

Over the years Reb Nechemiah had acquired quite a reputation. No pauper was ever chased out, no widow or orphan turned away, no *shaliach* denied funds for a mikvah or *yeshiva*. The doors were open, the coffers full, and Nechemiah's household dispensed alms with gusto.

"Saint" or "angel" were words often used to describe Reb

to shame. Wasn't Nechemiah an excellent provider? Her house, with its servants, livery, and carriages, was the envy of her neighbors. The neighbors themselves came for aid, or their husbands worked for hers. Not only were he and she materially well off, but they were blessed with scholarly sons and sons-in-law. True, Hashem had been kind. Why not repay Him? Still . . . sometimes Tirtzah

Nechemiah's support.

Instead Nechemiah expected another sort of influx — travelers, salesmen, merchants, and itinerant rabbis — as well as the usual people who were stranded.

But this night, the first of Pesach, was upsettingly different. A freak blizzard had driven all likely comers away.

So distressed was Nechemiah that

The Beggar and the Thief

By DEVORAH KIRSCH

Nechemiah. Charity meant more to him than an honorable deed or the usual obligation of a rich man. It seemed an obsession. It was if he had a need to provide for everyone's welfare, in whatever way possible.

Ever since his lumber business had flourished, nearly thirty years ago, Nechemiah had begun giving money away lavishly. Enormous sums were either stuffed into *pushkas* or scrawled onto bank drafts.

When his wife objected, saying that he was being far more generous than necessary, Nechemiah would quickly soothe her.

"I am not throwing money away," he would say reassuringly. "I am repaying Hashem for His kindness. Isn't that why we pray every day: *'Hodu lashem ki tov* — Praise Hashem for He is good? On Him we depend, and not our own efforts."

He paused, then continued. "Besides, charity saves from death. Believe me, I know how precious is Jewish life."

Tirtzah did not quite understand these last words, nor his general reaction. But it was enough to put her

wondered if her usually pragmatic husband was a trifle superstitious. Maybe all this giving away was some kind of ritual — a charm, perhaps, to ward off the evil eye. Always, whenever she brought the subject up, Nechemiah would mumble that he was saving a life.

This time of year, when winter segued into spring, was the busiest for Nechemiah. Not only was it the building season, for usually the snows had melted, but the days also ushered in Adar and Nissan. Poor people from miles around flocked to Nechemiah's door, seeking assistance.

And of course Nechemiah was there. No Purim meal could boast of as many guests; no Seder plate was shared amid so many strangers as Reb Nechemiah's.

Lately, however, he had become a victim of his own success. Because he had supplied so many of his fellow townspeople with either money or work, they did not have to rely on him this year for Pesach. The head of each household reclined on a pillow, surrounded by his family and his own guests. No one needed Reb

he couldn't admire the velvet matzoh cover gleaming under the dripping candles; the beaker of crimson wine, imported from Hungary; the shank, egg, *charoses*, and bitter herbs spread across the plate like the hands of a clock.

He could not appreciate how Tirtzah had outdone herself this year — even baking a new recipe which had kept her husband drooling for days. The children, too — the sons, daughters, sons- and daughters-in-law, and grandchildren — graced the table, all in garments worthy of royalty, all unnoticed.

In despair Nechemiah sat and gazed through the windows at the whiteness thick as gruel. The shriek of the winds occasionally sent the walls a-rattle, and some of the youngsters clutched their mothers, whimpering. It was an awesome night, one to enhance the drama of the Ten Plagues.

Nevertheless, the empty chairs seemed more empty, and Nechemiah waited hopefully for some visitor to show up. But finally an impatient glare from his wife indicated that he had no choice. They had to begin.



“Sorry to get impatient,” he mumbled. “But I nearly froze to death out there.”

The men all donned their *kittels* — the robe traditionally worn during the Seder. “*Kadesh, u’rchatz*—” the group sang. Then Nechemiah raised his wine goblet.

And at the knock on the door he nearly dropped it.

“I wonder who’d be out on a night like this?” ventured Tirtzah.

“He’s a bit early for Elijah’s cup,” Yaakov, her eldest son, joked.

The knock turned into pounding.

“Perhaps it’s a guest!” exclaimed Nechemiah. He hurried to the door, hoping his prayers had been answered.

The “guest” scraped the threshold in

soaked felt boots and heaved puffs of breath onto fingers that poked out of tattered mitts.

“Sorry to get impatient,” he mumbled. “But I nearly froze to death out there.”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

“You’re Nechemiah, right?”

The philanthropist nodded, scrutinizing the face in front of him. The stranger continued blowing on his stubby fingers and rubbed his arms up and down — arms embedded in a filth-encrusted coat. Icicles clung to his blue-gray beard — a beard matted with whatever was on the coat. From

under bushy brows glared a pair of bloodshot eyes. Sadness lingered within them.

Like a rabbit the stranger crinkled his reddened nose at the aroma of chicken wafting in from the kitchen, and a tongue spread across his chapped lips.

“Won’t you come inside?” Nechemiah offered.

“Do appreciate it,” the stranger declared. “I just about wore myself out. I trekked through Minsk and half of Poland in this weather, and I got a good mind to lay down right this very minute.”

Nechemiah pawed the Persian rug in terror. But to his relief the man waddled toward the table. He advanced to Tirtzah, hovering nervously near her son, and he gave his drenched fur cap a doff.

“Pleased to meet you, missus. Name’s Yehoshua. Shua for short. People told me all about your husband. I thought he could help out a fellow Jew who’s down on his luck. Especially on a night like this. Pesach ain’t the time to be alone.”

“Shouldn’t you change first?” asked Nechemiah. “You’re soaked.”

“Naw,” snapped the man with a shrug. “They kept me good and warm outside. I’ll just let ‘em dry off on me. My turn to keep ‘em warm.” He laughed at his joke, settled in the seat just vacated by Tirtzah, and sighed contentedly at the matzoh cover. “My first Pesach, you know, in quite a long while.” He sniffed, inwardly touched by some memory.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Nechemiah consoled. “Well, I hope this will be the first of many.”

He hurried to his seat, ignoring his wife’s expression. With fumbling hands he raised the beaker. “*Kiddush!*”

The stranger’s eyes widened. “Wine!” He seized his goblet and thrust it under Nechemiah’s nose.

"Gotta unclog my veins."

Hesitantly Nechemiah poured. "We are supposed to drink four full cups."

"That's quite all right," the other declared. "Me and liquor ain't shy." No sooner did the crimson liquid reach the rim than it entered straight into the gaping mouth. With the back of a hairy hand Shua wiped his lips. "Good stuff," he panted.

Then he yawned. "Hit me kind of hard. Guess I'm already dog-tired from the walk." He shut his eyes and tilted his head forward.

Nechemiah persevered. He waited for his sons to make *kiddush* and then tapped his guest.

Shua stirred. "Whatta you want?"

"It's time to read the Haggadah."

"The what?"

"Haggadah. The story of Passover. But first we have to eat a potato dipped in water and hide the *afikoman*."

"Hide the *what*?"

"It's all in here," Nechemiah explained, opening his booklet.

Shua glanced at the pages and grinned apologetically. "Oh, no thanks. It's in Hebrew. Can't read it. I may as well sleep. Wake me up when it's dinner." With that he shut his eyes again and nodded off.

Tirtzah's nostrils flared, but they were nothing compared to the buzzsaw in this man's mouth during the course of the Seder. As casually as possible Nechemiah reclined on a pillow, while reading the immortal story of the Jews' Exodus from Egypt. When his youngest granddaughter asked the Four Questions, the philanthropist beamed with pride, nearly forgetting about the noisemaking on his left.

The story virtually completed, Nechemiah raised the goblet. "*Kiddush!*"

Instantly the grizzled face sprang to life. "Wine!" He clapped his hands and seized his goblet. In a flash Shua quenched his thirst.

"We'll be eating dinner shortly,"

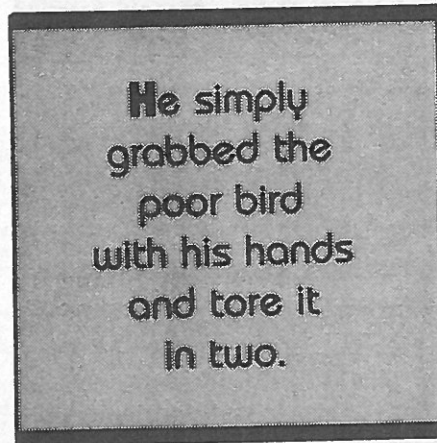
said Nechemiah.

"Dinner?" Like a child the stocky frame bounced up and down.

Tirtzah stiffened, then gripped the tablecloth. Nevertheless, she exited to the kitchen and returned with lettuce leaves and a bucket of water.

Awkwardly Shua let himself be guided through the washing of the hands. As soon as he bit into the matzoh sandwich he spat it out, showering Nechemiah with horse radish. Tirtzah bit into hers, while tears dribbled down her cheeks. The rest ate with an alarming lack of appetite.

The meal followed. Forks were apparently new to Shua, for he speared the fish as if he were at a river. He slurped the soup lustily; as for the



chicken, he simply grabbed the poor bird with his hands and tore it in two.

During this whole time Nechemiah served Shua with unusual attention. When Shua asked for more potatoes the merchant himself rose and returned with a steaming pot. And the beggar did not even have to ask for a second helping of dessert. The children and grandchildren nibbled weakly, and Tirtzah stabbed deep into the chicken's flesh with her blade.

After the *afikoman* and *Bircas HaMazon*, the third goblet was drunk. Shua reacted right on cue. Cheeks flushed, he sighed happily. Then he began to hiccup and dizzily clutched his head.

"Now I know I'm getting old," he

remarked. "Can't hold down my booze any more."

He rose and tried to walk. He passed by the youngest grandson, who peered at him. Woozily Shua patted the tousled locks. "Nice kid. You're lucky to have been born into a home like this. If only I . . ." Shua sighed. "No one cares for an old vagrant like me. Once people bowed and scraped when I walked by. Now . . ."

His eyes were half-mast. He slurred, "Thanks a lot, Nechemiah, for ev'rything. . . ." Shua slumped to the rug in a stupor.

Quietly Nechemiah removed his pillow and tucked it under the snoring head. From her chair Tirtzah bolted.

"Disgusting!" she snapped. "Our Seder ruined because of him!"

Her husband glanced at her, nonplussed, which irritated her even more. In embarrassment the others squirmed, while Tirtzah's second son motioned to the door, indicating that it wasn't nice to keep Elijah the Prophet waiting.

Tirtzah jeered, "You had to have him here, didn't you, Nechemiah? You didn't care a pin for our feelings — all because you wanted your *mitzvah!*"

"Do you suggest I should have left him outside, Tirtzah? In the snow?"

"There are other places. The servants' quarters, the stable — even the chicken coop."

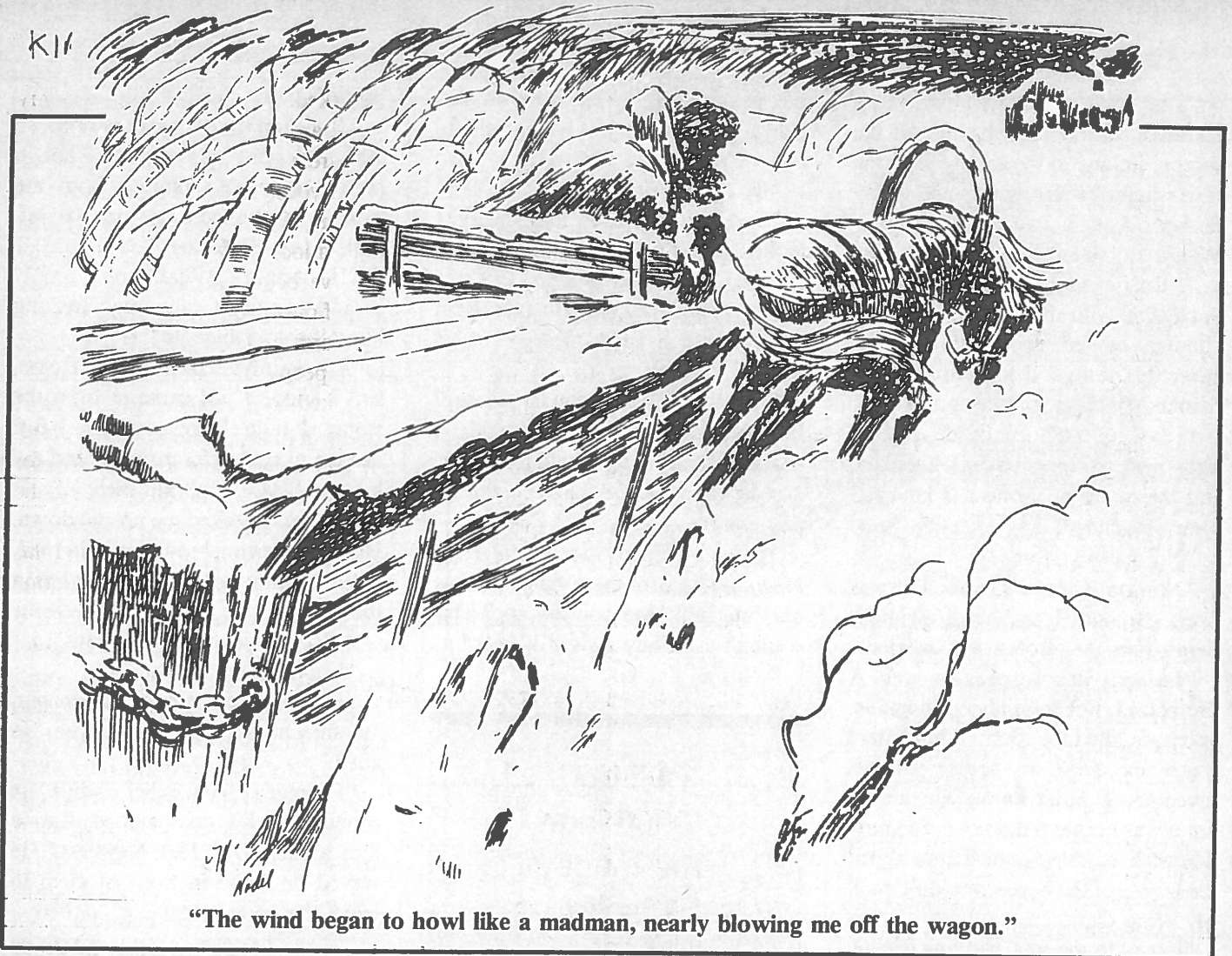
"On Passover?"

"Why not?"

"He came wanting to celebrate."

"Oh, rubbish! He didn't care at all about the holiday. He was just looking for a place to eat and sleep it off. But no . . . you had to let him in — filthy, reeking of whatever, and totally uncouth. Now look — he has completely passed out. As if this were a hotel."

Her voice rose to staccato fury. "Over the years I've watched you fritter your time and money away to these people. I never complained, Nechemiah, even when they took



"The wind began to howl like a madman, nearly blowing me off the wagon."

advantage. And now . . . we've come to this. You bring *him* in."

She pointed to her grandchildren, staring in wonder at the rug. "Why do *they* have to see this? Is *this* how you want them to remember Pesach?"

Nechemiah bristled. "I would like them to remember Pesach as a time for *all* Jews, Tirtzah. Young and old, rich and poor. I would rather they saw all of us sitting together, rejoicing over our freedom, and knowing that we left Egypt as one. I'd like them to see the joy of helping a fellow Jew."

He pointed to the sleeping beauty. "If what you're saying, then, is that this gentleman isn't worthy of help, then I am sorry, but you are dead wrong. I was once in a similar situation. Someone rescued me when others couldn't have cared less."

"Someone rescued you, *zeide*?" asked a grandson, wide-eyed.

"Many years ago," answered

Nechemiah. "Long before you were born, Tuvia. Or your father. I was young then — younger, I should say. And your *bubby* and I didn't live the way we do now.

"We were only married about a year. I had your *bubby* and your Aunt Gittel to feed. I found a job at a lumber mill — my first job, actually. Twice a week I had to drive a wagon all over the countryside, making deliveries.

"Believe me, Tuvia, it was never easy. I used to drive in all kinds of weather, and take all sorts of insults from everyone. I was slow, the wood wasn't the right size, it was too thin, and so forth. Also, many tried to get away without paying. Whenever that happened, my salary was garnisheed."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that whatever they owed my boss took out from my earnings. Which also meant that half the time I didn't eat.

"Anyway, it was a week before Pesach when I had to make my longest trip ever. You know where Cracow is, yes?"

The boy nodded. "My other grandmother lives there."

"Well, this was even farther."

"*That* far?"

"Right. It was smack dab in the mountains. To make matters worse, there was a blizzard — just like tonight. Of course I didn't expect it, so naturally I hadn't brought along any warm clothing.

"My poor horse trudged through piles of snow as high as you, and I could barely see beyond my arm. It was late; night was falling as fast as the frost. Hours had passed since I had last seen anyone, and I didn't know how much further I had to go to the next village. Even then, I didn't know how good my chances were of meeting a fellow Jew.

"The wind began to howl like a madman, nearly blowing me off the wagon. I clung to the seat, whispering to Hashem that He⁴ put an end to my misery. My merchandise was ruined. Wet wood wasn't good for anything.

"All at once I saw a lighted window. A cottage, with smoke rising from the chimney, waited beyond a birch grove. It seemed too good to be true, and I thanked Hashem for saving my life.

"I tied up the horse inside a stable right next to the cottage. I knocked. But there was no answer. I knocked again. Nothing."

"No one was home?"

"No one. I tested the door. It was open. Should I go inside without permission? My frozen feet decided.

"Inside it was warm as an oven. A fire blazed, fine food lay on the table, and beds filled the room. I didn't dare touch the food, of course; though ravenous, I didn't know whether or not it was kosher. I did not even know if Jews lived there or not. But I hoped the owner of the house wouldn't mind my being there.

"I went to the sofa, wanting to shut my eyes for a bit until the owner came. Then I'd explain what had happened and pay him for the lodgings, though I didn't have much money.

"I sat down, waiting. But the bed was so soft, and I was so tired, that I grew sleepier and sleepier. . . .

"I don't know what time it was, but in a haze I heard loud voices, and the door burst open.

"Well, look what we have here?" someone cackled.

"I rubbed my eyes, and to my shock saw about a half-dozen men glaring at me. Highwaymen, to be exact."

"Highwaymen?"

"Right. People who rob travelers. These men were the vilest looking creatures I'd ever seen — all hair like Shua, with a scowl that could frighten a guard dog. They had most likely returned from one of their 'jobs.'

"The ugliest of them approached

me and roared, 'Well, how do you like this? This bum just walks right in, like we're running a hotel.' "

"He called *you* a bum?"

"Yes. I can't blame him, really. I looked a fright — my clothing was streaked and soaked, and my hair was a mess. No civilized person in his right mind would have wanted me in his house.

"I pleaded, 'Won't you let me stay? I'm lost, and it's snowing outside. I promise you I'll leave after it stops. Just let me stay here for the night. I'll pay you.'

"I took out all my money, but it was much too little for these men. The ugly one laughed. 'Are you kidding? This couldn't even buy a swig of beer.'

"It's all I've got,' I said.

I'll do
anything.
The money
I make
I'll give
to charity.

"Why don't we just finish him off?" shouted another. 'He's seen too much. After the snow's over he'll report us.'

"I turned white. 'I won't!' I cried. 'I swear it!'

The others agreed with the man. 'Please,' I stammered, 'take my horse and wagon. I have timber inside. That should be worth something.'

"What? A bunch of wet boards?" spat Ugly. 'What are we going to do with *those*?'

"I thought I was finished. I whispered, 'Hashem please! Help me! Free me from these horrible men! I'll do anything. The money I make I'll give to charity. I'll do all I can to help my fellow Jews. Only save me,

please!'

"Just then the door swung open. In walked another highwayman. Though pretty bedraggled himself from the storm, he was handsomer than the rest, with a sad expression.

"He shouted, 'What's going on?'

"We caught this guy treating himself to our hideout.'

"I threw myself on the floor. 'Please, sir,' I cried, 'I just came in from the storm. I didn't take anything. I just needed to rest — for my sake, and my horse's. Please don't kill me!'

"The man looked me up and down. His hair, chestnut brown and trimmed, moved slightly as he chewed his lips in thought.

"You're Jewish, aren't you?"

"I nodded fearfully.

"He watched me a minute longer, and then his features softened a bit. 'So am I.'

"I sagged with relief, while he shouted to his companions, 'Leave him alone, boys. He's harmless.' He waved his knife in front of them to make the point.

"Then he said, 'You must be hungry.' He guided me to the table. Naturally I couldn't eat most of the food. I helped myself to some fruit.

"He, on the other hand, bit off a generous slice of ham, along with whatever else. It didn't occur to him that I might be offended. But who was I to complain? This man had just saved my life.

"When he asked me where I was from, I told him.

"And you?" I asked.

"Warsaw,' he answered, stuffing his mouth. 'My father died when I was small, so *that* put an end to my studying.'

"How long have you been involved in this?"

"Long enough,' he replied with a shrug. 'Long enough not to know anything else.'

"My boss could use someone like you,' I offered. 'Or I could find you

some other work.' I eyed him pityingly. 'This isn't the life for anyone, and certainly not for a Jew. Any Jew. A Jew has a special soul. He has to use it for a good purpose. It's never too late to go back. Why, this is no life at all . . . it's a spiritual death.'

" 'I don't need that pious talk,' he declared. He gave his hairy head a toss. 'Leave it for rabbis and old men. No one tells me what to do.'

" 'You'll be old yourself. If you live that long. Then what? What will you have? Nothing. But there is more than this world. There is the next world too. Why throw it away for this?' I swept the room with my hand.

" 'Because no one cares about me,' retorted the highwayman sourly. He bore a certain resignation. 'I'm no scholar. I ain't even from a good family. Whether or not I come back makes no difference. Not to you, not to the world — this one or next.'

" 'But you saved *my* life,' I ventured. 'That must mean something.'

" 'Oh, nonsense!' he snorted. 'I felt sorry for you, that's all.'

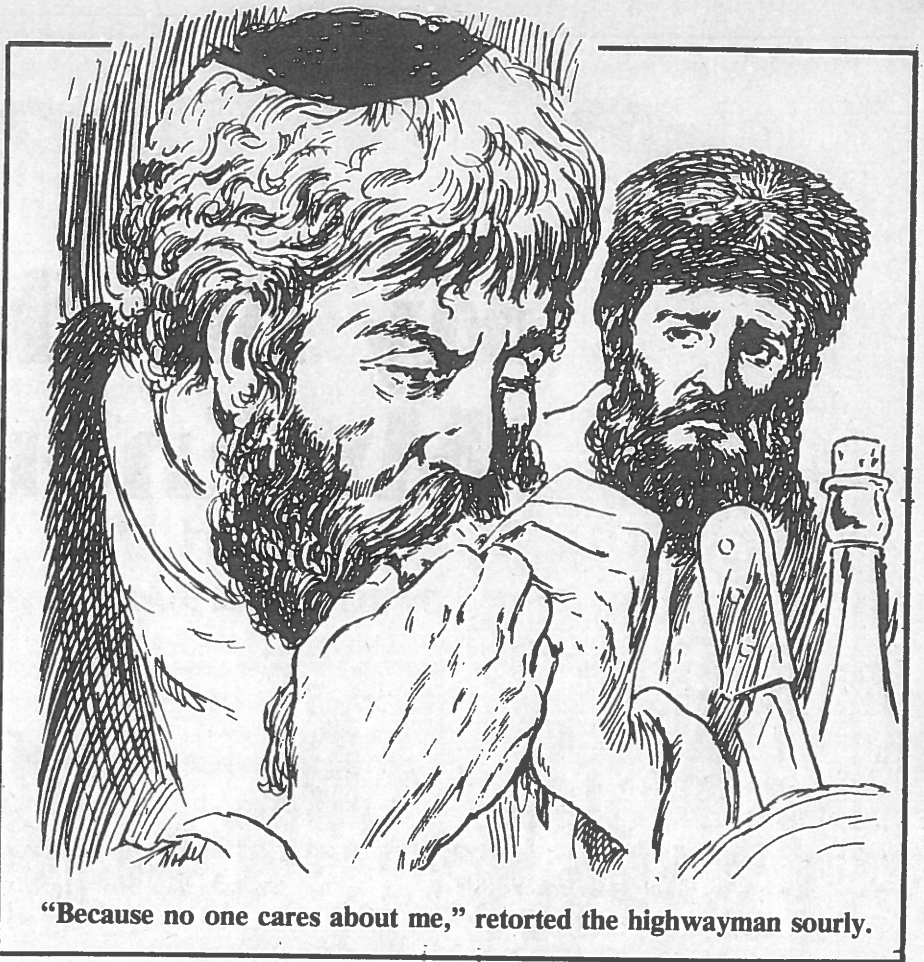
"I knew there was no point in arguing further. Besides, I was afraid he might change his mind. I finished my meal and went to the bed he had prepared. I slept very well, being exhausted.

"The next day he cared for me, in a gruff sort of manner. He even provided hay for my horse. The snow had stopped and the air was warming. Feeling revitalized, I knew I'd make it back home safely.

"He escorted me to the wagon, just like Avraham Avinu might have done had our forefather lived in Poland. He scanned the whitened hills, as if pondering what path to take.

" 'I beg you,' he said. 'Not a word to anyone about us. I saved your life; please, save mine!'

" 'It's the least I can do,' I answered. 'I won't endanger you.' We shook hands and parted."



"Because no one cares about me," retorted the highwayman sourly.

Tirtzah was silent, while Tuvia gaped in fascination.

"After that," Nechemiah continued, "I vowed never to ignore a Jew in need. If a lowly thief was capable of helping me in my direst hour, then how much more so could I help people in need. I think this oath gave me incentive to work harder. With G-d's help, of course, I became successful. I didn't have to drive any more wagons; now I hire people to drive them for me."

"You've always tried to find people work?" asked Nechemiah's son Shimon.

"Always. Providing a Jew with sustenance is the highest form of charity."

"I wonder what might have happened to your highwayman had someone like you been around who cared," said his son.

"I wonder what became of him afterwards," remarked Tirtzah.

"You're looking at him!" said Nechemiah.

He pointed to the hulking figure on the rug.

"Him?" his family declared in unison.

Nechemiah nodded. "The way he looked at me when he first walked in, I remembered. I wasn't sure at first — it was nearly thirty years ago. But the same sadness was there, the lingering pain of a soul that was trapped and needed a guiding hand. Instead it was left to fend for itself. Even back then I knew that someday we'd meet again."

He quickly poured the beaker. Yaakov went to open the door for Elijah the Prophet. Afterwards they recited Hallel.

"Praise Hashem, for He is good," chanted Nechemiah. Below him, on the beautiful Persian rug, his guest slept in peace, like a child who had found his way home.

ט"ב

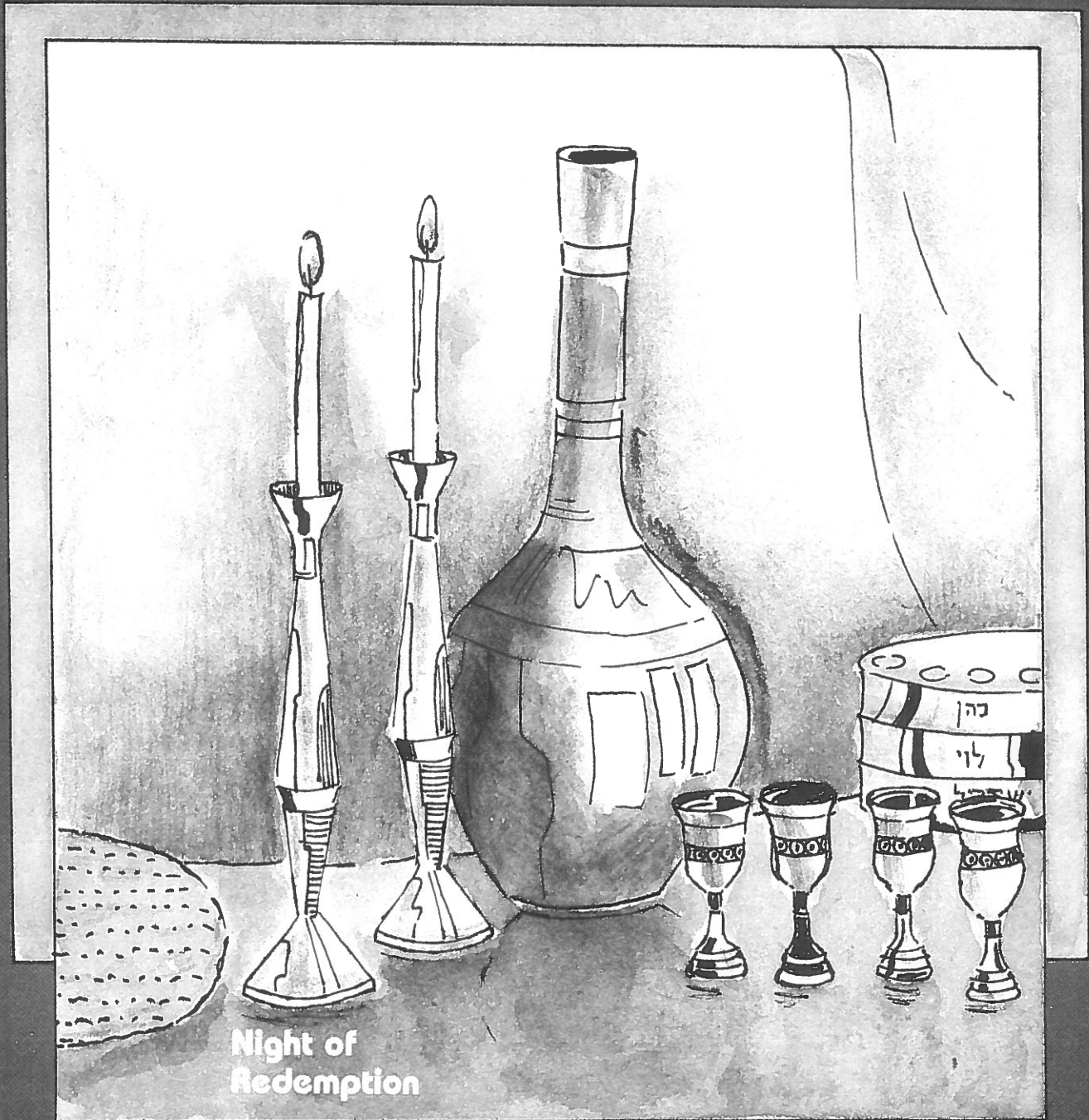
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The Jewish Reader

Nissan 5750

Vol. 2 No. 8

April 1990



TO OUR READERS

If a poll were taken, Pesach would probably win as the favorite holiday amongst Jews, and so it is quite natural that Pesach is the theme of the current issue.

First, in "The Beggar and the Thief," a wealthy man comes to terms with the Haggadah's instruction that all who are hungry are entitled to join the Passover Seder. Confronted by a guest who does not meet with the approval of his household, the man must reconcile the desires of his family with his own wish to aid the needy.

Torah Highlights focuses on various portions of the Haggadah.

In "If I'd Been There," two sisters try to get closer to the spirit of Pesach by jumping back into the past.

Our science section returns this issue, with the first part in a series on vitamins. Also back, by popular demand, is the Torah Quiz. "Our Story," however, does not appear this issue, but will return in the Iyar edition.

We are proud to print the entry of our fourth Writing Contest winner. In the next issue we will announce which of the four winning entrants will receive an additional \$50.

We wish all of our readers a very happy and kosher Pesach.

This publication
is made possible
by a grant from
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of the



Laboratories

MAIL

ROOM

Super Duper!

I *love* (triple underline) the stories that you put into your monthly issues, especially "My Brother, My Enemy." They really keep me busy when I have finished all the books in my house and don't have a chance to get to the library.

Now I can find that I have a *super* magazine to match my *super* teacher, who teaches us super things from our super magazine. Thanks again!

Tzivia Brummel
Brooklyn, NY

We're glad that you're not given to the use of superlatives.

□ □ □

I would like to congratulate you on the beautiful and hard work you put into your monthly magazine.

I read it every month with great joy, and wait with anticipation for another one to arrive. I get them from my older sister, who brings it home from her friends.

Chana Perel Katz
Brooklyn, NY

□ □ □

Ongoing Complaint

My children brought home a copy of your magazine. I looked it over and it seems good. They also enjoyed it.

They had one objection: Why are most of the stories part of a continuum? They really enjoy reading a story in total — not dragging it out for months.

Anyway, thanks for providing "kosher" reading material.

Esther Trainer

While some stories can be started and

finished in one issue, this is not always the case. The serializations that appear in our magazine involve broad themes and characterizations. These cannot be packaged into six pages.

□ □ □

Going Too Far

Your magazine is a source of excitement and inspiration for my children, who eagerly await each edition.

However, I believe more selective editing would have disqualified "Beyond the Limit" (Shevat). The story is excellent and the moral is to the point. But to portray this sort of tragedy to young, impressionable readers is not responsible journalism. I know that Feldheim refused to publish a book that included a murder, and I bow my head to them. My son, after reading the story, threw it away and couldn't read any other part of the edition.

A good story is not necessarily for everyone. As the Kotzker Rebbe said, "Not all one thinks should be said; not all that's said should be written. Not everything written should be published. And, finally, not everything published should be read."

Rabbi Moshe Ginsburg
Brooklyn, NY

Not every story will appeal to every reader. We carefully scrutinize a story before selecting it for publication. But different people have different reactions. We hope that, in the future, your son will find valuable material in The Jewish Reader.

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