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

A Torturous Shabbat

Only three Chasidim accompanied the ***Baal Shem Tov*** upon this particular trip: Reb Dovid of Nikolayev, Reb Dovid Firkus and Reb Dovid Leikes of Chernobyl -- plus Alexei, ***the Besht***'s regular gentile driver, of course. There was nothing unusual to begin with. The horses were given free rein, as they were accustomed, and sped miraculously along the road which rolled by in a blur under their flying hooves.

On the second day, the strangeness began. The carriage got lost among the trees of a very thick forest. The overhead foliage became so dense that it blocked the rays of the sun, until soon it became impossible to tell the difference between day and night. The wagon continued struggling through the forest path for days at a plodding rate.

The Baal Shem Tov himself felt as if he had lost all his heavenly powers. Shabbat was approaching, but he had no idea where they were or what they should do. Meanwhile, the only course of action was to continue onward. Wearing out by all the traveling and disturbed by the loss of his divine awareness, the Besht finally fell into a troubled sleep.

"Maybe something important will be revealed to the rebbe in a dream," the chasidim offered hopefully. But this was not to be. The Baal Shem Tov awoke somewhat refreshed, but not in the least enlightened.

It was midday when their situation took a turn for the better. They discerned a shining light emanating from a point a short distance further. As they approached, the light grew brighter until they finally came upon a clearing in the forest. The sudden emergence into daylight blinded them momentarily, but they soon perceived a small cottage in the middle of the clearing.

They approached it and knocked on the door. It was answered by a rough, coarse looking man, unkempt, barefoot, ragged; very much the crude Jewish peasant.

"We have lost our way and need a place to stay for Shabbat. Would you mind if we remained here with you?" they asked hesitantly.

"No. I don't want you staying here. By the looks of you, you are all chasidim and *maggidim* ('preachers'). I despise chasidim. So did my parents before me. Go away from here quickly. I can't stand the very sight of you!"

"Well, then, is there any other place nearby where we can stay for Shabbat?" they wanted to know.

"No. The closest village is at least a day's journey away."

The chasidim did not know what to do. The only place they could stay was right there, as much as they disliked the idea. They begged and pleaded with the peasant to let

them stay, promising up to a hundred times the price of food and board. After much entreaty he finally agreed, but with three conditions. When he enumerated them they were horrified.

“First of all, you are to pray silently, I don’t want you scaring away my gentile clients who come here for their whiskey.

“Secondly, you are to pray speedily. I don’t like waiting for my food, neither in the evening or morning.

“And thirdly, I don’t want you asking all kinds of questions about the kosher level of the food. Either you eat what I serve or you leave it, but don’t talk about it.”

Seeing that they really had no choice in the matter, the chasidim agreed. They unloaded their belongings and took them into the cottage so that they could prepare themselves for the coming Shabbat.

“Is there a stream or river in the vicinity?” the Baal Shem Tov asked. “I would like to immerse myself in honor of the Shabbat.”

“What?!” the man shrieked. “This just shows what hypocrites you are, you ‘chasidim’! Out with you! I will have nothing to do with the likes of you.”

He grabbed the closest parcel and threw it out the door, ranting and raving all the time. It took a good half hour for the chasidim to cool him down and make him agree to let them stay, although it was questionable if they really wanted to remain in the home of one so uncouth and violent.

The house itself reflected its uncivilized master, being devoid of the barest minimum of furniture. Four wooden posts supported the few planks which served as the table. There was nothing to show that a human dwelled inside.

{Outside, silence reigned. There did not seem to be another human being anywhere in the four directions, or even an animal. The realization of their total isolation chilled their spirits even more.}

The four men sat and huddled together unhappily. Meanwhile it was growing late but they could see no sign of preparation for the coming Shabbat on the part of their ungracious host. They shivered involuntarily.

Hours passed without any sign of Shabbat preparation from the owner. All he did was eat watermelon in loud, smacking bites, spitting out the pits all over the floor and whistling loudly in the manner of non-Jewish ruffians. Maybe this man does not even keep Shabbat, they speculated, afraid to open their mouths to ask anything for fear of being thrown out bodily.

About five minutes before Shabbat their host spread a piece of dirty burlap on the table. He laid a glob of muddy clay upon it, hollowing out a hole in the center into which he thrust one little candle, which he lit in honor of the Shabbat.

Whether he had already prayed *Mincha* or not, they could not tell. He launched immediately into a hurried *Kabbalat Shabbat* (“Welcoming the Shabbat”) prayer, swallowing half the words, skipping over the other half. Before they knew it, he had finished the evening prayers too.

They hastened to finish theirs according to the terms of the bargain. “Good Shabbat,” they wished him. A fresh string of curses was the quick response that they received.

At the table, when they tried to sing the *Shalom Aleichem* (hymn that inaugurates the Shabbat evening meal,) he shouted at them to stop. Simultaneously, he took a glass and filled it with wine, held it with two fingers and began to recite the *Kiddush*, mispronouncing most of the words and skipping over the others. In vain did the chassidim beg to say their own Kiddush.

“We will pay whatever you ask for the wine, besides what we promised for staying here.” He refused to hear of it. “The candle will go out by the time you finish your Kiddush.” He said angrily and drank the entire contents of the glass, leaving only a few drops at the bottom for his guests. “You won’t get drunk on this,” he remarked disdainfully.

The man then washed his hands and recited the *hamotzi* blessing over a loaf of black pumpernickel. In vain did the chassidim beg for their own double loaves. He refused to let them touch the bread, shouting that their hands would contaminate his food. He distributed a slice to each of them and told them to recite their own hamotzi blessing. The chassidim were helpless to complain. They had agreed to remain silent.

The peasant pushed large plates of lentil soup towards each of the men. “Eat!” he said, and, following his own words, he bent his head and body over his plate and shoveled the food in so rapidly that much of it poured out of the sides of his mouth.

When the chasidim tried to sing the traditional Shabbat table songs, he cursed them violently, and when they attempted to start the Thanksgiving Prayer After Meals with a *mezuman* (the required verbal invitation and response when three or more adult males ate together) he made them be silent. “That’s your mezuman,”¹ he said with a fiendish sense of humor, pointing to a box full of money.

The men were relieved when the meal finally ended. They prepared themselves to sleep. The peasant gave the Baal Shem Tov a woman’s garment for a pillow. To the other men he offered rags made of a (forbidden) mixture of linen and wool² that they quickly refused, to his great derision.

{“Why has G-d allowed this to happen to us? they asked each other. From the Besht there was no answer; his spiritual vision was still in abeyance.}

They finally escaped into fitful sleep. When they awoke it was barely dawn but already their host was rushing through the morning service. He stood in shirt and trousers, barefoot, singing the poetic *Nishmas* prayer to some peasant drinking tune. They hurriedly arose so that they could finish their prayers together with him.

It did not take long for them to experience that the torments of the night were nothing compared with those of the day. He continually heaped abuse upon them and their slightest demands, not letting up for a minute.

¹ A pun. “*Mezuman*” means “prepared”, and is often used in the sense of “invited” or “(ready) cash”

² Called *shatnez*

When evening drew near, the chassidim begged for something to eat for the traditional Third Shabbat Meal. “What!” he raged anew. “You want to eat again? You just finished your meal a short while ago. Gluttons!” They had to content themselves with Torah thoughts whispered among themselves instead of the usual meal.

Nor did their torture end with the passing of Shabbat. Their tyrannical host spread an evening meal before them and forced them to join him. The loud smacking of his food was spiced by the usual curses and insults, but he would not let them leave the table until most of the night had passed. Finally, wearily, they fell into their uncomfortable, makeshift beds and slept.

Morning dawned and they awoke with renewed hope. Today they could escape this terrible place and the master who ruled over them so cruelly. But then came another unwelcome surprise.

After they had finished morning prayers, their host barred the door before them and made them sit down with him to a meal. They had no choice but to obey. He continued to keep them thus imprisoned by the sheer force of his iron will. They were helpless to resist.

When evening fell they knew that they could not travel in the dangerous forest alone and were forced to remain till the next day. But Sunday’s events were repeated on Monday. In vain they pleaded that they would pay for the meal he had prepared without eating it, if only he let them leave.

“What? Am I a thief to take your money without giving you anything in return?” he shouted.

Finally, on the fourth day, he made an accounting of all they owed him. It cleaned the chasidim of their last money, but they felt it was worth everything to be able to escape this nightmare of a place.

Their fierce host insisted upon accompanying them part of the way, much to their consternation. Perhaps he intended to kill them, they feared.

Just as they were about to leave, the door to one of the rooms opened. A young married woman emerged {well-dressed and bejeweled}. The chasidim were dumfounded. They had not even dreamed that anyone else inhabited this out-of-the-way house in the forest, no less a young lady.

“Wouldn’t you do us the honor of staying one more Shabbat?” she asked the four men sweetly.

This was the very last thing they wanted to do! In any case, the matter required clarification. “Who are you?” one of the Chasidim queried her.

“Don’t you remember me, Rebbe?” the woman said, turning to the Baal Shem Tov.

“No, I don’t think that I ever saw you before Anyway, how do you know that I am a rebbe?” the Baal Shem Tov asked. {“And if you know that I am a rebbe, why did you allow my Shabbat to be ruined?”}

“But surely you did! I am Shurah who used to work in your home as a maid. Your wife took me in, seeing that I was an orphan with no one to care for me. I was full of sores and lice. Your wife the *rebbetzin* used to wash and comb me every Friday while I screamed with pain.

“One week the pain was too much to bear. I must have shouted louder than usual because the *rebbetzin* slapped me hard. You, Rebbe, were sitting nearby but remained silent in the face of my pain and shame. It was then that the heavenly court took you to task for not having had mercy upon an orphan. They sentenced you to forfeit your portion in the World to Come.

“When I married this man,” she pointed to their host, “who is, by the way, a *tzadik nistar* (a concealed holy man),³ the sentence was revealed to us. It disturbed us both very much and we resolved to do something about it. Through our many prayers⁴ we succeeded in converting the evil sentence to a lighter one; instead of losing your portion in the World to Come, you were to lose the pleasure of one Shabbat, the day which is a veritable taste of the World to Come.

“The question remained: who could carry out such a sentence? Where in the world was there a person willing to disturb the Baal Shem Tov and spoil his Shabbat *oneg* (pleasures)?

“The task was left to us and we succeeded in it. Now, thank G-d, your portion in the World to Come is complete and unimpaired.”

As she finished her explanation, the Baal Shem Tov felt a surge of his former powers. He could now clearly see that what she said was correct.

The Baal Shem Tov and his three followers gladly accepted the woman’s invitation. They remained for the second Shabbat, an uplifting, rejuvenating Seventh Day, the absolute opposite of the one spent so wretchedly, just a single week before.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* (volume 4, last story) by Y. Y. Klapholz (English translation by Sheindel Weinbach), who based it on the book, *Peulos Hatzadikim*. The few sentences and phrases within curly brackets { } I inserted, based on the version of this story in Treasury of Chassidic Tales (Artscroll).

*Connections:* Seasonal – **Shavuot**, whose holiness in Jewish Law extends throughout the first 12 days of Sivan (Shavuot falls on Sivan 6), which includes the first 5 days of this week, is 1) the *yahrzeit* of the Baal Shem Tov, 2) the anniversary and celebration of hearing the Ten Commandments, 3) of which the fourth is Shabbat observance, 4) and receiving the Torah, which includes several scattered warnings not to oppress or mistreat orphans.

*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

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<sup>3</sup> And endowed with a huge portion of dramatic talent. – y.t.

<sup>4</sup> Including her forgiveness?

to contain his teachings. One available in English is the excellent annotated translation of *Tzava'at Harivash*, published by Kehos.