

"Hello, there."  
The stranger glanced down. The young man glanced up from his Gemara, upset at the distraction.

"Hello," he responded.

The young man, uncomfortable among strangers, waited, unsure whether to bend back down or speak further. He looked around. Throughout the crowded *bets midrash* his companions swayed and chanted, the singing of Torah emerging from their lips.

The stranger broke into a grin. "I

where, but decided it was none of his business. Why should he be interested, anyway? To his surprise, however, he really wanted to know.

"Have you been traveling long?"

"Oh..." The stranger leaned back and sucked in his breath. "Long enough, I suppose."

"Are you a peddler?" the student asked.

"Not quite," the stranger answered. "But you could say I deal in business." He leaned forward. "I never could resist hearing a Torah scholar study."

With a "May I?" he pushed the text closer. "I see you're learning *Bava Metzja*. It's one of my favorite *mesechtos*. May I ask which commentary you are studying?"

The youth shrugged. "Tosafos."  
"What about it?"

"What about it? Well..." The student swallowed. "I was analyzing their viewpoint..."

"And what is their viewpoint?"

The student began weakly, but as he spoke he gained steadiness. The stranger prodded him along with questions and more questions, until

# PASSING THROUGH



BY CHAYAH SARAH CANTOR

hope I'm not intruding," he said cheerily. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Not at all," the student replied, although actually he did. He was not accustomed to random conversation.

Scraping a chair, the man threw down his pack. His dusty coat bore signs of extensive travel. Nevertheless, his salt-and-pepper hair was combed, a *kippah* glistened on his head, and though his eyes were dark and piercing, they exuded warmth.

"Fact is," the man continued, "that I was passing through. I stayed here for Shabbos, you see. And I'll be on my way soon."

The student was tempted to ask

"Me? A Torah scholar?" The student pointed to himself and laughed. "You are sadly mistaken, sir."

"And I see you are modest, too. That's a good trait in a *talmid chacham*."

The student blushed. "I'm just being honest." He giggled nervously and faced the rows of desks. "See him? That lad there? I think he's the one you should talk to."

The stranger shook his head. "No. The minute I walked in and saw you learning, I could tell you were something special." He added keenly, "And people have told me that I have a knack for sizing them up."

the student realized that this person was not at all ordinary. Eventually the stranger took over, integrating the thoughts of other *Rishonim*.

Afterwards he pushed the sacred book back. "Thank you very much."

"I must say, sir, that I am most impressed," the student said. "You are certainly a scholar."

The stranger smiled. "If I were, I wouldn't have to wander from town to town searching out *talmidei chachamim*." He rose, stretching. "Well, my friend, it was certainly a pleasure to meet you. What is your name?"

"Velvel," answered the student.

"And how long have you been in the kollel?"

"Six months, sir," Velvel replied. "Right after I married, I came here to live. My father-in-law supports me."

"He must be a fine man to have picked such a son-in-law." The stranger picked up his pack and shook the student's hand vigorously. "Again, it was a pleasure to meet you, Velvel. I can tell that you'll go far in Torah study."

Velvel started to blurt "And what is your name, sir?" but it was too late. The figure bobbed past the rows of eager students and through the door. For five minutes Velvel stood there, watching him fade away behind the window.

"Velvel!"

In a daze he spun around. A friend stood there, curious.

"Welcome to earth, Velvel," he said, laughing. "Whatever were you looking at?"

Velvel shook his head in bewilderment. "You'll never guess what just happened to me."

"Must be something extraordinary, from the looks of you."

"A stranger sat down to learn with me. He was brilliant."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know," Velvel replied. "He said he was just passing through."

With that he sat down and continued to learn, but not before casting another futile glance out the window.



ello, again."

Velvel looked up. He was slightly heavier by this time, in a pleasing, mature way; his eyes widened slightly at the inter-

ruption.

"How have you been?" the stranger continued.

Velvel nodded, to convey that he was well. Then he motioned the stranger to sit.

The stranger still wore the dusty coat, as if it were a lifetime friend. His expression also remained the same — kind, placid. His hair was a bit grayer.

"Have you been keeping busy this past year?" he asked.

The student smiled. "My wife had a baby."

*Velvel was tempted to say no. Certainly he would be telling the truth. Besides, there was no reason at all why he should give that much money to a stranger.*

"Mazel tov!"

"Thank you."

"And your studies?" the other asked carefully. "How are they proceeding?"

"Baruch Hashem, they are going well," Velvel answered. "I teach some of the bar mitzvah boys, in addition to my own projects."

"Tosafos, I imagine?"

"Among other things."

"Let me see what kind of a teacher you are."

The stranger pulled the Talmud volume closer. "Bava Kama," he read. "So tell me," he said, pointing, "what is Rashi's comment here?"

As if Velvel had been expecting this visit, he broke into a smooth

interpretation. The two began to argue, and Velvel felt his mind reach the bursting point.

An hour later the stranger leaned back. "Well, that was refreshing," he joked.

Then he withdrew a pocket watch. "I wonder if you would display the same kind of brilliance in the world of business . . ."

Velvel frowned. "Sir, that's quite a different world from the kollel."

"The same sharpness of mind is necessary, isn't it?" the stranger said rhetorically. He leaned forward secretly. "I'll test you. Perhaps you might lend me some money."

"How much?"

"Four hundred guilden."

Velvel stiffened. He was not used to dealing with that large a sum of money.

"That's quite a lot," he said uneasily.

"Do you think you could raise it?"

Velvel was tempted to say no. Certainly he would be telling the truth. Besides, there was no reason at all why he should give that much money to a complete stranger, even if the stranger was brilliant. This much Velvel knew about business.

Nevertheless, he did know something else: this stranger was not what he appeared to be. And hadn't he said that he dealt in business? Someone this brilliant in Talmud just might be so elsewhere as well. And assuming, too, he was ethical, he would be a good credit risk.

Velvel cleared his throat. "It might take a little while. I don't think I can ask my father-in-law." Business had soured recently, and his father-in-law could no longer afford to sup-

port him on a full-time basis. Neither could his own father. Velvel hated the thought of draining either of them.

But he glanced again at the gentle face, and the warm but fiery eyes. For all he knew, this man might need the money for charity. For all Velvel knew, this man might be saving a life.

"I think I can get it for you by next week," he concluded.

"Splendid." The stranger rose. "By then I shall be ready to leave. I'll meet you here before I do. And I promise you, I shall repay you next year."

"Next year?" Velvel exclaimed.

"That's how long I'll need the money," the stranger explained. He picked up his pack and extended his hand. "It certainly is a pleasure to see you again, Velvel. You're looking good. And your learning is superb."

"Thank you," Velvel whispered, cheeks and forehead flushed.

As the stranger turned to leave, Velvel called out, "One moment!"

"Yes?"

Velvel lowered his voice. "I would like to know just one thing. What is your name?"

The stranger blinked. "Leib," he answered. "Leib Sarahs."



**R**eb Leib Sarahs? Who on earth is that?"

Velvel's wife cradled their infant son while listening to her husband.

"I tell you, Esther, this man is something most unusual," Velvel declared, raising his hands for emphasis. "I have never met anyone like him in my life. And believe me, I know what I'm saying."

He clasped his hands. "He is ask-

ing for four hundred guilden, Esther, for a certain investment. I don't think he's the type to squander it. Chances are it will go for something important." He added quickly, "Besides, even if the deal falls through, he said he'd pay me back after a year."

"And you believe him?"

"If you met him, I am sure that so would you."

Esther pensively held the baby closer. Four hundred guilden was something normally out of their reach. Even were they to raise it, she would spend it on her baby or her parents first, before throwing it away on a stranger.

Slowly she shook her head. "Did

it ever occur to you, Velvel, that he might have singled you out because you looked gullible?"

Velvel sagged. "So you don't believe him, Esther."

"I don't know, Velvel. He just doesn't sound real."

"His learning is quite genuine, I assure you."

At last she sighed. "All right. I'll give the both of you the benefit of the doubt." She mumbled, "I suppose I could sell my jewelry."

"And I'll ask your father—"

"No!" she shouted. "We must not get him involved." She glanced at the wall. "You could pawn those goblets there."



Velvel nodded, to convey that he was well.

Then she added, "But I guarantee you this, Velvel: if he isn't back by next year, you'll never hear the end of it."

Well?" she demanded, hovering over his desk. This had become a weekly ritual since Velvel had scraped together the funds six months earlier. He did not dare confess to Esther or to himself that he just might have written the money off.

"I haven't heard from him yet, Esther," he stammered.

"Why not?" she pressed.

"I just haven't, that's all," he said. "I suppose he is busy."

"Busy, my foot," she muttered. "Busy looking for other fools."

"Now, Esther—"

"Did he at least send you some kind of financial statement?"

"Well, no . . ."

"And why not?"

At her hard gaze, Velvel averted his face. But she refused to leave. Finally he made the admission he had hoped to avoid making. "Esther, I don't know anything about the investment.

It was actually a loan; he didn't say he would invest the money. That was my supposition. But he did say we would be repaid in a year."

"A year," Esther huffed. "I guarantee you the Mashiach will come first." Then she marched away.

She did not say a word about the incident later, deciding instead to keep her peace. Only when she tended to the baby, loudly hinting how it needed new clothing or food,

was Velvel reminded of what he had thrown away. No, it was more than four hundred guilden; it was his innocence. He had stupidly been taken in; he certainly would never be a successful businessman.

He continued to reflect on his folly while trudging to the kollel. Watching the men engage in heated debates no longer fired him up; it only reminded him how little he had

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really learned about the world. A boob he was — a scholar, yes, but still a boob.

Eventually the wounds did heal. As the months passed and Velvel busied himself in his routine, the sting of the financial loss began to fade. When a year's time had passed since the loan had been made, his wife was expecting again; she busied herself in the double joy of seeing their son walk and talk and prepar-

ing for the new baby. Thank G-d, she once commented, that there were more important things in life than money.

Her husband, hearing her words, was comforted. Yes, thank G-d. Not only had she forgiven him, but he had forgiven himself. Life is temporary, anyway, he reminded himself; don't we all go through it, making a few mistakes? Only when she asked offhandedly if he had at all seen his "business" partner, and when Velvel brushed her off with a "No!" did he have to force himself not to worry about the future.

ello."

When Velvel saw the familiar figure, he nearly jumped.

The hair was a shade grayer, the coat a layer dustier, and the pack bulging, as usual. But the eyes flashed in merriness, laced with triumph.

"I'm glad to see you're still here," said Reb Leib Sarahs, throwing down his pack and pulling up a chair.

Warily Velvel exchanged greetings. Exactly one year to the day had gone by since they last parted, Reb Leib with his learning partner; Velvel with his money. Reb Leib had apparently fulfilled one half of his promise — that he'd return. Velvel inched forward hopefully, awaiting the other half.

Of the money, however, Reb Leib Sarahs said nothing. He merely pulled the volume of Talmud before him. Without even waiting for an introduction, Velvel began to speak.

The stranger soon joined in. By now Velvel had come to expect the remarkable train of thought, though he was too bothered by the issue of the loan to be impressed. Carefully he followed along and answered back, desperately refraining from changing the subject.

At last they finished. Reb Leib Sarahs smiled and shut the Talmud. "How have you been, Velvel?" he asked.

"Fine," Velvel answered tensely. His eyes tried to convey the message that his tongue would not.

"Still teaching part-time?"

"I must." He explained how he needed the extra income, after his father-in-law's store had been foreclosed. "I am also studying to be a rabbi."

"Good. I am sure you will put your mind to good use." With that the man rose and gathered his pack. He shook Velvel's hand, though it had not been offered, turned around, and disappeared through the crowd.

Velvel shot up, nearly overturning his desk, and he raised his hand to call out. But the words remained trapped inside his throat; somehow he couldn't bring them out.

Perhaps it was just as well; obviously the deal had fallen through. Judging by the man's tattered condition, Velvel could imagine what had happened, or not happened, over the year. To confront him with the loan would be to squeeze blood from a turnip.

He put away the Talmud, threw on his hat, and went home. To his

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surprise, he found his wife studying the calendar.

"Today is the twenty-third of Sivan," she announced. "Where is he?"

Velvel froze. "Where is who?"

"Your friend, the borrower." She came closer. "The year is up, Velvel. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

"Well, actually . . ."

"Velvel," she spluttered, "did he

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come back?"

Velvel sighed. "Actually, yes."

"So you did see him," she said, brightening.

"He came to the *beis midrash* today."

"And he *did* bring the money?"

"No."

She was about to raise her voice when he raised his hand, commanding silence. "Esther, I can't do it; I just can't ask him. If he is as righteous as he appears, he will bring the

money. If not, then . . ." He sighed as he removed his hat. "G-d will either repay us for helping a poor man, or punish him for being a thief."

He sank into a chair and added, as an afterthought, "He did come back, though — right on time, too. Think of that, Esther. That must show something."

ello."

He stood there the next day, pack on his back. Reb Leib Sarahs threw it down and pulled up a chair.

Once again Reb Leib Sarahs' brilliant thinking was evident. Velvel gritted his teeth, wondering how a man so erudite in Jewish law could fail to apply that same law to his own behavior.

To Velvel's surprise, Reb Leib Sarahs rose after an hour and withdrew a pouch from his pocket. "Here is your money," he said, smiling.

In amazement Velvel took the pouch and counted the pieces.

"Four hundred guilden, I believe," said the stranger, reading the other's thoughts.

"I have never broken a promise."

In embarrassment Velvel dropped the pouch on the floor, as if it were something dirty. "Forgive me," he murmured. "But it had remained on my mind."

"Yes, I see," said the man. "Four hundred guilden is not a trifling matter, especially for someone in your situation."

Velvel cringed. "I hope that as a

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# PASSING THROUGH

(Continued from page 7)

rabbi I can at least earn some kind of living."

"Learning is its own reward," replied the stranger. "You might certainly make a fine rabbi, though, for other reasons. Your piety, your compassion. Do you realize you might have never seen me again? Yet you willingly lent me a large sum of money."

"For some reason I felt you could be trusted," said Velvel. "Something about you, I suppose . . ."

"It takes a good businessman to possess such judgment," declared Reb Leib Sarahs. "I think you might do well to turn to the business world in earnest. Take this money, but don't store it away; instead, invest it. In anything you invest you will prosper."

He slowly backed away. "But you won't need to spend a great deal of time on your business ventures. An hour a week is sufficient; the rest of your week must be spent on your studies." With that he was gone.



**U** amazing," Velvel declared after watching the stranger's prediction quickly come true. Velvel had purchased several

bushels of wheat, working an hour a week. Within a fortnight their value grew, earning him a hefty profit. The same pattern continued every week, for about an hour. Velvel displayed and honed his instinct for buying and selling.

Soon Velvel's olderson had plenty of food to eat and plenty of clothes to share with his little brother. Velvel's wife got back her goblets and Velvel's father-in-law his mortgage. After Velvel received his *semitchah*, he continued his studies at the *kollel*. While he lectured and taught, he provided room and board for a number of

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scholars.

Another pattern continued: every year, without fail, he received a visit from the incredible Reb Leib Sarahs. Other times during the year Reb Leib relayed a message for financial assistance on behalf of somebody. Velvel eagerly gave; in spite of his wealth,

he never forgot what it was like to be poor.

His greatest love, however, came from helping scholars like himself; and a number had approached him, wanting funds in order to go to the Holy Land. Listening to these saintly men, Velvel felt his heart swell with yearning, and he wondered if he would ever merit joining them there.



**U**ello, there."

For the first time, Velvel had not waited to be greeted, but eagerly approached Reb Leib Sarahs and pulled him inside his study.

In bewilderment Reb Leib Sarahs put down his pack. "What is the reason for such a warm welcome?"

"Reb Leib Sarahs," the other began, "I want to ask your advice."

"Advice?" The older man chuckled. "What on earth for? You're the businessman, not I. You shouldn't need to ask me what to do."

"This isn't business, Reb Leib Sarahs," Velvel answered. "And even if it were, I do believe that every businessman needs a consultant."

Reb Leib Sarahs sat down. "So what do you wish to ask me?"

"Reb Leib Sarahs, I want very much to go to Eretz Yisrael." Velvel's eyes grew misty. "I want so badly to dwell among the Holy Land's scholars and drink in their words. But I don't know if I am worthy."

"And you want my opinion?"

"Yes."

"My son," Reb Leib intoned sol-

emply, "that kind of answer I can't give you. Not everyone can go to Eretz Yisrael. Even the Ba'al Shem Tov never made it there, though he tried."

"Apparently, then, he was meant to stay here," Velvel replied. "But how can I know where my place is?"

"For an answer you must travel to the town of Berdichev," Reb Leib Sarahs answered. "Ask for the whereabouts of a tailor called Yosef ben Mordechai."

"Yosef ben Mordechai?"

The other nodded. "Buy yourself some fabric, bring it to him, and ask him to sew you a suit. Then ask him your question."

Velvel nodded while pondering the strange reply. It seemed even more strange that a tailor might have to have fabric brought to him instead of supplying his own. Nevertheless, Velvel knew enough not to question this holy man. Until now, Reb Leib Sarahs had never let him down. Velvel expected the same from this Yosef ben Mordechai.



**T**he town of Berdichev lay a good day's journey from Velvel's city. When he arrived that late summer afternoon, the market stalls were closing and the merchants were sweeping up the debris.

When Velvel alighted from the carriage, he approached a fishwife, who was packing her wares in ice.

"Pardon me," he spoke up.

"Yes?"

"I am looking for a tailor named Yosef ben Mordechai. "Do you know

where he lives?"

"Yosef ben Mordechai?" The woman stared quizzically. "Never heard of him."

She turned to her flounder and left Velvel standing there, equally puzzled. He then went to some of the other market people.

Each time he received the same answer. No one seemed to have heard of the tailor. After roaming some of the streets and inquiring of passersby, Velvel began to wonder if he had come to the right town. Perhaps Reb Leib had erred in sending him to Berdichev.

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Nevertheless, as evening advanced, Velvel knew it was in Berdichev that he would have to spend the night. He received directions to a fine inn and arranged for a room.

The innkeeper presented him with the finest accommodations, over-

looking the town's outskirts near a dirt road. While gazing out the window, Velvel asked, "Do you happen to know where a tailor named Yosef ben Mordechai lives?"

"Yosef ben Mordechai?" The innkeeper apologetically shook his head. He then directed Velvel to the nearest shul.

After *ma'ariv*, Velvel again inquired as to the whereabouts of the mystery man. To a man the congregants responded in the negative.

Except for one man. "Sir, I do know a man named Yosef ben Mordechai."

"You *do*?" asked Velvel eagerly.

"He's not a tailor, though."

"Oh, he's not," said Velvel, crestfallen.

"He's really like a patchman — you know, a Jack-of-all trades," the other continued. "He mends old clothing."

"Where does he live?"

The congregant scratched his head. "A bit far, I should say — there's a dirt road, you see, at the edge of town, and there's a shack there. That's where he lives. He keeps to himself."

"A dirt road," repeated Velvel, remembering the scene from his window.

He stayed to learn with the town rabbi and have dinner with the rabbi and his wife, and then he hurried back to the inn.

From his window he scanned the road, watching it ascend, then slope over the ripening wheat fields. Nestled among a clump of trees was something small and square. Its outline blended into the night; a nar-

row, pipe-like chimney juttied, appearing about to pierce the moon.

The next morning, after *shacharis* and breakfast, Velvel returned to the inn, scooped up his fabric, and followed the side streets. As the buildings grew smaller and more sparse, he turned and caught an angular view of his window at the inn, and knew he was headed in the right direction.

He shared the dirt road with a farmer steering a herd of cows. A pair of carriage marks, embedded in the soil beginning from the edge of town, followed him all the way up the hill. Both he and they stopped at a shack.

A handsome carriage was parked alongside of it, making Velvel regret that he had not come in his own. Certainly he would have made a better impression. Two uniformed servants were posted at the entrance, faces frozen in stern guard.

Furtively Velvel approached one of them. "May I come in?" he asked.

The servant was firm but polite. "Rabbi Mordechai, son of the great saint and leader Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl, is inside. He must not be disturbed."

"Rabbi Mordechai," said Velvel. He had never heard the name. But Rabbi Nachum's, yes.

Reverentially he moved away and sat down nearby on a group of stones. He whiled away the time reciting Psalms and Mishnayos, which he hoped would prepare him for this royal visit.

Several hours later Velvel was fanning himself in irritation, and he wondered how the servants could

remain on their feet for such an extended period of time. He advanced, wanting to ask them how much longer it would take.

Suddenly the servants moved aside and the door flew open. A young man, dressed in silk, stepped into the sunlight. The sheen of his clothes nearly blinded Velvel, who nevertheless managed to get a glimpse of his face.

The man was quite handsome, with brownish hair over a glowing face. Something about him, some-

*He looked around, surprised to find little that indicated a tailor's shop. There were no spools of material, no lace or buttons, no tools or workmen, not even a mirror. There was, in fact, little furniture to speak of.*

thing even beyond the attire, conveyed a regal bearing, and Velvel, himself finely dressed, felt dwarfed in comparison.

Rabbi Mordechai walked down the roadway. The servants hurried to the carriage, where one of them opened the door and respectfully waited. Once Rabbi Mordechai had stepped inside, the carriage took off,

slowly rolling down the dirt road.

Velvel continued to watch in amazement until the carriage had disappeared. Then he straightened his clothing and, seizing his fabric, turned around and strode in.

When he entered, he nearly tripped over a mound of clutter lying in the center of the dirt floor. A damp, musty smell assaulted his nostrils; it seemed to emanate from the cobwebbed ceiling all the way through the mildewed walls. The room was dark, in spite of the broad daylight; it was weakly lit by a pair of oil lamps.

A man in late middle age was hunched over a table, cutting strips of dirty rags and mumbling to himself. He was short, with tufts of whitening hair springing from his head, and a beard flowing down his chest, like unwoven flax. The man squinted, while his spectacles nearly slid off his beak of a nose. Behind the spectacles, however, his black eyes glittered.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Pardon me. Are you Yosef ben Mordechai?"

"Yes!"

"I brought some fabric for a suit," stammered Velvel. "I would like to have you make

one."

"Well, bring it over, then!"

"Yes, certainly," replied Velvel.

On the way forward, he stumbled over broken crates and clocks strewn over the floor like a child's toys.

The man seized the fabric and held it up high. "Hmmm," he said. "Probably would make a good overcoat."



Velvel was tempted to argue that he wanted a suit, but he refrained. He looked around, surprised to find little that indicated a tailor's shop. There were no spools of material, no lace or buttons, no tools or workmen, not even a mirror. There was, in fact, little furniture to speak of. Instead, more junk lined the peeling walls.

"Come over here," the "tailor" grunted. "I have to measure you."

He held out a tape, which he pressed against a bewildered Velvel. Suddenly Velvel remembered the rest of the instructions.

"I am interested in going to Eretz Yisrael," he blurted. "I want to learn there. I was sent here by Reb Leib Sarahs to ask you whether or not I should go."

The man said not a word. In fact, he seemed not to have heard Velvel. Instead, he continued pressing the tape against Velvel and rattling off certain numbers.

At last he rolled up the tape. "Come back exactly one week from today and I'll have the coat ready."

Velvel stood there in bewilderment.

"Well?" the man demanded.

"Oh, nothing," Velvel answered. He cleared his throat. "I shall be back next week, then."

Stiffly he turned around and exited.

He spent the week touring the countryside, conferring with

the town's learned Jews, and transacting business at the market place. Wherever he went, he hoped to catch sight of Yosef ben Mordchai. But the oddball hermit remained at the shack, creating an overcoat Velvel didn't even need.

At the appointed time, Velvel summoned a carriage and set off for the dirt road. He gave instructions to the driver to wait, while he knocked on the door and entered the shack.

Yosef ben Mordechai raised a coat full of pins. Back turned to Velvel, he mumbled and waddled back and forth, from one peeling wall to the next, stopping to pluck out loose threads. He seized a scissors and — snip! snip! — chopped off a piece of sleeve.

This went on for a good hour. Velvel stood there, uncertain what to tell the driver. He peeked outside and saw the latter dozing. Then he turned back to the tailor.

Yosef ben Mordechai continued mumbling as he removed pins from the hem. He raised it one last time before the oil lamp and at last turned to Velvel. "The coat is ready."

With a hairy hand he beckoned Velvel forward. Then he helped Velvel slide into the overcoat. It was definitely sleek and handsome, thought Velvel, a testament to the man's sartorial skill.

"A perfect fit," declared the man, giving the coat a good shake. He stopped and studied the figure, then placed a hand to his mouth and



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nodded. "Good enough to wear to Eretz Yisrael."

Velvel gasped. The tailor meanwhile wheeled around and went to a bookcase, where several broken mousetraps sat next to a well-worn *siddur*. Mumbling once again, he picked them up and examined them. He had completely forgotten about his customer.

Quickly Velvel pulled out some coins and placed them on the table. Then he hurried out.

Velvel did not leave right away. Although he had received an answer to one question, he felt that he needed answers to dozens more.

Daily he prowled the shack, attempting a word with the mysterious tailor. He knocked on the splintered door, then knocked again. Nothing. Repeatedly he went back, assuming that the tailor might have either been asleep or away. But each time there was no answer.

After three days Velvel knew he would have to return home. Besides, he wanted to prepare for a longer journey — to Eretz Yisrael. But he decided to go back to the shack once more, to at least say goodbye.

For probably the dozenth time the carriage ambled up the dirt road. When it reached the shack, however, Velvel gasped, then shuddered.

Run-down and neglected to begin with, the shack now looked as if it had been abandoned for a century. The foundation had sunk deep into the ground; the chimney tilted forward, ready to break off, and two of the walls had virtually caved in. Through a cesspool a pig scampered, oinking.

"Hey, there!"

The voice was Yiddish. A farmer strolled through the trees, guiding a herd of goats. One of them bleated, raised itself on its hind legs, and helped itself to a piece of roof.

Velvel hurried over. "Tell me, what happened to the man who lived here? The man named Yosef ben Mordechai?"

The farmer blinked. "Yosef ben Mordechai?"

"He lived here," Velvel insisted desperately. "He made me an overcoat."

The farmer stared doubtfully at the shack. "You're mistaken, sir. No one has lived here since the time of my grandfather."

"But he did! Another gentleman also came here to speak with him."

The farmer pondered. "Well, come to think of it, I did see someone walking away from town the other day. An odd-looking fellow — short, nervous."

"Yes, that's him!" Velvel cried.

"He didn't tell anyone where he was going, though," said the farmer. "Or when he'd be back."

Velvel sped back to town. He waited at the shul for *mincha*, hoping to meet the congregant who had first directed him to Yosef ben Mordechai. But that person was not there.

Velvel assumed that the tailor's time in Berdichev was over. For whatever reason, he had needed to be there. With the mission over, he no longer wished to see Velvel.

Velvel sighed and bade the driver move on. He himself no longer had reason to remain in Berdichev.

It was the week after Tisha B'Av when Velvel received an old visitor.

"Reb Leib Sarahs!" Quickly he

rose and ushered his guest into a half-empty room. On the floor lay packed boxes and suitcases.

In bewilderment and amusement Reb Leib Sarahs sat down. "How are you?" he asked.

"Reb Leib Sarahs, I spoke with Yosef ben Mordechai," began Velvel breathlessly.

"What did he say?"

"I don't know," cried Velvel. "It was so strange."

"What?"

"Everything — his mannerisms, his speech."

Velvel described his journey and its outcome. He mentioned the shack and its occupant, who had mysteriously faded out of sight once Velvel's coat was completed.

"He put it on me," Velvel concluded, "and said, 'A perfect fit. Good enough to wear to Eretz Yisrael.' Then that was that. He turned around and went on to something else."

"Well, it's obvious, then, isn't it?" replied Reb Leib Sarahs. "He is telling you to live in the Holy Land."

"Yes, I assumed as much." Velvel motioned to the boxes. "I hope to leave once certain transactions are completed."

Then he added, "But I don't understand, Reb Leib Sarahs. Why couldn't he have told me directly?"

"That is not the way of a *tzaddik nistar*," answered Reb Leib Sarahs.

"A *tzaddik nistar*, one of the thirty-six righteous men who support the world?" exclaimed Velvel. "Do you mean to say that man was a *tzaddik nistar*?"

He trailed off in contemplation. Nothing had really distinguished Yosef ben Mordechai from a peasant or street laborer. The little tailor was the kind of man, in fact, one quickly

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*He decided to go back to the shack once more, to at least say goodbye.*

forgot: the kind who preferred to be left alone, quietly doing his work.

"But of course," Velvel said knowingly. "Of course he wouldn't want to tell me. It would attract attention. It would be immodest, wouldn't it, to answer my question with great fanfare? He needs solitude."

"That is the nature of being hidden," explained Reb Leib Sarahs. "Think of that building, Velvel — that shack where you saw him. Did you take notice of the foundation beforehand, while the shack was standing?"

"No."

"And what happened after the foundation sank?"

"Why, the whole shack was on the verge of collapse."

"Velvel, the role of a *tzaddik nistar* is to uphold the world in an unseen matter, just as a foundation supports a house. If you look too closely, you'll see what he does."

"Come to think of it," said Velvel, "he did possess a certain quality. It was subtle, of course, but something about him . . ." He trailed off, groping to find the words. "I might not have noticed it first. But now that you mention it . . . his eyes. They conveyed a certain spirit."

"It was indirect, wasn't it? Just like his statement about the Holy Land. Only a person of extraordi-

nary refinement and sensitivity would detect Yosef's holiness. Why do you think he is telling you to go to Eretz Yisrael?" Reb Leib Sarahs beamed. "That's what he evidently saw in you — refinement and sensitivity!"

Velvel blushed. "Certainly I am not on that level."

"Of course you are. Didn't I notice it? Why do you think I came to you, of all students, years ago in the *bets midrash*?"

Velvel laughed. "Funny. At that time, I just wished to be left alone."

"Modesty is the first step to holiness."

After a moment, Velvel continued, "Reb Leib Sarahs, I do have one final question."

"Yes?"

"That young man . . . the gentlemen I mentioned to you earlier. The one who stopped by in the carriage."

"Rabbi Mordechai?"

"Yes. Why was he there?"

"It is customary that when a new rebbe assumes the mantle of leadership he must meet the approval of all thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim*."

"So they recognized the quality of greatness in each other."

The visitor nodded. "Mordechai's father, Nachum, was himself a great *tzaddik*, but his role was public, not private, and so it is with his son. That is why he appeared openly and magnificently, dressed in the finest garments. A leader of the Jews must conduct himself like King David."

"In other words, each *tzaddik* has a different mission."

"Exactly. For some, it involves open participation in this world. For others, it's a quiet preparation for the next. As far as this world is concerned, they are just passing through." JB

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Vol. 4, No. 7

March 1992



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cover art

THE JEWISH READER (ISSN1049-1538) is published monthly, except July and August, by HaChai Publishing, 156 Chester Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Second-class postage paid at Brooklyn, N.Y.

Subscriptions: 1 year 10 issues \$12.50, Foreign \$US15.50

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JEWISH READER, 156 Chester Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Reprinting of any part of this publication without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.

All requests, subscriptions should be addressed to:

The Jewish Reader, 156 Chester Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. (718)633-0100

All requests, manuscripts should be addressed to:

The Jewish Homemaker, 705 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. (718)692-3900



## TO OUR READERS

"*Mishenichnas Adar marbn bestmchah* — When Adar arrives, we increase our joy" reads the title of this issue's cover, which looks forward in appropriately lighthearted fashion to Purim.

"Torah Highlights" and "This Month" discuss various aspects of Purim. In addition, the conclusion of "Mendel" revolves around that holiday.

Rarely do we find a man called not by his father's name, but by his mother's. This is precisely the case with Rabbi Leib Sarahs, one of the early Chassidic rebbes.

In this month's biography, you will read how Reb Leib Sarahs' mother merited having her name memorialized.

One of the stories about Reb Leib Sarah's is told in "Passing Through."

"Unshaken As the Continent," "Our Story," and "Our Wonderful World" do not appear in the current issue, because of space limitations, but will return next month.

We wish all our readers a very happy Purim!

This Publication is made possible by a grant from the educational division of the



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## Golden Age Project

I really enjoy reading your magazines. I especially like the "Torah Highlights."

I am doing a project about the Golden Age in Spain. I was wondering if you have any pictures of things during that era. Do you have any pictures of Rabbi Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, Rabbi Yehuda

HaLevi, or the Rambam? If you do, I will be very happy if you please send them to me.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Ilana Cainer

Richmondhill, Ontario

We are unable to provide pictures or other such materials, and recommend that you ask your librarian for assistance. Good luck!

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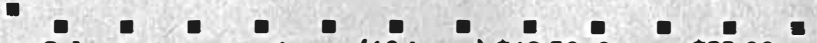
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