

Reb Yeheskel the Ritual Slaughterer

Tales of Lytin

(translated from Hebrew)

by Moshe Mandel

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granddaughter of Moshe Mandel*

Reb Yeheskel was an elderly Jew, an aristocratic figure, tall and upright; wide forehead, dark eyes, carved nose, thin lips and a white beard. On his head was a round velvet shtreimel with a plush skullcap underneath it. And on his back a long black satin kaputa¹ with two pockets, without a pleat in the back; in one pocket a large red handkerchief, half of which was hanging out and dragging on the ground, and in the other a light sash, to tie it up for evening prayers. And underneath the coat – his under clothing that were stuffed into his long white stockings tied with a string. On his feet were light shoes with narrow stripes of lacquer. In the winter he would wear a furry hat, pants lined in cotton, boots, and a cloak of cat's skin on weekdays and "Fie" skin on Shabat.

Reb Yeheskel was a head taller than all the other shochets in the town, bodily and in his expertise. He would make "halachaic" decisions on questions of items ritually unfit for food, not based upon "Tvuot Shor" and other short cuts, but based upon "Yoreh De'ah" (one of the four parts of the *Shulchan Aruch*) and the other first and last verses. He was knowledgeable in everything that was related to slaughter, unfitness of the lung, laws of meat and milk, and knew well all the questions on the topic, the questions and answers and the different explanation in these areas; and also knew questions and discussions in "Gemarrah" and method in "Sefrei Yeraim", and was considered to be one of the experts in torah and the study of torah.

In his fifties, he stopped studying regularly and only learned the tractate that was decided for him by the "Group of Shash"², and twenty portions of mishnah per month, that the "Group of Mishnayot" decided for him. Sometimes he would look at some verses, due to some difficult question that would arise, and the rest of the time he would devote to prayer, to studying the holy "Zohar" and the emendations, and extensive study of the hassidic books – "Shelah", "Toldot", "Kedushat Levy", "HaKedoshat", "Maor Eynaiyim", "Ohav Yisraelet", "Or Chaim", and others.

Reb Yeheskel was gifted with a pleasant voice, but didn't like to lead the prayers, and only on the holiday of Shavuoth would he honor the congregation by reciting "Aqdamuth"³ in his pleasant voice, that would grow steady and louder and more enthusiastic from verse to verse:

"אקדמות מליו ושריות שו-תא...
ובאתא קלילא דלית בה מששו-תא..."

¹ "kaputa" coat.

² "Group of Shash" a group that studied the six Orders of the Mishnah or the Talmud.

³ "Aqdamuth" name of an Aramaic poem read on Shavuoth.

Sometimes he would let the gentleness in his voice be heard at the hassidic parties that were at his home. It was especially nice to hear his melodies when he prayed. It was his custom to start his prayer with the last minyon and to continue alone until noonday. He would walk back and forth in the “*cloz*”⁴, back and forth, and pray in a whispered melody snapping his fingers with intermittent cries of “*Ohy Rebno shel Olan*” or “bim-bam-bam-bam!”, not only between chapter to chapter but also in the middle of a chapter. Anyone who passed by the “*cloz*” forced himself to stop for a moment and listen to the melodies of the prayers; and even the non-Jewish passersby would recognize the voice of his prayers, and it would be a sign for them that it wasn’t lunchtime yet, and they would say: “The day is still long! The shochet Yeheskel is still at his melody”.

And every Friday night Reb Yeheskel would stay after the prayers in the synagogue and continue in a melody that would touch deep in the heart “*Lecha dodi*” and the echo of his voice could be heard from afar.

Reb Yeheskel the shochet was a great expert in his profession and all the butchers honored him and loved him, and when the opportunity arose of adhesions on the lungs they wanted only him to take care of things. And this was the way it was done: The butcher would blow up the lung, and Reb Yeheskel with his thin fingers and sharp big nails would take care of it, and Alter the puncturer and all the butchers and even the simple lad stood around and watched the goings on, and exchanged glances between them on the expertise of the shochet, and if it was not kosher then the butcher was sure he hadn’t made a mistake.

Also in other questions he was knowledgeable; and when he traveled to the slaughterhouse, the rabbi was able to forego his presence on that day, even though there was a city ordinance that the rabbi had to be present at the slaughterhouse to overlook the examinations (internal and external).

Shochets and other knowledgeable persons admired his expertise in sharpening the blade, and his demands that it be sharp and smooth, and many shochets came to him to be trained; and when he gave ordination to someone, the community was sure that person had a good knowledge and could be trusted.

Reb Yeheskel was an expert in circumcision and fertility, and the young women and the midwives did their utmost to have him as the *mohel*⁵ and the expert on fertility. When he said the blessing of the circumcision in his pleasant voice, and his white hands circumcised the child, it would add special charm to the happiness of the circumcision.

Reb Yeheskel received a salary of 20 rubles a week, and donations from the animals that were valued at three rubles a week⁶, and even with all this he would live a simple life of poverty and give his salary to charity and feed people who were passing through the town.

⁴ “*cloz*” place of worship and study for a group of hassids.

⁵ “*mohel*” the person trained to do the circumcision.

⁶ It was usual to give the shochet the spleen and guts, a piece of the liver, a piece of meat, and sometimes a leg.

Even though Reb Yeheskel's house didn't have four entrances, all the honored citizens, the emissary of the unfortunate, and the gabi⁷ that came to receive the "daily selections" for the rabbi, found himself a place in this house, and there were always between five and ten guests at his table and all were satisfied.

His house wasn't decorated and the furniture was simple, cheap and even broken, but the plates were full of food for everyone who was hungry.

On Shabat he would invite two or three guests from the best.

On every holiday the group of wise men would meet at his house, which would include among them hassids, workers and simple honorable worshipers from the Sidgorah Cloz and from the other synagogues, enjoying themselves in happiness, song and dance and stories of hassids while sipping brandy, "*saadak*" wine, and a dessert of spleen and fried meat and other delicacies. And of all this the portion of Reb Yeheskel was only two handfuls. The hearts grew warm and the house was too narrow to include all that wished to enter, the feet became light and the desire to sing tickled the throat, and they would go outside and begin to dance and celebrate around the mound that was near his house, and then Reb Yeheskel also came out, he and another two, the three "young ones" in dance; tucking the hem of their dress in their sash, and crowing in a circle in the midst of a larger circle, and the whole large audience were amazed at the lightness of his feet and his dance, that had rhythm and proportion, and even those not of our religion, and among them the honorable policeman, stood and clapped their hands to enhance the happiness. Often this happiness continued from the afternoon till midnight.

And on the occasion that Reb Yeheskel would have to leave the celebration and go to the slaughterhouse in order to slaughter some animal, the crowd would continue the celebration in his house till the late hours of the night; and the exceptional individuals stayed and waited for his return, and then a new chapter would begin. They sang and "salted"⁸ the spleen and the rest of the pieces and prepared a proper "*Melaveh Malkah*"⁹; and again told hassidic tales and repeated the instruction of the Rabbi "*Zy" a*"¹⁰, and again drank and danced in a circle until the neighbors, asleep in the nearby houses awoke, and also came out and clapped their hands with great rejoicing.

The buffoons of Lytin would say that there is clear proof to the hypothesis, that there is no human life on Mars, for if there was, they would probably come down to create a circle around the mound of Reb Yeheskel's house, because no one in the world could stand against the attraction to his mound and his delicacies of spleen and fried meat.

Reb Yeheskel would participate in the charitable needs with all his heart. He would collect grains of wheat, sticks of wood and the allocation of money; if something happened to the friend that promised to help him that day in the collections of the donations, Reb Yeheskel wasn't discouraged by "*two collect and three divide*", and would go about it alone with his red handkerchief and collect the donations. It seemed

⁷ "gabi" the person who collects the funds for the synagogue.

⁸ "salted" part of the process of preparing meat according to the rules of kashrut.

⁹ "Melaveh Malkah" songs sung at the conclusion of the Sabbath, the Queen.

¹⁰ "Zy" a" May his virtue stand us in good stead!

as if Reb Yeheskel had a special virtue that no one could deny him, not even those who usually withdrew their hand. And so it was, who could resist the smile and the gleam on the face of Reb Yeheskel?

Even though his knowledge of the language of the country was weak, he managed to obtain a note from the town clerk for a couple of wagons full of wood for heating to give the poor of the town. He himself went out to see the wagons of wood that were sent him, and oversaw that the wood would be choice. He would say, " Nobles can wait till their wood dries, therefore they can be sent damp wood, but the beggars cannot wait, therefore they must be given dry wood and the best".

Reb Yeheskel would also give the poor "notes" for flour to honor the Shabat. And when one woman came and complained to him about the grocer that cheated her, be it on purpose or not, he would go to the grocer and return the spoiled challah while rebuking him, and the grocer would immediately return her money.

Reb Yeheskel honored the ways of mankind greatly, and even in a dispute between hassids and hassids (he was from the Squarer Hassids), he wouldn't interfere and continued on his way collecting donations among all the citizens of the town, and no one would bother him.

He had great patience, and suffered the complaints of the complainers in silence, and even the noisiest of the women would not upset him or make him impatient. When one woman complained to him with great audacity, and someone asked him to shut her up, he would smile and say "Leave her, she is a bitter person".

As Reb Yeheskel felt himself growing old, he became weak, and turned over all his doings including that of charity, to his eldest son Ben-Zion, who was like his father in everything and for years had prepared to be worthy of these duties.

As time passed, the mound of Reb Yeheskel was destroyed, and again there was doubt about there being people on the planet Mars... and the young of those days, who had in the meantime grown old, became homesick for that day when the pleasant voice of Reb Yeheskel in his announcing of the holiday of Shavuoth:

"כקל מן קדם שדי כקל מי נפישותא..."