

The Jar of Oil Within

When Rabbi Koves of Budapest got a call from a 'Bad Jew,' he saw the opportunity to rekindle a lost spark.

The Long-Awaited Restoration

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Shlomo Koves is a Chabad rabbi in Budapest. Around 2009, he got a phone call from a real-estate broker who asked him if he was interested in purchasing a synagogue.

Before the Holocaust, hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in Budapest, with many synagogues in operation to serve them. But after the Holocaust, the Communists shuttered most of them.

This synagogue had been taken over by the government and used by state television, but the TV station had moved to another building, leaving the former synagogue available for sale.

Rabbi Koves asked him how much it would cost. Two million Euros, the man said—but, he added, he could get it for him for a half-million. Rabbi Koves reached out to one of his supporters, himself a real-estate mogul, and the friend got very excited and pledged to fund the purchase.

They began the transaction process, but as the date drew closer, the supporter began to get cold feet. It was hard for him

to donate such a sum. Ultimately, Rabbi Koves offered to rent the synagogue for 500 Euros more than the rent which the TV station had initially agreed to rent it at.

They got the keys after Passover, and restoration work began about six weeks later. Two days before Rosh Hashanah, the formal grand opening celebration for the old synagogue was held. In attendance were the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel and other distinguished guests. No less than 2,000 people participated, including many older Jews who had attended the synagogue as little children. They lit candles in memory of their friends from synagogue who had been murdered in the Holocaust, and the emotion was intense. The event was covered across Hungarian and global media—and some 500 Jews attended services that Rosh Hashanah. It was a resounding success.

A Bad Jew

Several days later, Rabbi Koves got a phone call from a Jew in Manhattan. The caller said, “Rabbi, the first thing I want to say to you is that I am a bad Jew!”

“I don’t recognize ‘bad Jews,’” Rabbi Koves replied. “Every Jew is a good Jew!”

But the man proceeded to explain that ever since his Bar Mitzvah, he had never stepped foot in a synagogue. He lived in Manhattan and never even went into a kosher restaurant, never mind a shul.

The man went on to say that he subscribed to the newsletter

from the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., where he had read that Rabbi Koves had restored a synagogue in the third ward of Budapest. He then said, “Rabbi, that is the synagogue at which I celebrated my own Bar Mitzvah!” So Rabbi Koves kept the conversation going. He asked him what his primary occupation was, and the man said that he was currently a retiree but had previously worked as an electrician. If Rabbi Koves had thought that his restoration funding angel had arrived, those dreams were dashed.

The man said that several years earlier, he had personally visited Budapest with the goal of purchasing a hotel. Rabbi Koves politely pointed out that it did seem a bit strange for an electrician to be buying such major real estate. But the man explained that that was his specialty—and that in fact, he had a commercial electrical contracting company that employed 300 people and which had done all the wiring for JFK Airport decades ago. Rabbi Koves was happy to learn that this was a different type of electrician altogether. The man then said that he wanted to dedicate something in the synagogue in memory of his parents who had perished in the Holocaust.

Rabbi Koves told him that at the moment, they were restoring the stained-glass windows—at the cost of \$18,000 each. The man immediately agreed to dedicate one window in memory of his parents. After he made the donation, Rabbi Koves invited him to visit Budapest for the unveiling ceremony.

So on the set date, our hero from New York arrived in Budapest, and in his honor, they invited his childhood friends who lived in the city. He was very moved, and it was hard for him to speak

throughout the event. After the event, once everyone had left, he turned to Rabbi Koves and said, “I want to tell you why I haven’t stepped foot in a synagogue for 60 years.”

No Admission

“As a child, I lost my parents to the Holocaust. My sister and I were raised by our non-Jewish nanny. Our uncles and aunts were not exactly interested in us, but one thing was important to them—to make me a Bar Mitzvah. And they came to my Bar Mitzvah like respectable people—and took all the credit.”

“In 1952, when I was 14 years old, the rabbi of the synagogue met me and asked me, ‘Are you So-and-so’s son?’ I answered, ‘Yes.’ ‘What’s your name?’ he asked me. I said, ‘Peter.’ The rabbi said to me, ‘Peter, it wasn’t long ago that you had your Bar Mitzvah. Why don’t you come to shul?’”

“I was so startled by the question that I answered, ‘Because no one invites me!’ The rabbi answered, ‘In a few days, we’ll be celebrating Rosh Hashanah, and I’m personally inviting you to come to shul.’ So on Rosh Hashanah morning, there I was, a 14-year-old, orphaned of father and mother and remembering that I had promised the rabbi that I’d come to shul. I put on my holiday clothing and went to shul.

“But when I got there, I saw that the big door at the main entrance was closed. I knocked on the door, and the shamash opened it and asked me, ‘Boy, what do you want?’ In those Communist days, no one went to shul and the synagogue was empty. I answered him, ‘I came to pray in honor of Rosh Hashanah.’ The shamash put on a serious face and asked me,

‘Do you have an admission ticket?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘but the rabbi invited me.’ But he said, ‘I don’t know of any such stories. Invited, not invited—here you only get in with a ticket!’”

“At that moment, I thought in my heart that if they don’t want me without a ticket, then they don’t want me with a ticket either. I decided that I’d never step foot in a synagogue again.”

Over the next few years, the man would meet with Rabbi Koves in New York at kosher restaurants and the like. And at one such occasion, he suddenly said, “Rabbi, you can now start praying that I die!” Rabbi Koves, of course, was shocked at such talk. But the man explained that he had just written his will, and had included Chabad of Budapest in it...

In the end, the government presented the building to Chabad free of charge, and our Jew of Manhattan ended up funding the bulk of the restoration. And today, it remains one of the most beautiful synagogues throughout Hungary, and in active use throughout the year.

Seven or Eight

My friends, we now stand just before the Chanukah holiday, on which we celebrate the miracle of the jug of oil. In that little jar that they found in the Beis Hamikdash, there was only enough oil for one day—but by a miracle, the oil lasted for eight days.

If you think about it for more than a moment, you’ll notice something strange: For how many days was there a miracle? That’s right, seven! There was enough oil in the jar for the first day! So why do we celebrate eight days? The holiday should be

for seven!

This question is the well-known and famous question of Rabbi Yosef Caro, the great halachic codifier. In fact, there are hundreds of answers to this one question.

One of most well-known answers is that the miracle of the first day was the very fact that they had found a jar of oil sealed with an intact seal of the Kohen Gadol, after the destruction and the contamination that the Greeks had sown all across the Beis Hamikdash for the duration of three years. That itself was a miracle!

But the Rebbe asks a question of his own: If that was a miracle, why didn't G-d just include enough oil in the jug for eight days? Why did they have only enough for one, and then need an additional miracle for the duration of Chanukah?

The Rebbe answers that "The entire miracle was performed by G-d to show that He cherishes the Jewish Nation. Under Jewish law, they could have kindled the menorah using contaminated oil... and to further demonstrate that He cherishes the Jewish Nation, the miracle was such that it was noticeable that there was a special miracle happening each day, so that the Jewish Nation would be able to light the menorah using pure oil" (Shabbos Parshas Chayei Sarah, 5733, pg. 4).

A New Type of Oppression

Why did G-d show the Jewish Nation this love? What aroused such love on High?

At the events of Chanukah, the Jewish nation did something

they had never done before. Until then, any oppressor throughout Jewish history had attacked the Jews physically—meaning, they wanted to hurt or kill us. In Egypt, they subjected the Jews to slave labor. In the Purim story, Haman had wanted to “eradicate, kill and destroy” the Jewish Nation (G-d forbid!). But at Chanukah, something entirely different happened. The Greeks didn’t want to kill Jews. On the contrary—they loved and valued the wisdom of the Jewish Nation.

Their quarrel was with the religion of the Jewish Nation; they wanted to “make them forget Your Torah and remove them from the laws of Your Will.” They claimed that “we love the wisdom and beauty of Judaism! Improving the world is fine and dandy! But circumcision?! There’s no logic to that! If a male needs to be circumcised, then he would have been born that way! What’s this business of circumcising an eight-day-old infant?! It’s barbaric!”

And they said the same thing about Shabbos. “Shabbos?! What is this ‘rest’ business? In our culture, the elite never work, not even on weekdays, and employees/slaves work every day! What is this business of vacation day once a week?” The concept that we take a break on Saturday because that’s the day on which G-d rested after creating the universe on the first six days was precisely what they could not tolerate, and it was that that they fought against.

It was the first time that the Jewish Nation fought not for its physical survival but for its connection with G-d. And they did so to the point of risking their very lives—they sacrificed

themselves to do mitzvos. And so, measure for measure, G-d responded with affection in kind and performed an open miracle.

A Genuine Miracle

The existence of the jar of oil was in fact a miracle, but one within the order of nature. Some will even say that it wasn't a miracle; they just had luck. It just so happened that someone forgot a jar of oil and the Maccabees found it; there's nothing to get excited about. But the miracle of the oil is a miracle entirely beyond the order of nature—on such a miracle, there is no debate and there cannot be any debate. A volume of oil just enough for one day that lasts eight days because the Jewish Nation risked their lives for the sake of keeping mitzvos? In response to that, G-d stepped out of His own order, so to speak, and performed a miracle for them that was entirely beyond the order of nature.

The Rebbe repeatedly said that within every Jew, there is a hidden “pure jar of oil”—a pure soul just waiting for someone to come along and ignite it. For 60 years, the Budapest Jew of Manhattan was a “lost oil jar”—but then the miracle of “finding the oil jar” happened.

Today, thousands of lost Jewish souls drift around the world—and it is incumbent upon each one of us to find these Jews, to discover that jar of oil inside each of them, and to light their Jewish souls with them.