

All In for the Daughter

In the venerable chasidic book, *Toldos Yaakov*, a woman from the community of Mezibush is quoted as having said: "The Jewish people have done well to have chosen G-d as their G-D, but He too has selected well by choosing Israel as His nation, for even Feivish, 'The Lowest of the Low,' consecrated His holy name."

Reb Nachman Kahana, the Spinker Bebbe in Bnei Brak (?-1976), explained her words with the following story: There once lived in the vicinity of Mezibush a fabulously wealthy man who had an only daughter. When the time came for her to be married, her father approached a local *rosh yeshiva* in search of a likely candidate. The *rosh yeshiva* suggested Reb Feivish, a gifted young student with a brilliant mind and equally admirable character traits.

The wealthy man, a learned man himself, spoke with the young man and was so impressed, he immediately asked the *rosh yeshiva* to propose the match to the young Feivish. To further entice Reb Feivel, the father guaranteed a substantial dowry and promised to support his son-in-law for the rest of his days so that he might be free to pursue the study of Torah.

It goes without saying that Feivish was pleased with these conditions and agreed to the match.

The wedding took place after several months and the young couple went to live next door to her parent's home. Feivish continued studying Torah while his father-in-law continued to manage his business, providing for the young couple as he had promised. To the wealthy man's delight, Feivish, being clever and sharp, found favor among the townspeople and they began coming to him with their various problems.

Many years passed and two daughters were born to Feivish and his wife.

The years claimed their toll on the rich man and he felt that he could no longer carry the burden of his business upon his shoulder.

One day, while discussing the future with his wife, she offered this suggestion: "My husband, you are already old. You cannot continue devoting the same attention to your business as in the past for you simply do not have the strength. Is it not true that your laborers take advantage of you and try to cheat you at every occasion? You simply cannot continue this way indefinitely. You have children and grandchildren to support, and we too, must be provided for in our old age. I suggest that you take our son-in-law into the business. Let him start with an hour a day until he gets acquainted with all its workings. He is a clever man and will eventually be able to considerably lighten your burden. And besides, he will eventually have to take over the business when, after 120 years, you depart from this world."

The man listened to his wife's words but thoroughly disagreed. "It is not fair to Feivish," he argued. "He agreed to marry our daughter on the condition that he would not be required to concern himself with business matters. It would be totally unfair to involve him in worldly affairs when he is so diligent and devoted to his study. That is, after all, much more important."

The controversy raged back and forth. One day the daughter entered her parent's home to find her mother sitting and sobbing.

"Whatever is the matter, Mother? Is everyone well? What is wrong?"

The mother explained her feelings, describing her concern for the future of the family. She reviewed all her arguments while her daughter listened.

"But Mother," the daughter finally said, "you know that Feivish studies day and night, never wasting a minute. When could he possibly learn the business?"

The mother responded, "He doesn't have to assume complete responsibility at once. Let him but put in an hour a day to acquaint himself with the business."

The daughter, seeing her mother's deep concern in the matter, promised to speak to Feivish about it. The following day, when Feivish returned from the *Beit Medrash* (study hall), his wife greeted him despondently. Concerned, he asked her why she seemed so troubled. She told him of her conversation with her mother and begged him to begin taking an interest in her father's business, if only for an hour a day. At first Feivish was strongly opposed, but the mighty power of the evil inclination is overwhelmed him and he finally agreed.

Feivish began going to the store for an hour a day, but even during this hour, he would immerse himself in a *sefer* (book) and study all the while.

The 'Accuser' was not satisfied with the state of things and laid further plans to tear Feivish away from Torah study.

"You scoundrel! You dirty thief!" were the words that Feivish heard one day as he sat in the store, pouring over a *sefer*. An angry merchant had burst into the store and was now accusing his father-in-law of dishonest dealings.

". . . and don't think that this is the first time you've cheated me! I pay you in full each time for all the merchandise that I order and then you go ahead and swindle me in the amount that you deliver!" accused the enraged customer.

The father-in-law opened the package thrust before him on the counter and saw that his customer's accusation was quite valid. He cross-examined his workers until he found the culprit who had been stealing the merchandise. He settled the matter with his disgruntled customer and fired his dishonest worker.

This scene had its effect on Feivish. He realized that the workers took advantage of his father-in-law, stealing whenever his back was turned. He decided that it was up to him to take a more active interest in the business to prevent such unpleasant scenes in the future. He started coming for two or three hours daily, becoming engrossed with the comings and goings of the laborers and customers. His father-in-law, relieved to shed some of his responsibility, relied more and more on Feivish as he saw the capable young man grasp all the facets of the business.

Feivish, seeing that the present laborers could not be trusted, dismissed all of them and hired others to replace them, reorganizing the whole business. Thus it happened that when the father-in-law passed away, Feivish was left totally involved in financial affairs. The Accuser had won the first round.

By now, Feivish was spending the whole day at the store. This left him virtually no time for Torah study. He set aside an hour in the mornings before prayers and another in the evenings, but the business soon encroached even upon these precious hours. He found that during business hours he had to tend to customers so that he was required to review his accounts in the evening.

Since Feivish stayed up till late at night over his accounts, he was too tired in the mornings to adhere to his schedule of one hour of study. His *shacharit* (morning) prayers became increasingly hurried until he stopped praying with a *minyan* (prayer quorum) altogether.

The business prospered and Feivish soon found it necessary to expand. This naturally meant more responsibility and less free time. When Feivish was appointed the king's agent, the added burden left him with no time even for his prayers. On Shabbat he still managed to pray in a synagogue. But soon he stopped this too, being so worn out from his strenuous efforts of the

week. He would spend the whole day in bed, just recovering his strength for the week to come. The Accuser had won again.

His position as official supplier to the king once presented an excellent business opportunity to Feivish. He was invited to the prime minister's home to sign a contract on a large order. Since he felt it unseemly to appear as he was, he trimmed his beard, acquired different clothing, and went to keep his appointment.

As he sat discussing business, the prime minister's wife entered with refreshments. Feivish did not wish to insult his hostess and tasted one of the cakes laid before him. By way of compliment, he casually asked her what they were made of, and was relieved to hear that they contained no *treife* (non-kosher) ingredients. And thereafter, when his affairs brought him to the prime minister's home again, he would partake of the refreshments without pangs of conscience. Little did he realize that the woman did, in fact, use lard and fats to enhance the flavor of her baking.

Once he had become lax in his eating habits, he felt no compunctions about eating *treife*, eventually bringing such food into his own home.

His wife, distressed by Feivish's downfall, was powerless to do anything. It pained and grieved her deeply to see the metamorphosis of her husband from a Torah scholar to an unobservant Jew, but she no longer had any influence upon him and was forced to remain silent. His Godless ways were apparent to the whole community and Feivish acquired the name, "Feivish, Lowest of the Low".

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The years passed and Feivish prospered. The time arrived for him to marry off his older daughter. Although he realized that he was a sinner, Feivish desired the best for his daughter: a Torah scholar and an upright young man. But no one who knew Feivish or had even heard of him would be likely to consent to become his son-in-law. He decided to take a business trip, combining it with a search for a suitable young man. He took along with him his *tallis* and *tefillin*, though he had long ceased using them.

His travels brought Feivish to Hungary where he stopped at a village. When he entered the synagogue, he encountered a fine young student, whose very face bespoke his greatness. Upon inquiry, he learned that he was the son of the local rabbi and head of the *Beit Din* - the rabbinical court. After talking with the youth and becoming enamored of his fine qualities, Feivish desired him as a son-in-law.

Feivish returned home and summoned a penniless *shadchan* (matchmaker). He offered him a substantial sum to go to the village in Hungary and try to arrange a marriage for his daughter with the young man he had previously met, all the while concealing the current character of her father.. The *shadchan* accepted the project and immediately set forth.

When the *shadchan* reached the village, he went straight to the rabbi's home. Posing as a grain merchant, he said that business had brought him to Hungary where he was required to remain for several weeks. Since he was very particular in observance of *Kashrut*, he begged the rabbi to accept him as a paying guest. The rabbi, who barely subsisted upon his meager salary, agreed to the arrangement. The *shadchan* made himself very amenable during his stay. He possessed a glib tongue and would entertain the whole household with his amusing and interesting anecdotes.

One day he approached the rabbi with a suggestion. "I see that your son has already reached marriageable age."

"Yes, that is true. Indeed, he has had many offers for a *shiduch*, but they all require that we put up a large sum of money, which in our circumstances, we cannot possibly afford."

"Then I have just the prospect for you. You see, before I left my home town I was approached by a genuine Torah scholar, a man expert in Talmud and Jewish Law, who is extremely wealthy to the bargain. He told me that he sought for his accomplished daughter, a fine youth who would be willing to spend the rest of his days in Torah study. If I were to come across such a youth, I should feel free to represent him and suggest the match. After having lived here for a while, I feel I know you both, the honorable father and the learned son, well enough to feel that something might come of my humble suggestion."

The rabbi listened to his guest's words and agreed to meet with the father. The *shadchan* immediately wrote to Feivish that the rabbi was amenable and that he was to come and make his acquaintance.

Feivish's trip took several weeks but when he arrived he was loaded with expensive gifts for the entire family. Although his outward appearance did not make the most favorable impression, the *rebbetzin* assumed that this wealthy businessman certainly came in contact with high officials and must alter his appearance for their sake. When the rabbi himself spoke to Feivish, he was truly amazed at his erudition in Torah knowledge.

The couple now desired to see the daughter, but Feivish convinced them to first announce the engagement. If his daughter did not meet up with their expectations, when she came with her father on his next business trip, the engagement would automatically be declared void.

A grand feast, paid for by Feivish, of course, was made to celebrate the joyous occasion. Many poor people were invited and the *chatan* (bridegroom) delivered a brilliant speech. Feivish discussed several points, posing contradictions and resolving them with his vast knowledge. The *chatan* and his parents were very happy and eagerly awaited further developments.

Feivish took leave of his future *mechutanim* (relatives through marriage), again showering them with gifts. He promised to return soon with his daughter. When he did return with her, she was approved by the rabbi and his family. Feivish then suggested that they celebrate the wedding right away.

"Why must you be bothered by such a lengthy trip to our city. It is both tiring and expensive. How, too, do you propose to leave your city without its leader? Let us celebrate the wedding here and now, and then I will take the young couple back with me to their new home."

The rabbi agreed and the wedding took place. Hundreds of people attended from the *chatan's* side but the *kallah* (bride) and her father were the only ones to represent their side of the family. Feivish explained that they had few relations and that distance prevented their friends from attending.

After the seven days of celebration following the wedding, Feivish and the young couple packed their things and set out for home.

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When they finally reached their destination, they were greeted by many servants who rushed to take in their things and make them comfortable. The young husband was not accustomed to the splendor and wealth that was apparent all around him. They first entered a large courtyard lit up by many lanterns, surrounded by orchards and gardens from whence emanated a mixture of heavenly fragrances. The rugs and tapestries that adorned the rooms of the mansion within stunned the youth who had never seen such wealth in all his days.

The *chatan* and *kallah* were taken to their room to refresh themselves. Just as they had made themselves comfortable, a knock was heard at the door. It was Feivish, who begged to speak several words with his new son-in-law.

"I think it is only fair to inform you of certain things before you become a member of my

household. I am known in these parts as "Feivish, Lowest of the Low": this is because I transgress all the commandments of the Torah. I wish you to hear it first from me before you hear it from outsiders. You may accuse me of having deceived you, but first let me state my case.

"Even though I myself am no longer an observant Jew, I desire a pious and scholarly husband for my daughter. I will give you your own home complete with new furniture and dishes and you need have no contact with me at all. I agree to continue to support you for the rest of your days. If however, you still wish to back out, you must give your wife a divorce immediately and renounce all claims against me. Either way, you may keep all the gifts I have given to you until now. But whatever you decide. I want that decision to be made by morning."

The poor young man was thoroughly shaken up. What a disgrace for his eminent father and for himself as well, to be thus connected with a man known as "The Lowest of the Low"! His decision was clear; he would divorce his wife the very next day and return home.

When he had time to reflect, his mind was filled with conflicting thoughts.

"Does it not say 'He who divorces his first wife - the very altar sheds tears for him.' How can I return home and tell everyone that my father-in-law is an unobservant Jew. Who will believe me after the wonderful impression he made upon my whole village? They will all whisper that it is my fault alone that the marriage did not succeed. And it won't be easy for me to find myself another wife after this."

Opposing arguments now rushed into his mind. "Perhaps this is a plot fostered by the evil inclination to ruin me. Just as my father-in-law was seduced into abandoning the tenets of Judaism, so might I be led astray."

Suddenly he was reminded of his new wife. Why must she be punished for her father's sins. She was a good woman and had every right to live a Torah-true life.

He confronted his wife with this question : "Would you then be satisfied with leading a Torah life in contrast to the life you have led under your father's roof ?"

"My dear husband," said the young woman earnestly, tears streaming down her cheeks, "Do you not realize that it is not you alone that I married, but all that you stand for! How I have hated this life I lead here! How I have yearned to live a Torah life. Never fear - I will not hinder you from your studies but will do all in my power to encourage you and help you."

The entire night had passed while the young man had considered and weighed all the aspects of his situation. Early the next morning, a knock was again heard at the door. The young husband told the waiting Feivish that he had decided to remain. Feivish then took his son-in-law and showed him his new lodgings and told him that he would have furniture delivered that very day. The young man then went to the *Beit Medrash* (study hall) join a *minyán* for the morning prayers.

The people there greeted the newcomer and, noticing his Hungarian manner of dress, asked if he had come to stay. The young man then explained that he had married Feivish's daughter. Everyone was shocked to hear this and hastened to warn him about his father-in-law's irreligious ways, lest he be influenced by them.

He listened to their warnings politely and then went home to study.

The holy ***Baal Shem Tov*** lived not far from Feivish and the young son-in-law began to frequent the rebbe's *Beit Medrash*. In a short time, he spent several days each week studying there.

Two years passed and Feivish's second daughter became of a marriageable age. Feivish reasoned that his chances for getting a scholarly husband for her were even slimmer than before, for his first son-in-law had surely written home about him. He would now be notorious even in Hungary. He decided therefore to travel to a distant part in Russia and begin his search there.

Eventually, he arrived at a certain village and entered its *Beit Medrash*. There he found the rabbi, a follower of the Baal Shem Tov, seated at a table surrounded by his students, engrossed in Torah study. Impressed by the scene, Feivish made inquiries about this rabbi. When he learned that he had a son who was likewise a pious scholar, he was overjoyed. He hurried home and summoned the *shadchan* to him once again. This time however, the *shadchan* was loath to perform the deceptive mission and it required a doubling of the previous fee to persuade him.

The *shadchan* arrived at his destination and went to the *Beit Medrash*. The rabbi was again seated with his students. The *shadchan* sat down and joined them at their study. Eventually he brought the talk around to the Baal Shem Tov, about whom he knew many fascinating stories. His audience listened to him spellbound, their admiration and affection towards the capable storyteller growing by the minute. When the *shadchan* felt that the chassidim knew him well enough, he approached the rabbi's young son with his proposal for a *shiduch*.

The young man listened respectfully and then referred him to his mother. The *rebbetzin* also listened with interest but told him that it was her husband, the rabbi, who made all such decisions. After much pleading on the *shadchan*'s part, she finally agreed to personally approach her husband in this matter. She relayed to the rabbi all the information that the *shadchan* had told her, of Feivish's wealth and of his scholarly son-in-law, husband to Feivish's first daughter. The rabbi did indeed recall seeing the young man by the Baal Shem Tov but he refused to commit himself without first seeing Feivish.

The *shadchan* duly summoned Feivish to come and discuss the matter with the rabbi. But as soon as the rabbi beheld Feivish's face, he intuitively felt that it was the face of a sinner. Loath to discuss the matter, he asked Feivish to leave the next day.

That evening, the rabbi prayed that it be revealed to him in a dream what course of action he was to take. That night he had a dream in which he was told that even though Feivish himself was a sinner, his daughter was the predestined wife for his son. The rabbi was not to do anything to prevent this match for it was heaven-ordained and would come to pass in any event. The rabbi immediately awoke and hurried to Feivish's room with his answer.

Feivish had been lying in bed when suddenly he heard footsteps coming towards his room. He hurriedly donned a robe, and went over to his table to pore over a *gemarra* (Talmud), pretending that he had been studying all evening. The rabbi knocked and was told to enter.

"You have nothing to hide from me," the rabbi told his startled guest. "I know just what kind of a man you are and all your sins have been revealed to me. However, I agree to go through with the match for I have been informed that it is so willed in heaven."

Feivish was relieved with this news, as well as by the fact that he need not maintain his pretenses any longer. He therefore decided to hold the wedding in his city. He set a date for the event and returned home.

Feivish's family was overjoyed to hear the good news, most of all the first son-in-law. He would now have a companion with whom he could study. It was he who made all the arrangements for the forthcoming wedding making sure, of course, that all the food would be of the highest degree of *kashrut*.

The week of the wedding arrived. The rabbi and his students arrived in the city before Shabbos. Their arrival made a big stir in the community, but when the townspeople learned that the visiting rebbe was to be Feivish's *mehutan*, they simply shook their heads in bewilderment.

They tried to forewarn him of Feivish's true nature but the rabbi's mind was made up.

The wedding day arrived and all rejoiced -- Feivish, on having succeeded in again acquiring a scholarly son-in-law, the rabbi, on having married off his son so painlessly, and the first son-in-law on having acquired a pious brother-in-law.

During the festivities, the rabbi stood up and proposed a toast. "To your true repentance, *mehutan*."

"No, rabbi." answered Reb Feivish, "Such a time has not arrived as yet."

"When then will you repent?"

"Ah, if only I knew when I was to die, I would repent three days before my death."

"Let me have your promise on that," said the rabbi, and he leaned over to grasp Feivish's hand firmly. The week of festivities over, the rabbi returned home with his *talmidim* (students) and the new husband assumed his new responsibilities. Feivish provided a home complete with new furnishings and utensils for the couple, and life settled down to normal. The two brothers-in-law now went together to the Baal Shem Tov where they studied and received guidance.

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The years passed and the rebbe, the father of his second son-in-law, departed from this world but Feivish lived on, steeped in his evil ways. One Shabbos night he returned home from a wild party he had attended and threw himself down upon his bed. Suddenly the door of his chamber opened slowly and a man dressed all in white entered. Feivish was shocked to realize that it was the father of his second son-in-law.

"I have come from Heaven to remind you of the promise you made at your daughter's wedding. In three days time you will die. The time has come for you to repent your wicked ways."

The rabbi disappeared as silently as he had come. Feivish sat up in bed all shaken. Is it possible to repent in three days time, he wondered, what I have transgressed during thirty years?

Suddenly he fell into a fit. He screamed and struck his head against the wall and no one could restrain him. A doctor was quickly summoned but Feivish did not let him get near. Finally the two sons-in-law were called. When they appeared, Feivish calmed down somewhat and told them what had happened.

"What am I to do? How can I possibly repent all my sins? Maybe you can take me to the Baal Shem Tov? Right now! If anyone can still help me, it is he."

The two young men immediately ordered the carriage prepared and were soon speeding towards the Baal Shem Tov.

It was already after midnight and their only concern was how to get in to see the holy Baal Shem Tov at this late hour. But as the moment they arrived, the Rebbe's attendant hurried out to them and asked:

"Has Reb Feivish arrived?"

As soon as they entered the study, Feivish threw himself down at the Baal Shem Tov's feet and burst into uncontrollable sobbing, his life's story emerging between his racking cries.

"You can still repent, Feivish," said the Rebbe. "Now listen. You must fast for the next three days and spend the entire time in the *Beit Medrash* in prayer and repentance. When the people come to pray in the morning and evening, you are to throw yourself down at their feet and

exclaim, 'I am Feivish the Sinner who has transgressed all the commandments of the Torah. I regret it all and have accepted upon myself the burden of repentance as specified by the Baal Shem Tov. In addition to this, you are to throw yourself down at the feet of anyone who enters the *Beit Medrash* during the day and repeat what I have just told you.'

"Is that all, rebbe? How can these actions atone for thirty years of heavy sinning?"

"You just do as I have instructed and all will turn out well."

Feivish set out immediately for the *Beit Medrash* to begin his program of *tshuvah* ('repentance'). He recited *Tehilim* (Psalms) all day and night, he confessed his sins before everyone who entered the *shul*, and he wept and fasted all the while. By the third day he was at the end of his strength.

These developments irked and inflamed the Accuser. The man whom he had ensnared in his nets for thirty years was now making amends for them in three days time! It was just not fair! All of his work was being nullified. He raised a riot in heaven at the injustice of such instant *tshuvah* and the heavenly court ruled that Satan might descend to have another try at corrupting Feivish. If Satan could succeed in forcing Feivish to taste a bit of *treife* food again, his repentance would not be accepted.

On Tuesday afternoon a distinguished-looking person entered the *Beit Medrash*. Feivish rushed over, and throwing himself down at his feet, made his usual confession.

"What kind of silly behavior is this for a grown man?" asked the stranger.

Feivish explained his situation and said that the Baal Shem Tov had instructed him to thus prostrate himself at every newcomer's feet. The man sat himself at a table and opened a volume of Talmud. He began learning out loud, pretending that he could barely understand the text. Feivish politely interrupted him.

"Please forgive my impertinence, but that is not the way one should understand that particular passage."

"If you are indeed a learned man, than why must you abase yourself in such a manner? Does it not say that if a scholar sins let him study two pages of Talmud and he will be strengthened by Torah?"

Meanwhile a *minyán* had gathered in the *Beit Medrash* to pray *mincha* (the afternoon prayer). Feivish, greatly weakened by his three-day fast, struggled to stand up and go over to them, but the stranger tried to detain him.

"Does it not also say 'You shall guard your lives exceedingly.' If you continue fasting any longer you may not last the day. How then will you propose to repent the sin of suicide on top of all your other transgressions?"

Feivish hurried nevertheless to fulfill the Besht's instructions and threw himself down before the men who had assembled. Then he returned to the stranger, who had meanwhile taken out a package of food.

Feivish was literally dying for just a taste of fresh bread. The stranger offered to share his meal. Feivish wavered. Suddenly he noticed that a drop of candlewax, which was made from animal fats, had fallen into the stranger's soup.

"I wouldn't touch that soup, it's *treife*!" he shouted. The stranger then tried to make him taste some *challah*. But since Feivish had not washed his hands he refused to eat the bread.

"Here you are on the very threshold of starvation and you still stand on ceremony? Come with

me, I will help you wash your hands."

The stranger took Feivish to the sink but somehow there was no water in the faucets. He then led the weakened but resisting Feivish to the *mikveh* (ritual bath) where there was sure to be water. But here too, the man was disappointed. Poor Feivish summoned up his last ounce of strength to wrench himself away from his persuasive captor and jumped into the empty *mikveh*. As he was falling he felt the Baal Shem Tov's hands on him and he heard his voice.

"Feivish, it was such a self-sacrifice that we had hoped of you. Now all your sins are atoned for. Rest now in peace."

It was concerning this Feivish that they said, "Feivish the Lowly sanctified G-d's holy name in public."

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*Source:* Freely adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a story in *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* (vol. 2) by Y.Y. Klapholtz (English translation by **Sheindel Weinbach**), as posted on the [www.baalshemtov.com](http://www.baalshemtov.com) website of Tzvi-Meir HaCohain (Howard M. Cohn, Patent Attorney).

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5458- 6 Sivan 5520 (Aug. 1698 - May 1760 C.E.)], the **Baal Shem Tov** ["Master of the Good Name"—often referred to as "the *Besht*" for short], a unique and seminal figure in Jewish history, revealed his identity as an exceptionally holy person, on his 36th birthday, 18 Elul 5494 (1734 C.E.), and made the until-then underground Chasidic movement public. He wrote no books, although many works claim to contain his teachings. One available in English is the excellent annotated translation of *Tzava'at Harivash*, published by Kehos.

*Connections (2):*

- 1) ELUL, the last thirty days before *Rosh Hashana* is the month of tshuvah.
- 2) Early next week, Sun. night- Monday, is the 322<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the birthday of the **Baal Shem Tov**.