

This week we took our middle child off to university. For me, it was the first experience with getting a child settled at college, since I did not go with our oldest when she went away to school. It was much more emotional than I expected. At the same time, there was something exciting about seeing all the Freshmen students moving in to their dorm. Every family that helped move their children was carrying pretty much the same things - bed linens, magnetic boards for writing notes, computers, plenty of favorite snack foods, and cases and cases of bottled water. It makes you kind of wonder what we used to do in the 'old days' before all that bottled water? Did we just walk around dehydrated all the time? I mean, how much more water does it take to be a coed today than it did a generation ago? I have come to the conclusion that the only reason people need so much water with them all the time is that it's a result of global warming.

Seeing all the incoming students brought back vivid memories of university. Beyond the partying that took place during orientation, we kept asking each other, "What are you studying? What do you want to do?" I recall wondering as a university student who would be a success in their lives. And my definition of success clearly related to how wealthy they would be. Money was what I thought defined the successful person.

The older I get, however, the more I have come to understand that money, while a nice thing to have, is guarantee of neither well-being nor success. Indeed, having money is not even really a mark of wealth - or at least of the kind of wealth that makes one happy.

The one thing that has not changed over the years between my moving into college and my daughter's doing so is that everything we needed for the year could fit into a car. When I moved to Port Washington two years ago and saw that it took a semi-trailer and another small truck to move all our belongings, I wondered how we had accumulated so many things. A colleague of mine once remarked that we spend the first half of our life acquiring things, and the next half trying to get rid of them. As my mother moved from the home she raised us in to an apartment, then to a room in our house, to a center for assisted living and finally to a nursing facility, I saw the truth in the words of that colleague. At each move, more and more goods were given away - either to us, to charity or friends. At the end of her life she had not even as much as would a college-bound student. It was not the things that mattered and, in fact, all the material goods simply became a burden to *schlep* from place to place.

It is only after we succeed in attaining any material goal that we realize that, by itself, it can never bring happiness or spiritual ease. Consider the question Rabbi Sydney Greenberg asks: "Those of us who are today earning what appeared to us in our lean college days astronomical figures, are we basically happier than we were then? ... Is it true, as Tolstoy said,

that discontent is not the result of man's needs but of man's abundance?" Certainly we see signs of that in this community of bounty. From the outside many here seem to have attained the pinnacle of success. Yet there is an undercurrent of unease, and it manifests itself in behavior that is an endless round of seeking the newest thrill. Or maybe, as the ennui sets in at times when one has so much, yet feels so empty, one seeks any thrill - be it through drugs, alcohol or sexual abandon - just to feel something.

While what we own can bring us pleasure, without a sense of gratitude for those things the pleasure cannot help but be short-lived. The "trap" of having so many things, then, is not that we are ensnared by them, but that we simply become bored with them - assuming that they are not only always there, but that they somehow belong to us.

The tendency we have to take what we have for granted was recognized as early as in the Torah itself. In this week's *parasha* the people of Israel are told that the land that they are to occupy is a good land. After reminding us to give thanks to God for what we have, Torah exhorts us to not lose sight of the danger:

Take care that you forget the Eternal your Go, and failed to keep God's commandments, God's rules and God's laws which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Eternal your God who freed you from the land of Egypt the house of bondage ... in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end - and you say to yourselves "my own power and the might of my own hand have one this wealth for me." Remember that it is the Eternal your God who gives you the power to get wealth. (Deuteronomy 8:11-18)

While the Biblical perspective is that a sense of God's bounty can bring a sense of inner peace - a truly well-to-do position - the rabbis of the Talmud were not prepared to abandon all discussion of what defines wealth. Indeed, there was a significant debate among them about who is truly wealthy (B.Talmud, *Shabbat* 25b)

Rabbi Tarfon claimed that one could quantify wealth, much as we might say that anyone above a certain income bracket is rich. A man of means himself, he said that the one who is wealthy is "whoever has one hundred vineyards, one hundred fields, and one hundred slaves working in them." Like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Rabbi Tarfon knows exactly what rich is. It can be defined by "one long stairway just going up, the other even longer coming down" or enough income to support a retinue of servants.

A colleague of his, Rabbi Akiva, disagreed with his more well-heeled colleague. Akiva was quite poor throughout his life. Surely, he reasoned, one can be "wealthy" with more than just money. His answer, then, was one that allowed one of any income to feel "well-to do."

“Who is wealthy? Whoever has a spouse whose beauty shines in deeds.” Akiva seems to be arguing that true wealth is in the relationships we forge - and with those whose deeds are worthy. Success can be fleeting. In a market economy we know that what goes up in value can also depreciate. And even if the value increases, there is no correlation between what one has and the successful bonds one makes that can see one through good fortune or bad.

One of the wonderful features of the Talmud is the way it balances serious debate with a healthy dose of reality. In the argument over “who is wealthy?” Tarfon and Akiva present two seemingly irreconcilable positions. Lest the discussion get too serious, the Talmud offers a third point of view - that of Rabbi Yose. His answer is a more practical one, mediating between the ideal of wealth as only strong relationships and the view that it is, for most people, some unattainably great amount of material goods. “Who is wealthy? Whoever has an indoor bathroom.” Rabbi Yose sets the bar to a reasonable level - one that he hopes most might attain. And who is not to say that a relationship is not better because of indoor plumbing?

The most oft-quoted sage, however, is Ben Zoma. His prescription for the satisfied life, where one truly feels wealthy is simple yet profound: “אִיזְהוּ עֵשִׂיר׃ - who is rich? הַשֵּׂמֵחַ בְּחֵלְקוֹ - the one who is happy with his portion.” Is this not a worthy, if often elusive, goal - to be satisfied with whatever one has in one’s life? Is Ben Zoma arguing to completely acquiesce to one’s fate, to seek nothing greater? I don’t believe so. Rather, he is urging us to find joy in whatever blessings come to us.

Several years ago I had a very rare and special meeting with a congregant. With his adult son present in the room, he had a chance to reflect on his life. “You know,” he said, “though I have had a great deal of *tsoris*, I have accomplished nearly all that I wanted to in life.” Age had taught this man an important lesson that often eludes many others. Certainly Moses was worried that the Israelites of old would not understand. Caught up in their desires - in getting more and more - he was concerned that they lose the perspective of being thankful for what they had.

How, though, does one learn to be (as Ben Zoma taught) “happy with his (or her) portion”? Our traditions give us a few hints:

- First, learn to give thanks. In Judaism there is a blessing for almost everything. Say them enough and you will soon begin to see that you do, indeed, have much. The paradigm for recognizing one’s blessings is, in fact, in this week’s portion. We are to “eat, be satisfied, and bless” God for the food we have. Thus, blessing is seen as the natural consequence of having had that which we deem sufficient.

- Second, have the perspective to know that material things are ephemeral. The Israelites who looked to enter “The Promised Land” must have thought that once they were in that place “flowing with milk and honey” all their troubles would be over. Yet it is precisely when there is sufficient, when they eat their fill that Torah says they should remember the hardships they had to endure. When one has plenty, the assumption is that all those things will ever be there. The wheel of fortune turns, however, and life rarely is wholly easy. To enjoy is fine, but one must not be so attached to any material goods, for they last not.
- Third, work to help others. The more interaction you have with others, the more you will see they have sorrow, disappointments and broken dreams, too. In reaching beyond, therefore, you help yourself, for you learn that what looks good from afar may be far from good. A second benefit of recalling Egypt is to remember those who still live in a “house of bondage.” Judaism has never seen money as an evil. Rather, what we have is morally neutral. The key is how we use it - for selfish ends or to make this a world where all are free to recognize the blessings God gives.

As my daughters head off to university - and as the sons and daughters of so many seek their degrees - I hope that they understand that a higher education ought to serve the highest purposes. And may those who parent and grandparent these children (and all those younger) help them keep perspective - to know that the most important thing is not the “right” dorm or best grade or even the most prestigious degree - but to be grateful for the gifts each brings doing his or her best. This, then, my prayer for all who study:

Bless all who begin this new school year.
Bless them with teachers of caring,
 Who inspire students not merely to accumulate information,
 But who are motivated to continually want to learn.
Bless them with friends who
 Support them in times of trouble and
 Challenge them when they stray.
May each student learn to be grateful for the blessing of learning,
 And for the gifts they share with others.
Oh God, help us all recall the joy of new beginnings,
Ever eager to seek understanding and increase knowledge.
Bless us, O God, to know that the source of wealth is You,
 And to be satisfied with what you provide.

Who is wealthy? The one satisfied with what she or he has ... with who he or she is.