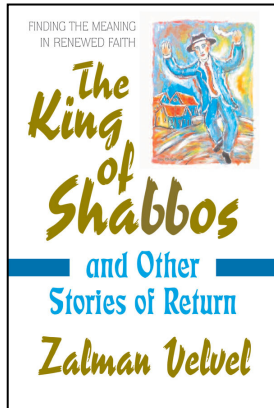


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Meet Zalman Velvel

The tale of how a successful and creative businessman rediscovered his Jewish faith, grew a beard, and became a great provider of joy through his writing

Garden City, New York—What leads a man who has gone from Wall Street, to being a successful real estate investor, to sit down, grow a beard, and write more than 100 short stories about what it means to be Jewish? In a word, faith. That’s what happened to Zalman Velvel, as he found himself smack dab in the middle of a reconnection with a Judaism that he had only half-understood in his youth and almost completely neglected as an adult. Faith drove him to return to his religious roots, and faith drove him to write stories. For Zalman Velvel in his new book *The King of Shabbos and Other Stories of Return* (Square One Publishers)—the answer is all around us: *faith*.

Whether at home, or in synagogue, or abroad, Zalman has looked at the people in his world and has drawn many rich and poignant stories from what he has witnessed. And just as his own rediscovered faith has brought him fulfillment, he has set out through his writing to help others find that place inside themselves where mind, heart, and soul strikes a balance. From the voice of a man who has struggled, hurt, and grown—and laughed with joy over the process—this new book of eighteen tales will make readers think and feel in a new and different way about the role of faith in their lives as members of the Jewish community.

In a recent question-and-answer session, Mr. Velvel explained the origins of his writing name, the stories behind his stories, and the reason he stops to smile at least once a day:

Q. You were born in New York with an American name, but you write under the name of Zalman Velvel. Why did you change your name, and what religious significance (if any) is there to the name that you chose?

A. I write under my Jewish name to remind me of Who is ultimately looking down and judging. Also, one of the interesting things about Judaism is our names - they tell a story about our families. The Velvel comes from my paternal Great Grandfather, Rabbi Velvel. He left Russia in the mid 1800’s because his congregation was getting too much education. By day, he pounded wisdom into their heads, and by night, the Cossacks did the same, only with clubs. That is the story about the tuchus, or the rear end of my name. The poopic, the Zalman, comes from my mother’s father. He was known for his lousy jokes and liking food too much. As you can see, I

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inherited strongly from that side of the family, also.

Q. In your stories, and now in this interview, you use Yiddish words. Do you find that most Jewish people still have a knowledge of these words? If not, are you making a conscious effort to re-introduce these words into Jewish culture again for the next generation?

A. I like using Yiddish words because they sound just like they mean, and a joke is usually funnier with them. Even if someone doesn't understand Yiddish, they can figure out the words just from the context and the sound. Tuchus and poopic – can you think of better words to use?

Q. When did you first start to write? What were the things that moved you to create stories?

A. I started writing in 1980, in the moldy, dusty attic in our first home, on a Xerox word processor that cost \$500 per month to rent, which was a lot of money in those days. Unfortunately, only Xerox made money on my writing back then. I started by writing novels, then turned to plays a few years later, and then turned to stories around 1995 – I guess my writing has gotten shorter, which made my critics happy. Most of my stories start with a challenging situation that I have experienced, or someone close to me has experienced. I especially like stories where your heart is at odds with your head and there is no easy answer. You know, now that you asked me how I started writing, I just realized my path was the reverse of Hemingway. He started out short, with stories, and then went longer, by making them into novels. As you can see, I have always been lousy at following good examples.

Q. Speaking of Hemingway, who are some of your favorite fiction writers? And for that matter, what are some of your favorite stories from the Old Testament?

A. Sholom Alechem, William Goldman, Mark Twain, and Hemingway are some of my favorite fiction writers. I'm sure there are more, but that list will have to do for now. I especially like when Hemingway and Stephen King talked about writing, more than most of their stories. My favorite non-fiction writer is God, and his scribe, Moses. I love all the stories in the Old Testament, but some of my favorites are Abraham hondeling with God over Sodom and Gemorah, Jacob and Esau, and the mini-novella, Joseph. I especially love the stories that are puzzling and stark, like Moses not being allowed in Israel, the Red Cow, and the most puzzling of all to me, the Akaydah.

Q. What was it in your life that led you to start writing all these new stories?

A. First, you have to ask why does anyone sit down and write at all? In the beginning, it was to leave something behind, to say to the world Zalman Velvel was here and lived. Then it evolved. Now I have to write. If I go too long without creating a new story, I get irritable. The act of creation has become important to me. I like putting words on paper that will enter someone else's heart and make both of us feel not so alone, and yet revel in our own individuality.

Q. In reading your stories, one gets the feeling that your characters could actually be real people. Are any of your stories based on real-life people or situations?

A. The vast majority of my stories are based upon real people and real-life situations. Of course, I mix and match personality traits, and take license with the events to make sense. I believe that a

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great portion of life does not make sense, and we seek out fiction to make sense, to make us feel something consistent. I especially like to be funny and make people laugh, which I seemed to have stopped doing in this interview because you got me talking seriously about writing – so please stop it.

Q. So, what's the story behind your beard? It's real, right?

A. Yes, and thank you for getting me back on track. Yes, there is a funny story behind the beard, and I put that story in the book. It's called "The Care and Feeing of a Beard." You know, a few years back I co-wrote, and acted in, several comedy routines called "Dear Rabbi." They were performed on a local cable show, along with David Saye, a professional comedian. I was the straight man with the real beard, and he played the Rabbi, with a dime-store Santa Claus beard. It was probably the most fun I have ever had while writing. David was generous in teaching me about comedy, while I taught him about investing in real estate. He went on to go broke, and you can judge for yourself how well he taught me about comedy.

Q. What is it about life that makes you happiest?

A. What makes me happiest are the times when I feel a sense of fulfillment. It happens maybe once a day, for some precious moments, when I look around me, at my family and friends, and career, and say to myself, "The guy who lives here is a very lucky guy." I am by no means a smiling fool, and I tend toward the serious side, perhaps too much.

Q. If the people who read your stories walk away with only one message, what would you like that message to be?

A. I like when people tell me they laughed, or they cried, because of one of my stories. That is, in effect, telling me that we have connected, heart to heart, and that connection means so much. My Mom, whom I am blessed to still have with me, cried when I handed her a copy of "King of Shabbos," and she saw I dedicated the book to her, and also my Dad, who is no longer with us. Then she called me two days later, sobbing, because she read the story "Father's Day," which is a very personal, even embarrassing, story written about my father's passing. Her tears were like a Pulitzer Prize to me. We connected.

If you would like to interview Zalman Velvel for your publication, please feel free to contact Anthony Pomes either by phone (516-535-2010 x 105), fax (516-535-2014), or email (SqlMarketing@aol.com). Thank you, and be sure to let something make you smile today. 😊

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