

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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*You Don't Always Get a Bargain by Bargaining*

Either I am crazy or a good portion of the Jewish people are crazy! I'll let you decide (although I'm sure some of you, after all these years, have already decided!).

On Sunday, Oct. 18<sup>th</sup> an op-ed piece appeared in a South Carolina newspaper which was written by two South Carolina Republican Party Chairmen named Edwin Merwin and James Ulmer. They were writing to defend South Carolina's U.S. Senator, Jim DeMint, who had been criticized for opposing earmarks that would bring money to South Carolina. In DeMint's defense, Merwin and Ulmer wrote: "There is a saying that the Jews, while wealthy, got that way not by watching dollars but instead by taking care of the pennies, and the dollars taking care of themselves. By not using earmarks to fund projects for South Carolina and instead using actual bills, DeMint is watching our nation's pennies and trying to preserve our country's wealth and our economy's viability to give all an opportunity to succeed." That's what they said, and the Jewish world went crazy:

- State Senator Joel Lorie, one of South Carolina's two Jewish legislators, said he was outraged: "The words of these key Republican leaders are disgusting, unconscionable and represent prejudice in its purest form."

- The Republican Jewish Coalition immediately demanded an apology. In the words of its Director, "Unbelievably, Merwin and Ulmer drew on an old and malignant stereotype of Jews."

- A leader of the Democratic Jewish Coalition said: "Is it any wonder that Jews don't vote Republican?"

The criticism got so loud from all bloggers and commentators around the country that the two immediately issued an apology, with Merwin writing, "I have always abhorred in the past and shall continue to do so in the future, anti-Semitism in any form whatsoever. I beg that any and all who are offended will accept my deep felt apology." And Ulmer declared: "I absolutely meant nothing derogatory by the reference to a great and honorable people. I hope that anyone and all who were offended by my comment will accept my humble apology." But for leaders of the Anti-Defamation League, that wasn't enough! Bill Nigut, the ADL's Southeast Regional Director, wrote: "Their apology is a first step but it doesn't go far enough ... stereotypes about Jews' facility with money have survived through generations and have been inculcated into our culture. Mr. Merwin and Mr. Ulmer need to better understand the impact of their words and how these words will resonate and reinforce anti-Semitism."

Now here is where some might think I'm crazy, but I have to ask: What was the big deal? And what was so terrible about what these two men wrote? They didn't accuse Jews of robbery, they didn't accuse the Jews of cheating ... they accused the Jews of being honest and frugal. Is that so terrible? Didn't your mother and father tell you more than once that "money doesn't grow on trees?" or "a penny saved is a penny earned?" Indeed, the Talmud tells us: "The righteous are careful with their funds lest they squander their money and come to theft." So, you tell me: what was so terrible about what those two men wrote? The truth of the matter is, Jews over the centuries, banned from so many occupations and so often taken advantage of ... Jews learned that there is nothing wrong in paying retail, but it's even better if I can get it for you wholesale! Nothing wrong with watching every penny!

And you know from whom we learned this lesson? No one knows for sure, but I think a case can be made that it comes from our forefather, Abraham.

Our Torah portion this morning began with the death of Sarah, and Abraham looking to purchase a burial place for her. To this day, the Near and Middle East is known for trading and bargaining in the marketplace. My friend, Jack Riemer, tells a story he heard many years ago from Rabbi Mordechai Waxman: Rabbi Waxman was once visiting in Athens and he was invited to dinner. On the way he stopped to buy some flowers for his hostess at an outdoor stand. He asked the man: how much are these flowers? And the man said: twenty six drachmas. So Rabbi Waxman reached into his wallet and started to pay him the twenty six drachmas. The man said: no, no, that's not how it works. You are supposed to say 'twenty six drachmas? For these wilted flowers. The most I will give you is five. And I am supposed to say: you are taking bread out of the mouths of my children, but I will come down to twenty one. And you are supposed to say: twenty one drachmas for these flowers—no way! They are not really worth it but I will go up to ten. And I am supposed to say: these are lovely flowers that I personally grew, but for you I will go down to eighteen. And eventually we are supposed to settle on thirteen drachmas. Rabbi Waxman said okay, and he reached into his wallet to give the man thirteen drachmas. But the man said: No, from my students I don't take money. And he gave him the flowers.

That's the way things have always been done in that neck of the woods. And I mean that not as a negative reflection on Arabs or Muslims or Turks or Greeks or Iranians ... Israelis are the same way! You go into Towson Town Mall, or go into most any mall in America and you know those shopping cart vendors selling spa lotions or some crazy toys or hats or whatever? Many of those vendors turn out to be Israelis! It's a fact. Because as one marketing director put it: "Israelis know how to hustle and haggle."

All this is nothing new. It goes all the way back to when Abraham was trying to purchase a burial place. Abraham asks to buy a burial place; the people of Het are gracious but don't quite say yes. Instead they hint that maybe they'll sell it, but not forever. Abraham responds and says that he wants to own the land, not lease it; asking

them to intercede with the head of the town named Efron. Efron is very pleasant, and thanks Abraham for asking ... but says that if I sell you the cave, I'm going to have to sell you the entire field as well. Abraham doesn't really want the field but he goes along and says he will take it if that's the only way I can get it. Efron very respectfully thanks Abraham and names a huge sum, but pretends that's just a few bucks. Abraham, having no choice, pays full price. And Efron waits until every single shekel has been paid before he gives Abraham the deed.

Abraham paid more than he had to! He paid retail plus ... he gives him "kesef maleh" – he gives him a lot of money. He overpays. "So what if he gets the better of the deal," thinks Abraham, "at least I'll have what I need, I'll have the cave of Machpelah for a burial place for our family."

And you know what? The path of Abraham is not such a bad idea except for one thing, the ultimate irony of history. The Midrash tells us that there were three places all mentioned in the Torah: "*Ein umot ha-olam, yicholem l'arer aleihem*, where the nations of the world can never argue about the Jewish rights to ownership." Here the Bible clearly tells us that Abraham bought Kiryat Arba in this transaction. Later on we read that Joseph bought the city of Shechem. And in the Book of the Prophets we find recorded that King David purchased the city of Jerusalem. Three places, all of which we paid for; all of which in a sense have the deeds of purchase eternally recorded in the Bible ... all of which our sages therefore said the world can never claim are theirs. The three? Kiryat Arba – today called Hebron; Shechem – today called Nablus; and the third, Jerusalem. We paid for all three of them. And yet, today all three of these cities – Hebron, Nablus and Jerusalem – Arabs and some European countries claim Israel has to give up; they don't belong to us, they are occupied territory. But we paid for them full price! The deed is recorded in the Bible! The problem is, in that corner of the world paying top dollar doesn't guarantee anything! In fact, they lose respect for you and keep bargaining for more and more.

Maybe – just maybe – it's from there that the Jews started watching every penny. Over the course of time the Jews found themselves bargaining with all the powers that ruled over them; whether it was the king and queen of Spain, or the Czar of Russia, or a simple nobleman in Poland ... the Jewish community always had its shtadlan – it's negotiator – who would make one offer after another in an effort to buy good will and security. And every time, the more they paid, the worse it got.

America would do well to learn this lesson in its dealings with Iran. It was more than six years ago that the international community caught Iran violating U.N. treaties and building a nuclear bomb. And what did the world do? Instead of coming down hard on Iran, it decided to negotiate and offer all sorts of political and economic incentives if Iran would stop. Then the French Foreign Minister said a deal was cut which was a promising start; but of course it went nowhere. A year later Tehran made a second deal with the Europeans. The so-called "Paris Agreement" offered an even sweeter package of incentives to Iran. It took Iran six months to come back with an answer, and the answer was no! Over the course of the next two years, the U.N. Security Council

approved four resolutions demanding that Iran cease enriching its uranium. President Ahmadinejad's response was: the world couldn't do a "damn thing" to stop Iran. So, you know what the world did? The world said that the thing that's holding back Iran is the fact that America is so hostile to it ... if America would just tone down its rhetoric and meet with the Iranians everything would be just fine. So President Obama videotaped a message to Iran, calling it a great civilization. When that wasn't enough, Obama apologized for the CIA having overthrown the Iranian government in 1954. When that wasn't enough, America offered to let Iran have Russia enrich its uranium. That offer was on October 1<sup>st</sup>, giving the Iranians a week to answer. Have you heard from them? Do you blame them for not agreeing, when every time they say "no" they get a higher price offered to them; this time including the U.S. basically remaining quiet while the Mullahs stole the government, shoot their protesters and continue to celebrate for having taken over the U.S. Embassy in 1979. And now, now with Iran pulling back for its seeming agreement ... America's response? We'll wait until the end of the year.

In a very real sense, that's what the world is expecting Israel to do. Since 1948 Israel has made one offer of peace after another to the Palestinians and each time the Palestinians said "no." And each time the world expected Israel to do more. And each time Israel did more, in the hope that this would secure peace, the Palestinians said "no." To this very day the Palestinians have offered absolutely nothing at the bargaining at the table; they insist on not only having a Palestinian state but a right of return for the refugees to Israel, which they refuse to call a "Jewish state." They insist that all of Jerusalem and all of the Temple Mount is theirs. And all the while, Israel has kept offering more ... we'll give you 94%, we'll give you 97%, we'll share Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, we'll return Gaza ... and each time it was never enough. And each time, the world kept saying: it's Israel's fault ... you have to give more. Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas announces that he refuses to negotiate with Israel unless it stops building settlements. Israel responds in what Secretary of State Hilary Clinton describes as unprecedented concessions, and the world's response? This week France's Foreign Minister declared: "It seems Israel no longer wants peace!"

Israel wants peace, but now it has a Prime Minister who feels that Israel has offered enough, more than enough, and has gotten nothing – absolutely nothing – in return. Bibi Netanyahu, before becoming Prime Minister, was Israel's Finance Minister, and it is generally agreed that he turned Israel's economy around from a socialist to a capitalist venture. In so doing, Israel has become one of the few countries that weathered the world's economic crisis, still standing on its feet. You see, Bibi Netanyahu is one of those Jews who understands that Merwin and Ulmer – the two South Carolina county Chairmen – were right, "that the Jews who are wealthy got that way not by watching dollars but instead by taking care of the pennies and the dollars taking care of themselves." Netanyahu would agree, and he's not willing to pay any more when he already feels that Israel has over paid and with nothing to show for it. The world would do well to learn this lesson.

There is a story told of a shadchan – a matchmaker – who came to a small East European shtetl and went to the house of the butcher and said, "I hear you have a bright

son. I have a wonderful girl for him. It's Rothchild's daughter." The butcher replied, "But Rothchild is in Paris, we're here in the Ukraine." The shadchan said, "That's no problem. She'll be willing to move here for your son." The butcher says, "My son is a religious young man." "Don't worry," says the shadchan, "the girl agrees to keep the Shabbos and a kosher home." The butcher says, "But my son is a student in the Yeshiva. He has no means of support." "The shadchan says, "That's no problem, Rothchild will take care of him." On hearing this, the butcher says, "Okay, it's a deal." To which the shadchan says, "Now I just have to get Rothchild to agree!"

America – and the world – have made countless offers to Iran. Israel has made countless offers to the Arabs and to the Palestinians. But in that neighborhood – the neighborhood of the shuk – enough never seems to be enough. We have given away enough of our dollars; the time has come to stand firm and make every penny count.

Rabbi Avi Shafran, who also saw nothing wrong with what our South Carolina party chairmen said, points out in his blog: "In the Torah we are told that when our forefather, Jacob, after transporting his family and possessions across a river, took pains to cross back over again, endangering himself. The Talmud conveys a tradition that the reason Jacob returned was to retrieve some small jars." From here we see, the rabbis went on to explain, that the possession of the righteous are as dear to them as their bodies.

Yes, the possessions of the righteous are as dear to them as their bodies. Israel is the sacred possession of the Jewish people. It goes to our very heart and soul. Let the world not sell it short. Let Israel stand firm in dealing with the Palestinians and let America stand firm in dealing with the Iranians. And then, hopefully, we will see the fulfillment of words from the prayer we recited this morning: The people of Israel, the people of the free world, will be blessed "with a life of peace, a life of goodness, a life of blessing, a life with sustenance, a life of vigor and vitality." Amen.

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