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The Story Behind the Miraculous Torah Scroll of the Baal Shem Tov

[A letter written by the 6th Lubavitcher Rebbe,
Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn (the 'Rebbe Rayatz')].

On Tuesday, the 21st of Cheshvan 5658, my [the author's] father, **the Rebbe Reshab**, began a journey to the resting places of [some of] the *tzadikim* [in Ukraine] – in Mezibuz, Postov, Anipoli, Berditchev, Haditch, and Nezhin. During this trip he also had meetings for his communal work in Kiev, Zitomir and Berditchev.

On Sunday, the 26th, at around 12 [noon], my father arrived in Mezibuz. Accompanying him was Reb Binyomin Berlin. Although it was after the time of the morning prayer, the first place he visited was the *shul* of **the Baal Shem Tov**. Meanwhile Reb Binyomin went to see if there was a kosher *mikvah* (immersion bathhouse) because my father was planning on visiting the *tziyun* (designated 'resting' place) of the Baal Shem Tov that evening and then continuing on his way.

By the time my father, the Rebbe, entered the shul of the Baal Shem Tov, most of the worshippers had already left. One elderly man, Reb Tuvia-Leib the *shamash* (caretaker), sat in *tallit* and *tefilin* at the front of the shul, while around him stood a few people. He was telling them a story of the Baal Shem Tov that he had heard from his father and grandfather.

This Reb Tuvia Leib, due to his old age, was not able to serve as a shamash for the shul, not even for the smallest task. However, because he sat every day in the shul, *davvening* (praying) and learning Torah, and stemmed from the family of those that had served the Baal Shem Tov, he was bestowed with the honorary title, "Shamash of the Baal Shem Tov's shul".

(Interestingly, his grandfather, Reb Yosef Tzvi, served the Baal Shem Tov in his last ten years and was blessed by the Baal Shem Tov with a long life for him, his children and grandchildren. Reb Tuvia was living proof of the power of this blessing.)

At the time the shul was in disrepair and in need of renovation. The people who davvened there, mostly poor and elderly people, couldn't afford to fund it, and those of the city with the means for the renovation didn't notice the great need.

The elders of the shul, headed by Reb Tuvia Leib, were greatly pained by the situation for they had a tradition that as long as the shul stood, the city would have peace and if the building were to fall, *chas veshalom* ('Heaven forbid'), the city would be destroyed.

They deliberated and finally decided that once in a while they would take out the "Miraculous *Sefer Torah*" (parchment Torah scroll) of the Baal Shem Tov and with the donations of those who would receive *aliyot* (called to the table of the reading of the Torah, to bless) they would be able to repair and renovate the shul.

When my father entered the shul, Reb Tuvia Leib was speaking about the great *kedusha* (holiness) of the Sefer Torah and how many of the tzadikim of the previous generation had made the journey to Mezibuz specifically to get an aliyah on this Sefer Torah and kiss the cloth of the Baal Shem Tov that lay on the *bima* (raised platform).

Never, cried Reb Tuvia Leib the shamash, had the *zechut* (merit) been sold for gold and silver. For years the Torah would only be bought out for *hoshanot* (a special prayer) on Hoshana Rabba (7th day of Sukkot festival), and for *hakafot* (the circle-dancing with the Torah) on Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Otherwise than those times no one would dare approach this Torah. And now, finished Reb Tuvia Leib, for a little money we will take out the Sefer Torah and honor rich people with *aliyot*! And he wept as he spoke.

In the meantime, Reb Binyomin Berlin returned with the news that there was a kosher mikveh, and that the wagon driver was ready to travel to the *beit hachayim* (cemetery).

My father, the Rebbe, asked Reb Tuvia to tell the story behind the Miraculous Sefer Torah. Here is what he told:

In 5512 (1752) there was, *lo aleinu*, ([but please] not on us) a terrible [heavenly] decree against the town of Mezibuz. Men, women and children got ill with different sicknesses and many were near death. The town was in an uproar, not one house was spared the epidemic.

They came to the Baal Shem Tov and cried bitterly about the sick and begged him to pray on their behalf. The Baal Shem Tov told them that he would not be able to help them, only they could help themselves.¹

The Baal Shem Tov said: "We say every day in the *Amidah* ('Standing') prayer 'May the service of Your people Israel always find favor.' This means: always the service of your people Israel can change His will to weaken and nullify a decree. And the service that constantly stands before G-d to make a good

¹ [In *Sefer HaShichot* it adds, "the towns' people responded to the Baal Shem Tov's refusal, "You help everyone who comes to you, and yet your own townsmen you can't help!" to which he said that only they could help themselves.]

will is the Letters of Torah. This can be in two ways: saying the words of Torah and *Tehilim* (psalms), or through writing a Sefer Torah in which everyone takes part."

When the town's people heard what the Baal Shem Tov said, they immediately decided to write a communal Sefer Torah, in which everyone from the community take part.

The Baal Shem Tov told his own personal *sofer* (scribe), the tzadik Reb Tzvi, to write two of the *yeriot* (sheets of parchment).

As soon as the Sefer Torah's writing was begun, the many sick people of the town began to get better. And so this Sefer Torah was named "The Miraculous Sefer Torah."

My father, the Rebbe, davvened *Mincha* (the afternoon prayer), hurried to the mikveh, and from there went to the tziyun (burial place) of the Baal Shem Tov, where he stayed till very late.

When he came back to davven *Maariv* (the evening prayer), while still fasting,² he told Reb Binyomin Berlin to request Reb Tuvia Leib to inquire from the other elders of the shul how much is the cost for the repairs to the shul. They told him that there are two options: either to do a simple, more basic level of repairs, which would cost about 300 silver rubles. Or to do a much nicer and longer-lasting job, but that would cost about 450 silver rubles.

My father, the Rebbe, instructed Reb Binyomin to tell the elders the following, "This man, [meaning the Rebbe Reshab], is a businessman from the city of Arsha, and he would like to donate the entire sum of money needed for the best renovation possible. However, this is on condition that tomorrow, Monday, there will be 1) a *minyán* (quorum of ten men) over here, in which 2) they'll read from the Miraculous Sefer Torah, and he [meaning the Rebbe Reshab] 3) will get an aliyah, 4) and *gelilah* [binding and covering the scroll].

In addition, there are certain other conditions which would have to be met. 5) The minyan must be early in the morning. 6) Only the elders may take part in the minyan. 7) A Kohen and Levi must be from those getting an aliyah. 8) For the first three days afterwards no-one else may find out what happened.

Reb Tuvia and the elders happily agreed to all the conditions.

² I once heard from my father-in-law the Rebbe that before going to a tziyun one does not eat, but does drink. [it is not clear if this is an instruction for all the chasidim or not, since perhaps not every time that one goes to a tziyun is the intention the same – the [7th] Rebbe],

My father, the Rebbe, gave them 200 silver rubles as a down payment, and Reb Binyomin wrote a receipt in his own name, with an address in Vitebsk, at the home of Reb Meir Mordechai Tzernin.

My father, the Rebbe, then went to his hotel room, where he broke his fast with a cup of hot water and some bread he had brought with him. Afterwards he went back to the shul, where he had mead and parter³ brought for Reb Tuvia and the elders, and they sat together till quite late that night.

My father returned to the hotel to rest a bit, and while it was still dark he got up and went to the mikveh. Over there he met some of the elders and they went together to the shul and prepared themselves for davvening.

After the prayers, my father went once more to the Baal Shem Tov's tziyun and from there went directly to the train station, to continue his journey.

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*Postscript:* The above Sefer Torah was the inspiration for the project of the Rebbe Rayatz to have written “the Sefer Torah of Moshiach”, the writing of which he inaugurated in the early 1940’s and was eventually completed under the supervision of his son-in-law, the 7<sup>th</sup> Rebbe, Rabbi M. M. Schneerson, in 1970.

*Source:* *Igros Kodesh*, Vol. 6, page 280, as translated and published in *Derher Magazine*,<sup>4</sup> and edited and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Connection:* Shavuot was the yearzeit of the Baal Shem Tov, and the beginning of the revelation from G-d Al-Mighty that He eventually instructed Moshe (Moses) to record in parchment scrolls.

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<sup>3</sup> Not clear what this is.

<sup>4</sup> I think that is where I found it, but I’m not sure.