

vayelech

Every Friday morning during the penitential prayers, from Slichot to Yom Kippur-- the days of repentance for the Jews, the rabbi of Nemirov would vanish. He was nowhere to be found. Not at the synagogue, not at the houses of study, not praying in a minyan. Nor was he at home. One could enter his home, after all, it was never locked--for who would steal from the rabbi? He was simply gone.

Where could he be, the villagers would ask? The answer was as simple as it was obvious. The rabbi went up to heaven. After all, during this time, surely a rabbi has plenty of business up in heaven interceding on behalf of his community. The Jews need peace, prosperity, health, well-being, good matches for their children.... They want to be pious and good, they try their hardest, but we are all only human after all.....

So who can help, if not the rabbi. And where should he go if not to heaven to get this help? This, at least, is what the villagers believed.

But one year, an outsider came to the village. A stranger from far away Lithuania. He laughed at the villagers. "To heaven?!" he scoffed! "Even Moses never went up to heaven! You think your little rabbi is better even than Moses?!"

"Then where do you think the rabbi is?" asked the villagers. "That is none of my business" replied the Litvak. But he was determined to find out.

That very same night, after the evening prayers, the Litvak stole into the rabbi's house, crawled under the bed, hid, and waited.....He'd watch all night and discover where the rabbi vanishes, and what he does during the morning penitential prayers....

He lay there under the bed all night. Anyone else might have fallen asleep, but not this man. Hours before the sun rose, the rabbi began to stir. Finally, the rabbi rose, and from under the bed, the Litvak watched as he walked to the closet, took out a bundle of peasant clothes; trousers, boots, a heavy coat, a big felt hat-- and got dressed. He then buckled a wide, leather belt around his waist, tossed a length of cord over his shoulder, and prepared to leave the house.

On his way out, the rabbi took down a hatchet from behind the stove, put it into his belt, and left the house. The Litvak crawled out from under the bed and followed.

The rabbi walked through the silent streets of the village, never knowing the Litvak, like a silent shadow, was following in his steps. They quietly crept out of the town and into the surrounding forest. The rabbi walked a few paces into the forest, took out his hatchet, and started chopping down a tree. The Litvak, who had stopped and stood behind a tree a ways off, watched as the rabbi felled the tree, and then chopped it into logs. He bundled the the logs, bound them with cord, and threw the bundles over his shoulder. He put the hatchet back into his belt, and began his walk back into the village.

The Litvak watched as the rabbi stopped at a poor, run-down hovel at the edge of town. The rabbi pulled his hat down to look more the part of a peasant, and tapped at the window.

"Who is there?" came a frightened voice from within. "It is I," answered the Rabbi in the peasant tongue. "I have wood to sell. It's very cheap! Next to nothing, really. Six cents!"

And with that, the rabbi entered the shack.

"Where will a poor, sick, widow such as myself get money to buy your wood?", asked the old woman with tears in her cloudy eyes.

"I'll lend it to you" answered the rabbi.

"And how will I pay it back?!" cried the woman. If I cannot get out of bed, I cannot work!

"You foolish woman!", answered the peasant impersonating rabbi. "Are you not a Jew?!"

Do you not have faith that your God will find a way for you to pay back a measly six cents?!"

"But who will kindle the fire?", wept the old woman.

"Never mind that", said the rabbi, "I will kindle it."

And as the Litvak watched on, the rabbi began to put the wood into the oven. As he did so, he recited the first part of the penitential prayers under his breath.

As he kindled the fire, he recited the second part of the penitential prayers.. And as the wood burned brightly and warmed the room, he recited the third part and closed the oven.

From that day on, from Slichot to Yom Kippur, the Litvak sat in the synagogue with the villagers for the morning penitential prayers. When strangers came through and asked where the rabbi was, the townfolk would tell them that their beloved rabbi was in heaven. And if one listened closely they would hear the Litvak reply, "If not higher."

In this week's parasha, "Vayelech" all the Israelites are commanded to "write" the Torah. The whole thing. Homework before entering the promised land. If you're a procrastinator like me, we'd probably still be sitting in the sand doodling in the margins

Nowadays, many people add a letter to a Torah written by a scribe in order to fulfill this mitzva. But I don't think writing down the Torah, letter by letter, is really what this commandment is all about. I think this means that in our lives-through our deeds, we must write our own Torah. The Torah of our lives so to speak. We're supposed to live as 'holy' as we can. And yes. 'Holy' is a loaded word and I don't claim to know exactly how to live 'holy'. I'm still playing tic-tac-toe in the sand on this side of the Jordan river, remember? And I believe that 'living holy' will look a bit different for each one of us. But I do know that part of being a community is learning from each other and growing from the examples of others. We create holiness every day, and most of the time we probably don't even know it. It's the impact we make on each other- the little pieces of our souls we leave lying around for others to pick up- that creates holiness.

It's in that holiness that we each will write our own Torah. We don't need to go far to find heaven.. It is within each one of us, .and it is upon each one of us to share it with those still struggling to find it.

May each one of us, in this new year 5783, be granted the insight, love, compassion, and understanding to find holiness along our own paths, so that each of us may continue to be a blessing in our own Torah..