

The Farmer's Unmarried Daughter

Yankel the peasant was a farmer by choice, and a wealthy one at that. Although he did not know how to read and write, he did, however, know almost everything there was to know about farming. That is how he had been able to work his fields to yield their maximum and enrich their master.

Yankel did not want his sons to grow up ignorant like he was, unable to read the simplest prayers. He tried to hire a tutor to come to his home but could not find one. Instead, he sent the two boys to a nearby town which boasted a good *cheder* (elementary-school level) and *yeshiva*. Shimon and Levi dedicated supreme efforts to becoming true Torah scholars and soon won a name for themselves as the *iluyim*-geniuses of their yeshiva. When the boys chanced once to hear **the Baal Shem Tov** speak, they became ardent admirers of him and traveled frequently to hear more from him and bask in his holy aura.

"Why are you always going to Mezibuz?" the father would ask the boys, not understanding what could draw his sons to that distant city.

"We want to visit the wise man who lives there, the famous Baal Shem Tov."

"Why is he considered so wise?" their farmer father would insist on knowing. "Can he plow? Does he know anything about planting? About crops? Weather?"

The sons tried to relate to their father in a language that he was familiar with "Yes Father," they would reassure him. "The Baal Shem Tov knows about everything under the sun, including farming." This answer would usually satisfy Yankel and he let his sons visit the *tzadik* of Mezibuz.

One time, however, his curiosity overcame him. "This time," he announced, "I am going to Mezibuz myself. Why should I not see this wise man with my own eyes?"

Yankel prepared for the trip, taking along many gifts for the rabbi. He arrived at his destination and was admitted into the *tzadik's* presence. "My sons tell me that you are a wise man. That you know everything there is to know about farming. Is this true?"

The Baal Shem Tov launched into a detailed account of all the fields the farmer owned and their exact boundaries. He then described exactly what Yankel had planted the past season in each of these fields. The peasant could not help being impressed with the detailed knowledge.

He decided that his sons were correct; this rabbi was indeed a learned and wise man. But if so, he thought to himself, then shouldn't the Baal Shem Tov also be able to advise him on what to plant in the coming season? That requires a special expertise.

The Besht obliged, giving him precise information about what he should plant, where and in what amounts. He then dismissed the peasant with a friendly nod of his head.

Yankel returned home and, recalling what the Baal Shem Tov had advised, followed his instructions to the letter, planting wheat where the *tzadik* had said and oats where the *tzadik* had advised. Summer came and with it the harvest. When Yankel had gathered in all his grain and fruit he found that the same fields had yielded many times their former amount. He could not help being impressed with the Besht's vast knowledge and foresight.

Yankel became a staunch admirer of the Baal Shem Tov, traveling to Mezibuz whenever he had any questions. Of course his interest lay in a different area altogether from that of his sons, but still, they all shared a mutual admiration for the *tzadik*.

Years passed and the peasant's daughter became of age. He had many offers for her hand -was she not the daughter of a wealthy man and the sister of two noted scholars?

Yankel felt that he could not take such a major step without consulting the wise man of Mezibuz. He listed the names of each prospective suitor and when he had accumulated many names, decided it was time to consult the rebbe.

“Tell me, honored rabbi, who on this list do you consider the most eligible suitor for my daughter? Many of these young men have wealth or family to recommend them, but I dare not make the decision alone.”

The Besht took the list from his hand and pored over it. Then he shook his head and gave it back to Yankel.

“None of these men are destined for your daughter,” he declared. “Return home and send me your two sons. I will find a suitable match for your daughter and he will accompany the boys home.”

Yankel did as he had been told. He returned home and sent his boys instead.

When Shimon and Levi arrived, the *Besht* took the youths with him and the three traveled to a distant city. The word spread about the Baal Shem Tov’s presence, and the townspeople prepared a lavish reception. Everyone came to pay his respects, from the trustees to the simplest cobbler.

When the people had all gathered in the large hall, the Baal Shem Tov revealed the purpose of his visit. “I want all your cooperation, my good people,” he announced. “I am looking for a certain young man, Shmerel the son of Velvel Itzik and Sarah Beila. If he is here today, let him step forward.”

Hundreds of eyes scanned the crowd but no one moved. The Baal Shem Tov continued, “Is there anyone here who knows where this young man lives?”

Again all eyes roved around the hall but no one spoke up. “I will be remaining here for several days. If anyone can trace Shmerel and bring him to me, I would be most grateful.”

Everyone wanted to be helpful but no one could recall such a name of a person living in their town. Several days went by but not a single clue turned up.

Meanwhile Rosh Chodesh came, which gave the happy townspeople another occasion to gather under one roof for a New Moon festive meal, and host the eminent Baal Shem Tov who had obliged them by gracing their city. A large meal was prepared in his honor and rows of tables were laid with snowy tablecloths. Fresh white challahs were put at each place.

Just as the people were about to wash and take their places, a wild youth with unkempt hair, dressed in dirty smelly rags, ran in and grabbed one of the dainty challahs. He ran out before people realized what was happening.

“Hey Shmerel!” someone shouted. “You, son of Velvel Itsik and Sora Baila, you come right back and return that roll.”

Suddenly everyone froze. That was the name they were to be on the lookout for! Could this really be? What could the Baal Shem Tov possibly want with such an uncouth and vulgar young man? He and his family enjoyed a reputation of being slothful, dirty, coarse and low.

They decided that this was a matter they would leave for the Besht to decide for himself. “Fine!” the Baal Shem Tov exclaimed. “Grab the boy. Wash him well and have him dressed up. Then bring him here to me.”

When Shmerel saw he was being pursued, he ran away as fast as he could. But his pursuers did not give up easily. They soon had him between two strong men who led him to the bathhouse. Before long he was being presented to the Baal Shem Tov.

The Besht made Shmerel sit next to him throughout the meal. In the middle of the meal the Besht suddenly took his handkerchief and passed it over Shmerel’s face. “Say some *dvar Torah!*” he commanded the youth.

Shmerel opened his mouth and began to expound on a complex Torah topic. His discourse continued for a few hours. Even the two brothers, who were geniuses in their own right and students of the Basht, couldn’t themselves understand all he said. When he had finished, the Besht turned to the brothers and asked,

“Nu, does this youth please you?” The reply was enthusiastically affirmative. “Very well, then take him home with you and prepare the *chupah* immediately.”

They did exactly that. They took Shmerel along with them and when they arrived home, began to praise him to the skies. They told their father that the Baal Shem Tov had instructed them to make a chupah right away. He gave his consent and the preparations were made for an immediate wedding.

Throughout the *sheva brachos* week following the wedding, Shmerel expounded Torah thoughts so deep that no one could fully understand them. People could not help being impressed by his deep knowledge. The brothers itched to sit down with him once the sheva brachos were over and delve deeply into the *Gemara* (Talmud) together with their new brother in law.

As talmidim of the Besht, the two brothers were accustomed to wake at midnight to recite the *tikun chatzos* (‘midnight rectifications’ prayer service), and then continuing with study until morning. They dared not wake him up, thinking that he must surely have studied until midnight. How he served the Creator was his business. But when it grew even later and the final time for reciting *the* Shema Yisroel prayer had arrived, they felt it their duty to wake him. They went over discreetly and knocked on the door of his room.

“My husband is still sleeping,” their sister answered their knock. She stepped aside and they entered the room.

With one look, they felt instinctively that the sleeping man was not a genuine Torah scholar, but they felt it not proper to make hasty judgments based on such a sketchy impression. Nevertheless, it was late, so they shook him gently and told him to get up.

“Oh leave me alone,” he yawned and stretched. “What’s the rush?” Something was basically wrong. A Torah scholar rises with the speed of a lion to do the will of his Creator.

“Say *Modeh Ani* (the first two words of a brief sentence of gratitude recited immediately upon waking),” they had to remind him. The brothers said to each other as soon as they left the room, “This strange behavior requires an explanation and there is no one who knows better than the Baal Shem Tov. He is the one who suggested this match to begin with”.

The brothers left for Mezibuz immediately. They were ushered into the rebbe’s presence, whereupon they reviewed the events of the past week, ever since they had left together with Shmerel until this morning. The Baal Shem Tov listened to their story and nodded.

“Let me explain what is really going on,” he said, and again nodded in understanding. “You see, there are matchmakers above in Heaven just as there are matchmakers here below. It was clear in Heaven that Shmerel is your sister’s true intended husband. The question that was proposed was how to bring about such a match. A young girl whose father was such a wealthy man and whose brothers were such excellent scholars would never be willing to marry a young man of such questionable manners, of such low intelligence and such disreputable family.

“A plan was formulated to have the girl born handicapped. But that was not the answer either, for as long as she had a rich father, she could still make a better match than this Shmerel, even if she was deformed.

“The *shadchanim* (matchmakers) above argued the possibilities back and forth. ‘What if her father were to die and she was deformed. The combination of these two faults might bring about the match on earth,’ one of them argued.

“I entered the discussion myself,” the Baal Shem Tov continued. “I refused to let this young girl or her father be touched in any way. I took it upon myself to open before him the gates of the Torah, both revealed and mystic. This would surely capture *your* hearts and ensure your consent.

“Had this Shmerel been a worthy receptacle for the Torah I filled him with, it would have remained with him in the future. But his gross coarseness overcame whatever I was able to squeeze from his potential after it had lasted for the seven days of sheva brochos.

“And now, my dear friends, there is nothing for you to do but return home. Tell your sister that this Shmerel is truly her intended husband. Let her continue to live with him and I will guarantee her fine children. And you, as Shmerel’s brothers-in-law, must constantly work on him. Teach him to *davven* (pray) and to learn, as much as his abilities permit. He will slowly improve and reach a decent level of Torah knowledge. Go, and good luck to you.”

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This story was retold by word of mouth from Rabbi Avraham-Yehoshua-Hershel, the Apter Gaon and Rebbe, who would conclude with this epilogue, “The sons that were born from this marriage are today among my closest chasidim.” (*Beis Mordechai*)

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from “*Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*” by Yisroel-Yaakov Klapholz, as translated by Sheindel Weinbach.

Connection: This Friday, the 15th of the Jewish month of-Menachem Av, when the unmarried “daughters of Jerusalem and Zion” would wear borrowed white dresses and dance together in the outskirts of Jerusalem, in the hope of being discovered by their destined soul mate. Therefore, this date is known as “Jewish Matchmaking Day.”

(For a deep dive into the historical and mystical significance of this occasion, see [Appendix C](#) in my 2nd book, “*Festivals of the Full Moon.*”)

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.