

A YOM KIPPUR TO REMEMBER

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The renowned sage and tzaddik Rabbi Yaakov Orenstein zt"l, the "Yeshuos Yaakov," lived for a time in the city of Yeroslav, where his father-in-law resided. During that period, the following story occurred, which he was fond of relating to his students, in order to illustrate to them the meaning of true love of Torah study.

One Erev Yom Kippur, as the Jews of Yeroslav arrived in shul and donned their talleisim in preparation for the Kol Nidrei prayer, an unfamiliar Jew - his entire being cloaked in fear and awe - entered the synagogue, and, to the astonishment of the congregants, proceeded immediately to the chazzan's stand, where he begun to chant the familiar beginning of the Kol Nidrei, "Al da'as ha-Makom..." Not wanting to create a stir, and perhaps an ugly controversy, on the holiest night of the year, the shul's board discretely decided not to forcibly remove him. After completing Kol Nidrei, the unknown guest proceeded to daven Maariv. After Maariv, he continued standing as he chanted the special liturgical poems. Then, still on his feet, he began reciting the entire sefer Tehillim.

By the time his emotional and tear-soaked recitation of Tehillim was over, the first rays of sun were already beginning to flicker over the horizon. The mysterious and holy "guest" wasted little time in beginning the Shacharis prayers. When the sefer Torah was removed from the ark, he lained (read) from it himself, and then returned to "his" spot at the chazzan's stand to lead the congregation in the Mussaf prayers. By this point, most members had ceased resenting the guest's uninvited intrusion, and were instead busy wondering how anyone could display such stamina and endurance. Over the entire period, his prayers had lost none of their intensity, nor their unworldly sweetness. Indeed, some congregants began to whisper that their mystery guest could surely be none other than Eliyahou ha-Navi, or perhaps a heavenly angel!...

"I myself," the Yeshuos Yaakov would later tell, "became caught up in the 'man-or-angel' question." After his arousing Mussaf prayers, he went straight to Mincha and from there to Ne'ilah - the day's final tefilah. During the last Kaddish, he himself blew the shofar, and the lead the awe-struck congregation in the most amazing post-Yom Kippur Maariv they had ever experienced. By this point, there was a general consensus that an angel had certainly been sent from heaven in order to arouse the Jews of Yeroslav to teshuvah (repentance), for it seemed humanly impossible for one of flesh-and-blood to have put on the type of display that they had witnessed over the last 24 hours.

"After Maariv," told the Yeshuos Yaakov, "my father-in-law approached him and invited him to his house. Not wanting to miss what transpired, I went along. My father-in-law asked his esteemed

guest to lead the household in havdalah, which he did, with his characteristic fervour. He drank some wine, and sat down, saying that he felt weak. He asked that they bring him something to 'strengthen his heart.' Could it be that our angel was no angel after all?"

"It seems, however, that no matter what foods he was presented, he displayed no interest. Eventually, it became clear that it was not food and drink that he desired, but rather a Sukkah Gemara, which was placed before him on the table, and from which he began to learn with great joy and enthusiasm. I," said the Yeshuos Yaakov, "concealed myself underneath a bed in the room, to see what would transpire. All night long he learned with great love and eagerness, completing the entire tractate, and leaving immediately afterward to pray Shacharis. Some time later, we were able to establish the identity of our 'heavenly' guest - the holy Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov, the Kedushas Levi zt"l."

The Klausenberger Rebbe zt"l received this story from his Rebbe, Rabbi Teb'le of Diklo zt"l, who received it person-to-person back to the Yeshuos Yaakov himself. "The amazing thing," the Klausenberger Rebbe would say, "is that even after such heavenly prayers, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak still felt weakened from not having learned Torah all day!"

Most of us are not on the level of the holy Kedushas Levi - who after a whole day's fast was thirsty for nothing but Torah. It is inspiring to consider, however, as we complete this year's Neilah prayers and hurriedly begin davening Maariv, that there are some Jews whose hunger and thirst for Torah study far outweigh their physical desires. May our portion be among them! Have a good Shabbos, an easy and uplifting fast, and a G'mar Chasimah Tova!

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