

Valentine's Day

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Just as we Jews are caught up in our internal conflicts between those who want no religion and those who want too much, a similar ideological conflict is waging on both sides of the Atlantic over financial policies.

On the one hand, the apostles of financial freedom explain away the disasters of unbridled capitalism as a temporary setback to an otherwise perfect system that encourages hard work, creativity, and innovation. On the other hand, the European model of socialism and government interference has led the Euro to near collapse. If Nobel prizewinners can argue both ways, it is not easy for layman to evaluate which system is better. One can see the abuses of both. Bonuses of millions are as offensive as abuses of welfare.

All that one can say is that consumerism everywhere is dominating our lives. The vast majority of humans are frail, shortsighted, pretty incompetent creatures who fumble through by following trends and fooling themselves that they are making rational decisions. The most one can do is comment on what is. Predicting the future is a mug's game.

If we accept the old Hobbesian contract that a country does have obligations to its citizens, then providing basic services, a charitable safety net, is now the accepted norm throughout the Western world, regardless of economic system. But to fund that, a government needs some income (although it seems to me that it is only massive debt that is enabling Western governments to pay their bills).

So those of us with any disposable income are encouraged to spend. It helps the economic recovery and that helps the government and that helps the world. But how do you get anyone to spend? One way is to make what you have to sell attractive, either because you've designed it that way (Apple) or because you have marketed it that way (De Beers persuading you to buy diamonds for your wife). The other is to establish a Special Day when everyone is expected to buy something for someone he or she cares about and you are persuaded to buy something that no one really needs because you will feel bad if you do not.

"But wait", as the commercial goes. We also have special or holy days that originally had nothing to do with commercialism. Once the Christian West celebrated Christmas exclusively as a religious festival. For many people it still is. But for at least as many it is simply an excuse for parties and gifts and trying to have a good time. And why not find an occasion to have a good time, especially if things are not so good?

There are subcategories. New Year's Eve (originally St. Sylvester's) or St. Valentine's Day (named after a highly unlikely Saint Valentine) might have started out as religious festivals, but nothing of the religious side seems to have remained. And all religions have their own esoteric holy days and new years. Is Halloween Christian, Pagan, or just commercial? Does it make any

difference if you celebrate it with no religious significance in the company of others who do? Like inviting your Christian neighbors to join you for a kosher Christmas pudding?

Then there are purely civil dates, like Thanksgiving, Guy Fawkes, Independence Days, and I guess Mother's Day and Father's Day. Even they, if you trace them back, had Christian origins.

What interests me is where the giving presents part comes in. Was it only the common practice of giving Christmas presents that forced us to start giving even more Chanukah presents to overcompensate. But the fact is that for thousands of years we have been commanded to celebrate our religious festivals by giving presents to our families and nice clothes and having lots to eat and drink. And remember Purim, when we have to give presents all round! So you can't say giving prezzies goes against the Jewish grain.

But what about the religious issue of not imitating other religions? Cannot this be said to imply the sort of response that once led many to fast on Christmas and nowadays manifests itself in late night study marathons? The argument usually goes that if a public holiday either has no religious significance or has largely lost it then there's no problem. That's why so many really frum Americans celebrate Thanksgiving Day. And what can be wrong with celebrating Mother's or Father's Day? Since most of us, including Christians, have absolutely no idea who St. Valentine was, what can be wrong in celebrating love? On the contrary, we are commanded to love, the more the better (if perhaps not romantically).

It seems to me that the issue is one of motivation. After all, virtually every one of our Biblical Festivals was copied from someone else before us. And our harvest festivals were all celebrated at the same times of year that the Bible required them of the Children of Israel, long before Isaac was a twinkle in his father's eye!

So I guess it all depends on what you have in mind. Is your Valentine's Day gift a nod in the direction of some obscure bishop or a character who may or may not have been jailed by the Romans and may or may not have fallen in love with his jailor's daughter? Or is it just because you really do want to please the woman or man you love? In which case, if you can afford it, make every day a Valentine's Day, help the economy, make some people richer, and please the most important person in your life.