

A Rebbe's Love For a Jew

"Where will we be staying?" Reb Yeshaya Berlin asked Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch (known as the Rebbe Maharash, fourth leader of Chabad), upon their arrival in Paris. "At the Alexander Hotel," the Rebbe replied. The Chasidim accompanying the Rebbe on this special trip were surprised. The Alexander Hotel was famous as one of the most luxurious establishments in the city. Members of royalty and other high-ranking dignitaries were its usual guests. "Common" people, no matter how wealthy, never dreamt of crossing its threshold. Yet this was where the Rebbe wished to stay. The Rebbe then told the Chasidim that he would do the talking, as none of the other members of his entourage spoke French. In fact, the Rebbe Maharash was fluent in many foreign languages, among them Russian, French and Latin. He was also extremely well read in a wide range of subjects and disciplines, in addition to his outstanding scholarship in both the revealed and esoteric aspects of Torah. At the front desk of the hotel the Rebbe announced that he was interested in reserving a suite of rooms. "There are several suites available at present," the clerk replied, "at a cost of 200 francs per night." It was an almost unimaginable sum of money in those days. But the Rebbe wasn't satisfied. "Perhaps you have something better?" he inquired. "I wish to stay on the same floor as the game room," the Rebbe insisted. The clerk consulted the register for a moment. "You're in luck," he told the Rebbe. "There's an empty suite next door to the casino." He then quoted a price far higher than 200 francs. The Rebbe asked to reserve three rooms - one for himself, two for the rest of his entourage - but the Chasidim were in no financial position to stay at the Alexander, and found lodging elsewhere. The Rebbe went up to his quarters and remained there for several hours. In the meantime, the Chasidim came back from their hotel and waited outside the Rebbe's room. The Rebbe's face was very serious when he eventually opened the door. Much to everyone's astonishment, he then strode purposefully over to the hotel's gambling casino and went inside. Needless to say, the players at the gaming tables were unaccustomed to guests of the Rebbe's stature joining them in their pursuits. Eyebrows were raised throughout the hall. Trailing after him, the Chasidim were just as baffled as the gamblers. But, from long experience they knew that Rabbi Shmuel certainly had his reasons. At one of the tables sat a young Jewish man, engrossed in a game of cards. In front of him was a goblet of wine, from which he sipped every now and then. The Rebbe walked over and sat down next to him. For the first few minutes the Rebbe said nothing and the man continued playing. Then the Rebbe suddenly stretched out his arm and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Young man," the Rebbe said, "it is forbidden to drink the wine of gentiles." The Rebbe paused a moment to let his words sink in. "Non-kosher wine dulls the mind and the heart," he continued, adding the admonition, "Be a Jew." Without further ado the Rebbe stood up, wished him a good night and left the casino. The Rebbe Maharash was clearly very agitated. Reb Yeshaya Berlin later commented that he never saw the Rebbe in such an emotional state. A few hours later the young Jewish man was seen making inquiries as to the whereabouts of the gentleman who had spoken to him in the casino. The Chasidim rushed over to show him where the Rebbe was staying, and he was admitted. The private conversation that ensued lasted several hours. The next morning, the Rebbe Maharash left the hotel. "It has been many generations since such a pure soul has come down to earth," the Rebbe later explained, referring to the young man. "Unfortunately, it had fallen into the depths of kelipa [the forces of evil]." Whatever was discussed, the encounter proved to be a turning point in the young man's life. No longer estranged from Yiddishkeit, he returned to full observance of Torah and mitzvot soon afterward. Today, his descendents are G-d fearing, religious Jews. This was the extent of the Rebbe Maharash's love for his fellow Jew, even one he had never met before.

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