

Terumah: Wealth or Wisdom?
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The story is told of a poor Jew who found a wallet containing \$1000. Amazing, he thought. But then he saw a notice in shul stating that a wealthy Jew has lost his wallet and was offering a \$100 reward to anyone who returned it. So, the poor Jew quickly located the owner and gave him the wallet.

The rich man counted the money and said, "I see you've already taken your reward."

"What are you talking about?" the poor Jew responded.

The wealthy Jew continued, "This wallet had \$1100 in it when I lost it."

The two men began arguing. They argued and argued until eventually, they came before Rabbi Katz.

Both men presented their case with the wealthy man concluding, "Rabbi Katz, I trust you believe me."

"Of course, I do," said Rabbi Katz. The rich man smiled; the poor man was devastated. Then Rabbi Katz took the wallet out of the wealthy man's hands and gave it to the poor man.

"Hey, what are you doing?" the rich man yelled angrily.

Rabbi Katz responded, "You are an honest man. So, if you say that your wallet had \$1100 in it, I believe you. At the same time, if the man who found this wallet was a liar and a thief, he wouldn't have returned it. Which means that this wallet must belong to somebody else.

"But what about my money?" the rich man cried.

The rabbi responded, "I guess we'll just have to wait until somebody finds a wallet with \$1100 in it!"

We have been hearing a lot about the rich and the poor- the rights of the poor, the ethics of the rich. One question, recently posed at a primary debate, caught my attention: "Should billionaires exist?" Now I know there is a lot to unpack in that question- questions about economic justice, about socialism, about campaign finance reform and more. We can't tackle all of those questions this morning. So, I want to stick with the primary question: Should billionaires exist?

For now, I am drawn to this topic not to endorse a particular candidate but to clarify what Judaism has to say about wealth? In a week when we've seen the market plummet, we can only hope that the question is not theoretical.

Perhaps unexpectedly, this question is directly related to our parasha. When we read the details about building the mishkan (tabernacle), our eyes may glaze over. But there is one detail over which we must pause.

Just outside the Holy of Holies was a long hallway that ran east west. In that hallway stood the menorah and a table with 12 loaves of bread. Moshe was told by God, “place the menorah on the southern wall and the table opposite it on the northern wall- et hamenorah al tzela hamishkan teimana v’hashulchan titen al tzela tzafon (26:35).

What is the significance where this furniture was placed? Is it the biblical version of feng shui or does it have deeper significance?

We read in the Talmud (Baba Batra 25b): Rabbi Yitzchak said, “One who wants to have wisdom should turn to the south; if he wants wealth he should turn to the north. The way to remember this statement is to recall that the menorah was on the southern wall and the table was on the northern wall. אמר רבי יצחק הרוצה שיחכים ידרים ושיעשיר יצפין וסימניך שלהן בצפון ומגורה בדרום

What are we talking about? Apparently, Rabbi Yitzchak suggests that during the amidah we turn our body one way or the other depending on what we are praying for. If we pray for wisdom, symbolized by the light of the menorah, we should turn our body to the south. If we pray for wealth, symbolized by the table, we should turn to the north. (Let me pause and explain why the table of bread symbolizes wealth. It is just like when we refer to money as dough.)

The northern wall is associated with wealth because the northern winds were thought to bring drought and thus raise the cost of grain. The southern wall is associated with wisdom because the sun, a reminder of Divine radiance, lay to the south.

I have to say, this is a bizarre passage. First, I thought we were supposed to face east. Moreover, I thought “m’lo haaretz k’vodo, God fills all space.” If so, why do we turn one direction or another at all? Perhaps it is for this reason that Rabbi Yitzchak’s opinion is not codified in the Shulchan Arukh, the Code of Jewish law. At the same time, I have to admit, I’d be curious to look around during davening and see which of you are facing north, which south.

As an aside I’ll just mention that some people arrange their shabbat table corresponding to this layout. They place their shabbat candles on to the south and their table to the north of their room. (I’ll give you a minute to picture your dining room set up. Mine is the opposite because of how the room is laid out.)

Let’s return to the Rabbi Yitzchak who taught turn to the south to pray for wisdom, the north to pray for wealth. Let me point out the obvious. Unlike other faith traditions that glorify poverty, Judaism believes it is kosher to pray for and strive for wealth. We even say on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, “Avinu malkeinu kotveinu b’seder paranasal v’kalkala God write me in the book of prosperity.” We could look as well at the description of the Mishkan and the Temple in this morning’s Torah and Haftara. These were not minimalist shrines. They were opulent, heavily laden with gold and silver, with precious stones and cloth. Apparently, God likes glitz.

In his book, *With All Your Possessions, Jewish Ethics and Economic Life*, author, Bank of Israel economist, and Torah scholar, Dr Meir Tamari writes: “Mainstream Judaism saw man’s material welfare as a reward from heaven, a gift of the Deity and therefore as something not intrinsically bad, but rather something to be valued and prized.” At the same time Tamari continues, “all of man’s actions, including those involved in the accumulation of material goods, are to be subjected to the ethical, moral, and religious demands of the Torah, so that the individual and society can attain a state of sanctity even while carrying out the most mundane acts (p. 30, 32). In other words, there is nothing wrong with wealth as long as it is obtained honestly and used ethically. We should view wealth as not just as a product of hard work but as a gift from God, as a Divine subsidy. Therefore, those who are so blessed have an opportunity indeed a responsibility to use their wealth to do good in the world.

To be fair, Jewish sources are equally clear that a lifestyle focused largely on materialism, on luxuries, on overindulgence is empty, irresponsible, a distortion of Jewish values and potentially morally and spiritually destructive.

To summarize, in Jewish tradition, there is nothing wrong with being wealthy. “From the Jewish perspective, the question is, how did you acquire the wealth and what are you doing with it. Financial well-being has no intrinsic value. How we use it determines its values and measures our character.” (Reconstructing Judaism website).

Let’s go back to our passage in the Talmud. Rabbi Yitzchak said, “pray to the south if you seek wisdom. Pray to the north if you seek wealth.” It seems to be one or the other. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. disagrees. Rather he says, we should always face south because if you have wisdom, you will acquire wealth *שמחוך שמתחכם, מתעשר*.

Now I know we can all think of examples of people who are wise but not rich and people who are rich but not wise. But this is how we can understand Rabbi Yehoshua’s teaching. Rabbi Yehoshua says face south to seek wisdom because wealth without wisdom is vanity and because if you have wisdom, you are already quite rich. This sentiment is affirmed by a story in Sefer Melachim, the Bible’s Book of Kings. It is a story appropriate for our own day about appointing the leader of a nation.

When Solomon was about to be appointed king and placed on the throne, God appeared to him and said, “with what shall I bless you?” Solomon thought for a moment and said, “God, you have made me king. But I know not how to come and how to go. Give me, therefore an understanding heart to judge thy people, v’natata l’avdcha lev shomeia lishpot et amcha l’havin bein tov l’ra.” This answer pleased God. And so, God said, “because you did not ask for length of years or riches or the destruction of your enemies, rather for understanding and discernment, I will give you a lev chacham v’navon, a wise and understanding heart. Moreover, I will give you that which you did not request, namely riches and honor. (1 Kings 3:5-14).

Chaverim, we can pray for the market to rise again. And it will. But King Solomon has set straight our priorities. He reminded us what matters. Like the poor man who found the wallet *and who returned it*, may we be granted wisdom and a heart of understanding that lead to wealth. And may we use both to be a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom