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From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

Chassid or Rebbe?

With fear, awe and love Reb Yitzchak entered the room of his rebbe, **Rabbi Naftali of Rofshitz**, and handed him the paper inscribed with the names of his family members and his requests for various blessings. One important request, however (the *most* important, according to his wife), he had intentionally omitted.

His first-born child, their daughter Sheindel, had reached the age for them to begin seeking her intended soul-mate, yet he had no funds available whatsoever for the expenses of the wedding and for the purchase of furniture and other basic needs. Still, he did not deem it appropriate to trouble the Rebbe, his spiritual master, with his financial needs.

The Rebbe read the list of names and requests thoughtfully, then raised his eyes towards Yitzchak and asked, “What about your first daughter, Sheindel – isn’t she due to get married? What will you do about the expenses?”

The chasid shrugged helplessly, too shocked by the Rebbe responding to his thoughts instead of his written words to be able to speak.

“If so,” smiled the Rebbe, “I recommend that you take my advice. On Thursday, tell your family you have to leave for a few days. Then pack what you will need and travel to the town of Dorna and spend Shabbos there.”

Yitzchak returned home in high spirits. He hadn’t the slightest idea why the rebbe had instructed him to go to Dorna, a popular tourist site in the summer,¹ but now, in the midst of the freezing snowy winter, would feel more like a deserted ghost town. Nevertheless, he trusted that this expedition would be his path to salvation.

He arrived in the evening. Friday found R. Yitzchak pacing aimlessly the streets of the Jewish section of Dorna, dressed in his Shabbat *bekasha* (long robe) with his *streimel* (expensive round fur hat) crowning his head. He had no idea where he was going or what he was supposed to be doing, but he trusted that Heaven would guide his steps.²

A local woman happened to glance out her window and saw this impressive-looking stranger passing her house. “Look!” she exclaimed excitedly to her husband. A *tzadik* (holy man) has come our town! Hurry and invite him to be our guest.”

The husband ran to do his wife’s bidding. In tones of great respect he invited the ‘tzadik’ into his home.

¹ Today called Vatra Dornei, a town in the north of Romania with a population of 13-14,000, according to the 2011 census. (Google)

² One of the daily Morning Blessings is: “Blessed are You, G-d, . . . who directs the steps of man.”

Yitzchak thought at first that the man was teasing him. "I am not a tzadik," he replied firmly; "just an ordinary Jew."

"Wow!" thought the townsman. "Not only is he a tzadik, he is also humble. A true tzadik!" His joy was boundless when the distinguished visitor agreed to accept his hospitality offer. The proud couple proceeded to treat their surprise guest as if the king himself had come to grace their home.

The word quickly spread to the Jews of Dorna: a tzadik had arrived and would be staying in their town through Shabbat. Many put aside their busy preparations for the holy day just hours away and hurried to be in the presence of the holy man.

Most came with requests for blessings, some came just to stare. To all Yitzchak kept vehemently protesting, "I most definitely am not a tzadik. You are mistaken!" This only resulted in the opposite of what he intended. It was like pouring oil onto a fire that shoots up the flames.

The pressure for him to accede to the many requests for blessings grew increasingly intense. No one even bothered any more to listen to his denials. He felt forced to assume the role that was being thrust upon him. Otherwise there would be no relief.

With a sigh he accepted the request notes signed with personal names and mothers' names, reading each one and reluctantly muttering a blessing. Of course each time he told the person they were making a terrible mistake, but those words were ignored while the blessings received hearty 'Amen's.

His heart was breaking from sorrow and worry. "Oy, my soul! What will be, what will be! They are clothing me in a glory that is not mine. Me, a tzadik? I am guilty of deceiving an entire population!"

A few minutes more passed when suddenly they heard someone screaming outside the house. "Let me in to see the tzadik. You must let me in. NOW!"

The door to the room burst open and a distraught man rushed in. Focusing on Yitzchak, he shouted, "Rebbe! My little daughter is critically sick. At this moment she is fluttering between life and death. Rebbe! You must save her. PLEASE!"

Yitzchak the chasid felt as if he was about to faint. "Now the life of a child has been placed on your shoulders," he berated himself. "This is too much already." His lips trembled as he choked back tears. "She should have a complete healing," he pronounced.

In synagogue on Shabbat, Yitzchak was escorted to the most honored seat. In the midst of the prayers, the congregation was interrupted by the loud entrance of the man with the sick daughter. Crying and laughing simultaneously, he called out, "Holy Rebbe! My daughter got better. She has recovered completely!"

Everyone present was astonished. It was difficult to digest at first the miracle that had taken place. Their already great esteem for their newly found Rebbe multiplied immeasurably more.

Nor did it end there. On Saturday night, before the agitated chasid could depart for home, he was visited by the head of the Dorin Jewish community accompanied by his wife. Politely and with much respect, they requested a blessing for children, because they were already married for seventeen years but had yet to be blessed with offspring.

“Oh, no!” thought Yitzchak. “Not this too!” He managed to mutter a blessing in a low voice, and then left the house and the town absolutely as speedily as he could, terrified that otherwise he might have to field even more impossible requests.

As Yitzchak was striding along the road that led out of Dorna, he saw in the distance a horse drawn carriage wheeling towards him. As it drew closer, his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Inside it was his rebbe, R. Naftali of Rofshitz!

Yitzchak the chasid burst into bitter tears. He wordlessly thrust his hand into his right pocket and pulled out a wad of all the request notes he had received. Then he put his other hand into his left pocket and retrieved all the money he had been given in Dorna. With a pleading look he extended both handfuls toward the Rebbe.

“I’ll take the notes; you keep the money,” the Rebbe said calmly, with a smile. “Use it to arrange a fine wedding for your Sheindel.”

This the chasid did, but only a year later the same dire need raised its head again. It was time for his second daughter, Chaya, to marry, and not a coin remained from the money amassed the year before.

In trepidation Yitzchak went once more to seek R. Naftali’s blessing and advice, praying mightily that the rebbe not send him to Dorna again, or any other similar location. The pain and shame from the previous year’s frightening expedition was still reverberating in his mind and heart.

With a sense of impending doom, he heard the Rebbe order him to Dorna again. For a brief moment he thought to resist, but then his complete trust in his rebbe re-asserted itself. He went home and organized everything he needed to take along.

His arrival in Dorna was greeted with wild excitement. The community leader was so beside himself with joy and gratitude, he seemed prepared to prostrate before Yitzchak and kiss his feet.

“This is truly divine inspiration!” he exclaimed. “Just this week my wife give birth to a son – a result of your blessing, of course! – and now suddenly you appear, just in time to honor us with your participation in the *brit mila* circumcision ceremony tomorrow. Rebbe, Rebbe; how can I possibly thank you sufficiently!”

The whole town was in an uproar. Many dozens of people came flocking just to gaze at the face of the miracle-working *tzadik*.

Yitzchak stared at the crowd assembled in his honor. At that moment a seductive thought crept into his mind. “Maybe it is actually true that *my* blessings helped them? Maybe *I* really do have much merit in Heaven?”

Yitzchak marveled how different this Shabbat was than the one he suffered through the year before. This time he was no longer bothered by the praise and adulation being thrown his way. Indeed, the opposite was more the case. He was enjoying all the attention and glory; he felt for him it was a period of elevated spirit.

Saturday night he left Dorna, his small suitcase filled with the monetary contributions the townspeople were happy to bestow upon him, even more than the year before. This time the Rebbe did not drive out to meet him, so after a few minutes at home, he walked quickly to the Rebbe's house to tell him all that happened.

Much to his surprise though, the *gabbai*, the Rebbe's attendant, would not allow him to enter. When pressed for an explanation, he said curtly, "I was told not to let you in."

Over the next few days the scene repeated itself many times. The gabbai kept refusing him entrance. Finally, Yitzchak decided that he would wait outside the Rebbe's door, and as soon as the Rebbe would come out, he would confront him about the reason for his rejection.

He stood there for what seemed an eternity until the Rebbe eventually emerged. Before Yitzchak could utter a word, the Rebbe addressed him directly.

"Oho! Here is the great tzadik who has merit in Heaven. Waiting for me are sick people, barren women, men in strangling financial predicaments. Perhaps you are able to bless them? As for me, I receive only ordinary Jews, not tzadikim such as yourself."

Yitzchak the chasid realized immediately that the Rebbe had perceived the enticing but silly thought that had entered his mind in Dorna – that it was in his own merits that the blessings he had proclaimed were fulfilled, and not the Rebbe operating through him.

He firmly removed all such feelings from his heart. R. Naftali sensed the return of his chasid's humility and was pleased. Yitzchak left the Rebbe's house accompanied by warm blessings, secure in his status as a chasid who knows his true place.

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Source: Translated-adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the Hebrew weekly, *Sichat Hashavua* #1412 (5774/2014)

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Naftali of Rofshitz** [of blessed memory: 6 Sivan 5520 (the same date and year as the *Baal Shem Tov's* passing!) - 11 Iyar 5587 (1760-1827 C.E.)] became the *rebbe* of many thousands of chasidim. He was noted for his sharp wit and humor and his illuminating aphorisms. Some of his teachings are collected in his works, *Zera Kodesh*, *Ayalah Sheluchah*, and *Imrei Shefer*. Many stories about him appear in the book, *Ohel Naftoli*.

*Connection:* Seasonal -- Thursday, Iyar 11, the 192nd *yahrzeit* of the Rofshitzer.