

So Long, Sandy

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Reprinted from *Olomeinu Magazine*

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"This is the most boring trip I've ever taken," whispered Sandy Segal to Joe Michaels. "I would just as soon be in school back in Linton, than to go poking around all these graves, tombs, and dead little villages."

"You sure are hard to please," answered Joe. "These ancient synagogues and old tombs are parts of history. They've seen more things happen than you'd ever dream of."

"Well I'm itching for a little excitement — something to tell the kids about in Linton — not just another relic from the olden days."

"Quiet down," insisted Joe. "I want to hear what the guide is saying."

The guide was speaking in Israeli accented English:

"This building is called the Synagogue of Rabban Shimon bar Yochai. Rabban Shimon and his son Eliezer are both buried here. Rabban Shimon is the author of the *Zohar*, a holy book that reveals many secrets of the Torah.

"Tomorrow," added the guide, "is Lag B'Omer, the day when Rabban Shimon passed away. In fact, tonight..."

"This is enough for me," muttered Sandy. He looked behind him at the rolling green hills.

"I'll explore those hills while he makes his speech," decided Sandy. "I'll be back to make our tour-bus when it heads for Tel-Aviv. Who knows? There might even be gold in them that hills."

Without saying a word to Joe, Sandy slipped away from the Shul, and then ran triumphantly up the hill, down its other slope, and then up, down, and up again — running as far and as fast as his feet could take him. Finally, completely out of breath, he sat on a pile of rocks that were near the mouth of a dark cave.

"Maybe there is a hidden treasure in here after all," mused Sandy.

He started to search for a clue that a chest of gold was buried in the cave. On the side of the entrance, however, he noticed an inscription.

"Humph," he muttered. "No treasure. Just a Rabbi Hillei buried here."

It was getting late and Sandy realized that he would ' have to run all the way back to his group to make his bus. He started to run, and he tripped over a stone in his path. He pulled himself up slowly and looked at his knees.

"Both of the legs ripped on my new pants," he groaned. "And blood from my knees staining my pants, too."

He groaned again, and painfully limped in the direction of his bus... By the time he reached the main road he was sure of it. He had missed his bus!

Sandy sat on the ground, leaning against a huge boulder near the Rabban Shimon bar Yochai Synagogue. He felt an uncomfortable gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach. When he felt like that at home, he used to head for the family refrigerator.... soda pop, jello, ice-cream, all within his reach, and now so far away. How he envied his friends in far-off Linton! They were all seated before their TV screens, watching their favorite programs, snacks in hand.

Why did he insist that he would not stay home while his parents toured Europe and Israel? "Why did he have to leave his parents in Tel-Aviv and take this foolish bus-tour of the Gallil? Well, there was no use thinking about that. Instead, Sandy made himself comfortable near the boulder, and began awaiting the return of the tour-bus to pick him up.

The skies darken very quickly after sunset in Israel, and Sandy was not prepared for the sudden darkness that fell upon the landscape. Lights shone brightly from the synagogue, and voices of people praying and studying came floating on the night air. Crowds of people began swarming up the main road. Perhaps some of his fellow tourists were among them, thought Sandy. He got up and walked toward the coming crowds.

There were people of all ages gathering around the shul — men with beards, women wearing kerchiefs on their heads, boys with long *payos* (side-curls), all moving joyfully about. Some of the men were piling old clothes in a heap; others were pouring kerosene on the pile. Suddenly someone threw a lit match on the mound of rags, and it became a mountain of flames, shooting skyward.

The men joined hands and were beginning to form a circle around the huge fire, when Sandy felt a sudden tap on his shoulder. There were two dark-eyed youths, with curly *payos* (side-curls) rolling down their cheeks. They were both about his age, and they both looked very much alike. They said something to him in Hebrew that he could not make out. Did they want something from him?

"*Shmi* Sandy — uh — I mean *Shmi* Shmuel," Sandy stammered. "Watcha want anyway?"

The boys grabbed Sandy's arms and started to drag him toward the fire. Sandy panicked, and tugged away from them until he finally pulled himself loose, and landed

with a thud against the chest of one of the people crowded around the scene. Both Sandy and the man he bumped into went tumbling down to the ground.

"Oh, I'm so sorry — pardon — I mean *selichah*," Sandy breathlessly mumbled, as he picked himself up from the thin, lanky frame of the man who served as his pillow.

The man had a long, thin face, framed by a spare, black beard, and he smiled as though being pushed over by twelve-year old boys was very much a part of his daily routine.

"Think nothing of it," he said, as he got onto his own two feet again. "Now, just tell me what's chasing you and whom you're afraid of."

"Oh, an American!" cried Sandy with joy. "I'm so happy to see you. I missed my bus, and those two boys want to drag me into the fire, and besides, my new pants are torn . . ." Sandy motioned toward his knees, and then sheepishly looked into the face of the American whom he so fortunately bumped into. "I mean . . . well, thanks for catching me."

"Those boys didn't mean any harm," the man said reassuringly. "Tell me your name — I'm David Fried of Chicago and Bnei Brak — and then we can join the people dancing."

Sandy told him all about himself, the group he was with, and how he became lost. David listened to Sandy's story with great interest. He motioned to the two chassidic boys who had tried to be friendly to Sandy, and said a few words to them. The two boys — their names were Moshe and Meyer — left and soon returned with some cake and fruit. They offered it to Sandy, and he quickly accepted it.

"You are in the Holy Land, so we are going to call you by your *Loshon Kodesh* (Holy Language — Hebrew) name. All right, Shmuel?"

Sandy — Shmuel, that is — nodded. He was so relieved to have a bite and to be among friends, that he would have agreed to anything.

In the meantime, the crowd around the bonfire grew. Some curly-haired little boys had their locks cut off and thrown into the fire. Men and boys with glowing torches danced lively dances around the flickering flames.

"Why are these boys getting haircuts here?" asked Shmuel in bewilderment.

"These three-year old boys are getting their first haircuts," explained David. "This is a happy occasion for them because they are keeping the command of letting their *payot* grow for the first time in their lives. Is there a better place than this holy spot to introduce someone to a mitzvah?" David asked meaningfully. "You start one in happiness, and then the rest all follow in joyful succession."

Shmuel understood David's message, but he was afraid to think about it too much ... Moshe and Meyer brought them each a torch. Soon the four of them joined the dancing throng, singing songs of *bar Yochai*, waving torches in the night air in honor of the great light of understanding that Rabban Shimon bar Yochai, revealed to the world on a Lag B'Omer centuries earlier, when he departed from the world.

Shmuel-Sandy Segal began to feel as though he had lived all of his life until then in darkness. How he wished he could make these moments last forever, so he might get a little more light of understanding of what it meant to be a Jew! Being a Jew in Linton meant very little besides a few extra musts and must-nots that his non-Jewish neighbors did not know about. There was never any of this unbridled joy!

Suddenly he felt a hand grab his arm. "Sandy! You'll burn yourself! Come right here!" Shmuel was shocked to see his father and mother standing at the edge of the fast-spinning circle. His mother was carrying a sweater. "Put this on, Sandy child, or you'll catch a cold, dear."

Somehow Shmuel was not as lonely as he had been a short while before, and he realized that he would have been happier if his parents had not found him so quickly.

"Hi, Mom, Dad," he finally said. "How'd you get here?"

"We wanted to surprise you and meet you in Tsefas — your bus's next stop. We were the surprised ones when the bus drove up, and Joey stepped down without you. Come, we have a long way to drive yet, Sandy child," his mother explained.

"But I would like to stay a while. This is a special night in a special place. These people are my friends — David, and Moshe and Meyer. Won't you let me stay a little longer?" Shmuel begged. "I finally found something I enjoy and some people I like, and you want to drag me off!"

Finally, David interrupted. "Don't have any worries, Mr. and Mrs. Segal. Your son is in good hands. I can take care of Shmuel — your Sandy — and then bring him to you in Tsefas."

The Segals looked at one another for a few doubtful moments. "No, we'll stay here, too. When you're ready to return to Tsefas, I'll drive you. We'll be near the blue Renault at the top of the hill," Mr. Segal said.

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A few hours later, as Mr. and Mrs. Segal steered the little blue car along the winding road to Tsefas, he was discussing David Fried's life in the Bnei Brak Yeshiva with him.

Shmuel piped up all of a sudden: "That's exactly what I would like to do — stay in the Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. There's so much I enjoyed tonight in Miron. I'm sure all the other holidays are at least as exciting and have as much meaning behind them."

"Sandy!" scolded Mrs. Segal. "Don't be foolish. We've always given you the best of everything in Linton, and you're not going to throw it all away because of one torchlight dance in Miron!"

"There's nothing, worth going home for in Linton. All the things you give me don't make me feel half as good as the bonfire in Miron."

David Fried laughed. "You know, Shmuel, I did not come here until I completed years of study in Chicago and New York. You're right — there's much more to being a Jew than just going to shul once in a while, or dancing around the bonfire in Miron. Like those three-year olds getting their first haircut, let this be your training in learning about mitzvos. Let the rest follow along. I'm sure your parents will go along with the idea — right Mr. Segal? Mrs. Segal?"

"Well, there is a Day School in the town next to Linton. I could get Sandy — I mean Shmuel — there every morning, if he really wants this."

"More than anything — if it means that I'll be able to get enough training to come back here with David, and Meyer and Moshe," Shmuel said.

"Just take the next steps," David said, "one at a time. Soon enough, you'll be ready to come back to Eretz Yisroel, and we'll be waiting for you."

