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The Trench Bargain

We recently met a very old man in Jerusalem. After he ate his meal, we couldn't help but notice how very slowly he was reciting *birchat hamazon* (the mandatory Grace After Meals blessings after eating bread), how carefully he pronounced each word, and with how much *kavanah* (focused intention).

After he was done, we went up to him and asked why he took so long to do this prayer--after all, it wasn't a Shabbat, Festival or special *Mitzvah* meal--just a regular lunch meal in a restaurant.

He was happy to explain. He told us that when he was a boy, before the war in Germany, he was in a *yeshiva*. His Rabbi told the students how important *birchat hamazon* was, how it and *Shma Yisrael* are the only two daily prayers spoken about in the *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses). The Rav said that if you say its blessings slowly and with *kavanah*, then G-d Al-mighty would never allow you to go hungry. It is truly helpful for this.

After that class, we students in the *yeshiva* said the prayer slowly and with *kavanah*, but only for a few weeks. Then all the boys got bored and reverted to saying it as quickly as before, in order to move on with their day. "Every boy in the *yeshiva*, except for this old man," he commented with a smile.

Fast forward a few years; the war broke out in Germany. The boys were ripped out of *yeshiva* and sent to a work camp. Miraculously, he was randomly chosen to work in the kitchen, instead of in the fields or factories.

But then, one day, he was pulled aside by an SS officer who noticed he wasn't skinny like the rest of the boys. When he was told that the boy worked in the kitchen, the officer gave him a small claw-hammer and ordered him to dig a large trench outside. The officer told him that if he couldn't finish it before he got back from his duties, he personally would kill him. However, if he finished it, he smirked, he would allow the boy to go back to work in the kitchen.

The boy understood that he was destined to die. The officer had given him an impossible task, intentionally. There was no way he could single-handedly finish such a large project with no tools and no help.

He sat down and cried. Then a truck delivering vegetables drove passed him, full of SS German officers. They laughed at the boy crying on the ground with the small hammer and started throwing onions and cabbages at him.

The truck drove away. Soon after arrived a truck holding Polish soldiers.

The Poles started to insult the boy as well. The boy realized they were starving; the Poles (and other cooperating nationalities) weren't given the same rations as the German officers. So he pointed to the large amount of onions and cabbage scattered around him, and cleverly yelled back that he has all this food and would give it all to them in exchange for their help in digging the trench.

The ravenous Poles agreed and got out of the truck. They set to work energetically. Quicker than could be imagined, they finished the trench, took the food, climbed back on the truck and drove off.

The Nazi officer came back expecting to shoot the boy, because of course he couldn't possibly have dug the trench. When he saw the completed trench, he shook his head in amazement and bemusedly allowed the boy to return to the kitchen. So the boy never went hungry, and survived the war because he worked in the kitchen.

The old man concluded by proclaiming that he never stopped reciting *birchat hamazon* slowly and with *kavanah*, and hopes to continue to do so until 120.

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*Source:* This came in my WhatsApp a year ago with a note that said “just read this story and had to share!” I copied it to my computer and thereby carelessly lost the heading with the name of who sent it, which I didn't realize till last week. If you, my benefactor, see this, and can still recognize it after my editing, please claim your credit. And if you know who the “we” in the story is, *please* inform me of that too.

*Connection.* The first mention of blessing G-d after eating is implied in this week's Torah reading. See Rashi on Gen. 21:33