



Share the Mitzvah

Which Jewish leaders were wealthy and wise? And why didn't Moses pay for the whole Mishkan if he could afford it?

Rich and Smart

Good Shabbos!

In Jewish history there were many leaders who were wealthy. But they didn't get rich from doing their job; rather, when they were tapped for leadership, they already were rich. One of the most famous of such leaders was Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, on whom the Talmud (Tractate Gittin 59a) says, "Torah and greatness in one."

As a general rule, there are two kinds of leaders in the Jewish People.

There are those who become leaders because of their great wealth. Even today we have the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which speaks in the name of the Jewish People and uses the influence it has thanks to its significant wealth for the good of the Jewish Nation.

On the other hand, there are leaders who are embraced by the Jewish Nation because of their greatness in Torah. And the entire strength of their leadership comes in the form of spiritual leaders, in which thousands of Jews listen to their words.

It is only rarely that a leader comes along who incorporates both advantages—both the Torah, in being the greatest Torah scholar of the generation, and in wealth. But that is what was special about Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who had "the Torah and the glory of Israel in one, for there was none in Israel as great in Torah and affluence like him" (Rashi, see there).

And so it was specifically he who was able to be the one to begin writing the Oral Torah.

Until then, the Jewish Nation adhered to the law that said that those aspects of the Torah transmitted orally had to remain as such, only studied orally and passed down from parent to child and from master to student. Along came Rabbeinu HaKadosh and quoted the verse, “A time to do for the L-rd; they have made void Your Torah,” and explained that this verse referred to his generation. (See Sichos Kodesh 5741 Vol. II, pg. 153.) Since the Jewish nation was exiled all over the world, Rabbi Yehudah decided that they needed to write the Mishnah so that the Torah not be forgotten.

An ordinary leader whose leadership came to him on account of his money would not have been able to accomplish that, because the rabbis would oppose him and say, “What do you know about Torah?” On the other hand, a prominent rabbi who would want to compile the Mishnah would not have the financial capacity to mount such a major project. And thus it was specifically Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the wealthiest man who was also the Torah leader of his generation, who succeeded. He had the means to establish this enormous project of sitting down dozens of scholars and setting up a think tank, to put it in modern terms, for the writing of the Mishnah.

The Talmud continues and tells us that several hundred years later, along came Rav Ashi, about whom the Talmud also says the same things it says about Rabbi Yehudah: “Torah and greatness in one.” And Rav Ashi established a yeshivah, a school, where over 60 years he and his students compiled the Talmud Bavli, the Babylonian Talmud.

The Wealthy Prophets

But this phenomenon started earlier. Even in the era of the Prophets we find that there were wealthy Prophets. Not only that, but the Talmud tells us (Tractate Nedarim 38a) “that G-d does not enshrine His Presence but upon one who is strong, wealthy, wise and humble,” to which the Talmud brings several examples of Prophets who were wealthy.

For starters, we’ve got Yonah HaNavi, the Prophet Jonah—yes, he of “Jonah and the Whale” fame.

We all know the story from the Haftarah that we read on Yom Kippur about how Yonah tried to literally run away from G-d. He went down to Yafo, a port city on the coast of the Mediterranean (today known as Jaffa), from which he caught a ship sailing to a place called Tarshish. They’re not sure where Tarshish exactly is; some say that it’s an island off the coast of Spain, and some identify it with places further out.

But regardless of where Tarshish was, Yonah wanted the ship to get underway immediately. So we read in the Haftarah, “He paid its fare and got down in it,” meaning, in his berth below decks. But the Talmud tells us that that “he paid the fare for the entire ship,” and that “the fare for the entire ship was 4,000 gold dinars.” That tells us that Yonah the Prophet was quite a rich man.

Then we have the famous Shmuel HaNavi, Samuel.

The Tanach tells us that before his passing, he assembled the entire Jewish Nation and challenged them: “Here I am! Refute me: Whose ox did I take? Whose donkey did I take?” (Shmuel I:12:13) In other words, I have everything I need, and so I challenge you to show me that I even once took something from someone because I needed it. And such a statement can only be made by someone who indeed never took anything from anyone.

The Talmud adds that wherever Shmuel HaNavi would travel, he would show up with a full entourage—in modern terms, like the Presidents travels with Air Force One and a full crew and automobile fleet from the Secret Service. The Talmud says, “Wherever he went, his entire household was with him.”

Shmuel HaNavi was constantly on the road. He would travel from town to town to see his Nation. And wherever he went, he went together with servants, aides and secretaries, and wherever he went, he had everything with him just like he did when he was home. And that’s a luxury that only a rich man can have.

And that brings us to the most famous leader of all in the history of the Jewish Nation: Moshe Rabbeinu.

Moses and the Tablets

We just read about the breaking of the Luchos, the Two Tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments.

When G-d had wanted to give Moshe new Luchos, He said to him, “p’sal l’cha”—“engrave for yourself.” “G-d showed him a deposit of sapphire within his tent and said to him, the fragments will belong to you, and from there Moshe became very rich” (Shmos 34:1, Rashi).

In plain English, G-d revealed to Moshe that right underneath his actual tent was a deposit of sapphire, and that he should dig it up and cut two tablets from it for G-d to once again write the Ten Commandments on them. However, the leftover pieces of sapphire

would belong to Moshe—which, as you can imagine, made him “very” rich.

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion, the Parshah of Vayakhel.

In Vayakhel, we read about how Moshe offered the opportunity to all the Jews to donate to the building of the Mishkan.

We might possibly say that Moshe Rabbeinu had wanted to take it upon himself to fund the entire construction of the Mishkan out of his own personal pocket. He didn’t need the Jewish Nation’s donations. But G-d had wanted to divide the merit of constructing the Mishkan across the Jewish Nation. G-d wanted every individual to have a part in the Mishkan. In other words, G-d wanted the Mishkan to belong to everyone—for everyone to feel that he or she had ownership of the Mishkan, and that when they entered the Mishkan, that they weren’t entering someplace that belonged to someone else but that they were home, because they paid for it.

With the Jewish Nation, too, with every mitzvah we do, we have the custom of bringing together as many Jews as possible. For a bris, a circumcision, for example, all you really need is two people: The Sandek (the person who holds the baby on his lap), and, of course, the Mohel himself. (You also need the baby, of course, so that would actually be three.) But in order to give as many Jews as possible the merit of the mitzvah, so first you have the Kvatter and Kvatterin (the couple that carry the baby in), and then you give someone the honor of placing the baby on Elijah’s Chair, and other person the honor of lifting the baby from the Chair, and a third person the honor of Sandek Me’umad (the Standing Sandek) who recites the blessings, and a grandfather is honored with giving the name—we divide up the honors to as many people as is possible. And it’s not just because we have to keep all the cousins and relatives happy, but because there really is a goal here: To get as many Jews as possible participating in every mitzvah.

It’s the same thing at a wedding: We get as many people as possible participating in the mitzvah. You have the people who hold the poles of the Chuppah (the wedding canopy), the witnesses, the person who read the Kesubah, and then seven additional people to recite various blessings under the Chuppah... all just to get as many people as possible to participate in a mitzvah.

And the same thing applies to our daily lives. When we do a mitzvah, it’s incumbent upon us to include the entire family in the mitzvah. So if

you put up a new mezuzah in one of your rooms, let one of your kids hold the hammer, another one hold the nails, and so on—even if it demands special effort because the kids are generally “busy” and you need to negotiate with them to get them to participate of their own free will. Also, when you make Havdalah, have one hold the torch, another hold the spices, and so on.

Because when it comes to Judaism, it is incumbent upon us to walk in the footsteps of Moshe Rabbeinu, who shared the privilege of building the Tabernacle with the whole nation.