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Berkeh's Story

LEAH LAX

THE YOUNG MEN stood shivering on the front stoop.

They huddled together with towels rolled under their arms, waiting for the school bus that picked them up at their dormitory every morning at 6:15. Their fatigue-drawn faces were expressionless, their shoulders and arms bent forward against the damp morning breeze. Shirrtails hung out over black, straight pants, and ritual fringes dangled like a tailor's forgotten threads. Several wore fedoras that hung off the back of their heads. Two stood with shoulders turned to the wind and hands cupped over a cigarette, squinting their smoke-stung eyes.

Berkeh was among them. He wanted to do this alone. He dreamed of a private pool where he could immerse without eyes around him. Like a fish in the ocean of Torah.

When the bus arrived, the group climbed in with a tired resignation. Some began their preliminary morning prayers on the bus. They set their feet apart against its rocking, trying to coordinate their own swaying to its motion, and clutched pocket-sized prayer books that were frayed and

unable to close tight, the pages fingered daily for months, years, the corners darkened and shining. The boys stood or sat, with brows knit and lips moving in silence.

Others stretched their legs in the aisle, leaned their heads back on the seat and closed their eyes to snatch a few more minutes of sleep. Their shoulders touched. Their limbs sprawled over one another. The bus bumped and snorted and sighed.

At the mikvah, they came alive. All but Berkeh

entered the pool area and stripped off their clothes while they chatted, then descended the steps into the small, tiled pool. They jumped into the warm water for their routine morning requirement, this ritual purification before communal prayer. The younger ones splashed one another, all elbows and jokes, and dunked each other's heads under the water, laughing and spluttering, then ran for the few showers.

"Kazen gets number one!"

"Lenowitz second!"

The boys were equal here; all locker-room naked, long ago past the bathing suit phase when they hid their budding selves, when each was sure his was a singular, private thing. All but Berkeh.

There were times, when he was younger, that Berkeh managed to immerse himself before the others came in, which he did with an urgency that left him stiff-jointed. He would step down into the pool, glance around with wide eyes, and duck one swift time beneath the water, hoping to seize for that brief moment a feeling of free-floating submer- sion, to be a drop nullified in the greater pool. But if someone stepped in to join him he looked away from their nakedness and left with his head down, as if he could find anonymity by avoiding their eyes.

Now, at 20, his days were like this one. He showered as soon as they entered the mikvah build- ing, while the others were still in the pool, and then waited on the bench in the inner area, dry and clothed, disappointed in himself for not joining them. He was afraid he would stare at their bodies and terrified of what they would say if he did, and yet he was unable to call attention to himself by refusing to come along. Berkeh's deepest wish was to dull himself enough to participate. He trained his eyes on the white tiles hoping they would leave a blank white picture in his mind's eye.

When the others came out of the water their hair was still wet. Luminescent drops clung to the

flattened rows of hair on young limbs and shimmered in their thin, new beards. It seemed to Berkeh as if the clothing the boys pulled over themselves was a transparent, ephemeral shell obscuring nothing, but placing their bright flesh in an inaccessible place. He wished he could crumble the shell in his fingers, and then shook himself to shake the wish away. He had to look until he no longer imagined he saw their lean muscles and sinewy firmness beneath the clothing, until his right hand stopped rubbing fingers on his palm in an unconscious caress. With effort his vision grew clouded and his eyes stopped drawing down below their chins in a reflexive sweep.

Shivering again in the morning chill beneath a gray, low sky that muffled sound, the students climbed aboard the ancient bus, which beeped its way into traffic toward the study hall. He leaned the back of his neck on the rusted chrome railing of his seat and was soon asleep. Shlomo was wait- ing when they arrived.

It was Shlomo shaking him, pulling his arm.

"Come on Berkeh. Let's go now." The hot cof- fee smell of Shlomo's breath was on his face.

Berkeh's lazy smile was a flash of pleasure aimed at his friend, at his sandy, wiry hair and quick, toothy smile. "Already?"

To Berkeh it was a wonder that Shlomo didn't go to the mikvah in the mornings. Shlomo insisted he did not feel the need to go through empty motions, and he didn't fear questions. For him it was a simple matter, but how, thought Berkeh, could it be simple? I am here, in this yeshiva, and this is what we are supposed to do. When Shlomo once questioned Berkeh it was as if the two spoke different languages. Why must you go to the mik- vah, he asked. Can you put on a different skin?

I want to, Berkeh wanted to say. Yes. Like a chameleon. "I want a match like the others, and a wedding. I want this community to celebrate me when I take my place among them." Shlomo nod- ded, sighed.

The two entered the yeshiva building, their cavern, Berkeh's cocoon. Berkeh looked up at its vaulted ceiling and behind him at the closed door. The brightness of things—the April sky, the traffic, the push in the streets and stores and homes, the rest of the world with all of its contentions— dimmed when the doors closed behind them. Their world was an interior, full of their rebbes and the cacophony of voices in the study hall.

Contest Guidelines

The MOMENT magazine—Karma Foundation Second Annual Short Story Contest. First prize, \$1,000. Stories should be between 2,000 and 10,000 words, must be unpublished, and must have Jewish subject matter. Winners will be published in an upcoming issue of MOMENT. Entries must be received by Dec. 21, 2001. Judges: Pearl Abraham, Rachel Kadish, Harvey Grossinger. Entry fee: \$15 payable to MOMENT. More info: www.momentmag.com. Send manu- scripts to: Short Story Contest, MOMENT, 4710 41st St. NW, Washington, DC 20016.

The two boys met after the first class. They lingered in a side hallway before entering the small synagogue adjacent to the lobby for morning prayers. For those few minutes Berkeh forgot where he was expected to be. Their amity was peppered with subtle nudges of the shoulders, finger pokes to the chest, hands on arms, and closed-lip smiles with foreheads tipped forward, almost touching.

Late the night before in bed, Berkeh's eyes had rested on the dim shadows of the high dormitory ceiling. He had to wonder if there were two Berkehs, two separate beings that flipped and tugged one another. When he joined the yeshiva boys in class and let his mind lock with theirs in Talmudic intricacies and in mystical worlds, that was his reality. But when he was with Shlomo ...

Berkeh's eyes stayed locked on his friend as they entered the synagogue. How could Shlomo be so sure, so calm? He was like a river with a steady current drawing him in as Berkeh struggled to swim against it.

At the front of the room was Rabbi Raichik, a local rabbi-turned-businessman who joined them in the mornings and led the prayers. Berkeh positioned the black leather tefillin boxes on his head and forearm with a grateful, swift expertise, as the mass of strong voices surrounded him and wrapped him like a human prayer shawl. His lone voice rose up among them and climbed still farther, searching release. He closed his eyes, swayed, and both heard and did not hear the words that came from his tongue, until the last.

"It is incumbent upon us to praise the Master of All, to ascribe greatness to the Creator of 'In the Beginning ...'"

Several boys approached as Berkeh was putting his tefillin away in its velvet bag. They slapped his shoulders, touched his arms. Shlomo stood close by. Berkeh was conscious of his chest rising and falling. He held up one hand in an affable manner to fend the boys off and smiled at their attention.

"Hey, Berk. You ready for Goldenberg's *faber*? That test'll be tough!"

"Berkeh never gets ruffled. He's probably got it down cold!"

"Berkeh, could you figure out *Daf Lamed*? I slept through it."

"Hey, if Berk can't get it, forget about it."

Rabbi Raichik watched them from across the room. Berkeh was drinking in the admiration when

Continued on page 79



MOMENT Magazine– Karma Foundation Short Story Contest

Our thanks to the more than 250 people who submitted manuscripts for our short story contest, and congratulations to **LEAH LAX** of

Houston (pictured), winner of the \$1,000 top prize. Lax, mother of seven children between the ages of 12 and 22, is a student at the University of Houston School of Creative Writing, where she is working toward an MFA.

She is currently compiling oral histories from American Jewish women for a book about their experiences in *mikvaot*, ritual baths. "Berkeh's Story" is her first published story.

We also thank our judges, Allegra Goodman, Anne Roiphe, and Harvey Grossinger.

Finally, we thank The Karma Foundation, as well as the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, and Gertrude and Milton Kleinman. This contest would not have been possible without their generous support.

Our aim is to establish MOMENT as a first-rate venue for short fiction with distinctly Jewish subject matter. We will be publishing our second- and third-place winners in the coming months, and we have already begun accepting manuscripts for our second contest (see guidelines on facing page). If you support Jewish short fiction and want to see more in our pages in the coming months and years, we need your support! If you have any comments about the contest, or would like to make a donation in support of our second contest, please contact our managing editor, Josh Rolnick, at jrolnick@momentmag.com.

Short Story *continued from page 75*

Shlomo caught his eye. Berkeh bit his bottom lip and ran his tongue back and forth along its warmth.

Shlomo put his hand on Berkeh's shoulder and spoke quiet words that blew warm in his ear.

"Let's get a head start on that test, huh? I haven't done a thing."

Berkeh held both his hands up to the others in modest refusal.

"Elbow grease does it, guys. Turning pages."

BERKEH AND SHLOMO SAT FACING ONE another across a narrow, wooden table in the crowded study hall. The sturdy table was nicked and scarred, strewn with books of many sizes in Hebrew or Yiddish. There were several dog-eared dictionaries.

Some of the students were already settled in. Others were still arriving. A hum and tangle of voices rose as partners squared off across their tables to spar over the Talmudic text.

Berkeh relaxed, ready to learn. When he dug into the oblique commentaries each line of text turned itself inside out to divulge its secret—that nothing is as it seems. Physical light was really darkness. Simple things were complex and the complex could be distilled down to a vivid point of God's essence as it shimmered its way through multiple worlds.

Berkeh and Shlomo had been study partners since they first met at summer camp as young boys. Other duos and groups of study partners had always surrounded them and all faced one another across a table. This is what Berkeh wanted for the two of them; a bond of Torah study, like heads suspended from bodies.

But Berkeh looked across the table and saw a young man with a body beneath his head. He was still troubled about their conversation the day before, when Shlomo related what he had told his father. When Berkeh first heard, he was horrified.

It was when Shlomo was last home to visit. He had gone to the local *beis medrash* to study in the evenings and came home one night to find his father waiting up for him. His mother was sleeping. As they sat down together at the kitchenette where Shlomo had once eaten his daily breakfast cereal, his father's gaze had made him feel transparent and small. It seemed, Shlomo told Berkeh later, as if a mass of elements had come together and it was time to talk. So he told his father. How he felt. What he felt. The slow, solid conclusion about



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who he was. And about Berkeh, although he wouldn't reveal his name.

But his father panicked. His gentle manner, the long-held bond between the two, seemed, for that evening, invisible.

"You can't do this!"

"Do this?"

"You can't live that way. You think you can't help it, but it's not allowed! You can't love a ... a man."

"Ta ..."

His father thundered. "An abomination! I thought you were my son!"

"Ta, do you want to flip a switch in me?"

AC/DC. How's that?"

"*Asur*," his father insisted. Their voices rose and fell into the night. "I can't be anyone else," Shlomo shot back, and although it was an angry retort, there was a note of desperation in his voice and a sliver of leftover hope. He was tumbling forward now. He felt like he was on a roller coaster without a driver, as if he could see his father's toy-sized figure far below, when he had wanted his father in the seat next to him, and still Shlomo wanted to defy and span the impossible distance, reach his unattainable father dis-

appearing behind him, gather him up and bring him back.

Shlomo's eyes went to the familiar tapestry of the living room sofa and then back to his father in front of him in the kitchen, to his father's receding, steel gray hair standing on end after being raked with an agitated hand, to his father's other hand still gripping the worn knob of the cane Shlomo had known since childhood. Somehow the Jewish community and his life in the yeshiva were all rolled into that view and sliding away.

Shlomo heard his father's words now lacking a fading hope. "Your mother has found a girl for you. Son, you've got to at least try ..."

Shlomo's voice was an accusation. "Is that why you were waiting up for me?" But guilt sat like a lump in Shlomo. "Tell her no," he said. He looked away from his father's dwindling image, shrinking himself from the burden of reportage he had placed on his father to inform his mother. It was the way that, with her, unlike with his father, he was at best awkward and newly arrived at manhood.

"Stay in the yeshiva. Stay ... stay," his father begged him in the end, when both of their eyes were half shut, certainly against what either wanted not to see, but also from fatigue. OK, Shlomo wanted to say as he stood on now-heavy limbs to go up the carpeted stairs to his childhood bedroom, still intact and, it seemed to him, shrine-like. He would not sleep, enshrouded like that in his parent's hopes. "I'll stay," he said, but in an ironic tone. "Don't worry." And he left the rest unsaid. *Until I can't.*

To Berkeh, when Shlomo recounted this story it was as if Shlomo were speaking a foreign language. Leave the yeshiva and his community? And to think of announcing such a deviation from his father's expectations, to expect his father might listen to his telling of forbidden desires, or to be able to face it if he wouldn't, required thinking in Shlomo's strange language.

No, Berkeh's father's language was one of Torah and community, in a world of husbands with wives and children. And their world was created by words, because if God withdrew His Word for a single moment, the world would cease to exist. But there was no word for Berkeh, for what he was, as if he was invisible. There was only a name for an act he desired and didn't want to desire. Shlomo's father had said it: *To'evah*. Abomination.

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SHLOMO SLOUCHED DOWN IN HIS SEAT in the study hall. His right knee protruded forward under the table, brushing Berkeh's thigh.

Berkeh jumped at the touch and pulled away, then almost as instinctively leaned his thigh into Shlomo's leg, relaxed, and felt Shlomo's leg pressing back against his. Berkeh dug more studiously into the text, frowning in concentration, but his pulse quickened and he heard his own breathing, guarded and fast. Shlomo's blue green eyes danced between the lines under Berkeh's gaze as they tried to discuss what they were learning. Berkeh's eyes locked downward on his book. One stolen glance told him Shlomo was doing the same. Berkeh began to recite. He forced his voice forward in a halting, stubborn resistance.

"Two grasp onto a single prayer shawl. One says, 'It is mine.' And the other says, 'It is mine.'"

As they proceeded, Shlomo's hand stroked the inner side of his own knee in time with their singsong, and Berkeh's eye picked up the rhythmic motion of Shlomo's arm. As Shlomo recited, Berkeh closed his eyes and envisioned Shlomo's leg and the hand that stroked it. Beads of sweat rose on Berkeh's brow and upper lip. His nostrils flared. He tried to push his mind away from forming an image beyond the blurred letters.

Then he felt Shlomo's hand moving up his own thigh and a tightening in his groin, as if it was reaching involuntarily toward the hand. He could not think. Their surroundings faded. The sound of voices around them goaded him, chided him. He felt weak, his head light, his tongue too frozen to protest words that didn't seem real. Nothing was real but Shlomo's hand. His thoughts were a vortex eddying and swirling downward to one point, his existence one thing only: Want. He wanted.

A BOOK SLAMMED SHUT. BERKEH SAT UP, suddenly disconnected from the tightness between his legs, like one just shaken, still numb, from sleep. Mortification hit Berkeh in a wave that left his stomach queasy and the hairs on his arms standing up over goose bumps. He tried to swallow. His eyes darted across the sea of students bent over their texts and arguing with one another. He thought in panicked relief of the suit jacket hanging on the back of his chair that he could use to cover the evidence of his erection. He was shaking.

For a moment he put his forehead into the palm of his right hand. When Shlomo leaned forward to speak to him, Berkeh counted on the muffling din of the study hall for cover.

"That's it," Shlomo said. "I can't."
"Hey," Berkeh said shakily. "We have a test."

"I can't be here. That's it."
"Is it ... is it me?"
"No. Not you. It's here. The yeshiva. I can't be here. And neither can you."

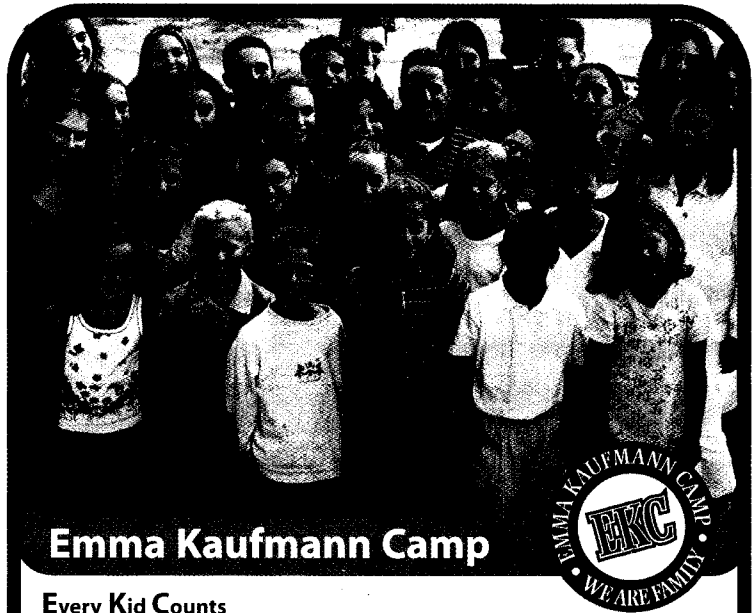
Berkeh swallowed again, tongue-tied, and shook himself. He forced himself not

to meet Shlomo's eyes. The words astounded him, shrunk him, drew him. No. He felt blinded.

"How could you leave?"
"I'm forced out," Shlomo whispered. "I don't want to leave."

"Where will you go?"
"I'll have to find a place. Where I can learn Torah without pretending."

"But where?"
"I don't know. Maybe my own living room. Don't you know it can't be here?"
"No!" Berkeh felt panicked. "No!"
Shlomo leaned forward and took his



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hand. His whisper was fierce, pleading. "Come with me, Berkeh!"

LUNCH WAS SERVED AT TWO O'CLOCK, after their classes and first session in the study hall. They ate sandwiches and hot soup and picked at an array of salads.

On the break, Berkeh stopped to watch a few boys out back playing basketball. He often watched them. They jumped with one hand on their heads to keep their yarmulkes from falling while the other arm flailed outward and tzitzits fringes flew; a blur of sweat and flapping, white shirttails, hastily donned tennis shoes, hot red cheeks, and joyful, wild eyes.

Berkeh watched their game and then went to the study hall during the break to look for a particular volume, a rare exposition on the text they were studying. He missed Shlomo, who had gone to the drugstore without him.

BERKEH HEARD HIS NAME OVER THE intercom in the study hall. There was a call for him. He left off his search and made his way around the narrow tables and out to the lobby. A group of boys

waited near the phone. Berkeh sighed: One very public telephone for all their communication.

"Hey, Berkeh. Where ya' been? I gotta make a call!"

"Sorry, Itz."

He lifted the receiver, still warm from the last person's hand, and leaned forward with his back to the others in a futile effort at privacy.

"Hello?"

"Shalom, Ber?" It was his father.

Berkeh smiled, pleased to hear that voice, but wary.

"Tateh, is everything all right?"

"Sure."

Pause. "Rabbi Raichik called us."

"Rabbi Raichik?"

"I don't—we don't know that much about him."

"He's a businessman, Ta. The guys around here respect him a lot. He gives a lot of money and he's a real scholar. And ..." Something was taking shape in Berkeh's mind. "He's found a lot of brides for the boys."

"He's most impressed with you."

"Me?" There was a thrill in that recognition.

"He's offering for you to go out with his daughter."

The news made a little explosion in Berkeh. "What?" Rabbi *Raichik* chose *him*? Berkeh grinned. Yes, he belonged. His face flushed with the honor of it. The entire yeshiva will place a crown on his head. He imagined all of the students crowded around, lifting him up on a chair tipping in the air as they danced at his wedding.

Berkeh couldn't seem to find his next breath. He could hear his heart beating in his ears in excitement ... and fear.

But Shlomo. He couldn't imagine being without Shlomo. "Ta, I don't know what to say." His hands shook. His mind was racing in two directions at once.

"What do you think?"

"What do I think?" He tried to envision himself married. He thought of his mother and her quiet ministrations. He saw a calm and kind shadow in his background that served him food and listened to him, and loved his learning. He looked around him. "Ta, there are a lot of people here."

"Will you go out with her? No commitment. You have to see if she's right for you."

There was a pain in his stomach that nagged him. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Berkeh, are you ready for this?"

"Were you?"

His father laughed. "Of course not. You'll learn."

I can learn to love a woman.

"Shalom Ber, we're ... proud of you. Mom and I."

His chest felt tight with love for his father. His voice went soft. "OK, Ta. Yes. I'll call her and set a date."

"Good."

"Ta?"

Silence. His father did not say it. He did not say he loves him. *I love you, Ta*. The unspoken words hung there as he disconnected.

Berkeh turned and found the impatient group of boys behind him had grown quiet, all looking at him. A line of eyes. They must have heard. Berkeh smoothed his jacket and tucked in his shirt to protect the veneer, grateful for his father's gift: The offer of a date would thicken his cover. Late at night there would be furtive boasting in the dormitory, exchanging notes, tips, teases. Berkeh had become a comrade. He had a girl. One of the boys shot him a sly smile and pointed one

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thumb upward, a vote of belonging. The rest of the group grinned.

Berkeh looked past the boys to Shlomo standing at a distance behind the group. A pace away from Shlomo was one of the younger students with an eager look, a known gossip with red ears. Shlomo's jaw was dropped. His eyes were alerted and searching Berkeh out, forehead creased.

Berkeh looked back at the row of eyes, feigned a confident smile, and raised a thumb upward in return. He strode off, past Shlomo's pain. He stopped for a moment at the window, pricking at the awareness of Shlomo staring at him from behind.

Outside, a woman passed in vigorous stride with her dog on a taut leash straining ahead of her. Several cars rushed past. The rolling, bluish clouds seeped downward.

BERKEH BORROWED A CAR, AN OLD Oldsmobile sedan that once, several owners ago, had been a luxury car. Its blue paint was dulled and its vinyl roof was networked with cracks and tears. Stale air and the odor of cigarettes filled the interior. A cassette of Yiddish Gems stuck out of the tape deck. Berkeh punched a button to turn it on, but the machine did not respond.

He tried not to think. Since his father's phone call, Berkeh had avoided conversation with Shlomo. His focus on the text was thorough when they learned together. Only once had Shlomo closed his book and tried to begin.

"Berkeh."

Berkeh raised up one hand. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But, Berk ..."

Berkeh felt as if he was being pulled down a dark corridor leading to an unknown and frightening place. "Look," he said, even as light glinted off Shlomo's hair and eyes and he sensed the pleading desire. "If Raichik's daughter is right for me, I'll marry her." He pushed the words with a tone of finality past a constriction in his throat. "Can't you understand?"

BERKEH STOPPED IN FRONT OF THE Raichik's home and smiled. He wanted to be swept along with a tide of his peers, down its old, deep-set course, close his eyes and float along. It was so easy. Someone mentions a girl. The parents talk. You go out with her, and then life takes its course for you. The engagement, the wedding, the buying of furniture, the plans for

the first year—all a standard form, all his friends the same. That was the pride in it, being the same. It meant you had arrived, joined a fine, exclusive club. You measured up against all of them and melded into them, indistinguishable, breathless at the calculated acceptance, thrilled that they see and are happy for you.

He hesitated in the car. Should he go to the door? He didn't want to be seen. What would he say if her mother answered? He'd missed that part: the requisite dormitory conferences with boys who had already dated, the tips about just these things. With lips pursed in indecision, he honked twice. It was a quiet time in the neighborhood. Large trees rustled above their shadows on the walks. Somewhere a dog barked.

When she finally emerged, she skipped down the concrete stairs and let the screen door bang. It echoed down the street. She seemed cheerful, and when she opened the front car door and got in with a founce, she smoothed her crisp, blue skirt in front of her, looked modestly downward for a moment, then looked straight into his eyes and offered the first hello. A scarf on her shoulders set off her face above a long neck, like a long-stemmed rose.

His first thought was that she was so at ease that it seemed she must have gone out with several boys before him. Her eyes were lively, her face open and friendly. Berkeh tried to relax. He tried not to think the worst thoughts—that he would say all the wrong things, or that she might see that a barely visible Shlomo clung to him from behind.

"So you're Shayna Raichik."

"Did you expect someone else?" This, smiling.

"Just checking."

Berkeh put the car in gear and pulled out onto the narrow lane. For a few minutes they drove in silence; Berkeh didn't know what to say.

"Where are we going?"

He did not look up from the road.

"The Ambassador?"

It was common for the boys to take their clandestine dates to the grand old lobby of the aging luxury hotel. There was a certain anonymity in a big city crowd that allowed them to talk together, far away from the eyes of their friends. The only couples seen in public together inside their community were engaged or already married.

"Oh, no," she said, sounding playful

and appalled. His foot jerked on the pedal. "That old place? It's so stifling."

Berkeh was completely confused. He said nothing for the moment and gripped the wheel tighter. "Then where?"

"The Highlands?"

Both were aware of the protocol that required their date to be both away from their community with its gossip and in a public place, with anonymous passersby forming a sort of chaperone.

"The Highlands? But no one will be there."

"Well, not hundreds, like at the Ambassador, but oh, I don't care. There'll be someone there, and I can talk there. I can breathe." She paused. Berkeh was driving forward with no destination. "You want to know if I can be your wife, right? How can you find anything out about me when we're sitting on some hotel couch and chatting about, I don't know, how many siblings we have?"

"How many do you have?"

"Eight, and you?"

"Four."

"Small family."

"We take what we get."

"Mom's going to have another in May."

"Shayna?"

"What?"

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen for two more months."

Berkeh smiled and made a right turn. He took a deep breath and relaxed. Park Lane was three streets over. "I think I can get into the middle of the park from there. I wonder if the tennis house is open."

Berkeh turned off the roadway onto a gravel path leading into the large, central city park. He parked near the gated entrance.

"Uh oh," she said.

"What is it?"

"Wrong shoes."

"You want to go?"

"I can handle it if we walk slow."

There was a cultivated garden at the front followed by a path into the park that was wide and well trampled. The arboretum was deep and dense. Items were labeled or transplanted with care for preservation. There were maps at the gatehouse, but they didn't stop for directions.

Many of the trees were old and black. Their knotted branches were heavy with rough bark. Olive green leaves were interspersed with spots of sunlight and the del-

icate yellow-green of new growth. Shayna stopped at the head of the path and leaned her head back to take it all in with a smile. She drew in a deep breath.

To Berkeh, the park was self-contained and controlled. A garden of Torah. Rows of flowers stood at attention; their beauty contrived, transcendent. His father's garden.

But for Berkeh the garden of Torah was not so perfect. As he walked he noticed rot, and twisted roots, and new cuttings struggling to take hold. They paused at a tree, still green, that lay on its side, its roots sprawled in the air, helpless.

"I wonder what could bring down a young tree like that?" she said.

"Maybe," he said, "maybe the soil wasn't right. Maybe the earth here couldn't hold it."

Varieties of mushrooms with their small, tilted caps teetered on firm upright stalks, still glistening from an earlier rain, seeking to spread their fecund spores. How would it feel to wander here alone with Shlomo, relaxed and unpressured, unjudged, unseen, with the subtle breeze touching their faces?

Berkeh and Shayna drank in the smell

of sun and green, tinged with car exhaust. On one side of the path lay a fallen, hollowed tree. It was an old tree and its hole was a cave. "Don't you wish," he had to ask, "that you could climb in?" He imagined the rich smell of moss and greenness in that womblike peace. There he could retreat from the forces that were pulling him in opposite directions.

"It would be delicious for about five minutes," she said and looked at him, puzzled. Then her face softened, and there was a look of delicate interest about her, almost wonder, like someone gazing at something rare and specialized. Berkeh didn't respond, although he felt he was being both examined and appreciated. Shayna's gaze fell to his feet and came up again, like a whispered touch.

Finally, a turn in the path revealed a bench with clumps of wildflowers clustered around its feet. It was set against a tree trunk in a clearing near the old tennis house. She sighed and sat down, kicked off her shoes, then leaned over to rub the top of a sore foot. He joined her on the bench, leaving a modest space between them.

"You're not a big talker." She looked up at him.

"I'm sure you already know plenty."

"Why do you say that?"

"How many questions did you ask before you accepted the offer to go out with me?"

She laughed. "About a hundred."

"I guess I passed."

"The preliminaries."

"And why did I pass?"

She paused. "Well, you have all the standard criteria."

"Like what?" He asked, but he knew.

"A good, religious boy. Careful with prayers. Good family. Dedicated to his learning. Good reputation in the yeshiva."

"You just described dozens of guys at the yeshiva."

"My father likes you."

"Ohh."

"That's important."

"Of course it is."

"To him. And to me. I mean, he'll probably look for someone he can take into his business."

"Oh." For a light-headed moment Berkeh's mind jumped past his Talmud to picture himself seated behind a desk, managing real estate.

"Well?" she said.

"What?"

"How many questions did you ask about me?"

He blushed. "Uh, zero."

"Zero?"

"Uh, yes. I mean, you're Rabbi Raichik's daughter."

"Rabbi Raichik's daughter. So I could have three hands and one eye sticking out of the top of my head and you'll still go out with me because I'm Rabbi Raichik's daughter?"

"Well, once."

"Once." Silence, but she smiled. "And what about Shayna? How many times will you go out with that girl? Shayna without a last name. Shayna sitting right here on her own, thank you."

He grinned at her, surprised. "At the present moment, he said, "the calculation is approximately ... four hundred and twenty three. But don't worry. Those are just the points you got on the first hour."

She laughed and leaned back. The bright sunlight through the leaves above them made a pattern across her face. The scent of the leaves mixed with the smell of sunlight. Her smile was more gentle than Shlomo's, but somehow it seemed too soft. Everything about her seemed too soft. Not unpleasant, he told himself, resolute.

"I don't want to go home," she said. "I could just stay here." She turned to him. "You're, I don't know, nice to be with. I feel safe with you."

He was relaxed, had let his guard down. He had begun to convince himself that this could be a simple and pleasant friendship. Then she reached her hand toward his face and held it there, just beyond the forbidden touch, but close enough for him to feel her warmth on his cheek. He froze. She was trembling. Her mouth hung slightly open as she looked at him and leaned forward. Her hand hovered there. "I wish ..." she said.

He shifted on the bench. "I don't think ..." he said. She flushed, withdrew her hand, and retreated to bend over and put her shoes on. When she stood up, their eyes met, and then both looked away again, embarrassed.

They walked back slowly and did not speak of her almost-touch. As they walked, he waited for the momentary awkwardness to pass, as if together they were walking away from the moment. He wanted to see them sharing space in a separate, undemanding way, fitting around one

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another like puzzle pieces, easier in a way, he was sure, with her, without the electrifying, confusing feeling that he had with Shlomo.

It was growing dark. Their shadows overlapped in front of them on the path. They spoke on and off on the drive home and the empty moments seemed easy enough between them, in spite of Shlomo's stubborn image in the periphery of his mind's eye. "Don't forget me," she said as she got out of the car. He called to her as she walked up the steps to her front door.

"Yes?" She turned toward him.

He leaned across the seat so she could see his face through the window on the passenger side.

"Next time wear tennis shoes!"

She laughed that laugh of hers. "You bet!"

ON SUNDAY EVENING A GROUP OF BOYS from the yeshiva walked into the cavernous lobby of the Ambassador Hotel. The mood was high. It was late and they had missed the outdoor wedding ceremony.

The group headed toward the main hall for the celebration. The wedding hall was filled with waiting people and with the sounds of happy conversation, the clink of catering dishes, and the smell of food; the first soundings of wedding music wafted into the lobby. The boys were eager, affected by the fresh joy radiating from the milling, smiling crowd ahead of them.

Berkeh was among them, from the outside indistinguishable from the others in his energy, his camaraderie, his pleasure that yet another friend had reached, in marriage, fulfillment.

The group came upon Shlomo, who had been standing alone in the lobby off to the side, and swept past him with waves and greetings. Berkeh caught Shlomo's nod toward nearby chairs. Helpless to resist, he held back and sent the other boys on.

The two sat together in the old chairs of heavy brocade over dark, ornate wood where Berkeh had intended to sit with Shayna on their date. The entry area of the hotel was covered with worn, red velvet carpeting and the high ceiling was studded with large, yellowed chandeliers, glistening in their own light.

Shlomo looked as if he had not slept. Berkeh read the familiar face, each shadow and line, as he had read it since they were

boys. He told himself he must be the *ner Hasbem*, the candle of God, wavering, small and weak, yes, but constant in its reach to the above. But he felt riveted to the presence before him. This, thought Berkeh, is desire. Aching helplessness.

For a few moments the two sat watching the wedding traffic in the lobby, unable to find words, and an onlooker might have thought them bored or waiting for someone. Shlomo leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees, as if it was necessary to whisper beneath the vaulted ceiling that protected their privacy with a blanket of air.

"I'm leaving tomorrow." Shlomo's words stood there unembellished, alone because he was alone. "I'll miss you," Shlomo said. "I can hardly think of going without you."

Loss washed over Berkeh. Now that it was real, he was surprised at the size of it. He had pelted himself forward down a different corridor, but how could he cut away the part of himself that was Shlomo? Berkeh wanted to grab Shlomo's hand and ask him not to leave. If he felt that touch just once more, it would open

something that Berkeh couldn't resist. He would forget Shayna, forget the yeshiva. Forget his father.

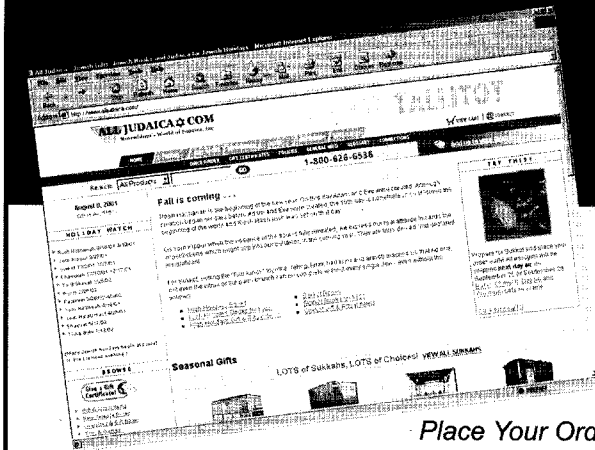
He wanted to say something that would make Shlomo open the door. "Shlomo, I..." But he didn't know the words.

Shlomo seemed unable to knock at a door he knew to be locked. He stood to go.

Berkeh stood, too, and then, just as Shayna had reached out to him, he reached out with a trembling hand to Shlomo's face; Shlomo's steady eyes were on him. The pads of Berkeh's tremulous fingers traced the side of the familiar nose, traced the lips, and traveled across the cheek in a caress, resting on a thin line of curled hair in the blond beard. Shlomo put his hand on Berkeh's shoulder and took a step closer to him.

Two fellow students were passing, headed into the wedding hall. One stopped a few paces ahead of Berkeh and Shlomo and then looked back at them, curious, just in the moment that Shlomo raised his other hand to Berkeh's other shoulder and leaned forward. The young

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man had polished his shoes. His eyes were already bright with excitement and vodka. "Hey, you guys coming in?" he said. His friend hovered, impatient.

Berkeh pulled his hand away from Shlomo's face as if he'd been burned. *Oh my God*, he thought. He saw a silent, too-long interchange between two sets of eyes, two knowing grins.

Berkeh's face went red. He was nauseated, full of raw fear. "Sure. I'll be right there," he said in a light and eager tone. The boys looked at each other and laughed, and then they passed, the first with a dismissing wave over his shoulder.

The heat of humiliation turned to rage. One look at Shlomo fed the fire in him. "You go ahead and leave," he said. "Maybe you don't belong here. But I..."

Shlomo stepped back, hurt, his eyes narrowed and cutting. He laughed. "Well, you'll see," he said.

Berkeh turned toward the celebration, in a fury, ready now.

The hall for the wedding celebration was divided down the middle by a lattice partition elaborately woven with long strands of decorative ivy and scattered flowers. The area on one side of the partition was full of milling women, elegantly

coifed, in formal gowns. The other side was a sea of black suits and black hats. At the end of the partition was a single long table heavily draped in rolls of pink satin and laden with fruits and pastries and every imaginable type of dainty food, interspersed with flowers, ribbon, and ivy. Both men and women hovered, nibbling from flowered plates. A three-course meal was to be served later.

Beyond the end of the partition at the front of the hall a band played. Hebrew lyrics were set to a wild mixture of liturgical, klezmer, rock, folk, classical music, and modern Israeli tunes, all at the same fast pace, all at earsplitting volume. Berkeh entered the men's side with Shlomo several feet behind him just moments before the band came to a dramatic stop. The lead player shouted into the microphone in an Israeli accent, "Ladies and gentlemen: Mr. And Mrs. Yossi Bendell!"

The bride and groom appeared at the doorway and the band immediately went into a frenzy. The couple separated and were swept into wild dancing on their respective sides.

The men whirled in circles around the groom, arm over arm. They stepped, they jumped, they sang. Hats came off. Jackets and ties and collars were opened, shirts unbuttoned.

This is home, Berkeh told himself. He looked at the groom and pictured himself in that place, made himself want again the warm satisfaction of such honor, like an arrival.

He jumped into the current. Everywhere red faces with open-mouthed smiles flew past and his feet carried him as if on air. Berkeh danced arm in arm with the others in one of the concentric circles of dancers around the groom, ready now to meld indistinguishable. The groom danced in the center with his father, his father-in-law, his new brothers-in-law and various people he wished to honor. With each circling Berkeh caught a fleeting image of Shlomo standing on the side, separate, different, and with each sighting Berkeh stepped higher and lighter and gripped the shoulders of the dancers on either side of him with more surety.

Bottles of vodka were passed. Unknown hands appeared at Berkeh's face to tilt tiny plastic cups of vodka into his mouth. A flush rose into his ears.

All clasped arms, whirling, whirling. A group of young men swooped into the

middle of the spinning circle, nudged the groom into a chair and lifted him upwards while they danced. The groom held on to the edges of the seat while the unsteady, tipping chair danced in the air above the others, who were still whirling arm over arm. Then the inner group lowered the groom and put him on top of a table that they had stripped, without ceremony, of its elaborate pink settings. More vodka was passed in a kiddush cup, and Berkeh tipped the cup himself now. He felt the warmth in his face and head, felt the blurring in his feet and tongue. And still he danced, furious, enthused, determined.

An hour passed, and part of another. Berkeh spun out of the circle to catch his breath and saw Shayna standing by the Viennese table. She turned and flushed when she saw him coming.

She was looking at him as he reached for a petit four. "You're different from the others," she said in the minute that the band paused between pieces. "I like that."

"I doubt that." He grinned and heard the foreign slur in his voice.

"Oh yes?" she said, teasing him. The band started up again. Dancers wiped brows and jumped back in.

Berkeh waved his arm, the petit four in his hand, at the circles dancing around the bride and groom. The motion of his arm was large and liquid from alcohol. "You know," he shouted above the music. "That could be us."

Shayna's eyes widened, glistened at what she took to be an invitation. "I would like that," she mouthed back to him.

"Yes?" His face was bright, eyes wide, smiling. "Hah!" he said. He put down the unfinished pastry and with fists raised he jumped back into the whirling circle with a new, fierce joy, victorious, full of the image of himself as the head of a household, a father, a scholar and community leader, a mensch. Best of all, he saw his father dancing at his wedding.

A few young men rushed in, still stepping to the music, and lifted the table up with the seated groom on it until he could salute his bride on the other side of the partition. Berkeh danced with the others around the groom, who was sitting high up on the table, and everyone clapped and shouted and sang. It was all becoming a pantomime; Berkeh's ears were growing deaf from the music. One of the rabbis dug small beanbags out of his pocket and began to

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juggle. Three young men balanced themselves on each other's shoulders like a drunken tower, wavering their way up to the groom. More vodka was passed. Another rabbi jumped in wearing a clown face and wig.

The men lowered the table and the groom jumped off and rejoined the dancing, and the whirling circle broke up into several smaller ones, one inside the other, each going in the opposite direction. Several spinning couples of men flew in and around it.

Berkeh moved to the innermost circle of dancers, where he couldn't see Shlomo past the string of dancing men. His head spun with the music. He, too, stripped off his hat and jacket and tossed them aside and turned and turned, red-faced and grinning. His limbs felt light and unconnected. He was an inner part now of a huge and noisy machine where he didn't have to think, didn't have to know anything but the stream of motion. Just move, go, and be filled with the pleasure of fitting into the larger flow of forward movement. His feet continued without stop and carried him along with the others, and then he was shoved forward to dance with the groom. Just as they began, someone handed Berkeh a larger cup of vodka and shouted "Mazel tov!" and Berkeh drank it all. Then Berkeh grasped arms with the groom and jumped into a faster dance, and the groom's feet tripped through an elaborate series of hazy steps while the music pulsated and filled Berkeh's whole brain with its beat. Uncontrolled laughter spilled out of him.

Then the groom let go too quickly for the next one. Berkeh's feet were not ready and he flew away and into Shlomo, who seemed to be waiting there to catch him. Shlomo grasped first one of his arms and then both to steady him while the inner circle of dancers widened to encompass them, and it felt as if the groom and his brother had melted away, as if the spinning circle were focused on them, including the passing faces of the two boys that had seen them in the lobby who were laughing now and pointing and Berkeh laughed with them.

Now Berkeh and Shlomo were the pulse that drove the machine. For the smallest moment, in between the beats of the music, Shlomo's beard was against his cheek and Berkeh felt Shlomo's hand at his back, felt Shlomo's breath blown into

his ear. Berkeh thought he heard rhythmic words in the pulse of the music. Same. We're the same.

The music's speed increased and the two were holding one another as a single spinning, teetering top, whirling now, each hand gripping a forearm against the centrifugal force that could rip them apart. For a full minute they were blurred together as the fleeting image of the laughing faces burned into Berkeh's

brain and Berkeh held on, his face contorting, his shoulders rising, a wave going through him, and they were fused as a spinning unit, balanced in twirling motion. The music drove their feet and Shlomo's pulsing arms filled Berkeh's hands. Then Shlomo's blue-green eyes were in front of his and Berkeh felt the bear hug of Shlomo's chest pounding against his and the cold air on the tears spilling down his cheeks. ❁



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