

Is Our Neshamah at Risk in an Affluent Society?

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On May 18, 1418, a group of Italian Jews representing the major communities of central and northern Italy met in the town of Forli. They had much on their agenda, including the following regulation which they passed:

In order also to humble our hearts, and to walk modestly before our God, and not to show off in the presence of the Gentiles, we have agreed that from today . . . no Jew or Jewess of the above recorded Jewish communities, towns or villages shall wear a *foderato-cinto* (fur-lined jacket), unless it is black. Also the sleeves must not be open, nor be lined with silk for that would be arrogant. These fur-lined jackets, however, other than black may still be worn, provided that the sleeves and the garments themselves are closed at the sides and at the back.¹

In Cracow, Poland, the community passed the following ordinance in 1615-16:

One is permitted to wear only two rings on weekdays, four on the Sabbath, and six on the holidays. Both men and women are absolutely forbidden to wear precious stones. An exception is made in the case of a pregnant woman who is permitted to wear a ring with a diamond because of its curative powers.²

Finally, the leaders of Posen's Jewish community ruled in 1659 that,

One who gave two gold pieces [to the community] was allowed to invite fifteen people to a *brit milah* dinner; one who contributed four was permitted to invite twenty; one who contributed six, was permitted to invite twenty-five, who must include the local rabbi, the preacher, the cantor and the beadle, apart from the travelling [poor] who come briefly for lodging in our city . . . With regard to weddings, every one of the three mentioned above may add five persons.³

These are all examples—and there are many more—of what is known as “sumptuary laws,” enactments by the community designed to limit the ostentatious display of luxury in their midst.⁴ Is our *neshamah* at risk in an affluent society? One of the corollaries of affluence is our ability to afford more—on nicer clothes, fancier jewelry and more lavish *se’udot* for a *brit* and wedding. An affluent society which is tempted to spend its money for these purposes was often considered by its leadership to be at risk.

What kind of risk? What sort of danger? Let us look back at the beginning of the first text cited above. The Jews in fifteenth-century Forli offered two reasons for their enactment. The second was, “not to show off in the presence of the Gentiles.” The Jewish community’s leadership was often very sensitive to this consideration and required that its members not flaunt their wealth in the face of the “*goyim*.”⁵ Under such circumstances they feared that not only the Jewish *neshamah* would be at risk but the Jewish *guf* as well.

This outer-directed concern—of “*mah yomru ha-goyim*”—has a very long history, going all the way back to Ya’akov *avinu*. The Torah describes the famine which struck the land of Canaan in his days and states (Gen. 42:1): וירא יעקב כי יש שבר במצרים ויאמר יעקב לבניו למה תתראו, “And Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and he said to his sons *lama titra’u*.” This last phrase is formulated in a strange way, literally translated as, “why do you look at one another,” or “why do you look at yourselves.” However, Rashi comments, based on a Talmudic statement (*Ta’anit* 10b): למה תראו עצמכם בפני בני ישמעאל ובני עשו כאלו אתם שבעים, באותה שעה עדיין היה להם תבואה, “Why do you show yourselves

as satiated in the eyes of the children of Yishma’el and Esav.” Ya’akov was concerned, already at the very dawn of our existence as a people, lest Jews’ ostentatiousness lead to greed, jealousy and therefore antagonism and hatred against them on the part of the Gentiles.⁶

Although on a broad communal level, this risk to our *neshamah* (and *guf*) is one that must be considered, I would like to focus on the first reason given by the Jews in Forli in 1418, i.e. “in order to humble our hearts and to walk modestly before our God.” Don’t get me wrong: there is certainly nothing wrong with affluence. *Oyf ale yidishe kinder gezogt!*; may all Jews be blessed with it! The concern, however, is with what one does with affluence and our ancestors felt, as we should feel, that to use it in an ostentatious manner does put our *neshamah* at risk. There is something intrinsically wrong with renting the QE II for a *bat mitzvah* party or with making a wedding for thousands of people. I was uncomfortable a few years ago when nineteen-year-old Frima Rabinovich, the daughter of the Munkaczer Rebbe, married twenty-year-old Yosef Horowitz, son of the Viener *dayyan* at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in the presence of some twenty thousand guests. I was even more uncomfortable when part of the wedding feast menu was printed in *The New York Times* a few days prior to the wedding: “200 pounds of Waldorf salad, 1,000 stuffed peppers, 540 pounds of moo goo gai pan, innumerable cantaloupe supremes, relish boats and sauteed pea pods in mock butter sauce. . . .”⁷

My aversion to this kind of excess is somewhat mitigated by the fact that, for Hasidim, it is a special *zekhut* to be present at the wedding of their Rebbe’s child and, after all, wedding guests must be fed. But no such redeeming feature applies to another wedding that took place at the same time, whose menu was reported in *The New York Times* one day later. Thomas Friedman began his article as follows: “For Israel, it was the wedding of the century. If you were not invited, you were either nobody or in jail.” He described the wedding reception hosted by Yaakov Nimrodi of Iran-arms-sales-fame in honor of his daughter. Only fifteen hundred of Nimrodi’s most intimate friends were invited to share

in the festivities . . . Friedman wrote:

The theme of the evening, which cost more than \$200,000, was the Wild West. Chuck wagons dangling lanterns were set up all around the lawn, where 150 Arab waiters flipped steaks on the open grills and carved watermelons on the spot. Live roosters strutted atop little haystacks set up to give a proper western ambience. Women in low-cut dresses danced with men in yarmulkes to a Dixieland beat.⁸

It is a truism and obviously self-evident, but maybe the point must still be made, that so many poor people and needy institutions could have benefitted from all of this crass ostentatiousness. Yes, indeed, if only we learned how to use our affluence wisely, our *neshamot* would not be at risk.

There is another area I want to discuss that also comes under the rubric of our subject. It is true that affluence means having more money; in many cases it also means having more time. My affluence allows me to work less hard, to hire other people to work for me, and to therefore give me more leisure time. At the trial of John A. Mulheren Jr., Ivan Boesky told the court that he illegally paid fellow prisoners a few quarters to do his laundry for him.⁹ Even in jail affluence can lead to leisure! And so our question is: Is the *neshamah* at risk when more leisure time is available?

The issue of leisure is a critical one, for so much of our modern lives relates to it.¹⁰ What we do with our leisure time will go a long way in determining what kind of person we are. The Talmud (*Eruvin* 65b) states: א"ר אילעאי בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר בכוסו ובכיסו ובכעסו ואמרי ליה אף בשחקו. The type of person someone is can be identified in three ways: is he able to hold his liquor, is he just in his business dealings, and is he quick to anger. Some add also that a person can be judged by the way he plays or spends his leisure time.

There are two paradigms of leisure I would like to draw upon—one in the present and one in the future—as models for our behavior. The first less obvious and less well known paradigm is *yemot ha-Mashi'ah*. In the very last halakhah in his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides describes that time as

one allowing for great leisure and is very explicit as to how that newly acquired leisure time is to be spent:

לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם ולא כדי שירדו בעכו"ם ולא כדי שינשאו אותם העמים ולא כדי לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח אלא כדי שיהיו פנויין בתורה וחכמתה ולא יהיה להם נוגש ומבטל כדי שיזכו לחיי העולם הבא כמו שביארנו בהלכות תשובה. ובאותו הזמן לא יהיה שם לא רעב ולא מלחמה ולא קנאה ותחרות שהטובה תהיה מושפעת הרבה וכל המעדנים מצויין כעפר ולא יהיה עסק כל העולם אלא לדעת את ה' בלבד. ולפיכך יהיו ישראל חכמים גדולים ויודעים דברים הסתומים ושינו דעת בוראם כפי כח האדם שנאמר כי מלאה הארץ דעה את ה' כמים לים מכסים.

The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the heathens, or be exalted by the nations, or that it might eat and drink and rejoice. Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Law and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world-to-come.

In that era there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Blessings will be abundant, comforts within the reach of all. The one preoccupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord. Hence Israelites will be very wise, they will know the things that are now concealed and will attain an understanding of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written: "For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:9).¹¹

If we, in our own personal lives, are already living this kind of "messianic" existence, "that blessings *are* abundant and comforts *are* within the reach of all," then we too should utilize our time "to know the Lord." I do not mean that we must totally reject other more conventional modes of spending leisure time but we should certainly take advantage of this wonderful opportunity to enhance our knowledge of God and His Torah. Is our *neshamah* at risk in an age of leisure? It need not be if we utilize our time properly and wisely.

The second, most obvious paradigm is, of course, the Shabbat. It would be instructive to extrapolate the purpose and value of Shabbat and apply it to the leisure time we have all week long. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Shabbat*, end Chapter XV) states: לא ניתנו שבתות וימים טובים אלא לאכילה

ולשתייה . . . לא ניתנו שבתות וימים טובים אלא לעסוק בהן בדברי תורה. Both are true. The Shabbat was given both for personal pleasure *and* for Torah study.¹² So must we also spend our leisure time.

Finally, if we act that way, we will be able to fulfill another important and significant, yet overlooked, aspect of Shabbat, hinted at in the *'Amidah* for *Minḥah* on Shabbat afternoon. We focus on the *menuḥah* of Shabbat and conclude with: יכירו בניך וידעו כי מאתך היא מנוחתם ועל מנוחתם יקדישו את שמך. We acknowledge and recognize that our rest is from God and by means of properly observing that rest, we sanctify His name. The notion of Shabbat and, specifically, the notion of *menuḥah* or leisure on Shabbat, leads to *kiddush Hashem*.

This brings me, in conclusion, to one of my most favorite talmudic passages. The Talmud (*Yoma* 86a) states:

כדתינא ואהבת את ה' אלהיך שיהא שם שמים מתאהב על ידך שיהא קורא ושונה ומשמש תי"ח ויהא משאו ומתנו באמונה ודבורו בנחת עם הבריות מה הבריות אומרות עליו אשרי אביו שלמדו תורה אשרי רבו שלמדו תורה אוי להם לבריות שלא למדו תורה. פלוני שלמדו תורה ראו כמה נאים דרכיו כמה מתוקנים מעשיו. עליו הכתוב אומר ויאמר לי עבדי אתה ישראל אשר בך אתפאר. אבל מי שקורא ושונה ומשמש תי"ח ואין משאו ומתנו באמונה ואין דבורו בנחת עם הבריות מה הבריות אומרות עליו אוי לו לפלוני שלמד תורה אוי לו לאביו שלמדו תורה אוי לו לרבו שלמדו תורה. פלוני שלמד תורה ראו כמה מקולקלן מעשיו וכמה מכוערין דרכיו. ועליו הכתוב אומר באמור להם עם ה' אלה ומארצו יצאו.

As it was taught: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God," i.e. that the Name of Heaven be beloved because of you. If someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, and attends on the disciples of the wise, is honest in business, and speaks pleasantly to persons, what do people then say concerning him? "Happy the father who taught him Torah, happy the teacher who taught him Torah; woe unto people who have not studied the Torah; for this man has studied the Torah—look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds!" Of him does Scripture say: "And He said unto me: Thou art My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But if someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, attends on the disciples of the wise, but is dishonest in business, and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? "Woe unto him who studied the Torah, woe unto his father who taught him Torah; woe unto his teacher who taught

him Torah! This man studied the Torah: Look, how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways; of him Scripture says: 'In that men said of them: These are the people of the Lord, and are gone forth out of His land.' "

This is what affluence can lead to—not risking the *neshamah* but, on the contrary, elevating it by bringing *kedushah* to man and a *kiddush Hashem* to God.

NOTES

1. This was first printed by S. Z. H. Halberstamm, "Takkanot Kadmoniyot," *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz* (Breslau, 1887), 58 (Heb.). It was reprinted in Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1964), 284f. The English translation, with some changes, is from Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (Cincinnati, 1938), 194. For a description of the clothes described here, see M. Guedemann's letter to Halberstamm printed as an appendix to his article, *ibid.*, 64. This regulation is discussed in L. Finkelstein, *ibid.*, 87-88 and Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1896), 144-45.
Since the garments are closed, any expensive lining would not be visible and, as a result, would be permitted to be worn.
2. See Jacob R. Marcus, *ibid.*, 195. For the curative power of a precious stone, see *Bava Batra* 16b.
3. See Leo Jung, *Business Ethics in Jewish Law* (New York, 1987), 188.
4. For other examples, see Israel Abrahams, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 181, 291-95; Cecil Roth, "Sumptuary Laws of the Community of Carpentras," *Jewish Quarterly Review* XVIII (1927-1928), 357-83 and the extensive bibliography cited in nn. 1-14; Louis Finkelstein, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 60, 88, 243-44, 262, 373-74; Salo Baron, *The Jewish Community II* (Philadelphia, 1942), 301-07; *Encyclopedia Judaica* XV (1972), 515-16; Aryeh Spero, "'Conspicuous Consumption' at Jewish Functions," *Judaism* XXXVII:1 (1988), 103-10.
5. See also in the Carpentras enactment, *ibid.*, 380: מפני הקנאה והשנאה אשר האומות עיניהם תלויות בנו זה דרכם פסל לנו ועברתם שמרה נצח בראותם אלה בני ישראל יוצאים במלבושיהם כל אחד ואחד כי ה' הטובה עליו. For another example of this consideration, see Israel Abrahams, *ibid.*, 294.
6. For evidence of this on the part of Gentiles, see Joseph Jacobs, *The Jews of Angevin England* (London, 1893), 339. Christian chroniclers blamed anti-Jewish riots on their ostentatious display of riches.
For a recent use of this Rashi in a similar context, see Rabbi Shimon Schwab, "The Jew in Golus: How High a Profile?" *The Jewish Observer* XXI:1 (February, 1988), 12.
7. William E. Geist, "Culinary D-Day: Caterer Marshals A Nosh for 20,000," *The New York Times*, June 10, 1987, p. B1.

8. Thomas L. Friedman, "Nimrodi Gives a Party and All the Big Guns Come," *ibid.*, June 11, 1987, p. A4.
9. Kurt Eichenwald, "For Ivan Boesky, Punishment Was Tax-Deductible," *ibid.*, May 25, 1990, p. D17.
10. In this discussion, I have benefitted from Norman Lamm, "A Jewish Ethic of Leisure," *Faith and Doubt* (New York, 1971), 186-211. For other discussions of this issue, see *Report of the Conference on the New Leisure* convened by The Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Boston, 1956); W. Gunther Plaut, "The Sabbath as Protest: Thoughts on Work and Leisure in the Automated Society," *Tradition and Change in Jewish Experience*, ed. by A. Leland Jamison (Syracuse, 1978), 169-83.
For some general treatments of the subject, see Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (London, 1952); Max Kaplan, *Leisure in America: A Social Inquiry* (New York and London, 1960); Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work and Leisure* (New York, 1962). Most interesting is Robert Lee, *Religion and Leisure in America* (Abingdon Press, 1964); Elihu Katz and Michael Gurevitch, *The Secularization of Leisure: Culture and Communication in Israel* (Cambridge, 1976); Uri Liptzin, *Tarbut ha-Penai ve-ha-Nofesh bi-Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv, 1981).
11. *Hil. Melakhim* XII:4-5.
12. This is along the lines of the opinion of R. Yehoshua (*Pesaḥim* 68b) with regard to *yom tov*—it is not to be utilized for either "eating and drinking" or "sitting and studying" as R. Eliezer maintains (*ibid.*) but for both activities.

BODY AND SOUL IN JUDAISM

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