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

Making Peace in Heaven

“To what better purpose can I use my riches than to have a Torah scroll written?” thought the wealthy Reb Meir to himself. From that day on he busied himself in his grand project which he executed carefully in all its details. At first he bought the animals which were to provide the parchment for the scroll. These he had carefully slaughtered and the meat thereof distributed among the poor. The hides were then sent to a tanner to be cured and prepared for parchment.

Next Reb Meir sought a G-d-fearing *sofer* (scribe) to do the major job. “You will concentrate only upon this work,” he stipulated, “in return for which I will pay you a weekly salary to sustain you and your family for as long as it takes to complete the job. Take your time, purify your mind and body before each writing session, but produce a perfect Torah scroll.”

The scribe agreed and entered the employ of Reb Meir for eight years, during which he worked exclusively upon the scroll. When he finished, Reb Meir made preparations for a huge feast to dedicate his new acquisition.

The celebration was to include most of the local population, crowned by all the notables. Reb Meir arranged to provide for their comfort by hiring waiters to cater to their individual needs. Among them was Chayim, known by all as “the *Tehilim* reciter.”

Chayim the Psalms Sayer was a simple man, unlearned but sincere and G-d fearing. He had earned his title through his recital of psalms, which never left his lips from morning to night. To earn his livelihood he worked as a water-carrier and at this celebration Chayim was to perform his usual task, that is, to bring water for hand-washing and in addition to serve drinks of all sorts.

The party began in the late afternoon. While the celebrants awaited the evening prayer to begin they partook of sweets and drinks, for the main feast would commence only after *Maariv*. Chayim was there, circulating among the guests with trays and alcoholic beverages, imbibing himself from time to time.

Soon, all the guests arose and went into an adjoining room to *davven* (pray) while the tables were prepared for the meal. The relatively short prayer was over quickly, whereupon the guests drifted back in and took their places. An

air of gaiety and warmth filled the hall, for this was the grand climax of eight years of expectancy, of work and expense, now culminating with a feast in honor of the Torah.

The guests sat down and waited for water to be provided for washing their hands. Reb Meir looked around but couldn't find Chayim, whose job it was to provide the washing water and vessels. He was nowhere to be found. Reb Meir searched in adjoining rooms for the missing waiter, upset that things were not going as smoothly as he had so carefully planned. He finally discovered him curled up in the cloakroom, fast asleep in a drunken stupor.

"What *chutzpa* is this!" he reprimanded his waiter as he grabbed him by the collar and shook him vigorously. "Here you are drunk on my liquor, shirking your duties. You should have stayed at home if you can't be relied on. All my guests are being kept waiting for the meal to begin while you calmly curl up and fall asleep."

Reb Meir raised his voice louder and louder while shaking his employee roughly, then dragging him towards the main dining hall until the latter had thoroughly shaken off his drunkenness.

Finally the water-carrier was able to get a word in and he made his plaintive apologies, "Sir, you said that the party was for all of us and that we were to feel free to partake of the food and drink too. I simply did not realize how strong your *shnaps* was, not being accustomed to such quality spirits. Before I knew it I fell asleep. Please don't shame me before all these people. I am thoroughly awake and will fulfill my duties as a waiter."

The host left the abashed waiter to his work and went to sit among his important guests. He hadn't been seated for five minutes before his attention was diverted.

"Sir, an important person awaits you outside. He says he won't keep you long but what he has to say is urgent." Reb Meir got up and followed his servant outside reluctantly. A well-dressed stranger asked to have a few words with him.

"Come, sit in my carriage just for a moment, please," urged the stranger. Reb Meir obliged and sat half in, half out, waiting impatiently. Suddenly before he could bat an eyelash, he found himself transported to a deep wood which he realized was many many miles away from home. He stood on the strange road in his light indoor clothes not knowing which way to turn. "What has happened to me?" he wondered dazedly. "And why?"

As the cold that began penetrating his bones also cleared his mind, he perceived a light from afar. He drew closer and had to rub his eyes in surprise; a magnificent palace stood in a clearing. Reb Meir entered the spacious hall which led into a huge, brilliantly lit chamber. He went over to the stove to warm himself. None of the people there paid him any attention. However, when an old man with a snowy white beard entered shortly afterwards, he received a warm welcome.

“Peace unto you. *Avraham Avinu* (‘our father Abraham’),” exclaimed the people seated at the table. The venerable man took his place to be soon joined by another and then another. Each succeeding sage was greeted in turn, “Welcome, *Yitzchak Avinu*,” and “Welcome, *Yaakov Avinu*,” etc., until the last expected guest took his place. When he arose, everyone became quiet and turned to face him.

“I have a complaint against the man over there by the stove,” he announced. All eyes turned to Reb Meir. “This person shamed the psalms sayer in public. I demand retribution, for it is as if he had shamed my holy *tehilim* which possess the power to abolish evil decrees, heal the sick, and bring balm to troubled souls.”

“This man must be judged,” agreed the seated people. “He must pay for his wicked deed.” They discussed what should be the suitable punishment, and a speedy verdict of death resulted for Reb Meir.

“One moment,” called out *Dovid HaMelech* (King David), rising once again. “Are we not defeating the purpose of the judgment? Would it not be preferable for this man to exonerate himself by his own deeds? Rather, let him return to the scene of the sin and expiate it by a public confession. Let him attest to the importance of saying psalms by relating this episode to all his guests.”

“Your suggestion is wise,” one man spoke up.” But I have another score to settle with him first. I demand to know why this man, who lives right in my city, in Mezibuz, has never visited me before nor invited me to his Torah celebration. If he is allowed to return home will he rectify this sin of omission?”

This was the **Baal Shem Tov** who had been present all the while among the rest of the spectators, but until this moment had not uttered a word. Reb Meir was called upon to express his view about this second charge against him. He heartily agreed to amend his wrongdoing. Suddenly he found himself in the same coach, which immediately spirited him back to his home.

Reb Meir stood shivering in front of his house. He paused. It seemed as if eons had passed since he last stood there, yet when he entered he saw the festivities were at exactly the same point as when he had left them. It must be that only a few moments had passed!

Reb Meir loudly asked for everyone's attention and then announced, "I beg you all to wait patiently for me. There is an important guest whom I must bring to tonight's celebration. I will return shortly."

Reb Meir ran quickly to the Baal Shem Tov's *beis medrash* (Torah-study hall) and saw the very man who had spoken against him during the strange scene in the forest. He begged the *Besht* to forgive him and join him at the feast. The *Besht* forgave him wholeheartedly.

They hurried back to Reb Meir's home, where once again Reb Meir demanded everyone's attention. He told his strange story, and then called Chayim the Psalms Sayer to stand next to him. In the presence of the entire assembly, he begged the water-carrier to forgive and forget the shameful treatment he had been subject to.

The Baal Shem Tov spoke after him, adding some words about the importance of reciting *tehilim*, and all present felt that the celebration had taken on a more meaningful tone.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* by Y. Y. Klapholz (translation by Sheindel Weinbach), who based it on "*Sipurei Yaakov*."

*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* (4):

- 1) Weekly reading (of this week outside of Israel) -- G-d awards His "Covenant of peace to *Pinchas*.
- 2) The peace-making tendencies and abilities of Aharon (Brother of Moses and the first High Priest) are mentioned in this week's chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (ch. 1, Mishna 12).
- 3) In the Torah reading of *Massai* (to be read next week both in Israel and outside), the date of Aharon's death is mentioned (Num. 33:38), the only one in the entire Five Books of Moses!...
- 4) ...And that date, *Rosh Chodesh Menachem Av* coincides with the day before Shabbat next week.