

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Siberiak's Siddur

After World War II, thousands of Holocaust survivors were left alone in the world, searching for a cousin, a distant relative, a neighbor; desperate to find someone from their prewar lives to reconnect with.

Throughout the late Forties and early Fifties, numerous gatherings were held in the New York area where survivors or people with missing relatives would assemble and try to find remnants of their family. One by one, the thousands of attendees would call out the name of the family or city they were searching for.

“Goldstein? Anyone know Goldstein from Lodz?”

“Is there anyone here from Baranovitch?”

The process would take hours as people slowly discovered relatives or were once again faced with disappointment.

At one such event, a man asked to say a few words. He was known to all as Siberiak, named

for the time he had spent exiled in the Siberian wilderness. The crowd quieted down. Siberiak was known as a dynamic speaker, and they leaned forward to hear what he had to say. He relayed the following story.

When the Soviets marched into my hometown during the war, I was among those deported to Siberia. We were rounded up and packed into cattle cars, body against body, without any room to move an inch. We were forced to stand upright the entire journey.

The arctic temperature, amplified by the brutal winds whipping against the train, caused many to freeze to death. The claustrophobia was unbearable, and many could not survive it. The bodies of those who perished in the windowless chambers remained upright, squeezed between the others. When the train finally rolled to stop at our unknown destination in Siberia, many of my fellow passengers were gone forever.

Those of us who survived the torturous journey soon discovered what sort of Gehinnom we had arrived at. It was a slave labor camp where we were to perform dangerous and backbreaking work in the open outdoors, exposed to the unforgiving elements. We were directly supervised by non-Jewish prisoners, who took out their fury and frustration over their own Siberian exile on us hapless Jews.

I was assigned to a work detail that panned for gold in a stream beside a gold mine. We crouched, shivering, in the knee-high water, panning for bits of gold. Our legs would become numb from the freezing water. It was unbearable, and many did not survive. They would collapse unconscious into the water, where they drowned.

We were given a single piece of bread every day. That was the sum total of our sustenance, just

barely enough to live on. Malnutrition was another common source of death in the camp.

Despite these challenges, I saw incredible *siyata dishmaya*. I felt the hand of Hashem strengthening me, keeping me alive against all odds. Day after day, I withstood the freezing stream. Day after day, I survived on just a thin slice of bread. Each morning that I awoke anew was a miracle. I grew thinner with each passing day, and I knew that I could not possibly survive too many more weeks of this difficult work.

The best part of the job was when we purified the gold. After hours of panning, when each man accumulated a certain amount of gold, he was able to leave the water to purify the gold in the fire. Around the fire, it was warm and pleasant, making it a strong incentive for us to pan quickly and effectively.

One day, as I crouched in the frigid stream, trying to ignore the ever-present hunger, a thought occurred to me. Why am working so hard to make my captives richer? I thought to myself. If I keep some of the gold for myself, by the time I leave this place, I'll be a millionaire.

From that moment onward, I always made sure to quietly sneak some of the gold I panned into my own pockets. The thought of the gold slowly accumulating in my secret chest buried in the snow filled me with hope and anticipation. The cold no longer felt as biting, the hunger no longer as difficult. I kept imagining myself leaving Siberia as a rich man, and these thoughts revitalized me, giving me the energy to continue.

One day, I was punished for some minor infraction and was not given my daily bread ration. I knew I would not survive without food, and since I was not given my ration, I would need to barter with another prisoner to get something to eat. Yet the only thing I had to barter was gold, from my precious millionaire stash. I had worked hard accumulating my stash and wasn't too keen

on parting from some of it. However, I realized that it was preferable to be a living pauper than a dead millionaire, so I carefully dug up some gold from my underground cache.

I approached another Jew whom I knew had some bread. Whispering, I let him in on my little secret.

"I own a lot of gold," I told him. "I'd like to give you these gold nuggets in exchange for a slice of bread."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Gold?" he blurted incredulously. "What would I do with gold? I have no need for gold here. I can't eat it." He looked at me and gave me some advice. "We are never getting out of here. Work on amassing things that matter in this frozen wilderness, like bread."

His words poured cold water all over my millionaire fantasy. I realized that he was right. Gold might have been precious in the greater world, but in our Siberian bubble, it was worthless. Suddenly, I was disgusted by the gold I had hidden away. Without delay, I dug up the hidden chest and added the gold to the pile being purified by the fire. I simply gave it all up to the Soviets. I had no need for gold. Instead, I focused my energy on attaining extra bread. After all, bread was life.

One day, I turned to my new mentor, the one who had enlightened me regarding the Siberian value system and the worthlessness of gold. "Is there anything worth more than bread in Siberia?"

"Paper," came his unhesitant response. "You can roll paper into cigars, light it, and it really warms your insides. We get enough bread rations to survive, but without warmth, we will surely die of frost and disease. The warmth from paper will keep your body going for days."

I nodded excitedly. He was right! Amidst the snow and ice, paper was most definitely a greater

lifeline than extra bread. I knew I needed to obtain some, but how? Where would I find precious paper?

Mail was delivered to Siberia only twice per year, once in the winter and once in the summer. I realized that these would be my best opportunities to try to obtain some paper. Being that there were many illiterate prisoners in the camp, many who received mail needed others to read them their letters. I hoped that after reading someone's letter to him, I would be able to keep the paper for myself.

Mail day was one of the most exciting days of the year. Although I did not expect to receive any mail myself, I found myself feeling eager as well. Perhaps I would manage to collect even more than one paper.

Soon enough, an irreligious and illiterate Jew approached me, holding an envelope in his hands.

"You read, don't you?" he asked me, opening the envelope and letting it drop carelessly to the floor.

"Can you read this to me?"

I hastily bent down to retrieve the precious envelope from the floor and accepted the letter he handed to me. "Sure," I said, unfolding the page and reading its contents to him. When I finished, I casually asked if he minded if I kept the letter. After all, he couldn't read it anyway.

"Are you crazy?" he asked incredulously. "This letter is from my son! Even if I can't read it! I'll treasure it forever!"

"Please," I begged him. "I need the paper. It will give me life. Please!"

"I'm sorry," he responded, hugging the letter to his chest and walking away.

I watched him go, disappointed that I hadn't managed to convince him. Then I brightened, remembering that I had snagged the envelope.

Quickly, I rushed to my barracks and selected some garbage to use in the inside of my cigar. I lay the paper before me and flattened it out, ready to start rolling, when something caught my eye.

This was no envelope, I realized. It was a page of a siddur! Dropping the garbage intended for my cigar filling, I lifted the page, glanced at both sides, and realized that it contained the tefillos of Az Yashir, Yishtabach, and the beginning of Yotzer Ohr, until אלקי עולם ברחמיך הרבים רחם עלינו. My first reaction was, Wow! A siddur! Who had a siddur in Soviet Russia?

Then, a sadness came over me as I realized how far our nation had fallen. The unfortunate reality was that a Jewish soldier, in need of paper for an envelope, had torn a page out of a siddur to use for his mail. I sat there, holding my precious paper, sad and confused.

But one thing was absolutely clear to me. I would not, I could not, use the paper to smoke.

I took the page to a man whom we dubbed Tzaddik'l. Tzaddik'l was a righteous and pious Jew who offered encouragement to his fellow prisoners in the camp. He would constantly discuss emunah, ingraining true faith in Hashem's salvation in the rest of us. I knew that Tzaddik'l would help me work through my feelings.

"Tzaddik'l!" I cried, holding out the precious page to him. "Take a look at this!" He craned his neck to see as I continued breathlessly, "I've been trying to get a hold of some paper for days. I need it, to make a cigar, to give me warmth. And warmth is life! And now I finally got this paper...but then I noticed that it's a page of a siddur!"

Tzaddik'l reach out for the page and kissed it tenderly. "No," he said, his voice a contradictory mix of gentle firmness. "This is not a cigar. This is our lifeline! From now on, we will all meet every night, no matter the circumstances. We'll go around the circle, and each night, another man will read all these words to the rest of us. This will keep us going far longer than all the cigars in the world!"

And so it was. Each night, all the frum Jewish prisoners sat together. One of us would read from the single page of the siddur. When we reached the end of the second side and concluded with the poignant words of אלקי עולם ברחמיך הרבים רחם עלינו, we all broke down and cried. The words never failed to deeply touch us as we reflected that Hashem was also the master of our frozen corner of the world, and with His great mercy, He could instantly grant us our salvation. We would kiss the page of the siddur, tears streaming from our eyes.

As Tzaddik'l foretold, this precious page of the siddur was truly our lifeline. More than gold, more than bread, more than the warmth of a rolled paper cigar, it was the tefillos of the siddur that gave us energy, endurance, vitality, life. In fact, whenever anyone in our group felt too weak to continue, we would place the piece of siddur on his heart, and amazingly, he would regain his strength.

Siberiak looked around at the Holocaust survivors assembled before him. "I am known as Siberiak because I am from the tiny percentage who made it out of Siberia alive. It was the siddur, above all else, that sustained me until the end.

"We are all gathered here, trying to find our families," he continued. "Yes, family is important. But even if we don't merit to find the relatives we are searching for, and especially if we do, we must always remember the most

important relationship that will carry us through galus—the siddur."

The road of life is riddled with potholes and speedbumps. Often, we try to circumvent these challenges by chasing after money, after tempting delicacies, after addictive substances. Siberiak reminds us that gold and bread and cigarettes can do nothing to help us. It is our tefillos, our relationship with Hashem, that carries us through our difficulties.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!
This story is taken from tape # TG130

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