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The Lazy Son-in-Law

Some 200 years ago on a freezing, snow-stormy night on a desolate road through a dark forest in the middle of Poland, a Jewish businessman's wagon, laden with goods, was stuck deeply in the mud in a blizzard. Perhaps the ice broke under the wheels but the wind was whistling so crazily it would have been impossible for the driver to hear. One thing for sure, the wagon wasn't budging and the two strong horses that for many hours had been faithfully doing their job were now helpless.

The driver tried all the tricks he knew: whipping, prodding, begging them, turning the reins this way and that, but nothing helped. The horses strained until they were exhausted, another few hours in the cold and they would freeze to death. The forest was filled with wolves and robbers who were just waiting for such an opportunity. The horses and the contents of the carriage would be easy pickings. The situation was desperate.

The businessman was at the end of his wits. He turned to the driver and yelled at him over the wind to run to the nearest town; perhaps there he could find someone with a horse or two or a few strong men to come back and help. They had to do something fast. He would wait here in the carriage until he returned. The nearest town was the city of Apta, perhaps a half hour's run from where they were.

The driver took a swig from the small vodka flask he carried and began running. But by the time he entered the town it was well after midnight and except for the screaming winds and snow the streets were enveloped in total, black, awesome, frozen silence.

The driver stood alone and looked around, all lights were out. Certainly everyone was curled up under their warm quilts, fast asleep. Where would he find anyone to help him now? But he couldn't go back. With no choice he began walking, hoping to find some sign of life... but in vain. It was so hopeless he wanted to cry.

He saw a dim light in the Synagogue; he had to get out of the cold. He entered the silent building, tried to warm himself up and after a few seconds burst into tears.

Suddenly he heard from a corner of the room someone say something. He looked up to see that a thin, young man who had probably been sitting and learning Torah by candlelight was standing looking at him.

"What's wrong?" the young man repeated. "Why are you crying? What happened?"

The driver walked over to him, dried his tears, shook the young man's hand and told him the whole story of the stuck carriage and exhausted horses in the forest. "Possibly there is a tavern or some other place in the town where they could find strong fellows who would help push the carriage, or maybe even someone who could lend them a horse or two to help pull it."

The young man told him not to worry, put on his coat, closed his book and told him to follow him. The driver couldn't believe his ears! It was a miracle!! He thanked the young man profusely and thanked G-d for sending him. Soon there would be help! Clearly he knew where there were some big strong men.

The driver followed him out of the Synagogue into the street but to his surprise the young man didn't turn right or left; he kept walking straight.... out of the town towards the forest.

The driver tried to protest, to explain that it was senseless to go alone; they had to go back and get help, bring a horse or even three. But the young man just kept walking swiftly through the swirling snow and freezing wind until they arrived at the site of the carriage.

When the businessman saw they had arrived he jumped, half frozen, out of the carriage expecting to see salvation. But when he saw that this skinny fellow was all the driver had brought back he turned around, held his head in agony and began to moan.

"No! NO! This is what I have been waiting in the cold for, for over an hour?! How is this matchstick going to help get us out? Soon the horses will be frozen dead. Oy, G-d in Heaven! Have mercy. PLEASE!"

But the young man seemed totally unaffected by his words. He just said quietly. "You have already been stuck here too long. I hate to see people being stuck. The time has come that you should continue in your journey."

There was something so simple in this young man's words that it caught the driver by surprise. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, go back up to your seat, crack your whip over the horses and continue in your journey." He replied.

"And what will you do? Stay here and freeze?" The driver asked.

"I'll get in the coach and return with you to Apta".

Somehow, the tone of the young fellow's voice convinced the driver to jump up onto the carriage without further thought, climb to his place, grab his whip and snap it over the horses. Amazingly, the horses pulled the carriage smoothly out of the mud with no effort! It was as if they were waiting for just this moment.

The businessman and the driver turned in astonishment to the young man, who was standing to the side waiting for the businessman to enter the carriage, before he himself climbed up and motioned for the driver to go.

Minutes later they entered Apta and when the carriage stopped on a main street, the young man alighted and walked quietly off into the darkness without saying a word.

Before they could digest what just happened, the irresistible smell of freshly baked bread wafted softly into their nostrils. The bakery of Apta was preparing for the morning customers. They followed the smell and in just moments found themselves entering the bakery and being greeted by its owner, a religious Jew.

"Welcome! Welcome honored guests. Come and partake of freshly baked bread! Please wash your hands and sit down," he said in the friendliest voice possible.

It was as though they had suddenly been transported into a warm, pleasant new world as though in a dream. They realized that their ordeal had left them tired and hungry. They washed for bread while the baker prepared some hot tea, and as they ate they told their host about the miracle that they had just experienced.

"Young man? Miracles? I know everyone in this city," the baker said. "I can tell you for sure there are no young, thin miracle workers here. Must be someone visiting from another city. Or maybe it was Elijah the prophet! It says in the Talmud that he makes miracles. But you should have asked him for a blessing- if he could do such wonders, who knows what else he could do for you!"

Suddenly the side door of the bakery opened and a skinny stooped over figure wrapped in an old cloth winter coat entered the room. The baker's smile faded and a look of disgust darkened his face. "*Nebech!* That's my son-in-law! What a lazy bum! The whole day I work like a slave to support him, my dear daughter and their children, and you know what he does?! Nothing! He drives me crazy!"

The driver's face became pale. That's him! Tha... that's the one that ... got us out of the mud!"

When as the baker understood the implications of what he was hearing and seeing, his eyes widened like saucers! "Him? He's the *tzadik* (holy miracle worker)?" He fell with a thud on the chair behind him totally confused,

mumbling, "It can't be! It just can't be!"

As soon as the baker's son in law heard the thud and the commotion he ran to his father in law's aid, but when the latter came to his senses he fell to one knee, took his son in law's hand and began to beg his forgiveness.

That night a hidden *tzadik* became revealed to the world, a great miracle worker who would help thousands 'out of the mud.' He became known as "**Ha'Yehudi HaKodesh m'Peshischa**" (The Holy Jew of Peshischa).

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Source: From the translation-adaptation of **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton** from *Toratcha Shashuai* #552, as edited by Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Rabinowitz** (1766 – 19 Tishrei 1813), The "**Holy Jew**" of **Peshischa**, was the leading disciple of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz, the "*Seer*" of *Lublin*, but subsequently split off to form the famous Peshischa movement of Chassidut. Rabbi Simcha-Bunim of Peshischa and Rabbi Menachem-Mendel of Kotsk were among his many disciples who became great Rebbes in their own right.

*Connection:* Weekly reading of *Naso* (haftorah) – the birth of *Shimshon HaGibor* ("Samson the Mighty").\*

\* *Editor's note:* You may be wondering what is the connection between the thin hero of the above story and "Samson the Mighty." Answer: according to the traditional teachings of our sages, Samson looked more like a scrawny Torah scholar than he did like *Goliyat* (Goliath), or A. Schwarzenegger, or any other biblical or mythological or current icon for muscular strength. Samson became overpoweringly strong only when he was temporarily filled with *ruach HaShem* ("the spirit of G-d") as a reading of the relevant verses in Judges 13-16 make apparent, (especially 14:6, 14:19, 15:14, 16:28).