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Inside Consumerism

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Fundamental to my life — presumably, to nearly all our lives — are the pleasure and burden of making choices. Clearly, we do not always have the luxury of choice; and yet, choice remains an inescapable feature of who we are, and perhaps more so as the world changes around us. In this issue of *Sh'ma*, we examine the critical questions we must ask ourselves as we navigate our lives as consumers. How are we distinguished by what we buy, how we eat, what we wear, where we live, what schools our children attend, and, also, where we choose to satisfy our spiritual longings? How, if at all, do we embed our Jewish values in these choices? We also address the ever-more-blurry chasm in some circles between consumer and producer in Jewish life — namely, the role of the “prosumer,” who both produces and consumes Jewish learning and religious experiences. To what extent might co-creation, like the work of a prosumer, offer a new paradigm for Jewish engagement on both the communal and personal levels? This month’s contributors include a medley of writers, activists, rabbis, parents, and bread-makers; they draw on these and other experiences in their explorations of the power of individual choice and working with others to create change.

—Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

Who Is Rich?

BRENT CHAIM SPODEK

I was recently in a store where I saw a beautiful print of a teaching from Ben Zoma, one of the sages of the Mishnah. It read, “Who is a rich man? He who is satisfied with his lot.” The calligraphy was fabulous, and I told my wife that I wanted to buy it; hanging it on the wall would remind me of what was really important in life. After pausing momentarily, she asked if purchasing a poster to remind me of the folly of consumption was, perhaps, missing the essence of the teaching. Of course. Point well taken.

Wanting, longing, and desire are all natural parts of human nature. We desire all the things we think are lacking in our life: freedom, beauty, health, friendship. Sometimes, that desire, that longing, can so fully overtake us that it is impossible to think of anything else. And yet without desire, the world would be a very different place. The ancient rabbis famously say that were it not for desire, no man would build a house, marry a wife, or beget children.¹ Natural human desire is what leads us

to do the incredibly hard work of human existence. If we didn’t desire the results, we would never do the work. At its best, desire spurs us on to inhabit the world and improve human life.

When it comes to “things,” however, there is a much easier way to get what we want: We simply buy them. Most of the time, when we want to live in a house, we don’t learn carpen-

Traditional bookplates are inscribed, “The world in its fullness belongs to God and this book is from so-and-so’s collection,” as if to say one’s ownership of a book is really just a limited stewardship.

try; we buy a house. When we want to hear music, we don’t learn to play guitar; we buy a CD. Most of what we want can be purchased, saving us tremendous time and effort. But fewer of us, then, develop the skills to facilitate our own everyday life. Similar to drugs, which allow us to experience a high without the hard work of spiritual practice, so, too, shopping allows us to satisfy our desires without the hard work of learning a skill.

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¹ Genesis Rabba 9:7

² Shannon Hayes, *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*. (Richmondville, NY: Left to Write Press, 2010), page 12.

³ Shabbat 10a: "Every judge who judges with complete fairness, even for a single hour, is given credit by Torah as though he had become a partner to the Holy One of Blessing in creation." See also Shabbat 119b: R. Hammuna said: "He who prays on the eve of the Sabbath and recites 'and [the heaven and the earth] were finished,' is given credit by Torah as though he had become a partner to the Holy One of Blessing in creation."

⁴ Kli Yakar's commentary to Exodus 23:11


⁵ Psalms 128:2

Shannon Hayes, the author of *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*, once speculated that although cooking a chicken at home is cheaper, healthier, and tastier than eating a chicken sandwich at Burger King, people eat fast food more often than they roast a chicken; many people simply don't know how to roast a chicken. "Mainstream Americans," she wrote, "have lost the simple domestic skills that would enable them to live an ecologically sensible life with a modest or low income."²

Simple ownership is certainly validated within the tradition but rarely, if ever, lauded. Humans are only praised as co-creators with God, but not as co-owners.³ We partner with God in creation when we bring something new into the world — art, an insight into spiritual practice, a new scientific process, an infant, or even a Shabbat meal. While the tradition praises human creation in powerful terms, ownership, though legitimate, is more often understood as a temporary, conditional situation. Traditional bookplates are inscribed, "The world in its full-

ness belongs to God and this book is from so-and-so's collection," as if to say one's ownership of a book is really just a limited stewardship. More explicitly, a 16th-century rabbi, the Kli Yakar, teaches that the purpose of sabbatical legislation is to "teach us not to regard humans as absolute masters of... the land."⁴ To a traditional Jew, the question is not how much stuff one owns, but whether we bring forth holiness from the stuff with which we've been entrusted.

Ben Zoma taught that a rich person is someone happy with his or her portion. The true impact of this teaching comes in Ben Zoma's proof text from Psalms: "Thou shalt eat the labor of thine hands: Happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee."⁵

Happiness comes neither from having every desire satisfied nor from denying that desire exists. It comes from working directly with one's hands to satisfy longing. Perhaps we'd be more contented if we found ways to cook our own food, make our own music, weave our own clothes, and know that working as a creator is a form of spiritual practice. 

Power and the Purse: A Jewish Approach to Ethical Consumerism

JASON KIMELMAN-BLOCK

The ripple effects of American consumerism are felt far and wide. As consumers, we live as the primary beneficiaries of a system of trade and production that has no parallel in human history. Like it or not, these arrangements are transforming our communities, our country, our planet, and people across the globe. Some changes, such as the establishment of communities that collectively support local farms and treat workers and the earth well, are good for people and the earth. Other consumer changes are not. For example, victims of child trafficking are forced into indentured servitude on American soil to make T-shirts in illegal sweatshops.¹

Rarely do we pause to consider how many hands have helped make, transport, market, and sell each item that we buy — Shabbat candles, a pound of potatoes, or our cell phone service. Like it or not, my purchases — what I consume — are an investment in the practices of companies that impact the quality of life in small-town America, the working conditions from here to China, and the environmental

quality in my backyard and across the globe. For each purchase we make, we endorse workplace policies, production standards, worker safety and equality, and so much more.

While we sometimes put these thoughts to the back of our minds in the rush of daily life, we know that our small choices add up — creating a bottom line for some and a bottom rung for others. How we conduct ourselves as consumers has an enormous influence on the world around us. If we buy products from companies that mistreat or underpay their workers, we should recognize that in doing so, we compromise our own ability to "do good" in the world. If we intentionally support companies and sellers that treat their employees well and promote a healthy planet, then we're not supporting that type of degradation. We can shift the impact of our consumption.

As inheritors of a tradition which teaches that Jewish practices and values should permeate every aspect of our lives, we can seek out Jewish ways to navigate the ethical implications of being consumers.

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¹ www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/odfs/factsheet.html