

THE CASTLE IN THE FOREST

Written by
Lauri Donahue

Based on a Hasidic Story

FADE IN:

EXT. FIELD OUTSIDE ZHITOMIR - DAY

A field of wildflowers, on the afternoon of a beautiful spring day; an idyllic scene, perhaps in the style of Miyazaki.

In the distance are the rooftops of a city of 4,000 people.

SUPER: Zhitomir, Ukraine -- 1792

SHIMMEL THE SHOCHET, early 30s, wanders amidst the flowers, picking some. He takes in the scene, enjoying the beauty, then turns his face to heaven and murmurs a blessing.

SHIMMEL

Baruch atah hashem elokeinu melech
ha'olam shekahchah lo ba'olamo.

EXT. ZHITOMIR - DAY

Shimmel strides through the busy streets, carrying a bouquet of wildflowers. It's Friday and the Jewish residents are bustling around doing their Shabbos shopping.

Many neighbors smile and greet him as they pass, and he returns their greetings.

NEIGHBORS

Good Shabbos, Reb Shimmel!

SHIMMEL

Good Shabbos, good Shabbos.

Shimmel sees his neighbor MOTEL, 20s, looking harried as he does his shopping.

SHIMMEL (CONT'D)

Motel! How is your wife?

MOTEL

Very near her time now, I think.

SHIMMEL

Baruch Hashem. If it's a boy, I hope to have the merit to perform the bris.

MOTEL

Of course, Reb Shimmel! Who else?

YANKEL, 30's, calls out to Shimmel as he walks down the street with another Chasid named MOISHE.

YANKEL

Shimmel! Will we be seeing you at
the Rebbe's dvar Torah?

SHIMMEL

Have I ever missed a week?

INT. SHIMMEL'S HOUSE - DAY

Shimmel enters his modest home. He hands the flowers to his wife DVOIRE and kisses her on the cheek.

He looks around and sees that the house is clean and ready for Shabbos. He goes over to the pots bubbling on the hearth, takes a deep breath of the good cooking smells, and smiles.

CHILDREN of various ages from 3 to 11 run to him and hug him.

CHILDREN

Tateh! Tatenui!

He picks up a small boy and gives him a kiss on the head.

EXT. REBBE'S SHUL - NIGHT

The windows and doors are open, and candlelight shines from within.

INT. REBBE'S SHUL - NIGHT

REBBE ZEV WOLF sits at the head of a table, surrounded by his rapt Chasidim, including Shimmel, Yankel, and Moishe.

Candles flicker in the breeze.

REBBE WOLF

Im tachaneh alai machaneh lo yirah
libi im takum alai milchamah b'zos
ani boteh'ach.

He lets everyone think about this for a moment.

REBBE WOLF (CONT'D)

Should an army besiege me, my heart
would have no fear; should war
beset me, still would I be
confident.

He looks around.

REBBE WOLF (CONT'D)

But how can this be? What man is
without fear, when attacked by an
enemv?

The Chasidim ponder this.

Rebbe Wolf smiles, gently.

REBBE WOLF (CONT'D)
Let me tell you a story...

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Murderous-looking THIEVES lie in wait in a dense forest, watching the road.

REBBE WOLF (V.O.)
In a forest between two cities
lived a band of thieves...

A POOR FARMER in a rickety wagon full of hay drives along the forest road.

REBBE WOLF (V.O.)
If a poor farmer drove a wagon full
of hay through the forest, the
thieves let him pass.

The thieves watch the poor farmer from the cover of the trees, and let him pass.

A RICH MERCHANT in a fancy carriage travels along the road, escorted by ARMED GUARDS on horseback, passing the poor farmer.

REBBE WOLF (V.O.)
But if a rich merchant passed, he
would surely be attacked, unless he
hired guards to protect him.

The thieves swoop down on the carriage, brandishing weapons.

The rich merchant peers out through the carriage window, seeing the guards fight the bandits.

REBBE WOLF (V.O.)
Now, who would imagine the rich man
would complain about the need to
hire guards?

The rich man looks back along the road and sees the poor farmer behind him.

REBBE WOLF (V.O.)
Would he say, "What a shame I'm not
a poor farmer with a wagon load of
hay"?

The rich merchant looks at the wooden chests and rolls of fine cloth and carpets packed inside the carriage.

REBBE WOLF (V.O.)

No! He is thankful for the privilege of transporting expensive goods that attract the attention of robbers.

The guards drive the robbers away.

INT. REBBE'S SHUL - NIGHT

The Rebbe looks around at his Chasidim.

REBBE WOLF

If I must battle with the Satan and his henchmen when they attempt to ambush me on my path through life, this battle will make me happy, and I will not be afraid!

The Chasidim look perplexed.

REBBE WOLF (CONT'D)

Because evil is only interested in me when I carry expensive goods. The Satan is only jealous when I possess a treasure worth fighting for. And this knowledge gives me the strength to fight when I am tempted.

The Chasidim nod and smile, understanding now.

Shimmel's face is wreathed with joy.

EXT. SHIMMEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Shimmel walks up to his house, accompanied by Yankel and Moishe, just as his friend YAAKOV pulls up in his wagon, very excited.

YAAKOV

Shimmel! I have a son!

SHIMMEL

After all these years! Mazel tov!

YANKEL

(overlapping)
Mazel tov!

MOISHE

(overlapping)
Mazel tov Yaakov!

YAAKOV

And I want you to do the bris.

SHIMMEL

Of course, Yaakov. When was the boy born?

YAAKOV

On Shabbos. I left home to tell you right after Havdalah.

Shimmel's face darkens.

SHIMMEL

But Yaakov...

He looks at Yankel and Moishe in dismay.

SHIMMEL (CONT'D)

You know that every Shabbos I go to the Rebbe's dvar torah. In all these years, I've never missed a week.

Yankel and Moishe nod in confirmation.

YAAKOV

Of course I know. But the Rebbe doesn't start until at least an hour after dark, yes?

Yankel and Moishe nod, confirming this.

YAAKOV (CONT'D)

My village is only half an hour from here. Come to me for Shabbos and perform the bris. You can leave after Havdalah and still be here in time for the Rebbe.

Shimmel still looks doubtful, but he nods.

SHIMMEL

Very well...

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Shimmel drives his wagon along the forest road.

Even in daylight, it's a bit creepy.

Shimmel looks around, apprehensively.

SHIMMEL

(to himself)

At least I don't have to worry about being mistaken for a rich man...

The trees thin ahead, and with relief he sees the village in the distance.

EXT. YAAKOV'S HOUSE - DAY

Shimmel drives his wagon up to Yaakov's house.

Yaakov comes out of the house to greet him, accompanied by his tired by proud WIFE, holding the baby.

YAAKOV

Shimmel! At last! Good Shabbos!

YAAKOV'S WIFE

(overlapping)

Good Shabbos, Reb Shimmel!

Yaakov holds the horses as Shimmel climbs down from the wagon.

YAAKOV

I hope you have a good appetite!
Such a feast my wife made in your
honor! You won't even miss your
Dvoire's cooking!

Shimmel forces himself to assume a pleasant expression.

SHIMMEL

Now let me see this son of yours.

He takes a peek at the baby and makes goo-goo faces at him.

EXT. YAAKOV'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Shimmel steps out of Yaakov's lighted doorway, looks up at the sky, and counts more than three stars.

Yaakov steps out to join him, followed by his wife, carrying the baby.

The wind kicks up dust and leaves.

Yaakov's wife looks up at the clouds scudding across the sky.

YAAKOV'S WIFE

There's a storm coming. Are you
sure you can't stay until morning?

SHIMMEL

I don't want to miss the Rebbe.
And Dvoire would be worried.

YAAKOV

I'll help you with the wagon, then.

He goes with Shimmel toward the barn.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Shimmel drives a wagon through the woods. It's spooky and dark and the wind is rising.

Owls HOOT and animals RUSTLE in the underbrush.

He looks up -- clouds are covering the moon and stars. In the distance thunder RUMBLES.

The first raindrops fall.

ZAP! There's a flash of lighting, too close.

The horses whinny and rear.

Shimmel fights to control them.

Thunder RUMBLES, much closer this time.

The rain becomes a torrent. It fills the ruts in the road.

Shimmel urges the horses forward; their feet splash and slip in the mud.

LATER

Shimmel hunches miserably in his soaked clothes, water dripping off his drenched hat.

The horses make barely any headway. He snaps the whip above their backs, but it doesn't help.

He peers into the darkness and sees a faint flicker of light, off to one side of the road.

He wipes the rain from his eyes, not sure of what he saw.

But now the light is clearer. He can see a lamp hanging from a stone gateway at the entrance to a private driveway, and the lights of a huge house beyond.

He sighs with relief and heads for the gate.

EXT. CASTLE IN THE WOODS - NIGHT

Shimmel drives the wagon up to the gates of a castle. The windows blaze with light.

Two LIVERIED SERVANTS appear. One takes charge of the horses, and the other helps Shimmel down from the wagon and escorts him to the door of the castle, holding an umbrella over his head.

INT. CASTLE IN THE WOODS - NIGHT

Shimmel enters the castle's entry hall and looks around in wonderment.

It's a magnificent space with fine paintings and carpets and a welcoming fire in the hearth.

He looks down at his muddy boots, and the puddle forming around him on the polished wooden floor.

More SERVANTS appear, carrying things.

SERVANT #1

Please sir, let me take your coat

He helps Shimmel take off his wet coat and hat.

SERVANT #2

May I offer you a towel, sir?

He hands Shimmel an embroidered towel.

Shimmel takes it and dries his wet face and beard.

Another servant presents him with a fine velvet coat, just his size, and helps him put it on and belt it with a silk sash.

SERVANT #3

Here sir -- the master wouldn't want you to catch cold.

Another servant indicates a comfortable chair by the fire.

SERVANT #4

Please sir, may I help you with your boots?

He leads him to the chair. Shimmel sits.

The servant helps him take off his muddy boots and wet, darned socks.

The servant holds the soggy socks up with distaste, like he's holding up rats by the tails. He hangs them up by the fire to dry.

Then another servant kneels at Shimmel's feet and presents him with velvet slippers, embroidered with gold thread.

Shimmel slips them on; they're just the right size.

He looks around, amazed.

SHIMMEL

Who is the master of this place?

SERVANT #1

You'll meet him very soon, sir. He asks that you join him as soon as you're rested.

Another servant appears with a bottle of whiskey and a glass on a silver tray.

SERVANT #5

May I offer you some refreshment, sir?

BANQUET HALL

A servant escorts Shimmel into a palatial chamber crowded with GUESTS sitting around a long table set for dessert with exotic fruits, fancy cakes, and wine.

Fires blaze in ornate hearths, and dozens of candles burn in crystal chandeliers.

Shimmel stares; there's something strange about the other guests. They're all richly dressed, but he catches glimpses of odd animal-like features -- a forked tongue, yellow eyes, pointed ears, sharp teeth....

But when he rubs his eyes and looks again the guests look normal.

At the head of the table sits a distinguished-looking OLD MAN with a long white beard.

He stands to welcome Shimmel.

OLD MAN

Please, friend -- come sit by me!

Shimmel, with a touch of apprehension, goes to sit at the old man's side.

SHIMMEL

I thank you for your hospitality...

The GUEST on Shimmel's other side murmurs in his ear as he hands him a glass of whiskey.

GUEST

You're in luck! You're just in time for the dvar Torah!

The other guests look attentively at the old man.

The old man strokes his beard thoughtfully.

OLD MAN

Hashem made earth and heaven and all that are in them. Don't you agree?

SHIMMEL

Of course.

OLD MAN

And every blade of grass has an angel telling it to grow. Is that not so?

SHIMMEL

So we are told.

OLD MAN

So, since everything is in the power of Hashem, everything is pre-ordained, yes?

SHIMMEL

Yes...

OLD MAN

And if it is pre-ordained, then you are powerless to change. You agree?

SHIMMEL

(doubtfully)

Yes...

OLD MAN

And each man and woman is to be judged, true?

SHIMMEL

True.

OLD MAN

So if you've already been judged, why bother to repent?

Shimmel looks around at the other guests, who are nodding in agreement.

SHIMMEL

But...

OLD MAN

What chutzpah to try to atone! To defy the judgement of Hashem!

SHIMMEL

(confused)

As you say...

The old man smiles and chuckles.

OLD MAN
You have answered well.