



A Story for the Shabbos Table

סיפורי הבעל שם טוב

THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S ADVICE

Everyone was waiting for for the Chupah of the Baal Shem Tov's grandson to begin. A wagon appeared with a stranger in it. The Bal Shem Tov went to the wagon, whispered something in the ear of the stranger, and then went back and began the Chupah. The man in the wagon had appeared to be a simple fellow, but the Chassidim were now all convinced that nevertheless, he must be one of the hidden *tzaddikim*. After all, hadn't the holy Rebbe delayed the Chupah just to speak with him?

The day after the Chasunah, the Chassidim wanted to know who this unknown *tzaddik* was. They found out where he was staying and went to visit him.

"*Shalom Aleichem*, Rebbe," they said to him. "Rebbe?" reacted the man, appearing quite surprised. "I'm neither a Rebbe nor the son of a Rebbe." "There is no need to hide yourself from us, Rebbe," persisted the Chassidim. "We know the truth. If the Baal Shem Tov delayed the Chupah to tell you secrets in your ear, it is obvious that you are a holy man."

"I'm neither a *tzaddik* nor a holy man," insisted the stranger. He seemed to be stressed as he tried to defuse their enthusiasm. "Your Rebbe spoke to me about something of a strictly personal nature." But the Chassidim were not to be denied so easily. "Tell us, then, what he told you," they clamored.

Now he was noticeably uncomfortable. After much hesitation he finally realized that he would not be able to shake them off, and agreed to tell his story. "I live in a small town. My best friend since childhood lives in the house opposite mine. He is a peddler by profession; he periodically travels to all the villages and settlements in our area, selling petty goods and wares. Whenever he is on the road for a lengthy time, upon his return his friends and neighbors gather at his house to welcome him back.

"Once, after an especially long trip, I crossed over to visit him. I was the first, as usual, and the house was empty. His children were playing in the yard and his wife was busy in the kitchen. They told me that he wasn't at home, that he had stepped out and would be right back. Feeling the desire to smoke my pipe while I was waiting, I opened the cupboard where I knew he kept his tobacco. The first thing that struck my eyes was his wallet, just laying there in plain view. It was full of money, all his profits from his last trip that he would use to pay his debts, support his family, and reinvest in new merchandise.

"I was shocked that he would leave his wallet so exposed and accessible. It wasn't right. I decided to teach my friend a lesson. I stuck the wallet in my pocket. "Will he be startled when he sees it is missing! I smiled grimly to myself. That will teach him to be so careless. Of course, I intended to give it right back. But first I

wanted to see the expression on his face. "I stood there for a while but he didn't show up. I decided to take care of something in my house while I was waiting, and so I left, deliciously anticipating the lesson in responsibility I was about to impart.

"Things, however, worked out much differently than I expected. When my friend returned home and discovered to his shock that all the money he had worked so hard to earn was gone, he erupted in bitter screams. His wife broke down in tears, crying as if her heart would break. The whole family turned the house upside-down in a frantic search, but, of course, to no avail. All the friends and neighbors who were streaming in to welcome my friend were caught up in the whirlwind of excitement.

"When I went back to my friend's house, a heavy gloom of mourning prevailed; it was like a house of mourning. My prank was turning out to be not so amusing after all. In such an atmosphere and with so many people around, I didn't have the courage to confess that I was the one responsible for all of this disturbance and crisis. I composed my face as if I didn't know anything and mumbled some words of condolence to my friend. I figured I could soon return the wallet at a more suitable occasion, at a calmer moment, and when no one would see me.

"But one day followed another, and the opportunity I sought never presented itself. My friend was struggling to arrange terms with his creditors, who always seemed to be around, pursuing him, and I knew I couldn't return the money at such a time without everyone labeling me a thief.

"Several months went by. I still had the money. I found myself considering seriously the suggestions of my Yetzer Hora to invest the money in some profitable business. Then, when I returned the money, I could add an appropriate large bonus that I would save for him. But how could I do that in my town, where everyone knew me and my situation? If all of a sudden I engaged in business with lots of start-up capital, it would instantly arouse suspicion.

"I realized I would have to move temporarily to a distant location. I hired a wagon and set off, with my head full of all sorts of plans, I arrived here just at the time of the wedding."

After a few moments pause, the man resumed his story: "When your teacher saw me last night, he walked over to me and whispered in my ear, "It's not too late to fix up your mistake. Go back home and immediately return the money. I promise you that your friend will believe you and won't think that you intended to steal it. If necessary, I'll even come myself and testify as to your true motives. But be careful: if you delay any longer, it may be too late."

"With his words, I felt as if a heavy weight had slipped off my heart. I stayed the night, and now I am setting out to go straight home and do exactly as he told me."