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THE PAINFUL PERCENTAGE

Rabbi Zusha had gone to visit his teacher. Rebbe Dov-Ber, the *Maggid of Mezritch* [the successor to the *Baal Shem Tov*, founder of the chasidic movement]. After a fulfilling stay drinking in his teacher's wisdom, Reb Zusha prepared to take his leave. When he went into his rebbe's study for a parting blessing, he mentioned to Rabbi Dov Ber that he needed to arrange a marriage for his daughter. Of course, Reb Zusha was as poor as could be, and to marry off a child requires a considerable sum. Rabbi Dov Ber immediately took from his desk drawer 300 rubles and pressed it into his disciple's hand, wishing him "mazaltov," and sending him happily on his way.

Reb Zusha was greatly relieved. Now, his wife and daughter could feel at ease. Although he had taken money, which was not his habit or desire, this time it was a necessary thing, he thought to himself.

The trip home took R' Zusha through many towns and villages. While passing through a certain tiny Jewish village, he was startled by the sound of bitter weeping coming from a small hut. The other villagers were going about their business, ignoring the weeping. R' Zusha stopped one and asked, "Who is that crying?"

"That is a poor widow who was about to marry off her daughter, but on the way to the *chupah* she lost the entire dowry. Now, the wedding is off because the groom and his family refuse to go on with it without the dowry. And how will she ever be able to amass 300 rubles again?"

R' Zusha's sensitive soul was pained for the poor woman. Then, struck by the realization that 300 rubles was exactly the sum he had with him, he walked up to the door of the hut and knocked. "My good woman, I think I may have found your money!"

Her eyes widened in disbelief. When R' Zusha next asked her if the money had any distinguishing marks, she replied, "Yes! The money was in a packet of two fifties, and ten twenties, and it was tied with a red string."

"Well, that's exactly what I found!" R' Zusha told her, with a wide smile. "I will go to the inn and get the money and bring it right back."

R. Zusha ran to the inn and changed his money for the denominations the widow had described. Then he tied the bills together with a red string and ran back to the widow's hut. By the time he returned the little village was buzzing with the good news. The girl had changed into her bridal dress, and the neighbors were bustling about preparing the wedding feast.

As R. Zusha presented the widow with the money, he said, "I am keeping one twenty ruble note for my trouble." She looked at him as if he was speaking a foreign language. The others who had overheard the remark stood with their mouths open. "What!" screamed the widow, finding her tongue. "How can you rob a poor widow of twenty rubles! Especially after you have just performed a most wonderful and holy mitzvah!"

The others converged around R. Zusha, screaming and yelling, "Thief! Stealing a widow's money? For shame!" R' Zusha, however, refused to budge. He clung to the twenty rubles as if to dear life. "This money is mine as a reward, and for my troubles!"

Relatives, friends and other townspeople berated R' Zusha, and soon it seemed that they would tear him limb from limb to retrieve the money. Finally, someone piped up: "Let's go to the rabbi. He will be able to settle this once and for all!"

Everyone agreed to follow the rabbi's ruling and they all trailed along to the rabbi's house. The rabbi listened to each side and then ruled: "Reb Zusha must give the widow the twenty rubles."

Still, R'b Zusha refused to give up the money. So what happened next? One young man put his hand into Zusha's pocket and extracted the bill, Then Zusha was escorted to the edge of the village and unceremoniously kicked out.

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Many months later the village rabbi happened to encounter Rabbi Dov Ber and related to him the incident with his disciple, Reb Zusha. The Maggid quickly responded, "You must go to Reb Zusha and beg forgiveness," he said firmly. "That 300 rubles was not the widow's missing money. I myself gave it to Zusha to marry off his own child. The reason he demanded twenty rubles is because he wanted to avoid honor at any cost. He wanted this great mitzvah to be completely pure. That's the way he is."

The rabbi was shocked and ashamed when he heard this. He went special to Anipoli to beg Reb Zusha's forgiveness.

Reb Zusha waved a hand in dismissal, "You don't need my forgiveness because I never was angry. I do not hold my honor to be of significance. In any case I will forget about the incident completely if you promise never to reveal the truth to the widow. I never want her to suspect that the money wasn't hers by right."

The rabbi, of course, agreed and the incident was never mentioned again.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from L'ChaimWeekly.org

Why This Week? Tonight starts the yahrzeit of Rebbe Zusha.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi [Meshulam-]Zusha of Anapoli** [5478 - **2 Shvat** 5560 (1718 - Jan. 1800)], was an important disciple of the *Maggid*. The seemingly unsophisticated but clearly inspired "Reb Zusha" is one of the best known and most beloved chasidic leaders. He and his famous elder brother, the Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk, spent many years wandering in exile, for esoteric reasons.