

THE GAME PLAN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Please say that you are my sister, so that on your account I will be treated well, and my soul shall live because of you.

Be'er Yosef: Rashi tells us what Avrohom had in mind when he sought to be "treated well." He anticipated that the Egyptians would shower him with all sorts of lavish gifts. This seems entirely out of character for Avrohom, who was hardly a person who looked for ways to take from others. Avrohom was, first and foremost, a giver, not a receiver. And when he made some windfall profit at the expense of others, he wanted no part of it.

We can guess that Avrohom was not looking to the gifts themselves, so much as the process whereby he would gain them. Avrohom was a talented leader and inspirer of men. He not only carried a powerful message of monotheism to the world, but he knew how to make people listen.

Like Onkelos who serially won over all the Roman soldiers sent by his uncle to retrieve him,² Avrohom was fairly confident in his powers of persuasion - assuming he could enter into protracted conversation with the locals! He feared, however, that he might not have a chance to deploy his verbal weapons. The beautiful Soro might so enchant those who saw her, that according to the practice of the Egyptian court, Paroh's henchmen would immediately seize her, and very quickly turn her into an eligible mate for their master by quickly turning her into a widow. Avrohom needed an opening.

This, then, is what he told Soro. If you will immediately introduce me as your brother, they will deal with us according to a different protocol. They will wine and dine us. They will sue for your hand in marriage by trying to win me - your assumed guardian - over in friendship. They will give me gifts. The courtship procedure will allow me to enter into conversation with them. They will hang on to every word I say. Being rather adept at turning people's opinions around, Avrohom saw this as a viable plan.

We could suggest a completely different approach. Avrohom's concern for gifts may have served a spiritual need, rather than a physical one. Avrohom's greatest joy and most important aspiration was to give people the gift of emunah, to enhance their lives by bringing them closer to Hashem. He told Soro that if the Egyptians learned that they were married, then he was a dead man. But if they believed that he was her brother, they would throng around him, pamper him, and treat him like a celebrity. He would not waste his time making small talk. He would move them from banter to

theology, and spread word of G-d's existence. They would snatch spiritual victory from the jaws of life-threatening defeat. Not only would he survive physically, but his great spirit, brimming with belief and commitment, would be vitalized by the episode. This would be truly life for his soul!

We might smile at this point, and celebrate the good outcome. Yet, it is still puzzling. Paroh learns the hard way about Soro's identity, and hastens to return her unscathed and untouched to her husband. Moreover, the Torah tells us that Paroh dispatched his men to send off Avrohom, Soro, and all the belonged to them. Ramban comments that the royal court did not take back any of the gifts it had given Avrohom when they believed him to be Soro's guardian. He sees this as miraculous!

Miraculous it may have been, but it doesn't seem like the right way to go for Avrohom. The gifts were all offered based on faulty assumptions by Paroh. Once he learned the truth, it would seem to us that Paroh had every right to ask for their return! How could Avrohom legally or ethically keep them?

Paroh could have insisted on their return, but he would never have done so. While commoners would in effect "purchase" a bride by lavishing gifts on a woman's family, this is not the way of royalty. People are supposed to see marrying into the royal court as a wonderful privilege for which they would gladly pay, rather than receive payment. Asking for the return of the gifts would appear distinctly un-regal. Paroh's gifts to Avrohom were not bribes or compensation. They were signs of his great admiration and estimation of Soro. His judgment of did not change when he learned of her identity. The gifts remained irrevocable.

Legally and ethically, then, Avrohom had every right to them. We are still perplexed. Avrohom shunned all gifts, not just the ones that were ethically fraught. When the king of Sodom offered him all the booty of the war, Avrohom's reaction was sharp and pointed. He would spurn even a string, a shoelace, rather than allow another human to claim the he had enriched Avrohom. Why didn't Avrohom simply mark all the gifts "return to sender?"

Avrohom may have seen these gifts in a very different light. The great miracles he and Soro witnessed were known to only palace insiders. Avrohom wished for the word about those great events to get out. This was particularly important because many who knew of us great journey from Ur at an advanced age mocked him. He had given up all he achieved in decades of his live to heed the call of some unseen Deity, who let him down by plunging the destination into a famine. They smugly laughed at him as Avrohom was quickly forced to flee the place that his G-d had promised would turn into a heaven on earth for him. Now, upon his return, they saw an Avrohom "heavily laden"³ with riches. This turnaround had enormous impact upon the doubters of his day. (The phraseology is precise. Avrohom's game plan required him to keep the gifts and to show them off. But he really had no interest in them. Taking them back to Canaan was something he had to do, but he saw the wealth with which he travelled as burdensome. He was "heavily laden.")

The circumstances were quite different after the war with the kings. Everyone had no choice but to

learn of the defeat of the recognized military powers of the day by Avrohom. Keeping the booty would have created no media buzz, no Kiddush Hashem. Avrohom increased the power of the miracle by spurning any financial gain.

He wished only to showcase Hashem's power - and His readiness to intervene in the affairs of Man.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 12:13, 16

2. Avodah Zarah 11

3. Bereishis 13:2
