least

The mountain smoldered and quaked. Thunder and lightning rent the skies. The Jewish people in their great multitudes stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain, awestruck by the spectacle of the revelation of the Divine Presence on the mountaintop and the knowledge that they were about to receive the divine Torah. But what did they actually receive at Mount Sinai? In fact, it was only a small percentage of the entire Torah - the Ten Commandments. These were the instructions Hashem chose to pronounce on that unforgettable occasion. These were the instructions He chose to inscribe on the Tablets that Moses carried down from the mountaintop.

Clearly, these ten pronouncements are the most fundamental of all the Torah's commandments, the very bedrock of Judaism. They define the relationship of the Jewish people to the Creator and to their fellow man. Have faith in Hashem. Do not worship idols. Do not blaspheme. Keep the Sabbath. Honor your father and mother. Do not commit murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not rob. Do not bear false witness. Do not covet another's property or wife.

Do not covet? How did this commandment find its way into this august group? Is coveting in the secrecy of one's heart an abomination against Hashem or society comparable to the other commandments?

The commentators explain that the tenth commandment is actually the key to all the others. Let us reflect for a moment. How can we control a feeling? How can a wretched person see his neighbor's prosperity without yearning for the same good fortune? Isn't it only natural for him to be overcome by a strong desire to enjoy those gifts of life that have been denied to him? How then does the Torah command him not to covet? What is he supposed to do?

The answer lies in our total acceptance of Hashem's will and a profound faith in His absolute and total goodness. The world is one vast interconnected organism, and every single person, every tree, every blade of grass has its designated role in the grand scheme of things. In guiding this great caldron with pure benevolence, Hashem pays meticulous care to even the minutest element so that all together the purpose of creation will be fulfilled. He assigns each of us a specific role in life that will help our purpose become a reality, a personalized mission for each of us to accomplish. If we acknowledge these truths, if we realize there can be no greater fulfillment in life than accomplishing

this divine mission, all else becomes trivial. If a wretched person truly believes his mission in life is to shine in his state of wretchedness, he will not covet another person's good fortune. The tenth commandment enjoins us to bow to the divine wisdom, to accept His guidance in every aspect of our lives and not to covet that which Hashem has chosen not to give us.

This then is the most fundamental of all the commandments, and the extent to which we fulfill it colors and characterizes our fulfillment of all the others. Why do we refrain from idolatry, murder and robbery? Why do we honor our parents and observe the Sabbath? Is it mere obedience, the grudging submission to the powerful Being who has commanded us to do so? Or is it something that resonates in the very depths of our hearts? If we have learned not to covet, if we are focused on our divinely ordained mission in life, then we will undoubtedly view the fulfillment of all the commandments as a joyous privilege that will help us reach the transcendent goals towards which we strive.

A mother returned home with her son from a visit to the optician. The boy wore a new pair of glasses with shiny, stylish gold frames, which he proudly showed off to all his siblings. A short while later, the mother found one her younger sons sulking in his room.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Why are you so glum? Has anyone done anything to hurt you?"

"Yes," the boy declared. "You did! You bought him glasses, but you didn't buy any for me."

The mother was taken aback for a moment, then she gathered her little boy in her arms. "Do you know why he got glasses?" she said. "Because he doesn't see well. Without those glasses, he can't see the blackboard. But you are so lucky. You have such sharp vision, you can read the smallest letters from far away. Why would I get you glasses?"

In our own lives, we are all too familiar with the pressures of living in a materialistic society where the quality of life is often measured by the possessions we accumulate. The tenth commandment offers us the means by which to rise above this myopic vision. If we connect to the universal will of the Creator and direct ourselves towards the accomplishment of our mission in life, we will find a serenity and fulfillment that will enrich us far more than the gratification of any of our covetous desires.