

The Ba'al Shem Tov's Gift of a Dry Sukkah

The Ba'al Shem Tov requested something of his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kitov, who fulfilled his request. "What can I give you in return for your favor?" the Ba'al Shem Tov asked Rabbi Gershon. Rabbi Gershon did not answer. "The gift that I will give you is that you will be able to sit and eat in your sukkah on the first night of Sukkot, this coming year."

That year, on the first night of Sukkot, it poured. The rain did not let up and it was impossible to sit in the sukkah. In Rabbi Gershon's sukkah, however, there was no rain at all. His family lit the holiday candles in the sukkah, made Kiddush and sat and ate in the sukkah at their leisure.

The town rabbi stayed up to wait for a break in the rain so that he could go out to his sukkah and fulfill the mitzvah – even if just for a few moments. The rain, however, did not let up. In the meantime, the Rabbi's assistant saw that they were out of wine, and went to bring some. When he passed Rabbi Gershon's sukkah, he saw the candles alight and the whole family sitting and eating in their sukkah.

The assistant returned to the Rabbi and told him what he saw. The Rabbi couldn't believe what he was hearing and went to see for himself. "Why is your sukkah dry?" he asked Rabbi Gershon incredulously. "It is a gift from my brother-in-law, the Ba'al Shem Tov," Rabbi Gershon replied. The Rabbi sat with Rabbi Gershon until the end of the festive meal.

The Tzaddik's Gift

When a person helps a tzaddik, he finds favor in his eyes. The tzaddik gives a gift corresponding to how much the recipient has found favor in his eyes. In the *Luach Yom Yom*, it is written that the connection between God and simple Jews is by means of practical mitzvahs. There is a parable about an extremely wise man and a boor, who have no ability to communicate with each other. It is only when the wise man asks the boor to do him a favor that communication is established.

The Ba'al Shem Tov's brother-in-law received a gift from him that belonged to the Ba'al Shem Tov himself. The entire miracle was not relevant to Rabbi Gershon's level. It was clearly the type of occurrence that the Ba'al Shem Tov would effect and an excellent example of the Ba'al Shem Tov's ability to transform reality. True, the Ba'al Shem Tov gave Rabbi Gershon the gift from his level because he found favor in his eyes. But clearly, Rabbi Gershon had to be an open vessel in order to receive the gift. The fact that Rabbi Gershon did not reply when the Ba'al Shem Tov asked him what gift he wanted is proof that he did the favor for its own sake and did not think of receiving any reward in exchange.

There are many stories of tzaddikim who feel that someone deserves something, and that he has to give it to him, without the recipient being aware of it at all. Sometimes, this is not in exchange for a good deed. In this story, we can say that even before the Ba'al Shem Tov asked for the favor, he felt that Rabbi Gershon deserved a gift that was relevant to the Ba'al Shem Tov's spiritual level. There are similar stories of simple Jews who have material wealth coming to them. In this story, the gift is a spiritual one.

From the way that the story is told, it seems that the Ba'al Shem Tov did not really need the favor, but rather invented his request. This is the secret of contraction: God 'pretends' that He needs the service of the world in a particular dimension in order to reward those people who serve Him. Prior to the contraction, God lacked nothing.

With his holy vision, the Ba'al Shem Tov saw that it would not be possible to sit in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot, so he made sure that the rain would not fall on Rabbi Gershon's sukkah. Rain depends on 'arousal from below.' A place where the rain does not fall is the revelation of "the crystal dew," which does not descend in the recipient's merit, but only as a result of finding favor.

Along with the gift, this was also an opportunity to publicize God's presence in the world by means of a miracle performed by a tzaddik. This is the revelation of God's Name, Havayah - the attribute of compassion – which is above nature.

A dimension that is repeated in many stories about the Ba'al Shem Tov is that part of the story includes a third party who is amazed at the miracle that happened to someone else. This can be understood as the attribute of kingdom of the story. In our story, the Rabbi, who is certainly a Torah scholar and tzaddik, is most amazed. He honors the mitzvahs and exerts great effort to fulfill them. Nonetheless, it is pouring in his sukkah and he cannot make Kiddush there. His amazement is so great that the Rabbi – it doesn't say that he was an opponent of Chassidut, so apparently he was simply connected to the revealed portion of the Torah – refused to believe that it wasn't raining in Rabbi Gershon's sukkah and had to go and see the miracle for himself.

Rabbi Gershon tells the Rabbi that it was a gift from his brother-in-law the Ba'al Shem Tov. For those connected to the Ba'al Shem Tov, a miracle is quite an ordinary circumstance, but for the Rabbi, it was amazing. The Rabbi's assistant was amazed on a simple level – that there was a tzaddik in his town who merited such a miracle. By contrast, the Rabbi was not amazed on a simple level. He considered himself to be just as great as Rabbi Gershon. For him, it was somewhat of a "breaking of the vessels" – a breakdown of his axioms about life. That is why he had to come to see the miracle for himself.

When Rabbi Gershon said that it was a present from the Ba'al Shem Tov, he was publicizing the miracle. If the Rabbi had not been close to the Ba'al Shem Tov until that point, he likely did reach out to him after this encounter. The Rabbi even insisted on sitting in the sukkah until the end of the feast.

A miracle performed by the Ba'al Shem tov is perfect until the very end. It is known that the Ba'al Shem Tov particularly loved Chanukah – specifically because the standard practice is to beautify the mitzvah of candle lighting above and beyond the dictates of Jewish law (*mehadrin min hamehadrin*). The same is true here. The main expression of love when performing a mitzvah is attention to beautifying it completely – and not just perfunctorily. When we sit down to a feast in honor of a mitzvah, we turn from the spirituality of the mitzvah to its material space. The spirituality in this story is making Kiddush in the sukkah, while sitting and eating is the physicality. The Ba'al Shem Tov's miracles descended all the way down into the body of the recipient and his earthly deeds.