

Coming Clean on the Consumer Society

By Tsvi Blanchard

Since its founding, CLAL has celebrated the social and financial success that Jews enjoy in North America. Beginning with Yitz Greenberg's seminal writings on this topic, CLAL has championed Jewish freedom, power and affluence. And we insisted that Jews confront the emerging social opportunities and responsibilities of being an affluent and influential ethnic community. We argued that substantially increased Jewish communal resources meant that the Jewish people in North America must take our responsibility to mend the world (tikkun olam) even more seriously.

We understood that there is always a tension between personally enjoying the blessings of abundance and honestly meeting our obligation to meet the needs of the socially vulnerable. Tzedakah, we insisted, is not charity. It is the righteous pursuit of a socially just society. The celebration of our newfound wealth was linked to the task of relieving the suffering of others -- Jewish or not, American or not.

One problem we probably did not confront as honestly as we should have was the darker side of North American consumerism. How might the problems of consumerism be described? First, we need to understand what makes our society a "consumer society." Then we can consider both the positive and negative aspects of the increasingly important role consumption has come to play for Americans today.

In our consumer society, acquiring and using consumer goods and services is primarily about who we think we are and how we communicate this image of ourselves to others. For those of us who are affluent, consuming is clearly about far more than the reasonable satisfaction of our desires. It can be, as the social critic of consumption Thorsten Veblen pointed out, little more than conspicuous consumption. Its message may simply be, in popular terms, rooted in "keeping up with the Jones." When expressed in the Jewish community, this approach tended to focus unsympathetically on the "nouveau riche" aspects of the American Jewish position. It was one-sided because it ignored the many positive features of a Jewish community which lived the immigrant/Ellis Island story and its American dream.

Other negative pictures of the consumer society were also presented. Our incessant buying and consuming, it was argued, resulted in too many empty, passive lives. Jews, like other affluent Americans, were becoming a narcissistic, self-gratifying people with an exaggerated sense of entitlement. Like other such communities, however, they are not happy. They wish for something "really meaningful." But, it was argued, we will be unable to actually attain what is truly

authentic, if only because we are too concerned with consuming, consuming, and consuming.

Opposing such a one-sidedly negative view of consumption is a recent book by Gary Cross, a professor at Penn State, whose *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won In Modern America*, recently appeared. In this new book he argues:

"I have come to accept that the act of consumption is far more interesting and important than commonly assumed by intellectual critics of consumer culture. It can not be reduced to economic manipulation or social emulation.... Modern people, and especially Americans, communicate to others and to themselves through their goods. The consumer society has not necessarily produced passive people alienated from their true selves, as regularly assumed by traditional critics.... Consumerism -- the understanding of self in society through goods -- has provided on balance a more dynamic and popular, while less destructive, ideology of public life than most political belief systems in the twentieth century." [p. viii]

Cross also argues that a consumer society provides for the values of autonomy, freedom and personal choice. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, the founder of CLAL, has been making a similar argument for more than twenty years, that consumer capitalism strengthens many of the most important values of modern Jews, among them freedom, autonomy and choice.

But to avoid an overly naïve celebration of consumerism, we need to be very careful about losing perspective on the social costs of consumerism. We can not forget the poor and other disadvantaged groups. In an era of the global flow of investment capital, it would be extremely naïve of us to pretend that there are no losers in the international consumption game. Moreover, as both Cross and Greenberg seem aware, there are social costs within our own society. A society that only communicates and connects through consumer goods is hardly a Garden of Eden.

Have we been able to acknowledge and respond to both the hells and the benefits of the contemporary consumer society? We have certainly done well at acknowledging its positive achievements. CLAL has certainly found ways to communicate the importance to Jews of fully celebrating the taking of pleasure in our world. We have taught that, for example, reciting a blessing before eating balances our very human appropriation of material reality, while at the same time celebrating the inherent goodness of the world because of its origin in divine creation. ("Behold it was very good." Genesis)

The partnership between humanity and the Creator transforms reality into "consumer goods." It does this by sanctifying the act of pleasurable consumption through acknowledging the divine source of even those "goods" which are

produced by human activity. The classical example of this is the blessing before eating bread. In this blessing, bread, which is clearly a human product, is connected to its origin in creation and G-d is acknowledged as "the one who brings forth bread from the earth."

All things considered, however, have we as a community taken a serious look at the social costs of consumption? Have we brought the inherited Jewish tradition to bear on the public policy debates about the very real costs of American consumption patterns to groups both within and beyond our borders? We know that many consumer goods deplete natural resources at rates that are intolerable internationally. We know that we need to be looking for ways to produce goods that consume less energy. Perhaps the Jewish community needs to be as active in exploring these less positive implications of our consumer affluence as we have been in celebrating it.

Finally, if tikkun olam means anything, it entails a willingness to engage the human imagination in the search for a more perfect world. Although we have always understood that this is done one step at a time, we have also refused to surrender the importance of the messianic idea. We have called for an imagination that creates a vision of new social and economic possibilities. In policy debates as well as in Jewish religious conversation, we have argued that there is something dangerous about closing down discussion with "there is no alternative."

While Jewish tradition has always demanded working within the present limits of social reality, it has also fostered a kind of messianic/utopian imagination that beckons to us to work for long-term change. Tikkun olam may have originally been limited to policy changes meant to make short-term improvements. By now, however, it has come to mean our ongoing Jewish imaginative work for a world where, for example, the consumer benefits to one privileged group does not mean poverty, ill health or early death for others.

Both as Jews and as Americans we need to make sure that we don't get so carried away by the goodness of our success that we begin to forget about its costs. We need to ask ourselves: Have we shown the same insistence on using imagination to address the hot issues of economic globalization or environmental damage as we have in insisting on an expansive realization of contemporary Jewish identity and community building?