

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Sacrifice and Salvation ***Part 1***

When the poverty that was the only reality in Eastern Europe became too much for the Sender family to bear, they made the difficult decision to emigrate to America, the land of diamond-studded streets and golden bridges. It was during the nineteen-twenties, and news of the magical land was trickling over to the tiny village where they lived. In America, they hoped, they would be able to live peacefully, without worrying about how to pay for their next slice of bread or where to obtain firewood on credit with which to heat their home.

Their small family of five set out on a rickety ship: Mr. Sender, Mrs. Sender, their five-year-old twins, and Zaidy, Mrs. Sender's elderly father. The voyage was long and difficult, consisting of storms and seasickness. Finally, after many weeks, they docked at Ellis Island and were

welcomed as immigrants to the land of the free. They settled on the Lower East Side in a crowded tenement building.

They very quickly realized that unlike common lore, the streets of New York were not lined with dollar bills, free for the taking. They had heard all about the unbelievable opportunities available in America, unequal to anywhere else in the world, but their experience taught them that it was not as easy as those tales had made it sound.

In fact, the Senders often felt that their new life was significantly more difficult than it had been back in Europe. The only available jobs were in sweatshops, where one was made to work for eighteen hours a day at a token salary that barely covered even the most basic necessities. Even these jobs weren't steady, since if someone wanted to remain Shabbos observant, he needed to find a new sweatshop to work in every Monday.

Between Mr. Sender and Mrs. Sender, they brought in enough money to pay their rent and buy simple food, but life was very difficult. Each Friday, they were fired from their jobs again, living in desperate uncertainty until they found more work the following Monday. Life was not easy.

Zaidy, Mrs. Sender's elderly father, would sit by the table in their tiny apartment, learning from his gemarah. "Chana," he would constantly tell his daughter, "We made a mistake in coming here. There's no future here. I don't have the strength to make the trip, but go with your husband and children back to Europe. Go back. This is not a life."

Each time he brought up the topic, Mrs. Sender would sigh. "You're right," she would agree, coming to sit beside her father. "There's no future in yiddishkeit here, and life is incredibly difficult.

But I'll never go back and leave you here yourself."

Various versions of this conversation took place in the months since their arrival, and they became almost routine.

After many weeks, Mr. Sender finally found a job that allowed him to work on Sunday instead of Saturday. While having steady employment was a relief, life did not get easier. Mr. Sender needed to be at the sweatshop at seven in the morning, and he did not return home until very late at night. Soon, he stopped davening with a minyan. It was just too difficult, being that he spent all of his waking hours at work.

One morning, Mr. Sender awoke with a pounding headache and a bad cough. His wife begged him to take the day off, but he explained that they could not afford to lose the day's wages. "I'll drink a tea and I'll be fine," he assured her as he prepared to leave for work.

Mrs. Sender watched him go, a doubtful expression on her face. He really did not look well enough to do physical labor for so many hours. With a shrug, she began chopping vegetables for a nourishing soup. She left for her own job an hour later, the soup bubbling on the fire. When she returned from her part-time job, she planned on bringing her husband a container of hot soup. If he needed to work while he was sick, the least she could do was bring him soup.

That afternoon, she walked the long blocks to her husband's workplace, a basket containing a small pot of steaming soup swung over her arm. She entered the sweatshop and asked for her husband. "You're looking for Sender?" an industrious looking man asked her, not glancing up from his work. "Second floor, back room."

Making her way up the narrow, creaking stairs in the dim lighting, a small smile played on Mrs.

Sender's wan face. She pictured her husband's delight at seeing her, at the soothing relief that the soup would bring him, and she hurried forward to the end of the hallway.

Entering the stuffy room hesitantly, she glanced around at the many heads bent over their work. Where was her husband?

"Chana!" a voice suddenly called, and she saw her husband stand up from his seat.

She walked toward him, holding the small pot of soup, and then her blood froze. Her husband was bareheaded.

"Where is your yarmulke?" she asked quietly, dismay coloring her words black.

Mr. Sender's hand instinctively rushed to his hair, and he colored. "Well, uh... ahem." Clearly embarrassed, he cleared his throat and tried again. "My boss doesn't let me wear it," he finally admitted. "Says its bad for business. I'm sure it's fine; it's not like it's a dioraysa or anything... And of course, I put it back on the second I leave work."

His wife was speechless. With tears streaming down her face, she set down the pot of soup and fled from the sweatshop. Her walk home was pained. Not her family! Not her husband! How could it be that her refined and pious husband was succumbing to the spiritual wasteland of America?

"What happened, Chana?" her elderly father asked in alarm when she walked into the tiny apartment a few minutes later, her face ashen.

"What's the matter?"

She collapsed into a chair, her tears pouring forth like an endless river. Briefly, she described what she had seen when she had gone to bring her

husband some soup. “I just can’t believe it,” she kept on muttering, over and over. “I just can’t believe it.”

Her father sat there, listening compassionately, not uttering a word.

“Tatte, I want to go back,” she whimpered suddenly, feeling very much like she was a toddler again. “Whatever happens there, happens, but there’s no way I can remain here, in a place where my husband doesn’t even wear a yarmulke!”

They launched into their usual conversation, with Zaidy insisting that she travel with her family back to Europe, and she countering that she would never leave him in America alone.

When Mr. Sender returned home that night, the atmosphere was strained. He had always been too ashamed to tell her about his boss’s demands, but each time he pictured the look of shock on her face when she had seen him earlier that day, he cringed uncomfortably.

On her end, Mrs. Sender was heartbroken that her family had reached this spiritual low, yet she felt she was powerless to correct it. She began to soak her tehillim nightly as she cried over the devastating circumstances her family was mired in. How deeply she regretted their decision to leave their life of poverty behind in Europe! Instead, they had received a spiritual poverty, far worse than she could have pictured back in the shtetl.

Shortly thereafter, the sweatshop where Mr. Sender had worked closed its doors, and he was back to his weekly job hunting. After enjoying a few weeks of steady employment, he found it very difficult to get fired every Friday consistently, and the pressure of providing food for his family weighed on him heavily.

At his next job interview, he negotiated an arrangement where he would work on Sundays in exchange for clocking in fewer hours on Saturdays. While he had never worked on Shabbos before, he felt he had reached the point where he had no choice. As if to appease his conscience, he resolved not to perform any tasks that required actual melachah.

The first Shabbos was the most difficult. He davened early and then conducted a quick Shabbos seudah. Being that he couldn’t take the train to work on Shabbos, he had more than an hour’s walk to his workplace. When he wrapped up the seudah and prepared to leave the house, he couldn’t look his wife in the eye. Staring at the floor, he mumbled that he was going to work, and left hurriedly before she could ask any questions.

Mrs. Sender wept bitterly as she watched her husband walk briskly down the street. What would be with her family? What would her descendants look like? How had it come to this?

“Chana’le, listen to me,” her father called hoarsely from his place at the table. “Take your husband and children and go back to Europe. Don’t worry about me; I can fend for myself. But if you remain, what will be with your generations?! Purchase ship tickets and go back!”

Tears streaming down her face, his daughter shook her head. “I can’t go back myself,” she whispered. “My husband will never join me.”

Things continued to deteriorate after that. Although he had promised his wife, and himself, that he wouldn’t perform outright melachah at work on Shabbos, it did not take long for Mr. Sender to renege on this commitment. His boss threatened to fire him, his colleagues jeered, and he capitulated.

Soon, he no longer tried to hide his sliding mitzvah observance from his heartbroken wife.

The lack of spiritual guidance and proper friends were taking a toll on his thought processes, and he no longer felt the way he had when he had first arrived in this new land. “We’re in America now,” he would defend himself against his wife’s tears. “It’s different here. These things just aren’t done anymore.”

The atmosphere in their home became tense with friction. Mr. and Mrs. Sender each felt worried, hurt, and misunderstood, and soon, they were barely on speaking terms. Every interaction between them became an argument between the old and the Torah way versus the new and the American mentality.

Mrs. Sender began to despair that her generations would remain religious. Each Friday night, she stood before the two tiny flames, her face buried in her hands as she wept for pious children. How she longed for descendants who would follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, clinging to their faith despite the challenges!

Zaidy was equally afraid of the terrible consequences of remaining in America, and he constantly urged his daughter to return to Europe. “If your husband won’t join you, go without him,” he would plead. “My most fervent wish is that your sons grow up to be yarei shomayim, and that can’t happen if you stay. I beg of you, daughter, leave this land, even if it means leaving your husband behind. Your obligation is for the future of your children.”

The painful situation took a toll on Zaidy’s already frail health, and he took to his bed, ill. As the weeks passed, he grew weaker and weaker, until he finally passed away from the heartache. He had a small levayah and was buried in a cemetery in New York. Mrs. Sender sat shivah for a long, agonizing week, as she pondered her family’s current circumstances.

When she got up from shivah, she turned to her husband with an usual resolve in her voice. “You can make your own decision,” she informed him, “But I have already made up my mind. I am returning to Europe, together with our twin sons. I’ll borrow money, do whatever takes, but I refuse to remain here for another week! You’ve already given up Shabbos! Who knows what’s coming next? As the boys’ mother, I can’t allow them to grow up like this!”

Mr. Sender’s face darkened. “Do what you’d like,” he snapped. “But don’t forget that these are my sons too. If you’d like to walk out on us, you are more than welcome to, but you can forget about taking the boys with you. We made a joint decision to bring them here, and unless we decide jointly to send them back, they aren’t going anywhere.”

“How can you say that?” Mrs. Sender cried. “The boys are only seven years old! They need a mother, not a father who spends his life at work! Who do you think will take care of them while you work every single day of the week, Shabbos included?”

Her husband shrugged. “No one is asking you to leave,” he pointed out. “You are more than welcome to stay and watch them yourself. But if you go back to Europe, the boys stay here, with me.”

“Absolutely not,” she whimpered. “I’ll never leave my boys behind in this spiritual wasteland. I’m doing this only for their sake! I gave birth to these boys! How dare you decide that they can’t join their own mother? I’m not a terrorist; I’m just trying to save their neshamos, to make sure that they are raised with values that you, too, used to care about!”

“I still care about them,” Mr. Sender tried defending himself. “But you have to understand

that things are different here. This is not Europe. You can't expect—.”

“I can expect them to grow up exactly the way our parents raised us, if I take them back to Europe,” she countered quietly.

“You can't take them, just like that,” he protested. “I'll never see them again! Listen, let's compromise. You can take Zelig with you back to Europe, and I'll keep Ahron here. How does that sound?”

“You are trying to destroy the family!” Mrs. Sender accused tearfully. “How can you suggest splitting the twins apart?!”

“You are the one destroying the family,” he responded defensively.

“I'm not trying to destroy anything. All I want is to keep their yiddishkeit intact!”

Mr. Sender looked surprised. “You don't want a get?”

“Not at all,” she replied, equally surprised by the thought. “In fact, I would be most pleased if you joined me and came back with me to Europe. I don't want to break up our family. I just feel that under the circumstances, I have no other choice.” “Perhaps in a few years, you'll think differently,” Mr. Sender suggested. “You'll see how yiddishkeit is flourishing in America, and you'll realize that this is a place to raise pious children.” She shook her head. “Perhaps, but right now I see no alternative other than going back, together with the boys.”

“Boy, not boys,” he corrected. “You can't just pick up with both of them.”

“Here we go again,” Mrs. Sender sighed.

They argued about it for a long time, with Mrs. Sender insisting that she would not leave without both children, but her husband stood firm. In the end, she agreed to his compromise. She would take only one child along with her.

Two weeks later, she stood at the port, both arms tightly encircling seven-year-old Ahron. “I'll miss you,” she murmured, pressing her tearstained cheek to her young son's. “Please, remember to stay true to Hashem and His mitzvos. Keep your yiddishkeit intact!”

Mr. and Mrs. Sender gazed at each other for a long moment, each wondering when they would ever see each other again. Mrs. Sender beseeched her husband to raise Ahron as they would have in the shtetl. Once more, they promised each other to remain loyal to the bond they had forged beneath their chuppah, to keep their marriage intact despite the physical distance between them. One day, they pledged, they would reunite.

From the deck of the ocean liner that would bring her back to Europe, Mrs. Sender stood, one hand tightly clutching Zelig's as she waved and waved until she could no longer see her husband and Ahron.

The journey, while physically uncomfortable, was emotionally excruciating for the young mother. She thought constantly about the son she had left behind, worried about his future and even about his present. He was such a young child!

However, gazing at Zelig, she would remind herself of the spiritual dangers lurking in America. I'm doing this for Zelig, she would tell herself, over and over. Had I remained, I would have lost them both. At least now, Zelig has a chance.

After a long and difficult journey, she and Zelig arrived at the shtetl they had left just three years earlier. The townspeople were shocked to see

them. It was unheard of for someone who had reached the golden land of America to return to their backwater village, where poverty was a fact of life and pogroms were a reality.

“It’s better to die here as a Jew than to live as a gentile in America,” Mrs. Sender told her disbelieving neighbors, describing how difficult it was to cling to yiddishkeit in the land of the free.

Someone found her a small one-room apartment, and as soon as she was settled, she immediately enrolled Zelig in the local cheder. To pay for food, heat, and Zelig’s tuition, she began to clean other people’s homes. The work was degrading and the pay was minimal, but she was grateful to be able to raise her son in the ways of his fathers.

Each morning, as she walked with Zelig along the dirt paths leading to his cheder, she would speak of the tremendous sacrifices she had made to enable him to learn. “I gave up my husband,” she would say. “I gave up my son Ahron. I gave up the peace of mind that comes with not having to fear the gentile neighbors. I gave up everything, for you, Zelig! I’m working as a cleaning lady so that you can become a talmid chacham. Shteig, Zelig, shteig! You will be the one who will continue our family tree.”

At night, Zelig would often cry himself to sleep. He was a living orphan, with a father across the vast ocean whom he fathomed he would never see again. His twin brother, too, was an unimaginable distance away. Still, he was determined to live up to his mother’s expectations, to make her sacrifices worthwhile. He threw himself into his learning with zeal and enthusiasm.

They lived together in their tiny, one-room apartment for five years as Zelig made tremendous strides in his learning. His mother shed tears of joy as she watched him swaying over his mishnayos and then gemarah. The nachas she

reaped from Zelig’s spiritual growth sweetened the difficulties of her lonely and difficult life.

When Zelig was twelve years old, Mrs. Sender sent him off to learn in yeshiva. Ensnared in the yeshiva environment for weeks at a time, she hoped he would grow even more in his learning. Her loneliness intensified, but she did not care. Zelig was becoming a talmid chacham, and that was all that mattered to her.

For the next five years, Zelig grew and matured, and his grasp of Gemarah was strengthened. Whenever things got rough, he reminded himself of his mother’s mesiras nefesh for his sake, and that was enough help him get through it intact. By the time he hit his seventeenth birthday, he was already an accomplished talmid chacham, the light of his mother’s life.

It had been ten years since Mrs. Sender had left her life in America behind and returned to Europe with her young son. Ten years of loneliness and difficulty, ten years of growth and sweet nachas. In those ten years, new winds began blowing across Europe, menacing winds of hate and evil. Danger was lurking.

Most Jews had nowhere to go. They had been living in their hometowns for generations and would not be scared away by the rhetoric of a madman in a nearby country. For Mrs. Sender, however, it was different. She did have a place to flee to—America, where her husband and son, whom she had not seen in ten years, awaited.

The news from America had begun to sound more positive spiritually, with yeshivos opening and small, Torah-true communities forming. Mrs. Sender began to seriously entertain thoughts of returning to America and reuniting her family. One day, as she flipped through her calendar, she noted that her father’s yartzeit was only a few months away. Her heartrate began to quicken. How she longed to be at his grave on the day of

his yartzeit! Zaidy had been the force behind her decision to leave the spiritual desert of America behind. She owed Zelig's success to him!

Making up her mind, she sat down and composed a letter to her beloved son in yeshiva. In it, she described her concerns regarding the political situation in their country and her great longing to reunite the family after so many years apart. She explained that she wanted to set sail as soon as the current yeshiva zman ended so that she would make it to America in time for Zaidy's yartzeit. She ended the letter by beseeching her son to speak to his rosh yeshiva for permission to return to America together with her.

To her immense joy, Zelig's rosh yeshiva advised him to join her on the journey away from the suddenly perilous European continent. Mrs. Sender immediately purchased ship tickets and began selling her few meager possessions. The bittersweet mixture of anticipation and apprehension became a familiar feeling in the weeks leading up to her departure. Who knew what kind of husband and son awaited her in far-off America?

When the ship finally set sail, she and Zelig aboard, they looked very different from the pair who had made the journey back to Europe ten years earlier. She was older, with a bent back and aching limbs. Zelig was tall and broad-shouldered, with a straggly beard and tzitzes dancing on either side of his waist. They weathered the stormy trip stoically, their minds constantly thinking about the remainder of their family.

What would Mr. Sender and Ahron be like? How had their years in America affected their yiddishkeit? Was there any hope for the family's reconciliation?

To be continued....

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A337

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סיפורי צדיקים

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

The Police Chief Part II

RECAP: A gentile police officer hit his head and died outside of a Jewish home in Prague after serving as a 'Shabbos goy'. At the Maharal's behest, the police chief assisted the Jews in covering up the story to prevent a pogrom against the entire Jewish community. A few weeks after the incident, the police chief visited the Maharal and revealed that he, too, was a Jew.

The police chief began his story. "Many years ago, I lived in a city a few miles from here. I came from a very wealthy and Torahdik home, and I married a modest and pious girl from a similar kind of family. About a year after we married, we were blessed with a beautiful little boy. Life was wonderful, and we constantly thanked Hashem for the blessings he showered upon us.

"My father had a brother who settled in Amsterdam. One day, my father received a letter from the government of Holland informing him

that his brother had passed away. Being that my uncle did not have a wife or children, my father was next-of-kin, and he was to receive his brother's money and property. While my father was wealthy, my uncle was doubly so, and this inheritance was a tremendous amount of money.

"My father was already elderly, and it was too difficult for him to travel all the way to Amsterdam to claim the inheritance. He asked me to travel in his stead. I, however, was reluctant to leave my wife and son, now a chubby toddler of three, behind. Holland was completely foreign to me, and I was uncomfortable traveling to a place in which I could not speak the language and did not know a soul.

"My father, however, did not let me off the hook so easily. There was a very significant amount of money on the line, and he did not want to forfeit it. He understood my concerns but felt that it was still worthwhile to travel to Amsterdam, promising me a nice cut of the inheritance as a reward for my trouble.

"Although my whole being rebelled against the idea, this was a request from my father, and as a frum Jew, my father's will was my command. I reluctantly bid goodbye to my wife and precious little boy and headed off for Holland. Other than my tefillin and a small amount of cash, I did not take much with me.

"The journey took about three weeks. I reached Amsterdam in the evening, and stopped off at a hotel to stay in overnight. It seems that there was a major fair taking place in the city that day, and so the hotels were all exorbitantly priced. I shelled out the steep fee and was provided with a room on the third floor. Exhausted from my long journey, I fell asleep almost immediately.

"Suddenly, I heard screams. Panicked, desperate, bloodcurdling screams. I sat up in bed and squinted. It took a moment for the sleep to fade from my conscience. The I began to realize that

the cries were coming from within the hotel. ‘Jump!’ people were yelling. ‘Jump from the windows!’

“The unmistakable smell of smoke hit my nostrils, and I realized that the hotel was burning. A burning ball of fire burst into my room, and without stopping to ponder what I was about to do, I opened the window and jumped from the third floor window.

“The next thing I knew; I was lying in a hospital bed. There was a Dutch Jew sitting at my bedside, and he explained to me that I had suffered a concussion from my freefall. I had broken several ribs and the bones in both of my legs. Not being able to speak Dutch, having a Jew around made me feel safe and taken care of. The man, who introduced himself as Zev, committed to come back every day to spend time with me until I got better.

“My recovery was slow and painful. I was very weak and being far away from my loved ones, compounded the difficulty. Zev’s daily visits were a genuine lifesaver. They gave me a reason to wake up each morning and filled me with vitality. I knew that if not for his presence, my chances of survival would have been rapidly diminished.

“After a few weeks in the hospital, I confided in Zev about the reason for my journey to Amsterdam. I lamented that after all the difficulty I’d been through to come to Amsterdam, I couldn’t even move my legs, let alone deal with government bureaucracy in laying claim to the inheritance left by my uncle. Zev promised to come to my aid and assist me with the process.

“Later that day, he returned to my hospital room with a lawyer. They had me sign documents authorizing Zev to deal with claiming the inheritance on my behalf, and I complied immediately, grateful for Zev’s kindness. That night, I slept well for the first time in weeks. The

burden that I had shouldered since leaving my family was now being managed by my new and capable friend.

“The trouble started shortly after that. Zev informed me that while my uncle had indeed left all his assets to my father, his wife had sued the court, upset that she had been left out of the will. She wanted half the money. I was very taken aback to hear this. ‘How can that be?’ I asked Zev. ‘My uncle never married. He never had a wife.’

“Zev looked at me strangely. ‘Are you sure?’ he asked. ‘There’s most definitely a woman insisting that she was his wife. She even has documents to prove it.’

“The next court date was scheduled for a few weeks later, and I pushed myself in my physiotherapy sessions, hoping to be well enough to make it to court in person. When the day finally arrived, I was given permission to leave the hospital for a few hours, and Zev pushed me in a wheelchair to the courthouse. His friend, the lawyer, joined us as well.

“From the spectator benches, we watched as the woman’s lawyer represented her side, explaining that she had been married to my uncle for many years and deserved fifty percent of the inheritance. Right away, I could tell she was lying. There was something about her that rang of falsehood. Zev, to the contrary, seemed convinced by her story, and he tried to bring me around to his point of view.

“When the judge called a recess, I wheeled myself over to the woman and introduced myself as my father’s son. ‘As far as I know, my uncle never married,’ I told her, point blank. She just shrugged in response. ‘You must be my nephew, then,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure why you were never aware of me, but your uncle and I married many years ago, although we never had children.’

“I rolled my wheelchair back to my seat, mulling over her words. While she sounded convincing, her eyes were glittering with greed. A sixth sense told me that someone had hired her to play this role, probably in exchange for a percentage of the inheritance if she won the case.

“Shortly thereafter, I noticed Zev’s lawyer huddled with the woman in a corner. They were discussing something animatedly, and the woman kept nodding in agreement with the lawyer’s words. Then, the lawyer approached Zev and the two began whispering together. My instincts shot up to high alert. Had the man I thought to be only friend in this foreign country betrayed me?

“When the session resumed, the woman’s lawyer called on witnesses and presented evidence proving that she had been indeed married to my uncle. The judge subsequently ruled that half the inheritance belonged to her. It was not an insignificant amount.

“Zev commiserated with me about the loss as he wheeled me back to the hospital. ‘It’s infuriating,’ he commented, expressing my very sentiments. ‘But if she’s the wife, then there’s nothing to do. It belongs to her.’

“Just a few days later, a check arrived from the government for fifty percent of the inheritance. I held onto it for a few weeks until I was finally released from the hospital. My first outing after my release was to cash the check at the bank, and that was when I ran into another obstacle. Dutch currency was worthless in my hometown. The inheritance had no value until I exchanged it for other currency.

“Seeing how tired I was, Zev offered to exchange the money for me, and with a niggling sense of foreboding, I entrusted him with the sum. That was the last time I saw the money, or Zev. Both disappeared, along with my uncle’s ‘wife’, no doubt enjoying their stolen treasure while I

suffered the double-edged pain of my friend’s betrayal and the loss of the entire inheritance.

“I was a wealthy man, son of a wealthy man, and married to the daughter of a wealthy man. Yet at that moment, I was trapped in the circumstances of the most destitute of paupers. I had absolutely no money on me, and was forced to beg for charity to pay for my daily bread. I walked and hitched most of the way home, a journey of many weeks, since I did not have the funds to hire a carriage.

“After weeks of traveling, I finally arrived back at my hometown, bearing nothing but the worn clothing on my back and scars all over my body from my midnight escapade out of the third floor window. As I approached the block that I lived on, I felt a fresh burst of life enter my tired limbs and I continued on with renewed vigor.

“And then, standing before me was... home! The large, stately structure that housed my small family stood there, set back from the road, familiar like an old friend. I broke into a run, crossing through the garden. The front door was wide open, which struck me as strange, but I was too excited to pay much attention. I glanced around, and not seeing my wife, made a beeline for our son’s room. There was a small child lying in the bed, and I lifted him up, pressing him close. “Then I stopped short. This was not my son. He was fair where my son was dark, and more importantly, the beautiful payos that graced my own little boy’s face were missing from this unknown toddler. Just as I laid the still sleeping child back onto the bed, three muscular soldiers burst into the room, guns drawn.

“I took a step back in fright as they yelled, ‘Kidnapper! Jew! Kidnapper!’ One of them grabbed me by the shoulders while his partner bound my hands together. I tried protesting that this was my home, but they did not heed my words. I was marched to a military compound, which had been constructed in town during my

lengthy absence, and tried before a military tribunal.

“During the trial, I was accused of attempted kidnapping, not just of any child, but of the son of the captain who had led the conquest of the city. It seems that during the ongoing wars taking place between feuding states, my hometown had been conquered by the other side and my home was repossessed for the family of the captain.

“I tried explaining that the house had formerly been my own, and that I had been out of the country for many months, unaware of the changes that had taken place in my absence. The tribunal, however, opined that kidnapping is kidnapping, and by lifting the child of the captain off his bed, I had committed this very crime. I was sentenced to death through torture.

“I begged for information about my wife and child, but none was forthcoming. I was taken to a room with vicious-looking equipment. Two executioners stood ready, axes in hand. Though I couldn’t fathom how I had ended up in this situation, I knew my end was near.

“I was bound, hand and foot, and laid across the floor. My executioner wielded his menacing axe, lifting it high above me and readying himself to bring it down with a crashing blow. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for death.

“Suddenly, the door opened. A priest walked in, dressed in flowing black robes. ‘Don’t kill him!’ he called out. ‘I want to offer him a chance to live, not only in this world, but for eternity!’ He approached me with a warm smile. ‘If you agree to become a Catholic, you will be completely exonerated. If not, you die now.’

“I felt disgusted by his false smile. ‘Absolutely not!’ I cried with a strength I did not even know I possessed. I was born a Jew and I will die a Jew! I will never renounce my faith!’

“The priest turned purple with rage and he kicked me with his shoe. ‘Kill him!’ he commanded, folding his hands and stepping back to watch. ‘Give this Jewish dog what he deserves! Kill him!’

“All those present in the room began to echo his words. ‘Kill him, kill him,’ they chanted. “Give the dog what he deserves!’ I lay there, unable to move, as the executioner lifted his axe again to the rhythm of their hateful words. Then I fainted in terror.

“When I awoke, I found myself laying on a bed. Half a dozen priests surrounded me, all smiling. ‘Congratulations,’ they exclaimed when they noticed that I was awake. ‘You’ve joined our religion! What a wonderful move!’

“I looked at them in astonishment, shaking my head from side to side. I had done no such thing! What were they talking about? As I lay there, stunned into silence, they began throwing water at me as part of my conversion ceremony. I wanted to protest, but I couldn’t utter a word.

“Then the friendly atmosphere turned menacing. A high-ranking army officer joined the semi-circle around my bed, his face stern. ‘We’ve done our homework,’ he informed me. ‘We know exactly who you are and who your family is. We know that you are intelligent and brave, exactly the kind of person we were looking for to fulfill a vacant position in the army’s intelligence unit. But consider yourself warned. One bad move, and we kill your wife and child.’

“I finally found my tongue. ‘My wife!’ I cried. ‘My son! Where are they?’

““We know where they are,” he snapped. ‘You want them to live? Follow orders and don’t try to be foolish. If you escape from here, your small little family won’t be waiting to greet you.’ He made a cutting motion across his neck, emphasizing his words.

“I was trapped. There was no way out. If I dared to defy my captors, the lives of those dearest to me were at stake. From that day on, I played my role to perfection. On the outside, I was a non-Jew, working for the army and consistently being promoted to higher and higher positions. Inside, however, I remained true to my faith.

“When the war was over, I was hired as the chief of police for the Prague police department. My former captors have relaxed their vigil over me somewhat, but my actions are still being monitored constantly. Despite the difficulty, I continue on only because I know that I am saving the lives of my wife and son, who is by now a grown man.”

When Moshe concluded his unfortunate tale, there were telltale tears in the corners of his eyes. “Rebbi,” he said, his voice low and serious. “I saved the entire Prague community from a terrible pogrom. Now it’s my turn to ask for a favor.”

“What can I do for you?” the Maharal asked.

“Who is going to say kaddish for me?” Moshe asked plaintively. “I gave up my life to save my family, to save the Jewish community of Prague. But who will be there to say kaddish for me?! I want the community to say kaddish for me! Let an extra kaddish be recited each year after kol nidrei, for me.”

The Maharal nodded. “I promise that from now on, we will institute a new minhag in Prague. We will say an extra kaddish, for you, after kol nidrei every year.”

Moshe began crying. “Rebbi, rebbi! What will be with me? Will I ever get out of this trap? Is there hope for me?”

The Maharal began crying along with him, long and bitter sobs. “I want you to know,” he told the pained Jew through his tears, “in the end, Hashem will bless you, and you will die as a Jew! You’ll

be a ben olam habah. One day, you will be able to do a proper teshuvah, and your wife and son will be protected as well.”

Moshe thanked the Maharal profusely. Donning his police cap, he left the house.

True to his word, the next Yom Kippur, the Maharal recited an additional kaddish especially for the police chief. The years marched on, and the minhag became ingrained in the Prague community. The extra kaddish was there to stay.

Many years passed. The Maharal grew older and frailer. One Friday night, the Maharal went to shul for kabbalas Shabbos and maariv. To the eternal puzzlement of the other congregants, he recited Mizmor Shir Liyom Hashabbos twice. When he attempted to make kiddush at home, his hands trembled violently and tears streamed down his face. It was obvious to his family that something was wrong.

When the seudah was over, the Maharal asked his grandson to call the Kli Yakar over. Known by the name of his famous sefer, the Kli Yakar was the Maharal’s closest disciple. Closeted in a room alone, the two gedolim spoke for many hours. The following morning in shul, the Maharal announced that he had designated the Kli Yakar to lead the community after his death.

Shortly thereafter, the Maharal passed away. His grieving disciple, the Kli Yakar, assumed his duties.

One year, on Yom Kippur evening, after the extra kaddish was recited, a man walked into the shul. White-haired and dignified, he wore an official-looking cap and a cape. People began whispering, turning around to stare.

“There’s a non-Jew who just entered the shul,” someone informed their rov, the Kli Yakar.

“What should we do?”

The Kli Yakar was quiet for a moment, lost in his thoughts. “Bring him forward,” he replied. “Bring him closer.”

The man was ushered to the front of the shul, where the Kli Yakar greeted him with a warm smile. At the rov’s behest, he was given a seat of honor in the front of the shul and was provided with a tallis and a machzor. As the mysterious man sobbed throughout Maariv, the people’s curiosity grew. Who was this man?

After davening, all the congregants filed passed the Kli Yakar and received his blessing. At the end of the line came the white-haired man. “Rebbi, may I speak with you for a few moments?”

“With pleasure.” The Kli Yakar ushered him into a side room and turned to face him. “I know who you are. You are Moshe, the chief of police.”

“Yes,” Moshe replied.

“The Maharal told me, before he passed away, that you would come back. He told me you would come back on Yom Kippur,” the Kli Yakar continued.

Moshe began to cry. “Rebbi, I am back. Today is Yom Kippur. What will be with me? My life is nearly over. My years are gone. The only thing I have to show for my life is the kaddish, the extra Kaddish in Prague. Will Hashem ever forgive me?”

The Kli Yakar put his arm around the weeping man. “Of course He will. You were being forced against your will to live this way.”

“That’s not the merit I think I’ll be forgiven in,” Moshe said hoarsely. “Rather, there’s a different reason I hope to merit forgiveness. After I had risen in rank in the army, I decided to use my powerful position and connections to track down Zev, the traitor from Holland. He had taken

advantage of me when I was weak and alone, and now that I had regained my power and strength, it was time for me to give that despicable thief what he deserved.

“I succeeded in tracking Zev down and had him brought before me. I reminded him of his terrible deeds, and he began shaking in fright and shame. He hadn’t dreamed he would be caught, and now he feared the retribution he would suffer at my hands. He really did have what to fear. He had terribly wronged a man who now controlled entire divisions of a powerful army. He was sure his end was near.”

Moshe paused and gave a half smile. “But no. I am a Jew, and a Jew does not seek revenge. It took superhuman strength to tell that to him, to feel it inside, but I persisted. I let him go after that one discussion, without penalty, confident that he would never repeat his despicable act. Now, I beg Hashem to forgive me despite my unworthiness, just as I did with Zev.”

The Kli Yakar was extremely moved by Moshe’s words. “Indeed,” he agreed. “In that merit, you will certainly achieve forgiveness. Will you join us tomorrow morning for Shacharis?”

“I don’t plan on leaving,” Moshe admitted. “It’s been years since I’ve been to shul. I plan on remaining here the entire night, doing teshuvah and davening.”

The following day, Yom Kippur, the tzibbur davened like they never did before. Moshe stood among them, wrapped in his tallis, his body racked in sobs. The atmosphere was one of elevation, of purity.

The Kli Yakar decided to honor Moshe with Maftir Yonah. Tears streamed down the police chief’s wizened cheeks as he recited the brachos before and after his aliyah. He could barely believe this was happening to him, a man who had

been trapped in a foreign religion and customs for so many years.

Neilah began and the congregation prepared to accept the yoke of Hashem's Kingship. They squeezed their eyes shut as they yelled "Shema Yisroel!" expressing their total belief that even if a non-Jew would threaten to kill them if they refused to serve his idol, they would willingly die for the name of Hashem. Moshe's voice rose above the others as he cried out his total and complete conviction in the Oneness of his Creator.

This followed by three resounding rounds of Baruch Shem, elevating the people to the level of angels as they made open use of the malachim's praise of Hashem. Moshe's eyes roved heavenward. Baruch Shem Kivod Malchuso L'olam Vaed! Again! And again!

And then came the climax, where the congregation expressed their complete faith in Hashem's mercy and judgement. Seven times over, with increasing fervency and intensity, they pledged their allegiance to the One Who is just and Whose ways are just. Just as Moshe finished screaming "Hashem Hu HaElokim!" for the seventh time, he collapsed.

The crowd surged forward in concern. The medically knowledgeable among them rushed forth to offer aid, but they were too late. Moshe's neshamah had left his body.

The kohanim fled. A murmur swept over the crowd. Moshe's face was covered, and the Kli Yakar stood up to address the congregation. In an emotional voice, he related Moshe's incredible life story to the spellbound mispallelim.

Over his years of estrangement, Moshe's pintele yid had always been alive and flourishing. His dedication and total commitment to accepting Hashem as his master had not faltered. While finally having the opportunity to accept ol

malchus shomayim upon himself, he had actually tasted the meaning of the words he was saying, and his soul simply could not bear the holiness. This precious neshamah merited to leave the world just as he reaffirmed his commitment to serve as Hashem's most loyal servant.

Rosh Hashanah is approaching. Unlike Moshe, we are fortunate to be able to live freely as Jews. As we say the tefillos on this awesome day, let us try to put ourselves into the words, to really feel them, and in that way, may we be zoche to truly crown Hashem our King.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A182

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