

Black Friday at Wal-Mart—Really Black



The spiraling economy has everyone in a grip of fear and anxiety. We have seen jobs, homes, wealth, retirement, our security imperilled or diminished or lost in just a few months. It reminds us of the interconnected global economy, and of the essential insecurity of the human condition. It also reminds us of the human predilection for deception and thievery fueled by greed.

Sometimes an event can put a cultural trend into frightening perspective. On the day after Thanksgiving, known as Black Friday, we watched as stores promoted a frenzy of shopping, offering deep discounts to entice people to line up in the wee hours of the morning, awaiting an early morning, 4:00 AM, 5:00 AM or 6:00 AM opening. In some communities, hundreds of people lined up and rushed through the doors the moment they were opened.

In one community, it turned ugly and tragic. In Valley Stream, NY, on Long Island, a crowd of more than 2,000 had gathered outside a Wal-Mart Store. As the appointed hour approached, the crowd turned into a mob. The doors were pushed in off their hinges, glass shattered everywhere, and a stampede of shoppers entered the building. In the melee, a store employee, trying futilely to hold the crowd back until opening time, was trampled to death. Others were injured and sent to the hospital, among them a pregnant woman. And when the store was temporarily closed because of the death, injuries and damage, the people refused to stop shopping. They were not to be denied their items on special sale.

To me, this is a vivid, if extreme, example of the materialism that is at the core of American society today and that corrodes our national character. In a world where religion is on the wane, and civic virtues are continually being undermined, we are suffering from a surfeit of material blessings and under the impression that they will give meaning to our lives, make us happy, and that we cannot do without them.

We have sent young men and women to die and be injured and disfigured in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we have continued to party obscenely at home while the dead and the maimed are hidden from view.

Why should it surprise us that in the quest for a large-screen TV at deep discount, the life of a human being is of marginal value.

I am reminded of the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. You remember how the citizens of Babel built a tower to rise heavenward, to put themselves on the same plane as God. But God destroys the tower, and disperses them all over the world so they cannot resume their pretentious designs.

But why was God concerned? Surely God knew that no matter how high they would build the tower it would never reach the Divine Abode. The *Midrash* teaches that the reason that God stopped them from building the tower had nothing to do with their threatening the Almighty, but because of what it did to human society. As the tower was being built, people would fall off the scaffolding, plunging to their death. God saw that when a construction worker fell, it went without notice. Another took the place of the dead one and the work continued without interruption. No one even stopped to collect the corpse. Surely, God thought, this cannot continue. This project corrodes human society. It must be stopped.

The incident on Black Friday at Wal-Mart should be a wake up call to us about the values of our society. It is an extreme incident, to be sure. But it is fueled by the materialism of our society. One chain during the holiday season urged its shoppers to be “shopper-tunistic.” And on a TV show highlighting the work of a children’s research hospital, the audience whooped it up only when they were told that the hospital’s “partners,” a clothing chain and jewelry store were each going to give every audience member a \$100 gift card. I wonder if they would have cheered if the “partners” had given donations to the hospital in the amount of \$100 for each audience member instead.

We all love “stuff.” We love to get new things. They can make us happy. For a while. But you can’t build life on material things. The Black Friday incident at Wal-Mart should be a wake up call to us about what is wrong with our society, and with our own lives. We need to search for meaning elsewhere. It is surely not to be found in a large screen TV, purchased at deep discount, after a fellow shopper is trampled to death. In a way, our materialism is trampling us all.

There must be a better way.

CONGREGATION
ADATH JESHURUN



7763 Old York Road
Elkins Park, PA 19027
215.635.6611
www.adathjeshurun.info