

The Paris to Petersburg Train Cabin

In the year 1912 in Russia, Rebbe Shalom-Ber Shneerson (“*HaRashab*”) was the leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch Chassidim, and his son, Rebbe Yosef- Yitzchak Shneerson (“*HaRayatz*”, who would become the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe after the passing of his father in 1920), was on a train from Paris to Petersburg. Life in Russia were not easy for the Jews, and the Rayatz was often sent by his father on long journeys to help Jews or even save Russian Jewry.

After several hours of travel, he left his cabin and went to the dining car for a cup of tea. As he sat down and looked around him, he noticed a finely-dressed clean-shaven businessman sitting at a table in the corner eating a fine meal of rabbit meat and drinking French wine with great savor.

The man was obviously an assimilated Jew. The Rebbe-to-be winced with each bite the man took. He couldn't bear seeing a Jew act that way. So he turned back to his cup of tea and tried to ignore him.

But then, he heard the man push back his chair, stand up and approach him. "Excuse me Rabbi," he said. "Excuse me, but are you the son or grandson of Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch?" (fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe - *HaMaharash*)

"Yes", the Rebbe turned to face him and answered, "In fact, I am his grandson."

The businessman just stood there speechless. His eyes filled with tears and he made no effort to wipe them away. He trembled slightly as though in shock, ran his hand over his eyes. Then he turned abruptly back to his table, paid the waiter and left the room without finishing his meal.

That evening, hours after this strange episode, the train made a short stop in Frankfurt. The Rayatz had just stepped outside for a breath of fresh air when that same businessman again approached him. But before he could begin to speak he again began to weep, and continued doing so uncontrollably until the train whistle forced him to return to his place.

Both episodes perplexed the Rayatz. On one hand the man looked like a nobleman; a large trimmed mustache, elegantly dressed in fine silk clothes. But on the other hand he acted as though he was insane.

The next morning, just as the Rayatz finished praying in his cabin, there was a knock on the door. It was one of the porters. He reported that a certain passenger would like to know if he could see the Rabbi.

The Rebbe agreed and in a few minutes the same man appeared. He entered, closed the door behind him and said, "Please excuse me my emotional outbursts but...." and suddenly began to again weep uncontrollably. He put his hands over his face and his entire body was shaking with sobs.

The Rayatz didn't know whether to stop him or not, but after several minutes the man dried his eyes, looked at the Rayatz furtively and asked if could borrow the Rebbe's *tefillin*.

When the Rayatz answered yes, he again began to weep like a small child saying "Oy! When was the last time I put on *tefillin*!! Oy!"

The man took the *tefillin*, removed them from their pouches, kissed them tenderly, put them on as one who was familiar with the commandment and began to pray.

The Rayatz left the man alone to pour out his soul before his Creator. After an hour he came out of the cabin, thanked the Rayatz, asked him if he could borrow a *Sefer Tehilim* (Book of Psalms) and left to his own cabin without saying another word.

That afternoon, several hours later, the man returned to the Rayatz's room. His face was pale and he looked as though he was undergoing drastic internal changes. He spoke in a weak voice.

"I would like to speak to you if possible. May I?" The Rayatz invited him to sit down; he closed the door and began.

"First, thank you for your tefillin and book of psalms. And I'm sorry if I was of any inconvenience. My name is Y... I was born into a family of Chabad Chassidim by the name of Monison, although I know I don't look it.

"My childhood was very happy; our house was always filled with guests, Torah and joy. But when I was fifteen I somehow got drawn into a bad crowd of young people and I began to enjoy them.

"My father saw what was happening to me and decided to take me to Lubavitch for the High Holidays and it worked. The first moment I saw your grandfather the Rebbe Maharash, it had a deep effect on me. My father even took me in for a private audience.

The Rebbe spoke to my father for a few seconds, then turned to me and said, ""The world can be very dangerous, never forget that you are a Jew.""

"The experience completely changed me. I had absolutely no desire to even see my 'friends'. But gradually the effect wore off. Little by little I became cool to Judaism and warm to what I thought was freedom. I stopped praying, stopped doing the commandments and after a year or so I left my parent's house and moved in with my new 'friends'.

"Several times my father tried to make contact with me but that only aroused my anger. I had made up my mind; I would not live my life according to some book. Six years later I finished university, married an assimilated girl like myself and broke completely with my past. I was free!

"At that time I joined a secret political movement whose goal was to help the needy. There had been several Pogroms (government instigated riots against Jews) at that time, and most of our efforts were directed to helping Jews.

"After several years of this work, we heard that the Lubavitcher Rebbe was to be visiting Petersburg in order to stop the Pogroms at the government level. We decided to let him know of several impending Pogroms that we had heard about.

"We arrived at the hotel where the Rebbe was staying and were met by a large group of Chassidim some of whom remembered me and greeted me warmly. Suddenly the Rebbe opened his door to come out to pray the afternoon prayer. He glanced at me and I immediately knew that he recognized me despite the fact that we had met for just moments over eight years ago. I was speechless

"Later one of the Rebbe's secretaries told us that the Rebbe would like to speak with us and we entered his room.

"His knowledge of the situation in Russia was nothing short of miraculous and the next few months we devoted ourselves totally to helping him in every way. We saw much fruit from our labors and saw how the Rebbe literally prevented tens of pogroms.

"Then one day as we were leaving his room and I was the last one out, the Rebbe called to me and said, "Tell me, when was the last time you put on tefillin? Please don't lie to me; I know exactly what you have been doing."

"I can't explain it, but I was so stunned I couldn't even open my mouth. I just made some strange gestures and left. Those few words made such an impression on me that that day I looked for a pair of tefillin and put them on for the first time in years and I even stopped eating non-kosher food.

"After the Rebbe left Petersburg I returned home, told my wife that I decided to return to a Jewish life to which she agreed and I eventually even renewed ties with my father. But I still was working with my friends in our organization and at the end of that year it became known to us that there were to be a series of massive Pogroms in the south of Russia.

"I was chosen to travel to Lubavitch to tell the Rebbe and when I entered his office I could tell he was happy to see me. We spoke for some time but he said that he had to go to the country for his health and we would deal with the problem when he returned in a few days.

"When we met again he told me that he had been at his father's (the third Rebbe, the '*Tzemach Tzedek*' who is buried in Lubavitch) gravesite and his father told him that there was no real danger but nevertheless we must take steps. The Rebbe then gave me some letters and told me what to do. He was in a good mood as he paused for a moment, smiled and said.

"It says that Moses, because he helped the Jews, G-d gave him the chips of sapphire from the Tablets that he carved out. You are helping Jews so you too deserve a reward.'

"The Rebbe looked me deeply in the eyes as he continued speaking.

"When I told you that my father spoke to me at his grave I noticed that you smirked. The reason for this is that you are so involved in the physical that you have no appreciation for spiritual things.'

"The Rebbe then sat with me for over an hour explaining, with many examples and stories, what 'spiritual' means and he concluded with these words:

"How long can a person live a life of physicality? Fifty years? Fifty five years? Remember who you are and where you come from. You are a son of a Chassid! May G-d protect you and give you true happiness.'

"I didn't really understand what he was getting at because I had already returned to Judaism for almost a year. But I thanked him warmly, took the papers he gave me, set out for Petersburg to give them to officials. On that trip I saw some open miracles.

"First, police stopped the train ordered everyone out and began searching each person for any political papers. I considered throwing the Rebbe's letters away before they got to me but the Rebbe's words made me think differently. And miraculously, when they came to me they just told me to get back on the train. I was the only one they didn't check!

"Then afterwards in Petersburg I got in to see the officials and hand them the papers with no trouble. And to top it all off the Rebbe, or rather his departed father, was right! The situation was not as severe as we thought.

"But despite all this, just like the Rebbe said, I had no appreciation of the spiritual. A few months later the Rebbe became ill and passed away at the age of forty-nine. After that, I gradually gravitated to my old friends again.

"Little by little I left G-d and His Torah and became a very successful businessman. That was thirty years ago. Believe me, for the last thirty years I never once even thought about G-d. Now I am retuning from my birthday party, I was fifty-five years old yesterday, and my friends made me a gala party in Monte Carlo.

"Then suddenly, like a flash of lightning, when I saw you I remembered the words of your holy grandfather. It touched me to the essence of my soul."

This businessman became a different person. He moved his entire business to a different country and became a pillar of the Jewish community there.

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Source: Supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the rendition of **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton** on the website of his yeshiva, //ohrtmimim.org/torah.

*Biographical notes (in order of appearance):*

**Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn** [of blessed memory: 12 Tammuz 5640 - 10 Shvat 5710 (Jan. 1880-June 1950 C.E.)], known as the **Rebbe Rayatz**, was the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, from 1920 to 1950. He established a network of Jewish educational institutions and Chassidim that was the single most significant factor for the preservation of Judaism during the dread reign of the communist Soviets. In 1940 he moved to the USA, established Chabad world-wide headquarters in Brooklyn and launched the global campaign to renew and spread Judaism in all languages and in every corner of the world, the campaign continued and expanded so remarkably successfully by his son-in-law and successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.



**Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn** [of blessed memory: 2 Iyar 5594 - 13 Tishrei 5643 (1834-Sept. 1882 C.E.)], the fourth Lubavitch Rebbe, known as **the Rebbe Maharash**, was the seventh and youngest son of his predecessor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the *Tzemach Tzedek*.

*Connection:* Seasonal – The 69th yearzeit of the Rebbe Rayatz.