

Good Yom Tov Everyone. This year, Yom Kippur falls out on Shabbos. Therefore, we have an extra special opportunity, because we have the benefit of the holiness of both Shabbos and of Yom Kippur. The highest time of Shabbos is during Shalosh Seudos (the third meal) which occurs near nightfall at the conclusion of Shabbos. It is at this time that the Neshama-Yeseirah - the Extra Soul which we receive on Shabbos, departs the body

The highest time of Yom Kippur is Neilah - which literally means the "locking" [of the gates of heaven.] The Neilah prayer is also said near nightfall at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. This year therefore, we get the double dose of holiness right before the conclusion of Yom Kippur; namely, the holiness of Shalosh Seudos, combined with the holiness of Neilah. It is during this special time that every Jew can take advantage of the final opportunity to do Teshuva on Yom Kippur. The following true story will inspire us to use Yom Kippur wisely.

R' Yechezkel Abramsky (1886-1966), the noted Slutzker Rav and the Av Beis Din (head of the rabbinical court) was, in his younger years while living under Bolshevik rule, arrested and exiled to Siberia — the nightmarish land of terrifying cold and biting wind. In later years he retold the following two incidents that happened there — one, on the day he arrived; the other, when he was released.

One of the first things the heartless Russian officers there did to welcome newcomers was to force them to remove their shoes and socks, and then run barefoot over the frozen tundra. Most people became sick as a result of this ordeal, and many succumbed to pneumonia.

The very first day that R' Yechezkel was in Siberia, he prayed, "Tatte, (my father, as he used to call Hashem) it says in Your holy Talmud (Kesubos 30a) 'Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for extreme cold and heat.' (meaning that man must find ways to protect himself against the elements). Under normal conditions I would try to guard myself from becoming ill, but in this weather and with my lack of warm clothing, I can do nothing. I am in Your hands. Please, Tatte, protect me." And not once, during the years that R' Yechezkel was in Siberia did he ever catch a cold.

The second story happened on his last day in Siberia. His release came on erev Yom Kippur. A Russian officer came over to him and suddenly announced, "You can leave today." With that he gave R' Yechezkel a train ticket to get home. "Make sure to give the train officials this ticket," the officer said, "and they will let you aboard."

R' Yechezkel quickly assembled his few belongings and made his way to the exit of the camp. As he was walking another police officer approached him. The officer looked around to see if anyone was within earshot and asked, "Are you leaving today?"

The officer obviously knew the answer to his own question and R' Yechezkel feared that he was coming to rescind the previous order. "Yes," replied R' Yechezkel nervously.

This same officer had not been very kind to him over the last few years, to say the least. He had not been one of the worst ones either, but any officer could make trouble if he so wished. R' Yechezkel repeated as firmly and as respectfully as he could, "I am leaving now."

"Let me see your ticket," the officer ordered. R' Yechezkel searched nervously for it while the officer said to him, "Are you a duchovner (rabbi)?" There was no point in lying, thought R' Yechezkel, they probably had all the information anyway. He answered that, yes, he was a rav.

Once again the officer looked around to make sure that no one else was around. He looked down at the purple ticket that R' Yechezkel was now holding in his hand, took it from him and said, "Here, take this other ticket, the yellow one. The one they gave you would have put you on a car without heat where you could freeze to death and no one would know the difference. This will get you on a heated passenger car."

Then looking around again to make sure they were still alone he whispered, "I too am a Yid. I am truly sorry that I was mean to you. Please, please forgive me. I had to follow my orders." The two men shook hands in a rare moment of mutual compassion and friendship and then R' Yechezkel turned and left the camp. R' Yechezkel was stunned that the Jewish officer had managed to ask forgiveness from him on erev Yom Kippur, probably without even knowing it!

At the train, just as the police officer had said, people were being directed to the freezing cars, while he with his yellow ticket went into a regular passenger car. "What horrible people, those Russians,"

R' Yechezkel thought, "if they don't actually kill a person during his stay in Siberia they try to have him die on the way home. And then with self-righteousness they can claim they had nothing to do with his unforeseen death."

When R' Yechezkel finally got on the train, he realized there was no way he could reach his home before Yom Kippur. Things had been so rushed and hectic for him during the day that he had no time at all to contact his family and let them know that he had been released.

He decided to get off in a town that he knew had a shul and stay there until after Yom Kippur. The day wore on and shortly before nightfall R' Yechezkel got off the train in the small town, made his way to the local shul and without having eaten anything began the fast. After Yom Kippur he boarded a train going to Lithuania where he changed to a train bound for Warsaw. During the long ride he noticed a tall man walking through the train corridors. He couldn't believe his eyes! It was R' Elchonon Wasserman, (who later murdered by the Nazis) his longtime friend, the rosh yeshiva of Baranovitch. They fell on each other in a warm embrace, thrilled to be together after not having seen each other for years.

As they began their excited conversation R' Elchonon said to R' Yechezkel, "You were freed erev Yom Kippur, isn't that right?" "Yes, that's right," answered the startled R' Yechezkel, "but how did you know that? I didn't have a chance to notify anyone about my release!" R' Elchonon then said, "I was with the Chofetz Chaim erev Yom Kippur in Radin, when he suddenly stopped and said, 'Boruch Hashem the Bolsheviks couldn't carry out their plans.' I looked at him with surprise. I had no idea to what he was referring, until he added, 'They just released the Slutzker Rav!' " (The Maggid Speaks, p.175 Reb Paysach Krohn)

Hashem gave the day of Yom Kippur a special power to cleanse the sins of Jews. We need only take advantage of the opportunity. No matter where our lives have taken us until today, we have teshuva as a means of starting over. As Rabeinu Yonah promises us in his Foundation of Repentance: "On that day, let him cast off all the misdeeds he has committed and consider himself as though he were newly born on that very day..."

The highlight of Yom Kippur this year occurs during the highlight of Shabbos. Thus, this year we have an even greater opportunity to spiritually cleanse ourselves. **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**