



Lesson 2, Series 2

Consumer Culture... *toward a culture of Thanksgiving*

Our forefather Jacob on his dramatic journey 'on the run' from his malevolent brother Esau, uttered a vow: "**If G-d will be with me, and He will guard me on this way, upon which I am going, and He will give me bread to eat and a garment to wear...I will surely tithe to You.**" Genesis 28:20

At first glance it would seem that Jacob asked for so little, being that frugality and minimalism is a virtue. In fact, the Keli Yakar commentary states that craving excess, is both unnatural and destructive and expresses a subtle lack of faith.

Midrash Bereishit Rabah 70:5: Aquilas the proselyte visited Rabbi Eliezer stating, "Is this the entire praise of a convert- that which it says, "And He loves the convert, to give him bread and clothing"? Rabbi Eliezer replied, "Is then the matter for which our ancestor [Yaakov] pleaded, so insignificant in your eyes? It is stated, 'And He will give me bread to eat and a garment to wear,' and this convert has been handed [these items] on a platter [from G-d]?" Aquilas then went to visit Rabbi Yehoshua. The latter began to appease him with words [explaining the verse as follows]: 'Bread' refers to Torah, as it is stated, "Come and partake of my bread." 'A garment' refers to a suit of prestige. It was said that if not for the magnanimity Rabbi Yehoshua granted Aquilas, the latter, would have abandoned his faith.

Rabbi Bachaye ben Asher (1255-1340) states: "And give me bread to eat and clothing to wear". This is the request of the righteous from G-d-they do not ask for luxuries rather for the bare necessities that one cannot live without. Knowing that chasing after one's urges and cravings for luxury can cause many troubles-that which is necessary for a person's life will be granted to him by G-d.

We can see this truth within the very nature of the world: With His infinite wisdom, G-d made that which is absolutely vital for our survival readily available, and that which is less vital is also less available. Pearls and other precious stones are thus not readily available. Food, however, is necessary for survival, and is therefore much more readily available. Indeed, in the marketplace one will find abundant food and grain but not an abundance of precious stones. Water is more essential to survival than food, for a person can go two or even three days without food, as opposed to thirst. Thus, water is more available than food. Air is even more crucial for survival than water, unable to exist even a few seconds without air. Therefore air is readily available to all. For this reason, Jacob only asked for his vital needs, *bread and clothing*, and not excess.

Mishna Tractate Avot 4:1: "Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot." Talmud Tractate Ta'anit 24b: Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Every day a Heavenly Voice comes forth and declares, "The entire world draws its sustenance in the merit of Chanina my son, and Chanina my son suffices himself with a kav (measure) of carobs from one Shabbat eve to the next."

According to **Maimonides, in the Laws of Prayer**, one is obligated to offer supplication every day and utter praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; and then petition for his needs in a manner of request and supplication.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said, "If you have arranged your prayers, do not constrain your mouth, rather, 'Open your mouth wide, and I shall fill it.' Rashi explains: **Open your mouth wide** to request of Me whatever your heart desires. **And I shall fill it**, I will grant your every request.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains: A person must recognize that "The Lord your G-d, it is He who gives you strength to make wealth" and as such, the only address where to find one's needs is G-d. Furthermore, one should ask as a poor man at the door, for benevolence and grace, and not to be brazen to make abundant requests. **Reish Lakish then comes and adds**, "If you have arranged your prayers, do not constrain your mouth, rather, 'Open your mouth wide, and I shall fill it.' This seems contradictory.

The explanation is as follows: We are speaking about various levels of Divine Service. Some are still at intermediate levels, "as a beggar at the door" so only asks for "bare necessities of life", their mode of Divine service being abstinence. However, at a more advanced level of Divine service, "he should not restrain his mouth rather open wide" even for material matters. The reason is because this person's material needs are part of his Divine service for he serves G-d in a manner of "In all your ways you should know Him," namely with the intent purpose of knowing Him. This individual transforms everything into a vehicle for G-dliness, thus making a dwelling place for the Almighty in the lower realms. This individual should ask G-d that all of his affairs be with abundance and luxury-so that the "know Him" can be that much greater as well.

The above approach is counter culture, entirely different from the conventional approach which is closer to promoting hedonism or Epicureanism. **So how do we find a balanced approach in our consumer culture?** When one feels charged with a mission from G-d to make this world a better place, then his or her approach to materialism is entirely different. Though one may amass 'stuff' and even become wealthy, it is entirely okay to enjoy and perhaps indulge. But, above all, it should be viewed as a chance to rejuvenate and be a better servant of G-d.

A wonderful story illustrates this. The Tzemach Tzedek (3rd Lubavitcher Rebbe) did not wish to waste money on painting his furniture, so his tables, chairs, etc. were made of plain boards. A rich follower (Chasid) once brought him a gift of painted furniture. He suggested that it be given to his son, Reb Shmuel, the Maharash. **How does this make sense?** The Rebbe explained: both concepts are true and not contradictory. The Tzemach Tzedek's manner of Divine service was such that he did not need painted furniture. The Rebbe Maharash's form of service was different than his. All Jews must have both these things.

Maintaining a healthy balance for G-d and for man ultimately defines the superiority of the human being, particularly a Jew who harbors a G-dly soul, to rise above, in the service of Hashem. Let us individually and collectively transform to a culture of Thanksgiving for all our G-d given Blessings.

Dear Friend:

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Sincerely,



Rachel Kaplan, Director, Aleph Learning Institute