

What Money Shouldn't Buy
Leviticus 19:9-18: 19:35-37; Psalm 19

Yosemite National Park is sacred ground for our family—its granite peaks quite literally are our touchstone. George and I were on a hiking trip when we first broached getting married. We have taken our kids every year from the time they were infants. Before they were old enough to valiantly carry their own backpacks, we'd stay in campgrounds. So as the family travel agent, I had an annual ritual. On February fifteenth, I would wake up early, pick up the phone, and redial—seemingly endlessly—hoping that the sites made available that morning for July wouldn't all be taken. Today, my friends and fellow campers enact that ritual on the computer. But it turns out that last season, it was not sleepy moms or dads who were the first online—no, it was scalpers, snatching up countless reservations to camp in Yosemite or to climb Half Dome. Instead of the nominal \$20/night charged by the National Park Service, the scalpers were marketing reservations for \$100-\$150/night on Craigslist. There was a fierce outcry when the Sacramento Bee broke the story, editorializing, “Scalpers strike Yosemite Park: Is Nothing Sacred?”

I suppose there are some who might appreciate the scalpers' ingenuity and chutzpah. Their entrepreneurial spirit shaped a strategy that was low risk and high reward. For wealthier campers aware of their business, the scalpers spared them anxious wait time on the phone. Cleverly, they found a way to capitalize on something that didn't belong to them.

But cash, cleverness and chutzpah are not the only ways to measure this enterprise. Especially in these difficult economic times, when so many of us have tucked away our dreams for expensive vacations, resting, relaxing and treasuring friends and family, surrounded by majestic granite mountains and fast moving streams, cooking over a campfire and sleeping under the stars makes for a compelling affordable alternative. But like Tantalus, the scalpers held it just out of reach for potential campers with modest means. In order to make their own tidy profit, they took a previously level playing ground and tilted it, creating yet another realm where those who have, enjoy, and those who have not, are left outside looking in. As the editorial asserted, “The wonders of Yosemite belong to all of us, not just those who can afford to fork over extra cash to a scalper.”

The scalpers shattered another ethic of fairness valued in our culture. As much as my blood pressure rose while waiting impatiently on the phone, as annoyed as I was at the inefficiency of the system, I nevertheless felt that waiting in line was fair. Admittedly, it didn't occur to me then that you could pay someone to phone on your behalf, or engineer a way to automate the dialing. While frustrating, there is something equitable and democratic about waiting in line. Whether those dialing or typing fingers belonged to the CEO of a green tech company or a struggling student, we were all subjected to the same rules. No one jumped the queue.

But it wasn't unfairness alone that precipitated outrage at the scalpers. We instinctively recognize that we lose something precious when a public inheritance is used as a tool for

private gain. It is a form of corruption, not by a bribe, but in the archaic sense of decaying or degrading. For the scalpers to treat a public trust as their own trust fund to be raided at will demeans its value. It is not a commodity to be sold like soap. You don't have to be a camper or clergy to feel that auctioning off access to Yosemite Valley, Tuolumne Meadows and Half Dome is sacrilegious. Even hard-boiled newspaper editors asked, "Is nothing sacred?" The Hebrew word for sacred, *kadosh* means separate or set aside. Our national parks have been aside, separated from the usual commerce of the countryside, preserved, not for royalty or for the rich, but stewarded for everyone, for all time. It is in the very DNA of a national park that its grandeur and natural wonder belong to you, me, the inner city kid and the cowboy poet. Stanford's own Wallace Stegner captured this idea perfectly when he wrote, "National Parks are the best idea we've ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best, rather than at our worst."

I can imagine some of you might be thinking, "Come on rabbi. So Yosemite matters to you, but you're making a federal case out of a couple of clever, enterprising guys. They were probably even Stanford students!" Firstly, I hope that students at Stanford learn more here than how to become financially successful at all costs. Secondly, I grant that this is one small example. But it's emblematic of a more comprehensive and corrosive phenomenon—the intrusion of money and moneymaking into nearly every corner and crevice of our lives. Not even the religious world is immune. In 2008, when the pope made his first trip to the U.S., free tickets to his mass were distributed in Catholic parishes...and scalpers turned around and sold some of them for \$200 apiece online.

This isn't a question only of dollars and cents. It is a question of morality, when our society's obsession with money fosters unfairness, constricts the common good, commodifies the unquantifiable and in its most unbridled form, corrupts our highest values. We are living in a moment in time in which, without debating or deciding upon its merits, economic models and principles have overtaken nearly all others. I'm no economist, but as a rabbi, I see profound and enduring implications for the well-being of individuals and communities. A wise man once said, "Woe to him that builds mansions for the body, and not for the soul." There are too many corners of our lives where money, the pursuit of it and the power that wealth makes possible, impoverishes not just the soul, but also the family, the community, the environment, the civic. There are too many spheres where the transactional consumes the transcendent.

As you may know, President Obama issued an interfaith and community service campus challenge. Last year, Stanford focused on immigration. This year, in collaboration with a series on Ethics and Wealth that the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society is engaged in, we are focusing on wealth and faith. The students are discussing what religious traditions can teach us not only about wealth as money, but wealth as well-being. We're working with the tentative title for our Interfaith@Noon class: "Wealth and Well Being: What constitutes a rich life?" I've been thinking a lot about that recently. The Jewish community just completed the High Holy Day cycle, our time to reflect and seek forgiveness. While it falls at a different time for those of you who attend to the Christian calendar, a process of reflection and reconciliation is found in most religious traditions. And even those untethered to a ritual calendar sometimes circle a day to rest, reflect, reconcile with those they've alienated or felt alienated from. All of us, secular and religious people, might be curious, or perhaps concerned, to learn of a company with the motto, "We say sorry for

you.” Really! Customers can hire a well-spoken lawyer, social worker or teacher with some counseling training to apologize on their behalf to someone they have wronged. Think about it—what would it mean to pay someone to say sorry for us? Or to receive such an apology? Would you be satisfied if a stranger came to your door bearing a bought apology from that failed flame? Would you insist that she return a few times so that the woman who disappointed you pays a premium or to satisfy yourself that she really meant it? Would it be enough to know that the business partner who cheated you made the effort to commission an apology or would you hear them say sorry and think to yourself, “Nice try...”? Would it matter if you knew that your insensitive roommate bought a top-of-the-line apology or a deeply discounted one? And if you’re feeling generous and willing to treat this stranger as an amiable ventriloquist for the friend who betrayed you—would you then expect him to follow up to get together or would the onus be on you to pick up the phone and thank him for his open-heartedness?

For me, not so much. I like my sorries sincere. I want to hear my apologies straight up, from the original wrongdoer, accompanied by a willingness to look me in the eye and to reach out with a heartfelt hug. And I hope I offer my own “I’m sorry” with courage and contrition, without adding insult to injury by asking the one I’ve hurt to calculate how genuine those words are...or how much I’ve paid for them to be spoken. There are some things money shouldn’t buy.

But the domain of what money shouldn’t buy has become smaller and smaller. A price tag has been slapped on much that is priceless. You know the famous line from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first inauguration in March, 1933, “... the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” What you may not know is that within that same soaring speech, confronting financial challenges as comprehensive as any we tackle in our time, he instructed the nation “...we face our common difficulties. They concern, thank God, only material things.”

Could we say this today? “...only material things?” I ask this, with deep awareness and appreciation for how elusive material comfort is for some of us. I don’t deny the importance of security and comfort. Material things have their place—but it is not every place. Yet, as a culture, it seems that our desire for material things has become insatiable. That yearning has grown so strong and all encompassing that it has obscured most other aspirations and values. What once may have seemed greedy and self-centered has become normative, we barely notice it. It’s easy to distance ourselves, to see this as someone else’s problem—after all, you may be thinking—I don’t have enough to be greedy. I don’t scalp. I make my own apologies. But, it’s the very nature of being inside a bubble that our vision is impaired. As we enter sacred space to reflect, let us ask, are we inadvertently living the values that surround us or intentionally living the values we proclaim in our places of worship? How does the pervasiveness of the material influence how we spend our time? How does our behavior express what we mean by a rich life? How does the success we aspire to embrace constitute more than wealth? If we are blind or acquiesce to the magnetism of the material, then we unwittingly increase its attraction. And it is not just in our personal lives where the transactional can overpower the transcendent; we are witnessing an eclipse in the very fabric of our civic and communal covenant with one another.

Wherever you stand in this election season, whether you cheer or deplore the Supreme Court's 2010 decision on *Citizen's United*, removing restrictions on political expenditures by corporations or unions, it was a triumph of the transactional over the transcendent. When individual donors identify and publically back a vanity candidate, they expect not just access; they are purchasing fealty to their interests and imperatives. When special interest groups secretly bankroll a campaign, they buy policies, practices and legislation to insure their continued privilege. But, to be successful, it is not enough only to court candidates—they also have to—and have the means to influence voters—or disenfranchise those who disagree. Countless people struggled, suffered and even died to attain the right to vote. An aggressive campaign to limit voting puts the priorities of the privileged over our most sacred civic act. So, now, and for the foreseeable future, money doesn't just talk, it shouts, louder and louder—drowning out honesty, propriety, proportionality and the commonweal. To insure their candidate will be in a position to do their bidding, they sell a story replete with selective or deceptive facts, endlessly repeated through monumental ad buys. We used to call that propaganda, now, thanks to Stephen Colbert, we call it “truthiness”. “We're not talking about the truth.” Colbert says, “We're talking about something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist.” By single-mindedly pursuing their own self-interest over the common good, enabled by bottomless material wealth, these individuals and organizations are attaining their own ends at an unacceptably high cost. That cost is the corruption of our very democracy.

Amidst this deluge of money, how can we build levees that will hold? It is easy to retreat from the public square into quiet and serene sanctuaries when the din of the marketplace has drowned out the voice of conscience and character, when citizenship feels so saturated by the corruption of money and influence, when our private lives, as well as our civic lives, are overwhelmed by the material. Complacency and weariness, shrinking our world to include only worries about me and mine is understandable.

But our religious traditions are not only contemplative. They also are prophetic. They do not teach, “Every man for himself.” The bible teaches, “I am my brother's keeper.” In Hebrew we talk about *tikkun olam*—the repair of the world, not simply my small corner of it. Religious texts urge us to educate, research, invent. If we have been unintentionally complicit in the magnetism of the material, we can be intentionally constructive in building a different kind of community. What if we consciously turned the money that so easily corrupts into educating ourselves and our fellow citizens, creating communities of caring, providing the scaffolding so that those in need can build a better life for themselves so that they, in turn contribute to our shared future? What if we applied the idealism, initiative, collaboration and knowledge found in such abundance in our community to preserving what is priceless—our relationships, our sacred places, our citizenry, even our precious democracy from the unregulated ubiquity of the material?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, “Speech has power. Words do not fade. What starts out as a sound, ends in a deed.” ...The world is too small for anything but mutual care and deep respect; the world is too great for anything but responsibility for one another...” At this election season of many words and promises proclaimed for the future, let our deeds speak, as we study and labor with integrity, as we contribute as citizens through education, engagement and voting. May the words we speak in our houses of worship suffuse each of

us, and all of us together, evoking within us deep respect and mutual care, responsibility and renewal. May our words proclaim the promise of the world we envision, and may our deeds herald us to bring it into being.

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