

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

*Captivating stories full of Yiras Shamayim taken from Shmuessin that
Reb Kalman Krohn z'tl gave in Adelpia Yeshiva*

Middos, Middos, Middos

In the background, a stirring medley played, its notes wafting softly over the assembled crowd, creating an atmosphere of emotion and anticipation. The chasan stood beneath the floral-adorned canopy, his eyes squeezed shut in fervent concentration as he swayed gently to the rhythm of earnest prayer.

A wedding. A chupah. Another home being built in Klal Yisroel.

The kallah, in pristine white, took tentative steps down the aisle, toward the chupah, toward her future. The crowd watched as she circled her chasan one time, two times, seven times before slowly halting beside him. The ceremony proceeded as expected: the family rav took his place under the floral canopy, cupping a glass of wine as he recited the brachos; the chasan slid a ring onto the kallah's finger; the rav began reciting the sheva brachos with joyous emotion. No one could have anticipated what was to come. An old, disheveled man, his bedraggled attire screaming of astute poverty, entered the chupah area just as the rav began the sixth bracha. The

guests observed him curiously as he dragged his feet, one in front of the other, shuffling slowly down the aisle. He reached the chupah as the rav concluded the last of the sheva brachos.

“...misameiach chasan v’kallah!” The rav intoned, his voice ringing out clearly.

The guests, concentrating on the chupah proceedings, barely took note of the pauper and his activities as they waited for the glass to be broken in commemoration of the destruction of the bais hamikdash. The old man walked right up to the new couple, murmuring something that was audible to their ears alone, just before the glass was placed before the chasan.

The chasan lifted his foot and brought it down hard on the glass, reducing it to shards.

Mazel Tov!

The orchestra began a lively tune and the crowd erupted in joyous song. Arms outstretched and feet flying, they whirled round and round in dance.

And the chasan?

The chasan lay in a heap on the floor. Crumpled. Unmoving.

The stunned guests pressed forward, closer to the chupah, struggling to comprehend the scene unfolding before their horrified eyes. People yelled for a doctor while others with medical experience bent beside the chasan in an attempt to ascertain whether he was okay. What had caused him to collapse so suddenly? Someone drew the chasan's arm, running his fingers along the limp wrist, searching, searching, searching for a sign of life.

But there was no pulse.

Still beneath his own chupah, the chasan had passed away, leaving behind a grieving, terror-stricken crowd and turning his wife of just a few minutes into a fresh, young widow.

Twenty years earlier.

They were young, merely teenagers, two youths barely out of childhood. Chaim, all of seventeen years of age, was the elder of two; his brother, Baruch, was just fifteen years old.

So young, and yet so alone.

So young, and already they had seen their fair share of suffering. Orphaned of their mother at a very young age, they grew up in extreme poverty. The two were bnei zekunim, born when their father was already an older man. As they entered their teens, he grew frail, and the responsibility of earning a living was transferred to their young shoulders. Still, their father was a good-hearted and loving individual, and despite his inability to provide for his two sons materially, he gave them a home of warmth, of stability, of strong and essential values. He was everything they had.

And now, he too, was leaving them.

The two brothers sat at their father's deathbed reciting tehillim, tears flowing freely as they beseeched Hashem to grant him a complete recovery. Yet their father sensed the approaching Angel of Death, and he knew the end was near.

It pained the ill man greatly that he had no assets to bequeath to his sons after his passing. Before departing from this world, there is no father who does not wish to ensure that his children are settled financially. In his situation, it was especially so, as he knew that with his passing, his sons would be doubly orphaned, and all alone in the world.

He lay weakly on the thin mattress, greatly distressed that he would have to leave his sons without an inheritance. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, and he knew what he would bequeath to his sons.

"I know I will soon be leaving this world," He whispered feebly, as Baruch drew closer to hear his father's words and Chaim stroked his arm, comfortingly. "Know that there is no such thing as an orphan who is alone in this world. Hashem is the Avi Yesomim, and He will take care of you." His sons began sobbing bitterly, and he joined them in their tears.

"You know that I don't have any possessions of value to leave over for you after my passing," He continued hoarsely. "However, there is something I do have, worth far more than any monetary bequest. And that is my ahavas habrios.

"Throughout my life, I always loved others. I was careful with lashon hara, with being happy for others, with greeting others with a smile, and the little I had I always shared with others. This ahavas habrios has become a part of me, and it was passed down to you as well. This is the inheritance I am leaving you with.

"This inheritance has much more value than riches. Wealth can easily blind an individual to the plight of those around him and lead to a terrible decay of his character. As a pauper, I didn't face these challenges against my middos, and I leave this world with my character intact." Satisfied that he was leaving his sons with an inheritance of incredible value, the ill man peacefully departed from this world.

When they got up from the week of shivah, the two brothers found themselves utterly alone. They had nothing other than each other and the ramshackle hut they lived in. Yet no matter how deep their pain was, and no matter how difficult

their situation, they knew that they needed to move on. They needed to earn money to put bread on the table, and perhaps even save a bit to marry themselves off.

Chaim, the elder brother, worked as a clerk in a local shop. From his perch behind the counter, he enjoyed many interactions with the countless customers who frequented the small store. The work was gratifying, the patrons were respectful and friendly, and the pay, though minimal, was fair. Through the course of his work, he got to know many of the shtetl residents. Chaim thrived in the hustle of the shop and the camaraderie it afforded him.

Baruch, the younger of the two, found work as a shoemaker's apprentice. He assisted the village cobbler in buffing leather and fixing soles. Working from dawn to sundown in a dank, dim room, with nothing other than iron nails and scraps of leather as company, the job offered little opportunity for social interaction. The barked orders from his boss and strongly worded demands from customers continuously ate away at his fragile self-esteem. The work was difficult and demeaning, and Baruch gradually grew more and more despondent.

Each evening, the brothers would come home to the crumbling shack they shared. After a meager meal together, they would divide the day's earnings: a bit for living expenses, the rest for savings. The months were passing, and their savings were slowly and steadily growing, coin by coin.

Weeks and months and even years went by in this fashion. Until Baruch, still entirely unhappy, decided he'd had enough.

"There's something I want to discuss with you," Baruch told his older brother one evening, some three years after their father's tragic passing. He chewed his lip anxiously, wondering how his

brother would take the news he was about to impart.

"You know that I am not happy with our circumstances here," He continued hurriedly. "I work at a difficult, thankless job and earn a pittance. Other than you, I have no family, and my work gives me no opportunity for friendship either. I want to go to America."

Chaim was shocked. "America?!" He repeated incredulously.

"Yes," Baruch replied confidently. "It's a land of opportunity, a country where I can actually become wealthy. I have enough savings to pay for passage on a steamer ship to America. I will miss you tremendously, no question about it. But there's nothing for me in this shtetl other than misery."

"But traveling across the ocean is dangerous," Chaim sputtered. "And who knows when we'll ever see each other again? Please, Baruch, think about this rationally. I am your only family member! Are you willing to say goodbye to me just for money?"

"I can't stay," Baruch insisted. "There's no way I can find my place in this shtetl."

Seeing that his younger brother was adamant in his decision, Chaim abruptly changed tracks. "Alright," He said quietly. "If you feel this is what you must do, then I won't stop you. But please... you know that I am in the midst of a shidduch. At the very least, can you wait until after my simcha, so that I won't have to celebrate completely alone?"

His request was fair, and Baruch agreed.

Chaim got engaged shortly thereafter to Devorah, a wonderful young woman, and Baruch was grateful to be able to participate in the simcha, to be there for his brother during the engagement

period, and to dance him away from the chupah. But the days of Chaim's sheva brachos were intensely lonely for the teenager, solidifying his decision to leave for America immediately. Chaim now had a wife, another relative besides for his brother and someone with whom he would develop an even deeper relationship. But Baruch essentially lost his only brother, and would now be the sole occupant of the decrepit shack he called home. He saw no reason to stay.

"Please, stay for one more year," Chaim begged when Baruch informed him of his plans. "Just one more year! Now that I'm married, you'll finally be able to be part of a real family. Are you going to leave now, just as things are starting to get better?"

His pleading caused Baruch to relent. "All right," He said. "One year. But that's all."

Chaim secretly hoped Baruch would marry during the year, and ultimately decide to stay. He was confident that once his brother tasted real family life, he would abandon all plans of leaving. Baruch, however, was determined to realize his dream of immigrating to America. Although eager to get married and begin a family of his own, he rejected all shidduch suggestions, unwilling to tie himself down to the primitive shtetl of his birth, to the village where he had experienced so much sorrow and tragedy. It was worth waiting a few more months until the year he promised Chaim was up, after which he would sail for America and build a family there.

Even the birth of his sweet little niece, Rivka, just weeks before he was set to travel, could not sway his decision. It would be difficult to say goodbye to Chaim, Devorah, and their adorable little girl, but Baruch held firm.

A year after Chaim's wedding, he was at the port, ready to sail, and the two brothers parted, possibly forever.

Chaim's Story:

Although his only brother's absence left a tremendous void in Chaim's heart, the stoic young man was accustomed to loss and bravely moved on.

Yet tragedy refused to leave him alone.

Just a short while after Baruch's departure, Devorah grew ill. Desperately afraid of losing his family yet again, Chaim brought his wife to the big city, where he hoped to find a physician with the medical know-how to facilitate her recovery. They went from doctor to doctor, specialist to specialist, sparing no expense in their quest to save her life. They also fulfilled their spiritual hishtadlus, storming the heavens with their tearful prayers.

After much effort, Devorah was seen by a top physician in the field, who recommended surgery and rigorous treatment. After following his medical regimen, she was declared healthy and well once again.

But the joy and relief were bittersweet. The news of Devorah's health was accompanied by the bitter tidings that she would never again be able to bear a child.

Once again, the couple accepted this difficult decree with heroic faith, resolving to continue on despite the difficult news. They showered all their love on their little daughter, Rivka, all too aware that she would be the only child they would have. Despite the hardships they had been through, both Chaim and Devorah were blessed with pleasant dispositions and good hearts, and their natural friendliness attracted others like magnets. His honesty and good character served Chaim well in his position in the shop, and he soon realized he had a knack for making customers happy and drawing sales.

When the couple decided to branch out on their own, they were immediately successful. It wasn't difficult to discern that Chaim put the needs of his customers first, and throngs of villagers patronized his shop. With the customers came sales, and with the sales came wealth. Soon, branches of their store began popping up in nearby shtetls as well, and the man who was once a penniless orphan became an affluent man.

Heeding the call of his departed father, Chaim did not allow his money to encroach on his good character. He never forgot his years of misery and donated generously to all those in need. His wife was renowned for her chesed and their home was open to all.

And then there was their daughter, Rivka.

Rivka was the light of their lives. They delighted in each of her childhood milestones and relished hearing her ringing laughter as she engaged in play. They showered her with everything money could buy, and with everything money couldn't buy. As their only child, she was the recipient of all the parental love they had bottled up inside, and they plied her with care and warmth, compliments and attention. Every toy, every dress, every whim she could only dream of was granted by her doting parents.

Unsurprisingly, Rivka grew into a selfish and vain young woman. She couldn't understand why her mother wasted so much of her energy on assisting the unfortunate. It was completely beyond her comprehension why her father would give and give so generously the money he rightfully earned to a lazy pauper who found it more convenient to spend his time begging instead of working for his bread. She scorned the indigents who knocked on her parents' door and made sure they were aware of her opinion of them in sharp and colorful wording.

When Chaim and Devorah finally awoke to recognize the disaster that was their only

daughter, it was too late. Rivka was already a young woman, accustomed to having her desires fulfilled and ever so firm in her ways. Though they tried, there was little they could do to transform her character.

When Rivka turned sixteen years old, the matchmakers in the area got to work, their eyes on the large compensation her father would surely provide to the one who was successful in marrying off his daughter. The young woman, however, did not make their job an easy one. She had a long list of wants and an even longer list of want-nots, and she rejected suggestion after suggestion with an air of superiority. There was no one, it seemed, that she would deem worthy enough of becoming her husband.

As the weeks passed and the promise of a successful shidduch seemed more distant than ever, the matchmakers convened at a secret meeting, brainstorming ways to finally marry the girl off so that the shadchanus would come rolling their way. Each knew that the one who would find Rivka a husband would be able to bid farewell to his parnasah worries for the remainder of his life. As word of the shidduch challenge spread beyond the shtetl, a shadchan in a faraway village joined the quest. He was acquainted with a bachur whose personality mirrored Rivka's description: he was rich, he was stingy, he was strong-willed and he was selfish. Seizing the opportunity, he traveled to the shtetl where the girl lived and broached the suggestion.

"The young man I would like to suggest is just what you are looking for," He declared confidently, impressing Rivka with his assured manner. "He's wealthy, he's smart, he's handsome. He's a savvy businessman who doesn't waste his time learning." From research of the many failed shidduchim previously suggested, the shadchan had discovered just which qualities to mention and which to wisely ignore.

His political cunning paid off, and Rivka was hooked. Her parents, who had long despaired of her ever finding a shidduch, were thrilled that she finally expressed interest in a match. The shadchan traveled back to his hometown to suggest the shidduch to the boy, and within a few short weeks, they were engaged. The wedding was set for a few months later.

Rivka's engagement was a joyous, busy time. Devorah employed various women to assist in the preparations for the wedding and with setting up her daughter's new home. There was shopping and appointments and a myriad of other tasks, so much to accomplish in the few short months before the wedding. Rivka desired the most expensive and luxurious of everything she purchased and insisted on a highly-upgraded wedding. Her parents, completely overtaken by their excitement and joy, indulged her. Yet despite the wedding expenditures, Chaim did not forget about those who were not as fortunate as he, and continued his philanthropic activities with the shtetl's poor.

A few short weeks before the chasan was due to arrive in town for the wedding, as the pace of the wedding activity began stepping up, a seamstress came down to the house to take measurements of Rivka and her mother for some dresses they had ordered. Busy as they were with materials, styles, and trimmings, they did not hear the soft yet persistent knocking on the door.

Yet the woman at the other side of the door was stubborn, it seemed, or perhaps she was desperate, and she knocked repeatedly, louder and louder. When she still did not succeed in attracting the attention of the inhabitants of the house, she gave up on the niceties. Turing the doorknob purposefully, she entered the house.

Hearing footsteps, Rivka, her mother, and the seamstress looked up from the pile of ribbons and lace and were greeted by the sight of a weary,

haggard-looking woman dressed in tattered garments.

"Please," The woman began, her tone pleading. "I'm a widow, with young children, and—"

The woman didn't even have to finish her sentence. Rivka jumped to her feet and folded her arms across her chest. Her menacing appearance caused the widow to instinctively take a step back. "Who do you think you are?" Rivka hissed. Her voice rose several octaves, oblivious to the horrified looks her mother and the seamstress were throwing her way. "Barging in on us like that! Without any shame! If you need money, go work to earn some! Do you think this is some sort of bank?!"

The widow's cheeks turned a deep shade of scarlet and she looked down at the floor. "I..." She tried feebly. "I-I- I'm a widow with young yesomim—"

"I can hear perfectly well; no need for you to waste your time repeating yourself," Rivka snapped sharply. "And since you don't seem to have such impeccable hearing, I'll repeat: THIS IS NOT A BANK. Nor is this a grant office nor a charity fund!" She drew closer to the woman until she was mere inches away, and without warning, delivered a ringing slap to the widow's already flaming cheeks. "If you exercise your brain cells carefully, you might eventually deduce that you have interrupted us in the midst of an appointment with the seamstress. Now what are you waiting for? Pick yourself up and skedaddle!"

The woman, sufficiently humiliated and intimidated, needed no second invitation. She fled from the room, her face blazing and her eyes stinging with tears.

Devorah stared at her daughter in horrification. She had known that Rivka was not as sensitive to others as she was, but this was taking things to an entirely new level. The cruelty her daughter had

displayed toward the widow shocked her to the core and rooted her to her spot. She still had not recovered her wits when the woman reappeared.

This time, burning humiliation in the widow's eyes was replaced by a look of steel. She took one step into the room, and turned to Rivka, who had already returned her attention back to the seamstress's patterns as if nothing had occurred. She pointed a shaky finger at the kallah and declared in a voice quivering with indignation, "You should be a widow! You should be a widow!" With those words, she turned on her heel and left again.

This terrible curse, uttered from the pained heart of a broken almanah, finally shook Devorah back to her senses, and she ran after the woman. "Please, come back," She called after her as she ran. She had wanted to help ease the widow's plight in any case, and now that her daughter had so brutally ripped the woman to shreds, she knew that it was up to her to make amends.

But the widow ignored her, walking quickly and steadily away.

The day of the wedding dawned.

The kallah's home was a beehive of activity. In the kitchen, a team of women labored tirelessly, whipping up dish after dish of scrumptious delicacies. Wagons drove back and forth between the home and the wedding venue, carrying enormous loads of everything needed for the lavish wedding, from food and flowers to goblets and gowns. Uniformed maids scurried about to fulfill the requests of the many out-of-town guests who had come to the shtetl for the wedding. The swinging door of Rivka's room kept opening and closing as hairdressers and seamstresses, her emotional mother and her closest friends, streamed in and out, preparing the kallah for her wedding.

An old, disheveled man slowly dragged his feet along the shrub-lined walkway leading up to Chaim's sprawling home. The elderly pauper entered the house and wandered the large corridors, unnoticed and undisturbed in the midst of all the hubbub. He peeked into doorways and scanned many rooms until he finally stumbled upon the wing of the house where the chasan and his family, who had traveled from far, were staying.

He poked his head into the chasan's room, and then entered, interrupting the young man in the midst of admiring his handsome suit in the full-length mirror. The chasan, sensing the intruder, whirled around and eyed the man with suspicion.

"Can I help you?" He asked impatiently.

In response, the pauper just held out a cupped palm and muttered one word. "Tzedakah?"

The chasan looked at him in annoyance. "I'm sorry, but I am getting married today," He responded curtly. "I'm afraid it's not a good time for you to come collecting here." With that, he turned his back on the beggar, and continued fiddling with his lapels and adjusting his collar.

But the elderly pauper persisted. His arm still outstretched, he repeated, "Tzedakah?"

"As I said," The chasan replied, his tone irritated. "My wedding is in just a few hours. You chose a poor time to come. You can't just bother a chasan on the day of his chupah!"

Without another word, the impoverished man turned and shuffled slowly out of the room. But he didn't leave the house. Once again, he meandered along the expansive hallways, this time seeking the kallah. There was a steady flow of traffic in and out of the kallah's room, and he waited until he could catch her on her own. Finally, the last woman in the room exited, and Rivka was left alone. The beggar entered her

room and held out his hand in the same gesture he had made to the chasan just moments before. From within his straggly beard, his hoarse voice emerged. "Tzedakah?"

Rivka was just as annoyed as her chasan had been, but far less polite about it. "NO!" She shrieked hysterically, her face contorted by a terrible rage. "The answer is NO! The nerve! The chutzpah! I am getting married tonight, and all you can think about is begging for a few coins instead of finding a respectable occupation!"

The man just looked at her and repeated himself. "Tzedakah?"

"I don't know who allowed you to come up here," She hissed, her voice low and dangerous. "But this is private territory and I could have you arrested for trespassing! THIS IS NOT A BANK! Now, scram!"

The pauper looked at her, pity in his eyes. He had asked, and she had refused to give. In that case... "I will come to the chasunah to take," He said quietly.

And then, as quickly as he had come, he was gone. But his words echoed softly in the uneasy silence he left in his wake.

Indeed, he did come. He came to the wedding just as the rav began the sixth bracha. Ignoring the curious stares of the wedding guests, he dragged his feet slowly down the aisle, reaching the chupah as the rav concluded the last of the sheva brachos.

"...misameiach chasan v'kallah!" The rav intoned, his voice ringing out clearly.

The old pauper walked right up to the couple, and in a tone audible to their ears alone, he murmured, "I have come to take."

The chasan lifted his foot and brought it down hard on the glass, reducing it to shards.

Mazel Tov!

Yet as orchestra began a lively tune and the crowd erupted in joyous song, the chasan collapsed. He lay in a heap on the floor. Crumpled. Unmoving. Still beneath his own chupah, the chasan had passed away, leaving behind a grieving, terror-stricken crowd and turning Rivka, his wife of just a few minutes, into a fresh, young widow.

It had taken endless effort, tedious preparation, and a large sum of money. And just like that, the wedding was over. The guests dispersed, the food was donated to the poor, and Rivka returned to her parents' home in shame.

It was difficult for her to leave after that.

The tragic story was a village sensation, as the news was told, then retold, then expounded upon and eventually exaggerated as it spread throughout the neighboring towns. The townspeople hashed and rehashed the details while their wagging tongues ground Rivka's already meager reputation mercilessly, all in the name of sympathy, of course.

The rav's ruling obliged Rivka to cover her hair, cementing her status as a once married woman and forever a bitter reminder of the terrible misfortune that had struck her on what she had presumed would be the happiest day of her life.

She remained cooped up in her room for days sobbing endlessly, completely shattered by the tragedy. When she did emerge, her parents noted with dismay that the pain had further eroded her already tainted character. Her anger flared easily, and her tongue was even more vicious than before. The terrified household staff quickly learned to stay far away from her terrible wrath.

News becomes old, and even the most sensational stories lose their luster after a while. As time passed, the villagers let go of the story and embraced the next scoop. Rivka, too, slowly moved beyond the tragedy and emerged from hiding out at home, first for short walks, then for longer outings.

It didn't take too long for the matchmakers to descend upon her again. After all, she was still young, and her large dowry was still intact. The monetary compensation for finding her a second husband would surely reflect the extra effort it entailed, and they all wished to cash in on the opportunity. Awful middos notwithstanding, the search was on to find the unfortunate young widow a husband again.

Eventually, after much searching and political manipulation on both sides, Rivka was engaged again. Her wedding date was set and the preparations began. Throughout the weeks leading up to the wedding, Chaim and Devorah increased their tefillos and philanthropic activities, seeking zechusim, as their daughter busied herself with fittings for a new pricy wardrobe and drawing up a lavish wedding menu. The chasan, who was from out of town, arrived at his kallah's shtetl a few days before the wedding, and at his future father-in-law's behest, settled down with his parents in a remote wing of Chaim's large home.

The day of the wedding dawned, the air thick with tension. Chaim and Devorah tried to show an excited front so as not to ruin the simcha of the upcoming wedding, yet they couldn't shake off the icy fear that gripped them firmly with unclenching fingers. Would this wedding end in laughter or tears?

As the staff bustled about, loading up carriages with wedding gear, an old, disheveled looking man dressed in rags shuffled slowly down the walkway leading up to the palatial home. They

paid him no heed as he entered the house through a side door and disappeared inside.

The elderly man continued his slow tread until he reached the room where the chasan sat engrossed in his thoughts as he considered the wisdom of several investment types and pondered how to get the greatest returns on the large dowry his future shver had promised. His financial calculations were abruptly interrupted.

An impoverished man with a scraggly white beard stood before him, his palm outstretched. "Tzedakah?" He prompted, his eyes boring holes into the chasan, who just blinked back blankly.

"Tzedakah?" The chasan repeated slowly. "You came here for money?" He shook his head disgustedly, and as if he hadn't been pondering that very topic just moments earlier, continued, "I'm sorry, but I have things to take care of that are of much greater importance than money right now. I assume you aren't aware, but I will be walking to the chupah in just a few hours."

If he thought the conversation was over, he was wrong. The elderly pauper did not lower his arm. "Tzedakah?" He repeated, gesturing meaningfully with his cupped palm.

"Perhaps it would be best if you came back another day," The chasan suggested politely, knowing very well that if the beggar did return, he would not be there anymore to greet him. "I am busy now. Have a good day." He nodded toward the door, and the pauper obliged with nary a word, moving slowly out of sight.

He continued through the long corridors and winding staircases and paused outside the swinging door of the kallah's room. When all was quiet, he stepped inside.

Rivka was a bundle of nerves as she relived the traumatic memories of her first wedding that just wouldn't leave her alone. If on a typical day, her

ire was easily aroused, due to her anxiety, her temper now lingered quietly like a glowing ember just waiting to pounce on a combustible substance and ignite into roaring flames.

The pauper's simple "Tzedakah?" was like gasoline to a fire, and she erupted. "You again!" She yelled. "Still haven't learned your lesson from last time!" The irony of her statement completely lost on her, she rose to her feet and snarled, "I have absolutely no money to give to lazy, good-for-nothings like you. Go find yourself employment!"

"Tzedakah?" The man intoned again, seemingly immune to her insults.

"Are you hungry?" She asked, if just to play up his hopes so that she could dash it back down. "Well, that's just too bad! I refuse to interrupt my preparations for my very own wedding to feed you! Go find yourself a different soup kitchen!" With those words, Rivka turned her back on him, purposefully.

"I will come to the wedding to take," The beggar promised, his ominous words echoing throughout the silent room.

The kallah gave no indication that she heard his words and completely ignored him.

She wouldn't be able to ignore him later that evening, however, when he would appear at the wedding...

Rivka stood beneath the floral canopy, a feeling of smug elation enveloping her. Despite all the negativity that had surrounded her previous wedding, she had defeated the odds and was marrying again. The young man standing behind her was really what she had been looking for—wealthy, suave, and brilliant, even more so than her previous chasan.

From behind her white veil, she listened as the rav concluded the sheva brachos, and then, as if on cue, the elderly pauper approached her. "I came to take," He whispered as the chasan stomped loudly on the glass with his sharply heeled shoes and successfully shattered it.

Now that the chupah proceedings had reached the fateful moment of the previous wedding, Devorah, standing nervously behind her daughter, held her breath. Chaim, as well, sucked in his breath anxiously. The mechutanim, the guests, no one in attendance dared to breathe...

And the chasan?

The chasan, too, stopped breathing, but never to breathe again.

The horrified onlookers watched as he clutched his chest and his faced turned a ghastly shade of blue. And then he fell to the floor.

He was gone.

And Rivka, still in her teens, was tragically widowed again.

If her shame after her first failed wedding had been bad, the terrible humiliation Rivka suffered after the tragedy repeated itself was completely unbearable. Young men don't die every day, and a chasan passing away under his own chupah is an unheard-of tragedy. Yet for a kallah to lose her husband just minutes after they were wed – twice! People began to suspect that something deeper was at play. And that something, they were certain, was connected to the kallah.

As she took each painful step away from the lavish wedding venue toward the carriage that would take her home, Rivka realized that this had been her final opportunity for marriage. There would be nobody else, no other young man, no matter how simple, no matter how underprivileged, no matter how tempting her

dowry would promise to be. There would never again be a man willing to put his life on the line and marry her.

She would be alone, a double widow forever.

She was still pondering this heartbreaking realization when she felt her mother stroking her shoulder.

“Rivka,” Devorah said softly, her voice hoarse with tears. Her fingers moved back and forth across her daughter’s heaving shoulders and she hesitated. Was Rivka ready to hear what she had to say? She set her lips firmly and took a deep breath. It wouldn’t be easy, but it was her responsibility as a mother. “The widow... the widow who came by to collect money shortly before your first wedding just a few years ago... She came while we were in middle of a sewing appointment. Do you remember that widow, Rivka?”

Rivka lifted her head and was silent for a moment. “I remember,” She finally whispered as a terrible understanding dawned. “I remember,” She repeated slowly. “She told me... she cursed me...”

Both mother and daughter reflected upon that fateful day. The almanah had pointed a shaking finger at Rivka, who had struck her so cruelly and rejected her desperate plea, and wished upon her, “You should be a widow! You should be a widow!”

“Twice,” Rivka murmured hoarsely as a wave of regret washed over her. “She wished me widowhood twice. And here I am, not even twenty years old, and a double widow.” She buried her face in her hands and burst into gut wrenching tears. “How do I atone for this?” She asked, wailing bitterly. “I don’t even know who she was!”

“Perhaps from now on, we can be extra sensitive to the needs of those less fortunate than us,” Devorah suggested gently. “Perhaps in that merit we will be able to recompense somewhat for what happened in the past.”

To her surprise, her normally egoistical, selfish daughter nodded agreeably. “You’re right,” She said quietly. “I will definitely make an effort toward treating others with more compassion and dignity. If only that would be able to atone for the terrible way I treated that almanah!”

It was on this note of regret and optimism that the carriage pulled up in front of their home, and Rivka dismounted, her head high, determined at last to begin the long, uphill battle of conquering her character.

Baruch’s story:

Baruch stood on the deck, waving to his brother, as the ship sailed further and further away from the shore until Chaim was no more than a speck in the distance. Then, he turned his back on the sorrow of his past and looked forward into the luster of his future.

The journey was a difficult one. The constant motion of the swaying ship as it navigated the turbulent waters triggered a severe case of seasickness in the lonely orphan. Baruch spent much up the trip in his cabin, battling feverish headaches and constant nausea. His queasiness engendered a lack of appetite, and he steadily weakened.

When the liner finally docked at the New York coast, Baruch’s condition had deteriorated to the point that he was unable to disembark on his own. Two sailors lifted him up and deposited him onshore with his meager luggage. Feverish and too weak to move, he lay where they left him, amidst the hustle and bustle of the busy port. The

dismalness of his situation was compounded by the fact that he was in a foreign country, where an unfamiliar language was spoken, and he could not identify a single other Jew.

Suddenly, he heard someone address him in Yiddish. With difficulty, he turned his head toward the direction of the warm voice. There stood a man, a Jew, who had come to the port to meet a relative arriving from Europe and chanced upon a fellow Yid, lying alone, ill and weak.

“You are coming with me,” The kind Jew declared, taking in Baruch’s unwell and lonely appearance. “You will stay in my home until you recover.”

Relief washed over the orphan, and he summoned his last reserves of energy to join his benefactor in his wagon. Even before the unknown Yid managed to finish loading Baruch’s trunk onto the cart, the youth was fast asleep.

When he awoke, Baruch found himself in a simply furnished room, on a plain, but comfortable bed right in the middle of a real Jewish home. His host and hostess plied him with care and hot drinks, slowly nursing him back to health. When he finally recovered, his kind host sought to find him employment and enable him to become financially independent. Being that his only expertise was in the field of shoes, he found a job once again as a shoemaker’s assistant.

His new boss soon learned that Baruch knew the trade better than any American worker. His rigorous European training and strong work ethic coupled with his inborn skill made him a real asset at his new workplace. In addition, Baruch made good use of the inheritance he had received from his father and treated all those who crossed his path with pleasant manners and deep respect. In no time, he was his boss’s most valuable employee. No longer was he laboring with leather and nails; now he held a respectable position as the repair shop manager.

The freedom of America had little effect on Baruch’s yiddishkeit. His meager savings grew into a tidy sum, and he was well on his way to achieving prosperity, yet he remained fiercely committed to davening three times a day, to a daily learning seder, to Shabbos and to kashrus. As he learnt a passable English and his wonderful reputation spread among New York’s small shomer Shabbos community, a shidduch was suggested with another European immigrant, a wedding was held, and Baruch established a family of his own.

He had come a long way from the penniless, orphaned cobbler he had been back in Europe. With his trademark vigor and creativity, he expanded the business for his boss, opening another shoe-repair shop at the other end of town and training more employees to serve clients there. In time, Baruch bought out the business from his aging boss and developed it further, building more branches and expanding his services, from shoe repair to selling shoes and eventually to manufacturing his own brand of footwear.

With their wealth, Baruch and his wife could easily afford to raise their family children in luxury, but they were wise. Understanding that a life of materialism has a high spiritual cost, they instead sought to infuse their children with the wonderful values they had learned from their impoverished upbringings. They toiled to bring up children who were unspoiled and hard workers, who were high achievers, happy with little, and had sterling characters. They labored to provide their children with a true Jewish upbringing in the spiritual wasteland of America, to teach them Torah and fear of Hashem.

It wasn’t an easy job.

But their efforts paid off.

All of their children were pious, good natured, and successful, yet their eldest son Shimon was

especially so. Shimon was mature, responsible, and extremely bright. He was also personable, kind, and well-liked. He successfully aced the difficult challenge of balancing his Torah studies with his father, his secular studies at school, and his youthful desire for play, and his parents reaped endless nachas as they watched him grow from boy to man. By the time he nineteen years old, he was a well-rounded, serious young man who was sincere in his commitment to yiddishkeit, an enviable rarity in his community. It was time for him to marry.

Yet before he would settle down, Shimon wished to travel to Europe for a few weeks. Having grown up as part of a tiny community in a largely non-Jewish environment, he was interested in visiting his parents' birthplace and the large Jewish kehillas that flourished there.

Baruch was very enthusiastic about his son's idea. There was a vast ocean separating himself and his only brother, and the two had not seen each other in more than twenty long years. Being various factors that inhibited him from traveling to Europe, he was excited that his brother would have the opportunity to get to know his son, bridging the physical distance between them.

They finalized the details, Shimon procured a ship ticket, and Baruch dashed off a letter to Chaim with the next ship leaving for Europe. In the letter, he informed his brother the date of Shimon's impending arrival at a specified European port, and asked Chaim to care for his son during his month-long visit. Shimon was set to travel a few weeks later.

In Chaim's home, Baruch's letter was received with equal enthusiasm and excitement. Almost a quarter of a century had passed since the brothers' parting, and at last they would again meet some of the family from America. A beautiful room in the guest quarters was lovingly set up as the

family prepared welcome their nephew from overseas.

On the day of Shimon's scheduled arrival, Chaim traveled to the port to meet his nephew, yet he found that the ship had not yet arrived. Communication with a vessel at sea was infrequent and unclear, and it was common for bad weather to hinder the arrival of an expected ship, so he took up lodgings in a hotel nearby. For the next few days, he appeared at the port, seeking news of the ship, but there was none.

When a week had passed, then two, Chaim began to grow concerned. More days passed, and the slight worry mushroomed into anxious fear. Had a tragedy occurred?

Soon, the bitter news arrived at the shore. The ship had met vicious storms and was forced to change its course, docking instead at a distant land until the stormy weather subsided. After a few days, it resumed traveling toward its original destination, but the weather had eroded the ship and in its battered condition, it held no match for the crashing waves. The ship had sunk at sea, taking most of its passengers along on its descent to the ocean floor.

The news was a terrible blow. Instead of a joyous meeting with his nephew, Chaim had met the devastating tidings of yet another loss. Despondent, he returned home, sans Shimon, and relayed the tragedy to his horrified family.

He knew he ought to shoulder the unpleasant task of informing his brother, Shimon's father, about the tragic occurrence at sea, yet he simply could not bring himself to put the awful tidings on paper. How could he break Baruch's heart with a letter bearing news of the demise of his beloved eldest son? Chaim knew his brother had permitted the dangerous journey across the ocean largely because of him, to reunite the two units of a family separated for so many years. How could he ever relay the bitter tidings that instead of unity,

all that had been achieved was yet another crushing loss in the family that had seen so much death already?

His heart heavy and his pen full of reluctance, he procrastinated. And so the news of Shimon's untimely passing remained on his side of the Atlantic.

On the night of the tragedy, as soon as he heard the first shouts foreshadowing the disaster ahead, Shimon got to work. Carefully, he strapped his money bag to his person, under his shirt. He did not know if he would make it, but he knew that if he did, he would be far from home and the money would be necessary for survival until he was able to renew contact with his family.

The ship was filling with water at a frightening pace, and he wasted no time. As soon the money bag was securely fastened, he abandoned his cabin and headed toward one of the emergency rowboats stowed at the rear of the ship. He discovered several others already there, trying to undo the knots binding the lifeboat, and he joined in the effort. As the water rose higher and higher, they lowered the small dingy into the raging sea and began rowing away from the danger.

Still, their safety was far from certain.

The nearest port was hundreds of miles away, and their small, hapless boat was tossed about by the stormy winds. With the stars clouded over and nothing in sight for miles, they were rowing with no sense of direction and little food. Would they ever reach land? Would they reach land before their food supply ran out, before they succumbed to the poor weather conditions?

Eventually, unbelievably, they did reach land, perhaps the only survivors of their wrecked ship to do so.

Despite his weak condition, Shimon was grateful to be alive. Knowing his relatives were surely worrying about his fate, he wanted to resume his trip to his uncle's home as quickly as possible. Parting from the other survivors, he opted to continue his journey by land, having experienced enough drama at sea. With his money still intact, he knew he would be able to afford wagon transportation over the European countryside and overnight loggings in inns that he passed.

He did not take into account the bandits that pirated the highways.

Just a short while into his journey, he rode straight into an ambush. A band of brigands demanded his money in exchange for his life and he was forced to part with his money bag, his only ticket out of his rapidly deteriorating situation. Now, he was truly alone.

With no other options, he covered the remainder of his journey by foot, arriving a few days later in the shtetl where his uncle resided with his family. Covered in dust and aching for sleep, he inquired of some passersby where R' Chaim lived. They directed him to a large, palatial home at the center of the village.

Shimon dragged his weary legs along the stone walkway leading up to the front door, contemplating the fact that he had made it at last. Raising a fist, he was about to knock on the door when a cleaning woman, who had been tending to some work outside, interrupted him.

"Excuse me, sir," She said, taking in his dusty appearance and mistaking him for a tzedakah collector. It was well known amongst the staff that the daughter of the house did not take kindly to beggars, and if any knocked on the front door, they would surely be victim to her wrath. Taking pity on the pauper before her, the maid suggested, "Perhaps it would be best if you went around to the side of the house and knocked on the kitchen entrance?"

Shimon looked at her questioningly. “Is this R’ Chaim’s home?” He asked.

“It is,” The maid confirmed, looking worriedly over her shoulder to see if Rivka would appear. “But it would be better if you went to the kitchen entrance. You’ll find my mistress there.”

Shrugging, Shimon obliged. He rapped lightly on the side door as sounds of a busy kitchen seeped out. From outside, he heard the activity in the kitchen stop and then the clicking of shoes walking toward him. The door opened and a smiling woman stood there.

“Hello, please come inside,” She asked pleasantly, motioning for him to step out of the frigid air outside into the warm kitchen. She was accustomed, it seemed, to assisting dusty strangers who knocked on her door. “Please sit down, rest your feet. What can I do for you?”

“Is this R’ Chaim’s house?” Shimon asked again in confusion.

“Yes, it is,” Devorah replied. “You’ve come to the right place. How can we be of assistance to you?”

“My name is Shimon,” He stammered shyly. “From America... I’m sorry I’m a few weeks late...”

“Shimon! From America!” Her face paled momentarily. Gathering herself together, she toward the inner rooms of the house, she called hysterically, “He’s alive! Shimon! He’s alive!”

From different corners of the house, her husband and daughter came rushing to the kitchen, staring disbelievingly at the young man, who flushed under their scrutiny. There were exclamations of shock-and joy and deep emotion all around as the two branches of the family finally reunited after so many years and so much difficulty.

A light meal was served so that Shimon could satiate his hunger. The family sat with him and listened raptly to the story of his tumultuous journey and his miraculous survival. Then, the room that had been prepared for him in the guest wing was hastily carefully dusted off and a weary Shimon was shown to his bed.

He thanked his uncle, bid him good night, and was about to close the door when Chaim spoke. “You’ve seen that your cousin, Rivka, wears a head covering,” He began. “She looks like a married woman, yet you haven’t seen a husband. This is because she is widowed.” He began, and then proceeded to recount the tragic story of Rivka’s two weddings and their terrible endings. “I just wanted you to understand what is going on so that you don’t end up asking a sore question unintentionally,” He explained after he concluded the sad tale, before taking leave of his nephew.

The next few weeks passed quickly as the family got to know Shimon and he got to know them. He found his uncle to be wise, giving, and understanding, and Devorah a woman of deep emotion, genuine kindness and infallible joy. He didn’t have much interaction with Rivka, yet Shimon observed his cousin at mealtimes and witnessed her dealing with others over the course of his stay. He couldn’t help but be impressed by her refinement and willingness to go the extra mile for someone less fortunate than she. He saw absolutely no evidence of the tainted character Chaim had hinted to on the first night of his stay. It seemed that in the three painful years since her second wedding, Rivka had succeeded in uprooting her awful middos completely.

Despite her reputation of causing the deaths of her husbands while still under the chupah, after observing her from up close for three weeks, Shimon knew she would be an ideal wife. Her good qualities were worth the risk in marrying her, he realized. Yet even as he came upon this realization, he knew it was nearly impossible that his uncle would agree.

On her end, Rivka had similar thoughts about her American cousin. She couldn't help noticing his intelligence, refinement, kind nature, and good manners in his every interaction with those around him. Wistfully, she observed as he praised her mother for another delicious meal, joined her father in deep discussion about a complicated business matter, and poured over a large Gemara at the dining room table, humming softly to himself. This, she knew, was the kind of man she would want to marry, were she to have the opportunity to get married again. Yet she understood that despite the difficult months she had spent battling her natural desires and completely revamping her character, no young man of such caliber would put his life on the line for her.

And then it was time for Shimon to return to America.

Two days before his scheduled departure, his relatives took him to the big city nearby to purchase souvenirs and gifts for his family back in America. They went from shop to shop, and he dutifully chose a shawl for his mother and some toys for his siblings, but his mind was not in it. He was returning to America, he knew, to start the process of shidduchim. But the match he was sure was destined for him was not in America...

They were finally finished the long purchasing expedition and preparing to head back to the shtetl when Devorah suddenly remembered a quick errand she had been waiting to take care of for some time. Promising it wouldn't take long, she had the carriage stop at one last store and disembarked, motioning for her husband to join her. Shimon and Rivka were left alone.

This was Shimon's last opportunity. Mustering his courage, he asked her to be his wife, assuring her that he fully comprehended the risk involved and this was his desire nevertheless. Tearfully, disbelievingly, joyously, she agreed. They decided to base their future home on chesed and

resolved to give half of any money they would earn to tzedakah. When her parents emerged from the store, they were greeted with a mazel tov. Against the odds, their daughter had become a kallah again.

"Absolutely not," Chaim declared. "There is nothing to discuss. Shimon, I love you like a son. There is simply no way I can allow you to marry my daughter. How will I ever face my brother if something happens to you at the wedding?"

"It was Hashem's will that the first two chasanim pass away," Shimon replied confidently. "If it is Hashem's will that I live, I will live. Tzedakah tazil mimaves, charity saves from death. We will build a home of true giving, and beezras Hashem no harm will befall me."

Both sides were adamant, refusing to give in. Shimon postponed his ticket and his uncle postponed any wedding plans. It was time to take the matter to a rav.

Theirs was a very difficult question, and the rav they consulted was hesitant to answer. How could he allow a young man to put himself in such grave danger? And yet, Rivka had changed, she was a different woman than she had previously been. There was no denying that she was softer, easier, kinder. He asked to speak to her, and determined that indeed, she was ready to devote her life to helping others.

After much thought and consideration, the rav permitted them to marry. A wedding date was set. Once again, Rivka found herself in the crosshairs of the town gossipmongers. "Did you hear?" People would exclaim to each other, eyebrows raised and noses pinched at the absurdity of the situation. "She's engaged again. To her first cousin! A fool, no doubt. Who else would agree to marry her?!"

As the date drew closer, her parents grew increasingly anxious. The chasan, too, was nervous.

But no one could compare to the kallah.

Rivka was a wreck. This time, the young man she was marrying was not just her chasan, but her first cousin as well. If he were to die under the chupah, she knew she would too. She would never be able to move on if the tragedy repeated itself a third time, and to a chasan she respected so much.

Night after night, she sobbed over her tehillim, begging, pleading, imploring that her chasan be spared. "I've changed my terrible ways, and I will keep improving," She vowed silently. "Please, Hashem, forgive me for the dreadful way I treated others in the past, especially the widow who I slapped in the face."

She tried, unsuccessfully, to find the widow and apologize, and having no clue who the woman was, the task was nearly impossible. She beseeched Hashem to give the widow thoughts of forgiveness and redoubled her acts of kindness and charity throughout her engagement period.

The morning of the wedding dawned.

Shimon sat in his room, fervently saying tehillim, when he heard someone enter the room. Looking up from the worn tehillim, he saw an old, disheveled looking man standing before him.

The man spoke hoarsely from behind his straggly beard, his arm outstretched in the international language of begging. "Tzedakah?"

"Of course, come in, come in, my friend," The chasan replied, genuinely happy to be able to assist him. All his life, Shimon had been exceedingly kind and generous with the poor, and now would be no different. "Please have a seat,

rest your feet for a few moments. I also want to take a minute to invite you to please honor me with your participation at my chasunah tonight." Opening his wallet, he extracted a few bills and pressed them into the pauper's hand warmly before offering, "Can I bring you something to eat?" Without pause, he began filling a plate with warm food that had been brought up to his room a short while before.

The beggar shook his head dismissively and pocketed the bills. "Looking forward to seeing you as an esteemed guest at the chasunah tonight!" Shimon called as he watched the pauper's retreating back round the corridor bend and disappear from view.

The elderly pauper resumed his wandering through the sumptuous hallways until he came to a halt beside the kallah's room. He poked his head in, discovered that Rivka was alone, and, shuffling, pulled the rest of himself inside.

The kallah regarded him with eyes puffy from sobbing, a mixture of fear and nerves floating across her tense features.

The beggar lifted his tattered sleeve and cupped his hand meaningfully. "Tzedakah?"

He waited.

Rivka stood up hastily, and with one arm gesturing toward a chair and the other groping through her purse wildly, she said warmly, "Please, come in, sit down. Here's a cold drink," She added, hastily pouring from a nearby pitcher and nearly tripping over herself in her readiness to correct her previous treatment of this selfsame pauper. Piling a wad of bills onto the table beside him, she asked, "What can I bring you to eat? Perhaps you would like to rest? I can offer you a comfortable guest room..."

But the man just shook his head in the negative, and accepted the money.

“Can I help you with anything else?” She pleaded, eager to rectify her past and, at the same time, eager to see him go. His presence had, after all, caused the deaths of her previous chasanim.

He shook his head again and then opened his mouth to speak. “I will come to the wedding,” He promised and promptly disappeared out the door. “Oyyyyyyyy!” The kallah shrieked as she processed his last words, her face draining of all color. Her mother came running into the room, and Rivka whispered, “The man. Who came to the last two chupahs. He was here again. He’s coming to the wedding!”

Devorah panicked. She quickly informed her husband, who promptly began hyperventilating as well. The members of the household staff who were present, too, began moaning hysterically as a terrible anxiety traveled throughout the house. Yet the guests were already streaming toward the wedding hall. There was no turning back the clock.

The first time, the second time, Rivka’s wedding had been packed. Chaim was well-known and well-liked and throngs had shown up to share in his joy as he married off his only daughter. But this wedding was even more crowded. Even those who had neglected to attend the previous times were in attendance, curiously watching the proceedings.

Swaying slowly to the pace of his fervent tefillos, Shimon walked slowly toward the chupah. His face was pinched in concentration as he begged life, for the opportunity to build a home of true chesed. As he stood under the canopy engrossed in prayer, his kallah appeared in view, her sobs muffled by her veil as she covered the length of the aisle flanked by her weeping parents.

The rav was called up to recite the sheva brachos when suddenly, from the far end of the hall, a bedraggled pauper came into view. Someone recalled seeing him at both of the previous

weddings, just before the chasanim mysteriously collapsed. He passed this observation on and it spread like wildfire. The crowd erupted. Wailing, shrieking, yelling, they began to flee the hall and the Malach HaMaves, who was slowly shuffling down the aisle.

Rivka peeked out from behind her veil and her heart dropped. “Hashem,” She cried out, “Please give me another chance!”

Hearing his kallah’s desperate plea, the chasan unclenched his eyes and looked up fearfully.

Now the pauper was only a few feet away. He drew even nearer, causing the mesader kedushin to scuttle away in terror. At this point, all the guests had already fled for the lives, and only the small group of close relatives were still huddled under the chupah.

The pauper stood mere inches away from the chasan and looked directly into his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but Rivka was quicker.

“Don’t take him, take me instead!” She cried out in desperation, tears streaming down her cheeks. And then she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Chaim gasped. Devorah shrieked. The chasan’s face turned a ghastly shade of white as the women still present pressed forward to examine the fallen kallah.

Once again, the pauper opened his mouth to speak as Chaim’s heart beat painfully in his chest and Shimon began feeling faint. But the only words the beggar uttered were, “Mazel Tov.”

Mazel Tov?

The chasan looked at him incredulously and then glanced at his brand-new wife, who was still on the floor. Was Rivka even alive?

“She opened her eyes!” Devorah called from her perch on the floor beside her daughter. A chair was brought and the kallah was helped up as the band began playing.

“Hashem has accepted your teshuva,” the pauper whispered to the new couple. “He will take care of the people who take care of His people. Everything will be okay.”

With that, the chasan, the pauper, Chaim, and the few other men present joined hands and burst into dance.

Mazel Tov!

As the strains of the lively music drifted out of the hall toward the rest of the shtetl, the townspeople, who were already dissecting the latest gossip surrounding the unfortunate Rivka, looked at each other in uncertainty. Hastily, they rushed back to the hall, and, realizing that nothing had occurred, joined in the dancing. Round and round they went, celebrating with the triumph of one who has battled with his inner inclinations and finally conquered his prize.

The night wound down and the dancing eventually ceased, yet the message of that wedding still resonates centuries later. Hashem takes care of the people who help his people.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A428

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