

The Delayed Delivery

Once, during his travels, the **Baal Shem Tov** stayed at the inn of one of his followers in a village near the city Brody.

The innkeeper, wishing to honor his distinguished guest and those accompanying him, prepared a huge feast on their behalf and accorded all the respect due them.

As the Baal Shem Tov took leave of his gracious host he said: “Ask of me what you wish.”

“Thank G-d, I lack nothing and have no request to make, other than that my heart be strengthened to continue serving and fearing my Maker,” said the righteous innkeeper.

“If so, than I have one small favor to request of you. Please do not refuse me,” asked the ‘*Besht*.’

The good man replied readily, “I am prepared to serve you with my whole body and soul and with all my might.”

The Baal Shem Tov went over to a desk and sat down to write a letter, sealing it with his personal seal and addressing it to two specific people by name, and also referring to them as the “Trustees for the Congregation of the City of Brody.” He handed the letter to the innkeeper saying: “I wish you to deliver this letter yourself, not by messenger. Give this to the people I have addressed it to.”

“I shall do as you have instructed,” said the man and placed it in the outer pocket of his jacket.

As the *Besht* prepared to go he asked his host, “You intend to accompany me part of the way, do you not?”

The innkeeper rushed to the stable and proceeded to take out the harness from its box in order to hitch up the horses. As he bent over to extract the equipment from the chest, the letter fell out of his pocket without his noticing it. He hurriedly harnessed his horses to the wagon and went to accompany his departing guest.

When he returned he had already forgotten all about the letter. Even when he later visited the Baal Shem Tov he did not remember it, nor did the *Besht* inquire whether he had delivered it.

Years passed. In 1760, the Baal Shem Tov ascended to his Heavenly reward. Some time after, the wheel of fortune turned against the innkeeper, to the extent that he was eventually forced to sell all he owned in order to provide for his family. By then it was seventeen years since the Baal Shem Tov had visited him.

One day the innkeeper went to look for something in the chest where he kept his harnesses. All of a sudden, he happened to notice the letter. Picking it up, he recognized the Baal Shem Tov's handwriting upon the envelope and remembered the incident of seventeen years before.

The innkeeper was very distressed and wept bitterly, blaming his misfortune on his oversight concerning the letter. He dared not open the letter for it was still sealed with the *Besht's* seal and the people for whom it was intended might still be alive. He decided to deliver it to the addresses, convinced that a letter written by the Baal Shem Tov would be dear to its recipient even if it had been written seventeen years ago. He picked himself up and walked to Brody, being too poor even to afford the fare for transportation.

After a taxing journey, he finally reached his destination. Immediately he began inquiring in the different study-halls and synagogues about the trustees named on the letter. To his great consternation he learned from reliable people who had lived in the city for over twenty years that no such trustees had ever served in Brody. When these men heard the innkeeper's story they were surprised too, for the Baal Shem Tov had been well known in Brody.

During the course of the conversation one man said in jest: "Are you aware that today elections are being held in the main synagogue for the new trustees? Who knows? Maybe those men will be chosen today!"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than some young boys rushed into the *Beit Midrash* (study hall).

"Mazel tov! Mazel tov!" they shouted. Mr. so and so and Mr. so and so were just elected as the new trustees for the community."

The innkeeper looked at the envelope in his hand in astonishment. Those were the very names that appeared on the letter! He rushed to the synagogue to find the two men and tell them his strange story.

He approached the new trustees, men in their early thirties, and greeted them: "Blessed be you unto G-d. I have here a letter addressed to you both from The Baal Shem Tov."

They looked at the letter he handed them and thought that it was a joke, for the Baal Shem Tov had passed away many years ago. The old man who had accompanied the innkeeper knew the Baal Shem Tov in person from the *Besht's* occasional visits to Brody. Now he spoke up.

"It is quite possible that the Baal Shem Tov sent this letter to you; his holy vision was capable of spanning time as well as distance. In fact, I am sure it was intended for you," he said with conviction.

They opened up the letter and read the following message:

"To the new trustees of the city of Brody" –addressing them by name.

“You have received this letter from a destitute innkeeper. I beg of you, do what is in your power for his sake, for his is a decent man who has been accustomed to wealth all of his life until his recent poverty. His strained circumstances are such that he has no means to feed his family. Therefore, do your best for him, for I, the Baal Shem Tov, ask it of you.

“If you doubt that I have sent this letter to you let me give you a sign. Your wives are both pregnant. You will soon be informed that the wife of one (whom he named) will give birth to a boy while the other woman (and he named her as well) will give birth to a girl. Let this, then, be the sign that I have really sent this letter and that I implore you to help the good man before you to the best of your ability.”

As they were finishing reading the letter, some people came in and announced the births, precisely as the letter had predicted.

The two young men told and retold this amazing occurrence to everyone they encountered that day, their astonishment growing all the while. As for the innkeeper, they did their best for him and, with Heaven’s grace, he soon became wealthy again.

* * *

The source of this story is the holy rebbe of Apta, Reb Avraham–Yehoshua-Heshel, who once related this wondrous episode to a large assembly of chasidim in Berdichev. After concluding, he commented:

“Does this story seem strange to you? To me it is not extraordinary at all. The *Besht* was able to see what would be seventeen years hence, because he was endowed with a spiritual vision which transcended past, present and future simultaneously. Plus, he had the necessary infinite wisdom to distinguish between them.

“What I do find extraordinary is the deep love for his fellow Jew that constantly burned within him and caused him to penetrate into the person’s future, and his deep concern to help and support that unfortunate man even after he himself had gone to the World Beyond. It is this boundless love that I extract as the lesson from this story.”

~~~~~

*My source:* “Tales of the Baal Shem Tov,” vol. 2, pp. 84-89, by Yisroel-Yaakov Klapholz, as translated by Sheindel Weinbach.

*Connection:* Today, Sunday Dec. 20, 2020, is **Hei Teves** (5th day of the Jewish month of Tevet) the Chabad “Holiday of the Return of the Holy Books,” (“*Didan Netzchak*”) the events of which in the late 1980’s included a delayed delivery.

*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.