

Story & Self - Week 4 - April 3, 2023

Barrels of Beer on the Riverbank

[https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach\\_cdo/aid/272551/jewish/Barrels-of-Beer-on-the-Riverbank.htm](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/272551/jewish/Barrels-of-Beer-on-the-Riverbank.htm)

Reb Kopel earned a living by purchasing barrels of vodka and beer from the local distillers and selling his wares to the taverns in and around his native village of Likova. It was not an easy life, with the heavy taxes exerted by the government and the hostile environment facing a Jew in 18th-century Europe. Yet his faith and optimism never faltered.

Each year, on the morning before Passover, Reb Kopel would sell his chametz to one of his gentile neighbors. Chametz is "leaven" — a category that includes bread but also all food or drink made with fermented grain. The Torah commands the Jew that absolutely "no leaven shall be found in your possession" for the duration of the Passover festival, in commemoration of the leaven-free Exodus from Egypt. In the weeks before the festival, the Jewish home is emptied and scrubbed clean of chametz; on the night before Passover, a solemn candle-lit search is conducted for every last breadcrumb hiding between the floorboards. By the next morning, all remaining household chametz is eaten, burned or otherwise disposed of.

What about someone like Reb Kopel who deals in leavened foods and has a warehouse full of chametz? For such cases (and for anyone who has chametz they don't want to dispose of) the rabbis instituted the practice of selling one's chametz to a non-Jew. Reb Kopel's neighbors were familiar with the annual ritual. The Jewish liquor dealer would draw up a legally-binding contract with one of them, in which he sells all the contents of his warehouse for a sum equal to their true value. Only a small part of the sum actually changed hands; the balance was written up as an I.O.U. from the purchaser to the seller. After Passover, Reb Kopel would be back, this time to buy back the chametz and return the I.O.U. The purchaser got a tip for his trouble —

usually in the form of a generous sampling of the merchandise that had been legally his for eight days and a few hours.

One year, someone in Likova came up with a novel idea: what if they all refused to buy the Jew's vodka? In that case he would have to get rid of it. Why suffice with a bottle or two when they could have it all?

When Reb Kopel knocked on a neighbor's door on the morning of Passover eve, Ivan politely declined to conduct the familiar transaction. Puzzled, he tried another cottage further down the road. It did not take long for him to realize the trap that his gentile neighbors had laid for him. The deadline for getting rid of chametz — an hour before midday — was quickly approaching. There was no time to travel to the next village to find a non-Jewish purchaser.

Reb Kopel did not hesitate for a minute. Quickly he emptied the wooden shack behind his house that served as his warehouse. Loading his barrels of chametz on his wagon, he headed down to the river. As his neighbors watched gleefully from a distance, he set them on the river bank. In a loud voice he announced: "I hereby renounce any claim I have on this property! I proclaim these barrels ownerless, free for the taking for all!" He then rode back home to prepare for the festival.

That night, Reb Kopel sat down to the Seder with a joyous heart. When he recited from his Haggadah, "Why do we eat this unleavened bread? Because the dough of our fathers did not have time to become leavened before G-d revealed Himself to them and redeemed them," he savored the taste of each word in his mouth. All his capital had been invested in those barrels of vodka and beer; indeed, much of it had been bought on credit. He was now penniless, and the future held only the prospect of many years of crushing debt. But his heart was as light and bright as a songbird. He had not a drop of chametz in his possession! For once in his life, he had been given the opportunity to truly demonstrate his love and loyalty to G-d. He had removed all leaven from his possession, as G-d had commanded him. Of course, he had fulfilled many mitzvot in his lifetime, but never at such a cost — none as precious — as this one!

The eight days of Passover passed for Reb Kopel in a state of ecstatic joy. Then the festival was over, and it was time to return to the real world. With thoughtful steps he headed to his warehouse to look through his papers and try to devise some plan to start his business anew. Clustered in the doorway he found a group of extremely disappointed gentiles.

"Hey, Kopel!" one of them called, "I thought you were supposed to get rid of your vodka. What's the point of announcing that it's 'free for the taking for all' if you put those watchdogs there to guard it!"

They all began speaking at once, so it took a while for Kopel to learn the details. For the entire duration of the festival, night and day round the clock, the barrels and casks on the riverbank were ringed by a pack of ferocious dogs who allowed no one to approach. Reb Kopel rode to the riverbank. There the barrels stood, untouched.

But he made no move to load them on his wagon. "If I take them back," he said to himself, "how will I ever know that I had indeed fully and sincerely relinquished my ownership over them before Passover? How could I ever be sure that I had truly fulfilled the mitzvah of removing chametz from my possession? No! I won't give up my mitzvah, or even allow the slightest shadow of a doubt to fall over it!"

One by one, he rolled the barrels down the riverbank until they stood at the very brink of the water. He pulled out the stops in their spigots and waited until every last drop of vodka and beer had merged with the river. Only then did he head back home.<sup>1</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. In an alternative version, found in Sippurei Chassidim by Rabbi S.Y. Zevin, he did indeed reclaim the spirits.