

## **The Torah Reaction to Madoff & Other Financial Scandals, and Greed**

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The spate of public arrests in the past few years by Jews who have swindled the government and many other people points to a serious breakdown in Jewish values. The most famous of these cases involves Bernie Madoff, who cheated people out of more than \$50 billion. Although he is not Orthodox, almost all of Bernie Madoff's victims were Jewish. This is compounded by the arrests of several Orthodox rabbis for their alleged roles in scandals on the West and East Coasts of the United States, which includes rabbis in the Chassidic, Lithuanian and Sephardic communities, as well as other Jews who have also been in the news for similar reasons. A very influential lobbyist was sent to jail for stealing from the government and Native American tribes, while purporting to live an Orthodox and moral life aside from these crimes. The same phenomenon has been witnessed in Israel, as one president of the country was forced to resign for accepting bribes, a sitting prime minister stepped down after being indicted for bribe-taking and many other financial irregularities. A past mayor of Jerusalem was arrested for similar crimes, and more recently, several mayors of smaller towns were forced to leave their posts for illegal financial dealings. It seems that this pandemic of unethical behavior in this particular area has affected the entire Jewish community, even as it affects many in the non-Jewish world as well. It is clear that the values of the entire western world "allowed" for these crimes to take place. And for every public official caught, there are many more who are guilty but not yet found out.

This atmosphere of greed that led to these behaviors, not only by leaders, but also by entire societies, needs to be addressed. It is clear that the voracious desire for money and wealth is not only a Jewish problem, but a value affecting everyone in Western society. What is Judaism's take on this rampant avarice affecting both leaders and others in the Jewish community, even those who profess to live by Jewish values? Can and should the Jewish community do anything about this phenomenon? This chapter will examine the specific Jewish attitude to greed through sources and through examples in the past.

### **REFERENCES TO GREED IN SCRIPTURE**

Before defining greed in Jewish terms and in Scripture, the term needs to be defined in general. Greed has many definitions. Some say it is an "excessive consumption of or desire for wealth and power." Others believe that greed is defined as "the excessive, extreme desire for something, often more than one's proper share." Some have cynically defined the attitude of the greedy towards life as "the person who dies with the most 'toys', wins". Whatever the definition, greed consists of people's constant drive to obtain material goods and wealth, often at the expense of others and at the expense of staying within the boundaries of the law.

There are very few references to the actual Hebrew word for greed – "*betza*" – in the Torah or Prophets. The only specific Torah reference to this word refers to one quality needed for Jewish leadership, specifically the judges that Yitro (Jethro), the father-in-law of Moses, advised him to appoint. One of their necessary qualities must be that they "despise greed."<sup>1</sup> Nachmanides explains that for people to be proper judges, they must despise even the idea of money in general, the obtainment of physical possessions, and they should not even care about their own wealth at all. Therefore, such a person can never be tempted to accept bribes when they are offered to him.<sup>2</sup> Riva explains that since

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 18:21

<sup>2</sup> Nachmanides commentary to Exodus 18:21

the judge's own possessions are meaningless to him, if he is threatened by a litigant who would burn down his field if the judge ruled against him, the threat will not faze or cause fear in this judge. Rabbeinu Bechaye cites this explanation, but then adds that hating greed signifies that a judge despises people who intentionally steal from others in order to gain wealth.<sup>3</sup> Tur also explains that such a judge has no desire to be rich, which inoculates him from ever accepting a bribe.<sup>4</sup>

The greedy person is also referred to by the Prophets, and the psychology behind such an individual is amplified by the commentaries. King Solomon wrote that a greedy person will find trouble in his own house, but whoever hates gifts will live (a longer and better life).<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Elijah Kramer, known as Vilna Gaon, explains that a greedy person is only interested in accumulating more and more wealth. But in the end, he or she will lose everything, even his home. Rabbi Meir Wisser, known as Malbim, says that a person who illegally gains wealth at the expense of other people believes that each additional acquisition enhances the honor of his home. However, the reality is that the person who makes his fortune at the expense of others actually destroys his home since he destroys his reputation. On the other hand, the person who refuses all financial help from any human being and is even unwilling to accept gifts but lives with only the money he legitimately accumulates by himself, that individual understands that all comes from G-d, and in the end he will gain the most.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, we know that the greed that pervades all of Western society, i.e., the great desire to accumulate more and more, has indeed destroyed homes both figuratively and literally. Friendships and families have been ruined by the insatiable need by one family member to accumulate wealth at the expense of spending time in the home with family. In addition, today many families have lost the homes in which they have lived for years, due to foreclosures that result from greedy behavior. Their avarice allowed them to buy homes that they could not truly afford, but were able to purchase with almost no down payment. However, they were too blinded by their desires to understand that they would never be able to maintain the rate of payments.

Proverbs also says that a prince who lacks understanding (of the power of his greed) will feel oppressed, but he who has no covetous or greedy desires will prolong his days.<sup>7</sup> Rashi explains that this greedy individual is unaware of how much he is destroying his life by unscrupulously cheating others for his own gain.<sup>8</sup> Even in the eleventh century, Rashi understood how a person's avarice can destroy him or her. Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (known as Ralbag or Gersonides) who lived two hundred years later, explains that a greedy person is a smooth talker, like a lion who controls others through fear of its roar. Underneath the talk and that roar, however, there is no real substance, and the greedy person will eventually be exposed for what he truly is, while the person who despises greed will live long and gain the respect of others in his life. Malbim, who lived in the nineteenth century, describes the greedy schemer like Bernie Madoff. He says that if this greedy person is clever, he will use the greed to get others to give him their funds. But if this greedy person is foolish, he will simply rob people. Either way, when the mastermind (or robber) is found out, his days are numbered and his life is shortened. On the other hand, the individual who earns money honestly will never live in fear of being caught, and his life will be lengthened.<sup>9</sup> How insightful this comment is. While Bernie Madoff was paying dividends for years to many clients that defied all market logic, his investors never bothered to question him or the inflated amounts they received because of their own greed. As long as he was making them large profits, their greed and desire for more money did not allow them to inquire too deeply (or at all) about how it was being accomplished, even though (in retrospect) the signs were all there for anyone to objectively see

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<sup>3</sup> Riva and Rabbeinu Bechaye commentaries on Exodus 18:21

<sup>4</sup> Tur Ha-Aroch commentary on Exodus 18:21

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 15:27

<sup>6</sup> Commentaries of Gra and Malbim on Proverbs 15:27

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 28:16

<sup>8</sup> Rashi commentary on Proverbs 28:16

<sup>9</sup> Rabbeinu Gershon and Malbim commentaries on Proverbs 28:16

what was happening. These ideas are also echoed in a third Proverbs text, which also uses this word, “*betza*-greedy,” and says that the attribute of greediness takes away one’s life.<sup>10</sup>

There are many other verses that discuss or imply concepts related to avarice, without using the actual word “*Betza*,” especially as it is interpreted by the commentaries. For example, in one of the most famous verses in the entire Torah, the Shema, it says that a Jew should love G-d with “all his heart, with all his soul and with all his *me-od*-might.”<sup>11</sup> Rashi explains that the third phrase actually signifies that a Jew should love G-d with all his money, i.e., G-d should be more important to him or her than money is. Rashi then answers an unasked question: why is “money” in “third place” in the verse, after loving G-d with all one’s heart and soul? Certainly, if a Jew loves G-d with all his or her heart and soul, loving G-d with money is obvious or redundant? Rashi answers that there are certain people who are so greedy, that to them, money and possessions are more important than even their lives. For them, it is harder to love G-d with all their money than to love Him with all their soul. Maharal expands on Rashi’s words and says that we already encountered Jews in the Torah who are very greedy – the two and a half tribes who wanted to stay out of Israel proper in order to have grazing land for their multitude of cattle. (More about them will be explained below.) Why does this verse, then, have to remind us of this lesson again – that G-d is more important than worldly goods? He answers that for some greedy people, the idea of acquiring more money actually gives them a sense of life and a reason to live. These people are so greedy that their entire existence is about accumulation of more wealth. Thus, G-d commands even Jews such as these must put G-d before their money.<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (1696-1743) gives a similar explanation, but he says the verse is not speaking about actual money, rather the desire for money. For greedy people whose entire life hinges on their great and insatiable desire for money, they should learn to love G-d with that same insatiable desire.<sup>13</sup>

Jeremiah described his era and his society, which seems very similar to ours today. He says that everyone in his time, from the least to the greatest in that society, had a greedy desire.<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Dovid Altshuler explains that the High Priest and prophet referred to by Jeremiah in that verse were also filled with greed, and these refer to a false prophet and a corrupt High Priest who worshipped idols.<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah also warns the Jew not to boast about his or her accomplishments of wisdom, strength/heroism or accumulated wealth. They should only “boast” about G-d, who is just and is the basis and source of all of these three accomplishments, which G-d allows people to achieve, and which can be removed from them at any time. If people have attained any of these three achievements without full belief in G-d, the success is worthless and will not protect any individual.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the greedy, wealthy person who ignores G-d is disdained by Jeremiah, who says he is leading a misguided life. Job agrees with this attitude, and states that a person who has insatiable greed will ultimately not save anything that he or she has accumulated.<sup>17</sup> King Solomon also said that a “lover of money” will never be satisfied, since, like any addiction, what is enough for today is never enough for tomorrow.<sup>18</sup> Long before psychologists classified greed as an actual addiction, as many have recently done, King Solomon alluded to this concept thousands of years ago. Ibn Ezra explains this “lover of money” literally. This is a special kind of greedy person who does not like to accumulate possessions but only desires to build up his or her bank account, i.e., to become the wealthiest person in the world, simply to have the money and not even use it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 1:19

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>12</sup> Rashi and Maharal (Gur Aryeh) commentaries on Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>13</sup> Ohr HaChaim commentary on Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 8:10

<sup>15</sup> Metzudat David commentary on Jeremiah 8:10

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 9:22-23

<sup>17</sup> Job 20:20

<sup>18</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:9

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Ezra commentary to Ecclesiastes 5:9

All greedy people are, by definition, truly ignorant of the fundamental concept that everything in the world belongs to G-d,<sup>20</sup> even those goods that are in a person's home or his or her money in the bank. G-d can arrange it for these people to be wiped out very quickly with a super-storm that destroys people's worldly goods or bank failures that wipe out entire fortunes. Many people unfortunately learned this lesson when Bernie Madoff destroyed their hard-earned life fortunes overnight. Only when people understand what Chagai taught – that all money and gold belongs to G-d and He decides who keeps it and who does not<sup>21</sup> – will they begin to have a proper perspective on life and towards worldly goods. Some have interpreted the verse about not making idols out of gold and silver<sup>22</sup> in a literal sense – do not make money into an idol – something that a person believes has ultimate power besides G-d. In fact, some commentaries have shown that the Hebrew word for money or silver – “*keseif*” – actually means an insatiable desire. Thus, Ecclesiastes is really teaching that when a Jew's desire for Torah is the same as a greedy person's desire for money, then he has achieved G-d's true will.<sup>23</sup> The word “*keseif*-desire” is even used by King David to describe his desire and longing to be close to G-d.<sup>24</sup>

Because it is so easy for powerful people to become greedy, G-d tried to ensure that the most powerful person in Jewish society, the king, would not succumb to this natural inclination. Therefore, He forbade the king from taking too many wives (physical desire), or having too many horses (material desire). G-d also commanded the Jewish king to write an “extra” Torah scroll (in addition to the one that each Jew is commanded to write), and to bring it with him wherever he went, and also to study it carefully. In this way, the king will be reminded that he must obey the Torah and not grow haughty, which will lead to greediness.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, like today's most powerful people, i.e. the CEOs of major companies who earn hundreds of millions of dollars yearly while, at the same time, they reduce the wages or benefits of their workers, all these Torah safeguards did not prevent most Jewish kings in the past from succumbing to their greedy desires.

When G-d promises the Jewish people wealth but also peace as a reward for keeping the commandments, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer (1815-1872) comments that when most societies become wealthy, like most countries in the twenty-first century who have achieved great wealth in comparison to previous generations, nevertheless, there will always be some people who have more wealth than others. This will naturally lead to jealousy and greed to accumulate more, even from people who have “enough” to live a very good and comfortable life. Thus, G-d's promise to the Jewish people is that if they keep all of the commandments, G-d will create a wealthy society that will have peace as well, i.e., a life without jealousy and greed.<sup>26</sup> King Solomon, who was vastly wealthy, understood that a good name is a far more important achievement in life than “good oil” – i.e., great wealth.<sup>27</sup> This has been shown to be true for those in the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, like Bernie Madoff and others who have been caught swindling others or the government, and have permanently lost their good names, their most valuable asset.

While the Talmudic and accepted understanding of the sins that led to the destruction of the First Temple were that the Jewish people worshipped idols, committed murder and adultery,<sup>28</sup> Isaiah describes a different reason why the Temple was destroyed, as he portrays a society at that time that

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<sup>20</sup> Psalms 24:1

<sup>21</sup> Chagai 2:8 with Rashi commentary.

<sup>22</sup> Exodus 20:20

<sup>23</sup> Ecclesiastes 10:19 with Chomat Anach (Chida) commentary

<sup>24</sup> Psalms 84:3 with Rashi and Ibn Ezra commentary

<sup>25</sup> Deuteronomy 17:15-20

<sup>26</sup> Leviticus 26:3-6 with commentary by Ktav Sofer

<sup>27</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:1

<sup>28</sup> Yoma 9b

seems very similar to the money-hungry culture we live in today.<sup>29</sup> Isaiah's "*Eicha-How?*" – unlike Jeremiah's similar expression – shows a city of Jerusalem bereft of honesty and justice, full of bribes, often leading to murder.<sup>30</sup> Isaiah asks how is it that Jerusalem, that used to be a city of faith, turned into a city of lies like a harlot who lies to her husband.<sup>31</sup> The people demonstrated greed as they fooled their customers much in the same way that Madoff did with his customers. They took coins of copper and painted them with silver, in order that they appear much more expensive than they really were. The customers thought they were receiving valuable silver coins instead of relatively worthless copper coins.<sup>32</sup> And just as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was the leaders of the Jewish community who conspired with the thieves, and made deals with each other, saying "I will lie and cover for you today, if you do the same for me tomorrow."<sup>33</sup> It was these sins, according to Isaiah, that led to the Temple's destruction.

### **NARRATIVES IN THE TORAH RELATING TO GREED**

There are numerous stories and recorded incidents in the Torah that involve avarice, as understood by the classic commentaries. By examining these accounts in the verses, we will shed even more light on the Jewish attitude towards greed, and why this quality is so heinous.

According to Rabbeinu Bechaye, the second sin in the Torah, that of *Kayin*-Cain, was based on his greed. He worked the land and brought a sacrifice to G-d from that land, only because he desired to take the entire planet from his brother Abel. He was cursed and forced to till the land in great labor as a punishment for his greediness.<sup>34</sup> Ten generations later, the society in Noah's generation was acting both on its rampant lust and its great desire for goods, which eventually doomed it.<sup>35</sup> Because that society was lawless, there was no need to hide their greed or stealing the way it is done today. Rather, they openly took anything they wanted.<sup>36</sup> According to Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619), it was their constant greed and desire for more and more to satiate their endless desires that made this generation evil.<sup>37</sup> In the end, despite the myriad other sins that this generation committed, G-d decided to destroy the entire world only because of the sin of greed.<sup>38</sup>

Even after the world had been destroyed due to the sin of greed, ten generations later, the generation of the Tower of Babel had not changed their essential values. Using a newly invented building material called brick, they built a massive tower to create a name for themselves and challenge G-d.<sup>39</sup> The Midrash says that the chief value of that civilization was worldly goods, and the most important among these goods was their precious bricks. Thus, when a person fell off the tower and died while building this seven-mile skyscraper, no one paid attention or cared. But if one brick fell and was lost, they stopped building, sat down and wept.<sup>40</sup> It sounds preposterous to care more about money or goods than human life. Yet, we live in a society today that is not essentially different in its values. Three examples from the operations of large companies are enough to prove how this idea exists in our own times. In the 1970's the Ford Company was in a rush to release their new Pinto car, despite the fact that it was well aware that its gas tank was prone to fire in the event of an accident, and would cause many unnecessary deaths. It would have cost an additional \$11 per car to install a part that would have fixed this problem. An internal memorandum revealed that Ford did a cost-benefit analysis and concluded

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<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 1:21-23

<sup>30</sup> Radak commentary to Isaiah 1:21

<sup>31</sup> Metzudat David commentary to Isaiah 1:21

<sup>32</sup> Rashi and Radak commentaries to Isaiah 1:22

<sup>33</sup> Radak and Metzudat David commentaries to Isaiah 1:23

<sup>34</sup> Rabbeinu Bechaye commentary on Genesis 4:7

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 6:11-13

<sup>36</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 6:11

<sup>37</sup> Kli Yakar commentary to Genesis 5:5

<sup>38</sup> Sanhedrin 108a, Rashi commentary on Genesis 6:13

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 11:1-5

<sup>40</sup> Midrash, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 24

that it would cost them about \$200,000 per death for each potential lawsuit. With an estimated 900 deaths, they figured, it would be cheaper to pay the bereaved families that money than install the part. Therefore, they consciously released the car without this part, which resulted in hundreds of deaths. Is this any different than the Tower of Babel generation who placed their precious bricks above people's lives?

More recently, it was reported (New York Times, May 11, 2013) that a Johns Hopkins University study found that a company had injected small amounts of arsenic into their chickens because this chemical Roxarsone kills intestinal parasites, promotes growth and makes meat look pinker. Although this was not an illegal action, this company knowingly increased people's chances of contracting cancer and other diseases as a result. Similarly, a poultry plant in upstate New York was treating its fowl with potentially toxic chemicals in order to remove contaminants that escape notice as processing line speeds have accelerated, in part to meet growing consumer demand for chicken and turkey. When a 37-year-old inspector, Jose Nevarro, a federal poultry inspector, died when his lungs bled out, only then did an investigation begin that eventually halted this practice (as reported in the Washington Post on April 25, 2013). Today, it is the greed of companies – i.e., their desire for profit above all other considerations – that endangers lives and sometimes kills people, which is no different from the Tower of Babel generation's practices.

In contrast, the Torah tells us that Abraham was extremely wealthy with cattle, gold and silver, and showed the world that it is possible to have wealth and power and not necessarily become greedy.<sup>41</sup> In the same vein, when it says that Abraham died an old man and was satisfied with life,<sup>42</sup> Nachmanides points out that this informs us that because Abraham was not greedy at all, he was always satisfied with what he had and was never desirous of obtaining more and more. Therefore, he did not waste his life on the continual pursuit of material possessions.<sup>43</sup>

Part of the insidious nature of greed is the need not only to have it, but also to show off one's wealth and accomplishments to others. Jacob was well aware of this, and how appearances matter. Therefore, even though he and his family were not particularly in need of food, when there was a famine in the Land of Israel, and almost all of the surrounding families required food from Egypt, Jacob nevertheless instructed his sons to go to Egypt to obtain food. Why? The Talmud explains that Jacob was careful that his family should not appear to be showing off its wealth by not requiring Egyptian food to survive.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, it appears that this message did not carry over to the next few generations. Two generations later, it says that the new Egyptian king did not know Joseph, i.e., he ignored all that Joseph had done to save Egyptian society, and he began to enslave the Jews. What caused this sudden change of attitude to Joseph and to the Jewish people? The verse immediately prior to this one about the new king says that as the Jewish people multiplied greatly and they became exceedingly eminent "*b'me-od, meod*," which is usually translated as "mighty." But we know from the Talmud and the explanation of the Shema cited above that this word also signifies "wealth." Thus, some interpret this verse to signify that the Jewish people showed off their wealth to the Egyptians (rather than keep it private), which is one of the symptoms of greed. It was for this reason that the Egyptian king and Egyptian people turned against the Jews, despite everything that Joseph had done to save and lead the country.<sup>45</sup>

Later, some Jews from the generation in the desert showed that they had not learned their lesson about the Jewish antipathy towards greed. Barely a year after escaping Egyptian slavery with their

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<sup>41</sup> Genesis 13:2 with Ktav Sofer commentary

<sup>42</sup> Genesis 25:8

<sup>43</sup> Nachmanides commentary on Genesis 25:8

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 41:57-58, 42:1-2, Taanit 10b

<sup>45</sup> Exodus 1:7-8, Berachot 54a

lives, a group of Jews were not satisfied with the daily manna, which provided for all their nourishment needs and was delicious. In addition, though they possessed many cattle, in their greed, they refused to “sacrifice” their own wealth for the taste of meat, which they desired even though they had never enjoyed meat in Egypt. G-d knew that if He did not deliver on their request, it would possibly appear to some that G-d was incapable of giving them meat in the middle of the desert. Therefore, He gave them quail. It was the way that these Jews reacted to the quail that G-d had sent, that truly demonstrates their greed. If they really just wanted to taste meat, then the first thing they should have done was grab a quail, slaughter it the kosher way, roast it and then savor its taste. However, the Torah records that when the quail came, the birds were stationary in the air, their formation measuring about twelve miles by twelve miles and three to four feet thick. Rather than immediately prepare to eat them, the people gathered the quail, and each Jew put them into his or her individual pile, with this process continuing for more than twenty-four consecutive hours. Only afterwards did they begin to eat the quail. This demonstrates their enormous greed and desire to put the meat “in the bank,” into those piles, rather than enjoy its taste, thereby indicating their true intent: In this way, they believed, they would not have to rely on G-d to send their daily portion of manna. It was for this reason that these Jews were killed by G-d one month later.<sup>46</sup>

Forty years later, another group of Jewish men showed greed by demonstrating that their possessions were more important than their children, wives, and spiritual connection to their people and their land. The two and a half tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Menashe, were blessed with extremely large herds of cattle. They feared that entry into the Land of Israel would deprive them of the large grazing area needed for their cattle, and hence make them lose some of their wealth. Therefore, they asked Moses to let them remain and live on the east side of the Jordan, which had vast grazing areas, rather than live in the Land of Israel. In their request to Moses they indicated their priority by mentioning their cattle before they mentioned their wives and children, and they also left out G-d’s name completely in the conversation with Moses. Only later, after the men committed to fight with their brethren for fourteen years to conquer the Promised Land, and after they included G-d in their words and got their priorities straight (at the urging of Moses), did Moses agree to their request. Nevertheless, the Sages tell us that it was these particular tribes that were destroyed first (before any other tribes) many years later, because of their initial sin of greed, putting their cattle (which constituted their wealth) above settling in the Land of Israel.<sup>47</sup>

#### **THE ONE SOCIETY THAT MOST RESEMBLES TODAY’S WESTERN WORLD - SODOM**

Although there are some similarities between the societies in the narratives above and twenty-first century life, the one place in the ancient world that most resembles today’s world seems to be that of Sodom. This sounds like a harsh evaluation, but if we compare the atmosphere and values of that society, according to traditional Jewish texts, we will see many parallels.

The first reference to Sodom in the Mishna, at first blush, does not seem to render this city as such an evil place. It says that a person who believes that what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine is truly evil, while a person who believes that what is yours is yours and what is mine is mine is an average person. But some believe this latter attitude is a characteristic of Sodom.<sup>48</sup> What is wrong with caring about only your possessions and letting others care about their possessions? Apparently, this indicates a feeling and general value that I only have to worry about me, and no one else. In a purely capitalistic society, this is the core value – everybody only worries about his or her own welfare, and does not help anyone out unless it is in his or her interest to do so. That is Sodom. In the extreme, this leads to the law that was passed in Sodom that anyone who helped out any poor person would be burned to death. The Midrash then records that the daughter of Lot, who had been brought up to be

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<sup>46</sup> Numbers 11:4, 7-9, 18-10, 31-34

<sup>47</sup> Numbers 32:1, 5-7, 16-17, 25-26 with commentary of Daat Zekainim

<sup>48</sup> Mishna Avot 5:10

kind by her great-uncle Abraham, secretly helped out a needy person. When she was caught doing this, the Sodom government actually killed her. This is what caused G-d to decree destruction upon the entire city.<sup>49</sup> Another similar Midrash speaks about two young girls meeting at the well, and one looked sickly because she did not have food at home. Her friend helped her by giving her wheat and when she was found out, the Sodom authorities killed her.<sup>50</sup> A third Midrash speaks of a Sodom practice in which any guest who came to visit Sodom was raped and all his or her money was taken.<sup>51</sup> The reason the Sodom citizens took the money of strangers or did not give anything to the poor was not because the people of Sodom were poor and needed the money. It was the choicest and richest area, the most luscious region in the country, and the people were all very wealthy. Rather, their core value of greed, never to part with their money, never allowed them to help anyone, and they felt they had to “punish” all guests and make even more money through them. While helping others is not considered evil in Western countries today, and most people believe that it is indeed their government’s obligation to help the poor, nevertheless, many people retain “each person for himself” attitude, and in practice, most people today do not go out of their way to help others.

Another source describes the lewdness and sexual immorality that took place in Sodom, where adultery was very common. There is a famous story about the residents in Sodom who constructed special beds – all one size – in order to house the guests who came there. If people were shorter than the beds, the “hosts” physically stretched their bodies until they fit the bed exactly. If they were too tall for the beds, they cut off their limbs until they fit into the bed. Finally, the same source records that when poor people came to Sodom (since it was so wealthy) to beg for help, every person was given special coins, ostensibly to help them. But when these poor tried to use these coins to buy food and pay for anything in the city, no one would accept them. The poor eventually died from starvation, and the people then retrieved their coins from the corpses. The Sodom citizens then fought over the clothing of these poor people.<sup>52</sup> The last example shows the true values of Sodom. On the surface, they seemingly cared about others, building beds for guests and giving the poor money. But, in truth, it was only a large show. Why would wealthy people fight over the tattered clothes of the dead poor people? This demonstrates the extent of their insatiable desire to own yet another item, even one that they would never use. Although today people are not as cruel and callous as the Sodomites, there are many people who will fight others to obtain even a small amount of additional wealth, and many others who on the outside seem like giving people, but in reality they never part with the wealth they have accumulated. This is particularly true of large corporations that ostensibly try to help people or the environment, but often are only concerned only with enhancing their image in order to increase sales even further. In Sodom, the prime motivator was greed, and as Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer says, it was all about accumulating more and more wealth.<sup>53</sup>

### **THE ATTITUDE OF THE RABBIS TO GREED**

The issue of greed or its avoidance is not simply “another” value in Judaism. How a Jew behaves with regard to money matters is front and center on the scale of Jewish values. The Talmud says that the very first question a person will be asked when he or she gets to Heaven will be, “How ethically did you behave in business and money matters?”<sup>54</sup> Only afterwards will a Jew be asked about his or her Torah learning. The questions about observing Shabbat and kosher is far down on the list. The Midrash says that a person is who is not greedy, but ethical and caring in business dealings, will earn the respect of everyone he or she knows, and it will be considered as if this Jew kept the entire Torah.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 49

<sup>50</sup> Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 49:6

<sup>51</sup> Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 50:7

<sup>52</sup> Sefer Hayashar (Sefer Toldot Ha-adam), Parshat Vayera, p. 58-62

<sup>53</sup> Midrash, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 25

<sup>54</sup> Shabbat 31a

<sup>55</sup> Midrash, Mechilta “Vayasa” 1

The Talmud relates that Alexander the Great visited the Land of Israel and posed ten philosophical questions to the Elders of the Negev, and then travelled on to Africa. After an encounter in search of wealth from a city of women, he came upon a stream with a nice aroma, and concluded it originated from the Garden of Eden. He followed the stream to the entrance of the Garden and requested to enter. He was not allowed to enter since entry was restricted only to the righteous; however, he was given an eyeball. He put the eyeball on a scale, but no matter how much gold and silver were placed on the other side of the scale to balance it, the eyeball outweighed it. Alexander wanted to know why this was so, and the Sages explained that this eyeball represented the greed of the human being, which can never be satisfied. Only after the eyeball was covered with earth, signifying after one dies and is buried, can its true weight be found.<sup>56</sup> Why?

The Sages clarified that it is in the nature of human beings that regardless of whatever goods they have accumulated until the present, their desire for more goods constantly increases. Therefore, if a person believes that when he or she will have a certain amount it will be enough, human nature is such that when that amount is reached, that person's desire for more goods will automatically be increased. This is such a truism that the Midrash states that a person always dies with less than half of his or her desires for material goods fulfilled.<sup>57</sup> This is true whether the person dies poor or was the richest person in the world. A person's desire for wealth increases in direct proportion to that individual's affluence. That is why it is also true that if a person's main value is accumulation of wealth, he or she can never be satisfied in life. This is the very definition of greed, and also the definition of an addiction, where the need constantly outpaces the consumption of that addiction. Only when a person learns that there are higher values in life than money and accumulated wealth, will that individual also realize that all prosperity comes from G-d, and a person should be satisfied with whatever goods and money he or she has. Thus, the Jewish definition of the concept of wealth is subjective. If a person is appreciative of what he or she has, not matter how much or how little it may be, he or she is considered wealthy. If the person is unsatisfied and remains greedy, then that person is never considered wealthy.<sup>58</sup>

Generally, say the rabbis, the more wealth a person has, the more worried he or she will be (in order to increase that wealth and/or worry about not losing it).<sup>59</sup> Thus, the greedy person is more worried and tense than other people, since his or her focus is always on getting or making more. Rabbi Mazuz adds that a greedy person who constantly runs after increasing wealth will take up almost all of his or her time in this pursuit, and will not have time for significant Torah learning or any other spiritual pursuits. As a result, this person will almost always lose his or her share in the World to Come.<sup>60</sup>

There are two types of greedy people: those that are openly greedy, proud of their accumulation of wealth, even at the expense of others, and who need to show off their possessions. Then there are greedy people, like Bernie Madoff, who are secretly greedy and feign concern for others while surreptitiously stealing from them. Which is worse? The Torah seems to believe that the second category is a worse type of greed because a robber who openly steals pays back only what he or she stole, but a thief who steals without people knowing it pays back double. Why? The thief who steals from people in secret shows more fear of human beings than fear of G-d. For that reason, his punishment is more severe.<sup>61</sup> And people who pretend to help society through their wealth, but their true values are only greed and accumulating more wealth, are disdained by G-d. This point is proven in the Talmud by a future discussion that will take place between Roman leaders who once occupied the

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<sup>56</sup> Tamid 32b

<sup>57</sup> Midrash, Kohelet Rabbah 3:13

<sup>58</sup> Mishna Avot 4:1

<sup>59</sup> Mishna Avot 2:7

<sup>60</sup> Avot Al Banim

<sup>61</sup> Bava Kama 79b

Land of Israel and G-d when offering reward to those engaged in Torah. G-d asked them what they did in life. Fearful of G-d, they replied that we built roads, bridges, and accumulated wealth, but did all this only so that the Jewish people could sit and learn Torah. G-d then castigated them and said that what they did and built was only for their own physical pleasure and greediness. They did not realize that everything belongs to G-d anyway.<sup>62</sup> Thus, greedy people and greedy corporations who pretend to benefit society but secretly use this benefit to gain even more wealth are worse than openly greedy individuals.

A person who does not realize that all prosperity comes from Above can indeed turn especially greedy. The classic Talmudic definition of a greedy person is “the individual who has food in his basket, but still asks ‘what will I eat tomorrow?’” Even when this person has enough to survive and thrive, it is not sufficient for him or her, and the Talmud calls this person lacking any faith in G-d.<sup>63</sup> In fact, one can tell the true values of a person, says the Talmud, by how an individual acts in three situations: when the person is drunk, how he spends his or her money, and how he or she behaves when angry.<sup>64</sup>

Rabbi Eliezer Papo (1786-1827) perhaps best summed up the Jewish attitude on greed. He states that just like the verse says that life and death are in the hands of the tongue,<sup>65</sup> so too, life and death are in the hands of money. Wealth can give or take away life. He also says that there are many other sins that a Jew often does in order to accumulate excessive wealth (see next section). And a person whose focus is on greed, i.e., accumulating more and more wealth, will necessarily forgo many important commandments not at all related to money. A greedy Jew who uses his money and wealth improperly will lose his share in the World to Come. But if a Jew uses his or her wealth properly, that will increase his or her share in the World to Come.<sup>66</sup>

#### **OTHER SINS NECESSARILY VIOLATED BY THE GREEDY PERSON**

In addition to the intrinsic sin and violation of ethical behavior by the greedy individual, the greedy Jew also necessarily violates a host of other sins in the process of displaying greed (many of which are discussed in other chapters in this volume). For example, by immorally taking money from others due to greed, a Jew is guilty of stealing (see chapter about Business Ethics), a Torah violation.<sup>67</sup> Even taking a very minor amount is still considered stealing.<sup>68</sup> And if the person is not aware that he or she is being swindled, this is the classic definition of stealing.<sup>69</sup>

Another sin that a greedy person is guilty of (by swindling victims without their knowledge) is that of being a hypocrite. (See chapter “Hypocrisy in Judaism”.) It is a Torah violation not to be “whole with G-d”, i.e., act the same on the inside and the outside.<sup>70</sup> In fact, Rabban Gamliel would throw out any student from the Beit Midrash-House of Jewish Learning if they showed any hypocrisy.<sup>71</sup> All those arrested for swindling others or cheating the government at one time seemed to act legitimately – until they were caught. They all acted hypocritically, especially those who supposedly were Torah observant Jews. Maimonides states that it is absolutely forbidden to speak one way and think another way (or act differently in secret).<sup>72</sup> According to the commentaries, this action is a Torah violation, much like a land

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<sup>62</sup> Avodah Zara 2b

<sup>63</sup> Sotah 48b

<sup>64</sup> Eiruvim 65b

<sup>65</sup> Proverbs 18:21

<sup>66</sup> Pele Yoetz on “*Kesef*”

<sup>67</sup> Leviticus 19:11

<sup>68</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Genaiva 1:2

<sup>69</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Genaiva 1:3

<sup>70</sup> Deuteronomy 18:13

<sup>71</sup> Berachot 28a

<sup>72</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 2:6

that appears fruitful on the surface but beneath the ground everything is rotten.<sup>73</sup> When King David specified the formula for a long and meaningful life, he stated that a Jew should not speak with guile. Rabbi David Kimchi understands this to be acting hypocritically, i.e., speaking one way but acting in a different manner.<sup>74</sup> Thus, an individual can achieve a great life by refraining from being a hypocrite. This is especially true in business, where one's word should be one's bond, and a violation of one's word violates a Torah law.<sup>75</sup> Of the three types of individuals whom G-d hates most in this world, the number one category is a person who acts hypocritically.<sup>76</sup> Thus, if one's greed leads to speaking to people nicely as he or she cheats them, this is the ultimate sin.

Another sin that most greedy people are guilty of in swindling others is "*Genaivat Daat*—receiving undeserved benefit." If someone believes that another individual is helping them when he or she is not helping at all, then that person is guilty of *Genaivat Daat*. (See chapter on Misleading Someone). This is particularly true in the business realm. This sin is violated if an item or commodity such as an investment opportunity, a car or even a fruit is portrayed as truly great when in reality it is not.<sup>77</sup> Of the seven types of thieves described in Judaism, the Jew who swindles in this manner is called the worst.<sup>78</sup> A Jew may not gain favor undeservedly, even from non-Jews. For example, if a greedy person seems to be offering "the deal of a lifetime" and "lets the person in on the ground floor," the investor is especially grateful. In addition to stealing from that individual, this greedy person is guilty of *Genaivat Daat*.<sup>79</sup> Even pronouncing one word that makes others think that he looks better than he truly deserves is considered *Genaivat Daat* and is forbidden.<sup>80</sup> The Code of Jewish Law spells out all the circumstances of *Genaivat Daat*, and most greedy people violate one or more of these laws when they deal with other human beings in business.<sup>81</sup> Rabbeinu Yonah calls this sin a "fundamental sin of the soul."<sup>82</sup>

Finally, when greedy Jewish people are finally exposed for whom they truly are, then they are often guilty of probably the greatest sin in the Torah – desecrating G-d's name.<sup>83</sup> If the greedy person is identified as an Observant Jew, the desecration of G-d's name is even greater, because when someone thinks less of G-d because of this Jew's actions, this sin has been perpetrated.<sup>84</sup> The entire purpose of Judaism and one's life as a Jew is to sanctify G-d's name in the world.<sup>85</sup> (See chapter entitled "Purpose of Life.") The greedy person who gets caught doing illegal activities does just the opposite. The Torah commands each Jew to love G-d.<sup>86</sup> Part of that love is to make G-d beloved to others through one's actions and one's words.<sup>87</sup> Thus, a greedy Jew who causes others to despise G-d has also violated this commandment. Pele Yoetz calls this the worst sin in the Torah, and the most difficult one from which to repent. He says that sanctifying or desecrating G-d's name very often occurs in the realm of business and how people act around money. In our days, when every Observant Jew is considered G-d's "representative" in the sense of how G-d is perceived by most others, it is especially crucial that all actions by a Jew who supposedly keeps the commandments should uphold G-d's image. Therefore, for

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<sup>73</sup> Numbers 33:35 with commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Malbim

<sup>74</sup> Psalms 34:13-14 with Radak commentary

<sup>75</sup> Leviticus 19:36, Bava Metzia 49a

<sup>76</sup> Pesachim 113b

<sup>77</sup> Mishna, Bava Metzia 4:11-12

<sup>78</sup> Tosefta, Bava Kama 7:3

<sup>79</sup> Chulin 94a with Rashi commentary

<sup>80</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 2:6

<sup>81</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 228:6-9

<sup>82</sup> Shaarei Teshuva 3:184

<sup>83</sup> Leviticus 22:32

<sup>84</sup> Yoma 86a

<sup>85</sup> Midrash, Tana Debei Eliyahu 26:2

<sup>86</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>87</sup> Yoma 86a

an Observant Jew today, there are additional reasons not to engage in any activity even slightly resembling greed.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Pele Yoetz on “*Chilul Hashem*”