

2015

Money and the Meaning of Life

Rabbi Richard A. Block

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel>

 Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Business Law, Public Responsibility, and Ethics Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Block, Rabbi Richard A. (2015) "Money and the Meaning of Life," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Journal of Ethical Leadership by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

Money and the Meaning of Life

Rabbi Richard A. Block

Temple-Tifereth Israel, Beachwood, Ohio

Jack Benny's most famous gag involved a confrontation with a man who accosted him, brandishing a gun, and threatened, "This is a stickup . . . Your money or your life." For two or three minutes, Benny—who often played a comical miser—fidgeted, but did not reply. Finally, the exasperated robber demanded, "Look, bud, I said, 'Your money or your life.'" To which Benny replied, "I'm thinking it over!"¹ In fact, Jack Benny, the son of Jewish immigrant parents, was one of the most generous, charitable people in Hollywood, but his renowned skit points to a deeper truth, that we sometimes cling to our material possessions as if they were as dear to us as life itself.

A prayer from the synagogue liturgy for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, poignantly describes a seemingly insatiable human ambition to acquire material things.

The eye is never satisfied with seeing; endless are the desires of the heart. We devise new schemes on the grave of a thousand disappointed hopes. Like Moses on Mount Nebo, we behold the Promised Land from afar, but may not enter it. Discontent abides in the palace and in the hut, rankling alike in the breast of prince and pauper. Death finally terminates the struggle, and grief and joy, success and failure all are ended. Like children falling asleep over their toys, we loosen our grasp on earthly possessions only when death overtakes us. Master and servant, rich and poor, strong and feeble, wise and simple, all are equal in death. The grave levels all distinctions and makes the whole world kin.²

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman*, we find the kindred observation, "There are two tragedies in life: One is not to get your heart's

1. *The Jack Benny Program*, March 28, 1948.

2. *Union Prayer Book* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1962), 2:310.

desire. The other is to get it.”³ The notion that getting what we long for can be disastrous is illustrated graphically in the Bible’s book of Numbers. Complaining bitterly about their discomforts, including the monotonous diet of manna, despite its being God-given, the Israelites long for meat and wax nostalgic about “the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic.”⁴ Such were the real, exaggerated, and imagined hardships of desert life that, in retrospect, slavery seemed like paradise. The people’s base ingratitude and ceaseless bellyaching angers the Lord. Moses, too, is fed up. Turning in frustration to God, Moses professes his inability to carry the people all by himself and asks, “Where am I to get meat to give this people when they whine before me . . . ?”⁵ God responds by sending a storm of quail, inundating the encampment with a torrent of birds that pile up some three feet deep, covering an area two days walk across.⁶ The people gather it and eat until it “comes out of their nostrils” and becomes “loathsome.”⁷ Not surprisingly, a severe plague ensues and many die.

This cautionary tale is reinforced elsewhere in Numbers, where we find words of blessing known to Jewish tradition as *birkat kohanim*, the Priestly Benediction: “May God bless you and keep you! May God deal kindly and graciously with you! May God bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!”⁸ The first phrase, “May God bless you and keep you,” is generally understood to be a prayer for material prosperity. Having this in mind, an ancient rabbinic tradition restates the verse in a strikingly contemporary manner, putting it this way: “May God bless you *with possessions* and keep *those possessions from possessing* you.”⁹ Thus are we taught that it is not only possible, but can be harmful, to have too much of a good thing.

This is a lesson most of us are reluctant to take to heart in twenty-first century America, despite the bracing reinforcement of personal experience. Rarely does our newest possession fascinate us for long. Rather than satisfy our appetite, additional possessions seem to whet it, sending us forth in search of newer, better, more, but coming up empty. We are blessed and

3. *Man and Superman*, act. 4, 1903.

4. Numbers 11:5.

5. Numbers 11:13.

6. Numbers 11:31.

7. Numbers 11:20.

8. Numbers 6:24–26.

9. See the commentary on Numbers 6:24 in J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1971), ,595.

burdened with more possessions than any generation in the history of the world. Most of us own far more things than we need, put to regular use, or fully appreciate.

Indeed, materialism, narcissism, and workaholism are hallmarks of modern Western secular culture. That culture has also brought us profound and abundant comforts, pleasures, and blessings, above all the freedoms, rights, and liberties that characterize democracy. But freedom becomes license without an accompanying moral code, self-discipline, and a communitarian ethos that emphasizes sharing, conservation, and voluntary limitations on our inherent self-centeredness.

A value system that contends we can “have it all” is spiritually empty; it encourages us to act in ways that rob life of meaning and threaten to leave us with nothing of genuine worth. Work is essential, of course. “Six days shall you labor,” Scripture insists.¹⁰ Work satisfies our need to be creative and productive. It is the source of our livelihood and our capacity to assist others. But when we live to work rather than work to live, when we place the pursuit of wealth and success ahead of family, faith, community, and country, when we acquire too much and share too little, we exhibit the telltale signs of *affluenza*, a chronic, debilitating, soul-sapping disease.

But let me be clear. While there are religious traditions that embrace asceticism, Judaism is not one of them. It makes no virtue of poverty. Rather, it sees it as an unjust social condition we are obligated to alleviate, even if we cannot fully eradicate it. Thus, on the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year, a day of fasting and prayer, we read from Isaiah 58, a text that denounces fasting, with bitter irony, when it is not accompanied by ethically responsible, generous, and compassionate deeds.

“Is this the fast I look for?” God asks, “A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not *this* the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?”¹¹

10. Exodus 20:9.

11. Isaiah 58:5-7.

Yet even as our tradition commands each of us, even the poor, to engage in acts of loving-kindness and righteous giving, it places limits on how much we should give and forbids us to be so generous that we impoverish ourselves.¹² Jewish tradition also holds that we are permitted to enjoy life. A talmudic passage teaches that we are called to account not just for the sins we committed, but for the legitimate pleasures of life we passed up.¹³ I recall a telling conversation, early in my rabbinic career, between a friend who was an Episcopal priest and my wife, Susie, at an annual holiday party we hosted in our home when I was president of the local clergy association. Dessert featured a luscious Black Forest cake. Coming into the dining room for a second helping, my colleague said, with a smile, “This is what we Christians call ‘sin.’” Susie replied, “This is what we Jews call ‘pleasure.’” Until that moment, little had I suspected that Susie was such a profound theologian!

Indeed, the tradition to which she alluded takes things a step further. It holds that if we refuse to partake of life’s pleasures, we are guilty of base ingratitude. It is as if, the rabbis suggested, a king were to invite everyone in the kingdom to a lavishly prepared banquet at the royal palace, the tables overflowing with every manner of delicious and appealing food and drink,¹⁴ and one of his subjects says, “Nah. I’m not hungry.” There is a certain arrogance and ingratitude in refusing to partake of God’s gifts.

Nonetheless, if we forget the second half of the blessing, “May God . . . keep *those possessions from possessing you*,” if we are not careful, the rabbis are warning us, the things we think we own will end up owning us instead, enslaving rather than liberating us. Thirty-five years later, I still recall vividly a moment when this lesson struck me with particular force. I was standing on a California sidewalk, in front of my in-laws’ home. I had given up a promising career in law and Susie, our two young sons, and I were about to depart for Jerusalem for my first year of rabbinical training. We had sold our comfortable suburban house, our two automobiles, and lots of other “stuff.” As the buyer of our second car drove away, I put my hands in my pockets, realized that I didn’t possess a single key, and I felt incredibly free.

Perhaps this should not have come as such a surprise, but I was not yet aware of the teaching of the ancient rabbinic sage, Ben Zoma, who asked

12. Babylonian Talmud, *Ketubot* 68a.

13. Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* iv, end. See, also, *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906), s.vv. “abstinence.”

14. Cf. William G. Braude, trans. *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 1:352; “All I have created, I have created for you,” *Midrash Rabbah, Kohelet*, 7:28, Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a.

rhetorically, “Who is rich?” His answer was, “Those who are happy with what they have.”¹⁵ How much better off we would be if we could experience fully the pleasure of what we already possess, if we did not need a thing until we already had it. Even better, if we were to align our values and priorities with what really contributes most to happiness and meaning in life: good health, loving relationships, honest work, supportive communities, and helping others.

Recognizing that our values are formed in childhood and that parents are their children’s most impactful teachers, Jewish tradition urges us not to spoil children or accustom them to a pampered existence.¹⁶ Rather, by word and example, we should help them learn to enjoy life’s simple pleasures, understand and accept limits, value what they have, and share with those in need. This is, by no means, an easy task. Today’s children are bombarded from every direction with distorted value messages and subject to many influences beyond parental control. We must fight back.

My first full-time congregation was in Greenwich, Connecticut, a very affluent community. Soon, our two young sons were under the misimpression that everyone in town except us was “rich.” Susie and I were mortified and worried. From then on, when one of the boys used the word “rich,” we would ask, “Do you know the Jewish definition of rich?” Or, “Are they happy with what they have?” This mantra rapidly became as tiresome to our kids as did quail to our ancient ancestors, but they got the message. They are now adults and parents in their own right, and I hope and pray that they will never use or hear the word “rich” without remembering its true meaning, and where they learned it.

Ultimately, the issue is one of balance. As the famous, first-century rabbi Hillel, taught, “If I’m not for myself, who will be for me? If I’m only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”¹⁷ If we’re not for ourselves, who will be? No one. Utter selflessness would be a kind of saintly foolishness, even self-destructive. But if we are unconcerned with the well-being of others and only look out for ourselves, what are we? Vain, self-centered jerks. And if we don’t strive for a healthier alignment between serving ourselves and caring for others now, when will we do so? Tomorrow? Can we be sure we’ll have one?

15. *Pirke Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers) 4:1.

16. Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin* 84a.

17. *Pirke Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers) 1:14.

The truth of human existence is that life gives us no guarantees. We are not promised good health, long life, prosperity, success, or happiness. What life gives us is a series of todays, each of them a precious, irrecoverable gift, an opportunity to give and receive love, to bless the lives of others, to make a lasting difference for good. If we're fortunate, we'll have many todays. We'll never have a single tomorrow.

Thus, we read in the Talmud, "Rabbi Eliezer would say, 'Repent one day before your death.' Asked his disciples, '[Do we] know on which day [we] will die?' Said he to them, 'In that case, we should repent today, for perhaps tomorrow we will die; hence, all our days are passed in a state of repentance.'"¹⁸ I don't take Rabbi Eliezer to mean that we should live our days in regret and self-reproach, but rather, introspectively, not putting off essential deeds of love, healing, kindness, forgiveness, justice, generosity, and compassion, thinking there will always be another opportunity to do them, when there's no assurance that will be so.

In Jewish tradition, repentance is more than feeling regret for our failures and shortcomings and trying to make amends to those whom we've hurt. It is an active, ongoing process of improving one's character by means of reflection and resolution, developing habits of mind and action that allow us to grow and transcend ourselves. Our ancient rabbis were well aware of the complexity of human nature. While they were hopeful about human possibility, they understood that human perfection is a noble, but unattainable goal. Therefore, they urged us to harness even our lesser attributes in service of good. They viewed human beings as having two fundamental and conflicting drives, which they called *yetzer ha-ra* and *yetzer tov*, "the evil inclination" and "a good inclination."

As it turns out, the so-called "evil" inclination is more akin to ego or ambition. Were it not for that inclination, they said, people would not have children, build homes, or create businesses.¹⁹ In other words, actions we undertake to gratify our personal needs often benefit others as well. The sages explicated the biblical verse, "You shall love the Lord with all your heart, your soul, and your might," in a similar vein, understanding the Hebrew word *me'odecha*, "your might" to mean possessions.²⁰ Thus: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, your soul, and your possessions." While ambition and acquisitiveness are not inherently

18. Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 153a.

19. *Genesis Rabbah*, 9:7.

20. Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 61b.

praiseworthy, the material resources we obtain honestly and share generously are a way to express love for God. What could be more meaningful?

With respect to *how* we gain money and possessions, the Talmud tells us that the first question God will ask when calling us to account for our lives is, “Did you conduct your business affairs with integrity?”²¹ Israeli economist and professor Meir Tamari elucidates this theme in his book, *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life*,²² whose purpose, he writes, is to provide “authentic Jewish answers to the challenge of wealth.” For much of the past two thousand years, Jews lived in semi-autonomous, self-governing communities where every aspect of life, including economic activity was governed by Jewish law. There emerged what Tamari calls

[A]n ethical and moral framework...introducing nonmaterialistic considerations, a unique social structure, and distinctive role models, which together tempered and restrained the excesses of more egotistic economic activity...This framework sought to sanctify man’s everyday actions in this field, in exactly the same way as it introduces holiness into the domain of other basic needs like sex, food, [and] shelter....Man’s economic desires are...legitimate, permissible, and beneficial, but restricted, educated, and sanctified by observance of God’s commandments.²³

Consequently, such seemingly secular subjects as weights and measures, fraud, misleading sales practices, payment of debts, employer-employee relations, intellectual property, negotiating practices, corporate and individual liability, competition, interest rates, prices and profits were seen as inherently religious. The fundamental spiritual principal that undergirds this framework is that all property, all wealth, belongs to God. As Scripture puts it, “the earth is the Lord’s and all that it holds.”²⁴ It follows that we are not the owners, but the custodians of what we possess. Thus, both the source of our means and our use of them are matters of ultimate significance.

In his profoundly moving book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*,²⁵ written largely while an inmate in Auschwitz, psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl argues that our

21. Ibid., *Shabbat* 31a.

22. Meir Tamari, *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998).

23. Ibid., pp. 1, 3–4, 29.

24. Psalms 24:1.

25. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1959).

deepest human need is not for power or other kinds of gratification, but for meaning. But he contends that the question, “What is the meaning of life?” is a meaningless one. Why? Because there is no universal meaning applicable to everyone. The most profound question of human existence, Frankl held, the question each of us must address, is “What is the meaning of *my* life?” And the answer is not something we discover, but something we create. It is the product of our choices.

A meaningful life is about making choices—choosing between good and bad and between less and more worthwhile, between important and unimportant, between ordinary and extraordinary. From a religious perspective, these choices are grounded in the affirmation that we live on in many ways after our physical death. We live on, if we are blessed with progeny, in our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and in the generations yet to come, who inherit our values and carry our very essence in their DNA. We live on in the memories of those who knew and cherished us. We live on in acts of goodness, compassion, and justice we perform, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of others. We live on in the actions others perform when they are inspired by our example. We live on in the causes and institutions in which we invest our passion, time, effort, and money, and which are larger, more significant and more enduring than our fleeting, perishable, sometimes lonely and bewildered selves. And we live on, we hope and pray, in the loving embrace of God who gives us life, both temporal and eternal.

In offering these assurances, religious traditions provide more than a perspective on mortality and immortality. They provide an agenda for living wisely and well: devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to family, faith, community, and country; performing consistently the deeds by which we want most to be remembered; doing our utmost to set an example we hope others will emulate; investing our precious lifetime in things that truly matter, that make a difference, that last, that endow our lives and those of others with purpose and meaning.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was surely right. We cannot hold the world “close enough.”²⁶ And as Rabbi Milton Steinberg reminded us, the things we value above all are never truly ours. We are privileged to enjoy them for a time, but they are and have always been “a loan due to be recalled.”²⁷

26. Edna St. Vincent Millay, “God’s World,” in *Renascence and Other Poems* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1917).

27. Milton Steinberg, “To Hold with Open Arms,” in *A Believing Jew: the Select Writings of Milton Steinberg*, ed. Maurice Samuel (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1951).

Mortality teaches us both the art of embracing and the art of relinquishing all that matters most. The tension between embracing and relinquishing is a paradox embedded in the nature of existence itself. Thus, even as we hold life precious, we must prepare to let it go. Our aspiration, in Steinberg's words, is to "clasp the world, but with relaxed hands," to "embrace it, but with open arms."²⁸ In the process, we create, experience and enhance the meaning of our lives.

28. Ibid.