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Special Favor from the Most Unexpected Source

This amazing story took place many years ago in Iran. It was related by a witness, Rabbi Yehuda Ezrachian, one of the leading rabbis in Iran at the time. The year was 1979, when the Islamic revolution broke out after the Persian *Shah* (ruler) was deposed and replaced by the notorious Ayatollah Khomeini, a rabid hater of Israel. Until that year, ties between Iran and the West were cordial. After the revolution, however, all those ties were cut off immediately.

There was an American consulate in Teheran at the time. When the revolution broke out, demonstrators sent by the new government, which hated the West - especially America - stormed the American consulate and took everyone inside hostage. They then presented a list of demands to the American government as a condition for their release.

Exhausting negotiations dragged on for a year and a half between representatives of the American government and of the Iranian regime. In the meantime, more than fifty captives were living in the consulate compound, among them Jews, under deplorable conditions. As the negotiation continued, with no end in sight, the captives were suffering.

During that time, the Americans managed to arrange, through the auspices of the United Nations, for a delegation of four neutral clergymen to enter Iran, and to visit the captives in the consulate to provide them with some encouragement. Three prominent priests were chosen for the mission, along with a rabbi for the Jewish captives. Thanks to the influence of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the one chosen was **HaRav Avraham-Mordechai Hirschberg**, the chief rabbi of Mexico. He was an erudite scholar and also a man of action with expansive ties to heads of state and prominent personalities.

It was Chanukah when Rabbi Hirschberg arrived at the consulate. Following the instructions he had received from the Rebbe, he lit the Chanukah candles with the captives and offered them effusive encouragement. He also spoke to them about the story of Chanukah - how a handful of Jews prevailed over masses of non-Jews in battle. His message infused them with hope and inner strength; some even grew closer to their heritage as a result.

As Rabbi Hirschberg's visit drew to a close and he was preparing to return home with the rest of the delegation, they were surprised to discover that they were not being allowed to leave just yet. The evil Khomeini, seeking to humiliate the Americans and promote himself, demanded their public

attendance at a mass Muslim event that was scheduled to take place in Teheran's central square. Millions were expected to be in attendance. The center point of the ceremony was a high dais on which senior regime officials – including Khomeini – were seated. Alongside them were the four American representatives, Rabbi Hirschberg among them.

Many more than a million Muslim men filled the square and the surrounding streets. The prayers began, in Persian. When the signal to bow was given, the religious figures on the stage all knelt on their knees and bowed – including the Christian priests. After them, the millions of Muslim men all bowed too, and also prostrated themselves, as is their custom. Of all the millions, one man remained standing tall – Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Hirschberg, similar to Chananya, Mishael and Azariah in their time.¹ He did not move, standing out among the masses.

The Ayatollah Khomeini sensed something, and flew into a rage. He immediately summoned Rabbi Hirschberg to him, and through a translator, asked him why he had not bowed, while his three American friends, the Christian priests, had?

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai – despite being overcome with fear and sure he was going to be sent to his death – did display any of his inner angst. He turned to the translator and politely asked him to explain to the ruler that our Torah states that one must not bow in idol worship, and because he did not understand Persian, he did not know to whom everyone was bowing. As such, he was forbidden from joining them. It is possible that the priests who did bow were familiar with the Persian language and knew to whom they were bowing. But because he did not know, he was compelled to remain standing.

His innocent words of truth took the evil ruler by surprise, and also found favor in his eyes. Instead of killing Rabbi Hirschberg or otherwise punishing him, he instructed the interpreter to tell the rabbi that he liked his answer. He was impressed by the fact that he was not a flatterer like the three priests in the delegation were.

This was a truly remarkable turn of events. Khomeini was known for his burning hatred of Jews, and yet, he respected and admired the Jewish rabbi for adhering to his religion.

When Reb Avraham Mordechai understood from the translator how much of an impression his words had made on the Ayatollah, he decided to utilize the opportunity to try to help his Jewish brethren in Iran. He asked to set up a meeting to discuss their plight with him. The Ayatollah agreed and told him when to come.

¹ Book of Daniel Chapter 9.

At the appointed hour, Reb Avraham Mordechai arrived at the Ayatollah's residence. When the audience began, the Rabbi said with tears in his eyes: "I want to plead for my Jewish brethren who live here. I have learned that the remaining Jewish residents are suffering terribly at the hand of their neighbors and enemies. Perhaps the ruler in his compassion can save them and help prevent this persecution."

The Ayatollah first tried to argue that the Jews were collaborating with his enemies. But Rabbi Hirschberg, with his humble nature, was able to influence him by calmly proving that the Jews had no hatred for the ruler and the revolution at all. On the contrary, they hoped and yearned for the new government to protect them from their harassers.

Surprisingly, the ruler agreed to the request, whereupon Rabbi Avraham Mordechai seized the moment to make one more petition, relating to something he had become aware of during his conversations with members of the community. When the revolution broke out, a curfew was imposed throughout Iran, each night, until the early morning hours. This was very difficult for many Jews, who were used to going to pray in their shuls at dawn so they could then go to work. Now, due to the curfew, they could not fulfill their religious practices.

Once more he received help from Heaven. The Ayatollah agreed to this request as well. He promised he would issue an order to the Iranian police commander that from that day on, if they saw a person during the curfew in the early dawn hours carrying a *tallit & tefillin* case, they should accept that as a sign that he is not an enemy of the revolution, but rather a Jew performing his religious duty and rising early to pray in synagogue.

This remarkable accomplishment made waves, and generated tremendous encouragement throughout the community, as everyone was able to see how a Jew who fulfills the commandments of his religion proudly and is not afraid of scoffers or those who threaten him ultimately merited to find such special favor in the most unexpected place.

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*Source:* Adapted and expanded by Yerachmiel Tilles from the version on //bneyemunim.co.il, where *Mipikudecha Asichah*, Vol. II p. 21, is cited as the source. The biographical note below is excerpted from an article in a Chabad publication.

*Connection:* On Purim, we read in the Scroll of Esther that Mordechai did not bow down to Prime Minister Haman, the descendant of evil-incarnate Amalek. So, too, we do not bow down to the descendants of wicked Haman.

*Biographical note:*

**HaRav Avraham-Mordechai Hirschberg** [1916 -- 25 Elul 1985] was a beloved student of Harav Meir Shapiro in the prestigious 'Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin.' In 1942 he arrived in the U.S. He met with the Rebbe Rayatz, who asked him to meet

with his son-in-law [and future successor], a connection that was kept up for the next 40+ years. In 1945 he established a Chabad yeshiva in Chicago. In 1960, at the Rebbe's initiative, Rabbi Hershberg moved to Mexico to serve as the chief Ashkenazi rabbi, which he did for the next 25 years. He also carried out many secret missions for the Rebbe in Third World countries around the world, most of which have yet to be publicized.