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SLAPS OF LOVE

DEDICATED in honor of my precious granddaughter **Michal Tilles**, who was born on 18 Adar Rishon, the date of the eleventh yahrzeit of **Rabbi Moshe Weber**, who was the "*Sandek Sheini*" at her father's *Brit Mila* (circumcision ceremony), which took place the same year as this story begins.

Two Americans are visiting Israel. It is Jan. 1988, just after the beginning of the Intifada. They had met as secular people, business people, working in the same city. Their relationship had developed over a year's time to include concerts, restaurants, lectures, and an ever-intensifying discussion concerning religion. Although nontraditional in almost every way you can imagine, they were trying to sort out their lives, and just beginning to learn about Torah-Judaism.

The elder, an American businessman in his 40's, arrived in Jerusalem in November 1987 and began taking classes at different beginners' yeshivas for English-speakers. The woman, in her late twenties at the time, arrived January 1. She had just quit her job suddenly, sold most of her belongings, and stored the rest. She felt she was embarking on a whole new path on her life's journey. Her intent was to meet up with this man, see some of Israel with him and discuss her decision about Judaism.

Although she had grown up "orthodox" Protestant, she had found Judaism at the end of her college career. Her apartment was lined with books, including translations of biblical texts and a tome on Jewish Law. The real truth was that she knew more about Judaism than he had from Day 1!

When he left for Israel to learn, they had parted ways but expected to remain friends. Three weeks into the separation, she was picking up the phone to call his daughter and get a telephone number to reach him when the phone rang. When she heard his voice again, she knew. She would go to Israel. What happened after that was up to G-d. Little did she know!

One afternoon, a tour guide took them to see *Meah Shaarim*, the most strictly religious Jewish neighborhood in the world. The weather was very cold and wet—a virtual deluge. The narrow streets were dark and full of water runoff.

The guide showed them the basics and then, with a wink, announced that he had "a brilliant idea, something off the beaten track." As he led them through slippery alleys, occasionally cutting between ramshackle buildings, he explained that he was taking them to visit "an old friend." He did not say, "a *tzadik*" —these two would not have known a *tzadik* unless hit between the eyes with one...which is precisely what happened next!

Knocking on a little door, they were met by a very tall, broad-shouldered, red-haired young man and a very short, bent, frail-looking older man, apparently on their way out. Both were dressed in traditional Jerusalem chasidic garb. Later, the couple found out that the older man had been about to go to the shul where he conducted a daily class in *Daf Yomi* [a two-sided page of Talmud per day].

The young man motioned them in. The Rabbi greeted them in what the man recognized as Yiddish; he had heard his grandmother speak the language many, many years before. The woman had no clue what was going on, but the look of kindness on the little old man's face and the intensity of his eyes made her knees weak and her heart open.

Introductions are made. The young man was Ido Erlich, close disciple and constant companion to the elder one, **Rabbi Moshe Weber**, and his translator into English for innocents such as they who knew neither Hebrew or Yiddish.

Although Rabbi Weber did not know a word of English, he still knew how to communicate quite effectively. He held the man's right hand affectionately between both of his for a number of moments, and then motioned for the two of them to sit down at the table. He started to speak to them excitedly about Israel, Torah and mitzvot. They couldn't understand a word, but nevertheless glowed at the obvious warmth and caring that was expressed in the tone of his voice and his kind sparkling eyes. They were thankful that Ido was present and able to act as a translator.

But then, in the tiny, dim, eight by eight room, the visiting couple's lives were transformed before the light of one tiny candle on the small gray formica table.

Rabbi Weber seated them at the table, asked if they would like something to drink or eat, and sent Ido for some cookies. After gently instructing him to say the proper blessings, Rabbi Weber took the hands of the gentleman between his and spoke calmly but urgently to him; every once and a while he would gently slap one of the man's cheeks. Apparently he was suggesting that his guest discontinue the use of his razor—if he had to shave, buy an electric shaver when he returned to the U.S.

After a few minutes, the man revealed that the woman accompanying him was not Jewish and that it was his intention to marry her. When he said that, Ido seemed shocked. And upset. Perhaps he thought that Rabbi Weber should either yell at the man for daring to bring a non-Jewish woman into his house and for brazenly announcing his plans to intermarry, or more simply, immediately ask the two of them to leave.

Rabbi Weber did neither. He continued to speak to the man in warm friendly tones and in a heartfelt manner, stressing the beauty and fulfillment in a life based on mitzvah observance. Within minutes, the truth of the expression “words that emerge from the heart enter the heart” was visible to all.

Once or twice the Rabbi looked into the eyes of the woman, conferred with Ido and the guide, then suggested that she consider candle lighting--not that she should actually light...yet, but that she should consider the light of the Shabbat candles. At this time, Mrs. Weber was very ill, but she was ushered in to her, introduced, and

given a seat next to her bedside. Of course neither one could speak the other's language, but they managed to communicate on some level.

The male visitor was obviously affected by the warmth and love with which Rabbi Weber was speaking to him. He declared that he was ready* to commit himself to putting on tefillin every weekday and to keeping Shabbat.

[* *But know that his intense four days at Ascent in Zefat shortly before relocating to Jerusalem helped prepare him spiritually for this encounter. —y.t.*]

“Very good,” replied Rabbi Weber, “but that is not sufficient. You must know that it is forbidden for you to be with this woman!”

Actually, no one had said outright what was the relationship between the two. Still, it was obvious the rabbi had sized the situation up very quickly.

The man quickly responded that it was her intention to convert, and had been so a long time before she had met him, and she was already quite knowledgeable. Rabbi Weber answered him that if it was indeed her desire to join the Jewish people and accept the yoke of Torah and Mitzvot, she would have to do so under the auspices of an Orthodox rabbi in the city where she lived in the USA.

They promised that was exactly what would happen. The man parted from Rabbi Weber with a warm hug, and a promise that he would do precisely as Rabbi Weber had instructed him.

After that wet evening, when the sun came out the next morning, everything looked different. They were amazed that Rabbi Weber had taken the time to speak with two such misfit American unknowns, help the man make blessings, and urge him toward more mitzvot: tefillin, prayer, Shabbat. A whole shul packed with his students was kept waiting on account of these two. They felt humbled, honored, confused, and elated all at once as if a vision of their whole future—together—had just unrolled before them.

She had made the commitment to an orthodox conversion long before, but he had not been sure as to what that would mean for him and the necessity for his parallel commitment to a Torah life: *Shabbat, mikveh, kashrut*—you know, the whole 613. Now it was clear; they were to lead an observant life together, even with the many years between their chronological ages, and even with her 20 years of diabetes behind her and an uncertain future ahead.

A half-year went by. One day, Rabbi Weber received an overseas phone call. It was that same American Jew. Rabbi Weber beckoned to Ido to take the receiver.

The American said that the woman had undergone a strictly kosher conversion, and that he had increased his personal level of observance as he had promised Rabbi Weber. He then announced that they were planning to marry soon, and they both deeply wished that Rabbi Weber would accept their invitation to attend their wedding in Pittsburgh, which they would send formally as soon as the date was set.

Rabbi Weber explained to him through Ido that such a long trip would be impossible for him, as his wife was seriously ill and bedridden, and he had to be available to care

for her. "But Reb Moshe," the man exclaimed, "You must come. We both desperately want you to be there. We need you to come. *And you asked us to invite you!*"

He was referring to the incident just before they left Israel, when they had visited in Meah Shaarim once more. Rabbi Weber, thru Ido, had asked the man to please make sure the woman did her learning with Chabad...and to be sure to invite him to speak at the wedding! The gentleman had marveled at this, but now he had a much better appreciation of the tzadik, and since Rabbi Weber had asked him to do this, he made sure to do it!

The date for the wedding suddenly had to be advanced. The father of the *kallah* (bride) had become very ill. It was rescheduled for *Chai Elul*, a special day among the Chasidim [which falls at the end of summer, 12 days before Rosh Hashana]. With very little notice, invitations were quickly designed, calligraphy-addressed, and mailed. There were to be eighty friends and family around the wedding canopy.

Ido telephoned. The invitation had taken only 4 days to arrive at the Webers—from the U.S. to Israel, to Mea Shaarim in just four days! A miracle. Also that summer, Mrs. Weber was admitted to a special rehabilitation home, for which she had been on a waiting list for many months! Another miracle!

"We can come," Ido told them excitedly." They of course were thrilled.

The joy of that unique wedding was extraordinary. Rabbi Weber danced with the *chatan* (bridegroom) for a long time. Everyone present was enthralled and delighted by the special guest from Jerusalem. More than a decade later, and they still speak about it.

The Creator provides in abundance! Not only were Ido and Rabbi Weber able to come to the wedding, they spent all of the holidays from Rosh HaShanah through Simchat Torah with the Lubavitcher Rebbe -- the first time in thirty years Rabbi Weber had left the Land of Israel!

Thirteen months after the wedding, the new couple visited Rabbi Weber again--this time with an infant son! -- during Sukkot. They continued to be supporters of his work and spoke with Ido frequently, exchanging messages with the Rabbi. He served as a guiding vision in their lives until his passing in 2000.

The couple subsequently moved to San Diego, California, where they established a true Jewish home. They had three sons, all of whom grew to study in fine Torah institutions. Every Shabbat, they invite many guests, some of whom they help draw closer to Torah-true Judaism. During the week they also host observant Jews from different communities who are visiting their city.

Who knows? Perhaps the reason Rabbi Weber was so patient with them at their first encounter, at his house, was simply an outcome of his kind and caring nature. Ido declares it was because he saw with true vision the potential for the fine Jewish home that would emerge from their union.

The Morrows, Reuven and I, Sara-Chana, who has been relating to you our story in third person, hold our memories of Rabbi Weber dear to our hearts. We keep his

memory alive by teaching our three sons and sharing with our guests the many lessons we learned at that little table by the light of that one tiny candle -- light that illuminated a world full of Torah, kindness to others, effervescent joy, and considerate behavior.

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*Source:* Primarily based on a detailed letter from Mrs. Morrow to me. Also some added details from my personal acquaintance with all the characters mentioned, and from an article in *Shemu V'Techi Nafshechem* (Hebrew). It was first published on [https://ascentofsafed.com \(story #146!-24 years ago\)](https://ascentofsafed.com/story/#146!-24%20years%20ago), and is also published in my book: *Saturday Night, Full Moon*"

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Moshe Weber** [5 Kislev 1914 – **18 Adar I** 2000] was a central and beloved figure in Jerusalem's religious community. Nearly every day he went to the Western Wall from his home in Meah Shearim to pray and to help visitors wrap tefillin. Less publicly, he distributed enormous sums of tzedakah to the city's poor. It is known that, decades ago, the *Lubavitcher Rebbe* said of him that he is one of the holiest and kindest people in the world. He published several volumes of Torah insights in *Yarim Moshe*. There is an ongoing periodical of his teachings distributed weekly called *Shemu V'Techi Nafshechem*, which also offers for sale his audio recordings.

*Why This Week?* Monday night-Tuesday, is the yahrzeit of Rabbi Moshe Weber of blessed memory.