

The Holiday of the Books - Hei Teves

Message from the Heavenly Court via the Federal courtroom.

The Next Holiday on the Calendar

I have a holiday every day...

We just finished celebrating Chanukah, and now, this Sunday, I will mark Hey Teves, the 5th of Tevet, which is a Chabad holiday.

What's so special about tomorrow? Well, here is the story behind this holiday.

When the previous Rebbe arrived in the United States in 1940, having just escaped the horrors of the Holocaust, he brought with him a valuable collection of books that meant a great deal to him. These weren't just any books—these were rare, ancient books that had been collected by the Chabad Rebbes, passed down from generation to generation. The collection included centuries-old books, some so precious that they were almost priceless. They were books that the Rebbes themselves studied. The previous Rebbe was ready to risk everything for this library.

When Chabad bought the famous building on 770 Eastern Parkway, they placed the library in the basement of the building.

About forty years ago, in 1985, the librarians noticed something strange: books were mysteriously disappearing from the shelves. After installing a hidden camera, they discovered the unbelievable truth: one of the Previous Rebbe's family members, who had left Chabad years ago, was sneaking in at night, stealing the books, and selling them to the highest bidder.

Naturally, they took immediate action and obtained an injunction to stop the thefts and sales of the books. The thief, however, claimed in court—through his lawyers—that the books belonged to him legally, as he was one of the rightful heirs of the previous Rebbe.

The Rebbe was very upset, and he spoke publicly about the issue. He said that these books were not the property of any individual, but rather the property of the Chabad movement. It's like when a U.S. president leaves office—he can't take gifts with him, because they belong to the country, not the individual. Legally, these books belonged to Agudas Chassidei Chabad, which is a legally recognized entity. And therefore, the books rightfully belonged to them.

This whole situation caused the Rebbe tremendous distress. It was a disgrace that the sacred books of his holy father-in-law, Chabad treasures, were being treated like seller's items and being publicly sold to the highest bidder. Naturally, this whole situation ended up in court.

The trial began on the 19th of Kislev 1985. One of the arguments presented by the lawyers of the other side was that

Agudas Chassidei Chabad was no longer active; it had been inactive for many years, and some of the board members had passed away.

When the Rebbe spoke about the proceedings, the Rebbe pointed out that Agudas Chassidei Chabad was the group that represented the entire Chabad movement. So to claim that Chabad Chassidim aren't active is a ridiculous claim. Who, if not Chabad, is active and engaged in Jewish life?

But then, the Rebbe took this in an entirely new direction. The Rebbe looked at it from a spiritual perspective. If a claim is raised, the Rebbe said, it really comes from above. That is, in the heavenly court, they are questioning if Chabad Chassidim are active enough.

It's true that the person making this claim in court is only doing it for their own benefit, and there's no truth to it. But the fact that this claim even reached the courtroom means there's a message from heaven. We need to ask ourselves: what's being asked of us here? After all, Chabad Chassidim are out there turning over the world with their efforts to spread Judaism.

To help understand the spiritual message, the Rebbe shared a story from the Talmud.

Salting Your Money

The Talmud tells a story about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who was the leader of the Jewish people during the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. One day, he was riding on a donkey, leaving Jerusalem, with his students walking behind

him. As they were traveling, Rabbi Yochanan noticed from a distance a young woman scavenging through the garbage, clearly starving. When she saw him approaching, she stopped and asked, “Rabbi, please support me.” Rabbi Yochanan asked her, “Who are you?” She replied, “I am the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion.”

Nakdimon ben Gurion was once one of the richest men in Jerusalem. Yet here was his daughter, rummaging through the trash for food. Rabbi Yochanan asked her, “My daughter, what happened to all your father’s wealth?” She answered, “Haven’t you heard the saying in Jerusalem that you have to ‘salt your money’?”

Just like salt preserves food, you need to salt your money to keep it. And how do you salt money? By giving charity. But they didn’t salt their money, and that’s why it’s all gone.

Rabbi Yochanan then asked her, “And what about your father-in-law’s wealth? What happened to that?” She answered, “It’s gone too.” She went on to remind him, “Do you remember signing my Ketubah?” Rabbi Yochanan replied, “I do. I remember reading it over and over, seeing it promised thousands upon thousands of gold coins from both your father’s and father-in-law’s estates.” As he recalled this, he broke down in tears. One of the wealthiest families in Jerusalem had been rendered destitute. (Kesubos 66b)

Nakdimon’s Charity

At this point, the Talmud raises a question: “Didn’t Nakdimon ben Gurion give charity?” After all, there are stories in the

Talmud about his remarkable generosity and the extravagant way he gave.

Once, during the festival season countless pilgrims had flocked to Jerusalem, but there wasn't enough water for them. Nakdimon approached an official and asked to borrow twelve springs of water for the pilgrims, promising to return the water by a specific date. If he failed, he agreed to pay twelve talents of silver instead.

That year, however, was a drought, and the official was sure there wouldn't be any rain. Confident he'd soon collect the hefty payment, he waited. When the deadline came, the official sent a message to Nakdimon: "Pay up—either the water or the silver." Nakdimon calmly replied, "The day isn't over yet."

The official laughed and mocked him, saying, "It hasn't rained all year, and now you think it will rain today?"

Feeling troubled, Nakdimon went to the Temple and prayed, "Master of the Universe, You know I didn't do this for my own honor but for Yours, so that the pilgrims would have water." Just then, the sky darkened, clouds gathered, and rain began to pour. All twelve springs filled up.

But the official wasn't satisfied. He claimed the rain had come after sunset, meaning it was technically too late, and Nakdimon still owed him. Nakdimon returned to the Temple and prayed again, asking G-d to perform another miracle. Immediately, the clouds cleared, the sun came out, and it was clear that the rain had fallen in time. (Taanis 19b)

This story shows just how central Nakdimon was to the people of Jerusalem—they relied on him for everything. So it's surprising to think he might not have given enough charity!

But the Talmud addresses this by saying, "He didn't do as much as he could have." While Nakdimon gave charity in large amounts—more than most others—he didn't give according to his full potential.

The Rebbe drew an important lesson from this: Even the suggestion of falling short, no matter how unfounded, carries a deeper message. It reminds us that no matter how much we've accomplished, there's always room to do more. The Rebbe then turned this into a call to action, urging everyone to expand their efforts. "We must increase all activities in Chabad Houses everywhere," he emphasized. "And wherever there isn't one yet, it's time to establish one immediately!" (Toras Menachem 5746 v. 2 pg. 191)

The End of the Case

A year after the court case, the ruling came down: the books didn't belong to any individual—they were the property of the Chabad community.

This decision was handed down on Tuesday, Hey Tevet 1987. That same day, in a talk (Toras Menachem 5747 v. 2 pg. 170), the Rebbe shared a lesson from the weekly Torah portion, Vayigash. The Rebbe explained that every event in life should be viewed as a message from Heaven, much like the story of Joseph.

When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers with the words, “I am Joseph, is my father still alive?” they were so shocked they couldn’t respond. But Joseph immediately reassured them, telling them not to feel bad about selling him into slavery. He explained that it was all part of G-d’s plan, saying, “G-d sent me ahead of you to preserve life.” Even the hardships had a divine purpose—to save his family during the famine.

The Rebbe said that every moment in life—whether joyful or challenging—has a higher purpose. Just as Joseph recognized that everything he endured was part of a greater plan, we too must see the events in our lives as part of a divine design.

How does this apply to the case of the books? The Rebbe said that even the claim that Chabad wasn’t active enough—despite all it had accomplished—carried a deeper message. Such claims, the Rebbe explained, are only allowed to arise to motivate us to even greater efforts in spreading Torah and Judaism.

Keep Jacob Alive

The Rebbe continued by drawing a connection to another part of the Torah portion: when the brothers returned to Canaan to tell Jacob that Joseph was alive, the Torah states, “The spirit of their father Jacob was revived.” After twenty-two long years of mourning for Joseph, this news essentially brought Jacob back to life.

The Rebbe posed a question: “How can we, thousands of years later, revive our forefather Jacob?” The answer, he explained, is found in the Talmud’s teaching: “Jacob our father did not die.”

When the Talmud challenges this, asking, “But wasn’t there a funeral and eulogies for him?” the answer is given: “Just as his descendants are alive, so too, he is alive.” In other words, as long as we, his descendants, live according to the values and path of Jacob, his spirit remains alive and active in the world.

The Rebbe emphasized that this places a tremendous responsibility on all of us. It’s through our actions, our commitment to Torah and mitzvot, and our influence on others that we ensure Jacob’s legacy continues. By living in alignment with his values and inspiring others to do the same, we keep his spirit alive.

The Rebbe turned this into a practical directive: every individual should turn their home into a Chabad House—a space of Jewish education, warmth, and community.

I can tell you that after the court case over the books, there was a noticeable surge of energy among Chabad Shluchim. The Rebbe’s consistent encouragement led to an unprecedented expansion of Chabad Houses globally. Everyone studying in 770 during those years went on Shlichus. The growth was unbelievable.

But the mission is not over yet. So, we each need to make sure that our own homes are Chabad houses, places where Judaism is spread and strengthened—and may we soon merit to see the ultimate Chabad house, the Holy Temple with the coming of Moshiach.