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

Which Comes First?

The morning prayers had just ended. The Baal Shem Tov, who was an esteemed visitor in the town, was about to wash his hands before partaking of a meal, when a distraught woman approached him. She had waited throughout the whole service and could contain herself no longer.

"Rebbe! My husband has been missing for a very long time. I have done everything I can think of to try to find him, but I have no idea where he went. What will happen to me? Please, Rebbe, help me find him," the woman wept.

The Baal Shem Tov stood there, his washing cup poised to pour water on his hands in preparation for the blessing on bread, but instead of continuing, he stopped and responded to the woman. "You will find your husband in the city of M."

Infused with new hope, the woman departed.

Meanwhile, the town rabbi, who had heard a great deal about the Baal Shem Tov, had been watching the exchange. Now he had what seemed to him to be a serious question of Jewish law.

"I beg your pardon," began the rabbi, "I overheard your dialogue with the woman, and it seems to me that you were saying words of prophecy to her. If that was true, I think you were required to have completed washing your hands before speaking."

The Baal Shem Tov responded to the rabbi with a question: "If you saw chickens suddenly fluttering about your table set with expensive glassware, what would your reaction be? Would you think about what to do or would you automatically reach out to chase them away?"

The rabbi agreed to the latter, of course, but clearly he was not following the Baal Shem Tov's logic.

"I did what came naturally to me," the Baal Shem Tov explained. "I saw standing before me a woman who was in utter despair, almost to the breaking point. I knew where her husband was. Do you really believe that I

could have continued washing my hands while she stood suffering before my eyes?"

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the version on //Lchaimweekly.org (#1059), with permission

*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.

*Connection:* Seasonal – **Chai Elul**, the eighteenth day of the Jewish month of Elul (this year: Tues. eve - Wed., Sept. 18,) marks the 321st year since the birthday of the Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the revealer of the Chassidic movement in 1734, on his 36th birthday.