

A (non-) Chassidic Story (#6)

written by Ozer Bergman

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Here's a *chassidisheh maaseh* that's not a *chassidisheh maaseh*. It's a parable from the Magid (preacher) of Dubno, who was a contemporary of the Vilna Gaon. I'm posting it because it's from Shabbat's *haftorah* (Parshat Masei) and the Kotzker Rebbe said the parable hit the bull's-eye.

A verse from the *haftorah* reads, "Has any nation changed its gods, even though they are non-gods? But My nation has exchanged its Glory for what cannot help" (Jeremiah 2:11).

An experienced businessman had a new son-in-law who was a novice in business. The father-in-law gave him money to buy some merchandise. "Go to that city. Visit a store and price an item. Then go to the market and buy it for the wholesale price." The son-in-law went and did as his father-in-law had suggested. He got a good price on shofars and bought a wagon-load.

When he arrived home, his father-in-law was flabbergasted. "What did you do?!" The son-in-law replied, "What's the matter? I checked the prices just like you told me to." "Yes," said the father-in-law, "but a shofar can last for 30 years! There's no repeat business in selling shofars!" The father-in-law told his workers to put the shofars in the warehouse.

Sometime later the father-in-law was ready to try again. The son-in-law went and this time he found a tremendous bargain—a gross ton of toothpicks for less than 10% of their wholesale price. Oy! Was he in for a surprise when he came home. “What’s the matter, Pop? I got an amazing price on these toothpicks.” “What’s the matter? What’s the matter?! The matter is, if you lived as long as Methusaleh you couldn’t sell all these toothpicks!” The father-in-law told his workers to put the toothpicks in the warehouse.*

After a while, the father-in-law called a merchant who dealt in odd lots and asked him to take the shofars and get whatever he could for them. The following day, he called somebody else, who dealt in overstocks, to do the same thing for the toothpicks. These two fellows met. Unaware that they were working for the same person, they made a trade, shofars for toothpicks. When the father-in-law got the report, he sighed, realizing that there was no way for him to avoid the loss.

His son-in-law complained. “Why are you so upset with me? These two guys are hot-shot businessmen and they both bought the same merchandise I did!” The father-in-law answered, “You’re an idiot. Each of them had something worthless and exchanged it for something worthless. But you twice threw away good, hard cash that you could have spent on priceless goods, and instead bought worthless merchandise!”

The Dubno Magid explained that even though one idol is as worthless as the next, no nation willingly trades away its god. But the Jewish people, sad to admit, have too often traded away God’s glory for things that aren’t even real.

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*Methusaleh lived to be almost a thousand years old.