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CHAPTER ONE

DEVARIM

DEUTERONOMY

“And like you have seen how G•d, your G•d, has carried you in the desert like a man carries his son” *Devarim 1:31*

A SPEEDY JOURNEY

AND then there was the time that Reb Michel of Ostropol, a great Torah sage and respected by all, received news that his close friend and colleague Reb Yankel would be making a bris for his newly born son, on the coming Friday. As Reb Michel and Reb Yankel were as close as brothers, Reb Michel decided that he would attend.

Besides being known as a great Torah sage, he was also known to be a fastidious and nervous man. So, as he began to ponder the anticipated trip, he became nervous. “Reb Yankel’s village is a half day’s travel from Ostropol,” he thought. “How will I be able to go the bris and still have enough time to return home for Shabbos? I know. I will send Reb Yankel a message requesting that he make the bris as early as possible so I can return home to Ostropol in time for Shabbos.”

A few days later, Reb Michel received a message from Reb Yankel agreeing to make the bris early in the morning. Reb Michel traveled to Reb

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Yankel's village Thursday morning allowing plenty of time for any delays. He immediately went to the home of Reb Yankel where they warmly greeted each other and celebrated the good news.

By early the next morning, preparations for the bris had been completed so that Reb Michel could return home in time for Shabbos.

Suddenly, a wagon full of Chassidim pulled up in front of Reb Yankel's house. It was the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples who had come to participate in the joyous event. Reb Yankel was overjoyed with this unexpected surprise of his Rebbe and the accompanying Chassidim.

As it was the custom of the Baal Shem Tov to immerse himself in a mikveh before morning prayers, the bris had to be delayed until he returned. The Baal Shem Tov did not rush his immersion, or his walk to and from the mikveh.

The bris was finally held several hours after the intended starting time. The seudah took longer than expected as the Chassidim sang song after song, exchanged Torah thoughts and rejoiced. Reb Michel was so overjoyed to be celebrating such a wonderful Simcha, and in the company of Chassidim, that he forgot the time. When the festivities were finally over, he looked at his watch

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and saw to his horror that there was less than an hour until candle lighting time for Shabbos.

Reb Michel began to panic: “What shall I do?” he thought to himself in despair. As he began to pace the floor, the Baal Shem Tov approached him.

“Reb Michel,” he began, “why are you so worried about time? Time is a creation like anything else. If the Almighty has created it for us, then it is to be used to serve Him. Do you think that you have somehow lost time because of our joyous celebration for the sake of the great occasion of a bris? If I arranged for you to arrive home in time for Shabbos, will you allow me and my Chassidim to be your guests this Shabbos?”

“But of course!” exclaimed Reb Michel in a daze. The Baal Shem Tov quickly instructed his Chassidim to climb into their wagon, and sat Reb Michel by his side. The wagon driver Alexei snapped the reins and the horses were off on the road to Ostropol. After fifteen minutes of travel, the Baal Shem Tov turned to the bewildered Reb Michel and said, “Look Reb Michel, we’re already approaching Ostropol, and you still have forty five minutes to spare to prepare for the holy Shabbos.”

The wagon stopped in front of Reb Michel’s house. Still unsure of what had just transpired, he quickly stepped down from the wagon and

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welcomed his honored guests into his home. It was a memorable Shabbos, and from that day, Reb Michel became an ardent Chassid of the Baal Shem Tov.

And so it was.

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“Do not fear them, for it is G•d, your G•d, Who is fighting for you.” *Devarim 3:22*

THE MAGIC MIRROR

AND it happened that once while traveling, Rabbi Schneur Zalman (known as the Alter Rebbe)¹ was in a city when a house caught on fire. When the Alter Rebbe arrived at the scene of the fire, a group of Russian soldiers were trying unsuccessfully to extinguish it. The Rebbe stood in front of the blazing house, leaned on his cane and gazed for a few moments into the fire. Suddenly, the fire died down and was easily extinguished.

The exhausted soldiers could barely believe their eyes. They ran to report the astonishing event to their General. After hearing their story, he sent a group of soldiers to ask the Rabbi to come and see him. When the Alter Rebbe arrived, the General asked him, “Are you any relation to the Jewish holy man known as the Baal Shem Tov?”

The Rebbe replied, “Sir, while I’m not a blood relative, I consider myself to be his spiritual grandson because I am a disciple of the Maggid of

¹ The Alter Rebbe (1745-1812), the first Rebbe of Chabad.

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Mezritch, the Baal Shem Tov's successor. Why do you ask?"

"When I heard how the fire was brought under control after you gazed at it for a few moments, it reminded me of a story that happened to my father.

"My father was also a general. Once he was stationed with his troops in the village of Mezibush. At that time, my father was deeply troubled because many weeks had passed since he had received a letter from his wife. He started to have all kinds of bad thoughts. This caused him to be in a very bad mood which he took out on his troops. One of his officers suggested that he should seek the advice of a local Jewish holy man, known as the Baal Shem Tov, who was reputed to be a miracle worker. 'Maybe he'll be able to tell you some news about your wife,' said the officer.

"My father, although still in a foul mood, agreed and sent this very officer to arrange a meeting between him and the Baal Shem Tov. Much to my father's surprise, the gabbai¹ of the Baal Shem Tov told the officer that the Baal Shem Tov refused to see him. So my father sent a higher ranked officer, but the Baal Shem Tov again refused to see him. By this time, my father was infuriated

¹ Person who assists in the running of a synagogue.

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that this simple Rabbi refused to see his officers and of course himself, the commanding officer, a general no less. My father knew about Jewish customs and holidays. At that time, it was right before Passover. So he sent another officer to relay the threat to the Baal Shem Tov that if he did not grant him an interview, he, being the General, would quarter his troops in Jewish homes. This would cause bread and even non-kosher food to be brought into the Jewish homes just before Passover.

“The threat worked and the Baal Shem Tov sent back a message inviting my father to his home. When my father arrived, he entered a waiting room and saw the Baal Shem Tov through an open doorway, sitting in his study. He was absorbed in a book which my father later found out was a kabbalistic book called the Zohar. However, before my father even knocked on the door to the study, his attention was caught by a large mirror on the wall in the waiting room.

“He went over to the mirror to adjust his clothes before meeting the Rabbi. When he looked into the mirror, to his astonishment, he saw the road leading to his own city, instead of his own reflection. As he watched the road, the scene changed and he saw his own house. Suddenly he

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could see into his house. There his wife was sitting at a table and writing a letter to him. He was able to clearly see the letter. She was writing an apology for having not written sooner. She explained that it was due to her difficult pregnancy and delivery of a baby boy. Everything was fine.

“My father was overwhelmed by the vision in the mirror. When he met with the Baal Shem Tov, he thanked him profusely. A few days later, he received a letter from his wife, identical to what he had seen in the mirror. My father then wrote down the whole story in his personal diary.

“I,” concluded the General to Rabbi Schneur Zalman, “am the son whose birth was announced in that letter! Also, I always carry with me the diary in which my father recorded this event.”

And so it was.