

MONEY CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

On this last day of his life, after completing the renewal of the Covenant between G-d and the Jewish Nation (in Parshas Nitzavim), Moshe gives one final warning to the masses. After conveying the endless favors G-d granted the Children of Israel, he tells of their future rebellion and the calamities that will befall them, and, finally, their ultimate redemption.

In a theme oft repeated in the admonitions of the Book of Devarim/Deuteronomy, Moshe's poem warns of the spiritual danger inherent in financial success. "Yeshurun ["yashar" means upright, straight and just; the name "Yeshurun" refers to Israel's trait of remaining steadfast in maintaining G-d's high standards] became fat and kicked - you became fat, thick, corpulent - and it deserted G-d its Maker, and was contemptuous of the Rock of its salvation." (32,15) How does fiscal accomplishment transform genuine, sincere servants of G-d into contemptuous rebels?

The Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities) tells a story of two sisters, one who married a rich man and one who married a poor fellow. After many years of separation, the poor sister went to visit her wealthy sibling. As she approached the mansion, a servant dressed in silk came out to greet her and find out her name so she could be announced to the mistress of the house. As much as this surprised her, it was nothing compared to the shock upon entering the house: the fantastic rooms with their exquisite furnishings and accoutrements, the gleam of the pearls and jewels in her sister's rings and earrings, the silk gown her sister wore, the servants responding to her every word.

Yet as they started to discuss their lives, the poor one started to notice how thin and gaunt her sister's face looked, the despondent look she had. She asked, "My dear sister, surely your husband could afford you roasted doves and geese daily. Why do you look as you do?" The wealthy sister explained, "My rich and influential husband does give the most beautiful wardrobe and the most precious stones, and I feast like royalty. But this is all meaningless because there is no intellectual or emotional connection; I am treated as one of the servants. He has no hesitation to publicly humiliate me, spitting and screaming at me. Yes, my dear sister, you may not have the jewels and stones and the servants, you may only have the dress on your back, but your husband treats you with respect, appreciates your intelligence and honors you publicly. You are happy with your lot in life because you are not a servant in your home, you are the mistress. For all my possessions, I have no right to even state my opinion regarding the issues of the home."

So, too, continues Rabbi Kagan, is the attitude of some toward our spiritual resource, the Torah. Some cover it with the finest silks, the most precious jewels, gold and silver, and keep it in the most ornate ark illuminated with golden lamps. But this is meaningless to the Torah. So long as we beautify her but ignore her intelligence, her input, her keen guidance, she is insulted and hurt. Surely she would give up all the adornments so long as she is not trampled upon. There are others who cannot afford the accoutrements but offer great respect, not deviating from her sage advice. And this is more precious than all the jewels in the world.

We are members of (probably) the most affluent Jewish community in Jewish history. Whereas, the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) discusses the financial priorities of one who cannot afford to buy Chanukah candles, these days we invest thousands of dollars in our daily Jewish experience, and that many more dollars around the Yomim Tovim (holidays). But societally we have inculcated the contemporary values of getting "the biggest bang for the buck" and feeling there is virtually nothing for which we cannot buy a solution. But spirituality cannot be bought off. Spirituality is about building a loving relationship with G-d; we cannot buy a relationship.

We find ourselves in the middle of the Ten Days of Repentance; Shabbos Shuva, the Shabbos of Return, is upon us and Yom Kippur is around the corner. Rambam/Maimonides, in his Laws of Return (Repentance), tells us these are the days that G-d is "reaching out" to us. This relationship is about investing our one commodity that is more valuable than all the jewels in the world - ourselves.

Best wishes for a healthy and sweet New Year! Good Shabbos!

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