



# What do the Ten Commandments Command?

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# Coveting in the Bible

**שמות כ:** לֹא תַחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ  
לֹא תַחְמַד אִשְׁת רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ  
וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר  
לְרֵעֶךָ.

**דברים ה:** וְלֹא תַחְמַד אִשְׁת  
רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תַתְאָוֶה בֵּית רֵעֶךָ  
שָׂדֶהוּ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ שׁוֹרוֹ  
וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ

**Exodus 20:** You shall not covet your neighbour's house: you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.

**Deuteronomy 5:** You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not crave your neighbour's house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.

# Abraham ibn Ezra

אנשים רבים יתמהו על זאת  
המצוה, איך יהיה אדם שלא  
יחמוד דבר יפה בלבו כל מה  
שהוא נחמד למראה עיניו?  
ועתה אתן לך משל: דע, כי  
איש כפרי שיש לו דעת  
נכונה, והוא ראה בת מלך  
שהיא יפה, לא יחמוד אותה  
בלבו כי ידע כי זה לא יתכן.

Many people are amazed at this commandment. They ask, how is it possible for people not to covet in their hearts all attractive things that appear desirable? Consider this parable:

A peasant of sound mind who sees a beautiful princess will not entertain any covetous thoughts about her in his mind, for he knows that this is an impossibility.

## Abraham ibn Ezra (cont.)

ואל תחשוב זה הכפרי שהוא  
כאחד מן המשוגעים, שיתאוה  
שיהיה לו כנפים לעוף השמים,  
ולא יתכן להיות,

כאשר אין אדם מתאוה לאמו,  
אעפ"י שהיא יפה, כי הרגילוהו  
מנעוריו לדעת שהיא אסורה לו,  
ככה כל משכיל צריך שידע, כי  
אשה יפה או ממון לא ימצאו  
אדם בעבור חכמתו ודעתו, רק  
כאשר חלק לו ה'.

This peasant will not think like an insane person who craves to sprout wings and fly to the sky, for it is impossible to do so.

Now just as a man does not desire to sleep with his own mother, although she be beautiful, because he has been trained from his childhood to know that she is prohibited to him, so must every intelligent person know that people do not acquire a beautiful wife or money because of their wisdom or intelligence, but only in accordance with what God has apportioned to them.

## Abraham ibn Ezra (cont.)

ואחר שידע שאשת רעהו  
אסרה השם לו, יותר היא  
נשגבה בעיניו מבת מלך  
בלב הכפרי, על כן הוא  
ישמח בחלקו ואל ישים  
אל לבו לחמוד ולהתאוות  
דבר שאינו שלו,

Once a man knows that God has prohibited his neighbour's wife to him, she will be in his eyes more unattainable than the princess is in the eyes of the peasant. He will therefore be happy with his lot and will not allow his heart to covet and crave anything which is not his.

# Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto; 1800-1865)

חמדה היא תאוה לדבר שהוא עתה  
ברשות אחרים, והוא אסור לנו,  
כלומר שאינו עומד להמכר; והנה  
כל תאוה וחמדה תבוא מאליה בלב  
אדם אחרי ראיית דבר הנחמד, אך  
בידו וברצונו הוא להשבית התאוה  
בהולדה ולהרחיקה מלבו כשידע  
שהשגת הדבר הנחמד בלתי  
אפשרית לו, או יעצרנה בלבבו  
ויגדיל מדורתה עד שיוציאנה לפועל

*Hemdah* is desiring something that is currently owned by others and is forbidden to us as it is not for sale. Although such desires arise naturally in people's hearts when they see desirable objects, it is within their power and will either to suppress the desire as soon as it is born and to put it far from their hearts, understanding that attaining the desired object is impossible or to preserve the desire in their hearts and stoke its flame until they do something . . .

## Shadal (cont.)

והנה אחר שאמר ה' לא תנאף  
לא תגנוב ואסר בזה כל מה  
שהוא לזולתנו, אמר מה שהוא  
לרענו צריך שיהיה בעינינו כדבר  
שהשגתו בלתי אפשרית לנו,  
אחר שכן צוה ה' שלא נקח מכל  
אשר לזולתנו דבר ועל ידי כך לא  
נחמדהו;

After commanding “Do not commit adultery” and “Do not steal,” thus forbidding to us anything of others, God told us that any possession of our neighbor must be seen by us as an unattainable object. Since God commanded us not to take anything that is not ours, we will not desire it.

## Shadal (cont.)

והנה כל החומד, דבר ה' בזה, והחמס  
קל בעיניו ודבר אפשרי; והירא את  
דבר ה', החמס בעיניו דבר נמנע,  
ואשר לא לו כאילו בשמים הוא, שלא  
יוכל לקחתו ולא יחמדהו; זה שמח  
בחלקו ושמח בטובת רעיו אוהב להם  
ואהוב להם; וזה כל ימיו בסערת  
התאוות והדאגות, חומד מה שאינו  
שלו וחומס רעהו, . . . ועיין דברי  
הראב"ע כי נעמו.

Those who indulge in *hemdah* despise the word of God; injustice is a light thing for them, within the realm of possibility. But for those who fear the word of God, injustice is unthinkable; they consider that which isn't theirs as if it were in heaven. This latter group are content with their lot, rejoicing in their neighbors' wellbeing, loving them and beloved by them, while the former spend all their days in a tempest of desires and worries, coveting what isn't theirs and cheating their neighbors. . . . See the words of Ibn Ezra; they are pleasing.



# Maimonides (1138-1204), Sefer ha-Mitzvot, negative commandment 265

The 265th prohibition is that we are not allowed to use our thoughts to devise ruses for acquiring something that belongs to someone else. The source of this prohibition is God's statement, "לא תחמוד" your neighbor's house."

The *Mekhilta* says, "From the phrase 'לא תחמוד,' I might think the prohibition applies even if you just **feel** envy. But another verse (Deut 7:25) says, 'Do not be envious of the gold and silver on them [i.e., idolatrous statues] and **take it** for yourselves.' Just as in that case the prohibition applies only when [because of envy] people **do** something, so too here it applies only when people **do** something." This shows that the prohibition forbids **carrying out schemes** to acquire for ourselves someone else's belongings that we desire. **Even buying it at a high price is included in the transgression "לא תחמוד."**

# Maimonides Mishneh Torah (Gezeilah va-aveidah 9)

כל החומד עבדו או אמתו או ביתו  
וכליו של חבירו או כל דבר שאפשר  
לו שיקנהו ממנו והכביד עליו ברעים  
והפציר בו עד שלקחו ממנו אף על  
פי שנתן לו דמים רבים הרי זה  
עובר בלא תעשה שנ' לא תחמד, .  
. . , ואינו עובר בלאו זה עד שיקח  
החפץ שחמד . . .

השגת הראב"ד א"א ולא אמר רוצה  
אני.

Any people who covet the slave—male or female—or home or chattels of another, or anything that can be purchased, and importune the owners, pleading with them until the owners agree to sell them the item, have transgressed the rule לא תחמוד even if they paid much money. . . . They have not transgressed this law until they acquire the item they desired.

[Gloss of Rabad: This is the case only when the owner does not say “I want (this transaction to take place).”]

# ספר שערי תשובה לרבינו יונה (1200-1263)

לא תחמוד . . . הוזהרנו בזה  
שלא להתעולל עלילות ברשע  
לקחת שדה וכרם וכל אשר  
לרענו, גם כי נתן מכרם... ואם  
יכסוף אדם שימכור לו חברו  
שדה או כרם או אחד מחפציו  
ולא יש את נפשו למכרו, ואם  
יפצר בו ברוב דברי תחנונים  
יבוש להשיב פניו, אסור לפצור  
בו, כי זה כמו הכרח ואונס.

“Do not covet”: We are here warned not to plot evil plots to acquire the field or vineyard or anything else that belongs to a neighbour, even if we pay for it.

If you yearn for a field or a vineyard or any other item that belongs to a neighbour, and the neighbour does not want to sell it, and if you beg your neighbour, who will be embarrassed to refuse you, then it is forbidden to beg, because then the sale was done under compulsion.

## רבינו יונה (המשך)

והחומד לקחת כל חפץ והוא  
איש נכבד, שאם ישאל שאלה  
אור פניו לא יפילון (ע"פ איוב  
כט 24) אסור לשאול מעם  
רעהו מקח או מתת, בלתי  
אם ידע כי נתון יתן לו בנפש  
חפצה ולא ירע לבבו בתתו  
לו.

And if you who desire the object  
are an honoured person who,  
when you ask for something,  
people don't turn you down, it is  
forbidden to ask a neighbour to  
sell you something or give you a  
gift, unless you know that the  
neighbour will do this willingly  
and hold no grudge against you  
when they fulfil your request.

## Abraham ibn Ezra (Deut 5)

ורבים אמרו: כי אין עון  
במחשבת הלב, ואין עליו  
שכר ולא עונש. ויש עליו  
ראיות רבות להשיב עליהם  
ולא אאריך

Many have said that there are no sins in the thoughts of the heart [or “mind”], no reward for them and no punishment. There are many proofs to refute them, but I will not go on at length.

# Benno Jacob

(1862-1945; Jewish Quarterly Review, 1923)

More serious is another [Christian] attack. In this commandment, it is maintained, not the covetous desire but its satisfaction is forbidden,  $\text{לֹא תִחְמַד$  meaning not "desire" and "covet" but "bring to oneself." The point involved is not a sinful desire but a knavish act. The real motive for this assertion is religious-historical theories which are made to rest on lexical-exegetical supports. It is not true that the Old Testament and its God are indifferent towards sentiment or inclination and judge only *opus operatum*. The Old Testament knows exactly the human heart and its cogitation and judges it inexorably. God knows of man that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen 6:5). . . . Because the law is aware that action springs from the mind and receives from it direction, aim, character, and value, therefore it addresses itself with its exhortations to the heart, so that it be one with God . . . that it should not be misled and yield to bad impulses.

Alexander Rofe (1932- ), “The Tenth Commandment” (1990)

[This led to an interesting] “reversal, with Christian commentators today holding to the halakhic interpretation [of the biblical text], while Jewish authorities dissociate themselves from it.”

# Maimonides Sefer Ha-mitzvot, negative commandment 266

The 266th prohibition is that we are forbidden to occupy our thoughts with a desire for someone else's property and to develop a craving for it, since this may lead us to carry out some ruse to acquire it.

The expression used for this prohibition is God's statement, "Do not desire **לֹא תַתְאוּהוּ** your neighbor's house."

These two prohibitions [**לֹא תַתְאוּהוּ** and **לֹא תַחַמּוּד**] are not synonymous. The first prohibition, **לֹא תַחַמּוּד** forbids acquiring someone else's belongings [in the inappropriate manner that Maimonides describes], whereas the second, **לֹא תַתְאוּהוּ**, prohibits even having the feeling of desire and envy.



## Ramban (Deut 5)

והוסיף ביאור בדבור לא תחמוד  
שהקדים האשה, בעבור כי יצר  
לב האדם רע מנעוריו באשה  
יותר מן הכל. וביאר כי יכנס  
בכלל חמדה אפילו התאוה, כי  
אם יתאוה לגזול מחברו דבר  
מכל אשר לו, ולא יוכל לעשות כן  
כי חברו תקיף ממנו, או שיש  
במקומו אימת מלכות, עובר בלאו  
הזה.

He added an explanation in the commandment "You shall not covet" by mentioning the [neighbor's] wife first [whereas in the Book of Exodus the neighbour's house is stated first] for the "imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" with respect to women more than anything else. He further explained, that included in the term "coveting" is even mere "desire." Thus a person who desires to rob anything from a neighbour, but is unable to do so because the neighbour is stronger, or because in their locality there is fear of the government, transgresses this commandment.