

# Two Groschen

By [Yanki Tauber](#)



(c) Shoshannah Brombacher

The disciples of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev noticed that something was amiss.

Yom Kippur, the most awesome day of the year, was approaching, and it was only natural that every G-d-fearing Jew's steps should grow more measured, his mind more focused, his manner graver. But this was something else. A heavy foreboding clouded their master's features; his eyes had grown red from weeping, and an uncharacteristic sigh would often escape his lips. The Rebbe must know something we do not, they whispered. Perhaps he sees a terrible calamity decreed for the coming year, G-d forbid.

Several days before Yom Kippur, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak summoned his *gabbai* (secretary). Much to the *gabbai*'s amazement, the Rebbe had business on his mind.

"Lately, the number of people coming to request that I pray for them on the Holy Day has been steadily increasing," said the Rebbe. "It's time we set a fixed price for the *kvitlach*. I think we should ask for two groschen for each name written in a *kvitel*."

When a chassid gives his rebbe the piece of paper (*kvitel*) on which his name and the names of his loved ones are inscribed for the rebbe to mention in his prayers, he always includes a sum of money, known as the *pidyon nefesh* (redemption of the soul), as a gift to the rebbe. As a rule, the

sum is left to the petitioner's discretion, which was why Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's *gabbai* was quite surprised by what the Rebbe was proposing.

So notices were put up in the synagogue and the market place, and soon the entire town had heard of the new rules: the Rebbe was demanding two groschen for each name.

Immediately after the morning prayers on the day preceding Yom Kippur, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak began receiving the *kvitlach*-bearers. A sense of urgency was felt throughout the town---the Rebbe's strange stipulation, coupled with his ominous behavior of the last few weeks, fed the feeling that it was of utmost importance to be included in the Rebbe's list. Two groschen was not such a great sum, but for an impoverished peddler or tailor with a dozen children to register, it was no small expense. Still, not a soul stayed behind. This year, no one was taking any chances.

All day the Rebbe sat, his faithful *gabbai* at his door, and received *kvitlach*. Soon his desk was covered with folded pieces of paper and copper coins. There were those who tried to bargain with the *gabbai*, but the Rebbe's instructions had been clear: no exceptions.

Around mid-day, a woman approached the *gabbai* and begged for an exemption. "I am a poor widow with an only child, without a single groschen in my purse. How can I pay four groschen so that my child and I may be inscribed in the book of life? Please, have mercy on me and my fatherless child, and allow me to add our names to the Rebbe's list. I promise to pay the entire sum as soon as I have the money."

"What can I do?" said the *gabbai*. "The Rebbe has told me that there are to be no exceptions."

"Let me ask the Rebbe," said the widow. "Certainly he will not turn me down."

The *gabbai* relented, but the Rebbe was unyielding. "I'm sorry," he said to the woman, "but these are the rules. Two groschen per name."

The widow left, heartbroken, but resolved to attain a year of life for herself and her child. One way or another, she would get the money.

Hours passed. The last of the petitioners had already left, and the hour of *Kol Nidrei*, the solemn prayer which opens the Yom Kippur service, was fast approaching. The *gabbai* had cleared the table, counting the coins and locking them away, and packing the *kvitlach* in the special parcels which the Rebbe would keep with him during his prayers. Everyone was already in the synagogue, garbed in their snow-white *kittelen* and wrapped in their *talitot*, awaiting the Rebbe. Still Rabbi Levi Yitzchak lingered, his eyes casting expectant glances at the window.

Then, a small, shawled figure was seen hurrying along the deserted street. It was the widow, a folded piece of paper and a few coins in her hand. "Thank G-d the Rebbe is still home," she cried. "Here is my *kvitel*, Rebbe. Please pray for me and for my only child that we may be inscribed in the book of life."

"But you only have two groschen here," protested Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, peering at the coppers she had placed on the table. "So you can only write one name in your *kvitel*."

"Holy Rebbe," cried the woman, "I have been running about all day, borrowing from everyone that I know. This is all I was able to come up with. Please pray for us both! I promise to pay the rest within a week."

"I'm sorry," insisted the Rebbe, "the price is two groschen per name. Which name do you want in your *kvitel*?"

With trembling fingers the woman took her *kvitel* and crossed out her own name. "Pray for my Shloimehleh, Rebbe," she said, her eyes brimming with tears, "that he should have a year of life, health and happiness."

Upon hearing these words, the Rebbe's eyes came alive with a fiery light. Grasping the widow's two groschen in one fist, and her *kvitel* in the other, he raised them triumphantly to heaven and cried: "Father in Heaven! Look! Look what a mortal mother is prepared to do for her child! And You---shall it be said, G-d forbid, that You are less a parent to *Your* children?! Can You look this woman in the eye and refuse to grant Your own children a year of life, health and happiness?!"

"Come," said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to his *gabbai* and to the widow, "let us go to *Kol Nidrei*."

[By Yanki Tauber](#)

Yanki Tauber served as editor of Chabad.org

Image: Detail from a work by chassidic artist Shoshannah Brombacher.

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