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Story #1357 (5784-14) 27 Kislev 5784 (Dec. 10, 2023)

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CHANUKAH SORCERY IN IRAN

[The identity of one of the two men in the story is well known. We know the story from his son (see Source note below).]

They made their way slowly, their boots sinking in the mud that covered the path, and the wind whipping their faces. The two Jewish men had no choice but to pull their coats tighter and plod their way through the puddles. They still had a long way to go without any sign of a settlement where they would be able to find shelter.

It was the eve of Chanukah in Iran. The two men had hoped to reach their homes before the beginning of the holiday but the sudden storm ruined their plans.

Unexpectedly they saw lights in the distance. Hope flared up. They realized that that was the place where there should be a small village. The hope gave them strength to walk faster till they reached the village. They knocked on the door of one of the houses, shaking from cold.

The door was opened a crack and the Muslim landlord looked at them suspiciously.

"Please," they begged of him, "could we stay in your house till the end of the storm? We will pay you well."

To their joy the man agreed. He showed them to a small, dark and cold room. Having a roof over their heads, shelter from the storm, was enough for them to feel great relief.

They were now able to focus on another disturbing problem: it was the first night of Chanukah, how were they going to do the *mitzvah* of lighting the first candle?

They considered asking their host for candles but they were afraid to do so. At that time there existed a superstition among the gentiles that the Jews practiced witchcraft. The landlord had already lit a kerosene lamp in their room, asking for candles might cause him to suspect them of sorcery and throw them out of his house.

"Why are we depressed?" one of the men turned to his companion. "Let's *davven* (pray) to G-d that we will merit to fulfill the *mitzvah*. No doubt He will make us a Chanukah miracle and we will be able to perform the *mitzvah* with joy."

At the time he said this there was no realistic possibility of this happening. Still, his friend was inspired by his words and both of them *davvened* the evening prayer joyfully.

They had hardly finished their prayer when someone knocked on the room's door. The wife of their host was standing there. "Please help me," she said, "my sister-in-law lives next door. She is jealous of me and she harasses me without let up. I heard that you Jews are experts at spells and incantations. Please curse her for me and save me from her evil intentions."

The men were shocked by her strange request. What did they have to do with spells and incantations? But then, they realized: here was a perfect solution for their problem!

They went to a corner of the room and whispered together, while the woman waited with ill-concealed impatience to hear their answer. One of the men called out to her, his expression serious, "You must realize that this not a simple request."

On hearing this her face fell.

"Don't worry," he continued quickly, "we will try to solve the problem, but we will need several things."

Her eyes lit up. "I will bring you whatever you need," she exclaimed.

"In that case," he said decisively, "we will need candles, eggs and a vessel with glowing coals."

The woman hurried to get to them what they asked for.

The men were ecstatic, their joy knew no bounds. They were experiencing a miracle!

They hurried to light the Chanukah candles, thanking the Al-mighty for making it possible for them to fulfill this great *mitzvah*.

After, they cooked the eggs on the coals and ate them with the bread from their bags. When they said the full 'Blessings After Meals' and came to the special section about the remembrance of the miracle of Chanukah, they said it with extra devotion, conscious of the miracle that they just experienced.

The candles were still flickering and casting dancing shadows on the wall of the room when there was again knocking on the door. Again the woman stood there, this time upset and frightened.

"Please stop!" she screamed. "Extinguish the candles! My sister-in-law is in agony; she has unbearable stomach pains and it looks as if she might die! I'm afraid that it will become known that I had a hand in this and her family will take revenge on me!"

The men stared at her, stunned. Realizing a second opportunity, they shook their heads. "We're sorry, madam," one of them said, "it is too late. The process cannot be stopped. We cannot douse the candles."

The woman burst out crying, stamped her feet on the ground in total panic. "I beg of you! I will give you anything you ask for. Just take away the curse you put on my sister-in-law!"

Again the men retreated to a corner of the room to discuss how to deal with this seemingly disastrous situation. After several moments they turned toward the woman and one of them addressed her, "Even though it is extremely complicated, we will do our utmost to relieve the suffering of your sister-in-law and affect her recovery. Bring us another package of candles, and more eggs and some potatoes, and let's hope that we will be successful."

The woman immediately brought them all they asked for. Now they had candles for all the eight days of Chanukah, and food too. Again they thanked the One Above for their personal "miracle of the oil" – truly something out of nothing.

A short time afterwards the woman returned to thank them for removing "the curse" from her sister-in-law; her stomach aches had ceased and she felt much better. As a result, the woman was convinced that she was hosting miracle workers. She treated them with great respect till the storm ended and they continued on their way.

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*Editor's note:* My best guess, based on research, is that this episode took place in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Source:* 'Enhanced' and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the translation by **C. R. Benami**, long-time editorial assistant for AscentOfSafed.com, from a report in the popular Hebrew weekly, *Sichat HaShavua* #1665, based on an entry in the six-volume set, "*Imrei Shefer*," by Rabbi Shmuel Pinchasi, whose father, HaRav Moshe, who was one of the men in the story.



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