

Stories of Breslov Elders: Too Easy

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When Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz was the Rav of Kremenchug, the head of the community once urgently knocked at his door. Some soldiers had arrived, demanding 50,000 rubles for the release of two Jews. If the community didn't pay the ransom by evening, they would kill the hostages.

"This certainly warrants my attention," cried Rabbi Sternhartz. "It's a great mitzvah to redeem a captive Jew!"

He hurried to the home of one of the wealthy residents. "How much do you want me to give?" the man asked. "Ten thousand rubles," replied Rabbi Sternhartz. "What?" exclaimed the wealthy man. "For such an important mitzvah, you're only asking for 10,000? I will give you 20,000!" At the next house, Rabbi Sternhartz asked for 5,000 rubles and the wealthy benefactor gave him 10,000. This scenario repeated itself at almost every house he visited, until he had accumulated the entire 50,000 rubles in a short time.

But before delivering the ransom to the soldiers, Rabbi Sternhartz told the community head, "Give all the money back to the donors."

"What about the captured Jews?" the community head exclaimed.

"Take ten strong boys from the yeshivah and let them pretend they're delivering the money," Rabbi Sternhartz advised. "Instead, they will attack the soldiers and free the hostages."

The community head was shocked. Such behavior could result in a pogrom. "Whenever you have listened to me in the past, I have not been wrong," Rabbi Sternhartz said. "Now, do what I say and God will assist us."

The community head accompanied the ten boys to the village square and watched as they attacked the soldiers. The soldiers screamed and begged for mercy. "The Jews ruin everything," they sobbed. "We were walking peacefully when we met these two Jews who suggested that we pretend to hold them for ransom and split the profits." The two Jews and the soldiers were chased out of town in disgrace.

Afterwards the community head visited Rabbi Sternhartz. "We always realized you were a true tzaddik, but we never knew you were a prophet!" he said.

"I'm not a prophet," Rabbi Sternhartz replied. "But I learned

from my teachers that a mitzvah never comes easily. When I was able to collect the money so quickly, I realized that this collection was *not* for a mitzvah."