

Business Mensch: Timeless Wisdom for Today's Entrepreneur

by Noah Alper

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Reviewed by David W. Gill www.ethixbiz.com

Would you believe that the first Noah's bagel shop opened just two blocks from my house in north Oakland in 1989? There is still a shop a couple blocks away but I rarely go there now. It feels like a franchise in a chain operation, with low skill, low talent, minimum wage kids donning plastic gloves to carefully parcel out the ingredients, making sure not to be too generous. It's not their fault and it's a lot better than many food chains but hardly the sensation it used to be. A similar thing happened to Togo sandwiches. We Berkeley guys used to get off the freeway heading south just to hit Togo's little shack next to San Jose State. It was worth a detour. Now that it is a big industrial chain, that memory is a distant one. It's not that Togo's is bad --- but it is industrial fast food.

From a culinary standpoint, and from a neighborhood standpoint, no chain stores will ever deliver what an indigenous, locally-owned and operated, neighborhood business can deliver. Today it is Bakesale Betty at the corner of Telegraph and 51st that (deservedly) has the lines running down the sidewalk every day. Or Genova Deli in the same neighborhood: still long lines and great service and food after decades.

But you can't blame Noah Alper for selling out to Einstein Bros on February 2, 1996, for one hundred million dollars. He had started Noah's six and a half years earlier and grown it to 38 stores and one thousand employees. And Noah Alper is no "one hit wonder": he also founded the natural food chain Bread & Circus and sold that company to Whole Foods before the bagel business began. *Business Mensch* is Noah's very personal, breezy, anecdotal, but wisdom- and insight-rich reflection of entrepreneurship, management, and values.

By "mensch" – a German and Yiddish term --- Noah means a "real character," a "businessman who is competitive, insightful, resourceful, nimble, and driven" but who "combines these qualities with an ethical backbone and has a 'shine' that is palpable" (p. 7). Noah Alper was Jewish by ethnic and family background and cultural association but not particularly thoughtful or observant growing up or in his early business career. But he says that "Noah's Bagels was a home run in large part because it was a specifically Jewish business, with Jewish values, a Jewish identity, and a Jewish soul" (p. 6). After the sale of Noah's, at just about age fifty, Alper made a pilgrimage to Israel that further awakened his appreciation for the spiritual and ethical heart of Judaism.

Business Mensch's chapters are organized around seven business and life principles: (1) have a little chutzpah --- be bold and willing to take risks; (2) discover yourself --- discover your own sense of purpose and be faithful to it; (3) go forth --- be active and engaged; (4) it takes a *shetl* (village)--- finding the right balance of independence and partnership/teaming with others; (5) the power of a mensch --- is in caring for others, not coldblooded authority; (6) come back stronger --- learn from failure and setbacks; (7) remember the Sabbath --- take time off, don't be a workaholic.

Business Mensch is full of quotations of Jewish (and other) terms, wise sayings, and common sense observations. This collection of fresh terminology and insight is worth the price of the book by itself. In addition, Noah provides many stories, vignettes, and anecdotes from his experiences, the losses as well as the wins. This is the kind of little book (166 pages) you could buy multiple copies of for your leadership

staff to read and then spend three hours discussing together how to apply the lessons in your own workplace.