

Rabbi Stories

By Frank Houtz

Once a great Rabbi was speaking to his talmidim. He told them a story of two brothers. "There once were two brothers," he said. "Both loved to play games. Jeffrey especially excelled in board games while Martin excelled in tennis. Martin loved tennis greatly. However, he had become so proficient in the game, few could keep up with him. He played in competitions and won many tournaments. He became so good that he won the national amateur title for tennis. This was quite an accomplishment for a farm boy from Prairie Dog, Iowa, a one court town.

After Martin had developed a great deal of fame he was attending a Welcome Wagon party for new arrivals to Prairie Dog. He was introduced to Dennis, a new person in town who knew nothing of Martin's success. After the introduction Martin asked Dennis if he liked tennis. Dennis replied that he didn't care much for the sport. He couldn't play very well, and always knocked the ball way out of bounds. Martin enthusiastically told his new acquaintance how much he enjoyed the game and explained to him that he only needed a good teacher and practice. They continued in conversation for much of the evening, but Martin did not tell Dennis about his accomplishments.

The next day Martin convinced his new friend to try the game. They played for hours just batting the ball back and forth. Dennis became much better with practice and it wasn't long before they were able to play games. Martin won the first game by a reasonable margin, but the second game he allowed the score to stay much closer. By the third game the score was very close. Dennis would pull ahead, then Martin. It continued back and forth until Dennis won. Now Dennis loved the game, and he wanted to play often.

Jeffery, Martin's brother who loved board games, always bragged about his accomplishments. In reality he wasn't as good as he thought, yet this did not keep him from telling everyone of his great triumphs in board games. Jeffery, like Martin, met a new person moving to Prairie Dog. However, unlike his brother, he did not hide anything concerning his accomplishments. He bragged to this new acquaintance concerning his abilities in a game called *Financial Conquests*. *Financial Conquests* was a board game with the theme of taking over the world by global economic domination. His friend Steven had not heard of the game but was soon convinced by Jeffery to try a few rounds. After a quick lesson on the rules they began to play a game. Jeffery took advantage of his new friend's inexperience and severely trounced him in the game. Steven was not inhibited by one loss, so he tried another round. Again, Jeffery had an easy win. Steven, not one to quickly give up, played Jeffery in a third round. Jeffery didn't let up at all. He played as hard as he would have if playing an expert. Again he mercilessly overcame Steven. Jeffery could contain himself no longer. He began bragging about his abilities. He told Steven that he never loses. He began to ridicule Steven's playing skills and told him he wasn't very good.

Later Jeffery found Steven sitting at the bar of the Do Drop Inn, the local gathering place for men of Prairie Dog. Jeffery quickly mentioned the game with Steven. He publicly bragged about his skills and how severely he triumphed over the new guy in town. Steven again was humiliated. All those around heard how ingeniously he was outsmarted. After this public disgrace, Steven had no intention of ever playing this egotistical louse in a game again. He no longer wanted to associate with Jeffery at all. He longed for Jeffery to be mortified. Then he would rejoice in Jeffery's defeat because of the way Jeffery had treated him.

There were two out of town cowboys within the crowd that knew how to play *Financial Conquests* quite well. They didn't appreciate the way Jeffery was belittling his opponent and thought he needed to learn a lesson. Both these strangers were very accomplished in the game and together

had won several championships playing the game. *Financial Conquests* could be played with two to six players individually, or it could be played with teams, two players to a team. These two strangers could detect that the brother was not as good as he implied. They also knew that if the two of them played him individually rather than as a team, they could stealthily gang up on him without him knowing it. They could easily beat him by working together as a team. They could have each beat him easily without team work. Both knew the game very well, but if they focused individually on winning, they might weaken each other and allow the braggart to win.

Without discussion one cowboy winked at the other and then spoke up. "Great Conquistador," he said, "My name is Bob. I've played that money game before. It was a real hoot! I would love to play you a game. I've never had the opportunity to play such an accomplished player like you. Could I play you in a game?" The brother thought this was a great idea, for he could show his great ability in front of all the town. He then turned and asked those gathered around, "Does anyone else want to play?" With that invitation the other cowboy spoke up, "Hi, I'm Roy, I'd like to join you." Jeffrey responded, "Great," thinking it would be an opportunity to humiliate two inexperienced challengers. No one else volunteered so they procured the game, set it up, and began to play.

Jeffery's strategy became apparent quite quickly. The two experienced challengers developed a counter strategy without even having to speak to each other. Ultimately, one of the challengers was going to have to sacrifice himself for the good of the other. The purpose of the game was to gain global economic domination. So each player would build up an international company that would slowly absorb smaller corporations becoming a world economic power. The goal was to become so dominant that you took over all your opponents' corporations. When you overpowered another player, you absorbed all his property and wealth, making you decisively stronger. Yet, it is possible that an amateur player could take someone over too quickly spreading his assets too thin making the new combined company venerable. Both Bob and Roy understood this and when the time came, it would be obvious which one should make the maneuver. That time came and Bob was willingly overtaken for the good of Roy. This fueled Jeffery's ego since one opponent had been eliminated and it was only between him and Roy. However, Roy was the one who had acquired Bob's assets, not Jeffrey, and both Bob and Roy knew how to play the game well, so Roy had not spread himself too thin. This empowered the stranger to continue his challenge of Jeffrey.

The game continued and got more intense. Jeffrey began to realize the takeover had not weakened Roy. Once discovering this, his irritation showed and he started making excuses. Roy calmly continued, without making retort. As the game ebbed closer to an ill-fated conclusion for Jeffrey, he became more sullen, but periodically bursting out with tirades of excuses. Yet, the crowd became more vocal and cheered as Roy looked stronger and stronger. Roy never uttered a discouraging word concerning his opponent. He continued to speak highly of him, but systematically built up his finances to overcome his foe. Finally the time had come for the conclusion of the game. It was obvious that Jeffrey had absolutely no chance to win. All the power was under the control of Roy and there was nothing Jeffrey could do to save himself from a demoralizing defeat. He had made every excuse for his poor performance and claimed it a terrible turn of bad luck. However the onlookers could see the great difference in skill between the two players and were very impressed with how ingeniously Roy was beating Jeffrey. The crowd rejoiced that he was being beaten since he had been so arrogant. It seemed justice was being served.

Roy did not seem to go in for the final blow. Instead, he continued to build up resources making his position for global domination stronger and stronger, but not taking his opponent down. He had taken over all of Jeffrey's companies except one, and it looked like a flea on a elephant sitting there on the game board. It was impossible for Jeffrey to re-establish himself. There was no expansion room for his company since his opponent owned everything. The opponent's build up of assets

around the brother was only making it look like a more unbalanced defeat. When it became so ridiculous and excessively humiliating, agitating Jeffrey to louder tirades of excuses and showing terrible sportsmanship, the challenger stated, "I guess no-one can win, maybe we should call this game a draw." This angered Jeffrey so, that he threw the board game across the room and ran from the Do Drop Inn. The surrounding crowd howled and jeered. They cheered the cowboy and from that time on, every time the story was told Roy would state, "I didn't win the game, it was a draw." Every time he would repeat that line, those listening would laugh and cheer again. Jeffrey lay in wait, plotting the proper time to retaliate.

One day Martin was on the tennis court with another true champion. They were in a heated match and the ball was flying everywhere when his amateur friend Dennis walked up. Dennis had become much better in tennis and now actually enjoyed the game, but still had no idea that Martin was as good as he was exhibiting in this match. It became obvious to Dennis that Martin had previously been playing with him on his level, not on the level he was capable of playing. Yes, Dennis had won the game, but it was really thrown by Martin. Even so, Martin had encouraged Dennis to play the sport that he so loved, and had instigated a possible life long friendship. It was obvious that this brother was humble and considerate of others and Dennis knew that he was a friend indeed. However, Dennis had improved and now had many skilled challengers. He had not developed to the skill of his teacher but he was well on his way to being a fine tennis player. Maybe some day he could develop into the skill of Martin."

The talmidim looked at the Rabbi and said, "Rabbi, this is a good story. What is the moral you wish to teach us?" The Rabbi replied, "If you want a playing partner, you must help him to enjoy the game. No one enjoys being humiliated, but they do enjoy a good contest with an opportunity to succeed. However, if success is impossible so is the enjoyment of trying."

After the class had pondered this for a while one of the talmidim spoke up, "That is a good lesson Rabbi, but surely you don't merely wish us to learn about good sportsmanship. Is there more to this moral?"

The Rabbi replied, "You have considered this well my good student. Also know that humiliation begets anger, and anger begets retaliation. Retaliation begets destruction and destruction begets annihilation. To restore the world, we must learn not to humiliate."

The students rejoiced at the new insight. They marveled at the wisdom of their Rabbi. He truly was a great teacher, for he revealed such insightful lessons. Class was over and some began to leave. On their way they spoke of the lesson and basked in its insights. They told their friends knowing that all should come to this knowledge.

Several talmidim lingered around the classroom for a while longer. They discussed what had been said among themselves. Then one stepped up to the Rabbi. He said, "Rabbi, we were discussing these things and believe that you may have something else to teach us from this story. Will you share it with us?"

The Rabbi smiled at his insightful students. He was pleased that some understood that there was more. He replied, "When teaching, don't make the challenges too lofty, for you will defeat the student before he learns the lesson. But for those who learn well and have not been discouraged, they can be taken to new heights."

The students smiled. They knew that they had learned well and stayed for the next level. A few more left. They were pleased they knew more than those whom had left early. They felt a little

better than them and the Rabbi had let them know that they were superior students. They felt this information was the real meaning of the story and the most important, so they spread the additional information. While doing so, they let people know that the superior students stayed behind and listened.

Four students remained discussing the Rabbi's answer. It was curious because while it could be derived from the story, it actually led to an additional question. To what new height could the students be taken? They elected one of the remaining students to request it of the Rabbi. He stepped up to the Rabbi's desk and said, "Dear wise instructor, your last answer left us inquiring. You informed us that some students could be taken to a higher level, but what information is on that level?"

The Rabbi was very pleased at this response. He spoke to his wisest students. He said, "My wise and patient students who desire true knowledge, know that humility wins friends, pride brings contempt."

"Thank you Rabbi," they replied. This was the answer they sought. The remainder with the exception of one talmid left, but this time they didn't leave proclaiming their new wisdom. They realized that the reporting of this to the others would cause contempt. It was also too hard for others to understand at this time so they humbly went on, saying nothing of the additional lesson. It had brought about the proper response in them because these students knew that if their knowledge turned into pride all others would hate them and the message.

One student remained. He knew there must be more. He understood that the depths of teaching doesn't spring forth at the beginning. Only those who wait will be rewarded with true teaching. He walked up to the Rabbi. He said, "Rabbi, I believe there is more. Will you share it with me?"

Again the Rabbi smiles. He says, "You are the top of the class! You are the one who waits for the real depths and knows that I have not given all the message. Yes, there is more my greatest student. Did you notice that when the wise brother played his game that he was making a new friend and brought him to enjoy the game as he did? The student replied, "Yes." The Rabbi then added, "Did you notice that in letting him win early in his teaching that he gained something which drove him on to developing his skills in the game? Again the student replied, "Yes." The Rabbi replied, "They both gained a new friendship because their basis started with a mutual gain." The talmid replied, "I see!" The Rabbi continued in contrasting that with the other story where the brother's opponent gained nothing but humiliation and contempt while the brother gained arrogance and claims of conquest. This built up a resentment and hostility that fostered a competition to overcome the other. Then the Rabbi said, "When brokering a deal between two parties in any type of relationship, both parties must receive a greater good. If both parties don't gain, the one will feel cheated and desire to get even or ahead."

The student replied, "Yes, that explains much in human relationship. That is what you really want us to learn! But Rabbi is there more?" The Rabbi replied, "Yes, my greatest student, but that will be all for now, go and apply what you know and we will discuss more later."

He who has ears, let him hear!

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