

Torah for Tough (Economic) Times: Part Three

by Rabbi Jeffrey Summit

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Sometimes we find important things in the most surprising places. A couple of years ago, very atypically, I got very caught up playing Megabucks. It was one of those weeks when the jackpot went up to \$58 million and it seemed like everybody in Medford was lined up outside convenience stores buying lottery tickets. Now, usually when I am struck with the desire to play the lottery (and this is a true story), I drive by the 7/11, take a dollar out of my wallet, and throw it out of the car window. I've found this to be just as effective as buying a ticket. But during that time, a group of friends at Tufts started buying tickets and I became fascinated wondering what was happening. What was the magic that drew us to that game? Why were we playing?

Of course, there was the money. But I also wanted to know how \$58 million would change your life, after buying a flashy car, a new house or two, repaying your student loans? I remember one conversation with this group of friends where we really spoke personally, thinking carefully to consider what we would do if we won the lottery. The conversation was so intense that our waitress at the restaurant pulled over a chair and sat down with us at the table to join our discussion.

One friend said that what he really wanted to do was to install an indoor pool and fully equipped gym and health spa in his house so that he could finally get into good shape. Another said that he would leave his job, which was providing him with less and less satisfaction. He would begin working in a related field of psychology that seemed more interesting and stimulating. A third person said that she loved her work and wouldn't want to leave but she would use her new resources to cut back to half-time so that she could spend more time with her kids while they were young. The waitress said that she loved spending time with her friends but now she worked every evening and it seemed like she just didn't see them anymore. She wanted to charter a plane to Cancun and take all of her friends off on a gala vacation together. What would you do if you won \$58 million?

The more we talked about our dreams and fantasies, one thing started to become unsettlingly clear. Many of the significant changes that we were discussing in our lives were not dependent upon winning the lottery. Oh, if we were sitting on \$58 million, we would make those changes in grand, dramatic ways, but a lot was possible right from where we were. If one's

goal was to finally get in good shape, it was possible to exercise just as easily at the Tufts gym as in your fancy home health spa. Another friend saw that maybe the time had arrived to leave his present job, buffer fortune or not. If spending more time with family or with friends was truly a priority, there were ways to do that right now without flying to Cancun or cutting back work to half-time. We had been thinking about the lottery jackpot as a magic wand, to vaporize obstacles that kept us from doing what seemed really important. But it wasn't ultimately that lack of money that kept us from addressing these issues. What stopped us, or slowed us down, was the illusion that we were powerless on our own to redirect our actions, to make changes in our lives.

I want to connect this story with a story of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. I first heard this story from Rabbi Zalman Schacter Shalomi, but I learned how to tell it from my friend, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. It's a story about a king.

Once there was a king and the king ruled a kingdom with many subjects. Now, what this king wanted, more than anything else in the world, was for his subjects to be close to him. But he was a wise king, and he knew that if he made it too easy for people to be close to him, they would not value that closeness. So he devised a plan. Now, this king was a master of illusion: he could make people see things that weren't there. So, he built a large, imaginary palace, with huge imaginary walls and impressive imaginary towers. And it looked formidable, but none of the barriers were real. They looked real, but they were all just illusions. And then, to make getting close to him even harder, he set imaginary treasures outside of the walls. And when he was finished, he sent out invitations to all the people of the land and said, "Please, come and be close to me."

The people received the invitations and said, "The king wants me to be close to him!" Many stopped what they were doing on the spot and went straight to the castle. But as they approached the castle, they looked and saw this huge moat and towering walls and many of them asked, "How could we possibly get in there?" And those people simply turned around and went home. Others came closer, but when they approached, they began to see the imaginary treasures. The first guy walked right up to the gate and there, in front of him was a new Porsche, keys in, engine running and he said, "For me? Great!" and he got in and drove off. The second person was handed a totally secure 401K retirement plan and ran off to quit his job. A third got a little closer and saw two tickets to Wimbledon. Another saw a sure-fire plan to have your children accepted at Princeton. I could keep going until I've

gotten most of us here listening now. Which is just another way of saying that many of us have given up searching for the king and decided that other things will bring us happiness instead. Those things are hardly bad things, but they have taken the place of our primary search, to find our real passion in life, to forge a deep connection with the people we love, to reclaim those parts of us that we might have lost, to do something truly important in the world, to be close to Avenu Malkenu, our Father, the King.

Let's go back to the story: So then, the king's son, who had also received an invitation, walked up to the castle and looked around and saw all of the illusory treasures and said, "These are nice things, and many of them may even be valuable, but they are not the reason that I came." And he walked right by them. Then, he walked up to this huge wall and cautiously stretched out his hand, and to his surprise, his hand went right through the wall. He said, "This wall isn't even here," and he walked right through. And he walked through wall after wall until, I imagine, he got to his father who, as Larry Kushner tells the story, was probably sitting on a bridge chair in the middle of a field, and with tears in their eyes, after being apart for so long, the father and the son embraced.

For many years, many of us have lived with the illusion that our happiness is tied to our bank account, the car we drive, the vacation to someplace warm and exotic. It is a shock to find that some of the things we thought were so real could disappear so quickly. But ultimately, money or things are not what make life fun, or satisfying or meaningful. The walk on a beach in Revere with a person you love is a lot better than Cancun with people you can't stand. A family celebration isn't made complete by being in Paris; it's made complete by having all the members of the family you care about around the table. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich eaten on top of a mountain after an incredible hike when you are hungry is more memorable and tastes better than a fancy dinner in some restaurant. I want to wish us strength in breaking through some of the illusions that hold us back from doing what is really important in our lives, to reclaim the best parts of our selves, to appreciate and connect to the people who bring joy and meaning to our lives. We don't have to pile all the toys in our room. We don't have to win the lottery. There are many other ways to invest in, and build, a life of peace and blessing.