

# ECHOES OF SHAVUOS

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

A senior colleague of mine told me in private conversation a few years back that he had failed seven times where his grandfather had succeeded once. I looked at him with a puzzled expression and that was license enough for him to tell me the following story:

His grandfather owned a small retail business in England. A Russian Jew who had recently emigrated there frequented his establishment and never left before delivering some barb or hostile remark demonstrating his personal disdain for the religious belief system of the store's owner. They never exchanged opinions about the matter of religion, but rather the elderly proprietor absorbed the skillfully aimed comments for years without confronting him directly.

One day the elderly Jew made his customer an offer he just couldn't refuse. He told him the following; "Business is often based upon difference of opinions. What's valuable to one person is plentiful or worthless to another. That thing then is available to be sold. Obviously you don't believe in G-d. If you don't believe in G-d then it's not likely that you subscribe to the existence of an eternal soul. If there is no eternal soul, then I can be certain that your portion in the next world has no value to you at all. If so, then I am ready to offer you \$300 for your portion in the next world."

The customer, with an incredulous look, wondering how an adult in the 20th century could be so stupid, accepted the money, as easily as one takes a lollipop from a baby, in exchange for his portion in the next world, but not before a document stating the terms of the agreement was signed and placed inside the store's safe.

Not even two days passed by and the Russian customer who was raised on a strict diet of Marx and Engel returned to the store looking as if he had seen a ghost, or had not slept for some time.

He hesitatingly expressed his regret at having taken advantage of the old man by taking his hard earned money like that. The elder ensured him that he was still very happy with the purchase and there was no reason to feel bad. The fellow continued with the sentiment of how bad he felt taking the money. The counter offer was made that if he wanted to return the money he would have no problem accepting it back.

The man was still not quite settled until he was made to articulate his demand that the document in the safe be returned and the deal voided completely. In that real moment he confronted the heart of his personal beliefs, in spite of years and years and layers upon layers of contrary mental training.

My colleague humbly admitted that he had failed seven times in this area. After traveling around the world and being involved in hundreds of seminars in the most outrageous of circumstances and locations and after having met Jews of almost every stated opinion about their standing with Judaism, only seven times did he confront a brick wall of resistance. That is, after discussing and arguing till early hours in the morning, his opponent refused, in spite of mountains of good reasoning to consider yielding to the notion of a G-dly world.

At those rare moments, of which there were only seven in so many years, he attempted to do what his grandfather had done. He reached into his pocket and put on the table not less than \$300, which is a significant sum for an Israeli hitch hiking through the far east, and each time, for some inexplicable reason he was never able yet to make the sale. The mystical tradition tells us that the soul of every Jew that ever was or will be was present at the moment of the giving of the Torah 3313 years ago. Perhaps on a deep subliminal level this experience still resonates within all of us and can sometimes be quantifiably tested in the market place...

Good Shabbos!

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