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" THE MEANING OF WEALTH "

sixth in a series on "Jewish Meanings"

Today is particularly appropriate for a discussion of the Jewish Meaning of Wealth. First of all, we have just read the special Biblical chapter of PARSHAS SHEKOLIM, the chapter concerning the donation to the Temple, by all Israelite adults, of the famous half-shekel; the charity tax, as it were. The shekel, the standard form of currency in ancient Israel, is the Jewish symbol of wealth, much as the dollar is its American counterpart. Second, ours is an age when the acquisition of riches is a sure sign of success and an admission ticket into high society. Third, ours too is a time when wealth in this country is factually within the reach of most men. It is proper, therefore, for us to do some constructive thinking along Jewish lines and attempt to discover the Jewish Meaning of Wealth.

The first clue to understanding what wealth, in the Jewish sense, is all about, comes from one of those lofty and beautiful legends which our people wove about the tradition of SHEKOLIM. The Talmud relates that in instructing Moses concerning the Laws of SHEKOLIM, G-d actually demonstrated the lesson, and He showed him SHEKEL SHE' ESH, a shekel of fire, which He had brought up MI'TACHAS KISEI HA'KAVOD, from under G-d's Throne of Glory. A SHEKEL of fire from under G-d's Throne. What an image - and what a message! There is absolutely nothing immoral about wealth, our Rabbis mean to tell us, Judaism, unlike its "daughter religion", does not make a virtue of poverty, and does not shut the doors of Heaven in the face of the rich. The rich and the poor alike can both gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven; There is no economic discrimination. A man need not be ashamed of his SHEKEL. He can hold it aloft, if honestly earned, as shining as a torch of pure fire. But - and this is the essence of what they want to tell us - never forget the source of your

shekels. Never forget the origin of your good fortune. Remember at all times that if you were blessed with many shekels, with a decent living and a measure of wealth, that the source of your blessing is G-d; that the shekels were assigned to you from the Throne of Glory; and that, therefore, those shekels must be used in a way which will bear examination by all people, they will be able to stand up under public scrutiny, just as if they were made out of fire itself, for all to see. Indeed, when a man knows that his shekels were granted to him by G-d, and that they must not embarrass the Throne of Glory from whence they came, then they are as open and as pure as shekels of fire.

Our great and wealthy nation had better learn this fact, and impress it in no uncertain terms upon the memories of its sons and daughters. Too many great empires have grown rich and become so top-heavy that they have toppled over into oblivion - all because they forgot that their wealth was only a trust assigned to them by G-d from his KISEI HA'KAVOD. Ancient Greece never thought of its wealth as a loan from G-d's Throne of Glory. It rather imagined that all its riches were rightly assigned to Greece in order to be able to lord it over the despicable "Barbarians". The unholy Roman Empire certainly could not conceive of fiery shekels emanating from G-d's Throne. And because this thought did not dawn upon them, they built an empire by deceit and squandered it by immorality. One can go all through history in this same way, showing how empire after empire fell and declined because they would not admit that their wealth was a sacred trust. Our beloved America is the richest nation upon earth today. Our shekel is worth more than any other. Fortunately, in recent years we have showed signs of learning from history, and we have begun to act as if we knew that our shekels must be used in a manner pleasing to the good G-d who blessed us with them. By means of Point Four and other agencies we have tried to help less fortunate peoples. We have tried to make of our dollars SHEKOLIM SHEL ESH, fiery shekels. But let us be on guard against those who would subvert this noble attitude; against those who would cynically attach selfish strings to this benevolent aid we offer our needy fellows. Let us remember that true SHEKOLIM SHEL ESH, true fiery shekels, must of necessity burn away any strings which might be attached. Let

us remember that the value of our wealth is based not upon the gold which we have, but upon the fiery shekels in which we believe; that our credit is drawn not ~~on~~ Fort Knox but ~~on~~ the Divine Throne of Glory.

With an attitude of that sort no nation, and no man, need be ashamed of his wealth. The realization that wealth is G-d's gift, and therefore carries with it responsibility as well as privilege, is the first premise in the Jewish Meaning of Wealth.

And from this there follows, of course, a second fact: that wealth must not be stored away for its own sake. Riches were given in order to be used. Money which is hoarded is of little value indeed.

The great Rabbi Meir had that in mind when he asked AIZEHU ASHIR, "Who is a rich man?", and himself answered, KOL SHE'YESH LO NACHAS RUACH ME'OSHO, "The rich man is he who enjoys his wealth". This is an eminently practical definition of Wealth. Practical from the point of view of economist and psychologist as well as teacher of religion. Certainly, a rich man who does not enjoy his riches is not really wealthy, for he has no money - rather, his money has him. Real, practical wealth is not the amount you have, but the amount you use. Wealth which is not useable, and is not used and exploited, is not wealth. If one cannot enjoy his affluence, then he is a ^a hoarder, not a rich man. A man who has only a heavy bank-book but no check-book is a pauper.

And what holds true for the wealth of money holds true for the wealth of other things. A man with a propensity for hoarding money will be similarly inclined, for instance, to hoard useless knowledge. It is the same type of pitiful mentality which motivated both. Our Sages tell of an interesting conversation between Moses and his fabulously wealthy antagonist, Korah. They tell us that Korah asked Moses: BAYIS MALEI S'FARIM, MAHU SHE'YEHEI PATUR MI'MEZUZAH?, If one's house ^{*} too to be adorned with a Mezuzah? (explain). "Yes," answered Moses, "a Mezuzah must be affixed to the door-post of such a house too." Korah replied, sneeringly, that it was ridiculous to say that a house-ful of holy writings is insufficient, while only ^{two} ~~few~~ small chapters are enough, provided they are affixed to the door-post. You see, my friends, this was more than a biting conversational duel. It was more than a debate which involved

* is packed full with scrolls of the Law, with Bibles & Talmuds & other Holy works, is that house too

what might seem an obscure point of law. Larger issues loomed before them. The issue was the use of learning, in the same way we discussed the use of money. Korah propounded the theory of hoarding - it is sufficient that one store himself up with knowledge, like a room full of books. That, he believed, was all that G-d required of man. But no, answer^{ed} Moses, storing knowledge is like storing money. If it is going to be piled up without being used, then one has not fulfilled his religious obligations. It is far from sufficient to have a warehouse full of Biblical chapters and works. One must post a Mezuzah on his door, he must have learning at his side, it must guide and guard over his comings - in and goings-out, his imports and his exports. If his learnings^{is} ~~are~~ not used to guide him over the thresh-holds of life, then it is merely a heterogeneous conglomeration of useless facts. And there is nothing holy about that. So it is with wealth, so it is with learning, so it is with everything else.

In 1876, that famous Englishman, Thomas Huxley, visited America at the invitation of the then-new John Hopkins University of Baltimore. The main theme of his speech was this passage: "I cannot say that I am in the slightest degree impressed by your bigness or your material resources, as such. Size is not grandeur; territory does not make a nation. The great issue, about which hangs a true sublimity and the terror of overhanging fate, is, what are you going to do with all these things?" A good question indeed, and one which clearly expresses what we have been saying. But indeed Thomas Huxley was not the first to say so. Rabbi Meir preceded him when he said that AIZEHU ASHIR, KOL SHE'YESH LO NACHAS RUACH ME'OSHERO, that the rich man is one who enjoys or uses his wealth. And not even Rabbi Meir was the first to enunciate this idea. Many many years before, that wisest of all men, King Solomon, said: YESH RA'AH CHOLAH SHE'RA'ISI TACHAS HA'SHEMESH, OSHER SHAMUR LI'VE'ALAV LE'RA'ASO, "There is one sickening evil I have seen under the sun, namely, riches which are stored up for their owner, for his own hurt". Let a man store up his riches, and they are "for his hurt", for they are useless. Such a man is not only evil, he is sick - psychically.

The third point in the Jewish Meaning of Wealth is based upon the famous words

of Ben Zoma, quoted in PIRKEI AVOS, or Ethics of the Fathers. Ben Zoma gives the crowning definition of wealth, a definition which strikes closer to the truth, it seems, than those given by his colleagues. AISHU ASHIR, "Who is a rich man?" asks Ben Zoma, as did Rabbi Meir; and he answers, "HA'SAMEACH BE'CHELKO", "The rich man is he who is happy with his lot". Riches should be measured not by the coldly objective standard of quantity, but by the subjective criterion how happy am I with what I do have. A man may be fabulously wealthy, but if he feels and thinks that what he has is insufficient, that he must have more, then he is for all practical purposes poor; for the meaning of poverty is insufficiency, and this man feels insufficient. For, for some, riches are like salt-water. You drink it to quench your thirst, only to find that it increases your desire for more water. The really rich man is one who is happy with what he has, whether that is by other standards much or little. If a man is happy, he is rich; if unhappy, he is poor. A definition, incidentally, which includes all others. And a G-dly, deeply religious and spiritual, as well as practical, definition of riches.

For who is so rich as the parent whose child quotes to him from Scriptures; who is so rich as the father whose son can teach him a "blatt gamarah"; how rich the child whose parents encourage him upon such a path;

Who is so rich as the child of meager means who, desirous of a life of daring adventure, can see an ocean in a bathtub, a mighty mountain in an inch-high ant-hill, a desert in a sandbox, a terrible, terrifying tiger in a calm, domesticated kitten;

Who is so rich as the man, who, thirsting for the beauties of nature, and without travelling to strange Lands and distant islands, can sit on a board-walk beholding the nocturnal leap of the ocean foam, and feel his heart swell as he watches the waves wash the white sands as of the beach under the mellow majesty of the moon;

Who is so^{it} rich as a people who, exiled from ~~their~~^{its} homeland, deprived of ~~their~~^{its} sacrificial rites and torn from ~~their~~^{its} Temple, can find a Jerusalem in a Vilno, a Temple in a Yeshiva, a sacrifice in a prayer;

Yes, Ben Zoma was right; the rich man is he who is happy with his lot. Such riches are within the reach of every man. One must merely aspire to them and he has them.

To summarise then, there are three parts to the Jewish ^meaning of Wealth.

First, man must realize that all that he has, all his wealth and riches are his only by the grace of G-d; they are, so to speak, borrowed from the Throne of Glory.

Second, his wealth is of no real value unless it is useful. His riches must work for him in order to be of any service. And, finally, and above all, the rich man is he who is happy with his lot - no matter what that lot is.

Our Sages write: HA'ROEH BEN ZOMA RA'CHALOM YETSAP~~EH~~ LE'CHACHMAH, "He who sees Ben Zoma in a dream may look forward to the gift of Wisdom." Ah, Ben Zoma, Ben Zoma, many are those who dream of material wealth and riches; yet when they wake up they realize that their lives have been based upon, not a dream, but a nightmare. In their frantic drive for more and more, they reap less and less, and they finally curse their own foolishness. But, Ben Zoma, those who dream of you, and your type of wealth, of being happy each with his own lot, such men are rich indeed; and when the dream which is life draws to a close, such a man does not curse his foolishness. Rather, he thanks G-d for the gift of Wisdom. For wise are your dicta, Ben Zoma, and wise are those who follow you, and wiser still - those who dream of you.