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The Eight Ivys and the Seven Sisters

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles



Dr. Rivkah Blau

In the late 1950s, Jewish day school graduates began finding themselves in Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges [1] and I [**Dr. Rivkah Blau**] was one of them.

On campus, we encountered an environment that was often hostile to Jews. Classes were held on Shabbat and exams were often given on holidays; we bought our own kosher food, but we still had to pay for room and board and could not bring

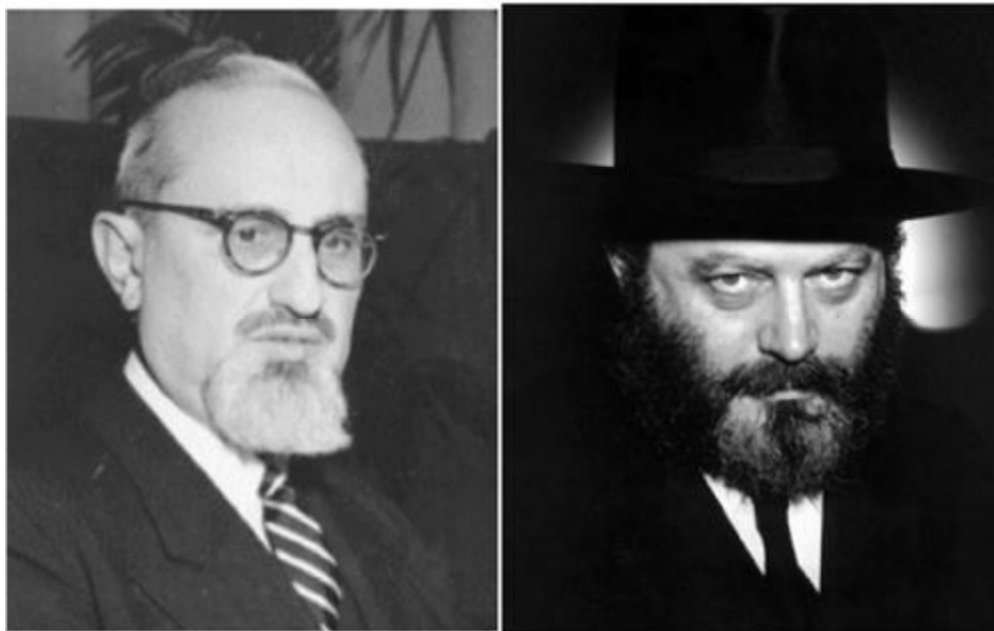
our food into the dormitories. We also found that people were asking us questions about Judaism that we couldn't answer. Despite our years of yeshiva education, many of us felt that we didn't know enough, and we wanted to continue learning.

We began organizing different groups: At Barnard, where I was, we called our group *Ari*; at Columbia, they called theirs *Yeshurun* and used to gather for afternoon prayers in the laboratory of a doctoral student; in Harvard, they called it *Taryag*; while Cornell had a Young Israel House with a kosher kitchen.

The Goal was to Promote Jewish Learning and Observance on Campus

Once we heard about each other, we decided to establish a single body to coordinate all the groups. We called it *Yavneh* and our founding convention was in February 1960. Our goal was to promote Jewish learning and observance on campus, to ensure that Jewish students wouldn't feel alone, and that if they wanted to learn more, we would be there to help them.

Everybody had his or her own reason for the name, but I was trying to carry on an organization that my father, **Rabbi Mordechai-Pinchas Teitz**, [2] had started before immigrating to America, when he was a fourteen-year-old in Latvia. After coming home from the Ponevezh yeshiva and discovering that the boys he had grown up with had joined the Communist Party, he founded a club called *Yavneh* for Jewish boys to learn and have fun while getting a better feeling about their Jewishness.



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe of blessed memories

Communal leaders took a keen interest in our new group and rabbis like my father and **Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik** thought it was a wonderful initiative, as

did **the Lubavitcher Rebbe**. They helped us by speaking on our behalf, raising money for us, introducing us to influential people, and doing whatever they could to help Yavneh flourish.

At first, I was the secretary of the organization. By the next year, 1961, I was its vice-president. At around this time, the Rebbe had a representative, **Rabbi Moshe Feller**, [3] who would come to Columbia and who became friendly with the president of Yavneh, Joel Levine. This young rabbi told Joel, who then told me, that the Rebbe wanted to meet with two officers of Yavneh, to discuss our activities and how we had gotten started.



Rabbi Mordechai-Pinchas Teitz, z"l
The father of Rivka Blau

Our appointment was for ten o'clock at night, but when we came to 770 Eastern Parkway there were so many people waiting to see him that we only came into his office at midnight. The Rebbe greeted us warmly; I brought him regards from my father, and he sent regards back. He was behind a desk, and he asked us to sit in two chairs across from him.

The Rebbe started listing the languages in which we could conduct the meeting - it was a funny moment, since he was giving so many options, and he did it with a smile. When he reached Russian or French, we settled on English as our language of choice.

He began asking us many detailed questions. He wanted to know how we had started Yavneh and how we had found each other; the problems, the possibilities, and the opportunities for people who were interested in finding out more about their Jewishness; our plan for reaching those people; what we found worked well and what did not. He had a purpose, and his questions were to the point.

I didn't know it at that time, but it became evident to me later on that since Chabad was planning to set up activities for Jewish college students, he wanted to have a sense of what exactly was going on from people who were in the thick of it. At the end he said, "I've asked you a lot of questions; would you like to ask me some questions?"

The Young Man Had Challenging Questions for the Rebbe

"No, thank you." I declined. It had been a wonderful meeting and I had nothing to ask him. However, the fellow who was with me did have a question. "I have spent a Shabbat or two here in Crown Heights and I hear all kinds of wonder stories about you. I hear that you know whether a person should have surgery, and you know which way to proceed with a legal case. Do you know more medicine than the doctors? Do you know more law than lawyers? What is this?"

The Rebbe smiled, apparently unperturbed by the audaciousness of the question. "You know," he replied, "when a house is built, the architect draws up a blueprint. He gives the blueprint to the contractor and then the contractor tells the plumber how to do the plumbing, the mason how to do the masonry, the electrician how to do the electrical work. It's not that the contractor can do the tasks better than everybody, but he can read the blueprint, and that's why he can give the instructions."

He then quoted the *Zohar* which states that the Torah is the blueprint for the world and explained that by understanding Torah, one can determine what should be done in other realms as well. "No, I don't know law better than the lawyers or medicine better than the doctors, but based on what I have learned in the Torah, I can give people advice."

Can All the Miracle Stories About You be True?

I thought that was a beautiful answer and was ready to go, but unfortunately this young man had another question. "Alright," he persisted, "but I hear these miraculous stories about you. Can they all be true?"

I thought this question was inappropriate, but the Rebbe wasn't taken aback at all. He had a sense of humor, and he knew how to respond to this young man. Laughing, he said, "People don't tell me stories about myself - they figure I know them already, so I have no idea what stories are being told about me, and I can't vouch for them."

He then gave a list of great Torah sages who were either not chasidic or were opposed to the movement, and said, "I have read stories, in books that I trust, about these people and the wondrous things that they did. You can believe those stories, but I would have to check out the stories that are being told about me."

It was such a wonderful answer, and he handled the interaction graciously.

When we came out, I saw Rabbi Herschel Schacter waiting in line, and I apologized that our audience had gone on for so long.



Rabbi Herschel Schacter

“Oh, don’t worry, this is going to go on until 3 or 4 in the morning,” he said. “This is what goes on every night at the Rebbe’s.

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*Source: Lightly edited and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from a weekly email of "Here's My Story, a part of JEM's extraordinary "My Encounter with the Rebbe" project.*

*After earning her PhD at Columbia University, **Dr. Rivkah Blau** worked as an educator in several yeshivah high schools and colleges, and authored 'Learn Torah, Love Torah, Live Torah', a biography of her father, HaRav Mordechai Pinchas Teitz, z"l. She was interviewed in May 2007.*

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*[1] In those days, The Ivy League colleges were all-male, but most of them had associated all-women colleges.*

*[2] Long term Rabbi and community leader in Elizabeth, NJ. {See also, story #216 in this Email stories list.)*

*[3] Who since 1962 has been the chief Chabad representative in Minnesota.*

*Reprinted from the Parshas Tetzaveh 5884 email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed in Israel.*

# Screaming My Name

By Rabbi Zechariah Wallerstein, zt”l



**Rabbi Zechariah Wallerstein**

Years ago, I was in Florida for a few days and it happened to be raining. Given the inclement weather, my wife and I decided we’d go to the Sawgrass Mills mall for a few hours. We left Miami at 2:00 knowing that Mincha was at 5:20.

But, not native to Florida, I got so lost on my way driving to the mall that we only got there at 4:55. Knowing that Mincha was in a short while, I phoned the shul near Fort Lauderdale and asked how long it would take me to get from the mall to the shul. “40 minutes,” I was told. But that wasn’t good. “Can I make it in 25 minutes?”

## **“How Could This Happen?”**

Despite my question, I had the feeling that the answer was no. “It 4:55 and it’s rush hour. It’ll be at least 40 minutes.” Now I knew that I don’t miss davening at a minyan and especially to miss it because I decided to go shopping. How could this happen? I had left for the mall with enough time to make it to Mincha, except I had gotten very lost and here I now was.

“Why don’t you ask if there’s a shul that’s closer to Sawgrass?” prompted my wife. Asking the shul secretary, I was told that there is a Lubavitch shul in Plantation. “I don’t know if they have a minyan every day though,” she said, “but it’s closer to you—15 minutes away.”

That sounded like a great idea. I’d get there in time. Still unsure if they’d be having a minyan, I called the shul just in case. No answer, but I did find out the



address. At this point, I figured that I should go on the off chance that they did have a minyan, and even if they didn't, at least I'd be able to daven in a shul which is preferred to davening at home. So off I went, dropping my wife off at the mall.

The shul was located in a strip mall near a Walgreens in Plantation, which I had never heard of. I had gotten lost going to Fort Lauderdale, and had the feeling that I'd have no chance finding this small shul in 25 minutes. So, I went slowly, driving from one block to the next and asking at each corner how to get closer to the strip mall near Walgreens.



Chabad of Plantation, Florida

Time wasn't stopping, and soon it was 5:15, then 5:20, and finally 5:25. I still didn't know if there would be a minyan, and even if there would be, I missed it already. Eventually though, to my surprise and relief, I arrived at Walgreens and noticed the sign that read Chabad. I figured that even if I missed the minyan accidentally, at least I'd be able to daven in a shul.

I came driving up, and standing outside the shul door was a man. "We need a minyan," he said, "and you're the man." I walked in and I was the tenth guy.

As I took a seat, I understood why I needed to get lost. Had I not, I would have gone to Fort Lauderdale and the Chabad here would not have had a minyan. My whole getting lost and being worried that I was going to miss the minyan was all so that I could make a minyan to help these people. (Truthfully, maybe this is so, but maybe not. Had I not been the tenth man, they would have called another guy and

they would have gotten a minyan anyway. It just so happened that Hashem arranged for me to be the tenth man both because they needed a minyan and I did too).

As I settled into the davening, I noticed an older man who I recognized. I couldn't believe that I'd know anyone in Plantation, Florida, but something about him looked familiar. Keeping my thoughts to myself, as I finished Mincha, the man came over to me.

"You're Rabbi Wallerstein, right?"

"I'm not speaking tonight," I said, trying to play down any requests.

### **Asked to be the Chazan for Arvit**

"No, you're Rabbi Wallerstein. You know, my grandchildren were in your class." I then put it together and figured out who he was. "I'd like you to be the Chazan for Arvit," he said.

That wasn't the only encounter I'd have that evening at the shul.

After I finished Maariv and started making my way out the door, a man accompanied me. Quickly, he turned to chatting with me. "So, you're a rabbi and a rebbe?"

"Yeah, I am," I said.

"I wanted to tell you who I am," he then added. I didn't think I knew him. After telling me his name, nothing registered, and I could tell he was surprised.

"You don't recognize my name?" I shook my head.

"I was on the Israeli Olympic Soccer team five times. Doesn't ring a bell?" Half-jokingly I told him that if someone is not on the Yankees or Giants, I don't know their name. With that, he began telling me about himself.

"I was on a team when I was pretty young, and as it happened, I sustained an injury. From that point on, I was never as good as I used to be. But then my father passed away, and I started saying Kaddish."

### **The Impact of Kaddish on the Child is Tremendous**

As he said those words, I began to sense where he was going with the story. We tend to think that the Kaddish said by a child when their parent passes away is for the parent. And while that is true, the impact it has on the child is tremendous. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish people have become baalei teshuva later in their life when they had no choice but to go to shul.

Even those who are irreligious feel that for that year, they owe their parents to say Kaddish. Coming to shul, meeting people, giving tzedakah and keeping Shabbos becomes one of the last chances a person has to do teshuva. So many times, through saying Kaddish, the child returns to Yiddishkeit. They're not only helping their parent, but they are helping themselves.



“As I started saying Kaddish for my father,” continued the former Olympian, “I realized something profound. I used to walk into the sports arena and hear 50,000 people scream my name. You know what I do now? I’m a Chazan. I don’t have 50,000 people screaming my name, but I have hundreds of people screaming Amen.”

As I heard this, all I could think to myself was “Wow.” To this former world-class soccer player, hearing Amen when he davens in front of the shul gives him more appreciation and happiness than when he used to walk into an arena where there were thousands of people enamored with him. Now they scream Hashem’s Name.

### **I Needed to Hear from this Former Olympian**

After the man told me this, I fully realized why I ended up in Plantation, Florida. It wasn’t as much because they needed me for a minyan; Hashem could have arranged that someone else be the tenth man. It was because I needed to hear this from this former Olympian.

If you make it your business not to miss davening with a minyan, Hashem will give you the siyata dishmaya not only to make the minyan, but to learn something from every minyan you go to. And that day I learned a lesson I will never forget.

“I don’t have 50,000 people screaming my name, but I have hundreds of people screaming Amen.”

*Reprinted from the Parashat Tetzaveh 5783 Newsletter of Torahanytime.com as compiled and edited by Elan Perchik.*

## **Married in a Pauper’s Ceremony**

**By Yair Weinstock**

In the hedkesh, my condition worsened, with painful sores so unsightly that no one could remain near me. My father-in-law demanded that I give his daughter a divorce, and I agreed. I had been punished measure for measure. I understood that Heaven was punishing me for the pain I caused my first kallah [whose engagement I broke after her father lost his wealth and became impoverished].

After several months in the hekdesch, I finally saw some improvement, and my appearance became less revolting. I utilized my time to learn Gemara and Shulchan Aruch. Another man in the hekdesch suggested that I travel together with him from village to village where he would introduce me as a learned man and collect tzedakah for me. He felt my appearance would arouse compassion. I needed sustenance, so I agreed.

Compassionate people realized I was no common pauper. They asked me questions on Gemara, which I explained to the best of my ability. People at first cringed at my appearance, but they soon knew “not to look at the bottle, but at what lies within.” Of all the sick people who collected tzedakah, it seemed I was the most ill and deformed.

### **His Daughter Seemed More Ill than Me**

One day, we came to a town where we saw a poor man sitting in a wagon near the town’s hekdesch. Inside the wagon lay his daughter, who appeared more ill than I was. We began to talk and I agreed to leave my companion and travel together with this man and his daughter.

Eventually I agreed to marry his daughter. I revealed to him that I had been divorced, but that did not deter him. We were soon married in a pauper’s ceremony – both of us sickly and weak, dressed in rags and tatters, with a wedding “feast” of bread and onions.

When we spoke alone in the yichud room, I was filled with happiness, but my bride broke down crying, as she recalled her past – her father was once rich and when she was a girl of nine, she was engaged to an outstanding scholar. Her engagement broke off because her father had lost his fortune prior to the wedding. She described her humiliation, and how it caused her to fall ill. She now was crying because she was forced to marry a sick, poor man.

### **We Both Sensed the Guiding Hand of Hashgacha**

I stared at her in amazement. This was my first bride! I exclaimed to her, “Look at me! I am your former chosson!” Both of us began crying. We sensed with powerful clarity the guiding hand of Hashgacha that brings people together and unites broken hearts. We informed the others of our story; we wanted all to see how Hashem, in His eminent compassion and loving kindness, establishes homes in Klal Yisroel. Even if a couple is parted against their will, He will seize them by the hair and bring them back to one another.

Immediately after the wedding, amazingly both of us recovered, returned to full health, settled in this small village near Amsterdam, and Hashem blessed us with wealth, honor, and wonderful sons and daughters. The man finished his story, and asked the Vilna Gaon, “I ask Your Honor, after I caused my wife so much pain and distress, am I not obligated to appease her over and above the strict letter of the law? Do you now understand why I accord my wife this honor?” (Tales for the Soul 3)

*Reprinted from the Parshas Ki Sisa 5784 email of The Weekly Vort.*

# **Leib Ben Sarah, the Innkeeper And the Prince or “Saving a Jew”**

## **Weekly Story of Rabbi Sholom DovBer Avtzon**

In the final years of Reb Leib's life, the tzaddik Reb Ezriel of Polotzk, who had learned from the Maggid, decided to accompany him on his journeys.

One time they were going to Vilna, and a few miles from Vilna they stopped off at an inn which had a tavern. They paid for a room for the night.

### **Instructs the Innkeeper to Ask the Prince to Visit Reb Leib**

In the morning Reb Leib asked Reb Ezriel to please call the innkeeper. When he came to Reb Leib's room, Reb Leib commanded him to go to a street that no Jew is supposed to walk on and call the prince who lives there. He should tell the prince that in his inn there is a Jew by the name of Leib ben Sarah, and he is requesting that the prince visit him.

The innkeeper was shocked and replied, Am I crazy to do such a thing? A Jew that walks on that street is not guaranteed that he would come out alive. The prince is a son of a king, and he never spoke with a Jew. So how can I tell him that a Jew is demanding that he comes to him?

Reb Leib retorted, “Do you know who I am? I am Leib ben Sarah, and if you don't obey me, you will regret it!”

### **The Innkeeper Had No Intention of Obeying His Guest's Dangerous Request**

The host left the room intending to ignore this warning, however, he then noticed that his wife and two sons had suddenly become ill, and they were lying in bed in grave danger. He understood that it was a result of his refusal to obey the tzaddik, so he rushed back to the tzaddik's room and said, I am prepared to do as the tzaddik instructs me to do, as long as the harsh decree is removed from my family.

Go immediately without any delay to the prince and tell him to come to me, and your family members will immediately be healed.

The man was terrified, but he went to that danger zone and began walking on that forbidden street. To his tremendous relief and surprise no one said a word to him. Arriving at the residence of the prince, he knocked on the gate, and a servant asked him what he wanted. He simply replied, I must speak with the prince.

The servant informed the princes' attendants that a Jew was standing outside and was requesting to speak with the prince. During their conversation the prince walked by and his attendants gave over the message.

The prince instructed them to allow the Jew to enter. When the Jew entered, he said, "My master, the prince, in my inn is an elderly Jew, whose name is Leib ben Sarah. He instructed me to summon my master, the prince, to come to him immediately.

### **The Prince Became Terrified**

Hearing the name of the tzaddik, the prince became terrified and replied, I am going to him, just please wait until I can put on my coat.

The innkeeper was completely dumbfounded at the prince's reaction and reply. True to his word, the prince hurriedly got dressed. Together they began walking to the Tzaddik.

When they came to the inn, Reb Leib instructed the innkeeper to visit his family members, and to his sheer happiness they all were healthy. At that same time, the tzaddik called the prince to his room. After speaking for some time, the prince left, and Reb Leib told Reb Ezriel to get the wagon as they were leaving immediately.

When the prince arrived at his residence, he thought over this strange occurrence, and wondered what caused him to fear and tremble to the extent to run over to a Jew, whose name was Leib ben Sarah, whom he never heard of. He immediately sent his soldiers to the inn to bring that Jew to him. While they rushed over a few minutes after they were sent there, their effort was futile as he was no longer there. Returning, they informed him that the old Jew had already left.

### **The Local Priests Make a Blood Libel Against the Innkeeper**

Some weeks or perhaps months later a non-Jewish worker of that innkeeper suddenly disappeared, and no one in the town knew where he may be. The local priests made the accusation that the Jew must have killed him in order to knead the flour with his blood and use that dough to make matzos for Passover. [This is known as the blood libel that many Jewish communities in those days were accused of.]

The authorities immediately arrested the Jewish innkeeper and placed him in prison. Being that he denied all charges, they began torturing him with unbearable and bitter measures, in order to force him to admit to a crime that he did not do.

Initially he continued to deny that he had any connection in the workers disappearance. Furthermore, he stated that it is forbidden for a Jew to eat blood, so the whole thing is a false accusation. However, as they increased the frequency and severity of the afflictions, he could no longer bear it. He then said to himself, I would

rather die than continue enduring this, so he admitted to whatever they wanted. At that point they stopped hurting him, in order that the judges could decree that being that he admitted to the crime he deserves the death penalty, with the hope that the judges would also punish the larger Jewish community as well.

Sure, enough the judgement was passed that he should die, but according to the protocol, it required the prince's signature to be carried out.

### **The Prince Pushes Off the Request to Sign the Execution Document**

Everyone considered this a mere formality, as the prince always signed onto the judgement. But this time the prince said, I am about to go to the fair to buy some horses, and I know that this Jew knows how to evaluate the worthiness of a horse. Therefore, I want to keep him alive until after the fair and if the honored judges state when I bring him back that their decision remains in effect, I will immediately affix my signature to their decision.

This was agreed to and the Jewish innkeeper went with the prince to purchase the horses that served the prince's needs. However, he was accompanied by a few guards wherever he went, to prevent him from running away and escaping.

One day while he was walking around the fair examining the horses, he suddenly saw his former worker walking around. A moment later the worker noticed him and full of joy he ran over to him. He fell to the ground and said, "Thanks to the Creator, I see you here!"

If you are so happy in being close to me, can you please tell me why you ran away without informing anyone about your whereabouts, asked the innkeeper. We were so nervous about your well-being.

### **Reveals the Nefarious Plot of the Town Priest**

The worker began to cry, "My dear master, you treated me better than my father and mother did. But one of the town priests began convincing me that I should travel to a distant town, and he promised me that there I would receive a nice house with some fields. Even after he repeated this offer to me numerous times, I refused to listen to him.

"Then, one night somebody asked me to come outside. When I came outside a few men grabbed me and placed me in a wagon. They tied me up and drove me to a very distant place. They dropped me off without giving me anything and since then I have been walking from place to place, and I have no way to support myself. I always desired to return to you, but the distance was too far to walk, and I had no way to pay for transportation.

I wasn't planning on coming here today, but last night an elderly Jew and his attendant came to me, after placing me in their wagon they brought me here. I slept throughout the night in their traveling wagon, and in the morning when I awoke the elderly Jew told me: Search for your master, as he is here at the fair!

The worker then began pleading, please take me back with you to your house, so I don't die of starvation!

### **The Innkeeper Knew that Everything Would Now be Good**

The innkeeper's spirit was revived. He knew that this is somehow connected to the elderly Jew who sent him to the prince, and just knew that everything will now be good.

Turning to the worker he said, first come and eat something that you don't starve. He took him to an inn and paid for the worker's meal. He then told him, I have work to do, so wait here until I return [in a few hours] to pick you up. Don't leave this place, until I return! He then bought the other horses that the prince required, tied them all up to the coach and they began to return.

But a moment later the horses began running wildly and went off the road. The prince was fearful that the wagon would overturn, and who knows what the consequences would be. Noticing this fear the Jew said, "My master, I know of an expert wagon driver here, who definitely can control these horses. If it is proper in your honors eyes, I will request that he joins us as the driver. Being that he lives in a village near to us, I am confident that he will agree to this proposition as he is in a rush to return home.

The prince agreed and the Jew went to get his worker, who took over the reins and drove back without any mishap.

### **The Prince Reveals What the Elderly Rabbi Asked Him**

On the way back the prince turned to the Jew and said, You surely remember that a while back you came to me as a messenger of an elderly Rabbi who was then in your house.

Yes, I remember that incident quite vividly, replied the Jew.

Therefore, I will now reveal to you what he said to me in the privacy of his room as I still don't understand his intent, said the prince. The Rabbi said, I am going to ask you for a small favor. When the authorities request that you sign off on their decision to kill this Jew, reply that before you do so, you need him to go to the fair to purchase horses. At the same time inform them that when you return you will fulfill their request.

When I received the judgement against you, I realized that this Rabbi has the spirit of his G-d in him, and I was thinking that without a doubt your salvation will come from your being at this fair. Now we are returning, and I promised the judges that I would hand you over to them to confirm your sentence and I will sign it. So tell me what did that Rabbi accomplish through his request of me?

### **The Jew Tells the Prince of What the Priest Plotted to Do**

When we return to the city and stand in front of the judges and witnesses who recognize the worker, then you will understand the Rabbi's intentions, replied the Jew. Know that the one who is driving the horses is my former worker! The priest commanded his henchmen to take him to a town that is very distant from us, in order to make this baseless accusation against me. If my master would ask the driver, he would inform his honor whatever they did to him.

The prince was overwhelmed in astonishment and declared; Now I know that the True G-d is in Israel. But tell me, if you are really innocent why did you sign onto the accusation and admit that you are the one that killed him? Don't you realize that that admission arouses the fury in the hearts of non-Jews against all Jews?!

The Jew burst into a cry and replied, I was too weak to continue bearing the horrific torture that were inflicting on my body, and I decided that death is better than life. I simply couldn't endure any more suffering. This is a sample of every signed confession a Jew gives; it is a result of the torture and suffering they endured in prison.

### **The Prince Returns the Jew to the Jurisdiction of the Court**

The prince interrogated the driver, and he told him all the details of what had occurred to him, in respect to his disappearance. The prince informed the judges that he has returned and requests that the accuser and witnesses be present, so all see that he is honoring his promise and returning the Jew to the jurisdiction of the court.

The next morning after everyone was in the courtroom the prince arrived with the Jew and the worker. The witnesses immediately recognized him, and in the presence of the priest, the worker related to the court the entire story.

The court immediately declared that the Jew is completely innocent, and passed a severe judgement on the priest instead.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Ki Sisa 5784 email of Rabbi Sholom DovBer Avtzon's Weekly Story. The following story is story # 292 in The following story is story # 292 in Sippurei Chassidim Moadim (festivals) from Rabbi Zevin (festivals) from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin.*