

What was Lee Harvey Oswald's motive for assassinating JFK?

- Shmuel Herzfeld.

If the Warren Commission understood Ibn Ezra's commentary on Lo Tachmod they might have acquitted Lee Harvey Oswald.

Thou Shall Not Covet Yitro--5767 , Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld

What was Lee Harvey Oswald's motive for assassinating JFK? Right after the murder Newsweek wrote, "Kennedy was Oswald's victim, because the young prince at the White House was and had everything that Oswald, the perpetual failure never could be or have."

According to a scholar named, Helmut Schoeck, Oswald's motive was as simple as the age old sin of envy. Schoeck argues that when you read Oswald's personal letters you see that he was consumed with envy; he claims that Oswald never could have committed this same crime against an older, less handsome President from an undistinguished family who was married to an ordinary looking woman. Envy drove him to kill JFK.

The prohibition against envy goes back to the Ten Commandments where we are told, "Lo tachmod beit reiekhah, do not covet the house of your friend. Lo tachmod eishet reiekhah ve-avdo ve-amato ve-shoro vechamoro ve-khol asher le-reoekhah, Do not covet the wife of your friend, nor his servant, maid, ox, donkey, nor anything that belongs to your friend."

We need to distinguish envy from jealousy. Envy comes at the very end of the Ten Commandments. At the beginning of the Ten Commandments, we are told that God is a Jealous God, e-l kanah. Jealousy means that that we are upset when someone else has something which we think belongs to us. When we say God is jealous, it means He is unhappy if we worship other gods because we really belong to Him.

On the other hand, envy means we want what belongs to another person. Envy means that we are unhappy with the possessions or achievements of another, even though we have no claim to those possessions or achievements and even to the point of spite.

The Ten Commandments are special. We recognize them as perhaps the most sacred part of the Torah because it is the only time God speaks to the entire nation. Many commentators say that all the mitzvoth of the Torah are hinted to in the Ten Commandments.

How does the prohibition against envy fit into the Ten Commandments? Why include the sin of envy in this fundamental group? After all, envy is different than the other nine Commandments. It is the only one of the commandments where we are told not to have an emotion or a feeling. As if it is even possible!

Can you imagine the Torah telling us that it is prohibited to be afraid or sad? Why is this emotion

different? There are other emotions that the Torah might have prohibited. Yet, here the Torah only tells us not to covet.

Further, envy is listed as the last of the Ten Commandments. Whenever something is first or last in a group it is a signal to give it extra significance. By its placement we are being told that “Do not covet” is at the core of the Ten Commandments. Why is that?

Envy is a nearly universal emotion. Every culture recognizes the power and danger of envy. This just makes the Torah’s prohibition of it more challenging. How can we be commanded to suppress a commonplace feeling?

The commentator Avraham Ibn Ezra helps us with these questions. (Ibn Ezra was a scholar who traveled throughout Europe and wrote a commentary on the Torah in the 12th century.)

I don’t believe they consulted his commentary when they conducted the Warren Commission, but his approach might have helped acquit Lee Harvey Oswald.

Ibn Ezra offers a parable. He argues that if a simple villager sees a beautiful princess he will not covet her in his heart since he knows from birth that such a relationship is impossible. We do not covet what is impossible. We are not envious of birds for flying or of bees for stinging. We only covet what we think is possible.

When we are envious we are demonstrating that we think we should have what the other has. We think it is the way the world is supposed to be. We are unhappy with our current state of existence.

Although, this is a natural emotion it demonstrates that our fundamental approach to the world is way off. It shows a lack of faith on our part. We must realize that whatever we have in this world is from God. Ibn Ezra writes: Kol maskil tzarikh she-yedah, every wise person needs to understand, ki ishah yafah oh mammon lo yimtzaenu ba-avur chahmato ve-daato, rak ka-asher chalak lo Hashem, that he will not find an appropriate wife or a lot of money on account of his own abilities, but only through what God gives to him.

As the Talmud states, “Benei, Chayai, U-mezonai lav be-zechuta talya milta elah be-mazala. How one’s children turn out, how long one lives, and how much money one makes do not depend upon a person’s own merits, but are entirely dependent upon mazal.” Mazal here means that which God decides to give him. Ibn Ezra concludes that if a person realizes this he will not be envious of anyone else.

When one covets something in their heart, what they are really doing is demonstrating that they do not believe that everything they have in this world is from God. They are saying whatever I have comes from my own merit and not from God. When envy appears in a person it thus demonstrates a fatal flaw in their thinking; it is a flaw which arises from a denial of God in our daily lives. Envy is thus idolatry; it is a rejection of God’s role in our lives.

The Ten Commandments begin with the recognition that we must believe in God and take no

other false gods. They end with the practical application of that recognition; we must be aware of how the material aspects of our lives are due to God and God alone.

Unless we have that recognition we will be doomed to a miserable life where we are filled with unending envy. Even more harmfully, the envy will be directed at those closest to us.

There is recognition amongst scholars that envy is most powerful and hateful when it is measured against someone in close proximity. Consider this proverb: “The envious man thinks that if his neighbor breaks a leg, he will be able to walk better himself.” We think we could have what our friend has and thus we envy them.

“Overwhelming and astounding inequality arouses far less envy than minimal inequality which inevitably causes the man to think, ‘I might almost be in his place.’” (Schoeck, *Envy*, 77.)

The verse that prohibits envy doesn’t just say, “lo tachmod,” do not covet. Three times it says “reiekhah.” Do not covet the house, spouse or possessions of YOUR FRIEND. The key here is that it is YOUR FRIEND’s possession that you must not covet.

Many societies have tried to end envy. Some societies have adopted all sorts of magical rites in order to ward off the evil powers of envy. Some have even adopted ideologies and political theories in order to end envy. One can even see Marxism as an attempt to end envy in the world.

But all these societies miss the point. Envy is not based upon objective data.

When I was 18 years old I lived on a kibbutz for awhile. On the kibbutz everyone had the same house, ate the same food, owned the same TV, and shared the same car. And yet, envy was still there in great force. If we all looked the same, we might still be envious of what other people are thinking.

There is only one way to end envy and that is to recognize that our Creator is responsible for everything we have in our possession.

Life is full of choices. We can live a life filled with envy. But as the proverb says, “envy makes life bitter.” Or we can obey the Ten Commandments and live a life in service of God. If we do so, when we our neighbor succeeds, there will be no envy, only an even greater love for God.