If Not Higher!

A Hasidic Story

Every morning during the week of Penitential Prayers, the Rebbe of Nemirov would vanish—disappear without a trace!

He was nowhere to be seen: not in the synagogue, not in either of the study houses, not in a prayer minyan, and certainly not at home. The front door stood open, and anyone could come or go at will. No one would steal from the Rebbe, though not a living thing stirred at home.

Where could the Rebbe be?

Where should he be? Up in heaven, of course! Does a rebbe have so little business to take care of up there before the Days of Awe? God save us from the Evil Eye, Jews need sustenance, peace, health, and good matches for their children. Jews want to be good and pious, but many are the sins and Satan—with his thousand eyes—sees from one end of the world to the other, submits complaints, and denounces people. . . . Who should help us, if not the Rebbe?

That’s what his disciples thought.¹

But once a Litvak came to visit, and he laughed! You know the Litvaks—they look down on books about everyday moral teachings, and they stuff themselves with Talmud and commentaries. So the Litvak points to a clear passage in the Gemarah, he pokes out your eyes with it. He shows that even Moses, in his lifetime, was unable to ascend to heaven—he remained ten hands’ breadths below! Well, go argue with a Litvak!

“Then where does the Rebbe go?” the people asked.

“How should I know?” answers the Litvak and shrugs his shoulders, but at that moment he decides to find out. What won’t a Litvak do?

That very day, soon after evening prayers, the Litvak steals into the Rebbe’s room, crawls under his bed, and lies there. He would wait all night to

¹ This line, not in the original (1900) publication of the story, was added later.
see where the Rebbe goes and what he does during the week of Penitential Prayers.

Another person might have dozed off and slept away the hours, but a Litvak knows what to do: he studies a complete tractate of the Talmud from memory! I don't recall whether it was Hulin or Nedairim.

At dawn the Litvak hears people being called to Penitential Prayers. The Rebbe has been awake for some time. For almost an hour, the Litvak has heard him groaning.

Anyone who has heard the Rebbe of Nemirov groan knows how much anguish, how much sorrow for the people of Israel is contained in each groan. Hearing him groan would break your heart! But a Litvak's heart is made of stone, so he listens and stays where he is! So does the Rebbe. The Rebbe, long may he live, lies on the bed, and the Litvak lies under the bed.

Then the Litvak hears the beds in the house start to creak. . . . He hears people in the house climb out of bed, murmur a few words, pour water over their hands, and open their doors. . . . Next the people leave the house and once again it becomes still and dark. A single ray of light from the moon shines through the shutters.

The Litvak later admitted that, when he was all alone with the Rebbe, he became terrified. His skin was crawling with goose bumps from fear. The roots of his forelocks pricked his temples like needles.

It was no small matter, being alone with the Rebbe one morning during Penitential Prayers! Who knows what can happen and who might appear?

But a Litvak is stubborn, so he quivers like a fish in water and stays where he is.

Finally the Rebbe, long may he live, gets up.

First he does what a Jew must do. . . . Then he goes to the clothes closet and takes out a bundle. Peasants' clothes appear: canvas pants, oversized boots, a coat, a large fur hat, and a long, wide leather belt with brass rivets.

The Rebbe puts it all on. The end of a rough peasant cord peels out from the pocket of the coat.

The Rebbe goes out and the Litvak follows! As he passes through the kitchen, the Rebbe bends down and takes an axe from under a bed, sticks it into his belt, and leaves the house. The Litvak trembles but doesn't give up.

A quiet dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark streets. Often a cry es-

capes from some minyan saying the Penitential Prayers, or a sick person moans behind a window. The Rebbe keeps to the sides of the road, in the shadow of the houses. He slips from one house to the next and the Litvak follows.

The Litvak hears the pounding of his own heart merge with the sound of the Rebbe's heavy steps; but he keeps walking and leaves town together with the Rebbe.

Outside the town there is a small forest.

The Rebbe, long may he live, enters the woods. He walks thirty or forty steps and stops beneath a small tree. The Litvak watches, amazed, as the Rebbe takes the axe out of his belt and starts to chop down the tree.

He watches the Rebbe back and hack, and he hears the tree groan and crack. The tree falls. Then the Rebbe chops it into logs and splits the logs into thin pieces of wood. He makes a bundle of wood, ties it with the cord from his pocket, hefts the bundle onto his shoulders, sticks the axe back in his belt, leaves the forest, and returns to the town.

On a back street he stops at a poor, broken-down hut and knocks on the window.

"Who is it?" someone asks, frightened, from inside. The Litvak recognizes the voice of a woman, a sick old woman.

"Ya, it's me!" answers the Rebbe in the language of the local peasants.

"Kto ya? Who?" comes a voice from the hut.

"Vassil", the Rebbe answers again in Russian.

"What Vassil? And what do you want, Vassil?"

"I have wood to sell!" says the Rebbe. "Very cheap wood, a bundle of wood for almost nothing." And without waiting for an answer, he goes into the hut.

The Litvak also sneaks in and, in the gray light of dawn, he sees an impoverished room, in shambles, with squalid furnishings. In bed lies a sick Jewish woman wrapped in rags, and she says in a bitter voice:

"Buy? How should I buy wood? Does a poor widow like me have money?"

"I'll lend it to you," answers the disguised Rebbe. "Just three kopecks!"

"And how will I ever pay you?" moans the old woman, half in tears.

3. Here the translation follows the 1900 text, which works better in English. The later version replaces "the Rebbe" and "the disguised Rebbe"—here and several lines later—with "the disguised Vassil."
“Foolish person,” the Rebbe moralizes. “Look, you’re a poor, sick woman and I trust you with this little bit of firewood. I have faith that you will be able to repay me, while you have such a great, strong God and don’t trust in Him. You don’t even have faith that He will give you three kopecks for the bundle of wood!”

“And who will kindle the fire for me?” the widow grumbles. “You think I have the strength to stand up? My son is off working.”

“I'll even make the fire for you,” the Rebbe says.

Placing the wood in the stove and sighing, the Rebbe began to say the first part of the Penitential Prayers.

When he lit the fire and the wood gave off a cheerful glow, the Rebbe's voice became livelier as he continued the prayers.

The Rebbe finished his prayers after the fire caught and he had shut the oven.

The Litvak who saw all this became a disciple of the Nemirov Rebbe.

Later, whenever a hasid told a story about how the Rebbe rises every morning during the period of the Penitential Prayers and ascends to heaven, the Litvak no longer laughed. He would only add quietly:

“If not higher!”

Translated by Ken Frieden