

TERUMAH (EXODUS 25:1-27:19)

Budget Busters

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

I am not comfortable with excessive opulence. I find it hard to understand how anyone can spend many tens of thousands of dollars more than necessary for a luxury vehicle. The purpose of a car is to get you safely and comfortably from Point A to Point B. For that, you need four good tires, a well-tuned engine, a working heater/air conditioner, and a few accessories to hold it all together. Of course, one doesn't want to drive around in a rusty old clunker with a bumper hanging down and a muffler that doesn't muffle. But does it make sense to buy a car whose sticker price rivals the gross domestic product of a Third World nation?

A house should provide shelter. Again, it need not be a shack with a leaking roof and toilets that don't flush. But too many of us throw our money away on luxuries that are only there to show our friends and neighbors that we can afford such splendor. (Even when we can't!)

We need to learn to spend our money in moderation. There is nothing wrong with living comfortably. But it is essential that we learn the difference between comfort and waste.

Everything I said above gets thrown out the window when you read this week's Torah Portion.

Moses puts out the word that he is making a collection for the Tabernacle, a portable Temple. He intends to spare no expense in building G-d's house. He wants precious metals and precious stones. There will be ornate tapestries woven from the finest materials. This Temple will be beautiful and it will be expensive. And, apparently, it will be wasteful.

The Talmud is replete with references to the fact that money was no object when it came to the Temple budget. *"There is no poverty in the place of wealth."* Since the Temple was *"a place of wealth,"* anything that suggested a limit on spending was rejected. Damaged Temple vessels, which could have been easily repaired by silver-, gold-, or coppersmiths, were discarded. Knives with nicked blades were not re-sharpened. Garments for the Priests were woven entirely as a single unit, rather than separate woven pieces being sewn together. Once those garments became soiled, they were not laundered. The Talmud even wonders why some of the tables in the Temple were made of just marble, rather than silver or gold. Money in the Temple flowed like water.

Why was this done?! The Talmud tells us that Mount Sinai was chosen as the place of G-d's revelation because it was smaller and less majestic than other mountains in the region. The Burning Bush is a symbol of simplicity and humility. The Torah was given in a barren, ownerless desert to teach us that the Torah is available to everyone. Isn't that message undermined when we state that *"there is no poverty in the place of wealth"* ?!

The answer, I believe, is that placing a budget on the Temple would imply a limitation on G-d's resources. *"The earth and its fullness belong to G-d -- the inhab**ited world and those who dwell in it."* (Psalms, 24:1) *"'Mine is the silver and the gold,' says G-d."* (Haggai, 2:8) He is the source of our life, our health, and our sustenance. Anything that even resembles penny-pinching and cutting corners would suggest that G-d can't afford the very best.

There is nothing wrong with wealth. G-d gives us our money and He expects us to spend it. We are supposed to use our material possessions to elevate ourselves SPIRITUALLY. The problem comes when we use our wealth to elevate ourselves MATERIALLY. It is fully appropriate to enjoy the comforts of the world in moderation. A beautiful, comfortable home allows us to have the piece of mind we need to dedicate ourselves to living as G-d wants us to live. But clearly the solid gold doorknobs and pearl-handled toothbrushes are a bit much.

The Temple was a place where all material objects were channeled toward the service of G-d. The absolute, uncompromising use of money in the Temple indicates to us what our money is for.

It is important to live within one's means. After all, it is decided every Rosh Hashanah how much we are going to earn in the coming year. How dare we spend with abandon if we don't know how much G-d has allotted us for the year? However, there is an exception to this rule. The Talmud tells us that Mitzvah-related expenses such as good food for Shabbos are not included in the Rosh Hashanah budget. If we decide to spend more money for Shabbos meals and Yeshiva tuition, G-d will make up the difference.

Many years ago, I had a philosophical debate with my father-in-law of Blessed Memory. He decided to have his Tefillin redone. He had a beautiful pair already, but he "upgraded" them with a new set of parchment scrolls for the inside. A well-known scribe in Jerusalem had stopped writing the scrolls for personal reasons, and had reluctantly agreed to come out of retirement to write a limited number of sets. My father-in-law had the connections to buy a set for a "mere" \$750 and encouraged me to do the same.

I disagreed with him. At the time, a top-of-the-line set of Tefillin scrolls could have been purchased for \$450 - \$500, and I felt that it was a waste of money. Once you have a flawless set of scrolls, I reasoned, it was frivolous to spend the extra money for scrolls that were a little "prettier," even if they are written by a scribe who is known for his piety.

I called one of my teachers to ask him who he felt was right. “You both are,” he said. “Your father-in-law appreciates a beautiful pair of Tefillin. You don’t. For you, it would be a waste of money!”

The Temple’s approach to finances teaches us an important lesson. Serving G-d costs money. It’s worth it. Kosher food costs more than non-Kosher. It’s worth it. When you realize and appreciate the value of living as a Torah Jew, you realize what a bargain you are getting.

How much materialism we receive each year is up to G-d. How much spirituality we receive is up to US. Our job is to take that materialism and channel it toward spirituality.

Perhaps that is what is meant by the opening of the Torah Portion: ... “*Speak to the children of Israel, that they should TAKE for Me an offering...*” (Exodus 25:2) Why does G-d say that they should TAKE for Him an offering? Wouldn’t it make more sense for them to GIVE to Him an offering? The obvious answer is that when we use our possessions to elevate the world, we TAKE, we receive, G-d’s blessings.

The Talmud’s observation about the Temple, that “*there is no poverty in the place of wealth*”, is a mind set that applies to our homes as well. It is not possible to be poor if you view yourself as wealthy. If we squander G-d’s gifts on silly belongings, we’ll never be satisfied with what we have received. As such, even if we are millionaires we will remain in “poverty” due to our limitations. However, if we appreciate those gifts and use them wisely, we will be satisfied with what we have. We, too, will then be truly wealthy.

Have a great Shabbos.

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