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The Kol Nidrei Plot

One of the members of the Jewish community in Berditchev was a fierce *mitnaged* (opponent) of the Chassidic movement in general and **Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak** in particular. He tried his utmost to cause disturbances in the Rebbe's holy work. Despite the many insults suffered from him, he never answered him back. This infuriated the *mitnaged* even more. In his heart he concocted an entire plot on how to put Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to shame in public.

Since he knew that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had a beautiful voice and that many people always came to hear him praying on the holy day of Yom Kippur, and especially the prayer of '*Kol Nidrei*', he made up his mind to disturb Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in this prayer specifically.

On the eve of the holy day, the *mitnaged* came to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's house and asked to speak to the rabbi in private. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak welcomed him in, and his opponent explained to him that because it was the Eve of Yom Kippur and each person must ask forgiveness from people whom he might have hurt during the year, he also wanted to ask for forgiveness for all that he had done to the rabbi.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak immediately forgave him with a full heart.

His new 'friend' then took out a big bottle of vodka that he had brought with him, containing 96% alcohol. He asked the rabbi to say '*l'chaim*' as a sign of forgiving him. He poured out a big glass of vodka and handed it to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. The Rabbi said '*l'chaim*' and blessed his opponent with a good and prosperous year.

When the *mitnaged* was about to leave, he turned to the rabbi and said that since he was not sure that the rabbi had forgiven him with a full heart, he wanted the rabbi to say '*l'chaim*' once again. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak accepted his request and once more the *mitnaged* poured him a full glass of vodka.

The *mitnaged* went towards the door, as if intending to leave the *tzadik's* room, but instead turned around and came back, asking the rabbi to say just a 'small' '*l'chaim*' for him...and then another one...and then....

And Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, the defender of all Israel and the lover of his people, how could he refuse the request of a Jewish man on the Eve of Yom Kippur? In the end, the *mitnaged* made sure that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak finished the whole bottle of vodka.

The man hoped that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak would be unable to pray properly due to the influence of the large amount of vodka that he had drunk. Maybe he would vomit or do something else that would portray him in a negative light to the large congregation attending the *Kol Nidrei* prayers in the synagogue.

It was twilight time. All the synagogues were filled with Jews, standing in awe on this holiest of holy days. The last Jews hurried along, dressed in their white robes and

prayer shawls, in order to get to big synagogue in Berditshov where Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was to officiate. In the background, quiet words of *Tehilim* were being recited. Everybody was busy making a final spiritual reckoning, purifying his soul before the Day of Forgiveness. Within a few moments the shadows of darkness would descend on the city and the Holy Day would commence. The awe of the Holy Day was clearly felt upon the faces of all the people in the big synagogue.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, wrapped up in his prayer shawl, rose to approach the Holy Ark. The sound of his sweet voice, so full of emotion, could be heard in every corner of the synagogue. The Kol Nidrei prayer had begun.

The whole congregation was lifted above the physical reality, borne by the exalted words of prayer emanating from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. “And the whole congregation of the sons of Israel shall be forgiven...”

Even the *mitnaged*, who had arrived specially to see the ‘drunk man’s show’ could not but feel the impact of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s prayers and admire his beautiful voice, so full of emotion and devotion. Not the smallest reminiscence was felt of drinking a whole bottle of vodka containing 96% alcohol.

After the evening prayers were completed, nearly everybody remained in the *shul* to recite the book of *Tehilim* (Psalms), as is customary on this night.

When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak reached the verse (Tehilim 41:12) “By this I knew that You wanted me, since my enemy will not cause harm upon me”, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak repeated this verse over again.

Suddenly he turned to the people in the synagogue and said: “How did King David, who had so many opponents, know that he had found favor in G-d’s eyes? The answer is: ‘since my enemy will not cause harm to me’ – which can be understood in an additional sense – that my enemy will not be harmed because of me.”

The *mitnaged* understood full well towards whom these words were directed. He realized that the rabbi was arousing compassion for him, that he – the opponent – should not be punished because of what he had intended to do against Rabbi Levi Yitzchak.

There words of pure love entered his heart. He became a changed person, and soon thereafter, a true follower of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

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Source: From “Chassidic Gems”, compiled by Tuvia Litzman, who heard it from Rabbi Levi Pressman.

Connection: Seasonal – YOM KIPPUR!

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev** [of blessed memory: 5500 - 25 Tishrei 5571 (1740 - Oct. 1810)] is one of the more popular rebbes in chasidic history. He was a close disciple of the *Maggid of Mezritch*, successor to the *Baal Shem Tov*. He is best known for his love for every Jew and his perpetual intercession before Heaven on their behalf. Many of his teachings are contained in the posthumously published *Kedushat Levi*.