YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Halakha in the Age of Social Media**

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**Shiur #12: Privacy, Part 3:**

**The *Hashkafic* and Psychological Downsides**

**of Curiosity in the Age of Social Media**

**Introduction**

In the previous two *shiurim*, we discussed the potential halakhic issues that arise in violating the privacy of others for curiosity’s sake. Those prohibitions are primarily relevant when the person whose information is being accessed would object to this violation of privacy. However, even when people **want** their profiles to be accessed, there are several Torah values that may suggest that one should limit taking advantage of this information. Several of these issues are more philosophical than legal, but they are worth exploring to complete our perspective.

**Psychology**

In 2012, Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge published an article whose title summarizes one of the central problems created by Facebook and other social networks: ‘”’They Are Happier and Having Better Lives than I Am’: The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others’ Lives.”[[1]](#footnote-1) They note that while jealousy may be normal, it is particularly insidious in the world of Facebook, where people craft their own profiles and therefore can generate the perception that their lives are perfect, or at least better than the lives of others. When people consume this information, they inevitably judge their own lives as less successful than those of their friends. Their conclusion is as follows:

The results of this research support the argument that using Facebook affects people’s perceptions of others. For those that have used Facebook longer, it is easier to remember positive messages and happy pictures posted on Facebook; these readily available examples give users an impression that others are happier…

[T]he results show that the longer people have used Facebook, the stronger was their belief that others were happier than themselves, and the less they agreed that life is fair. Furthermore… this research found that the more ‘‘friends’’ people included on their Facebook whom they did not know personally, the stronger they believed that others had better lives than themselves. In other words, looking at happy pictures of others on Facebook gives people an impression that others are ‘‘always’’ happy and having good lives, as evident from these pictures of happy moments. In contrast to their own experiences of life events, which are not always positive, people are very likely to conclude that others have better lives than themselves and that life is not fair. The correspondence bias is more likely to occur when people make inferences about people whom they do not know well. They tend to perceive that others are constantly happy, while paying little attention to the circumstances that affect others’ behavior. One could argue that frequent Facebook users shall know the tricks others use to manage the impression; therefore, experienced Facebook users could avoid the potential distorted perception. However, the results of the research suggest that frequent Facebook users tend to perceive that others are happier. In other words, they are more likely to be affected by the easily recalled content and tend to have the correspondence bias, whether consciously or unconsciously. The problems of relying on an availability heuristic and having correspondence bias can be alleviated by having more balanced information, which can be gained through deeper interactions with others. The results of this research found that the more time people spent going out with their friends, the less they agreed that others have better lives and are happier. In other words, when people have more off-line interactions with their friends, knowing more stories about others’ lives, both positive and negative, they are less persuaded that others are happier than themselves. In this way, they can avoid correspondence bias. Since becoming ‘‘Facebook friends’’ usually starts with two people knowing each other in person, it follows that those with more friends on their Facebook tend to have a more balanced view of others because they know more people in person. Therefore, they are more likely to agree that life is fair, and less likely to agree that others are happier, as the results of this research indicated.

Thus, the nature of Facebook, as opposed to real friendships, exacerbates the problems of jealousy, including of inaccurate perceptions of people’s lives.

**Happiness in Judaism**

Some have noted that the Torah’s perspective on happiness militates against defining happiness based on that of others, perceived or real. For example, Rabbi Dr. Moti Klein has noted that while Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory indicates that people usually judge their self-worth based on the perception of others, the Torah advocates for a radically different perspective.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ben Zoma in the Mishna in *Avot* (4:1) suggests the following definition of wealth:

Who is the rich one? He who is happy with his lot, as it says, "When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you" (*Tehillim* 128:2).

The commentaries focus on several related points. If one is happy with the portion granted him, it prevents him from stealing or committing other crimes to illicitly increase his wealth.[[3]](#footnote-3) More fundamentally, the identifying quality of someone who is impoverished is that he is lacking to the point that he constantly desires and is seeking more. Someone who has vast material wealth but is never happy will similarly be overcome by cravings and devote himself to expanding his property, rather than enjoying the wealth he has amassed. Thus, he is essentially in the same category as a poor person. On the flipside, by being happy with one’s lot, one can enjoy what he does have, which is the identifying quality of one’s living an affluent lifestyle.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As true as these sentiments are when one compares himself to the reality of what others have, it is even more striking when comparing oneself to the intentionally positively spun lives of those around him. This is true even in cases in which there is no invasion of privacy. In fact, people put these versions of themselves on social networks specifically for others to see their lives. Nevertheless, the effect of obsessing over the lives of others drives people away from the Torah ideal of happiness.

Beyond the *hashkafic* element, however, there is a potential legal one as well: the prohibition of “*Lo tachmod,”* “You shall not covet.”

***Lo Tachmod***

*“Lo tachmod”* appears in the two version of the *Aseret Ha-dibberot,* Ten Commandments, in *Shemot* 20:14 and *Devarim* 5:18. In the latter source, the Torah adds, “*Ve-lo titaveh,”* “And do not desire.” Ibn Ezra explains the following:

The Hebrew word ḥ-m-d has two different meanings. One meaning is robbery, oppression, taking from others through force or compulsion (as in, “no man will attack your land” [[*Exodus* 34: 24](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.34.24)] — for if the verb denotes jealousy, then a verse intending to extol the land instead deprecates it!). The other meaning is jealousy, that does *not* express itself in overt action.  (Ibn Ezra, *Devarim* 5:18, trans. by Jay F. Shachter)

As my teacher Rav Michael Rosensweig has pointed out, it is these two understanding that drive the main interpretations as to the nature of the prohibition.[[5]](#footnote-5) Namely, is this prohibition fundamentally a problem of thoughts and desires, or one of illicit actions?

The *Mekhilta* (*Yitro* 8) argues that one does not violate the prohibition until one performs an action, though it does not specify what action that is. At the other extreme, the Moshav Zekenim (*Shemot* 20:14) cites a position that one violates *lo titaveh* as soon as he covets and violates *lo tachmod* as soon as he **verbalizes** his desire, even if he does nothing to actualize it.

What action might be required? Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (*Birkat Netziv* ibid.) argues that it is the **attempt** to actualize desire that causes one to violate the prohibition. Rav Rosensweig argues that according to both the Moshav Zekeinim and Netziv, the prohibition is essentially emotional. The requirement to verbalize the desire or attempt to achieve it is simply a measurement of the degree of desire one must have to violate — not mere “wanting,” but an overpowering longing that spills over into words or actions.

Rambam (*Hilkhot Gezeila* 1:9) and many other Rishonim argue that one does not violate the prohibition unless he **successfully gains the object of his desire**. At first glance, this would indicate that these Rishonim understand that the prohibition is **action-oriented** rather than **emotion-oriented.** However, Rambam writes that one does not receive lashes for this crime, despite that being the normal punishment for violating a biblical prohibition, because *lo tachmod* is a *lav she-ein bo ma’aseh,* a prohibition that does not entail an action. Ra’avad is dismayed by this position; if, after all, one does not violate the prohibition until he successfully takes the object, it should be defined as a *lav she-yesh bo ma’aseh,* a prohibition that entails an action! Rav Rosensweig suggests that Rambam’s position lies on the same continuum as the positions above: the prohibition is emotion-oriented, but the degree of emotion that is prohibited is only that which ends with successfully taking the object.[[6]](#footnote-6) This seems to be the way the Semak (19) understands the view of the *Mekhilta* mentioned above.

Other Rishonim, however, clearly believe that this prohibition is one of criminal actions. Tosafot in some places argue that the prohibition is identical to theft, and its relevance is that it causes one who takes something without paying (due to desire?) to violate two prohibitions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In other places, Tosafot[[8]](#footnote-8) follow the position of Ra’avad, namely arguing that *chemda* refers to cases where one pressures someone into selling his property.[[9]](#footnote-9) Formally, this is obviously not theft, as he is paying for the property. However, Ra’avad may still think that this a prohibition related to theft, as evidenced by the requirement that he cites for one to return property that he pressured someone into selling.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Formal Violations in Viewing Social Media**

According to the above, does one violate this prohibition by becoming envious of someone else’s life or property, a common occurrence when constantly viewing the lives of others on social media, whether it be Facebook, Instagram or anything else?

According to the Moshav Zekenim, if one’s envy leads him to verbalize his jealousy, he has already violated the prohibition. However, according to most of the positions above, *lo tachmod* is not mere desire; rather, it is the attempt, successful or not, to take someone else’s property by theft or pressure them into selling. Just viewing the lives of others and wanting what they have does not entail a violation of *lo tachmod.* This is especially the case as *lo tachmod* seems to prohibit an attempt to take **someone else’s actual property**. Deciding to buy the same car one’s friend has, just to be like him, may not reveal control of one’s passions, but it is not a formal violation of *lo tachmod.*

It is also interesting to wonder as to whether one would violate *lo tachmod* for desiring someone else’s life, when the life they desire is not real, but a construction intended to deceive. According to the positions that tie this to theft and the like, it may be that one cannot violate the prohibition when the object of desire is imaginary. If the sin is in the emotion itself, it would seem that one would violate the prohibition even in these cases. However, this is speculation.

**The Ethic of the Law[[11]](#footnote-11)**

While, as we have noted, one probably does not violate the technical prohibition of *lo tachmod* by becoming overcome with envy due to viewing the lives of others, whether in person or through social media, the philosophy behind the mitzva can shed light on the potential problems involved, beyond those outlined based on the value of true wealth introduced above.

The first point emerges from *Sefer Ha-chinnukh*, which notes that many people are surprised that the Torah issues commands directed at thoughts and desires at all. They assume that they cannot control these facets of their personalities. However, this commandment proves that God cares about what people think and feel, and more importantly, that people have the ability to control their inner lives:

And do not wonder to say: how is it in the hand of a man to prevent his heart from desiring the storehouse of every delightful vessel that he sees in the hand of his fellow, whereas he is totally empty of them; and how does the Torah forbid that which is impossible for a man to avoid? This is not the case, and only silly evildoers and those that sin with their souls say it.

Truly, it is in the hand of a man to dissuade himself and his thoughts and his desires from anything that he wants; and [it is] within his control and his cognizance to distance or to bring close his want for all things according to his will. His heart is given into his hand; to anything that he wants can he incline it. God — Who sees all that is hidden — “searches all the rooms of the belly, sees the kidney and the heart.” Not one of man’s thoughts — little or big, good or bad — is concealed from Him; nor is it covered from His eyes. [Hence] He will bring vengeance upon those that transgress His will in their hearts, while “He safeguards kindness for the thousands [of generations] for those that love Him,” who dedicate their thoughts to His service. There is nothing as good for a man as positive and pure thought, as it is the beginning of all actions, and their end. This is apparently the matter of the “good heart” which the Sages praise in Tractate *Avot* 2:9. (*Sefer Ha-chinnukh* 416)

Rabbeinu Yona (*Shemot* 20:14) writes that desire causes one to lose fear of God. Presumably this is because constant desire causes the fulfillment of one’s passion to become the more important goal in one’s life, no matter the expense. *Sefer Ha-chinnukh* (38) adds that the desires can lead one to violations, as those desires may eventually know no bounds. Rambam (*Hilkhot Gezeila* 1:11) notes that in some cases in *Tanakh*, such as the story of Achav and Navot, it even leads to murder (*I Melakhim* Chapter 21). Rabbeinu Bachya (*Shemot* 20:14) contends that this mitzva comes at the end of the *Aseret Ha-dibberot* because envy can cause one to violate any and all of the Ten Commandments! Even when one’s desire may not reach the technical level of *lo tachmod,* as psychologists have noted, this can be the result of the nature of jealousy that social media enables: constantly seeing the “perfect lives” of others can overtake a person, driving all positive thoughts from his mind.

Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 20:14) sees the key to this mitzva in fear of God, but in the opposite way as Rabbeinu Yona. He provides a parable to explain how the Torah could command one to feel a certain way. If a commoner sees a beautiful princess, he will not (usually) realistically desire to be with her, as he knows this is impossible (*Aladdin* notwithstanding). Similarly, he argues, one who truly fears God and believes that all he needs in life, God has provided and will provide for him, will not desire that which belongs to others. God gives each what he needs. Thus, the problem for Ibn Ezra is not that *lo tachmod* drives out fear of God, but that it indicates a lack of that fear and belief.[[12]](#footnote-12) Rav Ya’akov Mecklenburg (*Ha-ketav Ve-hakabbala, Shemot* 20:14) makes the same argument, though for love of God, rather than fear. Again, while one who spends his days envying the illusions of perfection he views in the lives of others on Facebook may not violate the letter of the law, the spirit of the law will have been lost.

In his comments to *Devarim*, ibn Ezra adds, in line with the view of *Sefer Ha-chinnukh* above, that while it may be hard to control these emotions, this is the purpose of the Torah. It is specifically the difficulty that causes the Torah to mandate this behavior.

Umberto Cassuto (*Shemot,* p. 166) argues that the victim is not God, but rather the person whose life and property is being desired. The Torah is teaching that even when one does not actually steal, the very act of desiring and obsessing over that which belongs to someone else is a kind of trespass. Many people, I would think, would indeed feel violated if they knew that others were constantly viewing their profile, wishing that they could live their lives. Many other commentaries, including the *Midrash*, note that *lo tachmod* seems to the antithesis of *ve’ahavta le-rei’akha kamokha.[[13]](#footnote-13)*

However, as the psychologists above note, in many ways it is the person overcome by desire who is the real victim; he forfeits the true wealth the Mishna in *Avot* advocates for. Rav Elchanan Samet summarizes the view of Philo of Alexandria, who sees this as the key to *lo tachmod* as well:

The introverted nature of the prohibition against coveting — the limitation that it places on a person's internal, emotional world — gives rise to another possible explanation: this prohibition is meant to educate the coveter himself, and to bring him to a level of spiritual purity, free of forbidden desires. It is not the "neighbor" that the Torah means to protect here — for what harm is there in someone else's covetous thoughts (especially since there are people who actually wish to arouse the envy of their neighbors)? Rather, it is the coveter himself that the commandment comes to protect, for "Jealousy and desire and honor remove a person from this world” (*Avot* 4:21).[[14]](#footnote-14)

Beit Ha-Levi (*Shemot* 20:14) suggests a solution. He observes that no matter what passion one may be overtaken by, if one is overcome by fear, that passion will be extinguished. Thus, if one manages to inculcate fear of God, he will manage to subdue his passions. The same can be said for love of God, based on Rav Mecklenburg’s words above. Alternatively, if one manages to understand how self-destructive these emotions can be, self-preservation can help him overcome it.

**Conclusion**

While obsessing over the lives of others through their Facebook profiles or what they post on Instagram may not be prohibited, there are many hashkafic and psychological reasons to avoid it. It shares many of the negative qualities of *lo tachmod,* and leads to depression, damaging our relationship with others, God and ourselves. We must recognize that the lives we see are not as perfect as they seem; even if they were, our lives do not have to be identical to theirs to be meaningful and positive. This seems to the most healthy and spiritually proper direction to take.

1. CYBERPSYCHOLOGY, BEHAVIOR, AND SOCIAL NETWORKING, Volume 15, Number 2, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Available at: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/901425/rabbi-dr-motti-klein/torahpsych-8-facebook-self-worth-social-comparison/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rashi, Rabbeinu Yona and Rav Matitya Ha-Yitzhari. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “*Be-inyan Lo Tachmod”, Beit Yitzchak* 19. Available: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/749754/rabbi-michael-rosensweig/%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%9C%D7%90-%D7%AA%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%93/>. Most of the analysis that follows comes from this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This seems to be how Maggid Mishneh understands Rambam. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Tosafot Bava Metzi*a 5b s.v. *Be-lo dami; Sanhedrin* 25b s.v. *Mei-ikkara.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See above, as well as *Bava Kama* 62a, s.v. *Ma, Chamsan.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Gemara in *Bava Metzia* 5b notes that people do not understand that one can violate this prohibition even when he pay for the property. Thus, while it is prohibited to do so, those who violate the prohibition remain valid witnesses, though violating biblical prohibitions under many circumstances invalidate people’s status as witnesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Rav Rosensweig’s article for a full discussion of these positions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rav Elchanan Samet has a thorough summary of many of the possible rationales for this mitzva, at: https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tenth-commandment-you-shall-not-covet. Several others are mentioned in Rav Rosensweig’s article. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the similar comments made by Rambam in the context of the prohibition against revenge in *Hilkhot De’ot* 7:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Vayikra Rabba* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See above. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)