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CHAPTER ONE

SHEMOT

PERFECT PRAYER

“It was in those days when Moses was grown that he began to go out to his brethren, and he saw their burdens.” *Shemot 2:11*

Moses was 20 years old. *Midrash*

He (Moses) cast his eye and heart to feel the distress. *Rashi*

AND then there was the time that the Baal Shem Tov and several of his closest followers had been traveling by horse and wagon for several days. After another long day of travel, they were all cold, tired and famished.

They came upon a secluded village, and much to their relief, the Baal Shem Tov announced that they would stop there for the night. He went on to say, “I think that we will receive a large amount of tzedeka (charity) from one of the villagers.”

The followers looked at each other and rolled their eyes in disbelief. None of them had ever heard of this out of the way hamlet. Moreover, the houses in the village appeared so rundown that they were skeptical that any of the villagers would have any

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money to give them. Besides, they were far from their home in the holy community of Mezibush, and it seemed unlikely that the villagers would have heard of their wonderful Rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov.

The horse, also weary, slowly pulled the wagon into the village. On its own, it came to a stop in front of the dilapidated house of a poor Jewish family. With a sigh of relief, they all got down from the wagon and knocked on the door. The woman of the house gave them a warm welcome and asked them all to come in and sit down. When they entered, they looked around and saw that the interior of the two room house was as shabby as the exterior. They all sat down around the one table in the middle of the room.

After a few minutes the Baal Shem Tov spoke. "We cannot thank you enough for your hospitality. We have been traveling all day and are still cold and very hungry."

She felt sorry for them, so she heated water for tea and gave them the little bread that she had been saving to feed her children. This did not go unnoticed by the children, who were wearing rags. They stared at the group of strangers eating the meager dinner their mother had originally prepared for them.

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The children began crying. “Mama we’re hungry. Please give us some food to eat.” The mother was heartsick, because after feeding the men, there was no food left over for her children.

The Baal Shem Tov’s followers were mortified by the scene unfolding before their eyes. How could they have taken food from children? They looked with questioning eyes to the Baal Shem Tov, but he seemed unmoved by the children’s cries.

Just then, the man of the house, Reb Moshe, opened the door. Reb Moshe sold liquor, and had just returned from an unsuccessful business trip. He had tried to purchase a keg of whiskey on credit, but he had been turned down because he still owed money to the whiskey merchant from previous purchases.

When he saw his children crying with hunger, his wife upset, and a group of strangers sitting around his table eating his family’s last morsel of food, Reb Moshe was shaken.

Immediately, the Baal Shem Tov stood up and introduced himself and his students to Reb Moshe. At first, Moshe was flattered that the famous Baal Shem Tov had come to visit him, of all people. But then the Baal Shem Tov said, “My dear friend, we’ve come all this way to collect eighteen rubles from you.

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It is for a very good cause, and I'm sure you will be blessed for giving this tzedaka."

"Eighteen rubles!" gasped poor Moshe, "but Rabbi, I don't even have one ruble."

"Maybe you could sell something to get the money," replied the Baal Shem Tov.

"But Rabbi, look around. I don't have anything of value to sell," said Reb Moshe.

"Why don't you sell the bedding?" suggested the Baal Shem Tov.

The followers were so embarrassed by this conversation that they couldn't even look in the direction of Reb Moshe or his wife.

Once Reb Moshe realized that the Baal Shem Tov was serious about his request, he asked if he could wait until the next morning for the eighteen rubles.

"Fine, we can wait until tomorrow," answered the Baal Shem Tov, "but then we have to be on our way."

The next morning, Reb Moshe gathered up all the pillows and blankets in the house and took them to the marketplace. A few hours later, he returned with exactly eighteen rubles.

"Here Rabbi," he said, as he hesitantly handed the money to the Baal Shem Tov. With barely a thank you, the Baal Shem Tov took the

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money. Then he got into the wagon and motioned for the rest to get in with him. As the wagon pulled away, the Baal Shem Tov yelled back to Reb Moshe, “G•d be with you.”

Moshe, his wife, and the children followed the wagon for a short time, hoping that the Baal Shem Tov would stop and return the eighteen rubles. But the Baal Shem Tov never even looked back. The wagon soon disappeared from sight.

Moshe returned to an empty house, a crying wife, and starving children. By this time, it was late afternoon and time to pray Mincha, the afternoon prayer. He was so upset, he could barely speak. But he prayed as never before. Big tears streamed down his face. He begged G•d to provide him and his family with food, money, and good health.

That night, the family got into the bed with empty stomachs, and huddled together for warmth. In the middle of the night, Moshe heard a loud knocking at the door. “Who is it?” he asked fearfully.

A rough peasant voice answered, “Moshke, let me in. I’m freezing, and I want a glass of whiskey.”

Reb Moshe had sold his last bit of whiskey more than a week earlier. But he was afraid of the peasant, so he opened the door and let him in. He told him to sit down and get warm, while he got

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him a drink of whiskey. Then, Reb Moshe went into the next room and poured a cup of water into the empty whiskey barrel. He sloshed the water around in the barrel, and then he poured it back into the cup. "Here," he said, handing the full cup to the peasant.

The peasant downed it in one gulp. "Uhhh," he uttered with satisfaction, as he licked his lips, "I really needed a good, strong drink. And what you just served me was really good and very strong. The only problem is that I don't have any money, so I will have to pay you later."

Moshe, still sleepy said, "Sure, pay me when you can."

He lay down again to sleep, thinking, "What a day? What a night?" A few hours later, he was again awakened by a loud knocking at the door.

"Who is it?" he yelled out. It was the same peasant, back for another glass of whiskey. Moshe served him as before, and this time the peasant handed him a dirt covered coin that he took from his pocket. "Here, I don't know how much it is worth, but it should cover my drinks."

When Reb Moshe took the coin to the market the next day, he learned that the coin was worth enough to pay for much more than the peasant had drunk.

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When the peasant returned again the very next night for another glass of whiskey, Moshe gave him a drink and the change from the coin. The peasant was astonished at Moshe's honesty, and began coming every night. It wasn't long before Moshe had many customers and liquor sales were booming. He was getting richer by the day. Soon, the days of poverty were over, and Moshe became involved in other lucrative businesses.

About one year later, the Baal Shem Tov and the same group of followers happened to be passing by the little village where Reb Moshe lived. Instead of a dilapidated house, there stood a stately mansion surrounded by a number of smaller, but equally beautiful buildings. The followers stared with open mouths. "Rebbe, what happened?" they asked.

"All of this wealth was set aside for Reb Moshe on Rosh Hashanah," explained the Baal Shem Tov. "But he did not receive it, because he accepted his poverty without any complaint. As you know it says in the Tehillim, 'You open Your hand and fulfill the will of every living being.'¹ So I had to take everything he owned from him. When he was left without food and even his bedding, he had no

¹ Psalm 145:16.

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one to turn to but the Holy One, Blessed Be He. And from one sincere prayer requesting livelihood, G•d heard and opened His hand to fulfill the requests of our friend Moshe.

So the poor man of last year is a rich man today, thanks to his fervent prayer.”

And so it was.

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THE BURNING TREE

“As he looked, [Moses] realized that the bush was on fire, but was not being consumed.” *Shemot 3:2*

AND then there was the time, on a freezing winter day, that the Baal Shem Tov was traveling in his wagon with Reb Boruch of Kaminka, Reb Tzvi the Sofer and his non Jewish driver Alexei. They planned to reach an inn before night fall in time to pray Mincha (the afternoon prayer) and spend the night.

While the cold weather did not seem to bother the Baal Shem Tov, the others were freezing. Reb Boruch asked Alexei in a whisper, “How much longer until we get there?”

“It’s still many miles and it’ll take a few more hours,” answered Alexei.

“I don’t know if I can make it,” said Reb Boruch, “my hands and feet are already almost frost bitten.”

“I’m also freezing,” answered Alexei, “but we surely cannot stop until the Rabbi tells us to.”

The Baal Shem Tov overheard the conversation and instructed Alexei, “Stop the wagon right over there by that large oak tree.”

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As soon as the wagon stopped, the Baal Shem Tov jumped off, walked over to the oak tree and touched it with his finger. Suddenly the tree burst into flames. The cold travelers quickly warmed themselves around the burning tree. When they were sufficiently revived, they prayed the Mincha prayer and continued their journey. As they left, Reb Boruch looked back to see what would happen to the tree that saved them from the bitter cold. The Baal Shem Tov spoke to him sharply, "Reb Boruch, don't look back."

Immediately, Reb Boruch turned around and stopped looking. But he never forgot the image of the burning tree.

And so it was.