



RABBI JUDAH

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Selichos!

The central Beis Medrash of Belz was packed with an overflowing crowd, throngs of chasidim eagerly anticipating the solemn beginning of the Yamim Nora'im. It was Motzaei Shabbos, the first night of *Selichos*, and the great tzadik, the “*Sar Shalom*”, Reb Shalom of Belz, was nowhere to be found. Little did the masses awaiting the Rebbe’s arrival know that he was miles away...

Immediately following *havdala*, the Rebbe had instructed his attendant to saddle the horses and head toward the edge of town and into the woods. The faithful *gabbai* humbly followed instructions as the horses weaved through the dark, dense forest until they arrived at a small hut with a light flickering within.

Through the window they saw an *alter Yid*, an elderly Jewish man, sitting alone at his table with a bottle of mashkeh, two glasses and an empty seat beside him. Peering in, the Rebbe saw this Yid lift his glass, tearfully mutter a few words toward the empty chair, pause attentively and then shout “*L’chaim!*” After drinking it down, he refilled his glass, and repeated the strange

drama again and again.

Finally, the Rebbe motioned to his *gabbai* and instructed him to summon the Yid. “Tell him to gather his things immediately; he is coming back with us to daven *Selichos*.”

The attendant knocked gently and the tipsy Yid opened the door with a look of bafflement. “Reb Yid, Shalom aleichem, please forgive me... what is your name?” “My name is Yankel, can I help you?” “Dearest Reb Yankel, the Rebbe is here. He asks that you gather your things and come with him to *Selichos*.” Yankel hesitantly peered outside, saw the Rebbe gazing at him from the carriage, and saw he had no choice but to heed the Rebbe’s instructions.

“Really? Now this?!” I was stretched so thin, I could barely handle the pressure, and lashed out at God

The journey to Belz passed in absolute silence. Yankeleh was so filled with trepidation he could hardly breath. When they arrived at the shul, the entire congregation fell silent and turned to stare at the Rebbe and the elderly man. The *Sar Shalom* pulled Yankele close and whispered in his ear, “I saw you sitting there in your house drinking and want you to explain yourself



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to the *tzibur*.

Shaking and still tipsy, Yankeleh began to speak, his voice cracking with emotion...

“Oy Rebbe, I’m so embarrassed, what can I say? It has been a very painful *tekufah*, a very terribly difficult time. Only God knows how my wife and I prayed over the years to merit to have children. When she became ill, I davened with all my might for her to recover. I even threatened Hashem, and gave an ultimatum: if my wife doesn’t get better, I’m not coming to shul – not even to say *Kaddish*! But alas, she passed away and I was left alone, just me and my cow, a goat and a few chickens. I haven’t been back to shul since.

This summer, my cow got sick; I asked Hashem to please have mercy on me and spare my *parnassah*. Considering all I’d been through, I was pretty worn down. One day I just said to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, “Come on, please! You’re the Master of the World! What’s the big deal in sparing my one old cow? If she doesn’t get better, I’m done with keeping Shabbos.” The cow died, I was without milk, and Hashem now spends Shabbos without hearing *Kiddish* and *zemiros* from me.

“And then, I know it sound crazy, my goat got sick too! I couldn’t believe it, so I said to Hashem, “Really? Now this?!” I was stretched so thin, I could barely handle the pressure, and lashed out at God: “If you take my goat, that will be the last day I ever lay Tefillin.” So since my goat died, I haven’t worn Tefillin... and Rebbe, it gets even worse. My few remaining chickens got sick as well. This time, I was at the end of my rope, and I told God that I’d never speak to Him ever again if they didn’t make



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it. Unbelievably, they died as well. I was so angry, I decided that I was through with God, once and for all.

“I held out for a while, I really kept my word, until I realized that Selichos Night was approaching. I thought to myself, ‘Gevalt, Yankeleh, how are you going to keep this up? How can you miss Selichos with the heilige Rebbe?’ I was so confused and upset, and because of my *neder*, I realized I was stuck, *mamish* in a jam.

“But I then remembered something that happened years ago... I once had a major falling out with a dear friend, Reb Feivish the butcher. For months, we wouldn’t even wish each other a ‘good Shabbos’ when we saw each other in shul. One day, he showed up at my doorstep with a bottle of vodka and said, “My brother, we have hurt each other enough. Let’s forget the past and be friends

again.” And just like that, we sat down, made a few *l’chaims* and reconnected.

“So tonight, I figured I’d try the same thing with Hashem. I poured myself and the *Ribbono Shel Olam* a couple of *l’chaims*, and said, “Oy, My God... we have hurt each other enough! I’m sorry things have gotten to this point. Let’s call it even, start over and just go forward into the new year together...”

With that, Yankeleh began to cry. “Oy Rebbe, I’m so embarrassed!”

The Sar Shalom embraced the older Yid. Holding him tight, he turned to the congregation and finally spoke, his own voice choked with tears: “*Chevreh*, did you hear what Yankeleh said? Let’s open our hearts to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, and move forward into the new year together.”

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This Motza’ei Shabbos, we Ashkenazim join our Sefardic brethren with the recitation of *Selichos*. This service is formal invitation to stand before Hashem as a congregation and humbly place before Him our mistakes and wrongdoings. This year, let us use the opportunity of *Selichos* to reconnect with Hashem, no matter how distant we may have felt, and open up a sincere conversation with Him.

With an open heart, some vulnerability and honesty, we can begin to repair the difficult points in our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

ואמר: הלא כְּשֶׁהָשִׂים יִתְבַּר עֲזָר בְּהַתְבוּדוֹת, אֲזִי הַהַתְבוּדוֹת הוּא כְּאֶשֶׁר יִדְבַר אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ

And Rebbe Nachman said: Indeed, when God assists..., *hitbodedus*, personal prayer, is like a conversation between friends (*Likutei Moharan* II:99). ■

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