

The Story of the Sabbath Loaves

Tonight is a night about words.

After all, the Kol Nidre prayer is all about words, albeit a disavowal of the words we say and the words we will say. And some of our prayers of this holiday ask for forgiveness for the harmful way we use words. They indeed are powerful. When we string words together they can form a story. And so tonight I want to use words to tell a story, a simple yet profound story.

The story has to do with the Aron HaKodesh, the Holy Ark which houses the Torah scrolls in the holy city of Tzefat.

Certain symbols can be found in just about every synagogue. The eternal light, called the Ner Tamid, symbolizes God's eternal presence. The seven branch menorah recalls the one which once stood in the Beit Mikdash, the Temple in Jerusalem and reminds us that the synagogue is the spiritual heir of that place of glory. There are other symbols as well, and while each synagogue has its own architectural touches, the central focus of almost every one is the ark, the Aron HaKodesh, which houses the sifrei Torah, the Torah scrolls.

Ours is designed to resemble a Sephardic Torah scroll and is adorned with the beautiful bead work done by Cherry Goldblatt depicting the twelve tribes. Among the questions the story may evoke are: where is God? How do we find God in the world?

Tomorrow night, individuals will line up to approach the ark during the powerful closing service known as Ne'ila. Ne'ila refers to the closing of the day and is meant to parallel the symbolic closing of the gates in the Temple. The custom reminds us we have one last chance to come and offer our heartfelt prayers before the gates are closed to this year's Day of Atonement. I encourage you to think about what you bring when you come to the ark and how to approach it. One rabbi explained that part of the popularity and attraction of the custom is because standing in front of the open ark, especially on Yom Kippur allows people to experience something they don't usually feel -- a sense of *kedusha*, of holiness, of the sacred because it allows people to feel they are in God's presence.

With that by way of introduction, here is the story:

There once there was a poor converso, someone who secretly practiced Judaism while outwardly professing loyalty to Christianity, who escaped the oppression and persecutions of Portugal sometime in the 1500's and came to Israel. He and his wife settled in the holy city of Safed, where they both stopped pretending to be Christian and joyously returned to embrace the hidden faith of their ancestors.

One Shabbat the man heard the rabbi deliver a sermon about the special Sabbath loaves the priests used to prepare in the Temple when it stood in Jerusalem. Although he could not understand everything the rabbi said, because his knowledge of Hebrew was limited, he understood what the

rabbi said when he concluded his remarks, "Because of our sins we stopped bringing God these special loaves as we did in times past."

When the service was over, the former converso, also referred to as a *marrano* hurried home and said to his wife, "My beloved, please make two Sabbath loaves that I can bring as an offering to God. Be sure to use only the finest flour, and make sure your hands are pure when you knead the dough."

His wife did as he asked. That Friday he brought the two loaves to the synagogue and set them down in the Holy Ark. "Almighty God!" he cried as he stood there, "Please accept our offering, which we offer with all our heart. My wife and I hope You find these loaves tasty and that the sweet smell pleases You. We pray that You will not be disappointed."

As soon as he had left the synagogue, the *shammash* came in to prepare the room for the evening prayers. After he finished dusting the floor and his other chores, he approached the ark and uttered a solemn prayer, "*Ribbono shel olam*, Master of the Universe, I am going home to my family and again this week I must bear the pain of a Shabbos without hallot. Can you not help me? Can you not provide food for my poor family? You know how hard I work on Your behalf. I beseech You O God. Please, answer my prayer."

After he finished uttering his prayer, he opened the ark to finish cleaning it, and lo and behold he found the loaves left in the holy ark by the simple Crypto Jew.

In joy the *shammash* cried out, "Praise be to God who has provided for all our needs. It is a miracle! You have answered my prayers. Now my family and I can celebrate the Sabbath in joy and gladness." He ran home to give the loaves to his wife telling her of the miracle God had performed on their behalf.

Just before sundown the simple Jew hurried back to the synagogue and discovered that the loaves were gone. How great was his joy to discover that God had accepted his offering! He stood before the ark and prayed, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, surely you must have enjoyed the challot I brought you, for they are all gone, and not a crumb is left."

And sure enough he brought challot again, even sweeter than what he had offered the previous week. And sure enough, the *shammash* approached the ark, and prayed, "Dear God, I have little merit to stand before You and ask for another miracle. But you made my family so happy last week, if it is not too much to ask of You, I hope You will see fit to provide for me again."

Upon the completion of his prayer he slowly opened the ark, and to his delight discovered two beautiful loaves, even bigger than last week's were there waiting for him. And so it continued this way for many weeks: The former converso and his wife would offer the loaves, and the *shammash* and his family would consume them. Both rejoiced in their good fortune. Each week one would fill the ark with gifts for God, while the other would accept and express gratitude to God for his good fortune.

One Friday the rabbi came to the synagogue early. While sitting in the back of the synagogue, absorbed in his books and studying, the man came in and laid his two loaves before the ark. As in previous weeks, he said his prayers and asked God to accept his offering.

But before he reached the door, the rabbi who saw what happened, and who heard the man's prayer approached and called to him, "You fool! Do you really think that God needs your bread? Do you really think that God has a body and an appetite? It is a great sin to think so! There must be someone who has been eating your loaves!"

Just then the *shammash* came in and started to make his way to the ark. The rabbi stopped and asked him what he was doing. Sheepishly he admitted that he was the one who had been taking the loaves of bread all these weeks. Tearfully he told the rabbi, "All this time I thought that that God had taken pity on me and my family and answered my prayers."

"You see!" cried the rabbi to the shamefaced converso. "It is just as I said. Imagine thinking that God was eating your loaves!" And to the *shammash* he said, "How foolish of you to think that God would provide you with bread."

With that, the former crypto Jew burst into tears. "Oh, rabbi, what a sinner I have been! When I heard you talk about the special Temple loaves in your sermon, I must have misunderstood your words and have committed a grave transgression. Will God ever forgive me?"

The *shammash* realizing his foolishness was dejected and shed tears of embarrassment.

At that moment, a messenger of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the holy Ari entered and said to the rabbi, "My master says that you are to go home and set your house in order for it is the will of heaven that tomorrow you will die."

Upset by the grave words, the rabbi hurried to the Ari, Rabbi Luria and asked him to explain his message. "Not since the Holy Temple was destroyed has God derived such pleasure as from the two loaves offered by this simple *Marrano* and his wife," said the holy Ari. "Each Sabbath the Holy One looks forward to the words of thanksgiving and praise that this simple Jew pours forth from the depths of his heart, and the words of thanks expressed by the simple *shammash*. But in shaming this pious man, you have robbed God of one of His supreme pleasures. And because of this, you have been sentenced to death. It is useless to pray for forgiveness, for your fate has been sealed."

So the rabbi went home and made out his will. And the next day at the conclusion of the Sabbath, the words of the Ari came true, and he died.

Lest I conclude the story and leave you on such a sour, cruel and sad note, I share with you one of several alternative endings of the same story, and will let you decide which of the endings you like the best

In one of the other versions the rabbi was not the villain, but the hero of the story. What was going on was discovered not by the rabbi, but by someone else. The two men who had been

bringing and taking the challot were shown into the rabbi's study who shook his head, and groaned in sadness when he heard the story of what had been going on in his synagogue and had now come to an end.

He looked up at the two, who looking in his eyes could see the pain in his heart. He told them, "Now I understand the meaning of the terrible dream I had last night and what must be done. God was ready to destroy the whole world, because something precious and holy had been destroyed and taken from him. I pleaded with God and begged the Almighty to let me try to figure out what had gone wrong so I could repair it. Now that I have discovered why he was so upset, I will tell you what we must do."

"Reb Chayim," the rabbi said to the man who brought the challot, "I want you to know your gifts did reach God, who took great joy in the offering you brought with all your heart. And Reb Yankel, I want you to know that when you said words of thanks to God each Shabbos for providing you challot, your prayers reached higher than the songs of the angels!"

"It has been God's greatest joy to watch this miracle take place each week, and only if the act of mercy is restored will God let the world continue! So to repair the damage, each of you must continue to do what you did before you discovered each other, only now you will provide it directly. And even though you now know that the bread was neither consumed nor produced by God, you must nevertheless perform the act as if you are doing it for the sake of the Almighty, and believing with all your heart that you are participating in a miracle and that you are fulfilling God's will. For of all the mitzvot fulfilled by God's creatures since the world was created, it was this mitzvah above all that brought such great joy to the Creator."

But that my friends is not the end of the story, for the rabbi's work was not yet done.

Once the miracle had been restored, the rabbi summoned the man who had revealed what was going on and thereby ruined the charade. He said to him, "Your cruelty almost destroyed the entire world, and so you must be punished for what you did. As punishment you will leave town tonight, and will wander the world the rest of your days. In every place where you find Jews who make Shabbos, you will tell them the story of the miracle of these two simple Jews.

And when you die, your children will tell the story. And when they die, their children will tell the story, and it will not stop until every Jew in every corner of the world has heard the story. In that way, you, too, will restore the miracle, repair the world and allow the it to continue."

And now, dear congregants, you, too, on this Yom Kippur have heard the story as well, and so you also must do your part to preserve the spirit of the miracle and sustain the world.