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The Baal Shem Tov Loses a Shabbos

Aside from Alexei, the gentile driver, only three people accompanied **the Baal Shem Tov** upon this particular trip: Reb Dovid of Mikalaev, Reb Dovid Firkiss and Reb Dovid Leikiss. There was nothing unusual to begin with. The horses were given free rein, as they were accustomed, and sped miraculously along the road which verily rolled under their flying hooves.

The strangeness began on the second day when the carriage got lost among the trees of a very thick forest. The overhead foliage was so thick that it hid the rays of the sun to the extent it became impossible to tell the difference between day and night. The horses struggled through the forest path for days at a plodding rate.

The Baal Shem Tov himself felt as if he had lost all his spiritual powers. Shabbos was approaching but he had no idea where they were or what they should do. Meanwhile, the only course of action was to continue onward, which they did. Tired by all the traveling, disturbed by the loss of his usual divine inspiration, the Baal Shem Tov finally fell into a troubled sleep.

“Maybe something important will be revealed to the rebbe in a dream,” the chasidim offered hopefully. But this was not to be. The Baal Shem Tov awoke somewhat refreshed but not in the least enlightened.

It was midday when their situation took a turn for the better. Suddenly they discerned a bright light coming from a point a short distance further. As they approached, the light grew brighter until they finally came upon a clearing in the forest. The sudden emergence into daylight blinded them momentarily, but they soon saw a small cottage in the middle of the clearing. They approached it, saw the doorway adorned by a *mezuzah*, and knocked on the door. It was answered by a coarse looking man, unkempt, barefoot, and ragged, very much the crude peasant.

“We have lost our way and need a place to spend Shabbos. Would you mind if we stayed here with you?” they asked hesitantly.

“No. I don’t want you staying here. By the looks of you, you are all chasidim and *maggidim* (synagogue speakers). I despise chasidim. So did my parents and grandparents before me. Get out of here quick. I can’t stand the very sight of you!”

“Well, then, is there any other place nearby where we can stay for Shabbos?”

“No,” he snickered. “The closest village is many hours journey away.”

The chasidim did not know what to do. The only place they could stay was right there, as much as they disliked the idea. They begged and pleaded with the peasant to let them stay, promising him an exorbitant sum for the food and board.

After much entreaty he finally said he would agree, but only under three conditions. They listened dumbly while he enumerated them:

“First of all, you are to pray silently; I don’t want you scaring away my non-Jewish clients who come here for their whiskey. Secondly, you are to pray speedily and then come immediately to the table; I don’t like waiting for my food. And thirdly, I don’t want you asking all kinds of silly fussy questions about the *kashrus* of the food. Either you eat what I serve or you leave it, but don’t talk about it.”

The chasidim saw that they really had no choice in the matter, so they agreed. They unloaded their belongings and took them into the cottage, and began to prepare themselves for the coming Shabbos.

“Is there a stream or river in the vicinity?” the Ball Shem Tov asked. “I would like to immerse myself in the honor of the Shabbos.”

“What?!” the man shrieked. “This just shows what hypocrites you chasidim are! Get out! I want nothing to do with the likes of you.” He grabbed the closest parcel and threw it out the door, raving and cursing the entire time.

It took a good half hour for the chasidim to cool him down and get him to agree to let them stay, even though it was questionable if they really wanted to remain in the home of someone so uncouth and violent.

The house itself reflected its uncivilized master, being devoid of the barest minimum of furniture. Four wooden posts supported the few planks which served as the table. The other rooms were equally bare.

Nor were there any signs of life in the surrounding forest – no rustles of animals, no chirping birds, nor any gentile customers such as their ‘host’ had referred to.

The four men sat and huddled together unhappily. It was growing late but they could see no sign of preparation for the coming Shabbos on the part of their ungracious host. They shivered involuntarily.

It grew later. Still no sign of Shabbos preparation from the owner. All he did was eat watermelon in loud, smacking bites, spitting out the pits all over the floor and whistling loudly in the manner of gentile ruffians. They were too terrified to open their mouths to ask anything, for fear of being thrown out bodily.

About five minutes before Shabbos their host spread a piece of dirty burlap on the table. He laid a glob of muddy clay upon it, hollowing out a hole in the center into which he thrust one little candle which he lit. Whether he had also muttered the blessing or not, they could not tell.

They also could not tell if he had already said the Friday Afternoon Prayer. Immediately after lighting the solitary candle, he launched into a hurried *Kabbalat Shabbat* ('Welcoming the Shabbos' series of prayers), swallowing half the words, skipping over much of the other half. Before they knew it, he had finished all of it and the Shabbat Evening Prayer as well. In spiritual and emotional pain, they hastened to finish quickly their precious Shabbos prayers according to the terms of the bargain.

"Good Shabbos," they wished him. A fresh string of curses was the response. When they tried to sing the *Sholom Aleichem* song which customarily precedes *Kiddush*, he shouted at them to stop.

He took a mug and filled it with vodka, and told them they could say Amen if they wished. In vain did the chasidim beg to say their own Kiddush. He refused to hear of it. "The candle will go out by the time you finish your ridiculous chasidic-style Kiddush," he said angrily.

Quickly he recited the Kiddush, swallowing half the words and skipping over some of the others, and drank the entire contents of the glass, leaving only a few drops at the bottom for his guests. "You won't get drunk on this," he snarled viciously.

He then washed his hands and recited the blessing for bread over a loaf of black pumpernickel, and distributed a slice to each of them. In vain did the chasidim beg for their own pair of loaves. In addition, he refused to let them touch the bread, shouting that their hands would contaminate his food. The chasidim were helpless to complain. They had agreed to remain silent.

The peasant pushed a tureen of lentil soup towards them but no bowls, instead simply giving each of the men a spoon. "Eat!" he ordered, and following his own words, bent over his plate and shoveled the food in so rapidly it poured out of the sides of his mouth. When the chasidim tried to sing the traditional Shabbat Evening songs, he cursed them violently. Nor would he allow them to recite in unison the brief introduction to the Blessings After a Meal, which is traditional when three or more men have eaten together.

The men were relieved when the meal finally ended. They prepared for bed. The peasant gave the Baal Shem Tov a woman's garment for a pillow. To the other men he offered rags of linen and wool [a forbidden mixture, known as *shatnez*], which they quickly refused, to his great derision. They finally escaped into fitful sleep.

The torments of the night were nothing compared with those of the day. When they awoke it was barely dawn but already their host was indifferently rushing through the morning service. He stood in shirt and trousers, barefoot, singing one of the hymns to a peasant vulgar drinking tune. They hurriedly arose so that they could finish their prayers together with him, ruefully foregoing the leisurely meditations that usually accompanied their prayers. During the Shabbat Day meal and throughout the rest of the holy day of rest and peace, the host continued to heap abuse upon them, and to refuse their slightest demands.

When evening drew near, the chasidim begged for something to eat for the Third Meal. "What?" he raged anew. "You want to eat again? You just finished your meal a short while ago. Gluttons!" They had to content themselves with Torah thoughts whispered among themselves instead of the usual food.

Their torture was not over with the conclusion of Shabbos. Their tyrannical host spread a light, unappetizing evening meal on the table and forced them to join him. The loud smacking of his food was spiced by yet another round of curses and insults, but he would not let them leave the table until most of the night had passed. Finally, wearily, they fell into their uncomfortable, makeshift beds and slept.

Morning dawned and they awoke with renewed hope. Today they could escape this terrible place and its master who ruled over them so cruelly. But they were in for a surprise. After they had finished their morning prayers, the host barred the door before them and made them sit down with him to a small breakfast. In vain they pleaded that they would pay for the meal he had prepared without eating it if only he let them leave. "What? Am I a thief to take your money without giving you anything in return?" he shouted.

They had no choice but to obey. The man kept them thus imprisoned by the sheer force of his iron will. They were helpless to resist. When evening fell they knew that they could not travel in the dangerous forest alone and were forced to remain another day.

Sunday's events were repeated on Monday, and then again on Tuesday. Finally, on the fourth day, after breakfast, he made an accounting of all they owed him. It cleaned the chasidim of their last money and most of their meager possessions, but they were glad to leave this nightmare of a place.

Their violent host insisted upon accompanying them part of the way, much to their consternation. "Did he intend to kill them?" they feared.

Just as they were about to leave, the door opened suddenly and a well-dressed, sophisticated-looking married woman entered. The chasidim were dumfounded.

She approached the Baal Shem tov and asked deferentially, "Rebbe! Please do us the honor of staying one more Shabbos?"

"Rebbe? How do you know that I am a rebbe?" the Baal Shem Tov asked. "And if you knew that, why did you allow my Shabbos to be so disturbed? Couldn't you have saved us?"

"Oh, Rebbe! Don't you remember me?" the woman demurred.

"No, I don't know you. I don't think that I ever saw you before."

"Please try to remember. I used to work in your home as a maid many years ago. Your wife took me in, seeing that I was an orphan with no one to care for me. I was full of sores and lice. Your wife used to wash my hair every Friday, and comb it and

scrape my head while I cried with pain. One week the pain was too much to bear and I tried to stop her. She got upset and slapped me. You, Rebbe, were sitting nearby but remained silent in the face of my pain and shame.

“It was then that G-d’s ire was aroused for violated the commandment, ‘Do not afflict any widow or orphan’ (Ex. 22:21). This led to the Heavenly Court sentencing you to forfeit your portion in the World to Come.

“When many years later I married this man,” she pointed to their host, “who is, by the way, a secret *tzadik* (pious and pure), the sentence was revealed to us. It disturbed us both very much and we resolved to try to do something about it.

“Through our many prayers it was granted that instead of losing your portion in the World to Come, you would lose the tranquility and pleasure of one Shabbos, the day which is a veritable taste of the World to Come.

“The question remained: who could carry out such a sentence? Where in the world was there a person willing to disturb the Baal Shem Tov and spoil his Shabbos? So we accepted this task upon us. Now, thank G-d, your portion in the World to Come is complete and unimpaired as before.”

As she finished her explanation, the Baal Shem Tov felt a surge of his former powers. He could now clearly see that all that she said was true.

The Baal Shem Tov and his three followers gladly accepted the woman’s invitation. They remained for a second Shabbos, a day replete with the exchange of mystical Jewish insights with the secret *tzadik*—a day totally opposite of the one spent so wretchedly just seven days before.

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*Source:* Compiled and edited by Yerachmiel Tilles (partially with the aid of *A Treasury of Chasidic Tales* (Zevin -- translation by Uri Kaploun), from the rendition of Meir-Tzvi Cohn on //baalshemtov.com based on *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* (Klapholz -- translation by Sheindel Weinbach), which cites the original source as being Peulos Hatzadikim in the name of Rebbe Dovid of Tolna.

*Biographical note:*

**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.

*Connection:* This week’s Torah reading begins with several verses about the importance of Shabbat observance.