

The Long Prayer

Whenever he and his disciples gathered together in prayer, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chasidic movement,* would be completely absorbed. This was particularly true on Shabbos morning, the morning of the Sabbath. During such a sacred and inspirational time, the prayers of the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples would continue for hours. At the conclusion of their worship, they would gather in a side room for a wonderful Kiddush, a light meal of cakes and schnapps.

Each week, however, it happened that the disciples finished their prayers long before the Ba'al Shem Tov finished his. In fact, the Ba'al Shem Tov would continue on and on and on. He would *daven*—pray—with his *tallis*—his prayer shawl—draped over his head, swaying back and forth and back and forth. The disciples would wait until their wonderful leader finished. Even so, while he prayed the disciples couldn't help but be distracted by the sweet aroma of the cakes and the schnapps wafting in from the adjoining room. Their stomachs would start to rumble, and they'd get impatient. But they knew they had to wait for the Ba'al Shem Tov.

One Shabbos morning before the disciples had begun their prayers, one of them whispered to the others. "You know," he said in a voice so quiet the others had to strain to hear him, "if we just got up and tiptoed into the next room, we could grab a quick bite and return right away. We wouldn't make a sound. He'd never know; he's always concentrating so intensely. What would be the harm?"

The others weren't so sure. "It's not the right thing," many remarked. But later that morning, having finished their prayers, the men watched the Ba'al Shem Tov davening beneath his *tallis*, swaying back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The cakes and the schnapps beckoned, and the disciples' stomachs won out.

Without making a sound, the leader of the disciples motioned for everyone to get up. Just when they rose from their seats, the Ba'al Shem Tov

lifted his head, threw his *tallis* from his shoulders, and cried out, “What happened? Where are you going?”

The disciples were embarrassed. They looked at one another and then back at their leader. They hemmed and hawed and stammered. “Um, well . . . um. We hardly even moved. How did you even know? We didn’t make a sound!”

The Ba’al Shem Tov looked at his followers. “When I pray, it is as though there is a ladder stretching from earth to heaven,” he said. “And as I pray, I ascend the rungs of that ladder. But you, you hold up that ladder. And when you stood up to leave, I fell.” ✨

* The Chasidic movement has its roots in eastern Europe. Its earliest devotees built a profoundly religious life on the twin foundations of kabbalistic speculation and traditional religious observance, and are notable for their devotion to single charismatic rebbes.

Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman

of the Barnert Temple, a Reform

congregation in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, chose this as her favorite story because of its many levels of meaning. “Its most immediate message is about how, in prayer, we’re there for one another,” she explains. She also likes that this story mirrors congregational life. “We are here to support one another, to help one another live on a higher plane. What we do as individuals always affects others. In this story even a great leader needs the support of others and teaches that we need others to support us.”