

The Coachman

WHEN TZVI ELIMELECH WAS 10 YEARS OLD, HIS father, Reb Pesach, who was known as Reb Pesach Prechniker, took a job as a *melamed* in a faraway town. He would spend the entire winter living in a Jewish-owned inn; he did not see his family for more than six months. In those days, at the end of the 18th century, this kind of arrangement was not all that unusual.

That winter was a terribly harsh one. The snow and icy winds were relentless, and people kept running out of wood with which to heat their homes. On one very cold and stormy night, the proprietor of the inn in which Reb Pesach was staying heard a knock at the door. He opened it to find three peasants standing on his doorstep; all three were freezing and desperately in need of a place for the night.

The innkeeper was somewhat of a hardliner. When he asked them if they had money to pay for their night's stay and they responded in the negative, he did not allow the peasants entry. They begged and pleaded, their frozen teeth chattering, but the innkeeper stood his ground and adamantly refused to let them in.

Reb Pesach could not believe the coldheartedness of the innkeeper. He spoke up on behalf of the peasants, but the innkeeper would not budge. Eventually, seeing that Reb Pesach was really looking out for the welfare of the three wayfarers, the innkeeper

asked Reb Pesach if he would be willing to take upon himself the responsibility of paying for the three newcomers. He assumed that he would most certainly decline, but much to his surprise, Reb Pesach agreed to pay for their stay. The three peasants were very grateful, and they thanked Reb Pesach profusely for his graciousness and generosity.

Little did he know, however, that the storm was not a one-night storm; it was to last for the better part of two weeks. After it was over, it took some time to clear away all of the snow that had piled up. By the time they were prepared to leave, the peasants had racked up quite a bill. But Reb Pesach had given his word, and so, in spite of the unexpected expenses, he agreed to pay.

Spring finally arrived. Reb Pesach was ready to leave the inn and travel back to join his family for the Yom Tov of Pesach. He had hoped to make 51 rubles over the winter, but the price of his newfound friends' stay at the inn was 55 rubles, four more rubles than he had earned over the entire winter. Not only was he not coming home with any money, he even owed his innkeeper four rubles.

He was extremely disappointed and did not know what to do. How could he possibly head home after six months without having made a penny? When he arrived in his hometown, instead of going directly to his house, he headed toward one of the shuls and opened up a Gemara. This was the one constant in his life. He knew he could always find solace in a *blatt* Gemara.

Young Tzvi Elimelech knew that his father was on his way home and he ran to greet him, eventually finding him learning in the shul. The child urged his father to please come home right away, as the entire family was waiting for him; he had been away for so long.

Reb Pesach was torn. On the one hand, he, too, wanted to go home. But on the other hand, he was embarrassed to come home empty-handed. He knew that his wife had bought the children new clothing and shoes for Yom Tov on credit, and now they were going to have to return what they had purchased.

Realizing he had no choice, he picked himself up, painted a fake smile on his face, and headed home with his son. On their way, a fancy carriage rumbled past the two of them. It was speeding through the alleyways when a package fell off the back of the wagon. Reb Pesach picked up the package and ran as fast as he could after the carriage, but it was to no avail. His feet were no match for the eight horses running at full speed. Even when he and Tzvi Elimelech called out to the coachman to stop, he did not seem to hear them and kept on going. As the horses galloped away, Reb Pesach was left holding the package in his hands.

He checked the bag. There were no identifying signs on it. Reb Pesach would never have thought of keeping someone else's bag, but there was no way to return it. Assured that he was able to keep it *le'halachah*, he opened up the package and could not believe his eyes. There were exactly 55 rubles inside.

The night of the Seder, Tzvi Elimelech ran to the door to open it up for Eliyahu HaNavi. When he opened the door, he began to smile. "Tatty," he called, "the coachman is here!" But everyone at the Seder table looked on in amusement. There was no one at the door.

Sensing what was happening, Reb Pesach walked over to his son. He gave him a *glettele* and whispered in his ear that he should never tell anyone about the story, not until right before his death.

Indeed, the coachman was Eliyahu HaNavi.

And many years later, right before he died, Rav Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov, the Bnei Yissaschar, related this story to his close family members and disciples who were gathered around his bed.

Picking Up the Pieces

Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, who was known as the Nesivos Shalom after the sefer he authored, was already in Yerushalayim during World War II. Yet, though the Rebbe himself was not in Europe during the conflagration, the Slonimer dynasty was practically destroyed in the Holocaust. After the war, the Slonimer Yeshivah in Yerushalayim served as the center for the dynasty's revitalization, as the Rebbe helped others rebuild their lives, as well.

In the following poignant and moving tale, one such survivor learned a lesson from the Rebbe, which helped him rebuild his life.

HERTZKA SAPERSTEIN WAS COMPLETELY ALONE IN THE world. Before the war, he was part of a beautiful family and community, and now nothing remained. There was no one left from his village and he had no friends. Like a shattered piece of glass, his heart was broken into one million fragments; in his mind, he surmised that the pieces of his life would be impossible to be picked up and put back together again. And who could blame him for thinking this way? Indeed, the odds were stacked against him.

Hertzka had been taken away from his parents' home early in the war and spent a long time in the Russian Army. By the end of the war, after all the suffering he endured, there were nearly no recognizable signs that he had ever been a Jew. There was certainly nothing about him that resembled a Slonimer Chassid. Though his

family had, once upon a time, been affiliated with Slonim, that seemed liked hundreds of years ago, not just several.

Somehow, Hertzka made his way to Eretz Yisrael in time for Pesach. Once there, he found himself wandering aimlessly. He did not know where he was heading and didn't even know if he would have a Seder. Providentially, his wanderings brought him to the Slonimer *beis midrash*, yet he still had no idea what he was going to do about the upcoming Yom Tov.

Suddenly, on the first night of Pesach, Hertzka felt a tap on the shoulder. He turned around and there was the Rebbe. With a warm smile and deep, loving eyes, the Rebbe didn't ask him, but told him, "You will be our guest tonight for the Seder."

Although he did not know what to expect, Hertzka felt comforted by the fact that somebody cared enough to invite him. He walked along with the Rebbe until they reached his home. The Rebbe opened the door to his house, and in a loud and exuberant voice, he called out, "*Gut Yom Tov!*" There was a palpable feeling of joy and excitement in the house. The children seemed so happy; it was almost as if the walls were smiling.

Hertzka looked around the room and his eyes immediately lit upon the table, which was set beautifully. The décor in the rest of the house was very simple, but the table, which was covered in a pristine white tablecloth, bespoke royalty. It was obvious that great efforts had been expended to pull this together.

Rav Shalom Noach approached the Seder table and began arranging everything. He brought the wine to the table and found matzos that were perfect and whole. He had even managed to somehow purchase proper *maror* despite the exorbitant cost. His face shone with the joy of mitzvos. He put his *kittel* on as his family stood around him, watching every one of his moves.

With great curiosity, the young ones asked him about all the symbolic foods. He answered each question with patience and love. He began to explain about the significance of the night to his children, while informing them that much more information

would be forthcoming. Their anticipation grew; they could hardly wait for the actual Seder to begin.

All of a sudden, the Rebbe's 3-year-old daughter grabbed the tablecloth. She yanked it so hard that in a split second, everything came crashing to the floor. The floor was now a potpourri of shattered glass, spilled wine, smashed and soggy matzos, and bits of *maror* and *charoses*. The room, which, moments before, had been the scene of total serenity, was now transformed into a tornado of chaos. No one knew what to do first.

The matzos were ruined; broken into a pile of crumbs and covered in wine, they were all but useless. In fact, it was hard to find anything of value in the whole pile of debris that lay scattered on the floor. The wine, too, was spilled all over; only a small amount remained in a nearly empty bottle that was lying on the floor.

Hertzka observed everything. The scene was traumatic for him. He had been looking forward to a peaceful and memorable evening. He felt like running out of the house, but he knew he had nowhere to go. So he stayed in a corner, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. But then, something caught his eye.

Amid the tumult and commotion, Rav Shalom Noach went over to his 3-year-old daughter, the cause of the whole mess. Her face was white and she was terrified. Her action had been impulsive; she had had no intention of causing so much damage. But one person understood and knew that she hadn't known any better and could not be blamed. And that person was her father.

He picked her up and walked over to the window. There was so much noise in the room, but Hertzka was standing right near him, and so he heard the Rebbe's words: "Look outside, my dear daughter, and take a look at the stars; see how peaceful the sky is. I know that there's much confusion in here and that you are scared, and I know that you don't understand why there is so much noise around you. You probably want to go to your room and hide.

"But you know what? Not everything is lost. Why don't we try to see what we can pick up from the floor? Let's see what we can salvage.

We may be able to find a piece of matzah or a little bit of wine. Maybe there's a plate or two that's not broken and a glass that's not chipped. We can put together what we can. It may not look exactly the way it did before. But it's a start. And it's important to try to put things back together again, even when everything seems lost."

Hertzka listened carefully and tears began streaming down his face. He couldn't believe that someone could remain so calm in such a chaotic setting. In a way, it restored his belief in humanity. It showed how we can be in control of our emotions. He had seen human beings acting like animals. He needed to see someone act like an angel.

Aside from the lesson he learned from the Rebbe's attitude, his words were exactly what Hertzka needed to hear. It was almost as if he were speaking to him. His world, too, had been completely destroyed. Everything that he had once known and held dear was now completely shattered and broken into many pieces.

But now, he was told that there were two options: He could go and hide, or he could try to salvage whatever he could and begin to set the table of his life once more. Perhaps it would not look as magnificent as it had before, but he could save what he could.

That's what the three of them — the Rebbe, his young daughter, and Hertzka — did. They bent down and picked up all the pieces from the floor.

That night, those were not the only pieces that were picked up and put together. Hertzka's heart began to heal, as well. From there, he began to put his life back together. Before long, he was happily married, with children, and he had begun a new life.

Rav Naftali Hertz Saperstein became one of the outstanding Chassidim of the Rebbe. Although Hertzka had many wonderful and outstanding middos, he became especially well known for one of these traits: he was someone who never got angry.

After all, he was too busy picking up the pieces to worry about unimportant things like that.

The Sound of Angels

One of the well-known Russian refuseniks in the era after World War II was the very resilient Rav Yitzchak Zilber. He was taught Torah by his father at a very young age, and soon after he began to teach his fellow Russian Jews, right under the nose of the KGB. Numerous times, they tried to catch him and throw him in prison, but he managed to elude the authorities and always seemed to have an explanation for his activities. He was a mathematics professor, and the KGB authorities were convinced that he would not teach his class on Shabbos. But he would walk to his classes, teach them, and walk back home. This is but one example of how, for many years, Rav Yitzchak managed to keep mitzvos without compromise, and how he drove the KGB crazy by not falling into their trap. In fact, they only managed to imprison him when someone planted evidence that Rav Yitzchak was an enemy of the state.

RAV YITZCHAK HAD A SON BY THE NAME OF BENZION Chaim. Following in his father's footsteps, he, too, wanted nothing more than to learn Torah and to lead the life of an observant Jew. But he was not as savvy as his father, and the authorities caught him and threw him into prison. Yet, he still possessed his father's trait of defiance, and he continued to observe Torah and mitzvos despite the difficult conditions.

Life in prison was very challenging. As summer came to an end, Benzion Chaim began to wonder if he was going to be able to fulfill the mitzvah of shofar. He did everything in his power to

obtain a ram's horn. Though it seemed that this mitzvah would be impossible to fulfill, Benzion Chaim would not give up. His fellow inmates mocked him and told him that he was delusional, that it was never going to happen, but he was not that easily convinced. He knew that if you believe, anything could happen.

Finally, the first night of Rosh Hashanah arrived; the other inmates laughed heartily. Yes, they had been right. Although he had hoped for a miracle, there was none. And so, for the first time since he could remember, Benzion Chaim realized that he would not be hearing the sounds of the shofar.

That night, Benzion Chaim prayed for the salvation to come. He cried bitterly, not only for his own personal redemption, but for Heavenly assistance in obtaining a shofar. As he prepared to go to sleep, his roommate would not let him forget the fact that he would not have a shofar the next morning. And though he knew that the salvation can come at any minute, he was embarrassed that he had assured his fellow inmates that he would have a shofar, which in the end had not materialized. But he also understood that he wasn't running the show. He was only a player in Hashem's world. If this is the way He wanted it to happen, then so be it.

Little did Benzion Chaim know that at that time, his father, Rav Yitzchak, who was a free man at that point, was doing everything in his power to make shofar-blowing happen in the Gulag. The prison compound where his son was being held was heavily guarded on three of its four sides. However, on the fourth side, there were miles and miles of thick forest. The only way one could get to the prison would be by traveling for many hours through the thick forest. With the below-freezing temperatures and meters of snow on the ground, it was highly unlikely that someone could survive the intolerable conditions if they chose to visit by way of that route.

But that didn't prevent Rav Yitzchak Zilber from setting out to accomplish the impossible. From the moment he heard that his son was being held captive, he began to devise a plan to arrange for a shofar to be blown in the compound. He knew his son would

also try to gain access to a shofar, and yet he knew how difficult that would be. So he decided to take matters into his own hands.

It was Rosh Hashanah morning and Benzion Chaim lay in his flimsy cot. He had barely slept the night before. How could he, knowing that he would not hear the shofar?

Suddenly, at the crack of dawn, he heard a sound, and then another. They were the unmistakable blasts of the shofar piercing the morning dawn. As he listened, he noticed that his roommate had also heard the blasts. There were 30 of them. Then, just as suddenly as the sounds had come, the blowing stopped and it was quiet. Benzion Chaim tried to peek out the window, but he was unable to see anything. It must have been a miracle!

Somehow, somehow, an angel had appeared out of nowhere and blown the shofar. The other Jewish inmates had heard it, as well. Later that morning, he watched as the guards huddled together, trying to figure out what had happened. But there was no trace of anyone.

A number of months later, Benzion Chaim was released. He ran into his father's arms and hugged him tightly. As he let go, he asked his father an interesting *shailah*. Does one fulfill his commandment of hearing the shofar if the one blowing it is an angel? Then he proceeded to tell his father the entire story.

His father could not help but smile in return.

Benzion Chaim wondered aloud why his father was smiling.

Rav Yitzchak replied, "Suffice it to say that it was not an angel whose shofar you heard. Don't worry, you were *yotzei* your mitzvah."

Realizing the tremendous *mesirus nefesh* of his father, Benzion Chaim hugged his father again and thanked him for his dedication, love, and commitment.

Perhaps the greatest display of appreciation toward his father is that now Rav Benzion Chaim continues to carry on his father's magnificent legacy of devotion to Russian Jews.