

FULL AND EMPTY SYNAGOGUES

The Baal Shem Tov gathered together a small group of his disciples and bid them to quickly get ready for a trip. The Baal Shem Tov's chasidim were quite used to short notice orders. They often traveled by coach with their Rebbe, usually leaving in the late evening and, at the break of dawn, miraculously finding themselves hundreds of miles away. But, wherever the place, whatever the time, they knew that eventually they would find out the reason for the mysterious trip.

The Baal Shem Tov and his students sat themselves in the coach and Alexi, the Besht's gentile faithful driver, sat outside. Within a few minutes, Alexi had fallen asleep and the coach picked up speed. Though without a driver, the horses knew exactly where to go as they sped across the land.

In the morning, the Baal Shem Tov and his students found themselves in a small Jewish village. The town was just beginning to wake up and the visitors quickly made their way to one of the little *shuls*. The Baal Shem Tov walked in quietly and motioned his chasidim to do the same.

Inside, the noise was nearly deafening. Of the thirty men gathered in the *shul* to say the morning prayers, most seemed to be conducting some type of business transaction. Even during the Torah reading, many of the men were talking and whispering to each other. Those who were praying were simultaneously gesturing to their friends or staring off into space in boredom.

The Baal Shem Tov left the synagogue, motioning for his chasidim to follow him. Once outside, he told them quietly and with the utmost seriousness, "The *shul* that we were just in is full of Jewish prayer."

Surprised and shocked, the chasidim waited for some type of explanation, but none followed. "What might the Besht have seen in other 'worlds' that they could not perceive to allow him to make such a statement?" they wondered.

Quickly the Baal Shem Tov lead his followers to another small *shul*, not far from the first. Inside, they found another group of thirty-or-so men offering their morning prayers. But this *shul* was indeed different from the first.

Here, too, silence did not reign. But the sounds that one heard could not be categorized as noise. There was the sound of a sigh from one bemoaning the long exile, or the heart-breaking sob of one unburdening his troubled heart to his Maker. There, too, was the sound of joyous melody as the worshippers praised their Creator with ancient prayers.

The Baal Shem Tov once again led his disciples out of the *shul*. "This synagogue is empty of prayer," the Baal Shem Tov announced to his amazed chasidim.

The chasidim now waited patiently, certain that soon the Baal Shem Tov would reveal the meaning of his extraordinary statements. And so, he did.

"Whenever a Jew prays or performs a *mitzva*, an angel of sorts is created by the prayer or *mitzva*," the Besht explained. "When the prayers are said wholeheartedly, when the *mitzvot* are performed with sincere intention, the newly formed angels are whole and perfectly shaped. They can easily fly straight to the Heavens where they will act as advocates for the person and his family. Too, they will be there when it is time to welcome the one who brought about their formation and defend him against strict Judgment.

"But when prayers are said without concentration, and *mitzvot* are performed haphazardly or for the wrong reasons," continued the Baal Shem Tov, "the angels they create are 'crippled.' They cannot break through the gates of heaven. They cannot even fly to the heavens. They cannot argue the case for the person or his family now or in the Final Court. They remain here on earth."

The faces of the Baal Shem Tov's chasidim began to light up in understanding. "And so," concluded their rebbe, "The first *shul* we went into was filled with, *nebuch* (a pity!), crippled angels of Jewish prayer. The worshippers there were not praying with any feeling or concentration and their prayers were stuck in the synagogue.

But the second *shul* we visited was different. There, the prayers, offered sincerely and wholeheartedly, were able to soar to the Heavens, through the gates, where they appealed to the Supreme Judge to heal and have mercy, to bless and protect. And there, the beautiful and sparkling angels will remain until such time as they need to welcome the person who formed them."

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Source: Supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from //L'ChaimWeekly.org (#942), with permission.

Connection: Weekly Reading: Yaakov's reaction to his dream of the ladder ascending from Earth to Heaven: "*Surely G-d is in this place and I did not realize.... This is none other than the House of G-d, and this is the Gate of Heaven.*" (Gen. 28:16-17)

Biographical note: **Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5458- 6 Sivan 5520 (Aug. 1698 - May 1760)], 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), 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.