

What Wealth Means to Me



When I was growing up, I had no idea I lived in a wealthy community. I grew up in Lawrence, NY—one of the Five Towns, as they are called. I love the community; my parents still live there and nearly all of my closest friends are those who grew up with me there. At some point—I think it was when I began to date while in Yeshiva—I became more conscious of the economic status of my community. Maybe it was the subtle way people described families (“they’re **very** comfortable”), but at some point economic identity became a more palpable presence in my daily discourse in the Jewish community. I find this very concerning. Allow me to explain why.

I was invited as a guest on a podcast called *Kosher Money*, hosted by my friends Eli Langer and Zevy Wolman. It was a wonderful conversation (even though my wife hasn’t completely forgiven me for

being so transparent about our savings). One thing I shared in the discussion is what I lovingly called *Gvir Culture*™. A *gvir* is the yiddish word that means someone who is wealthy. And I shared the following with them:

@DBashIdeas Excellent observation here.

(Dibs on the Gevirim Pictures market.)

— Eli Langer (@EliLanger) December 8, 2021

So what exactly is this *Gvir Culture*™ that I am getting so worked up about?

First and foremost, it is **not** about demonizing wealth and not even demonizing luxury. As they say, “some of my closest friends are *gvirim*.” And I, like everyone else, avail myself to luxuries that bring me joy—some that are simple (books, streaming subscriptions, an occasional uber ride) and some that are silly (wine on Shabbos that I’ve convinced myself I can taste the difference, a fancy watch I bought myself to celebrate not yet being married). The moment that griping about *gvir* culture becomes an excuse to start picking apart other people’s choices is the moment we’ve already lost. Blaming any individual is not the path. Instead the path is far more personal. We need to begin taking radical ownership of our personal joy.

A second word of introduction: is this even new? Money has been an aspiration since Tevye sang, “If I Were a Rich Man.” So what changed? I think two factors have contributed to a notable shift: our messaging and our exposure. Open up an old issue of *The Jewish Observer* and look at the advertisements. There were wealthy people back then, but the messaging was far simpler. Look at how excited they were about cheese!

Once upon a time there was sincere excitement for new kosher cheeses.

— D Bash (@DBashIdeas) December 10, 2021

That change obviously also reflects the evolution of general marketing sensibilities, but it was also more than that. Wealth was not promoted as a marker of religious accomplishment. I am concerned that has changed. As our communal infrastructure has grown, making *yiddishkeit* more accessible in so many ways, it has also come at a cost. We need larger donations and gifts to sustain our institutions and those oftentimes require getting the attention of larger and larger donors. And that shapes the very messaging of our institutions—they need VIP seating, exclusive experiences, and intimate meet and greets with the leaders of those institutions. That’s not necessarily a bad thing,

especially if it allows us to build a stronger religious foundation for the next generation, but it is also naive to think that there is no cost to this growth.

Imagine an individual with a growing family who decides to buy a larger house. They could continue living where they are, but a larger place would be much much more comfortable. So they drum up the down payment and purchase a more spacious abode. But now they need to keep up with the mortgage payments, which can mean longer nights in the office, a second job, a more pressured budget. Individuals can make such decisions, but over the past few decades, many institutions have been making similar calculations and the “cost” is then passed down to the very fabric of our community, which needs to sustain this growth. Yes, our communal institutions are more comfortable, but they also come at a financial and—more importantly—cultural cost.

Those who eke by, muddle through, and live lives without fanfare and applause are too often overlooked.

There are many institutions that eschew this type of growth to avoid the very cultural costs we are discussing. Brisk Yeshiva in Israel is a great example. It remains small, never has major public fundraisers, doesn't build new dorms, and continues to cater to a select few. There is no culture of wealth surrounding the Yeshiva because their lack of growth never necessitated it. I am not suggesting that we should stop growing—of course not! But we need to recognize that our rapid growth can have cultural and financial consequences. And we need to figure out ways to address these costs.

This is all compounded by our exposure. Social media gives us a window into other people's lives like never before and as we peer into the luxurious funhouse mirror of social media we can see a warped vision when we reflect on our own lives. Luxuries can function like nicotine. The more we encounter it, the more potential for addiction. The more we are exposed to, the more we find ourselves fiending the status and lifestyle we see in others. And this is particularly acute in close knit communities like ours. We have a greater propensity for what René Girard describes as mimetic desire: the imitation of other people's wants and desires. Whether it is a certain type of *simcha* celebration, or brand of clothes, or make of car, our desires mimic what we see around us. How else can you explain why out of the clear blue sky I thought of buying a Patagonia vest?

Mimetic desire, as Peter Thiel remarks, can easily run amok and have us collectively wanting something that won't even bring us personal satisfaction. It removes us, like the *Mishnah* in Avos states, from our world, from what we *really* want..

“Jealousy removes you from the world.”

~Avos 4:21

Read this incredible ? and understand that the world you're removed from is *you*

— D Bash (@DBashIdeas) October 22, 2021

So what are some of the consequences of the ever-present financial pressure and the way mimetic desires shape our community?

I think there are primarily three consequences:

1. **Anxiety about Wealth:** There is a great deal of communal anxiety about how we can sustain this lifestyle. Many young Jews feel like they are priced out of Orthodoxy. Many young Jews feel like Orthodoxy has become more of a socio-economic status than a religious movement. This is not good. As Scott Sandage argues in his amazing book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, around the 1840's (heyo!), as the notion of becoming a self-made man became more popular, so did the notion of becoming a failure. Success became synonymous with wealth and those who couldn't attain it felt like it reflected on their personal character. As our financial expectations rise, so does our capacity to feel like a failure.
2. **Diversity of our Community:** A while back there was a blog called *250K Chump*, which spoke about the difficulty of getting by on a household income of 250K. Of course that varies drastically by area, but one of the serious costs of the rising costs within the Jewish community are the limited set of professions available to afford this lifestyle. As Elli Fischer once argued, the limited career choices—particularly in the United States—for Orthodox Jews leads to a lack of professional diversity in our community. This can stunt the creativity of the breadth of who affiliates. Orthodoxy is more than a professional network; we need to accommodate the diversity of personalities and professions within our ranks.
3. **The Toll on our Schools:** People don't want to become educators. It has become increasingly difficult to afford an Orthodox life if you dedicate yourself to perpetuating it. It's an ironic problem in a way—we have a high cost of living because of our commitment to private education and that very commitment has created a crisis in our ability to staff our schools. This was highlighted in a recent article in *Mishpacha Magazine* by Alex Fleksher, entitled, "Where have all the teachers gone?" Our success has become the very roots of our struggle. I remember when I told someone in my neighborhood that I wanted to go into education and he responded with the classic line, "what kind of job is that for a good Jewish boy?" Cute line, but I am worried we've created a culture where we've started to believe it. We committed ourselves as a community to providing a Jewish education for our families and it is the primary source of our financial pressures. Where will we be left as a community if that very pressure prevents us from providing that quality Jewish education? Wasn't that the point of all this?

So how do we combat this?

1. **Make Jewish Life more Affordable:** More than anything else, we need to find serious ways to make Orthodoxy affordable. Too much has been written about this and in the future, I hope we can address the tuition crisis as its own subject. As one anonymous father boldly wrote, we need to be willing to search for bold alternatives in order to find a better solution. Maybe it's more government advocacy, maybe it's pressuring school leaders, maybe it is moving to a more affordable location, maybe it is setting up an endowment—but this generation needs to find a way. As Rabbi Wieder recently shared in an address to the students of Yeshiva University, this generation needs to demand change. This much I will say—don't just *kvetch*, please vote. We live in a democracy where most funding is allocated on the local level. It's fun to talk about who should be the next president, but your local school board elections play a

much more practical role in your day to day life. The next time you're at a table and people start *kvetching* about potential solutions, make sure they are all—at the minimum—voting in their local elections to ensure that children are afforded the services they need most. Then you can *kvetch*.

2. **Celebrate the Middle:** Of course we need to celebrate those who give generously to support our institutions, but we can't allow that to shape the very fabric of our community—those who stand in the middle. Too often we are either valorizing wealthy donors or praising those who sacrifice in poverty, at the expense of the unsung heroes of the middle. Those who eke by, muddle through, and live lives without fanfare and applause are too often overlooked. These stories need to be told more loudly. We need to find ways to celebrate the middle, discuss transparently how they, we, us, make it work, and provide a more robust path for living in a financially sustainable Jewish life without having to live in either abject poverty or enormous wealth. A strong community celebrates a strong middle.
3. **Personal Growth:** Whatever communal solutions we need—and we do need them—we also have to extricate ourselves from our collective mimetic desire. Families need to be willing to chart their own paths and ask tough questions about what really brings them satisfaction without falling prey to the tidal wave of mimetic desire. Similar to Gerard's principle of "Wanting is About Being," there is a beautiful idea from Rabbeinu Yonah on the verse in *Proverbs* 27:21 that man is tested according to their praise. Simply read, this seems to mean that the quality of a person can be assessed based on what others say about them. Want to know if a person is a good person? Read their communal Yelp review and see how others praise them. Rabbeinu Yonah offers a different read. We are evaluated based on **what we praise**. If you want to know a person's value, see what they value, explore their desires. It's worth taking a moment to see what people, lifestyles, accomplishments we praise most. As emphasized by Rav Hutner, reflecting on our aspirations is a window to our soul. We all have work to do in this area. And this is probably the hardest, most elusive step of all. But it's not **just** about communal changes, better financial planning, generalized *kvetching*, finding the right community—the work also needs to occur inside of us. We are who we praise. And it's time to reorient the object of our desires and aspirations.