

bs"D From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles
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The Helpful Thief

It was early morning when the police knocked on his door. In front of the stunned faces of his family the officers arrested him and put him in handcuffs. Before he could open his mouth he was taken to the police station, where he soon found himself in a holding cell, already occupied by criminals.

Rabbi Menachem-Mendel of Horodok/Vitebsk, one of the greatest students of the **Maggid of Mezritch**, had not the slightest idea what crime he could have committed that caused the authorities to arrest him as a lowly criminal. Yet, he was extensively interrogated and accused of serious misconduct.

Slowly the situation was clarified somewhat: someone had invented a false accusation against him and made him out to be a powerful criminal. Rabbi Menachem Mendel tried to convince the interrogators of their mistake. He told them that all the accusations directed at him were nothing more than slander and lies, that there was no connection between them and reality.

His explanations fell on deaf ears. The interrogators wouldn't budge from their position and pressured him to admit to the grave accusations. When he refused he was thrown back into the crowded cell.

There, on the hard board, surrounded by coarse thugs, Rabbi Menachem Mendel considered his situation. He withdrew within himself and began a self-examination to try and discover the spiritual reason that would explain why he had been thrust in this untenable situation.

When it was time for prayer he went to a corner, faced the wall, closed his eyes and concentrated deeply on his prayer, ignoring the noise around him and immersing himself in the words, in which he found support and consolation.

Turning around after finishing his prayers he noticed one of the other prisoners watching him attentively. At first he ignored the man, but the next time he prayed he noticed that the other man again watched him carefully. The prisoner didn't take his eyes off him, from the beginning of his prayer till the end.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel studied the man who looked like any other gentile just like all the rest of the prisoners. Soon after, the man approached him, offering him help and concerning himself with Rabbi Menachem Mendel's well-being and comfort. It was obvious that he was going out of his way to be of service to the holy-looking Jew.

Also in the following days the prisoner sought Rabbi Menachem Mendel's company. He humbly did his utmost to be of service to Rabbi Menachem Mendel. The latter decided to find out more about this helpful prisoner.

It became clear that the man had been waiting for this. With tears running down his cheeks he began to tell his life story, interrupted again and again by sobs.

He was a Jew and his name was Nachum. Life's hardships dragged him down to crime. He sunk lower and lower till he became a burglar. He would break into houses at nights and steal everything he could lay his hands on. For a long time he lived this way, always afraid and every night taking great risks.

And then one day he was caught and thrown into jail. None of his Jewish brothers came to his assistance. Quite the opposite, those Jews who knew who he was were secretly glad that they finally got rid of the damage he caused them. So Nachum found himself alone and deserted in his distress.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel listened with great attention to his story.

"All of a sudden you arrived, standing there, praying", continued Nachum, "the sight of which touched my heart and started to melt the indifference to my Jewishness that has surrounded me for so many years. For the first time in my life I felt true regret for my evil behavior. Please, help me find a way of *teshuva* (return) and atone for my sins."

At that moment a thought crossed Rabbi Menachem Mendel's mind: here, in front of him, was the reason why he was incarcerated for a crime he had not committed. A Jewish man, whose soul is crying out in misery for help, and hoping to be rescued from the pit in which she is trapped.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel decided to dedicate himself entirely to help Nachum. He started teaching him Torah and Fear of Heaven, and guiding him how to repent and to reject his bad tendencies and to attain to a correct way of living.

Nachum proved to be a serious and devoted student. He accepted upon himself all the instruction Rabbi Menachem Mendel gave him. He stopped eating non-kosher food, put on *tefilin* every morning and his awe of G-d increased daily until he succeeded in transforming himself to be a genuine observant Jew.

"You should know," said his special personal Rabbi, "that we are still at the beginning of the way. Now G-d will help; we will be released from imprisonment, and then we will travel together to the Rebbe, the **Maggid of Mezritch**, and he will show you a complete way of return."

While he was still talking to Nachum, the commander of the jail entered to inform Rabbi Menachem Mendel that he is released. The accusations against him were investigated and proved to be groundless. The interrogators came to the decision that he was innocent.

To the amazement of the officer the prisoner said with finality: "I am not leaving here unless my friend Nachum is released as well!"

The commander thought that he hadn't heard correctly. Never had he come across or even heard of a prisoner who refused to be released! Looking at Nachum he said: "This prisoner hasn't completed his sentence; he cannot be released."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel did not give in. He demanded to speak to the regional judge. When that was arranged, the rabbi promised him that he would take Nachum under his supervision and see to it that he will not steal any more or harm anyone.

The judge was impressed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel's personality and gave instructions to release Nachum immediately.

When they arrived at the house of the Maggid of Mezritch, even before they entered, the Maggid said to those surrounding him: "For this soul I have waited." Indeed, Nachum changed his way of life entirely and became a faithful student of the Maggid.

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Source: Translated by **C. R. Benami**, long-time editorial assistant for [www.AscentOfSafed.com](http://www.AscentOfSafed.com), from the rendition in the popular Israeli weekly, *Sichat HaShavua* (#1728) based on *Beit Tzadikim Ya'amod*," page 3. Edited and supplemented by R. Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk/Horodok** [of blessed memory: 5490 - 1 Iyar 5548 (1730 – May 1788.)] was an elder disciple of the *Maggid of Mizritch* and one of the earliest Chasidic rebbes. He led the first modern aliyah to Israel, in 5537 (1777 C.E.), where he and three hundred Chasidim and others settled in Tzefat (Safed). After a few years most of the group moved to Tiberias, where he is buried in the "Students of the Baal Shem Tov" section of the Old Cemetery. His works include *Pri HaAretz* and *Likutei Amarim*.

**Rabbi Dov Ber** [of blessed memory: c.5460 - 19 Kislev 5533 (c.1700- Dec. 1772)], the son of Avraham and Chava, known as the **Maggid of Mezritch**, succeeded his master, the *Baal Shem Tov*, as the head of the Chasidic movement. Most of the leading chasidic dynasties originate from his disciples and his descendents. The classic anthologies of his teachings are *Likutei Amarim* and *Torah Ohr* (combined by Kehas Publishing as *Maggid Devorav l'Yaakov*), and *Ohr HaEmmes*.

*Connection:* Sunday night-Monday, 1 Iyar, is the yahrzeit of R. Menachem Mendel.