

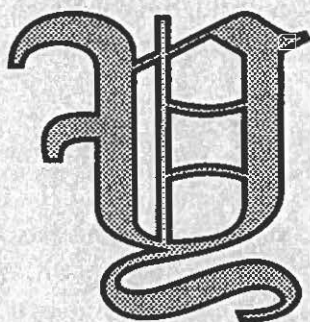
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# BEYOND PRICE

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By Devorah Kirsch

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Yosef was an innkeeper. That was his livelihood; but his *life* came from Torah. He spent hours and hours poring over texts and performing mitzvos, preferring to leave the task of running the inn to his wife Leba.

But Yosef was down-to-earth enough to understand responsibility. Came rent date, he ran to pay the *poritz* — nobleman. And Yosef would take the opportunity to help the many Jews who could not meet their own obligations to the *poritz*. He loved giving charity.

Beggars, cripples, orphans, widows, and the unemployed knocked constantly at his door. He never turned anyone away, even in lean times, and

more than once didn't hesitate to donate an article of his clothing. To him, charity was more than a good deed; it was his own special *mitzvah*, and he cherished it.

His good name must have extended everywhere, for one day Yosef received a most surprising visit.

It was the *poritz*. Dressed in fur and velvet, he waited tensely outside his tenant's dwelling, which was located in the left wing of the inn.

Yosef stared in amazement. He would have expected an entire livery to accompany the landlord — carriage and servants waiting in rigid elegance. But there was nothing, save the nobleman's stallion. The animal had been tied up against the wooden post by the *poritz* himself, who glanced about, as if to ensure that he was alone.

"Please, my lord, come in," stammered Yosef.

He called to his wife. Leba hastily brushed the crumbs off the table, then bowed and retreated to the kitchen, returning only briefly to deposit some refreshment.

The *poritz* continued to throw glances over his shoulder. Then he studied the inn's plain but pleasant decor, giving special attention to the front entrance. Yosef, as if reading his master's thoughts, called to his wife and insisted that for the duration no one else be allowed in and that the two of them not be disturbed.

Satisfied at last, the *poritz* sat down.

"Yoske," he began, "I have a minor problem, but it must remain a secret."

"A problem, sir?"

The nobleman removed a handkerchief and began wiping his brow. "It seems that I must . . . leave the country for awhile."

Yosef frowned. "Why, sir, do you come to me?"

"Because I trust you, Yoske, to do me a small favor." The nobleman paused and put down the handkerchief. Then he took a breath and said, "You have been an excellent tenant — a most profitable one. I can tell by the way you run the inn. Therefore, I must ask you to prepare an answer."

"For what, sir?"

The nobleman exhaled, then began twirling his mustache. "I have one week's time in which to leave the country. I must liquidate all my assets immediately in order to raise cash. If you can give me ten percent of the value of my assets by this time next week, I will sign the deeds over to you. If not, then my estate managers will have to sell them off slowly."

He squarely faced his tenant. "It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for anyone. I am offering it to you, Yoske."

Yosef blinked in silent disbelief. The nobleman sniffed into the handkerchief and rubbed an eye, as if to wipe away a tear.

It took a full minute before Yosef found his voice. "Sir, this offer is most unusual."

"Then you will accept it?"

"I don't know," Yosef stammered. "I shall have to ask my wife." He did not mention how the inn's success was due largely to her. "Do I have time to decide, sir?"

"If the answer is yes, you shall come to me at the end of the week," replied the nobleman, rising. "If you have the money, well and good. If not, then . . ." He sighed. "I would rather see it go to you, Yoske. Though a Jew, you've always appeared to be a good man."

Yosef hurried to open the door and respectfully held it wide. At the threshold, the nobleman turned around. "Next week," he whispered. "I trust you will have decided wisely."



No sooner did the door close than Leba hurried into the room. "What did he want?" she gasped.

As Yosef recounted the conversation, her jaw dropped. "That's amazing, Yosef! Who on earth would have ever expected this?"

"Clearly it is a gift from Heaven," declared her husband.

Lebaspun around the room. "Well, what are you waiting for, Yosef?" She ran into the kitchen and

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removed a key from the cupboard. She returned and circled the desk.

"What are you doing?" Yosef asked.

"What do you think?" she snapped. With trembling hands she jammed the key into their safe and threw open the metal door.

She withdrew a small pouch. It swished empty as she dropped it on the desk.

"I am afraid that's all we have left after I gave some to the beggar this morning," Yosef said apologetically.

She sighed. "No matter. We shall have to find some other way to raise funds."

"Do you think the nobleman will be true to his word?"

She glared at him incredulously. "Yosef, do you think that man would come all the way here, by himself, to play a joke? Hasn't he better things to do?"

It is obvious he is down on his luck. No doubt his creditors are after him. That's why he must leave the country."

She meditatively sucked on her fingers. "His loss can be our gain. Listen, Yosef. Go to my bureau dresser. In the lower left-hand drawer you'll find my jewelry box. Sell all my pieces."

"All your pieces? Leba, dear, I don't think—"

"Do as I say, Yosef!"

"Leba, those were our wedding gifts!"

She gripped his lapels and spoke firmly. "Yosef, are you daft? Listen to me. I have enough experience to know that if you don't buy and sell when the moment comes you've lost it. We must act quickly. Go to all the neighbors

and borrow the money. But don't say a word about this opportunity. Tell them instead that we were

*But then, as he contemplated the empty pouch and the reason for its being drained of coins, he realized that with this new wealth he might go very far. He could have ten people for Shabbos instead of two.*

"Please, my lord, come in," stammered Yosef.



robbed. They'll believe you. You have a good name. That's why the poritz came to you in the first place. If anyone can get the money together, you can!"

Yosef caught the gleam of the gold in her eyes and he shook his head skeptically, regretting that he had ever brought up the subject. But then, as he contemplated the empty pouch and the reason for its being drained of coins, he realized that with this new wealth he might go very far. He could have ten people for Shabbos instead of two, support ten families instead of four. Indeed, his wife was

correct: the fact that the nobleman went to him, of all people, clearly indicated Yosef's destiny — to be a man of means, a man who would support his people.

The next morning after prayers he made his rounds. Friends and neighbors stared at him strangely, and some even intoned in sympathy, "Oh, you poor man. Robbed of all your gold! Well, you have helped me so often that it's high time I helped you. Here . . . perhaps this will suffice."

"Thank you. May G-d bless you," whispered Yosef. "But I beg you. Not a word to anyone! Please!" He added, "By publicizing your mitzvah you'll only publicize my misfortune."

Each person agreed. Little did he or she know that the innkeeper had virtually memorized these lines like an actor, altering them to fit his audience of the moment.

By evening he returned to the inn with a pouch full of gold coins. His wife, too, displayed her profits. No earrings dangled off her head, and her wrist was without a bracelet. Nevertheless, Leba beamed in triumph and anticipation.

It was agreed. The next morning he would set off to the estate, a good half-day journey from the inn. The nobleman would be waiting there.



The next day he finished prayers, ignoring the somewhat sympathetic looks from some of the worshippers. Then he raced home, hitched his cart, and saddled a mare.

Leba followed him part of the way, wishing him good luck. As the cart disappeared into a thicket, she lingered hopefully by the road.

The cart jostled amidst the leaves and bushes, rolling into ominous shade. The road narrowed, becoming little more than a strip of rocky soil, and twice the horse nearly stumbled. Undaunted, Yosef continued. The sunlight struggled for a glimpse among the branches overhead, but soon collided with a dark gray cloud, while the sky in general turned a matching color.

Nervously Yosef recited Psalms. He felt like Avraham Avinu, being tested and facing numerous obstacles on his way to sacrifice his son. But Yosef could not exactly say he was sacrificing anything; he was merely trading it in for something better.

About an hour later, as the cart submerged itself deep within the forest, Yosef felt the first drops of rain tickle his cheek. Quickly motioning his horse off the road, he managed to steer the cart to a leafy shelter before the air cracked with thunder and let loose a watery torrent.

In despair he watched the roaring storm and calculated his chances of arriving at the nobleman's estate before the day was done. Well, he sighed, the worst thing that might happen would be his having to return all the money to the townspeople. His wife would get back all her jewelry. They might not be wealthier or wiser from the experience, but at least they were not worse off for it.

Apparently, though, luck was with him. In less than an hour the rain subsided and through the branches the clouds dissipated into fluffy streaks. Yosef whispered a grateful prayer and once again mounted the cart. With a flick of the whip he took off.

He had not gone too far when again he halted. A strange sound wafted through the bramble. Yosef dismounted and edged closer. The cry resembled that of a wounded animal — faint and mournful. But it soon materialized into human babbling — incoherent at first, then followed by a steady stream of words and

*(Continued on page 26)*

He had not gone too far when again he halted.



# Beyond Price

(Continued from page 7)

voices.

Yosef crept closer. The babbling gave way to feminine wailing.

"Oy, Master of the universe!"

Yosef pushed away the twigs. Two women lay on the ground, convulsing in sorrow. Both appeared the same age; they were surrounded by about a dozen children, some of whom had huddled into a pitiful shield to protect against the overwhelming wetness, while the others stared dumbly at the muddy earth. All the faces were streaked with either rain or tears — it was hard to say. But there was no mistake about their abject misery.

"Good people! What is wrong?" Yosef demanded.

Frightened, the women looked up. At the sight of Yosef's kind expression, however, they softened and, rising to their feet, clasped their hands beseechingly.

"Oh, sir!" one of them wept. "Thank G-d you are here! With the storm we were afraid that we had been totally forsaken!"

Her dirt-streaked face was young— probably not more than thirty. Five children hurried to her and hugged her protectively.

"My sister and I left for Cracow two days ago with our husbands and children," she explained. "Some highwaymen attacked us." She sniffed. "They killed my husband and made off with our carriage. They are holding my brother-in-law for ransom. On our way to find aid we got lost and became stranded. Now we are destitute!" With that they all burst into even greater sobbing.

As he listened, Yosef's eyes welled up with tears.

Remembering the treacherous road and the natural dangers on any travels, he realized how easily he could have put his dear wife through a similar calamity. Only by the grace of G-d had he not ended up under an unknown grave himself.

The children coughed violently. Their clothing, no more than rags, clung wetly to their thin bodies. Clearly, neither these sisters nor their families had known plenty. It made Yosef realize even more how blessed he was. Not only had he and his wife done well, but Leba controlled the finances with toughness. Undoubtedly these two sisters, frail and alone, would now be at a dead loss.

Then he brightened.

"One moment," he said, and hurried to the cart.

In a minute he was back with a bulging pouch. "Here." He promptly untied the string, eliciting awe.

"Is this yours?" the first sister cried.

"It's yours now," replied Yosef.

"But sir, I don't think we can—"

"Think nothing of it," insisted Yosef. "I could never carry this with me knowing that widows and orphans are being deprived. Please."

Hesitantly the women accepted the pouch.

"And now," said Yosef, "if you'll kindly follow me, I

shall give you all a ride on my cart to the next town. I know a rabbi there who will be able to help you. And he might even have your husband's remains transferred to a Jewish cemetery."

"May G-d bless you," gasped the first sister. She called to their children, who collectively rose and scampered out of the brush.

"And what is your destination?" asked the second woman.

"Someplace," mumbled Yosef in confusion, "but . . . it's no longer relevant."

Pondering this unusual disruption of his plans and his destiny, he tried to hide his glumness. While the sisters bundled up the younger ones and placed them on the cart, Yosef mounted the front and bade the mare move forward.

As the trees receded and the outline of a town emerged, he contemplated Leba, who was thankfully not a widow. Only she'd never again be a well-dressed wife. Perhaps, sighed Yosef, she might understand, had she children. At least -- he comforted himself --

*"They are holding my  
brother-in-law for ransom.  
On our way to find aid we got  
lost and became stranded.  
Now we are destitute!"*

they didn't have to worry about another mouth to feed — not like these two women, for whose sakes he had just become a pauper. With this he tried desperately to console himself, realizing he was now broke. No, more than broke; in debt. Their savings were gone, and they owed money to their fellow townspeople.

Silently he approached the town. The horse retreated to a leisurely trot until it halted before a dingy bungalow. Only the Star of David above the entrance indicated that the place was a synagogue.

"Here we are," he said. "Talk to the rabbi. He shall help you."

The children bounced off the cart, and the older ones moved to help their mothers. The new widow turned to Yosef and said, "Again, I don't know how we can ever reward you. What you have done for us is beyond price."

"Madam," said Yosef, sighing, "helping a fellow Jew is enough of a reward. I ask for no other favor."

"I pray that my late husband provide you with favor in the heavenly court," she blessed him. And with that the group disappeared inside the synagogue.

"Favor," murmured Yosef. He fingered his pockets for his few remaining zlotys. There was enough for a decent lunch, probably his last. He might as well fortify himself before returning home



His wife reacted less dramatically than he had expected. She simply went pale and silent. Perhaps, when confronted with the women's horrifying tale, she grew too numb with shock and gratitude that her husband was still alive. Or perhaps, businesswoman that she was, she recognized that certain things in this world — namely human life — contained greater value than a few pieces of jewelry.

Nevertheless, Leba slumped into her chair, dazed and dejected. They both had to confront the dismal fact: their borrowing spree had left them with an enormous price to pay.

Sadly Yosef sold the inn and the mare. After covering part of what they owed, they moved into a shack near the edge of a wheat field and hired themselves out to farmers, families, and laborers. At night they returned home stiff and exhausted from pruning trees or scrubbing pots. Many of his friends, overcome with pity, offered to cancel or postpone the debts, but Yosef refused to listen.

When the day came that there was simply no work in town, Yosef knew he had no choice but to try his luck somewhere else. He packed a meager lunch and after prayers told his wife that he would be back at week's end. With that he slung his sack over his shoulder and like a peddler trudged down the dirt road.

The path was far, leading him by late afternoon to a cluster of huts, rafts, and more huts near the river. From their condition Yosef guessed that their inhabitants were not the kind to have money to hire help. Nevertheless, feeling tired and achy, he decided to spend the night there, in the hopes of moving on the next

day. Perhaps he might find work loading river barges.

The center of town was little more than an empty space strewn with rotting, discarded produce from market day. Yosef, his lunch long ago digested, probed the ground for something to eat. The elongated shadows indicated that the afternoon was passing and that he had better *daven minchah*. Noticing Jews hurry into one of the larger huts, he followed them.

They were dressed in rags almost identical to his. None of them looked like they were able to accommodate Yosef; nevertheless, after services had finished, he moved to the benches behind the *shul* and, while waiting for a kind gesture, distracted himself with a volume of Talmud.

Evening came, and Yosef was still studying. In the old days he had loved locking himself up in his study and absorbing the holy words for hours. But now, not even their fire could obliterate his disappointment or his hunger pangs. The Jews filed in for *ma'ariv*, which was hastily completed. They quickly disappeared, leaving Yosef once again to the benches.

*There was enough for a decent lunch, probably his last. He might as well fortify himself before returning home.*

He gloomily reviewed more Talmud, groping for solace. At last his eyelids drooped, taking him into sleep and temporarily out of his misery.

At morning the light streamed in from the windows and woke him. Squinting, Yosef stretched, rubbed his eyes, and rose from the makeshift bed, groaning and clutching his back in pain from the bench's hardness.

In front of him the Jews had once again begun to congregate. All heads turned when a gentleman walked in — a gentleman who was obviously a stranger. Clad in a royal blue cape with knee-high boots and a broad hat with tassels, this man reminded Yosef of the *poritz*, because of whom he himself now wore tatters.

Ignoring the others, the gentleman picked a *siddur* off the shelf. Something unmistakably noble shone from his visage. He recited the preliminary blessings, while the town rabbi gaped at him before donning *tefillin*.

Yosef himself staggered forward, washed his hands, then pulled a *siddur* off the wall. From his emptied pack he removed his *tefillin*, and tossed a yellowed prayer shawl over his shoulders.

During the service, he tried very hard to concentrate. But his stomach refused to cooperate, and twice Yosef had to clutch the lectern to keep from fainting. He managed to recite *Aleinu* and even a few Psalms before wobbling to the back of the *shul* and collapsing.



"Sir."

In a haze Yosef opened his eyes.

The gentleman's eyes stared back.

In embarrassment Yosef averted his face. But the gentleman persisted. "Sir, are you all right?"

Before Yosef could protest, the man had clutched his arm and like a mother gently raised him. He then propped Yosef against the wall and asked, "Are you feeling well?"

"I'm . . . all right," mumbled Yosef. "Just hungry, I'm afraid. I haven't eaten in quite awhile."

"Well, then," exclaimed the man, "I shall rectify that at once." He glided down the aisle and called outside, "Yaakov! Go to the inn and purchase refreshment! Spare no expense!"

Yosef cringed, doubly ashamed. In the old days,

he too could have afforded to be generous. In those days he had managed his own inn.

The *shul* had long ago emptied, making Yosef wonder how long he had been asleep. Only a few dirty children poked their heads through the windows, fascinated at the sight of the nobleman who was visiting among them.

The gentleman returned and smiled at Yosef benevolently. His face was heavily bearded but pensive, possessing a dignity and spirituality that no *poritz* could ever sustain. That this noble should tend to him, especially in Yosef's wretched state, was surprising, more so as no one else in the town had bothered. And why Yosef merited this concern was even

*Yosef remained silent,  
staring at the wooden  
floor, lost in thought.*

more of a mystery.

Yosef tried to rise out of respect, but the gentleman restrained him. "You need your rest," he said.

"Sir, I am honored by your attention," replied Yosef, "but why are you troubling yourself with me?"

"I can tell that your poverty is not your doing," answered the man. "You are, no doubt, the victim of ill luck; you are not some thief or shiftless character." He seated himself on the opposite bench. "But I would be curious to know what was it that reduced you to such misfortune."

Yosef feebly described his entire tale. To his surprise, he spoke without bitterness — only resignation to G-d's will.

"Do you regret what you have done?" asked the nobleman.

Yosef remained silent. Staring at the wooden floor, lost in thought, he finally answered, "I regret that I acted recklessly by borrowing on leverage in order to buy the nobleman's property. For my greed I accept responsibility."

He added, "But knowing that I helped those women and children makes it all worthwhile. I would gladly do it again, regardless of the cost. The worth of a Jewish life exceeds all of that."

The gentleman beamed. "A splendid answer. And one appropriate from a man of your caliber. For that reason I will make you an offer. You shall have back all of your wealth. I have far more than that *poritz* ever possessed. I am willing to give it to you. But on one



condition: you must sell me the reward of your mitzvah."

"My mitzvah?"

"Of rescuing the women and children. You will be paid most handsomely."

"No!" Yosef roared. He clutched his temples. Though he was dizzy from hunger, something deep inside spoke for him. "Sir, what you ask of me is repugnant. What do you take me for? Some kind of contestant, seeking a prize for my duties to G-d? Never! Had I wanted that, I could have struck the same deal with the people of my town. They would never have had me repay my debts."

"Well, then," the man pressed, "suppose I become a partner in your mitzvah, sharing the reward equally with you, and still give you what I offer?"

Yosef's stomach rumbled, threatening to rupture, and he studied the finery in front of him. Had Yosef been as good a businessman as this person apparently was, or even as good as his wife, he might never have fallen to his present station. Certainly he was being offered the chance to get out of it. But he wasn't a businessman — only a Jew who did what he knew was expected of him.

"The answer is still no," he declared.

As the gentleman rose, light burst from his face, spraying the windows white and the benches golden. Yosef shielded his eyes; then, when the light receded, he beheld a table laden with delicacies.

The gentleman had cast off the cape of royal blue and stood there in robes of shimmering white. And instead of nobility, the face radiated saintliness.

Forgetting his hunger, Yosef fell to the ground and prostrated himself. "Who are you?" he asked, trembling.

"I am Eliyahu HaNavi," answered the other, "come to test your faith in G-d. Yosef, you have answered the

questions well. A mitzvah is worth more than all the wealth in the world. Nevertheless, I shall offer you a reward, based on three choices. One: all the wealth you can imagine. Two: long life and health for you and your wife. Or three: a child who will illuminate the world."

"A child?" Yosef cried.

"He shall become a leader of leaders, a Torah giant blessed with every fine quality." The prophet went silent. "However . . . should you choose that reward, you shall have to resign yourself to a life of poverty."

Yosef rose. The dizziness was gone, along with the weakness. Something revitalized him, infusing his veins with spiritual power and majesty.

"Wealth is of no consequence to me," he uttered, "except when I use it for a mitzvah. But a child . . . a child is to be treasured above any material reward. A child is genuine insurance that my life will be perpetuated. We have always wanted a child,

but didn't dare to hope."

And with that Yosef returned to his hometown. He and his wife continued their modest ways. They never again knew wealth; neither did they ever again invest in any get-rich-quick schemes. But they enriched their lives in another way — through the mitzvos.

At times they couldn't help lamenting the loss of their status. But when, at year's end, Leba gave birth to a son, their sorrows vanished. They named their son Menachem Mendel, because Menachem means "comforter," and the child was his parents' comfort.

In time Menachem Mendel would be connected with a town called Rimanov and a Chassidic dynasty worthy of his lineage. His contribution to Jewry would also be beyond price. **JB**



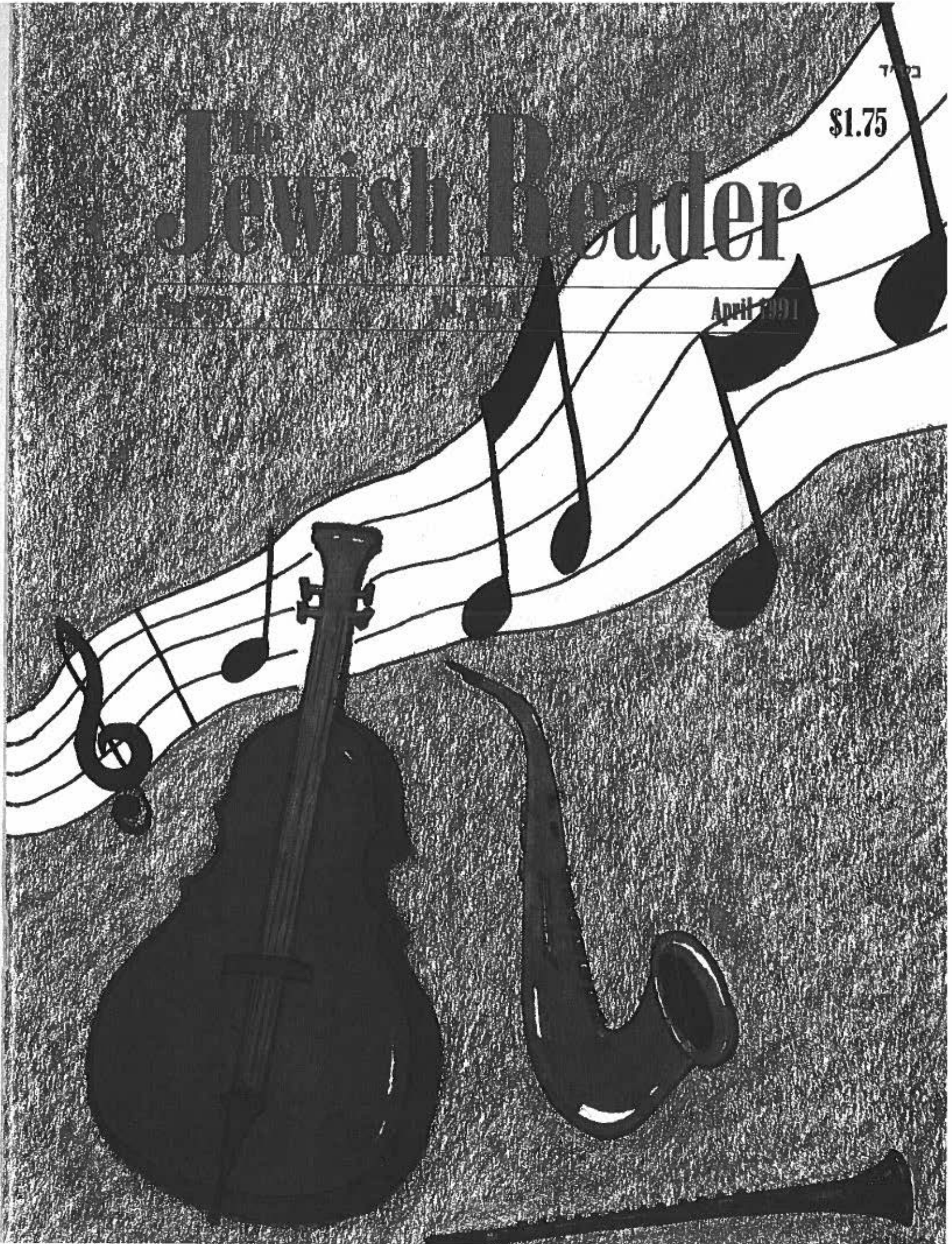
Yosef tried to rise out of respect.

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# Jewish Reader

April 1991



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## TO OUR READERS

In the course of the last few months we have presented biographies of various *tzaddikim* who have passed into the next life. These great men have represented various trends in Jewish life, but all had in common a deep love for the Torah and for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, who is profiled in the current issue, fits this mold perfectly. A chassidic leader who studied at the feet of one of the great non-chassidic Torah giants, Rabbi Menachem Mendel was familiar with the entire gamut of Jewish religious life. His influence has continued to be felt until today.

One of the hardest rules to keep is that against speaking slanderously of others — *lashon hara*. How far does the prohibition to speak *lashon hara* go? In "At Mama's Knee," which returns after a one-issue hiatus, the Hameln family explores this critical subject.

In "Our Story," the development of the Talmud Bavli, or Babylonian Talmud, is depicted. The Talmud, which is the bedrock of Jewish law, has helped keep the Jews alive through centuries of persecution. It has been insulted, censored, and burned, but it has survived and even become stronger. In our generation we are witnesses to the phenomenon of *Daf Yomi*, with thousands of people studying a page of Gemara every day. With Hashem's help, this trend toward more study will continue.

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# MAIL ROOM

## The Bais Yisrael

I had not known anything about the Bais Yisrael until I read your article about his life ("As a Mother Carries Her Child," Adar). I was amazed by the story of how a woman predicted he would be a rebbe when he was still a young boy.

The story about how the Chazon Ish and the Bais Yisrael respected

each other was very moving. I think it is important for all of us to learn a lesson from this story: we must treat all people respectfully.

The other anecdotes about the Bais Yisrael were just as interesting and informative. Thank you very much for this beautiful biography, and keep writing about our *gedolim*.

Yaakov Michael  
Cleveland, OH

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