

Ethical Consumerism
Desire, Responsibility, and the Good Society
The Moral Power of the Dollar!



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I. Negative Torah Ethics of Consumerism

1. Lifnei Iver

<p>Leviticus 19:14</p> <p>“You shall not curse the deaf, and you shall not place a stumbling block before the blind, you shall fear your G-d - I am Hashem.”</p>	<p>ויקרא פרק יט (יד) ל' א תקלל חרש וְלפני עור ל' א תתן) מִכָּשׁ ל' וְרַאתָ מֵאֵל הַיָּד אֲנִי יְק' נְק</p>
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2. Asceticism and Abstinence

A. Pleasure as ends distances one from G-d and destroys religion

<p>Chovot HaLevavot 9:2: Perishut</p> <p>“The instinct attracts them to an indulgent lifestyle and a pursuit of wealth, enamoring them of this world’s luxury and prominence, until finally they sink in the depths of the sea, forced to face the crush of its waves. The (material) world rules them, stopping up their ears and closing their eyes. There is not one among them who occupies himself with anything but his own pleasure - wherever he can attain it and the opportunity presents itself. (Pleasure) becomes his law and religion, driving him away from G-d. As it says, ‘Your own wickedness will punish you, your own sins will rebuke you....’ (Yirimeyahu 2:19).”</p>	<p>ספר חובות הלבבות שער ט - שער הפרישות פרק ב</p> <p>ויפה להם התפארה בו והרבות מהונו, וחבב עליהם להתעדן ולהתנשא בו, עד אשר צללו במצולות ימיו. וחייבם היצר לסבל צער גליהם, והעולם מושל בהם ואוטם אזניהם ומעצים את עיניהם, ואין מהם אחד אלא מתעסק בתענוגו כשישיגנו ויזדמן לו והוא תורתו ודתו, עד שטרד אותו מאלהיו, כמו שאמר: תיסרך רעתך! ומשבותיך תוכיחך וגו'</p>
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B. Consumption and Character

<p>Chovot HaLevavot 9:5 : Perishut</p> <p>“There are three ways of (partaking of) the permitted things left to our discretion.</p> <p>The first (way) is partaking (only) of food that is not consumed for pleasure, (food) without one could not live or continue to exist.</p> <p>The second (way) is partaking of permitted food in a (more) liberal fashion, aiming for moderation in pleasure without extravagance or profligacy - for example, by meeting (basic) needs with good bread and finely prepared dishes, by drinking good wine in moderation. The same applies to dress, living accommodations, and other needs.</p> <p>The third (way) is overindulging in permitted pleasures purely for the sake of luxury. This leads one to forbidden pleasures and keeps him from performing the duties he owes G-d, as it says: ‘Lest he quaff and forget that which is decreed,’ (Mishlei 31:5).”</p>	<p>ספר חובות הלבבות שער ט - שער הפרישות פרק ה</p> <p>וכן הניתן ברשותנו מן המותר הוא על שלשה פנים: אחד מהם, קחת המאכל, אשר לא יכוין בו בעליו אל תענוג ולא יוכל האדם לעמד בלעדיו ואין לו תקנה זולתו. והשני, קחת המזון מן המותר על דרך הויתור ומכוין בו אל התענוג השוה, מבלי רבוי ולא הפקר, כהשלמת הצורך מן הלחם הטוב בתבשילים מתוקנים במלאכתם ושתות היין הטוב על הדרך השוה וכן במלבוש ובדירה ושאר הענינים. והשלישית, קחת הרבה מן התענוגים המותרים, המפליג בהם בעליהם, עד שמביאים אותו אל התענוגים האסורים, עם טרדתו בהם מעשות חובות אלהיו שעליו, כמו שאמר: פן ישתה וישכח מחוקק</p>
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II. A Positive Consumer Ethic Beyond Abstinence

A. Desire: Need for the Yetzer Hara

<p><u>Yoma 69b</u></p> <p>“(The Men of the Great Assembly) then said: since it is now a time of Divine favor, let us pray for the (evil) inclination for immorality (to be subdued before us). They prayed and it too was delivered into their hands. (Then) it (the evil inclination) said to</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף סט עמוד ב</p> <p>אמרו: הואיל ועת רצון הוא נבעי רחמי איצרא דעבירה. בעו רחמי ואמסר בידייהו. אמר להו: חזו דאי קטליתו ליה לההוא - כליא עלמא. חבשוהו תלתא יומי, ובעו ביעתא בת יומא בכל ארץ ישראל ולא אשתכח.</p>
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<p>them: See that if you kill that (me) the world will become desolate. They imprisoned it for three days. (Over those three days) they sought a freshly laid egg throughout Israel and it was not to be found.</p> <p><u>Bereshit Rabbah 9:7 - commerce ceases</u></p>	
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B. Rav Yisrael Salanter’s Solution (Ohr L’Yisrael)

- o Kibbush Ha’Yetzer
- o Tikkun Ha’Yetzer

C. Giving Dignity to Emotional Life

The worth of a particular emotion must not be measured by some intrinsic quality it possesses, but rather by the relevance and significance of its correlate object. There are neither bad nor good emotions; instead there are bad or good emotional objective references,” (Rav Soloveitchik, A Theory of Emotions, p. 182).

D. Addressing Poverty Through Consumerism

<p><u>Taanit 21a</u></p> <p>Ilfa and R. Yochanan studied together the Torah and they found themselves and they found themselves in great want and they said to one another, Let us go and engage in some commerce so that we can fulfill the Torah verse “There shall be no needy among you.”</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כא עמוד א</p> <p>אילפא ורבי יוחנן הוו גרסי באורייתא, דחיקא להו מילתא טובא, אמרי: ניקום וניזיל וניעבד עיסקא, ונקיים בנפשין +דברים ט"ו+ אפס כי לא יהיה בך אביון.</p>
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E. Business is better than tzedakah and loans

<p><u>Shabbat 63a</u></p> <p>R. Abba said in the name of R. Shimon ben Lakish: He who lends (money) is greater</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף סג עמוד א</p> <p>ואמר רבי+ אבא אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: [גדול המלוה יותר מן העושה צדקה, ומטיל</p>
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than who performs charity; and he who forms a partnership is greater than all.

בכיס יותר מכולן.

III. Thinking About the Producer (Religious Consciousness)

Berakhot 58a

Ben Zoma say a multitude (of Jews while he was standing) on a step of the Temple Mount. He said (the blessing) Blessed...the Sage of the Secrets. And (and he also recited) Blessed...Who created all these to serve me.

He used to say: How many exertions did Adam the first man make until he found bread to eat. He plowed, he sowed, he reaped. He gathered (stalks) together, he threshed, he winnowed, he selected, he ground (grain into flour), he sifted, he kneaded, he baked, and afterwards he ate the bread. But I (Ben Zoma) rise early in the morning and find all these (labors) prepared before me.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף נח עמוד א

בן זומא ראה אוכלוסא על גב מעלה בהר הבית, אמר: ברוך חכם הרזים, וברוך שברא כל אלו לשמשני. הוא היה אומר: כמה יגיעות יגע אדם הראשון עד שמצא פת לאכול: חרש, וזרע, וקצר, ועמר, ודש, וזרה, וברר, וטחן, והרקיד, ולש, ואפה, ואחר כך אכל, ואני משכים ומוצא כל אלו מתוקנין לפני

IV. The Good Society

Avodah Zara 2b

In times to come, the Holy One, blessed be He, will take a scroll of the Law in His embrace and proclaim: 'Let him who has occupied himself herewith, come and take his reward.'...the Kingdom of Edom (Rome) will enter first before Him...the Holy One, blessed be He will then say to them: 'Wherewith have you occupied yourselves?' They will reply....'we have established many marketplaces, we have erected

תלמוד בבלי מסכת עבודה זרה דף ב עמוד ב

אמר להם הקב"ה: במאי עסקתם? אומרים לפניו: רבש"ע, הרבה שווקים תקנינו, הרבה מרחצאות עשינו, הרבה כסף וזהב הרבינו, וכולם לא עשינו אלא בשביל ישראל כדי שיתעסקו בתורה. אמר להם הקב"ה: שוטים שבעולם, כל מה שעשיתם - לצורך עצמכם עשיתם, תקנתם שווקים להושיב בהן זונות, מרחצאות - לעדן בהן עצמכם, כסף וזהב שלי הוא, שנאמר: +חגי ב+ לי הכסף ולי הזהב

many baths, we have accumulated much gold and silver, and all this we did only for the sake of...Torah.' The Holy One, blessed be He, will say in reply: 'You foolish ones among the peoples, all that you have done, you have only done to satisfy your own desires. You have established marketplaces to place prostitutes in them, baths to revel in them, (as to the accumulation of) silver and gold that is Mine, as it is written: 'Mine is the silver and Mine is the gold, says the Lord of Hosts' (Haggai 2:8).

נאם ה' צבאות

V. Returning to a Culture of Gifts

“The desire to consume is a kind of lust. We long to have the world flow through us like air or food. We are thirsty and hungry from something that can only be carried inside bodies. But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption that leads to neither satiation nor fire. He is a stranger seduced into feeding on the drippings of someone else’s capital without benefit of its inner nourishment, and he is hungry at the end of the meal, depressed and weary as we all feel when lust has dragged us from the house and led us to nothing.....A paradox of gift exchange: when the gift is used, it is not used up. Quite the opposite, in fact: the gift that is not used will be lost, while the one that is passed along remains abundant.” (The Gift, Lewis Hyde, p. 8, 26)

VI. Is the radical privatization of property what the Torah intended for us?

Without determining the economic system envisaged by the Torah, it is evident that a consistent application of the Torah’s socio-economic norms is incompatible with the tenets of Capitalism. The Torah’s statutory insistence in ‘thou shall do that which is right and good’ harbors such severe limitations upon private property as to render it virtually untenable and unprofitable,” (Rav Kook, Hazon Vehagshamah, p. 194)

VII. Ethical Concerns

Vayikra 19:13

You shall not defraud your neighbor, nor rob him; the wages of he who is hired shall not remain with you all night until the morning.

Dvarim 24:14-15

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is of your brothers, or of your strangers who are in your land inside your gates;

At his day you shall give him his hire, nor shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it; lest he cry against you to the Lord, and it should be sin to you.

Sefer HaYirah, Rabbeinu Yonah

Be careful not to afflict any living creature, whether animal or bird, and all the more so, one should not afflict a person who is created in the image of the Divine. If you want to hire laborers and you find that they are poor, they should be [regarded as] poor members of your household, and do not degrade them, for you were commanded to have a respectful manner with them and to pay their wages.

ויקרא פרק יט:יג

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה קֶרֶךְ אֶת רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תִגְזֹל לְלֹא תִלִּין
פְּעֻלַת שְׂכִיר אֶתְךָ עַד בֹּקֶר:

דברים פרק כד: יד-טו

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה קֶרֶךְ שְׂכִיר עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן מֵאֲחֵיךָ אוּ מִגֵּר
אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצְךָ בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ:
בְּיוֹמוֹ תִתֵּן שְׂכָרוֹ וְלֹא תָבֹא עָלָיו הַשְׁמֵשׁ כִּי
עֲנִי הוּא וְאֶלְיוֹ הוּא נִשְׂא אֶת נַפְשׁוֹ וְלֹא יִקְרָא
עָלֶיךָ אֶל יְקֹיָהוּ וְהָיָה כְּךָ חַטָּא:

ספר היראה (רבינו יונה)

השמר מלצער בע"ח הן בהמה הן עוף, וכ"ש
שלא לצער אדם שהוא עשוי בצלם המקום.
אם אתה רוצה לשכור פועלים ומצאת עניים
יהיו עניים בני ביתך, ואך אל תבזה אותם, אך
דרך כבוד תצוה להם, ותשלם שכרם
משלם...

<p>Deuteronomy 7: 26</p> <p>You must not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be proscribed (Herem) like it; You must reject it as abominable and abhorrent, or it is proscribed.</p>	<p>דברים ז', כ"ו:</p> <p>"ולא תביא תועבה אל ביתך והיית חרם כמוהו שקץ תשקצנו ותעב תתעבנו כי חרם הוא."</p>
<p>Deuteronomy 23:19</p> <p>You shall not bring the fee of a whore or the pay of a dog into the house of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both are abhorrent to the Lord your God.</p>	<p>דברים כ"ג, י"ט:</p> <p>"לא תביא אתגן זונה ומחיר כלב בית ה' אלוקיך לכל נדר כי תועבת ה' אלוקיך גם שניהם."</p>
<p>Vayikra Rabbah 6.2 (Soncino Press)</p> <p>There once was a governor who used to put to death receivers of stolen property and release the thieves, and all used to find fault with him, saying that he was not acting correctly. What did he do? He issued a proclamation throughout the province, saying: 'Let all the people go out to the public field!' What did he do then? He brought some weasels and placed before them portions of food. The weasels took the portions, and carried them to their holes. The next day he again issued a proclamation, saying: "Let all the people go out to the public field!" Again he brought weasels and placed portions of food before them but this time he stopped up all the holes. The weasels took the portions, and carried them to their holes, but finding these stopped up, they brought their portions back to their places. [He did this] to demonstrate that all the trouble is due to receivers. This then we learn from the governor: How can we illustrate our texts by an example? Reuben stole from Simeon, and Levi knew of it. Said Reuben to Levi: Do not expose me, and I will give you half." The following day, people enter the Synagogue and hear the functionary announce: "Who has stolen from Simeon?" and Levi is present there. Surely the Torah has decreed, "If a soul sins...If he be a witness, whether he has seen or known, if he do not utter it, then he shall bear the responsibility for his sin." (Lev. 6:1)</p>	
<p>Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 429 Not to Gain Pleasure from Approaching Idol Worship</p>	<p><u>ספר החינוך, מצוה תכט</u></p> <p>שלא נדביק שום דבר מעבודה זרה עם</p>

For we should not attach any item of Idol Worship to our money or property, in order to gain pleasure from it, and for this reason, the Torah says "You must not bring an abhorrent thing into your house." And one reason for this commandment is to distance every element of detested idol worship...

And within the commandment is that one should not attach to his own money, which God graced him with, the money of another which was gained through theft, violence or exploitation, or from any disgusting element, because all of these are included in the elements of idol worship. For man's heart is inclined towards evil, which desires [items paid for by any means] and brings it into the home; and this inclination towards evil is called idol worship... And about monies such as these, that we have discussed, and about the elements of idol worship, on all these it is written "you will be proscribed (Herem) like it," meaning that any thing which is attached to it is proscribed, and God's blessing is absent from it, and it is lost and destroyed, as the Rabbis say, "The inclusion of even one perutah [a very small amount] of money gained by extorting interest will destroy large treasuries of money.

ממוננו וברשותנו ליהנות בו, ועל זה נאמר [דברים ז', כ"ו], ולא תביא תועבה אל ביתך וגו'.

משרשי המצוה כדי להרחיק כל ענין עבודה זרה הנמאסת.

ומן הנכלל במצוה זו, שלא ידביק האדם אל ממונו שחננו האל בצדק ממון אחר שהוא של גזל או חמס, או מרבית או מכל דבר מכוער, שכל זה בכלל משמשי עבודה זרה הוא, שיצר לב האדם רע חומד אותו ומביאו אל הבית, והיצר הרע נקרא בשם עבודה זרה... ובממונות כאלו שזכרנו ובמשמשי עבודה זרה – על כולן נאמר "והיית חרם כמוהו", כלומר: שכל הנדבק עמו הוא חרם, שאין ברכת האל מצויה בו, ואבד וכלה, וכענין שיאמרו זכרונם לברכה שפרוטה של רבית מכלה כמה אוצרות של ממון, שבא זה ומאבד את זה.

VIII. The Challenge

“With the birth of the norm, man becomes aware of his singularly human existence which expresses itself in the dichotomous experience of being unfree, restricted, imperfect, and unredeemed, and, at the same time, being potentially powerful, great and exalted, uniquely endowed, capable of rising far above his environment in response to the divine moral challenge,” (Rav Soloveitchik, Lonely Man of Faith, page 59).