

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Shabbos in Siberia

My older brother, R' Paysach Krohn, has merited to write many books that were well-received in the Jewish world, such as The Maggid Speaks series, and Around the Maggid's Table. The following is a story from Around the Maggid's Table which I read recently.

The Second World War broke out when Reb Tuvia Goldstein was in his teens. Finding himself on the Russian side of the ever-changing borders, he was sent off to Siberia for difficult labor. With anti-Semitism rampant in Russia, the Jews were always given the harshest treatment. In Siberia, too, they were assigned the most difficult slave labor.

Dressed in his threadbare clothing so unsuited to the harsh winters in the Siberian taiga, Reb Tuvia and his unit of twelve men were forced to chop down trees with rusty handsaws. This dangerous

work, minimal daily rations, and bitter weather ensured a very high death rate amongst the slave laborers. As the war dragged on, conditions in the Siberian labor camp grew worse and worse.

Reb Tuvia's unit was assigned a large area in the woods that they were to completely clear of trees. Within a specified time-frame, they were to turn this forested land into an empty meadow, with not one twig remaining. The timetable wasn't just unrealistic; it was completely impossible. They would need to work day and night in order to get the entire area deforested by the deadline.

Up until that point, these courageous Jews had never desecrated Shabbos, working much harder to fill their quotas in six days instead. Now, however, they realized that it would be simply impossible to meet the deadline without working on Shabbos. Not completing their assignment on time meant certain death, and saving their lives took precedence to Shabbos.

Pained by these circumstances, they decided to avoid as much Shabbos desecration as possible. Since, according to Halacha, if two people perform an action that could have been done by a single individual, it is not considered melachah, they decided to do everything in pairs. They would work fast, but two men together would wield each saw and two men together would pull out each leaf. In this way, they would not be violating any laws outright.

To avoid the prohibition of carrying on Shabbos in a public domain, they resolved to walk no more than four amahs at a time while carrying something. After a second's break, they would lift the object again and walk another four amahs.

When the first Shabbos arrived, the group of Jews arrived at their work detail ready for labor. Their supervisor, a Russian officer, counted them and sent them off to work. Wrapped in a warm fur coat

and puffing on a steaming cigar, he settled down to keep an eye on his men.

The supervisor squinted down the hill at the laboring men in surprise. What was going on? He saw two men lift a small, thin branch and walk a few steps. Then they stopped. Then they walked another few steps and stopped. The officer rolled his eyes. What was this, a show?

Then he noticed another pair of men doing the same thing. They were carrying a larger log, but nothing so heavy that it demanded the muscles of more than one adult man. They, too, kept stopping on their way to deposit the log onto waiting wagons.

Looking around in disbelief, he realized that the entire Jewish unit was operating in this bizarre fashion. Enraged, he stomped his foot and vowed to get to the bottom of this strange behavior. Whatever these men were up to, they were in for a big punishment. No one would sabotage the Russian war effort and get away with it!

That night, the Jewish laborers stumbled into their barracks, exhausted. Since every two men had done the tasks of one, they had worked with tremendous speed to make up for the missing labor. The physical strain was terrible, and they collapsed into bed, grateful the day was over.

Their sleep was short-lived, however. They hadn't even been sleeping for a half-hour when guards burst into the barracks and rounded up the twelve bachurim. Exhausted and terrified, the trembling young men followed their guards out of the barracks. Judgement, they knew, was about to be rendered.

Limbs chattering from the cold, they were led to a large room. A group of Russian officers sat around a large table, and they turned to face the group when they entered. Their expressions were hostile. The bachurim shivered.

Their supervisor stood up. "These men are traitors," he declared. "In the midst of this great national emergency, as our heroes on the front lines fight for the liberty of our entire nation, these comrades have turned the war effort into a jest. Were they asked to stand on the front lines, hiding in trenches and felling the enemy as they risked their own lives on the battlefield? No! Were they ordered to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy? No!

"These young men were dispersed to the safety of the forests, far away from bloodshed and danger. In the comfort of their peaceful surroundings, they were given just one small task to aid our glorious army in vanquishing the enemy. All they were asked to do was clear the area for the army's use."

The supervisor paused dramatically, enjoying his own speech. "Did they do as they were commanded? No! Time is of essence, but these comrades don't appreciate that. I saw today as they worked. For every small, simple task, two men would do it together, stopping very frequently along the way."

He stopped speaking and began demonstrating the way two men together had carried one twig. The other officers burst out laughing at his ridiculous impersonation. "One twig, carried by two grown men, who stopped every few feet," the supervisor roared, laughing along with his friends.

The highest-ranking officer in the room stood up. "Well?" he demanded, wiping the mirth of his face. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

Of all his friends, Reb Tuvia Goldstein had the best command of the Russian language. They nudged him forward to represent them. He racked his brain desperately, trying to think of a plausible excuse, and then decided to admit the truth.

“We are religious Jews,” he began hesitantly. “We have a Torah with 613 laws. We sincerely respect the Russian war effort and feel both honored and humbled to be a part of it. We were merely trying to ensure that we would be following the laws of our Torah while simultaneously preparing the area for the great Russian army.”

“Hmm,” their judge responded, pursing his lips. “I know who gave you the Torah. Someone by the name of Moshe. And Moshe, I heard, was a very smart man.” He gave the Jews a long look. “You expect me to believe that a smart man like Moshe gave you these most ridiculous laws? Really? Two grown men to carry one twig? Preposterous!”

A collective tremor passed over the defendants. They could tell that this would not end well.

“Traitors, that’s what you are!” the officer declared. “A group of lowly traitors, engaged in sabotage against the mighty Russian army.” He gave a thin, cold smile. “I’m sure you are well aware of the punishment that awaits traitors, eh? The firing squad!”

His announcement was met by loud applause as the officers around the table indicated their support for his ruling. Reb Tuvia and his friends began to silently recite vidui.

At that moment, they heard the roar of an engine and then the screeching of tires pulling to a halt. There was the noise of slamming car doors, and then five more Russian officers marched into the room. They were dressed in full uniform, metals glinting in the light, their rank clearly visible on their chests. These were no ordinary officers, but individuals very high up in the army hierarchy.

The other officers immediately jumped to attention, saluting in deference to their superiors.

“At ease,” one of the newly-arrived majors pronounced. “As we passed through the area, something went wrong with our vehicle,” he explained. “We need a place to spend the night until our truck can be repaired tomorrow morning.”

“Certainly, Major, sir,” the officer who had sentenced the Jews to the firing squad replied, saluting. The members of the Jewish unit, pressed silently against the wall, couldn’t help but contrast his submissive attitude to the arrogance he had displayed earlier.

“Have sleeping quarters arranged for us at once, Captain,” the major continued, watching as the captain saluted again and then left the room to carry out his bidding. He glanced around the room and noticed the group of twelve Jews standing against the back wall. “And what are these comrades doing here?” he demanded.

The Russians all looked toward the unit’s supervisor, who look away.

“Sergeant?” the major prompted.

The supervisor launched into the story again, describing how the men had wasted time that day. “They are to be put before the firing squad,” he added.

A second major stepped out from behind the first. “Is that so?” he asked coolly. “I’d like to speak to these men first. Bring them to the next room, where I can speak to them privately.”

“You heard what he said,” their supervisor told the Jews impatiently. “Let’s go, march.”

Reb Tuvia and his friends marched obligingly to the next room, wondering what was waiting for them there. The major followed behind them and shut the door.

They stood silently, facing him.

“A gutte voch,” the major said softly.

They exchanged glances but did not respond, afraid of a trap.

“A gutte voch,” he repeated. “You don’t have to be afraid. I, too, am a Jew. Tell me what happened.”

Realizing that since they were already sentenced to death, they had nothing to lose, the bachurim began explaining what happened. They described how they had managed to keep Shabbos throughout their Siberian exile, and the scheme they had come up with to avoid Shabbos desecration now that they were forced to work on the holy day.

The major smiled, appreciating their logic. “I am a Communist, and no longer religious,” he said slowly. “But I grew up in a religious home. My mother passed away just recently. At her deathbed, she told me that she had no nachas from me since I stopped keeping the mitzvos. She made me swear to her that although I no longer lead a religious lifestyle, I would look out for religious Jews and assist them. I promised her I would do so.

“I never dreamed I would actually come across a situation where a religious Jew would require my assistance, and this is the first time such an opportunity arose. It seems to me that I am bound by my promise to my mother to save your lives.” He grew quiet for a moment, tapping his foot thoughtfully. “Tell me, honesty. Other than Shabbos, do you perform your duties the way you are supposed to?”

“Of course!” the bachurim assured him. “We work extremely hard, harder than anyone. As Jews, our work is scrutinized far more than that of

the other laborers, and we offer everything we have to produce the best results.”

“And I assume you get smaller rations, draftier barracks, and worse conditions in general?” the major guessed.

They nodded vigorously. There was no use complaining, but due to the rampant anti-Semitism among the officers in charge of their division, there was no question that their situation was significantly worse than the non-Jews.

“Let me see what I can do for you,” the major promised.

Rejoining the other officers, he stated his opinion that the members of the Jewish unit were all loyal Russian citizens who gave everything they had toward the war effort. “They work harder than most of our other men, in fact,” he said confidently. “And despite their loyalty, they are treated inhumanely by those in command.

“Their actions today were a genuine attempt to resolve a conflict between their religion and their desire to contribute to the Russian cause. Despite the unusual manner in which they worked, their output equaled that of the other units.”

His raised his voice dangerously. “Shame!” he declared. “Shame on you, for sentencing such loyal citizens to death. Shame on you for attempting to steal loyal workers from our great country. And I ask you, who are the traitors here?!”

He didn’t wait for a response and stomped out of the room, the other four high-ranking officers following him out.

The shaken officers quickly ordered the Jews back to the barracks and rescinded the death sentence. Their hatred for Jews notwithstanding,

they were afraid of the major and did not wish to defy him.

The following morning, before leaving the base with his comrades, the Jewish major arranged for Reb Tuvia and his friends to be transferred to another battalion, where the work was a lot less strenuous and significantly less dangerous.

And that was how Reb Tuvia Goldstein survived his Siberian galus.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A255

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