

The Nod

A True Story by Rabbi Nachman Seltzer

I met a man in shul. He asked me my name as I was about to leave. I told him who I was.

“That’s what I thought. I have a bunch of kids in Ramat Beit Shemesh.”

“What’s your name,” I asked him.

“Yosef Schick.”

“What can I do for you Reb Yosef?”

“I wanted to tell you a story. It has to do with the story you wrote in the paper this week. I just read it today.”

“And now you just saw me...”

“Yes, but the truth is, I’ve been meaning to share this story with you for years. In fact, this morning after I read your story, I said to myself, “I have to call Rabbi Seltzer!”

“And now, here we are.”

I invited Reb Yossi into my car and turned on the air conditioning. It was quite a hot day and the sun was beating down. As he spoke, I drove him home.

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My grandfather Reb Yosef Schick – after whom I’m named, lived in Vienna. Though the Austrian people were never great friends of the Jewish people, their real face and feelings was about to be displayed in the open with the advent of the Anschluss. Adolf Hitler (who was born in Austria,) sent the German military over the German/Austrian border and into the neighboring country on March 12, 1938 where they were warmly welcomed by the native populace with flowers and an outpouring of appreciation. It was almost as if there was no difference between the two countries and peoples – as the Austrians quickly joined their German masters, not only in their joint hopes for the future, but in their treatment of their Jewish citizens.

If the lives of Vienna’s Jewish citizens had been growing steadily worse in the months leading up to the Anschluss – that milestone changed everything. The Germans wasted no time in making their presence felt in the city – with the SA raiding Jewish apartments and businesses around Vienna that very night, to general applause.

It wasn’t long before it would become extremely dangerous for Jewish people just to walk down the street in the cities they had called home for hundreds

of years. For the Jews of Vienna, a simple trip to the store could result in one being forced to clean the sidewalk before a crowd of laughing gentiles. Life had become decidedly unpleasant, and there were those, who realizing what lay in store for them, did everything in their power to sell their businesses – and if that wasn't possible, just to get out of the country.

But there were many more who remained behind, hoping that things would quiet down and revert to the way they had been before.

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The more Jewish the area, the more at risk a person was. The Schick family lived on Rembrandtstrasse which was a good twelve minute walk from the more predominant Jewish enclave in the vicinity of the world famous Schiff shul, which had been at the center of Jewish life in Vienna from 1858. The fact that their home was a distance away from the main community, was a tremendous chesed, because it allowed the family to keep a low profile.

From March through June life grew progressively worse for the Jews of Austria. There were widespread acts of violence against Jewish people – for no reason and at any time of the day or night. The smartest thing for a Jew to do was stay off the street if he didn't absolutely have to be there.

The decrees came thick and fast.

Soon the Austrian government announced that Jewish people would no longer be allowed to work for the public service. This was followed by a spate of deportations to the Dachau concentration camp and the introduction of the Nuremberg racial laws. So it went through that long and dreary winter.

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As winter finally eased itself out for the year and the weather turned balmy and warm, the German masters decided it was time to spring some more surprises on the Austrian Jews. There would be numerous decrees and edicts against the Jews from summer until fall, as large posters in the streets made it clear that from then on every single Jew would be forced to take on the name Israel or Sara as a first name, depending whether they were male or female. Suddenly Jewish people were no longer allowed to use the public parks and many of the Jewish owned stores were closed down or “sold” to non-Jews.

Life was becoming increasingly more difficult for the members of Klal Yisroel. Yet even within those trying times, the Jews of Vienna never dreamed of relinquishing the connection to their heritage. They didn't stop keeping the mitzvos

and they didn't stop going to shul. Which was why, Reb Yosef and his son, would leave their home on Rembrandtstrasse every erev Shabbos and made their way through the city streets and past the stately homes of Vienna, until they reached the warm and welcoming confines of the Schiff Shul. One can only imagine how uncomfortable it must have been for father and son to make that walk, knowing full well how easy it would be for them to be stopped by an SA patrol and forced to get down on their hands and knees to clean the street.

And yet, they continued to make the twelve minute walk to shul, week after week. (not for so long because the shul was burnt down on kristalnacht)

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Like most European cities, Vienna is known for the river which flows through it. The Danube is a major tourist attraction, with visitors coming from far and near to enjoy its beauty. Second only in length to the Volga, the Danube, passes through Budapest, Bratislava, Belgrade, Linz and Regensberg – and is enjoyed by tourists and natives alike. Making the walk from the Shick home on Rembrandtstrasse to the shul, meant crossing over water – and necessitated using the bridges provided for that reason. Though using the bridges had not been a big deal back in the old days when life was simple, in the aftermath of the Anschluss – Austria had officially become a fascist state – which meant that soldiers and their officers were stationed everywhere.

With bridges consistently considered strategic fortifications, officers were stationed in guard houses at either side of the bridges. It was their job to make sure that nobody crossing the bridge would cause it harm. The officer would stare coldly at the father and son as they made their way past him and crossed the bridge. He never acknowledged them at all. He barely gave them a glance. There was almost no way to know that he was even seeing them, because he gave no sign that anyone was passing by. But Reb Yosef didn't allow the officer's behavior to influence the way he treated anyone he came in contact with. Rather than return the officer's favor by ignoring him the way he ignored them, Reb Yosef never failed to raise his hat when they reached the officer and to nod politely at him. The Torah teaches Klal Yisroel to greet every person you with a happy, smiling face – and Reb Yosef Schick didn't see any reason to treat the Austrian officer as if he was invisible.

No.

Every time their paths crossed on the way to the Schiff shul, the officer received his nod and hat tip, and the same went for their return journey home. And

so it went for weeks on end. Reb Yosef lifted his hat and nodded, while the officer pretended they weren't even there.

Reb Yosef's son didn't understand his father's behavior and asked him why he persisted in nodding to a person who gave no sign or recognition that he was even aware of their existence.

"The Torah tells us to greet every person we meet and to treat them with respect and honor. Only good can come out of greeting another human being b'seiver panim yafos."

And Reb Yosef's son accepted his father's answer.

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One Friday night they left their home as they always did, bundled up against the frigid Austrian winds. The sky was a dismal grey, covered with a patchwork of heavy clouds, as they trod in the shadows of the imposing brick houses standing four or five stories high. They passed the ubiquitous coffee shops – the aroma from within warm and fragrant. Through the windows they could see the regular clientele sitting at the tables, sipping a cream coffee and eating a piece of tart, pie or cake - heavily involved in reading the newspaper. It was all very European, so very Vienna.

Father and son walked on, past the shops, the homes and onwards towards the bridge which would deposit them on the other side of the river and not far from the shul. Soon they were closing in on the guard house where the officer waited – silent and immobile as always – face closed and stern - eyes unmoving.

Another half a minute and they were standing before the officer.

Reb Yosef Schick reached up to lift his hat and give his nod, but suddenly the officer – who had never said a word to them or given any indication that he even knew they were there – spoke.

"Herr Schick," he said to Reb Yosef. (How did the man even know his name??!!)

"Yes?"

"Go home, Herr Schick, go home."

And Reb Yosef understood that he had just received both a thank you and a warning.

Lifting his hat in thanks, he nodded yet again, and father and son, turned immediately away from the bridge to retrace their steps back home.

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The officer's timely warning to Reb Yosef Schick possibly saved their lives from the huge roundup that took place that very night among the Jewish population in the vicinity of the Schiff shul. Many Jewish people were rounded up and sent away to concentrations camps – a large percentage never returned. Reb Yosef and his family were left alone that night. They had been warned by an officer who went out of his way to show his appreciation for the nod and hat tip he'd received week after week - expressing his hakoras hatov by keeping them away from the main place of danger.

I do not have to tell you what is happening in the news around the world today – and yes, even around the United States. We are living in dangerous times. My friends, please go out of your way to make a kidush Hashem to the people around you. Be nice to them. Be polite. Give them a nod and tip your hat. Such behavior is always worthwhile.

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The Schick family would send a number of their children on the Kinder-transport to England. Two of their older daughters were sent to the United States. As for Reb Yosef and his wife, it would be 1940 before they managed to escape Austria for America. There the Schick family would eventually open a restaurant in Williamsburg – which was frequented by many gedolim of the day. Today members of the Schick family still operate a catering hall in Boro Park – which has been the sight of many a Yiddishe simcha.

I know this up close and personal.

You see, a young boy named Nachman Seltzer celebrated his Bar Mitzva at Schick's Manor in the month of June - 1991.

It was a beautiful simcha. We danced to Samcheim and the Stoliner Nigun.

To think that a simple nod played such a huge role in a family's survival.....

Let it be a lesson to all of us.

As heard from Reb Yosef Schick of Har Nof - grandson of Reb Yosef Schick of Vienna

Names have not been changed

