

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Food for Thought

The skies were calm on the day of that fateful flight, giving no hint as to what was to come. Yaakov leaned back in his seat as the plane glided gracefully through the air. It was his first time flying, and he felt adventurous and excited.

The friction of rolling wheels against the floor caught his attention, and he watched as the stewardess made her way down the aisle with her service cart. She stopped at Yaakov's row, turned to the man sitting beside him. "Kosher meal?" she asked, her hand hovering over the double-wrapped plastic cartons.

"Yes," the man replied in a heavy Israeli accent, his tightly curled peyos swaying as he spoke.

She placed a wrapped meal on the tray before him and then turned to Yaakov.

"I need a kosher meal, too, please" Yaakov said.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we are low on the kosher meals," the stewardess said apologetically.

"What do you mean?" Yaakov asked indignantly. "I can't eat this food. I only eat kosher."

"Are you dati?" she asked in surprise, her eyes raking over his jeans and polo shirt and landing on his head, where a tiny, barely discernable yarmulke was pinned. She hadn't noticed he was wearing a yarmulke.

Yaakov looked stung. "Of course!"

"He's not dati," his Yerushalmi seatmate told the stewardess dismissively in Ivrit. "He can have the regular meal."

"What are you talking about?" Yaakov practically yelled at the man, his face flaming in embarrassment. "You don't even know me."

The man just gave him a pointed look and turned back to the sefer he had been in the midst of studying.

Yaakov gave another huff, though inside, he squirmed with shame. How had it come to this? How had it come to this?

Just a year earlier, he had been studying in yeshiva. True, he had been floundering to survive as the gap between his comprehension and the rest of his classmates' had grown larger every day. He definitely hadn't been the kind who had brilliant kushyos on the Gemara and made siyumim every other week, like his two older brothers.

But how had he reached this point, where a Yerushalmi man sitting next to him was insisting he could eat treif food?

He recalled the day that he had bumped into Shimshon, an old friend of his who had dropped out of yeshiva earlier in the year and held the glamorous position of warehouse stocker.

Shimshon had convinced him to skip seder and visit the warehouse. Against his better judgement, Yaakov had agreed.

Things had spiraled after that. In the warehouse, Yaakov discovered the thrill of operating the electric lift. He felt needed and accomplished after working on transporting boxes to their correct places in the massive building. It was a feeling he hadn't experienced since beginning Mesivta.

The son of accomplished professionals and the youngest of three brothers, Yaakov grew up in the shadow of his family's academic successes. Not having been blessed with the sharp head that everyone else in his family seemed to have inherited, he struggled in school. When he was young, the problems were subtle, but as he transitioned from elementary school to high school, his difficulties grew proportionally.

Mesivta had been one long, frustrating disappointment. No matter how much energy and brainpower he invested, he continued to fall short of his rabbeim's expectations. His parents, noting his test scores with growing dismay, hired tutors to help him keep up, but by then, it was too late. Yaakov had lost interest in fighting to keep pace and seemed to prefer to plod along with the class while not understanding much of what was being taught.

It didn't help that his two older brothers were outstanding talmidei chachamim who shone from amongst their peers without having to invest a quarter of the effort that was required of Yaakov. Both had attended the most prestigious yeshivas in America and overseas. His eldest brother had already snagged an incredible shidduch and was learning in an elite kollel, while his second brother was making the most of his final single years in a top-notch yeshiva, learning with unmatched diligence.

Measured up against brothers like that only increased Yaakov's feelings of failure, and pangs of pain and bitterness cut away at his heart. How he longed to make his father's face light up the way it did when his brothers shared an original Torah thought with him. How he longed to see the pride in his mother's eyes when she returned from parent-teacher conferences with a good report. No matter how much he tried, he simply could not live up to his brothers' name, and after a while, he gave up trying.

He craved success like a drowning man craves air, and he finally achieved the feeling at the warehouse with Shimshon. After that, there was no turning back. He simply could no longer sit in yeshiva, feeling useless, when he could achieve, accomplish, and earn money at the same time working in the warehouse or at a similar occupation.

"Do they have any openings at your job?" Yaakov asked his friend casually as they walked home.

Shimshon stopped walking and turned to face him. "Why? Are you looking for a job?" His voice held a tinge of guilt. "I didn't mean to pull you out of school. Look, being a dropout isn't all it's cracked up to be. Once you leave the system, there's no going back. Stay where you are while you still can. Take it from me."

"Take it from one who's living the good life, free of yeshiva and earning nice money besides, huh?" Yaakov muttered bitterly.

"If I were you, I would stay in yeshiva at least until the end of the year," Shimshon advised, ignoring his comment. "Don't be a loser and leave in the middle of the year. Listen, if you dropped out, I would recommend you to my boss without question, but I still think you should be a man and stick it out a little more."

His words fell on deaf ears. Yaakov had already tasted success and was convinced he would only

experience it again if he left yeshiva and began working. By the time he came home, he was certain of his decision.

At the supper table, he garnered up the courage to broach the topic with his parents. The only child still living at home, it was just the three of them around the table; the ideal time to try. As his mother placed a steaming bowl of vegetable soup before him, he took a deep breath and spoke. "I didn't go to yeshiva today."

"What?" His mother, back at the stove, whirled around in surprise. "You left this morning just like you usually do. Where did you go?"

His father put down his spoon and raised his eyebrows in disapproval, but did not speak, waiting for Yaakov to continue.

The soup was tasteless in Yaakov's sandpaper mouth. He forced himself to take another spoonful. Nervously, he continued, "Remember Shimshon Kaufman? I bumped into him yesterday, and he invited me to visit him at his job. I ended up staying to help him, and I really enjoyed it."

With sparkling eyes, he described the warehouse to his wary parents, explaining how the machinery operated and how the process worked. "I felt..." he searched for the right word. "Alive. I felt alive there, you know? And I realized that yeshiva is just not for me. I'm drowning there."

"Nonsense," his father declared. "True, it's more difficult for you than for your brothers, but if you would invest more effort, you would be successful."

"What about Rabbi Willner?" his mother asked sorrowfully. "I thought you really liked him, that it was working out well."

"It's working out better than my last tutor,"

Yaakov admitted. "But that doesn't mean I'm not failing through yeshiva. I need a tutor to help me keep up with the basics, not to push me to the head of the class. I'm done being a failure."

His parents tried reasoning, threatening, and bribing, but nothing could sway Yaakov. "You're acting like the world is coming to an end," he complained to his mother. "I'm not going off the derech or anything like that. I just need to be in an environment where I can thrive."

"Thrive," she echoed doubtfully, picturing the scene at the warehouse and imagining the company her son would pick up there.

His parents would not give up so easily. They consulted with his rabbeim and the principal; they spoke to rabbanim and professionals. They dragged him to consultations and tutors and mentors. It was only after they had exhausted all their options that they reluctantly consented to Yaakov's leaving yeshiva.

Contrary to their long faces, Yaakov's own face lit up with a brilliant smile, one that they hadn't seen in a long time. For a moment, they wondered if perhaps this was indeed a beneficial idea. Clearly, their son had been unhappy in yeshiva. Then, they reminded themselves that he hadn't even tried it out yet. How Yaakov would flourish outside of the bais medrash walls remained to be seen.

Yaakov returned to the warehouse the following morning and landed a job operating the lift. From the start, he loved the job. He relished the frenetic activity in the warehouse, the camaraderie of his colleagues, and the thrill of making his supervisor happy. His first paycheck, paid the Friday after his arrival, caused a tinkling of contentment in a way that he had never felt before. He got out of bed each day with renewed vigor, feeling more and more energized with the passing of time.

In the beginning, the excitement of a fresh start spilled over into all the areas of his life. His father was pleasantly surprised to see him awake and ready for Shacharis early, and his tefillos were suffused with gratitude for the new, satisfying turn his life had taken. Filled with good will and positive energy, he spent an hour and half in shul each night during those first weeks, cracking his head over a Gemara.

But when a young bachur is out of the spiritual sanctuary of yeshiva, he is all too vulnerable to slipping, and Yaakov was no different. Without the support of his rabbeim and likeminded peers, remaining true to his upbringing became a struggle, an unconscious struggle that he was not even aware of.

With his yeshiva friends on a completely different schedule, Yaakov began spending more time with his warehouse buddies, most of them fellow yeshiva dropouts and others not even that. Their level of mitzvah observance left much to be desired.

Though Yaakov came from a stronger background and wouldn't have dreamed of lowering his standards to match theirs, it happened naturally, without his input and without his noticing.

He missed Minchah once, then twice, then three times. Soon, he was davening Minchah regularly without a minyan in a corner of the warehouse. Maariv in shul was next to go, followed by Shacharis shortly thereafter. From there, he stopped davening Mincha and Maariv altogether. His mumbled Shacharis each morning became incrementally shorter, and tefillin became a suggestion instead of a command.

His mode of dress changed drastically. The typical yeshiva dress code wasn't suitable for a warehouse, and while he had originally thought that the warehouse attire wasn't suitable for after work, he quickly changed his mind. Formal

clothing felt stiff and uncomfortable, and besides, he didn't want to look quite that yeshivish. His hair grew longer, his yarmulke smaller, and his payos all but disappeared.

The weeks and months passed, and soon, it was Elul. While the atmosphere in yeshiva during Elul was solemn and serious, in the warehouse, they focused more on their upcoming vacation. With Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos tripping over each other's heels, they would be off from work more often than not, and it seemed like the prime time to take a vacation.

Yaakov had never davened anywhere but at his father's side during the yomim noraim, but that would now change. He was swept into the excitement of his friends' constant chatter and booked a ticket to Eretz Yisroel together with them. They would be renting an apartment together from before Rosh Hashanah until after Sukkos with an itinerary that included a lot of adventure but the bare minimum spirituality.

The trip began uneventfully. Check-in at the airport was smooth, they boarded on time, and their flight took off without a hitch. Yaakov was seated behind one of his friends and in front of two others, with a fifth across the aisle. Seated beside him was an authentic Yerushalmi man who spent the whole beginning of the flight with his eyes in his Gemara while Yaakov sat beside him watching a movie on the small screen before him. The incident with the kosher meals took place several hours into their flight. Yaakov shifted in his seat and huffed, pointedly ignoring the Yerushalmi man beside him. What right did he have to interfere during his conversation with the stewardess, and to imply that his level of observance was not up to par? He glared at the man, whose eyes were focused on Gemara again. Who did he think he was?!

A short while later, a frum man began walking through the aisles, waking people for Shacharis. The Yerushalmi hurriedly stood up. With a final,

lingering glance at Yaakov, he moved past him to reach his tallis bag stowed overhead.

Yaakov looked away from his seatmate's penetrating gaze, inwardly squirming with shame. Was the man challenging him, his unspoken communication implying that if Yaakov wasn't frum enough to daven with the minyan, he wasn't either frum enough to enjoy a kosher meal from the limited stock available on the plane?

As he watched the Yerushalmi make his way to the back of the plane, lovingly clutching his tallis bag, Yaakov felt an overwhelming sense of regret. He had made sure to pack food, entertainment, and other little comforts in his carryon, but his tefillin had been checked-in together with his other suitcases and was now languishing somewhere in the belly of the plane. Why hadn't he brought the tefillin with him?

One voice within him encouraged him to get up and join the minyan at the back of the plane, even without his tefillin, while a conflicting voice reminded him how conspicuous he would look without tefillin. He deliberated over and over, trying to overcome his self-consciousness, but in the meanwhile, he remained planted where he was in his seat.

The Yerushalmi returned before he reached a decision, effectively ending Yaakov's deliberations. He rolled up his tefillin and kissed them reverently before putting them away. He sat down silently and busied himself with his affairs, ignoring Yaakov.

Relieved, Yaakov opened the thriller he had brought along and immersed himself in its pages. The flight would be over in a few hours. Hopefully, his seatmate would continue to ignore him until they landed, and they would never have to meet again.

The stewardess began serving drinks. "I'm dati," the Yerushalmi reminded her as her hands

hovered over the cans in her cart. She smiled and handed him a drink with a kosher certification.

Turning to Yaakov with a question in her eyes, he opened his mouth to say the same thing, but the Yerushalmi cut him off. "He's not religious," he said with a decisive finality that would have made Yaakov laugh if it wasn't so personally insulting. "I'm telling you, this boy is not dati!"

The stewardess looked from a red-cheeked Yaakov to the determined Yerushalmi and then back at Yaakov, her eyebrows still raised.

"He didn't daven," the Yerushalmi told her, to strengthen his case. "No tefillin, no minyan. You tell me, is that dati?"

Too mortified to defend himself, Yaakov remained silent as she placed a can on his tray. Seething inside, he deliberately turned his back on his seatmate. Why had he checked his tefillin in? What had he been thinking? Regret and shame over his spiritual decline suffused him suddenly, drowning out his anger. How had he fallen so far?!

The rest of the flight was uneventful, a cold silence settling between the two seatmates. Yaakov leaned back and closed his eyes, but sleep would not come.

As the plane touched down in the Israeli airport, the Yerushalmi pulled a pen from his pocket and scrawled something on a piece of paper. He folded down the paper and pressed it into Yaakov's hand. "I love you," he murmured into Yaakov's ear. "I love you."

Confused, Yaakov gave a small smile. The humiliation had still not abated, and he couldn't meet the man's eye. Uncomfortably, he gathered his things and prepared to disembark.

At last, the line began moving and Yaakov got off the plane, eagerly escaping from his seatmate to

rejoin his friends. It was only after they had flagged down a cab and were seated inside that he had time to read the note the man had written.

It was brief, just three lines. It said the man's name, Shloime Berkovitch. Beneath the name was an address and phone number.

Yaakov huffed at the paper and stuffed it into his pocket. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on shelving the entire episode with the man. Then he allowed himself to be drawn into his friends' lively banter. This was his vacation, and he was determined to enjoy it.

He never had to see Shloime Berkovitch again.

They had landed in Eretz Yisroel just a few days before Rosh Hashanah, and Yaakov and his friends had a packed itinerary, determined to make the most of every moment. They toured the old city, rode on camels, and tried out the bulk of Yerushalayim's restaurants. The mood was lighthearted and carefree, and from watching them, no one would have guessed that Rosh Hashanah was around the corner.

One night, Yaakov and his friends were lounging around in their rented apartment, snacking on papitas and beer, when one of them spoke up. "I wish they would accept me into the army," he said, tossing his empty can in a high arc to the garbage can across the room. "Watching the soldiers here, filled with a sense of purpose, I just wish I could grab a gun and fight for the country, you know?"

"Not at all," another boy shot back. "I'd rather fight for myself, thank you very much. I have no interest in dying so young. I say that my life comes first."

"Selfish," the first one taunted. "Why should your life come before the greater good? I don't have Israeli citizenship, but if they'd accept me into the army, I would fight to protect the weak and the

elderly, the women and the children who cannot stand up for themselves."

Yaakov's gaze flicked from one to the other as he followed their heated argument. Who was right? Was it incumbent upon someone to risk his life to protect others? The debate put him in a pensive mood, and he retired for the night thinking about life and death, and whether one's life took precedence over the lives of others.

The following morning was erev Rosh Hashanah. Still in a pensive mood, Yaakov listened with half an ear as his friends made plans, his mind still grappling with weighty matters. He felt so detached from their lighthearted prattle and could not picture himself standing in shul beside them on one of the holiest days of the year.

Fumbling in his pocket, he withdrew the scrap of paper with his Yerushalmi seatmate's name on it. He stared at it for a few moments, pondering his next step. The man had professed that he loved him, and despite his behavior on the plane, Yaakov believed him.

Glancing again at the words scrawled on the slip of paper, he debated whether to call him, and then decided against it. He could barely speak Ivrit, and he had no doubt that the man's family didn't speak English. The language barrier would be too difficult to scale over the phone.

Yom Tov was rapidly approaching, and he had still not decided on a plan of action. His friends got ready for Yom Tov and he automatically did the same. Standing before the mirror, knotting his tie, he leaned forward and spoke to his reflection decisively. "You are going to visit him," he told himself. "Go to the address he gave you and find Shloime Berkovitch."

Emerging from the bedroom, he found his friends standing in a cluster at the door, still joking with each other. "Ready?" they asked him, preparing to leave for shul.

“Uh,” Yaakov said uncomfortably, trying his best to sound nonchalant. “I won’t be joining you guys tonight. I’m spending Rosh Hashanah with... a friend. I’ll meet you after Rosh Hashanah.”

“No prob, whatever you want.” His friends replied agreeably. They rode down the elevator together and split directions outside the building; his friends headed toward a nearby shul and Yaakov walking briskly in the direction of the Yerushalmi’s neighborhood.

Scores of people hurried past him on their way to shul, and he quickened his pace, hoping the Yerushalmi was still home. He found the street easily, but the building was harder to locate. He finally found it, crowded between other ancient buildings, and rushed up the steps.

A kerchiefed woman, presumably Mrs. Berkovitch, answered the door and greeted him in Yiddish. Mustering up a passable Yiddish, Yaakov explained what he wanted.

“Ah, but my husband is in shul,” she replied, speaking slowly so that he would understand. “You are welcome to go there and find him.”

Turning to a pigtailed little girl who couldn’t have been more than five years old, she instructed her, in rapid-fire Yiddish, to accompany their guest to the shul.

Feeling sheepish, Yaakov followed the little girl through alleyways and down winding streets and up a long flight of stairs until she stopped at a nondescript door. “My Totty is in here,” she said shyly.

Yaakov thanked her and opened the door. His heart sank. The room was filled with kittle-clad men wrapped in talleisim. This community, he understood, had the custom of wearing their kittels and talleisim on Rosh Hashanah night. In his dark suit, he stuck out terribly.

Forcing himself to swallow his pride, he approached the first man he saw. “Where is Rabbi Berkovitch?” he whispered in broken Yiddish.

He had hoped the man would offer to call Reb Shloime to the back of the shul, but instead, he took Yaakov’s hand and led him toward the front of the bais medrash to a seated man wrapped in a tallis. He tapped him on the shoulder and gestured at Yaakov.

Reb Shloime Berkovitch jumped up, recognizing his seatmate immediately. A moment later, Yaakov was enveloped in a tight embrace. “You came!” the Yerushalmi exclaimed, sounding genuinely joyous. “You really came!”

One of the Berkovitch sons were dispatched to find Yaakov a chair and another was sent off to bring a machzor. The seats at the Berkovitch table were rearranged so that Yaakov was, once again, seated near Reb Shloime.

He barely had time to digest what had happened when the chazzan began. “Borchu es Hashem Hamevorach!”

A thunderous response rocked the small shul. Yaakov found himself swept into the awesome atmosphere, davening like he had never done before. He wasn’t sure if he was dreaming or awake; the experience felt surreal.

After Hama’ariv Arovim, they began reciting Ahavas Olam. For the first time, Yaakov really concentrated on the words he was reciting. Hashem loves klal Yisroel forever! Despite the pain and suffering a person may experience, he has a loving Father who will never forsake him! Yaakov’s eyes welled up, and the Yerushalmi squeezed his hand.

A wellspring of emotion bubbled up inside of Yaakov. Somewhere deep within, something significant was aroused. And then he began to cry.

He wept and wept, sobbing for his learning disabilities and for the difficulty he had had in yeshiva. He cried for his weak character, ashamed and regretful that he had given up, given in. He wept for the spiritual decline that had happened almost without his noticing.

The congregation moved on, but to Yaakov, nothing existed but himself, Hashem, and the words in the machzor before him. He recited each word, slowly and carefully, tasting each word with a depth and intensity that he had never experienced before.

Shloime Berkovitch stood beside him throughout, allowing Yaakov to clutch his hand as his fingers caressed him softly.

The shul finished the entire Maariv by the time Yaakov began Shemona Esreh. Reb Shloime whispered to his sons to head home and make Kiddush without him. He would remain in shul to wait for Yaakov.

When Yaakov finally finished davening, Reb Shloime sat him down and looked at him with an open, loving expression. Yaakov began to speak. Slowly, he opened up to his Yerushalmi seatmate, describing the suffering he had endured since he was very young due to his difficulties learning. In broken Yiddish, he described the events of the past year and how much he had slipped since then. The unlikely pair, a hardened Yerushalmi and a soft teenager from Brooklyn, connected in that empty shul on Rosh Hashanah night.

When Yaakov finished unburdening himself, he accompanied Reb Shloime to his home. He was seated amongst the pure Yerushalmi children at the simple table and soaked in the authenticity of their Rosh Hashanah seudah.

After an uplifting meal, the Berkovitches invited Yaakov to sleep in their home for the night. Unwilling to leave the pure environment to return to the apartment he had rented with his friends,

Yaakov accepted. He was given a bed in a room crowded with children, but he felt clean. It was the sweetest sleep he'd had in a long time.

The following morning, Yaakov joined his host in the small Yerushalmi shul for Shacharis and Mussaf. Once more, he experienced a davening like never before. This is real, he realized, thinking back to the emptiness that had characterized his life just a few days before. This is how I want to live.

That Rosh Hashanah was the beginning of a new start in Yaakov's life. After yom tov, Reb Shloime connected him with an American-Israeli askan who found him an appropriate yeshiva in Eretz Yisroel. From there, he never looked back. Today, Yaakov resides in Eretz Yisroel where he has established a beautiful family. He is a talmid chacham and an asset to klal Yisroel, forever changed by the love of a single Yerushalmi who cared too much to let a fellow Jew stray.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A354

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