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CHAPTER 1

BEREISHIT

GENESIS

“G•d blessed the seventh day, and He declared it to be holy “ *Bereshit 2:3*

TWO CANDLES ARE ENOUGH

AND then there was the time that Reb Yankel, a hard working wagon driver, had the worst experience of his life. Reb Yankel was simple man and could barely read the Hebrew prayer book — much less study the Holy Torah. Nevertheless, he tried his best to fulfill the Mitzvahs.¹ He often thought to himself, “Surely, G•d will look kindly on my efforts.”

One Friday afternoon, Reb Yankel was returning in his wagon from taking someone to a neighboring village. The road was very muddy and his progress was very slow. By early afternoon, he started to worry that he might not make it home before the beginning of the holy Shabbos. He urged the horse to go faster but the wagon wheels kept getting bogged down in the mud and made the wagon very difficult for his old horse to pull. As the afternoon wore on, he even took the whip to his struggling old horse! But then he thought, “What’s the use? I’m just too far away.”

¹ Divine Commandments.

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He considered spending Shabbos in the forest, but quickly abandoned that idea. "It's just too dangerous in the woods at night, what with the wild animals and the roaming bandits." So he continued on his way.

When he finally reached his little village, the streets were empty. The women were preparing the Shabbos meal or putting the younger children to bed and the men were already at the synagogue beginning the Shabbos evening prayers.

Reb Yankel quickly unharnessed his horse from the wagon, put her in the small barn next to his home and gave her an ample amount of oats and water. As he walked past his house, he looked through the window and saw that the Shabbos candles were already lit!

When he opened the door, his anxious wife came running and threw her arms around him. "Yankel, I was so worried about you. Where have you been?"

With that, Yankel broke down. "I've committed a terrible sin. I've desecrated the holy Shabbos," he sobbed as he told her the whole story.

She tried to comfort him. "Yankel, a Jew should not be upset on Shabbos. You didn't intentionally break Shabbos: You had no choice.

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When Shabbos ends, you will talk with the Rabbi. He'll know what to do.”

His wife's words made Yankel feel better, so he changed into his Shabbos clothes, recited the Shabbos evening prayers, made Kiddush over the wine, and sat down with his wife for the Shabbos dinner.

The next night, as soon as Shabbos had ended, Yankel hurried to see the Rabbi. He related his story in a sad and broken voice.

The Rabbi reassured him. “Reb Yankel, don't despair. The Almighty is merciful. Next Friday, bring two candles to the synagogue in honor of Shabbos. G•d will surely forgive you.”

The next Friday afternoon, Yankel brought two large candles to the synagogue. He arrived early and the synagogue was empty except for Reb Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov — a devoted follower of the Holy Baal Shem Tov. Reb Yechiel watched as Reb Yankel placed the two large candles on the chazzan's¹ stand and lit them.

“Reb Yankel, what are you doing?” Yechiel asked. Yankel told him the whole story of how he had transgressed the Shabbos and how the Rabbi had instructed him to bring the two candles.

¹ Prayer leader.

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Reb Yechiel was outraged. “Two candles to atone for violating the holy Shabbos!” he screamed. “What are you thinking?”

Reb Yankel was crushed. To make matters worse, at that very moment, the door to the synagogue opened, and the flames on Yankel’s candles were blown out by a gust of wind. Yankel felt like a broken man. G•d had rejected his repentance!

So Yankel returned to the Rabbi and told him what had happened. The Rabbi suggested that he visit the Baal Shem Tov and ask his advice. Early on Sunday morning, Yankel left for Mezibush in his wagon with his old horse leading the way.

As soon as he arrived, he was escorted into the Baal Shem Tov’s study for a private meeting¹ with the Rebbe. Yankel’s eyes filled with tears, as he told him the whole story.

The Baal Shem Tov responded in a warm, soft voice. “Reb Yankel, your Rabbi gave you an appropriate atonement. Next Friday afternoon, take two candles to the synagogue and light them. I assure you that the candles will burn brightly and that your repentance will be accepted by G•d.”

Yankel was relieved and thanked the Baal Shem Tov.

¹ Yechidus.

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“And Reb Yankel, could you kindly do me a favor?” asked the Baal Shem Tov.

“Of course Rebbe, what can I do for you?”

“When you return to your village, would you please give this letter to my Chassid, Reb Yechiel Michel?”

Yankel took the letter and left the Baal Shem Tov feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

As soon as Yankel returned home, he delivered the Baal Shem Tov’s letter to Reb Yechiel Michel. Without a second pause, Reb Yechiel opened the envelope. Inside, he found an invitation from his Rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov, to spend the next Shabbos as his guest in Mezibush. Yechiel was thrilled beyond words.

The following Thursday morning, Reb Yechiel Michel harnessed his horse to his wagon and departed for Mezibush. Although the journey normally took only half a day, Reb Yechiel took a wrong turn and found himself lost in a deep, dark forest. As he searched for the right way, it began to snow. Soon, the snow was falling so heavily, he could barely see his horse, which trotted very slowly down the muddy road, now covered with snow. Being hopelessly lost, Reb Yechiel was forced to spend the night in the forest, huddled in his wagon.

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Friday morning it was still snowing. Yechiel was freezing and hungry, and he began to fear that he would not reach Mezibush before Shabbos began. As the hours passed, he was beside himself with worry. "If I stay out here, I can easily freeze to death. And what about the wild animals and the robbers? But if I drive the wagon into Mezibush, I'll desecrate Shabbos."

About an hour before sundown and the beginning of Shabbos, it finally stopped snowing. Yechiel took the whip to his horse to pull the wagon faster and it wasn't too long before he could see Mezibush in the distance. And with just seconds left before the sun set, Reb Yechiel's wagon stopped in front of the inn where he planned to stay for Shabbos.

Reb Yechiel quickly changed into his Shabbos clothes and rushed to the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue. "But," he wondered, "how can I stand in the presence of the Rebbe without having gone to the mikveh?" So Reb Yechiel spent the entire Shabbos sitting in the corner at the back of the synagogue, very depressed. To make matters worse, the Baal Shem Tov never even glanced his way.

At the end of Shabbos, the Baal Shem Tov motioned to Reb Yechiel and asked him to join him in his study. After the Baal Shem Tov had closed

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the door, he said, “Reb Yechiel Michel, it was decreed in Heaven that you should feel the pain and anguish that Reb Yankel the wagon driver felt when he couldn’t get home in time for Shabbos. It was only through my intervention that you were saved from transgressing Shabbos. This is a very important lesson for you to learn. If someone truly regrets his transgression, then two candles are enough for a proper atonement.”

And so it was.

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“He (G•d) drove the man out, and stationed angels of destruction at the east side of the Garden of Eden, along with a revolving sword wreathed in a flame to guard the path to the Tree of Life.” *Bereshit* 3:24

THE GANG OF ROBBERS

AND then there was the time that Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer was as his custom, walking in the Carpathian Mountains, when he came to a place where two mountains were separated by a very deep ravine. Being that he was in a deep state of meditation, he didn't notice that he was walking perilously close to the edge of the ravine.

Coincidentally, at the same time, a gang of robbers happened to be planning their next robbery on the adjacent mountain across the ravine. Being that this part of the mountains was usually deserted, they were startled to see a stranger walking along across the ravine on the opposite mountain. Their first inclination was to quickly runaway and hide. But then they realized he wasn't paying the slightest attention to them. In fact, it looked as if he were in a deep trance.

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When it appeared that he was going to fall off the edge of the mountain into the ravine, they all gasped and yelled, “Stop!! Stop!!”

But at the moment the Baal Shem Tov stepped off the edge, the two mountains miraculously moved towards each other and joined together. Immediately after he crossed from one mountain to another, the mountains separated and returned to their original location. The Baal Shem continued walking near where the robbers were standing, without the slightest notice of them and as if nothing had happened.

The robbers were dumbfounded. They didn't say a word to him as he walked past. And it didn't appear that this stranger even noticed them. For the next few hours, the Baal Shem Tov kept walking and crossing the ravine between the mountains again and again. Each time, the mountains moved towards each other and then separated after he was safely on the other side. The robbers realized without a doubt that he was a very, very holy man.

A few days later, the band of robbers again saw the Baal Shem Tov walking in the mountains and they approached and told him what they had seen. After telling him that they were robbers, they asked, “Rabbi, we know that you are a holy man.

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Would you please pray for us and ask G•d to make us successful in our chosen line of work?”

The Baal Shem Tov answered, “If you swear to me that you will not harm or rob any of my Jewish brothers and sisters, I will pray as you ask.” Each of the robbers swore to him and the bargain was struck.

From that day on, the robbers would visit the Baal Shem Tov, sometimes to settle a dispute, sometimes to ask advice, and sometimes just to talk with their new friend.

Once during a friendly conversation, the Baal Shem Tov confided to them that his life-long dream was to visit the Land of Israel. The robbers became very excited. “Rabbi Yisrael, we know how to reach the Land of Israel by means of caves and underground passages. We’ve never traveled the whole distance, but we are told that it is definitely the way. Would you like for us to take you?”

The Baal Shem Tov didn’t hesitate a second before giving his answer. “Yes, my friends,” he exclaimed, “let’s go!”

So the band of robbers and the Baal Shem Tov gathered a few belongings and some provisions for the way and off they went. After a day of walking, they reached the opening to a cave located deep in the Carpathian Mountains. It was very dark

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inside the cave, so they lit a torch, and began to travel along a seemingly unused path. For days they traveled deeper and deeper into the earth. Finally, they heard the sound of rushing water. They had reached a narrow, underground river. The robbers said, "This is as far as we've ever gone."

The Baal Shem Tov replied with great excitement, "Let's cross."

Using a limb of a tree that just happened to be there, the robbers built a bridge to ford the river.

The Baal Shem Tov said, "I'll go first." So they gave him a staff to balance with and he walked across the tree limb. Just as he stepped off the limb on the other side of the river, he saw a revolving sword, wreathed in flame, blocking his path. Looking back, the Baal Shem Tov realized that the robbers couldn't see the sword or even the rotating flames. He stared at the revolving sword for a few minutes but didn't move towards it. Being that the robbers couldn't see the revolving sword, it appeared to them that the Baal Shem Tov inexplicitly and abruptly stopped and stared for several minutes into empty space.

They yelled out, "Rabbi Yisrael, is everything okay? Are you alright?"

The Baal Shem Tov answered back, "Everything is *perfectly* fine."

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Then, he crossed back to the other side of the river and told the gang of robbers without explanation, “My friends, let’s return. The journey has ended here.”

And so it was.