

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

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The Bearded Doctor

This story occurred in Russia some 150 years ago in the days of the fourth Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch; **Rabbi Shmuel Scheersohn**, nicknamed "***the Maharash***".

The story begins as one of the chasidim of the Rebbe, Yehuda-Leib Hofman, had just boarded the train in Petersburg and found his seat. He was waiting to begin the ten-hour journey to Lubavitch when he felt that someone was staring at him. He glanced up and got a glimpse of a thickly bearded man, apparently a Jew, looking at him intently. He nodded cordially and the man stood, approached him, shook his hand, and said.

"Good afternoon. Please pardon the intrusion. My name is 'M...' Excuse my asking but, are you a Lubavitcher chasid? That is, of the Rebbe Maharash?"

Yehuda Leib nodded his head yes. His visitor sat down opposite him as the train started to move and began to speak:

"I know your Rebbe and he is a true G-dly man. He changed my life. That is why I am on this train. I am now on my way to see him for the second time in ten years. Please, do you mind? I feel I must tell you my story. It is so amazing that I am seeing a chasid of the Rebbe!"

He took out a handkerchief, obviously in an emotional upheaval, wiped his forehead, and continued:

"Some fifty-five years ago, not far from here, I was born into a very religious Jewish family. In school I was an excellent student in learning Torah. Even when I was very young, five or six, all my teachers were amazed at how smart I was and were sure that I would be a famous rabbi or Talmudic scholar.

"But they didn't know how wrong they were. When I was about sixteen, I got introduced to one of the secular Jewish thinkers and from there to the works of the great philosophers and secular thinkers of the day. My heart and mind became inflamed with fresh, radical, atheistic ideas and I decided to be "free" from the yoke of the *mitzvot*.

"It wasn't long before I was spending days on end in coffee houses discussing these ideas. I refused to return to the *Yeshiva*.

"Of course, my parents and teachers felt it their obligation to dissuade me but their attempts only made me angry. I began to hate them and Judaism so much that, finally, I decided I had enough, packed my belongings, moved to

another city, changed my name, and became a new person with no religion at all.

"I enrolled in medical school, excelled in my studies, graduated with honors, and married into a very wealthy gentile family. We had a few children. I opened a large clinic and became one of the most successful and famous doctors in Petersburg.

"Twenty years passed and I never even once thought of my past. I was totally involved in my work and my life and couldn't have cared less about Judaism or my parents.

"But then, I had a dream.

"An old Jew with a white beard dressed in white stood out against a totally black background and stared at me. At first, I didn't recognize him but when he called me 'my son,' I realized that it must be my father. He told me that after I left home, he and my mother had searched for me for years, that my leaving broke their hearts. He told me that although now he was no longer among the living, he had a message for me: I should return to the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And then he disappeared.

"I woke up in a sweat but I didn't tell my wife or any of my acquaintances. Neither she nor anyone else knew that I was Jewish and I didn't want them to. But I was shaken; nothing like this had ever happened to me.

"It took me a while but after a few days I calmed down. After all, I told myself, it was only a dream. And even if it was real, so what?! I never listened to my father when he was alive. Why should I care now? I decided to just forget the whole thing. If it were to happen again I would ignore him.

"But it wasn't so simple.

"A few days later the dream recurred and this time it was much harsher. I became frightened, remorseful. I almost wanted to cry and tell him I was sorry but then, in the dream, I caught myself. 'What's there to be sorry about? Because I left the dark ages?!"

"But my father said, 'Don't do it for me; return to Judaism for the sake of the truth.' And again, I awoke in a cold sweat.

"I tried to put it out of my mind, to keep busy and think of other things but it haunted me. Day and night I thought about it. People began to notice that I was acting tense and distant some even asked me if I was ill. But I managed to get along.

"Then there was the party.

"For several months I had no dreams but I was still far from normal. I was depressed and uneasy all the time and even took to drinking. So when my wife

and I received an invitation to the duke's birthday party, we took up the offer with joy. It would be packed with interesting and important people.

"The ideal opportunity to get back into life.

"We had clothes specially tailored for the occasion and it was everything we expected -- a magnificent ballroom, joyous music, excellent food, plenty of good brandy, the richest and most important people in Petersburg--hundreds of them, and a lot of fun. In fact, I got a bit drunk and felt so good that, when the orchestra played a quick polka, I leaped to the middle of the dance floor and began spinning and kicking to the glee of the crowd. They all stood around me and clapped.

"Then, without warning, on the dance floor in front of me, suddenly appeared my father! But this time he looked menacing.

"I was infuriated! I stopped dancing, pointed my finger at him, and screamed, 'Leave me alone! Go away!' The music stopped and everyone fell silent in shock, but I continued, 'I do what I want and you won't stop me! LEAVE ME ALONE!'

"Insane with anger, I pulled out my pistol, aimed at him, and fired!

"Pandemonium! Women screamed and fainted and men began to run for the door. Several men jumped on me and took the gun. Luckily, no one was hurt.

"Everyone thought that I, their honorable doctor, had totally gone mad. Well, they were right! I ran desperately out of the room and began to weep. I was going insane! I had to have a cure. But who could understand my problem? No one even knew I was Jewish.

"I decided I had to find a holy Jew, a miracle worker even. Somehow, the name of the Lubavitcher Rebbe popped up in my mind. He was known as a holy man, a healer with great spiritual powers; I would pay him big money and he would save me! I ran home packed some clothes, took a lot of money, and headed for the train station.

"The next day I arrived in Lubavitch, arranged a meeting, rested up, put on my best clothes, and the very next evening entered his private office with the money in my pocket and a letter explaining my situation. But as soon as I closed the door behind me and stood facing him, I froze. It was a totally different experience than I had ever had. I cannot explain it but when I saw his holy face it was like looking into heaven.

"But the Rebbe didn't even look at me. He got up, went to his window, opened it as though to let in fresh air, and yelled, 'What is a man who tried to kill his own father doing in my house?!'

"Suddenly the truth hit me like a huge hammer! I fell to my knees and held my head in my hands. It was as though the entire world turned upside down in an

instant.

"He was right. I did try to kill my father, not only now but for the past twenty years! Even worse, I tried to do the same thing to G-d!

"I lowered my head to the ground and began to weep and weep and weep until I felt my soul was about to leave my body. My whole life had been a huge, ugly mistake and now I regretted every second of it.

"After several minutes I came to and begged the Rebbe to fix me. He said I should leave my gentile family, giving them my house, all of my belongings and half of my money. Then I should move to a distant town, and devote myself to Torah and prayer until a certain thing, which I cannot divulge, would happen. This will be the sign that I have been forgiven by G-d. He told me that when I see that sign I should return to him in Lubavitch and that is why I'm on this train.

"He is truly a G-dly man! Today I saw the sign he spoke of and I am on my way to see him!"

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*Source:* Edited by Yerachmiel Tilles from the free translation by **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton** based on an article in the Hebrew weekly, "*Yidion HaKfar*" 8.6.06):

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn** [of blessed memory: **2 Iyar** 5594 - 13 Tishrei 5643 (1834-Sept. 1882 C.E.)], the fourth Lubavitch Rebbe, known as *the Rebbe Maharash*, was the seventh and youngest surviving son of his predecessor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the *Tzemach Tzedek*.

*Connection:* Wednesday, Iyar 2 (*tiferet sh'b'tiferet*), is the 137<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the **Rebbe Maharash**.