

The Hot Dog Revenge

This happened in the early 1960's. Dr. Velvl Greene was then a professor of microbiology and public health at the University of Minnesota. He also had recently been hired to join the NASA program to find life on Mars.

Around that time, Rabbi Moshe Feller had recently moved back home to Minneapolis, in the role of chief emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the state of Minnesota. He devoted much effort to get Professor Greene to become more mitzvah-observant. They spoke often.

One day, Rabbi Feller called Dr. Greene and said, "Velvl, I know you're traveling somewhere by plane. Before you take this trip, please do me a favor. Call the airline and order a kosher meal."

Velvl replied, "What? You know I don't keep kosher. If I don't keep kosher in my house, why do I need a kosher meal on the plane?"

Rabbi Feller responded that when the other Jewish passengers hear that Professor Velvl Greene had asked for his kosher meal, it could inspire them as well. Why should they lose out just because he's not there yet?

Velvl responded, "Look, I'm not so sure about all this, but if it is going to make you happy, I'll do you the favor."

Dr. Greene ordered the kosher meal, and boarded the plane the next day. But when the flight attendant came by, she handed him a regular, non-kosher meal.

Dr. Greene was ready for this too. Clearing his throat, he declared for everybody to hear, "No, ma'am, I ordered a kosher meal!"

"Your name, please?"

"Professor Velvl Greene."

All heads turned. Professor Greene had ordered a kosher meal! The attendant said, "Okay, I'll be right back."

While fellow passengers were feasting on chicken parmesan or steak, even wiping the gravy with bread, the flight attendant was nowhere to be found. The professor was hungry; his mouth was starting to really salivate. The aromas were stabbing his *kishkes*!

He pushed the little button, and when the lady returned he said, “My kosher meal?”

She replied, “We’re still checking.”

After a few minutes, and after everyone on the plane had been served, the flight attendant came to his seat and said, “Um, Dr. Greene, there must have been a mistake. We don’t seem to have your meal on the plane.”

Dr. Greene was about to blurt out, “Fine, give me another meal.” After all, this wasn’t his idea. He ate all sorts of food at home. Problem was, how could he ask for that meal after he had just made such a big deal on the plane for everyone to know that Professor Velvl Greene had ordered a kosher meal? How would it look if he suddenly said, “Fine, give me a regular meal”?

Greene resisted...but Greene was angry. Very angry. He was angry at the airline. He was angry at himself for listening to this nonsense. He was angry at G-d, because the least G-d could do was arrange for his meal to be on this darn plane, especially after Greene had done something nice for G-d! But he was most angry, boiling angry, at Rabbi Moshe Feller for convincing him to do this. Right then Greene decided that *he* would show *him!*

He landed at Chicago’s O’Hare airport at midnight for a one-hour stopover. He arrived at the terminal, and there was still one store open: a non-kosher hot dog stand. The hot dogs looked and smelled good, plump and juicy. There was even hot sauerkraut available.

Velvl Greene was very hungry, but he was even more angry than hungry. He therefore headed first to the phone booth and called the rabbi—collect. A collect call in the middle of the night was sure to invite panic. And indeed, Rabbi Feller was deeply concerned that something terrible had happened.

“This is a very upset and hungry Professor Greene calling from O’Hare airport in Chicago,” he said. “I’ll have you know that they did not have the kosher meal that I ordered at your request on the plane, and I’m starving.

“I also want you to know that there is a hot dog stand 20 feet away from me. Before I go ahead and buy one and eat it, I just wanted to wake you up to tell you exactly what I’m going to do. I’m going to enjoy it with mustard, onions, relish and kraut. And after I finish the first one, I’m going to have a second one!”

The rabbi was quiet for a minute, and then he said, “Velvl, on many occasions you have asked me about the essence of Judaism, what it all comes down to, what it calls forth from within us. Tonight, right now, in this telephone conversation, I’m going to tell you the essence of Judaism. It’s about passing the hot dog stand and not buying one. It’s about being able to get on your connecting flight without having eaten the hot dog. That’s all of Judaism; the rest is commentary.”

The professor's response was instant, "Feller, you're nuts. I always thought you were nuts; now I know you're nuts. This is all of Judaism? Feller, as every bite of this hot dog goes down my throat, I'm going to be thinking of you and saying your name. I am going to eat every bit of this *treif* hot dog in your honor."

And he hung up the phone.

He headed straight for the stand, stood in line and waited for his turn. He was about to place his order, when something very strange happened. He tried to say, "Can I have a hot dog?" He wanted it, he was hungry, he was angry, and gosh, those hot dogs looked better and better with each rotation of the grill.

But he couldn't.

At that moment, he got it. It wasn't that he was stronger than the hot dog. Or than the craving hunger in his gut. It was that G-d was stronger than that hot dog. And he had to listen to G-d. Not out of fear, not out of guilt, but out of love. And that truly is Judaism. All of it.

Professor Greene never bought that hot dog, not then, not ever again. That trip changed his life. One small "no" for a hot dog, one great step for a man.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the telling of **Yossi Lew** (Rabbi Feller's nephew) in *Chabad.Org Magazine* (where you can see a photo of the hot dog), as submitted by Daniel Keren 8 years ago.

*Connection—Weekly Reading of Re'ey* (Deut. 14:4-11), where we are told which animals, fowl and fishes Jews must not eat.

*Biographical notes:*

**Professor Velvl Greene** [17 Tammuz 5688 – 25 Cheshvan 5772 (July 1928 – Nov. 21, 2011)] was a professor of epidemiology, microbiology and public health at the University of Minnesota from 1959 to 1986. In 1960 he joined the NASA agency's Planetary Quarantine Division, due to their concern about the possibility of spacecraft becoming contaminated by extraterrestrial microbes and infecting populations on earth. In 1986 he moved to Israel, where he was invited to be the chair of epidemiology and public health at Ben-Gurion University and director of its Center for Jewish Medical Ethics. For 30 years he maintained a scientific and religious dialogue with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. One of his sons, Rabbi Dovid Greene, is director of Chabad-Lubavitch in Rochester, Minnesota.

**Rabbi Moshe Feller** [born 1 Tammuz 5697 (June 1937)] is a senior *shliach* [emissary] of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (and one of the most popular and respected by the other thousands of shluchim.) For nearly sixty years he has been the chief emissary for Jewish Activities in the state of Minnesota.