



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת יתרו תשע"א

CRAZY WITH JEALOUSY

R' Yehonasan Eibshitz once pondered the following inconsistent behavior, which he found to be somewhat common:

Here's a simple Jew: perhaps he's a butcher or a *shochet* (slaughterer). In any event, he goes one day to the local *rav* with a *shaylah* (question) concerning his animal, to determine whether or not it's kosher. Upon inspection, the *rav* discerns some imperfections in the animal, rendering it *treife* (unfit). The *rav* turns to the owner with a heavy heart, aware of the implications of his ruling: a substantial financial loss for the butcher.

But the Jew reacts to the news with equanimity. "No problem, *rav*," he says. "Thank you for your time."

Some time later, this same Jew once again finds himself awaiting a ruling from the *rav* concerning his affairs. Only this time, it's a *din Torah* (civil matter) in which the *rav* is adjudicating a monetary dispute between the butcher and a neighbor. The sum involved is not of an unusually large amount; nevertheless, as the two litigants failed to reach a compromise between themselves, the matter was brought before the *rav* to rule on the merits of the case.

A careful review produces a ruling in favor of the other man. At this point, the butcher becomes enraged and emerges from the whole affair resolved never to have anything to do with this *rav* again.

What happened here? When the *shaylah* involved matters of the *Yoreh De'ah* (ritualistic) variety, the individual in question seemed quite able to swallow the loss without even flinching, despite the rather hefty sum! But when it came to *Choshen Mishpat* (civil law),

the same person "had a cow" when the ruling was not in his favor, even though the sum was paltry in comparison!

R' Yehonasan realized, however, that there is one very significant difference, which would seem to account for the inconsistent and disproportionate reaction. When his animal was deemed to be *treif – nu*, he experienced a loss, but that was the extent of it. But when he lost a smaller sum at a *din Torah* – there, *his neighbor* emerged the victor. He would have much preferred a greater loss – so long as *no one else* was gaining (*Tam V'Da'as, parshas Toldos*).

OUT OF THIS WORLD

This tendency – and the tremendous destructive powers that lie in its wake – can account for the severity with which Chazal view the trait of envy. An illustration is provided by the Mishnah in Avos (4:21), which states:

רבי אלעזר הקפ"ר אומר: הקנאה והתאווה והכבוד מוציאין את האדם מן העולם.

"R' Elazar Hakapar says: Jealousy, desire, and (the pursuit of) honor remove a person from the world."

The *Medrash Shmuel* (*Avos, ibid.*) employs a parable to demonstrate the harm caused by such attributes and the often self-defeating consequences brought about by the preoccupation with what "yenum" (others) have:

Two individuals stood before a benevolent king, who made them the following generous and curious offer. "Whichever of you speaks up and presents a request," he told them, "I will grant him whatever he

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by Mr. Mark Scherer, Bellmore, NY

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asks for. However, I will give double of that request to the other.” The problem here was that each of these candidates possessed one of the aforementioned traits. The first was stricken with extreme envy over others’ success; the second was a consummate *ba'al ta'avah* (greedy and desirous).

And so the two found themselves in a real quandary: who would be the one to go first and lodge his request, knowing that his companion would get double the prize? The envious one hesitated, unable to bear the thought that his colleague would end up with twice as much bounty as himself. The *ba'al ta'avah* likewise would not take the plunge; if there was double to be had, how could he let that slip by?

Finally, the envious one had a brainstorm and volunteered to go first. Confident that he found the perfect solution to his dilemma, he indicated to the monarch that he would state a request. “Remember, whatever it is, your friend will receive double the share,” the king reminded him. “So, what is it that you wish?”

The man reacted to this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity with the following response: “I would like to have *one* of my eyes gouged out,” he said.

ANCIENT ORIGINS

This tendency and its attendant consequence of “removal from the world” has apparently been around since time immemorial. The primeval sin of Adam and Chavah serves as an archetypical example of the global implications of the Mishnah’s message. When the first lady ate of the forbidden fruit – an act that introduced death to the world – the Torah states that “she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (*Bereishis* 3:6). Rashi there explains why Chavah was not content to partake of the fruit herself but instead coaxed her husband into violation as well. “(She feared) lest she die (as a result of the sin), her husband would remain alive, *and he might marry someone else*.” R’ Chatzkel Levenstein deduces from Rashi’s comments the enormity of the power of jealousy. The

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prospect of her own impending death did not seem to propel Chavah to take any further rash action. But for some other unknown figure to enjoy her husband’s company after she was no longer here – such a possibility was too much to bear (*Ohr Yechezkel, Michtavim*, 185).

In this week’s *parshah*, the *Aseres Hadibros* (Ten Commandments) include a Commandment – *Lo Sachmod* (“Thou shalt not covet”) – which reflects the trait under discussion. This Commandment is listed as the tenth and final one, a fact which, according to the Rabbeinu Bechaye (*Kad Hakemach*), reveals it to be equivalent all of the preceding ones combined. He proceeds to elaborate. The corrosive effects of jealousy have already been demonstrated by the narrative of Chavah, where sentiments of envy led to severe transgression. In a similar respect, the mind-numbing effects of this toxic trait can lead a person on a path of no return – to the extent where he violates every one of the Commandments.

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