



The Great Exchange

The following story was related by the Frierdiker Rebbe on Acharon Shel Pesach 5698.¹

The Alter Rebbe once related:

As is well known, before my grandfather (i.e., the Baal Shem Tov) revealed himself, he used to travel about from town to town and from one Jewish village to the next in order to rouse Jews in their *avodas Hashem* and to raise their spirits. Observing their lot, he would intercede on their behalf and invoke heaven's mercies. People did not yet know who he was.

In a certain place in which a number of Jews lived, a child of three or four lost his father (may no

one know of such woes!) and soon after, when he was five, he was also left without a mother. An uncle brought him up in his home and hired a *melamed* to teach him, but the child was such a slow student that no matter how much he was taught he did not learn.

His friends were already learning Gemara. Yet, though the child was eager to learn, the *melamed* barely managed to teach him the individual letters and *nekudos*—but nothing beyond that, except for memorizing the *brachos* to be recited before eating and drinking.

As time went on and his relatives saw no progress, they ended the arrangement

with the *melamed* and enrolled the child in the Talmud Torah run by the community. When he was twelve the communal authorities decided that it was pointless to keep him at school, and apprenticed him to a local tinsmith.

This pious Jew taught him his craft honestly, took responsibility for his conduct, and patiently taught him by constant repetition which *brachos* to recite over which kinds of food.

He learned his trade well. After he reached the age of bar-mitzvah, though he had originally been apprenticed for several years, his master released him to set up shop independently if he

so desired. This he did. He worked honestly, his workshop succeeded, and he contributed generously to *tzedakah*. One thing caused him anguish — he had remained an *am ha'aretz*.

When the time came, he married the daughter of a man who made pitch in a forest to which he had rights and lived in a nearby village. The young man settled there too and worked there successfully as a tinsmith. Yet even when he became a prosperous property-owner, he still shed tears of distress over the fact that he had never learned how to study Torah.

The few Jewish families in that village had a place in which they davened together, as well as a *shochet* and a *melamed*.

One day the tinsmith called on the only *ben Torah* in town and poured out all the pain in his heart. The *ben Torah* suggested that he support *talmidei chachamim*

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לזכות
החיילת בצבאות ה'
זעלדא תחי'
לרגל הולדתה ביום י"ט חשוון ה'תשע"ז
נדפס ע"י הרה"ת ר' חיים אפרים
ומרת חי' מושקא ומשפחתם שיחיו
גאלדשטיין



anonymously, because what Hashem most desires is an earnest heart; רחמנא לבא בעי. He explained that the numerous unlettered folk who support such people are as worthy as the scholars they support. From then on, the tinsmith strove more in this direction.

The custom in that hospitable village was that whenever a visitor arrived, which was not often, they would cast lots to decide who among them would have the privilege of fulfilling the mitzvah of *hachnassas orchim*. One day an ailing man whose whole body was afflicted with a distressful skin disease arrived in town — and the lot fell on the tinsmith. He took him home, gave him a room of his own, washed him, and gave him ointments to ease his suffering. A few days later, when the guest wanted to move on, his host asked him to stay for another few days.

One day he asked his guest what it was that had ruined his health. The guest told him that he had once been thoroughly familiar with the entire Shas. Desperately wanting to master all the *rishonim* and *acharonim* as well, he had gone on to study with extreme assiduity while undertaking numerous fasts, until his health collapsed.

A short time later the guest went on his way.

Hearing such a story, the tinsmith walked around and begged of Hashem that even if it cost him all kinds of physical suffering he would accept this willingly, so long as He would enable him to study, to become a *ben Torah*. However, as the days passed and his ability to learn did not improve, he decided to act as his guest had acted. He began to fast for entire days. He would wander off to the forest and sit among the ants, reciting as many

chapters of Tehillim as he could manage, for over the years he had learned to read. Weeping and sighing, though he did not understand the meaning of the words, he would read them one after another.

Looking up through his tears in the forest one day, he was overawed by the sight of a man with a sack on his back and a staff in his hand. He regained his composure, however, as the stranger approached him and asked what he was doing here in the forest and why he was crying.

The poor fellow shared his story, and added that a recent visitor to his home had told him that fasting enabled one to study. He had therefore decided to take this advice — so long as G-d would enable him to become a Torah scholar.

“That is advice,” the stranger conceded, “but if you like I’ll give you an easier way to achieve this.”

The young man agreed at once, so the stranger said: “If so, give me a document that transfers everything you own — money, silver and gold, possessions, land — to me. And come away with me for three years. Then you’ll be a *ben Torah*.”

The tinsmith eagerly agreed at once, but the stranger said: “Take your time. Discuss it first with your wife and hear how your father-in-law reacts. Come back to this spot next week, I’ll be here too, and you’ll tell me then what you’ve decided.”

And with those words, the stranger with the sack and the staff went on his way.

The tinsmith’s wife heard the whole story and her response was simple: “Since you are always so sad that you cannot learn, and now you have been made such an offer, then of course you should agree to it. I’m agreeable, too — but on one condition: before we give

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the man everything we own, let him be our guest for one meal so that we can fulfill the mitzvah of hospitality, because we won't be able to practice *hachmassas orchim* when we have nothing left.”

As to his father-in-law, he began by saying: “True, it is written that the Torah is ‘more precious than gems’—*יקרה היא מפנינים*. However,” he added, “I don't think the law of the Torah allows you to do such a thing. Look, you've got a wife and children to support, so you can't give everything away. There are plenty of unlettered Jews around. If they support *talmidei chachamim* and perform the mitzvos with an unquestioning heart, they are just as good as the scholars. So I don't think you're allowed to give everything away and go off into exile.”

These words left their impact. Day after day the young man fasted and wept, confused by doubt and indecision. On the last day, when he told his wife how her father's words had left him confused, she said: “The fact that a doubt has arisen in your mind proves that all your sighs and tears were not utterly truthful. If

your desire to study sprang from all the truth in your heart, then when someone gave you a way of becoming a *ben Torah* you would certainly agree.”

“Well, what have you decided?” asked the stranger with the sack and the staff when they met in the forest.

“I am agreeable to everything,” said the tinsmith.

But as they sat down to talk, a sigh escaped his heart.

“Why are you sighing?” asked the stranger. “If you have second thoughts, you can still withdraw.”

The tinsmith then told him the whole truth — what his wife had said, but also the fact that his father-in-law's words had made a certain impact.

“Your father-in-law is right,” said the stranger. “There are certainly many unlettered Jews who support *talmidei chachamim* and fulfill the mitzvos, and they are even worthier than the scholars themselves.”

“I hear you,” said the tinsmith, “but I have made my decision. I want to give everything away and to wander in exile for three

years. My wife, though, has made one condition: before this happens, please be our guest for just one meal. Let us fulfill the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim* while we can.”

And off they went to the home of the tinsmith.

They brought out a big bag and filled it with everything — money and silver and gold — as agreed. They then wrote out a document which transferred everything they owned, including houses and fields, as a gift to the stranger, and two neighbors signed as witnesses. After the meal they retired for the night.

Before the two men took to the road the stranger told the tinsmith's wife that though the house was now his, he allowed her and her children to live in it — as tenants — until her husband came home. He presented her with a sack of flour and a bag of potatoes and told her that she could sow in the garden and use the fruit of the orchard — all as gifts between neighbors, not by virtue of ownership. Finally, having blessed her and her two sons and daughter, he took up the big sack, bid them

all farewell, and set out with her husband.

Left alone, the woman found that the garden and the orchard were so extraordinarily fruitful that she was able to maintain her family throughout her long wait.

When the tinsmith came home after three years he and his wife settled elsewhere and became wealthy. In the course of time he became a hidden *tzaddik*.

After 120 years, the tinsmith was granted a palatial place in Gan Eden in the company of Torah scholars and his wife was granted a palatial place in Gan Eden in the company of other righteous women. Moreover, whenever the time came for his soul to be elevated to a loftier level of Gan Eden, her soul was summoned there, too, and it was announced that he was being elevated thanks to her.

The Alter Rebbe concluded his narration by saying that the stranger with the sack and the staff was the Baal Shem Tov, before he became revealed. **1**

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