

A Chassidic Story (#25)

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December 24, 2023



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This week's Torah reading, *parshas Vayechi*, deals with the passing of Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch, who was the real-live, everyday father of his twelve sons (and Dinah, his daughter). It includes his final words to them, what he felt they had to know to properly fulfill their mission.

Similarly, the haftorah tells of King David's final words and instruction to his son that would succeed him, Shlomo *HaMelekh* (King Solomon). (In comparison to what Yaakov Avinu said, these words are much more blunt and direct, seething on the surface, with a broad undercurrent of meaning.)

So here is a summary of a long story, the origin of the holy Baal Shem Tov, with its ending. The connection to this introduction will be clear.

Reb Eliezer, the holy Baal Shem Tov's father, ended up in exile, far, far away not only from his home, but from Jews as well. He was the only Jew in a country that executed anyone who was known to be a Jew. Yet, somehow, Reb Eliezer rose from being the viceroy's valet to the king's most trusted minister. When the prime minister dies, the king rewards Reb Eliezer by making him the new viceroy and by giving him the previous viceroy's daughter for a wife.

Of course, pure and holy God-fearing Jew that he is, Reb Eliezer never lives with the young woman. After a while she comes to him and asks, "What fault have you found in me that you do not touch me and do with me that which all people do?" Reb Eliezer answered, "If you swear to not reveal to anyone what I say, I will tell you the truth."

She swore and Reb Eliezer told her that he was a Jew. She immediately told him to return home, giving him a fortune in gold and silver to take. On his way home Reb Eliezer was attacked by bandits who robbed him of all that the viceroy's daughter had given him.

While still on his way, Eliyahu HaNavi (the Prophet) came to Reb Eliezer. "Because you overcome all the temptations you faced, you will be blessed with a son who will bring light to the eyes of all Yisrael. He will be a manifestation of the verse (Isaiah 49:3), "Yisrael, in whom I [God] take pride." When he arrived home, he found his wife alive and well. The holy Baal Shem Tov was born to them when they were both close to 100 years old. (The holy Baal Shem Tov once commented that his soul could not be brought into this world until his father had no more desire left.)

The child grew. When he was about four or five years, Reb Eliezer called young Yisrael to his bedside. "Light of my life, I won't have the privilege of raising you. My darling, I want you to always remember one thing, for as long as you live.

"God is with you—fear nothing."

May the merit of the tzaddikim protect us and all Yisrael.
Amen.

Based on *Shivchei Baal Shem Tov* #1

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