In the early 1980s, I arrived in Brooklyn to celebrate the final days of Sukkos with the Rebbe. It was the morning of Hoshana Rabba, the last of the festival’s “intermediate days.” That morning the Rebbe was handing out the traditional “leach,” honey cake, in his sukkah, and people were lined up to receive a piece of cake and share a quick moment with the Rebbe. Standing ahead of me in line was a young fellow, dressed hippie-style in sloppy jeans and sporting an unkempt bush of hair. Standing behind me in line was a distinguished Satmar chasid, a Rosh Yeshiva in the Satmar yeshiva in Williamsburg.

As the unkempt fellow approached, the Rebbe asked him, “Where are you going to be tonight for the hakofos?” — referring to the traditional dancing with the Torah.

The man answered, “I have no plans to be anywhere for hakofos tonight or any other night.”

“It would be my great honor and privilege,” the Rebbe replied, “if you would attend hakofos tonight with me in the synagogue.”

The fellow thanked the Rebbe for his invitation, but remained noncommittal. “I’ll think about it,” he said, and walked away.

I was next in line. I received my lekach from the Rebbe without incident. Just behind me was the Satmar chasid. As he approached the Rebbe, I turned back, and I heard as the Rebbe addressed him: “I see that you’re wondering why I’m pleading with this fellow to come to hakofos tonight. What connection do I have with him?”

“The answer is clearly articulated in the book Tehillah L’Moshe.”

The Rebbe paused and added, “Do you know what I’m alluding to in Tehillah L’Moshe?”

The chasid replied that he didn’t know.

The Rebbe smiled. “It was authored by one of your Rebbes!”

The chasid, obviously mystified, could only stand there. He shrugged his shoulders, puzzled.

And then the Rebbe shared the teaching at length. I tried very hard to hear and understand, and thereafter wrote it down to the best of my recollection.

First, a brief introduction: The book Tehillah L’Moshe was written by Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, also known as the Yismach Moshe, who lived in the early 1800s. A student of the Chozeh of Lublin, he served as the Rabbi of Przemyl and later as the Rebbe of Ujheley, Hungary. His descendants became the great chasidic leaders of the communities of Sighet and Satmar. This teaching that the Rebbe imparted comes from his commentary on the Tehillim, Tehillah L’Moshe.

Now, here’s what I heard the Rebbe telling the Satmar Rosh Yeshiva, standing at the door of his sukkah: continued on reverse
“The Yismach Moshe writes a wondrous story in great detail. Reb Itzikel of Drobitch — he was the father of Rabbi Michel of Zlotchev, the renowned disciple of the Baal Shem Tov and the Magid of Mezritch — once encountered Rashi in the Heavens.” Rashi is the renowned commentator on the Torah.

“Rashi asked Reb Itzikel: ‘Why is there such a commotion On High about the greatness of your son?’ How did Reb Michel merit such praise, Rashi wanted to know.

“Reb Itzikel replied that his son studies Torah purely for the sake of Heaven.

“But aren’t there many who do the same?” Rashi responded, unsatisfied.

“My son fasts and deprives his body of worldly pleasures,’ replied Reb Itzikel.

“But aren’t there many who do the same?”

“My son gives away huge sums of money to the poor,’ replied Reb Itzikel. But Rashi was still unsatisfied. ‘Aren’t there many who do the same?’ he asked.

“Finally, Reb Itzikel replied, ‘My son has made many baalei teshuvah across the world. He returned many from the path of sin to their Father in Heaven.”

When Rashi heard this response, he was finally satisfied. He understood clearly why the heavenly angels are so excited about the greatness of Reb Michel.”

Throughout the time the Rebbe was speaking — it must have taken a least a couple of minutes — the Satmar chasid stood listening with great respect. When he finished, the chasid thanked the Rebbe and said softly, “Ich hob git farshatan. I understood very well.”

As the chasid began to walk away, the Rebbe smiled and said, “Have a good Yom Tov.”

There’s a little postscript to this story. After the formal hakofos in 770 would finish and the Rebbe had left the synagogue, many of the more hearty chasidim would stay on until the until the next morning, dancing, singing, and celebrating the joyous festival as only chasidim can. Early the next morning, amongst the dancers, I suddenly saw the young fellow whom the Rebbe had personally invited the previous afternoon.

I guess he couldn’t resist that invitation after all.

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