

## **When Wealth becomes Taxing: How to be in the Upper Class with Class Parashat Lech Lecha**

By Rabbi Jason Miller

I'm really looking forward to the end of the year. Each December since I was a young boy, I've anticipated the annual end-of-the-year magazines. I'm always curious to see how the media helps us remember the year just passed. What events will they focus our attention on? What are the defining moments of the past twelve months? And this year, I think it should be even more interesting to see what kind of "spin" the media puts on the year 2002.

One would think that these Year-In-Review magazines would focus on our nation's response to last year's terrorist events, the debate over whether or not to go to war against Iraq, and our nation's homeland security efforts. And yet, it will be inevitable for these magazines to exclude one of the biggest stories of the year. Yes, in a year in which our military has been battling Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, a year in which we have reached Code Orange on our Homeland Security alert gauge; we've been inundated with stories of \$15,000 gold umbrella holders, \$2,000 garbage cans, \$6,000 shower curtains, retirement packages consisting of perks for sports tickets, cashmere sweaters, and toilet paper. All paid for with company funds. How will we ever explain to future generations that in the same year we were plagued by Anthrax and dirty bombs, we were glued to our televisions to hear the news report of the latest corporate executive to fall from glory, lose his \$30 million mansion, and fight to stay out of prison?

In this morning's parsha, after we are told of the divine order given to Abraham - Lech Lecha, that he should get out of the land and travel to a new land that God will show him, we are informed about Abraham's financial status. V'Avram Kaved Meod. And Abram was very rich. Rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. There is much to be learned from this word kaved, or rich. The word most often used for rich or wealthy in the Torah is ashir. So we must be curious about the choice to use kaved here.

In modern Hebrew, we use the word kaved to mean heavy, as in that sofa is too kaved for me to move. It can also mean a burden. The medieval commentator Rashi mentions this meaning in his commentary on the verse, and adds another meaning of kaved that many of us are familiar with. From the fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments, kaved et avicha v'et imecha - that we should honor our parents - we understand kaved to mean honor or respect. Similarly, from the same root of course is the word for an honor that is given out in synagogue, a kavod. Finally, the word kaved also means liver, the heaviest part of our body. So to review, Abraham, we learn in our parsha this morning is wealthy. We know this from the Hebrew word kaved, which is an unusual choice for wealthy, and also according to the dictionary connotes honor, respect, dignity, seriousness, heaviness, burdensome, taxing, laborious, and liver.

Here it is used to mean that Abraham was weighted down with many possessions because of his wealth. But in the very next verse, we learn that Abraham traveled from the Negev to Beit El "in stages," I'ma-asav. Rashi tells us that the use of this word means that upon Abraham's return from Egypt, he took the same route back staying in the same places he had lodged on his way down to Egypt. Rashi points out that while Abraham is wealthier now, he has retained his humility and doesn't choose to stay in nicer places. Abraham, our patriarch, was not altered by his accumulation of wealth. Recognizing the tendency to be burdened by material wealth, Abraham managed to maintain his kavod when he became kaved. This is not always the case.

We tend to only see the positive side of enormous financial wealth. But as we have become all too familiar with this past year with such episodes as the Enron debacle, having power and wealth can be burdensome, it can be a challenge. In our society, such a vast possession of wealth requires much responsibility and integrity. It catapults people into the public eye, living life in a fishbowl, having every business decision scrutinized, every investment maneuver questioned. There are many advantages to a life of wealth, but it must be done while maintaining kavod.

Yes, there is much to learn from our patriarch Abraham. Was he wealthy? Was he well respected? Was he burdened with what he had? Did he possess the dignity to keep him from a life of over-indulgence in material wealth? Perhaps all of these are true. It would serve today's troubled CEOs well to use Abraham as a paradigm of corporate leadership. Abraham, a man who founded a company - a company that still thrives today some four millennia later with millions of associates. It's a family business, the chief executive position having been passed on throughout the generations, but always to a family member. It's a company in which more people want to join than leave, and no one ever gets a pink slip. It's a company worth investing your 401(k)s in. Trust me, it's a wise investment.

We have quickly traveled from a time in which the corporate executive was so praised and respected, to a time when all CEOs are compared to the greed-ridden Gordon Gekko of the film Wall Street. But we have heard enough about the Ken Lays, the Martha Stewarts, and the Jack Welches. So, I'll leave you with a positive story of corporate leadership.

I learned of CEO Aaron Feuerstein from an article in the Washington Post. Feuerstein is the head of a manufacturing company called Malden Mills. It is located in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is the 23rd poorest community in the country. Malden Mills might not ring a bell to you, but I'm sure most of you have heard about their special product. Polartec, a light, warm fabric that many of you may wear in the form of a fleece, is produced by Aaron's company and is currently keeping our nation's Marines warm in the freezing cold of Afghanistan.

Aaron Feuerstein does not fit the greedy CEO stereotype we have heard so much about lately. His unique story begins in 1995 when, just before Christmas, his factory burned down. The Washington Post story explains that "rather than taking the insurance money and retiring or moving the plant to some Third World country, Feuerstein promptly announced that he would rebuild." He gave bonuses to his employees and paid them while they waited for the factory to re-open.

Feuerstein has received kavod from many for clinging to his principles, not leaving Lawrence, and treating his employees as respected human beings. But Feuerstein has gone through a very difficult time lately as sales have dipped due to the economy, and he recently had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Through it all however, Feuerstein has maintained his kavod from his workers, who cheered as their leader told them that together they would rebuild and they would succeed.

Aaron's grandfather, who was also his rabbi, once explained the verse from the Torah, teaching, "You are not permitted to oppress the working man because he is poor." Feuerstein memorized the passage in Hebrew. It has undoubtedly become his creed.

In Avot D'Rabi Natan, we learn that "character is tested through business." After this crazy year, how can we argue with this observation? Many of the CEOs we read about in the news today might be kaved meod, but they are certainly not deserving of the kavod ascribed to Aaron. WorldCom, Enron, Adelphia, Tyco. They may only see their employees as workers, but Aaron Feuerstein sees them as partners. It is kaved, burdensome, at the top, but if done with class, it can be full of kavod.

Feuerstein was kaved meod. He was wealthy. He was respected. He was burdened. But he was also a mensch. And yet, it is a story you won't read about in any of the Year-In-Review magazines come December. But nevertheless, for the corporate world, it should be required reading.

Shabbat Shalom.