

## **A Passover Miracle**

It was Erev Pesach in the year 5344 (1584). As Rabbi Leib (the MaHaRaL) was intoning the prayers which usher in the Festival of Deliverance in the Altneur Shul of Prague, he made an error. Instead of reading "Umachalif es hazmanim" (and He changes the seasons) he read "Umachamitz es hazmanim" (and He sours the seasons). Rabbi Leib was frightened by this error. "Stop," he thought to himself, "this must signify something special, perhaps even an attack upon us!" He broke off his praying and turning to the congregation, said: "I must leave off praying for now, but you may go on, but no one is to leave this place until I give the word".

He then called the old Shammes, Avrohom Chaim, and directed him to go to all the other synagogues. He was to tell the worshippers not to complete the service nor to leave until he sent word. To the Golem, Rabbi Leib said, "Go quickly to my house and bring me one of the ordinary matzohs and one of the special (Shmurah) matzohs."

In a few minutes the Golem returned, his errand performed. Rabbi Leib asked him to taste a piece of the ordinary matzah and then a piece of the Shmurah matzah. When he tasted the first matzah, the Golem indicated that it tasted good.

However when biting into the "Matzah shel Mitzvah" he became deathly pale, and indicated that he was in great pain. Rabbi Leib's countenance showed profound concern and the congregation showed great fear. The face of the Golem became more and more distorted as he groaned and moaned. Rabbi Leib felt compelled to relieve the pain by placing his hand on the Golem's body. The services of the supernatural creature were urgently needed.

The officials of the congregation stormed Rabbi Leib with questions but he gave no hint. He tried to ease their fears by saying: "Be of good cheer, brothers, Hashem's help comes speedily, and He will save us from destruction." He then called the shames and instructed, "Go into all the synagogues and say, in my name, that the Matzah which was baked in Prague (in those days matzah was also furnished to the city dwellers by neighboring places) are to be regarded as Chometz until I shall be able to satisfy my doubts as to their character. No one is even to touch one of those matzohs, especially children and sick persons. It is a matter of life and death!

The Rabbi then called together all the men and women who had been connected with the preparation of the Matzohs and asked if any non-Jew had worked with them.

From them he learned that on the last day of baking, fearing that the work would not be completed on time, they had called in two non-Jews. These non-Jews were baker's apprentices, but these two had been busy entirely with the "reidling" (making the lines on the matzohs). They were well known in the Jewish quarter, where they had often been employed to do miscellaneous work. They were generally referred to as the "Red Beards."

Thereupon, Rabbi Leib gave instructions that only those matzohs which were baked on the previous day were under the ban. All other matzohs could be freely partaken of, on condition they be equally divided, so that those whose Matzohs belonged to the forbidden batch should have a supply. He then ordered that the services be resumed and that each person should, upon their conclusion, go home and celebrate the Seder without much ado.

Rabbi Leib also went home but he did not sit down at the table. Again he called the Golem. He instructed him to go to the home of the "Red Beards" and to look for any suspicious vials of liquid or packages of powder. He provided the Golem with an amulet which rendered him invisible.

In a short time the Golem returned. He had not found either of the apprentices at home and had no difficulty in his search. In a drawer, he had come upon a little box of powder which he had brought back with him. When the Rabbi smelled the powder, he noticed that it had the same odour as the matzah shel mitzvah but to a more concentrated degree. He then ordered the Golem to return at once to the apprentice's home and to replace the box, exactly as he had found it. Accompanied by the shames, Rabbi Leib and his companion met the "Red Beards" who could not conceal their surprise at the encounter. They greeted the Jews with a "Gut Yom Tov," being familiar with Jewish customs and expressions, and after the Rabbi and shames passed, they remained standing for some minutes watching them.

Rabbi Leib had great difficulty controlling himself, at the inquiry of the chief of police as to what had brought him to the prefecture at so unusual an hour. He explained to him the purpose of this unanticipated visit. The chief listened with rapt attention to the Rabbi. He expressed his willingness to personally conduct an investigation at once. Accompanied by two of his most skilled detectives, he proceeded to the home of the two suspects. Rabbi Leib in the meantime returned home in order to celebrate the Seder. It was already midnight. Almost all the members of the congregation who had already completed the Seder were assembled at his house, hoping to learn from him what had happened.

When the chief of police arrived at the abode of the apprentices, he did not find them at home. Hardly had the search begun when the detectives came upon the box of powder, more than half empty. The chief knew at once that it was poison. It was clear to him that the two criminals must have mixed some of the powder into the flour used for matzoh. He at once sent the two detectives to find the "Red Beards," declaring that he wouldn't leave the house until they were brought to him.

About an hour later, the detectives returned with the culprits, who were handcuffed. The officers reported that the two miscreants had resisted arrest. The chief started questioning them, inquiring as to where they had procured the powder and what they did with the portion missing from the box. Throughout, they remained dumb, though their eyes testified that they were terrified. The Chief stamped his feet and declared: "If you come clean with the truth, your punishment will be mild, if not, you may be put to death!"

The two exchanged looks but remained silent. Then the chief raised his voice in a tone which penetrated to the very marrow of their bones. At this, one of them felt compelled to make the following statement: "We have been at home in the homes of the Jews for a number of years. They have been good to us. But sometime ago, we were sent for by the monk Thaddeus, who said to us: 'It is quite probable that the Jews will need you as Pesach-goyim and they will give you work. Do you wish to do something for which many will be thankful to you?' We answered: 'Yes, we would be glad to do such a good deed.' Then he said: 'We must be through with the Jews once and for all, because their faith, their false faith, is harmful. Therefore, when you are employed by the wine-seller Berger, try to pour into each barrel of wine a few drops of this liquid.' 'We are not permitted to come near the wine,' we replied. Then he said: 'We must therefore find another way. Try your best to secure work in the matzah bakery. If you succeed in getting work, be sure to drop this powder into the flour which is being used for the matzoh of the Rabbi, who is a terrible sorcerer.'"

Saying this he gave us a box of powder, promising us huge sums of money as a reward. So we asked the matzoh bakers to give us work but they refused to do so until the day before the eve of Passover, when they sent for us. At a time when we were unobserved, we threw part of the

powder into the flour, but only part. We were sorry to cause the death of so many people who had given us employment and the means of a livelihood for so many years.

It was dawn before the police chief finished putting into writing the confession which both miscreants were willing to sign. Rabbi Leib was then requested to instruct those Jews who had received the poisoned Matzohs to bring them to the authorities. The matzoh would be needed as evidence. During the morning services on the first day of Pesach, an announcement was made that all matzohs which had been baked on the day before Erev Pesach were to be delivered to the office of the police chief. The Jews received this announcement with anxiety, as they could not understand what connection the authorities had with the matzohs.

In the meantime, police officers called upon the monk Thaddeus. They examined him in an attempt to verify and confirm the statement of the apprentices. But Thaddeus denied the entire story, declaring that he knew nothing about it. He offered to take an oath to that effect. Although they suspected him, the officers could not arrest Thaddeus, because they had no evidence other than the confession of the two apprentices. Those two however, were sentenced to five years in prison.

Since that day, the Jews of Prague, have been careful not to let a red beard come into their homes. The proverb is to this day current among them: "Beware of a Red Beard."

On the seventh day of Pesach, in the course of a sermon on the wonderful redemption of the Israelites from Egypt through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, Rabbi Leib told all about the providential rescue. He said: "EIn Baal HaNes Makir B'Nisso - Those for whom heaven prefers a miracle do not know of the greatness of the miracle. Had I not in reciting the prayers of the first night Pesach, made an error by saying "Umachamitz" instead of "Umachalif, a dreadful calamity would have fallen upon our community".

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