

Yom Kippur Sermon, 5767
Rabbi Jen Feldman

It was right after last High Holy Days, and I'd just come back from visiting with family friends. These friends had a terrific, new home. Everything, down to the faucets in the kitchen, seemed made to order and beautifully designed. It felt great to spend time with them in such gracious surroundings. There was one problem. Once we came back, my own material, domestic life looked and felt very different than it did before we had left. My satisfaction and gratitude for all we had – a lovely home and financial security -- melted into envy. Ben, my patient spouse, listened in amazement as I catalogued everything that needed to change around the house. What had happened, he must have wondered, to the person who loved how the light streamed in the windows in the morning and who found simple joy in planting the backyard vegetable garden?

Now, I did not become a contestant on *Trading Spaces* or *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. I came to my senses. I tell this vignette because I believe we all wrestle with demons of envy, jealousy, and competitiveness. On Yom Kippur we assess our thoughts and our deeds, and so I ask you, “How much of our emotional and spiritual lives, and our everyday energies, are directed toward envying and then trying to get what others have?”

Judaism has much to say about envy and its consequences: The last of the Ten Commandments reads, “You shall not covet your friend’s house; or his wife, servant, ox, donkey or anything that belongs to your friend.” In the *Mechilta*, a legal midrash (commentary) on the Exodus, the rabbis conclude that all the other commandments rest on this one. They posit that if you covet something then you will potentially plot to steal it, may ultimately be willing to kill for it, and so on, until you have violated all of the Ten Commandments.

My own concern with envy or coveting does not extend to total moral destruction; but I do think the commentators had great insight when they spoke of the centrality of this commandment. I would venture that nearly all of us have, at one time or another, longed for something that someone else had, or envied another person’s good fortune. And I would further venture that we do so at great personal cost.

Both Jewish tradition and modern research provide insight into the ways that envy affects our self-perception, our perception of others, and our lives. That will be the focus of my talk this morning – as well as the concrete ways the tradition offers to free ourselves of this “green-eyed monster.”

Rabbi David Wolpe recounts being told by a very prosperous man who had made a generous donation, “But I looked at what Bill Gates was doing, and I felt small.” Each of us is vulnerable to envy. And for each of us it can have a devastating effect on our self-esteem and sense of self-worth. No matter a person’s wealth, social status, or successes – someone else will always have done more or done better in one domain or another. In the face of others’ accomplishments we may feel small, inadequate, or unable to achieve our life’s dreams. The rabbis of the Talmud don’t mince words when they describe the debilitating effect of envy: “When a person has envy in their heart, their bones rot.” (Shabbat 152b). In other words, it can corrode our strength, our resolve – the very essence of our being.

But with our sense of self-worth reduced, our ability to see others accurately becomes compromised as well:

Toward the end of my rabbinic studies, I was approached by a colleague who complimented me on a recent event that I had led and then said, “I wish I were more like you. Everything comes so easily to you.” I was shocked. Indeed, in my experience nothing seemed further from the truth. As a student, I often spent hours preparing myself to lead services and provide teachings in my pulpit. In addition, I was taking five courses, working close to twenty hours a week at my student congregation, and helping my sister care for a critically ill relative. I was struggling to keep up each day. But my colleague, wrestling with her own difficulties, saw none of this because the eyes of envy reduce their subject to one dimension. That other person becomes what it is that we want that we cannot have – and nothing more. It is no surprise that our High Holiday liturgy, as Rabbi Wolpe notes, refers to envy as “tzarot eyn,” narrowness of vision. Eyes clouded by envy cease seeing other people in all their complexity. Envy robs us of any opportunity for authentic relationships with one another.

Research in social psychology helps to illuminate the process by which we engage in envy. Professor Barry Schwartz, in The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less, writes:

Of all the sources we rely on when we evaluate experiences, perhaps nothing is more important than comparison to other people. Our answer to the “How am I doing?” question depends on our own past experiences, aspirations, and expectations, but the question is virtually never asked or answered in a social vacuum. “How am I doing?” almost always carries “compared to others” (People are driven to social comparison largely because they care about status, and status, of course has social comparison built into it)” (pg. 187-189).

Schwartz recounts a study in which people were asked to choose between receiving a salary of \$50,000 amidst others earning 25,000; and earning \$100,000 when others earned \$200,000. The answer? More than half of the respondents chose earning \$50,000.

The focus on social comparison does not produce greater satisfaction with our lives; instead, it embroils us in any number of “rat races” and creates unforeseen and undesired consequences. Schwartz likens it to a football stadium, when someone in the front row stands to get the best view. Soon those behind him are forced to stand to see anything, and so on until everyone is standing. People don’t get the comfort of sitting, and, really, their view hasn’t improved at all.

As one example, he discusses the way in which many parents, doing what – understandably – they believe best for their children, focus on getting a child an increasingly scarce and coveted spot in one of the “best colleges.” In some urban areas the race begins with jockeying to get a child into the most elite preschool program. Then, in the upper grades, parents push their child to study harder – but, of course, other parents are doing this, too. So there must be more AP courses, sports, volunteer work, extracurricular activities – but others are trying this, too. Parents invest money in special tutors and insist that the child invest time and energy in more activities. The pressure on children can be intense, and sometimes things that once brought pleasure –

being on a team, learning new things at school – become so weighted with parental expectations that they become joyless stressors for the child.

The tragedy in all of this, as Schwartz develops in his book, is that often the durable goods and marks of status that we strive for in order to keep up with the Joneses or the Goldbergs don't provide us the satisfaction we anticipated. Schwartz notes that the higher we climb on the social ladder, the more we seek out goods that are in scarce supply. But research shows that once basic needs are met, the objects money can buy ultimately don't provide us happiness.

This is due, according to Schwartz, to the process of adaptation. Think about the last time you saw a friend's electronic gadgetry or great piece of clothing that you just had to have. After you got it, you probably loved it initially, but then simply got used to wearing it or having it around. In no time at all, last year's fashion trend is just something a bit dated hanging in the closet. Last year's jee-whiz computer upgrade now feels sluggish and, we're convinced, needs this year's jee-whiz upgrade. We look at others – yet again – to see what we're missing that could make us happy, and the cycle continues on.

Further, this doesn't only damage ourselves; it damages the world. In our *kishkes*, our guts, each of us understands the Torah principal *bal tashchit* – that to use more than we need and engage in wanton waste reflects a fundamental disrespect for Creation.

How do we get out of this pattern of envy and competition that can make us feel inadequate, distort how we feel about others, leave us endlessly dissatisfied, and deplete our environment?

Rabbi Yossi Goldman recounts this folk tale: A group of villagers is brought together to form a circle, each one grasping a sack that holds their most precious possession. Together they are asked to open their sacks and show each other their possessions. Then each is given the opportunity to choose the item he most desires. In the end, each of the peasants chooses his own possession – the one he brought to the circle in the first place.

Satisfaction begins with awareness, and from that awareness gratitude. Rather than looking at others to assess how we are doing (and then planning the next acquisition that will get us where we feel we should be), we must begin by looking our lives on their own merits. We need to be aware and thankful for the abundance of goodness and blessing that we already have, whether large or small, whether in easy times or in challenging times.

Schwartz takes a secular approach to inculcating this awareness, asking his readers to make a list at the beginning or end of every day of the five things that happened that we're grateful for – big or small. He believes that this exercise will help us gradually to feel better and better about our lives and thus take the edge off of our seeking "new and better" objects to enhance them.

But the importance of gratitude is hardly a recent discovery. Judaism inculcates it through the language of prayer. Even going to the bathroom is an opportunity to recognize the miraculous complexity of the body, the intricacy of our organs, and to be grateful that all is working to allow us to go to the bathroom. You can find this prayer for the body in the opening pages of our Shabbat prayer book and High Holy Day *machzor*. When we see the first flowering buds of

spring, we are told to stop and bless the Source of All for beautiful things that fill our world – and for our ability to perceive them. It is said by our sages that each day we should find 100 opportunities for blessing.

While cultivating gratitude for what we have is an important step in overcoming envy and finding deeper satisfaction, ultimately, Judaism recognizes that true contentment is not about what we acquire, but how we give. The person with the most toys, you see, really does not win, because acquiring the most toys is not, in and of itself, a goal that can sustain the soul. In contrast, acts of kindness, tzedakah, and compassion live on even after our own deaths and make our lives matter. We cannot all afford to own a vacation home in the south of France, but each one of us can call a friend who has just experienced a loss, help make a minyan at the home of someone sitting shiva, drop off food for someone who has just returned from the hospital, or fill a bag for the food drive. In doing so we are rich in deeds. And create lives that are rich in meaning.

“The magnificence of Judaism,” writes psychotherapist and Rabbi Laura Gold, “is teaching that if our dreams are about bringing holiness to the world, then we are capable of fulfilling our desires. . . .we are taught not to desire the material goods of our friends, so that we may learn instead to wish for – and to work for – those things that would bring healing to the world.”

Eizeh Hu Ha Ashir? Who is the rich one? asks the Mishnah. The answer: *Ha sameach b'chelko*, the one who is satisfied with her or his portion. (Mishnah Avot 4:1). May each of us create for ourselves a good year by learning to find joy in what we have, by looking at each other with friendship rather than with envy, and by living meaningful lives filled with acts of compassion, responsibility, and repair.

Gut Yun tov to everyone. For those who are able to fast, may it be a meaningful and easy fast.