

A Yom Kippur Scandal

Sholem Aleykhem

“That’s nothing!” called out the man with round eyes, like an ox, who had been sitting all this time in a corner by the window, smoking and listening to our stories of thefts, robberies, and expropriations. “I’ll tell you a story of a theft that took place in our town, in the synagogue itself, and on Yom Kippur at that! It’s worth listening to.

“Our town, Kasrilevke — that’s where I’m from, you know — is a small town, and a poor one. There is no thievery there. No one steals anything for the simple reason that there is nobody to steal from and nothing worth stealing. And besides, a Jew is not a thief by nature. That is, he may be a thief, but not the sort who will climb through a window or attack you with a knife. He will divert, pervert, subvert, and contravert as a matter of course; but he will won’t pull anything out of your pocket. He won’t be caught like a common thief and led through the streets with a yellow placard on his back. Imagine, then, a theft taking place in Kasrilevke, a such a theft at that. Eighteen hundred rubles at one crack.

“Here is how it happened. One Yom Kippur eve, just before the evening services, a stranger arrived in our town, a salesman of some sort from Lithuania. He left his bag at an inn and went forth immediately to look for a place of worship, and he came upon the old synagogue. Coming in just before the service began, he found the trustees around the collection plates. ‘Sholem aleykhem,’ said he. ‘Aleikhem sholem,’ they answered. ‘Where does our guest hail from?’ ‘From Lithuania.’ ‘And your name?’ ‘Not even your grandmother’s worry!’ ‘But you have come to our synagogue!’ ‘Where else should I go?’ ‘Then you want to pray here?’ ‘Can I help myself? What else can I do?’ ‘Then put something into the plate.’ ‘What did you think? That I wasn’t going to pay?’

“To make a long story short, our guest took out three silver rubles and put them in the plate. Then he put a ruble in the cantor’s plate, one into the rabbi’s, gave one for the cheder, threw a half into the charity box, and then began to divide money among the poor who flocked to the door. And in our town we have so many poor people that if you really wanted to start giving, you could divide Rothschild’s fortune among them.

“Impressed by his generosity, the men quickly found a place for him along the east wall. Where did they find room for him when all the places along the wall are occupied? Don’t ask. Have you ever been at a celebration — a wedding or circumcision — when all the guests are already seated at the table, and suddenly there is a commotion outside — the rich uncle has arrived? What do you do? You push and shove and squeeze until a place is made for the rich relative. Squeezing is a Jewish custom. If no one squeezes, we squeeze each other.”

The man with the eyes that bulged like an ox’s paused, looked at the crowd to see what effect his wit had on us, and went on.

“To make a long story short, our guest went up to his place of honor and called to the shammas to bring him a praying stand. He put on his tallis and started to pray. He prayed and he prayed, standing on his feet all the time. He never sat down or left his place all evening long or all the next day. To fast all day standing on one’s feet, without ever sitting down — that only a Litvak can do!

“But when it was all over, when the final blast of the shofar had died down, the Day of Atonement had ended, and Chaim-Khone the melamed, who had led the evening prayers after Yom Kippur from time immemorial, had cleared his throat, and in his tremulous voice had already begun — ‘Ma—a—riv a—ro—vim ...’ suddenly screams were heard. ‘Help! Help! Help!’ We looked around: the stranger was stretched out on the floor in a dead faint. We poured water on him, revived him, but he fainted again. What was the trouble? Plenty! This Litvak tells us that he had brought with him to Kasrilevke eighteen hundred rubles. To leave that much at the inn — think of it,

Eighteen hundred rubles — he had been afraid. Whom could he trust with such a sum of money in a strange town? And yet, to keep it in his pocket on Yom Kippur was not exactly proper either. So at last this plan had

occurred to him: he had taken the money to the synagogue and slipped it into the praying stand. Only a Litvak could do a thing like that! ... Now do you see why he had not stepped away from the praying stand for a single minute? And yet during one of the many prayers when we all turn our face to the wall, someone must have stolen the money ...

“Well, the poor man wept, tore his hair, wrung his hands. What would he do with the money gone? It was not his own money, he said. He was only a clerk. The money was his employer’s. He himself was a poor man, with a houseful of children. There was nothing for him to do now but go out and drown himself, or hang himself right here in front of everybody.

“Hearing these words, the crowd stood petrified, forgetting that they had all been fasting since the night before, and it was time to go home and eat. It was a disgrace before a stranger, a shame and a scandal in our own eyes. A theft like that — eighteen hundred rubles! And where? In the Holy of Holies, in the old synagogue of Kasrileke. And on what day? On the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur! Such a thing had never been heard of before.

“‘Shammes, lock the door!’ ordered our rabbi. We have our own rabbi in Kasrilevke, Reb Yozifel, a true man of God, a holy man. Not too sharp witted, perhaps, but a good man, a man with no bitterness in him. Sometimes he gets ideas that you would not hit upon if you had eighteen heads on your shoulders ... When the door was locked, Reb Yosifel turned to the congregation, his face pale as death, and his hands trembling, his eyes burning with a strange fire.

“He said, ‘Listen to me, my friends. This is an ugly thing, a thing unheard of since the world was created — that here in Kasrilevke there should be a sinner, a renegade to his people, who would have the audacity to take from a stranger, a poor man with a family, a fortune like this. And on what day? On the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur, and perhaps at the last most solemn moment — just before the shofar was blown! Such a thing has never happened anywhere. I cannot believe it is possible. It simply cannot be. But perhaps — who knows? Man is greedy, and the temptation — especially with a sum like this, eighteen hundred rubles, God forbid — is great enough. So if one of us was tempted, if he were fated to commit this evil on a day like this, we must probe the matter thoroughly, strike at the root of this whole affair. Heaven and earth have sworn that the truth must always rise as oil upon the waters. Therefore, my friends, let us search each other now, go through each other’s garments, shake out our pockets — all of us from the oldest householder to the shammes, not leaving anyone out. Start with me. Search my pockets first.’

“Thus spoke Reb Yozifel, and he was first to unbind his gabardine and turn his pockets inside out. And following his example all the men loosened their girdles and showed the linings of their pockets, too. They searched each other, and they felt and shook one another, until they came to Leyzer Yossel, who turned all colors and began to argue that, in the first place, the stranger was a swindler, that his story was the pure fabrication of a Litvak. No one had stolen any money from him. Couldn’t they see that it was all a falsehood and a lie?

“The congregation began to clamor and shout. What did he mean by this? All the important men had allowed themselves to be searched, so why should Leyzer Yossel escape? There are no privileged characters here. ‘Search him! Search him!’ the crowd roared.

“Leyzer Yossel saw that it was hopeless, and began to plead for mercy with tears in his eyes. He begged them not to search him. He swore by all that is holy that he was as innocent in this as he would want to be of any wrongdoing as long as he lived. Then why didn’t he want to be searched? It was a disgrace to him, he said. He begged them to have pity on his youth, not to bring this disgrace down upon him. ‘Do anything you wish with me,’ he said, ‘but don’t touch my pockets.’ How do you like that? Do you suppose we listened to him?

“But wait ... I forgot to tell you who this Leyzer Yossel was. He was not a Kasrilevker himself. He came from the devil knows where, at the time of his marriage, to live with his wife’s parents. The rich man of our town had dug him up somewhere for his daughter, boasted that he had found a rare nugget, a fitting match for his daughter like his. He knew a thousand pages of Talmud by heart, and all of the Bible. He was a master of Hebrew, arithmetic, bookkeeping, algebra, penmanship — in short, everything you could think of. When he arrived in

Kasrilevke — this jewel of a young man — everyone came out to gaze at him. What sort of bargain had the rich man picked out? Well, to look at him you could tell nothing. He was a young man, something in trousers. Not bad looking, but with a nose a trifle too long, eyes that burned like two coals, and a sharp tongue. Our leading citizens began to work on him: tried him out on a page of Gemara, a chapter from the Scriptures, a bit of Rambam, this, that, and the other. He was perfect in everything, the dog! Whenever you went after him, he was at home. Reb Yosifel himself said that he could have been a rabbi in any Jewish congregation. As for world affairs, there is nothing to talk about. We have an authority on such things in our town, Zaydel Reb Shaye's, but he could not hold a candle to Leyzer Yossel. And when it came to chess — there was no one like him in all the world! Talk about versatile people ...

Naturally the whole town envied the rich man his find, but some of them felt that he was a little too good to be true. He was too clever (and too much of anything is bad!). For a man of his station he was too free and easy, a hail—fellow—well—met, too familiar with all young folk — boys, girls, and maybe even loose women. There were rumors ... At the same time he went around alone too much, deep in thought. At the synagogue he came in last, put on his tallis, and with his skullcap on askew, thumbed aimlessly through his prayerbook without ever following the services. No one ever saw him doing anything exactly wrong, and yet people murmured that he was not a God—fearing man. Apparently a man cannot be perfect ...

“And so, when his turn came to be searched and he refused to let them do it, that was all the proof most of the men needed that he was the one who had taken the money. He begged them to let him swear any oath they wished, begged them to chop him, roast him, cut him up — do anything but shake his pockets out. At this point even our rabbi, Reb Yosifel, although he was a man we had never seen angry, lost his temper and started to shout.

“‘You!’ he cried. ‘You so and so! Do you know what you deserve? You see what all these men have endured. They were able to forget the disgrace and allowed themselves to be searched; but you want to be the only exception! God in heaven! Either confess and hand over the money, or let us see for ourselves what is in your pockets. You are trifling now with the entire Jewish community. Do you know what they can do to you?’

“To make a long story short, the men took hold of this young upstart, threw him down on the floor with force, and began to search him all over, shake out every one of his pockets. And finally they shook out ... Well guess what! A couple of well—gnawed chicken bones and a few dozen plum pits still moist from chewing.

You can imagine what an impression this made — to discover food in the pockets of our prodigy on this holiest of fast days. Can you imagine the look on the young man's face, and on his father—in—law's? And on that of our poor rabbi?

“Poor Reb Yosifel! He turned away in shame. He could look no one in the face. On Yom Kippur, and in his synagogue ... As for the rest of us, hungry as we were, we could not stop talking about it all the way home. We rolled with laughter in the streets. Only Reb Yozifel walked home alone, his head bowed, full of grief, unable to look anyone in the eyes, as though the bones had been shaken out of his own pockets.”

The story was apparently over. Unconcerned, the man with the round eyes of an ox turned back to the window and resumed smoking.

“Well,” we all asked in one voice, “and what about the money?”

“What money?” asked the man innocently, watching the smoke he had exhaled.

“What do you mean — what money? The eighteen hundred rubles!”

“Oh,” he drawled. “The eighteen hundred. They were gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone forever.”