

The "Burglar"

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I could hardly believe it myself! How could I be the one to solve a mystery that was puzzling the whole town? Then, again, I loved that clock more than anyone else did, and it taught me a lesson I sorely needed.

Oh, but I did it again! I always begin my stories from the middle and ruin the whole thing. This time I'm going to start all over again right from the beginning.

When I was a young boy, my family lived in a very ordinary little town. There was only one thing to distinguish it from the other ordinary little towns nearby. Near the synagogue we had a clock that was so magnificent it is hard to describe. The numbers were gold on a blue face. Around the border were little ivory flowers studded with jewels of all colors. Its body was a shiny dark wood polished faithfully by the *shammos* of the synagogue.

A clock like this did not really belong outside. But the man who had owned it insisted upon it. To protect it he planted trees on either side and built an overhanging roof to cover it.

Our house was directly across the road from the *shul* and I had a clear view of the clock anytime I looked out. It may sound silly, but I felt as though it was my job to guard it in case anyone tried to harm it.

One night, about two weeks before *Shavuot*, my friend Dov Ber slept over at my house. For some reason I was finding it hard to sleep. I climbed out of bed and looked out the window. Were my eyes playing tricks on me?

"Dov Ber, Dov Ber, wake up," I whispered urgently, shaking him.

"What do you want?" he asked sleepily.

"There's somebody outside by the clock. He's breaking a piece off!"

"Oh, you and your clock!" Dov Ber laughed, but he got up and looked out anyway.

Sure enough, we both saw him this time. He was already walking away and we couldn't catch a glimpse of his face.

"Let's go out and see if we can catch him," suggested my friend, always the adventurous one.

I wasn't that brave, but I had to check my beloved clock. "Let's just see if he did anything to the clock."

Quietly, we tiptoed outside.

Examining the clock, Dov Ber said, "There's nothing missing. You just worry too much about this clock."

"No, Dov Ber, look. Someone has cut a piece of wood out from the base of the clock!"

"Why would anyone want to cut a piece of wood from the clock?" Dov Ber was puzzled. "Was there anything on it that someone would want?"

"I think there was something inscribed on the base of the clock and it seems to be missing," I said.

"I don't remember anything like that." My friend still looked puzzled. "What did it say?"

"It was from *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers). היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה והפועלים עצלים

"Oh, that's right!" he recalled. "Doesn't it mean that our lives are short and there's a lot to do in this world but we are lazy?"

"Wow, you remember it so well," I marveled.

"Well, doesn't our *rebbe* always talk about it?"

"I guess he does and he probably means me most of the time," I admitted with a grin.

We went back to the house. Dov Ber fell asleep instantly. I slipped out again and went back to the clock. I don't know why, maybe I was trying to play boy detective like in the stories. I wasn't really looking where I was going and my foot stumbled over something. I stooped and picked it up. In the dark it looked like an ordinary ruler to me. I was going to throw it away but just then a thought entered my mind. "The ruler might be a clue to the mystery of the clock!"

I decided not to let anyone see the ruler—not even Dov Ber. I was going to find the answer to this mystery myself.

The next day the whole town was in an uproar. The men noticed the missing plaque on their way to *shul*. Nobody could imagine who would have done it. I had the only clue and I would find the answer. It seemed to me that I had once seen that ruler—if only I could remember where



It was a few days before *Shavuos*. I was sitting in *yeshiva* but my mind was not on our studies—as usual. When I saw my *rebbe* walking around the room, I quickly started looking for the place. I didn't want to feel his ruler tapping me on the shoulder and then pointing to the place.

My *rebbe's* ruler! That was it! The ruler I had found near the clock—it was my *rebbe's*! I sneaked a look at him over on the other side of the room and that proved I was right; he was holding a *new* ruler.

Could it be? What would the *rebbe's* ruler be doing by the clock? Could *he* have removed the plaque? Impossible!

I lingered behind after class.

"*Rebbi*" I began hesitantly, "did you lose your ruler? I found it near the clock by the *shul* after the plaque was noticed missing," I finished in a rush before my courage failed me.

"Do you know what was written on that plaque?" he asked.

"It said *היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה והפועלים עצלים*," I answered.

"Yes," he said quietly, "but not many people even know that there even was an inscription on the clock. I dropped the ruler there purposely. I knew one of my observant and clever *talmidim* would recognize it and come to me for an explanation as you are now doing."

Then in a sad voice which I had never before heard him use he whispered, "Yes, I removed the plaque because Mr. Finkel gave the clock to me, and asked me to place it where everyone could see it. But it was overlooked in this busy town. We marvel at the beauty of the clock without even looking at the words at its base. Why do you think Mr. Finkel wanted his clock to stand outside in the street? Only to remind every passerby how short life is—how the minutes become hours, the hours days, and the days years.

"Now, *Shavuos* is almost upon us—the time when the Torah is given. How much time have we spent learning Torah this past year and how much time have we wasted? Even some of my students spend their day in *yeshiva* daydreaming and wasting time."

I grinned to myself, recognizing myself in his description.

"The plaque will be put back in its place, but we can't bring back the hours we waste. Everyone in town is talking about the missing plaque now, even though they never noticed it before. I wanted everyone to learn this lesson especially now that *Shavuos* and summer are almost here. Just because summer is here doesn't mean that everything we learned must be forgotten. Even when you are at play, you are a living Torah lesson! You must be fair and honest. Help your friends and parents. Give *Tzedakah* (charity) and visit the sick. Never pass up the chance to do a *mitzvah*. Life

is so short and there is so much to do. We can't afford to be lazy. When *Shavuos* begins I'll say the same thing to all the people in *shul*. Maybe my little 'burglary' will wake people up." He smiled at me.

"It woke me up, *rebbe*. And I won't forget the lesson."

There was hardly a person who was unmoved by my *rebbe's* words that *Shavuos* but I still think I was the one who benefited the most.

