

THE SOURCE WEEKLY

*Biblical Answers to
Life's Hard Questions*

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You Shall Not Steal *What?*©

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“You shall not steal,” the eighth commandment cautions us in the biblical Book of Exodus (20:13). And so, implemented in most civilized societies, most people won’t walk out of department stores with expensive trinkets they inadvertently slipped into their pocket and for which they “forgot” to pay. But the funny thing is, many of us will pluck a few grapes in the grocery store or grab a few nuts and pop them into our mouths.

No harm done, right? Wrong. A deeper look into that apparently straight-forward eighth commandment reveals that it is much more encompassing and complex than it appears to be. On the scales of Divine justice,

the stolen grape may tilt the scale against mankind and the definitions of stealing may hit man deeper than his pocket.

We learn the price of stealing in the pre-diluvial story of Noah. G-d decided to destroy the world via a flood because “...the earth had become filled with *robbery*” (Genesis 6:11). In Hebrew, however, the exact word used in the biblical text, which in English has been translated as “robbery,” is *chamas* (not to be confused with Hamas or Chummus).

The earth had become filled with *chamas*. “[It] is a wrong that is too petty to be caught by human injustice...but if committed continuously can gradually ruin your fellow man.”¹ In other words, it means “taking” something of an insignificant amount which cannot really be defined as stealing. For instance, someone goes to a market and tears off a grape and eats it — not much damage done. However, then the next person comes along and does the same thing, and so on. It is not long before the bunch of grapes, or nuts or olives are diminished both in appearance and quantity — and the owner really has no one to blame for the theft. Nonetheless, the damage *is* done. Interestingly, the Talmud states that the obligation of returning a lost object does not apply to an object that is worth a trivial amount and *chamas* falls into that negligible category. Yet, it is still strictly forbidden to steal or borrow, without permission, an item even of insignificant worth. The sages, point out that doing so was one of the sins, as mentioned, for which the Generation of the Flood were punished.²

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Rabbi Elie Munk points out that what makes *chamas* uniquely deleterious is that it leaves the perpetrated against with no legal recourse. When an item of great worth is stolen, the law has its safeguards and such “grand thefts” do not corrupt the core of a society because society has a way of correcting them. But *chamas*, Munk explains, “leads society to its destruction. This word [also] means a crime committed through cunning or malice, a crime which human justice has not the means to pursue....”³

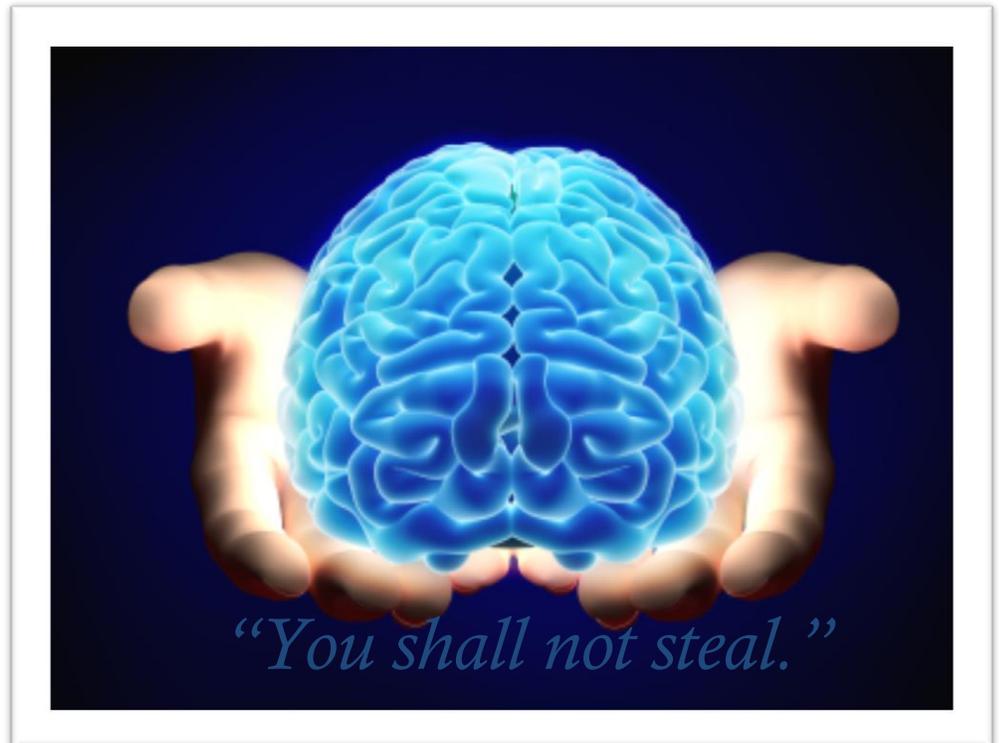
Munk’s explanation, in regards to cunning and malice, leads us into another area of stealing that seems to fall beyond traditional definitions and that is manipulation, the strategic use of mind over neighbor.⁴ It is called *genevat daat* / “theft of the mind.” When one manipulates another person, one is guilty of stealing away another’s clarity of mind or innocence or emotions. For instance, it is prohibited to invite a person for dinner just to look kind and show good will if you know that they will turn you down. The Talmud states that there are *seven types of thieves* and, of these, the worst is the *one who “steals the minds” of people* (*Tosefta Bava Kama 7:3*).

It is simply prohibited to imply something that is not true to influence another person’s behavior. As Rabbi Mosheh Ben Maimon (Maimonides) taught: “It is forbidden to say one thing with your mouth and to have

another thing in your heart.”⁵ The world of nuance is the world of shadows, a world inhabited by the dishonest whose words cannot withstand the light of day.

Leading someone to believe something that is not true is not only morally wrong and tantamount to stealing, according to

being into the hands of a manipulator who does not even possess an ability or skill he or she coaxingly boasted about, whether they be a doctor, a PR person, a real estate agent, an intern or an athlete. The consequences can be tragic, and thus long before it became illegal to produce subliminal



Jewish law, but can also cause a whole chain of events which can ultimately result in the death of the victim. Imagine such unfortunate scenarios where a heartbroken individual may have given up her virginity or abort a baby because the manipulator strongly implied he’d marry her; or one may have spent one’s last dollar because the manipulator strongly implied that a lot of money would be forthcoming; or one may have put their well-

advertisements in America, the Talmud had already prohibited such artful connivance.

This prohibition can also be extrapolated from the negative commandment: “Do not place a stumbling block before the blind” (Leviticus 19:16). For certainly, if we cannot put a stumbling block before the figurative blind person, evermore so we cannot “blind” someone to the truth and then further be the cause for him or her to stumble.⁶

But the parameters of stealing do not end there either. Another means of stealing from someone is by talking bad about them. And in contradistinction to secular libel law, this holds even if what is said is true. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (*Mishlei* 18:21). In speaking ill of others, we are essentially stealing their fortune by poisoning the many paths they may intend to walk down in life. How can a person ever have a fair chance if mean and damaging words knock down their opportunities even before that individual has a chance to grab for them?

Lashon harah, evil speech, also falls into the category of manipulation. Often, out of jealousy, people speak ill of others in a cheap effort to manipulate an outcome. That is regarded as stealing. The Talmud thus cautions us that unless it is imperative to warn someone about dealing with a dangerous or dishonest person, silence is golden,⁷ for what is stolen by ill words can never be repaid in gold.

The hand and tongue indeed have a lot in common; they are they only parts of the body which have the dual ability to be beneficent and giving as well as hurtful and thieving. And it is no accident that “the commandment not to use the name of G-d in vain [a sin of the tongue] corresponds to the prohibition of stealing [a sin of the hand]—[they are each the third commandment on their respective tablet]—for in the end every thief will resort to a false oath to deny his deed.”⁸ The

slandorous tongue and “crooked” hand either partner in crime or in G-dly compliance.

In addition, using words in a hurtful and condescending manner toward another human being steals away their dignity and often their confidence as well. Without those traits of dignity and confidence, a man is robbed of his ability to face life’s challenges with healthy courage. Simply put, begrudging someone what is owed to them is stealing.



“Thou shalt not steal,” the eighth commandment cautions. And just when we seem to have a grip on its larger meaning, the medieval biblical commentator Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, better known as Rashi, offers a pivotal exegesis for consideration. Rashi suggests that the commandment here in discussion is referring to kidnapping, the stealing of people, and not to money at all. But it is perhaps Rashi’s viewpoint that allows us to expand on the definition of “stealing” most of all. For we have only to look at the most famous kidnapping in the Bible to discover the many variances of stealing: The kidnapping of Joseph by his brothers and the subsequent sale of the young

dreamer into slavery.

In kidnapping Joseph, his brothers stole many things from him: his potential to earn a livelihood; his very identity which was made up of his familiar surroundings and filial relationship; his time, innocence and youth; his self-worth and dignity; perhaps his ability to dream (for post-kidnapping the Bible doesn’t recount anymore of his prophetic dreams); his reputation (for he was a stranger in a strange land); any heritage that would have been bequeathed unto him; his personal ambitions; his pride; his comfort and leisure, etc. How the story ended is irrelevant for our purposes here.

As we have seen above, what man can steal from man has many nontraditional currencies and certainly extends beyond grabbing for another’s wallet. And though most people would regard themselves as honest people who would never steal anything, the new definitions presented should have us all reassessing our behavior and evaluating whether eating a few unpaid-for grapes is really harmless, whether minor manipulations are really casualty free, whether a little gossip is meaningless, whether condescending words are just benign words, etc. Yes, it is true, most of us would not actually kidnap someone and steal a whole person. But in light of the above, perhaps we should entertain the notion that we may be guilty of stealing from each other one little piece at a time.

The Source



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ENDNOTES

¹ Samson Raphael Hirsch. *The Pentateuch*. (London, England: The Judaica Press, Ltd., 1989), 139.

² <http://www.torah.org/learning/jewish-values/lostobjects4.html>

³ Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vol.1.Breishis*, (Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1994), 94.

⁴ Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vol.2. Shmot*, (Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1994), 281.

⁵ <http://www.schechter.edu/AskTheRabbi.aspx?ID=131>

⁶ http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/1846964/jewish/A-Stumbling-Block-Before-the-Blind.htm

⁷ Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Guard Your Tongue*, Gross Brothers Printing Co. Inc., (Union City, New Jersey: 1975), 166.

⁸ http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/379526/jewish/The-Guiding-Hands-of-Torah.htm