

Carrying The Story

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The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism was one of the great spiritual masters of all time. And, because of his great piety, he attracted a huge number of students who showed him a rather intense loyalty. When he was advanced in years, and knew that his end couldn't be too far off, he called his students to his side and gave each one a task to continue after he was gone. Yankele was one of his favorite students, and so he expected to be given a job of the highest importance, deserving of the greatest of honor. And so you might imagine that Yankele was a little surprised, and more than a little disappointed when he heard his master tell him, "Yankele, your task will be to travel around the world, telling stories about me."

"Are you serious? You want me to travel around, from town to town, as some itinerant storyteller? I'm supposed to beg people to listen to me tell stories? How will I earn any money to support my family? How long will I have to do this?" the distraught Yankele asked his teacher.

"You'll know when you're done."

"How?"

"You'll know when you're done." And that's the last that the Ba'al Shem Tov would say about it. And so that's what Yankele did. He packed up a few things and headed out traveling from city to city, town to town, stopping at each one to tell his stories to whomever would listen. Stories of the dear, sweet teachings of his master. Stories of the other great rabbis who were won over by the brilliance of this somewhat rebellious teacher. Stories of miracles which he had heard, and seen with his own eyes, the Ba'al Shem Tov perform. People donated just enough money to keep him alive and traveling until somehow he found himself in Italy, a place where his great teacher was hardly known at all. But, he soon heard of a rich Jew living in a nearby city who was offering a gold coin for every new story someone could tell him about the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Yankele thought to himself, "This must be why I was given this task — the Ba'al Shem Tov knew that I could make my fortune this way!" And so he went as fast as he could to the rich man's house and introduced himself. The rich man's face lit up when he saw Yankele. "I am Yaakov, and you are welcome in my home," he said, inviting Yankele in and showing him to a comfortable guest room — more comfortable than Yankele had seen in many, many months. "I cannot tell you how honored, or how thrilled I am to have you with us. It's almost Shabbat, so you'll stay with me tonight, and I'll invite all the Jews of the city to sit and hear your stories of the Ba'al Shem Tov."

When they went to services that night, Yankele couldn't help but notice how fervently Yaakov prayed. "He is truly a pious man, himself," Yankele thought. When they were back at Yaakov's house, sitting around the table, food served and wine poured, Yaakov turned to Yankele and asked him for his first story.

And, Yankele's mind went blank. He couldn't remember a single story, not a single sentence of a single story, from the Ba'al Shem Tov. Nothing.

Yankele was so embarrassed he was almost in tears. But his host didn't seem angry or frustrated at all. Just sad. "You're probably just tired from your journey," he said. "Sleep, and you can tell your stories tomorrow."

The next morning, during services, Yankele watched as Yaakov prayed with even more intensity than the night before. He prayed as if his entire life depended on it. And then, afterwards, when they gathered back around the table, he again turned to Yankele and asked him for his story.

And, again, Yankele's mind went blank.

They all passed that meal in a sad, uncomfortable silence. As soon as Shabbat was over, Yankele packed up his few things and snuck out of the house, and headed out of town, ashamed and confused. And then, on the very edge of town, he saw a house with its windows covered in closed shutters, and suddenly like a flash of lightning, he remembered. Not a great story, not even the whole story, but at least a piece of the story. Forget about the gold coin — maybe he could buy back some of his dignity if he could share just a piece of the story with that kind, rich Jew. He ran back as fast as he could, burst through the front door, ran up the stairs and charged into the man's study where he was shocked by what he saw. Yaakov sat in his chair, head in his hands, weeping. But, when he looked up, and saw Yankele standing there, a faint smile crossed his lips. "Sit. Please, sit," he whispered to Yankele.

Yankele sat in the chair across from him and said, "I'd like to tell you a story."

I was once traveling with the Ba'al Shem Tov and we came to a town which was gripped with fear. All of the Jews in the town were huddled into one house, with the doors locked and the shutters closed. They let us in and told us why they were so afraid. "It's the Bishop. The bishop of the city hates Jews like no one ever has. We think he must be descended from Haman — it's the only way we can explain his loathing. And he's called for a pogrom today. He's set up a stage in the city square, just outside our door. In a few minutes he's going to gather the people of the city, rile them up with a hate filled speech, and set them loose on us. We don't think any of us will survive the night."

The Ba'al Shem Tov peeked out of the shutters and saw the crowd gathering. And then he watched as the crowd parted and a man, standing tall and dressed in the finest regalia, walk through the crowd and headed up to the stage. The Bishop.

"Yankele," the Ba'al Shem Tov said. "Go to the Bishop, tell him I must see him. When he says 'no,' insist. Don't worry," he added, because he must have seen how scared I looked, "no harm will come to you. Go now, quickly."

It took all the faith and trust that I had, but I left the house, walked through the crowd without so much as an angry word being sent my way, and walked right up the stairs of the stage and faced the Bishop. "The Ba'al Shem Tov demands to see you, now."

"You must be kidding," the Bishop replied. "I don't obey the commands of some Jew."

"Now." And, to my everlasting surprise, he looked at me, gave the slightest of nods, and follow me down the stairs. We went back in the house and the Ba'al Shem Tov took him into a back parlor, where they sat for hours. When the door finally opened, the bishop came out, but he looked like a different man. His eyes were red with tears, and his shoulders were hunched as if they were weighted down with some great sorrow. He walked out of the house, past the crowd, and out of the town square. The crowd was confused, but after a few minutes they realized that nothing was going to happen and, little by little, they all went their separate ways. There was no pogrom that day. And the next day, we left the town, never to return."

As soon as Yankele finished his story, Yaakov began to weep, uncontrollably. Yankele was shocked — he had no idea what was happening, or what to do. "Are you all right?" was the best he could think of.

"Yes. Yes I am. At long last, I am all right. Let me tell you a story, now.

"I was born a Jew, but to a very poor family. We were always cold and hungry, and to make matters worse, we were always picked on by the others in the town, mercilessly. And so, I grew up hating being a Jew. When I was old enough — still a boy, really — I ran away and took refuge in a church. I made up a name, told them I was an orphan, and that I was Christian. They took me in, but I always feared that someone would discover my secret. And so, to make sure that no one would ever suspect my true heritage, I always spoke about how much I hated the Jews. I became the greatest Jew hater in the land. Even when I became a priest, even when I became a bishop, I always tried to keep my secret safe by hating the Jews more and more. That's why I called for that pogrom. It was the last part of the lie I had been living, ever since I left my home.

"I don't know how the Ba'al Shem Tov knew my secret, but when he pulled me into that back room that day, he told me my own story, showed me how sinful I had been, and convinced me to do *teshuvah* — to repent. Of course I knew that true *teshuvah* would

not be an easy, or a quick process. I had years of lies and hatred to atone for. But the Ba'al Shem Tov told me that I would know I had been truly forgiven, that my *teshuvah* had been accepted by God, when someone came to tell me this story.

“When you first came to town, Yankele, I recognized you, and I prayed and prayed that this was a sign that my *teshuvah* was about to be complete. But, when you couldn't remember the stories, I knew I had failed. As hard as I prayed, you couldn't remember anything, and so I knew I had not been forgiven. And, when you left, I felt my heart break. Because I feared that I would never be forgiven. I laid my broken heart open to God, and prayed with all my might, all my soul, one last time, that after all of these years, I might finally be forgiven. And only then did our God have compassion on me.

“My dear Yankele, all of these years you have been wandering this world carrying a piece of me inside of you. Carrying the key which would set me free. The story that you told, my story, was the key to my salvation.”

And Yankele sat there, stunned by the majesty of it all, remembering one of the dear, sweet teachings that his teacher, the Ba'al Shem Tov, had shared with him. “Each of us carries, deep within our hearts, the missing piece of someone else's soul. You have been placed on this earth for no reason other than to bring it back home.”