

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

Story #1241 (5782-03) `13 Tishrei 5752 (Sept. 20, 2021) FREE [email subscription](#)

Discover! the "TillesTells" [WhatsApp Saturday Night Stories group](#)

A Refined Thief in the Sukkah?

It was before **Rabbi Natan Shapira** became known as the author of the book "*Magaleh Amukot*". At the time he was a young man of about 30 years old, whose life was dedicated to learning Torah and serving G-d. He tried to hide his saintly lifestyle from the eyes of others and even asked his wife not to divulge his deeds to anyone.

She was the daughter of a highly respected citizen of Krakow. One day in discussion with her sisters she couldn't resist. She told them of the special qualities of her husband: "Do you know? My husband prays every night *tikun chatzot* (the midnight prayer mourning the destruction of the Temple) and angels come to listen to his prayer. He told me that the door of his room has to stay closed at that time and that no one should enter, because it would be dangerous."

Her sisters told their husbands, who smiled dismissively. One day they decided to prove that the warning of their brother-in-law was of no consequence. That night, when Rabbi Natan went to immerse himself in the river as was his habit, his brothers-in-law slipped into his room and hid under the bed.

On his return from the river, Rabbi Natan prepared himself for *tikun chatzot* without sensing the presence of his brothers-in-law. After he finished lamenting the destruction of the Temple, he sat at the table and started to learn Torah.

The next morning a terrible catastrophe was discovered. The men who disparaged the warning of Rabbi Natan were found lifeless under the bed.

Rabbi Natan was devastated by the tragedy. He decided to judge himself as one who murders another unintentionally, and decreed upon himself to go into a long exile. He made his wife swear not to tell anyone where he went. "How long will this exile be?" she asked.

"Until from Heaven I will be shown that my sin has been forgiven." he said.

When his father-in-law heard of the mysterious disappearance of his son-in-law, he was beside himself with anguish. He just lost two of his sons-in-law and now the third one is not to be found! He tried to convince his daughter to tell him details that might help him to

discover where her husband had gone, but she pretended not to know anything.

In despair he sent letters to the Rabbis of different cities describing his son-in-law's appearance and requesting their assistance in finding him.

In the meantime Rabbi Natan was far away. He joined a group of paupers who went from town to town and from Jewish house to Jewish house to beg for alms. At night he slept in the *hekdesh* (the community shelter for paupers). His clothes were tattered and his whole appearance told of poverty and wretchedness.

On the eve of the holiday of **Sukkot** the group of beggars arrived in Lublin. Rabbi Natan had not accepted any invitation to be a guest at someone's house since he began his self-imposed exile. He did accept this time though, because he wanted to have the opportunity to make the blessing over the *etrog* (the citrus fruit in the Four Species that are bundled together on Sukkot) of his host. It was his luck to be invited to the house of one of the rich people in town.

On returning from synagogue they entered the beautiful *sukka*. Rabbi Natan's feelings were so uplifted by this that for a moment he forgot his state of exile. Loudly and with great devotion he began to sing "Enter Heavenly Guests" (traditional song for Sukkot). His host paid close attention to his guest and concluded that his was no regular person.

Rabbi Natan immediately composed himself. During the meal he didn't say a word. The repeated request of his host that he share a Torah thought didn't change his mind. He tried as hard as he could to continue his anonymity. In spite of this, the way he ate and his general comportment strengthened the conviction of his host that this was a great man.

After the meal Rabbi Natan asked permission to sleep in the *sukka*, which was granted. Because the host trusted his guest he didn't take into the house the beautiful silverware that was on the table in the *sukka*.

Rabbi Natan was soon immersed in the study of the book of Kabbalah that he had with him, he was completely oblivious of his surroundings. That is how he was unaware of the thief who entered the *sukka* and was putting all the expensive vessels into his sack.

When the host returned to the *sukka* he was shocked to see it empty of the exquisite silverware. His suspicion immediately fell on the "imposter," the guest who obviously must have hidden the silverware, and then returned to the *sukka* pretending to be absorbed in learning. He started shouting and yelling. Soon all the neighbors came running.

All the shouting and even the beatings couldn't make Rabbi Natan admit to a crime he didn't commit. When it became obvious that nothing would help, they took him to the *hekdesh* and locked him in till he would "confess".

Rabbi Natan was worried only about one thing – where would he get *arba minim* (“Four Species”: the *etrog*, palm branch, myrtle leaves and willow leaves used on Sukkot) to make a blessing over! Beaten and humiliated he sat down next to the window, while begging the passersby to bring him *arba minim*. They laughed at the thief who all of a sudden wants to excel in *mitzvot*.

When the Rabbi of Lublin arrived in *shul* for the morning prayers he was told what occurred. He asked to speak to the thief. As soon as he looked at him he recognized him as the young man whose father-in-law had written him. He instructed Rabbi Natan to be brought to a separate room and there ordered him to tell him his identity.

Left no choice, Rabbi Natan admitted that he was the lost son-in-law. He told the Rabbi the reason for his self-imposed exile. Immediately the Rabbi left the room to announce that he had questioned the prisoner and was satisfied that he was not the thief.

After the holiday Rabbi Natan told the Rabbi of Lublin that the fact he had to disclose his identity was for him a sign from Heaven that his sin was forgiven. He would now return home, to Krakow. The Rabbi decided to accompany him.

On the way the word reached them that the rabbi of Krakow had passed away. The rabbi of Lublin advised the community of Krakow to make Rabbi Natan their rabbi. And so it was. At the age of 31 Rabbi Natan Spira became the rabbi of Krakow.

~~~~~

*Source:* Translated from *Sichat Hashavua* #508 by **C.R. Benami**, long-time editorial assistant for AscentOfSafed.com. Edited and supplemented by R. Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Natan-Nota Shapira** [5345 – 13 Menachem-Av 5393 (1585–July 20,1633)] was a noted rabbinical authority and kabbalist, who at the young age of 24 became the Chief Rabbi of Krakow in 1617. He was a main figure in the dissemination of the Kabbalah teachings of “the Holy Ari” of Safed throughout Poland. He is often referred to by the title of his most important book, the “*Megaleh Amukot*,” an astonishing work containing 252 explanations of Moses' prayer in the first verse of *parashat Va’et’chanan*.

*Connection* -- Seasonal: the festival of SUKKOT