

Is Money Good For The Jews?

This parshah brings us to the age-old debate: do Jews do better with money or without it?

Jews and Money

Whenever statistics are released about the richest people in America, Jews are a noticeable part of the list. Interestingly, Jews are also very high on the list of philanthropists as well. Jews and money seem to go very nicely together.

In this week's Parsha we read about the golden calf. When the sin was committed an argument broke out between Moses and G-d about whose fault it was that the Jews sinned. G-d blamed Moses and vice versa.

Moses was still on the mountain when G-d told him the news. The first thing G-d says is, "Get off the mountain because your nation has committed an abomination." G-d was referring to the mixed multitudes that Moses had accepted of his own accord, feeling that it would be good for these people to join the Jewish people. But now G-d was blaming him for bringing about this abomination by inviting these Egyptian sorcerers to join them. [Rashi]

In fact, the Midrash states that these were the same sorcerers who competed with Moses in Pharaoh's court. As soon as the gold had been thrown into the fire these sorcerers had stepped

forward and created the calf with their magic.

They were not honest converts to the Jewish religion and belief system. They had not committed themselves to the Torah and mitzvos because they saw it as the truth. They were glory seekers. As by any successful movement, once it becomes clear that it's worthwhile to join them all of the glory seekers will jump onto the bandwagon at the last moment. When the Jews were leaving Egypt many Egyptians realized that joining the Jewish people would be a worthwhile venture.

G-d saw through to the hearts of these men. He knew that their motives were not pure and He was not pleased that Moses had been so accepting of them. But Moses, who notoriously gave each man the benefit of the doubt, welcomed them with open arms.

Now, while these mixed multitudes didn't have the chutzpa to rebel while Moses was around, as soon as Moses was not in camp to squelch their rebellion against G-d, rebel they did. It was they who stirred the hearts of the people against G-d. Thus, G-d laid the blame for the actions of these impostors squarely on Moses' shoulders.

However, (a few verses later) Moses returns to G-d and says, "This nation has committed a grave sin. They have made themselves a god of gold. But it's Your fault. You lavished gold upon them and whatever else they desired. What should they have done so as not to sin?" [Rashi]

It's like a parent who gives a child free access to the internet. How can that parent be surprised when the child wanders into

those inappropriate sites? The child is practically powerless to stop himself! Similarly, G-d supplied the people with abundant physical wealth and it led to this. Well, what did He expect!

But these two didn't start arguing only after the golden calf. Even before the people left Egypt G-d said to Moses, "Please, (I beg you) make sure the people borrow all the silver and gold of the Egyptians."

Why did G-d have to beg? Because He and Moses had already started arguing whether or not money was good for the Jews!

Moses argued that having too much physical wealth would bring the people to stray from the righteous path. It's hard to be spiritual when you are rolling in dough.

He argued that it was a better strategy to supply the Jews with the bare minimum. But G-d had promised Abraham that the Jews would emerge from their Egyptian bondage as wealthy men, so he had to literally beg Moses to get the people to comply with His request.

The fact is that Moses took none of Egypt's gold with him when he left. The only thing Moses took with him was Josef's casket. While the Jews were amassing all that wealth he busied himself with the task of finding it.

The Alter Rebbe's Debate

This argument — is money good for the Jews — has been debated throughout the centuries. When Napoleon led his armies halfway across the west the Jewish leaders of the era again butted heads on this very issue. The Alter Rebbe felt that

life under Napoleon's democratic government, where men were free to do as they wish, would effect the Jewish people's connection to their heritage. The Rebbe felt so strongly about this that he even sent his own Chassidim to spy on the French armies and report to the Czar. Others felt just as strongly that freedom would do the Jewish people very well.

It was Rosh Hashanah, 1813, and the various Rebbes all knew that this was the time to influence the heavenly court on the matter of Napoleon's conquest of Russia, being that on that day every country's fate is decided. Since the most decisive event of Rosh Hashanah is the blowing of the shofar they knew that whoever was first to entreat heaven with that piercing sound would have the matter decided as he saw fit.

One of the opposed Rebbes began his Rosh Hashanah prayers as early as possible so that he reach the Shofar blowing before the Alter Rebbe. But the Alter Rebbe simply blew the shofar first thing that morning and then went on to pray a leisurely pace. Indeed the Russians won the war.

That was in the times of the Alter Rebbe. These days I think our situation is different. Our generation is the reincarnation of the generation who left Egypt. Both wealth and poverty are difficult to handle and the Rebbe once said half-jokingly that if we must be tested it should be with great wealth!

The truth is that in the shtetl they didn't need money in order to serve G-d. But our generation is on the threshold of Moshiach's coming and to Moshiach (and bring every Jew back to Judaism), a lot of money is indeed helpful!