

The Chazzan

The Yalkut Shimoni comments that Klal Yisrael cried out to Hashem, and Moshe Rabbeinu stood in prayer on their behalf. Hashem told him, "Now is not the time to entreat a lengthy prayer. The Jewish People are in a moment of distress." Sforno contends that Moshe was included in the phrase, "Bnei Yisrael cried out to Hashem." The cry of Moshe, however, was not motivated by fear of Pharaoh and his army, for he had already told Klal Yisrael that the Egyptians would perish. His cry was a complaint against the arrogance of the Jewish leaders who had asked, "Were there no graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the wilderness?" Moshe thought that because of their defiance of him, the people would not listen to what he told them and would not enter the sea. Thus, Hashem told him, "Why do you cry out to Me? You err in not trusting the people. They will listen to you."

The city of Slonim was a unique community known for the piety and scholarship of its citizens. Thus, it was no surprise that whoever assumed the position of chazzan, cantor, for the High Holy Days, must have been an individual of great piety who was endowed with a powerful and melodious voice. Regrettably, these criteria were detrimental to the community, since anyone who was able to achieve this lofty position was immediately propositioned by another city to accept the position of chazzan in that community. This was because the city of Slonim was distinguished in the piety of its citizenry - not in their financial portfolios. Alas, they had the finest chazanim every year, only to lose them for the following year.

One year, they were unable to locate a chazzan that was acceptable to them. Their criteria constituted a tall order, and that particular year no one was able to fill their needs. Yom Tov was just a few weeks away. What would they do? One of the elderly members of the community, who many years previously had an excellent voice, offered to be the chazzan for the current year. The lay leadership was inclined to accept, as long as the man agreed to sign a document promising to keep this position for a minimum of five years. Reb Yosha, as he was known, agreed and the contract was signed, sealed and presented to the Rav of Slonim, the distinguished Horav Aizil Slonimer, zl.

As the rav read the agreement, a small smile began to show on his face. Soon, it was a full-fledged laugh. The lay leaders were perturbed at their rav's reaction. He should be ecstatic. They were able to secure a chazzan for the next five years. "My friends," the rav began, "let me share a story with you. Many years ago, when I first took the position of Rav of Slonim, the community had established a new cemetery. The old one was just about filled, and the members needed a new place to inter their dead. Unfortunately, no one wanted his loved one to be the first corpse to be buried in the new cemetery. The Chevra Kadisha, sacred burial society, decided to offer an incentive to the person who agreed to be buried in the new cemetery. They hung signs throughout the city, declaring that they were offering a sizable sum of money to the family of anyone who was buried in the new cemetery. All they could do now was to wait for someone to accept their offer. There was a man in the city who, besides being very poor, was also somewhat of a clever joker. Indeed, his ability to make light of everything helped maintain his sanity concerning his financial status. Pesach was quickly approaching, and his wife notified him that the proverbial cupboard was beyond bare. They had no money whatsoever with which to buy food to celebrate the festival. Ever the optimist, he told his wife to be patient. He would come up with something. He went out of his daily "route" from shul to shul, begging for alms. When he saw the signs offering an incentive to whomever was buried at the new cemetery, he thought of an idea.

Rushing home to his wife, he said, "Quick, I have a way to get out of debt and help us start a new life. As soon as I finish speaking, call the Chevra Kadisha and notify them that I have suddenly died. Dress me in the traditional tachrichim, shrouds, and cover me with a sheet. Tell them that I am all prepared for burial in the new cemetery. Explain to them that you are so poor that you are unable to pay

for any of the incidental expenses resulting from my sudden passing. You, therefore, ask to obtain the "incentive" money immediately. Go out and purchase whatever we need for Pesach and leave the rest to me."

The wife had no recourse but to listen to her husband. The Chevra Kadisha felt bad for the new widow, but were overjoyed with the prospect of finally having someone buried in the new cemetery. Everything went along as planned. The funeral procession took a little longer, since the distance to the new cemetery was quite a bit further. Along the way, the members of the Chevra Kadisha decided to stop at an inn and get a drink. After all, it was not easy carrying a coffin for such a distance. As soon as they left the coffin, the poor man jumped out, and together with his wife, fled the scene, never to be heard from again.

When the Chevra Kadisha discovered what had happened, they realized they had been taken for fools. This would never happen to them again. Thus, when the next person died and his family was willing to have him buried in the new cemetery, his body was tied down to the coffin, so that he could not "escape."

Rav Aizil concluded his story, saying to the lay leadership, "You should have made a contract years ago with the young, healthy chazzanim. Our Reb Yosha is not going anywhere. He is too old. He does not need ropes to hold him here!"