

“It’s Not About the Money”

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It wasn't always easy for Rowling. She would have to overcome a lot of obstacles to get to where she is today. At one time, she was a single parent living on welfare diagnosed with clinical depression, and yet, somehow she managed to pull through to become one of the richest female authors in history. J.K. Rowling is her famous author's pen name. In 1995, she completed the first Harry Potter book and submitted it to 12 different publishing houses, all of whom rejected her book. A year later, she finally found a small publishing house, *Bloomsbury* who decided to publish her work. Later she would go on to complete 7 books in the series, all of which became bestsellers and huge movie hits. The Harry Potter brand is said to be worth \$15 billion and Rowling herself worth over \$1 billion. She is now one of the richest women in the world and, as her Harry Potter series comes to a close, she can now do whatever she desires. Her success with both the books and the movies are well deserved.

I might like to add that there has been an interesting development. For seven years, a Harry Potter fanatic worked on a guidebook to J. K. Rowling's best-selling series, but in the end, federal judge Robert Patterson ruled that Steven Vander Ark's book was too close to the work he admired. The judge went on to explain that the Harry Potter Lexicon would cause her irreparable harm as a writer. The decision, which came nearly five months after a four-day trial, was a victory for Ms. Rowling and the company that produces the Harry Potter movies, Warner Brothers Entertainment. However, some think this was a step backward for our society. Judge Patterson awarded the plaintiffs \$6,750 in damages.

I can understand the judges' rationale. I can understand and would even defend the law that protects the intellectual property of an individual. I can also understand the deep psychological motivations of a person to protect themselves against people who want to take advantage of them, no matter what their wealth. However, I cannot understand this suit. I can imagine, when asked, "Why would she pursue such an insignificant lawsuit?" Her response, "It's not about the money, it's about the principle." So I would ask, "What is the principle?"

We live in an age where there's an insatiable thirst for wealth, an age when enough is never really enough. At some point, we lose sight of what we really want. The following story illustrates what this really means to our society today. When I ask our children, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" so often the answer is, "I want to be rich." This greatly disturbs me. Children used to say they wanted to be a mom or a fireman, some wanted to be school teachers and some wanted to be professional athletes. However, today more children respond, "I want to be rich." Now, to me, that was always a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. To me, wealth was a means towards something. It seems that in today's world, children may not have the ability to think creatively about what they want. We seemed to have limited our children's capacity to wonder about their big dream and replaced it with the pursuit of currency and that which yields the greatest wealth. Oh, how they have missed the point.

As our Torah reading opens this week, it talks about the rules of war. Moses acknowledges that in the real world there are wars which will have to be fought and, we too, have battles to fight. Each of us has challenges to overcome, but there must be more. So our parasha continues. It moves from the specifics of making our way in the world to actually constructing a model society, a culture based on values and morals, a civilization based on ideals. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England writes,

“Yes,” says Moses, “We have left Egypt. We have reached the brink of the Promised Land and there will be wars to fight, battles to win, and land to settle. However, these things are not just the means to an end, they are preliminaries only. Our real task is to create a new kind of society with God in its midst and respect for human dignity as its aim. We did not leave Egypt only to create another Egypt. You, the next generation, are to become joint architects of a reality that will give practical expression to the dream.”

In this week’s reading we learn of the economics of communal living. We are taught of the limits to business interactions. “*Lo tashikh l’achicha neshech kesef...*” “You shall not deduct interest from loans to countrymen, whether in money or food or anything else.” (Deut. 23:20)

Rabbi Obadja Sforno explains, “After admonishing us to guard against those things which cause God to distance Himself from us, the Torah now advocates diverse acts of kindness which draws God closer to us. – these being the matters of interest and vows.” (32:20)

Strangely, the text says this phrase twice, “But to your brother you shall not give interest,” causing Sforno to again comment that, “Even if there is an agreement between the lender and the borrower, nonetheless it is prohibited for one Jew to pay interest to another Jew.”

There are models in our society for doing the right thing. Everything can’t always be about making a quick dollar and everything can’t be about amassing more money, greater wealth. There are many examples of people who are about developing progressive ideas.

The economist Preston McAfee is on a mission, trying to do some good. In an open letter to all university presidents and provosts, Theodore Bergstrom and R. Preston McAfee write,

“For nearly a century, a symbiotic relationship existed between scholars and scholarly publishers. Academics freely provided their discoveries, work, and time editing and reviewing, while scholarly publishers provided packaging and sold the output of the academics’ labors for a modest profit. This benefited both groups, because the publishers received the most valuable inputs for free, while the academics were sheltered from the business end of publishing and received the packaged output at reasonable profits. Since ***the primary concern of academics is the wide dissemination of their ideas***, the arrangement was suitable for both parties.”

In the 1970s, some “for-profit” scholarly publishers discovered that they could greatly increase their revenues by sharply increasing their prices. This gap widened in the 1980s and further widened in the 1990s. In fact the “for-profit journals” charge about five times as much per page and fifteen times as much per citation as the “non-profits.”

Then, under the creative commons license, Preston published for free *An Introduction to Economic Analysis* by R. Preston McAfee of The California Institute of Technology. In the introduction he writes. “You are free to use any subset of this work, provided you don't charge for it, and you can make any additions or improvements to it under the same terms. In addition, you must provide a link to my site on the first or top page of your version. If you are writing a “for-profit” book, don't start here.

I am compelled to ask, are there things we create and give freely for the betterment of society? Is there ever a time in our life when we are well cared for, a time when we feel confident that we can give freely for the betterment of the world?

Too often the debate over control tends to the extremes. At one pole is a vision of total control – a world in which every last use of a work is regulated and in which “all rights reserved” (and then some) is the norm. At the other end is a vision of anarchy – a world in which creators enjoy a wide range of freedom but are left vulnerable to exploitation. It is either all or nothing, either I have complete control or I must give it all away. Balance, compromise, and moderation have become endangered species.

Recently, we once again passed the anniversary of 9/11, historically, one of our country's most tragic days. It's a stark reminder that there are wars which will have to be fought. There are people who want this world to be a more violent place and there are those who want to impose their will on others through the use of force and destruction. Our response is to attack back and to protect. That is understandable. In fact, I would go even further to say that it is necessary. However, that cannot be our only response. We must refocus ourselves towards the good and building a better world, “a more perfect union.” These are words written just miles from here, some 221 years ago, as our forefathers sought to declare their independence. They were written so that they, and ultimately we, might “narrow the gap between the promise of their ideals and the reality of their time.” (Obama March 18, 2008, Philadelphia)

I vividly recall one of my high school teachers who proclaimed, “There is no free lunch.” I suppose she was correct, but the idea still bothers me. What an amazing statement. Everything comes with a price tag. It bothered me then and it still bothers me today. So, I ask you today to prove that statement wrong just once this week. Find a *chesed shel emet*, an act of kindness, a free gift that you can give without thought of reciprocity. Give love unconditionally, give care unconditionally and together we will make this improbable experiment called the human project succeed.