

THE OLD SIDDUR'S STORY

Adapted from "Dreams of Childhood" by Hermann Schwab, published by Anscombe, London.

(The book is now out of print.)

"Mummy! Look at this old Siddur," said little Binyomin. "It's so dusty and torn. I was exploring our new house and found it in the attic among all the lumber. Whose is it, Mummy?"

"Kiss it," said his mother. "When you hurt yourself, I always kiss the place to make it better. That poor Siddur looks hurt. Kiss it to make it better."

Little Binyomin kissed the old prayer book, and stood there, looking tenderly at the fragile Siddur. And then, slowly, the old, tattered pages began to rustle, and the sound formed into words. The voice was so soft, so old and tired, that he could hardly hear it at first. Then it became louder, more distinct. It sounded like the voice of a man who has been shut away for a long time, without an opportunity to speak and who then meets another man to whom he can at last talk about his loneliness and his sufferings and his life.

"Dear little boy," it said. "I have lain in that lumber room for years, forsaken and forgotten. If you hadn't found me there, I might never again have seen the light of day. And I longed so much for the sunshine and the sky and to see the bright eyes of children. You took me out of the lumber room, and held me gently in your hands. You kissed me, though I am old and worn and tattered. You asked to whom I had belonged. Let me tell you the story of my life.

"It must be more than seventy years since I came off the printing press. I was very proud of myself. I looked so fine. My print was clear and bold, and stood out on the shiny white paper. I was bound in deep red velvet with silver edges. All the other books in the printing works envied me for my lovely dress. There were lots of books there in the printer's shop, big books and little books, and some massive volumes, of which we smaller ones stood in awe. They were not only big, but also wise. They rarely spoke to us, but we were happy to be near them.

"I wasn't left there for long. A pleasant young man came in a few days later and bought me. He gave me to his Kallah, a beautiful girl with blue eyes. She thanked him for the gift, and stood admiring me with my beautiful binding and my silver edges and my bold, clear print. She could see her face mirrored in my silver edges, but she did not look at her reflection.

"The Chassunoh took place the next week, and before the Chassunoh the Kallah said her prayers in my pages. She davened earnestly and with devotion, and her eyes were full of

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tears. I was with her under the Chuppah, and at the Chassunoh Se'udoh I saw and heard everything. I shall never forget that day. There was music and songs and speeches, and the hall was bright with light. The glasses clinked like silver bells as all the wedding guests drank to the health of the bridal pair."

"Then they packed me away in a dark trunk. When I was taken out again, I found myself in a big handsome room. I was put in a fine bookcase in the place of honour, and when visitors came I was shown round and admired. Three times each day my young mistress said her prayers in my pages, till after a time I knew exactly where she wanted me to open, and I opened in the right place by myself. It pleased her.

"Months passed by, and then the house was full of stir and bustle. A little boy was born. He grew up, and I watched him learn to talk and walk. I watched him laugh and run and play. He made his parents very happy. He began to read when he was six. It was slow work at first, but soon the letters became words, and the words sentences, and in the end he could read. He was followed by two other boys and a girl, who romped about the house merrily. They were good children. But I had little contact with them. My beautiful binding had suffered during the years, and their mother wanted to spare me. They were not allowed to touch me, and I led a quiet, retired life. I must say that this did not please me. I often thought how other Siddurim had friends and comrades, while I lived alone, like all who regard themselves or are regarded by others as better than their fellows. There were times when I envied my humbler comrades. They were taken to school and to Shule. They learned to know the world and people, while I always had to stay at home.

"Yet I was happy to think how my mistress treasured me and confided in me. For on the back of my title page she kept a record of all that was most important in her life. She wrote down the date of her Chassunoh, and of the Chassunos of her brothers and sisters, the date of birth of her children, and other things like that.

"So I stayed quietly in my bookcase till one day a dreadful change came into my uneventful life. I was sent to a bookbinder to be renovated. Little Shimon, the youngest boy, carried me there under his arm through the streets.

"The bookbinder was not gentle with me. I was not accustomed to such rough treatment. He tore off my velvet binding, with the silver edges, and the title page. Then he smeared a lot of nasty, smelly paste all over me, and put me under a press to dry. The press hurt me. I was kept there in torment for a whole day and night before the bookbinder at last released me from my sufferings.

"Imagine my feelings when, instead of giving me back my velvet binding with the silver edges, and my own title page, he put me into ordinary cardboard covers. I rustled my pages in protest, several times I jumped out of his hands, but it was no use. The bookbinder again placed me under the press where I could not move. I had to lie there and watch him put a different Siddur into my velvet binding. I never thought life could be so cruel. But there was nothing I could do.

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“A few days later little Shimon came to take me away. The bookbinder gave him the other Siddur with my binding. I tried to attract his attention. I jumped down angrily on to the floor.

“‘Look,’ said Shimon, ‘there’s a Siddur fallen on the floor.’ And he bent down, picked me up, and kissed me. Dear little Shimon! I was very fond of that boy. His kiss did me a lot of good. But I knew it was a farewell kiss; that I would never see him again.

“I was left for weeks on the shelf in the bookbinder’s shop, and had plenty of time to think about all that had happened to me. I realized that I had been vain and puffed up with pride. I had thought too much of my beautiful dress. I had not considered that the dress is only the outer covering and that other books, with so much that is good and beautiful in them, can be dressed even in a plain binding.

“When I understood this, I stopped grieving for my lost glory. I was glad that I had come to the bookbinder’s shop, and I vowed that I would never again be so foolishly proud and vain.

“One day a travelling peddler came to the shop, and bought me for a few pence. My new master was a poor man. He was on the road all the week trying to sell his goods, and spent only Shabbos at home.

“He went from village to village. Whether the sun was blazing hot, or the snow lay thick on the ground, or the rain came pouring down in torrents, he always went cheerfully on his way. I lay right on top of his pack near to his hand. I felt sorry for him, because his back had become bent from carrying his heavy load.

“The poor peddler had a hard life. I witnessed many humiliations which he had to suffer. I heard people call after him ‘Jew!’ as he walked through the streets. But he refused to be dispirited by it. The word ‘Jew’ was to him a term of honour. He was proud of the history of the Jewish people.

“I learned a lot on our travels about the world, and about people. I had a great many interesting experiences. I found myself in the company of good people and of bad people. I listened to wise people, and to stupid people saying foolish things. I like to think back to the years I spent wandering with my master, even though much of that time was hard and filled with trouble.

“Every Friday evening my master came home from his wanderings, and I saw his house, and his wife and children. It was a humble little home, yet I shall never forget those Friday evenings, especially in winter. The table was laid with a clean white cloth. It was not of fine linen, but it was so shining white that it almost reflected the seven-branched lamp hanging down from the low ceiling. The old clock on the wall ticked quietly away. There was a cosy fire in the stove, and the frost painted flowers on the window-panes. It was happy and peaceful in the little room, and happiness shone in the eyes of the peddler and his wife. During their modest meal, one of the children turned up the right page in me, and they all sang Zemi’ros, in praise of the Shabbos. For Shabbos is the friend of man, and

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comes without waiting to be invited, bringing joy and making grief and sorrow vanish at its approach. They were remarkable songs I listened to every Friday night. The grown-up voices of the parents merged with the thin trebles of the children. Sometimes one little voice was higher pitched than the rest, or it sang out of tune or out of time. Yet there was pure joy in their singing, there was love and trust in HaShem, and happiness because of the Shabbos, and there was a beautiful harmony in that unmelodious song.”

The old Siddur paused, overcome with emotion at these memories, and a gentle sigh passed through its pages. Then it continued:

“I must have been with the peddler for some years. Then another change came into my life. It was in the depths of winter. We had arrived at an inn late at night. Though it was so late, there was still plenty of movement and talk going on, for many other people had come there like ourselves, to find shelter from the wind and the cold.

“The first thing my master did was, as always, to say Maariv, the evening prayer.

“Only this time, when he had finished, instead of putting me back in his pack, he left me lying on the bench while he ate his simple meal. When he rose the next morning, it was still dark, and he did not see me. In the dim light of the oil-lamp I saw his rounded back bend over to take the accustomed load. I saw his work-worn hand lifted to touch the Mezuzah on the doorpost as he went out. Then the door closed behind him. I heard his footsteps crunch in the new snow, and he was gone.

“This is how I lost my second master. In my younger days I would have worried about it. But now life had made me patient and submissive. So I lay there, waiting quietly for the daylight, and whatever was in store for me.

“Presently the inn was astir with life and movement. All the people who had stayed there overnight took their belongings, and went their way. Only one man seemed to be in no hurry. He walked slowly up and down the room, and saw me lying on the bench.

“He told the innkeeper, who explained that I did not belong to the house and said that if no-one came to claim me he could keep me. I stayed at the inn for two days, and as my master did not come back to fetch me, the finder finally put me in his coat pocket and took me home.

“There he presented me to his little boy, who was about six years old. The youngster took me to school, where he learned to read in me, and to translate from the Hebrew. So in my old age, I went back to school! The schoolroom was fairly large. The children sat on low benches, with their teacher on a raised platform. He was a youngish man, who treated the children in a very friendly fashion, and they were all very fond of him.

“Little Yitzchok, my new master's son, was a diligent pupil. He was not content with what he was taught at school. He went over the lessons again at home, and next day the teacher could be sure that he would know them perfectly. I was glad to see how keen he was on his

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studies. But it also caused me a great deal of anxiety, because I was no longer young and could not stand so much handling. Some of my pages became loose and fell out. One day Yitzchok's father noticed it, and gave him a different Siddur to use. He stuck back my loose pages and took me to the Shule. He left me there with other Siddurim and Machzorim in his box-seat. I spent several years there.

“My owner did not come to Shule every day. He was away all the week, travelling. I was brought out only on Friday night and Shabbos. I soon noticed that my master did not pray with devotion. He prayed as a routine, with his lips, not with his heart, and this hurt me. For I knew that people could find the right words in the Siddur for everything they needed if only they would look for them. I was sorry for my master, because he did not seem to understand this fact. The Siddur should be a friend to man at all times. It has the right words for joy and sorrow, for hopes and disappointments. Those who know how to davven, have always turned to HaShem with their Siddur and, feeling oppressed, have found consolation and comfort in its words. And anyone who wishes to express his gratitude to HaShem, too, can find the right words, and be contented and come near to HaShem.

“The years passed, and gradually my owner came less often to the Shule until he hardly ever came at all. I was left all alone and I wondered what had happened. Then one day I was lifted out of my place in the box-seat and I found that I was being held by his son Yitzchok.

“He had grown up, but he looked very sad, and he opened me at the page where the Kaddish is printed. I understood that I would never see my master again. Yitzchok went up to the front of the Shule with me and said the Kaddish very quietly and sadly. Then he walked back again, a little unsteadily, and returned to his place.

“I thought then about the Kaddish, which is a prayer said by a mourner, yet has no word in it of death and mourning, only praise of the Creator. HaShem gives man life, and takes it back, and when HaShem calls for the soul to return to Him, the soul must go to Him. When a father or mother dies, the son stands up in his grief before the congregation and praises the Creator Who gives and takes away, and the congregation responds ‘Omayn’.

“And the father or mother in Heaven are happy in their child.

“Yitzchok came to Shule every day. Then one day I saw him clearing out all the books from the box-seat where I lay. There were many Siddurim and Machzorim and Chummoshim and an old Tallis. He took most of them away and left me behind with a few other old Siddurim. That summer afternoon I heard him say good-bye to his neighbours, and heard them speak of a long voyage to America. I was glad to think that I would be going so far away. I had never been on the sea and I looked forward to the experience.

“But after he had said Kaddish that day, Yitzchok held me in his hand for a while, turned my pages fondly, and said:

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“You are very old. I can't take you with me. I learned to read in your pages. With you in my hand, I said Kaddish for my father. I should perhaps have davvened better, with more Kavonnoh, from your pages and from now on I will start to davven better. But the long voyage will be too much for you, so I'll leave you here, and other people will davven from your pages.’

“He kissed me, and he put me back in my place in the box-seat, and walked out.

“Time passed by, and no one bothered about me, till one day I found myself in the hand of a strange young man. It was the evening of Kol Nidre, on Yom Kippur, one of the few occasions when this young man, whose name was Dov, came to Shule. He did not seem pleased with me. He put me next to a fine new gold-edged Machzor, and I looked poor and shabby in comparison. Dov showed me to the Shammas, who looked surprised.

“‘Yitzchok must have forgotten it here. If you want, you can have it,’ he said.

“I knew better. I knew that Yitzchok had not forgotten me, but had left me behind, thinking to spare me the long voyage; he had thought I would find new friends here. He had been wrong in that. He had not realized how old and worn I had become. It is the way of the world that everything old and worn must make way for what is young and pleasing.

“When Yom Kippur was over Dov wrapped me up in paper and took me home.

For a few days I was left all alone. Then he gave me to his cousin Naftoli who was visiting from abroad and needed a small Siddur. ‘Here,’ he said to him, ‘you can have this Siddur. The Shammas said I could take it but you can have it.’ So I went travelling, after all.

“Naftoli was pleased with me because I had been bound together with the whole Sefer Tehillim and he used me to say each day's set chapters of Tehillim.

“I don't know why, but I didn't think much of this Tehillim recital. There was no heart in it, it was as if Naftoli just wanted to get the recital out of the way, to be over and done with it. My new sister — that's how I felt about the Sefer Tehillim since she had been bound with me — also was unhappy about Naftoli's recital. We both thought how it would have been so much more worthwhile to say just a few chapters but properly and with feeling than to gabble down pages and pages without much devotion. We don't think Naftoli understood the words he was saying. But I suppose it was good of him to go through with this formality each day.

“My new master was an interesting person, very efficient. He was careful to utilize every moment that he was in Shule. Besides his Tehillim, during the Chazzan's repetition he scanned through a portion of the weekly Sidra with Rashi; he read through a daily Mishna and he also quickly rushed through the Perek Shiroh. And of course, he dispensed charity to the collectors that came round each day. Yet, with all this activity, when Shacharis ended, he always managed to be one of the first out of the door! The trouble was that he was busy doing Mitzvos but he didn't really pray at all. This was a great pity for he never

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really learned the meaning of prayer. I don't think he realized that the great Rabbis who composed my prayers thought hard and long and were guided from Above in their holy work. But Naftoli seemed to deliver his prayers like the coalman delivers a load of coal! His young son Mendel watched all this. He learned a lot of things from his father, to be sure, but I'm afraid that how to pray properly was not one of them. With all the frenetic activity, I was quite relieved when Naftoli eventually bought himself another Siddur and he kept me at the back of his drawer in Shule, as a spare, I suppose. The new Siddur was a beauty. Leather bound. And it had a great deal of other additions that Naftoli thought he ought to get through each day — all within the time set aside for Shacharis.

“One day, new furniture was delivered to the Shule. I was roughly taken out of the drawer and put into a sack together with other old Siddurim and Tehillim and unwanted Taleisim.

“For a long time I lay dozing in a dark corner until the day I was rudely awakened by a hand that knew no pity. I was thrown into another room, an attic at the top of the house, having been lumped together with a bundle of rubbish. I was stunned by the fall and only slowly did I come to.

“There was silence in the attic. But rarely did I hear footsteps and they never stopped to open the door. I was covered with dust. Spiders crawled over me. Summer came and went and winter followed, and so the years went by. And I lay there, and no one came near me. Then one day I heard you running about, and laughing. I saw you rummaging about among the lumber, and I hoped you would find me and take me out in the sunshine and today you did find me. You did not throw me aside. You took me to show to your mother, and you kissed me.

“You are a good boy, I can tell that from how you have been kind to me. Stay like that. Be kind. Always be good to your parents, to your brothers and sisters, and to all people, and they will be fond of you.

“I have one last wish. Bury me. When a man grows old and tired of life, and dies, he is buried in the earth, so that he may sleep. I am not a man, but I am a friend of man. I have grown old and weary, and I too would wish to sleep in the earth.”

The worn, tattered pages rustled again, softly and sadly and then they were still.

Little Binyomin took the Siddur into the garden. He dug up some earth, kissed the Siddur once more, and laid it in the little grave he had made. Then he covered it with green moss, and made a mark so that he should know the place where it was buried. And when the sun shone on the little grave he was glad, because the old Siddur had loved the sunshine.

Many years have passed since then. Little Binyomin has grown up and has seen and heard many things, but he has not forgotten the story told to him by the old Siddur.