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The Possible Third

[I usually don't use "Don't know if it is true or not true but in any case certainly it could be true" stories, but this one I was unable to resist because of its weekly reading connection. --YT]

Years ago [In the 19th century], the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel was entirely dependent on the generosity of its brethren in the Diaspora. To that end, special emissaries would travel throughout Europe collecting donations, visiting local Jews and soliciting funds.

One time an emissary arrived in a certain city and was given a warm welcome. All of the townspeople came to the synagogue to hear him deliver his appeal. At the end of the speech, a prominent member of the local community volunteered to accompany him on his rounds from house to house.

The two men walked through the Jewish section knocking on doors and asking for donations. Not one family refused to contribute. The contributions varied according to financial circumstance, but everyone was happy to give at least something. Then the emissary noticed that they had skipped a mansion, and asked his companion why. "It would be a waste of effort," he was told. "The man who lives there is a miser. He has never given even a penny to charity."

"But we have to try," the emissary insisted. "Who knows? Maybe our words will penetrate his heart."

They knocked on the door, which was opened by the wealthy miser himself. "Good day!" the emissary said cheerfully. "May we speak with you for a minute?"

"You may certainly speak, but if you've come for a donation of money you're wasting your time," the miser said dryly.

But the emissary would not give up. "You're obviously a wealthy man. Don't you want to help support the poor and hungry Jews of the Holy Land? Everyone else in town is contributing generously."

"My money belongs to me," the miser declared sharply. "I worked very hard for it, and saved every penny. I refuse to give the fruit of my labors to someone who didn't expend the effort."

The emissary looked at him with pity in his eyes. "You're right, it's your money and your decision," he conceded. But before he left he added under his breath, "It looks as if you're going to be the third."

The miser closed the door with the emissary's words echoing in his ears. What did he mean? A whole day he couldn't get the comment out of his head, and that night he tossed and turned in bed. "It looks as if you're going to be the third." The third what? He had to find out.

The next day the miser searched the city until he found the emissary from Israel. "I must know," he pleaded with him. "What did you mean when you said that I would be the third?"

The emissary smiled. "Yesterday I honored your principle of not giving away any of your hard-earned money. So how can you expect me to share my wisdom with you for nothing? I also worked very hard to acquire it."

The miser acknowledged that he was right, and agreed to pay for the answer. The emissary insisted on a sum three times what he usually asked of the rich, and the transaction was made.

"Now I will tell you a story," the emissary began. "Many years ago there lived a very wealthy man who was as stingy as he was rich. He was even miserly when it came to himself. He even refused to marry, lest a wife and children drain his finances.

"The man worked very hard his whole life and eventually amassed a fortune. Before he passed away, he instructed the Burial Society to bury him with all his money. Even after death he refused to part from his riches.

"His final wishes were carried out, and not one cent remained above ground. When the grave was filled, the angel in charge of the deceased came to accompany him to the Heavenly Court.

"'Did you study Torah?' the man was asked. 'No,' he replied, 'I was a businessman.'

"'Then certainly you supported those who did with your charity. Tell us,' the judges urged him, 'which good deeds did you perform with all your money?'

"'Look, there's nothing to talk about,' the man answered. 'I brought all my money with me. Do whatever you want with it.'

"'You don't understand,' they explained. 'Here money has no value. The currency is mitzvot-commandments.' The man's fate hung in the balance.

"After much discussion the judges realized that there was only one precedent in history, when the wealthy, rebellious Korach had been swallowed up by the earth with all his riches. In the end it was decided that the miser, who had also been buried with all his money, should be sent to keep him company. The lonely Korach would no doubt be delighted.

"But it's very hard to spend such a long time with even two people," the emissary continued. "I'm sure that Korach and his friend are very bored by now, and would welcome a third conversationalist into their group. When I met you I thought to myself, 'Who knows? Maybe their boredom will soon be alleviated. Now though, that you've given me your donation, I think that Korach and his friend will have to wait a while longer."

From that day on the former miser was always the first to contribute to every charitable cause that came his way.

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