

Vayishlach: The Brisker Rav and The Innkeeper

- Peysach Krohn.

The Brisker Rav teaches an innkeeper a lesson in hospitality. This is the story told by Rav Sholom Schwardron, as retold around Rabbi Pesach Krohn's hospitable table. A text of "vekacha lo yease" teaches the lesson.

Source: AROUND THE MAGGID'S TABLE By RABBI PAYSACH J. KROHN
"HOUSE GUESTS"

It is said that outside the house of the Maharsha (R' Shmuel Eliezer Eidels, 1555 1631), head of the beis din (religious court) in Ostroh, Poland, and author of a noted Talmudic commentary, there was a placard on which was written the verse from Iyov (31:32), "Bachutz Lo Yalin Ger Dilosai LoOrach Eftach" Let no stranger sleep outside, my doors are open for guests." Indeed, it was well known that the Maharsha's home was open to all wayfarers, regardless of their station in life.

The Maharsha stressed the careful wording of Chazal (the Talmudic scholars) in their teaching in Avos (1:15), "Heve Mekabel Es Kol Adam Bisever Panim Yafos" Receive every person with [your] cheerful countenance." The dictum specifically states, "Kol Haadam" indicating that it is proper and obligatory to greet all individuals in a friendly manner, regardless of their positions in life.

The following story, told by R' Sholom Schwadron, involves the Brisker Rav, R' Yosheh (Yosef) Ber Soloveitchik (1820 1892), author of Beis HaLevi, who, as the Maharsha did generations earlier, displayed an attitude of uniform concern to all members of Klal Yisrael.

It happened one bitter cold evening that R' Yosheh Ber had to travel to another town, through a blinding snowstorm, to take care of an important matter. The roads were getting impassable, and finally R' Yosheh Ber and his wagon driver realized they would have to stop somewhere and stay overnight.

It was already very late. The wind was howling and visibility was extremely poor, but the wagon driver thought he remembered coming across an inn somewhere in this area, so he continued on. After traveling a bit more they came upon the inn, and the driver told the Brisker Rav to wait in the wagon while he went to knock on the door. The driver knocked and knocked but there was no answer. He continued banging on the door and still there was no answer. He came back to R' Yosheh Ber and said, "I think we will have to continue on. There doesn't seem to be anyone here."

"There has got to be someone there," said R' Yosheh Ber. "Just knock as hard as you can." The driver, a huge strong fellow, knocked until the owner, who had been sleeping upstairs, thought the door would be shattered. The owner came to his window and yelled down, "What do you want so late at night? Can't you see this place is closed?"

The owner had indeed heard the knocking earlier, but he didn't feel like getting out of his warm comfortable bed to welcome a traveler who happened to need lodgings so late at night.

"We are freezing out here and it is dangerous for us to travel further. Please open up so we can come inside," the wagon driver yelled back.

"You couldn't find any other place?" the innkeeper shouted downward.

"We must get out of the cold or we'll freeze to death," the driver roared into the frozen night. The innkeeper slowly got out of bed, grumbled something under his breath, and came downstairs to see just who was making all the noise. When he opened the door, the driver ran to get the Brisker Rav, who had been waiting in the shelter of the covered wagon.

The two men made their way into the inn where the innkeeper made it obvious that he was in no mood to tend to them. He told his guests to unpack their things in a side room which was near the washrooms. The room was cold, but to the two travelers it was a great improvement over being outdoors. The Rav and his driver tried to make themselves comfortable in the tiny room as they settled in for the night.

About half an hour later a tremendous din came from outside j the noise of people banging on the front door. "Open up in there" someone called from the other side of the door. "The Rebbe and his chassidim are here!" The owner, who had just fallen asleep, couldn't help but hear the commotion outside. He ran to the window and saw that indeed there were close to twenty people outside his door. That meant good business, and so he ran downstairs and opened the door with a smile. "Come right in out of the cold," he said warmly. "I have room for all of you." The chassidim ushered their rebbe [some versions of the story say that it was R' Aharon Koidonover (1839 1897)] in ahead of them, and soon a band of twenty chassidim followed. The owner invited them all into his main dining room, assuring them they would be made comfortable, and convincing them how lucky they were to be able to spend the night at his inn. The owner brought out whiskey and cake and passed around the drinks until everyone felt warm. Soon songs and lively conversation broke out as the guests celebrated the fact that they had indeed found a place to spend the night, and were saved from continuing their perilous journey through the frozen darkness.

As their partying continued, the Rebbe had to leave the room for a moment to wash his hands. As he walked towards the washroom he noticed two people shivering in the side room. The Brisker Rav, who heard the Rebbe coming, pulled his hat over his eyes so that he would not be recognized. But the Rebbe entered the room, walked over to the man hidden under the hat, and lifted the brim.

"Oy vay' Brisker Rav!" he exclaimed, recognizing the Torah luminary immediately. "What are you doing here in this cold room?"

"Who put you here?" The Rebbe didn't wait for an answer but insisted that the Rav and his driver get up immediately and come with him. The two followed the Rebbe into the huge room where the chassidim had gathered.

As the Rebbe walked in with the two behind him, everyone stood up. "Do you see who is in the inn with us?" the Rebbe asked out loud. "The gadol hador, R' Yosheh Ber."

And with that he led the Rav to the head of the table where he seated him, disregarding his protests. Soon the owner of the inn came in with more food, and the Rebbe tore into him verbally. "How could you have put the Brisker Rav, the gadol hador, in that small cold room? Where is your kavod haTorah (honor befitting a Torah scholar)? He was freezing in there. You must ask the Rav for mechilah (forgiveness)!"

Everyone turned to see what the innkeeper would do, and slowly he began talking to the Brisker Rav. "I am sorry," he said. "I didn't realize who you were." The Brisker Rav peered at the innkeeper through icy eyes and said aloud, "I cannot be mochel (forgiving)."

The Rebbe angrily turned towards the innkeeper. "Then you must ask for forgiveness again," the Rebbe said. "You obviously mistreated the Rav and his driver, so you must beg his pardon a second time." And once again the innkeeper asked for forgiveness and once again the Brisker Rav refused to grant it.

The Rebbe continued to address the innkeeper, saying, "Your sin is so great that your end will be a bitter one unless you somehow get the Rav to forgive you." The innkeeper now pleaded with the Rav to forgive him, but the Rav remained silent. People began to wonder amongst themselves why the Rav was being so obstinate. Finally, as the innkeeper, along with everyone else, waited on edge to hear what R' Yosheh Ber would say, the Rav began to speak softly.

"My dear friend and host, of course I will forgive you. But first I would like to explain something to you and to all who are here. Many of you are aware that this Shabbos we will read [as the Torah portion of the week] Parshas Vayishlach. "In the parshah we find that the children of Yaakov were angered when they learned that their sister Dinah, the daughter of our Patriarch Yaakov, had been defiled by the immoral man, Shechem. The verse states (Bereishis 34:7) Vayichar Lahem Miod Ki Nivala Asa BiYisroel Lishkav Es Bas Yaakov Vichen Lo Yease j The men (Yaakov's children) were distressed and were fired deeply with indignation, for he (Shechem) had committed an outrage in Israel by defiling the daughter of Jacob j such a thing may not be done.'

"Why," asked R' Yosheh Ber, "did the Torah add the last part of the verse, Vichen Lo Yease - Such a thing may not be done?' The Torah had already expressed the anger of Dinah's brothers (in the first part of the verse) at the outrage that had been committed.

"The answer," continued the Brisker Rav, "is that the Torah is telling us that 'such a thing may not be done' under any circumstances, regardless of whether it was to the family of Jacob or to any other family.

"And that," said the Rav, "is the problem here. You are begging my pardon because I am the Brisker Rav. That's not why you should be asking forgiveness. You should be asking forgiveness because it was wrong of you to behave like that to any Jew that may have come to your inn. No one should be left out in the cold waiting, and then be the subject of your derision.

"I harbor no ill feelings towards you," continued the Rav. "Quite the contrary. I forgive you and I would greatly appreciate if the very next time you come to Brisk, you will be a guest in my home!"

The innkeeper was without words for he was in an emotional quandary. On one hand he was gratified and relieved that the burden of guilt had been lifted from his shoulders by his having been forgiven, while on the other he felt humbled by the lesson he had just been taught. Slowly he walked up to where the Rav was sitting, bowed his head respectfully, and told the Rav that he would indeed welcome the opportunity to be a guest at the Rav's home. The Rav smiled warmly, and everyone drank l'chaim as the rest of the evening was spent in a warm and friendly atmosphere.

By the next morning the storm had subsided and everyone prepared to continue on his own particular way. The innkeeper bade everyone farewell, and as he watched the travelers fade into the distance, he realized that a change had come over him because of the special individuals who had by chance spent an evening at his inn.

A number of weeks later the innkeeper had an occasion to be in the city of Brisk, and true to his word he made his way to the home of R' Yosheh Ber. The Rav went out of his way to serve the innkeeper personally, and saw to it that the man's accommodations met the highest possible standards.

As the guest personally experienced the quality of the Rav's hachnasas orchim (hospitality) and saw how the Rav went out of his way to make him comfortable, the transformation that had begun a few weeks ago became complete. The innkeeper returned to his roadside inn having learned, both by instruction and example, how to treat a fellow Jew. From then on his inn became a model of hospitality and good cheer as he became the most noted host in the entire region.