

A Chassidic Story (#15)

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October 8, 2011



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This story is one of my personal favorites. It's human in many ways: the innkeeper's desire to help both at the story's beginning and end; in the protagonist's tenderheartedness and his desire to celebrate Shabbat as best way possible. There's a deep current of mystery running throughout and—it's a fish story.

The compiler of Shivchei HaBaal Shem Tov heard this story from both the Toldot Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye and from Reb Gedaliah of Linitz.

Reb Nachman of Kosov had a relative, Reb Yudel of Tchidnov. Reb Yudel's father, Reb Yosef, was a preacher. Part of Reb Yudel's path in serving God was to not to take favors from others. If he couldn't pay for it out of his own pocket, he didn't want it. (The Baal Shem Tov said that Reb Yudel was a reincarnation of Shmuel (Samuel) the Prophet. See Berakhot 10b.) He worked in the iron trade.*

Reb Yudel was once traveling and stopped at an inn. He wanted to stay for Shabbos (Shabbat), but the innkeeper told him, "What will you eat, sir? I don't have fish. I have meat, but my standard of keeping kosher is not as high as yours. I suggest you travel to the next inn, which is not too far

away. That innkeeper is wealthy. He certainly has fish—and a standard of kosher that will satisfy you. You should go there.” And Reb Yudel did.

Now, to get to that next town one had to cross a river. There was no bridge, however. People would ford the river because the water was generally not that deep. As it happened, the winter snows had melted and the river was actually quite deep. From the riverbank, however, it didn’t seem any deeper than usual. As Reb Yudel got close to the river, a dog suddenly run ahead of them and jumped into the river.

The poor dog started to drown. It disappeared under the water and surfaced a few times, whining in fear. Reb Yudel’s pity was aroused and he cried for the dog. He also understood that the river was unpassable, so he and his party returned to the first innkeeper.

When he got there, Reb Yudel pleaded with the innkeeper to get fish for Shabbos. The innkeeper went to the local fisherman and begged them to catch him some fish. And they did. They caught a huge pike. The innkeeper brought it home and showed it to his guest. “Rabbi, I’ve been living in this village for years and I’ve never seen them catch such a big fish!” He then went and prepared a few different dishes from the pike.

At the Shabbos night meal, Reb Yudel was singing zemiros (Shabbos-table songs). He fell asleep and his deceased father, Reb Yosef the preacher, appeared to him in a dream. “I want to tell you something. I am reincarnated in this fish. The Jewish snitch that I hounded was reincarnated in the dog that drown. Drowning in order to save your life was his tikkun (rectification).

“Because I hounded him, I had to be reincarnated in this fish. When you cried for the drowning dog, that was my tikkun. Now, be careful how you eat this fish!”

Based on *Shivchei HaBaal Shem Tov* #82

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*Reb Nachman of Kosov was originally an opponent of the Baal Shem Tov, but later became an adherent.