

Chassidic Tales

“He who completely believes Jewish folk tales is a fool; he who completely dismisses them is an even greater fool.”

TO TELL THE STORY

In the days of the Ba'al Shem Tov, whenever a catastrophe threatened the Jewish people, the great master would go into a secret place in a nearby forest. There he would chant a prayer according to a special melody while standing under a densely branched tree he had known from the time both he and the tree were young. Thus the catastrophe would be averted.

Two generations hence, when enemies again rose up against the House of Israel, the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson, a famous Rabbi in his own right, would go into the same forest and say: “I cannot find the tree where my grandfather once prayed. But I know the right prayer and the proper melody.” And once again the Jews were saved.

The grandson's grandson, another renowned scholar, moved too far from the forest to be able to visit whenever there was a need for divine intervention. Moreover, the words to the prayer his grandfather had once recited were now lost.

Nevertheless, when the Jews were in mortal peril, he would hum the Ba'al Shem Tov's melody. And this too was sufficient to avert the disaster.

In our days, the words to the prayer are forgotten, the melody is lost, and even if the forest still existed we could never again locate the exact spot where the Ba'al Shem Tov once stood under the densely branched tree. Yet we will continue to tell and retell the story of the forest, the melody and the ancient prayer. And this too will be sufficient.

ILLUSION & REALITY

One of the Besht's (Ba'al Shem Tov) essential parables tells the following tale: The king built a castle which he surrounded with concentric barriers, made up of high walls, each more formidable than the previous. Then he issued the following statement: Anyone who is able to find me will become my most trusted advisor, and elevated to the position of assistant to the King.

The first group of those who attempted to reach the King were scared off by fierce guards and wild animals that threatened them when they began to approach the castle. The second group was able to overcome their fear, but were offered lavish riches when they reached the second wall. They too succumbed, and went no further.

Only the King's son, who loved him so much, whose only desire was to see his father's face, kept going. But, finally he too, was overwhelmed by the obstacles. He

cried out: Father please help me! In a moment, all the walls disappeared, and the King was standing right next to him.

Moral: All obstacles in life are an illusion; God is right in front of you if you truly seek him.

ENDLESS LOVE

A father complained to the Ba'al Shem Tov that his son had forsaken God. 'Rabbi, what shall I do', he asked. 'Love him more than ever'.

HOW GOD FEELS

A little boy went out to play hide-and-peek with his friends. He went out to hide, but all of his friends left and he found himself alone. He ran crying to his grandfather and told him what happened. His grandfather started crying, too. He told his grandson: 'That is exactly how God feels. Because He too is hiding, and no-one is looking for him.'



INNOVATION & TRADITION

A newly appointed Hasidic Rabbi was challenged by his Hasidim for innovations he was introducing. They complained that he was violating the tradition that had been passed down to him by his father, the previous Rebbe. The young Rebbe replied: 'By introducing my new ideas, I am being loyal to the tradition of my father. He was an original human being who followed the dictates of his heart and so am I.'

NOT A TRACE

On the day before Passover, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, while walking through the marketplace, met several Gentiles who were known to be smuggling goods across

the border.

'Do you have any smuggled silk' he asked them.

'We do', they answered.

'How many yards to you have', he continued.

'Don't worry Rabbi,' said the smuggler.

'We have as much as you need.' He left them and soon met a Jew.

'Do you have any Hametz', he asked.

'Hametz?' asked the astonished Jew.

'Heaven forbid that a Jew should have Hametz after the sixth hour on Erev Pessach!'

Soon he met a second Jew and again asked, 'Do you have any Hametz?'

'What did you ask, Rabbi', answered the distraught man. 'Hametz at this time!' Am I not still a Jew?'

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak lifted his eyes toward Heaven and said 'Master of the World, look down from Heaven and see how Your people Israel tremble at Your word and hasten to fulfill Your commandments. The Russian Tzar is a mighty and fearsome ruler who has many generals and guards and prisons to enforce his decrees. And he commands thousands of soldiers to protect the border to see that no merchandise is brought across it unlawfully. Nevertheless, daily they smuggle in all manner of merchandise and fear not to see it openly in the market. But You, O Lord, Who have no generals or guards or prisons, have simply written in Your Torah 'There shall no leavened bread be seen with thee.' And on Erev Pessach, long before the evening comes, there is not a trace of Hametz to be found among all of the people of Israel'.

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

Reb Zusya of Hanipol once said: When I reach the seat of judgement, I am not afraid that I will be asked: 'Zusya why were you not like Moses, why were you not like Rabbi Akiva?' I am afraid that I will be asked: 'Zusya! Why were you not Zusya!!!'

THE FORGOTTEN ART

There once was a king who so loved music, he hired musicians who shared his passion for music to play each morning before him. And the king delighted in hearing their music. When the musicians died, their sons sought to take their places. But, alas, they had neither mastered the art of their fathers nor had they kept their instruments in proper condition. Worse still, the sons no longer loved the king as did their fathers but set their eyes only upon the reward, blindly following their fathers' custom of arriving early each morning at the palace to perform. But the harsh sounds that emerged were so offensive to the ear, that after a time the king no longer listened to their music.

Still, there were among the sons of the old musicians, those who were determined to correct the situation. They set about the difficult task of relearning the forgotten art. Before coming to the king, they would now first try to tune their instruments, and in so doing would often arrive late. Upon entering the king's court and hearing the racket of the other musicians who were already present, they sought out an obscure corner for themselves where they could play undisturbed in accordance with their ability. They gathered each morning to perform, remaining long after the other musicians had departed so that they might improve their skill. Long before leaving their homes for the



palace each morning they continued to struggle with their poor instruments.

The king was aware of their efforts and it was good in his eyes. For even though they did not play with the same talent as their fathers, still they strove, within their limits, to once more bring joy to the king. Thus was their music received by the king with favour.