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# *Shanghai Torah*

*Yuanfen*



*Briana London*

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**Dedication**

In memory of my mother, Suzann C. Spears

*Yuanfen*: (Chinese)

The destiny or fate that brings two people together in an unlikely relationship.

## *Author's Note*

One day my phone rang.

“Get your butt to the Temple. You never had a *bat mitzvah*, and I’m teaching a class.”

I heard the voice, the one you trust, the one you never question. Frannie Morris Rosman has been my dear friend since we were eleven years old, and my faith in our friendship never wavered—until this phone call.

It was true that my parents happily nested in the comfortable stereotypes for raising girls and boys. Dictated by the 1950’s, my brother was encouraged to play baseball, soccer, basketball; and for me, horseback riding and swim team. Our future careers—for my brother, medicine or law—and for me, marry a lawyer.

For my brother, a *bar mitzvah* was not a choice but a requirement. I was then forty-something and had a husband, a son, two dogs, and a horse. To top it off, I was working twelve-hour days editing television shows. I was so tired that I could hardly converse in my native language, so the idea that I would need to learn a new language seemed ridiculous and impossible. However, like I said, Frannie doesn’t take no for an answer.

A few days later I was sitting in a class of forty adults. I wondered why they were all here and did they all know Frannie? There was a well-known recording artist, a retired aerospace engineer, a young publicist, and four converts amongst the group. I remember thinking—why would anyone want to convert to a religion that is so hated throughout the rest of the world?

I decided that I wouldn’t fight the learning, though I doubted this experience would amount to anything more than a waste of my valuable time. Then, the Cantor, Nathan Lam, brought out the little Shanghai Torah.

The forty of us stood in a circle and held the parchment as Rabbi Ron Stern and Cantor Lam unfurled the scroll, recounting the story of how the little Torah came to Steven S. Wise Temple in Los Angeles.

I was stunned by the beauty of the penmanship; tiny and precise strokes

made up each character imprinted upon the page. I was mesmerized by the idea of saving this little scroll from the terror of a Nazi assault on the Synagogue in Vilna. I was holding a part of what was once wrapped around the waist of a brave soul fleeing for his life.

Thinking about the original owner of this little scroll gave me chills. I thought a lot about this young man and his journey. Who did he meet? What about the differences in language and cultures? Also, who helped him during his times of struggle? How did he survive and then make it from Vilna, Lithuania, to Shanghai, China? What happened after the war?

So began my journey, the one in my imagination. I thought of his situation of being a fish out of water in a foreign land. I thought about the need for love during times of great oppression. I thought about the little Torah, its importance being so great that a young man would put it ahead of his own existence.

Finally, my experience learning a new language and discussing the stories of my ancestors reminded me of the vital and fragile relationship between the written word and our preservation.

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## *Introduction*

## *The Recipe*

### **How to be an ink chef:**

Boil one pint of water.

Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  pint of (crushed) gallnut powder.

Add  $\frac{1}{4}$  pint of (crushed) gum Arabic crystals.

Add  $\frac{1}{8}$  pint of (crushed) copper sulfate crystals.

Add  $\frac{1}{8}$  pint of (crushed) fine black carbon powder.

Mix together and store in a clean glass jar.

### **How to whittle a pen:**

Find a quill from a turkey or goose. Using a scalpel or razor blade, sculpt the stem of the quill into a fine point.

### **How to make the parchment:**

Use the skin of a kosher animal. (It is very important that the animal either died of natural causes or was killed for food).

Soak the hide in limewater from nine to eighteen days to soften.

Scrape hide to remove fat and hairs.

Dry hide on a stretching rack.

While on rack, sand and scrape until parchment becomes smooth and flat.

To keep the letters straight and even, use a straight edge and draw forty-three horizontal lines across the parchment. Make three columns per page. Leave a blank margin four inches on the bottom, three inches on the top, and two inches between the columns.

After the ritual prayers, the washing of hands, or the visit to the *mikvah*—the ritual baths—you are ready to begin.

On a scrap of parchment, write the name *Amalek*, Israel's enemy. Cross it out to erase the memory of a cruel ancient people who killed and maimed many young children, mothers, and Israelis.

Dip the quill into the ink and write: בְּרֵאשִׁית—*Bereshit*—In the beginning—the first word of a long and fierce story that binds one generation to the next; words that blend together to teach the laws necessary for the existence of a civilized society. Stories filled with the tug of war between good and evil, love, passion, greed, and rebellion. Words that shine like mirrors reflecting our human nature, presenting us with life choices and recipes for peace.

*Bereshit*—our journey begins.

*Part One*  
*Vilna, Lithuania 1939*



## Chapter One

A burst of cigar smoke punches Akiva in the face. He recoils. Nose to nose, blubbery blob pressed to button, Mr. Bernstein, the village postal master, utters an amazing proclamation—his words a soupy mixture of Yiddish and Polish.

“You are now twelve years old, Akiva. I make you the responsible one, not like your *meshuge* brother, Levi. Go now, take this letter to your big brother Moshe.” Pulling the boy closer he whispers, “It’s from America.”

Akiva bolts out the door of the post office. His long, curly *payot* slap his ears as he runs past the stores facing the main street. With one eye guarding the envelope that is stuffed tightly in his small, pudgy hand, Akiva knows he has been tasked with an important mission.

Why else had Mr. Bernstein walked all the way around his desk to hand him the envelope personally? The old man never leaves his chair—ever.

Dusk to dawn Mr. Bernstein takes his naps and studies Torah until his wife Rachel brings in his meals. Akiva and his siblings are convinced that throughout the years Mr. Bernstein’s rear-end has grown so large that one day he will be found deceased, stuffed into the seat of that

creaky old chair. Then, he and the chair will have to be buried together. But, maybe that will happen in the near future.

Today, Mr. Bernstein had stood up sliding the chair aside; wheels smashing against the wall. He had bounded around the large oak desk and issued an order!

This has to be an important letter.

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Mid-afternoon on a Friday means people are hurrying to wrap-up their errands. Sundown will herald the Sabbath, and families will soon join together to eat, pray, and rest. Akiva needs more fuel in his skinny legs if he is going to race the sun.

“Akiva! Where’s the fire!” yells Mr. Penkowski as Akiva crashes into the open arms of the loud, jovial man with fish blood staining his dirty apron. Even worse than standing next to Mr. Penkowski is being hugged by him. Mama says that it takes four washings to get one of Mr. Penkowski’s hugs out of clothing. Akiva jumps backwards.

“Sorry, I can’t stop. I have an important letter to deliver!”

“Really? A letter? Let me see,” he demands.

Akiva holds out the crumpled envelope, but instead of taking the letter, Mr. Penkowski shoves Akiva behind his large body. Two Soviet soldiers come to a halt.

“Ah, good afternoon officers,” Mr. Penkowski says and gestures towards the row of fish lying on beds of ice. “The sturgeon is fresh today. So fresh it will slide down your throats and swim in your stomachs.”

Peering around the big man, Akiva smiles at his reflection in the soldier’s tall, shiny boot. The sun glints off the brass buckles that hook onto the leather. Akiva sticks out his tongue and laughs, but the boot returns an angry stomp onto the ground. Akiva recoils behind the fish man, who tightens his hold on the boy.

The soldier points to a large sturgeon glistening in the sunlight. Mr. Penkowski wraps the fish in a sheet of newspaper and hands the package to the soldier.

The soldier studies the patch sewn onto Mr. Penkowski’s shirtsleeve; the embroidered yellow Star of David glares back. The soldier straightens, folds the wrapped fish under his arm, and says goodbye—no money is exchanged. When they are out of sight, Mr. Penkowski turns to face the boy.

“Eh! That was one of my best catches. I hope it bites him on the way down to his stomach. Pfft.”

“Did he steal the fish, Mr. Penkowski?”

“No, *boychick*, it was a gift, and in return they will protect my shop when the Germans come. Go on now, the sun is setting and the Sabbath is coming.”

Akiva slides the letter into the waistband of his pants.

“Go. Go. *Shabbat Shalom*. My best to your father, the *Rebbe*.” Mr. Penkowski steps aside.

The young boy swings his right leg forward, followed by his left, and picks up speed. Two blocks down the street, Akiva cuts the corner short and smacks into Tanta Sophie. Looking older than her late thirties, she wears the mantle of *yenta* proudly.

“Slow down. What’s the rush? You have a bus to catch?” she frowns. “Look, you made me drop my *challah*.”

“Sorry,” Akiva says, scooping up the loaf of bread. “I can’t stop!”

“You don’t have a moment to give a hug to your *tanta*?”

“Nope, I have an important job to do.”

“What kind of job is so important for a twelve-year-old that he has to make his *tanta* drop her groceries?”

Akiva frowns; he doesn’t like being scolded, especially by Tanta Sophie—whose face resembles a pickle.

Then he brightens. “I have a letter from Levi!”

“Ahh, from Levi. Where? Where is this letter?”

Akiva gathers up his *tallit katan*, exposing the envelope tucked into his waistband.

Sophie examines the letter.

“Well, this will be a good *Shabbat*,” she smiles, “news from America!”

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In the flicker of candlelight, Moshe hunches over a small piece of parchment. He keeps his mind focused on the task at hand, writing the words that hold sacred the history of his people.

A delicate balance exists between the amount of ink on the end of the quill and the pressure of his hand resting on the paper. A *sofer* must be careful not to let the oils from his hand smudge the ink. One mistake and he will have to start over. Several partially started sheets of parchment lie crumpled on the floor at his feet.

Coating this small attic room, mounds of dust belie the sanctity within. The room is small, cramped, and filled with stacks of parchment, old inkbottles, and quills. A golden hue of light licks the surface of the silver crowns that adorn the tops of several Torahs awaiting attention.

Writing a Torah may take a lifetime, and repairing tears and smudges may take two. Moshe looks up and draws in a breath of stale air. He enjoys the solitude of the work; the smells of the dusty old scrolls lining the walls, a sanctuary within a palace—*The Great Synagogue of Vilna*.

Inside his little attic studio, no fear exists, no Soviets, no Germans, only the words of God and a seventeen-year-old with a feather quill.

Since his *bar mitzvah* at age thirteen, he has imagined writing a single scroll, beginning to end—79,976 words comprised of 304,805 letters. It could take his entire lifetime to finish, and for that he feels honored.

Moshe closes his eyes and whispers a prayer. “I am hereby writing this *Sofer Torah* for the purpose of proclaiming the sanctity of the *Sofer Torah*.”

Then, when the moment arrives, his hand applies a steady pressure and the ink flows.

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It has been said that Napoleon stood at the entrance of the Great Synagogue of Vilna and was rendered speechless. In fact, due to building regulations, the synagogue was built with two levels going below ground and three stories rising above. Though plain and unobtrusive on the outside, the interior is magnificent.

Designed in the Italian Renaissance-Baroque style, the cavernous main hall includes large marble columns, ornamental carved wooden detailing, iron balustrades, and bronze and silver chandeliers. The prayer hall can accommodate three hundred people. In the center of the room, four statuesque columns encircle the *bema*. Seemingly in motion, two stories tall, the columns swirl and curve with imposing, dynamic opulence. The rococo styled podium sits atop a stone pile three tiers above floor level. Overhead, the grand, ornately carved cupola directs a column of warm light upon the *bema*.

To Akiva, the synagogue is both wondrous and terrifying. Standing in the portal at the western side of the building, he throws all his weight against the massive iron door. It shifts a few inches. If he expels all the air in his lungs he will be able to squeeze his body through the small opening. Once inside, Akiva shrinks behind a massive marble column.

The synagogue is quiet now, but on *Shabbat*, and especially on the holidays, the room doesn't appear to be so cavernous. Those are the times when hundreds of voices chant, sing, and collectively raise a joyous spirit that wraps Akiva in warmth and love. Now, peering around, he gazes at the ornate ark standing two stories high along the eastern wall.

The ark is resplendent with carvings of Jewish symbols, animals, and plants, but it is what sits on the top that makes Akiva shudder. Perched high atop the ark doors is a carving of a two-headed eagle, daring all who approach.

Akiva has debated the significance of this bird with his friends. Is it a symbol of protection, warding against evil that might try to destroy the sacred scrolls housed within? Or is it, as his friend Dovid believes, a monster meant to scare away anyone who isn't *shomer Shabbos*. Whatever the reason for its existence, Akiva finds the eagle threatening and makes a point of hastening his steps whenever he ventures near the ark.

The crunch of the letter in his waistband reminds him of his task. Releasing his hold on the marble column, he moves away from the two-headed eagle, passes the stairway leading to one of the women's sections, and enters the library on the southern side of the building.

At the far end of the room a narrow stairway leads to Moshe's studio. Akiva follows a stream of sunbeams rising up the stairs. The light settles

onto Akiva's worn out shoe as he lingers in the doorway. One step into the room, he will break the beam and complete his mission.

"Ah, Akiva, have you come to tell me that it is almost *Shabbos*?" Moshe asks without looking up from his parchment.

"Moshe, is that the Baby?" Akiva asks, pointing to a little Torah lying open on Moshe's writing desk.

Moshe smiles. "Indeed it is, and it is just your size. One day I will see you dance with this little one on *Simchat Torah*." He studies the wet ink. "Come, you can help write the final letter of the day."

Akiva climbs onto Moshe's lap.

"Okay, cover your hand over mine. Good. Now we will make a *mem*. See, it takes five strokes to make this letter. Each one is for the Five Books of Moses."

"I think the *mem* looks like an elephant with his trunk in the air. Do you see animals when you write your letters, Moshe?"

"I do, and I also see God." Moshe smiles, puts down his quill, and blows softly on the parchment.

"Make me an airplane, Moshe."

"Okay, get me a sheet off the floor and I'll teach you how to fold one."

Akiva selects one piece of parchment and hands it to his older brother. Moshe carefully folds the paper lengthwise in half, and then folds each side into two triangles making the wings. Akiva eagerly copies him, matching Moshe's paper airplane with his own.

"I hope that one day, Moshe, I will fly in a real plane and it won't be made of paper."

"I bet you will."

"Yep, and I'm going to ask the pilot to teach me to fly the plane."

"Where will you fly to?"

"I'll wait until Mama is cooking in the kitchen, and then I'll buzz over our house a bunch of times," Akiva laughs.

"Ha, that will make her mad," Moshe smiles.

"Yep, and she'll run outside and shake her fist at the sky! And you will know it's me, Moshe, because I'll tip my wings to say hello."

"I will look forward to your first solo flight, Akiva. Here's your plane. Let's have a contest and see who is the better pilot."

Moshe opens the window. "Go on, you can take off first."

"I'm going to try to land on the roof across the road," Akiva says and winds back his throwing arm, launching the plane with great force. It sails high above the street, hovering over the people chatting below. Midflight, Akiva's plane stalls, spirals, and lands nose down, piercing an apple on Mr. Pinkus' fruit cart.

"Uh oh," says Akiva, ducking below the windowsill.

"*Ahhhh!!*" Mr. Pinkus yells, shaking his fist at the window. "You rotten kids! I will make your mothers buy my entire cart!"

"Mr. Pinkus is really mad, Moshe."

"It's okay, his apples are mushy anyway," Moshe winks. "Okay, it's time for us to go. We'll have to resume our contest another time."

Moshe slips his paper airplane into the pocket of his wool coat and rechecks the ink on the section of the little Torah. "It looks like the ink is dry, so let's put the Baby to bed."

Akiva retrieves the blue velvet *mantel* while Moshe rolls up the little Torah and secures it with a linen sash. Akiva gently slips the cover over the top of the wooden shafts and carries the sleeping baby to a small wooden box leaning against the corner of the room. He gives the Torah a kiss and lays it gently into the little ark.

Moshe locks the attic door and Akiva follows him down the narrow stairway. The excitement of writing a letter in the little Torah and the airplane contest was a distraction. Akiva forgot about his promise to Mr. Penkowki—to deliver the letter from America.

## *Chapter Two*

Rivka pulls her shawl over her head; her hands draw circles above the flames of the *Shabbos* candles. Her neighbor, Miriam Holtzman, along with her two teenage daughters, Elana and Sarah, join Rivka's three young daughters at her side.

Rivka covers her eyes and begins the chant that heralds the start of the next twenty-four hours.

*"Baruch ata Adonai elohenu melech ha-olam,"* Rivka recites.

Moshe and Akiva stand in the doorway. Elana catches a glimpse and turns away. When she turns back, Moshe has one eyebrow raised and his lips scrunched.

Elana flares her nostrils in and out. Moshe makes fish lips. Akiva enjoys this game.

Rivka continues, *"Asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat."*

The girls utter, "Amen."

Moshe crosses his eyes and Akiva bursts out laughing. Rivka throws a disapproving look to the boys. She turns to the girls. "May the Sabbath light forever shine in your lives and keep you safe in your homes," Riv-

ka says, turning to Elana and Sarah, “and may this light shine your way to the arms of your future husbands.”

Elana and Moshe smile at each other. Their friendship has endured since childhood. The families have integrated to the point where the mothers, Rivka and Miriam, are interchangeable. Moshe has always been like a brother to Elana. That is, until earlier this year. Racing through the woods playing pirates, she inexplicably took his breath away. Elana is no longer the little girl who could run faster or hit harder. Her once chunky body has grown soft and shapely.

He is keenly aware of how her brown eyes smile whenever she sees him; how her long, untamed curly hair collects leaves, twigs, and bugs whenever they walk in the woods near their homes. In reality, he has loved her since he was six years old, and it is his greatest desire that next year when they turn eighteen, she will become his wife.

“Girls,” says Rivka, “come with me to the kitchen. Elana, you and Moshe bring in some wood for the fire. Be quick, the sun is setting.”

Elana follows Moshe through the foyer towards the back of the house. They pause outside the door leading to his father’s study. Inside, several men from the village and a couple of older students from the *yeshiva* huddle around the Rabbi’s desk studying a large map. They speak in hushed tones, unaware that they are being observed.

As a little boy, Moshe would pretend that his father was born without eyes so there would be a good excuse for being ignored. People from the *shtetl* would wait for hours in the foyer just to have a quick moment to tell him their troubles. The Rabbi would sit with eyes closed, stroking his frizzy long beard and swaying before speaking. Whatever he said brought the women tears of joy and the men heaving sighs of relief.

Waiting in the doorway to his father’s study, little Moshe hoped for a chance to sit in front of the Great *Rebbe*, his father, and hear his words of wisdom. Time after time, without even looking in Moshe’s direction, the Rabbi would wave him away. There was one day when Moshe and his older brother Levi hatched a plan to get their father’s attention.

This is how it would happen: drag a mattress outside to the backyard and position it underneath their father’s study window. Borrow mama’s

heirloom quilt to use for a parachute, climb up onto the roof, jump, and land safely on top of the mattress. Papa would cease his studies as their bodies flew by. Leaning out of the window, looking down in amazement, Papa would marvel at his sons’ ingenuity.

Here is how it went: dragged the mattress outside to the backyard and positioned it underneath their father’s study window, covering mama’s newly planted flowerbed; pulled mama’s heirloom quilt along the ground, tearing the fringe off the bottom; climbed up onto the roof and jumped.

The howls from Levi after missing the mattress brought Mama running outside, screaming. First, she screamed about her quilt, and then she screamed about her destroyed flowerbed and, finally, she screamed at her naughty sons.

Levi and Moshe laughed and looked up to see a young *yeshiva* student poke his head out the window, glare down at the boys, shut the glass panes, and snap the drapes closed.

Levi spent the next eight weeks using wooden crutches to get around the house and the neighborhood. That first night his foot swelled to the size of a melon. Mama iced Levi’s foot every two hours. Their father never came upstairs into their bedroom to visit.

The day of the “accident” was the beginning of a change for Levi. Always a bit restless, he preferred to wander into the back woods than to sit in father’s study with the books. He also harbored bitterness deep inside. Like Moshe, he yearned for his father’s attention, but he was born with the heart of a rebel—resisting authority—and Rabbi Lozinsky couldn’t relate to his eldest son.

“Books are boring,” he would tell Moshe. “One day I will travel to places where there are wonderful things to see, mountains, deserts, oceans, instead of reading about them on paper.”

“But there are wonderful adventures in the Torah, Levi.”

“Those are made up stories, Moshe.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But how would you have known that there are wonderful places to see on earth if you hadn’t read about them first in books? Papa says learn first, then explore.”

“Papa says. Well I say you’re a brownnoser, Moshe.”

Moshe bristled at the insult—“Am not!”

But he was. Every evening, while preparing to go to sleep, Moshe would think about the next day's lesson and try to come up with questions that would make his father proud. Although the Rabbi encouraged Moshe to ask questions, he preferred to challenge one of the older *yeshiva* students for the answers.

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The conversation in the Rabbi's study is hushed yet intense. Still, the Rabbi's voice remains calm. How is it that the Great Man has so much room in his heart for kindness, even when facing fear? Memories of an unusually warm spring day flood Moshe's mind where once he witnessed just such an act of kindheartedness.

The year was 1933, and a thirteen-year-old Moshe was perched on top of the woodpile picking off the leaves. Music, voices, glasses clinking, and children laughing filtered through the breeze outside. The celebration happening inside the house was marking the day that Moshe-Yaakov had become a man.

*A man? At thirteen?* He had studied for a year, worked with the Rabbis to learn his Torah and Haftarah readings for his particular *Shabbat*, memorized the melodies so that he could chant his *parsha*, and prepared to lead the men and *yeshiva* students in a spirited discussion. So why did his body feel the same at this minute as it did the hour before he was called to the *bema* to read from the Torah for the first time? He kicked a rock with his shoe.

"So, the *bar mitzvah* boy is too grown up to attend a silly party?" The voice was startling, undeniably familiar, and yet strangely foreign, coming from outside in the yard. The *Great Man*, the Rabbi—his father—was standing on the porch on the *outside* of the door.

"No, Papa, of course not. I am praying," Moshe lied.

Rabbi Lozinsky stifled a laugh. "I can see that. Well then, say your 'Amens' and join me for a walk."

"*Ani Adonai eloheichem, Amen*," Moshe rushed and jumped off the

woodpile.

The Rabbi added, "Amen," as the two headed out of the yard and into the woods.

Late afternoon had always been Moshe's favorite time of day to be outdoors. The deep golden light of the sun shimmered atop the tree leaves, casting purple shadows across the dusty pathway. Moshe called this time of day the *whisper hour*. As the breeze grew softer, fluttering the leaves in the canopies, there was a still, peaceful feeling as all living things began the routine of settling in for the upcoming night.

Rabbi Lozinsky seemed deep in thought and for a while, the two wound their way down the wooded path in silence. When he spoke, his voice echoed off the tree trunks and gave Moshe a start.

"Every day I study the lessons faithfully, and still the Torah has something new to teach me."

"Yes, Papa."

"Well, I'm proud of you Moshe, you gave me fuel for thought today."

"Really, Papa?" Moshe said, surprised.

"So why are you not in the house with your friends and family celebrating?"

"I don't think it's right to celebrate, Papa. I'm not feeling like I'm a grownup."

The Rabbi studied his son. "Ah, I see. Well, the birth year of thirteen was decided centuries ago when people didn't live as long, and so to guarantee a future for the Jewish people, they needed to marry and have their children at younger ages. Today, we aren't in so much of a hurry. So don't despair and you needn't rush growing older. The feelings will come, and when they do, Moshe, you will wish you were still a child."

Moshe stared at his father. "Do you, Papa?"

The Rabbi sighed, but his attention was diverted to a commotion occurring above the bough of the trees. A large, aggressive squirrel was in a fierce battle with a sparrow for homesteading rights to the tree limb that was occupied by her nest. The sparrow darted at the squirrel, pecking at his head.

"See that, Moshe? That is the great *Passer montanus* quarreling with a common tree squirrel. Foolish squirrel, one should never get between a mother and her children."

“A *Passer* what?”

“*Montanus*—fancy name for Tree Sparrow.”

“You know about birds, Papa?” Moshe asked, amazed.

The big man chuckled, “There’s no law saying I can’t have an inquisitive mind about things other than Torah, Moshe.”

The sparrow swirled around squawking, and the squirrel answered with a forceful cacophony of clicks and screeches. Suddenly the squirrel swiped at the sparrow and the nest tumbled to the ground below. Frantic, the mama bird dove, her hatchlings lay helpless under the tree on the soft dirt. Rabbi Lozinsky knelt down, withdrew his hands into his coat sleeves, and carefully placed the baby birds back into their nest. The mama bird fluttered around the Rabbi’s head but strangely, didn’t attack him.

“Moshe, come here. Take this nest, we will put it back up where it belongs.”

Moshe ran to his father.

“Hold it carefully,” the Rabbi continued, “I will give you a boost.”

The Rabbi knelt and clasped his fingers together making a sling. Moshe hesitated.

“It’s okay,” his father urged as his large hands cradled Moshe’s foot.

The hands felt soft and squishy, not the hands of a workingman forging molten lead over the roasting heat of a fire. No, these were scholars’ hands, made to gently trace fingers over letters, sentences, paragraphs, discussions, arguments, and laws; chapters of a people’s past and present; warmth wrapped around a small foot.

“Okay. I’m going to lift you up,” the Rabbi commanded.

Moshe’s head barely missed the tree limb. It was an effort to remain balanced on one leg while trying to avoid the mama sparrow that pecked at his head and squawked in his ears. He rested his other foot on top of his father’s shoulder.

“Easy there, Mama,” the Rabbi reassured the panicked bird, “we’ll have your babies back home in no time.”

Moshe’s hands trembled as he lifted the nest up to the limb. He held his breath and secured the nest into the crook of a branch.

“Okay, Papa, we’re good.”

The mama sparrow fluttered overhead as the Rabbi lowered Moshe to

the ground, his strong arms wrapped around Moshe’s waist. For a brief moment their bodies were locked together as one.

Moshe closed his eyes. All his life he had yearned for a simple pat on the head or a hug from the majestic man. This was a moment he hoped would never fade.

The two stood side-by-side, watching as mama sparrow surveyed the condition of her hatchlings. Satisfied, she settled in and began singing a song of gratitude.

“*Baruch Hashem*,” said the Rabbi, dusting the dirt off his hands.

Moshe studied his father with wonder. Today, this larger than life man opened his heart to tiny birds, and Moshe got a smile, a hug, and a pat on the head.

“So that was a very insightful discussion you led in *shul* today, Moshe. I’m talking about your thesis on the Blessings and Curses. God put the Curses in place to encourage us to live a more righteous and devout life. The Curses show us that if we deviate from the laws, there will be consequences. In the Torah, God makes life simple; there is a right path or a wrong path. We walk down one or the other. And yet, you constructed a different interpretation. I’m curious, how did you arrive at your conclusion that blessings and curses are symbiotic? That both can exist at the same time as one action?”

*How can this man be both a Rabbi and a father? And, he is waiting for an answer? From me?*

Moshe swallowed hard. “Levi wrote a letter to me that mentioned an American saying, and I have been thinking it applies to my Torah portion.”

“And what is this American brilliance?”

“The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

The Rabbi looked around thoughtfully.

“I believe it is a metaphor, Papa,” Moshe continued. “People are not contented with the blessings they have, instead they yearn for more. Many are not even satisfied with the rewards they have earned.”

“True, many break the tenth commandment,” the Rabbi sighed, “but there is a scenario where yearning for more can be good. Take the artist who endeavors to create an awe-inspiring work, the athlete who yearns to break the fastest record, and the learned man who strives to be en-



lightened. Achievement is a blessing, even if the goal is unattainable.”

“Achievement yes, Papa, but sometimes a blessing can turn out to be a curse. See, it is not that simple. I believe it isn’t a case of either—or. I don’t believe these are separate principles. I believe that one resides within the other; one triggers the other. So we have to not be hasty with our choices. We need to weigh our decisions carefully.”

“Ah, thus another of your American idioms, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’”

“Papa!”

“Ah, my *boychick*, you think these eyes only read religious writings? These ears aren’t deaf, you know. I am aware of some American idioms though I admit they don’t always cross the language barriers. I mean who really needs greener grass?”

Moshe looks at his father and laughs.

“So, in your speech you mentioned our dear Mr. Korsky. May he rest in peace. Go on.”

“Yes, Papa. Mr. Korsky had a good business, many sons and daughters, respect in our community. He was considered the best milliner in all of Vilna. Those were his blessings, but it was never enough. He needed a bigger house, more horses, more silver for his wife’s table, a new coat every winter for each member of his family. So, he started buying cheaper material and forcing his workers to sew faster. Soon he had a shoddier product but charged his customers a more expensive price.

“When his business saw hard times,” Moshe continued, “he stole and cheated people until he lost everything and brought shame to his family. His blessings drove him to his destruction. I believe that God also wanted us to understand that if we misuse our blessings, then we will suffer consequences.”

“Ah, Moshe,” the Rabbi smiled and placed his arm around his son’s shoulders. “You said when we started our walk that you didn’t feel any differently today. You studied the Torah, interpreted the meanings, and related the lessons to your own world. In my eyes, there is the proof you are seeking that you are becoming a man.”

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What happened that day in the forest with the sparrow was but a fleeting moment. Perhaps it was God’s way of showing him that his father is a mortal being, capable of compassion in spite of his holy stature. Moshe wonders if the heart has finite space for compassion, and then the overflow is left as scraps to fill the beggar man’s cup. His father, the Great *Rebbe*, possesses infinite patience for all things—except his children.

A young scholar turns in Moshe’s direction and nods. The rest of the group is too immersed in their conversation to notice Moshe and Elana in the doorway.

“It isn’t very long from now that Germany and Russia will be signing a pact to invade Poland. They will split it up, and they won’t stop there,” says one of the village men.

“Yes,” another adds, “Latvia, Rumania, Lithuania, even Finland. No one is immune.”

“The Soviets are commandeering the factories, silencing the press, and arresting the Jewish leaders. Time has run out, *Rebbe*,” warns a *yeshiva* student. “We must leave within a few days.”

A youthful village man leans over a map that covers the surface of the large oak desk. “We board the train at Kaunas and travel through Lithuania, to Moscow. There, we switch to the Trans-Siberian Railroad that will take us to the port of Vladivostok. The trip will take about ten days. At the port we board a ship for Japan.”

“Japan,” whispers the Rabbi, “we might as well go live on the moon.”

An elderly gentleman places a packet of visas onto the desk. He opens to a page containing two official stamps. “The Dutch diplomat stamped two hundred passports for our families to go to Curacao.”

Resigned, the Rabbi frowns and strokes his beard, “Curacao.”

The gentleman nods. “Yes, but that is really not our final destination. Curacao is one of the few countries that will let us in. I persuaded our Russian contact to grant our exit visas to leave Russia, however, we are missing our transit visa stamps. Tomorrow we will go to the Japanese consulate in Kaunas and get the transit visas.”

“The *yeshiva* is prepared to leave first thing in the morning,” the student interjects, “you, *Rebbe*, and the families will meet us at the train station in Kaunas in two days.”

“I’m worried,” says the elderly gentleman, “how do we keep *kashrut* in a foreign land?”

The Rabbi sits quietly for a moment. “Do you think Moses worried about keeping kosher when he wandered the desert for forty years? Have we learned nothing from the Egyptians enslaving the Israelites?”

The men fall silent.

The Rabbi continues, “Rivka has lit the candles, yes?”

The student peeks his head out the door and nods to Moshe and Elana as they quickly scoot out the rear door. He studies the shadows of candlelight flickering across the gilded wallpaper in the foyer.

“Yes, *Rebbe*, they are lit.”

“And the sun—has it set?”

The student returns to the doorway to see a stream of yellow gold light pouring through the leaded glass windowpane and across the wood floor.

“There are still a few minutes until we welcome the Sabbath.”

“Well, then, I won’t be offending God,” the Rabbi says as he tears off the yellow Star of David patch sewn onto his coat sleeve and tosses it down onto his desk.

The men freeze.

“I see my actions have surprised you. Well know this, I am a willing and humble servant of *Adonai* only, but I will not serve a man who is trying to rob me of my name or obliterate our faith. We are no longer welcomed in the land of our birth. We will find shelter in another.”

One by one the cloth squares of tattered yellow stars are ripped from coat sleeves and settle upon the surface of the heavy oak desk where some disappear, slipping between the stacks of leather-bound books.

## Chapter Three

Outside the house, Elana draws her shawl tightly against her chest, partially to ward off the cold, but mainly because in his presence, Moshe makes her body tremble. He looks at her and smiles.

Since Elana became a young woman they can’t speak as freely as they could when they were children. Theirs is a secret friendship since Orthodox law prohibits young men and young women from socializing without an adult present. Moshe misses the days when they would sneak away from the house and play together in the woods.

It’s too bad that Elana couldn’t have been on his kickball team. Sometimes they would get into a wrestling match, with Moshe landing in a headlock. He remembers teaching her how to ride a bicycle and how to fish. In turn, Elana taught him the names of plants and not to be afraid of bugs.

Even though it was forbidden for young girls to study Torah at the *yeshiva*, Elana was better at debating the weekly *parsha* than his friends at school. Moshe knows that had she been born a boy, she would have single-handedly squashed his team in stickball, become a revered Tal-

mudic scholar, and been his best friend.

There are times when he is in her presence that he finds himself questioning the purpose of some of the sacred laws. Elana is living proof that the female brain is in many respects smarter and more focused than the male's. If his father could read his mind, he'd be banished from the family forever. Maybe his older brother Levi made the right decision moving to America.

Moshe moves to the woodpile and retrieves a small box. "I want to show you what Levi sent me from America. I've been hiding it from my little sisters."

"What is it?"

Moshe unwraps a small snow globe. He flips it upside down, and then right side up. White flakes rain down upon the Golden Gate Bridge and the harbor in the San Francisco Bay.

"Levi says he can see this bridge from his living room window."

"San Francisco," she reads from the sign inside the globe. "It looks like a wonderful place. Does it get as cold as here?"

"I guess, since it snows," he says shaking the globe.

"How do you feel about leaving our home, Moshe?" Elana asks, watching the snowflakes float around the little snow globe harbor.

"I am very worried about my work, Elana. There is much that I haven't finished. Thank goodness Torahs don't have feet, or I would have a lot of chasing to do when we return," he laughs and hands her some firewood.

"I'm worried, Moshe," she sighs, "Mama cries all the time. She is upset that Papa will only let her take one suitcase. And she doesn't want the Germans to steal *Bubbe's* silver."

"I doubt Hitler—or the Russians—will have use for your *Bubbe's* silver platters," Moshe laughs, affecting a German accent. "Please, *fraulein*, may I interest you in a juicy *schweinebraten*?"

Elana waves him away, "*Ech, tref.*"

Moshe likes her quick wit and how easily she'll play along. He hands her another log and his finger brushes the top of her hand. An electrical current pulsates throughout their bodies—their hearts quicken. Elana

lets her hand linger just a little too long. The blood races up her neck and into her face. Her eyes become glassy and her cheeks glow red.

"Are you feeling okay, Elana?"

"Of course not," she says, holding the snow globe to her cheeks. "My hair is hot!"

"Ha, that's a good one," Moshe laughs, curling his index finger around hers. Her soft, round fingers intrigue him. Warmth envelops his body as he studies her face—*Raise your eyes. See me. Please be mine.*

Her eyelids flutter and lift. The deep, brown pools tease, the fragrance of her soap entices, and the pout of her mouth seduces. His lips brush hers. He tastes the olive and wine that she sampled before the Sabbath prayers. He pulls back and laughs, "You cheated."

Elana covers her mouth and giggles. "I was starving! I couldn't wait for the sun to set."

There had been kisses before, in the days when she would wrestle him to the ground and plant wet smacks onto his forehead. That was when girls were disgusting; now they are a mystery. She squeezes his hand and smiles. At this moment by the woodpile they pledge their everlasting love, and he gifts her his heart.

Akiva pokes his head out the screen door. "Moshe, Elana, come, it's time for dinner."

Elana quickly pulls her hand away and heads towards the door.

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The Lozinskis' Sabbath table is dressed in the finest embroidered cloth. At one end, the Rabbi stands at the place of honor; his sons stand on both sides. Elana's brothers and several of the Rabbi's students join them. At the far end of the table Rivka, Miriam, and their daughters, stand next to their seats. Miriam notices that Elana's face appears flushed.

"Are you unwell, Daughter?" Miriam whispers.

"Very well, Mama," Elana blushes. "I was carrying firewood. I got hot."

“Tch,” Miriam clucks with disdain. “You must let the boys do the outside work.”

“Yes, Mama.” She smiles and steals a glance at Moshe.

The family gathers to sing ‘*Shalom Aleichem*’ as the Rabbi circles the table, placing his hands upon each child’s head for a blessing. Elana admires the table, set with Rivka’s finest bone china plates, crystal goblets, and sterling silverware. The place settings have been in the family for decades, passed down from one bride to the next. One day she will have the honor of setting such a table for her own family’s *Shabbat* dinner.

She thinks about the ritual for preparing for the Sabbath meal. On the Wednesday prior, she will shop, bake, and prepare the soups. On Thursday, she will marinate the beef, which she will slow cook on Friday morning. On Friday, she will visit Mr. Penkowski’s shop to purchase a fresh salmon and the bakery to buy her fresh baked *challah* bread. During the week, her daughters will help with the baking of cakes and cookies. Then, twenty minutes before sundown on Friday evening, she will fulfill her commandment and proudly gather her children to light the *Shabbat* candles.

*Shabbat* dinners are a time to reflect and relax, a time to come together as a family and a community. It is a sacred time to exchange ideas and tell stories. Elana smiles, imagining that the most brilliant Rabbis from all over the world will come to dine at her *Shabbat* table.

The *Shabbat* evening should be a time of joy, but tonight a veil of bitterness hangs over the hearts of the families. All this decades-old beauty is soon to be abandoned, left behind unprotected. Elana shudders.

Rabbi Lozinski lifts the spigot on the ornate sterling silver urn, and the deep red wine pours into twelve small cups.

The cups are passed and raised as the Rabbi leads the *Kiddush*: “*Baruch ata Adonai, elohenu melech ha-olam, b’re p’ri hagafen.*”

The guests utter, “Amen,” and each takes a sip.

Following the *Kiddush*, each member at the table washes his or her hands before the meal. Rivka pours water from a glass jug, first over each guest’s right hand and then their left, while Elana follows with a bowl to catch the flow. The Rabbi wets his hands.

“*Baruch ata Adonai, elohenu melech ha-olam asher kid’shanu b’mitz-*

*vo-tav v’tzivanu al netilat yadayim.*”

The group immediately sits and Rabbi Lozinsky reaches for a silver platter. Carefully, he removes the ornately decorated silk cloth covering the *challah* bread. He vaguely remembers his grandmother separating the gold and blue threads she used to stitch her design into the silk. He pauses to marvel at the perfection of her handiwork. The littlest child giggles that his father is taking so long. The others quickly shush him. No talking is allowed until after the eating of the *challah*.

The Rabbi smiles; he knows well the impatience of a hungry child. Slicing into the golden bread he recites: “*Baruch ata adonai elohainu melech ha’olam hamotzi lehem min haaretz.*”

“Amen,” the group says in unison.

This is Moshe’s favorite part of the meal. The sweet smells of breads baking fill the home each Thursday. The wafting scent teases his senses and tries his patience, for as soon as the aroma reaches his second-floor bedroom, he knows he has a twenty-four-hour long wait until the hot, buttery sweet bread melts on his tongue.

Platters of brisket and poached salmon rotate clockwise around the table. There are three salads and a dish of potato *kugel*. Moshe helps the little ones with the servings.

“In this week’s *parsha*,” the Rabbi says, “we read about the *mitzvah* of *mezuzah*. What is the meaning of the word *mezuzah*?”

The children squirm in their chairs—their hands reach to the ceiling.

“Yes, yes children. Kiva, you tell me.”

“It means doorpost.”

“Yes, and what is a *mezuzah*?”

“I know, Papa,” says Sadot, the Rabbi’s youngest daughter. Plain and studious, Sadot is happiest when she is left alone with her books. Her misfortune is that she, like Elana, was born female. The sight of all the young men entering the *yeshiva* to study makes her burn with envy, and the thought of being stuck the rest of her life in a kitchen is nauseating.

“Yes, Sadot, you may answer.”

“The *mezuzah* is a piece of parchment that has two passages from the Torah written on it. A *sofer*—”

“Like Moshe!” interrupts Kiva.

“Yes, like Moshe,” sighs Sadot, annoyed, “has written the passages

which are *Shema Yisrael* and *Vehaya*.”

“Very good. Ah, my little daughter, you would have made a fine *yeshiva* student. Now why is the letter *shin* on the outside of the *mezuzah* cover?”

Kiva cannot contain himself. His arm shoots upwards beyond the length of his jacket sleeve. The crumpled letter flies out of his waistband, shooting across the *Shabbat* table and landing onto Rivka’s plate.

“*Nu?* What is this, Kiva?” Rivka asks, looking at the envelope.

“Ah. I forgot. Mr. Bernstein gave me this letter to deliver to our family, Mama. It’s from Levi in America!”

Rivka looks at the envelope and sighs, “I will put this away until the Sabbath is over.”

She stands and heads towards the heavy oak credenza.

Her husband motions to her. “Rivka, I know we are forbidden to partake in reading anything other than the study of Torah during the Sabbath,” he says, “however, these are not the times that our forefathers imagined when they received these laws from God. Therefore, I am making an exception. We need some good news. Hand me the letter.”

Rivka pauses just a moment to examine the brightly colored stamps and admire the neatly penned address.

“*Baruch Hashem*,” says the Rabbi, staring at the envelope, “it has been too long since we’ve heard news from our firstborn.”

Heightened anticipation fills the room as they watch the Rabbi carefully open the envelope along its seams. As he slides out the folded pages of the letter, several magazine ads float to the floor and a small photograph slips onto his plate. He leans forward. The chatter around the table falls silent as the muscles on the Rabbi’s face tighten.

“Please, Papa,” says Moshe, “the letter. What does Levi say?”

Rabbi Lozinski pushes up his glasses that have slipped down onto the bridge of his nose.

“Uri,” says Rivka, “you want us all to expire from the anticipation?”

The Great Man sets the folded letter down on his plate; the photo floats onto his chair as he stands. No one moves, not a word is said. They watch him leave the dining room. The click of the study door echoes through the foyer.

Chairs fly. The group huddles. Moshe bends down, snatches up the papers off the floor, and discreetly places them into his pants pocket. Akiva swipes the photo off his father’s chair. On it, a young couple poses with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. The young man is dressed in a business suit and hat. One arm drapes around the bare shoulders of a young woman whose golden hair frames the delicate features of her face.

“It’s Levi, Mama,” Akiva says.

“Uh, what happened to his beard?” Rivka utters with surprise.

“Who’s the lady, Mama?” Sadot asks. “She looks like an angel.”

Rivka can feel the rise of her blood pressure—*This can’t be possible!* Levi, her first born—her hope for their future in America—with his arm around a sleeveless flowered dress! *Bare arms. Outrageous!*

A black leather belt is cinched tightly around the young lady’s slender waist—*What is she? An actress? A prostitute? Or worse—a shiksa?*

“Akiva, Sadot! Get your instruments and play something!” Rivka orders. “Everyone sit. Eat. The food will get cold!”

The children look confused. “During *Shabbat*, Mama?”

Rivka’s mind is spinning. “Yes, yes. Just play.”

“What do you want us to play?” Akiva asks, grabbing his violin.

Sadot returns with her viola and joins her brother.

“Anything—something soft and sweet but nothing mournful. Go ahead.”

Strains of Bach drift around the room as Moshe watches his mother fuss with the serving platters. He stares at the photo of Levi standing beside the young lady. With one click of a camera shutter, Levi has managed to tip the family’s world on end.

The mood at the Sabbath table is now awkward. Until the photo arrived from America, life in the *shetl* had been consistent and predictable. Propriety was well established. Rules followed without question. Looking at the photo in his hand, he cringes. Staring back at Moshe is his clean shaved brother and the bare-armed girl—the two, frozen in a moment of modernity.

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