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

The Shwarma Rebbe

David Deri used to own a kosher meat restaurant in Manhattan's. One day, he noticed a man enter tentatively and begin to look over the menu that was laying on the table nearest the entrance. He was wearing jeans with a few holes and patches, and a shirt that had clearly seen better days – a not so unusual look on the streets of New York in those years. He approached this unpromising looking customer.

“Hello, sir. My name is David. How may I help you?”

“Hi. I'm **James**. I'd like shwarma.”

David looked at him curiously. He had included shwarma on the menu only because there were Israelis that liked to drop in from time to time. But Israelis, he knew, were not likely to respond to being called ‘James.’

He couldn't hold himself back from asking. “How do you know what is shwarma?”

“Whaddya talking about?” responded James like a true Jew. “All my life I've eaten shwarma.” Then he added emphatically, “I'm an Israeli.”

“And your name is ‘James?’ David wondered if perhaps he had heard incorrectly.

James laughed. “My real name is Chayim, However, here in America I decided to adopt a more popular name.”

David decided to utilize the opportunity; he was, after all, a *Chabadnik*, a follower of **the Lubavitcher Rebbe**. He began to pepper their exchange with words of Torah. James' facial expressions indicated that he quickly grasped the theme and that he enjoyed hearing ideas that were new to him.

After a series of visits to the restaurant, in which James ordered a large portion of shwarma and received it each time seasoned with Torah thoughts, David suggested to him that he subscribe to a weekly one-on-one Torah class with a Lubavitch Yeshiva student, who would contact him to arrange a mutually convenient hour.

“Why not?” James responded, smiling, handed to David one of his business cards. David had never inquired about what James did for a living, so he was quite surprised to discover that James was the CEO of a large investment firm on Wall Street!

That evening David gave the card to a yeshiva student he was acquainted with, named Shneur. In the next few weeks, David didn't see James at all. Had he switched restaurants? Did he come in the hours when David was not there? He didn't know. In any case, the incident soon passed from his mind and he didn't think about James at all.

But then, after several months, it occurred to David that he hadn't seen James in such a long time, and he wondered what had happened with him. He phoned Shneur, and asked him if he was still in touch with James.

"Am I still in touch with him? I certainly am. And our connection has become much stronger," was the response David heard, to his joy.

And more good news was still to come.

Shneur continued. "Know that James purchased his own pair of tefillin and puts them on faithfully every [week] day. Not only that, he also has taken on to observe Shabbat! – at least partially, at any rate."

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Years passed. David was standing behind the cash register when a religious-looking Jewish man entered the restaurant. The man looked around and, upon noticing David, rushed over to him, grabbed his hand, and began shaking it enthusiastically.

"Do you remember me?" he asked, still grasping David's hand.

David didn't.

The man smiled triumphantly. "I'm James!"

David gulped. "Of course I remember you. But you certainly look different," he added, staring at the *kippah* adorning James' head and his overall well-groomed appearance.

"That's right. I wear a kippah all the time now. And it is all because of you!" he snapped with mock indignation.

"Here's what happened," James continued. "I began to study with Shneur, the yeshiva boy you told to call me, by telephone once a week. In one of those sessions, we encountered the Rebbe's idea that those who have very little Torah knowledge should take it upon themselves to teach the little they know to another Jew who unfortunately doesn't even know that much.

“This idea was difficult for me to digest. I asked Shneur, how could it possibly be that someone like me, who not only knows very little, but also is not mitzvah observant, is qualified to teach the holy Torah?”

“Shneur easily deflected my concerns, and went on to convince me that I could do it, that me too the Rebbe had in mind.

“Right then on the telephone, I decided I would arrange a Shabbat party every week for the Jews among my employees and customers, and that in addition to the food I would have catered, I would share with them the teachings that I was learning with Shneur.

“To host the Shabbat parties, I rented a large gallery space in an upscale building in Manhattan. The parties became an instant hit. No doubt the long tables aligned along one wall laden with a wide variety of food from the best kosher catering available was a major element. Still, the highlight each week was my presentation of the Torah teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

“From week to week the number of people requesting to be invited grew, until after a few months I had no alternative but to assign the regular participants into shifts that would attend on alternate weeks.

“The moment finally came when I could no longer push aside the realization how inappropriate it was to be having Shabbat parties in which the Shabbat laws were not being adhered to. Even more, that I, the organizer, host and teacher, was only partially Shabbat observant. After a brief inner struggle, I had to accept that the time had come: I would be fully Shabbat observant!

“Once I actualized my Shabbat commitment, other mitzvahs came smoothly in its wake. Eventually, I decided to take the plunge and change my life to be a full-fledged religious Jew in all its implications.

“More time went by and then I met a wonderful religious Jewish woman. We got married, thank G-d, and we moved to Canada.”

“See the power of shwarma!” David commented wryly. Then he winked and patted James on the shoulder.

“Hold on,” protested James. “The story I came to tell you is not yet finished.

“A few weeks ago – like now – I flew into New York on a business trip. I was walking on a street in Manhattan when suddenly a kippah-wearing Jew

approached me and greeted me excitedly. ‘Rabbi James, hi!’ he exclaimed emotionally.

“‘Rabbi’ he called me, no less! Meanwhile, I had no idea who he was.

“Then he began pumping my hand and wouldn’t let go. ‘You should know that you changed my life!’ he said, to my open-mouthed amazement.

“It turned out that he was one of the regulars at those Shabbat parties I used to organize while I still lived in New York. The words of Torah he heard each week seeped into his heart and, like with me, percolated there until he realized that he had to change his lifestyle, and accept upon himself to live according to Torah and mitzvot.

“Do you get it, David? Without me even realizing it, the Lubavitcher Rebbe turned me of all people into a *shliach* -- one of his emissaries to inspire other Jews to return to their roots, thus bringing closer the final redemption.”

James laughed. “Yes, that was genuinely powerful shwarma that you served me.”

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Source: Translated and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the weekly, *HaGeula*, #990.

*Connection:* Seasonal -- Shabbat, Tammuz 3, is the 25th *yahrzeit* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe** מנחם מנדל: [11 Nissan 5662 - 3 Tammuz 5754 (April 1902 – June 1994 C.E.)], became the seventh Rebbe of the Chabad dynasty after his father-in-law’s passing on 10 Shvat 5710 (1950 C.E.). He is widely acknowledged as the greatest Jewish leader of the second half of the 20th century. Although a dominant scholar in both the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah and fluent in many languages and scientific subjects, the Rebbe is best known for his extraordinary love and concern for every Jew on the planet. His emissaries around the globe dedicated to strengthening Judaism number in the thousands. Hundreds of volumes of his teachings have been printed, as well as dozens of English renditions.

