



STORY FOR THE TABLE

An Etrog for Berditchev

Rabbi Hanoch Teller

When it came to securing a beautiful *etrog* for Sukkot, no one was more particular than the famous and saintly Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. Months before the holiday season, he would begin his search for an *etrog* that was truly *mehudar*.

By and large, *etrogim* are grown in Eretz Yisrael and shipped all over the world. One year, however, the ship carrying the precious cargo from the Holy Land to Berditchev never arrived. Distraught, Reb Levi Yitzchak – also known as the Berditchever Rebbe – sent messengers to all the outlying areas, hoping that they would discover an *etrog* somewhere in their travels.

But the messengers returned empty-handed. Their efforts had borne no fruit.

One week before Rosh Hashanah – only three weeks until Sukkot – there was still no hope in sight. So the Rebbe sent out a new group of messengers, instructing them to bring back an *etrog* – any *etrog* – at any price! But their mission, too, was a failure.

On Yom Kippur, the Rebbe implored the Almighty to allow him to fulfill this *mitzvah* as he always had. “Master of the Universe, we wish to obey Your command,” he cried, “but there isn’t a single *etrog* in all of Berditchev or the surrounding countryside!”

Just before the Neila service, Reb Levi Yitzchak issued a moving plea to the hundreds of worshippers gathered in his shul: “I ask each one of you to take to the streets tomorrow, stop

any Jewish wagon driver you see and inquire whether he has an *etrog*. We must spare no effort to fulfill Almighty’s commandments!”

This was followed by a unique prayer he had composed himself: “*Ribbono Shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, let us make a deal. I will give you my sins, transgressions, and errors, and You will give me children, life, and sustenance.

“The Greeks contend that their god is the Lord, but I disagree.

“The Romans contend that their god is the Lord, but I disagree.

“The Indians contend that their god is the Lord, but I disagree.

“And the Russians contend that there is no G-d, but I, Levi Yitzchak ben Sarah Sushah, say, ‘Glorified and sanctified be G-d’s great name...’”

The next day, as per the Rebbe’s instructions, one of his *chassidim* at the northern entrance to Berditchev accosted Berel the spice merchant who was returning home from the summer fair. Lo and behold, Berel had an *etrog*, a very beautiful one... but he had no interest in parting with it. Anxious to return to his family, he didn’t appreciate being buttonholed and questioned by a persistent *chassid*.

“I’ve been away from my family for the entire summer,” the merchant argued. “I’ve earned plenty of money, *baruch Hashem*, so none of your offers can tempt me. This little *etrog* will be the highlight of my family’s Sukkot; it will be our *simchat Yom Tov*.”



But the *chassid* was determined to succeed in his mission; he just would not take “no” for an answer.

Eventually, after a lengthy debate, Berel was brought to the court of the Berditchever Rebbe and offered a very handsome price for his *etrog*. Still the merchant refused. “But you haven’t heard my final offer yet,” Reb Levi Yitzchak proposed in a soft voice.

Berel was about to raise his hand to indicate that he would not change his mind for any sum of money, but before he managed to convey this message, the Rebbe dropped his bombshell: “Sell me your *etrog* in exchange for my portion in the World to Come.”

The Rebbe’s offer was astounding! As a businessman, Berel recognized a terrific deal when he heard one, and this was one proposition no Jew could afford to pass up. After all, Reb Levi Yitzchak’s piety was legendary and there was no doubt at all that a special place of honor awaited him in the World to Come.

The Rebbe explained his proposal, making the deal sound even more tempting “We wouldn’t want you to be lacking an *etrog* for Yom Tov, so you will be our guest for the holiday, and you may use the *etrog* just like every other Jew in Berditchev.”

The merchant immediately gave his consent and sent word to his family. He was then given comfortable accommodations in the home of one of the Rebbe’s *chassidim*.

On the first night of Sukkot — when the Torah commands us to eat in a *sukkah* — Berel joined Berditchev’s *chassidim* for evening prayers in the shul. The service was moving and was chanted with an enthusiasm and an intensity that he had never experienced before. He returned home from shul extremely inspired and looking forward to the festive meal he was about to enjoy. But when he walked through the door, his host turned to him and said, “You may not eat in our *sukkah*.”

The merchant could not believe his ears!

“We will not deny you food,” the host assured him, “but you may not enter our *sukkah* to eat it.”

Angry and deeply offended, Berel stormed out of the house, vowing never to return to such an ungracious host. But when he knocked on the door of a neighbor and asked if he could join him in his *sukkah*, to his total astonishment, this fellow, too, refused.

He tried door after door, house after house, but every *chassid* in Berditchev turned him away. Berel was beside himself with resentment and frustration. “What an evil town of sinners!” he thought to himself. “Imagine denying a fellow Jew permission to eat in a *sukkah*!”

It was already after midnight and the merchant was as hungry as he was furious. In desperation, he approached a Jewish family on the other side of town and begged to be let in. This resident refused him, too, although not as rudely as the others. He also hinted that the Berditchever Rebbe was behind the ban on Berel. Enraged, Berel made a beeline for Reb Levi Yitzchak’s house and burst through the door.

“What have you done to me?” the businessman snarled through clenched teeth, confronting the Rebbe. “Don’t I have the right to fulfill the *mitzvah* of eating in a *sukkah* on the first night of Sukkot?” “You certainly do,” the Rebbe replied, “...provided that you sell me back my World to Come.”

“What?!” Berel smacked his palms together as he lost all control of his temper. “You,” he accused, “are supposed to be the pious Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the leader and advocate of the Jewish People. But look how low you have stooped, tricking me into abandoning my family and selling my *etrog* under false pretenses!”

“My dear friend,” the Rebbe said calmly, “my World to Come is still yours, and our deal is still a deal. However, if you wish to eat in a *sukkah* tonight, you will have to sell it back to me.”

The businessman paced back and forth, thinking over his terrible

problem. On the one hand, he had only remained in Berditchev in order to use the *etrog* he had sold for the Rebbe’s World to Come. On the other hand, every year of his life — in stormy wind, pouring rain, or frosty snow he had eaten in a *sukkah*, or at least recited *kid-dush* there, on the first night of Sukkot.

Berel thought it over again and again. Finally, he concluded that no matter what he stood to lose, he had to do what was right: He had to eat in a *sukkah* the first night of Sukkot. “Very well,” the businessman responded with a heavy heart, “I will resell you your portion in the World to Come in exchange for a meal in a *sukkah*.”

Reb Levi Yitzchak breathed a deep sigh of relief and offered Berel a warm embrace and an explanation: “In my eagerness to secure an *etrog* for my People, I gave away my World to Come. Once I had made the deal, however, I deeply regretted my decision, for how could I how dare I give away something so precious to a person who might have done nothing to earn it? After all, did you not refuse at first to share your *etrog* with the Jews of Berditchev, knowing full well that without it we would all have been deprived of the *mitzvah*?”

“But now that I see you have passed this difficult trial of faith and opted to do what is right, it is clear that you are truly deserving of my World to Come.

“And now, Reb Berel, please come into my *sukkah*, where it will be my honor to personally serve you.”

● *Heard from Rabbi Yosef Zeinwerth.*

Rabbi Hanoch Teller is an internationally acclaimed storyteller extraordinaire, an award-winning author and a producer. His new podcast “Teller from Jerusalem” chronicles the stories of the early struggles of the modern State of Israel. Available wherever you listen to podcasts.



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