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חסידי הראשונים

Stories of the Early Chassidim

THE MYSTERY OF THE SUNDIAL

In Connection with the Alter Rebbe's birthday on Chai Elul, we are printing this story about the Alter Rebbe.

This story took place a short time after the Alter Rebbe's Chasunah, when he was living in Vitebsk with his wife's parents.

The Governor of Vitebsk had a wonderful sundial which he was very proud of. (Before they had watches, they used to use a sundial to tell the time. A sundial is an instrument that shows the time of day by the shadows of the sun.)

All of a sudden, the sundial stopped working for a few hours every afternoon. This made the Governor very upset. He immediately sent for the professors and the wise men in the area to solve this problem. But no one was able to figure out why this was happening. Every day, at the same time in the afternoon, the sundial would stop and then it would start again a few hours later with the correct time as if there had been no problem. This problem became the talk of town and everyone was wondering about it.

The Alter Rebbe's father-in-law, Reb Yehuda Segal asked the Alter Rebbe to come with him to the Governor to see if he could solve the mystery. If he was able to solve it, he hoped that this would change the way the noblemen acted to the Yidden for better.

After examining the sundial a few times during the hours that it was not working, the Alter Rebbe simply said, "There is a hill about 10-15 Kilometers west of here. On that hill there are trees. It seems that the trees have grown very tall over the years and are now blocking the direct rays of the sun. This is what is causing the problem."

A non-Jewish professor who was standing next to the Governor, laughed at the solution that the young Jew had given (the Alter Rebbe was 15 years old at the time). The Governor did not know if he should check to see if the Alter Rebbe was right. He was afraid that if the professor was right and not the Rebbe then everyone would laugh at him. So he did not do anything.

A few days later, the sundial suddenly began working again as if nothing had happened. The professor again laughed and said, "You see, it is working properly without us searching for any hills or trees."

The following day, however, a few workers came to the Governor and told him that they did believe the young genius, so they searched for the trees on their own, found them and yesterday morning they cut them down.

Everybody then realized that the Rebbe was right, and the professor was very embarrassed and word spread quickly about the smartness and clear-headedness of Reb Yehuda Segal's son-in-law. From that time on, the respect for the Alter Rebbe and the Jews in the area was greatly improved.

How did the Alter Rebbe know the answer to the mystery of the sundial?

Because in the Gemara it says that in the middle of the day, the sun is exactly on top of every person's head and nothing (besides clouds) can block the rays of the sun from shining. But when the sun is lower in the sky, there could be things that block its rays from shining. From this the Alter Rebbe figured out the answer to the mystery.

