

It was the best of tallises, it was the worst of tallises, it was a display of wisdom, it was a display of foolishness...

OK, so maybe it wasn't the worst of tallises. But when one pays good money for a specific tallis, one expects to receive that tallis. Mistakes do happen, but when they do, we have a reasonable expectation that the mistake be rectified.

I happen to own a tallis that I treasure a great deal. As you can see, it is a beautiful burgundy and gold tallis. At each corner of the atarah is the logo of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. You see, this is not a tallis you can simply go out and buy. This is a tallis that is awarded to you. Between the logos of the USCJ, on the atarah, is my Hebrew name, written in beautiful Hebrew letters. This tallis was given to me by my former congregation for many years of service there. The irony is I treasure it so much that I rarely wear it. I don't want it to get dirty or farschvitz, so like a classic car that never gets driven, it stays in its lovely burgundy bag in my study.

Although you cannot buy a USCJ award tallis for yourself, you can buy an almost identical tallis without the USCJ/Hebrew name atarah on it. I know someone at CST has the same red and gold tallis and sometimes wears it on Shabbat mornings. You can also get it with silver instead of gold, and that brings us to the tale of two tallises.

Dennis Prager likes this style tallis, and he ordered one for himself. If you have seen the photo of us in my study, you know Dennis is taller—he is 6'4" to my 6'2". He assumed an Internet site in Israel would be most likely to have the tallis he

wanted in his size. He ordered it on May 3, and received the following email on May 4:

“Thank you for your interest in ---.com products. Your order has been received and will be processed once payment has been confirmed. Order Details; Order ID: 77; Date Added: 04/05/2013; Color Wool Talis; Size: 60”x80”; Color: Red - Silver 1 \$138.98; Regular Shipping: \$10; Total: \$148.98”

Two weeks later, Dennis received a tallis. He was gracious enough to call it a “lovely tallit.” But he received my red and gold kind, not the red and silver that he wanted.

Mistakes happen. But Dennis was about to enter into what he described as the classic Monty Python skit in which a man buys a parrot in a pet store. The parrot immediately dies, and the buyer goes back to get a refund, but the shopkeeper refuses to stop trying to convince the buyer that the parrot is alive and well.

Dennis wrote to the company: “Re: Invoice ID: 77, I ordered red and silver, but the tallit I received is red and gold. How do I go about exchanging it for the correct one? Thank you.”

Four days later, Dennis received his response: “Sun, May 26, 2013, at 7:40 a.m. Subject: Question from ---.com To: Prager Dennis Please send me picture of the tallit.”

Dennis, being an avid photographer who can afford the gear I merely dream about, sent back a photo which I have every confidence did confirm that the tallis was red

and gold, not red and silver. Surely an apology and an exchange was about to follow.

Sun, Jun 2, 2013, at 11:04 a.m.

To: Dennis Prager

“Hello

Please send me the order number”

Who here recalls that the order number was on the first email the company sent to Dennis? He responded:

“Dear Mr. Y---:

First, your company sent me the wrong tallit.

Then, after waiting a week for a reply, I was told that I had to take a picture of the wrong tallit. And now you need me to tell you what the order number is. You don't know?

Would you like the name of the mailman who delivered the tallit?

As you can see, it has been, shall we say, an odd experience dealing with ---.com.

Here is the order number: Order ID: 77”

Sensing their customer's frustration, the company responded that very day. I quote their response verbatim, which is not easy as it is unpunctuated:

“I am sorry you are right do you want to keep its and get credit for the site or some refund or replace it

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact me anytime

With kind regards”

Dennis:

“Weeks ago all I asked was to be sent the correct tallit while I return the wrong one.”

Finally Dennis received a long list of detailed instructions on how to return the wrong tallis, how to avoid it getting stuck in customs, an email too long and detailed and unfunny for me to include it here. I will tell you that the company did promise to pay Dennis the \$15 it would cost him to follow their instructions. Knowing that, listen to Dennis's next email:

“My wife went to the post office to mail the tallit and was told that the cheapest possible way to send the tallit (first-class postage is the least expensive option) would cost \$27. and that is without any tracking, meaning that if the tallit got lost, I would be out the cost of the tallit and the \$27 shipping. With tracking it would cost \$40. You have stated you will cover only \$15 of the return shipping cost.

Please explain why I should have to pay the difference, given that I made no mistake, and your company did, sending the wrong item. It is unheard of for a company to penalize the customer for a mistake the company made.

Moreover I am not even asking for a refund. All I want is the tallit I ordered.”

Fear not, my friends, the company leapt into action:

“I will check it.”

And then, at last, sent the following to Dennis:

“Please send in \$27.”

I spoke to Dennis last night. He still has the wrong tallis. I told him I almost felt guilty for liking my red and gold one, and he offered me his wrong one as a back-up. I think he should still try to send it back and get a refund in Israel, and I told him that Zion Tallis, in Florida, probably has what he wants and in his size.

So that is the tale of two tallises. But remember, this sermon has a subtitle: What is the first question you will be asked in heaven? Do you remember? We've talked about this before. The first question you'll be asked when you stand before God in judgement will be “Were you honest in your business dealings?” As Micah said, Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God, being honest in business is part of doing justice, and yes, there is a section on business ethics in The Observant Life. Have you ever felt an insurance company was just trying to keep stalling you until you gave up in frustration? That's just wrong, wrong for an insurance company, and even more wrong for a tallis company that makes a product intended to remind Jews of our obligations through the commandments.

It's one thing to make a mistake. It's another to force your customer to suffer for that mistake, especially when that customer is an internationally syndicated talk show host and writer. Imagine what this story will do to this company's reputation. In fact, don't imagine. Let me tell you. It will do nothing. Zero. I did not mention their name because Dennis did not mention their name, not even in private to me. I have no clue who they are. So tonight, we have two models of behavior from two different Jews. Let us each choose our own role model, and I pray we choose wisely.

June 21, 2013

A Tale of Two Tallises; or Rabbi Benjamin Sendrow
What is the First Question You'll Be Asked in Heaven?