



WHAT IT IS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

When I was growing up, I had no idea I lived in a wealthy community. I grew up in Lawrence, NY — one of the Five Towns, as they are called. I love the community; my parents still live there and nearly all of my closest friends are those who grew up with me there. At some point — I think it was when I began to date while in yeshiva — I became more conscious of the economic status of my community. Maybe it was the subtle way people described families (“they’re ‘very’ comfortable”), but at some point, economic identity became a more palpable presence in my daily discourse in the Jewish community. I find this very concerning. Allow me to explain why.

I was invited as a guest on a podcast called *Kosher Money*, hosted by my friends Eli Langer and Zevy Wolman. It was a wonderful conversation (even though my wife hasn’t completely forgiven me for being so transparent about our savings). One thing I shared in the discussion is what I lovingly called *Gvir Culture*™. A *gvir* is the Yiddish word that means someone who is wealthy. And I shared the following with them:

Magazines, yeshivas — all of our media — need to do a better job of highlighting the average Jew and what that is like. Again, I am terrified of *gvir* culture. It was one of my early Top 5’s in my *Mishpacha* column: “Top 5 Ways to tell if You are a *Gvir*.” There is a way



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we treat them differently. There is a way their homes are different. They’re always right. “That’s such a good idea!”

growth can have cultural and financial consequences. And we need to figure out ways to address these costs.

This is all compounded by our exposure. Social media gives us a window into other people's lives like never before, and as we peer into the luxurious funhouse mirror of social media we can see a warped vision when we reflect on our own lives. Luxuries can function like nicotine. The more we encounter it, the more potential for addiction. The more we are exposed to, the more we find ourselves fiending the status and lifestyle we see in others. And this is particularly acute in close-knit communities like ours. We have a greater propensity for what René Girard describes as mimetic desire: the imitation of other people's wants and desires. Whether it is a certain type of *simcha* celebration, or brand of clothes, or make of car, our desires mimic what we see around us. How else can you explain why out of the clear blue sky I thought of buying a Patagonia vest?

Mimetic desire, as Peter Thiel remarks, can easily run amok and have us collectively wanting something that won't even bring us personal satisfaction. It removes us, like the Mishnah in *Avos* states, from our world, from what we *really* want.

So what are some of the consequences of the ever-present financial pressure and the way mimetic desires shape our community?

I think there are primarily three consequences:

1. Anxiety about Wealth:

There is a great deal of communal anxiety about how we can sustain this lifestyle. Many young Jews feel like they are priced out of Orthodoxy. Many young Jews feel like Orthodoxy has become more of a socio-economic status than a religious movement. This is not good. As Scott Sandage argues in his amazing book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, around the 1840's (heyo!), as the notion of becoming a self-made man became more popular, so did the notion of becoming a failure. Success became synonymous with wealth and those who couldn't attain it felt like it reflected on their personal character. As our financial expectations rise, so does our capacity to feel like a failure.

2. Diversity of our Community:

A while back there was a blog called *250K Chump*, which spoke about the difficulty of getting by on a household income of 250K. Of course, that varies drastically by area, but one of the serious costs of the rising costs within the Jewish community are the limited set of professions available to afford this lifestyle. As Elli Fischer once argued, the limited career choices—particularly in the United States—for Orthodox Jews leads to a lack of professional diversity in our community. This can stunt the creativity of the breadth of who affiliates with it. Orthodoxy is more than a professional network; we need to accommodate the diversity of personalities and professions within our ranks.

3. The Toll on our Schools:

People don't want to become educators. It has become increasingly difficult to afford an Orthodox life if you dedicate yourself to perpetuating it. It's an ironic problem in a way—we have a high cost of living because of our commitment to private education and that very commitment has created a crisis in our ability to staff our schools. This was highlighted in a recent article in *Mishpacha Magazine* by Alex Fleksher, entitled, "Where have all the teachers gone?" Our success has become the very roots of our struggle. I remember when I told someone in my neighborhood that I wanted to go into education and he responded with the classic line, "What kind of job is that for a good Jewish boy?" Cute line, but I am worried we've created a culture where we've started to believe it. We committed ourselves as a community to providing a Jewish education for our families, and yet it is the primary source of our financial pressures. Where will we be left as a community if that very pressure prevents us from providing that quality Jewish education? Wasn't that the point of all this?

So how do we combat this?

1. Make Jewish Life More Affordable:

More than anything else, we need to find serious ways to make Orthodoxy affordable. Too much has been written about this and in the future, I hope we can address the tuition crisis as its own subject. As one anonymous father boldly wrote, we need to be willing to search for bold alternatives in order to find a better solution. Maybe it's more government advocacy, maybe it's pressuring school leaders, maybe it is moving to a more affordable location, maybe it is setting up an endowment

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— but this generation needs to find a way. As Rabbi Jeremy Wieder recently shared in an address to the students of Yeshiva University, this generation needs to demand change. This much I will say — don't just *kvetch*, please vote. We live in a democracy where most funding is allocated on the local level. It's fun to talk about who should be the next president, but your local school board elections play a much more practical role in your day-to-day life. The next time you're at a table and people start *kvetching* about potential solutions, make sure they are all — *at the minimum* — voting in their local elections to ensure that children are afforded the services they need most. Then you can *kvetch*.

2. Celebrate the Middle:

Of course, we need to celebrate those who give generously to support our institutions, but we can't allow that to shape the very fabric of our community — those who stand in the middle. Too often we are either valorizing wealthy

donors or praising those who sacrifice in poverty, at the expense of the unsung heroes of the middle. Those who eke by, muddle through, and live lives without fanfare and applause are too often overlooked. These stories need to be told more loudly. We need to find ways to celebrate the middle, discuss transparently how they, we, us, make it work, and provide a more robust path for living a financially sustainable Jewish life without having to live in either abject poverty or enormous wealth. A strong community celebrates a strong middle.

3. Personal Growth:

Whatever communal solutions we need — and we do need them — we must also extricate ourselves from our collective mimetic desire. Families need to be willing to chart their own paths and ask tough questions about what really brings them satisfaction without falling prey to the tidal wave of mimetic desire. Similar to Gerard's principle of "Wanting is About Being," there is a

beautiful idea from Rabbeinu Yonah on the verse in Proverbs 27:21 that man is tested according to their praise. Simply read, this seems to mean that the quality of a person can be assessed based on what others say about them. Want to know if a person is a good person? Read their communal Yelp review and see how others praise them. Rabbeinu Yonah offers a different read. We are evaluated based on what we praise. If you want to know a person's value, see what they value, explore their desires. It's worth taking a moment to see what people, lifestyles, accomplishments we praise most. As emphasized by Rav Hutner, reflecting on our aspirations is a window to our soul. We all have work to do in this area. And this is probably the hardest, most elusive step of all. But it's not just about communal changes, better financial planning, generalized *kvetching*, finding the right community — the work also needs to occur inside of us. We are who we praise. And it's time to reorient the object of our desires and aspirations.

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