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The Almost Certain Death Sentence in Tiberias

Rabbi Yaakov-Shimshon of Shepetovka lived the last eight years of his life in the Holy Land. When he first arrived in 1794, after docking at the port in Acco, he travelled due east, making a point of visiting all the known burial places of tzadikim in the Meron-Tsfat('Safed')-Tiverya('Tiberias') area of northern Israel.

At the end of his journey he settled in Tiverya, where he was immediately appointed to be the chief rabbi of the Ashkenazic Jewish community, so great was his reputation that preceded him of being a leading authority in Jewish Law.

In Tiberias itself, when he prayed at the gravesite of the great Rabbi Akiva, an eyewitness reorted that the Rabbi quoted by heart all of the statements of Rabbi Akiva in both the Babylonian and *Jerusalem Talmuds*.

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One time, a local Jew quarreled seriously with one of his Arab neighbors. The Arab summoned him to court, where according to Muslim law it seemed virtually certain that a death sentence would be decreed upon him. The terrified Jew didn't know what to do. He hurried to the home of the new Rabbi of the city and poured out his heart to him.

Rabbi Yaakov-Shimshon advised him to give a *pidyon nefesh* (soul-redemption donation) to a fellow-Jew in need. The man did so wholeheartedly, praying that this good deed would somehow lead to his salvation.

On the day of his trial, the Jew walked with trembling steps to the courthouse which was located in the lower section of Tiverya, on the west bank of Lake Kinneret ('Sea of Galilee').

When he was near the entrance, he spotted his Arab neighbor ascending the steps to the courtroom, accompanied by his lawyer who was carrying a packet of papers, which the quaking Jew assumed to be incriminating documents.

Suddenly, there was a loud rumbling sound, followed by panicky screams and a loud splash! The Jew rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Where a broad staircase had stood a moment earlier, there was now a chaotic pile of rubble. The structure had collapsed, throwing the two accusers into the water together with all their papers for the court. [IMHO, it is unlikely that the two Arabs suffered serious injury. The Kinneret waters are calm, and

near the bank they are shallow. But all the papers were certainly destroyed by the immersion. – Y.T.]

Later that day, the grateful man went with joy to thank Rabbi Yaakov-Shimshon, and to tell him all about the miracle that had taken place. The Rabbi was not surprised. "It is not a miracle at all," he said dismissively. "It is a clear verse in the Torah (Deut. 15:8): 'Ki Paso'ach tiftach es yodecho lo' [כִּי פָּאֹחַ תִּפְתַּח אֶת יָדְךָ לְיָדוּעְךָ] -- 'For open, you must open your hand to him [the needy fellow-Jew]...'"

He went on to explain to his puzzled but still smiling guest. "The intonation on the first two words is determined by the *trope* (cantillation note), *Darga Tavir* under the 'sof' in 'paso'ach' (the middle letter in the second (left) word).



[The Aramaic name of this tune marker,] *Darga Tavir* literally means 'broken steps.' So there you are. By opening your hand and giving *tzedakah* ('charity'), you merited that the steps should break, thereby saving your life!"

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Source: Adapted, rewritten and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from an article on /charedi.org (*Chukas* 5775).

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon of Shepetovka** [? – 3 Sivan 5561 (? - May 1801)], a descendant of Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropole, was a student of the Maggid of Mezritch and Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz (two of the three main followers of the Baal Shem Tov) and a close friend of Rabbi Baruch of Mezibuz (the grandson of the Besht). As a great authority in Jewish Law, he earned considerable respect also in rabbinic circles. In 1794 (according to charedi.org), he moved to Israel and settled in Tiberias, where he is buried.

*Connection:* Weekly Reading of Re'eh -- the verse, "For open, you must open your hand to him [the needy fellow-Jew]..." (Deut. 15:8) plays a starring role in the story.