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The Rusty Penny

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Laidi, (founder on Chabad Chassidism, 1745-1812) was raising money to ransom Jewish prisoners. He went first to a city that was famous for its miser. It seems that this stingy man, despite his considerable wealth, was loath to share his blessings, no matter how worthy or urgent the cause. Rabbis and beggars alike avoided his home. Anyone who did unwittingly end up on his doorstep was offered a single rusty copper coin, which even the most desperate pauper would promptly refuse.

When Rabbi Shneur Zalman arrived in the town, the elders of the community graciously received him. But when he announced that he wanted to visit the house of the miser and wanted two rabbis to accompany him, he was met with serious resistance. The Rebbe was adamant, however, and they finally acquiesced and gave him the escort he requested.

The next afternoon the three of them were standing in front of the miser's mansion. Before knocking on the door, the Rebbe turned to his companions and requested that they not utter a word, no matter what they hear or see. Several moments later they were sitting in the luxurious front room and the owner was returning from his safe with a small velvet money pouch.

"Yes," said the rich man. "A touching story indeed! Widows and orphans in captivity. Ah, the suffering of the Jewish people! When will it all end? Here Rabbi, take my humble donation."

To the miser's surprise, the Rebbe seemed pleased by the gift. He was actually smiling at him warmly as he put the coin into his pocket and said, "Thank you Mister Solomons, may G-d bless and protect you always." The Rebbe then proceeded to write him a receipt, adding all sorts of blessings in the most beautiful script.

"Thank you again, my friend," said the Rebbe as he stood and warmly shook the man's hand looking him deeply in the eyes with admiration. "And now," he added, turning to his two companions, "we must be on our way. We have a lot of collecting to do tonight."

As the three rabbis walked to the door, the Rebbe turned and bade his host yet another warm farewell. "You should have thrown it back in his face" hissed one of the rabbis after they heard the door close behind them.

"Don't turn around and don't say a word," whispered the Rebbe as they walked down the path to the front gate.

Suddenly they heard the door opening behind them and the miser calling: "Rabbis, Rabbis, please come back for a minute. Hello, hello, please, I must speak to you, Please... please come back in."

In a few minutes they were again sitting in the warm, plush drawing room, but this time the rich man was pacing back and forth restlessly. He stopped for an instant and turned to the Rebbe. "Exactly how much money do you need to ransom these prisoners?"

"About five thousand rubles," the Rebbe replied.

"Well here is one thousand... I have decided to give one thousand rubles, you may count it if you want," said the miser as he took a tightly bound stack of bills from his jacket pocket and laid it on the table. The other Rabbis were astounded. They stared at the money and were even afraid to look up at the miser, lest he change his mind.

But the Rebbe, nonplussed, again shook Mr. Solomons hand, warmly thanking him, and wrote him a beautiful receipt replete with blessings and praises, exactly like the first time.

"That was a miracle!" whispered one of them to the Rebbe as they left the house and were again walking toward the gate. Once more the Rebbe signaled him to be still. Suddenly the door of the house again opened behind them. "Rabbis, please I have changed my mind, please come in once more. I want to speak with you," Mr. Solomons called out.

They entered the house for a third time as the miser turned to them and said, "I have decided to give the entire sum needed for the ransom. Here it is, please count it to see that I have not made a mistake."

"What is the meaning of this?" wondered the Rebbe's astonished companions after they had left the rich man's home for the third time that evening. "How did you get that notorious miser to give 5000 rubles?"

"That man is no miser," said Rabbi Schneur Zalman. "No Jewish soul truly is. But how could he desire to give, if he never in his life experienced the joy of giving? Everyone to whom he gave that rusty penny of his threw it back in his face." (Told by Rabbi Tuvia Bolton, of Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim, Kfar Chabad, Israel - chbdonline.com)

Our Sages stated: "Everything that happened to our Ancestors is a sign for their children." The events of our ancestors' lives were not just a foreshadowing of what would happen to the Jewish people throughout history, but a source of strength and encouragement that Jews have called upon throughout the ages.

We read in this week's Torah portion, Toldot: "There was a famine in the land." G-d appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go to Egypt. Dwell in the land which I will tell you of. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and bless you."

When G-d commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, Isaac had been willing and he was thereafter considered by G-d to be "a perfect offering." It was therefore inappropriate for him to leave the holy soil of Israel for the lesser sanctity of other countries. G-d forbade him to go elsewhere despite the famine that gripped the land.

G-d's command to Isaac contains a lesson for us, his descendants: The only rightful place for the Jewish people is not in exile but in the Holy Land. Jews can never be truly happy in exile, for they know that they are not where they belong. Our perpetual hope and plea to G-d is that He bring us back to the land of Israel, as we pray three times each day, "May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy."

Years before, in the time of Abraham, there was also a famine in Israel. But unlike Isaac, Abraham went down to Egypt, carrying the knowledge of the One true G-d even there. Abraham brought everyone with whom he came in contact under the wings of the Divine Presence, drawing them nearer to their Creator.

Isaac, however, never once left the borders of Israel. And, even within Israel, Isaac's emphasis was "inward." Isaac did not actively go out to draw people closer to G-d. His focus was more on achieving self-perfection.

Abraham and Isaac teach us two different paths in the service of G-d: From Abraham we derive the strength to go outward, to reach out to other Jews. Abraham taught us how to spread the knowledge of G-d wherever we go, to disseminate Torah throughout the world. Even a Jew whose primary concern is Torah study and the perfection of his own path of worship must set aside time to involve himself with others.

Isaac, on the other hand, taught us the importance of turning "inward," and it is from him that we derive the strength to involve ourselves in Torah study. For even a Jew whose primary focus is on worldly affairs [by means of which he draws others closer to G-d and brings holiness into the world] must occasionally withdraw from these concerns to devote himself to learning and self-betterment. (Adapted from Likutei Sichot, Volume 25, L'Chaim 5759, #544)

MY GRANDFATHER ONCE EXPLAINED IN A MAAMAR THE STATEMENT, R. ELAZAR FIRST GAVE A COIN TO A PAUPER AND THEN DAVENED : "DAVENING MUST BE WITH LIFE. BY GIVING, BEFORE DAVENING, CHARITY TO A PAUPER - THEREBY GIVING HIM LIFE - ONE'S DAVENING IS SUFFUSED WITH A GREAT INCREASE OF 'ALIVENESS'."

SO SAYING HE MOTIONED WITH HIS HAND IN AN UPWARDS GESTURE TO INDICATE THAT THE INCREASE IS BEYOND IMAGINATION. INDEED MY FATHER WOULD OFTEN SEEK OUT A PAUPER BEFORE DAVENING TO GIVE HIM FOOD. (FROM REBBE'S HAYOM YOM, KISLEV 2)

* THIS DAY IS THE CROWNING CULMINATION OF THE DIDAN NATZACH VICTORY, MARKING THE ACTUAL RETURN, IN 5748 (1987) OF THE S'FARIM AND K'TAVIM OF THE REBBE'IM TO THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE IN THE LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASIDEI CHABAD. THIS WAS THE "...PIDYON SH'VUYIM ('RELEASE OF THE CAPTIVES') OF THE S'FARIM, WHICH WERE RETURNED TO THEIR PLACES IN ACTUAL FACT, ON MONDAY OF THE TORAH-PORCION 'I SHALL RETURN IN PEACE TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE,' ON THE SECOND OF KISLEV." SICHA, TEVET 5, 5748. (THE EVENT COINCIDED - IN TIME AND LOCATION - WITH THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE SHLUCHIM, EMISSARIES OF THE REBBE SH'LITA.

No one can predict the tomorrow of a human being. We move from abject poverty to opulent wealth on the spur of a moment, from hedonism to spiritual heights in a sudden flash. We are creatures who know no bounds, with limitless power to be whatever we want to be. We get stuck—but not from a shortage of power. Rather, it is from our failure to recognize the knots with which we have tied ourselves.

Be Within, Stay Above by Tzvi Freeman