



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > First Days

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 6-7, 2012

Pesach

**What Drives You: Self-Interest
or Greater Good?**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest questions plaguing mankind – one that has recently been the center of debate amidst a climate of corporate greed, with companies claiming to serve society while raking in billions – is whether we can balance self-interest with the greater good. This question is answered, of all places, at the Passover Seder.

The Passover Seder takes up the issue of freedom. It forces us to examine if we can be free to do as we wish while not compromising and infringing on the freedoms of others ... and how we can assure that greed does not override the interests and rights of individuals.

The Passover Seder is comprised primarily of two antithetical elements – wine and matzah. Matzah is the bread of the impoverished. Wine by contrast is a rich drink, symbolic of wealth and prosperity.

With these key symbols, the Seder presents a revolutionary way of looking at the meaning of freedom both for ourselves and the world around us. By extension it offers us a powerful demonstration of the Torah's profound relevance to our lives today – how a contemporary issue, and one that has troubled humans throughout history, is resolved by a tradition that goes back over 3300 years.

WHAT DRIVES YOU: SELF-INTEREST OR GREATER GOOD?

A Passover Question For Mark Zuckerberg, Sergei Brin, Larry Page, Lloyd Blankfein And For The Rest Of Us

1. What is Freedom?

Happy Passover!

With Passover being the “time of our freedom,” it seems appropriate to open up with the question: What is freedom?

As opposed to our parents and ancestors who lived under oppression, we live today in a free world. But are we truly free? Are we free when those of us who have more are exploiting those that have less?

Witness what people are doing to each other in the name of their personal freedoms, in the name of self-expression and self-interest. We don’t need any reminders how those claiming to protect their clients and the public interest abuse their power and positions. Sadly, we witness this virtually every day.

2. Is Capitalism Failing? (Joke)

A capitalist is walking through his factory with a friend.

The friend asks, “What did you tell that man just now?”

“I told him to work faster,” answers the capitalist.

“How much do you pay him?” asks the friend.

“Fifteen dollars a day,” answers the capitalist.

“Where do you get the money to pay him?” asks the friend.

“I sell products,” answers the capitalist.

“Who makes the products?” asks the friend.

“He does,” answers the capitalist.

“How much does he produce in a day?” asks the friend.

"Fifty dollars worth," answers the capitalist.

"That means," concludes the friend, "that in effect he is paying you thirty-five dollars a day to tell him to work faster."

"But I own the machines," and the capitalist quickly adds.

"How did you get the machines?" asks the friend.

"I sold products and bought them," answers the capitalist.

"And who made those products?" asks friend.

To which the capitalist can only respond, "Shut up! He might hear you!"

Another:

A young girl asks her father, "Why is it so cold in the house?"

"We don't have any coal," he says.

"But why is there no coal?" she wants to know.

"Because I lost my job," he replies.

Still unsatisfied, she asks one more time—"And why did you lose your job?"

To which he answers, "Because there is too much coal."

3. The Latest News

Lately, newspapers have been full of articles and essays struggling with the issue of corporate greed versus the common good, debating the behavior of such giants as Goldman Sachs, Google and Facebook, and (in a more positive vein, Starbucks and Timberland).

Let's begin with Mark Zuckerberg's recent statement in Facebook's IPO filing, claiming that Facebook was "built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected." In the prospectus for what will be a record \$10 billion initial public offering, Zuckerberg

promises: “We don’t build services to make money; we make money to build better services. And we think this is a good way to build something. These days I think more and more people want to use services from companies that believe in something beyond simply maximizing profits.”

Cynics have pointed out that we have heard posturing like this many times before. You can forgive Zuckerberg, I guess, considering that Facebook’s IPO offering is estimated to value the company at between \$75-100 billion, of which \$28 billion is likely to wind up in his pocket!

And Google made the same claim when it went public in 2004, declaring that Google was “not a conventional company” but one focused on “making the world a better place.” A decade earlier, Steve Jobs insisted that “being the richest man in the cemetery doesn’t matter to me ... Going to bed at night saying we’ve done something wonderful ... that’s what matters to me.”

This narrative offers an antidote to tales of bailed-out bankers collecting undeserved bonuses and job-crushing private-equity barons paying lower tax rates than their secretaries. But wishing to hold the moral high ground does not make it so – whether in industry, politics, or religion.

4. Posturing Comes Easy (Optional)

Posturing obviously comes more easily to the search engine and Internet tycoons because they can claim they are more virtuous than those who run wicked old smokestack industries. Except, that is, when they are advertising their products, which just happens to be how the new tykes make most of their money.

Google is a case in point. As much as Google promised to “make the world a better place,” in time, as their coffers filled up, Google went from “a technology company that empowered its employees to innovate” to “an advertising company with a single corporate-mandated focus,” as James Whittaker complained¹ while trying to explain why he left Google for ... Microsoft.

¹ http://blogs.msdn.com/b/jw_on_tech/archive/2012/03/13/why-i-left-google.aspx.

Now wait a minute, wasn't Microsoft once accused of being the great behemoth, using unfair practices to bully the marketplace?

And where is that company's founder today? Bill Gates has left Microsoft to administer his charitable foundation, distributing millions, along with Warren Buffet's money. I guess Microsoft was not a sufficient enough venue for doing the greater good.

5. The New Robber Barons

In one recent critique of hi-tech companies' moral posturing, entitled "The Robber Barons of Silicon Valley," Rob Cox of *The Daily Beast* writes:

Though Silicon Valley's newest billionaires may anoint themselves the saints of American capitalism, they're beginning to resemble something else entirely: robber barons. Behind the hoodies and flip-flops, lurk businesspeople as rapacious as the black-suited and top-hatted industrialists of the late-19th century. Like their predecessors in railroads, steel, banking, and oil a century ago, Silicon Valley's new entrepreneurs are harnessing technology to make the world more efficient. But, along the way, that process is bringing great economic and labor dislocation, as well as an unequal share of the spoils...²

He goes on to lay out specific abuses by these mega-companies, including: exploitative manufacturing; indifference to copyright; disregard for privacy; crony capitalism. And he concludes with prudent advice:

The original robber barons had decent intentions when they built railroads to connect America's emerging cities and drilled oil wells that fueled the nation's growth, but their empires still needed to be regulated, reined in, and in some cases broken up by vigilant watchdogs. Lofty words and ideals are fine for motivating employees and even for spurring sales, but they can also serve as

² <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/03/11/the-robber-barons-of-silicon-valley.html>.

cover for motives that clash with the broader interests of consumers and society. We need more than fancy promises in IPO prospectuses to ensure that the rise of the Silicon Valley engineer is good for the world.³

All this would lead us to conclude that individual expression and the drive for personal gain inherent in self-interest, left unchecked, cannot coexist with the higher good. Greed and selfishness will always prevail.

6. Goldman Sachs

This argument only intensifies when we look at the economic meltdown of late.

Goldman Sachs – one of the entities left standing after the 2008 debacle – now epitomizes the greedy goblin. The world’s most powerful investment bank, Goldman Sachs has been described as “a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money.”

This sentiment was reiterated in Greg Smith’s scathing resignation, published in the *New York Times*.⁴ Therein, he described a corporate culture that values only one thing: making as much money as possible, by whatever means necessary. He accused Goldman Sachs of treating its clients as pigeons to be plucked rather than customers to be valued. He alleged that the company’s traders vie to see how much profit they can make at the expense of their clients, even if it means selling them products that are sure to “blow up” eventually.

Does all this mean that our only other option is socialism, in which we don’t allow self-interest to be the driving force? But socialism and communism have brought us even greater abuses of individual power than any democracy ever has.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/opinion/why-i-am-leaving-goldman-sachs.html>.

7. Communist Humor (Optional)

Some humor to lighten this up, from Ronald Reagan's collection of communist jokes about the former Soviet Union:

The commissar came to the collective farms to see how the harvest was doing. He asked a farmer who replied, "Oh comrade commissar! If we took all the potatoes, they would reach the foot of God."

"Comrade farmer, this is the Soviet Union. There is no God."

"That's okay, there are no potatoes."

Another one:

It was hard to get an automobile in the great USSR. Cars were owned mainly by elite bureaucrats. It took an average of 10 years to get a car, and only 1 out of 7 families owned automobiles. You had to go through a major application process and put the money out in advance.

A man who did just that was informed by the car dealer. "Everything is in order, and in 10 years you can come to get your car."

"In the morning or the afternoon?" The man replied.

"What difference could it make?"

"A big difference. The plumber is coming in the morning."

8. The Best of the Worst

Churchill famously said: "Capitalism is the worst system. But I have never found a better one."

Yet, does this mean that we are doomed? Does personal gain of capitalism negate the possibility for a humane and just society?

Can we ever balance the two forces – personal interest and common good – or are we forever trapped in this battle?

Not necessarily.

In stark contrast to the Goldman Sachs (and others) “rip your eyeballs out” approach to making money, we are also blessed to witness a different kind of American capitalism.

Take Jeffrey Swartz, the former owner of the mega footwear company, Timberland, which he sold last year for \$2 billion. Mr. Swartz, who incidentally is a Torah-observant Jew, pioneered a new level of social responsibility at Timberland. “It is not enough for Timberland to make the absolute best boots, or shoes, or clothing in the world. We recognize we must also serve. Everything we do, everything we sell has an impact on the communities in which we live and work,” he wrote in his first “corporate social responsibility report,” in 2000. From then on he made a point of issuing such a report every three months, along with the requisite quarterly financial reports.

Even when he ran a company with annual revenues of \$1.6 billion, he didn’t seem especially interested in talking profit margins, share yield and market value. Swartz, 51, began preaching corporate social responsibility back when it was considered a loony idea reserved for activists. Defining himself as a “change agent,” he implemented some of the farthest-reaching social initiatives ever enacted by an American corporation.

Swartz contends that the key to social change is civic engagement and dialogue with the centers of power, whether they are governments or businesspeople. “There is a rap song from a long time ago by Public Enemy, called ‘Fight the Power.’ [I say] No – use the power. That is what is wrong with the rage movement. There is no agenda. There has to be an agenda. The agenda has to be the perfection of society, not its destruction or demonization.”

In addition to Jeffrey Swartz, we also have Howard Schultz’s latest efforts at Starbucks in practicing a kind of moral capitalism – making a direct link between Starbucks’s record profits and a larger societal role the company has embraced.

These two examples – and we hope that Facebook, Google and others will also live up to their promise – are shining models that demonstrate that capitalism can be balanced with the greater good.

The question is: How?

9. But How? (Optional)

How do we reconcile the two – self-interest and the greater good?

Adam Smith, widely cited as the father of modern economics and capitalism, contended that self-interest is the inevitable driving force in life and thus, economics.

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.⁵

And this self-interest inevitably helps the public good:

By pursuing his own interest [the businessman] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

Smith's ideas however are inconclusive as *how* to actually balance the two – self-interests and public good – and *what* to do when the former overwhelms the latter, as we are witnessing in today's corporate culture.

In a new book, *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, take Smith's idea a step further. They argue that the wealth of a country is most closely correlated with the degree to which the average person shares in the overall growth of its economy. Using a series of clever historical studies that persuasively argue that the cheesiest of clichés is actually correct: the true value

⁵ See *Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith.

of a nation is its people. If national institutions give even their poorest and least educated citizens some shot at improving their own lives – through property rights, a reliable judicial system, or access to markets – those citizens will do what it takes to make themselves and their country richer. This suggests, among other things, that instead of supporting one-off programs promoting health or agricultural productivity, the international community should focus its aid efforts on deep political and economic change.

Yet, at the end of the day, most people see the two forces of personal and communal good, as irreconcilable. But are they?

Well, let me share with you a secret: Despite all these arguments, Passover teaches us that the two are very much reconcilable.

10. The Passover Answer

Passover shows us how.

It does so by means of its two primary elements – wine and matzah.

When you think about it, these two are antithetical to one another. Matzah is the bread of the impoverished, *lechem oini*. Stripped to its bare minimum, matzah consists of nothing more than water and flour. Not allowed to rise, it represents the ultimate in humility. It is devoid of any hint of inflated sense of self.

Wine, on the other hand, is a rich drink. Unlike water, wine is the epitome of sense and experience. Rich with taste and zest, it boosts one's energy and elicits joy from the heart and soul, "rejoicing G-d and man."⁶ Wine is symbolic of wealth and prosperity – and, in this regard, it is the direct opposite of the impoverished matzah.

How do these two come together in one Seder? And why even bring them together in one setting?

⁶Judges 9:13.

11. Secret to True Freedom

The answer to this is both simple and profound, and it contains the secret to all of life, not to mention the answer to the dilemma between corporate greed and greater good:

True freedom – which is what we achieve on Passover – is not simply about every individual doing whatever he or she wishes, regardless of how it affects others; true freedom is about connecting to a Divine force that is beyond anything man-made. And that connection frees us from all human strictures and confines.

True freedom compels us to have both elements in our lives: 1) a deep sense of humility in face of God and His blessings, and 2) a strong sense of self. Our humility is not meant to efface us, but enhance us ... to enrich our individuality and allow our personalities to shine forth.

We pursue success and wealth not because we are egocentric, but because God wants us to be individuals that succeed, and to use our skills to excel and prosper.

12. Let My People Go

Perhaps the most pointed statement that captures the Passover story is God's instruction to Moses as what to tell Pharaoh, "Let My people go, so that they will serve Me."⁷

Ostensibly, this evokes the obvious question – which is an oft-cited critique of faith: Why do we consider this an exodus from slavery, when all it led to was another form of servitude – serving God? If we are to be truly free human beings, then we should serve no one – not human beings, not man-made institutions, and not God. After all, how is serving God different than serving other people? Isn't it just replacing one form of slavery with another?

⁷Exodus 9:1.

Questions like this reveal a stereotypical and distorted view of God. If God is just a larger, more powerful version of ourselves, then serving Him is indeed just another form of slavery. But if God is a reality radically different than our own – an absolute existence that is completely unlike our relative and arbitrary existence, an omnipotent, immortal and indivisible God diametrically opposed to our flawed, mortal and divisible lives – then submission to the Divine is a step toward emancipation.⁸

All man-made structures, even the most sublime, can lead us to great heights, but only to those heights that we can reach with our own human tools and devices. The Divine – and the fact that we humans were created in the Divine Image – offers us the ability to reach and connect with a reality that is *beyond* our human parameters ... to marry heaven and earth and to fuse the finite with the infinite.

Armed with this Divine freedom we can fuse the seemingly antithetical forces of self-interest (wine) and humility (matzah) with the greater good.

13. Successful Balance

The only system that can successfully balance individual and societal needs is one built on faith in God. The underlying flaw of all systems – be it raw capitalism or raw socialism, fascism or democracy – is that they are based on human rules. Any system built on human judgment is bound to revolve around the prejudice, subjectivity, and arbitrariness of individual humans or groups. But God, who created all people equal, also gave them a system of absolute morality and justice.

A society that yearns to be righteous must be built on such unwavering ethical values, and then there is hope for true freedom – a freedom that integrates personal and social good.

⁸ Thus we read in Leviticus (25:42), “they are My servants, who I brought out of Egypt” “not servants to my servants” (Talmud, Bava Metzia 10a).

Too often we find one at the expense of the other. Some go to the extreme of self-nullification, and they cease to have any sense of value. Eventually, total demoralization ensues. Others opt for the other end of the spectrum, as described by Ayn Rand – a sense of super-human self-reliance and singular drive, devoid of any humility.

14. The Perfect Formula

Hillel, however, provided us the perfect formula: *Im ayn ani li mi li? V'im anu l'atzmi moh ani?* “If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself what am I?”⁹

For each of us – and society as a whole – to be healthy and balanced, we need a fusion of both ingredients:

Wine: A strong sense of self-worth and self-esteem ... feeling rich and confident in our skills and abilities ... recognizing that “If I am not for myself who will be for me?”

Yet, in order to prevent this self-assurance from turning into arrogance, to check it from making us self-absorbed and greedy, we need ingredient two:

Matzah: a healthy dose of humility and modesty ... recognizing that we are not self-made and self-contained human beings ... that “If I am only for myself what am I?”

15. Bridging Self Interest and the Common Good

The same goes for society as a whole: The follies of Goldman Sachs and Google should not dissuade us. Passover renews our hope in the human race that it is indeed possible to bridge self-interest and the greater good.

⁹Pirkei Avot 1:14.

Passover offers a powerful message to the corporate lords of our time – Mark Zuckerberg, Sergei Brin, Larry Page, Lloyd Blankfein and so many others, as well as a message to each one of us:

A healthy economy requires a proper balance between wine and matzah – self expression and humility.

I submit that, whether they know it consciously or not, the Passover spirit has affected people like Jeffrey Swartz and Howard Schultz, as well as Warren Buffet and Bill Gates. Passover has embedded into human consciousness the power and ability to bridge wealth (wine) and humility (matzah).

16. Passover Relevance

Long before capitalism was born, long before our current raging debates about corporate greed and social justice, the Passover Seder set the tone and pioneered the way to balance self and selflessness.

Therein we see the profound relevance that Passover offers us. The Seder presents us with a sophisticated system for experiencing freedom and for balancing our own personal needs and the greater good.

It took many years for this Passover lesson to infiltrate the mainstream. But infiltrate it has in the likes of Jeffrey Swartz's Timberland and Howard Schultz's Starbucks. Now it is our mission to make sure the word gets out and the Passover message reaches all corporations, communities and individuals around the globe.

How many other lessons can we derive from the classic Passover Seder?

Something to think about. Something to ask ourselves and our families and friends as we gather around the Seder table tonight. Amen.

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