

THE PRISON VISIT

What does it take to be a Rebbe?

Sing Sing is the name of a famous prison in New York State. One fine day back in the 1980s, the famous Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman of Israel, while visiting New York, got a phone call from Rabbi Binyomin Klein, of blessed memory—one of the Rebbe's secretaries. Rabbi Klein was calling from a phone in the Rebbe's car, which was a rarity back in those days. Rabbi Klein told Rabbi Grossman that he was calling from the Ohel.

The Rebbe himself at that moment was visiting the Ohel of the Previous Rebbe. The Rebbe would visit the Ohel frequently and would bring with him all the letters that he had received from all over the world in which people had asked him to pray for them. The Rebbe would stand next to the Previous Rebbe's monument and read those letters at length for hours on end. The Rebbe would also leave many of them at the Ohel. So during the times that the Rebbe would be spiritually bonding with his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, no one would be on the site with him—it was the Rebbe alone. The secretaries would merely wait for the Rebbe outside the Ohel until the Rebbe finished.

So that day, the Rebbe suddenly stopped his prayers, exited the small booth at the Ohel in which he would stand, summoned the secretary and told him that he knew that Rabbi Grossman was currently located in the United States. The Rebbe wanted Rabbi Klein to call Rabbi Grossman and ask him to go visit a Jewish

prisoner currently serving his sentence in New York's Sing Sing prison.

Now, Rabbi Grossman had received the request from the Rebbe in the late hours of the afternoon. So Rabbi Grossman asked Rabbi Klein if it were possible for him to visit Sing Sing the next day, or if it were something had to get done now. Rabbi Klein replied that if the Rebbe had interrupted his prayers at the Ohel to ask him to call Rabbi Grossman, then obviously the issue could not bear any postponement.

So Rabbi Grossman got the name of the prisoner from Rabbi Klein, canceled all of his appointments for the rest of the day, and had his driver transport him directly to Sing Sing, located in Ossining, New York.

Now, Rabbi Grossman did not know how he was supposed to even get into the prison. He had no entry card or credentials of any sort. Besides, he wasn't even a U.S. citizen! But the Lubavitcher Rebbe had spoken, and so he set out at once. Upon arrival, he approached the main gate and declared that he had come to visit Prisoner So-and-so—and to his surprise, they admitted him right away! It looked like they had almost been waiting for him to arrive.

It shortly became clear that this prisoner was an Israeli doctor who had moved to the U.S. and had been incarcerated on suspicion of some grave crime. He had been sentenced to life in prison. Over the past several days, this prisoner had attempted suicide twice. When a rabbi arrived who had said that he wanted to speak to that prisoner, the prison let him in with open

arms.

Rabbi Grossman met with the doctor, encountering a man burnt out, depressed and hopeless. Rabbi Grossman broke the ice, opening with, "I bring regards for you. The Lubavitcher Rebbe sent me to visit you here." Upon hearing that, the doctor burst into tears.

The doctor went on to say that he had given up on life. His freedom had been taken from him. He was no longer a human being. Here he was, an outstanding doctor who had helped so many people, now reduced to needing help from other people. He then said: "Rabbi, I'm sick of life! I want to end it all." So Rabbi Grossman started talking to him, telling him that he was a Jew and that G-d loved him, and that he could still turn things around, etc." "Not me," pouted the doctor. "I'm too far gone."

The Message

At that moment, Rabbi Grossman remembered the words he had heard from the Rebbe at the last farbrengen he had attended. At that time, the Rebbe had commented on the verse in Tehilim (Psalms, 139:5), "From the rear and the front You encompassed me," which refers to Adam, who is considered the first and last creation in all of Creation.

Now, seemingly, it's pretty clear from the text of Bereishis (Genesis) that Adam was the last thing created on Friday, the sixth day of Creation, after all of Creation had come to be. So then what does Tehilim mean when it says that Adam was also the first creation? How do you reconcile that?

So the Rebbe explained that, according to the Midrash, Adam's body had indeed been created last. However, his soul had been created first—even before the creation of the angels. And that's what the Midrash means when it also says, "If a person is meritorious, he is told, 'You preceded the Ministering Angels,' and if not, he is told, 'The fly preceded you'" (Bereishis Rabbah 8:1).

The Rebbe said that here, our Sages are telling us something wonderful—that even should a person feel degraded, to the point that that he feels lower than the animals, that may be true only with regards to his body—but his soul, the G-dly soul within him, stands above everything.

The imprisoned doctor sat and wept, and then asked, "That's what the Rebbe said?"

Well, Rabbi Grossman went back to Brooklyn and reported to the Rebbe that he had met with the Jewish prisoner. The Rebbe was very gratified, and encouraged Rabbi Grossman to continue visiting him. Throughout that week, Rabbi Grossman came back to see the doctor every day. He reported to the Rebbe that he had put on tefillin with the prisoner, and asked the Rebbe if he should try to bring him a little closer to Judaism. The Rebbe told him that he should just concentrate on giving him morale.

From then on, whenever Rabbi Grossman would visit New York, he would go visit that one Jewish prisoner. Over the course of the years, fortunately, the prisoner was released and went back to Israel. Just over a year ago, the doctor passed away.

Rabbi Grossman finished the story by saying that to this day, he

has no idea how the Rebbe knew about this one prisoner. Rabbi Grossman himself had never heard of him—and in fact, the prisoner himself had never written or approached the Rebbe. But the Rebbe worried about him.

Now, my friends, I'd like to share with you another short story.

The Rebbe Remembered

Back in 1988, on the night of the 22nd of Shvat of that year, after 60 years of marriage to the Rebbe, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka suddenly passed away. She had not been especially ill. She had suffered an internal bleed in the stomach and passed on right away.

The Rebbe was very broken. The Rebbe had had no children. His brothers had died many years earlier. The Rebbetzin had been with him throughout for 60 years, and with one fell swoop, it was all cut away. There were no words to describe how broken the Rebbe looked, and it weighed on everyone's heart.

In the morning, they brought the Rebbetzin's body from the hospital back home. The Rebbe came out to receive the bier. The pain on the Rebbe's face was heartbreaking. The next day at noon, the funeral took place.

That same morning, the personal physician of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin, Dr. Ira Weiss of Chicago, arrived to be with the Rebbe at this difficult time. He stood by the Rebbe's side at the time of the actual burial, supporting the Rebbe.

Dr. Weiss remained in New York for several days, to be with the

Rebbe. Late on Saturday night, while the Rebbe was walking up the steps to the second floor of his home with the doctor behind him, the Rebbe suddenly turned around and asked him if there were any news from Mrs. So-and-so of Chicago.

Dr. Weiss was shocked that the Rebbe, at such a personally sad time, was thinking about this woman. The Rebbe was referring to a couple that had been trying to conceive, and Dr. Weiss was their family physician. He had been updating the Rebbe throughout the entire process. Now, as the Rebbe was sitting Shiva for the one person closest to him in the entire world, the Rebbe was interested in how that couple from Chicago was doing.

Be The Rebbe's Hands and Feet

The Rebbe explains in a Sichah that when it comes to leaders, there are leaders of specific groups who only care about those specific groups. For example, leaders of countries care specifically about the citizens of their countries. You have rabbis who care for their communities and for the members of their synagogues, etc.

But a true Rebbe is something else entirely.

The word "Rebbe" in Hebrew is an acronym for "Rosh Bnei Yisrael," or "Head of the Jewish Nation." As everyone knows, the head feels pain anywhere else in the body—meaning, that a person who only cares about certain category of people may very well be a good leader, but he is not a Rebbe.

So, what is a true Rebbe?

A Rebbe is a leader who worries about every Jew, no matter who he or she may be. Even if that Jew is sitting in prison for life, or if we're talking about a Jewish couple in Chicago who are trying to bring children into the world, every Jew is as precious to a Rebbe as an only child (Sichah, 12 Tammuz, 5727, Toras Menachem 47, pg. 156).

And it is out of that same caring that the entire institution of shlichus arose—because the Rebbe cared for every Jew. So therefore, it mattered to the Rebbe that there be a Pesach Seder in China, and that a Jew in Alaska hear the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah. And it was that caring that the Rebbe internalized into every one of his Chasidim, and essentially into every person who came into contact with the Rebbe.

Today we mark the yahrzeit of the Rebbe. We need to serve as the Rebbe's hands and feet. But we can't sit around waiting for a phone call from Rabbi Klein. It is incumbent upon us to take the opportunity to approach the Jew who comes before us and see what he or she might need, and then to help him or her—whether materially or even more so spiritually; if we can encourage him or her to do one more mitzvah.

It often happens that people ask themselves, "How can I possibly know what the other guy really needs?"

The story is told that there was a villager somewhere in Europe who was sitting at the local tavern, drinking with his buddy. Now, this was after they both had had a good few drinks, and neither one was particularly sober at the moment.

And so, in a drunken stupor, the first villager asks his buddy,

“Do you love me?”

“Sure!” says the second drunk guy. “I love you a lot!”

“How can you say that you love me?” the first guy answers back. “You don’t know what bothers me! If you really loved me, you’d know what bothers me.”

And so, my friends, if we truly care about the Jew sitting before us, then we’ll know what’s causing him pain. And more importantly than that, we’ll help him.