

acharon shel pesach: What You See is Not What You Get

Sometimes, it's difficult for children to get over their hard feelings about their parents. A bit of perspective is in order.

The Miser

It's sometimes hard for people to say Yizkor for their parents. For example, people are angry at their parents even after they have passed. One may be angry at his father for not acting nicely—for not wanting to help him with money when he needed it. Or one may be angry at his mother for spoiling his brother more than him—for always feeling like a second-class citizen. Such people harbor these grudges and resentments that give them no peace. And when Yizkor or Kaddish time rolls around, these feelings rise to the surface.

I'd like to offer a little story today that may help us a little in looking at such feelings with the proper perspective.

About 200 years ago, in the city of Berditchev, the town millionaire went to his eternal rest. This man was notorious for being a miser of the worst sort. The townsfolk all hated him—and they were delighted to hear that the Chevra Kadisha, the Jewish burial society (every Jewish town had one), was demanding a large sum of money from his children before they undertook his burial.

However, his children did not want to pay the heavy toll that was imposed upon them, saying, “It’s not our fault!” They said that they were not obligated to pay for the results of the deceased’s behavior.

The dispute reached the town rabbi, the legendary Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok summoned the members of the Chevra Kadisha to clarify the matter. After hearing just who the deceased was, the rabbi instructed them: “Don’t demand a lot of money for the burial.” The rabbi even let it be known that he would participate in the funeral! And so, when the villagers saw their own rabbi marching behind the casket, they stopped working, stepped out of their little shops and went forth to render last honors to the deceased.

After the funeral, the leaders of the town approached the rabbi and asked him why he compromised his values. After all, this departed rich man was a known miser and certainly didn’t deserve any honor!

But Rabbi Levi Yitzchok explained, “I participated in his funeral in the merit of the three court cases (Din Torahs) that he brought before me, from which I discerned his true character.”

The First Case

“The first dispute happened many years ago,” the rabbi continued, “when a merchant came to town with a large sum of cash in hand.” The money had been entrusted to this merchant by other merchants for the purpose of making bids on merchandise. When the merchant had finished making his purchases, it came time to pay—and it was then that he

realized that he had lost his wallet.

In great shock and despair, the merchant fainted. A doctor succeeded in reviving him, but as soon as the merchant remembered where he was and why, he lost consciousness again, and it was virtually impossible to revive him. "If we don't find the money," said the doctor, "his life will be in danger."

Suddenly, as everyone stood around at a loss, the now-departed rich man appeared and announced that he had found the missing wallet. He extended the missing sum of cash to the merchant who had now woken up from his faint after the information had penetrated his mind.

Sometime quite later, a man arrived at the rich man's house. The man identified himself as the thief who had stolen the merchant's money.

"I was moved by the great act you did," said the thief. "I want to atone for my actions by giving you the money I have to replace the money you gave the merchant."

But the rich man refused to accept the money. "Saving a Jewish soul was a great merit for me," he said. "I will not give up the mitzvah I did."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok concluded the first story and said, "When these two could not reach an agreement, they turned to me, and I ruled in favor of the rich man." In other words, the Jew was not obligated to accept the money from the thief.

The Second Case

“The second case occurred some time after this,” continued Rabbi Levi Yitzchok. There had been a villager having difficulty supporting his household. As a last resort, he decided to head out to another village to find a source of income. His wife was afraid that leaving home would only make matters worse, leaving her and their children without a penny, so she didn’t agree to her husband’s journey. But the husband was determined to set out on the road.

Suddenly an idea popped into his head. “I just got a job traveling for this rich man. Go to his office each week,” the man said to his wife, “and ask him for my salary for the work that I am doing by going on this trip.”

The woman trusted her husband, and so, the week after he left, she showed up at the rich man’s office and asked the bookkeeper for the promised salary. The bookkeeper, obviously, didn’t know what salary she was talking about. Unable to convince her that she was making a mistake, he called his boss, the rich man, to help him get rid of this strange lady.

When the rich man heard the lady’s claims, he read between the lines what had really happened. Out of desperation, the husband had concocted a clever scheme. He told his bookkeeper that he had “forgotten” to tell him but that he should pay her husband’s “salary” every week.

In the meantime, the husband actually did quite well in finding business in the next town over. Having made some money, he came back home to his wife and children— and was surprised to

find an orderly house lacking nothing. When he asked how they managed until now, his wife said that she simply collected his salary from the rich man every week.

Now, the husband, who knew the truth that he and the rich man had no business relationship, was amazed by the good heart of the rich man. He ran to the rich man to pay back the money—but the rich man refused to accept it.

“I am not prepared to sell a mitzvah that I merited fair and square,” said the rich man, establishing his position.

“Both of them came to me,” concluded Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, “and I again ruled in the rich man’s favor.”

The Third Case

The third court case occurred in the wake of a loan that a town merchant had requested from the rich man. This merchant had lost a lot of his money and needed to borrow. When the rich man asked who would be the loan’s guarantor, the merchant said, “G-d.” The rich man said, “Okay - G-d is a great guarantor,” and gave him the loan.

When payment time came, however, the merchant still did not have the money. Only one year later was he able to come back to the rich man with the full sum of cash in hand. But to his surprise, the rich man refused to accept the money, saying that G-d, the guarantor of the loan, had already paid him back.

Still, the merchant didn’t want a handout—he wanted to pay his debt.

“When the rich man refused to budge, both of them came to me, and again, I ruled in the rich man’s favor,” concluded Rabbi Levi Yitzchok.

Judge and be Judged

The lesson of all these stories, the thread that connects them all, is: always judge a person favorably. The proof is that even a person who seems like the worst miser to everyone can really be an exceptional philanthropist. As a matter of fact, it was this man’s humility and insistence on giving secretly that hid who he really was from everyone—to the point that even his children didn’t know.

Ultimately, what we learn from this story is that it’s impossible to judge others—and certainly not parents. We can never know why they acted in the ways that they did. But one thing we know for sure—it is the G-d-given nature of every parent to want the best for their children. So while it may be true that they didn’t do the right thing, they did it with good intentions. Thus, when we judge them favorably, we have a better chance that when the day comes, our children will judge us favorably too.