

Money only talks to those who listen!

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Judaism has never advocated poverty nor recommended it as a spiritually uplifting experience. Indeed, the Talmud describes the feeling of poverty as akin to death. Nor has it ever suggested that “money is the root of all evil” or that “it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven than a camel can pass through the eye of a needle.” On the contrary, there are lots of indications that having money can be beneficial, to kings and High Priests, for example, to keep them from being corruptible. I wonder if we should follow the example of the priests who were expected to contribute towards making sure the High Priest was richer than any of them. If only I believed that making all religious judges richer would ensure their incorruptibility!

Riches can be used to benefit both those in need and help society in general. They can help in every area of welfare. The drive to accumulate can be used in unselfish ways, to better human existence, rather than for conspicuous over-consumption, self-indulgence or exhibitionism. However, wealth does not automatically bestow wisdom, intelligence, or even common sense. Indeed, Jacques Maritain once said, “You can tell what God thinks of money by the sort of people he gives it to!”

According to the Talmud wealth is more due to chance or Divine Intervention than to any personal qualities. (Though it does seem to me that single-mindedness—with a dollop of opportunism—helps!) So it is hard to understand the tendency to have rich men running communal or religious organizations simply on the basis of their wealth. Indeed I would say that my experience has proved to me beyond doubt that wealthy men in charge of communal or educational organisations invariably make a right mess and apply all the wrong methods. The successful institutions I can think of have all been run professionally by experts in the field. Yet we suckers continue to repeat our old mistakes. Indeed, there is a well-known expression that “baal hameah hu baal hadeah”—he with the hundred has the opinion! The Jewish version of “He who pays the piper calls the tune.”

Billionaire Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, is a case in point. It was reported in the Jewish Chronicle (by a thoroughly reliable journalist), that at a recent press conference in London, Bronfman replied to a question about the future of the Jewish people with the absurd comment that, “The whole concept of nationhood and the lines of being pure begins to sound like Nazism, meaning racism.”

Racism is excluding or discriminating on the basis of race. Particularity is not necessarily racist. Neither are rules of citizenship. Now, a case could be made that our conversion laws are too rigid. And it could be argued that Israel ought to have different levels of association in addition to the religious. (Indeed, the Law of Return defines Jews in the loosest of possible ways—only one Jewish grandparent!) But anyone more than vaguely familiar with

Jews knows that racial characteristics do not apply (unless you are an anti-Semite).

For Bronfman to use the word "racist" and the term "Nazism" simply suggests to me that the guy should be prevented from speaking in the name of any Jews (other than himself) immediately. These are remarks one expects from Islamic fundamentalists or members of the fascist British National Front (or Oxford academics), not those claiming to represent the Jewish people!

What qualification does Bronfman have for representing Jews, anyway? And, for that matter, what is the World Jewish Congress that it should represent Jews, either? It is just another one of those self-perpetuating, oligarchic inventions of a few rich men who think their wealth enables them to speak for anyone but themselves. I find it humiliating that we Jews are represented by people, simply because they have money and nothing better to do. Indeed, it is having men like Bronfman in leadership positions that turns most Jews off having anything to do with communal organizations and conveys the unfortunate impression that Jewish religious and communal life is for the rich only.

Anglo Jewry is typical, no better and no worse. But over the fifty years of my knowledge of communal affairs it has been consistently beggared by having rich men put in positions of responsibility and supposed leadership only to have them disappoint and even betray. The only mitigating argument is that alternatives have been even less inspiring. Yes, indeed, if a community, a people, gets the leadership it deserves, then we must have done a really lousy job on ourselves to get to where we are today.

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