

“WHO BUYS HIS SERVANTS IN JUDGEMENT”

A well-known Chassidic tale.

(This translation into English borrows heavily from the work of Maurice Samuel.)

The Chossid was speaking. The Rebbe of Nemirov, he said, compared those cold and formal people who would study the words and grammar and syntax of the prayers, without appreciating the spirit and warmth of the prayers, to workmen who know the mechanics of a musical instrument and even know how to make such an instrument or how to mend it, but cannot play on it. “Their hands are often skilful, but their ears are stopped up; and when someone plays the instrument they have made, they cannot hear. Or else their hearts are stopped up; they hear but do not understand. And if there is among them an exceptionally gifted workman who does occasionally put the instrument to his lips, all he can do is imitate someone else’s melody.

“I myself,” added the Rebbe of Nemirov, “I am not a workman. I cannot make an instrument nor mend one. But, G-d be thanked, I can play on all of them.”

Concerning this special quality of prayer among Chassidim that is almost out of this world, another Chossid in that small group described a great experience. He did not mention the name of the Rebbe who was at the centre of what happened. It may have been the Rebbe of Nemirov; it may have been another. It doesn’t matter. The Chossid told it well.

“Joy within joy” he called the experience — a special encounter with the loftiness of prayer. It was connected with the services of Rosh HaShannah, the New Year — the time of the annual accounting and judgement in Heaven of mortals on earth. “And as you know,” he reminded his listeners “we Chassidim make a happy occasion of it. We aren’t like those who are terrified by the approaching judgement. We know that we are not being hauled before some foreign potentate or a human judge. It is our own Father in Heaven Who is going to judge us; and so, after prayers, we are confident that all will be well and we take a couple of glasses of brandy, and we dance.”

But on this Rosh HaShannah of which he tells, something quite out of the ordinary happened and made it the most memorable New Year in the memory of all those who were there.

The Rebbe had stood before the congregation, leading it in prayer. And what a prayer leader he was! All day long his voice poured out supplication and praise; for on Rosh HaShannah he permitted no one to take his place. And who would have wanted to? Who would have dared? As he stood there, the messenger of the Jewish People to the

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Throne of Glory, his voice was like a pathway from earth to Heaven, his prayers like a ladder, broad and unbroken, bearing the hopes of his people.

And then suddenly, a dreadful pause, a break. He had reached the prayer that begins: “All shall acknowledge sovereignty to G-d Who prepares Man for judgment.” The words rang out clearly. But those which followed: “To G-d Who searches hearts” ... “to G-d Who uncovers the depths,” were uttered uncertainly and hesitantly. And when he came to the words: “To G-d Who buys His servants in judgment,” his voice broke completely, and a frightful silence followed.

One second, two seconds, three — and every second an eternity. Dread spreads through the congregation; up in the gallery women feel faint.

And then the Rebbe comes to. A shudder passes through his body, and the tense and dreadful silence is broken by a joyous cry: “To G-d Who is merciful to His people on the Day of Judgment.” And the Rebbe prolongs the words in happy turns and trills and roulades, while his feet begin to move, as of themselves, as if in a jubilant dance. And the rest of the morning prayers continue with renewed strength.

Between the first and the second morning prayers, said the Chossid, the Rebbe explained what had happened. A very trifling matter, you would imagine; but wait.

As we know, when a man reads from the Siddur, the eyes run ahead of the lips. The lips say, “Who uncovers the depths,” but the eyes are scanning ahead, they are already at, “Who buys His servants in judgment.” And that is what happened with the Rebbe that morning of the Rosh HaShannah service. But there and then it occurred to him that the words made no sense! He simply did not understand them, had never understood them. What possible interpretation could one put upon these words, which declare that “G-d buys His servants in judgment”? And in the utter confusion of that moment the Rebbe suspended his prayer and fell silent.

As you may well imagine, the break was noted at once in the Higher Realms where the prayers of the righteous are cherished and treasured. Our Rebbe’s prayers halted! A calamity! Not to be endured! Why had he stopped? Because he was perplexed by a phrase! But his prayers were precious, they must not cease! Immediately the decision was made to reveal to him, in a vision, the meaning of the words, so that he might continue with the prayer.

And as the Rebbe closed his eyes in perplexity, the Heavens were cleft before him. And this is what he saw:

The chamber of the Heavenly Court. It is the Day of Judgement but the chamber is still empty. The prosecuting attorney, counsel for the defence, the judges, all are yet to arrive. The Rebbe looks around. The chamber has five doors. One in the right wall, with the sign: “Counsel for the Defence.” One in the left wall: “Counsel for the Prosecution.” Three doors at the front of the chamber, in the eastern wall, and in front of them the table and the scales. The middle door, which is closed, bears the legend:

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“Hosts of the Blessed.” The other two doors are open. Through the one on the right the Rebbe sees the Garden of Paradise. There the Patriarchs and the sainted ones are seated, bathed in the brilliance of the Divine Light, blissfully studying the Torah, their crowned heads bent over the sacred texts. Through the open door on the left the Rebbe sees the dark, grey labyrinths of Hell. Hell is empty and silent; on the Shabbos and Festivals — and Rosh HaShannah is a Festival, even if it is a serious Festival — the souls in Hell are given respite, there is no torment and no punishment. The fires still burn, as if it was “the everlasting fire which shall not be extinguished.” But the demons usually there are not there today. They are occupied with a special task.

And now the door in the right wall opens, and Counsel for the Defence enters, carrying under his arm the records of the good deeds of Mankind for the past year. Alas, a very small sheaf. A poor year it has been for good deeds. Counsel for the Defence observes that the door opposite is still closed. A bad sign, that. It is taking them too long to collect their records. The harvest of Mankind’s misdeeds, he knows, fills the storehouses of Hell and it is taking a long time to fetch them all for the trial. Counsel for the Defence drops into a seat and closes his eyes in frightened, sad anticipation.

The door in the left wall opens, and two demons enter, staggering under the load of their first bundle. The Rebbe can almost hear their bones creaking under the burden. They throw down the bundle onto the table and sing out loudly: “That isn’t even a tithe of the harvest! The demons are still collecting — whole treasuries are yet to come!”

Counsel for the Defence covers his face and groans. To himself. He doesn’t think that anyone cares and that’s why he groans to himself. The Court is not yet assembled, the residents of Paradise are busy with the Torah. He thinks that no one hears his groan.

But Counsel for the Defence is mistaken! For among the residents of Paradise there is the beloved, the unforgettable Rebbe, Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, the Great Defender of the Jewish People. He hears the groan of anguish that bursts from the lips of Counsel for the Defence. Although he is among the children of bliss in the Garden of Paradise and the Day of Judgement holds no fear for the sainted ones, he has not forgotten those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death; he remembers that for those on earth below it is the fearful Day of Judgment. And if someone groans in Heaven, it is undoubtedly for them. Reb Levi Yitzchok interrupts his studies, looks up, and through the open door perceives the crushed figure of Counsel for the Defence.

He steals into the chamber and he sees the slender sheaf in front of the Counsel for the Defence lying opposite the vast bundle just dumped on the table in the place of the Counsel for the Prosecution and he understands at once what is happening.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, most tender-hearted of all Jews, most vigilant in defence of his erring people, pleader with the Almighty for mercy towards mortals, Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev knows his people. Even though he is here in the celestial world, he recalls his own time down below and he feels for them. He relives the fear and senses in his every fibre how on this Day of Judgement, down on earth, they are

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contrite and sincerely repentant about all their misdeeds. He must do something to help them. But what? It takes Reb Levi Yitzchok just one instant to decide. He bends down and, straining himself to the utmost, picks up the bundle of malevolent records — and he throws it through the door at the left, down on to the glowing ashes of Hell.

Again two demons enter, bent double under a load of records and, with a heavy thud, drop their burden on the table in front of the scales. Without looking, they hurry out to fetch some more. The moment they leave, Reb Levi Yitzchok deals with this bundle as he dealt with the first. And so with the third and the fourth and the rest.

Finally it is Ashmodai himself, Satan, the Prosecuting Attorney, who enters, a broad grin on his malevolent face. But what is this? Help! The records! Where are the fat bundles? Not a sign of that opulent harvest! He looks around, sees the last bundle crackling and burning in Hell; looks around again, and sees Reb Levi Yitzchok sneaking back toward Paradise. He yells, “Stop, thief!” and springs over and grabs him by the arm. “Justice! I demand justice!”

The cry resounds through all the seven heavens. Patriarchs and saints, startled from their studies, are quickly summoned into the chamber. The centre door at the front opens and the celestial members of the Court file in hurriedly to take their places. But first, before the process can begin, there is an objection which must be addressed. A point of order.

“What is it?”

Before the Heavenly Assembly the Devil declares how he caught Reb Levi Yitzchok red-handed. He points to the fires of Hell, where the last bundle — it was the heaviest of all — is still smouldering.

Truth is truth! Reb Levi Yitzchok confesses — but he had to do something to help his people, didn't he? Nevertheless, justice is justice! The Devil is asked what sentence he demands. He too decides on the instant. He quotes the Scriptures — he would! — “The thief shall be sold for his theft.” Let Reb Levi Yitzchok be sold as a slave publicly, to the highest bidder. The Devil will, of course, join in the bidding. And no matter what it costs him, he intimates, he will find the price.

This is the law, and there is no appeal from it. Let the auction begin!

So they stand facing one another, the Devil on one side, all the saints from Paradise on the other, Reb Levi Yitzchok between them. The members of the Court watch. The bidding opens.

Father Abraham makes his offer: his Heavenly credit for the priceless gem of the Covenant, the first Jewish commandment; and he adds as bonus his credits for his famous hospitality. After him comes Isaac, whose contribution is almost as large: the credits for his readiness to be sacrificed on the altar by his father. Jacob follows: his possessions are his simplicity and truth, his dedication to duty and devotion to family

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while his brutish brother Esau went hunting and robbing. Then comes Rachel, with her special distinction of self-sacrifice for her sister's honour and after her the other Matriarchs, each contributing her own glorious deeds. And row upon row of saints follow, each putting up, for the purchase of Reb Levi Yitzchok, whatever reward he had garnered during his sojourn on earth.

But it is the Devil himself against whom they are bidding, and he has treasures beyond computation. For every addition to the right pan, he throws a corresponding hunk into the left pan. He ransacks the earth, brings out forgotten wealth from beyond the hills of darkness, till the eyes become glazed over by the shameful display. The saints have exhausted their stocks, the two pans stand level, and in a last flourish the Devil takes the flaming crown off his own head and flings it into the auction. He must have Reb Levi Yitzchok at any price. The pan on the left begins to sink; it dips lower, lower.

Counsel for the Defence advances and throws in on the right the meagre records of the year's good deeds. In vain. They are not substantial enough to arrest the relentless downward dip of the pan on the left.

A crooked and vindictive grin spreads over the Devil's lips, and triumph flickers in his eyes. Oh, what a catch, what a haul, what a victory for Hell! Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev! Perhaps one of the most glorious figures in the Chassidic world after the founder himself, the holy Baal Shem Tov! Even before the pan has touched bottom the Devil places a hand on Reb Levi Yitzchok's shoulder and points significantly to the door on the left, the door opening on Hell. “This way, please.”

Horror runs through the ranks of the blessed. What! Reb Levi Yitzchok lost? It cannot be! And yet — what is to be done?

The horror and confusion increase — until they are suddenly stilled by a Voice. It is the Voice from the Throne of Glory.

“*I* buy him!”

And again, through the deathly silence: “I raise the bid! ‘For Mine is the earth and the fullness thereof’ — and I give the whole world for Levi Yitzchok!” And the Devil's face became black as thunder.

Reverently and with serene joy, the Chossid finishes his account:

“That's what the Rebbe told us in the pause between first and second prayers that Rosh HaShannah morning. You can well understand what happiness was ours that Rosh HaShannah!

“First, our repentance was accepted and the record of our sins were destroyed — which means a happy and prosperous New Year is as good as in our pockets. Second, Reb Levi Yitzchok redeemed. And third, to top it all, and perhaps best of all, the meaning of a text at last revealed: ‘To G-d Who buys His servants in judgment!’ That G-d Himself is ready to redeem His worthy, faithful servants.”