

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 Ibn Ezra

The Ibn Ezra led an extremely difficult life. In the introduction to his commentary on *Koheles*, he writes that he could not find success in any area of *parnasah* that he tried. His bad fortune was such that if he would have become a gravedigger, he writes, people would have surely stopped dying.

Still, despite his challenging experiences, the Ibn Ezra recognized that each difficulty was a blessing in disguise, a stepping stone on which to draw closer to Hashem and His infinite kindness. The Ibn Ezra was well-versed in many sciences, and his knowledge was vast. He would travel to different places to acquire knowledge from the experts in different areas. His wisdom was such that the Rambam later told his son Rav Avrohom that the Ibn Ezra's commentary was the only one he needed to properly learn Chumash.

One of the great men whom the Ibn Ezra wanted to obtain knowledge from was the Rambam, Rav Moshe ben Maimon. He traveled to Egypt to spend time in the company of the Rambam and

gain from his wisdom. When he arrived, the Rambam ordered his servants to set up the Ibn Ezra in a room with a pile of onions. He was to peel onions for the next three days.

The Ibn Ezra was not very pleased with this arrangement. He had wanted to learn from the Rambam, and instead he was put to task peeling onions like a kitchen maid. However, since he was a guest in the Rambam's home and thus depended on his host for food, he had no choice but to obey.

He stood over a mountain of onions, peeling one after the other, the pungent scent causing his eyes to water terribly. Tears streamed down his cheek as he worked his way removing the brown skin on onion after onion.

Soon, servants arrived, and upon instruction from the Rambam, held buckets to his cheeks to collect his tears. For three torturous days, he sat with burning eyes and wet cheeks, peeling and chopping onions as his tears dripped into containers. He could not understand why he was subject to such cruelty.

On the fourth day, he was brought before the Rambam who embraced him warmly and greeted him with tremendous respect. "Shalom aleichem, Rabbeinu Avrohom ben Ezra!"

Confused, the Ibn Ezra responded, "I've heard so much about you, and I want to learn from your knowledge... but why did you treat me so sadistically for three days?"

Instead of responding, the Rambam asked a servant to bring the bucket containing the Ibn Ezra's tears. "Look carefully into the container," he told his guest.

The Ibn Ezra peered inside. Crawling, creeping, swimming inside the puddle of tears were tiny bugs.

“As soon as I saw you, I knew it was urgent for you to cry profusely for three days, to rid your eyes of these poisonous bugs,” The Rambam said quietly.

The Ibn Ezra was astounded at the brilliance of the Rambam, of his incredible diagnostic skills and medical know-how.

Since he was interested in learning different sciences, including medicine, the Ibn Ezra asked the Rambam where he acquired his medical knowledge.

The Rambam told him that there were three important physicians whom he had longed to learn from. However, since he was Jewish, they refused to teach him. He decided to pretend he was dimwitted and hung around their practices, acting foolish but making himself useful at the same time. He would carry things across the room for the doctors, bring them supplies, and volunteer to run small errands for them.

After a while, they got used to having him as their errand boy, and would ask him to help them with small, basic tasks. He was allowed to remain in the operating room and sit in on consultations with patients, and he began to pick up a lot of knowledge.

One day, a man was brought in seriously ill. They gave him a potion to help him fall asleep and brought him into a windowless room so that the airflow should not impair the surgery they planned to perform on him. They opened up his head and discovered a tiny insect resting on his brain. However, they had no knowledge of how to remove the insect without damaging the brain. The consensus among the doctors was that the insect needed to be lifted off the brain by its stomach, yet they did not have instruments fine enough to grasp the tiny bug without causing damage to the fragile organ.

The Rambam was present in the room, but he was just an unintelligent errand boy whom nobody paid much attention to. Peering closely at the insect while the doctors deliberated heatedly, he noticed that the insect possessed tiny claws. If the doctors would attempt to lift the insect off, it would dig its claws deeper into the brain and cause lasting damage to the patient.

Just as they were about to try to remove the insect with their clumsy instruments, he cried out, “Wait!” The doctors all looked at him in surprise. They did not expect their idiotic assistant to have the solution to this medical challenge, but the Rambam begged them to give him a chance. Running out of the room, he went outside and plucked a leaf off a nearby tree. He returned to the operating room and with utmost care, brought the leaf right up to the insect, taking care not to frighten the small bug into clinging more tightly to the brain.

When the insect smelled the leaf, it behaved just as the Rambam had thought it would. With miniscule steps, the tiny bug crawled off the brain and onto the green leaf. The Rambam moved the leaf away from the man’s head with shaking hands. The doctors, deeply impressed, finished sewing the man back up.

Afterward, the Rambam told them that he was really a Talmudic scholar who wanted to learn medicine from them. His impressive performance during that day’s operation convinced them to take him on as a student, and thus he learned all about medicine.

The Rambam and the Ibn Ezra spent a lot of time together, sharing each other’s wisdom. The days passed, and it was time for the Ibn Ezra to move. He left by ship to travel to another part of the world to acquire a different kind of knowledge. In the midst of the journey, the ship was captured by pirates. They killed the captain, plundered the cargo of all valuable items, and shackled the passengers to be sold on the slave market. On a

low platform, his hands and feet tightly bound, the Ibn Ezra was put up for sale.

A wealthy priest arrived at the market to shop for some new slaves. He scrutinized the row of captives carefully before stopping in front of the Ibn Ezra. “Are you smart?” He demanded.

The Ibn Ezra hesitated and then responded carefully, “I am good at math.”

“I, too, am excellent in mathematics,” The priest told him. He cited a complicated calculation for the Ibn Ezra to compute. In a heartbeat, the Ibn Ezra fired off the correct answer.

“My turn,” the Ibn Ezra said with a soft smile and proceeded to ask the priest a complex mathematical equation of his own. The priest was silent, his mind churning, but he could not keep track of all parts of the equation in his head and was forced to admit defeat.

“I’ll take this one!” the priest called to the slave dealer, gesturing at the Ibn Ezra and counting out coins to pay for his new slave. The chains were removed, and the Ibn Ezra became the property of the priest.

When they reached the priest’s home, the Ibn Ezra was brought to his master’s study and shown his business ledger. The priest recognized his slave’s unsurpassed brilliance and wished to take full advantage of it. “You will be my business coach,” he said to the Ibn Ezra. “I want you to give me advice on various business issues. For example, I am unsure if selling my sheep now would be a sound business decision. What do you say?”

“How many sheep do you have?” The Ibn Ezra asked, carefully noting the answer. “How much does it cost to feed them? How many slaves do you have caring for these sheep? How much does it cost to feed those slaves?” Using the

information the priest provided, the Ibn Ezra skillfully sketched a profit and loss calculation for either side of the decision, allowing his master to easily compare and reach the most profitable conclusion.

Impressed and satisfied by the Ibn Ezra’s work, the priest offered him a meal, and took it very well when he heard that his new slave had special dietary requirements. Overall, the Ibn Ezra was treated decently.

A few days later, a royal messenger arrived to summon the priest for a sudden audience with the king. Anxious about the unexpected summons, the priest quickly dressed in his clerical robes and hurried to the palace.

He was brought before the king and bowed deeply.

“My dear advisor,” the king said to him. “I have a large pool of consultants and counselors, and I want to downsize to a select group of only the most intelligent men. I am therefore subjecting all my advisors to a small test to weed out the less bright from among them. I would like to ask you three questions, which you must answer within the next three days in order to retain your position on my advisory council.”

The priest bowed respectfully even as his stomach turned. He was versed enough in the manners of the court to detect the hidden threat in the king’s words. If he could not answer the king’s questions, he knew, his fate would be far worse than just a demotion from the king’s council. His very life hung on providing the king with satisfactory answers.

The king began. “My first question is: Which direction is G-d facing?”

The priest nodded, keeping his features even. Inside, though, he was a mess. He hadn't the faintest idea of what to answer!

"And for the second question," the king continued. "What can travel around the world in a single day?"

The priest's knees turned to jelly and he struggled to retain his composure. What would be? The king was asking impossible questions!

"As for my third question," the king said slowly. "How much am I worth?"

This was the most difficult question of all. There was no answer the priest could give that would satisfy the king. If he said too little, he would almost certainly insult the king, and if he said too much, he would be accused of flattery. It was a lose-lose.

The priest left the palace, his mood low. He could not eat or sleep. He watched his new slave work through business calculations but decided against asking him for assistance in answering the king. In his depressed state, his pride would not allow him to stoop and ask for help. He was just as smart as the Jew!

A day passed. Two.

The priest grew depressed. He was staring a noose in the eye, and he saw no way out.

"Something seems to be troubling you," the Ibn Ezra probed, seeing his worried expression.

The priest took a deep breath. As much as he loathed coming on to his slave, he really did not have much of a choice. Curtly, he explained the situation. Then he broke even further and actually begged his slave for help. "Please, tell me the answers," he pleaded. "If you can provide satisfactory answers, I will set you free."

"I have a better idea," the Ibn Ezra responded after a moment. He did not trust his master's word that he would be granted emancipation. "Instead of me giving you answers that may or may not be accepted, I'll dress in your clothing and present myself to the king in your stead. If he is satisfied with my answers and I return back to you, you will set me free then. If he is disappointed with my responses, then he'll kill me in your stead, and you will be able to escape."

The priest liked this idea, which removed the danger from his head entirely. He gave his slave his robes to wear to his audience with the king.

The Ibn Ezra donned the priest's clerical robes and pulled the hood low over his eyes. With surprising accuracy, he impersonated the priest's voice and asked his master for some coins to purchase supplies to use as part of his presentation to the king.

On his way to the palace, the Ibn Ezra stopped at a religious goods store and purchased a small statue for eight francs. He entered another shop and purchased a single candle. Then he continued on his way to the royal residence.

He was led into the king's chamber, and he bowed, his eyes peeking out from beneath his large hood. A row of dignitaries stood in a semi-circle beside the king, waiting to witness the priest's brilliance. If he would be able to answer the questions, he would be promoted as the king's foremost advisor. If not, he would become a head shorter.

"Tell me," the king called out in a thunderous voice. "In which direction is G-d facing?"

"Your Majesty," the Ibn Ezra responded, reaching into one of his cavernous pockets and removing a small wax cylinder. "Do I have your permission to light this candle?"

The king gave a curt nod. "Proceed."

The Ibn Ezra ignited the wick at the head of the candle and placed it in the center of the room. The soft candlelight glowed equally in all directions surrounding it. “Your noble Majesty,” the ‘priest’ continued, stepping away from the candle. “G-d is facing the same direction as the candle is facing.”

The king smiled, accepting this answer. He moved on to his next question. “Can you tell me what travels around the world in a single day?” “The sun,” the ‘priest’ responded.

“Very well,” the king said, impressed. “As for my last and most difficult question: How much am I worth?”

The Ibn Ezra did not miss a beat. “Your value is six francs, Your Majesty.”

The dignitaries gasped. The king stood up, his face flaming. Each word he uttered was like a firebomb. “Six francs! That’s all you think I’m worth?”

The ‘priest’ removed the small idol from within his deep pockets and held it up for all to see. “Yoshke is worth eight francs,” he said carefully. “It would therefore be logical that His Majesty, our great ruler, is worth just two francs less.”

The king was amazed by this clever rejoinder. “I’d like to ask you one more question,” he said slowly. “Tell me, what am I thinking now?”

“You are thinking, *who is talking to me, a priest or a rabbi?*” the Ibn Ezra said quietly.

“That is exactly what I am thinking!” the king exclaimed.

The Ibn Ezra threw back the hood of his robe and bowed. “Your Majesty, my true name is Avrohom, and I am a Jew from a faraway land. I was captured by pirates and sold as a slave to the

priest. I’ve given you the answers you sought, and I’m happy to assist you further with anything you may need.”

The king grew furious at the priest for cowardly sending his slave to respond to the king’s questions in his stead. He ordered his soldiers to arrest the priest and kill him. He then instructed his servants to transfer the priest’s property and possessions to the Ibn Ezra as a reward for his brilliance.

The Ibn Ezra remained with the king for a few days to give him wise advice and assist him with some government affairs. Then, he returned all the money the king had given him and begged to be allowed to go back to his family instead.

The king arranged for a ship to bring the Ibn Ezra home, and before long, he was at last reunited with his beloved family.

When he arrived home, the Ibn Ezra said that although he wasn’t privy to the reason why he had to go through such a *golus*- being captured by pirates, being sold into slavery, and being separated from his family for so long, he was confident that from then on, the king would treat his Jewish subjects with a fair hand. Through his suffering, the Jewish community in that country would receive the gift of benevolent rule, and for that alone, it was worthwhile.

The Shem Havaya contains two different ways that Hashem runs the world. Yud-kay, the first half of Hashem’s name, connotes goodness that comes through suffering. Vov-kay represents goodness that is received easily, on a silver platter.

Picture yourself walking in the street and suddenly slipping on a stone. As your knees

scrape on the concrete and your nose receives a painful blow, you suddenly notice a beautiful diamond winking up at you a few inches away. Did Hashem give you a gift? Most certainly! You found a valuable diamond.

Picture another scenario. You are walking down the street on a beautiful spring day. The sun is shining down from a crisp blue sky, the birds are chirping, the flowers are blooming. As you enjoy the scenery, something on the ground glints in the sun and catches your eye. You bend down and find a beautiful diamond. A gift from Hashem!

When Hashem acts with the Shem Havaya, He bestows only goodness, but he can do it with Yud-Kay, as the first scenario demonstrates, or Vov-kay, like the second scenario.

Hashem often does things that we do not understand, but in the end אשרי הגבר אשר תייסרנו קה ומתורתך תלמדנו. Sometimes, we have to go through the Yud-Kay of the Shem Havaya. We trip and fall flat on our faces, and it may be very difficult. Still, if we wait patiently, we will soon see the beautiful diamond that we were given through the fall.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A438.

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