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PEN\$AR EL DINERO

JORGE WIESSE REBAGLIATI
CESARE DEL MASTRO PUCCIO

Editores

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“Blood Money” or Money against Blood? Money in the Eyes of the Rabbis

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Introduction – Between a minefield and an oversimplification

Can a Rabbi, objectively and rationally enter into dialogue on the ethics of money? The question is bold and daring. Importantly, reflecting on the extreme difficulty of articulating a rabbinic thought with the ethics of money as its subject is nothing less than a dangerous minefield. Indeed, over the centuries, and in particular since the Third Council of Latran¹ prohibited usury within the Catholic Church—thus relegating it to the Jews—and later on when Pope Clement V made the belief in the right of this financial practice an heresy in 1311, Jewish behaviour and attitude towards money had in effect been declared heretical in itself! While this paper does not have the pretention to shed light on the historical unfolding of the “economic anti-Semitism” that characterised almost seventeen centuries of European history,² it is nevertheless essential to remind ourselves, as

¹ In 1179, the Council ruled as follows: “Nearly everywhere the crime of usury has become so firmly rooted that many, omitting other business, practise usury as if it were permitted, and in no way observe how it is forbidden in both the Old and New Testament. We therefore declare that *notorious usurers* should not be admitted to communion of the altar or receive Christian burial if they die in this sin. Whoever receives them or gives them Christian burial should be compelled to give back what he has received and let him remain suspended from the performance of his office until he has made satisfaction according to the judgment of his own bishop.”

² It was with the First Council of Nicaea in 325, forbidding the clergy to engage in the practice of usury, that this “forbidden practice” slowly became a “Jewish attribute.”

we attempt to embark on a rabbinic exploration of the theme of money, of this anti-Semitic image of the Jews—ruthless, heartless and consumed by their own greed—as portrayed so vividly by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*. The infamous “pound of flesh” encapsulates the essence of the minefield! Indeed the minefield is deeper and more dangerous than it may seem at first glance. The anti-Semitic imagery of the Jew always concerned about his money and his wealth has a flip side. Many, not only in past centuries but today as well, tend to believe that far from upholding a condemnable attitude towards money and financial matters, the Jews—and with them the core teachings of Judaism—are money experts, depositaries of some mystical and secret teachings, hidden in the midst of the obscure pages of the Talmud or the writings of the Kaballah.³ While it is only an anecdote, the existence of the Talmud Hotel in Taiwan, advertising itself as being “ready for business” and animated by the spirit of the “sacred Jewish texts of the Talmud,”⁴ offering to its customers a copy of the “Talmud-Business Success Bible”⁵ in every room, translates quite accurately the “positive” perception shared by many of a specific Jewish relationship with finance and money making. Needless to say, many Jews themselves boast of such “innate knowledge.”

In the midst of such a minefield, how does one (and a rabbi in particular) talk rationally and with an intellectual rationale about the meaning and the ethics of money in the Jewish tradition? Faced with such a daunting challenge, the first temptation is certainly to find a haven in the wisdom of carefully chosen biblical and rabbinic sayings, highlighting the sense of disdain for money, seen as a simple vanity of this world. Quotes from Ecclesiastes instantly spring to mind. King Salomon, the presumed author of this book of wisdom, was indeed a man of great experience and wealth. At the end of his life, he is presented to us as having achieved unequalled wisdom. Thus, we read in the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes: “*He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loves abundance*

³ The Kabbalah refers to the mystical writings of Judaism. These teachings emerged very early on in the history of rabbinic Judaism. Yet, they have remained slightly outside the mainstream teachings of the rabbis, reserved for a scholarly elite who have already mastered all the other core teachings of the tradition. By its mystical and at times secretive nature, the Kabbalah is often the object of fantasies, including in the realm of finance.

⁴ The actual wording of the advertisement for this hotel is as follows: “Inspired by the Talmud theory, the owner uses red interior to add a splash of fashion and professionalism. In each room, there is also a copy of the “Talmud-Business Success Bible” for anyone who would like to experience the Talmud way of becoming successful” (see <https://talmud.hotel.com.tw/eng/> - retrieved on 1/28/2016).

⁵ A book seemingly not accessible in English, yet readily available in its original Chinese edition (<http://www.books.com.tw/products/0010264012>).

*with increase; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them; and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, saving the beholding of them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a labouring man, whether he eats little or much; but the satiety of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.*⁶ This romantic view of the simple life, relegating wealth and money to the sole scope of vanity and sleepless nights, while possibly quite cynical coming from the mouth of the particularly rich King Salomon, is nonetheless restated and amplified by rabbis of the Tannaitic period⁷ who in their own lives experienced the real suffering that results from powerlessness and poverty. While the quest for quotes could easily be expanded, the well-known passage from Pirkei Avot⁸ attributed to Ben Zoma will suffice to illustrate the early rabbinic perception of wealth and money. “*Ben Zoma says: who is rich? The one who is satisfied with what he has.*”⁹ Thus, for the early rabbis, true richness does not lie in the accumulation of physical wealth but rather in the inner wisdom of being satisfied with one’s lot. The rejection of money and abundance indeed seems far removed from the rabbinic minds of the time.

Yet, such selected teachings, either from the Bible or from early rabbinic texts, are very misleading. One needs to be acutely aware of the dangers of such oversimplifications. Between the minefield of anti-Semitic images and the oversimplified concepts of selected biblical and rabbinic texts, one needs to find a different way to navigate the complex topic of money and wealth in rabbinic writings and thoughts. Within the limited scope of this paper, we will attempt to focus solely on the question of the emergence of money in biblical and then in rabbinic texts¹⁰ in order to reveal a more complex, balanced, and at times ethically rich dimension of money that slowly takes shape over time.

⁶ Ecc 5, 9-11.

⁷ The Tannaitic period, or the “period of the Tannaim” is usually understood to stretch from the start of the Common Era to the end of the 2nd century when the Mishnah (first code of Jewish law) was compiled by Yehudah Ha-Nassi and became the basis for Talmudic discussions and debates.

⁸ Also known as the “Ethics of the Fathers,” Pirkei Avot is a compilation of essentially ethical sayings attributed to the Tannaim.

⁹ Pirkei Avot 4, 1.

¹⁰ Due to the limited scope of this paper we will only look at the first explicit mention of money in the Bible. In regards to the rabbinic texts and since the notion of “chronological emergence” is elusive (rabbinic documents in the Talmud, the Midrash or the Codes are not concerned about “chronology”) we will focus on one single Talmudic passage where money suddenly emerges in the rabbinic discussion.

I) The Biblical emergence of money

The emergence of money in the Bible is, in itself, a vast and complex subject. To clarify matters, it is necessary to differentiate between the narrative level of the Bible and its Law sections.¹¹ While the theme of money emerges both in the realm of the narrative and the Law sections of the Bible, the images and teachings derived from these two distinct families of biblical texts have very distinctive flavors and carry with them contrasting teachings.

a) The emergence of money in the narratives of the Bible

The first passage in the Bible where money is explicitly mentioned can be found in the story of the burial of Sarah in the book of Genesis.¹² Immediately following the episode of the binding of Isaac,¹³ the reader of the Torah learns of the sudden and quite unexpected death of Sarah at the age of 127. While Abraham mourns the passing of his wife, he suddenly enters into negotiation with Ephron, the Hittite, and expresses his wish to purchase, for money, a specific plot of land on which to lay her to rest. It is worth recalling the details of this very first financial negotiation: *“And Abraham rose up, and bowed down to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying: ‘If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in the midst of you for a possession of a burying-place.’ Now Ephron was sitting in the midst of the children of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying: ‘Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee; bury thy dead.’ And Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. And he spoke unto Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying: ‘But if thou wilt, I pray thee, hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there.’ And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him: ‘My lord, hearken unto me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that betwixt me and thee? Bury therefore thy dead.’ And Abraham hearkened*

¹¹ Here we consider the biblical passages that then become the subject of rabbinic legislation (Mitzvot), seen as embedded in the verses of the Bible, thus contributing to the shaping of Halakhah, the code of Jewish law.

¹² Gen 23, 1-18.

¹³ Gen 22. As the “sacrifice” of Isaac is not as such a sacrifice but only a test of “binding,” rabbis have always referred to this passage as the Akedah Yitzhak, the “binding of Isaac.”

*unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.*¹⁴ The narrative is dense and insightful. As we are engaged by the flow of the unfolding story, we can easily imagine a lively and heated negotiation, a real “bargaining experience in reverse” where Ephron begs Abraham to take the field for free while the latter insists on paying. Finally, after some verbal back-and-forth arguing, a fee is set: 400 shekels of silver. When Ephron emphatically declares “*a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that betwixt me and thee,*”¹⁵ we intuitively imagine a frank “pat on the back” to seal the deal!

It all looks simple and straightforward. Yet, as is often the case, the biblical text is deeper than it seems at first glance. A detail of the story, when discovered, will radically change our perception of the purpose of this narrative. Indeed, a closer look at the introductory verses depicts the figure of Abraham as a “mighty prince,”¹⁶ wealthy, in actual money, cattle and most probably in land. A sudden question then arises. If Abraham had all the means and land at his own disposal why does he suddenly engage in such financial dealing in order to acquire a plot? By all accounts, Abraham does not really need this land to bury Sarah in a proper and respectful manner. If this is the case, an interesting twist emerges from the Genesis story. More than a plot of land, what Abraham really needs and is looking for at this time of his life is social interactions. Money, unrestricted to actual translation of wealth into “exchangeable coins” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 56), becomes a useful tool to enable a proper human encounter. As such, it is quite remarkable that the discussion between Ephron and Abraham over the details of their financial agreement is by far the longest dialogue recorded thus far in the Bible.¹⁷ This understanding of the emergence of money as enabling human encounter must be taken one step further. In the many episodes of Abraham’s story recorded in the verses of the Torah, it is also on this occasion that, for the first time in his life, Abraham really speaks outside of his direct and limited family unit or clan. In all previous stories, Abraham acts as a “tribal leader,” as the patriarch of a self-secluded family. With the notorious exception of his travelling to Egypt and his two famous words describing his wife Sarah as “his sister” to Pharaoh’s emissaries

¹⁴ Gen 23, 7-16.

¹⁵ Gen 23, 15.

¹⁶ Gen 23, 6. A description that echoes Gen 13, 2: “And Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver and in gold”.

¹⁷ From verse 3 to verse 15, with 12 verses of pure debate and argument between the two protagonists of the story, this dialogue is lengthier than any previous occurrence of dialogue in the Torah.

and princes,¹⁸ Abraham does not speak much to any other human being.¹⁹ Money therefore emerges in the biblical narrative not only as a catalyst for full and proper human interactions but also as a tool that permits the breaking down of social barriers, propelling a human being outside his or her own social comfort zone. This highly positive perception of money should in no way be minimized or disregarded.

b) The emergence of money in a Law section of the Bible

Let us now turn to a second case of the emergence of money in the Bible. Leaving aside the storyline of the biblical verses, it is on a particularly intriguing legal section of the Torah that our attention should focus. The first reference to money as a Halakhic preoccupation appears in Exodus 30, in the context of the census and the collection of funds for the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Here we read that, “*the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: ‘When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord, when thou numberest them; that there be no plague among them, when thou numberest them. This they shall give, every one that passeth among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel is twenty gerah, half a shekel for an offering to the Lord.’*”²⁰ In later rabbinic tradition, this passage is known as the Mitzvah of the Half Shekel, emphasizing the legal nature of the passage. After the exodus from Egypt and as the children of Israel are commanded to build the tabernacle that will contain the Ark of the Covenant, the Torah sets a communal tax that each adult over the age of twenty will have to pay. Nothing out of the extraordinary thus far! At the simplest level, this first occurrence of money in a legal context asserts the ethical dimension of individual possession of wealth, as it is through taxation for the communal good, that money can be shared. Yet, here again, for the attentive reader, the text of the Torah carries more depth than it appears to at first glance. In order to dig deeper into the possible significations of this very succinct commandment of the Half Shekel—and extrapolate from it some important teachings about the meaning of money in the thought of the rabbis—we must now turn to three short commentaries, both ancient and modern. As we will discover, when put together almost

¹⁸ The two Hebrew words “Akhoti Hee” (she is my sister) are ascribed to Abraham in the recollection of the Egyptian Pharaoh in Gen 12, 19. As such, the Torah does not even record the actual dialogue that Abraham might have had at the time.

¹⁹ By contrast, it must be noted that Abraham does not spare words in his dialogues with God. In particular, Abraham argues at length concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

²⁰ Exodus 30, 11-13.

like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, these three rabbinic teachings create a challenging vision of the role of money in our lives.

So we start with the commentary of Rashi²¹ on Exodus 30, 15. The great master of Troyes makes quite an insightful comment on the text, as he often does, highlighting one specific aspect of this first recorded taxation: *“The first offering [of silver] is for the sockets [of the Mishkan], for he [Moses] counted them when they commenced with the donations for the Mishkan. Everyone gave a half-shekel, amounting to one hundred talents, as it is said: ‘And the silver of the community census was one hundred talent’ (Exod. 38:25). The sockets were made from this, as it is said: ‘One hundred talents of the silver was [used to cast the sockets of the Mishkan and the sockets of the dividing curtain]’ (Exod. 38:27).”* The double reference to the “sockets” of the tabernacle, that is the piece on which the whole structure rests, is particularly evocative. More than a simple architectural detail, Rashi is possibly pointing to the fundamental nature of money. When partially shared for the communal good, money is not a peripheral matter. It is not an “aside” relegated to the superfluous decorations on the margins of society. Interestingly, it is not taboo either.

Rashi’s commentary takes on new urgency when read in the light of a short midrashic text²² from Midrash Tanhuma.²³ Commenting on Exodus 30, 13, *“and they will give,”* rabbi Meir teaches: *“The Eternal created a coin of fire that he placed under His throne of glory. He then showed it to Moses and said to him: This they should give. But Moses asked: Who should give? God answered: All those who have crossed the sea.”*²⁴ As often with the Midrash, it is the question asked—more than the answer given—that is of real interest. As such, two simple questions constitute the backbone of this short text: a) what is this coin that the Eternal suddenly had to create with fire? b) who are the people that could effectively give? This double query is rather surprising as the verse from the Torah already provides the reader with straightforward answers. The coin is the half shekel, and the people obligated to give are all those over the age of twenty. So how can one really understand the question of rabbi Meir, let alone the extravagant answer about the

²¹ Rashi (1040-1105). Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhaki, is the most well-known biblical and Talmudic commentator. He lived in northern France in the 11th century. His commentary is consistently printed alongside the Torah and the Talmud.

²² The Midrash is a rabbinic method of interpretation that seeks to interrogate the biblical text. To do so, the Midrash often refers to images or to allegories, exploring some of the details of the verses under scrutiny.

²³ Name of a Midrashic collection on the weekly section of the Pentateuch. Most likely compiled during the first half of the 9th century.

²⁴ Midrash Tanhuma, Ki-Tissa 13.

“coin of fire”? What is so “fundamental” in the idea —yet to be unearthed —carried by the image of the fiery coin?

A third commentary, taken from recently rediscovered ancient knowledge, will finally help us to piece together the whole picture. Some years ago, in 2008, an archaeological excavation in Israel brought to light a rare 1st century half shekel coin. A brief news report simply stated: “A rare half shekel coin, first minted in 66 or 67 C.E., was discovered by 14-year-old Omri Ya’ari as volunteers sifted through mounds of dirt from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem [...] The half shekel coin was first minted during the Great Revolt against the Romans” (Shragai 2008). Yet, beyond the apparent simplicity of this discovery, an interesting reality emerges. If only minted during the Great Revolt, which took place in the 1st century, one must conclude that the actual half shekel coin did not exist in biblical times, let alone when the children of Israel were ordered to equally participate in taxation for the tabernacle! How then were they able to perform this legal commandment? The double question of Midrash Tanhuma suddenly comes to light. Indeed who could have given such a “non-existent coin”? The only reasonable answer is that two individuals had to join together financially in order to give a full one shekel coin. In the words of the Midrash, even Moses could not grasp this idea. “Who should give?” asked the greatest prophet of all time, thus betraying his inability to fathom the ideal of a society in which people would join together in financial matters in order to participate in the common good. The astonishing potential of money, far from being a source of divisions and splits in a society, becomes, as Rashi foresaw the “sockets,” or the foundations of our society.

Thus, whether in the narrative sections of the Bible or in its Law sections, the emergence of money seems to convey a similar message. Far from looking at wealth and money as a source of division, deceit and vanity, the biblical text enables a remarkably positive understanding of the role of money in our societies. Money, as a tool for human encounters and human sharing; money as a device for cohesion.

II) When money suddenly emerges in a Talmudic text: blood-money or money against blood?

The vast corpus of rabbinic literature comprising the Talmud, the Codes of Jewish law, the midrashic collections and anthologies and the biblical commentaries, by its sheer volume, presents a challenge of its own. How can one objectively choose a passage as “representative” of the rabbis’ view on money? The task is simply impossible. A more structured approach seems necessary.

Rabbinic “blood-money”

Thus, before even attempting to single out a rabbinic text, it seems highly appropriate to start our inquiry with this issue of terminology. While the Bible essentially refers to money with the word *Kesef* or *Shekel*,²⁵ (respectively pointing to the “silver” aspect of the coin, to its physical weight, and to the name given to its most basic unit), the rabbis in later Talmudic texts refer to money using terms of their own making. Of particular interest is the word *Damim* so often used in rabbinic debates where money is involved. The *Jastrow Dictionary of the Talmud* (the definitive Talmudic and Midrashic dictionary), provides the following translation and indication: “*Damim*: plural for, Equivalent, Compensation, Price, Value and Payment” (Jastrow, 1886, p. 313) It proceeds to list all the Talmudic and rabbinic references where the term appears. Yet, as one scrolls up and down the page of this entry, it soon becomes clear that the word could originate from two possible roots. Either it comes from the verb *DaMaH*, meaning “to resemble”; or from the noun *DaM*, meaning, “blood.” Now, the idea that the rabbinic term for money is derived from an expression of “resemblance” is, after all quite natural as it carries the idea that money is indeed a tool that enables exchange of objects or goods of “similar” values. What is more surprising is the derivation of this term from the word “blood.” The rabbinic allusion to “blood-money” immediately springs to mind.

Money against blood

With this vision of “blood-money” and the potential violence it implies, carried so powerfully by the very term used by the rabbis to express the idea of money, it now seems natural to turn to one specific Talmudic text that sheds an interesting light on this concept. In tractate Sanhedrin 79a-b, the Talmud debates what should be the proper understanding of the (in)famous Lex Talionis of the Bible, in Exodus 21, 23-25: “*But if any harm follow, then thou shalt give life for life; eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot; burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*” The words are well known, over-rehearsed and indeed too often quoted in order to highlight the violent nature of some biblical passages. The rabbis of old certainly would have felt uneasy at the possibility of seeing the ideal of justice translated, by a literal reading of the verses, into a bloodbath.

²⁵ The Hebrew term *Shekel*, comes from the root Sh-K-L, meaning to “weigh.” Here, the reference to the measurement of the silver weight is quite explicit.

The following Talmudic text clearly attempts to negate any suggestion that the Torah verses should be read literally: “*But how does R. Simeon interpret, ‘thou shalt give life for life’? — It refers to monetary compensation, in harmony with Rabbi’s interpretation. For it has been taught: Rabbi said: Then thou shalt give life for life: this refers to monetary compensation. You say, monetary compensation: but perhaps this is not so, life being literally meant? ‘Giving’ is stated below; and ‘giving’ is also stated above: just as the latter refers to money, so the former too.*”²⁶ Talmudic texts are often, at first glance, enigmatic. This one is no exception and therefore requires some explanation.

This short Talmudic extract is structured around a technical and hermeneutical argument. In the language of the rabbis, the Talmud is elaborating on a *Gzerah Shavah*, a linguistic “analogy”²⁷ (Steinsaltz, 1989, p. 150). In our particular case, rabbi Shimon points to a peculiar verb used to evoke the “life for a life” principle of the Torah verse: *Venatata Nefesh Takhat Nafesh*, “and you shall give a life for a life.”²⁸ The “giving” in question, through a hermeneutical reading, echoes the “giving” of money clearly alluded to in Exodus 21, 22.²⁹ Beyond the technical hermeneutic, specific to the rabbinic mind of the Talmud, here we witness the sudden emergence of money as an escape from violence. While the literal understanding of “a life for a life; an eye for an eye” is profoundly violent, the rabbis claim that this verse only refers to monetary compensation in order to move away from such violence. Far from being “blood-money” in the commonly accepted sense of the expression, money becomes the tool for preventing the spilling of blood.³⁰

²⁶ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 79a-b.

²⁷ The *Gezerah Shavah* is part of the classical 13 hermeneutical rules established by Rabbi Ishmael: “Verbal analogy, a fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation appearing in all the standard lists of exegetical rules. If the same word or phrase appears in two places in the Torah, and a certain law is explicitly stated in one of these places, we may infer on the basis of ‘verbal analogy’ that the same law must apply in the other case as well.”

²⁸ Exodus 21, 23.

²⁹ “If men quarrel and hurt a pregnant woman, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no further harm follow; he shall surely be punished, according to what the women’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judge determines.” The Hebrew expression to render the idea of payment is by: “giving what the judge determines in financial compensation.”

³⁰ For this very specific reason the rabbis here refuse to use the word *Damim* to refer to “money” and replace it with *Mamon*, a more neutral term.

The price of psychological violence

And yet, nothing is that simple and definitive. If the introduction of money does indeed provide an escape from the inevitable cycle of blood implicit in the Lex Talionis, it appears that the sudden emergence of money only shifts the physical violence towards a more subtle form of violence. To perceive this troubling reality, it is certainly useful to turn to a second Talmudic text that encapsulates the essence of the problematic we now face. The following text debates the way one can calculate the value of lost embryos, once it is understood and accepted that financial compensations are the only way to extract justice from such a tragedy: *“How is the compensation for the loss of embryos fixed? ‘Compensation for the embryos’? Should it not [also] have been ‘compensation for the increase in [the woman’s] value caused by the embryos’? This indeed was what was meant: how is the compensation for the embryos and for the increase [in the woman’s value] due to embryos fixed? Her estimated value before miscarriage is compared with her value after miscarriage. But Shimon ben Gamaliel said: if this is so, a woman after having given birth increases in value. What did he mean by this statement? Rabbah said he meant to say this: does a woman increase in value before giving birth more than after? Or, does not a woman increase in value after giving birth more than before giving birth? [...] Does not the value of a woman increase after having given birth more than before giving birth? [...] Raba, however, said: what is meant is this: ‘is a woman’s increase in value wholly for the benefit of the husband for whom she bears, and has she no share at all in the increase in the value due to the embryo? It is therefore the value of the embryos which has to be estimated and this amount will be given to the husband, whereas the amount of the increase in the value caused by the embryos will be shared equally between husband and wife.’”*³¹ The boldness of the argument does not require a detailed and close reading of the words of the rabbis to be perfectly understood. The picture emerges immediately in its full significance. Once money has been introduced to escape the blood cycle of vengeance based on a literal reading of the Lex Talionis, one cannot avoid entering in full swing the psychological violence of a monetary evaluation of life. The questions asked by the rabbis are disturbing, yet needed. What is the value of an unborn child? Does the embryo increase or decrease the value of the mother, treated here almost as a simple object? What is the correct market value of a human life, if not that measured by the scale of a “slave market,” imagined or real? And yes, through this process, the financial (and

³¹ Talmud Bavli, Baba Kama 49a.

hypothetical) argument can be made that the loss of the embryo benefits the “slave’s financial value” as the “slave” is no longer a mother and no longer burdened with child—her “slave” value has therefore increased. There is little doubt that the argument of the rabbis is not to be understood literally, fixing as it were, the official price for a lost embryo. More wisely, the Talmud text simply points the reader toward an understanding of the shift that occurs once money is introduced into our understanding of the Lex Talionis. While escaping physical violence, we now enter the world of psychological and emotional violence as we speculate on the value of human life.

For the Talmudic rabbis, money certainly seems to have the power to tear us apart between two totally unsatisfactory attitudes: on the one hand, the temptation to escape the physical violence of a “life for a life”; on the other hand the potentiality damaging financial calculation on the value of human life.

Conclusion: an attempt at escaping the dilemma

Is there a way one can escape the dilemma created by the emergence of money in the Talmudic text? While the scope of this paper is limited and does not allow for a full investigation into this matter, let us briefly, by way of conclusion, shift our attention to yet another rabbinic text, taken from the realm of Halakhah, the legal and codified tradition of the rabbis. In the 12th century, Maimonides³² endeavored to compile the first comprehensive code of Jewish law since the Mishnah of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nassi in the 2nd century. The move was “bold and not without controversies” (Diamond 2014). In one particular section of the Mishneh Torah, his code of laws, the Rambam legislates on the biblical command of Pidyon Shevuyim, namely the “redemption of the captives.”³³ The principle of the commandment is in itself rather simple. One is obligated to financially redeem Jewish captives that might have been taken as hostages or prisoners by bandits and pirates. Just as in the Talmudic text on the Lex Talionis, here we can also easily perceive how the usage of money as a way to escape the violence of captivity, can instead become the tool of a different psychological violence. What is the “price” of a human life and can we speculate on which life is worth saving

³² Maimonides, also known as the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon), Egypt, 1138-1204. Doctor, rabbi and philosopher, Maimonides is the author of the Mishneh Torah and the Guide of the Perplexed, two major works that have shaped the rabbinic canon over the centuries.

³³ Maimonides considers that this Mitzvah, or commandment, is based on three passages from the Torah: “you shall not harden your heart” (Deut 10, 16); “you shall not stand idly by the blood of your brother” (Leviticus 19:16); and “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

and which one is not? Quite aware of this difficulty, Maimonides posits the following legal position: *“The redemption of captives receives priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. [Indeed,] there is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives. For a captive is among those who are hungry, thirsty, and unclothed and he is in mortal peril. We do not redeem captives for more than their worth for the benefit of the world at large, that is, so that enemies will not pursue people to hold them captive. We do not assist captives in escaping, for the benefit of the world at large, i.e., so that enemies will not oppress captives seriously and be very strict when guarding them.”*³⁴ This rather short text of the Rambam is fascinating and emotionally touching. By setting two strictly defined limits to the actual payment of ransoms, Maimonides attempts to grapple with the dilemma created by the introduction of money. It seems that the solution he advocates, is to propose a sudden change of perspective. From a micro perspective on money and a micro reading of history, the readers of the Mishneh Torah are invited to turn to a macro perspective. It is nothing less than a complete change of horizon. Suddenly, it is for the benefit of the “world at large,” the macro reading of history, that money emerges as a powerful tool against violence, blood or even in-humane captivity and avoids becoming a tool for the psychological violence of financial speculations on the value of life.

The suggestion of Maimonides is paradoxical yet powerful and daring. The paradox lies in the necessity to start with a micro reading of history, in order to engage with the life and suffering of a particular and identifiable person. Yet, it is this same micro perspective that at some stage needs to be abandoned in order to avoid the unethical financial speculation on the value of life. Ethics is then rediscovered by shifting our understanding of the value of money towards a macro reading of history. The daring thought behind Maimonides’ proposition is in the suggestion that it is not money as such that can become “blood-money” or “money against blood,” unethical or ethical. What constitutes the emergence of money as a contribution to a potentially less violent world is only our ability to constantly, and without peace or rest, change the focus of our perspective which is neither micro nor macro, but in constant movement from one to the other.

³⁴ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts, Chapter 8, 10 and 12.

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