



**RABBI JUDAH**

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# The Bottom Line

Once, a successful and generous *gvir* named Moshe had lost his fortune and was in distress. In debt and facing the wrath of the local *poritz*, Moshe traveled to seek out the guidance and blessing of his Rebbe, Reb Menachem Mendel of Kosov, zy'a. Arriving in Kosov for Shabbos, Moshe was pleasantly surprised to meet the great *tzadik*, Reb Uri of Strelisk — Reb Menachem Mendel's brother-in-law.

Reb Uri, known as the *Seraph*, or 'fiery angel' of Strelisk was renown for his ascetic holiness, exalted *Avodas Hashem*, lengthy *dveykus*-filled prayers and disengagement from the material world. Moshe, desperate for assistance, was thrilled at the opportunity to share his burden with his Rebbe's brother-in-law, the *tzadik* of Strelisk.

"Oy, what a *tzarah*..." said Reb Uri sympathetically. "To do my part, I will have *kavanah* and keep you in mind while this morning when I go to *mikveh*; may the *zechus* of the immersion sweeten all judgments against you."

When Moshe's turn came to greet Rebbe Menachem Mendel, he shared the exchange he'd had with Reb Uri: "Please go back to my righteous *shvugger* (brother-in-law) and let him know that you can't pay your creditors by dipping in the mikveh." Slightly uncomfortable, Moshe followed his Rebbe's advice. Reb Uri furrowed his brow deep in thought and replied: "Very well. I understand your predicament is serious... I am prepared to dedicate the *zechus* of the mitzvah of tefillin toward your salvation."

When Rebbe Menachem Mendel heard, "Please go back to Reb Uri and tell him that despite the great holiness of his *avodah*, the *poritz* is not interested in his tefillin."

With no choice but to follow his Rebbe's directive, he returned to Reb Uri and delivered the message. This time, the Strelisker listened with even more intent and reassured him. My brother in law is right; your situation is grave, indeed. I will undertake a *taanis*, a fast, to break the decree. *B'eizer Hashem*, the collective *zechuyos* of these three *mitzvos* together will save you."

This time, Rebbe Menachem Mendel approached his brother-in-law in person. "My dear *shvugger*, there is no way to estimate the value and kedushah generated by your intentions, prayers and mitzvos! I'm sure that Heaven is pleased! Nonetheless, there is a time and place for everything in this material world. Now is the time for us to take action and help him pay off his debts.

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And so, together, the two *tzadikim* hit the road, going door to door until enough money was collected to settle all of Moshe's debts, restoring his dignity and wellbeing.

ולקחת את הלולים לי אני ה' תחת כל־כֹּכֶר בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...  
וְנִתְּמָה הַכֶּסֶף לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו פְּדוּיֵי הָעֹלֳפִים בָּהֶם: וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה  
אֶת כֶּסֶף הַפְּדוּיִם מֵאֵת הָעֹלֳפִים עַל פְּדוּיֵי הַלִּוּיִם... וַיָּמָן מֹשֶׁה  
אֶת־כֶּסֶף הַפְּדוּיִם לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו עַל־פִּי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צֻוָּה ה' אֶת־  
מֹשֶׁה:

What, we may ask, does money have to do with ‘redeeming’ someone? Furthermore, why the emphatic repetition of the phrase **כֶּסֶף הַפְּדִיָּה**, *kesef ha-p’duyim*, “redemption money”?

To review the backstory: Originally, elements of the Divine service in the Mishkan were performed by firstborn Jews. According to the Medrash (*Bamidbar Rabba*, 4), once the firstborn *Yisraelim* participated in serving the Golden Calf, they could no longer serve in the Mishkan and they needed to be replaced



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by Leviim, who had not participated in the *Cheit haEigel*. Furthermore, as each firstborn Yisrael was replaced by a Levi, the Yisrael was “redeemed” from the spiritual burden and harsh consequences of the *Cheit haEigel*. The only issue was that there were more firstborn Yisraelim than there were Levite replacements; the solution was revealed that the “excess” firstborns would be redeemed from their former role and spiritual burden, by contributing a sum of *keseif ha-p’duyim*.

Rashi points out that in addition to the money used for the process, the leftover Yisraelim were redeemed בגופן, “with their very selves”. This is perhaps the goal and “bottom line” of the monetary exchange.

While the exalted Reb Uri of Strelisk was of course correct in his instinct to remain above attachment to money and the material world, there’s a time for everything. And the Baal Shem Tov teaches another perspective: our possessions are, in a sense, part of us, part of our souls. Thus, “One who steals from his fellow, it is as if he robbed his soul.” One’s money is ‘part of oneself’. By offering their money, the Yisraelim were offering themselves, and this is what brought them redemption.

Rebbe Meir of Apta, the *Ohr LaShamayim*, one the leading students of the Chozeh of Lublin, provides another expansive interpretation:

“*Keseif ha-p’duyim*” refers to the yearning of Yisrael to come close to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*; the word *keseif* comes from *kisufin*, ‘yearnings’.

“כאשר יכספו ישראל להתקרב אליו ית, יקרבו בכך את גאולתם ופדיון נפשם

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By means of their yearning they were powerfully brought close to their redemption, the *pidyon* of their souls.”

Chazal (Avos, 6:11) explain: כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו, לא בראו אלא לכבודו, “Whatever the Holy Blessed One created in His world, he created only for His glory.” Everything, including money, was created for *avodas Hashem* and *K’vod Shamayim*.

Reb Shlomo Carlebach shared an anecdote in the name of Reb Yitzchok Menachem, the saintly Rebbe of Aleksander HY”D, who was martyred by the Nazis:

Someone once challenged the Aleksander Rebbe, asking, ‘If everything was created for *avodas Hashem* and *K’vod Shamayim*, for what purpose was atheism created? The Rebbe replied, “When a Jew is in need and asks us a favor, as *maaminim*, believers, we may think, ‘OK, I’ll pray for him, I’ll bless him, and ‘*Hashem Ya’azor*.’ We may think we don’t have to do anything more than that, since ‘Hashem will help.’ But this is when you have to be an ‘atheist’, and act as if there is no God to help him. You have to help the person like there’s no one else to do it!”

When someone is in need it is a time to act; our *kisufin*, our yearning for the redemption of Klal Yisrael demands that we take direct action. And the bottom-line action is to give of ourselves through giving *tzedakah*: “Great is *tzedakah*, for it brings the Redemption!” (Bava Basra, 10a). ■

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