

Don't Collect Compensation for Saving Lives

Category: Tazria, Vayikra

What happens when Jews refuse to take payment for favors?

A Jew's Priorities

A Jew named Meir Sokachevsky emigrated to Mexico from Poland around the year 1920. Like many other Jews of that day and age, he had tried to get into the United States but didn't succeed in getting a visa, and so ended up moving to Mexico.

Once in Mexico, good fortune shone upon him, and he formed excellent relationships with the highest levels of its government, including the President of Mexico himself.

Mr. Sokachevsky was the first person to open a gun store in Mexico. In the 1930s, he succeeded in getting several bulletproof vests, which he gave to the President and the head of his security detail as a gift.

Several weeks later, as the President was exiting the Parliament building, someone tried to shoot him, and his life was saved because of the vest he was wearing.

The very next day, "El Presidente" informed his advisors that he wanted to see "the Russian," as Mr. Sokachevsky was called (he was from Poland, but in Mexico that's what everyone called him). So Mr. Sokachevsky came immediately, and the President thanked him for saving his life.

Then the President said that he wanted to reward him for it.

The President asked Meir to name any request and he would fulfill it. Meir said that he needed time to think about it and discuss it with his family, and then get back to the President. So Mr. Sokachevsky went home and told his family exactly what the President had said.

Now Meir had three children—two sons and a daughter. The first-born, a son, suggested that he ask the President for three gas stations, to ensure that each one of the kids will always have a good and steady income.

During that time, however, a group of Jewish refugees from Europe arrived at the Mexican port of Puerto Vallarta. They tried to get into Mexico but they didn't have visas, and they stayed stuck in the port city, supporting themselves with temporary work.

The primary industry of Puerto Vallarta at the time was agriculture, and Jews arriving from the big cities of Poland were not accustomed to any such related work and they were in a difficult situation. So Meir Sokachevsky came back to the President and told him: "I don't want you to give me anything for what I did for you. I only ask one thing from you: to give visas to each of those 200 Jews stuck at the shore and let them into Mexico."

The President fulfilled Mr. Sokachevsky's request, and those Jews were accepted as new citizens of Mexico. His grandson who told this story would always add with a smile: "It's too bad that he didn't also ask for a few gas stations too..."

The Purim Analogy

This sort of behavior, my friends, this belief in using favors from influential people to help other Jews, is something with deep roots in Jewish history.

The first such example that comes to mind is from the Megillah that we read on Purim.

In that Purim story, we read about how Mordechai overheard Bigsan and Seresh, two guards at the royal palace, plotting to assassinate King Achashverosh. So Mordechai quickly and secretly informs Queen Esther, Queen Esther informs the king, an investigation is opened and it is indeed discovered that they did in fact want to kill the king. And so both of them are hung.

But the king did not ask Mordechai what kind of reward he wanted. Mordechai didn't even ask the king for any reward—he didn't even ask Esther to ask the king for a favor for him.

So years passed, and later, when Haman came out with his decree "to eradicate,

kill and destroy” all the Jews, and the entire Jewish Nation fasted and prayed to G-d to save them, then the Megillah tells us that “on that night, the king’s sleep was disturbed.” As a result, the king commanded that the official book of royal chronicles be read to him.

But in the chronicles, the servant reading the pages came across an entry describing how Mordechai had saved the king’s life. So then, King Achashverosh asked the big question: “What was done to Mordechai for this? And the king’s lads said, ‘Nothing was done for him.’”

At that very moment, Haman himself walked in, and the entire wheel of fortune began to turn against him—the king sent Haman to parade Mordechai on the king’s own royal horse through the streets of the city, and that’s where Haman’s downfall and the Jewish Nation’s rescue began. And it was all because of Mordechai not asking for a reward for having saved the king’s life.

Avraham & Lot

There is a similar story with Avraham Avinu.

Avraham had a nephew named Lot, whom you may have heard of. At a certain point, Lot decided to stop living with his uncle Avraham and go live in Sodom, which was the Gotham City of the day.

So one fine day some time later, Avraham gets notified that there had been a battle over the city of Sodom, and that his nephew Lot had been taken captive by the conquering armies. So Avraham immediately gathered up his warriors—in today’s terms, you’d say he rounded up a posse—and headed out to set Lot free, and he succeeded, along with all the other prisoners from Sodom as well as all the spoils that had been seized from Sodom.

When Avraham came back from the front lines of battle, the King of Sodom came out to greet him and asked him the following: “Give me the souls, and the spoils take for yourself”—give me the prisoners, and all the goods that you brought back, you can have.

But what was Avraham’s reaction? He took a vow, saying, “From a thread to a shoelace, I will take nothing from all that is yours” (Bereishis 14:23). Avraham did

not want to take any financial compensation for saving all those lives.

Naaman's Miraculous Recovery

That brings us to this week's Torah portion, Tazria.

In the Haftarah for Tazria, we are told about a man named Naaman, who was the general of the Aramean army, the forerunner of today's Syria. In those days, the army of Aram was the mightiest military in the Middle East, and the Jewish Nation suffered terribly from them.

At that time, General Naaman came down with Tzaraas, or leprosy (known today as Hansen's disease). In his household he had a Jewish maid who had been taken captive from the Holy Land. This young maiden told "Mrs. Naaman" that "there is a prophet in Israel," and that if Naaman would go see him, he would heal him of his leprosy.

Naaman indeed came to the Holy Land. He first visited the king and then came to the prophet Elisha—who didn't even want to receive him, but sent him a message that he should immerse himself in the waters of the Jordan River seven times and thus be healed of his leprosy.

At first, Naaman was insulted that the prophet didn't even want to see him, but after being pressured by his servants, he agreed to do what the prophet said.

So Naaman went and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times—and indeed, a miracle happened and his skin reverted to its healthy state, and as healthy as the skin of a little child. So Naaman then went back to the Prophet Elisha, who this time accepted him. Naaman said to him, "Behold, I now know that there is no G-d in all the land but in Israel."

He then immediately pressed Elisha: "And now, please take a blessing from your servant"—he wanted to give Elisha a present for having healed him from leprosy.

But the Prophet Elisha's reaction was similar to that of Avraham Avinu. Elisha took an oath and said, "'As G-d Lives... I shall not take'... and he pressed him to accept, and he refused." In other words, Elisha would not in any way agree to take payment or reward for the miracle he had done. So Naaman turned to him and said that he would no longer worship idols and would believe only in G-d, the

G-d of Israel.

One might say that if Elisha would have accepted Naaman's present, Naaman would have felt that he had paid the prophet for his miracle—and that now he owed no one anything. It was specifically because Elisha was not ready to accept any payment for the miracle that caused Naaman to feel spiritually obligated to change his ways and come to believe in the G-d of Israel.

In Conclusion

Before we conclude, it's important to clarify one matter: When is it appropriate to accept a gift and when is it not?

In some cases it's straightforward. For example, someone whose job it is to save lives, like a doctor, certainly can't be expected to work for free. But when an unusual event occurs to a person and he's thrust into a situation for which he's totally unprepared and feels that he's been made a messenger of G-d almost against his will—in such situations one must remember that it's inappropriate to interpret that merit as something that gives him or her the right to charge money for it. It's just better to hold onto that merit than to take a material reward—and on that, the Prophet (Koheles 11:1) said, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for in the multitude of days you shall find it."