Toxic Jealousy

Shabbat B'reishit 5787

October 9, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

"The Bible," wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "is primarily not [hu]man[ity]'s vision of God but God's vision of [hu]man[ity]. The Bible is not [humans'] theology but God's anthropology, dealing with [hu]man[ity] and what [God] asks of [us]."[i] If Heschel was right, then God displays a dim view of humanity in opening chapters of Torah. *Parashat B'reishit*, the first portion after we have rerolled to the beginning, includes not only the creation story, but all the narratives about the first human family—eating the forbidden fruit and, not long thereafter, a murder.

Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's sons, bring offerings to God. Cain, a farmer, presents "the fruit of the soil." Abel, a shepherd, offers "the choicest firstlings of the flock." God gratefully receives Abel's offering, but not Cain's. We aren't told why. We read that Cain speaks to Abel, but we aren't told what he says. Our sages speculate that he expresses his anger and articulates a justification for murder, but the words are lost.[ii] Or perhaps Cain confronts Abel with the plan of expressing

himself verbally but is overtaken by his jealousy and anger. He does not "use his words," as we like to teach our children. Instead, Cain murders his brother.[iii]

Heschel **was** right. Torah does teach anthropology—that is, it tells us what makes humans human. Being human includes feeling jealous from time to time. When jealousy turns toxic, it can lead to destructive actions and disastrous consequences.

Jealousy is considered so destructive that Torah addresses it in the Tenth Commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's [spouse] or slave of any gender, or ox or donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."[iv]

In a book called *Inscribed: Encounters with the Ten Commandments*, Alan Morinis suggests a three-step process to avoid coveting, which begins with recognizing that we want something we do not have.[v] The Tenth Commandment demands that we acknowledge we are disturbed by unhealthy desires. We have permitted the *yetzer ha-ra*, evil inclination, to get the best of us.[vi] God would be accused of wishful thinking, if the Holy One were really asking us not to **want**

something that isn't ours. Moreover, what we want may not be tangible, despite the Torah's list of specific people and things we must not covet. We may, like Cain, want God's apparently withheld approval—or, not so different, the approval of a parent or teacher.

No, the Tenth Commandment is not a prohibition against **wanting** something that somebody else has. Still, the first step to avoiding the sin is to recognize that we **do** want things we do not currently possess.

Our Al Barron Book Club is currently reading Nicholas Lemann's investigative memoir, *Returning: A Search for Home Across Three Centuries*. I am so taken by the book that I'm now rereading it. Lemann describes his father endearingly, except when he's writing about his father's desire to be fully accepted at the pinnacle of New Orleans high society despite being Jewish, which is most of the time. Tom Lemann imagined that, one day, if refined Reform Jews of German extraction could be disassociated from the hoi-polloi of Eastern European Jews and their "primitive" ethnicity and religiosity, if these Reform Jews would continually strive to strip themselves of every unique vestige of Jewishness that distinguishes

them from their surroundings, and especially if they would never speak about antisemitism or Israel when non-Jews could hear them, then a person like the author if not his father could one day be the king-for-a-day during Mardi Gras. The Lemanns always had a Christmas tree, and their annual Christmas party was a grand affair, attracting a broad swath of New Orleans society, including a smattering of Jews deemed appropriate to the setting. Tom Lemann even designed a coat of arms, a family crest, as if the family had been Rhine Valley nobles, electors in the Holy Roman Empire, not Jewish peddlers eking out a living and seeking to evade persecution.[vii]

Tom Lemann's jealousy, craving what a handful of his neighbors had but he did not, deprived his children of a rich and meaningful Jewish upbringing.

Nicholas Lemann and his sister were far from the only Reform Jewish southerners of their generation who were deprived in that way. The desire to fit in fully, not to be associated primarily and certainly not exclusively with Jews, and to be fully embraced at the pinnacle of society was common among Jews of German extraction in the generation that raised Baby Boomers like Lemann and his sister.

On Rosh Hashanah, “Standing on Their Shoulders” told the story of the “scandal” that rocked Congregation B’nai Israel when the then-rabbi invited Phil Kaplan, of blessed memory, to chant the Haftarah and its blessings in Hebrew on the High Holy Days. That put a stop to chanting Torah or Haftarah here for a long time, until it eventually became part of Bar and Bat Mitzvah here, although Bar and Bat Mitzvah was not embraced by some B’nai Israel families whose priority was acceptance beyond the Jewish community. In some long-time Little Rock families, Baby Boomers who made Jewish choices as adults settled in larger metropolitan areas. Nicholas Lemann settled in New York, where he’s an active Conservative Jew. Had he not been so repulsed by the excesses of the Reform Judaism in which he was raised, though, he could have found the same fulfillment in more than a few Reform congregations.

Today, the congregation where Nicholas Lemann was raised is dying, a casualty of toxic jealousy, the desire to fit into elite New Orleans by deemphasizing Jewishness. Congregation B’nai Israel, by contrast, is thriving, as is a New Orleans Reform congregation a few blocks from the Lemann family’s temple, because both

have diversified membership and been unafraid to adopt traditional practices that are consistent with the values of Reform Judaism.

We may be grateful that Reform Judaism has evolved in form but not in what it holds most dear: Studying and observing Torah—that is, practicing Judaism—with a goal of bringing the entire world closer to redemption. Many of us here tonight have been among those who embraced and even steered a Reform evolution away from a style of Judaism that met the needs of the descendants of German Jewish immigrants who were jealous of status denied them not because of the supposed ethnic peculiarity or actual religious practices of Jews from Russia or Poland, but because of antisemitism.

If we are to be jealous—and to some extent, that's the human condition—let us be envious of a future we must create together with good people across the breadth and depth of American society. That future would be free of antisemitism, of racism, of sexism, of homophobia and transphobia, of Islamophobia, indeed of all the prejudices that keep worthy individuals from reaching their full potential, all the while proudly expressing ourselves as exactly who we are.

Amen.

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[i] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 1956.
[ii] See, for example, Rashi on Genesis 4:8.
[iii] Genesis 4:1-8.
[iv] Exodus 20:14.
[v] Alan Morinis, "Conquering and Transforming the Impulse to Want What Is Not Yours," *Inscribed: Encounters with the Ten Commandments*, Rabbi Oren J. Hayon, Editor, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, 195. The translations in brackets are also Alan's, from the same article, but not the same sentence.
[vi] My own chapter in *Inscribed* describes the Tenth Commandment as a warning: "beware the *yetzer ha-ra*."
[vii] Nicholas Lemann, *Returning: A Search for Home across Three Centuries*, Liveright Publishing, 2026.