

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Vayeshev

What Can We Learn from Yosef's Brothers' Jealousy About Finding Fulfillment in Life?

Jealousy –The Primary Negative Emotion Described in the Torah

People are commending me for my refreshing honesty. So, I'll disclose the embarrassing fact that I have been struggling with jealousy since my sister was born more than 60 years ago when I was a mere toddler. I've been jealous of the attention my parents showed her and felt left out when they had less time for me. When my oldest son got married, I was jealous that he and his wife favored and visited his wife's family more. This feeling of jealousy stems from a desire to be the best, the most beloved, and the favorite by parents, students, and children alike. It takes a lot of inner work to realize that rather than comparing ourselves with others, we must strive to be our own best, most beloved, favorite selves. A 2020 study shows that 40-90% of people feel jealousy, and about 30% of people show their jealousy. Jealousy is one of the most fundamental negative emotions described innumerable times in the Torah. Sibling rivalry raged between the two first brothers in the world, which sadly ended in murder (*Bereishit* 4:8). Later we learn about Yishmael's attempted murder of his brother Yitzchak due to his chosen status entitling Yitzchak's descendants to the land of Israel (*Bereishit* 21:9 with Rashi). It was jealousy over this same birthright that spurred Esav to pursue Ya'acov with murderous intentions (*Bereishit* 27:41). King Shaul became possessed with a spirit of jealousy of David which prompted him to attempt to kill David numerous times (See *the Book of Shemuel* Chapter 18). In *Parashat Vayeshev* we learn about the jealousy that Yosef's brothers harbored against him, prompting them to sell Yosef into slavery in the city of Shechem (*Bereishit* 37:12-28), which eventually brought about the Egyptian Exile. This jealousy continued to reverberate many generations later when the kingdom of Israel was divided in the city of Shechem (*I Melachim* 12:1-16), under the leadership of Yeravam ben Navat descended from Yosef.

As it states, "Ya'acov said to him: Go now, see whether it is well with your brothers... and he came to Shechem" (*Bereishit* 37:14). This place was destined for a variety of unfortunate events. In Shechem Dinah had been raped; In Shechem they sold Yosef. In Shechem, the kingdom of David was divided as stated, "Yeravam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim (*I Melachim* 12:25); (*Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev* 2).

Why Were Yosef's Brother's Jealous of Yosef?

The brothers' relationship with Yosef is a classical example of jealousy. It began when their father favored Yosef with a special coat.

ספר בראשית פרק לז פסוק ג-ד

וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת יוֹסֵף מִכָּל בְּנָיו כִּי בֶן זִקְנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים:

him a fine colorful coat. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and they could not speak with him peacefully" (*Bereishit* 37:3-4).

Rabbeinu Bachaya explains that the brothers' hatred developed into jealousy when Yosef appeared to be greater than they were: It is well known that in most instances hatred is the result

of jealousy; the hatred that the Torah had spoken of earlier had been due to the brothers' awareness that their father Ya'acov loved Yosef more than he loved them. Why then did the Torah have to repeat here that the brothers were jealous of Yosef?

ספר בראשית פרק לז פסוק יא וַיִּקְנְאוּ בּוֹ אֶחָיו וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת הַדָּבָר:

“So, his brothers envied him, but his father awaited the matter” (*Bereishit* 37:11).

It is possible that the original hatred of the brothers toward Yosef was not due to the preferred status Yosef enjoyed in the eyes of their father due to his excelling in virtues, but was due merely to their father showing him more love. There was no reason to be envious of a young boy of seventeen years of age who had not demonstrated any qualities superior to those of his brothers. One usually envies one's peers or one's superiors. One usually does not envy inferiors.

Now, after having heard Yosef's dreams repeatedly, his older brothers realized that there might be more to Yosef than they had thought before. Therefore, they now envied him and hated him because of his dreams. Thus, the Torah told us of this additional dimension of the brothers' jealousy of Yosef. This idea is supported by the Torah's change of preposition describing their new jealousy. In our verse, the Torah chose the preposition **בו/vo** – “in him” as distinct from the preposition **את** or **אותו** which was used to describe their hatred of him, as well as in the verse where the Philistines' jealousy of Yitzchak is described as **וַיִּקְנְאוּ אֹתוֹ פְּלִשְׁתִּים** (*Bereishit* 26:14); (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Bereishit* 37:11). The difference between being jealous **בו/vo** or **אותו/oto** is the difference between being jealous of the possessions of others rather than being jealous at their accomplishments. When the brothers at first hated Yosef due to the extra love their father showed him (*Bereishit* 27:3-4), it was jealousy of his possession – the possession of their father's love. Yet when Yosef demonstrated his superiority by relating his dreams, their jealousy became directed at Yosef's character realizing that he was a greater person than them. Although this latter jealousy is deeper and more painful, it can be redeemed by transforming it into respect and the desire to emulate the positive character trait in the other. This is the known concept in the Torah called *Kinat Sofrim* (jealousy among teachers increases wisdom), (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 21a).

Spiritual Jealousy Goes to the Core

There is a further difference between the response of the brothers to Yosef's first and second dream: “Behold, we were binding sheaves amid the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright, and behold, your sheaves encircled [it] and prostrated themselves to my sheaf. “So, his brothers said to him, Will you reign over us, or will you govern us? And they continued further to hate him because of his dreams and on account of his words” (*Bereishit* 37:7-8). The first dream describing the produce in the field indicated that Yosef would be wealthier than his brothers in this world, and they would need to turn to him for their sustenance. However, the second dream about the sun, moon, and stars indicated Yosef's spiritual superiority. Whereas wealth does not pertain to the essence of a person, and the rich is not necessarily better than the poor person, spiritual qualities describe the essence of a person and his righteousness. Therefore, in the first dream, the brothers' sheaves bowed down to Yosef's sheaf but not to Yosef himself, whereas in the second dream, the eleven stars (corresponding to the brothers) bowed down to Yosef himself. Therefore, in the first dream jealousy isn't mentioned at all, for the righteous brothers weren't jealous of wealth and success in this world, yet the second dream describing Yosef's spiritual superiority ignited their jealousy (*Beit HaLevi, Bereishit* 37:11). The brothers were jealous of Yosef due to his righteousness.

The brothers were jealous of Yosef due to his righteousness. The brothers wanted to be elevated to the level of Yosef the Tzaddik, although that was beyond their potential. Eventually, due to their lofty intention, they did get elevated through Yosef himself (Sefat Emet, *Likutim for Rosh Chodesh Adar*).

What are the Underlying Root Causes of Jealousy?

Research has identified low self-esteem as one of the root causes of jealousy. Behind the brothers' jealousy of Yosef was their low self-esteem of not being good enough if they couldn't reach Yosef's level. Yet we must all realize that although a spinach plant can never become a glorious fragrant rose, its vitamins, and minerals serve humanity in ways that the rose cannot. Just as Hashem created different kinds of plants that complement each other and contribute their unique color to the greater whole, so has He created people with different individual strengths each with the ability to employ their particular talents to improve the world. Rather than comparing themselves with Yosef, the brothers would have prevented succumbing to jealousy if only they had appreciated themselves and their particular gifts. Yehuda was the leader. The royal dynasty of Mashiach emanates from him. Levi, who includes the Kohanim, commands respect in his special role serving in the Tabernacle and holy Temple. The rest of the tribes too were beloved by Hashem who imbued each of them with their individual talents and greatness. Another root cause of jealousy is having expectations of what others should do for us, or what we should achieve in life if these expectations are not met. We may become jealous when we are not satisfied with our lot. When we compare ourselves with other people who appear more fortunate than us, we become envious of their achievements, positions, wealth, or resources. Thus, the key to overcoming jealousy is developing self-love, overcoming the natural tendency to compare ourselves with others, and letting go of unrealistic expectations.

Focusing on What We Have Rather than What Others Have

When we observe children at play, we will notice that they completely ignore a toy until one of their siblings picks it up. Then suddenly they become fueled with desire for that toy. They didn't want the object until someone else had possession of it. Someone else's possession of it created their want and desire. Once the object has been retrieved, the passion dissipates, and it becomes uninteresting again. It is difficult to grow out of this tendency toward jealous desire of what others have. Yet, we need to work at overcoming it so that it won't rob us of the present moment and the beauty of our own lives. We may feel perfectly happy with our home until we visit someone else's home which may be larger, fancier, and better decorated. Suddenly, our home, which was once perfectly fine becomes inadequate and inferior in our minds. I experienced this recently when I took a walk with a Shabbat guest who admired my neighbor's garden profusely. Her beautiful bright, multicolored flowers and edible greens completely outshined my garden of struggling plants. After that walk, I felt disillusioned as if all my desire to improve my garden was zapping out of me. My prior enjoyment of gardening was gone. Yet, nothing had changed except for the awareness of not having as nice a garden as my neighbor. When feelings of jealousy make my heart twinge, I try to catch myself and start counting my blessings. But it can be hard in real time to do because self-pity can be so persuasive and pervasive. Advertisements take advantage of our tendency to desire what we don't have. People love and rave about their phones until they hear that a new version has been announced. The awareness of the new object suddenly creates want –and want usually leads to an awareness of one's lack. Suddenly the phone that was mind-blowing the year before (and every day up until the announcement of the newer version) is perceived as outdated, lacking in features, and

just plain old. To overcome jealousy that leads to dissatisfaction and unhappiness, we need to stop focusing on the objects we don't have and shift our awareness to what we do have and what we were perfectly happy with until we discovered that others had something seemingly better.

How Does Gratitude Serve as an Antidote to Jealousy?

"The cure for jealousy and envy is gratitude" (Fr. Mike Schmitz).

Gratitude is fundamentally incompatible with envy as it is very difficult to experience anxiety, fear, and regret while practicing gratitude. In a 2002 study on gratitude, researchers found that: Grateful people report themselves as being less materialistic and less envious. Material success is not a very important factor in the happiness of highly grateful people. I've long been aware of the importance of gratitude and have shared its benefits with others, but I never really thought about its inverse relationship with envy. It makes perfect sense. Gratitude enhances our lives by extracting the good points of any given moment or experience, while envy redirects our attention away from the present moment and into the abstract future. Most of us crave success, popularity, and material gain, but too much emphasis on these things leaves us perpetually unable to enjoy what we have at any given moment. Gratitude roots us firmly in the present moment. It dissolves those past and future-oriented mindsets and reminds us that this moment right now is good. Since present moments are the building blocks of our lives, if we learn to live our moments well, we will find fulfillment and closeness to Hashem wherever we go. If we find ourselves struggling with a discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else's fortune or qualities" then gratitude might be the perfect antidote.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Vayeshev

Practicing gratitude helps us overcome jealousy and other negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and regret. These feelings stem from future-oriented thoughts. Regret emerges from over-analyzing the past. But gratitude roots us firmly in the present moment.

- **Count Your Blessings** – Whenever you feel a tinge of jealousy focus on what you have rather than what others have.

- **There is no instant cure for jealousy** – But accepting that jealousy is normal, challenging negative thoughts, and practicing mindfulness may help reduce its pull. When jealousy is overwhelming, talking to a friend or therapist can help enormously.

- **Meditation to Overcome Jealousy**

1. **Notice Your Feelings** – The first step to overcoming any problem is becoming aware of it. Although it may feel taboo, simply acknowledging jealousy's presence can help ward it off in the future and strengthen a relationship within the present. Exploring the emotions that underpin jealousy can inspire self-reflection that may help to develop internal coping skills. Being honest with the other party about jealous feelings can spur productive conversations about what the relationship might be missing and how to repair the bond. Become aware of any tinge of jealousy that you may be experiencing.

2. **Acknowledge Your Feelings** – Take this moment to pause and notice, whatever environment or situation you are in. When a jealous feeling arises, acknowledge it. Before you run off on a thought

tangent, take a moment and a deep breath into your belly and recognize that the feeling is there. You might say (aloud or to yourself), "I am feeling jealous." Observing your thoughts gives you the power to take control of their direction.

3. Breathe and Reflect – Once you've noticed that you're feeling jealous, simply paying attention to your breathing and taking slow, conscious breaths can ease the tension by bringing you back to the present moment. It can even stop you from becoming stuck in that one negative thought and letting your spirit spiral down into an impasse of pessimism. This practice may seem simple, but it's tough at first since our minds are conditioned by old thinking habits. Try to practice your breathing for at least one minute, with deep inhales into your belly and deep exhales out, making the exhales longer than the inhales. With repetition, this exercise can be the one that saves you from what may be the most common happiness killer – overthinking.

4. Practice Letting Go by Replacing a Negative Thought with a Positive Phrase – The idea of letting a negative thought or thought pattern go is great, but our brains don't necessarily work that way. If we're going to give up a habit that's essential to the way we view ourselves and others in the world, we need to replace it with something. Your positive phrase doesn't have to be complicated; all it has to do is propose a positive phrase to replace a negative thought. Because jealousy often arises as a result of feeling inadequate, you may choose to combat jealousy with a phrase focusing on abundance. Think about it this way, if you believe there's enough for everyone, there's nothing to compete for.

5. Practice Pronouncing Your Positive Phrase – Choose a phrase that best counters your negative jealous thought. If you're struggling with feeling like others have more than you have, you may recite something like, "Hashem grants all of us exactly what we need," "There is enough for everyone in Hashem's world" or "I'm happy with my portion." If you find that you're struggling with feeling inadequate, you may choose, "I am Blessed with Hashem's abundance..." or "I'm an intelligent, capable, and kind person." Repeat your chosen positive phrase slowly over and over, with a long breath in between each repetition. Do this for a few minutes, even if it feels dishonest at first – which it might if your mind is fighting to tell you the same old story. Saying your positive phrase gives your mind something else to focus on and introduces a new way of thinking. Eventually, and with repetition, you'll start to actually believe it.

6. Retrain Your Mind – A simple meditation practice like this one can do wonders in training the mind to think more positively about yourself and the world around you. Taking some time in your day to pause, breathe, and reflect is an act of self-care that allows you to connect with yourself in a way that benefits everyone. Remember, the grass is always greener where it's watered.