

Calculating Change

An unfortunate widow from Lithuania was in a desperate predicament. Because her husband had died without children, she was obligated to undergo the *chalitzah* ceremony before remarrying. The brother-in-law who was required to perform this rite, however, was a feebleminded fellow and appeared *halachically* unfit to fulfill this *mitzvah* according to Jewish Law.

The woman consulted many Rabbis, yet despite their extensive study of the matter, they could not find a solution which would allow her to remarry. Finally, the Rabbis in Vilna sent her to a learned scholar who, after lengthy consideration, suggested that she seek the ***Tzemach Tzedek's*** advice.

“He is a true genius,” said the Rabbi. “I would approve of his decision should he find a *halachic* ruling allowing the *chalitzah*. Besides, he is a great *tzadik* and perhaps he will be able to cure your brother-in-law.”

The Rabbi generously provided her with traveling expenses to White Russia. Then he added, “I have but one request of you. Please ask the Tzemach Tzedek for his answer in writing, and on your way back from Lubavitch, stop here and show it to me.”

The woman arrived in Lubavitch at a very busy time. Many guests had come and it was impossible for her to gain access to the Rebbe. To pay for her stay, she offered to help out in the kitchen. The kindhearted Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka accepted the offer and saw to her welfare.

Days went by with the poor widow still waiting for an opportunity to see the Rebbe. The Rebbetzin herself decided to act. She approached her husband and told him of the woman's desperate situation.

The Tzemach Tzedek immediately addressed himself to the problem. “Send for the brother-in-law,” he instructed.

When the man arrived the Rebbe asked him: “Will you follow my instruction?”

“Surely,” answered the man.

“Look here, I am giving you ten kopeks. Go to the store and purchase a pen for one kopek, another kopek's worth of paper, three kopeks' worth of ink and a pencil for two kopeks. Do you know how much change you will have to bring me?”

“Of course. It amounts to seven kopeks and I’ll have three kopeks change.”

“Then go ahead.”

“Yes sir!”

In keeping with his strange behavior, the man jumped out the window and went on his errand. In a short time, he returned through the window with his purchases.

“Please review the bill for me,” requested the Rebbe.

Obediently, the man stated each item and presented the correct change, whereupon the Tzemach Tzedek instructed the local Rav (rabbinical authority) to arrange for the *chalitzah* ceremony. The next day it was carried out, thus freeing the woman to remarry.

Before she left, the grateful woman presented the request of the Rabbi who had recommended her to approach him. The Tzemach Tzedek took a piece of paper and wrote this answer: “The Jerusalem Talmud¹ explicitly states that a feebleminded person who is capable of making a purchase and calculating change is not disqualified because of his disability.”

When the Rabbi saw this response he was amazed at the simplicity of the Tzemach Tzedek’s ruling. “How great is true Torah study!” he exclaimed. “All the Rabbis that you consulted surely know of that ruling in the Talmud Yerushalmi, yet no one else recalled it in their attempts to find a solution to this difficulty.”

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*Source:* Adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from “*From my Father’s Shabbos Table*,” Rabbi Eliyahu Touger’s excellent selection and translation from the first two volumes of Rabbi Yehuda Chitrik’s 4-volume series, *Reshimat Devorim*.

*Connection:* the weekly Torah reading discusses the necessity and laws for *chalitzah* (Deut. 25:5-10).

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneersohn** [29 Elul 5549 - 13 Nissan 5626 (Sept. 1789 – April 1866)], the third Rebbe of Chabad, was known as the **Tzemach Tzedek**, after his books of Jewish Law responsa and Talmudic commentary. He was renowned not only as a Rebbe of tens of thousands, but also as a leading scholar in his generation in both the revealed and secret aspects of Torah.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version than the Babalonian Talmud, and rarely studied except by advanced scholars.