

“The Problem with Other People’s Successes”

Shabbat Machar Chodesh: 29 Nisan 5775; April 18, 2015

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Last Shabbat, at the end of services, I bent down to wish my four year old friend Mia New-Schneider Shabbat Shalom. Now little Mia and I are good buddies. She goes to the Har Shalom Early Childhood Center and is here with her parents Dan and Betsy and her brother Noah almost every Shabbat. So we’re pretty comfortable with each other. Mia took her little four year old hands, put them on my bearded cheeks, and shook her head disapprovingly. “I don’t like it,” she said with a frown, referring to my beard. And because I just adore this kid so much, I wanted to shave it off right then and there!

The truth is, my wife doesn’t like it ...neither do my kids...But I haven’t been growing it out in order to channel my inner Justin Timberlake or Ryan Gossling. As many of you know, the period between Passover and Shavuot, is known as the Omer, or Sefirat Ha’Omer...when we literally count the days between our freedom from slavery in Egypt, to that glorious moment 49 days later when our ancestors stood together at Mt. Sinai and received the Torah. You can’t have Passover without Shavuot! It’s like having the Declaration of Independence without the Constitution. What would our country be if we threw off the yoke of England but didn’t adopt a system of laws and a structure of government of our own? Passover is our Declaration of Independence, and Shavuot is when we ratify our Constitution. Now there is also an agricultural component to this time period, and the Omer actually refers to a measure of barley that was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem in anticipation of the spring harvest. But there is still one additional layer of meaning that isn’t particularly related to the holiday cycle, but is very much related to my facial hair. The Talmud recounts that at this very time of year there was a great catastrophe that decimated 24,000 rabbis. These rabbis happened to be followers of the renowned Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef. Rabbi Akiva was a scholar of extraordinary accomplishment, who came from very humble origins. He was an illiterate shepherd who later in life became one of Judaism’s most influential scholars. He was a patriot and a martyr for teaching Torah in defiance of Roman decree. What happened to those 24,000 disciples of this illustrious teacher? What was the cause of their demise? Historians believe that the calamity was actually politically

motivated. Rabbi Akiva happened to be a well-known supporter of active, armed resistance to Roman occupation, so scholars contend that these students' association with a revolutionary leader made them targets of Roman reprisal.

But the Talmud offers a totally different explanation: *mipnei she'lo nahagu kavod zeh la'zeh*, their death, their destruction was caused by the fact that these students, these rabbis did not treat each other with respect. The Midrash Rabbah further offers, "they died because they grudged each other the knowledge of Torah." They were jealous of each other's learning and scholarship. Now I happen to believe that there is probably some truth to both the historical and Talmudic accounts of this tragedy. But it's the second of these that I want to focus on.

I want you to think about a time in your life when you heard of someone else getting a promotion, or being recognized for some accomplishment at work or school, or enjoying outright success. May it was a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend or a classmate. Think about how you felt about that other person getting all that positive attention. While you may have been happy for them, you may not have been entirely happy. Maybe you even congratulated them, wished them *mazal tov*, told them how much they deserved the attention, but somewhere deep inside you also felt a little bit jealous, a little bit envious, a little bit covetous of the honor and the spotlight. A lot of us have a hard time being truly happy for other people when they succeed. We allow someone else's accomplishments to make us doubt ourselves. How come I'm not making as much money? When will I get some recognition? Am I even good enough at my career to advance the way this other person is? When will I get my lucky break or be in the right place at the right time like that person was? Instead of just being happy for that other person, we have these questions and self-doubt swirls around in our heads. I hear whispers of this here in leafy Potomac, MD, where people, particularly at this time of year are comparing SAT scores, college admissions, and scholarship packages. It can be bittersweet to hear about someone else's kid getting into a prestigious school when your kid got wait-listed or rejected. The students of Rabbi Akiva took that to a wild extreme, allowing that envy and jealousy to literally destroy them. And that, my friends, is why I have grown a beard.

A wise friend and mental health professional told me recently that envy is the most destructive of human emotions. Envy, in clinical terms, is not the same as how we may use it in casual conversation. Envy means that I want something so badly that I'm prepared to make sure that if

I can't have it, no one else is going to have it either. This can lead people to do some pretty crazy, destructive things. When I was teaching these Talmudic texts to my sixth graders in Hebrew school this week, the story of Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan came up in conversation...remember them? I was shocked that they did, because none of them were alive at the time! In the 1994 World Figure Skating Championships, which would determine the composition of the Olympic team Tonya Harding was implicated in a brutal attack on her main competitor Nancy Kerrigan, who was unable to compete because of the assault. Harding went on to win first-place in the championship, but when her role in the attack on her competitor was revealed she was stripped of her title. Kerrigan went on to compete in the '94 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway, winning in the Silver medal. Now most of us won't take envy to the extent of causing physical injury or death, but some of us will allow this toxic emotion to fester inside of us and do damage to ourselves, if not others. Tonya Harding's toxic envy was career ending, and her connection to the assault on her teammate will forever be her legacy. In trying to destroy someone else, she ended up destroying herself. It's interesting to note that Rabbi Akiva's students also not only allowed envy to tear them apart, but following the plague the Talmud reports: *haya ha'olam shamem*, the world was bereft of Torah. That is to say, they not only acted destructively toward each other, they also left the Jewish community without teachers, without role models, without a way to connect to Torah. These men, who were supposedly jealous of each other's rank in learning Torah, wound up bankrupting the Jewish people of Torah until they were replaced by other scholars.

As you know it is common to not shave when a person is in a state of mourning. Some people don't shave during shiva, some for all of sheloshim, some even refrain from shaving for a year if they lost a parent. There's no way that my wife –or Mia New Schneider- will let me keep this beard for a year. But I felt that I needed to take this lesson of the Omer period to heart, and to really internalize [and for that matter, externalize] its message. The next time we hear of someone else's success, let's not immediately make it about us. Let's not consider someone else's advancement or good fortune as a critique of where we are or what we're doing in life. Happiness, taught the rabbis, is being able to find satisfaction in whatever station of life you're in, with whatever you happen to have, and whatever you happen to be doing. *Eizehu ashir?* Who is rich? *Ha'sameach be'chelko*...the one who is truly happy with their lot.

My friend the mental health professional told me that envy has no up-side. There's no way to twist it or redefine it as a positive or healthy trait. We've all got our own struggles with envy, and we just have to acknowledge it, contain it, and set it aside at a safe distance. When we are able to do that, we'll be able to be a whole lot happier for other people, and a whole lot happier with ourselves as well.