

# STORY WITH RAV CHAIM OF VOLOZHIN AND THE MESHULLACH

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshios Vayakhel & Pekudei

### Story With Rav Chaim of Volozhin and the Meshullach's Expense Account

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 761, Killing Two Birds With One Stone. Good Shabbos!*

This week, we will be shedding insight into two pasukim in Parshas Vayakhel -- one with the story of a Torah personality who resonates with our readers who are Misnagdim and one story with a Torah personality who resonates with those who are Chasidim.

In Parshas Vayakhel, the Torah says that "Hashem has proclaimed by name, Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur of the tribe of Yehudah. He filled him with the 'spirit of Elokim', with wisdom, with understanding and with knowledge, and with every craft -- to make artistic designs (v'lachoshov machashavos) to work with the gold, with the silver and with the copper..." [Shemos 35:30-32]

We will explain this last expression (v'lachoshov machashavos) via a famous story told about Rav Chaim of Volozhin, the preeminent disciple of the Gaon of Vilna and the founder and first head of the Yeshiva in Volozhin, Lithuania. The "Volozhiner Yeshiva" started in the early 1800s and was the first "modern day Yeshiva," after which many other such schools were modeled.

In addition to being the "Grand Daddy" of all Yeshivos in terms of educational curriculum, the "Volozhiner Yeshiva" also founded many other practices associated with subsequent Yeshivos including the institution of "meshulachim" (hired fund-raisers sent by an institution to distant communities to collect funds for the Yeshiva).

The "Volozhiner Yeshiva" had several such charity collectors who went around from city to city and from village to village in various locations in Eastern Europe. One of them came to the head of the Yeshiva, Rav Chaim, and told him that there were flaws in the system. In those days, the way a meshulach travelled around was with a hired wagon driver, who provided the rough equivalent of a car service. The meshulach complained that he was wasting his time and the Yeshiva's time with the inefficiency of the setup. First, it was not easy to find wagon drivers and then the wagon drivers had

multiple stops with many passengers. The system lacked efficiency. He argued that if he were given his own horse and cart, he could save significant time and be much more effective for the Yeshiva. He further said that when he came into donors homes shabbily dressed, he did not make a good impression. He suggested that if the Yeshiva could afford to provide him with a proper suit and coat, as a type of uniform to indicate he was representing a high class institution, the results would be more impressive.

Rav Chaim Volozhin was sympathetic to the meshulach's arguments. He understood that "to make money you need to spend money" and he authorized the purchase of a horse and cart as well as a dignified set of clothing for the Yeshiva's designated fundraiser.

Rav Chaim had the practice of reviewing receipts from each city where he would send fund-raisers to collect. There was one Jew in a certain city who always used to give generously to the Yeshiva. He was not a wealthy man, but rather a simple villager who nonetheless gave a sizable donation each year, way beyond his means. Rav Chaim noticed that the next time this particular meshulach went to this man's village, the man did not give anything at all to the Yeshiva. Rav Chaim inquired as to what happened. The meshulach told him "I don't know. I came into him like always and I expected a warm reception and a sizable donation as usual, but this time he gave a cold shoulder and no donation. I don't know why!"

Rav Chaim was perplexed. He told his meshulach, "Let us both go together to see this fellow and ask him again for a donation." They both went and knocked on his door. The fellow was blown away that the greatest Rabbi of the generation, the famous disciple of the Gaon of Vilna, was standing before him! He invited them in and after the initial niceties and refreshments, Rav Chaim got to the purpose of his visit. "What happened? All these years you gave us such a nice donation, and this year you cut us off completely?"

The simple Jew responded as follows. Every year when I sacrificed and gave my contribution I thought to myself: "I am giving to the Volozhiner Yeshiva -- the pre-eminent Torah institution in the entire region -- so young men can sit and learn Torah and develop into great Jewish leaders." But when I saw your well dressed meshulach come with his own cart and his own horse I asked myself "Is this what I'm giving my money for -- for a horse and cart and finery? I wanted my money to go for the study of Torah not for transportation costs and a uniform!"

Rav Chaim Volozhin told him, I want to explain the matter to you by interpreting a pasuk in Chumash. After the Torah already told us "And G-d filled Bezalel with the 'Spirit of Elokim'", what does the Torah mean to tell us when it adds the fact that he is one knows "lachashov machashavos" [literally to think thoughts] to do with the gold, the silver and the copper?

Rav Chaim explained that Bezalel was given a special form of Ruach HaKodesh [Divine Spirit]. There was gold used for the items in the Mishkan that were at the pinnacle of holiness - the Aron, the Menorah, the Shulchan, and the Mizbeyach (of incense). There was also money used in the Mishkan

for things that were not as holy, for example, the boards and the curtains. Bezalel had the Divine Spirit to know that when a person gave money strictly for the sake of heaven in a highly spiritual intent, that was money used for the holiest of the keylim. When a person gave money with ulterior motives, then Bezalel knew to earmark that money for the boards, the curtains, or the less "holy" utensils in the Mishkan.

This is the interpretation of the pasuk: Bezalel looked into the precious metals that were given and he knew why they were given and therefore what to do with them. The same is true with donations to our Yeshiva. There are people who give money strictly so that the young men can learn Torah; they are not interested in any of the amenities or the bells and whistles. However, some people cannot focus in on the main purpose of a Yeshiva. If they see a physical dump or they see a representative of the Yeshiva who is poorly dressed without adequate means of transportation, they will be turned off by that. It is for the latter category of contributors that I had to dress up my fundraiser and give him his own horse and wagon. Rest assured, I know the holy intent with which your contribution is given. Your money goes only to support the Torah learning of our students. It is the money of the other people who focus on material matters that is used to purchase the horse and carriage and wardrobe of my meshulach.

### **Story of Reb Zusha, His Rebbetzin, the Seamstress, and the Wedding Gown**

In narrating the story of the building of the Mishkan, the Torah says: "They took from before Moshe the entire portion that the Children of Israel had brought for the work for the labor of the sanctuary, to do it; but they (also) brought to him additional voluntary donations each morning." [Shemos 36:3]

Rav Shlomo Kluger asks why the Torah singles out the fact that they collected money from those involved in the work in addition to the donations from "the Children of Israel". Let the Torah state they took money from everybody (which is in fact what happened) and we will know that those who did the work are also included?

He explains the matter with a story:

The daughter of the Rebbe Reb Zusha was engaged. The Rebbe's wife, mother of the Kallah, went to the seamstress to order a beautiful gown for her daughter. Four or five weeks later, the Rebbetzin went back to the seamstress to pick up the gown for the bride. However, she returned home without the gown. The Rebbe asked her what happened. She related that she in fact picked up the gown but that as she was leaving the store, she noticed that the seamstress was crying.

The Rebbetzin inquired why she was crying and the seamstress told her "It is because I also have a daughter who is a Kallah. I wish I could afford such a gown for my own daughter. The Rebbetzin explained to her husband, "I told her on the spot -- 'You keep the gown!'" Reb Zusha was overjoyed that his wife fulfilled the mitzvah of Hachnasas Kallah [providing for the needs of a bride] in such a noble fashion.

But then he asked his Rebbetzin, "Did you pay her for the gown?" Reb Zusha's wife was incredulous at the question. "What do you mean did I pay her for the gown? I gave her the gown! Must I pay her for the gown on top of that as well?"

"Indeed you must!" Reb Zusha told his wife. "After all, she did work for you for five weeks, so you must pay her for the gown." The Rebbetzin told her husband that he was right and she returned and paid the seamstress for the gown that she had just "given" her.

Rav Shlomo Kluger related this incident to explain our pasuk in Vayakhel. There were some people who just donated money. But there were people who worked for the Mishkan as well. Did they give money? They could have easily argued, "We worked in lieu of our money. Our contribution to the Mishkan was our effort and labor!" (i.e. -- We gave at the office!) That is why the pasuk emphasizes that not only were donations received from the masses of the Children of Israel; they were also received from those who did the labor.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshios Vayakhel and Pekudei are provided below:

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