

The Little Shoemaker's Shavuos

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In the tiniest of tiny villages, near the foot of the big hill, past the huge flour-mill by the large blue lake, on the left side of the dusty winding road that leads to the great City of Lemberg, lived a little old man with a pale face and a humble soul. His eyes, which were deeply set in their sockets, were always sad. His meager stringy beard, with its wisps of wild hair pointing in all directions, was not only gray, but it was also peppered with little tufts of black and red. His name was Velvel, and he was a shoemaker.

Reb Velvel was an extremely short man who would not have been easily picked out from a group of average sized Yeshiva students, were it not for his beard: and when he permitted his little round shoulders to sag (which was almost always) he became almost as short as the smallest Cheder bachur.

The ragged clothing Reb Velvel wore on weekdays was generally in tatters, with patches sewn on patches, and a generous amount of soup and gravy stains distributed on his cap, lapels, and sleeves. But on Shabbos and holidays, he wore a fairly good black hat with a very wide brim, a reasonably neat suit without stains, and an extremely long coat that almost touched his neatly shined shoes — the coat was free of patches.

There were many people in the tiny village who had fun at the expense of Reb Velvel. When they spotted him entering the little market in the village square to shop for a few potatoes, an egg or two, or perhaps even a salted herring, some of them would roll with laughter. Motke-the-Barber, who was at least twice the size of Reb Velvel, would sneak up behind him and imitate his little roly-poly walk. Zalman-the-Red-Faced-Egg-Vendor would call him over and compliment him on his beautiful clothing, and Moishe-the-Pretzel-Man would imitate his high squeaky voice. Watching all these antics, the vendors and shoppers would hold their sides and roar. Reb Velvel never seemed to resent these pranks. He simply bought whatever he needed and went home to his little cottage.

In shul, too, they played all kinds of tricks on him. After davening, during kiddush, they would fill his little glass with water instead of wine... On Simchas Torah, they would tie the fringes of his Tallis to a leg of a chair or a table... On Succos, they would hide his esrog and lulov... And practically every Shabbos, they would find a new place to hide his hat or coat. Here, too, Reb Velvel never

seemed to get angry at all of these annoying little tricks they played on him. He simply came to shul to hear the Torah read, and not to stand in the back talking loudly, and thinking up various new pranks to play on someone else.

The children of the little village never made fun of Reb Velvel. They loved him dearly, just as he loved them. On their way home from the Yeshiva, they would stop off at his tiny cottage for a while to watch him fix shoes. They loved to watch him put a handful of tacks in his mouth and then remove them one at a time, to nail them into a new pair of heels. At times, when there were no shoes to fix, he would talk to them about what they had learned in the Yeshiva. He would ask them questions about Chumash and Rashi, and he would tell them again and again that they must always live according to all 613 mitzvos — beginning with the Asseres Hadibros.



I suppose that Reb Velvel would have remained the butt of all jokes until his dying day, had not a certain unusual incident happened on a certain Shavuos. That little occurrence made him one of the most respected members of the village.

It started during the first night of Shavuos, when most of the men of the little community gathered in the shul after a good holiday meal to say Tikkun Shavuos and to learn the whole night through.

Most of the night was spent in deep study. The great Rabbi of the village sat at the head of the huge table, while the people around the table listened intently to the pearls of wisdom that fell from his lips. There was no one who could explain a particularly knotty passage of Gemora better than the great Rabbi of the village.

Toward morning, Motke-the-Barber, along with Moishe the-Pretzel-Man, and a few of the others were becoming restless, and they began playing their usual tricks on Reb Velvel. They put a little salt in his glass of tea and then they dropped a few walnut shells down the back of his neck. They began to laugh so loudly that the Rabbi became disturbed at their antics, looked up from his Gemora, and shouted: "Sha!"

Reb Velvel, who was used to all the teasing did not even bother to take any notice of the incident. He simply went on with his learning until the first sharp rays of the morning sun cut through the dusty window panes and lit up the shul.

He heard the Shammass say, "It's time to daven!" He looked up from the Gemora, stood up, and prepared himself to put on his tallis.

When they came to the part of the reading of the Torah when the next aliyah would include the reading of the Asseres Hadibros, all eyes automatically turned toward the great Rabbi who was sitting in his usual seat against the East Wall. Everyone in the shul knew that this was one honor that was always reserved for the great Rabbi.

Motke-the-Barber winked at Moishe-the-Pretzel-Man: "I hear they are considering giving this most important aliyah to Reb Velvel."

"Naturally. Who else could they possibly give it to?" said Moishe-the-Pretzel-Man, with a wide grin on his face. Reb Velvel overheard this little conversation, and although he tried very hard to hold back, he could not help but smile at such a silly notion. He could not imagine how such an unimportant person as himself could even hope of getting an aliyah so great.

Everyone was waiting for the Rabbi to be called up to the Torah, when suddenly the Rabbi rose from his seat against the East Wall. He quietly walked over to the Shammass, whispered something in his ear, and just as quietly returned to his seat and sat down.

The Shammass stood quite still for a moment with his mouth wide open, and a puzzled expression on his face. A few moments later, everybody in the shul except the great Rabbi and Reb Velvel wore puzzled expressions of their own. The Rabbi, of course, knew what he had done so he was not surprised by what happened. As for Reb Velvel, he simply sat in his seat in stunned silence, his face growing paler by the second. There was a great buzz of whispering in the shul . . . No one could understand the meaning behind it. The great Rabbi had given up his aliyah to Reb Velvel, the poor little shoemaker!

Reb Velvel rose ever so slowly from his seat, and from the way his body was weaving, it seemed to all that he must have been standing on rubber legs. Motke-the-Barber and Moishe-the-Pretzel-Man, who only a little while ago had put salt in his tea and walnut shells down his back, sprang to either side of him and walked him ever so slowly to the bimah.

Everyone in the shul stood up during the reading of the Asseres Hadibros. Reb Velvel let the words sink so deeply into his heart that he was sure he was really standing in front of Mount Sinai. Tears started to well up in his eyes, and then slowly began to trickle down his pale cheeks.



It was during the kiddush and Reb Velvel had already left the shul. The men were all sitting around a long table, sipping wine and tasting the various delicious cakes. One of them asked the Rabbi why he had given up his Aliyah to Reb Velvel and they all leaned toward the Rabbi to hear his answer.

The Rabbi took a sip of wine, thought very deeply for a moment, and said the following:

"The mere fact that you have to ask me such a question only further proves to me what a great and humble soul Reb Velvel really possesses. Permit me to ask you a few questions. If you knew a man who worked hard all day, and distributed almost all of his meager earnings among the very poor, would he not have deserved that aliyah? If you knew a man who took a great interest in the children who attend the Yeshiva, making sure that they all have enough food in their bellies, and good strong shoes on their feet, would he not have deserved that aliyah? If you knew a man who wasn't interested in the material things on this earth, such as fashionable suits, beautiful hats, and fur-lined coats, would he not have deserved that aliyah? If you knew a man who labored hard all day, and still managed to learn Torah much of the night, would he not have deserved that aliyah? If you knew a man who never uttered an unkind word against the very people who poked fun at him, would he not have deserved that aliyah? Well, I found a man who possesses all of those great qualities. How could I possibly not do him the honor?"

There was nothing further to be said, so they sat around the table in complete silence.

