

The Song of the Heart

A Shabbat Children's Story

Leila Gal Berner

Once there was a grumpy Jewish farmer who did not know how to rest. He worked and he worked and he worked—on Sunday he worked, and on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday he worked and worked. He even worked on Shabbat when all the Jews in his village rested. And because he worked all the time, he was tired all the time, and because he was tired all the time, he was grumpy all the time.

The farmer worked on Friday night, stopping only to watch his wife light Shabbat candles, stopping only to eat the delicious Shabbat meal she put on the table before him. Barely noticing that it was Shabbat at all, he would wolf down his food quickly and then go to his desk and write a LIST:

- Milk the cows
- Clean the plough
- Buy more seed
- Feed the chickens
- Paint the barn
- Buy more hay
- Collect the eggs
- Wash the wagon
- Plant more crops

The list went on and on.

On Shabbat morning, he would wake with the rooster's crow, and instead of getting nicely dressed and going to shul with all the rest of the Jews of the village, the grumpy farmer would get started on his long list of chores. As he worked, he would always remember "one more thing" that he had to get done and he would run and add it to the list. It never stopped. The list just kept getting longer and longer—because every time the farmer finished one chore, he remembered two more that simply had to get done!

And so it went—from day to day, month to month, and year to year. The farmer worked all the time, never stopping, not even for Shabbat. And because he worked all the time, he was tired all the time, and because he was tired all the time, he was grumpy all the time, and because he was

grumpy all the time, he had no friends, and because he had no friends, he was a very lonely man.

One week in the midst of winter, a famous rabbi and his students were traveling by carriage from Minsk to Pinsk by way of Slobodka. It was Friday afternoon and the rays of the sun were beginning to settle over the hills. The rabbi and his students began to talk about stopping for Shabbat, because they joyfully welcomed Shabbat, the day of rest and relaxation. As they were discussing where to stop for Shabbat, their carriage broke down—right in front of the grumpy farmer's house.

Walking up to the farmer's door, the rabbi knocked. When the farmer opened his door, the rabbi said, "*Shalom aleichem, haver!* Peace be with you, friend!"

"Harumph!" said the farmer. "I don't have any friends! What do you want?"

"Well," said the rabbi. "Our carriage has broken down and soon it will be Shabbat and we cannot travel on Shabbat—it is a time for us to rest and sing and pray and relax. Could you possibly let us stay with you until Shabbat ends tomorrow night?"

"Rest?! Singing?! Praying?! Relaxing?! You'll throw off my whole schedule and I won't be able to get the things on my list done! I don't think I want you here!"

"But dear sir," said the rabbi, "we really have no place else to go—and it will get very cold outside here if we sleep in the carriage. We'll freeze! Please give us shelter."

"Oh, all right!" said the grumpy farmer grumpily. "I suppose you can come and sleep in our extra room, and I suppose we can feed you—but don't distract me from my work, understand?"

"Oh yes!" said the rabbi. "We will simply celebrate Shabbat like we usually do—and we will keep out of your way!"

Evening came and with it Shabbat began. The grumpy farmer's wife, Yetta, cooked a delicious meal and set the table with a crisp white table cloth—everything shone with the beauty of Shabbat. The rabbi and his students sat down, and the grumpy farmer plopped down on his chair with an exhausted look on his face. Yetta lit the candles, waving her hands in the air, bringing the Shabbat light into her heart. She sang the blessing with her sweet voice, and then the grumpy farmer—whose name was

Yossel, by the way—quickly and mechanically said the blessings over wine and bread. The rabbi's face shone with joy and after they had finished the meal, and sung *birkat ha-mazon*, the grace after meals, he began to sing—and his students joined in:

YA BA BA BA BAM. . .

After a few minutes, the grumpy farmer got up impatiently and exclaimed, "Harumph! Singing! What a waste of time!" And off he went to do some more work, to cross one more thing off his long "to do" list.

The next morning, the rabbi and his students arose and put on their *talleisim*, their prayer shawls, and they began to sway as they prayed.

They sang with joy, filled with feeling, filled with a sense that God was right there with them, filled with a sense of wonder in the universe.

And when they had finished the prayers from their *siddurim*, their prayer books, they began to sing again:

YA BA BA BA BAM...

Yossel the farmer milked the cows, and painted the barn, all the while hearing that infernal SINGING! He hated it, he thought to himself. Well, maybe hate was too strong a word. He actually had to admit to himself that the sound of the singing made him a bit more relaxed... But NO! He couldn't get too relaxed! He had so-o-o-o much work to do!

At lunch time, Yossel came into the house and sat down with the rabbi and his students and Yetta. They ate their meal with delight—and once again, after *birkat ha-mazon*, the grace after meals, the rabbi and his students began to sing...

YA BA BA BA BAM...

As soon as they began to sing, Yossel jumped up from the table and went off to the barn, to pitch hay. He pitched and he pitched and he pitched—faster and faster—until his whole body was drenched in sweat. "That infernal SINGING!" he cried out. "I HATE it!" But despite himself, he had to admit that inside, in his heart, the music soothed him—and despite himself, he began to relax. Soon, Yossel found himself stretched out on a bale of hay and began to feel sleepy and as he slipped into a nice afternoon nap, he found that despite himself, he was humming...

YA BA BA BA BAM...

Yossel slept for a long time, and when he awoke in the late afternoon, he jumped up from the bale of hay, annoyed that he had “wasted” a whole bunch of hours. Walking quickly into the house, he went to look for his list and see what was next, what chore awaited him. As he looked down at the lo-o-o-n-n-n-n-g-g-g piece of paper, he heard the rabbi teaching his students about the Torah portion. “You shall honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” the rabbi was reading—and then the rabbi told his students, “You know, my dear children, even God rested on Shabbat! Every time we sing *V’shamru* we sing about that, you know: ‘*U-va-yom ha-sh’vi-i shavat va-yinafash—and on the seventh day, God stopped working, took a deep breath and rested.*’”

“How good it is to have this Shabbat day!” And then, as if God’s spirit had floated into him, his face broke into a deep smile and he began to sing...

YA BA BA BA BAM...

Yossel the grumpy farmer tried very hard to ignore the rabbi’s words and to concentrate on his list of chores. He tried covering his ears, so that he could not hear the rabbi’s teaching, but the words kept ringing in his ears, “Even God rested on Shabbat!...On the seventh day, God stopped working, took a deep breath and rested.” God rested...God rested...even God rested...and that infernal SINGING! Try as he might, the sound flowed through his body, and his muscles relaxed, and try as he might, he couldn’t stop feeling as if something wonderful, something miraculous was happening to him. And try as he might, he couldn’t stop his mouth and breath from forming the sounds.

Soon, he gave in—and like a heavenly wind within him, his breath turned into song...

YA BA BA BA BAM...

Yossel felt less and less grumpy. He went and he sat at the table by the rabbi—and with eyes closed and heart full, he sang with the rabbi and his students. He sang and he sang and he sang.

And on the seventh day, Yossel took a deep breath and rested.

Night fell. Three stars were seen in the sky. Shabbat was over. The rabbi and his students lit the Havdalah candle—delighted in the last glimmers of

Shabbat light, breathed in the lovely fragrance of the spices, symbolizing the sweetness of the departing Shabbat, and tasted the sweet wine. As they bid farewell to Shabbat, one more time, they began to sing...

YA BA BA BA BAM...

And Yossel, the not-so-grumpy farmer sang with them.

Soon the rabbi and his students packed up their belongings, fixed the broken wheel of their carriage and thanked Yossel and Yetta for their hospitality. They wished their hosts *shavua tov*—a “good week”—and they waved goodbye as they set off down the road.

Yossel watched as the carriage got smaller and smaller on the horizon, farther and farther away. He began to feel lonely and sad. Slowly, Yossel went into the house and began to add more items to his “to do” list—but somehow, his heart was not in it. He put the pencil down and sat quietly, thinking.

Suddenly Yossel jumped up, ran to the barn, saddled his horse and sped down the road in pursuit of the rabbi and his students. After galloping for about an hour, Yossel caught up with the rabbi’s carriage. “Stop!” Yossel cried out. “Stop! Please come back to my farm. I will build you a *bet midrash*, a house of study! I will build you a *shul*, a synagogue—you must come back! Without you, I don’t know how to rest! Without you, the song is gone!”

The kind rabbi took Yossel’s hands in his. “Yossel,” he said, “don’t you know that Shabbat is *God’s* gift to you, not mine. And God brings it to you each and every week. All you have to do is open your heart to Shabbat—and the rest will take care of itself. You will know how to rest, you will know how to let go of your list, at least for twenty-four hours. You will know how to relax. All you have to do is receive God’s gift.”

“And as for the song, Yossel,” the rabbi continued, “the song is in your heart, ready to bring you joy whenever you need it. Look to your heart, Yossel, look to your heart.”

YA BA BA BA BAM...

Shabbat shalom!

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