

# Kol Nidrei: breaking records

*What Jewish things are in the Guinness Book of World Records? And what records should we really strive for?*

## **Jewish Guinness Attempts**

Good Yom Tov and a meaningful Yom Kippur to you!

This Day of Atonement, I'd like to begin with a different sort of question: How do you get into the Guinness Book of World Records? Anybody have any idea?

So here's what you might call a Jewish answer to that question: Several years ago, the world's largest mezuzah was installed upon the entranceway to the Kotel, the sacred Western Wall in Jerusalem. This scroll is no less than 60 centimeters, or just under two feet, long—and is actually one of three of that size written for the expressed purpose of getting into the Guinness Book of World Records.

But it gets better.

A few months after that, another world record was scored right in Jerusalem—when a giant matzah, ten times the size of a normal store-bought matzah, was rolled out into the streets.

This matzah, my friends, weighed no less than 60 kilograms, or 132.7 pounds, to be exact, and was three meters in diameter. It

was made using 50 kilograms (110.2 pounds) of flour and 22 liters (five gallons) of water. When they finished baking this matzah, they needed to lift it with a crane—and despite the ingredients involved, it still fully baked in less than 18 minutes.

And all that was done just to get a Guinness World Record.

At that rate, who knows what's next? Soon we may see the world's tiniest Torah scroll, or the world's biggest Sukkah. Not too long after that, we'll find the rabbi who blew shofar the longest and the cantor who stretched out Kol Nidrei the longest—and finally, we'll end up with the world's sharpest circumcision knife...

But in my opinion, instead of standing like beggars in the doorway trying to get into the Guinness World Records, it's time for the Jewish People to have a “Book of Records” of its own that includes all the unique records of the Jewish People.

Because, after all, there are things that only Jews are likely to understand. I mean, go try to explain to an average guy on the street about a prize for the biggest cholent pot in the world, or the planet's largest kreppl. In our Book of Records, however, we could freely express ourselves—and even squeeze in a few words in Yiddish, like “World's Greatest Kvetcher.”

## **Real Achievements**

Truthfully, however, there have been many Jews who have done things that should be in the Guinness Book of World Records.

For example, the Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Peah I 1:3) tells us that the great Sage Rabbi Tarfon once bent down and put his

hands on the ground so his mother could step on them—all the way home. His mother's sandal had broken, and Rabbi Tarfon didn't want his mother to step on the ground—so he had her step on his hands, one step at a time, until she got home. Not only that, but Tractate Kiddushin 31b tells us that Rabbi Tarfon's mother slept on a high bed, and it was hard for her to get down to the ground—so Rabbi Tarfon would get down on his hands and knees and form a human stepstool with his back so that his mother could literally step on him and then climb down from bed.

I'm sure that Rabbi Tarfon could get into the Guinness World Records. After all, how many people do you know who honored their mother that much?

The Talmud continues, telling us about Rabbi Avimi, another Sage who greatly honored his parent, this time his elderly father. One time, Rabbi Avimi's father asked him for a cup of water—but by the time Rabbi Avimi came back, his father had dozed off. Rabbi Avimi stood by his side for an entire hour until his father woke back up. And I'm sure that that story could get into the Guinness World Records, too.

The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 17a) also tells us about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who lived to the ripe old age of 120. Rabbi Yochanan testified about himself that “he never let anyone greet him first”—meaning, anyone that he encountered, he was always first to say “Hello!” or “How are you?”

Now, we also may try to say hello and greet people—but how many of us really make the effort to put on a cheery face for

everyone, no matter who, whether it's a stranger you pass in the store, or anyone else? A person who could testify about himself that he's always the first to greet others is a fitting candidate for the Guinness World Records.

The great Hillel the Elder is said to have had tremendous patience for everyone and anyone. He is said to have never, ever lost his patience. So the Talmud (Tractate 31a) tells us that once, two people bet 400 zuzim (the ancient coin which, according to one opinion, is equivalent to about 100,000 American dollars in today's terms) over whether they could get Hillel to lose his cool and patience.

So one of these two clowns shows up at Hillel's house one Friday afternoon not too long before Shabbos, when Hillel was in the bath getting ready for Shabbos. He stood outside under the window and brazenly called out, "Who here is Hillel? Who here is Hillel?"

Hillel heard and calmly got dressed and went outside. He calmly asked the man, "What do you seek, my son?" So the man asked him, "Why are Asian people's eyes narrow?"

Hillel patiently explained to him that, according to the Jewish tradition, many areas of the Far East are desert, and as such, the people who live in such regions could get sand blown into their eyes by the desert winds—and so G-d created them with narrow eyes to help keep the sand out.

A short time went by, and the wise guy came back crying out, "Who here is Hillel? Who here is Hillel?" Hillel, who had gone back into the bath, got dressed again and asked the man what

he desired. And again, the man asked him a strange, bizarre question.

This repeated itself several times—until the man blurted out to Hillel: “I lost four hundred zuz because of you!” And Hillel responded: “It’s better to lose 400 zuz than to lose one’s temper.”

But we don’t have to go all the way back to Talmudic times. In the last generation, the Rebbe would greatly speak the praises of Russian Jewry for living for 70 years under Communist rule, which tried to wipe out anything with any connection whatsoever to Judaism or G-d. But with their supreme self-sacrifice and limited knowledge, the Jews of Russia remained faithful to Judaism and continued to teach their kids and remind them all the time that they were Jews. These were the people who set new records, and didn’t even know that they were doing things that deserved such records.

My father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, sat in Russian prison during the 1940s and 1950s of the past century for the “sin” of trying to escape from Russia to Israel. He was sent to Siberia, where, in a work camp, he got ahold of a machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He then copied the machzor, word for word, by hand into a notebook, except for one page that was missing from the machzor—the most important prayer of all on Yom Kippur: the Kol Nidrei prayer. The stories of heroism and bravery that we heard about our father definitely deserve to go into the book of records.

## **Breaking Your Record**

And just in case you were wondering, Judaism does in fact very much believe in the concept of breaking records—in other words, in breaking drab routines.

In the Tanya, the “Bible” of Chabad Chassidic philosophy, Chapter 15, it’s explained that in the Talmudic Era, it was the custom that any Torah studied would be literally reviewed 100 times. You have to remember that in those generations, Torah was not transcribed—besides the Torah scroll itself, none of what we call Torah today was written down. Not the Mishnah, not the Talmud, nothing. Instead, it was passed from teacher to student and from father to son. And so, they needed to make sure and verify that all the material studied would remain memorized—and so, they had the custom to repeat everything 100 times.

But the Talmud says something very interesting: “One who repeats his studies 100 times is not the same as one who repeats his studies 101 times.” In other words, the student who reviews his studies one time more than he usually does is breaking a record. He’s making a supreme effort in whose merit he’s considered an *oved Elokim*, a “servant of G-d”—and he thus gets into the book of records.

In the first portion of the Torah, the Parshah of Bereishis which we’ll read soon, the Torah tells us, “This is the book of the chronicles of man.” And indeed, man’s entire life is a book.

Every day we inscribe another page in our book of records. Every day we decide whether our actions will get us into the

book of records or whether we'll stay ordinary, drab people. And today, each one of us must resolve that this year, we'll earn a record in our Judaism.

But in our personal record books, we don't draw comparisons. We don't compare ourselves to any other person. Because every individual person has his or her personal limits and his or her challenges—and what one person takes lightly, another person will take with great hardship.

In your personal book of records, you compare the you of today to the you of yesterday and the day before that—did you break any records in your Judaism today? Did you join an extra Torah class that you never joined before? Did you give charity at a level you never reached before?

So now, my friends, as we stand just before Kol Nidrei, perhaps this is a good time to start. So let's resolve to stay in synagogue five minutes longer than we did last year—thus entering a new record in our personal record books... and maybe even in the Guinness World Records book.

May we all be blessed with a record-breaking year!