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A Sure Thing

By David Koppelman



Rav Chaim of Brisk

Rav Chaim of Brisk, known as the Gaon of Brisk, was renowned for his compassion.

One day during the reign of Czar Nicholas II of Russia, a young Jewish man was arrested and accused of committing a heinous and revolutionary act, punishable by death. His distraught mother came running to Rav Chaim, crying and imploring him to use his influence on a high official whom he knew, and intervene on behalf of her son. Rav Chaim promised to do whatever was in his power to help free the prisoner.

The Gaon discussed this matter with some of his close associates, who begged him not to get involved. “Don’t endanger your own life by trying to defend this criminal!” they pleaded.

Rav Chaim remained stubborn in his determination. “Let’s examine the facts,” he said. “Pidyon shebuyim (redeeming captives) is definitely a great misvah. That is one fact. That this heartbroken mother is suffering terribly is also a definite fact. But your fears that I might endanger myself by getting involved is only a hypothesis. The Gemara teaches us (Pesachim 9a) that something which is in doubt cannot take precedence over the definite. And all the more so when there are two existing facts...”

Rav Chaim succeeded in freeing the youngster. (Glimpses of Greatness)

Reprinted from the Parashat Re’eh 5782 email of Rabbi David Bibi’s Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace.

The Secrets of Tzadikim



Rav Shimon Finkelman relates a great story. When the Chofetz Chaim was fifteen years old, he went to the town of Horodna so that he could learn from a Tzadik known as Reb Nachum'ke of Horodna. The Chofetz Chaim later considered Reb Nachum'ke his main Rebbe.

After spending a little time diligently observing Reb Nachum'ke's ways and learning a lot from him, he came to realize that Reb Nachum'ke

carefully concealed many of his great deeds so that others would not recognize his full greatness. The Chofetz Chaim understood that although Reb Nachum'ke was acclaimed as one of the greatest Tzadikim of that time, people were unaware of his true greatness.

Reb Nachum'ke was the Shamash of the Chevrah HaShas Shul in Horodna, and he considered it an honor to care for the needs of a place

that was dedicated to Tefilah and learning Torah. The Chofetz Chaim noticed an interesting practice of Reb Nachum'ke. Every night after everyone had left the Shul after Ma'ariv, Reb Nachum'ke would lock the Shul's door from the inside, shutter all the windows, and remain in the Shul for quite some time.

A Mystery to the Chofetz Chaim

What Reb Nachum'ke did during this time was a mystery that the Chofetz Chaim wanted to solve, because he desired very much to learn from the Tzadik's ways so that he could improve his own Avodas Hashem. One night, after Ma'ariv, as the people filed out of Shul, the Chofetz Chaim quietly hid behind a bench in the back of the Shul, being careful not to make any noise. He could hear Reb Nachum'ke bolt the door, and shuttering the windows, as Reb Nachum'ke went about his nightly chores in the Bais Medrash, getting it ready for the next morning.

Seemingly Nothing Out of the Ordinary

It seemed that he was doing nothing out of the ordinary, but Chofetz Chaim was sure that if Reb Nachum'ke saw it necessary to lock the Shul during these hours, there must be a good reason for it, so he continued to hide quietly behind the bench. At midnight, Reb Nachum'ke walked over to the Bimah in the center of the

Shul, and reached into its bottom compartment.

The Chofetz Chaim watched as Reb Nachum'ke pulled out a box, and from the bottom of it, he removed a Sefer on Kabbalah. He then lit a candle and began to learn. Suddenly, a flash of light appeared. A fire had broken out! Bright orange flames danced about in the center of the shul, but Reb Nachum'ke, engrossed in his Sefer, did not seem to notice them.

A Frightening Fire

It seemed to the Chofetz Chaim that Reb Nachum'ke would be engulfed in fire at any second! The Chofetz Chaim opened his mouth to shout a warning to Reb Nachum'ke, when he realized that Reb Nachum'ke was not actually in any danger. The Chofetz Chaim comprehended that this was not a fire that consumed. It was not an ordinary earthly fire. It was a Heavenly fire, created by Reb Nachum'ke's learning!

The Chofetz Chaim remained in his hiding place and watched this amazing sight. When Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz, the Rosh Yeshivah of Kamenitz, heard this story, he said that he was amazed that the Chofetz Chaim, at such a young age, was able to distinguish between an ordinary fire and a fire from Shamayim, and this was more surprising to him than the fact that Reb Nachum'ke's Torah learning could even cause such a fire to appear!

The person who told this story over to Rav Baruch Ber said he heard it directly from the Chofetz Chaim, but he added that he had more to tell. After hearing this story from the mouth of the Chofetz Chaim, this very student said to his Rebbi, the Chofetz Chaim, “Now that I have been privileged to hear this story from the Rebbi, I would like to relate a similar story in which I was involved.”

Went Off Alone into the Forest

He went on to explain that those who were privileged to be close to the Chofetz Chaim knew that from time to time he went off alone into the forest, and what he did there, no one ever knew. He described that he recently followed the Chofetz

Chaim on one of his visits to the forest, and he explained to his Rebbi that his intentions in doing this were proper, just as his were when he hid behind the bench in Reb Nachum’ke’s Shul, and he only desired to absorb whatever he could from his teacher. He said that he followed the Chofetz Chaim into the woods, and he watched as the Chofetz Chaim stopped at a clearing in the woods, picked up a stick, and drew a circle in the dirt.

The Chofetz Chaim then stepped into the circle, looked up toward Shamayim, and said, “Ribono Shel Olam! I come before You today with an urgent request, a valid and important request, which must be granted in full. Hashem, I will not leave this circle until my Tefilah has been accepted and my request is fulfilled!”

Left the Circle and Returned Home

After a few moments, the Chofetz Chaim left the circle and returned home. The student said to the Chofetz Chaim, “Rebbi, I did not see any fire descend from Shamayim, or any other sign that the request had been granted. But if the Rebbi went home, that means that the Rebbi somehow knew that his request had been granted. How did the Rebbe know?” The Chofetz Chaim did not reply.

Rav Shimon Finkelman writes that when we speak of a hidden Tzadik, we usually refer to a Jew who appears to be quite ordinary, but, unknown to most people, he serves Hashem in a very special way. The Navi tells us (Michah 6:8) that one who truly desires to be close to Hashem will excel in the Middah of Hatznei’a Leches, serving Hashem simply for Hashem’s sake, without fanfare, and without a desire for honor. He will seek to disguise and conceal his great deeds to the best of his ability, so that they will be known only to Hashem.

The Chofetz Chaim was a Tzadik who was known around the world, yet, there were deeds that he concealed during his lifetime from everyone. We can be sure that there were other deeds which he concealed from everyone, and Reb Nachum’ke did

this as well, and these are actions that will never be revealed, and will remain hidden forever, and this is the most desirable form of Avodas Hashem

Reprinted from the Parshas Re'eh 5782 email of Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg's Torah U'Tefilah.

The COVID-19 Informer

Rabbi Yoel Gold told a story about a couple that was getting married in Israel right at the start of the pandemic. They decided to make the wedding quickly with just immediate family before Israel went on lockdown. Only 20 people came to attend.

Right after the kedushin, the mishtarah—police showed up, saying they received an anonymous tip, and demanded that everyone evacuate the venue. They were afraid coronavirus would be transmitted so the police slapped everyone with a 5,000-shekel fine and sent everyone home, except the bride and groom, who were required to wait outside against the building in the cold.

Surrounded by Police with Guns

Picture it: Tamar—the bride—in her wedding dress, David—the groom—in his tuxedo, were surrounded by police with guns, shivering from cold. By the time the police let them go, the wedding was ruined, and the couple was in debt on their very first day as husband and wife. The couple tried their hardest to stay happy, to dance, to cheer each other up, to not cry. As much as they knew it was for the best, they were so disappointed and heartbroken with how the night turned out.

Seven months later, David got a phone call, and he was visibly upset after hanging up. His wife asked him, “What’s wrong?” He said, “That was my father. A young man in kollel contacted him to say that he was the person who gave the police the tip at the wedding, and he’d like to speak to us.” “Should we go?” Tamar asked. “I guess so... maybe it will help us come to terms with how our wedding turned out.”

Felt a Tremendous Guilt

They went to meet the boy. He explained to them that COVID-19 had just emerged in Israel, and he was extremely afraid of the new virus. He heard the music and assumed it was a big wedding, so he called to tell the police there was a party going on next door at the hall. Since that night, he felt a tremendous guilt. He was also in shidduchim and usually got calls with matches. Since the wedding, not

one shadchan had called with a date, and when he reached out to matchmakers, he could not get set up with anyone. He knew he had to apologize to this couple. He tracked them down and was begging for their forgiveness.

The newlyweds, so traumatized from the event, told him they needed some time. After a few days, on Erev Yom Kippur, they decided that even though it was so hard, they would put it all behind them. They would forgive him. They called him, and the bochur broke into tears, crying, “I’m so sorry for what I did. Please forgive me.” The couple was emotional and accepted his sincere apology.

They went into Yom Kippur feeling so at peace, knowing that they overcame a huge challenge, and they felt comfortable asking Hashem for forgiveness when they did the same a few hours earlier.

A Very Bad Car Accident

The next day, while David was building the Sukkah, Tamar was driving to work, and she was in a bad car accident. Three cars plowed into hers. When David got to the hospital, the doctor walked into Tamar’s room and said, “Your wife must have G-d watching over her.” The whole car was completely totaled, except for the driver’s side! Not only that, but the airbag should have deployed on impact, and for some reason it didn’t. Tamar was newly pregnant and would have lost her child.

Tamar said, “Hashem must have had a sentence on me. And in His kindness, He orchestrated this whole situation with the wedding and having to forgive this yeshivah boy, for us to have the zechut, for me and my son to be saved. When we forgive Hashem’s children, Hashem forgives us. When we hold grudges, they weigh us down and they’re very hard for us. And when we forgive, we become lighter and happier, and we become better people for it.”

Reprinted from the Parashat Re’eh 5782 email of Jack E. Rahmey based on the Torah teachings of Rabbi Amram Sananes.

The Kosher Soldier

By Rabbi Reuven Semah

Years ago, there was a city in Lithuania called Kovno. In order to prevent the desecration of the Jewish cemetery, it was necessary to evacuate the graves and transfer them to a safe place. The Jewish workers discovered two people buried there whose bodies were still completely intact.

When this occurs, this is a clear sign that the person was very righteous. It was revealed that one was the Rabbi of Kovno, and the other was known as the “Jewish soldier,” and on his tombstone was written, “Here lies the kosher Jewish soldier.”

Their curiosity drove them to find out what was so special about him to have caused his body to be preserved completely. It was written in the town records that this soldier served in the gentile army. He refused to eat anything unkosher while serving in the army, and never ate any food from the army. He subsisted solely on raw fruits and vegetables.

One day his fellow soldiers decided that they would force him to become impure at all costs. They took some hot unkosher soup and tried to force him to eat it. The holy soldier refused to take it. They continued to force him until he choked on the soup and died.

His sacrifice for the purity of kosher food sanctified his body to such a level that the body remained whole and perfect. How fortunate we are to have the opportunity to purify ourselves by eating only the purest of kosher foods. Shabbat Shalom.

Reprinted from the Parashat Re'eh 5782 email of Rabbi David Bibi's Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace.

The Screaming Poor Man

By Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

A story is told of a Rabbi who used to give out money to poor people every Friday to help them with their Shabbat expenses. Many people would come to him every week, and he would always give everyone the same amount of money. One week, a man came to the Rabbi and asked if he could get twice the amount. The Rabbi explained sympathetically that he doesn't give anyone more than the set amount. The man then began to scream insulting remarks at the Rabbi, after which he stormed out of the Rabbi's office.

The Rabbi told his attendant, “Quickly, run after him and give him the money he was asking for.” When the attendant left to catch the man, the other people in the room asked the Rabbi, “Why would you give him more money after the way he just disrespected you?”

The Rabbi said, “I know this man. He has been here many times before and he has never acted this way. It must be that he is under extreme pressure this week due to his dire situation and he just lost control. My honor is not important. What matters

right now is to get him what he needs in order to help him out of his difficult situation.”

Reprinted from the Parashat Re'eh 5782 email of Rabbi David Bibi's Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace.

The Protection of Charity

Two families, the Horowitzs and Itzkowitzs, made a shidduch with their children and the local townspeople could hardly wait for the wedding. As the two wealthiest families in town, this was sure to be an event you didn't want to miss!

Two weeks before the wedding, Mr. Horowitz receives an urgent message that Mr. Itzkowitz's factory just burned down, and all his money was gone. Now he is not exactly the richest man in town anymore - to say the least.

Shocked, Mr. Horowitz didn't waste a moment and hurried to the Rabbi's home. "The wedding is off," he cried, "If Mr. Itzkowitz can't pay his share of the deal, I can't do such a shidduch!"

The Rabbi thought for a moment. "Okay, not a problem," he replied, "but now is erev Shabbos. Come back after Shabbos and we'll discuss." Well, if the Rabbi said it's not a problem, then he has nothing to worry about. Shabbos was relaxed.

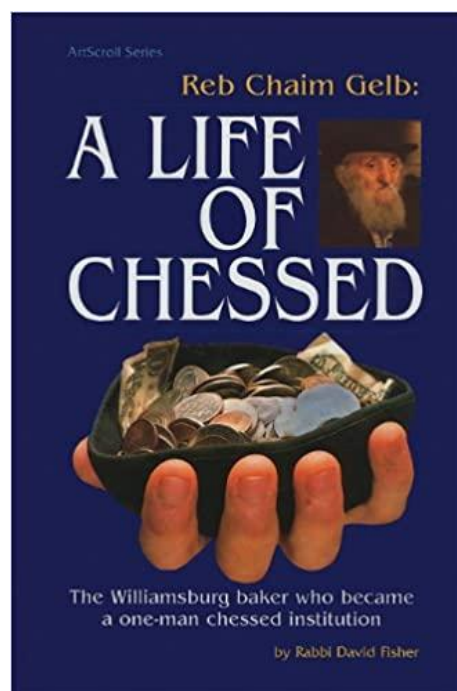
Immediately after Shabbos, Mr. Horowitz hurried to the Rabbi's home together with Mr. Itzkowitz to discuss the details. After hearing both sides, the Rabbi declared: "Mr. Horowitz should pay for both sides of the wedding!"

Mr. Horowitz was stumped. What kind of deal was this? "Yes," explained the Rabbi, with a great deal of patience. "You have good luck - your factory didn't burn down. Now you should show some gratitude to Hashem that you can afford the expenses and pay for the entire wedding!"

The world is a cycle, explains the Kli Yakar. Some people get rich while others remain poor; and then the tide turns. Money disappears from wealthy families while the more needy get rich. This is to stand as a constant reminder for us that this world is only temporary - nothing lasts forever. For this reason, the Torah tells us that one should give readily to charity and in return, Hashem will bless him and his children. The tide will keep turning in his benefit.

Reprinted from the Parshas Re'eh 5782 email of Rabbi Dovid Hoffman's Toral Tavlin.

The Legendary Reb Chaim Gelb of Williamsburg



We all know wonderful baalei tzedakah, charitable, generous people, who easily part with checks, but refuse to visit or come face-to-face with the poor man, or the individual who is in need. Empathizing with the indigent provokes feelings of guilt. Some well-meaning people just do not want to come face-to-face with the fellow who is in need.

Giving the check does not exonerate a person from empathizing with his friend's plight. He must be nosei b'ol im chaveiro, carrying the yoke with his friend. See it, feel it, get into it, and then help him. Let him know that someone cares. For some, receiving a check without meeting/speaking to the benefactor is for some an experience they would rather forgo.

A Permanent Fixture at Weddings and in Shuls

In order to appreciate the following story, one must first have somewhat of an idea concerning the personality of Reb Chaim Gelb, zl. To those who go back over fifty years, we remember Reb Chaim as a permanent fixture at weddings and in shuls all over Williamsburg.

Reb Chaim was an immigrant who came to these shores in 1901. From a spiritual vantage point, America was a disaster. Kashrus and Shabbos had been left in Europe. The handful of observant Jews was the exception to the rule. The prospects of a young man growing up observant were bleak. Poverty was rampant, especially for one who insisted on observing Shabbos. The job market was open only to one who was willing to work six days a week, with the sixth day being Shabbos kodesh.

His Love of Hashem and His People Superseded All Else

Some remained strongly committed to the religious lifestyle they had experienced in their European hometown. Reb Chaim Gelb was one of them. He was a man whose love of Hashem and His people superseded all else. His entire life was devoted to helping his brothers and sisters, but it was not only Jews whom he helped. He is vividly remembered as dashing through the snow in sub-zero weather numerous times to bring fresh cake and hot coffee to shivering firefighters battling a blaze.

Others remember him purchasing hot knishes for young yeshivah students whose parents could not afford even basic staples, let alone delicacies. He felt, and obviously so, that just because a boy was poor, he should not be deprived of some of the delicacies enjoyed during recess by his wealthier friends.

I remember him going from wedding to wedding, collecting bills and coins in his outstretched yamulka. He then covertly transferred the collected funds to those in great need. Reb Chaim Gelb's life was the living embodiment of lovingkindness. He left this world imparting this legacy to all those who seek an exemplar of how the mitzvah of chesed should be executed. He taught that empathy can best be realized when one has a ringside seat to observe the poverty and pain of those whom he benefits.

True Chesed is Performed with Empathy

Veritably, the beneficiary benefits regardless, but true chesed is performed with empathy, which can only be felt first hand. When the benefactor personally observes the abject poverty to which some are subjected, he will give with feeling. He will be helping someone whom he knows, someone who is now family.

A family on the Lower East Side (Manhattan) was in dire need of assistance. When Reb Chaim heard of their plight, he immediately went to one of his wealthy supporters and solicited his help. When he apprised him of the abject poverty that reigned in their home, the man took out his checkbook and immediately made a handsome donation. He added, "If this is insufficient, you know my address. I am always willing to help."

Reb Chaim did not settle for the check alone, “I insist that you come with me to their house. I want you to see firsthand how they are suffering.” The man gave all kinds of excuses but when Reb Chaim refused to budge, he went with him. They traveled by car, the businessman’s car, which probably cost as much as most homes.

They arrived at the rundown apartment building which this family called home. The smell that permeated the hallway was overpowering; denizens of various nationalities lived here, and the odors of their cooking wafted through the air. The man remarked that the stench was so bad, they should have brought along a gas mask.

Building Was Not Equipped with an Elevator

They walked up a number of flights of stairs, since the building was not equipped with an elevator. They knocked on the door of the apartment and a young woman attired in a housecoat that had seen better days greeted them. Reb Chaim introduced his friend to the woman, who asked them to take a seat. The chairs were ancient and remnants of different sets of furniture. No two chairs matched.

They creaked under the guests’ weight, and they felt like they would give out at any moment. The hostess opened her icebox (prior to refrigerators, and furthermore, most people couldn’t afford them) to offer them some fruit. Nothing was in it. The icebox was empty. The woman apologized, “I have not gone shopping yet today.”

The truth was that she could not shop without money. Thus, the family simply starved until they could raise the money for provisions. When the man whispered to Reb Chaim that he needed to use the facilities, the woman said that the lavatory was in the hall and shared by all the occupants of that floor. He decided that he would wait.

“Mommy, Mommy, We are Starving”

The children burst through the door, having just come from school, “Mommy, mommy, we are starving!”

Their mother replied, “You had breakfast this morning. Why are you hungry?”

As soon as our guests leave, I will go to the store and buy you some goodies.” The children, aged two to seven, three boys and one girl, said that they would wait patiently. From the way they expressed themselves, the guests deduced that this was a nightly interchange. They had no food, because they had no money.

The woman asked Reb Chaim, “What brings you here today?”

He explained that he just wanted to check up on their welfare.

“Everything is fine,” she replied. “Only my husband is having great difficulty finding a job.”

The man looked at Reb Chaim and declared, “Fine, I have seen enough. I do not know how these people live.” He told the woman, “Here is my card. Have your husband call me, and I will give him a job.”

She replied, “I am sorry, but we have no phone.”

“Fine, have your husband come see me. I will take care of him.”

The man located a decent, furnished apartment for the family. The father was a hard worker and did very well. The visit changed the trajectory of their lives, all because Reb Chaim understood that seeing a situation up close makes a powerful impression. By seeing the poverty with his own two eyes, he realized that dismissing them with a check would never do. Before we give, we must see.

Reprinted from the Parshas Re'eh 5782 email of Rabbi A.L. Scheinbaum's Peninim on the Torah.

A Father is Always a Father



The story is told of Rebbe Hershele of Spinka who was a great Admor abroad, when he danced with the Sefer Torah in the hakafos on Simchas Torah. In the middle of hakafos, the Rebbe heard a large commotion that developed in the shul. He turned his head towards the noise and saw that there was indeed a quarrel at the side of the Bais HaMedrash. On the spot, the Rebbe handed the Sefer Torah to another man

who would continue to dance with the Sefer Torah and headed to the area of the quarrel.

In the midst of the fight, he saw that his son who was a young man fighting with an older man, each of them was trying to shout above the other one while all the men surrounding them were fanning the flames, all of them siding with the older man.

Why Didn't the Rebbe Try to Reconcile the Two Sides?

The Rebbe intervened on behalf of his young son and told the old man that if he could not stop, he should leave the Bais HaMedrash. Afterwards, when everything calmed down and the old man was appeased and everything returned to peace, they turned to the Rebbe to teach them how it happened that the Rebbe sided with his son in such an extreme way and did not even try to reconcile them at the time?

The Rebbe replied, "I heard the sound of a quarrel, I looked and realized that everyone had come out against my son, and no one tried to protect him and understand what was in his heart. At that moment, I decided to take off the mantle of the rabbinate! I removed the title of Admor from me, I set the hakafos on the side, and I approached my son to be his father! In a situation like this when everyone was attacking him, I felt that the child should know that he has a father who supports him and will be his father, no matter what!!!"

[Of course, afterwards he was treated properly.] Our teacher, Rav Gamliel, told the story and said that he once received testimony from a man whose son had completely gone off the derech and left everything. The same man when he heard the story was very moved and turned to his son and said, "My son, I want you to know one thing. I want you to know and take to your heart well, no matter where you are or what situation you will be in, always remember that in any situation you may find yourself, I am your father!!! I was your father when you were a baby, and as a child, and I will always be your father!!!"

Returned with a Wholehearted Teshuva

It was not long before the boy returned with wholehearted Teshuva, and he later said that this sentence had transformed him. How appropriate is this story for the month of Elul! Hashem, Who is the King of all kings is our Father! And if we want, then He is able to act as an uncle for us, the main thing is that we get close to him, and earn a good writing and seal [kesivah v'chasimah tovah].

Reprinted from the Parshas Shoftim 5782 email of Tiv Hakehila.