**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Vayeishev 5773**

Volume 4, Issue 12 24 Kislev 5773/December 8, 2012

***For a free subscription, please forward your request to*** ***keren18@juno.com***

**Love of the Land**

**The Grave that**

**Was Saved**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach**

 One of the most revered graves in Eretz Yisrael is that of Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, the author of the Ohr Hachayim commentary on the Torah. Thousands of Jews come to this grave on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem

on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz, the day he passed away in 5503 (1743), to pray for Heavenly aid in the merit of this sainted Torah scholar and kabbalist.

 During the period of Jordanian control of the Mount of Olives cemetery between 1948 and 1967, there was mass desecration of the Jewish graves. The Arabs even decided to build a road through this ancient cemetery which would pass directly over the grave of the Ohr Hachayim.

**Something Strange Happened**

 When the bulldozer came within inches of the grave, however, something strange happened. The engine sputtered and died. Another attempt the following day failed in a more spectacular way. As the bulldozer

rushed towards the grave at full speed, it suddenly flipped over and plunged into the adjoining Valley of Kidron, killing its driver.

 The Arabs thereupon abandoned their plans for desecrating this holy grave and rerouted their road to pass much higher on the mountainside. Visitors to the grave can clearly see how the original clearing went straight in the direction of the Ohr Hachayim’s grave.

Reprinted from last week’s email of OHRNET, the Ohr Somayach Torah Magazine of the Internet.

**It Once Happened**

**The Maggid of Mezritch**

 When Dov Ber (later to be known as The Maggid of Mezritch) was a small child of five around the turn of the 18th century, his parents' home was consumed by fire. The child was upset by his mother's display of grief and he asked her: "Mother, is it right to grieve so much for the loss of our house?" "G-d forbid," she replied, "I am not grieving because of the loss of the house, but over the loss of the document of our family tree burnt in the fire. That document traced our descent to Rabbi Yochanan Hasandler who was a direct descendant of King David."

 "If so," replied the child, "I shall start for you a new dynasty." In his seventy-odd years of service in this world, Dov Ber fulfilled the promise he made to his mother, becoming a remarkable Torah scholar and later assuming from the Baal Shem Tov (BeShT) the mantle of leadership of the growing Chasidic Movement

 Like many of the Baal Shem Tov's sixty outstanding disciples Rabbi Dov Ber was won over to his master's controversial teachings in a profound and uniquely personal way. Once Rabbi Mendel of Bar, a leading disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, was staying next door to Rabbi Dov Ber. He happened to overhear the teachings of the "Maggid" and was fascinated by the explanations he heard.

 Stepping in to meet the teacher, he was shocked by the sickly appearance of the man. "Don't you know that there is a Baal Shem Tov? Go to him and he will cure you!" said Rabbi Mendel. The Maggid replied curtly with a quote from the Psalms, "It is better to take refuge in G-d than to trust in man!"

 When Rabbi Mendel returned to Medzibozh he praised the Maggid but the Besht replied that he was already aware of him, and in fact, greatly desired that the Maggid come to him.

 Over the course of the next few years the Maggid vacillated in his desire to meet with the Besht, but finally decided to travel to Medzibozh. Upon his arrival he expected to hear profound and wondrous expositions on the Torah, but instead the Besht regaled him with seemingly meaningless stories about coachmen and horses and similar themes. These stories were parables alluding to abstruse topics in Torah. Dov Ber was put off and decided to leave at once.

 Just as he was about to leave, the Besht sent for him and questioned him, saying: "Are you well versed in Torah study?" Having received a positive answer, he continued, "Yes, I know that you are a scholar. Do you also know Kabbalah?"

 The Maggid replied that he did. With that the Baal Shem Tov questioned him on a passage, asking him to explicate it. When the Maggid presented his interpretation the Besht told him, "You don't understand it at all!" The Maggid reviewed the passage once more, and with assurance replied that it was certainly correct, and if not, he would like to hear a better explanation.

 To that the Besht said: "Rise and stand!" As the Maggid gazed around him, the Baal Shem Tov interpreted the passage which referred to various angels. As he spoke the house was ablaze with light and the angels described in the passage were actually visible.

 Over the course of perhaps two extended visits in Medzibozh the Maggid was able to absorb all the teachings of the Besht and take his place as the foremost disciple of the master.

 In the tempestuous years following, the two spiritual geniuses were bound together in an extraordinary relationship of master and disciple. In the year 1760 when the Baal Shem Tov passed away, the Chasidic Movement was at a crucial juncture, requiring strong, dynamic leadership.

 The matter of succession was in question, as the Baal Shem Tov had left no specific instructions for his followers. In a move of respect and honor for the Besht, his only son Rabbi Tzvi was appointed interim leader. He served in that capacity for one year.

 The disciples had gathered for the first yahrzeit of the Besht and were seated around a table with Rabbi Tzvi at their head. He had just concluded his Torah discourse when he rose and said: "Today my father appeared to me in a dream and informed me that the Shechinah and Heavenly Assembly that used to be with him 'have gone over this day to Rabbi Dov Ber; therefore my son, transfer to him the leadership in the presence of the Chevraya Kadisha (Holy Society). Let him sit in my place at the head of the table and you, my son, sit in his place.'" When he finished speaking he removed the white robe symbolizing his office and placed it upon the shoulders of Rabbi Dov Ber.

 Thus, leadership passed to the Maggid. In a short time he was able consolidate his leadership, and although some of the older chasidim did not become his disciples, he was ultimately recognized as the official successor and spokesman for the entire Chasidic Movement. The yahrzeit of Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, is on the 19th of Kislev.

*Reprinted from the archives of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, New York. (Issue #189 – Parshas Vayetzey 5752 (1991).*

**Worth to Come**

From: Jack

*Dear Rabbi,*

 *Maybe my wife is more spiritual than I am, but she’s always encouraging me to be observant because of the World to Come, whereas I say that if I’m going to do something it’s because it will benefit us in the here and now. Would you please help clarify this for us?*

Dear Jack,

 In a way, you’re both right; but also both wrong. You’re both right because the Torah lifestyle is beneficial for a person both in this world and the next. But you both could improve on your concept as to why we do so. Ideally, it’s not for the benefit or reward in either, but rather we observe the Torah because it’s G-d’s will that we do so. There’s nothing wrong with being aware of the benefits and beauty of the Torah’s teachings and instructions in both the material and spiritual planes, and each of you should perhaps work on a more balanced appreciation of that, but the motivation behind it all should really be more about doing things for G-d.

 Your question reminds me of a story:

 A man of very little means once came to the Tzadik Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshil from Apta, explaining that he had no money to marry off his daughter. The rabbi asked how much he needs and how much he has. He answered that he needs 1000 rubles and has only one.

 The rabbi, gazing afar, thought for a minute and then told the man to return to his hometown and that all would be well, instructing him to take

advantage of the first business opportunity that comes his way.

 On the way home, he stopped in a tavern where there were Jewish gem dealers examining their wares at one of the tables. Curious to see such wealth, the man stood by and gasped at the beauty and value of the stones. Seeing the poor man, one of the merchants mockingly asked if he’d like to do some business. Overcoming his obvious inclination to decline, yet recalling the rabbi’s words, he replied, “Yes”.

 With great delight, the scoffer jeered, “And just how much money do you have for the deal?” “One ruble”, he replied. At which the dealers broke out in uncontrollable laughter. The leader of the group then asserted with feigned seriousness, “You know what, I have a deal for you. I’ll sell you my portion in the world to come for your ruble”.

 To his astonishment, the poor man agreed, and with the cynical support of his friends, they wrote out a bill of sale which they signed with witnesses.

 After a time, the gem dealer’s wife came in the tavern, and eager to let her in on the joke, he told her the whole story, accompanied by the merriment of all - except for that of his wife. “Do you mean to say that you forwent the only good thing that you have, no matter how small that portion

may be? I refuse to be married to such a wicked person with no place in the world to come!” And with that she stormed out of the tavern declaring her desire to divorce.

 It suddenly dawned on him what a predicament he was in, and now the jeers of the tavern were directed toward him. Realizing he had no other option, he approached the poor man requesting to tear up the “worthless” document. But the man insisted that the bill of sale was binding.

 The dealer then offered to buy back his world to come, first at a ridiculously low price, until he agreed to pay the pauper’s demand of 1000 rubles, which he explained he needed to marry off his poor daughter.

 When the merchant’s wife heard that her husband paid such a handsome sum for his world to come while also enabling a poor Jewish maiden to wed, she withdrew her intention to divorce.

 After hearing about the rabbi’s role in this odd chain of events, she traveled to him in order to meet firsthand the person who orchestrated this great thing. Once there, she asked the rabbi, “Was my husband’s world to come really worth so much that it generated 1000 rubles dowry for a poor Jewish girl?”

 To which the rabbi replied, “When he sold it, it wasn’t even worth the poor man’s ruble; but when he bought it back, it became worth even more than the 1000 rubles he paid!”

*Reprinted from last week’s email of OHRNET, the Ohr Somayach Torah Magazine of the Internet.*

**Good Shabbos Everyone**

**A Very Special Wedding**

 On the marriage certificate from their fundamentalist Christian wedding in 1990, their names were listed as Roy and Pamela. On their ketuba, signed this past September, their names are Levi Yitzchak and Penina Leah. Pamela grew up in an assimilated Jewish home in Northern California where she attended the local Conservative synagogue for Sunday school.
 "The Judaism I had been given wasn't enough. I needed a big G-d; I wanted to believe that the Bible is true." Instead, Pamela was expected to limit her spiritual yearnings to the few hours at Sunday school where she was taught that G-d doesn't have much to do with our lives and how to refute the miracles of the Bible.

**Inspired by Non-Jewish Holiday Specials**

 Pamela remembers watching many of the Christian holiday television programs. For her, the holiday specials were just as enjoyable as the televised sermons and masses. And so, at the age of 13, after one very inspiring holiday special, Pamela offered her own prayer: "If all of this is real, show me a sign and I will believe that Christianity is true." But no sign was forthcoming.

 Pamela finished high school and left home to attend college. Right before her nineteenth birthday, her boyfriend broke up with her. At the ice cream parlor where she worked part-time, a co-worker, who was part of a fundamentalist Christian organization on campus, told her: "You're devastated because you don't have a relationship with G-d. The way to have a relationship with G-d is to accept [the Nazarene] into your heart. If you say this little prayer, you'll have a relationship with G-d. Say this short prayer, you'll feel better."

 Pamela hesitated but then said the prayer. "I did feel better! And I suddenly felt that this was the sign that I had prayed for when I was 13 years old." Pamela got involved with the missionaries on campus and, she says, was somewhat of a star. "I was special to the Christians because I validated them. Even non-fundamentalist, mainstream churches that don't actually missionize Jews give a tremendous amount of money to organizations whose main objective is missionizing Jews."

**The Family’s Rabbi Had No Answers for Pamela’s Questions**

 Pamela's parents told her to speak to their rabbi, but "he had no idea how to work with someone who had been missionized," she recalls. "He had no answers. He couldn't refute any of the missionary claims. He reinforced my feeling that Judaism doesn't have answers and that Christianity is true."
 Pamela moved back home, at her parents' insistence, and began taking courses at the local junior college. She attached herself to the Maranatha Church which was preaching on her campus. Two years later, in 1984, Roy Weese appeared in Pamela's life, sort of. Roy came from a Christian family and had been part of the Maranatha Church in Alabama. Unable to find an engineering job there, he wanted to try his luck in California. Roy began doing administrative work for the church in San Jose and looked for an engineering job.

**Noticed Roy at Church**

 Pamela had noticed Roy at church and was interested in finding out more about him. After a few years of very casual interaction, Pamela privately submitted his name to the church. From that time on she was not permitted to show any interest in him. If and when Roy submitted her name, they could date.

 Roy revealed to her six years later when she finally confronted him and asked him what he thought of her, "I've always wanted to marry you but I didn't think you would want me." Pamela and Roy were married soon after that revelation in a "very Christian wedding."

 Needless to say, Pamela's parents did not attend. "I'd been missionizing to them for years, telling them that they were going to hell. I had hurt them too much," says Pamela. Two weeks after they returned from their honeymoon, Pamela and Roy began looking for a new church. They had left the Maranatha Church after it had merged with another denomination.

 "We began attending a fundamentalist church, but it was huge and wealthy and very fancy. We didn't feel as if we fit in. We went to a smaller church that was more casual but we just couldn't make friends. It was as if G-d was pushing us along, showing us that there was no place for us in Christianity. We tried a Messianic church but the services were long and boring. We were thinking about how we would raise our family. We wanted tradition, a short prayer service, nice music..."

**Still Searching for the Truth**

 Soon after, Pamela and Roy decided to convert to Catholicism because, as Pamela explains, the Catholics seemed to have answers to the questions in the Bible that still disturbed them. "We were still searching for Truth."
 The Weeses became disenchanted with Catholicism when they had major disagreements with policies of the Pope. "My husband eventually shared with me that he had always had trouble with the trinity. 'Maybe we should see what Jews believe,' he suggested.

 “Personally, I was tired of telling people that they were going to hell. I was tired of feeling guilty when I wasn't preaching, but preaching is really all there was. You're either a slave to their god or to the devil. It's all emotion."

**Bought Jewish Tapes from Chadish Media**

 Pamela decided to learn how to do things Jewishly. She went to a Jewish bookstore and bought "how to" tapes from Chadish Media. She called Rabbi Mordechai Rosenberg, of Chadish Media, who told her, "You must go to Chabad." Pamela and Roy went to meet with Rabbi Yosef Levin, of the Greater South Bay. "

 After talking with Rabbi Levin I realized that Judaism did have answers. Rabbi Levin was so nice to both of us," Pamela recalls. "He treated us both so well. He was totally non- judgmental." Even though their experience had been so positive with Rabbi Levin, Pamela decided to speak with other rabbis because, "I didn't think my husband would want to be Chasidic.

 “I went to another rabbi but he just kept telling us over and over again, 'Your marriage is a problem.' My husband was so hurt. Our marriage was all we had! We went back to Rabbi Levin which was the best thing that ever happened to us."

 To show how serious Roy was about Judaism, he and Pamela separated. Roy built a shack in their backyard and slept there each evening. "We were very grateful with the rabbis who were supervising Roy's conversion during this whole process," says Pamela. Roy studied Torah and began observing some mitzvos. The Weese's moved to Palo Alto to be closer to the shul and Roy built a new shack.

**Planning for Their Real Wedding**

 After Roy's conversion, we began planning for our wedding. "My parents wanted to give us a trip to Israel as a honeymoon, rather than make a lavish wedding," says Pamela. But she told them, "'This is the only real wedding I'm ever going to have.' My mother didn't believe I could pull together anything decent.

 “But I found a dress and Rabbi Levin helped us get the JCC. We had a caterer, flowers, and hassidic dancing. My mother said that had we booked the band a year in advance, we couldn't have done better!" I am finally home, with my Jewish soul-mate. I feel proud of my heritage, and have answers of why I am a Jew. This void is gone, and my search of being a Jew is finally over after many years."

*Reprinted from this week’s email of Good Shabbos Everyone*

**The Human Side of the Story**

**Looking at Lawyers**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach**

 While once walking with a guest, the rav of the Latvian community of Dvinsk, Rav Meir Simcha Hacohen, was asked who owned a magnificent

mansion they had just passed. The reply was that he was the most expert lawyer in the country.

 “Are you not the greatest expert in your profession?” asked the guest. “Why is it that you don’t own such a beautiful home?”

 The rav, who was considered one of the great Torah scholars of his generation, modestly replied: “It is the conflicts among Jews which supply the income for lawyers while my livelihood depends on their good deeds. We all know which there are more of!”

 The Chafetz Chaim once wished to offer a blessing for a lawyer who was very helpful to the Jewish community. This is what he told him:

 “I cannot bless you to win every case, for justice may be on the side of the party you do not represent. I will therefore bless you that every party that is indeed in the right should hire you as his lawyer.”

*Reprinted from last week’s email of OHRNET, the Ohr Somayach Torah Magazine of the Internet.*

**My Journey from**

**Chinese to Jewish**

**By** [**Aaron Wood**](http://www.aish.com/search/?author=175209351)

 A chance encounter with a Bible launched my 16-year road to conversion.

 I was born and raised in [Tianjin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tianjin), China, a city southeast of Beijing with 13 million people. My father was an engineer and my mother was a technician.



 Under Communist rule, I received a very secular education. The very idea of religion seemed nonexistent. Although traditionally China is not an atheistic country – there are hundreds of millions of Buddhists, Taoists and Confucians – the more recent influence of Communism, nationalism, and even Western consumerism has produced a strong atheist component.

 I attended university and studied mechanical engineering. In my senior year, after submitting my thesis, I had a lot of free time. So I began attending graduate-level English classes, taught by an American teacher.

 One day after class, the teacher began speaking with me about religion and the Bible – a topic with which I was completely unfamiliar.

**Introduced to the Bible**

 He gave me an English-Chinese Bible to read. I was eager to learn English, and the book seemed liked an excellent learning tool: English and Chinese sentences side-by-side, with each sentence numbered, making it easy to find the corresponding words.

 I started to read the book carefully, word by word. This raised many questions – not only the definitions of certain English words, but also the concepts discussed in the book.

 I went back to the teacher, again and again with my questions. I didn’t realize that he was a Christian missionary who had come to China on the pretense of teaching English… with the hidden agenda of proselytizing.

**Indoctrinated with Christian Philosophy**

 With my many questions, he did not waste the opportunity to indoctrinate me with [Christian philosophy](http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48892792.html).

 This process came to a sudden halt when his true identity was unmasked by the Chinese government. Though China generally has tolerance for religious activity, the government is suspicious of foreigners who may also possess subversive political goals – so he was not welcome to stay in China any longer.

 I decided to seek out local Christian churches to continue my studies and began to attend church every Sunday. The Chinese pastors were not able to read the Bible in English (not to mention the original Hebrew), yet they impressed upon me Christian ideas such as: the Jews are guilty of deicide; Jews invented tradition to replace the holy revelation; Jews are blind and unable to see the light of truth, etc.

 I had never met a Jew, nor knew anything of their history. All my information came from the Chinese media which depicts Jews as evil thieves and Israel as aggressive imperialists and an American proxy. So I did not question the validity of these negative Christian teachings about Jews.

 After graduation I got a good job working as an engineer in automotive design.

 I spent most of my free time undertaking a more thorough study of religion. I obtained various versions of the Bible, both in Chinese and English, and read all of them very carefully, word by word. This was not an easy task. I spent years studying the Bible, along with any books I could find about Western religions.

**Various Discrepancies in the Translations**

 I encountered various discrepancies in the translations. For example, the "virgin birth" is of fundamental importance to Christianity, yet in some Bibles the Hebrew word *almah* (Isaiah 7:14) is translated not as "virgin" but as "young woman."

 I tried to find a pastor who could help resolve this contradiction, but unfortunately, even in a country of a billion-plus people, I could not locate anyone with sufficient scholarship in the text.

 I realized that if I truly wanted to understand the authentic meaning of the Bible, my only choice was to [learn Hebrew](http://www.aish.com/jl/heb/) myself.

**The Foreign Language**

**Section of the Central Library**

 I set my sights on the huge central library, whose foreign language section took up almost an entire building. This was before the Internet and the book catalogue was not computerized. The religion section was particularly poorly done and I had to pore through each book by hand. The good news is there were two librarians and I was the only customer. After two years the library finally acquired a Hebrew-English dictionary.

 It was a slow, steady process to becoming proficient in Hebrew. After about two years the library acquired a Hebrew-English dictionary which helped me learn the alphabet. Unfortunately I still didn’t know how to pronounce anything, because while a dictionary helps for reading, you can only guess at the sounds.

 Another couple of years later, with Israel and China normalizing diplomatic relations, a Chinese tourist went to visit and brought back a “learn Hebrew” CD. That eventually got passed along to me and I crossed another hurdle in my quest, finally hearing spoken Hebrew for the first time.

 After that I met a nice man, Avigdor Cohen from Maaleh Adumin in Israel, on a Bible-related Internet forum. We began corresponding by email and he sent me a Hebrew-English Bible. For those who have always had access to Judaism, it’s probably hard to appreciate how thrilling it was for me to finally have the authentic original text in my hand.

 At the time I was teaching Chinese to foreign visitors, and one of my students gave me a Hebrew-only Bible. I brought it to church and showed it to the pastor in order to gauge his reaction. There was no reaction, however, because he had no idea that it was Hebrew he was looking at. At this point I was becoming more and more reluctant to rely on anyone claiming to be a “faithful believer in God’s Word” who could not even recognize the Words.

**Began Searching for Anything**

**Connected to the Jews**

 Again I became more independent in my search. I set out to read any book I could find that was even remotely connected to the Jews – everything from Holocaust memoirs to Israeli politics. Around this time the Internet was coming into full swing. The Chinese government had not yet instituted filtering technology, so I had full access to everything from Maimonides to Martin Buber. All this made a tremendous intellectual impact on me.

 The more I read about the Jews, the clearer I saw how Christianity had taken Judaism and twisted it into something else. I assumed it was all a series of unintentional misunderstandings, so I began writing articles in Chinese about the Jews and publishing them on the Internet with the hope of dissipating Christian misunderstanding.

**Threatened by Chinese**

**Fundamentalist Christians**

 Before long, I received vehement threats from Chinese fundamentalist Christians. This awakened me to the persistent reality of anti-Semitism.

This attitude really bothered me because it raised a contradiction between what I read in the Jewish books of a nation subscribing to mankind's loftiest ideals – universal education, care for the sick and the poor, justice for all – with the evil image of Jews that pervades the Chinese media.

 I started to think about what being Jewish might mean for me and decided to try locating a Jew in China. You might think this was easy. After all, in the first half of the 20th century, thousands of European Jewish refugees arrived in China, and there has been a steady influx of Jews concurrent with the economic expansion of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing.

 Finally I got in touch with a man named David Buxbaum, an American Jewish lawyer practicing in East Asia. (Coincidentally, his son Benyamin Buxbaum is the email list manager at Aish.com.) We met in David’s office in Beijing, in the same building that houses the Israeli Embassy. It was a real breakthrough to talk with a flesh-and-blood Jew who believes in the veracity of the Jewish Bible.

 Yet what really impressed me was how humble, sincere and scholarly this man was. Now I knew that the negative stereotypes I had been getting from the Chinese media were indefensible.

 Throughout this process, I kept coming back to a memory I had from years earlier as a teenager.

**“Return to Israel”**

 I had been listening to my shortwave radio and although I could not understand what the people were saying, it sounded like they were reading Scripture. The only words I understood was a phrase that was repeated several times: “Return to Israel.” I didn’t pick up the context of their discussion, and at the time I didn’t even know what Israel was. Yet I somehow felt a deep emotional connection every time I heard “Return to Israel,” time and again.

 During my years of research, this refrain kept ringing in my head. I identified very clearly with the Jews, wandering the world in search of the promised land. I felt that I, too, was wandering in search of my homeland.

After a long build-up I finally reached a point of utter clarity. I decided to become Jewish and move to Israel… although I had no clue of what precisely that would entail.

**Realizing the Need to Leave China**

 I needed a halfway stop to become Jewish and then go to Israel.

 I soon discovered it was logistically impossible to achieve this from the confines of China. I needed a halfway stop to serve as a launching point – enabling me to gain Western citizenship, become Jewish, and then go to Israel.

 There was no direct path and I needed a plan.

 I had a friend living in Canada, a Chinese guy who had successfully navigated the immigration process. He showed me exactly how to do it. So in 2005 I moved to Toronto and that became part of my destiny.

 I got a job in mechanical engineering. I began attending the Village Shul, which is part of the Aish network. I saw Judaism alive and in action. Imagine my first taste of matzah, my first shofar blast, my first dance at a Jewish wedding. It was all so beautiful, so pure, so untainted by the cynicism and materialism that has overrun our lives.

 As I learned more and more, it felt hypocritical that I was not putting this into practice. So I made a decision to become observant: Lighting Shabbat candles. Prayer. Kosher. The big deal was when I stopped eating pork products, which is a main ingredient in almost all Chinese food.

 I studied, I struggled, and I questioned. I was determined to take this as far as the truth would allow.

 A few years past and I was starting to feel like a Jew. I identified with the Jewish people who have been so unjustly slandered and persecuted. I understood that Judaism is true, and in order to solidify my love for the truth, I was ready to become Jewish.

**Converted to Judaism in Toronto Last Year**

 I studied extensively with Rabbi Robinson in Toronto, who guided me carefully through the whole process. In 2011, after 16 long years of journey, I completed my conversion with Rabbi Shlomo Miller in Toronto. I had finally come home to the Jewish people.

 Some converts describe the conversion process as “gaining a new identity.” I did not feel that way, however. For me, it was more like the actualization of a longtime identity that I yearned to fulfill.



 Since the conversion I have continued my passion of studying Torah, and in May 2012 I arrived at the [Aish Yeshiva](http://www.aish.com/ai/ip/Beis_Medrash_Program.html) in Jerusalem. For me this opportunity was like winning the lottery. Who would have thought that a kid growing up in Tianjin would one day be studying Torah at the best location in the world – directly across from the Western Wall.

 My goals are to study Torah, settle in the land of Israel, and fight anti-Semitism. As I have become more aware of modern anti-Semitism in the form of demonizing Israel, I began a Chinese blog to provide basic knowledge of Jews and Israel so Chinese people will not become easily brainwashed by the overwhelming media bias.



 I am also working to translate counter-missionary materials into Chinese, in order to refute religious slander against the Jews.

 I am disappointed that the modern State of Israel has less Jewishness than I expected. For me this was a culture shock. Ironically, I discovered there are around 20,000 Chinese workers in Israel, mostly involved in menial labor.

 This whole thing has not been easy with my family. My parents don’t like religion and they have a very closed mind about this. I have a younger sister who is more understanding; she studied in D.C. and is now living in Shanghai.

**A Long History of Jews in China**

 Looking back, I see that my Jewish identity did not totally arise in a vacuum. The history of Jews in China actually dates back many centuries. Some people even suggest that China harbors some remnants of the Lost Ten Tribes.

 It is believed that Jews first immigrated to China, through Persia, following the Roman Emperor Titus's capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Jews lived in China throughout the Middle Ages and till today some Chinese communities practice rituals that resemble Judaism.

 For many centuries (1163-1860) there was a Jewish community in Kaifeng, 650 miles from Beijing. They did not eat pork, they placed some form of mezuzah on their doorposts, and they spoke of a faraway homeland called Israel. (Recently, 14 people from Kaifeng made aliyah and converted.)

 In the early 20th century, Russian Jews fleeing pogroms moved northeast to China, as did Jews escaping the 1917 Russian Revolution via the Trans-Siberian Railway. Only much later did I discover that my own city of Tianjin actually has a non-functioning synagogue, built in the early 1900s by Russian refugees.

**An Ironic Growing Chinese**

**Fascination with Judaism**

 Ironically, today there is a growing Chinese fascination with Judaism. Three universities have departments of Jewish studies, with probably a few hundred master’s and doctoral candidates, all of whom are Chinese. In operating on a purely academic level, however, these studies tend to miss out on the spiritual core driving the Jewish people. The Talmud in particular has gained a reputation as the “grand repository of secret business advice.” With popular Chinese titles like *Crack the Talmud: 101 Jewish Business Rules*, this faux-Talmudic wisdom has now become a guide for those seeking fortunes.

**Discovering the Real Wealth of Judaism**

 As for myself, I am grateful to have discovered that the real “wealth” of Judaism is in its ethics and spirituality.

 My Chinese family name is Chai, which translates as “wood.” It’s amazing that this same word is the iconic Hebrew word for “life.” I chose a new Jewish first name, Aaron, because the biblical Aaron was known as a man of truth and a lover of peace. The Jewish people are lovers of truth and peace. That’s why I joined.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the Aish.com website.*

**Story #784**

**Prisoner Exchange**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

[**editor@ascentofsafed.com**](http://webmailb.juno.com/webmail/new/8?folder=Inbox&msgNum=0000lP00:001Gjmc400001PqV&block=1&msgNature=all&msgStatus=all&count=1354755454&randid=993827688&content=central)

 The tavern keeper stood before his poritz quaking with terror. His rent was due that day but he did not have a penny to pay. He would have to ask for a postponement. Would the hard-hearted gentile landlord agree? The Jew shivered, waiting for an answer, hoping and fearing.

 From the frown on the landlord's beefy face, he already had his answer. The heavy-set gentile growled as he said, "How dare you appear before me without bringing the money, you filthy Jew!"

 He shouted for his servants to bring clubs and whips to beat the tavern keeper. They fell upon him with a lust of their own, striking him until he was bruised and bleeding. He suffered in silence, but his ordeal was still not over.

 "Now take this Jewish dog, chain him and throw him into the dungeon. And throw his family out into the street."

**A Word that Struck Terror in All Jewish Hearts**

 Mere mention of the dungeon struck terror in all Jewish hearts. It was a damp, dingy underground pit in a cellar on the landlord's estate. It was used to punish all those who dared defy and displease the landlord, owner of the vast estate which employed dozens of Jews in various capacities. Not always did the victim emerge from this horrible pit alive.

 The pain-racked Jew lay on the damp floor of the dungeon. He wept and thought, "Will I ever see my wife and children again? Will I ever get out of here alive?"

 The news of this tragedy reached **Rabbi Moshe-Leib Sassover**, the great Rebbe whose heart wept for all of his brothers in sorrow. The plight of the homeless, fatherless family shook him deeply; the tears streamed involuntarily down his cheeks.

 He arose and made his way to the landlord's mansion. Rabbi Moshe-Leib knocked boldly on the door. The landlord's gateman opened the huge door and was surprised to see a distinguished looking Jew standing outside.

"What do you want?" he asked.

 "Take me to your master," Rabbi Moshe-Leib demanded authoritatively. "I must speak to him."

 The gateman was so impressed by the rabbi's bearing and confidence that he led him straight to the poritz. The landlord was stunned to see this impressive Jew in his home.

**Suggests an Amazing Offer to the Poritz**

 "Sir," said Rabbi Moshe-Leib, "I have heard that there is a wounded Jew imprisoned on your property, in the dungeon of your castle."

 "He deserves it!" the landlord replied hotly. "He did not pay his rent. That is the punishment for failing to pay rent."

 Rabbi Moshe-Leib did not make any demands. With a suave tone, he said, "I would like to suggest an offer."

 "An offer?" he landlord repeated, his voice rising with curiosity. "What could you possibly offer?"

 "Look at the matter logically. What possible benefit can you reap from holding this Jew in jail? His suffering will not pay the rent; you surely can understand that. However, if you were to free him and imprison me in his stead, I am certain that my fellow Jews would hasten to redeem me for the amount that he owes and even more. What do you say to that suggestion?"

**The Landlord’s Eyes Lit Up**

 The landlord's eyes lit up. He would never have conceived such a thought. He would be able to demand any amount of ransom for this distinguished Jew. "I accept your offer," he said. He freed the Jew and imprisoned Rabbi Moshe-Leib instead, chaining him hand and foot.

 Rabbi Moshe-Leib lay on the cold, damp stone floor, happy in his suffering, for he had freed a fellow Jew! The chains bit into his hands and feet but he gave them no care. He was so transported with joy that had he been able, he would have broken into a dance.

 He lay there all morning, unconscious of any discomfort or pain. But in the afternoon, when the hour to pray Mincha drew close, he tried to rise and found that he could not do so. Now his imprisonment disturbed him.

"How will I be able to commune with my Creator?" Rabbi Moshe-Leib wept, sighing from the depths of his heart. "I cannot stand up!" The pain did not disturb him, but he suffered greatly because he could not pray erect.

 Meanwhile, the landlord rubbed his hands in glee as he returned from the dungeon to this comfortable mansion. "It cannot take long for the Jews to find out that their beloved leader is being held prisoner here. Soon, they will send a delegation bearing a huge sum for his ransom. They will come begging on their knees for me to free him."

 The landlord sat himself in a comfortable chair to await their arrival. Suddenly, a spasm shot through his head; he could not see straight. His entire body began aching. He groaned in agony and begged his family to fetch a doctor.

**The Doctors Were Unable to Help the Landlord**

 The landlord's private physician was summoned, but he could discover no cause for the strange pain. Specialists were called in, but they, too, were baffled. This was a strange disease which they were unable to diagnose or treat.

 The landlord writhed in agony. His shouts and screams echoed throughout the castle and brought all the servants to his side. His family tried in vain to alleviate his pain, but they were utterly at a loss. They sought some clue to his illness. Perhaps, it was a result of something he had eaten? Or done?

 "What did our master do this morning?"

 "He was fine until he came back from the dungeon. He released the tavern keeper and imprisoned the rabbi."

 "Perhaps" the family hesitated to express their fear. Perhaps the rabbi had put a curse on the master; perhaps this was a punishment.

**A Suggestion to Release the Jew from the Dungeon**

 "Master," said a number of his advisors, "who knows if the Jew is not to blame? Maybe if you released him from the dungeon, you might get relief."

 Unable to speak, the landlord merely nodded his head. Servants were quickly dispatched to free the Jew from his bonds and take him out of the dungeon.

 When they arrived, Rabbi Moshe-Leib refused to be released, much to their amazement. "I demand that the landlord come here himself," he insisted.

 Moaning and groaning, the landlord was carried to the dungeon. Supported on either side, he cried down into the pit, "Please forgive me for having imprisoned you. You are free to leave. I will also forgive my Jewish tenant."

 Rabbi Moshe-Leib was still not ready to emerge. He had other demands. "I will not leave here until you allow the tavern keeper and his family to return to their home.

 The landlord had not expected such a harsh demand. Despite his excruciation, he thought not to agree. But at that moment he had another severe attack, which served to remind him why he was suffering. "Very well," he said, "they can return to their home in the tavern. And now, you are free to go. Please, leave my property at once."

**Not Finished with His Demands**

 Rabbi Moshe-Leib had not come to the end of his demands, "I want you to guarantee to let him manage the tavern, as before. I want you to restore his lease."

 "Anything! Just go!"

 Rabbi Moshe-Leib finally agreed to let the servants unchain him and lift him up out of the pit. And lo! The very minute that the tzadik stood on firm ground, the landlord's anguish began to recede. The closer Rabbi Moshe-Leib got to the main gate, the weaker it became. The moment he departed the property, the landlord was completely healed.

 And from that day on, the landlord was wary of his Jewish tenants. He treated them with respect and care and never dared harm them again.

 Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from Tales of Tzaddikim (ArtScroll) by G. MaTov.

 Connection: Weekly Reading “thrown in the pit-dungeon”

 Biographic note: **Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sassov** (1745-4 Shvat 1807) was the leading disciple of Reb Shmelke of Nicholsburg. He also received from the Maggid of Mezritch and from Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhinsk. Subsequently a Rebbe in his own right with many followers, he was famous primarily for his love of his fellow Jews and his creative musical talent. His teachings are contained in the books, Likutei RaMal, Toras ReMaL Hashalem, and Chidushei RaMal.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent to Safed. www/ascentofsafed/cp,*