

Brazenly Disturbing the Rebbe

When **Rabbi Shneur Zalman** was still a young student under the tutelage of the famed **Maggid of Mezritch**, he boarded at a house owned by a local widow. One day, the young scholar arrived home to find his landlady on the floor wailing hysterically. Her only son, she sobbed, had decided to convert to Christianity, and was being held in a locked room in a monastery.

“Don’t worry,” Rabbi Shneur Zalman comforted her, “with G-d’s help, we will bring your son back.”

Bringing this woman’s plight to the Maggid would be difficult. The Maggid stayed locked in his room throughout most of the day; this enabled him to quietly contemplate Torah. And outside his door stood his wary attendant, who was adept at keeping people away when the master wished to be alone.

“Listen to what I say,” Rabbi Shneur Zalman said to the widow. “Tomorrow, Friday afternoon, while the attendant is away from the door for his pre-Shabbat bath, I will be able to open the door for you. Do not waste a second. Run inside and inform the Maggid of your dilemma.”

The next day, Rabbi Shneur Zalman took advantage of the attendant’s absence to open the door for the distraught widow. Inside, the Maggid, who was occupied with his spiritual preparations for the holy day of Shabbat, did not expect a strange woman to suddenly appear in his doorway, weeping uncontrollably. He raised his eyes to her, but the poor woman was so shattered that she stood silently at the threshold, unable to emit a single word. Apparently seeing no use for the interruption, the Maggid waved his hand, signaling her to leave. The woman emerged from the brief audience shattered and bitterly disappointed with herself.

But Rabbi Shneur Zalman was confident that the Maggid knew of the widow’s misery down to the last detail. Righteous people, after all, are not bound by the conventional ways of learning information.

After the widow left, the Maggid did not make any mention of her or the purpose of her visit. But when the attendant returned from the bathhouse, the Maggid suddenly instructed all of his students to enter his room to welcome the Shabbat together. Despite the unusual nature of the request, the group heeded the Maggid’s words.

Immediately after prayers, the attendant rushed to set the table for the evening meal. Generally lengthy and peppered with mystical Torah insights, the Shabbat meal was eaten in a hurry, again leaving the students

wondering at their master's unusual behavior. Grace After Meals was recited promptly after the meal.

All this time, the Maggid maintained deep concentration and spoke with a booming and forceful tone, a marked departure from the calm, unassuming voice the students usually heard. Torah insights, the likes of which were never heard before, were expounded upon, his holy words interspersed with the occasional call to "listen, my brothers, to the Torah's sweetness."

Of all the students, only Rabbi Shneur Zalman knew the reason for the unusual change in routine. He sensed that from the moment the widow left the Maggid's office, the Maggid busied himself with reigniting her son's soul.

Then a mighty wind began to roar outside, steadily picking up speed. By this point, the Maggid's face was shining like a glowing torch. The students listened with growing trepidation to the wind that howled violently around them.

Boom! Something thudded against one of the walls of the house and the students, concerned that the roof would collapse from the wind, bolted out of their seats. Unperturbed, the Maggid stopped his discourse and turned to his attendant: "Quickly take him to the nearby inn," he ordered.

The attendant hurried out the door and immediately stopped in his tracks. Lying on the ground outside the house was the widow's son, softly weeping. The attendant did not waste a second and proceeded to whisk the son away to the inn.

After the attendant left, the Maggid's serious demeanor, which had persisted throughout the entire evening, transitioned to joy, and he finished the discourse on a euphoric note. The Maggid then retired to his room, whereupon Rabbi Shneur Zalman headed for the inn, curious to learn what led to the son's seemingly impossible release from the second floor of the monastery.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman found the young man sitting on the bed and reading the weekly Torah portion with large tears streaming down his face.

"How did you escape?" Rabbi Shneur Zalman asked gently.

The widow's son paused his tearful reading and began to tell his story.

"The beginning of my escape started two hours before nightfall. I was lying on my bed in a small cell on the monastery's second floor, determined to follow through with my choice. No amount of convincing would have made me change my mind. But then I had an overwhelming bout of longing for the G-d of my people, an urgent need to leave and reestablish my connection with the Jewish faith.

“I bolted from my bed and quickly strode to the cell door, intending to break it down. But the door remained steadfastly bolted from the outside. Discouraged, I collapsed back on my bed for about half an hour. But the pangs of yearning and love toward Judaism continued to intensify until I sensed my materialistic desires give away. This is how a dead person must feel, I thought; none of the things that had mattered so much to me seemed to have any consequence anymore.

“Lying there in bed, becoming more restless by the moment, I understood that this love could not have developed from myself. G-d was actively trying to protect my Jewish soul from self-destruction.

“Again, I unsuccessfully struggled to break down the door. There was no way out. I slumped on the bed, tears streaking my cheeks, and began to deliberate with myself. If G-d allowed me to experience this indescribable arousal of G-dly love, I had no doubt that He would surely come to my aid. I had to continue to try.

“I walked over to the cell’s small window. I pushed it and, to my relief, it swung open. However, peering over the precarious ledge in the failing light, I was greeted by the sight of the hard flagstones far below. To jump from this height would leave all of my bones shattered, and even the prospect of a Jewish funeral was nonexistent. I was unsure what to do next.

“I rethought my decision several time, and made my way to the window, only to be discouraged again and again by the sheer drop.

“Darkness had already set in when I suddenly felt my legs dash across the room, leap onto the windowsill and carry me through the open window. I landed miraculously intact, aside from some minor pain in my feet.

“Despite this, my excitement was short lived. During my brief stay in the monastery, I had learned of the vicious dogs who guarded the premises. Chained away during the day, the dogs were set loose on the monastery grounds at night. Even if I managed to fend them off, their barking could easily alert the priests, who would surely take me back, and who knew what they would do to me then?

“G-d will help, I thought, and fearlessly strode towards the pack of dogs. They bounded towards me excitedly and circled around me eagerly, as though reuniting with one of their masters. Thankfully, they also kept silent, and I was able to slink cautiously across the monastery grounds.

“But then my heart fell. A towering stone wall separated me from my freedom. Topped with sharp spikes and the height of two men, the wall surrounded the monastery, its smooth surface providing no grip. It was impossible to scale.

“Raising my eyes once more, I pleadingly explained to G-d that I had tried everything that was humanly possible to escape, risking my life in the process. Now, standing beside the wall, I had nothing more to do.

“I was answered in the most incredible way. A strong gale immediately swept me off my feet and lifted me into the air. I was tossed over the unpassable wall and into the sky, tumbling over the countryside until I landed right beside the Maggid's house.”

Displaying a zeal and aptitude that he had never known before, the young man applied himself to Torah study and the performance of good deeds for the rest of his days.

Years later, when Rabbi Shneur Zalman already had his own followers, he recounted this story on numerous occasions (noting that the young man's change of heart happened right around the time the Maggid began his devotions), testifying to the Maggid's greatness.

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Source: Translated by **Asharon Baltazar** for //Chabad.org from *Sippurim Nora'im*, by Yaakov Kadanir, p. 38; lightly edited and also supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles. [**Rabbi Yaakov Kaidaner** was a chasid of the first three Lubavitcher Rebbes and a prominent Torah personality in his own right. Today he is primarily known for his extraordinary collection of chassidic stories, *Sipurim Noraim*, a number of which he witnessed or took part in personally.]

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Dov Ber** [of blessed memory: c.5460 - 19 Kislev 5533 (c.1700- Dec. 1772 C.E.)], the son of Avraham and Chava, known as **the Maggid of Mezritch**, succeeded his master, the *Baal Shem Tov*, as the head of the Chasidic movement. Most of the leading chasidic dynasties stem from his disciples and his descendents. The classic anthologies of his teachings are *Likutei Amarim* and *Torah Ohr* (combined by Kehas Publishing as *Maggid Devorav l'Yaakov*), and *Ohr HaEmmes*.

**Rabbi Shneur Zalman** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5505 - 24 Tevet 5573 (1745 - Dec. 1812 C.E.)], was one of the main disciples of the *Maggid of Mezritch*, successor to the Baal Shem Tov. He is the founder of the Chabad-Chassidic movement and the author of *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* and *Tanya* as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

*Connection:* Seasonal -- Monday night-Tuesday is the Chasidic celebration, **Yud-Tes Kislev** – the date on which the Maggid passed away in 1772, and Rabbi Shneur Zalman was miraculously liberated from Russian prison in 1798 after nearly being sentenced to death. Check out the festivities at the Chabad House nearest you.)