

King of Shabbos

by

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Rabbi Yaakov Levi was sent by the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe to Sunshine, Florida, a small town west of Miami, to educate the Jews who lived there and to help them return to their traditions. Rabbi Levi, whose nickname was Yankee, was twenty-four and slim, with a full, dark beard. His soft brown eyes were magnified by a pair of thick glasses. He was accompanied by his young wife, Rebecca. She was pretty in a modest way, warm-hearted, and generous, but not at all shy about speaking her mind. Together they started a synagogue, Bais Simcha. The small congregation they built loved their young Chabad rabbi and his rebbetzin.

By the end of their third year in Sunshine, Rebecca had given birth to two children. Rabbi Levi, however, had problems with their other creations—very serious problems. The bank was going to take away their house, their car, and the shul because there was not enough money to make the monthly mortgage payments.

The solution to these problems was Michael Fein—the richest Jew in town and the president of Bais Simcha. Each year, he gave the synagogue \$100,000—in one check. His next contribution was due after Shabbos. *Without that check . . . no*, Rabbi Levi didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think about having to close the doors to the shul and on the congregation he loved.

This year, Michael Fein had one important condition. "If you can't get ten men for my mother's yartzeit on Shabbos," he told Rabbi Levi, "then I'm through supporting Bais Simcha!"

It was now an hour before Shabbos, and only nine men were available, including the rabbi. Rabbi Levi sat at his desk and looked down once again at his congregation list. He called everyone he could think of. Why did it have to be Fourth of July weekend, with so many families out of town?

Then he thought about who wasn't on the list, and he smiled. He still had one last hope—Yussie Yablonski. Of course! Yussie would not be going out of town. Yussie had no car to go out of town with. Yes, Yussie would be the tenth man and complete the minyan! He dialed Yussie's number.

We're sorry, the number you have dialed is temporarily out of order. Please check the number and dial again or ask the operator for assistance.

Translation: Yussie had not paid his telephone bill. Again.

Rabbi Levi looked at his watch. Forty minutes to sundown. There was only one thing to do. He jumped into his rusty Dodge and ten minutes later, he was knocking on the door to Yussie's apartment.

No answer.

He knocked again. And again. And again.

Finally, the lock turned, and fifty-four-year-old Yussie Yablonski appeared. Yussie looked terrible, even for Yussie. His gray hair streamed from his head in all directions, and his short, stocky body smelled of sweat. Wearing just a pair of plaid boxer shorts and a stained undershirt, he looked expectantly at the rabbi.

"Yussie! How are you?" the rabbi asked as cheerfully as he could.

"You shouldn't ask, Rabbi," Yussie replied, forlornly.

The rabbi raised his dark eyebrows. "But I have to ask. It's my job."

"Well, in that case, I'm not so good," Yussie admitted.

The rabbi grimaced. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No . . . maybe . . . well . . . I don't know, Rabbi."

The rabbi lifted his palm and looked up at the sky. A dark thundercloud was rolling in.

"Yussie, you think maybe I could come inside, before it pours, so we can figure this out together?"

"Come in already," Yussie said, standing aside.

The apartment was in chaos. Crusty dishes were piled high in the sink, the garbage can was overflowing onto the floor, and wrinkled clothes were scattered everywhere. The rabbi moved a pair of stained workpants from one of the kitchen chairs, and sat down.

"So what's wrong, Yussie?"

"What's wrong? Everything is wrong. My life is one big wrong. . . . Would you like some wine, Rabbi?"

"No, thank you, Yussie. I don't drink before Shabbos."

"Shabbos? Is it Shabbos already? You know, sometimes I lose track of time, Rabbi."

Yussie poured himself a large glass of red wine and sat down at the table with his rabbi.

The rabbi squinted at his watch in the dimming light. "Shabbos starts in about twenty minutes, Yussie, and I promised Michael Fein we would have a minyan for his mother's yartzeit. Yussie, you'll have the honor of being the tenth man."

Yussie took a gulp of wine. He belched, looked embarrassed, and then said, "No thank you, Rabbi."

A threatening peel of thunder followed Yussie's words.

"No thank you?" the rabbi repeated with disbelief.

"Rabbi, I cannot go to synagogue anymore."

"And why not?"

"Because, Rabbi, I don't believe in God anymore."

The rabbi felt a thunderous rumble in his gut.

"Yussie, come, get dressed, and we'll talk on the way."

The rabbi wrestled with Yussie, briefly, in an attempt to get him to stand up, but Yussie refused to move. Feeling foolish, Rabbi Levi sat back down again and stared at his tenth man.

Under the rabbi's penetrating gaze, Yussie stood up and walked over to the kitchen window. The sky was darkening by the minute. He turned around and faced the rabbi.

"Rabbi, when you look at me . . . what do you see?"

Rabbi Levi sighed and nodded his head. "I see a good man, Yussie."

"The children make fun of me, Rabbi, when I pass them on the street. They say, 'Here comes the raggedy man! Raggedy man! Raggedy man! Hey, raggedy man!'"

"You're a good person, Yussie. It takes a rabbi to see that."

"Good for what, Rabbi? Good for nothing, that's what."

"Now, Yussie . . ."

"Rabbi, in case it didn't occur to you, when I was born I didn't win any prizes in the looks department. And as far as smarts go, my brain doesn't work right sometimes. I never had a wife, never even a girlfriend. I don't have any friends anymore. I have some relatives, but they don't want to come near me because they're afraid I'll borrow more money from them."

"Yussie—" the rabbi tried to interrupt, but Yussie continued.

"Rabbi, look around you. All I have is this crummy little apartment, which is all I can afford with the crummy job I have. I pick up litter by the side of the highway using a pointy

stick. That's my living. That's what I do. I pick up MacDonald's wrappers and cigarette butts and sticky plastic bottles. In this world, I am nothing. People look past me like I don't exist."

If I let him talk, thought the rabbi, then perhaps he will feel better and go with me to shul.

The rabbi touched his watch, wanting to look at it. *I just hope it's sooner than later.*

"Each year, my life gets worse, Rabbi. Each year, I sink lower. Today it dawned on me that as I get older, I will keep becoming less and less, until the nothing I am now will seem like something compared to what I will become."

The rabbi shook his head. "Yussie, you're being too hard on yourself."

"Too hard? Rabbi, even God has no use for me. He has given me no blessings of any kind. And then He tells me not to covet my neighbor! Hah! No one wants to be Yussie Yablonski, and I would rather be anyone else but me. How can I not covet?" Yussie banged his fist on the counter. "No! I refuse to believe in God because He refuses to believe in me."

"What can I do, Yussie? Tell me how I can help you."

Once again, Rabbi Levi glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes until sundown.

Yussie saw the rabbi glance at his watch, and he shook his head.

"Leave me alone, Rabbi. Just leave me alone." Once again, Yussie turned his back and stared out the window.

Rabbi Levi stood up, walked over to Yussie, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Yussie, do you think maybe I could leave you alone *after* Shabbos? I need a tenth man now." He smiled hopefully.

Yussie pushed the rabbi's hand off his shoulder.

"I am serious, Rabbi. Find someone else, and leave me be."

"Yussie, please come with me to the synagogue. Please. Together we will pray for

blessings for you. Together we will explain to God how He has forgotten you. Maybe God will listen this time."

"Oh, God listens, Rabbi. And then He laughs. He always laughs at my prayers."

"Yussie, please. How many ways can I beg you? I need a tenth man. I have no one else to turn to. My job depends on it. My family depends on it. My life depends on it! Is it so much to ask?"

Yussie turned and faced the rabbi.

"Yes. It is too much. Maybe if you were a better rabbi, God would listen to you, and He would find some blessings for me . . . instead of His Empty Hand."

Yussie walked from the kitchen to the front door. The rabbi followed.

Holding the door open, he said, "Please go, Rabbi. Go to your Michael Fein and your congregation. Go find someone else who still believes in God to make your minyan."

Rabbi Levi sighed deeply.

"Is there nothing I can do for you . . . Yussie . . . something . . . anything . . . if you will just do this for me?"

Yussie shook his head.

Rabbi Levi walked toward the door. Before he left, he looked beseechingly into Yussie's eyes. Yussie looked away. The rabbi shrugged, paused for just a moment, then left.

Driving back to Bais Simcha, he found himself lost in Yussie's sadness. *What is the Holy One's purpose in making one such as Yussie?* he wondered. *How can I understand him. How can I help him? I have a wonderful wife and two beautiful children. I have a challenging career and a congregation of good people who depend upon me and respect me. My biggest problem is getting a minyan for Michael Fein. Who is Michael Fein? Is he God? If Michael Fein chooses to*

stop giving, will I survive? Of course I will. I have blessings beyond belief and yet . . . I am poor with the wisdom to help my friend Yussie.

And then, Rabbi Levi surprised himself. He forgot about Michael Fein, forgot about the minyan, forgot about Bais Simcha and his bills. He screeched to a stop and then turned his old Dodge around. He looked at the speedometer, and then at his watch. When it was one minute until sundown, he pulled over and parked, and ran the remaining distance to Yussie's apartment. The heavy summer rain began its descent just as he arrived.

Rabbi Levi pounded on Yussie's door.

No answer.

He pounded until his hands hurt, but still, no answer. He rammed his body into the door until his shoulder ached. Finally, he managed to break the door open.

"Yussie?" the rabbi called out. "Yussie are you here?!"

No answer. The apartment was dark. The rabbi hadn't noticed it before, but the power must have been turned off—another unpaid bill no doubt. When the rabbi's eyes adjusted to darkness, he searched around. Yussie was not in the kitchen . . . or the living room . . . or the bedroom, but he sensed the man's presence. He also sensed something was wrong. *Very wrong.*

There remained only one place Yussie could be. The rabbi opened the bathroom door.

There was a lit candle on the sink, and Yussie was standing in front of the mirror, staring at his reflection. In his hand was a bottle of pills.

"Yussie, why didn't you answer me?"

"Rabbi, you don't belong here . . . go to your synagogue." He continued staring into the mirror.

"No, Yussie, this is where I belong."

"Leave me in peace, Rabbi!"

"No, Yussie."

"Rabbi, please. I am begging you. Leave me be!"

"No, Yussie . . . I will stay here with you until we figure this thing out together."

When Yussie turned to face the rabbi, there were tears in his weary eyes.

"Rabbi, I cannot take the pain of living. Do you understand that? It hurts me to be alive and be so miserable. Could you live my life, Rabbi? Look around you! Could you live this way?"

"I would not live like this . . . and you do not have to either, Yussie."

"Rabbi, I have become so used to no one caring, that I, too, no longer care about myself. What value is there in being neat and clean when you are poor and alone, with no one to love, no one to even talk to? How long can anyone care about himself when he is ridiculed and laughed at? How long could you live my life and still care, Rabbi?"

Rabbi Levi thought for a long time.

"I don't know," he answered, finally breaking the silence.

"Then go! Let me be!"

Yussie threw the bottle of pills into the bathroom sink and buried his face in his hands. His painful sobs pierced the heart of the good rabbi.

Putting his arm around Yussie's shoulder, the rabbi managed to steer him out of the bathroom and into the kitchen. He settled the troubled man into a chair and sat down next to him.

"Yussie, I was taught that whenever I encounter situations where life is unfair, and I could find no reason for it, I was to say, 'Only God knows why.'"

Yussie continued sobbing, his face hidden in his hands.

"Then I was told to have faith and go on. 'Only God knows why.' I wish I had a better

explanation for you, Yussie. You're right. If I were a better rabbi, I would have the right words."

Yussie's shoulders stopped shaking.

"You have had faith longer than anyone could hope for, longer than even me, and I am supposed to be a student of God and a teacher of God's ways to men."

Yussie's cries became softer now.

"Perhaps, Yussie, God gives blessings to those whose faith is weak, not strong."

Yussie took his hands away from his red face and stared with tear-rimmed eyes at the rabbi as he continued.

"Perhaps to the strongest, God gives little, and He is happy that His best creations need so little from Him. So, no, Yussie. I could not take living like you. Faith is the greatest blessing, and my faith is less than yours."

"Do you mean that, Rabbi?"

"Yes I do, Yussie. And would you like to know a secret?"

Yussie nodded his head and wiped his eyes on the corner of his undershirt.

"Sometimes, when I pray, Yussie, I ask God not to test me like He does you, because I know I would come up short."

"You think I am stronger than you, Rabbi?"

"Yes," the rabbi said, and he meant it.

"Stronger than even Michael Fein?"

"You are many times stronger than Michael Fein." He meant that, too.

Yussie wiped his eyes once more and smoothed out his shirt. Then, the rabbi watched raptly as Yussie seemed to go through an amazing transformation. The man stood up, straightened his back, and puffed out his chest. He set his jaw, and when he spoke, there was a

new confidence and purpose in his words.

"Then come, Rabbi. We'll go pray for Michael Fein. If we do not keep bothering God for blessings for him, that rich weakling will perish."

Rabbi Levi stood up and hugged Yussie. He hugged him for a long time, and when he let him go, he said, "Thank you, Yussie, my good friend."

Rabbi Levi waited in the kitchen while Yussie changed into his best clothes—an old, tattered suit that had seen better days a decade ago. Together, they walked the two miles to Bais Simcha in the pouring rain, without an umbrella.

"It was nice of God to provide me with a shower, wasn't it, Rabbi? I was starting to smell so bad even I could not stand to be around myself."

The rabbi looked over at Yussie, and he was smiling. Yussie had a child's smile, and it made Rabbi Levi smile along with him.

Forty minutes later, the two men—drenched to the skin but in great spirits—opened the heavy doors to Bais Simcha. Eight men stared back at them. Seven of them had been waiting patiently. The eighth, Michael Fein, was scowling.

Rabbi Levi and Yussie looked at each other when they saw the expression on the wealthy man's face.

"Weakling," Yussie whispered to Rabbi Levi.

"We should pray for him," Rabbi Levi whispered back.

Rabbi Levi walked up to the bimah, cleared his throat, and began the Friday night service. He insisted that Yussie stand at his side.

The young Chabad rabbi beamed with pride at the thought that the Lubavitcher Rebbe would be pleased with his work once again.

Gift Section

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on the occasion of your _____.

I love you,

Person Giving Gift

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