Who is Rich?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Temple Judea
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One upon a time, in the world of our Great Great Grandparents there was a great poverty throughout the land. It touched the young, and it touched the old, no one was immune to it.

In this far away land there was an old Jewish couple. Moishe the cobbler and his wife, Bluma. The poverty hit them particularly hard, they had very little and *yontif* was coming. Not just an ordinary *yontif* , but Rosh Hashanah. And not just an ordinary Rosh Hashanah. It was a Rosh Hashanah that came out on a Shabbat.

The old couple lamented at their pain. Moishe was ashamed that he could not provide for his wife. Bluma felt terrible for her husband. All they wanted was to make a beautiful yontif. But they had no money even for an ordinary meal. Finally, the night before Shabbat, Bluma turned to her husband. She said, "Please, Moishe. Please let me go to the neighbors and ask them for help. Jews are charitable people. They won't turn me down. "

But Moishe said, "No Bluma, the neighbors are as desperate as we are, I am going to go out and find work. Surely, in spite of the times, in spite of the poverty, there must be some people who need to have their shoes fixed for *yontif*. I am a good cobbler. I would rather work than beg."

So Moishe went out to look for work. And Bluma began to clean the house, so that the house, at least, should be ready for *yontif*, even if they weren't. She cleaned the main floor, and then went downstairs to clean the cellar. There, she came up on an old trunk she had not opened In years. Inside was Moishe's fine blue coat, the one he wore at there wedding, the one she never let him wear for fear that he would use it up.

It had been so long since he'd worn it that she took it out, thinking it might cheer her husband's spirits. That was when she noticed the blazer had *three gold buttons*. Gold buttons! Do you know how much gold was worth in those days?? (about as much as they are worth today). Quickly, Bluma cut off the gold buttons and ran to the market. She bought food for *yontif:* carp and chicken soup and apples and honey. When the time came to pay, and the bill was totaled up, it came to exactly one gold button. She handed the clerk one button went happily on her way. The clerk was thrilled. He had not a single customer all day because of the poverty throughout the land.

From the market, Bluma went to the antique shop. There, she bought candlesticks and two candles so that they could light candles and make a blessing thanking God for the New Year. The owner of the store was very happy to have a sale because he had not had a single sale that day, because of the poverty throughout the land. He charged her exactly one gold button.

Then Bluma went to the wine merchant and bought a bottle of wine. Not just ordinary wine, but the best wine In the shop, in honor of the holiday. And she bought one more

delicacy -- a noodle kugel. She knew Moishe loved kugel, and it was *yontif*. The price for the wine and the kugel? One gold button.

With the food and the wine and the candlesticks and candles, Bluma went home to make *yontif*.

Meanwhile, knowing nothing of what had happened, Moishe went door to door, looking for work. No one would give him any business. True, they all had shoes that needed mending for *Yontif*. But no one had any money to pay him.

Moishe was about to give up when he went by the market He went in and said to the grocer: "Do you have any shoes that needs mending?" And the grocer said, to Moishe's shock and delight, "I sure do!" He gave Moishe two pair of shoes, his and his wife's and paid him for his work. With one gold button.

Then Moishe the cobbler went to the candlestick maker, and said : "Do you have anything that needs mending today?" The candlestick maker said: "I sure do!"

He gave him his him his shoes to fix, and his wife's, and paid Moishe with - one gold button.

Moishe was thrilled. Almost enough money to make a perfect Yontif. He went next door to the specialty store, and said to the owner: "Have you any shoes you need repaired?"

And the specialty store man said: "I sure do."

And he gave him his shoes and his wife's shoes to fix, and paid him with the one golden button that he had just taken in. Moishe could not believe it. Three gold buttons in his pocket!

He was so happy—but there was one catch. By the time he finished fixing the shoes it was almost dark; too late to purchase food for *yontif*.

So he came home, and arrived just as the sun was setting. He knew there wouldn't be time to change clothes, or even empty his pockets before the Sabbath and holiday began.

He walked inside…and nearly fell on the floor. The house was lit, the table was set. There were candles ready for the blessing, there was food, there was wine and there was even his favorite noodle *kugel*.

Moishe was very happy—but part of him was sad. He was sure that Bluma had borrowed or begged from the neighbors. But what could he do? It was Shabbat and it was *Yontif*. So he said nothing to her but thank you and sat all through the meal with one hand in his pocket, grasping the three golden buttons.

After the meal, after Shabbat songs and *Birkat Hamazon,* the blessing after the meal, he finally turned to Bluma.

"Bluma, my beautiful wife. It was a wonderful meal and I thank you very much. But why did you take charity? "

“But I didn’t, she said. And she told him the story of how she had been cleaning the cellar and found the coat from their wedding with the three golden buttons.

Before she could any further, he shouted, "Stop!"

Then, Moishe reached into his pocket and pulled out the three golden buttons. And with a voice full of heavenly wonder he said, “They came back to us!”*

Why do I tell you this story? Because while our tradition instructs us to make an accounting of our souls many of us sit here in synagogue this evening and we can’t stop thinking about our bank accounts, about our jobs, our mortgages, our car payments, our retirement funds and the stack of bills that keep pilling up and await us when we get home. I tell this story because as our nation faces what economists call potentially the greatest economic crisis in history, and our families face growing expenses and shrinking resources many of us are wondering if we have any old coats with gold buttons in the garage, some are considering a second career as modern day cobblers to help make ends meet.

I tell this story not to remind us of our anxiety, but to gird our spirits with hope, and to inform our choices in the coming months with Jewish values.

When I was a child the lessons learned from the Great Depression were self-evident every time you walked into my Grandparent’s home. In their house you never threw anything away, my Papa had drawers filled with loose plastic bags and rubber bands that he saved from the newspaper. A toolbox was always near by to fix things that today we might just throw away and buy new. My grandmother would greet my mother with an envelop of coupons that she had clipped from the paper for items our family would regularly purchase. Bottles and cans were saved not for the environment but for the pennies and nickels they were worth. My grandparents were middle class, owned their own home, had a car and a business – they were not poor, but they knew what poor was and that memory informed their values and their behaviors.

An entire generation was changed in profound and lasting ways by the challenges faced in the last great economic crisis. It taught them to do more with less, to live on what they had – and live not only **within** but **below** their means. It taught them the value of having a savings and planning for a rainy day. It taught them to learn to roll with the punches, the importance and responsibility of family and that what happens to your neighbor can just as soon happen to you – that we are in this together – we are our brother’s keeper.

Historians describe the Great Depression as a defining moment in the life of America. They observe that in the face of great national and individual hardships our national character was born. John Steinbeck immortalized the struggle of the time and the American resilience in his classic work The Grapes of Wrath – the poignant image of a family schlepping across the country, eking by on the most meager of wages and possessions but never losing there humanity. Steinbeck paints a picture of a family where each member from oldest to youngest understands and shares the burden of the family’s

survival. Children aren't shielded from the reality of the crisis but rather instrumental in helping the family make it through.

Tom Brokow celebrated those children who grew up in the Great Depression by bestowing upon them the title The Greatest Generation and attributing to them a spirit of volunteerism and community, a work ethic and a commitment to national purpose and solidarity that not only rebuilt our national infrastructure, but produced the soldiers and factory workers who made the selfless sacrifices necessary to save the world from Nazism and tyranny.

Friends I am not an economist and I don't have a crystal ball to predict what the future will hold for our economy in these uncertain times – but I do have the Torah and I do have a few things to share about how we should face them and what is expected of us as individuals and as a Jewish community.

The Talmud teaches that when we die God doesn't ask us if we believed in God, or if we observed the Jewish holidays? But rather the first question that God will ask us as He sits in judgment of our lives and how we lived them is, "Were we honest in our business affairs?" It's an amazing statement of the importance of how we conduct ourselves when dealing with money. The Torah itself goes so far as to predicate the survival of the Jewish people, not on Shabbat observance or keeping kosher, but whether we have honest weights and measures in dealing with customers. Why is this fundamental to the survival of the Jewish people? Because as the Talmud teaches, "One must let his fellow's money be as precious to him as his own." Our tradition is trying to make clear that no matter our economic hardships – ethics and Jewish values are still primary; the **means** must justify the ends. The Golden Rule always applies; "Do not do to your neighbor what you would not have done to you." That means we have to pay our bills and honor our debts. We are commanded to go to great lengths to provide for and sustain our employees, to pay them on time and fairly for the work they perform and deal honestly and compassionately with those who owe or have lent us money.

The Tenth Commandment is, "Thou shall not covet thy neighbors' house." I would add even if he bought at the bottom of the market and has a 30 year fixed rate mortgage. It is a curious commandment because it is unique from the other nine. Where they deal with behaviors, don't steal, don't lie, don't have other God's, "thou shall not covet" addresses intentions that lead to behaviors. Part of what created the mess that our country is in today is that we allowed our desires to out pace our means. Maybe it wasn't any one in this room – but we live in a culture of excess and entitlement far removed from the frugality and make do with what you have of The Greatest Generation. Judaism asks the question, "W*ho is rich?*" And answers it, "*The one who is content with his lot*". We must teach our children; and remind ourselves - to stop finding happiness in material possessions. The materialism in America today is part of this problem – we look over the fence or a person's shoulder and we want what they have, what they are wearing, driving, living in. It is so easy to forget the difference between a want and a need. We must never forget. We know what is truly valuable in life, what we really need, its not things, it is people – the mastercard commercial is wrong – you can't buy what is priceless no matter your credit limit.

And lastly in these challenging times ahead we need to also remember a lesson I learned while I was travelling in Israel this summer. In Israel there are two bodies of water the Kinerert in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. The Dead Sea deserves its name because it takes water in from the Jordan river and the water just stays there and dies. The Kinneret in the north is green and lush it takes water in from the Jordan and then gives it out to the whole land. Our Rabbis teach that the reason the Dead Sea got its name is that it takes and never gives and so it is slowly dying. But what makes the Kinneret so lush and vibrant is that it has learned that in order to live you have to give as well as receive. We may think in these difficult economic times that the first place we might economize is to cut back on our Tzedakkah, but in fact our tradition says just the opposite, that even those who see their livelihood as barely sufficient, even those who themselves are dependent on Tzedakkah must also give to others. Why because it protects against self pity – reminding us that there're other people who are equally bad off or even in worse circumstances than we are. Even more importantly, we must continue to give Tzadakkah because the time that Tzedakkah is needed most is when times are hardest – to remove our charitable giving now would be doubly detrimental to the people and institutions that so many rely on to support them in these trying times and friends that includes this synagogue and the many people that rely on us to help them. It is in times of crisis that we need community and each other most of all.

So what of Moishe and Bluma? When we left them, they were still at the *Yontif* table.

After husband and wife hugged each other, wished each other Shana Tova, and laughed about their good fortune, there came a knock at the door. Moishe answered, and found there a man dressed in rags, all his earthly possessions in a sack by his feet. "Moishe the cobbler," he said. "I am Fishel from Minsk. Do you have any tzedakah for a poor Jew on *Yontif*?"

Moishe and Bluma invited the man in. They made the blessings again, filled the poor man a plate, and shared the remainder of their Shabbat meal. Then, before Fishel went on his way, Bluma told him to wait. She ran downstairs to the cellar, and came back with a gift: the fine blue coat without any buttons.

"Thank you," Fishel told him. "And Shana Tova." He thrust his hands in his pockets against the cool night and headed for the door. Then, he stopped. For he felt something in one of the pockets. A single gold button.

He took it out and offered it to his hosts, for Fishel was an honest man. "Take this. It belongs to you."

"No," said Moishe. "Please keep it."

"We have all that we need," Bluma added. "That button Is for you."

**Story adapted from and old Chasidic Tale*