



Table Talk: A Study Guide

**Prepared by the Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values
and Leadership**

1. Devarim 32:15

וַיִּשְׂמַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעַט שְׂמִמָּתָ עֲבִיטָ כְּשִׁית
וַיִּטֵּשׂ אֶ-לוֹהַ עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יִשְׁעָתּוֹ.

So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked—You grew fat and gross and coarse—He forsook the God who made him and spurned the Rock of his support.

1a. Seforno on 32:15

שמנת עבית כשית. הנה אתה ישורון קהל תופשי התורה ובעלי העיון פנית אל התענוגים הגשמיים ובוזה עבית מהבין דקות האמת כאמרו וגם אלה ביין שגו ובשכר תעו כהן ונביא.

You, the elite of the people, preferred to concentrate on the physical enjoyments offered by a life of leisure, and by doing so avita, you became too gross to understand the finer points of the teachings of the Torah, the only truth. Isaiah (28:7) describes the conduct of the spiritual elite of the people when he writes: “but these are also so muddled by wine, and dazed by liquor, Priest and Prophet are muddled by wine.”

Questions for Discussion:

- What concern in this verse is Moshe identifying and why would entering the land of Israel change the relationship between Israel and Hashem?
- To forsake and to spurn is different than when our material preoccupations make us indifferent or apathetic to our spiritual needs. What explains this strong language?
- How does Seforno understand this verse?

2. Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 5:9

אֲהַב כֶּסֶף לֹא יִשְׂבַע כֶּסֶף וּמִי אֲהַב בְּהֶמוֹן לֹא
תִּבּוֹאָה גַם זֶה הַבֵּל.

A lover of money never has his fill of money, nor a lover of wealth his fill of income. That too is futile.

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you think it means to love money? How can you love a thing that only has transactional value?
- Can you apply this cycle of desire and discontent to examples in your own life of a material need that keeps increasing in intensity?

3. Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers 4:1

אִיזְהוּ עָשִׂיר, הַשְּׂמִיחַ בְּחֻלְקוֹ, שְׂנֵאָמֵר: יִגִּיעַ כְּפִידָה כִּי תֹאכַל אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ וְטוֹב לָךְ (תהלים קב"ח:ב').
אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ, בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְטוֹב לָךְ, לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Who is rich? The one who rejoices in his lot, as it is said: "You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper" (Psalms 128:2). "You shall be happy" in this world, "and you shall prosper" in the world to come.

3a. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch on Avot 4:1

The greed for physical pleasure is circumscribed by gratification and satiation. But the striving after money, the means for pleasure, has no limit for though money in itself does not give pleasure, it makes possible all future enjoyment. Therefore, the lust for money can never be satisfied. And a man's craving for more and more wealth may well grow to such excess that the lack of what he does not now possess may actually mar his joy in whatever he does have at present. Yet it is precisely this joy in what one possesses, this contentment with one's portion that constitutes the only genuine treasure and the sole true happiness in life; without it, even the richest of men will remain poor in the midst of all his wealth... This awareness of where one's duty lies can endow any God-given "portion" with irreplaceable blissful worth. Desire no more than you have – and you are indeed rich.

Questions for Discussion:

- Enjoying the fruit of one's labors is different than contentment with one's possessions. How is happiness connected to work here?
- How does contentment with what one has get in the way of aspiration and ambition?

4. Hershey Friedman, "The Simple Life: The Case against Ostentation in Jewish Law," https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2294784

If Judaism frowns on ostentation, what kind of lifestyle does it recommend? Histapkut bamuat, being content with less, is definitely considered a virtue in Jewish law. Ben Zoma's statement (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 4:1): "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot" succinctly states this philosophy. The following verse in Proverbs (21:17) indicates that a life of luxury can lead to poverty: "One who loves wine and oil shall not be wealthy." Moreover, the Mishna (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 5:19) states that "Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our forefather Abraham: ... a good eye [generous], a humble spirit [humility], and a modest soul." "Modest soul" is translated as one who controls his physical desires even for things that are permitted (Shaarei Teshuva, Shaar 1:34).

5. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 429

For we should not attach any item of idol worship to our money or property, in order to gain pleasure from it, and for this reason, the Torah says "You must not bring an abhorrent thing into your house" (Devarim 7:26). And one reason for this commandment is to distance every element of detested idol worship... And within the commandment is that one should not attach to one's own money, which God graced you with, the money of another which was gained through theft, violence or exploitation, or from any disgusting element, because all of these are included in the elements of idol worship. For one's heart is inclined towards evil, which desires [items paid for by any means] and brings it into the home; and this inclination towards evil is called idol worship... And about money such as these that we have discussed, and about the elements of idol worship, on all these it is written "You will be proscribed like it," meaning that anything which is attached to it is proscribed, and God's blessing is absent from it, and it is lost and destroyed, as the Rabbis say, "The inclusion of even one perutah of money gained by extorting interest will destroy large treasuries of money.

Questions for Discussion:

- Why is attachment to money related to idol worship?
- How can one sublimate one's natural inclination towards materialism?

6. Lewis Lapham, *Money and Class in America: Notes and Observations on Our Civil Religion*, (Grove, 1988)

No matter what their income, a depressing number of Americans believe that if they only had twice as much, they would inherit the estate of happiness promised them in the Declaration of Independence. The man who receives \$15,000 a year is sure that he could relieve his sorrow if he had only \$30,000 a year: the man with \$1 million a year knows that all would be well if he had \$2 million a year... Nobody has enough.

7. Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (Knopf, 2006)

Economies thrive when individuals strive, but because individuals will only strive for their own happiness, it is essential that they mistakenly believe that producing and consuming are routes to personal well-being.

8. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas* (Hodder Faith, 2022), p. 176.

When religion dies and consumerism takes its place, people are left with a culture that encourages them to buy things they don't need with money they don't have for a happiness that won't last. It is a bad exchange, and it will end in tears.

Questions for Discussion:

- How has consumerism created cultural change?
- How does religion offer a counter-cultural tempering of consumerism?
- What Jewish rituals and laws aim to moderate our impulse to buy things, especially luxury items?

9. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (Schocken, 2014), pp. 201-202

Most people in the West tend to rate their wellbeing not on an absolute scale, but relative to others. Given the choice between earning \$50,000 a year in a society where the average wage is \$30,000, or earning \$100,000 a year in a society in which the average wage is \$200,000, most prefer the former. This is symptomatic of the force driving consumerism, namely envy, whose strange logic consists of letting someone else's happiness spoil mine. Envy is the art of counting other people's blessings. The fastest route to happiness is precisely the opposite: not thinking of what others have and we do not, but instead thanking God for what we do have, and sharing some of that with others.

Questions for Discussion:

- How do you explain this societal phenomenon?
- What effort can you make to combat it?

10. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Antidote to Materialism" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNP8HjC9qfA&t=1s>)

If you look in the Torah to see the command Moses issues immediately before and then immediately after the Golden Calf, it is the same command: Shabbat. Why is Shabbat the antidote to the Golden Calf? On Shabbat, you can't buy, you can't sell. You can't go into work and make money. On Shabbat, you focus on the things that have value, but no price. You focus on home, your spouse, your children, you spend time together as a family. You spend time together in the synagogue as a community. You learn, you pray, you thank God for what you have instead of worrying about what you don't have.

Questions for Discussion:

- In what way do you experience Shabbat as an antidote to materialism?
- How does the presence of other people minimize or maximize our material needs?
- Judaism is not an ascetic tradition, so how does the Torah want us to approach materialism?

11. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *I Believe* (Koren, 2022), p. 184

I believe wealth and power are not privileges but responsibilities, and we are summoned to become God's partners in building a world less random and capricious, more equitable and humane.

Questions for Discussion:

- How have you used money to create a more equitable world?
- How can you curb your own material needs to strengthen your religious observance and mindset?