

An Unexpected Encounter

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

A charming story about the late, beloved Conservative Rabbi Mordecai Waxman:

Once while visiting Greece; he was invited out to dinner. On the way, he stopped to buy flowers for his host from a vendor in the street. He asked the price. The vendor said “26 drachmas.” When Rabbi Waxman reached into his wallet to pay him, the vendor said: “That’s not how it works. I’m supposed to say ‘26 drachmas,’ and you’re supposed to say, ‘My dear Sir, they are only worth eight.’ Then I am supposed to say ‘You are taking the bread from my children but since you are a guest, I will go down to 21.’ And then you are supposed to say ‘Honored friend, the most they could be worth is ten.’ Eventually after the back and forth, we settle on thirteen. That’s how it works here.”

So Rabbi Waxman reached into his wallet again and pulled out 13 drachmas. But the vendor said, “From my students, I don’t take money” and gave him the flowers.

Incidental, unexpected encounters can be wonderful. Don’t ignore the bag boy, the checker, the parking attendant, the merchant, the maintenance man. Every soul has sweetness; each hides treasures.