

The Ladder

A lesson from the *Baal Shem Tov* to his disciples

Questions for Reflection---

What is the goal of the *Baal Shem Tov* in this story?

How does the *Baal Shem Tov*'s metaphor of the beautiful bird symbolize the shared goal of teacher and student?

How does the *Baal Shem Tov* elevate the student/teacher experience?

The great Chassidic master Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov would pray for many hours every day. His disciples, who had long concluded their own prayers, would form a circle around him to listen to the melody of his prayers and feast their eyes on the spectacle of a soul soaring in meditative attachment to its Maker. It was an unspoken rule amongst them that no one abandoned his post until their master had concluded his prayers.

One day, a great fatigue and hunger befell them. One by one, they slipped home for a bite and a few moments rest, certain that their master's prayers would continue for several hours more. But when they returned, they found that he had finished praying while they were gone.

"*Tell us, Rebbe,*" they asked him, "*why did you conclude your prayers so early today?*"

The Baal Shem Tov answered them with a parable: Once, a group of people were journeying through a forest. Their leader, who was blessed with a keen eyesight, spotted a beautiful bird perched atop a tall tree.

"*Come,*" he said to his companions, "*I wish to capture this beautiful bird, so that we may delight in her song and gaze upon her wondrous hues.*"

"*But how can you reach this bird you see,*" asked they, "*the tree being so high and ourselves held captive by the ground?*"

"*If you each climb up onto the shoulders of your fellow,*" their leader explained, "*I will climb on to the shoulders of the topmost man and reach for the treasure that beckons to us from the heights.*"

And so they did. Together, they formed a chain reaching from the earth toward the heavens, to raise their leader to his aspired goal. But they soon wearied of the exercise and went off to eat and rest, and the man who had sighted the bird tumbled to the ground.

Source: Yanki Tauber (Hebrew), Eliezer Steinman (English trans.)

http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/421875/jewish/The-Ladder.htm#comments