



GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT VAYELECH

An Unforgettable Kippur

A number of years ago, a man named Moshe Ehrlander, an Israeli Jew, traveled to Germany for business shortly before Yom Kippur. Because of severe weather, his return flight from Frankfurt to Tel Aviv was repeatedly delayed. Eventually he was told that Ben Gurion Airport had closed for the holiday and he would not make it home in time. Disappointed, Moshe phoned his wife and family to say that — for the first time since his wedding — he would not be spending Yom Kippur in his own shul.

He booked a hotel near the Great Synagogue of Frankfurt and arrived there moments before Kol Nidrei, tallit in hand but no siddur or kittel. He felt like a stranger — unprepared, unsettled, out of place. Then the chazzan began Kol Nidrei. His name was Reb Tzadok Greenwald, a fellow Israeli who traveled to Frankfurt each year to lead the High Holiday services. From the first haunting notes, Moshe was transfixed. Reb Tzadok sang with a depth of longing Moshe had never heard before. Midway through the prayer the cantor's voice cracked; he wept openly, his sobs echoing through the vast sanctuary. Moshe, too, felt tears well up.

After the service, Moshe approached him. They spoke of home and travel, and Reb Tzadok shared why he came each year. His parents were Holocaust survivors, and leading the High Holiday prayers in a rebuilt Jewish community on German soil was a sacred mission. "Maybe," he said gently, "Hashem wanted you here to feel Yom Kippur in a different way."

Moshe asked what had moved him to such tears. Reb Tzadok took a breath and told a story he would never forget.

"A few years ago," he began, "I had just finished leading the entire Yom Kippur service — every word from Kol Nidrei the night before through the long, intense prayers of the day. My voice was raw, my body drained. All I wanted was a glass of cold water, a simple bite to eat, and a quiet night's rest at my hotel before heading home to Israel to prepare for Sukkot. I put away my cantor's robe, turned off the lights, and stepped outside. There, by the locked gates, stood an elderly Jew, perhaps in his sixties, his accent a mix of German and Russian.

"Why are the gates closed?" he pleaded. 'Isn't tonight Yom Kippur? I came for Kol Nidrei. It's always filled with thousands of people!' My heart sank. Yom Kippur had been the night before. I tried to soften the truth, but he pressed me. Finally I said, 'My dear Jew, I'm so sorry. Yom Kippur has passed.'

"He began to sob — deep, heart-wrenching cries. Through tears he told me his story: His parents had barely survived the Holocaust. They had chosen a life far from Judaism, but his father clung to one tradition: attending synagogue for Kol Nidrei. Before his death he had told his son, 'This is how you know you are a Jew. No matter what, come to shul on Yom Kippur night.'

"I have never missed Kol Nidrei, not once. Until tonight. This year I am no longer a Jew.' The man wept, brokenhearted.

"I felt the weight of generations in his words. Without thinking, I unlocked the gate and said, 'Come with me.' We entered the darkened sanctuary. I put on my tallit, my kittel, my chazzan's hat. Seating him beside me, I said, 'We will have Kol Nidrei — just you, me, and G-d.'

"And I began to sing. No audience to impress, no grandeur — just the raw cry of a soul. Now, I'll tell you the truth. As a professional cantor who sings before two thousand people, I think a little about G-d, but most of my mind is preoccupied with impressing the people. That night was different. I was singing only for one elderly, assimilated Jew. There was no crowd to impress, only a soul to reach. In that quiet, I felt G-d's presence so vividly that I couldn't hold back; I broke down in tears. I felt all of Jewish history in that moment. We finished Shema together. He hugged me and whispered in Yiddish, 'You will never know what you did for me.'

"The following Yom Kippur he was back, seated in the very front, his face glowing. 'You remember me?' he asked. I assured him that I could never forget. He clasped my hand and whispered, 'What you gave me that night — nobody but me and G-d will understand.' From then on, every time I lift the shofar-like cry of Kol Nidrei, I am transported to that silent synagogue with just the two of us and the Shechinah. And every year, without fail, the tears return.

Hearing the story firsthand from the chazzan, Moshe suddenly understood why he had been rerouted to Frankfurt for Yom Kippur. The lesson was as personal as it was universal. Even those of us who are "regulars" in shul on the High Holidays can arrive to find the gates closed — our emotional and spiritual gates. We often feel unmoved, uninspired, alienated; sometimes even angry, dejected, or indifferent. Sometimes it can feel like the gate to our own heart is locked. Yes, we may go through the rituals — we have our seats in shul and our prayer-books, but the inner soul can feel locked and numb. We can be in the right time and the right place, but not be emotionally present.

But the truth is, our essence can never be shut away. Beneath every layer of habit or hurt is a soul bound eternally to its Creator. It isn't the rituals that unlock the soul; it's the willingness to look past the outer layers and reach for the spark within. Each of us carries a divine core that can never be sealed off or lost. When we strip away the distractions and remember that we are living emissaries of G-d in this world, we discover a bond that no gate can bar. That connection has always been there — and always will be. Yom Kippur calls us to do what that lone Jew did: to knock, to wait, and to believe that the gates will open. No matter how far we feel, the connection is already there, unbreakable. We have only to step inside.