

R' Shimon's Power (II)

>In his work, *Hilula D'Rashbi*, the noted kabbalist R' Asher Zelig Margulies wrote the following:

While this work is not one of stories, nevertheless, I cannot restrain myself from relating the workings of Hashem, an awesome story of a wondrous miracle which we witnessed with our own eyes. Behold! I am an eyewitness to this miracle which took place in Meron on Lag BaOmer in the year 5683 (1923).

The following is a translation of R' Margulies' account:

That year, Lag BaOmer fell on a Friday. Most of the multitudes who had come there for Lag BaOmer remained there for the Sabbath — we experienced a Sabbath gladness that was exalted and wondrous.

It happened on Sabbath morning, after the last *minyan* had completed the *Mussaf* prayer at around noon in the study hall at the tomb of *Rashbi*. Suddenly, we heard a great, anguished cry. A Sefardic woman had brought her three-year-old boy to fulfill her vow — a well-known custom — that his *chalakah* (first haircut) would take place at R' Shimon's tomb. Then without warning, the boy was struck with cholera and died at the tomb. The child was placed in a small room on the roof of the building which stands above the tomb, while doctors on the scene ordered that everyone present be quarantined. People began to panic and some attempted to leave, but police soon arrived and sealed off the area.

Piercing cries and wailing filled the air; above them all, the anguished cry of the young mother whose one and only child had died on the day after his *chalakah* had been celebrated with such joy. I personally saw the lifeless body of the boy, his facial appearance drained of all color.

The entire assemblage was pained beyond description; we simply found it impossible to recite *Kiddush* and partake of the Sabbath morning meal. Then suddenly, the mother of the child, in the way of Jewish women of valor, girded herself with great inner

strength. She went to the room where her son lay, lifted him up into her arms and carried him downstairs to the synagogue which is at the tomb of R' Shimon. She placed the body on the floor and then, in an anguished, tear-choked voice, she cried out:

O *tzaddik*, O *tzaddik*, *tzaddik* Rabbi Shimon! Behold! I, your maidservant, came here in your honor, to cut the hair of my only child, whom God granted to me in your merit. I fulfilled my vow that I would bring him here [for his first haircut] on Lag BaOmer. Yesterday, I brought him here alive, and had his hair cut accompanied by music, song, food and drink, and much joy. Now, how can I leave from here without my child? How will I enter my house . . . ?

Her cries and wailing could be heard throughout the area — whose heart could not be melted, hearing such anguished cries of inner pain?

The woman then stood up and said:

Tzaddik, tzaddik! I am leaving my child before you as he is. I beg of you, do not shame me, do not turn me away empty-handed. Return my child to me alive and well as he was when I brought him before you. Let the Name of God, as well as your name, be sanctified in the world, and let it be known that there is a God Who rules this world, and there are *tzaddikim* whose bidding He fulfills.

As a *segulah* (auspicious omen), they closed the doors of the synagogue, leaving the child inside alone. After a few moments, the sounds of the boy crying for his mother could be heard coming from the synagogue. The *chacham* (Sefardic scholar) who was there opened the door for the mother to enter. The little boy, who was now standing on his feet, cried, “*Ima* (Mother), give me some water, for I am thirsty.” They brought him some water, after which his mother carried him upstairs to the room where he had been previously.

A great tumult erupted as news spread that the child had returned to life. The entire assemblage came to see with their own eyes, and the doctors gathered to examine the child. They admitted that by the laws of nature, the impossible had occurred.

It could only have been a miracle, in the merit of the holy *Tanna*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The quarantine was lifted.

The *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God's Name) was incredible. The entire assemblage recited the blessing of [Blessed are You, Hashem . . .] Who resuscitates the dead.^[1]

R' Shimon's Power (III)

*The following is adapted from an article by Baruch Ben Zahav which appeared in **Hamodia**. It is written in the first person as it appeared there.*

¶ We were a group of young men rejoicing together on the night of Lag BaOmer. Caught up in the holy spirit of the day, we began to recount the power of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, during his lifetime and throughout the generations.

Someone mentioned the *segulah* (auspicious omen) mentioned in *Taamei HaMinhagim* to pray at the grave of R' Shimon on behalf of a childless couple and promise that, if the couple will be granted a child within the coming year, then on Lag BaOmer of that year 18 *roytel* (approximately 53 liters) of wine will be distributed in Meron to those who come to pray on R' Shimon's *hilula*.

One of the young men present mentioned that on the previous Lag BaOmer, a friend of his had made such a promise on behalf of a couple who had been childless for many years. The couple had been blessed with a child and their friend was planning to distribute 18 *roytels* of grape juice at Meron in the morning.

I thought of a close friend of mine who was childless after six years of marriage. I stood up and announced, "I accept upon myself *b'li neder* (without the force of a vow) to distribute 18 *roytels* of grape juice in Meron on Lag BaOmer 5757 (1997) if . . .^[2] will be granted a child within the year."

1. *Shaar Yissoschor* writes that the *gematria* (numerical value) of שְׁמַעַן בָּן יוֹחָנָן is equal to that of מְחִילָה מְתִימָה, one who resuscitates the dead (553).

2. At this point, one inserts פָּלָנוֹן בָּן פָּלָנוֹת, the husband's Hebrew name, son of his mother's Hebrew name. The wife's Hebrew name [daughter of her mother's Hebrew name] should be said as well.

No sooner had I said these words than another man stood up and uttered the same resolution on behalf of a friend.

We drank "L'chayim" and wished one another "Mazel tov." The next morning at Meron, we repeated our promises.

¶ The Case of the Forgotten Cases

One month before Lag BaOmer 5757, my friend and his wife celebrated the *bris* of their newborn son. Two weeks later, the other couple on whose behalf a promise had been uttered were also blessed with a child.

The man who had made his promise on behalf of the second couple was a friend of mine and lives in my neighborhood. Happily, we made plans to transport 106 liters of grape juice to Meron in honor of Lag BaOmer to fulfill our promises. Accomplishing this should not have been very difficult; on Lag BaOmer, buses with large luggage compartments would be leaving from our neighborhood in Ashdod for Meron. However, my friend and I agreed to use another means of transport which would be more difficult and more expensive — but did have one advantage. A charity organization in Bnei Brak charges a fee to deliver such "segulah" beverages to the tomb of R' Shimon in honor of Lag BaOmer, and also undertakes to distribute the drinks among the multitudes there. We were apprehensive lest something go wrong at the last minute which would prevent us from honoring our promise. Using the services of an organization which provides this service annually seemed a sure way of having our grape juice reach its intended beneficiaries.

But a very strange thing happened. We traveled to Bnei Brak, delivered the grape juice ourselves to a drop-off spot from where the charity organization had it brought to a warehouse. There it was to remain until it would be transported to Meron in the week prior to Lag BaOmer. However, each time that the organization sent a delivery to Meron that week, our fifteen cases of juice were mistakenly left behind.

This happened despite the fact that this organization is known to be highly reliable, and that my friend and I called their office a number of times that week to ensure that our goods would be on the next truck to Meron. Each time, there was a reason why

the cases had been forgotten: the driver had misunderstood the instructions . . . ; he had been unable to locate our cases . . . It was very strange indeed.

On Lag BaOmer morning, our cases were still sitting in the storeroom in Bnei Brak. We were left with no choice but to go to Bnei Brak and transport the cases ourselves. But we wanted to travel to Meron with our friends so that we would be able to celebrate together with them. We also needed their help in carrying the cases of grape juice up Meron's steep hills. So my friend and I made plans to transport the cases by bus to Ashdod in time to catch our chartered bus to Meron.

But we missed the bus.

The bus pulled into the Bnei Brak station at 12:05, five minutes ahead of schedule. My friend, who is known to be punctual, arrived at the bus stop less than one minute after the bus pulled away. It was then that it became clear to me that, for some unknown reason, Heaven was placing obstacles in our path which seemed to be preventing us from accomplishing this mission.

My friend and I were contemplating taking a *sheirut* (group taxi) from Bnei Brak to Meron when suddenly a *sheirut* pulled up in front of us and the driver called out, "Ashdod, Ashdod!"

What good fortune! That time of day, one does not expect to find a *sheirut* to Ashdod. Moreover, the driver, a secular fellow who was quite amiable, hopped out and helped us load our precious cargo onto the van. "Since when does a *sheirut* go to Ashdod this time of day?" we asked the man. "I myself don't know," the driver replied. "It just worked out that way."

❧ A Telling Conversation

As we headed toward Ashdod, we discussed the cost of the trip. Rafi, the driver, wanted a hefty surcharge for transporting the grape juice and we felt that he was asking for too much. I told Rafi that we were on a *mitzvah* mission, and proceeded to relate the entire story to him.

The driver was obviously shaken by my words. Gripping the steering wheel tightly, Rafi told us with emotion that his sister was already married for twelve years without children. "I'm

transporting your cases for free," he now declared, "but I want you to do this for my sister: When you go up to Meron, mention my sister and brother-in-law's names and promise the 53 liters of wine for them if they have a baby. I'll worry about bringing the wine next year, *b'ezrat Hashem* (with God's help)."

We arrived in Ashdod on time and Rafi helped us load our cargo onto the chartered bus. "We will stay in touch," he told us happily as we parted.

After Lag BaOmer, I phoned Rafi to say that we had prayed at R' Shimon's tomb on behalf of his sister. He told me that his family had prayed as well.

We did not stay in touch after that conversation.

The Next Encounter

On 15 Tammuz, 5758 (July 9, 1998), we hired a van to take us from Ashdod to Bnei Brak to attend a *bris*. The van had only gone a few blocks when the battery died. The driver could not believe it, as the van was brandnew.

We quickly made our way to a nearby taxi stand and were relieved to find an available van. As we headed on our way, our new driver exclaimed that that very morning at 3 A.M., his sister had given birth to a girl, her first child after thirteen years of marriage.

Upon hearing this, it dawned upon me that the driver had been looking at me strangely soon after I had entered the van. Could it be . . . ?

As I was sitting there wondering, the driver suddenly turned around to me and with a shy smile asked, "Is it possible that you once rode with me?" It was Rafi.

Rafi began to cry and I cried with him. "This morning," he said, "when they woke me up to tell me the news, I said to myself, 'How will I ever find my friends and benefactors to tell them that their prayers had been answered?' That this has happened today can only be from Hashem, so that I could tell you the news."

I was speechless. All I could do at that point was to begin reciting *Tefillas HaDerech* (Prayer for a Journey). Rafi withdrew a *kippah* and placed it on his head. "I have to do this," he ex-

plained, "I am coming closer to Judaism. I am *mitchazek* (being strengthened)."

When, with God's help, we will visit Meron this coming Lag BaOmer, we will be joined by a very happy family who is drawing closer to Hashem and His Torah through the wonders which they have merited. And we will be reminded of the incredible workings of *hashgachah pratis* (precise Divine intervention) that brought us to celebrate with them.

His Greatness Revealed

The following was related by R' Yechezkel of Shiniv,^[1] who heard it from a God-fearing Jew in Safed when he visited the Holy Land in 1869:

For years, R' Elazar Azkari,^[2] author of *Sefer Charedim*, served as a *shamash* (synagogue attendant) in Safed and people assumed him to be an average Jew. Then, on one Lag BaOmer, he visited Meron and was present as the holy kabbalist R' Yitzchak Luria (the *Arizal*) and his disciples celebrated the *hilula* of R' Shimon bar Yochai.

The *Arizal* and his disciples danced with fervor for a very long time. Also present was an elderly man of regal bearing, clothed in white, whose countenance radiated holiness and purity. Some of the time this man danced with the others, while part of the time he danced alone. At one point, he joined hands with R' Elazar Azkari.

During one dance, the *Arizal* suddenly took hold of the old man's hands and danced with him inside the circle for a long time. Then, the *Arizal* took R' Elazar Azkari by the hand and danced with him for a long time with great fervor and joy. Later, when the *Arizal*'s disciples expressed wonderment over this, the *Arizal* smiled and said: "If the holy *Tanna* R' Shimon bar Yochai

1. It was related in R' Yechezkel's name by R' Chaim Elazar Shapiro of Munkacz, author of *Minchas Elazar*.

2. 1533-1600.

chose to dance with R' Elazar alone, then could it be beneath the dignity of someone as insignificant as myself to dance with him?" Only then did the disciples begin to realize R' Elazar's true worth, and only then did they discover that they had been joined by the one whose *hilula* they had come to celebrate, R' Shimon bar Yochai (*Masos Yerushalayim*).

More Precious than Gold

Once, a *chassid* of the *Tzemach Tzaddik* of Viznitz journeyed from Europe to be at Meron on Lag BaOmer. He was unprepared for something that is a rarity in the Land of Israel — a downpour in the spring! When the day of prayer and celebration ended, the *chassid* skidded as he made his way down the muddy mountain. His suit was caked with mud. Anxious that he not miss the boat for the return trip home, he changed into his Sabbath finery, threw his muddied suit into a bag and hurried on his way.

Soon after his return home, he went to visit the *Tzemach Tzaddik* and report on his journey. After greeting his *chassid*, the Rebbe asked in jest, "Did you bring me a gift from the Holy Land?" The *chassid* then began to relate his experiences. He told of his mishap in the mud, and mentioned that he had not yet had time to clean his clothing. The *Tzemach Tzaddik* said, "I would greatly appreciate it if you could bring me that garment."

Later, the *Tzemach Tzaddik* held the garment in one hand and with his other hand carefully scraped off some of the dried mud into a clean handkerchief. "I assure you," he told the *chassid*, "that you could not have brought me a more precious gift than this, the holy soil of Meron."

No Cause for Concern

In the year 1919, Arabs in Palestine made it known that they would attempt to block Jews from making their yearly pilgrimage to Meron in honor of Lag BaOmer.

Living in Safed at that time was the legendary Sefardic kabbal-

ist, R' Shlomo Eliezer ("Maharsha") Alfandri, known as "the *Saba Kadisha*" ("The Holy Elder"), who was then past ninety. *Maharsha* Alfandri, who had served as chief rabbi in Istanbul and then Damascus, was revered by Jews the world over as a pure and holy *tzaddik*. Upon learning of the Arab threat, *Maharsha* closeted himself in a room for a night and a day; not even those closest to him were permitted entrance. Finally, he emerged from his seclusion and declared that Jews should travel to Meron as always in advent of Lag BaOmer — and he gave his personal assurance that no harm would befall anyone.

Lag BaOmer passed without incident.

The Forgotten Promise

In *V'Nichtav BaSefer*, R' Yaakov Meir Shechter relates the following:

¶ In the Old City complex of *Battei Machseh*, where R' Shechter lived as a boy, lived an outstanding Sefardic scholar named *Chacham Shaul Sharbani*. *Chacham Shaul* once related that when he was a young man, he and a friend received notices from the ruling Turkish government that they had been drafted to serve in the Turkish Army. It was well known that for a religious Jew to serve in the Turkish Army meant being exposed to serious physical and spiritual dangers. Thus, anyone who received the dreaded notice did everything in his power to free himself from service.

Shaul and his friend devised a plan which stood a fair chance of accomplishing this goal. They both vowed that if God would help them succeed, then they would express their gratitude by traveling to Meron to pray at the tomb of R' Shimon bar Yochai.

The plan worked and they were both exempted from army duty. *Shaul Sharbani* wasted no time in fulfilling his promise, which involved a week-long journey by donkey or camel. He arrived safely in Meron and poured out his heart in prayer of thanksgiving.

His friend, however, did not join him. For whatever reason, he never made the trip to Meron.

Unfortunately, the friend later received a second draft notice. *Chacham Shaul* was never again asked to serve.

In recounting this episode, R' Schechter writes:

Both when praying in times of distress and when expressing thanksgiving to God for one's successes, a person must always remember that all his efforts and successes are only through the kindness of God who had mercy upon him and rescued him. Only then can one's successes endure.

R' Isser'l's Reward

Lag BaOmer is the yahrtzeit of R' Moshe Isserles, the famed Rama of Cracow (see "Laws and Customs" in this volume).

¶ In sixteenth-century Cracow lived a Jew named Yisrael Isser, known as "R' Isser'l." R' Isser'l was a noted Torah scholar, philanthropist, and respected communal leader. He manufactured and sold fine silk; among his customers were many of Poland's nobility.

Late one Friday morning, a nobleman entered R' Isser'l's store with the intention of making a huge purchase. Slowly, the nobleman made his way from shelf to shelf, carefully selecting some of R' Isser'l's most expensive merchandise. When noon arrived, the nobleman had completed his selections, but the fabrics still had to be measured before payment could be made. R' Isser'l told his customer:

"Please forgive me, but I must close the store now. It is my practice never to work past noon on Friday, so that I can properly ready myself for the Sabbath. I will measure your merchandise Sunday morning as soon as the store opens and will have it delivered to your door."

His words incensed the nobleman. This purchase would net R' Isser'l a handsome profit. The nobleman wanted the silk *now*. Couldn't R' Isser'l spare the half-hour it would take to measure all

the silk? In any case, if the purchase could not be completed now, the nobleman would take his business elsewhere.

R' Isser'l again offered his apologies. He emphasized, "In all my years in business, I never once deviated from my practice of not engaging in business on Friday afternoon."

The nobleman left in a huff. The deal was off.

R' Isser'l's sacrifice was noted in Heaven. It was later revealed to him that as a reward, he would be granted a son who would illuminate the world with his Torah wisdom. R' Isser'l's wife gave birth to a son whom they named Moshe. He grew to become the famed *Rama* of Cracow. ר' משה אַיסְטֶרֶלֶס, *R' Moshe Isserles* [son of Isser].