

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 13(A): THOU SHALL NOT COVET

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Rabban Yochanan] said to them [his students], 'Go out and see what is a good way to which a person should cleave.' R. Eliezer said, 'a good eye.' R. Yehoshua said, 'a good friend.' R. Yossi said, 'a good neighbor.' R. Shimon said, 'one who considers consequences.' R. Elazar said, 'a good heart.' He said to them, 'I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over your words, for included in his words are your words.'

In the previous mishnas we were introduced to R. Yochanan and his five primary disciples. Here we learn of an interaction between the teacher and students, and many important lessons may be culled from it.

R. Yochanan asked his students to determine what is the best path a person should follow. Clearly, he was not referring to the proper path in life in a broad sense -- e.g., Judaism vs. Christianity, Torah vs. Koran, Chassid vs. Litvak, etc. Rather, as we see from the responses he received, he was asking for one small trait or practice which one should focus on -- one from which many other good traits will follow.

Along these lines, the commentator Rabbeinu Yonah (of 13th century Spain) observes that it is often better to become very good in one area than mediocre in a whole lot of them. The rabbi thus asked his students to find one good trait alone to focus on. By focusing on a single area, we not only achieve in that area, but we learn what it means to strive for excellence. And this will spill over to other areas as well. If we attempt to be good at everything, we will probably be mediocre all around, and we will have very little to show for ourselves when it's all said and done. If, however, we find limited areas in which to really excel, we will have at least a few accomplishments to make ourselves -- and our G-d -- proud.

This advice is not limited to character development. I have seen quoted from an early authority that it is advisable to select a single mitzvah (commandment) and "specialize" in it. Take one good deed and make it "yours": observe it as well as you can and without exception. It could be something grand and challenging -- never to gossip, lie, or raise your voice, or it could be something small but meaningful -- to light candles every Friday before sundown, to never leave synagogue before the end of services, to never waste food, to always greet others cheerfully, or to stay away from non-kosher seafood even if you know you are not perfectly careful about keeping kosher in all its aspects. It can be something you're already pretty good at. But it must be observed as a matter of principle and with a sense of sacrifice and commitment. Sooner or later we will all stand before the

Heavenly Tribunal. When our time comes, we may be far better served with a few genuine acts of devotion than a lifetime of mediocrity.

As a final introductory point, some of the commentators note that R. Yochanan instructed his disciples to "go out" and find which trait is most beneficial. Such knowledge may best be acquired by observing mankind, by seeing how people behave and what works best in the real world. It's very easy to moralize while sitting in the study hall, surrounded by Torah scholars and sacred books. It's so clear at such times to know what is right and wrong -- which kind of people are kosher and which are unacceptable. But this time, said the rabbi, take the time and effort to see what the real world is like. Very few of us merit to live surrounded by Torah our entire lives. It is unrealistic to ask for uncompromising perfection in all areas -- though it may appear so attainable in the sheltered environment of the study hall. Rather, asked R. Yochanan, think in terms of the small and practical. What should the average person do in order to maintain his religious bearings? What is one particular trait or attitude which will keep one's connection to Torah healthy and strong wherever his fate may lead him?

"R. Eliezer said a good eye:" One who has a good eye looks favorably upon others. He is not jealous of their wealth or accomplishments but is happy for them and theirs. We will learn later G-d willing that this was a quality of our forefather Abraham ([5:22](#)).

In truth, having a good eye towards others stems from possessing a healthy attitude about oneself. If a person sees himself as capable and worthy in G-d's eyes (which of course he is -- G-d makes no mistakes), then he will not begrudge others their achievements. We are all beings precious in the eyes of G-d, each in his or her own special way, and we all have our individual tasks to fulfill.

If, however, the person lacks such basic self-esteem, he will have a negative eye and look askance at others. He will feel threatened by their accomplishments -- seeing them as somehow detracting from his own tenuous sense of self-worth. He will become so preoccupied with the popularity and successes of others he will be unable to grow as an individual himself. He will spend his time wishing he were someone he is not and will meanwhile fail to see and develop his own talents. The Talmud states it well: "Anyone who sets his **eyes** (emphasis mine) on something which is not suited for him, what he seeks is not given to him and what is his is taken from him" (Sotah 9a).

One, however, who develops a good eye will recognize that he has his own G-d-given abilities and another person has his own. He will trust that G-d has given him what he needs to fulfill his mission in life. He may admire others' talents but he will not crave them and wish they were his own.

The Ibn Ezra, a medieval Spanish poet, philosopher and Torah commentator discusses the prohibition in the Torah not to covet (the last of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:14). He poses the obvious question. How can G-d restrict our thoughts and desires? If we desire someone else's wife or wealth, what can we do about it? Maybe G-d can tell us not to **act on** our impulses, but how can He tell us what we should feel?

The Ibn Ezra answers (to use my own illustration) that our attitude should be comparable to two skilled laborers who view each other's tools. The dentist will admire the construction worker's powerful, earth-heaving tools but will **not** desire his hydraulic hammer to remove his patient's loose tooth. ("Now stay exactly still... This might hurt just a little bit..." :) Likewise, the construction worker will admire the dentist's precision tools, but they will bear no relevance to his own task in life. Each person will realize that as fascinating as the other's tools are, they are simply meant for someone else and his life task rather than his own. We may learn from one another's gifts and accomplishments, but admiration does not need translate into coveting and jealousy.

This in truth is the attitude of the one who possesses a good eye. Each of us must recognize his or her own talents and develop them. We often attempt to take the "easy way out" in such matters. Rather than achieving on our own, we hope for the downfall of those we perceive as more talented than we. I.e., he'll lose his fortune, fall from his popularity, miss the free throw, etc. This, however, does not really solve our own problems. We cannot replace our own lack of achievement simply by eliminating our competition and the source of our jealousy. Unless you are the second best figure skater in the world, breaking the leg of your competitor will not place you on the top. (I wonder how many of you even remember the incident my example, this time around hopelessly dated, is based on. Oh well, you get the idea.) The only true antidote to jealousy is the good eye: one which reflects a healthy sense of self-worth on the inside and which sees that same goodness and potential without.

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