

## ***The Surprise Cantor***

Once, on the eve of **Yom Kippur**, an *avrech* (a young Torah scholar) arrived in the town of Yaroslav, it was just before the start of *Kol Nidre* (the Yom Kippur evening inaugural prayer) when he suddenly appeared in the main shul. Without any words or introductions he went up to the reader's stand and began to chant the Kol Nidre prayer in a frightening and hauntingly beautiful melody. Not one of the members present in the shul could identify the stranger or explain his behavior, but since he was clearly a person of considerable spiritual stature, they allowed him to continue uninterrupted.

After the Evening prayer ended, the surprise cantor chanted all of the *Shirei Yichud* ('Songs of Unity') and then began to recite *Tehillim* (Psalms) one after the other, all the while standing.

When the members of the shul arrived back in the morning, they found their mysterious guest still standing on his feet, absorbed in prayer. As soon as a minyan assembled he began to lead *Shacharit* (the morning service). He himself read the Yom Kippur section from the Torah scroll and chanted the Haftorah. He said the *Yizkor* memorial prayer and then innediately began the arduous *Musaf* (additional prayer service).

At this point the members were suspicious if he was indeed a mortal human being or some kind of angel that had descended on this awesome day; for his voice and his stamina were other worldly. But then there were times when the cantor kept silent while the congregation sang, and they found themselves reaching such heights of exultation that they accepted that he was but a mortal and they were his equals. However, as the Neilah prayer drew to a close, the congregation, thoroughly swept up by his singing and roaring as he stormed the gates of prayer petitioning to bring in the Jewish nation in the merit of their *teshuva* ('repentance'), they felt certain that indeed, he could only be an angel.

One of those present that special Yom Kippur was Rabbi **Yaakov-Meshullam Orenstein** (1775-1839), the widely respected scholar and author of *Yeshuos Yaacov*. It is from him that we know this story. After the completion of the services, R' Yaacov Meshullam decided to follow the unknown man to his lodgings to see if he would eat right away or not. He saw how he heard the *havdalah* ceremony [which officially concludes the fasting] from others and then asked his host for some *kvickenish* (a tasty morsel) to refresh his soul since he was hungry.

They happily served him some cake and fruit, and so were shocked when he thundered, "No! This is not what I need. Bring me a *Gemara Sukkah* (the Talmudic tractate that centers on the festival which follows four days after

Yom Kippur's completion). Carrying the large volume under his arm, he retired to his room claiming that he wanted to rest.

R. Yaacov peeked in the key hole and saw that he opened up his book and started to study with extraordinary exuberance, not pausing for a minute. R. Yaacov could already not stay awake himself, so he left to break his fast and to rest. In the early morning he returned to find that the fellow was still learning and about to complete the final page of the tractate. Only after that did he proffer a sheepish request for a glass of coffee and a bit of cake.

This mysterious cantor turned out to be none other than **Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak of Berdichev**, later to become one of the greatest and most beloved of the chasidic masters. His son writes about him in the introduction to his own book, *Kesser Torah*, "he raised up thousands upon thousands of disciples... and ignited within them a passion for learning Torah and serving the Creator with love. His own divine service was such that even the angels above were envious of him!"

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Source: Adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the rendition on [//nishmas.org](http://nishmas.org), as submitted by Yosef-Yitzchak Muchnik.

Connection: YOM KIPPUR

*Biographical note:*

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