

***THE NIGHT BEFORE YOM KIPPUR**

Key Ideas: Judaism, caring for others

It was the Friday night before Yom Kippur, the holiest night of the year. And yet, the rabbi of Nemirov was not at synagogue. He had disappeared before Kol Nidre night, when Jews prayed for forgiveness for their sins. And the strange thing was, he did the same last year and the year before.

Where had he gone? Some people in Nemirov thought they knew the answer. The rabbi had gone to heaven to speak to God. There were so many things to sort out at this time of year, so many requests for forgiveness. That was why he was not praying with them.

But Eli, who was going to be barmitzvah next year, overheard the villagers talking. This year he was just a boy, but please God, when he was a man, he would find the answer to the mystery.

A year passed and Eli had not forgotten his vow. He was now thirteen and felt brave enough to find an answer to the disappearing rabbi. The evening before the Kol Nidre prayers, he slipped into the rabbi's house and popped himself under the table.

From his hiding place under the tablecloth, Eli saw the rabbi going to his cupboard and taking out some peasant clothes - some linen trousers, old boots, a worn coat and a green felt hat. The rabbi put on the clothes and left the house, pausing to pick up an axe which was propped up outside. Eli shivered with fear - what could this mean.

As the rabbi walked down the street, he kept his hat firmly over his face. He passed solemn men and women from his congregation, walking to synagogue to begin the fast. Eli follows. He saw the rabbi walking towards the wood, away from the town. He saw him picking up his axe and cutting down a tree. And he saw him cut the tree into logs and then cut the log into sticks.

The rabbi gathered the sticks together and walked towards an old broken down house. He knocked on the door. 'Who is it?' called out a sad, tired old lady. 'It is I,' said the rabbi in a Russian accent, 'the peasant Vassil. I am selling wood cheaply, please let me come in.' And he walked into the old lady's house without waiting for an answer.

'I'm sorry,' said the old lady, wrapped up in rags to keep herself warm. 'I cannot afford to buy any wood. I don't have the money.'

'And who will help make the fire?' said the old lady, feeling a little happier. 'I'm, all alone.'

'I will,' said the rabbi. And as he put the wood together, he said the first part of the Kol Nidre prayers, quietly. And as the wood set alight, he said the second part. And when the flames burnt brightly, he completed the prayers: 'Let He who makes peace in His high places, make peace for us and for all Israel.'

When Eli saw this, despite the glorious day of his barmitzvah, he realised this was the moment that he became a man.

Every year, the rabbi of Nemirov disappeared. Some said he went to Heaven to speak with God. But Eli used to whisper to himself, 'If not Higher'.

*Adapted from Selected Stories, I L Peretz
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