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Non-stop to Bangkok

Rav Sholom Schechter, an elderly rabbi, was on a return flight to Israel with a stopover in Athens where he would board a connecting flight. It was two days before **Rosh Hashana**, and his past few days in New York had been exhausting. Fund-raising, selling Torah books, packing, and preparing for his trip home had all taken their toll on his seventy-year-old body. Exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep as the plane traversed the Atlantic.

He had asked someone to wake him when the plane landed in Athens, but evidently his request was forgotten. Seemingly, it didn't strike anyone as unusual that the rabbi with the long beard remained asleep even as the plane landed in Athens and people disembarked. He remained asleep throughout the stopover and awoke only as the plane roared down the runway, taking off to its next destination.

The captain greeted everyone and detailed the flight plan. Their next stop was Lebanon!

Rabbi Schechter blinked his eyes a few times in disbelief. Lebanon? What happened to Athens? He realized he had slept through Athens, and unlike a bus, he couldn't just get off. His baggage was probably on its way to Israel, but he most certainly was not.

This obviously Jewish man would be in danger in Lebanon. He discussed his predicament with the flight attendant, who discussed it with the captain. They suggested that he stay aboard the plane in Lebanon, and disembark at their next destination - India!

Rabbi Schechter knew that there were Jewish communities in Bombay and Calcutta, but en-route the captain informed the passengers that due to civil disturbances in India, only those people holding Indian passports would be permitted to disembark.

Rosh Hashanah was only a day off. Checking plane flights and schedules, Rabbi Schechter realized that he had no chance of getting back to Israel on time for the holiday. He couldn't help but wonder where in the world this incredible journey might take him. He would have to get off at the next stop after India, wherever it may be. He soon found out: Bangkok, the capital of Thailand.

By the time the plane taxied to a stop at Don Muang Airport and Rabbi Schechter was cleared through customs, it was only a few hours before Rosh Hashana. After some desperate inquiries, he was told that there was indeed one synagogue in Bangkok,¹ and it was in the center of town. He made his way there, hoping that someone would be kind enough to invite him home. The people turned out to be more than kind.

He had no trouble conversing with the congregants, for most of the men who attended the synagogue spoke English. He was invited by the president of the synagogue, Mr. Atlas, to be a guest in his home, and it was there that Rabbi Schechter stayed for the next few days.

At the Atlas' table, Rabbi Schechter ate only some cake, fruit, and vegetables that his daughter had packed for his trip, and matzah, which his host provided. He was introduced to Mr. Atlas' children, two of whom were brilliant young scholars studying at Oxford University in England.

When he came to the synagogue the next morning, a surprise was waiting for him: Not only was there no *mechitzah* (partition) separating the men from the women, but the congregants were all sitting together. Rabbi Schechter decided to pray alone in a side room, where he could still hear the prayers of the congregation. After *Shacharit* (morning prayer), he asked the rabbi if he could address the congregation.

"My dear Jewish brothers and sisters," he began, "I am grateful to G-d Al-mighty who has granted me the privilege of being with you this Rosh Hashana. Many of you probably know that my original intention was to be in *Eretz Yisrael* with my family, but G-d in His wisdom decided that I be here with you in Bangkok. I deeply appreciate your hospitality and friendliness, and I feel I owe you an explanation of why I did not pray together with you this morning.

"Every Jewish synagogue is a micro-model of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple that stood in Jerusalem. Thus, its sanctity is to some degree comparable to the sanctity of that most holy site. In order to ensure that there be no frivolity or diversion of attention from the sanctity of the Temple, the Rabbis decreed that men and women should not mingle there. Similarly, a synagogue in which men and women sit

¹ *Beth Elisheva* is Bangkok's oldest existent synagogue. In May 1993, Rabbi Yosef Kantor, the first and head *shliach* (emissary) of Chabad-Lubavitch in Thailand, accepted an invitation by the Jewish Association of Thailand, to serve as our Community Rabbi and rabbi of *Beth Elisheva*. Thanks to his inspiring leadership, the Jewish Community now enjoys regular Shabbat and holiday prayer services, kashrut facilities and an educational program. Today, Kantor is Thailand's Chief Rabbi.

together loses some of its sanctity. With all due respect, this is why I did not join you."

Rabbi Schechter's words were eloquent, and moving, yet respectful. He did not talk down to them nor criticize them. Afterwards, he encouraged them to create Torah-study groups so that they could become more knowledgeable about the traditions and customs of their forefathers.

When he finished speaking, an unbelievable thing happened: A Dr. Frankel, one of the members, walked up to the front and began speaking spontaneously. "I'm sure many of you feel, as I do, that it is an honor to have such a distinguished guest in our presence. In deference to Rabbi Schechter, may I suggest that we separate before we continue with the Torah reading and shofar blowing, so that he can pray with us."

In an instant, two hundred people were on the move. The men stationed themselves on the right side of the synagogue, and the women went to the left. And so they remained for the entire holiday.

The next morning, Rabbi Schechter was asked to speak again. The Atlas boys were present. The older of the two, Morris, possessed an inquisitive mind, and was taken with Rabbi Schechter's speech. They had subsequent discussions, and a strong bond was forged between the two.

Morris had never been to a yeshiva, and had little idea what Judaism was about. Yet here was an Orthodox man who touched his heart. By the time Rosh Hashana was over, Morris had made a decision. He was going to interrupt his studies at Oxford and transfer to *Ohr Somayach* (a yeshiva with a program for men with minimal Torah background) in Jerusalem. After much negotiation, Mr. Atlas agreed that his son could try it for one semester. The young scholar went off to Israel, and the one semester ended up lasting for three fruitful years. During those years he became a true knowledgeable Torah-based Jew, and was the catalyst for his younger brother to come to study in Ohr Somayach as well.

Subsequently, both Atlas brothers became Orthodox Jews living in London, strongly committed to Torah and mitzvot, and deeply indebted to the rabbi who slept through his stopover in Athens. Back in Bangkok, the classes which Rabbi Schechter organized also bore fruit; some women are now observing family purity laws for the first time in their lives.

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*Source:* Lightly edited and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from one of the books (*The Maggid Speaks*) in the famous “Maggid” series of collected stories by Rabbi Paysach Krohn.

*Connection:* ROSH HASHANA