

# The Kavod Wagon

By Emanuel Feldman

**T**he season of the cluttered mailbox is upon us. Invitations to the annual banquets of the Jewish federations, synagogue bodies, yeshivot and seminaries all compete for space and attention.

One element is common to all of them: the award ceremony. A dinner without awards is like a dinner without food—and, like food, the more awards the better. One major yeshivah awarded 12 honors at last year's dinner. And the names of the awards are themselves indicative of the verbal inflation that has engulfed everyone. No longer is there a simple Man of the Year award—nothing as demeaning as that. So bloated have the titles and accolades become that before long we will surely witness the World's Holiest Man and Woman award; the Most Godly Person award; the Ultimate Jewish Hero award; and the Greatest Jew Who Ever Lived award.

Awards, of course, are meaningless unless they are "coveted." One organization, The International Committee to Fight Worldwide Evil, holds the record: 21 honors will be distributed at their forthcoming annual dinner, ranging from the universally coveted Man and Woman of God award, the

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nationally coveted Fighter Against Evil award, all the way down to the locally coveted Greatest Person of the Year award.

The competition on the banquet circuit is very stiff. The program chairman of the International Congress of the World's Greatest Charities became so obsessed with running the most perfect function that one night, in a fitful sleep, he even fantasized about inviting the Supreme Guest Speaker to the next banquet: God Himself. Now

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that would be a coup, he mused. The fantasy came to an abrupt end when the chairman could not think of an appropriate award to give Him.

But it was the president of the International Congress who created the concept that would outdo every other organizational dinner. He proposed that every single man and woman who attended their annual banquet should receive a special honor. Not just a favor or a souvenir, but a full, personalized award, complete

with appropriate adulatory remarks and a plaque.

When this revolutionary idea was first mooted at a board of directors meeting, Joe Shuldig, last year's Man of the Millennium awardee, objected that while it was a great idea and would guarantee a large turnout, there was one major problem: "Let's be practical. Every honoree has to sit on the dais, so who will sit in the ballroom? And where are you going to find a dais big enough to seat 700 people?"

Sam Finster, recipient of 12 awards, including The Prophet Isaiah Visionary award, rose to his feet. "You don't have a dais big enough? No problem. You turn the whole ballroom into a dais. Big deal."

While there were some misgivings about the mass awards, in the end they realized that the power of *kavod* should not be underestimated. They knew that even if all 700 attendees received awards, each individual honoree would proudly display his award in a prominent place. Five years from now, who would remember that 699 other identical Man of the Decade awards had been distributed that night? By then, even the awardee himself, as he modestly shows it to his friends, would have forgotten.

And so the gala dinner of the International Congress was held at the Waldorf Astoria Dais, the ballroom's name having been changed for that

night only. The room was filled to capacity and people had to be turned away.

The entire program consisted of the awards ceremony. The attendees, honorees all, proudly accepted their plaques, congratulated one another on their contributions to Jewish life, listened to the citations extolling their historic virtues, and went home with stomachs filled with food and psyches overflowing with self-esteem.

All except Sam Cohen. Despite the warm glow of the banquet, Sam could not sleep that night. He kept thinking: *I have been honored tonight in front of 700 people. They recounted my many wonderful qualities. They paid me great tribute. They called me the Man of the Decade. They gave me a beautiful plaque to prove it, and everyone applauded. I should feel very honored and flattered, but I don't.* Tossing and turning, Sam asked, again and again: *Why do I not feel honored?*

Suddenly Sam sat up in bed: *I know why! If everyone is an honoree, no one is an honoree. If everyone is a leader, no one is a leader. If everyone is exceptional, then no one is exceptional. I don't feel honored because of one reason: I have not been honored at all.*

The next morning Sam went straight to the office of the president of the International Congress and returned his plaque. The president tried to explain that they sincerely meant to honor him, and furthermore, that *kavod* is *kavod*, and should not be dismissed so lightly. "Your children and grandchildren will be proud of you for generations to come when they see this plaque," he added. "True, 700 people received this recognition. But think of the tens of thousands who were not so honored." But Sam was stubborn; he deposited the award on the president's desk, and left.

Word of Sam's action began to leak out. The other awardees also began to see the absurdity of their awards, and soon enough the international headquarters of the International Congress of the World's Greatest Charities was overflowing with 700 returned

plaques.

Gloom pervaded Jewish organizational life. Reports coming in from around the country showed an alarming trend: More and more people were refusing to accept honors, and more and more were realizing that the gesture had lost all meaning.

There was only one thing left to do: call an emergency meeting. The heads of all major Jewish organizations came together to discuss the problem. "Ladies and gentlemen," said the chairman, "we are in the midst of a deepening crisis in Jewish life. *Kavod* is the lifeblood of organizational life. But *kavod* is no longer selling. We must create new and fresh ideas, because if this trend continues our future as a people is seriously threatened."

The meeting resulted in a groundbreaking recommendation: In order to head off a groundswell of resentment, the number of honorees at annual dinners must be radically reduced. A non-proliferation agreement was ratified by all the groups, to be followed by a voluntary honors-reduction program to be phased in over the next three years.

The effects were felt immediately. The number of awardees per dinner fell precipitously, and before very long, one awardee per dinner became the norm.

And then one organization—the same International Congress of the World's Greatest Charities—decided once again to trump everyone else. It stunned everyone at a news conference called expressly to announce that its next dinner would feature a daring innovation in Jewish life, something never before attempted: an evening without a single honoree. In a press conference, the president of the International Congress declared: "These trying times call for bold and imaginative initiatives. This No Awards Banquet is our contribution to Jewish life."

It was an affair to remember, the talk of the town. So appealing was the No Awards concept that it quickly became the accepted norm of Jewish organizational life. Multiple awards

were out; no awards were in.

One thing led to another. Certain banquet organizers began inviting lecturers and scholars to present enlightening remarks on Jewish thought, practice and belief. The innovation proved to be wildly popular, and throughout the country this soon became the major feature of organizational dinners.

One night, the International Congress program chairman had another fantasy. An angel appeared and informed him that the Creator was ready to make a Divine promise: He will be present in spirit at every banquet where Isaiah 6:3 is remembered and Exodus 20:21 is lived up to. The angel vanished. The chairman jumped out of bed, ran straight to his Bible, and looked up the verses. In Isaiah he found: "...the entire earth is filled only with His honor." And in Exodus he found: "...in every place that My Name is caused to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you." **JA**

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