

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

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The Astonished Bedouin

Rabbi Yosef Chaim, the great Torah sage of Baghdad, was commonly referred to by the name of his most popular book, "**The Ben Ish Chai**." Even though he was not the chief rabbi of the city, he served as a leading rabbi there for 50 years until his passing in 1909, and was respected by all. His sermons attracted thousands, for he was followed by the great and the simple. What's more, his house was always wide open to the needy and any petitioner.

One day, a loud argument between two angry men within the walls of his *Beit Din* (rabbinical court) disturbed the quiet of the morning. Whoever might have entered would have been surprised at what he saw. The appearance of the litigants who stood opposite each other was most unusual. One was a poor member of the local Jewish community; the other, an Arab, who was also a local, but of shady reputation.

The Arab was the plaintiff, the Jew the defendant. Standing before the Ben Ish Chai to present his claim, the Arab claimed that the Jew had stolen his money and refused to return it to him.

"We went to the Iraqi court," he said, "there the Jew denied the existence of any loan. The judge ruled in his favor, as I had no proof for my claim. That's why I asked him to come to the Beit Din of the Rav. I hoped that maybe here he will admit his guilt."

The Ben Ish Chai listened attentively, observing both men carefully. After hearing the testimony of the Arab, he requested to speak to the Jew privately. meeting his eyes, he asked, "Is the money of the Arab in your possession?"

The Jew was incapable of impudence while facing the Ben Ish Chai. He lowered his eyes and admitted, "Yes. That is, it was. I wanted to return his money but I am a pauper, I have no idea from where to get the money to give him. That's why I denied the debt in the court; I knew that if I admitted but didn't return the money immediately, I would be thrown in prison."

The Rav then summoned the Arab. The room was quiet, the Rav was deep in thought. He knew he had to find a way for the money to be returned to the plaintiff.

Finally, he opened a drawer in his desk, took out a bundle of bills, held them out to the Arab and said, "Since *"All Israel are guarantors one for the other,"* I will pay the debt of this Jew. When his situation will improve he will return the money to me."

This noble gesture of the Ben Ish Chai greatly impressed the Arab. Aware of the state of the finances of the poor Jew, it was obvious to him that the money would not be returned in the near future, if ever. The Arab expressed his admiration for the righteousness of Jewish rabbinical judges and returned home joyous and satisfied.

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Years went by. The Ben Ish Chai became still more famous and was now the foremost of all the rabbis in Babylon. From countries far and wide, questions in Jewish law were sent to him.

Despite his prestigious situation though, he yearned to leave his birth country and move to the beloved Holy Land. An example of his longing was his habit of scrupulously sending all the manuscripts of his many books to Jerusalem, to have them printed there exclusively.

Eventually, on the 25th of Nisan in the year 1868, he decided to make his wish a reality, leaving Baghdad with his brother and a few wealthy families to travel to the Holy Land.

The way, which led through deserts, was beset with dangers. The greatest threat was from gangs of robbers who used to waylay travelers. No one would cross the desert on his own, but instead waited for the gathering of large caravans. These would set out accompanied by guards.

When the Ben Ish Chai and his fellow travelers joined a caravan, they discovered that this caravan travelled also on Shabbat. The Ben Ish Chai decided to forgo traveling with them or any other caravan, and looked for a Bedouin who, for a respectable amount of money would guide them, halting on Friday till after Shabbat. He managed to find a suitable person who agreed to the conditions -- even though not very readily -- and they set out into the desert.

Friday afternoon, in the middle of the desert, the Ben Ish Chai announced that they would rest and spent the Shabbat there. He asked the Bedouin to stop but the latter wouldn't hear of it. He started yelling that it was a very dangerous place, full of robber gangs. He refused to stay there for a full 24-hour period.

Without a word, the Ben Ish Chai and his companions dismounted their camels, arranged their luggage for the coming Shabbat, and lit the Shabbat candles before sunset.

Grinding his teeth in dismay, the Bedouin also stayed. However, out of fear of a possible attack by robbers, he moved away from the group and hid behind some rocks from where he watched the Ben Ish Chai and his group.

The Ben Ish Chai prayed the "Welcoming the Shabbat" prayer with great devotion after which he recited the *Kiddush* (Shabbat sanctification prayer recited over a cup of wine) with pleasant melody. During the meal he sang the *zemirot* (special Shabbat songs).

Suddenly the Bedouin heard a stealthy sound. Turning his head towards that direction, he saw a gang of Muslim bandits making their way quietly towards the Jews.

The blood froze in his veins. He didn't doubt what was going to happen next in front of his eyes. Holding his breath he watched the leader of the gang step ahead and move closer to the unsuspecting group.

A few minutes later, he noticed the leader of the robbers suddenly turn on his heels and signal to the rest to retreat also. They obeyed grudgingly, annoyed that he was denying them the easy prey they had chanced upon.

The surprised Bedouin heard the man explain to his followers that the leader of the Jewish travelers was a great and holy rabbi, who had supported him in a difficult financial situation by paying him from his personal funds the money owed him by another Jew. Under no circumstance would he allow any of them to harm him.

After the robbers disappeared, the Bedouin ran from his hiding place in great excitement. He fell at the feet of the Ben Ish Chai and begged for forgiveness, for now he realized even more what an exceptional person he was.

After Shabbat they continued on their way, soon reaching the Holy Land. The Ben Ish Chai visited the burial site of the holy patriarchs and other holy places. During this time, he was offered the position of *Rishon LeZion* (Sephardic Chief Rabbi), but he decided not to accept.

At the end of the month of Elul that year he returned in peace to his home in Bagdad, where he lived until his passing at age 75 on the 13th of Elul, in Jewish year 5669.

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*Source:* Adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the somewhat literal translation by **C. R. Benami**, long-time editorial assistant for [www.AscentOfSafed.com](http://www.AscentOfSafed.com), of an article in *Sichat Hashavua* (#1338).

*Connections:*

- 1) This week's Torah portion was *Shoftim* / "[Rabbinical] Judges."
- 2) Tis coming Friday, 13 Iyar, is the 113<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit* of the *Ben Ish Chai*.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, the Ben Ish Hai** (27 Av 1834 - 13 Elul 1909), is one of the most important Sephardic Jewish sages in the last two centuries. At the age of 25, he succeeded to his father's rabbinical position and continued in it for 50 years. In 1869 he visited the Holy Land and was offered the position of *Rishon LeZion* (Sephardic Chief Rabbi), but he did not accept. A great scholar and Kabbalist and highly regarded as a pure and holy man, his rulings are adhered to still today by many Sephardim world-wide. He published many important books on Jewish law, Midrash, Kabbalah and Ethics.

