

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

The Rich Man's Atonement

R' Yaakov was a tremendous talmid chacham, a man who was well-versed in all aspects of the entire Torah. In addition to his vast wealth of Torah knowledge, he had also been blessed with monetary abundance, which he utilized to assist those less fortunate than he. Indeed, it seemed that R' Yaakov had achieved near perfection in both spiritual and materialistic areas.

The wheel of fortune turns, slowly and continuously, and suddenly, almost overnight, R' Yaakov went from prosperous to penniless. His emunah intact, he accepted his poverty as a decree of Hashem. Still, the day-to-day practicalities were excruciating. Always a fine, refined type, it went completely against his nature to grovel and beg for food, especially if this included competing against other paupers for assistance. Further magnifying the difficulty was the extreme disparity between his former wealthy lifestyle and his current circumstances.

The day came when there was absolutely no money left, not a single coin with which to purchase food. Despite the sheer discomfort, R'

Yaakov knew that the responsibility of feeding his family was his to shoulder. Since scavenging for food amongst the philanthropists of his former social circle would be too difficult for him, he decided to travel to nearby towns where his face would not be recognized. He hoped that his anonymity would provide him with sufficient courage necessary to raise some money for his family.

When he arrived in the next town, he discovered that his refined nature had not toughened much. He stuck together with the other paupers in the bais medrash, yet could not bring himself to ask wealthier Jews for money or even food. After minchah, his fellow beggars had no problem procuring themselves a meal at the home of one kind villager or another, yet even as he observed their methods for obtaining food, R' Yaakov simply could not bring himself to beg for his supper. Only after the bais medrash emptied out did one of the last Jews to leave notice the lone beggar in tattered clothing, and R' Yaakov was invited to his home for supper.

And so, the days and weeks continued. As his desperation grew, R' Yaakov grew slightly bolder and managed to hold out his hand to collect a few coins. He would travel from town to village, collecting a few pennies at a time, and hoping to find someone who would offer him a meal. Even as he suffered through collecting for weeks, he still could not bring himself to beg for bread. Somehow or another, there was always someone who noticed him and provided him with the lifegiving substance of a daily meal.

One day, however, the bais medrash emptied after minchah until the only person remaining was R' Yaakov. No one had invited him for supper. Not having eaten since the previous day in a different village, R' Yaakov felt dizzy with hunger, yet it appeared that he would not have what to eat. Instead, he resumed learning from where he had left off before davening. When the crowds returned for maariv, no one noticed the one,

hungry man still hoping and shyly waiting for an offer of food. The townspeople chatted as they waited for maariv to start, and soon were engrossed in tefillah. After maariv, the room emptied again, and R' Yaakov was alone once more, still hungry. Resigning himself to his fate, he continued swaying before his Gemara until sleep finally claimed him.

Early the next morning, he used a few of his precious coins to hire a wagon to drive him to the next town. Although he didn't have money to spare for this luxury and usually walked the distance from one town to the other by foot, he had been fasting for more than thirty hours and did not have the physical energy to tackle the distance between the villages. As he slumped on the wagon bench and observed the passing scenery, he hoped he would find a more mindful crowd of Jews who would provide him with some desperately needed food.

To his disappointment, the scene in the second town mirrored that of the first, and for the second night in a row, he went to sleep starving. By now, he had not tasted a morsel for over two days. He barely had strength to drag the weight of his body, and he utilized his last reserves of energy, along with his last coins, to hire another wagon to take him to the next village.

When they arrived at the next village, he was on the verge of losing consciousness. "Please take me to the nearest wealthy Jew," He instructed the driver weakly. Despite his previous inability to stretch out his hand for food, at this point, he knew his only other option was death.

The wagon rolled to a stop before a grassy estate. R' Yaakov stumbled out, pushing one weakened leg in front of the other. There was more than one structure on the estate. One was clearly the residence of the wealthy individual, yet there was another building as well, which appeared to be a bais medrash. Using his waning strength, R'

Yaakov entered the shul and collapsed into a chair.

He was noticed immediately. People streamed over to greet the new face and welcome him to their city. R' Yaakov found that although he barely had the strength to respond to their greetings, he still had some energy left to indulge in his favorite pastime: learning Torah. A lively Talmudic discussion was happening nearby, and he joined it eagerly. Although he was not nearly at his physical best, the townspeople were impressed by his vast knowledge and sharp analytical skills.

As the Gemara debate continued, more and more people crowded around to listen. When the wealthy owner of the bais medrash, R' Mordechai, entered for minchah, he noticed a thick knot of people in one corner of the room. Curiously, he approached the small crowd to investigate the commotion. The crowd parted to allow him to pass, and he noticed a newcomer seated in the middle, engaged in deep discussion with some of the talmidei chachomim who frequented his bais medrash. "Shalom Aleichem," R' Mordechai interrupted, extending his hand to the newcomer in greeting. "It looks like you are new here. Welcome to my bais medrash."

R' Yaakov returned his greeting briefly, too weak to speak much, yet the crowd surrounding him had no problem substituting as his mouthpiece. "He just arrived an hour ago," One man with a pointy beard explained. "He is a massive talmid chacham, and it seems he is well acquainted with much, if not all, of shas."

"Not just a talmid chacham," A short, round fellow interjected. "But a man with a real head on his shoulders. R' Yaakov is the real deal!"

R' Mordechai's expressive mustache quivered excitedly above his well-trimmed beard. One of the things that afforded him much pleasure was listening to divrei Torah, which was why he had

built a bais medrash on his property. He was eager to host this new talmid chacham in his home. "After minchah," He informed R' Yaakov in his self-assured tone, "I would like you to come with me to my home."

Minchah that day was much easier for R' Yaakov than any other tefillah he had davened over the previous fifty-plus hours. The promise of something, anything, to eat was finally awaiting him. As he wet his siddur during davening, he thanked Hashem for sending him to a home where there was ample food, where he had been invited without even having to request it.

As soon as minchah was over, his eyes roved the bais medrash in search of R' Mordechai, and he noticed that the wealthy man was already hurrying out of the shul. His dry lips cracking, R' Yaakov got up to follow him, yet his frailty forced him to keep a slow pace. By the time he managed to pull himself up all the steps leading to R' Mordechai's vast front door, the large home had already swallowed the wealthy man inside. Mustering his courage, he knocked weakly on the door. His knocks were light, and they went unheeded. Sighing, he summoned more energy and rapped a little louder. Finally, the door was swung open by a uniformed butler.

"Is R' Mordechai in?" R' Yaakov asked hesitantly.

The butler nodded stiffly and then motioned to the beggar to follow him inside. They walked through sumptuous corridors decorated with expensive draperies and oil paintings and stopped beside the doorway of the dining room. At the center of the room stood a large table of polished oak, currently groaning under the weight of a festive meal. Rolls and spreads, meats and wines, steamed vegetables and fried potatoes and all kinds of dishes were arrayed in platters of varying heights. For R' Yaakov, who hadn't eaten in over two days, the sight was almost too overwhelming to bear.

"Come in, come in," R' Mordechai called jovially, pulling out a chair for his guest. "I was waiting for you! Please sit down." He gestured meaningfully at the chair beside him and then continued piling food onto his plate, oblivious to R' Yaakov's intense hunger. "What was the kasha you were discussing in shul?" R' Mordechai asked as he cut his meat and then dug in. As his guest launched weakly into a response, he proceeded to polish his plate clean.

R' Yaakov, his mouth salivating, observed his host wistfully, too bashful to request his own plate and permission to partake of the meal. He answered R' Mordechai's questions as briefly as possible, eyeing the food longingly, yet his host did not even notice.

At last, the torturous meal was over. R' Mordechai, sated, was in great spirits as he walked his famished guest to the door and thanked him warmly for coming. "You are invited back after maariv," He said magnanimously, pumping R' Yaakov's weak arm energetically. "Thank you! Thank you!"

When R' Yaakov staggered back into shul, he was greeted warmly by the others, who were eager to continue their Talmudic discussion. They all assumed he had received ample food at the home of R' Mordechai, and therefore saw no need to confirm that he had indeed eaten. R' Yaakov, although significantly weaker, did not fault them for their failure to inquire after his welfare and participated in their discussion as much as was physically possible for him. He noticed a jug of water in the corner of the shul and helped himself to a few cups of the lifegiving liquid, if only to sooth his parched throat and moisten his dry lips.

After maariv, when R' Mordechai approached to invite R' Yaakov to his home, the latter considered the invitation warily. On the one hand, he had strained himself with much difficulty during the previous meal to talk to his host in learning, and in the end, he had not been allowed

to taste a morsel as R' Mordechai indulged in a tantalizing spread of food. On the flip side, he knew he could not survive much longer without food, and he allowed himself to hope that perhaps this time R' Mordechai would invite him to partake of the meal.

Alas, his hopes were cruelly dashed when the same scene repeated itself. R' Mordechai helped himself to the elaborate repast as he encouraged his guest to share Torah thoughts. R' Yaakov was subjected to another torturous hour of mouthwatering aromas that played with his famished mind and teased his starved body.

R' Yaakov stumbled out of the palatial home when he was finally dismissed and headed back to the bais medrash, which he found to be empty. Despondently, he turned back the way he had come, but he was a scarce few steps away from the shul when his body gave way, and he collapsed.

Moments later, he passed away.

It was only the next morning when the early-risers came to the bais medrash that they noticed a Jew sprawled on the walk. A quick examination confirmed the unfortunate fact that the man was no longer among the living. From his tattered clothing and emaciated body, they determined that he was a beggar. The Chevra Kaddisha was summoned, a small levayah was organized, and R' Yaakov was duly buried. Within a short time, the tragic story was forgotten and the villagers resumed their daily lives.

For all his oblivion to the plight of the famished beggar in whose death he had played a part, R' Mordechai was still a talmid chacham and considered himself to be a person of lofty stature. Every night, at midnight, he would awaken to recite tikkun chatzos in his personal bais medrash. Since he did not want anyone to witness the way he rolled around in ashes as he recited tikkun

chatzos, he would ensure that he was completely alone in the bais medrash.

A few days after the occurrence with R' Yaakov, R' Mordechai slipped out of his home and covered the short distance to his shul. The building was guarded around the clock, and as he entered the building, he confirmed with the night guard that there was no one inside. "Make sure no one comes in until I leave," He instructed the guard as he did every night.

R' Mordechai entered the darkened bais medrash and stopped in his tracks. Clear footsteps resounded throughout the room. Turning on his heel, the wealthy man exited the building. "Excuse me, but I think someone is still inside," He called to the guard. "I hear footsteps in the building!"

The guard got up from his post and followed his employer. Holding his lantern, he entered the bais medrash and proceeded to light the oil lamps hanging on the walls until the entire room was brightly lit. The two men looked around. There was no one there.

"I'm sorry, I must have been imagining things," R' Mordechai said apologetically. "Please lock the door behind you."

"No problem," The guard responded agreeably. He collected his lantern and left the room, closing the door behind him.

R' Mordechai donned his sackcloth and sat down on the cold stone floor. He was about to begin tikkun chatzos when he heard the footfalls again. His heart pounding, he looked around, but although he could hear the footsteps clearly, he did not see anyone.

Suddenly, a man appeared before him, dressed completely in white. R' Mordechai jumped up in fright and took a step back. As he gazed fearfully at the apparition, he realized that he recognized

him. It was R' Yaakov, the erudite pauper who had told him some magnificent Torah thoughts just a few days earlier.

“Do you recognize me?” The ghost of R' Yaakov asked suddenly. As R' Mordechai cowered in fear, R' Yaakov continued, “Don't utter a sound. If you do, you will die on the spot.”

R' Mordechai's already pale faced drained of all color.

“I have come from the Next World,” R' Yaakov continued. “Do you realize the role you played in my death? I hadn't eaten a single crumb for nearly three days by the time I stumbled into your dining room. I was too bashful and refined to ask for food. You should have given me something to eat, and yet you allowed yourself to enjoy a hearty meal before my eyes, without inviting me to partake of it. I died shortly thereafter.”

He took a step closer, and R' Mordechai instinctively took a step back.

“When I came to the Next World, there was a comfortable place awaiting me in Gan Eden,” R' Yaakov said softly. “All my days, I toiled in Torah and mitzvos. Toward the end of my life, I had been subject to terrible poverty, and this atoned for any sins that I had to ensure that I would arrive in Olam Habah completely pure. The reason I am not in Gan Eden now is because of you.

“When you neglected to give me food and ultimately caused my death, you lost your own portion in the World to Come and will be subject to terrible punishment. Since this came about through my death, I am considered to have caused you this damage. Therefore, they are reluctant to give me my own allowance in Gan Eden.

“Since you are generally a righteous person, I was given permission to visit you here to give you insight on how to atone for your terrible deed. By

giving you this information, I am enabling you to regain your portion in Olam Habah, which will in turn allow me to claim my own rightful place in Gan Eden. However, I must warn you that if you disregard my instructions and do not properly atone for your misdeed, you will have lost your Olam Habah forever.”

R' Mordechai was still shell shocked and just stared fearfully at R' Yaakov, unable to respond. “Are you willing to accept upon yourself punishment in this world to rectify the terrible act you committed?” R' Yaakov prodded. “Are you willing to obey what I am about to tell you so that you do not lose your eternity?”

“Yes,” R' Mordechai managed to stammer out. What choice did he really have?

“Tomorrow, meet me by the river at exactly ten o'clock,” R' Yaakov instructed. “There, I'll give you further instructions.”

With those final words, the deceased man disappeared.

R' Mordechai's heart still hammered painfully in his chests, and for the next few moments, he remained frozen in place. Then, the enormity of what had occurred echoing loudly in his head, he raced out of the building toward the relative safety of his home. He was too agitated to attempt tikkun chatzos.

Back in bed, he could not fall asleep. He tossed and turned, but the image of a white-clad R' Yaakov continued haunting his thoughts. The hours crawled by, and by morning, he was in no better condition. He appeared downstairs in rumpled clothing, looking unusually disconcerted, and every few moments, he could not stop himself from tearing.

“Is everything alright, Tatte?” His children asked in concern.

“I have to go on an emergency business trip,” R’ Mordechai fibbed. “I haven’t done this in a long time, and I am a little nervous about going. I’ve been awake all night, and I’m just not feeling myself. I’m worried about leaving you.”

“Don’t worry, Tatte, we’ll be fine,” His family tried to assure him, yet their words did little to soothe his disquiet.

After davening, he packed a small suitcase with some belongings and instructed his personal driver to take him to the next town. As they passed the nearby river, R’ Mordechai requested that the wagon driver stop so that he can disembark for a few moments. His heart kept thumping loudly and his teeth chattered uncontrollably as he stood near the river, looking around.

At exactly ten o’clock, R’ Yaakov appeared, dressed in his burial shrouds. “It is fortunate that you have come,” R’ Yaakov told him quietly. “This means that you are ready to atone for your actions, and it will spare you from much harsher punishment in both this world and the next.”

“What do I have to do?” R’ Mordechai asked anxiously.

R’ Yaakov handed him a pair of tattered garments. “Remove your expensive suit and put on these rags,” He instructed. “Dressed in these torn clothing, go back to the shul that you have built on your property. You may not accept any offers for food or lodging. Instead, you must remain all day in the bais medrash, and sleep there at night.”

“But how am I supposed to survive if I’m not allowed to take food from anyone?” R’ Mordechai asked. “And anyway, everyone will recognize me!”

“The only way you are allowed to get food is by going to your own home and begging for

something to eat,” R’ Yaakov responded. “As for your second question, dressing in rags will completely alter your appearance. No one will suspect that the beggar in tattered garments is the wealthy R’ Mordechai. Even your own children won’t recognize you.”

“How long do I have to live like this?” R’ Mordechai asked in a low, determined voice.

R’ Yaakov’s reply was brief. “Do it for an entire year. In exactly a year from today, if you manage to hold out that long, come back here to meet me, and I will instruct you further.” With that, he disappeared.

Concealing himself behind some bushes near the river, R’ Mordechai changed into the tattered clothing he had received from the deceased man. As he donned the poor man’s attire, he felt his body undergoing a shift. His back became bent, his beard grew streaked with grey, and he suddenly felt weary. The clothing had transformed him from a wealthy, self-assured man to a broken, downtrodden pauper.

With his new clothes and identity, R’ Mordechai was unable to go back to his wagon. Instead, he remained behind the bushes, waiting for his driver to give up and go home without him.

After waiting for his boss for the better part of an hour, the wagon driver tied the horses to a nearby tree and came down to the river to search for him. Seeing no trace of R’ Mordechai, he drove back to town to inform the family that their father was missing.

“What do you mean, he disappeared?” The oldest son demanded. “Maybe he was kidnapped!” “We have to search for him!” His wife cried out before breaking down in tears.

As the family began organizing a search committee, R’ Mordechai left the riverside and made his way back to town, his figure stooped and

his eyes downcast. Heading straight for his own property, as R' Yaakov had instructed, he made his way to the bais medrash and tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible in a small corner.

From his seat at the far side of the room, he heard the commotion of the townspeople and his own family as they tried desperately to figure out what had happened to him. The cries of his children tugged fiercely at his heartstrings, yet he knew that there was nothing he could do. Instead, he opened a Gemara and began concentrating on the ancient text before him.

As the day waned, his hunger pangs made themselves known. Accustomed to three large meals every day, an entire day of fasting was difficult for him, and the thought of going to bed hungry was even more excruciating. Still, he could not bring himself to beg for food at his own home. As the night set in, he pushed a few chairs together and lay on this uncomfortable perch, willing himself to ignore his gnawing hunger and fall asleep.

In the morning, he stood during davening like a true pauper, bent and broken. His hunger still not sated, he sat determinedly at the table, learning from the Gemara. By the end of the day, he was at breaking point. Despite the terrible shame of having to beg for bread from his own wife and children, he was desperate to sate the relentless hunger.

His head bowed, R' Mordechai walked up the steps to his own front door and mustered up his courage to knock. The door was swung open by a member of his staff. "How can I help you?" He asked.

"Please," R' Mordechai asked, stretching out a shaky hand. "Please, a piece of bread!"

"Do you know what is going on here?" The servant asked incredulously. "The owner of this house disappeared. We are pretty sure he died. It's

total chaos in this house! It's a really poor time to come collecting here now." He was soon joined by some of his fellow servants, and they succeeded in chasing the beggar away.

R' Mordechai sat on the bottom step of his palatial home, despondent, dejected, and hopelessly degraded. However, he felt that he would shortly pass out from starvation, and he decided that his life was worth more than his dignity. Picking himself up, he knocked on the door a second time. "Please. Just one small piece of bread for a starving man!"

"Didn't we tell you it's a bad time?" The servants responded. One of them lifted a big stick and began beating the hapless beggar. Two more lifted him up and tossed him down the steps like a sack of potatoes. They stood at the door, watching the crazy beggar lick his wounds for a few moments, and then they disappeared into the house.

R' Mordechai fingered the large bruise on his forehead. How much more suffering could he take? Still desperate enough to attempt for a third time, he stood up and brushed himself off. By now, his little children had joined in the game and had fun taunting the beggar for coming back again and again when they obviously wouldn't help him. Astonished at the cruelty of his own children, R' Mordechai realized that he only had himself to blame. He had never educated his children to be respectful and kind to the unfortunate, and he was now suffering as a result. His six-year-old daughter had some compassion for the crazy beggar, and she offered him some of the hard, old bread that had been soaking in water waiting to be fed to the roosters. His eyes filled with tears at this indignity, but grateful for the sustenance, no matter how meager, R' Mordechai quickly swallowed the bread.

As the days went by, R' Mordechai earned a reputation amongst his children for being mentally unstable. Each day, he subjected himself

to terrible degradation by begging his family for food, and each day, the children would tease and taunt him, often beating him physically as well. Usually, the most he got for his efforts were dried out pieces of bread or moldy leftovers typically reserved for the animals.

For an entire year, R' Mordechai suffered from the malice of his own flesh and blood. For an entire year, he was forced to swallow huge doses of his own bitter medicine. He was sure at first that he wouldn't survive even a week, but he managed to endure a full twelve months of the incredible torture.

And then the year was over.

Hesitantly, R' Mordechai approached the riverside and awaited the arrival of the deceased man. When R' Yaakov appeared, he was smiling. "You have atoned for your sins," He exclaimed jubilantly, handing R' Mordechai his old, expensive suit. "Your teshuva has been accepted. You may now go back home and resume your life from where you left off a year ago. And please don't forget the lessons you've learned from this year of atonement."

R' Mordechai watched, as if in a trance, how R' Yaakov disappeared, until all that was left was the suit he was holding. Still dazed, he took off the rags he had worn for the previous year and donned his fine wool suit. Instantly, he felt the aches in his back disappear and the lines around his mouth smooth out. The transformation made him feel fifteen years younger. Gathering the tattered clothing into a small bundle, he tucked it under his arm and made his way back to town, his step light and peaceful.

Stopping at the home of a respected person in town, R' Mordechai explained that he had lost his way and had finally found his way back home. "Can you please break the news to my family?" He requested. "I don't want to shock them."

The individual agreed, and a short while later, R' Mordechai was reunited with his family. The entire town buzzed with the news as everyone celebrated along with the family that had been without a father for so many months.

His family was overjoyed to see him. The kitchen staff began cooking up a storm, and a festive dinner was arranged for all the members of the family. As he bit into the soft bread and tasted the hot soup for the first time in a year, R' Mordechai could not contain his emotions.

His children, too, could not believe that their father was back and kept coming over just to make sure he had really returned. "We missed you, Tatte," They expressed, over and over.

As the family enjoyed the lavish meal, they began to recount the events of the past year to their father. "And then there is the crazy man," One of the kids said, and the others burst out laughing. "Tatte, you should see him. He comes every day, begging for a piece of bread. Something is off with his mind. He doesn't seem to realize that we don't want him around. It became a whole game for us."

R' Mordechai's blood ran cold as he heard his children describing their aversion toward 'their' beggar. "Where is this crazy pauper?" He asked them.

"He always hangs about the bais medrash," A little boy said flippantly. "We can see him when we go for Maariv."

"Yossele, please go now to bring him here," R' Mordechai requested one of his sons. "I would like to meet this man."

His son rose from his seat obligingly, but returned only moments later, sans beggar. "He's not in the bais medrash," He reported. "I can't find him anywhere!"

“Wait a moment, then,” R’ Mordechai instructed his family. “I’ll be right back.” Hurrying to the restroom, he changed out of his suit into the rags he had been forced to wear during his begging days. Dressed in the tattered clothing, he returned to the dining room and resumed his seat at the head of the table.

“Hey, look!” One of the children called. “Mr. Beggar is back! Wait, where is Tatte?”

“Here I am,” R’ Mordechai responded. “It’s me. I am your father, but I was also the beggar.” Seeing his family staring at him uncomprehendingly, he related the events of the entire previous year. He described how he had caused the death of R’ Yaakov, and the deceased’s nocturnal visit to instruct him on how to atone for his terrible deed. He described the miserable, torturous year of having to beg his own family for food. And he described the powerful lessons he had learned from his difficult experience.

His children, horrified that they had mistreated their own father and subjected him to such terrible suffering, absorbed the profound lesson in shocked silence. The year had turned out to be a tremendous learning experience for all of them and should serve as an important lesson for all of us as well. Our actions toward others determine the reactions of others toward ourselves---

במידה שאדם מודד מודדין לו

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

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