

To Be Misunderstood

The following episode from the life of Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, has previously been featured in these pages. I repeat the story because of its impact and lesson. Rav Schwab served as rav in a small town in Germany. On Shushan Purim, 1936, he became the focus of a libelous accusation. The Nazis, who were becoming more powerful, claimed that in one of his sermons, he had publicly slandered Hitler, yemach shemo. The Gestapo picked him up and demanded an explanation. He looked the Gestapo official straight in the face and flatly denied having said anything disparaging about the German chancellor. Apparently, when he was addressing the sin of the Golden Calf, he made use of the word "vermittler," which in German means intermediary. The government spy who was in the audience thought he had heard the name Hitler instead. Rav Schwab was told that the case would be discussed and reviewed and that they would advise him of the result. In the meantime, he was remanded to his home.

It goes without saying that Rav Schwab feared for his life. It took two months for the matter to be settled in his favor. He later related that during this entire time, he did not change into his bedclothes when he retired at night. The reason he gave for this behavior demonstrates to us the quality of pride and dignity with which we should be infused. It seems that it was common for the Nazis to break down a person's door in the middle of the night and take the person out to a makeshift gallows erected in the middle of the town to execute them. Rav Schwab feared for his life, knowing that until his case was resolved, his life hung in the balance. Therefore, he feared that if the Germans found him guilty, it was important that he, the rav of the community, not hang there in his bedclothes. This would denigrate the position of the rav and everything that he represented. Therefore, for two months, Rav Schwab went to bed every night in his clothes. He maintained his dignity under the greatest duress, because he understood who he was, from whom he had descended, and whom he represented. What a powerful lesson for us all.