

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

King for a Year

The following story was told over by R' Nachman Haradniki.

There was once a man who was as kind and generous as he was wealthy. People would flock him for money and assistance, and he would respond graciously to each request. His friends, his acquaintances, and even his slaves adored him. Needless to say, he was very successful in business.

One day, he noticed that one of his slaves, Jacob, served him with exceptional devotion and loyalty. It dawned on him that although he was helping hundreds of strangers every year, his own faithful servant had not been the recipient of his largesse. *I give generously to every anonymous beggar who stops by my home, he thought to himself. It only makes sense that I do at least the same for my dedicated Jacob, if not more.* After thinking the matter over carefully, he decided to grant his loyal retainer the gift he wanted most: freedom.

Jacob was duly summoned to appear before his master. He entered the room and bowed deeply.

“How can I be of assistance to my most respected master?” He asked

“Come sit down, dear Jacob,” His master invited. “There is something I wish to discuss with you. You see, I pride myself in being a kind and generous man. Indeed, you’ve served at my side and helped me ensure that no person who passes through my home in need of assistance is turned away. My dear Jacob, the time has come for me to bestow such kindness upon you, the man who has served me so devotedly all these years. Despite the fact that I will lose a most dedicated servant, I would like to grant you emancipation.” “Oh, no, sir,” Jacob responded quickly. “I don’t deserve such kindness. To the contrary, I am already indebted for the privilege of working for such a benevolent master.”

“Nonsense,” His master replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Besides, whether you do or do not deserve this is not really our concern right now. The main thing is that I desire to be a giver, and as such I want to grant you freedom. I will send you off with a sum of money so that you can establish yourself in the big world.”

When Jacob was dismissed, he left the room in a daze. He could not believe his incredible fortune. He spent his last few days in servitude working with renewed vigor, eager to show his master his gratitude.

At last, his final day as a slave dawned. Jacob was summoned to his master and handed his bill of emancipation. His master walked him to the front door. “Here, take this money purse. It contains a large enough sum for you to invest in a business of your own. Remember and perpetuate my legacy of being a giving person. Go out into the world and be successful.”

“My dear master,” Jacob said in a choked voice. “I have no words to thank you.”

His master stuck his hand into his pocket and withdrew a ship ticket. “This is for you,” He said, handing over the slip of paper. “This should grant you passage on a ship sailing later today for another country. Establish yourself in a place where no one is aware of your former servitude. May you merit much blessing and success in your new life. Goodbye, my dear Jacob.” He stood at the door for a long while, his expression wistful, as his faithful servant walked toward his new future.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Jacob walked away from the home he had known for so long and made his way to the port. All around him, sailors and porters were bustling about, loading up the ship and readying it for the journey. A long line of passengers waiting to board snaked along the pier, and Jacob took his place at the end of it.

When he reached the ticket master at the front of line, he presented his passage ticket and his identity card. Since his ID identified him as a slave, he also presented his bill of emancipation. The ticket master wished him luck in his new life as a free man and waved him aboard.

The first few weeks at sea were uneventful. The passengers chatted, ate, slept, and tried to pass time. Then, signs of impending danger began to appear. There were dark clouds on the horizon and the waters churned angrily beneath them. Recognizing that a storm was about to set in, the captain issued instructions to everyone on board. Each passenger was given a specific job, and together, they would work to keep the ship afloat until they reached calmer waters.

The waves grew larger and taller, and the sea conditions were more dangerous than ever. The sailors folded up the sails and the passengers moved to their posts, yet none of their efforts succeeded in quelling the effect of the storm on

their boat. The large cruiser was tossed haplessly about as if it was a small toy ship. Tremendous waves lifted the ship high into the air and then brought it crashing back down onto the water. A loud, splintering sound was heard as the bow separated from the rest of the ship.

Water gushed onto the deck as the boat slowly began to sink. Passengers grabbed planks of wood and tried to remain afloat, yet the swirling waters pulled many of them down, down, to a burial somewhere within its depths.

Jacob, the newly freed slave, clung tightly to a piece of driftwood and fought desperately to keep his head above the water as the stormy rapids carried him further and further away from the shipwreck. From his position amidst the waves, he could no longer see any other survivors and lost all sense of direction. All his possessions had sunk along with the ship. The only thing he still had was whatever was left of his life itself.

He was terribly hungry and all the more thirsty, and more than anything he was exhausted. Still, he forced himself to remain awake, since he knew that if he were to succumb to slumber, he would drown. For almost two days, he was pushed rapidly along with waves until he was finally tossed, almost lifeless, onto a lone island.

He sat on the shore, more dead than alive, thinking about the events of the past few weeks. Only a short while ago, he had been a slave, yet he had led a contented, comfortable life. Now, he was a free man, yet one without any food or clothing, abandoned on a forsaken island. He looked around fearfully. Who knew what could be found on the island? Were there dangerous animals? Cannibals? He had no desire to find out. After a few minutes, however, he realized that he really had nothing to lose. He hadn't eaten in two days and his tongue was brittle with thirst. He could either wait on the shore for the death to claim him, or he could venture further into the island. Perhaps he would meet death there as well,

but there was also a chance that he wouldn't. He hoped to be fortunate enough to find food, and maybe even some friendly humans.

With his last ounces of energy, Jacob stood up and slowly limped inland, searching for footsteps or other signs of human habitation. Soon enough, he came across a trail covered in footsteps leading into the forest. He followed the footsteps to a large clearing in the midst of the trees. After trauma and delirium at sea, he no longer trusted his eyes. Could it be? It seemed there was a large crowd of people gathered in the clearing.

He froze in terror. He hoped the people would be merciful, yet he was under no illusions. Most likely, they would not be able to communicate in the same language, and they would soon slaughter him for trespassing on their territory.

Suddenly, trumpets began blasting. The entire crowd stood at attention and began shouting, "Long live the king!"

This was even worse than he thought. They were probably putting him on trial at that very moment, and their king would decide his fate. Jacob looked around for the king, wanting to seek out his fate on the king's features, yet he didn't see anyone who fit the description.

The islanders moved forward, toward him, and he controlled his impulse to take a step back. Suddenly, to his disbelief, they all bowed... to him. The trumpets continued blasting, the crowd continued hailing the king, and some distinguished looking ministers stepped forward. Before he could process what was happening, the ministers handed him royal garments, surrounded him with a curtain, and with utmost respect, requested that he change into proper clothing. Feeling somewhat foolish, he complied. When the curtain was removed, a golden crown was set on his head and a group of servants came before him to offer him a fine white stallion and something to eat.

Jacob still did not understand what was going on, yet he was at the mercy of these men, and he realized it was in his best interest to play along. He mounted the handsome horse and followed the ministers through the forest and out into the city. The streets of the city were lined with citizens dressed in their finery. As he passed on his stallion, they bowed and cried "Long live the king!"

Finally, they pulled up at a magnificent palace. He dismounted his horse and was shown inside.

"We assume His Majesty is tired," The ministers said respectfully. "He probably does not wish to deal with government affairs until tomorrow. Would Your Majesty desire to be shown to his sleeping quarters?"

Jacob gratefully accepted. He was brought to a magnificent room decorated with majestic splendor. Polished gold, gleaming marble, and shining crystal peeked out from every corner. A sumptuous bed stood in the center of the room, topped by a thickly padded mattress and covered with the fluffiest of quilts. Beside the bed stood a table of pastries, fruits, and drinks, for him to partake of in bed should he so desire.

The newly minted king was exhausted. After donning his royal pajamas, he settled into the comfortable bed and was soon fast asleep.

Jacob awoke the following morning and was shocked to discover that the events of the past few days had not been a mere dream. He was a free man, he had actually survived a terrible shipwreck. He was still unsure how it had happened, but it seemed he had been crowned a king the day before! He got off the large bed and went to the door. Pushing it open, he was greeted by uniformed servants.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," They greeted him. "We hoped Your Majesty slept well?"

“Yes, of course,” Jacob responded. “Thank you.”

“Would Your Majesty like to get dressed now?”

The servant asked. He opened the door of a closet stocked with royal robes made of the finest materials. Jacob chose a set, which his servant immediately laid out for him to put on.

After a delicious, filling breakfast, a man who introduced himself as his chief of staff came by with the day’s schedule. It included many kingly duties such as court cases and government meetings. He served on a tribunal to determine the fate of some criminal charges. While the ministers presented their opinions, they left the sentencing up to him and accepted his judgement unquestioningly. Jacob still had no idea why they had chosen him to be the king, and yet he continued in the role they set for him.

After a few days of acting like the king, he decided to speak to one of the ministers privately to find out what was going on. Was this some sort of hoax?

“Fredrick,” He said to one of the ministers. “I would like to take a walk with you in the orchard.” A walk in the king’s orchard, alone with the king! It was unparalleled honor, and Fredrick felt privileged to have been chosen. They strolled silently together among the fruit trees and manicured flower beds.

“Fredrick,” Jacob finally began. “I’m just wondering... can you explain to me what is going on here? I’m not sure how I ended up in this position. Is this a trick? Why are you all treating me as your king?”

Fredrick bowed deeply. “Your Majesty,” He replied. “This is not a trick. Your Majesty truly is our revered ruler.”

“I don’t understand,” Jacob said, bewildered.

“But why?”

“This island was established many years ago by a wealthy man. However, he does not wish to be king. Instead, he instituted a custom that the islanders coronate a new king each year. The king may not be a native of the island. After one year of rule, we send the king off. Then, we pray and wait in the forest near the seashore for a newcomer to arrive. Each year, we are not disappointed. Someone has always come to the island and is then crowned our king. This year, Your Majesty appeared, and thus you have become king of the island.”

Jacob tried to process the information. “So I am a king now, with everything that entails?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And what happens after the year is up?”

“After the year is up, as per our custom, the king is banished to a different island. Just as he was suddenly made king, he is suddenly torn off his throne and sent to an uninhabited island. He may take nothing along with him.”

Jacob’s mouth fell open. “But... what happened to the previous kings?”

“Exactly that,” Fredrick replied. “They were banished to isolated islands, where they are forced to live with whatever resources they can find there. I apologize, Your Majesty, but this is the custom here. Your Majesty will be accorded all honors of a king for the entire year, and then you will be left to your fate forever after.”

Jacob put his hands behind his back and paced the garden, deep in thought. He had thought this was too good to be true, and he had been correct. He’d rather never be a king and never be banished then rule for a year and then be abandoned to die!

Then he stopped and shrugged. There was no way out. He was on a forsaken island and subject to the whims of the islanders. He might as well enjoy his year of kingship and make the most of it while it lasted. What would come later could not be avoided, and so there was no reason not to take full advantage of the good parts while they lasted. Nine months passed. Nine months of royal splendor, unparalleled honor, and unquestioning obedience. Nine months of kingship.

The end of Jacob's rule was but three months away, and it loomed before him mercilessly. In just three months he would be banished to a lonely, difficult existence on an uninhabited island in the middle of nowhere. He was a king now! Could it be he was so powerless to prevent this?

"Fredrick," He confided. "There must be something I can do to prevent my banishment from the island when my term is up. Please, help me find a loophole in the system somewhere."

"Your Majesty, I feel terribly sorry, but it is what it is," Fredrick said apologetically. "This is the custom here, and there is no way around it. In three months' time, His Majesty will be sent off the same way he arrived: only with the clothes on his back."

"Surely there is a way I can help myself, Fredrick!" Jacob insisted.

"Yes, Your Majesty, there is indeed a way that you can help yourself," His minister replied.

"Tell me, please, Fredrick!" Jacob begged.

"At present, Your Majesty is still the ruler of our country," Fredrick said quietly. "You have an entire nation at your beck and call, ready to carry out your every desire."

"And of what use is that to me when I am no longer king?" Jacob asked. "No one will pay the slightest heed to my desires then."

"Yes, and that is why you can utilize the time now to prepare for your eventual banishment. You are to be sent to the uninhabited island fifty-three miles south and eighteen miles west. This is public knowledge."

"Yes?"

"Order some ships to be loaded up with building materials and supplies. Send a large team of experienced builders to quickly put up the basic structures of a city: homes, shops, and a palace for yourself. Reward a group of people to collectively settle the island. Stock the island with food, supplies, sea vessels, and an abundance of gold."

"I can see where this is leading, Fredrick!" Jacob exclaimed. "This is a marvelous idea!"

"In three months, you will be set off the island empty handed, yet the place where you will settle will no longer be lonely and forsaken," Fredrick continued. "A beautiful palace will be waiting for you, along with a team of servants. A group of dedicated settlers will have already laid roots in the island, and you will slowly build up a new city. On your new island, you will remain a king for an unlimited term."

"I don't understand," Jacob said when his minister finished speaking. "This sounds like a terrific plan. But what about the previous kings who ruled over this island for a year? Didn't you give them the same advice?"

Fredrick gave a long-suffering sigh. "I did, Your Majesty," He said quietly.

"And did they follow your directions?"

"They did not," Fredrick responded. "They were too caught up enjoying the kingly pleasures on our island that they did not spare any time or thought to what would take place when their year of rule was over. The glory of the moment blinded

their judgement. In the end, they were left with nothing.”

“Fredrick, I thank you for your wisdom and advice,” Jacob said gratefully. “If you will accept the position, I wish to appoint you my chief advisor and executor of the operation.”

For the next three months, Jacob did not dawdle at the festive and abundant meals laid out for him three times each day. He did not allow himself the luxury of sleeping a full night under his feathery quilt. He slept briefly and ate little. All his waking moments were devoted to setting up a new kingdom on the island where he would soon be banished.

“Your Majesty looks tired,” One of his ministers commented at a government meeting. “The most comfortable bed in the kingdom awaits you each night. Why does His Majesty insist on sleeping so little?”

Jacob gave the man a funny look. Couldn’t his minister understand? If he slept in his comfortable bed now, he might have to sleep on the hard ground for the rest of his life! Giving up the pleasures of three months of kingship was truly a bargain to earn comfort for a lifetime.

With Fredrick’s assistance, he put together a huge group of people who were willing to settle on the new island. This diversified group was comprised of doctors and teachers, entrepreneurs and laborers, builders and farmers and everyone in between. Most of the construction industry on the island was temporarily relocated to the new island to build a palace for Jacob and a city for the new inhabitants. Massive ships were loaded up with enough food and supplies to serve the new settlers until they established themselves independently. Armored water vessels were loaded up with huge stores of riches: gold, silver, and jewels. There was heavy traffic on the waterway between the two islands in those last three months of Jacob’s rule.

Soon, reports began flooding back to Jacob and Fredrick.

“The new palace is almost ready, and it is far more magnificent than the one here!”

“The first group of settlers have finished construction on their homes, and next week, the school is set to open!”

“You should see the views from the other island! Gorgeous!”

“The newly built treasure house is fully stocked with enough gold and jewels to buy a few countries! Even if the king is a spendthrift, it should last at least a few generations.”

The months passed quickly, and soon Jacob’s rule of the island came to a conclusion. He was sitting on his throne, presiding over a court case, when suddenly, a group of thugs burst into the room. He was about to protest the intrusion when one of them walked right up to him and knocked the crown off his head. Two more thugs grabbed him roughly and tossed him down the steps of his own palace. Jacob suddenly realized what was happening: his rule was now over.

Instead of the courtesy and respect he had become so used to, he was handled with brusque impatience and even downright nastiness. He was bound hand and foot and shoved onto a wagon. The crude wagon wheels rolled through the streets and he found himself jostled from side to side, becoming black and blue in the process. In contrast to the admiring crowd who had hailed him on his first day, the citizens of the island now lined the streets, jeering, as they witnessed his humiliating departure. The thugs steered the wagon into the forest, and the ride became even more bumpy. To add to Jacob’s discomfort, it began to rain. From his unsheltered position in the wagon, Jacob became thoroughly soaked.

Drenched and bruised, he was dumped unceremoniously onto a rickety boat that would take him to his new island.

The next few hours were not easy at all. Jacob had not been sent off with a warm coat to protect him from the winds, nor with any food. Yet he knew that despite the hardship, he would soon land on the island he had prepared during his tenure as king, and he would ascend to the throne there to rule over a beautiful country forevermore.

Hashem is the ultimate Giver, and there is nothing more He desires than to bestow His generosity upon His most devoted servants. He therefore sent each of us down to this world and allows us to be king for seventy, eighty, maybe even ninety years. We are given an advisor, a *yetzer tov*, who explains to us that the goodness surrounding us in *olam hazeh* is transient; in a mere few decades we will be banished from the world of the living.

Will we be like the foolish kings, spending our time eating and shopping and driving luxury vehicles? Or will we be Jacobs, individuals who devote their time toward stocking their island with shiploads of *mitzvos*, *chesed*, and *limud Torah*?

Can we find it within ourselves to truly internalize that by spending time in our comfortable beds here on earth, we are dooming ourselves to sleep on the hard ground for eternity?

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A136-1989.

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