

bs"D From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles

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The Jogger in 18th Century Beirut

Like lightening out of a clear sky, the message shocked the Jewish residents of *Tiverya* (Tiberias). Two hundred years ago the Jewish settlement there was small and poor, and the decree passed against them was beyond their abilities.

Representatives of the Jewish community of Tiberias were told to present themselves before the tyrannical Governor of the Galilee, the *Pasha* (Turkish officer of high rank), Achmad El-G'azar, who was known for his cruelty and hatred for the Jews. He abused the position of power the Turkish government had given him to harass the Jews and to limit their liberties.

Now the Pasha demanded of them to pay him an enormous sum. He added a warning: "If you don't bring me the full sum by the appointed time, you and your families will be expelled from the city".

The heads of the community called an emergency meeting to try to find a solution to the treat hanging over their heads. They decided to send a messenger to the Jewish communities in neighboring lands, to request their assistance in gathering the money needed to save the Jews of Tiberias. There was unanimous agreement that no one was better suited for this mission than **Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon from Shpitovka**, whose holiness and piety were known to all.

He had arrived in Tiberias in 1791. After the demise of his Rebbe, the "Toldot" (Rabbi Ya'akov-Yosef of Polnauer), he had become one of the followers of **Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz**. In Tiberias he chose to live a life of poverty so he would be able to immerse himself in learning Torah and devote himself completely to serving the Creator. He was barely six months in Israel when he received the news that his Rebbe, the Koritzer, had passed away.

It was difficult for Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon to accept this assignment which demanded of him to leave his Torah study for a protracted period of time. The trip also entailed many dangers. However, the danger threatening the Jews of the town convinced him to disregard all other considerations.

He set out for the city of Beirut in Lebanon, where there was a large Jewish community. According to hear-say, the community there consisted of craftsman and laborers. Even though they were not wealthy, they earned an honorable living.

Upon the request of Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon, the head rabbi of the community invited all the congregants to hear the sermon their special guest would give that Shabbat in the synagogue.

Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon spoke passionately, including in his speech many inspiring teachings from that week's Torah reading and other sayings that were a pleasure to hear. There was total silence in the synagogue; everyone was listening intently.

All of a sudden the speaker broke of his oratory and burst out crying. Everyone was stunned as the rabbi immediately explained the reason for his tears:

"Dear Jews, I am not a sermonizer not the son of a sermonizer. I am an emissary from the Jews of the city of Tiberias who – Heaven forbid! -- have a great danger hovering over them." He then told them of the demand of the tyrannical Pasha, and requested of all present to donate a sizable sum for the rescuing of the Jews of Tiberias.

The Jews of Beirut showed sincere concern and empathy. However, it soon became clear that they didn't have the means to give adequate assistance. The heads of the community explained to Rabb Ya'akov-Shimshon that the earning of the local Jews was barely enough for their daily needs; they would not be able to donate, certainly not the enormous sum that was needed.

Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon was deeply disappointed. If this was the situation in Beirut, what hope could he have concerning the other communities, where the situation might even be worse.

Once back in the home of his host, Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon lay down to rest. He dreamed, and in his dream he saw his rebbe, Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz, who asked him why he was worried on the holy Shabbat. Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon told him about the decree of the Pasha and the disappointment of his hope to receive the necessary aid from the Jews in Beirut.

His Rabbi told him: "Do not worry! the Al-mighty will help you if you do as I tell you. Pray the Morning Prayer as early as possible tomorrow. Then go into the street and watch the passersby. When you see a man with a belt made of coarse rope running without looking around, grab his belt and tell him that I sent you to ask for his help."

Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon awoke, encouraged. To the surprise of his host when he saw the change in his mood, the guest answered shortly: "It was made known to me that with G-d's help a solution for the Jews in Tiberias will be found." More he wouldn't say.

The next morning Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon did exactly as his rebbe had told him. He watched the passersby till suddenly there appeared a running man who suited the description he was given in his dream. Immediately he went over to him, took hold of his arm and said "Reb Yid (Jew), I need your help!"

The man stopped completely and shrugged his shoulders. "What do you want from me? Can't you see I'm in a hurry and I am not able to help you?!"

Nevertheless, Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon didn't let go of him. He said urgently, "I am turning to you on a mission from my rebbe, Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz. I will not let you go till you agree to my request."

When the man heard the name of Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz, his attitude changed. Quietly he said "If so, hold on to me and come. Don't let go."

Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon held on to the man's belt and followed him. Shortly they were outside of the city. To his utter astonishment, he found himself standing with the man at the gate to the tomb of **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** in **Meron!**

The man turned to Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon and warned him not to go inside with him, for he had to be alone when he prostrated himself on the *Rashbi's* grave. Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon obeyed and waited outside the cave in prayerful trepidation.

Abruptly the man exited the cave, his face shining with joy. He called out to Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon "Let us thank G-d; just now Rabbi Shimon caused the decree to be cancelled! You can return to your city."

Rabbi Ya'akov-Shimshon parted from him and returned to Tiberias, tranquil and cheerful. As soon as he entered the gate of the city he was told that Pasha Achmad El-G'azar died suddenly, and as a result, according to Ottoman law, all of his decrees were null and void. Thus, the Jews of Tiberias lost neither their lives or their homes.

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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* (#1373). Adapted and supplemented by R. Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Connection* - seasonal: LAG b'OMER – part of the story takes place in Meron.

*Biographical profiles* (in order of appearance):

**Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon of Shepetovka** [? - 3 Sivan 1801], a descendant of Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropole, was a student of the Maggid of Mezritch and Rabbi Pinchus of Karitz and a close friend of Rabbi Boruch of Mezibuz. As a great authority in Jewish Law, he earned considerable respect also in rabbinic circles. In 1791 he moved to Israel and settled in Tiberias, where he is buried.

**Rabbi Pinchas** (ben R. Avraham Abba Shapiro) **of Koretz** [ (1726 - 10 Elul 1791) ] was considered to be one of the two most pre-eminent followers of Chassidism's founder, the *Baal Shem Tov* (along with his successor, the *Maggid of Mezritch*). His teachings appear in various collections (such as *Midrash Pinchas*), and are cited in the classic *Bnei Yissaschar*.

**Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai**, one of the most important sages in Jewish history, lived over 1800 years ago. Teachings in his name abound throughout the *Mishnah*, *Gemorrhah*, and *Midrashim*, while the **Zohar**, the primary source text of Kabbalah, is built around Rabbi Shimon's revelations to his inner circle of disciples. During the hours before his passing, on **Lag b'Omer**, he disclosed the "most sublime" secrets of Torah, in order to ensure that the day would always be an occasion for great joy, untouched by sadness because of the Omer period and mourning for him. The seminal importance of the Zohar in Jewish thought and the annual pilgrimage to Meron on Lag b"Omer are testimonies to his success.