

“CAN WE REJOICE IN THE SUCCESS OF OTHERS?”

Jealousy of others, even those closest to us, can poison our own happiness. Samuel Beckett's relationship with his wife Suzanne was soured by her increasing jealousy of his fame as a writer. One day in 1969 the phone rang. Suzanne answered, listened for a moment, and hung up. Looking stricken, she said to Beckett, "What a catastrophe!" She had just been told the Swedish academy awarded Beckett the Nobel Prize for literature.

In robbing us of the ability to be happy for others, jealousy reduces the joy we can have in this world. "It is not enough to succeed" said La Rochefoucauld, "one's friends must fail." The aphorism satirizes the real attitude of many. Success is somehow sweeter if it is comparative -- the downfall of another feels as elevating as our own rise.

After the Exodus from Egypt, now free, Moses encounters his father in law Yithro. Yithro is exultant, and rejoices over the kindnesses that God showed to Israel.

Yithro is himself a Priest, and he is faced with evidence that God has shown a special bond not with him, but with Moses and the Jewish people. The natural, almost inevitable result would be jealousy. But remarkably Yithro rises above jealousy, for he possesses the rare and treasured capacity of being happy for another's good fortune. Yithro has the equanimity of righteousness.

Moses learns Yithro's lesson well. Years later he, too, might have felt jealousy over God's relationship to others. While wandering in the desert, Joshua approaches Moses, upset that two Israelites, Eldad and Medad, are prophesying. Instead of feeling threatened, Moses says simply: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!" (Num. 11:29). Moses and Yithro remind us of the ideal -- rejoicing in the goodness, and the good fortune, of others.