

## EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5784 – COLUMBIA JEWISH CONGREGATION

The Ba'al shem tov, which means the owner of the good name, is the nickname for the founder of Chasidism. His real name was Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, and he grew up in the Ukraine in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While I doubt the Baal Shem Tov would recognize Chasidim today (except for perhaps the way they dress), he started Chasidism as a way of getting Jews to experience joy again, and do good things for each other and the world rather than worry about the legalistic approach of the Mitnagdim, which means “the opposers”.

The Baal Shem Tov (also called simply the Basht) was also an avid story teller. And I want to share with you one of my favorites of his that I first heard on the high holidays back when I was in my high school USY group in Detroit.

It was said that the Baal Shem Tov was such a good soul, such a *mentsch*, that God granted him a special wish before he would transition to the *olam haba* – the world to come. He pondered it for a while, and then decided that he would like to see the difference between Heaven and Hell. “That’s what you want with your one wish??” God asked. “yes” replied the rebbe without hesitating.

The next day, God sent the *malach hamavet* – the Angel of Death – in his black cloak and scythe to gather the Baal shem tov. Of course, he didn’t speak so he just motioned the Basht to follow him. The Basht tried to ask some questions, but received no replies, just a motion with his finger to keep following. He followed the Angel to an elevator, which they both entered and then began descending slowly. The Baal Shem tov realized that he was going to get to see hell first, and he began to get nervous and wondered what it would be like. It was a long ride and he was jarred out of his imaginings when the elevator came to an abrupt halt. The doors opened and before them and the Basht was in shock with his jaw dropped, for he was looking at a long winding path with beautiful landscapes on either side. The *malach hamavet* motioned him again to follow, and they started down the path. After a while, The Basht could see they were heading for a building but he couldn’t quite see what it was. As they got closer, he saw that it was a magnificent castle, with huge wooden doors and intricate carvings on them. Moving closer to the doors he heard a sound but couldn’t quite make out what it was. When they got to the castle the doors opened as if by magic, and inside there was a long beautiful hallway, with beautiful furniture and tapestries and art lining the walls. They were headed down the hall when the noise became clearer. It was people screaming and crying in agony! He didn’t understand why that would be in the midst of such beauty. At the end of the hall, they found a huge dining room spread with more foods and more kinds than anyone could imagine. The smells were incredible, but the sounds of agony made him put his hands on his ears. And when they finally entered the room, the Basht was shocked and again his jaw dropped open. He saw that the people had their arms bound from the shoulders to their hands so that they

couldn't feed themselves from all the tasty bounty in front of them. The Besht realized the cries were cries of hunger and frustration at being tempted with such a beautiful spread, but not being able to enjoy any of it.

As they walked back to the elevator, a few tears were shed by the sensitive rebbe. And as they again entered the elevator, as it rose, he began to reflect on what he saw and understood about that hellish place.

The Rebbe was so lost in thought he was again jarred when the elevator stopped. The doors opened and the Besht was in shock and his jaw dropped again, for he was looking at the exact same long winding path with beautiful landscapes on either side that he'd seen in Hell. He was so confused that the malach hamavet again motioned him to follow, and they started down the path. After a while, The Besht could see they were heading to a building that also looked familiar. As they got closer, he saw that it was the exact same magnificent castle, with the same huge wooden doors and intricate carvings on them. Moving closer to the doors he again heard noise coming inside but couldn't quite make out what it was.

When they got to the castle and the doors opened again and inside was the same beautiful hallway, with the same beautiful furniture and tapestries and art lining the walls. The Baal Shem tov was shaking his head in disbelief and confusion. But as they headed down THIS hall, the noise became clearer, only this time, it was people laughing and enjoying themselves! When they finally got to the same dining room, it was again spread with more foods and more kinds than anyone could imagine. And when they finally saw the scene in that room, the Besht was shocked and again his jaw dropped open. He saw that here, too, the people had their arms bound from the shoulders to their hands so that they couldn't feed themselves from all the tasty bounty in front of them. But here in heaven, they had learned to feed each other.