

This week we've been riding the roller coaster that is the United States economy. What was once the most stable, solid economic system in the world has now become a candidate for the next hit ride at Cedar Point -- one day up, the next day down. Sunday saw a major investment house -- Bear Stearns, an investment bank that has been around for eight-five years, sell itself for literally pennies on the dollar in a fire-sale to avert bankruptcy. Why did they sell for so little? Why is the economy teetering? Why are so many people struggling? We're living through these problems for one simple reason: a lack of modesty. I'm not speaking about modesty in the way we normally think about it -- in terms of skirt lengths and exposed skin. Rather, I'm concerned with a much more fundamental form of modesty that I think is far more significant in our lives. The dictionary defines modesty as reserve or propriety in speech, dress, or behavior; lack of pretentiousness, and simplicity. But the modern word "modesty" is linked to the Latin modestus, 'keeping within measure', which originally signified moderation, as in Cicero's 'golden mean of living'. Modesty is living within your means, and being happy with that fact; not wanting nor needing more because there's more to have. And it seems to me that our country suffers from an epidemic lack of personal, familiar and behavioral modesty. We want it all. We want the most, the best, the biggest, the greatest. And we want it now. And that's why we're in trouble.

Think about it. Why are so many people losing their houses right now? Sure, some were clearly swindled. But many others -- most in fact, bought houses that they could not afford committing themselves to make payments that they could not make. They wanted the bigger house. The small house wasn't enough. And the banks were only too happy to lend those people money they couldn't pay back, because they liked the interest rates they were getting, and the fees people were paying. So they took risk they should not have taken. And the shareholders were all too happy to see great returns on their investments that didn't make sense. Because we wanted more, and higher returns, and we wanted it now.

But life doesn't work that way. You can't keep borrowing money -- as a homeowner, or a mortgage lender, or an investment bank, or a country for that matter -- without any way to pay it back, and not expect that sooner or later someone will want you to pay it back. And it all stems from that lack of modesty. From a greed; an insatiable desire for more that, when unchecked, can destroy families, communities, even the Jewish people.

What is the story of Purim if not a story of contrasts -- of modesty and immodesty; of excess on the one hand, and modesty on the other. In one corner we find our heroes, Mordechai and Esther -- whose very attributes of modesty bring them to prominence. Esther finds herself in the palace of the king, forced to prepare herself for her fateful meeting -- tryout -- with אחשוורוש. She can have anything she wants: jewelry, perfume, makeup. Anything. What then does she ask for?

וְבִהְיֶינָהּ תֹרֶ-אֶסְתֵּר בַּת-אֲבִיהֶּיָא דִּד מְרְדֳכָי אֲשֶׁר לִקְחָהּ לִוּ לִבְתּוֹ
לְבֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ, לֹא בִקְשָׁה דְבָר

Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she requested nothing...

What does she want? She wants nothing. She'll go as is -- whatever they tell her to take, that's what she takes. She doesn't need anything special. And lo and behold, what do you know: the king likes her more than anyone else.

Mordechai discovers the plot of ותרש to assassinate the king. He divulges the plan to the king, who has the would-be assassins executed. Mordechai is in the cat-bird seat. He's just saved the life of the king. What does he ask for? What riches does he want? What powerful position does he request for his demonstration of loyalty? Nothing. He asks for a receives nothing. And it's for that very reason that years later, when the lives of the Jewish people hang in the balance; when the king cannot sleep and needs an ally he can trust that he reads his old diaries and remembers Mordechai's act and wonders:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ--מִה-נִעֲשָׂה יְקָר וְגִדּוּלָה לְמְרְדֳכָי, עַל-זֵה; וַיֹּאמְרוּ
נְעָרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, מִשְׁרָתָיו, לֹא-נִעֲשָׂה עִמּוֹ, דְּבָר

And the king said: 'What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?' Then said the king's

The King can't believe it. Nothing? He didn't ask for anything, or want anything? I didn't reward him in any way?

Now let's contrast Mordechai with our archenemy, the evil Haman. He's your classic glass-half-empty guy. There's never enough. He can never be happy. And it's that lack of modesty -- that inability to appreciate what he has and not want more, that foils his plan, costs him his life and saves the Jewish people.

The Gemara in Chullin asks a very interesting and well-known question: הַמֵּן מִן הַתּוֹרָה מֵיָא -- "where is the source for Haman in the Torah?" It's a very strange question, as the Torah precedes the story of Haman by several thousand years. But the Gemara gives us an answer, telling us that we find a reference to Haman in the story of the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Chavah eat that first forbidden fruit, God interrogates them and asks,

הַמֵּן-הָעֵץ, אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי לְבַלְתִּי אֲכֹל-מִמֶּנּוּ--אֲכַלְתָּ

Did you eat from the fruit that I commanded you not to eat?

The Gemara seems to be a play on words; we can read the word הַמֵּן as Haman. But the commentators explain that the Gemara here teaches us a critical insight into human nature that is Haman's fatal flaw. In the Garden of Eden God gives man everything -- literally paradise. He tells him, מַכַּל עֵץ הַגֵּן -- "eat from any fruit you like." Do whatever you wish. The world is your oyster. You can have anything and everything...but. You cannot eat from one single tree. And man wants not what he can have, and not what God gives him. No, he wants the one tree, the very fruit that God forbids. He wants everything. He wants it all. He has no modesty. (So is it at all surprising to us that immediately after they eat from the fruit, they discover their own sexuality?)

That's Haman. The entire world bows to him. People cower before his power. He has wealth, children, fame, fortune. But it's not enough. He wants it all. He cannot stand the fact that one person -- one Jew -- won't bow. Listen to what he tells his family when he returns from the first party with the King and Esther:

וְכָל-זֶה, אֵינִי שׂוֹה לִי: בְּכָל-עֵת, אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת-מְרְדֳכָי
הַיְהוּדִי--יוֹשֵׁב, בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ

Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

Nothing? You've just come from a private audience with the king and queen, and it's worth nothing. And that greed, that lack and modesty, the need for immediate gratification -- bring Haman to his own destruction. He builds the gallows. He goes then -- that very night to ask for royal permission to execute Mordechai. But he picks for himself the wrong night, and everything spirals out of control from that point forward.

And what about the Jews? Do they learn this lesson? Do they begin to appreciate the value and virtue of modesty? Indeed they do. At the beginning of the story we learn about how everyone, Jew and gentile alike, partake in the gluttonous and self-indulgent party of the king. But later, when the time comes for the Jewish people to stand up to their enemies and defend themselves, the edict from Mordechai proclaims that all Jews have the right to gather, defend their lives, destroy their adversaries, and וּשְׁלָלִים לְבוֹז -- "and to take the spoils of war for prey." That's the way it works after all. When you kill an enemy, the spoils of war belong to you. But when the day of battle comes and the Jews do wipe out their adversaries, the Megillah twice teaches us that, וּבְכִזְזָה--לֹא שָׁלְחוּ, אֶת-יָדֵם, -- "they did not lay their hands on the spoils." It's about self-defense. It's about the right to live and worship our God and be His chosen people. It's not about the money. It's about living lives infused with Jewish values. Even in war, it's about living with modesty.

This notion of modesty extends deep into our personal lives. How many people overextend because they want the latest, the best, the nicest car or television? How many families implode because the relationship "doesn't give me what I want right now" and I see people having what I think are happier lives -- more enjoyment, more fun? And we want it all, and we want it now. So they sacrifice deep, meaningful relationships and important values for the sake of self-indulgence and self-fulfillment, and they end up no happier; no more satisfied than they were before. Just more miserable.