

Vayigash 5766: Bloodsuckers

- Basil Herring.

The crucial importance of economic justice and maintaining impeccable behavior in business in order to prevent anti-semitism and a negative perception of the Jew.

Rabbi Basil Herring, Ph.D
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Bloodsuckers

When Nation of Islam leader Farrakhan calls Jews “bloodsuckers,” he draws on a very specific tradition of anti-semitism. And when African Americans in Harlem torch a Jewish owned store and claim that they are acting against some kind of exploitative Jewish business practices, they too do not act in a void. They in fact continue a long and remarkable public and literary caricature of Jews in relation to money and business: that of the Jew as a financial bogeyman who takes unfair advantage of Gentiles to enrich himself at their expense, has a long history in Western culture. And what is the major source of such portrayals? It is none other than the greatest figure in Western literature: William Shakespeare, whose “Merchant of Venice” portrays Shylock, the Jewish money-lender, as an unforgiving, merciless and bloodthirsty usurer, who takes every opportunity to exploit and destroy his hapless Gentile victims, so as to exact his proverbial “pound of flesh.”

Now it is significant to note that while Shylock can be, and in the 18th and 19th centuries was, portrayed in more sympathetic manner, a victim of circumstance and prejudice, in recent years, as pointed out by Prof. James Shapiro of Columbia University, and noted in the New York Times, there has been a revival of the tradition of Shylock as evil incarnate. Last year, Joseph Papp’s production of the play was seen by many as anti-semitic. And in recent weeks, Hollywood movies such as “Casino” and “Get Shorty” portray Jewish businessmen as venal, greedy, and fundamentally money-grubbing sociopaths. The question is why this should be so: why now, why davka at this point when Jews are becoming more and more integrated into the mainstream of American society, why when by all accounts anti-semitism seems to be on the wane? I would like to suggest an answer to this question, but before I do, an excursion into this week’s parshah, dealing with the subject of Jews and financial exploitation of the masses, might be in order.

It is of course the story of Joseph, viceroy of Egypt that is our focus. During the 7 years of famine that he foretold and anticipated, the people run out of food. In desperation that turn to Joseph who has filled Pharaoh’s granaries in preparation for this moment. First they pay for food with their available cash; when that runs out they hand over their livestock, then their lands, until finally they plead with Joseph to take them as slaves, with whatever crops they will produce to be given to the state. At that point Joseph refuses: he insists that they keep 80% for themselves, with 20% for Pharaoh. Rather than exploit them under a crushing burden of poverty and

dependency, turning them into a hapless class of welfare recipients dependent on the handouts of the state, Joseph employs good capitalist theory: give the the people an effective profit incentive to succeed, thus increasing the gross national product in an expanding economy.

And indeed from this example of Joseph, the great medieval compilation known as the Sheiltot d'Rav Achai Gaon, makes the following statement: “From this we learn that Jews are forbidden to hoard fruit so as to articially inflate the price of food in a time of shortage ... One who does this will never be forgiven by God. As is written, ‘Those who hoard fruit, those who take interest on loans, those who cheat on standard measures, and those who overcharge are all described by the passage: I will never forget their deeds.’”

How remarkable! Even though there is no specific mitzvah in the torah forbidding this action, we are told that one who exploits the masses in this manner will never be forgiven. The only other law that has such a harsh punishment in rabbinic literature is the sin of desecrating God’s name, of which the Rambam says “However, as far as one who has desecrated God’s name is concerned, even after he has repented, and Yom Kippur has arrived, and he maintains his repentance, and he has been punished with suffering—such a one is not completely forgiven until he dies.” [Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 1:4]. What an equivalence: desecrating God’s holy name and exploiting the poor! Both are crimes never to be forgiven by God. So fundamental is the Jew’s consciousness of the economic imperative to treat people fairly. One might well say that there is indeed a fundamental connection between the two behaviors: insofar as unethical business practices lead directly to a H_illul Hashem, or the desecration of God’s name with which every Jew is willy nilly associated.

But of course Joseph’s fairness, while appreciated at the time by the Egyptians whose lives he saved, in time was used by the enemies of the Jewish people to discredit them: eventually they were blamed for the problems of Egypt, enslaved, killed, and trodden upon.

No wonder the Sages placed such a high priority on economic justice. As the Talmud states: “Each one who is brought to judgement (at the end of his life) is asked the following: Did you do business in good faith? Did you establish times for Torah study? Did you anticipate redemption?” [Shabbat 31a]. Note the order of the questions we are asked at the proverbial pearly gates: The first question is about business. Only after this come questions about Torah study and about expecting redemption. Thus, the priority is clear: impeccable behavior in business comes first; then Torah study, last is our faith in the ultimate redemption.

Yes it is true that Jews have an uncommon ability to make money—and lot’s of it. Endless, it would appear, are the Jewish stories of success, the monied Jewish classes and families who have succeeded in legendary proportion. But that in no way means that such Jews, or for that matter any Jews, must have done it in ill-gotten manner. Why then, to return to our original question, should we we see, at this particular point, a recurrence of ancient canards about Jews and wealth?

It is my opinion that the matter is related to a trend that many have noted: namely that today in America, and elsewhere, there is a fundamental splitting of the population into the have and the

have-nots. The rich are getting richer, the vaunted post-war middle class masses are not keeping up, and the poorer are getting poorer. More and more do we hear about middle class layoffs, downsizing, rising levels of debt, and growing welfare dependency on the bottom of the pile, while a small segment of the population at the top just gets richer and richer.

To my mind such a trend is what accounts for this newest negative perception of the Jew: in the mind of many, he symbolizes the exploitative upper class...