Passing the Test of Wealth: Jewish Views on Material Consumption
Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project.

Outline of Sources:

1. Who is Rich?
2. You Can’t Take It With You
3. Out of Balance
4. The Error of Korach
5. Riches Kept for Harm

1. Who is Rich?

Mishna, Pirke Avot 4:1
Ben Zoma would say, ‘Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot. As is stated (Psalms 128:2): "If you eat of the fruit of your hands, fortunate are you, and good is to you"; "fortunate are you" in this world, "and good is to you" in the World to Come.’

Theft or stolen property can be considered a gift.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 25b, translation adapted from Soncino translation
Our Rabbis taught: Who is wealthy? He who has pleasure in his wealth: this is R. Meir's view. 15 R. Tarfon said: He who possesses a hundred vineyards, a hundred fields and a hundred slaves working in them. 1 R. Akiba said: He who has a wife pleasant in deeds. 2 R. Jose said: He who has a bathroom near his table. 3

Rashi to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 25b, translation by R’ Yonatan Neril
pleasure in his wealth: one who is happy with his lot, whether little or great.

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1 Maharsha suggests that R. Tarfon intentionally states his case in an exaggerated form, to intimate that one who seeks wealth can never really attain it, unless he is satisfied with what he possesses.

2 He spoke from personal experience: his wife stood out as a model of fidelity and trust, and it was she alone who enabled and encouraged him to attain his high position (Ned. 50a).

3 In a time when sanitary arrangements were very primitive and privies were situated in fields, this would be a sign of wealth,
Sefer Ma'aloth Hammidoth, translated by M. Joseph in Judaism as Creed and Life, p. 388.

‘Despise not riches. Honour the wealthy if they are benevolent and modest. But remember that contentment is the true wealth’.

Discussion Questions:
1. According to these sources, what is the true meaning of wealth?
2. Give an example of when you experienced this concept personally.
3. Does wealth allow us to achieve contentment, or is contentment totally separate from how much money we have?

2. You Can’t Take It With You

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 65b, translation by Y. Neril

Rabbi Ilai said: Through three things a person is known: through his cup [i.e. wine], through his wallet, and through his anger. And some say: even through his playfulness.

Rabeinu Chananel, commentary to Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 65b, translation by Y. Neril

and through his money: when he becomes wealthy, whether he becomes haughty

Ecclesiastes 5:14, Soncino translation

As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he go back as he came, and shall take nothing for his labour.”

Midrash Rabbah - Ecclesiastes 5:20, Soncino translation

“As he came forth of his mother’s womb, [naked shall he go back as he came, and shall take nothing for his labour.]” (Ecclesiastes 5:14). Genibah said: It is like a fox who found a vineyard which was fenced in on all sides. There was one hole through which he wanted to enter, but he was unable to do so. What did he do? He fasted for three days until he became lean and frail, and so got through the hole. Then he ate [of the grapes] and became fat again, so that when he wished to go out he could not pass through at all. He again fasted another three days until he became lean and frail, returning to his former condition, and went out. When he was outside, he turned his face and gazing at the vineyard, said, ‘O vineyard, O vineyard, how good are you and the fruits inside! All that is inside is beautiful and commendable, but what enjoyment has one from you? As one enters you so he comes out.’ Such is this world...

R. Meir: When a person enters the world his hands are clenched as though to say, ‘The whole world is mine, I shall inherit it’; but when he takes leave of it his hands are spread open as though to say, ‘I have inherited
nothing from the world.' For thus said Solomon, ‘As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he go back as he came, and shall take nothing for his labour.' (Ecclesiastes 5:14)

Discussion Questions:
1. Do you consider earning a lot of money a high priority? Why or why not?
2. Given that the money we earn ultimately goes to others when we die, why is it so important to us?
3. There are numerous ancient cultures in which kings were buried with all their wealth. How does this contrast with the Jewish view?

3. Out of Balance

The straight path: This [involves discovering] the midpoint temperament of each and every trait that man possesses [within his personality.] This refers to the trait which is equidistant from either of the extremes, without being close to either of them.

Therefore, the early Sages instructed a man to evaluate his traits, to calculate them and to direct them along the middle path, so that he will be sound (of body).

For example: he should not be wrathful, easily angered; nor be like the dead, without feeling, rather he should be equidistant from both extremes.

Also, he shall not labor in his business except to gain what he needs for immediate use, as [Psalms 37:16] states: "The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul." For example: he should not be overly stingy nor spread his money about, but he should give charity according to his capacity, in order to prevent the matter from recurring. Similarly, he should not desire anything other than that which his body needs and cannot exist without, as [Proverbs 13:25] states: "The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul." Also, he shall not labor in his business except to gain what he needs for immediate use, as [Psalms 37:16] states: "The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul.

He should not be overly elated and laugh excessively, nor be sad and cry excessively. He should not be overly stingy nor spread his money about, but he should give charity according to his capacity, in order to prevent the matter from recurring. Similarly, he should not desire anything other than that which his body needs and cannot exist without, as [Proverbs 13:25] states: "The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul.

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This path is the path of the wise. Every man whose traits are intermediate and equally balanced can be called a "wise man."
and stood upright at the entrance of their tents together with their wives, their children, and their infants.

26. He spoke to the congregation saying, "Please get away from the tents of these wicked men, and do not touch [them], lest you perish because of all their sins.

Numbers 16: 26-35

Discussion questions:

1. Do you think that our society is addicted to money, wealth and the pursuit of a “good time”? What are the consequences of this?

2. How can we become more balanced in our pursuit of wealth?

4. The Error of Korach

He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loves abundance (hamon) with increase... (Ecclesiastes 5: 9), that is to say, he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he that loves abundance (hamon) with increase...

Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus 22:1

He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver... (Ecclesiastes 5: 9).

Numbers 16: 26-35, Judaica Press Translation

26. He spoke to the congregation saying, "Please get away from the tents of these wicked men, and do not touch anything of theirs, lest you perish because of all their sins.

27. So they withdrew from around the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and Dathan and Abiram went out standing upright at the entrance of their tents together with their wives, their children, and their infants.
28. Moses said, "With this you shall know that the Lord sent me to do all these deeds, for I did not devise them myself.
29. If these men die as all men die and the fate of all men will be visited upon them, then the Lord has not sent me.
30. But if the Lord creates a creation, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they descend alive into the grave, you will know that these men have provoked the Lord."
31. As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the earth beneath them split open.
32. The earth beneath them opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, and all the men who were with Korah and all the property.
33. They, and all they possessed, descended alive into the grave; the earth covered them up, and they were lost to the assembly.
34. All the Israel who were around them fled from their cries, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up [too]!"
35. A fire came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who had offered up the incense.

Deuteronomy 11:6, Judaica Press Translation
and what He did to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, the son of Reuben, that the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up and their households and their tents, and all the possessions at their feet, in the midst of all Israel.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntshits (Kli Yakar) to Deuteronomy 11:6, translated by Rabbi Dr. Albert Milton Kanter, in Kli Yakar on Devarim, HTC Press, 2003

"and every living substance who were with at their feet" (Deuteronomy 11:6): Rashi exegeted [interpreted the Biblical text]: this (refers to) the wealth of the human being which establishes him upon his feet; well (queries Kli Yakar), he who has no wealth-limps upon his feet, and all his wisdom as well as the other human excellences do not stand for him? (Obviously not); so now it appears that he (Moshe) is speaking about the pejorative aspect of the acquisition of wealth…

Now it would be given under the domain of the human being (i.e.) to do with his wealth what he would desire. But as the end (in many cases) this position is reversed in that his wealth has power over him; (i.e.) to whatever he (that human being) desires it will lead him so that it will rise from the earth because of the denigration of his condition, just as a man would arise against his neighbor; this (too would be) his wealth that arise against him in that it rules over him and transfers (controls) over his intelligence and (even) over the will of his Creator (lit. “the Dominion of his Acquirer”). Therefore he (Moshe) called it “the living substance who were with them.”

Because that is the shameful sadness which seizes the cords of shame and is given under the soul of his foot, that is the establishment which (itself) will rise up against him to have dominion over him. Now just as “a man would rise up against his neighbor and slay his soul,” similarly this acquisition brings its owner (i.e. the owners of the wealth) into many (grievous) perils. Now that is what slew Korach because he trusted (only) in his wealth
and hence fell. Therefore he (Moshe) called the wealth of Korach and his congregation “that of every living substance who were with them” (Deuteronomy 11:7).

Ecclesiastes 5:12-13, Judaica Press translation

Those who rely on their possessions and boast of their great wealth

Midrash Tehilim (Buber), chapter 49

Another reading of: Those who rely on their possessions: this is Korach and his assembly.

Discussion Questions:

1. According to these sources, what was Korach’s mistake?
2. In what way do we rely on our possessions today?
3. How can we prevent ourselves from having a false sense of security because of what we have?

5. Riches Kept for Harm

Rashi to Ecclesiastes 5:12-13, translation by Y. Neril

Riches kept by their owner for his harm: like the riches of Korach, who because of them became arrogant and came to question [Moses' legitimacy].

Shemot HaRav (ורל) שעשהו לא

Psalms 49:7, Judaica Press translation

Those who rely on their possessions and boast of their great wealth

כבר אחרא הבמות ועל חלומ. זה קרח ועורת.

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Another explanation of ‘If you lend money to any of My people’ (Exodus 22: 24). It is written, There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt; and those riches perish by evil adventure (Ecclesiastes. 5:12). Happy is the man who can withstand the test, for there is none whom G-d does not prove. He tries the rich man to see if his hand will be opened unto the poor, and the poor man He tries in order to see whether he will accept chastisement without repining, as it says, And that you bring the poor that are humbled to thy house (Isaiah. 58:7). If the rich man with stand his test and practice charity, then he will enjoy his wealth in this world, while the capital will be preserved for him in the Life to Come, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will, moreover, redeem him from the punishment of Gehinnom, as it says. Happy is he that considers the lend; the Lord will deliver him in the day of evil (Psalms 41:2). If the poor man withstands his test without rebelling he takes a double portion in the World to Come, as it says, For G-d is judge; He puts down one, and lifts up another (Psalms 75:8). You will find that there are riches that positively harm their possessors and other riches that stand them in good stead.

As an example of riches that do harm, take the case of Korah who was richer than all Israel and of whom it is written, So they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit (Numbers 16:33). Another example: Such was the wealth of the wicked Haman of whom it says, And Haman recounted unto them the glory of his riches (Esther 5:11), and of whom it is written, And that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows (ibid 9:25). Riches that benefit their owners are like those of Jehoshaphat of whom it says, Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honour in abundance (II Chronicles, 18:1). What happened to him? -But Jehoshaphat cried out, and the Lord helped him (ibid, 31)...Thus there are 'Riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt'.

Sanhedrin 110b, Soncino translation

Riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt:(Ecclesiastes, 5: 12.) Resh Lakish said: This refers to Korah's wealth. And all the substance that was at their feet:(Deuteronomy 11:6) R. Eleazar said: This refers to a man's wealth, which puts him on his feet. R. Levi said: The keys of Korah's treasure house were a load for three hundred white mules, though all the keys and locks were of leather.

R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: Three treasures did Joseph hide in Egypt: one was revealed to Korah; one to Antoninus the son of Severus, and the third is stored up for the righteous for the future time.

Discussion Questions:
1. According to these sources, how can riches cause harm to their owner?
2. Can you think of any modern day examples of this?
3. How can we protect ourselves from riches that may cause harm to us?

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