

**THE SERVICE OF GOD,
STORIES ABOUT THE SERVICE OF GOD,
AND A STORY ABOUT STORIES ABOUT THE SERVICE OF GOD**

Deuteronomy 24:19-22: When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow – in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick over it again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. Always remember that you were a slave in the Land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

Mishnah Avot 1:3: Antigonos of Sokho received the tradition from Shimon the Just. This was a favorite teaching of his: Do not be like servants who serve their master with the intention of receiving a reward [peras]; be rather like servants who serve their master with the intention of not receiving a reward, and let reverence for heaven be upon you.

Maimonides, Commentary on Mishnah Avot 1:3: “Peras”: This is the word for the reward that one grants another not because he is indebted to him, but rather as an act of grace and goodness. For example, one might say to his servant or to his young child, or to his wife: “do the following, and I will give you a dinar or two dinarii.” This is the difference between “peras” and “sakhar”; for “sakhar” is that which pays off a debt. The pietist [i.e. Antigonos] expressed this thought: do not serve God with the intention that God will be good to you, or give you grace, for then you would find yourselves pursuing the reward and working for its sake; rather, serve God as do servants who pursue neither grace nor goodness, i.e. be as servants who serve out of love, as I have already explained in [the commentary on] the tenth chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin.

Maimonides, Commentary on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1: Now my diligent reader should understand the following analogy and then attend to my words on this entire subject. Let us assume that a young child has been brought to a tutor so that the latter will teach him Torah. This is a great good for the child, through which he will achieve wholeness and fulfillment. However, because of his young age and defective knowledge, he is incapable of understanding its value, nor the kind of fulfillment it would bring him. So of necessity, his tutor (who does understand learning’s value) must encourage him in his learning by means of that which is dear to him because of his young age. He will say to him, “Learn this, and I will give you nuts or figs, or a lump of sugar.” Then the child will make efforts at learning not for the sake of the learning, since he cannot understand its value, but rather in order to get the food. And eating that food is more valuable to him than the learning, and certainly more enjoyable. Because of this, he considers the learning to be work and drudgery that he endures in order to achieve by its means the objective that is most dear to him, namely the nut or the sugar. When he gets older, and his intelligence gets more solid, and he no longer values that which he valued in the past, but rather other things, he will now be enticed with the things that are now dear to him. His tutor will say

to him, "Learn this, and I will get for you beautiful sandals or a particular cloak." Then, too, he will make efforts not for learning itself, but rather for the clothing, for that is more dear to him than the learning; indeed, it is the objective for which the learning is a means. When his intelligence has filled out even more, and these things also become less important, he will be enticed with more valuable things. His tutor will say to him, "Learn this Parashah or this chapter, and I will give you a dinar or two dinarii." Then, too, he will make efforts only in order to receive that money. For he will honor receipt of the money more than the learning, since the learning will be merely a means to the end of receiving the promised money. When he acquires yet more understanding and even this comes to have trivial worth to him, he will be enticed with something even more important. They will say to him, "Learn this so that you can become a master and a judge; people will honor you, they will stand up in your presence, your word will be obeyed, and you will acquire fame that will last your lifetime and beyond, just like this one and that one. Then he will make efforts at study in order to achieve that station, and his objective will be that people should honor him, exalt him, and praise him.

But all of this is vulgar, and we have recourse to it only because people are generally light-headed, and they consider the objective of learning to be something external to the learning. They say, "why would I study all of this were it not for what it will get me?" This is what the Sages called "not for its intended purposes"; that is, such a person fulfills mitzvot, and expends effort studying Torah not for the end of doing those very things, but rather for some other aim. Our Sages warned us about this, and said, "do not make Torah an ornament for self-aggrandizement, nor a means for some other end [literally: 'a spade to dig with']".....for the objective of discovering truth is knowledge of truth itself. And since the mitzvot are truth, it follows that the objective in fulfilling them is the fulfillment itself.

This was the high degree reached by Father Abraham, who served out of love; it is incumbent on us to strive to reach that level. But the Sages of blessed memory knew that this is exceedingly difficult, and not all persons can achieve it, and that even some who achieve it don't realize at first that this is the true path. They knew that human nature is such that a person rarely does anything but for the purpose of achieving some external good or avoiding some external evil, and the absence of such purpose renders the action meaningless in that person's eyes. If so, it is very difficult to train someone in the ways of Torah by saying "do this" or "don't do that" without adding the fear of God's punishment or the hope for God's grace, for not all people see the truth and thus achieve Abraham's station. Thus the masses were permitted to retain their point of view and to do good in the hope of grace and to avoid evil out of fear of punishment. Indeed, we encourage them in these very terms, and thus corroborate these views, until such time as a person sees the truth and the path of true fulfillment, just as we do with children as per the example I have given above. Moreover, they condemned Antigonos of Sokho for publicizing his views among the masses, and they said of him, "Wise men! Be cautious in your pronouncements!" And the masses do not lose *all* value in fulfilling mitzvot out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. They are, however, incomplete.

Talmud, Kiddushin 31a: Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: They asked Rabbi Eliezer, "How far does the obligation to honor father and mother extend?" He said to them, "Go see what a certain pagan named Dama ben Netinah did for his father in Ashkelon. The Sages sought to purchase from him stones for the priestly Ephod for a price of 60,000 silver pieces [Rav Kahana relates that it was 80,000]. Now the key [to the strongbox] was under his father's head [as he slept], and he did not trouble him [by waking him up]. The next year, the Holy and Blessed One gave him his reward, in that a red cow was born into his herd. The Sages of Israel came to him, and he said to them, 'I am well aware that you would pay me any price in the world that I would ask; but I merely ask for that which I forfeited by honoring my father'."

Talmud, Makkot 24a: "...and in his heart acknowledges the truth" [Psalms 15: 2] – this is exemplified by Rav Safra.

Rashi, Makkot 24a, s.v. "Rav Safra": This is found in the She'iltot of Rav Ahai [She'ilta 36 – Parashat Vayyehi], and this is the story: Rav Safra had some merchandise to sell, and a certain man came to him at the time that he was reciting the Shema. He said to him, "sell me this object for such and such amount of money", but Rav Safra did not answer him since he was reciting the Shema. The purchaser was under the impression that he was refusing to sell it at the offered price, and he thus raised the offer: he said, "sell it to me at this [higher] price." When Rav Safra finished reciting the Shema, he said to him, "Take the merchandise for the originally offered price, for when you made the offer, I had in mind to sell it to you at that price."

LIVES; Great Expectations (New York Times Magazine, 6/17/01)

By Roxana Robinson

One Friday, my husband and I were heading uptown for dinner. We hailed a cab, and I slid inside. On the seat was a small black rectangle that looked like a wallet, though I couldn't believe it was. What you actually find in cabs are old newspapers and single gloves, no matter what they first look like. I picked it up: it was a wallet, smooth black leather worn by use. It was packed, dense, loaded with someone else's life, and it was in my hands.

"Look," I said to my husband, "someone's wallet." It felt incalculably intimate, valuable.

"Give it to the driver," my husband said, but I disagreed.

"He might just take the money and throw the wallet away," I said responsibly. "I'll call the owner."

I opened the wallet with an illicit thrill. It was, of course, unacceptable to pry, but I had to find the owner. From the first credit card, I discovered his last name was Harada. From a photo ID, I learned that he was Asian, in his late 20's, with narrow dark eyes and a smooth, impassive face. There were school portraits of Asian children: a girl about 5 in a red sweater, smiling, an older boy in a blue blazer, serious. There was an image of a meditative Buddha. One ID was from Canada, but now Mr. Harada seemed to be here: he had several American credit cards and a frail yellow withdrawal slip from a nearby bank machine. But there was no address or phone number.

By now I loved Mr. Harada. I loved the brave story that I had imagined of immigration and success, his hardworking, camera-shy parents and his hopeful, shiny-eyed siblings. His religious commitment, his industry, his ambition. But mainly I loved him because I was going to do something wonderful for him.

At the restaurant, I called information, giving his first and last names. They gave me the number, and I punched it in.

A man answered. "Hello?"

"Is this Mr. Harada?"

"Yes," he said.

"I found your wallet in a taxi," I announced.

"Oh, good," Mr. Harada said calmly. "Thank you."

I waited a moment. Surely he had something more to say. But he didn't.

"I'm at a restaurant uptown if you'd like to come and get it," I continued. I thought he would leap at this -- I had his whole life in my possession -- but he said nothing.

"Or you could pick it up tomorrow," I went on doubtfully. "We're leaving for the weekend, but I could give it to the doorman."

There was a pause. Then Mr. Harada said precisely, "I will pick it up tomorrow."

Perplexed, I gave him our address. Didn't he worry that I might forget or turn greedy? Why was he sure it would be there tomorrow? In an unknown lobby, with strange doormen changing shifts? And why wasn't he more amazed that I had called?

"I went into a deli," Mr. Harada explained. "I reached in my pocket and the wallet was gone."

"Oh?" I said hopefully. Maybe now we would talk about how wonderful it all was.

"I must have left it in the cab," he finished.

Why wasn't he enthusiastic? Grateful? Didn't he know how fortunate he was? But he said nothing more, and I gave him our phone number, disappointed.

During dinner, I forgave Mr. Harada. It had all been too sudden. Tomorrow he would leave a grateful note with the doorman or a heartfelt message on our machine. The next morning, I spread the wallet flat and slid it into a heavy envelope. I wrote "Harada" on it and gave it to the doorman. Over the weekend, I checked our messages to see if Mr. Harada had called. He hadn't. I wondered if he had lost our address. Perhaps he was tearing his place apart, trying to find it.

When I returned Sunday, I asked the doorman about the envelope. Had Mr. Harada picked it up? Oh, yes, Saturday morning. Had he left a note? The doorman checked: no.

All day Monday, nothing from Mr. Harada. At first, I was disappointed, but by evening I felt foolish. Why had I expected a deluge of gratitude? I had felt so noble, but in fact I hadn't been noble at all, only responsible. My entire effort had cost exactly 25 cents. Why had I expected to be treated like a hero? Besides, Mr. Harada was from another culture, one I didn't know. Perhaps where he came from praise for normal behavior would be considered embarrassing. And on reflection, I thought it should be: I was embarrassed by my own expectations. In any case, the whole thing was over.

On Tuesday afternoon, the doorman handed me a heavy, ungainly package: "This came for you." Upstairs, I unwrapped a ceramic pot holding a great white phalaenopsis orchid. Two tall, graceful arching arms were hung with clusters of fragile white blossoms, pure and perfect. In each luminous heart was a delicate tracery of purple. With the orchid was a card: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I love New York."

Ner Yisrael (Rabbi Israel of Rizhin), Part III, "Prayer", pg. 175: Our Master, may his merit protect us, once spoke on the subject of "vain talk before the morning prayers", and he told this story:

"A certain Hasid used to make a handsome living by going to a once-a-year market where merchandise was bought and sold. His merchandise consisted of coats that provided warmth and protected against the freezing cold. One year, he traveled, as was his wont, to the market, bringing with him a very large inventory of merchandise. But when winter arrived, the cold was not nearly as gripping, and he remained with his entire inventory. There was barely a penny of change in his pocket, and although his household cried for food, there was none. One morning, before the prayers, the local squire came to him and offered to buy his entire stock. But the Hasid told him, 'I don't conduct business before the morning prayers'."

Our Master, may his merit protect us, then concluded: "Everyone always asks me: 'what was the end of the story?' And I tell you, 'This *is* the end of the story'. That is, it is about how far the faithfulness of a simple Hasid extends."

