

Stories about Shabbos

The Shabbos Queen to the Rescue

The story we are going to tell you here came to pass over a hundred and fifty years ago – in the year 1831. It was the year of the Polish uprising, when Polish patriots organized a rebellion against their Russian overlords. They drove the Russians out of Warsaw and proclaimed independence (Jan. 1831). But later that year, the Russians recaptured Warsaw and crushed the revolt.

In a small Polish town near Kovno, there lived at that time a Jewish innkeeper. His name is not known to us, but we will call him Yosef. He was well known in the surrounding countryside as an honest and G-d-fearing Jew, whose wife could prepare delicious Jewish dishes. Members of the Polish nobility frequented Yosef's inn, where there was never a shortage of good food and wine.

One day, on a late Friday afternoon, a Russian General and his troops arrived in town. They were returning from the fighting around Warsaw, and settled in the town for a rest after the long march. The sun had already set when the General sent his assistant to fetch some wine. The General had been told about the good reputation of the local Jewish innkeeper, and to him he directed his aide.

From every Jewish house the Shabbos candles were shining forth, which cast an air of festivity and holiness in the otherwise dark and deserted streets, through which the General's aide made his way. He finally found the inn, but it was closed. He went around to the private entrance and knocked at the door.

The innkeeper, dressed in his Shabbos clothes, welcomed the adjutant into his house.

"The General sent me to buy some of your best wine," the aide said, taking out a roll of money.

"I am sorry indeed," Yosef replied. "We are now celebrating the Sabbath. I do

not do business on our holy day of Sabbath."

Nothing the adjutant said could make the Jew change his mind. The adjutant returned to his General and told him that the Jew had refused to sell him wine because of the Sabbath.

The General flew into a rage. He immediately dispatched two soldiers to the innkeeper to warn him that if he still refused to sell them wine for the General, he would face the most serious consequences.

Some time later the soldiers returned to the thirsty General – without wine.

"Why didn't you bring me wine?!" the General roared.

"The Jew said, he could not sell any wine to anybody on his Sabbath. However, he sent the key to his wine cellar, and suggested that perhaps the General might wish to help himself to any of the wine as his guest," the soldiers reported.

The fury of the General began to evaporate as he contemplated the strange situation. "How strange that Jew is!" the General thought. "He would not sell me a bottle of wine because of the Sabbath, yet he is prepared to give away his entire wine-cellar. That little Jew has a great deal of brazenness, or perhaps courage is more to the point."

Such were the thoughts that crossed the General's mind at that moment, and he decided to meet the Jew in person!

When the General entered Yosef's house, he remained standing at the door as he absorbed the wonderful scene that met his eyes. The table was covered with a white cloth and laden with tasty dishes. The Shabbos candles shone brightly. Yosef and his wife and children were dressed in their Shabbos clothes; all faces aglow with delight. The General almost felt sorry to have disturbed this beautiful atmosphere and to have frightened the children.

Yosef rose to meet the General and

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respectfully invited him to join in the feast.

The General, who had burst into the house with the intention of teaching the Jew a lesson, felt his anger melt away. He sounded quite human, even polite, when he asked Yosef why he had refused to sell him some wine. "Don't you know that refusing to sell provisions to the army in times of war is tantamount to rebellion?"

"Your gracious highness surely knows that we Jews are forbidden to do business on our holy Shabbos day," Yosef replied. "To keep the Shabbos day holy is one of the Ten Commandments given to us by G-d, the Supreme King of Kings. His command we must obey before any command by human kings and princes. However, now that your highness has been so gracious as to honor our humble house with your presence, allow us the opportunity of fulfilling another great commandment – that of hospitality. We shall indeed consider it a privilege if you and your adjutant would join us at the table. Please be our guests."

The General was greatly impressed. He sat down at the table and motioned his aide to do the same. Never in their lives had they enjoyed such delicious dishes before – gefilte fish with horseradish, roast chicken with tzimmes, kugel and kishka, with plenty of excellent wine to wash down each course. It was a feast fit for royalty.

Before leaving, the General took from his pocket a handful of golden pieces and offered them to Yosef. Politely but firmly Yosef refused to accept any money. "Have I not told your Highness that we consider it a special Mitzvah to offer hospitality. You were our guests, not clients. We are grateful to you for the privilege."

The General warmly shook hands with Yosef and departed in a happy mood.

Several years later, some militiamen suddenly appeared in Yosef's inn and

arrested him. Together with other dangerous rebels and criminals Yosef was brought to Vilna in chains.

During the long investigation that followed, Yosef learned that he was accused of taking part in a new Polish conspiracy to overthrow the Russians and drive them out of Poland. It so happened that the leader of the local rebels, Pan Kanarski, was captured, and in his documents, Yosef's inn was mentioned as the place where members of the Polish nobility frequently met to plan their revolt. This was proof enough that Yosef, too, was part of the conspiracy.

Yosef sat in prison awaiting trial, fully aware of the serious sentence that would be meted out to him – lifelong deportation to Siberia with hard labor, from which very few ever returned alive; or perhaps more mercifully – a quick death by a firing squad. In addition to his own plight, Yosef knew that if he were found guilty, it would cast a shadow on all the Jews of his town, with endless repression and persecutions.

While he knew that all efforts would be made by his fellow-Jews to establish his innocence, he could not feel very confident about the outcome. His only hope was to trust in the Heavenly Father. There was nothing for Yosef to do but to pray fervently and recite Tehillim, which he did constantly, tearfully, and with a broken heart.

One day, as he was in the midst of such supplication, the heavy door of his solitary cell opened, and a high official appeared. He was the Chief Inspector of prisons, on a routine check-up of the prison cells. The tears which filled Yosef's eyes blurred his vision, and he could not see the Inspector very well. But the Inspector gazed at him intently, and then exclaimed, "Why, this is my good friend Yosef the innkeeper. Good Heavens, what are you doing here?"

Yosef wiped his tears and looked in

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astonishment at the Inspector. It suddenly dawned on him that this was none other than the General whom he had entertained in his house that Friday night many years before!

"Believe me, your Highness, I have done no wrong. I have always minded my own business, and taken no part in any politics. I am as innocent as a baby," Yosef cried.

"I have no doubt about it, Yosef," the Chief Inspector assured him. "Rest assured that I shall leave no stone unturned to get you out of here. At last I shall be able to repay you for the friendship and hospitality you showed me that Friday night. I have never forgotten the experience of that evening."

The General, now Chief Inspector, personally appeared before the investigating committee and vouched for the innocence of the Jewish innkeeper. He told them in detail of his experience with the innkeeper, and assured them that from his personal knowledge, he

had not the slightest doubt that Yosef had no part in any conspiracy.

"He is nothing more than an innkeeper, whose inn is open to all. In between serving his customers, he was always busy with his sacred books. How can he be held responsible for the actions of customers who found his inn a very attractive place to have a good meal?"

The Chief Inspector's words, and his great influence in the highest spheres of the Russian government, dispelled all the suspicion directed against Yosef, and he was promptly released and sent home.

Great was the joy of Yosef's family when he suddenly returned home, a free man.

"How did this wonderful thing happen?" his wife asked.

"The Queen has intervened in my behalf," said Yosef.

"What Queen?"

"The Shabbos Queen, of course," replied Yosef with a smile.

Story of the Rebbe

One Good Deed

This story was related by Rabbi Grossman:

In 1974, the Rebbe began a campaign to have all women and girls light Shabbos candles.

Soon after, I had the privilege of having a Yechidus with the Rebbe. I wrote down the names of my family members and asked the Rebbe to give them a blessing. Among the names were, of course, the names of my two little daughters. When the Rebbe reached my three-year-old daughter's name, he asked me if she lit Shabbos Candles. I told the Rebbe that she did. The Rebbe then asked me how old she was when she started to light candles, and I answered that she had started as soon as

the news came that the Rebbe wanted little girls to light candles.

The Rebbe took a dollar from the drawer and told me: "Please give this dollar to your youngest daughter, as a present in my name. Tell her it's for the joy she brings me when she lights Shabbos Candles. Also ask her, in my name, to convince one of her friends to light Shabbos Candles as well.

A non-observant family lived next door to us. Their little daughter often played with our daughters. When my daughter heard the Rebbe's message, she talked to her about lighting candles, and in no time at all, our neighbors were lighting candles every Shabbos.

Two weeks later, the girl's mother approached my wife. She wanted to know how to use a Shabbos clock for

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the lights and a hot plate for warming food on Shabbos. She explained that she had found it hard to live with the fact that her daughter lit candles every Shabbos, while she, her mother, didn't, and so she also began to light candles on Shabbos eve. But she felt uncomfortable because before Shabbos she lit candles, yet on Shabbos she turned lights on and off! That's why she had come to learn how to operate a Shabbos clock, so that she would be able to keep Shabbos!

From then on they came to Shul on Shabbos, ate a Shabbos meal and kept

Shabbos the way it should be. They enrolled their daughter in a Jewish school, learned to observe the Mitzvos, and returned to Judaism.

Today, thanks to the Rebbe, the whole family observes the Torah and all the Mitzvos.

All this resulted from a single act – the lighting of one candle on Shabbos eve! As our Sages said: “One Mitzvah leads to another Mitzvah” (Avos 4:2) and “A little light dispels a lot of darkness.”

The Lost Sister

It was a cool morning in the early spring. From their window, Sandy and Ellen looked out upon the blue sea. The sun shone bright and golden upon the water. “Hurry,” called Ellen, “or we'll be late for school.” Sandy and Ellen were two Jewish girls, whom their mother invariably called, Sarah and Ella. They lived in a small town in Holland, not far from the sea.

A little later the two girls were off, hand in hand they made their way towards the little schoolhouse. Ellen, the elder of the two, was a kind and quiet child with deep blue eyes. But seven year old Sandy was quite the opposite. Her merry black eyes twinkled mischievously as though she were always contemplating some new prank, or laughing at some mischief she had already done. Although the two little girls were so different, they never quarreled. Rather, they were greatly attached to each other, and could not bear to be separated.

That winter, when Sandy had slipped on the ice and injured her foot, Ellen did not go to school for many days. She sat at her sister's bedside all the time. When Sandy grew tired of one game, Ellen would play another, and when Sandy grew tired of playing, Ellen would tell her stories, or read to her. Although Ellen could see the boys and girls

frolicking on the ice, and could hear their merry shouts, she never left Sandy's bedside, until Sandy could walk again.

Finally, Sandy was well enough to return to school. On her first day back, she listened intently to the teacher's lesson. Suddenly, the door was flung open. An excited and terrified-looking youth stood in the doorway. In a voice hoarse with terror, he cried, “Flee, flee for your lives. The dike has broken! The water is coming up. Run to the plain!”

A wild panic gripped the children. Everyone stampeded to the door. In the street were hundreds of people, pushing, running, fleeing for their lives!

The mob surged forward at breakneck speed, racing with the water. When the plain was sighted, a cry of relief broke from the panting people. At last they were safe. Everybody was there but little Sandy. She was not able to keep up with the mob. Her old wound had reopened and she fell behind. Exhausted, she threw herself on the ground, and in a few minutes she was fast asleep. She was blissfully unaware that the surging water was coming closer and closer, and in another minute she would be devoured by the foaming sea.

The next morning Sandy awoke and rubbed her eyes sleepily. “Oh,” she cried

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looking about her. "Where am I?" Sandy lay upon a bed in a little room. "How did I ever get here?" she thought to herself.

The door opened, and in walked an old woman with hard and cruel eyes. "Well, little girl," she said in a harsh voice, "you have me to thank for this. If I hadn't found you and carried you up the hill to my cottage, you might have drowned."

Sandy looked about her in bewilderment. At last she was beginning to understand what had occurred. But it was difficult indeed to thank the ferocious-looking old hag for saving her life. "Five long miles I carried you" the woman muttered. "You'll repay me for my kindness, though."

"But where are my mother and my father?" cried Sandy. "Where is my sister Ellen?"

"Don't worry about them," said the old woman. "You'll be happy enough here without them."

"But I want to go home," cried Sandy again.

"You have no home any more except this home here!" replied the woman. "You have no one left in the world but me. You might as well get used to the idea." The old woman forbade Sandy to mention her parents or her sister, and besides, she made Sandy work so hard that she had no time to think of them at all.

As the days passed, Sandy began to forget her parents, and her home, and her dear sister Ellen. Saddest of all, Sandy began to forget that she was a Jewish girl. For the old woman never lit the Shabbos candles, or made a blessing, or kept Shabbos. So, Sandy, too, forgot how to do these things.

The old woman's appearance did not disguise her character. She was as mean and cruel as she looked. For the three years that she kept Sandy with her, Sandy never had a moment of rest from

morning till night. With the first light of day, she rose to milk the cows. Then she would lead the cows to pasture and bring them home again. She had to fetch water from the well, and keep the house tidy and clean. And not one little speck of dust escaped the woman's eyes. Mercilessly, she worked the little girl till she grew wan and lean. Her cheeks lost their rosy look, and her eyes no longer twinkled. Her little hands were red and rough, and thin. At night her little bones ached with the long hours of drudgery and backbreaking toil. Never was a little girl as unhappy as Sandy was!

It was Thursday evening. Sandy was sitting in the kitchen mending some clothes. "Sandy," called the old woman, "come in here." Obediently, Sandy went into the next room and the old woman said to her, "Tomorrow, there will be a fair near the village of Yondam. You will take the butter and cheese that you have prepared this afternoon to the fair. Be sure that you get a high price, and don't let anyone fool you. You will start at dawn, but you must be back before nightfall, if you don't want a beating. Now get back to your sewing."

As she sewed, Sandy mused about the task that she had to perform the following day for the first time. "I hope there will be other people from the neighborhood going to the fair. I will surely be afraid to go home all by myself, and Yondam is so far away."

The next day, at dawn Sandy started for the fair. She had plodded a good many miles along the dirty road before she came to Yondam. But she soon forgot her fatigue. She had never seen such a colorful and exciting event. Vendors calling off their wares, farmers and merchants bargaining and talking together.

After Sandy had sold the dairy and made some purchases for the old woman, it was nearly dusk, and she started reluctantly on her way back. Wearily she trudged through streets that were

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deserted, and dark. Suddenly, through the shutters of a little window she saw the gleam of candles. They struck a chord in her memory that had long lain forgotten. Somewhere, long ago, she had seen these same candles. But when? Where? Sandy could not tear herself away from the candles. They held her like a magic spell. She had stopped in front of the little house, and was watching the candles flicker and play on the shutters. They stirred a wonderful feeling in Sandy's heart, and suddenly familiar scenes of her childhood came back to her. She remembered her mother lighting the candles on Friday night. She remembered the Shabbos table, laden with delicious food, everyone sitting about with shining eyes, and smiling faces; and she could not resist an impulse to enter the little house where the candles shone in the window.

"At least, once again, I will see the Shabbos table as it was in my own home many years ago," thought Sandy, and she knocked timidly at the door. The next moment, the door opened.

"Sandy!" cried Ellen. "Is it really you?" she cried again, embracing her long-lost sister.

"Oh, Ellen!" Sandy cried, and fainted.

A little while later, Sandy was sitting by the table surrounded by her parents and sister. "At last, Sandy, you have come home again! We thought you had drowned on that fateful day when the dike broke. Where have you been? What brought you back to us?"

Sandy told them what had happened to her, and with tears of joy gleaming in her eyes, she concluded: "The candles, mother! The Shabbos Candles, burning in the window, brought me back home!"