

Where does envy originate? Does it always have to be bad? Is there anything you can learn about yourself from being envious of others? What is the key to understanding Judaism's seemingly contradictory response to feelings of envy?



People strive to do the best they can, focusing on their own potential as selflessly as possible. But Judaism teaches that there are times when most people also experience the very human emotion of envy. Jewish wisdom on this emotion is complex and paradoxical, instructing that envy can be both harmful and helpful in one's life. While envy can "take us out of this world", envy can also offer the key for change and improvement. In parsing the many seemingly contradictory Jewish teachings on envy, it comes down to the individual and how he or she *chooses to react* to the feelings of envy. That process ultimately determines envy's usefulness and/or destructiveness.

## ① LOOKING IN OTHER PEOPLE'S WINDOWS

Envy can be immensely destructive. The insecurities you may have about your own achievements might push you to see others as more successful or accomplished than you. You may feel that the world's "unfairness" or injustice plays out in others having, getting, or taking more than you might feel they deserve. Alternatively, those same insecurities can drive you to hope others will be envious of what you have. These examples of destructive envy, on their own, with no further insight, breed resentment - which is poisonous.

The Mishnah, written over 1,500 years ago, and one of the first codes of Jewish law, addresses envy's destructive power directly in this passage:

Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar said: envy, lust and honor take a person out of this world.

Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) 4:21

1. What do you think it means when the rabbis of *Pirke Avot* say that envy, lust, and honor take a person out of this world? What unifies these three emotions?

2. How does being envious of others cause you to lose sight of what you otherwise find important? How often do you experience this?
3. Feeling envy towards others can be a way of pushing a deeper issue off of yourself onto someone else. When was there an example in your own life when you did this? Can you think of a time when someone has done the same to you? What would you say to that person now?
4. How do the insecurities you have manifest in wanting others to envy you? How do you feel when it happens?
5. Though on the surface it might initially make you feel good about yourself, what do you think you would *really* say to someone who was envious of you?

The Mishnah also addresses the problem of envy with a peculiar (and quite pragmatic) instruction:

One must not make their windows to open into the courtyard of jointholders.

Bava Batra mishnah 3:7

*The text goes on to say:*

One may not open into the courtyard of jointholders by a door opposite a door [of another], or by a window opposite [another's] window.

Essentially, when building a house or making changes to an existing house, you may not build a door or window directly facing your neighbor's door or window.

This concept is known as *hezek r'iyah*, a visual intrusion, or damage caused by looking. It highlights the need for privacy based on the damage that can be done when others can see what you own – or vice versa. For the *viewer* it can cause feelings of envy and as a result, cause them to lose a connection and appreciation for what they have. Furthermore, it can cause the viewer to define the other person solely by his or her possessions, instead of seeing the other person as a whole, complex person. For the *one being seen*, it can hold them back from fully focusing on their own life because they become concerned with how other people are seeing them.

1. How often do you find yourself noticing what others have? Do you notice it and let it pass, notice it in relation to what you lack, or notice it in relation to what you have? What do you think is at the heart of each of these responses?
2. In what ways do Hanan and his mother spend too much time looking in other people's windows? Do you fault them for their reactions or do you find their behavior perfectly human? How similar are their reactions to the way *you* respond to what others have?
3. Have you considered that noticing what someone else might *not* have, even when it might lead to an act of giving, may ultimately still have to do with your own ego and what you may feel you lack yourself?

**② ENVY AS MOTIVATOR**

Judaism has much to say about how envy, in its most *positive* application, can be an excellent tool to find drive and motivation.

Referring to the creation story, the following teaching is presented in Midrash Rabbah, a collection of teachings written around the 5th century, but including texts as old as the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: The words, ‘Behold, it was good’ refer to the impulse to good, and the words, ‘Behold, it was very good’ refer to the impulse to evil. But how can the impulse to evil be termed ‘very good’? Because Scripture teaches that were it not for the impulse to evil, a person would not build a house, get married, beget children, or engage in commerce. All such activities come, as Solomon noted (Ecclesiastes 4:4), ‘from a man’s rivalry with his neighbor.’

Bereshit Rabbah 9:7

This sentiment is echoed by Mommy:

**MOMMY**

I don’t see why looking at another person’s accomplishments has to be all bad. Envyng Ruti motivated me to learn a new language. Envy motivated me to get off the couch and go to the gym to lose weight. (By the way, this week, I lost two pounds at the Weight Watcher)

**DADDY(looking at Hanan sheepishly)**

...Hmmm.....you’re mother has a point. Envy can also be a source of inspiration.

**HANAN**

But there is a distinction in what you are saying Mommy. You’re starting out with envy, but immediately turning back to yourself and your own potential- You’re not saying I want her house, you’re saying, look at how she maximized **her** potential, I can also maximize my own potential.

**MOMMY (triumphantly)**

That’s EXACTLY what I’ve been trying to tell both of you this entire time!

Hanan understands Mommy’s statement to mean that if envy helps you reflect and improve upon yourself then it can be beneficial.

1. When has envyng someone else pushed you to improve yourself?

There is a Chasidic notion that when “you become bigger, I do not become smaller.” It is often explained by using the analogy of lighting one candle from another. The act of lighting one does not diminish the light of the original candle.

2. Why does it sometimes feel like acknowledging what someone else has diminishes what you have? Is this feeling more or less intense when it involves a friend or close acquaintance?
3. In what ways can you try to accustom yourself to see it the other way – encouraging yourself to grow instead of feeling envious?
4. Is there a negative consequence for others if envyng them provides you motivation to change yourself? If so, what is it, and is it worth the motivation it might provide? What if you were the one being envied, would that change your response?
5. What triggers envy in you? Are the triggers easy to identify? How comfortable do you feel sharing them with others? By identifying them, does it make it easier to let go of them a little?

**③ USING ENVY AS A KEY TO LOOK INSIDE OF YOURSELF**

Envy is complicated. As described in Section 1, Judaism teaches that envy can make us lose touch with ourselves and with other people, however, Judaism also teaches that envy can be used as a key to discover something hidden within ourselves, and as such, envy can be an immensely valuable tool for growth. Daddy touches on this idea when he and Hanan discuss Hanan’s disappointments regarding Jenny and his current situation. Daddy points out that the benefit of going beyond just envyng what others have is that Hanan may be able to figure out the root of his feelings.

**DADDY**

Really? Think about Kevin who had the car. He wasn’t even aware of the car because he was so focused on getting Jenny. Instead of looking outside to the next accomplishment, you could be looking inside of yourself.

**HANAN**

Well, that’s just disappointing.

**DADDY**

But at least it’s YOURS! Maybe if you focus on it and struggle with it, the disappointment will turn into a new source, a well. Maybe you’ll find out what you’re really after, instead of chasing another person’s dream that you adopted...

**MOMMY(cynically)**

And maybe Hanan *simply* wants what *Jason* has, because he feels he deserves it too?

**DADDY**

What are these things we so desperately want? Think about it, is this really about Jason, or even Jenny? If you were with Jenny, would all your problems really be solved?

**HANAN**

Probably not. But I'd be happier.

**DADDY**

How do you know?...And besides, if what you want, is to happier, then maybe it would be more effective to focus on what is making you unhappy?

**HANAN**

The fact that he has something tha I want! THAT is making me unhappy!

**DADDY**

Again, you're looking outside. Envy can be a quick solution, Hanan. You focus on the other person so you don't have to focus on yourself. But the SAME envy can also be a key to discovering something more meaningful that is unresolved within you!

**HANAN**

And what would that be?

**DADDY**

How should I know? it's YOUR key!!! But you have to choose to look INSIDE instead of outside at Jason or Jenny. Follow your envy, to figure out where the real hole is! What is the source? Where is the beginning of the story? **Stop looking in other people's windows.**

Daddy tries to point out to Hanan that envy and disappointment aren't necessarily harmful. If you become aware of your feelings of envy, if you observe your envy, even embrace your envy and follow it inwardly to its source within you (as opposed to staying focused outward, on the other person) envy can ultimately offer a phenomenal opportunity for discovery and growth. At its most paradoxical, Judaism even teaches that envy, if followed inwardly, can become a well, a source, instead of something that consumes you.

Referring to the same quote from Bereshit Rabbah 9:7 that was listed in Section 2, Nechama Leibovitz, a highly regarded contemporary commentator, has a similar interpretation as Daddy about envy and its potential for allowing growth:

Thus, according to Rav Nachman, it is through the confrontation rather than the repression of the inclination that man can realize his true greatness.

Nechama Leibovitz [http://lookstein.org/nechama\\_parasha1\\_bereshit.htm](http://lookstein.org/nechama_parasha1_bereshit.htm) (Bereshit Rabbah 9:7)

In both the Daddy's advice to Hanan, as well as Leibovitz's interpretation of Bereshit Rabbah, people are encouraged to think about envy in a different way. Daddy and Leibovitz point out that feelings of envy mask deeper internal issues; that the feelings themselves can point to something deeper inside of you. They encourage people to engage with the feelings, to live in the discomfort, and see what can be learned from the feelings.

1. What makes it so hard to move from engaging with the discomfort you may feel, to turning inward, embracing the discomfort, and learning from it? What can the benefit be if you follow through till the end? In what way does each step advance you to the next?
2. Daddy says "But you have to choose to look INSIDE, instead of outside at Jason and Jenny and everything external." Do you agree that often times the things you envy are surface concerns but not really the deeper issues you may have?
3. What are the reasons you might be nervous about confronting the deeper issues behind the envy you might feel toward others?
4. How do you feel about the idea that growth sometimes requires such difficult and intense work?