



## A Story for the Shabbos Table

## סיפורי הבעל שם טוב

### THE DESIRE TO LEARN TORAH – Part 1

In a certain place in which a number of Jews lived, a child of three or four lost his father (*May no one know of such woes!*) and soon after, when he was five, he was also left without a mother. An uncle brought him up in his home and hired a *melamed* to teach him, but the child was such a slow student that no matter how much he was taught he did not learn. The teacher told his other students not to make fun of him and not to bother him. So they obeyed their teacher and did not tease their little classmate.

His friends were already learning *Gemara*. Yet, though the child was eager to learn, the *melamed* barely managed to teach him the individual letters and Nekudois -- but nothing more than that, except for memorizing the Brachos to be said before eating and drinking.

As time went on and his relatives saw no progress, they ended the arrangement with the *melamed* and enrolled the child in the *Talmud Torah* run by the community. When he was twelve the communal authorities decided that it was pointless to keep him at school, and apprenticed him to a local tinsmith.

This pious Yid taught him his craft honestly, took responsibility for his conduct, and patiently taught him by constant repetition which Brachos to recite over which kinds of food. The young boy for his part was so anxious to learn that he wanted to learn something even while he was working. In those days it was common for craftsmen to recite pesukim of *Tehillim* or paragraphs of *Mishnayos* by heart. So he repeatedly recited by heart all the Brachos he had mastered, thinking that by doing so he was studying Torah -- until someone explained to him that unless one eats or drinks, such Brachos are made in vain. From that time on, as he worked he would repeat from memory *alef, beis*, and so on, or *kometz alef -- oh*, and so on.

He learned his trade well. After he reached the age of *bar-mitzvah*, though he had originally been apprenticed for several years, his master released him to set up shop independently if he so desired. This he did. He worked honestly, his workshop succeeded, and he contributed generously to *tzedakah*. One thing caused him anguish -- he had remained an ignoramus.

When the time came, he married the daughter of a man who made pitch in a forest to which he had rights and lived in a nearby village. The young man settled there too and worked there successfully as a tinsmith. Yet

even when he became a prosperous property-owner, he still shed tears of distress over the fact that he had never learned how to study Torah.

The few Jewish families in that village had a place in which they *davened* together, as well as a *shochet* and a *melamed*.

One day the tinsmith called on the only Torah scholar in town and poured out all the pain in his heart. The scholar suggested that he support Torah students anonymously, because what Hashem most desires is a sincere heart. He explained that the numerous unlettered folk who support such people are as worthy as the scholars they support. From then on, the tinsmith strove more in this direction.

The custom in that hospitable village was that whenever a visitor arrived, which was not often, they would make a *Goral* to decide who among them would have the privilege of fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *hachnassas orchim*. One day a sick man whose whole body was afflicted with a distressful skin disease arrived in town -- and the *Goral* fell on the tinsmith. He took him home, gave him a room of his own, washed him, and gave him ointments to ease his suffering. A few days later, when the guest wanted to move on, his host asked him to stay for another few days.

One day he asked his guest what it was that had ruined his health. The guest told him that he had once been thoroughly familiar with the entire *Shas*. Desperately wanting to master all the earlier and later Mefarshim as well, he had gone on to study with extreme *Hasmadah* (assiduity) while undertaking numerous fasts, until his health collapsed.

A short time later the guest went on his way.

Hearing such a story, the tinsmith walked around and begged of Hashem that even if it cost him all kinds of physical suffering he would accept this willingly, so long as He would enable him to study, to become a *ben Torah*. However, as the days passed and his ability to learn did not improve, he decided to act as his guest had acted. He began to fast for entire days. He would wander off to the forest and sit among the ants, reciting as many Kapitlach of *Tehillim* as he could manage, for over the years he had learned to read. Weeping and sighing, though he did not understand the meaning of the words, he would read them one after another.