

Jewish Insights into Jealousy

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Jealousy is defined as “feeling resentment against someone because of their success or advantages.” Judaism has much to say about this feeling, and the particular sin, when acting upon this emotion in a specific manner. Surprisingly, many Jewish sources point to some positive aspects of jealousy as well.

HOW JEALOUSY CAN DESTROY A PERSON

A recent Jewish commentary (19th century), who organized a book describing Jewish concepts in detail¹, explained jealousy as a very poor character flaw that is driven by man’s evil inclination. When a person strives to succeed in any field and sees another individual achieve the success that he or she craves, jealousy drives this person to anguish, and creates a desire to besmirch the successful individual. This feeling can remove any joy from the life of the person experiencing jealousy.

Many verses in Jewish Scripture describe this terrible character flaw. Proverbs² describes the jealous person as full of constant rage, a feeling much more severe than cruelty and anger.³ Song of Songs⁴ compares jealousy to a form of “Hell.” This character flaw makes one’s bones rot⁵ and can even kill a person,⁶ say other verses. Jealousy can also cause a person to lose his or her share in the World to Come.⁷

The declarations in these verses are not mere predictions and ideas. Specific individuals in the Torah, some even great and righteous people, have demonstrated the enormous damage that jealousy can cause in the world. The very first and second sins in the history of man came about because of jealousy. The Talmud⁸ explains that the serpent became jealous of Adam and how man was being treated by G-d, and this led him to entice Eve to eat from the forbidden fruit. The very first murder in this world also came about because of jealousy, when Cain was jealous of his brother Abel, after G-d accepted Abel’s offering and not his own. The jealousy caused an inner rage that led Cain to then kill Abel.⁹ The Torah also tells us that Jacob’s sons were jealous of their brother Joseph,¹⁰ which not only led to the sale of Joseph and his slavery in

¹ Pele Yoetz on “Jealousy”

² Proverbs 6:34

³ Proverbs 27:4

⁴ Song of Songs 8:6

⁵ Proverbs 14:30

⁶ Job 5:2

⁷ Ecclesiastes 9:6

⁸ Sanhedrin 59b

⁹ Genesis 4:4-5, 8

¹⁰ Genesis 37:11

Egypt, but also, according to Rabbi Joshua,¹¹ led to retribution of the famous Ten Martyrs who were tortured and then murdered by the Romans, much later in Jewish history.¹² The Rabbis¹³ discuss how painful and terrible were the results of jealousy among several personalities in the Bible. These included Esau and Jacob, Saul and David.

When Eldad and Medad started prophesying in the camp, Joshua was jealous on behalf of his mentor and teacher Moses,¹⁴ thinking that the gift of prophecy was reserved for Moses exclusively, or to whomever Moses designated. Moses was surprised by Joshua's reaction and asked, "Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Jews were able to prophesy like these two." Moses, the humblest man in the Torah, was never jealous of anyone's success. Moses despised jealousy so much that the Rabbis¹⁵ tell us that Moses said that he preferred dying one hundred times, rather than feeling one emotion of jealousy. On the other hand, variations of the word "jealous" occur four separate times¹⁶ in the discussion of the suspected unfaithful wife, the *Sotah*. The husband is jealous of his wife's lover, whom he suspects had sexual relations with his wife. The offering that she must bring is called the "Mincha of Jealousies" And the summation of the portion is called the "Torah of Jealousies."

Rabbi Elazar Hakapar¹⁷ points out that jealousy is one of three negative character traits that can remove a person from this world, either due to his anguish or as a punishment. The Rabbis¹⁸ say that jealousy actually tears up a person inside (makes a person's bones rot), while a non-jealous person will never suffer this fate. As much as this trait is undesirable in Judaism, the Rabbis also recognized that it is a common emotion, even among Rabbis themselves. The Talmud¹⁹ thus declares that if two Rabbinic scholars live in the same city but do not get along in Torah law due to jealousy, one should die and the other should be exiled. Another passage²⁰ says that this jealousy among Rabbis also causes Divine displeasure.

PREVENTING JEALOUSY

Knowing how easy it is for a person to become jealous and the damage it can cause a person, one should anticipate certain situations in advance and take action, wherever possible, to prevent any person from becoming jealous. The Talmud²¹ explains that when G-d asked Moses to gather 70 new Elders/Judges, Moses realized that if he merely selected the 70 best people in his estimation, this would certainly cause jealousy among the 12 tribes, some tribes would necessarily receive more Elders/Judges and some fewer (as seventy is not evenly divided into twelve). What did he do? He selected 6 from each tribe (72) and then held a lottery, where 70 slips of paper were marked "judge" and two were left blank. Thus, the two tribes who were eventually left with five judges could not blame Moses or become jealous because their tribe

¹¹ Midrash Mishlei 1:19

¹² How and why this works and how it is "fair" that these Rabbis suffered for the sins of their ancestors, is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹³ Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabbah 8:7

¹⁴ Numbers 11:28-29

¹⁵ Midrash Devarim Rabbah 9:9

¹⁶ Numbers 5:14-15, 29

¹⁷ Mishna Avot 4:21

¹⁸ Shabbat 10a

¹⁹ Sotah 49a

²⁰ Taanit 8a

²¹ Sanhedrin 17a

now had fewer judges. In a similar manner, the Rabbis²² admonish every parent to treat all children exactly the same, and not to favor any one child over the others by bestowing an extra gift to the favored child, as this will certainly lead to jealousy, just as it did when Jacob favored Joseph over all of his sons. Similarly, Rabbi Nehemiah²³ declared that Achashverosh treated all his guests equally at his banquet (and not according to their standing), in order to prevent jealousy among the participants.

WHY PEOPLE SHOULD NOT BE JEALOUS

Although the emotion of jealousy is common and “normal,” logically, a G-d-fearing person should never become jealous of someone else’s good fortune. The Mishna²⁴ says that one of the reasons that G-d created each individual in a unique manner, with different characteristics, was to prevent jealousy. If everyone were created literally equal in all ways, and then some people received more desirable attributes while others received less, then everyone who received less would most likely and legitimately become jealous. But since, in fact, people have unique physical traits, different talents, singular personalities and diverse goals in life, then reasonable people should not be jealous of each other. Especially if a person believes in G-d, a G-d that gives every individual specifically what is right and needed for that unique person, then “desiring” something more for oneself or comparing one’s achievements and accomplishments to that of another, different person, is pointless and demonstrates a lack of trust in G-d’s judgment. Since all people or all Jews are compared to one body, then it is similarly pointless for one part of the body to be “jealous” of another part of the body because it is larger, or because it receives more oxygen or blood than a different part of the body.²⁵ Thus, for a G-d-fearing individual, jealousy of another person is illogical.

Even though Aaron displayed many leadership qualities, upon hearing that his brother Moses was chosen to be the leader of the Jewish people, the Talmud says he was happy for Moses rather than jealous of his younger brother.²⁶ For this selfless feeling, Aaron was rewarded to become the High Priest, with the Holy Breastplate placed upon his heart. Just as the Rabbis tell us²⁷ that no one begrudges or is jealous of a child or student who exceeds a parent’s or teacher’s achievements, so, too, all people should be happy when all others they know succeed in life and reach their potential.

POSITIVE JEALOUSY

It would seem from all the above that feelings of jealousy are to be avoided at all costs, as they inevitably lead to inner discontent and can destroy a person. Nevertheless, the Sages tell us²⁸ that sometimes jealousy can be something very positive and useful. If an individual recognizes jealous feelings and uses them to build himself up rather than direct the feeling toward the other person, this emotion can indeed be very positive. Thus, if a person sees the achievements of a friend, and analyzes why that person achieved what he or she did, and then uses that achievement as motivation to better himself or herself, this jealousy is turned

²² Shabbat 10b

²³ Megillah 12a

²⁴ Avot DeRabbi Natan 4:6

²⁵ Pele Yoetz on “Jealousy”

²⁶ Shabbat 139a

²⁷ Sanhedrin 105b

²⁸ Pele Yoetz on “Jealousy”

outward, and becomes a motivator to help a person succeed more. Therefore, intellectual jealousy among Rabbis is permitted²⁹ in order to increase Jewish wisdom. The Midrash³⁰ explains that if not for this kind of jealousy -- i.e. using others' achievements to motivate to accomplish more -- the world as we know it would fall apart. Fewer people would be motivated to build homes, marry, and achieve more in life. Proverbs³¹ tells us not to envy sinners, but rather to be jealous of those who fear the L-rd. The commentaries explain that a person should not be jealous of any success of evil doers. Rather, they should envy the accomplishments of the righteous and then try to emulate them.

When Rachel saw that her sister had given birth to many children while she remained barren, the Torah³² tells us that Rachel was jealous of her sister. But she used that jealousy to improve her own deeds and eventually merited to have children.³³ Based on this Biblical story, the Talmud³⁴ makes a general statement that childless women are usually jealous of friends who have children. How one uses this jealousy (positively or negatively) is up to each individual.

HOW COULD G-D BE JEALOUS?

Whether jealousy is a positive or negative trait, it would hardly be imaginable as an attribute of G-d Almighty. And yet, in the Ten Commandments,³⁵ it states that the Lord is a jealous G-d, concerning those who forsake Him and worship idols. The Torah repeats this concept of a jealous G-d numerous times.³⁶ How can we possibly understand this concept? Even if we can comprehend that the Almighty could have base emotions like jealousy, why would or should G-d be jealous of stones that people foolishly worship? How do the classical commentaries understand this idea?

Rabban Gamliel³⁷ was asked this very question by a non-Jewish philosopher: we can understand that someone, even G-d, could be jealous of something that is "better" than Him or has worth. But how could G-d be jealous of meaningless idols? Rabban Gamliel answers that if a son names his dog the same name as his father, the father is jealous of his son. How could the son equate his father with a dog? So, too, G-d is jealous of the Jewish people who foolishly call stones and wood by the same name, G-d, as the Almighty. Another Midrash explains that since (at the time) the urge to worship idols was so great, G-d wanted to give extra reward to those Jews who resisted the urge to worship idols, and thus used the terminology of jealousy to make their reward higher. Other explanations³⁸ compare G-d's love for the Jewish people as being so strong that He is "jealous" when any Jew forsakes Him for an idol. (It is clear that the Torah spoke in anthropomorphic terms in order to help us act and possibly understand,³⁹ as G-d does not really "feel" any of the emotions of love or jealousy). G-d's relationship with the Jewish

²⁹ Bava Batra 21a

³⁰ Midrash Tehilim 37a

³¹ Proverbs 23:17

³² Genesis 30:1

³³ Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 71:6

³⁴ Megillah 13a

³⁵ Exodus 20:5

³⁶ Exodus 34:14, Deuteronomy 5:9, 6:14-15

³⁷ Midrash Mechilta 6

³⁸ Midrash Devarim Rabbah 2:18

³⁹ Berachot 31b

people is thus compared to that of a scorned lover,⁴⁰ much like the *Sotah* and her jealous husband mentioned above.⁴¹ One commentator⁴² notes that the only time in the entire Bible that G-d is referred to as jealous is in the context of idol worship, to demonstrate that special husband-wife relationship between the Jewish people and G-d.

ZEALOUS AND JEALOUS – CONNECTED OR NOT?

The word zealous is defined as “filled with or inspired by intense enthusiasm or zeal; ardent; fervent.” But the term zealot is also somewhat negatively defined as “fanatical or extreme adherent to a cause, especially a religious one.” In Biblical Hebrew, the same word is used for both jealousy and zealotry (זֵלֶה). In fact, the Greek origin for both words jealous and zealous is *zelotes*, which connotes “emulation, admirer or follower.” Are these two concepts connected – and if so, how?

One commentary⁴³ explains that zealousness is another form of positive jealousy – jealousy for G-d, in which the zealot will defend G-d’s name and honor whenever it is threatened. Pinchas is called a zealot by G-d,⁴⁴ as he is praised by the Almighty for killing two people who publicly worshipped idols, thereby desecrating G-d’s name. Their actions brought about a plague upon the followers of the idol worship, while Pinchas’ deed stopped the plague after 24,000 people were killed, and he is rewarded by G-d. Elijah is also called a zealot⁴⁵ when he confronted the idol worshippers in his time. Moses, too, was called a zealot by the Sages,⁴⁶ when he gathered the Levites to smite the 3,000 idol worshippers of the Golden Calf. Like the jealousy describing G-d, it seems that zealotry on behalf of G-d in the Bible relates exclusively to idol worship.

However, we also see that the commentators did not wholeheartedly support the notion of zealotry. Elijah seems to be castigated by G-d for being “too” zealous. In addition to the perpetual priesthood for all his descendants, Pinchas is given the gift of “*Brit Shalom*-Covenant of Peace.” One modern commentary⁴⁷ explains what this reward actually was, and suggests that this quality of zealousness for G-d by Pinchas was appropriate in that particular instance, but only as a one-time act. G-d was afraid that Pinchas might become emboldened by this action and use zealotry again in subsequent activities. G-d, therefore, changed the personality of Pinchas to make him a peaceful man (Covenant of Peace), never to use the trait of zealousness again. Thus, while zealousness and zealotry may be appropriate in certain situations, it is not positive if it is an ongoing character trait. Later on in the Torah, when G-d commands the Jewish people to utterly destroy a city whose Jewish population was worshipping idols⁴⁸ -- an act of zealotry on behalf of G-d -- the “reward” these destroyers received was the gift of mercy and peace from G-d, to insure that this would be a one-time action only.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ Midrash Tanchuma 94:6

⁴¹ Numbers 5:14

⁴² Rabbeinu Bechaya on Exodus 20:5

⁴³ Pele Yoetz on “Jealousy”

⁴⁴ Numbers 25:11-13

⁴⁵ I Kings 19:10-14

⁴⁶ Midrash, Pesikta Rabbati 4:3

⁴⁷ Haamek Davar on Numbers 25:12

⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 13:13-17

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 13:18

JEALOUSY AS A PUNISHABLE SIN: THOU SHALL NOT COVET

While jealousy is an emotion mentioned in the sources, it is not one of the 613 commandments/prohibitions enumerated in the Torah. However, acting upon the feeling of envy jealousy, or doing more than simply feeling jealousy is mentioned prominently in the Torah – in the Ten Commandments: “Thou shall not covet.” What is the difference between jealousy and coveting? It seems that a person is jealous only of another person (generally not a good emotion unless channeled properly, but not a sin either). But when a person covets a specific item belonging to that person, then it is a sin. What exactly is the sin of coveting? How “big” is this particular sin in the larger scheme of things?

COVETING IS ONE OF THE WORST SINS IN THE TORAH

The Vilna Gaon⁵⁰ states that coveting is so severe, that every other sin in Judaism is ultimately derived from the sin of “Thou shall not covet.” The Midrash⁵¹ draws a parallel between the laws and ideas in Leviticus 19 (stated before the entire Jewish people) and the Ten Commandments. It then compares the prohibition of not coveting to the mitzvah-commandment of loving one’s neighbor, which is then called the central principle of the Torah.⁵² Thus, by implication, it seems that not coveting would be the central prohibition in the Torah. One later commentary,⁵³ in fact, says that since the prohibition of coveting is placed as the final commandment in the Ten Commandments, it encompasses them all.

One of the three fundamental characteristics of Abraham and his descendants, says the Mishna,⁵⁴ is a “good eye,” which is explained⁵⁵ as being satisfied with what one has, and not desiring or coveting the objects of anyone else. One medieval Rabbi⁵⁶ says that desiring a specific object of one’s neighbor not only damages the person who desires the object, but even hurts the owner of that object. Another medieval commentator⁵⁷ states, in effect, the converse: a person who refrains from coveting any of his or her neighbor’s objects, will come to never harm any individual.

What, then, is the specific prohibition of coveting? Must a person take any action or can he be guilty of this sin merely for thinking or feeling an emotion? Is there any time or situation when coveting is permitted?

DEFINING THE PROHIBITION OF COVETING

The Torah repeats the Ten Commandments in the Book of Deuteronomy. In the book of Exodus, the tenth commandment reads “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor any thing that is your neighbor’s.”⁵⁸ The Hebrew verb prohibiting coveting is “*Lo Tachmod*.” In Deuteronomy, however, a second verb is added with other slight changes: “You shall not *desire* your neighbor’s wife, nor shall you covet your neighbor’s house, his field, or his

⁵⁰ Gaon of Vilna, Even Shlaima, 3rd chapter

⁵¹ Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 24:5

⁵² Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 24:7

⁵³ Pele Yoetz on “*Chemdah*”

⁵⁴ Mishne Avot 5:19

⁵⁵ Bartenura commentary on Mishne Avot 5:19

⁵⁶ Rabbeinu Yonah commentary on Mishna Avot 5:19

⁵⁷ Ramban commentary on Exodus 20:3

⁵⁸ Exodus 20:14

manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his donkey, or any thing that is your neighbor's."⁵⁹ The additional verb "Do not desire" (*Lo Titave*) is the subject of debate among the commentaries.

Some Jewish law authorities⁶⁰ see both verbs as identical, and make no distinction between the laws in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. Rashi⁶¹ agrees with this interpretation. However, the vast majority and normative Jewish approach is to divide this prohibition into two distinct categories.⁶² One prohibition, merely desiring your neighbor's object, is prohibited under *Lo Titave*, without requiring any action to take place. Coveting, on the other hand, requires a distinct action to be taken, in order to be guilty of the sin. But how could a Jew be guilty of a sin for a mere emotion, which may be beyond his control? Maimonides⁶³ indeed points out that merely desiring the object is not enough to be guilty of "Do not desire (*Lo Titave*). A person must actually plot and scheme how he will obtain the object (without doing any action) to be guilty of this prohibition. Thus, while this sin does not involve any actual action, it does require much more than a mere base emotion. The Code of Jewish Law, the Shulchan Aruch,⁶⁴ agrees with Maimonides. One can sin without an action, but to be guilty, a person must do more than simply desire. He must also use his brain to devise a means to buy or obtain the object.

The second prohibition of coveting is more clear-cut. The Midrash⁶⁵ states that in order to be guilty of sin, a person must act upon his desire to obtain his neighbor's wife, his house or any object belonging to him. What action renders one guilty of coveting? Tur⁶⁶ seems to say that merely talking about obtaining the object is enough to make a person guilty. Maimonides believes that a person must take a concrete action to obtain the object by approaching the neighbor and repeatedly annoying him or her to give or sell it when the neighbor is reluctant to do so. If the neighbor actually does give it or sell it, only then is the person guilty of the sin of coveting. Shulchan Aruch⁶⁷ reflects the view of Maimonides, which has become normative Jewish law: until the neighbor (reluctantly) gives or sells the object after badgering, a person is not guilty of "Thou shall not covet." Rabbi Eliezer Papo,⁶⁸ a later commentary (1785-1825), sums up the two prohibitions succinctly: "Anyone who desires and then attempts to obtain his neighbor's object as a gift or by purchasing it, violates 'Thou shall not covet.' And even if he does not attempt to buy it but merely thinks about ways to get the object into his possession, he has violated the prohibition of 'Thou shall not desire.'"

WHEN IT IS PERMITTED TO COVET

Only tangible objects that can be bought and sold are subject to the prohibition of "Thou shall not covet". Thus, the Zohar⁶⁹ states that it is permitted to be jealous and covet the Torah learning of another individual without violating any prohibitions. While certain

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 5:18

⁶⁰ Semag, Mitzvah 158

⁶¹ Rashi commentary on Deuteronomy 5:18

⁶² Zohar 3:261

⁶³ Maimonides, Hilchot Gezaila 1:10

⁶⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Chosen Mishpat 359:10-11

⁶⁵ Midrash Mechilta Hachodesh 8

⁶⁶ Tur, Choshen Mishpat 371

⁶⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Chosen Mishpat 359:10

⁶⁸ Pele Yoetz on "*Chemdah*"

⁶⁹ Zohar Yitro 2:93

commandments are not subject to this prohibition, coveting other objects of mitzvah can violate it. For example, coveting the shofar or lulav of a neighbor and then trying to obtain it, would be prohibited, since these are objects that are bought and sold, even though their purpose is for mitzvah and holiness⁷⁰. Rabbeinu Bechaya even claims that one receives reward for coveting a neighbor's non-tangible mitzvah.⁷¹ Chofetz Chaim⁷² writes that this prohibition does not apply to giving of Tzedaka-Charity, and one may continually badger a wealthy neighbor to give Tzedaka.

DOES THIS PROHIBITION APPLY IN ALL (NON-MITZVAH) SITUATIONS?

Some authorities⁷³ believe that the prohibition to covet applies even to minute, almost worthless objects as well. There is a debate whether the object must be a hard-to-obtain object, or if it also applies even to objects that can be purchased in any store. Logically, if the object can be purchased anywhere, then a person will not feel specific envy, desire or covet his neighbor's object. He can simply go and buy the object for himself whenever he wants. Nevertheless, a Talmudic passage⁷⁴ claims that this prohibition applies even to easy-to-purchase objects and even to money itself. But most of the later authorities⁷⁵ restrict this prohibition to hard-to-find items that one can only obtain from that neighbor.

The prohibition to covet need not apply only to a tangible object. One can be guilty of envying (and then acting upon that feeling) the standing or the position that someone obtained, such as High Priesthood, presidency, or even a promotion.⁷⁶ On the other hand, if a tangible item is already for sale, badgering the owner to lower the price in order to buy the object would not be considered a violation of the prohibition.⁷⁷ But approaching a neighbor who has no interest in selling the object, and constantly offering more money to entice the neighbor to sell, would clearly be a violation of the sin.⁷⁸ Pressuring a neighbor to give the item that a person desires, even as a gift, also violates *Lo Tachmod*.⁷⁹ This prohibition is not limited to Jews, but is forbidden to non-Jews as well.⁸⁰ The reverse situation is also forbidden: A person, desirous of his neighbor's money, may not parade his unique object on his front lawn in order to entice the neighbor to become jealous and try to obtain the object.⁸¹

In the final analysis, the Talmud⁸² promises that a person who spends his time trying to obtain that which is not his, will, in end, forfeit that which he already has. The result for any person will be similar to the result of the first act of jealousy by the serpent, who thought he could obtain everything he wanted and rule over all the other animals, but in the end the

⁷⁰ Responsa Betzail Chochma 3:43

⁷¹ Rabbeinu Bechaya commentary on Exodus 20:14

⁷² Shemirat Halashon, Sections II, end of the book 4

⁷³ Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 38 claims "*Lo Tachmod*" applies to objects worth less than a perutah (penny)

⁷⁴ Kalah Rabbati 6

⁷⁵ Rabbi Aryeh Tzvi Fromer, Responsa Eretz Tzvi 4

⁷⁶ Sotah 9a, see Rashi and Meiri commentaries

⁷⁷ Responsa Shevet Kehati 3:329

⁷⁸ Sefer Charedim 21:2-5

⁷⁹ Shaarei Teshuva 3:43, Responsa Eretz Tzvi 3:6

⁸⁰ Sefer HaChinuch 416

⁸¹ Sefer Chasidim 99

⁸² Sotah 9a

serpent is the most cursed of the animals. So, too, will be the fate who think they can profit and gain through their jealousy and desire.⁸³

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⁸³ Sefer HaMitzvot HaKatan 19