

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Courage and Conviction

Rav Chatzel Miletzky (later of Yerushalayim) was sixteen years old when war tore through Europe in a wave of devastation, destruction, and death. Young Chaikel skirted danger and looked fear in the eye, yet he never allowed the fear of human threat overcome his fear of Heaven. Following are three stories, shared with me by Rav Chaikel Miletzky's nephew, R' Aryeh, demonstrating Rav Chaikel's strength of character and conviction to do the right thing regardless of danger or difficulty.

Sixteen-year-old Chaikel Miletzky was walking on the street one day, when a deep moan suddenly

startled him. He glanced around, trying to determine the source of the sound. There, on the wayside, between two trees, lay a soldier. He moaned again, and Chaikel hurried over.

Even to a novice, the soldier's condition looked bad. His complexion was grayish, his uniform covered in blood. "I'm dying," the soldier confirmed in a weak voice. "And I'm a Jew. Please ensure that I will be brought to a Jewish burial!"

Still thoroughly shocked by the scene before him, Chaikel nodded. He tried to find the words to respond, but the man didn't wait for him to reply. He closed his eyes and whispered Shema Yisrael.

And then it was over. His soul had returned to his Maker.

Chaikel bit his lip. He knew he needed to bring this anonymous soldier to kever Yisrael, but it was extremely dangerous to do so. If he was caught walking through the streets with a dead soldier, it was practically a death sentence. Even if he did manage to make it to the mikvah to perform the taharah, the stakes were still very high. At any step of the process, from cleansing to burial, the probability of being discovered and charged with the soldier's murder was extremely high.

Chaikel looked down at the body on the floor. It would mean risking his life, but he would not betray his commitment to the soldier. Even if it was the last mitzvah he would ever merit to perform, it was his obligation to try.

A dead body is significantly heavier than a living, breathing one, but Chaikel was a young and muscular young man. He took a deep breath, hefted his muscles and heaved, half-carrying, half-dragging the uniformed corpse onto the road.

No less than half a minute later, still just a few feet away from the site where the soldier had died, a wagon pulled up beside Chaikel and his heavy load. Two soldiers on patrol jumped down, their eyes roving over him and the body, demanding to know just what he was doing.

Chaikel knew that the sight of himself, a strong and obviously Jewish youth, in the company of a dead soldier, was extremely suspicious. He'd known it from the moment the anonymous Jewish soldier had breathed his last. Taking a deep breath, he decided to tell the truth and plead for mercy. Though the chances were slim, he could only pray that the soldiers would believe him.

"I was walking down the road, and I heard him moaning," he said earnestly, hoping the soldiers wouldn't notice how badly his hands were trembling. "I found him lying between the trees, dying. He asked me, with his final breaths, to ensure that he would be buried according to Jewish law, and then he died. All I wanted to do was to fulfill his dying wishes!"

The soldier on his right snorted in obvious disdain. "He was dying, huh? After you helped him die!"

"I didn't, I promise!" Chaikel cried, distressed. "I don't know what caused his death; I only found him when it was too late to do anything to save him!"

"Traitor," the other soldier said flatly, binding his wrists behind his back. "Do you expect us to believe you? You will pay for this crime."

"I'm not a traitor," Chaikel tried protesting. "I promise I didn't kill him!"

The soldiers glared at him until he fell silent and then hauled him over the side of the wagon like a sack of vegetables. "Save your breath," they said, loading the body onto the wagon beside him with

considerably more respect. "You're going to need it at the trial."

Chaikel began murmuring fervent tefillos. The odds of him escaping death seemed slim, and he pleaded with Hashem to save him. Concentrating on his prayers, he barely noticed the passing scenery, and was startled to discover a few minutes later, when the wagon rolled to a stop, that they were at the center of the local army base.

A military tribunal was hastily assembled, and Chaikel was forced to try to defend himself in an effort that was doomed from the start. Although he staunchly maintained his innocence, he had no way of proving that he had not killed the soldier, and the circumstantial evidence weighed heavily against him. It did not take long before the guilty verdict was handed down.

The judge ordered him to the large field, where he was surrounded by fifteen soldiers in a semicircle, their guns pointed at his temple. Caught in the crosshairs of fifteen guns, Chaikel was given a final opportunity to pray before the triggers would be pulled on all fifteen revolvers.

He stood in the middle, looking so young and vulnerable, like a newborn calf surrounded by fifteen lions. He began to recite vidui, tears streaming down his face, but then the sight of the guns pointed at him overwhelmed his senses. He simply could not bear the sight of death, and he collapsed on the floor, wailing like a baby.

The soldiers showed him no mercy. They hooked him by the elbow and dragged him to a wall, forcing him upright against it. His face was completely sapped of all color; his lips a pasty white. In a terrified voice, he began screaming Shema Yisrael as the soldiers took up their positions around him and aimed their revolvers.

But before they could pull the trigger and release a hail of bullets in his direction, a tall, decorated officer strolled over. “Halt!” he ordered, conceit and arrogance dripping from his words. “What is going on here? Who authorized this?”

The soldiers lowered their guns and saluted. The officer, a high-ranking general, was not too pleased to hear that a military trial had been convened in his absence, and he insisted on investigating the matter himself.

In the meantime, the dead soldier’s uniform was removed from his body, and his pockets were emptied in the process. Among the assorted belongings he had been carrying on him at the time of his death, the soldiers discovered a note, a suicide note, written by the dead soldier, in which he declared that he planned on taking his own life.

The note was evidence enough to prove Chaikel’s claims of innocence, and when the general concluded his investigation, he declared the young Jew a free man. Chaikel was allowed to perform the taharah, and the Jewish soldier was duly buried.

A few months passed, and a deadly epidemic broke out in the city. The illness spread quickly, claiming the lives of victim after victim, young and old indiscriminately. To slow the spread of the disease, infected patients were quarantined in a primitive sanatorium so that their family members would not become infected as well.

Chaikel Miletzky was young and strong, but when the dreaded disease took hold of his body, he slowly began to waste away. Lying in quarantine, away from his family and his yeshiva friends, he felt death draw nearer and nearer. Sooner or later, he would succumb to the illness, just like so many others around him.

One night, as he lay in bed, feverish and delirious, he dreamed that the soldier came to visit him, bearing optimistic news. “You risked your life for me,” the soldier told him in his dream. “Despite the danger involved, you did not back down from your commitment to doing the right thing, bringing me to kever Yisrael. You will be repaid! When you wake up in the morning, you will find grass under your pillow. Cook the grass in water and drink the liquid. This medicine will heal you from your illness.”

In the morning, Chaikel lifted his head weakly from his pillow and groped underneath it. Indeed, just like the soldier in his dream had promised, there was a clump of grass beneath his pillow. Dredging up his last reserves of strength, he boiled the grass in water and drank the liquid.

Unbelievably, he got stronger and stronger, and just a few short days later, he completely recovered from the illness.

His courage and commitment to do the right thing had been rewarded.

The war had taken a toll on the civilian food supply, and there was little food to be found. Hunger was rampant, and the unfortunate sight of hungry children begging on the streets was common.

The transplanted yeshivos, too, suffered from a severe lack of food. While the roshei yeshiva understood the importance of physical nourishment to sustain limud Torah, they simply were not able to obtain enough food to satisfy the hungry bachurim. Whatever staples they did manage to procure for the bachurim was strictly rationed, and the yeshiva bachurim became accustomed to the painful sensation of hunger.

In the yeshiva where Chaikel Miletzky learned during those years, headed by the famed Rav Leib Chasman, the food shortage was similarly acute. The bachurim learned to be grateful for their miniscule portions, understanding that there were many who were less fortunate than they. Instead, they nourished their bodies with rigorous Torah study, filling up on the teachings of Abaye and Rava.

One Friday afternoon, a bedraggled looking bachur showed up in the yeshiva's bais medrash. His face was thin and gaunt, his threadbare clothing hanging on his skeletal frame. Chaikel, noticing the newcomer, went over to greet him.

"Please let me stay here for Shabbos," the young man begged. "I'm starving, and I have nowhere to eat or sleep. Please allow me to join the yeshiva for Shabbos."

A deep sense of compassion overtook Chaikel. The other boy looked to be around his age, and the suffering on his face and the hunger in his eyes touched Chaikel deeply. "Of course," he said warmly, his heart going out to the starving boy. How could he turn down a Jew in need?

The unusual news spread quickly that a talmid in the yeshiva, Chaikel Miletzky, had given permission to a stranger to join the yeshiva for Shabbos despite the severe food shortage. Eventually, the news reached the ears of Rav Leib Chasman, the rosh yeshiva himself.

Rav Leib was somewhat taken aback that a talmid in the yeshiva saw himself as possessing the necessary authority to spend Shabbos in the yeshiva at the yeshiva's expense. Chaikel's compassion for the young bachur notwithstanding, it was not his place to decide for the rosh yeshiva whether or not a boy from outside the yeshiva was allowed to join for Shabbos.

Rav Leib knew that it was impossible to run a yeshiva, especially under such difficult circumstances, if the lines of authority were not respected. If he did not nip the issue in the bud, it would not take long before matters escalated out of control. After all, there were thousands of starving Jewish children, but the yeshiva, which quite simply could not satisfy the needs of its own students, could not possibly take care of them.

"Chaikel," Rav Leib summoned the bachur, his expression severe. "Is this a free-for-all? Who is the rosh yeshiva here? Who gets to decide who can spend Shabbos here?"

Chaikel accepted the rebuke with a lowered head, but when he realized that the rosh yeshiva was waiting for him to respond, he said quietly, "But the bachur was so hungry!"

"If that is the case," Rav Leib said sternly, "He will eat your portion this Shabbos. He will sleep in your bed and enjoy your meals, while you will suffice with whatever crumbs you can find when the meal is over. There are no extra portions in yeshiva."

"I understand," Chaikel said softly, his head still bowed. Though he would be hungry over Shabbos, he did not regret his actions. The rosh yeshiva was correct; he really did not possess the authority to welcome new bachurim on the yeshiva's tab. But the sorrow and the hunger, that he'd seen in the bachur's eyes convinced him that he'd done the right thing. It was worth his own hunger to help a starving bachur.

That Shabbos, Chaikel sufficed with spare crumbs while thriving on the nourishment of helping another. Despite the fact that he hadn't had much to eat, he was energized by his commitment and his courage to do the right thing. By the time shalosh seudos was over and he joined the other bachurim in Rav Leib's home for

the rosh yeshiva's weekly schmooze, he was sure the entire matter was behind him.

Rav Leib's weekly schmooze was a packed event. Roshei yeshiva and talmidei chachamim from around the city would crowd together with the yeshiva bachurim in Rav Leib's home, where he would deliver a fiery address that would rouse and inspire them. Each week at the end of the schmooze, Rav Leib would honor one of the present roshei yeshiva with the amud for Maariv.

That week, Chaikel stood in the audience as Rav Leib wrapped up his schmooze, musing over what he'd heard, when he suddenly heard his name being called. "Chaikel!" Rav Leib boomed. "You are a rosh yeshiva, aren't you? Come up and daven Maariv!"

Chaikel's cheeks burned as he immediately grasped that the rosh yeshiva was rebuking him. Rav Leib had not yet forgiven him for his brazen act of allowing the stranger into the yeshiva for Shabbos on his own authority. But as embarrassing as it would be, he had no choice but to obey his rosh yeshiva's command, and so he walked up to the front of the room and began Maariv.

When Maariv was over, the lesson his rosh yeshiva had been trying to convey settled a little more deeply into him, but if he thought it was over, it wasn't.

"Chaikel, please make Havdalah," Rav Leib urged. Since this was an honor usually reserved for one of the roshei yeshiva, Chaikel understood that this was a continuation of Rav Leib's rebuke. Swallowing his pride, he picked up the goblet and recited Havdalah.

After Havdalah, the assemblage began to disband as the bachurim and talmidei chachamim trickled out of the house. Chaikel, hoping to escape the

rosh yeshiva's house as quickly as possible, tried to inch away, but Rav Leib motioned to him to remain until everyone had left. He watched the room slowly empty out and waited nervously for the axe to fall.

At last, only the two of them were left in the room – sixteen-year-old Chaikel Miletzky and the great rosh yeshiva, Rav Leib Chasman. Rav Leib withdrew a small box of cigarettes. "A new rosh yeshiva, eh?" he asked, handing one to his talmid. "Let's smoke."

Chaikel felt extremely uncomfortable smoking together with his rosh yeshiva, as though they were equals. He took a hesitant puff, afraid to disobey.

Rav Leib lowered his cigarette and looked Chaikel in the eye. "Did you learn your lesson?" he asked quietly. "Next week, if a bachur comes, will you allow him to stay in yeshiva without asking my permission?"

Chaikel returned his gaze. "Yes," he said respectfully. "I would be willing to give up my portion again, to suffer the humiliation of leading Maariv and Havdalah, and not turn down a starving Jew who needs a place for Shabbos."

Rav Leib's face lit up and he gave his talmid an appreciative tap on his cheek. "May you continue using your kochos for klal Yisrael," he wished him warmly. "That is what I wanted to see! Flaunting authority on a whim cannot be tolerated; but for a bachur to have the courage to stick to his convictions – that is greatness!

Leaning back in his chair, he smiled at his talmid. "Now we can really smoke together as equals."

It was a half-hour before Kol Nidrei and the door of the local shul burst open. Fourteen soldiers

dashed inside, panting for breath. “Yidden!” they cried. “Please! Help us! Help us!”

Between ragged breaths, they explained that they had just deserted from the army in order to participate in the Yom Kippur davening. With the War still raging fiercely, they were not permitted to take furlough in order to spend Yom Kippur in shul, and so they’d run away from their battalion. If they were caught, they would be sentenced to death immediately.

The risk they placed on the heads of all the Jews in the city was tremendous. If the deserters were caught, not only would they be killed, but all the Jews would be branded as traitors. However, despite the very real danger, the Jews knew that they could not betray their brethren. Ignoring the threat to their own lives, they quickly found fourteen sets of clothing and shoes for the soldiers so that they could shed their army uniforms and blend in with the crowd.

Even once the soldiers had all changed into civilian attire and were indistinguishable from the rest of the men in the shul, a problem remained in the incriminating pile of coarse army uniforms, now disposed in a heap on the floor. They needed to get rid of the uniforms, and quickly, lest the military police chance upon it during the search that was sure to soon commence.

One of the rabbanim present came up with a brainstorm. In the cemetery was an empty grave, which he had dug as a segulah for longevity. Since the grave had already been dug, all they needed to do was bury the uniforms inside of it. Even if the uniforms were eventually found, the deserters would be long gone by then.

The idea was a solid one, but not too many people were interested in volunteering for the difficult and dangerous task of burying the uniforms. There was a high risk of being caught transporting

the incriminating clothing to the cemetery, and people were afraid.

Realizing that no one else was ready to undertake the mission, Chaikel jumped in. The sun had fully set by then, and while the rest of the shul davened kol nidrei, he found himself lugging a heavy sack of fourteen sets of uniforms and army boots to the cemetery.

He took the longest but quietest route, hoping to avoid the scrutiny of people, and prayed the entire time that he not be caught by the soldiers roaming around the city. When he reached the cemetery, he searched feverishly until he found the empty grave and dumped the entire sack inside. With his foot, he shoveled dirt over the grave until the mound of clothing was covered up. When the operation was finally completed, he sighed with relief and began hastily walking out of the cemetery.

“Halt!” a voice rang out just as Chaikel exited the cemetery. He looked up and saw a pair of soldiers coming toward him. Not about to give himself up without a fight, Chaikel ran.

The soldiers ran too, releasing their dogs at his heels and cornering him into a tree. He began murmuring vidui. He had done a mitzvah, on Yom Kippur night, and now it appeared that he would die for it. *Let it be an atonement for klal Yisrael*, he thought to himself.

“Where are you going?” a soldier on horseback demanded. “Why did you run from us? What do you have to hide?”

“And what,” his colleague added, his arms folded across his chest. “Were you doing in the cemetery at night?”

“I,” Chaikel began, his mind racing. “I... I was helping a widow,” he blurted. “There’s a widow in town who just lost her eight-year-old son. She

begged me to help her, and so I agreed to bury him for her.”

“Really,” the soldier on horseback said, his tone betraying his disbelief.

“Yes!” Chaikel said quickly. “She was hysterical, and I wanted to help her.”

The other soldier withdrew a knife and held it up toward Chaikel’s neck. “If you are lying to us, I will slit your throat,” he said menacingly. “Show us the grave!”

Chaikel shivered as he walked back into the forbidding cemetery sandwiched between the knife-wielding soldier and the mounted one. As they walked and walked between the rows of graves, he tried to think of a way out.

“Where is it?” the soldier murmured dangerously, very close to his ear.

Chaikel’s voice was wobbly as he responded, stalling for time. “It’s at the very end of the cemetery.”

Suddenly, without warning, the mounted soldier seemed to have a change of heart. “I know what it means to lose a child,” he said, sympathy oozing from his voice. “I know how difficult it is. I don’t think it’s right that we are making you go to more trouble now. Where were you headed before we found you, boy? We’ll accompany you there to make sure no bothers you.”

And just like that, the two soldiers accompanied Chaikel back into town right up to the door of the shul, like a pair of protective bodyguards.

A stunned Chaikel stumbled into the shul just as the congregation began to recite ‘Keil melech yoshev al kisei rachamim...’ It was the night of Yom Kippur, and he’d personally merited to experience the mercy of his King.

When he later told the story to his rosh yeshiva, Rav Leib Chasman, Rav Leib didn’t get excited. “You were a shliach mitzvah,” he told Chaikel simply. “And it says in the Gemara that one who is sent to do a mitzvah will not be harmed on his way to or from performing the mitzvah.”

Indeed, Chaikel demonstrated unwavering courage and conviction to do the right thing despite difficulty or danger, a courage that propelled him to the elevated heights of the famed Rav Chaikel Miletzky that he later became.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape #A218

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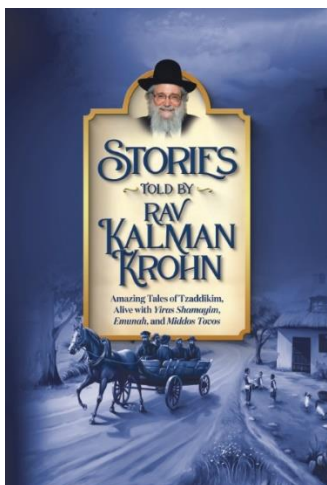
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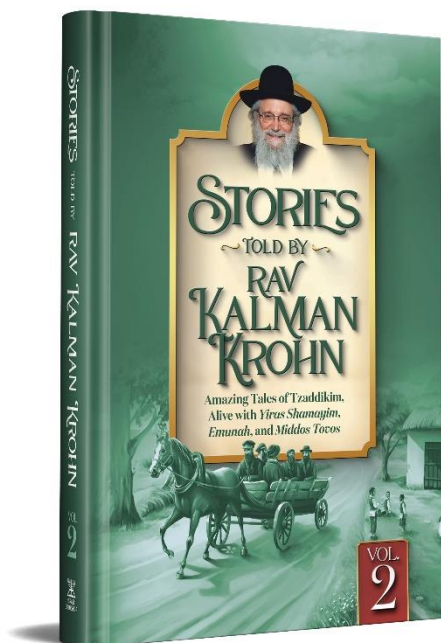
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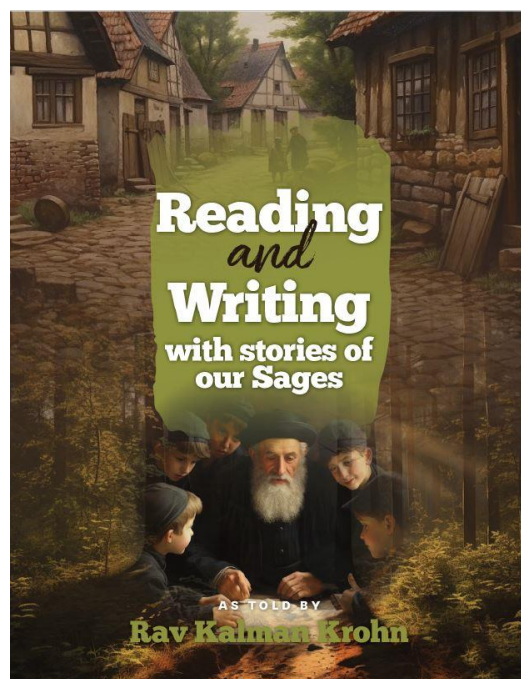
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