

One can find several indications in this *parsha chayei Sarah* that Abraham was a well-off man.

Questions about whether the price Ephron the Hittite asked for the Cave of Machepelah was exorbitant or reasonable, but one who parts with 400 shekels of silver does not sound like an impoverished man.

When Abraham commissions his servant to the city of Nahor to find a wife for Isaac, he sends him with “ten of his master’s camels” (24:10) indicating that Abraham had more than that.

When the servant encounters Rebekah, he presents her with two gifts: “a gold nose-ring” and “two gold bands” (v. 22). The Torah states that when

Rebekah's brother Laban "saw the nose-ring and the bands on his sister's arms" he became eager to greet him. Of course, Laban is known to be one who is overly impressed with wealth and is even greedy and exploitative, but the description does accord with the impression that Abraham is wealthy.

If that wasn't enough, in his speech to Laban, Abraham's servant begins, "I am Abraham's servant...The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become rich" (v. 35). That is an unmistakable remark. The servant goes on, describing Abraham's assets. God "has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female

slaves, camels and asses” (v. 35). The impression is clear: Abraham is a wealthy man.

I wonder what to make of this fact. What does the Torah’s noting of Abraham’s wealth tell us about the Bible and its teaching? In other words, why mention this at all?

The topic of wealth is a constant subject of conversation in society. An entire field – economics – is devoted to the study of how it is generated, accumulated, and dispersed. Political discussions often center around how wealth is employed in society – its distribution and allocation.

Money is a regular topic everywhere and among every people.

For Jews, however, money can also be a source of discomfort. When I graduated college, I decided to teach in the Bronx. I became friends with another teacher there, and one day, we were at a public library together. Perusing the books on the shelves, we noticed a title, Poor Jews. My colleague remarked snidely, “Is there such a thing?”

Not only non-Jews make remarks about the wealth Jews possess or are purported to possess. I recently listened to a Jewish comedian who said, “I grew up in a small sect of Judaism: poor.” The

comment elicited a resounding response from the audience.

The topic of money and Jews unnerves many of us because we know how antisemitic stereotypes have regularly abused the relationship between the two to assert negative caricatures about Jews.

Undoubtedly, this is an enormous conversation that cannot be handled in one sermon. It possesses numerous dimensions. To keep the topic within boundaries, let's return to the Torah itself. Why does the Torah make a point of notifying its readers that Abraham was rich? The first response I have is the most natural one. Most people if given the choice of

being rich or poor would choose to be rich. The Torah's teaching is as much as anything a teaching about human nature. That it remarks upon the wealth of an illustrious patriarch, thus placing a positive valence on wealth, should not be all that surprising. While some religions explicitly or implicitly make poverty an ideal, Judaism does not, but its view of wealth is certainly complicated and does not fit easily into the categories of discussion that characterize our public discourse.

Over a decade ago, a series of protests took place near Wall Street in downtown Manhattan at which the protesters used the slogan, "We are the

99%.” Their purpose was to raise awareness in society about the discrepancy between rich and poor. Indeed, that movement had legs as several presidential candidates – certainly in this election cycle but even in the 2016 election cycle – have made income inequality their top priority.

I don’t imagine that the Torah can be our only guideline in how to address the complex topic of economic equality or economics in general, but let us at least acknowledge the message it tries to convey to us about the nature of wealth.

The first point we learn I’ve already detailed. Our first patriarch was a wealthy man, and the Torah

makes a point of saying that. This establishes immediately that the earning of money is good. Nonetheless, several other messages appear to ensure that the making of money is not an unadulterated good.

The first check upon such a notion is simple and very important. God makes a two part promise to Abraham: He will have many offspring, and he will inherit the land of Canaan. At no point in his promises to Abraham does God promise him that he will become wealthy. Abraham's wealth may not be completely incidental, but it's also not central to

who Abraham is, and it seems to be marginal regarding Abraham and God's relationship.

The second check on the generating of money as an unadulterated good is the character of Laban. We will see in a coming *parsha*, Laban's capacity for exploitation when he deceives Jacob into working for him for twenty years. Nonetheless, even in this *parsha*, the Torah describes a conversation that speaks to the problem of greed, which is necessarily connected to money. Once Abraham's servant is in Laban and Rebekah's house, the Torah states, "The servant brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, gave them to Rebekah; and he gave

presents to her brother and her mother” (25:53).

These gifts followed upon an oral agreement between the servant and Rebekah’s brother and father that Rebekah would accompany the servant to the Land of Canaan to marry Isaac.

Yet, when they all awake in the morning, Laban and his mother seek to renege on the agreement.

“Let the maiden remain with us some ten days; then you may go” (v. 55). This is a subtle indication on the Torah’s part that Laban, having seen evidence of the servant’s wealth, sought to extract more from him even at the expense of breaking an agreement.

Laban serves as foil throughout this *parsha* and

future *parshiot* of one who does not have the proper relationship to money. In short, while the Torah highlights Abraham's wealth, it also demonstrates an awareness of how the acquisition of wealth can override all other concerns, even the keeping of promises – a value the Torah holds dear.

We live in Jericho, one of the wealthiest towns in one of the wealthiest states in the wealthiest country in the world. Our public discourse is suffused with discussions about money. Often these discussions are divisive. While communism has fallen away as a viable economic option, the discontent and desire for alternatives to our present

free market system has never been greater since the fall of the Soviet Union.

What I have shared with you regarding this *parsha* may not have transformed how you look at the issue of income inequality in our society or any of the other issues related to money and wealth.

Rather it presents to us the Torah's simple but pertinent teaching about the acquisition of wealth. It is not something to be ashamed of, and it is far from central to the quality of the relationship one has with God. This is just one of the messages that we can learn from studying the life of Abraham.