



## SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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***The Chassidic Train Conductor***

# Reei

## **The Chassidic Train Conductor**

Good Shabbos!

Today, trains are powered by big diesel engines similar to those in regular automobiles—or by electric motors. But in the 1950s, the common method of powering locomotives was still the traditional steam-powered engine. Thus, locomotives were essentially giant boilers that produced levels of steam powerful enough to pull entire trains.

Rabbi Shlomo Maidanchik, was the mayor of Kfar Chabad was also the conductor of one such locomotive.

Once while he was driving a steam locomotive, a jet of ash blasted into his compartment—a boiling wave with the power to destroy a building. Together with him in the compartment was an assistant engineer—who got blown out of the compartment and seriously injured. But Shlomo succeeded in pulling the break on the train and the train began to slowly slow down. He meanwhile jumped off the boiling car and then ran along side the train for over a mile till it slowly came to a halt.

Once it stopped, he crept up and got into the flaming cab, got burned all over his body and shut the ash valve.

If he had not done that, the entire train and all its passengers would have gone up in flames.

But who was this Shlomo Maidanchik who had such strength of self-sacrifice as to jump into a flaming engineer's cab and get burned just to save passengers' lives?

Shlomo Maidanchik was a Russian immigrant. Even while still in Tashkent, Uzbekistan he learned how to drive trains. After the Holocaust, he was inspired to seek out Judaism and he somehow found his way to a synagogue in Tashkent. There, he met Jews with beards who reminded him of his father. They were Chabad chassidim.

In that Communist era, all religious matters were absolutely illegal and considered acts of sedition against the state. So the Chabad chassidim were very fearful for spies and informers, and when they saw this young man whom no one knew beginning to regularly visit the synagogue, they immediately suspected him of being a Communist agent sent to spy on them. So they kept their distance from him and didn't exchange a word with him.

But it was late Rabbi Aharon Chazan who determined that this young man was not a collaborator in the authorities' informing activities but was rather a Jewish lad who was seeking a way to get close to Judaism. Rabbi Chazan drew him very close.

In the year 1949, Shlomo Maidanchik made Aliyah to Israel and immediately got a job as an engineer on Israel's trains.

On the morning of August 7, 1949, the new train line from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was inaugurated. At eight o'clock in the morning, a festive train covered in decorations headed out to Jerusalem. On board the train was Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

Crowds stood along the entire length of the railway cheering the train on, and the engineer was none other than our friend Shlomo Maidanchik.

Years later he would relate that he considered it a great merit for himself that he, a Russian-born Holocaust-survivor immigrant, be the engineer who drove a Jewish train into the Holy City.

In years to come, Shlomo was chosen to head the city council of Kfar Chabad, the village he called home, a capacity in which he forged connections with all of the country's leaders: Menachem Begin, Ariel Sharon, Yitzchak Rabin, Yitzchak Shamir and Shimon Peres. They were all his personal friends, and in the merit of that he was able to effect much good for Judaism and Chabad.

But I think that it is the following story that will reveal to us the secret of the strength of Shlomo Maidanchik.

Mr. Maidanchik once visited the Rebbe, and the Rebbe told him that he, as the mayor of Kfar Chabad, should meet with the Jewish mayor of New York, Abraham Beame. And so an entire delegation came to the meeting headed by Maidanchik, who didn't speak a single word of English. It was Sukkos time, and so they brought Mayor Beame a lulav and esrog set, and Mr. Maidanchik gestured to him that he should recite the blessing over the lulav. The mayor of New York thus put on a yarmulke and happily said the blessing. When he finished, Shlomo Maidanchik gave him a Chasidic kiss.

In those days, New York was undergoing terrible financial problems. But Mr. Maidanchik addressed the mayor and, speaking in Yiddish, spoke to him as one mayor to another: "I heard you have money concerns. I also have money concerns!" He was the mayor, after all—and what difference did it make that Kfar Chabad was just a little smaller than New York? "But the way to overpower all worries is with the power of happiness. Chasidim are always happy! And when a Jew is happy, then G-d helps!"

That was Shlomo Maidanchik's trademark. He always had a smile on his face and happiness in his heart. He was a sworn optimist. After he passed away, the leaders of the country wrote that what was unique about him was the great love that he had for every human being, simply because the other was a human being.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah of Reei, we read at the end of the portion about the three *regalim*: the three holidays on which one was required in Temple times to go up to Jerusalem. These were Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkos—during which a Jew was (and is!) required to be happy.

But when we look into the verses, we discover something very interesting: when the Torah speaks about the holiday of Pesach, the Torah does not mention explicitly that one needs to be

happy. However, immediately after that, the Torah goes on and mentions Shavuos, where the Torah (16:11) does explicitly use the word *v'samachta*, and you shall rejoice—that it is a mitzvah to be happy on the holiday of Shavuos. And when the Torah gets to the holiday of Sukkos, it's not enough with one commandment but rather, it delivers the happiness mitzvah twice: once, "*v'samachta b'chagecha*" (and you shall rejoice on your festival) and in the verse after that, "*V'hayisa ach samayach*" (And you shall be only happy) (16:14-15).

What we notice here is the idea that happiness proceeds and progresses from one holiday to another. You have to be happy on Pesach, too—but that's a deeper, more ethereal happiness. On Shavuos, when the Torah explicitly states once, "And you shall be happy before the L-rd your G-d," you need a more open happiness. We're happy over getting the Torah. But that's still happiness over a spiritual gift: the Torah.

When we get to Sukkos, however, a holiday on which the Torah commands us twice in our Parshah that we have an obligation to be happy, and one more time in the Book of Vayikra: "And you shall rejoice before the L-rd your G-d" (23:40), here the happiness needs to be much greater and more tangible. Because here the happiness flows from the fact that the person has gathered all his crops into his storehouses, and so it's a material happiness to which everyone can connect.

And so on Sukkos, we really celebrate every day with the Simchas Beis Hashoeivah celebration, and above all, on the last day of Sukkos, which is Shmini Atzeres followed by Simchas Torah—at which point the happiness bursts forth like a jet of ash from a locomotive with all its power. And the goal of all that happiness, the Rebbe writes in a letter, is that the happiness of the holidays give us enough spiritual strength to be happy all year 'round (Kol Menachem chumash pg. 1233).

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