

# TORAS REB KALMAN



## סיפורי צדיקים

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

### ***Moshe Known as Menashe***

In a small Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of a Polish village lies a nondescript tombstone with the following inscription: פה נטמן משה המכונה מנשה – here lies Moshe, known as Menashe. Who was the man buried here? And why does his tombstone bear such a cryptic inscription? Was he Moshe? Was he Menashe? The following story was found in the record book of the *Chevrah Kadisha* that serviced the cemetery where Moshe/Menashe is buried.

Moshe was a simple Jew who owned a wine store that was frequented by the Jews and non-Jews in the area. This establishment was not the stereotypical bar of yore, where drunken peasants hung out together and plotted against the Jews as they nursed cup after cup of vodka. Rather, it was an orderly and clean shop that sold closed bottles of Moshe's homemade wines for customers to take home. Moshe was respected by both Jews and non-Jews alike and was known for his honesty and decency.

Moshe was a regular, average fellow who led a regular, average life. A good Jew, he was

scrupulous in his observance of all the *mitzvos*. There was one particular mitzvah which was very close to his heart. This *mitzva* was *melavah malkah*, which he honored with tremendous dedication.

Each Friday, in addition to the usual preparations for Shabbos, Moshe's wife would prepare a delicious hot dish exclusively for consumption at the *motzai* Shabbos meal. They owned a special tablecloth and a beautiful set of candlesticks which were only used for their weekly *melavah malkah*.

When Shabbos concluded, the family would clean up the home from the accumulated Shabbos mess. Moshe didn't allow his wife or children to set up for *melavah malkah*; this was a task reserved for him alone. Lovingly, he would spread the tablecloth over the table and place the candlesticks in the center. He would personally prepare the wood in the stove for his wife to warm up the food she had cooked specifically for *melavah malkah*.

The family would gather around the table, still dressed in their Shabbos finery. The candles would be lit and they would recite the *piyutim* for *motzai* Shabbos. A warm, fresh meal would then be served. Moshe was careful to carefully follow all the halachic requirements and stringencies for *melavah malkah*.

And so it was, week after week, year after year. One week, it was particularly cold on Shabbos. A heavy snow was falling outside, blanketing the ground and roofs in inches of white. Moshe's family spent Shabbos inside their warm home. When the sun set, Moshe and his sons *davened Maariv*, and then the family began tidying up from Shabbos. The table was cleared and Moshe came in to set the table. He laid out the designated *melavah malkah* tablecloth and began setting out the silverware when his daughter approached him. "Tatte," She said softly. "There is no more wood with which to heat up the food that Mamme

prepared for *melavah malkah*. It seems like we will need to eat cold food tonight.”

Moshe stared at her. “What do you mean?” He asked, dumbfounded. “The Halacha clearly states that something warm should preferably be eaten for *melavah malkah*. I’ve devoted my life to this mitzvah; how can we just eat cold food? Are you sure there are no forgotten logs in the cellar somewhere?”

“There is nothing, absolutely nothing to burn,” She responded despondently. “It was bitterly cold on Shabbos; all the wood we had was consumed in the furnace that heats the house. We have a bit of kerosene in the lantern which was lit to provide us with light, but we don’t have anything else.”

Moshe’s expression remained determined. “I can’t just abandon this mitzvah,” He declared, looking around the room at the wrought iron chairs and table. If only he owned a wooden crate, a wooden stool... if he had those, he would gladly part with them to provide wood for the stove. But there was nothing in the house to burn.

He glanced out the window. The pristine white flakes were still falling steadily, and the layer of snow on the ground was knee-deep. How could he venture out in such terrible weather to try to obtain wood? Could he chop down some branches in this weather? Could he drag them home through the snow? Would freshly cut branches even ignite?

“You can’t go out in this weather, Moshe!” His wife insisted, following his gaze. “We’ll have to eat cold food. There’s no way to get wood right now.”

Moshe just shook his head and went to bundle up. *Melavah malkah* was dearer to him than anything else, and he was prepared to go to great lengths to observe it properly.

Outside a vast expanse of white stretched out before Moshe in any direction he turned. Shutting

the door behind him, he ventured into the knee-deep snow in the direction of the forest. It wasn’t long before the arctic temperatures began to penetrate the many layers that shielded his body and face. His skin stung from the cold, but he continued plowing onward.

After only a few minutes, he realized that his mission was doomed. It wouldn’t be more than another twenty or thirty minutes before his body would give way to the cold. He simply did not have enough time or physical strength to chop down a tree, saw it into smaller logs, and carry the wood home to burn before he would succumb.

Looking around despairingly, he suddenly noticed a wooden cross sticking up in the snow. Moshe’s eyes lit up. Wood! Dry, sanded beams of wood! He briefly considered the fact that stealing the wooden cross would arouse the ire of the non-Jews, but he quickly discarded the thought. The continuously falling snow would cover his tracks, he knew, and there was no way they would be able to trace the act back to him.

With a fresh burst of adrenaline, he moved his frozen legs across the snowy field. He swung his axe energetically and watched the cross fall. Working quickly, he cut the wood into smaller beams and tied them neatly together. He tossed the bundle over his shoulder and whistled a happy tune as he made the cold and painful trek back home.

His family was tremendously relieved to see him back alive. Moshe changed into warm, dry clothing and slowly regained circulation in his limbs. Not wishing to cause a commotion, he did not tell his family where he found the wood. He merely untied his bundle and used a few of the pieces to heat the food for *melavah malkah*. Soon, the family was gathered around the table as always, singing *zemiros* together and enjoying the special time.

When the meal was over, Moshe packed up the remaining wood and dumped it into his storage

shed. For *melavah malkah*, he had had no choice other than to use the wood of the cross, yet he did not want to have any more benefit from wood that had been used for such an impure purpose. Grateful to have been able to fulfill his special mitzvah, Moshe drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

Sunday morning dawned. The snow had finally stopped and the sun was out. The freezing temperatures did not deter the many non-Jews who wished to attend their Sunday services. It wasn't long before someone noticed that the polished wooden cross was missing. A commotion ensued. Where was it? Who took it? The snow in the area was pristine and untracked, keeping the secret. There were no footprints, no clues, nothing to point them in the direction of the culprit.

The first clue came when someone remembered that he had seen the cross the day before. "It was here yesterday," The man maintained, his breath frosting the air as he exhaled between phrases. "I know I saw it yesterday. That means it was taken during the storm last night."

"Who could have ventured out in such a storm?" Someone else asked. "It must have been Moshe, the owner of the winery!" A bushy-bearded peasant declared. "His house is the closest. The thief couldn't have come from much further away in such weather."

"Moshe? Are you crazy?" Another peasant asked scornfully. "We know Moshe. He's not the type to go outdoors in such weather, and neither is he the type to steal a cross."

"I don't know if he is or isn't the type," The first man countered. "But it couldn't have been anyone else. He's the only one who lives close enough. Come on, friends, what are we waiting for? Let's go to Moshe's house to check it out!"

Laughing coarsely, the group of peasants made their way to Moshe's home. "Hey, Moshe," They greeted him. "Tell us

something. Were you the one who stole our cross?"

Moshe just looked at them and did not respond. "I don't trust that Jew," A peasant murmured. Louder, he announced, "Let's search his house!" Moshe wordlessly stepped aside and allowed the men to enter. The peasants turned his home upside down but did not find what they were searching for. Cursing loudly, they left the house and Moshe breathed a premature sigh of relief. "Hey, Ivan, we didn't check the shed out back!" One of the non-Jews called, lingering in the courtyard. He motioned to his friends to join him, and the group trudged through the snow to the storage shed.

Laying on the floor at the entrance to the shed, in plain view, were some pieces of polished wood. The peasants recognized it immediately. "It was Moshe!" They cried, picking up the bundle. Congratulating themselves on their fine detective skills, they went back to the house.

The peasants showed no mercy as they pummeled Moshe, his wife, and his children with their fists, delivering punch after painful punch. They finally left the wife and children, bleeding and limping, and turned their full attention to Moshe. All ten of them let out their hatred and rage on the poor Jew, who bore his suffering stoically. When they were done, the peasants bound Moshe's bruised limbs tightly together and brought him to the priest for judgement.

The word spread quickly among the Jews and non-Jews that Moshe was being tried for stealing, breaking, and burning the cross. The entire village was in uproar. The Jews could not understand what had caused such a level-headed man like Moshe to do something so foolish. The fate of the entire community was at stake, and they were terrified.

By the time the trial commenced, a huge crowd had gathered. The peasants were eager to witness

the punishing of the Jew who had the audacity to steal their religious symbol, and the Jews, huddled at the edge of the crowd, came to provide moral support and hear the truth about what happened. They could not accept the story as truth, since it was so uncharacteristic of their friend.

A hush settled over the assemblage as the priest rose. He looked into Moshe's eyes and demanded, "Admit the truth. Were you the one who stole the cross?"

"Yes," Moshe responded, his voice ringing out clearly. "It was I. I took it, I broke it, and I burned it."

"And can you tell us why committed such a heinous crime?" The priest asked, ice dripping from each word. "It was snowing," Moshe said. "And I needed wood to heat up some food so that I could perform the mitzvah of *melavah malkah*, the Saturday night meal, properly."

The Jews gasped. For *melavah malkah*?! Moshe risked his life and stole the cross just so that his food for *melavah malkah* would be warm? There was no requirement for him to be *moser nefesh* so that his *melavah malkah* would contain warm food! They shook their heads in astonishment and disbelief.

"The sin you have committed is very grave," The priest said sharply. "The only fitting punishment is to have done to you what you did to the cross. We'll slice your limbs into pieces, same as you brazenly did to our cross."

Moshe's family and the Jews in the audience began wailing in terror while the non-Jews cheered gleefully. Moshe himself remained stoic, his face betraying no emotions.

The priest raised his arms to silence the crowd. "However," He thundered. "We are a merciful people, and we will offer you a way out. Agree to become a Christian, and you will be pardoned

fully. Convert, and you will not come by any harm."

Moshe lifted his chin proudly. "I am a Jew," He declared. "And I will die a Jew. You might tear my limbs apart, you might defile my body, yet I will never to give up my *yiddishkeit*."

With fury blazing from his eyes, the priest ordered that Moshe be bound again and thrown into a dungeon until the sentence would be carried out.

A few days later, Moshe was brought out of the dungeon. An executioner stood before him with an array of instruments, each more menacing-looking than the next. His expression bespeaking an inner calm, Moshe asked permission to relay a final request.

"Speak," The executioner said curtly. "After I die, I would like for my body to be given over to the Jewish community for burial," The brave Jew said. "They should write the following inscription on my tombstone: פה נטמן משה המכונה מנשה - here lies Moshe, known as Menashe."

"Granted!" With a final nod, the executioner began plying the tools of torture. He continued even after Moshe breathed his last breath, desecrating his corpse until it was barely distinguishable. Then, to fulfill the dying man's wish, Moshe's body was handed over to the Jewish community, along with his instructions regarding his *matzeivah*.

The *levayah* was well-attended by the town's many Jews, who were numb with grief over Moshe's terrible death. They still could not understand what had prompted Moshe to go to such extreme measures for *melavah malkah*. Something did not add up about the story. Even if Moshe had risked his life for his convictions, why would he so easily confess? He did not even attempt to deny the charges.

There was a *baal mekubal* in town who decided to get to the bottom of the story through a *shaalas chalom*. He went through the procedure of purifying himself and reciting certain *pesukim*, and then went to sleep. In his dream, he requested that Moshe appear before him to explain why he had behaved the way he had.

Moshe appeared and related that he was the *gilgul* of Menashe ben Chizkiyahu, who committed the abominable sin of putting *avodah zara* in the *heichal* of the *Bais Hamikdash*. Although the Gemara concludes that Menashe ultimately did *teshuvah*, which Hashem accepted, his *neshamah* was still sent down in the *gilgul* of Moshe to destroy a cross, a symbol of *avodah zarah*. Only then would his atonement be complete.

With this, the *Chevrah Kadishah's* records conclude the story of the cryptic *matzeivah*.

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How did Moshe, a simple Jew, instinctively know that he was the *gilgul* of Menashe? How did he know which sin to rectify from a previous *gilgul*? He wasn't a kabbalist or visionary; he was an ordinary Jew living an ordinary life.

I (R' Kalman Krohn) would like to suggest an explanation.

There is a famous story of Menashe ben Chizkiyahu, when he was captured by the goyim and tortured. He was placed in a large pot and set to roast over an open fire. As the searing flames burned his soles, he began screaming to every *avodah zarah* he could think of, begging the wood and stone to save him from the terrible heat. As can be expected, none of them came to rescue him.

As he thrashed about, wild-eyed with pain, searching desperately for salvation, he suddenly exclaimed, “זכור אני שהיה אבי מקלה אותי את הפסוק הזה בבית – I remember my father once explaining a *possuk* to me in *shul*.” The *baal korei* leined the following *possuk*, כל הדברים האלה באחרית, בצר לך ומצאוך כל הדברים האלה באחרית, הימים ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ושמעת בקולו כי קל רחום ה' אלקיך לא ירפך

ולא ישחיתך ולא ישכח את ברית אבתך אשר נשבע להם. Chizkyahu explained to his young son, Menashe, that this meant that if someone is in pain, he should cry out to Hashem, and Hashem will come to his aid.

Menashe committed every sin possible. He stooped so low as to put an *avodah zarah* in the *heichal*! And yet, the *possuk* he had heard as a young child was baked into his essence, and it steered him to *teshuvah* later in life.

I would like to suggest that not only did the things Menashe learned as a little boy remain embedded in his essence for his entire life, they also remained in his essence for all his future *gilgulim*. The essence of Menashe was present in Moshe, who drew upon them to withstand terrible pain for the sake of a mitzvah.

Such is the raw potential of a young child. That which enters his mind and soul at such a young age will remain his foundation not just for his entire lifetime, but for his future lifetimes as well.

*Have a Wonderful Shabbos!*

This story is taken from tape # A27b.

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