

“To Him that buyeth his slaves on the Day of Judgment”

by Y.L. Peretz

translated by Maurice Samuel, in *Prince of the Ghetto*¹

“As you know” [the narrator] reminds us, “we Chassidim make a happy occasion of [Rosh ha-Shana]. We aren’t like the other Jews, the Misnagdim, who are terrified by the approaching judgment. We know that we are not being haled before a foreign potentate. It is our own Father in Heaven who is going to judge us; and so, after prayers, we take a couple of glasses of brandy, and we dance.”

But on this New Year of which he tells, some thing quite out of the ordinary happened and made it the most memorable New Year in the annals of that Chassidic group.

The Rabbi stood before the congregation, leading it in prayer. And what a prayer-leader he was! All day long his voice pour out supplication and praise; for on New Year he permitted no one to take his place. And who would have wanted to? Who would have dared? As he stood there, the messenger of Israel to the Throne, his voice was like a pathway from earth to heaven. It stretched from prayer to prayer, broad and unbroken, bearing the hopes of his people.

And then, suddenly, a dreadful pause, a break. He had reached the prayer that begins, “To God who prepareth judgment.” The words rang out clearly. But those which followed, “To Him that searcheth hearts, to Him that uncovereth the deeps,” were uttered uncertainly. And when he came to the words, “To Him that buyeth his slaves in the day of judgment,” his voice broke completely, and a frightful silence followed.

One second, two seconds, three seconds — and every sentence an eternity. Terror spreads through the congregation; up in the gallery, women fall down, fainting.

And then the Rabbi comes to. A shudder passes through his body, and the tense and terrified silence is broken by a joyous cry “Who taken mercy on His people on the day of judgment.” And the Rabbi prolongs the words in happy turns and roulades, while his feet

¹ Maurice Samuel did not say what title Peretz gave this story, nor did he give it a title himself. Samuel has a way of segueing from a general discussion into a translation of a story, which is why the first sentence I’m quoting seems awkward. Samuel’s translations are often quite far from literal, sometimes almost retellings. I don’t know where or when Peretz’s was originally published. There is a quite different variant of this story, in which R. Levi Yitzchok is both the prayer-leader and the protagonist in Heaven, in Hebrew on a Chabad site.

https://he.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/563481

begin to move, as of themselves in a jubilant dance. And the rest of the morning prayers continue with renewed strength.

Between the first and second morning prayers the Rabbi explained what had happened. A very trifling matter, you would imagine, but wait.

As we know, when a man reads from the prayer-book, the eyes run ahead of the lips. The lips say, “uncovereth the deeps,” the eyes are already at “buyeth his slaves in the day of judgment”. And thus it happened with the Rabbi that morning of the New Year service. But there and then it occurred to him that the words made no sense! He simply did not understand them, had never understood them. What possible interpretation could one put upon these words, which declared that “God bought His slaves in the day of judgment?” And in the utter confusion of that moment, the Rabbi suspended his prayer and became silent.

As you may well imagine, the break was noted at once in the Upper Circles. Our Rabbi’s prayer suspended! A calamity! Not to be endured! Immediately the decision was made to reveal to him, in a vision, the meaning of the words, so that he might continue with the prayer.

And as the Rabbi closed his eyes in perplexity, the heavens were cleft before him. This is what he saw:

The chamber of the heavenly court. It is still empty. The prosecuting attorney, counsel for the defense, the judges, all are yet to arrive, The Rabbi looks around. The chamber has five doors: one in the right wall, with the sign “Counsel for the Defense”; one in the left wall: “Prosecuting Attorney”; three doors at the back, in the eastern wall, and in front of them the table and the scales. The middle door at the back, which is closed, bears the legend, “Hosts of the Blessed”; the other two doors at the back are open. Through the one on the right, the Rabbi sees the garden plots of paradise. There the Patriarchs and the sainted ones are seated, steeped in the effulgence of the Divine Light, studying the Torah. Their crowned heads are bent over the sacred texts; for them there is no judgment day. Through the door on the left the Rabbi sees the labyrinths of hell. Hell is empty and silent! on a holy day the souls in hell are given respite, there is no torment and no punishment. The first still burn — it is “the everlasting fire which shall not be extinguished” — but the demons are occupied with a special task.

And now the door on the right wall opens, and counsel for the defense enters, carrying under his arm the records of the good deeds of mankind for the past year. Alas, a very small sheaf. A poor year it has been for good deeds. Counsel for the defense observes that the door opposite is still closed. A bad sign, that. It is taking them too long to collect *their* records. The harvest of mankind’s misdeeds fills the granaries of hell. Counsel for the defense drops into a seat and closes his eye sadly.

The door in the left wall opens, and two demons enter, staggering under the load of the first bundle. The rabbi hears their bones creaking under the burden. They throw down the bundle and sing out loudly, ``That isn't even a tithe of the harvest. The demons are still collecting — whole treasuries are yet to come.”

Counsel for the defense covers his face and groans. He apparently feels that no one hears him. Among the residents of paradise there is the beloved, the unforgettable Chassidic Rabbi Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, the Compassionate One. *He* hears the groan of anguish that bursts from the lips of counsel for the defense. He alone among the children of bliss has not forgotten those who sell in darkness and the shadow of death; he alone remembers that for *them*, on earth below, there is still a judgment day. And if someone groans in heaven, it is undoubtedly for them. Reb Levi Yitzchok interrupts his studies, looks up, and through the open door perceives the crushed figure of counsel for the defense.

Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, tenderest of all Jews, most vigilant in defense of his sinful people, rebuker of the Almighty for His severity toward mortals, Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev steals into the chamber and understands at once what is toward: he sees the slender sheaf under counsel's arm, the vast bundle on the table. It takes Reb Levi Yitzchok just one instant to decide. He bends down and straining himself to utmost, picks the bundle of adverse records: he flings it through the door at the left, down into the flames of hell.

Again two demons enter, bent double under a load of records. The moment they leave, Reb Levi Yitzchk deals with this bundle as he dealt with the first. And so with the third and the fourth and the rest.

Finally it is the Ashmedai himself, Asmodeus, the Devil and prosecuting attorney, who enters, a broad grin on his face. What is this? Help! Not a sign of that opulent harvest. He looks around, sees the last bundle burning in hell, looks around again, and sees Reb Levi Yitzchok sneaking back toward paradise. He runs over, grabs him by the arme and yells:

“Stop, thief!”

The cry resounds through all the seven heavens. Patriarchs and saints start up from their studies and rush into the chamber. The center door at the back opens and the members of the court file in. Counsel for the defense starts up.

“What is it?”

Before this heavenly assembly the Devil declares how he caught Reb Levi Yitzchok red-handed. He points to the fires of hell, where the last bundle — it was the heaviest of all — is still smoldering.

Truth is truth! Reb Levi Yitzchok confesses. Justice is justice! The Devil is asked what sentence he demands. He too decides on an instant. He quotes the Scriptures — he would! — “The thief shall be sold for his theft.” Let Reb Levi Yitzchok be sold as a slave publicly, to the highest bidder. The Devil will of course join in the bidding. And no matter what it costs him, he intimates, he will find it worth his while.

This is the law, and there is no appeal from it. Let the auction begin!

So they stand facing one another, the Devil on one side, the children of bliss on the other, Reb Levi Yitzchok between them. The members of the court take their seats; the bidding opens.

Father Abraham makes his offer: his heavenly credit for the priceless gem of the Covenant, the first Jewish commandment; and he adds as bonus his credits for his famous hospitality. After him comes Isaac, whose contribution is almost as large: the credits for his readiness to be sacrificed on the altar by his father. Jacob follows: his possessions are his simplicity, his devotion to learning in the days when his brutish brother Esau went hunting in the fields. Then comes Rachel, with *her* special distinction, the love-mandrakes; and after her the other Matriarchs, each contributing her own glory. And row upon row the saints follow, each putting up, for the purchase of Reb Levi Yitzchok, whatever reward he had garnered during his sojourn on earth.

But it is the Devil himself against whom they are bidding, and he has treasures beyond computation. For every addition to the right scale he throws a corresponding price into the left scale. He ransacks the earth, brings out forgotten wealth from beyond the hills of darkness, till the eyes are dazzled with the display. The saints have exhausted their stock, the two scales stand level, and in a last flourish, the Devil takes the crown off his head and flings it into the auction. He must have Reb Levi Yitzchok at any price. The scale on the left begins to sink, it falls lower, lower.

Counsel for the defense advances and throws in on the right the meager records of the year's good deeds. In vain. They are not substantial enough to arrest the downward flight of the scale on the left.

A crooked and vindictive grin spreads over the Devil's lips, and triumph flickers in his eyes. Oh, what a catch, what a haul, what a victory for hell! Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, perhaps the most glorious figure in the Chassidic world after the founder himself, the Master of the Name! Before the scale has touched bottom the Devil places a

hand on Reb Levi Yitzchok's shoulder and points significantly to the door on the left, the door opening on hell. "This way, please."

Horror runs through the ranks of the blessed. What! Reb Levi Yitzchok lost? It cannot be! And yet — what is to be done?

The horror and confusion increase — until they are suddenly stilled by a Voice. It is the Voice from the Throne of Glory.

"I buy him!"

And again through the deathly silence. "I raise the bid! 'For Mine is the earth and the fulness thereof' — and I give the whole world for Reb Levi Yitzchok."

The Devil's face becomes black as thunder.

Gleefully the Chassid finishes the story:

"That's what the Rabbi told us in the pause between the first and second prayers that New Year's morning. And you, you non-Chassidim, you Misnagdim, you unbelievers, can you understand what happiness was ours that New Year?

"First, there was the record of our sins destroyed — which means a happy and prosperous New Year as good as in our pockets. Second, Reb Levi Yitzchok redeemed. And third, to top it all, and best of all, the secret of a text at last revealed. 'To Him that buyeth His slaves in the day of judgment!' "