

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Yankel Am Haaretz

About a hundred and fifty years ago, in a small shtetl, everyone was occupied with preparing themselves for seven weeks to properly celebrate the holy yom tov of Shavuos. The more learned men increased the intensity of their learning; the more ignorant increased their charitable activities. Those in between strengthened their concentration during davening or began to say Tehillim with more fervency.

And so, each Jew, according to his level, took full advantage of the weeks of Sefirah to prepare for Shavuos.

All except for R' Yaakov Shimon, better known as Yankel.

Yankel was a wagon driver by profession, and he spent his days and nights traveling from one village to the next, transporting goods and people to their destinations for a small fee. All he owned

was his scrawny horse and the ramshackle hut he called home. He had no friends, no money, and a very cold and shallow connection to yiddishkeit. He lived a life of drudgery, traveling endlessly in all sorts of weather just to have some food and firewood. That was his entire existence.

Shavuos kept creeping closer and closer, just five days away, just three days away. The excitement in the atmosphere grew stronger, and the Jews in the shtetl hurried about preparing themselves for yom tov. They got their hair cut and picked flowers from their gardens and cooked delicious meals for Yom Tov. They also continued their spiritual preparations with renewed zest.

All except for Yankel.

He was a Jew, true, but he observed the yomim tovim mechanically, just as he lived the rest of his difficult and empty life. There were no haircuts or flowers or delicious meals in his shack that Shavuos.

When the night of Shavuos finally arrived, everyone donned their yom tov finery. The rich dressed in newly-sewn suits, the poor donned their simple but freshly-pressed Shabbos clothing. In homes and cottages throughout the shtetl, all sat down to festive seudos, breathing in the unadulterated joy and kedushah of the holy yom tov of Shavuos.

All except for Yankel.

He was so poverty-stricken that his yom tov meal was no different than his regular supper of dry bread, which he ate alone in his leaky hut, which was full of drafts that left his comfort at the mercy of the weather.

As is the practice of Jews for centuries, the first night of Shavuos the meal was eaten quickly in the shtetl so that the men could hurry to shul to learn. The wooden shul resounded with the sweet sounds of Torah as the men and boys of the shtetl

concentrated on the avodah of Shavuos all throughout the night. Some men learned gemarah, others learned chumash, and some said tehillim. All spent the night awake in shul, each experiencing kabalas haTorah according to his own level.

All except for Yankel.

Yankel was a broken person with such a difficult life. He did not know how to say tehillim, let alone learn a piece of chumash or gemarah. He barely knew how to daven. The energy of Shavuos seemed to bypass him.

Still, it was Shavuos, and after eating his meager seudah, he wanted to go shul like everyone else. He had no Shabbos clothing, nothing special to wear for yom tov. All he had was the same rags he wore every day of the year. The only nice garment he owned was a black coat that he had received at his wedding many years earlier. He treasured this coat and kept in pristine condition. So many years later, it no longer fit him properly and could not close around his waistline. Yet to him, it was clean and special, and on this Shavuos night, he wore it over his ragged clothing when he went to shul.

Sitting at the back of the bais medrash, Yankel observed the other residents of the shtetl. Everyone, it seemed, had a portion of the Torah of his own. Yankel watched as two men shouted at each other regarding a difficult sugya in the Gemara. He observed another man chanting the pesukim of chumash, one after the other. A few teenagers were struggling to understand some mishnayos. At the far left was a stooped old man reciting passages of tehillim from memory. The room was abuzz with Torah learning, and everyone had a part in it.

All except for Yankel.

He had nothing, not a single part of Torah that he could claim as his own. He could do no more than

observe everyone else relish in their learning, while he looked on, an outsider.

Deeply pained by this realization, Yankel burst into heart-wrenching sobs. Sitting in the back of the bais medrash, his distressed cries were lost amongst the thunderous kol Torah. Who am I? What am I? Yankel thought miserably to himself. Even when I close my eyes, all I see is the tail of a horse, the same sight I see all day long as I drive my wagon along highways and rickety side roads. That's all I am- the tail of a horse!

He wiped his damp cheeks and continued sobbing, longing desperately to truly be a part of the kabalas haTorah happening around him. How I wish I knew how to learn! How I wish I could say some tehillim! How I wish I could participate, in some shape or form, instead of sitting here like an outsider. A fresh torrent of tears cascaded down his cheeks onto his beautiful coat, the solitary item he owned to elevate the mundane into the holiness of yom tov.

He looked around the room at the joyous sea of Torah surrounding his small island of misery. All these neshamos were at Matan Torah, he thought brokenly. Was my neshamah there? I have proof that it wasn't. I have absolutely no relationship with Torah and barely any connection with yiddishkeit. For everyone, today is yom tov. But what about me?

Yankel's shtetl was home to a great Chassidic rebbe, a man who was well-versed in the hidden secrets of the Torah. In the weeks leading up to Shavuos, the rebbe would count sefiras haomer with tremendous thought and concentration, and he would spend erev Shavuos in great contemplation as he strove toward his personal kabalas haTorah.

This year, on erev Shavuos, the rebbe went to the mikvah at chatzos. Then, he closeted himself in his study and refused everyone entry. This was extremely unusual, as the rebbe was usually

available for his chassidim and for his family. Now, his door remained locked and everyone was turned away. When the time for Minchah arrived, the rebbe did not appear in shul like he usually did, and the congregants were forced to daven without him. The same happened at Maariv on Shavuot night. Instead, R' Yoel, the rebbe's assistant, gathered ten men to daven outside the locked study door so that the rebbe could participate in a minyan.

After Maariv, the minyan left, but the rebbe did not emerge for Kiddush. The minutes, then hours, ticked by, and the rebbe's family waited to begin the seudah, but he was still locked in his study. Chatzos was nearing, and they had still not made Kiddush. The rebbitzen sent someone to knock on the study door, and he could hear the rebbe pacing the room, yet there was no answer. The rebbe's sons decided to wait until Chatzos. If their father still did not emerge, one of them would make kiddush and they would begin the meal without him.

Suddenly, they heard the rebbe banging on the door from inside the study, a signal that he wanted his assistant. R' Yoel hurried into the room to do his bidding. The rebbe's face was flaming, and he instructed his assistant, "Go to the bais medrash, and bring me Rav Yaakov Shimon, right away."

"Who is Rav Yaakov Shimon?" R' Yoel asked hesitantly.

The rebbe didn't hear him. "Hurry, please. Bring Rav Yaakov Shimon immediately!"

Frightened by the rebbe's actions over the course of the night, and now, of his unusual tone of voice, R' Yoel scurried out of the room. When he entered the bais medrash, people came over to find out why the rebbe had been absent from davening, and where he was at the moment.

"I have no idea what happened," R' Yoel confessed apologetically. "This whole thing is

really strange. Now the rebbe wants Rav Yaakov Shimon. Who is Rav Yaakov Shimon? Does anyone know him?"

The other men looked at each other and shook their heads. "Who? Rav Yaakov Shimon? Who is that?"

"Perhaps the gabbai of the shul can help you," Someone suggested. "He has a list of all the congregants."

R' Yoel approached the gabbai, and the two went over his list, but they did not see anyone by the name of Yaakov Shimon. They were about to give up when the gabbai noticed something on his list of yartzeit obligations. There was a notation that someone, Yaakov Shimon, had yartzeit on a specific date in Kislev.

"Look here!" The gabbai exclaimed excitedly. "Yaakov Shimon!" His voice suddenly deflated. "Oh. But it's only Yankel, the wagon driver. See him, over there in the back, sitting and spacing out? He's the only Yaakov Shimon I know about in this shtetl."

"It can't be the rebbe meant him," R' Yoel replied, frowning. "He said Rav Yaakov Shimon, and we both know that Yankel is no rov." He peered again at the man in the back, his mouth still twisted downward in a grimace. "You're sure there is no other Yaakov Shimon in town?"

"Positive," The gabbai affirmed.

"Well, then, I guess the rebbe did mean Yankel," R' Yoel said with a resigned air. He walked through the crowded bais medrash, past fathers and sons, pairs of young men, clusters of business people now thoroughly immersed in learning.

When he reached the wagon driver, R' Yoel noticed immediately that something was wrong. Dressed in his regular rags and an ill-fitting black coat in decent condition, Yankel was sobbing

uncontrollably. His clothing were drenched with tears. R' Yoel was taken aback, and he tapped the weeping man gently on the shoulder. "Yankel?" He called softly.

Yankel lifted his shoulder and shrugged R' Yoel's arm off, not bothering to look up.

"Yankel, I really need to speak to you," R' Yoel tried again. "The rebbe asked me to call you."

Yankel half-turned, too embarrassed of his tears to meet the gaze of the rebbe's devoted assistant. "Tonight is Shavuos," He said hoarsely. "I know that I am worth nothing at all, but do you really have to make fun of me tonight, on Shavuos?"

"Please, the rebbe really wants to speak to you!" R' Yoel pleaded. "He didn't even make kiddush yet. He's asking for Rav Yaakov Shimon, and he's waiting for you!"

"Rav Yaakov Shimon, huh," Yankel muttered, his voice pained. "What is this, some sort of prank? Who calls me Rav Yaakov Shimon?" But he stood up anyway and followed R' Yoel out of the bais medrash.

As they walked, side by side, to the rebbe's home, Yankel tried his best to make himself appear presentable. Ironing his drenched clothing with his palm, he tried to smooth out the creases. His lips twitched nervously as he walked. He had never met the rebbe before. On one occasion, years earlier, he had tried to submit a kvittel, but the rebbe's assistant, the same assistant who was now walking beside him, had neglected to pass the worthless wagon driver's kvittel on to the rebbe.

When they reached the rebbe's home, it was only two minutes before chatzos. R' Yoel led Yankel up to the door of the rebbe's study and knocked. "Rav Yaakov Shimon is here!" He announced loudly, so that the rebbe would hear him from inside.

Immediately, the study door swung open and the rebbe stood there. Taking the broken wagon driver's hand into both of his own and caressing them warmly, he invited Yankel inside. "I've been waiting for you, Rav Yaakov Shimon! Come inside!"

R' Yoel, standing discreetly outside the door, realized immediately that something extraordinary was about to take place. He entered the study behind the rebbe and Yankel and locked the door behind him. The rebbe, busy with the wagon driver, did not notice his presence, and he remained in the room, observing.

"Rav Yaakov Shimon!" The rebbe suddenly cried. "Please, give me some of those tears!"

Yankel took a step back, startled. "The rebbe wants my tears? I'm just a broken person, a man without worth, living a life with no meaning."

"Don't you realize how beloved your tears are in shomayim?" The rebbe exclaimed. "A Jew is crying of real pain, he sobs that he doesn't know any Torah. A Jew is crying that he doesn't have any connection with spirituality! These tears are so precious in shomayim!"

Hearing the rebbe's words, a fresh torrent of tears burst forth from Yankel's pained heart. "Rebbe, I have no Torah!" He wailed. "I have no connection whatsoever with Torah. Tonight is Shavuos, and I am the only one who is completely removed from the yom tov. I am a person of no value! I am nothing!"

The rebbe continued caressing his hands. "Rav Yaakov Shimon, don't you know who you are? You are a Jew! You aren't nothing, you are a Jew!"

"I might be a Jew," Yankel hiccupped. "But I was most certainly not by Matan Torah! What kind of Jew am I anyway?"

The rebbe led Yankel by the hand toward the window. "I want to show you something, Rav Yaakov Shimon," He said. "But it must remain a secret between us. Look out the window and tell me what you see."

Yankel peered out the window, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. "I see stars?" He said doubtfully, wondering if he understood the rebbe's instructions. "I see the shul... I see the wind blowing the trees..."

"Look carefully," The rebbe urged. "I am going to show you something now that you have never seen before."

Yankel, the simple wagon driver, looked again. This time, he saw the image of two million Jews gathered together. All of them were made of fire, and they were all jumping up and down, fires burning from the ground until shomayim. He breathed hard, awestruck.

"Tell me what you see!" The rebbe instructed.

"I see two million Jews," Yankel responded, somewhat discombobulated. "They are jumping up and down and made of fire."

"Tell me everything you see!" The rebbe coaxed.

"I can't even describe what I am seeing!" Yankel responded. "It's too amazing for words."

"What is it that you see?" The rebbe prodded.

"I see two million Jews," Yankel repeated. "They are all shining brilliantly, a collective group of shining light." He struggled to formulate a description. "However, when I focus on just one Jew, it appears that he individually is glowing even brighter than the others put together! Each Jew individually shines more than the collective group. How is this even possible?"

"Please continue looking," The rebbe said, ignoring the question. "Do you see faces? Can you find yourself?"

"Yes, I can see myself," Yankel said slowly.

"And what do you see?"

"I am made of fire," Yankel replied.

"What else do you see?"

Yankel squinted. "I see the way my hands are outstretched, and my eyes are roving upward, toward shomayim. I'm aflame with brilliant fire, and I see myself jumping up and down, glowing."

"What about your face?" The rebbe wanted to know.

"My face is radiant," Yankel described. "It is so radiant, that it is outshining everyone else."

"And what is your neshamah shouting?"

Yankel did not even hesitate. "It's shouting, 'Naaseh V'Nishma!'"

"Let's shout it together," The rebbe urged. "Naaseh V'Nishma!"

The simple wagon driver and the erstwhile rebbe stood together at the window, and at the highest decibels they could reach, they repeated over and over, "Naaseh V'Nishma!"

Yankel yelled with the rebbe until his voice grew raspy. Finally, he caught hold of himself, and the rebbe left go of his hands. A deep sense of calm settled inside of the tortured wagon driver. He suddenly understood that the vision he had been observing had been Matan Torah, and he himself had been there. He wasn't worthless; his face had shined brighter than everyone else's together. He was precious to Hashem after all!

The rebbe explained, “If you would ask a father which of his ten children he loved, he would respond that he loves them all. If you ask him specifically about one child, for a moment, as he thinks about that child, he’ll feel more love for him than for the other nine together. The same will happen when he visualizes each of his other children individually. This is because a father loves all his children, but when he holds just one close, for those moments, his love for that child overpowers everyone else.

“Rav Yaakov Shimon, you are one of Hashem’s beloved children, and you have the potential to be more beloved than all the others put together. When you started crying, weeping for Torah, each of your tears turned into a spiritual diamond to adorn your neshamah. You say you have no *ruchniyus*? Each of your tears is another piece of spirituality, another real connection to Torah and *yiddishkeit*.”

“But Rebbe, look at me!” Yankel responded plaintively. “I can’t learn! If I’m so beloved, if I was at *Matan Torah*, if my *neshama* truly leaped and danced with an extra radiance, why can’t I learn Torah?”

“We don’t know why Hashem makes decisions,” The rebbe said softly. “But we do know that he puts each Jew in the exact situation necessary for him to fulfill his mission in this world. If you were supposed to be a major *gaon*, Hashem would have given you the skills, the talent, the patience, and you would spend your days in *yeshiva*.

“But Hashem did not do that. He made you Yankel, a wagon driver. Your mission is to serve Him faithfully as a wagon-driver. Daven, do *mitzvos* to the best of your ability, and make sure to use your mission as a wagon driver to serve Hashem as best as possible.”

Hearing the rebbe’s words, and seeing in his mind the incredible vision of his *neshamah* aflame at *Matan Torah*, Yankel felt comforted. He suddenly

stood straighter, taller. He was, after all, a beloved Jew, a Jew who was fulfilling the mission tailor-designed by Hashem for him.

Yankel joined the rebbe and his family for *kiddush* and a brief *seudah*. Then, the rebbe took his hand, and together, they went to the *bais medrash*. Yankel was seated right next to the rebbe, and together, they said *Tikkun* until morning.

When morning dawned, they joined the *minyán* for *Shacharis*, the rebbe in his royal splendor, and Yankel in his ragged *tallis*. They davened side by side, and Yankel fed off of the extraordinary *kedushah* emitting from the rebbe. After davening, pastries were put out and a small *kiddush* took place.

For the congregants of the shul, it had been a long, yet inspiring night. For Yankel and the rebbe, this was especially true. Motivated by the holiness of the night, those assembled burst into dance. In the middle danced the rebbe, his hands tightly clasping Yankel’s, the man whom everyone thought was no better than the horse he drove and who had only just discovered his true personal worth.

Yankel went home, feeling many feet taller. Finally, he respected himself for who he was. Within a very short time, this self-respect led to others treating him with more dignity. People began to call him *R’ Yankel* and speak to him as an equal rather than a lowly simpleton. The respect that the rebbe had shown him on *Shavuos* night truly turned his life around.

Each one of us is beloved in *shomayim*, and each one of us received our own mission in this world. Not everyone will become a brilliant *talmid chacham* who will dazzle the world with his learning. Not everyone will become a *gadol hador* who will lead *klal Yisroel* with wisdom and foresight. Each one of us have our own mission, our own connection to Torah and greatness. Our

goal should be to go from Yankel to Reb Yankel, to move forward as much as possible using the capabilities granted to us to enable us to fulfill our own unique tafkid in this world.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A45a - 1993.

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