

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

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

Stepping Stone Part 1

Meir was sixteen years old when his world came crashing down. Living in a Polish shtetl in the nineteenth century, life was difficult, but routine, until the day his father was driven out of the town. A career thief who stole for a living from the other Jews in the shtetl, the day he was exposed was the day he was kicked out of the tiny village, never to be seen again.

Meir found it difficult to show his face in public after that.

With his father gone, all he had were his younger siblings and his mother, a bent and broken agunah who lived under the stigma of her husband's

shameful career. Wherever she went, people pointed her out as the wife of the thief, treating her with extra doses of suspicion. With her husband gone, so was his stolen income, and she knew she needed to work in order to have what to eat. However, she simply could not find employment. No one, it seemed, was willing to trust the wife of a thief.

Meir knew what it felt like to be stared at with pointed, accusing eyes. He knew what it felt like to be avoided, ignored, by the people he had once considered his friends. He knew all too well the feeling of burning cheeks, of the sudden urges for the ground to swallow him whole.

Every Shabbos since his father was exposed as a thief was an excruciating experience for Meir. This was not the kind of pain that one could get used to; it was simply impossible to become accustomed to the burning shame of sitting in shul together with the rest of the shtetl but isolated in a prison of silent accusation.

With his mother unable to find work, the poverty in their house was terrible. There was nothing, absolutely nothing eat. There was no wood to heat their homes, no new clothing to replace their rags. Though Meir had formerly worked as an apprentice to a local craftsman, he had since quit his job, too ashamed to be seen in public.

It did not take long for the teenager to fall into depression. With a listless mother, an empty house, and nothing to do all day, his future seemed bleak. Meir started sleeping most of the day. He had no hope for relief, for salvation, as one black day bled into the next.

When Purim rolled around, it seemed that the entire shtetl was celebrating. From outside the window, Meir was able to see his neighbors dancing down the street, drunk with exhilaration and a special Purim fever. He observed the little

children, dressed in exaggerated attire, strutting from house to house with mishloach manos deliveries. Even the leafless trees seemed to be smiling along.

Only his family's little hut seemed to have been excluded from the festive bubble enveloping the rest of the world. Observing the rest of the villagers with an air of detachment that unnerved even himself, Meir felt more down than ever. He longed to join everyone else in their joy, but he felt incapable of moving past the pain, the despair, the melancholy that seemed to have engulfed him. And while the joyous atmosphere did not succeed in breaking through his depression, it did succeed in pushing him to seek help.

After Purim, he went to see his rebbi, a former teacher whom he'd kept up with somewhat. "Rebbi," he sobbed brokenly. "Please help me! I can't continue on this way, but I don't know how to get out of the shame, the sadness. Should I run away? What kind of life do I have here?"

His rebbi put a gentle hand on Meir's shoulder. He was quiet for a few moments to give his former student a chance to calm down before beginning to speak. "Meir, you should know that if Hashem put you in a particular situation, it is not by happenstance, but for a specific purpose. It's difficult, yes, it's even a tragedy, but at the same time, it is the very thing that will help you in your life. Not only will you be helped through going through a challenge, the challenge itself will be a help to you.

"One day, Meir, you will see how this is the very best thing for you. Hashem loves you immensely, and He gave you this situation because He knows that this is what you need. This is not a boulder blocking your way, but a stepping stone to help propel you to greatness." The rebbi put his hand on Meir's head and blessed him.

Meir left his rebbi's study feeling encouraged. For the first time in months, he suddenly had a desire to be productive again, to take care of himself, to help out his family. His head held high, he walked out of his rebbi's home, blinking in the bright sunlight.

All it took was the sight of two old friends, walking ahead on the other side of the street and conversing quietly, and Meir's new-found optimism withered completely. Whatever confidence he'd gleaned in his rebbi's study flew away with the wind. His friends were surely talking about him! Everyone must be talking about him! His cheeks turned crimson and he lowered his eyes, hurrying home as fast as he could without meeting anyone's gaze.

His mother, who looked at him so hopefully when he returned from his visit with his rebbi, realized just moments later that nothing had changed. "Meir," she sighed, sitting down heavily in a chair. She had aged considerably over the previous few months, and the worry lines around her mouth and eyes deepened more and more each day. "You must find some sort of work. It's been months since we've had any sort of income, and even with the little bit that my brother gives to make sure we don't starve, we're barely managing. You're sixteen years old, old enough to hold down a job and bring in a steady source of income."

It was hard for Meir to meet his mother's anguished gaze, to see the pain in her eyes and the worry on her face. He rubbed his shoe on the floor and looked away. "I'm embarrassed," he finally said. "I'm embarrassed to be between people."

His mother's eyes softened. "I know," she said quietly. "I feel the same way. But we can't allow our situation to deter us from continuing –." She stopped abruptly mid-sentence. Meir had already left the room.

The depressed teenager left the house. He needed air. He needed to breathe. He needed to feel the sun's rays warming his neck. He needed to be someplace where he could be alone with himself and his feelings. Without even noticing where he was going, his feet took him into the forest behind his house. He knew this part of the forest well, having spent many hours there in play over the course of his childhood.

The crunch of the leaves underfoot was soothing, almost satisfying. Meir stomped between the trees in angry desperation. Crunch! Crunch! He listened to the birds chirping from the treetops in a happy chorus. Crunch! Why did everyone have to be so happy? And why couldn't he feel any part in it?

After walking for a while, he stumbled upon an empty field, a large grassy meadow, surrounded on all sides by trees. On the other side of the meadow, he could see a bubbling brook, its current flowing lazily under the shining sun. It was a picturesque scene, a gorgeous view, but his eyes beheld only dark thunderclouds.

He longed to appreciate the beauty, to fill his heart up with Hashem's wonders, but there was something, something stubborn, blocking the way. He wished he could enjoy the sunlight, he yearned to be able to sing along with the birds, but he felt trapped by his own emotions, powerless to break free.

Tears stung his eyes as he seated himself on a large rock. "Ribbono shel olam!" he cried, from the depths of his very soul. "Why did You do this to me? Why are You causing me so much pain? All my friends have normal homes, with caring parents who are respected in the community. Why couldn't I have that, too? Why did You give me a broken home, a father who is a thief and a mother who is so poor? What did I do to deserve this?"

He sobbed and sobbed, but the more he let himself feel the pain, the more pain he seemed to feel. "Why are You doing this to me?!" he screamed in anguish, turning his face heavenward. "Hashem, I can't take this anymore! Help me! HELP ME!"

As he yelled from the depths of his being, a wagon rolled to a stop beside him. Its driver, Velvel the Vasser Trager (watercarrier) hopped off the wagon and walked toward the distraught boy. Velvel was an elderly fellow who delivered water to all the Jews in the village, with the aid of a few employees. He could always be counted upon for a smile and a kind word, and he was a beloved figure in the shtetl.

"What's the matter?" he asked tenderly, sitting down on the rock beside Meir. He had been in the midst of his water deliveries, but helping a Jew in distress was of much greater importance. "Please, tell me why you are crying."

Meir wiped his tearstained cheeks and gave a small sniffle. He glimpsed the genuine caring in Velvel's eyes, and instinctively knew he could be trusted. "Oh, Velvel," Meir sobbed. "I am so stuck. I'm in an unbearable situation. How would you possibly be able to help me?"

"I don't know," Velvel said softly. "But maybe just talking about it will help. You sounded so heartbroken, screaming to Hashem."

Meir nodded miserably. "Hashem made my life so difficult! My father is a thief, my mother is poorer than poor. My life is over!"

"I don't understand," Velvel said quietly, taking Meir's hand into his own, gnarled one. "You have difficult circumstances at home, but why does that have to define your whole life?"

"Because who wants to be friends with the son of a thief?" Meir exploded, jumping up from the

rock. “Who wants to hire the son of a thief? He was discovered months ago, and trust me, people are still eating this topic for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I would rejoin society if I could, but who would ever want me?”

“Me,” Velvel said simply. “I want you. In fact, I would love to spend time with you! Join me on the wagon?”

A dazed look crossed Meir’s face. Disbelievingly, he followed Velvel onto the wagon. Velvel reached into his pocket and removed a piece of cake. “First, food.” He handed the cake to Meir who quickly recited a berachah and swallowed the piece whole. He hadn’t eaten all day.

“Here, grab the reins and I’ll get you some more food from the back,” Velvel said, handing Meir the leather straps and swiftly jumping over the divide to the back of the wagon.

“Th-thanks, b-b-but I don’t know how to drive a horse,” Meir stammered.

“It’s no big deal,” Velvel called from the back, where he was rummaging through a sack. “Just hold the reins and let the horses continue walking.” He paused for a moment. “Here’s a baked potato, still somewhat warm. And here’s a drink of water, of course. You want chicken? My wife sent chicken. You’re driving great, Meir.”

For the first time in months, Meir’s stomach was full, and he realized that his heart was full as well. As he experimented with the reins, tugging them this way and that, the horses obeyed his commands, and the thrill of controlling the animals was exhilarating. Even after Velvel rejoined him on the bench, he left the reins in Meir’s hands, sufficing with providing directions when necessary.

They took the longest route back into the village, chatting as they drove. Meir found himself describing his family to Velvel, and the life they’d lived when his father was still at home. They schmoozed and schmoozed, keeping one eye on the horses, until the village gates loomed before them.

“I would love if you could come with me to my farm,” Velvel said suddenly. “You seem to be great with animals, and it would be so nice to have your help.”

Meir nodded eagerly. “I’d love that,” he said shyly.

Velvel beamed, and each one of his wrinkles seemed to be winking joyfully. “Wonderful! Do you mind driving us to your house to ask your mother permission?”

“Sure,” Meir tugged at the reins, and the horses obediently turned in the right direction. As they rode through the shtetl, Meir was surprised to realize that he was able to keep his head lifted the entire time. Instead of squirming under the curious gazes of the other villagers, he felt important and respected as he drove beside Velvel. *He* was driving the horses!

They reached Meir’s home and he stopped the horses, handing the reins to Velvel. He hesitated for a moment.

“Should I accompany you inside?” Velvel asked kindly.

Meir gave a sheepish smile. “Thanks,” he murmured, blushing.

They entered the house together, and Meir turned to introduce his mother to his new friend. “Mamme, this is Velvel.”

“Of course, the vasser trager,” Meir’s mother nodded. She noticed the eagerness, the contentment on her son’s face and breathed deeply. Could she dare to hope?

“You have a wonderful son!” Velvel declared warmly. “Would you mind if he slept at my farm tonight?”

She blinked. “Oh! You’re inviting him to sleep at your farm?” She peeked at Meir, afraid he would jump in and veto the whole idea, but he just stood there with an open expression, waiting for her reply. “Uh, sure. Sure! If your wife wouldn’t mind...”

“We love guests,” Velvel assured her.

Meir said nothing, but his shining eyes said everything she needed to hear.

“Don’t forget your tefillin, Meir,” his mother said hastily, hurrying to bring it from the back of the house.

“And maybe also some clothing?” Velvel suggested after Meir left the house to bring his tefillin to the wagon. “In case Meir decides he wants to stay for a little longer...”

Meir’s mother raised her eyebrows. “You mean...” she stammered.

“We love guests,” Velvel repeated. “I assure you that Meir will be most welcome in our home, and we will be happy to have him for as long as he’d like, if you are okay with that.”

Her throat squeezed. “Thank you,” she whispered gratefully. “Thank you so much! May Hashem repay you...” She left the room to pack her son’s clothing, all the while thanking Hashem for His salvation and praying that Velvel be successful with her broken son.

When Meir came back inside, he was surprised to see his mother carrying a heavy suitcase. “These are your things,” she said, handing it to her son. There were tears in her eyes as she blessed him.

“You’re kicking me out?” Meir asked, bewildered.

“Of course not,” his mother exclaimed, casting pleading glances at Velvel.

“Meir, your mother is sending your clothing in case you want to stay at the farm for an extended stay,” Velvel explained. “If you like the work, we’d appreciate having you stay on to help.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of Meir’s mouth. It had been so long since he had felt wanted, and the feeling warmed him inside. Bidding goodbye to his mother, he followed Velvel out of the door, a spring in his step.

To be continued...

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape #A329

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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

Stepping Stone Part II

Recap: Meir, a teenage bachur, fell into depression after his father was exposed as a career thief and was driven from the shtetl. While sobbing in the forest one day, Velvel the Vasser Trager discovered him and invited him to stay at his farm.

The sun was high in the sky as they drove out of the shtetl toward Velvel's farm. Meir clutched the reins with taught muscles, nervous and calm all at once. It felt good, steering the animals, and the rhythmic clip-clop of the horses was soothing.

As they sat, side by side, on the bobbing wooden wagon, Meir and Velvel chatted like old friends. They were a study in contrasts: Meir, with his dark, clipped hair and melancholy eyes set above a tight smile and angular cheekbones, and Velvel, his grey curls bouncing about, his silver beard framing a laughing smile, his wrinkled eyes twinkling merrily. And although they had just become acquainted, there was a bond between them, a bond of trust and kindness and caring.

"You look happy," Velvel observed with a smile.

Meir stopped humming. He hadn't even been aware that he was humming. "I am happy," he admitted. "Today was wonderful. After I met you, that is."

"What made it so wonderful?" Velvel inquired.

"Firstly, I finally feel full," Meir said, his eyes on the road ahead. "I am always hungry. Always. Thank you so much for the meal. I haven't eaten well in a long time, and I have to admit that it feels great to be satiated."

"Yes," Velvel agreed. "Is that all?"

Meir looked thoughtful. "I'm also feeling good because I am driving the horses and buggy," he said slowly, coming to the realization as he spoke. "I've never done this before. It's an amazing feeling. When I drive the horses, I feel... I feel... needed."

"You are an insightful young man," Velvel responded, impressed. "And you've hit upon the secret to success. It's a feeling we all crave, we all need. We need to feel needed. Look, there's the farm up ahead. Believe me, Meir, here you'll be very needed."

As the wagon rolled through the gates of the farm, more than a dozen children streamed down to

greet it. They piled in from all different directions, boys and girls, young children and teenagers. Bringing up the rear was a dignified, if elderly, woman who was presumably Velvel's wife. "Hello, hello!" they called excitedly. "Welcome back!"

Meir's eyes widened as he tried to count the children. He counted at least fifteen boys and eight girls, but it was hard to tell for sure since they were constantly moving. "I don't understand," he said, nudging Velvel. "Who are these children?"

Velvel laughed. "These are my children. Come, let me settle the horses so that I can go and greet them."

"But... but..." Velvel had sounded perfectly serious, but Meir was finding it difficult to believe him. "How can you have so many children the same age?" he asked, dumfounded. "And aren't you... um... aren't you a little old to have children?"

Velvel laughed again and wagged a shriveled finger at Meir. "I'm not old! And Hashem sent me a large family, baruch Hashem!"

"Tatte, Tatte," five of the boys bleated together, racing toward Velvel and enveloping him in a big hug.

"Hello, *kinderlach!*" Velvel cried back, just as joyfully. "Come, we have a guest. Let's all go inside and I'll introduce you to him."

A bewildered Meir followed his host and the throng of skipping children into the house, where an elderly woman stood near the stove, apparently waiting for them. Her face was creased with wrinkles, her posture somewhat stooped. But her eyes were warm and her smile genuine. Meir immediately placed her as Velvel's wife.

He looked around the large room, his eyes taking in the many lanterns that lit up the room to a shining glow. A long table stood in the center of the cavernous room, lined on each side by an endless row of chairs. Meir watched as Velvel took his place at the head of the table. Two children hurried over with a water basin, which he used to wash his hands.

Meanwhile, the rest of the children in the family were scrubbing up at the water pail and taking their seats around the table. As they sat down one by one, Velvel introduced them to Meir, whom he had seated right beside him. "This is Shmulik and Naftali. Here's Chaim, and Sruli, and Dovid'l." He continued on and on, introducing each of the children, and Meir listened open-mouthed, wondering if he would ever learn all their names.

Three girls stood at the stove, where fragrant aromas were wafting from the pots. Velvel's wife sat at the far end of the table, directing them from there. As one of the girls dished out steaming bowls of soup, her sisters brought the soup to the table, serving Velvel and his wife, then Meir, and then the rest of their many siblings lining the table.

"Tatte, look what I made!" a sweet-looking little boy called excitedly. He scrambled onto Velvel's lap, showing off his creation with a beaming smile. Velvel oohed and aahed over the masterpiece as the little boy's smile grew wider than Meir thought was possible.

As he slid off Velvel's lap, the next child came over for a little attention. He was taller than the first, and Meir placed him at ten years old. "Zaide, Zaide!" he exclaimed, breathless with excitement.

As Velvel listened attentively, the boy told him about a new skill he had learned on the farm, but Meir's mind was too busy churning to listen.

Zaide? Was Velvel the boy's grandfather? It actually made a lot of sense, considering Velvel's age, but where was the boy's parents? And the first boy had been a good five years younger than this one, and he'd called Velvel, "Tatte."

As Meir pondered the subject, a slight girl with two braids came over, holding a small tray of muffins. "I made these for you," she said shyly, handing Velvel the tray."

"For me?" Velvel asked, his astonishment and joy causing a gratified blush to creep up on the girl's cheeks. "I didn't know you were so talented! These muffins look delicious! Here, Meir, you are the guest. Please, I want you to have the first muffin that Gittel baked for us."

Meir tried to tamp down the questions in his mind and forced himself to focus on the beautiful atmosphere, the camaraderie, and the satisfying meal instead of harping on the details that didn't seem to add up. He finished his soup and put down his spoon, watching the elderly Velvel interact with his many, many children.

"Yankel, Asher, did everything go smoothly today on the farm?"

"Yes, Tatte," the two responded in unison.

"And how are the horses doing today, Shimmele?" Velvel addressed a quiet looking boy sitting toward the middle of the table.

Shimmele perked up. "Very good," he said, a touch of pride in his voice.

"And, you, Nachum? Weren't you working on a table for someone? How is it coming along?"

"Baruch Hashem," the boy called Nachum, a confident looking youth in his mid-teens, replied with a smile. "The customer came to see it today, and he was very satisfied."

Velvel gave him a warm smile. "That's excellent, Nachum! Chana'le? Raizel? Were you able to bake the challahs for the poor people for Shabbos?"

"Yes, Zaidy," one of the girls sitting near Velvel's wife responded, twirling the end of her braid. "And Shifra has already packed up the packages, so they'll be all ready to be delivered tomorrow."

"Wonderful!" Velvel beamed at his children. "Who wants to bring the basin so that I can wash my hands and recite *birchas hamazon*?"

As the children scrambled out of the chairs, a lightbulb went off in Meir's mind, and he finally understood what was going on. These children were not Velvel's biological children, but children who needed a home, who needed loving parents, and who had found what they were looking for in Velvel and his wife.

He turned to the boy sitting beside him. "Where are you from?" he asked quietly.

The boy shrugged. He obviously didn't want to answer the question.

Meir turned to the boy across from him. "And you... Shmulik, isn't it? Where are you from originally?"

Shmulik looked uncomfortable. "Ask me something else," he said, also avoiding the question.

Meir took the hint and stopped questioning. He benched quietly and then stood up with the others, looking questioningly at Velvel. His host put a warm hand on his shoulder. "Let's talk," he said quietly. "The children will prepare for bed now, and then we'll have some time to speak."

With so many children helping clear the table and wash the dishes, the kitchen was sparkling in no

time. They waited as the kitchen emptied out, the children's happy chatter fading along with their footsteps. Velvel's wife gave Meir an encouraging smile as she slowly made her way out of the room, and then the kitchen was empty.

"What's going on?" Meir asked in a low voice, just in case some of the children were still in earshot. "Please, I must understand what's happening here."

"They are all children from broken homes," Velvel explained slowly. He didn't say, "Just like yours," but Meir heard it anyway. "They each have their own background story, but the common thread joining them all was their desire to find joy again. I promised them that if they would come to live with us here on the farm, they would find the happiness they were seeking. And they did."

"But how?" Meir asked plaintively. "How did they find happiness if they knew heartbreak and tragedy wherever they came from?" He didn't say, "And how can I, too, find that happiness?" He didn't have to. Velvel understood him.

Velvel patted his guest on the back. "You want to know the secret, huh? I'll tell you how. Through hard work. When someone works hard investing all his energy and efforts into something with tangible results, he will be happy."

Meir looked skeptical. "That's all? Just hard work, and boom, I'll be happy?"

"It isn't enough to just work hard," Velvel clarified. "You need to work hard for somebody else. You need to invest yourself in doing, not for yourself, but for others. Try to ease his plight, try to help him however you can. Forget about your own problems, and focus on the problems of another. That's where you'll find happiness!"

He peeked at Meir, and satisfied that the boy was listening and absorbing his message, he allowed himself to continue. He lowered his voice. "You saw Nachum tonight, didn't you? If you think you have it bad, once you'll hear about Nachum, you'll realize just how fortunate you are. Nachum's mother was married to someone else before marrying his father, and she did not receive a *get* before marrying a second time."

Meir let out a small gasp.

"I see you understand correctly," Velvel continued in the same low voice, his eyes betraying the pain he felt on Nachum's behalf. "Our wonderful Nachum is a *mamzer*, with all the repercussions that comes along with it. The stigma of his status followed him persistently in his childhood, and he was the victim of terrible bullying. You must understand that even once he came here, where he is respected for the human being that he is, his troubles are far from over. There is nothing humanely possible that can be done to reverse the effects of his mother's terrible deed."

Meir tried to picture himself in Nachum's shoes, crushed under the burden of an irreversible life sentence, and found that Velvel was right. By comparison, his own situation was a walk in the park.

"I took Nachum in, and apprenticed him to a carpenter," Velvel continued. "And along with his carpentry skills, his confidence was polished as well. When he comes of age, I hope to marry him off to a maidservant, who will convert, and his children will be perfectly kosher Jews. Take a look at him, and you'll never guess that he was once a beaten child with his head perpetually bent in shame. The work he did for others, building for

them and enhancing their lives, has in turn enhanced his own life.”

“What about your own children?” Meir asked after a long, contemplative pause.

“My wife and I weren’t blessed with biological children,” Velvel responded, matter-of-factly. “But we didn’t let this bog us down or keep us from accomplishing in life. Instead, we adopted children, children without homes and children without parents. Our family is arguably the biggest in the country. We always have between twenty and thirty children in our home, and whenever we marry some of them off, we quickly take in new ones. Hashem may have decreed that my wife never bear a child, but we are as far from childlessness as can possibly be.”

“Wow,” Meir said, awed by the elderly man sitting beside him.

“From now on, you, too, Meir, are one of our children,” Velvel said softly, putting an arm around Meir’s frail shoulders. “Consider this your home, and consider me in the place of your missing father. We will find you a job that suits your temperament, perhaps driving the horse and wagon, and I hope that you will succeed in finding the joy that so many other children before you have discovered on this farm.”

Meir stood up, overcome with gratitude, and hugged Velvel tightly. “I don’t know how to thank you,” he said, his voice scratchy with emotion. “What should I call you, Tatte? Zeide?”

“That’s up to you,” Velvel replied, warmly returning the embrace. “You should really head to bed now. Here on the farm, we all get up at dawn. There’s no such thing as sleeping the day away. Come, I’ll show you to your room.”

Meir followed him out of the kitchen, thinking about the endless sleep – eat – sleep cycle that he couldn’t seem to break out of in the depression of his mother’s home. “What if…” he suddenly began, and then stopped.

Velvel turned around, his expression open and inviting. “Yes?”

“What if I can’t take my mind off of my problems?” Meir asked hesitantly, unable to imagine returning to a worry-free life.

Velvel gave a quiet laugh. “Don’t worry so much, Meir! You’ll see that you’ll be too busy here to think about your problems. Just try it, try one day focusing on assisting others with their problems, and you’ll understand exactly what I mean.”

The next morning dawned bright and early, and Meir rose along with the others, blinking away cobwebs of sleep. Completely unaccustomed to waking so early, he had a very groggy morning, that first morning, but with time, his body adjusted to the schedule. For the next few days, he joined Velvel on his water carrier rounds, getting excellent practice at the reins before he was designated as the farm’s official driver.

His days were long and busy, but extremely fulfilling. He slept a scant five hours each night, a far cry from the eighteen hours of slumber he’d gotten used to at the height of his depression, and yet he never felt more alive, more energetic, more capable, and more at peace with himself. As he delivered packages of challahs, baked by the girls Velvel had taken in, to poverty-stricken families in the village, the positive feeling of doing for others filled the father-sized void in his heart. Slowly, he began to heal.

There was another boy on the farm his own age, a tall, sunburned young man named Yoni, and the

two became close friends. Yoni, like all the others in Velvel's household, came from a broken home, but under Velvel's care, he blossomed and thrived. The two boys would talk for hours, sharing their memories, both the good and the bad, and their dreams of the future.

The months and years passed, and both boys soon became of marriageable age. Velvel hadn't grown any younger, but his youthful spirit and massive heart didn't weaken in the slightest even as his hands began to tremble and his vision slowly faded. Like a true father, he carefully sought out matches for both of them, and within a few months, Meir left Velvel's home to form his own, followed shortly afterward by Yoni.

Although he never saw his father again, the rehabilitated Meir didn't abandon his mother and siblings to a sorry future. He supported them financially, as well as emotionally, and to the best of his ability, ensured that their difficult circumstances did not prevent them in building their lives anew.

With their own fledgling families to support, Meir and Yoni began to look into different business opportunities. Once again, it was Velvel who came to their aid and offered to lend them the capital to start their business. The friends used the money to purchase a huge tract of forest, and before long they were operating a successful timber business together.

Their families continued to grow, and the relationship between Meir and Yoni grew along with them. They were more than friends and business partners; they were practically brothers, having shared in each other's hopes and sorrows, and of course, having shared the same 'father', Velvel.

And watching the two of them, mature and distinguished businessmen who contributed to the community and were raising Torah-true families, no one had more *nachas* than Velvel the *vasser-trager*. They may have been just two of the tens of children he'd invested his heart into, but to Velvel, each of those tens of children was as precious as an only son.

One morning after *Shacharis*, as Meir and Yoni wrapped up their *tefillin* and prepared to get a start on their workday, they heard a commotion outside. A funeral was being announced in the shul courtyard. Hurrying outside, they heard the name of the departed man, and a deep sorrow overcame them. It was Velvel, the man who had rescued them both from despair and given them a new lease on life.

The two men stared at each other in shock before falling on each other's shoulders in terrible grief. "Oy, oy!" Meir cried, weeping bitterly. From deep inside his shoulder, Yoni responded with pained wails of his own. Velvel had passed away! Velvel was no longer with them! The pain was enormous; it felt as though they had lost their father.

Velvel's *levayah* was one of the largest the village had seen. A huge crowd of villagers turned out to pay their last respects to the water-carrier, the *tzaddik*, who lived in their midst. The streets were teeming with people, first men and then women. Velvel had been a fixture in the *shtetl*, and his passing affected everyone.

And in the center of the crowd, their minds numb with grief, were the twenty-five children who still lived on the farm, all of whom had considered Velvel their father. They were joined by the many young adults who had already married and 'graduated' the farm, but who nevertheless

considered themselves part of the family. Velvel had never fathered a child of his own, yet he nevertheless had tens of bereaved children at his funeral.

When the *levayah* was over and Velvel was laid to rest in the local cemetery, his wife returned to the farm to sit *shivah*. A huge crowd of her adopted children followed her there, to sit with her and reminisce about Velvel, to try to comfort her with their memories of Velvel's kindness and generosity. Meir and Yoni, too, were there, soaking up the stories and telling anecdotes of their own. For seven days, they remained at the farm, part and parcel of the *shivah*. They were, after all, Velvel's children.

When the week of mourning was over, Meir and Yoni stood up to address the unspoken question that hung in the air. What would be with the children? Who would care for them now that Velvel had passed away? And what about Velvel's wife?

"Mamme," Meir said, addressing the woman who had given him a home when he'd needed it the most. "Yoni and I wanted to tell you that we will step into Tatte's shoes. We will care for you, for the farm, and for the children who are here, just as you and Tatte have done for so many years."

Velvel's wife's eyes filled with tears as she looked at the two of them, remembering the days when they'd first arrived on the farm. Gone was the anger, the melancholy, the despair in their eyes. Instead, she glimpsed strength, determination, and kindness, testimony to the success of her husband's caring. "Thank you," she said quietly.

True to their word, the two friends took responsibility for the farm and its occupants. Under their leadership, Velvel's kindness evolved

into a full-scale orphanage, where children from disadvantaged homes were cared for and rehabilitated. The orphanage, one of the first such Jewish institutions in Europe, carefully followed Velvel's model of achieving success through working hard for others instead of focusing on one's own problems.

Indeed, because the two friends had personally experienced how Velvel's model worked, they saw extraordinary success, helping many, many children grow out of their difficult circumstances into successful adults. And just as his *rebbe* had promised so many years earlier, Meir saw firsthand how his own challenge served as the very stepping stone to his success.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape #A329

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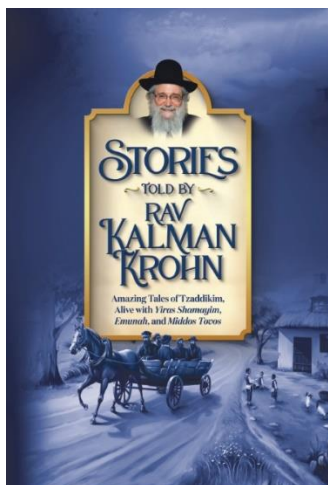
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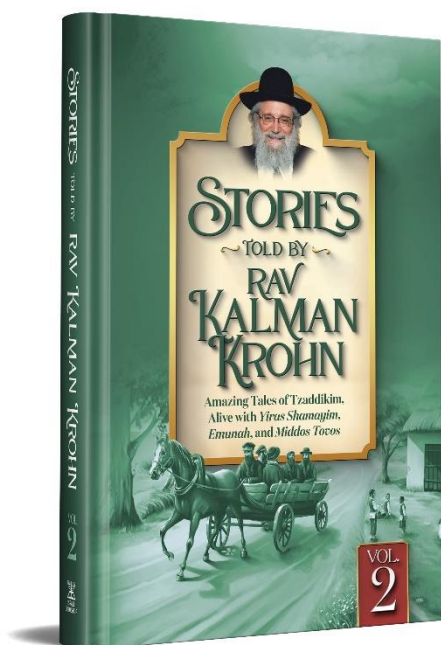
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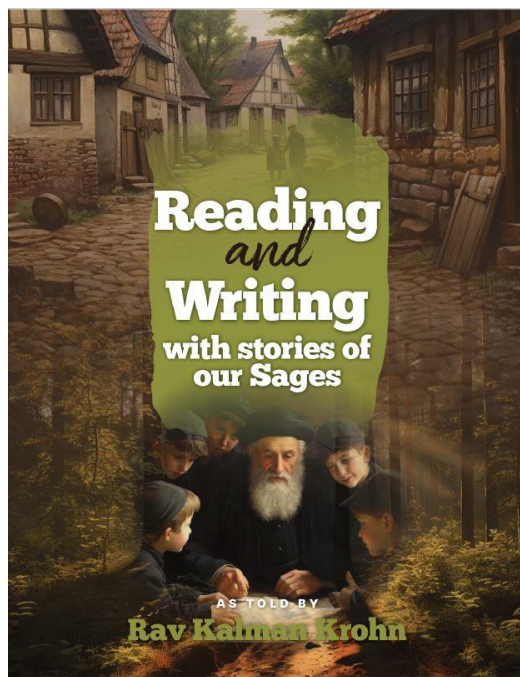
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