

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Missed Opportunity

One Purim morning, after *megillah*, we gathered in the Yeshiva dining room, with Rav Shneur Kotler and Rav Sholom Schwadron. Rav Sholom relayed inspiring stories for close to three hours. The following is one of the stories he shared that day, which he heard directly from the protagonist himself.

Rav Chaikel Miletzky was one of the *tzaddikei* Yerushalayim of yesteryear. Aside from his sharp head and brilliance in learning, he was also blessed with tremendous physical strength. He was known to have been able to bend a Russian coin in half with the sheer strength of his bare hands.

A few months before Rav Chaikel passed away, he was diagnosed with a disease in his right leg. The illness was spreading, and so to save the rest of his body, the doctors amputated his leg.

Then something eerie occurred. One month after Rav Chaikel's amputation, his wife was diagnosed with a similar illness in her left leg. Before long, she underwent an amputation of her leg as well.

A few short months later, Rav Chaikel passed away. His wife followed him one month later.

Speculation abounded. Rav Chaikel was a *tzaddik*, and two spouses losing legs within a month of each other isn't an everyday occurrence. People turned to Rav Sholom Schwadron to shed insight on the unnatural happenings.

Rav Sholom explained that Rav Chaikel's wife amputation took place shortly before *Sukkos*. That *yom tov*, Rav Chaikel invited his family to his sukkah for a gathering. He himself hobbled into the sukkah using crutches, as he had already lost his leg. The sukkah was crowded with his children and grandchildren, as well as some *talmdei chachomim*. Rav Sholom Schwadron had wanted to join as well, but when he arrived, he found that there was no room inside. Instead, he stood outside the sukkah near the spot where Rav Chaikel was sitting, and he listened to every word from there.

Rav Chaikel was naturally adept at poetry, and that day in the sukkah, he told over a story as a rhyming *grammen*, in a beautiful tune. Those in attendance were so moved by the story that the sukkah floor became wet with tears. The story took half an hour to relay, and when he finished, Rav Chaikel implored his descendants that the story be told over at the last *sheva brachos* of every family member for the coming generations. This was the story he relayed:

Rav Chaikel Miletzky was blessed with a good head and a love for learning. Living in Russia at the turn of the century, he headed a *chaburah* which learned in a quiet, out of the way *shtiebel*, uninterrupted by the hubbub of daily life. They were a group of ten geniuses, and Rav Chaikel

was the leader of them all. Though he was not the oldest, the others respected him for his sheer brilliance and looked up to him tremendously.

In order to minimize distractions, the *shtiebel* was built a few minutes out of the city. None of the members of the chaburah were affluent enough to own boots, which meant that they needed to trudge through the snow, clad in their flimsy shoes each day to reach the small spiritual enclave. Other than the ten of them, few others ventured out to the small *shtiebel*.

One exception was Yitzchok the Shikur. Yitzchok was a drunkard who always seemed to be in a stupor. Since his days and nights were occupied with getting drunk and then getting hungover, he could not hold down a job, let alone heat his home. He found the *shtiebel* to be a warm, quiet haven where he would lay down near the warm oven and sleep off the previous night's drinks.

One day, the group of *talmidei chachamim* were in the midst of a fiery Talmudic argument when the door to the *shtiebel* creaked open, ushering in a blast of cold air. A Jew stood at the entrance, his cheeks red, rubbing his gloved hands together in distress.

"What's the matter?" someone asked.

"Help me!" he cried, breathing heavily. "My horse fell, about a five-minute walk from here. If I don't help it stand up, it will surely freeze to death! I can't lift it alone! Please, is there someone available to come help me? We'll bring the horse back to town where we can fix its leg. Without this horse, I have no *parnasah*! Please, have pity. Someone, help me!"

Rav Chaikel eyed the man pityingly. It was a shame that the man's horse fell. However, they were in the midst of intense learning! *In the Mishnah, it's written that chesed is great, but learning Torah is greater than all mitzvos*, he thought to himself. "I'm sorry, Reb Yid," he said

aloud. "We would love to help you, but we're in the midst of learning. The Mishna says *that talmud Torah keneged kulam*. I apologize, but you'll have to wait until we finish learning."

"What do you mean?" the man shouted, anger and desperation lacing his voice. He stomped some snow off of his boots. "The horse will freeze to death! You're a murderer! And what about my family? I'll lose my livelihood!"

Most of the other members of the chaburah disagreed with Rav Chaikel's reasoning, yet they didn't dare challenge the opinion of their revered leader. Some of them looked at him intently, trying to motion with their eyes that he should have pity on the unfortunate Jew, but Rav Chaikel stood strong. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "We're in this *shtiebel* for a reason: to learn Torah. And *limud Torah* is greater than all the other *mitzvos*. Perhaps you should go to the city and try to find someone there who can help you with your horse."

The man was beside himself with worry and desperation. He pleaded with the men to change their mind, but no one was willing to challenge Rav Chaikel's decision. Seeing that he could not persuade them, the Jew despondently left the *shtiebel*, hoping for a miracle to save his horse before time ran out.

No sooner did he leave the small hut when Yitzchok the Shikur lifted his head from beneath the oven door. "Chaikel, you don't want to help a Yid?" he asked accusingly. "You know what will happen to you, Chaikel? You won't be able to walk on your two feet. And you," he continued, pointing to someone else. "Your head will be blown off! And *you*, you'll be trampled to death!" He continued to curse each of the ten *talmidei chachamim*.

"Nu, Yitzchok, you want something to drink? A little *l'chaim*?" One of the men asked, trying to lighten the suddenly somber mood.

“Nu,” Yitzchok responded, his voice muffled with fatigue. He lay his head back down and was soon asleep.

An uneasy silence hung over the room, but Rav Chaikel tried to dispel it. He delved back into the *sugya*, drawing the others in with him, for the next few minutes. Still, he could not shake the troubled feeling. He battled with himself, his heart beating furiously. *What did I do? How did I allow that Jew to leave here without helping him?*

“*Rabbosai*,” he suddenly called out. “We really should go help that man.”

The others nodded in agreement. They stood up, donned their warm coats, and pulled open the door. The snow stretched out ahead of them like a carefully spread blanket, with no signs of footsteps or other tracks. The continually falling snow had done a wonderful job of erasing the man’s trail, and it was impossible to tell which direction he had gone in.

They split up into groups, each trekking in a different direction. One group soon came upon the Jew, partially buried in the snow. He was sitting beside his dead horse, his tears freezing on his cheeks.

“We came as soon as we could,” they tried lamely excusing themselves. “Is there something we can do to help you now?”

“Thanks for nothing,” the man murmured in a pained voice, avoiding their gaze.

They returned to the *bais medrash*, cold and wet, and tried halfheartedly to return to their learning. For the rest of the day, their concentration eluded them. They tried to read the text before them, but all that floated before their eyes was the image of the man they had snubbed, buried in snow beside the corpse of his *parnasah*.

By *Maariv* that evening, there was not a dry eye in the *minyan* as they each beat their hearts by *selach lanu*. By *Shacharis*, their remorse was equally deep, and by *Mincha* as well. Yet as the days wore on, the terrible result of their careless indifference to the plight of another Jew faded away into their subconscious. That Yom Kippur, the regret came rushing back with a vengeance, and they tried to repent as best as possible, but with the onset of *Sukkos*, once more, the episode was forgotten.

The years passed. Rav Chaikel married and established a home. He accepted a rabbinical position in a different town, where he saw much success and satisfaction. It had been years since the unfortunate story had occurred, and the memory was completely erased from his memory. One day, there was sharp knocking on his front door. Opening it, he saw Yitzchok standing before him. Yitzchok the *Shikur*, now old, with a white beard. “Reb Yitzchok!” he greeted him warmly. “Come on inside! Would you like a *l’chaim*?”

“No, no, I didn’t come to drink,” Yitzchok said quickly, stepping inside. “Rav Chaikel, I need to speak to you.”

“Sure, come on in,” Rav Chaikel said, leading him to the table and pulling out a chair. He winked, remembering the drunkard who had been part of the scenery in his *chaburah* days. “Let me get you a little something to drink.”

“No, no,” Yitzchok said urgently. “Rav Chaikel, I need to speak to you, but if you don’t want to listen, I can go find someone else.” He paused for a moment. “I need someone to be with me when I leave this world, and I wanted to ask you be there.”

Rav Chaikel looked at him. Really looked at him. He was definitely Yitzchok, but he was sober. “What’s bothering you, Reb Yitzchok?” he asked with significantly more respect.

“Do you agree to come to be with me tonight before midnight?” Yitzchok the no-longer *Shikur* asked, making deep eye contact with Rav Chaikel.

Locking gazes with the drunkard of his past, Rav Chaikel was suddenly aware that Yitzchok the *Shikur* was not the person they had thought him to be all along. Quietly, he agreed, and Yitzchok walked out.

Busy as he was with his obligations as a *rov*, Rav Chaikel spent the next few hours writing responses to halachic queries that had been posed to him. Suddenly, he glanced at the time and noticed that it was shortly before twelve o’clock. Getting up abruptly, he left the house to fulfill his promise to Yitzchok the *Shikur*, yet he suddenly realized that he had no idea where the former drunkard resided.

“Excuse me,” he said to a random passerby who was luckily still in the streets at that late hour. “Do you know where Yitzchok the *Shikur* lives?”

The man scratched his head and pursed his lips. “Oh, that guy,” he said after a moment. “He lives near the cemetery, in one of those huts.”

“Thanks,” Rav Chaikel said, turning in the direction the man had pointed. He didn’t relish the idea of walking through the cemetery alone, at night, yet he had promised Yitzchok the *Shikur* that he’d be there, and he didn’t want to let the dying man down. He walked briskly, knowing that he needed to be at Yitzchok’s home by midnight.

When he reached the row of decrepit shacks just beyond the cemetery, it was a few minutes before midnight. Rav Chaikel scanned the huts questioningly, and then noticed that only one of them was still lit. He walked toward the dimly lit shack and rapped on the door. “Reb Yitzchok? Reb Yitzchok! Can I come in?”

“Come in!” he heard a voice call from inside. “Come in quickly, it’s late!”

Rav Chaikel pushed the creaky door open and gasped. Lying in bed on the side of the small room was Yitzchok the *Shikur*, his beard a snowy white, his face radiant like the sun. There was a lit candle on top of him, and the presence of the *shechinah* was keenly felt. He took a few tentative steps into the room.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Yitzchok said softly, resting his glowing eyes on Rav Chaikel. “In a few moments, I will be leaving this world. Please, I ask you as a favor, please ensure that I am buried near the great *tzaddik* in the cemetery.” Rav Chaikel’s head jerked back in surprise.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Yitzchok continued before Rav Chaikel could utter a word. “You’re thinking, *he’s only Yitzchok the Shikur. Why should he be buried near the tzaddik? And you’re also thinking, the tzaddik was buried decades ago. There is no room near him for another grave.*”

He looked at Rav Chaikel for confirmation, and the latter gave a small nod. That had been exactly what he was thinking.

“To answer your first question,” Yitzchok said quietly. “My head is resting right now upon a wooden chest. Inside this chest, you’ll find hundreds of sheets of paper. Look at them, take them to the other *rabbonim* to review. When you see them, you’ll agree that it’s okay to bury me near the *tzaddik*.”

Rav Chaikel was at a loss on how to respond, so he was silent, waiting for Yitzchok to continue.

“And if you measure the space between the *tzaddik’s* grave and the one beside his, you’ll see that there is exactly enough room for me to be buried there.” With that, Yitzchok gave Rav

Chaikel a small smile. He said *Shema Yisroel* and closed his eyes for the last time.

‘He’s a lamed vov’nik! Rav Chaikel suddenly understood, shaking his head to let this new, unbelievable reality sink in. He hadn’t been a drunkard at all, just a tremendous tzaddik concealing his greatness!’

Grasping the top of his shirtfront with both hands, he made a sharp, downward motion, tearing the cloth in mourning. He then pushed open the door and ran out of the house, through the uneven ground of the cemetery, back into the town proper. “The *tzaddik* was *niftar!*” he called as loud as he could, over and over, running through the streets. “The *tzaddik* was *niftar!*”

Townpeople, awoken from slumber, clustered in the doorways of their homes, holding lanterns and squinting at Rav Chaikel. “What’s going on? Who passed away?”

“The *tzaddik! Moreinu Harav Yitzchok!*” Rav Chaikel responded. “He was just *niftar!*”

“Rav Yitzchok?” they asked in confusion.

“The great man, *Harav Yitzchok*, who lived near the cemetery,” Rav Chaikel explained. “He was known as Yitzchok the *Shikur*, but in essence, he was one of the thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim*.”

The people were shocked. They dressed quickly and streamed to the cemetery to try to understand what was happening. The *chevrah kaddisha* was called down, and after the *taharah* was performed, they brought Yitzchok’s coffin to the shul, where the *levayah* would take place.

Rav Chaikel went to collect the *ksavim* from the chest on Yitzchok’s bed and found that he had been a tremendous *mekubal*. He also discovered a beautiful pair of *tefillin*, *tefillin* that Yitzchok must have donned in private, since no one had ever seen him laying *tefillin*. It was then that he

truly understood just what a loss Yitzchok the *Shikur*’s passing was for the city.

After an impressive array of *hespedim*, where Yitzchok was eulogized by the *rabbonim* of the city, he was escorted to his final resting place by a tremendous crowd. One by one, each resident of the town came forward to beg Yitzchok’s forgiveness, since they had not accorded him the respect he deserved during his lifetime

Many years passed, and Rav Chaikel’s peaceful life underwent many changes. The First World War took place, shaking up countries and empires and leaving thousands dead, injured, and displaced. After a few short years of relative calm, the Holocaust claimed the lives of six million of our people. Eventually, Rav Chaikel Miletzky wound up in Eretz Yisroel, where he settled in Yerushalayim.

One day, he met an old acquaintance, and through their conversation, learned that one of the members of his *chaburah* had perished during World War I. He had been serving in the Russian army when a hand grenade exploded in his face and blew his head off. Sometime later, Rav Chaikel learned the fate of another member of the group, who was run over by a vehicle years earlier, meeting an early and tragic end.

It was exactly the way Yitzchok the *Shikur* had predicted, with each of the *chaburah* members receiving the punishments he had cursed them with.

When Rav Chaikel was diagnosed with a dreaded disease in his leg, which was subsequently amputated, he was not surprised. He knew that this was retribution, wished upon him by Yitzchok the *Shikur*, for callously denying to come to the aid of the stranded Jew so many years earlier.

Rav Chaikel’s wife, seeing her husband’s suffering, *davened* profusely that her leg be taken

instead, so that his second one could be spared. Indeed, a short time later, her leg was amputated as well.

Rav Chaikel Miletzky's sobering story teaches us that if a fellow Jew requires our assistance, we are obligated to help him. It is only the *yetzer harah* who tries to convince us to abandon another Jew to his fate for the sake of *limud* Torah.

As well, we learn the importance of treating every Jew with the utmost respect. While there are only thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim* in the world, one never knows who they might be. Every *tzelem elokim* deserves our honor and respect.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A436b

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