

A Piece of Advice ¹

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Talk about a holy man! Our powers are not theirs; their ideas are not for us to understand. But let me tell you what happened to my own father-in-law.

At the time, I was still a young man, a mere boy, and a follower of the rabbi of Kuzmir — who was there more worthy? My father-in-law lived in Rachev, where I boarded with him. He was a wealthy man and ran his house in a grand manner. For instance, look at what happened at the blessing. Only after I had washed my hands and said the blessing, did my mother-in-law take the rolls from the oven. So that they were still hot and fresh. She timed it to the very second. In my soup, she put hard boiled eggs. I wasn't accustomed to such luxuries. In my own home the loaves of bread were baked two weeks in advance. I used to rub garlic on a slice, and wash it down with cold well water.

But at my father-in-law's everything was fancy — brass door latches, copper pans. You had to wipe your boots on a straw mat before crossing the threshold. and the fuss that was made about brewing coffee with chicory! My mother-in-law was descended from a family of Misnagids¹ — the enemies of the Hasids — and to Misnagids the pleasures of this world mean something.

My father-in-law was an honest Jew, a Talmudic scholar; also a dealer in timber, and a mathematician of sorts. He used to have his own hut in the forest; and took a gun and two dogs when he went there, because of robbers. He knew logarithms; and by tapping the bark of a tree with his hammer, could tell if the tree were as sound inside as out. He knew how to play a game of chess with a Gentile squire. Whenever he had a free moment, he read one of the Holy Books. He carried the "Duty of the Heart"² about with him in his pocket. He smoked a long pipe with a amber mouthpiece and a silver cover. He kept his prayer shawl in a hide bag, and for his phylacteries he owned silver cases.

He had two faults. First of all, he was a fervent Misnagid. What a Misnagid — he burned like fire! He called the Hasids "the heretics" and he was not ashamed to speak evil of the saintly Baal Shem himself. The first time I heard him talk like

¹ The term "Misnagdim" commonly refers to opponents of Hasidism.

² Divine unity, divine wisdom and goodness as the foundation of creation and nature, divine worship, trust in God, unification of and sincerity in purpose and action in serving God, humility, repentance, self-examination, abstinence, and the love of God.

that I shuddered. I wanted to pack up and run away. But the rabbi of Kuzmir was against divorce. You married your wife, not your father-in-law. And he told me Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, hadn't been a Hasid either. I was amazed Jethro later became a holy man. But that's putting the cart before the horse. . . .

My father-in-law's second fault was his uncontrollable anger. He had been able to conquer all his other moral weaknesses, but not that one. If a merchant did not repay a debt on time and to the penny, he called him a swindler and refused to have any further dealings with him. If the town shoemaker made him a pair of boots, and they were a little too tight or too loose, he harangued him heartlessly.

Everything had to be just so. He had gotten it into his head that Jewish homes had to be as clean as those of the Christian squires, and he insisted that his wife let him inspect the pots and pans. If there was a spot on them, he was furious. There was a joke about him: that he had discovered a hole in a potato grater! His family loved him; the town respected him. But how much bad temper can people take? Everybody became his enemy. His business partners left him. Even my mother-in-law couldn't stand it any more.

Once I borrowed a pen from him. I forgot to return it immediately, and when he wanted to write a letter to Lublin, he began hunting. Remembering that I had it, I hastened to give it back. He had fallen into such a rage that he struck me in the face. Well, if one's own father does a thing like that, it's his privilege. But for a father-in-law to strike a son-in-law: it's unheard of! My mother-in-law became sick from what had happened; my wife wept bitterly. I myself wasn't that upset: what was the tragedy? But I saw that my father-in-law was eating his heart out, regretting it. So I went to him. "father-in-law," I said, "don't take it to heart. I forgive you."

As a rule he spoke very little to me. Because if he was particular about everything, I was lax. When I took off my coat, I never remembered where I had put it. If I was given some coins, I promptly misplaced them. And though Rachev was a tiny village, when I went beyond the market place, I could no longer find my way back. The houses were all alike, and I never looked at the women within. When I got lost, I would open a cottage door and ask, "Doesn't my father-in-law live here?" those inside would always begin to titter and laugh. Finally I took a vow never to walk anywhere except straight from my home to the study house and back again. — only later did it occur to me that near my father-in-laws' house stood a landmark: a thick tree with deep roots, which must have been two hundred years old.

Anyway, for one reason or another, my father-in-law and I were always quarreling, and he avoided me. but after the incident of the pen, he talked to me. “Baruch, what shall I do?” he said. “I’m a bad-tempered man. I know the sin of anger is as evil as that of idolatry. For years I’ve tried to control my temper, yet it only gets worse. I’m sinking into hell. In worldly matters too, it’s very bad. My enemies want to destroy me. I’m afraid I’ll end up without bread in the house.”

I answered: “Father-in-law, come with me to Rabbi Chazkele of Kuzmir.”

He turned pale. “Have you gone mad?” he shouted. “You know I don’t believe in wonder rabbis!”

I held my tongue. First, because I didn’t want him to scold me as he always regretted it later. And, second, I didn’t want him to go on slandering a holy man.

Imagine then: after the evening prayer, he came over to me and said, “Baruch, we’re going to Kuzmir.” I was stupefied. but why go into that. . . . He had decided to go, and we began to prepare for the journey immediately. As it was winter, we had to hire a sleigh. A deep snow had fallen and the road was far from safe; the forests were full of wolves; nor was there any lack of highwaymen. but we had to go right away. Such was my father-in-law’s nature! My mother-in-law thought — heaven forbid — that he had lost his mind. He put on his fur coat, a pair of straw overshoes, and said the special prayer for a journey. I found the whole thing a great adventure. wasn’t I going to Kuzmir and taking my father-in-law with me? Who could be happier than I? Yet I trembled with fear, for who knew what would happen there!

On the journey, my father-in-law didn’t utter a word. It snowed the whole way. The fields as we passed were full of swirling snowflakes. Philosophers say the shape of each flake is unique. But snow is a subject in itself. It comes from heaven and lets us experience the peace of the other world. White is the color of mercy according to the cabala, while red signifies law.

Nowadays snow is a trifle: it falls for a day or two at most. But in those days! Often it snowed for a month without stopping! Huge snowdrifts piled up; houses were buried; and everyone had to dig their way out. Heaven and earth merged and became one. Why does the beard of an old man turn white? Such things are all related. — at night, we heard the howling of beasts . . . or perhaps it was only the sound of the wind.

We arrived in Kuzmir on a Friday afternoon. My father-in-law went to the rabbi’s study to greet him. He was permitted to go in immediately. Since it was the middle of winter, few of the rabbi’s disciples had come. I waited in the study

house, my skin tingling. My father-in-law was by nature such a bullheaded man. He might very well talk back to Rabbi Chazkele. It was three-quarters of an hour before he came out, his face white as chalk above his long beard, his eyes burning like coals beneath his bushy eyebrows.

“If it wasn’t the eve of the Sabbath, I would go home immediately,” he said.

“What happened, father-in-law?” I asked.

“Your wonder rabbi is a fool!” An ignoramus! If he weren’t an old man, I would tear off his sidelocks.”

The taste of gall was strong in my mouth; and I regretted the whole affair — to talk this way about Rabbi Chazkele of Kuzmir!

“Father-in-law,” I asked, “What did the rabbi say to you?”

“He told me to become a flatterer,” my father-in-law answered. “For eight days I must flatter everyone I meet, even the worst scoundrel. If your rabbi had an ounce of sense he would know that I hate flattery like the plague. It makes me sick even to come in contact with it. For me, a flatterer is worse than a murderer.”

“Well, father-in-law,” said I, “Do you think the rabbi doesn’t know that flattery is bad believe me, he knows what he’s doing.”

“What does he know? One sin cannot wipe out another. He knows nothing about the law.”

I went away completely crushed. I had not yet been to the ritual bath, so I went there. I have forgotten to mention that my father-in-law never went to the ritual bath. I don’t know why. I guess it’s the way of the way of the Misnagids. He was haughty perhaps. It was beneath his dignity to undress among the other men. When I came out of the ritual bath, the Sabbath candles were already lit. Rabbi Chazkele used to bless the Sabbath candles long before dark — he himself, not his wife. His wife lit her own candles. But that is another matter. . . .

I entered the study house. The rabbi was standing in his white gabardine and his white hat. His face shone like the sun. One could see clearly he was in a higher world. When he sang out, “Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good for His mercy endureth forever,” the walls shook. While praying the rabbi clapped his hands and stamped his feet.

Only a few disciples were present. But they were the elite, men of holy deeds, every one of them a personal friend of the rabbi. As they chanted, I felt their prayers reaching the heavens. Never, not even at Kuzmir, had I experienced such a beginning of the holy Sabbath. The rejoicing was so real that you could touch it. All their eyes were shining. My mind became so light that I could barely keep my

feet on the ground. I happened to be praying near a window. Snow had covered everything — no road, no path, no cottages. Candles seemed to burn in the snow. Heaven and earth were one. the moon and the stars touched the roofs. Those who were not in Kuzmir that Friday evening will never know what this world can be. . . . I'm not speaking now of the world to come. . . .

I glanced at my father-in-law. He stood in a corner, his head bent. As a rule, his sternness was visible in his face, but now he looked humble, quite a different person. After the prayers we went to eat at the rabbi's table.

The rabbi had put on a white robe of silk, with silver fasteners, and embroidered with flowers. As his custom was before the Sabbath meal, he now sat alone in his library, reciting chapters of the Mishnah and of the Zohar. The older disciples sat down on benches; the younger men, among them, stood about.

When the rabbi came out of his study, he intoned the verses, "Peace be with you," and "A woman of worth, who can find?" Then he blessed the wine and said a prayer over the white bread of the Sabbath. He ate a morsel no bigger than an olive. Immediately thereafter, he began the Sabbath table chants. But this wasn't mere chanting! His body swayed; he cooed like a dove; it sounded like the singing of angels. His communion with G_d was so complete that his soul almost left his body. Everybody could see that the holy man was not here but high up in heaven.

Who knows what heights he reached? How can one describe it? As the Talmud says, "He who has not seen joy like this has never seen joy at all." He was at the same time at the court in Kuzmir, and high above in G_d's temples, in the Nest of the Bird, at the Throne of Glory. Such rapture is impossible to imagine. I forgot about my father-in-law and even about myself. I was no longer Baruch from Rachev — but bodiless, sheer nothing. It was one o'clock in the morning before we left the rabbi's table. Such a Sabbath service never happened before and never will again — maybe, when the Messiah comes.

But I am forgetting the main thing. The rabbi commented on the law. And what he said was connected with what he had told my father-in-law at their meeting. "What should a Jew do if he is is not a pious man?" the Rabbi asked. And answered: "Let him play the pious man. The Almighty does not require good intentions. The deed is what counts. It is what you do that matters. Are you angry perhaps? Go ahead and be angry, but speak gentle words and be friendly at the same time. Are you afraid of being a dissembler? So what if you pretend to be something you aren't? For whose sake are you lying? For your Father in Heaven. His Holy Name, blessed be He, knows the intention and the intention behind the

intention, and it is this that is the main thing.”

How can one convey the rabbi’s lesson? Pearls fell from his mouth and each word burned like fire and penetrated the heart. It wasn’t so much the words themselves, but his gestures and his tone. The evil spirit, the Rabbi said, cannot be conquered by sheer will. It is known that the evil one had no body, and works mainly through the power of speech. Do not lend him a mouth — that is the way to conquer him. Take, for example, Balaam, the son of Beor. He wanted to curse the children of Israel but forced himself to bless them instead, and because of this, his name is mentioned in the Bible. When one doesn’t lend the evil one a tongue, the must remain mute.

Why should I ramble on? My father-in-law attended all three sabbath meals. And when, on the Sabbath night, he went to the rabbi to take leave of him, he stayed in his study for a whole hour.

On the way home, I said, “Well, father-in-law?” and he answered: “Your rabbi is a great man.”

The road back to Rachev was full of dangers. Though it was still midwinter, the ice on the Vistula³ had cracked — ice-blocks were floating downstream the way they do at Passover time. In the midst of all the cold, thunder and lightning struck. No doubt about it, only Satan could be responsible for this! We were forced to put up at an inn until Tuesday — and there were many Misnagids staying there. No one could travel further. A real blizzard was raging outside. The howling in the chimney made you shiver.

Misnagids are always the same. these were no exception. They began to heap ridicule upon Hasids — but my father-in-law maintained silence. They tried to provoke him but he refused to join in. They took him to task: “What about this one? What about that one?” He put them off good-naturedly with many tricks. “What change has come over your?” they asked. If they had known that he was coming from Rabbi Chazkele, they would have devoured him.

What more can I tell you? My father-in-law did what the Rabbi had prescribed. He stopped snapping at people. His eyes glowed with anger but his speech was soft. And if at times he lifted his pipe about to strike someone, he always stopped himself and spoke with humility. It wasn’t’ long before the people of Rachev realized that my father-in-law was a changed man. He made peace with his enemies. He would stop any little brat in the street and give him a pinch on the cheek. And if the water carrier splashed water entering our house, though I knew this just about

³The Vistula is the longest and the most important river in Poland

drove my father-in-law crazy, he never showed it. “How are you, Reb Yontle?” he would say. “Are you cold, eh?” One could feel that he did this only with great effort. That is what made it noble.

In time, his anger disappeared completely. He began to visit Rabbi Chazkele three times a year. He became a kindly man, so good-natured it was unbelievable. But that is what a habit is like — if you break it, it becomes the opposite. One can turn the worst sin into a good deed. The main thing is to act, not to ponder. He even began to visit the ritual bath. And when he grew old, he acquired disciples of his own. This was after the death of Rabbi Chazkele. My father-in-law always used to say, “If you can’t be a good Jew, act the good Jew, because if you act something, you *are* it. Otherwise why does any man try to act at all? Take, for example, the drunk in the tavern. Why doesn’t he try to act differently?”

The rabbi once said: “Why is ‘Thou Shalt Not Covet’ the very last of the ten commandments? Because one must first avoid doing the wrong things. Then, later on, one will not desire to do them. If one stopped and waited until all the passions ceased, one could never attain holiness.”

And so it is with all things. If you are not happy, act the happy man. Happiness will come later. So also with faith. If you are in despair, act as though you believed. Faith will come afterwards.

—translated from the Yiddish by Martha Glicklich and Joel Blocker

Notes

¹http://wintersoldier2008.typepad.com/summer_patriot_winter_sol/2008/04/a-piece-of-adv.html