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## ***Help From a Haunted House***

It happened one of those times that an *agunah*<sup>1</sup> came to consult with the third Rebbe of Chabad, **Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn**, known as the ***Tzemach Tzedek***. Her husband had disappeared, leaving her and their young son alone. Having heard amazing stories of miracles wrought by the Tzemach Tzedek for others sharing her plight, the woman now set her hopes on meeting with the Rebbe. Her brother accompanied her and her little boy on the journey to Lubavitch, and shortly after they arrived, they were admitted into the Rebbe's *yechidus* (private audience) chamber.

Overcome with emotion, the woman burst into tears, hardly able to form words together. Her brother came to her rescue and described his sister's unfortunate situation, asking the Rebbe for his blessing.

"But I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet!" said the Tzemach Tzedek.

Sensing the Rebbe's reluctance, the brother changed the subject. "I am planning to travel to the Land of Israel," he said. "Will the Rebbe bless me?"

The Tzemach Tzedek thought before responding.

"Well," he said, "if that's the case, I want your sister to travel with you. The journey is a long one; perhaps your sister will find her missing husband on the way."

"Alright," said the brother.

The Tzemach Tzedek then blessed them both and the pair left the Rebbe's room. They returned home and began getting ready for their journey, loading their belongings onto a carriage and taking farewell of family and acquaintances. It did not take long until brother, sister, and the son/nephew left their hometown and set out for their first stop, the city of Odessa.

"You know," said the brother as the carriage rolled along the country roads, "I've been thinking about a possible problem concerning your son. The passport officials in Odessa are very particular about their job. They take great pains to check every detail mentioned in people's passports. Your son isn't mentioned in all your papers, so we are likely to be headed for trouble trying to go through Odessa.

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<sup>1</sup> A woman that it is not known if her husband is alive or not.

"Better, you take the boy and go through Yassi, where they are not so particular. We'll meet up together afterwards."

"How could you leave me alone with a little boy?" cried his sister. "I can't make the trip without your help!"

"Okay," her brother shrugged. "Then we'll both travel through Yassi." He pulled on the reins, turning the horses towards Yassi. Ever mindful of the Rebbe's counsel, the travelers made certain to stop at every village on the way. They combed the streets and questioned local residents, but to no avail. They could not locate the missing man.

They continued driving through the country, getting almost to Yassi, when nightfall forced them to stop at a roadside inn. The near complete darkness confused the brother and, as he neared the inn, he accidentally bumped into a mail coach parked nearby. A string of obscenities rang through the air as the mail driver roundly cursed whoever it was that dared bump his carriage.

"He sounds like my husband," whispered the woman.

"Don't be ridiculous," her brother answered. "Stop fantasizing; it's some Russian peasant. Can't you hear from his language? Let's get away before he vents his anger on us."

He drove right up to the inn where, tired and hungry, the small group entered for some food and rest. The innkeeper quickly approached his newest customers, sat them down at a table, and offered them a warm meal.

"You know, we bumped into the mail carriage outside," said the brother. "Who's the person sitting in it out there?"

The innkeeper sighed. "He used to be a Jew like us," he said. "He converted."

"That's interesting," said the brother. "My sister says he sounds like her runaway husband."

The innkeeper opened his eyes in surprise. "That's too bad," he said, shaking his head sadly. "He's a real difficult character. No way you'll receive a writ of divorce from that crook."

Suddenly the door crashed open and the mail driver stormed into the room, still cursing the driver who had collided with his carriage. The lady rose from her chair with a cry of surprise and the villain, seeing her, stopped dead in his tracks.

"So you found me" he said sulkily. "I suppose you want a divorce. We can go to the next village. There's a rabbi there; he'll do the divorce for us."

Now it was the innkeeper who cried out in surprise. He had never seen the loathsome creature act so gracious – without offering an argument or total denial.

The group quickly left the inn and soon two carriages could be seen headed for the nearest village. They arrived at the rabbi's home, informed him of the circumstances, and the divorce was properly performed. The convert remained strangely subdued throughout the entire procedure, granting the divorce without demanding conditions of any sort. With gratitude in their hearts, and warm thoughts of the Tzemach Tzedek, the freed woman now eligible for remarriage clutched the precious paper and returned to lodge at the inn.

Inside, the innkeeper stood alone at a table in the quiet dining hall and thought about the amazing scene he just witnessed – the renegade Jew, the fearsome ruffian, acting so respectfully to his despised wife.

The next moment he jumped as the door crashed open again. The mail driver stood in the doorway, shaking with cold. He closed the door and sat down at an empty table.

"Pour me a large beer!" he shouted to the frightened innkeeper.

The innkeeper hurried behind the counter and filled his largest glass with the frothy liquid. After all, the driver deserved the best treatment for his dramatic reversal from his usual behavior.

He brought the glass over and set it down on the table.

"I just gave the divorce," the driver said to no one in particular. "Didn't ask for anything."

The innkeeper steadied his shaking hands. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the brother and sister enter the room and sit down nearby. Curiosity overcame his fear as he sat down opposite the driver.

"That was very nice of you," he offered. "Some people refuse to give a divorce until they demand and receive money in return. Why didn't you?"

The driver took a few large gulps and wiped his dirty sleeve across his mouth.

"I know you're surprised," he said gruffly. "No matter. I'll tell you everything and you'll understand. You know the haunted house near this inn?"

The innkeeper nodded. It was a reference to an empty ruin nearby, understood to be frequented by evil spirits. All kind of hair-raising stories were associated with the demons living in that place, and local residents made sure to give the house a wide berth.

"My mail route passes it every day," continued the renegade Jew. "I drive past that haunted wreck, past your inn, and I deliver mail to the villages. I couldn't care less about the demons; what can they take from me anyway? I drive right by there every day and laugh right in their faces."

The driver took another swig and set the glass down.

"Today it was different though," he said grimly. "The horses had barely trotted toward the ruins when I was overcome with fear. I pulled the reins and just parked there, shaking in fright. I could feel the goose-bumps cover my body. My hair stood on end; my teeth chattered violently. I was totally powerless and unable to command the horses any further. Whenever I merely thought of continuing, the fear intensified tenfold.

"Suddenly, something crashed into the back of my carriage. Apparently, someone accidentally bumped into my wagon and, strangely, I felt the fear dissipate at once. I cursed them – whoever it was – and felt my old courage return. Yet the whole thing was so strange – the sudden fear and its inexplicable end – that I resolved to get to the bottom of the matter and find out who had bumped me. I came into the inn and..., well, the rest you know already.

"The demons were holding me hostage until I gave the divorce, of that I was certain. So I gave in, I went with my wife and did whatever the rabbi wanted. I didn't request anything, not a penny. You can ask her."

The driver stood up and approached his former wife.

"Here!" he said, offering her a wad of bills. "This is for the boy. He's my son after all."

He finished his glass and left the inn, leaving his family agape in wonderment at the supernatural powers of the Tzemach Tzedek. They rested up, thanked the innkeeper for his hospitality, and continued onward to the Holy Land.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from "*The Third Judge*" by Rabbi Elchonon Lesches.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn** [29 Elul 1789-13 Nissan 1866], the third Rebbe of Chabad, was known as the *Tzemach Tzedek*, after his books of Halachic responsa and Talmudic commentary called by that name. He was renowned not only as a Rebbe, but also as a leading scholar in his generation in both the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah.

*Connection:* The problems of divorce and *agunah* are set forth in this week's reading, *Ki Teitzei*.

