

You say you don't believe in monsters? You haven't since you were a child? But believe me, we are all haunted by monsters. For some, it's the monster of guilt and shame hovering over us, crushing our hopes, killing our dreams. For others, it's the monster of pain and loss dogging our footsteps, filling us with doubt and despair. For most of us, though, it's a "green-eyed monster" one that sits on our shoulder, cranes our necks to look enviously about us, and forever turns our faces down in disappointment.

We know this monster well – don't we? He's our constant companion wherever we go, never letting us sit back and take pleasure in our accomplishments, ever driving us on like a demon from hell. We say we are adults, and we know there is no such thing as monsters. But the truth is: there are monsters in our world and the worst one for most of us is the "green-eyed monster" of jealousy, greed, and envy. A monster that drives us on – all too often, literally, to an early grave.

Do you doubt it? Do you doubt this monster controls us? Then look around. Look at the way we live. For most of us, it really is – in Thomas Hopps' words – a struggle of all against all." How often do we find ourselves – in spite of our best intentions – looking upon our neighbors, our classmates, our co-workers not as friends, not as associates but as competitors. Our lives are like some great, cosmic contest. It is us against everyone else. When we come up short, we are devastated. When we see their successes, we start to worry. For if they are getting ahead, then surely, we must be losing ground.

We know, of course, how this, "green-eyed monster" got control over us. Competition – the root of jealousy and envy – had been drummed into us from the time we were young – especially in us males. From the very first, we were told that life is a contest in which the only worthwhile goal is to finish first.

For us, the sports field was the great metaphor of our lives. And it wasn't how we played the game. It was whether we won or lost. The world hailed the winner, pitied, or even despised the loser – and there was no mid-ground in between. We were taught to

accept the “wisdom” of Vince Lombardi – that winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing. So, we aspired to be winners, to come out on top no matter the cost.

We learned this in the school where we discovered that the pursuit of knowledge was less important than class ranking. We learned that there was nothing more important than being best looking, best dressed, most admired. We learned to raise our voices in one great, ugly chorus of the chant, “We are number One, we are number One.” All the while that monster smirked, remarkably from our shoulder asking, “Are you, are you sure?”

This is the way we grew up – most of us – driven, unhappy, never at peace. No wonder we spend so much of our time pursuing trophies of success – a big home, a fancy car, a more exotic vacation. We want to prove that we are winners. We want to show the world that we have arrived, that we are “special.” But it’s not easy – because we ourselves are never quite certain if it’s true.

That’s why we are always so busy calculating, counting our points. We need to know how we are doing. Just as we check the sports page or the stock market in the morning to see who is up and who is down, we need to know where we are in the “standings of life.” Almost unconsciously, we keep a kind of scoreboard in our heads, comparing ourselves with everyone. And the outward signs – the labels of our shirts, the schools to which we send our children, the stores in which we shop – these are the indicators of who is winning and who is losing.

The problem is: it’s hard to convince the world we are winners when we are not sure ourselves. For there are always new trophies, new rewards, new competitors in the game. And even if we are on top today, how can we be sure about tomorrow? So we are out there forever achieving and acquiring. For us, there is no such thing as having “enough.” We hunger for more and more, bigger and better. Whatever we see, we need. Whatever our neighbor has, we have to have. For if he has something and we don’t – where are we? Are we losing the race? Are we falling behind? Plagued by doubt, we acquire and amass, all the while looking nervously over our shoulder to see that no one is passing us.

We focus on what we lack rather than on what we have, on what we need rather on how we are blessed. This is what torments us – this terrible feeling of envy feeds on our

peace of mind, brings us misery and internal anxiety that we are not getting what we deserve. In the words of the Talmud: "We who focus our attention on that which is not ours are denied what we seek and lose what we already have." It's time for us to banish the monster from our lives, to escape his tormenting grip and find real meaning and joy in our lives. Let me tell you: it's not easy to rise above envy and jealousy. We all look nervously over our shoulders. We all want what others have. We all envy the successes of our friends and brothers – all of us. In the words of one essayist: This is what makes the "green-eyed monster" so pernicious: it is in all of us, and it is deadly.

We Jews have taught this from time immemorial – perhaps none better than the great Rabbi Israel Salanter. According to the tale, Rabbi Israel was overheard one day pacing his room, endlessly repeating to himself the words of Pirket Avot: "Envy, lust and the pursuit of honor drive a person from the world." Over and over again he repeated these words like a Mantra till finally one of his young disciples asked him the meaning of his strange behavior. "Tonight," Rabbi Israel explained, "I am going to the home of the richest man in our town to beg for Tzedakah for our community here. I know that I will see the most phenomenal wealth and luxury and I'm truly afraid I will be tempted by feelings of envy. All I can do is protect myself with the words of the rabbis: 'Envy, lust and the pursuit of honor drive a person from the world.' So, I say it again and again in hopes that it will protect me from the demon of envy." The "green-eyed monster" is a tough one to fight – but I tell you that he can be defeated. How?

First, we need to take the time to ask ourselves if our frantic pursuit of cars and clothes, furniture and vacations is making us really happy. Are we ever really satisfied? We always imagine that if we just had enough money to buy this or afford that – then finally we would be happy. But does it happen? Do we ever sit back after a purchase and say – now life is good. Now I've got everything I need and lack for nothing. Is this what happens, or do we find the satisfaction of one appetite leads inevitably to the inflaming of the next, that our possessions invariably disappoint and isolate us, obscuring from our view precious opportunities for love and joy.

Somehow it all reminds me of Eugene Ionesco's little play, "The New Tenant." It's a marvelous little play about a man who moves to a new apartment. As the drama begins, movers are bringing in his furniture. They carry in a sofa and some chairs and an armoire and a refrigerator – on and on they go. Pretty soon there is no place on the stage for the man to move. He just has to stand still. Then they report that the stairway outside is clogged with furniture, and they've got to get it n. So, the movers go on top of the roof and they began letting down furniture onto the stage from above. Soon they got furniture all the way to the very top of the stage, and you don't see the man at all any longer. Finally, an unseen voice says: "Is there anything else?" And way down under it all, under all the stacked-up furniture, in a tiny voice, the new tenant says: "The lights. Get the lights." The lights go out and the play ends.

How apt is this for so many of us. We are so enveloped, so enwrapped by things; we are no longer able to see anybody but ourselves. Surrounded by our hard-won possessions, we find ourselves disappointed and alone. We've lived out the nightmare of getting everything we ever wanted and now we have to face the sad and lonely truth, about ourselves: that while we were rich in possessions, we were poor indeed in joy and love. If we could only realize today how illusory and empty this pursuit of more and more, bigger and better – we would be well on our way to finding something truly bigger and better in our lives.

But we all need more than this awareness if we are going to defeat the "green-eyed monster." We will also need to change the focus of our lives from acquiring to doing, from exclusive interest in ourselves to compassion for others. We Jews call this kind of doing mitzvoth. Truly, these acts of kindness and caring are our best protection against the monster. Does this sound a little naïve? It's not! In fact, it really works. When we concentrate on doing mitzvoth for others, when we focus on the task of building a more loving and caring world, the "green-eyed monster" has no entry into our lives. We have barred the door and it cannot enter.

Our compassion for others, our ability to sense that they, too, are God's creatures – this is the surest way to defeat the monster. When we look to those beside us, not to those

ahead or in hot pursuit of us, we pull ourselves out of the race. When we learn to stand in the shoes of brothers and sisters, and feel their pain as our own, then we are more fully human, and the "green-eyed monster" does not stand a chance.

My friends, it's true. We are privileged, indeed. We go to sleep with full bellies and a roof over our heads. We are able to run and do and see so much of the world. We are blessed – I pray – with the love of family and friends. And yet we take all of this for granted. We say: "With my luck..." as though nothing ever works out right for us, as if life continually conspired against us. We miss the fact that we are the most fortunate generation of Jews, of human beings that ever was. Yet we complain about what we lack and what we will never have. I guess it's only human – but it's truly sad. Because, you see, we already have everything we need and it's not a better car or a bigger house. It is the awareness that we are already blessed, already have all we need. We simply need to open our eyes and our ears, our hearts and our souls and appreciate what is already ours.

It is like the story of the great but impoverished art lover who spends all his time standing in awe in front of the great art works of his day. As he stands enthralled before the particularly lovely piece, he is asked by a bystander. "Why do you get so excited about things you can never afford to have than to own?" The art lover replies: "I'd rather be able to appreciate things I cannot have than to have things I cannot appreciate." If only we could realize this. If only we could understand that we lack nothing but the awareness that we already have everything we need to be happy. Then we will have the "green-eyed monsters" on the run.

Finally, we need to cultivate a stronger sense of self-esteem, for the surer we are of ourselves, the less liable are we to the torments of jealousy and envy. Our best protection against the "green-eyed monster" is a sense of our own worth, independent of what we own, what we wear or what we drive. We shouldn't need initials on our clothes – either our own or some designers in order to confirm our value.

This has certainly been my experience over the years. Again and again, I have seen it. Those who are at peace with themselves envy nothing and no one. They can be happy when others succeed because, you see, it's no threat to them. Their sense of themselves

as successful does not require someone else to be a failure. They don't need "losers" in order to consider themselves "winners."

When we are happy with ourselves, we need not tear down, knock down, find fault. When we are at peace with ourselves, we can enjoy the successes of others without feeling threatened. Here is the simple truth. When all is said and done, our very best protection against the "green-eyed monster" is a sense of our own worth, the feeling that we are truly successful in what we do.

So, it is with us when we allow the "green-eyed monster" to rule over our lives. We are driven by competition and resentment too, our envy boomerangs back on us, we are cut down by our own ill-will and pettiness. But when we concentrate on doing mitzvot, when we remember how blessed we are in our lives, when we are at peace with ourselves, we need not fear the terrible "green-eyed monster." It has no hold over us. We are free from it forever.