

Dear Community,

In our contemporary society, we struggle with our feelings toward wealth. On one hand, wealth is the bedrock of the American Dream, the quintessential American hero uses his or her grit and talents to reap the benefits of material success. In a capitalist society, luxury proclaims success; ostentation the due of the powerful. However, as our national conversation begins to focus in earnest on those who have been left behind, the immorality of abundance has dominated the public discourse. As our society explores the power imbalances created by wealth and seeks to ensure a level playing field, the concept of wealth has taken on, not necessarily correctly, or even intentionally, a morally corrupt connotation. These prevalent issues have only made discussions about wealth ever more salient

What does Judaism say about wealth? What should be our ideas about luxury? Surely a faith that preaches the primacy of the spiritual life rejects the material trappings of grandeur. Yet, while we are commanded to give charity and limit our immersion in materialism (see Ramban, Kedoshim, 19-1) this attitude does not seem to extend to our places of worship. Even as a nomadic community, traveling through the harsh, unforgiving desert, we were commanded to erect a magnificent, if temporary, structure, replete with the most expensive materials available at the time. The tabernacle had it all; vessels made of pure gold, tapestries woven of fine threads spun from a dazzling array of dyed materials. Precious stones, silver blocks, a list worthy of a Russian oligarch's fantasy. Yet how can we build the physical manifestation of G-d's presence on this earth with the bricks of excess and indulgence?

To understand the Mishkan, the tabernacle, is to understand wealth. When we explore how our sages looked at wealth, we are not greeted by exhortations to live in poverty. While the life of poverty for the sake of Torah study is lauded, poverty in and of itself is not seen as a virtue. Even asceticism is not appropriate for the regular Jew (Tannit 10a, Yer. Kiddushin 3). While we are commanded to live in moderation, living according to one's means is completely acceptable (Ketubot 59b). Financial possessions have a deeper connection to us, as humans than simply as a means of keeping body and soul together.

Throughout Jewish law, our possessions become a part of who we are. They are not simply assets, but rather an extension of our sense of self. We are commanded to have our animals observe the Shabbat (Mispatim 32:12); when our animals inflict damage, we are liable not simply because we were negligent, but because our possessions - an extension of ourselves - did something wrong (Brisker Rav, Baba Kama). The Talmud

relates the tale of Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair's donkey which observed various Torah laws (Chullin 7a). Rabbi Aaron Lopianski explains that the notion of 'Kinyan,' acquisition, has a spiritual dimension. We recite in the Shemona Esre "Koneh shamayim Varetz" that G-d has 'acquired' heaven and earth. How could a religion that preaches monotheism recite thrice daily that G-d had to buy us from someone else? Rabbi Lopianski explains that "koneh" means to make another part of one's self; thus, we are claiming that G-d made heaven and earth within Himself, as part of His essence.

When we were commanded to build the tabernacle, we were building a place for G-d to manifest in this world. G-d asked that the manifestation of his presence should not be in proximity to the Jewish people but within the Jewish people. To accomplish this, we needed to give of our possessions, of ourselves, to bring G-d into our midst. Why did we need to give the most luxurious possessions for this purpose? We did so in order to show G-d, and more importantly ourselves, that G-dliness is our highest priority. We will not only be allowing G-d in, but we will make our Judaism the definition of our identity and who we are. We will dedicate the best part, the most important part of ourselves, to living, experiencing and partnering with G-d, as we work toward our purpose for existence.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein