

THE BENJAMIN AND ROSE BERGER TORAH TO-GO®

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ESTABLISHED BY RABBI HYMAN Z"L & ANN ARBESFELD

A Material Matter

Jewish Affluence in
Contemporary Times



**Dedicated in
loving memory of
Dr. Harlan Daman
by Carole, Gila and
Avi Daman**

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Bernice and Irby Cooper
by their Loving Family**

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Dear Friends,

As we embark on the 18th year of the Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah to-Go publication, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated founding editorial team led by Rabbis Robert Shur, Josh Flug, Michael Dubitsky and Mrs. Andrea Kahn for their unwavering dedication and commitment to disseminating the Torah of YU and RIETS to our community.

We are immensely proud to celebrate this milestone as a pioneering Torah publication, with over 1,000 articles available in print as well on our renowned platform, YUTorah.org.

Our gratitude also extends to our benefactors, Rabbi Hy z'l and Ann Arbesfeld, along with our edition sponsors and community partners. Their steadfast support enables us to share the Torah To-Go publication with hundreds of communities worldwide.

This edition's theme, "Material Matters: Jewish Affluence in Contemporary Times," explores the multi-faceted impact of material success in our community. We have included articles addressing various aspects of this challenge as well as a roundtable discussion in partnership with YUConnects on materialism as it relates to dating and marriage and a "Table Talk" on materialism from the Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership. We also included divrei Torah for the upcoming yamim tovim including two excerpts from our latest offerings from RIETS Press.

We hope you enjoy this edition and invite you to share your feedback with us at office@yutorah.org

Wishing our readers and community a Shana Tova



Rabbi Ari Rockoff

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לעילוי נשמת בן ציון בן אפרים Ben Jakobovits

Born in Sighet, Romania, emigrated to Israel after the Holocaust and became a חיל in the 1948 war. He later moved to Los Angeles where he married his חיל אשת Betty Jakobovits, and built a beautiful family and became a pillar of the Los Angeles Jewish Community.

Sheila and Ronny Apfel and Family

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THE Sound OF Silence

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

President and Rosh Yeshiva,
Yeshiva University and RIETS

One thing I was not prepared for was when I first returned to my parents' apartment after the *shiva* for my father. Walking through the door, I naturally and thoughtlessly was waiting to hear my father's joyous welcoming that always greeted me upon my arrival. But all I found was silence. Unconsciously, I began to search for him. I walked through the living room and went into the back rooms and saw the chair that he regularly inhabited in the final years of his life. But he was not there. There are times when sound awakens. But there are other times where the absence of sound is even more startling.

This Rosh Hashana we expect to hear

the guttural notes from the shofar as we would every year. But what characterizes the day of Rosh Hashana when it falls out on Shabbat is not sound, it is the absence of sound. Certainly the Rabbinic ruling of not sounding the shofar on this day reflects our profound care and concern for the spiritual and emotional life of every single individual Jew. Perhaps somebody, somewhere, at some point in history will be unaware of the laws of carrying the shofar on Shabbat and would accidentally violate this prohibition on the new year. One can, however, parse an additional layer of meaning from the fact that the midrash interprets the verse of "*zichron teruah*" (remembrance of the blast)

as applying to the circumstance when Rosh Hashana falls out on Shabbat and there is only a remembrance of sound. Sometimes we need acoustic vibrations in order to communicate. Music, words, cries, laughter, are the sounds that shape our life experiences and personal relationships. But there are other times when the connection is so deep that no sound needs to be uttered to feel the presence of the other.

Music, words, cries, laughter, are the sounds that shape our life experiences and personal relationships. But there are other times when the connection is so deep that no sound needs to be uttered to feel the presence of the other.



At first, the tunes and the *tefilot* of the Rosh Hashana service move us to naturally anticipate the sound of the shofar. After all, it is the way that we are accustomed to communicate with God on this holy day. Its absence is startling and perhaps even disconcerting. But Shabbat is so holy, its spirit is so suffused with the presence of Hashem, that upon reflection, one realizes that an even higher level of connection is not through communication but by feeling surrounded and embraced by His holy presence.

In life, we need to learn how to use words and sounds to express ourselves. We need to learn how to listen to the tears, pains, and joys of those who are around us. But we also need to carry with us throughout our lives the embrace of those whom we love, even when they are not physically present.

I have not seen my father in his chair now for close to ten months. But I still see him, and I still feel him. I may not have his “*teruah*,” but I have the “*zichron teruah*,” and that fills my life with great meaning and love.

May we all feel Hashem’s presence and love on this day and throughout our lives.



See more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Berman at www.yutorah.org/teachers/Rabbi-Dr.-Ari-Berman

 <p>CORE TORAH VALUES</p> <p>Yeshiva University is a unique ecosystem of educational institutions and resources that prepares the next generation of leaders with Jewish values and market-ready skills to achieve great success in their personal and professional lives, endowing them with both the will and wherewithal to transform the Jewish world and broader society for the better.</p> <p>YU.EDU/VALUES</p>	<p>TORAT EMET</p> <p>אמת TRUTH</p> <p>We believe in truth, and humanity's ability to discover it.</p> <p>The pursuit of truth has always been the driving force behind advances in human understanding, from Socrates' wanderings through the streets of Athens to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution. People of faith, who believe in a divine author of Creation, believe that the act of discovery is sacred, whether in the realm of philosophy, physics, economics or the study of the human mind.</p> <p>The Jewish people in particular affirm that beginning with the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God entrusted eternal teachings and values to us that we must cherish and study diligently above all else, for they represent the terms of the special covenant that God made with us. All people, regardless of their faith background, should value the accumulation of knowledge because it is the way to truth and a prerequisite to human growth.</p>	<p>TORAT CHAIM</p> <p>חיים LIFE</p> <p>We believe in bringing values to life.</p> <p>Jewish thought asserts that truth is made available to human beings not simply so they can marvel at it but also so that they can use it. Students studying literature, computer science, law, psychology or anything else are expected to take what they learn and implement it within their own lives as well as apply it to the real world around them.</p> <p>When people see a problem that needs addressing, their responsibility is to draw upon the truths they uncovered during their studies in finding a solution. They must live truth in the real world, not simply study it in the classroom.</p>	<p>TORAT ADAM</p> <p>אדם INFINITE HUMAN WORTH</p> <p>We believe in the infinite worth of each and every human being.</p> <p>Judaic tradition first introduced to the world the radical proposition that each individual is created in the divine image and accordingly possesses incalculable worth and value.</p> <p>The unique talents and skills each individual possesses are a reflection of this divine image, and it is therefore a sacred task to hone and develop them. The vast expansive human diversity that results from this process is not a challenge but a blessing. Each of us has our own path to greatness.</p>	<p>TORAT CHESED</p> <p>חסד COMPASSION</p> <p>We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others in compassion.</p> <p>Even as we recognize the opportunities of human diversity, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of common obligations. In particular, every human being is given the same responsibility to use his or her unique gifts in the service of others; to care for their fellow human beings; to reach out to them in thoughtfulness, kindness and sensitivity; and to form a connected community.</p>	<p>TORAT ZION</p> <p>ציון REDEMPTION</p> <p>We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and move history forward.</p> <p>In Jewish thought, the concept of redemption represents the conviction that while we live in an imperfect world, we have a responsibility to strive toward its perfection. Regardless of a person's personal convictions about whether social perfection is attainable or even definable, it is the act of working toward it that gives our lives meaning and purpose. This common striving is an endeavor that brings all of humanity together.</p> <p>The Jewish people's task to build up the land of Israel into an inspiring model society represents this effort in microcosm. But it is part of a larger project that includes all of humankind. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then redemption represents our responsibility to work together in the service of God to move history forward.</p>
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A Material Matter: Jewish Affluence in Contemporary Times



WHAT IT IS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

When I was growing up, I had no idea I lived in a wealthy community. I grew up in Lawrence, NY — one of the Five Towns, as they are called. I love the community; my parents still live there and nearly all of my closest friends are those who grew up with me there. At some point — I think it was when I began to date while in yeshiva — I became more conscious of the economic status of my community. Maybe it was the subtle way people described families (“they’re ‘very’ comfortable”), but at some point, economic identity became a more palpable presence in my daily discourse in the Jewish community. I find this very concerning. Allow me to explain why.

I was invited as a guest on a podcast called *Kosher Money*, hosted by my friends Eli Langer and Zevy Wolman. It was a wonderful conversation (even though my wife hasn’t completely forgiven me for being so transparent about our savings). One thing I shared in the discussion is what I lovingly called *Gvir Culture*™. A *gvir* is the Yiddish word that means someone who is wealthy. And I shared the following with them:

Magazines, yeshivas — all of our media — need to do a better job of highlighting the average Jew and what that is like. Again, I am terrified of *gvir* culture. It was one of my early Top 5’s in my *Mishpacha* column: “Top 5 Ways to tell if You are a *Gvir*.” There is a way

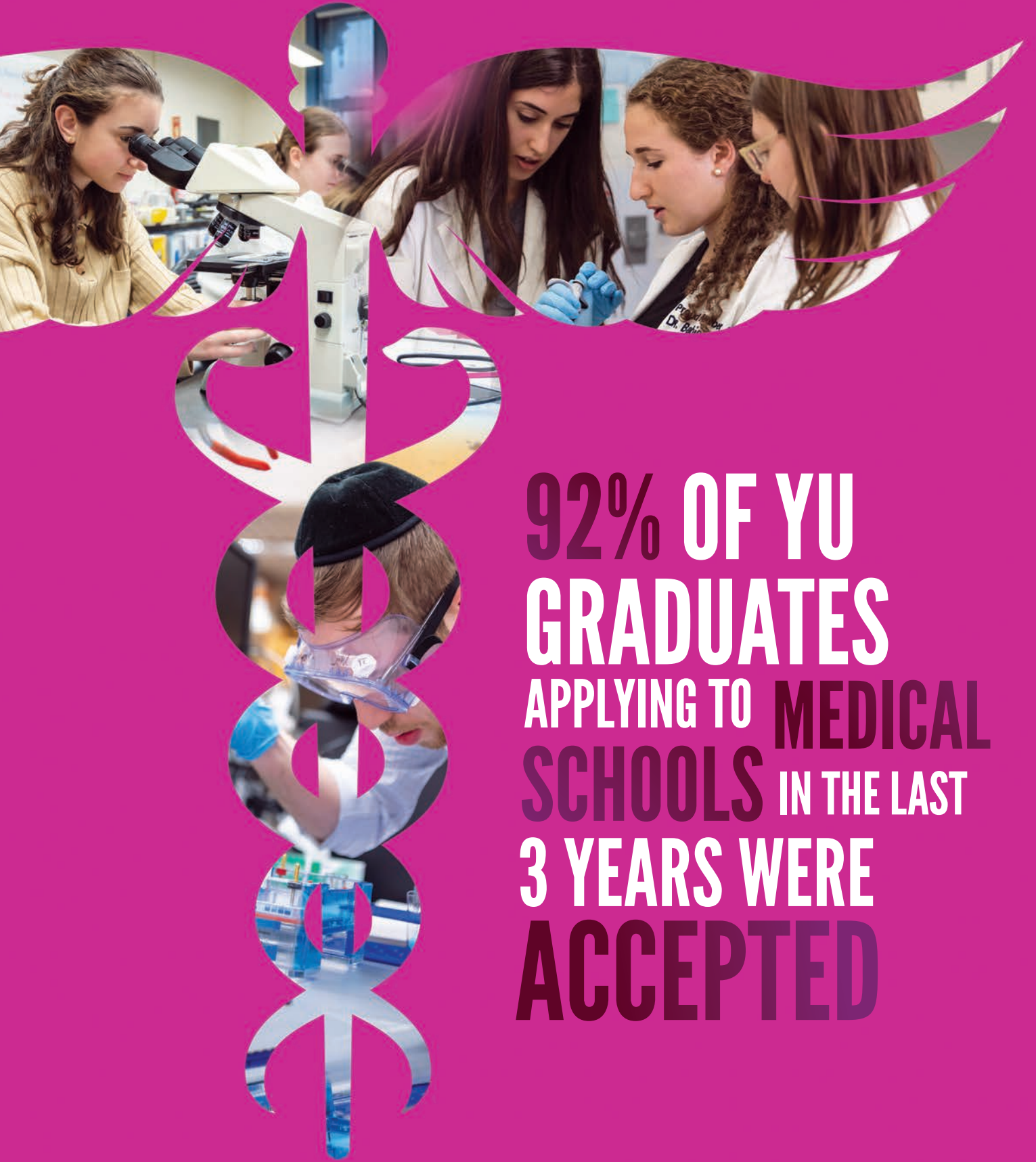


**Rabbi Dovid
Bashevkin**

*Assistant Clinical Professor of
Jewish Values, Sy Syms School of
Business*

*Founder and host of 18forty
Director of Education, NCSY*

we treat them differently. There is a way their homes are different. They’re always right. “That’s such a good idea!”



**92% OF YU
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APPLYING TO MEDICAL
SCHOOLS IN THE LAST
3 YEARS WERE
ACCEPTED**

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And we turn them into celebrities. It is terrible. And I think this is very recent — the last 20 years. You have kids in their twenties who can name more *gvirim* than gedolim. Or worse — have our *gvirim* become our gedolim? I am, not God-forbid, demonizing wealth. But when you ask a lot of young people what they aspire to become they say, “I want to be a *gvir*.” And I think that is scary.

So, what exactly is this *Gvir* Culture that I am getting so worked up about?

First and foremost, it is *not* about demonizing wealth or even demonizing luxury. As they say, “some of my closest friends are *gvirim*.” And I, like everyone else, avail myself to luxuries that bring me joy — some that are simple (books, streaming subscriptions, an occasional Uber ride) and some that are silly (wine on Shabbos that I’ve convinced myself I can taste the difference, a fancy watch I bought myself to celebrate not yet being married). The moment that griping about *gvir* culture becomes an excuse to start picking apart other people’s choices is the moment we’ve already lost. Blaming any individual is not the path. Instead, the path is far more personal. We need to begin taking radical ownership of our personal joy.

A second word of introduction: is

this even new? Money has been an aspiration since Tevye sang, “If I Were a Rich Man.” So what changed? I think two factors have contributed to a notable shift: our messaging and our exposure. Open an old issue of *The Jewish Observer* and look at the advertisements. There were wealthy people back then, but the messaging was far simpler. Look at how excited they were about cheese!

That change obviously also reflects the evolution of general marketing sensibilities, but it was also more than that. Wealth was not promoted as a marker of religious accomplishment. I am concerned that that has changed. As our communal infrastructure has grown, making *Yiddishkeit* more accessible in so many ways, it has also come at a cost. We need larger donations and gifts to sustain our institutions and those oftentimes require getting the attention of larger and larger donors. And that shapes the very messaging of our institutions — they need VIP seating, exclusive experiences, and intimate meet and greets with the leaders of those institutions. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, especially if it allows us to build a stronger religious foundation for the next generation, but it is also naive to think that there is no cost to this growth.

Imagine an individual with a growing family who decides to buy a larger house. They could continue living where they are, but a larger place would be much more comfortable. So they drum up the down payment and purchase a more spacious abode. But now they need to keep up with the mortgage payments, which can mean longer nights in the office, a second job, a more pressured budget. Individuals can make such decisions, but over the past few decades, many institutions have been making similar calculations and the “cost” is then passed down to the very fabric of our community, which needs to sustain this growth. Yes, our communal institutions are more comfortable, but they also come at a financial and — more importantly — cultural cost.

There are many institutions that eschew this type of growth to avoid the very cultural costs we are discussing. Brisk Yeshiva in Israel is a great example. It remains small, never has major public fundraisers, doesn’t build new dorms, and continues to cater to a select few. There is no culture of wealth surrounding the Yeshiva because their lack of growth never necessitated it. I am not suggesting that we should stop growing — of course not! But we need to recognize that our rapid



David/Dovid Bashevkin
@DBashIdeas

Once upon a time there was sincere excitement for new kosher cheeses.



Open an old issue of *The Jewish Observer* and look at the advertisements. There were wealthy people back then, but the messaging was far simpler. Look at how excited they were about cheese!



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growth can have cultural and financial consequences. And we need to figure out ways to address these costs.

This is all compounded by our exposure. Social media gives us a window into other people's lives like never before, and as we peer into the luxurious funhouse mirror of social media we can see a warped vision when we reflect on our own lives. Luxuries can function like nicotine. The more we encounter it, the more potential for addiction. The more we are exposed to, the more we find ourselves fiending the status and lifestyle we see in others. And this is particularly acute in close-knit communities like ours. We have a greater propensity for what René Girard describes as mimetic desire: the imitation of other people's wants and desires. Whether it is a certain type of *simcha* celebration, or brand of clothes, or make of car, our desires mimic what we see around us. How else can you explain why out of the clear blue sky I thought of buying a Patagonia vest?

Mimetic desire, as Peter Thiel remarks, can easily run amok and have us collectively wanting something that won't even bring us personal satisfaction. It removes us, like the Mishnah in *Avos* states, from our world, from what we *really* want.

So what are some of the consequences of the ever-present financial pressure and the way mimetic desires shape our community?

I think there are primarily three consequences:

More than anything else, we need to find serious ways to make Orthodoxy affordable. This generation needs to demand change.

1. Anxiety about Wealth:

There is a great deal of communal anxiety about how we can sustain this lifestyle. Many young Jews feel like they are priced out of Orthodoxy. Many young Jews feel like Orthodoxy has become more of a socio-economic status than a religious movement. This is not good. As Scott Sandage argues in his amazing book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, around the 1840's (heyo!), as the notion of becoming a self-made man became more popular, so did the notion of becoming a failure. Success became synonymous with wealth and those who couldn't attain it felt like it reflected on their personal character. As our financial expectations rise, so does our capacity to feel like a failure.

2. Diversity of our Community:

A while back there was a blog called *250K Chump*, which spoke about the difficulty of getting by on a household income of 250K. Of course, that varies drastically by area, but one of the serious costs of the rising costs within the Jewish community are the limited set of professions available to afford this lifestyle. As Elli Fischer once argued, the limited career choices—particularly in the United States — for Orthodox Jews leads to a lack of professional diversity in our community. This can stunt the creativity of the breadth of who affiliates with it. Orthodoxy is more than a professional network; we need to accommodate the diversity of personalities and professions within our ranks.

3. The Toll on our Schools:

People don't want to become educators. It has become increasingly difficult to afford an Orthodox life if you dedicate yourself to perpetuating it. It's an ironic problem in a way — we have a high cost of living because of our commitment to private education and that very commitment has created a crisis in our ability to staff our schools. This was highlighted in a recent article in *Mishpacha Magazine* by Alex Fleksher, entitled, "Where have all the teachers gone?" Our success has become the very roots of our struggle. I remember when I told someone in my neighborhood that I wanted to go into education and he responded with the classic line, "What kind of job is that for a good Jewish boy?" Cute line, but I am worried we've created a culture where we've started to believe it. We committed ourselves as a community to providing a Jewish education for our families, and yet it is the primary source of our financial pressures. Where will we be left as a community if that very pressure prevents us from providing that quality Jewish education? Wasn't that the point of all this?

So how do we combat this?

1. Make Jewish Life More Affordable:

More than anything else, we need to find serious ways to make Orthodoxy affordable. Too much has been written about this and in the future, I hope we can address the tuition crisis as its own subject. As one anonymous father boldly wrote, we need to be willing to search for bold alternatives in order to find a better solution. Maybe it's more government advocacy, maybe it's pressuring school leaders, maybe it is moving to a more affordable location, maybe it is setting up an endowment



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— but this generation needs to find a way. As Rabbi Jeremy Wieder recently shared in an address to the students of Yeshiva University, this generation needs to demand change. This much I will say — don't just *kvetch*, please vote. We live in a democracy where most funding is allocated on the local level. It's fun to talk about who should be the next president, but your local school board elections play a much more practical role in your day-to-day life. The next time you're at a table and people start *kvetching* about potential solutions, make sure they are all — *at the minimum* — voting in their local elections to ensure that children are afforded the services they need most. Then you can *kvetch*.

2. Celebrate the Middle:

Of course, we need to celebrate those who give generously to support our institutions, but we can't allow that to shape the very fabric of our community — those who stand in the middle. Too often we are either valorizing wealthy

donors or praising those who sacrifice in poverty, at the expense of the unsung heroes of the middle. Those who eke by, muddle through, and live lives without fanfare and applause are too often overlooked. These stories need to be told more loudly. We need to find ways to celebrate the middle, discuss transparently how they, we, us, make it work, and provide a more robust path for living a financially sustainable Jewish life without having to live in either abject poverty or enormous wealth. A strong community celebrates a strong middle.

3. Personal Growth:

Whatever communal solutions we need — and we do need them — we must also extricate ourselves from our collective mimetic desire. Families need to be willing to chart their own paths and ask tough questions about what really brings them satisfaction without falling prey to the tidal wave of mimetic desire. Similar to Gerard's principle of "Wanting is About Being," there is a

beautiful idea from Rabbeinu Yonah on the verse in Proverbs 27:21 that man is tested according to their praise. Simply read, this seems to mean that the quality of a person can be assessed based on what others say about them. Want to know if a person is a good person? Read their communal Yelp review and see how others praise them. Rabbeinu Yonah offers a different read. We are evaluated based on what we praise. If you want to know a person's value, see what they value, explore their desires. It's worth taking a moment to see what people, lifestyles, accomplishments we praise most. As emphasized by Rav Hutner, reflecting on our aspirations is a window to our soul. We all have work to do in this area. And this is probably the hardest, most elusive step of all. But it's not just about communal changes, better financial planning, generalized *kvetching*, finding the right community — the work also needs to occur inside of us. We are who we praise. And it's time to reorient the object of our desires and aspirations.

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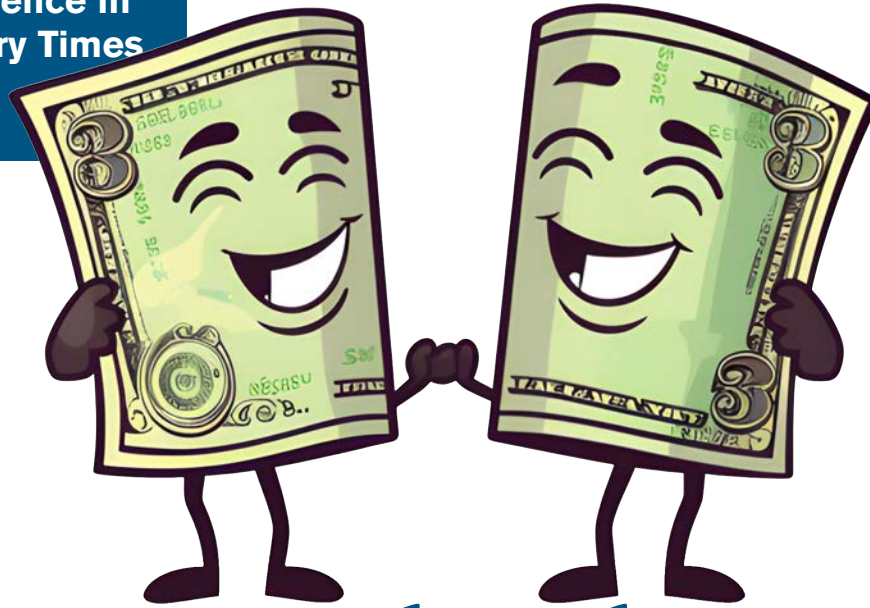
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Knei Lecha Chaver:

True Friendship Beyond Materialism

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* imparts profound lessons on various aspects of life, including the importance of friendship. One of the memorable teachings found in *Pirkei Avot* is:

יהושע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חֵבֵר, ויהיו דין את כל האדם לכהן זכות:
Yehoshua ben Perahiah used to say: appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge all favorably.

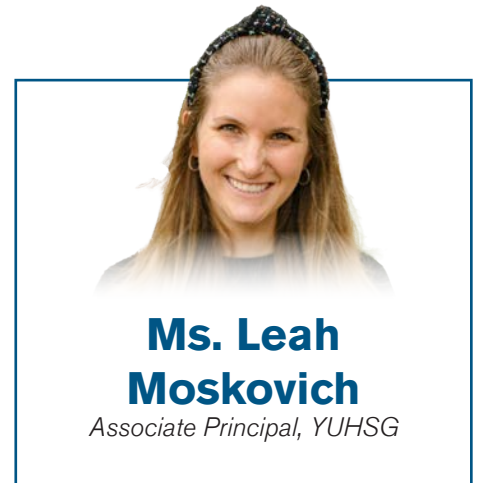
Avot 1:6

"*Knei lecha chaver*" is often translated as "Acquire for yourself a friend." However, this profound saying goes far beyond the superficial notion of buying friendship with materialism or money. Instead, it encourages us to contemplate friendship with the same seriousness and consideration we would give to acquiring a material object. True friendship, as guided by this teaching, prioritizes values, character, and genuine

connections over material possessions and fleeting trends, recognizing that lasting happiness lies not in materialism but in authentic human connections.

The Essence of "Knei Lecha Chaver"

To understand the true meaning of "*knei lecha chaver*," we must delve into the essence of the phrase. In Hebrew, the word "*knei*" is derived from the root "*kinyan*," which refers to an acquisition or purchase. While this might initially suggest the notion of acquiring a friend through material means, it actually urges us to invest time and effort in building meaningful relationships. The word "*chaver*" in Hebrew means "friend," but it goes beyond casual acquaintanceship. It implies a deep bond, a companion who shares values, virtues, and experiences on a profound level. Hence, "*knei lecha chaver*" challenges us to invest in



**Ms. Leah
Moskovich**

Associate Principal, YUHSG

friendships the same way we would carefully choose and acquire a precious material object, recognizing that genuine connections hold immense value beyond any material possession.

True Friendship & Materialism

In today's society, it is easy to fall into the trap of equating material possessions with happiness and using them as a means to gain popularity and acceptance.

Just walk into a high school cafeteria and look around: many are wearing some type of designer white sneaker, an overpriced sweatshirt, all while holding a Lululemon lunchbag. Students scour the internet searching for the newest trends, at better prices, to come to school in the newest shoe, wearing that new backpack, or using the newest water bottle. However, materialism is a hollow pursuit that often leaves us feeling unfulfilled and disconnected. True friendship cannot be bought or traded like commodities; it is forged through shared experiences, mutual respect, and meaningful interactions.

The pursuit of material possessions as a means to gain friends creates an illusion of connection, but ultimately leads to shallow relationships. When friendships are based on materialism, they tend to lack the depth and emotional support that are fundamental to lasting relationships. We need to think of friends as a *kinyan*: what are we willing to invest, and on what are we willing to invest, to create real relationships.

The Importance of Values and Character

The beauty of the teaching “*Knei lecha chaver*” lies in its emphasis on the significance of values and character in cultivating true friendship. Material possessions may capture attention momentarily, but it is shared virtues, integrity, respect, and kindness that form the backbone of authentic connections. The Mishna itself suggests that with a guiding rabbi and a good friend, you yourself will become someone who judges others favorably, someone with good values and middot. Therefore, in choosing friends, we should prioritize individuals who possess qualities that resonate with our own values. Friends who embody virtues such as loyalty, compassion,

generosity, and those with a non-judgmental nature are more likely to offer genuine emotional support during both happy and challenging times.

Teenagers, in particular, often find themselves swept up in the desire to be “cool” and follow the latest trends to gain acceptance among their peers. However, the pursuit of what’s “on trend” can be an exhausting endeavor. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and materialistic norms may lead to a loss of identity and individuality. In contrast, the wisdom of “*Knei lecha chaver*” reminds us to focus on building friendships based on shared values and character rather than trying to fit into a superficial social circle.

Material Possessions Won't Buy Happiness

Numerous studies have shown that material possessions have only a temporary impact on happiness. Once the initial excitement of acquiring something new fades, we often experience a sense of emptiness and a desire for the next coveted item. The pursuit of material possessions can become a never-ending cycle, leaving us perpetually dissatisfied. True happiness is derived from sincere personal humility, meaningful connections, genuine interactions, and a sense of belonging. The care and support of good friends enriches our lives and contributes to a deeper sense of well-being. As we invest in friendships based on values and character, we cultivate a support system that provides lasting happiness and emotional fulfillment.

Acquiring Good Friends Takes Time and Effort

Overcoming our natural tendencies is hard work. We all want to fit in, be on trend, and have commonalities, no

matter what social circles we fall into. The Rambam himself acknowledges this human nature:

דָּרָךְ בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם לְהִיטֵב נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדַעְוֹתָיו
וּבְמַעֲשָׂיו אַחַר רָעוֹ וְחֻבְרָיו וְנוֹהֵג כְּמִנְהַג אַנְשֵׁי
מְדִינָתוֹ. לְפִיכֹף צָרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִתְחַבֵּר לְצַדִּיקִים
וְלִישֵׁב אִצְלָם הַחֲכָמִים תָּמִיד כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּלְמַד
מִמֵּנֵם שֵׂהֵם. וְיִתְרַחֵק מִן הַרְשָׁעִים הַהוֹלְכִים
בַּחֲשׂוֹךְ כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִלְמַד מִמֵּנֵם שֵׂהֵם.

It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds.

Hilchot Deiot 6:1

Because of our human nature to conform, we need to look beyond the material, beyond the external, and truly find friends with values we admire and seek to replicate. It is not just a suggestion, but an obligation to do so. Elul is the perfect month to take some time and introspect on both current and past friendships, on our values and what values we look for in others, to enter this new year with a newfound outlook on our “acquisitions.”

By prioritizing authentic human connections over materialism and trendy popularity, we unlock the potential for lasting happiness, emotional fulfillment, and personal growth. In a world that often emphasizes external appearances, “*Knei lecha chaver*” serves as a guiding light, reminding us to focus on what truly matters: the meaningful relationships that enrich our lives.



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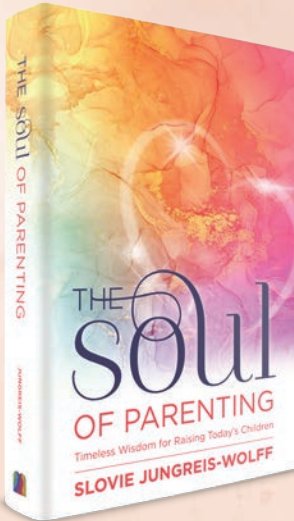


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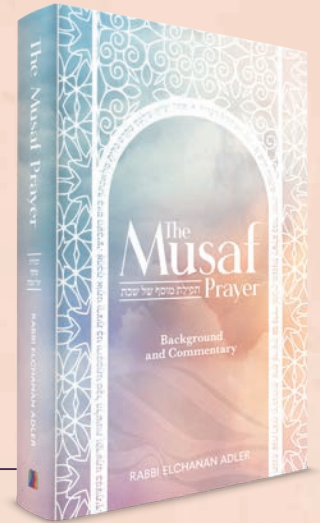
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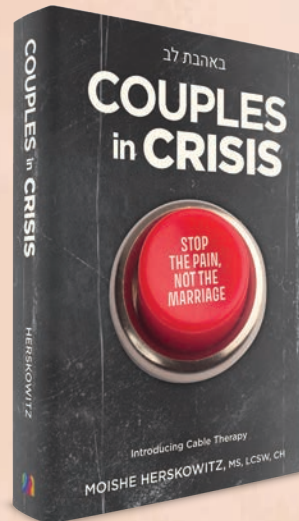


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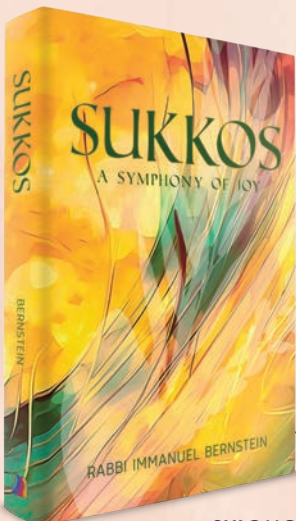


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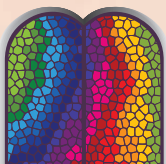


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Poverty, Affluence, & Property:

Tzedakah as Distributive Justice

1. Introduction: Property, Charity, and Tzedakah

We often translate tzedakah as charity, but it means something else. Charity suggests a voluntary act of beneficence, a gift proffered by a generous donor.¹ The laws of tzedakah, by contrast, set forth a system of distributive justice, one that defines the property rights we have in the first place.²

Each society defines its own rules of property. Certain property rules pertain to what you can own. Before the Civil War, fifteen states permitted ownership of people (slavery), but the Thirteenth Amendment now prohibits it. Capitalist countries allow private ownership of the means of production; China does not. Other property rules relate to the rights we have in the things we own. In Sweden, you are permitted to trespass across someone else's land provided that you cause no disturbance or harm; in the United States you may be shot. Societies also differ regarding the amount of personal income you can own. In Florida you own your entire income, but

California will take more than ten percent of it. Property rights can be specified in wondrously diverse ways.³

I shall argue that tzedakah is best understood as a property rule, a specification of what belongs to you and what does not, a law that reassigns property rights from the affluent to the least advantaged. I will defend the conclusion that Jewish law grants the indigent a right to welfare—that tzedakah belongs to the poor by right. The mitzvah of tzedakah is just to facilitate the transfer of these assets to their rightful owner.

2. Tzedakah as an Enforceable Obligation

The first proposition I wish to establish is that *tzedakah* is a legally enforceable obligation, not a discretionary donation. This is evident from the Talmud's report that Rava seized 400 zuz from R. Natan for tzedakah.⁴ The Talmud concludes that a *beit din* can forcibly take tzedakah from someone who refuses to contribute his due, and such is the ruling of all the major codes.⁵ Like taxes, tzedakah is not



supererogatory but obligatory, and it is enforceable by law.⁶

What justifies the *beit din's* power to collect tzedakah by force? Some explain that Jewish courts have a universal mandate to enforce performance of positive mitzvot, and they can use physical force to induce compliance. This is based on the Talmud's position (*Ketubot* 86a-b) that a court can use batons to motivate someone to sit in a sukkah or shake lulav. On this view, the court cannot seize assets for tzedakah,

but it can incentivize compliance with baseball bats.⁷

The theory that coercion for tzedakah flows from the *beit din's* mandate to enforce positive mitzvot runs into trouble. For one, the language of the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 8b) – “*mimashkenin*” – implies that the court can directly garnish assets for tzedakah. So rule the Rambam and the *Shulchan Arukh*.⁸

Second, the theory struggles to explain the case of the *shoteh*—a person of unsound mind. A *shoteh* is exempt from mitzvot. Yet the Talmud rules that the *beit din* must collect and distribute tzedakah from the *shoteh's* estate.⁹ That ruling is indefensible if the basis for coercion is the individual's mitzvah obligation. The *shoteh* is not obligated.¹⁰

Third, many rishonim point to the rule that a court is not authorized to enforce performance of positive mitzvot whose reward appears in the Torah.¹¹ Wherever the Torah states a reward, it is at the discretion of the obligee whether he wants to comply and receive reward, or to not comply and forgo it.¹² Because of this rule, a court cannot coerce performance of *kibbud av va-em*.¹³ Since the reward for tzedakah is explicated in the Torah, it follows that a court should not be authorized to collect tzedakah by force.¹⁴

These considerations indicate that the *beit din's* authority to coerce for tzedakah does not derive from its power to compel performance of positive mitzvot.

3. Tzedakah Modifies Property Rights: Liens and Liability

What, then, is the basis for the *beit din's* authority to coerce tzedakah? The *Kesef Mishneh* and Radbaz contend that the *beit din's* authority to seize tzedakah derives from its power to enforce property rights. They explain that tzedakah actually modifies your property rights by creating a lien on your assets.¹⁵ Like eminent domain, tzedakah redistributes property, assigning rights in what once was yours to the least

advantaged.¹⁶ The *beit din's* legal power to enforce tzedakah collection is identical with its power to seize assets to repay a defaulted-debtor's creditors. In Hohfeldian terms, tzedakah generates a financial liability rather than a mere personal duty.¹⁷

This explains why the court collects tzedakah from the *shoteh's* estate. The tentacles of tzedakah latch directly onto his financial assets and claim them for the poor. Thus, the estate of the *shoteh* is liable for tzedakah collection even if he, the *shoteh*, bears no personal obligation to contribute. Just as the *beit din* can take wrongfully held property from the *shoteh's* estate to return to its proper owner, so too it can seize tzedakah from his estate to distribute back to its rightful owners, the *aniyim*.¹⁸

This theory of the *Kesef Mishneh* and Radbaz also solves the problem of “a *beit din* cannot compel performance of positive commandments whose reward is stated in the Torah.” The court, in garnishing tzedakah, is not acting to enforce performance of a positive mitzvah. Rather, the court acts in its capacity to enforce property rights, to return property to its rightful owners.¹⁹ We have now established our second proposition: *tzedakah modifies your property rights by imposing a lien on your assets.*

4. Tzedakah Already Belongs to the Poor

Like the *Kesef Mishneh* and Radbaz, the *Ketzot Ha-Choshen* believes that the *beit din's* authority to seize tzedakah flows from its power to enforce property rights. But his formulation advances our conception of tzedakah further. The *Ketzot* writes that the assets liable for tzedakah already belong to the indigent (“*mamon aniyim gabei*”).²⁰ The court can seize tzedakah from the affluent person because he is holding money that belongs to the poor. According to the *Ketzot*, the transfer of ownership is so complete that the obligation of tzedakah is just to *return* to the needy (“*le-hachazir le'aniyei olam*”)

that which is already theirs by right.²¹ With the *Ketzot's* formulation we can articulate our third proposition: *tzedakah already belongs to the indigent, and it belongs to them by right.*

John Locke captures this idea in his *First Treatise of Government* when he writes that tzedakah grants the poor title to (or ownership of) the wealthy's abundance: “As *justice* gives every man a title to the product of his honest industry and the fair acquisitions of his ancestors... so *charity* gives every man a title to do so much out of another's plenty as will keep him from extreme want where he has no means to subsist otherwise.”²² Since charity is a poor translation of tzedakah, and since, as Maharal observes, tzedakah just means *tzedeq*, justice,²³ we are better off rephrasing Locke: ‘As *justice* gives every man a title to the product of his honest industry and the fair acquisitions of his ancestors... so *justice* (tzedakah) gives every man a title to so much out of another's plenty as will keep him from extreme want.’

Evidence for the total transfer of ownership can be adduced from the following ruling of the *Tur*. Generally, you can prohibit others from deriving benefit from you. The procedure involves a vow, but if done properly, the persons named are forbidden from receiving benefits from you, and consequently, they may not accept gifts from you. Now suppose you were to make such a vow against the poor: Are they permitted to accept tzedakah from you? The *Tur* (*Yoreh De'ah* 227) holds that they are permitted to, and the rationale, as explained by the *Perishah*, is that the vower has no power to deprive the poor of what already belongs to them.²⁴ Other commentators explain that the poor are not benefiting *from the vower*, as the Torah has already transferred the property right to them.²⁵

5. Tzedakah as a Right to Welfare

The *Ketzot's* conclusion—that the Torah has assigned the property right to the poor and that it is the wealthy's obligation

to return to them that which they already own by right—implies that the poor have a right to tzedakah, a right to welfare. Let us inquire, then, whether it is the wealthy’s obligation that generates the poor’s right or whether it is the poor’s right that generates that wealthy’s obligation. Which is more fundamental to the concept of tzedakah—the *ani’s* right or the *ashir’s* obligation?

It is sometimes held that mitzvot generate obligations only: honor your parents, don’t murder, love a convert. R. Lichtenstein has even suggested that rights are alien to Judaism, and Robert Cover has argued that the West’s rights-based *nomos* is in tension with Judaism’s mitzvah-based one.²⁶ I remain unpersuaded by this thesis, as I have explained elsewhere.²⁷ The word mitzvah means commandment (or precept),²⁸ and a commandment (or precept) can generate either an obligation or a right. The concept of mitzvah is neutral between the two, and many of the mitzvot codified by Rambam as “*dinim*” confer rights.²⁹

Let us focus here on tzedakah, but first a word is in order on the concept of rights. Joseph Raz has offered perhaps the most influential account of rights. The theory is known as the “interest theory” of rights because the function of a right, according to the thesis, is to further the right-holder’s interests. Raz explains that “X has a right if X can have rights, and, other things being equal, an aspect of X’s well-being (his interest) is a sufficient reason for holding some other person(s) to be under a duty.”³⁰ So if I have a right to a proper education, we are saying that an aspect of my well-being (say, my intellectual and moral development) is a sufficient reason for imposing a duty on some person(s) to educate me.

With this framework, I shall argue that tzedakah is a right-conferring mitzvah—that the mitzvah of tzedakah, first and foremost, confers upon the indigent a right to welfare. In Razian terms, to say

the poor have a right to tzedakah is to say that their well-being is a sufficient reason for the Torah to impose a duty on the rich. We can prove that tzedakah is a right if we can demonstrate that the basis for the tzedakah obligation is the Torah’s desire to improve the well-being of the destitute. This will establish our fourth proposition: *The Torah confers upon the needy the right to welfare—the poor person is entitled to tzedakah.*³¹

We can support this proposition by revisiting the *beit din’s* authority to enforce tzedakah. Earlier we saw that this authority contradicts the rule that “Jewish courts cannot enforce positive commandments whose reward is stated in the Torah.” Why does tzedakah break this rule?³²

Ritva explains that the Torah carves an exception for tzedakah because of its acute concern for “the poor person’s deprivation.”³³ The *beit din’s* power to enforce tzedakah reflects the Torah’s commitment to improving the *ani’s* well-being.³⁴

Maharal offers a more meticulous formulation: The *beit din’s* power to enforce tzedakah stems not from the obligation of the *ashir* but from the right of the *ani*. With respect to the *ashir’s* obligation, the *beit din* lacks jurisdiction to compel him to perform his halakhic duty—wherever the Torah explicates reward for a positive commandment, it is at the discretion of the obligee whether he wants to comply and receive reward, or to not comply and forgo it.³⁵ However, the *beit din* can compel tzedakah to protect the rights of the *ani*, to “support the poor person” and secure “his welfare.”³⁶ As the *Arukh Ha-Shulchan* puts it, the coercion is not for the affluent’s mitzvah but for the destitute’s distress.³⁷

These formulations suggest that the well-being of the poor serves as the sufficient reason for halakhah to impose the duty of tzedakah on the wealthy. On the interest theory of rights, we would say that the *beit din’s* power to enforce tzedakah flows from its responsibility to vindicate the

rights of the poor.³⁸

Conceptualizing tzedakah as a right illuminates two further features of the mitzvah. First, many authorities recognize a poor person’s entitlement to seize tzedakah from a wealthy individual who altogether refuses to give.³⁹ This rings like a principle of self-help whereby the poor person is authorized to vindicate his rights. It’s difficult to explain this ruling if tzedakah is exclusively an obligation on the giver.

Thinking of tzedakah as a right also explains the amount of tzedakah one is liable to pay. Contemporary discussions of tzedakah get bogged down in *ma’aser kesafim*, which quantifies the obligation from the duty-bearer’s perspective, a percentage of his income. But *ma’aser kesafim* is most likely just a custom or rabbinic enactment.⁴⁰ The authentic halakhic obligation actually quantifies the amount of tzedakah due according to the needs of the poor. This is the doctrine of *dei machsoro* (Devarim 15:8), that the *ani* is entitled to “that which he lacks”. The Rambam, *Tur*, and *Shulchan Arukh* all rule that you are liable to pay for tzedakah the amount necessary to satisfy the *ani’s* deprivation, if you can afford it.⁴¹ So, the authentic halakhic calculation of tzedakah begins with an assessment of the *ani’s* welfare, how much is needed to improve his well-being. That amount is then assigned to the well-off as their obligation.⁴² Calculating tzedakah by the needs of the *ani* suggests that the mitzvah centers on the recipient’s right, not the giver’s obligation.

The point can be sharpened as follows. Imagine an affluent world where everyone’s basic needs are satisfied and their welfare accounted for—a world with no poverty. It is clear from the Rambam that there is no obligation of tzedakah in that world.⁴³ Without needs of the poor, there is no duty assigned to the rich. It follows that the poor person’s well-being is the reason for imposing the duty of tzedakah on the affluent, which is

equivalent to saying, in Raz's terms, that the poor have a right to tzedakah.⁴⁴

The rays of light being cast on the indigent's right should not eclipse the obligation of the affluent which orbits beyond. Raz's analysis entails that rights and duties are closely related, and it was Hohfeld's incisive observation that rights are in fact correlative to duties.⁴⁵ Per Hohfeld, X's right against Y is equivalent to Y's duty owed to X. If I have a right against you not to trespass on my land, then you owe me a duty not to trespass.

It is not my intention to deny the obligation of tzedakah incumbent upon the affluent. That too is a piece of tzedakah. For to speak of the X's right to tzedakah against Y is to commit oneself to Y's duty of tzedakah owed to X. My intention is to cast light on the *more fundamental* dimension of tzedakah—viz. the indigent's right to welfare—that is obscured by our habit to reduce mitzvot to obligations.⁴⁶

I have argued that the impoverished man's right to welfare grounds the affluent's obligation to give, and that it is not the other way around. Contrast this portrait of tzedakah with what some writers call the Christian conception of charity, according to which, "almsgiving was understood as a means to redemption" for the wealthy, not a means to aid the poor—"God could have made all men rich, but He wanted there to be poor people in this world, that the rich might be able to redeem their sins."⁴⁷ An obligation-based interpretation locates the moral edge of charity in the benefit it delivers to the duty-bearer (sin redemption). A rights-based interpretation locates the moral edge of tzedakah in the dignity of the right-holder, in the claims asserted by the *tzelem Elokim* residing within.⁴⁸

Admittedly, echoes of the obligation-based interpretation of charity surface within the Jewish tradition.⁴⁹ These too may be facets of tzedakah. But to focus on these elements and to characterize the mitzvah as such is to be caught by what's *tafel* and not *ikar*.⁵⁰

We have traveled quite far from the notion of tzedakah as charity that opened this essay—the notion of tzedakah as supererogatory beneficence, a gift proffered by a generous donor. It has been argued that (i) that tzedakah is an enforceable legal obligation which the courts can compel, (ii) that tzedakah modifies property rights by putting a lien on one's assets, (iii) that assets due for tzedakah belong to the poor, and (iv) the needy have a right to welfare.

My students at Yeshiva have raised the following objection. If tzedakah is the poor person's right, and if halakhah has transferred ownership to him, wherein lies the *ma'aseh ha-mitzvah*?

The question assumes mitzvot need an act, either of omission or commission, and that assumption contradicts the set of mitzvot classified as *dinim*, where the mitzvah is conceptualized as a body of rules, law. The mitzvah of inheritance, for the Rambam, appears to include no *ma'aseh mitzvah*, just the rules of law that assign property rights in the estate to the proper heirs.⁵¹ Under the rights-based theory of tzedakah, the mitzvah would operate analogously to the mitzvot classified as *dinim*. The mitzvah just is the reassignment of property rights from the affluent to the poor.⁵²

There is a more moderate response to the objection, though equally rich in conceptual intrigue. It can be conceded that tzedakah involves a *ma'aseh ha-*

mitzvah, but that obligation is just to facilitate the return of property to its rightful owner. Relevant paradigms might include the obligations to return lost property and stolen goods. In fact, the Talmud proclaims that one who facilitates the transfer of tzedakah from the rich to the poor has greater merit than the donor from whom the tzedakah was procured.⁵³

6. Property Rights, Tzedakah, and Redistribution

One of the pressing moral questions of today is whether governments should use the tax system to redistribute property from the rich to the least advantaged. Many governments already do this by funding Medicaid and other welfare programs (food stamps, housing subsidies) from taxes collected from the better off. Opponents of wealth redistribution argue that governments have no right to take our hard-earned income and give it to others. Government sponsored theft is also theft.⁵⁴

Proponents of wealth redistribution counter that the government does not take that which is yours. Rather, the amount you are entitled to own is limited by, restricted by, defined by, the needs and claims of society's most vulnerable members.⁵⁵ Such is the view of Thomas Aquinas: "According to the natural order instituted by divine providence, material goods are provided for the satisfaction of human needs. Therefore the division and appropriation of property, which proceeds from human law, must not hinder the satisfaction of man's necessity from such goods... whatever a man has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance.... The bread which you withhold belongs to the hungry; the clothing you shut away, to the naked; the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless."⁵⁶

And I believe this is what the *Tur* has in mind when he counsels:



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Do not let the thought stir in your mind "Why should I diminish my money by giving it to the poor." For you ought to know that this money does not belong to you. Rather you are a trustee with a mandate to manage it in accordance with the true owner's direction. And it is His instruction that you distribute it to the poor."⁵⁷

Legal systems can specify property rights in different ways. The moral of tzedakah is that Jewish law defines what is ours only after accounting for the privation of others. We cannot call something our own—it is in fact not ours—until the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, and the homeless are sheltered. We have no claim to property if the needs of our brothers have not been met.

The Torah does not ask us to support the poor. It overturns our property holdings and assigns the right of ownership to the person whose well-being depends on it.

The needs of our neighbors do not just beckon for our attention and our mercy. They assert deep, moral claims that define the universe of entitlements, privileges, and rights we are licensed to enjoy in the first place. This is tzedakah.

Endnotes

1. This point about charity is made by Peter Singer, "Famine Affluence, and Morality" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (Spring, 1972), p. 235: "The bodies which collect money are known as 'charities... if you send them a check, you will be thanked for your 'generosity.' Because giving money is regarded as an act of charity, it is not thought that there is anything wrong with not giving. The charitable man may be praised, but the man who is not charitable is not condemned."

2. Sometimes called 'justice in distributions' or economic justice, distributive justice refers to the principles of justice that apply to the distribution of income and wealth in a society. See "Distributive Justice", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

3. For the different ways property rights can be specified, see Itamar Rosensweig, "Property and Distributive Justice: A Theory of Moral Property Rights" (PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2022), Chapter 5. See also Tony Honore, "Ownership" in *Making Law Bind* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

4. *Bava Batra* 8b, *Ketubot* 48a.

5. See Rif *Bava Batra* 5b, *Rambam Matnot Aniyim* 7:10, *Tur* and *Shulchan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 248.

6. R. Soloveitchik also compares tzedakah to taxes in *Halakhic Morality*, p. 135. See also Peter Singer, above, n. 1, "We ought to give [this] money away... to do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called 'supererogatory'—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so."

7. See *Ba'al Ha-Ma'or Bava Kamma* 18b, *Rashba Ketubot* 49b. Some authorities hold that physical coercion is licensed only if the person will ultimately consent under pressure. See *Ba'al Ha-Ma'or* op. cit. If he will never consent, and the court knows this, they have no right to coerce him. See *Or Sameach Gerushin* 2:8.

For some authorities, the *beit din's* power to coerce a recalcitrant husband to give his wife a *get* stems from their power to coerce on positive mitzvot. See *Ketzot Ha-Choshen* 3:1. This would imply that wherever the *beit din* is licensed to compel a *get*, the husband has an antecedent mitzvah to divorce. See my forthcoming "Mitzvat Gerushin" (Hebrew) *Beit Yitzchak* 50 (New York, 2023).

8. See above, n. 5, and *Bach Yoreh De'ah* 248.

9. See *Ketubot* 48a, *Rambam Nachalat* 11:11.

10. This argument is made most forcefully by the *Ketzot Ha-Choshen* 290:3.

11. The rule appears in *Chulin* 110b.

12. See Rashi *Chulin* 110b s.v. *she-matan*.

13. See *Chulin* 110b.

14. The reward is stated in *Devarim* 15:10. See *Tosafot Bava Batra* 8b s.v. *ki* and *Chulin* 110b s.v. *kol*.

15. *Kesef Mishneh Nachalat* 11:11, *Radbaz Matnot Aniyim* 7:10. (A lien is a charge against real or personal property that can be taken as collateral to satisfy a debt.)

16. Eminent domain is the state's power to expropriate private property for the public good.

17. Hohfeld distinguishes between duties and liabilities. See Wesley Newcomb Hohfeld, "Some Fundamental Legal Conceptions as Applied in Judicial Reasoning" *Yale Law Journal* 23 (1913), p. 30. A personal duty means you have an obligation to do or not do something, whereas a liability means that someone else has a legal power against you—in this case, to seize assets for tzedakah. For an overview of the Hohfeldian system, see "Rights", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.).

18. This explanation is offered by *Kesef Mishneh Nachalat* 11:11 and *Ketzot Ha-Choshen* 290:3.

19 See *Ritva Rosh Hashanah* 6a:

הכא לאו משום מצוה דרמיא עליה... כייפינן אלא מפני שחייב... לעניים, וכשם שכופין אותו לפרוע מה שחייב להדיוס.

20. See *Ketzot Ha-Choshen* 290:3.

21. *Ibid*:

ולפי מ"ש בדצדקה אית ביה שעבוד נכסי ליתן ממונו לצדקה וא"כ ממון עניים גביה הוא, כאילו חייב להם חוב ממש, א"כ זה שאנו כופין אותו, היינו להחזיר לעני עולם מה שחייב להם, ובוה דאי אפילו מתן שכרה בצדו נמי מוטל על הב"ד להחזיר מה שחייב, כיון דנכסיהו נשתעבודו.

22. John Locke, *First Treatise of Government*, 4.42.

23. Maharal, *Chidushei Aggadot Bava Batra* 9a.

24. See *Perishah Yoreh Deah* 227:6:

דלאו כל כמיניה להפסיד מהם מה שזיכתה להן התורה.

25. R. Ovadia Bartenura *Nedarim* 11:3 and Meiri

Nedarim 83a. The most striking formulation appears in R. Gustman's *Kunteresei Shiurim* (*Nedarim* no. 11):

מתנות עניים היינו מתנות דרמנא יזיב להו להעניים בעל כרחו דבעל הבית ומשמיא קא זכו העניים במתנות... ואין העניים לקחים אלא את שלהם, ולא מבעל הבית.

Most commentators address this question with respect to the agricultural forms of tzedakah—*leket shikhhah* and *pe'ah*—which is based on the Mishnah in *Nedarim* 11:3. The *Tur* expands the Mishnah's ruling to include financial tzedakah. See the discussion in *Beit Yosef Yoreh De'ah* 227:3 and the citation of Rabbenu Yerucham therein. On the *Tur's* approach, the rationale supplied by these commentators applies with equal force to financial tzedakah.

Further support for the idea that the property right has been transferred entirely to the poor is the concept in halakhah of *gezel aniyim*. The idea is that someone who interferes with the poor's ability to take tzedakah—or even someone who attempts to lower his tzedakah liability—is considered *stealing* from the poor. For *gezel aniyim*, see *Talmud Bavli Shabbat* 23a, *Mishnah Pe'ah* 5:6, *Pe'ah* 7:3, *Kiryat Sefer Matnot Aniyim* chapter 4, *Iggerot Moshe Yoreh De'ah* 1:150.

26. See R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Rights of the Individual Under American, Israeli, and Halakhic Law," *Congress Monthly* 45 (1978), p. 4: "Rights, natural or other, are the current coin of Roman legists. They are the legacy of Locke and Montesquieu, of John Stuart Mill and Martin Luther King. They are not the lingua franca of the Torah or the Talmud, of Rabbi Akiba or the Rambam."

Robert M. Cover, "Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order," *Journal of Law & Religion* 5 (1987), pp. 65-73 (1987).

For an overview of their arguments, see Itamar Rosensweig & Shua Mermelstein, "Rights and Duties in Jewish Law," *Touro Law Review* 37, pp. 2179-2209.

27. Itamar Rosensweig & Shua Mermelstein op. cite.

28. *Ibid* pp. 2198-2200 and n. 86 therein.

29. *Ibid* 2194-2195. In addition to the mitzvot codified as *dinim*, some mitzvot are directly formulated as rights. See for example, the right of the agricultural worker to eat from his employer's produce. See *ibid* 2193-2194. See Rambam's formulation in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot aseih* 201, *minyana ha-katzar* no. 201, and Rambam *koteret* to *Hilkhot Sekhirut* no. 4.

My analysis is limited to mitzvot *bein adam la-chaveiro*, where it makes sense to speak of mitzvot bestowing a right on an individual good against others. Granted, most mitzvot are formulated as duties. But, as we'll see below, many duties correlate to rights. It is an open question whether the formulation of mitzvot in the Torah and codes reflect pedagogic and rhetorical considerations (the system of law works better by prescribing duties) or metaphysical ones (a true description of ultimate halakhic reality). It was the Rambam's observation regarding anthropomorphic terms in the Torah that they reflect rhetorical considerations rather than metaphysical ones.

30. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 166. For an overview of the interests theory of rights and competing theories, see "Rights", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.).

31. Note that R. Samson R. Hirsch refers to tzedakah as the right of the poor in his commentary to *Vayikra* 19:10: "For in the state governed by the law of God the care of the poor... is not left to feelings of sympathy... rather it

is a right that God has given to the poor.” (*Recht* in the original German.) See also R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Morality* p. 136: “*tzedakah* is a legal bond, granting the beneficiary the right to donations and support.”

32. Earlier we discussed the explanation of the *Kesef Mishnah*, Radbaz, and *Ketzot Ha-Choshen* that the power to coerce *tzedakah* derives from the *beit din*'s authority to enforce property rights, not their authority to coerce positive commandments. The commentaries we are about to see may agree or disagree with that analysis. If they agree, we can rephrase the question in the text above to ask: “why is *tzedakah* conceptualized as a reassignment of property rights rather than as a mere personal mitzvah-obligation?” If they disagree—and hold that the power of the *beit din* to coerce *tzedakah* derives from their power to enforce positive mitzvot—the question is just as it sounds: why is the court allowed to coerce for *tzedakah* as a positive mitzvah?

33. Ritva *Ketubot* 49b:

ואף על גב דהוי מצות עשה שמתן שכרה בצדה וקיימא לן (חולין ק"ב) דכל מצות עשה שמתן שכרה בצדה אין ב"ד מוחרזין עליה, התם הוא בשאר מצות כגון כבוד אב ואם וכיוצא בזה, אבל לענין צדקה כייפין מפני מחסורם של עניים.

34. See also Radbaz *Matnot Aniyim* 7:10 who emphasizes that *tzedakah* provides “*takanah la-aniyim*” as the reason for allowing coercion.

35. See above note 12.

36. Maharal *Bava Batra* 8b s.v. *ki*:

ואף על גב דכל מצות עשה אשר שכרה כתוב בצדה אין ב"ד מוחרזים, בודאי אין ב"ד מוחרזים על הנותן, אבל אין יפרנס העני, ואם לא היו העניים צועקים לא ה' צריך לכוף אותם אבל בשביל צעקת עניים שהיה צריך להם חיות היו כופין... ולפיכך בצדקה מצוה לכוף, והיינו בשביל חיות העניים... בודאי חייב לכוף לצדקה משום פירנסת העני.

37. *Arukh Ha-Shulchan Yoreh Deah* 240:6:

ולכן בצדקה כופין ולא כדי שיקיים המצוה אלא מפני צער העניים.

38. These formulations can be disentangled into different theories. Ritva might hold that the *beit din* is coercing the giver to perform his positive mitzvah, and they are permitted to do so despite the general rule because the Torah has carved an exception so that the poor won't starve. Maharal and *Arukh Ha-Shulchan* might hold that the coercion has nothing to do with the giver's obligation, since the court is acting exclusively to vindicate the poor person's right. It's not clear, from their statements here, if Ritva and Maharal conceptualize the power to coerce *tzedakah* as an enforcement of a positive mitzvah (for Ritva, the giver's mitzvah-obligation, for Maharal and *Arukh Ha-Shulchan*, the recipient's mitzvah-right) or as an enforcement of property holdings. See above n. 32.

Radbaz (*Matnot Aniyim* 7:10), however, takes a stand on this question and explains that it is because the Torah seeks to protect the poor people's interests and welfare that it structures *tzedakah* as a direct redistribution of property rights. In other words, the *ani*-centric focus of *tzedakah* explains why the Torah designed the mitzvah as a redistribution of property rights rather than as a personal obligation left to the discretion of the giver:

והקשו בתוספות דהא ק"ל כל מ"ע שמתן שכרן בצדה אין ב"ד ש"ל מטה מוחרזין עליה והרבה דברים נאמרו בתירוץ קושיא זו ונ"ל דשאני מ"ע של צדקה שיש בה תקנה לעניים והרי הוא כחוב עליו וכופין אותו לפרוע חובו ויורדן לנכסיו כאשר עושין למי שמסרב לפרוע החוב אשר עליו.

This unifies the analysis in this section with the analysis in section 3, above.

39. See *Machaneh Ephraim Zechiyah U-Mattanah* 8, *Gilyon Maharsha Yoreh De'ah* 248:1, *Tur Yoreh De'ah* 227 and *Beit Yosef Yoreh De'ah* 227:3 and *Derishah* 227:6.

40. See *Bach Yoreh De'ah* 331, *Arukh Ha-Shulchan Yoreh De'ah* 249:2.

41. See Rambam *Matnot Aniyim* 7:1 and 7:3.

לפי מה שחסר העני אתה מצווה ליתן לו.

Tur and *Shulchan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 249:1:

שיעור נתינתה, אם ידו משגת יתן כפי צורך העניים.

42. Halakhically, it appears that *tzedakah* is supposed to operate like a tax system. Each community would appoint *gabbaim* to administer a centralized treasury. The *gabbaim* would first assess the needs of the community and determine the cost of satisfying those needs. Then they would audit the constituents of the community and calculate the amount of wealth that was available for redistribution. The *gabbaim* would then determine a fair way of distributing that burden across the different constituents based on their income and wealth. See *Bava Batra* 8b, *Responsa Rashba* 3:380, *Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De'ah* 250:5. Note also the Rambam's use of “*ra'uy*” in *Matnot Aniyim* 7:1 and 7:10, suggesting a legal determination of the amount liable for *tzedakah*.

The Talmud (*Bava Batra* 8b) explains that the administration of *tzedakah* requires a *beit din* because these *tzedakah*-tax assessments demand the rigor and integrity of *dinei mammonot*. (See also *Tosafot Bava Batra* 8b s.v. *u-mitchaleket*). The requirement of a *beit din* to assess *tzedakah* liabilities as a form of *dinei mammonot* also follows from the nature of *tzedakah* as a redistribution of property rights. *Tzedakah* assessments are like adjudicating monetary disputes because the process determines and assigns ownership.

43. See Rambam *Matnot Aniyim* 7:1 and 7:3. This point is made by *Shevet Ha-Levi* (4:124).

44. See my father's striking formulation in R. Michael Rosensweig, “*Tzedakah ke-Chiyuv u-ke-Mitzvah*” *Torah She-Ba'al Peh* Vol. 31 (S750) p. 151:

מחסורו של העני ומצבו הגרוע הם היוצרים חיוב נתינת הצדקה.

I should note that the poor person's right to *tzedakah* does not exempt him from attempting to alleviate his own suffering, and his failure to do so may quash his right. See *Keli Yakar* *Shemot* 23:5:

ומכאן תשובה על מקצת עניים בני עמנו המטילים את עצמם על הציבור ואינן רוצים לעשות בשום מלאכה אף אם בידם לעשות באיזו מלאכה או איהו דבר אחר אשר בו יוכלו להביא שבר רעבון ביתם, וקוראים תגר אם אין נותנים להם די מחסורם, כי דבר זה לא צוה ה' כי אם עווב תעווב עמו הקם תקים עמו כי העני יעשה כל אשר ימצא בכוחו לעשות ואם בכל זה לא תשיג ידו, או חייב כל איש מישראל לסעדו ולחזקו וליתן לו די מחסורו אשר יחסר לו.

45. See Wesley Newcomb Hohfeld, “Some Fundamental Legal Conceptions as Applied in Judicial Reasoning”, above, n. 17, pp. 31-32.

46. There may be cases where the *ani* has a right to *tzedakah* without a corresponding obligation on the *ashir*. Earlier we saw that the *beit din* takes *tzedakah* from the *shoteh*'s estate even though he is not obligated in mitzvot. So it seems that the poor person's right can generate a lien against the *shoteh*'s estate, even though the *shoteh* bears no obligation of *tzedakah*.

Some commentators struggle to understand how the *shoteh*'s estate can become liable without the *shoteh* being obligated. Doesn't the financial liability have to arise from a personal obligation? See *Responsa Avnei Nezer Yoreh Deah* 167:3, *Machaneh Ephraim Tzedakah* no. 1:

איכא לאתמוהי דגבי שוטה כיון דחייבא דמצוה ליכא עליה, שהרי הוא פטור מכל המצות, מאי שיעבוד נכסיו שייך כאן.

Recognizing the centrality of the *ani*'s right to the mitzvah of *tzedakah* solves this problem. The *Machaneh Ephraim* and *Avnei Nezer* assume that *tzedakah* must start with an obligation. However, according to our analysis that *tzedakah* begins with the right of the poor, it is natural that the poor person's right to *tzedakah* should directly generate the financial liability in the *shoteh*'s estate—without having to wind its way through a personal obligation of the *shoteh*.

47. These quotations are from Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 2 and p. 64.

48. The idea that rights arise from the metaphysical and moral status of persons as endowed with *tzelem Elokim* is implied by *Bereshit* 9:6 and *Bereshit Rabbah* 24:7. See also *Avot* 3:14 and Itamar Rosensweig & Shua Mermelstein “Rights and Duties in Jewish Law” *Touro Law Review* 37 note 117 therein. One important consequence of this idea is that *mitzvot bein adam la-chaveiro* are genuinely owed to the recipient/beneficiary. They are not just occasions for the obligee to perform a mitzvah owed to God. See idem “Rights and Duties in Jewish Law” 2204-2208.

49. See statements of R. Meir and R. Akiva in *Bava Batra* 10a.

50. For example, the source cited in the above note states that God allows the rich to support the poor so that they may receive reward for doing a mitzvah. But this does not imply that the *purpose* or *reason* for the mitzvah of *tzedakah* is to provide the rich with an opportunity for reward. Rather, the *mechanism* for the execution of *tzedakah* (taking money from the wealthy) was chosen to provide them with reward.

It's also possible that *tzedakah* carries a second, ancillary *din* that focuses on the duty of the giver, distinct from the first *din* that focuses on the right of the *ani*. Perhaps this is what the *Arukh Ha-Shulchan* has in mind in *Yoreh De'ah* 248:1-3.

51. See Rambam *Sefer Hamitzvot*, *Aseh* no. 248.

52. This is the *Sifra*'s point when it suggests that you have performed *tzedakah* if you lost a coin and a poor person retrieved it for himself. See *Sifra* *Vayikra* Parsha 12, 20:13. As some commentators note, the point of the *Sifra* is that *tzedakah* has no defined *ma'aseh ha-mitzvah*. See *Responsa Le-Horot Natan* 3:37.

53. Perhaps the best way to unpack this statement is that the property right has already been transferred to the poor. So the real moral action in *tzedakah* lies in ferrying the money back to its rightful owner.

Another way to construe the *ma'aseh ha-mitzvah* is that it may lie in the manner in which the *ashir* interacts with the *ani*—kindly and graciously. See *Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De'ah* 249:3 and Rambam *Matnot Aniyim* 10:7-14.

54. See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), p. 168.

55. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 302, and Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 138-139. And see my “Property and Distributive Justice: A Theory of Moral Property Rights (University of Pennsylvania: PhD Dissertation, 2022) 224-228.

56. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Question 66 Article 7.

57. *Tur Yoreh De'ah* 247.



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Table Talk: A Study Guide

**Prepared by the Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values
and Leadership**

1. Devarim 32:15

וַיִּשְׁמַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעֵט שְׂמֵנֹתָ עֲבִיטָת כְּשִׁית
וַיִּטֵּשׁ אֶל-לוֹהֵ עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יִשְׁעָתוֹ.

So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked—You grew fat and gross and coarse—He forsook the God who made him and spurned the Rock of his support.

1a. Seforno on 32:15

שמנת עבית כשית. הנה אתה ישורון קהל תופשי התורה ובעלי העיון פנית אל התענוגים הגשמיים ובוזה עבית מהבין דקות האמת כאמרו וגם אלה ביין שגו ובשכר תעו כהן ונביא.

You, the elite of the people, preferred to concentrate on the physical enjoyments offered by a life of leisure, and by doing so avita, you became too gross to understand the finer points of the teachings of the Torah, the only truth. Isaiah (28:7) describes the conduct of the spiritual elite of the people when he writes: “but these are also so muddled by wine, and dazed by liquor, Priest and Prophet are muddled by wine.”

Questions for Discussion:

- What concern in this verse is Moshe identifying and why would entering the land of Israel change the relationship between Israel and Hashem?
- To forsake and to spurn is different than when our material preoccupations make us indifferent or apathetic to our spiritual needs. What explains this strong language?
- How does Seforno understand this verse?

2. Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 5:9

אֲהַב כֶּסֶף לֹא יִשְׂבַע כֶּסֶף וּמִי אֲהַב בְּהֵמוֹן לֹא
תִּבּוֹאָה גַם זֶה הַבֵּל.

A lover of money never has his fill of money, nor a lover of wealth his fill of income. That too is futile.

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you think it means to love money? How can you love a thing that only has transactional value?
- Can you apply this cycle of desire and discontent to examples in your own life of a material need that keeps increasing in intensity?

3. Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers 4:1

אִיזְהוּ עָשִׂיר, הַשְּׂמִיחַ בְּחֻלְקוֹ, שְׂנֵאָמֵר: יִגִּיעַ כְּפִידָה כִּי תֹאכַל אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ וְטוֹב לָךְ (תהלים קב"ח:ב').
אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ, בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְטוֹב לָךְ, לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Who is rich? The one who rejoices in his lot, as it is said: "You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper" (Psalms 128:2). "You shall be happy" in this world, "and you shall prosper" in the world to come.

3a. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch on Avot 4:1

The greed for physical pleasure is circumscribed by gratification and satiation. But the striving after money, the means for pleasure, has no limit for though money in itself does not give pleasure, it makes possible all future enjoyment. Therefore, the lust for money can never be satisfied. And a man's craving for more and more wealth may well grow to such excess that the lack of what he does not now possess may actually mar his joy in whatever he does have at present. Yet it is precisely this joy in what one possesses, this contentment with one's portion that constitutes the only genuine treasure and the sole true happiness in life; without it, even the richest of men will remain poor in the midst of all his wealth... This awareness of where one's duty lies can endow any God-given "portion" with irreplaceable blissful worth. Desire no more than you have – and you are indeed rich.

Questions for Discussion:

- Enjoying the fruit of one's labors is different than contentment with one's possessions. How is happiness connected to work here?
- How does contentment with what one has get in the way of aspiration and ambition?

4. Hershey Friedman, "The Simple Life: The Case against Ostentation in Jewish Law," https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2294784

If Judaism frowns on ostentation, what kind of lifestyle does it recommend? Histapkut bamuat, being content with less, is definitely considered a virtue in Jewish law. Ben Zoma's statement (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 4:1): "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot" succinctly states this philosophy. The following verse in Proverbs (21:17) indicates that a life of luxury can lead to poverty: "One who loves wine and oil shall not be wealthy." Moreover, the Mishna (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 5:19) states that "Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our forefather Abraham: ... a good eye [generous], a humble spirit [humility], and a modest soul." "Modest soul" is translated as one who controls his physical desires even for things that are permitted (Shaarei Teshuva, Shaar 1:34).

5. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 429

For we should not attach any item of idol worship to our money or property, in order to gain pleasure from it, and for this reason, the Torah says "You must not bring an abhorrent thing into your house" (Devarim 7:26). And one reason for this commandment is to distance every element of detested idol worship... And within the commandment is that one should not attach to one's own money, which God graced you with, the money of another which was gained through theft, violence or exploitation, or from any disgusting element, because all of these are included in the elements of idol worship. For one's heart is inclined towards evil, which desires [items paid for by any means] and brings it into the home; and this inclination towards evil is called idol worship... And about money such as these that we have discussed, and about the elements of idol worship, on all these it is written "You will be proscribed like it," meaning that anything which is attached to it is proscribed, and God's blessing is absent from it, and it is lost and destroyed, as the Rabbis say, "The inclusion of even one perutah of money gained by extorting interest will destroy large treasuries of money.

Questions for Discussion:

- Why is attachment to money related to idol worship?
- How can one sublimate one's natural inclination towards materialism?

6. Lewis Lapham, *Money and Class in America: Notes and Observations on Our Civil Religion*, (Grove, 1988)

No matter what their income, a depressing number of Americans believe that if they only had twice as much, they would inherit the estate of happiness promised them in the Declaration of Independence. The man who receives \$15,000 a year is sure that he could relieve his sorrow if he had only \$30,000 a year: the man with \$1 million a year knows that all would be well if he had \$2 million a year... Nobody has enough.

7. Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (Knopf, 2006)

Economies thrive when individuals strive, but because individuals will only strive for their own happiness, it is essential that they mistakenly believe that producing and consuming are routes to personal well-being.

8. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas* (Hodder Faith, 2022), p. 176.

When religion dies and consumerism takes its place, people are left with a culture that encourages them to buy things they don't need with money they don't have for a happiness that won't last. It is a bad exchange, and it will end in tears.

Questions for Discussion:

- How has consumerism created cultural change?
- How does religion offer a counter-cultural tempering of consumerism?
- What Jewish rituals and laws aim to moderate our impulse to buy things, especially luxury items?

9. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (Schocken, 2014), pp. 201-202

Most people in the West tend to rate their wellbeing not on an absolute scale, but relative to others. Given the choice between earning \$50,000 a year in a society where the average wage is \$30,000, or earning \$100,000 a year in a society in which the average wage is \$200,000, most prefer the former. This is symptomatic of the force driving consumerism, namely envy, whose strange logic consists of letting someone else's happiness spoil mine. Envy is the art of counting other people's blessings. The fastest route to happiness is precisely the opposite: not thinking of what others have and we do not, but instead thanking God for what we do have, and sharing some of that with others.

Questions for Discussion:

- How do you explain this societal phenomenon?
- What effort can you make to combat it?

10. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Antidote to Materialism" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNP8HjC9qfA&t=1s>)

If you look in the Torah to see the command Moses issues immediately before and then immediately after the Golden Calf, it is the same command: Shabbat. Why is Shabbat the antidote to the Golden Calf? On Shabbat, you can't buy, you can't sell. You can't go into work and make money. On Shabbat, you focus on the things that have value, but no price. You focus on home, your spouse, your children, you spend time together as a family. You spend time together in the synagogue as a community. You learn, you pray, you thank God for what you have instead of worrying about what you don't have.

Questions for Discussion:

- In what way do you experience Shabbat as an antidote to materialism?
- How does the presence of other people minimize or maximize our material needs?
- Judaism is not an ascetic tradition, so how does the Torah want us to approach materialism?

11. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *I Believe* (Koren, 2022), p. 184

I believe wealth and power are not privileges but responsibilities, and we are summoned to become God's partners in building a world less random and capricious, more equitable and humane.

Questions for Discussion:

- How have you used money to create a more equitable world?
- How can you curb your own material needs to strengthen your religious observance and mindset?



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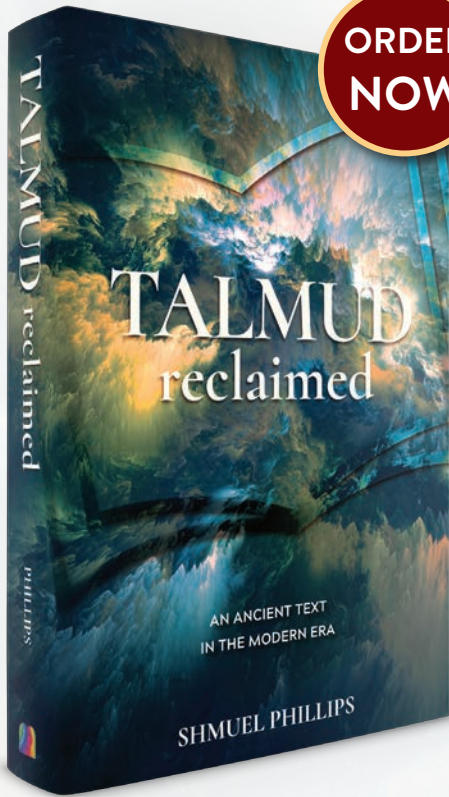


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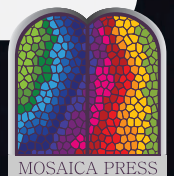
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MATERIALISM, DATING AND *Marriage* A YUCONNECTS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Money and how to relate to material goods can have a profound impact on a relationship between husband and wife. This roundtable discussion focuses on questions relevant to the intersection between materialism and dating, marriage and relationships.



Rabbi Josh Blass
(RJB)

Mashgiach Ruchani, RIETS



**Dr. Efrat Sobolofsky, LMSW
and Mrs. Mindy Eisenman,
MSW (YUC)**



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*Couples Therapist &
Premarital Workshop
Facilitator*



Introduction by Rabbi Jeremy Wieder

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS



An episode in the Biblical account of the struggle between Shaul and David offers an important lesson for one of the most important requirements for a harmonious marriage. When Shaul haMelekh, consumed with jealousy, is trying to rid himself of David, he decided to offer his daughter Meirav to David in marriage in exchange for David's fighting his battles against the Philistines in the hope that David would fall in battle against them (Sam I 18:17). That match, however, did not come to fruition and Meirav was given in marriage to someone else.

As the story continues, David then caught the eye of Shaul's younger daughter, Michal. We are told that Shaul was pleased, thinking to himself that "she will be for him a snare; and the hand of the Philistines will harm him" (*ibid.* v. 21). Many commentators understand these to be linked, that the marriage would lead to David's fall at Philistine hands, as the condition for the marriage was David's continuing to fight Shaul's battles against them. Taken literally, however, it seems that there were two independent benefits that appealed to Shaul about the match: 1) David's marriage to Michal would somehow be a snare for him and 2) David might fall in battle at the hands of the Philistines. Malbim picks up on this two-fold consideration and suggests that Shaul hoped that the marriage to Michal itself would harm David because of a halakhic controversy over whether he had already betrothed her sister, Meirav, potentially rendering his relationship with Michal as *gilui arayot*.

Reading on the level of *peshat*, however,

provides an alternative understanding of the way in which Shaul imagined that marriage to Michal itself would harm David. Shaul, who had spent the formative years of his life as a commoner, viscerally understood the difference between the lifestyle of a commoner and that of royalty — he after all, had experienced both, and his expectations and norms were shaped by his youth. At his core, he remained a *nechba el hakeilim*. His youngest child, Michal, however, had grown up as a princess. With keen insight Shaul understood that David shared his own life experience — like Shaul he had grown up as a commoner, and he too saw himself as unworthy of marrying royalty. Shaul recognized that this difference between Michal and David, specifically the expectation of pomp and privilege, including material abundance, had the potential to create irreconcilable fissures in David's home life which could undermine his capacity for success.

While Shaul's plans to prevent David's ascension to the throne failed, his insight was prophetic. When David brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem, he joined the celebration dancing enthusiastically and exuberantly (Sam II 6:16). Looking out her palace window and seeing her husband dancing with the throng, Michal felt only contempt, confronting him afterward for his mingling with the people (*ibid.* v. 20-22). As marriage researchers John and Julie Gottmann have shown, there are few things more toxic to a marriage than one spouse's contempt for the other. Michal's contempt and David's predictably harsh response to that contempt seems to have fractured their marriage forever (*ibid.* v. 23).

Shaul haMelekh's insight was both profound and, in retrospect, obvious. When we raise our children, the circumstances in which they grow up shape their expectations for a lifetime. Children raised in a context of material excess, in a home and community where one's "stuff," broadly construed, determines one's status, often enter adulthood with assumptions of norms that cannot be met, either initially, or sometimes ever. This can be a formula for a life of unhappiness.

It is a truism that money is one of most common causes of marital conflict. When a young man and a young woman enter a relationship where their attitudes towards money and their material expectations are not in sync, the dissonance has the potential to be a major impediment to *shalom bayit*. This consideration should be one of the significant questions addressed by young people dating (and, when relevant, by their *shadchanim*). Young men and women should remember three things: 1) It is important to carefully consider your compatibility in this area with those who you are dating — this is not a trivial matter to be brushed aside with the assumption of "love conquers all," but a reflection of a core value. 2) High expectations may be an impediment to finding a spouse (by limiting one's potential dating pool) and to enjoying *shalom bayit*. 3) Finally, while we in no way valorize poverty, a life in which shared spiritual goals take precedence over those of status or material success is a more well-trod path to a life full of meaning, and one of *shalom bayit*.

When dating, how important is it for a couple to have the same perspective and approach to earning and spending money?

RJB: The starting point for any young person entering the world of dating is to assess who they are and what their life vision is. Obviously, these are questions that are complicated for any person and the answers can often change and shift as the person or couple ages and grows. The most important factor is that the couple have a shared life vision. If the man wants to have a house overflowing with guests and the woman is interested in something more sedate, if the woman is passionate about aliyah and the man is attached to his family in Woodmere, if the man wants to go into *klei kodesh* (Jewish communal life) and the woman is interested in something very different, then no matter how much the couple love each other, the relationship may run into significant obstacles, if not in the present moment then certainly over time. Part of navigating this fundamental question of life-vision is taking into account the lifestyle of both daters. If a certain young man wants to go into *klei kodesh* and the young woman he is dating is supportive of this vision but also is aware that she grew up with a relatively high standard of living, then these factors need to be fleshed out and discussed, preferably with the help of a third party who can help the couple navigate the fundamental complexities of the situation. Expectations of standard of living, degree of financial support from families, overall perspectives about the world of the *gashmi* (material) are all significant, and while they are not elements that must necessarily disrupt a shidduch, they shouldn't be overlooked. That is especially true when each of their chosen professions might be more limited regarding expected incomes.

Navigating real-life decisions, expectations, obligations and shared responsibilities are as much a part of

a healthy relationship as any of the more elegiac emotions and values. In a healthy relationship, different potential expectations and tastes of each party can be worked through, but these matters are by no means simple, and require open and frank conversations. Part of that process is each party looking at themselves in the mirror and asking themselves what they feel they need — in all areas, including in the materialistic and financial realm.

YUC: For this question, we will focus primarily on the dating stages. It is quite common that when a young man and woman begin dating, they may have vastly different approaches to spending money on dates and materialism. Often, the difference is not one of values, but just of needing a little education. We sometimes find that young men appreciate being mentored on how to make a young woman feel special. We could share "dating mishaps" involving a young man who accidentally slighted a young woman simply because he had little experience in knowing how to prepare adequately for the date. He may not initially understand why she feels that way, and sometimes, he may even think that his date is being too needy or materialistic. This young woman simply wants to be treated nicely after spending time, money and energy preparing herself for the date. Hence, with gentle guidance and proper communication, hopefully he will find that it is not a function of materialism and that there are times when spending a little bit of money is important in making the other person feel special.

Of course, there are instances when the gap of standards or expectations between two individuals is quite wide, and it is not simply a matter of education. And, like many other aspects of dating, the dating couple should explore how far apart they really are and determine if they can find common ground in lifestyle expectations, or if their differences may interfere with them living happily ever after.

When young couples are dating seriously,

the YUCnects "CandiDate" podcast episode "Money Matter\$," by Tamar Snyder Chaitovsky of Project Ezra, is an excellent resource discussing how to appreciate and navigate money spending differences. Achieving financial independence can sometimes create contrasting approaches to living and spending harmoniously. An awareness of any "major" (we all have "minor") differences and open and respectful communication between a dating or young married couple can help bridge gaps and create compromises along the way. Additionally, "The Aisle" a workshop offered by Project Ezra, is fantastic for engaged and newly married couples to assist with budgeting and prioritization.

MPF: As a couples therapist and premarital workshop facilitator, my role is often to help couples navigate these types of conflicts. Many times, how to spend money is one of the stressors in the relationship. This issue may not come out right away when a couple is dating, engaged or even newly married, if the financial constraints are minimal.

I am a strong advocate for premarital education where couples can learn how to navigate conflict and communicate properly. If the couple has a strong foundation and good communication skills, they should be able to navigate minor differences in their approach to finances.

If their values are very different in this area, the conflict can still be managed with proper communication — I have seen couples get through much more difficult conflicts — but it does have the potential to be quite challenging and put a great strain on the relationship. Daters should educate themselves about the financial realities of raising a Jewish family and when daters have discussions about values with their prospective partners, this topic should be discussed.

If a dater is going to be in school for a number of years, how important is it to know a family's financial background and willingness to help before allowing a relationship to advance?

YUC: The financial realities of the modern world, even beyond our community, are such that many young couples are not prepared to be financially independent right away. Therefore, some parents or daters may wonder whether the other side is in the position to partner and assist a young couple in getting started. In order to allow young daters to feel secure in dating and early marriage, it is advisable for parents to initiate conversations about finances in an honest and open fashion, and discuss to what degree they are able and willing to help. As a relationship progresses, a couple can broach the topic with each set of parents (best to do it separately), so the couple can plan accordingly for the beginning stages, with an eye toward future financial independence.

It should be noted that economic background or financial comfort do not always correlate directly with endless generosity. Often it is the values or commitment that a set of parents display that will affect the finances of the couple more than a bank account. Furthermore, parents may have varying standards and values of how they support and educate their children toward financial responsibility and independence. We all have heard comments ranging from “we are happy to continue paying our son’s or daughter’s car insurance” or “we will pay for childcare for our grandchildren, but we won’t pay for...” or “we Zelle our children a set amount of money each month and allow them to prioritize and pay for their expenses directly.”

If the couple needs financial assistance at the beginning of marriage, it is of course helpful when both sets of parents can

contribute, but not always possible. Some may not be in the position to provide financial support to their married children, but will assist and support in other ways. Is this a reason to dismiss a shidduch? How about if you determine that the young woman or man is a great soulmate for your son or daughter? He or she is a hard worker and not looking for a high maintenance lifestyle. How about if you learn that the *middot* in their house are pristine, the family is known for their *simchat hachaim*, and they are juggling multiple financial responsibilities and really don’t have the extra money to contribute? Will money really bring happiness? These are all hard questions parents and daters need to ask themselves and others, with the acknowledgement that it is only one factor of the total picture when considering a potential match idea.

MPF: The practical considerations are important, and we must recognize that certain career paths may require parental support in the first years of marriage. That said, the practical issues are usually solvable as the relationship progresses, without one side having to dig into the other side’s financials before they first meet.

I am not here to say how much research needs to be done into the other side, if at all. However, I do know the type of questions people ask the references (I myself appear as a reference on a number of shidduch resumes), and I have observed that there is too much emphasis on researching a potential shidduch’s family finances and other material matters and not enough emphasis on more important aspects of the family background — what values and character traits is the dater exposed to at home? Are the parents good relationship role models? If not, does the dater have other relationship role models that he/she spends time with? Beyond relationships, are the parents, older siblings (or other relatives) good role models for other character traits?

If one feels that financial background questions are important, at least it should focus on the family and the dater’s approach to finances. Are the parents generous people? Do the parents model a healthy relationship in how they deal with financial issues? Did the dater learn to spend money responsibly? These types of questions, whether they are asked in advance or explored by the couple in their conversations, can provide real insights about the dater and his/her family.

RJB: This is a complicated question. Is it helpful to marry into a family that has the means to be financially supportive in helping to buy a house or in allowing the couple some support in getting off their feet? Absolutely. Depending on the financial background and stability of the other person, this might be something desirable. With that said, there are many far more important aspects in reflecting on the family of a potential spouse. Is it a home of kindness, of Torah, of *middos tovos*, and respect demonstrated to all members of the family? This is the real *osher* (wealth) that a young man or woman brings with them into the next chapter of their lives. Economics are a factor but should be placed within the proper hierarchy of overall life values.

Should a person consider changing career paths based on the expectations of a potential spouse? For example, a young man is planning on going into avodas hakodesh and is dating someone who doesn't think she is ready for that lifestyle. Another example, a young man is planning on going into a career that in our community, typically requires additional income. The woman he is in a relationship with wants to be at home to raise the children. How do we navigate these situations?

MPF: You marry a person not a career. A person’s career choice doesn’t define who

he or she is as a person. If everything else is aligned, they can make it work, if each of them is flexible. If a young man who is dating wants to pursue a career that is not expected to completely cover normal family expenses, he needs to be open about that when dating and his potential wife needs to be willing to make that work, whether it means not having the husband home a lot because he is working a second job or whether it means the wife working (or both). We never know what life will bring and both partners need to be flexible and open to changes that may be required. She should be willing to live a more modest lifestyle and he should be flexible about his career plans. It doesn't mean that he has to give up his dreams, but the couple needs to have open communication about it to make it work.

I am a practitioner of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) where the goal is to create a secure attachment between the man and woman. When there is a secure attachment, they each feel comfortable expressing their needs to their partner and their partner is open and flexible to making changes that meet those needs. Flexibility is a key ingredient in a healthy relationship, especially when combined with good communication.

We all know people who originally pursued a career in *avodas hakodesh* and then switched careers and we also know people who did the reverse. We also know women who were set on staying at home and then decided to pursue a career and vice versa. I often remind daters that someone's career choice doesn't define their level of commitment to Torah. Shared values are more important and if they are aligned, they can figure out how to navigate this challenge together.

RJB: You have stumbled on one of the big questions that as Mashgiach, I, and many others before and after me, have contended with dozens of times and in a whole host of shapes and forms. Obviously, the question is beyond complicated and is so dependent on

both people involved, the nature of the concerns, and at which juncture in the relationship the hesitations are expressed.

In a general sense, I would say the following: There are people whose job or career path is not just a job but a real calling and reflects the inner core of who the person is. The husband, especially if he is in *avodas hakodesh*, will need a real partner and not just a woman who begrudgingly drags herself into the fray. Marrying an individual who is not a supportive and engaged partner in one's life, work and passions can lead to deep-seated internal or relational dissonance. I would be hesitant to advocate for a relationship in which one person is passionate about a certain life calling or life vision and the potential spouse doesn't in some way share those passions. I would note that a certain amount of this can be ascertained before the couple goes out, in order to avoid attachments being formed only to realize later that their life visions don't match.

That being said, there are so many details and specifics related to this question that each situation would need to be looked at independently. It's nevertheless worthwhile to look at the examples in the question.

Regarding whether there is an expectation that a wife works, obviously, expectations of each spouse to some degree are dependent on the community from which they come. Expectations that a husband learn a year or two after marriage, that he have a two-hour night seder, that he share in carpool responsibilities when they have children etc. are all somewhat dependent on each community, and those broader cultural expectations definitely play a role in this discussion about women working as well. What is critical is that the couple form a partnership in which they can clearly communicate their own needs, desires and aspirations. If a man enters into a marriage in which the woman states very clearly that her intention and desire is to be a stay-at-home mother, then that should guide

decisions that they make moving forward. That might change either by necessity or by choice over a period of time, but either way, the partnership has been established with clear communication and expression of needs by the partner.

YUC: People typically choose their career paths based on their own personal passions, capabilities, and upbringing. Career choices are also driven by values. While many find the financial responsibilities of the Orthodox lifestyle daunting, most agree that one should not forgo his or her passion or choose a career that he or she will not enjoy, purely for the earning potential and lifestyle expectations. Yet at the same time, with ample research and inquiries, people need to be realistic about expectations and know that some choices will often entail tradeoffs (e.g., salary, day or night shifts, travel, lifestyle, summer responsibilities, etc.). Someone who wants to give to the community may choose a career in *avodat hakodesh* or communal service, recognizing that he or she may need to have supplemental jobs depending on family size and his or her spouse's profession. Concomitantly, sometimes a place of residence affects earning potential of certain professions, higher or lower than if a couple chooses to live in a different state or country.

Further, every person has a different belief system on balancing the value of work and family. This is a great discussion for couples to have as they are dating to figure out the balance that works best for them. One should not be judged for differing values, but should be aware of the implications. Some young men and women may not want to date someone who has chosen a certain career because they don't see it working with their own career or lifestyle wishes. As such, if one is insistent on a certain path, it may limit potential shidduchim, but that tradeoff is something an individual will contemplate by circumstance.

As in many areas of life, there is certainly

no one-size-fits-all approach here. As such, flexibility is often key. The most important piece of advice is that a couple should be prepared for the economic opportunities before them and explore the respective implications for family life. And we all know that circumstances and fortunes often change. Having personalities and values that can co-exist with these changes will create a strong marital bond regardless of the financial challenges that may arise.

How important is it for young couples to spend money on experiences during their first few years of marriage? Should parents help fund vacations for their married children (and grandchildren)?

RJB: I believe that there are two elements at work in this question. The first is the need for the couple to really bond during the beginning year of marriage (see *Sefer HaChinuch* mitzvah no. 582). That bond becomes the bedrock for the rest of the couple's life together. The question then becomes: what is the best mechanism for the couple to create this special bond? Is that through travel? Is it through being at home? Is it being home with guests? Without guests? Is it through going out to eat? Is it by having a stay-at-home date night once a week? Those are questions that the couple needs to figure out.

The second element of this question, and something that I believe is absolutely crucial, is the establishment of joint goals and spiritual aspirations for the couple during the early part of their marriage. Life is complicated and an early establishment of values and the centrality of learning, chessed and religious growth is critical. For some, this might be best accomplished by spending some time in Eretz Yisroel, which allows the couple the opportunity to bond in an environment of learning and *kedushas ha'aretz*.

In an ideal world, the values of the parents and the values of their children align and

parents can help before their children are completely on their own feet. Also, ideally, parents are in a position that they can be financially helpful during these years. What is important to emphasize is the enormous *hakaras hatov* that kids should have for their parents, especially when support is being extended beyond the period when a child is *someich al shulchan aviv* (being supported by parents) and, consequently, that support from family should never come with an attitude by the children of *magi'ah li* (it is coming to me).

YUC: It is wonderful for a young couple to spend time together to share experiences and create memories. This can be a hike, picnic or trip and does not have to be a luxurious vacation. Part of the early marriage stage is learning to live within our respective means and taking pride in budgeting and planning accordingly. Parents can gift their children money for a vacation, but it should not be expected by the young couple. The important lesson is to establish quality time together in the early years of marriage and to make these times sacred until 120 in the various ways that work best for the couple.

MPF: Family vacations are wonderful if the parents/grandparents want to treat their children. However, I don't think it's important for marriage building. It is important for the couple to have time together alone (date nights or nights when the kids are with their grandparents), but that doesn't require spending a lot of money.

Parents can also "invest" in marriage building more directly. They can offer to pay for a couple to take premarital education or marriage enhancement courses. They can also offer to help ease some of the common stressors in relationships. This can include providing funds for domestic help, extra-curricular activities for children, or assistance with a down payment for a house.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Ishus*)

15:19) says **שיהא אדם מכבד את אשתו יותר מגופו ואוהבה כגופו, ואם יש לו ממון כפי הממון, מרבה בטובתה, a husband should honor his wife more than he honors himself, love her like he loves himself, and if he has financial means, he should spend it on her accordingly. Practically speaking, how do we guide a couple in which the wife expects that her husband spend money on her and he feels that she is being too materialistic?**

YUC: It is essential for couples to have candid conversations before marriage as to what they like to spend money on, and if they will have the finances to afford these expenses. Some people grow up with lavish vacations and others are more accustomed to more modest and simple standards. Some dream of entertaining many guests regularly and some hope to work less hours to allow for dedicated chessed hours each week. In any event, as we mentioned earlier, financial and lifestyle wish lists need to be openly communicated and not left as silent assumptions that each person takes for granted.

Despite the different standards some men and women may have, when it comes to following Rambam's advice on a husband making the wife feel special, the thought really does count. Oftentimes, demonstrating love and care through the intention of gift-giving matters more than the actual gift. Similarly, accepting gifts in a gracious and appreciative manner is a proper *middah* for all. For those who are in a serious relationship, we recommend reading Gary Chapman's, *The Five Love Languages*, and how he relays individual styles and preferences in giving and accepting gifts. Spouses should feel comfortable sharing the types of "gifts" (not only purchased items) they appreciate most. As with so many areas of marriage, the key here is planning and open communication.

MPF: If the couple is dealing with this

issue, it probably came up on the first special occasion of their marriage and you can expect it to come up again and again. It is what marriage expert Dr. John Gottman calls a “perpetual issue.” Perpetual issues, including this one, are best addressed with open communication. Each must understand the other’s needs and values. Hopefully, they will find a way for the husband to make his wife feel special without having to spend more than they can afford.

RJB: I think it’s fair to say that building a great marriage can be a long process. One of the many parts of that process is each member of the relationship learning about the other and developing a knowledge of, and a healthy respect for, what the other party likes and what the other finds meaningful in a gift. This is explicit in the Gemara and the Rambam in regard to the mitzvah of simchas Yom Tov (see *Pesachim* 109a and Rambam, *Hilchos Yom Tov* 6:18). There are two elements at play: (a) the difference between men and women generally and (b) learning about each person’s individual strengths, likes and particularities. This process of learning about the other person, and even more important, of accepting the other person, can be a bumpy ride for many young couples. [I personally finally got the hang of it after about 20 years of marriage!!]

The key is partnership and communication. If the wife feels that the husband is not sensitive enough to the types of gifts that she would appreciate (whether that be jewelry, cards, books, words of affirmation or otherwise), then those feelings should be warmly but clearly communicated. If the husband feels that the expectations of the wife might not be aligned with the financial realities of the family, that too should be an open and respectful conversation. This might be an area in which a trusted family rav could be helpful, if the issue is too sensitive to raise just between the husband and wife. To me, the issue itself is by no means a concern. What would

be a concern is if the couple felt that they couldn’t speak openly with each other, and that the partnership didn’t support this type of communication.

What advice can be given to an engaged couple where one set of parents wants to spend a lot of money on the wedding and the other side would prefer putting that money towards the young couple’s future?

MPF: This is a very delicate situation, and it would not be wise for the parents to draw the young couple into it. The parents should manage this on their own and work hard to find a peaceful solution.

Sometimes people get so caught up in the wedding that they forget about the marriage. The wedding is a six-hour event and the marriage will, G-d willing, last many years. Whether it is the conflict posed in this question or any conflict relating to the wedding preparations, parents need to consider the issue at hand and whether it is worthwhile to introduce conflict into the relationship. Even if the parents are handling it on their own, if there is contention between the two sets of parents, it can be a source of conflict for the young couple.

RJB: The advice here is the same advice that one would give a couple when dealing with most of the differences that come up between *mechutanim*: whenever possible, stay far away! The children getting involved in this issue between the parents can only take a contentious situation and ignite it even further. Before you know it, the couple has taken sides with each of their respective parents, animosity is created between the children and their future in-laws, and the whole thing becomes a mess. The chassan and kallah should express to the parents what they feel is important about the wedding (perhaps the music, what type of seating arrangement there ought to be between males and females, who they would like to give kibbudim to etc.), and then back

away as much as possible. Hopefully, all the parents involved have the capacity to keep their children in a space in which they can focus on their own preparations instead of bringing the children right into the middle of wedding plans.

YUC: The engagement party, wedding and all the accouterments are fun, festive and frequently take enormous energy and time to plan. They can be temporarily all-consuming, yet we all know that those few days are not the main event. Rather, the ultimate joy is watching the couple begin their life together, building a *bayit neeman b’Yisrael*.

Furthermore, while planning a wedding can be challenging and stressful, it is important that the process, and any consequences, do not distract from the focus on the healthy relationship of the budding couple. The two families who are uniting for the first time in planning the simcha may have differing perspectives and wish lists for the upcoming celebrations. We encourage *machatanim* to discuss with each other the details of their desired arrangements and their capabilities for contributing toward them. They may have differing financial, family and social circumstances that all factor into the plans. It is important to be understanding and not to pressure the other family to spend money they do not have.

Placing the new couple in the middle of negotiations may end up being detrimental to the health of their relationship. However, that does not mean that the parents need to keep the couple completely in the dark. Each set of parents can be honest with their respective child as to what they believe they can afford. Some people like a ten-piece band and others prefer to spend money on flowers. Others like to be more minimalistic with the wedding expenses and give some money to the couple as a gift toward their future. However, all agree that regardless of respective preferences on wedding spending, the *shalom bayit* of the couple and families is most important

and we would not want to sacrifice it for the details of a five or six hour event. Parents should be careful not to pin the chatan and kallah against each other or against their future in-laws. The couple can also be cautious as to not be drawn into the negotiations, and speak to their parents openly if they feel they need to take a step back. Being *mevater* (giving in) by displaying restraint, flexibility, and kindness are excellent *middot* to model at this time, and will teach the young couple valuable lessons that they can bring into their upcoming marriage.

What is a healthy way for parents to support their married children without the children feeling like there are strings attached? What types of conflict arise if the couple feels pressured to live in a certain community or spend many Shabbasos and Yamim Tovim with the parents who provide support?

RJB: Like most things that pertain to relationships, the keys are communication and boundaries. A boundary is the fundamental statement that the other person's space and autonomy is significant and will be respected and protected. A lack of boundaries or an encroachment on boundaries severely puts relationships to the test. This is true of all relationships but is often most manifest in relationships between parents and children. There are two components to this question: The first is that ideally, the parents have a natural sense of how to be giving, generous, and involved while still being able to stay in their proverbial lane (Rav Wolbe writes about this at length in his beautiful sefer, *Zeriah U'binyan B'chinuch*). Often that requires the capacity to refrain from commenting about what one's married kids are doing even if their decisions or actions do not coincide with the parent's behavior or sensitivities and might on occasion deviate from the parent's values.

The second part is that if those boundaries have not been respected, then the children need to feel comfortable to respectfully communicate with the parents about space and independence. If the parents are open to a healthy conversation, then those conversations, while not comfortable, can in fact be positive and growth producing for all involved. If the parents are not able to engage in a healthy and respectful dialogue, then these issues tend to be incredibly difficult and painful, and I would recommend that the couple have a Rav or a therapist who can help guide them through this complicated process of establishing boundaries specifically when boundaries are going to have to be imposed.

YUC: In speaking with community marital therapists, one of the common causes of marital discourse today in young marrieds is parental overinvolvement. Parents can affect marriages in many ways and one area may relate to attaching strings to financial support.

Parents who are able and willing to provide support to their children are advised to do so unconditionally with no strings attached. While this may be difficult at times, it is most beneficial for the health of the young couples' marriage and the young couples' relationship with both sets of parents. Again, we should keep in mind that parental support may come in many different forms, not only financial. A young couple receiving support from their parents regardless of form and amount, large or small, should continuously show appreciation and gratefulness for the support, love and care they receive.

Encouraging our married children to be kind and respectful to their in-laws and visit and call their homes as often as ours, regardless of financial means or support, is an ideal practice. In fact, one astute mother commented to a matchmaker recently with the proper perspective, "I am so happy when the young couple spends time with the other side. I feel

so blessed that someone loves my child as their own." This positive mindset is indeed serving as a *bracha* for this couple and for the development of positive relationships across family members.

MPF: This is a deep-rooted issue. I don't know if a brief answer can sufficiently provide guidance, but that being said, these issues generally arise because of a lack of open communication. Parents tend to make assumptions or have unrealistic expectations, both from the married children and the *machatanim*. Married children are then in an uncomfortable situation and don't know how to navigate it.

Parents should give what they are comfortable giving. It is not healthy to give and then harbor resentment. They *cannot* have expectations of their children that are tied to their gift.

I have seen the Shabbos and Yom Tov issue create terrible strife between the parents and the children and between the husband and wife. Young marrieds must put their spouse's needs before the parents. Parents should make it clear that the couple is welcome but there is no pressure. The parents should also respect the couple's need to focus on each other and on building the relationship by putting each other first and being sensitive to each other's needs.

Fake it Till you Make it

Should we try to use superficially “fancy” items in our performance of mitzvos?

At this time of year there is a certain focus on the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, enhancing the performance of a mitzvah. As we all scramble to accrue *zechuyos* (merits) during the *yemei hadin*, we may, at times, be inclined to spend increasingly exorbitant amounts of money on the accoutrements of our mitzvah performance. With the prices on *esrogim* and *succah* adornments skyrocketing, we may feel like we are being stretched to our limits financially, but we still want to perform the mitzvos of this time of year in the most fitting way.

In certain instances, we may be presented with a choice between an item that appears to be quite expensive and fancy or one that may look less impressive but is worth more and made

from better, more precious materials. Although we are still some ways away from Kislev, I would like to present a case study based on a *shaila* regarding the Chanukah menorah.

Someone with limited funds is looking to purchase a menorah. They can afford a small, basic one made from pure silver OR a large and “fancy” one that is silver plated, but looks real. Which is more *mehudar*?

To address the question, we must first learn the background of the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* and draw the parameters and limitations of its application. The Gemara in *Maseches Shabbos* (133a) introduces the concept of Hashem preferring mitzvos performed with more beautiful, higher quality items. Rashi elsewhere (*Yoma* 70a) elaborates and explains that it is not only that



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Hashem prefers mitzvos performed with more beautiful instruments, but that our effort to procure such objects enhances the mitzva's performance by highlighting our love for, and commitment to, the mitzvah.

Rav Asher Weiss shlit”a, (*Minchas Asher*, Shemos 26:6) discusses a question that directly relates to the practical applications of the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*. Is there a benefit to superficial beauty of mitzvah items? Does a nice-looking item that is cheap and of a lower quality enhance the performance of the related mitzvah? Perhaps when dealing with items that are looked at or used visually in the performance of a mitzvah (e.g. a sefer Torah that is read from, etc.), there is a concept of *hiddur mitzvah* that relates the superficial appearance of an item.

Another question that may help us draw parameters is whether the concept would extend to items that accompany the mitzvah item, but are not used in the actual mitzvah performance. For instance, is there a concept of *hiddur mitzvah* when choosing an esrog box? Perhaps when discussing these ancillary items, the concept of *hiddur* would not be extended to items of this nature.

What’s the nature of a menorah when lighting Chanukah candles? Is the menorah fundamentally part of the fulfillment of the mitzvah? Or is it merely a way to hold up and arrange the oil cups or candles with which we could fulfill the mitzvah without the massive silver menorahs, which are ubiquitous throughout our neighborhoods?

The Maharal (*Ner Mitzvah* vol. 2) notes that lighting a *ner* inherently requires a vessel to hold the oil and wick. This seems to imply that the vessel that holds our oil cups or candles is necessary for

the fulfillment and would also beg the same level of *hiddur* as any other item that must be present for the mitzvah’s completion. However, not all agree with this premise. Rav Shmuel Vosner Z’L, the author of the famed halachic work *Shevet HaLevi* (8:157) writes that the consensus of the poskim seems to be that the vessel that holds the ner is not critical to the performance of the mitzvah. Rav Soloveitchik (in *Nefesh HaRav* pg. 226) also felt that requiring a vessel is an unnecessary stringency.



Is there a concept of *hiddur mitzvah* when choosing an esrog box?

The *Mishna Berurah* (OC 673:28) writes that it is certainly a good practice for one to obtain a nice and fitting menorah. Although it does not seem that the *Mishna Berurah* viewed this as a halachic imperative, it is certainly telling

that he mentions the improvement that a *mehudar* menorah can provide and that he emphasizes that every individual should strive to obtain a menorah that is fitting based on their own financial situation.

In conclusion, based on our analysis of the topic, let’s now address our initial question. Should someone spend their money on a small, high-quality silver menorah? Or should they instead buy a large and ornate silver-plated one? Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky, shlit”a, the famed Rosh Yeshiva and leading posek, posits (*Kovetz Halachos*, Chanukah pg. 34) that with regards to the mitzvah of menorah, there may not be a definitive requirement of *hiddur* but there is certainly a fulfillment of the lofty concept of beautifying our mitzvah performance, which is linked to the *kavod* with which we view the mitzvah. Based upon this understanding, we can assess each of the two options that we have been presented.

If we are looking to enhance that *kavod* of the mitzvah and its fulfillment, posits Rav Kamenetzky, we should obtain the menorah that has the most beautiful and respectable appearance. Although the solid silver menorah may be worth more money, it does not look as impressive relative to the large and ornate silver-plated menorah. According to Rav Kamenetzky, when analyzing this question, we assess the aesthetic rather than the practical value of the object in question.



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Exploring Materialism, Vanity & Frivolity in Kohelet

When All You Have Isn't Enough: *Materialism in Kohelet*

“So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?” sings Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof*? Indeed, what would have been so terrible? If we regard this as a serious rather than rhetorical question, we might turn to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his *Letters to the Next Generation*. There he wrote that, “What the financial collapse should teach us is that we were becoming obsessed with money: salaries, bonuses, the cost of houses, and the expensive luxuries we could live without. *When money rules, we remember the price of things and forget the value of things.*” This may explain the important statement of Rabbi Ilui in BT *Eruvin* 65b: “A person is recognized through three things: his cup, his purse and his anger.” One of the ways we are known is by the way in which we spend money. Money can make us more generous and charitable.

But it can also surface miserly or greedy tendencies or make us overly materialistic and unhappy with what we do have. Yes, Tevya, sometimes it is terrible to have a small fortune.

The Biblical book that perhaps addresses materialism with the greatest degree of candor and honesty is Kohelet. Chapter two is an experiment in hedonism. What if one could buy anything one wanted and more? How would that change and shape one's personal identity? Kohelet engages in these questions without apology:

הגדלתי מעשׂי בניתי לי בתים נטעתי לי כרמים.
*I multiplied my possessions. I built myself
houses and I planted vineyards*
Eccl. 2:4

He describes the status items he purchases in great detail and then arrives at a conclusion to his study:

וכל אשר שאלו עיני לא אצלתי מהם לא מנעת



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את לבי מכל שמחה כי לבי שמה מכל עמלי וזה
היה חלקי מכל עמלי.

*I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked
for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather,
I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And
that was all I got out of my wealth.*

Eccl. 2:10

Kohelet indulges himself and then admits that he enjoyed himself, but his hedonism offered nothing more than temporal pleasure. It could not buy him lasting happiness. Expecting that it can is an error of judgment.

Kohelet addresses this problem directly a few chapters later in some of the most cited verses in the book:

אהב כסף לא ישבע כסף ומי אהב בהמון לא תבואה גם זה הבל. ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה ומיה כשרון לבטלה כי אם ראות עיניו.
A lover of money never has his fill of money, nor a lover of wealth his fill of income. That too is futile. As his substance increases, so do those who consume it; what, then, does the success of its owner amount to but feasting his eyes?

Eccl. 5:9-10

The more money one has, the more money one wants, the less satisfaction one has, the more others want. Rabbi Sacks confronts this issue as well in *Letters to the Next Generation*: “The financial collapse happened because people borrowed money they didn’t have, to buy things they didn’t need, to achieve happiness that wouldn’t last.” He goes so far as to say that consumerism is a “mechanism for creating and distributing unhappiness.” He diagnoses our unprecedented affluence as the source of our unprecedented levels of stress and depression.

Kohelet has other thoughts about the limits of materialism that appear throughout the *sefer*. While he acknowledges the role that money plays in enjoyment, he also regards the

acquisition of it as a waste of time:

ופניתי אני בכל מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש.
Then my thoughts turned to all the fortune my hands had built up, to the wealth I had acquired and won—and oh, it was all futile and pursuit of wind; there was no real value under the sun!
Eccl. 2:11

Later on in the chapter, in verses 18 and 19, Kohelet turns his attention to the foolishness of laboring and obtaining wealth to pass on to the next generation when it is unclear if a wise or a foolish descendant will be the inheritor. This same sentiment is repeated in chapter 4, verse 8.

Hoarding money, however, is also a bad idea, Kohelet confesses in 5:12-13, because then the one who earned it gets no benefit from it at all:

יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש ורבה היא על האדם. איש אשר יתן לו האלקים עשר ונכסים וקבוד ואיננו חסר לנפשו מפל אשר יתאנה ולא ישליטנו האלקים לאכל ממנו כי איש נכרי יאכלנו זה הבל וחקלי רע הוא.
There is an evil I have observed under the sun, and a grave one it is for man: that God sometimes grants a man riches, property, and wealth, so that he does not want for anything his appetite may crave, but God does not permit him to enjoy it; instead, a stranger will enjoy it. That is futility and a grievous ill.

Eccl. 6:1-2

Kohelet neither advises financial restraint nor judges financial excesses. Instead, he reminds readers that it is

ill-advised to think money can provide meaning. Chasing profit is often a wasteful use of time and attention, and there are unintended complications when it goes unspent or lands in the wrong hands. The sobering perspective he offers, however, does not minimize its necessity. Author and economist Meir Tamari concludes in his book *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* that: “Judaism acknowledges the legitimate satisfaction of man’s basic needs, provided that these needs are fulfilled within the framework of morality and justice set up by religious law.” Tamari observes that, “Man’s economic desires are treated by Judaism in exactly the same way as all other basic human needs: as legitimate, permissible, and beneficial, but restricted, educated, and sanctified by observance of God’s commandments.”

One of the unusual features of the book is that Kohelet never directly advises the giving of *tzedaka* or any useful contribution money can make to ameliorate the lives of others or to engage in more spiritual pursuits. This we leave to Teyve who tells us what he would do if he had more money: “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray. And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall. And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all.”



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Unlocking the Layers of Laughter

The term *schok*, laughter, appears several times across various books in Tanach. In some contexts, it might be construed as an act of frivolity, mockery, or ridicule. Alternatively, it may have connotations of joy and exuberance. Undoubtedly, *schok* is quite multifaceted, its definition varied based on the settings in which it arises. This article will explore the manner in which Kohelet illustrates the complexities behind *schok*, an understanding that will be applied to other occurrences of this word throughout Tanach in order to appreciate the true depth and nuance behind the term.

Kohelet's first mention of *schok* states "I said of laughter, it is foolishness, and of happiness, what does it accomplish?" (Kohelet 2:2). This excerpt maintains a harsh perspective of *schok*, equating it to folly and uselessness. Why the severe

condemnation of laughter and joy? Commentators on this verse provide explanations for the distinct form of laughter to which Kohelet refers here. Shadal, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto on Kohelet 2:2, writes, "Happiness like this, that is without reason, but rather a human's compelling himself to be happy, is not complete happiness which is enjoyed by the soul." Shadal says that the *schok* Kohelet denounces is laughter devoid of meaning, laughter for the sake of itself. Similarly, R. Ovadiah Seforno, on the same verse, defines this type of laughter as, "Without intention for a proper purpose." Once again, there is an emphasis on the lack of substance behind this laughter. Evidently, Kohelet's statement criticizes the act of empty laughter, as it does not achieve true, substantive joy.

Accordingly, the next two mentions of *schok* in Kohelet capture a similar

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theme. The text states in one instance, "Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the face the heart is made good" (Kohelet 7:3). Kohelet contrasts foolish laughter with sorrow, a valuable emotion. While anguish stimulates the empathy of others, laughter without meaning accomplishes little. Additionally, Kohelet states, "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool" (Kohelet 7:6). The imagery used here evokes the sound of cackling, implying the vacuous manner of this laughter. By equating

foolish laughter to the noise of crackling thorns, Kohelet reiterates the hollow and ineffective nature of this *schok*.

However, the word *schok* next arises in a different context in Kohelet, seeming to contradict the previously formed precedent of negativity associated with the term. Here, Kohelet asserts that there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (Kohelet 3:4), implying that laughter in certain scenarios is appropriate. Further, Kohelet’s final mention of *schok* states, “Bread is made for laughter, and wine makes the life glad, and money is the answer for all things” (Kohelet 10:9). In this verse, Kohelet provides a recipe for laughter, implying that such laughter is encouraged. It is odd that Kohelet, after all his harsh excoriations of laughter, would now promote it.

Commentators view this statement as a promotion of true laughter. Rashi on Kohelet 10:9 writes, “Without money, there is no feast, therefore, a person should not shy away from work, so that he will have what to produce.” Rashi explains that this type of *schok* is a result of productivity. Exertion and recognition of actualized efforts leads to a feeling of contentment and joy, a satisfaction with one’s notable contribution. The laughter that is achieved following accomplishment is true, fulfilling *schok*.

The *Lekach Tov* on Kohelet 10:9 states, “One who has a field that he sows and produces bread to eat, behold he laughs, for he will not die by famine, and one who has a vineyard and harvests it and produces wine will also be happy with his lot.” The *Lekach Tov*’s interpretation indicates that this *schok* is facilitated through the process and success of labor, the sense of security that is gained through achievement. Similar to Rashi, he views true laughter as a product of productivity.

When observing the differing contexts of the word *schok* throughout Kohelet and its resulting connotations, Kohelet’s appreciation for the multifaceted nature of this term becomes clear. He first demonstrates the worthlessness of empty laughter, perhaps referring to sarcasm, or derisiveness at the expense of others. This type of *schok* is the vice of fools, who, throughout Kohelet, are notoriously indolent. In contrast, Kohelet encourages the laughter that results from exertion and achievement, laughter that can only be attained by one who has labored and felt the sense of security that accompanies successful accomplishment. Kohelet’s understanding of *schok* supports its inherent connection to productivity or lack thereof.

This interpretation of *schok* can be applied more broadly to its appearances throughout Tanach. One such example arises in Yirmeyahu, when he complains in 20:7, “Hashem, you have persuaded me, and I was persuaded. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock all the day, everyone mocks me.” Yirmeyahu’s statement exemplifies the negative form of *schok*, the hollow laughter that comes at the expense of others. In this instance, the Jews, who have foolishly disregarded Yirmeyahu’s desperate calls for religious improvement, laugh while he works to follow G-d’s commands. The Jews of the time, paradigms of idleness, are prone to this form of derisive *schok*.

This theme of *schok* as ridicule continues in Iyov, which states, “But now they that are younger than I have me in derision, whose fathers I disdained to set with the dogs of my flock” (Job 30:1). Here, Iyov expresses the irony of his wretched predicament; he has become the object of scorn, mocked by those individuals whom he

holds in contempt. Like Yirmeyahu, Iyov, who has withstood and weathered many disappointments, is disparaged by ignorant fools. This verse portrays the type of *schok* that Kohelet deems the worthless sport of unproductive individuals.

In contrast, a valuable form of *schok* appears in Tehillim, which states, “Then our mouth filled with laughter, our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, ‘Hashem has done great things with these’” (Tehillim 126:2).

This poetic account illustrates a joyful recognition of G-d’s success, a moment marked by a bout of exuberant laughter. In a related verse that appears within the same chapter, Tehillim reads, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Tehillim 126:5). This offers another poignant portrayal of the bond between productivity and happiness, an account that indicates that true joy results from hard-earned accomplishment. It points to a bliss felt only by those who have watched their progress and seen it come to fruition, a sense of self-worth resulting from the realization of an actualized vision.

As noted in *Brown-Driver-Briggs* (pg. 2060), the root *schok* is interchangeable with *tzchok*, a perhaps more familiar term that is similarly translated as laugh. This word famously appears in Bereshit, after G-d informs Avraham that he and Sarah will give birth to a son in their old age. The text reads, “And Avraham fell on his face, and he laughed” (Bereshit 17:17). Additionally, when Sarah hears this information, she laughs: “And Sarah laughed to herself” (Bereshit 18:12). These peculiar instances of laughter can be explained through applying Kohelet’s interpretation of the word *schok*.

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What is Hevel?

There are many words and phrases throughout the book of Kohelet that repeat themselves. These repetitive words and phrases are meant to draw out themes and major ideas that the author wants the reader to hone in on. One of these words in particular, though, leaves us with an ambiguous understanding. The word *hevel* appears 38 times throughout the sefer. In fact, the word bookends the sefer, when it is used five times in the very first pasuk and then in a similar pattern at the end of the last chapter. Many of the major themes throughout Kohelet are easier to understand. There are words like *simcha* (happiness), *ruach* (spirit), and *chaim* (life), all of which are familiar to us. However, the word *hevel* is a vaguer concept and is not as familiar to us. Yet it is clear from its frequent use in the sefer that Kohelet wants us to learn something here. Our job is to dig deeper and try to uncover the meaning and definition of this term.

The first time that a term is used in Tanach will usually provide lens to its meaning. The first time the word *hevel* appears in Tanach is in Bereishit perek 4 in the story of Kayin and Hevel. Here, Hevel is a person, a character that can shed light on the meaning of this word. This usage we will get back to later. However, after this usage of the word, *hevel* next appears in Devarim 32:21. There, in Parshat Ha'Azinu, Moshe gives his final speech to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem tells Moshe to use this speech as a witness to the commandments that were given to the nation. Moshe says:

הם קנאוני בלא אל כעסוני בהבליהם ואני
אקניאם בלא עם בגוי נבל אכעיסם.
They have moved Me to jealousy with that which is not God. They have provoked Me to anger with vanities (b'havleihem). I will move them to jealousy with those who are not a people. I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

Devarim 32:21

Here, Moshe is rebuking Bnei Yisrael for their future rebellions and for

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leaving Hashem to serve other gods. Here *b'havleihem* means “with false gods.”

Ibn Ezra comments on this word and says “*v'lo b'dvar emet*,” that these things have no truth to them. Ramban here also comments that these are “*ha-sheidim*.” Again, something that is nothingness. It is silly and has no value. This word appears many times throughout the book of Nevi'im as well. One context that sums up the way it appears in many other places is in Melachim I, 16:13. There it says:

אֶל כָּל חַטָּאוֹת בַּעֲשָׂא וְחַטָּאוֹת אֵלֶּה בָּנוּ אֲשֶׁר
חָטְאוּ וְאֲשֶׁר הִחַטִּיאוּ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַכְעִיס אֶת
ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַבְלִיהֶם.

For all the sins of Baasa and the sins of Elah his son, that they sinned, and

that they caused Israel to sin, to provoke Hashem, the God of Israel, with their vanities.

In this chapter, Yehu receives a prophecy that Baasha was just as bad as his father, therefore he will die. This pasuk points out that one of the sins that he committed was causing Bnei Yisrael to leave Hashem and serve false gods. This pasuk is very similar to the one mentioned in Devarim as well as many other pesukim in Nevi'im, as they both use the word *hevel* to mean false gods. It connotes something that is silly, worthless, and meaningless.

Taking this meaning back to Sefer Kohelet will help us put this word into context and understand its meaning there and perhaps shed light on what Kohelet was trying to ultimately convey.

The term appears in the second chapter of Kohelet more than anywhere else in the sefer, thus it is reasonable to start there as we try to understand this term. In this chapter, Kohelet explores wisdom and struggles to understand it. Eventually he concludes that purpose, meaning and joy can only exist when we believe in Hashem. In this chapter, Kohelet speaks of his own personal experiences and explains that it is all *hevel*. In 2:1 Kohelet says that all the pleasures of life are *hevel*. He continues like this throughout the chapter, stating that all his life experiences are *hevel*. Kohelet concludes in pesukim 24-26 that he should enjoy life and affirms there is a benefit to his toil because this is what Hashem wants from him. Rashi on 2:26 says:

נתן חכמה ודעת ושמחה – לב לעסוק בתורה
ובמצות.

[God] gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy — A heart to engage in Torah and mitzvot.

Here, Kohelet gives meaning to the word *hevel*, saying that the work that

one toils in and does not get rewarded for is *hevel*. We can infer that here this term can mean worthless, meaningless and a waste of time. Kohelet continues and says your toil will not be *hevel* if it has purpose, such as work in Torah and mitzvot and serving Hashem.

We can correlate this meaning back to the pesukim in Devarim and Melachim I. There, the word *hevel* was used to mean false gods. Here, in chapter 2 of Kohelet, it is used to mean work that does not serve the purpose of Torah or Hashem, the true God. Both uses of the term imply something that people work at, but in the end is pointless as it has no real meaning. Kohelet is trying to teach us that all is *hevel* unless it is for the purpose of serving Hashem. There it is meant “no-gods,” here it means not for God, which is a fascinating contrast.

Aside from the abundance of times we find the word *Hevel* in Perek 2 of

*In life, we may think
we are so great and
indestructible, but in
the end we all take a
shallow breath and die.
Mortality exists.*

Kohelet, we find this word many other times throughout other perakim of the sefer. While the word may have slightly different definitions throughout the sefer, it always connotes something negative, just as it did in Devarim, Nevi'im and Perek 2 of Kohelet as it related it false gods, something worthless. In Perek 1, Kohelet uses this word to say everything under the sun is *hevel*. In Pasuk 14, he connects the word *hevel* with the word *r'ut*. *Metzudat*

David says here that everything is *hevel* and therefore no one will ever achieve their desires and will always be disappointed. In Perek 3, *hevel* is used to compare man and beast showing that they are the same since they both amount to *hevel* — to nothingness. In Perakim 4 and 5, *hevel* is used in context of physical labor, wealth and money, and Kohelet says it is all *hevel*. Rashi on 5:9 sums it up by explaining that we toil in physical labor to gain wealth. But it is all *hevel* since it will disappear, and we cannot benefit from it forever. Only from toil in Torah and mitzvot can we forever benefit. Throughout the rest of the sefer, Kohelet used *hevel* to denote similar things. It always has a negative connotation, defined as something worthless, meaningless, futile, vain, or empty. All the synonyms are used in different contexts, but all truly define what *hevel* is. The definition we find in Perek 2 of “not for God” also relates and is a synonym for these definitions. Clearly, across the sefer, *hevel* implies something negative.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gives us beautiful insight into another possible meaning of the term *hevel* and uses the character Hevel, the first time the word appears in Tanach, to support his understanding. Rabbi Sacks, in his shiur “Why We Read Kohelet on Sukkot,” asks why Sukkot is called “*Zman Simchateinu*” (a time of our joy). Next, he asks why do we read Sefer Kohelet on this holiday? He asks this question because he points out that Kohelet is a depressing sefer. Why would we read this on a holiday that is “*Zman Simchateinu*”? Rabbi Sacks recognizes that a key word in the sefer is *hevel*. While previously we defined this term as vain, futile and worthless, Rabbi Sacks introduces a new definition. He says *hevel* is a

shallow breath. In life, we may think we are so great and indestructible, but in the end we all take a shallow breath and die. Mortality exists. Everything we build and accumulate is nothingness because we are just a breath and can die at any moment. We will not be around to see what we have accumulated. This is the theme of Sefer Kohelet and what troubles Kohelet throughout the Sefer. Rabbi Sacks then brings up the character Hevel, the first time *hevel* is used in Tanach and the first human to ever die. Kayin (who killed Hevel) means “to acquire.” The story of Kain and Hevel is symbolic of death and defeating death by acquisition. Kohelet, too, tries to defeat death by acquiring things, but realizes it is all *hevel*, that acquisition is all temporary. Rabbi Sacks continues and says that true *simcha* is about living in the moment, which is

why you can feel *simcha* even when bad things are happening around you. Kohelet realizes that you cannot defeat death by acquisition. But you can defeat death by *simcha*, by enjoying today, by enjoying the now.

In Rabbi Sacks’ conclusion, he states that a sukkah is a temporary dwelling. Kohelet is obsessed with the notion that human life is temporary, that it is *hevel*. What allows us to overcome the fear of the temporary is *simcha*, is living in the moment. And that is why Sukkot is called “*Zman Simchateinu*.” It is the means necessary to not fear the *hevel*.

Rabbi Sacks provides us with a less intense definition of *hevel*, meaning temporary or a fleeting life. He reassures us that it is not that scary and shows us how Kohelet teaches us to overcome the fears of *hevel*. While Rabbi Sacks’

definition may be less dramatic than the previous definitions given, it is not too far off and is still synonymous with meanings such as worthless, futile, meaningless and pointless. When trying to understand this term, we need to look at the context of how it is presented. However, whatever the context, *hevel* always teaches us the same lesson over and over, which is truly how we can define the word. *Hevel* always teaches us what is important in life. Do not waste your time with things that are *hevel*, you must serve God and follow the Torah in order to live a non-*hevel* life. Do not worry about physical accumulations, they are *hevel*. Focus on *simcha*, Hashem and the now. *Hevel* may be the ultimate lesson that Kohelet wants us to learn from his sefer. But we must pay attention to its context and usage to truly understand the message.

Unlocking the Layers of Laughter: Continued from Page 24

Avraham and Sarah had spent much of their lives committing themselves to G-d and His commands, making efforts to facilitate His promise that they be the matriarch and patriarch of a proliferating nation. The challenge of Sarah’s barrenness had led to her selfless bestowal of Hagar to Avraham. This pairing had resulted in Yishmael, the presumed beneficiary to Avraham’s and Sarah’s mission. In yet another test of dedication, G-d made it clear that Yishmael was not meant to take on this role. At this point, Avraham and Sarah had become weary from a seemingly endless struggle to produce the proper heir. When G-d finally informs Avraham of the impending birth of the chosen son, he cannot help

but laugh; after many years of trials and failed attempts, Avraham now has confirmation of imminent success. This laughter is a reaction of exuberant joy at the recognition of forthcoming accomplishment. However, when this news reaches Sarah’s ears, she responds with laughter of a different nature, an act that she tellingly attempts to deny. In contrast to Avraham’s laughter, Sarah’s evokes the *schok* that Kohelet spurns; that of sarcasm and disbelief, indicative of a lack of faith in G-d. Even within this microcosmic narrative, *tzchok* is marked as a profoundly impactful theme, so expressively expansive in meaning, ultimately culminating in the naming of Avraham and Sarah’s son, Yitzchak. Through studying the depth of the

word *schok* and its connotations within Kohelet, it becomes evident that the term is inherently connected to the concept of uselessness, and alternatively, productivity. The type of laughter that connotes the former is the frivolous sport of fools, mockery; an act which throughout Tanach is often performed by idle individuals who dismiss the legitimate efforts of others. The second form of laughter results from a recognition of the accomplishments achieved through exertion. This emotional response presupposes a certain level of labor, a struggle to attain something, and eventual success. Only a life of overcoming challenges will warrant the euphoric joy of true laughter.

The Blessing of Material Wealth: Living Modestly in the Service of G-d

The new year is ushered in by a month replete with *kedusha, tefillah, Torah, Yom Tov seudos*, all shared with family and friends. There are many hallmarks of this month, including the many *mitzvos* and customs associated with each day of Tishrei.

However, the singular *avodah* that begins in Elul and runs through *Shmini Atzeres/Simchas Torah* is the exalted *avodah* of *tefillah*. From Tehillim 27, *L'Dovid Hashem ori v'yishi*, "To David, Hashem is my Light and my Salvation," recited daily, beginning on the first of Elul; to the daily selichos prayers; the *Malchiyos, Zichronos* and *Shofaros* passages of Rosh Hashana; the wordless prayer of the shofar; the *Tashlich* service performed near water; and the supplications and confessions of Yom Kippur... the prayers we offer during Elul and Tishrei are profound and innumerable.

Not only are we praying for these Days of Awe, we are praying for the year to come. We beseech G-d for our health and wealth, for our family and friends,

for Jewish communities near and far, for stability in the foreign lands in which Jews live and peace and blessing in the Land where we all are meant to live.

Recounting the awesomeness of these days in the *Unesaneh Tokef* prayer, widely understood as one of the most stirring *tefillos* of these days, we say:

בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן וּבִיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחַתְמוּן.
כְּמָה יַעֲבְרוּן וְכְמָה יִפְרְאוּן. מִי יִחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת.
מִי בָקָצוּ וּמִי לֹא בָקָצוּ. מִי בָאֵשׁ. וּמִי בַּמַּיִם ... מִי
יָנוּחַ. וּמִי יָנוּעַ. מִי יִשְׁקֵט וּמִי יִטְרַף. מִי יִשְׁלֹךְ. וּמִי
יִתְיַסֵּר. מִי יִעֲנִי וּמִי יִעֲשֶׂר. מִי יִשְׁכַּח וּמִי יָרוּם.

On Rosh Hashana will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed how many will pass and be created; who will live and who will die; who at his predestined time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire ... Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degraded and who will be exalted.

It is during these days of prayer that our *parnasah*, our physical sustenance



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for the upcoming year, is inscribed and sealed. Chazal teach:

כל מזונותיו של אדם קצובים לו מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים.

One's entire livelihood is allocated to him during the period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur.

Beitzah 16a

Our *tefillos* of Elul and Tishrei revolve around praying for mercy and goodwill, both for our spiritual and physical needs. Indeed, it was on the very first Rosh Hashana of Creation — *ha'yom haras olam* — that man was created as a

composite of both material and physical elements:

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה. And G-d fashioned the man, dust from the earth (material elements), and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life (spiritual elements), and the man became a living spirit.

Bereishis 2:7

Hence, if man is made up of dust from the earth and a soul that emanates from Hashem Himself, we must supplicate G-d to provide sustenance for both aspects of ourselves. As G-d creates, sustains and provides for all, we turn to Him to inscribe us in the book of provisions for life.

Like all our *tefillos*, the prayer for physical sustenance is one that continues daily throughout the entire year, known as *Birkas Ha'Shanim*, the ninth *bracha* recited in the daily Amidah:

בְּרַךְ עָלֵינוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת הַשָּׁנָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת כָּל מִינֵי תְבוּאָתָהּ לְטוֹבָה... בְּרַוֶּךְ אֶתָּה ה', מְבָרֶכְךָ הַשָּׁנִים

Bless upon us, Hashem our G-d, this year and all the varieties of its produce for good... Blessed are You, Hashem, Blessor of the years.

R' Samson Rafael Hirsch teaches:

Emphasis is placed here on both aleinu (upon us) and le'tova (for the good), for a year may be blessed and still not afford blessings to us. Such a year cannot then be a blessed one as far as we are concerned. It is quite possible for the soil to yield abundant produce and the fields to flourish

without man benefitting from them. As the Sages teach הגפן תתן פריה והיין ביוקר, "the vine may give of its fruit and still the wine may be expensive" (Sotah 49b). Field and pasture may abound with luscious fruit and yet, because of human folly, crookedness and perversity in human relationships, dearth and famine will hold sway and spoil our lives. Therefore, we ask G-d not only to bless the fields but also to arrange circumstances in such a manner that the blessed year may prove a blessing to mankind also, and that the abundant harvest of field may thus bring happiness and prosperity to people's homes.

The Hirsch Siddur, Feldheim, p.153-154

Do we daven for our material needs (and wants) to be fulfilled only to enjoy a good time in this world, amassing an abundance of material wealth?

Not only should the fields be blessed, but the blessing should benefit us so that we may enjoy, be nurtured, succeed and prosper.

This leads us to wonder: Do we daven for our material needs (and wants) to be fulfilled only to enjoy a good time in this world, amassing an abundance of material wealth? Or do we ask G-d to

bestow materialism upon us so that we may become more sincere, authentic, and thoughtful *ovdei Hashem*?

Rabbi Zev Leff *shlita* writes:

The Gemara (Beitzah 16a) relates that 'the Babylonians were foolish, for they ate bread with bread.' The ba'alei mussar explain that this is an analogy for the Babylonians' philosophy of work. If one were to ask a Babylonian why he worked so hard, he would answer that it was because he had to earn a living to be able to eat. When asked why he needed to eat, he would respond, 'I have to eat to be able to have the strength to work to earn a living.' He worked to eat and ate to work — a vicious cycle.

It is not only the Babylonians whose entire lives revolve around earning a living. There are many who fall into the trap of making work their purpose in life and not a means to reach a more exalted goal... True, one must work to earn a living, but one earns a living in order to live, and one must live with the goals of acquiring Torah and yiras Shomayim in order to merit the eternity of the Next World... The weekly Shabbos is 'me'ein Olam Ha'bah' — a taste of the World to Come... With Shabbos we gain a proper perspective on work and toil in this world. Work is no longer perceived as something one does to earn a living in a vicious cycle of earning to live and living to earn, but rather, we understand that we are working to live and living to earn everlasting life, through the performance of Torah and mitzvos.

Shemoneh Esrei, R' Z. Leff, Targum Press, p.174-176.

When we utilize the material blessings G-d bestows upon us for *Torah*, *mitzvos*, and *gemillus chassadim*, as well as enjoying Hashem's world in a way that is both *yashar* and *kasher*, the physicality becomes elevated, serving the higher purpose for which it, and we, were created. Hence, we will be able



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to live a life of *tov li Toras picha me'alfei zahav vachesef*, “The instruction of Your mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver” (Tehillim 119:72).

Not only must our material blessings be used for *avodas Hashem* — *tzedaka, limud Torah, chinuch ha'bonim*, upkeep of our shuls and yeshivos, preparing food for Shabbasos and Yomim Tovim, acts of *chesed* such as *hachnasas kallah, hachnasas orchim*, and supporting community funds — but we must do so in a modest, reserved and humble fashion:

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה ה' דורש ממך כי
אם עשות משפט ואהבת חסד והצנע לכת עם
אלקיך

He has told you, O man, what is good, and what Hashem seeks of you, but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.

Micha 6:8

At the beginning of Devarim, the pasuk says: *p'nu lachem tzafonah*, turn to the north (Devarim 2:3). Noting

that “*tzafon*” means both “north” and “hidden,” the *Kli Yakar* powerfully comments:

שאם ימצא האיש הישראלי בגלות החל
הזה איזו הצלחה זעיר שם, אז יטמינו ויצפינו
הכל בפני עשו ... ע"כ צוה דוקא על עשו
פנו לכם צפונה שלא יתקנא בכם. וזה הפך
ממה שישראל עושין בדורות הללו בארצות
אויביהם, כי מי שיש לו מנה הוא מראה את
עצמו במלבושי כבוד ובתים ספונים וחשובים
כאילו היו לו כמה אלפים ומגרים האומות
בעצמם ועוברים על מה שנאמר פנו לכם
צפונה. ומנהג זה הוא ברבת בני עמינו והוא
המסבב את כל התלאה אשר מצאתנו.
והמשכילים יבינו ליקח מוסר.

Should a Jew find material success in exile, he should certainly “hide” and diminish the display of his wealth before the nations amongst whom we live. Hence, p'nu lachem tzafona, turn inward to yourselves, so that the nations should not be jealous of us. And this is the opposite of what Jews are doing in these generations in the lands of our enemies. For one who has means, he displays it with garments of

honor, and lavish and opulent homes, as if he has much and great wealth, and thus the nations are provoked. Thereby the Jew transgresses p'nu lachem tzafona. And this behavior is prevalent amongst our nation, and the cause for all of our travail, and the wise and discerning will understand this and take mussar.

Kli Yakar to Devarim 2:3

During this awe-inspiring month of Tishrei, when the *avodos* of *teshuva, u'tefilla, u'tzedaka ma'avirin es ro'ah he'gezeirah*, let us direct our prayers with the proper *kavanos*. We all beseech HKB”H to bless us with bountiful blessings from His *otzar ha'tov*, His vast storehouse of unlimited blessings. But the material goods He grants us in the coming year must be utilized with the dual *kavanos* of living a Torah way of life, and doing so in a modest, humble and discreet fashion.

In this way, we will work to live, and live to merit eternal life.

כתבנו לחיים, למענך אלקים חיים.

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Hachazireinu Bitshuva:

Davening for our Spiritual Needs

Rav Yonason Eibschutz, in his work *Ya'arot Devash (Derasha 1)*, underscores the profound capacity we possess to approach God with all our needs during the *Shomei'a Tefillah* blessing:

One should put all his intentions to Hashem, to pray to Him for all his needs, whether small or large. One should not refrain from davening for anything. If one must find a shidduch, he should pray to Hashem; for merchandise, he should pray to Hashem...

The principle of the matter is that there is nothing that one needs to do on a given day that he would not need to daven to Hashem for help to succeed... And he should not have to say that [only] if, chas v'shalom, there is trouble in his home that he should [therefore] pray...

These personal requests serve a dual purpose: they fortify our *emunah* and serve to amplify our *kavanah* when we daven. While *Shomei'a Tefillah* is a general *berachah* designated to encompass our diverse personal needs, as affirmed in the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah 8a*), the *Shulchan Aruch (OC 119:1)* aligns with Rav's opinion, allowing individuals to insert specific

requests into each corresponding Amidah blessing. The *Mishneh Berurah* goes even further, asserting that such a practice is not only permissible but also "proper and fitting" (122:8).

Although many are accustomed to mentioning the names of ailing relatives and friends within the *Refa'einu* blessing, it's crucial to remember that we can also beseech God for assistance with our spiritual aspirations. As exemplified by the Gemara (*Kiddushin 81b*), where Rav Chiyya bar Abba regularly implored for divine aid in subduing his *Yetzer Hara*.

This concept is underscored in the *Shemoneh Esreh*, where we first request the ability to make sound decisions (*Chonen Hadaat*) and then implore God for the capacity to repent (*Hashiveinu Avinu*). Similarly, every morning, in the closing blessing of *birchot hashachar*, we recite:

May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that You allow us to follow Your Torah, and adhere us to Your commandments. Do not bring us into sin, transgression, iniquity, tribulation or disgrace, and do not allow the evil inclination to control us. Keep us distant



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from a wicked person and a wicked companion. Have us cling to our good inclination and good deeds. Make our inclinations subservient to You.

Furthermore, as Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, *Mashgiach Ruchani* of the Mir Yeshiva, expounds (*Or Yechezkel 3:177*):

Prayer is first and foremost in every effort, and there is no matter which is not rooted in prayer ... One merits God's beneficence only through prayer and the request to benefit from His kindness. Without prayer, one does not merit anything. And this is true not only for the acquisition of material things – it is true of spiritual gains as well. Therefore, it should be second nature to solicit God's guidance in our avodat

Hashem. We might erroneously hesitate to seek His assistance in *material* aspects of our lives, deeming them as inconsequential or trivial. However, when it comes to studying Torah, fulfilling *mitzvot*, and growing ever-closer to Him, we should readily seek His support.

Nevertheless, many are more inclined to pray for material needs than for spiritual ones. Why is this the case?

Tefillah, especially spontaneous personal prayer, is born out of a sense of need, and often, we are more attuned to our physical requirements than our spiritual ones. We feel a stronger urgency for sustenance than for success in prayer. A physical injury, like a cut on our finger, typically grabs our immediate attention more than the remorse we should feel for neglecting a *berachah*. This dichotomy should not persist. The deliberate placement of spiritual needs at the forefront of the *Amidah's* petitions is intended to prompt us to reevaluate our priorities. However, for most individuals, the initial thoughts that come to mind when contemplating what to ask from God tend to be more material in nature.

Additionally, this disparity arises because material needs often seem not just more important, but more immediate and pressing than spiritual ones. We assess our growth in Torah and *mitzvot* annually, coinciding with the approach of Elul and the *Yomim Noraim*. We seldom take the time to gauge whether we are better servants of Hashem today compared to yesterday. Consequently, we prioritize our physical well-being, material necessities, and other requests that we anticipate with greater impatience.

There's another reason why we hesitate to make personal requests for spiritual advancement. Paradoxically, we find

it somewhat awkward to ask God for help in this regard. After all, isn't it *our* responsibility to make righteous choices? Are we not supposed to utilize our free will to draw closer to Hashem? As Chazal convey (*Berachot* 33b), "All is in the hands of God - *except for the fear of heaven*," signifying that our choices to do right or wrong are within our control.

The Maharsha (*Berachot* 10a) elucidates that "in the direction that a person wishes to go, he is led." While God has the capacity to control free will, He often opts not to intervene. Humans retain the autonomy to choose their path, and if one desires spiritual growth, they can beseech Divine support.

Chidushei Harim, Likutei Shas (Berachos 33b) takes this a step further. He suggests that matters of a physical nature are in the hands of God. He decides whether to accept our *tefillot* on these matters. However, if we pray for spiritual success (the fear of heaven) and we are sincere, He will certainly accept those prayers.

In fact, there are times when we *must* ask for assistance. Individuals are obliged to exert themselves to uphold *mitzvot* independently. However, when one senses they are on the brink of faltering, they are duty-bound to cry out for help. This act, which involves speaking up and entreating their Creator for assistance, is itself an exercise of free will. They could choose to remain silent and succumb to the urges of the evil inclination. Instead, they choose to engage in the struggle, first and foremost by entreating God for assistance.

A poignant parable by Rav Shimshon David Pincus further illuminates this point. It recounts the tale of a young doctor assigned to the emergency ward as his more senior colleagues

collectively took the evening off.

The doctor's supervisor told him, "There's an important conference this evening and all the doctors will be attending. You'll stay here in charge of the emergency ward. Right now, there are only three patients here. It's your job to keep an eye on them and make sure they're okay. If for any reason you can't take care of these patients by yourself, or if any more patients arrive, remember you have all our numbers. Call immediately for help and we'll send more doctors."

This doctor, filled with extreme self-confidence, gave a salute and said, "Yes sir! I'll be just fine, you can trust me. Tonight, you'll see what I can really do!"

The night started off perfectly well. The doctor made the rounds, checking all the patients every five minutes. One of the patients started moaning and groaning in pain. While the doctor was busy taking care of him, two more patients were wheeled in from a car accident needing transfusions. The doctor rushed from one patient to another, doing the best he could. Then another patient cried out, urgently in need of help. Suddenly the doors swung open and another patient was wheeled in on a stretcher. The doctor remained calm and stayed there with great devotion, not even stopping to eat or drink (or call for help). He treated every patient, hour after hour, all night long.

By the crack of dawn, he found himself with eight patients, seven of them still alive. One had returned his soul to his Creator that night due to a lack of timely medical care.

In the morning, when he needed to inform the incoming shift of the patients' condition, the entire staff was appalled to hear what happened. They couldn't understand how only one doctor had been in charge of eight patients in critical condition. How could there be such negligence with people's lives? But the

doctor insisted, "I didn't even stop for a drink of water. Believe me, I did everything I could!" They said right back, "Why didn't you call for help?" He continued with his foolishness, explaining how devoted he was and how hard he had tried.

The family of the deceased patient sued this doctor for negligence. Even in court, he tried to defend himself with the same arguments, saying he had done everything he could. Did it help? Not at all. He was held accountable for the patient's death and was given a severe punishment to match his crime. The most responsible thing he could have done - what he should have done - was to call for help.

This narrative parallels our own tendency to insist on self-reliance. While we must strive to fulfill God's will to the best of our abilities, when challenges arise and complications ensue, we must not hesitate to request help. Stubbornly asserting, "I'll handle it myself," is imprudent.

Lastly, beseeching God's aid in our teshuva (repentance) endeavors can be profoundly transformative. Many of us outline resolutions for self-improvement around the *Yomim Noraim*, dedicating time during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* to reflect on these goals and implore Hashem for forgiveness and guidance on Yom Kippur. However, as time progresses, these resolutions often wane and fade into the background, only to be resurrected the following year.

Several years ago, I began requesting Hashem's help with my *teshuva* goals during the "*Hasheiveinu Avinu*" blessing. This practice has revolutionized my *avodat Hashem*. At any point in the year, I can communicate my aspirations to God and remind myself of the areas I am diligently working on. *Shemoneh Esreh* has transformed into a daily *teshuva* ritual, not solely seeking God's acceptance of my repentance but also outlining my plans and objectives. If I detect a slip in any of these areas, I don't need to wait until the next Elul; I immediately beseech Hashem for forgiveness in the "*Selach Lanu*" blessing.

This practice allows a 40-day *teshuva* process, running from Elul through Yom Kippur, to evolve into an ongoing journey of self-improvement. Requesting God's assistance in our spiritual growth not only invokes Divine support but also reinforces our own determination.



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Rosh Hashana as the Beginning of the Teshuva Process

The core theme of Rosh Hashana is coronating Hashem, declaring and accepting Him as the king. One way to coronate Hashem is through acts of kindness. The verse in Nechemiah 8:10, records the charge Nechemiah gave the Jewish people on Rosh Hashana (see Nechemiah 8:2):

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לִכְבוֹ אֲכֹלוּ מִשְׂמֵנִים וּשְׂתוּ מִמֵּתֻקִּים
וְשִׁלְחוּ מִנּוֹת לְאֵין נֶכּוֹן לוֹ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ הַיּוֹם
לְאֲדָנֵינוּ וְאֵל תִּעַצְבוּ כִּי חֲדוֹת ה' הִיא מֵעַזְבְּכֶם.
*He said to them: Go and eat delicacies,
drink sweet drinks and send packages to
those in need because today is holy to our
Lord. Do not be sad because joy in G-d is
your strength.*

Why is Nechemiah insisting on sending packages to the needy on Rosh Hashana? Rav Hutner, *Pachad*

Yitzchok no. 1, writes that we see from Nechemiah that engaging in acts of kindness is an integral part of Rosh Hashana. Rav Hutner explains that *chesed* (kindness) is the basis for the creation of the world. Hashem created the world out of total kindness to humanity. If we want to coronate Hashem on Rosh Hashana, we have to show that we follow the values that Hashem's Kingdom was built on. We have to recognize that all of mankind was created in the image of Hashem and that Hashem wants all people to be the beneficiaries of kindness.

One of the verses we read in the *Malchuyos* section comes from *V'zos Haberacha* (Devarim 33:5):

וַיְהִי בִישֻׁרוֹן מֶלֶךְ בְּהַתְאֵסֵף רִאשֵׁי עַם יְחָד
שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
*And there was a king in Jeshurun, when
the heads of the nation gathered, all of the
tribes of Israel were together.*



**Rabbi Dovid
Hirsch**
Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

The key word in this verse is *yachad*, together. If we want to coronate Hashem, we have to be unified. The Maharal, *Tiferes Yisrael* no. 21, writes that the first two commandments were given to all of the Jewish people together and not individually because without unity, there is no nation, and without a nation, Hashem cannot be a king. We achieve this unity by engaging in acts of kindness on Rosh Hashana and by committing to be kind people throughout the year.

This is also why there is a minhag, recorded in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 128:14, to ask forgiveness from our friends and family before Rosh Hashana. The *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 606:1, writes that we should ask forgiveness from our friends and family before Yom Kippur. Asking for

forgiveness before Yom Kippur makes sense because we want to rid ourselves of all of our sins before Yom Kippur. If Rosh Hashana is not about our sins, why should we ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana? Perhaps the *minhag* to ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana serves a different

purpose. The purpose is to unify us, to make sure that each person is whole with everyone else. We are trying to create a sense of unity in order to coronate Hashem and in order to do that, everyone must put all of their gripes and grudges behind.

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The Freedom of Rosh Hashana

We know that Rosh Hashana is a special time of teshuva, of taking stock and attempting to improve. Why are these days different from the rest of the year? We know that we can do teshuva at any time.

The Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* (10b) says that on Rosh Hashana Yosef was freed from prison and was brought to see Pharoh. The *Shem M'Shmuel* (Rosh Hashana pg. 40) points out that Yosef is a designation that is applied to the Jewish people (we are referred to as the Bnei Yosef in Tehillim). There is a concept in chassidus that explains that as you go through the year, every day and every time-period has a particular energy. Rosh Hashana is a time of freedom, as illustrated by Yosef's

departure from the prison.

Throughout the year we may find ourselves in a "prison." Not one of fences and locked doors but an internal prison, which keeps us captive and prevents us from having complete freedom of choice. Internally, we are always constrained to a certain extent by our base instincts. The drives that lead us off the path of *avodas Hashem* are impediments to our achievement of perfection in our spiritual lives. We also live in a culture that is, in many ways, antithetical to the values of the Torah, and we cannot completely escape the influences of our surroundings.

However, on Rosh Hashana a Jew can access the energy of freedom that is linked to the day of Rosh Hashana itself. By accessing this special energy, we can achieve complete freedom as we attempt to return to Hashem



b'teshuva shleima. It is on these days, and during this time of year, that we can truly have complete freedom of choice and can make the right decisions and resolutions that can set us off on a trajectory of spiritual growth for the new year ahead.

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Gadol Worship and the Avodah of Yom Kippur: The Importance of Visualizing Success

Beginning on Rosh Chodesh Elul we begin a tekufah during which we are hyper-focused on the concept of repentance. The days of the Elul and the beginning of Tishrei are referred to as *yemei hadin* and it is during this time of year that we reflect on our past conduct and attempt to repent for any wrongdoing we may have perpetrated over the previous year.

Interestingly, the Mussaf of Yom Kippur, the focal point of the day's tefillah, is not focused on individual teshuvah or on one of the more fundamental themes of the day. It is solely focused on the *avodah* of the Kohein Gadol in the *Kodesh Hakodashim* on Yom Kippur. We punctuate this part of the day's *avodah* with the popular piyyut *Mareh Kohein* which is usually sung to a joyous tune with enthusiastic participation from the congregation.

There is another peculiarity related to the entirety of the *avodah* that was performed throughout the day of Yom

Kippur including those that were daily and not unique to Yom Kippur. While the regular routine daily korbanos could be brought by a regular Kohein on other days of the year, on Yom Kippur all of the *avodah* was performed by the Kohein Gadol.

Why the emphasis on the Kohein Gadol on Yom Kippur? What about Yom Kippur and the character of the day demand the exclusive participation of the Kohein Gadol? Why, when we are so focused on personal introspection and spiritual growth, do we find the focus on one individual's actions?

The image of the Kohein Gadol on Yom Kippur, who is completely engrossed and dedicated to *avodas Hashem* is meant to inspire us. We even sing a song at the crescendo of the day's tefillos that describes in vivid detail the resplendent visage of the Kohein Gadol as he successfully completed the day's *avodah*.

On Yom Kippur, as we prepare ourselves for a year of spiritual growth and successful *avodas Hashem*, we need a vision of success in this realm. We are provided with a role model of what dedication to the service of God looks like and we are meant to take that imagery from the *yemei hadin* with us



Rabbi Daniel Stein

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for the rest of the year.

Rather than focus on our past failings and leave the *yemei hadin* solely with the fear of future mistakes, we instead gaze upon the Kohein Gadol's regal countenance as he departs from a successful day of service in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*. We should all aim to emulate that dedication and commitment as we go through the ebb and flow of our daily lives. We live lives that are structured and centered around *avodas Hashem* and opportunities to fulfill the *ratzon Hashem*. We too can gain the holy glow that the Kohein Gadol acquired as he went through the Yom Kippur *avodah* so that when people see us involved in mitzvos they'll say "*mareh Kohein*."

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Aseret Yemei Tefillah?

It is striking that during Aseres Yemei Teshuva, when our focus should be on doing teshuva and consequently, we would think that we should be spending time in introspection, analyzing our actions and motivations, and we would have little time for quiet contemplation. Ostensibly during Aseres Yemei Teshuva we spend more time davening than we do all year. Our tefillos are

lengthened with Selichos, and Avinu Malkeinu. Why is this so? Why don't we assign a fixed time for contemplation or mussar study? Why do we in effect have Aseres Yemei Tefilla rather than Aseres Yemei Teshuva.

I believe that the answer to this question lies in an inference in the Rambam's language of *viduy*. Rambam (*Teshuva* 1:1) notes that one who recites *viduy* is "*misvadeh lifnei haKel*



Rabbi Ezra Schwartz

Rosh Yeshiva & Associate Dean, RIETS

Baruch Hu” confesses in the presence of Gd. This focus on *viduy* in the presence of Hashem can mean many things. However, on its most basic level, it means that our *viduy* is meant to bring us in the presence of Hashem. Sin distances us from Hashem; *viduy* draws us back (see Rambam *Teshuva* 7:6).

It is worth noting that Rav Chaim, in his sefer on the Rambam notes that the fundamental element of davening is our awareness (*kavana*) that we stand before Hashem. Other forms of intent and concentration are not as critical; the sense that we stand in the presence of Hashem is. I maintain that

for this reason we spend *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* engaged in *tefilla*. The goal of our *teshuva*, as articulated by the Navi Hoshea is to return to Hashem. What better way to reconnect to Hashem than through *tefilla*?

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The Avodah of Neilah: Loving Hashem

There is a concept introduced in *Maseches Yoma* 85b, that *kapparah* (atonement) happens in different ways and at different paces for different transgressions. These differences all fit within the general framework of repentance but there are nuanced differences in the exact achievement of *kapparah* from sin to sin.

Although the gates of *teshuva* are open all year long, there is a greater level of receptiveness to our repentance during the days of Elul and Tishrei. The general hierarchy of repentance, the nuanced differentiation between ways in which one achieves *kapparah* for their transgressions seem to fall by the wayside as well and it's as if our repentance for all our sins is accepted in the same way and at the same time.

What is it about Yom Kippur that seems to supersede the regular functioning of the repentance process?

The *Meshech Chochma* (Vayikra 16:30) writes that there is a special power that the conclusion of the day of Yom Kippur has that is fundamentally different than any other day of the year.

The final hours of Yom Kippur, when we recite *neilah*, seem to be a time that possesses an unmatched level of heavenly openness to our repentance.

The *Minchas Chinuch* (364:35) explores the repentance of the rest of the year. When a person does repentance in the middle of the year their *teshuva* is simply a “band-aid” that covers over the sin but there is still some remnant of that transgression, that is why some sins require additional components of repentance before one achieves complete *kapparah*. However, there is a form of *teshuva* that completely wipes out the sin and could even transform our *aveiros* into *zechuyos*. When one does *teshuvah me'ahava*, repentance out of love, the general rules of repentance or bypassed and the repentant person is entirely forgiven.

When we recite *neilah*, during the waning moments of Yom Kippur the demeanor in heaven is one of complete *rachamim*. The trait of strict judgement, which had been present since the beginning of the Yamim Noraim is supplanted by an outpouring of Hashem's mercy. It is in this context that one can truly tap into a sincere *teshuva me'ahava*. It is not



something that can be accomplished in the moment. We must constantly work on enhancing our *ahavat Hashem* to reach the level where *neilah's* power can be unlocked. By constantly working to deepen our understanding of Hashem and His ways we can reveal some of the endless power and splendor of Hashem. As we reflect on the blessing we each have in our lives and contemplate the profundity of Hashem's creation we will undoubtedly develop an even deeper love for Hashem which will grant us the complete repentance of *neilah* and the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

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Mi-Darkhei ha-Teshuvah: Authentic Repentance

Of the many novel insights presented in Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, Rambam's development of the "darkhei ha-teshuvah," "the ways of repentance," is at the forefront. Rambam states:

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותו המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ולדרך ישרה וגולה ממקומו, שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להכנע ולהיות עניו ושפל רוח. *It is of the ways of teshuvah for the repentant to shout continuously before God with cries and supplications, for him to give charity according to his ability, for him to distance himself significantly from the matter with which he sinned, for him to change his name, as if to say, "I am a different person and not the person who committed those transgressions," for him to transform all of his ways into the good and straight, and for him to exile himself from his place, for exile absolves sin, as it causes*

him to humble himself intensely.

Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:4

Rambam's formulation raises a variety of challenging questions.

First of all, what is the source for Rambam's description of "darkhei ha-teshuvah"? *Kesef Mishneh* assumes that Rambam's position is anchored in a comment of R. Yitzhak in *Rosh ha-Shanah*:

ואמר רבי יצחק: ארבעה דברים מקרעין גזר דינו של אדם, אלו הן: צדקה, צעקה, שינוי השם, ושינוי מעשה. צדקה - דכתיב (משלי י:ב) וצדקה תציל ממות, צעקה - דכתיב (תהלים קז:ו) ויצעקו אל ה' בצר להם וממצקותיהם יוציאם, שינוי השם - דכתיב (בראשית יז:טו) שרי אשתך לא תקרא את שמה שרי כי שרה שמה, וכתיב וברכתי אתה וגם נתתי ממנה לך בן, שינוי מעשה - דכתיב (יונה ג:י) וירא האלקים את מעשיהם, וכתיב וינחם האלקים על הרעה אשר דבר לעשות להם ולא עשה. ויש אומרים: אף שינוי מקום, דכתיב (בראשית יב:א) ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך מארצך, והדר ואעשך לגוי גדול.



Rabbi Michael Rosensweig

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

Excerpted from Rabbi Rosensweig's new sefer, *Mimini Mikhael*, available at www.RIETSPress.org

And R. Yitzhak said: Four things uproot a man's fate, and these are the four: charity, screaming [in prayer], changing one's name, and changing one's deeds. Charity, as the verse states, "And charity will save from death" (Mishlei 10:2); screaming,

as the verse states, “And they cried out to Hashem in distress, and He would deliver them from their distresses” (Tehillim 107:6); changing one’s name, as the verse states, “As for Sarai your wife – do not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name,” and it is written, “And I will bless her and also give you a son from her” (Bereishit 17:15); changing one’s deeds, as the verse states, “And God saw their deeds,” and it is written, “And God regretted the evil He said He would do to them and did not do it” (Yonah 3:10). And some say that even changing one’s place uproots his fate, as the verse states, “And Hashem said to Avram, ‘Go forth from your land,’” (Bereishit 12:1), and then He promised, “I will make you into a large nation” (ibid. 12:2).

Rosh ha-Shanah 16b

R. Yitzhak and the “*yesh omerim*” delineate all five of the various *darkhei ha-teshuvah* that Rambam records. Consequently, it is not surprising that *Kesef Mishneh* identifies R. Yitzhak’s statement as Rambam’s source. The context, however, is different in the two discussions. As Ritva notes, R. Yitzhak’s “four things” are methods that can uproot one’s fate. The act of changing one’s name, in particular, divorces one from the astrological harm to which he is subject:

שינוי השם שמשנה שמו שאינו האיש בעל העבירות כדי שלא יזכירוהו לרעה, ובר מהכי דבטיל ונפיק מאצטגנינות דיליה כדרך שאמר באברהם (שבת קנו).

The purpose of changing one’s name is to declare that he is not the same person who committed sins in the past, and thereby prevent others from speaking negatively about him. And aside from this, another benefit of changing one’s name is that his astrological fate is nullified and removed from him, as the gemara (Shabbat 156a) explains about Avraham.

Ritva, Rosh ha-Shanah 16b

Yet, while R. Yitzhak’s statement

concerns the changing of one’s *gezar din* (verdict), Rambam’s statement concerns the acts of a repentant! The act of uprooting one’s troubling destiny is certainly distinct in character from the act of repentance.

Kesef Mishneh himself accentuates Rambam’s deviation from R. Yitzhak when he states:

ואל ה’ דברים אלו רמז רבינו בדבריו אלה. And our rabbi [Rambam] hints to these five things with these words.

Clearly, *Kesef Mishneh* recognizes that Rambam does not quote R. Yitzhak’s instruction, but rather only hints to it. Rambam reinvents the application of R. Yitzhak’s words, and Rambam’s comments therefore cannot be construed as a verbatim quotation. The source for Rambam is the *gemara* in *Rosh ha-Shanah*, but Rambam alters its meaning.

On what basis does Rambam diverge from the simple interpretation of R. Yitzhak’s statement, broadening its scope to include not only *keri’at gezar din* but also *teshuvah*? What does Rambam’s interpretation of the passage in *Rosh ha-Shanah* reflect about his understanding of the concept of *teshuvah*?

Lehem Mishneh notes another critical discrepancy between Rambam’s comments and his apparent source:

וכל החמשה הזכרו בדברי רבינו...אף על פי דבגמרא אמרו דכל חד מנייהו סיג.

And all five ways are mentioned in our rabbi’s [Rambam’s] words, even though the gemara states that one of the five is sufficient [to uproot one’s fate].

If Rambam’s source is the *gemara* in *Rosh ha-Shanah*, why does Rambam argue that all five of the behaviors detailed in the *gemara* are indispensable to the accomplishment of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*? After all, according to R.

Yitzhak, only one of the five behaviors is necessary to uproot one’s fate!

Perhaps a more basic question should be confronted as well. What is the meaning of Rambam’s phrase, “*mi-darkhei ha-teshuvah*”? Rambam himself coins this terminology; it does not appear in the Mishnah or Gemara, and other *Rishonim* do not utilize it when discussing the same concept. Even Meiri, in *Hibbur ha-Teshuvah*, reformulates this idea. Lest we assume that Rambam’s phraseology is merely coincidental, we must note that the phrase appears not only in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, but also in *Hilkhot Ta’anit*:

ודבר זה מדרכי התשובה הוא, שבזמן שתבוא צרה ויזעקו עליה ויריעו ידעו הכל שבגלל מעשיהם הרעים הורע להן ככתוב (ירמיהו ה:כה) עונותיכם הטו וגו', וזה הוא שיגרום להם להסיר הצרה מעליהם.

And this is of the ways of teshuvah, that when suffering arises and they [Klal Yisrael] shout and blow trumpets, all will know that because of their bad deeds, they have been distressed, as the verse states, “Your sins have caused you to stray...” (Yirmiyahu 5:25), and this will cause them to remove the suffering from upon them.

Hilkhot Ta’anit 1:2

Rambam’s usage of the same phrase in both *Hilkhot Teshuvah* and *Hilkhot Ta’anit* suggests that the phrase carries significant meaning; it is not simply a convenient way of describing the proper way to react to sin and a methodology for attaining forgiveness.¹ Rather, it is indicative of some broader concept and ideal. What are the full implications of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*?

To unpack the meaning of Rambam’s *darkhei ha-teshuvah*, we begin by explaining Rambam’s veering from the simple understanding of R. Yitzhak’s comments. We can suggest two distinct, yet consistent, approaches.

First, in contradistinction to Ritva, Rambam may shy away from emphasizing astrological significance, especially in light of his broader rationalistic proclivities and specific rejection of this discipline. For Rambam, R. Yitzhak does focus on the uprooting of one's *gezar din*, but the method employed to uproot a *gezar din* demands the transformation of values, personality, and merit, rather than the alteration of one's astrological or mystical fate. It was natural for Rambam to apply R. Yitzhak's *keri'at gezar din* formula to a methodology of repentance, since repentance and *keri'at gezar din* share in common the need to transform one's personality and value system.²

Teshuvah, as the climax of Sefer ha-Madda, is not indispensable to man's life only because it facilitates his neutralizing of past sins; rather, teshuvah, at its finest, is an independently vital process, one that transforms a person into an oved Hashem and facilitates avodah mei-ahavah.

Second, Rambam's application of R. Yitzhak's statement to *Hilkhot Teshuvah* reflects Rambam's tendency to broaden and expand throughout *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.³ *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the final section of *Sefer ha-Madda*, constitutes a climactic transition, bridging the ideas of *Sefer ha-Madda* with the ideas of *Sefer Ahavah*. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* emphasizes the ideal service of Hashem, a service motivated by *ahavah* and rooted in the proper legal philosophy of *Sefer ha-Madda*. For this reason, chapter 10 of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the section's final chapter, centers on the "*oved mei-ahavah*,"⁴ the one who serves Hashem due to his love for Him. As evinced

by Rambam's stance that the laws of *teshuvah* are the prerequisites for *avodah mei-ahavah*, Rambam defines and interprets the process of repentance in an all-encompassing fashion. *Teshuvah*, as the climax of *Sefer ha-Madda*, is not indispensable to man's life only because it facilitates his neutralizing of past sins; rather, *teshuvah*, at its finest, is an independently vital process, one that transforms a person into an *oved Hashem* and facilitates *avodah mei-ahavah*.⁵ Rambam's discussion of repentance for corrupt traits, values, and beliefs in the seventh chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuvah* further corroborates his broad understanding of repentance. Although Rambam records that true repentance includes the uprooting

of certain emotions and traits, such as anger, hatred, and jealousy, this assertion is unsourced.⁶ On what basis does Rambam justify his position? Additionally, we might question why Rambam waits until chapter 7 to discuss repentance focusing on character and personality; such discussion seems relevant to the core components of repentance, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2.

Perhaps Rambam's understanding of *teshuvah*, as captured by his thesis of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*, explains these apparent anomalies. If *teshuvah* is necessary not only to counteract sin

but also to propel man toward *avodah mei-ahavah*, then chapter 7 — which is dedicated to *ma'alat ha-teshuvah*, the greatness of repentance — is the most appropriate context in which to present repentance from traits. Rambam informs us that the greatness of repentance is precisely its transformative potential, but in order for *teshuvah* to achieve this ambition, it must be comprehensive; it must address both action and thought. Since *teshuvah*, in its most pristine form, is the laying of groundwork for service of Hashem *mei-ahavah*, no source is necessary to conclude that such *teshuvah* must encompass repentance that holistically addresses the entire personality.

Given Rambam's broad understanding of *teshuvah*, his reading of the passage in *Rosh ha-Shanah* emerges lucid and sensible. R. Yitzhak's statement advises one as to how to change his *gezar din*. Rambam intensifies and transforms R. Yitzhak's statement into "*darkhei ha-teshuvah*," expanding its relevance beyond the uprooting of decrees and applying it to the institution of repentance as a whole. Rambam adds that as part of "*darkhei ha-teshuvah*," one should not only shout, as R. Yitzhak advises for *keri'at gezar din*, but he should be "*tzo'ek tamid*," shouting constantly. Moreover, he should not only yell, but he should yell "*bi-vkhi u-vetahanunim*," with cries and pleas. One should not only give charity, as R. Yitzhak instructs, but he should do so "*ke-fi koho*," according to his ability. He must not only distance himself from evil, but he must distance himself greatly — "*u-mitraheik harbeh*." Finally, Rambam emphasizes that one must be "*meshaneh ma'asav kulan*"; he must change *all* of his ways. Rambam's intensification of R. Yitzhak's instructions reflects Rambam's attitude toward them. For Rambam, they are

part of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*. They are ways of motivating man toward and assisting him in self-evaluation and self-transformation. For *keri'at gezar din*, less intense shouting, charity, or changing of deeds may be sufficient, but for concrete repentance that leads to *avodah mei-ahavah*, intensification is necessary. Furthermore, not only must these acts be strengthened qualitatively, but they must be bolstered quantitatively as well. Rambam, as *Lehem Mishneh* notes, requires all five actions as part of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*. For *keri'at gezar din*, one action may be sufficient, but for *teshuvah* that leads to *avodah mei-ahavah*, all five are necessary.

The motif of “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*” as a window into *teshuvah* dominates much of Rambam’s *Hilkhot Teshuvah*. Interestingly, when Rambam articulates the well-known practice to increase giving of charity and multiply acts of kindness throughout the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance, he adds that the practice includes as well “*esek be-mitzvot*,” involvement in *mitzvot*.⁷ For Rambam, not only altruistic action should pervade the Ten Days; rather, the *ba'al teshuvah* must make extra effort to increase his punctiliousness regarding all commandments. Rambam’s expansion of the scope of proper activity during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* coheres precisely with his characterization of “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*.” If *teshuvah* is not simply an accumulation of merits but also a process of personal transformation, one that directs and

facilitates *avodah mei-ahavah*, then it must include intense involvement in all *mitzvot*.⁸ Thus, while they may seem innocuous on their surface, the “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*” are in fact the means, both quantitative and qualitative, that guide one on his path toward *avodah mei-ahavah*. This is not merely an itemized list of actions to take in order to achieve forgiveness. On the contrary, the phrase “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*,” in its intensified form, signifies Rambam’s all-encompassing understanding of *teshuvah*.⁹

Endnotes

1. See also *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 4:2, where Rambam again uses the term “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*” and mentions that which prevents one from accomplishing *darkhei ha-teshuvah*.
2. See *Shu"t ha-Rashba* 1:19. Rashba argues that exiling oneself from his locale, as R. Yitzhak advises, is beneficial not only for *shinuy mazal*, but also for attaining *kapparah* for one’s sins. As we have suggested for Rambam, Rashba similarly does not limit the application of R. Yitzhak’s advice to *shinuy mazal*, but rather includes attainment of *kapparah* as well.
3. See chapter 2 of מיכאל מיימני, “An Alternative and Complementary Perspective on *Teshuvah*: Rabbeinu Yonah’s *Sha'arei Teshuvah*,” which includes an analysis of the breadth and theme of Rambam’s *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.
4. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:2.
5. For a more extensive analysis of the tenth chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, see מיכאל מיימני chapter 8 “*Ahavat Hashem and Talmud Torah: The Telos of Teshuvah*.”
6. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 7:3. See Migdal Oz, ad

loc., who suggests that Rambam’s source is the concept of “*hirhurei aveirah kashu mei-aveirah*” (*Yoma* 29a). This suggestion, however, seems difficult, if not untenable; Rambam is explicit in his assertion that repentance must address not only thoughts of sin but also *middot ra'ot*.

7. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4.

8. See מיכאל מיימני chapter 9, “Religious Stringency, Consistency, and the Implications of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*.”

9. See *Sefer Likkutim, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:3, who formulates the notion of repentance as “*takhlit bi-fnei atzmo*,” a purpose in and of itself. Such a characterization highlights the approach to repentance not as solely a reaction to sin, but as a proactive effort to achieve *avodah mei-ahavah*.



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Yom Tov Insights from The Rav: Excerpts from Batei Yosef

Selichos

The recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy can only be performed in the presence of a *minyan*. Rav Soloveitchik explained that this is not simply because the Thirteen Attributes are considered a *davar sheb'kedusha* like Kaddish and Kedusha that require a *minyan*. Rather, the whole concept of reciting the Thirteen Attributes is only relevant to a congregation, not to an individual.

We see this from a ruling of Rama OC 565:5, who writes that if there is no *minyan* for Selichos on a fast day, not only may one not recite the Thirteen Attributes, one may not either recite the *piyyutim* that are recited between these recitations. *Magen Avraham*, 565:6, and others ask: Why is it problematic to recite these *piyyutim*? They should be no different than the many other prayers that don't require a *minyan*. Rav Soloveitchik answered that Rama apparently holds that because the Thirteen Attributes are only relevant to a congregation, these *piyyutim*,

which serve as an introduction to the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes, are only relevant to a congregation.

However, Rav Soloveitchik noted, Rama's ruling only applies to Selichos that are recited on a fast day. If someone recites Selichos without a *minyan* during Aseres Yemei Teshuva (or the days before Rosh HaShanah), these *piyyutim* may be recited. This is because Selichos of a fast day and Selichos of Aseres Yemei Teshuva are fundamentally different. The Selichos of a fast day were originally recited during *chazaras hashatz* (the chazzan's repetition), and nowadays, we recite them immediately after *chazaras hashatz*. Selichos are part of Tefillas Shacharis of a fast day. In contrast, Selichos of Aseres Yemei Teshuva are recited before Tefillas Shacharis. They are an independent tefillah that is added during these days because, as Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 2:6) teaches, the Aseres Yemei Teshuva are auspicious days for teshuva and prayer.



Batei Yosef (Hebrew) is a collection of insights into the laws and customs of the holidays through the rulings of The Rav as well as those of current Roshei Yeshiva at RIETS.

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The Gemara, *Rosh HaShanah* 18a, teaches that the Aseres Yemei Teshuva are so auspicious for prayer that the prayer of an individual is also elevated during these days. For this reason, we can understand why the individual recites the *piyyutim* of Selichos during Aseres Yemei Teshuva. During these days, these prayers are relevant not only to the congregation but also to an individual. Therefore, while the Thirteen Attributes cannot be recited without a *minyan*, the *piyyutim* may be recited.

Choice of a Chazzan

The Mishna, *Ta'anis* 15a, tells us that when a fast day is declared for a crisis, the *chazzan* should be a *zaken v'ragil*, a wise and experienced person of good character. While *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 53:4, mentions this as the criteria for a *chazzan* at all times, many Acharonim (see *Ba'er Heitev* no. 7) note that it really only applies to the *chazzan* on a fast day. Nevertheless, Rama, OC 581:1, writes that these criteria also apply to the *chazzan* who leads during the Yamim Noraim.

Rav Soloveitchik explained that ordinarily, the *chazzan's* primary role is to assist those who don't know how to pray to fulfill their obligation (*Rosh HaShanah* 34b, *l'hotzi es mi she'aino baki*). On a fast day, the *chazzan's* primary role is to represent the *tzibbur* and pray on behalf of the whole *tzibbur*. This is why we specifically choose a *chazzan* of good character. The reason we apply these criteria to the *chazzan* of the Yamim Noraim is that on some level, we view the *chazzan* as a representative of the *tzibbur*. In the *Hineni* prayer that is recited by the *chazzan*, he says "*basi la'amod ul'hischanen lifanecha al amcha Yisrael asher shelachuni*," I come to stand and

pray before You on behalf of Your nation Israel who has designated me (to represent them). His role is similar to the role of *chazzan* on a fast day, and therefore, we have the same criteria.

The Blowing of Shevarim-Teruah

The biblical requirement of shofar is fulfilled by blowing three sets of *tekiah-teruah-tekiah*. However, the Gemara, *Rosh HaShanah* 34a, notes that there are two traditions among the Tannaim as to what a *teruah* sounds like. One opinion is that it is three truncated blasts, what is commonly known as *shevarim*. Another opinion is that it is nine staccato blasts, what is commonly known as *teruah*. The Gemara also introduces a third possibility, that it is a combined *shevarim-teruah*. R. Avahu instituted that one should blow all three versions three times.

There is a dispute among the Rishonim as to whether this combined *shevarim-teruah* should be blown with a break between the *shevarim* and the *teruah*. For this reason, *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 690:4, recommends blowing the *shevarim-teruah* sounds that are blown before Mussaf (the *tekios d'meyushav*) in a single breath, and the *shevarim-teruah* sounds that are blown during Mussaf (*tekios d'meumad*) with a breath between the *shevarim* and the *teruah*.

Rav Soloveitchik explained that the question about whether to take a breath can be explained as follows. Those who hold not to take a breath are of the opinion that *shevarim-teruah* is a single unified sound that has its own identity separate from the *shevarim* or the *teruah*. As such, taking a breath between the two components would not be appropriate. The other opinion holds that the *shevarim-teruah* requirement is fulfilled by blowing a *shevarim* and then

a *teruah*. Each sound retains its identity and the added feature is not the creation of a hybrid sound, but the blowing of both sounds consecutively. Therefore, one should take a breath between each sound so that the *shevarim* and the *teruah* can each have its own identity.

Rav Soloveitchik felt that the opinion to blow *shevarim-teruah* in a single breath is the primary opinion. Therefore, he thought that this should be followed both for the *tekios d'meyushav* and the *tekios d'meumad*. In order to fulfill the other opinion, Rav Soloveitchik suggested blowing the *shevarim-teruah* of the additional blasts (after Mussaf) with a breath between the *shevarim* and the *teruah*.

Teshuva

Rambam opens *Hilchos Teshuva* with the following statement:

כל מצות שבתורה, בין עשה בין לא תעשה, אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן, בין בודון בין בשגגה, כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתודות לפני הא-ל ברוך הוא ... וידוי זה מצות עשה.

If one violates any of the commandments of the Torah, whether a positive commandment or negative commandment, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when he repents and returns from his sin, he is obligated to confess before G-d. ... This confessional is a positive commandment.

A number of Acharonim have deduced from Rambam's statement that there is no mitzvah of *teshuva* and that the only mitzvah is *vidui* (confession). Rav Soloveitchik noted from his grandfather, Rav Chaim, and his father, Rav Moshe, that it is difficult to assume that Rambam doesn't consider *teshuva* to be a mitzvah. We find that Rambam elsewhere in *Hilchos Teshuva* (2:7 and 7:5) references an obligation to perform *teshuva*. Why, then, does Rambam open

Hilchos Teshuva by instructing us about *vidui* and not *teshuva*?

Rav Soloveitchik explained that regarding most mitzvos, the act itself creates the fulfillment of the mitzvah. When someone eats matzah or picks up a lulav (with the other species), the act was performed and the mitzvah was fulfilled. However, there are some mitzvos where the act is performed and the fulfillment takes place from the resultant experience (*kiyum balev*). For example, when someone is mourning (*aveilus*), there are certain specific acts that are performed that are intended to bring about a proper emotional state of mourning, and the mitzvah is fulfilled by experiencing the mourning. The mitzvah of *simchas Yom Tov* (rejoicing on the festival) entails engaging in specific acts (in the time of the Mikdash eating the korban shelamim), and the fulfillment takes place when those acts lead to an inner joy. Here, too, the *ma'aseh mitzvah*, the act of *teshuva* is *vidui*, but the essence and fulfillment of the mitzvah takes place when that person has made an inner commitment to change. That inner commitment is *teshuva*.

Vidui of Yom Kippur

Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 1:1) writes that the text of *vidui* is “*ana HaShem chatasi etc.*,” please, HaShem, I have sinned. Use of the word “*ana*” is found in the Mishna’s description of the *vidui* of the Kohen Gadol (*Yoma* 35b), and we use this formulation as well, when we recite the *avodah* of the Kohen Gadol in the chazan’s repetition of *Mussaf*.

A number of *machzorim* include the word “*ana*” in the introduction to the *vidui* that we recite throughout Yom Kippur: “*ana tavo lifanecha tefillaseinu*,” please allow our prayer to come before you. Rav Soloveitchik was particular about using the version that contains “*ana*.” He explained that there are really two components to the *vidui*: First, a delineation of one’s *aveiros* and a request for atonement. Second, a prayer.

What is the nature of this prayer? The text of *vidui* gives no indication as to what we are praying for. The text only provides a means of delineating our *aveiros*. Rav Soloveitchik explained that before requesting atonement, we must first request that HaShem accept the *vidui*. Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 7:7) tells us that before *teshuva*, the sinner stands isolated from

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HaShem, he screams to HaShem and his prayers are not heard. Therefore, before reciting *vidui*, we begin with a prayer that we are ready to do *teshuva* and HaShem should reopen the door and allow our request for atonement to be answered. We reference this idea in the *piyyut* “*V’Chol Ma’aminim*” when we say “*haposiach sha’ar l’dofkei b’seshuva*,” He opens the door for those who knock with [requests of] *teshuva*. HaShem, in His great mercy, will welcome us back when we are ready to do *teshuva*, but first we have to make that request. That is why we recite “*ana*” before *vidui*.

The Exemption of an Ill Individual from the Sukkah

The Mishna (*Sukkah* 25a) teaches that an ill person is exempt from sitting in the sukkah. The Gemara (26a) adds that this doesn’t only apply to someone in a life-threatening situation; it even applies to someone who is sick without any life-threatening conditions. The Gemara (25b) also teaches that a *mitzta’er*, someone who is uncomfortable, is also exempt from sitting in the sukkah. Tosafos (26a, s.v. *Holchei*) suggest that the source for this exemption is *teishvu k’ein taduru*, we are only required to live in the sukkah the same way we would live in our homes. If something happened to our home that made it too uncomfortable to live there, we would find temporary shelter elsewhere. Similarly, if the situation in the sukkah is such that it is too uncomfortable, we can leave the sukkah and go back to our home.

Why is there a need to specifically exempt an ill individual if there is a broader exemption for someone who is uncomfortable? Rav Soloveitchik explained that the exemption of *mitzta’er* only applies when leaving the

sukkah will eliminate the discomfort. If it is raining in the sukkah or extremely hot, going inside the home will eliminate the discomfort. However, if one has an ailment that makes him uncomfortable regardless of where he is, the exemption of *mitzta’er* does not apply. The exemption for an ill person is more expansive. An ill person is exempt from sitting in the sukkah even if the symptoms of the illness are not mitigated by leaving the sukkah.

The Shaking of the Lulav

The Gemara (*Sukkah* 32b) concludes that a lulav must be one *tefach* (handbreadth) longer than the hadasim and aravos so that one can shake it properly. The size of the lulav (including the extra *tefach*) seems to be a biblical requirement. We also find in the Mishna (*Sukkah* 42a) that the proper age to train a child to take a lulav is when he is old enough to know how to shake the lulav.

These two ideas indicate that shaking the lulav is part of the mitzvah of lulav. Rambam (*Hilchos Lulav* 7:9-10) writes that the proper way to fulfill the mitzvah is to shake the lulav upon taking it and at the time of Hallel. Tosafos (*Pesachim* 7b, s.v. *B’Idnei*) present a similar idea in trying to explain how to recite a beracha on the lulav. They are bothered by the following dilemma: normally, one recites a beracha while holding the item used for the mitzvah so that the mitzvah can be performed immediately *after* the recitation of the beracha. However, once someone picks up the lulav (and the other species), the mitzvah is complete. How is one supposed to recite the beracha immediately before the performance of the mitzvah? One of the answers suggested by Tosafos is that even after picking up the lulav, there

is still an additional fulfillment when one shakes the lulav during Hallel. Therefore, the beracha is appropriately recited prior to the fulfillment of shaking the lulav.

Rav Soloveitchik noted that it is for this reason that the tradition in his family is to recite the beracha on the lulav immediately before Hallel (and not in the morning before prayers). This is so that the beracha can cover the fulfillment of shaking the lulav during Hallel without any significant interruption between the beracha and the shaking of the lulav.

Reading the Torah on the Night of Simchas Torah

Many communities have the custom of reading the Torah on the night of Simchas Torah. We don’t find any mention of this practice in the Talmud and we don’t read the Torah at night on any other occasion. Rav Soloveitchik presented two suggestions as to why we read the Torah at night on Simchas Torah. First, because we take out the sifrei Torah to dance with them, it is only appropriate that we also read from the Torah to show it the proper honor. Second, on Simchas Torah night, we open some of the sifrei Torah to roll them to Bereishis for part of the next day’s Torah reading. When opening the Torah, we show honor to the Torah by reading from it.

Sukkot Insights

Looking to the Stars

The Mishna, *Sukkah* 22a, has an interesting comment about how much *schach* is ideal for a sukkah:

המעובה כמין בית אע"פ שאין הכוכבים נראין מתוכה כשרה.

If [the sukkah has a cover that] is thick like [the roof of] a house, even though one cannot see the stars when inside of it, it is valid.

The implication of the Mishna is that, ideally, one should be able to see the stars when sitting in the sukkah, but if the *schach* is thicker so that one cannot see the stars, it is valid. The Rosh (*Sukkah* 2:2) quotes a Yerushalmi that the Mishna is really dealing with the *kochvei chama*, the “stars of the sun.” In other words, the sun’s rays should shine through during the day. This implies that there is no requirement or even ideal to be able to see the stars at night. However, the Rosh’s son, the *Tur* (*Orach Chaim* 631), does not follow this approach. He rules explicitly that the *schach* should be such that the sun’s rays and the night stars are visible from the sukkah.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 631:3, follows the *Tur*’s approach and writes that the *schach* shouldn’t be too

thick and one should be able to see large stars from inside the sukkah. The *Mishna Berura*, 631:5-6, writes that there is room for leniency if the sun’s rays are visible during the day or if there is one area of the sukkah where it is possible to see the stars. This is especially true if there is a concern that the lack of sufficient *schach* will allow the sukkah to become more easily invalidated by a strong gust of wind. Nevertheless, we need to ensure not to make the *schach* too thick such that rain won’t enter. In that case, it is possible that the sukkah is not valid.

We can understand why the *schach* can’t be so thick that it won’t allow rain to enter, because then, it is more like a permanent structure. Why, however, is there a requirement that we see stars? Isn’t subjecting ourselves to the elements sufficient to call the sukkah a *diras arai*, a temporary structure? Furthermore, why do our rabbis specifically use stars as the metric to determine how much *schach* we should use?

I heard from the Talner Rebbe that the imagery of stars can be understood based on the following passage in the Gemara:

ומצדיקי הרבים ככוכבים לעולם ועד אלו



Rabbi Eli Belizon

Rebbe, Stone Beit Midrash Program and Rabbi, Young Israel of Fair Lawn

מלמדי תינוקות.

“Those who bring the many to righteousness are like stars forever” (*Doniel* 12:3), this verse refers to those who teach children.

Bava Basra 8b

Why does the Gemara compare our teachers to stars? One possibility is that stars don’t shine as soon as they appear. When they first appear, it is not completely dark and only later, when it is completely dark, do we see how bright they truly shine. Similarly, a teacher doesn’t always see his *talmidim* (students) shine right away. The fruits may come months or years later.

On a deeper level, the symbolism of a star represents the fashion and the

manner in which we should educate our children. Rashi (Bereishis 1:16, based on *Bereishis Rabbah* 6:4) tells us that the stars were created to appease the moon. The moon should have had the same glory as the sun, but Hashem couldn't have both the sun and the moon on equal levels, so He diminished the power of the moon. In order to appease the moon, He created the stars to enhance the moon's glow.

A star's entire existence and purpose of creation is to facilitate and to enhance the light of the moon. That is the essence of *chinuch* (Jewish education). The educator must have that mentality — to mimic the stars. *Chinuch* is about cultivating and nurturing the student. The educator is selflessly dedicated to teaching others.

If we had to choose a holiday where the theme is education of children, many of us would choose Pesach. I would argue for Sukkos. The Torah tells us why we sit in the sukkah:

בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

יִשְׁבוּ בַסֻּכּוֹת. לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

You shall dwell in booths seven days. All who are citizens of Israel shall dwell in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am Hashem your G-d.
Vayikra 23:42-43

The whole purpose of sitting in the sukkah is *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem*, so that your generations may know. We sit in the sukkah and discuss with our children our experience as a people in the Midbar when we left Mitzrayim. There is even a discussion in the poskim (See *Bach* and *Bikkurei Yaakov* to *Orach Chaim* 625) as to whether one fulfills the mitzvah on the first night if he doesn't remember the reason for sitting in the sukkah. The first letters of *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem* make up the word *yeled*, child, because educating children about the messages of the sukkah is a core theme of Sukkos. We are all responsible to teach our children

about Hashem's protection and how He watches over us.

This is why we want to be able to see the stars when we sit in a sukkah. On Sukkos, we want to look to the stars, our educators, as a source of inspiration for how we educate our own children. Like the stars, we must approach *chinuch* with selfless dedication. We put our children's needs first. We need to think about the unique needs of each of our children, we need to be patient, we need to find creative ways to teach our children so that they can understand and be inspired. Our selfless dedication will be the catalyst for teaching foundations of *emunah* and we will truly fulfill *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem*.

Through our efforts to try to teach like our educator stars, we will also learn to appreciate their efforts. They selflessly devote their careers to ensuring *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem*. They are at the forefront of ensuring that our *mesorah* (tradition) is passed on and they will be igniting the spark in the stars of the next generation.

Being Uncomfortable: The Pursuit of Meaning

Koheles makes us uncomfortable. When the time to read Koheles arrives each Sukkos, we shift in our seats, looking for somewhere to go. The book is so long (it's twelve chapters). It seems deeply pessimistic (the word *hevel*, which means futility, vanity and emptiness appears more than thirty times). It is full of apparent contradictions (is joy a virtue or worthless?). And it questions the meaning of our life and challenges our assumptions.

Today, Koheles makes us uncomfortable on a global level. In an era of such enormous technological

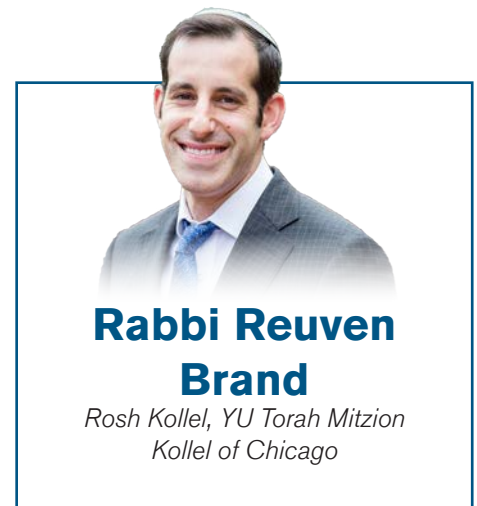
progress and innovation both in scope and speed, we feel a tense dissonance with the stark descriptions of Koheles as it derides life's material and physical pursuits.

We are also troubled on a personal plane. For example, we often tell ourselves and others that we don't have time for certain things, yet Koheles tells us that in fact there is a time for everything.

All of this can be very unsettling. We want to turn the other way and hide the book, as our sages nearly did. Yet, we are called upon to confront it, to reflect on it and to grow.

We must face the key question:

How do we reconcile the often-repeated



statement that the life we live under the sun is futile with our deep-seated belief that the life Hashem has given each of us is full of purpose and meaning?

Perhaps Shlomo Hamelech, the author

of this Divinely-inspired work, is encouraging us to rethink the frame in which we live our lives. He is asking us to consider: Must we exist and operate in a world that is only “under the sun”? Must we define our success in material and physical terms? Is life always a situation where one’s win is another’s loss?

Through Koheles we are called to see a deeper side of life beyond a transactional, superficial natural existence.

In the book of Koheles, God is referred to by a specific name: Elokim. This appellation connotes the way in which Hashem connects with our world through nature. It is the name through which our measurable, scientific, natural world was created as the first pasuk in Bereishis describes, *Bereishis bara Elokim*. Koheles is noting that in a purely natural world, we face terrible challenges: scarcity, loneliness, frustration, inequality, and futility. We dutifully proceed through this world under the sun — the symbol of a fixed fate — only to meet the same end as every other creature.

Yet, there is another name of God. It is י-ה-ו-ה, which was introduced when Hashem endowed Adam Harishon with a soul. It connotes a transcendent, spiritual identity: הויה ויהיה (“was,

is, and will be”). In this realm we experience life differently. When we live on the level of הויה we bypass the contradictions and frustrations of the material world. We don’t resolve the problems; rather we find respite and refuge as we seek and create meaning within every life circumstance. The energy of life — the light of Hashem — is present within every moment and every place, helps us navigate life even in the absence of a concrete Why.

Shlomo Hamelech wrote three books: Mishlei, Shir Hashirim, and Koheles. Yet his name, Shlomo, which connotes wholeness and peace, is noticeably absent from his Koheles. Perhaps because in the natural world we never feel whole. Only through a meaningful (Mishlei) and passionate (Shir Hashirim) spiritual life does a person feel a sense of wholeness.

Our sages understood that Sukkos is a time of material plenty. Imagine an agrarian society in which an entire year’s supply of food was just harvested: storehouses brimming with sustenance. It is understandably and deservedly a time of joy and happiness. We can easily imagine how this momentary bliss of palpable material blessings can shape one’s orientation. Koheles is the sharp and uncomfortable reminder of the fickle and often fleeting nature

of worldly success (see Sforno’s commentary on Chapter Two). Koheles cautions us to avoid the inevitable dopamine crash that follows the material, physical high found in the world of Elokim. It is the reminder that living a superficial, hedonistic life will end in frustration. Ultimately, it presents us with the opportunity to choose a spiritual framework for our lives and mine the spiritual connection that lives within the material world.

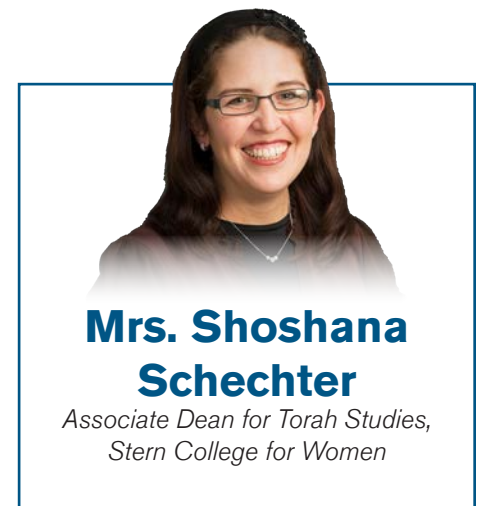
The discomfort we feel when confronting Koheles helps us orient ourselves properly. By jolting us out of the comforts and rhythm of a natural, physical orientation (what Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt”l termed a “bovine” existence), we reappraise our values. In practice, this perspective of י-ה-ו-ה invites us to rethink where we devote our resources when making a simcha, how we spend our available time, and what we praise in conversation. We take a fresh look at life with an eye to the spiritual depth with which we live, as Koheles helps us realize the true joys of life. With this perspective we elevate our natural, ordinary existence by coloring it with our spirituality. As Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, remarked, “we must find some spiritual basis for living, else we die.”

The Simcha of Sukkot

“*V’samachta b’chagecha v’hayita ach sameach*,” you shall be joyous on your holiday and you shall have nothing but joy” (Devarim 16:14-15). Many of us are familiar with this famously exhorted phrase referring to the holiday of Sukkot. But what does it mean to be happy and why are we mandated to be happy specifically on Sukkot?

The holiday of Sukkot is explained

in the Devarim reference to the Shalosh Regalim as a time that we are recognizing G-d’s role in sustaining us and demonstrating gratitude for our harvest, “*ki yevarechecha Hashem Elokecha b’chol tevuat’cha*,” for the Lord your God will bless all your crops (Devarim 16:15). This requirement to rejoice during the chagim is perplexing, however, since rejoicing at harvest time would seem to be the natural human reaction. Yet the Torah usually does



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not command us to follow our natural instincts, but rather to control our natural instincts in order to elevate us in holiness. So why command us in this instance to simply follow our natural inclination? To answer this question, we must understand the meaning behind the word “*simcha*” — happiness, — and what G-d means when He tells us to be happy. The American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is most often translated in hedonistic terms, with “happiness” being defined as materialistic success. A student of mine who converted to Judaism as a young adult was inspired to convert because, as she explains, she saw her parents working hard to make money in order to buy a house, a car and go on vacations, and she felt strongly that there must be more meaning to life — that happiness must stem from something deeper than just material success. We as Jews are encouraged to pursue happiness, but that happiness is qualitatively different from the general American definition. Real, long-term happiness comes from a deep sense of fulfillment and meaning.

The Malbim in *Sefer Hacarmel* defines the word “*simcha*” as consistently content, as opposed to “*gila*,” which is a sudden happiness that is fleeting. Often the *gila* that we feel following a single, exciting event is followed by *simcha*, which is a more consistent happiness, a *simchat olam*, or eternal happiness that comes from an appreciation of G-d and the recognition that following G-d’s will is our recipe for a meaningful and fulfilling life.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “happy” as “feeling or showing contentment, having a sense of trust and confidence in (a person, arrangement or situation).” Interestingly, the first time the verb “*sameach*” appears in the Torah is in Parshat Shemot, when Moshe is

chosen by G-d to be the leader of the Jewish people, with the initial mission of bringing the Jews out of Egyptian bondage. The Torah tells us the reaction to this appointment by Moshe’s older brother, Aharon: “*v’ra’acha v’samach b’libo*, When he sees you he will rejoice in his heart (Shemot 4:14). Aharon is praised for this emotional reaction, because in place of the instinct of jealousy at his younger brother’s appointment, he showed contentment and confidence in G-d’s choice. The Torah encourages happiness that stems from the contentment that comes from trust and confidence in G-d, not just in ourselves.

In Megillat Esther (5:9), Haman leaves Esther’s first party “*sameach v’tov lev*,” joyful and exuberant, with his *simcha* defined as personal feelings of contentment due to confidence in himself. That *simcha* was fleeting and ended badly for him.

The *simcha* that we are commanded to feel on Sukkot is the Jewish definition of happiness, which stems from having a sense of trust and confidence in G-d and finding meaning in that relationship. Perhaps for that reason, the element of *simcha* is highlighted more in reference to the agricultural component of the Shalosh Regalim. As we gather the first of our crops and harvest them at the end of the agricultural cycle, we are happy because we trust that G-d is sustaining us. Commentaries question the wording of the second command to be happy on Sukkot, “*v’hayita ach sameach*,” asking why the word *ach* is used and what exactly it means. The Ibn Ezra defines *ach* as “only,” explaining this phrase as meaning we should do nothing else but rejoice. Rashi explains that this phrase is not a command but a statement, a promise from G-d that we will only be happy because He is taking care of us (Devarim 16:15). Both

Rashi’s and the Ibn Ezra’s approach strengthen the entire thematic approach to Sukkot. If, in fact, on Sukkot we are celebrating our trust in G-d and His sustaining us, then it makes sense that we are commanded to be only happy. Human nature would allow us to be happy only if the harvest gathered is a strong and plentiful one. Our happiness would naturally be dependent on the success of the harvest in each particular year, and in a year with a less plentiful gathering, our happiness would be tempered or nonexistent. The Torah is telling us “*v’hayita ach sameach*,” be only happy, regardless of the outcome of that particular harvest, because of our trust and confidence in G-d. The Malbim, after defining *simcha*, differentiates between *sameach b’*, *sameach l’* and *sameach al*. *Sameach b’* is to be happy in the thing itself, as is used in the phrase “*v’samachta b’chagecha*,” be happy in the chag itself, because of the holiday, not because of the harvest. It is ultimately that relationship with G-d that we are celebrating on Sukkot as we go out in our temporary huts, which demonstrates our trust in G-d and our confidence that He takes care of us and is the source of all our needs. That recognition leads to a feeling of contentment, which should enable us to feel nothing but *simcha* on Sukkot.

There is also a clear correlation between our happiness that we experience as a result of Hashem’s caring for us, and our caring for other people. Like Aharon who was happy not for himself but for Moshe’s honor, our *simcha* during the chagim is not just about our own satisfaction, but how it translates into helping others. The practical application of G-d providing for us is that we must provide for others. The Rambam in *Hilchot Yom Tov* explains that the key component of *simchat yom tov* is sharing with others. Those who enjoy their food

on Yom Tov without sharing it with others do not experience *simchat yom tov*, only “*simchat kreiso*,” happiness of the belly (*Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:18).

The *simcha* that we experience on Sukkot should inspire us to translate that *simcha* into helping others

The Esrog as a Tool for Achdus

The four species that are employed in the mitzva of *daled minim* are replete with symbolism. *Midrash Rabba*, Vayikra (30:12) notes that the esrog has a taste and aroma, the lulav has a taste and no aroma, the hadas has an aroma and no taste, and the arava has neither. Taste stands for good deeds, and aroma represents Torah knowledge. The Midrash compares each of the species to a different type of Jew: one who performs mitzvos, one who studies a great deal of Torah, some who achieve both, and others who have yet to accomplish either. Chazal conclude by stating that the Torah’s command is to create an “*agudah*” — to unite all forms of Jews as one, just as all four species are held close together. This unity brings atonement to Klal Yisrael and proclaims the greatness of Hashem. Indeed, the Baalei Tosfos (Vayikra 23:40) express this notion as a necessary element in the process of repentance that begins on the Yomim Noraim. We refer to this goal in the prayers of Rosh Hashana and

experience that same *simcha*, which comes from knowing we are being taken care of. As Rashi says so beautifully on the words “*asiti k’chol asher tziviti*,” I’ve done as you commanded me: “*samachti vsimachti vo*” — I was happy and I caused others to be happy

Yom Kippur, “*V’Ye’asu kulam agudah achas*” — may all unite in service and recognition of Hashem just as the four species and types of Jews form an *agudah*.

However, Ramchal, in the classic ethical work *Mesillas Yesharim* (end of chapter 13), adduces additional meaning from this Midrash. It is impossible, he explains, for one nation of so many individuals to exist on the same level of spirituality. Each person has unique abilities and talents to employ in *avodas Hashem*. Some will be suited to satisfy the basic requirements of Judaism while others are equipped to go above and beyond as needed. This reality creates an opportunity for more inspired souls to elevate others and positively impact the array of Jewish population. The “*agudah*” created by the four species is not only a symbol of the blessings of unity, it is a mandate for those who are capable to bring others closer to the love of God and encounters with the Divine. Elsewhere (end of chapter 19), Ramchal includes in this the responsibility to pray on behalf of other

(Devarim 26:14). Ultimately, that is our goal in general and on Sukkot specifically. May we enjoy both personal and communal *simcha* during Sukkot and beyond, and help spread that *simcha* to those less fortunate.



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Jews and to find merit in their actions.

In this light, the heightened spirituality of this time of year behooves us to make the inspired choice to be the “esrog” of the Midrash. To whatever extent possible, we can choose to raise our Torah and mitzvos to the next level, rather than choosing to wait passively to be the subject of influence of others. We are not to suffice with achdus alone, but to capitalize on achdus and become a source of positive influence drawing others near, just as we draw the *daled minim* near, each day of Succos.



Learn more about Sukkot with shiurim and articles from the Marcos & Adina Katz YUTorah.org site at www.yutorah.org/categories/holidays/Sukkot/



שנה טובה

EL AL Israel Airlines wishes you and your family
a happy, healthy and fruitful new year.