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[This is a redo of Story #263 in this series, which I did for my second book, Festivals of the Full Moon. But since it is more than 50% larger and a different Rebbe is identified as the tzadik involved, I decided it deserves its own number.]

The Very First Match

A young unmarried chasid named Meir celebrated the New Year festivals in Kishenev* with his rebbe, **Rabbi Moshe-Zvi of Savran**. A day or so after Simchat Torah, when he was admitted to the rebbe's room for a parting blessing, he brought up the difficulties he was having finding a wife. Because of his poverty, and his threadbare, half-starved appearance, no one was willing to help him find a marriage partner.

"Trust the Al-mighty," said the Rebbe. "Agree to the first offer of a match that is suggested to you."

Meir set out on the long journey to his home town. He arrived in a certain village just as it was becoming dark, so he entered the local inn to arrange to spend the night there. What met his eyes was a crowd of carefree men sitting at several adjoining tables, drinking, and laughing raucously at their own silly jokes. Wanting to keep a low profile and feeling fatigued and cold from the long day of travelling, he sat down next to the stove in the corner of the large room, as far away as possible from the crowded tables.

It didn't help. The drinkers noticed him right away. One of them asked where he was from and why he was traveling. Meir responded with the name of his town, and that he was returning there after having passed the holidays with his Rebbe in Kishenev.

"What did you request of the rebbe, and what blessing did he give you?" they pried.

Meir innocently recounted what had transpired. "I asked him to pray for me that the Al-mighty allow me to soon meet my destined wife. He said I should accept the first match that I am offered."

One of the wilder partiers smiled broadly and called out: "Listen! I have a great idea for you. My sister is a young widow, very pretty, and she even has a hundred silver rubles for a dowry. She is here right

now, in the kitchen. I'll introduce you and you'll let me know what you think."

What Meir didn't realize was that this joker had no family connection whatsoever to the woman he referred to as his sister. Rather, she was the daughter of the innkeeper, a man named Tzvi Velbka, who happened to be away from home that evening.

The prankster ran into the kitchen, explained the joke to her and asked her to play her role, saying it would be excellent for the inn's business, as many celebratory drinks would certainly be ordered. She decided to humor the tipsy customers and agreed. When she emerged into the main room, she was greeted with loud cheers and applause.

A few minutes after he introduced them, the brother nudged Meir and whispered, "So, what do you say? Do you agree to the match? Shall we conclude it?"

Meir answered coolly: "Fine; I agree."

The boisterous customers rushed to order a selection of hard drinks and began to merrily toast the new 'bridegroom.' They had a great time calling out *l'chaim* and showering upon him their blessings for his fortunate engagement, while privately they ridiculed the naïve young chasid.

An hour or so passed in this manner, when suddenly one of them yelled out that he had a great idea: "Look how much fun this engagement celebration has been for us. Let's continue by making the wedding. Right now! Then we can throw a really super party."

His suggestion earned an enthusiastic reception, until a slightly more sober member of the crowd wondered aloud, "But none of us here is a rabbi. We don't know the text of the *ketubah* (marriage contract document) or how to conduct a *chupah* (wedding ceremony)."

Meir, overhearing them, spoke up that he knew how to write a *ketubah* and how to administer the wedding. The crowd burst into pleased laughter. One of them 'borrowed' from Meir his *tallit* and drafted four others to hold it up at its corners with broomsticks over the heads of the couple as a *chupah* canopy. Meir carefully scribed the marriage contract and, after one of the drunks cheerfully donated a gold ruble, Meir solemnly intoned the traditional phrase to the giggling 'bride,' "You are sanctified to me [as my wife] with this coin, according to the laws of Moses and Israel," and gave her the gold coin.

After every one loudly shouted out “Mazaltov” in unison when the glass was broken, the bride (on a chair) and groom were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd. The customers were enjoying the entire prank so much they began to tease the young chasid even more outrageously, including poking at his hat and pulling him by his long coat.

When they started to actually slap him around a bit, Meir realized that the situation had become untenable, and at the first respite snuck out of the building. He managed to arrange to sleep in the house of a nearby non-Jew, trusting that the bride would be cared for by her brother.

The next morning he returned to the inn, but he stopped outside the entrance. He was apprehensive about going in and possibly having to deal with further verbal and physical abuse. As he was standing there deliberating what to do, he overheard one worker say to another: “Look! The boss is about to leave.”

Meir walked quickly over to the man indicated and said, “Good morning, father-in-law!”

The innkeeper’s eyes opened wide in shock. “Who are you? What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“I’m the fellow who married your daughter last night.”

“What! How can that be? Where is she? In the kitchen?” He couldn’t contain his agitation. “Come out here right away! Now!” he shouted to her.

The daughter ran out and explained: “This chasidic guy kept everyone amused last night. He is so naïve. I pretended to be someone’s eligible widowed sister, and we made a pretend engagement and marriage ceremony. It was so much fun! And, father, you will be quite pleased when you see how much extra food and liquor was sold.”

Her father was visibly upset. He plied her with questions in order to find out exactly what had taken place. When he heard her answers, he became furious and shouted at Meir: “Idiot! How dare you make a legally binding marriage with my precious daughter? Those silly ignoramuses may not understand the implications of a *ketubah* and a wedding ceremony in front of witnesses, but if you are a chasid and a scholar as you mode of dress indicates, you should certainly have known better. How could you not realize that they were playing a joke on you?”

He became angrier and angrier, until finally he slapped the startled young man across the face. "I cannot abide this. You must divorce her immediately!"

Meir said not a word. He simply shook his head from side to side.

The innkeeper quickly perceived that a violent approach was not going to succeed. "I'd better not get him too angry; then he will refuse me simply out of spite. I'll have to speak reasonably to this pathetic tramp to persuade him to release my poor daughter."

Whereupon he changed his tone, and asked the young man again to agree to divorce his daughter, this time calmly and politely. When that didn't work, he offered him twenty silver rubles. "After all," he added in a friendly tone, "This must be a difficult experience for you."

To his surprise, the visibly impoverished chassid quickly refused. He raised his offer several times—50, 80, 100 rubles, a significant amount of money --but each time with the same lack of success.

"Sir, you might as well stop trying to buy me off," said Meir finally. "Let me tell you what is really going on. I was with my Rebbe for the holidays. I had a private audience with him afterwards, and he told me to accept the first marriage proposal that was offered to me. I trust him completely and simply followed his orders. Those people last night intended to play a trick on me and had a good time laughing at me, but I related to everything said to me as real and accepted the match wholeheartedly. Even though you don't want me as a husband for your daughter, I could never consider nullifying the marriage without a specific order to do so from the Rebbe."

"Who is your rebbe?" demanded the innkeeper

"Rabbi Moshe-Zvi of Savran, in Kishenev."

The innkeeper smiled at hearing this. "I know your Rebbe; I have great respect for him. Let's go see him together. Whatever he decides, we will do."

When they arrived in Sevrans, Mr. Velbka expressed to the Rebbe why he was so upset: "Last night, I had to be away from the inn. I left my daughter in charge. This pauper wanders in, hears from some unrestrained clown who makes up a story that my daughter is his widowed sister and she wants to get married again. So he accepts this joker's proposal to marry her without ever being told that she is my daughter."

“Then they went under a wedding canopy in front of witnesses! One of the customers gave a gold ruble to be in place of the ring, while he himself even wrote a *ketuba* for the occasion!

“I want to dissolve it and I offered him some money to do so, but he won’t agree unless you first approve. I still am prepared to stand by my final offer to him of one hundred silver rubles—a fortune for him—but only if he grants my daughter a divorce.”

The Rebbe then turned to Meir, who insisted that he was delighted with the match. The innkeeper’s daughter struck him as a nice person, of good disposition, generous and kind, and she seems to be quite willing to be married to him.

The Rebbe turned back to Tsvi Velbka and said, "I suggest that you go to your hostel here and get some rest. In the meantime, I’ll speak further with the young man about the matter."

A few hours later the innkeeper came to the Rebbe’s house again. The Rebbe told him, "We discussed the divorce and your offer at length. My advice is that you give him a thousand silver rubles, not a hundred. I can arrange the *gett* (document of divorce) and two witnesses within a week. At that time I will introduce you to an excellent young man from a respectable family that I thought of for your daughter. And he is an accomplished Torah scholar as well. But you needn’t worry about suffering a financial loss; this one will come with a thousand silver rubles that is prepared to contribute for the marriage. You can either keep the money, or leave it for the young couple to start their new home."

"Of course I will do whatever the Rebbe thinks best," responded the astonished innkeeper. "As for the delay of a week, anyway I need that time to arrange the money."

The Rebbe took from his desk drawer three hundred rubles and hurriedly summoned one of his Chasidim to buy a new suit and an impressive *shtreimel* for Meir. With his new clothes, he seemed a different person. Everyone was struck by his newly presentable appearance, one that allowed his intelligence and refinement to shine through.

Exactly a week later the innkeeper returned, with the money and accompanied by his daughter, to participate in the divorce procedure. The Rebbe suggested that Velbka first go with him to the *Beit Midrash* Study Hall for a peek at the young man he had in mind for Velbka’s daughter. From the door he pointed to the young man in new clothes

studying intently at a table in the middle of the room. The innkeeper did not recognize Meir at all.

At that point the Rebbe murmured to Velbka, "This young chasid is already your daughter's husband!" A pained look crossed the innkeeper's face. The Rebbe ignored it and swiftly continued. "I can guarantee that this young man comes from a fine family of distinguished ancestors, and that he possesses excellent character traits. The only problem anyone could find with him was his poverty. New clothes and a good diet have already improved his appearance considerably. Now, praise G-d, he will also have a thousand silver rubles! You are strongly advised to let the marriage remain in force. He is the ideal husband for your daughter. I want you to know: this match was truly ordained from The One Above. The reason it had to come about in such an unusual manner is because otherwise you would never have agreed to it."

Tsvi Velbka and his daughter were convinced by the Rebbe's words, and agreed happily to let the marriage continue. The couple went on to live together in joy and prosperity, and in full compatibility with the bride's pleased parents.

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\* *Editor's note:* Not for sure. Could be one of his earlier rabbinical postings -- see '*Biographical Note*' below.

*Source:* Translated-freely adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from *Sipurei Chasidim-Torah* (#49) by Rabbi S. Y. Zevin, with significant modifications based on other written and oral sources. (First published in *Festivals of the Full Moon*.)

*Biographical Note:*

**Rabbi Moshe-Zvi Giterman of Sevrans** [of blessed memory: 5535 - 27 Tevet 5597 (1775 - Dec. 1837 C.E.)] was a disciple of his father, whom he succeeded as Maggid of Savran in 1802, and of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of and Rabbi Boruch of Mezhibuz. He later became the Rabbi of Berditchev after the passing of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in 1810, and subsequently of the towns of Uman and Kishinev as well. He had thousands of chasidim. His Torah insights were collected and printed in the book, *Likutey Shoshanim*.

*Connection:* Weekly Reading of *Chaye Sarah* -- the above story's title is a good description of its dominant theme.