

In a town not far from Shpula lived a widow named Sarah. Actually, she was not a widow; at least she hoped not. But after so many years she was beginning to wonder. Her husband had left for Danzig fifteen years earlier — to make his fortune, he had promised. He had also promised to write her faithfully and keep in touch.

But the years had passed. Fifteen

a second-hand report. The woman hated to think the dreaded word, but she finally did: she was an *agunah* — uncertain if her husband was alive or dead, and so unable to marry another man.

In the meantime, she hired a cook, an older woman from Shpula named Devorah. Big-boned and merry, Devorah made a nice companion as well as servant. At times she even acted like a mother toward her lonely

To Devorah's surprise, the younger woman burst into tears. The cook put down the soup kettle and hurried over. "Oh, Sarah, please don't cry. What is wrong?"

"My husband," sniffed the mistress, "he's missing. I haven't heard from him in fifteen years."

"Fifteen years?" exclaimed the cook.

"Yes." Sarah dabbed her eyes with a kerchief. "He left for Danzig and I

# THE WIDOW

BY CHAYAH SARAH CANTOR

long years, during which Sarah had waited patiently. But still there was no word from her husband, Yehoshua — nary a letter, not even

mistress.

One day the cook asked offhandedly, "I haven't seen your husband, Sarah. Where is he?"

have not heard from him since. He may be dead, for all I know. But I don't know — that's the problem. I can't even mourn for him properly,

let alone remarry."

The cook threw her fleshy arm around her employer and hugged her gently. "Madam, please don't cry. There is always hope."

Then she asked, "Have you ever thought of going to the Shpuler Zeide?"

Her employer stared, uncomprehending. "The Shpuler Zeide?"

"His name is Reb Leib. He's a holy man who lives in my hometown," explained the cook. "A man who has studied with the Ba'al Shem Tov. He possesses great powers. He may be able to help you."

Skeptically the mistress shook her head. "I doubt he could help me," she replied. "He doesn't even know my husband."

"No, but he might know people who do," Devorah countered. "People who might be witnesses to your husband's fate. People who might free you of your condition and tell you what became of your husband." She added reluctantly, "At the very least, they might be able to direct you to his grave — Heaven forbid."

Sarah still wavered. But the cook persisted, until, days later, her mistress finally agreed.

Overjoyed, the cook prepared a hearty meal for the journey. She told Sarah how to get there and even what to wear. Like a child preparing for her first day at class, the poor woman nodded timidly.

"Remember," the cook warned as they approached the waiting wagon,

"the best time to see the Shpuler Zeide is Friday morning."

"Friday morning?"

"That's when the Shpuler Zeide is in his kitchen, cooking fish for the

gives you definite word about your husband."

Sarah arrived in Shpula on Thursday evening. Friday morning she made her way to the holy man's cottage.

The Shpuler Zeide's *shamash* (assistant) took the pouch of money and the *kvittel*, the note upon which was written her request. After reading it over, he said, "Follow me."

The cottage was busy, filled with visitors, as well as family and friends preparing for the Sabbath. Servants brushed by the woman, making her feel as if she were in everyone's way. Stiffly she stared ahead, until she reached the kitchen.

The air wafted with the smell of stews and onions, and the woman thought of her cook, who was no doubt perspiring over the same pots and ladles back home. Awkwardly Sarah waited, still uncertain wasn't wasting her time.

The Shpuler Zeide walked in. He went straight to the stove,

raised a filleted fish that lay sprawled on a block of wood, and placed it onto an oiled skillet over the crackling fire.

The skillet hissed, letting loose an angry steam, but the holy man curled his wrist tightly around the handle.

A few minutes later he looked up, and his soft eyes caught Sarah's.



*Stiffly she stared ahead, until she reached the kitchen.*

Sabbath. You must remain there, no matter what, and hear whatever comes from his holy tongue. If he tells you to leave, you must do just the opposite. You stay there and insist he speak to you."

Nervously Sarah alighted.

The cook waddled closer. "Remember, do not leave him until he

"What do you want?"

Convulsing, she began, "I... I..."

She burst into tears. She managed to blubber the story of her husband and ended with the plea: "I wondered if the Rebbe might help me find him."

The holy man turned over the fish, spattering his sleeve with oil.

The woman waited.

"Go home," said the Shpuler Zeide. "In three months, at Wednesday midnight, you'll meet him."

Then he continued frying.

The woman remained riveted to the floor, in bewilderment. The *shamash* pointed toward the door, but she shook her head no.

The Shpuler Zeide removed the skillet and placed it on a heap of ash. When he turned, his eyes widened. "What? You're still here?"

"Rebbe," she began, "for fifteen years I have waited and wondered about my husband. I have lain awake nights, praying that he is alive and well. I made a special trip here, *erev Shabbos*, for a good word. Is that all you can tell me?"

Sagging, the Shpuler Zeide gazed at the woman in apparent helplessness. "Madam, go home. Three months from now, on Wednesday at midnight, you will meet him. On that night, light every candle you can find and prepare a fine meal."

He motioned to the *shamash*. The man said, "Lady, please. The Shpuler Zeide is busy."

"Good Shabbos," muttered the woman.

Sarah returned home just in time to usher in the Sabbath Queen.

Devorah was waiting impatiently by the door. "What did he say?" She saw the perplexed look on her mistress's face.

Sarah told her every detail, even about the fish. The cook listened eagerly, then raised her hands to the pale sky. "I knew it. I thank G-d for the holy man's advice. It will certainly come true."

"Yes," answered the woman in an unconvinced tone of voice, then went inside.



It was exactly three months later. Devorah waddled around the rooms, covering all the furniture with *can-delabras*—the tables, the cupboards, even the footstools. The house dazzled with light while the cook rushed into the kitchen and out with mouth-watering dishes.

"Food fit for a king," she sang.

Sarah looked it over with disinterest. "I'm going to bed," she announced.

The cook's face fell. "Won't you stay up till midnight?" she asked.

"Whatever for?" snapped the wife. Then she retired.



*At the corridor she clasped her throat and choked in tears.*

At midnight the cook shook herself awake and moved her frame closer to the window. The starless sky had darkened, so that the trees were no longer even visible — only faint outlines of branches writhing into clouds. Somewhere an owl hooted and a wolf answered with a howl.

The cook shivered, although the inside was made warm by the abundant candles. She glanced at the clock, whose hands shot straight up, like an arrow aimed for heaven.

Approximately one minute later she jolted.

A sound had come from the blackness. A clopping, accompanied by the creaking of wheels, slowed rhythmically as something approached the glowing house. The cook smelled horses.

"Halt."

The carriage was round and mahogany, and glistened against the flames inside. As the driver tugged the reins, the four stallions snorted and pawed the earth.

"Pardon me," called the driver. "Can you tell us where we are?"

"You're near the town of Shpula," answered the cook in amazement. "This is the home of Sarah Brodsky."

The driver dismounted, and with a limp borne from hours of sitting advanced to the passenger window.

A man leaned out. His face was pale and topped by a velvet three-cornered hat.

He listened intently to the driver, then broke into a radiant smile.

Raising his hands in triumph, he exclaimed, "Thank you, Hashem, for

showing me the way back!"

Nearly tripping over the footstools, Devorah raced into the other room.

"Sarah! Sarah!"

She shook the bed vigorously. Her mistress groaned, half asleep. Finally she awoke and squinted at her servant. "What is it? I'm trying to sleep."

"Madam, a gentleman is here! A

"I am home at last."



The meal was indeed fit for a king, just as Devorah had promised. The conversation lasted well into the night as Sarah caught Yehoshua up on life in their town and on the whereabouts of their relatives. Above all, they were happy to be united once again.

At the end Yehoshua glanced about the room in wonder. "I don't understand," he said. "What was all this doing here? Were you expecting somebody?"

Sarah laughed. "Yes," she said, and recounted her visit with the Shpuler Zeide. "He said to light many candles and to set up a banquet," she concluded. "I must confess, though, that I didn't believe him. I was lucky the cook did."

The husband frowned. "The Shpuler Zeide? Tell me — did he have a long gray beard and an intense demeanor?"

"I suppose so." After her husband pressed for other details, she said, "You've met him, then?"

"Yes, I have." Yehoshua proceeded to tell his story.

"When I set out for Danzig, I was determined to become a rich man. I wanted to do well, to establish myself and to make sure you would never lack for anything.

"Luck was with me the minute I arrived. I met up with a merchant who needed an assistant and negotiator for his shipping firm. He hired

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in wonder.*

*"I don't understand,"  
he said.*

*"What was all this  
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*Were you  
expecting somebody?"*

fine-looking gentleman, too, if you ask me!"

"Gentleman?" The woman threw on her robe and followed.

At the corridor she clasped her throat and choked in tears.

Her husband stood there before the candelabras and delicacies, in a silk waistcoat and breeches. The candlelight undulated against his velvet hat, making his pale face appear moonlike.

"I am home at last," he announced.

# THE WIDOW

(Continued from page 7)

me and even set up lodging.”

“He must have been impressed with your talents.”

“Very. Would you believe it — within months I became his manager!”

“You must have been quite busy,” Sarah said, a tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

“Yes.” Yehoshua paused guiltily. “So busy that I simply had no time to write. Each night I returned home, exhausted. It took me every ounce of strength just to *daven ma’ariv* before I collapsed into bed. Your face appeared before me—lovely, sad — and I vowed each night that I would send you a letter. But I kept putting it off.

“Months passed. I grew even more self-absorbed. By the end of two years this merchant had made me a junior partner. I was traveling all over Poland, even as far away as St. Petersburg, in Russia. By the end of five years I had become a full-fledged partner.

“Yet I had no time to write. So increasingly preoccupied was I that I scarcely looked at the calendar — only for the Sabbath and holidays. Otherwise I was arranging contracts

with princes and kings. Honors were showered on me; rabbis came to me for charity. Could I spare a few minutes of my time? Certainly. But for my own wife? No.”

*“I was working late at night in my office when I received an unexpected visitor. . . . To this day I have no idea how he got in.”*

He sighed. “I continued to succeed. I felt that I hadn’t reached the pinnacle. Five years later the merchant died, leaving me the entire business. It virtually became a twenty-four-hour-a-day obsession. It no longer *occupied* me. It *consumed* me.

“I traveled all over Europe. I got to know Jewish communities every-

where, from the German village to the Oriental market. But did I stop to visit my Saraleh in Poland? Not once.” He paused and dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief. “I am so sorry for what I have done.”

Sarah smiled wanly. “I accept your apology, although it is hard. What happened next?”

Yehoshua continued. “Each time I sat down, pen in hand, to write you and urge you to join me, I was interrupted by a client with a new request, a nobleman needing money. I had to hire a secretary just to keep them at bay. I was no longer master of my own fate.

“I was soon ensconced in my world, where I completely forgot about my place of birth. Until three months ago.”

He glanced outside the window, in the direction of Shpula. “I was working late at night in my office when I received an unexpected visitor.

“An old Jewish man entered. To this day I have no idea how he got in; usually my secretary informed me in advance of any visitors. I would have had this man thrown out immediately, but something about him made me hesitate.

“He looked like an angel, or something similar. His bearing was straight, and his eyes rested on me softly, yet sternly.

“‘You must go home,’ he said. ‘Your wife is waiting.’

“Trembling, I rose. ‘Who are you?’ I asked.

“But it was too late. He had left.

“I wondered if I might have been

dreaming. It was, after all, late at night, and I had foregone a lot of sleep to conclude a new business deal. Your eyes are apt to start playing tricks, you know. So I shrugged it off.

"But the next night, the same thing happened. He walked into the room and announced, 'Your wife is waiting. It's been fifteen years.'

"I stretched out my arms to call out, but he had left. I became sure it was some kind of demon.

"I made sure to go to sleep early the next night, and I hung up all kinds of amulets and talismans to ward off any demonic power. But to my surprise, he appeared in the street, in broad daylight, just as I was getting into my carriage.

"'You are making your wife an *agunah*,' he declared. 'You must go home.' I gasped and had the carriage speed away.

"The same thing happened for the next few weeks. Each day, without fail, he came to me, at all hours, in public and in private, and ordered me to go home.

"By then I was convinced he was a gentle spirit. I wheedled, 'I'm in the middle of something most pertinent. Please. Let me finish it. Then I'll obey.'

"His soft eyes narrowed. 'You must go home, *now*, or you will pay with your life.'

"I shuddered, and wanted to ask him what he meant. But once again he had disappeared.

"Even in spite of all this, I remained stubborn," the husband ex-

plained. "You see, I considered myself married to my business. It had supplanted my real wife. So naturally the business took precedence. 'I must finish this business,' I insisted. 'It could mean thousands of gulden. It's money I could donate to the poor. Just a few more days. Once it's over, then I'll go home.'

"That night, after I said *Shema* and lay down, I felt a chill. First it

*"We traveled a whole day. I was still shivering, though less than before. I was too indifferent to notice any of the towns."*

touched my arms and legs, soon it was rushing up and down my body. I shivered dreadfully, as King David did toward the end of his life; no blanket could warm me. Then I broke into a fever and began sweating.

"I tried to get out of bed, but my body throbbed with pain. And in my delirium I saw faces. First yours, pleading, then the old man's.

"'You must go home at once,' he ordered.

"'But I am sick,' I argued. 'Have mercy on me.'

"'This is the only way you'll gain mercy,' he said. And he disappeared.

"Weakly I forced myself out of bed and put on my clothes. Then, clutching the staircase, I went down and summoned the coachman. I gave him the name of the area and ordered him to prepare the carriage at once.

"We traveled a whole day. I was still shivering, though less than before. Nevertheless, I was too indif-

ferent to notice any of the towns. And I could scarcely remember where mine was."

He sobbed, then continued. "As it grew dark, I ordered the carriage to halt within a village. 'There's an inn. Let us stay there for the night,' I said.

"Just then a figure emerged from a building. I recognized him at once.

"He came to me. 'You must go home,' he bade.

"'But it's late!' I tried to reason. 'How can I go about at night? Especially in my condition. I'd be utterly helpless.'

"'Do not worry,' answered the man. His voice was expressionless, like an echo.

'Keep going, as far as you can. Stop when you come to a lighted house.'

"Again he walked away. By now I should have known not to argue. Sighing, I ordered the coachman to proceed.

"We left the village behind and entered onto a strip of road. Soon all signs of human life had disappeared. The sky seemed unusually dark, and the horses slowed down in fear.

"I could see nothing. I wondered if perhaps my illness were blinding me. It was pitch black, as if we had

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landed inside a tunnel. I had no idea where we were, and I did not know where to go.

"Just then we saw a glimmer behind some trees. As we grew closer, the light grew larger. And larger. A whole house was bathed in light.

"I saw a woman waiting by the window."

"Devorah."

"Yes. As soon as the carriage pulled up, the driver asked her who lived here. Once she told him, and he told me, I knew that I had arrived safely at last . . . that I was home."



The candles began to flicker, and the room retreated into shadows.

Yehoshua's face was a healthy flush, and his body was relaxed, finally free of pain.

"It feels good to be here," he finished. "I realize now how I missed you terribly, and how no business can ever take the place of a Jewish home. I have sinned against you greatly, and again ask your forgiveness."

"So you'll stay?" Sarah asked.

"With you, yes, of course, but not here," answered the husband. "My home is in Danzig now. *Our* home. I'm taking you with me. And I'll never again leave you."

She looked outside the window. A sliver of sun had erupted behind a hill. Soon there would be no need for any more candles.

"There is one thing we must first take time out to do," she declared.

"What is that?"

"Go to a town not too far away."

"What for?"

"To the Shpuler Zeide. We owe him a visit, don't you think?"

She smiled. JR

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