

Good Shabbos Everyone. The Torah tells us this week, "If you will follow my decrees and observe my commandments and perform them... I will walk among you and I will be a G-d unto you and you will be a people unto Me." (Vayikra 26:3,12) The commentator Sforno explains that Hashem is telling us: Be good, keep my mitzvahs, and I, Hashem will go with you the Jewish Nation wherever you go in golus (exile). The following amazing true story told by the daughter of the Rabbi involved, illustrates this concept.

"Almost thirty years ago, my father (Rabbi Schochet) was asked to lecture to a group of Jewish and non-Jewish students in a city that neighbored Buffalo, New York. Although he was reluctant to accept, he was urged to do so by his Rebbe who directed him to focus his lecture on charity, as charity is a universal responsibility of both Jews and gentiles.

He began his lecture by telling the following story: During the time of the Tosafos Yom Tov [Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, Chief Rabbi of Prague and Cracow during the 17th century and author of a commentary on the Mishna], there lived a wealthy individual who ostensibly never contributed to charity.

After this miser died, the Chevra Kadisha [Jewish burial society] felt that he was unworthy of being interred next to any upright and respectable individual. They buried him in an area of the cemetery called hekdesch, where society's outcasts were buried.

A few days after the funeral, there was a tumult in Prague. Two prominent members of the community, the butcher and the baker, who had previously been extremely charitable and generous, suddenly stopped distributing their funds. The poor people of the city, who had always relied on the benevolent pair for their sustenance, were in an uproar. Emotions ran so deep that the matter was finally brought before the Tosafos Yom Tov.

The Tosafos Yom Tov asked the butcher and baker why they had so suddenly stopped their acts of charity. In reply, they informed the Tosafos Yom Tov that they were not personally wealthy. "We were only able to give so much charity because the 'miser' who died just a few days ago constantly supplied us with funds for charity. He strictly warned us, however, not to disclose from whence the money had originated, since he wanted the great merit of performing the mitzva anonymously. Now that he is gone, we no longer receive the funds, and are, unfortunately, unable to continue with this worthy work."

The Tosafos Yom Tov was so impressed by the modest behavior of this unassuming "miser" that in his own will he requested to be buried next to this humble man.

When my father completed his lecture, a participant from the audience, a priest, approached him and asked him to repeat the story. My father, about to return to his hotel, arranged a time to meet with the priest the following day. Thinking that the matter would be forgotten, my father was surprised when the priest actually arrived. My father repeated the story for the priest but was astounded when, after concluding the story a second time, the priest seemed terribly disturbed and begged him to repeat it yet a third time. Finally, the priest divulged the reason for his agitation.

"Rabbi Schochet, that charitable man in the story was my ancestor." Skeptically, my father calmed the young man saying that there was no connection between him and the story, which took place over 100 years ago.

"Furthermore," he told him, "you are a gentile, while this man was a Jew." The priest looked intently at my father and whispered, "Rabbi, now I have a story to tell you!" He began by describing his background.

He had grown up in the state of Tennessee. His father was a major in the U.S. Army during the Second World War. In Europe, his father had met a Jewish girl and fell in love with her. He brought her back home as his war bride, and no one knew of her Jewish background.

A short time after their marriage, the couple was blessed with a child, who they devoutly raised in the Catholic Church. The child grew up and attended a seminary where he eventually trained to become a priest. In his early adulthood, the priest's mother died. On her deathbed, she disclosed her secret to her astonished son. After reciting the Shema prayer, she confessed, "I want you to know that you are Jewish." She informed him of his heritage and told him that his great-grandfather was buried next to the well-known sage called the Tosafos Yom Tov. She then recounted, almost verbatim, the story that my father had told in his lecture.

At the time, the priest, who was unaware of this information, imagined that his mother was delirious. Although he felt uneasy about his mother's parting words, it was only a temporary, fleeting emotion. As he got on with his life, he soon forgot the entire episode.

"Rabbi," cried the priest, in a state of utter emotional turmoil, you have just repeated this story, detail for detail! You have just reminded me of my mother's parting words, and I realize now that the story must be true, or it wouldn't be so well known. Yet, what am I to do? I am a reputable priest with a large congregation of devoted followers."

My father offered to assist him in any way. He emphasized to him, however, that according to Jewish law, he was indeed Jewish. He encouraged him to explore his heritage, and he put him in contact with people in his city who could guide him. With that, the newly-found Jew departed.

My father then understood why his Rebbe had "prophetically" suggested the topic matter. He had no further interaction with the man, and did not hear from him again. Several years ago, when my father was on a visit to Israel. A Jew with a beard and a kipa approached him at the Western Wall and wished him "Shalom Aleichem [Peace unto you]!" My father, who didn't recognize the individual, was completely taken aback when the man exclaimed, "Don't you recognize me, Rabbi Schochet? I am the former priest whom you met in Buffalo." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**