



A Story for the Shabbos Table מעשה בפועל

A STRANGE PLACE TO BE ON ROSH HASHANA

In honor of this year being 250 years since the Histalkus of the Baal Shem Tov, we will IYH be printing stories about the Baal Shem Tov.

This story is about the son-in-law of the Baal Shem Tov, Reb Yechiel Ashkenazi.

One summer, he went to visit his father who lived in Germany. Before he left, the Baal Shem Tov gave him a Bracha for a safe journey and a safe return, and Reb Yechiel asked the Baal Shem Tov for a Bracha that he would return home before Rosh Hashana. The Tzadik did not answer him. Three times he asked, and three times he received no answer. Realising that this probably meant he would not be back before Rosh Hashana, Reb Yechiel took a Shofar with him on his journey, just in case.

After visiting his father, on his way home, the ship which was taking Reb Yechiel home, was caught in a big storm, and was drawn off course. Only on Erev Rosh Hashana did the sea calm down, and the ship was able to stop near a strange city in a far away land – a place where no Jew had ever lived.

Reb Yechiel realized that Hashem wanted him to spend Rosh Hashana in this far-away place instead of at home with his community. He rented a house near the sea shore, so he would be able to go to the Mikve, and he prepared himself for Yom Tov. When Yom Tov came in, he started davening, in the way that a Chossid of the Baal Shem Tov would, with Kavanah, saying the words loudly and crying a lot.

People who passed by were amazed at this sight that they had never seen before, and did not quite understand. They thought he went out of his mind.

In the morning, they were even more surprised when they saw him go down to the sea, then come back and continue to talk and cry as he did the day before. It became even stranger when he took out his Shofar and started blowing. By the time it came to Musaf, there was a huge crowd outside his house, watching Reb Yechiel as he davened.

Just that morning, the king of that country decided to go out for a ride in his carriage. Surprised by the unusual sight of a large crowd near the seashore, he approached and asked what was going on. When the king was

told, he realized that this must be a special man, not a madman, and they he probably belongs to a religion that he had never heard of.

So he called for the Chassid, who explained to the king where he came from and how he came to the island. The king was very impressed, and wanted to find out more, so he invited the Chassid to come back to the palace with him. The Chassid answered that he could come the next night (after Yom Tov) to continue the conversation. Sure enough right after Rosh Hashana, Reb Yechiel went to the king's palace and had a conversation with the king.

The king was so pleased with the conversation, and with the davening that he heard the day before, that he asked Reb Yechiel if he could bring 300 Yidden like him, to live in his country.

“Your Majesty,” Reb Yechiel answered, “For two reasons I am not able to fulfill your wish.” First of all, I am not a minister or governor, that can command people to leave their homes and go to your country. Second of all, if Hashem would want Yidden to live here, they would be brought here, even as prisoners, against their will. However, since not even one Jew lives in this land, it is clear that this is the will of Hashem. So it is impossible for your request to be fulfilled.”

The king was happy with this answer, and blessed Reb Yechiel as he left. In time, Reb Yechiel found his way back home, and went straight to see his father-in-law, the Baal Shem Tov.

The Baal Shem Tov greeted him warmly, and told him, “In the place where you were, a large number of Nitzutzei Kedusha (sparks of holiness) were hidden. If you would not have gone there, a certain number of Yidden would have to have been taken there, even against their will. But since you were there for Rosh Hashana, with the great power of your davening, you succeeded in elevating these nitzutzos (sparks) and now there is no need for other Yidden to live there. And indeed no Yid will ever live there until the coming of Moshiach.”

[Sippurei Chasidim Moadim – p. 23]

Q: What was the real reason that Reb Yechiel Askenazi had to be in the far away country for Rosh Hashana?