

ראה

POVERTY

אפס כי לא יהיה בך אביון

But there shall be no poor among you (*Devarim* 15:4).

שחזר הקב"ה על כל מדות טובות ליתן לישראל ולא מצא אלא עניות...יאה עניותא ליהודאי

כי ברזא סמוקא לסוסיא חירא

The Holy One, Blessed Be He, reviewed all the good qualities in order to give them to Israel, but the only good quality He found befitting Israel was poverty ...

Poverty befits Israel like a red bridle on a white horse (*Chagigah* 9:).

The white horse is a handsome animal whose beauty is enhanced by a red bridle. Similarly, *Klal Yisrael* is an inherently virtuous nation, and that virtue is enhanced by an additional good quality. Poverty refines and polishes its subjects, ultimately leading them to improvement (Maharsha, *ibid.*). Poverty weakens undesirable character traits, particularly insolence and haughtiness (*Ein Yaakov*, *ibid.*). Poverty aids *Klal Yisrael* in focusing on its true worldly objectives and does not allow the material digressions offered by wealth.

הזהרו בבני עניים שמהן תצא תורה

Be heedful [not to neglect] the children of the poor, for from them Torah goes forth (*Nedarim* 81•).

Torah knowledge is especially prevalent among the poor because they have no other distractions to consume their time (Ran, *ibid.*). The poor conform most closely with the Torah ideal of not paying for, nor expecting remuneration from Torah teaching (*Ein Yaakov*, *ibid.*). The wealthy are identified with mundane materialism, while the poor are bereft in this world. Hence, the poor seek something with which to be identified; since materialism is unavailable to them, they are receptive to spirituality (Maharal, *Chidushei Aggados*, *Nedarim* 81•). The Chassidic *tzadik* Rav Yeivi relates: the Ba'al Shem Tov said that there is great good fortune in poverty, for everyday the poor man merits to approach Hashem to ask Him for sustenance.

A primary proponent of this philosophy was Rabbi Yochanan ben Napcha whose teachings comprise a major portion of the *Talmud Yerushalmi* and whose name appears extensively in the *Talmud Bavli*. He inherited fields, vineyards and olive groves, all of which he sold so that his study of Torah would be undisturbed. He claimed that he was disposing of objects created in six days so that he could acquire the Torah, which was given in forty days (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 8:7). After exhausting his inheritance, Rabbi Yochanan turned to commerce, but soon returned to the *yeshivah*, remarking that he would fulfill the verse:

כי לא יחדל אביון מקרב הארץ

For the poor shall never cease out of the land (*Devarim* 15:11, *Ta'anis* 21•).

Rabbi Yochanan went on to become one of the most glorious Torah teachers in history. When he left this world his generation eulogized him:

If a man were to give away all his personal fortune for the love of Torah, as did Rabbi Yochanan, that man would be viewed as if he had been plundered (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 8:7).

The question that must be addressed is why many other *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* who enjoyed the privilege of material wealth did not share this attitude. Why did they maintain and partake of their affluence in spite of the fact that “poverty befits Israel?” The list of wealthy *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* include: Nakdimon ben Gurion, Ben Kalba Savua, Ben Tzitzis Hakeses (*Gittin* 56•), Rabban Gamliel (*Berachos* 16:, *Bava Kama* 74:), Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer*, introduction), Rabbi Akiva (*Avos D'Rabbi Nasan* 6:2), Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaryah (*Berachos* 27:), Rabbi Tarfon (*Nedarim* 62•), Rav Papa (*Pesachim* 113•), Rav Huna ben Rav Yehoshua (*Horayos* 10:), Rav Nachman (*Ta'anis* 5:), Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi (*Gittin* 59•), Rabbi Eliezer ben Charsim (*Kesubos* 49:), Rav Ashi (*Gittin* 59•), Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (*Eicha Ravti*), Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri and Rabbi Eliezer Chisma (*Sifri, Devarim* 10:14), Rav Chana ben Chanilai (*Berachos* 58:) and many others. Why did they seek wealth? Why did they not renounce their wealth? Could they have achieved greater spiritual heights had they been poor?

The attitude that poverty is desirable must also be reconciled with a number of other Talmudic expressions which indicate the opposite to be true.

קשה עניות בתוך ביתו של אדם יותר מחמשים מכות

Poverty in one's home is worse than fifty plagues (*Bava Basra* 116•).

Therefore, man should seek divine intervention to change this fate (Rashbam, *ibid.*).

עניות כמיתה

Poverty is like death (*Nedarim* 7:: *Avodah Zarah* 5•).

The Maharal of Prague explains that this is because wealth is an intrinsic part of life (Maharal, *Chidushei Aggados, Nedarim* 7:). Shlomo *Hamelech* warns:

כל ימי עני רעים

All the days of the poor are evil (*Mishlei* 15:15).

והאיכא שבתות וימים טובים

The poor do not even enjoy the *Shabbos* or festival days (*Kesubos* 110:).

ג' דברים מעבירין את האדם על דעתו ועל דעת קונו...ודקדוקי עניות

Three things cause a man to violate his own will, and the will of his Creator...the exactions of poverty... (*Eruvin* 41:).

Since poverty tends to distance a person from his Creator, it is important to pray in advance that this problem not appear at all (Ben Yehoyada).

The Torah writes:

אפס כי לא יהיה בך אביון

But there shall be no poor among you (*Devarim* 15:4).

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 64:) explains that this *pasuk* is not merely intended as a good-natured guarantee of blessing, but is intended as a definitive *mitzvah*. The Torah warns that it is the responsibility of each individual to endeavor in his personal life not to become poor. A person may not perform irresponsible acts which could lead to poverty. Although the ultimate determination of wealth is made by Hashem and is out of man's hands, each individual is nevertheless obligated to vigilantly avoid poverty. In light of all this, how could the state of poverty be considered ideal?

Mishlei — the Book of Proverbs — written by Shlomo *Hamelech* for the purpose of serving as a manual for the moral and religious instruction of *Klal Yisrael*, is replete with overt references to the virtues of accumulation of wealth. It might be argued that Shlomo *Hamelech* merely used the metaphor of wealth to illustrate a higher moral teaching, and when he referred to accumulation of monetary wealth what he really meant was an accumulation of wisdom or an accumulation of Torah. It must be understood that the proper way in which to correctly comprehend the lessons of *Mishlei* is to consider both the *mashal* — illustration — and the *nimshal* — lesson to be learned. If Shlomo *Hamelech* used a specific example with which to portray an idea, then that example also carries significance, and must be studied on its own merits.

Hence, in declaring

ויד חרוצים תעשיר

And the hand of the hustler becomes rich (*Mishlei* 10:4),

Mishlei intends many lessons, but a basic lesson which must be learned lies in the simple, straight-forward meaning of the words. He who endeavors to become financially rich, will become so. One cannot sit back and be lazy and hope to achieve financial success. Wealth can only be realized by actively pursuing it.

When Shlomo warns:

לך אל נמלה עצל, ראה דרכיה וחכם...תכין בקיץ לחמה...

Go to the ant, you lazy one; consider her ways and be wise: ... she prepares her food in the summer (ibid. 6:6-8),

he is instructing the reader to be vigilant in getting the work done in its proper time. If one does not accumulate wealth when he is able to do so, he will not have money at a time when he cannot work. Similarly:

אגר בקיץ בן משכיל, נרדם בקציר בן מביש

He that gathers in summer is a wise son, but he that sleeps during harvest is a son that causes shame (ibid. 10:5).

Shlomo *Hamelech* understood that in order for a leader to properly exert influence, he must not only be fluent in Torah, but also command the people's respect by being wealthy.

חכמת המסכן בזויה, ודבריו אינם נשמעים

The wisdom of a pauper is despised, and his words are not heard (*Koheles* 9:16).

עטרת חכמים עשרם

The crown of the wise is their wealth (*Mishlei* 14:24).

Similarly:

הוֹן עֲשִׂיר קִרִית עֶזוֹ, מַחֲתֵת דְּלִים רֵישׁוֹ

The rich man's wealth is his strong city; the destruction of the poor is their poverty (ibid. 10:15).

And:

גַּם לְרַעְהוּ יִשְׁנָא רֵשׁ, וְאֶהְבִּי עֲשִׂיר רַבִּים

The poor is hated even by his friends, but the rich are beloved by the multitudes (ibid. 14:20).

Thus, it is evident that Shlomo *Hamelech* placed great emphasis on wealth.

The attitude that poverty is an ideal is also manifested in other areas of human endeavor. Self-denial and repudiation of pleasure and enjoyment are considered to be noble principles in certain circles. Complete immersion in spirituality and an indifference to mundane delights are considered by many to be the epitome of religious practice (*Yevamos* 20.).

This is in direct contradiction, however, to the expression of Hashem regarding each day of creation:

כִּי טוֹב

It is good (*Bereishis* 1:4).

This phrase is reiterated in the *Chumash* at the conclusion of most of the days of creation—the final day of creation is crowned with the exultation:

וְהָנָה טוֹב מְאֹד

It is very good (*Bereishis* 1:31).

The *Midrash* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 9:2) is moved to exclaim:

אֵת הַכֹּל עָשָׂה יָפָה

He had made everything beautiful (*Koheles* 3:11).

Hashem created everything good and beautiful so that man may enjoy this world. For the good and beautiful is only a small reflection of Hashem, and appreciation of Hashem's work is the primary method by which mankind is to come to recognize and appreciate Hashem. Mankind is further commanded to "rejoice in every good thing which Hashem has given you" (*Devarim* 26:11). It is Hashem's will that mankind enjoy this world and come to appreciate Him. David *Hamelech* states in *Tehillim* (89:3):

עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶה

Forever will [your] kindness be built.

The restriction of joy diminishes one's gratitude for Hashem's blessings because gratitude is only the result of joy (*Kuzari*, *Sha'ar* 8). Hashem demands that man have pleasure from His bounty.

The *Gemara* (*Nedarim* 10.) teaches that, according to certain views, a *Nazir*, an individual who swears not to drink wine, is called a sinner because he deprives himself of a pleasure that Hashem intended for mankind. The *Gemara* further states that anyone who denies himself [kosher] worldly pleasures is certainly referred to as a sinner, for self-denial is a sin (Ran, ibid.).

One who engages in fasting is called a sinner (*Ta'anis* 11•).

The *Gemara* (*Ta'anis* 22:) states:

A person is forbidden to torture himself... 'a living soul' (*Bereishis* 2:7) [means] sustain the soul that I gave you.

Are the Torah's prohibitions not enough for you that you come to create new prohibitions for yourself? (*Yerushalmi Nedarim* 29•).

Our Sages of blessed memory have said (*Yerushalmi Kidushin* 48:) that a man will have to give an accounting to Hashem for everything that his eyes beheld and he did not wish to eat, though he was permitted and able to do so. They advanced Scripture in their support:

וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר שְׂאֵלוֹ עֵינַי לֹא אֲצַלְתִּי מֵהֶם

Anything my eyes asked, I did not keep from them (*Koheles* 2:10).

Hence, how could self-denial, abstinence, and poverty be considered an ideal?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, in his work *Mesilas Yesharim*, outlines various vital steps, in ascending order of importance, for an individual to achieve the highest human level of *kedushah* —holiness. The initial step up the “ladder of saintliness” is the “*midas haperishus*” — “trait of separation” — in which the individual is encouraged to separate and withdraw himself from permitted pleasures. Man should attempt to escape worldly contingencies as far as possible, so as to better protect himself from the evil upon which they border. For there is no worldly pleasure upon whose heels some sin does not follow (*Mesilas Yesharim* 13).

The trait of *kedushah*, the pinnacle of human achievement, is the actual fusion of one's soul with the will of the Creator. In all of an individual's actions and movements, the heart must be directed to the intimacies of true communion until there is conferred upon him a spirit from On High. The individual will then actually be like an angel of Hashem, and all of his actions, even the lowly, physical ones, will be viewed as sacrifices and as Divine service. Eating and drinking, all physical pleasures, are now elevated to a spiritual level so that the human being is akin to the altar of Hashem (*Mesilas Yesharim* 26).

The *Midrash* (*Otzar Hamidrashim* [Eizenstien] 172) exults over a certain *Kohein Gadol*, Yochanan ben Narbai, in whose time there was never any *nosar* — left over meat from the *karbanos*. Yochanon ben Narbai was renown for consuming all leftovers (*Pesachim* 57•), to the extent that a *bas kol* — heavenly voice — pronounced his virtue. In the entire 420-year tenure of the second *Beis Hamikdash*, a *bas kol* occurred only four times, so the import of this pronouncement must be appreciated. This man was praised for the consumption of food; he was extreme in his dedication to eating *karbanos*. For this virtue he merited praise from a *bas kol*.

The *Mesilas Yesharim* (13) points out that the majority of the people cannot be *chasidim* — “saintly” — it is too much to ask of the masses. It is sufficient that they are *tzadikim* — “righteous” — the level which is the spiritual responsibility of every individual. The concept of *perishus*, leading to ultimate *kidushah*, is only offered to the select few with the desire and ability to achieve closeness to Hashem.

The ideals of self-denial, abstinence, and poverty are designed for individuals of high spiritual station who seek to acquire intimacy with Hashem. Beauty, pleasure, and the enjoyment of Hashem's bounty is the intended norm for all people. Voluntary rejection of these gifts is

designed only for those who choose to seek a higher spirituality. It is important to note, however, that once these achievers reach the apex of holiness, they no longer deny themselves this world's bounty, but instead utilize it to achieve greater spiritual heights. Rabbi Yochanan and the other spiritual giants represent different points on the spiritual spectrum. Poverty is an ideal only when used properly in the appropriate situations by suitable individuals.

The difference between Rabbi Yochanan and the other Sages can be understood from another perspective. The *Chovos Halevavos*, in his chapter on humility, presents two methods for the acquisition of the trait of humility. It may be procured either through affliction (such as illness), or it may be attained through personal success. If one is afflicted with problems, he understands that he is not really that high and mighty, and readily accepts the authority of a Higher Source. However, it is also possible for one to achieve personal success and understand that that attainment is not a result of his own doing, but due only to the benevolence of Hashem. If one is then able to acquire humility as a result of that great insight, that humility is much sweeter and certainly more satisfactory. Rabbi Yochanan felt that the best way for him to realize spiritual elevation was through affliction (i.e.: poverty), while the other Sages were very comfortable in seeking spiritual fulfillment through personal success.

All this can help to understand the diversity of attitude among the Ta'naim regarding wealth. The Gemorrah (*Shabbos 25:*) presents the question: "Who is wealthy?" Rabbi Meir responds, "He who has pleasure in his wealth." This view is consistent with the well-known dictum on wealth in *Avos* (4:1): "Who is wealthy? He who rejoices in his portion." Nevertheless, other Rabbis took a more materialistic view of wealth. Rabbi Tarfon, who was himself very wealthy, opines: "He who possesses a hundred vineyards, a hundred fields and a hundred slaves working in them." Rabbi Akiva said, "He who has a wife comely in deeds." He was speaking from personal experience: his wife stood out as a model of fidelity and trust, and it was she alone who enabled and encouraged him to attain his high position (*Nedarim 50a*). Rabbi Yose expressed: "He who has a privy near his table." In a time when sanitary arrangements were very primitive and privies were situated in fields, this would be a sign of wealth. Different personal experiences lead to divergence of opinion, but all is acceptable as long as one's life is directed to the Glory of Heaven.

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