



Stories My Grandfather Told Me - Parshas Chukas

Big Spenders

וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה

“And they shall take to you a perfectly red cow”

(Bamidbar 19:2)

R' Yaakov Dovid of Amshinov once overheard some chassidim discussing the greatness of Dama ben Nesinah, who was offered a vast sum of money for a fine jewel that was missing from the *Choshen* but did not want to wake his father, who was sleeping on the box where the keys were kept (*Kiddushin* 31a).

The Rebbe said, “Why are you so amazed by this gentile’s actions? Stand amazed at the greatness of *Bnei Yisrael*, who were prepared to spend so much money for a mitzvah that was a *chok*, without reason. You see, afterwards they used that very money to buy a *parah adumah* (red cow) from that same gentile, who had passed up money for the sake of a logical mitzvah —the mitzvah of honoring one’s parents.”

Never Too Late

זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲדָם בִּי יָמוּת בְּאֶהָל

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent”

(Bamidbar 19:14)

“Words of Torah do not endure except in a person who ‘kills’ himself over them”

(Maseches Berachos)

R' Chaim was a well-known businessman. Customers flocked to his store not only from his own city, but from surrounding ones as

well. He was so busy that he reached the point where he could not find time to *daven* in a shul with a minyan.

Years passed. R' Chaim's beard turned white and he grew old and feeble. In terror, he thought, "My time is drawing near. Soon I will be called upon to give a *din v'cheshbon* for all my actions in this world. I must prepare!"

That very night, R' Chaim went to shul. After he finished *davening*, he remained in shul to learn a little.

The next day he went to shul for *Shacharis*, then stayed to learn for two solid hours. It wasn't until 10 o'clock that morning that he finally put in an appearance at his store.

"What happened to you today?" his wife asked in surprise.

"I was busy."

Another day passed, and R' Chaim's wife saw that her husband no longer opened the store on time, as he had always done. She hurried over to the shul to see what had happened, and found him sitting and learning.

"Have you lost your senses?" she asked angrily. "A huge crowd of customers is waiting at the shop—and you're learning? If you don't hurry, they'll go to our competitors instead!"

"Listen for just a minute," R' Chaim said gently, trying to appease his wife's anger. "What would you do if the Angel of Death appeared right now and told me, 'Come with me, it is your time to die!' Would you be able to tell him that the store is full of customers?"

"Consider me dead for now. In a couple of hours, I will rise to life again and return to work!"



R' Chaim of Volozhin would relate that each time he came to Vilna, he would bring along a list of the questions that had occurred to him in his learning. He would pose all his questions to the Vilna Gaon, who would solve the problems for him.

One Friday, R' Chaim came to spend Shabbos in Vilna. Because he arrived at midday, he did not go at once to the Gaon, but went directly to the bathhouse to clean himself in honor of the Shabbos. Hearing that he had arrived in town, however, the Vilna Gaon sent a special messenger to the bathhouse to hurry his faithful student to his home.

R' Chaim hastened to his Rebbe, and found him very distressed. The Vilna Gaon was suffering from a severe headache.

“Please,” he asked R’ Chaim, “help me understand one matter in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* that’s been plaguing me for days. I can’t figure out its meaning.”

“Who am I, to be able to figure out something that is difficult for the Rebbe?” R’ Chaim asked in astonishment.

“Let’s go through the matter from the beginning,” the Gaon replied.

R’ Chaim listened attentively to the Gaon’s questions and thought about them deeply. Suddenly, he thought of a way to resolve the issue they had been discussing.

Hesitantly, he began to express his thought. The Gaon’s eyes lit up and his face grew radiant. He took up the thread of his beloved student’s thought and completed it. The problem had been solved!

“And now,” said the Gaon, “I can revive myself with something light to eat.”

R’ Chaim left the room at once and hurried to the kitchen to fetch his Rebbe a little food. It was there that he learned that, for the past three days —ever since the difficult question in his learning had arisen —his Rebbe had been so upset that he could not eat. Only now, with the problem resolved, did the Vilna Gaon refresh himself with a bit of food. Then the two, rebbe and student, went out to welcome the Shabbos with joy.

Someone Else’s Property

וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הָעֶדְהָ וְאֶת בְּעִירָם

“And give drink to the assembly and their animals.”

(Bamidbar 20:8)

“‘And their animals’ —from here [we see] that the Holy One, Blessed is He, has pity on Israel’s property.”

(Rashi)

A student of R’ Isser Zalman Meltzer told this story:

“I was once walking down the street with my rebbe, R’ Isser Zalman, when we passed a yard filled with chickens. As we walked by, several of the chickens took fright and darted out into the street.

“R’ Isser Zalman worried that he had caused the chickens’ escape, and that they would get lost. And so, what did this elderly, venerable *rosh yeshivah* do? He picked up his stick and began to chase the fleeing chickens back into their yard. We worked for some time until all of them were returned to their proper place.”

Another story occurred during the period when R’ Isser Zalman was serving as rabbi of Sutzk. He was walking down the street, absorbed in his thoughts, when he passed a building that was under construction and accidentally stepped into a tub of plaster.

R’ Isser Zalman became agitated —not because the plaster had soiled his shoes, but because by stepping into the tub, he had taken a small amount of material away from the builder —an amount worth perhaps a penny.

Without regard for his status as rabbi of the city, R’ Isser Zalman would not leave the site until he had tracked down the builder, paid him for his loss, and begged his forgiveness.

Bringing Forth Water

הַמֵּן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם

“Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?”

(*Bamidbar* 20:10)

R’ Chaim Vital’s reputation for greatness spread even to the non-Jews of Eretz Yisrael —and sometimes caused him serious problems. Despite his strong wish not to leave Eretz Yisrael, he was once forced to flee for his life to Damascus.

Here is that story:

One Friday, all the gates in Jerusalem were sealed off. No one was permitted to enter or leave the city. The Muslims gathered in the mosque that, tragically, stands where our holy *Beis HaMikdash* once stood in its glory.

One of their high-ranking officers, a rabid Jew-hater by the name of Abu Sifin, was passing by one of the gates. In the silence, of the empty roads, he heard the sound of water flowing beneath the gate. These were the waters of *Nachal Gichon*, the waters that King

Chizkiyahu had sealed off when facing the enemy, Sancheriv. As it says in *Sefer Divrei HaYamim* (II:32:30): “And he, Chizkiyahu, sealed the exit of the upper waters of the Gichon...”

The official, recalling the existence of this water channel and knowing who had sealed it off, turned to his men.

“Is there any Jew who is capable of opening this channel?”

“Certainly,” one of his men replied. “Not far from here lives a great rabbi. He can do anything!”

Within the hour, Abu Sifin was standing in R' Chaim Vital's doorway.

“Listen, Jew,” he said. “The people of this city need the waters of the Gichon. I command you to open the channel —on pain of death!”

R' Chaim did not want to use Hashem's holy Name to perform open miracles in public. Instead, he fled, and with *kefitzas haderech* (his journey was shortened miraculously), he arrived in Damascus that same day. He fell asleep and had a dream in which his rebbe, the *Arizal*, appeared before him.

“Why didn't you open the Gichon?” the Ari asked. “This would have been the proper time to repair what Chizkiyahu did against the Sages' wishes. Had you opened the Gichon, it would have been the start of the *geulah*!”

R' Chaim Vital wished to return to Jerusalem at once, but his Rebbe stopped him. “The time has passed,” he said. “We have lost our chance.”

In the Public Eye

יען לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל

“Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel”

(*Bamidbar* 20:12)

In a talk he gave in Elul 5743 (1983), the Sanzer Rebbe once told the following story:

After his marriage, the author of *Yeshu'os Yaakov* lived with his in-laws in the city of Yeruslav, and he *davened* in that city's shul.

One *erev Yom Kippur*, late in the day, a stranger suddenly entered the shul. Trembling with awe, he went at once to stand at the *bimah* facing the assembly. In a voice like a lion's that was also strangely sweet, he began reciting *Kol Nidrei*, the opening *tefillah* of Yom Kippur —without asking anyone's permission!

Though the usual *ba'alei tefillah* were present, on this holy night no one wished to enter into a quarrel. The stranger's *davening* was filled with fire and inspiration. They allowed him to continue.

When *Kol Nidrei* was over, the uninvited *sheliach tzibbur* went on to *daven Ma'ariv*, along with all its special *piyutim*, in a powerful voice. He continued until the very end, said the *Shir HaYichud*, and then, with amazing sweetness, began to recite the entire *Sefer Tehillim*.

By the time he was done, dawn had broken. This *sheliach tzibbur*, still standing in place before Hashem, began to *daven Shacharis*. Then he stood up and read the Torah portion, after which he returned to his former position and *davened Mussaf*. He did all this in a strong and pleasant voice, without taking a single break.

The congregation was astounded at the spectacle. Some of them began to whisper that this amazing *sheliach tzibbur* was no ordinary human being, but an angel. No one could *daven* like that, without pause, from *Kol Nidrei* the evening before, and continuing through the entire night reciting *Tehillim*, and then go on all through the following day, with neither his voice nor his energy ever faltering!

"I, myself," the author of *Yeshu'os Yaakov* said afterwards, "could not decide whether he was man or angel."

Immediately after *Mussaf*, the stranger began to *daven Minchah* —and then, without any pause, *Tefillas Ne'ilah*. He himself blew the shofar, then led *Ma'ariv* on *motza'ei Yom Kippur*. At this point, the congregation became convinced that he was indeed an angel, as no human could possibly be capable of doing what they had seen this man do that day.

After *Ma'ariv*, the amazing *sheliach tzibbur* turned to the assembly and wished them a "*Gut Yom Tov*." The *Yeshu'os Yaakov's* father-in-law went over to the man and invited him to his home for *Havdalah*. The stranger accepted the invitation. The *Yeshu'os Yaakov* went along with them, eager to see how the "angel" would act in his father-in-law's home.

Upon their arrival, the guest was given the honor of reciting *Havdalah*. This, too, he said in a strong, vigorous voice. After he

drank a little wine, he sat down on a chair, sighed, and said that he did not feel well. He asked for something to revive and strengthen him.

“He’s not an angel, after all,” thought the Yeshu’os Yaakov.

But he abandoned this opinion quickly when he saw what happened next. Members of the household offered the guest cake and fruit, which he declined. “Please bring me a *Maseches Sukkah*,” he requested. He began to learn at once, with great enthusiasm, until morning.

The Yeshu’os Yaakov hid in the stranger’s room, wanting to see how this stranger behaved, but he fell asleep there. When he awoke, it was already morning, but the guest was still learning. When the stranger had completed learning the entire tractate, he stood up and went at once to the shul for *Shacharis*.

It was only later that the man’s identity became known. He was R’ Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, author of *Kedushas Levi*.

When telling this story, the Sanzer Rebbe would add, “This story came to me from sources that trace themselves directly back to the Yeshu’os Yaakov. We can learn from this that, although R’ Levi Yitzchak’s *tefillos* were able to pierce the Heavens and he elevated himself mightily on the holy day, on *motza’ei Yom Kippur* he still felt weak and needed to revive his spirit by learning Gemara. Our holy books tell us that the holy Torah is food for the soul.”

Hurry, Hurry

וַיַּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹאֲבֹתֵינוּ

“And the Egyptians did evil to us and to our forefathers.”

(*Bamidbar* 20:15)

The British authorities suspected a certain resident of Jerusalem, the son of an elderly and pious Torah scholar, of belonging to an underground organization. He was arrested and thrown into jail. Two months later, when it turned out that their suspicions had been groundless, the prisoner was released. He went immediately to R’ Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe, who was then staying in Jerusalem, to let him know he had been set free.

The rebbe's first question was: "Have you told your old father that you've been let out of jail?"

"Not yet."

"Don't wait another minute!" the Rebbe urged. "Hurry and let him know that you've been released. Hurry, hurry." He practically pushed the man out the door. "See to what extent people are not careful enough to hurry and prevent distress to a Jew who is anxious and worried!"

The Robber's Threat

פֶּן בְּחָרֵב אֵצֶא לְקִרְאָתְךָ

"Lest I go forth against you with the sword!"

(Bamidbar 20:18)

R' Mordechai Dov of Hornsteipel was traveling by wagon, when the driver veered off into the forest. The wagon driver stopped the horses and turned to R' Mordechai Dov, saying, "I am a robber by profession. I demand that the Rabbi bless me with success! If you refuse, I will not hesitate to kill you on the spot!"

The Rebbe was frightened by these threatening words. But sitting up tall and erect, he said, "Let me tell you something important. Something like this once happened to my grandfather's grandfather, R' Zusha of Anipoli. He was traveling, and came upon a band of robbers, who demanded that he bless them with success in their activities — or else, they would kill him.

"R' Zusha told them, 'A *poritz* will soon come to you. You will not have to kill him, for he will die on his own while he is still with you, and he will be carrying a great deal of money. If you will be satisfied with this fortune and repent of your ways —if you stop practicing your "profession" immediately —I promise you success. But if, Heaven forbid, you continue in your wicked ways, you will fall into the hands of the authorities and will end up being dragged in chains past my house.'

"Several members of the gang did repent. They returned to the straight and narrow path, and were successful in their endeavors.

But the others continued to rob and murder, until they were caught by the king's officers. And when they were taken to prison, in chains, they indeed passed right by R' Zusha's house.

"As for me," R' Mordechai Dov told the wagon driver, "I will not give you any blessings or promise you any *poritz*. What I will say is this: If you leave your wicked ways and return to the path of righteousness—good. If not, be assured that a black future awaits you. It is I who tell you this! And now, if you wish to kill me, go ahead and do it!"

The moment the Rebbe finished speaking, the wagon driver burst into a loud wailing and fell at the Rebbe's feet, begging his forgiveness. In the end, he repented and changed his way of life. He remained close to the Rebbe, and became known as the *Ba'al Teshuvah* of Bobroisek.

Their Money's Worth

וְאִם מִימֵיךָ גִשְׁתָּה אֲנִי וּמִקְנֵי וְנִתְתִּי מִכָּרָם

"And if we drink your waters—I or my flock—I shall pay their price."

(Bamidbar 20:19)

One Friday, shortly before Shabbos, some guests arrived at the home of R' Yeshayah of Moskowitz. R' Yeshayah welcomed them pleasantly, and the guests hurried off to prepare themselves to greet the Shabbos Queen.

R' Yeshayah appeared at the door to their room and said, "I know that you've come from a great distance and are not familiar with me or my lodgings. Therefore, I'm letting you know in advance that you'll have to pay me four *zuz* per person for your Shabbos stay. This may sound like a large sum, but it entitles you to eat and drink the best of everything in my house all Shabbos long, and also during the *melaveh malkah* meal on *motza'ei Shabbos*."

Shabbos passed comfortably for the guests. They ate wonderful meals and drank fine wine. After all, they wanted to get their money's worth!

Sunday morning came, and it was time for the travelers to move on. Before setting out, they went over to their host to pay him and settle their account.

A smile spread over R' Yeshayah's face. "Do you think I would give up a precious mitzvah like *hachnasas orchim* for four *zuz*?" And he absolutely refused to take a penny from them.

Then the guests understood. R' Yeshayah had told them he would charge money for their visit only to make them perfectly comfortable about enjoying the best he had to offer them in his home, all Shabbos long.

On Second Thought

וַיִּבְכוּ אֶת אַהֲרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל

"And they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Israel."

(Bamidbar 20:29)

"For Aharon would pursue peace and instill love between parties to a quarrel!"

(Rashi)

R' Eliyahu Lopian lived in the city of Kelm. When his family grew too large for their home, it became necessary to move to a bigger apartment. R' Eliyahu began to search for an appropriate one. Finding good apartments at that time was very difficult, and it was only after a great deal of effort that he succeeded, at last, in finding one. R' Eliyahu concluded the deal with the landlord, hired a wagon, piled all his household belongings on it, and transported his family to their new home.

Upon their arrival at their new apartment, they found a man waiting for them. He turned to R' Eliyahu and said, "I am about to marry off my daughter, R' Eliyahu. I've been searching the entire town for an apartment for the young couple —and haven't found anything suitable except this one. Now you've come and snatched it up before me. You should know this: If you move into this apartment, I'll have to postpone the wedding!"

Hearing this, R' Eliyahu's family began to scold the man for his chutzpah. A family blessed with numerous children had found the apartment first and finalized the deal with the landlord. On what grounds does this man have to complain to them?

But R' Eliyahu listened to the man's argument, and then his family's counterargument, in silence. After a few minutes, he broke the silence to say to the wagon driver, "Please do not unload the wagon. You must drive us back to our old apartment."



Rabbi Weingarten of Belgium tells another story of R' Eliyahu Lopian's ability to put other people's concerns before his own. During the Second World War, when the Nazis entered his city, Hashem helped Rabbi Weingarten escape through a back door with nothing but a *sefer Torah* in his arms. He eventually ended up in London, where he stayed as the guest of a young yeshivah man he knew.

His host began to search for some source of livelihood for Rabbi Weingarten. "There is a big shul in London," he said, "whose rabbi recently passed away. Maybe you can try to take his place as rabbi of the shul." However, the young man added, he had heard that the members of that shul wanted to ask R' Eliyahu Lopian to become the rabbi. It would be a good idea to speak to R' Eliyahu first. Perhaps he would agree to give up the post. And that is what they did.

On *erev Shabbos*, just before it was time to leave for shul, R' Eliyahu suddenly appeared at the host's door. Taking R' Weingarten affectionately by the arm, he said, "Come with me tonight to *daven* in the shul."

When they entered the shul, R' Eliyahu took Rabbi Weingarten immediately to the eastern wall, beside the holy ark. He himself stood at the *bimah* and announced, "*Rabbosai*, I've brought you a rabbi who is great in Torah and *yirah*!"

R' Eliyahu then blessed the rabbi and his congregation profusely, and stepped down from the *bimah*.