Modern economy is based on desire. The desire of the sellers, to increase their wealth, and the desire of the buyers for something they don’t have, or to replace old with new, etc. Indeed, without desire, the economy has no leg to stand on.

Of course though, there is no clear cut definition of what is permitted to desire and what not. The Torah does not oppose the possession of property or that people should be financially successful. Our forefathers were very wealthy and we do not find a puritan stance anywhere at all in the Torah. Furthermore, if people didn’t have the drive for more, and to attain and obtain better and bigger goals, many of the world’s greatest discoveries would never have been discovered! And we would be stuck in the same place as many underdeveloped countries today.

That’s not all. Even Torah study and other life treasures would be affected. The prohibition to covet does not just apply to monetary matters, but to other things too, such as someone else’s wife. Similarly in the world of the mind and the spirit – some of the revelations in academia, research and Torah learning also stem from the internal desire to find better and more truthful arguments, ideas or proofs, and to share them with the masses. Hence, if it would be forbidden to desire such things as well, we would simply be eradicating the powers that drive the world.

Therefore, we find ourselves having to strike a balance between our G-d-given trait of wanting to move the world forward and make it a better place, and the unequivocal directive of “You shall not covet.”

This is a lesson we have been learning now, during the Coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, we have learned to make do with much less than we were used to beforehand, while on the other, we are faced with the stark reality of a collapsing economy, in which people are not only not able to but have even lost the will to buy new things. And on a third hand, our relationship to various products and activities has undergone a certain distillation, with it suddenly becoming clear to us how much we were falsely dependent on certain needs and items.

What else are these times teaching us? First and foremost, we need to remind ourselves that what is truly important is who we are – what good deeds we do for others, what injustice we fight against, and how much we are prepared to exert ourselves in the pursuit of peace. This moral and ethical stance is more important than any material achievement, scientific development or personal wealth.

Secondly, the impetus for things we want must be need, even when it’s to do with our welfare or convenience. It is so important not to build our needs around what our neighbors have, and to want to have more than they do. A person’s motives must come from within, and not from a comparison between what he has and what the other person has.

And thirdly, we have learned that we also need to consider the damage the entire consumer-oriented existence does to us all. We can certainly say that much of the spread of this virus was a result of people’s concern for themselves, without thinking whether and how their behavior could affect others. Indeed, once we began to consider our surroundings – both human and global – there was much greater success in fighting the virus.

Above all, this is about shaping society. A society that bases itself on “you shall not covet” builds its values on a different plane. A society like this is constantly educating itself “not to look at the pitcher but at what is in it,” and always striving for a life of internal content rather than external superficiality. Its advertising and sales are aimed at real needs and benefits rather than targeting the darker emotions in the consumer.

This type of society behaves modestly, for example, not holding grandiose weddings and giving the couple the chance to study for a year instead, with no financial worries. A society like this strives for justice and chessed, and everything anathema to desire – concession and giving to others, from an open-hearted perspective noticing and catering to genuine needs.

The main benchmark for such a society is the constant concern that the benefits of economic development are divided equally, and that it should be justice and charity that drives resource distribution rather than greed and desire.

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