

TALES OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV

Following the weekly Torah reading

A project of **THE BAAL SHEM TOV FOUNDATION**

Freely adapted by Tzvi Meir HaCohane - Executive Director Baal Shem Tov Foundation

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VAYECHI

"When Israel realized that he would soon die..." Genesis 47:29

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THE PASSING

Following the revelation of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, as a great Jewish leader and mystic, many of the Jewish community, especially in Poland, became his followers, and students of the Chassidic path of Judaism. The time arrived all too soon of the Baal Shem Tov's passing to the next world.

For the Passover of 1760, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, came to visit his Rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov. On the eve of the seventh day of Passover, Rabbi Pinchas was feeling weak and decided not to go to the Mikveh as was his custom. The next day during his morning prayers, he had a premonition that the Baal Shem Tov would soon pass away. Rabbi Pinchas began to daven (pray) more intensely, begging that the Heavenly decree against the Baal Shem Tov be lifted. But he felt that he was unable to affect the decree and started to deeply regret that he had not gone to the mikveh that morning.

Coincidentally, after morning prayers, the Baal Shem Tov asked Reb Pinchas if he had gone to the mikveh on the previous day. When he answered he had not, the Baal Shem Tov replied.. "It's too late to correct that now."

After Passover, the Baal Shem Tov fell ill. However, he did not tell his followers and continued to pray before the ark. While he might have told his close followers, who were able to effect changes with their prayers, instead he

sent them on missions to other communities. Rabbi Pinchas, knowing of the Heavenly decree against the Baal Shem Tov did not return to his home but stayed with the Baal Shem Tov.

On the evening of Shavuos, all of the followers of the Baal Shem Tov gathered with him to spend the night learning Torah, as is the custom. The Baal Shem Tov expounded on the Torah portion of the week and the meaning of Shavuos. In the morning he sent for his closest followers to gather in his room. He told Rabbi Leib Kessler and several others to arrange for his burial. Because they were members of the funeral society and were knowledgeable in signs of illness, he showed them the signs on his body and explained how the soul emanates from each part.

Then, he told them to gather a minyan to pray with him. Before they began, he said, "Soon I shall be with the Holy One, blessed be He."

After the prayers, Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka went to the Beis Medrash to pray for the Baal Shem Tov. Later, the Baal Shem Tov said, "He petitions in vain. Maybe if he could have entered in the Heavenly gate where I was accustomed to enter, his prayers would have helped."

At that moment the soul of a dead man came to the Baal Shem Tov asking for redemption. The Baal Shem Tov rebuked him, saying: "For eighty years you have wandered, and you have not bothered to come until the day of my parting from this world. Go away you rasha (wicked person)." Then the Baal Shem then told his gabbai (custodian of the shule) what had just happened. He told him, "Go quickly and tell everyone to stay away from the road because I angered that soul and he may hurt someone." Before the gabbai had a chance to warn everyone, the soul had already injured a girl, the daughter of the shammash.

When the gabbai returned to report what happened, he heard the Baal Shem Tov saying, "I grant you these two hours. Do not torture me."

The gabbai asked, "Rebbe, who are you talking to?"

The Baal Shem Tov answered, "Don't you see the Angel of Death? Before, he always ran from me. As people said, 'I banished him to where black peppers grow.' Now that he has been given control over me, he stands straighter and laughs at me."

In the afternoon, after morning prayers, the town's people who did not know of the Baal Shem Tov's condition, came to see him. As always, he delivered a discourse of Torah to them. Later, during the Yom Tov meal, he asked his gabbai to put mead in a large glass. Instead, the gabbai put it in a small glass. The Baal Shem Tov quipped, "Man has no power on the day of death, even the gabbai does not obey me." Then he said, "Until now I have done favors for you. Now you will do a favor for me."

All of the close disciples were sitting in the room of the Baal Shem Tov while he lay in his bed. He gave them a sign. "My friends, when I leave this world, both clocks in this room will stop." His followers saw the hands of the big clock stop while he washed his hands. They stood in front of the clock so that the Baal Shem wouldn't see that the clock had stopped. He said to them, "My friends, I am not concerned for myself because I know that when I leave through the door of this world, I'll immediately enter into the door of the next world."

The Baal Shem Tov then sat up in his bed and told them to gather around him. He spoke Torah explaining about the column on which one ascends from lower paradise to upper paradise, and how this was so in each of the four worlds. Then he described the world of the souls, and expounded the order of worship. He instructed them to say with him, "Let the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us." He lay down and sat up several times. Meanwhile he concentrated on mystical kavanos (intentions) until they could not distinguish the syllables of his speech.

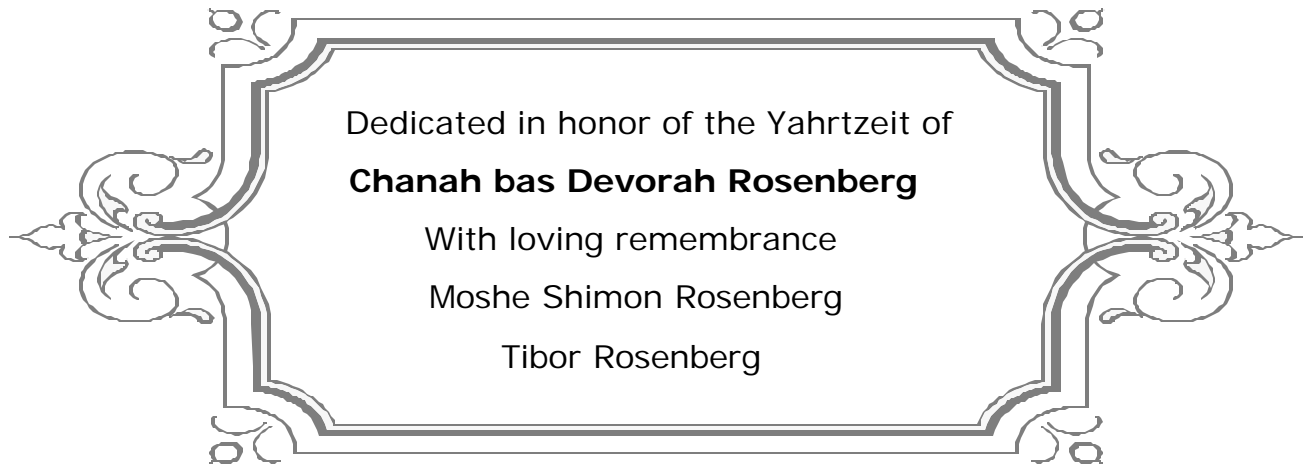
Finally he lay down and told them to cover him with a sheet. Then he began to tremble as when he said the eighteen benedictions. Slowly he

became quiet and they saw that the small clock had stopped. They waited for a long time but he didn't move. Then they put a feather under his nose to detect his breathing, and then realized that he had passed away.

Rabbi Jacob, of the holy community of Medzibush, reported that Rabbi Leib Kessler saw the departure of his soul as a blue flame.

And so it was.

Adapted by Tzvi Meir HaCohane (Howard M. Cohn, Patent Attorney) from a story in Shvchei HaBesht and translated in Praise of the Baal Shem Tov by Mintz and Ben Amos.



If you would like to dedicate a weekly Story, please contact Tzvi Meir HaCohane (Howard M. Cohn, Patent Attorney) Executive Director, Baal Shem Tov Foundation cohn@baalshemtov.com

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