

It Happened Once



There was once a woman named Rachel who had no children. Her husband, Nosan, considered himself to be modern and disdained rabbis and their “antiquated” teachings. Rachel, however, believed differently, and whenever her husband was away on business she would visit the great *tzadik* Rabbi Meir of Premishlan to beg him to bless her with children.

For poor Rachel each visit was the same. She would wait for her turn and then make her request. Each time Rabbi Meir’s reply was the same: “I cannot bless you unless you come together with your husband.” And each time Rachel would return home sad, but not hopeless, for she believed that somehow salvation would come to her.

On one visit her faith was rewarded when Rabbi Meir replied, “Return home. When your husband returns from his business trip, tell him, ‘Rabbi Meir of Premishlan commands you to come at once.’ Of course, he will refuse, but when he does, tell him, ‘On the day before yesterday, which was Lag B’ Omer, you attended a gathering where you spoke disrespectfully of Rabbi Meir.’ When your husband hears this he will certainly come, and then you will be blessed.”

Rachel was at home when Nosan returned, and she immediately repeated Rabbi Meir’s words. His response was the expected one, but when Rachel countered, telling him about his untoward comments about Rabbi Meir, his face flushed. How could the rabbi know such a thing, he wondered, and he at one resolved to visit Premishlan to find out.

Nosan was not, however, ready to endure the ridicule of his friends. He decided that instead of traveling straight to Premishlan he would make a detour through Lemberg, thus cloaking his true intentions in a bogus business trip.

When he finally arrived in Premishlan and was admitted to Rabbi Meir’s room, he announced his name and his request. Rabbi Meir responded, “Don’t think I don’t know that you came here via Lemberg. If you want my blessing, you must return home and then come here directly.”

Nosan was completely amazed. How could Rabbi Meir have possibly known that? If he had such wondrous powers, he would do as Rabbi Meir said. To his wife’s utter joy, Nosan returned home and announced his plans to spend Shabbat in Premishlan.

When the couple arrived in Premishlan, Rabbi Meir was pleased to see them. On Shabbat, Nosan was honored with an *aliya* to the Torah for the passage which read, “There shall not be a sterile or barren one amongst you.” He was so moved, that he was about to offer a large donation. Rabbi Meir interrupted him with the words, “Because he has promised to help a *Yisrael* [lit. Israelite].” Nosan was confused. What could Rabbi Meir’s words mean?

When the prayers ended, Rabbi Meir explained his cryptic words. “One day you will have the opportunity to save a very holy Jew, at great personal risk. If you promise to help him, you will have a son.” Without giving the matter a moment’s thought, Nosan said, “I promise!” In due time, the *tzadik*’s blessing was fulfilled, and Nosan and his wife were the parents of a baby boy.

A year or more passed and Nosan was on a business trip near the Austrian-Romanian border when he heard that the illustrious Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin was also there. He was fleeing the Russian authorities and had to somehow get across the border. This was obviously what Rabbi Meir had alluded to when he had made the promise.

True to his word Nosan presented himself to Rabbi Yisrael and

disclosed to him a plan to carry him across the border over a small, frozen river. Rabbi Yisrael agreed and they set off at midnight.

Nosan knew the crossing well, but he was unaccustomed to heavy physical labor. Despite the bitter cold, sweat poured down Nosan’s face. Carrying a grown man was harder than he had thought, and at each step he prayed that the thin ice would hold the weight of the two men and not crack, plunging them to a frozen death. Suddenly Nosan stopped walking. “Is anything wrong?” Reb Yisrael asked.

“Nothing is wrong. I just realized that we have reached the middle of the river. If I am to make my request, this is the time. Rebbe, I have committed many sins. I have scoffed and disregarded the teachings and precepts of the Torah. But before I continue, I want your promise that I will have a place in the World to Come. If you give me your promise, I will continue; if not, I won’t go on.”

Rabbi Yisrael replied at once, “Of course, I will give you my word. I am happy that at such a time you can have such thoughts!”

With that assurance, Nosan continued his dangerous progress across the icy darkness. It wasn’t until many hours later that they arrived safely in the small, Austrian border town. It was Nosan’s good fortune to have spread the news that through his efforts, the holy Ruzhiner was finally safe. ■

THOUGHTS THAT COUNT

And G-d called to Moses (Lev. 1:1)

The Hebrew word for “called,” “*vayikra*,” is written with a tiny *alef*, alluding to Moses’ exceptional humility. As Reb Simcha Bunim of Pshischa explained, Moses was unimpressed by his own greatness. True, he had attained an extraordinary level of spirituality, but he saw himself as if standing on top of a high roof: G-d had given him his outstanding qualities, and thus his achievements were not the result of his own efforts. For that reason Moses waited until he was called to enter the Tent of Meeting.

He shall bring it, of his own voluntary will (Lev. 1:3)

Citing the Talmud, Rashi comments: “From this we learn that force may be applied. And what if it is against his will? The Torah states ‘voluntarily’; the person is forced until he admits that he wants to comply.” Coercion, it seems, is a legitimate way to obtain compliance. This is because, on the deepest level, a Jew’s innermost desire is always to obey G-d’s command. Outwardly he may protest, but in his heart of hearts he would rather overcome his evil inclination. (*Maimonides, Laws of Divorce, chap. 3*)

And he shall remove its gizzard with its feathers, and throw it beside the altar...at the place of the ashes (Lev. 1:16)

The gizzard is disqualified from being offered because it receives its sustenance from “stolen” food (that the bird picks at indiscriminately). This teaches us that even the poorest person (who can only afford to bring a bird as a sacrifice) must refrain from helping himself to other people’s money... (*Alshich*)

With all your sacrifices you should offer salt (Lev. 2:13)

The sacrifices are symbolic of the revealed part of Torah, which is likened to meat; the salt alludes to the esoteric part of Torah that deals with more abstract and spiritual matters. Just as salt preserves meat in the literal sense, so too does learning the innermost aspects of Torah ensure that the revealed part will remain preserved. (*Likutei Torah*) ■

CANDLE LIGHTING



Adar 29--March 27
NY Metro Area 5:56
Torah portion: *Vayikra*
Rosh Chodesh Nisan
Parshat Hachodesh
Shabbat ends 6:57 p.m.