

## A Yom Kippur Scandal

*Sholom Aleichem*

“That’s nothing!” called out the man with round eyes, like an ox, who had been sitting all this time in a corner by the window, smoking and listening to our stories of thefts and robberies.

“I’ll tell you a story of a theft that took place in our town, in the synagogue itself, and on Yom Kippur at that!

“Our town, Kasrilevke - that’s where I’m from, you know - is a small town, and a poor one. No one steals anything for the simple reason that there is nobody to steal from and nothing worth stealing. Imagine, then, a theft taking place in Kasrilevke, and such a theft at that. Eighteen hundred rubles at one crack.

“Here is how it happened. One Yom Kippur eve, just before the evening services, a stranger arrived in our town, a salesman of some sort from Lithuania. He left his bag at an inn and went forth immediately to look for a place of worship, and he came upon the old synagogue. Coming in just before the service began, he found the trustees around the collection plates.

‘*Sholem aleichem,*’ said he. ‘*Aleichem sholem,*’ they answered.

‘To make a long story short, our guest took out three silver rubles and put them in the plate. Then he put a ruble into the cantor’s plate. one into the rabbi’s, and then began to divide money among the poor who flocked to the door.

“Impressed by his generosity, the men quickly found a place for him along the east wall. Where did they find room for him when all the places along the wall are occupied? Don’t ask. Have you ever been at a celebration - a wedding or circumcision - when all the guests are already seated at the table, and suddenly there is a commotion outside - the rich uncle has arrived? What do you do? You push and shove and squeeze until a place is made for the rich relative. Squeezing is a Jewish custom. If no one squeezes us, we squeeze each other.”

The man with the eyes that bulged like an ox’s paused, looked at the crowd to see what effect his wit had on us, and went on.

“So our guest went up to his place of honor and called to the *shames* to bring him a praying stand. He prayed and he prayed, standing on his feet all the time. He never sat down or left his place all evening long or all the next day. To fast all day standing on one’s feet, without ever sitting down - that only a Litvak can do!

“But when it was all over, suddenly screams were heard. ‘Help! Help! Help!’ We looked around: the stranger was stretched out on the floor in a dead faint. We poured water on him, revived him, but he fainted again. What was the trouble?’ Plenty! This Litvak tells us that he had brought with him to Kasrilevke eighteen hundred rubles. So he had taken the money to the synagogue and slipped it into the praying stand. Now do you see why he had not stepped away from the praying stand for a single minute?.

“Well, the poor man wept, tore his hair, wrung his hands. The money was his employer’s. He himself was a poor man with a houseful of children. There was nothing for him to do now but go out and drown himself, or hang himself right here in front of everybody. Hearing these words, the crowd stood petrified, forgetting that they had all been fasting since the night before and it was time to go home and eat. It was a disgrace before a stranger, a shame and a scandal in our own eyes. A theft like that - eighteen hundred rubles! And where? In the Holy of Holies, in the old synagogue of Kasrilevke. On the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur!

“‘*Shammes,* lock the door!’ ordered our rabbi,’ Reb Yozifel, a true man of God, a holy man. Not too sharpwitted, perhaps, but a good man, a man with no bitterness in him.

“When the door was locked. Reb Yozifel turned to the congregation, his face pale as death and his hands trembling, his eyes burning with a strange fire.

“He said. ‘Listen to me, my friends. This is an ugly thing, a thing unheard of since the world was created - that here in Kasrilevke there should be a sinner, who would have the audacity to take from a stranger, a poor man with a family, a fortune like this. And on what day? On the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur. Man is greedy, and the temptation - especially with a sum like this, eighteen hundred rubles, God forbid - is great enough. Therefore, my friends, let us search each other now, go through each other’s garments, shake out our pockets – all of us. Start with me. Search my pockets first.’

“Thus spoke Reb Yozifel, and he was the first to unbind his gabardine and turn his pockets inside out. And following his example all the men loosened their girdles and showed the linings of their pockets, too. They searched each other, they felt and shook one another, until they came to Lazer Yossel, who turned all colors and began to argue that, in the first place, the stranger was a swindler, that his story was the pure fabrication of a Litvak. No one had stolen any money from him. Couldn’t they see that it was all a falsehood and a lie?

“The congregation began to clamor and shout. All the important men had allowed themselves to be searched, so why should Lazar Yossel escape?

‘Search him! Search him!’ the crowd roared.

“Lazer Yossel saw that it was hopeless and began to plead for mercy with tears in his eyes. He begged them not to search him. He swore by all that was holy that he was innocent. Then why didn’t he want to be searched? It was a disgrace to him, he said. ‘Do anything you wish with me.’ he said. ‘but don’t touch my pockets.’ How do you like that? Do you suppose we listened to him?

“But wait, I forgot to tell you who this Lazer Yossel was. He was not a Kasrilevkite himself. He came from the devil knows where. The rich man of our town had dug him up somewhere for his daughter, boasted that he had found a rare nugget, a fitting match for a daughter like his. He knew a thousand pages of Talmud by heart, and all of the Bible. He was a master of Hebrew, arithmetic, bookkeeping, algebra, penmanship - in short, everything you could think of.

“Well, to look at him you could tell nothing. He was a young roan, something in trousers. Not bad looking. He was perfect in everything, the dog! As for world affairs no one could hold a candle to Lazer Yossel. And when it came to chess - there was no one like him in all the world!

But some people felt he was a little too good to be true. He was too clever (and too much of anything is bad!) At the synagogue he came in last, put on his talus, and with his skullcap on askew, thumbed aimlessly through his prayerbook without ever following the services. No one ever saw him doing anything exactly wrong, and yet people murmured that he was not a God-fearing man. Apparently a man cannot be perfect...

“And so, when his turn came to be searched and he refused to let them do it, that was all the proof most of the men needed that he was the one who had taken the money. At this point even our rabbi. Reb Yozifel, although he was a man we had never seen angry, lost his temper and started to shout.

“‘You!’ he cried. ‘You thus and thus! You see what all these men have endured. They were able to forget the disgrace and allowed themselves to be searched: but you want to be the only exception! You are trifling now with the entire Jewish community.’

“To make a long story short, the men took hold of this young upstart, threw him down on the floor with force, and began to search him all over, shake out every one of his pockets. And finally they shook out. Well, guess what! A couple of well-gnawed chicken bones and a few dozen plum pits still moist from chewing. You can imagine what an impression this made - to discover food in the pockets of our prodigy on this holiest of fast days. Can you imagine the look on the young man’s face? And on that of our poor rabbi?

“Poor Reb Yozifel! He turned away in shame. He could look no one in the face. On Yom Kippur. and in his synagogue. As for the rest of us, hungry as we were, we could not stop talking about it all the way home. We rolled with laughter in the streets. Only Reb Yozifel walked home alone, his head bowed, full of grief, unable to look anyone in the eyes, as though the bones had been shaken out of his own pockets.”

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The story was apparently over. Unconcerned, the man with the round eyes of an ox turned back to the window and resumed smoking.

“Well,” we all asked in one voice, “and what about the money?”

“What money’?” asked the man innocently, watching the smoke he had exhaled.

“What do you mean - what money? The eighteen hundred rubles!”

“Oh.” he drawled. “The eighteen hundred. They’ were gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone forever.”