

## THE SHOFAR AND THE BLESSING

*Shana Tova!* Tonight I want to share with you a story that I learned from Rabbi Susan Grossman. She learned it from Yitta Halberstam, who heard it from Daniel Wisse. Jewish tradition says that a person who recounts words of Torah in the name of the person who first told them hastens the coming of the Messiah.

It's a story about a shofar, which clearly connects it to this evening. And it's a story of a blessing and of a promise, both of which we hope for on Rosh Hashanah.

One more thing before I begin: as with many of the miraculous tales to emerge from the Holocaust, some of the details seem hard to believe. That's part of what makes them miraculous. I ask you to suspend any cynicism; to listen with your soul; to pay attention to the heart of the tale.

The story begins in Poland, before World War II. Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler, the Grand Rebbe of Radoszyce, was well known as a holy man. Multitudes came to see him. Among his followers was a young man named Moshe Waintreter.

In 1943, Moshe was deported to the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp in southeastern Poland. It was a particularly brutal camp, from which few survived. In the midst of the nightmare in which Moshe found himself, there was one ray of light: in his assigned barracks—Barracks 14— was also his beloved Rebbe Finkler!

Throughout his time there, the Rebbe continued to offer endless words of comfort and encouragement to the dispirited. In addition, he conducted regular Shabbat prayer services and, whenever possible, taught Torah. He encouraged Jewish observance. Every morning, under the cover of darkness, a pair of tefillin that had been smuggled into the camp was passed around so each man could have the opportunity to fulfill the *mitzvah* of putting them on.

As Passover 1943 drew near, the Rebbe decided that they must observe a *seder* in some concrete way. He approached a man named Shloma and asked him to

undertake an important mission. Shloma worked in the camp's kitchen. The Rebbe asked him to acquire enough beets to make enough juice for the four cups of wine for the *seder*.

Shloma was terrified, but the Rebbe assured him that in the merit of performing this great *mitzvah*, he would give Shloma his personal blessing and promised him that he would survive and live to see many better years. On a daily basis the Rebbe put his life on the line for his fellow Jews, and now it was time for Shloma to put his life on the line for the Rebbe. He performed the Rebbe's bidding, his clandestine activities mercifully undetected by the prison guards. That Pesach, the Jews in the camp fulfilled the commandment of drinking the four cups—with Shloma's beet juice.

Before Rosh Hashanah that same year, the Rebbe decided a shofar must be acquired to give the inmates a remembrance of those times when their spirits had soared. The Rebbe took a diamond he had hidden—one that could have easily bought him more food and less privation—and gave it to a local Polish peasant who worked in the camp. "I give you this diamond in exchange for a ram's horn," he bribed the peasant. A few days later, the peasant brought the Rebbe an ox horn, protesting he could not find a ram's horn. The Rebbe replied, "A ram's horn is what I asked for...If you want me to give you more diamonds in the future, you will have to find me a ram's horn. Otherwise, I will approach someone else." Several days later, the peasant returned, this time bearing a ram's horn in his pocket.

The only problem was the ram's horn still had to be cleaned out and a hole made in its tip for it to become a shofar that could be used for the holy day.

The Rebbe approached Moshe Waintreter, who now worked in the metal shop and had access to tools. Would he make the shofar for their holy observance? Anguish and fear flickered in Moshe's eyes as he appealed to his beloved master. "Rebbe," he said faintly, "You know I would do anything for you, but just

yesterday a Jew from my workplace smuggled in a tiny piece of leather that he hid in his belt. A guard inspected his clothing and, when he found the leather, shot him dead. We are checked every day as we go in and out of the factory. Rebbe, if a man was killed for a scrap of leather, surely I will be killed, too.”

“Moshe,” the Rebbe replied gently, using the exact same words with which he had countered Shloma’s fears just six months before, when he had asked him to make the beet juice.

“I understand your fear. But in the merit of this great mitzvah, I will give you my blessing and promise that you will survive and live to see many better years.”

Unable to refuse his Rebbe’s request, Moshe reluctantly set out to fulfill it. He successfully sneaked the horn into the shop, picked up a tool and began drilling. Within a few minutes, the factory foreman was at his side, alerted to Moshe’s “subversive” activity by the very public buzzing sound of the drill.

“What are you doing?” the foreman demanded. Moshe’s father had once told him that the best way to disarm an interrogator was to surprise him with the truth.

“I’m making a *shofar*, so that we can blow it on the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,” he said.

“Are you crazy?” the foreman shouted, pushing Moshe into a storage room nearby. It’s over. I’m dead now. The Rebbe’s blessing didn’t protect me after all, Moshe thought, bracing himself for the gunshot. But none came.

In the privacy of the empty storage room, the foreman addressed him in an entirely different, gentle voice: “Listen,” he told Moshe, “I am a religious Catholic, and I believe in the Bible. I respect your religion, and I respect the sacrifices you religious Jews make to follow your faith. I will allow you to make your *shofar*. I’ll lock you in here with the tools you need, so no one else will see what you’re doing and you’ll be safe.” A few days later, Moshe slipped the crude but completely kosher *shofar* into the Rebbe’s outstretched hands.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, before they were called to work, the congregants of Barracks 14—whose bodies had long ago been broken but whose souls remained miraculously intact—rose early to hear the last *tekiat shofar* of the Grand Rebbe of Radoszyce. And although the *shofar* was makeshift and crude, its notes were pure and true, piercing the prisoners' hearts, penetrating Heaven, and breaking down its inner gates.

The months passed and, in late May 1944, the Nazis started to liquidate the camp. Moshe was among the few survivors who were deported to Czestochowa, a forced labor camp nearby. Sadly, the Rebbe was not.

Moshe managed to take the *shofar* with him and successfully smuggle it into this new camp. He clung to the *shofar* as tenaciously as he clung to life itself. Each evening, Moshe would return from his labors and frantically search his secret hiding place to make sure the *shofar* was still there. And, miraculously, it was.

However, one day, while he was at work, Moshe was suddenly thrown onto a train bound for Buchenwald. The *shofar* was left behind. He could not stop lamenting its loss.

When Moshe was liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945, he attributed his survival to the *bracha* -the blessing- he had received from Rabbi Finkler, the Rebbe of Radoszyce.

Moshe very much wanted to find the shofar, but life intervened. He married another survivor; he helped organize the illegal immigration of Jews into Israel; and eventually he moved to Israel to live.

But he never forgot the *shofar*. It was Moshe's sole physical link to the Rebbe. Finding it - and bringing it to Israel - was the only tangible way he could think of to honor the Rebbe's memory. So he set out to find the *shofar*. He placed ads in Yiddish newspapers around the world, wrote to Holocaust-survivor organizations, contacted friends of friends.

Incredibly, one day in 1977, he received a call. His thirty-year search was over. A few months later, in an emotional ceremony, Moshe Waintreter was reunited with the *shofar* he had shaped and molded in the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp. He formally presented it to Israel's Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem in memory of Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler, the Grand Rebbe of Radoszyce, who defied the Nazis over and over again.

My work is finally done, Moshe thought. But the story doesn't end here.

Moshe had a son. When the time came for that son to marry, a *shidduch* was proposed with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor in Canada. The young man flew to Canada to meet the young lady. From the very beginning they knew they were each other's *bashert* (destined one) and they decided to get engaged. Moshe came to Canada for the engagement party. As his son started to introduce the two *mechutanim* (fathers-in-law), the men began to sob and ran into each other's arms. The future father-in-law turned out to be none other than Shloma, the Chasid who had made the beet juice for the *seder's* four cups for Pesach in 1943!

These two men were the only Radoszyce Chasidim who survived the Skarzysko-Kamienna labor camp. They survived exactly as the Rebbe had promised.

There are many possible lessons and take-aways from this story. My teacher, Penina Schram, always said that a story-teller should let the listeners figure out what resonates for them. So rather than telling you what it means to me, tonight I want to ask a different question. What did you think was the most incredible part of the story? It was filled with miraculous moments. Which one stood out for you?

There are the ones that drive the story: Shloma making the beet juice and not getting caught. Moshe and the Catholic foreman. The fact that Moshe could take the shofar with him to the next camp. That he could be reunited with it. Or the coincidence of the *shidduch*, the match of his son with Shloma's daughter.

There are the more subtle ones. That Moshe was in the Rebbe's barracks. That they had a pair of tefillin and were never caught using them. That the Rebbe had a diamond with which to bribe a peasant.

And yet, with all of that, a beautiful, moving, heart-warming story nonetheless. For me, the most miraculous part of the story was that both Shloma and Moshe were able to overcome their well-founded fear of being killed in order to undertake tasks that, one could easily argue were not worth the risk. So I have to wonder – why did they do it? I believe they each risked their lives in this way not because of what was asked, but rather because of who was asking. They were willing to do it because of their relationship with their Rebbe. This is not a not-so-subtle hint that you should do what I ask of you. It is not about the title. It is about the person. I hope that we all have at least one relationship with someone for whom we would do something just because they ask. Whether it makes sense or not. Not necessarily risking your life, though there are those relationships as well. Rather, someone who has touched you so deeply, that they could ask nearly anything of you, and you would consider it not because of what it is, but because of who they are.

There are plenty of other lessons in this story. Rabbi Grossman said that perhaps this story of great adversity and great courage will inspire you to take that leap of faith you may need to in the coming year. Or perhaps this story of death-defying commitment to our tradition will inspire you to take more seriously traditions we can so freely celebrate here. Or perhaps this story will inspire you to take a chance to help another. Any and all of these reasons would be enough to tell this story on the first night of Rosh Hashanah

Here is one more. When we listen to the sounds of the shofar tomorrow morning, I hope this story will help open our hearts and lift our souls and bless us with the strength to do what we think is impossible. May it be so, and let us say, Amen. *Shanah Tovah!*