

CASE CLOSED

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Though this week's portion is packed with messages and moral examples that we can garner from our forefather, Avram, there is, however, a small lesson I'd like to share learned from none other than the ancient Egyptian customs agents.

Avram is forced to leave Canaan due to a famine and travel the only country that has food, Egypt.

The Torah tells us that Avram was afraid. His wife Sora was beautiful, and he feared that she would be taken to Pharaoh as a wife or concubine. Avram would be killed. So Avram devised a ploy to spare his life from certain harm.

But that was not his first strategy. The Torah tells us, "And it was when Avram came to Egypt, and the Egyptians saw the woman that she was very beautiful (Braishis 12:14). Rashi quotes the Medrash's question. Why doesn't the Torah say, "And it was when they came to Egypt?" After all, Sora came too?

The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni (12:67) explains that Avram actually arrived alone at the border. Sora was hidden in a crate.

It chronicles the account: Avram arrived, and the customs agents stare at the large crate and demand, "Pay a duty! You are carrying a crate of utensils! Avram gladly agreed. Seeing Avram's acquiescence, the agents were not pleased. "You must be importing expensive silk garments," they declared. Avram once again agreed to pay the tax on a crate of silk garments. Again they became suspicious. You are carrying a crate of jewels! Pay tax on jewels!" And again Avram readily accepted the enormous financial burden. At that point the agents expressed their skepticism and pried the crate open. The Medrash continues to tell us that a great light illuminated Egypt. What they found was Sora, hidden in the box.

Now, I am not sure of the procedures of customs agents. But from the Medrash it surely seems that they lost out on the biggest booty they could possibly have snared. Avram was willing to pay tax on a crate of jewels, the most valuable entity that the agents had known. Why open the box and risk finding a box filled with pebbles?

Financier J.P. Morgan wanted to give his wife a gift, so he called a jeweler and asked him to send a beautiful jeweled ring for his wife.

"Send the ring to me," he barked, "put the bill in the package, and I'll send you out a check

immediately."

Two days later a box arrived. Mr. Morgan inspected the contents and found a beautifully crafted ring with an enormous diamond in the center. Along with it came an equally enormous bill for \$25,000. Morgan stared in disbelief, as he removed the stone and wrote a check. Then he thought for a moment and re-wrapped the gift box with ornate, monogrammed gift-paper and sealed it with his inimitable JP Morgan cachet. He sent it back to the jeweler with a check and instructions.

"Dear Friend,

"The ring was magnificent, however your bill was exorbitant. Enclosed please find a check for \$12,000, which I hope, will meet your approval. If it does, please return the gift, untouched, in its personalized gift-wrap and seal. Then you may cash the check. If my amount does not suffice, please rip-up my check and return it at once. Feel free to remove the stone and keep the wrapping as a token for your good intentions.

J.P. Morgan."

The jeweler was incensed at the amount on the check. He ripped up the \$12,000 check and mailed the shreds back to Morgan. He then proceeded to carefully remove the ornate gift-wrapping that ensconced his precious jewel box. He walked toward his safe and opened the gift box and was about to put the ring into his safe when he was startled.

The ring was not in the box. In its stead was a small rock. Around the rock a check was wrapped. It was signed by Mr. J.P. Morgan -- for \$25,000.

Even the repartee between Avram and the customs agents can teach us a lesson. There can be something even more valuable than what is found in one's imagination. And as the item in question is under wrap and seal, you never know its true value. Because the contents of simple crate can never be estimated. You may even fantasize that it is filled with jewels, and you will still be underestimating.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated by Mark & Deedee Honigsfeld and family in memory of Joseph Gross and Bluma Honigsfeld - ob'm

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