

Two Jews Who Lived Exemplary Jewish Lives
-- in Two Very Different Ways
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Parashat Vayishlach
November 20, 2021

What does it mean to be a *m'kadesh et ha-shem*, to sanctify God's name?¹

Recently, our own Rabbi Gil Rosenthal published an article about *kiddush ha-shem* (the sanctification of God's name) and *hillul ha-shem* (the profanation of God's name), which I commend to you.²

The term *kiddush ha-shem* refers to behaving in a way that brings credit to the Jewish people, our faith and/or our way of life, through the way in which one exemplifies what it means to be a Jew. Others, non-Jewish people, looking upon one's behavior, can come away with respect and admiration for who Jews are, what they believe, and how they behave.

I want to share with you two stories about two men -- two Jewish men -- for whom memorial services were recently held: one service took place two weeks ago; the other, the week before that. Both men were born in the mid-1920s; their birthdays

¹ After all, in the Kedushah prayer -- which we insert into the Amidah when we recite it as a congregation -- we say, "*Nikadesh et shimcha ba-olam, k'shem she-makdishim oto b'shmei marom*" -- "We shall sanctify Your name in the world, just as it is sanctified in the highest heavens." We could, of course, say that we are literally fulfilling this when we recite the Kedushah, but there are other, more concrete ways to sanctify God's name.

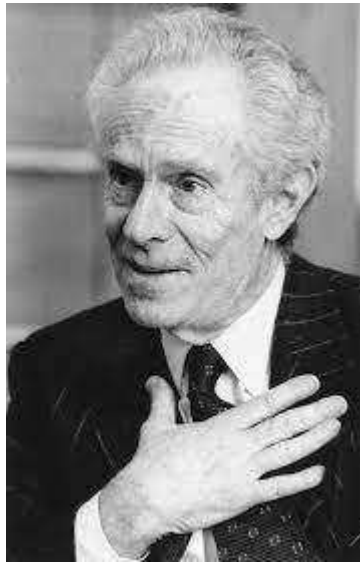
² "Two Sides of One Coin: Hillul Hashem and Kiddush Hashem," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Volume 55, Number 3, Summer 2020, pp. 415-436; [Project MUSE - Two Sides of One Coin: Hillul Hashem and Kiddush Hashem](#) .



were only two days apart. These two men led very different lives -- and yet there were significant commonalities.³

I.

The first of these men is, I'm sure, well-known to those of us who remember the mid-1990s. His name was **Aaron Feuerstein**.



Aaron Feuerstein was born into a well-known Orthodox Jewish family in the Boston area. Twenty-five years ago, he was the owner of the Malden Mills factory in Lawrence. It was there, on the night of December 11, 1995, that a devastating fire, that appears to have been an accident, broke out at the factory.

Suddenly, three thousand employees were out of work. What to do? Aaron Feuerstein immediately promised to keep paying his workers their salaries for at least ninety days. As he later put it, "I could not have taken another course of action."

³ One man was born on December 11, 1925 and died on November 4, 2021 at the age of 95. The other was born on December 13, 1927, died on August 18, 1948, and was reinterred on October 28, 2021.

“I have a responsibility to the workers, both blue-collar and white-collar. I have an equal responsibility to the community. It would have been unconscionable to put 3,000 people on the streets [two weeks before Christmas] and deliver a deathblow to the cities of Lawrence and Methuen.” (Parade Magazine interview, 1996)

By the way, according to one observer, that decision arguably cost Aaron Feuerstein “\$25,000,000, his CEO position and, [eventually,] ... bankruptcy.”⁴

The key question for us is: Why did he do it? What led him to behave the way he did? Aaron Feuerstein was asked that question, and he answered it matter-of-factly. He said it was his study of the Talmud. Aaron Feuerstein learned a lot at Boston Latin, where he went to high school, but he continued his studies at Yeshiva University in New York, where he earned his BA in 1947.

Feuerstein’s reaction was a learned instinctual reaction that came from his understanding that the relationship between employer and employee is not one-sided. Yes, there is a hierarchy: one pays the other for the value of his or her work. But the employer bears responsibilities as well -- beyond paying the employee for his or her labor.

Where does that responsibility come from? Here in the United States, it is not a secular legal responsibility. You will look in vain in American law for that. It came from a long, unenforceable yet highly influential tradition within Jewish law of treating employees, particularly low-wage employees, with respect.

There is one case described in the Tosefta, a rabbinic work from late antiquity: Imagine that you’ve hired a worker to carry a jug from one place to another, and the worker drops it. Do you, the employer, have to pay him in full? After all, you’ve suffered an economic loss! What’s the answer? The answer is, yes, you must pay the worker in full. Not because the “letter of the law” requires it, but

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_Feuerstein .

because the “spirit of the law” “obligates the employer to take care of the worker, who depends on his wages for survival.”⁵

What’s the basis of that obligation? What’s the basis for the conclusion that the so-called “spirit of the law” requires one to behave in such an exemplary way, even in a case in which a worker may have been clumsy and thus partially responsible for the loss of that jug? It’s a quote from Proverbs 2:20 that goes like this:

(לְמַעַן) תִּלְךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ טוֹבִים וְאַרְחֹת צְדִיקִים תִּשְׁמֹר:

... [F]ollow the way of the good
And keep to the paths of the just.

If that’s how you’re supposed to behave when a worker might actually bear some responsibility for a loss, how much more so in a case where, through no fault of the laborer, that loss is incurred?

There’s a saying in the Talmud that although some people earn their place in the world to come only after years of toil, others do so in one moment.⁶ In one moment, Aaron Feuerstein earned the reputation by which he has been remembered -- and, I imagine, he will *always* be remembered. One headline that recently appeared (on the wgbh.org website) following his death read as follows:

“Aaron Feuerstein, famously generous mill owner, dies at 95”

To be known at one’s death as “famously generous” -- that says a lot, doesn’t it?

II.

Now, there are other ways in which people can perform acts that are described as sanctifying God’s name. Perhaps the most well-known paradigm is to die on behalf

⁵ [Jewish Employee-Employer Relations](#) .

⁶ B.Avodah Zarah 17a, 18a, and elsewhere.

of the Jewish people. Typically, in the Middle Ages, that's how martyrdom was viewed. In the modern period such self-sacrifice takes different forms.

I mentioned that another memorial service was conducted almost exactly a week before Mr. Feuerstein's of a Jewish man who, like him, was born in the 1920s but whose life took a very different course. One sign of that is that, although he died many years ago, his memorial service only took place two weeks ago. How is that? Well, here's his story.



The man's name is Martin Davidowicz. He was born in Czechoslovakia on December 17th, 1927.⁷ In 1943, when he was only sixteen years old, he and his family were deported to Auschwitz, where all but Martin were murdered. He somehow survived as a slave laborer and was eventually liberated in the spring of 1945. He was only eighteen years old at the time. He returned home and joined the Czech Army.

When he was discharged, he joined a relatively secret effort in Czechoslovakia to provide assistance to those involved in the struggle to bring a Jewish state into existence in the Land of Israel. One form of that assistance was providing airplanes and other war material. Another form of assistance was military training.

⁷ [Davidovich, Martin . 73 years on, Czech Holocaust survivor will be buried as Israel's first paratrooper .](#)

Just after Israeli independence was declared, Martin Davidowicz signed on to a special course that the Czech Army offered to young Jewish men who wished to participate as paratroopers in the War of Independence.

In the course of that training, Davidowicz participated in a training exercise where he was supposed to subdue a Czech Army officer. While doing so -- which he was trained to do -- the Czech Army officer accidentally shot and killed him.

Think about it: This young man had survived Auschwitz, he'd survived the annihilation of his family, and he'd survived a stint in the Czech Army. But on the eve of fighting for the Jewish state, he was killed in a training accident.

Since the entire paratrooper training program was being conducted secretly, he was buried surreptitiously the next day in a nearby Jewish cemetery that the Nazis had somehow neglected to destroy.



At the time of his death he was neither a citizen of Israel nor an IDF combatant. In fact, he had never set foot in Israel! But eventually, in 2001, a full fifty-three years after his death, he was formally recognized as Israel's first fallen IDF paratrooper.

But then, for twenty years, nothing happened. And then, just this year, the Israeli government, realizing its oversight, began what became a successful effort to

exhume Davidowicz's remains and to rebury him, this time with full military honors, on Mount Herzl among so many others of Israel's war dead.⁸

That service took place three weeks ago.



The behavior of each of these two men exemplifies what it can mean to live a life in which Jews and Judaism come to be held in high esteem.

In a moment of clarity, Aaron Feuerstein made a choice to behave like a mensch, and to support thousands of people, virtually none of whom were Jewish, who otherwise would have suffered terribly. Martin Davidowicz, after losing all of the members of his family to Nazi murderers, was willing to risk -- and lose -- his life

⁸ The contents of these paragraphs are drawn from Rabbi Martin S. Cohen's Ruminative Rabbi blog: [The Ruminative Rabbi](#) .

in pursuit of the struggle to create a Jewish state designed to become both a center of Jewish culture and a refuge for Jews all over the world.

May the souls of Aaron Feuerstein and Martin Davidowitz long remain an inspiring blessing in our lives.

None of us ever knows when that moment will come when we will be called upon to exemplify what it means to be a Jew in the world, what it means to defend the good name of Jews, Judaism or Jewish values. None of us knows how we will behave when we will be called upon to be a *m'kadesh et ha-shem*, to sanctify God's name.

When that day comes, may we choose wisely and well.

Amen.