

THE DOWRY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, upon coming to join the Jewish nation during their sojourn in the desert, came upon a scene that he found inexplicable. Moshe sat, while multitudes of people stood before him, waiting to receive his advice on matters of Torah law. It was obvious to Yisro that Moshe, with Hashem's approval, had to delegate authority - he could not carry the burden of judging an entire nation on his own.

"Now heed my voice, and I shall advise you, and may G-d be with you. You will be a representative of G-d... And you shall discern from among the entire nation men of wealth, G-d fearing men, men of truth, who despise money... And they shall judge the nation at all times." [18:19-22]

While Yisro listed four separate requirements for the leaders and judges, in the end Moshe was only able to satisfy one of the characteristics:

"And Moshe chose men of wealth from among all Israel..." [18:25]

Of all the four qualities, perhaps the most novel is that of "Men who despise money." What does it mean to despise money? Targum Onkelos understands it to mean that they despise the very idea of accepting money from others. Ramban says that they despise improperly obtained money. It is not hard to imagine why "men who despise money" is a highly unusual quality!

My step-grandfather writes in his memoirs the following amazing story about his paternal grandparents. R' Yaakov, his, grandfather, was one of the rare individuals upon whom one could confidently confer the title "men who despise money." He writes:

Grandfather Yaakov and his brother Yonta were engaged in heavy physical work. They specialized in draining swamp land to produce additional crops. In the cold months, grandpa worked for a brewery in Ponadel, which was operated by a Jewish innkeeper. Grandpa was a devoted Lubavitch Chassid, and was scrupulously honest in all his dealings. He was married to Nechama, who came from a learned family in Dvinsk. The family lived modestly, always having enough to eat and to help less fortunate neighbours. Grandma was a frugal manager, and made the most of what grandpa earned.

Grandma came from Dvinsk, from a family that produced a famous scholar and rabbi. Her cousin, R' Meir Simcha Ha-Kohen, was the gaon of Dvinsk. Grandma was described to me by a local resident as the most righteous woman in town. He still remembers her going to the synagogue carrying a large prayer book with wooden covers under her arm. She was very charitable, making sure that

others had the necessities to celebrate the Shabbos. In the summer, she would pick wild raspberries that grew around the cemetery fence. She would process the juice and store it for the winter, when she would provide it as a home remedy for the sick. Today we know that raspberries are high in vitamin content, and could indeed help as a home remedy. My father told me that she would go and clean up the hekdesch, a shelter for homeless wayfarers usually in a mess. Once, he said, there was a man in town who was dying from an advanced stage of syphilis; no one would come near him but grandma, who nursed him in his agony. In her old age, she fasted two days a week.

Grandpa was a man of great honesty and integrity, as illustrated by the following story, that I call "The Dowry." My grandparents oldest child was a daughter, Sara Malla. In those days, when a girl reached sixteen she was already referred to as a kallah maid (a bride girl), and the hunt was on for a suitable husband. It was customary for the bride's parents to provide a dowry, a sum of money to start the couple in their new life. A suitable husband was found for Sara Malla, and the agreement called for a 200 ruble dowry.

As the time approached for the completion of the marriage arrangements, my grandparents had only been able to get together 170 rubles toward the 200 ruble dowry. This is where things stood when a strange thing happened. Grandpa worked for a brewery run by the local innkeeper. Each day, when he finished his work, he would stop at the inn and discuss with his boss what was happening at the brewery.

On the day of this event, the shtetel was alive with people. It was the market day, when the peasants from the surrounding area came to town. They sold their produce, bought provisions, and settled in at the pub to regale themselves with beer and vodka. This day, as well as all other days, grandpa came in to see his boss. The town was abuzz, and in the inn there was drinking and loud laughter. As grandpa left the inn and walked on to the town square, lo and behold, he saw a small sack on the ground. He bent down and picked it up. He was surprised how heavy it was. He opened it up, and what do you think he found? Thirty gold rubles! There was no name or identification as to who owned it. The square was a public place, and since there were no identifying marks, according to both Jewish and Russian law, he was entitled to keep the money.

At this stage, you would guess what was going to happen with that money. Just the right amount to complete Sara Malla's dowry! But to grandpa, when it came to honesty, there were no shadings. It was either black or white. He returned to the inn, found his employer, and told him of what he had found. He requested that the rightful owner be found, and the sack be returned to him. Without further comment, he left for home. When the family was having their evening meal, grandpa casually told of what had taken place that day.

Well, grandma was very pious, and was in constant touch with G-d. Among the other things she prayed for was the completion of the dowry, so that her daughter could get married. When she heard grandpa's story, she felt sure that Hashem had heard her pleas, and had so neatly sent just

the right amount. The dowry would be complete, and her daughter's wedding would take place. She made this known to grandpa in no uncertain terms. She called him a fool, and accused him of throwing Hashem's gift away. He kept protesting that it was not his money. It was not his money.

Time for completing the dowry passed, and the match could not be completed. The deal was off. Weeks later, a young man by the name of Moshe, from a good Ponadel family, approached grandpa in the synagogue. He said he heard that Sara Malla was no longer spoken for, and that he would like to be considered as a suitable husband. When the two families got together, grandpa asked what dowry was expected. "I came to ask for your daughter," Moshe replied, "that is dowry enough for me." The rest of the story is there for all to see. The young couple were married, and enjoyed a fruitful life together. Moshe was a devoted husband and father. He was very respectful of my grandparents, and if you asked my father and his siblings, they would have told you that he was the pillar of the family. [Morris Silbert, Family History and Other Stories, p. 3-6].

Perhaps, indeed, there do exist rare individuals whose vision is not blurred by the allure of money, even when it is most desperately needed.

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