

THE GENESIS PRIZE

In 2006 I self-published a book called *Jewish Medicine. What It Is and Why It Matters*. It didn't attract much attention at the time so I imagine my surprise when this past January, I received an e-mail from Steve Rakitt, who identified himself as the president of the Genesis Prize Foundation and said that he wished to discuss my book. Although I'd never heard of the Genesis Prize, a quick Google search informed me that often it is referred to as "The Jewish Nobel Prize" — and that got my attention!

I read that in 2013 the Genesis Prize Foundation was registered in Israel as a non-profit Public Benefit Company that's managed by its employees, who are the sole shareholders. The operations of the Foundation are funded by a \$100 million endowment and the purpose of the Prize is to foster Jewish identity, inspire Jewish pride and strengthen the bond between Israel and the Diaspora. The Prize celebrates Jewish talent and achievement, honoring individuals for their accomplishments and commitment to Jewish values, inspiring Jews to connect to their heritage and to Israel. "The vision of the Genesis Prize is a strong and vibrant Jewish people, aware of its roots while looking to the future; a Jewish community flourishing in diversity, yet united in appreciation of Jewish values and support for the Jewish State."

The selection process winnows several hundred nominees down to five finalists who represent "the Jewish values of the foundation" and also are highly successful in their career. Previous Genesis Prize winners included Michael Bloomberg (the first in 2013), Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Itzak Perlman, Michael Douglas, Robert Kraft, Natan Sharansky and last year's winner Steven Spielberg. Quite an impressive list and, reportedly, previous winners all have donated their cash prize to good works and charity.

No I wasn't going to receive the million dollar prize. That would go to this year's Laureate Dr. Albert Bourla, Chairman and CEO of Pfizer, but Mr. Rakitt wished to consult with me about a video they were producing about Jewish contributions to medicine that would be shown during a gala ceremony to be held in Jerusalem on June 29—think Oscars Night. Steve Rakitt explained that he'd read my book and had many questions that he and his committee wished to discuss with me on a Zoom conference call.

Naturally, I was flattered but also rather puzzled. After all, my book had reviewed two millennia of Jewish medical achievements and I wondered how all that could be reduced to a 12 minute documentary? This year's Laureate Albert Bourla is a Greek-born veterinarian and research scientist who had risen in Pfizer's ranks over nearly three decades. He was the son of Holocaust survivors and, of course, during the current pandemic Pfizer has excelled as the world's major vaccine manufacturer. Some 200,000 internet-voters for the Genesis Prize apparently agreed that Dr. Bourla is a "bright star in the constellation of outstanding Jewish scientists at the forefront of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic."

Two days after I received Steve Rakitt's e-mail, we held a virtual conference at which I expressed skepticism about how Jewish medical history could be covered in such a short time. He said, "You think that we're crazy" don't you?" I wished to be tactful, but had to admit — "yes." Undeterred, Rakitt told me that a production team already was working on the film and that they only wanted my advice about a few things. So I gave some suggestions and the meeting ended with a vague promise that they might consult me again. They didn't, but in April I received an e-mail from Stan Polovets, chairman and co-founder of The Genesis Prize Foundation, inviting me to attend the Award ceremony on June 29 at the Jerusalem Theater when President of Israel Isaac Herzog would present this year's Genesis Prize to Albert Bourla.

The Genesis Prize Foundation was founded by several Russian-Jewish oligarchs and in addition to the prestigious award, the foundation supports non-profits in dozens of countries. It has become a financial mainstay of Jewish communal life and among recipients of their largesse have been Hillel International, Friends of the IDF, Birthright, the ADL and the Joint Distribution Committee.

Earlier this year, three Russian co-founders resigned from the Genesis Foundation's Board of Directors after being sanctioned by the U.S. but Steve Rakitt was quoted as saying, "Like so many around the world, we are heartbroken by the terrible events unfolding in Ukraine.... [but] the recent events have no impact on The Genesis Prize Foundation. Our priorities remain unchanged and we are moving forward with our work as planned." So, despite certain misgivings, including COVID-19 concerns, I accepted the invitation and, accompanied by my daughter Andrea Sherman, we decided to spend five days in Israel, just enough time to catch up with family and friends, and to learn more of what this was all about. Our brief visit was wonderful but exhausting and what follows here is limited to the Genesis Prize and this year's Laureate.

Two unexpected events framed our evening at the Jerusalem Theater. As we exited our taxi, Andrea and I were startled by blaring loudspeakers, banging drums, crowds of angry people yelling “Shame” and holding up signs saying “Bourla is a Nazi!” We were shaken and hurried inside past security guards who didn’t appear to be disturbed by the chaos. First there’d been talk about Russian oligarchs and now Nazis — were we making a mistake? Safely inside, we knew none of the elegantly dressed people at this cocktail party which allowed time for me to Google what Dr. Bourla had to do with Nazis.

I learned that in 2020 a Greek newspaper which had an anti-Semitic publisher warned its readers that Pfizer’s Jewish CEO will “stick the needle” into them. They called the company’s prospective COVID-19 vaccine “poison” and accused Bourla of resembling Dr. Josef Mengele who infamously experimented on prisoners. Despite the vaccines eventual success, it appears that this calumny has persisted and the demonstration outside the Jerusalem Theater was by wackos venting about vaccines, not very different from what we experience in our country where, sadly, we’re getting used to character assassination. So Andrea and I decided to relax and enjoy the evening.



Despite my initial reservations, the gala proved to be well produced and even at times inspiring. The charming emcee was Sarah Rafferty, an American actress who stars in a TV show called "Suits." There was rousing singing, especially from a Greek-Israeli icon Yehudi Poliker, and laudatory remarks about the honoree from President of Israel Isaac Herzog and Ambassador Ron Dermer. There were numerous references to *tikkun olam* and "whoever saves one life saves the world entire" and, finally, there was Dr. Bourla's gracious acceptance speech. He included the narrative of his courageous parents, especially his mother who was miraculously saved from a Nazi firing squad and whose constant reminder to her son was that nothing is impossible. Of course for me the highlight of the evening was the documentary film about Jews in Medicine much of which reflected what I'd written about so many years earlier. It was well done and I was proud to see my name listed among the credits.

A second surprise came when Andrea and I were exiting the theater and were handed a gift bag that contained a copy of Albert Bourla's newly published book *Moonshot. Inside Pfizer's Nine Month Race to Make the Impossible Possible*. Then we rushed through the fractious crowd of anti-vaxxers, luckily found a taxi and the next morning, after hours standing in airport lines, we began the twelve hour flight home. During much of that time I read Dr. Bourla's book which was a fascinating description of how under his leadership, Pfizer developed and then distributed their mRNA COVID-19 vaccine. What especially impressed me was how Bourla's family background and personal philosophy significantly transformed the company's corporate culture which, in turn, led to their dedicating maximum effort to developing the first safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine.

When Albert Bourla became Pfizer's CEO, he established as the company's primary goal, "Breakthroughs that change people's lives." In the early days of the pandemic he gathered his executive leadership team in a meeting room at corporate headquarters and asked each of them to hang on a wall photographs of patients who had inspired them personally. The idea was to remind them of the importance of decisions they would make to the people who matter most, the patients. Patients over profits would be their rallying cry and Dr. Bourla's insistence on making a difference in people's lives was especially intended for those who are the most disadvantaged. Words matter, but even more important are deeds and Pfizer's leaders committed the company to work fast on the vaccine. The CEO remembered his mother's message that "nothing is impossible" and repurposed a familiar corporate maxim that *Time is money* to *Time is life*.

As I read Albert Bourla's book while on the long airplane ride, it reminded me of what I'd written about in my own book back in 2006 when I distinguished between individual physicians who happened to be Jewish versus those who practiced a distinctive brand of "Jewish Medicine." In fact, this defied conventional thinking because from the perspective of science, there never has been a discrete body of work that was uniquely Jewish. I understood that many would object to such specificity, but I'd become discouraged that the medical profession was becoming dehumanized and wished to revitalize the reason why many of us had chosen to pursue a medical career. I wished to make Jewish physicians aware of their unique legacy and suggested that a worthy challenge for all physicians is how to integrate spiritual and social dimensions with scientific knowledge — as an old hasidic maxim observed, "Wisdom of the mind, without wisdom of the heart, is hopeless."

Any physician, Jewish or other, is enriched when they feel connected to something greater than themselves and one physician cited in my book was Julius Preuss, an esteemed German medical historian and Bible scholar. Before he died in 2013. Dr. Preuss stipulated in his will that nothing should be inscribed on his tombstone except for his name followed by three Hebrew words: *rophe, velo lo* — "physician, but *not* for himself". It was a succinct explanation of the Jewish physician's creed. Albert Bourla seemed to exemplify this same philosophy.

In my book I'd described the characteristics of what I called a "medical *mensch*." You don't have to be male and neither fame nor fortune is enough to qualify as a medical *mensch*. To be sure, many medical educators are striving to develop ways to incorporate "humanism" or "professionalism" into the curriculum, but such abstract terms mean different things to different people. True, they endorse virtuous behavior, but because they don't provide a useful prescription of how to do it, so as an alternative, I coined this easily understood term. Being a *mensch* is very much in the eye of the beholder. When someone's behavior is described as *menschlichkeit*, it suggests that their actions speak louder than their words. In the vernacular, when we call someone a *mensch*, we mean a person of high character, admirable, human in the best sense of the word. All physicians and related scientists should aspire to be medical *menschen* and Albert Bourla certainly qualifies.

It's tempting to be cynical about the Genesis Prize Foundation whose founding fathers were Russian oligarchs, and what's the point of giving a million dollars to Michael Bloomberg or Robert Kraft or still more honors to Steven Spielberg or Itzak Perlman? However, implicit in the award is that recipients will use the money and acclaim for

positive effect — indeed, Albert Bourla is donating his award and more to building a Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki, his Greek hometown where only 4% of some 50,000 Jews survived the war. Hopefully, others will be inspired to do likewise in an effort to repair the world. *Tikkun Olam*. To my mind, Albert Bourla is a worthy recipient of this year's Genesis Prize — he is inspired by traditional values and is a person who puts people first.

Michael Nevins, MD

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