

Stories about Seder Hayom

Rebbe Maharsh

During Yecidus the rebbe told a chossid that he envies him as he can review chassius in the market place while he is working. That is the point of "Dira BaTachtonim" that even while at the market place he can think about hashem.

A Matter of Life and Death

I was in a great hurry that morning. I was heading a delegation slated to meet with the German Minister of Education, and had only 30 minutes to get to the station where the two other representatives of the Meintz Jewish community awaited me and from where we would board the train to the capital.

I had already put on my coat when I heard an unfamiliar voice in the hallway asking to see me immediately. I heard my wife explaining that I was in a terrible rush and suggesting that the visitor come back the following day. "No!" the unknown voice cried. "Tomorrow will be too late. It's absolutely urgent -- a matter of life and death!"

I ran into the hallway and invited the stranger into my study. "Please tell me what the problem is very quickly," I said. "I'm about to leave to the station, and the carriage is already waiting."

"Yes, Rabbi. But first, Shalom Aleichem! Don't you recognize me?" the little white-haired old man asked.

"No, I'm sorry. But please get to the point. I can only give you a minute. You said..."

"Yes, Rabbi," the little man said, settling comfortably into a chair. "It is indeed a matter of life and death. But I'm surprised that you don't remember me. About a year ago I heard you give a sermon in your synagogue. Ay-ay-ay, what a sermon! Every word you uttered was a gem. I have a good memory, Rabbi. I could repeat it for you, if you'd like."

"My dear friend," I replied, "please get to the point. Otherwise, you'll be sitting here by yourself. I really must run."

"Alright, Rabbi. This is the story..."

"Thirty years ago I married a true 'woman of valor.' For 25 years we lived happily. Then, five years ago, my wife passed away..."

I was getting annoyed. "I'm afraid there's not much I can do at this point, is there?"

Come back tomorrow and I'll be more than happy to listen to your life story. But I simply must leave for the station. My train is departing in a few minutes."

The old man clutched my sleeve. "Please hear me out," he begged. "I assure you, the life of a live person is at stake. Let me continue..."

"A few years ago my son moved to America. After my wife died, he asked me to come live with him. I went, but I didn't like it in America, and I came back. That was a year ago, about the same time I heard your sermon. Ay-ay-ay, what a sermon! Every word was a pearl, a precious gem..."

"Again with the sermon!" I cried, looking at my watch.

"All right, I won't mention it again. But just listen to what happened. I arrived home a few days before the brit (circumcision) of my grandson, and was given the honor of being sandek (the one who holds the baby). Unfortunately, the day before the brit the baby got sick and died..."

"But that isn't why I'm here. Last week, my daughter gave birth to another son, and again asked me to be sandek."

"May the brit take place in a good and auspicious time," I mumbled, rushing to the door.

"But Rabbi!" the old man persisted. "I'm afraid. Don't you understand? I don't even want to say it aloud, but... Maybe I shouldn't be sandek?"

"So let someone else be sandek!" I said distractedly as I scrambled into the waiting carriage.

"And the name?" the visitor called after me. "What should we name the baby? Should we name him Yitzchak-Shlomo, as we planned to name the first baby? Or should we choose a different name? This is a life-and-death matter!"

"You want me to pick a name?" I cried, finally losing my patience. "Call him Abraham, Baruch, Chayim, David, Michah, Yerucham, Zerach ..."

"I'll pay you double if we get to the station on time!" I yelled to the driver, but it was too late. As soon as we arrived at the station we heard the train departing.

I was beside myself. How would we ever excuse our lateness to the Minister? Should we even go at all? But the other members of the delegation, who had waited for me at the station, were more amused than upset when

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they heard the cause for my delay. We decided to take the next train, scheduled to depart in two hours.

When we returned to the station later, the whole place was in an uproar. The train we had missed had been involved in a terrible accident. Many of the passengers had been killed and dozens were injured. In retrospect, the old man with his rambling story had been an emissary sent from G-d to save our lives. Indeed, it had been a matter of life-and-death...

The Minister had been very worried about us, and was delighted to learn that we had not been on the ill-fated train. The delegation's mission was conducted successfully.

Two years later, I passed through a certain village, and many of the townsfolk came out to greet me. Standing at the front of the line was none other than my old friend, the little white-haired man.

"Shalom Aleichem! Do you remember me? A few years ago I heard you give a sermon. Ay-ay-ay, what a sermon!" The old man held a small child in his arms. "This is my grandson, Abraham-Baruch-Chayim-David-Michah-Yerucham-Zerach."

"So many names?" I asked in surprise. "But you yourself told us to name him that!" the old man replied. "I have an excellent memory. I can even repeat your sermon word for word if you'd like. Ay, what a sermon that was..."

In the small town of Tschortkow in Galicia (Poland) there lived a learned and saintly man called Rabbi Hershelle Tschortkower. He was busy night and day, for he never refused his help to those who needed him. Some people sought his advice; others his blessing. And then there were the poor widows, orphans, sick people, and old ones who needed money for their daily bread. He was forever collecting money for those who were unable to help themselves.

One day Rabbi Hershelle Tschortkower decided that he needed an assistant, for there was too much work for him to do alone. So he hired a shamash (secretary) to share his responsibilities. Anshel Moses Rothschild, who was then a poor young man, was happy to accept this job. The Rabbi and the shamash became dear friends. But, after a few years, Anshel Moses decided to get married. He went to live in the nearby town of Sniatyn, where his

father-in-law opened a store for him. The Rabbi was happy about the marriage, but he was sad to see his shamash leave, for he had been a faithful, devoted assistant.

Several months later, on the night before Passover when a solemn search for leaven is conducted in the Jewish home, a terrible thing happened. Rabbi Hershelle Tschortkower was examining the drawers in his desk, when he discovered that his purse with five hundred guldens was missing! That was money that had been collected to help orphans, widows and others in need. The Rabbi pulled out the entire drawer and checked the desk more carefully. Then he pulled out the rest of the drawers to search them again. He looked under the desk and behind the desk, but the purse was not to be found. The Rabbi's heart was filled with pain. It took a long time to collect all that money, and now he had no way of helping unfortunate, helpless poor people.

Then he began to feel even more sad, for he suddenly realized that the only one who had known about the purse was Anshel Moses. The Rabbi had always trusted him; but who else could have taken the money? There was no other explanation.

Yet the Rabbi found it hard to believe that Anshel Moses might be a thief. Perhaps, thought the Rabbi, there was an explanation for the whole thing. Maybe Anshel Moses had borrowed the money when he went to Sniatyn to get married. Maybe he was already planning to return it? The Rabbi decided not to tell anyone about the missing money. He did not want to embarrass Anshel Moses, or let people know that he even suspected him. He decided to travel to Sniatyn to discuss the matter with Anshel Moses and give him an opportunity to clear up the matter.

Immediately after the festival, the Rabbi hired a wagon and went to visit Anshel Moses. Anshel Moses was very pleased to have such an honored visitor. Then the Rabbi told him the reason for his visit. The Rabbi said that he was sure Anshel Moses had only meant to borrow the money, and he was sure would return it now. G-d would forgive him for his wrongdoing, and no one would ever know about it. If it had been his own money, the Rabbi said, he would not have been so concerned, but this was money collected for people who otherwise might starve or suffer hardships, G-d forbid. And

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he himself had little money, so the stolen money had to be found immediately. As the Rabbi spoke, Anshel grew pale and frightened, and his eyes filled with tears. He went to his money-box, emptied it, and without a word gave all the money to the Rabbi. The money was counted, but it was only half of the total sum. With deep regret, Anshel Moses promised to give the rest of the money to the Rabbi as quickly as possible.

The Rabbi was both relived and saddened. Anshel had not said word in self-defense. He had offered no excuses for his conduct. The tears in his eyes were proof of his shame and guilt. That made the Rabbi sad. He was happy, however, that Anshel Moses had realized his mistake and was returning the money.

The Rabbi thanked Anshel Moses. They shook hands and embraced, and the Rabbi said that everything was forgiven and forgotten.

During the next few months, Anshel Moses worked longer hours than ever and saved his money carefully to repay the Rabbi. The Rabbi realized that Anshel Moses was an honest and fine young man who had indeed deserved his trust and respect. Anshel Moses had made a mistake, but he was eager to make amends.

One morning, there was a loud knock on the Rabbi's door. He was surprised to see the Chief of Police standing there. The Chief asked the Rabbi to come with him to the Police Station on some important business. A horse and carriage were waiting in front of the house.

The Rabbi was very puzzled. He was afraid that there might be a serious problem. He prayed to G-d it should not be connected with any danger to the Jewish community. The Police Chief brought the Rabbi to his office and in a very friendly way asked him if anything had been stolen from his house recently.

The Rabbi who had never spoken to anyone about the missing money was completely surprised. He told the Police Chief about the missing purse, but assured him that the one who took it had since returned the money. It was a young man who was getting married and needed the money. He really only meant to borrow it. The Police Chief asked a few more questions and he looked very bewildered by the entire story.

"You Jews are a wonderful people," the Police Chief said with respect and admiration. "Never in my life have I heard of anything like this!"

Then he opened the drawer of his desk, pulled out a purse and handed it to the Rabbi. Do you recognize it?" he asked. It was now the Rabbi's turn to look bewildered. This was certainly his missing purse, but how did it come here? The door opened and a police officer brought in a handcuffed peasant woman.

"Do you recognize her?" asked the Chief of Police. The Rabbi shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I don't," he answered, still mystified by the happenings.

"Well, I suppose you are busy with your work and do not notice the cleaning woman who comes to clean your house. Anyway, it does not matter. She has confessed." And then the Chief of Police told his story.

When the woman was cleaning the house before Passover, she happened to find the purse. She took it to her house and buried it in the garden near a tree.

A few days later, she took some golden coins and went to buy new clothes. Then she decided to stop working, for now she had plenty of money. A week passed, and she took some more guldens to buy new boots and shoes. The neighbors became suspicious and reported it to the police.

It didn't take long for them to catch her. They found her digging in the garden, and when she was opening the purse, the police arrested her. There were only four coins missing. "Here you are, Rabbi," said the Chief of Police with a friendly smile.

"But you know," he said, "I just can't understand what you said. Why did that young man pay for the theft when he was not guilty? And why didn't he explain to you that he was not at fault?"

The Rabbi shook his head. This was something he could not explain.

The next day the Rabbi traveled to Sniatyn. He rushed out of the wagon, ran up to Anshel Moses, and tearfully asked his forgiveness. "Why did you not tell me that you were innocent?" asked the Rabbi in a trembling voice.

Anshel Moses explained that the sadness and worry of the Rabbi had deeply touched him. He knew that if the truth were told, and he offered to help, the Rabbi would have refused to accept it, knowing that Anshel

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Moses was far from a rich man. So Anshel Moses and his wife gave everything they owned to the Rabbi, and for many months they saved every penny to complete the missing amount.

The Rabbi embraced Anshel Moses and blessed him to have great riches so that he might always be able to help the poor and needy of his people. "Here is the money you so kindly paid out of your pocket. Go to Frankfort, Germany, where you will have a better chance to succeed in business, as well as to do good deeds. May G-d be with you and your wife and children for generations to come."

The blessing of Rabbi Hershele Tschortkower was fulfilled. Anshel Moses became a successful merchant and banker in

Frankfort. His son, Mayer Anshel Rothschild, was even more successful. His five sons settled in different capitals in Europe, and they carried on their banking business in partnership and their wealth increased from generation to generation. A grandson of Mayer Anshel, Baron Edmund de Rothschild of France, head of the House of Rothschild, earned the name of *Hanadiv Hayadua* -- "The Famous Benefactor." He helped many Jews in many different ways. He died in Paris in 1934 at the age of ninety.

So this was the secret of the Rothschilds' success -- the unselfish generosity of an ordinary man, a man who gave charity without letting anyone know of his great sacrifice.