



SOME SNUFF

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

My loyal readership will know that I enjoy sharing stories I heard from the Bobover Rebbe Harav Shlomo Ztl. The written word can never do full justice to anything actually heard first-hand from the Rav. He shared his stories with such vibrancy, that you truly felt you were there in that far-off time, experiencing step by step the actions and thoughts of what was being depicted. His was a gift that I have never failed to be enraptured by, and the lessons taught in this divine way will never be lost. Let me revisit just such a tale, in the hope that its moral will bring strength.

In the time of the Apter Rav ztl there lived a Yid who was well and truly down and out. He had absolutely nothing and faced starvation regularly. Reb Menachem by name, he lived in a village not far from Apt. One-year things got really bad — it was erev Yom Kippur and Reb Menachem had nothing to eat. While others ran about, having Seudahs, going to the mikva, our Reb Menachem sat in the Beis Medrash, distraught and hungry. The time for Kol Nidrei arrived, everyone came into shul, and were soon engrossed with thoughts of the coming Yom Hadin. Reb Menachem looks around: everyone has eaten, for them it will be a fast of 25 hours. For Reb Menachem the fast has started long ago. For him, every day is Yom Kippur. Feverishly he wonders how he will survive yet another day without food. Suddenly he gets an idea — a shmek tabak (a pinch of snuff) will do the trick. With that bit of stimulation, he will be able to enter the fast day. Reb Menachem pushes his way through the full shul — and makes his way to the Mizrach wall — where all the sheiner Yidden are sitting. They are all wearing white, each wrapped in his talus. Reb Menachem makes his way to Reb Sholom Ber, a well-known Baalabus who would no doubt

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have a silver box full of the best tabak available. Reb Menachem creeps forward. Reb Sholom, please a shmek tabak.” Sholom Ber glares out from his bushy browed eyes. A shmek tabak? Now? Just before Kol Nidrei? “Don’t you see me davening — this is the most sacred moment of the year and you want tabak?”

Sholom Ber’s voice cuts through Menachem’s very ‘being — such scorn, the poor fellow was so crestfallen that he had nothing to say. With a weak heart, he just crawled away, tears in his eyes and a stomach screaming with hunger. Well, somehow our Reb Menachem survived that Yom Kippur. In fact wonder of wonders, his luck turned and soon he was doing very well. Word spread throughout the area. Menachem the shlepper was now Reb Menachem the Baalabus. Everything he turned his hand to was blessed with success. Time passed, days became months and months became years. Reb Menachem was now a permanent fixture on the communal scene -well respected for his kindly ways. He was soon blessed with the greatest honor possible; his daughter became engaged to the son of none other than the Rosh yeshiva of the area’s Yeshivah.

Meanwhile what had happened to Sholom Ber? As much as Reb Menachem’s mazel grew — so it seemed Reb Sholom’s went down. He lost everything to the point that after some time he was left a beggar -going from one door to the next asking for a few pennies. He lost sight of Reb Menachem, of everyone he knew. His shame was so great that he cut all ties with his previous life. On and on he roamed, a desperate man broken in body and spirit. One day he happened to be in Apt, having heard of the Tzadik, “the Ohev Yisrael”, and he decided to ask the Rebbe for a bracha. After entering the Rebbe’s room, he stood trembling as his gaze fell upon the tzadik’s face. The Rebbe asked him about his past, where he came from, what his previous life looked like. After some time, Reb Sholom Ber disclosed to the Rebbe the episode of the “Shmek tabak.” “Oh yes,” sighed the Apter Rebbe, “that’s when things turned around. You denied a Yid that which he needed most. Why? Because you felt so self-important that you actually believed your devotions were more praiseworthy than that Yid ‘s very existence.”

The Rebbe looked into Sholom Ber’s eyes, “You can change it all. Go find that Yid and ask him for a shmek tabak. If he refuses you, then everything will return to what it was before that fateful Kol Nidrei.” Sholom Ber left the Apter Rebbe with a new goal. He sought out Reb Menachem and plotted his next move carefully. It was soon to be the chassunoh of all chasunahs, Reb Menachem’s daughter to the Rosh yeshiva’s son. A huge chupah was set up in the town centre. It was built on a stage so all could see. The day arrived and the whole town was Yomtovdik. Hundreds of Yidden stood around the raised chupah “Sha! The chasan is coming!” Through the crowd came the young chasan, his holy father the Rosh yeshiva on one side and his mechuten Reb Menachem on the other. Sholom Ber looked astounded, this was the “shlepper” who didn’t have a shmek tabak. Look at him now, a broad shtreimel on his head, new kapota, shining shoes. The chasan stands in the middle of the chupah — the kalloh encircles him seven times. The Rosh Yeshiva looks up to the heavens. Reb Sholom Ber makes his move, from below the stage he reaches up and tugs at Reb Menachem’s kapota. Reb Menachem looks down with an

uncomprehending stare. “Reb Yid, give me a shmek tabak” croaks Reb Sholom Ber. For a moment everything seems frozen in time, at this most holy of times someone has had the chutzpa to stop the events, asking for a trivial shmek tabak. Sholom Ber looks into the eyes of Reb Menachem. Time has gone by — Reb Menachem doesn’t recognise his former tormentor. He looks down and then while everyone seems to be holding their breath, he slips his hand into his pocket and draws out a silver tabak box. Reb Menachem is naturally kindhearted, he bends down and offers this unknown Yid a shmek tabak.

Sholom Ber faints with a cry of despair. Reb Menachem doesn’t understand — he calls for a doctor — the chupah goes forward. Later the story is told. Reb Menachem is dumfounded, he never meant to harm this Yid. They go to the Apter Rebbe, the Rebbe assures Reb Menachem that the cause of Reb Sholom Ber’s problem were of his own making. A truly contrite Reb Sholom receives a bracha from the Apter Rav and soon after, his fortunes turn to the better.

As mentioned, I heard this tale from the Bobover Rav a number of times. In his telling you could actually feel the despair of that poor yid, smell the biting sting of the snuff, and sense the uplifting moments in the narrative. The Power of the chesed in a mere pinch of snuff was palatable.

We who were gifted the zchus to hear firsthand these stories, owe it to the next generation to share them and impart their lessons to our young. Chasidisha stories were never meant to be just time fillers, something to while away the day. No, they are a living testament of Torah life lived with the fullness of the human condition, and each tale keeps alive that which is most treasured, the Yiddisha ability to see Hashem in our everyday.

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