

**Who is Rich?
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In their classic comedy routine, the 2000-year-old man, Carl Reiner interviews Mel Brooks, who plays the centuries-old human. At one point, the discussion turns to career and employment. It turns out, the 2000-year-old man was quite an entrepreneur, anticipating trends and capitalizing on them. Carl Reiner asks Mel Brooks, "Did you ever have any formal job?" Mel Brooks answers, "I was a manufacturer...I used to make the Star of David, the Jewish Star...as soon as religion came in I was on that...I figured this is a good thing..." After Mel Brooks describes the production process – six men, each with a wooden point running at full speed to the middle of the factory – Carl Reiner asks, "You never thought of going into anything else?" Mel Brooks responds, "I had an offer once. A fellow came to me...Simon. He said he had a new thing, a new item, a winner, looks like a winning item that's gonna be a big seller. It's called a 'cross'." Mel Brooks says, "I looked at it and I turned it over. I looked at all sides of it and I said, 'It's simple. It's too simple. I didn't know then that it was eloquent. I didn't know it would be such a hit.'"

If the 2000 year old man would have subscribed to an email newsletter called JOHO he might have been able to see the cross coming. JOHO is published by David Morgenstern, a former Beth Shir Sholom member now living with his family in northern California. David writes marketing and business communications for business all over the world. JOHO covers American social trends, new products, fashion, entertainment, and marketing news. JOHO is a Japanese word meaning, ""accurate, timely and important information", David produces JOHO for his clients, and, although I'm not one, I'm glad he put me on the mailing list.

It was in JOHO that I first found out about a business in San Diego that the 2000-year-old man might have used the moment he realized his mistake about underestimating the popularity of the cross. The business is called Sarah's Smash Shack and it's pretty

much what you might imagine. Think of it as a “Catharsis Center.” Customers at Sarah’s Smash Shack, which opened just a year ago, are given protective clothing and goggles to wear so they can spend some time smashing plates, cups, glassware, even cell phones and pda’s against a wall in a “smash room.” Looking back, last summer wasn’t a great time to start **any** small business, but, according to testimonials, a prime motivator for all the people who are flocking to Sarah’s Smash Shack is to relieve stress resulting from the recession and economic challenges.

Another response to the recession has begun to appear all over the country. It seems that an anonymous donor approached an advertising agency about producing a campaign “designed to remind Americans” of our strongest attributes that enabled us to weather previous hard times. The messages of the campaign, called Recession 101, are displayed on billboards nationwide. Members of the Outdoor Advertising Association of America are donating space and materials because, their website says, “this campaign is about America and resiliency. The recession has hurt one of America’s greatest attributes – its unshakable optimism...Recession 101 isn’t selling anything other than the American spirit.” Despite the fact that calming down Americans about the recession is in the best interests of outdoor advertisers, I still believe these billboards really are helpful.

For a brief time, a Recession 101 billboard recently appeared not far from here. On a background made to simulate a spiral-bound, college notebook, the billboard read, “Recession 101: Chill (Hysteria feeds recessions)”.

Here’s a sampling of some other billboard texts from the campaign that you might find as you travel around the country:

- Self-worth beats net-worth.
- Bill Gates started Microsoft in a recession.
- Nobody can repossess your future.
- Interesting fact about recessions...they end.
- Become the recessionista your parents always wanted.
- Don’t switch to cheaper scotch...drink slower.
- This is the worst downturn since 1929, according to economists who predicted 14 of the last 5 recessions.

My favorite is:

- Stop obsessing about the economy; You’re scaring the children.

These are all great perspectives. Still, in our less confident moments, we still may need to visit Sarah's Smash Shack occasionally. At the Smash Shack, the items thrown against the wall are surrogates, symbols for things that we cannot solve as easily. Plates, glasses and cell phones become replacements for the challenges of dealing with a difficult person, or a reduced paycheck, or an annual vacation we can no longer afford. Nonetheless, just because the objects and what we do with them is symbolic, doesn't mean that we should dismiss them or demean them. I frequently pass on a great teaching from my professor, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, that helps us understand what we're doing when we infuse meaning into a representative object. Rabbi Hoffman said, "The phrase 'merely symbolic' should be stricken from the English language. Things are either symbolic or not."

Of course, our main symbol for anything having to do with the Recession is money itself. After all, what are coins, bills, checks, or asset printouts but symbols of how well or poorly equipped we are to navigate through society using the common tender that everyone will accept. Just like Rabbi Hoffman would predict, we take the symbol of money seriously and often when we are least aware.

Scientific inquiry has produced some interesting insights about our brains and money. Kathleen Vohs, is a consumer psychologist at the University of Minnesota. She conducted an experiment in which two groups spent a good amount of time watching a screen saver on a computer monitor. One group watched exotic fish. The other group watched floating dollar bills. Afterward, they were presented with a task to accomplish and were asked whether they would prefer to work on the task alone or with a partner. Eighty-percent of those who watched the fish wanted to collaborate. Eighty-percent of those who watched the money chose to work alone. Similarly themed experiments demonstrated that merely thinking about money made the subjects less likely to help a stranger struggling with belongings. Rabbinic Judaism has a phrase for this syndrome, *Adam bahul al mamono*, money makes a person anxious, concerned and hasty.

Our tradition's most famous adage about money and wealth is that of Rabbi Simon ben Zoma, who concluded: "Who is rich? The one who is content with his/her lot." Later generations of rabbis put in their two shekels! One says to be rich is to own one hundred vineyards, one hundred fields and one hundred slaves working in them!" For Rabbi Akiva, wealth is about appreciating relationships,

especially a loving and loved partner whose actions improve society. He says a wealthy man is one who has “a wife whose deeds are beautiful.” Rabbi Yosi says: “(Who is rich?) One who has a toilet near the table.” In the second century anything approximating “indoor plumbing” was a real sign of wealth. Today, it is sobering to realize how much we take for granted in our lives that so many millions in the world have no choice but to live without – not only indoor plumbing, but access to health care, education, safety, security and a basic set of civil rights.

In the enduring Christmas season movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” George Bailey also has an answer to, “Who is rich?” Admonishing his family’s nemesis, Henry F. Potter, George tells him that he treats people “like cattle” versus George’s father who treated people like “human beings.” George’s final chastisement to Potter is, “...In my book (my father) died a much richer man than you’ll ever be!”

Still, we know that it took a whole movie, George’s personal economic crash and the intervention of an angel 2nd class for George to understand just how true his understanding of wealth really was. For us, too, the current recession makes it difficult to be content with our indoor plumbing and to feel comparatively wealthy. Recessions make it difficult to feel that the real worth of our lives is anywhere other than our net worth. Recessions make us feel as though our self worth **depends** upon our net worth! That is precisely the point of the billboard that reads, “Hysteria feeds recession”. Hysteria, as in panic. Hysteria, as in not thinking clearly or rationally. Hysteria, as in sacrificing our values, turning inward and away from each other in order to right our financial selves in the water. *Adam bahul al mamono*, money **can** make a person anxious, concerned and hasty – **can**, but doesn’t have to, **can**, but we need not allow it to, **can** but we must work hard to choose otherwise.

George Bailey got an angel. We, on the other hand must be our own angels...and each other’s. We must be each other’s angels by behaving toward one another based on the understanding that we are all economically interdependent. Knowing how fickle the economy can be and how subject any of us are to its capricious ascents and declines, as we are able, we must allow clients just a little more time to pay their bills. As we are able, we must give a little more tip to those who so depend on them. We must recognize that not paying workers a decent, living wage is tantamount to withholding pay from them, a severe transgression in our tradition – an

“abomination” against the very nature of the universe. We must be willing to pay for minimally respectable health care for all, but not just so the cost, hopefully an eventually comes down. Rather, we should do so in order that no one is forced to choose between food and medication or treatment

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, was riding by horse and coach. Along the way, the coachman stopped to take some barley from a farmer's field that bordered the road. He told the Ba'al Shem to alert him if anyone comes along and sees him taking the barley. No sooner had the coachman touched the barley than the Ba'al Shem cried out, “Someone sees! Someone sees!” The coachman stopped what he was doing and ran back to the coach. Looking around he saw no one and yelled at the Ba'al Shem for saying a witness to the theft was present when there wasn't one. The Ba'al Shem pointed towards heaven and said “Oh, but there really is!”

We can't depend upon heaven or angels to watch us. We must watch ourselves. We must be the eyes of Everything and Everyone when credit is packaged like candy and debt is bundled in ways that hide its true risk from even those whose business it is to know better.

Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, says:

“a sustainable market economy depends on certain values that are **not** created by the market—among them (are) trust, integrity, honesty to customers, loyalty to employees, industry, reliability...strong families, a passion for education, and a sense of responsibility to the community.”

Sadly Rabbi Sacks concludes that...

“...the market tends to erode those values necessary to its own survival.”

In other words, “the market” will not create a recovery – we will. We must. There will be no economic recovery, no one will have 100 acres, cows and servants, husbands will notice how beautifully their wives act in the world and how consistently right they are, no one will have indoor plumbing unless we are all worthy of each other's trust. There will be no economic recovery unless we work to both restore and engender integrity, for us and for others – simultaneously. There will be no economic recovery unless honesty in business and decent treatment of workers are not goals but standards.

Given the economic slide at this very time last year, it might seem incongruous to some that our Beth Shir Sholom community persevered with our Capital Campaign to support our Renovation. During the ensuing months, I've learned two vital lessons from my discussions with people about their participation in this project. The first is that while we repair the present, we have an obligation to create a foundation for and begin to actualize the possibilities of the future. Others took their risk and did it for us. Now it is our turn.

The second lesson is that those who give monetary gifts do so out of a very active sense of what wealth is. They know the answer to Ben Zoma's question: Who is rich? Those who give away some of what they have. They don't consider it angelic to do so. It is a privilege. They consider giving a gift to be an opportunity to express gratitude – a great, bursting forth of appreciation into the Oneness-of-the-Universe.

Ironically, our tradition requires **all of us** to be so forthcoming. Even those who receive tzedakah are required to give it. Of course, I said thank you to each one of our Campaign contributors for me and on behalf of the community. In each instance, they responded, sometimes in words and sometimes by a certain smile that said, "Please don't thank me. *I* am grateful to give." Today and in the years to come, I will continue to thank all of you who have given funds and/or time and energy to our synagogue.

Who is rich? We all are. We are all rich because we have the opportunity to give to one another, to care for one another, to earn or regain each other's trust, to recover, economically and otherwise, **with** one another not despite one another, and to watch over each other. We are rich because our relationships with our Beth Shir Sholom community set a standard for how we must be with the world. We are rich because we have the privilege to create together what we lovingly call "our Temple". We are rich because we have become each other's opportunity for gratitude. Amen.