

*“On Account of a Hat”
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Events occur on many levels. Sometimes things occur, and there are layers beneath layers to the event. More often than not, the participants are not even remotely aware of the deeper meaning of the drama they may be participating in, but sometimes we are lucky enough to be conscious of their greater significance.

On my recent trip to Israel, I had such an experience.

It was the kind of thing that can only happen when you fly El Al to Israel.

As I boarded the airplane for my flight to Tel Aviv, I did what anyone does when getting on an airplane. I proceeded to open the overhead container to place my jacket and carry-on luggage. The only problem is that the container was full. A quick survey of other nearby options revealed that no other space was available.

Upon further examination of the one over my seat, I noticed that it wasn't really full, but just appeared to be, since a hat was taking up about one quarter of the compartment. I realized that if I moved it slightly, there would be more than enough room to accommodate my belongings as well as the hat.

So, naturally, I proceeded to gently reposition the hat so that there would be room for my coat and small bag. And that is when the problem began.

The hat, you see, was no ordinary hat. It was a firm, sturdy, black hat belonging to a Hasid who was worried that disturbing it would ruin it. He took umbrage at my attempt to move his hat, concerned that placing anything else in the compartment would smooch and thus destroy his hat.

He insisted that I not move or even touch his hat. It must be left alone, and allowed to occupy as much space as necessary. He insisted that his hat be treated with the same respect one would reserve for a sacred ritual object, which it is not. Instead, he asserted, with certainty and authoritatively that I must find an alternative place for my small bag and jacket.

In theory, this would be an ideal solution to the problem. But in reality, most people were in their seats and the other overhead storage bins were all full. Telling this to him, however, does not move or impress him at all. He doesn't budge.

By now the people sitting near us are aware of the situation, and the next thing I know there is a boisterous and energetic discussion amongst not just the Hasid and me, but among just about everyone in the immediate area.

Naturally, since the passengers are all Jewish, everyone has an opinion about the matter, and even more naturally, everyone knows their opinion is correct. So everyone in the immediate vicinity proceeded to weigh in with their opinion, as to whether it was justified for the hat to take up so much space, and should be left alone, or if it should be moved to accommodate and

make room for my carry-on items. Even though I was a participant, I couldn't help but notice that on some level there was a Talmudic-like quality to the discussion.

As all this was going on, I started to imagine the rabbis of the Talmud debating the matter:

Reb Tevye says that a hat takes precedence over a suitcase, for it goes on one's head, whereas Reb Nahman says that for that very same reason, the hat should be moved, and the suitcase must be placed in the compartment. But Reb Shlomo says that it does not matter which item is more important, but rather the determining factor is whichever item was there first should not be moved.

In reality, truth be told, I couldn't help but notice that it was not merely a debate about the merits of which item belonged in the bin. It was much more charged, and thus a much more profound discussion. In fairness, it must be said that the hat was a carefully crafted one, which probably cost more than my coat. The expense was not the issue for my fellow passengers, though. If by now it isn't clear, I should let you know that this black hat was what is called a *shtreimel*.

Leo Rosten, in his classic work, "The Joys of Yiddish" defines a *shtreimel* as "a black, broad-rimmed hat, trimmed with velvet, worn by religious men, especially in Galicia and Poland." He concludes, "nowadays, a *shtreimel* is worn only by the very Orthodox, and the Chasidim."

And therein lies the problem! While on one level, the discussion appeared to be about a hat and a suitcase, on another level, the passengers clearly saw this in a much broader context. For them, the stakes are much higher. Why is that? What is the altercation really all about?

The discussion is intense because the unspoken issue, beneath the surface, has to do with issues of religion and secularism, of encroachment, and the feeling on the part of secular Jews that the ultra-Orthodox are slowly but surely taking over more and more parts of their lives. They are afraid that the Haredim are imposing their way of life on those who do not want to let religion intrude in their lives. In other words, what right does this Hasid have to take up so much space? Let his hat take up the whole overhead compartment, and the next thing you know, they will be moving into our neighborhoods, taking over our schools, and forcing us, against our will, to close our stores on Shabbat.

And the religious Jews resent the hedonistic, seemingly paganistic way of life of the secular Jews who have such blatant disrespect for Jewish tradition. His supporters are all thinking, who do they think they are? Don't they have any respect for the holiness and sanctity of Jewish ritual life? Let this guy move the hat, and the next thing you know, the secular Jews will try to further define the nature of Judaism so that it will be devoid of any content and appreciation for the role of the Almighty in our lives and we will have lost our role in history as the Chosen People.

And that, my friends, is what this little discussion was really all about.

As all this is going on, one other thing pops into my mind.

I recall the title of a short story I once read in a Yiddish literature course I took in college, by Shalom Aleichem entitled, "On Account of a Hat." When I got back home, I re-read the story.

Ironically, it takes place on a train, and it has to do with a hat, but there the similarity to my circumstances end. In the story a Jewish traveling salesman assures his wife he will be home in time for Passover. Instead of grabbing his own hat, when the conductor awakened him from his nap, he took the hat of the Russian official sitting next to him. Not aware of the mistake, he does not understand the deference and courtesy extended to him by both Jews and non-Jews. When he finally looks in the mirror, and sees that he is wearing the wrong hat, he is upset with the conductor, and goes all the way back to the town where he started his journey. He is upset with the conductor, because, as he says, "What an idiot that conductor is. I specifically told him to wake me up, and instead he went and woke up the Russian, while leaving me behind, still asleep on the train."

So, how, you may be wondering, did the whole affair end?

Someone sitting a few rows behind us offered to take my coat and bag and put it behind his seat. I accepted his offer, the Hasid was happy, that his hat wasn't disturbed. I was happy that I had a place for my things, and the argument ended, somewhat anticlimactically.

As for the greater significance of all this, the meaning beneath the surface, several possibilities come to mind. Rather than be annoyed by the whole thing, I actually found it quite humorous. It clearly shows the advantage of flying El Al, and of flying coach, at that. I can't imagine anything similar occurring on Air France.

The intensity and communal nature of the whole situation reflects the nature of our people. Anywhere else, it would have been a private affair. And that is precisely, what I love about being Jewish – our passions, our opinions, our intensity. You can't help but love a people like this. The oft-quoted verse from the Talmud, "All of Israel is responsible for one another" could be interpreted, more literally, "All of Israel is *evin zeh b'zeh*, involved with each other. How true, and how glorious it is to be a part of such a wonderfully opinionated people!

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