

Life Tip #4 – Pay Extra for Olive Oil
Haftarah Vay'era
Kings II 4:1-37

If you ever have the chance to drive through Israel, you will notice that olive trees are everywhere. Olive trees. These are the trees, low to the ground, with strong and bulky and stocky trunks, almost Shrek-like. They have wild and curly branches filled with dark-green leaves. The leaves are shiny, even oily, resembling the oil which the olives growing on the tree branches produce. The olive trees are all over Israel, and all over the Mediterranean world in general. If you go to Jerusalem, you can visit the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives—a mountain which is covered with olive trees. It is said that the Garden of Gethsemane is where Jesus was arrested by the Romans the night before his crucifixion. In the Garden of Gethsemane, you can see olive trees which are nine-hundred years old and are the oldest olive trees known to science.

Olives produce olive oil. If you've ever held a ripe olive oil in your hand, you know that it is an oily fruit. And so the ancients were able to produce olive oil without any modern technology; all they needed to do was remove the pits, grind the olives up, and press out the oil—hence the term “cold-pressed” olive oil. Archaeological evidence dates the production of olive oil in the Galilee to more than eight-thousand years ago.

In the ancient world, olive oil was easy to make, but it was not that easy. There is a reason that you have likely never made olive oil at home. It takes time, energy, and a lot of olives.

Olive oil was also not just food but a kind of all-purpose elixir. Homer referred to it as “liquid gold.” It was used to anoint kings and queens and emperors. In Ancient Greece, the olive wreath was used to crown Olympic victors and these same champions given olive oil as their prize.

Let's switch gears for a minute and talk about olive oil's evil twin—vegetable oil and its equivalents like corn oil, soybean oil, cottonseed oil, and rapeseed oil. These oils were largely re-invented for cooking purposes in the early twentieth-century. They had multiple uses, however; they also could be industrial purposes—as, say, insecticides or automobile engine fuel. Procter and Gamble developed cottonseed oil in 1911. Margarine was invented in 1901 by a German chemist. In the 1950s and 1960s, soybean oil became the most popular vegetable in the US after Henry Ford created a research lab for it in the thirties. It was used not just for eating but also for developing soybean plastics and soybean fuel.

When I was a child, I thought vegetable oil was healthy. After all, it had the word “vegetable” in it. As I got older, I thought soybean oil was healthy. After all, it had the word “soybean” in it. And for a long time, I thought canola oil was healthy. It had the word “canola” in it, after all.

You can imagine my shock when I learned, in my late twenties, that, in fact, there is nothing healthy or natural about these oils. In order to get the oil out of these sources, extensive processing and heavy factory machinery needs to be put to the task. To get oil from these foods, they need to be cooked at over five-hundred degrees, thrown into multiple stainless steel vats, deodorized, and subject to a petroleum-derived substance known as hexane.

There is, of course, a reason, perhaps an obvious reason, why it is vegetable or seed oil we find in our food nowadays rather than time-tested, fabled olive oil. The reason is that it's cheaper. A soybean is cheaper than an olive. A canola seed is cheaper than an olive. Now, a

soybean is not *that* much cheaper than an olive. Olives are themselves rather inexpensive. But on the scale of mass production, that difference in cost adds up tremendously. This is why, if you go out to a restaurant, they will almost always cook with vegetable or soybean or canola oil and not with olive oil. Because it increases the restaurant's profits, and nobody—except maybe for me—asks which oil they cook with. This is why, if you read the ingredients on packaged food you buy, the oil used will almost never be olive oil and will always be soybean or canola oil. Even Whole Foods and Trader Joe's often use canola oil in their products—because not enough people have caught on yet how terrible canola oil is for you, and Whole Foods and Trader Joe's are, at the end of the day, corporations interested in maximizing profits. Canola oil is cheaper, and it saves the company perhaps millions of dollars over time. But that cost has to get paid somewhere. It gets paid by your health.

What is particularly tragic is that olive oil is already pretty *inexpensive*. This is because olive oil, too, can be mass-produced. It does not need to be made by hand anymore, as it did in Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Greece. I looked it up. A bottle of 16 ounce olive oil will cost about five or six dollars. A bottle of 16 ounce canola oil will cost about half that—\$2.50. Olive oil is, indeed, twice the price, but five dollars still seems to me to be a pretty good deal to get a glass bottle of what Homer once called liquid gold. Olive oil also tastes better, looks better, and is infinitely better for your body.

Olive oil should not be as cheap as it is. It is only this cheap because of capitalism and mass industrialization. The ability to make olive oil on a massive scale brings the price down because, in the aggregate, less work needs to go into making it.

In 1928, the playwright Bertolt Brecht would premier his legendary work for the stage, *The Threepenny Opera*. This play was also made into an equally famous film in 1931, directed by G.W. Pabst. It premiered in Berlin, becoming a great success and playing over four-hundred times in the next two years. We cannot get too deep into the plot, but let's just say that *Threepenny Opera* is a vicious critique of capitalism. In *Threepenny Opera*, the rich hire people to pose as beggars and amputees to collect money on the street. This operation is led by Mr. Peachum, known as king of the beggars. Brecht's main point in this play was to show how capitalism is not just an economic system but a way of life. It is a way of life which infiltrates society from all sides. It does not only damage the externals of society, like our health and the environment, but it also injures our values and even our psyche. Capitalism has so flooded our society that it now appears ridiculous to anyone who takes a step back and looks. This is why Brecht shows, in *Threepenny Opera*, how even the beggars are employed by capitalist bosses. It is a ridiculous image.

The haftarah reading for this week comes from chapter four of Kings II. The book of Kings a far different book from Isaiah, which we read the last three weeks. Whereas Isaiah was more of a poem and a prophecy, the Book of Kings is essentially a history book. It tells the history of Ancient Israel from the time of the death of King David in 960 BCE all the way down to the Babylonian Exile in 586 CE. The Book of Kings is one of the many books in the Torah with a really badass title. If anyone ever asks you what book is that you're reading and you answer with, "I'm reading the Book of Kings," I promise, you're *going* to sound cool.

In this particular chapter from the second Book of Kings, we learn of a woman who finds herself in a bad situation. She had been the wife of the prophet Obadiah before he died, so let's call her Mrs. Obadiah. Mrs. Obadiah is in debt, serious debt. How do we know it's serious? Because her creditor has threatened to take her two children for himself as slaves if she does not pay him what she owes. We can only imagine that this is quite a lot of money which Mrs.

Obadiah owes if she could lose her two children in exchange for it. Anyway, in order to gather the money, she cries out to another prophet named Elisha, who was the student of the more famous prophet Elijah. Elisha asks her what possessions she has. She tells Elisha that all she has in her house is one jug of oil. She doesn't say "olive oil" specifically, but we can assume it's olive oil as that was the only oil that anyone used in the Middle East back then. Elisha comes up with an idea for Mrs. Obadiah. He tells her to begin collecting containers from her neighbors. Mrs. Obadiah collects a good amount of containers or jugs. She closes the door to her home with all of these jugs from her neighbors. And magically, she is able to fill all of these empty containers up with oil. Mrs. Obadiah is then able to make enough money by selling these jugs of oil to pay back her creditor. Her sons are saved from slavery.

Now, let's think about this for a moment. Whether you believe in miracles or not, the fact remains that Mrs. Obadiah was able to pay off her debt simply by selling off some jugs of oil. What does this tell us about olive oil in the ancient world? It tells us that it was *expensive*; it was *precious*. It was not five dollars a bottle like it is today—in fact, it was more like five-hundred dollars. But why was olive oil so much more expensive back then in comparison today? Because this was a time before industrialization. All olive oil was made by hand. And hence, to make a jar would have taken days or even weeks of labor. Today, because of industrialization, a jar of olive oil can be made within minutes.

Now, here you may be thinking: isn't this a good thing? Isn't it good that we can now buy olive oil for five dollars instead of five-hundred? Isn't it good that olive oil is no longer liquid gold but just liquid, in plentiful supply, available at all hours of the day for us to enjoy? Yes, I agree, it is good. Of course it is good. But that is what makes the situation of olive oil so tragic and so revealing. Even after we have figured out a way to surround ourselves with so much of this liquid gold that we could probably afford to take baths in it, we often forego the opportunity. Instead, we go for the cheaper option—we go for canola oil, because it is *a little bit* cheaper. It saves us a couple of dollars. We choose to consume oil which was originally designed to lubricate the engines of our cars rather than the oil which is suited to lubricate the veins of our bodies. Why? Because it saves us an relatively insignificant amount of money. The image of someone buying a bottle of soybean oil instead of olive oil is just as ridiculous as Brecht's image of beggars *being paid* to beg for money.

Unrestrained capitalism does not destroy our lives like you may have seen in movies. It does not make us die alone in a mansion clutching a snow globe and whispering "Rosebud." It does not cause us to wait in bread lines starving for food. As Brecht wanted to communicate, capitalism comes at us from all sides. It often wreaks its havoc in the most subtle and unexpected of ways which are all but invisible to us. Capitalism often means death by papercuts.

What I am trying to say is this: olive oil saved Mrs. Obadiah's life. And it could save yours, too, albeit for vastly different reasons.