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The Respectable-Looking Thief

Once a merchant from the town of Whitfield returned from a buying trip with a wagon piled high with merchandise. He arrived late at night and was too tired to open up his store and unload the wagon. Instead, he unharnessed the horses and left the wagon outside his store, planning to unload it the next morning. After all, he thought, "Who would steal such a large wagon?"

The next morning, the merchant rose early and rushed to his store to unload. To his shock, the wagon with its precious load was no longer there. He was beside himself with fear and pain at the loss of almost all his wealth. A number of his friends joined him in his frantic search through the town. But there was no sign of the wagon. He realized that a thief must have seen the unattended treasure the night before, harnessed other horses to the wagon, and stole it together with all the merchandise.

The merchant sent a letter with a friend to **the Baal Shem Tov**, advising him of his loss and requesting a blessing that the wagon and his merchandise be returned. When the messenger arrived in Medzibush, he found the Baal Shem Tov kissing the *mezuzah* of his house, as he was leaving to attend a *Brit Mila* (circumcision ceremony) in the Jewish community of Derzane.

The Baal Shem Tov took the letter from the messenger and quickly read through it. He then instructed the messenger, "Please wait here until I return." The messenger agreed and took lodging at the local inn.

The Baal Shem Tov left in his wagon for the long trip to the city of Derzane accompanied by Reb Zev his scribe and Alexei his gentile wagon driver. As they were entering the city, the Baal Shem Tov saw a wagon loaded with merchandise in the distance. He turned to his scribe and asked, "Reb Zev, do you see that loaded wagon over there pulled by two horses?"

"Yes," answered Reb Zev.

"And do you remember the man that spoke to me just before we left?" inquired the Baal Shem Tov.

Reb Zev nodded yes.

"That man," continued the Baal Shem Tov, "was sent by a merchant from Whitfield whose wagon full of merchandise was stolen. He requested my blessing that the wagon and the merchandise would be found and returned; it represented nearly all of the merchant's wealth. Well, that very wagon full of merchandise is the one that was stolen.

”When we get to town, I want you to immediately ask around and find out at which inn the supposed owner of the wagon is staying. Then, go to that inn, find the wagon owner and tell him that you know the wagon was stolen from Whitfield. Tell him to give it to you to return to the merchant. Meanwhile, I’ll go to the *Bris*.”

Immediately upon arriving in town, Reb Zev inquired and found that the man driving the wagon was staying at a certain inn. He went to that inn and found the man praying in his *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefilin* (‘Phylacteries’). Reb Zev was reluctant to call the man a thief since he appeared innocent, as he prayed like any honest Jewish man.

Reb Zev rushed to the Baal Shem Tov and told him what he had seen.

The Baal Shem Tov responded forcefully. “Return immediately and tell that thief as I instructed you. Otherwise he will soon leave town and the wagon and merchandise will be lost.”

Reb Zev ran back to the inn where the thief was staying. This time he found the man eating breakfast. He questioned the man about the wagon and the merchandise. The man responded with a credible story. When the man stepped out for a minute, Reb Zev questioned the innkeeper. “Did that man drink a lot of whiskey like some kind of thief?”

“Oh no,” answered the inn keeper, “He just had one drink like many do after the morning prayers.”

Reb Zev left again without directly confronting the man. He returned to the Baal Shem Tov and reported all that had happened. He concluded with frustration in his voice, “Rebbe, you must be mistaken. He is an upstanding Jewish merchant and can’t be a thief.”

This time the Baal Shem Tov stood up and pushed Reb Zev to the door saying, “He is not an upstanding Jewish merchant, he is a Jewish thief. Now go and confront him and call him a thief. Then prove your accusation with the following signs.” After Reb Zev heard the signs, he rushed back to the inn.

As soon as he entered the inn, he walked up to the man and said that the Baal Shem Tov had sent him. He then told him that the Baal Shem Tov knew he was a thief and had stolen the wagon and the merchandise. Further, he offered to prove it with the signs the Baal Shem Tov told him.

“After the wagon was stolen, you hid for three nights in the forest until the owner gave up looking. During that time, you slept in an abandoned cabin near the river. Then you stayed at two inns until you arrived here in the city of Derzene.” After Reb Zev related the signs, he warned the thief, “You had better return the wagon and merchandise to the Baal Shem Tov. He’ll take it back to the merchant. Otherwise, I don’t even want to think about what

might happen to you.”

The thief was overwhelmed by the Baal Shem Tov’s knowledge. “You’re right,” he said, “I confess; I stole it. Take the wagon with the merchandise.”

Reb Zev asked the innkeeper to guard the wagon and merchandise because he was going to the *Bris* with the Baal Shem Tov.

When the thief heard Reb Zev speak with the inn keeper, he thought, “Now that I’m a poor man again, I might as well go to the *Bris* and eat with the other beggars.” During the meal after the *Bris*, the thief approached the Baal Shem Tov and asked, “Rabbi, I have a question to ask you. Since you know how thieves steal and where they sleep, you must be able to see better things than this. Why do you bother to pay attention to bad things? Why don’t you look at good things instead?”

The Baal Shem Tov answered: “That is a very profound question.” He began to expound words of Torah on this topic until the time of Mincha (the afternoon prayers) arrived, and still he had not finished.

As soon as the Mincha prayer was completed, the Baal Shem Tov turned to Reb Zev and said, “We should be going. That messenger is still waiting for us to return with the merchant’s wagon and merchandise.”

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Freely adapted by Tzvi Meir HaCohane (Howard M. Cohn, Patent Attorney) from a story in *Shivchei HaBesht* and translated in *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* by Ben-Amos and Mintz. Cohn also is the founder and director of [//baalshemtov.com](http://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.

*Connection:* Weekly reading of *Lech Lecha* – the first mention of the mitzvah of circumcision.