

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

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Inside the Holy of Holies

Reb Leib Sarah's, one of the greatest of the **Baal Shem Tov's** disciples, had long desired to live in the Holy Land. After years of struggle, of wandering, of perfecting himself to the utmost of his ability, his deepest desire was to settle in the Holy Land, there to be able to attain spiritual achievements unreachable elsewhere.

Although he was himself a person of renown, he was also a chasid, and so, he went to his rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov, to ask his permission and blessing for the trip. "Rebbe," he asked, "I request your permission to settle in the Holy Land, which is my heart's desire."

But, to his surprise, the Besht's reply was negative. The next year Leib Sarah's again went to his rebbe with the same petition. But, again, the Besht denied his request, without even an explanation. This scenario repeated itself year after year for several years, and Leib Sarah's was deeply disappointed.

One year he decided that he wouldn't go to his rebbe at all; he just wouldn't ask. The desire to travel and settle in the Holy Land had become so strong within him, that he could no longer deny it. So, Leib Sarah's sat down with his wife and then with his children and discussed the question of moving to the Holy Land, there to perfect his soul in the service of his Maker.

His wife and children were all agreeable, and so it was decided to go. Wasting no time, he sold all of his worldly goods save the barest necessities, and gathering all of his money, he bought tickets for himself, his wife and children for the long journey to the Land of Israel.

When everything was in order, Reb Leib Sarah's packed up his belongings and set off with his family through Russia toward Turkey, whence he would travel to Israel. It was a slow and arduous journey overland with many stops in the small towns and villages through which they had to travel.

One day they came to a small town and noticed some sort of excitement in the town. Leib Sarah's inquired of the villagers, and was shocked when he heard their reply. For none other than the famous Baal Shem Tov was unexpectedly visiting the town, and the people were overwhelmed by the great honor of receiving such a personage.

Leib Sarah's was even more overwhelmed by his own dilemma. He thought of the possibility of not going to greet his rebbe, thereby avoiding any embarrassment because of his disobedience, but how could he not

acknowledge the presence of his great rebbe and teacher? He sat in his wagon deliberating, when suddenly he had no choice, for the Baal Shem Tov's carriage pulled up next to his own. Reb Leib Sarah's dismounted and approached the rebbe. The Besht appeared to be surprised and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Rebbe, please forgive me for not heeding your words, but I am now on my way to settle in the Holy Land."

The Besht replied, "Well, if your wish to go is so strong, then go. But now, where are you going to spend the Shabbat?"

"I am just now searching for a place, but it's difficult since I spent all of my money on the tickets for the journey," replied Reb Leib. The Baal Shem Tov offered to host Reb Leib and his family for the whole Shabbat. When they were in their rooms preparing for the arrival of the holy day, the Besht knocked on Reb Leib's door, asking if he had immersed in the *mikva* yet.

"No," he replied, "I have no money remaining, so I will forego the *mikva* this week." To this, the Baal Shem Tov replied that he would pay the entrance fee for him, and they should go together to the *mikva*. Reb Leib Sarah's joy was unbounded, for he understood the profound meaning of the immersion and was relieved not to miss his usual ritual.

Upon arriving at the *mikva* the Besht said, "Reb Leib, you go first."

But, he refused, saying, "Please, Rebbe, you go; you are my teacher, after all." The Besht was adamant, and Reb Leib immersed first.

After the proscribed immersions were completed, he rose from the water, turned to his rebbe and said, "I have changed my mind. I will not go to the Holy Land. I will return to Medzibozh, to you. Let me tell you what I saw in the *mikva* during my immersions. As I entered the water I saw a continent. As I looked closely I saw Eretz Israel, and as I looked even more closely I saw Jerusalem.

"As I narrowed my focus still more, I could see all the parts of the Temple Mount, even the Holy Temple itself. Then I looked inside and saw the Holy of Holies, but though I strained my eyes as hard as I could, I couldn't see the Holy Ark, the Tablets of the Law, or the Divine Presence. Then I looked again and noticed that there appeared to be a man sitting on the floor. I assumed it was the Kohein Gadol ('High Priest'), even though he did not seem to have on the special white linen garments. But then the image came more sharply into focus and I saw that the person was none other than you, my Master!

"Therefore, I am following you back to Medzibozh to fulfill my Divine Service. I now realize that during the exile, the Divine Presence dwells with the leader of the generation."

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The last two paragraphs were significantly altered by Yerachmiel Tilles according to a special oral source at a special personal occasion – see \* Editor's Note below. Also, in that version, it was not Reb Leib Sarah's, but rather an unnamed 'regular' chasid, the chasid had reached all the way to Ishtanbul, and the Besht was not physically present there – only in his vision.

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5458 - 6 Sivan 5520 (Aug. 1698 - May 1760 C.E.)], **the Baal Shem Tov** ["Master of the Good Name"—often referred to as "the *Besht*" for short], a unique and seminal figure in Jewish history, revealed his identity as an exceptionally holy person, on his 36th birthday, **18 Elul** 5494 (1734 C.E.), and made the until-then underground Chasidic movement public. He wrote no books, although many works claim to contain his teachings. One available in English is the excellent annotated translation of *Tzava'at Harivash*, published by Kehos.

**Rabbi Leib Sarah's** (1730 - **4 Adar** 1796) was held in high esteem by the Baal Shem Tov. One of the "hidden righteous," he spent his life wandering from place to place to raise money for the ransoming of imprisoned Jews and the support of other hidden tzadikim. [The Lubavitcher Rebbe stated the possibility that Rabbi Leib Sarahs and Rabbi Leib, the Shpuler Zeide, are the same person. There are two different, equally remarkable and well-known stories about the birth of each. There are also differing traditional *yahrzeit* dates.]

*Connection:* The 4<sup>th</sup> of Adar (this year: Shabbat, Feb 9) is the *yahrzeit* date of Rabbi Leib Sarah's.

\* *Editor's note:* In the middle of Shvat 5738, a few days before we moved to Israel, our friends surprised us with a gala farewell party (perhaps in part because it was so uncommon in those days to receive a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe for *aliyah*). We were honored that one of the Rebbe's secretary-attendants also attended (he did know us personally). He was asked to speak, of course, in honor of our departure on *Aliyah*, whereupon he chose to tell the above story!