

MATERIALISM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God will then judge His people, and comfort His servants, once He sees they are powerless, with nothing left, neither one saved by a ruler nor one who is strengthened. (Devarim 32:36)

Every time I return to places such as London, the States, or Canada, I am always awed by just how far materialism has advanced. I wasn't always religious, and I am the son of a designer with very good taste. And, though we ourselves lived modest lives, my father's clients did not, so I have at least seen the "good life," and can recognize it when I see it.

Besides so much of it has already influenced many in the frum community as well, so it's all around no matter where you go these days. First it was the houses, then it was the clothing, and now it even seems to be spilling over into the cars that people drive, which seemingly, are a lot more luxurious than most religious Jews ever cared to drive in the past, and I am not the only one to notice this either.

Why do I personally care? you may be wondering.

Well, don't let the black hat, black suit, and long beard fool you. Or the fact that I try to be very spiritual, and write accordingly. As I said before, for the first half of my life, "their" world was my world. Before I became Torah observant, I was on a fast path for the business world, and looked forward to making as much money as I possibly could as soon as possible, so that like so many of my "colleagues," I could enjoy as much of the "good life" as my money could buy.

As they say, "You can take the Ba'al Teshuvah out of the world of materialism, but it is much harder to take the world of materialism out of the Ba'al Teshuvah." As a result, as I walk through the streets of affluence and influence, as distracted with my thoughts as I might have previously been, something talks to me.

Thank God, these days, I get much pleasure from very little, at least by Western standards. My values regarding life shifted just in time, just before I dived head first into the financial pool of secular life, allowing me to choose a path that does not demand that I keep up, financially, with anyone else. It only demands that I make enough money to keep my family happy and healthy, which gratefully, once again, does not entail very much, again, by Western standards.

And, since I spend much of my day entrenched in my modest home away from the fast-paced world of Western life, which also exists not too far from where I live even in Israel, I am not overwhelmed by

the song of sirens that calls out to so many:

"You could have a lot more. Why not go out and get it?"

The Torah has told me what really counts in life, which I buy into 100 percent. Well, intellectually, at least. And, emotionally too, as long as I am not being hounded by bills I can't pay, or family members in need of things I can't afford. At times like those, a little inner voice seems to emerge from within me and say, "You know, if you had graduated and worked in the business world, you wouldn't struggle like this." Funny how it sounds a lot like my mother ...

When I travel, or pass through wealthy neighborhoods, the voice tries a different tact: "People are driving around in expensive cars while you have to think twice before even spending a few bucks on far simpler pleasures, or to buy your children some extra clothing! Does that sound right to you?"

Ouch.

However, not to be backed into an emotional corner I quickly retort, "Shhhhh," and tell the nudnik from within, "Be happy with what you have, because I am happy with what I do." "True, I have financial hardship," I point out defiantly to him, "but it is the price I have chosen to pay to remain in a world of Torah, learn Torah, write Torah, and share it with so many others who can benefit from it. That's got to be worth a lot in the World-to-Come," I say somewhat attackingly, "far more than all that luxury can buy us in this world."

Touché.

However, the situation gets more complicated than that. Being from a secular family, I have family, siblings, who went the other direction I did not, and, thank God, it has paid off for each of them. Sure, they may complain about financial "difficulties," but clearly it is on an entirely different level than I might. I am the poor rabbi in the family, who, by forsaking his secular education and a more secure profession, has condemned himself, and his family too for that matter, to financial obscurity.

Don't get me wrong. I am not one of those people who deliberately turned his back on financial security. Indeed, to this very day, I plan and scheme to have my cake and eat it to, by producing the perfect project that will cater to millions of people who will buy it and make me, well, at least more financially stable. God runs the world, everything is possible, and my job is just to provide the avenue for Him to do it.

In the meantime, as I pave my personal avenue of parnassah, Heavenly traffic is light. We survive, but so much of the year it is like receiving daily manna, like for so many other Orthodox Jews in a similar position. However, the greater problem and pain is the poor PR on behalf of God and Torah: "Wow, you're what happens to a person becomes Torah observant!" people either say or think. "Glad I'm not one of you!"

Ouch, ouch, and ouch again.

"Dear God, if you don't want to give me a higher standard of life for my sake, then at least do it for Your sake! Put an end to all those of scoff at what happens to those who do Your work, passing up some of the bounty of this world to reap the bounty of the next world! Why must it be that a Torah lifestyle comes, more often than not, at great material cost, scaring off so many could-be ba'alei teshuvah?"

The answer, of course, is all through Torah, and especially in this week's parshah.

God will then judge His people, and comfort His servants, once He sees they are powerless, with nothing left, neither one saved by a ruler nor one who is strengthened. (Devarim 32:36)

Talk about tough love. God will, in the end, comfort us. However, to get to the point that we will be "worthy" of such comfort, we have to first become independent of our dependency on other sources of security and livelihood. It's not that God hasn't supported us through them until now; He has. It is more that, as Yemos HaMoshiach comes around, it has to be perfectly clear that it was always only God who took care of us, and Who will be the One taking care of us until that point in time, and onward.

Easier said than done. If a person's paycheck does not arrive one week, and the exact amount happens to fall onto his front lawn just that day just as he heads for his car, he will, more than likely, look up into the sky and wonder which plane accidentally dropped the money. He might call it a "miracle," a wonderful act of Divine Providence, but he would still be wondering from which "heavenly" vehicle it fell into his possession.

A part of him might say, "Maybe an angel really did drop it off on behalf of God, just as I prayed?" And, though, part of him might want to believe that it is true, another part of him will probably say, "Nahhhhh, angels do not do that, especially for me." After thousands of years of getting a manna from the local grocery store, it is hard for us to go back to believing that it "falls" from Heaven.

We want to, but it is hard to. It's the way that we humans are made, and it is the bed that we sleep in because, ultimately, we are the ones who made it. For, righteous people are those who never lose sight of this fact, and live their lives accordingly, as all of us are supposed to try and do. They are the ones who always receive their parnassah directly from God, even when it comes through some kind of human agency. It's a perception thing, sometimes more than an actual physical thing.

This is, I believe, what Chazal meant when they included the following plea in Birchas HaMazon:

Make it be that we do not need, God our God, gifts from the hand of man, and not loans, except from Your hand, which is full, open, holy, and wide ...

It's a tall order, and not one that is, seemingly, commonly fulfilled. If we're not getting gifts from people, the Torah world sometimes receiving more "gifts" than anyone else, then we're receiving salaries, and in some more dire cases, bank loans. In this world, it is very hard to avoid such situations, and it is hard to imagine that the rabbis only had Yemos HaMoshiach in mind (which the Rambam says will not be too much different from pre-Yemos HaMoshiach times), because, even in Temple times, we worked for others and received gift and took loans.

Fine. It's the way of the world. It is something that is hard to avoid. The question is, when you are taking that salary, or receiving that gift, or even borrowing money, are you taking a salary, or receiving a gift, or borrowing money? Or, are these just other avenues that you have provided God to give you your daily stipend in order to survive or do the mitzvos? In bentching, we pray that we never lose sight of the latter, and think that it is the former.

I have to admit that, I am not there yet. As much as I talk about everything coming from the hand of God, and believe it intellectually, my heart is still not quite on that level of reality. As a result, I still look for employers, or generous people who like to give gifts, and in some cases, I even take on debtors. Once in a while, it occurs to me that the same God Who gave me my salary in good times, or gave me a gift when I needed it, or lent me money to get by, is the same God Who gave the Jewish people their daily manna directly from Heaven.

Like it or not, you'll have to get used to it, because it is the way that we are going. It is the way that Jewish history is going, in preparation for Messianic times. That is why, in case you haven't noticed, everything that we have come to rely upon over the last several decades is now proving itself unreliable, except for God. And, it will continue to be this way until the end, until we enter the period of time when we will no longer be distracted by the illusions of this world, and give more credibility and power to our physical sources of survival than we ought to.

That is the way we may have entered the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah. However, when we emerge from Yom Kippur and head for Succos, it will be important to have adjusted our way of thinking, if we are to make sense of what is happening today, and what seems to be coming up.

Text

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