

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 Chesed that Saved the Sukkah

A few centuries back, in a European city that was rife with anti-Semitism, a decree was enacted forbidding the Jews from constructing sukkahs for Sukkos. Of course, this law was cloaked in false safety concerns and building codes and blamed on the danger that the small, feeble huts boded to anyone entering them. However, it was clear that it was a decree born out of sinister intentions and pure hatred against the Jews.

The penalty for defying the no-Sukkah law was harsh: prison, for a long time. With Sukkos drawing closer, it was a threat that hung over the Jewish community like a dark raincloud. The city was not very large, and anyone who would build a sukkah would be easily discovered.

With a heavy heart, the Jews all came to the same conclusion. As much as it hurt them to eat indoors on Sukkos, they had little alternative. Prison

conditions were brutal. It was almost akin to a death sentence. And if the men were to be jailed, their families would be left without a livelihood, and no source of income meant starvation.

The rav of the city, Rav Zecharia, was not afraid of the threatened penalty. What was prison time in comparison to the lofty mitzvah of sukkah? With a will as stubborn as iron and an inner peace as calm as a placid lake, he lovingly constructed a sukkah in his yard. The boards were faded and the wood corroded, but it was a structure that symbolized strength in the face of evil.

Naturally, Rav Zecharia's yard was the first place the authorities searched in their efforts to ensure that the decree was being adhered to throughout the city. They were aware of his status as leader of the Jewish community, and they sought to make an example of him to ensure obedience from the rest of the community.

"Jew, you must dismantle this structure at once," they demanded when they discovered the sukkah standing proudly on the rav's property. "Don't you know that it is against the law to build this kind of hut? You are playing with a long prison sentence."

"Thank you, gentlemen, for bringing me this information," Rav Zecharia said politely, indicating toward the door with his head. "Now, I'm sure you are very busy... the exit is that way."

"But, Jew! You don't seem to understand!" one of the police officers sputtered. "We are ordering you to dismantle your sukkah right now."

Rav Zecharia simply nodded. "Yes, I understood what you said. I have heard what you would like me to do, and so you have done your duty. You may leave now."

Fuming, the policemen returned to their superiors. "He's ignoring our command," they reported. "He brazenly constructed his hut, and

he's simply ignoring us when we tell him to remove it."

"I'll go speak to him myself," the police chief promised grimly. "Tomorrow, I'll face that Jew and let's see if he has the guts to ignore me, the chief of the entire police force!"

That night was the first night of Sukkos. The Jews of the city all lined up outside Rav Zecharia's sukkah, where they each received a turn to recite the blessing of *leishev b'sukkah*. Though they were too afraid to build their own sukkahs, no one wanted to give up the mitzvah entirely.

The following morning, the police chief himself paid a visit to Rav Zecharia's home and ordered him to take down his sukkah. Rav Zecharia politely but firmly declined to obey. Besides the fact that he didn't want to give up the mitzvah, it was *yom tov*. How could he take the sukkah down on *yom tov*?

The police chief found himself facing a brick wall. Shaking his head, he left the rav's home. There was no way they could let Rav Zecharia get away with his crime. The entire Jewish community was aware of their rav's actions, and if it was overlooked, there would be sukkahs popping up all over the city.

That night, the rav slept in his sukkah, a contented smile on his face. Ah, sukkah! There was nothing like doing a mitzvah with one's whole being!

The next morning after davening, Rav Zecharia sat in his sukkah, learning, when a squadron of police officers, led by the mayor of the city himself, knocked on his door looking for him. Quaking with terror, the family directed the mayor and his entourage to the sukkah at the back of the house.

They barged into the wobbly structure without warning, startling the rav. "You!" the mayor, a notorious anti-Semite, shouted. "Why is there an

illegal structure here? Dismantle it at once! Get out of this dangerous hut right now and take it apart!"

When he responded, Rav Zecharia's voice was calm and collected, a sharp contrast to the mayor's hysterical ranting. "I'd like to speak to you privately," the rav said evenly. "Please send your men out of the sukkah, and then we can discuss this."

Surprisingly, the mayor obeyed. There was something about the rav's tone that brooked no refusal. The police officers were sent out, the creaky door was shut, and the rav began to speak.

"Sit down, and I'd like to tell you a story," he said. "A story that took place about fifty years ago."

"I didn't come here for stories!" the mayor growled, though his curiosity was piqued.

Rav Zecharia forged ahead anyway. "Half a century ago, there lived a wealthy mayor who owned vast swatches of land all around the city. One day, he decided to transform one particular property into a beautiful flower garden. Gardeners were hired and plans were drawn up.

"There was just one obstruction to the stunning plans they created, and those were the fruit trees that dotted the property at the time. The fruit trees hadn't been planted in orderly rows, but were scattered haphazardly throughout, and they ruined the mayor's vision for the garden. It was decided that these trees would be chopped down."

The mayor, his eyes riveted on the rav, pulled out a chair and sat down.

"According to the Torah, destroying fruit trees is strictly forbidden," the rav informed the mayor.

"The Jews of the city went to inform the mayor of this fact, but he shrugged them off. After all, as a non-Jew, he was not obliged to follow the

mitzvos. Shortly thereafter, twelve to fifteen fruit trees were destroyed.

“The garden was planted, and it was truly magnificent. The mayor was very pleased, and he invited all the dignitaries in the area to view his beautiful garden.

“It was just one week later when tragedy struck. His five-year-old son was playing outside when he fell off a tree, smashed his head on a rock, and was killed instantly. The mayor was heartbroken.

“Just one week later, his oldest daughter suddenly fell ill. She lay in bed, her fever raging, for but one night. By morning, she was gone. The anguish of her grieving family was impossible to fully describe.

“The tragedies did not abate. One by one, the mayor’s children passed away suddenly. Of his ten children, he lost nine of them within a very short span of time. Coupled with his unspeakable grief was his perpetual worry over the safety of his last remaining child. He didn’t know what went wrong with his family’s fate, but a sixth sense warned him that this child was next.

“Desperate, he went to consult with his priest, who advised him to discuss the matter with the local Jewish rabbi. ‘This is no simple matter,’ the priest said gravely. ‘If anyone can help you, it would be the rabbi.’

“The mayor swallowed hard. A rabid anti-Semite, the last thing he wanted to do was pour out his tale of woe before the leader of the Jews, but the priest made it clear that he had no choice.

“His head between his legs, he knocked on the rav’s door. ‘I know that your Torah forbids cutting down fruit trees,’ he said defensively before the rav could utter a word. ‘But I am not a Jew, and I don’t keep the mitzvos. Now nine of my children died, just like that. Why am I being

punished for cutting the fruit trees? It wasn’t a problem for me!’

“The rav scrutinized his face. ‘True, you were under no obligation to preserve the fruit trees,’ he agreed. ‘But let me ask you, how did you cut them down? Was there anything you said or something you did that was out of the ordinary?’

“The mayor’s face colored. ‘I’ll be honest, but yes,’ he confessed. ‘When I had those trees cut, I proclaimed that I was doing it despite the Torah prohibition. I announced that my actions were a mockery of the Torah, and I intended to degrade the Jews and their laws as I chopped down the trees.’

“The rav nodded slowly. ‘If so, then it makes sense that you are being punished. Though you are under no obligation to follow the laws of the Torah yourself, by making a mockery of them, you became deserving of punishment. That is why your children have perished.’

“The mayor began to cry, a desperate and anguished cry that emanated from deep within him. ‘What can I do now?’ he pleaded with the rav. ‘You must help me! I can’t lose my only remaining child!’

“ ‘I can pray for you,’ the rav offered. ‘I’ll pray that your tenth child remain healthy and well.’ Indeed, the rav prayed hard on the mayor’s behalf, even fasting from food and drink. He knew that saving the child’s life was the greatest favor he could do for the mayor, and he hoped this favor would one day stand in good stead for the Jewish community.”

The rav looked closely at the mayor. “The mayor’s son lived,” he said simply. “He grew up, married, and had a son of his own. Do you perhaps know who that son is?”

The mayor stood up uneasily. “No, how would I know?”

“Was your father formerly the mayor of this city?” the rav asked pointedly. “And before that, his father?”

“This is about my family?!” the mayor asked incredulously. “You know, I did hear stories as a child about my father having many siblings, all of whom died within a few weeks.”

“Well, the rav also had children and grandchildren,” Rav Zecharia continued. “In fact, I myself am one of his grandsons.”

The mayor felt faint. “Then I owe you my life,” he said weakly. “I owe you my life!”

“Now, do you allow me to remain here in my sukkah, celebrating yom tov in peace?” the rav asked.

“Certainly,” the mayor said quickly. “Certainly! I’ll order my men to protect your sukkah, and I’ll abolish the decree banning sukkahs altogether. I owe it to you.”

While we do chesed for others just for their sake, and not for the benefit that we may have from it, chesed does bear fruit. It sometimes takes generations, but the good we do for others never goes unpaid.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A75

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