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Paying Full Attention: Learning the Language of Birds and Animals

The Maggid, **Rabbi Aryeh-Leib of Polnoye** desperately wanted to learn the language of birds and animals. He thought this knowledge would be useful in soothing the souls of his followers and the congregations to whom he preached.

The language of the animals, birds and even the plants and rocks is always known by at least one person in every generation. He knew that in his generation, this knowledge had been acquired by the holy ***Baal Shem Tov***.

R. Aryeh Leib decided to beg the holy Baal Shem Tov to teach him this language. Although possibly presumptuous, he reasoned that it was okay to ask because, "after all, I only plan to use the power for the sake of Heaven. With this knowledge, I will be more able to help my followers overcome their worldly concerns."

Having made up his mind, R. Aryeh Leib traveled to Medzibuz. The trip seemed to take almost no time because his mind was engrossed with thoughts of listening to the speech of birds and animals.

It was already night when he arrived. The Study Hall of the Baal Shem Tov was lit up and filled with his followers. R. Aryeh Leib entered and saw the Baal Shem Tov sitting at a table speaking with a group of his close followers. While he was sure that the Baal Shem Tov had noticed him, the Rebbe's eyes didn't meet his to acknowledge his arrival. Later, after most of the followers had already left the study house, R. Aryeh Leib still waited and hoped to be recognized by the Baal Shem Tov. Finally, when the Baal Shem Tov walked out of the study hall, he glanced over to R. Aryeh Leib and greeted him in a formal tone, "*Shalom Aleichem*."

R. Aryeh Leib was upset. "Why didn't he greet me warmly as he always has before?" he thought. "Maybe I should just leave. But then again, there is nothing more important to me than learning the language of the birds and animals. So no, I won't leave. I'll just wait for a better time to approach him."

For the next few days, the Baal Shem Tov didn't say anything special to R. Aryeh Leib. Then, after Shabbos, the Baal Shem Tov instructed Alexei, his wagon driver, to prepare his wagon for a journey. He invited R. Aryeh Leib and several others of his close followers to join him. They all readily agreed. R. Aryeh Leib especially was filled with excitement; he was thinking that his wish might finally be fulfilled.

The next day, after many long hours of travel, the wagon with the Baal Shem Tov and his followers stopped at an inn. The Baal Shem Tov went right up stairs to a private room

that the innkeeper prepared just for him. The rest of the travelers stayed together in the main common room of the inn. Being tired after the long trip, they all immediately fell asleep.

Only R. Aryeh Leib couldn't fall asleep. He kept wondering if the Baal Shem Tov would teach him the knowledge he desperately wanted to learn. Later in the night, he heard the Baal Shem Tov pacing back and forth in his room. So he gathered his courage and went upstairs to speak with him. When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw a bright light shining from the Baal Shem Tov's room. He started to go into the room but then realized that the bright light was shining from the face of the Baal Shem Tov. He stood glued to the floor, unable to look away from the Rebbe's face that was ablaze like a fire.

When the Baal Shem Tov walked over to him, R. Aryeh Leib nearly fell to the floor with fear and begged forgiveness for disturbing him.

The Baal Shem Tov gently put his hand on his shoulder and said "R. Aryeh Leib, don't be afraid. What is it that you want?"

But R. Aryeh Leib was too embarrassed to say anything. So he turned around and went back downstairs.

The next day, as they continued their journey in the wagon, the Baal Shem Tov asked R. Aryeh Leib to sit next to him.

After some time passed, the Baal Shem Tov said, "I know that the reason for your coming to see me is to learn the language of the birds and animals. I've decided to teach it to you. There is, however, one condition that is of utmost importance. You must listen with your full attention to what I'm about to say."

"Oh yes Rebbe, I promise to give my undivided attention to all that you say," R. Aryeh Leib answered.

The Baal Shem Tov continued, "To begin: it is known that the Heavenly Chariot is supported by 'four Heavenly beings, each with the face of a lion and the face of a man on the right side, the face of an ox on the left, and the face of an eagle.'¹ It is also known in Kabbalah that from the eagle face flows the life power to the birds, from the ox face flows the life power to the domestic animals, from the lion face flows the life power to the wild animals and from the man's face flows the life power down to the lower man. Also the language of the birds, the animals and people comes from the Heavenly Chariot. A wise person who can see things at their source in the Heavenly Chariot can understand the speech of the birds and animals."

As the Baal Shem Tov continued explaining the deepest teachings from several Holy Books, including the *Zohar* and the *Tikunei Zohar*, the wagon entered a forest.

¹ 41.html

R. Aryeh Leib listened with all his attention to the Baal Shem Tov. Suddenly a branch brushed against his cheek and he began to hear the animals and birds speaking to each other.

Meanwhile the Baal Shem Tov continued talking. Reb Aryeh was so enthralled with hearing the speech of the animals and birds that he divided his attention. With one ear he listened to the Baal Shem Tov and with the other ear he listened to the birds and animals.

Later, when the wagon came out of the forest, the Baal Shem Tov said, "So you understand all that I said."

"Oh yes!" answered R. Aryeh Leib.

Then the Baal Shem Tov passed his hand over the face of R. Aryeh Leib and while R. Aryeh Leib still heard the sounds of the animals and birds, he could no longer understand their speech.

R. Aryeh Leib started to ask what happened when Baal Shem Tov looked directly into his eyes and said, "Because you couldn't hold your full attention on what I was saying [the many deep secrets related to this subject], you're not ready to be entrusted with the knowledge of the language of birds and animals."

And so it was.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the rendition of Meir-Tzvi Cohn on his dedicated website, //baalshemtov.com.

*Biographic 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.

*Connections:* (1) Seasonal: last week started with the festival of Shavuot, which is also the birthday of the Baal Shem Tov;

(2) The haftorah of (the first day of) Shavuot is quoted in the story;

(3) Weekly Torah of *Beha'alotecha* (last week in Israel, this week in Diaspora) -- see Num. 11:17.