

Rosh Hashana in Berditchev

The following story, properly entitled Rosh Hashana in Berditchev, is one of the family's favorite stories, and I've been asked to repeat it over for everyone to have for posterity. The central figure of course is R' Levi Yitzchok יגן עלינו זכותו .

It was the first day of Rosh Hashana in the shul in Berditchev by the Rebbe, R' Levi Yitzchok. It was crowded. The Rebbe himself was at the עמוד, leading the תפילות on this most solemn of days. "All declare your majesty, Hashem, who sits in judgment, לְקַל עוֹרְךָ דִּין". The famous, פיוט that we say. The Rabbi's soft and vibrant voice touched the heartstrings of every מתפלל. Hardly anyone's eyes were dry.

From the women's gallery, many a sob burst forth, loud enough to send the tears rolling down every face. "To He Who searches the hearts הדין ביום". As the Rebbe pronounced the words, his voice broke. Everyone's heart was filled with תשובה. Everyone pictured himself standing before the כסא הכבוד, where the judge of the entire universe presided to dispense judgment and pronounce the verdict. "Be merciful and gracious to us", was the inaudible plea coming from the innermost recess of every heart. The Rabbi recited line after line of this תפילה, while the congregation repeated him until he came to the line לקונה עבדיו בדין. Here the Rabbi suddenly paused. The words died on his lips. His טלית slipped from his head, and everyone could see his pale face. His eyes were shut. He seemed to be in a trance. A shudder passed through the entire קהילה. Something was amiss. A critical situation must have arisen in the מעלה של בית דין. Things didn't appear to be going well. The prosecution was apparently on the verge of triumph. Only תפילה and תשובה could change the ominous verdict. The whole קהילה held its breath and waited with palpitations. A few moments later, the Rabbi suddenly came to. The color returned to his face, which now became radiant with joy. His voice shook with ecstasy and triumph as he recited, "To he who acquires his servants לקונה עבדיו בדין - בדין".

After the תפילה, when the Rebbe was sitting at his festive table surrounded by all of his חסידים, one of the elders plucked up the courage to inquire of the Rebbe as to what had caused the interruption in his תפילה and why precisely at those words. R' Levi Yitzchok began to relate.

"I felt myself lifted up to the שערי שמים. I saw the שטן carrying a heavy load. The sight filled me with anxiety, for I knew that the טמא one was carrying a bag full of עבירות to put on the scales of justice before the בית דין. Suddenly, the שטן put the bag down. He hastened down in a downward swoop, no doubt to pick up yet another עבירה committed by some hapless Jew on this very solemn day. The bag, having been left unattended, I went up to it, began to examine its contents, it was filled with all kinds of עבירות: lashon hara, sinas chinam, kinah, ביטול זמן which should have been set aside for the study of torah, תפילה without כוונה. On and on and on. Ugly creatures of עבירות, big and small.

While I was wondering what to do, I knew that even at this very moment, the one with a thousand eyes had yet spied another sin, and would soon bring it gleefully to put into his bag. "Dear me," I thought, "things don't look too good at all." I pushed my hand into the bag and began pulling out one עבירה after the other to look at them more closely. I saw that almost all the עבירות were done without כוונה, without any הנאה, just carelessness or out of הארצות. No Jew is really bad, but the circumstances of עניות, גלות, poverty, and עבירות, and hardship sometimes harden a Jew's heart, set his nerves on edge, bring along petty jealousy and the like. Strangely enough, as I was examining all these עבירות and thinking about what was really behind them, they seemed to start to melt away, one by one, until hardly anything was left in the bag. The bag dropped down back, limp and empty. The next moment I heard a terrible cry. The שטן was back. He had discovered what I had done. He was filled with anger and consternation.

"גב! What have you done with my wonderful עבירות?" He grabbed my beard and payos and yelled, "You're a גב! All year I labored to gather these precious sins, you have stolen them! You have to pay כפל. You have to pay me back double." "How can I pay you?" I pleaded. "My sins may be many, but not that



many?" "Well, you know the law", the שטן countered. "Whoever steals has to pay back double. If he's unable to pay, you have to sell him into servitude. You have to become my עבד! You are my עבד now, come." The thought of being the שטן's slave chilled my blood. I was ready to collapse. Finally, my captor brought me before the כסא הכבוד and pleaded his case before the supreme judge of the universe.

After listening to the שטן's complaint, הקדוש ברוך הוא said, "I will buy him. As I promised through my נביא ישעיהו, I'll be the same, when he is gray-headed, I will sustain him. I have made him, I will bear him. [It's the famous מפתח פתאום]. I will sustain and save him."

"At that point I came to", concluded the ברדיטשעבער. "Now I understood the meaning of the words, לקונה. We are the עבדי Hashem. If we are faithful, Hashem protects us and will be our master. Let us remain faithful servants only to Hashem. We'll be spared from becoming servants of servants. And in the merit of this, הקדוש ברוך הוא should write us all in the ספר החיים.

