

bs"D From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles

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Crumbs of Matza

A certain Chabad rabbi led a large congregation, many of whom were holocaust survivors. Each member had his own memories and problems, of course, but all of them learned to cope pretty much. Or so it seemed.

Mr. Goldvasser (fictitious name) was a seemingly normal person--a good businessman with a healthy sense of humor a generous heart and a keen mind. However, he had one idiosyncrasy; he never remained in the synagogue for the Blessing of the Cohanim on the holidays.¹

The Rabbi was always a bit apprehensive about asking Mr. Goldvasser for an explanation, but when his curiosity finally became too great to resist he concocted a plan. He invited the man to his home for a meal, and after they had eaten well, sang a few songs and made a few '*l'chaims*,' he asked.

"Tell me Mr. Goldvasser. I've noticed that you don't stay for the blessing of the Cohanim on the holidays. Am I right? Is there some reason? Is something wrong? I know it's not that important; it's just something I have been noticing for quite a while. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I just wondered."

Mr. Goldvasser became silent and it seemed that his eyes became glossy with some past vision, or perhaps with tears.

"Well, Rabbi" he began after almost a minute, "It was like this...."

I was in Auschwitz. I can't explain what happened there, I think it's even forbidden to remember such things. But there was one person; we called him 'The Rabbi,' although we never knew if he was really ordained or not. No one knew his name, but he was different than all of us. He must have lost his family and everything just like the rest of us, but he never showed it. Not only that but he used to keep everyone's spirits up.

If he saw someone depressed he would say a good word. If you ever wanted to talk he would listen. He could listen forever. He always had a hand for a bent shoulder and a shoulder for someone to weep on, and a hug for a broken heart and even a joke to break the sadness.

Anyway, once it was getting close to Passover and he announced that we had to figure out a way to get *matza*.

¹ The Cohanim- priests are direct descendants from the Cohanim who served in the Holy Temple 2000 years ago. They are commanded to bless the congregation with a fifteen-word blessing as prescribed in Num. 6:24-26. Outside of Israel the blessing is usually made on only four occasions during the year: on the holidays (Passover, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, Sukkot) in the morning '*Musaf*' prayer.

Matza! Everyone was thinking about dropping dead and he made us think of matzos. And it worked. Until finally someone noticed on the way to where they took us to work outside, someone noticed a few crumbs of matzos!

It took a few days but finally we found out that one of the prisoners had a job cleaning the house of one of the Nazi officers and when the German wasn't at home this Jew risked his life and made a matza for himself. If he got caught he would have been killed for sure. Anyway a few crumbs must have fallen there near the road and that's how we found out. It was a genuine miracle.

The Rabbi had a talk with this fellow and at first he said it was impossible; too dangerous. But finally he agreed...and somehow he succeeded in making two more matzos. Another miracle!

The Rabbi woke us all up for the Seder. It doesn't matter that we were about eight hundred men in that bunker. Do you hear? Eight hundred! But we were actually happy when the Rabbi woke us up at midnight and showed us those matzos.

He broke them into pieces and handed them out, then each of us broke them into smaller pieces until each of us had a piece.

Each person held his piece in his hand while the Rabbi recited what he remembered from the Passover Haggada by heart and we repeated after him.

Finally he finished the recitations and made the blessing on the matza. He ate and so did we--each one ate his crumb of matza. At first we were quiet, whispering so those German snakes wouldn't hear us, but after a few minutes we kind of forgot where we were, and began talking louder.

When we realized we became frightened. But then the Rabbi demanded our attention and spoke with fire: "Listen Jews! Listen my friends and my brothers. We just left Egypt! See! No one can break our spirit. No one! We are free!"

He began to sing a song and to dance. He actually danced! It was not long till we were all dancing. Everyone, even the atheists! We were free.

But then the door came crashing open and the spell was broken. There stood a Nazi officer with a few soldiers behind him like mad dogs.

"What is this?" He screamed, red with anger. "SINGING?!" He screamed even louder. "In Auschwitz you cry, you don't sing!"

He pulled out a pistol, put it to the head of one of the prisoners and said "Tell me who is responsible or I'll kill you. I'll kill all of you out one by one! **Who** is responsible for this?"

Everyone knew it could happen. The Rabbi stepped forward and said in a loud, calm voice. "I am. I'm responsible. You can kill me."

The officer motioned to his soldiers to grab The Rabbi, lowered his pistol, put it in its holster and said, "You won't die so fast, Jew. You will die tomorrow, in public by hanging."

They took the Rabbi away and early the next morning before dawn they woke us early, and made the entire camp stand in the yard. There were several thousand prisoners and Nazi guards were everywhere us with pointed guns. There in the middle on a podium between two huge Gestapo guards stood the Rabbi.

The officer stood straight, hands behind his back, his chest jutting out and yelled. "Now, Jews, you will see what happens to someone who dances in Auschwitz. Everyone will watch! Do you understand?! Everyone! Anyone caught not watching will be killed on the spot!"

As they were putting the noose around the Rabbi's neck he turned to the officer and said in a clear voice for all to hear, "As a man about to be killed I demand my last wish! Doesn't a dying man get a last wish? Where is your honor?"

The commander hesitated, smiled as though amused, and said.

"Last wish is it? Alright, Jew, what is your last wish?"

"I am a Cohen," he answered. "So I want to bless the crowd."

"Bless? Heh! And how long will this take?"

"It will take one half a minute, perhaps less," he replied.

The officer looked at the soldier with the noose, made a motion with his head to wait, looked at the watch on his wrist and said, "You have thirty seconds."

The Rabbi's voice was clear as a child's. He stood proudly straight, closed his eyes and raised his hands with his fingers spread in the special way of the Cohanim while blessing.

The fifteen words of the blessing rang out like a voice from heaven. "*Yivorechechaw, HaShem, V'yishmorechaw.*"

We all burst out crying like babies and when he finished...well, it was over.

Goldvasser looked the Rabbi in the eyes and concluded, "That blessing is what kept me alive in Auschwitz, through the rest of the war and to this very day. It rings in my ears when there is no hope and shines in the darkness when all is lost. I never want to hear another Cohen's blessing. I never want to forget that pure blessing I heard. That is why I leave the Shul."

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the telling of **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**, as heard from Rabbi **Shabtai Slavatitski**, the shliach (representative) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Antwerp, Belgium.