



Acharon Shel Pesach: A Story Within a Story Within a Story

How a story of the Baal Shem Tov continued to bear fruit centuries later.

The Shochet

In the early 1900s, the state of Judaism in Crimea was very weak. Jewish observance was on the decline, and the younger generation was far less connected to their heritage than their ancestors had been.

In a town called Bakhchisarai, there was a shochet named Pinye Ber Goldenshteyn who wanted to make a difference. He was a Chabad chossid, and his fascinating autobiography was recently published in English.

Pinye Ber was particularly pained by the state of the mikvah in his town. It was in serious decline, and most women had stopped using it altogether.

He raised the issue with the city leaders—but they weren't interested. "There's no money," they told him. Apparently, there was enough money to build a new secular high school—but when it came to an old-fashioned mikvah, suddenly the budget was tight.

Then, a prime piece of real estate came up for sale. Pinye Ber saw his opportunity. He took all his savings and bought the property—then set out to find funding to build the mikvah.

The Strange Source

There weren't many options. It was a very poor region, and every fundraising attempt ended in failure. Pinye Ber seemed to be at a dead end—and time was running out. He was no longer a young man, and he had already decided to move to the Holy Land for his final years. Somehow, the mikvah would have to happen before he left.

One day, he settled on a rather unusual idea. In a nearby big city, there lived a wealthy Jew who was originally from Bakhchisarai—someone who could easily afford to cover the entire cost of the mikvah. There was just one slight problem: he had long since converted to Christianity.

Now, to his credit, he had made some attempts to return to Judaism. But he also felt deeply offended by the Jewish community in Bakhchisarai. Years earlier, he had offered to donate a Torah scroll to the town, but his brother, the Rabbi and his nephew, the Gabbai refused to allow it since they were embarrassed of him. (Much to Pinye Ber's dismay—he had argued that they should take the Torah and use that as a bridge to bring him closer.)

Still, Pinye Ber decided to try his luck.

He traveled to the man's home and knocked on the door. At first, he was curtly turned away. But after several more attempts, he was finally let in.

"I just want to speak with you," he said, "and bring regards from your family back home."

Mr. Kizelshteyn—the meshumad—agreed. They sat down to talk. He was actually surprised that the shochet had come back after being treated so coldly the first time. But Pinye Ber reassured him: "Don't worry about it," he said. "Everything happens by Divine Providence. It was all meant to be..."

"Let me explain with a story," he continued. And proceeded to tell the following famous Baal Shem Tov story.

The Baal Shem Tov's Story Teller

Before the Baal Shem Tov passed away, he called over one of his prized pupils and gave him a mission: "I want you to travel around and tell stories about me." That was to be his livelihood—his full-time job.

The devoted chassid didn't question it. He packed his bags and hit the road. As you can imagine, it wasn't exactly the dream life—wandering from town to town, hoping to find new audiences who hadn't yet heard his stories. The money he earned was barely enough to get by, and he struggled to support his family.

One day, he heard about a wealthy Jew who would pay a *rendel*—a generous sum—for every story of the Baal Shem Tov he was told.

“This is it!” the weary storyteller thought. “My salvation! I’ll tell him five hundred stories—I’ll tell him every story I know!”

He traveled to the man’s house, where he was warmly welcomed. He was given room and board and told he would share his stories at the Shabbat meal.

Shabbat arrived, and lo and behold... the storyteller drew a blank. Not a single story came to mind. It was as if someone had wiped his memory clean.

The next day—same thing. Total blackout. He was mortified. But his host was kind and invited him to stay the week. One week turned into two... and still, nothing. The host waited patiently, but the storyteller simply couldn’t deliver.

Finally, utterly ashamed and brokenhearted, he packed his things and left.

But as he walked down the street, something suddenly clicked. One story—just one—popped back into his head. Overjoyed, he turned around and ran back to the house, where his host was still standing at the doorway.

“I remember a story! I remember a story!”

The Story in the Story

One night, the Baal Shem Tov took his students on one of his mysterious nighttime journeys. By morning, they arrived in a town, and the Baal Shem Tov pointed to a specific house. He knocked on the door.

The Jewish family inside was stunned to see a rabbi and his group of students standing there. They quickly ushered them in and locked the door behind them. In hushed voices, they explained that it was Easter—and the anti-Semitic Cardinal was preparing to give his public address. As usual, that meant a pogrom was likely to follow. The Jews of the town were hiding behind locked doors, trying to be as quiet and invisible as possible.

But the Baal Shem Tov didn’t seem concerned in the slightest. In fact, he turned to his student—our storyteller—and said, “Go summon the Cardinal. I’d like to speak with him.”

The Jewish host nearly passed out from fright. But the chossid didn’t

ask questions. He followed orders.

After some back and forth, shockingly, the Cardinal agreed to come. He stepped down from his podium, left behind the massive crowd gathered to hear him speak, and came to meet the Baal Shem Tov. The two spoke for ten minutes. Then the Cardinal turned and left.

“That’s the story I remember,” the storyteller said. “I don’t know what happened to that Cardinal—or to that town.”

The Second Half

The host was visibly moved by the story. “That’s the story I’ve been waiting to hear all these years...”

“I was that Cardinal,” he said.

He went on to explain that he had once been a Jew, but had left Judaism, converted to Christianity, and climbed the ranks of the Church. He had become a fierce antisemite—someone who never missed a chance to incite hatred against Jews.

But as that particular Easter approached, something strange began happening. His grandfather appeared to him in a dream—then again, and again—each time warning him to stop his attacks and return to his people.

And then, the Baal Shem Tov had arrived.

He had realized it was a sign. He asked the Baal Shem Tov how he could make amends—how he could return. And how he would know that his repentance was accepted by G-d...

“When someone comes to you and tells you your own story,” the Baal Shem Tov replied, “that’s how you’ll know your repentance has been accepted.”

Back to Mr. Kizelshteyn

When Pinye Ber reached the part of the story about the dream, Mr. Kizelshteyn stirred. “Me too,” he said quietly. “My journey back to Judaism also began with a dream.”

Pinye Ber realized he had touched a nerve. They ended up talking for hours, sharing stories from their lives. Over the next few weeks, they grew close.

Finally, Pinye Ber decided it was time for “the ask.” He told Mr. Kizelshteyn about the mikvah in Bakhchisarai, and asked if he would be the one to make it happen.

By then, Mr. Kizelshteyn was a changed man. Without hesitation, he agreed.

Pinye Ber moved to the Holy Land, and not long after, he received a letter from his hometown. The mikvah had been completed, and the benefactor had even made other generous donations to the community. The townspeople were overflowing with gratitude for all that he had done.

Pinye Ber wrote a heartfelt letter to thank Mr. Kizelshteyn—but he was surprised when no reply came.

Soon, he found out why. Just a few short months after turning his life around, his new friend had passed away.

The Baal Shem Tov

Today is the last day of Pesach—Acharon Shel Pesach.

The Baal Shem Tov used to hold a special meal at the end of the day called Seudas Moshiach. It’s a meal in honor of Moshiach, because on this day, a special light connected to Moshiach shines in the world.

The first days of Pesach are about remembering the Exodus from Egypt. The last days, especially today, are about looking forward to the coming of Moshiach.

The Rebbe instituted the custom of drinking four cups of wine during this meal. It’s a joyful farbrengen with singing, dancing, and celebrating what’s coming next.

It’s the best way to finish the holiday with a bang.