

MONEY AND WEALTH

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel October 15, 2018

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Within the past century, the significance of money and wealth has risen in importance and has become the central value in society. It used to be that the most admired people in western society were athletes or politicians. Today, more people admire billionaires or athletes with the largest bank accounts. With the collapse of the Communist system and the establishment of capitalism as the dominant economic force in the western world, most countries and most individuals now consider the accumulation of wealth as a primary or the primary goal in life. Many successful athletes today, even under contract, refuse to play until improved financial conditions are renegotiated. Even the Olympics, for so long the bastion of amateurism and athletes competing for glory of country and not money, have been tainted, as most competitors are now professionals. In the 1992 Olympics, a few athletes almost refused to publicly accept their gold medals rather than endanger their private sports contracts. In short, in today's society, the bottom line in judging people and which activities drive most people is how much money a person makes and how much money will any particular endeavor generate.

It is clear that Judaism does not equate accumulation of wealth with wisdom,¹ as many other people do. But what does Judaism feel about wealth and the importance of money? In many Jewish circles, the leaders of Jewish organizations are those individuals who are the wealthiest and most philanthropic. Is this how it should be? Is the emphasis on money something good or bad for individuals and society? In short, does Judaism view wealth and the accumulation of money as something good or not good?

WEALTH IN JUDAISM SEEMS TO BE VERY POSITIVE

Various sources seem to show that Judaism looks very positively on wealthy individuals and the accumulation of money. The Talmud² says that both Rabbi Judah the Prince and Rabbi Akiva, the outstanding leaders and scholars of their respective generations, had great respect for wealthy individuals. This tradition and general attitude seems to have continued by rabbinic leaders to this very day. Wealth was deemed a positive Jewish quality in ancient times, since a person could not become a prophet unless he or she was wealthy, in addition to other required traits.³ The Talmud also says⁴ that to acquire Talmudic wisdom one should study the laws that deal with money and business. According to the Mishna,⁵ one of the qualities that a righteous person should possess is wealth, as it is both pleasant for him and for the world. Clearly, then, wealth is a good value, which people should strive to attain.

THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF WEALTH IN JUDAISM

On the other hand, numerous sources point out that wealth is not such a good thing for a Jewish

¹ Avot 6:1

² Eruvin 86a

³ Nedarim 38a

⁴ Bava Batra 175b

⁵ Avot 6:8

person. The more money one has, says the Mishna,⁶ the more worry and frustration a person will also have. The Midrash⁷ points out that a person necessarily dies with only one-half of his or her desires fulfilled. How could the Midrash know that each person would have accumulated exactly half of his desires before he dies, not more and not less? The answer is that a person's desire for money and wealth is always changing. No matter how much a person accumulates, he always desires more. So, for example, a poor man would certainly say that he would be very satisfied with \$500,000 in his bank account. However, by the time he actually accumulates that amount, his tastes, social circle of friends and vistas have all changed. That person will now "need" a million dollars to satisfy his desires. But once he has accumulated that first million, with the peer pressure to have as much as the next fellow, he will "need" more. It is a never-ending cycle and only engenders frustration. Except for the one richest person in the entire world (who is also under pressure to preserve his or her top status), the desire for wealth will never be fulfilled and the satisfaction of achievement will always be outweighed by the desire for more. Thus, wealth, by itself, can never bring happiness or satisfaction.

This same concept is demonstrated in the story of Alexander the Great,⁸ who placed his gold and silver on one side of a scale and a human eyeball on the other side. No matter how much gold and silver he continued to pile on, the eyeball outweighed it. The Rabbis explained to Alexander that since the human eye has unlimited desires, it will always be "heavier" and outweigh any riches pitted against it.

It is true that Judaism views wealth as a reward from G-d, as we Jews pray to G-d⁹ to be granted a life of wealth. However, it is possible that one who receives wealth in this world may be denied his or her ultimate reward in the Next World, as is demonstrated by the story of Rabbi Chaninah.¹⁰ Rabbi Chaninah was a very holy but very poor man. When he prayed for riches, he was granted his wish, became instantly wealthy and was very happy. Then, in a dream, he saw that his golden chair reserved for him the World to Come had only two legs, instead of three, and he understood that the third leg was being used to grant him the riches in this world. The next morning he awoke and prayed that his wealth be removed, and it was.

There is another Jewish disadvantage to becoming wealthy. The wealthier a person gets, the more a person naturally tends to forget about G-d, and think only about himself. The classic reaction to wealth and the "good life" is in the Torah,¹¹ describing the person who "kicked," i.e. complained when he became "fat," i.e. successful, as he no longer appreciated G-d. People who work hard and accumulate riches usually tend to think that it is through their own efforts alone that they have become wealthy, and that, therefore, all the wealth belongs to them. The prophet¹² teaches us that all money belongs to G-d, and none of it belongs to man. The entire world is G-d's to begin with,¹³ and the more one accumulates, the more one tends to forget this, since the power that accumulated wealth brings tends to go to a person's head.

One of the "lures" of wealth is that man tends to think that wealth brings security to an individual. The more wealth a person receives, the more he believes that he can depend on himself and no longer needs

⁶ Avot 2:7

⁷ Kohelet Rabbah, 1:32

⁸ Tamid 32b

⁹ Blessing of the New Moon, recited in the Musaf prayer on the Shabbat before the Rosh Chodesh, the holiday of the New Moon

¹⁰ Taanit 25a

¹¹ Deuteronomy 32:15

¹² Chagai 2:8

¹³ Psalms 24:1

G-d. Not only is this not the Jewish way, as we know that Judaism believes that people can only truly depend on G-d and nothing else,¹⁴ but the reality of the world, especially in the last few years, has demonstrated otherwise. No matter how much a person has accumulated and no matter where that person has invested, there is nothing that is truly secure. Many people used to think that putting their wealth in real estate was the most secure investment, and that one could not lose their money in this safe venture. The Great Recession 2008 demonstrated how wrong these people were, as the both the small real estate investor and many of the wealthiest people in the world lost most of their money when the real estate market collapsed. Others used to feel and still feel today that gold was the most secure investment, especially when it became a free market and has gone up over \$1500 an ounce. But just as gold once was valued at over \$800 an ounce in the 1980's and then went down to under \$100 an ounce, it could go down today once again just as easily. We know now that this market, too, collapsed, and gold today is worth less than half of what it was once worth. Others believed that putting money in a bank would guarantee security, until the Savings and Loan scandal of the 1980's took place, when billions of dollars of bank savings disappeared overnight. Yet others lost fortunes in the stock market in the crashes of 1987, the Dotcom Bubble of 2000 and 2008, after having invested in "safe stocks." Therefore, there is no such concept that money and wealth alone will bring a person security — only G-d can do that.

Another disadvantage of money and wealth in the past is that it has often kept Jews from getting to or living in Israel. This phenomenon which has kept millions of Jews from leaving the Diaspora to live in the State of Israel after 1948 is not new. There are three allusions to this very idea in the Torah. When Jacob crossed over the Yabok River on the night before meeting his brother Esau,¹⁵ Rashi¹⁶ says that the reason he went back was to get some jars that he did not want to leave behind. According to many commentaries, this river was the border between Israel and the Diaspora. Thus, for monetary reasons, Jacob left Israel and, consequently, met up with the angel that made him fight for his life. Later on in the Torah, when the Jews finally defeated the Egyptians after the miracle of the Red Sea, it says¹⁷ that Moses brought the Jews into the wilderness on a march that was supposed to lead them, within a short time, to the land of Israel. But the Torah word for "he brought" is *Vayasa*, not the usual form of the verb, *Vayisa*, implying that Moses had to force the Jews to travel. Noting this change of usage, Rashi¹⁸ based on the Midrash Mechilta, says that the people did indeed refuse to travel, insisting on staying to retrieve all the gold and silver of the Egyptians that had washed up on the beach. Thus, Moses had to force them to travel towards Israel and abandon these riches. This is another example how the possibility of gold and silver held back Jews from traveling toward the Land of Israel.

Perhaps the most clear example of this is the story of the two and one half tribes (Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe),¹⁹ who requested not to enter and live in Israel proper, in order to have ample grazing room for their vast cattle, which was the measure of wealth in that desert society. After lengthy negotiations, they were granted their request on certain conditions. Once again, the wealth of Jews prevented them from entering the land of Israel. Historically, these were also the first tribes that were defeated in conquest in history and disappeared forever.

¹⁴ Psalms 115:9

¹⁵ Genesis 32:25

¹⁶ Rashi commentary on Genesis 32:25

¹⁷ Exodus 15:22

¹⁸ Rashi commentary on Exodus 15:22

¹⁹ Numbers 32:1-5

WHAT THEN IS THE REAL JEWISH VIEWS OF WEALTH – GOOD OR BAD?

Like all Jewish values, money and wealth by itself is neither good nor bad. It all depends on the circumstances in which a person uses it. The when, where and for what purpose can make any action or anything in life good or bad (see chapter on Holiness). This very concept is symbolized by the Shekel coin, which G-d commanded²⁰ the Jewish people to donate for building the Tabernacle. The verse says,²¹ "This is what you should give," and Rashi,²² based on the Midrash Rabbah, says that G-d actually showed Moses a coin made out of fire. Commentaries ask what is the significance and symbol of the coin of fire, and answer that just as fire can be used for a positive purposes (heat, light, electricity) or negative purposes (building atomic bombs, crematoria in the death camps), so, too, money can be used for positive, beneficial and moral purposes in the world or it can be used for destructive and immoral purposes. If used properly, money can be a good force and something very positive. If used improperly, it is viewed in a negative light as attested to by many sources.

When the Midrash²³ describes how a person gets into the Gates of Heaven, it says that if a person used his or her money to feed the hungry, clothe the needy, help orphans and other acts of Tzedakah, this person will surely get into Heaven. Therefore, using accumulated wealth for these purposes (and not just the accumulation of goods and vacations) is a noble pursuit. What was the prayer that the High Priest recited²⁴ as he emerged from the Holy of Holies at the holiest moment of the year on Yom Kippur? It was a prayer that there should be proper rains so that the fields should maximize their produce, i.e. that everyone should become wealthy, as wealth in that agrarian society was measured in bountiful crops. Of all the things to pray for at that spiritual moment, why did the High Priest choose this seemingly "non-spiritual" prayer? The High priest indeed wanted the people to be spiritual, but he understood that without basic money and wealth, the people would never be able to maximize their spiritual ideals, as they would be too absorbed in attaining life's necessities. All that the people and the High Priest had prayed throughout Yom Kippur day could not be attained if basic financial needs were not met. Therefore, money is good if the people use it as a means to attain spiritual goals.

THE DEFINITION OF A WEALTHY JEW

Understanding its function and appreciating one's wealth leads a person to a life of greater satisfaction. The Jewish definition of a wealthy person is not a specific amount accumulated (since we saw above that this can never lead to satisfaction) but, rather, a state of mind. The Mishna²⁵ states that a wealthy person is he who appreciates what he has, no matter how much or how little (see chapter on Happiness for a discussion why *simcha* does not mean happiness but appreciation). Therefore, a billionaire may not be considered wealthy in Jewish terms if he doesn't appreciate what he has and is constantly seeking more wealth, while a man of modest income may indeed be rich in the Jewish sense. The "Jewish" rich man will always be more satisfied and at peace with his life, as well. Another Talmudic passage²⁶ amplifies this definition by stating that a truly wealthy person is he who achieves a peaceful state of mind through his money, according to Rabbi Meir.

²⁰ Exodus 30:12

²¹ Exodus 30:13

²² Rashi commentary on Exodus 30:13

²³ Midrash, Tehillim 118:17

²⁴ Yoma 53b

²⁵ Avot 4:1

²⁶ Shabbat 25b

In light of this view of wealth, Rabbeinu Bechaye²⁷ quotes a fascinating Ashkenazic custom of the Middle Ages. He says that since today Jews have no Altar (used in the Temple), their tables in their homes becomes the symbol of that Altar and the means by which we attain atonement for their sins. Thus, how Jews behave around their tables, i.e. how they used their wealth to invite guests, give Tzedakah, etc., will be their atonement. Therefore, it was the custom of people to use their wooden tables from their homes to build their coffins when they died. Thus, the symbol of a person's good deeds could accompany a person to Heaven when he or she died. This is in keeping with the Mishna²⁸ which says that when a person dies, all his or her wealth will stay behind, but that which accompanies a person is only his or her good deeds. Therefore, it is clear that if money and wealth were converted to good deeds, it will accompany a person in the future and lasts in this world much longer as well. If used only to give a person physical pleasures, it will die with the person.

In a similar vein, Rashi²⁹ implies that, like children, the good deeds of a person can immortalize that individual, keeping him alive long after death. We know today that philanthropists who have helped Jewish education and Jewish poor, have begun projects whose effects will be felt for hundreds of years to come.

NOT SHOWING OFF ONE'S WEALTH

Once Jews attain wealth, they must be careful not to flaunt it, especially in front of non-Jews, says the Talmud and Rashi³⁰. According to this understanding of events, when there was famine in the world and all people were going to Egypt for food, initially Jacob and his sons had plenty of food. Nevertheless, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food (and eventually met their long-lost brother Joseph), so that the Hebrews would not appear to be wealthy when everyone else was poor. Jacob was afraid that appearing wealthy when others are not, as this will invite jealousy which will bring antisemitism. This is also one possible explanation of why the Jews were suddenly enslaved a few years later, so soon after Joseph, who was venerated in Egypt, died. The verse³¹ says that the Jews grew exceedingly mighty and that the land was filled with them. But the Hebrew word *Meod*, exceedingly, also can be related to money, as it says you shall love G-d with your *Meod*, exceedingly.³² But the Talmud³³ understands this to mean that you shall love G-d with all your money. Thus, the verse in Exodus may also be understood that the Jews grew mighty monetarily and they flaunted this wealth throughout the land. If this indeed occurred, we can easily understand why this incurred the wrath of the Egyptians and the desire to enslave these foreign Jews. Thus, wealth should never be flaunted, and especially not in the Diaspora where Jews remain a minority and are always suspect.

MONEY IS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT LIFE VALUE

In the verse referred to above, it says that one should love G-d with all one's heart, all one's life and all one's money, based on the understanding of the Talmud.³⁴ But the Talmud continues and asks why is it necessary to state that one should be willing to give up one's money for G-d if it already states in the verse cited previously that one should be willing to give up one's life? And the rabbis answered that (even then) there are some people whose money is more important to them than their lives. Although this sounds absurd, we know that there are workaholics today whose job and money come before any other value. Even after a

²⁷Commentary of Rabbeinu Bechaye on Terumah

²⁸ Avot 6:9

²⁹ Rashi commentary on Genesis 6:9

³⁰ Taanit 10b

³¹ Exodus 1:7

³² Deuteronomy 6:5

³³ Berachot 54a

³⁴ Berachot 61b

heart attack when the doctor forbids them to go back to their pressurized lifestyle at risk of dying, many people ignore their doctors and put their lives at risk return to their businesses — all for wealth. This is not the Jewish way.

When the Mishna³⁵ states that the way of Torah is with bread and water, it does not signify that this is the ultimate Jewish lifestyle to aspire to. Rather, it means that Jews should understand that to achieve a life of Torah and a fulfilling life, one does not have to have monetary wealth. It is not the most important aspect of life to the Jew and not necessary for true fulfillment.

WEALTH CAN BE MISUSED EVEN FOR RELIGIOUS PURPOSES

As two rabbis passed by the beautiful edifice of a synagogue,³⁶ one rabbi remarked how beautiful this synagogue was. The other rabbi began to cry and said how many Jewish lives were lost in the effort to build this synagogue. This passage tells us that even though the money was used for positive, religious purposes, Jewish lives were still considered "lost" if the enormous monetary investment could have used to teach poor students who had no opportunity to learn Torah or to give them room and board so that they could live as Jews. Therefore, there is a hierarchy of uses for money and wealth, even it is being used for proper, religious objectives.

Sometimes, money and wealth used for ostensibly religious functions make a mockery out of Judaism and this ostensible use. The Priests in the Temple³⁷ used to fight vehemently over who had the best sacrifice. They would spend great sums competing for the wealthiest sacrifice, but not share with each other. The Talmud frowns upon this misuse of "holy" money. This is no different than the Jew who spends the most money in the community for an etrog for Sukkot (as part of the commandment to acquire and wave the Four Species), merely to be able to say to his friends that his is the most beautiful and expensive Etrog, without any concern for the mitzvah itself. Misusing money in Judaism and for religious purposes for the wrong ends is also an improper way to spend one's funds.

The Mishna³⁸ exhorts Jews not to desire someone else's table that seems greater — since yours is really greater. It is improper to judge people or success by what material possessions they have. That is not the most important thing in life. As mentioned above,³⁹ all accumulated wealth will have no value after a person passes from this world, unless that wealth was converted to a more important commodity, good deeds, which are recognized as greatly valuable in Judaism.

There is a parable told by the Chofetz Chaim:

A man heard of a far-away island where diamonds were so plentiful that they lay on the streets. A boat sailed there only once yearly, and off this man went to make his fortune. When he landed after the long journey, he indeed saw that diamonds were all over the streets and he immediately started gathering them up, when the people started laughing at him. When he asked why the laughter, they explained that the diamonds are of no value on the island since they had no use there. What is really valuable is chicken fat since it can be used to preserve food and make it tastier. The man began working to accumulate chicken fat, and

³⁵ Avot 6:4

³⁶ Shekalim 15a

³⁷ Shekalim 11a

³⁸ Avot 6:5

³⁹ Avot 6:9

after many months of hard work, acquired huge vats of chicken fat that he loaded on the boat to take him home. When his wife and friends met the man, he started showing off all the chicken fat he had brought back, and they thought he was crazy and didn't want to hear his explanation. He died a lonely and brokenhearted man.

It is no different for individuals in this world, says the Chafetz Chaim. People think that the really valuable things are money and wealth (like chicken fat), but, like on the island, the diamonds, the mitzvot-commandments, are all around for the taking. In the Next World, people will realize the true value of things, but by then they will have left the island, this world, and it will be too late to gather the diamonds, the mitzvot-commandments.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.