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ד"ר

Parashat Yitro Part V The Tenth Commandment

1. Meanings of *Lo Tahmod* and *Lo Titaveh*

In this study we will survey the basic traditional views concerning the definition and scope of the Decalogue's tenth commandment* as well as some interpretations of the several differences between the Exodus and Deuteronomy formulations of it.

The Exodus Decalogue concludes with two injunctions of *lo tahmod* ("You shall not covet"). The first is brief, "You shall not covet your fellowman's *bayit*" (house). The second contains a number of objects: "You shall not covet your fellowman's wife, his male slave, his female slave, his ox, his donkey, and all that belongs to your fellowman." In Deuteronomy, the tenth commandment similarly comprises two injunctions. The first also begins with *ve-lo tahmod* (with a prefix of a conjunctive *vav*) and also contains only one object, but the application is "your fellowman's wife." The second injunction begins with *ve-lo titaveh* (which at this point we will translate as "And you shall not crave") and lists many objects: "your fellowman's house, his field, his male slave, his female slave, his ox, his donkey and all that belongs to your fellowman."

Many commentators have asked: How is it possible to prohibit an emotion (to covet or to crave)? The emergence of a desire within an individual appears to be an aspect of the human condition beyond a person's control, a sensation that often arises spontaneously, not a matter that could be prohibited by a command.

Ibn Ezra addressed this fundamental problem. Just as people are able to condition themselves not to squander time and energy in craving to obtain that which clearly is beyond the realm of possibility, they can also habituate themselves to viewing all that is

prohibited as unobtainable and removed from thought. This disposition is linked with a person being satisfied with his lot in life, who realizes that true happiness is not achieved by more acquisitions, and who trusts that G-d provides for him what is necessary. (Prohibited desire might spontaneously arise even in such an individual but he would be sufficiently conditioned to immediately shun it.)

The *Mekhilta* has a different approach, based on a different translation of the key words. Perhaps it did not accept the concept of a prohibition of a mere desire or craving. It defines and differentiates between *lo tahmod* and *lo titaveh* (cited here as codified by the Rambam, MT *Laws of Stolen and Lost Items*, 1:9-12), as follows:

Whoever is *homed* a male or female slave or house or vessels of his fellowman...and implores him with friends and presses him until he purchased it from him, although he paid him well for it, transgresses the biblical negative precept *lo tahmod*...Whoever is *mitaveh* the house or wife or vessels of his fellowman...when he reflected upon how he could acquire this item and was seduced in his heart to do so, transgresses the biblical negative precept *lo titaveh*.

According to this view, violation of either of these precepts involves some movement toward acquisition of a desired object that belongs to another. *Lo tahmod* prohibits implementation of a scheme to obtain the item while *lo titaveh* prohibits the more preliminary stage of focusing on the goal of attaining it and developing a scheme to that end.

A number of Scriptural proof texts have been cited to support the understanding that *lo tahmod* implies action. In Exodus 34:24 it states that when the males

go on their pilgrimage to the central sanctuary three times a year there will be no cause to worry about their land's safety וְלֹא יִחְמַד אִישׁ אֶת אֶרְצְךָ בְּעֵלְתֶּךָ לְרְאוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ to appear before Hashem your G-d"). The argument is that if *yahmod* only means "covet," referring to a desire in one's heart, it would be stating that the land of Israel is not desirable, surely not the intention of the verse. The divine guarantee assures that no one will appropriate the land while the males are away (*Mekhilta*).

The *Mekhilta's* proof text has been countered with an alternate interpretation. The landowner is being told that while away on the pilgrimage he would not have to worry about the safety of his land (although it may be desirable), for outsiders will be so respectful or fearful of him (and the other Israelites) that the emotion of desiring it will not arise in their hearts. (This is somewhat analogous to Ibn Ezra's explanation of how a person may condition himself to prevent a forbidden desire welling up within him.)

Ibn Ezra himself posited that *h-m-d* sometimes means desiring and sometimes means appropriating and must be judged from the context.

Some commentators have veered from the above interpretations, claiming they did not fully capture the straightforward, intended meaning of the Decalogue verses and have proffered other distinctions between *tahmod* and *titaveh*. The Malbim interprets *lo tahmod* as referring to the desire that is stirred by visual contact with an object. He points out that the root *h-m-d* often appears with the meaning of something that is a delight to the eyes in a context that does not abide a connection to an action. Consider these verses: the trees G-d had sprout in Eden are described as *nehmad lemareh* ("pleasant to the sight" [Gen. 2:9]); Esau's garments that Rebekah dressed Jacob in were described as *haḥamudot* ("choicest" [27:15]); the possessions that would be taken from the evildoers included *karme ḥemed* ("attractive vineyards" [Amos 5:11]); the slaying included *maḥamadde 'ayin* ("those pleasing to the sight" [Lam. 2:4]).

Lo titaveh, on the other hand, the Malbim defines as referring to inner longings and cravings, connected to one's imaginations, as illustrated in the following verses: וְהִאֲסִפְטָה אֶשְׂרָר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הִתְאַוּוּ תַאֲנִה... וַיֵּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאֲכִלֵנוּ

בְּשָׂר ("The riffraff in their midst had a gluttonous craving...and said, who will give us meat to eat?" [Num. 11:4]); כִּי תַאֲנִה וְנִפְשַׁךְ לֵאֶכֶל בְּשָׂר ("when you have the deep urge to eat meat" [Deut. 12:20]); וַיִּתְאַוֶּה דָוִד ("David felt a craving and said 'who could get me water to drink from the well in Bethlehem'" [2 Sam. 23:15]).

This distinction leads the Malbim to a novel answer to the question as to why Deuteronomy employs *lo tahmod* in framing the prohibition toward another's wife and *lo titaveh* in articulating the prohibition toward another's possessions. The prohibition regarding another's wife, he proposes, is not addressed in the first instance to the general sensual urge in itself. Rather, it is directed to the particular instance of a specific married woman, the thought of whom may be an object of delight to a man and stir his desire. Regarding house, field, servants and animals, however, *lo titaveh* addresses a person's general urge for ownership, wealth and various material needs, regardless of the delight he may have in a particular object.

A number of scholars, recognizing the frequent close connection in scriptural usage between *h-m-d* and an appropriating action, while also recognizing the root's basic meaning of the emotion of desire, have taken a middle path in translating *lo tahmod*. They understand it as referring to a step beyond mere desire, but a step that is still before action – an intermediate state pointing to action. According to them, the Torah is prohibiting the intention to act to acquire the object of one's desire. Consider the following statements in which the *h-m-d* verb does not refer to the actual appropriating (an attached verb refers to perpetrating the action) but it points to a step just before appropriation: "*Lo tahmod* the silver and gold on them and take it for yourselves" (Deut. 7:25); "*Veḥamdu* fields and stole them, houses, and took them" (Mic. 2:2); "*Va'eḥmedem* and I took them" (Josh. 7:21).

If *h-m-d* includes the step after desire – desire plus the intention to take the object of his desire – but before action, the Exodus 34:24 verse translates smoothly, stating that nobody will have the intention to appropriate your land although they may, indeed, desire it. They will be aware it is not within the realm of achieving.

Some halakhic authorities have considered the above distinctions between *lo tahmod* and *lo titaveh* as unconvincing, and take the two as virtually synonymous. A problem they cite with the Rambam's distinction between the two is the following: How is it possible that the Deuteronomy prohibition regarding possessions – *lo titaveh* – is stricter (prohibiting an earlier stage of contemplation) than that regarding another's wife, a more serious transgression? (See *Sefer Misvot Gedolot*).

2. Further Regarding Variations

The classical commentators have not provided a compelling explanation to the basic questions concerning the variations between the two formulations of the tenth commandment. Perhaps the question most often asked is why in Exodus does the first of the two injunctions specify the house of one's fellowman, and only his house, relegating his wife to the second injunction together with his slaves, animals and "all that belongs to your fellowman," while in Deuteronomy the first injunction is devoted to the wife of one's fellowman?

Ibn Ezra, assuming that the Exodus formulation was first, suggested that G-d placed "house" first because in the proper lifestyle, young men should first acquire a house before getting married.** Accordingly, coveting another's wife was placed in the second injunction. In Deuteronomy, Moses, exercising the latitude granted him in reviewing the Decalogue, placed the "wife" prohibition first because he saw the young men caring more about getting married. But this law is not addressed only to young men thinking about a home and marriage. In any event, this interpretation is overly dependant on variable societal norms and individual psychology.

As we pointed out in our study *On Decalogue Variants*, it appears that the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue was first and the Exodus formulation followed, expounding words and concepts of the former for further exposition and expansion. It appears that there is a support for this thesis in the variations of the tenth commandment as concerns the listing of items that belong to a man. A Ugaritic cuneiform tablet dated to no later than the 12th century B.C.E., and probably earlier, contains a general list of a man's possessions. The order and

specification of items is exactly the same as in the Deuteronomy formulation. Other evidence has also been found indicating that this was the standard list of possessions in the ancient Near East (see *Olam HaTanakh*).

Regardless of which interpretation is accepted, the reason that this commandment is included and was placed at the end of the Decalogue appears to be apparent. It is a bastion of support to the "between man and man" precepts, an ever timely precautionary measure serving to inhibit violation of the previous commandments.*** One who violates the tenth commandment is on a path that may lead to violation of one or another of those prior precepts; indeed, violation of each of the previous four usually begins with violation of the tenth.

Some have seen it as more directly addressed to commandments seven and eight, the prohibitions of adultery and stealing. The Deuteronomy order of another's wife followed by his house and other objects corresponds smoothly to adultery and stealing. This also explains use of a different term for each category: *lo tahmod* for the command against adultery and *lo titaveh* for the command against stealing.

The Exodus order of the objects of *lo tahmod* requires explanation. The first item mentioned is "house" followed by "wife" and then the other objects, concluding with "and all that belongs to your fellowman." It is likely that in this context *bayit* (basically "house") takes on the expanded meaning of "household," and refers to all that belongs to a person. In other words, the Exodus formulation is a כָּלל וּפְרָט, beginning with the broad general statement followed by stating the particulars. In this view, the prohibition of another's wife is actually the first to be itemized, similar to what is stated in Deuteronomy.

If *lo tahmod* is taken as prohibiting an act or an intention to act, while *lo titaveh* refers to the more fundamental desire, and the Deuteronomy formulation is first, an aspect of the relationship between the Exodus and Deuteronomy formulations may be explained as follows. Deuteronomy, with *lo titaveh* for possessions, is the more fundamental and idealistic. The Exodus version is more practical, stressing the connection to, and expanding upon, the prohibition to engage in stealing. The repetition of *lo*

tahmod may be because in its manner of itemization another's wife is included in the second clause.

Endnotes

* Through its method of dividing the text by spaces, the Masoretic Text appears to consider the *lo tahmod* verses as comprising the ninth and tenth commandments, but for our purposes we will retain the more traditional formulation.

** Some have noted a similarity to the sequence of the announcements of milestone exemptions at the mustering before war (Deut. 20). A new house is there mentioned first, followed by a new orchard and then

by a newly betrothed wife. In the Deuteronomy execrations, when things are going wrong (28:30), the sequence is betrothed wife, house and orchard.

*** This is analogous to אָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כָמוֹךָ (“Love your fellowman as yourself” [Lev. 19:18]), a precept that seems to correspond to the tenth commandment in the context in which it appears. It immediately follows a section of law that expounds the previous laws of the Decalogue. In that context it serves as a general precept that reinforces the prior commandments, as we point out in our study on that chapter.

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