

The table was still a wasteland of plates, pits, and bones. Baron von Schmetterling rubbed his eyes, still groggy from the effects of the wine. The chimes of the ancestral clock by the window assailed his brain like an anvil on a stone.

He stretched, in a decided attempt to rise. Instead it sent him sprawling on the marble floor, where he emitted a loud groan of futility. He rolled over, crawled to the opposite chair, and

was quite a feast, wasn't it?"

"Oh, quite," replied the steward tightly. "Most memorable." He held out the large white paper. "Unfortunately . . ." Shaking his head, he clicked, "Everything has its price."

The baron coughed and grabbed a half-empty flask near him. After a gulp of scotch he leaned forward. "Now let me see this."

He pulled the paper closer. Instantly

from the table and paced the hall. "Well, we are in a dilemma now, aren't we?"

"We are, sir?"

"Yes. I'm afraid that the money from the peasants' rent is already gone."

The steward rubbed his forehead and grumbled, "Yes. I do recall it went to pay off some losses."

"Luck wasn't with me at the racetrack, I'm afraid," gabbled the

Beyond the Limit

By CHAYA SARAH CANTOR

clutched it until he wobbled to his feet.

"Klaus!" he growled.

The steward stepped in, hand primly clutching a series of documents. He paused to stare at the banquet's remains, shook his head in bemusement and disgust, and hurried on, the heels of his little shoes tapping the marble.

"Here I am, my lord."

"What time is it?"

The steward waited till the last chime. "Twelve o'clock, sir."

"Twelve o'clock!" the baron bellowed. "Do you mean to say that I've been asleep for ten hours?"

"No, sir," answered the steward. "You've been asleep for *one day* and ten hours."

The baron slumped. He had not expected the wine to be that potent. Hands groping the armrests, he sat down, hoping he could honor his ancestors by retaining some semblance of an aristocrat.

He grinned sheepishly. "I must say it

his bloodshot eyes opened wide. "Are you mad?"

The steward stammered, "I'm afraid those are the current expenditures, my lord."

"Are you telling me that a banquet would cost that much?" the baron roared.

"It's not just the banquet, sir," explained the steward. His little head almost sank inside his shoulders. "Have you forgotten the baroness's latest acquisition?"

The baron lapsed into silence for a moment, then grimaced in memory. "Oh, yes. That Venetian mirror." He snorted. "She simply had to have it. All her friends did. She said she couldn't bear the humiliation."

He balled his fist and slammed the table. "It's her fault. All this infernal spending. You'd think money grows on trees."

"I wish it did, sir."

Body trembling with rage rather than liquor, the baron pushed himself

baron. He sighed. "The baroness always said I wasn't a gambler." He chuckled, glad to find some humor in an otherwise hopeless situation.

"I'm afraid we may have no choice, sir, but to sell some lands."

The baron grumbled. He wandered to the window and beheld the acres of fields and fauna sweeping across the landscape in fertile promise. A fine contribution he would make to centuries of lineage — giving away what took countless battles and machinations to acquire.

Finally he turned away. "I'd just as soon take my chances on the horses," he snapped.

Then he brightened. "That has given me an idea, though, Klaus. Perhaps . . . there is a way to raise money."

The steward was astonished. "My lord, you can't be serious. Would you risk gambling again?"

"Not I, Klaus," answered the baron. "My subjects!"

The steward paled, sensing that he was about to become privy to another of the baron's schemes. "I don't understand, sir."

The baron scooped him by the collar and thrust him against the wall. "Listen, and I'll explain."

The proclamation covered the door, magnetically drawing in its audience across the town square. For those who couldn't read, the steward described the contest, enunciating each word and repeating the sentences, as if talking to children. The listeners nodded, while the buzz of interest increased several decibels.

An old man, hard of hearing, cupped a hom-like aid to his ear and repeated, "A contest? A contest?"

"Yes," shouted Klaus. "The baron is giving away land — as much you like, to whoever bids the highest price."

The murmur intensified. Another asked, "But what if everyone offers the same?"

"That is the purpose of this contest," responded Klaus. "He who bids the highest shall receive as much land as he can traverse by foot within twelve hours." He swallowed and pierced the air with his whiny voice. "The person shall begin his trek in the morning. He may walk as far as he wishes, at whatever pace and in whatever direction."

All was silent now. The public watched the little steward intently.

"Whatever land he is able to cover shall be his," the steward continued. "But there is one condition: he must return within twelve hours. No exceptions. He must be back at the starting line by nightfall. If not, he forfeits both the land and his money."

He rushed off, fearing that the swell of arguments might ravage him. The peasants hastened home, gesticulating wildly to their wives and exclaiming how well off they'd become with such

fields, and how they might even become barons themselves someday.

"And we would not even be robbing anybody, as the old ones did!" they cried.

The wives nodded in approval. Families decided to cadge or borrow as much as they could, to even pawn their goods to the Jew Isidore in the ghetto. With what he would supply they could enter the contest and claim land in abundance. The sky was the limit.

The populace was simply too excited to sleep. Each man, from the town elder to the fresh-faced newlywed, lay in bed reveling in mountains of gold beyond anyone's imagination.

It was nightfall. Baron von Schmetterling waited calmly at the finish line, while the peasant's wife bit her lips and wrung her hands.

"He should be here in no time, my lord," she wailed. "He couldn't have gone that far."

"They always do," replied the baron.

He grinned at the steward, who calmly tallied up the figures under the torchlight and announced, "One thousand guilder."

"Splendid. Relatively speaking, of course." The baron turned and sauntered to the crowd of peasants, faces riveted toward the vacant fields. "Well, I do believe the contest is still



The baron looked out at his estate.

open. Would anyone else care to try his luck?"

"I will, sir!" called a man.

"How much?"

"Eleven hundred gulden!"

"Very well. Be here tomorrow at sunrise."

At the sound of the church steeple, the baron announced, "The contest is over. Good people, return home, and we shall see what tomorrow brings."

The crowd groaned, while a maid gently led away the sobbing wife. "We've lost everything!" she cried mournfully.

The steward, following the baron, raised his eyes intermittently from the lengthy sheet to the noble figure in front of him.

"How much?" asked the baron.

"Twenty thousand, thus far," mumbled the steward.

"Excellent!" The baron's face beamed, matching the moon up above. "And I expect to be eleven hundred gulden richer tomorrow."

"How can my lord be so certain?" asked the steward, frowning. "It is possible that that man shall win."

The baron flung a glance over his shoulder, along with a smirk. "Klaus, there is something you should know about gambling. Consider it the advice of — what shall we say? A veteran. A scholar of life."

"What, sir?" asked the steward.

They entered the medieval wing of the manor. Built by the baron's great-great-grandfather, its heavy brick walls enveloped them, blocking out the sound of the township below.

The baron faced him. "Gambling is based on a universal and unfortunately very human weakness."

"What, sir?"

"Greed." The baron extracted a box of snuff and daintily placed the pinch of tobacco to his nostrils. "No one ever wins, Klaus. Perhaps for a short while. But no one ever wins that illusory pot

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of gold. And do you know why, Klaus?"

The steward shook his head.

"Then I shall tell you. At some point in the person's apparent victory, he exceeds his limit. You, Klaus, assume that once someone reaches a sizable amount of winnings he stops. Oh, no. The lure of gold is dazzling. It blinds one to reason and weakens his will. He must go on. Sooner or later, Klaus, he goes too far."

With that the baron sneezed.

The peasant humbly bowed, before pocketing the miserable coins. He took a final look at his pewter beer stein and mumbled, "I hope to buy it back very soon."

He bowed again, then hurried out. The pawnshop door trembled, while the bell above it tinkled in merriment.

Isidore studied the inlay. "I don't think it is worth more than ten gulden. I must have been a fool to give him twenty." He sighed. "Lately I have

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in the person's
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he exceeds
his limit.

been too generous. Out of pity, I suppose."

He placed it on the shelf, so that it inched against the porcelain bowl and pipe, and the ceramic plates. Lately he had accumulated enough to start his own museum, and the shortage of space was becoming critical. Never in his life had business been this good, and he was seeing profit in amounts he had never dreamed of.

He smiled and watched the dark blanket of night. The y always came at this time, he mused. Ever since the baron's contest. It was more of a bet, actually — to see if the person could cover as much ground as possible within a given space of time. Simple as that. But not quite. For some reason, they always wandered too far. No one had yet returned in time to claim his winnings.

Isidore lit the lanterns. He wasn't what anyone would consider young; at forty-five, he clung to the health G-d had allowed him. His hair, once jet black, was more like coal that had been dipped in ash, and his face was a sort of tan, sprouting wrinkles over a sagging complexion. Nevertheless, the brown eyes sparkled with vivacity, revealing the intellectual intensity of one who had once wanted to be a rabbi.

His wife entered. Sarah was a more petite version of her husband, though her hair lay concealed under her kerchief. But the face underneath was gentle, while the lips, thin and straight, were pursed in seriousness.

She was bearing a tray of food. "Hadn't you better pray, Isidore?"

Isidore turned, started. "Yes, of course," he exclaimed. "So quickly it becomes evening." He chuckled. "I wonder if G-d planned it that way for the baron."

"The whole thing is disgusting!" she snapped. She put down the tray with a clang. "Robbing them blind. Making

them believe they can actually win that much land."

"The baron isn't being dishonest, Sarah. He is offering it to them. The peasants do have a choice."

"But it's not grounded in sanity," she muttered. She lifted the cover off the bowl of soup and began stirring with a vengeance. "I have watched them over the past fortnight. Giving away their money, goods — for some dream of wealth. Even were they to win the fields, what would they do with all of them?" She shook her head. "So many lie fallow now. If G-d wanted these people to be wealthy He would have made them so."

She waved the ladle dramatically. "What does the Torah say about the one who is happy? *Eizehu ashir? Hasomeach bechelko*. Who is truly rich? He who is satisfied with his lot. Why can't they be satisfied with theirs?"

Isidore shrugged. "It's human nature, I suppose, to want more. All of us feel we have the power to change our situation — and we can. Provided, of course, that we stay within our limits — and have the right motivations."

He faced the wall. His wife continued to stir the soup while he prayed. During the *Shemoneh Esrei*, however, his mind drifted to the land. Theoretically it was obtainable. But somehow it eluded those who treaded it. Those who attempted to grab a large amount ended up with a handful of air.

At *Refa'einu* Isidore barely remembered to insert the prayer he was wont to add for his own health, something of concern in his advancing years. Then he continued. Perhaps the problem lay in trying to seize too much. The contestants randomly ran in a circle, triangle, or what not, trying to cover whatever ground. It was like scooping up diamonds in one great armful, rather than measuring carefully the amount one could carry

in several buckets, two on each arm, and allowing time —

That was it! After *Aleinu* he spun to his wife and announced, "Sarah, I know why everyone loses."

make money."

"But we have enough now from the peasants."

"We'll have more."

When Isidore saw the agony on her



Sarah dropped the ladle, splattering her dress. "Isidore. Please don't tell me you want to enter."

"Why not?" Isidore exclaimed. "The contest is open to everyone — even Jews. And I certainly have more than enough capital to offer." He swept his arm around the well-stocked shop. Eyes pulsating wildly, he declared, "There's enough here for two contests — in case I don't win the first. We'll have plenty to live on, anyway. What have we got to lose?"

Sarah backed away, face contorted in doubt.

Isidore approached her. "Just think, Sarah. Think of what we might win. Think of how we can live. With the fields we'll earn much, and then some. We may even invest. It takes money to

face, he begged, "Sarah, please. I won't throw away our earnings. I'm not like the rest; I'm different. And with my plan, we'll succeed!"

Sarah reluctantly yielded. She put down the ladle and wandered to the door. "Good luck, Isidore," she mumbled. "And may G-d be with you."

The next day the crowd was larger than usual, for a number of Jews had attended. Some came to wish Isidore good luck, intone a blessing, or give him advice. A few eyed him in gloom and trepidation, yet others in contempt.

The baron, as usual, was there with his faithful steward. He eyed the Jew with the bright brown eyes, who was

nodding eagerly in conversation with his colleagues. Then the baron chuckled. The contest was certainly becoming interesting. If his ancestors knew who was trying to usurp their lands, they might die again, laughing.

Finally Isidore approached the baron. The latter addressed him condescendingly, as if the Jew were already a beggar. "So, we begin. Do you understand the rules?"

Isidore nodded.

"You have until nightfall, beginning at the stroke of the clock. You may cover as much ground as you wish, within an enclosed area. But" — and the baron frowned — "you must return by the onset of night, as soon as three stars appear. Do you understand?"

With a faint smile Isidore nodded again. Apparently the baron knew the Jewish definition of night.

The bells from the church steeple tolled. The baron watched Isidore cynically. "Begin."

At once Isidore bolted. His spindly legs, whirling like an egg beater, whisked him out of sight and sound of the cheering mass. His feet glided over the bridge, traversing the river, until they touched the mossy bank of the opposite side. He glanced over his shoulder momentarily to see the wooden homes and gabled roofs recede.

He was now officially on the proclaimed land. It was his, his to own — he could feel it. The soil, soft with the sediment of spring rains, crumbled at his feet with a hush, while pebbles fell aside as if on command.

Down the meadow Isidore continued, while the muddy earth sank and rose into ridges, miniature mountain ranges splattering his boots and staining them brown. He didn't care if they couldn't be cleaned. In no time he'd have enough cash to buy ten of them.

He increased his trot in growing exuberance, the town proper now far behind him. Success was sweet, sweet as the air, filled with daisies and beckoning him further. Isidore had never realized how much acreage the baron owned. In the past the pawnbroker had not paid too much attention. Now, with ownership becoming a reality, he took mental inventory of the farmlands and lush meadows, deciding which he would like to cultivate and which he would sell.

Isidore remembered a plateau, straddling two brooks at the edge of a

**Isidore panted,
while his heart
beat furiously
in protest.**

grove. It was there, he had spent the previous night calculating, that he could run the farthest distance in a straight line in three hours. At the sight of a birch, rising in majestic welcome, Isidore's heart beat even faster. He knew he was making it.

At the last set of trees, all clustered solemnly, like a *minyán* in a small *bais midrash*, Isidore beamed. His panting broke into gasps of triumph at the sight of the brook and the level plot of land beyond.

He guessed that three hours had elapsed. He knew what he had to do.

He tossed a colored rock on the ground, as the baron had ordered. The next day the latter's men would come and retrieve it. It was the first marker, the first indicator of how far Isidore had gone. According to the peasants who came to his pawnshop, some had run even farther — virtually to the next duchy. But no, Isidore would not

make that mistake. Even if it meant getting less land, he would not lose track of the time — nor of his calculations.

No sooner did he drop the marker than Isidore turned ninety degrees to his left. He continued to run, watching the ribbon of blue trickle away and yield to pastoral fields dotted with poppies.

Isidore smiled. He had already covered the requisite length. All he had to do now was delineate the width. It was so simple. Fortune had come.

The pasture blended into a gradual ascent and Isidore found himself, quite against his will, slowing his pace. He had overlooked — quite stupidly, he had to admit — that one is apt to exert more effort in going up a hill. Still, he might regain his energy once he had passed this slight obstacle.

The land grew steeper. Isidore panted, while his heart beat furiously in protest. He longed to stop, or perhaps try walking instead. But the climb was only temporary, he argued. The top of the hill was the furthest point he could reach within another three hours, according to his calculations. Courage, he gasped. He must go on. Once he had made it to the top, the rest was downhill — an easy run all the way.

At the crest he fished in his pocket for another colored rock, and tossed it near a gopher hole. Then he made another right angle, and continued counterclockwise.

The descent helped him to regain momentum, gladdening his heart — overexerted as it was — and filling him with hope. All he had to do now was go to the crag of boulders, which was located at the end of a marsh. There he would let fall his third marker, finalizing the square and sealing off three-quarters of the border. From there he would establish the perimeter, staking his territory — his,

and nobody else's.

On the way to the third landmark Isidore was feeling positively giddy. Whether it was euphoria or exhaustion he did not know. He simply knew that he had triumphed. According to the sun, settled over the grass and giving it a velvety glow, he still had time. He might even try going a bit farther.

But no. Isidore shook his head. He would not fall into that trap. He had to

be firm. He had seized more than enough land for a lifetime. In fact, he might even lease much of it — hire tenant farmers, thereby yielding a greater profit. Better still, he might build a synagogue or a yeshiva — or support them, at least, with whatever he made off the peasants. He would be an important person at last, as he had always wanted to be.

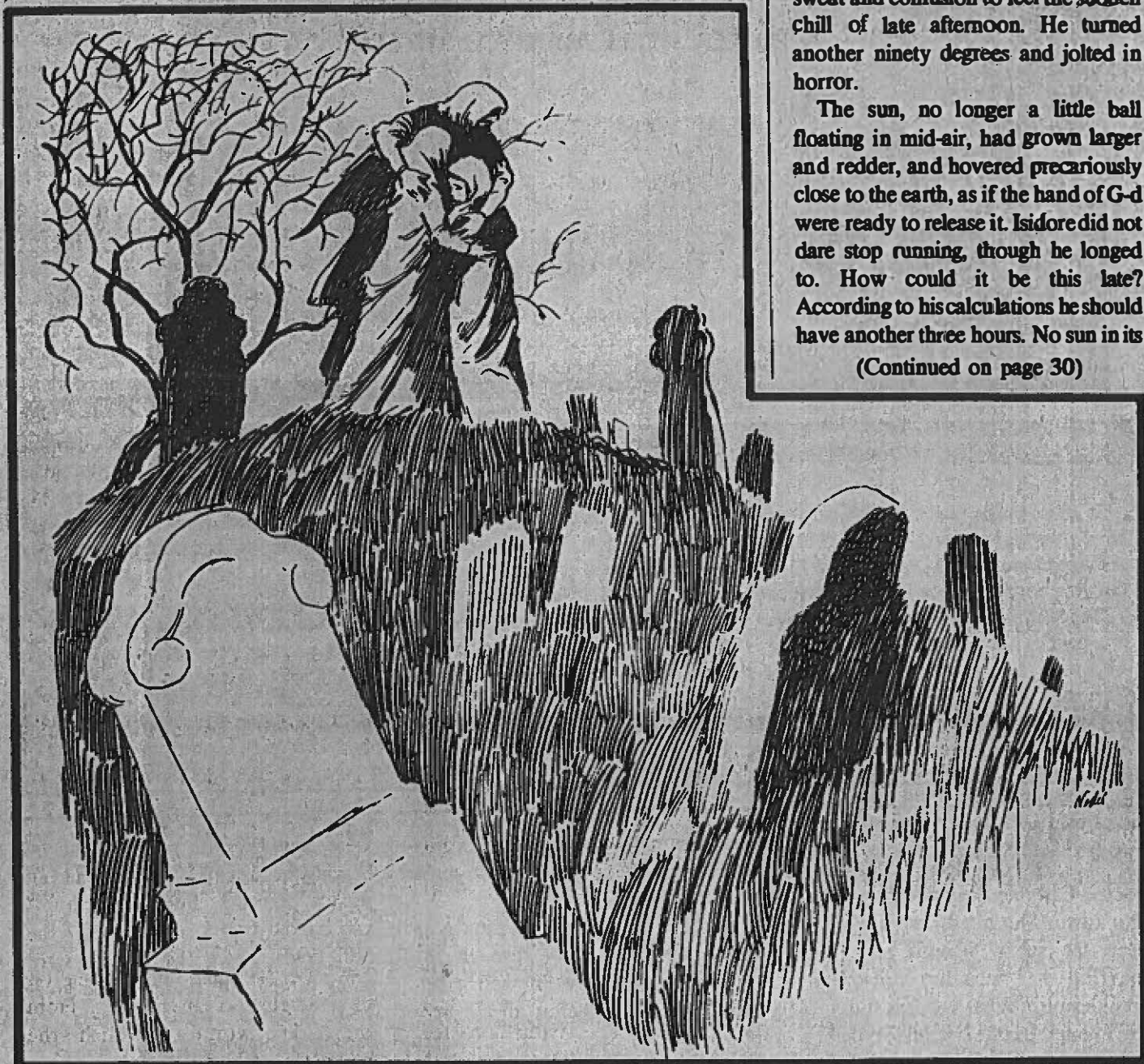
The muscles in his thighs had constricted. Teeth clenched, Isidore

propelled himself further. He caught sight of a rocky pass, jutting above a watery mass of reeds. Counting each step, Isidore exhaled a massive sigh of relief. He had reached the crag of boulders. He tossed another colored stone. Almost done. Now he could go home.

The air, no longer redolent, had the stagnant smell of a marsh, and the temperature had dropped. Isidore, panting wildly, was too drenched in sweat and confusion to feel the sudden chill of late afternoon. He turned another ninety degrees and jolted in horror.

The sun, no longer a little ball floating in mid-air, had grown larger and redder, and hovered precariously close to the earth, as if the hand of G-d were ready to release it. Isidore did not dare stop running, though he longed to. How could it be this late? According to his calculations he should have another three hours. No sun in its

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Beyond the Limit

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right mind would sink that low.

His legs circled mechanically, their movement restricted by the cramping thighs. Frantically Isidore tried to evaluate the day's events. He had made it to the first marker in time. He knew it. And the second. Granted, climbing a hill took longer — and he was foolish to have forgotten. Still, even were he slightly delayed, he would still have had enough time.

Or would he? Remembering how his legs had begun to ache, Isidore realized another awful truth: the longer one ran, the the more tired he was apt to become. All this time Isidore was running more slowly, but he had forgotten to account for it in his calculations.

Watching the setting sun, he cursed himself. How utterly stupid! Instead of running, as everyone did, he should have relied on a steady but brisk walk! And to think he had believed he was so different.

His heart clattered wildly, sending spasms through his chest. Isidore mumbled: I must go on. He no longer cared about the land, caked and hard under his feet. He only sought to recoup his losses. He had bequeathed to the baron much of the pawnshop as collateral.

When the sun became an orange semi-circle, Isidore realized he had not yet recited *minchah* — something else he had overlooked. He would have to stop somewhere. But he couldn't. He estimated that he barely had a half-hour more of daylight. Just this once I shall have to miss the afternoon prayer, he told himself. I'm sure G-d understands. If He helps me win, I shall give half the money to charity.

The sky had turned an angry purple, but Isidore's run had dwindled into a

sort of stagger. His middle-aged body, unaccustomed to a run difficult even for someone younger, was nearly crumpled like a rag doll's, limbs all awry and flailing against his torso.

The sky had turned the color of a stormy sea, through which a star faintly glimmered. The view of the gabled roofs loomed ahead and Isidore, by now stumbling like a blind man, came closer. His vision was blurred; instead of gold he discerned crowds cheering, his wife Sarah spreading her arms wide, and the baron sneering into the night. He had made it!

Then everything went black.

Sarah hovered over the grave, sobbing and clutching her daughters. While her sons-in-law threw in scoopfuls of earth, the rabbi intoned the eulogy. Behind them others huddled, until *Kaddish* began.

Yitzchak the *gabbai* and Yechezkel the tailor watched from behind a Hebrew gravestone.

"His heart gave out," whispered Yitzchak. "Can you believe it? Right when the stars came out."

"He went too far," mumbled the other.

"He did it all wrong," said the first man. "I'm going to try it tomorrow. I won't make his mistakes."

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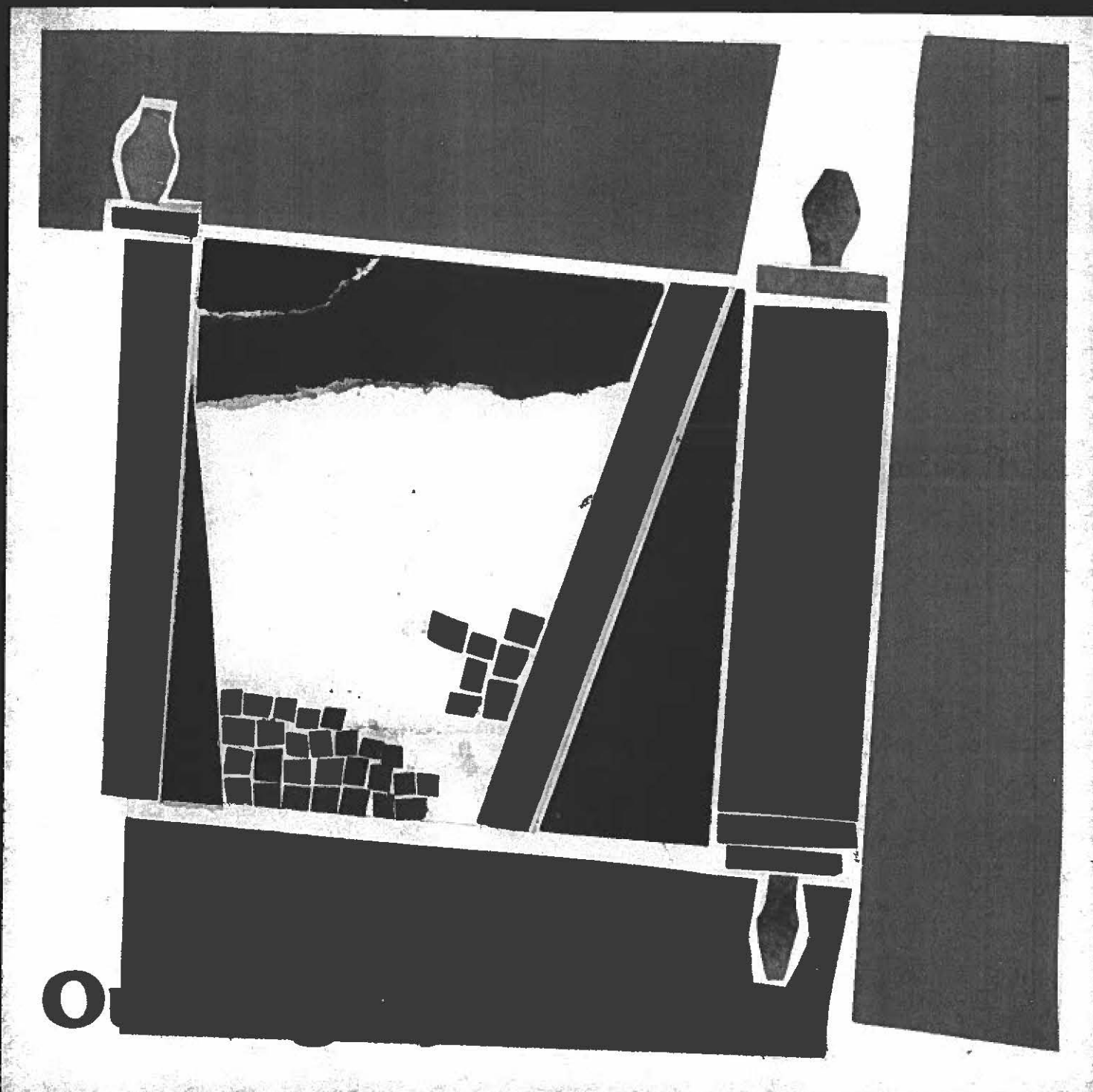
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The Jewish Reader

Shevat 5750

Vol. 2 No. 6

February 1990



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THE JEWISH READER () is published monthly, except July and August, by HaChai Publishing, 705 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Application to mail at Second-class postage is pending at Brooklyn, N.Y.

Subscriptions: 1 year 10 issues \$12.50, Foreign \$15.50.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JEWISH READER, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230.

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