



Fighting for our Fathers' Traditions (day 2)

Too often, families fight over inheritances. But there is one sort of inheritance in which there is enough for all...

The Precious Bible

Good Yom Tov!

Back in the 1960s, when Dr. King led marches for civil rights all across the United States, he carried his personal Bible with him wherever he went. And that holy book triggered a squabble among his three children. His two sons wanted to sell it for the highest price (along with their father's Nobel Peace Prize gold medal), but his daughter—who had kept that Bible in her possession all the years—vigorously opposed any such sale. She argued that the book was more valuable to her than anything else, and she was not prepared to sell it for any price.

Well, the brothers took the case to court, where a judge ruled that since they constituted the majority of the three heirs and wanted to sell it, the sister could therefore not oppose it and was obliged to transfer the Bible to their possession. But the daughter still resisted, and refused to obey the court order.

In the meantime, the story leaked out to the media—to the point that the family eventually turned to Jimmy Carter, the former U.S. president, to mediate between the two sides. And ultimately, Bernice King had to surrender the travel Bible to her brothers.

The Holy Tefillin

[L'havdil] There is a similar story about the sons of the tzadik, Rabbi Yisroel of Ruzhin. The Ruzhiner Rebbe was a famous leader in the history of the Chasidic movement who had thousands of Chasidim. He was perhaps most famous for living in extravagant affluence. (Why he did so is a whole other discussion.)

When he passed away, his children divided the inheritance, and among of the most valuable items that had belonged to their father were his tefillin, which actually originally belonged to his own great-grandfather, the Mezritcher Maggid (the successor to the Baal Shem Tov). Obviously, each of the Ruzhiner Rebbe's sons wanted those tefillin for himself—and so they decided that each of them would write a note listing what they were prepared to give so as to get the tefillin, and then put those notes in a sealed envelope. Whoever was willing to give up the most would get the tefillin.

Just before they opened the envelope, they changed their mind and decided to do a lottery instead. And as it turned out, son Dovid Moshe—who later became the Chortkover Rebbe—drew the winning ticket and got the tefillin. However, after the lottery, Dovid Moshe's older brother was curious to know what each of the brothers had written on their original notes. So they opened the envelopes—and discovered that Dovid Moshe, who had ultimately won the tefillin, had written that he was prepared to give up his entire inheritance just so that he could get the Maggid's tefillin. Then, they all understood why he had won the lottery.

The story doesn't end there. Two years later, Rabbi Dovid Moshe's older brother, who had become the Sadigurer Rebbe, was sitting among his Chasidiim and speaking, and among other things, he remarked that he was jealous of his brother Rabbi Dovid Moshe who prays with the Mezritcher Maggid's tefillin.

Well, two of his Chasidim there got up and confessed that immediately after the lottery, they had seen how their Rebbe (Rabbi Dovid Moshe's older brother) had so strongly desired the Maggid's tefillin—and so they had gone ahead and secretly removed the original parchment scrolls from inside the tefillin and replaced them with other kosher ones. But now, they were going around with the parchments for the past two years, not knowing what to do—and they were afraid to tell their Rebbe because they knew that they had done something very serious and that he'd rebuke them for it. When their Rebbe heard this, he told them to bring them the parchments, and instructed them to not tell anyone about it.

At the next opportunity, he went with those same two Chasidim to visit his brother, the one from whom the parchments had been stolen. So now, the Sadigurer Rebbe arrived in Chortkov—and the following morning, he joined his brother, the Chortkover Rebbe, for the morning Shacharis prayers in shul. He went into his brother's room and saw how on the desk, there was another pair of tefillin in addition to the Maggid's tefillin. He then watched how his brother approached the desk, picked up the Maggid's tefillin—and then sighed and put those tefillin back down on the desk and put on the other pair of tefillin.

He asked his brother, “Why don't you wear the tefillin you got as an inheritance?” His brother replied that throughout the two years that the Maggid's tefillin were in his possession, he had not put them on even once—because every time he picked them up to put them on, he felt that he was not worthy to wear them. So he left them on the desk and would wear other tefillin.

Now, the older brother said, “That's not the case, brother! It's not that you are unworthy of wearing the Maggid's tefillin—it's that you don't feel the holiness of the tefillin... because their holy parchment have been removed! And now, I've come to bring the parchments back to you.” (Sipurei Chasidim, Moadim pg. 249.)

When the Jews Fought Over Their Inheritance

The Torah tells us that, on the last day of his life, “Moshe wrote this Torah and gave it to the Kohanim, the sons of Levi, who carry the Ark of G-d’s Covenant” (Devarim 31:9). That means that when Moshe Rabbeinu finished dictating the Torah as we know it (and as G-d dictated it to him, of course), he handed it over the Tribe of Levi—because the mission of the Tribe of Levi was to teach the Torah to the Jewish Nation. They were the people’s rabbis, as Moshe Rabbeinu himself stated in his parting blessing (Devarim 33:10): “They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob, and Your Torah to Israel.” And so Moshe Rabbeinu handed them the Torah so that they could teach the people directly from it.

But the Jewish Nation didn’t exactly love the idea that they hadn’t gotten a Torah scroll themselves.

Rashi (Devarim 29:3) says: “On the very day that Moshe gave the Torah scroll to the sons of Levi... all of Israel came before Moshe and said to him: ‘Moshe Rabbeinu! We also stood at Sinai and accepted the Torah, and it was [also] given to us! Why, then, are you giving the members of your Tribe control over it, so that someday in the future they may claim, “It was not given to you—it was given only to us!”’ And Moshe rejoiced over this matter and it was on account of this, that he said to them, ‘This day, you have become a people!’, [meaning] ‘It is today that I understand that you cleave to the Omnipresent and desire Him.’”

When Moshe Rabbeinu saw how the Jewish Nation reacted to the fact of only the Tribe of Levi getting a Torah scroll and not them, he was thrilled—he saw that they weren’t fighting over material things like meat or money but rather, over the Torah, with each of the 11 other Tribes wanting the Torah. And thus, in the merit of that complaint, Moshe Rabbeinu in fact provided a Torah scroll to each of the Twelve Tribes, not just Levi. (Midrash, Devarim Rabbah 9:9; see Likutei Sichos

Vol. 24, pg. 207, et al.)

No Need to Fight

My friends, we're now standing just before the Yizkor prayer, in which we remember our parents. And to our great chagrin, most family feuds among inheritors are over matters of money—because of such issues, family members fight and hang out in courtrooms for years.

However, it is incumbent upon us to remember that when it comes to the spiritual legacy of our fathers and mothers, there is no fight. Each one of us can carry on the customs of our parents. If there was a certain holiday that was precious to them, and they observed it with special traditions, then it is incumbent upon us to continue those traditions. If our mother would light Shabbos and holiday candles, then we, her children, can continue that custom.

And when we fight to keep our traditions, then no less than Moshe Rabbeinu himself testifies on us that “this day, you have become a people!”

Good Yom Tov!