

Saturday Night,
FULL MOON

Intriguing Stories of Kabbalah Sages,
Chasidic Masters,
and other Jewish Heroes

volume 1

By

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HONG KONG · JERUSALEM · LAS VEGAS

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Foreword

What a happy occasion! The first book of stories from Ascent. The Ascent Center in Safed is a place where thousands of people come annually to find out more about what it means to be Jewish. Perhaps the most successful vehicle to do this is through the stories about tzadikim, mystics, sages, chasidim and men and women of action. The tales of the righteous are not simply historical records of events that happened many years ago, rather each story serves as an example of how we can better live our lives with integrity.

Each expert story teller recounts his stories through his or her own particular lens, with his or her unique style. Stories have been a part of the Ascent tradition for 30 years and Rabbi Tilles, one of Ascent's founders, is our master story teller. After decades of sharing his wealth of knowledge, we bless him in this most successful endeavor and pray that this book is not only well received, but that it is the first of many to come.

Rabbi Shaul Leiter

Director, Ascent of Safed



Approbation



The stories of Rabbi Tilles are tremendously creative and engaging. Rabbi Tilles enables the reader to enter the life of the story — to experience in a very real and tangible way its feelings, beauty, life and drama. Rabbi Tilles' stories have been on the front page of the Living Jewish weekly publication for years. People will approach me on the street, in shops, and enthusiastically tell me how much they enjoyed a particular story. The Living Jewish readership is particularly diverse yet the stories have the ability to appeal to people from a wide array of backgrounds. Rabbi Tilles has an amazing gift and I am very excited that with this new book more people will have the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from his stories.

Aaron Schmidt

Editor, Living Jewish

Biographical notes for this story:

Rabbi **Yisroel** (ben Baruch) **Hager of Vizhnitz**, Bokovina [of blessed memory: 5620– 2 Sivan 5696 (1860– May 1936 C.E.)], had many thousands of followers over the 43 years he served as Rebbe. After WWI he headed a major yeshiva in Hungary. Because of his warmth and friendliness to every Jew, he was known as “the *Ahavas Yisroel*”.

This story can be related to:

Weekly Readings: *Kedoshim* — Leviticus 19:17 (“...Rebuke you shall rebuke your fellow...”); *Mishpatim* — Exodus 22:21 (“Do not mistreat a widow or an orphan.”)

Jewish Calendar Date: Sivan 2 (4 days before *Shavuot*) — *yahrzeit* of Rebbe Yisrael of Vizhnitz

Main Themes: Rebuke, Deeds of kindness

Other Topics: Exercise, Widows

Silence Speaks

IT HAPPENED ABOUT A HUNDRED YEARS AGO. Every weekday evening Rabbi **Yisroel Hager**, the saintly *Vizhnitzer Rebbe*, would go out for a stroll for about half an hour, accompanied by one of his attendants. One day, much to the surprise of his *shammash* (attendant), the Rebbe stopped in front of a large house next to the town park belonging to the manager of the local bank, went up the steps, and knocked on the door.

The attendant had no idea what the Rebbe could possibly want in the house of the bank manager. The banker was most certainly not a chasid. In fact, he was one of the local leaders of the *Haskalah* (Reformed Enlightenment movement opposed to traditional Judaism). Nevertheless, when he saw the door open and the butler usher the Rebbe in, he quickly raced up the steps and slipped into the house too, not willing for the Rebbe to be left alone and unattended.

The bank manager came downstairs and couldn't believe his eyes, the *Vizhnitzer Rebbe* in his house! He greeted his guest warmly, showed him to a comfortable chair in the salon, and sat down opposite him. After some initial pleasantries, he waited for the Rebbe to state the reason for his unexpected call.

A few minutes passed in silence. The host became a bit uncomfortable. A refined cosmopolitan man, he would never presume to confront his distinguished guest about why he had come. Excusing himself, he walked to a position where the Rebbe couldn't see him, and frantically signalled to the Rebbe's attendant to join him in the hall.

"Why on earth did the Rabbi come here?"

“I have no idea. The Rebbe didn’t tell me anything. I saw him enter, so I followed him in.”

Perplexed, the bank manager returned to his seat. He looked at the Rebbe. The Rebbe looked at him. More silence. What was going on?

The host was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain his sophisticated constraint. Finally, after several more minutes, the Rebbe stood up. Still not saying a word, he walked towards the door. Displaying good manners, the bank manager escorted him out. He followed the Rebbe down the steps and several paces along the sidewalk, started to turn back but almost instantly reconsidered, and continued to follow behind the calmly strolling tzadik.

When they reached the Rebbe’s house and the Rebbe paused to start up the steps, the bank manager finally threw off all restraint and called out, “Vizhnitzer Rebbe! Please excuse me for asking, but why did you come to my house? While you were my guest I would never presume to pry, but now we are at *your* house, so I can ask you.”

The Rebbe turned slowly towards him. “I came to your house to fulfill a *mitzvah*. Thank G-d, I succeeded.”

“Which *mitzvah*?”

“Our sages say that just as it is a *mitzvah* to speak out when you will be listened to,* so it is a *mitzvah* to not say anything when you know you will not be listened to.

“But what does it mean to not say anything?” the Rebbe continued. “To sit in your house in silence? Not at all. You have to go to the person to whom you are not supposed to say what he won’t listen to, confront him face-to-face, and then refrain from saying it!

“And that,” concluded the Rebbe, “is precisely what I did.”

“So what is it that you did not say?” queried the bewildered bank manager.

The attendant, standing by respectfully, was equally curious to know.

"I can't tell you that," the tzadik insisted.

"Why not?"

"Because then I will lose my mitzvah!"

"But how do you know that I wouldn't listen?"

"I know."

"But you can't know that. You *must* tell me what it is!" pleaded the bank manager, totally overcome by curiosity.

"I'm sorry. No," said the Rebbe firmly

After several more rounds, the bank manager begged: "Please, please, please, at least give me a chance."

"Oh, all right," said the Rebbe with a show of reluctance. "Yesterday, a distraught woman, recently widowed, came to speak to me. Apparently, she received a notice signed by you that your bank has decided to put her house up for auction next week because she is unable to pay the mortgage. That means she and her little children will be out on the street. She asked me to speak to you, because she knows that you are Jewish. She hoped I could influence you to have compassion on her and her children.

"I, however, did not bring it up to you because of the mitzvah to not say."

"But Rebbe," exclaimed the banker in frustration, "You don't understand! It's not *me* she owes, it's the bank. I don't *own* the bank, I only manage it; I don't set policy. Besides—"

"Right," the Rebbe interrupted. "As I said. I knew you wouldn't listen. Good night."

The Rebbe walked up the steps to his dwelling, followed by his attendant. The door closed behind them. The bank manager stood immobile, stunned. Finally, he walked home, alone and bemused, but the matter had entered his heart and he was unable to dismiss it.

Before the week was up, he paid the widow's entire mortgage out of his own personal account.



Biographical note for this story:

Rabbi **Benyamin** (ben Menachem Mendel) **Mendelson**, of blessed memory: (?– 24 Iyar 5739 (?– May 1979 C.E.)) was born in Plotzk, Poland. He immigrated to Israel after WWII, where he became the founding rabbi of Komemiyut, a religious moshav in the south, which, under his guidance and rabbinical leadership, became one of the first settlements to observe *all* the biblical and rabbinical agricultural laws which apply to the Holy Land. He is still considered a foremost authority on the laws of the Sabbatical Year.

This story can be related to:

Weekly Readings: *Bahar* — Leviticus Ch. 25 (“The Sabbatical Year”)

Jewish Calendar Date: the next Sabbatical year begins Rosh Hashana 5775 (Sept. 2014 C.E.)

Main Themes: Sabbatical year

Other Topics: Israel, Moshavim and kibbutzim, Farming, Divine supervision

Rotten Seeds

MY NAME IS DOV WEISS and I was one of a group of about thirty religious young men that started *Moshav Komemiyut*, an agricultural settlement in the south of Israel. It was in 1950, after we had completed our army service. I was still a bachelor then. Among the founders was also the well known Torah scholar and rabbinical authority, Rabbi **Benyamin Mendelson**, of blessed memory. He had immigrated to Israel from Poland and had served as the Rabbi of Kfar Ata.

At first we lived in tents, in the middle of a barren wilderness. The nearest settlements to ours were several kibbutzim associated with the left-wing *Shomer Hatzair* movement: Gat, Gilon, and Negvah. Several of our members supported themselves by working at Kibbutz Gat, the closest to us, doing different types of manual labor. Others worked in our fields, planting wheat, barley, rye and other grains and legumes. I myself drove a tractor. We sold our produce, which grew throughout the 15,000 or so *dunam* [nearly 4,000 acres] allotted us, to bakeries and factories.

At that time, there were no water pipes reaching our *moshav*. We had to content ourselves with what could be grown in dry rugged fields. Every few days we would make a trip to Kibbutz Negvah, about 20 kilometers away, to fill large containers with drinking water.

The second year we were there, 5711 on the Jewish calendar (Fall 1950– Summer 1951 C.E.) was the *Shmitah* year which comes every seventh year, in which the Torah commands us to desist from all agricultural work (see Leviticus 25:1–7). We were among the very few settlements in Israel at the time

to observe the laws of the Sabbatical year, and refrain from working the land. Instead, we concentrated on building, and succeeded that year in completing much of the permanent housing. The moshav gradually developed and expanded, and more and more families moved in, as well as a number of young singles. By the end of the year, we already numbered around eighty people.

As the Sabbatical year drew to its completion, we prepared to renew our farming activities. For this we required seeds to sow crops, but for this purpose we could only use wheat from the sixth year, the year that preceded the *Shmitah*, for the produce of the Seventh Year is forbidden for this type of use. We went around to all the agricultural settlements in the area, near and far, seeking good quality seeds from the previous year's harvest, but no one could fulfill our request.

All we were able to find was some old wormy seed that, for reasons that were never made clear to us, was laying around in a storage shed in Kibbutz Gat. No farmer in his right mind anywhere in the world would consider using such poor quality seed to plant with if he expected to see any crops from it. The kibbutzniks at Gat all burst into loud derisive laughter when we revealed that we were actually interested in this infested grain that had been rotting away for a few years in some dark, murky corner.

"If you really want it, you can take all that you like, and for free, with our compliments," they offered in amusement.

We consulted with Rabbi Mendelson. His response was: "Take it. The One who tells wheat to sprout from good seed can also order it to grow from inferior wormy leftover seed as well."

In any case, we didn't have an alternative. So we loaded a tractor with all the old infested seed that the kibbutz had offered to us free of charge and returned to Komemiyut.

The laws of *Shmitah* forbade us to plough and turn over the soil until after *Rosh HaShana*, the beginning of the eighth year, so we didn't get to actually sow the seed until the next

month, *Mar'cheshvan*. This was two or three months after all the other farmers had already completed their planting.

That year, the rains were late in coming. The farmers from all the kibbutzim and moshavim gazed upward longingly for the first rain. They began to feel desperate, but the heavens were unresponsive, remaining breathlessly still and blue.

Finally it rained. When? The day after we completed planting our thousand dunam of wheat fields with those wormy seeds, the sky opened up and the rains exploded down to saturate the parched earth.

The following days we were nervous in anticipation, but we turned our attention to strengthening our faith and trust in G-d. Anyway, it did not take a long time for the hand of the Al-mighty to be revealed clearly to all. Those wheat fields that were planted during the Seventh Year, months before the first rain, sprouted only small weak crops. At the same time, our fields, sowed with the old infested seed and long after the optimal time, were covered with an unusually large and healthy yield of wheat, in comparison to any standard.

The story of the "miracle at Komemiyut" spread quickly. Farmers from all the agricultural settlements in the south came to see with their own eyes what they could not believe when they heard the rumors about it.

When the farmers from Kibbutz Gat arrived, they pulled a surprise on us. After looking in open-mouthed astonishment at the impressive bountiful quantity of wheat flourishing in our fields, grown from the infested seeds they had provided us, they decided to renege on their generosity. They announced they wanted payment for the tractor load of old rotten wheat they had scornfully given us for free only a short time before.

Even more startling: they said they would file a claim against us at the *beit din* (rabbinical court), and with Rabbi Mendelson himself, no less! They figured that in a secular court such a claim wouldn't have the slightest possible chance of gaining them even a single penny.

Rabbi Mendelson accepted their case seriously, and in the end judged that we should pay them. His explained that the reason they gave it for free was because they thought it worthless for planting, while in truth it really was excellent for that purpose. We were astonished to hear his ruling, but needless to say, we complied.

The whole story became an extraordinary *kiddush Hashem* (glorification of G-d), in the eyes of people throughout the country. Everyone agreed it was a clear fulfillment of G-d's promise in the Torah:

If you shall say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year? Behold we shall not plant, nor harvest our produce!" I will command my blessing to you...." [Leviticus 25:20-21].



Source: Translated- freely adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the Hebrew weekly *Sichat HaShavua*, #721. (First published on *AscentOfSafed.com*.)

Translator's note:

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In addition to being a leader in the observance of the agricultural commandments that apply in the Land of Israel, **Komemiyut** is world famous for its high-quality (and tasty!) *shmurah matzah* — round, hand-made matzah prepared under exacting supervision from the time the wheat is harvested through to the end of the baking, guarding the wheat and the matzah against the minutest moisture.