**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Mishpatim 5774**

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**Why Jews Don’t Follow**

**The Majority of Others**

**By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**

 Rabbi Yonatan Eibashets was the chief rabbi of Prague some 300 years ago and a champion of the Jewish people.

 This was not an easy task in those days; all of Europe was either Catholic or Protestant and, as someone once said; they worshiped a suffering Jew and tried to make as many Jews suffer as possible.

**An Encounter with the Bishop of Prague**

 One day the Bishop of Prague stopped Rabbi Yonatan in the street and asked him a question.

 "Rabbi, I have just been thinking. In fact I've been thinking of this for several days…. You Jews certainly believe what it says in the Old Testament that we must go after the majority; (Ex. 23:2) correct? Well then, why do you not comply with your own rules and follow the vast majority who follow the Gospels? Why, I would estimate that you are outnumbered over a hundred to one!"

 The Rabbi knew he was in trouble; if he didn't give an answer it would be interpreted as defeat and forced conversions could result. But if he angered the Bishop by saying one wrong word against their religion it could bring a wholesale massacre.

 He pretended to ponder over the question as he prayed to G-d for help. Suddenly he had an idea! He took a deep breath and replied.

 "Your highness, action speaks louder than words. You have asked a very wise question and I will try to give a befitting answer. Please let us go to the town square."

**Looking up and Pointing to the Sky**

 They walked together until they were standing in the middle of the open market place. Only a few people were there when the Rabbi turned to the Bishop and said quietly, "Now, your Excellency, please do as I do; look up and don't stop pointing to the sky".

 The Bishop did so and in a short time people, seeing these two honorable men pointing to the clouds began to gather around and look up as well. "What do you see, your highness?" One of the braver members of the crowd asked.

 "The arch-angel Michael" whispered the Rabbi in feigned awe, "There he is in the clouds."

 "The Angel Michael!!" Whispered the man in reply as he crossed his heart, squinted even harder on high and fell to his knees in trepidation.

 In seconds the word spread and thousands of people were crowded in the square in various poses of submission. Women were weeping; grown men stood transfixed, hands raised in supplication. All were pointing above and echoing the words, "The Angel Michael!! The Angel Michael.

 "Now" said the Rabbi to the Bishop, "let us leave them and move to the Jewish sector".

**Going to the Jewish Marketplace**

 The Rabbi led the way through the twisting streets into the Jewish ghetto and soon they were again standing in the middle of the much smaller Jewish marketplace.

 This time the Rabbi pointed heavenward until a small group of people gathered around. "What is your honor pointing at? Someone asked the Rabbi politely.

 "The Archangel Michael" he answered. "There he is in the clouds!"

 In no time a crowd of Jews had gathered with heads craned upward. "What is it?" someone asked. "What are we looking at?" "Dunno" someone else answered, "The Rabbi says he sees an angel up there. Do you see anything? All I see is clouds." "Maybe he just has a stiff neck" someone whispered jokingly.

 People were scratching their heads, shrugging their shoulders and squinting at the sky until finally someone got up the courage to go up to the Rabbi and ask,

 "Excuse me Rabbi but are we supposed to see something up there? I mean, is the Rabbi sure he sees an angel? Is the Rabbi feeling all right?"

**Walking to the Nearest Synagogue**

 The Rabbi stopped looking up, apologized for the error and, motioning to the Bishop, walked away toward the nearest synagogue with the Bishop following at his heels.

 "Please try to understand, your highness, I'm not trying to be rude but," he turned to the Bishop as they reached the door of the Shul, "But I'll have to ask you to hide that cross around your neck before we enter."

 The congregation was just about to begin the reading of the Torah. (The Torah is read publicly four times a week) and when everyone saw the Rabbi enter they stood in honor, although they were surprised to see him accompanied by the Bishop.

 The Rabbi asked if he could read from the Torah. Of course no one objected, indeed they were honored. He walked to the podium, the first man was called up, made the blessing, (The reading was 'Yisro', just like this week and it begins with the words 'Vayishma YISRO'..) the Rabbi opened the scroll and began to read in the ancient melody:

**Mispronouncing the Name Yisro**

 "Vayishma MISRO.."

 Immediately the entire crowd yelled out in unison to correct the obvious mistake. "YISRO! YISRO!"

 When things quieted down the Rabbi again began:

 "VaYishma FISRO…"

 And again the crowd yelled "YISRO!!, RABBI, IT'S YISRO!! NOT FISRO!!" Three people ran up to look into the Torah scroll for a spelling error and when they saw that there was none they politely asked the Rabbi if he would please let someone else read.

 The Rabbi stepped down, excused himself and motioned for the Bishop to follow him outside.

 "You see, your Excellency" he said to the Bishop, "This is why we don't follow your 'majority'.

 These people are for the most part simple folk and they revere me as their Rabbi and leader. But when I tried to make them see an imaginary angel or made just one small mistake in the Torah reading, they refused to accept it.

 "But as you see, your followers don't care so much about the truth. Just as they just now bowed to a non-existent angel so they believe that a person can be G-d and can alter the meaning of the entire Torah. So how can we leave the Torah which we have been reading publically four times a week for three thousand years for ideas that have no basis in truth?

 So that is why we can't follow your majority."

*Reprinted from last week’s email of Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, Israel.*

**Chiune Sugihara**



In downtown Los Angeles, in Little Tokyo one block from the Japanese American National Museum, stands a statue of a man very few people know about or would ever recognize. His name was Chiune Sugihara, and he did an extraordinary thing seven decades ago.

Sugihara was a diplomat working at the Japanese consulate in Lithuania during the first years of World War II. As the Nazi forces threatened to overrun the small nation, thousands of Jewish refugees, who already had fled the horrors of Poland, crammed around the compound desperate for safe passage out of the country.

**Didn’t Hesitate to Risk His Own**

**Career to Help Save Jewish Lives**

Sugihara didn’t hesitate. Disobeying direct orders, and thus risking his own career and indeed freedom, he issued visa after visa, scribbling them out as quickly as he could and even enlisting his wife to help over the course of nearly a month, often staying up all night to process ever more. Survivors recall that Sugihara, who was forced to vacate the compound, even thrust completed, stamped visas out of his train window as it pulled away from the platform.

In all, six thousand people who would otherwise be destined for the gas chambers were spared; they fled to Japan and often on to other nations from there.

For years the survivors and their families tried to locate Sugihara, if only to thank him for what he did.

He paid a heavy price for his actions; after spending 18 months in a Soviet prison camp, and finally returning to Japan, he was asked to resign his post, likely as a direct result of his incredible stance. Sugihara lived out the remainder of his days in obscurity until happily, in 1985 just a year before his death, he was honored with a Righteous Among the Nationsaward an honor bestowed on non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. He shares this title with the likes of Oskar Schindler.

Heroes come in all forms, and there are times each of us may be called upon to be heroic. Chiune Sugihara heard that call, and he answered it resoundingly.

*Reprinted from last week’s email from Chabad of Great Neck, NY.*

**My Son's Different Path:**

**When Children Choose to Become Religious, It Doesn't Have to Cost Family Harmony.**

**By** [**Heather deSilva**](http://www.aish.com/authors/106875668.html)

I can still remember the feeling I had when my first child, a son, was born. He was planned for, wanted, gorgeous and healthy. I was transformed into another zone. I wrote a daily journal in his voice, dressed and redressed him up each day and repeated every wonderful thing he did to anyone who would listen. I felt that he was my greatest achievement ever. When people would ask "What do you want him to be when he grows up?" I would simply answer, "Happy."

**Growing Up Secular in**

**A New Toronto Ghetto**

I grew up in a secular household in the midst of the newest Jewish ghetto Toronto had to offer. Everyone I knew was Jewish, yet we never belonged to a synagogue. My brother was the only one who attended Hebrew school -- when he was 12 to learn his bar mitzvah portion by rote.

It wasn't surprising then that my friends and family teased me when we signed our son up for Hebrew school at the age of four, which required a synagogue membership. The only synagogue in our city at that time was Reform, and we decided that it would be a good fit for our multi-cultural, inter-religious family. That was my first synagogue affiliation.

**Attaining a Position of Comfort**

Since my husband and I had agreed prior to marrying on the importance of religious training and that the children would be Jewish, I became responsible for the religious education of our children. To do that, I needed the help of a community. As I accompanied my three and four year-olds to services on Friday nights, I felt that I was the only one in the room who knew nothing. I knew none of the songs, the prayers, the bible stories -- it was overwhelming. Never one to back away from a challenge, I made it my mission to attend every week with my kids, took every Torah study, Hebrew lesson, and discussion group available until slowly, over several years, I attained a position of comfort.

By then, with three little boys in tow, I started to take leadership roles in the running of the synagogue and felt a great sense of joy in having found a place that gladly accepted my odd mixture of a family; a place that embraced and taught and included us. I decided I would have a bat mitzvah to mark my 40th birthday and studied long and hard to prepare the Torah portion, *haftorah* and sermon. Afterwards, I decided to teach in the school to keep my skills honed. I taught beginner Hebrew to adults for many years and began to feel that I was quite learned.

**His Jewish Education**

Each one, in his own way, fell in love with the land.

I had always presented the after-confirmation trip to Israel to my sons as a given. One by one they graduated and made their trip, and each one, in his own way, fell in love with the land. Quickly, while I wasn't looking, the boys became young men and my first-born started his own personal spiritual exploration.

His regular synagogue attendance and leadership roles in Reform youth group led me to believe he was a happy and fulfilled religious young man. However, as he became involed in the Jewish campus groups such as Jewish Student Association and Israel Committee, he found that things were done in a more observant manner in order to allow inclusiveness of all students. Slowly he began to question parts of his Jewish upbringing and gradually took on new practices.

He attended conferences in New York, Florida, California and Israel. Although he taught at the Reform synagogue in his school's city during his first year at university, by his second year my son was attending the Orthodox synagogue and establishing a very close relationship with the rabbi. He waited to wear a *kippah* until he felt he could be a model for people who would identify him as a Jew. He developed a love for Israel and through his involvement in all things Jewish, managed eight trips during his university years. I watched all of this happening, trying to be supportive but with a fear of rejection and complications in my heart.

**Different Schools of Thought**

Some couldn't help but tell me how it would divide our family.

As his observance increased, my friends seemed to feel quite entitled to comment on this terrible occurrence that had befallen my family and pointed out all the problems that would arise. Some were shocked; others, angry. Some found it ironic that *my* child should become "religious" and others couldn't help but tell me how it would divide our family and end all hopes of a peaceful home. I didn't know if I should panic, fight or applaud.

It was my *Rebbitzen*'s mother, who knew my *zaidy*, who told me how proud *Zaida* would have been of my son's chosen path -- his courage and determination, and how proud I should be that I had given him the self-esteem and the unfailing knowledge that I would always stand beside him, with pride, wherever his path led him. So I stood aside and watched him blossom.

**There Have Been Challenges**

We did have challenges and we butted heads on many occasions -- words were misinterpreted and feelings were raw, but thank G-d, over a period of time, we worked through the issues, and my husband and I came to realize that our dream for our son was coming true. He was happy! He glowed. He wrote about the joy of his learning and we could not miss it. We began to share his writings and everyone saw the same thing; he was so happy!

Our friends and family began to show some interest in what he was doing and expressed admiration in his strength of conviction. So when he finally announced his intention to make Israel his permanent home, to marry there, study and raise his family in a religious setting, I had to be happy for him. By that time, he was laying *tefillin*, wearing *tzitzit* and a *kippah*, keeping kosher, had legally changed his name to his Hebrew name, was keeping the Sabbath and, most indicative to me of his dedication, *shomer negiah* (not interacting physically with the opposite gender outside the construct of marriage).

I knew that how I reacted and presented to him could determine our future relationship. I looked at each problem my friends happily laid at my feet as a challenge, and quietly began to read and study and try to understand this life he had chosen and these people who would be an integral part of the rest of his life. I was also challenged by the distance and the basic differences in thinking. In North America we hoped for our children to do well in the world and that was measured by a secular ruler, in units of money. There, in Israel, his doing well is measured by his love of learning and serving God. There, he will work to live. Here, we live to work.

**Continuing Ed**

After his *aliyah*, he sent me information of a learning program in Israel for women my age called [GEM](http://www.aish.com/gem/). Having only been to Israel once before, the thought of returning, studying and visiting with my Israeli son and his brother (who by then had been accepted to work on the Northern Israel Recovery Program with Livnot U'Lehibanot), was very enticing to me.

Son number two had gone to Israel vowing that he was not religious like his brother and that he was not interested in being preached to. Yet somehow during his six month stay, he was studying with a rabbi, keeping the Sabbath, keeping kosher, wearing a *kippah* and *tzitzit*! I was very nervous.

I envisioned myself starting all over knowing nothing, being on the outside, feeling "less than" again and the prospect left me filled with trepidation. I was determined not to conform to a dress and behavior code that I felt was disenfranchising to women. I jokingly promised all my friends that I would not return wearing a wig and reassured them that I was just going to hear what "they" had to say in order to better understand my sons' journeys.

I arrived in time for Shabbat with my eldest in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Nof. We were the guests of his Rosh Yeshiva, head rabbi and another very wonderful family of friends for the three meals of Shabbat. I was given a room in the apartment of a young, North American couple, who had chosen to become observant like my son. All of my hosts warmly welcomed me and made me feel like an honored guest. This proved to be a recurring theme throughout my three week stay in Jerusalem.

**The Women Were Modern**

**Thinking and Looking**

The women were modern thinking and looking. The men stared into their partners' eyes with adoration while they blessed them for the work they did in preparing for the holiday and they helped to serve, change a baby, and make a last minute preparation. They seemed to love to refer to their partners as "my husband" or "my wife" and there was a palpable electricity between them; a deep understanding of their feelings and needs without the need to explain, cajole or whine. They had learned that they could ensure they would be taken care of, loved and respected by their family, if they made their priority taking care of, loving and respecting their family. It was so simple and yet so profound.

I kept looking for the terrible people everyone had warned me of... the ones with tunnel vision, a hidden agenda and a self-righteous attitude.

The GEM program itself was a most amazing, non-threatening, enlightening experience. The daily schedule was grueling. We studied for four hours most mornings with amazing teachers and world-known rabbis, had field trips, visited renowned yet humble *rebbitzens*, and did a bit of touring. We usually finished our activities and returned to the hotel by 11 p.m.

**Witnessing Incredible Things**

Much of our time was spent in the Old City of Jerusalem and it felt very special and very holy. I was witnessing incredible things, having unique experiences and meeting Torah giants -- in their kitchens! -- experiences and people that I never would have had or met in my world, and, most impressive and important, they were relevant. It made me glad that I had stepped out of my comfort zone. My ideas were never dismissed nor was I ever spoken to with anything less than respect and interest. There was never a derogatory comment or inference.



I kept looking for the terrible people everyone had warned me of... the ones with tunnel vision, a hidden agenda and a self-righteous attitude, who would tear my child from my arms and never allow him to come home, but all I found (and I looked way under the surface) was a gracious group of individuals who were joyous and steadfast in their deep beliefs and ecstatic to share their joy and knowledge. I learned so much in the classrooms, at the sites, in the dining rooms, in the alleyways of the Old City and on the streets of Jerusalem.

But even more than the studies and sights, the chance to see the community from the inside: to see the peace and love in the homes of the families who welcomed me on Shabbat; the total trust and respect of the families who gave me the key to their apartment while they were gone and left notes everywhere saying, "help yourself"; and the kind words from the many, many families who have fed and housed my sons, worked with them and taught them for the pure joy of sharing their knowledge; all these things brought me complete peace of mind about the decision they had made. I realized their choice was not a rejection of me and my ways, but an adoption of their own course.

**Integrated Reality 101**

I realized their choice was not a rejection of me and my ways, but an adoption of their own course.

No, I didn't come back fully observant, but I find myself taking baby steps, like making a concentrated effort to not speak negatively on Shabbat (keeping the laws of *lashon hara*). I am moving forward. I have a deeply satisfying feeling that my sons are on a good path and will attain the peace and happiness in their lives that we had always hoped for them. I feel so proud of them for having the conviction to take a road less traveled and choose the life situation that is best for them. At the same time, I indulge myself a little in having given them the self-confidence and character to follow their paths away from mine.

I know that we will continue to have many more frank discussions over the years and will disagree on many matters, but with my new insight and their new peace, serenity and belief in the laws of Torah, we will work through each of the challenges presented to us. We know that the love we share is worth all the temporary heartache we may experience due to a lack of understanding, but that rejection, on either side, cannot be considered as an option. When a big challenge arises, I remind myself of that cute little blue bundle they handed me and my simple and naive answer to people who asked after my wishes for my child's future. I wanted him to be happy and he most certainly is.

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

**After Diligent Search, Burial of Former 'John Doe' Proves a Mitzvah**

**By** [**Menachem Posner**](http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/12145/jewish/Menachem-Posner.htm) **|**

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Rabbi Yosef Wolvovsky traveled an hour each way on Jan. 10 to perform a graveside funeral for a man he had never met. Eight of the other nine men present that Friday morning were in a similar position.

But duty called, and the group rose to the occasion.

“It all began earlier in the week,” explains Wolvovsky, who co-directs the Chabad Jewish Center of Glastonbury, Conn., with his wife, Yehudis. “I was in the office of Dr. Steven Rafalowsky, a friend with whom I study Torah and put on *tefillin*. All of a sudden, I start getting calls and urgent text messages from my colleague, Rabbi Levi Schectman, who serves as Chabad on Campus rabbi at Wesleyan University, about 15 miles away from Glastonbury. Someone had passed away, and it seemed urgent.”

After excusing himself and calling Schectman, Wolvovsky learned that a man named Jeffrey Gollinger, 72, had passed away in a nearby hospital. A long-term resident at the Twin Maples Health Care Facility—a nursing home in Durham, Conn.—Gollinger suffered from physical and mental handicaps, and had no known relatives.

The staff knew that he was Jewish and that a rabbi visited occasionally, but had no instructions for burial and didn’t know the rabbi’s name or whereabouts. Left with no recourse, they were in the process of turning his body over to the state.

While looking through his meager possessions, they discovered a Chanukah guide published by the Chabad *yeshivah* in New Haven, Conn. Hoping to find the rabbi, they called the number on the pamphlet. They reached Rabbi Yosef Lustig, principal of the high school division. Since the school distributes hundreds of such publications tucked into menorah kits every year, he had no idea who brought Gollinger that particular flier.

Gollinger—a long-term resident at the Twin Maples nursing home in Durham, Conn., who suffered from physical and mental handicaps—had no known relatives.

Using Chabad.org's [Chabad center locator](http://www.chabad.org/centers/default_cdo/jewish/Centers.htm), Lustig determined that the closest Chabad center was Schectman’s and gave him a call. Since Schectman’s primary work is with university students, he quickly contacted Wolvovsky, hoping that perhaps he was the rabbi in question or would otherwise know how to care for Gollinger’s remains.

**A Sacred Obligation**

In Judaism, caring for the dead is known as *chesed shel emet*, or “true kindness,” since it’s done with no possible hope for reward. When the deceased leaves no relatives or friends, he or she is known as a *met mitzvah*, and it is a sacred obligation to help bring him or her to proper Jewish burial.

Right then and there, Wolvovsky and Rafalowsky started working the phones and searching the Internet, looking for possible relatives with no success. At the same time, Wolvovsky contacted other Chabad rabbis in the area, hoping to discover the unidentified rabbi.

At last, he struck gold. Upon the advice of Rabbi Yosef Hodakov of Chabad of Westville, Conn., he called Rabbi Berel Levitin, a Chabad rabbi whose main work involves Torah classes and other services for seniors in New Haven.

It turned out that Levitin had been visiting the man for 20 years. Gollinger’s father had left when he was a small child; his mother had passed away in 1966. Ever since, he had been alone in the world. Levitin first met him when Gollinger was living in a group home in New Haven. Gollinger would often walk near the *yeshivah* and enjoyed interacting with the students.

“He was always really happy when I would visit,” says Levitin. “We would put on *tefillin* and celebrate Jewish holidays together. He was just so thrilled to be able to say the blessings with me and ask how his old friends at the *yeshivah* were doing.

They may not have been aware of it, but he felt very close to them.”

**Transferred to a Succession of Facilities**

With time, Gollinger was transferred to a succession of facilities, ultimately ending up in Durham, a half-hour drive away. Levitin continued to visit, bringing holiday goodies, prayers, news from the *yeshivah*—and most importantly, his companionship.

Upon learning of the death of his friend, Levitin began making arrangements for the funeral. He called the Robert E. Shure Funeral Home, with which he had a relationship, and was surprised to learn that Gollinger had put down some money toward his funeral many decades ago.

Rabbi Berel Levitin called the Robert E. Shure Funeral Home and was surprised to learn that Gollinger had put down some money toward his funeral many decades ago.

**Wanted to be Buried Near His Mother**

Upon further investigation, Levitin learned that he had left instructions that he be buried near his mother. However, due to a breakdown in communication, the facility where he had last been living was unaware of the arrangements, and the funeral home had no way of knowing that he had died.

“Thank G‑d, we were able to give him a proper Jewish burial right next to his mother,” says Levitin. “Rabbi Wolvovsky and I were joined by eight students from the *yeshivah,* and the *kaddish* prayer was recited for his soul.”

“You never know the power of a mitzvah,” Wolvovsky concludes. “Someone gave a Chanukah pamphlet to a lonely man in a nursing home, and that one isolated act of kindness was the key to ensuring that he was accorded a dignified and spiritually significant burial with the people who meant the most to him.”

*Reprinted from this week’s Chabad.Org email.*

**Bar Mitzvah Boy Declares: 'I Was a Muslim from Gaza, Now I'm a Jew'**

**By Ari Yashar**



A bar mitzvah (photo for illustration only)

 An unusual bar mitzvah ceremony was held on Tuesday for the son of a Jewish woman tricked into marrying and living with an Arab man in Gaza for years. The mother and her children recently managed to escape violent abuse and restart their lives as Jews.

 "I lived for years as a Muslim. Today I stand as a proud Jewish youth," remarked the bar mitzvah boy, referred to as D., at the event. "I won't forget all the days and nights that I knew I was a Jew but lived as a Muslim in Gaza."

**Lived with His Jewish Mother and Arab Father**

 The boy lived with his Jewish mother L. and Arab father A. in Gaza with no connection to Judaism until 4 years ago, reports Yisrael Hayom. He comments "I'm realizing a dream thanks to the Yad L'achim organization that brought me to the most moving day in my life."

 [Yad L'achim](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/173732), an anti-missionary organization that has [saved captive Jewish women](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/160166) on numerous occasions, had been helping L. get back on her feet.

 L. immigrated to Israel from the Muslim country of Uzbekistan at the age of 14, settling in Ofakim between Be'er Sheva and Gaza. At 16 she went to work at a local packing facility to support her family, where she met 17-year-old A. from Gaza, who was working there illegally and hiding his origins.

 Despite warnings from those around her and her mother's opposition, the girl was tricked into marrying A. a year later, as he bought her gifts and promised her that his family owned land and factories.

 "He promised me that he loved me and I was happy," recalls L. "What else does a girl need at that age? He sold me tons of lies, and I believed every word of his."

 While she wanted a Jewish wedding, he convinced her to marry through the auspices of a "lawyer," who turned out to be a Muslim qadi (Sharia judge) who married them in a Sharia Islamic court. In the marriage, L. went through the process of Islamic conversion without knowing it.

 I waited for the real marriage, the big fancy party, that he promised his 'rich' family would throw for us," tells L.

**The Truth revealed, the Violence Unveiled**

 A month later she conceived her first son. In the third month of pregnancy, A. revealed to her that he was an Arab from Gaza, that his parents were poor, and that his family of 20 lived in two rooms, sleeping on the floor.

 Towards the end of the pregnancy A. began threatening, beating, and emotionally abusing his Jewish wife. He was caught by Shin Bet (internal security agency) and deported to Gaza in the 9th month of the pregnancy.

From Gaza A. called L. every few hours, telling her to come to him. 40 days after the pregnancy, L. made the fateful decision to travel to Gaza with her newborn infant.

**Promised to Treat Her Like a Queen**

 "He promised me that I would be a queen in his parents' home," L. relates. "I went into the refugee camp, I was in shock over the neglect and abandonment. Seven brothers and sisters living in a 2 room house."

 "After a week his mother started abusing me while he was out of the house. He took the [Israeli National Insurance Institute] child stipend and single-parent stipend from me every month, and wasted it on his entertainment," comments L. The couple had two more children over the passing years.

 As the situation in the house became more violent and dangerous, L. eventually fled and managed to escape Gaza. She and her children have been cared for by Yad L'achim, a group that has returned them to Judaism amid emotional and financial support.

 When the organization heard that she was having trouble arranging a bar mitzvah for her son, they gathered donations and enabled the event to take place in Be'er Sheva this week.

 "Now we are Jews," said a visibly moved L. "We have started new lives, and I hope that other women won't fall captive to promises of 'rich men' like I did."

*Reprinted from the January 16, 2014 email of Arutz Sheva.*

**A Life-Saving Vow**

**To Serve Hashem**

 He served as the head of the rabbinical court in Lwow after the Chacham Tzvi and afterwards in Berlin, Metz and Frankfurt. During his tenure in Lwow a terrible calamity occurred and there was an explosion of several barrels of gun powder which caused a terrible fire that killed thirty six Jews including his in laws, his wife and daughter.

 It was during this tragic episode which the author of Pnei Yehoshua describes in great detail in the introduction to his multi volume Talmudic commentary, that he was trapped under the rubble. Lying there beneath the heavy beams of his destroyed home, paralyzed by shock he waited for the collapsing structure to subside. As he lay there immobile he vowed to Hashem that just as his illustrious maternal grandfather, the author of Maginei Shlomo, for who he was named, authored a commentary on the Talmud, should Hashem help him survive this terrible calamity, he vowed that he too would not rest until he had studied, reviewed and authored a similar Talmudic commentary.

 Miraculously, no sooner had he vowed this, then the rubble mysteriously parted and he found a path through which he crawled out unscathed and unhurt. Seeing this open miracle and understanding that Hashem had accepted his vow, he undertook to study and write novel interpretations and commentary on the Talmud and its commentaries, Rashi and the Tosfos. It is this famous multi volume work which has preserved his fame till this day.

 Hakhel Note: There are many remarkable additional incident relating to the Pnei Yehoshua. When opening the Sefer or other Seforim such as these, we should be moved by the dedication and greatness of the authors who compiled them!

Last week, the 14 Shevat, was the Yahrzeit of the Pnei Yeshoshua (R’ Yaakov Yehoshua B’R’ Tzvi Hersh Falk, Z’tl), the mechaber the Pnei Yehoshua on Shas and the grandson of the mechaber of the Maginei Shlomo after whom he was named. The following moving incident is excerpted from Me’Oros HaTzaddikim.

*Reprinted from the January 15, 2013 Hakhel Email Community Awareness Bulletin.*

**It Once Happened**

**Ovadia the Convert**

 This is the story of a remarkable man named Ovadia, who lived during one of the worst periods in Jewish history - the Crusades. As during the terrible Roman persecutions, the time of the Crusades saw a notable number of men and women who risked their lives to become Jews. These gentiles, often from the highest echelons of society, became converts to Judaism out of love of the Torah and a desire to serve G-d according to its holy precepts.

 Johannes, who upon conversion took the name Ovadia (which means "servant of G-d"), was one such man. He was a Norman nobleman and the son of a Norman knight who took part in the First Crusade under the command of Godfrey, the Duke of Lorraine.

**The Unfortunate Victims**

**Of the First Crusade**

 The First Crusade, initiated by Pope Urban II, drew a motley crew of noblemen, adventurers and rogues who left France in 1096, ostensibly to free the Holy Land from the Moslem "infidels." Along the way, they seized the opportunity to rid France and Germany of the local "infidels," the Jews who lived peacefully in hundreds of communities along the Loire Valley, throughout the Rhineland, in Bohemia and in England. As the Crusaders passed through these lands they engaged in the most fearsome wholesale slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent Jews who happened to live in their path.

 Johannes was introspective and scholarly, different from his brother, Roger, who fought alongside his father in the Holy Land. It is unknown whether or not Johannes also accompanied his father, but when Jerusalem was conquered by Godfrey and all the Jews in the Holy City were mercilessly slaughtered, he was living in Southern Italy and studying to become a priest.

**Came to the Conclusion that**

**Judaism was the True Faith**

 At some point in his Bible study, Johannes came to the conclusion that Judaism was the true faith, and he resolved to become a Jew. It is possible that he was moved by the staunch adherence to their faith displayed by countless thousands of Jews who chose to die horribly rather than abandon their beliefs. It is also possible that he was inspired by the conversion of another prominent gentile several years earlier.

 The conversion, in about the year 1094, of no less a personage than Andreas, the Archbishop of Bari (Italy) created a great stir and caused tremendous consternation within the ranks of the Church.

 In his diary, Ovadia (Johannes) wrote of Andreas: "G-d put the love of the Law of Moses into his heart. He left his country, his priesthood and glory, and went to the land of Constantinople, where he underwent circumcision. There he suffered great persecution and he had to run away before the uncircumcised, who had tried to kill him. But others imitated him and entered the Covenant of the Living G-d. And the man went to Egypt and lived there until his death, while the leading churchmen were downcast and bowed their heads in shame."

**Traveled to Aleppo, Syria**

 Upon his decision to convert, Johannes traveled to Aleppo [Syria], where he sought the help of Rabbi Baruch ben Yitzchak. Johannes told the rabbi that he came from a wealthy and powerful family, but he had decided to abandon everything to become a Jew.

 This revelation was not only quite astonishing, but frightening as well, since persecution was guaranteed to follow and death was a very real possibility for any gentile who risked conversion. Johannes replied that he was well aware of all the repercussions of his actions, having made the decision thoughtfully over many years. And so, convinced of Johannes's sincerity, Rabbi Baruch accepted him as a righteous convert.

 It was impossible to continue living in France, and so Ovadia moved to the city of Bagdad, where life was far from easy, but there was more religious freedom for Jews. Ovadia had managed to bring a considerable part of his fortune with him, and in Bagdad he devoted himself to helping his less fortunate Jewish brethren. He became distinguished for his distribution of charity and was even appointed by the community to be treasurer of the community chest.

**Wrote a Fascinating Diary**

 Ovadia wrote a fascinating diary during these years. In approximately 1121, he decided to relocate to Fostat (old Cairo), which had a flourishing Jewish community. He noted that while traveling, he met a certain Karaite named Shlomo Hakohen, who claimed to be Moshiach. The man tried to persuade Ovadia to become one of his adherents. Ovadia just laughed at him, countering that Moshiach would be a descendant of King David, not from the priestly tribe as was this Karaite.

 Ovadia eventually settled in Egypt, where he wrote an autobiographical memoir in the year 1241. The only fragments that remain were discovered in the famous Cairo Geniza (a collection of ancient manuscripts discovered in the Ezra Synagogue in Cairo).

 In this remarkable cache of thousand-year-old documents were not only fragments of his memoirs, but an inscription on his prayer book and a letter of recommendation given to Ovadia by Rabbi Baruch ben Yitzchak. The bits and pieces which have come down to us, provide us with a window into that time and a glimpse into a remarkable life of faith, sacrifice and adventure. (*Adapted from Talks and Tales)*

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