

JEALOUSY OF SCHOLARS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Why have you placed yourselves above the Congregation of G-d?" [16:3]

Korach and his group came to complain. Why were they complaining? The answer, of course, is that they were jealous of the high positions G-d had granted to Moshe and Aharon.

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan, points out that there are two types of jealousy. One can be jealous of the good things that another person has, meaning that he or she wants them also. And then there is another type of jealousy, which comes with a negative outlook towards others. One who has this second type of jealousy doesn't want others to be blessed with good things even (or especially) if he himself will never have them.

Korach and his congregation, says the Chofetz Chaim, suffered from this "stingy-eyed" sort of jealousy. Whether or not Korach could ever be the High Priest, he didn't want others to have the honor that he lacked. "Why have you placed yourselves above the Congregation of G-d?" As Rashi explains Korach's words to Moshe and Aharon, "far too much greatness have you arrogated for yourselves."

Jealousy of whatever sort is a terrible characteristic. It is something to avoid in any case. But when the jealousy is not merely a feeling that "I want that wealth or honor as well," but is accompanied by "and at least he or she should **not** have it," then it is even far worse than jealousy alone.

They say that every rule has an exception, and this is certainly true with regards to jealousy. Our Sages speak about it in the harshest terms in every case -- except one: "the jealousy of Scribes increases wisdom."

This is an amazing statement. The Torah tells us how horrible jealousy is, and the sort of destruction it can cause. Korach and his fellows were swallowed alive into the earth as a result of their jealousy. Everyone else, says the Sages, cannot be jealous. And then they say, "but we Sages **can** be jealous, and the result of that jealousy is increasing wisdom!"

It is obvious that the Sages are not speaking of the sort of jealousy that destroyed Korach. Certainly wisdom would not increase if scholars devoted themselves to tearing each other down.

This does not, however, completely solve our problem. It still seems odd that jealousy would be considered such a terrible characteristic in other cases, but helpful to learning and wisdom.

Perhaps we must look more deeply at what is truly wrong with jealousy. The jealous person is setting his or her sights upon something which he or she may never have. If Reuven is wealthy, Shimon may never be wealthy -- so his jealousy will only lead to bitterness. He would be far better off remembering the wisdom expressed in the Chapters of the Fathers: "Who is wealthy? He who is happy with his lot." If Sarah is beautiful, Rachel can only become negative and bitter if she is jealous of Sarah's beauty.

With Jewish learning, however, there is a fundamental difference: yes, you can have the wisdom you see in another person! There is no loss in saying "I want that wisdom for myself," because you are never hoping for something which is impossible for you to have. On the contrary, you are working to achieve something which G-d wants to give you.

Success in Jewish learning doesn't depend upon innate talents to nearly the same extent that it depends upon a desire to learn. Anyone who has spent time in a Yeshiva has seen at least one student of limited intellectual gifts who acquired tremendous knowledge by applying himself more. It's almost unbelievable how quickly this can happen.

So the "jealousy" of scholars -- as long as it is devoid of the negativity towards others that was found in Korach and his congregation of evil -- is only something which will, in fact, lead a person towards positive growth. If we see those who have acquired tremendous Torah wisdom and want it for ourselves -- we can, in fact, go and get it. Indeed, the jealousy of Scribes increases wisdom!

Good Shabbos,

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