

Ohr Somayach Light Lines

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Light Insight

On Being A Mensch

“**M**ensch” is one of those un-translatable Yiddish words which define what it means to be Jewish.

A few years ago, an El Al flight to London was carrying a young child in need of an urgent and critical operation. Apart from the child’s medical problem, there was another problem — money. The parents had barely enough to cover the cost of the flight to London which involved the purchase of a whole row of seats to accommodate the stricken child and his medical support systems.

During the flight, a religious Jew who was traveling in first class came to the back of the plane to pray with a *minyan*. On his way back to his seat, he went over to the father of the child and asked how the child was doing. In the course of the conversation, the father mentioned that he had no idea how he was going to be able to cover the cost of the operation. He was already way over

his head in debt with the medical expenses that he had already incurred. He would need nothing short of a small miracle.

Without further ado, the man walked back to the first class cabin, pulled out his hat and proceeded to tour the aisles of the first-class cabin collecting for the operation. In approximately ten minutes his hat contained checks to the value of some \$100,000 — sufficient for both the operation and the flights and all the medical expenses to date.

If Jews excel at anything, it’s *tzedaka*. Charity.

Actually, “charity” is not the correct word. Rabbi Uziel Milevsky, obm, who was one of Ohr Somayach’s great teachers, used to say that national characteristics are evidenced in the language of that nation. In English, we say “my duty calls.” The equivalent expression in Hebrew would be — “I need to acquit myself of my obligation.” The Jew doesn’t see his duty as something that “calls” to him, something external, which he elects to

do out of a higher moral sense. Rather he sees the very fact of his existence as obligating him — “I exist, therefore I am obligated.”

So too, there is no separate word in Hebrew for charity. What the rest of the world calls charity, the Jew calls *tzedaka* — “righteousness.” It’s what’s right — what has to be — no more and no less. It’s not something that I deserve a medal for. It’s not a “calling.” It is a basic qualification of being human.

“You shall be glad with all the goodness that your G-d has given you and your household — you and the levite and the convert who is in your midst.”

Sometimes it seems as if selfishness has become a religion. And ironically, the more proficient we become at being takers, the less it makes us happy.

The words of this week’s Torah reading come to remind us that we will only “be glad with all the goodness” that G-d has given us if we define our happiness in terms of being able to provide for the poor and the helpless.

That’s what it means “to be a *mensch*.”

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

Giving people the benefit of the doubt

A moment of thought can diffuse an otherwise contentious situation. As an example of this, the following story...

Takes the Cake

It was my husband's birthday, and I wanted to have a decorated birthday cake for our dinner. So I went to our local Jewish business phone book and looked up the number of my favorite bakery. I gave the order and spelled the name to appear on the cake, and the clerk asked me for a credit card number before she would complete the order. That was understandable, as the bakery didn't want to be caught with a cake that couldn't be sold in case

I never came to pick it up.

A few hours later I arrived to pick up my cake, but I was told that they had no record of my order. I was very upset, as it was only a short time until dinner. But they were very kind to quickly decorate another cake for me. I was about to pay when I remembered that I had already given my credit card number by phone, and I wanted to make sure that the credit slip hadn't been processed. The owner told me that they never take credit card numbers by phone.

Now I was really shaken, wondering who had been in the bakery who now knew my card number and was probably using it all over town. The owner asked me, "Are you sure you gave your order to Abe's Bakery?"

"Abe's Bakery? I didn't call Abe's Bakery! I called Sam's Bakery!" I paid for the cake and hotfooted it over to Sam's, and my husband had two birthday cakes that year!

Response Line

Re: Liebermania

We received the following description of the first "Liebermania" Shabbat, reported by an attendee:

"The sense of surrealism continued and the euphoria was tangible. Senator Lieberman, Hadassah and their daughter Hani were accompanied to shul (synagogue) by 15 to 20 secret service agents. Some walked beside; most trailed slowly behind in a SUV and one of those black vans with all the techno equipment. The press was there to film him walking-in. The shul gave out a statement letter to the reporters welcoming them to observe the service, but asking that no cameras, laptops, pens, notepads, etc. be used inside the shul; and that the media not attempt to interview service-goers

on Shabbat. About five secret service agents went into shul; by and large, they blended in very well. There was a female agent to protect Hadassah Lieberman, and word is that Hani gave her an excellent tutorial on the services.

Senator Lieberman got an *aliyah* (i.e., he was called up to read from the Torah) after which the shul burst into "*siman tov u'mazel tov*" (a song of congratulations). After Joe's *aliyah*, the *gabbai* said a *misheberach* (blessing) for Al Gore.

After the Torah reading, the Rabbi gave a short address on "*Hilchot* Vice President." The major points were that security demands might in the future require a metal detector. The walk through kind would not be allowable, but the agent-held devices would not violate Shabbat for the person being checked. Press interviews should

not be given on Shabbat.

After services, *kiddush* was held. The secret service no doubt has even greater appreciation for Orthodox Judaism after seeing that eleven am shots of single malt scotch are part of the observance. (smile) *L'chaim's* (toasts) included: "Next year in the White House!" Hadassah said they have not yet thought about whether they would, if elected, build a *sukkah* at the Naval Observatory, which is the Vice President's home.

The Rabbi's *drasha* (talk) was about a verse in that week's Torah portion, *Va'etchanan*, that states that following G-d's commandments will give one wisdom which will be respected by the other nations of the world. The rabbi said that Senator Lieberman is an embodiment of that verse. Following services, the secret service quickly escorted Joe out of shul and walked him home.