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## ***Superior Milk and Butter***

Many of the Baal Shem Tov’s ways might have seemed strange, even questionable, to an outsider. Rabbi Zev-Wolf Kitzess, the Baal Shem Tov’s constant companion, however, had enough confidence in his rebbe never to doubt his actions. He knew that in the end, even if it took years, all would be for the best.

Reb Wolf accompanied the Baal Shem Tov one time when the latter visited a certain village Jew. The villager welcomed the Besht into his home which was sparsely furnished and showed evident signs of poverty.

“I want a *pidyon* (‘redemption’ donation) of eighteen rubles,” the Baal Shem Tov requested from his host.

Eighteen rubles was a considerable sum and the poor man did not have it. However, since the Besht insisted upon that sum, he took some of his furniture and his cow and sold it in the market, returning with the necessary sum which he gave to his important guest. Reb Zev Wolf looked on silently while the Baal Shem Tov took the money and departed without further comment. It was only many years later that he understood what the Besht had done and why.

The villager’s rent was due several days after that incident. Naturally, he could not produce the sum required and the landlord was forced to evict him and his family from their home. He saw no future for himself in that village and decided to settle down in another village belonging to a different landlord.

He found himself a tiny hut to house his family and by selling some more of his belongings managed to scrape together enough money to buy a cow. This cow provided him with his only source of income; each day he sold the milk she produced and managed to eke out a bare existence for his family.

Some time later his landlord's cow took sick and their milk was non potable. The landlord sent his servants to the surrounding villages in search of a new supply of milk. They came upon the new tenant and bought some milk.

When the landlord was later served some of his milk, he could not help commenting upon its quality. "I want you to buy all the milk that his cow produces," he told his servants. "Tell the owner of the cow that I will pay handsomely for the privilege of being his only customer. This milk and butter is most superior to what we have been using until now."

It was this incident that turned the tide of the villager's fortune. Each day he would deliver milk to the manor and each day the landlord would comment on the quality of the milk and milk products derived from it.

As time went by, he grew fond of the Jew and began to consult him about his business, slowly turning over to him many responsibilities. He trusted him implicitly and paid generously in appreciation of the Jew's honesty, reliability and faithful service. The landlord respected him so much that being childless, he transferred ownership of that village and the nearby city to the Jew. Feeling that now everything was in good hands, the landlord took leave and went abroad after giving the Jew legal title to that area.

The next time Reb Wolf set eyes upon the former pauper was several years later. This time, however, he did not recognize the former villager.

The occasion of Reb Zev Wolf's visit was an appeal on behalf of Jewish prisoners and captives. The Besht had sent his *talmid* on a countrywide tour of villages and cities to raise money for the many Jewish tenants who, through lack of funds, had been indefinitely thrown into jail until someone came to their aid. Reb Wolf had done well in his travels and lacked three hundred rubles for the allotted sum which his rebbe had designated. Reb Wolf had arrived at the city which belonged to the former villager and had come to stay by the rabbi of the city. He was received cordially by the rabbi who was an acquaintance of his.

"Why are you so festively attired?" Reb Wolf took the liberty to ask. "Is there some special occasion for this delegation of communal dignitaries whom I see coming to fetch you?"

"Yes," he replied. "We are all going to greet the landlord of this city who will be paying us a visit today. Why don't you come along with us? He is a Jew and will most probably be willing to contribute to your cause."

Reb Zev Wolf agreed to accompany the rabbi and his companion to greet their guest in his townhouse. The landlord greeted the delegation warmly, paying special attention to the newcomer, Reb Zev Wolf, whom he recognized. When he had finished exchanging greetings with his guests and dealing with the necessary matters which they had come to discuss, he took Reb Zev Wolf aside.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he began. Reb Zev Wolf scrutinized the wealthy man but could not place his face. “No,” he admitted.

The landlord went on to explain how his change of fortune had come about. Then pressing the three hundred rubles still lacking into Reb Zev Wolf’s hand, he bade him goodbye.

It was only when he returned to Mezibuz that Reb Zev Wolf understood the entire story. Reb Zev Wolf presented himself to the Baal Shem Tov and handed over all the funds that he had gathered during his travels. “The last three hundred rubles were donated by the village Jew whom you once asked for a *pidyon* of eighteen rubles, many years ago. Today he is a wealthy man.”

“Yes, I know. Let me now tell you why I extracted that large sum from him when his circumstances were so difficult.

“I saw at the time that a change of fortune was awaiting him in the future but not in that place. I found it necessary to bring him to the end of his tether so that he would be forced to leave and settle elsewhere. Which is exactly what happened! The rest you already know for yourself.”

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* by Y. Y. Klapholz (English translation by Sheindel Weinbach), who based it on “*Emunas Tzadikim*.”

*Connection:* Weekly Torah Reading of [*Mattot-*] *Massai* – [42] Stages of Life

*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.