

# The Forty-Ninth Man

*By Avidov*

for Olomeinu Magazine

Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

One day, Don Eldra was davening Mincha in his room, locked from the inside. He lived in Barcelona, Spain in 1497 and he could be burned to death if he was seen practicing his religion. There was a knock on the door and the servant announced the arrival of Don Eldra's business manager. He completed the davening and went to the door where he was told, "You are needed in the fields, sir." Don Eldra mounted his horse and set out with his manager.

About halfway there he suddenly remembered something. His siddur! He had been interrupted in the middle of the davening by the visit, and he had forgotten to put away the siddur after he finished Mincha. Now the servant would probably clean the room, spot the siddur, and realize that Don Eldra was a Jew. This would be enough evidence to denounce him before the Inquisition (the investigation and punishment of Jews). Rewards were being offered to people who reported Marranos—secret Jews, and no servant was immune to such temptation.

Don Eldra paled. "Manuel," he said, "I just remembered something I must take care of at home. I must return at once."

"But the fields . . . the men can't work until you come."

"I know, I know, I'll come right back, but I must take care of something first. It's urgent!"

With that, he suddenly turned his horse around and galloped back home. Sweat covered his face, and tension stiffened his whole body as he strained to get back before the servant entered the room.

He was exhausted and out of breath when he arrived. He ran to the room. Too late — the servant was already in the room cleaning. He must be distracted while the "evidence" was removed. Don Eldra spotted a valuable crystal vase on a small table. He "accidentally" bumped into the table, tipping it and making the vase crash to the floor. The startled servant turned at the sound of the crash and instinctively ran over to pick up the broken glass.

"I'll clean it up!" he exclaimed. Meanwhile, Don Eldra walked over to the other side of the room, stealthily picked up the siddur, and put it in his pocket. The servant was too busy to notice and Don Eldra, in his most natural voice, apologized to the servant for the extra trouble he caused him.

The servant apparently had not seen the siddur. Don Eldra whispered a silent prayer of thanks to Hashem. “Ribono Shel Olam (Master of the Universe), let us merit being in our land, where we can pray to You without fear or danger.”

All this happened a few days after Pesach. Don Eldra should have been a happy and relieved man that night, but he wasn't. When he got home he heard the news that his friend, Raoul had been caught by the Inquisition in the act of celebrating the Pesach Seder. Tears came to Don Eldra's eyes as he thought of Raoul's fate . . . and the lot of those people who were with him. This was the risk these brave Jews took in fifteenth century Spain. To be caught observing Hashem's mitzvos in that accursed country meant a painful death.

Don Eldra himself was able to observe all the rituals of the Seder. He and his group, fortunately, were able to escape detection. But for how long? The menacing tentacles of the Inquisition seemed to be tightening around that small group of loyal, hidden Jews. Decades before, the Jews were able to enjoy a “Golden Age” in Spain; now, there was only fear, sorrow and gloom.

Even at home, one spoke in low tones, as if someone were listening to his every word. Don Eldra spoke to his friend Izak, “Shavuos is not too far away and it is now the ninth day of the Sefirah. What will we do on Yom Tov (festival)?”

“Well, we'll have a minyan as usual in our secret hiding place.”

“Do you really think we should risk it?”

“On the day of Kaballas HaTorah (Acceptance of the Torah) we must celebrate the holiday by hearing the reading of the Aseres Hadibros (Ten Commandments).”

“But how can we be sure of the actual date when we have to count the Sefirah by ourselves? We couldn't possibly have a regular minyan every day during the week. It's too dangerous.”

“It's too easy to forget the counting when one davens by himself. What should we do?”

“I have an idea,” Don Eldra exclaimed. “We'll use Esther's plan!”

He meant Queen Esther's plan in the palace at Shushan. She appointed a different maiden to serve her every day of the week. When the seventh girl appeared, Esther knew it was Shabbos. The next day he was busy recruiting new workers for his business. It was a large group, indeed, assembled in that room when their new employer gave them the details of their jobs.

“Men, I have some special projects for you. I have to work this on a rotating basis. I'm going to give each of you an assignment. Each day another person will come to me with a report on the job. Each man will get a number; you, sir, are number ten; you are number eleven and so on.”

Finally, the big day arrived. Number Forty-Nine had come the previous night; Shavuos had arrived!

With a secret password, the message was given about the minyan for Yom Tov. Some once brave souls decided not to take the risk of being caught. There were others, however, who could not let the anniversary of Kaballas HaTorah go by without Tefillah and Krias HaTorah with a minyan.

The men slowly gathered in Don Eldra's home. The servants were told that it was a social gathering to celebrate his wedding anniversary. In a way it really was, for, on Shavuos, the Jewish nation is like a chassan (bridegroom) and the Torah is like a kallah (bride).

There were only nine adult Jews present and the group was anxiously awaiting the arrival of number ten. There was a knock on the door, but it wasn't the usual signal of a participant. It was Don Eldra's daughter Shani, with a warning that a stranger had come to the house.

Don Eldra quickly left the basement room to speak to the visitor. The minyan was halted, and the eight men were all afraid that their unexpected visitor was an agent of the Inquisition. The men started to recite Tehillim quietly.

It was one of Don Eldra's "hired hands" – one of his new workers, number Forty-Nine, to be exact!

"What do you want?" Don Eldra asked in an irritated voice. "Why are you disturbing me now? Didn't we conclude our business already?"

"Of course," the man said, smiling. "It's just that I saw through your scheme. It was the forty-ninth day of the Omer that you were really interested in when you gave us the numbers, wasn't it?" He looked intently at Don Eldra as he spoke.

Don Eldra was flabbergasted. How had this man ever guessed what was in his mind? Who was this man?

"I'll tell you who I am," the man declared as if he had read his mind. "My parents were Marranos (secret Jews). They had to send me to a Catholic school and I grew up almost like everyone else, but not quite. Something inside of me told me that I didn't belong, that I wasn't like my schoolmates. I kept on searching and asking. Then I discovered the truth: that my parents were Jews and that I was forced to grow up differently. So I started to read secretly about my heritage.

I went to Catholic services but I secretly yearned for the day when I could become myself. I knew all about Pesach and Shavuos, but I didn't do much about it. A few nights ago I had a dream. My grandfather was standing over my bed, crying. I begged him to stop crying, but he persisted, "I will mourn over you until you return

to your heritage!” That’s when I decided once and for all that I must act – only one question remained, “How and with whom?”

Then I realized what you were doing, because you see, I was also counting Sefirah, (I learned about that, too!) and I knew the exact date without your special reminders. Today is Shavuos and I want to join you. Do you have a minyan?”

For a long time, Don Eldra could not answer. He stared at his guest – formerly Senor Forty-Nine. Something about the way he spoke convinced him of the man’s sincerity. He rose from his chair, stretched out his hand and said. “You have indeed come to the right place. Come, you have made our minyan.”

