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## Keep Dreaming: Lots of happiness, lots of wealth

By DAVID BREAKSTONE  
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The poor person's guide to becoming one of the world's richest Jews.

The world's 50 richest Jews. Really? Says who? Actually, it was the staffers of *The Jerusalem Post* who compiled this list that was published in its Rosh Hashana supplement. I have no doubt that they did their homework, and I'm certainly not questioning the accuracy of their figures. I do, however, question the admission requirements they set for getting into this exclusive club. Three times I checked the names and couldn't find mine among them. What gives?

Particularly in this season of introspection, when the only stock that's meant to interest us is the one we're supposed to be taking of our lives, it's curious that the criteria applied didn't factor in anything other than the size of the candidates' bank accounts. Had the reporters consulted with our elders, they might have put together a very different story. "Who is wealthy?" asks Ben Zoma in *Pirkei Avot*, and then proceeds to answer his own question: "He who is happy with his lot."

Lots of happiness, lots of wealth. I can't help wondering, then, how many of the 50 billionaires profiled in this paper's feature would have made the cut had our sages been put in charge of the project. Not many, if there be truth in the Kohelet Raba exegesis of Ecclesiastes: "One who has 100 wants 200." Money, after all, can't buy happiness. Or can it?

Turns out that this is a more intriguing question than your Hebrew school teacher made it out to be. According to a Gallup survey on happiness released earlier this summer, researchers found a positive correlation between income and the degree of satisfaction with one's life. This linkage held not only in regard to individuals and their personal financial situations, but also societies and their gross domestic product.

It would appear that despite all our moralizing to the contrary, it's a great deal easier to be happy when there's money in the bank. So much for King Solomon's observation that "the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep," or that "with an increase in wealth comes an increase in worry."

Of course, one could argue that all those rich people responding to Mr. Gallup only think they're happy. Which is actually quite comforting, because by extrapolation, one could then conclude that the rest of us, who might think we are unhappy, really aren't. I, for one, feel better already.

Sour grapes aside, I still haven't gotten to the truly amazing thing about this Gallup poll. In what amounts to

an absolute mockery of conventional wisdom, Israel was ranked as the eighth happiest country out of the 155 surveyed! I rarely use exclamation marks, but this is one of those rare instances for which they were conceived. I mean, with all the complaining we are bombarded with daily, how is such a thing possible?

Perhaps the answer's in the old joke about the American Soviet Jewry activist who makes his way to Moscow before the fall of the Iron Curtain and asks a group of refuseniks how they feel about the menial labor they've been relegated to.

"Can't complain," one of them responds, and the rest all nod their heads in agreement. "And the long bread lines?" he persists, somewhat disarmed. Again, his query is met with a consensual "can't complain." Baffled, he asks about religious persecution. They look at one another for a moment, shrug their shoulders, and proclaim in unison, "Can't complain about that either."

Wondering why he's investing so much energy on behalf of people seemingly so content, he inquires accusingly. "Then why are you struggling so hard to get to Israel?" The answer, of course: "Because there we can complain."

AHHH. THE essence of Zionism encapsulated in a single phrase. To have a country of our own to complain about. And to be the first generation in more than 30 privileged to be able to do that.

There's actually a serious side to this proposition, and it comes in the form of a response to yet another mind-boggling survey, this one published last month by *Newsweek*. Hard to believe, but Israel was ranked as the 22nd best country to live in out of the 100 surveyed. Despite being convinced that the entire world is out to get us, not to mention the myriad challenges facing us on the home front, we inexplicably judged our own quality of life as being higher than we should have, were only objective data taken into consideration. Enter Omri Zegen of the Reut Institute, who asserts that it is the "Jewish added value" of living in this country and the sense of being part of the Zionist enterprise that gives us the edge in assessing our quality of life.

Furthermore, he argues, it is this factor that we must cultivate if we are "to leapfrog socioeconomically" and actualize the vision of his policy group which would, within 15 years, place Israel among the top 15 countries in terms of quality of life.

But here's the rub. The Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies revealed on the eve of Yom Kippur that there is also a correlation between politeness and wealth. For every 10% increase on your good manners rating, you can expect a 5.8% increase in family income. That's the good news. The bad news is that the report also confirmed that Israelis are notoriously rude. So much so, that simply by being more considerate of one another, we might actually be able to wipe out the national debt.

So where do these conflicting hypotheses and sets of data leave us? Right now, the answer for many is sitting in a succa, which happens to be a wonderful place from which to be contemplating this matter of wealth and happiness. Among its many meanings, this festival of tabernacles highlights the temporality of the material, reminds us that we can make do with less, and – just before the gates of heaven close for the season – focuses our attention not on what we have, but on who we are. It is a particularly good place, then, to be asking oneself the question, "If next year's list of the world's 50 richest Jews were to be comprised of those happiest with their lot, would I be wealthy enough to be included on it?"

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