

Chayei Sarah 5764

I want to talk about value. There is a whole branch of philosophy devoted to defining value – what makes something valuable. Why makes a piece of art valuable, for example? How do we value people, for that matter – what traits do we consider admirable and worth having. And these things change over time, and in different societies.

We can tell a great deal about a society by what it values. What are the traits that it celebrates? Who are its celebrities – the people who embody those traits?

מִצְרַף לְכֹסֶף וְכוּר לְזָהָב וְאִישׁ לְפִי מֵהַלְלוּ: רַבֵּינוּ יוֹנָה. Who do we praise – what do we value.

For example, we know that virtually every culture has celebrated great military heroes – Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, Henry V, Frederick the Great, Napoleon. And that says something important about human nature, about its bellicosity and pugnaciousness.

In the 16th and 17th centuries great explorers were celebrated – men like Hudson and Cook, who explored new continents and new seas. And that tell us something about the spirit of that age.

During times of great intellectual ferment great thinkers and natural philosophers might become famous. When Samuel Johnson, the composer of the first real Dictionary of the English language, went on his celebrated journey to Scotland, he was greeted as a star. Poems were written about Newton; Rousseau's grave became a shrine. Pasteur, and Kant, and Darwin, and Einstein, were immensely famous.

What are the qualities that are celebrated in America today? What does it value? Who are its celebrities, its famous men and women?

For the most part, America values two things: Money, and good looks.

Outside of politics, we bestow fame almost exclusively on rich businessmen, like Buffet and Gates, or on actors and actresses, and athletes, whose stock in trade is their beauty or physical prowess.

And that's about it. Most Americans could not name a single famous contemporary scientist, a single famous contemporary poet, a single famous contemporary philosopher, a single famous contemporary religious thinker.

When they needed a new governor in California nobody said: "Let's get a famous scientist – or economist – or philosopher". Nobody would have heard of him anyway. Rather – "let's get a rich guy with big muscles". At least he's famous.

There's a very telling expression in contemporary English. "How much is he worth?" And the answer, of course, is denominated in dollars. That is how we value people in this country – by how much they have, by their possessions.

The Torah, however, has a different perspective:

תקומה היתה לה, שיצאה מיד הדיוט ליד מלך. On which Rashi comments: ויקם שדה עפרון. The same piece of land, to a superficial observer nothing has changed about it. But everything has changed. Because before it was used for the meaningless pursuits of a הדיוט, a person without values. And so it had no value. But now it belonged to אברהם, who could use that land to create קדושה and eternity – and so the land became valuable; תקומה היתה לה.

We are used to thinking – the American way of thinking – is that עפרון was worth a lot because he had a lot of fields. The Torah perspective is just the opposite – the שדה was valuable only when it belonged to אברהם. אברהם made the field valuable – and not the other way around.

And this has traditionally been our perspective. Who were the celebrities of the Jewish people? For the most part, צדיקים and גאונים. Whose names do we remember from the long history of our גלות? רש"י, the Vilna Gaon, ר' יוסף קארו, רמב"ם, ר' עקיבא איגר, and חתם סופר – those were our celebrities.

There were also Jews who gained a lasting name for themselves through their wealth – but only because they used that wealth, they dedicated it, to the betterment of their people. Men and women like Donna Gracia Nassi, who dedicated her wealth to bringing her fellow maranos back to Judaism, and Moses Montefiore, who helped rebuild ארץ ישראל and championed oppressed Jews in far-away Russia and Syria.

Like אברהם, these were people who by their deeds gave value to their wealth, and not the other way around.

I would add only – that today, when we live lives that are so much engaged with the society around us, we have to be careful to make sure that we maintain this Torah perspective. We have to be careful that we not value people by what they have, but by what they are.

We have to be careful that our celebrities – the people whose names are in our mouths like household words – are the גאונים and צדיקים of our time. And we have to be especially careful in front of our children, and our grandchildren.

We have to be so careful that when our children and grandchildren hear us talking of someone with admiration – or even envy – in our voice, they know that we are talking about a great חכם, תלמיד חכם, צדיק, or בעל חסד. Because our children absorb their values from us – and we impart those values most of all by whom we admire and praise – איש לפי מהללו.

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