



# Shuster's Law

*A proud father, a village gossip, a company CEO,  
a daughter-in-law, three children, and a pair  
of seemingly indestructable shoes*

by Nahum Finkelstein

"*Shalom aleichem*, Mr. Shuster! Or should I say, Mister Professor Shuster? I have a problem for you," and he plumped a newspaper-wrapped bundle onto the counter.

Joseph Shuster looked over the top of his spectacles and removed half a dozen tacks from between his lips. "*Ale-ichem shalom*. What's this Professor business, Mr. Golden? Are you starting on me too ... about my boy, Sam? Shame on you!

"That's a fine pair of shoes you have in that packet, Mr. Golden, and brand new too. Ah, I don't see such shoes so often these days. Sandals, sandals, sandals. No wonder they call me a *sandler*, a mender of sandals. I, who *made* shoes in the Old Country, made shoes from first to last — from the last to last, heh, heh. But a person has to make a living. As they say, 'without flour there is no Torah.'"

"So what can be the problem with new shoes?"

"They're too tight on my feet. They nearly killed me as I walked to the shul last Shabbos."

"Killed? That's serious, and on Shabbos, too. What thief was it sold you

shoes that are too small for your feet? Didn't you try them? No matter. The Lord, Who shows special mercy to children and fools, has sent you to me. Perhaps I can stretch them. I have the machine right here. Let's see."

"I hear that Sam has found a job in the University."

"Aha! So that's the reason for making fun of the poor *sandler*. All these years, they mocked me, because I am a shoemaker and not a scholar, or a lawyer, or a doctor. And now they resent the *nachas* my son brings me.

"It's true. Sam has taken a job. But not any job. You know he's a fine student. Since he got his last degree, he's called Dr. Shuster. Imagine that! Dr. Shuster! The University wanted him for a teacher, a lecturer. After five or six years he will become a Professor ..."

"That's a wonderful thing. Our village is proud of you."

"But you don't know the best of it. His main work is not the teaching. It's doing research. That is much more important. Research!"

"Here, try this one, Mr. Golden. I don't want to overdo it, or they'll rub a blister on your heel. How does that feel? Good? Now, I'll do the right shoe."

"I see you are puzzled. So was I. Af-

ter all, what does a *sandler* know of such things? Sam explained it all to me last Shabbat. While you were limping back from your prayers, he was with his old father. Research. That means he spends his days discovering new knowledge — what no one has thought of before. What no one has ever done, he finds a way to do it. He is making a new type of telephone that you can carry everywhere with you ... in your pocket. And he writes about it all in the papers that the best scholars read, so they can also know what he has found out. They will invite him to teach in their universities. What my son has done will be known and taught all over the world. In years to come they will teach about Shuster's Law, and sell the Shuster Phone."

"That's better, much better, Mr. Shuster," said Mr. Golden, as he paced up and down in the little shop. "A perfect fit. Comfortable as butter. I'll say a special blessing for you at the morning service next Shabbos."

"Make the blessing, if that pleases you. But blessings I cannot eat. For now, that will be twelve shekels."

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"Shalom, Mr. Golden," said the shoemaker. "It's some time since last I

saw you. I hear that Miriam has not been well. How is she doing?"

"Much better. Please G-d, she will make a full recovery."

"And what is this I see? Those fine black shoes. Still new are they? Have you not worn them since I stretched them? If they were not comfortable you should have brought them back. Aha, now I see. You can't judge a sole by its upper. You've walked a hole right through the leather. I'll replace the sole. I have a beautiful piece of hide here waiting for you, soft and strong. Should I replace the heels while I'm at it?"

"For what? The heels are still perfect."

"Well, if you say so. Just the soles, then, half-soles. The day after tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Shuster. And tell me, what's this I hear about Sam?"

"What you have heard?" said the shoemaker, as he fitted a shoe onto the boot anvil and reached for a hammer. "How should I know? I'm a fixer of soles, not a reader of minds."

"Well, they say that he has left the University. That he could not get a permanent position, and be called Professor."

Thwack! Thwack on a tack. "Mr. Golden! How can you come here spreading gossip, like an old woman?" Thwack.



"But I am not gossiping. I came here to offer my sympathy. It must be very hard for Sam and for you ..."

"Thank you. No need. The trouble with you tittle-tattles is that you only see the black." Thwack.

"That's not fair, Mr. Shuster ..."

"Fair? I ask you, when were the people of this village fair to the *sandler*? They can't stand he should have some success." Thwack, thwack, thwack. "That's that. Now for the other. Did they tell you that there *is* a Professor Shuster?"

"What? Did Sam ..."

"No, not Sam. Judith. You know that Sam's wife is also a doctor of electronics. Such a beautiful girl! A pearl. *She* was made a Professor ... three weeks ago." Thwack, thwack.

"What wonderful news. Mazel tov, Mr. Shuster, that you should be so blessed. She will provide for Sam and their baby, so they will not be a burden on you."

"What foolishness you talk, if you will excuse me, Mr. Golden." Thwack. "You and your gossiping friends really do not know the whole story. It would be better if you prayed, when your fine black shoes take you to shul, rather than whispering your neighbor into poverty." Thwack. "Did they not tell you that Sam has been advising Voyager Telecom — that's a big industrial company — for years? Now they have given him a job, full-time. And not any job. He is assistant to the big boss of the company, the CEO. So, you see he will not have to live on his wife's wages."

"Well, I am happy for Sam, and for you, Mr. Shuster. But, tell me, isn't he disappointed about the Knowledge — to be just another worker who does what they tell him? Like the rest of us. There will be no Shuster's Law now, will there?"

"Are you forgetting our Judith? Is she not a Shuster-in-law? Heh, heh." Thwack. "That's that." He returned the hammer to the neat tool board. "I need a glass of tea. Will you join me?"

"To get back to Sam, Judith explained it to me. Sam is very busy these days, running around for his boss; the company has divisions spread out over the country. Judith tells me that Sam

will change the future, not for the professors in the universities, but for ordinary people. Voyager Telecom is a leader in inventing new telephones. There will be telephones like a computer, a camera, and a television all at once. Everyone will have one ..."

"You, too? So, will it be able to resole a pair of Sabbath shoes?"

"Of course not, Mr. Golden. What foolishness! It's Sam's job to help the CEO understand what the people in the different divisions are doing, and tell what is good, and what is bad. The boss doesn't have the knowledge to decide. He is a manager and does not understand technical matters. But my Sam does. He knows. How many sugars? Three? At your age!"

"What can I do? Hashem has blessed me with a sweet tooth."

"Shalom, Mr. Golden. I'm happy to see you again. I hope everything is all right with the family. And what brings you to my humble workshop today? Just passing by, or have you another weighty problem on your hands, by which I mean your feet? Or perhaps a gem of information to share in confidence with the whole world?"

"There you go again, Mr. Shuster, always a joke with a sting in its tail. Still, you were worse when you were young ..."

"I thank you."

"Then you attacked people with your fists and even your feet, if you thought they had insulted you. It only needed a fly to fly over your nose."

"If you fight fair, when Hashem has decreed that your head is only five feet above the ground, Mr. Golden, you'll end up *under* the ground. That's what I taught my Sam ... you know he is no giant. The biggest kids in the school knew not to mess with him. And he's still a fighter."

"But of course, I did not have to ask," the shoemaker continued. "When I

see you with a parcel wrapped in newspaper, I can guess that you have brought the black Sabbath shoes to help me make a living. Look at them, still smart and shiny. Congratulations on the way you keep these shoes. How many years is it? That much? Just shows that quality counts. Cowhide soles and calfskin uppers firmly stitched, and heels made from layers of leather nailed together, and a metal heel tip. Shoes like that are made to last. Not like today. Everyone wears those clumsy sports shoes, all plastic and rubber and always white and dirty ... There is no pride and no shame ... No wonder there are so many babies without fathers, these days ... And they're glued together. Glue. How can I make a living from gluing?"

"This time you will have to have the new heels. I'll make you a pair of heels fit for a king. And let me put on a full sole while I am about it. You won't regret it. No sole? All right, just the heels."

"You know, Mr. Shuster. There is another reason why I had to come to see you. The newspapers are full of the changes at Voyager Telecom, and the scandal because the new telephone has not been a success. Firing this one, and firing that one. Even the CEO, Sam's friend, has been sent home. Naturally, I have been worried about Sam. For a young man with three children to be without a job ..."

"Don't worry, Mr. Golden. Tell all your friends that my Sam will not drive his father to the poorhouse. Sam has not lost his job. Just the opposite. He has been made manager of one of the most important divisions of Voyager Telecom, the one that Donald Millman ran before he became the new CEO. Donald is a friend of Sam's. They play golf together and visit each other in their homes."

"And don't cry for the new telephone. It will be all right, when its time comes. It's all politics. You have to know how things work." Shuster tapped his forehead and smiled knowingly. "These government companies depend on the party in power. Whenever a new party wins the elections, they change the directors and then the senior people. But they don't like

to do it openly. So they picked on the new telephone as an excuse."

"Well, I am pleased to hear that Sam has survived the changes. He must count himself lucky."

"Ah, Mr. Golden. I don't think you hear the words that are not spoken. It was not luck. No matter. One day I'll explain it to you. Your shoes will be ready on Friday in time to take your feet to pray."

"Is that you, Mr. Golden, sitting on my favorite bench? Peace and blessings to you, and welcome back. May I sit and enjoy the spring sun with you? How have you been since you left the village to live with your daughter?"

"*Shalom Aleichem*, Mr. Shuster. Sit down, of course. Since when do old friends have to ask? How am I? I cannot complain, although it's hard when you are left alone. But I don't have to tell you."

"I heard that you had retired, closed your workshop ..."

"What? Even in the big city they find time to talk about the poor *sandler*? I thought they had bigger things to worry about. Yes, it's true. I was hitting my thumb more often than the nails."

"And you still live in your apartment? Why don't you go to live closer to Sam? He's a big success, they tell me. CEO of Voyager Telephones. An important man. I hear the Prime Minister takes his advice."

"You hear? You hear! That's my old friend! To tell you the truth, I don't feel at home in Sam's house. It's too big for me. I don't understand the paintings on the walls, just a jumble of colors. Kamienski. De Rein. Who has heard of these names? And what if I should spill my tea on the Persian carpets? No. Better stay where I am."

"Now, I'll tell you what you do not hear. You know that the government pri-

*"And you still live in your apartment? Why don't you go to live closer to Sam? He's a big success, they tell me. CEO of Voyager Telephones. An important man. I hear the Prime Minister takes his advice?"*

vated Voyager Telecom. They sold it to an investor from America. This investor is a man with no sentiment. He threw out half the management, including Donald Millman, and made Sam the big boss." "I see. He wanted Sam because of his great knowledge from his time as a Professor ... excuse me ... as a researcher in the University."

"No, I am afraid you do not see because you still do not hear. Sam *did* discover Shuster's Law at the University. This has nothing to do with telephones or new knowledge in physics. It says 'People are Power.' That's Shuster's Law. When he joined the company, he worked by this law. He looked to find where the centers of power lay. Then he would get close to the person with power, and influence him so he got what he wanted. "Remember, Papa," he said to me, "How you told me to use the heavy shoes — I was ashamed to wear them when everyone else wore sandals — if I found I could not win with my fists. It's the same in business. You have to work hard to learn all about your colleagues and rivals and their strengths and their weaknesses. That knowledge is the tool, the boots, you use to reach your goal. And my goal is to have the power that adds inches to my height and brings respect."

"Ah, Mr. Golden. I see I have confused you. For once, you have nothing to say. Forgive me for using technical words that are not my own, but that is the way my Sam explains it. Think of it this way. Life is like your Shabbos shoes. If you have a handsome pair to start with and know a *sandler* to keep the soles and heels in repair, the shoes will take you to the shul every week. Even if they do not carry you to the gates of Paradise, you will be able to enjoy the prayers." ■

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