

Choosing Contentment
Rosh Hashanah Day II 5783 (2022)
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Ben Zoma said: “Who is rich? One who rejoices in what he has.” (Pirkey Avot 4:1).

The story is told of a king who built a marvelous castle at the center of town. In its surrounding gardens, the king planted opulent trees, ample with fruits, nestled among stunning rose bushes and lush flowers. At the entrance of the garden, the king placed a small sign that read: “The castle and the gardens will be gifted to the person who rejoices in what they have.”

Every passerby who chanced upon the sign immediately knew, “This palace and its gardens could not be claimed by me! Indeed, whatever one has, they always wish to double!”

And yet, one person did come upon the sign and thought of himself as deserving of these gifts, “For after all”, he said to himself, “Certainly, I am content with all that I have!”

Feeling confident, the man approached the king and proclaimed, “I am one who rejoices in all that I have! The king ought to reward me with this marvelous castle and its surrounding gardens.”

The king smiled knowingly at the man and quietly explained, “If you are indeed content with all that you have, why then did you set your eyes upon my castle and my gardens? Why would a person who is presumably content with all that he has, wish for more and more?” (Rav Ovadia Yosef, *Anaf Etz Avot*, 4:1).

We all get the paradox that lies in the clever trap set by the king. That very trap is set within the human heart – a heart that strives, and longs to achieve and succeed, at times without appropriate restraints.

And yet, I can also understand the other side of the equation. The desire to have more exists in a context worth our appreciation. Consider any recent trip to the supermarket or the gas station.

At some point during the summer, while checking out at Trader Joe’s, it suddenly dawned on me – “My money is worth.....less.” Just a few months ago, it seemed to me that \$50, \$100, \$150, got me a lot more.

And I am sure that many of us feel that way at gas stations: “My money is worth....less.” Just a few months ago, it seemed to me, that \$30, \$60, \$90 got me a lot further.

And if you’re blessed to have a retirement fund or other forms of financial investments, I imagine that at some point recently you’ve thought to yourself: “These funds were supposed to last much longer.” Sure, we are told that one who rejoices in what they have is rich, but I can’t help but think that what I have today is considerably less than what I had yesterday or the day before.

According to the Talmud, I am in good company in my search for a different response. In fact, Tractate Shabbat (25b) offers several answers to this question that greatly differ from that of Ben Zoma:

“The Sages taught: Who is rich?

Anyone who gets pleasure from his wealth, that is the statement of Rabbi Meir.

Rabbi Tarfon says: A wealthy person is anyone who has one hundred vineyards, and one hundred fields, and one hundred servants working in them.

Rabbi Akiva says: Anyone who has a wife whose actions are pleasant.

Rabbi Yosei says: Anyone who has a bathroom close to his table.”

These instructive responses afford us different ways to think about wealth and contentment.

Is our sense of contentment purely psychological— simple and difficult as Ben Zoma’s clever aphorism instructing us to rejoice in what we have?

Or perhaps it requires a further step – tangibly taking pleasure in what we have, as suggested by R. Meir?

In stark contrast, R. Tarfon insists that wealth can be measured in objective terms – show me bank statements and I’ll tell you who is rich!

R. Tarfon’s materialist approach invites R. Akiva’s social and pietistic response – wealth lies in your home, in the family and social circle to which you belong, and the deeds that those relations inspire.

Finally, R. Yosei’s counsel that wealth is experienced by those whose bathroom is near their table, reminds us that a life of wealth and contentment is one in which there is proper balance between what we intake, consume, and ingest, and what we digest, discharge, and reject.

In reflecting upon these answers, I've developed my own three responses to this question.

First, have less and give more.

Second, practice gratitude.

And third, be prepared for change.

First: Have less and give more.

In my search for an answer to this question, I came across the story of Julie Wise and Jeff Kaufman. The couple has been featured in Larissa MacFarquhar's book, titled *Strangers Drowning*, in which she presents cases of "extreme virtue."

"In 2013, [the couple's] combined income was just under \$245,000, putting them in the top 10% of US households. And yet, excluding taxes and savings, they lived on just \$15,280, or 6.25% of their income. What happened to the rest of their income, just under \$100,000? They gave it to charity."

<https://qz.com/515655/this-couple-lives-on-6-of-their-income-so-they-can-give-100000-a-year-to-charity/#:~:text=Julia%20Wise%20is%20a%20social,or%206.25%25%20of%20their%20income>

By asking a simple question – what is enough? – the couple developed a unique approach to giving.

Initially, they discovered through various studies and research experiments, that "for individuals living in affluent countries additional income simply does not increase your well-being very much past a certain point" (ibid.). Further along, they quantified this number as \$70,000 for a household of two. Eventually, as their own income increased significantly, they made a commitment to give away at least \$100,000 every year. And when their wealth grew even more, they committed to giving at least 30% of their earnings every year. In actuality, they've been giving 50% of their income away for the past few years.

I must stress that this couple has been consistent with their way of giving – and perhaps more accurately, in their way of living – well before their annual earnings were above \$100,000.

On the one hand, this couple's approach seems like a pietistic exaggeration of Ben Zoma's approach. Who is rich? One is able to know what is enough!

On the other hand, their approach is also a very realistic take on R. Tarfon's materialistic or objective response. For R. Tarfon, a wealthy person is anyone who has one hundred vineyards, and one hundred

fields, and one hundred servants working in them. Julie and Jeff give a contemporary counter response: Anything beyond \$70,000 in a household of two makes you rich in an affluent country.

Now many of us don't earn that much, so our sense of wealth and contentment may need to come from elsewhere. Even still, for those of us earning more than that amount, we may not feel fully comfortable adopting such an extreme pietistic approach.

And yet, my sense is that we can all benefit from truly reflecting on this very question: What is enough? What is enough for us? Specifically, what is enough for me? Might we require less than we actually think we need?

In thinking about this current economic downturn, and after getting over the shock of rising costs and expenses, I imagine that many of us – though in truth, not all of us – have discovered, that while we may have less, we still have what we need.

So, who is rich? One who understands that they have enough and recognizes that they always have a little bit more to give.

Second: Practice gratitude.

In tractate Brachot the rabbis ask: "From where is it derived that one is obligated to recite blessings before eating?" (BT Brachot 48b). That is, what verse teaches us that we ought to say blessings before each first bite that we take. The rabbis provide a logical answer, arguing that "it can be derived through an a fortiori inference: When one is satisfied, he is obligated to recite a blessing and thank God for food; when he is hungry, all the more so that he should recite a blessing to offer thanks for the food he will eat." Given that the Torah instructed us explicitly to bless God after every meal, doesn't it seem logical to bless God just before eating. Our sense of gratitude actually begins with an empty stomach. We practice gratitude well before getting our needs met.

But there's more. The Torah explicitly instructs us to only thank God once we become satiated. In the words of the Torah in Deuteronomy 8:10: "And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God" – ואכלת ושבעת וברכת. And yet, that particular instruction is not followed in actuality, as the Talmud notes: "[Jews] are exacting with themselves to recite Grace after Meals even if they have eaten as much as an olive-bulk or an egg-bulk. Since they go beyond the requirements of the law, they are worthy of [God's] favor" (BT Brachot 20b).

The Torah only instructed us to thank God after we eat. Not only that, but it also only commanded us to thank God once we feel fully satiated. And yet, our rabbinic tradition challenges us to practice gratitude in quite a different way. We bless God even before our very first bite. And we thank God even if after our very last bite we remain hungry.

So, who is rich? One who practices gratitude, whether they are full or they are not.

Third: Be prepared for change.

A story I recently heard:

Shortly before dying, a very wealthy, old man gave his son a box, instructing him as follows: "When you really need help, open this box."

Upon the old man's death, his son inherited a vast fortune, which he enjoyed to no end. At the peak of his indulgence, the son seemed to have everything, without any real want or need for anything, and yet in time, a certain void began to fill his heart. No knowing what to do with this feeling, the son reached for his father's box.

Inside the box he discovered a note, which read: "Everything Changes." The box also contained another smaller box in it.

The son threw out the note and the original box and kept the smaller box that was set inside of it.

Some time later, the son lost absolutely everything he had. He became destitute with nothing left but the smaller box his father once gave him. In final desperation the son opened up the smaller box and inside he discovered another note. The note read: "Everything Changes" (as told by Roman Polnar).

So who is rich? One who remember that everything changes.

Parashat Reeh begins with these words: "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing - if you listen to God's mitzvot...and the curse - if you do not listen" (Devarim 11:26-28.) R. Eliakim Koenigsberg asks, "Why does the [verse] begin with the word '*re'eh* – see'? It should have simply said, 'I present before you today a blessing and a curse.'" In response, R. Koenigsberg offers this insight, "the Torah uses the word *re'eh* [see], to highlight the fact that feeling blessed is often a matter of perspective" (https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2017/parsha/rkoe_reeh.html).

What perspective do we bring with us into this new year?

How might we think differently about what we have and what we need?

What is within our power, within ourselves, that would ensure, no matter the economy, no matter life's blessings and curses, that we will still feel satiated and fulfilled?

First, even if we have less, let us give more. If we give more, we will feel like we have more as well.

Second, let us practice gratitude with our stomachs empty, and please God, with our stomachs full.

Third, let us remember that everything changes. And if everything changes, I promise you, it can change for the better as well.

And if we choose hope and contentment – it will!