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The Yom Kippur Mistake

Rabbi Dovid of Nikolayev was bound for his rebbe, the *Baal Shem Tov*, for Yom Kippur. He had set forth several days before, and now it was already *Mincha* time on Erev Yom Kippur. He decided to stop at a tiny village several miles away from Mezibuz to pray before continuing on the last lap of the journey.

After he prayed, he was besieged by the handful of inhabitants. "Please remain here with us. You saw that you were the tenth. We are one man short; one of the regulars will be out of town. If you leave us we will not be able to pray in a *minyan* on the holiest of days."

Reb Dovid listened to the townspeople's pleas and was almost moved to remain with them. But on second thought he recalled the long journey he had traveled to be expressly with his rebbe, so he refused the nine Jews.

Continuing on his way, he arrived in Mezibuz before Yom Kippur, as scheduled. He entered the synagogue, but the Baal Shem Tov did not even look his way. All during Yom Kippur, Reb Dovid felt he was being deliberately ostracized. After nightfall, the Besht greeted him weakly but did not address him for the remainder of his stay, including the entire week-long festival of Sukkos.

Reb Dovid was very perturbed and made a self-examination of his recent deeds to see if any particular transgression or omission was causing his cool reception. He was very distressed all throughout the holiday. On the night after Simchas Torah ended, the Besht finally called his disciple over to him.

"Reb Dovid, you caused the destruction of a soul by your refusal to remain in the village for Yom Kippur. This particular soul waited there seventy years for your redemption. It awaited you, Reb Dovid, for it stems from the same source as your own *neshama*. And by refusing to complete the minyan there, you let this chance slip between your fingers. You thereby caused your own destruction, Reb Dovid, because your own soul was doomed. The only remedy at this point is for you to take upon yourself the burden of exile."

Reb Dovid accepted the yoke of exile, asking only, "How long must I keep it up?"

"When your time is up you will know of your own accord." came the mysterious reply.

Reb Dovid set forth on his travels. He wandered from village to town, with no particular destination in mind. He posed as a simple small time lecturer, dressing accordingly, for the Baal Shem Tov had warned him not to reveal his identity, since Reb Dovid of Nikolayev was a well-known personage of the times.

Two years of wandering finally found Reb Dovid in Slonim for Shabbos. As was customary, he first presented himself to the head of the community to ask for permission to address the public. The man in turn asked to hear a sample of his speech, to which Reb Dovid complied with a well-delivered message that pleased his host very much.

I think you should address the congregation of the large shul on Shabbos," he urged.

"No, thank you," answered Reb Dovid, keeping his rebbe's warning in mind. "I'll be happy enough speaking to the minyan in the beis medrash (study hall)."

As it turned out he did neither. For suddenly come the news that a famous lecturer had arrived in Slonim. The whole city went out to greet the renowned speaker and brought him to the house of the head of the community, for there he would be lodged for Shabbos.

That Friday evening the famous lecturer noticed Reb Dovid at the table. "Who are you?" he inquired with a hint of condescension in his voice. Reb Dovid replied that he was merely a simple lecturer who was supposed to have addressed the people that Shabbos.

"But seeing that such a famous person has graced Slonim," he explained deferentially, "I shall stay over until next week and get my chance then."

"Indeed!" the lecturer seemed interested. "Let us hear some dvar Torah, Reb Yid, since you too are a lecturer."

Reb Dovid declined politely but their host, who had been so impressed by him earlier that day urged him to speak a few words. Reb Dovid could not refuse his host and half-heartedly delivered a Torah thought on the parsha.

"Why this man is an ignoramus," exclaimed the famous lecturer. "He doesn't know a thing!" Turning towards the host, he asked, "This is what you called a lecturer?" and went on to ridicule Reb Dovid.

The incident passed and the guests and family resumed their eating and drinking until late that evening. Reb Dovid went to the room he shared with the other lecturer and settled himself on the floor to sleep. He had taken

upon himself not to enjoy the comfort of a bed for the duration of his exile so as to feel his punishment more deeply.

In the middle of the night the famous lecturer awoke and found himself suddenly consumed with temptation. He approached the bed of the host's wife but she suddenly awoke in alarm to see a strange form beside her. She grabbed the man's yarmulke and began shouting in fright.

The lecturer escaped quickly to his room and snatched the sleeping Reb Dovid's hat, placing it upon his own head. He jumped into bed and feigned a deep sleep. Meanwhile the members of the household were wide awake and listened to the frightened woman's tale. Since she could not identify the strange figure, the host concluded that Reb Dovid was the guilty person since he was the man in bed without a head covering. The blameless man was attacked by the alarmed members of the household and put into chains upon orders of the head of the community.

That Shabbos the famous lecturer addressed the entire city with a message to strike fear in any sinner's heart. He called upon the townspeople to repent all their sins and to come after Shabbos concluded to witness the punishment of a man of evil design.

That night the lecturer had Reb Dovid brought before the congregation, which had assembled in the large shul to witness the proceedings. He berated him for his wicked intentions and demanded a public confession. Reb Dovid stood silent, neither admitting nor denying. His passiveness angered the lecturer, who demanded he be whipped in public until he confessed.

The constables readied their whips and were about to strike when suddenly there was a knocking on the window. "Is Reb Dovid of Nikolayev amongst you?" a voice inquired.

All rushed outside to see the source of this mysterious call, but no one was in sight.

Back inside, the lecturer signaled that the beating commence, but once again a knocking interrupted and again a voice was heard inquiring if Reb Dovid of Nikolayev was within.

Once again Reb Dovid was silent and once again people rushed outside only to return more mystified.

"This man is a sorcerer as well," shouted the famous lecturer. "See! He is trying to prevent our beating him. Well, he will not succeed. We will get a confession out of him yet."

But just as the constables were about to lay their whips upon Reb Dovid's back for the third time a voice cried out again. "Reb Dovid, why are you silent?"

Hearing himself thus addressed directly, Reb Dovid suddenly recalled the Baal Shem Tov's words, "You will know when your golus has been accepted for atonement." He now answered composedly, "I must atone for my sins".

At the mention of Reb Dovid's name and at the prisoner's reply, the townspeople gasped. Everyone had heard of the famous disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. They hurriedly sent a messenger to summon two of the city's personages who knew Reb Dovid personally to corroborate the accused stranger's identity. And sure enough, when they arrived, the two men confronted Reb Dovid with surprised recognition.

"What are you doing here, Master?" they asked.

Reb Dovid now took his place at the fore and explained everything. He told how the Baal Shem Tov had decreed he must suffer exile as an unknown person until his repentance had been accepted. "This lecturer here is the guilty man. It was he who snatched the yarmulke from my head while I slept a blameless sleep. Bring the yarmulke he is wearing and look under the lining. You will find a *kemeya* (amulet) there which I carry about with me."

The cap was brought and it was found to contain what Reb Dovid had said. The entire community begged his forgiveness and began to accord him proper respect. Reb Dovid heaved a sigh of relief for he was now able to return to Nikolayev, assured that his sins had been properly atone for.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from "*Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*" by Yisroel-Yaakov Klapholz, as translated by Sheindel Weinbach. Based on the Hebrew book, *Adas Tsadikim*.

*Connection:*

- 1) 18 Elul (Sept. 14) is the anniversary of the birthday of the Baal Shem Tov (and the Alter Rebbe of Chabad).
- 2) ELUL is the month of Teshuvah, dedicated to preparing for Rosh HaShana & Yom Kippur.

*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.