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**The Man Who Lived on Stories Alone:
Original Tales from the Town of Seepor¹**

A Rabbinical Capstone Project by Benjamin A. Rosen

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¹ Please visit the official website for the Town of Seepor: www.townofseepor.com

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Abstract

Stories and storytelling are core to the human experience. Our lives are spent creating, sharing, and witnessing stories – from childhood through death. In particular, stories and their dissemination are a key aspect of Jewish culture. We see this in nearly every aspect of Jewish life. The cycle of public Torah recitation is central to traditional Shabbat observance. When we gather around the Passover seder table, it is to retell the story of our spiritual ancestors' redemption from Egypt. The same is true for Chanukah and Purim observances, to name but a few. It is through the telling and retelling of these ancient narratives that Jewish identity is built. Through our stories, we can discover who we are and how we fit into the centuries-old chain of tradition.

Through the centuries, Jewish identity has evolved and our stories have reflected on that. The emergence of *chassidism*, for example, has led to the creation of a vast library of stories which are now known across the Jewish world. As my studies led me deeper into the Jewish folklore tradition, I came to find that what I was reading did not necessarily reflect the Jewish communities that I live and learn alongside. There were tales of shtetl and yeshiva life, but how could those speak to the identities of Jews who no longer (if ever) possess a frame of reference for that lived context? Through this project, I sought to give voice to the lived experiences of modern Jews who struggle to find themselves within the stories of our tradition. What follows is a collection of original Jewish stories that speak to elements of Jewish life that previous generations could not foresee.

Acknowledgements

כִּי־כבד מִמֶּךָ הַדָּבָר לֹא־תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְךָ:

“...For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.”

Exodus 18:18

This project, the culmination of five years of work and study (and a lifetime of stories), would not have been possible without the support of my loved ones. My heart overflows with gratitude for the blessing of so many treasured relationships. I dedicate this project to the following:

My teachers – for your wisdom and generosity.

My family – for your patience and love.

אני לדודי ודודי לי – My wife, my teacher, my partner-in-life

אני אוהב את כולכם!

I love you all!

Foreword

I was lucky to grow up in a household that treasured the art of storytelling. As a young child, not a night went by that I was not treated to a story prior to bedtime. I remember climbing under the covers, anxiously waiting to hear my mother or father's footsteps as they came to my room to deliver my nightly treasure. The stories they would tell, pulled from a number of story collections (one of which I still own), were like a balm. In equal turn, the stories whisked me away to far-away lands and times and caused me to ponder fundamental truths of human existence. And yet, these stories were not *my stories*; they often belonged to cultural traditions to which I had little or no tie. My love of storytelling began in my childhood bedroom, but the stories that spoke to my *neshama* were instilled in me as part of my family's religious tradition – Judaism.

I believe that my own affinity for storytelling is a result of the environment in which I was raised. Before I was capable of forming my own memories, my family was engaged in the sharing of memories which had been formed and inscribed upon the hearts of the Jewish People for thousands of years. Each spring, Jewish families the world over gather around the dinner table to participate in the time-honored tradition of the Passover Seder; a ritual which calls upon its practitioners to tell the story of the Biblical Exodus from Egypt. According to the 2020 Pew Study of Jewish Americans, the Passover Seder is the most widely practiced religious ritual across Jewish America, with approximately six-in-ten respondents replying in the affirmative.²

Peninnah Schram, founder of the Jewish Storytelling Center and renowned *maggidah*, shares an anecdote about intergenerational story acquisition in her own family. In “Because God

² Mitchell, T. (2022, October 6). *Jewish Practices and Customs*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-practices-and-customs/>

Loves Stories,” edited by folklorist Steve Zeitlin, Schram recalls how frustrated she was by the stories that her mother would insist on sharing. She remembers saying, “I don’t want to hear that story, Ma, I’ve heard it a hundred times.” Her mother would respond, “You’ll hear it one hundred and one times, my child.”³ Schram gives an example of one of her mother’s didactic tales, “The Czar’s Army,” which she believes was meant to teach her to keep her anger in check. Now the mother in her own right, Schram tells how she had forgotten the story, but in a moment of anger with her daughter the story returned to her; just when she most needed it. Schram notes that for many years she believed that her mother had made up “The Czar’s Army,” but would later come to find a version of the story in a 13th century text. Recognizing that her mother had likely never engaged with the medieval source text, Schram traces the story’s journey from 13th century Eastern Europe to her childhood home in Connecticut; a journey which will continue as she passes the story to her own daughter.⁴

Every Shabbat, after roast chicken had been devoured and the dancing had concluded, the attendees of my childhood Jewish summer camp⁵ would gather around a bonfire to conclude the night. There we would be treated to beautiful music, but my favorite part came at the end when the Rabbi of the camp would stand before us to weave a tale. These were the folktales of my people; stories of wise Rabbis and foolish students, of *shtetls* that no longer stood. Unlike the stories of my early childhood, which featured buff Greek gods and wealthy European kings, these tales centered around people with names like Malke and Yankel. The heroes of these stories were not knights in shining armor, but learned scholars of Torah and pious every-men. They

³ Zeitlin, S. (1997). *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling*. Touchstone. (95).

⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁵ It is my sense that summer camp is so conducive to storytelling because at camp outside distractions are very limited. During the rest of the year, we are bombarded with stories, from when we wake up until we go to sleep. We engage with stories on the radio, TV, social media, print media, to name but a few. When we are at camp, the stories we tell each other are only accessible method of story transmission.

were people who I knew somewhere deep in my bones; they were my grandparents and my Uncle Eddie who would always greet me with “Ben-YA-min, my boychik” and a pinch on the *punum*. These characters were *me*. For the first time in my life, as we sat around the campfire situated deep in the woods of Zionsville, Indiana, I had found *my* stories.

On my first Shabbat serving as Rabbinic Fellow for a Jewish senior living community, I told one of my favorite Jewish stories – known to me as “The Long Prayer.” The story details how the Baal Shem Tov and his students would gather in the Beit K’nesset for their morning prayers during every Shabbat. The liturgical centerpiece of this morning service is the *Amidah*, a collection of benedictions, which is recited while standing. The Baal Shem Tov would daven the *Amidah* long after his students had finished. As the students waited, their hunger and impatience got the better of them – they tried to sneak into the back room where the oneg would be held to grab a bite to eat. The Baal Shem Tov prayed the *Amidah* for oh so long, and the students figured that they could make it back to the sanctuary, having eaten a cake or two, before their teacher finished. With great caution, one of the older students made for the door, but just as his hand touched the doorknob the Baal Shem Tov turned around with a shout. He then explained to the students that when he prayed the *Amidah* it was as if he was climbing a ladder. And as he prayed, he ascended the ladder – rung by rung – but it was his students, his community, that held the ladder steady. When the student got up to leave, the Baal Shem Tov explained, the ladder had fallen.

This classic Chassidic tale is but one example, within the larger corpus of Jewish folklore, of the *mashal*. The word is composed of the root letters *mem-shin-lamed*, and its meaning is related to the concepts of example and similarity. In practice, *meshalim* (parables) are stories which not only offer a lesson to the listener or reader, but also provide a way for the

storyteller to parallel the lived experience of its audience.⁶ In other words, as David Stern wrote, “[the *meshalim*] draw a connection between the fictional situations they recount and a concrete one at hand.”⁷ What draws me to this particular form of story is that it trusts the listening audience to suss out the intended lesson and decide, for themselves, how best to apply it to their lived reality.

When I told the story of “The Long Prayer,” it was not to instruct my audience that it is inappropriate to exit the sanctuary while others are praying, nor was it to demonstrate the pious nature of the Baal Shem Tov. Rather, I told the story in the hopes that those in attendance would draw a parallel between the story and their present situation. By telling this particular *mashal* in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown, I gambled that my listeners would come to understand the need for communal engagement; whether that be through their attendance at Shabbat services or other regularly-scheduled communal programming.

Telling this story to a community of elderly Jewish folks, I did not feel that I had to define each of the Hebrew or Yiddish words. I did not have to explain the form and character of a Chassid, like the Baal Shem Tov, for they knew men like this.⁸ Though they themselves were not Chassidim, nor had they lived their lives in European shtetls, these folks knew this character and setting in their *neshamot* – their souls. Even if they hadn’t heard this exact story before, its form and delivery was like one’s favorite pair of jeans: they just fit. This is not to say that I believe that future generations of Jews will be incapable of understanding the message or lesson embedded within any particular *mashal*. Perhaps it is not a question of understanding, but of resonance.

⁶ It must be noted that the use of fable and parable is not unique to Jewish culture. Examples abound across time and place: Aesop’s Fables, Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales, The Tales of the Ashanti Tribe, to name but a few.

⁷ Stern, D. (1981). Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal. *Prooftexts*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 261-291. (262).

⁸ Is it a coincidence that, for me, the two most influential Jewish storytellers have been women (Peninnah Schram and Ellen Frankel)? My favorite collection of Jewish stories, “Three Times Chai”, was compiled by another Jewish woman, Laney Becker, and the book itself was introduced to me by Rabbi Sissy Coran, z”l.

As my wife and I look toward our future – one we hope will be filled with the blessing of children – I have begun to question whether the Jewish folktales, which so resonated with me as a young person, will bear the same resonance for my future children. I was blessed to be born into a family whose elders still, at least from my perspective, existed with a foot firmly planted in the “old world”. My grandfather grew up practicing Orthodox Judaism and all members of that generation maintained a *bissel* (a little bit) of Yiddish. Unfortunately, my children will only know this grandfather and his generation through the stories that I tell. I cannot assume that when I tell them stories of the Baal Shem Tov, and his like, that my children will find themselves in his stories as I have.

And yet, that does not mean that the stories of figures like the Baal Shem Tov and The Wise Men of Chelm are worthy of being tossed away. To do so would be to undermine the system of telling and re-telling which has been a hallmark of Jewish culture from its earliest days.

Folklore and Jewish Identity Formation

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan once wrote, “...the function of religion is to hold up to the individual the world of the group and the importance of his complete identification with it. [Religious ceremonies] necessarily call attention to the advantage of being able to share the life of one’s family, tribe or clan, and this points to a high degree of awareness of the collective unit of which one is apart.”⁹ He goes on to explain that engaging in religious ritual not only connects the initiate to their contemporaries, but also connects the group and its members to their ancestors. This is achieved through the intergenerational sharing of practice and lore.¹⁰

⁹ Kaplan, M. M. (1981). *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. Jewish Publication Society of America. (333).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 334.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between folk religion,¹¹ as Kaplan defines it, and the relatively modern concept of patriotism.¹² Core to both expressions of group identification are their use of folklore to build and sustain group identity. When Jewish families retell the Exodus narrative during Passover, practitioners look past historical inconsistencies to find the spiritual truth of redemption and renewal nestled within. The myth of the first Thanksgiving, which for generations existed as a way for Americans of European origin to understand their place in the land, is a less savory example of the use of folklore to form and maintain group identity.

Alan Dundes wrote that, "...any identity system is dependent on an individual's belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols and with their meaning. There can be collective as well as individual identity systems. But how are a group's symbols communicated? Folklore is perhaps the most important vehicle for the communication of a group's symbols."¹³ This begs the question: If an individual is no longer able to identify with the symbols of their group, must the communication method (in this case, folklore) evolve to meet their lived reality?

It is also important to recognize that the lived Jewish experience that I bring to the table as a storyteller is merely one Jewish perspective in a sea of Jewish identities. Take the Israeli author Ayelet Tsabari; a woman of Yemini descent who currently resides in Canada. Speaking to the concept known as *Ashkenormativity*,¹⁴ Tsabari shared her experience as a Mizrachi-Israeli who moved to Canada:

"Jewish meant delis and lox and matzo ball soup, as exotic to me as a Woody Allen movie. At parties, dipping into a too-garlicky hummus, people asked if I spoke Yiddish.

¹¹ "...systems of habits and values through which the group life became so significant to the individual that it constituted his principal medium for self-fulfillment" (337).

¹² Kaplan understands patriotism as "the modern form of folk religion".

¹³ Dundes, A. (1984). Defining Identity Through Folklore. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 21, 149–152.

¹⁴ The assumption that Ashkenazi culture (Jews from Europe) is the default expression of Jewish culture.

‘Do I look like I speak Yiddish?’ I said, but the questioners just stared at me, smiles frozen, clearly wondering, ‘What kind of Jew are you, anyway?’”¹⁵

This anecdote is a powerful reminder that Jewish identity is not monolithic. For hundreds of years, Jewish communities have existed across the world; from Brazil to Shanghai. In addition, those communities rarely existed in a vacuum; they have always been informed and influenced by the broader culture. Ayelet Tsabari’s writing is informed by her own unique life experience; a life that does not directly correlate to the Ashkenormative deli-culture that many assume to be the singular expression of Jewish identity.

The Question of Authenticity: What Makes a Story “Jewish”?

Adam Kirsch, author of “Who Wants to be a Jewish Author” presents the following as an answer to our operative question:

“...what makes literature Jewish is its decision to engage with Jewish texts and vocabularies, even in a negative way. Doing this does not require an extensive knowledge of Jewish tradition...but it does require an instinct for finding the elements in that tradition which can be used, or even misused, in order to communicate a modern truth. Jewish literature is what happens every time a writer tries to make a place for himself or herself in that ancient lineage.”¹⁶

At the heart of the inquiry is a question of *authenticity*. Anxieties regarding Jewish authenticity seem to be central to much of the intra-group discourse. During my year of study in Israel, I remember feeling discouraged when confronted by more conservative sects of Judaism. Not only had I grown up in a community which over-conflated the traditional with the authentic, but a persistent voice in my head would snicker at my “inauthentic” attempts to practice

¹⁵ Tsabari, A. (2013, March 20). *What kind of jew are you, anyway?* National Post. Retrieved January 1, 2023, from <https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/books/ayelet-tsabari-what-kind-of-jew-are-you-anyway>

¹⁶ Kirsch, A. (2019). *Who Wants to Be a Jewish Writer?: And Other Essays*. Yale University Press.

traditional Orthodox *davening*. Although that voice still exists within me, it no longer holds sway over my emotions as it once did. My studies of the history of Jewish thought and practice has given me the necessary confidence to express and embody what I believe to be a progressive and authentic Jewish identity.

There are multiple approaches to the concept of authenticity. When it is proposed that Orthodox religious practice is the only “authentic Judaism,” the argument relies on what Stuart Z. Charme calls an “essentialistic understanding” of authenticity.¹⁷ From this perspective, that which is traditional is authentic, but the understanding of “tradition” itself must be incredibly narrow. As Charme writes, “Tradition is the collective expression of a group’s essence, or *volksgeist*¹⁸ ...authenticity is often associated with loyalty to a primordial and largely homogeneous tradition.”¹⁹

While this may be the most pervasive understanding of *authenticity* and thus, what it means for a person, idea, or thing to be “authentically Jewish,” it is by no means the only perspective. An essentialistic understanding of authentic Judaism fails to account for the myriad of ways that modern Jewish identities are characterized by fluidity and intersectionality, while I find Kirsch’s perspective to be too permissive (amorphous boundaries). There must be a middle path.

Perhaps a better way to approach the question of “What is and what is not authentically Jewish?” is to rely on Michael Rosenak’s multi-lens approach to understanding the Jewish quality of any given piece of work (visual art, literature, music, etc.) described in his piece “Education for Jewish Identification: Theoretical Guidelines.” For Rosenak, a curriculum attains

¹⁷ Charmé, S. Z. (2000). Varieties of authenticity in contemporary Jewish identity. *Jewish Social Studies*, 6(2), 133–155. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jss.2000.0001>

¹⁸ J.G. Herder, ‘Spirit of the a people’ – understands “ethic, national, or religious groups as a distinct species with its own unique cultural outlook to which it remains true”

¹⁹ Ibid., 136.

the designation of “Jewish” when it is based upon the three pillars of Jewish Identity: Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewry.²⁰ While Rosenak is writing from the perspective of a Jewish educator and addressing the topic of curriculum, I believe that his perspective can apply to the topic at hand: the sharing of stories as a means to build individual and group identity and what allows them to qualify as “Jewish stories.”

Judaism, according to Rosenak, refers to Jewish theology and ideology, where *Jewishness* refers to those elements of Jewish identity related to distinct cultural memory. The third of Rosenak’s pillars, *Jewry*, consists of sociological elements which serve to define “in-group” vs. “out-group”; who are we vs. who are they.

In the telling of a single story, it is possible to see each of these pillars at play. Such an example can be found in the story of Rabban Gamliel²¹ and Caesar.²² It was said that once Caesar asked Rabban Gamliel (*Jewishness*) if it was true that God exists wherever there are ten Jews²³. Gamliel responded in the affirmative and Caesar was quick to point out that, in order for this to be true, the Jews must worship many gods. Gamliel expressed that, in fact, Jews only worship one God (*Judaism*). To demonstrate God’s ability to be all places at the same time, Gamliel struck one of Caesar’s servants on the head. Gamliel then accused the servant of allowing “the hot sun to shine upon [his] master’s house.” The servant, irked that he had been punished for something beyond his control, protested that the sun shines all over the world and that it is impossible to control. Gamliel concurred and said to Caesar, “If the sun, which is only one of God’s countless servants, shows itself at the same time all over the world, how much more so

²⁰ Rosenak, M. (1978). ‘Education for Jewish Identification: Theoretical Guidelines,’ *Forum* (Winter):118-129

²¹ It is likely, given the historical context, that this is Rabbi Gamliel II, a rabbi who lived and served as Nasi (religious authority and liaison to Rome) following the destruction of the Second Temple.

²² Montefiore, C. G., & Loewe, H. (2013). *A Rabbinic Anthology*. Cambridge University Press., 695-697.

²³ Reference to the concept of *minyan*, in which ten Jewish men are required to be present for certain elements of Jewish worship and practice to take place.

must God...” After Gamliel’s case was made, Caesar had no choice but to acknowledge the Rabbi’s wisdom (*Jewry*).²⁴

In this single story, we have three distinct examples of Rosenak’s three pillars at-play:

1. *Judaism*: Caesar’s question draws attention to the core of Jewish theology; there exists one God and that God is Adonai.
2. *Jewishness*: Gamliel as the heroic rabbi character. Without resorting to violence, Gamliel is able to convince the mighty Caesar to view the world through a Jewish lens; wisdom and knowledge are the source of Gamliel’s triumph.
3. *Jewry*: The narrative represents the collision of Jewish theology and the beliefs held by the majority (in this case, the Romans). In his defense of monotheism, Gamliel draws a stark line between “us” and “them”.

Utilizing the criteria proposed by Rosenak, I have written five original Jewish stories which speak to challenges faced by modern Jewish communities across the world. These stories, set in the fictional Town of Seepor, are my attempt to provide present and future Jewish communities with an entry point to discuss such topics as: divorce, interfaith marriage, conversion, and aging. It is my hope that these stories will uplift and challenge those who read them, while also affirming those who have been unable to locate their own identities within the greater corpus of Jewish storytelling.

²⁴ Frankel, E. (1993). *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore*. J. Aronson., 310.

The Man Who Lived on Stories Alone

*An original framing device inspired by “The Wise Men of Helm & Their Merry Tales” by
Solomon Simon.*

In a country, not entirely unlike your country. In a town, not unlike your town, lived a thriving Jewish community. Nestled in a lush valley, situated along a river, the town bustled with activity: the Beit Midrash never lacked for students, the shopkeepers met each customer with a friendly word, and the town synagogue was alive with the sounds of beautiful music and meaningful prayer.

And yet, this town was not without its mysteries. The town always appeared spectacularly clean and orderly, not a sign or shrub was out of place. The people were almost unnaturally happy: streets were free of debris, the buildings appeared as they did on the day they were completed, and families relaxed in beautiful gardens. When visitors would come to town, they would often wonder aloud, “How is everything so beautiful here?” These visitors would take guesses as the townsfolk nodded and smiled:

“Perhaps the people of this town were fabulously wealthy?”

The townsfolk would smile and shake their heads— that wasn’t it.

“Perhaps the government sends workers from the Capitol on a weekly basis?”

No, that wasn’t it.

“Perhaps it was magic?”

Again, the townsfolk would smile and shake their heads.

So what was it? The out of town visitors would learn that the town’s preservation was the result of the work of one man — a man who never accepted monetary compensation for his work. A man for whom the only acceptable form of payment was a story.

From dawn 'til dusk, the man would busy himself with the tasks of the town. On Sunday he would collect rubbish. On Monday, he would sweep the streets. On Tuesday, he would repair masonry. On Wednesday he would tend to the garden, and on Thursday would offer his services to any who required them. On Friday he prepared the synagogue for Shabbat, and on Saturday he rested. To the outside world, he appeared no different than any other public worker. One might think, "This man must make a fine salary for all the work he does." And if one were to visit the man's home, these thoughts might be confirmed... his home was modest, but fairly well appointed, and there was always more than enough food on his table to go around. "Surely, this man profits from his labors." "Surely," they say, but they would surely be wrong.

You see, this man never accepted any monetary compensation for all that he gave to the town. Despite his neighbors' protests, this man would shake his head and kindly ask them to keep hold of their money. All he required from his fellow townsfolk was that they share a story with him. One story for a job well done. This was how the man lived for all the years of his life.

Still, the people of this town remained perplexed. Certainly they were more than happy to avail themselves of the man's services. And why wouldn't they? For a single story a pop, the town was well cared for and the people were more than content. But there remained a question on the mind of all who benefitted from the services of the man whom they would come to call The Tanna.²⁵ How was it that he survived all these years when his sole source of income was the stories shared by the townsfolk themselves? How might a man subsist on stories alone?

Sadly, the Tanna died before their questions could be answered. The man had no family and so, for weeks after his death, his humble home stood unoccupied and dark. And when his neighbors entered his home in search of answers, they were met by a massive, bound tome. No

²⁵The name *Tanna*, often translated as "repeater", is inspired by the group of rabbis known as the *Tanaaim*.

title was given to the collection of text, but a note was attached: “Dear Friends, Here lies the fruit of my labors. May it be a blessing to you all.”

As the townsfolk pored through the massive book, it became clear that each story contained within was a story that the man had received in payment over the years. They were the stories of their lives; epic tales, short musings, and everything in between. This was their book, their story; a final gift from the Tanna.

What follows are but a few of those stories, taken directly from the pages of the Tanna’s Tome. May they sustain you, as they sustained him.

—

Our time in this world is finite – a version of immortality exists as long as our stories continue to be told once we have passed. The history of the Jewish people is long and varied; marked by great joy and horrific tragedy. For thousands of years we have engaged in the sacred process of creation and renewal, all the while bearing the stories of those who came before. In Pirkei Avot²⁶ we read of the transmission of Torah; from God to Moses, on to those of us who continue to find it to be a fount of love and wisdom. While Jewish theologies and practices have changed since the time of our ancient Israelite ancestors, the story that we tell remains. May these stories continue to preserve and enlighten those who will live long after we are gone.

²⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:1

A Rainy Day Tale

An adaptation of “Kisa Gotami: There is No Cure for Death”, a Buddhist parable, filtered through the lens of Jewish mourning practice.²⁷

“The Sages taught the following *baraita*: During the first week after [one’s] bereavement, the mourner may not go out of the opening of [their] house...R. Yehuda says: [The Sages] did not need to say this...This teaches us nothing new, as at that time everyone goes into [the mourner’s] house to console [them].” Moed Katan 23a:3-4²⁸

It was a rainy morning in the Town of Seepor and Naomi had just lost her husband; just two months shy of their third wedding anniversary. The woman’s cries of agony were powerful, but the relentless rain muted her grief and it was for this reason that it wasn’t until much later in the day that her friend, noticing that Naomi wasn’t at work, came to check on her.

Soaked from head to toe the friend entered to find Naomi on the floor cradling her beloved husband. Without hesitating, the friend, eyes brimming with tears, knelt down to the woman and said, “Let us go quickly to the Rabbi, they are a person of infinite wisdom and have studied our greatest texts. If there is a way, surely, the Rabbi will know it.”

The two friends bounded down the muddy village streets, both soaking wet and out of breath as they banged on the Rabbi’s door. Before the second round of knocks could land the door swung open. The Rabbi stood before the two friends with a knowing look on their face.

²⁷ Watson, E. (1970, January 1). *Buddhist Parables*. Internet Archive. Retrieved October 1, 2022, from <https://archive.org/details/buddhistparables00bur1/page/92/mode/2up?view=theater>

²⁸ These verses of Talmud indicate that the practice of visiting and consoling the bereaved is so inherent in Jewish tradition that it need not be mentioned that a mourner should not leave their own home. By engaging with this mourning tradition, I was able to transform the original Buddhist parable, which sought to teach about the inevitability of death, into a *mashal* which teaches the importance of communal support in the Jewish mourning tradition. Thus, the Buddhist folktale is filtered through a decidedly Jewish lens.

They ushered the two friends in from the rain and before the Rabbi had a chance to offer them a seat Naomi collapsed in tears crying out, “Please, you must help me. Return my husband to me! We were supposed to have children and grow old together. Now I’m all alone.”

The Rabbi thought for a moment. After taking a deep breath they nodded and knelt down to the grieving wife and said, “There is a way. Have faith, do this one thing, and God will return your husband to you. Leave us and go to every house in the town. At each house you must ask if their family has lost someone. If you find a house in which the answer is no, ask them for bread. Eat the bread and your husband will be returned to you.”

So Naomi rushed out of the Rabbi’s house, brimming with purpose. Just one house was all she needed. Surely she could find just one! She knocked on the first house and asked her question. The man that had answered the door told her that he had lost a brother ten years prior. Seeing that Naomi was alone, he said, “Let me join you - you shouldn’t be alone in this rain.”

The two set out together. Door after door was opened, but the answer was always the same. Some houses had lost more than others - parents, spouses, siblings, children. After answering Naomi’s question the person who had answered the door would look at the poor woman, soaked to the bone from rain and tears, and say the same thing, “You shouldn’t be alone in this rain.”

And so it was that Naomi came upon the last house in the town, her own. At this point the entire town followed behind her. Some had umbrellas, others embraced the downpour, but all were there with a shared purpose. Naomi opened the door to her home and her neighbors streamed past her. Some began to prepare her husband for burial, while others busied themselves with cleaning or cooking.

It was then that Naomi understood the Rabbi's teaching. No house in her town had been spared the horrible grief that comes from loss. Now surrounded by her town, she was able to take the first deep breath since the passing of her husband. Her grief did not evaporate, rather it was enveloped in the love and support of her community.

The Treasure Map

An original meditation on the various paths available to those who seek a connection with Jewish tradition and the holiness inherent in those diverse seekers joining together as one.

והחוט המשולש לא במהירה ינתק...

A threefold cord is not readily broken!

Kohelet 4:12²⁹

On the morning of Jacob's 13th³⁰ birthday he descended the stairs from his attic bedroom, turned the corner into the kitchen, and was surprised to find his parents already sitting at the table. Instead of eggs and toast, set before his parents was a rolled piece of parchment. The purple ribbon that bound the mysterious document beckoned to Jacob from across the room.

"What is this," he asked.

"It's a gift," answered his mother.

"Who's it from?" he wondered.

"It's from us and our parents before," answered his father.

Jacob's curiosity bubbled over. Barely able to keep himself from tearing the alluring present open he blurted out, "Can I open it?"

"It's yours to do with as you will," they responded. The parents smiled up at their son; it did not seem that long ago that Jacob had beamed up at them from his cradle.

²⁹ "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). It is from the earliest story in the Torah that we learn the importance of living in and engaging with community. In my mind, Kohelet 4:12 is the proper conclusion of the idea presented by Gen. 2:18. Not only is community essential to human existence, but the strength of a community can be found in its willingness to allow a diversity of experience and opinion.

קהילה=150=13+88+49 ³⁰

No sooner than he had received the go-ahead, Jacob lifted the parchment and was surprised by its weight. In his hands he felt the suppleness of the paper, observed its rich patina, and took in its deep fragrance. He wondered how something so old could feel so alive. It called to him in a language unfamiliar to his ear, but known in his heart. Jacob gingerly pulled at the ribbon; the last barrier between him and whatever magic rested upon its face. Placing the parchment on the table before him, Jacob unrolled the parchment. Inch by inch, the document revealed itself to the boy... it was a map.

On the morning of Judith's 88th birthday, she ascended the steps up to her attic. *Another year, another birthday...* she thought to herself. Each step that she took was a trial, but one she did not intend to fail. Years had passed since the day of her birth was one she greeted with cheer – those birthdays had gone the way of her late husband, of blessed memory. The fact is that Judith didn't feel like she had much to look forward to these days. Much better, she thought, to enjoy the memories of the past than to attempt to make new ones at her age. And so, on her 88th birthday, Judith carefully navigated the rickety steps to her attic, hoping to find comfort amongst old friends and loved-ones long-gone from this world.

As the stairs gave way to level ground, Judith took in the sight of her past, now boxed and stacked away beneath countless cobwebs. The layers of dust which rested upon the boxes kept time for her; a rough estimate of the last time that she had dug into their contents. Carefully scribed labels adorned the various containers. As she hobbled further into the attic, using the dusty shelves as support, Judith eyed several of the labels and read them aloud. "Sweaters... Tools... Chanukah Decorations," she murmured to herself. Judith shook her head and moved deeper into the space. It wasn't until her gaze rested upon a box labeled "Ima" that she stopped.

How many years had it been since she'd packed her mother's life into that box and hauled it to its current resting place? 25 years? 35 years? A lifetime ago, to be sure.

"*Boker tov, Ima,*" she said as she pulled the box from its shelf. Holding her breath, Judith brushed the thick layer of dust from the top of the box and only took another once it had settled on the floor. Judith's hands moved busily through her mother's possessions. What remained was mostly old documents and a few knickknacks. Her mother's most prized possessions, namely the jewelry, had been dispersed decades ago amongst Judith and her siblings.

As Judith's fingers felt their way through the contents of the box, she touched on what appeared to be a scroll protected by a yellowed plastic wrap. Sliding the document gently from its resting place, Judith held in her hands what was, perhaps, the most valuable of all her late mother's possessions – a *ketubah*. As quickly and carefully as possible, Judith cleared space to unroll the wedding contract. Within the scroll of parchment, there resided a map – where it would lead, Judith did not know. Regardless, she felt compelled to follow the map to its conclusion.

On the morning of Ruth's 49th³¹ birthday, she awoke with a start. It was that same dream again; the one she'd been having on-and-off for going on two decades. She could never remember exactly what happened or specifically what was said, rather, she awoke each time with an image in her head that she just couldn't shake. Before the dream completely slipped away, she turned over in bed and grabbed a hold of a small journal which sat on her bedside table for this express purpose. As quickly as she could, Ruth sketched the lingering dream-impression: lines and shapes came together in a way that implied something important, but the connections were

³¹ Ruth's age, at the time of this story, is representative of the Jubilee Year. During this period, all debts are to be forgiven; it is a time of renewal (see Leviticus 25:8).

too loose to form a full image. Marking the date in the upper-left corner of the page, Ruth began to flip backwards through the journal; one she had kept since childhood. Maybe if she could see all the drawings at once, she could make sense of the dream! She knew that she was missing a crucial piece of the puzzle and, as she flipped through her memories-made-physical, one name jumped out at her – Eddie Mayne. As she read her previous entry, Ruth drifted into a memory:

When Ruth was a child she and her mother would while-away their evenings listening to the family's transistor radio. The device reigned supreme from its perch atop the bookshelf which stood proudly in the living room. Her favorite program was the noir-serial, "Justice by Dark." Joining in on these bite-sized adventures, Ruth would act out the radio-dramas for her mother. Each episode was another wild night in the life of lawyer-by-day-detective-by-night, Eddie Mayne. With his trademark gravel-throated growl, Mayne thrilled Ruth and audiences across the country each Monday and Wednesday evening at seven-sharp.

Ruth's first encounter with Judaism was when the voice behind Eddie Mayne, the actor Jackson Flash, failed to show up on one September evening. It was Erev Yom Kippur and Jackson Flash (born Jacob Fleischer) was at shul with his family. Unbeknownst to his legion of fans, the producers behind "Justice by Dark" had been at a loss for how to explain their star's absence that evening. Would they tell the truth and explain that Jackson Flash was with his family observing Yom Kippur? Ultimately, the decision was made by men in suits sitting around a mahogany conference table in a smoke-choked office to blame Flash's absence on laryngitis. Surely, they couldn't risk alienating large swaths of their audience by revealing that their strapping lead was voiced by a Jew! And yet, despite their best efforts, this news leaked to the tabloids in a matter of days; a rag which eventually made its way to Ruth's kitchen table.

Ruth's reveries were interrupted in fantastic manner by an incessant knocking at her front door. Pulling her robe closed, Ruth cautiously made her way to the door. From the living room window, she took note of her visitor: a nondescript individual bundled in gray overcoat and galoshes, standing stiffly at her front door with a manilla envelope under his arm. "Just a minute," Ruth called to the man outside.

"Is this the home of Dr. Ruth Cisco?" the man inquired through the door. Ruth opened the door a bit, leaving the chain attached.

"Yes, I'm Dr. Cisco. And you are..."

"My name is Eli Navim, of Navim, Eckles, and Solomon. I apologize for the disturbance, but I am here on a most urgent matter," he replied in a clipped tone. Ruth remained silent as her visitor began to explain himself. Decades ago, my father received a curious package. Wrapped in brown paper and held together by a length of twine, the package was accompanied by a letter addressed to my father.

Dear Mr. Navim, the package you have received is destined for one Dr. Ruth Cisco who will receive it on June 18th of her 49th year. I have included payment of \$180, for which you will do the following: protect the package until the designated time and deliver said package to Dr. Ruth Cisco. Not a day early, nor a day late may she receive the contents of what you are to deliver. For your discretion, I am most grateful. ~ J. Fleischer

Eli Navim slid a yellowed piece of letterhead through the door for Ruth to confirm and once she had, Ruth disengaged the security chain and ushered her visitor into the foyer. "Shoes off at the door," Ruth said as she watched her unexpected visitor for any sign of funny-business. Once the guest's galoshes were removed and stored, Eli Navim and Ruth took a seat at the kitchen table. Under Eli Navim's watchful gaze, Ruth set about unwrapping the mysterious

package. Having sat undisturbed for years, the twine had become brittle and it snapped apart with minimal force. Ruth pulled the slightly-decayed wrapping from the package and what she found sent a charge of excitement up her spine; it was a map. She did not know where the map would lead her, but she knew she had seen it before. Ruth opened her dream journal to the most recent entry and placed it next to the map. They matched! The dreams were an impression of the map; as if viewed through a dirty pane of glass. With something like an answer in her hand, Ruth ran out of her front door leaving Eli Navim to see himself out.

—

A sweet summer breeze rustled through the magnificent tree that stood outside of Beit HaShutaf, the synagogue in the Town of Seepor. Hearing a commotion outside and grateful for the opportunity to get some fresh air, the Rabbi of Seepor arose from her desk and stepped out into the townsquare. As the Rabbi's eyes adjusted to the bright summer sun, she saw three individuals standing at the foot of the synagogue steps; two she recognized and one she could not place.

"Rabbi, you'll never believe it," cried the boy known as Jacob. The Rabbi noticed that each of the three were holding parchment in their hands.

"And what will I never believe," asked the Rabbi. Jacob looked to the two women standing next to him and back at the Rabbi.

"It's so wonderful, Rabbi," chirped Judith. "All three of us arrived at the exact same time, following these identical treasure maps." She held her map up for the Rabbi to inspect.

"Ah yes, I know of the treasure you seek," the Rabbi said cryptically. "And who are you, my friend," asked the Rabbi of the second woman.

Ruth shuffled back and forth. The map had brought her to this new town, far from the community that had raised her, and now she stood alongside two strangers. What had brought them here and what could this treasure be? “I’m Ruth,” she replied, “and I’m not sure if I’m supposed to be here.”

The Rabbi approached Ruth and smiled, “My friend, you are exactly where you are supposed to be. I know this map and the fact that it has revealed itself to you is no accident. Now please, will you three follow me inside the synagogue? It’s time to receive your treasure.” And so, the three map-bearers followed the Rabbi into the sanctuary and they began to study.

The Rabbi Learns a Lesson

*Adapted from “A House too Small” as retold by Rabbi Tracee L. Rosen in “Three Times Chai”.*³²³³

The local goat herder had a space problem. Although his flock was strong and produced enough wool to put a beautiful roast chicken on his family’s table each and every Shabbat, it was not enough to build a house to fit his growing family. The home which he and his wife had built for themselves following their wedding was more than enough space for a couple; perfect, even, for a family of three. But after the birth of their second child, the home began to feel cramped, and with the birth of their fourth the situation became nearly unbearable. Just to fit his whole family around the dinner table, the goat herder would sit with one foot out the front door. As his children grew, he knew it was not long before he would be taking his meals *al fresco*. He knew that he should be grateful for all that he did have; for his four healthy children, for his loving wife, and for his flock of goats. Even so, when he put his children into their shared bed and saw the thin mattress sink to the cold floor under their collective weight, he knew that something had to give. But what? Surely the Rabbi would know!

So the next morning, the goat herder ran to visit with the town’s long-time Rabbi. Upon arrival, the goat herder was greeted warmly by the Rabbi; tea was offered and graciously accepted. As the two sat sipping their tea, the goat herder explained his troubles to the Rabbi. It turns out that not two-weeks prior, the town’s shepherd had approached the Rabbi with a similar problem. “If it worked for the shepherd, why wouldn’t it work for the goat herder?” thought the

³² Becker, L. K., & Rosen, T. L. (2007). A House Too Small. In *Three Times Chai: 54 Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories* (pp. 111–112). Behrman House.

³³ This adaptation of a well-known Jewish folktale represents the tradition of folktale modification. According to William Bascom in “Four Functions of Folklore” a teller of folktales is often expected to take a well-known tale and reimagine it by “introducing new elements or giving a novel twist to the plot...” (pp. 343).

Rabbi before he began to offer his prescription. “I know this story,” intoned the wise Rabbi, “and I know what you must do.”

“Please Rabbi, what must I do?” pleaded the goat herder.

The Rabbi answered, “My dear goat herder, you must return home at once. Then take each member of your herd, all of your goats, and bring them into your house for the night. This will surely solve your problem.”

The goat herder thanked the Rabbi and returned home just as quickly as his feet could carry him. Upon his arrival, the man began to drag his goats one by one into his modest house. Deaf to the complaints of his wife and children, the man continued until goats spilled out from the front door and windows. Once he had crammed the entirety of his herd into the small house, he stopped and took notice of his wife who only looked on in shock. “What... what have you done?” she asked her husband.

“Trust me,” he replied, “the Rabbi said this will solve all of our problems!”

She shot back, “Only if the problem was having a roof over our heads tonight!”

That night, unable to squeeze even their smallest child into the over-run house, the family of six spent the night on the cold, hard ground. Little sleep was had by all and the next morning, as the goat herder opened his eyes, he saw his wife and children standing over him. As they shook their heads in disappointment and confusion, the goat herder ran back to the Rabbi. Surely he must have misunderstood the instructions.

Upon arrival, the goat herder was again offered tea and he gratefully slurped the warming elixir. “Rabbi, I did what you said... I brought my entire herd into the house and nothing got better. In fact, things are so much worse now!”

Time to flip the script like I did with the shepherd a couple of weeks ago. Time to hit him with the old gratitude trick, thought the Rabbi. “My dear goat herder, you must do one more thing. Return home at once and *remove* your herd from your house. This will surely solve your problem,” the Rabbi instructed. Confused and a little suspicious, the goat herder thanked the Rabbi for the advice and ran home to do exactly as he had been instructed.

It took hours, but by the time the sun was setting the goat herder and his family managed to extract each and every goat from their home. After replacing all of their belongings and furniture, the family entered the house and sat down for dinner. The goat herder was perplexed. Hadn’t the Rabbi ensured him that once all the goats were out that his space problem would be solved? He had followed the instructions to the letter and yet, he still found himself with too small a table and too few beds to make his family comfortable.

Desperate to understand what had gone wrong, the goat herder returned the next morning to the Rabbi. Just as before, the Rabbi offered the man a mug of tea, but this time the goat herder politely declined. “Rabbi, I’m begging you. Tell me the meaning of all this! I followed your instructions, yet found my family no better off than before I came to you,” explained the goat herder.

That Rabbi was confused and asked, “Yes, but how did you feel when you re-entered your goat-free abode?”

“Cramped, cold, and disappointed,” replied the goat herder.

“Yes, but after you removed your goats did you not have a new appreciation for all that you *do* have in your life,” the Rabbi asked.

“Rabbi, I have always been grateful for all that I have in my life...but my children can’t sleep on gratitude,” replied the goat herder.

“So strange,” the Rabbi said. “This lesson worked for the shepherd, but not for you.” The Rabbi explained his thinking: that the goat herder problem was not so different from that of the shepherd and that the same lesson could be applied.

Appalled, the goat herder retorted, “That’s all well and good, Rabbi...but the shepherd doesn’t have four children!”

Origins: A Story of the Tree of Souls³⁴

Thousands of years before the Earth was settled by humans, there existed a massive forest that stretched from land to sea. Deep within this lush region grew a giant tree.³⁵ Its branches stretched up to Heaven, where *malachim* were known to sing and dance among its lush canopy, and its roots stretched deep into Sheol,³⁶ where all manner of subterranean creatures made their home amongst the souls of those departed.³⁷ This great tree bore fruit with regularity; great ruby orbs which would fall to the ground when ripe. The fruit would fall far, as the tree was so very tall, and upon striking the ground the fruit would split and hundreds of gem-like seeds would spill out upon the tree's base. It was from these fruits that the animals of the forest were sustained and it was from these fruits that the Town of Seepor would come to be.

It came to be that one day two fruits fell from the Great Tree at exactly the same time. As they fell towards the ground they struck each other multiple times; ultimately they landed mere feet from one another. But a strange thing occurred that day... Instead of seeds, what emerged from the two pieces of fruit was a miracle: from the flesh of the fruit sprung two men. From the day that they emerged, fully-formed, the two were inseparable; bound together by that magical force known as *love*. They shared everything there was to be shared and, together, dreamed of the future. And of what did they dream? Security, affection, sustenance, shelter; in short, a good life.

³⁴ According to Howard Schwartz, there exists a Jewish myth explaining how souls come to be created. It concerns the Tree of Souls (the heavenly counterpart of the earth-bound Tree of Life). It is from the Tree of Souls that all souls are born; likened to the fruit of an earthly tree. Once these souls ripen, they fall and are placed in the heavenly repository known as the *Guf*. This is supported by "I am like a cypress tree in bloom; your fruit issues forth from Me." (Hosea 14:9). Schwartz, H., & Loebel-Fried, C. (2007). *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*. Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Genesis 3:22-24

³⁶ Sheol, known as Gehinnom in Rabbinic literature (Eruvin 19a:16), is traditionally understood as the realm of the dead; comparable to Hades in Greek mythology. In its earliest form, Sheol existed as a realm where all souls of the dead reside. Although later understandings of Sheol would come to mirror Christian Hell (a place of punishment), it is the earlier version of Sheol that I am appropriating for this story.

³⁷ Lee, L. (2015). Fiery Sheol in the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Revue De Qumran*, 27(2), 249–270. (254).

Motek, always the sweetheart, spent his days around their home tending to the needs of the local plantlife. He felt most at home amongst the creeping vines, fragrant herbs, and tilled soil. Harif, on the other hand, grew to be a young man of intense passion who felt more at home in the wilder corners of their beloved forest. For days at a time, Harif would venture out into the woods where he would track and hunt wild game; thus ensuring a steady source of meat for the two. Motek and Harif found meaning in their work and after a long day the two would gather under the stars, at the base of the Great Tree, to fall asleep nestled in each other's arms.

For forty years, their lives went unchanged, until one morning another fruit fell to the ground. Landing at Motek's feet, the fruit burst apart and what emerged? It was a child! A beautiful baby girl. As the child took in her first breaths of the sweet forest air, Motek knelt down and brought her close to him. He had never seen a more precious thing in all his life. At that moment, Motek knew that he would do anything for the infant he now held in his arms.

When Harif returned from his hunt, Motek held the child high. With tears of joy in his eyes, Harif drew Motek and the baby close and kissed their foreheads. "Our family has grown! The Holy One, Blessed be God, has truly blessed us," he crowed.

"What shall we name her?" asked Motek.

"She is our gift and our blessing; let us name her Bracha," replied Harif. And so Motek, Harif, and Bracha began their lives as a family under the branches of the Great Tree.

Years passed and Bracha grew into a woman of strength and tenderness. She was as sweet as her father Motek and as passionate as her father Harif. The two men could not believe their good fortune and praised Bracha with their every waking moment. Eventually, Bracha grew to adulthood and she left the home of her fathers to seek her own future. With tears and a final embrace, the fathers watched as their daughter disappeared into the forest. With Bracha on her

own path, Motek and Harif went back to their fairly routine lives; Motek in the field and Harif on the hunt. But something had changed. It was the case that, devoid of a child on which to focus, an uncomfortable gap revealed itself. Motek and Harif could not put words to their feelings until, one evening, Harif returned from his hunt with a grand idea: “We have dwelled beneath the branches of this Great Tree for all our lives. Surely, there must be more to discover in this world. Let us leave this place and seek new frontiers!”

Motek was shocked, “My love, why would we leave this place? Do we not have all that we desire here?”

“This is true, but I long for more. We must not grow too complacent, lest we spend the rest of our lives in stagnation,” declared Harif.

The two argued long into the night. When they both became too tired to continue, they fell asleep. For the first time, they did so apart. When they awoke, the air was still. No longer did a delicious breeze rustle the leaves of the Great Tree. Weeks turned into months, and still Harif could not shake the desire to journey far from the Great Tree. The sweet kisses the two had once shared had become stale; the space between them grew until it became too much to bear for either man. As they stood opposite one another, it was clear that the life they had built together under the tree's canopy was no longer tenable.

“I must go,” declared Harif.

“And I must stay,” admitted Motek.

“Do you love me still,” asked Harif.

“I do not know,” admitted Motek.

The ground became wet with their tears as the two men looked upon the face of their beloved. Were Harif to stay, he knew that he would always long for more than their home under

the Great Tree. Motek knew this to be true, as much as it pained him to admit. Just as Harif could not stay, Motek could not leave. It was at this impossible impasse that they came to understand the inevitability of their separation. The life they had together, under the branches of the Great Tree, was over.

“Harif, I will always treasure our time together. I know that you must leave, but before you go please accept a parting gift,” Motek said through his tears. As quickly as he could Motek scaled the trunk of the Great Tree, only stopping once he had reached its branches. As he shimmied along, Motek’s ears were filled with the music of the *malachim* and his heart was comforted. Upon reaching one of the Great Tree’s flowers he withdrew a pair of shears and clipped a single blossom – careful to leave its stem intact. Placing it in his pouch, Motek descended from the home of the *malachim* and returned to the ground below.

“What is this?” Harif asked as Motek placed the precious bloom in his hands.

“Wherever your journey takes you, carry this flower. I pray that this will remind you of the love we once shared,” Motek answered. As Harif held the flower, tears fell from both of their eyes and landed on its petals. It was in this way that the flower remained as beautiful and alive as the day that Motek plucked it from its place in Heaven. That day, Harif packed his belongings and set out to seek his future while Motek remained beneath the Great Tree to tend to his beloved garden.

Harif wandered the land for another forty years, and when his aging body would carry him no further he sat down to rest. Sensing that his end was near, Harif withdrew the flower given to him by Motek. Still as beautiful as the day that Motek plucked it, Harif took it into his gnarled hands and gazed upon it. He had lived a wonderful life and was grateful for all that he had discovered in his wanderings, but it was now time to plant his roots. With great deliberation

Harif scooped a handful of earth and gently lowered the flower into the newly vacant earth. As he covered the flower's roots with soil, tears ran down his cheek and fell to the ground below. It was then that a miraculous thing occurred...as Harif's tears mixed with the soil the flower began to grow. Its roots grew until they reached the depths of Sheol and its stem transformed into a tree trunk with branches that stretched into the Heavens. On that day, Harif named this place *Beit HaShutaf*,³⁸ as this tree was the companion of the Great Tree he had once shared with Motek. Although their life together had ended, the two trees would stand as a testament to the wisdom of their separation. As Harif drew his very last breath, he heard the music of the *malachim* echoing down from the branches above.

In time, a small town would grow up around Harif's tree. The people who eventually came to build their lives around the tree found that life was just a bit easier under its shade. The homes that they built were sturdy, and a nearby stream provided sweet water. Some say that on Shabbat, if one listens carefully, you may hear the song of the *malachim*; the very same song that had lifted the spirits of Motek and Harif, centuries before.

³⁸ Drawing on the Biblical tradition of naming locations of important encounters, I have decided to use Beit (house) HaShutaf (the partner) (See Genesis 28:19).

Two Towns, One Love

“While other voices will surely proclaim that endogamy is the only effective way to have a committed Jewish family, the Reform movement has something altogether different to say: Jewish commitment can be established in a variety of settings, especially with support and increased opportunity for learning and engaging. Falling in love with someone who is not Jewish is not a failure of Jewish commitment...”³⁹

The sun was shining and the birds sang a cheery tune in the Town of Seepor. Underneath a canopy of autumnal leaves, just outside of the synagogue, James and Miriam were to be married.⁴⁰ James’ family, recently arrived from the nearby town of Libreville,⁴¹ mingled with the native townsfolk as the final touches were put on the chuppah. By and large, the two clans got along well, but there were those amongst the elders of Seepor who questioned the wisdom of such a union.

“I heard that Miriam spent Shabbat in Libreville and couldn’t find a challah for their dinner table,” one elder whispered to another.

Clutching her cane for support another elder whispered, “And I heard that when James was in Seepor last winter, he asked where he could procure a rasher of bacon for his breakfast!”

With a shout another elder wailed, “And what of their children? Surely, they’ll be raised in confusion!” At this, the elders could only look to the ground and shake their heads side-to-side.

³⁹ Jacobs, R., “Intermarriage is a Fact of Jewish Life – Not a Disease.”, *Forward*, 2014.

⁴⁰ “When Jews and Christians fall in love, they usually regard themselves as individualists who will be able to transcend the specific cultural demands of the pasts that shaped their beliefs and laid claims on their loyalties. But this is a more difficult task than they imagine...If couples don’t acknowledge such assumptions...they can damage the ecology of an intermarriage.” Cowan, P. and Cowan, R., “Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage”, New York: Penguin Books, 1987, 346.

⁴¹ “Liber” means “book” in Latin; the idea being that though these two towns possess different cultures, they are more alike than one might think.

On the other side of the town square, elders from the town of Libreville gathered in a similar fashion; their conversation echoing the sentiments of their contemporaries from Seepor.

One elder confided to the others, “I heard that James started skipping Mass soon after he met Miriam!”

Another whispered, “And I heard that when Miriam visited Libreville last Spring she refused to eat the beef casserole that James’ mother had specially prepared for their visit!”

With a shout another elder wailed, ““And what of their children? Surely, they’ll be raised in confusion!” At this, the elders could only look to the ground and shake their heads side-to-side.

As the elders fretted, the sun glinted off of the fine crystal glasses that had been set out for the customary festive meal, and Miriam’s mother fanned herself cool. Though it was a cool autumn day, sweat ran in rivulets down her forehead as she flitted between the synagogue and home; back and forth, back and forth. Preparation for this special day was akin to conducting an orchestra, and she would accept nothing but the perfect symphony for her daughter’s wedding day. Returning home to fetch the family kiddush cup, she came across her husband hard at work in the kitchen. Sweat beaded on his brow as Miriam’s father stirred the soup that was to be their first course. “Come my love, tell me what you think,” he said as he offered a ladleful of his culinary creation to his wife.

”Mmmm, just like your *Aba* used to make,” she cooed after she had sipped from the ladle. After a moment she clicked her tongue, as her face became drawn and her eyes fixed on an unknowable point in the distance.

“What’s the matter, my love,” asked her husband as he set down his ladle and wiped his hands on his well-worn apron.

“It just dawned on me...what if Miriam doesn’t make your *Aba’s* soup in her new home?”

“Then I’ll make it for her; like I always have!”

“But you won’t be here forever,” she whispered.

“Then I’ll teach her before I die,” he proclaimed.

“What if she forgets,” she worried.

“I’ll write it down,” he declared. And so, with an eye always on the pot of simmering soup, Miriam’s father began to record the family soup recipe for his daughter. When he finished, Miriam’s mother gently lifted the parchment and rolled it into a tight cylinder. From her husband’s apron, she cut a strip of cloth, wound it around the parchment, and tied it with a bow. *A wedding gift*, she thought to herself, *the perfect one*.

As the elders fretted and Miriam’s parents prepared, James’ parents found themselves with nothing but time on their hands. James’ parents had been assured, frequently and firmly, that they were not to bother themselves with the multitude of wedding tasks – they were guests of Miriam’s parents and they would be treated as such. As James’ mother gazed out the window at the wedding preparations in-progress, James’ father fiddled with the bow on the gift meant for the happy couple.

“Put the box down, dear. The bow is tied as well as any bow could be tied,” called James’ mother from her window perch.

“Well, there’s nothing else I’m allowed to do,” mumbled the exasperated father. “They didn’t want our money or our help.”

“You act like that’s a bad thing, my dear! How lucky are we that our son is to marry into such a kind and generous family,” she asked rhetorically. She turned away from the bustling square below and held her husband’s gaze firmly.

With a big sigh James' father replied, "Of course, dear. They've been perfectly hospitable and I really shouldn't complain..."

"But..." added James' mother, her inflection and eyebrow lifted as she spoke.

"But...they're just different, Miriam's family. And James is entering into their world, a world that looks different than the one we raised him in. I suppose I'm worried that we'll be left behind; that James won't need us once he joins this community."

"And what are the values with which we raised our son?" asked James' mother as she stood and walked over to take her husband's hand.

"Honesty," he answered.⁴²

"Yes and what else?"

"Humility," he continued.⁴³

"Yes and what else?"

"Dedication," he answered.⁴⁴

"You're forgetting one," chided James' mother as she gave her husband a kiss on his balding head.

With a chuckle, James' father patted his wife's hand tenderly, "And love."⁴⁵

"And love," she echoed. "Have we not experienced this community to live by these values?" She explained to her husband that these four core values belonged to Miriam's family as well. "Perhaps we are not so different after all, my dear," she gently confided.⁴⁶

integrity – יושר⁴²
 humility – ענוה⁴³
 perseverance – נצח⁴⁴
 love – אהבה⁴⁵

⁴⁶ While Miriam's parents are concerned with the perpetuation of their culture through a family recipe, James' parents are concerned with the perpetuation of their culture through shared values (*middot*). What the two sets of parents fail to realize is that they both seek the same end – continuity. It is my hope that readers will come to understand that the bridging of two worlds through marriage need not necessitate the dissolution of one culture in favor of another. When two cultures meet, it is very easy to pick out the differences and it may indeed be healthy to maintain a friendly separation between the two. In the case of dietary customs, one partner's kosher practice cannot

As the sun dipped below the horizon line, Miriam and James were married under the chuppah in the presence of their respective communities. As the ceremony led into celebration, the various factions present began to intermingle; the elders of Seepor found they shared much with the elders of Libreville, while the parents of both bride and groom found they were not so different at all. Bathed in the moon's light, a new family had emerged.

allow for the presence of the other partner's family pork loin recipe. However, it is crucial to recognize that points of harmony can be found.

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