

# The Cost of a Mitzvah

Category: Metzora, Vayikra

*What did Moses think of freeloaders?*

## One of Use

What word comes to mind when we think “terrorist”?

I’m not going to answer the question. But suffice it to say that for many of us, there was a time when it reminded us of the stereotype of a person from the Middle East.

However, as we’ve learned in recent years, attacks against innocent civilian targets, for political or religious (as opposed to criminal) purposes, do not always fit that stereotype. As a matter of fact, many do not.

I remember one unique story from ten years ago: In 2011 a 300-pound pipe bomb went off outside a Chabad center in California. Fortunately, no one was hurt and only a little damage was done—but understandably, many of us assumed at first that it was another stereotypical terror attack, with the attacker being a Middle Eastern Arab Muslim extremist and the targeted victims being Jewish.

But as it turned out, the “terrorist” was himself Jewish, not to mention a little crazy.

And besides shattering stereotypes, what’s also interesting is that the reason he was caught is because of the Hachnosas Orchim, the mitzvah of having guests, that was done by the religious Jewish community of Cleveland, where he was caught four days later.

This man, a homeless Jewish soul, had arrived in Cleveland asking for help, saying that he needed to get to New York for surgery. But after a few questions, the directors of the community’s guest hosting program concluded that the Jew was a bit strange and should not be put up in anyone’s private family home. Instead, they gave him a room at a local hotel.

The next morning, he was seen wandering around the Jewish community

neighborhood, where one community member recognized him from the “wanted” images put out by the L.A. police, and reported him to the Cleveland Heights Police Department.

Of course, a lot of people were deeply shocked to find out that he was Jewish. They didn’t want to believe that a Jew could do such a thing. But unfortunately, it wasn’t the first time in Jewish history that troublemakers were found within our own ranks.

## Freeloaders

We’re now a few days before Pesach, on which we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt. When the Jewish Nation left Egypt, they camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for close to one year. While there, they received the Torah, committed the Sin of the Golden Calf, built the Mishkan and finally began moving in the direction of the Holy Land.

But then, the problems suddenly started.

In the Torah portion of Behaalos’cha, we read that the “asafsuf,” a word that means “rabble” or “mob” but which refers, according to most commentators, to non-Jews who had joined the Jews on their journey, came along and complained, “Who will feed us meat?” (Bamidbar 11:4) They wanted meat!

Rashi asks a question that almost asks itself: “Did they not have meat?...” When they left Egypt, they brought plenty of sheep and cattle—and hence plenty of beef and steak. So perhaps it means that they actually had run out of sheep and cattle to slaughter and eat, leaving them with no meat? Rashi continues and says, “And if you say they ate it all, [you cannot say that because] at their entry to the Land does it not state, ‘And the sons of Reuven had great flocks’? Rather, they were seeking to complain.”

What does that mean? What did they really want? The answer is found immediately in the next verse: “We remember the fish that we ate for free in Egypt.”

It wasn’t that they didn’t have meat in the desert, but rather, that it had gone up in price. In other words, they now wanted to get meat free, without having to pay

anything for it, just like they had gotten the Manna for free. That's just human nature—when you get something for free, you get used to the belief that you're owed that thing, and you demand more and more. Why use up the meat they had? They wanted more, and free of cost.

But this didn't find favor in Moshe's eyes. Moshe argued before G-d that people who want stuff for free, no matter how much you give them, it's never enough for them. Ultimately, however, G-d did indeed give them meat for free—and the final results of that were not good.

From that episode we can learn that Judaism doesn't believe in handouts. As a matter of fact, that's what it also means when the verse says, "Which we ate in Egypt for free"—in Egypt, in a world that worships idols, you can eat for free.

But everything connected to Judaism, to all things holy and spiritual, has a price, and one must pay for those things.

The Rebbe explains that we find this belief even with the first Jew of history:

## **Paying Full Price**

When Avraham Avinu asked to bury his wife Sarah, he turned to the Sons of Chais, the local tribesmen, and asked to purchase the Meoras Hamachpeilah, the famous Double Cave where the Patriarchs are buried to this day in modern-day Chevron.

The Bnei Chais at first offered Avraham the cave for free. They said to him that it would be an honor for them if he were to use it to bury his wife. But Avraham insisted that he wanted to pay the full price.

Again, Efron, the leader of the Chittim, offered him the cave for free. But still, Avraham didn't want to take a handout. Avraham didn't even want to take it for a low price. Instead, he insisted that he would pay the full worth of the cave (Rashi 23:6), and indeed, he did pay the full price.

A similar story happened with King David.

King David was the one who conquered Jerusalem. He's the one who turned Jerusalem into the capital city of the Jewish Nation. Before him, the Yevusim were

the occupants of Jerusalem.

But even after King David had conquered the city and had settled in the part of the city that today is known as Ir David, the City of David, he didn't expel the Yevusim from Jerusalem. Rather, they submitted to King David and continued living there. They had their houses and field and vineyards, and they paid taxes to King David.

Now Mt. Moria, which later became the mountain upon which was built the Beis Hamikdash, where today the Kotel is located, belonged to Aravna, the former King of the Yevusim. King David had not expelled him from the area, and he, too, paid a tax to him.

So when the Navi Gad came to King David and said that G-d now wanted him to build an altar in the barn of Aravna the Yevusi, King David went up to the barn, and Aravna came out to greet him and asked him: "Why has my master the king come to his servant?"

"And David said, 'To buy from you the barn to build an altar unto G-d... And Aravna said to David, 'Take, and let my master the king do as is fitting in his eyes...' and the king said to Aravna, 'No, for I shall surely buy it from you at its price, and I shall not bring up to G-d burnt offerings for free.' And David purchased the barn." (Shmuel II:24:21-24, see Radak there.)

## **The Explanation**

The Rebbe says that even though that Mt. Moria belonged to King David because he had conquered it, "Still, when it came to building the altar, he didn't rely on conquest and not even on the fact that Aravna would give it to him. Rather, it would be his acquisition by full price. And the reason for this, said King David, was that 'I will not take as a gift that which belongs to you for G-d, and the burnt offering shall go up for free.'" (Likutei Sichos Vol. X, pg. 62.)

The Rebbe mentions that the Arizal would take pains to not do any mitzvah for free. Not only that, but he wouldn't even compromise on the price. Rather, the first price he was given, he would pay right away. And that was all because in holiness, nothing is for free. (See Sichos Kodesh 5734, Vol. II pg. 50.)

The Rebbe adds and quotes from the Zohar, which says that mitzvos are not fulfilled for free—because then you do not succeed in bringing down the “spirit of the holy” into the mitzvah because “free” is the way things are on “the other side,” in Egypt. Rather, one must strive to do the mitzvah at full price.

What’s important when it comes to mitzvos is effort—how much a person tries to keep the mitzvah, how much physical and spiritual effort he or she invests in it. G-d doesn’t just value the actual doing of the mitzvah, but more than that—the sweat invested in the mitzvah. And as the Rebbe always said, the Torah brings healing to the world—and on healing, it is said, healing that you get for nothing is worth nothing.

And indeed, we see that this philosophy is very much true—anything having to do with mitzvos, as a general rule, costs. Kosher meat? More expensive. Shmurah matzah? Astronomical. Every Passover need? Five times the price. And we didn’t even get to Jewish education, schools, camps... the list never ends.

Now as Jews, we love to go shopping for bargains. Don’t mean to invoke stereotypes, but we do tend to like bargaining and haggling over prices to get ourselves good deals, and then to boast about it. This is probably a good thing.

However, when it comes to mitzvos, don’t look for free meals—because anything holy costs.