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What does Judaism teach us about Envy?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

As I write these words at the start of January I have in mind a recent conversation on the subject of Jewish Christmas tree envy. For those so afflicted, how does one handle this powerful feeling? Appreciate from afar? Get one ourselves? Compensate by going all out for Chanukah?

When Joseph's brothers saw that that father loved him over them they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him. Intentionally or not, it was clearly unfair for their father to play favorites. This aroused envy among the brothers for Joseph's special status. Worse than this, they not only begrudged his good fortune in their heart. They took violent steps to strip him of it. In so doing, they put themselves at risk. According to Pirke Avot, envy is a vice that can "take one out of the world." It can be corrosive, all-consuming and self-destructive.

Alternatively, according to another Talmudic saying, one ought to be contented with his or her lot. Consider the camel who wished to have horns but ultimately lost his ears. Envy of what you can't have can backfire. You can come out worse than when you started.

But perhaps acceptance of one's lot isn't the answer either especially if it promotes complacency. Envy is a natural human feeling. While it can be destructive it can also be a positive catalyst that motivates us to take active steps to go after similar rewards for ourselves. Though maybe not the Christmas tree.

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