

The Torah Any Times

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Rabbi YY Jacobson

No Strings Attached

Rav Zalman Bronstein was a Russian Chassidic Jew in the Russian army during the Second World War. His comrades were falling like flies given the heavy artillery and bullets being fired. Life was trying on the front lines, and a life for one more day was always another gift.

One day in the middle of the war, Rav Zalman entered the bunker and in entered alongside him a Russian general who wanted to shave. As the Russian general shaved, Rav Zalman Bronstein noticed that he was singing to himself a Russian lullaby. Rav Zalman himself, who was gifted with a beautiful voice and knew the Russian songs well, felt that the general was not singing it right. Even though the Russian fellow was a general, Rav Zalman couldn't deal with the forgery of the niggun (tune). So Rav Zalman began to sing himself.

The general couldn't help but notice the accompanying voice. Turning to his side, he interrupted Rav Zalman. "With such a voice, what are you doing here? You have to be a solo in the Red Army's choir! Come with me!"

Rav Zalman later recounted that this saved his life. The Russian general plucked him out of the front lines where everyone was being killed, and he became very active and very successful. His voice and talent were beloved.

"One day," recalled Rav Zalman,

"I was told that in a little while there will be a huge performance. It would be the biggest performance the Red Army has ever seen. All the top echelons of the army were going to be present. Being given this information, I took a look at my calendar that I had, and noticed that the day of the performance was scheduled for Yom Kippur. I grew dispirited. On Yom Kippur, I would go and sing Russian songs? Moreover, I would need to travel, use a microphone and be accompanied by the musical instruments. I couldn't do it. But to say that I couldn't do it would get me sent back to the front lines. It was a question of pikuach nefesh, something life threatening. Struggling with the dilemma, Rav Zalman didn't know what to do.

The night of Yom Kippur arrived. "Bronstein!" they called out "It's time to go." "My voice, my voice," Bronstein coughed, "I don't know what happened. I must have some virus. I'm hoarse. I can't sing. What should I do?" Bronstein had made his point. "Okay, listen," replied the officer. "If you're hoarse, you need to protect your voice because we need it." "Of course," said Bronstein, "spasiba (thank you), achen charasho (very good)." Bronstein was let off the hook.

Now in his room, Bronstein remained all by himself. There was no shul, no siddur, no machzor. Nothing. But he remembered the tefillos (prayers). Sitting in his little room,

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he began to sing the Yom Kippur davening—Kol Nidrei, Avinu Malkeinu. As he sat in the middle of his Yom Kippur reflections with tears in his eyes, bereft of his home and family amidst the dark years of the Second World War—there was a knock on his door.

There, at the entrance to his room, three generals stood. “Bronstein, we know why you didn’t go sing today. Your voice is as hoarse as our voice. It’s Yom Kippur.” Oy vey, vey, vey. “Bronstein, we are Jewish. We want to hear Kol Nidrei.” At first, Bronstein didn’t let up, uncertain if this was merely a ruse. “Bronstein, we know why you didn’t sing. We want Kol Nidrei.” Bronstein began thinking it through. “If I get up here and start singing Kol Nidrei, and the people hear my voice, you know what they will do to me. Why do you want to put me in this danger?” “Bronstein,” the generals reiterated, “behind here there is a forest. We’ll go deep into the forest where the trees are tall. There, the trees will hear your Kol Nidrei, but no other person will.” And so it was.

Three decorated Communist generals walked on Yom Kippur into the depths of a Russian forest. They needed to be completely removed from civilization. After walking for a long time, finally, one of the generals announced, “Here, it’s safe. Nobody’s going to hear. Start Kol Nidrei.” Zalman Bronstein, who had a heavenly voice, began.

In Bronstein’s imagination, he was back in his shul, with his wife, with his children, with his community, with his Rav, with his friends, singing Kol Nidrei.

Rav Zalman recounted, “It was a Kol Nidrei I never had before.” No fanfare, no seats, no chazzan (cantor), shamash (attendant), gabbai (warden). It was him, Hashem, the forest, and three Russian generals who had no connection to Judaism whatsoever. But it was so authentic, so deep.

After finishing the first Kol Nidrei, and he was ready to go to the second, he opened his eyes. Looking around, he saw three huge, muscular, powerful generals sobbing like babies. He had brought them back to a world that was seemingly gone forever. That world of their youth that they gave up for the Bolshevik paradise of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. They were sobbing. “Nochamol (again),” they said. He recited Kol Nidrei a second time, a heavenly wind carrying his voice upward, and then a third time. They wanted him to proceed through all the songs of Yom Kippur, which he did in the forest until they returned home.

Every year, when Rav Zalman Bronstein gets up in shul and Kol Nidrei beckons the time when Jews gather together wearing their tallis, kittel and gartel in a splendorous, beautiful sight, he is back in the forest with

three generals who have no strings attached to anything. They are not trying to get their kids into seminary, or this school or that school; they’re not on shidduchim (match-making) lists. They’re in a forest, and they’re connected. “That’s where I go to,” said Rav Bronstein. “That’s why my Kol Nidrei sounds the way it does.”

This is a powerful tool for all of us. Even when we are in shul and there are hundreds or dozens of people, in a certain way, each of us is in a forest with three little or big creatures inside of ourselves that are often alienated. But at that moment, you can let go of everything. Let go of expectations and disappointments. Let go of particular dreams and ambitions that are making you frustrated because they were not realized. And let your soul be in its repose as the essence of the soul which is one with G-d.

There, all the vows—all the promises we make to ourselves, wherein we say, “I can’t,” “I’m not allowed to,” “I’m unworthy,” “I can’t have it”—are nullified. They are forgiven, eradicated and nullified. They are no longer valid and they no longer exist.

And then close your eyes and allow the heavenly words of Kol Nidrei to carry you to another world. The world that is your soul.

Rabbi Daniel Glatstein

Finding Life in a Lost Suitcase

Recently, I was invited by the Harris family of Cleveland, Ohio to deliver a Teshuva address in honor of their father’s first yearzeit. I was scheduled to take off at 2:00 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon. I arrived at the airport

with plenty of time beforehand, carrying with me a new suitcase my wife had gotten me. It was just the size for a short trip, as I was only going for the night and it was perfect for the occasion. The problem was that I was not really used to the suitcase. Along

with me, I had three items—my knapsack with notes in it, a hatbox for my hat, and my suitcase that I was going to take on the plane with a few personal items and my tallis and tefillin. I put all three items through the security, and a little while later, I was sitting

at the security gate, and I had my hat box, my knapsack... but where was my suitcase? I couldn't believe it. The first question that came to mind was if my notes were in it, because that was the whole reason I was going to Cleveland.

I quickly realized that though my notes were in my knapsack, which was with me, my tallis and tefillin were in my suitcase, which was not. That was not good. Where was it? I must have left it in the concession stand, where I purchased a bottle of water because I had been feeling dehydrated. I ran back there, but was met with no positive responses. No, they had not seen a suitcase. Where could it be? It then dawned on me. I must have left it at security. I was not used to this suitcase, as it was brand new and this was my first time flying with it. The last place you want to leave a suitcase, I knew, was the airport.

I ran as fast as I could until I reached the security lines. And there, in between the two conveyor belts

was a table. And there, lying on the table was my suitcase. It must have remained there for thirty minutes, untouched. All I knew was that I was very grateful to Hashem.

I soon thereafter got on the plane and was told that the plane would be taking off soon, despite there being a delay. But then again, the flight was pushed off. After three hours of stalling, the pilot announced that we needed to refuel. But then, after a further delay, came the official announcement that the flight had been cancelled.

However, despite the delay, I coordinated with a friend of mine who was able to quickly put together a livestream for the lecture, and I delivered it.

All the while, I wondered to myself why I needed to go to the airport in the first place if the flight needed to be cancelled. And then it hit me that this experience taught me a very important lesson.

Imagine if I had gotten on the plane and flown to Cleveland. Would I ever

have seen the suitcase? It would have been somewhat of a miracle if I had been reunited with the suitcase in a timely fashion, if ever. The reason I was able to get the suitcase and retrieve it right away was because I was still in the airport. And when you are still in the airport, you have a fighting chance to find your suitcase. If you're not in the airport, you'll need lots of luck to find it.

This highlighted to me what the Aseres Yemei Teshuva and Yom Kippur are about. As long as we are still alive, we can still do teshuva and can correct our actions. We can go back in time and leave our old ways, regret our decisions, confess our wrongdoings and turn a new leaf. If we are still alive, we have all these opportunities before us. This is the gift we are given on Yom Kippur. We are still in the airport, and we can correct and repair our past.

Your suitcase can still be found, so long as you are alive. Look for it, and you will find it.

Rabbi Zechariah Wallerstein zt"l

Poor Man, Rich Man

There was once a very wealthy man who was making a wedding for his daughter. The custom in those days was that the poor people would be given to eat first, after which the wedding began. But one time, one poor man came to the wedding late. He had missed the smorgasbord, and now all of the food was gone. Arriving at the chuppa, he was famished. But the chuppa was about to begin, with the father of the groom and

bride there, along with the chassan and kallah themselves.

The poor man, feeling faint, walked up to the chuppa and approached the father of the bride. "Can you please give me a shmeck tabeck (snuff)?" This snuff, placed into a small box, would be used to smell and give people renewed energy and spirit. Turning to the poor man, the father began to whisper. "My daughter is walking around the chassan right now. I would love to help you, but I can't do

so right now. Come back to me later, after the glass is broken, and I'll help you out." "Please, I'm going to faint," pressed the poor man. "I'm sorry," urged the father. "You need to leave this area now. I'll find you later."

The poor man walked away, exiting the wedding hall. Sitting down on the floor, the poor man turned his eyes to heaven. "Hashem, it's one thing that I'm not rich. It's another thing that I have no food or drink. But a shmeck tabeck, even that You

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won't give me!" And then the poor man fainted.

Within seconds, a crowd surrounded the poor man, noticing that he had passed out. Waking him up, they gave him something to eat and drink, while wedding carried on until it concluded later that night.

But then strange things began happening. The father of the bride, a very wealthy man, started losing many of his assets. Sooner than later, he had lost all his money. Heartbroken, he came to his Rebbe. "I don't understand what happened to me. I continue to keep the entire Torah. How did I become a poor man?" "Come back tomorrow," said the Rebbe. That night, the Rebbe had a dream, in which he saw the poor man coming to the father of the bride, asking for a shmeck tabeck and the father of the bride denying his request. The poor man then cried to Hashem, after which he fainted. It was because the poor man had cried, and his tears ascended to Heaven, that a decree had been issued over the rich man that he in turn would become poor.

The following day, the Rebbe brought the memory back to the father. "You made a wedding a few years ago. Do you remember how a poor man came over to you for a shmeck tabeck?" "Yeah, I remember something like that," replied the father. "Do you remember what you

did?" "Yeah, I told him to come after the chuppa." "Do you know that this poor man fainted and cried to Hashem, and now because of that, he has all your money." "What do you mean?" asked the father. "Go to this town and ask for Yosele who was the beggar, and you will see that he is exactly as rich as you were." The father couldn't believe it, but off he went.

Upon arriving in the town, he inquired for Yosele the beggar. "We don't have anyone here who goes by that name. Do you mean Yosele the multi-millionaire who supports the entire town?" "Really?" "Yeah, once upon a time he was very poor, but he became very wealthy." The father followed the directions to Yosele's house, and when he in fact noticed who he was, lo and behold, it was the same poor man who was now extraordinarily wealthy! After staying overnight, the father returned to the Rebbe. "Rebbe, how can I get my money back? He has all my money." The Rebbe had an idea. "It happens to be that his daughter is getting married next week. Go to the wedding, wait until his daughter is walking around the chassan, ask him for a shmeck tabeck, and if he doesn't give it to you, you'll get all your money back."

On went the father, now a poor man, and returned to the town. After waiting for some time, the kallah was finally making her way around the chassan, and up he went to the father

of the bride. "Please, please, can I get a shmeck tabeck?" The father put his hands in his pocket and took out six little boxes. "Of course, which one would you like?" The man fainted on the spot. That's it. He wouldn't be getting back his money.

The father returned to the rebbe distraught. "Rebbe, I asked for a shmeck tabeck and he took out six boxes! I'm never going to get my money back." The Rebbe told the father to remain in the town, and in the meanwhile he called over the rich man to meet. After telling the rich man the entire story, he asked the rich man if he could make the poor man a partner in his business, and together they would both be wealthy. He agreed, and on they both went to live wealthy lives.

The world is a revolving door, a cycle of ups and downs. One day, a person can be on the very top, wealthy and filled with life's blessing and goodness, and the next moment, just the opposite. The reverse can be true too. From the most dismal of conditions, life can turn around and an abundance of blessing can become your new lot in life. It all depends on our actions.

What will you do with your shmeck tabeck?



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