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ILLEGAL MEXICAN BORDER CROSSINGS

Upon completing their mandatory three years in the Israeli Defense Force, many young Jewish soldiers decide to tour various distant parts of the world...the figure in our story was one of them.

Naftali [not his real name] grew up in a secular Israeli community in Naaveh Ilan [between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv], and after completing his service, he felt he needed a break. After some thought, he decided to crash on his relatives in San Diego, the southernmost city in California. He knew the city was situated along side of the Pacific Ocean and he enjoyed water activities. So without even notifying them, one sunny day he showed up by their door.

After overcoming their initial shock, they invited him for dinner and throughout the meal asked him about the family, his tour of duty and other points of interest. When they asked him what are his plans, Naftali responded that he wanted to hang around southern California for a while, so he thought he might stay with them.

They responded that it will be our pleasure to have you over for some meals. However, we are sorry to inform you that there are no extra rooms in our house, so there is no way we can accommodate your need for a room to sleep in, even for a short period of time.

The relatives realized that although he brought some money with him, that was intended for his excursions and similar expenses; he certainly didn't expect to have to pay for room and board. So after some thought, they suggested to him to put on his uniform and go over to the local Chabad Center. Maybe they have room to put you up. "We know that some Jewish students of the University board there," they added.

So off he went to the Chabad House and to his delight and surprise, they responded by saying "You can stay as our guest. The only thing we ask is that as long as you stay, you must participate in the morning services and, of course, put on *tefillin* on the weekdays and not desecrate the Shabbat."

To Naftali this was a small price to pay. They were not intruding into his life or making any outlandish demands on him. Their only request was just to be respectful of his hosts' lifestyle. "I won't smoke a cigarette in the synagogue on Shabbat or in front of anybody in the house," he said to himself, "but I can continue do so in the privacy of my room or when strolling the streets."

This arrangement continued for a few months, and during that time he befriended a young man, a native Californian who was also taking some time off. One Sunday they decided to cross the border and visit the Mexican town of

Tijuana. They remained there until Friday morning, when they decided it was time to return.

However, to his shock, at the border he was refused reentry into the United States. His visa was for a one time visit, and by leaving the States, the visa became no longer valid. Naftali argued with the immigration guard that he still had another few months on his visa, but to no avail.

He then pleaded that the reason he decided to return today is because he keeps the Shabbat, and there is no way to keep the Shabbat in Tijuana. “Therefore, I cannot remain in Mexico. I must get back to the place I was staying in San Diego before sunset.”

The border guard again dismissed his words and pleas, and instead directed him to a side room, to await his fate.

As soon as the guard left the room, another agent came over to Naftali and said in a low voice, “I too am Jewish. And while I am not Shabbat observant, I respect a Jew that is. So although I likely will be definitely reprimanded and punished for helping you, with the possibility that I may be dismissed from my job too, I am going to leave through the back door and leave the door slightly ajar. You can then do what you have to do.”

True to his words, the door was left ajar and Naftali sprinted across the border.

That night in the privacy of his room in the Chabad center, he stretched out his hand to get a cigarette from the table. But then his conscience stopped him; “The border agent put his livelihood in jeopardy, in order that you can maintain the sanctity of the Shabbat and now you are going to desecrate it and smoke?! Is that how low you will stoop. You will cause a person to lose everything he has, so you can have this little enjoyment and relaxation? Shame on you!”

With these thoughts lingering in his mind throughout the next twenty four hours, he survived that Shabbat without a cigarette, and then decided to honor his benefactor by truly becoming a *shomer* Shabbat.

Upon his return to Israel, his family noticed that he had some kind of transformation. They realized that not only was he now observing the Shabbat, but he was becoming completely observant of many other commandments too.

Today, Naftali is the husband and father of a beautiful observant family.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a weekly email of **Rabbi Sholom D. Avtzon** in 5778 (2018), who heard the story from Rabbi Mendel Groner of Kiryat Gat, who knows the individual personally.

[Rabbi Sholom-Dovber Avtzon is a veteran educator and the author of numerous books on the seven Chabad Rebbes and their chasidim.]

*Why This Week?* The double weekly reading of *Vayakhel-Pekudei* starts with three verses of instruction for Shabbat observance.