

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 Rebbe's Mechutan

The Noam Elimelech, Rav Elimelech of Lizensk, was a tremendous oheiv Yisroel. In fact, his love for his brethren ran so deep that he had the power to turn people toward teshuvah. Under his loving direction, he ensured that people who strayed in certain areas were brought back on track.

As an example, we'll bring the story of Velvel.

Velvel was a Jew in town who was a terrible glutton. He didn't overeat sometimes; rather, his entire day revolved around food. His regular breakfasts and lunches were huge feasts, and so were his dinners and the snacks in between. He was a nice man, kind and goodhearted, but when food was around, he simply lost all control. He could eat and eat to the point of pain, and even then, he just couldn't stop himself from enjoying another helping.

Rav Elimelech, in an attempt to help him, asked that they start having breakfast together each morning. Needless to say, Velvel was flattered that the great tzaddik wanted his company at his morning meals, and he agreed immediately.

The following morning, after Shacharis, he knocked on Rav Elimelech's door, trying to hide his smile of anticipation. Breakfast in the company of such an exalted tzaddik! What could be better?

Rav Elimelech invited him in and showed him to the table. Velvel blinked. In the middle of the table was a small loaf of bread, a small jug of hot water, and some salt. He shrugged. He should have realized that there wouldn't be much food.

They washed and sat down. Rav Elimelech took the loaf of bread, and holding it with both hands, recited a fervent Hamotzi. Slicing off a small hunk of bread from the loaf, he dipped it into salt and put it into his mouth. "Oy, Elimelech, you baal taavah," the tzaddik murmured to himself after he swallowed the piece.

Velvel stopped chewing on his own plain bread and looked at the rebbe in surprise. What? The rebbe considered himself a baal taavah because he liked the bread? He coughed uncomfortably.

"Oy, Elimelech, what will be with you?" Rav Elimelech continued speaking to himself. "You want to eat the entire loaf of bread- and the salt shaker, too! Get more control of yourself! Oy!"

Velvel forced himself to take another bite of his bread. He watched as the rebbe sipped a bit of his watery 'tea' and cut himself another piece of bread. "Nu, Elimelech, what are you talking about?" the rebbe asked himself. "You eat l'shem shomayim, so that you should be healthy and have strength to serve Hashem. You eat what your body needs, and that's all."

The conversation that Rav Elimelech had with himself lasted a few more minutes, as he alternated back and forth between scolding himself for his lack of self-control and then defending himself that he only ate what he needed to function properly. Finally, he exclaimed, "That's it, no more. You have no control! No more food!" With that, he washed his hands and proceeded to bentch from his meager breakfast.

That was all. He did not address Velvel's faults directly, not to scold him nor to try to remake him. But that one breakfast was enough to change Velvel's life completely. He took responsibility for his behavior into his own hands and took control of his eating habits.

For the remainder of his life, Velvel would tell and retell the story to his grandchildren, to demonstrate how with his wisdom and patient modeling, the rebbe Rav Elimelech succeeded in bringing others to teshuvah.

Rav Elimelech and his brother, Rav Zusha would often travel together, disguised as beggars. During one of these travels, Rav Elimelech asked the gabbai of the shul for permission to address the locals after davening. It was common, in that age, for a traveling maggid to deliver a speech in shul when he passed through a town. It was customary to pay these maggidim eight coins after a speech.

The gabbai looked at Reb Elimelech and tried not to wrinkle his nose. With his dented hat, torn clothing, and tangled beard, he did not look the part of a maggid. His bedraggled appearance gave the gabbai the impression that the man before him was a beggar trying to earn eight coins by posing as a maggid. "What's your name?" he asked suspiciously.

"Uh. Um. My name?" Rav Elimelech stammered, unwilling to lie but also very much wanting to keep his identity a secret. "I'm a maggid. This is

the way I earn my livelihood. I travel from place to place and speak to the Jews there. I actually have something really nice on the parshah that I'd like to give over."

"You're no maggid," the gabbai responded bluntly. "Go make someone else crazy. I have other things to do."

"No, I really am a maggid," Rav Elimelech tried to insist. "I'll say my speech, inspire the people to do teshuvah, and earn my fee."

The gabbai didn't bother responding. Very deliberately, he turned back to the shul's ledgers open before him.

Avner, the gabbai's eight-year-old son, was observing from the sidelines and decided to intervene. Taking his father aside, he whispered, "This man seems to need the money. So what if the people will laugh at him? So let them laugh! He's an old man, his clothing is torn. Let him say a few words; either it will be inspiring, or it won't. He'll earn his fee, he'll be happy, and you'll have given tzeddakah in the most respectable way possible."

"It's not like that," his father tried explaining. "If I bring that kind of person up to the bimah, the people will think I went nuts."

"You'll explain to them afterward that he was a poor man, and you were trying to help him," Avner countered.

"You've convinced me," the gabbai said, heaving a sigh of defeat. "Whatever happens, happens, but don't say I didn't warn you." With another sigh, he turned back to Rav Elimelech and informed him that the shul would be accepting his offer to deliver a speech.

"I'm prepared," Rav Elimelech responded. "I'm even ready to speak right now."

“That won’t be necessary,” the gabbai assured him. “I’ll hang up signs that a talmid chacham is speaking tonight, and hopefully there will be a large showing.”

That evening, the shul was crammed with people. They filled the rows and aisles expectantly, waiting to hear the pearls of wisdom from the visiting talmid chacham. Puzzled glances were exchanged throughout the room as a man with worn, tattered garments ascended to the bimah.

Rav Elimelech took his place behind the podium and looked around. His piercing gaze roved up and down the crowd as he treated each man individually to a stare. He sniffed, then sniffed again. Three minutes had passed, and he had still not said a word.

From the sidelines, Avner felt his face warm. He had convinced his father to allow the beggar to speak, but now it seemed that his father had been correct in initially refusing him. The supposed maggid was standing silently at the bimah, sniffing the air loudly and staring into the audience.

Jumping off his bench, he approached the bimah. “Reb Maggid,” he whispered. “The people are waiting to hear what you have to say.”

Reb Elimelech looked down his nose at the young boy. “I would like to begin speaking,” he announced loudly in response, his voice audible in every cranny of the room. “But I can’t, because it smells. It smells terribly! This odor is really offensive, and I can’t speak this way!”

Avner took a step back, looking at him with fresh eyes. Was the man crazy? There was no smell, not as far as he could tell. He saw the townspeople shaking their heads. No one, it seemed, knew what the maggid was talking about.

But the beggar behind the bimah continued complaining loudly about the terrible odor in the town. He went on and on, his language becoming more colorful, until the audience could not tolerate the foul language any longer.

“He’s no maggid,” someone declared, standing up. “This one’s a fraud.”

“Get him!” someone else yelled.

As the crowd surged forward, Rav Elimelech turned and fled. The people were hot on his heels. They chased him out of the shul and through the streets, weaving in and out of alleyways around the entire town.

He continued running with youthful energy, slowing slightly to allow the panting crowd to keep up. Suddenly, he stopped beside a nondescript door and banged on it loudly. Their curiosity aroused, the people paused to check what was happening inside that home. To their shock, they discovered two young Jews, who had strayed from the Torah path, preparing for a robbery.

Had they not been caught, the robbery would have been a major chilul Hashem and would have caused many problems for the entire Jewish community. With his trademark love for his fellow Jew, the Noam Elimelech had dealt with the problem as only he could, calling the people’s attention to rotten apples in their midst before the damage could be done, all without revealing his identity.

Belatedly, however, the people realized that the ‘beggar’ was no simple Jew, but an extraordinary tzaddik. Still, they were occupied with dealing with the two would-be thieves and the ‘maggid’ was momentarily forgotten about.

Eight-year-old Avner, however, did not understand all the goings-on. All he knew was

that the poor beggar had tried to earn eight coins and would now be left with nothing. As Rav Elimelech slipped away in the midst of the tumult, he ran after him.

“Sir, please wait,” the young boy called breathlessly as he tried to keep up with Rav Elimelech’s brisk pace. “Wait!”

Rav Elimelech stopped and turned around. “How can I help you?” he inquired.

“I wanted to give you... this,” the boy responded, still panting for breath. He held out a clammy hand. There were eight coins nestled inside. “You wanted to give a speech,” he explained. “The people chased you out, but I want you to have the money.”

Rav Elimelech put an arm on the boy’s shoulder.

“My child, that is very nice of you, but where did you get the money from?”

“My father is rich,” Avner explained. “He gives me an allowance every day. This is some of my pocket money. I want you to have it. You wanted to give the speech; it’s not your fault that it didn’t work out.”

Rav Elimelech stood there in silent disbelief, awed by the young boy’s sensitivity and generosity.

Mistaking the silence for dismay, Avner added, “I want to give you even more, because you were shamed.” Another three coins were withdrawn from his pocket, joining the others on his outstretched palm.

“Thank you, but that’s okay,” Rav Elimelech assured him. “The regular fee for a maggid’s speech is more than enough.”

Avner dropped eight coins into the tzaddik’s hand. “Thank you for agreeing to take the money,” he said sincerely. “It makes me very happy to be able to pay you.”

“My child, how should I bless you?” Rav Elimelech asked emotionally. “What can I bless you with in return for your kindness?”

Avner smiled bashfully. “I’ll be happy with whatever you bless me with.”

Rav Elimelech placed his hands over the young boy’s head and closed his eyes. “I promise you that one day we will be mechutanim. One day, we will be related.”

Avner wasn’t sure how to react to such a brachah. He looked at the man before him, dressed in pauper’s attire, and shrugged. “Thank you,” he said politely.

Rav Elimelech kissed him on the forehead and wished him much success in Torah and yiras shamayim. “And may you merit to continue in your father’s ways, to continue his good deeds,” he added. “May you be blessed with much wealth.”

Avner thanked him and they parted.

The years passed. The holy rebbe Rav Elimelech passed away, and Avner grew from a boy to a man. He was blessed with much wealth, which he used for noble causes, and established himself as a mainstay of his community.

When his daughter was old enough for shidduchim, the matchmakers descended upon him from all sides. Everyone, it seemed, wanted the refined daughter of such a giving and kindhearted man such as Avner. Her father weeded and weeded, and eventually, she got engaged to a prince of Torah.

Her chassan, who hailed from a home steeped in Torah and chassidus, was a grandson of the esteemed Apter Rav. The chassan was a prince, a talmid chacham with excellent middos, and he had shining yichus to boot. The holy Noam Elimelech himself, though no longer living, was one of his esteemed grandfathers.

Their wedding was attended by seventy famous rebbes of the generation, including the Chozeh of Lublin and the Yid Hakadosh. Each had come out of respect for the chassan's grandfather, the Apter Rav. The dais was packed with rebbes discussing divrei Torah.

Avner sat in the center of the dais, near his new son-in-law. He was glowing, floating on a cloud of joy that he, a simple Jew with no famous ancestry, had merited such a pious chassan from such an esteemed family. Just as he pondered this fact for the umpteenth time, the chassan's grandfather turned to speak to him.

"You know that our chassan is a grandson of the rebbe Rav Elimelech," the Apter Rav began. "How did you merit this shidduch? In what merit did you achieve this?"

Avner puckered his forehead. "Well," he said slowly. "I'm not sure myself. Perhaps it is because of the hachnasas orchim that I do? Or the tzeddakah that I give?"

His mechutan turned his nose in dismissal. "No, that's not it. There are many people who do hachnasas orchim and give charity. It has to be something else."

"I really don't know," Avner replied in confusion. He began to relay a few anecdotes that had happened to him. Perhaps his response to those situations had earned him this special merit?

The Apter Rav didn't think so. "Tell me more," he requested.

Avner felt uncomfortable enumerating his mitzvos. "I can't think of anything else," he mumbled, his face turning a deep shade of red.

"Perhaps you did something as a child?" the Apter Rav pressed.

Avner pursed his lips. "Now that you mention it, when I was eight years old, I once gave a poor man eight coins. He asked to speak, like a maggid, because he wanted to earn the fee, but he was no maggid." In a few short sentences, he pieced together the fragmented story of the long-ago memory.

"How did the man look?" the Apter Rav asked.

Avner closed his eyes and tried to put himself back into his eight-year-old shoes. He pictured the shul of his youth, crowded with townspeople, and then the chase through the streets of the village. Hesitantly, he described for the Apter Rav the pauper's appearance. "At least that's how I remember him now," he added apologetically. "It's been many years..."

Hearing the description, the Apter Rav grew pensive. The man Avner had depicted sounded just like the holy Noam Elimelech.

"He blessed me," Avner said slowly, understanding dawning. "It was strange. He was just a beggar, or so I thought, and so I didn't take it seriously. But he blessed me that the two of us would one day become mechutanim."

The Apter Rav smiled. "The man you met was no beggar, but the rebbe Rav Elimelech himself," he explained. "Now I understand why you merited this shidduch. It was the kindness of your youth and the blessing of the holy rebbe that stood in your favor."

The actions that a person, even a child, does in his lifetime often seem small and insignificant,

perhaps even childish. However, even though one may never see the effects of his actions, everything we do has ripple effects for years to come.

As the night wore on, Avner danced with unflappable joy, surrounded by a sea of Chassidic leaders. He was just a simple Jew, but he was entering a family of Torah royalty, testifying to the power of just one small act of kindness.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A212

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