

The Baal Shem Tov Seudah

On the last day of Pesach, as the sun begins to set, the members of my family prepare a special *seudah* called the Baal Shem Tov's Seudah. We gather a *minyan* and tell the story of the attempt of the Baal Shem Tov, of whom I am a ninth-generation descendant, to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael. This is a scrupulously observed tradition in my family, as in many other families of the Baal Shem Tov's descendants.

My mother's mother, Tzivia Serebrier, was born in Medzhybizh, the town in the Ukraine in which the Baal Shem Tov lived and taught. Many of his descendants lived in Medzhybizh over the years and intermarried with each other, and consequently, my grandmother was descended from him through three lines – from Reb Moshe Chaim Ephraim and Reb Baruch, the two sons of the Baal Shem Tov's daughter Udel, and from Reb Herschel, the Baal Shem Tov's son. In my family, our descent from the Baal Shem Tov has always been our precious heritage, and the yearly telling of the story is sacrosanct.

I heard the story many times from my grandfather, who heard it from his father-in-law over one hundred years ago, who heard it from his grandfather, who heard it from Reb Baruch of Medzhybizh, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson. My brothers and I tell the story as we heard it from our grandfather, who repeated it as he had heard it, free of additions and embellishments, and I am convinced that this carefully preserved form is the story the Baal Shem Tov himself told at his own table every year.

The story took place when the Baal Shem Tov was already famous throughout Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, he decided to leave the Ukraine and travel to Eretz Yisrael. During his journey, he was saved from mortal

danger on several occasions and was ultimately forced to turn back. When the events came to an end on the last day of Pesach, the Baal Shem Tov made a *seudas hodaah*, and he asked that all his descendants for ten generations make such a *seudah* every year and tell the story of his miraculous deliverance. The following is the story, which has been told and retold in my family in this way for over two hundred and sixty-five years.

The Baal Shem Tov always had a great desire to go to Eretz Yisrael and meet up with Rav Chaim ibn Attar, the author of *Ohr Hachaim*. It is said that one of them had the *neshamah* of David Hamelech and the other had the *nefesh* of David Hamelech, and that if these two *tzaddikim*, the holiest of their generation, could meet they would bring Moshiach immediately.

Years later, during a *shalosh seudos*, the Baal Shem Tov told his *talmidim*, “*Kavah ner maaravi*. The western light has been extinguished.” In other words, the Ohr Hachaim had passed away. How did he know this? Because a kabbalistic secret regarding *netillas yadaim* that is revealed to only one person in each generation had just been revealed to him as he was washing for *shalosh seudos*. Clearly, the Ohr Hachaim was no longer in this world. And indeed, it was so. Reports reached Medzhybizh that on that very Shabbos the Ohr Hachaim had passed away in Yerushalayim.

In the year of our story,¹ the Baal Shem Tov waited until the worst of the winter was over and then embarked on the arduous journey from the Ukraine to Eretz Yisrael to meet up with the Ohr Hachaim. The Baal Shem Tov was accompanied by his *gabbai*, Reb Hershel, his daughter Udel and her husband Rav Yechiel Ashkenazi, known as the Deitchel; his grandchildren had not yet been born. They traveled south by horse-drawn wagon past Odessa and down the western coast of the Black Sea, headed for the Turkish port of Istanbul, which the Russians still called Constantinople, its archaic name from the time of the Byzantine Empire. In Istanbul, they

¹ The Baal Shem Tov’s daughter Udel was born in 1720, and her first child, Moshe Chaim Ephraim, was born in 1748. Since there is a husband but no child in the story, the story must have taken place before 1748. The date is narrowed down further, because the Ohr Hachaim passed away in 1743 in Yerushalayim, after leaving his native Morocco ten years earlier. Therefore, the story must have taken place in the late 1730s or early 1740s.

would board a ship that would take them the rest of the way to Eretz Yisrael.

When they were only a short distance from Istanbul, they were attacked by highwaymen and all their valuables were taken. Fortunate to escape with their lives, they arrived in Istanbul bereft and penniless on Erev Pesach. They took rooms in a simple boarding house and brought in the meager belongings remaining to them. The Yom Tov was just a few hours away, but they had no means of preparing for it. The Baal Shem Tov, his son-in-law and his *gabbai* went off to the *beis medrash*, and his daughter remained in the boarding house.

Udel unpacked their belongings and arranged the rooms as best she could. Then she took a few sheets and went down to the Bosphorus Strait that runs through the city to wash them in honor of the Yom Tov. As she sat by the water and cried, an elegant carriage pulled up and a well-dressed man stepped out.

"I was passing by," he told Udel, "and I saw a young Jewish woman crying, so I stopped. I am Jewish myself. Why are you crying? Is there any way I can help you?"

"My father is the holy Baal Shem Tov," she replied. "We were on our way to Eretz Yisrael when we were robbed of everything, and now we are here in Istanbul hours before Pesach with nothing but these poor sheets. Back in the Ukraine, my father is a famous man, but here no one knows him. How will we have a Pesach? That is why I am crying."

"Please do not cry," said the man. "I'm a wealthy merchant, and I'll arrange a proper Yom Tov for your family. Are your rooms nearby?"

"Yes. Just across the way."

"Then I'll bring everything to your rooms. All I ask is that my wife and I be allowed to join you at the Seder."

"I am sure my father will have no objections," she said. "He'll be so grateful for your kindness."

And so it was arranged. Over the next few hours, the merchant's

servants outfitted the Baal Shem Tov's rooms with exquisite furnishings, fine white linens, silver utensils and pots of steaming food.

The Baal Shem Tov returned from shul, and without saying a word to anyone, he went to his seat and began the Seder immediately. He conducted the Seder in his usual manner until he reached *shulchan oreich*. Only then did he reach out his hand to his benefactor.

"*Shalom aleichem*," he said. "I am grateful to you for everything you've done for us here. Is there anything for which you'd like my blessing?"

"Thank you very much, Rabbi," said the merchant. "It was a great honor for me and my wife to help such a great *tzaddik* in his time of need. As for us, we have everything we could possibly want, but we have no child."

"Then that is my blessing to you," said the Baal Shem Tov. "In a year, you shall have a son."

The merchant and his wife were delighted, and it is told that precisely a year later they were blessed with the birth of a healthy boy. But the Baal Shem Tov heard a voice from Heaven declare, "There was a *gezeirah*, a divine decree, that this couple should be childless, but because *tzaddik gozer veHakadosh Baruch Hu mekayem*, because the Almighty fulfills the decrees of *tzaddikim*, the divine decree will be rescinded. Nevertheless, for promising this couple a child, the Baal Shem Tov has lost his share in Olam Haba."

The Baal Shem Tov was not dismayed. "Very well," he said. "Until now I was an *eved oved es rabbo al menas lekabel sechar*, a servant serving his master for the purpose of being rewarded. Now I will be an *eved oved es rabbo shelo al menas lekabel sechar*, a servant serving his master with no expectation of being rewarded."

Thereupon, the Baal Shem Tov heard another declaration from Heaven, "Because the Baal Shem Tov has responded in such a splendid manner, he has regained his share in Olam Haba."

After the meal was finished, the Seder continued with the saying of the Haggadah. When the Baal Shem Tov reached the words "*leOseh niflaos*

gedolos levado, to the One who performs great wonders by Himself,” he threw back his head and closed his eyes.

Fifteen minutes passed and then an hour and then two, and still the Baal Shem Tov remained in this trancelike position, with his head thrown back, his eyes closed and his face immobile. The others sitting at the table were astonished and dumfounded, but no one dared move from his place.

After three hours in this position, the Baal Shem Tov opened his eyes and raised his head.

“*Ki le’olam chasdo*,” he said. “For His kindness endures forever.”

The Baal Shem Tov walked to the window and looked out onto the street, where the heavy darkness of the night was just beginning to lift.

“*Uhn geit ehr*,” said the Baal Shem Tov. “There he goes.”

The others crowded around the window to catch a glimpse of this person that the Baal Shem Tov had pointed out to them. It was a man in ministerial garb walking by himself through the deserted streets.

They returned to their places at the table, and the Baal Shem Tov explained to them what had transpired during this fateful night.

At this time, the Ottoman Empire was ruled by the queen mother. There was also a young crown prince whom she was grooming for the throne.² On that first night of Pesach, as the Baal Shem Tov was sitting down to the Seder, a drama was beginning to unfold in the royal palace. A high-ranking imam closely associated with the royal family asked the queen if he could take the crown prince for a drive through the city. The queen consented, and the crown prince and the imam set off in a royal carriage.

As they rode through the streets, the imam turned to the crown prince.

“You know,” he said, “tonight is the first night of the Jewish holiday of Pesach. The Jews are very powerful here in Istanbul. One of the high

² According to the historical sources, the sultan of the Ottoman Empire at this time was Mahmut I. He was childless and withdrew from active involvement in governmental affairs, spending most of his time writing poetry. The government was run by his viziers and by his powerful mother, Saliha Sabkati. Mahmut was succeeded in 1753 by his brother Osman III. It is quite possible that the crown prince in this story is Osman, who was already designated as the heir apparent to his childless and disinterested older brother.

ministers of the government is a Jew. So what do you say we pay a surprise visit to our Jewish minister on his holiday?”

“I think it’s a very good idea,” said the crown prince.

The imam gave the driver instructions, and in a few minutes, they were knocking at the minister’s door. The minister and his family were already seated at the Seder table when a servant entered to announce the arrival of visitors – the crown prince and the imam. The minister was flabbergasted. He welcomed his guests into his home and invited them to join the Seder.

After refreshments were served and some pleasantries were exchanged, the imam rose and announced that it was time for them to go.

“Your majesty,” the minister said to the crown prince, “I cannot begin to tell you what a great honor it was for me to have you cross the threshold of my home. I want to give you a gift, but what can I possibly give you that will be fitting for a prince? So I’ll give you something that has special meaning to the Jewish people. The holiday of Pesach is our most important holiday. The Seder feast is the highlight of the holiday. The *ke’arah* is the highlight of the Seder. The three *matzos* are the highlight of the *ke’arah*. And the top *matzah*, the *kohein*, is the most important of the three *matzos*. This, the *kohein matzah*, is my gift to you, your majesty.”

The minister took the *kohein*, wrapped it in a beautiful silk cloth and presented it to the crown prince. The expression on the crown prince’s face showed how pleased and honored he felt. The imam bid the minister good night and led the crown prince back to the royal carriage.

As soon as they settled into the plush cushions, the imam turned to the crown prince. “So what do you think of your gift?”

“I think it’s wonderful,” said the crown prince.

The imam arched his eyebrows. “Really? Didn’t you understand what was going on?”

“What was going on? What do you mean?”

“Hah! You are too innocent. You do not understand these things, but it was obvious to me. The minister was mocking you. The crown prince visits

him in his home, and all he gives him as a parting gift is a dry flatbread? It is an outrage.”

“Really?” said the crown prince.

“Absolutely.”

“So what should we do?”

“I have an idea, your majesty. Give me your signet ring, and I will make sure that the royal honor is restored. We will expel the Jews from our city.”

The crown prince removed his ring and, somewhat reluctantly, gave it to the imam.

“You have done the right thing,” said the imam. “You don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

That night, the crown prince went to sleep at his usual time. A short while later, the queen looked in to check on him, but he was still awake. An hour later, she checked on him again, and he was still wide awake.

“What is the matter, my son?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“It’s not nothing,” she said. “I can see you have something very serious on your mind. Please tell me what it is.”

The crown prince sighed. “I think I’ve done a bad thing tonight,” he said. He went on to tell her everything that had happened concluding with the transfer of the royal signet ring into the hands of the imam.

The queen wrung her hands. “This is very serious,” she said. “We have a tradition in our family that whoever persecutes the Jews will eventually suffer a disastrous downfall. You go to sleep, my son. I’ll take care of it.”

The queen called an emergency midnight meeting of her closest advisors and told them what had occurred. She asked for suggestions on how to deal with the crisis, but no one put forward any good ones.

Finally, one of the advisors said, “The minister in this affair is one of our most brilliant people. Why don’t we ask him what to do?”

“Good idea,” said the queen, and she immediately sent off a squadron of royal guards to bring the minister to the palace.

The second knock on the minister's door that night was louder and harsher than the first. The minister himself opened the door and was aghast to see royal guards on his doorstep.

"By the orders of her majesty," said the captain of the guards, "you are to come with us immediately to the palace."

The minister feared the worst. Unsure if he would ever come home or even survive until morning, he bid his family a tear-filled farewell and went off with the royal guards.

As soon as he was led into the presence of the queen, the minister flung himself to the ground in a position of abject supplication.

"I don't know what I have done, your majesty," he pleaded, "but I assure you it was not intentional. I beg your royal pardon."

"Stand up, sir," said the queen. "I had you brought here, because I need your advice." She proceeded to tell him what had happened after the crown prince and the imam left his house. "What do we do about this?"

"Your majesty," said the minister, "I believe we should make a public announcement that the crown prince's ring was stolen, and that all documents and proclamations sealed with the royal insignia are henceforth null and void until the ring is found and returned to the crown prince. Furthermore, whoever is caught with the ring in his possession will be sentenced to death."

The queen clapped her hands with delight. "Excellent, excellent. I'll have this done immediately. You may go, sir, and a happy holiday to you."

On the way home, the minister would not accept a ride in the carriage of the royal guards, because it was Yom Tov. Instead, he set off on foot for his home, which was on the other side of the city. His walk took him past the rooms in which the Baal Shem Tov and his family were staying. He was the lone man walking through the deserted predawn streets that the Baal Shem Tov had pointed out to his family from the window of their rooms.

On Chol Hamoed, the Baal Shem Tov and his family boarded a ship in the port of Istanbul and resumed their journey to Eretz Yisrael. After a day

or so at sea, a violent storm suddenly arose.

The sailors, convinced that they had somehow incurred the divine wrath, threw furniture and other items overboard as appeasement, but it did not help. They then decided that one of the people on the ship was responsible. They drew lots and threw the loser overboard, but the storm did not subside. They repeated the process again and again until eventually Udel and her husband were also thrown overboard, but it was all to no avail. The storm continued to toss the ship about, threatening to tear it apart at the seams.

The Baal Shem Tov then realized that the cause of the storm must be a bundle of esoteric kabbalistic writings he was carrying with him to Eretz Yisrael. These had been composed by Rav Adam Baal Shem, a *tzaddik nistar* who had lived in the previous generation and had given instructions that these writings be delivered to the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov understood that it was the divine will that these writings be withdrawn from the world. He dropped the writings over the side of the ship into the roiling waters, and the storm subsided.

The ship, however, was too battered to continue on its voyage. It was barely able to reach a nearby island where the crew could attempt to make repairs and the passengers could rest.

While the crew struggled with the broken masts and shredded sails, the Baal Shem Tov and Reb Herschel, his *gabbai*, went for a walk into the interior of the island. The path led them into a wooded area, and fairly soon the ship and its crew were out of sight and earshot.

As they were walking, a number of strange and savage men sprang from the shadows, screaming at the tops of their lungs. They grabbed the Baal Shem Tov and his *gabbai* and tied them to a tree. Then they set about making a bonfire. It seemed as if these ghoulish apparitions were preparing to eat their captives. The Baal Shem Tov and his *gabbai* were terrified.

“Say something, Rebbe,” said the *gabbai*. “Use your powers to get us out of this situation.”

“I can’t do anything,” the Baal Shem Tov replied. “I’ve forgotten everything. My mind is a blank. Why don’t you say something?”

“I’ve also forgotten everything. All I remember is the *aleph-beis*.”

“The *aleph-beis*!” exclaimed the Baal Shem Tov. “Excellent! I remember it, too. So let us say the *aleph-beis* together.”

And so they said the letters of the *aleph-beis* together with great *kavanah*. “*Aleph! Beis! Gimmel! Daled! Hei!*”

Suddenly, a deafening din reverberated through the woods, causing the creatures to flee in a panic, and the ropes binding the Baal Shem Tov and his *gabbai* fell apart. The Baal Shem Tov and his *gabbai* wasted no time in hurrying back to the safety of the shore and the beached ship.

When they got back to the ship, the captain informed them that the voyage to Eretz Yisrael would have to be aborted. The ship was simply not seaworthy enough to head out into the open seas. They would have to return to Istanbul.

Leaking and creaking, the battered ship sailed back into the Istanbul harbor towards evening on the last day of Pesach. After making landfall, the Baal Shem Tov went looking for news of his daughter who had been thrown overboard together with her husband during the storm. He discovered that both of them had returned to Istanbul just hours earlier and were now warming themselves in a small hut in the harbor area. The Baal Shem Tov found them near a glowing oven in the care of a Jewish family. There was a pot of *kneidlach* on the oven.³

The Baal Shem Tov asked them how they had been saved from drowning. They told him they had grabbed onto floating planks that had been jettisoned from the ship. After a long while, a Turk in a small boat had come by and said, “*Tandelamai*.”⁴ He took them into his boat and brought them back to Istanbul.

The Baal Shem Tov told them they would be returning to Medzhybizh

³ Some say that this is why *kneidlach* are customarily eaten at the Baal Shem Tov Seudah.

⁴ The meaning of this word is unclear. Some connect it with the French *tendez le main*, which means give me your hand, but why a Turk would speak French to them is unexplained.

and not continuing their journey to Eretz Yisrael. All the obstacles and perils they had encountered were manifestations of the divine will, he explained. Apparently, the Ribono Shel Olam did not want him to meet up with the Ohr Hachaim; the time for the *geulah* had not yet come.

The Baal Shem Tov then made a *seudas hodaah* in acknowledgment of his and his family's miraculous deliverance to safety. He continued to make the *seudas hodaah* every year thereafter after Minchah on the last day of Pesach, the day and the time that the deliverance had been completed. He also left a *tzavaah* that all his descendants should make this same *seudas hodaah* for ten generations. It is said that by that time Moshiach will already be here; may he come speedily in our days.