

Parschas Mattos-Masei 5772

PRESERVING HONOR

THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF R' CHIZKIYAH MEDINI AND THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM IT

Clearing one's name is not only good policy; it is a mitzvah as well. This week's *parshah* instructs us to remove suspicion when it arises, as the verse states (*Bamidbar 32:22*): "And you shall render yourselves innocent (in the eyes of) G-d and Yisrael" (*Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Rechilus, 6:3*).

Sometimes, however, there may be overriding concerns. The Chofetz Chaim (*ibid.*) delineates a scenario whereby the individual under suspicion recognizes that his detractors are so sold on the allegations that they are clearly uninterested in hearing the truth. In such an instance, it may be preferable to merely keep quiet until the storm has passed.

What follows is an amazing account of a highly regarded individual who was faced with false allegations. Although presented with an opportunity to defend himself, he relinquished this option — all for a higher purpose.

R' Chizkiyah Medini is perhaps best known for his magnum opus, *S'dei Chemed*. Talmudic scholars and *halachic* experts are familiar with this encyclopedic masterpiece so thorough in its treatment of such a wide range of topics. It would almost seem that supernatural abilities were required to produce such a monumental work. This was, in fact, the case, as R' Shalom Schwadron relates (*She'al Avicha V'yagedcha, vol. I, pp. 257-260*):

POTIPHAR'S WIFE (BEREISHIS CH. 39)

As a young man living in a Bucharian town, R' Chizkiyah spent his days immersed in Torah study in a *kollel* supported by one of the wealthy householders. His outstanding

diligence and purity of spirit won him a special place in the heart of this patron, who showered the young scholar with admiration and respect.

Unfortunately, the serenity of this idyllic situation was soon to be shattered. R' Chizkiyah's special station and favorable circumstances raised the ire of a colleague whose character was significantly less pristine. This individual could have chosen to correct his reprehensible tendencies or to raise his own level toward that of R' Chizkiyah. Instead, the pernicious peer sought to "bring down" the object of his envy and resorted to a most nefarious plot.

The magnate employed a maid who cleaned both in the *beis medrash* that housed the *kollel*, as well as his own private residence. The schemer perceived herein a perfect opportunity. With the help of a hefty payment, he convinced the woman to fabricate accusations against R' Chizkiyah. Although completely baseless, the plotter was confident that — through his instigation — enough ruckus could be raised to tarnish R' Chizkiyah's sterling reputation.

Allegations of impropriety tend to catch on rather quickly; through the efforts of the evil schemer, the gossip spread like wildfire. R' Chizkiyah — who alone knew of his complete innocence in the matter — maintained his strict study regimen, but a great storm swirled around him. Led by the instigator, there were soon calls for his ouster from the *kollel*. All eyes turned to the wealthy patron to see what he would do. His was still the final word.

The magnate instructed the crowds to cease from their demonstrations while he conducted his own investigations. In the meantime, the regular learning schedule at the *kollel* was to resume. As he stood in the *beis medrash* perusing the scene and contemplating the matter, his gaze fell on R' Chizkiyah, who remained immersed in his studies as

לז"נ מרן הגה"ר שמואל יעקב בן הרב יצחק מתתיהו זצוק"ל

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of אברהם יעקב בן העשיל ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

completely and pristinely as before.

After half an hour of reflection, the patron knew in his heart what must be done. “I have considered the matter,” he announced, “and I am as convinced as ever that the accusations are completely false; R’ Chizkiyah has not deviated one iota from his pure, spiritual nature. From here on in, whoever utters a word against him will be expelled from my *beis medrash*.”

ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL – EXCEPT FOR THE BAD GUY

Soon afterward, R’ Chizkiyah was approached by someone in need — none other than the maid herself! In light of her part in the scheme, the wealthy man had relieved her of her duties, and she was now left without a source of livelihood. Almost unbelievably, she petitioned R’ Chizkiyah to intervene on her behalf! She offered, in exchange, to make a public confession of her role in manufacturing the scandal. She would reveal to the public how she had been paid off to level false accusations, and who was behind it.

Initially, R’ Chizkiyah was intrigued by the chance to clear any possible lingering doubts about his innocence. But then another thought occurred to him. When people would learn the truth about the egregiousness of the event — how a certain scholar was capable of such malice, ensnaring an innocent colleague (himself) in a fabricated public scandal — it might cause a *chillul Hashem* (desecration of the Divine Name). People might make erroneous generalizations about Torah scholars — *look at the depths to which a student of Torah had sunk!* And so, R’ Chizkiyah proposed to the maid to do just the opposite: he would find her another job and — in exchange — she would keep all of the details of the occurrence to herself.

“As soon as I told her of my decision,” R’ Chizkiyah later related, “I suddenly felt a strange sensation. My mind was suddenly opened and filled with Divine Wisdom. The results of this sudden infusion of knowledge formed the basis of the *sefer S’dei Chemed*.”

Through this selfless act — in which he sacrificed an opportunity for public exoneration to prevent an erosion of

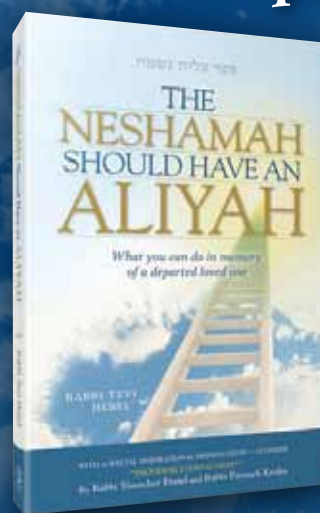
the Honor of Heaven — R’ Chizkiyah seemed to be adhering to the words of the following Mishnah (*Avos 2:4*):

בטל רצונך מפני רצונו, כדי שיבטל רצון אחרים מפני רצונך.

“Nullify your personal will in the face of His interests; consequently, He will nullify the will of others (who seek your harm) in the face of your interests.”

Indeed, it appears that in R’ Chizkiyah’s case, this Mishnah was fulfilled in its fullest sense. The Bartenura explains the final phrase to mean that Hashem will completely thwart the designs of one’s enemy. And so it was, that within a matter of days, the instigator was found dead.

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