The Paradox of Money and Wealth



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Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches (*Likkutei Moharan*, 68:1) that selfhood and wealth emerge and descend from the same source, which is why everyone desires money, for the self yearns after its root. When wealth descends, there is only one thing that can block its emergence, and that is the replacement of the wealth with something identical in its root, namely the difficult terrain of the self. So it turns out that it is the sense of self that so desperately seeks wealth that runs the risk of interfering with the wealth that is intended for it.

And how does the sense of self interfere with the emergent wealth? It is specifically the character trait of anger that gets directly in the way. Anger is rooted in a perversion of selfhood, an attempt to make oneself appear as something they are not. When imagined forms of power are taken away, the self shrinks into a state of fear, a fear of powerlessness. In response to the loss of control, the self attempts to reinstate the equilibrium by redoubling its sense of strength and power.

And how does one who is in the freefall of powerlessness redouble the power they don't actually have? By making themselves appear larger and more powerful than they are; in other words, they get angry. Raising a voice, clenching a fist, slamming on the horn, all of these are last-ditch attempts of the self to create a semblance of power in the face of powerlessness.

Anger and urgency go hand in hand, for if I am powerful and in control, then I must ensure the outcome of each and every thing, urgently imposing my desire on external reality. Patience is the fruit of calmness, a cool, calm, and collected trust that what is taking place right here and right now will inevitably shift with the process of time. Aware of the infinite potential that the future holds, we allow ourselves to be patient, to see beyond what *is* towards our trust in what is to come.

Wealth is a state of mind, a perspectival shift that reshapes the reality within which I live. It is rooted in the highest imaginable point and it can descend into the lowest imaginable pit. "Who is wealthy? One who finds joy within their portion." Wealth is a relative orientation, but its true import is the calmness and patience that come from a settled mind.

Yitzchak represents the paradox of money and wealth. On the one hand, he is the root of severity and constriction, the setting of boundaries and limits that separate and distinguish one thing from the other. On the other hand, he represents the site of intensification, the never-ending movement of the *gevurot* whose friction gives birth to growth and exponential gain. How can it be that the site of withholding and concealment is also the site of expression and revelation; how can the descent inwards enable the oppositional ascent outwards?

ויאמרו ראו ראינו כי היה ה' עמך ונאמר תהי נא אלה בינותינו ביניינו ובינך ונכרתה הברית עמך

And they said, "We now see plainly that God has been with you, and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you…

When Avimelech wanted to make a treaty with Avraham, it was not a difficult path. Avraham was wealthy and successful. With his expansive estate, he represented blessing in the most revealed way, the constant flow of *shefa* (abundance) and *bracha* (blessing) associated with the attribute of *Chesed,* the revealed expression of objective wealth. There was no need for a double take, as the success and expansion were immediately available.

When it came to Yitzchak, however, the treaty was different, for, as opposed to Avraham's revealed wealth, Yitzchak (at first glance) appeared to be missing this element. He was not actively developing more capital, but rather the opposite, he was passive in his approach, a posture that seemingly appears to be the opposite of cultivating wealth. But that was only at first glance, the immature assumption that all wealth development looks the same. Upon looking twice, they came to understand the secret that rested behind Yitzchak's apparent passivity, and they knew they wanted to partner up with him.

ויזרע יצחק בארץ ההוא וימצא בשנה ההוא מאה שערים ויברכהו ה

Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. God blessed him…

In understanding the posture Yitzchak developed towards wealth, we will take our first step down the path of "*ashirus d'kedusha*," a holy wealth and a wealth of holiness. Rather than seek out the visible and graspable capital that was available at hand, Yitzchak planted a seed. He took the little bit that he had and he let go of it, investing it in a place beyond himself. In the act of planting a seed, Yitzchak revealed a new path towards wealth, a path focused not on the immediate return, but rather on an action in the present with eyes on the future return. Rashi points out that the words "that year" and "that place" refer to the fact that there was nothing particularly remarkable about the time, nor the place that contributed to the emergent growth. But the growth was a hundredfold, as Rashi points out, the measured and expected return turned out to be a hundred times its value.

The original act of planting depends upon faith. *Zeraim* is *emunah*—the willingness to trust that this act which externally appears to be a destructive one, will in truth one day yield a reward beyond its own value. Taking a seed and planting it ensures its decomposition, without receiving anything immediate in return. It is the trust in a future that has not yet arrived. And it is this trust itself that enables the future to take shape. This type of capital gain is not apparent at first glance, for it is the opposite of an immediate result. To grasp the possibility of growth, one must look twice. The first look sees the absence of immediate results, the seeming absence of value. The second look looks deeper, it gazes through the craving for immediate gratification, through and beyond towards the secret of slow and steady growth.

וכל הבארות אשר חפרו עבדי אביו בימי אברהם אביו סתמום פלשתים וימלאום עפר

And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth.

ויחפרו עבדי יצחק בנחל וימצאו שם באר מים חיים

But when Isaac’s servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water,

ויריבו רעי גרר עם רעי יצחק לאמר לנו המים ויקרא שם הבאר עשק כי התעשקו עמו

the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, “The water is ours.” He named that well Esek, because they contended with him.

ויחפרו באר אחרת ויריבו גם עליה ויקרא שמה שטנה

And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah.

Yitzchak’s posture towards wealth developed as a response to the posture of Avraham. The wells dug by Avraham were closed up, the path of wealth ready at hand could no longer be the only one. Shifting from the object-oriented path of wealth, Yitchak looked beyond the present moment, searching for a different sort of growth. Digging towards a “well of living waters,” Yitzchak uncovered the long view, a gaze towards the future, a perpetual flow of slow and steady growth. Planting and investing towards the future, the present moment’s attempt towards gain loses some of its hyper significance. There is no telling which seed will take root. Inherent to the process is the acceptance of the inevitable miss. Rather than over-identify with the loss which breeds shame and self-destruction, he took the loss in stride as a fundamental step along the path.

ויעתק משם ויחפר באר אחרת ולא רבו עליה ויקרא שמה רחבות ויאמר כי עתה הרחיב ה׳ לנו ופרינו בארץ

He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, “Now at last God has granted us ample space to increase in the land.”

Moving beyond the momentary loss, Yitzchak shatters the dependency on immediate gratification, opening up the expansive path of future-oriented growth. With the future in mind, the present investiture takes hold of future hope, drawing strength from hopeful anticipation. The gift of the third well is the expansivity of it all, for when I shift my gaze from the immediacy of the now, I come to find the possibilities of the future.

ויגדלו הנערים ויהי עשו איש ידע ציד איש שדה ויעקב איש תם ישב אהלים

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob became a mild man who stayed in camp (tents).

The future orientation towards capital gain developed by Yitzchak finds full expression in the life of Yaakov, as opposed to Esav. Cultivation of wealth takes two paths: the path of immediate gain and the path of future growth. Esav, “man of the field,” represents the first path, where the gain is realized immediately upon investment. Going out into the field to bring in the day’s keep, ready at hand. Yaakov, “man of the tent”, represents the second path, where the gain is cultivated and developed, choosing patience over immediate gratification.

ויאמר עשו אל יעקב הלעיטני נא מן האדם האדם הזה כי עיף אנכי על כן קרא שמו אדום

And Esau said to Jacob, “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished”—which is why he was named Edom.

It was this split in the posture towards wealth that led to Yaakov’s purchase of the birthright from Esav. The rights of being firstborn are reserved for the future, they only take shape at a point further down the road. To see the hidden light of the birthright one must have the vision to look beyond the immediate here and now, beyond instant gratification and delivery. One must look towards future growth and increase that is not yet present. Understanding Esav’s infantile perspective of immediate deliverance, Yaakov used his mistaken view to his benefit. Sell it to me *today,* as it is *today.* For the Esav mindsight, all there is is the immediate now—there is no value in the hope of future growth. The product needs to be ready at hand, immediately apparent. Yaakov understands the secret of long-term investment, he received it from Yitzchak. Unlike Esav whose pessimistic outlook on the future forces him to mistake the lentils as the true gain of the present, Yaakov knows the slow and steady process of investing in the unknown, yet hoped-for future.