

An Icy Flame in Siberia

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

Last week, a menorah of ice kindled the flame in a long lost Jew in Siberia. From the Baal Shem Tov, to Yosef, to a faraway Chabad Rabbi in our day, the goal is the same. Seeking out our long lost brothers.

Good Shabbos.

Last week, on the first night of Chanukah, an Israeli television station made a special holiday presentation: Through a live broadcast, they participated in a menorah lighting in Tyumen, Siberia, led by Chabad Rabbi Yerachmiel Gorelik.

They lit a twelve-foot menorah made entirely of ice. In order to construct it, they needed to cut five-foot blocks of ice out of the frozen river. Once completed, it weighed two and a half tons.

A day after the broadcast, the rabbi received a phone call from the local Protestant minister. He said that friends in Israel had told him about the ice menorah in Tyumen they had seen on television, and he wanted to meet with the rabbi near the menorah.

Later that day, they met up at the menorah's location. To the rabbi's surprise, the minister went over to the menorah and gave it a kiss!

"This menorah is mine too..." he said.

Rabbi Gorelik was baffled.

"My grandmother," the minister explained, "was Jewish too."

Now the rabbi's ears perked.

"Which grandmother?" he asked.

"Oh, my mother's mother..."

When Rabbi Gorelik told over the story, he noted in amusement that usually people come to the priest to confess, but this time the priest confessed to the

rabbi... Amazingly, a menorah made of ice managed to kindle the flame in the minister's soul and inspire him to reveal his Judaism publicly.

WHEN THE STORIES FLEW AWAY

I want to share a similar story about the Baal Shem Tov.

Shortly before he passed away, his personal attendant turned to him with a question.

“Rebbe, when you go to heaven, how will I support my family? How will I put food on the table?”

The Baal Shem Tov calmed him. “You’ve served me faithfully for many years. Travel around and share your experiences, and you will be able to support yourself from the proceeds.”

The Baal Shem Tov soon passed away and the attendant purchased a horse and buggy and set out on his way. He went from city to city sharing stories and teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, but the results were disappointing. Very little money came in.

Weeks and months passed as he wandered from place to place. The entire time he was bothered by the question: Where was the livelihood that he was supposed to earn? What had happened to the Baal Shem Tov's promise?

One day, he met up with another traveling preacher. They were able to commiserate with each other; they each had their fair share of difficulties and failures in their unlucky profession.

Suddenly, the preacher remembered something.

“In a certain city,” he told the Baal Shem Tov's attendant, “there is a wealthy man who loves stories of the Baal Shem Tov. He pays a handsome fee for each one. Why don't you travel there and share your experiences?”

The attendant didn't need to be told twice. He immediately hitched his horse and got on his way.

He arrived at the wealthy man's home shortly before Shabbos. When he

introduced himself, the man was overjoyed.

“You were the attendant of the Baal Shem Tov?” he exclaimed. “You will be my honored guest; I will provide you with all your needs. But let’s not waste time. Please, tell me a story of the Baal Shem Tov.”

Settling down in the receiving room, the attendant opened his mouth to share a story. But to his shock and consternation, he couldn’t remember a single one. His mind went completely blank!

“I’m a bit tired from the journey,” he told his host. “Allow me to rest a bit, and I will share a story after Shabbos dinner.”

That evening, at the Shabbos table, the host once again asked him to tell a story. Again, he went blank. He wracked his mind for a story but couldn’t come up with anything. Decades of work for the Baal Shem Tov seemed to have been swallowed up by thin air.

He was mortified. Guests at the table began to whisper that he was an imposter who had never met the Baal Shem Tov at all. The host, however, was more forgiving. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I’m sure you’ll have what to share tomorrow.”

The next day, the same scene repeated itself. Terribly ashamed, he impatiently waited for the end of Shabbos to escape.

But then, several minutes before Shabbos was over, he suddenly remembered a story. Afraid he would forget it, he began to tell it immediately.

THE MYSTERIOUS TURN-AROUND

“The Baal Shem Tov once asked me to join him on a journey. After a long, difficult trip, we arrived at the home of a Jewish villager, and the Baal Shem Tov asked if we could stay the night.

“To my surprise, the villager began to yell and cry. ‘Please, I beg of you,’ he said, ‘leave this village as quickly as possible. As long as you are here, your life is in danger!’

“Apparently, a famous pastor, an apostate Jew who had converted to Christianity,

was preaching that day in the city. The family expected him to fan the flames of anti-Semitism, and then the crowd's fervor would be directed at them—the only Jewish family in the area.

“The Baal Shem Tov calmed them. ‘Everything will be alright,’ he promised. Calmly, he stood at a window.

“The window was situated directly across from the town square, where hundreds of peasants listened attentively to the passionate address. The priest, a talented orator, looked around at his crowd, making eye contact with everyone present. Suddenly, I saw his eyes rest on the Baal Shem Tov.

“The Baal Shem Tov raised his hand and motioned to the priest to come over to him. To my shock, the priest stopped everything, got off his podium, and approached the window, where he had a hushed conversation with the Baal Shem Tov. I don't know what they spoke, but when he got back to his podium, he spoke well of the Jews and encouraged the populace to help them.

“I don't know what became of the priest,” the attendant finished his story. “But I witnessed this event with my own eyes.”

IT WAS ME!

The host thanked him warmly for his story. When Shabbos was over, he went into his study and emerged carrying bundles of gold.

“This is my payment for your story,” he said to the shocked attendant.

It was a phenomenal sum of money, and the attendant hesitated to take it. The host's family was surprised as well. They knew he always paid for a story, but this sum was unprecedented.

But the host insisted, “Take it, my friend, you've earned it.”

“Let me tell you a story of my own,” he explained. “I was that priest. When the Baal Shem Tov spoke to me on that day, he rebuked me for inciting against Jews. ‘Do you know how many Jews have been murdered because of you?’ he asked me.

“At that moment, I was moved to tears. ‘I've done too much evil,’ I told him, ‘I

don't believe I have a path to repentance...'

"The Baal Shem Tov promised me that every Jew can return to G-d. He even gave me a sign. 'When someone comes and retells the story of today's events, you will know that G-d has accepted your repentance.'

"When you arrived at my home, I recognized you immediately. When I saw that you couldn't remember your stories, I realized that my teshuva was not yet complete. Throughout Shabbos, I prayed and cried to G-d from the bottom of my heart to accept my regret. And now, you've remembered the story.

"This sum of money is a just small portion of my wealth. Thank you for being the trusted messenger to tell me that my teshuva has been accepted by G-d."

SEARCHING FOR YOSEF

In this week's Parsha, Yosef becomes the ruler of Egypt and a severe famine descends on the land. Back in Canaan, Jacob tells his sons, "What are you showing off? I heard that there is food in Egypt."

At that point, they still had enough provisions to survive. However, Jacob didn't want his neighbors to be jealous of his wealth, so he asked his sons to go to Egypt to purchase food like everyone else.

Then the Torah says an interesting verse: "And the brothers of Yosef—ten of them—went to acquire food in Egypt."

Commentators make two points.

First of all, the Torah calls them "Yosef's brothers." Normally, they are called Yaakov's sons, but here they are associated with Yosef. The reason, Rashi explains, is that they deeply regretted selling Yosef seventeen years earlier and planned to use their trip to find him and bring him home. They were finally acting like "Yosef's brothers."

Secondly, the verse says that there were ten of them. Why is that important information? We know that Binyamin remained home; we could reach the number ten on our own. What was it important to mention the number?

The Midrash answers that ten is a lucky number. A minyan of people have the power to nullify spiritual decrees. Avraham asked G-d to spare the people of Sodom—if there were ten righteous people in the city. The brothers understood that they had special powers as a group of ten, and they hoped that it would assist them in their search for Yosef.

Indeed, when they arrived in Egypt, they chose to enter through ten separate gates. Why? To search for Yosef! The official reason for their trip was to purchase food, but their real intent was to find Yosef.

In last week's Parsha, Yaakov sent his son Yosef to search for his brothers. He wandered in Shechem, saying, "I'm looking for my brothers, has anyone seen them?" Now, twenty-two years later, it was they who searched for him.

This week's Parshah teaches us the mission of our generation as the Rebbe taught us. We must search for our missing brother, the long-lost Jew who may just be a priest in Siberia. Just as the brothers ultimately found Yosef, and Yaakov was reunited with his entire family, we can be sure that if we search out our long-lost brothers, we will be united as well, with the coming of Moshiach.

May it be very soon.