

א! פרייליכן חנוכה This is a story from the Torah Tavlin (Parshas Mikeitz 5769) that I've been telling for the last 14 years, and it's my favorite חנוכה story.

In one of the last transports to arrive in Bergen-Belsen, one of the notorious concentration camps of the Nazis, toward the end of World War II, there was a Jew named R' Shmelke Schnitzler. He was a חסיד and a תלמיד חכם, with warm and penetrating eyes. Most amazingly, he maintained a mood of genuine cheerfulness - a rare disposition to find in the horrible environment of a concentration camp. He worked hard to encourage his fellow inmates at every turn, making their lives a bit brighter.

As the end of 1944 approached and winter set in, he became increasingly troubled by a pressing concern: how could he possibly find oil to light the חנוכה lights? חנוכה was just a few days away. He asked everyone he came into contact with, but no one had any oil or anything that could substitute for oil. Still, R' Shmelke did not give in to despair. The מצוה of lighting the חנוכה lights was far too important to him. Beyond that, it would bring much-needed encouragement to the desperate Jews in the camp.

On the day before חנוכה, R' Shmelke was assigned the grim task of removing the bodies of those who had succumbed to starvation נעבעך. As he hurried toward the far end of the camp, near the fence, his foot sank into a patch of soft earth. Stumbling, he realized it was covering a small hole that someone had clearly dug on purpose. He knelt down and brushed some of the dirt aside with his hands. Beneath the surface, he discovered a small jar, half-filled with liquid. He removed the cover and gingerly dipped his finger in - it was oil! His thoughts immediately flashed to the original חנוכה miracle of finding a single jug of oil. Could this truly be happening? Was he dreaming? Then he noticed that the jar had been concealing other objects beneath it. He dug out some more with his hands and uncovered a small package wrapped in a swatch of cloth. In it were eight small cups and eight little thin strands of cotton. This was almost too impossible to believe. Someone had intentionally buried this חנוכה stash, thought R' Shmelke, as he quickly replaced everything back into the hole, filling it with dirt and carefully smoothing the surface. It would be much too dangerous to keep these materials in his possession until חנוכה began the next night. Besides, perhaps someone would come back for it.

R' Shmelke circulated among as many of the inmates as he could during the next day and a half, casually asking if anyone had hidden a quantity of oil in a hiding place. Everyone stared at him as if he was out of his senses. The next night, R' Shmelke stealthily recovered the buried items and set up a מנורה. All the Jews in his barrack crowded around as he lit the first candle. He struck a match and recited the ברכות with great emotion before touching the tiny flame to the thin strands of the first candle. It was a scene from a storybook in stark contrast to the harsh environment of the concentration camp, a ray of hope that repeated itself for a total of eight nights.

The elderly R' Shmelke managed to survive the next few months until the conquering allied forces liberated the camp. His faith and hope had proven victorious. In time, he was able to make the journey to the United States, where he once found himself visiting the holy Satmar Rebbe, R' Yoel Teitelbaum זצ"ל, in Brooklyn. The Rebbe welcomed him warmly, and after some conversation, he said, "I hear that you had the honor of lighting חנוכה candles in Bergen-Belsen." R' Shmelke was surprised. How had the Rebbe known? R' Yoel bent over and whispered in his astonished visitor's ear, "I am the one who hid the oil, the cups, and the wicks in the hole near the fence where I was imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen, the year before you, before my miraculous escape." The Rebbe smiled. "I knew that Hashem would allow the right person to find it at the right time and do the right thing."

