

THE PRICE OF AN ESROG

*From "The Prisoner and Other Tales of Faith" by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern
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Reb Itzig was walking with his head bent against the rain, which the wind was driving across the exposed field path. His heart was as heavy as his feet. Business had been bad again today. The heavy autumn rains had made many roads in these Hungarian flatlands impassable. Some villages were completely cut off. In others the peasants were too busy protecting their barns and saving what they could from exposed stacks to think of trading with him.

And there were only a few days to Sukkos! There would be no new clothes for his family this time.

He was amongst the bare fields of his village now. Soon he would warm himself in front of the fire. Thank Heaven he had been able in time to barter some merchandise for a load of wood. He wondered about the approaching frosts: would he be able to walk out in his bald sheepskin coat another winter?

One thing at least was sure. He had his Esrog and Lulav already. And what an Esrog! Ripe, yellow and spotless! But it looked as if he would be the only one in the village. The rain that had impaired his living here had cut the railways lower down, and the Esrogim had not yet arrived. He was glad now that he had accepted the Esrog offered him four weeks ago, which the dealer had received as a sample. Itzig had been doubtful at first, afraid it might spoil before Yom Tov, and the dealer owed him a good Esrog, one of the finest he could get. That had been the agreement they had made two years ago, when Esrogim had been so dear that Itzig could only afford one by sharing with neighbours. It was then that he had determined that never again would he miss an Esrog for lack of money. Ever since then, he had paid the dealer six kreutzer every Friday on the understanding that he would get an Esrog Mehudar every year regardless of the current price and pay any balance later.

And now the whole Community might have to be 'Yotze' with his Esrog, the Esrog of the poor peddler who sat behind the Bimah!

To be sure, the dealer had tried to buy it back, had offered fantastic prices. He had gone up to forty gulden. Forty gulden! What Itzig could have bought with forty gulden! But he had refused. He would not sell such a Mitzvah for a hundred!

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And Zirel, his wife, had agreed. She needed a new dress urgently, and things for the children, but she understood the value of a Mitzvah, too.

A good wife, Zirel, thought Itzig. She did not complain if things were hard. She understood. She would not ask about the day's business. She would guess it, and say nothing. But she would have a glass of tea for him in no time; she would make him comfortable, tell him something clever his little Rivkaleh had said, or what the Rebbe thought of Shimela's reading. All the same, it was hard to come home empty-handed ... Here was his cottage. He had hoped to be able to rebuild the north wall this year. It would have to wait ...

His wife greeted him cheerfully enough, but from the start Itzig sensed something in the air. When he had finished supper and started sipping his tea, he asked his wife what was the matter.

"Oh, Itzig," replied Zirel. "I have worried so much. The Esrog dealer has been again, and this time he brought three Baalei Battim from Debrecen. They have no Esrogim there at all, so the Rosh HaKohol there has sent Gabbo'im to all the Kehillos in the district to buy one at any price."

"Well," said Itzig, "you know that we are not selling ours. You told them so, didn't you?" He sat up tensely.

"Of course I told them, but they pressed me so hard. They offered a hundred gulden from the start, and then they offered more, laying it all out on the table, all those banknotes and gold pieces ... It made my head swim to see it."

"I hope you did not give in?" interrupted Itzig anxiously. "We could not sell a Mitzvah for money! And besides, our whole Kehillah wouldn't have an Esrog!"

"No, thank G-d, I did not sell it, though it was very hard to refuse. In the end they put four hundred gulden on the table! Four hundred gulden! And the arguments! G-d forgive me, I am only a weak woman. But I told them I would do nothing without you and they had to be content with that. They wanted to leave the money on the table, but I scolded them and they took it back. I would have gone mad with all that money in the house." She began to cry.

Itzig reassured her. "Now, now, Zirel, calm yourself. You did a great Mitzvah; not many would have had the strength. It was very wrong of them to press you," he continued when she was calmer. "But in any case you could not have given in to them even if you had wanted to. They know that they could not be 'Yotze' with the Esrog if you had sold it against my wishes. And we cannot sell our Mitzvah. There would be no blessing in such money. It is only a temptation sent to test us!"

There was a knock at the door. A man's voice called: "May I come in? Reb Itzig is in now, isn't he?"

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"Yes, come in," answered Itzig. The man entered. He was tall and stout, his greying beard falling over a new-looking silk gabardine.

"Ah, Reb Mendel! Sholom Aleichem!" Itzig greeted him. "Take a seat. You came with the other Gabbo'im earlier?"

"Aleichem Sholom," answered the newcomer. "Yes, we came about the Esrog. But your wife could not decide without you. Have you thought it over?"

"I do not have to think it over," answered Itzig, with some sharpness. "I am sorry if you have no Esrog, but you cannot have ours. You can save your words: there is nothing more to be said about it."

"Well, well," Reb Mendel calmed him. "I thought as much myself, but the others would not believe me. Do you know any place where we can find an Esrog?"

Itzig did not, and after they had talked a while of some local events, Reb Mendel got up to go. Itzig accompanied him.

"One more thing," said Reb Mendel when they were outside. "I am glad I came here, even if I did not get an Esrog. You see, I have never met anyone with such devotion to a Mitzvah as you and your wife. And listen to an old man: after this, G-d will send you prosperity. He could keep us all comfortable if we were worthy, but not everyone can resist the temptations that riches bring. But you have shown that money cannot corrupt you and I am sure you will have plenty of it soon. Now let me give you ten gulden — no, don't refuse. I don't mean it as a gift. Return it when you don't need it any longer. The wheel turns, you know, and if ever I or my children fall on bad times, you will help them in return." With this he went away, and Itzig was left standing, holding the banknote.

Well, that was enough to make a comfortable Yom Tov anyway. And as Reb Mendel had said, he did not have to regard it as a gift. He went in and told his wife but she was not as delighted as he had thought she would be and went about her work silently. At last, he asked her what worried her now.

She sat down by him. "Look, Itzig," she explained, "I know that I had to do what I did. I had to leave the decision to you. But all along I have been wondering if you were doing right. You should at least have asked a Shaaloh. We ask Shaalos on smaller things than this. If you had told the Rov what four hundred gulden mean to us, how much good can be done for us and others with all that money, maybe he would have decided otherwise. That is what worries me."

Itzig considered it. "There is something in what you say, but it does not need a Shaaloh. The position is so clear! On the one hand I have a Mitzvah, a Mitzvah

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that one can fulfil only once a year. On the other hand I have four hundred gulden. Here is cold, dead money, and there is the living Word of G-d. Is there any doubt what one must choose?" He thought for a moment. "And yet," he went on, "if you like, I shall ask a Shaaloh even now. But not of the Rov. I shall ask a Shaaloh of G-d!"

She looked up at him, puzzled: "What do you mean?"

"Look, Reb Mendel has given us ten gulden and he says he feels sure we shall be rich soon. You say maybe we should have taken the four hundred gulden. Now, even five gulden are enough to carry us over Yom Tov. We could buy a lottery ticket with the rest and if G-d really wants us to be rich, He can give us the money in this way. And if we do not win we shall have lost our five gulden, but at least we shall know that we are not meant to be rich, so that we did right in refusing to sell the Esrog."

His wife was satisfied with this solution and next morning Itzig bought a five gulden ticket for the State Lottery. The other five were spent on Yom Tov preparations.

Sukkos came, and a strange Sukkos it was. Itzig and his family got up early to say the Brochah on the Esrog in their Sukkah, for the Shammes was already waiting to take their Esrog round the houses so that the women could also fulfil the Mitzvah. In Shule, davvening took even longer than usual, for everybody had to make the Brochah on Itzig's Esrog. In Hallel, too, many made the Na'anuim with this one Esrog. Thus, Itzig's seat below the Bimah for the moment became the centre of the Congregation. But though Itzig was glad of the special merit that had come through him, he showed no conceit, so no one felt humiliated or envious.

But he was uneasy in his mind. He did not allow himself to regret his refusal of the money, but he wondered if he had been right to buy the lottery ticket. It was not likely that he would win anything, so he had probably wasted a lot of good money. But supposing he did win — and after all, he was hoping for that — would that not mean that he would receive the reward for the Mitzvah in this world and get nothing for it in the World to Come? This clever idea of "asking a Shaaloh of G-d" didn't look so clever to him now. It was beginning to look to him very much like "testing G-d," the sin for which the Jewish People had been so severely punished in the Wilderness.

At last, he took his problem to the Rov. The learned man listened to him and after considering for a moment said: "Reb Itzig, you have nothing to worry about. I wish people would do "sins" like this every day! You see, "testing G-d" means a case when someone doubts the power or the love of G-d and demands a miracle to prove it. But according to what you told me, you did not doubt G-d, but only your own worthiness. Also, a lottery win is not exactly a miracle.

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Someone who would not want to believe that it comes from G-d would still call it "chance." Although in truth, you know, it's exactly the opposite. I have heard this from my Rebbe, of blessed memory. He used to say: "The less you can influence the outcome of a thing, and the less it seems to depend on the so-called laws of Nature, the clearer is the hand of G-d in it." Those people who talk of "chance" as if it could decide anything are only cheating themselves, for "chance" means something happening without a natural cause to decide it, so how can they call it a cause in itself?"

That last part was too deep for Itzig, but the main thing was that there was no sin in what he had done. But what about the reward of his Mitzvah, he still wanted to know.

"Well," replied the Rov, "I can tell you on what this question depends. If a person wants the things of this world, money, honours or enjoyment, for their own sake, and he even does his Mitzvos in order to get such things, then his reward is paid off in this world. But if he serves G-d with a pure heart, and he wants money and other things only in order to be able to do more Mitzvos, then G-d gives them to him not as payment for his good deeds, but in order to help him to do more of them. Which of these applies to you, Reb Itzig, no man can tell you for sure, for only G-d sees the heart. But one can tell a lot from the outcome. If you win something, and you find that afterwards you are doing more good deeds and Mitzvos and learning more Torah than before, then you can assume it was sent as a help and not as the paying-off of Mitzvos. Anyway," he continued with a smile, "this Shaaloh is not a practical one just now. You haven't won yet. I hope from my heart, though, that you do win something. I should be glad to know that you have *parnossoh* more comfortably."

With this blessing, the Rabbi sent Itzig home. But for a quite a long time he sat in his study wondering about the odd things people may do. Fancy this Itzig, who barely made a living, putting five gulden into the Lottery! In the end, he told himself, simple men in their innocence may succeed where wiser ones would not dare to begin. Itzig deserved to win a prize for his trust in G-d alone. "I should certainly like to know the end of this!" he mused. Then he turned to his Gemorroh again.

To Itzig, his Shaaloh was serious and practical enough. That evening, after Shemoneh Esreh, he said a private prayer: "Please, G-d, nobody knows if it is good for me to win, but You *do* know. I pray You, if it is not good for me or my children, don't let me win."

He felt better after that. And to make a start, he resolved firmly that of whatever he might win, much or little, he would give, not a tenth, but a fifth part, to Tzedokoh right away.

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With a lighter heart he enjoyed Shemini Atzerres and on Simchas Torah he felt joyous as never before.

On the day after, he went out again with his sack, the peacefulness of the Yommim Tovim still in him. He made a few sales and was thankful. He felt that G-d was helping him.

He was wondering, however, what had become of his Lottery ticket. Days passed and the draw must have taken place already. Since he hadn't heard of it, he probably had lost. Nu! So be it!

One evening, as he was getting nearer home, he saw a small boy standing near the first house of the village, then running towards him. It was his Shimela. Breathlessly the boy told him that they had won a lot of money. "Mummy is quite ill from it!" he added. "She sent me to look out for you."

In the street people stopped to congratulate him, but he hurried home. He found his wife still very excited, and dabbing at her eyes. With difficulty she managed to tell him that they had indeed won — and the first prize! A hundred thousand gulden! He calmed her, and said: "Don't worry, Zirel. G-d gave us strength to live in poverty, now He will give us strength to be rich." Then he spoke the Brochoh, "HaTov ve'HaMaytiv."

The next day, he travelled to town to receive the money and he put it into a bank. On the advice of Reb Mendel, he kept a fifth part, twenty thousand gulden, in a separate account. This was his Tzedokoh account, and he soon distributed almost half of it to people and organizations in the district. The other half he kept in the account for the time being, to be distributed later.

He decided to move to Vienna. He felt it was not good for him and his family that he should be the richest man for many miles around.

In Vienna he found good friends who advised him how to invest his money. He had sound business sense himself, and became a successful financier. But never did he spend less than five hours a day in learning Torah, and never was a deserving cause or needy person sent away empty-handed from his house.

One peculiarity remained with him all his long life: Every Sukkos he had to have the very best Esrog that money could buy. He would spend hours and hours choosing and selecting and often he would buy a dozen from different dealers before he was satisfied. When his friends chaffed him about this, he would reply: "Ah, but you don't know the value of an Esrog. I do."