

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Mishpatim-Shekalim 21 “Gamestop”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I'd like to mention that the Mekor Habracha community is mourning the passing of Beryl Gottesman, Dvora bat Aharon Bentzion v' Chana Shprintz, grandmother of Mekor member Jonathan Korman. May Jonathan and Alexandra and family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

The financial sector has been somewhat newsworthy for the past few weeks. First, we had the GameStop frenzy, and this week, Elon Musk invested 1.3 billion dollars in Bitcoin, causing it to hit an all-time high, approaching \$50,000! It seems fitting, then, that our Torah reading this week includes parshat Shekalim, which is obviously about money, and parshat Mishpatim, which introduces the topic of finance, in the context of civil law. In fact, Mishpatim is the topic addressed immediately following the narrative in last week's parsha about receiving the Torah at Mt Sinai, when the Jewish people agreed to obey whatever God commanded, *kol asher dibeir hashem naaseh*.

But right after this week's discussion of the laws about financial dealings, the Torah returns to the events at Mt. Sinai and reports a different declaration by the Jewish people, *Kol asher dibeir hashem Na'aseh v'nishma*, *Everything God says we will do **and we will listen***. The Torah's sequence seems odd – why does the Torah frame a discussion about financial law with 2 separate sections about the revelation at Sinai? I think the two declarations by the Jewish people have very different connotations which reflect their developing relationship with God, and the laws of finance gives us insight into that relationship.

In particular, the laws about interest, *neshech*, brought in the parsha, teach a subtle lesson that we've explored in the past. In a Torah centered society, profiting from a transaction based solely on monetary value is vehemently discouraged. Instead, one should do business by investing in people, by having a stake in someone's actual business venture. Because the former inevitably becomes an unfeeling, cold kind of transaction, like with a bank. It is disconnected from the actual business on the ground, the physical business so to speak. So, for example, if you use your home for collateral and lose it when you can't pay back the loan, too bad, because after all, that was the agreement. The banker profits even when you lose.

But if someone invests in your business, if you fail, your investor is in the same boat with you.

And that could be the difference between the two declarations by the Jewish people of *Naaseh* and *Naaseh v'nishma*. Before we received the laws of business, we looked at our relationship with God, as the Rambam puts it, as *avoda meyirah*, transactional. We'll be good servants and God will reward us. But *Na'aseh v'nishma* expresses a much deeper kind of commitment. It is an expression of *avoda meahava*, it says we care about the work – that we'll be devoted to our activity in the service of God, not just for reward, but because we want so much to be involved in the relationship that our commitment will never be conditional on the details of what God will command. It took the perspective of *Mishpatim* to learn that lesson.

So, what should we make of the Gamestop frenzy? I think it was a debacle that in the end not only didn't really hurt most hedge funds, but actually helped them – but all in all, it was a blip on the financial screen so to speak. And Elon Musk may be right - Bitcoin could be a great investment even at these levels. (However, full disclaimer, I take no responsibility for investment tips.)

Nonetheless, I think we could see these episodes as examples of how we've become accustomed to investing in monetary value alone, as opposed to actual people. That attitude can all too easily spill over into our personal lives, and it's something we should be mindful about – that is, not to treat people and situations in a transactional way, but to place a priority on the potential for genuine relationships. If we take that lesson to heart, we can increase our monetary wealth as well as feelings of joy and happiness, as we usher in, on Shabbat, the festive & jubilant new month of Adar. Shabbat shalom.