



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

“The Thief of Blessing”

I am sure that you, dear reader, have had the occasion to come across a book which you simply could not put down. Something so fascinating, so gripping, that you were compelled to read it cover to cover in as short a time as you could manage.

I came across such a book—a Hebrew book, the biography of a rabbi named Dov Cohen. Rabbi Cohen passed away at the advanced age of 94. He was one of the last, if not the last, of the students of the *yeshiva* in Hebron that experienced the horrible massacre there in the summer of 1929.

The book is entitled *Vayelchu Shnayhem Yachdav (And the Two of Them Walked Together)*. Much of Rabbi Cohen's story is encapsulated in that title. For, you see, he was born in Seattle, WA into a family of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. The family faced all of the challenges of Americanization in the early decades of the last century.

Rabbi Cohen's mother witnessed the inexorable process of assimilation with which her older children were involved. She was determined that her youngest child, Dov, would receive a Jewish education as intensive as the one she witnessed back in the old country.

So, in 1926, she took her then

fourteen-year-old son from Seattle eastward across the United States, across the Atlantic Ocean, through the straits of Gibraltar, and ultimately to the then totally primitive and isolated village of Hebron. She committed him there to the tutelage of the famed Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel of Slobodka. Indeed, “the two of them walked together.”

I cannot possibly share with you, in the context of this column, all of the ensuing adventures in Rabbi Cohen's life. But there is one episode that I must relate.

Dov visited the United States several times during the eighty years that followed his first days in the land of Israel. And each time he experienced a sort of “culture shock.”

Once, on a Sunday morning, he found himself in a taxi with the radio on. He soon realized that the radio was playing a sermon being delivered by a Christian minister in his church. He was unable to have the taxi driver change the radio station. And so, quite uncomfortably, he listened to the preacher's sermon. And this is what he heard:

“The group in charge of increasing the enrollment in *gehenna*, or hell, was

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discussing ways to get more people to sin. One suggested encouraging them to steal. But the others all protested that the laws against theft were too strict and not enough people would sin by stealing. Another suggested encouraging people to lie. Again, the others protested that lying would make people feel too guilty. Finally came the suggestion with which everyone agreed:

“Let’s encourage people to do good deeds, acts of loving kindness, acts of charity, acts of courage and justice. But let’s tell them not to do those things today. But rather, tomorrow!”

Rabbi Cohen was moved to the core by that story and was inspired by it. Indeed, he shared it with Jewish audiences whenever he could. The lesson he learned and shared was one that Judaism also teaches, albeit not with that particular story. It is the lesson of the dangers of procrastination, of the importance of doing things as soon as possible and not putting them off for tomorrow.

This lesson is conveyed in the opening verse of this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Re’eh*. “See, I set before you today blessing and curse.” Homiletically, the stress is upon “today,” this day and this moment. Do the right thing today and it will be a blessing. Put it off until tomorrow and the result is cursed.

We have all heard the advice, “Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” This advice is useful in all aspects of life, but it is especially useful in the context of religious behavior and spiritual service. Postponing until a tomorrow which may never come can be, as the Gentile



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preacher’s story suggests, nothing less than sinful.

You may also have heard the adage, which originates with the 18th century poet Edward Young, “Procrastination is the thief of time.” The opening words of the Torah portion suggest that procrastination is not only the thief of time but it is the thief of life and of blessing.

“See, I have given you today, this day, now and not later, to perform the good deed, and if you do it now it will be a blessing. If you procrastinate you may never do it at all, and the result may be quite different from a blessing.” This is the lesson of the opening verse of *Re’eh*. And how ironic it is that the subject of the engrossing biography that I just finished reading, Rabbi Dov Cohen, a *yeshiva* boy and eventually a well-known Jewish rabbi, learned this lesson from a Protestant preacher on a Sunday morning long ago! ■