

“THOU SHALT NOT COVET”

THE IMPOSSIBLE COMMANDMENT

Parashat Yitro 5772

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman – Temple Beth El

יג לא תחמד, בית רֵעֶךָ ; Ex. 20:13 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's
{ס} לא-תחמד אִשְׁת רֵעֶךָ, house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his
וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ, man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his
וְכָל, אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ. {פ} ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

**Isn't Judaism about Action? How Can the Torah Command an Emotion?
Doesn't everyone want things? And why is that so bad?**

"Desire leads to coveting, and coveting leads to stealing. For if the owner (of the coveted object) does not wish to sell, even though he is offered a good price and is entreated to accept, the person (who covets the object) will come to steal it, as it is written (Mikha 2:2), 'They covet fields and (then) steal them.' And if the owner approaches him with a view to reclaiming his money or preventing the theft, then he will come to murder. Go and learn from the example of Achav and Navot."

Rambam (Hilkhos Gezeila Va-aveida 1:11)

"The wicked are ruled by their hearts...But the righteous rule their hearts"

Bereisheet Rabbah 67:8

If Judaism frowns on ostentation, what kind of lifestyle does it recommend? *Histapkut bamuat*, being content with less, is definitely considered a virtue in Jewish law. Ben Zoma's statement (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 4:1): "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot" succinctly states this philosophy. The following verse in Proverbs (21:17) indicates that a life of luxury can lead to poverty: "One who loves wine and oil shall not be wealthy." Moreover, the Mishna (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 5:19) states that "Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our forefather Abraham: ... a good eye [generous], a humble spirit [humility], and a modest soul." "Modest soul" is translated as one who controls his physical desires even for things that are permitted (*Shaarei Teshuva*, Shaar 1:34). Rabbi Yechiel b. Yekusiel Anav (*Ma'alos Hamiddos*, Virtue 21) lists being content with less as a virtue and advises people against extravagance.

Hershey Friedman - *The Simple Life: The Case against Ostentation in Jewish Law*

(51) Yitro: Coveting's Promise

The Teaching from Jehiel Michael of Zloczow

It is a widely known problem: How is it possible to caution someone to refrain from something that is not in his power? Even if he didn't want to covet, would not coveting come into his heart anyway? [The answer] "You shall not covet" is [not only a commandment] but also a promise; as a person who is careful to observe the [preceding] nine holy utterances, it is certain that we will not covet. □

Perush: Explaining the Teaching

Our teacher offers a profound explanation of one utterance that is probably the most frequently violated (I see it; I want it). He does so by offering a unique perspective on the structure of the Decalogue. The observance of the other nine commandments holds the tenth one in check. Thus, this tenth commandment is not a commandment at all. Rather, it is God's promise to us that if we observe God's other instructions, we will not [be motivated at all] to covet. □

anything else. And if your heart be filled to overflowing with the love of God, it is impossible that it would covet anything from among all the beautiful things of this world, for then there is no place in the heart that would desire or covet anything at all. It is like a full cup, unable to receive anymore. □

Background Jehiel Michael of Zloczow (Zlotchov, c. 1731-1786) was one of the earliest *chasidim* in Galicia. When the Baal Shem Tov died, Yechiel was one of the few disciples who accepted the authority of Dov Baer, the *Maggid* of Mezerich. Yechiel was highly regarded as a

Scriptural Context

Our text is taken from the tenth utterance at Mount Sinai. □

From the Tradition

Jacob Zvi Mecklenberg taught in his *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah*: Many are surprised by this commandment. How is it possible for a person not to covet a beautiful thing in his heart? Doesn't the heart covet by itself, contrary to a person's wishes? The answer seems to be as the author of *Sheni Luchot Ha-Beit*,

Isaiah Horowitz wrote concerning the verse "And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart. . . ." What would the scriptural text be lacking if it were simply written, "And you shall love the Lord, your God, with your heart" [it would have been sufficient]? What could be the purpose of adding the words "with all"? The answer is simply that the intention of the text is that your heart be filled with the love of God. In other words, that there be in your heart nothing other than the exclusive love of God, for there cannot be both the love of God and the love of

teller of miracle tales and strongly opposed by the *mitnaggedim*. According to *Likkutei Yekarim* 31b, written by one of his disciples: "It little mattered whether he had before him a *Gemara* or a kabbalistic text, for Yechiel saw in them only the means of serving God." □

SPARKS BENEATH THE SURFACE

KUSHNER & OLETSKY

The Teaching from Me

There :
and philo
pondering
the myst
misuse th
because t
tual level

But th
ple. The
special i
that ele
perceptua
and enat
transcenc
of their i
attain th
the mini

Perush: the Teac

Menac
of Kotz
the clas
of the
when th
their res
of the
stipulate
the text
will do
hear." □
faces t
question
we do
before
By enca

Backgrc

1859) is
history
pared to
They liv
Poland,
mark) a
(1813-1
in 1843
self from

Sources from many faith traditions on DESIRE, LUST, AND GREED

http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_10co.htm

Passion, greed, covetousness, hatred, lust: these emotions dominate the soul, causing blindness and leading to destruction. Every major religion recognizes that suffering and evil are caused by excessive desires or desires directed toward a selfish purpose. Buddhism has summed up this principle in the second of the Four Noble Truths and denotes these desires by the term "craving." Craving is a fetter: poisoning the heart, deluding the mind, and binding people to evil courses of action.

While all religions view selfish desire as baneful and the cause of much suffering, they differ in explaining these selfish desires in relation to human psychology. Buddhism, and similarly Jainism, reject desire of all kinds, even the grasping for existence itself, as harmful and a source of bondage. In the monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and in some texts from Sikhism and Hinduism, the passions of the flesh--which are evil--are distinguished from the healthy ambition for goodness and the passion for God. Chinese religion condemns only excessive desire and selfish desire: Desires themselves may be good if they are in harmony with the Tao. Similarly, Hinduism honors desire when it takes its rightful place within the dharma of family and society; this ambivalence is illustrated from a passage which identifies Kama, the god of desire, with the generative forces of nature.

To these condemnations of selfish desires, the reader may add many additional passages concerned with their renunciation, which may be found in The Noble Truth of the Origin of suffering is this: It is craving that leads back to birth, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence and becoming, and craving for non-existence. 1. Buddhism. Samyutta Nikaya Ivi.II: Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth

Have you seen him who makes his desire his god, and God sends him astray purposely, and seals up his hearing and his heart, and sets on his sight a covering? Who, then, will lead him after God [has condemned him]? Will you not then heed? 2. Islam. Qur'an 45.23

What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 3. Christianity. James 4.1-3

The man who gathers flowers [of sensual pleasure], whose mind is distracted and who is insatiate in desires, the Destroyer brings under his sway. 4. Buddhism. Dhammapada 48

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God;" for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. 5. Christianity. James 1.13-15

In desire is man born;
From desire he consumes objects of various tastes;
By desire is he led away bound,
Buffeted across the face.
Bound by evil qualities is he chastised-- 6. Sikhism. Adi Granth, Sri Raga Ashtpadi, M.I, p. 61

Envy and desire and ambition drive a man out of the world. 7. Judaism. Mishnah, Abot 4.28

There are three gates to self-destructive hell: lust, anger, and greed. 8. Hinduism. Bhagavad Gita 16.21

Arjuna:

What is the force that binds us to selfish deeds, O Krishna? What power moves us, even against our will, as if forcing us?

Krishna:

It is selfish desire and anger, arising from the state of being known as passion; these are the appetites and evils which threaten a person in this life.

Just as a fire is covered by smoke and a mirror is obscured by dust, just as an embryo is enveloped deep within the womb, knowledge is hidden by selfish desire--hidden, Arjuna, by this unquenchable fire for self-satisfaction, the inveterate enemy of the wise.

Selfish desire is found in the senses, mind, and intellect, misleading them and burying wisdom in delusion. Fight with all your strength, Arjuna! Controlling your senses, conquer your enemy, the destroyer of knowledge and realization. 10. Hinduism. Bhagavad Gita 3.36-41

Clinging, in bondage to desires, not seeing
in bondage any fault, thus bound and fettered,
never can they cross the flood so wide and mighty.

Blinded are beings by their sense desires
spread over them like a net; covered are they
by cloak of craving; by their heedless ways
caught as a fish in the mouth of a funnel-net.
Decrepitude and death they journey to,
just as a sucking calf goes to its mother.

11. Buddhism. Udana 75-76

The fish that is excessively attached to water, without water dies.
For love of the lotus is the humming-bee destroyed,
Finding not the way of escape...
Subdued by lust is the elephant caught,
Helpless under others' power.
For the love of sound the deer bows his head,
Thereby torn to pieces.
Beholding his family, by greed is man attracted,
With wealth involved:
Deeply in wealth involved, regarding it as his own,
Which inevitably he must leave behind.
Whoever with other than the Lord forms love,
Know him to be eternally the sufferer.

12. Sikhism. Adi Granth, Dhanasari, M.5, pp. 670-71

Just as a tree with roots unharmed and firm, though hewn down, sprouts again, even so while latent craving is not rooted out, this sorrow springs up again and again.

If in anyone the thirty-six streams of craving that rush towards pleasurable thoughts are strong, such a deluded person torrential thoughts of lust carry off.

The streams of craving flow everywhere. The creeper sprouts and stands. Seeing the creeper that has sprung up, with wisdom cut off the root.

In beings there arise pleasures that rush towards sense-objects, and such beings are steeped in craving. Bent on happiness, they seek happiness. Verily, such men come to birth and decay.

Folk enwrapped in craving are terrified like a captive hare. Held fast by fetters and bonds, for long they come to sorrow again and again....

That which is made of iron, wood, or hemp, is not a strong bond, say the wise; the longing for jewels, ornaments, children, and wives is a far greater attachment. That bond is strong, say the wise. It hurls down, is supple, and is hard to loosen. This too the wise cut off, and leave the world, with no longing, renouncing sensual pleasures.

Those who are infatuated with lust fall back into the stream, as does a spider into the web spun by itself. This too the wise cut off, and wander, with no longing, released from all sorrow. 13. Buddhism. Dhammapada 338-47

Confucius said, "I have never seen anyone whose desire to build up his moral power was as strong as sexual desire." 14. Confucianism. Analects 9.17

There is no crime greater than having too many desires;
There is no disaster greater than not being content;
There is no misfortune greater than being covetous. 15. Taoism. Tao Te Ching 46

They say that woman is an enticement.
No, No, she is not so.
They say that money is an enticement.
No, No, it is not so.
They say that landed property is an enticement.
No, No, it is not so.
The real enticement is the insatiable appetite of the mind,
O Lord Guheswara! 16. Hinduism. Allama Prabhu, Vacana 91

All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 17. Judaism and Christianity. Ecclesiastes 1.8

Desire never rests by enjoyment of lusts, as fire surely increases the more butter is offered to it. 18. Hinduism. Laws of Manu 2.94

Passion makes the bones rot. 20. Judaism and Christianity. Proverbs 14.30

The ignorant one craves for a life of luxury and repeatedly hankers after pleasures. Haunted by his own desires he gets benumbed and is rewarded only with suffering.

The benighted one is incompetent to assuage sufferings, because he is attached to desires and is lecherous. Oppressed by physical and mental pain, he keeps rotating in a whirlpool of agony. I say so.

21. Jainism. Acarangasutra 2.60, 74

The love of money is the root of all evils. 22. Christianity. I Timothy 6.10

Wealth is the fountainhead of inordinate craving. 23. Islam (Shiite). Nahjul Balagha, Saying 56

What is that love which is based on greed?

When there is greed, the love is false. 24. Sikhism. Adi Granth, Shalok, Farid, p. 1378

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth, with gain: this also is vanity. 25. Judaism and Christianity. Bible, Ecclesiastes 5.10

Even were the wealth of the entire world bestowed lavishly on a man, he would not be happy: contentment is difficult to attain. 26. Jainism. Uttaradhyayana Sutra 8.16

O my wealth-coveting and foolish soul, when will you succeed in emancipating yourself from the desire for wealth? Shame on my foolishness! I have been your toy! It is thus that one becomes a slave of others. No one born on earth did ever attain to the end of desire.... Without doubt, O Desire, your heart is as hard as adamant, since though affected by a hundred distresses, you do not break into pieces! I know you, O Desire, and all those things that are dear to you! The desire for wealth can never bring happiness. 27. Hinduism. Mahabharata, Santi Parva 177

He who considers wealth a good thing can never bear to give up his income; he who considers eminence a good thing can never bear to give up his fame. He who has a taste for power can never bear to hand over authority to others. Holding tight to these things, such men shiver with fear; should they let them go, they would pine in sorrow. They never stop for a moment of reflection, never cease to gaze with greedy eyes--they are men punished by Heaven. 28. Taoism. Chuang Tzu 14

The gods asked Shiva to revive Kama [Desire], and they said, "Without Desire the whole universe will be destroyed. How can you exist without Desire?" But Shiva replied in anger, "The universe must continue without Desire, for it was he who caused all the gods, including Indra, to fall from their places and become humble, and it is Desire who leads all creatures to hell. Without Desire a man can do no evil.... I burnt Desire in order to give peace to all creatures, and I will not revive him, since he is the evil at the root of all misery. Now all of you should set your minds on asceticism." The gods and sages said, "What you have said, Shiva, is no doubt the very best thing for us, but nevertheless, all of this universe was created by means of Desire, and all of it is the form of Desire, and that Desire cannot be killed. How can you have burnt Kama? You yourself made him and gave him the ability he has just used." But Shiva merely scowled and vanished. 31. Hinduism. Skanda Purana 1.1.21

The sin of coveting

2. Coveting, an offshoot or outgrowth of envy, is the only emotion (as opposed to action) outlawed in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife . . . or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exodus 20:14). While envy refers, among other things, to wanting what others have for ourselves, coveting—in the context of the Ten Commandments and the usage of this term in Jewish life—refers to desiring what others have so much that we start scheming to acquire it.

In the normal course of events, we might assume that those most likely to covet would be the underprivileged. However, the Bible describes two major incidents involving kings whose covetousness leads them to violate even more fundamental commandments:

King David is highly attracted to Bathsheba. Even after he learns that she is married to an officer in his army, he orders her brought to his palace and sleeps with her. Bathsheba becomes pregnant, and David summons her husband, Uriah, back from the front, with the hope that he will sleep with his wife and presume that she became pregnant through him. But when Uriah twice avoids going home to be with Bathsheba (perhaps he had heard rumors of her dalliance with the king), David realizes that the woman's pregnancy will result in a major scandal, and arranges to have Uriah killed in battle (II Samuel chapter 11). Thus, what began with the seemingly not-so-serious violation of the ban against coveting led to violations of the prohibitions against adultery and murder.

For the even more serious offense committed by the covetous King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, see pages 48–49.

The self-destructive nature of envy

3. Envy destroys our ability to enjoy what we already have; instead, our joy is diminished or entirely eliminated by the fact that others have more—perhaps only one thing more—than us. The most prominent example is Saul, Israel's first monarch, who was a popular king, and whose army had triumphed over the Philistines. However, when Saul hears the young women of Israel extol David, who had killed Goliath, in song—"Saul has slain his thousands, David his tens of thousands"—he becomes very upset: "From that day on, Saul kept a jealous eye on David" (I Samuel 18:7–12). Like many envious

people, Saul quickly loses all sense of proportion. He arranges for his daughter, Michal, who loves David, to become betrothed to him, simply so that he will be in a position to bring about David's death more easily (I Samuel 18:20–25). What father, other than one crazed with envy, would manipulate his daughter's deepest emotions in this way? And when his Saul's son Jonathan, who is David's closest friend, tries to protect David from his father's wrath, Saul attempts to kill him (I Samuel 20:33).

So poisoned is Saul by envy (and his increasingly paranoid hatred of David) that he ignores tangible evidence that David is not his enemy. Thus the Bible describes two incidents in which David finds Saul asleep and unprotected, but does not harm him (see, for example, I Samuel, 24:5–12). Unfortunately these incidents do not convince Saul for more than a few hours that David is not his enemy. After a very brief respite, he quickly resumes his campaign to kill David.

In addition to alienating himself from his son Jonathan and his daughter Michal, Saul's campaign against David is self-destructive in another way. By alienating David, his leading soldier, Saul placed himself in a much weaker position vis-à-vis the Philistines, Israel's historic enemy. It was they, and not David, who eventually succeeded in killing him and three of his four sons in battle. In other words, Saul's envy helped bring about his destruction.*

A medieval folktale highlights the self-destructive nature of envy. A king promised a man anything he wanted on condition that the man's neighbor, whom he envied, would receive double. Instead of being pleased by this extraordinary offer, the man, obsessed and disheartened by his neighbor's even greater good fortune, asked the king to pluck out one of his eyes, just so that his neighbor would lose both (a similar version of the story is found in Orchard Tzadikim, "The Gate of Envy").

4. Both the Bible and the Talmud note the negative effects of envy: "A calm disposition gives the body health, and envy rots the bones" (Proverbs 14:30; see also *Shabbat* 152b). *The Ethics of the Fathers* (4:28) teaches that "envy . . . takes a person out of this world" [that is, it brings about a person's death]. Rabbi Abraham Twerski comments: "Ironically, there is a saving

*Nor was this envy inevitable. Saul's son Jonathan, the one who stood to lose most by David's success (if David became king, Jonathan would not succeed his father), loved David and did not envy him (I Samuel 18:1).

grace in alcohol or drug addiction, because eventually the condition precipitates some kind of crisis that shocks the person into reality. At this time, he may accept treatment for his condition and turn his life around. Unfortunately, with jealousy [or envy] . . . there is not likely to be any crisis that may bring a person to his senses. People may have this self-destructive trait for their lifetime, which may be shortened by this futile and endless pursuit.”*

In short, envy destroys our chances for happiness. Since there will always be people with possessions or talents that we don't have, if we are envious, we will always be dissatisfied and unhappy.

33

REDUCING ENVY

1. Accept that a certain level of envy is natural, and cannot be entirely eliminated.[†] The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berachot* 4:2) records a rabbinic prayer “that the hearts of others not be envious of us, and our hearts not be envious of others.” The fact that the Rabbis felt they needed God's assistance to achieve this suggests that they believed that we should all solicit God's help to avoid or minimize envy.

A second talmudic teaching is even more explicit: “Rabbi Joseph son of Choni said: ‘A man envies everyone except his son and his disciple’” (*San-*

**Visions of the Fathers*, page 264. It should be noted that jealousy and envy are similar, but not identical. Envy involves two people, while jealousy often involves three (for example, a man who is jealous of his wife because he fears she is cheating on him is also jealous of the man he suspects is her lover). In addition, it has been noted that jealousy and envy prompt different sorts of aggressive and violent responses, one straightforward, the other surreptitious. The journalist Irma Kurtz has written, “Jealousy fights duels. Envy poisons the soup” (cited in Joseph Berke, *The Tyranny of Malice*, page 292, note 42). Unlike jealousy, which has no particular stigma, envious people are rarely willing to acknowledge to others, and perhaps to themselves, a trait they likely regard as shameful. Joseph Epstein distinguishes the two as follows: “One is jealous of what one has, envious of what other people have. Jealousy is not always pejorative; one can after all be jealous of one's dignity, civil rights, honor. Envy, except when used in the emulative sense mentioned by Aristotle, is always pejorative” (*Envy*, 4).

[†]A talmudic dictum declares that “if you try to grasp everything, you will grasp nothing” (*Rosh Hashana* 4b). In other words, if you aim for perfection, such as by trying to eliminate every trace of envy from your life, you are likely to fail.

hedrin 105b). While the child and disciple might not be envied, this rabbinic maxim assumes that other people will be.

This last statement, as Daniel Taub notes, also offers a clue to how to reduce envy. We don't envy our children or students because we have contributed to, and are invested in, their success. Helping others achieve success, and feeling a sense of personal involvement in it, is one way to diminish feelings of envy.

The Rabbis deduce that a father will not envy his son from the case of Solomon, son of King David. When Solomon was anointed king during his father's lifetime, David's advisers congratulated him and said, “May God make the renown of Solomon even greater than yours, and may He exalt his throne even higher than yours” (I Kings 1:47). That it did not occur to them that such a statement might upset or antagonize the king suggests the psychological truth that a parent is not generally jealous of a child, and rejoices when the child achieves greater success than did the parent.

The Rabbis also cite the case of the prophet Elisha, who was the disciple of Elijah. When Elijah was about to depart from this world, Elisha beseeched him, “Let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me” (II Kings 2:9). Although Elisha was requesting that he be granted the ability to become an even greater prophet than Elijah, Elijah was not upset or annoyed by the request. He responded, “You have asked a difficult thing. If you see me as I am being taken from you, this will be granted to you. If not, it will not.” Indeed, Elisha does witness Elijah's ascension to heaven in a chariot of fire (II Kings 2:11–12), and is granted extraordinary prophetic powers.

It seems to me that while the rabbinic view that a parent will not envy a child is almost always true,* in the case of a teacher-disciple relationship, envy will not occur if the relationship is as close, or as idealistically based, as that of Elisha and Elijah, or if the student takes pains to credit his teacher for what he has learned. Otherwise it is quite possible that a teacher will envy a disciple who has achieved greater success.

That a certain amount of envy is a universal trait is reflected in a bitterly comic observation of Sholom Aleichem (1859–1916), the great Yiddish writer: “A man must always be considerate of the feelings of his neighbors. . . . So, for instance, if I went out to the fair . . . and did well, sold everything at a good profit, and returned with pockets full of money . . . I never failed to tell my neighbors

*Herod, the first-century B.C.E. king of Judea, intrigued against and murdered three of his sons, prompting the Roman emperor Augustus to say, “It is better to be Herod's pig than his son.”

that I had lost every cent and was a ruined man. Thus, I was happy and my neighbors were happy. But if, on the contrary, I had really been cleaned out at the fair... I made sure to tell my neighbors that never since God made fairs had there been a better one. You get my point? For thus I was miserable and my neighbors were miserable."

2. Focus on the good someone is doing or has done. The Torah teaches that when two Israelites received the spirit of God and started to prophesy, Joshua, Moses' assistant and successor, became alarmed, and asked Moses to restrain them. But Moses refused, saying, "Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:26-29).

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) taught that an envious person should force himself to focus on the good traits of those whom he envies. "Don't look at the person whom you envy with an 'evil eye,'" Rabbi Nachman cautioned, and don't downplay or try to explain away any good that person has done. Rather, look upon that person with a "generous eye"; indeed, if you force yourself to appreciate her good actions, you may come to believe that her good fortune was deserved, which will help you to stop envying her.

The French poet and playwright Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) mocked the way envious people downplay the accomplishments of others: "We must believe in luck. For how else can we explain the success of those whom we don't like."

3. If you are a religious person, be aware that envy will make it impossible for you to fulfill one of the most important biblical commands, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). You can't both love someone and feel envy and hostility toward him (an occasional pang of envy is common). Therefore, as noted in the preceding paragraph, when you envy someone, focus on what it is in that person that you find good and lovable. If you are a relatively good person, it is unlikely that the person whom you envy is devoid of virtue; good people don't envy the Adolf Hitlers of the world, no matter how powerful, affluent, or otherwise "successful" they are. Also, try to counter your hostile thoughts (most envious people wish that those they envy will suffer a significant decline in fortune) by offering prayers to God on behalf of those you envy. At first, when you offer a prayer like this, it may be difficult to be sincere. Therefore, before you pray, spend a minute concentrat-

rating on your desire to fulfill the command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Offer the prayer on a daily basis for several weeks, or until you feel your envy start to decline.

4. Focus on the suffering endured by the person you envy. Arrogant people compare their successes with other people's weaknesses. Envious people do the opposite. They compare their lack of success with the successes of others, and believe that other people enjoy unmitigated happiness and ease. But this is never the case. As my mother, Helen Telushkin, of blessed memory, used to say, "The only people I know who are happy are people I don't know well." If you are going to envy the success of others, consider whether you would be willing to assume their suffering and problems as well.

The psychologist Solomon Schimmel was treating a patient who was writing a book on coping with suffering, at a time when a book on the subject had been published by a rabbi. The rabbi's book was extremely successful, and whenever the patient saw the book on the best-seller list or heard the rabbi on a talk show, he became upset.

Although his patient understood that the envy he was experiencing was irrational (it was the rabbi, after all, not he, who had written the best-selling book) and was hurting him, he still remained upset. Dr. Schimmel instructed him to reflect on the following: "You know that the rabbi's book on how to cope with suffering was based upon a profound and prolonged personal tragedy which he experienced. One of his children had been born with a debilitating genetic disease that entailed slow, progressive deterioration. [The rabbi and his wife had to witness their child's physical and emotional pain, and his early death.] The fact that [his book] became a bestseller testified to the sensitivity and wisdom that he had acquired and his ability to pass it on to others in need of solace. Now you, in your personal life, have never experienced suffering in any way comparable to the torment that the rabbi went through for so many years of his life. Can you really envy this man and his success as a writer? Would you be willing to undergo what he experienced even for millions of dollars? Don't think about his fame or fortune. Think rather of his pain and suffering. Even as a rich man, can his money bring his child back to life or erase the memories of his child's suffering from his consciousness?"

Schimmel concluded, "As my client began to focus his thoughts on the rabbi's misfortune in life, which engendered compassion, his envy subsided."

5. Dr. Schimmel offers the following strategies to help curb our envy.³ I have added brief commentaries that offer concrete examples of how to internalize these suggestions.

- Think about positive and valuable things you possess that the person you envy does not. It is unlikely that she has had greater success, skill, and contentment than you in every sphere, including professional or financial success, admiration of her peers, happiness with her spouse, children, parents, and friends, and various talents, such as athletic or musical ability, and good health.
- Compare yourself with those less fortunate than yourself, rather than with those more fortunate. If you are a middle-class American—the predominant readers of my books—you are living a more comfortable life than ninety-five percent or more of humankind. Therefore, it is absurd to compare yourself only with those who have things that you don't have, and to feel deprived and miserable as a result.

My friend Dennis Prager read about an actor who was earning millions of dollars for each film he made, yet who noted with envy that Arnold Schwarzenegger, the actor and now governor of California, was earning even more. As my friend wrote, "Had this actor compared his salary with that of, let us say, any of his high school classmates, he would have been deliriously happy at his extraordinary good fortune." Instead, he compared his income with that of one of the only actors in the world who was making more than he was, and therefore succeeded in making himself feel envious and unhappier.⁴

- Consider whether the person you envy deserves her level of success, and that there may be good reason why you do not. In other words, instead of asking yourself, "Why should she be more successful than I am?" (the implication being that the other person's success is undeserved), consider this question seriously. Maybe she has accomplished more because she works harder or more effectively than you do, or is friendlier to people and they therefore respond well to her. Instead of allowing yourself to wallow in self-pity, consider whether there is something you can learn from the more successful person that might improve your life.*

*Obviously this does not apply in all cases. If you envy the large inheritance a friend or acquaintance received, it is unlikely that you will find reasons that he deserved such an inheritance (except perhaps that maybe he was an exceptionally devoted child). But there are other questions

- Realize that your envy could lead you to do things that may harm others and yourself. As noted earlier, King Saul's envy of David caused Saul, who had once been humble, kind, and forgiving (see I Samuel 9:21 and 11:12–13) to become a murderer (see I Samuel 22:9–19).

In 1994, champion figure skater Tonya Harding grew obsessively envious of her rival, Nancy Kerrigan, who, it was widely assumed, would soon beat her to become the American figure-skating champion. Harding's ex-husband, Jeff Gillooly, with whom she remained close, began plotting to injure Kerrigan and thereby clear the path for Harding to become the champion. Harding informed Gillooly where Kerrigan trained, and he hired two men, who attacked her one day when she left practice. One of the attackers hit Kerrigan repeatedly with a baton, just above the right kneecap, and she was badly hurt and had to withdraw from the upcoming competition. Two days later Harding was crowned American champion at the national meet in Detroit. At the time she complained hypocritically, "It won't be a complete title without having competed against Nancy [Kerrigan]." Harding's role in the attack was subsequently exposed, and in March 1994 she pleaded guilty to hindering the prosecution. She was ordered to pay a \$100,000 fine and, most significantly, was stripped of her coveted national title, and permanently banned from the U.S. Figure Skating Association. Aside from the suffering endured by Kerrigan, what was the price paid by Harding for her envy? "I lost my life, my career, and everything else."⁵

Don't provoke envy

6. We noted earlier the prayer offered by the Rabbis "that the hearts of others not be envious of us." This reminds us not to act in a manner that will incite other people's envy. For example, people are less likely to envy a wealthy person known as an unostentatious philanthropist.

So, if you have been successful, don't initiate conversations with others about your achievements, your famous friends, your honors, or the successes of your children. If, in a small group, people ask you about some area of success, answer honestly, but try to downplay, and certainly not exaggerate, the accomplishments' significance. Don't give others cause to feel less good about themselves and envious of you.

you could ask yourself. For example, if you love your parents, would you prefer to have had different, wealthier parents, just so that you could have received a large inheritance?

At social events, prominent people should make an effort to speak to those around them at least as much about *their* lives as about their own. This may not be easy, because people often prod famous people to speak about themselves. Therefore, one must make an extra effort to encourage others to speak about themselves.

7. Try to anticipate and forestall situations that will cause envy. The *Sefer Chofetz* teaches that "when two righteous men arrive in a city at the same time, but the people pay homage to only one of them, then the one who is shown honor should show respect to the other, so that he not become jealous, and also to cause the people to honor the other righteous man" (paragraph 359).

So, if you have achieved success, express your admiration and appreciation for those who might not be as well known. For example, I have long been impressed that Rabbi Harold Kushner, one of America's most popular writers, has often used his fame and success to help promote the writings of people far less known than he.

8. Parents should take care not to provoke jealousy among their children. This was the great flaw in Jacob's raising of his sons: "And when [Joseph's] brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him" (Genesis 37:4). * Parents have a moral obligation not to provoke envy.

Even on purely prudential grounds, a parent should act the same way toward all his children. Thus, if a parent truly does love one child more than the others, he does the child great harm by making that known and causing the child's siblings to envy him or her. One suspects that, during Joseph's days as a slave and prisoner in Egypt, he did not remember Jacob's favoritism with gratitude. Indeed, that might be the explanation for an action (or rather non-action) of Joseph's that is otherwise inexplicable. When he was elevated to a high position in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, he made no effort to contact his father and inform him that he was alive and well. Was he perhaps feeling some anger toward his father, whose behavior had helped provoke his brother's animosity, and bring about their terrible crime of selling him into slavery in Egypt?

Is envy ever good?

9. The word *envy* is sometimes used in a manner that implies admiration or respect for another, and not ill will. * For example, "I envy him his cheerful disposition," or "I envy her her faith." To a certain extent, a cheerful disposition and faith might be natural inclinations or gifts from God, but for most people, both of these qualities have to be developed. Someone who is cheerful has, just like you and me, endured upsetting and perhaps devastating experiences, and yet has found a way to remain upbeat. The same applies to faith. So, even where envy has an element of admiration, don't just envy or admire that person. Rather, see if you can learn from him how to integrate these life-affirming values in your life.

Ask the cheerful person if she ever feels down or depressed, and how she deals with it. If somebody had developed a business technique that yielded great profits, you would want to learn how to apply it to your life. Why not do the same with personality qualities that will bring greater happiness and a sense of well-being into your life?

10. The Talmud says that envy among scholars leads to intellectual advances and breakthroughs: "The envy of scholars brings about greater wisdom" (*Bava Batra* 21a). One can hope that at least part of the wisdom it will bring about is the realization that envy, if not held in check, is among the most destructive and self-destructive of traits.

Unfortunately, it is widely known that in the worlds of art and academia, envy often leads to pettiness far more than to greater wisdom. Joseph Epstein, the long-time editor of *The American Scholar* and a faculty member at Northwestern University, laments that: "rarely, in my observations, do the top three or four people in any line of intellectual endeavor have kind words to say about the others. . . . How little it takes to make one academic sick with envy over the pathetically small advantages won by another: the better office, the slightly lighter teaching load, the fickle admiration of students. For years in universities, if a scholar wrote well and commanded a wider than merely scholarly audience because of the accessibility of his prose, he was put down as 'popularizer.' Pure envy talking, of course."⁶

*The story of Joseph also shows that favoritism can be just as cruel to the favored child as it is to the others.

⁶Sometimes it implies just friendly goodwill. As Joseph Epstein writes, "One might say, 'I envy you your two-month holiday in the south of France,' without in one's mind plotting how to do the person out of it" (*Envy*, 6).

