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The Sound of Silence

The Jews from a small town near the city of Ushomir, in the Ukraine, suffered greatly from the antagonism of the estate manager where many of them worked. Nothing they did could meet with the man's approval, and it seemed as if he pursued them day and night in order to find fault with them. He even reduced their salary at every opportunity, each time citing a different picayune reason.

This seemingly anti-Semitic manager was actually a Jew himself. None of the Jews in the region knew where he had come from, or anything about his past. The present, however, was clear: he was a Jew by accident of birth only, and even that seemed to be a bit too much for him to bear.

A week before Rosh Hashana, a visiting *tzadik* arrived in Ushomir, **Rabbi Mordechai-Dov of Hornisteipl**. It was his habit to travel around to the cities and towns in his area during the month before Rosh Hashana in order to arouse the people to repent and turn closer to G-d in preparation for the awesome Day of Judgment. He planned to spend Shabbat in Ushomir, and to speak in its main synagogue.

As the word spread that the famed chassidic master would be in the city, Jews from all the neighboring towns and villages flocked to Ushomir. The Shabbat was as spiritually exhilarating as everyone had hoped for, and after the closing *havdalah* ceremony, all the guests lined up to take leave of the rebbe and to receive his farewell blessing.

The Jews from the small town that suffered from the estate manager agreed among themselves that they would each mention the situation to the rebbe. Rabbi Mordechai listened with full attention to each one, and they could feel that he shared in their woe. They also saw that his sorrow was even greater from the awareness that the oppressive manager was himself a Jew.

He gave each one the same answer: "Be patient until tomorrow, and we will see what can be done."

The next day, after the morning prayers, Rabbi Mordechai told his attendants to immediately prepare to depart. But to everyone's surprise, he instructed them not to travel in the direction they had originally planned, but instead to head for the nearby village. The villagers who hadn't yet returned home were also taken by surprise, and they hurried to pack their wagons in order to travel together with the rebbe.

Soon a long caravan snaked along the dusty road, with the carriage of the Hornisteipler Rebbe leading the way. As soon as they arrived, the rebbe asked for directions to the residence of the estate manager.

As they approached the impressive house of the estate manager, all those accompanying the rebbe, as well as many from the village who had joined the procession, waited breathlessly to see what he would do. The locals wondered if perhaps the holy man would cast his gaze on the source of their misery and turn him into a heap of smoldering bones!

Meanwhile, the estate manager stood, unmoving, on the expansive balcony of his home. The pipe in his mouth and his general appearance testified to his haughty attitude, but as they drew closer they could see from the expression on his face that he was a bit puzzled. What was the meaning of this extensive delegation rolling towards his property?

The Hornisteipler Rebbe instructed his coachman to drive right up to the entrance of the house. This he did, as all the other carriages lined up behind his in a long row stretching back onto the road. Only then did the rebbe raise his eyes and, after a glance at the fancy house, stare straight at the estate manager on the terrace. The manager looked back at him. The rebbe's gaze didn't waver, and for an endless few minutes the two stared at each other.

Suddenly Rabbi Mordechai climbed down from his carriage and walked firmly towards the door. The estate manager quickly disappeared within the house, and a few moments later the door swung open from within. All the bystanders watched excitedly from their places to see what would happen next.

The rebbe and one of his attendants entered the house. After a few minutes they emerged and went back into their carriage. The driver tugged the reins, the horses reversed their direction, and they drove away.

Only at a later time were the townspeople able to find out, from the rebbe's attendant, what had transpired inside the house. They learned that from the moment the estate manager opened the door to his house until the moment the rebbe and his attendant stepped out, not a word had been uttered!

With a slight nod of his head, the manager signaled them to enter. Then, with a flourish of his hand he motioned the rebbe to sit in a chair he had placed for him, while he himself sat in a chair opposite him.

The rebbe placed his hands on the table between them, straightened his back and stared fixedly into the eyes of the estate manager. The latter looked back cynically.

Thus they sat long moments, unmoving. The stare of the manager, which had been defiant, began to soften. At the same time, the rebbe's gentle gaze intensified and his pure, holy eyes seemed to harden.

Then, to his surprise, the rebbe's attendant noticed that the manager's eyes were moist. A large tear formed and rolled slowly down his cheek. At that moment, the rebbe rose from his seat and walked to the door, still not having said a word. The manager remained frozen in his chair, as if paralyzed; he couldn't even manage to escort his guests out.

The rebbe remained the rest of the day in the village. All those who missed the opportunity in Ushomir went to him to receive his blessing. Towards evening the lines thinned, and eventually the home at which the rebbe was staying became empty of guests.

But a silent, shadowy figure was seen approaching the house. His soft knock broke the dusky silence. It was the estate manager. His frightened eyes and the manner in which he slipped inside made it seem as if someone were chasing him. He and the rebbe went into an isolated room, and remained there for two hours.

That Rosh Hashanah, an unexpected visitor arrived at the *shul* to join the prayers of the Day of Judgment. This, of course, was the estate manager, who for the entire two days of the holiday practically didn't move from his spot.

With a *tallit* covering his head and upper part of his face, he stood nearly the entire time, praying with copious tears. The man who had been so alienated and removed from Judaism was from that day on a full penitent, and also acted with kindness towards his Jewish brethren.

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*Source:* Translated by Yerachmiel Tilles from the popular Hebrew weekly, *Sichat HaShavua*. First published on //Chabad.org.

*Connection:* The story begins in the week of *Selichot* and ends on **Rosh Hashana!**

*Biographical note:*

Chassidic master **Rabbi Mordechai Dov Twerski of Hornisteipl** (1840–1904) was named after his two maternal great-grandfathers, Rabbi Mordechai of Chernobyl and Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch. In addition, he was a direct descendant of Rabbi Zusha of Anipoli, and the son-in-law of Rabbi Chaim of Sanz. A highly respected Talmudic scholar, he was also the author of a popular book of chassidic guidance, *Pele Yoetz*.