

“The Kiddush Rabbi,”

by Simon Fleischer

It started with a shot of whiskey during Shabbos morning services.

That morning, he walked out of shul and headed for the upstairs library, where he knew the “Kiddush Club” was gathered, having watched them slip out after the Torah reading to take a break from the service and have a l’chaim. He heard them laughing through the door, and, taking a deep breath, he said, “Gentlemen!” as he walked into the library. An awkward pause followed.

Until they replied, with surprising cheer, “Good Shabbos, Rabbi!” five men draped in prayer shawls offered him the friendliest of greetings, a bottle of whiskey on the table, a plate of herring, crackers.

He was the rabbi, and he was there to tell them: *No More Kiddush Club! You can’t just leave services to go have a drink! It’s time to daven!* But when they smiled at him, his courage failed him, and he smiled back. Then they poured him a drink, *and what’s one drink really*. He made the blessing out loud, relished their “Amen!” and tilted his head back. He held his yarmulke so it wouldn’t fall and drank it all down to the sound of their cheers.

After drinking their whiskey, it seemed easier to insist, “Well? Back to shul!” They stood, laughed and walked back together. Unused to the whiskey, he felt a fire in his belly. His feet were light. He knew there was

something about his eyes and his smile, he knew he was their rabbi, he was everybody's rabbi, and minutes later when he climbed the few steps to the podium in the sanctuary to offer a few words of Torah to his congregation he thought: *these are my people - No! This is my flock. I am their shepherd. I will not leave them wanting.*

His tongue was thick as he spoke, but the words came to him so easily. No sense of sacrifice - it was a gift he offered them that morning. *Oh, my people! My people! Drink from the deep well of my Torah!*

By the time services were over that morning, the burning in his belly had faded. He barely remembered what he had told them, but he loved what Danny, whose head was usually buried in a book during the sermon, said, "You were on fire this morning, rabbi!" And Sarah, kissing him on his cheek, told him, "Honey, you spoke beautifully." And Gabe, a masterful gabbai, confident and stumble free even when pronouncing the most tongue-defying names as he called the chosen congregants to the Torah to recite a blessing, Gabe, whose few words during kiddush after shul always resonated to the rabbi as a subtle critique of his morning's sermon, Gabe said, "Something different today, Rabbi? I liked it!"

He thought about his success that Shabbos morning all week. He tried to recall exactly what he had done differently, but he only remembered the story with which he'd begun, about a man looking for his lost watch by the light of a streetlamp, and a passerby who offered to help him search. The passerby asked, "Are you sure this is where you lost it?" And the man replied, "No, I lost it over there, by the curb." "So why are you looking for it

here then?” “The light’s better over here!”, the man explained. He remembered he had opened with this story, an old joke his dad used to tell, and he remembered explaining how often we search in the wrong places because we think it will be easier, but sometimes the well-lit path is the wrong path, and sometimes the truth can only be found in the darkness. He remembered feeling confident and sincere, he remembered the sense of drama with which he paused and looked at his congregation, right in their eyes instead of down at his papers or at a book or at the clock on the wall at the back of the room. He let his gaze settle on face after face after face, vulnerable and strong. So rabbinic! Such command! Such presence!

On Thursday night, when the time came to gather his thoughts for the next Shabbos morning talk, he asked Sarah, “It was a good talk last week, wasn’t it, Sarah?” She repeated, “Honey, you spoke beautifully,” looking at him with shining eyes, and he knew he needed to speak beautifully once more.

So, he slipped out again that morning and made his way to the shul library. “Rabbi!” they called out. He drank their whiskey and laughed and sang a song with his new friends, and if he was a little late getting back to davening that morning, he was the rabbi, so he was still on time. He skipped a step as he made his way up to the table from which he spoke to his congregation, and the speech he had carefully written that Thursday night was just his point of departure, no, it was like leaping off a cliff knowing you can fly, a miracle of a speech, and their prayers that morning lifted to the heavens. He felt it.

On the third Shabbos, when the kiddush club greeted him that morning, they said, “Sit, rabbi! Sit! We have something for you!” In the glittering gift bag, they handed him was a carefully contoured silver flask with a strange cap. “Look, rabbi! The cap, it’s a shot glass!” Engraved on one side were the words ‘The Kiddush Rabbi.’

He didn’t show Sarah his gift. He slipped it into his suit pocket, then transferred it into the velvet bag in which he kept his prayer shawl. When he got home that morning he went straight to his basement office and put it in one of the drawers of his desk. He felt proud: the Kiddush Rabbi. He really was their rabbi now.

From that point on, things became private. He went to the liquor store for the first time in his life the following Monday, like a rebellious teenager, and bought his own whiskey. Why wait until Shabbos morning? A shot Thursday night to help him think. And if the words on the screen swam before his eyes, he reprimanded himself: *too much thinking! I have to make them feel!*

He was a new rabbi. He told stories. He talked about what it was like to grow up in a small town, the son of a rabbi. Did he always know he wanted to be a rabbi? He didn’t always know, and he told them that too, how afraid he was that first Shabbos, facing them, uncertain whether what he had to offer was what they needed, what they were searching for. He let them see him, and in doing so he saw his congregation as if for the first time. Their love, and their anger, and most deeply their fear; that’s what he saw, the deep fear that lay beneath everything they did. So, he spoke to them of fear

and they shook his hand and thanked him, and he knew what they were thinking: Only our rabbi speaks this way. Our rabbi.

He told no one. He had a secret, a drink here, a drink there. He never went to the same liquor store twice in a row, he was afraid of what they'd think. He told himself: *Just to help with the sermon; but writing a sermon is no small thing. You can't wait until the last minute. You had to sit with it, to prepare, to think.* So, one drink became two and one night became two nights, and if he was searching in the wrong place he didn't really mind. He liked being the Kiddush Rabbi. It felt good to be the Kiddush Rabbi.

Months passed and his reputation spread. The sanctuary was full, both with his own congregants, and, increasingly, members of other synagogues as well, all there to hear him speak. Seeking inspiration, seeking something-- they didn't know what they were searching for.

But he knew.

He spent more and more time in his basement office, sometimes nodding off at his desk, sometimes shifting to the recliner in the corner. He brought a blanket down to keep him warm at night, and when Sarah asked him, "What's going on? Did I do something wrong?", he touched her cheek with two fingers, looked into her eyes, kissed her on her forehead and said, "Sarah, I have work to do, that's all. They need me." He had never looked at her so intently, so directly, but she, too, was in need of shepherding. She breathed him in, smiled and said, "Come up, wake me when you're done."

He couldn't tell her how he was feeling, the power, and beneath the power, the fear. Rather than stumble up to bed, he slept in his office more and more often, careful to leave a Bible or a volume of the Talmud open on his desk, so when she came in to wake him in the morning she'd think he'd been studying all night long. He wanted her to believe he'd changed, and for thirty minutes every Shabbos morning he believed it too, standing in front of his congregation, breathing fire into them so they prayed like they were jumping off a cliff into a heaven of his making.

He called to them, "Pray with me!" And they did.

Until one night, sleeping in his office he had a dream, but he couldn't tell if his dream was actually a memory, or if the feeling of remembering was part of the dream itself.

In his dream he is a boy, unable to sleep, he is afraid, so he goes downstairs to find his parents. They are sitting at the kitchen table, and laughing, but the moment they see him they stop. His mother asks, "What's wrong?" and touches his cheek with two fingers. He wants to tell them he is afraid, but he is too scared. After a moment of silence his father says, "Here, drink this, it will help you sleep," and hands him a glass. When his mother laughs again and nods, he drinks it down at once. It tastes like fire. He coughs. Suddenly he is in his own bed sleeping, in his dream. The boy in bed is unafraid, but the man watching him sleep is frightened.

What does he remember when he wakes up? How it felt to be a child, to be laughed at, to be sent away.

He soon realized that after one drink, he found himself drowning in memories. He remembered the fridge in the kitchen where he and his parents ate all of their meals, even on Shabbos, how they hung each of his triumphs there: his perfect spelling tests, his mitzvah of the day certificate, the letters of commendation he received from various awards he won. He remembered studying with his father for his bar mitzvah, the subtle expressions of disapproval on his father's face when he made a mistake - the arched eyebrow, the pursed lips - how deeply they stung. He remembered telling his mother and father of his intention to go to rabbinical school. His mother exclaimed, "A rabbi!" When he replied, "I just like to study Torah," his father insisted, "My son, a rabbi." After one drink, he remembered odd corners of life he would rather have forgotten.

But after two drinks he didn't remember anything at all.

Once, he was almost caught. Sitting in his chair, before him a bottle uncapped and a glass half-full, he heard footsteps and in his haste to keep his secret he spilled his whiskey across the surface of his desk. When he heard, "Dad?" he flipped over the volume he had been pretending to study and wiped its pages over the mess he'd made. "Dad?" His son stood in the doorway. "Mom asked me to call you for dinner." He jumped to his feet, trying to block his son's view of the mess he'd made.

"I'll be there, I'll be there. Thank you, Rafi."

When his son went back upstairs he took note of what he'd done, how he'd ruined the tractate "Shabbos," the soggy stink of its pages a token, a symbol, an accusation. Whereas once he spent his evenings sitting on the side of his son's bed while his son practiced reading, looking up at his father each time he stumbled over a word as if to apologize-- "Keep going, you're doing great," he'd tell his son, because he didn't care about his son's mistakes, he only cared about the quiet of his son's bedroom at night and the way he felt when his son looked up at him. Now he was alone in his office, and he knew that he had to stop.

But letting go of his secret was more frightening than keeping it close. He'd made choices and become the sort of man who hides from his wife and lets his kids put themselves to bed. Change required confession, and confession required a kind of confidence he couldn't begin to muster without first having a drink or two. It was easier to lie.

He was almost caught once, until he was caught, that is. Yom Kippur. It had been a little over a year since his first drink. The prospect of a full day without whiskey skimmed across the surface of his mind, and if he was afraid of what it meant to go without a drink or two, he papered over his fear and reminded himself, "I'm a rabbi." With this declaration he remembered that he was the one who had inspired so many with his words, his speeches, his ideas.

Minutes before leaving for shul, standing up from the kitchen table where Sarah and their two kids were still stuffing down bites of chicken and noodles and drinking tall glasses of water like shots of whiskey in

preparation for the fast, he excused himself to gather his papers from his office desk. He needed to drink enough to last for twenty-five hours, so he drank straight from the bottle, screwed it shut, then turned back to walk upstairs, where his son was staring at him from the doorway of his office, the sound of his footsteps apparently muffled that evening by obsession and anxiety.

“Dad? What are you doing?”

What could he say? He brushed it away. “It’s nothing! Just a quick kiddush. It’s Yom tov. Yom Kippur is a day of simcha! It’s not a sad day.” If he wondered what his son understood, he buried the uncertainty. He thought, *I’ll talk to him later, man to man. I’ll really listen to him, and we’ll talk.*

He took his flask to shul in his tallis bag that night, a talisman of sorts, something to keep him safe and help him through the day. But unused to drinking from the bottle, he had drunk too deep. His vision swam, his head spun, and the fire in his belly raged beyond what he could control.

He stepped through the fog to address his congregation before beginning the evening service. Looking out at their expectant faces, he made a choice.

He began, “I wrote what I think is a pretty good speech. It might even inspire you, help you get through the fast more easily. It’s a difficult day.” He lifted the pages he’d printed earlier that afternoon and crumbled them into a ball. “Lies. Lies of omission. Nothing sinister. Nothing at all.”

Not a peep. He could hear them breathing. He continued.

“I don’t have much to offer you tonight, but I’m thinking that there is another life I’m not leading, which means that inside me there’s another man. Inside each of you there is a life you are not leading, which means that inside each of you there is someone else, a stranger, someone you dream about. Everyone is two, the person you are, and the person you choose not to be.” He pointed his finger at his congregation, singling out one congregant, then another, then another. “Hashem knows the stranger you dream about. Hashem knows the life you are not living. Hashem knows you.”

He felt them staring at him, wondering. He, too, was wondering.

“I think about him, that other man. About me. I don’t want you to think today about what you do wrong, but about that other self, that other life. I want you to remember. Hashem knows the person you choose not to be. Hashem knows you.”

That was how he began his talk on Yom Kippur. If they found him strange, he didn’t notice. All he knew was that he had told them something true, and as they sang the words of the prayers that night he found himself nodding and smiling, lifted up by their singing, an island in the middle of the sea, a rock, their shepherd.

He woke the next morning to a raging thirst. His mouth was filled with sand and his head was pounding. He stood in shul with his prayer shawl

over his head, not saying a word, concentrating only on his feet and the floor and on staying upright. As his two sons sat by his sides, he laid his hands on their heads and shoulders, consumed by love. If he leaned a little on them so he wouldn't fall they offered no complaints. He couldn't decide whether the day passed with abnormal rapidity, or if it crawled by one heartbeat at a time. Davening that day was a slow blur. Perhaps he prayed. He couldn't say.

He stayed in shul during the break between the morning and afternoon services, unable to face the short walk back to his house. He told Sarah, "I need to be in shul today," to which she replied, "Of course, I understand, it's Yom Kippur," which made him seem strong, but what he felt was, "I don't have the strength." Sitting in his seat before the ark in which the Torah scrolls were housed, he was filled with aching self-loathing.

The day passed. He heard bits and pieces of the service: Ashrei-- happy are those who dwell in your house. The beginning of the silent devotion. The recitation of the Book of Jonah from the Bible. And even through his silent throbbing he imagined Jonah after the people of Ninveh had repented, silent sullen Jonah, angry at god, angry at the world, sitting by himself in the desert weeping over how the gourd plant under which he'd found some shade, a moment of solace, perhaps some peace of mind, weeping over how the gourd plant had rotted away. He wished he could flee to his basement. He thought, *everyone is two people*, and he felt all alone.

Taking his tallis bag, he fled.

He took the stairs to the library two at a time. When he found the room empty he almost cried with relief. He shut the door behind him, reached for his flask. Before he had a chance to think, he swallowed once, twice, three times, pouring the whiskey down his throat in an angry rush. Who was he angry at? He couldn't say, he wouldn't say, but anger was fire, it was the shade cast by a rotting gourd. In the shade of his anger, he didn't have to think.

Back to his seat, his head was spinning. His son looked at him curiously, so he smiled and squeezed his son's hand.

When the time came for him to once again climb the few steps to the podium and speak to the congregation, to uplift them with his words before the Neilah prayer that they would recite as sheets of darkness dropped down to conceal the light of day and the gates of heaven swung shut, he found he could barely move, he was too heavy to move. He reached for his sons' hands and groaned softly as they helped him to his feet.

A step, then a pause, another step, another pause.

He stood on the pulpit facing his congregation but unable to speak, and he motioned to the cantor to begin singing, knowing he wouldn't be offering his congregation a sermon that evening. He was not one man, but two. Tears fell from his eyes. His tears were words of Torah, and against his own will he offered them to his people. He was their rock, their shepherd.

He was their Kiddush Rabbi.