

## THE TENTH JEW

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In the second generation of Chassidim (in the latter half of the eighteenth century) there lived in the town of Rovno, in the Ukraine, a Rabbi known as Reb Leib Soreh's, one of the "hidden" Tzaddikim. Much of his time was spent travelling and collecting money for *Pidyon Shevuyyim* (to free people unjustly imprisoned) and other important, often secret, purposes.

Once, a few days before Yom Kippur, he was staying for the night at a village inn when heavy rains set in, rapidly converting the primitive roads into mere stretches of mud. The traveller was enquiring if anyone would still try to drive to the town where he had meant to spend Yom Kippur when he was told that there would be a Minyan in the village. Eight Jewish men and boys lived in the place and two men were to come in from a hamlet in the middle of the forest. There was a Sefer Torah, too. He understood that it was G-d's will that he should pray with these country Jews.

On Erev Yom Kippur, Reb Leib bathed in the river which ran by the village for *t'villah* in preparation for the holy day. He ate something from his knapsack and made his way quickly to the improvised Shule and prepared his soul for the Minchah prayer. The eight local Jews gathered, but they had to davven Minchah without a Minyan as the two guests had not yet arrived. They dispersed again to take the *se'udoh hamafsekkes*, the meal which precedes the fast.

His meal finished, the Rabbi went back to the little wooden Shule, put on his *kittel* and *tallis* and immersed himself in the private prayers before Kol Nidrei. Suddenly he realized a change in the room. The men were talking worriedly; the sun was going down and soon it would be time for Kol Nidrei, but the two had not arrived.

Then the door opened. But the man in muddy sheepskin coat and cap, who had come, was no Jew.

"Panke Rivkah sends me," he began, in the Ukrainian dialect known as "Goyish." "Yossel and Moshka were taken away this morning. The gendarme arrested

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them, for stealing, but Rivkah says it isn't true. She is crying all the time, and says you should pray for them."

Weeping started in the next room, where the women had assembled. Then the room was filled with babble, several people trying simultaneously to drag more information out of the peasant whilst others were discussing possible developments. Only the Rabbi did not take part. He was standing in his corner, whispering. "Master of the Universe! I thank You for making me stay here, that I may help free them. Since this is Your purpose, I rely on You to help me set them free soon. But must I really pray without a Minyan on this holy day?"

A moment later, he raised his voice: "Yidden, let us not forget the message sent to us: We were asked to pray for them, not talk or think of ways to help them. That can be done later. First we must pray, for I tell you that their being arrested just today, of all days in the year, means that their case is now, today, being considered in the High Court above. Our prayers, as well as their own, will decide the issue. Now, I have a feeling that we may still have a Minyan. Where have the men been taken to?"

A man answered: "The goy says they were taken to Rovno."

"If so," replied the Rabbi, "it is not they who will make up our Minyan. Has anyone been expecting another guest?"

No-one had.

"Does anyone know of another Jew living round here?"

"No," the villagers assured him. "There's only us."

The Rabbi persisted. "Perhaps there lives round these parts a Jew who doesn't mix with Jews? A *meshummad*, a Jew who converted out of the faith of his fathers?"

"A *meshummad*!" exclaimed several men at once.

"Certainly," said the Rabbi, "why not a *meshummad*? Can't he do *Teshuvah*? The doors of *Teshuvah*, of repentance, are never locked, even in the face of an apostate. I have heard from my teachers that when one pokes around, even in only warm ashes, one can come across a hidden spark from which one can kindle a fire. And will we not say, "We give permission to pray with sinners"? Why, is there a *meshummad*, then?"

The oldest man spoke up. "Yes, Rebbe, there is one here. It is fifty years now. A poor young man settled here. He wore modern dress and he took liberties with many laws. He was clever, though. He had learnt a little, and he could also write Polish and Russian. The *poritz*, the lord of the manor, engaged him as a

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clerk. Then the *poritz's* only daughter fell in love with him and her father promised him that if he converted he could marry the girl and he would make him his sole heir and he — may his name be wiped out! — sold his faith for the *poritz's* gold. For that boy is now the *poritz*, and a worse hater of Israel than any *shlecht shtick!*”

“And what became of the woman?” asked the Rabbi.

“She died long ago. There were never any children. No-one is left but that *meshummad* and he lives all alone with his old servant in his great big house on the top of the hill, just outside the village. He is a cruel master and is hard with his tenants but especially harsh with the Jews on his land. He doesn't even visit his neighbour *pritzim*.”

The Rabbi closed his eyes for a moment. Then he said, quietly, but with a curious tone of emphasis: “He sold himself, did you say? ... and it is Yom Kippur of his fiftieth year? ... Isn't that a fitting time for a slave to be set free? “You shall sanctify the fiftieth year as a Jubilee Year and proclaim freedom throughout the land and you shall return, each man to his heritage and each man to the family of his fathers ...” We must try it. Where is his mansion?”

“You want to go to him? He'll have you thrown to the dogs!”

“Don't worry about me,” replied the Rabbi. “A *shliach mitzvah*, someone engaged on a Mitzvah mission, has special protection. But pray that I may succeed. Pray for that poor lost soul and forgive him your personal complaints. If I should not be back in half an hour, start without me.”

With that he strode to the door, still in his *kittel* and *tallis*. He asked a boy to point out the way, then disappeared into the night.

Reb Leib hurried as quickly as he could up the hill to the mansion, his white *kappel* on his head, his *kittel* and *tallis* billowing in the wind. Soon he was at the top of the hill and at the gates of the mansion. All was in darkness. The place seemed to be deserted. Bravely, he walked up the wide driveway, expecting to be stopped or challenged, then through the high arch and up the stone staircase. He knocked on the heavy door and turned the iron handle. It was unlocked. He pushed the door open and entered the great entrance hall and suddenly found himself standing in front of the old *poritz*. The Rebbe met the shocked eyes of the *poritz* and for a few long moments they stood in silence, face to face, the apostate and the *Tzaddik*. Reb Leib's eyes held the *poritz* with a steady gaze, fearless and firm, confident in his mission. The initial anger of the *poritz* gave way under the kindly, penetrating gaze of the Rebbe. Despite himself, he found

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that he was almost mesmerised by the radiant face of the holy apparition standing in front of him.

“My name is Leib Soroh’s” the Rebbe said quietly. “It was my privilege to know Rabbi Yisroel, the Baal Shem Tov, who was admired also by the non-Jewish aristocracy and noblemen. I once heard from his mouth that every Jew should pray to be saved from selling his soul for money, that money should never become one’s god.

“My mother, of blessed memory, was called Soroh. She was a holy woman. One of the local Polish noblemen had taken it into his head to marry her. He promised her wealth and status if she would agree. But she sanctified the name of Israel and refused all his enticements. You did not withstand the same test and for silver and gold you betrayed your faith, the faith of a Jew. But you should know that there is nothing that stands in the way of sincere repentance. Nothing.

“You should know, too, that our Sages teach that there are some people who in one moment can earn their place in the World to Come. For you, that moment has come now. Tonight is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Jews who live in your village are short of one Jew to make up a Minyan. Come along with me and be that tenth Jew. Despite your past, if you sincerely repent now of your mistakes you will be accepted by G-d for He is forgiving and merciful. You are our tenth Jew and the Torah tells us, ‘The tenth one shall be holy to G-d.’ Come with me now!”

For a long moment the *poritz* looked at the Rebbe with a curious intensity. Then, without saying a word, he took his cape from the stand there in the entrance hall. As he wrapped himself in his cape, he called in the direction of his servant somewhere at the back of the hall that he was going out. “Don’t wait up for me!” Taking his silver-topped walking stick, he walked with the Rebbe out into the gathering night.

Meanwhile, down in the village, the simple villagers, at first bemused, had become anxious. Then anxiety had changed to fear. Who is this strange holy man? And who knows what calamity he might bring upon them with his unheard-of ideas? But after a while they had opened their Machzorim and found some prayers to say. They were still sitting thus, trying to drown their perplexity in the private prayers in the Machzor, when the door opened and Reb Leib came in, still dressed in his *kittel* and *tallis*, closely followed by the *poritz*. The *poritz*’s gaze was downcast and at a sign from the Rebbe, one of the men handed the *poritz* a *tallis*. He enveloped himself in it, covering his head and face entirely.

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The Rebbe stepped forward to the Aron HaKodesh and took out the Sefer Torah. Handing the Sefer Torah to the oldest villager present, the Rebbe started to intone the traditional declaration before Kol Nidre: "By the sanction of the Heavenly Court and with the sanction of this congregation, we declare it permissible to pray together with those who have sinned." The Rebbe then continued in the slow, sweet Yom Kippur tune with the Kol Nidre prayer, followed by Maariv.

There was a Minyan. How the Rebbe had achieved it, they had no idea. But there was the tenth man, in the south-east corner, a tall, gaunt figure hidden in the *tallis*. And from under the *tallis* showed the knees of blue velvet breeches, white silk hose and black polished leather shoes that went with the costume of the gentry of the period. And the simple men trembled ...

Trembling still, they followed their self-chosen Chazzan through the Service. Never, even on Yom Kippur, had they prayed like this before. Their tears flowed freely, their hearts were humble: when they came to confess their sins they found so many they had never thought of as sins, yet they found themselves willing to repent and mend their ways. Was not a greater miracle of *Teshuvah* going on in this very room? And somehow they felt that the achievement of forgiveness for themselves was bound up with that of the *poritz*, and they reached out to help him. When the Rabbi intoned: "May He raise up our prayers of evening ..." they felt themselves strangely lifted up. When he said: "For like clay in the hand of the potter are we in Your hand ..." they saw how crooked their souls had become in the bitter struggle for survival, and they besought the Potter to make them over ...

When the villagers left late at night, the strangers, the Rebbe and the *poritz*, were standing in their corners. When they returned the next morning, they found the two in earnest conversation, and kept away from them, until the Rabbi began the prayers. All day long the *poritz* remained on his feet, his face to the wall, swaying in prayer, now and then shaking with sobs.

When night came on, and they said the *Sheyimos*, the *poritz* put his head into the open Aron HaKodesh, and cried, ever more loudly, "HaShem is the true G-d!"

And with the seventh time, he collapsed.

Reb Leib himself took part in the purification and preparation of the body for burial and he stayed for the Baal Teshuvah's burial in the nearby Jewish cemetery. Then the Rebbe set out to work for the release of the arrested men.

And for the rest of his life, Reb Leib Soreh's observed the *yahrzeit* of the Baal Teshuvah every Yom Kippur by saying Kaddish for the elevation of his soul.