

Torah for Tough (Economic) Times: Part One

by Rabbi Jeffrey Summit

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Throughout most of my adult years, I decided that I was not going to put a lot of money into the car I drove. I do care about safety, and the funk factor, or style, is of some concern to me. So I came up with a solution. For years, I drove old, very funky Volvos and I was proud to say my Volvo station wagon had 250,000 miles on it before the odometer broke.

Besides keeping the car running, I never worried about it a lot. If friends needed a station wagon, they were free to borrow mine. Then I got to a place (maybe I was tired of jump-starting the car late at night) when I said, "OK, I'm ready to drive a new car." So I bought a brand new fancy Volvo, very cool, and all of a sudden, things began to change. I was nervous about where I parked the car. When friends asked to borrow the car, I didn't want to lend it to them. If we were going downtown, I asked other people to drive. And the question began to dawn on me: Just how much better did I make my life by buying this new car? I was certainly worrying a lot more. Did I own the car, or did the car own me?

In these difficult economic times, I wanted to share a series of *divrei Torah* on the role of money in our lives. I'm calling the series "Torah for Tough Economic Times." Some truths about money are somewhat evident. Having money does not guarantee that you will be happy. Not having enough money to live in dignity guarantees that your life will be difficult. How do we come to some balance in our lives, where we are realistic enough to understand the value of money, and yet not so obsessed with money that we lose perspective on the things that really bring value and meaning to our lives?

First, let's get historical. I want to credit Rabbi Arthur Waskow for opening my eyes to a numbers of these concepts. When the Torah, and then the rabbis' commentaries, first deal with the issue of wealth in society, they do it in the context of our relationship with land, which in an agricultural society, is the basis of all wealth. I've always been taken with Native American concepts about the ownership of land. Perhaps you know that the Navaho believe that people can't own land, and that it is the land that owns the people. Three thousand years ago, the Torah addressed the ownership of land, and through that, our relationship to wealth.

In Leviticus, the Torah teaches that the land belonged to God. It was distributed to the tribes of Israel for their use, but a person couldn't "own" the land. You could rent the land, but what you owned was what the land produced, not the land itself. Then, every seventh year, there was a sabbatical year and the land deserved to rest, just like people deserved to rest on Shabbat every seven days. During that year, you put food in a storehouse in advance and ate what grew without cultivation. You let the land lie fallow -- an early system of crop rotation. Furthermore, every seven cycles of seven, on the 50th year, called the jubilee, something amazing happened: the land reverted back to its original owners. Under this system, it was impossible to play monopoly and acquire Park Place, and all the other cards on the board, forever. Every 50 years, the cards were all redistributed. Also, all indentured servants were freed, and debts were forgiven on the seventh year. If people needed help, you loaned them money, but you couldn't charge interest. In Arthur Waskow's important book "Down-to-Earth-Judaism," he examines how the community acted like a family. Giving help didn't turn the giver into a permanent overlord, and it didn't turn the recipient into a permanent supplicant, because by seven years, at the latest, the debt would dissolve.

While this system was not always followed in exactly this way, this concept had tremendous implications for how the rabbis thought about ownership, wealth and its distribution in society. Our importance, worth and power can't be determined by what we "own." It's not really ours anyway, and it's important for us to remember that.

In fact, this concept – that even if you are a "landowner" you don't fully own the land – is reinforced by another law. This is the law of *peah*, which means "corner," the injunction that you are not allowed to harvest the corners of your field. In addition, if you missed anything when you were harvesting your land, that produce belonged to the gleaners as well. The poor didn't need special permission to access the land and its produce, they didn't have to ask for a handout, and there were always sections left for them to work and gather food. It was their right to have access to them. The wealthy person couldn't live in a gated community and say, "This is mine. No trespassing." At the corners, what you "owned" blended into what the community owned as a whole.

To go even deeper, the rabbis raise the possibility that perhaps our entire concept of what we own, what we possess, needs to be reexamined. There's a wonderful *midrash*, a story in which a rabbi (I learned that it was Rabbi

Akiba) poses a math problem to his students.

He said, "If you have one thousand dinars and you give away three hundred, how many do you possess?" "Seven hundred," his students answered. "No!" the rabbi countered. You truly possess only the three hundred you gave away. Anything could happen to the seven hundred you "have." You could be robbed or lose them in a business deal. But no one can take from you the all the good you've done, all the people you've helped, the pleasure and fulfillment and impact of the money you've given away." The rabbis understood that while money was powerful, in itself, it meant very little. Money is only meaningful to the extent that it can be used to have a positive effect on the world.

We live in a time when recently we've seen a lot of money disappear from our accounts, primarily by the fall in the financial markets. Other funds were tragically and criminally lost through deception and fraud. For many people, these immediate losses are losses on paper, but they still have profound impact: on their retirements, the support they can offer to their elderly parents and their children, how they live their lives day to day. These losses will impact how people will think about their ability to give charity and support important educational, cultural and religious institutions.

Wealth is sometimes more ephemeral than we want to imagine. It's important for us to pause and consider what is deeply important in our lives and to think about the investments we make that will support us when life becomes difficult. Jews are no strangers to difficult times. We've gotten through them because we have been sustained by strong communities, by the values of our tradition, by friends who watch out for one another, by families who pay attention to our health and well-being. The investments we make in these precious people, the time and love we put into our marriages, in our children, in our parents, in our friends, are more important now than ever. Our tradition has stressed that these will be sources of strength, wisdom and perspective. These investments will truly pay back and provide solid ground when, like now, we must confront challenging times.

I want to finish by returning to the example of my car, just in case people think I went back to driving a 1985 Volvo station wagon. I didn't. But when I park my nice car in downtown Boston, or when it gets scratched or dented, as cars invariably do, I think about the words of my wife's grandmother Dora, who would say, "It's just a thing. Things don't matter. People do."