

The Grape Crush

The smell was the first thing that hit me. The closer we got to the place, the stronger the smell became until it was almost overpowering in its intensity. We were surrounded as far as the eye could see, by rows and rows of grapevines stretching off to eternity. Just one giant vineyard, the producer of some of the best grape juice in the United States. Smuckers jelly harvests their grapes in the area as well as the other giants in the industry.

We had flown in as part of a team of mashgichim to oversee what is known in the business as "The Grape Crush, the gigantic harvest of tons and tons of grapes." The "Crush" lasted about a month and through that time we would be on call to ensure that everything was carried out according to halacha. This was Washington State and we were separated from the rest of civilization, by fifty miles of grape vines and apple orchards. It was heady but boring work, and it paid very well.

Well we arrived and right away I saw that we had enough guys for a minyan, so I walked over to the mashgiach in command of our detail and asked him what we were supposed to do about a Sefer Torah so we could hear leining when we davened together.

"It's takeh a problem," he said. "I didn't think we were going to have a minyan, yep it's mamesh a problem." Obviously, he was at a loss.

I for one didn't think that it had to be so complicated. I got ahold of a phonebook for the closest three cities and leafed through it looking for listings of temples. I struck pay dirt when I found a number for Temple Beth Shalom in the city of Yokama. I dialed the number and it was picked up after a few rings by a man with a pleasant voice who introduced himself as Rabbi Dale.

"Good morning Rabbi Dale," I said. "My name is Rabbi Greenstein and I am here in Washington State as part of a team from the OU to oversee the Grape Crush."

"What's that?" he asked me. I explained.

"Oh that's so interesting," he said. "But what can be unkosher about a grape?" And this was the rabbi!

"Many things," I replied, "the least of them would be in a case where a person such as yourself would find himself touching a bottle of wine, thereby making it yayin nesech."

"What is yayin nesech," he asked.

So I explained how Orthodox Jews weren't allowed to drink wine that was touched by a non-Jew or by someone who didn't keep Shabbos and how we were there to make sure that that didn't happen. And to carry out our mission, we desperately needed a Sefer Torah for the days of the week that called for Torah reading.

"Rabbi Dale was intrigued. "You mean to say that you read from the Torah more than twice a year," he asked me in a perplexed tone of voice.

"You got it buddy," I told him.

"But in the temple we read the Torah when someone gets bar mitzvah and on Simchat Torah and that's it," he said.

"Well," I rejoined, "as Orthodox Jews, we are quite old fashioned in the way that we practice, doing things the way the Rabbis prescribed them thousands of years ago. And since they read from the Torah more than twice a year, we do as well."

"I see," he said, "and I would love to help you, but I am only a Rabbi in training here and I don't have the authority to let you remove a Torah from the sanctuary. You have to speak with Dr. Leimann the president of the Temple."

"What is Dr. Leimann's medical specialty," I wanted to know.

"He's an anesthesiologist," he said "and he's in charged of the three biggest hospitals in Yokama, Washington."

"This is just great," I'm thinking to myself. "I have to call up this great doctor, who leads the Reform temple in town as well as the three biggest hospitals and beg him to lend me a Sefer Torah. Like c'mon, there is no way this guy is going to do that!" Boruch Hashem, I was wrong.

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"The man who answered the number that "Rabbi Dale" gave me spoke in a cultured voice that sounded like he had been around the world once or twice.

"Hi," I said, "I'm one of the rabbis here for the Grape Crush and I was wondering if we would be able to borrow one of the Torahs from the Temple?"

"No problem!" he said. "Why don't you come down here tomorrow so that I can meet with you and if everything looks okay, then I'll lend you the Torah and you can be back in a hour."

"Sounds good," I said.

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The following morning found me and one of the other rabbis comfortably ensconced in Dr. Leimann's office. He was most cordial and offered us coffee and tea which we declined. The temple was located in a restored colonial structure with a grace that bespoke of finer days. As it was, there was something forlorn about the place. The doctor had ushered us into his office and we took our seats in front of his desk on which were piled two stacks of notebooks.

"I hope you don't mind," the doctor began, "but I cannot recall having had the pleasure of hosting Orthodox rabbis in the past and I would like to take the opportunity to ask you guys a couple of questions that have been bothering me for the last few years."

"Fire away," we said.

"Well," he began, pointing to the smaller pile of notebooks, "these books contain all of my Jewish knowledge. And these," he said, pointing to the other much larger pile, "contain all the questions that I have on that information."

And so began a conversation that lasted way past the amount of time we had allotted for meeting with him, but it was time well spent. The doctor was intelligent, articulate and above all genuinely interested in pursuing the truth. We spoke for about three and a half hours and as we were beginning to get our stuff together, he asked us if we knew what tephilin were.

"Sure," we told him.

"Well do you put them on every day?" he asked us.

"We do."

"Can I put them on as well," he asked, and it seemed as if he was holding his breath as he waited for our answer.

"Of course," we said, "of course you can put them on. But are you really ready to drive ninety miles, all the way from Yokama to the Grape Crush and another ninety miles back just to put on tephilin?"

"Wouldn't you?" he asked us!

He escorted us from his office into the sanctuary, a large, though rather functional room with mild personality and over to the aron. He opened the aron and removed the Sefer Torah that he was lending us. As he worked, he related the history of this particular scroll. How it was from Prague, had somehow survived the holocaust and how many years after the war there had been an offer to come see if there was anything his Temple might need from the large collection of religious artifacts; all that remained of the once thriving Jewish community of Prague.

He had seen the scroll and fallen in love with it on the spot. It was very very large. About a third bigger than the largest Sefer Torah I had ever seen. The letters were huge. The wooden handles were much larger than on a normal Torah scroll and there were carvings in the wood and careful etchings of pesukim all around the handles. It was very heavy and we handled it carefully.

Before we left we made up to see the doctor the next morning at our minyan ninety miles away and then we bid him farewell, the whole episode becoming more and more dreamlike the farther we drove. Somehow, I doubted that he was going to come.

But there he was bright and early the next morning waiting outside our motel, eagerly awaiting his chance to don our tephilin. I have never seen anyone waiting to do a mitzva with as much anticipation as he was. I helped him put them on and as he was sitting down at the table wrapped in my tallis and tephilin, he suddenly burst into tears! It was as if we had unleashed a storm of emotion within him and he didn't even know why! He had never put on tephilin in his entire life up until that day, but the moment that he put them on, they became part of him and something cracked inside.

Again we spent many hours in conversation with this man and again he impressed us more than we had ever imagined possible. And then he invited us to come down to Yokama over Sukkos, telling us that he was going to build a sukka and that it was going to be kosher according to halacha. I explained all the rules and he told me where he was planning to build it. Carefully we drew up a diagram of what he needed to avoid while building and then we planned the Simchas Beis Hashoava that the Temple would be invited to and he asked me what he could serve. I told him that drinks, fruits and vegetables would be fine and that we were all looking forward to the party. He left us feeling that we had been in the presence of greatness. We checked the Sefer Torah for that weeks parsha, as brought down in halacha and when we found that it was fine, we figured that we were in great shape.

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The next day I received a phone call from a rabbi I knew out in Portland, Oregon. He had a situation, he said and needed my help. His wife was due, smack bang on Yom Kippur and she was usually straight on target. It was very probable that he would be called away right in the middle of the services. Could I come down to Portland for Yom Kippur and run the davening if he was called away? I agreed to come but wasn't sure what to do with Dr. Leimann's Sefer Torah. I called the doctor and told him the situation.

"Would you mind if I bring the Sefer Torah along with me to Portland," I asked him.

"I don't have a problem with that," he said after I had explained the whole story to him, "but why don't you just leave it in your motel room until you get back?"

I explained that you didn't just leave Sifrei Torah lying around in motel rooms. You guarded them and watched them and made sure that they were well taken care of.

"No problem," he said, "take it along with you and have a meaningful Yom Kippur."

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The drive to Portland was long and tedious and filled with monotonous scenery for most of the way. This is middle America and beautiful, but lacks the charm of say the Grand Canyon in Arizona or Yellowstone National Park. It is pretty much the same stuff over and over again. We arrived on erev Yom Kippur to the home of a very relieved rabbi.

"You are a life saver," he told me.

"Good," I said, "I need all the zechusim I can get before Yom Kippur."

He took us to his shul and I'm telling you it was like something out of Europe. I guess the Yidin who settled in Portland before and after the war wanted a shul that would remind them of home. It was a huge, beautiful structure with shining wood, graceful candlesticks holding electric candles and lights and polished floors. There was a very nice balcony up above for the women and the whole place gave off a grand impression. It was a shame that it was barely used. Even on Yom Kippur, the rabbi told us, the shul was mostly filled with Holocaust survivors and their grandchildren who came to spend the day with them. Somehow the second generation had been skipped over.

I stood in the empty shul on erev Yom Kippur looking around at the rows and rows of wooden seats crying out to be filled by Yidin that never came and shivered at the thought of what lay in store for the Jews of Greater America. We moved the Sefer Torah into it's temporary home and the rabbi brought out a couple of white mantles to cover it for the morrow, but the Sefer Torah was so big and tall, that none of them fit well and it ended up covering up about two thirds of the sefer. So in the end, we just left the original blue mantle on the Sefer. Then we went to get ready for the big day. Me to polish up my davening and the rabbi to work on his drasha.

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Yom Kippur dawned grey and cloudy. There was a slight mist in the air which accentuated the somber mood and the walk to shul was one of silent contemplation. My friend had in fact gone to the hospital in the middle of the night and so it came to be that I was in fact leading the services that Yom Kippur morning. The shul was fairly full of older people and a handful of younger ones and I davened shacharis in the opulent sanctuary where my voice was the only one that was really raised and the congregation sang along just a little bit. The acoustics were delightful however and after a few songs the old men started to get more into it.

I had to lean for them as well, being as the rabbi wasn't back yet and then the rabbi did in fact come back for Mussaf with the grand news that he had just had a boy and the day felt lighter and seemed more favorable and the rabbi davened Mussaf with the joyful tones of a man with much to thank Hashem for. Then he left to go back to the hospital and I took them through Mincha and Maftir Yona and then we were rounding the bases and it was almost time for Neilah. It was then that I was informed that the congregation expected a speech prior to Neilah. I wasn't prepared for a speech and I wasn't in the mood to deliver, but there they were, all the old men, all the holocaust survivors waiting with expectant looks and I couldn't just let them down like that. So I got up to talk.

I stood up there at the front of this crowded room and I thought about what I should talk about. I hadn't prepared anything on Maftir Yona, or on the meaning of Yom Kippur. And then I suddenly realized that there was something very special to talk about. I could speak about the Sefer Torah that I had brought with me. I mean, this had been a long journey for one Sefer Torah. From Yokama to the Grape Crush and from the Crush to Portland all because the rabbi's wife had given birth to a boy davka on the night of Yom Kippur. So the Torah had ended up here for the day, in a place it had never been before.

I told the fascinated crowd the whole saga of the Torah. I explained that the Torah is the neshoma, the soul of Klal Yisroel and that it will never die. As much as they attempt to destroy our nation, I said, they will never be able to destroy our soul.

"Many of you are survivors of the worst gehinom the world has ever known," I told them. "Many of you lost their parents, their families, to the Nazi murderers. But there is one thing you must never forget," I told them, "as much as it seems like they are gone, that is not really the case. Their bodies may be gone, but their neshomos, their souls are here, just like this Torah is here from Prague!"

I really got into it, using my hands and shaking my fists and the crowd was loving it, following my gestures with their heads as here and there, someone wiped away a tear. And then from amongst the crowd, an old man stood up and interrupted me right in the middle of my speech. He was openly crying, tears streaming down his face.

"Do you know where I am from," he asked me in a trembling voice.

"Where are you from," I asked him.

"I am one of a small group of survivors from the city of Prague," he told me.

The shul was quiet. Everyone waited to hear what was coming next.

"Do you know something," he went on, "I was honored last night to stand by the bima with one of the Sifrei Torah in my hands. Do you know which one? It was that tall one, that giant Sefer Torah that I was holding."

He paused for a moment. You could have heard a pin drop in the shul.

"All the time that I was holding the Sefer Torah I felt something there, a connection that I have never felt before with any Sefer Torah that I have ever held since my Bar Mitzva so many years ago. And then last night while holding the Sefer Torah I felt that exact connection that I felt so many years ago. And now I know why! This is my Sefer Torah! This is my Torah from my home town! I recognized the wooden handles, the inscriptions along the edges. But I wasn't sure. And now I know!" He was crying, tears of joy rolling out of his eyes and we cried along with him.

"The Torah and I, we are both survivors, and as you say, they can try and try, but they'll never be able to take our neshomos away from us!" What can I say, I at least never experienced a Neilah like this before or after.

That was the old man's final Neilah. He was niftar on Chanuka that year. May his memory be blessed.

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That my friends was The Grape Crush. I returned to Yokama many times after that first tremendous trip and witnessed a profound change in a community that all had given up for dead. Quite a few of those then Reform couples are completely frum today and Dr. Leimann is shtarker than ever. And all this because of something totally physical, all because of something known as "The Grape Crush."

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