

The Power of Tzedah

A Jewish businessman was once returning to Brooklyn, New York, from a business trip to Albany. Having been delayed, he left at nightfall for what should have been a routine trip. In addition to already being fatigued, he drove into a torrential downpour that delayed him even more. Realizing that it was probably too dangerous for him to continue his trip to Brooklyn, he began looking for a motel to spend the night.

At the next tollbooth, he questioned the attendant for directions to the nearest motel. He was told that the closest motel was at least twenty-five miles away. There was, however, a geriatric center where he might conceivably find a place to sleep. Upon arriving at the home, he asked the head nurse if they had an "extra bed" for the night. He was told that while this was highly irregular, they would help him - just until the morning. It seems that a patient had just expired and his bed was available until the morning, when they would clean up the room in preparation for the next patient. Having no recourse, he took the bed and immediately fell asleep.

Morning came very quickly, as an attendant came and woke him, explaining that he was here to clean up the room. Curiosity overtook the person, and he decided to find out in whose bed he had slept. Looking through the effects of the deceased, he saw a wallet with an identification card in the name of "David Almoni." He was shocked that a Jew had spent his last months in a Catholic nursing home. He questioned the attendant regarding the release of the remains. He was told that if there was no family to claim the body, he was to be buried in a private cemetery owned by the diocese, sort of a private "Potters field." Incidentally, "David Almoni" had no family and would be buried in the Catholic tradition in their cemetery.

Sensing that there was a providential factor in his spending the night in this home, the businessman offered to claim the body and bury it in a Jewish cemetery. The administrator of the home was certainly no friend of the Jews and did not expend any extra effort to accommodate his request. Stubbornness gave way to the businessman's persistence. After signing the necessary papers, the businessman was able to claim "David Almoni's" body. With the help of a few of the home's workers, he was able to place the casket with the body into his van. He left for Brooklyn on a mission to see to it that this niftar, deceased, would be availed a Jewish burial.

He came to his shul and asked the president how to go about burying a meis mitzvah. The president told him that he was aware that the Chevrah Kadisha of Washington Heights had access to a small plot of land in which ten gravesites were designated for such a need. He immediately called the Chevrah Kadisha in Washington Heights and related to them the entire story. They, of course, did their own checking to confirm the source of this body. After a short while, they agreed to prepare the corpse ritually in accordance with Jewish law and bury him in the special cemetery.

The chevrah took the body to the taharah, ritual purification room, along with his "sponsor," and they prepared to begin the process of taharah. No sooner had the sheet covering the face been removed than the leaders' face turned white, and he almost fell over in a dead faint. They brought him a chair to sit down and gave him a glass of water to drink until he finally calmed down. After awhile, those assembled asked the leader of the chevrah what was it that caused this terrible reaction on his part. He related the following story.

"I recognize the deceased," he began. "He came to our community about twenty years ago, lonely and homeless. He, more or less, made his home in the shul, eating and sleeping there. He spent most of the day studying in the bais ha'medrash. He would go around from home to home asking for alms, being invited to many members of the community for Shabbos and Yom Tov meals. He became a

member of the community.

"One day, he approached me and asked, "What happens if a member of the community dies and leaves no relatives? Who takes care of his burial?" I responded that it was truly a problem. We would have to make a collection to purchase a gravesite and all particulars needed for a funeral and burial. Indeed, if we fail to raise the necessary sum, we have a serious problem.

"The man looked at me and said, "I would like to purchase a plot of land specifically for those people who leave this world 'alone,' without anyone to care for them or who have no money to bequeath to others to care for them. I am giving money to the Chevrah Kadisha to provide for ten mesei mitzvah."

"Do you know who our deceased is? He is that individual! That man's name was David Almoni! Hashem repaid his kindness. He will be buried in the cemetery that he created for others like him."