

When I was a boy at Jewish summer camp in rural Indiana, my favorite time of the week happened during Shabbat. As the sun was finally going all the way down, after services, and dinner, and song session, and some vigorous Israeli dancing, the whole camp would descend a familiar yet mysterious path into a clearing in the woods. When we arrived, we would find the counselors who had surreptitiously disappeared after dinner and gather around the blazing campfire they constructed while we sang and danced. Once we sat down, after we sang some more, our camp director, Rabbi Ron Klotz, would come to the center of the circle and tell the camp a story.

Rabbi Ron is a master storyteller. Most often, he would tell a story of the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary and mystical founder of Chasidism. When he told these tales I felt as if I, myself, was right there among the students of the great master. When the camp heard these stories, we were not just listening. We were witnessing.

The warmth of that campfire and the stories I heard there have stayed with me for the decades since, and the lessons I learned from them continue to evolve as I grow through the stages of my life. There is one story he would tell, of a story within a story, that I never truly felt I understood. That is, until now. I want to tell you that story tonight.

A long, long time ago in the faraway shtetls of Eastern Europe lived a simple Chassid by the name of Yankel who had once been a student of the Baal Shem Tov. Before he died, the great master told Yankel that his mission should be to travel around and tell stories about him, and that he would know when his mission was complete. And so, for many years Yankel travelled from town to town, happily spreading the tales of his great teacher.

One night, while staying at an Inn, the innkeeper told him of a rich man in Vitebsk who would pay 10 rubles for a good story! “Go there,” said the innkeeper to Yankel, “you have such wonderful stories, perhaps you could even tell him more than one!”

So, Yankel set off for Vitebsk in search of the man who would pay for stories. When he arrived, he was directed to the edge of town to a large estate, where he found the man of whom he had heard. The man was delighted to welcome Yankel. “Please, come in,” he exclaimed, “I am a great lover of stories, and I am particularly fond of stories about the Baal Shem Tov.” “What luck!” Yankel thought to himself, but when he opened his mouth to speak, all of the stories fled from his mind. He couldn’t think of a single tale to tell.

The two men sat there while Yankel became increasingly embarrassed and flustered for failing to do what he always did with such ease. The man was kind and forgiving and offered Yankel another chance. “Why don’t you come back for Shabbos. You can stay here and we’ll have the whole night and day for you to tell stories.” Yankel, grateful for the

opportunity to save face, agreed and returned the very next evening ready to celebrate shabbat and share stories with the man and his guests.

But when they had finished praying the blessings after dinner, Yankel again was unable to remember any stories. For all of shabbat, anytime Yankel tried to tell one of his tales, he was unable to find the words or even a hint of the plot. At the end of Shabbat, the man was disappointed and Yankel was ashamed. “Thank you for hosting me, I am so sorry that I was not able to tell you a story and if I ever see you again, if I can ever think of a story again, I will tell you for free.” And at that, Yankel bid the man farewell and left the house.

No sooner than he had reached the gate at the edge of the property, Yankel suddenly remembered a story. He rushed back to the house and knocked frantically at the door. The man opened it, surprised to see Yankel back so soon and so out of breath. “Please, are you alright? Come and have some tea.” Yankel was too excited even to express thanks for this additional kindness and blurted out “I have a story!” The man was confused, but he brought Yankel inside. They both sat down and Yankel launched into a story he had never remembered to tell before.

He began: “Often, after Shabbat had gone out, The Baal Shem Tov would gather his students and ask them to load into his carriage. They would set off, sometimes for hours at a time, as they discussed what they had studied on shabbat over the clip clopping of horses’ hooves. One winter night, though, was different. On this night, when the students were crammed into the carriage, they felt for a moment as if they were flying. When the feeling passed, their teacher got out and beckoned to them to follow.

The students found themselves in another place entirely – they were in an unfamiliar and empty town square with a grandstand at the far end. It was evening, and the air was warm like in springtime. The Baal Shem Tov hurried off down an alley while his students followed close behind. Soon they found themselves in what appeared to be a Jewish ghetto, where their teacher made his way to a small door, barely noticeable in the walls of a dark alley. He knocked and waited and then knocked again. Soon a woman came to the door. Seeing the group of religious Jews, she quickly ushered them inside. “What are you doing out there?”, she exclaimed. “It’s not safe! Don’t you know what day it is?”

Once they were inside, she explained: “This very evening, and soon, the bishop will go out to the square at the center of town and give one of his speeches against the Jews. He will rile up the masses, and they will search high and low for us to make trouble! So, we stay inside and hide away, hoping not to be their next victims.”

The Baal Shem Tov listened seriously. When she finished, he turned to one of his students and said “Go and fetch this Bishop. Return to the square and just before he

speaks, go to him and tell him that he must come to speak with me.” The student was afraid, but loyal, and so he did what his teacher asked. He made his way back through the alleys, back to the square where they had arrived with their carriage and saw that a crowd was now forming and moving towards the grandstand. He muttered the words of the Shema and a prayer for strength and safety and began to push through the throngs of people until he made it up to the stage. When he looked up, the bishop had taken his position on the stage.

The student was frightened, but he reached up and tugged twice on the bishop’s bright red robes. The bishop looked down, rage filling his eyes as he took in just who had interrupted him. The student, mustering his courage, looked back at him calmly and said, “My teacher, the Baal Shem tov, wants that you should come speak with him.” The bishop’s expression turned from anger to fear. “Not now,” he whispered, “I will come later.”

The student returned to his teacher and told him what had occurred. “No,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “this task is not complete. Tell him he must come now, if he does not, it will be too late.” And so, the student set out once again and made his way up the bishop, praying the whole way. This time, he was insistent, and he shared the message of his teacher. “If you don’t come now, it will be too late.” The bishop nodded and, without saying a word, stepped off the stage to follow the student to see the Baal Shem Tov.

When they arrived and entered through the door in the wall, the bishop immediately burst into tears and fell on his face. The students and the woman stared in awe, but the Baal Shem Tov sat patiently and waited. When the Bishop finally collected himself, the great teacher turned to his students. “This man was born a Jew and even became bar mitzvah, but in the years that followed he was taken by the church and made to convert. There, he forgot where he came from and learned to despise the people of his origin. When I prayed this last shabbat I saw a vision that this was the time he could be reminded.”

After that, the Baal Shem Tov took the bishop with him into a room where they spoke alone for several minutes. When they came out, the bishop no longer wore his red robes, but instead the simple clothing of a poor Jew. He left and was never seen again. And that is the end of the story.”

As soon as Yankel finished his telling, his host burst into tears and fell on his face. After a few minutes, he looked at Yankel, his glistening eyes illuminated by a bright smile. He said to Yankel, “I was the bishop. When I spoke with the Ba’al Shem tov he told me to live a life of *teshuva*, and that one day a Chassid would tell me my own story. Then I would know that God has answered my prayers and forgiven me.” And Yankel knew his holy mission was fulfilled.

For years, I have wrestled with the meanings woven through the many layers in this story. Fortunately, a life of Jewish learning often means a life of Jewish discovery! Recently, in studying about *teshuva* in preparation for this very holiday, I came across a text by another great Rabbi and philosopher, HaRav Kook, that helped me finally unravel this tale. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of pre-state Israel and is seen as the father of religious political Zionism. His work within the context of state building, however, was only one part of his vast scholarship, through which he sought to synthesize different ideas of spirituality, philosophy, and Jewish law. In one collection of eight of Rav Kook's journals, entitled Eight Journals, he reflects on the meaning and process of *teshuva*. Towards the end of the eighth journal, he writes:

“When we forget our own subjective soul, when we distract ourselves from looking at our inner life, everything becomes confused and uncertain. And the main *teshuva*, that lights up the darkness in an instant, is that one returns to oneself, to the roots of one's soul... And this is the case with a lone individual, a whole people, all of humanity... whose ruin always proceeds from forgetting itself.” (“Shemonah Kevatzim 8:213:1 | Sefaria Library”)

Typically, when we think of *teshuva* we think about repentance and return. We consider where we have missed the mark in the last year and how we can get back on the right path. We learn from Rav Kook that this return also requires memory. *Teshuva* asks that we pierce through the many layers of the person we present to remember the essence of who we are at our core, in the roots of our souls. This is the *teshuva* of our story.

In both the frame story and the story within, we encounter characters who forget who they are. When Yankel goes to tell stories for money. He forgot the essence of who he was. The Baal Shem Tov charged him to tell stories for the value they hold, not the value he could extract. When he remembered this, he was able to return to his mission. The stories came back.

When the Bishop forgot who he was, the consequences were much more severe. He became consumed with the hatred that had been drilled into him, and he became a force of destruction. His own people, forgotten to him, suffered at his hands. He lost sight of his true purpose in the world. He became disconnected from the roots of his soul and he forgot himself. He brought ruin and was ruined. But when he remembered that he was a Jew, his life and potential was restored. He spent the rest of his life in *teshuva*, never again forgetting himself. And his *teshuva* was accepted.

It was not only the bishop's life that improved once he remembered; hope returned to the Jewish community. No, the harm he caused was not undone, but the harm he might have continued to cause was negated. Without his vitriolic rhetoric, there was a chance that they would be spared. There was a possibility for a different future than the terrible present. They could imagine a world in which they could continue the work of being Jewish. They could continue to honor the eternal covenant between God and the Jews in which we swore to be God's partner in repairing the world, all because one Jew remembered that he was one of us.

We, too, are called to honor this covenant. We too are called to remember that we are Jews. We too are called to this *teshuva*. In these days of awe, these days *teshuva*, we must examine the ways in which we have forgotten ourselves. We must return to the roots of our souls. We must remember that we are Jews.

Judaism today is a product of memory. It is filled with and built by memories of generations passed and fallen temples, of wise prophets and selfish kings, of miraculous triumphs and guiding mitzvot. It sits upon the foundation of the memory of a nation enslaved and freed to worship the One God. It is driven by the memory of covenants and community. Judaism is a constantly growing collection of memory that gives life to us, and which lives through us.

It is precisely the living nature of our Jewish memory that requires us to act as we remember. We cannot solely hold a thought in our heads and ponder it because Judaism is not something that happens to us. Judaism is something that we do.

Tonight it is not only Rosh Hashanah, but also Shabbat. On Shabbat, Jews all over the world sing the words of the 16th century acrostic poem by the Kabbalist, Rabbi Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz, Lecha Dodi. In the first verse we sing the words "Shamor v'Zachor b'dibur echad." Keep and Remember in one utterance.

This line is almost a direct quote of a teaching by Rashi in his commentary on Exodus 20:8, when our Israelite ancestors first hear the 10 Commandments at mount Sinai. Moses reports the word of God, saying "Zachor et Yom haShabbat l'kadsho." Remember shabbat and make it holy. The first verb, Zachor, is a command to Remember.

Later when Moses retells the story of Sinai in the book of Deuteronomy, Torah records the same commandment as "Shamor et Yom haShabbat l'kadsho." Keep Shabbat and make it holy." According to medieval commentator Rabbeinu Bachya, the second command is not only to observe shabbat, but to act to safeguard it by performing the rituals and rules which surround it.

When Rashi notices this is a potential contradiction, he comments on both verses to allay our concerns. There is no contradiction! In his brilliance, he demonstrates that both verses are correct by his explanation that both commands were indeed spoken as one word and were heard simultaneously. And whether or not we can wrap our minds around that possibility, we remind ourselves of this unified duality every Shabbat. We sing out, in harmony, the inextricable connection between our Jewish actions and our Jewish memory. It is a singular, cyclical truth as only God can construct. We cannot do Judaism without remembering we are Jews. We cannot remember that we are Jews if we do not do Judaism.

We know here in our community that, although this truth is singular, doing Judaism is not. We are the fortunate inheritors of thousands of years of Jewish thought and reform, of folktales and fine art, of music and literature and films, of commentaries and translations that make our textual tradition accessible to all, of the return to Jewish sovereignty in our ancestral homeland. Truly, there are countless ways to remember that we are Jews and to participate in our multidimensional heritage. In this new year, let us explore them!

And yes, I am encouraging you to spend more time at Temple, where we engage in and celebrate the many facets of Jewish life. But this whole sermon is not an ad! It is a call for action...davka Jewish Action, so that we can remember ourselves and remember our mission out in the world. To use the double word: Temple is a place where you can shamor, so that you can go out into the world and zachor. Come here to act on and remember your Judaism, so that it is easier to remember and act as a Jew when you are not here, so you can pursue our mission in the world.

When I was a young boy at camp, I couldn't understand the story of Yankel and the Bishop. At Jewish summer camp, every moment of every day unfolds as an act for and a remembrance of Jewish identity, peoplehood, and civilization. There was no way for me, in that environment, to conceive of a time or place when a Jew could forget who they are. Now, I know it is possible. Out there beyond these walls is a world that does not always affirm our identities, in which it is sometimes easier to slowly allow ourselves to forget. But if we do the *teshuva* of which Rav kook speaks, and we hear the words of God as Rashi explains, we can choose to affirm ourselves through the consciousness of our deeds and to be affirmed in community with the people who remember our shared story. Let us choose this life, let us choose to remember. The world needs us to be Jews. Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tovah.

