

# Sounds of Life

by

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*"Yitgadal vayitgadash shmay rabah..."* Cantor Yosef chanted.

At 53, he looked resplendent in his expensive, dark suit, contrasted by his full white beard. He sounded resplendent, too, with his rich baritone voice melodically chanting Kaddish, the mourner's prayer. A respectful hush swept over the small congregation of synagogue Bais Chaim, in Sunshine, Florida, a little town west of Miami.

This was a holy moment, a special moment in the Shabbos morning prayer service, when it was time to remember the dear departed souls of loved ones. Cantor Yosef's mother had died two months earlier, still young at 78, and he and Shmuel Rosenkrantz, who's wife passed on after 55 years of marriage, stood and said the Kaddish prayer together. Shmuel whispered, not wishing to interfere with Cantor Yosef's superlative rendition.

*"B'almah dee varah kerootay va-"*

The second verse was interrupted when eight year old Benjamin Stein burst into the synagogue from the children's room in the back, followed by seven year old Sholem Greenberg.

"You're it!" Benny yelled as he ran.

"I'm gonna get you!" Shooly shouted back.

Several of the older men uttered loud shushing noises. Shooly chased Benny to the front door. Benny threw the door open, and ran out, followed by Shooly, who slammed it shut.

Cantor Yosef's concentration was broken and a look of rage transformed his face. He stared bullets at the front doors. Finally, after struggling for composure, he continued.

*"... vayamleek malchootay vyatzmach poorkanay vee-"*

The front door was thrown open again. Benny ran in, Shooly close behind.

"I tagged you and you're it!" Shooly yelled.

"Never touched me!" Benny shouted back.

Cantor Yosef took his double-sized heavy-duty prayer book, the one with big print made especially for weakening 53 year old eyes, and slammed it down on the bimah, the pulpit. It was like a peal of thunder as it reverberated inside the small synagogue.

Benny stopped dead in his tracks, a look of surprise and shock on his face. Shooly was unprepared for Benny's sudden stop; he crashed into his friend, sending both of them sprawling. They landed tangled up together on the floor in front of Cantor Yosef's bimah. This situation struck them as hilarious and they lapsed into a laughing and giggling fit.

"QUIET!" Cantor Yosef shouted.

Once again he took his heavy siddur and slammed it down. It sounded like the angry voice of God Himself on Mt. Sinai, after the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, saw the golden calf.

The boys stopped laughing and looked up at the red-faced Cantor, fear written all over their now angelic faces. The Cantor, a self-righteous froth on his lower lip, raised the book again. As he lowered his arm like a sledgehammer, he was suddenly stopped.

David Cohen, known to the congregation as the 'Mystery Man', held the Cantor's wrist.

"Boys, go sit next to your fathers," David Cohen ordered. He continued to hold the Cantor's wrist while the boys scurried over to their respective parents.

The faces of the congregation were pulled to the scene at the Cantor's bimah like iron filings to a magnet. David Cohen was also fiftyish, with thinning hair, a gray beard, and a body like a steel barrel. He came to services, blended in, and then left, talking little with the other members of the congregation, leaving nothing but questions in his wake.

Where does he live? ... What does he do? ... Does he pay his dues? were some of those questions. Rabbi Levy ignored them, even though he knew the answers. It was not his place to talk.

"Let go of my wrist!" Cantor Yosef hissed through gritted teeth.



David Cohen relaxed his grip, but not before he warned, "Please, don't slam the prayer book down like that." The Mystery Man then turned around and headed back toward his seat in the rear of the congregation.

Cantor Yosef was a boxer in his youth, a Golden Gloves contender from the wilds of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. His retort was automatic.

"Says you and what army?"

And with that rejoinder, Cantor Yosef took the double-sized heavy-duty prayer book and slammed it down one more time on the bimah.

David Cohen turned around as if he were stung by a bee. He walked back to the bimah and said, just above a whisper, but loud enough for the closest congregants to hear, and then repeat to those not fortunate or gifted with good hearing, "Meet me outside after you finish Kaddish."

David Cohen then marched to the front door, opened it, and closed it softly behind him.

Rabbi Levi shook his head and sighed. He had been watching this scene unfold, stroking his long dark beard, hoping there would be some Divine intervention. When there appeared to be none, he thought, *this is just what I need on Shabbos, a fight between two men who are old enough to know better*. Rabbi Levi rose to his six-foot height and went to the bimah.

"Cantor, please finish Kaddish."

Cantor Yosef handed Rabbi Levi the double-sized heavy-duty prayer book.

"No, you finish it, Rabbi."

Cantor Yosef made a great show of taking off his prayer shawl, his expensive suit jacket, and his tie. With great reverence, he placed them on the back of one of the nearby empty chairs. Then he unbuttoned his shirtsleeves and rolled them up. He did this while Rabbi Levi stood there, watching, his mouth opened wide enough to catch flies.

Cantor Yosef strode to the front door like Joshua approaching the conquest of Jericho. The rest of the congregation fell in line behind him.

It was Shabbos, and forbidden to fight, carry money, or gamble. That being understood, Rabbi Levi still thought he heard whispers of 3 to 1 odds, and wagers made to sound like pledges to the Congregation's Building Fund.

**"STOP!"**

Everyone stopped and turned around. No one had ever heard Rabbi Levi raise his voice in such a way, or to such a level before, including Rabbi Levi himself.

"I forbid this to go on! This is Shabbos, for Heaven's sake! I want everyone to come back here and sit down! Cantor Yosef, I mean you most of all."

The congregation slunk back to their seats, all except for Cantor Yosef.

"He profaned the memory of my mother, Rabbi, and I can not allow that, Shabbos or no Shabbos." Cantor Yosef opened the front door, and walked out.

Rabbi Levi continued the prayer service, speaking at a speed of about five hundred Hebrew words per minute.

In less than ten minutes, the service was completed. At the conclusion, the Rabbi asked anyone mourning to once again rise and say Kaddish. Shmuel Rosenkrantz rose slowly again, helped by the younger men on each side of him. While Shmuel's old bones creaked, the front door also creaked.

Cantor Yosef walked back in. He was unmarked and his attire was just slightly askew.

The Cantor ignored the stares of the congregation. He walked silently over to the back of the chair where his coat and tie and tallis were. He put on his tallis, and then said Kaddish. As he came to the end of the prayer, his voice broke and he wiped his eyes.

Rabbi Levi dismissed the congregation, bidding them "Shabbat shalom." They filed out of Temple Chaim, staring back at Cantor Yosef, afraid to ask the question they were all thinking. Cantor Yosef removed his tallis, and then took a very long time knotting his tie, long enough so that he and Rabbi Levi were alone.

"Nu?" Rabbi Levi asked.

"Nu what?"

"You know nu what."

"I don't want to talk about it, Rabbi."

"Okay. I was only asking in case you wanted to share something with me."



Cantor Yosef walked to the front door and stopped, his back to the Rabbi. "He showed me a picture and told me a story."

"A picture and a story," Rabbi Levi repeated.

Cantor Yosef opened the front door. "So maybe I shouldn't be banging on the bimah so much. They're only children."

Then Cantor Yosef walked out.

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Rabbi Levi was alone inside Temple Chaim. *These are the good and quiet times*, he thought as he locked the front door - *I can almost hear the Holy One breathe*.

The Rabbi stood in front of the ark and closed his eyes. He opened his heart to God, pouring out his innermost secrets and needs, things he could not tell another human being, truths he could only tell his Creator. When he was done, he felt a great sense of relief.

Rabbi Levi hummed as he put away the prayer books. He checked to make sure the ark was locked, and then walked to the rear exit of the synagogue. He opened the door -

David Cohen was standing there.

"Hello, Rabbi."

Rabbi Levi's mind raced ahead to the scene that awaited him. In his mind's eye he saw his wife, Rebecca, standing by their Shabbos table, eyeing his empty seat. He saw his children hiding in the hallway closet, ready to jump out and surprise him when he opened it to put his hat inside. He saw their Shabbos guests, the Mittleman's, sitting in the living room, waiting for his arrival.

But when he saw the look in David Cohen's eyes, he knew he could not leave this man alone.

"Would you like to talk, David?"

"Yes."

Rabbi Levi walked back into the synagogue, David following him. David sat in the back, on the same seat he always sat on. Rabbi Levi sat next to him and waited.

"Rabbi, I'm sorry for causing a commotion at services."

"David, no apology is necessary."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure."

David exhaled and shook his head. "I was afraid you would not let me back into the congregation."

Rabbi Levi placed his hand gently on David Cohen's shoulder. "You are always welcome here. You should know that."

David stood and went over to the bimah. He picked up the heavy-duty double-sized siddur and slammed it down. "How I hate that sound, Rabbi."

He slammed it again.

"That sound does not belong inside a synagogue."

David slammed it again. And again.

He kept slamming the book on the bimah until he grew tired. While Rabbi Levi waited, he said a prayer beseeching the Holy One to let this man be free of the torment he kept hidden inside.

David pounded the bimah one last time.

"To me, that is the sound of anger, the sound of judgment ... it is the sound of my father," David whispered.

Rabbi Levi nodded.

"The sound of children laughing and playing, that is the sound that belongs inside a synagogue. Those children will grow up and think of this place as their home, as their community, as an important part of their life. The sounds of children inside a synagogue are the sounds of life, Rabbi."

When David did not continue, Rabbi Levi stood up and joined him at the Bima.

"What happened outside with Cantor Yosef, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I tried to talk to him, but before I could say anything, he threw a punch at me."

"He did?"

"Yes. He missed me by a mile, thank God."



"Then what happened ... if you don't mind my asking?"

"He took another swing at me."

"Did he miss that time, too?"

"Yes. Only now he tripped and fell down."

"Then what happened, if you still don't mind my asking?"

"I gave him my hand and helped him up. Then I helped him brush off his clothes."

"Then what, if you-"

"Please, Rabbi, I'll tell you ... just give me a chance."

"I'm sorry ... please continue."

"After we got him cleaned him up, I apologized for embarrassing him in front of the congregation."

"That was a wise thing to do."

"Perhaps I was wrong, but I think maybe he was a little more wrong than me. What do you think?"

The Rabbi considered the question.

"Perhaps the Cantor was wrong first, and you were wrong second. As to degrees of wrong, I think I'll let the Holy One render the decision on that one."

David smiled. "Answered like a true Rabbi."

Rabbi Levi returned the smile. "You should know, Rabbi Cohen."

"Ex-Rabbi," David corrected him.

Rabbi Levi did not argue the point. Instead he casually mentioned, "The Cantor said you showed him a picture and told him a story."

David said nothing, which drove Rabbi Levi mad. He waited as long as he could, then he blurted out, "So what picture did you show him, David?"

David reached into his wallet and pulled out an old, wrinkled photograph. He handed it to Rabbi Levi. When the Rabbi looked at it, he saw a young boy of bar mitzvah age, wearing a tallit and yarmulke.

"That was Mendel, my son."

"Was?"

"He died shortly after that picture was taken."

"I'm so sorry, David."

"Just like those two boys today, he was horseplaying around at shul with his friends. Only it was after he said his haf torah at his bar mitzvah. I slammed the bima with my prayer book, just like Cantor Yosef. And just like Cantor Yosef, I yelled at Mendel and embarrassed him in front of his friends. He ran out of shul, crying."

David struggled to keep his composure.

"He did not see where he was running, blinded by tears. The car that hit him had no chance to stop."

David broke down and began sobbing. Rabbi Levi took David in his arms, and the older man cried on his shoulder like a baby, while the Rabbi patted him on his back. When David was cried out, he pulled away and wiped his eyes.

"Today was my Mendy's yartzite, Rabbi. I have never said kaddish for him because I didn't feel I was worthy of asking God for anything after that."

The Rabbi asked, softly, "Do you want to say kaddish for your son now, David?"

"I can't, Rabbi. There is no forgiveness for what I did."

Rabbi Levi took his tallis from his velvet satchel and placed it over the strong shoulders of David Cohen. As he did this, he said in Hebrew, "The sounds of forgiveness are also the sounds of life."

Rabbi Levi began, "*Yitgadal vayitgadash shmay rabah...*"

"Even if I wanted to say it, I couldn't, Rabbi."

"*B'almah dee varah kerootay va-*"

"Kaddish can not be said unless there is a minyon. You know that, Rabbi."

"No minyon? Our patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are praying by the bima. Can't you see them? And there is Moses and his brother, the High Priest Aaron, davening next to the them. Surely you can see them, can't you? And



next to them are Elijah the Prophet and the Baal Shem Tov. Don't tell me you can't hear them, too? Then there is me and you, of course."

"That's only nine," David said, smiling.

"And there is your Mendy, looking down. He was bar-mitzvah, so he can be counted."

Rabbi Levi took the double-sized heavy-duty prayer book, opened it to page seventy-seven, and handed it to David.

"*Vayamleek malchootay...*" Rabbi Levi paused. *Please God*, he prayed, *let him-*

"... *vyatzmach poorkanay veekarave misheechay...*" David Cohen continued.

**The End**

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**Gift Section**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This Story is a special Gift for a Special Person  
on the occasion of your \_\_\_\_\_ .

I love you,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Giving Gift

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