

LOVE YOUR FELLOW AS YOURSELF^[2]

- Dr. Meir Tamari

Perhaps the most appealing and attractive aspect of Judaism is the possibility of observance by the average man or woman. Of course there is the rarefied and elevating observance by the learned and righteous but there is also value and spirituality in the hurried and seemingly irrelevant fulfillment by the ignorant and irreverent. One does not have to be at the level of a Moshe or Levi Yitschak Berdichever to realize the sanctification in the observance of mitzvot by them. Chassidism is replete with true or perhaps imaginary such stories, but any visit to an average Shabbat mincha will support this. However, the interest free loan as adherence and fulfillment of ahavta le reiacha is common to all the centuries and throughout Eretz Yisrael but equally in all the countries of galut. Knowing full well the cost of capital and the benefits of its alternative uses, Judaism permitted payment for their use, as moral. Jews nevertheless, gave up part of those legal and permitted benefits so that the recipient could use them as capital for his own business and commerce, often in competition with the donors. It should be obvious that this could not be extended to the whole human

race and had to be limited to Jews similar to a family, where lender was also sometimes borrower and vice versa. Rambam codifies this as the highest form of charity, primarily perhaps because the recipient and the lender both do not regard this as free handouts but as a business venture.

At the outset it should be clear to all of us that, money matters, especially banking and investment, has always depended to a great extent on the character and moral standing of both parties. The lender has to have good qualities like concern for the material needs of others, the ability to save some of his income rather than instant consumption and an experienced business career which enabled him to accumulate the sums necessary to lend. This is borne out by the fact that in most societies the bankers grew out of a successful mercantile career or from religious groups who had the faith and the moral ability to postpone some consumption and save. The borrower too has to have an ethical education, one that will be careful in the use of the borrowed funds and ensure repayment. These qualities are a mainstay of those societies like orthodox Jewish communities in which interest free loans have always been part of a culture and a faith.

It is not only credit, banking and investment which depend to a great

extent equally on the character and moral standing of the various parties involved. These characteristics are essential in all avenues of economic activity and distinguish them from brigandage and robbery. They confirm safety of economic assets, mutual assistance and their transmission over the generations. Their absence condemns societies to economic stagnation and even to poverty. Perhaps the most outstanding and most singular aspect of Jewish life in a galut devoid of the foundations of political freedom and geographical borders, is this involvement in all aspects of economic life. It has been argued that Judaism's communal and national character and institutions built as it were a substitute for this freedom and these borders. One of the most intriguing questions of economic history is this involvement of a stateless nation, politically powerless, lacking tenure in any country, in all the aspects of various national economies and international trade. Some scholars have attempted to draw analogies from other minority and stateless groups but these groups have failed to persevere over long periods or simply have assimilated into the host society.