

# Chassidus Behind Bars

Reb Pinchas Reizes was a Chossid of the Mittlerer Rebbe. When Rabbi Pinchas passed away, his only heir was a nephew, who unfortunately was a complete scoundrel.

Among the items that came into the nephew's possession was a letter written by the Rebbe to his uncle, asking Reb Pinchas to serve on a special committee to disburse funds for charity. The sum cited in the letter was 4,000 rubles.

The nephew saw this as a golden opportunity to blackmail the Rebbe. If the Rebbe did not give him money, he threatened, he would go to the authorities and tell them that the Rebbe was collecting funds for clandestine, illegal purposes. But the Rebbe was immune to his intimidations. "Not one penny will you get from me," he told him. "Do whatever you want, for I have done nothing wrong and am not afraid of your slander."

Incensed by the Rebbe's response, the nephew carried out his threat. With the help of some unsavory associates he forged the original letter to make it appear as if the Rebbe had 104,000 rubles instead of 4,000 -- a veritable fortune in those days. The Rebbe was accused of various criminal activities, such as trying to bribe the Turkish Sultan, and it was also alleged that the Rebbe's study hall had been built to the exact specifications of the Holy Temple in Yerushalayim, indicating his pretensions to the throne.

On Saturday night, Tishrei 28, 5587 investigators showed up at the Rebbe's house. They conducted a thorough search of the premises. Careful note was taken of all written materials, and anything else they considered suspicious. At the same time, a separate group of investigators measured the Rebbe's study hall; the astonished chassidim could not figure out what they were trying to find.

By that time a large crowd had gathered in front of the Rebbe's house, and everyone could hear the tearful pleading of the Rebbe's family with the police. The only one who seemed to be taking everything in stride was the Rebbe. As if nothing unusual were going on, he withdrew to his room to write a *ma'amar*. A while later he announced that he would receive people for private audiences, which he did.

The following morning the Rebbe was ordered to accompany the police to their headquarters in Vitebsk. Word of the Rebbe's arrest quickly spread, and in every town and village

along the way hundreds of Yidden came out to greet him. Thanks to the efforts of several influential Jews, it was agreed that the long journey would be made in stages, with numerous stops to allow the Rebbe to rest.

When the carriage arrived in Dobromisl, the Rebbe asked to be allowed to daven Mincha in the local synagogue. Afterwards, to everyone's surprise, he said a *ma'amar* on the possuk in Shir Hashirim, "Mayim Rabim Lo Yuchlu." The allusion to his present situation was clear.

The Rebbe was subsequently imprisoned in the city of Vitebsk and placed under tight security. Sometime later it was learned that the formal charge against him was rebellion against the government.

The Rebbe was jailed for one month and ten days, but even from the beginning he was granted certain privileges. Three people were permitted to stay with him, and three times a day, twenty Jews were allowed into his room to daven with him. The Rebbe was also permitted to say a *ma'amar* twice a week in front of fifty people after the Rebbe's doctor testified that it was crucial to the Rebbe's health.

In the meantime, efforts to secure the Rebbe's release were being made behind the scenes. Several high-ranking government officials who had heard about the Rebbe and held him in great esteem tried to exert their influence. The Rebbe was interrogated numerous times, during which he proved that not only were his connections to the Turkish Sultan completely fabricated, but his designs on the Czar's throne were equally fictitious.

At the end of several weeks the results of the investigation were turned over to the Minister of the Interior. The minister was very impressed by the Rebbe's responses to all the questions, and decided that a direct confrontation between the Rebbe and his accuser was in order.

On the designated day the Rebbe dressed in his white Shabbos finery. When he walked into the minister's office, the official was so disconcerted by his angelic appearance that he ordered his servants to bring the Rebbe a chair.

The informer began to heap his invectives upon the Rebbe, but one by one, the Rebbe dismissed the accusations entirely. At one point in the proceedings the accuser addressed the Rebbe as "Rebbe," prompting the Rebbe to turn to the minister and remark, "Did you see that? First he calls me a charlatan and a revolutionary, and in the next breath he calls me Rebbe!"

From that point on the accuser's allegations became increasingly illogical. The minister was so irritated by his behavior that he ordered him to "stop barking," and he was led away in humiliation. The Rebbe was escorted back to his room with great deference, and informed that he would soon be released.