



A Story for the Shabbos Table

סיפורי הבעל שם טוב

THE SHOSHANAS YAAKOV THAT SAVED

To know the true meaning of Purim joy, one had to go to Medzhibozh and spend Purim in the company of the helige Rabbi Yisroel Baal Shem Tov. Many were the lucky ones who did. So great was the crowd that there was not much left of the Purim feast in the way of food or drink to go around. But there was much to drink of the endless fountain of Torah which flowed from the lips of the Baal Shem Tov. It was an experience which forever remained engraved on their minds and hearts.

One of the happiest of all was young Rabbi Meir Margolis. He was a faithful follower of the Baal Shem Tov, and on this occasion he had brought with him his five year-old boy, Shaul. Shaul was a bright little boy, with a sharp little mind and a very sweet voice. The Baal Shem Tov placed Shaul next to him and asked him to sing.

Shaul knew a very nice song. It was *Shoshanas Yaakov*, the prayer said after reading the Megillah on Purim. It was about "the Lily of Jacob (the Jewish people) which rejoiced and was glad, when all saw Mordechai in purple clad, because Hashem has been Israel's salvation and hope in every generation . . ."

His singing was even sweeter than the sweet honey cake that the Baal Shem Tov gave him. And no one had to tell little Shaul what blessing to make over it.

When Purim was over and everyone prepared to go home, the Baal Shem Tov said to Rabbi Meir, "I know you have to return to Lemberg to take care of your community, but leave young Shaul with me for a few days. After Shabbos, Im Yirtze Hashem, I will personally bring him home."

Rabbi Meir Margolis was very happy that the saintly Baal Shem Tov took such a great liking to his little boy, and he knew that there must be a good reason for his great teacher to want little Shaul to stay with him over Shabbos. If only little Shaul would be willing to stay!

When Shaul was asked if he wanted to stay with the Rebbe, he eagerly agreed. "Yes, Father, I will stay, and I promise that I will not cry."

Shaul's father left, and little Shaul stayed. And the great Baal Shem Tov spent much time with little Shaul and taught him *Chumash*, as he had

long ago taught the little children when he had been an assistant schoolteacher, before he became known as the famous Baal Shem Tov.

On the morning after Shabbos, the Baal Shem Tov set out on the way to Lemberg. He sat little Shaul next to him, and took two other young men from among his favorite students to accompany them.

After covering quite some distance, they passed an inn from which came the sound of drunken voices. The local peasants were apparently having a rousing good time.

Suddenly, the Rebbe gave an order to turn around and stop at the inn. His students were surprised. What could they possibly do in the company of drunken peasants? Surely they would be passing other, more suitable inns on the way! But of course they said nothing. The Rebbe's wish was to them a command, and so they all got out of the carriage and followed the Rebbe into the inn.

Holding little Shaul by the hand, the Baal Shem Tov stood for a few moments among the noisy peasants. Then he clapped his hands to get their attention. "SILENCE!" he called out in their language, which the Baal Shem Tov knew well.

Immediately there was silence, and all turned their eyes to the unexpected visitors whom they had not noticed before.

"Do you want to hear real singing?" the Baal Shem Tov called out, and not waiting for their answer, he added: "Listen to this boy and you will know what real singing is!"

Then he turned to little Shaul and said to him, "Shaul, sing *Shoshanas Yaakov*." Little Shaul felt that there was something special about all this, and he sang with much feeling. He sang as he had never sung before. The peasants listened with rapt attention, and tears streamed down their faces. When Shaul finished they remained as if spellbound for a moment, and then all of them suddenly burst out, "Bravo! Bravo! Wonderful!"

The Baal Shem Tov raised his hand, and all became quiet again. He turned his face to three young peasant children, who were about Shaul's age, and beckoned them to come forward.

"What is your name?" he asked one of them.

“Ivan!” replied the boy, a little frightened.

“And yours?” he asked the second boy.

“Mine is Stepan,” replied the boy.

“And yours?”

“Anton!” replied the third boy.

“Now, boys,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “meet little Shaul, who sang for you. Do you like him?”

“Oh, yes!” they replied eagerly.

“Well, then,” said the Baal Shem Tov. “Remember, just as you feel friendly to little Shaul now, you should always be friendly to him. Remember that!”

“Yes, rabbi, we will,” the boys promised.

The Baal Shem Tov and his party then said goodbye, and departed as suddenly as they had appeared.

The peasants in the inn were left speechless at the sudden appearance and disappearance of the holy man and his followers. But the Baal Shem Tov’s students were also greatly puzzled by their rabbi’s strange conduct. Surely there must have been an important reason for this, but what that reason was, they could not imagine.

Many years passed. Shaul was now grown to manhood. Shaul Margolis was a respected and honored name, for he was a Talmud scholar and a successful merchant.

It was the Fast of Esther and Shaul was hurrying home from a business trip. He wanted to be on time to hear the Megillah at the onset of Purim that evening, and he drove his horses as fast as they would go. He was also anxious to get out of the dark forest through which he was passing. Suddenly he had to halt. Three murderous-looking bandits jumped out of the thick woods, armed with knives and hatchets.

While two bandits seized him and tied him to a tree, the third grabbed the bag in which Shaul was carrying a large sum of money. “We are going to kill you,” the bandits said.

Shaul pleaded with the bandits to give him a few minutes to say his last prayer to the Almighty. “Pray all you want,” they said. “Your Hashem cannot help you now.”

Shaul said *vidui* (the last prayer before returning one’s soul to G-d), while the bandits were counting the money and dividing it among themselves. Shaul’s eyes were closed and filled with tears. A vision of his wife and children rose before him. They would be waiting for his return, to celebrate Purim with him, yet he would not be there. He always used to read the Megillah for them at home, in case they missed a single word of it in the Shul, and then he would sing for them *Shoshanas Yaakov*, as he had once sung it for the holy Baal Shem Tov. The mere thought of this joyous Purim prayer made Shaul feel better. Yes, if he had to die, he wanted to die with *Shoshanat Yaakov* on his lips.

*The Lily of Jacob rejoiced and was glad
When all saw Mordechai in purple clad
You, O Hashem, have been Israel’s salvation
And their hope in every generation . . .*

Shaul sang with all his heart and soul, the way he had sung in the inn for the drunken peasants when he was a little boy. When he finished, he expected a death blow at any moment, but all was quiet. He opened his eyes. There were the three bandits standing before him, openmouthed in wonder, as the peasants had stood then in the inn. He looked again, and suddenly it occurred to him that he knew who they were.

“Aren’t you Ivan?” Shaul cried out to the first man. “And you, surely you are Stepan! And you, your name is Anton, isn’t it?”

As he spoke, he could see that the bandits had also recognized him. Gone was the fierce look on their faces, and in its place there was sheer wonder and, yes, friendliness.

The next moment the three bandits fell on their knees before Shaul. “Please forgive us,” they begged.

Then they hastily set him free and returned his money to him. “Go, in the name of Hashem. There will be no more robbery for us from now on. You have made us different men.”

Filled with gratitude to the Almighty for saving him from certain death, Shaul sped home. Now he knew why the holy Baal Shem Tov had stopped at that inn and made him sing for the drunken peasants and introduced him to the three peasant boys.

You can well imagine what a happy Purim that was for Shaul and his family, and how prayerfully they all sang *Shoshanas Yaakov* after the Megillah.

[Written by Rabbi Nissan Mindel. Thank you to Chabad.org]