

THE LONG GROCERY LINE

by Rabbi Yechiel Spero

This story is actually quite simple, but the full implications of the fine deed that was done will probably never be known. What makes this story so powerful is that most people who read it will realize that they too have been in a similar situation. But how many of us have reacted in the manner in which the hero of our story did? Above all else, this story will teach us that one may never know the far-reaching results of an act of kindness.

Stern's Kosher Market is a unique type of store. Not a day goes by when the large full-scale supermarket is not frequented by hundreds of residents of the local Jewish community. All types of people enjoy the full service that the store offers. They have a fresh-fish section that always supplies a nice selection of that day's catch. There is a tremendous assortment of cut meats, chickens and other poultry, as well as a full bakery, and food section. Thus it attracted everyone...

But there are a few times a year when one would do anything NOT to go to Stern's; on the days before every Yom Tov holiday, shopping in Stern's is a harrowing experience. Not only do the crowds empty the normally well-stocked shelves, but the number of patrons is too great for the check-out lines. And it is then that the patrons begin to experience the pre-Yom Tov traffic jams that are notorious at Stern's a few times a year.

One year, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, as usual, nearly everyone there wanted to be elsewhere. But they had all been sent there to do last-minute Yom Tov shopping. As Naftali Brownstein, a 70-year-old youthful zeidy who had moved to the town two years before, was standing in line, he looked around to see if there was perhaps a shorter line. But keeping in mind Murphy's Law, he knew that whichever line he might switch to would all of a sudden start moving slower. So he stayed put and hoped that his line would move a little quicker. But it didn't.

There must have been nine or ten people ahead of him. But Naftali moved along patiently with the rest of the line. While he remained patient, the rest of his line did not, and the closer he moved toward the front of the line the longer the line in back of him grew.

It took approximately a half-hour and finally he reached the front of the line. He unloaded his groceries and was quite thankful that he had finally made it to the front. He was tired and really needed to get home. The cashier rang him up and after a few minutes announced, "That will be \$230.43, please."

The cashier's loud voice rang clear and Naftali reached into his pocket to get his credit card out of

his wallet. But -- it wasn't there.

He checked his other pockets as well but he already knew the distressing truth. He had forgotten his wallet at home. Normally that is not such a problem. Either he could have made the short trip back to his apartment a few blocks away, or he could have asked the cashier to void the transaction and return the groceries to the shelves. But as he thought for a minute about how to resolve this sticky situation, he began to hear grumbling from the hostile crowd behind him...

"Come on. What's the problem?"

"Hurry up. Move along."

The comments kept on coming and Naftali did not know what to do. Soon nearly the entire store was in an uproar. Naftali was mortified. Suddenly a young man stepped forward. He was a rabbi in one of the local yeshivas, clearly not a person of financial means, but he said, "Here, take my credit card. I'll pay the bill."

Naftali turned around in surprise -- he had no idea who this man was. He had never seen him nor did the young man seem to know him. As he looked around he noticed that all those who had been somehow enjoying the commotion were now suddenly hiding their faces in shame, as if to say, "Why didn't we do that? It was such a simple thing and would have saved this man from so much embarrassment." But they hadn't. Not one of them. Not one person out of the 50 or so who had witnessed the incident had stepped forward to offer to lend the man the money.

One person was sharp enough to call out, "At least someone realizes that it's Rosh Hashanah tomorrow."

The young rabbi helped the man with his bags. The wealthy women still on line behind him, with their Gucci bags dangling so fashionably from their arms, could not afford to lend this disgraced man a few hundred dollars. They couldn't even have let it go for a moment. And now they quietly held their heads in shame.

The rabbi told Naftali that he was in no rush to get the money and that whenever he had a chance he could pay him back. But Naftali insisted on getting his address and later that day, a few hours before Rosh Hashanah, he pulled up to the rabbi's house with a plate of cookies that his wife had baked. The rabbi's children ran to the door. "Daddy, someone's here to see you."

The rabbi came to the door with his small children buzzing around him. He welcomed Naftali and thanked him for coming so promptly. Naftali then spoke, "I want to thank you. You don't know who I am, but I moved here two years ago with my wife to be closer to our children. But we have not felt at home here and have not found our place. In fact we were planning on moving back to our old home after Sukkot. That is, before you came along. I told my wife when I got home that if people like you live in this town, then I don't want to move anywhere else."

The rabbi smiled. So did his children. They were quite proud that he was their father. But he had to hurry.

Rosh Hashanah was beginning.

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