

Behar - Bechukotai, 5780 Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

Parashat Behar is, as Willie Sutton would say, where the money is. No Parasha in the Torah deals more extensively with laws of commercial economics and transactions than this one. It is noteworthy, though, that the diverse monetary concepts taught in this Parasha span the entire spectrum: while we find examples of money being used as an agent of selfishness and oppression through price gouging and interest, we also find money as a unique vehicle for spreading love, such as uplifting your brother who is falling financially, redeeming a person who has been sold into poverty, and helping a relative redeem his beloved ancestral field. Although many people dismiss the pursuit of money as inherently insignificant and superficial, this Parasha reminds us of the great spiritual potential of money.

Few things color a person's life more than his or her connection to money. How one sees money may affect how one spends one's time, whom one chooses to marry, and how one defines one's own self worth. And yet, despite this immense influence, people all too often fall into the trap of mindless pursuit, without ever reassessing *why* they want money; seeing everyone around them rushing to maximally earn, and automatically needing to do the same. I remember once asking a person, who happened to live alone with copious savings, why he was working so hard to earn so much money. His answer was surprising but not necessarily atypical. He shrugged and said, "I don't know, I just do it."

While saving money for ourselves is obviously an inevitable necessity, the highest value of money comes in building love towards others. Whether in major ways, like redeeming a relative's sentimental ancestral field, or in more minor ways, like buying a small souvenir for someone you thought he might enjoy, there is no greater use for money than to lift someone else's spirits. If I work solely to amass as much money for my own personal needs and all potential eventualities -- like a squirrel anxiously stockpiling as many acorns as it can grab -- my money becomes vapid and meaningless. Burnout and depression will frequently be waiting not far down the road, and my inability to part with my money will likely make me more anxious about the prospect of ever losing it. But if I earn in order to be able to elevate others, my labor becomes inspiring, and my money becomes truly valuable. Exhausting late night work sessions become a lot more meaningful when you imagine the smiles on your children or grandchildren's faces with the toys you plan to buy for them with your earnings. Or how happy you will make a lonely person feel by being able to afford to host them at your Shabbat table. The love that comes from selflessness is ironically the greatest reward money can buy.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler famously wrote, perhaps counterintuitively, that the secret to developing feelings of love for others lies in giving to them, as opposed to receiving from them. It seems that this is most true when one gives with conscious intention to cultivate this love. Oftentimes, when we give charity, we do so from a sense of obligation: this is what I'm supposed to do, perhaps I will be rewarded for doing so, or perhaps I'm a bit guilty. While such a level is undoubtedly admirable, in doing so, we forget what we are supposed to feel when we give: a sense of deep compassion and love towards the recipient. Perhaps this is why our Parasha utilizes the phrase, "your brother," so often when talking about monetary relationships: the act of giving with a full heart enables you to truly feel like someone is your brother. Before the next time you press the "submit" button on a donation website, it might be worth pausing for a moment and meditating on this truth.

Now is a time when many people need help desperately. Many of us have been hit heavily financially, and many others are in fear of future losses. For those who do have means, there is no greater opportunity to sanctify your money and your life, not only by giving, but by giving with a deep sense of love. It is an investment you will never regret.