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SHARING THE SAME SINS

It was the custom in Berditchev that the *tefilin* of deceased townsmen would become the property of the local burial society, whose *gabbai* would sell them for the benefit of the *Chevrah Kaddisha*.

One day this functionary received a visit from **Rebbi Levi Yitzchak**, the rabbinical judge of the town, who asked to be shown all the *tefilin* on hand, for he wished to buy a pair for himself. The *gabbai* complied, whereupon the *tzadik* soon chose a particular pair.

The *gabbai* gathered that he would not have come along to simply buy himself a nondescript secondhand pair of *tefilin*, there must be more to this purchase than met the eye. So he said: "Rebbe, I am willing to sell you all the pairs of *tefilin* you see here – except for this pair. This pair I am not willing to part with..."

But it was only this pair that the *tzadik* earnestly begged him to sell.

So finally the *gabbai* said: "Very well, I will agree to sell them to you, but only on condition that you tell me what is so special about them that makes you seek this particular pair."

"Very well," said the *tzadik*. "As you no doubt know, for many years the brothers **Reb Elimelech of Lyzhinsk** and **Reb Zusya of Anipoli** wandered about among the townships and villages, with the aim of making *ba'alei teshuvah* – filling people with the desire for repentance.

"Whenever they arrived at some place for the night, one of them would address the other as if he were a sinner turning to his rebbe, weeping over his imagined sins and requesting a suitable penance. And while so doing within earshot of their host, he would list all the transgressions of which his host was in fact guilty.

"Overhearing the seeming confession of another, the host would recall that he 'too', as it were, had sinned in a like manner, and this recollection would cause him to repent.

"Arriving one night at the house of a Jew who lived in a certain village, Reb Zusya began tearfully begging his brother to prescribe a penance for him for his negligence. Throughout his life, he had never had his *tefilin* checked to see whether the verses inscribed on the parchment scrolls inside them were still in valid condition. And now he had at last given his *tefilin* to a scribe for checking, and had found that there were no scrolls inside them whatever! If so, then he had lived all his life in an illusion, and clearly fell in the category of 'a head that had never worn *tefilin*.'

"At this point, Reb Elimelech, the older brother, took over, and explained to his brother what a serious state of affairs this was. And as their host overheard this dialogue, he recalled that he 'too' had never given his *tefilin* to a scribe for checking.

"He ran off to fetch them, and when they were opened, he found that they were utterly empty! Alarmed by his discovery, he sobbed out his story to the two visitors and begged them to direct him as to how to repent.

"Reb Elimelech now turned to Reb Zusha and said 'Please write out a set of scrolls for the tefilin of our host. And as you do so, make it your solemn intention to draw down into their words the kind of light from Above that will be of the intensity appropriate to a man who has never fulfilled the mitzvah of tefilin in his life.'

"Reb Zusha took out parchment, quill and ink, and devoutly inscribed the passages required. Then he rolled up the tiny scrolls, placed them inside the black leather boxes of the tefilin, and returned them to their owner.

"But the divine light that those tefilin now radiated was of an intensity that this man was unable to bear. Soon after this incident he moved here to Berditchev and a short while later, died in our city.

"And these," concluded Reb Levi Yitzchak, "are the selfsame tefilin which thus found their way into the hands of our local burial society."

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Source: Modified by Yerachmiel Tilles from 'A treasury of Chasidic Tales' (Artscroll), the translation by R. Uri Kapoun of the classic 'Sipurai Chasidim' by one of the most prominent Talmudic and halachic authorities of the 20th Century, Rabbi Shlomo-Yosef Zevin.

*Why this week? The second day of the Jewish month of Sh'vat (2025: Friday, Jan. 31) is the yahrzeit of Rebbe Zusha.*

*Biographic notes (3 – in order of appearance):*

**Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev** (1740 - 25 Tishrei 1810) is one of the most popular rebbes in chassidic history. He was a close disciple of the *Maggid of Mezritch*. He is best known for his love for every Jew and his active efforts to intercede for them against (seemingly) adverse heavenly decrees. Many of his teachings are contained in the posthumously published *Kedushas Levi*.

**Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhinsk** (1717 – 21 Adar A, 1787), was a major disciple of the *Maggid of Mezritch*, successor to the *Baal Shem Tov*, and the leading Rebbe of the subsequent generation in Poland-Galitzia. Many of the great Chassidic dynasties stem from his disciples. His book, *Noam Elimelech*, is one of the most popular of all Chassidic works.

**Rabbi Zusha of Anapoli** (1718 - 2 Shvat 1800), was a major disciple of the *Magid of Mezritch*, successor to the *Baal Shem Tov*. The seemingly unsophisticated but clearly inspired "R. Zusha" is one of the best known and most beloved Chassidic personalities. He and his famous brother, R. Elimelech of Lizensk, spent many years wandering in exile, for esoteric reasons.