

Torah for Tough (Economic) Times: Part Two

by Rabbi Jeffrey Summit

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In this part of "Torah for Tough Times," I want to speak about how money influences our concept of self-worth. There is a tendency to think that because we are privileged to live in a nice house, or have enough money to go to a great university, this might be some proof of our value and importance in society. The rabbis clearly teach a very different lesson. A person's self-worth is established much more by how they act than by what they own. People were respected for their deeds of loving kindness, righteousness and charity, for the level of learning they had acquired. Those were the things that truly belonged to them. This is illustrated by the following story, which I learned from the collections of Rabbi Dov Peritz Elkins.

Once there was a famous rabbi who rode a train to visit his many followers. The rabbi was renowned for his learning and revered for his kindness. He was unassuming and modest and insisted on being inconspicuous and dressing simply. So he sat in the train compartment and it turned out that his fellow passengers were two very wealthy couples, dressed very fancily, who totally ignored the rabbi during the ride. They turned up their noses, made comments about him as if he weren't there, and simply treated him rudely. When the train arrived at the station, there was a huge crowd of the rabbi's followers waiting to meet the train and to give him an appropriate welcome. When the two wealthy couples saw how important the rabbi was, they were mortified that they had treated him so badly. One of the men approached and said, "We are so sorry. We had no idea who you were." The rabbi replied, "Don't apologize to me; you can't even apologize to me. You weren't wronging me. You had no idea who I was. Apologize to all of those people who you *thought* I was, the "little people" who you thought didn't merit your sensitivity, kindness, respect or attention. Those are the people you need to find and to whom you need to apologize."

Having money doesn't make us any better than people who don't have wealth. While we might know that intellectually, it's important to put it into practice in our lives. There are a lot of people here at Tufts who have a great deal to teach, and I'm not only talking about our talented professors on campus. I learn a great deal when I talk with the people on staff, the men and women in buildings and grounds and in dining services. It drives me

crazy when occasionally I see people be rude to them or speak down to them. It's important never to confuse the nature of a person's work, or the amount of money they earn, with their worth or importance in life.

There is another truth about money that we sometimes miss. Money can be very expensive. I often think of this when some of our students get those fancy jobs right out of law school where they are making a really nice salary but they are literally working 80 hours a week. Now, I don't have anything against lawyers (I was almost one myself), and if that kind of job fits into your larger career goals, that's fine. But life is short and I think it's important to think carefully about the price we pay for money. I recently heard a friend redefine the notion of *avodah zarah*, and apply it to work we do that doesn't fit who we truly are in life. Traditionally, the term *avodah zarah* means idol worship, but the literal translation of the Hebrew is "strange or foreign work." (*Avodah*, meaning "work," was one of the terms used for "worship.") When we apply this to work in our every day lives, *avodah zarah* might be applied to work that makes you feel *estranged* from who you are. Often I will meet people who are "successful," but are so unhappy with their jobs that I wonder if the price of success is worth the money. It feels great to be making an impressive salary, but very quickly you realize that you are spending most of your waking hours at work. If you aren't passionate about your work, if you don't think it makes a difference, if you don't derive satisfaction from it, then maybe you are practicing some form of modern day idolatry.

I am in no way saying that making or having money is bad. In the Jewish tradition, there is nothing wrong with money. We weren't the ones to say, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven." That is in the Christian Bible. The question is how you look at that money and what do you do with it?

If you choose to view money competitively, there is always someone who has more of it than you do. As my friend who owns a nice little sailboat says, "There's always someone with a bigger boat." The problem is that our culture has made money into such a goal that however much you have, there's a feeling of not having enough. This will bother some people so much that they can't see or enjoy anything without wanting to own it themselves. It's easy to get off track when we are overly impressed by the things that money can buy.

Let me share a personal example: I love music and I'm always listening to music one way or another. I have a tendency to become overly impressed by

fancy stereo systems. But I've found a foolproof way to know when my values go afoul. When I find myself listening more attentively to the stereo system than to the music, I know I'm off track. The key is to enjoy, appreciate, and hear the music, not focus on the fancy toy that's playing it.

In many ways, the Jewish tradition stressed the importance of putting money in a larger perspective. One rabbi in the Talmud said, "I am truly a wealthy man: I never wanted anything until I already had it." To have things isn't bad, it's the baggage that often goes along with acquiring them that is problematic. It's dangerous when we think that money itself will make us happy or loved, or provide us with self-worth or solve our problems. It's dangerous when we want money so much that the envy becomes all-consuming, or when we'll go to such lengths to acquire money that we'll give up our dreams for money's sake. In Pirkei Avot, the rabbis pose the question: "Who is wealthy?" They answer: "The person who is satisfied with what he/she has." We are truly blessed when we're conscious of the blessing surrounding us and understand that money is only a means to an end, not the end in itself.