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## A TWO-WAY SURPRISE AT THE TZFAT CEMETERY

Get ready for a deep, lengthy, emotional and inspiring read. I [**Yehuda Azulay**] almost never post these types of events that happen to me, but I feel I have no choice with this one.

I arrived in Israel yesterday with an amazing group of forty-five Moroccan Jewish business men from Toronto, called the "Sephardic Unity Israel Trip." After concluding a tour of Tsfat and visiting burial sites of the *Tzadikim*, nearly everyone was now gathered back on the bus outside the new cemetery of Tzfat for the next leg of the trip, a visit to a winery. I, though, was late, as usual, as was my good friend, Ariel Picillo, and the three rabbis with the group.

Then the unexpected occurred.

It was scorching hot. I remembered seeing a soft drinks machine nearby, up a short hill inside. As I approached, two middle-aged Sephardic-looking women were standing near the cemetery 'chapel.'<sup>1</sup> I said to them (in Hebrew), "Please, do you have any change for the coke machine?"

One of the women responded with a thick Israeli-Moroccan accent, "No, I have no change and anyway, the coke machine doesn't work. However, I am part of the *Hevra Kadisha* ('Burial Society') of Tzfat. Do you perhaps have ten men? We need a *minyán* to bury a woman, We have been here for nearly an hour, waiting to bury her. She is an elderly Holocaust survivor, and has no male descendants except for one grandson. He is in the chapel hoping a *minyán* can be assembled."

Astonished, I quickly blurted out, "Hold on a minute. I have a bus filled with about 50 men waiting for three Rabbis to return from immersing in the Arizal's *mikveh*. I will be right back."

I was stunned by the sudden turn in events. The woman was equally in shock and became extremely emotional, but I had no time to waste.

I ran down the small hill from the new section of the cemetery to our bus waiting outside the cemetery gates, and told two of the organizers, Victor Arrobas and Rabbi Leib Irons, the situation.

Victor said to me, "Look, it's 12:55pm. The rabbis are coming any moment and we have only five minutes left. We are very behind schedule and you know how Israeli's are. They say "five minutes," and it can be over an hour. I know it is a big *mitzvah*, but at least first see if the body is even there."

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<sup>1</sup> An enclosed area outside the Chevra Kadisha building, to where, upon completing the purification procedure upon the dead body, it is rested there upon a table until the close family members tear garments and the eulogies are completed.

I responded, “You are correct about the timing. I’ll go right now to check if the body is there.”

I ran back up the hill as fast as I could. Despite the mounting pressure on me from both sides. I said to myself, “I will not let anything will stop me from arranging the minyan.”

I approached the ladies filled with emotion, and asked them, “Where is this woman’s body?” One of them answered “*Bifnim*” (‘inside’).

I went into the first room and found nothing there. I quickly reported back to the two women, who promptly replied, “Further in.” After going through three more rooms I finally spotted the body of the woman in the fourth, wrapped in shrouds.

My heart stuttered. I said to myself, “She must be buried with the utmost respect.” I ran out with not a minute to spare and told the women to delay the burial.

I ran down the hill and asked Rabbi Irons if the rabbis came back yet and he said “No.”

I said to him “Perfect. We are going to help bury this lady. The body is there; now is the time.”

I got on the bus filled with emotions. and I raised my voice so that everyone could hear me. I didn’t even pause to pick up the microphone. They were all wondering why I got up to speak.

I announced, “Listen, everyone. I was just up the hill and a burial is about to begin. There is no family present except for one grandson, so there will be no minyan and no *Kaddish* without us. Let’s go help! I got permission to delay our departure. It’s just up the hill, two minutes away.”

Everyone was taken by surprise, but inspired. I ran up the hill with nearly fifty people behind me. I saw the two women's faces; they couldn’t stop crying from joy over what just occurred.

As we all entered the chapel, it was as if this was all planned from above. Immediately the body was brought out on a stretcher.<sup>2</sup> There were nearly fifty men including several rabbis present. *Kaddish* and other prayers were recited.

After, we escorted the body out of the chapel and only a one minute walk away was the burial spot. The body was lifted from the stretcher and carefully laid to rest. Several shovels were provided and we helped scoop the mounds of dirt into the grave. The rabbi said a few words, as did the grandson before reciting the *Kaddish* again. The Toronto group was greatly moved by the opportunity to participate in this unexpected mitzvah.

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<sup>2</sup> In Israel the custom is to bury the deceased directly into the earth--no coffin.

[Burial of the dead and respectful treatment of the deceased in preparation for proper burial is considered one of the greatest mitzvot. It takes precedence over any other *Mitzvat Aseh* — a scriptural commandment to do a particular deed.]

After the very brief funeral, the grandson thanked me and then added, “You know, my sister, the only other living relative of my grandmother, lives in Toronto, but was unable to come.”

“Really?!” we exclaimed. “Our whole group is from Toronto. In what part does she live?” “Her husband is the rabbi of the Romano synagogue, the Chabad Romenu *shul*,” was the reply. One person on the trip knew the rabbi well, and was so excited to hear this that he whipped out his cell phone and immediately called the Rabbi .

The rabbi was very moved. He excitedly informed us that the Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote in his *HaYom Yom* (daily wisdom) book in the entry for this day’s date on the Jewish calendar all about *Hashgacha Pratit* (Divine supervision of the individual). There it states, “One should learn about divine providence -- there is no such thing as ‘coincidence,’” and “each particular movement of every human being is directly related to the overall intent underlying the creation...” “Thus”, the rabbi concluded, it was no coincidence that the granddaughter was from Toronto and the group burying this stranger is from Toronto.

Rabbi Irons turned to me after the burial, saying, “Your mission in *Eretz Yisrael* is complete. Even if you go home now, you did your job.” I responded, “Thank you, but as long as I am alive, I am never done.”

This ninety-five year-old lady from Vilna who went through the Holocaust must have had a great merit. She passed away on the same date as her birthday. May the merit of **Ida bat Chunya obm** be a source of blessing to us all, I wrote this with the hope that her story will be told--and especially about her large funeral.

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*Source:*

I originally received this as an anonymous WhatsApp message. “Anonymous” bothered me, but I decided to use it anyway, as there were many accurate names in it. Then, just before posting it on *AscentOfSafed.com*, I thought to search around for the identity of “I” in the story. I finally found it in issue #753 of *Mishpacha Magazine*. I stuck with my editing, in which I invested so much time and work on the WhatsApp message (it’s easy to see that it was also a first draft for *Mishpacha*), although Barbara Bensoussan’s version is clearly more polished and literary). I did, however, add several details from there, such as the full names of the author and the two rabbis mentioned.

***One more addition, later submitted from a different member of the group:***

“Absolutely incredible! I am in a bus with almost 50 men who do not stop speaking about what happened. I want to add one more thing... We all had immersed in the mikveh of the Arizal just minutes before. So we were all properly purified and prepared for this mitzvah! She must have been a very special person.”

*Connection:*

The 7th of Adar (this Friday) is a holiday for the *Chevra Kadisha* (Jewish "Burial Societies") worldwide (some also fast). It is the date of Moshe's passing. Who buried him? G-d Himself! No need for the Chevra Kadisha. That's how it became their annual vacation day, and the one date they need not worry about being weakened by fasting.