

The Missing Napoleon

The year was 1914. World War I had just broken out in all its intensity.

Although the war began in Europe, its tentacles reached as far as Palestine, which was then ruled by the capricious and cruel Ottoman Empire who oppressed its impoverished Jews. With the outbreak of war, the economy quickly collapsed, and there was no food to be had, even for an inflated price.

The yishuv in Yerushalayim was struggling, as were Jews across the world, but the impoverished young men who toiled in Torah, learning in the Eitz Chaim yeshiva, were suffering most of all. They were accustomed to living simply, to subsisting on a crust of dry bread and some gruel, and perhaps a citrus fruit for Shabbos. Meat or chicken were rare treats, which were saved for yom tov, and even then, everyone could have but a sliver.

Now, with the advent of the war, there was hardly any bread to be found. The Arab merchants who would come by to hawk their wares stayed away, because they had noth-



ing to sell. The children of the old *yishuv* became pale and gaunt, their hungry eyes and skeletal bodies attesting to their starvation diet.

From time to time, some rare treats or luxuries were smuggled in from abroad, but those items were hard to obtain and very costly.

The Shtern family, who lived on *Rechov Chabad* in the Old City, (names have been changed,) were struggling, just like everyone else. Reb Yaakov Shtern had been a flour merchant, but now that the war was raging there was hardly any wheat to be turned into flour. He managed to find a few scraps with which to feed his family, but soon their larders were empty.

There was only one treasure that Reb Yaakov possessed, which he guarded with his life. For many years, ever since his father had left him a sizeable *yerushah*, he had hidden the coins carefully, waiting for the right opportunity to use it. Eventually, he traded the pile of coins for a single gold napoleon, considered to be one of the most valuable denominations in that era. He stored this precious coin in the top drawer of his bureau, hidden under a pile of blankets. Every so often he would check to ensure that his precious coin was safe.

And then came the day that Reb Yaakov would never forget. It was the day his faith in humanity was shattered, the day a stone of suspicion became lodged in his heart.

It began when his six year old son, Shmuel, was playing outside, and noticed that his friend was licking a sugar lollipop. The child's mouth watered. He hadn't seen this sweet in several years.

"Can I have a lick?" he begged. "Just one tiny lick?"

The little boy shook his head. "My *Zeidy* bought it for my *Chumash seudah*."

"From where?" Shmuel asked with undisguised envy.

"From Rachamim, the vendor in the marketplace."

When little Shmuel heard this, he was filled with a burning desire to taste such a lollipop for the first time in his life. And so he did something he knew was wrong, quashing his guilt in the back of his mind. He ran back to the family's cramped apartment, to the special bureau drawer in the back room where his father kept his treasure. He carefully opened the drawer, took the coin out, and ran to the marketplace a short distance from his home.

It took him a few minutes to reach Rachamim's stall.

"What do you want, my child?" the vendor asked.

The boy pointed to a sugar lollipop, his face alight with joy and anticipation. Rachamim pocketed the coin, which could have purchased thousands of lollipops, and supported several families for a year, and, without a word, handed him the treat. The child licked it carefully, his hands and face sticky, a smile on his face.

"Where did you get this sweet from, Shmuel?" asked his mother with suspicion.

"From Rachamim," the child replied happily.

"Why did he give it to you? Did you give him any money?"

The little boy shrugged, realizing he had said more than he should.

This made the mother even more suspicious, and she called her husband to investigate. Yaakov soon interrogated his son, and the whole story came pouring out. He was stunned, and shaken, at the vendor would take such a valuable coin without a second thought.

"I can't believe Rachamim would stoop so low," he raged. "How could he take a gold coin from a child and give him a sweet instead? What a *ganef*!"

Reb Yaakov marched to Rachamim's stall with his bashful child in tow.

"Did you give my son a sugar lolly?" he demanded, without a greet-

ing.

Rachamim smiled and nodded. "Yes. Of course. Just a few minutes ago. Is there a problem?"

"How much money did he give you?" the father pressed on.

"How much? Ten lira. That is my price, has always been, even during wartime, when it's harder to get the raw material---"

"You thief! He gave you a gold Napoleon, a *yerushah* from my father of blessed memory. This was the only treasure I owned, and I want it back."

Rachamim was shaken. "A gold napoleon?" he cried. "I have never seen a gold napoleon in my life. Come. Look at my pile of money. Tell me if you see anything resembling a gold napoleon."


Reb Yaakov gave a distracted glance at the pile of coins, but in truth, he didn't expect to see anything. After all, if Rachamim had taken the money, he would have hidden it quickly, not left it out in plain sight.

"I don't know what you did with the money, but I want it back now! My son says he gave it to you just a few minutes ago, so where did you hide it?"

"How dare you suspect me without any proof? I didn't take your gold napoleon. I would never touch money that doesn't belong to me, G-d forbid. I swear by all that is holy!"

On and on the argument raged, and soon all the vendors in the marketplace were involved. Many vouched for Rachamim, who was known to be an honest man, but others began to murmur about Rachamim. After all, Reb Yaakov was a respected Yid, a *talmid chochom* to boot. If he said that his son took a gold napoleon and gave it to Rachamim, he was to be believed. Why would he lie about something so serious? Besides, the little boy clearly said he had taken the coin from the bureau drawer.

Since the impasse saw no sign of



being resolved, someone suggested that the two parties go to *bais din*. And so it was. Reb Yaakov and Rachamim went to the local *bais din*, run by the distinguished *rabbonim* of the Old City. They listened carefully to the arguments---to Reb Yaakov's insistence that his child had taken the money, and Rachamim's insistence that he had been given a 10 lira coin.

The *bais din* convened to discuss the case, and issued the following *psak*: since there were no witnesses, only hearsay, and since the testimony of a child cannot be accepted, Rachamim would be obligated to swear on a *Chumash* that he hadn't received the money. If he agreed to swear, he would be free of all obligations and suspicion. Conversely, if he refused to swear, he would need to repay the full amount.

Rachamim was very upset. As he insisted, he had never sworn in his entire life, and he wasn't going to start now. But a gold napoleon was worth more than he had ever earned, or expected to earn in his lifetime. And so he swallowed his discomfort, and swore by all that was holy that the child gave him a ten lira coin.

Reb Yaakov was devastated, but he was a G-d fearing Jew, and a *psak* was a *psak*. He tried to accept the loss and moved on. It was a hard blow to swallow, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Rachamim also tried to move on, but it was very difficult. The entire city had heard about the *din Torah*, and there were murmurs about his honesty and reputation. Unfortunately, his business began to suffer, as people avoided his stall. Eventually, he was forced to close his shop.

In the meantime, the war continued to rage, and the Jews of the old *yishuv* continued to suffer.

Several years passed. The war ended in 1918, and the British now controlled Palestine. And then, one day Reb Yaakov received a letter in

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU
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the mail.

He opened the envelope, and to his astonishment, a gold napoleon fell out.

He read the letter with a pounding heart and dry mouth.

"I want to apologize to you, Reb Yaakov. I am sure you remember the loss of your gold napoleon during the Great War. Although all the Jews of the *yishuv* went hungry, my children were practically starving. I was wandering the streets, holding my last ten lira coin, desperately searching for food, when I saw a little boy walking around with a gold napoleon in his hand. I was stunned. I thought that if this child was walking around with that kind of fortune, he must be from a very wealthy family. In a moment of weakness, I decided to "borrow" the coin, with the intention of returning it at some time. I distracted the child, and exchanged the coin for my own ten lira coin, and he skipped on merrily to buy his sweets. Later I heard the story in the marketplace, and realized that I had caused the entire misunderstanding. However, I had already spent much of the money, repaying my debts and buying food for my family, and was too embarrassed to repay it. I am sending it to you now, and hope you can forgive

me."

Reb Yaakov read the letter carefully, stunned and shaken. He realized that he had cruelly misjudged Rachamim, the *ehrlliche* vendor in the marketplace, and unjustly destroyed his reputation.

Sadly, it was too late to beg forgiveness, because Rachamim had passed away a few months earlier. Instead, Reb Yaakov pledged to support his wife and children, as penance for having falsely suspected him, which may have contributed to his untimely demise.

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The *maggid* of *Yerushalayim*, Rav Shalom Schwadron (1912-1997), was a small child when these events unfolded. Years later, he shared a unique perspective on the story.

"Each of the actors in this saga suffered greatly. Rachamim, who was entirely innocent, unfairly endured scorn and suspicion, while Reb Yankel, owner of the coin genuinely believed, with good reason, that the storekeeper had robbed him. Given that he was trying to protect his family's savings in desperate circumstances, his efforts to retrieve his fortune were understandable.

"Even the man who 'borrowed' the coin, who was guilty of theft, can be understood, because his theft was committed under extenuating circumstances, with his family's lives in danger. Does not the *possuk* teach us, 'Don't despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite, for he is hungry?'

"The people who have no excuse for their actions are the bystanders who spread rumors about Rachamim's dishonesty. They got involved in a conflict that did not concern them, making a painful and difficult situation much worse. What, possibly, could be their justification? What good did their outrage accomplish, except to spill the blood of an innocent person?"