



The Maggid and the Gaon

The Test

The scene in the Beis Midrash was typical: two students poring over their seforim, with not a care for anything else. They were deeply engrossed in a particular Ta”z, and no matter how long and hard they tried, they couldn’t grasp its meaning. At a standstill, they turned their question to the local Rav, but he too was unsuccessful in understanding *pshat*, and the unsolved Ta”z weighed greatly on his mind.

A TEMPTING PROPOSAL

A short while later, the Ta”z appeared to the Rav in a dream and made a proposal. “I am prepared to answer the question, but on condition that you then travel to the Maggid of Mezritch,” said the Ta”z. The Rav agreed to the condition and the Ta”z revealed the *pshat*.

The next morning, the Rav was perturbed by his promise to visit the Maggid and decided to seek advice from the Vilna Gaon.

THE CONDITIONS

The Gaon, on hearing the story, gave the Rav permission to travel to Mezritch, but requested that he look out for two things on his travel. “Firstly,” instructed the Gaon, “find out if the Maggid’s *talmidim* have *Ruach Hakodesh* and, secondly, if they stand in awe in front of their master.”

The Gaon then gave him a question in Zohar to ask the Maggid and bade him farewell.

Arriving in Mezeritch, the Rav went directly to the Beis Midrash and was pleased to hear the sweet sound of Torah learning. One *talmid* in particular caught his attention and he inched toward his table. Immediately he recognized the *sugya* from *Bova Metzia* that the *talmid*

was learning and listened in. “If he admits when he is *chayav*, why then doesn’t he have to return it?” the *talmid* asked and then, answering himself out loud, said, “If the Vilna Gaon admits that there is *epes* something in Mezritch, why then doesn’t he come here himself?”

Hearing this, the Rav was stunned, and he realized that there certainly was *Ruach Hakodesh* in Mezeritch.

A while later, a thumping sound floated through the Beis Midrash and the *talmidim* fell silent, watching in awe as the Maggid entered the study hall. [It is known that for medical reasons the Maggid required the assistance of crutches.]

The Rav absorbed the scene before him and recognized the deep respect and awe the *talmidim* had for their master. Now he had only one more thing to determine—the Gaon’s question in the Zohar.

THE FINAL REQUEST

The Rav was then afforded the opportunity to see the Maggid in his room. The Maggid addressed him as he entered. “We passed the test on the first two things, if the Gaon wants to know about the third thing let him come and I will personally explain it to him.”

The Rav returned to Vilna and reported to the Gaon. When the Gaon heard his account, he gathered his Tallis and Tefillin with the intention of travelling immediately to Mezeritch. For some unknown reason, however, the Gaon never made the trip.

The Pilpul

Reb Refoel of Hamburg was a brilliant Gaon and a devout follower of the Vilna Gaon. The Maggid of Mezritch recognized his greatness and wanted to draw him close to Chassidus.



One Shabbos afternoon, during the third meal, the Maggid delivered a scholarly *pilpul*. The *talmidim* were taken by surprise, as it was quite uncommon for the Maggid to speak in such a manner.

A STRANGE MISSION

On the following day, the Maggid instructed Reb Zusya of Anipoli to journey, without intimating a destination to be reached. Reb Zusya, faithful and devoted, did not question the strange command; he packed a bag and simply began travelling. He traveled from one hotel to another, assured that sooner or later, whatever he was supposed to accomplish would materialize.

At that time, the Rav of Hamburg passed away and the city leaders sought a suitable replacement. They required all candidates to present a *pilpul* in *Nigleh*, and if the *pilpul* was considered of high standard and resisted

all the questions asked of it, then that individual would be appointed as Rav of Hamburg.

Reb Refoel [before he became known as Reb Refoel of Hamburg] was among those who were considered to succeed the Rav, and he worked hard in preparing a profound *pilpul*. When he finished, he traveled to Hamburg and, on the way, stayed overnight in an inn. It so happened that Reb Zusya, who was still traveling randomly, arrived at this same inn.

The innkeeper, however, was reluctant to give Reb Zusya entry, as he appeared a mere beggar in his worn clothing, and told him that Reb Refoel had taken the last room. Reb Zusya insisted that he be allowed to enter and pleaded to at least be able to see Reb Refoel, to which the innkeeper agreed.



CONFUSION!

When Reb Zusya entered the room, he heard Reb Refoel reviewing his *pilpul* and recognized the topic as the very same one that the Maggid had discussed on the Shabbos prior to his departure.

Suddenly, Reb Refoel recalled a *Tosfos* that contradicted the premise of his *pilpul* and sighed deeply. He reviewed the *Tosfos* again and concluded that his *pilpul* was no more.

Reb Zusya stepped forward and offered his help. Hesitantly, Reb Refoel agreed, realizing that it certainly could do no harm. Reb Zusya revealed that he had heard the same *pilpul* from the Maggid—with the answer to problem from *Tosfos*—and would recount it on the condition that if he were to be accepted as Rav, he must then travel to the Maggid.

Reb Refoel had little choice and agreed.

For the next few hours the two delved deep into the *sugya* and by the time they were finished, Reb Refoel understood the brilliance of the Maggid's answer.

The next day, Reb Refoel arrived in Hamburg and delivered the *pilpul* with clarity and poise. The Rabbonim were left open mouthed at the sheer genius of it and Reb Refoel was asked to become the new Rav of Hamburg.

It was now time for him to travel to the Maggid. However, being a fervent follower of the Vilna Gaon, he decided to first seek his advice.

The Gaon listened to his tale and responded that according to Halacha he was obligated in keeping his word, adding that he should report back to him whatever he should witness on his trip. The Gaon then gathered ten men and made Reb Refoel swear in their presence that he would not reveal his identity while in Mezeritch.

KOSHER OR TREIF?

Reb Refoel kept to his word and did not reveal his identity. He wandered about anonymously and became entranced with the Chassidim's way of life, especially with the way the Maggid and his Talmidim davened.

One day while he was there, a woman brought a chicken to the Maggid to Pasken if it was Kosher or not. The Maggid called to his students and challenged them to answer the question. After several hours of heated

discussion they concluded that there were three opinions—the Rambam, Rif and Ritva—and that the bird was Kosher. In response, the Maggid exclaimed, "I learned from my teachers that *Kabola* mirrors *Nigleh* and in *Kabola* there are also three opinions—the Chayat, Ramak and Arizal—and also according to *Kabola* the bird is Kosher."

The Maggid then added, "Standing here with us is the Rav of Hamburg," and turning to Reb Refoel he said, "What is your Psak in this case?"

This incident greatly impressed Reb Refoel and he quickly returned to the Gaon to give him his report.

THE REPORT

The Gaon called together a group of ten men and instructed them to listen to what Reb Refoel had to say.

Reb Refoel began, "In my opinion the Maggid is imbued with spiritual powers far surpassing the regular powers of man." And he then related what had happened.

Hearing this, the Gaon remarked, "The bribe blinds..." and related an incident of his own.

"For the past few days, a young man sat near me and learned the same *Inyan* that I was involved in. He learned with great fervor and explained each idea with clarity. At one point he approached me and suggested that we learn the *sugya* together. I declined his offer because I was worried that he was a messenger of the "*Sitra Achara*." So too, I am afraid of travelling to the Maggid, because maybe this is the work of the Satan to snare me into the hands of *tumah*, *Chas V'sholom*."

Reb Refoel responded to the Gaon, "It is known that the Satan is also the Yetzer Horah. It is therefore very possible that this is one of their tricks to prevent you from accessing the great *Kedusha*."

Reb Refoel's words impressed the Gaon and he readied to travel to Mezeritch. However, his family intervened, warning him of the dire repercussions that would follow such a decision.

From that point on, Reb Refoel never again travelled to Mezeritch, as he did not want to show disrespect to the Gaon. However, he also never again travelled to the Vilna Gaon. ■