

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles < editor@ascentofsafed.com >
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TWO SHOCKINGLY REVEALED SECRETS

In 1734, **the Baal Shem Tov**, revealed himself and the chasidic movement. In the following years, many Jews flocked to him, as he was gaining fame as a healer of souls and a worker of miracles. However, the well-known illustrious Torah scholar, **Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef of Polnoye** remained unconvinced, suspicious that the charismatic new leader was a charlatan.

It happened that the child of a chasid of the Baal Shem Tov who lived in Polnoye became engaged to the child of one of the *Besht's* closest followers. At the *tenaim* (engagement contract ceremony), it was stipulated that the Baal Shem Tov would officiate at the wedding. It was also agreed that the wedding would take place in Polnoye.

As the day of the wedding drew close, doubts arose in the hearts of the family from Polnoye. How would Rabbi Yaakov Yosef react? Was he not the rabbi of the city, and thus traditionally honored to officiate at all weddings in his town? Would he agree that the Baal Shem Tov, whose path was unconventional and which he did not appreciate (to say the least), be the one to officiate at a wedding in his city?

The chasid from Polnoye decided to speak to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef. He told him that he had not thought much about it initially, but that now he was having second thoughts. In fact, he was even considering annulling the engagement, since he did not want to cause a scandal in the town. But first, he wanted to know the rabbi's opinion.

The rabbi told him that he absolutely must not annul a match that was agreed upon by both sides. As for him, he was ready to forgo his honor for the sake of a match that was surely announced in heaven even before the young couple was born. He blessed the chasid that the wedding should be in a good and auspicious time, and that the young couple build an everlasting edifice.

On the day of the wedding, right after the evening prayers, the rabbi closeted himself in his home and became immersed in the study of Torah. However, for some reason he was unable to concentrate as well as usual.

From time to time a thought arose in his mind: "Since the Baal Shem Tov has come to our city, perhaps it would be worthwhile to go and see him. This way I will know with certainty if I am right in my opposition."

But then he would reconsider: "It is not permitted to disrupt Torah learning. I had good reason not to go to this wedding, and so I will not change my mind now."

But the rabbi felt himself being tugged back and forth; no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to focus on his studies. In the end, he decided to go and find a secret

spot from which he could observe the Baal Shem Tov and his actions. It was already quite late at night, and the streets of Polnoye were not well lit with streetlights, so he was able to get to the wedding hall undetected.

The rabbi noticed that on the eastern wall of the building there was an open window. Somehow he managed to get up to this window where he was able to peer in and see what was going on inside. He was delighted to see that the Baal Shem Tov was sitting right below him. The crowd gathered around him, so intent on the words of the Baal Shem Tov that no one even glanced his way.

To his utter amazement, he heard the Baal Shem Tov say:

“You should know, Polnoye Jews, that your rabbi is very holy and exalted. He studies Torah day and night, and the fear of heaven is his treasure, but twice he made a small mistake.

“The first time was just before Passover. The rabbi had to prepare the traditional sermon delivered on *Shabbat Hagadol*, the Shabbat before Passover. The family was busy cleaning every nook and cranny in the house for the holiday, so he couldn't sit in his regular place because of the noise and tumult. He went up to the roof, and there he worked on his talk.

“Since spring had already come and it was hot on the roof, the rabbi wanted to drink some water. But he did not want to trouble his family members who were so busy. Instead, he left the house, hoping he would find someone who was bringing water from the well.

“Indeed, just as the rabbi stepped onto the street, one of the water carriers came by, lugging a pail of water on his shoulders. The rabbi asked him for some water, but the carrier continued walking, saying that he was on a mission to bring this water to some people. The rabbi was hurt by the water carrier's lack of respect and replied sharply.

“To tell the truth,” continued the Baal Shem Tov, “know that this water carrier was a hidden *tzaddik* (righteous person), and he was on his way to bring the water to his friends, who are no less righteous and learned than your illustrious rabbi. Therefore, the fact that he did not reply to the request of the rabbi was justifiable.”

When Rabbi Yaakov Yosef heard these words his mouth dropped open! How did the Baal Shem Tov know all this? Not a single detail was missing or incorrect.

But then he thought: perhaps someone was following me and saw all this and told the Baal Shem Tov what happened. Actually, he did not have much time to process what he heard, because the *Besht* soon continued:

“The second incident took place the night of the Tisha B'Av 24 hour fast. After praying and reciting *Eicha* (Book of 'Lamentations'), your exalted rabbi sat in the synagogue, feeling pain and sadness about the exile of the Divine Presence and the destruction of the Holy Temple. The time was after midnight and the synagogue was empty. The rabbi continued to sit in his corner on a low stool and cried bitterly until he had no strength left in him.

“His heartfelt tears and prayers accomplished their goal, pierced the Heavens and reached right up to the Throne of Glory. Indeed, it was even decided to send *Moshiach* to redeem the Jewish people from their exile in the merit of the beseeching and tears of the rabbi of Polnoye.

“But then the Satan (‘Accuser’) interrupted: Why are you are so impressed with the cries and pleas of *this* rabbi? Wait until I go down and entice him, and you will see that he is not so pure.’

“The heavenly court agreed to wait and see if the Satan would be successful in his endeavor.

“Satan came down and entered the synagogue in Polnoye holding an apple. He appeared as a Torah scholar and addressed the rabbi: ‘Our dear Rabbi, the light of our eyes! You have become so weak, your life is in danger. If you do not taste something, G-d forbid, the worst could happen!’

The rabbi rebuffed him, but Satan was not easily deterred. He continued, giving all sorts of learned arguments demonstrating that the rabbi must indeed eat at least a little bit.

“The thought slowly worked itself into the mind of the rabbi, ‘Perhaps this man is right.’ When the Satan saw that a crack had opened in the wall of opposition, he continued more forcefully. At last his efforts were crowned with success. The rabbi took the apple in his hand and made the blessing that is said before eating fruit.

“As soon as the rabbi finished the blessing, even before he put the apple to his mouth, he realized that something was not ‘kosher.’ He threw the apple on the ground and shouted: ‘Get out of here, impure one!’

“Suddenly the man—and the apple—disappeared! Realizing what had happened, the rabbi cried bitter tears, heartbroken that he had been ensnared by the Satan.

“Worn from the exertions of the evening, the rabbi fell asleep. He dreamed that he was walking out of the city. He soon came upon a big and beautiful apple orchard and thought to himself, ‘I know this whole city, and I never saw this apple orchard in this place.’ He walked around to see where the entrance to the orchard was. Finally, he spotted the gate.

“Seeing a guard sitting by the gate entrance, he asked him, ‘Whose orchard is this?’ The guard answered, ‘It belongs to the rabbi of Polnoye.’

The rabbi replied in surprise: ‘What are you talking about? I am the rabbi of Polnoye, and I do not have an orchard!’

“The guard smiled bitterly and said, ‘I know that you are the Rabbi, and you need to know that this orchard is indeed connected to you. The orchard, the trees and the fruit, and everything here was created through the unnecessary blessing that you made under the influence of Satan. I was sent here to guard your orchard.’

“Is there no rectification for my sin?’ asked the rabbi, humbly.

“The guard answered, ‘If you read *Tehillim* (Psalms) with proper intent, you will be shown from heaven how the orchard is slowly being nullified. Eventually, when you see the trees upside down, their roots above and their branches in the ground, you will know that your repentance has been accepted.’

“The rabbi awoke from his dream with his spirit broken. The next day, after the prayers, he said the whole book of Psalms with great intention and focus, while tears streamed down his cheeks.

“When he finished the first section, he was shown that the fruits from the trees had fallen off; when he finished the second section, he saw that all the leaves withered and disappeared; when he finished the third, the thin branches dried up; by the time he finished the fourth, the large ones had also shriveled and the trees were now naked. When he finished the fifth and final section, the trees were uprooted and had toppled over—but, they did not turn upside down.

“From then on, your rabbi has continued to say the whole book of Psalms with tears of repentance and with great intention. However, he sees that the trees remain flat on the ground, so he knows that his repentance is not complete.”

When the rabbi heard all this coming from the lips of the Besht, his heart melted., He said to himself, “Indeed the Baal Shem Tov is a G-dly and holy man. It is impossible that any plain mortal should know all the details of what happened in such an exact manner.” He decided then and there that he would attach himself to him.

At that moment the Baal Shem Tov stood, turned toward the window, and called out, “Rabbi Yaakov Yosef HaKohen, if you wish to get to the ultimate rectification of your sin and see with your own eyes that all the trees are upside down, come to me!”

From then on, the Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye became an ardent student and one of the most illustrious disciples of the Baal Shem Tov.

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*Source:* Freely adapted by Blumah Wineberg of Kansas City from *Otzar HaChasidim* (pp. 400-405), where it is told in the name of Rabbi Yisroel Pinchas Shreiber, known as *Pinye Rakshiker* (1892 –1942). First published at [www.chabad.org/3863682](http://www.chabad.org/3863682). Further adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles.

*Biographical note:* **Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef HaKohain of Polnoye** [5470 – **24 Tishrei** 5544\* (1710 – Oct. 1783)] was one of the earliest and closest rabbinical disciples of the Baal Shem Tov. He was the first person to author a book of Chasidic teachings, titled *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*, which had a revolutionary effect upon publication. Subsequently, he published two other chasidic classics, *Ben Porat Yosef* and *Ketonet Passim*. These three books, in which he said many hundreds of times “I heard from my teacher, my master, that...” (249 times in ‘Toldos’ alone), were the chief printed sources for teachings in the name of the Baal Shem Tov.

\* *Not certain--some say 5542 (1781) and some say 5551 (1790).*

*Connection:* The 24th of Tishrei is the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef.