

The Jew and the Potlatch

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The Gift and the Potlatch

One of the seminal studies in anthropology and the social sciences was Marcel Mauss' *Essai sur le don*, translated as *The Gift*,¹ which introduced the world to the idea of the gift economy. When Mauss, Emil Durkheim's nephew, published his slim volume in French in 1925, he firmly established the idea that not all exchanges within society are financial in nature and that there are entire economies within communities that are based upon the seemingly free exchange of property and that serve to affirm and stabilize communities and tribes as well as to establish and affirm each individual's place in the social order.

The principal practice discussed by Mauss was the potlatch, an extreme form of gift giving found in the Pacific Northwest, but having strong parallels in other pre-modern societies throughout the world. The potlatch can be defined as a ceremony of feasting among Native American peoples of the coast of northwestern North America, in which the host gains prestige by giving gifts or, sometimes, destroying wealth. Among the remarkable aspects of the potlatch was that it occasionally bankrupted the tribe that gave the potlatch. Additionally, the potlatch was sometimes destroyed by the recipient in a public demonstration to indicate that his tribe had

¹ Marcel Mauss. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by Ian Cunnison. Glencoe, Ill., 1954; reprint, New York, 1967.

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no need for the gift of the potlatch. The destructive nature of the potlatch so disturbed Westerners when they initially encountered it, that it was banned in both Canada and the United States and legalized only in 1951.

Over the past century, there has been extensive anthropological interest and numerous studies of the potlatch both for its own sake and for what it teaches about gift cultures worldwide. It was critically studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Emile Durkheim among others. Different theories have been posited to explain the potlatch and its significance. These have been applied to understanding the underlying dynamics of modern life as well as prescriptively to suggest changes to Western society. While a careful analysis of Gift Giving within America Orthodox Jewish communities would be valuable, I would like to focus here on one particular explanation of specific aspects of the potlatch and how it can be applied to understand certain phenomena within different contemporary Orthodox Jewish communities.

The Usefulness of the Potlatch to Society

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* defines the Potlatch as:

Potlatch is any of a disparate variety of complex ceremonies among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America, associated with the legitimization of the transfer or inheritance of hereditary aristocratic titles and their associated rights, privileges, and obligations. Potlatches are characterized by the reenactment of the sacred family histories that document the legitimacy of the claimant to the rank, by ritual feasting, and by the formal distribution of gifts by the host group to its guests, each according to his rank. Though the wealth distributed at a potlatch may be quite substantial, the amount distributed is much less important than the requirement that it be distributed according to the correct social protocols and moral prescriptions.²

² Stanley Walens. "Potlatch." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 11. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 7345-7346. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 5.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the potlatch is the occasional component where the recipient would publicly destroy the gift as soon as it was received; not as an act of rejection of the gift, but as an indication that he and his tribe did not need the gift. Additionally, the potlatch would sometimes be so large that it would bankrupt the giver. The extreme nature of the gift is one of the more remarkable and notable aspects of the potlatch.

If the potlatch was such an excessive gift that it would occasionally financially ruin the giver, the obvious question was then, why would a tribe collectively perform an action that was economically suicidal? Different anthropologists and social scientists have proposed various theories to explain the persistence of and the centrality of the potlatch and in particular these details of the potlatch for the societies that practiced it.

Clearly the potlatch served many different roles within the tribes that practiced it. However, I would like to focus on one understanding of features of the Potlatch previously described. As a preface, we must begin to think about the role of surplus within society. Any surplus is a challenge to the stability of any community or society because extra resources create opportunity, choice and freedom for its membership. This applies to any surplus: in money, resources or time. This then undermines the stability and structure of that society. Once its members have more than they need for their basic needs, they are free to make choices beyond the basic requirements and obligations, explicit or implicit, of that community. It also allows members to potentially threaten the leadership by giving them the resources to act independent of the leadership's rules and dictates. It also potentially undermines the established power and social structure that allocates resources to its members by conferring upon those with extra resources the basis to create external loci of power.

Every society or community has specific and general expectations of its members. Additionally, each community and sub-group has its own specific expectations for its members. After one has taken care of their basic needs such as food, clothing, transportation and housing, then one has to fulfill all of the obligations of their community.

Any resources left over are a threat to the stability of that society. Any time a member makes choices independent of the norms of their society, the possibility exists that they will make choices beyond the framework of their society. Any excess gives members additional opportunity to challenge the rules of their culture.

Therefore, the fewer choices available within a society, the more stable that society is.

There is, of course, a countervailing idea to this principal, namely, that people will resent their lack of choice. Therefore, it is important for people to feel like their life and lifestyle is freely chosen.

Consequently, ideally, each member of a community will freely choose to be a member of that community while having enough obligations and expectations from their chosen community to severely limit their choices as a member. Most important, people should feel like they are freely making the choices that are expected by their situation and community. However, unconsciously or subconsciously, members feel they must conform to the rules of that society. If they choose not to follow the explicit and implicit rules of their community, they will be looked down upon and shamed by the other members of their society. If they choose not to invest their resources in what is expected from members of their social group, they will be made to feel inadequate and as an inferior member of their group. Their identity as a member of that community will be threatened. As all identity in a post-industrial American society is based upon choice, individuals will be made to feel uncomfortable if they choose a community with a given identity and yet make choices not in sync with the expectations of that community.

Therefore, with this in mind, let us return to the potlatch. By forcing tribes to use all of their extra resources in the potlatch, the stability of the larger society and social order is maintained. This explains the benefit of larger and larger gifts, as well as the benefit of the destruction of the potlatch by its recipients.

According to this explanation of the potlatch, every society also has a need for a way of destroying its surplus. This destruction is often accomplished through waging war, which, in addition to other social benefits such as the reinforcement of group solidarity, effectively destroys any excess resources. Alternatively, conspicuous consumption by its members achieves this end. Conspicuous con-

sumption creates ever greater needs, further drains resources and creates an endless cycle of further want, which removes surplus capital from circulation.

Orthodox Judaism and the Potlatch

So what is the significance of this theory to twenty-first-century Orthodox Jewish communities? At this historical juncture, the strongest Jewish communities in North America are the Orthodox. They have the strongest social structure, identities and group cohesiveness. There are many factors to explain their strength. I would like to suggest that an additional factor is their effective destruction of surplus capital. Each community has its own way of destroying the surplus resources of its members, reflective of the behavioral norms of that particular community.

For the Modern Orthodox, the lifestyle required to be Orthodox is prohibitively expensive. There is no need to explore this topic, which has been extensively documented numerous times. However, in order to finance this “freely chosen” lifestyle, families are required to have two working parents at two high-paying positions. Even so, being upper middle class does not guarantee that there will be enough resources to finance their Modern Orthodox lifestyle. Modern Orthodox Jews are encouraged to have more children than they can afford, which effectively destroys any surplus capital. Young people are made acutely aware of the financial burdens associated with a Modern Orthodox lifestyle and are encouraged, explicitly or implicitly, to choose careers that will finance said lifestyle. In order to pursue such careers, the emerging adults spend their earlier twenties in school, and beginning their careers. The excess resource of time that is often the luxury of other Americans of similar social status is successfully consumed by the early marriage and the family formation necessitated by the Modern Orthodox lifestyle.

On the other hand, *Hareidi* or Yeshivish communities follow different social patterns, where college is not the automatic path after graduating high school. Rather, young men are strongly encouraged to spend their late teenage years and earlier twenties studying in yeshiva, while women are expected to marry and start raising a family shortly after finishing their formal high school and seminary education at age 19 or 20. Even after marriage, men are

encouraged to continue studying Torah full time until they can no longer afford to do so. Practically, it effectively destroys the surplus time that others their age in post-industrial America have.

As sociologists of religion have documented across most American religions, young adults in college and post-college is the most likely demographic to leave formal religion. By creating a lifestyle where the excess resources of young adults (time, money and flexibility) are practically and creatively wasted, the Ultra-Orthodox communities create and reassure greater stability.

This is not to say that the explicit or implicit purpose of kollel is to destroy the free time of its members or to reinforce the stability of the communities in this fashion. Rather, the preexisting system and beliefs serve to reinforce the stability of the community. Those communities with greater stability will outlast communities with lesser stability, if only because opportunities for attrition will be diminished and the threats that excess capital creates will be lessened.

It would be incorrect to state that the mechanisms described here are deliberate social engineering of the current or previous rabbinic or lay leadership to remove choices from the members and to destroy the excess capital of the laity.

Rather, these processes are unconscious to most members of the community, leadership and laity alike. Nonetheless, the benefits accrue incidentally. As mentioned earlier, all communities need techniques to deal with excess. Those who do not have these outlets will self-destruct. It is an almost natural process that societies and communities that have healthier methods for destroying any surplus resources will thrive while those without such methods will self-destruct.

The purpose of this essay is to identify the avenues for the consumption of excess capital within several contemporary Orthodox Jewish communities and explore how they serve to strengthen and reinforce those communities.

The destruction of resources may appear, on face value, to be counterintuitive. We generally think of abundance and prosperity as a sign of the strength and success of a community. Additionally, a lack of resources is generally seen as a crisis that must be addressed by the leadership of a community. However, as explained earlier, an

excess of resources, while beneficial to individual members of the community, is actually a threat to the overall stability of the community. Secondly, crises are important for reinforcing the identity of the community and unifying it against a threat, whether that threat is real or imagined.

Conclusion

To conclude, like the potlatch of the northeastern Pacific tribes and similar grand gifts within a gift economy, Orthodox Jewish communities have different ways of eliminating surplus resources, whether those resources are financial, chronological or intellectual. The destruction of their surplus resources serves an important role in maintaining the stability of the communities.

By identifying the places of destruction of resources by American Orthodox communities we can better understand these communities and the unconscious or unspoken dynamics within the communities. In general, the study of anthropology and sociology can raise important questions and help create useful tools for the self-awareness of American Orthodox Judaism and the phenomena of modern Orthodox Jewish life can be understood through the lens of important ideas from the social sciences. 