

## ***A Shabbat Test from the 1930's Depression***

This story took place during the period of financial depression in the USA some 90 years ago. Many stores closed down, companies collapsed and banks failed; people were trapped in an economic crisis.

A certain Jew living in Pueblo, Colorado, Mr. E.A., was sitting in his store dreaming about the past when many people patronized his store. Now, three weeks had passed without a single customer. The cash register was empty, yet he still had to pay the rent of his store, electricity, water and many additional expenditures.

His 19-year-old daughter was also sitting in the store, idle. In the good old days before the economic depression, she helped him in the store and they were both kept very busy serving the customers. But now...

There was a small Jewish community in their town, with less than a hundred families.<sup>1</sup> They had a synagogue where they came to pray, mostly on Sabbath and holidays. On weekdays it was difficult to get a *minyan*, since most of the community members were not that observant regarding the Torah and its commandments. The owner of the store, however, tried his best to keep the *mitzvot* in an exemplary manner.

On Friday afternoon, when father and daughter had already begun to make preparations for closing the store, a customer entered. He examined different types of merchandise and chose item after item, then continued to add additional items until eventually a large pile stood on the counter.

When he asked the price for the goods, the sum amounted to more than \$200, which was a most significant sum in those days [equivalent to the buying power of 3000 2018 dollars – yt<sup>2</sup>].

The storekeeper looked at his watch and saw that it was already getting very late. He would not even have time to have a shower and change his clothes before going to the synagogue.

At that moment the client said: "Please pack all of my purchases and bring everything to the hotel where I'm staying. I must depart early tomorrow morning."

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<sup>1</sup> Today the Jewish population is said to number approximately 500 adults.

<sup>2</sup> Information available in many places online. Search on "Inflation 1930 to".

The Jewish storekeeper thought quickly about how to deal with this situation. There was not enough time to bring the goods to the hotel before the commencement of Shabbat within just a few minutes.

He explained to the gentile client that he was Jewish and the Sabbath was about to begin and he was unable to fulfill the man's request. He said that he would be willing to open the store after the Sabbath especially for him, and then he would pack the merchandise and bring it to any place in the town.

However, the Gentile man said that he was unable to stay for another day since he had to leave early the next morning.

At this point the daughter intervened and turned to her father: "I'm ready to call one of our friends who is not Jewish. We'll ask him to help us; that is what many of the Jewish people do in this town."

The father [correctly, according to Jewish law] did not agree to ask a non-Jew to work for him on Shabbat.

The client was not interested in the matter of Jewish Shabbat observance. He said: "Why did you allow me to go to the trouble of choosing all this merchandise if you are not willing to pack it now and deliver it to my hotel?" He left the store angrily and said: "I shall go and buy all that I require in some other store!"

The father did not even have time to close the store. He asked his daughter to quickly lock up before Shabbat began while he went straight to the synagogue.

When he came back to his house and noticed the looks of his wife and daughter he understood that his daughter had not approved of his stubbornness, and that she had told her mother what had happened.

The mother said in distress: "We could have lived for a long time with that sum of money. Now we have lost everything because you did not want to use a method of solving the problem that is accepted by all the Jews in the town."

During the Shabbat meal they all sat in complete silence, each one absorbed in his own thoughts. Finally, the father said to himself: "This is not right. The holy Shabbat is not being honored or enjoyed in this way." He began to chant the traditional Shabbat evening melodies in order to lighten the mood around the table.

When the Shabbat ended, he asked his daughter to accompany him to the store in order to return the items of merchandise to the shelves.

Lo and behold, the moment he switched on the light in the store, they heard the sound of approaching steps. The customer of the previous day had been waiting next to the store!

He said: “Wait, don’t put anything back on the shelves! I will be taking everything. Start to pack, and meanwhile I will look around to see whether there are more things that I need.”

The Gentile man looked through the shelves and chose many items. When they added up the sum, it amounted to over \$600 [equivalent to \$9000 in 2018]!

The man paid in cash and asked them to bring everything to his hotel as quickly as possible.

Before leaving the store, he said to them: “You must be wondering why I came back to your store. I’ll tell you the truth: I was very angry at you last night when you refused to pack my purchases and send them to my hotel, and I decided to go elsewhere in order to buy everything that I need. So today I went from store to store the whole day, but I could not find what I wanted.

After a while I began to think: the storekeeper must certainly be well aware that in these times of financial crisis clients are very scarce. Yet despite that, he was prepared to forgo a good profit because of his faith. He must be a man of principle, and certainly an honest and upright man.

I decided to return to your store and buy even more items. I am very satisfied with all that I have bought. I am aware that this is quality merchandise as a very good price.”

His daughter hung her head in shame. She was embarrassed to face her fathers. She realized that his firm adherence to his principles in observing the commandments strictly had brought about this astonishing positive outcome. He had withstood the test observing the Shabbat properly, and as a result had ended up selling three times more merchandise than expected. What’s more –indeed, above all -- he had sanctified the Name of Heaven.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from... -- I’m sorry, my records are not clear. If anyone recognizes this story from elsewhere, please let me know.

*Connection:* The weekly Torah reading of *Bereshis* 1) is the source of the text of the Friday night Kiddush recital; and 2) takes place on the first Shabbat of the 5780 yearly cycle -- An excellent time for Jews to renew or initiate their commitment to our weekly holy Shabbat and its pleasures.