

Thou Shalt Not Covet: Making Sense of an Inscrutable Commandmentⁱ

Shabbat Yitro 5779

January 25, 2019

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When Jimmy Carter was running for President in 1976, he (in)famously told *Playboy*, “I’ve looked on many women with lust. I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times.”ⁱⁱ Carter’s confession was controversial in its day, which is hard to believe forty-plus years later. Even in the 1970s, though, Jewish Americans’ reaction might best have been characterized as, “Nu?” Elaborating, a Jew might have said (and many did), “Well, of course, Governor Carter has lusted after people who aren’t his wife. Virtually every married person does. The only pertinent question is whether or not he committed adultery,” for which there was never any evidence.

Rava, sage of the Babylonian Talmud, famously proclaimed, “Matters of the heart are not matters.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, Judaism holds that every human being possesses *ha-yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination), and that we are not guilty unless we act upon it. It is strange, then, that the Tenth Commandment seems to prohibit a mere desire to sin: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor male nor female slave, nor ox nor ass, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”^{iv} While we can well imagine the corrosive complications of craving romantic partners and material possessions prohibited to us, the desire itself hardly seems criminal.

Or is it? 11th Century Spanish commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra suggested that the Tenth Commandment really is a thought crime – forbidding, for example, a person from desiring sexual intimacy with an immediate relative. For Ibn Ezra, incestuous or adulterous urges – and, we might add, an eagerness to steal – are the Tenth Commandment’s targets. In short, for Ibn Ezra, “You shall not covet” is an injunction against the evil inclination itself.^v

How can Torah forbid an inclination with which God has created us? And supposing that we could expel *ha-yetzer ha-ra*, should we do so? After all, despite its name – *ra* does mean “evil” – our rabbis do not view our *yetzer ha-ra* as exclusively evil. Without it, they say, a human being would never marry, procreate, build a house, or earn a living.^{vi}

We all demonstrate moral failings that are remarkably similar to our greatest achievements. We fight our evil inclination with ambivalence, seeking to conquer our bad behavior without sacrificing its benefits:

The temptation to cheat on our taxes (to steal from the government) comes from the same impulse that drives our success at work.

The allure of glancing over at the next student's test paper is the very same that pushes a person to do well in school.

The urge to lie for our kids overcomes us precisely because we are so devoted to wanting the best for them.

The stinginess that makes a person uncharitable seems inseparable from the thrift by which the same individual has provided for a secure retirement.

The failure to express thanks for another's kindness, or to make room for another's success, may stem from laudable self-reliance.

We are shocked by clergy sex scandals; but should we be? The insatiable desire to connect with congregants may lead the unrestrained priest or rabbi to violate boundaries that should never be breached.

The challenge of the Tenth Commandment, then, is to retain our evil inclinations without giving in to the urge wickedly.

In considering how we accomplish that end, Rabbi Stephen Fuchs offers the unlikely example of Ebenezer Scrooge, from *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. Scrooge is as successful at business as he is miserly. The nightmares that lead to his repentance begin when he sees his late partner, Jacob Marley, as "he walks about [the afterlife] chained to his account books, wailing in misery." Scrooge objects: "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob!" And that he was. Indeed, Marley's obsession with amassing and preserving his fortune had been intimately connected to his stinginess, the principal manifestation of his evil inclination.

Ultimately, Scrooge recognizes Marley's problem as his own. By the time the story reaches its conclusion, he has found a way to turn away from the wicked results of his natural impulses without sacrificing the benefits. Scrooge can perpetuate his success at work – indeed he must, to continue employing Bob Cratchit – in order to provide for Tiny Tim, his worker's loveable and gravely ill son.^{vii}

The Tenth Commandment must not be commanding us to obliterate our *yetzer ha-ra*, for that would be both impossible and inadvisable. Our task instead is to redirect that inclination to do only good:

Those who must stop cheating on their taxes – a form of stealing, after all – may channel their financial wizardry into helping a charitable organization to balance its books.

Students who sneak peeks at classmates' tests should redirect their eagerness for good grades by helping a student who has a harder time. Tutoring somebody else will sharpen one's own skills.

Been lying for your kids? Channel that poorly-spent energy into a *mitzvah*. A less fortunate child could use your help to get ahead in life.

Others, as stingy as Scrooge, might keep working and earning and saving, while also utilizing their fiscal acumen to create and stick to a generous charitable budget. That may be hard work at first, but the miser is no stranger to effort. The payoff will be immeasurable.

People who have taken self-reliance to an extreme, failing to acknowledge the gifts and contributions to others, may make it their business to build up the esteem of others, spreading gratitude around their homes, workplaces, and communities.

For many, the most powerful of urges is sexual. The same passion that inclines a person to sexual immorality may be redirected to the people with the rightful claim upon one's love and devotion.

Jimmy Carter was wrong, at least from a Jewish perspective. If a married person lusts after a person who is not his or her spouse, no sin has been committed. Instead, to the extent we can know anyone only from his public persona, the evidence from President Carter's life is that he has directed that passion lovingly and exclusively to his wife of more than seventy years, Rosalynn. But the 39th President of the United States – or Jesus, whom Carter quotes – isn't the only one who has failed to grasp the true intent of the Tenth Commandment. It's hard to understand how Ibn Ezra could be correct when he suggests that the commandment prohibits particularly pernicious thoughts, outlawing *ha-yetzer ha-ra*.

Instead, the Tenth Commandment, like the First, can be read not as a commandment at all, but rather a warning: "Beware the evil inclination!" We are enjoined to pay attention to our *yetzer*, to guard against its leading us astray. Those who are most punctilious in observing "You shall not covet" will turn unhealthy desires to good use – improving our own lives, repairing the world, and serving God.

Amen.

ⁱ Excerpted and edited by the author from the author's manuscript for a forthcoming CCAR Press anthology about the Ten Commandments, edited by Rabbi Oren Hayon.

ⁱⁱ Robert Scheer, "Jimmy (Carter), We Hardly Know Y'all," *Playboy*, November, 1976.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Kiddushin* 49b

^{iv} Deuteronomy 20:14.

^v In Ibn Ezra's commentary to Exodus 20:14, the commentator explains that non-sinful people do not lust after people whom they know to be forbidden to them, explicitly referencing lusting after one's mother. By inference, we understand Ibn Ezra to interpret the Tenth Commandment as forbidding sinful lust.

^{vi} Genesis Rabbah 9:7

^{vii} Rabbi Stephen Fuchs, "A Yom Kippur Carol – Charles Dickens' High Holy Day Sermon," accessed on May 13, 2018 at scheinerman.net/Judaism/Sermons/fuchs-4.html.