

HERSCHEL THE GOAT LOVER

ONE DAY, while the Ba'al Shem Tov was still a secret mystic, he was out walking in the marketplace with some of his companions when he noticed a man walking alone at a distance, surrounded by an aura of light. The man shone so brightly that it was as if he had swallowed the sun, and the Ba'al Shem Tov immediately set out across the marketplace to meet him. But by the time he got to the other side, the man had disappeared.

The next day the Ba'al Shem Tov made sure to arrive at the marketplace earlier. Sure enough, there was the man again, standing in the same place, shining like gold. "That must be a really righteous person," the Ba'al Shem Tov told the other mystics, and he went off to follow the man through the marketplace. He watched as the man, who was dressed in tattered clothing, selected the greenest, freshest greens to buy, breaking off a tiny piece of each one to taste before he chose it and placing the selected produce into a very fancy tote bag.

After the man finished his shopping, the Ba'al Shem Tov followed him all the way to the outskirts of a village, to the tiny shack the man called home. Standing on the street and looking through the open front door, the Ba'al Shem Tov could see that the man's house was filled with goats. He watched as the man set his beautiful bag of greens on the table, and the goats gathered around, bleating. Then the man fed the goats the tender herbs, petting each goat as it had its fill, and he was licked with affection in return. The Ba'al Shem Tov was so touched and

puzzled by this scene that he returned very late that night to the shack to investigate and found the man sleeping on the bare floor with the goats lying on top of him like a blanket.

The next morning, during his visit to the marketplace, the Ba'al Shem Tov asked everyone who greeted him, "Who is that man with the goats, the one who shines so brightly?" And the people shrugged and said, "Oh, that guy? He's Herschel the Goat Lover. He sure loves his goats!" But this explanation hardly satisfied the Ba'al Shem Tov's curiosity. It didn't make sense to him at all that a man who dressed in tattered clothing, lived in a shack, took care of goats, and did nothing else should be enveloped in an aura of light.

After following Herschel for two more days, the Ba'al Shem Tov still couldn't make sense of him. Finally, he cornered Herschel in an alleyway and demanded, "Tell me your secret!"

"But I don't have a secret," Herschel said.

"You must have a secret! Tell me what it is!"

"No, no secret," Herschel said. "I'm just a simple man."

"All right then," the Ba'al Shem Tov relented. "Please, just tell me your life story."

So Herschel sat down in the alleyway with the Ba'al Shem Tov and began.

"I was married to a very, very holy woman, who spent her time taking care of the poor and the sick," he said. "But, sadly, she passed away at a young age. After she died, she came to me in a dream and told me that I had to keep doing what she had done—take care of the hungry and the sick. I wanted to honor her by fulfilling her command—but, at first, I didn't know how to do it properly. All I knew was that I owned goats. So I began keeping these goats very well. I feed them the choicest food and give them the best life they could possibly have. In return, they produce for me the highest-quality goat milk. Every night, I go to the local synagogue and check the list of people needing prayers to find out who's sick or injured, who just gave birth,

and who's recovering from surgery. And then, when everyone is sleeping, I go out and secretly leave a jug of goat milk on each of their doorsteps. I know my milk brings them healing."

When the Ba'al Shem Tov heard this story, he understood why Herschel had such a bright aura, and he was so moved by Herschel's story that he invited him to join his society of holy mystics. The Ba'al Shem Tov himself taught Herschel how to read and educated him so that Herschel eventually became a great mystic.



Unfortunately, in our ambitious, materialistic society, we tend to look down on simple tasks. We think, "I'm too important or distinguished to do that," or even "I'm too holy to do that." But when you look at simple tasks from the perspective of godliness, you can see what is really holy: An impoverished person like Herschel, wearing tattered clothing, living in a shack at the edge of a city—taking care of his animals with the sincere intention of using their milk to help the sick, the hurt, and the downtrodden. Herschel the Goat Lover's whole existence, from morning to night, might have been strange, but he lived that way so he could produce the greatest quality of milk to bring about healing to other people. His life was a true example of *tahavak yisrael* (love of thy neighbor).

Ultimately, our mission in this world is to help other people, and we can each do so in our own way. The Ba'al Shem Tov teaches that each of us may be put on the earth for seventy or eighty years just to do one single favor for another person. Herschel dedicated his entire life to helping people, and that is why he was surrounded by the brightest possible aura of light.