

Parashat Beshalach: Prosperity and Spirituality

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The appearance of an advertisement for [Mocher's Magazine](#) blew up social media this week, as an old debate on the place of materialism in a Jewish lifestyle was freshly renewed. On their website, they ask on your behalf "what's in the mag?" And they answer, "Kiddush club, Mocher of the Month, Premium Cigars, Fine Wines, Scotch & Bourbon, Kosher Craft Beer, Eats, BBQ & Grilling, Cars, Cologne, Man Caves, The Chosson's Watch, Suits & Style, and more." Some people saw this add and expressed outrage at such a display of sensualism in the name of observant Judaism; others assumed it to be parody (it does not seem to be that way); and yet others, even educators, cautioned that this is either reflective of pre-existing culture and/or reminded those incensed that Judaism does not deplore all forms of pleasure. Even before this magazine appeared, last week's episode of [Halacha Headlines](#) dealt with the issue of vacations and flaunting wealth. This topic is receiving a lot of attention, even as we are in the midst of a pandemic. We are dealing with a basic question: have we gotten too comfortable in America? What is the right balance to strike?

We are constantly faced with a tension between the human need and desire to pursue more and the religious calling to have faith that God provides for us.

When I say that the discussion of materialism is not new, I do not mean that it has taken place over the last number of decades as American Jews have achieved affluence in America. Rather, concerns of materialism have occupied B'nei Yisrael since they escaped Egypt, of which three consecutive episodes are instructive. The first takes place at that very moment they successfully cross the Sea of Reeds. Bnei Yisrael sees Pharaoh and his army drowning; now what? Do they keep moving? The Torah tells us וַיֹּסֶע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף - "Moshe caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds" (Shemot 15:22). Rashi quotes a Midrash Tanchuma that notices this phrasing is strange. Why is the Torah telling us that Moshe forced B'nei Yisrael to keep moving? Was there something preventing them from going forward? Apparently, Pharaoh and his army had decorated their chariots with gold, silver, and precious stones. When they drowned, the riches floated to the shore, and B'nei Yisrael were collecting them the way children dash to pick up the candy thrown at a bar mitzvah boy.

The next two episodes are identified by Rabbi Yehuda (Arakhin 15b) as instances of B'nei Yisrael's testing God in the desert. A mere three days after they resume their traveling, B'nei Yisrael complain that they do not have fresh water; all of the water is bitter. It would seem that complaint is reasonable and legitimate. However, once they receive the water, they find other insufficiencies about which to complain:

(ב) וַיִּלּוּנוּ כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אֶהֱרֹן בַּמִּדְבָּר: (ג) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד יְקֻזִּק בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל סִיר הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֶכְלֵנוּ לֶחֶם לְשִׁבְעַת כִּי הוֹצֵאתֶם אֹתָנוּ אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית אֶת כָּל הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה בְּרָעַב:

In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pot of meat, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.” ([Shemot 16:2-3](#))

On the one hand, the complaint about hunger and the lack of bread would seem well-placed. Yet, they recall “sitting by the pot of meat.” Granted, the emphasis of their concern seems to be starvation, and they had not yet received the miraculous manna as far as the text demonstrates. Still, the expressed lust for meat does not go unnoticed. In response, they are swarmed with excess quail in addition to manna (Rashi specifies it is quite fatty). The “over”-reaction of manna covering the whole camp is meant to expose B’nei Yisrael to the absurdity of their request. If there was any *limmud zekhut* regarding B’nei Yisrael’s complaint here, the inappropriate fixation on meat is readily apparent in Parashat Beha’alotecha. B’nei Yisrael *cry* that they have no meat and fish! At this point, surely they have been sated by the manna, recognize Moshe’s capable leadership, and place their full trust in God. Instead, they dismiss the manna that represents God’s providence, demanding “higher-end” delicacies.

Finally, once B’nei Yisrael begin to become the beneficiaries of the manna, they fail to obey instructions. On the one hand, on an average day, they are not supposed to leave over any of the manna for the next day. New manna would be provided the next day, and they were given just enough for each day. However, many did not obey at first. They simply found the next day that their manna spoiled. On the other hand, on Friday they are told to collect a double portion, as the manna would not fall on Shabbat. Yet, here too, many disobeyed and attempted to collect more manna on Shabbat; they obviously did not find any.

It might be easy to transition from here to say that faith is the opposite of materialism, and we should proceed with extreme caution before going after riches and exquisite delicacies. However, is Judaism’s view exclusively that pursuing wealth is bad? Is a palate for meat something that is entirely negative? This would be a distortion of the Torah. In his introduction to Pirkei Avot, known as *Shemonah Perakim*, Rambam goes to lengths to dispel the notion that God desires us to afflict ourselves. Perhaps some pious individuals avoid meat and wine, sexual relations, and isolate themselves as a method of rectifying insufficient discipline, but he goes on to chastise those who mimic such individuals. Rambam quotes the Gemara as saying that it is important for a sage to have a pleasant and comfortable home. Furthermore, we know there are times where we

are encouraged to enjoy earthly pleasures that may be considered “materialistic.” Chazal encouraged people to eat more pleasurable food on Shabbat that brings one delight; several statements in the Gemara promise spiritual blessing for doing so. On Yom Tov, Chazal mandate people express their joy through eating meat and drinking wine; husbands are supposed to buy their wives jewelry. A *talmid chacham* is required to dress in a nice and clean fashion; every Jew is supposed to dress nicely on Yom Tov. Is it wrong for a magazine to assist people in determining which wine and meat will enhance their *oneg Shabbat* and *simchat Yom Tov*? Finally, in response to the *midrash* of B’nei Yisrael collecting riches at the Sea of Reeds, [Rabbi Reuven Spolter](#) posed the question: what if the gold and silver was for the *mishkan*? In other words? What if our materialism leads to a spirit of volunteerism and *tzedakah*.

We know that wealth in general is also not necessarily frowned upon. None other than Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi was extremely wealthy. The Gemara in Nedarim quotes Rabbi Yochanan as saying that God’s presence dwells only with those who are wealthy, in addition to those who are wise, humble, and heroic. One is not required necessarily to spend more than a fifth of their assets on *mitzvot* and *tzedakah*. If one has excess money that can be used for other material pleasures, is that terrible?

However, inasmuch as we quote Rambam, we are reminded that even if one should not be ascetic, one should also not go to the other extreme of being a hedonist. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, as wealthy as he was, was careful not to overindulge. While a *talmid chacham* must dress nicely and should not wear sackcloth, he should also not dress like royalty. Ramban famously explained the command *kedoshim tihyu* to mean that we are required to sanctify ourselves through that which is permitted to us, that we would not be *גבול ברשות התורה*, a scoundrel with the “permission” of the Torah. Even if some pleasures are permitted, it is possible to overindulge. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l famously critiqued the materialism of his day with the term “[Glatt Kosher hedonism](#).” In his words, “the message is enjoy, enjoy, enjoy, and everything has a hekhsher (kosher certification) and a super-hekhsher. The message is that whatever the gentiles have, we have too.” For Rav Lichtenstein, it is not enough that something be simply kosher in technicality; we should not be overly-fixated on the fine details of how exquisite our food and drink is. We can and should enjoy, but not obsess. He would call Mocher’s Magazine “*muktzeh machmas mius*” - untouchable due to being revolting.

We would do well to keep in mind that what is considered excessive may shift from generation to generation. The affluence of the Jewish community has undoubtedly evolved during our time in America. A Jew need not be ashamed if God gave them the gift of a middle or upper class lifestyle, for which they worked hard.

What can we do, then, to ensure we maintain the proper balance of priorities?

I would suggest three things based on the three episodes we listed above:

First, if we look at the episode of collecting the booty of the drowned Egyptians, perhaps the concern is not that they were collecting at all, but they spent too much time there. The destination from the Sea of Reeds was Har Sinai - spiritual growth. Yet, they could not let go of the extra riches in order to move on. That is when Moshe Rabbeinu pushed them forward. For us, it may not be inappropriate to work hard to live a comfortable lifestyle if it is within our ability. However, does it distract us from the spiritual goals of prayer and Torah learning? Is Yom Tov an extra opportunity for lavish vacation, or do we feel extra connected to God on these special days?

Second, we encounter the trial of manna versus meat. R. Mendel of Rymanov made his mark by speaking about manna for every Shabbat for twenty-two years (could you imagine if I spoke about the same thing for more than two weeks straight?! In an article this week, [R. Elli Fischer](#) characterizes R. Mendel's teachings about manna by noting his focus on manna's lack of excess: "There was nothing superfluous about the manna; it was precisely what was necessary to keep the body intact and tethered to the soul, nothing more. It produced no waste, but was completely absorbed by the body." It was meant to instill an element of frugality, thereby reducing envy. While we may not be as frugal as R. Mendel suggests, to say the least, we can still learn two things: first, whatever it is that God gives us should feel enough. That does not have to mean that we reject anything more. But when push comes to shove, if we do not receive more, can we live with that, or are we going to *kvetch* about the meat we used to have? As we [spoke about earlier this year](#), COVID-19 has hopefully taught us to distinguish between our essentials and excess - our needs versus our wants. But beyond that, the danger of materialism is when we are constantly "keeping up with the Joneses." Is there a point where we can say that we have received enough to "keep the body intact and tethered to the soul," or do we feel the need to have what someone else has just because it is more? Will a magazine that promotes higher end products merely help us enhance our Shabbat and Yom Tov, or will it drive us to salivate over that which other people can afford but we cannot? R. Mendel's Torah sheds light on the failures of B'nei Yisrael in their complaints - they did not recognize that Hashem provided exactly what they needed, and they maintained envy for the past. Ben Zoma wisely reminds us that those who are wealthy are those who are content with what they have (Avot 4:1). In our pursuit of the material, one needs to ask: is my pursuit of more coming from a place of reasonable comfort and pleasure, or am I being driven by insecurity with what I already have?

Finally, B'nei Yisrael at points failed to heed God's commands when they were supposed to and not supposed to collect manna. At the core of this is a lack of faith. On the one hand, when God tells them they will be provided with more manna the next day and will be well-fed day to day, they do not believe God, so they try to collect more than warranted. On the other hand, when they are told to collect extra for Shabbat and it will

last appropriately, they still do not believe God. Manna is the reminder to maintain faith that listening to God's voice will ensure we have what we need. The Gemara says one who has enough food but asks what they will eat tomorrow is a person of little faith (Sotah 48b). Furthermore, as was discussed in this week's *parasha* shiur, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch writes that violating Shabbat for the purpose of sustenance is the greatest violation of faith; it demonstrates a disconnect. In my pursuit of the material, do I recognize that *כי מן הכל*, that everything comes from God? Do I properly thank God for it? Does my share enhance my conviction to serve God, or am I on a different wavelength?

It is easy to jump to judgment at those who seem to overindulge and live in luxury, no less those who flaunt and propagate it. Yet, I am not sure this is an exact science. There are deep questions at stake that depend on context and mindset. The issue may not be dollars and quantity of items, but the heart of the person who acquires them. May we all be blessed with plenty to satisfy our needs, and may our blessings be an instrument through which to serve God with deep faith.