

IllumiNations

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Hashem Cleans Souls and The Rabbi Cleans Floors

By Chaya Chazan

Kol Nidrei night has a pull all its own. More than Rosh Hashanah, more than any other service of the year, Jews who rarely, if ever, step into a synagogue still find themselves drawn to shul.

That night in Peabody, Massachusetts, our Chabad House was full.

I stood at the front in my white kittel, tallis draped across my shoulders, as the haunting melody of Kol Nidrei filled the room. The atmosphere was thick with reverence. You could almost feel the weight of the moment pressing down — like even the walls knew it was Yom Kippur.

And then — it was over. Kol Nidrei is powerful, but brief. Within an hour the service ended. And on Yom Kippur, there's no kiddush, no cake, no soda, no chance to schmooze over food. People lingered a few minutes, speaking quietly, and then began collecting their things and heading home.

I stood near the front, watching the crowd, when I felt a tug on my sleeve.

Aman shifted uncomfortably, looking embarrassed. "Rabbi," he whispered, "I really need the restroom. But it seems to be locked. I've been knocking

and no one answers. Could you... maybe check? Please — I really need to go."

His face flushed red.

My brow furrowed. Who could be inside so long? I glanced around the shul. Almost everyone was accounted for — almost. Then it struck me. Leonard, the elderly gentleman who always sat in the back, wasn't in his place. His wife was still in the women's section. He couldn't have left without her.

With a sinking feeling, I walked down the hallway and tapped gently on the restroom door. "Leonard? Are you in there? Do you need help?"

For a moment there was silence. I wondered if I'd made a mistake. Then, from the other side, came a faint, shaky voice. "...Please... call my wife."

I hurried back, found Mrs. Greenberg, and she rushed to the restroom. She slipped inside quickly and shut the door.

When she came out again, her face was pale. She leaned close and whispered. "Rabbi... I'm so sorry. My husband... he had an accident. You know how it is with older people. Sometimes the body doesn't work the way we want it to. Please — could you clear the hall so we can slip out the back without anyone noticing? I don't want him embarrassed."

Her eyes were pleading. It wasn't just about helping Leonard. It was about protecting his dignity.

I nodded gently. Within moments I had redirected the few people nearby, sent others through the front, and made sure the hallway was empty. Quietly, the Greenbergs slipped out the back door and into the night.

I thought that might be the end of it. They were gone, their dignity preserved. Maybe I could just walk away.

But something inside told me I had to look.

I pushed the door open — and froze.

It wasn't a small accident. The floor was covered. Even the walls were stained. And then the smell hit me. Sharp, sour, overwhelming. It filled the little room so fast I had to step back and cover my mouth. For a moment I thought I might throw up.

I leaned against the doorframe. What now?

Normally, this would be a job for the cleaning crew. But it was Yom Kippur night. There were no phone calls to make, no staff to call in. Tomorrow morning people would come back to shul — and if they walked into this... it could be terrible. It would humiliate the Greenbergs, and it could even drive people away.

There was no one else to handle it. No cleaning crew. No caretaker. No one but me.

I glanced toward my father, Rabbi Gershon Schusterman, who had been the chazzan that night. He met my eyes. His expression was calm, steady — but his look said everything: *This is yours to do.*

For a moment my stomach tightened. I wasn't trained for this. I didn't even know which spray was for which job. But I knew I had no choice. This was my shlichus now.

Hashem is busy tonight, I thought, cleansing the neshamas of His people. And here I am, cleaning a bathroom.

I opened the janitor's closet and grabbed whatever I could find — brushes, sprays. Later I would laugh (a little) when I realized one of the bottles I used was tire shine, not floor cleaner. But at that moment, I didn't care.

I rolled up my sleeves, dropped to my knees, and began to scrub.

The smell was awful. I gagged, coughed, nearly retched. But I didn't stop. Spray, scrub. Again and again. Sweat poured down my back. My hands ached. Slowly, slowly, the mess began to disappear. The bathroom began to look — and smell — normal again.

When at last I stepped back into the hallway, drained and dripping with sweat, my father was waiting. He put a hand gently on my shoulder.

"Nechemia," he said softly, "this was your Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev moment. Loving Jews isn't



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only about the beautiful parts — singing, davening, giving speeches. Sometimes it means bending down and cleaning up after an elderly man. Sometimes, it means getting your hands dirty.”

At the time, I thought that was the end of the story.

But Hashem had written a different ending.

Months later, during a Torah class, I was teaching about Moshe Rabbeinu. I spoke about how his greatness wasn't in standing tall above the people, but in bending low with humility — caring for each Jew as if they were his own child.

When the class ended, a man named Kyle Herzkowitz walked up to me. He had only recently begun coming to Chabad. In fact, he admitted, his first time had been that Kol Nidrei night.

“Rabbi,” he said, “I need to tell you something. Religion never meant much to me. My wife dragged me here on Yom Kippur, and honestly, I had no plans of coming back. But that night... I saw you. I saw you on your knees, scrubbing that bathroom floor.

“You didn't preach about loving Jews. You lived it. I thought: *This is what leadership looks like*. Not a rabbi in a big chair giving speeches. I grew up in Reform temples. I've heard plenty of sermons. But you were different. You were a rabbi willing to clean the floor for another Jew. That's why I came back. That's why I'm still here.”

His words pierced me. On the holiest night of the year, Hashem forgives us and washes away the stains of our souls. And that night, in my own small way, I had done the same — scrubbing away the mess so another Jew could keep his dignity intact.

And from that, another Jew found his way back — not through a sermon, not through a class, but through some soap, and a rabbi willing to get his hands dirty. That Kol Nidrei night, I thought I was cleaning a bathroom. But really, Hashem was showing me — and Kyle — what true leadership means.

When we first moved, the housing market was in decline, and good properties were a rare find. When I found a suitable place, I grabbed it, dismissing its close proximity to the Conservative and Reform temples - which were both just down the street.

A few weeks later, I was invited to a meeting with a wealthy and prominent member of the Conservative temple. He eyed me thoughtfully from behind his mahogany desk, before writing out a check for \$3,600.

“I'm giving this to you because you either deserve it, or you need it. Buying a house directly between the Reform and Conservative temples shows tremendous chutzpah, and I think you should be rewarded for that boldness. However,” he continued, tapping his pen against his chin. “It's also possible you bought the house without realizing what you were doing. And in that case, you need all the help you can get!”

Our first house was right across the street from Raheeq, who I got to know very well, not only because he was our neighbor, but also because I had to bring my car to his shop pretty often. Recently, Mikey, one of Raheeq's guys, came up to me and told me he was Jewish.

“Really?” I asked, in shock. He didn't look Jewish at all, and I'd seen him around the shop many times over the past twenty years! The thought never even crossed my mind.

“Sure am! Name's Schaefer. I even had a bar mitzvah!”

“How would you feel about me bringing tefillin next time and putting them on with you?” I asked him.

Mikey agreed, and the next day I went in, we put on tefillin together.

2020 was our 18th year of shlichus. We came up with a whole marketing plan, really playing to the “chai” theme, including eighteen different initiatives to be deployed throughout the year. I met with our key donors, presenting them with a list

of everything I wanted to accomplish, including sending personalized yarmulkes to everyone on the mailing list, subsidizing a set of arba minim for each person, and more. Rounding off the list was a new Torah. Our Chabad house has three Torahs, each taken from a shul that had no use for them anymore. I thought it would be nice to have a brand new one made, just for us.

David, who'd already generously paid off our Chabad house mortgage, scanned the list and asked, “How much would a new Torah cost?”

I threw out an estimate of what I thought it would cost, and David smiled.

“I know that the first mitzvah in the Torah is to have children, and the last is to write a Torah. I completed the first, and I can't tell you about all the ones in the middle, but I want to do the last one as well. I'll tell you what, Rabbi: I currently hold stock in Tesla, but it's not doing so well. When it reaches 900, you'll get your Torah.”

I watched that stock like a hawk over the next weeks, seeing it slowly inch up bit by bit. The SpaceX rocket was scheduled to launch on Shabbos, and Hugh predicted that by Monday, Tesla stock would reach 900 points. The stock did shoot up a lot after the successful launch, but the market closed on Monday afternoon with Tesla at 898 points.

“Nu?” I asked David.

“Close enough,” he answered. “You got your Torah.”

He even jokingly suggested we should call it the “Tesla Torah.”

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