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Two Admitted But Unalterable Mistakes

Some months after the passing of **Rabbi Shneur-Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe** of Chabad, the Jewish community in Haditch received a letter from the Imperial Government. It stated that the cemetery that they were using was located on land that belonged to the Imperial Government, and since they converted it into a cemetery without permission, all the graves there, including the Rebbe's, must be removed to another location.

The Jewish community was shocked and distressed. It was disrespectful to move someone from his eternal rest. They replied that their decision was done with permission of the local authorities. They sent a copy of the permits from the local jurisdiction where it stated clearly that the provincial government bequeathed that parcel of land to the Jewish community of Haditch for the specific purpose of a burial grounds.

The Imperial Government replied, "Yes, we see that the provincial government gave you permission, but they mistakenly permitted you to use land that is not theirs. Their parcel is a short distance away and you can re-inter your loved ones there. However, they must be removed from the place where they are now buried."

The provincial government acknowledged that it was their mistake and apologized. They offered to swap a larger parcel of land to the Imperial Government in order not to violate the dignity and sanctity of the cemetery. However, the government was firm: **all graves must be removed!**

The Alter Rebbe's son and successor, Rabbi DovBer, known as the *Mitteler Rebbe*, was informed and was asked what does he prefer to do? Does he want to send someone to move his father, the Alter Rebbe, or should the community do it?

The Mitteler Rebbe refused to do either. He had heard that one of his father's former chassidim was an important official in the Imperial office that has the final say on this matter. He sent a chasid to plea with that person to leave the Jewish cemetery and accept the provincial government's offer of swapping parcels of land.

The chasid, Rabbi Moshe Vilenker, who was a friend of this official when they were in Liozna together with the Alter Rebbe, was chosen to be the representative. Reb Moshe immediately travelled to the capital, Petersburg, to visit the official.

When the official saw Reb Moshe waiting in the antechamber, he immediately recognized him and granted him an audience. As soon as Reb Moshe entered his office he said, "I'm sure that you came to request something of me. But that is not the ways of chasidim. First you will come to my house this evening, where we will *farbreng*. After the *farbrengen* (chasidic get-together), you can present your request."

Having no choice, Reb Moshe agreed to this arrangement. They sat down, sang the Alter Rebbe's *nigunim* (songs and melodies), and reminisced about their time with the Rebbe. The officer then said, "You of course noticed that I have a beautiful mansion; I am wealthy and have whatever I desire. But you should know the truth is that I don't really enjoy it, not even for a moment. Yes, it sounds strange, but let me tell you why. Even when I was a student by the Rebbe, I had my doubts about G-d, and that is what ultimately caused me to leave and eventually become what I became. However, one time before I left, without explaining his reasons, the Rebbe instructed me to go visit the *tzadik*, **Rabbi Aharon of Karlin**.

"R. Aharon's custom was that he didn't accept people in *yechidus* (private audience), as our Rebbe did. Whoever came to him would sit in the *beis hamidrash* ('study hall'), say *Tehillim* (Psalms) or learn and wait until the *tzadik* gave him an answer. After I was sitting for some time, the *tzadik* entered the crowded *beis hamidrash* from his room that was adjoining it, and, without directing his gaze towards any particular person, said, 'Young man, young man! Maybe, after all, there is a G-d.'

"When he said this, no one in the room took it as if his question had been answered, and everyone remained in their place. A few minutes later, he came into the room for a second time and repeated the exact same words.

"When the same scene repeated itself a third time, I realized he was talking to me! He was informing me that notwithstanding my questions and doubts, I cannot dismiss the possibility that there is a Creator. So now, every time I sit down to enjoy something that is forbidden by the Torah, those words come back and haunt me. But I am too weak and don't have the strength and will power to give up everything I have."

Some hours later, he said, “now that we *farbrenge*d, please tell me what is the reason of your coming to visit me?” When Reb Moshe informed him of the dilemma and showed him the legal papers, he immediately replied, “I will agree to accept the offer of the provincial government, but only for the Rebbe’s sake.”

In the book, “*B’Ohel Chabad*,” published in 1920 by a grandson of a chasid of the third Rebbe, the *Tzemach Tzedek*, grandson of the Alter Rebbe, he notes that his grandfather told him, “Chasidim say that is why the Alter Rebbe expressed some days before his passing a desire to be interred in Haditch. He wanted to help all the Jews buried there that their eternal rest not be disturbed. And that was accomplished only because he too was there. So he did a favor for other Jews even after his departure from this physical world.”

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the writings of Rabbi Shalom DovBer Avtzon, as published in “*Living Jewish*” 721 (Shmos 5780).

Rabbi Avtzon is a veteran educator and the author of numerous books on the Rebbes of Chabad and their chasidim. He is available to *farbreng* and can be contacted at [avtzonbooks@ gmail.com](mailto:avtzonbooks@gmail.com)

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Shneur Zalman** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5505 - 24 Tevet 5573 (1745 - Dec. 1812 C.E.)], the **Alter Rebbe**, was one of the main disciples of the *Maggid of Mezritch*, successor to the Baal Shem Tov. He is the founder of the Chabad-Chassidic movement and the author of *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* and *Tanya* as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

*Connection:* This Friday 24 Tevet, is the 209th *yahrzeit* of the Alter Rebbe.