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VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AS A SPIRITUAL REMEDY FOR HYPERMATERIALISM AND OVERCONSUMPTION: PERSPECTIVES FROM TWO OF THE OLDEST FAITHS

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Abstract
Hypermaterialism and overconsumption harm the environment and present serious ethical problems. This paper examines how Jewish scholarship encourages one to live a life of voluntary simplicity and avoid ostentation. Judaism addresses four moral dangers associated with living a lavish, luxuriant lifestyle: (1) arousing the envy of others, (2) causing others to be ashamed of their lack of means, (3) producing feelings of arrogance and conceit, and (4) compelling one to become dishonest in order to maintain said extravagant lifestyle. The viewpoint of Buddhism regarding simplicity is also discussed.

Keywords: Voluntary Simplicity, Hypermaterialism, Attitude of Judaism Toward Ostentation, Overconsumption, Buddhism and Voluntary Simplicity

Hypermaterialism and overconsumption harm the environment and present serious ethical problems (Demirel, 2022). An obvious question is whether it is ethical for marketers to encourage overconsumption, given the adverse effects on society as well as the environment. According to the United Nations, high-income countries consume 13 times more resources, such as oil and plastic, than low-income countries. Moreover, high-income countries rely heavily on resources extracted from low-income countries.

> The material footprint per capita has also increased at an alarming rate. In 1990, about 8.1 metric tons of natural resources were used to satisfy an individual's needs. In 2017, that rose to 12.2 metric tons, an increase of 50 per cent. That year, high-income countries had the highest material footprint per capita (approximately 27 metric tons per person), 60 per cent higher than the upper-middle-income countries (17 metric tons per person) and more than 13 times the level of low-income countries (2 metric tons per person). The material footprint of high-income countries is greater than their domestic material consumption, indicating that consumption in those countries relies on materials from other countries through international supply chains. On a per-capita basis, high-income countries rely on 9.8 metric tons of primary materials extracted elsewhere in the world (UNstats, 2019, para. 3).

The economic path we are currently on, which has consumers obsessed with hypermaterialism and overconsumption, is leading us to destruction. It is not sustainable and is destroying the environment – clearly, global warming is exacerbated by overconsumption-

and the authentic values that result in a healthy and happy society. Reboucas and Soares (2020, p. 303), in their review of the literature on voluntary simplicity, highlight that "Global warming, scarcity of natural resources, increase in social inequality and consumption-related mental disorders have become widespread globally" and that these problems are strongly related to hypermaterialism and overconsumption. They also make the point that what is badly needed are behavioral, psychological, and cultural changes in consumption to correct the above problems.

Kasser (2002) posits that materialism and greed are not good for society and adversely affect individuals psychologically and socially. Research demonstrates that materialism does not result in happiness but causes depression, low self-esteem, anger, dissatisfaction, alienation, poor health, a tendency to treat others with less empathy, and anti-social behavior.

Voluntary simplicity is not a new concept. Researchers were writing about it in the early 1980s, and consumers used it to cope with daunting economic times (Friedman & Friedman, 2010; Shama, 1981, 1988; Shama & Wisenblit, 1984). Herman Daly, a prominent ecological economist, wrote numerous books (e.g., *For The Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, 1989 and *From Uneconomic Growth to a Steady-State Economy,* 2015) positing that more is not always better and that economic growth was not sustainable and could result in ecological disaster if its costs overshadow its benefits. Planet Earth has finite natural resources, and focusing solely on growth without taking into account its environmental impact is a mistake. He argued that GDP should be measured in a way that considers the environmental costs.

There is ongoing research to discover what kind of people are willing to change their consumption practices and adopt a voluntary simplicity lifestyle (Demirel, 2022). Chang (2021) found that individuals with self-transcendence values (the ability to rise beyond caring primarily for one's self and adopting a larger perspective that includes concern for others and the world at large) and CFC (consideration for future consequences) are more likely to opt for a voluntary simplicity lifestyle. He also found that those following this lifestyle tended to be older and have a bachelor's degree.

Unfortunately, capitalism encourages consumerism, and the media attempt to convince the public that luxurious products bring joy. The adage that 'money cannot buy happiness' is accurate. Eventually (often when one is advanced in years and near death), people realize what truly matters is not the number of material possessions but family and how happy they live. Brooks (2009, p. A39) noted that, in explaining the rise and fall of many great empires, historians feel that "Wealth and power lead to affluence and luxury. Affluence and luxury lead to decadence, corruption and decline." Longmire, Chan, and Lawry (2021) summarized the literature on materialism and found that materialism can cause one to have a distorted reality of life because it results in one overemphasizing the effect that wealth and belongings may have on happiness and the value of life. Unsurprisingly, it is seen as a moral failing by virtually all sociologists and psychologists, reducing well-being, contentment, and happiness.

There is a positive relationship between voluntary simplicity and intrinsic religiosity (Chowdhury, 2018). This suggests that intrinsic religiosity could be used to motivate consumers to pursue a simpler, less extravagant life. In addition, the religious values and behaviors of parents can reduce the materialism of their children. The authors propose that religious institutions might be able to work with families in the endeavor to reduce hyperconsumption (Casabayó, Dávila, & Rayburn, 2020).

This paper will examine how the Torah, Talmud, and Jewish religious thought encourage one to live a life of voluntary simplicity and avoid extravagance. There is nothing

wrong with enjoying one's wealth in a modest, unostentatious manner. Indeed, there is a Talmudic opinion that one will be punished for not indulging in permissible pleasures (Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12). We shall see that Buddhism also encourages a simple lifestyle not based on showing off material goods.

Biblical Attitude towards Wealth

Unlike the Christian Bible, which is mainly dismissive of wealth and the wealthy, the attitude of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud towards wealth is quite positive since it enables one to help others. God blesses those that use their wealth to help the poor (Deuteronomy 15:10; Isaiah 1:17-19; Proverbs 19:17). Wealth, peace, and/or long life are rewards from God for obeying His laws (Leviticus 26: 3-13; Deuteronomy 11: 13-16; Deuteronomy 25:15; Proverbs 22:4).

Schorsch (1996) opines that Judaism and Christianity have different opinions regarding the wealthy. The idea that "You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24) and "How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24-25) is not consistent with Jewish values. The Hebrew Bible highlights that all three Patriarchs, Abraham (Genesis 13:2), Isaac (Genesis 26:16), and Jacob (Genesis 30:43), became affluent. Schorsch concludes that Judaism and Catholicism may disagree on the morality of wealth, but they both recognize the utmost importance of charity and deeds of lovingkindness. Indeed, the Talmud claims that the reward for being charitable is long life (Friedman, 2016).

People are obligated to use their wealth to help needy people. The Psalmist declares (Psalms 82:3): "do justice to the needy and the orphan; deal righteously with the poor and the impoverished; rescue the needy and the destitute and save them from the hand of the wicked." Isaiah (1:17) also makes this point: "learn to do good; seek justice, aid the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." The obligation to care for the orphan, widow, the destitute, and the stranger (one is even obligated to love the stranger) is mentioned numerous times and is a core value of the Torah. Indigent individuals will not have the ability to help the unfortunates in society.

The acquisition of wealth through hard work is permitted and encouraged by the Torah; greed and materialism are serious problems. Avarice is not good and may violate the tenth commandment dealing with coveting what one's fellow possesses, including wife, house, field, or ox (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18).

The Bible (Deuteronomy 17:17) states that even a king is not permitted to "greatly increase for himself silver and gold." It gives a reason (Deuteronomy 17:20): "So that his heart does not become lifted above his brethren." It is quite obvious what happens to a king and country when there is an obsession with acquiring gold rather than justice and prosperity for all. Jeremiah (9:22-23) observed, "Let not the mighty man glory in his might; Let not the rich man glory in his riches." What matters to the prophet is "lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth. Ramban, a prominent medieval commentator, observes that if haughtiness is to be shunned by a king, all the more so should it be avoided by ordinary people. The king, however, is permitted to increase his wealth to help others (*Sefer Hachinuch*).

Job described how individuals with means are supposed to live their lives. Job was a person who treated all with dignity, even his servants (Job 31: 13); Job took care of the poor, the needy, the orphan, and the widow (Job 31: 16-21). Job was not materialistic, and he declared that he never "made gold my hope" or "rejoiced because my wealth was great" (Job 31: 24-25).

Talmudic Attitude towards Wealth, Work, and a Lavish Lifestyle

The Babylonian Talmud (Baba Bathra 110a) stresses the dignity of honest work. Rav told Rabbi Kahana: "Flay a carcass in the street and earn a wage and do not say, 'I am a great person, and this job is degrading to me.'" The Babylonian Talmud remarks (Kiddushin 82b), "There is no occupation which can disappear from the world [i.e., all are useful and important] …The world requires both perfumers and tanners; fortunate is he whose occupation is that of a perfumer, and woe to him who works as a tanner."

The sages of the Talmud worked in many diverse occupations, including woodchoppers (Hillel), grave diggers Abba Shaul), builders (Shammai), field laborers (Abba Chilkiyah), cotton dealers (R. Shimon P'kuli), school teachers (R. Shmuel b. Shilas), scribes (R. Meir, R. Chananel), shoemakers (R. Yochanan Hasandler), launderers (Abba Oshiya), beer brewers (R. Chisda, R. Pappa), blacksmith (R.Yehoshua b. Chananiah), merchant (R. Safra and R. Dimi of Nehardea), tanner (R. Yosi b. Chalafta), tailor (R. Abba b. Zavina), farmer and cattle raiser (R. Huna), wine smeller who determined which wine could be stored and which had to be sold immediately (Karna), salt merchant (R. Chiya b. Yosef), silk merchant (Abba bar Abba), and Mar Shmuel (doctor). They spoke not as theoreticians but as people who understood what it meant to work for a living. The sages of the Talmud encouraged people to do their work conscientiously. They taught that four things should be done industriously: Torah study, good deeds, prayer, and performance of one's occupation (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 32b). Whenever he went to the academy, Rabbi Yehudah would carry a pitcher on his shoulders and say, "Great is labor, for it honors the worker" (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 49b). The Psalmist declares (128:2): "When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you."

The Babylonian Talmud (Maakos 24a) states that the prophet Micah (6:8) reduced the Torah to three major principles: "What does the Lord require of you: only to do justice, to love acts of kindness, and to walk discreetly before your God." The Talmud says that 'walking discreetly' before God refers to funerals and weddings; "If in matters that are generally not done in private the Torah says that one should 'walk discreetly,' how much more so in matters that usually call for modesty should certainly be done so." The Talmudic sages felt that one should live a life of moderation and not be ostentatious, even when making funerals and weddings. As we shall see, the Talmud opposed a lavish, excessive lifestyle.

One of the Talmudic sages noted that former generations were at a much higher spiritual level than his own generation, and they were thus worthy of having miracles performed for them (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 20a). One of the sages, Addah bar Ahavah, was at such a high spiritual level that he could get God to make it rain when there was a drought as soon as he removed his shoe (as a sign of affliction) and prepared to pray. Other sages could pray all day, and nothing would happen. The Talmud asserts that the scholars of the previous generations were willing to make great sacrifices for the sanctification of God's name and provides the following example. Rabbi Addah bar Ahavah once saw a woman that he thought was Jewish wearing a *karbalta* (a very ostentatious red garment) in the street and tore it off her. It turned out the woman was not Jewish, and the authorities fined him heavily. This story indicates how wrong it is for Jews to wear ostentatious garments.

Four Moral Dangers Associate With Flaunting Wealth

There are four moral dangers associated with living a lavish, luxuriant lifestyle with which Judaism is concerned: (1) it arouses the envy of others, including enemies of the Jewish people, (2) it can cause the less wealthy to be ashamed of their lack of means, (3) it

can produce feelings of arrogance and conceit, and (4) cause one to become dishonest in order to maintain an elegant lifestyle.

1. Arousing the Envy of Others

During the seven-year famine that afflicted the world, Jacob told his sons (Genesis 42:1): "Why do you make yourselves so conspicuous?" The Babylonian Talmud (Taanis 10b) interprets this verse as follows: "Jacob said to his sons, 'Do not show yourselves to be sated either before Esau or Ishmael so that you do not arouse their envy against you.'" This suggests that the Jewish people must be careful about arousing the jealousy of the gentile nations surrounding them. However, the Talmud uses this verse to derive the law that if a Jew travels from a town where the populace is not fasting to a place where the inhabitants are fasting, he should fast with them. Even if he inadvertently eats (or is a sick person permitted to eat), he should still not eat in public. This implies that the prohibition against "making oneself conspicuous" applies to arousing the envy of Jews and Gentiles.

Rabbi Baruch Epstein (1860-1941), author of the Torah Temimah commentary, remarking on the verse mentioned above (Genesis 42:1), connects the idea of not making oneself conspicuous with the Babylonian Talmudic (Sanhedrin 29b) assertion "a person is accustomed not to make himself appear sated with wealth" [and to achieve this may falsely declare in public that he owes money to others so that he should not be considered rich] and states that this Talmudic principle is derived from the warning mentioned above of Jacob to his children. This Talmudic theory explains why when a person pretends to owe money to others, we do not necessarily use this as an admission of indebtedness. Thus, the "creditors" may not collect without additional proof. The Talmud believes that it is possible that the wealthy person professed to owe money to several individuals either in order not to arouse the envy of others - people do not want to make others envious of their riches.

This idea of not showing off wealth is also discussed by Rabbi Ephraim Lunshitz (c. 1550 - 1619), author of the Kli Yakar, a popular commentary on the Torah, in his homiletic interpretation of the verse (Deuteronomy 2:3): "Enough of your circling this mountain; turn yourselves northward." The Hebrew for "northward" is *tzafonah*, a word that also means "hidden." The Kli Yakar's homiletic explanation of this verse is that the Torah is telling the Jewish people to maintain a low profile when wandering around in exile and not flaunt wealth in order not to arouse the envy of the gentiles. He then criticizes those Jews in his generation who live beyond their means, wear fancy clothing, and live in extravagant homes, thereby inciting their gentile neighbors against them. In the Kli Yakar's words, an individual with assets of a hundred lives as though he has thousands. The Kli Yakar then blames the troubles that befall the Jews on ostentatious lifestyles. Rabbi Lunshitz headed a yeshiva in Lemberg, Poland, and later became a rabbi in Prague. His words were prescient, and the horrific massacres of Polish Jews beginning in 1648 during an uprising led by Bogdan Chmelnitzki were a major tragedy for the Jewish people. Somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000 Jews were brutally murdered.

The enigmatic statement quoted in the Babylonian Talmud (Chagiga 9b), "Poverty is so fitting for a Jew, like a red strap (or saddle) on a white horse," is interpreted by Rabbi Elijah, Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), in the following manner. A horse is saddled up when it goes out; in the stable, everything is removed. So too, the Jewish people should wear their poverty when they go out not to arouse the envy of the gentiles. However, wealth is acceptable within the privacy of one's house (Kreuser, 2000, p. 171).

Rabbi Menken (2014) asks why the Torah describes in so much detail the offerings brought by the heads of each tribe to commemorate the dedication of the Altar (Numbers 7:1-83). After all, the offerings brought by the twelve tribal leaders were identical, and the Torah could have mentioned it once. Surprisingly, the Torah repeats the same six verses twelve

times. He cites the answer of Rabbi Shmuel Greinemann of Bnei Braq. The decision to bring the same offering on the second day as on the first day was purposely made by the tribal leader (Nethanel ben Tzuar), who did not want to outdo the tribal leader who brought his offering on the first day (Nachhon ben Aminadav). Nethanel did not want to show off and thereby cause envy. The Lord was so pleased with this that he allowed one of the sacrifices to be brought even on the Sabbath (they were brought for twelve straight days) and recorded every leader's sacrifice in full detail. This is a message for future generations not to seek to outdo others and thereby arouse envy.

It is quite possible that all the "humor" about the Jewish American Princess (so-called JAP jokes) is a modern-day manifestation of envy generated by the conspicuous display of wealth. In civilized societies, Jewish neighbors who may appear wealthier than the rest of society are not physically assaulted; they are verbally attacked with nasty stereotypical humor.

Is It Morally Wrong to Arouse the Envy of Others?

Arousing the envy of gentiles in non-democratic countries where Jews had few civil rights was certainly not wise. Is there anything wrong with making other Jews envious? Marketers often use envy as a tool to promote status products. There is an expression, "If you've got it, flaunt it."

The tenth commandment in Exodus (20:14) states: "You shall not covet your fellow's house. You shall not covet your fellow's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, nor anything else that belongs to your fellow." In Deuteronomy (5:18), the wording is slightly different: "And you shall not covet your fellow's wife, you shall not desire your fellow's house, his field, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, nor anything else that belongs to your fellow." In Deuteronomy, the wording is changed from covet (*tachmod*) to desire (*titaveh*). One violates the prohibition of not coveting only if there is an action, even if one pays for the object. The violation against desiring another's property is even in the heart. Maimonides, a medieval philosopher and codifier of Jewish law (1138-1204), makes this distinction between *tachmod* and *titaveh* (Hilchos Gezelah 1:9-12). He concludes that "desire leads to coveting, and coveting leads to robbery." Also, one who simply desires another's property has violated one prohibition. In contrast, one who purchases the preferred object by coaxing the owner to sell it to him is guilty of two prohibitions. One who steals the item is guilty of a third prohibition against stealing.

From the above discussion, it is unclear whether or not individuals who purposely display their wealth to arouse the envy of their fellows are guilty of "*lifnei iver*," i.e., "placing a stumbling block before the blind" (Leviticus 19:14). This is a prohibition that includes helping or causing another to sin (Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 22b). One might argue that being ostentatious may produce desire on the part of others for a particular product, but not necessarily desire for *my* product, and is thus not a violation of *lo titaveh*. In the classic medieval ethics (*Mussar*) work, *Orchos Tzadikim* (Chapter 14: Jealousy), the unknown author notes that jealousy, a trait which he asserts no person can totally escape from, comes from observing what friends own. We become envious of a friend's garment, food, house, and/or wealth, and envy leads to coveting.

Once a person is overpowered by coveting, he becomes capable of violating each of the Ten Commandments. This is the reason the sages of the past prayed: "let no person's jealousy rise up against me nor my jealousy upon others." Causing others to be envious of oneself violates the Biblical injunction against "placing a stumbling block before the blind person." The author advises men, women, and children not to wear exquisite and expensive clothing and thereby arouse the envy of others. He also advises moderation concerning food

and other goods for the same reason. Thus, flaunting wealth can cause one to be guilty of the sin of *lifnei iver*, according to the view of the *Orchos Tzadikim*.

Rabbi Acha bar Yaakov died from an *ayin hara* (evil eye) in the following story. Rabbi Rosenfeld (2014) explains that a person should have humility and not flaunt his blessings. One who shows off draws the attention of others and incites their jealousy. By doing this, the person may cause the Heavenly court to reconsider the good fortune bestowed on the flaunter. The court might ask whether the person truly deserved the gift that caused others to be unhappy. Several commentaries note that the sages did not intend to harm Rabbi Acha, but this resulted from their surprise at his fantastic achievement. The lesson from this story is to be discreet with one's accomplishments and not boast about them.

> It is related that Rav Huna wrote seventy Torah scrolls himself, and it happened for him only once that the length and the circumference were equal. Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov wrote one Torah scroll on calf hide, and it happened to have the same length and circumference. The Sages looked at him and his achievement with jealousy, and he died from their envious gaze (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 14a; based on the translation by Sefaria.org).

Intriguingly, the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 20a) contends that one who does not covet that which is not his, the evil eye has no dominion over him.

2. Shaming Others With Limited Means

Sometimes, ostentation causes more than envy. Poor people will often, because of shame, borrow money to keep up with their neighbors. It is not unusual for them to borrow and then be unable to repay the loans. Some might even engage in dishonest practices to afford the expense of keeping up with their neighbors. Indeed, very little good can result from making other people envious. The Talmud describes several rules instituted out of deference to the poor, i.e., so they should not feel ashamed of their poverty. The Babylonian Talmud notes that the following changes were enacted in the funeral ceremony in order not to embarrass the impecunious.

> Our Rabbis taught: Formerly, they would bring food to the house of mourners in the following manner: to the rich, in baskets of gold and silver, and to the poor in wicker baskets made of peeled willows. And the poor people were ashamed. The sages therefore instituted that all should be provided with food in wicker baskets made of peeled willows out of deference to the poor.
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> Our Rabbis taught: Formerly, they would provide drinks to the house of mourners in the following manner: to the rich in white glass [which was very expensive] and to the poor in colored glass. And the poor people were ashamed. The sages therefore instituted that all should be provided with drinks in colored glass out of deference to the poor.
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> Formerly, they would uncover the face of the rich [corpse] and cover the face of the poor because their face became blackened by famine. And the poor people were ashamed. The sages therefore instituted that all faces should be covered out of deference to the poor.
>
> Formerly, they would carry out the rich [corpse] in a state bed and the poor on a common bier. And the poor people were ashamed. The sages therefore instituted that all should be carried out on a common bier out of deference to the poor…

> Formerly, the expense of carrying out the dead was harder on the family than the death itself; the family therefore abandoned the corpse and fled. Until Rabban Gamliel [President of the Sanhedrin] disregarded his own dignity and had his body carried out in flaxen shrouds. Afterward, all the people followed his lead and had themselves carried out in flaxen shrouds. Rabbi Papa stated: And nowadays, all follow the practice of being carried out even in a canvas shroud that costs but a *zuz* (Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 27a-27b).

The Meiri (1249–1315), a prominent commentator on the Talmud, based on the above passage, makes a general statement that people should always be careful that poor people or others are not ashamed because of their actions. Wealthy people should therefore do the same as the poor, not to embarrass those who have limited means. To this very day, observant Jews are obligated to bury their dead in a plain pine box.

The Babylonian Talmud (Taanis 26b) describes the great days of joy on the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur when the single girls of Jerusalem would dance in the vineyards in front of the single men to attract a spouse. The Mishna notes that the girls went out in "white garments which they borrowed in order not to shame those that did not have the means" and could not afford nice clothing. The sages did not enact this, but the girls, on their own, recognized the importance of not shaming those with limited financial means.

The Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 82a) discusses why an individual was not permitted to burn a Paschal lamb that became ritually unclean in front of the Temple with his own wood. Rabbi Yosef offers the following reason: The sages did not want to embarrass the poor people who did not have their own wood, so they, therefore, enacted that everyone had to use the altar wood that belonged to the Temple.

There is one situation in which the sages were not concerned with the principle of "not shaming those that do not have the means." Although the required amount of the *Kethubah* (the marriage certificate which indicates how much the wife will get if she becomes widowed or is divorced) is fixed — 200 *zuz* for a virgin and 100 *zuz* for a widow or divorcee — the husband is allowed to add as much as he wants (i.e., *Tosfos Kethubah*). The Gemara asks: Is this not obvious? Of course, an individual can add whatever he wishes. The Talmud answers that I might have thought that not to embarrass the poor, the sages fixed the amount of the *Kethubah* and did not allow adding to it. This is why the Mishna explicitly states that one can add whatever amount he wishes. It seems clear that the sages did not want to use the principle of "not shaming …" in a situation where another party — one who was usually poor herself — would be hurt, i.e., the wife. The principle, however, is still operant in other situations.

The Babylonian Talmud (Bava Bathra 9b) states that one who gives charity secretly is "greater than Moses" (probably an exaggeration). Charity, ideally, should be provided in secret so that the two parties, the giver and the receiver, do not know each other (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 5a; Maimonides, Hilchos Matnos Aniyim 10: 7 -14). Maimonides lists eight levels of charity: There is only one level above entirely anonymous charity - providing a poor person with employment. If Jewish law prefers that charity be anonymous not to embarrass the indigent, it certainly will condemn ostentation — for the same reason.

As the following selection from the Talmud indicates, the idea of not shaming the poor was also extended to not shaming the ignorant. The *Mishna* (Bikkurim 3:7) relates that at first, those who knew how to recite the prayer of gratitude to God (in Hebrew) — said when bringing the *bikkurim* (first fruits) to the Temple (see Deuteronomy 26: 1-12) — would recite them; those that were unable to read would repeat the words of the prayer after hearing the priest say them. This caused a great deal of embarrassment for the ignorant, so they

refrained from bringing the first fruits. The rabbis therefore enacted that both the person who knew how to recite the blessings and one who did not would repeat the words.

Not shaming those with limited means was the rationale for many sumptuary laws (laws designed to restrict excessive extravagance on personal expenditures) passed by Jewish communities throughout history.

3. Producing Feelings of Arrogance and Conceit

Materialism is discouraged by the Torah since it can lead one to become arrogant. A successful individual might believe that "my power and the might of my hand has made me all this wealth." The Torah states (Deuteronomy 32: 15) what can happen when people overindulge in the pleasures of this world: "Jeshurun [Israel] became fat and kicked … And he forsook God who made him." Instead, one should remember that God gives individuals wealth so they may do His will.

As noted above, the Torah (Deuteronomy 17:17) states that even a king is not permitted to "greatly increase for himself silver and gold." so as not to become haughty. Hezekiah, a righteous king, was punished for flaunting his wealth. He brandished the great wealth in his treasuries to Merodach-Baladan, son of Baladan, the King of Babylonia. Isaiah said to Hezekiah (Isaiah 39:6): "Behold, a time is coming when everything in your palace and what your forefathers have accumulated to this day will be carried off to Babylonia; nothing shall remain, says the Lord." Hezekiah's sin was taking too much pride in his worldly possessions and showing them off.

The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 57b) asserts that "three things broaden an individual's mind: a beautiful house, a beautiful wife, and beautiful clothing." It is unclear whether the term "broaden the mind" is positive or negative. Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, known as the Maharsha (1555-1631), a foremost Talmudic commentator, interprets this passage to mean that these three things can make one arrogant since it leads to a preoccupation with the pleasures of this world.

Maimonides (Hilchos De'ot 5: 9) describes the garment of the scholar as not being "of gold or purple wool that everyone stares at" or one that is so poor that it is an embarrassment to its wearer. Instead, one should choose the middle road when it comes to clothing and wear nice garments. Rabbi Solomon Ganzfried (1804-1886), in his compilation of Jewish laws and customs, the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (3:3), also believes that the middle road is the ideal as far as clothing. He states that one should not wear costly clothing since it leads to arrogance; wearing clothing that is too cheap or soiled is wrong since it will cause one to be denigrated by others.

Bhattacharya, Chatterjee, and Basu (2017, p. 5) make the connection between modesty and humility and see the two concepts as being closely related. Modest people do not have an "exaggerated estimate" of their abilities and have freedom from "vanity, boastfulness, ostentation." Modesty is included in the construct of humility and focuses mainly on moderation in all behaviors, including eating, dressing, and talking about oneself.

4. Cause One To Become Dishonest To Maintain An Elegant Lifestyle.

The Babylonian Talmud (Chullin 84a) states: "A parent should not accustom his children to eat meat and wine." It was felt that a luxurious lifestyle could lead one to a life of dishonesty. A similar idea can be seen in the verse (Exodus 16:8): "When the Lord shall give you in the evening meat to eat, and in the morning bread to fill you up." The Israelites were promised bread (manna), not meat, to fill them up. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105), a prominent medieval commentator, notes that the Torah teaches one to sate himself with simple foods such as bread and eat luxuries such as meat only occasionally. During the forty years of wandering the wilderness, the Israelites had to be satisfied with manna. They

were not permitted to hoard it (it would only last for a day); each person was supposed to gather only one *omer* (Exodus 16). The Israelites were punished severely for grumbling about the manna and demanding meat: "Would that we were given meat to eat!" (Numbers 11). God did send forth a wind to bring the people a vast number of quails from the sea, but it did not end well for the people. The place where this incident occurred and resulted in the deaths of many via a plague was called *Kibroth-Hattaves* (The graves of lust).

The rebellious son (*ben sorer u'moreh*) described in the Torah (Deuteronomy 21: 18-21) — who has become a threat to family and society — is accused by his parents of being a "glutton and a drunkard." Overindulgence in the pleasures of the world has contributed to his downfall, and he is headed down a road in which his behavior will get much worse. This is why we punish him today (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 71a). The dangers of wealth may explain why Agur asks the Lord not to make him poor or rich. Poverty might make him become dishonest, but wealth could cause him to deny God (Proverbs 30:7-9).

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as the *Chofetz Chaim* (1838-1933), wrote about the dangers of ostentation. He underscores that it causes a person to become arrogant and also produces feelings of inadequacy in others, making them borrow money they cannot repay.

> Our sages, blessed are they, have stated that: 'Who is wise man? One who sees the consequences of his actions.' Therefore, a person, even if he is in a strong situation, must always understand that because of the turbulence of our times, which is prevalent because of our many sins, one should behave when it comes to personal expenditures in the middle way, according to the individual and place. And even if God has been kind to him and given him great wealth, he should not wear costly embroidered clothing since that will damage his soul because it brings him to arrogance and incites the Evil Inclination. In addition, it causes others who do not have the means to look at him and desire to emulate him. In the end, they will borrow and not repay their loans or rob and cheat. And because of these extravagances, the expenses in our times for clothing for weddings have increased so that many of our daughters are humiliated when it comes time for them to get married. Fathers and mothers cry and wail, and no one can help them (Chofetz Chaim, Kuntros Sefat Tamim 5).

Histapkut Bamuat; Being Content With Less

The ideal Jewish lifestyle is *Histapkut bamuat*, being content with less. Ben Zoma's statement (Avot 4:1): "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot," succinctly states this philosophy. The following verse in Proverbs (21:17) indicates that a life of luxury can lead to poverty: "One who loves wine and oil shall not be wealthy." Moreover, the Talmud (Avot 5:19) states that "Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our forefather Abraham: … a good eye [generous], a humble spirit [humility], and a modest soul." "Modest soul" is translated as one who controls his physical desires even for permitted things (*Shaarei Teshuva*, Shaar 1:34). Similarly, Rabbi Yehoshua declared that the "evil eye, the evil urge, and the hatred of other people remove a person from the world" (Avot 2:11). The "evil eye" refers to greed, selfishness, and envy of another person's success.

Many books dealing with Jewish ethics (*Mussar*) recommend *histapkut bamuat* as an ideal way of living a Torah life. For example, Rabbi Yechiel b. Yekusiel Anav, in his classic thirteenth-century ethics book, *Ma'alos Hamiddos*, describes 24 essential virtues. Virtue 21 is being content with less, and he advises people against extravagance. Rabbi Bachya (1255 – 1340), in his classical work on ethics, *Chovos Halevavos* [Duties of the Heart], devotes an

entire chapter to "The Gate of Abstinence." He points out that a lifestyle focused on materialism, luxuries, and overindulgence will turn a person away from God. The Torah attempts to teach the individual the importance of intellect ruling over desires and not to make the pursuit of pleasure one's "Torah" and religion.

An exemplar of *histapkut bamuat* was Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who had minimal needs. Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav that every day a Divine Voice emerges from Mount Horeb and proclaims: "The entire world is sustained by the merit of My son Chanina ben Dosa, and yet for Chanina, My son, a *kav* [this ancient measure is about 1.22 liters] of carobs is sufficient to support him for an entire week, from one Shabbat eve to the next Shabbat eve" (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 24b). The Talmud often uses stories to make a point and teach ethical values (Friedman, 2022); the narratives do not have to be literally true.

> Once, the wife of Rabbi Chaninah b. Dosa told her husband: "How long will we go on and suffer so much [in poverty]?" He told her: "What should we do?" She replied: "Go and pray that you should be given from the good that is reserved for the righteous in the world to come." He prayed, and something resembling a hand's palm emerged from Heaven and gave him one leg of a golden table. Subsequently, he said to his wife [in some versions, the wife has the dream]: "I saw in a dream that in the future [the World to Come] all the righteous will sit at a golden table of three legs, but you will be eating at a golden table of two legs. Is it acceptable to you that all the righteous will eat at a whole table and we at a defective table?" She said to him: "What should we do? Pray that the leg should be taken away from you." He prayed, and it was taken away (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 25a).

The message of this story is evident. We must make sacrifices in this world if we desire the rewards in the World to Come. The table is a metaphor since the sages did not believe that the souls in the World to Come eat. A two-legged table is not stable and collapses. This story illustrates that wealth can change people's personalities and make them less righteous.

Sumptuary Laws

Many Jewish communities, including those in Eastern Europe and Yemen, passed sumptuary laws — regulations limiting personal expenditures on religious grounds — during the last several centuries. These regulations dealt with such matters as overly flamboyant clothing, expensive foods, elaborate weddings, etc. The extravagance of the bar mitzvah feast (*seudat mitzvah*) became so uncontrolled that there were *takanot* (decrees) made in 21 different communities in Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and Italy between 1595 and 1793 to limit these excesses (Golinkin, 2021).

Tamari (1996, pp. 172-173) lists various sumptuary laws passed in several communities. Because tea and coffee were quite costly back then, the community of Furth prohibited serving them. Tamari describes how the Council of Four Lands (*Vaad Arba Aratzot*), the leading Jewish religious body based in Poland, used a different approach to deal with ostentation. The more guests invited to a festive occasion, the more the host had to pay the community tax collector, who would then use the funds to benefit the needy. In addition, one poor person had to be invited for every ten guests.

The following are just a few examples of sumptuary laws that were enacted:

> The earliest known sumptuary laws among East European Jews are the Kraków statutes of 1595. An important feature of these regulations was that they sought to control not only such public forms of ostentation as dress, but also such domestic items as tablecloths.

> Moreover—and more significantly—explicit distinctions were made between members of various economic classes. Those who paid at least 10 zlotys in annual taxes were entitled to use gold and silver embroidered tablecloths in their homes, but only at such special occasions as Passover, the Sabbath after a birth, and a circumcision meal. Similarly, female household members of those who paid annual taxes of at least 5 zlotys were allowed to wear gold chains in public, albeit beneath their outer garments.
>
> About 30 years later, in 1628, the council of Lithuanian communities passed a series of regulations about clothing. All velvet garments were prohibited for both men and women regardless of economic status. Silk garments, by contrast, were prohibited only to brides whose fathers had received financial aid from relatives in order to marry them off, or were the recipients of communal charity. Nine years later a new series of clothing regulations was promulgated that added, among other prohibitions, using sable for men's hats. Furthermore, the wearing of gold rings was strictly regulated. The Moravian statutes reconfirmed in 1650 by representatives of the region's communities permitted women to wear gold and pearl necklaces only if these were concealed, as was the case earlier in Kraków, but did not distinguish between the tax brackets of their respective families. Those statutes also prohibited new dresses to be made out of velvet or damask, although old dresses made of those luxurious materials could be worn. One particular garment, the glittering scarf known as the *glintser*, could be worn only on special occasions such as circumcisions, or when (as on special Sabbaths) two Torah scrolls were taken out for prayers (Horowitz, 2010).

More recently, in 2001, 27 prominent ultra-Orthodox Jewish rabbis headed by the late Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, the former chief religious authority of the Agudath Israel of America, issued wedding guidelines (*"Guidelines for Financial Realism and Modesty in our Weddings"*) that limit the number of guests, the number of musicians, and even the amount and kind of food being served at weddings. The Rabbis intended to contain excessive materialism by issuing these prohibitions. Rabbi Yoel Roth encourages people to renounce lavish lifestyles and eliminate unnecessary wedding expenses, including gaudy invitations (Eller, 2022).

Rabbi Shafran, a spokesperson for Agudath Israel, opined that "The concept of modesty, not only in dress but in behavior and expression, is central to the Torah. Limiting excess, whether in general lifestyle or celebrations, is an inherently Jewish ideal" (Parnes, 2002). Several Chassidic groups also have guidelines on how much may be spent on weddings. Thus, Aaron Teitelbaum, Chief Rabbi of Satmar, decreed new rules to significantly reduce the cost of weddings (Sullivan, 2008). These guidelines have only been partially successful.

Viewpoint of Buddhism

Judaism is not the only religion that stresses the value of living a simple life. In the Buddhist context, simplicity and voluntary self-restraint are seen as the awareness of one's unity with all of life (Chowdhury, 2018).

The Buddha stressed living in this world based upon an understanding of (i) the individual, (ii) an individual's internal motivators, and (iii) how the individual fits into the

great cosmic environment, which includes others, the environment, and all living things. This approach was novel in that the Buddha did not start out with a series of a priori propositions, such as this is s "good" and this is "bad," but instead, he proscribed an introspective approach that relies upon the person's actual reality to help guide them towards proper conduct. So, over time, many early monastic rules and proscriptions emerged. Those proscriptions, in the main, arose out of a need to affirmatively address divergent problems within the early Buddhist community (sangha), such as when monks were often unable to consistently apply the Buddha's directions (Niwano, 2013).

For example, a careful examination of early Pali Buddhist texts provides little guidance from the Buddha regarding what comports with evil. On the other hand, there are scores of references to the three "unwholesome roots" or three poisons of (i) greed (lobha), (ii) anger (dosa), and (iii) ignorance or delusion (moha), which primarily deal with how a person thwarts their own joy or happiness.

The first of these three, greed, goes directly to the idea of voluntary self-restraint, as has been previously addressed in another religious context. Indeed, the Buddha asks the individual practitioner to be restrained, and to look deeply into their own experience, to see why they want more and more of anything. Then upon careful Buddhist self-inquiry, the individual can see for themselves that any human experience brings with it a sensation or sensations to which the mind seeks to cling. The practitioner aims to see their own mind and its contact with phenomena. Then the mind's attendant and ongoing attempts to either prolong inherently fleeting experiences or recreate pleasure once felt, both of which lead to suffering. When the Buddha's prescription is avoided, there is created a sort of internal feedback loop, whereby people crave what is pleasurable and seek to actively avoid what they perceive to be painful.

While this approach at first may seem simplistic, it is nevertheless profound in its application because, from this simple insight, the individual, based upon their own self-awareness, can see that their desire, when based upon greed, is one of the key components of why they suffer. The process thereby becomes one in which the individual, simply by seeing the desire "as it is," can now assess if it is worth pursuing and whether that pursuit of this action, person or thing will result in greater suffering. Upon self-inquiry, individuals naturally realize that they require far less than they previously thought and that their resultant actions based on their own insights leave them happier than they were before.

For now, skipping over the second poison, anger, in the case of the third poison, ignorance (moha), we see how the individual practitioner is asked to see their life in a universal context. So, what is this "ignorance" that leads the average person to pursue a life of hypermaterialism?

Again, the answer is simple: all phenomena in the universe are ever-changing or impermanent, and no phenomena exist in isolation. In terms of living or as an antidote to hypermaterialism, nothing could be more helpful than a proper understanding of the impermanent nature of all phenomena. For impermanence informs one that all possessions will be lost no matter how much you have of them or consume. When looked at in isolation, the concept of impermanence seems a little less than sanguine if looked at only in isolation. However, the Buddha was clear that while all phenomena are ever-changing and must be looked at in conjunction with the equally powerful law, "no phenomenon exists in isolation," no matter how remote. This latter concept is known as dependent origination. And the Buddha described it this way, "When this exists, that exists; when this arises, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist; when this ceases, that ceases" (M, III.63, cited in Siderits & Katsura, 2013, p. 81). All things are connected; nothing exists in isolation. For human beings, only by understanding that we are caused to live by causes and conditions that

are empty of a separate self can true liberation, happiness, and societal well-being be established.

Superficial perspectives based upon one having more than another or accumulating more than others are shown to be meaningless, for only when you establish an awareness of your interconnectedness to all of life and others is true happiness and fulfillment possible. For example, one does not exploit the water because one understands that you are not just a steward of the earth alone, but rather that you are one with the planet and that to poison the water is, in effect, to poison oneself. The evident subtext is that to accumulate material items as badges of power and status goes against the oneness of humanity, which while like a sugar rush, will leave you momentarily satisfied. Still, you will invariably feel queasy, dissatisfied, and unhappy. Thus it is implicit in Buddhist practice that a life of simplicity in proper alignment and abundant with wisdom is a kind, joyous and compassionate life. Therefore, from a Buddhist paradigm, simplicity is not merely a choice, but a necessity, like breathing. Attempting to consume mindlessly can be likened to trying to catch the wind with your hand, which is inevitably futile (Niwano, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusion

Judaism and Buddhism frown on wasting one's life on the meaningless accumulation of material goods, and both religions strongly oppose wasteful destruction. Indeed, unnecessary waste (known as the principle of *bal tashchit*; the literal meaning is "do not destroy") is seen as a violation of Torah law (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 129a, Bava Kama 91b). The Torah prohibits soldiers from cutting down fruit trees even when conducting a siege of an enemy city (Deuteronomy 20:19).

Although Judaism patently frowns on extravagance, most of the ancient Talmudic sages did not approve of asceticism (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 10a, Nedarim 22a, Taanit 11a; Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:1). The prevalent view in Judaism seems to be that asceticism is not admirable (Tamari, 2000, pp. 231-235). While Judaism encourages honestly-obtained wealth, ostentation and materialism are inconsistent with Torah values. Both can lead a person astray; therefore, the ideal life is based on voluntary simplicity. A person who leads a relatively simple life — albeit not ascetic —will more easily be able to live a spiritually fulfilling life.

Many see Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," as a message of promise informing humankind that if people reduce their wants and needs and are satisfied with less, there will be plenty for everyone. Greed and a desire for a flashy, flamboyant life filled with material goods make people unhappy. Thus, making the Lord one's shepherd is about rejecting the view that rational man (*homo economicus*) is solely concerned with maximizing his/her self-interest and selfish needs; this theory almost sounds like we are teaching students that it is normal to be highly selfish and unconcerned with others, i.e., acting like a sociopath (Hámori, 1999).

Howard (2002) uses the expression "tragedy of maximization" to describe the devastation that the philosophy of maximizing self-interest has wrought. He believes that damage caused to the environment will be one of the foremost causes of human misery and suffering this century. Researchers have shown how a philosophy that seeks only to maximize shareholder value (MSV) and is indifferent to long-term outcomes can lead society towards monopoly, inequitable income distribution, unemployment, and environmental disaster (Clark & Friedman, 2016; Pitelis, 2002). The Great Recession of 2008 foreshadowed the devastation that resulted from ego-centric philosophies such as MSV. The same might be said of hyperconsumption and materialism. People are spiritual beings who rejoice when everyone is satisfied and should not be slaves to their wants.

> Perhaps you've heard the one about a human who asks God, "Why do you allow poverty, suffering, and injustice when you could do something about it?" And God replies, "I was about to ask you the same question."… Perhaps it helps to think about it this way, when the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want… Because if we are being guided in God's way of life, we will be good stewards of the earth and grow healthy food that can feed hungry bodies instead of some other bottom line. When the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want because we will understand that we are one human family, created to care, share, and provide for one another. We will both desire and choose in ways that assure ALL have what they need, that ALL have enough. Together, we can be the answer to prayer (Gaines-Cirelli, 2021, paras. 7,9).

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