

The Shofar and the Blessing

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This morning I want to share with you a very moving story that was shared with me by colleague and friend, Rabbi [Susan Grossman](#). I offer it to you this morning exactly as she presented it to her congregation.

The story comes from Daniel Wisse and others who recounted it to Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, who you may know from their series of Small Miracle books.

The story begins in Poland, before World War II. Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler, the Grand Rebbe of Radoszyce, was well known as a holy man. Multitudes came to see him. Among his followers was a little boy named Moshe Waintreter.

Moshe was deported in 1943 to the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp in southeastern Poland. This camp had particularly brutal conditions and frequent "selections." (Perhaps Skarzysko-Kamienna is little known because so few survived.)

This was the nightmare into which Moshe found himself. But, almost as soon as he entered his assigned barracks—Barracks 14— he saw his beloved Rebbe!

Not only had the Rebbe continued to offer endless words of comfort and encouragement to the dispirited, he had also conducted regular Sabbath prayer services and, whenever possible, taught Torah. He encouraged Jewish observance. Every morning, under the cover of darkness, a pair of tefillin that had been smuggled into the camp was passed around so each man had the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah (commandment) of putting on the tefillin each day.

As Passover 1943 drew near, the Rebbe decided a seder must be observed in some concrete way. He approached another Jew in the camp, Shloma, and asked him to undertake an important mission. Shloma worked in the camp's kitchen. The Rebbe asked him to acquire enough beets to make enough juice for the four cups of wine for the seder.

Shloma was petrified, but the Rebbe assured him that in the merit of performing this great mitzvah, he would give Shloma his personal blessing and promised him that he would survive and live to see many better years. On a daily basis the Rebbe put his life on the line for his fellow Jews, and now it was time for Shloma to put his life on the line for the Rebbe. He performed the Rebbe's bidding, his clandestine activities mercifully undetected by the prison guards. That Pesach, the Jews in the camp fulfilled the commandment of drinking the four cups—with Shloma's beet juice.

Before Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe decided a shofar (ram's horn) must be acquired to give the inmates a remembrance of those times when their had spirits soared. The Rebbe took a diamond he had hidden—one that could have easily bought him more food and less privation—and gave it to a local Polish peasant who worked in the camp. "I give you this diamond in exchange for a ram's horn," he bribed the peasant. A few days later, the peasant brought the Rebbe an ox horn, protesting he could not find a ram's horn. The Rebbe replied, "A ram's horn is what I asked for...If you want me to give you more diamonds in the future, you will have to find me a ram's horn. Otherwise, I will approach someone else." Several days later, the peasant returned, this time bearing a ram's horn in his pocket.

The only problem was the ram's horn still had to be cleaned out and a hole made in its tip for it to become a shofar that could be used for the holy day.

The Rebbe approached Moshe, who worked in the metal shop and had access to tools. Would he make the shofar for their holy observance? Anguish and fear flickered in Moshe's eyes as he

appealed to his beloved master. "Rebbe," he said faintly, "You know I would do anything for you, but just yesterday a Jew from my workplace smuggled in a tiny piece of leather that he hid in his belt. A guard inspected his clothing and, when he found the leather, shot him dead. We are checked every day as we go in and out of the factory, Rebbe. If a man was killed for a scrap of leather, surely I will be killed, too."

"Moshe," the Rebbe replied gently, using the exact same words with which he had countered Shloma's fears just six months before, when he had asked him to make the beet juice. "I understand your fear. But in the merit of this great mitzvah, I will give you my blessing and promise that you will survive and live to see many better years."

Unable to refuse his Rebbe's request, Moshe reluctantly set out to fulfill it. He successfully sneaked the horn into the shop, picked up a tool and began drilling. Within a few minutes, the factory foreman was at his side, alerted to Moshe's "subversive" activity by the very public buzzing sound of the drill.

"What are you doing?" the foreman demanded. Moshe's father had once told him that the best way to disarm an interrogator was to surprise him with the truth.

"I'm making a shofar, so that we can blow it on the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur," he said.

"Are you crazy?" the foreman shouted, pushing Moshe into a storage room nearby. It's over. I'm dead now. The Rebbe's blessing didn't protect me after all, Moshe thought, bracing himself for the gunshot. But none came.

In the privacy of the empty storage room, the foreman addressed him in an entirely different, gentle voice: "Listen," he told Moshe, "I am a religious Catholic, and I believe in the Bible. I respect your religion, and I respect the sacrifices you religious Jews make to follow your faith. I will allow you to make your shofar. I'll lock you in here with the tools you need, so no one else will see what you're doing and you'll be safe." A few days later, Moshe slipped the crude but completely kosher shofar into the Rebbe's outstretched hands.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, before they were called to work, the congregants of Barracks 14—whose bodies had long ago been broken but whose souls remained miraculously intact—rose early to hear the last tekias shofar of the Grand Rebbe of Radoszyce. And although the shofar was makeshift and crude, its notes were pure and true, piercing the prisoners' hearts, penetrating Heaven, and breaking down its inner gates.

The months passed and in late May 1944, the Nazis started to liquidate the camp in mass killings. Moshe was among the few survivors who were deported to a smaller forced labor camp nearby (Czestochowa). Sadly, the Rebbe was not.

Moshe managed to take the shofar with him and successfully smuggle it into this new camp. He clung to the shofar as tenaciously as he clung to life itself. Each evening, Moshe would return from his labors and frantically search his secret hiding place to make sure the shofar was still there. And, miraculously, it was.

However, one day, while he was at work, Moshe was suddenly thrown onto a train bound for Buchenwald. The shofar was left behind. He could not stop lamenting its loss.

When Moshe was liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945, he attributed his survival to the bracha (the blessing) he had received from the Rebbe of Radoszyce.

Moshe yearned to find the shofar, but life intervened. He married another survivor, helped organize the illegal immigration of Jews into Israel, and eventually moved to Israel to live. But Moshe never forgot the shofar. The shofar was Moshe's sole physical link to the Rebbe. Finding it-and bringing it to Israel-was the only tangible way he could honor the Rebbe's memory and inspire people with his

story. So Moshe set out to find the shofar, combing the world for anyone who might possibly know its fate. He placed ads in Yiddish newspapers, wrote to Holocaust-survivor organizations, contacted friends of friends.

One day, in 1977, he received a call. His thirty-year search was over. A few months later, in an emotional ceremony, Moshe Waintreter was reunited with the shofar he had shaped and molded in the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp. He formally presented it to Israel's foremost Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem in memory of Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler, the Grand Rebbe of Radoszyce, who defied the Nazis over and over again.

My work is finally done, Moshe thought. But the story doesn't end here.

Moshe had a son. When the time came for that son to marry, a shidduch (match) was proposed with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor in Canada. The young man flew to Canada to meet the young lady. From the very beginning they knew they were each other's bashert (destined one) and they decided to get engaged. Moshe came to Canada for the engagement party. As his son started to introduce the two mechutanim (fathers-in-law), the two men began to sob and ran into each other's arms. The future father-in-law turned out to be none other than Shloma, the chassid who had made the beet juice for the Radoszyce Rebbe's four cups for Pesach in 1943!

These two men were the only Radoszyce chassidim who survived the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp. They survived exactly as the Rebbe had promised.

Why do I tell you this story?

Because perhaps this story of great adversity and great courage will inspire you to take that leap of faith you may need to in the coming year. Perhaps this story of death defying commitment to our tradition will inspire you to take more seriously traditions we can so freely celebrate here. Or perhaps this story will inspire you to take a chance to help another.

May the sounds of the shofar that have reverberated in our ears and our hearts this morning help open our hearts and lift our souls and bless us with the strength to do what we think is impossible but miraculously, with God's help, will not be in the coming year.

May it be so, and let us say, Amen. Shanah Tovah