



Between Economy and Luxury

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Parashat Tetzaveh 5779

Parashat Tetzaveh opens with the commandment to illuminate the *mishkan*,¹

שמות כז:כ-כא

אתה תצוה את בני ישראל ויקחו אליך שמן זית זך כתית למאור להעלות נר תמיד: באהל מועד מחוץ
לפרכת אשר על העדות יערוך אתו אהרן ובניו מערב עד בקר לפני ה' חקת עולם לדורתם מאת בני ישראל:

Shemot 27:20-21

And you shall command *Benei Yisrael* to bring to you pure, pressed olive oil for lighting to light a constant lamp. Aharon and his sons should set it outside the divider which is on the meeting-place from evening to morning, an eternal statute for generations, from *Benei Yisrael*.

This light spares no expense and actually serves very little function. It is to be lit constantly. This includes during the night, when no one is serving in the *mishkan*, as well as during the day, where natural light could have been used instead. And God insists that the lamp oil is to be of the highest quality, though it is only being used as fuel. Through its golden construction and its costly upkeep, the *menorah* (lamp) becomes a focal point for how to understand and think deeply about the economics of the *mishkan*. How are we to understand its lavishness and expense? On the one hand, God deserves only the best, but on the other hand, is the best that we bring to God our material possessions? Is the most expensive way to serve God the only or best way to serve Him?

¹ The *mishkan*, often translated as “tabernacle,” was a mobile “home” for God, where sacrifices and other ritual ceremonies were performed.



In Massekhet Menahot, the Mishnah² states that each of the seven lights of the Menorah used up a half a *log*³ of fine olive oil a day, a three and a half *log* total. The Gemara later asks how it is that they got to this measure, and in the process contrasts two opposing financial principles that operate throughout the construction of the *mishkan* and the service within it:

תלמוד בבלי מנחות פט:

ושערו חכמים חצי לוג מאורתא ועד צפרא. איכא דאמרי מלמטה למעלה שערו. ואיכא דאמרי מלמעלה למטה שערו. מאן דאמר מלמטה למעלה שערו - "התורה חסה על ממוןם של ישראל." מאן דאמר מלמעלה למטה שערו - "אין עניות במקום עשירות."

Talmud Bavli Menahot 89b

And the Sages measured the half *log* [that it would be sufficient to burn] from night until morning. There are those who say that they measured by increasing the amount [of oil each time they ran the experiment] and there are those who say that they measured by decreasing the amount.⁴ The position that says that they measured by increasing [employed the principle of] “the Torah spared the money of Israel” and the position that says that they measured in decreasing amounts [employed the principle of] “there is no poverty in the place of wealth.”

This “dispute” in Menahot is not a dispute about the law—the quantity of the oil is unanimously agreed upon. The dispute here is about the process, about the proper way to assess how much oil is needed. Do we want to start cautiously with the smallest amount of oil, increasing with each iteration, so as not to waste the money of the Jewish people, or do we want to spend lavishly, overestimating the amount of oil necessary, because this experiment is important and we don’t want to be stingy?

Both of these impulses are present in the laws of the *mishkan* (and later, the Temple) and its service. On the one hand, the daily incense offering was prepared in relatively inexpensive silver vessels and then poured into gold, in deference to the principle that God and the Torah are sensitive to the finances of Israel and therefore don’t want them to be constantly ruining and replacing expensive gold instruments.⁵ On the other hand, Rav Aha bar Ya’akov says that when the dyes were prepared for the *mishkan*’s curtains, they were made in generous

² Mishnah Menahot 9:3.

³ A *log* is about 10 fluid ounces.

⁴ To measure in decreasing amounts means that first you put in the maximum amount of oil that could possibly be necessary, when you see that it is too much, you decrease the amount in the next iteration. Measuring in increasing amounts is the opposite. First you start with the minimal amount of oil and then add until you find out that there is enough. The final amount doesn’t change, but the amount of oil used in the process of the experiment is much greater when using decreasing amounts.

⁵ On Yom Kippur, however, even the preparation of the incense was done in gold vessels. See Talmud Bavli Yoma 43b.



amounts that exceeded how much was needed since there is “no poverty in the place of wealth,” and in the work of the *mishkan* there was no concern about waste.

Many have suggested different ways to account for why the principle of frugality applies in some cases while the tendency towards lavishness and even wastefulness applies in other cases, attempting to find a systematic rule of thumb for explaining why each rule would apply in each case. However, the fact that both of these tendencies exist side by side and can be difficult to coherently disentangle from one another is a lesson in and of itself. Sometimes the right approach is to spend and sometimes the right approach is to scrimp and save. Sometimes the Torah asks us to invest and sometimes the Torah has compassion on us and our often meager means.

One way of bridging these two principles is to understand them entirely in terms of budgeting. I need to save in order to spend later and if I keep on spending, I’ll eventually need to save. However, this explanation privileges spending and assumes that there is no inherent value to the self-discipline that frugality requires and the modesty that frugality displays. Yet this is what the Mishnah in Avot valorizes when it talks about the simple life that a Torah scholar lives:

משנה אבות ו:ד

כך היא דרכה של תורה, פת במלח תאכל ומים במשורה תשתה ועל הארץ תישן וחיי צער תחיה ובתורה אתה עמל, אם אתה עושה כן, (תהלים קכח:ב): **אשריך וטוב לך. אשריך בעולם הזה - וטוב לך לעולם הבא.**

Mishnah Avot 6:4

This is the way of the Torah. Eat bread and salt and drink water in measured amounts. Sleep on the ground and live a life of difficulty, and labor in the Torah. If you do so, **you are fortunate and it is good for you** (Tehillim 128:2). **You are fortunate**—in this world and **it will be good for you**—in the world to come.

On the one hand, this *mishnah* clearly promises an eternal reward, there will be good that comes to you and is saved for you in the afterlife. On the other hand, the Mishnah articulates the life of living on the bare necessities as being the way of the Torah. This in and of itself makes you fortunate and praiseworthy in *this* world. The Mishnah views the life without luxury as being inherently valuable. This is one way of interpreting the Torah’s statement that despite the Torah’s efforts to redistribute wealth and to keep families on their ancestral homelands, there will always be poor people:

דברים טו:יא

כי לא יחדל אביון מקרב הארץ על כן אנכי מצוך לאמר פתח את ידך לאחיך לעניך ולאביוןך בארץך.

Devarim 15:11

For impoverishment will not cease from the midst of the land. Therefore I command you saying, “Open up your hand to your brother, your poor, and your impoverished in your land.”

God sees that it is difficult to be poor and He wants to alleviate the suffering of the poor, but He does not try to erase poverty and poor people entirely. He does not want to make Israel into a wealthy nation. In fact, Moshe prophesies that should Israel become too wealthy, they might turn their backs on God:

דברים לב:טו

וַיִּשְׁמַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעֹט שְׁמֹנֶת עֶבֶרֶת כְּשִׁית וַיִּטֹּשׁ אֱלֹהִים עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֹּל צוּר יִשְׁעָתוֹ:

Devarim 32:15

Yeshurun⁶ grew fat and kicked. You grew fat and wide and coarse. He abandoned the God who made him and spurned the rock of his salvation.

It seems, then, that the wealthy and the poor are in a mutualistic relationship. The poor teach the wealthy humility and the wealthy teach the poor generosity. Being wealthy can limit our empathy and modesty, but being poor can limit our capacity to do good in and truly appreciate this world. This understanding is reflected in a saying of R. Illa'i:

תלמוד בבלי ערובין סה:

א"ר אילעאי בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר בכוסו ובכיסו ובכעסו.

Talmud Bavli Eruvin 65b

R. Illa'i says: A person is known by three things: their drink, their wallet, and their anger.⁷

R. Illa'i says that a person's character is reflected in how they act when under the influence of alcohol (or by their choice to drink more or less), how a person spends their money, and how a person acts when they are angry (or by what makes them angry). What R. Illa'i does not say is that a person should not drink, should not have money (or should not be poor), or should never get angry. Everyone has a different temperament, a different temper, and a different financial situation. What is important is how you manage what you have.

One of the most central lessons of having a role for wealth and a place for poverty in God's home is that neither wealth nor poverty is assigned a moral value. Both are reflections of the way that we live, both are paths that we can trod to serve God. We're not always placed on

⁶ This is another name for Israel.

⁷ In the Hebrew, these three words sound very similar: *koso*, *kiso*, *ka'aso*.



the path that we prefer, but neither is inherently more spiritually worthwhile. As humans, we feel uncomfortable with this asymmetry, that we rightly acknowledge as unfair. We can and should work towards bridging the gap between those who have more financial capital and those who have less. However it is important that we not assign moral value where it doesn't belong. Rich people don't "deserve" to be rich and poor people don't "deserve" to be poor.

In Bava Batra, the Roman governor Quintus Tineius Rufus, R. Akiva's tormentor and interlocutor⁸ adopts the wrong approach:

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא י.

וְזוֹ שְׂאֵלָה שָׁאֵל טוֹרְנוֹסְרוּפּוֹס אֶת ר' עֲקִיבָא: אִם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אוֹהֵב עֲנִיִּים הוּא מִפְּנֵי מָה אֵינוֹ מְפָרְקֵם?
אָמַר לוֹ: כִּדִּי שְׂנֵאוֹל אֲנִי בְּהֶם מְדִינָה שֶׁל גִּיהֶנֶם.
אָמַר לוֹ: אֲדַרְבֶּה, זוֹ שְׂמִיחַיְבָתֶם לְגִיהֶנֶם. אֲמַשֵּׁל לָךְ מַשָּׁל, לָמָּה הַדָּבָר דּוֹמֶה: לְמַלְךָ בֶּשֶׁר וְדָם שֶׁכַּעַס עַל עַבְדּוֹ וְחָבְשׁוֹ בְּבֵית הָאֲסוּרִים, וְצוּהוּ עָלָיו שֶׁלֹּא לְהַאֲכִילוֹ וְשֶׁלֹּא לְהַשְׁקוֹתוֹ, וְהִלֵּךְ אָדָם אֶחָד וְהִאֲכִילוֹ וְהִשְׁקָהוּ, כְּשֶׁשָּׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ - לֹא כּוֹעֵס עָלָיו? וְאַתֶּם קְרוּיִים עַבְדִּים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: **כִּי לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּים** (ויקרא כה:נה).
אָמַר לוֹ ר' עֲקִיבָא: אֲמַשֵּׁל לָךְ מַשָּׁל, לָמָּה הַדָּבָר דּוֹמֶה: לְמַלְךָ בֶּשֶׁר וְדָם שֶׁכַּעַס עַל בְּנוֹ וְחָבְשׁוֹ בְּבֵית הָאֲסוּרִים, וְצוּהוּ עָלָיו שֶׁלֹּא לְהַאֲכִילוֹ וְשֶׁלֹּא לְהַשְׁקוֹתוֹ, וְהִלֵּךְ אָדָם אֶחָד וְהִאֲכִילוֹ וְהִשְׁקָהוּ, כְּשֶׁשָּׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ - לֹא דוֹרֵן מַשְׁגֵּר לוֹ?
וְאֲנִי קְרוּיִים בְּנִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: **בְּנִים אַתֶּם לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם** (דברים יד, א)...

Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 10a

Tineius Rufus asked this of R. Akiva, "If your God loves the poor, why doesn't he provide for them?" [R. Akiva] said to him, "So that we can be saved through them from a judgment of hell."

[Tineius Rufus] said to him, "To the contrary! This (i.e. supporting the poor) is what is condemning you to hell. I will construct a parable for you, to what is this analogous? To a human king who was angry at his servant and imprisoned him and commanded regarding him that no one give him food or drink. One person came and gave him food and drink. When the king hears, won't he be angry?! And you are called servants, as it says, ***Benei Yisrael are My servants*** (VaYikra 25:55)."

R. Akiva said to him, "I will construct a parable for you, to what is this analogous? To a human king who was angry at his son and imprisoned him and commanded regarding him that no one give him food or drink. One person came and gave him food and drink. When the king hears, won't he send him a gift?! And we are called children, as it says, ***You are children to HaShem your God*** (Devarim 14:1)."

⁸ R. Akiva is understood to have been an active supporter of Bar Kokhba's revolt against the Romans. Quintus Tineius Rufus is the general who put down the revolt. In Rabbinic texts, he and R. Akiva face off philosophically more than they do politically.

Tineius Rufus has a particular way of explaining evil in this world that allows him to justify why there are poor and suffering people—they deserve it because God is angry at them. Therefore, giving charity or helping someone impoverished in any other way contradicts God’s command, His punishment of this person. In his parable, Tineius Rufus thinks of the poor person as a servant or slave who the King does not care about and thinks of only in terms of his instrumental value. R. Akiva, on the other hand, sees everyone, rich and poor, as being God’s children. He sees the poor person as unfortunate, not as morally inferior. And though his response frames the “function” of the poor person as being somewhat instrumental—a needy individual provides an opportunity for a rich person to be saved from hell—there is a subtle implication here that R. Akiva, as a formerly impoverished person, is making. He teaches that wealthy people are not inherently good and therefore wealthy. If they were wealthy because they were righteous then they would not need anyone to save them from hell. Their virtue alone would save them. Clearly then the rich aren’t automatically virtuous, the poor necessarily blameworthy, or the contrary.

The *mishkan*’s ability to have the principle of “no poverty in the place of wealth” exist side by side with cost-saving measures, like the sliding-scale *oleh v’yoreid* offering,⁹ teaches us not only that both wealth and poverty, rich and poor, can coexist, but also that they can do so in close proximity to one another. In a socio-economically stratified society the poor live next to and associate with other poor people and the wealthy socialize only with people who have similar means. This prevents the poor and rich from supporting and educating one another. The anonymous text of Mussar, the *Orhot Tzaddikim*, warns against this physical isolation, which he classifies as a type of physical haughtiness. According to him there are a number of ways to demonstrate pride, *g’avah*, in the body. And he distinguishes between a positive way of demonstrating pride and a negative way of demonstrating pride. And in the bad way an arrogant person isolates themselves:

אורחות צדיקים-גאווה

באזניים: לא ישמע דברי העניים האומללים. בריח אפו: בעמדו אצל עניים או כשנכנס לבתיהם, הם סרוחים בעיניו.

Orhot Tzaddikim-Ga'avah (Pride)

[Pride¹⁰] in the ears: He doesn’t hear the words of the downtrodden poor. Of the sense of smell: When he stands next to the poor or enters their house, they are disgusting in his eyes.

⁹ VaYikra 5:7-13.

¹⁰ Though *ge'avah* is often translated as haughtiness, the *Orhot Tzaddikim* later talks of a “good” type of *ge'avah* which only makes sense if *ge'avah* is understood as pride, which is not exclusively negative.

According to the Or^hot Tzaddikim it is critical for the moral development of the wealthy that they don't look down on the poor, and critically, do not distance themselves from those who they think are less "refined" than they are.

These two strands are also within us. Are we willing to acknowledge our wealth and spend money when we can and should or are we always scrimping and saving? Are we willing to invest in what matters? And do we think consciously about living modestly, maybe beneath our means, displaying the virtue of the poor? God wants the *mishkan* to be beautiful and this will only happen if respect for wealth and those who have it is shown. But God also wants His house to be inviting and welcoming to all including those whose means do not allow them to spend lavishly. God invites the wealthy to contribute their wealth and the poor to contribute their poverty. Each can worship God with who they are and what they have and benefit from the contributions and example of people who are not like them.

Wishing you a Shabbat of opulence and simplicity.

