

PIRKEI AVOT 2-12

Translation:

Rabbi Yehoshua says: The evil eye, the evil **inclination** and hatred towards human beings remove a person from the world.

Maimonides

He said that lust for money, excessive passion, and evil spiritedness—that is, the malady of melancholia which will bring a man to disdain what his eyes behold and he will loathe it the company of beasts and solitude in deserts and in forests will be beneficial to him, and an area that is uninhabited will be preferable to him—this [type of withdrawal] on their part is not from the standpoint of "separateness," but [it is to be attributed] to the evilness of their passion and their envy of others; these [traits] will undoubtedly put a man to death, for his body will become sick and he will die before his time.

רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֹמֵר, עֵין הָרַע,
וַיִּצַר הָרַע, וְשִׁנְאָת הַבְּרִיּוֹת,
מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן
הָעוֹלָם :

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This mishna continues to discuss the five primary students of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai (Mishna 10) and their teachings. Here R. Yehoshua, the second student, lists three personality flaws which "remove a person from the world." The implication is not simply that G-d will punish such a person, but that his behavior itself will actively "remove" him from this world. He will make his own life miserable. As we will see below, his evil traits will actively ruin his life, making him unable to enjoy even the blessings he has been granted.

The commentators (R. Yonah and others) understand an "evil" eye to mean a jealous one. One who has an evil eye looks askance at others. Rather than being happy with others' good fortune and accomplishments, he begrudges them what is theirs. And such a jealous person does not have a life -- not his own one at least. He pines away wishing he were

someone else -- that he had his fellow's talents, success, popularity, or prestige. And one who wishes he were someone else will fail to live up to his own talents -- or even recognize what they are. He will "remove" himself from the world, not living and enjoying the life G-d has granted him, but rather wasting away in greed and self-pity. As the Talmud puts it, "Anyone who sets his eyes on something which is not [meant] for him, what he seeks is not given to him, and what is his is taken from him" (Sotah 9a). He will certainly not get what is not meant for him, and by his own actions, he will deny himself that which is truly his as well.

Likewise, one who is ruled by his "evil inclination" -- his passions and lusts -- will be consumed by his desires and will be unable to live his own life positively and productively. His life will be an endless drive to satisfy his insatiable appetites -- ones which will merely grow the more he attempts to satisfy them. Regarding this, the Talmud provides us with

yet another pithy insight into the reality of the human condition: "There is a small limb in a man: if he starves it, it is satisfied; if he satisfies it, it is hungry" (Sukkah 52b). Human drives are an undeniable part of our reality. But as with all aspects of nature, if we do not control them, they will control us.

The final negative trait R. Yehoshua lists is hatred of others. We can perhaps contrast this to jealousy of others. The jealous person relates negatively to the world around. He is jealous of other people's talents, and so he wastes away wishing he were someone else rather than himself. One who hates others too is focused on the other person rather than himself. Rather than focusing on his own abilities and living his own life, he eats himself up with his dislike of others. He's more interested in his foe's failure than his own success. And so, he too does not truly have a life. (Anyone who has been involved (directly or indirectly) in ugly divorce proceedings can appreciate how true this is. I'll spend more money on lawyers than your entire claim just to make sure you don't get it.)

Thus, at first blush there seems a strong similarity between jealousy of others and hatred of

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them. Whereas jealousy stems from competition -- I envy you and therefore fail to appreciate myself, hatred is more outright destructive -- I hate you more than I care for myself. The faults are related, and the results equally tragic.

It is more difficult, however, to understand the rationale behind such hatred. Jealousy we can all understand: He's more popular, more successful, more highly regarded, etc. -- and so I become jealous. But where does anger towards others stem from? I don't believe this is simply a manifestation of jealousy -- since deep down I'm jealous of him I "hate" him and want his downfall -- because that is merely an expression of my jealousy. R. Yehoshua would not have listed that as a separate trait. I further do not believe we are talking about justified hatred of others -- he ripped me off and so I hate him. The healthy individual too would hate such a person, and not because he's all-consumed with others, ignoring his own life. If so, what sort of negative trait is hatred of others? Where does it stem from and what is its cause?

The commentator Rashi explains: "Hatred of others" is what the Sages call "sinas chinam" -- baseless hatred. I hate others for no real reason -- certainly no reason which justifies hatred. They are different, they have annoying habits, different religious practices or different outlooks in life. And so I hate them. I see the negative in them and find fault in their every action.

Well, we now know what this trait is, but we still do not know why. Why would I hate others for no other reason than that they are not me? What do I stand to gain from it? Yet the Jewish People have been riled by such senseless hatred for millennia. The Talmud tells us that the destruction of the Second Temple occurred because the Jews hated each other without reason (Yoma 9b). Anyone who has an even modest familiarity with Jewish history -- ancient, current and every stage in between -- knows that such hatred has wreaked havoc on Israel. We seem to be more consumed with hating each other than liking ourselves. From the Roman conquest to the ghettos of Nazi Germany, Jews have often been too busy fighting each other to unite against a common enemy -- even with their imminent doom plainly spelled out. And the results have invariably been catastrophic.

And so, the "why" looms ever larger. Why do we seem to have this predilection towards such obviously destructive behavior? Isn't tolerance clearly just a nicer way to live? We all become selfish, petty and immature now and then, but doesn't any rational person realize it is better to love than to hate? Are we Jews really such an evil, spiteful lot?

The answer is unfortunately a very simple one, and it provides us with a fundamental insight into the workings of the human mind. On a level I would much rather hate the rest of the world than like it. Why? Because it is the easy way of facing life. What should our attitude towards others be? That they are human beings in the image of G-d, that they are essentially good people, beloved to G-d and possessing Divine souls. I must see beyond our external differences and see the good inherent in them. I must learn from their good qualities. And they might even be better than I; their good behavior might just obligate me to improve my own ways.

Most importantly, though, I must look favorably upon the rest of mankind. I must expand out of my own space, out of my own self-centered shell. Seeing a world of color and diversity must force me to see the myriad reflections of G-d contained in humankind. I must be open to new friendships, to new ways of life, and to new attitudes. Each person I encounter teaches me just a little bit more, reveals yet another angle of G-dliness. I must expand and grow from such encounters -- and I must be prepared to grow.