

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 Debate

In the shtetls of yore, little boys who were lucky enough to receive a formal Torah education were taught by the town melamed, one-room schoolhouse style. In once specific shtetl, where vast farmlands separated one home from the other, a non-Jewish ten-year-old, Victor, was hired to travel around the village, pick up the boys, and bring them to the melamed. He would drive his wagon from house to house, and the little boys would come running out with their lunch pails, tzitzes and payos flying in the wind. They would board the wagon and chatter excitedly as their friends joined them. When the route was complete, Victor would bring the boys to school. In the afternoon, he would bring them back home.

Often, the boys would sing along the way or discuss what they had learned. Over time, Victor grew very knowledgeable in Jewish practices. He had a sharp mind, and after a few years of driving the 'school bus', had picked up aleph bais, kria, and many concepts of Yiddishkeit. He knew all about the yomim tovim, was an expert on the parshah, and could rattle off famous stories from

chazal. He even knew how to speak and act like a Jew and often entertained his friends with his perfect imitations of their Jewish neighbors.

When Victor was fourteen years old and had been driving the wagon for four years, he suddenly came up with a brilliant idea. Instead of wasting his brains and energy driving little boys to school for minimal pay, he would get himself an education of his own. Hailing from a poor peasant family, his parents could not afford to educate him. His plan would serve as his ticket out of ignorance, illiteracy, and poverty.

Shortly thereafter, he quit his job and traveled to a nearby town which boasted a small yeshiva. He donned a yarmulke and entered the bais medrash. "My name is Moshe," He told the menahel. "I'm an orphan without any parents. Can I learn at this yeshiva?"

The menahel looked at him warmly and put his arm around him sympathetically. "Where are you coming from, my child?"

"I'm wandering from town to town," 'Moshe' replied. "There's no one to take care of me. Do you offer room and board here?"

The menahel led him to a different room and immediately served him some food. "Eat, my child," He said softly. "Then we'll see how much you know, and if this is a suitable place for you."

Moshe lifted the spoon and recited a clear brachah before beginning to eat. The menahel was impressed by his brachos and saw no need to test him further. He gave him a warm kiss on his forehead and invited him to learn together with him.

Moshe, the non-Jew, sat and learned with tremendous diligence. He had a sharp head and was immediately successful in Gemara. Each day, he learned more and more and was well on his way to becoming a talmid chacham.

After a while, when he felt he had used up all there was to gain from the yeshiva, he picked up and left. He traveled to a town a little further away, where there was a large yeshiva gedolah. He approached the Rosh Yeshiva and repeated the same story that he had told the menahel of his first yeshiva, explaining that he was an orphan, alone in this world.

The Rosh Yeshiva granted him a farher. The lengthy oral examination showed that Moshe had a clear mind and was up to the level of learning demanded in the yeshiva. He was accepted as a student of the yeshiva.

Since he was a poor orphan, the rosh yeshiva treated him with extra warmth and attention. "Come to me as often as you'd like, and we'll spend some special time together," He told Moshe kindly. "I'm available for you for anything you need."

Moshe joined the yeshiva and quickly developed an unpleasant habit of tattling on the other students. Since the rosh yeshiva wanted to make him feel welcome and accepted, he would listen seriously to everything Moshe told him. Within a very short time, he earned a reputation as the yeshiva's snitch. He would run to tell the rosh yeshiva about every minor infraction committed by the other bachurim, which would in turn lead to those students being rebuked by the rosh yeshiva. It did not take long for the other boys to develop a strong dislike for their new classmate.

The bachurim of the yeshiva would gripe about Moshe behind his back, longing for the days before he had joined them and begun poking his nose into their business. They were good boys, but even good boys come late to seder occasionally. Even good boys need to have a little fun once in a while. Moshe's eager tattling caused them to appear a lot worse than they actually were, and they resented him for it. Who did he think he was, anyway? He was a new boy, and he

thought he was superior to them all, acting as their mashgiach.

When they tried complaining to the rosh yeshiva, he explained to them that it was important to include Moshe, the poor orphan, and to make him feel part of things. The rosh yeshiva assured them that he knew they weren't doing anything wrong, but that he felt it was necessary to show Moshe that he was being taken seriously.

Seeing that the rosh yeshiva would not take their side, the bachurim decided to take matters into their own hands. Was Moshe really such a tzaddik himself? Perhaps they could catch him committing his own wrongdoings that they could then report to the rosh yeshiva and get him into trouble.

"I'm telling you, there is something off about Moshe," A short, chubby bachur said to his friends. "He's a big masmid, true, but did you ever watch him during learning? He sits there, stiff as a board. He doesn't shuckel, he doesn't sway to the rhythm. There's something wrong here."

"Come to think of it, he doesn't shuckel by davening either," A dark-haired boy with a deep voice put in. "I sit right near him, and he davens like a statue, ramrod-straight."

"Listen, if you think there's something fishy about him, we'll get him to tell us," Another bachur declared. "Let's get him drunk, and we'll ask him whatever we want."

"Great idea!" The boys bumped fists as they headed back to the bais medrash, armed with their plan.

"Hey, Moshe, Ephraim is throwing a little celebration," Someone called to Moshe after seder. "You're invited to join!"

“Thanks,” Moshe responded. He closed his Gemara and headed out of the bais medrash together with them.

The other bachurim made sure to give him strong wine to drink, and within a short time, Moshe was thoroughly inebriated. They began peppering him with questions, and he responded drunkenly to everything they asked. Over the course of the night, the bachurim received slurred confirmation that ‘Moshe’ was not Jewish.

This was all they needed to hear. Enraged, they began pummeling him with their fists, letting it out on him for fooling them all that he was a Jew and then causing them so much trouble. When they were finished, they left him where he was, battered and bruised, with a terrible hangover.

When he woke up and found himself lying on the floor, covered in black and blue marks, Victor understood that he had been discovered. He stood up painfully and hobbled out of the room. As soon as he was spotted, the bachurim came over to spit at him. “Take your non-kosher self out of our yeshiva!” Someone yelled.

The rosh yeshiva, who heard what had occurred, came over to take control of the situation. “As a non-Jew, it is not feasible for you to continue studying here,” He said kindly. “You learn so well, and you have a lot of potential. If you choose to become a ger, you can continue to learn here and become a tremendous talmid chacham.”

However, Victor’s inborn hatred of Jews had been stirred awake by the shameful beating he had received from the other bachurim, and he shrugged the rosh yeshiva off angrily. Stalking out of the yeshiva building, he went straight to the Catholics to take his revenge.

“I happen to know the entire Torah,” He told the priests of the town. “I want you to teach me your bible. Then, once I’m well-versed in everything,

I’ll be able to publicly debate the Jews and expose the lies in their Torah.”

The priests did not believe him right away, as he appeared very young, and his claim of knowing the Torah was fantastic sounding. However, after speaking to him for a while, they concurred that he really did know what he was talking about. They took him under their leadership and began to teach him their faith. Being a quick learner, it took only a few months before he became an expert in the subject matter. The priests had full confidence in Victor’s abilities to score victory in a religious debate with a Jew.

A highly publicized debate was scheduled. The Jews were given thirty days to choose an orator to debate against Victor. The rules were clearly laid out beforehand: the loser of the debate would be burned at the stake.

For the yidden of this town, it was a bitter time. There are certain pesukim in the Torah that can seem inconsistent with each other, and they were afraid that Victor would trip them up using such a contradiction. Who could they choose to stand up to this knowledgeable and vengeful non-Jew, who was so well-educated in Torah? They fasted for many days and shed many tears, davening for salvation.

There was a businessman who passed through the town during this time, and he heard all about the debate hanging over the heads of the Jews. When he returned to his hometown, he mentioned the news to one of his employees, clucking his tongue in sympathy of the plight of those yidden.

“Why don’t they just take a big talmid chacham?” His employee, Refoel, asked, his eyes showing how much he cared for his brethren in the next town.

“They can’t,” The businessman responded. “The Catholic debater learned in yeshiva for a few years and is very familiar with the Torah. He

fooled everyone in the yeshiva, and he is very smart. He's bound to confuse even the smartest person."

"Okay, then I'll do it," Refoel said.

"You?!" His employer raised his eyebrows expressively. Refoel was a good person, kind and sweet, but he was not a talmid chacham to say the least. "How can you debate him? You didn't even learn in yeshiva!"

"If no one else wants to do it, then I will," Refoel said with conviction. "Hashem will help me."

Against his employer's better judgement, Refoel traveled to the town of the debate and went to see the rov. He explained that he had heard about the debate and asked why the rov himself didn't participate.

"I'm not capable," The rov responded. "Who knows what kind of difficult questions Victor may ask?"

"In that case, I volunteer to go," Reuven said quietly.

The rov stared at him. "You? Who are you? How can you take the chance?"

"It says in Chazal that before Moshiach comes, prophecy will come to young children and to fools," Refoel explained. "I am considered a fool. We're shortly before the times of Moshiach; the nevuah can now come through me."

The rov chuckled. "This isn't a joke, R' Yid," He rebuked. "Klal Yisroel is in a time of trouble."

"Please, I want to do this!" Refoel pleaded. "I have an idea of how to make this work. I want to help klal Yisroel!"

Seeing he was sincere, the rov granted him his blessing. "Hayad Hashem tiktzor- Hashem can

make the salvation come about through any means. Hashem should be with you, and you should be successful."

When the thirtieth day arrived, two podiums were erected in an arena, with a huge fire between them. Standing near the stake were four burly men. If at any point during the debate one of the contenders were to be unable to answer, these four men were tasked with immediately hauling him into the raging fire. They stood near the podium that the Jewish contender would use, since the certain outcome even before the debate began was that the Jew would lose.

The arena began filling with people. Confident Catholics and terrified Jews took their seats on the spectator benches as Refoel calmly walked up to his podium to face Victor.

"Who shall begin?" The moderator asked by way of formality.

"I will," Refoel said confidently. "I will ask the first question, and once for all, we will show the Catholics just how smart the Jews really are."

When the Jews in the audience heard this, they redoubled the fervency of their tefillos. The debate had not even begun, and already Refoel was proving himself inept, provoking the Catholics for no reason at all. They knew that if he lost the debate, not only would he be burned, but there would be a pogrom against the entire Jewish community. Now, seeing that their fate was in the hands of someone as incompetent as Refoel, they knew with stark clarity that there was no hope other than Hashem.

The Catholics, and Victor, were enraged at Refoel's remark. "I will begin," Victor contradicted.

The two began yelling at each other for first rights to begin, and things began to get out of hand. The

moderator banged his gavel and called for silence. When quiet reigned, he ordered Refoel to begin.

“You say you know our Torah, correct?” Refoel asked.

“Certainly,” Victor replied smugly. “I know it very well.”

“Alright, then, I will ask you just one question on the Torah,” Refoel said. “If you can answer my question, then you are the winner, and I shall be burned at the stake. If you can’t answer, then I win and you die.”

“Go ahead. I’m not afraid,” Victor responded. “I know the Torah.”

Refoel removed a small tehillim from his pocket. “It says in Tehillim, v’ani baar v’lo aido beheimos hayisi imach,” He said, reading the words carefully off the page. “Can you translate this posuk for us?” He challenged.

Victor smirked. This was an easy one. “I am an idiot and I don’t know,” He declared, translating the words of the posuk word for word. “I’m like an animal before you.”

The group of four thugs, waiting near the stakes to roast their victim, heard Victor’s words and took them as an admission of defeat. The Jew had asked a question, and Victor had responded that he was an idiot who did not know the answer. Immediately, they grabbed him off the stage and dumped him into the fire.

The wisdom of Refoel, an am haaretz, had saved the entire town.

When someone is blessed with a sharp mind and can easily understand difficult concepts, it is easy to forget Who has granted him this wonderful gift. However, an important moral of this story shows that wisdom is in the hands of Hashem alone. The brilliant talmidei chachomim, the ones who knew

the most difficult Rambams and could easily understand Gemara, were incapable of facing a knowledgeable anti-Semite in debate. However, a bumbling ignoramus, who did not even have enough wisdom to not incite the Catholics unnecessarily, succeeded in tripping up Victor using just his genuine desire to save Klal Yisroel. Wisdom, brilliance, brainstorm- these are all equally in the hands of Hashem, who decides to whom, how and when to dispense it.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A159 – 1986.

Goy who made believe that he was a Yid

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