

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

The Ransom Part I

Eliezer was one of the Talmidei HaGra, one of the disciples of the great Vilna Gaon, and from the early settlers of Yerushalayim in his generation. He and his wife made the treacherous journey across land and sea, together with a few other of the Gaon's students, and settled in the desolate wasteland that was Eretz Yisroel.

For many years, Eliezer and his wife were childless. In their old age, they were finally blessed with a long-awaited son. The little boy brought joy and life into their home, and he filled their world with nachas.

Eliezer wanted nothing more than to raise his son to be a true oved Hashem, a tzaddik and a talmid chacham. From when little Naftali was very young, he would spend hours each day learning with him. Like his father, Naftali proved to have a brilliant mind, and he blossomed under his father's guidance. At twelve years old, he was already an accomplished talmid chacham.

Years earlier, Eliezer had inherited a vast some of money, and he was very successful in his business dealings. However, although he was blessed with abundance, he chose to live a simplistic lifestyle, committed to practicing histapkus bimaat, being satisfied with little materialism. He and his family lived as paupers, and although he often gave money to charity anonymously, no one was aware of his great wealth, not even his own child.

When the frailty of his age began to catch up with him, Eliezer found himself concerned with the vast sums in his bank account. His only desire was that his Naftali live in purity and spirituality, undistracted by the world around him. Money, he knew, would only hinder Naftali's path to the greatest of heights. However, according to the Torah, after his death, his money would become Naftali's. He was not permitted to throw away his son's inheritance just like that.

With his health failing, Eliezer knew he needed to inform his son about the business and inheritance in his possession. One evening, after an enjoyable learning session together, he broached the subject. "I'm getting old, my son," he began. "I won't be here forever. It's time for you to start learning a little about business."

"Tatte, with your permission, I'd really prefer not to," Naftali, now fifteen years old, responded respectfully. "I only want to learn Torah. I really don't want to be involved in anything else."

Eliezer smiled, then sighed. "Naftali, after I pass on, you will need to devote a portion of your time to earning a livelihood. You won't be able to remain in the bais medrash all day. It's important that you know how the business world works, so that you don't flounder in it when the time comes."

Naftali lifted his shoulders helplessly. "It's just so not me," he protested. "It's not for me. I can't see myself learning how to make transactions. The Torah is calling my name!"

Eliezer let the subject rest for the time being, intending to bring it up again a few weeks later. When he tried again the next month, he was met with the same resistance. The same thing happened a few months later, and then a few months after that. Every time Eliezer tried discussing business with his son, Naftali wriggled out of it.

Naftali became sixteen, then seventeen. The conversation, though not for a lack of trying on Eliezer's end, never took place. In the meantime, Eliezer's health took a bad turn. Lying on his deathbed, there was no time for soft introductions or beating around the bush. "I have to tell you a secret, something I've never told you before," he said to his son, who was sitting at his bedside, stroking his hand. "There's a tremendous amount of money awaiting you. I implore you; don't be foolish. Learn the ropes of the business, and do only good things with your money. If you invest in mitzvos, you'll see success. But if you use the money foolishly, and if you don't use the power of your tongue properly, you'll lose everything."

Naftali listened to his father's words, his face registering surprise, nothing more. He had been taught to value a life of spiritual wealth and simplistic materialism. The fact that his father was secretly wealthy was an interesting fact that meant little to him. The conversation turned to other matters, and father and son enjoyed their last moments together.

Shortly thereafter, Eliezer passed away. His brokenhearted son, Naftali, sat shivah all alone. His father had also been his rebbi, and since his mother had already passed on years earlier, the loss was compounded. Comforters came and went, and Naftali tried to remain strong, to live up to the ideals his father had ingrained in him his entire life.

After shivah, he resolved to learn for the entire year with renewed diligence and vigor in his father's memory. For the entire year, he knew nothing other than his Gemara, accumulating

merits for his father's soul. At the first yartzeit, he made a siyum on the tremendous amount of material he mastered over the course of the year.

After the yartzeit, Naftali felt restless. He was still just a teenager, not yet married, and all alone in the world. His father, he recalled, had constantly been trying to teach him the ropes of business. Now, Naftali decided to leave Yerushalayim, the city of his birth, and travel a little. He wanted to see the world outside of the only one he knew.

Eliezer had left him a fortune comprised of coins, gold, and precious stones. Naftali visited the vault where the money was stored and emptied most of it into a nondescript sack. Dressed as a beggar, carrying a burlap sack, no one would dream that he was walking around with a fortune on his shoulders, and it would be helpful to have the money with him in case a good deal came up during his journey.

Leaving Eretz Yisroel, Naftali traveled from city to city, country to country. He visited various Jewish communities, met with many rabbonim, and toured new places. This was his first experience outside his own tiny community, and he was wide-eyed with awe and wonder at the sights and smells and cultures he encountered.

One morning, he arrived at a busy metropolis that boasted a thriving business sector. Eager to witness the bustling market activity that the city was famous for, Naftali asked for directions from passersby and was guided to an enormous open square. Hundreds of tables and stalls lined all sides of the square, and it was clear that this was a place where thousands of transactions occurred weekly. Now, however, it was eerily silent.

The stalls were empty. The tables were bare. No merchandise, no vendors, no haggling clients. Even the familiar sounds of hoof beats were strangely absent. Naftali looked around in surprise. Was the market closed for the day?

In the middle of the square, a giant man stood on top of a wooden box. He was tall, very tall, with broad shoulders and bulging muscles. He held a menacing looking sword, drawn, and looked ready to pounce at any moment. In addition to the sword, an assortment of equally dangerous weapons were strapped to him on all sides.

Other than him, there were few people on the square. A group of three were clustered on one end, speaking in hushed tones. Another man was hurrying across, seeming to have cut through on his way to his destination. There were some others, equally silent, but that was all.

“What’s going on here?” Naftali questioned one of the men.

The man gave him a penetrating look. “Don’t talk to me about this,” he said finally, turning away.

Naftali walked across the square to the group of three huddled together. “Can you tell me what’s happening here?” he asked.

Instinctively, all three men looked over their shoulders at the giant with the drawn sword and turned back to Naftali with frightened eyes. “We don’t want to discuss it,” they said curtly.

The scene was so bewildering, that Naftali looked around again, trying to find someone to clue him in. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a Jewish man entering the square. Relieved at finding a fellow kinsman, Naftali hurried over to him.

“What’s happening here?” he asked quietly. “I see that everyone is living in intense fear. The market is closed. What’s happening?”

The Jew just shook his head. “Leave it alone,” he advised. “Just forget about it.” He hurried away before Naftali could press him for more information.

Naftali shrugged. If no one was willing to clue him in, he would go straight to the source.

Fearlessly, he approached the massive man standing in the center. “Hey,” he called up to him with a friendly smile. “How are you doing, sir?”

The man pointed his sword at him. “What do you want?” he growled.

“How are you doing?” Naftali repeated, ignoring him. He smiled disarmingly. “It’s a nice hot day today, huh? Why are you standing here in the hot sun? Come down and let’s chat a little.”

The giant glared at him, tightening his grip on his weapon. “Get lost!”

“I’m just curious,” Naftali tried. “I see that everyone here is afraid of something, and you’re standing here, in the middle of this hot square, on top of a box. I’m just curious about what’s going on, that’s all.”

“I said, get lost, kid!” the man yelled.

Naftali held up his palm. The golden coins he held caught the sun and glinted. “This is for you,” he said, waiting patiently.

The man grabbed up the coins. In a flash, they disappeared into the bowels of his pocket.

“Alright, I’ll tell you. Do you know who this is?”

“What? Who?” Naftali asked. “What are you talking about?”

“This,” the man said, pointing at the box he was standing on. He hopped off, and sat down on the wooden crate, indicating to Naftali to sit beside him. “Let me tell you a little story, and then you’ll realize just what’s going on here.”

Naftali sat down cautiously. “I’m listening.”

“My name is Suleiman,” the man began. “I occupy a powerful position in the government of our most glorious Sultan. There are thousands of people in the Sultan’s employ, in various different

positions: domestic staff, government officials, soldiers, officers, and more. For a long time, the Sultan had a Jewish advisor among his vast staff. His name was Nissim.”

Suleiman winked at Naftali. “There are many versions to the story, but I was there, so I’ll tell you the truth. The Jew was very successful, and over the years, he made a real name for himself in the Sultan’s palace. Watching their rival, their Jewish rival, surpass them, was a too much for many of the Sultan’s other advisors. They worked hard to find some dirt on him, and eventually, they found something to work with.

“They discovered that the Jew owned vast tracts of land, something unusual for a man of his earning power. His rivals went to the Sultan and reported that he must have stolen money from the treasury. After all, the Sultan’s advisors didn’t make nearly enough money to finance such assets. Since the Jew had frequent access to the treasury, it was the perfect way to smear him.

“The Sultan, no Jew-lover himself, agreed that the Jew’s financial life was fishy, and he demanded an explanation from the Jew. The Jew, Nissim, had a simple defense for himself. He explained that he had been receiving a steady salary from the Sultan for the previous twenty years, and he had invested his salary into land.

“The Sultan, fueled by the hatred of the other advisors, asked for a detailed profit and loss statement proving this, which the Jew could obviously not provide. This was twenty years of investments, not a few months. There was no way he could prove such a thing. The Sultan took this as evidence that the Jew had stolen from his treasury.

“The Jew, who had once occupied a prominent position in the government, was taken from his home. One by one, his limbs were cut off; first his hands, then his feet, then his head. His limbs were wrapped up and placed into a wooden cart. That’s the box you are sitting on right now.”

Naftali jumped off as if bitten by a snake. “In here?” he shrieked in horror. “But why won’t they bury him?”

Suleiman shrugged. “The Sultan refuses to relinquish his body to the Jews until they pay him 20,000 golden coins. The Jews don’t have that kind of money, so in the meantime, I was appointed to stand guard here over the box, here in the middle of the square, where the Jews will be reminded of its presence constantly.”

Naftali looked pensive. “Where does the Sultan live?” he questioned.

“It’s not far, just one day’s travel from here,” Suleiman responded, settling himself more comfortably on the box. “I can give you precise directions if you want.”

Naftali listened closely as the man described the route to the Sultan’s palace. Thanking him, he took immediate leave of the city and began traveling in the direction the Suleiman had pointed him in. He rode for a full day and night, without stopping for food or rest, and drove up to the Sultan’s palace the following day at midday. A Jew’s body was being degraded. There was no time to waste.

Naftali washed his face at a public fountain and dusted off his garments as best as possible. Smoothing his peyos, he approached the front gate and was immediately confronted by armed guards demanding to know the reason for his presence.

“I’d like to meet with the Sultan,” Naftali replied confidently.

“What is your business with the Sultan?” they challenged.

Naftali squared his shoulders. “I’m from a distant land, and I wanted to speak to him about an important matter.”

The guards exchanged glances. From Naftali's dress, it was obvious that he was a Jew, and they realized immediately that he had come in connection with the ransom being demanded for Nissim's body. "Follow me," a thin, gangly guard ordered, leading Naftali into the palace.

Naftali followed the guard through sumptuous corridors to the Sultan's audience chamber. A sentry announced his presence, and Naftali found himself standing before the powerful ruler. He bowed low.

"Rise, young man," the Sultan called from his golden throne. "What can I do for you?"

"I heard that our esteemed Sultan has a business proposition," Naftali began. "I've heard that Your Majesty wishes to sell the body of a deceased Jewish advisor for the sum of 20,000 gold coins. I come to humbly ask if I may accept the proposition. I would very much like to purchase this body."

The Sultan's eyes widened. "You're just a young boy," he stated, taking in Naftali's youthful face and clear, shining eyes. "Can you afford to pay the price I'm asking for?"

"I can, Your Majesty," Naftali responded. He removed a bulging sack from his pocket. "I believe this is the full amount."

The Sultan beckoned to his aides, who took the sack from Naftali and began counting the money. "It's the full sum, Your Majesty."

"Very well," the Sultan said with a satisfied smile. "It's a deal. I'll have my scribe write you a note ordering my government minister, Suleiman, to release the body to you. You may go to the city where the body is being kept and redeem it."

Naftali bowed again. "Thank you, Your Majesty." Pocketing the note which the scribe handed to him, he bowed and backed out of the room.

Watching him leave, an amused smile played on the Sultan's lips. Who was this kid, confident enough to appear before the Sultan himself, and walking around with so much money in his pocket? What were his true motives in ransoming the dead remains of the late Jewish advisor?

He summoned the chief of his security detail. "I want that kid followed," he commanded. "I want to see what he'll do next. And whatever you do, don't let him out of the country before speaking to me."

The security chief bowed. "Certainly, Your Majesty."

Two of his most talented men were sent out immediately to tail Naftali. They followed him throughout an exhausting journey straight through the night, going to great lengths to avoid detections. Twenty-four hours later, during the early afternoon, the weary scouts rode behind Naftali into the city where Nissim's body was being held.

Naftali arrived during Minchah. He waited at the back of the local shul for davening to conclude and then walked up to the bimah. "Rabbosai!" he cried, banging on the bimah. "I redeemed the niftar! I ask that every Jew in this city come to give this man a levayah that he deserves! Come and show honor to the deceased!"

The people were shocked. They looked at him, wondering who he was and where he had come from. "Who are you?" people tried asking him.

Naftali shrugged off their queries. "Who are the local rabbonim? We need hespeidim, we need strong inspiration for repentance."

By the time he left the shul, a tremendous crowd followed, with the Sultan's two scouts bringing up the rear. Naftali walked to the large, empty square and approached the giant of a man, still standing in the same place on top of his wooden box. "Hey, Suleiman! Remember me?"

Suleiman turned, the menacing tip of his drawn sword nearly piercing Naftali's chest. He lowered the sword. "Hey, kid! You're back! Went to visit the Sultan, huh?"

Naftali smiled and handed him the note that the Sultan's scribe had given him. "This is from the Sultan."

Suleiman's jaw dropped. "How did you... where did you get so much money? And so fast?!" As he spoke, he stepped off the box. "It's all yours!"

A beautiful funeral took place on the spot. The entire Jewish community showed up to pay its final respects to the man whose funeral they had been awaiting for so long. The local rabbonim delivered stirring eulogies, the deceased's family members spoke for a few heartbreaking moments, and then the procession made its slow way to the cemetery.

Naftali stood at the edge of the crowd, watching as the chevrah kadisha prepared the grave, when someone approached him. "Excuse me, sir, but are you the one who spoke to the Sultan?"

"Yes," Naftali responded, eying the man warily.

The man flashed his badge. "I'm an officer within the Sultan's security team," he said briskly. "The Sultan would like to speak to you."

Naftali hesitated for a moment, then realized that he didn't have much of a choice. With almost of all his money spent on ransoming Nissim, he had only a few coins left; certainly not enough to bribe this security officer. He nodded his head.

As the coffin was lowered into the grave, Naftali mounted his horse and followed the Sultan's two scouts out of the cemetery.

They arrived at the Sultan's palace in the morning, a day and a half after they'd started out on the return journey. Naftali, trembling in fear, was ushered before the Sultan. He bowed

respectfully, remaining low on the ground until he received the order to rise, his mind racing in a thousand directions.

Why did the Sultan want to see him? Did he regret allowing Nissim's body to be ransomed? Did he want to keep Naftali hostage to exhort more money out of his family, who were obviously wealthy? Would he leave the palace alive?

To be continued...

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A430

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