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“AND ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH  
SHALL BE BLESSED THROUGH YOU”:

# *Memorable Moments of the Nobel Prize Ceremony*

BY SHIRA LEIBOWITZ SCHMIDT

You have just received the Nobel Prize and been feted with kosher food at the king's banquet in Stockholm. At the post-banquet ball, a fellow laureate, who deservedly won the Prize for discovering the bacterium that causes ulcers, jumps up on the stage and sings his own composition, "Ballad to Bacteria."

Only Robert J. (Yisrael) Aumann would at that moment be reminded of a midrash that describes a similar situation.<sup>1</sup> During the meal following the *brit milah* of Elisha ben Abuyah, some of the secular guests at the circumcision feast sang non-religious songs. Said Rabbi Eliezer to Rabbi Yehoshuah, "They are busy with their songs, why aren't we busy with ours?!" The rabbis began to recite Torah, then Neviim, then Ketuvim, and the words of Torah rejoiced as on the day they were given on Sinai, surrounded by fire.

At the ball, this midrash flashed through Professor Aumann's mind. "They are busy with their songs, why aren't we busy with ours?!" With that, he ascended the stage, stepped up to the microphone and led the predominantly non-Jewish celebrants in Rabbi Baruch Chait's now-classic song, "*Kol haolam kulo, gesh-er tzar meod,*" speeding up into a rousing, foot-stomping refrain, "*Veha'ikar lo lefached klal.*"<sup>2</sup>

This was one of the unplanned moments recounted by Professor Aumann to an audience of hundreds of Jerusalemites who came to the Great Synagogue to honor him upon his return. It is indicative of how steeped he is in Jewish tradition that no matter what goes on around him, it is family and tradition that form Professor

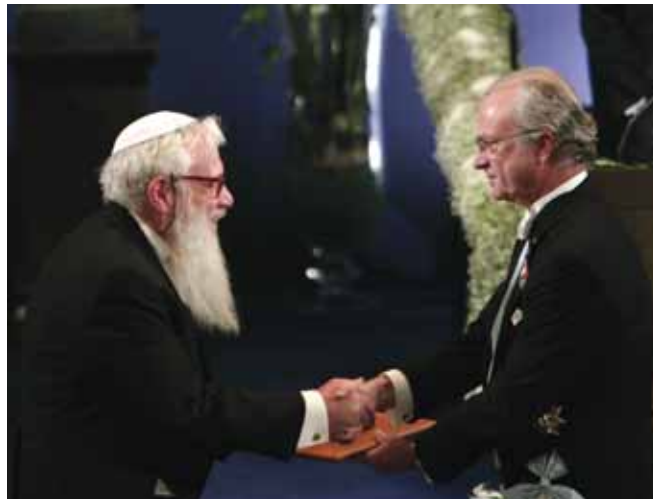
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Aumann's own x and y coordinates.

Professor Aumann admitted that he had a childlike wonder at the fairy-tale opulence of the palace: thousands of lit candles, eight fireplaces ablaze, glittery silver, elaborate tapestries. Yet, when asked, he said the most memorable moment was cut from a different cloth—the Israeli flag flying over the palace, along with the five flags of the nations of the other winners.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Aumann observes that the actual ceremony, where the king awarded him the Prize, was exciting. But even more meaningful was what happened the moment after the king and queen left the hall. His children, their spouses and his myriad grandchil-



Robert J. Aumann receives the Nobel Prize for economic sciences from King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden on December 10, 2005.

dren burst onto the stage while his son gave him an emotional embrace. This reflects the Aumann "family first" values. Professor Aumann insisted on making this an outing for the *gantze mish-pachah*, taking five children, nineteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren to Sweden.

Another extemporaneous moment came at the start of Professor Aumann's banquet speech, which he began with the blessing in Hebrew for good things in this world, "*Baruch ata ... hatov vehameitiv,*" invoking the full *Shem Malchut*.<sup>4</sup> He had told no one about his intention to pronounce the *berachah*,

and his family's spontaneously resounding Amen is etched forever in his memory.

The banquet was not without moments of anxiety. Professor Aumann had made sure that the *kashrut* details were meticulously carried out. But when he sat down at the start of the banquet, he suddenly started worrying about how he would perform *netilat yadayim* since he had made no provision for the ritual hand washing. As he wondered whether he could do an airplane-style hand-ablution (surreptitiously pour the water over one's hands under the table), he was surprised to see a liveried waiter heading toward him with a silver chalice and bowl. Similar chalice-and-

bowl-laden waiters were heading toward the rest of the Aumanns, scattered among the 1,300 dinner guests. It turned out that the head of the Swedish Orthodox community had thought of this detail beforehand.

Each prizewinner can invite sixteen guests. Professor Aumann needed twice that number to accommodate the families of his five children and a few colleagues. The literature laureate Harold Pinter did not attend and gave his sixteen guest places to the Aumanns.

Professor Aumann had been widowed several years ago, and shortly before the trip to Sweden married Batya, a sister of his late wife. He was then a double *chatan* because Nobel laureate in Hebrew is *chatan Nobel*. At the post-banquet celebration, his children hoisted him on their shoulders and danced with him "just like a *chatan*," he relates.

He credits his bride with the successful planning of the logistics of Shabbat, *kashrut* and clothing. The king insisted that the china, silverware and crystal for the Aumann entourage be identical to those of everyone else. Since the palace buys new dishes every year to

make up for breakage, the Aumanns received the new dishes, so the tableware was kosher. The royal family also insisted that the kosher meal look exactly like what everyone else was served. To this end the royal chef revealed the menu, kept secret until the banquet day, to the kosher cooks so together they could find look-alike substitutes for the non-kosher menu, which included crayfish with fennel-baked Arctic char, scallops and Norwegian lobster on baby lettuce, ptarmigan (grouse) breast baked in horn of plenty mushrooms with caramelized apples and lemon and yogurt mousse with raspberry-Arctic bramble sauce. In addition, there were three different Carmel wines: sparkling, red and dessert, matching the non-kosher selection.

Another strict rule is that all men

Stockholm. With foresight, the Aumanns had a sample of the formal-wear flown to Israel to check for *shatnez*; it turned out that the tailcoats had the Biblically forbidden wool-and-linen mixture. The Aumanns solved this problem by renting *shatnez*-free formal-wear from an Israeli rental agency and having it flown to Stockholm for the ceremony.

Shabbat planning was done in a similarly punctilious manner. The Aumanns excused themselves from the Friday night reception and Saturday rehearsal. The Aumann family, who often go mountain climbing together, did a lot of walking from the Grand Hotel to the three synagogues in Stockholm. Friday night they went to one Orthodox synagogue, and Shabbat morning to the other.<sup>3</sup> Then they

to the ceremony, arriving at 4:10, before the king and queen entered at 4:30.

While the Nobel Prize comes with a sizeable monetary gift, the most meaningful present was the watch that Professor Aumann's children and grandchildren gave him to replace his own ancient ten-dollar timepiece. On it they engraved a verse from *parashat Vayeitzei*, which was read that memorable Shabbat, December 10, "*Venivrechu vecha kol mishpechot ha'adamah uvezarecha*, And all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and your offspring."<sup>6</sup> **JA**

## Notes

1. *Midrash Ruth Rabba* 6:4.  
2. A statement attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, "The whole world is nothing but a very narrow bridge. And the main thing is to have no fear at all." The tune, by Rabbi Chait, *rosb yeshivah* of Maarava, can be heard at [www.greatjewishmusic.com/Midifiles/kol%20HaOlam.htm](http://www.greatjewishmusic.com/Midifiles/kol%20HaOlam.htm).

3. S.Y. Agnon, the 1966 Israeli Nobel laureate for literature, was also moved by the sight of the Israeli flag in Stockholm and asked his wife, Esther, "Did you ever dream you would see the Israeli flag flying over the palace in my honor?" Her laconic reply: "I usually do not dream about flags!"

4. "Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who is good and does good." The banquet speech and Prize lecture can be found at <http://nobelprize.org/economics/laureates/2005/aumann-lecture.html>. See [www.nobelprize.org](http://www.nobelprize.org) for the video of the ceremony. Professor Aumann can be seen from minute fifty-eight onward.

5. This was an ironic "closing of the circle" for Professor Aumann who, as an eight-year-old, fled Frankfurt with his family before Kristallnacht. One of the Orthodox shuls in Stockholm had been transplanted from Hamburg. It survived Kristallnacht intact because it was on the second story of a building that the Nazis did not notice. It was transferred to Stockholm after the War and installed on the second floor of a building there.

6. Bereishit 28:14.



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must dress in formal black tailcoats, with white bowties and waistcoats; even the seven-year-old grandsons wore white ties and tails, cufflinks and shirt studs—an interesting contrast with their festive knitted *kippot*! Women must wear solid-color floor-length gowns (no problem for the modestly attired Aumanns), and though the only head covering for women usually allowed are tiaras for royalty and married women, they did allow the *tichel*-like headscarves of the Aumann women. Every year all male participants rent formal attire in

attended a *kiddush* in the social hall of the Conservative synagogue. Before Shabbat, all the fancy clothes had been shipped to a hotel located closer to where the ceremony was going to be held. After *seduah shelishit* at the Grand Hotel, they walked to where their ceremony clothes were waiting, and wore them for a while on Shabbat, so as not to violate *hachanah lechol* (preparing for the weekday on Shabbat).

Thanks to the early Shabbat nightfall at 3:55 p.m., they were able to *daven* Maariv, make *Havdalah* and walk

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