

Poor in Jerusalem

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

After I graduated from Cambridge University, I went to study at Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The yeshiva occupied a six-story building clad in Jerusalem stone, in Beyt Yisrael. It was a small industrial quarter sandwiched between Meah Shearim and the Mandelbaum Gate. In those pre-1967 days the Mandelbaum Gate was the crossing point between, between West Jerusalem, the New City, and East Jerusalem, the Old City which was then occupied by Jordan and under the control of the Jordanian Legion. The Jordanian Legion was an army built, financed, and led by the British under the command (until 1956) of the Englishman John Glubb, known as Glubb Pasha. A concrete wall divided the two parts of the city, and one would often see Jordanian soldiers patrolling the ramparts of the Old City. Sometimes they fired seemingly at random into the New City.

During the 1967 War, the yeshiva was shelled as the students sat down in the subterranean dining room. You can still see the patched brickwork on the western façade where it was hit. Afterwards Jerusalem changed dramatically, as the unified city opened up to new vistas and populations. But before the war, the city was so small it seemed everyone knew everyone else. Mir was in pretty run-down area, and some of the destitute lived in makeshift huts and cardboard shelters right up into no-mans land.

The large study hall, the Beys HaMedrash, was packed throughout the day. It was always stuffy and very noisy as everyone argued and shouted or sang as an aid to concentration, trying to solve the complex problems in the Gemara. In summer the haze was compounded by clouds of cigarette smoke. Everyone in those days smoked. In winter it was made even worse by a large paraffin (kerosene) stove in the middle of the hall, with a flue that climbed up to a small opening in the roof. It radiated fumes that stank but were at least warm, as the cold winds swept around and through the wet stones of the building.

Throughout the day as we studied, beggars kept up a constant stream, clinking the coins in their hands under our noses, as a way of asking for donations as they passed up and down the gangways between the rows of benches and shtenders. Some were well-dressed and even elegant. Others in smelly rags and clearly down and out. We would have rows of small coins ready at hand to dispense until they ran out.

In those days, most of the students in Mir were married. They went home to sleep. So by the night study session only a few remained. Mainly those who, like me, actually slept in a dormitory in the building. And by midnight in winter time, the hall was all but empty, except for a few smelly bodies who had crept in to lie on the benches and enjoy some warmth from the stove during the bitter winter nights. I often stayed up late studying. I had so much to catch up with. I was surrounded by those who had studied Torah all their lives, day in and day out, whereas I had frittered so many years, some

of it on vanities and others on academic study.

Amongst those who came in for warmth was an elderly man in old tattered clothes that he never changed and shoes with holes in them. Most of the time he dozed by the warmth. But when he was awake, he would open a Chumash and seem to be studying. We sat as far away from him as we could, because he really stank. On occasion we would engage him in a brief conversation, but he was rarely lucid. He never asked for money, but he would accept anything we gave him.

I recall one late night when he was present. It was late and cold, and into the hall bounced a well-known beggar, one of the professional set, and started clinking his hand for donations. The poor old man rose from his sleeping position and fumbled around under his clothes. He took out an old worn leather purse and found a grush, about a ha'penny, a cent, and gave it to the beggar. To my surprise and anger, the fellow took it. I was amazed. I did not know anyone poorer or more destitute than that poor man, and yet he still gave to a much better-dressed and better-off man than he was. I went over to him. I asked him, "Why did you give your money to him? You know he doesn't need it as much as you."

He looked at me and smiled. He said, "The Torah commands everyone to give charity. Me, as well."

A week later the old man was not there where he usually lay late at night. Nor was he there the following night, which was very, very cold. In the morning, a fellow student and I wondered where he was. We asked around. No one seemed to know. But the kitchen helper said he thought he might be living amongst the huts and shelters near the border. We went in search of him. Eventually we found him, covered in cardboard and newspapers, in the cellar of an abandoned building. He was dead. We ran to the burial society, and they went and picked his body up.

I will never forget that old man. I have never gone without food or shelter. I give charity, but never to the extent that he did. Whenever I think of him, I feel profound sadness that there is such destitution. I regret that I didn't do more. But at the same time, I feel profound gratitude for having known him. Most of us have no idea how spoilt we are. This man remains someone I respected for his simplicity and nobility even in the depths of destitution. He was an unknown, silent Jew.