

NO JOKE

by Rabbi Label Lam

"And you should love HASHEM your G-d with all your heart and all your soul and all your might."
(Devarim 6:5)

With all your heart: With both of your inclinations. (Rashi)

With all your soul: Even if one comes to take your life. (Rashi)

With all your might: With all your money! There is such a person that his money is more important than his body and therefore it is written and with all your might/ money. (Rashi- Brochos 61)

What's bothering Rashi? Why does he tell us about someone whose "money is more dear than his life"? If we examine the order of the verse we can observe that at first there is an increasing expectation of love from "the whole mind" to "life itself" and then the verse seems to retreat to "all of one's money". It's as if I say "I love you 300. I love you 400. I even love you 200." How absurd! The number 200 is already included in 400. Therefore Rashi tells about a pathological personality type whereby money is more-dear than life itself.

One of the longest laughs in radio history occurred during the Jack Benny show. Mr. Benny who was notoriously cheap was -late in arriving at the studio. His sidekick- straight man asked him why he was so late. He told him that he was mugged on the way. The questioner continued to wonder how that accounted for such extreme lateness. Does it really take that long to be robbed? Jack Benny answered in his deliberate manner, "The robber threatened me with the ultimatum, "Your money or your life?! And, I was thinking..."

I don't remember why I got onto this subject but while teaching a group of Jewish prisoners I began to describe how monkeys are captured in South America. They listened in rapture as I described the brilliant methodology of the hunters. They take a coconut and hollow it out. They put inside the coconut rice. The coconut with the rice is placed in a clearing. The curious primate takes the risk to explore what's inside the coconut. When he discovers the rice he places his hand in to remove it.

The hole on the top of the coconut is calibrated so that the monkey can just barely squeeze his hand to get his prize but once he makes a fist to grasp it, his hand is now too large to allow him to withdraw the rice. He's stuck at this point trying to figure out how he can get his hand out with the rice in his fist. He is not clever enough to let go of the rice and pour it into his hand and he stubbornly refuses let go of the rice. While he ponders his quandary a net is dropped on his head and he is

captured for the zoo or monkey soup or whatever fate that market-place demands.

At this point the audience of prisoners broke out into uproarious laughter as if I had said the funniest joke. I had no intention to make a joke. I didn't even know what was so funny. I asked one of the fellows, "Murray, what's so funny?" He told me, "That's how we all got here!" There was a second wave of laughter. This time I got it.

It may not be such an uncommon phenomenon. There are times when a person will risk everything, just not to take their hand out of the coconut, and let go. That becomes the tragic flaw and at that point it's no joke. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).