

**“CARRYING THE STORY”**  
**A Story for Rosh Hashanah Evening**  
**October 2, 2016 - 1 Tishri 5777**  
**Rabbi Daniel Treiser**

A little Hebrew lesson. Just moments ago, we sang one of the most popular High Holiday prayers, *Avinu Malkeinu*. The translation of the prayer in our machzor, our prayer book is – pretty good.

Most of the time, it is a fair representation of the Hebrew. But there’s a translation one line that’s always bothered me, the one we JUST sang. “*Avinu Malkeinu, choneninu v’aneinu, ki ayn banu ma’asim...* Our Father our King, be gracious with us and answer us, for we have little merit.” The first part’s OK, *choneinu* is be kind or gracious to us, *oneinu* is answer us. But “*ki ayn banu ma’asim*”, that’s a little tougher.

What is ma’asim? Well, it’s actually related to a word we are more familiar with Oseh, like in Oseh Shalom, the One who MAKES peace. It comes from the root that means TO DO or TO MAKE.

*Ma’asim* are the “things we’ve done,” our deeds. So really, a better translation would be “be gracious and answer us even though we have no deeds,” presumably in this case deeds worthy of such kindness from God.

There’s another way to define that word, however, and it’s one you might know if you’re a little familiar with Yiddish. If we were translating ma’asim to Yiddish, we would say they are *maisehs*- stories.

You’ve heard *maisehs* before, any good Jewish story. You’ve probably even used it. A *bubbemaiseh* is the story that your bubbe, your grandmother would tell you. And you were probably sure that it was made up. but like most stories, there was, at least to some extent, an element of truth. If we take THAT definition, then we might translate the prayer as, “for we have no stories to tell of our goodness.”

But we can play the rest of the phrase, too. And when we do, we get a beautiful translation that my colleague Rabbi Jeff Salkin offered me the other day, “We are nothing without our stories.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a conversation on the CCAR’s Facebook discussion page, September 18, 2016

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We are nothing without our stories. The Jewish people is kept alive because of our stories that stretch back through history. It is in the stories of our ancestors that we learn our customs, we know where we come from, and we gain insight into where we are going. Stories grant us a glimpse of immortality because a character can never fully die in a story. Think about it: As soon as a beloved character dies, he or she lives again the next time the story is told. And we ALSO find immortality, for we live on in the stories of our lives told by our friends and loved ones after we're gone. Even a story that isn't true, will often have truth within it. Stories are so powerful. Perhaps that is why Elie Wiesel once taught that God created humanity because God loves stories.

So, a story. This one, like so many of the great stories handed down to us, tells us of Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer. He lived almost three hundred years ago, in the earliest days of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, deep in the Carpathian mountains of what is now Ukraine. He was known as the Baal Shem Tov – the Master of The Good Name. An orphan who came from a small town and no wealth of his own, he worked in small, simple peasant jobs during the day, and poured over the great Jewish texts at night. Through a series of events he became a rabbi. He is, in fact, considered the father of Hasidic Judaism, and one of the greatest spiritual masters of all time. And, because of his great piety, he attracted a huge number of students who showed him a rather intense loyalty, for they believed he was so learned, so holy, that he could perform miracles. Countless stories are told of his wisdom, his insight and his powers.

When the Ba'al Shem Tov was advanced in years and knew that his end couldn't be too far off, he called his students to his side and gave each one a task to continue after he was gone. Yankele was one of his favorite students, and so he expected to be given a job of the highest importance, deserving of the greatest of honor. And so you might imagine that Yankele was a little surprised, and more than a little disappointed, when his master told him, "Yankele, your task will be to travel around the world, telling stories about me."

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“Are you serious?” he asked in disbelief. “You want me to travel around, from town to town, some itinerant storyteller? I’m supposed to beg people to listen to me tell stories? How will I earn any money to support a family? How long will I have to do this?” the distraught Yankele asked his teacher.

“You’ll know when you’re done.”

“How?”

“You’ll know when you’re done.” And that was the last that the Ba’al Shem Tov would say about it.

So, that’s what Yankele did. He packed up a few things and headed out, traveling from city to city, town to town, stopping at each one to tell his stories to whomever would listen. Stories of the beautiful, sweet teachings of his master. Stories of the other great rabbis who were won over by the brilliance of this somewhat rebellious teacher. Stories of miracles which he had seen the Ba’al Shem Tov perform with his own eyes, and others he heard tales of. And people paid him, donated just enough money to keep Yankele alive and traveling to his next destination.

In the course of his travels he found himself in Italy, a place where his great teacher was hardly known at all. But, he soon heard of a rich Jew living in a nearby city who was offering a gold coin for every new story someone could tell him about the Ba’al Shem Tov. Yankele thought to himself, “This must be why I was given this task — the Ba’al Shem Tov knew I could make my fortune this way!” And so he went as fast as he could to the rich man’s house and introduced himself.

The rich man’s face lit up when he saw Yankele. “Benvenuto Yankele, I am Abramo, and you are welcome in my home,” he said. He brought Yankele to a comfortable guest room — more comfortable than Yankele had seen in many, many months. “I cannot tell you how honored, how thrilled I am to have you with us. It’s almost Shabbat, so you’ll stay with me tonight, and I’ll invite all the Jews of the city to sit and hear your stories of the Ba’al Shem Tov.”

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When they went to services that night, Yankele couldn't help but notice how fervently Abramo prayed. "This is truly a pious man," Yankele thought. When they were back at Abramo's house, sitting around the table, food served and wine poured, Abramo turned to Yankele and said, "So, storyteller, tell us your first story."

And, Yankele's mind went blank.

He couldn't remember a single story, not a single sentence of a single-story, from the Ba'al Shem Tov. Nothing.

Yankele was so embarrassed he was almost in tears. But his host didn't seem angry or frustrated at all. Just sad. "You're probably just tired from your journey," Abramo said. "Sleep, and you can tell your stories tomorrow."

The next morning, during services, Yankele watched as Abramo prayed with even more intensity than the night before. He prayed as if his entire life depended on it. And then, afterwards, when they gathered back around the table for Shabbat lunch, he again turned to Yankele and asked him for a story.

And, again, Yankele's mind went blank.

They passed that meal in a sad, uncomfortable silence. As soon as Shabbat was over, Yankele packed up his few things and snuck out of the house, and headed out of town, ashamed, embarrassed and confused. As he reached the very edge of town, he saw a house with its windows covered in closed shutters. Suddenly like a flash of lightning, he remembered. Not a great story, not even the whole story, but at least a piece

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of the story. Forget about the gold coin — maybe he could buy back some of his dignity if he could share just a piece of the story with that kind, rich Jew.

He ran back as fast as he could, burst through the front door, ran up the stairs and charged into the man's study -where he was shocked by what he saw. Abramo sat in his chair, head in his hands, weeping. But, when he looked up, and saw Yankele standing there, a faint smile crossed his lips. "Sit. Please, sit," he whispered to Yankele.

Yankele sat in the chair across from him and said, "I'd like to tell you a story."

"I was once traveling with the Ba'al Shem Tov, and we came to a town which was gripped with fear. All the Jews in the town were huddled into one house, with the doors locked and the shutters closed. They let us in and told us why they were so afraid. 'It's the Bishop. The bishop of the city hates Jews like no one ever has. We think he must be descended from Haman — it's the only way we can explain his hatred. And he's called for a pogrom today. He's set up that stage in the city square, just outside the door. In a few minutes he's going to gather the people of the city, rile them up with a hate filled speech, and set them loose on us. We don't think any of us will survive the night.'

The Ba'al Shem Tov peeked out of the shutters and saw the crowd gathering. And then he watched as the crowd parted and a man, standing tall and dressed in the finest regalia, walk through the crowd and headed up to the stage. The Bishop.

'Yankele,' the Ba'al Shem Tov said. 'Go to the Bishop, tell him I must see him. When he says "no," insist. Don't worry,' he added, because he must have seen how scared I looked, 'no harm will come to you. Go now, quickly.'

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It took all the faith and trust that I had, but I left the house, walked through the crowd without so much as an angry word being sent my way, and walked right up the stairs of the stage. I faced the Bishop. ‘The Ba’al Shem Tov demands to see you, now.’

‘Surely you can’t be serious,’ the Bishop replied. ‘I don’t obey the commands of some Jew.’

‘Now!’ I responded. And, to my utter shock, he looked at me, gave the slightest of nods, and followed me down the stairs. We went back in the house and the Ba’al Shem Tov took him into a back parlor, where they sat for hours. When the door finally opened, the bishop came out, but he looked like a different man. His eyes were red with tears, and his shoulders were hunched as if burdened by some great sorrow. He walked out of the house, past the crowd, past the stage, and out of the town square to his home. The crowd was confused, but after a few moments they realized that nothing was going to happen and, little by little, they all went their separate ways. There was no pogrom. And the next day, the Ba’al Shem Tov and I left the town, never to return.”

As soon as Yankele finished his story, he noticed that Abramo was now weeping openly and uncontrollably. Yankele was shocked — no one had ever reacted to a story like this. He had no idea what to do. “Are you all right?” was the best he could think of. “Yes. Yes I am. At long last, I am all right.

Let me tell you a story, now.

“I was born to a very poor family. We were always cold and hungry, and to make matters worse, we were always picked on by the others in the town, mercilessly. Picked on for my shabby clothes. Picked on for my scrawny body. Picked on for being Jewish. And so, I grew up hating who I was, hating being a Jew most of all. When I was old enough — but still a boy, really — I ran away and took refuge in a church. I told them I was an orphan with no family and no knowledge of where I came from, only that my name was Abraham. They took me in, but I always feared that someone would discover my secret. And so, to

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make sure that no one would ever suspect my true heritage, I always spoke about how much I hated the Jews. I became the most vicious hater of Jews in the land. I played the part until I believed it. When I became a priest, I spoke of hatred. **Even when I became a bishop**, I tried to keep my secret safe by hating the Jews more and more. That's why I called for that pogrom. It was the last part of the lie I had been living, ever since I left my home.

“I don't know how the Ba'al Shem Tov knew my secret, but when he pulled me into that back room that day, he told me my own story, showed me how wrong I had been. He convinced me to do *teshuvah* — to repent. Of course I knew that true *teshuvah* would not be an easy, or a quick process. I had years of lies and hatred to atone for. But the Ba'al Shem Tov told me that I would know I had been truly forgiven, that my *teshuvah* had been accepted by God, when someone came to tell me this story.

“When you first came to town, Yankele, I recognized you, and I prayed and prayed that this was a sign that my *teshuvah* was complete. But, when you couldn't remember the stories, I knew I had failed. As hard as I prayed, you couldn't remember anything, and so I knew I had not been forgiven. And, when you left, I felt my heart break. Because I feared that I would **never** be forgiven. I laid my broken heart open to God, and prayed with all my might, all my soul, one last time, that after all of these years, I might finally be forgiven. And only then did our God have compassion on me.

“My dear Yankele, all of these years you have been wandering this world carrying a piece of me inside of you. Carrying the key which would set me free. The story that you told, my story, was the key to my salvation.”

And Yankele sat there, stunned by the majesty of it all. All the stories of his master returned to him, all the tales of miracles and wonders. All the lessons he learned sitting by his teacher were clear as glass once again. And one memory, one lesson, glowed brightly in his eyes. “Each of us,” the Ba'al Shem Tov

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taught, “carries deep within our hearts, the missing piece of someone else’s soul. You have been placed on this earth for no reason other than to bring it back home.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to my friend and colleague Rabbi Jason Rosenberg for sharing this story with me.