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Pierre-Louis and the Baal Shem Tov

One day, **the Baal Shem Tov**, founder of the Chasidic movement, summoned Rabbi Nissan. He gave his faithful chasid a closed envelope and asked him to travel to the castle of the local landowner, Count Radzwill. Rabbi Nissan was to open the envelope in two days time.

The purpose of this trip was to try to arouse the Count's best friend, Pierre-Louis, to return to Judaism. Rabbi Nissan was perplexed for, as far as everyone knew, Pierre Louis was not Jewish. Yet, he followed his Rebbe's instructions without question.

Count Radzwill was kind and just to all those living on his lands, Jew and gentile alike. On the particular day that Rabbi Nissan arrived at the castle, Count Radzwill and Pierre Louis had just returned from a two-month holiday in Europe. Crowds of people were gathered to welcome them back.

After the two men entered the castle and the crowd had dispersed, Rabbi Nissan meandered around the grounds for the rest of the day wondering how he could arrange to speak to Pierre Louis. When night came, Rabbi Nissan travelled into town and slept in the local synagogue.

Early the next morning, Rabbi Nissan returned to the castle hoping to be inspired as to how he could obtain an audience with Pierre Louis. But as he approached the castle, Rabbi Nissan immediately noticed that something was wrong. A large crowd was gathered there, but many of them were crying.

Rabbi Nissan inquired and found out what had transpired. The Count and Pierre Louis had gone hunting late the night before. When they returned from their successful trip, a tragic accident occurred. The Count tripped on one of the castle steps, his pistol discharged and he suffered a large bleeding wound in his chest.

Despite the attention of the best doctors, all efforts to stop the bleeding had not helped. The Count was dying.

That's when Rabbi Nissan remembered the envelope the Rebbe had given him. He opened it, took out the letter and began reading. It was a prescription with exact directions how to prepare a salve to cure...a gunshot wound to the chest!

Rabbi Nissan ran to the castle gate waving the letter and demanded to be let in, but the guards refused. Pierre Louis heard the noise from inside the

palace and ran out to the gate, obviously irritated, "Jew! What do you want here?" he shouted. "Don't tell me you are a doctor? Leave here immediately!"

"Wait!" he shouted even louder. "What is that paper you are holding?"

Rabbi Nissan tried to explain, but the Frenchman snatched the prescription from his hand and began to read. "This is your cure?!" He screamed. "This is nonsense!"

He was about to tear it into pieces when one of the doctors emerged from the castle, noticed the commotion and approached. He examined the paper, turned to face Pierre Louis with his back to the Jew and whispered. "They've given up in there. Let the Jew try; it can't hurt."

Minutes later Rabbi Nissan was in the castle, preparing the medicine. Then he began the treatment. Some of it he smeared on the wound, and some of it he applied on various parts of the Count's body. Every few minutes he repeated the process, following the instructions exactly.

To everyone's surprise, the Count stopped hemorrhaging almost immediately! After a few applications he even seemed to be breathing more deeply and evenly. After an hour, instead of being dead as everyone had anticipated, color returned to his cheeks and minutes later he regained consciousness!

The doctors and professors were speechless; they had never seen anything even vaguely like it. Pierre Louis, moreover, was moved to the essence of his very being.

After several hours the Count was strong enough to call Rabbi Nissan to his bedside and thank him. He offered to reward him but the chasid refused. "Seeing you returned to health is my reward. Just continue to treat the Jews kindly," he said. "But," he added, "I do have one request: I wish to speak with Pierre Louis privately."

The bewildered Pierre Louis and Rabbi Nissan went into a side room and closed the door. Rabbi Nissan said, "I am a follower of a great Jew called Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov. He was the one who wrote that prescription and saved the Count. He told me to come here and tell you to return to Judaism."

Pierre was still in shock from the near death of his friend and then his strange supernatural recovery. And now this?

Pierre just looked at the chasid, eyes wide in disbelief. "Return? Judaism?" He mumbled to himself. "I don't understand."

"The Baal Shem Tov told me to tell you that your real name is *Pesach-Tzvi*," continued Rabbi Nissan. "Both your parents were Jewish. Your mother

wanted to give you a Jewish education but your father was opposed and prevailed. Eventually you lost your Jewish identity. But now it is time for you to return."

"I don't understand," said Pierre, trying to clear his throat, "Are you saying that I am a Jew? Me! A Jew? It's impossible! Absolutely impossible!"

Pierre Louis refused to discuss the subject further and abruptly ended the conversation. All he agreed only to give it further thought.

Almost a year later Rabbi Nissan heard a knock on his door. He opened it and was surprised to see a bearded Jew standing in front of him whom he didn't recognize. "Don't you recognize me?" the man queried.

Then Rabbi Nissan realized: It was Pierre Louis, now Pesach Tzvi, returning to the G-d of his fathers.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the rendition of **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton** on his website, *OhrTmimim.org*, as posted on *LChaimWeekly* #822

Connection: The *Weekly Reading of Shoftim* contains a strong exhortation (Deut. 18:13-15) to not be led astray by non-Jewish practices, and for spiritual guidance to listen only to the Jewish prophet of the time.

*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.