

THE CAVE TO THE HOLY LAND

There once was a poor Hasid and his wife who lived in a small hut in the forest outside the city of Shebreshin. This Hasid was very poor, for all that he and his wife possessed were two skinny goats. With the milk of the goats the Hasid and his wife made butter and cheese, but the goats gave so little milk that they could hardly make a living.

Now every Sabbath the Hasid came to town to pray in the House of Prayer, and he always prayed that he might someday live in the land of milk and honey. For his fondest desire was to travel to the Holy Land, even though he was far too poor to go there.

One day the Hasid's wife went to milk the goats, but they were not there. Then she remembered that she had forgotten to tie them up, and she hurried to get her husband and together they searched for the goats in the forest. But even though they searched all day long, there was no sign of the goats, and when it began to grow dark they returned home with heavy hearts. For how would they make a living without their goats?

But later that evening the goats returned home by themselves, and they gave a lot of milk, much more than they usually did. So too was that milk far sweeter than it had ever been. And the Hasid's wife understood that the goats must have found a new place to graze, so she did not tie them up the next day either. And once more the goats were gone all day, but in the evening they returned on their own. So too was the milk they gave as sweet as it had been the day before.

Now when the Hasid sold that milk in the city, the people soon saw that it was not like any other. It cured anyone who was sick, and before long there were no more sick people in the city of Shebreshin.

After this the Hasid decided to follow the goats to see where they went. So he followed them into the forest, to a place where there were two overlapping trees, and there they disappeared. The Hasid hurried to that place and found that it concealed the entrance to a cave. He entered that cave and saw the goats before him, walking toward a dot of light that could be seen in the distance. And the Hasid followed after them.

Now it did not take the Hasid very long to discover that it was an enchanted cave, for on the way, black demons with red tongues of fire jumped out to frighten him, and he heard the sound of money falling from behind him and naked women beckoned him as he passed. But

the Hasid kept walking forward. He didn't look to the left or right, for he had faith in God. And the powers of Satan that tried to obstruct his way were overcome one by one.

That is how the Hasid arrived at the other end of the cave. When he stepped outside it, he saw blue skies and a boy playing the flute, while his two goats grazed nearby. The boy approached the Hasid and said in Hebrew, "Are you new to our land?" The Hasid became afraid and his legs began to tremble, because he understood that he must be standing in the land of Israel. And the boy continued to speak and said, "I am also new in the area of Safed. Until now I walked with my goats in the mountains of Judah and Jerusalem."

And the Hasid fell to the ground and kissed the earth and gave thanks to God. Then he wrote a long letter to the Jews of his town and to all of the Jews in the Diaspora. He called upon them to join him in the Holy Land by means of that enchanted cave. He warned them about the obstacles of the cave and assured them that these were only illusions. Then he wrapped the letter in a fig leaf and tied it to the neck of one of the goats.

In the evening the goats came back home, but when the Hasid's wife saw that he was not with them, she became frightened. She was so worried about her husband that she did not notice the fig leaf on the neck of the goat. She waited one day, two days, three days, but still her husband did not come back. She was certain that robbers had slain him in the forest. Then she decided to move to the city of Shebreshin, for she could not bear to be alone. And since she was moving there, why did she need the goats? So she sold them to a butcher, and only after the goats had been butchered did they notice the fig leaf and find the letter inside it. They called the rabbi of the city at once, as well as the man's wife, and when the rabbi read the letter out loud, they all started crying, for the goats could not be brought back from the dead, and they were the only ones who had known the way to the enchanted cave. And because the letter had been found too late, they could not go to the Holy Land.

The rabbi kept that letter for many years in the synagogue of Shebreshin until it was lost in the great fire. And they still speak of it to this day.

□ Poland: Oral Tradition