

Good Shabbos Everyone. Having gotten his Tefillin from one of the most prominent scribes of his time, Reb Michel Prager was quite proud of them. He would always point out how dear they were to him and how rewarding it was to wear them.

Throughout his lifetime he had been faced with numerous challenges and difficulties, but never did he miss the opportunity to wear his tefillin. As a Chassidische Yid, Reb Michel's davening played a major role in his life, and knowing that his tefillin were so special made it all the more gratifying.

Although he knew that there were some opinions that encouraged checking tefillin every so often, Reb Michel was careful not to have the sealed boxes opened for fear of exposing them to air and dust, and perhaps ruining them. And so, the tefillin were never checked.

One day, however, seventy-two years after he first put on the tefillin for his bar mitzvah, someone inadvertently switched their tefillin with his, and this man gave what he thought were his tefillin to a sofer (scribe) for checking.

The sofer (scribe) carefully checked all the words, scrutinizing them to ensure their validity. Suddenly, he let out a gasp. "Oy Gevalt! These tefillin are missing an entire word!" He continued to check the shel yad (hand) portion of the tefillin and found a missing word in them as well, rendering the entire pair pasul (invalid).

The man who had brought the tefillin to be checked was quite upset, but soon realized that these were not his tefillin at all. Upon closer examination he was able to determine that they were Reb Michel's tefillin. It was unbelievable! Reb Michel's tefillin were posul.

How would they break the bad news to the elderly man? He was 85 years old and the shock, horror, and disappointment of never having fulfilled a mitzvah of which he had been so proud could possibly cause him enough grief to endanger his life.

Several of the elderly members of the shul conferred and decided that they had no choice but to tell him. A doctor was brought along just in case, Reb Michel experienced any medical problems. "Reb Michel," one of the elder gentlemen said, "we have something important to tell you,"

Slowly they spelled out the story — how the tefillin were switched, how the tefillin were taken to a sofer, and how Reb Michel's tefillin were found to be posul - invalid. They didn't have to explain further. Reb Michel understood that he had never properly fulfilled the mitzvah of tefillin. Not even once.

At first Reb Michel sat there frozen. They worried. Had he heard them? How was he going to react? They were wondering what else they should do when suddenly Reb Michel stood up and started smiling. At first Reb Michel began to laugh and then he started to sing and dance, instead of joining him they watched with pity, assuming that he was "losing it." This was someone who took more pride in his tefillin than in any other mitzvah. Who could blame him now for losing control? He sang and danced around the room, skipping with joy. To see an 85-year-old act this way was quite unusual and, under the circumstances, very sad. But, no one dared to interfere. After all, he was entitled.

Finally he finished dancing and singing. Suddenly he looked up and noticed everyone staring at him. He then explained. "Do you know what this means? Had my tefillin never been checked, I never would have had [the opportunity to fulfill this precious mitzvah. But now I will. For this, I am very grateful."

And then, with tears streaming down his eyes, he began to unwrap a pair of kosher tefillin and put them on his head and on his arm. With a smile on his face and tears running down his cheeks. 85-year-old Reb Michel Prager fulfilled the mitzvah of tefillin for the very first time. (Touched by a Story, p. 205, Reb Yechiel Spiro.)

In this week's portion Balak, we read about the attempts of the evil Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. When Bilaam opens his mouth intending to curse the Jewish people, Hashem causes Bilaam instead to utter praises of the Jewish people. In Bilaam's first "blessing" he says about the nation of Yisroel, "Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations." (Bamidbar 23,9) When the verse states that the Jewish nation will "not be reckoned among the nations," it means that we are different and special. We Jews have different priorities in life than the nations. We get excited about mitzvahs such as tefillin while the nations are busy rioting when their sports team wins.

Tefillin are referred to as a sign, a sign of being a Jew. Let us all be inspired to dedicate and rededicate our lives to doing that which distinguishes us from the nations, namely the performance of mitzvahs such as Tefillin. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**