

Story #1

A Yom Kippur Scandal - by Sholom Aleichem

“That’s nothing!” called out the man with round eyes, like an ox, who had been sitting all this time in a corner by the window, smoking and listening to our stories of thefts, robberies, and expropriations. “I’ll tell you a story of a theft that took place in our town, in the synagogue itself, and on Yom Kippur at that! It’s worth listening to.

“Our town, Kasrilevke — that’s where I’m from, you know — is a small town, and a poor one. There is no thievery there. No one steals anything for the simple reason that there is nobody to steal from and nothing worth stealing. And besides, a Jew is not a thief by nature. That is, he may be a thief, but not the sort who will climb through a window or attack you with a knife. He will divert, pervert, subvert, and contravert as a matter of course; but he will won’t pull anything out of your pocket. He won’t be caught like a common thief and led through the streets with a yellow placard on his back. Imagine, then, a theft taking place in Kasrilevke, a such a theft at that. Eighteen hundred rubles at one crack.

“Here is how it happened. One Yom Kippur eve, just before the evening services, a stranger arrived in our town, a salesman of some sort from Lithuania. He left his bag at an inn and went forth immediately to look for a place of worship, and he came upon the old synagogue. Coming in just before the service began, he found the trustees around the collection plates. ‘Sholem aleykhem,’ said he. ‘Aleikhem sholem,’ they answered. ‘Where does our guest hail from?’ ‘From Lithuania.’ ‘And your name?’ ‘Not even your grandmother’s worry!’ ‘But you have come to our synagogue!’ ‘Where else should I go?’ ‘Then you want to pray here?’ ‘Can I help myself? What else can I do?’ ‘Then put something into the plate.’ ‘What did you think? That I wasn’t going to pay?’

“To make a long story short, our guest took out three silver rubles and put them in the plate. Then he put a ruble in the cantor’s plate, one into the rabbi’s, gave one for the cheder, threw a half into the charity box, and then began to divide money among the poor who flocked to the door. And in our town we have so many poor people that if you really wanted to start giving, you could divide Rothschild’s fortune among them.

“Impressed by his generosity, the men quickly found a place for him along the east wall. Where did they find room for him when all the places along the wall are occupied? Don’t ask. Have you ever been at a celebration — a wedding or circumcision — when all the guests are already seated at the table, and suddenly there is a commotion outside — the rich uncle has arrived? What do you do? You push and shove and squeeze until a place is made for the rich relative. Squeezing is a Jewish custom. If no one squeezes, we squeeze each other.”

The man with the eyes that bulged like an ox’s paused, looked at the crowd to see what effect his wit had on us, and went on.

“To make a long story short, our guest went up to his place of honor and called to the shammas to bring him a praying stand. He put on his tallis and started to pray. He prayed and he prayed, standing on his feet all the time. He never sat down or left his place all evening long or all the next day. To fast all day standing on one’s feet, without ever sitting down — that only a Litvak can do!

“But when it was all over, when the final blast of the shofar had died down, the Day of Atonement had ended, and Chaim-Khone the melamed, who had led the evening prayers after Yom Kippur from time immemorial, had cleared his throat, and in his tremulous voice had already begun — ‘Ma—a—riv a—ro—vim ...’ suddenly screams were heard. ‘Help! Help! Help!’ We looked around: the stranger was stretched out on the floor in a dead faint. We poured water on him, revived him, but he fainted again. What was the trouble? Plenty! This Litvak tells us that he had brought with him to Kasrilevke eighteen hundred rubles. To leave that much at the inn — think of it,

Eighteen hundred rubles — he had been afraid. Whom could he trust with such a sum of money in a strange town? And yet, to keep it in his pocket on Yom Kippur was not exactly proper either. So at last this plan had occurred to him: he had taken the money to the synagogue and slipped it into the praying stand. Only a Litvak could do a thing

like that! ... Now do you see why he had not stepped away from the praying stand for a single minute? And yet during one of the many prayers when we all turn our face to the wall, someone must have stolen the money ...

“Well, the poor man wept, tore his hair, wrung his hands. What would he do with the money gone? It was not his own money, he said. He was only a clerk. The money was his employer’s. He himself was a poor man, with a houseful of children. There was nothing for him to do now but go out and drown himself, or hang himself right here in front of everybody.

“Hearing these words, the crowd stood petrified, forgetting that they had all been fasting since the night before, and it was time to go home and eat. It was a disgrace before a stranger, a shame and a scandal in our own eyes. A theft like that — eighteen hundred rubles! And where? In the Holy of Holies, in the old synagogue of Kasrileke. And on what day? On the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur! Such a thing had never been heard of before.

“‘Shammes, lock the door!’ ordered our rabbi. We have our own rabbi in Kasrilevke, Reb Yozifel, a true man of God, a holy man. Not too sharp witted, perhaps, but a good man, a man with no bitterness in him. Sometimes he gets ideas that you would not hit upon if you had eighteen heads on your shoulders ... When the door was locked, Reb Yosifel turned to the congregation, his face pale as death, and his hands trembling, his eyes burning with a strange fire.

“He said, ‘Listen to me, my friends. This is an ugly thing, a thing unheard of since the world was created — that here in Kasrilevke there should be a sinner, a renegade to his people, who would have the audacity to take from a stranger, a poor man with a family, a fortune like this. And on what day? On the holiest day of the year, on Yom Kippur, and perhaps at the last most solemn moment — just before the shofar was blown! Such a thing has never happened anywhere. I cannot believe it is possible. It simply cannot be. But perhaps — who knows? Man is greedy, and the temptation — especially with a sum like this, eighteen hundred rubles, God forbid — is great enough. So if one of us was tempted, if he were fated to commit this evil on a day like this, we must probe the matter thoroughly, strike at the root of this whole affair. Heaven and earth have sworn that the truth must always rise as oil upon the waters. Therefore, my friends, let us search each other now, go through each other’s garments, shake out our pockets — all of us from the oldest householder to the shammes, not leaving anyone out. Start with me. Search my pockets first.’

“Thus spoke Reb Yozifel, and he was first to unbind his gabardine and turn his pockets inside out. And following his example all the men loosened their girdles and showed the linings of their pockets, too. They searched each other, and they felt and shook one another, until they came to Leyzer Yossel, who turned all colors and began to argue that, in the first place, the stranger was a swindler, that his story was the pure fabrication of a Litvak. No one had stolen any money from him. Couldn’t they see that it was all a falsehood and a lie?

“The congregation began to clamor and shout. What did he mean by this? All the important men had allowed themselves to be searched, so why should Leyzer Yossel escape? There are no privileged characters here. ‘Search him! Search him!’ the crowd roared.

“Leyzer Yossel saw that it was hopeless, and began to plead for mercy with tears in his eyes. He begged them not to search him. He swore by all that is holy that he was as innocent in this as he would want to be of any wrongdoing as long as he lived. Then why didn’t he want to be searched? It was a disgrace to him, he said. He begged them to have pity on his youth, not to bring this disgrace down upon him. ‘Do anything you wish with me,’ he said, ‘but don’t touch my pockets.’ How do you like that? Do you suppose we listened to him?

“But wait ... I forgot to tell you who this Leyzer Yossel was. He was not a Kasrilevker himself. He came from the devil knows where, at the time of his marriage, to live with his wife’s parents. The rich man of our town had dug him up somewhere for his daughter, boasted that he had found a rare nugget, a fitting match for his daughter like his. He knew a thousand pages of Talmud by heart, and all of the Bible. He was a master of Hebrew, arithmetic, bookkeeping. algebra, penmanship — in short, everything you could think of. When he arrived in Kasrilevke — this jewel of a young man — everyone came out to gaze at him. What sort of bargain had the rich man picked out? Well, to look at him you could tell nothing. He was a young man, something in trousers. Not bad looking, but with a nose a trifle too long, eyes that burned like two coals, and a sharp tongue. Our leading citizens began to work on him: tried him out on a page of Gemara, a chapter from the Scriptures, a bit of Rambam, this, that, and the other. He was perfect in everything, the dog! Whenever you went after him, he was at home. Reb Yosifel himself said that he could have

been a rabbi in any Jewish congregation. As for world affairs, there is nothing to talk about. We have an authority on such things in our town, Zaydel Reb Shaye's, but he could not hold a candle to Leyzer Yossel. And when it came to chess — there was no one like him in all the world! Talk about versatile people ...

Naturally the whole town envied the rich man his find, but some of them felt that he was a little too good to be true. He was too clever (and too much of anything is bad!). For a man of his station he was too free and easy, a hail—fellow—well—met, too familiar with all young folk — boys, girls, and maybe even loose women. There were rumors ... At the same time he went around alone too much, deep in thought. At the synagogue he came in last, put on his tallis, and with his skullcap on askew, thumbed aimlessly through his prayerbook without ever following the services. No one ever saw him doing anything exactly wrong, and yet people murmured that he was not a God—fearing man. Apparently a man cannot be perfect ...

“And so, when his turn came to be searched and he refused to let them do it, that was all the proof most of the men needed that he was the one who had taken the money. He begged them to let him swear any oath they wished, begged them to chop him, roast him, cut him up — do anything but shake his pockets out. At this point even our rabbi, Reb Yosifel, although he was a man we had never seen angry, lost his temper and started to shout.

“‘You!’ he cried. ‘You so and so! Do you know what you deserve? You see what all these men have endured. They were able to forget the disgrace and allowed themselves to be searched; but you want to be the only exception! God in heaven! Either confess and hand over the money, or let us see for ourselves what is in your pockets. You are trifling now with the entire Jewish community. Do you know what they can do to you?’

“To make a long story short, the men took hold of this young upstart, threw him down on the floor with force, and began to search him all over, shake out every one of his pockets. And finally they shook out ... Well guess what! A couple of well—gnawed chicken bones and a few dozen plum pits still moist from chewing.

You can imagine what an impression this made — to discover food in the pockets of our prodigy on this holiest of fast days. Can you imagine the look on the young man's face, and on his father—in—law's? And on that of our poor rabbi?

“Poor Reb Yosifel! He turned away in shame. He could look no one in the face. On Yom Kippur, and in his synagogue ... As for the rest of us, hungry as we were, we could not stop talking about it all the way home. We rolled with laughter in the streets. Only Reb Yozifel walked home alone, his head bowed, full of grief, unable to look anyone in the eyes, as though the bones had been shaken out of his own pockets.”

The story was apparently over. Unconcerned, the man with the round eyes of an ox turned back to the window and resumed smoking.

“Well,” we all asked in one voice, “and what about the money?”

“What money?” asked the man innocently, watching the smoke he had exhaled.

“What do you mean — what money? The eighteen hundred rubles!”

“Oh,” he drawled. “The eighteen hundred. They were gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone forever.”

Story #2

Fishing on Yom Kippur - A Short Story by Jon Zalaznick - 2011|

"How long are we-"

"Shhh," my Dad whispers back. "He does the sermon, then the Torah reading, then we're home."

"Thank you," I nod. As I turned back towards the bimah, out of the corner of my eye I noticed something strange. At the back of the room, a congregant was frantically waving her arms, trying to grab the Rabbi's attention.

Catching the entire congregation off guard, the rabbi stops his sermon and looks towards the back of the room at the flailing woman. Almost immediately, he runs off down the aisle, his right arm extended towards her. As he reaches her, she puts an open cell phone in his outstretched hand, and we sit and watch as the two of them exit the doorway. I turn back towards the front of the room only to see the student Cantor unsure of what to make of the situation and the crowd getting anxious and confused. Before I could think to say anything, my dad starts nudging me out of my chair, "Jon, you've got to go do something."

Go do something? "Such as"

"I don't know, you're Mr. Creative," he shrugs. "Go up there and stall."

"You want me to stall an entire congregation on the morning of Yom Kippur? What would I"

"It's Yom Kippur and the rabbi is a family friend. Clearly there's an emergency."

"Yes, but"

"No buts," he points towards the bimah. "You'll figure something out."

I look at him to see if he's serious. But as I see his face, I slowly realize that he's right. I'm only 20 years old, but I get that a friend needs help. I guess there's a reason for these High Holy Days, isn't there?

I stand up and begin walking toward the bimah, each step echoing through the sanctuary. My natural fear of public speaking is amplified by the fact that my audience is comprised solely of hungry Jews, forced to spend the day with their in-laws.

Taking my spot on the bimah behind the podium, I angle the microphone towards me. The slight crackle on the speakers almost immediately returns the crowd to its default High Holy Day silence and I look out on the congregation. I grab the podium firmly as if I were delivering my Inauguration Speech in front of the Capitol Building.

"The rabbi said he'd be right back and asked if I could say a few words"

Great, it's Yom Kippur and I'm kicking off with a lie.

"Uhm I don't uh" Think Jon. Say something honest. How bad could you be if you're just honest?

"I don't have anything truly profound to say. I'm not uh I'm not going to say something this morning that you don't already know."

Wow, that's weak. You need to find a better voice than this. Just tell a joke. Go from there.

"Earlier in the week, I was I was sitting in the library with a friend of mine, Nick. Nick isn't Jewish - not a religious guy at all actually. And at one point, he looks up from his textbook and whispers to me, *Hey Jon, when's Yammer Kippy?*

A few laughs.

"That's the holiday your people celebrate, right? When you guys don't eat so that you can be absolved? Like a big Jewish Confession, right?"

"Yeah, I answered him. Close enough."

"He nods back and asks, *So, when is that anyway?*

"This Saturday, I tell him."

"YES!" he responds by throwing a celebratory fist bump in the air.

"I had to ask him, *Why are you so excite-*

"He cut me off, *It's on a weekend.*

"Yeah. Sure So"

"Lot of smart Jews out there Way I figure, you guys probably have this religion thing all figured out right"

"Nick," I laughed, "Just because you believe in some stereotype doesn't mean"

"He stops me. Jewish holiday Jewish god I'm betting you guys get great weather Perfect for fishing."

The congregation laughed harder, and I began to find my groove.

"It's funny when you get to laugh on Yom Kippur," I smiled. "Last Yom Kippur, I didn't have the privilege to come back home for services. Tests and papers kept me up at school, and I kind of missed out on the whole experience; seeing family and friends, sneaking food when Mom isn't looking, watching the football game on TV - the Essentials" More laughter

"But," I sighed. "Next best thing was the Hillel service. I don't even think I was going to go, but my buddy Nate insisted. So, there we were, sitting at the back of the service, trying not to fall asleep.

"To tell you the truth," I continued, "I don't remember the service too well. I remember it being long. I remember checking my watch and asking Nate what time break-fast was but the service isn't what I remember best. What I remember was the walk from the service to break-fast.

"I remember leaving Ne'ila and speaking with my friend Nate," I smiled. "He was cracking jokes on how he didn't understand the point of fasting. "My favorite part of it was" I paused to remember the quote. *"Jon, I believe in God. You believe in God. So what are we doing starving ourselves?*

"God wouldn't forgive us? How could he not forgive us? It's Yom Kippur."

More laughs.

"Nate was always a funny guy he was always saying things like that. He, uh I remember when we entered the break-fast room, he started cracking up at the sight in front of us. I asked him what was so funny and he said *Jon, we've been tricked.*

"I didn't get what he was referring to and asked him to explain.

"I just realized what we are all doing here, he laughed.

"What are we?"

"He cut me off, *We've all gathered here, looking our best, to surround ourselves with gorgeous Jewish women."*

The congregation went hysterical.

I waited for the crowd to calm down and continued. "I of course tried to play it off. *No, no, no, I wasn't staring at* But Nate knew me too well.

"Think about it, he said. This is an event designed by your mother, Jon."

I paused as the crowd turned their faces to see my Mom as she was laughing and trying to stop herself from blushing.

"We are being offered the chance to mingle with future college-grad, pretty Jewish girls that don't need to be forced to attend High Holy Day services Clearly, your mother is playing a much bigger game than we know."

The congregation goes into uproar as my mom nearly ducks behind her prayer book, hiding her beat red expression.

"But that was Nate for you just having a good time..."

I paused and watched as the rabbi silently appeared in the doorway of the sanctuary and waived to me slightly as if to say that he was ready to take back the podium. I began to conclude, "Truth is, I haven't thought about Nate in months."

"See unfortunately, Nate died not too long ago. He went swimming in a lake over the summer and drowned," I paused trying to stop myself from tearing up. "Kind of sudden, I thought at the time. One minute he's here, the next I'm getting a phone call with the bad news.

"But yeah," I sighed. "Guess it's easy to see why you'd want to forget. Why you'd want to focus on other things and not dwell on" I choked up. "But last week, talking with Nick, reminded me of him. It reminded me of that silly little concept - laughing on the most solemn day of the year."

"So," I looked out at the congregation. "Think of Yom Kippur not as a solemn day of quiet reflection, but as a day surrounded by family, friends, and loved ones

"And when you are with people you love, you should never miss an opportunity to laugh"

"In fact, you may have to make those memories last you a lifetime."

I nodded towards the Rabbi indicating that he should come back to the bimah and I started walking back towards my seat. As our paths crossed, he patted me on the back and then regained his place on the bimah.

My dad gave me a solid nod as I took my seat, and we watched as the rabbi grabbed the podium as I had only moments ago. Rabbi smiled, looked right at me from the bimah and then turned to the rest of the congregation, "And if there is anyone else here that needs to make a phone call during the service, please go right ahead." The congregation chuckled.

"And if this call comes from a friend," he turns towards the windows and looks out on the sun shining, "Remind them that it's a great day to fish."

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Story #3

It's Never Too Late To Atonement – by Etgar Keret (2014)

Even if the person you wronged doesn't remember what you did, it can still make a difference to ask for forgiveness. Maybe.

Yom Kippur was always my favorite holiday. Even in nursery school, when all the other kids liked Purim because of the costumes, Hanukkah because of the latkes, and Passover because of the long vacation, I was hooked on Yom Kippur. If holidays were like kids, I once thought when I was still a boy, then Purim and Hanukkah would be the most popular in class, Rosh Hashanah would be the most beautiful, and Yom Kippur would be a kind of weirdo, a loner, but the most interesting of all. When I think about that now, “a kind of weirdo, a loner, but the most interesting of all” is exactly how I saw myself then, so maybe the real reason I loved Yom Kippur so much is that I thought it was like me. The thing is that even though I'm not a kind of weirdo anymore, definitely not a loner, and grown-up enough now to understand that I'm not the most interesting, I'm still in love with that holiday.

Maybe it's because Yom Kippur is the only holiday I know that, because of its very nature, recognizes human weakness. If on Passover, Moses and God settled accounts with the Egyptians, on Hanukkah Judah Maccabee beat the crap out of the Greeks, and on Israeli Independence day we fought bravely against the Arabs and won our country, on Yom Kippur we're not a heroic dynasty or a people, but a collection of individuals who look in the mirror, are ashamed of what demands shame, and ask forgiveness for what can be forgiven. And maybe that was actually the quality that attracted me to Yom Kippur from the very beginning, that it is the most private of all our holidays, a day when you stand alone before your deeds and their consequences without TV, without bustling cafés and restaurants, without stores crammed with merchandise, without all the rest of the day-to-day noise that makes them more palatable. It's the holiday when you come face to face with your life as it is, and there's no stupid reality show to divert your attention, no news updates, no chocolate-chip ice cream cone to offer you some consolation.

For me, Yom Kippur was and remains *the* holiday, always. That's why, even though it's been years since I've bothered to wish people a happy new year on Rosh Hashanah, or since I've taken the trouble to dress up on Purim, as Yom Kippur approaches, I still apologize to people I feel I've hurt. It doesn't happen too many times, but when I finally call to ask for someone's forgiveness and I'm waiting in embarrassment for the phone to be answered, still praying deep down that no one will pick up so that I can settle for an apologetic message on the answering machine, I feel with every bone in my body that there's something very healthy about being compelled to ask for forgiveness. So, maybe it's easier to love a holiday that commands you [to eat jelly doughnuts](#) than a holiday that requires you to put yourself in a vulnerable, uncomfortable position, but when you're finally done, you feel that, thanks to that weird holiday, you've gotten rid of a burden that has been oppressing you for a very long time without your even knowing how much.

My strangest Yom Kippur apology story begins when I was 4. One of the kids in my new preschool group was a pretty, sweet girl named Noa. She was quiet and smiley, two qualities I was not blessed with, and when I once accidentally touched her thick blonde hair, it felt like sticky cotton candy. I really wanted to play with her but didn't exactly know how to do it, so after six months of looking at her from a distance, I decided to make a move, and one morning, when I saw her running next to me in the yard, I stuck out my foot and tripped her.

Noa fell and hurt herself. She started to cry, and when the teacher ran over to help her, Noa pointed at me and said, “He did it. He tripped me.” The teacher, who liked me very much, asked me if it was true, and I immediately said no. The teacher rebuked Noa, “Etgar is a good boy who never lies. Why are you making up such terrible things about him? You should be ashamed of yourself!” Noa, who'd almost stopped crying, started all over again, and the teacher stroked my head and walked off angrily. Right then I wanted to tell Noa I was sorry and confess to the teacher that I'd lied, but I couldn't find the courage. Meanwhile, another girl helped Noa walk over to the fountain so she could wash her scraped knee, and I remained standing in the yard.

Noa wasn't in kindergarten or in elementary school with me. In high school, during a break one day, a girl in my class mentioned Noa's full name and said she was a real grind, studying in the biology track. It was the first month of school, Rosh Hashanah had already passed, and Yom Kippur was on the way, and when school ended that day, I waited for Noa near her classroom. She was almost the last one out, orange headphones on her head and a Sony Walkman in her hand. She looked completely different from how I remembered her from when I was 4; she barely smiled and had a lot of pimples on her face, but her hair was still thick and blonde and still looked like cotton candy. I went up to her, legs weak. It's always hard to say you're sorry, but saying it after 13 years is especially hard. I wanted to tell her that since that day in the preschool yard I'd tried hard not to lie, and that every time I felt the urge, I remembered her, her hair in tangles, crying and hurt in the yard, and immediately quashed the impulse and told the truth. I wanted to tell her that soon I'd be a man and go into the army and everything, and that when I looked back on my life, what I did to her then, at the age of 4, was the thing I was most ashamed of, and that even though so much time had passed, I wanted to make it up to her somehow: buy her a Popsicle, lend her my sports bicycle for a week, or I didn't know what, something.

But instead of all that, the only thing that came out of my mouth was her name, "Noa," in a very shrill voice. Noa stopped, took off her headphones, and studied me. "I'm Etgar," I said, "Etgar Keret. We were once in the same preschool together." She smiled and said she remembered preschool but didn't remember me. I told her about how I tripped her and lied, and how she cried because of the affront and a little because of the pain, but she didn't remember any of it.

"It was a long time ago," she said, half-apologetically.

"But I remember," I persisted, "and soon it's going to be Yom Kippur, and I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize for something stupid you did when you were 4?" she said and smiled that lovely smile I remembered from preschool, then added, "Were you this weird back in preschool, too?" She laughed and so did I, because the truth is I really was weird in preschool. "Apology accepted," she said after a brief pause, and then put her orange headphones over her ears and left.

I remember going home from school on that day. I rode my bike, the pedals turned easily, the road felt smooth, and even the uphill parts felt like they were downhill. I never saw her again, but since then, whenever I have a strong urge not to tell the truth, I think of her outside her high-school classroom, smiling broadly, her face full of pimples, saying she accepted my apology. Then I take a deep breath, and lie.

Translated by Sondra Silverston