Market Volatility, Spiritual Tranqulity

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Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tavo, Shabbat September 20, 2008

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The stock market is volatile. The real estate market is in trouble. The world economy is nervous. Huge companies have gone bankrupt. Other companies have been bailed out by the US government. Thousands of people have lost their jobs, their homes, their savings, their pension funds.

Economists and commentators offer their explanations and interpretations. They tell us who should be blamed for the crisis. While they may differ in particulars, they all seem to come to the same conclusion. The current economic crisis is the direct result of greed. Bankers made shaky loans because they thought they would personally make money from this practice. Highly paid financial "experts" sold investors speculative loan packages that promised high returns. These experts did so because they made money and huge bonuses from these transactions. The buyers bought because they didn't want to get left behind in the real estate mortgage boom. A bubble of artificial wealth grew larger, and people were eager to cash in. When the bubble burst, fortunes were lost; despair has set in; accusations are flying. Greed caused highly-trained, intelligent people to act unreasonably and imprudently, ultimately causing immense damage to themselves and to millions of others.

When an economy bases itself on the principle of greed, it is on a weak foundation. It is subject to corruption, volatility, and collapse. Yes, earning money is a good thing; but greed is the wrong principle with which to build one's portfolio.

This week's Torah reading offers a spiritual view of economic life, a view that promotes personal growth and responsible commitment to society as a whole. It is not rooted in personal greed; it is rooted in personal responsibility and the recognition that our wealth ultimately derives from God.

The Parasha records the laws of "the first fruits". A farmer has worked hard for many months. Now the harvest has come in. The natural instinct would be for the farmer to take the first fruits and eat them or sell them for profit. The Torah teaches, though, that "the first fruits" are to be brought to Jerusalem. The farmer gave the baskets of fruit to the priest in the Temple, and recited passages recalling God's redemption of the people of Israel from Egypt and His bringing them to the Promised Land. This ceremony was a clear reminder that our produce is a blessing from God for which we must be grateful. The Torah then says: "And you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you and to your household, you, and the Levite, and the stranger that is in your midst." We are to rejoice in what God has given us--and we are to share our good fortune with others, with those in need.

The Parasha goes on to instruct us in the laws of tithing. The tithes were to be given to the Levite, to the stranger, to the orphan and to the widow "that they may eat within your gates and be satisfied." A person might think: I worked hard for my income, it all belongs to me. The Torah teaches: yes, you worked hard, but your income is a gift from God, and God wants you to share a good percentage of your income with those in need.

The laws of "the first fruits" and tithing offer a healthy view of economics, providing spiritual tranquility to the earners and to society. The goal of earning is not to amass as much as one can for himself. Greed is a bad foundation for economic wellbeing, ultimately harming the greedy person and society in general. The goal of earning is to maintain oneself and one's family, and to recognize that one's wealth is a blessing of the Lord that must be shared with others. The guiding force is not greed, but the desire to be a good, constructive, helpful and generous member of society.

Judaism offers a balanced approach to life. It encourages hard work, prudent investment, material wellbeing. Yet, Judaism insists that our economic life not be governed by personal greed, but by righteousness and responsibility.

The current economic volatility reminds us how vulnerable we all are to the ravages of a philosophy of greed. It should also reawaken within us an appreciation of the Torah's teachings that foster material wellbeing within a context of spiritual tranquility.

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