

**A Rabbi, a Prophet, and a King
Walk into a Bar
and other
Jewish Stories Every
Person Should Know**

Stories that reveal Jewish humor,
traditions, and values.

retold by
Sandy Schuman

This Too Shall Pass Press
Albany, New York

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What is a Jewish Story?

Is there anything special about Jewish stories? What is it that makes a story distinctively *Jewish*?

I thought I would explore this original question—until I discovered that it wasn't so original; others had already asked the question and given thoughtful answers, writing about unique aspects of Jewish folktales, jokes, and humor.

Henry Eilbert wrote that a joke is *Jewish* if it "stems from the conditions of Jewish life or from the experience of the Jewish people, ... depends on the use of a Jewish language ... or shows real or supposed Jewish characteristics or stereotypes."¹

According to Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, a *Jewish* joke "must express a Jewish sensibility ... concerning precisely those subjects and values that receive disproportionate attention among Jews. Antisemitism ... professional success ... verbal combativeness and aggression ...

¹ Henry Eilbert, *What is a Jewish Joke*. Jason Aaronson, 1981, pp. 59-61.

assimilation ... logic and argumentation ... family relationships ..."²

A *Jewish* folktale is depicted by Nathan Ausubel as "philosophical and subtle, pious and moralistic, witty and ironic ... ethical, pointing a lesson of right conduct, ceaselessly instructing, often even when it is being entertaining or humorous. ... The most precious quality in them is their agitation over the eternal mysteries of the human soul."³

As seen by William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, Jewish humor "is substantive ... can be sarcastic, complaining, resigned, or descriptive ... tends to be anti-authoritarian ... has a critical edge which creates discomfort in making its point ... and mocks everyone – including God."⁴

Dov Noy, founder of the Israel Folktale Archives, showed that a *Jewish* folktale involves four main elements:

1. a Jewish *time* (such as a holiday or life cycle event)
2. a Jewish *place* (such as a synagogue or the Land of Israel)
3. Jewish *characters* (such as a rabbi, or a person from Jewish historical figure)
4. a Jewish *message* (such as an ethical teaching, or duty to God, family, and community)⁵

These explanations make sense and provide useful insights. But the most satisfying explanation I've found is this:

A distinctively Jewish story is one that a non-Jew wouldn't understand, and a Jewish person has already heard.

Given that definition, if you are Jewish but don't know these stories, this book amounts to required reading. Read on so you too can say "Yeah, I heard it before"—and then tell your version, which is, of course, better.

By retelling these stories, we share what we find of value.

² Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*. William Morrow, 1992, pp. 16-17.

³ Nathan Ausubel, Editor, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*. Crown, 1948, pp. xx-xxi

⁴ William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, Eds, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. Harper. 1981. pp. xx-xxii.

⁵ Dov Noy, "What is Jewish about the Jewish Folktale." In, Howard Schwartz, *Miriam's Tambourine*. Oxford University. 1988. pp. xxxiii

Tell These Stories!

Storytelling is the primary vehicle for transmitting Jewish history, traditions, values, and beliefs across generations. While we are often referred to as the "People of the Book" we could just as well be described as the "People of the Story." Following in the Jewish storytelling tradition, these are some of my favorites.

These stories are meant to be told. Yes, you can read them aloud for someone else to hear. But, more importantly, you can tell them, heart to heart, wherever and whenever they serve a purpose.

So, take one story that finds a place into your heart. Learn the "bones" of it; its basic elements. When you tell it, "flesh it out."

Tell the story when it becomes relevant to the circumstances you find yourself in. For example, when a child asks you the meaning of "hospitality," tell "With God's Blessing." When friends are stuck in a back-and-forth argument, tell "What is Our Tradition." When colleagues argue

about trivial matters, tell "The Man on the Bridge."

Learn one story and tell it. Then, learn another. Have these stories at the ready. You never know when they might come in handy.

Example "Bones" of a Story.

Elijah the prophet, disguised as a poor, old traveler, visits the house of a rich family and is given some meager food and a lousy place to sleep. He thanks them: "Whatever you do next, may you continue to do forever." The next night he visits the house of a poor family. They welcome him into their home and set up a bed for him. He thanks them the same way but adds, "with God's blessing." The next thing they do is wash the bedding but, the bedding reappears "forever." They sell the bedding and are no longer poor. The rich family is still peeing.

For a "fleshed out" version, see "With God's Blessing."

A Rabbi, a Prophet, and a King Walk into a Bar

Sounds like a joke, takeh. My purpose in placing the next three stories under this joke-inducing title is to help you remember and retell them. I will tell you the punch line but, to understand it, you have to know these three stories.

The Angel's Question

His students gathered in his room, praying for his recovery. "How do you feel, Reb Zushya?" one of his students asked.

Laying in his bed, his eyes red and teary, Reb Zushya replied in exhausted gasps, "It feels as though a heavy stone is weighing on my chest." Mercifully, Reb Zushya fell asleep. He slept for an hour, and when he awoke, he pushed himself to a sitting position. His students saw his improved posture and looked hopeful.

"You look a little better, Reb Zushya, how do you feel?"

"I had a dream," he replied. "In the dream I had died and was to be judged at the Gates of Heaven. I looked down the long line of people ahead of me and I saw how, when they approached the Gate, each person was questioned by the Interviewing Angel."

His students gave him their full attention, eager to understand the significance of his dream.

"I stood in line, trembling, anticipating the question I would be asked. Perhaps the Interviewing Angel would ask me, 'Why didn't you rise to the potential of Moshe Rabbeinu?' 'Why didn't you rise to the potential of Rabbi Akiva?' 'Why didn't you rise to the potential of the Baal Shem Tov?' I waited in line apprehensively, preparing and rehearsing my responses."

"Finally, it was my turn. I approached the Gates of Heaven. The Interviewing Angel looked into my soul and asked, 'Why didn't you rise to the potential of Reb Zushya?'"

"And then I woke up."

Stunned, the students looked into their own hearts, wondering about their own unfulfilled potential. After a long pause, one student asked, "How do you feel now, Reb Zushya?"

"I feel like the great stone has been lifted from my chest," Reb Zushya replied, "and placed on my shoulders."

With God's Blessing

The old traveler, weary from his day's journey, approached a grand house with a lovely garden and flagstone walkway. He grasped the ornate iron handrail and made his way up the red sandstone steps, knocked on the door and waited, and knocked again. At last, the door opened part way. Inside the door he saw a well-dressed man and woman. The old traveler said to them, "I have been walking all day and as evening approaches I wonder if you might have a place where I could spend the night and if perhaps you could give me something to eat." They looked him up and down, noticing his worn and tattered clothing, covered with dust from the road. They looked at each other apprehensively. One of them turned to the old traveler and spoke.

"There is a storage shed behind the house. You can sleep there. You'll find an old rug you can use as a blanket. And here is some leftover bread to eat." With that they closed the door and the old traveler

took his bread and went to the shed to sleep.

The following morning, he knocked again, and after a time the householders came to the door. "Thank you for allowing me to spend the night," he said, "and thank you for the bread." The man and woman looked quizzically at him until they recalled his coming the night before. "Whatever you do next," he continued, "may you continue to do forever." The householders were puzzled by this statement but gave it no thought, coming as it did from a man of no consequence. They closed the door without a word. The old traveler turned to the road and continued his journey.

He walked all day long and, as evening approached, he came upon a small house. A dirt path led to the weathered wood steps in front of the door. He grasped the handrail but it wobbled unsteadily. He knocked on the door and was soon greeted by a man and woman. The old traveler said to them, "I have been walking all day and as evening approaches I wonder if you might have a

place where I could spend the night and if perhaps you could give me something to eat." They smiled and welcomed him into their home.

They were about to have their supper, which had already been served but not tasted. They placed a third bowl on the table and ladled some soup from each of their bowls into the third, so each had an equal portion. They asked the traveler about his journey and he asked about their lives in the village, and they talked until it was time for bed. The man and woman made up a mattress in the kitchen with their best linens and gave their guest fresh towels so he could wash.

The following morning the old traveler said, "Thank you for allowing me to spend the night, and thank you for sharing your supper. Whatever you do next," he continued, "may you continue to do forever, with God's blessing." The man and woman were puzzled by this statement but smiled graciously as they waved goodbye and watched the old man walk back to the road and resume his journey.

They returned to the kitchen and gathered up the sheets and towels. They carefully washed them and dried them and stored them away. But, when they returned to the kitchen, they saw linens and towels still there. So, they gathered them up and carefully washed them and dried them and stored them away. They returned to the kitchen and again found linens and towels! They realized, that was no ordinary traveler; their guest had been the Prophet Elijah in disguise! Whenever they needed money, they could sell their linens and towels and they would no longer live in poverty.

As for the first household, upon his departure the Prophet Elijah had said the same thing, "Whatever you do next may you continue to do forever" but, he did not conclude, "with God's blessing." After he went on his way, both the man and the woman had to use the toilet. They went to different bathrooms and, to this day, they are both sitting on the toilet peeing.

An alternate ending

When I told this story at an interfaith storytelling program, with people from various cultures and religions, I was concerned that some people might be offended by the ending. So, I created an alternate ending. Ironically, I actually like this ending better but, it doesn't work with my joke.

After the old traveler went on his way, the man said to the woman, "Go to the shed and see what that old man stole from us." To which the woman replied, "No, you go out to the shed and see what he stole." So, they argued and argued and to this day they are still arguing.

This Too Shall Pass

King Solomon was unable to concentrate. His faithful advisor and general, Benaiah, asked what troubled him. "When I make a wise decision, I feel good," the king explained, "but sometimes I become over-confident and then my decisions are foolish. At other times, when I make poor decisions, I despair, and my confidence is shaken. When that happens, my wisdom is diminished. How can I prevent these changes that impair my judgment?"

Benaiah promised to help his King. "I will consult with people throughout the kingdom in search of an antidote." Benaiah talked with people and recorded their wisdom. After a year had passed, he reviewed his many writings, sifting through and trying to find the words of wisdom that would help his king. While all the collected sayings were wise, none provided a remedy. Forlorn, Benaiah made his way back to the palace. He had failed in his task; he was unable to keep his promise to help the king. How could

he ever again hold his head high in King Solomon's presence?

As he considered his unhappy position, he heard the wind whispering, "This too shall pass. This too shall pass." The wind's whisper made him feel better, knowing that however bad he now felt, in time his situation would improve.

There was the answer! That was the wisdom he could give the king to make him feel better in times of distress. Elated, he held his head high and quickened his pace. Then he heard the wind whisper again, "This too shall pass. This too shall pass." And he realized that his high spirits were also fleeting, that in time they would be tempered. He felt the wisdom of the wind and entered the palace in a more restrained mood.

"My king," he began, "I have searched the kingdom for wisdom but only now have I heard it from the wind. Whenever you feel too happy or self-confident, and whenever you feel too sad or self-doubting, you only need recall the words of the wind, 'This too shall pass.'"

King Solomon found these words wise and inscribed them on a ring, which he wore always.

גַּם זֶה יַעֲבֹר
Gam zeh ya-avor
This too shall pass.

The Joke

With apologies to anyone who has ever had a kidney stone, here is the joke:

A rabbi, a prophet, and a king walk into a bar.

The rabbi says, "I have a stone."

The prophet says, "I have to pee."

The king says, "This too shall pass."

responds, "I recall a man who used to be known by that name.

The students follow the villager's directions and proceed down a narrow street, which turns into a dirt road, which turns into an overgrown footpath. They spy a small cabin ahead. As they approach, they see a window sealed up with cardboard, some shingles missing from the roof, the outer door hanging askew from its upper hinge. Carefully, they knock at the door. A voice from within whispers, "I'll be with you soon."

In a few minutes, a man opens the door from within and asks, "What can I do for you, my sons?"

"Our rabbi sent us here to ask a question. Are you Reb Zushya?"

"Yes, I am. Welcome, come in, but please be quiet. My wife is very ill, and she has just gone to sleep." He pointed to a blanket drawn across the opposite corner of the cabin's single room. He waved in the students and pulled up two wooden boxes so they could sit around the table. He reached for three cups, apologizing for their broken handles, and filled them with

Reb Zushya's Bad Day

Two students are studying the psalms and they come to the line, "This is the day God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). As they discuss the line and probe its meaning they arrive at a difficulty. So, they ask their rabbi. "On a good day, when you have everything you need—food, clothing, shelter—it is easy to say this line with a full heart. But, on a bad day, how can we say it with genuine intent?"

"A good question," says their rabbi. "For this question, 'you should visit Reb Zushya.'"

To find Reb Zushya the students travel to a distant village. At last, they arrive in the heart of the village. They ask, "Can you tell us where we can find Reb Zushya?"

"Sorry, we don't know anyone by that name."

They knock on many doors, receiving the same response. They continue to inquire further and further from the center of the village and still, no one knows of Reb Zushya. Finally, someone

water. The table wobbled as he set them down. He broke his remaining bread in three pieces. When they each had something to drink and eat, he asked, "What is this question you have come here to ask?"

One of the students explained, "We are studying the psalms and came to the line, 'This is the day God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.' We were troubled by it, so we asked our rabbi. 'It is easy to say this line with a full heart on a good day. But, on a bad day, how can we really mean it?' Our rabbi told us, 'This is a question you should ask Reb Zushya.' So, here we are."

Puzzled, Reb Zushya looked at one student and then the other. Shaking his head slowly, he replied, "I don't know why your rabbi sent you to ask me this question, I have never had a bad day!"

Dealing with Differences

Many folktales revolve around a conflict and how it is resolved. Here are a few from the Jewish tradition. I have placed the first three in Herschel's Kosher Bakery

The Bakery Bout

Friday morning at Herschel's Kosher Bakery is the busiest time of the week. Everyone comes to buy their *challah* for Shabbat and whatever additional treats are in store for their families—*rugelach*, *babka*, *mandelbrot*, *strudel*, *kichel*—whatever they like. Jake usually comes early in the morning, right after *minyan*, while Abe usually does some grocery shopping after *minyan* and arrives at the bakery an hour later, just so he can avoid running into Jake. But, on this particular day, Jake and Abe arrive at the bakery at the same time, which is unfortunate because Jake and Abe are like *milkhik* and *fleyshik*, they should never be in the same place at the same time. When Herschel sees the two men waiting on the long line

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of customers, he anticipates trouble. True to his expectations, Jake and Abe are soon yelling at each other, arguing over who knows what and it wouldn't matter if you did. Herschel's customers are disturbed; rather than witness this behavior, some head for the door. Herschel is anxious; he's losing customers.

To Herschel's relief, the rabbi arrives, as he does every Friday morning to buy his *challah*, and approaches the arguing pair. "Jake," he says, "you're scaring away Herschel's customers. What's the problem?" In a shrill tone, Jake quickly gives his side of the story. "You're right, Jake, you're right," replies the rabbi. Incensed, Abe jumps in and vigorously presents his side of the story. "You're right, Abe, you're right," replies the rabbi.

Herschel, who has been listening closely, speaks up. "But rabbi, these two men have been arguing and arguing, how can they both be right?" Considering Herschel's point, the rabbi furrows his brow. Then he brightens up and responds, "You're right too!"

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The Listener

Fortunately for Herschel, Jake and Abe return to their usual schedules and are not seen at his bakery at the same time, until one day, months later, when they both appear in the early afternoon. Most of the customers have already come and gone so, at least, they won't disrupt his business. But when Jake and Abe start arguing, this time in Yiddish, they feel unrestrained by the presence of others and in only moments they are screaming and pushing and shoving each other. Herschel, fearing their violence will escalate, wishes the rabbi would show up but he has already bought his *challah* and gone home. What is he to do? Desperate, he runs out of the bakery to the Catholic church across the street. He finds the priest and begs him to come to the bakery.

The priest approaches the two men. Initially, they ignore him and continue arguing in Yiddish. The priest places his hand on Jake's shoulder. Turning to the priest, Jake makes his case; in his

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excitement, he is still speaking Yiddish. The priest quietly nods his head and gazes sympathetically. Abe wants his turn, so he faces the priest and begins to explain his position, still speaking Yiddish. Again, the priest listens intently, nodding his head respectfully. Jake wants another turn to explain things to the priest, more calmly now, carefully elucidating his point of view, as does Abe. The priest continues to listen and acknowledge each man. Gradually, the two men begin listening to each other. They begin turning their attention from the priest to each other, still speaking Yiddish, but now in more considerate voices. In a few minutes, the two men have resolved their differences and shake hands. Herschel, meanwhile, has put their orders together and as he hands them their shopping bags, the two men wish "*Shabbat Shalom*" and leave the bakery.

Herschel, ever so grateful, wraps up a seeded rye and a chocolate *babka*—the priest's weekly order (for he is also a regular customer) and throws in an apple strudel for good measure. Refusing

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payment from the priest, he thanks him profusely. "I so appreciate your help, and on such short notice. I fear what would have happened without you. But tell me, how is it that you understand Yiddish?"

The priest replied, "In my profession, you have to be a good listener, but of what they said to me, I didn't understand a word."

What is Our Tradition

We can't say that Jake and Abe became the best of friends but, they came to amicable terms and no longer avoided each other. They conversed civilly, most of the time. Meeting at Herschel's Bakery one Friday after *minyan*, Jake laments the loss of a tradition. "It used to be that when we came to the Mourner's *Kaddish*, only the mourner's stood, but now, it seems, everyone stands."

Abe, looking quizzically, responds, "No, that's not how I remember it. When it came to the Mourner's *Kaddish*, everyone stood. That has always been our tradition!"

"No," returned Jake, "it has always been our tradition that only the mourners rise!"

Back and forth, each of them makes his case again and again, with no resolution in sight. Herschel, who has been monitoring this conversation cautiously, tries to forestall an escalated argument. "Gentlemen," he says, "why not pay a visit

to your old teacher, Rabbi Schwartz, and ask him!"

Rabbi Schwartz—who gave them both *Bar Mitzvah* lessons so many years ago—has long since retired and moved to Florida. Jake relishes the idea of making the trip just so he can prove himself right and Abe wrong. Abe is no less eager. They buy plane tickets, rent a car, and make their way to Rabbi Schwartz's apartment. Glad to see his students haven't forgotten him, the old rabbi welcomes them warmly. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit," he asks.

Well, Rabbi," Abe begins somewhat sheepishly, Jake and I have been arguing. It's my contention that, in our synagogue, the tradition has always been that, during the Mourner's *Kaddish*, everyone stands, the mourners as well as everyone else."

"No," responds the rabbi, shaking his head, "that was never our tradition."

Jake, brightening at the prospect of his victory, puts forward his view. "Yes, our tradition has always been that only the mourners stand for the Mourner's *Kaddish*."

Shaking his head again, the Rabbi responds, "No, that was never our tradition."

Stunned, Jake and Abe call out in one voice, "But Rabbi, one of us has to be right! We've been arguing and arguing and arguing!"

"Aha!" responds the rabbi, nodding, "that is our tradition."

The Man on the Bridge

In 2005, while the British government was considering legislation to outlaw offensive religious jokes, the Ship of Fools website conducted a contest for the best jokes about religion (<https://shipoffools.com>). This joke, which I have adapted and retold in a Jewish context, won first place—out of 951 entries. It was written by comedian Emo Philips, who tells it here: <https://youtu.be/l3fAcxcxoZ8>

On his way home from the airport, Jake drives over a tall bridge. There, standing on the railing, is a man, ready to jump. Alarmed, Jake immediately pulls over and runs over to the man. "Hey, mister, don't jump! You have a lot to live for!"

"Not so," replies the man, "People hate me, the whole world is crazy, I have nothing to live for."

Searching for a way to distract the man, Jake asks, "Do you believe in God?"

"Yes," the man replies.

"Me too!" says Jake, "That's wonderful! Are you Christian, Muslim, Jewish ..."

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"Jewish."

"Me too!" exclaims Jake, "What a coincidence. Which denomination? Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Humanistic, non-denominational, multi-denominational, post-denominational ...?"

"Conservative," the man says.

"Me too!" says Jake. "Which *siddur* do you use?"

"*Siddur Sim Shalom*" the man replies.

"Me too! The 1985 edition edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow or the 2002 edition edited by Rabbi Leonard Cahan?"

"The 2002 edition edited by Rabbi Leonard Cahan," the man says.

"Me too!" says Jake, "That's amazing! And when you say the *Amidah*, do you use page 36a, that names the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or page 36b, that also names the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah?"

"36b" says the man.

"Die you *apikoyris*!" yelled Jake and he pushed the man off the bridge.

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When Rabbis Disagree I: The Oven of Akhnai

The story of the Oven of Akhnai appears in the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59a-b). Unlike most of the stories in this collection, it is not humorous. For decision-making situations where there is not unanimity, it reinforces the Biblical standard for making decisions based on the predominant view. More importantly, with tragic consequences, it underscores the importance of respecting and honoring those who are in the minority.

The sages of ancient Israel convened⁶ to consider a new type of oven that has been presented to them.⁷ Rabbi Eliezer

concludes it cannot convey ritual impurity. However, the other rabbis disagree. In their judgment, it can transmit ritual impurity.

In their deliberative mode, Rabbi Eliezer addresses all the rabbis' concerns. Nonetheless, they maintain their view: the oven is susceptible to ritual impurity.

Rabbi Eliezer will not go along with the predominant view; he insists he is right. "If the *halakha* agrees with me," he says, "let the tree show it." With that, a carob tree in the courtyard is uprooted and lands 100 cubits⁸ away.

The rabbis reply, "Proof cannot come from a carob tree!"

convey ritual impurity. The other rabbis conclude that, because sand fills and cements the gaps, this oven is of a single piece and therefore can convey ritual impurity. The issue of ritual impurity was of great concern in those times (about two millennia ago). For example, if an object came in contact with a dead animal, it would become ritually impure, and any object that that came in contact with it would, in turn, become ritually impure.

⁸ A cubit, a widely used measure in the ancient world, is roughly the distance from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger.

⁶ This is a meeting of the *Sanhedrin*, the supreme judicial authority in ancient Israel.

⁷ The particulars of this oven are something of a distraction from the purpose of this story. In brief, this oven is made of separate sections; sand fills the gaps between them. In previous rulings, it was determined that a vessel made of separate pieces cannot convey ritual impurity but a single, whole vessel can. Rabbi Eliezer considers this oven to be made from separate pieces and therefore cannot

Rabbi Eliezer says, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let the stream show it." The stream stops flowing, reverses direction, and flows backwards.

The rabbis reply, "Proof cannot come from a stream!"

Still striving to enforce his view, Rabbi Eliezer says, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let the walls of the *Beit Midrash* show it." The walls lean inward.

Rabbi Yehoshua calls out, "Stop! If Torah scholars are deliberating in matters of *halakha*, what is your place in it?" In deference to Rabbi Yehoshua, the walls stopped leaning inward, and in deference to Rabbi Eliezer they did not straighten up, and so remain leaning.

In a final attempt to win, Rabbi Eliezer says, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let Heaven prove it." A *Bat Kol* is heard, "Why are you arguing with Rabbi Eliezer; the *halakha* follows him in all cases!"

Impatient with Rabbi Eliezer's attempts, Rabbi Yehoshua abruptly stands and, quoting Moshe Rabbeinu, declares, "It is

not in Heaven!"⁹ What did he mean by this? Rabbi Jeremiah explains: The Torah was given at Sinai. It is our job to interpret it. We don't follow a voice from Heaven. Nor do we follow any individual. Rather, we abide by the predominant or majority interpretation.¹⁰

Having reached their conclusion, the rabbis have all of the objects that came in contact with the Oven of Akhnai burnt in a fire. Further, they ostracize Rabbi Eliezer; he is no longer a member of the judicial body. Learning of this, Rabbi Eliezer is understandably distraught. His wife, Imma Shalom (Mother Peace) prevents him from reciting the twice daily *tachanun* prayer, a personal plea for divine intervention to address wrongdoing. Why? Because Rabbi Gamliel, the leader of the Sanhedrin, the

⁹ *Devarim* 30:12 - "Lo bashamayim hi." "לא בשמים הוא" "It is not in heaven."

¹⁰ *Shemot* 23:2. "Lo-tih'yeh acharey-rabiym l'raot" "לא תהיה אחר-רבים לרעה" "You shall not side with the mighty/ multitude/ predominant view/ majority to do wrong." The implicit corollary is that you should side with the mighty/ multitude/ predominant view/ majority to do right.

judicial body, is her brother. She fears that if Rabbi Eliezer laments his fate, God will seek retribution on his behalf and Rabbi Gamliel will die. Every day she watched her husband and made sure he did not say *tachanun*. However, there are certain days when the *tachanun* prayer is not said, and Imma Shalom miscalculated. She thought it was a day when *tachanun* was not said, and she left him alone while she gave alms to a pauper who came to their door. Indeed, it was a day when *tachanun* is said, and Rabbi Eliezer did so. Within moments, Rabbi Gamliel was dead.

Rabbi Eliezer asked his wife, "How did you know your brother would die?"

She replied, "My father's father taught, 'Even when the gates of Heaven are locked, they still remain open for victims of verbal mistreatment.'"

When Rabbis Disagree II: Hillel and Shammai

Hillel and Shammai lived in the first century BCE and early first century CE. Each founded a school—Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai—that survived through perhaps the 2nd century CE. The legal judgments of these two schools were often in conflict. In this story, adapted from the Talmud (Eruvin 13-b), the subject matter of the dispute is not mentioned.

*Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. Beit Shammai insisted, "The halakha is in accordance with our opinion." Beit Hillel insisted, "The halakha is in accordance with our opinion." Each school presented its arguments and reasoning in an attempt to convince the other. Nonetheless, the disagreement went on and on—for three years! At last, a *Bat Kol* proclaimed, "Both houses express the living words of God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel."*

Since both opinions are the living words of God, why was the *halakha* established in accordance with the opinion of *Beit Hillel*? Because the followers of Hillel were humble and modest, allowing for the possibility that their position might not be the right one or the only right one. They listened carefully to the arguments made by the followers of Shammai and sought to understand and learn from their points of view. When the followers of Shammai became aggressive and adamant, they remained calm and considerate. And when they taught the *halakha*, they respectfully presented the opinion of *Beit Shammai* before giving their own.

The Slanted Mezuzah

Jews who are not observant—they don't keep kosher, they don't go to a synagogue, they don't keep Shabbat—may nonetheless observe at least one commandment: at the entrance to their house, on the doorpost, they have a *mezuzah*.

The *mezuzah*, a small container typically of metal, wood, or ceramic, contains prescribed verses from the Torah (*Devarim* 6:4-9 and 11:13-21). These verses include the instruction, "And you shall write [these words] upon the doorposts of your house ..." These verses are also included in the *Shema*, a central prayer of Jewish religious practice.

Rashi, the 11th century scholar and legal authority, ruled that the *mezuzah* should be mounted on the doorpost vertically, just as the Torah is positioned vertically when it is stored in the *Aron HaKodesh*.

A century later, Rashi's grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, ruled that the *mezuzah* should be mounted horizontally, just as

the Torah is positioned when it is read on the *amud*.

Rabbeinu Asher, the 14th century scholar and compiler of Jewish law, suggested that both rulings should be honored by attaching the *mezuzah* at an angle, with its top inclined toward the inside of the house.

That is how *Ashkenazi* Jews do it to this day.¹¹ And that is how we try to maintain *Shalom HaBayit*, Peace in the House, by leaning into each other, respecting each other's opinions, and finding a way to move forward together.

If Not Even Higher

"*Oyb Nisht Noch Hecher*" ("If Not Even Higher"), was published in 1890 in Yiddish by I. L. Peretz. It has been retold many times with titles such as "Even Higher," "If Not Higher," "And Maybe Even Higher," and "The Rabbi of Nemirov." My version places the story in a contemporary setting. Its source is likely a Hasidic tale about Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov (1745–1807).¹² In that story, Rabbi Hirsh follows Rabbi Moshe Leib at midnight to discover that he chops wood and builds a fire for the mother of a newborn baby who cannot afford to pay. While doing so, he recites the nightly *Tikkun Hatzot*, the Midnight Prayer Service or Lamentations at Midnight.

The New Yorker was looking for a change. His Ph.D. completed, he searched for a post-doc position in a new place,

¹¹ *Sephardi* Jews typically read the Torah vertically and likewise mount a *mezuzah* vertically.

¹² Recorded by Uzziel Meisels and Joseph Karo in *Sefer Menorah Ha-Tehorah* (1883) and by Martin Buber in *Tales of the Hasidim* (1948) with the title, "Lamentations at Midnight."

another part of the country. Observant of Jewish laws and customs, he needed a place where he could continue to attend the daily *minyan*, obtain *kosher* food, and cultivate his Jewish learning. Although a scientist, Jewish practice and scholarship were essential to his being.

Of the few alternatives that met his requirements, he chose a research institute on the other side of the country, in California. His Internet search revealed a congregation with its daily *minyan* schedule and adult education classes posted online. He found an apartment within walking distance of the *shul*, so he wouldn't have to drive there on *Shabbat*. The research institute would be a short commute. Since there was no mass transit, he would buy a car. This was not New York, he reasoned, this was California. He could adapt.

His drive across the continent was an exciting adventure, though tiring and lonely. He arrived in his new hometown as sunset neared. It was time for *ma'ariv* so, he and drove directly to the *shul*. As he entered the *Beit Midrash*, a few minutes

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weekly study group and came to have a great deal of respect for the Rabbi's knowledge and scholarship. The others were impressed by the New Yorker's knowledge of *Torah* and *Talmud*. They tried to involve him in the social justice and other activities of the *shul* but, with his research and studies, he said he was too busy. Nonetheless, he was impressed by the Rabbi's sincerity and how the members of the congregation revered him.

At a *Shabbat* dinner, some months later, he asked a question. He was at the home of the couple that first befriended him. The old woman *bentsht licht*, the old man made *Kiddush*, and he made *motzi*. Over a dinner of grilled tofu, broccoli, yams, and brown rice, they asked about his research and how he felt about his new surroundings. He felt comfortable enough to introduce his question. "I have noticed," he began, "that the Rabbi is at the *minyan* every morning, even on his days off, but never on Fridays. Where does he go?"

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late, the congregants all turned to see. He found himself staring into a room full of graying, long-haired men and women, wearing beaded necklaces and headbands and smelling of patchouli and organic brown rice, carry-overs from the 1960s and '70s.

What had he gotten himself into! He wasn't going to be taken in by this west coast, new-age, hippie spirituality; this California, where pop stars study *Kabbalah*! Oh no, he was rational, traditional, a New York Jew who smelled not of incense, but of pickles and rye bread.

As soon as *ma'ariv* concluded, an elderly couple came over, introduced themselves, and invited him to their home for *Shabbat* dinner on Friday night. And they weren't the only ones. Everyone was delighted to welcome him. Why, by his presence alone the average age of the congregation dropped to 65! He was assured of a *Shabbat* dinner invitation every Friday night.

In addition to becoming a regular *minyanaire*, he attended the Rabbi's

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The old woman glowed with knowing pride, exchanged looks with her husband, and looked back at the New Yorker. "On Friday mornings, our holy Rabbi ascends to heaven to give thanks for our blessings, to beg forgiveness for the wrongdoings of all of mankind, to plead, to pray for justice, for mercy, for the future of humanity, for the future of the world. On Friday mornings, our beloved Rabbi goes up to heaven." The old man nodded slowly, affirming her words.

The New Yorker thought they were making a joke but, he realized, they were serious! He was dismayed. What *meshugas*! Such a *bubbe meiseh*! He had come to trust and respect these people and had even come to find meaning in their repetitious chanting and their *Kiddush Levanah* staring at the new moon and now, it seemed, they were, *epes*, too California for him.

For weeks afterward, at Friday night dinners in home after home, he presented the same question and heard the same answer. He tried to reason with them, to point out its absurdity. His protests were

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met with the same reassuring nod. "On Friday mornings, our beloved Rabbi goes up to heaven." He resolved to put an end to this *narishkeit*. He would follow the Rabbi closely and see where he went.

On Thursday night, after *minyan*, he followed the Rabbi in his car. The Rabbi drove up a driveway and entered the house through the side door. A light went on inside. The New Yorker remained in his car, *krekhtzn* as he made himself comfortable, and watched. The downstairs light went out and, a minute later, an upstairs light went on. He waited. The upstairs light went out, *takeh*, it was late. Thursday became Friday. The Rabbi slept, but not the New Yorker.

He kept himself awake all night by reciting from memory passages of *Torah*, pages of *Talmud*, recalling, chapter and verse, his favorite sayings from *Pirke Avot*. The house was still. Then, a light upstairs. Dawn was approaching. The light went off and, moments later, the downstairs light came on, but not for long. The New Yorker squinted to see more clearly in the dim light. The side door

opened. A man left the house and entered the car but, it didn't look like the Rabbi. The car backed out of the driveway and headed down the street. The New Yorker started his own car and followed.

The Rabbi's car turned into a supermarket parking lot. The New Yorker pulled in too, but kept his distance. In the light of the early dawn, the man that emerged from the Rabbi's car was not dressed like the Rabbi. He wore shorts, a T-shirt, sandals, and a straw cowboy hat. Could he have missed the Rabbi? He waited while the man went into the supermarket.

By the time the man returned, the sun was up. Yes, it was the Rabbi, strangely dressed though he was. He pushed a shopping cart full of paper bags, which he loaded into the back seat of the car. By the way he leaned over to lift the bags, the New Yorker could tell they were heavy. The Rabbi drove out of the parking lot. The New Yorker followed, entering a neighborhood in an old part of town he had not visited before.

The Rabbi parked in front of an old house with peeling paint. The steps leading to the front door were broken, the treads cracked; a crack in the front window was patched with duct tape. The Rabbi got out of his car, opened the rear passenger door and retrieved one of the grocery bags, placing a hand underneath to support the weight. In the stillness of the morning, the New Yorker heard the Rabbi begin *Birkhot Hashachar* as he carried the bag up the steps. The Rabbi knocked loudly. "Delivery man!" he called out.

A fearful, shaky voice responded from inside. "I didn't order anything. I have no money. Go away!"

"Please," the Rabbi replied, "I'm just the delivery man. I don't collect any money. I just have to make the delivery."

"Oh," the voice replied, "my Friday delivery? Is it Friday? I was hoping you would come. Please, come in."

"Of course," the Rabbi responded, "I'll put these things away for you."

The Rabbi brought the bag inside. The New Yorker heard them chatting. It took

several minutes. The Rabbi returned to his car and the New Yorker followed to the next house, and the next, and the next. All morning long it was "Delivery man!"

Back in *shul*, the New Yorker said nothing. He continued to attend the Rabbi's classes and, when the sign-up sheet was passed around to help at the local soup kitchen, he added his name to the list. When the chair for Mitzvah Day took ill, he volunteered to take his place.

One morning, a young woman appeared at the *minyan*. A Mid-Westerner, she had just moved into the area for a job. The old members nearly cheered her arrival and invited her into their homes for *Shabbat* dinner.

Weeks later, at one of those Friday night *Shabbat* dinners, at the home of that first couple who invited him, the New Yorker and the Mid-Westerner found themselves sitting side-by-side. They talked with the old couple about their work and how they were feeling about the community. The young woman had apparently had dinner with them before and she conversed easily. Then, after a pause, she spoke

hesitantly. "I have been at the daily *minyan* for several weeks now, and I have a question. I have noticed the Rabbi is at the *minyan* every morning, even on his days off, but on Fridays he disappears! Where does he go?"

Nodding knowingly, the old man replied, "On Friday mornings, our holy Rabbi rises to heaven to give thanks for our blessings. He begs forgiveness for the wrongdoings of all mankind. He prays for guidance so that we may do what is right and good, so we can make our contribution to *tikkun olam*, to repairing the world. On Friday mornings, our beloved Rabbi goes up to heaven." The old woman smiled radiantly, affirming his words.

The Mid-Westerner stifled a laugh, realizing in disbelief they were serious! Desperately, she looked to the New Yorker. "What do they mean," she whispered, "where does he go?"

The New Yorker leaned toward her ear. "Heaven?" he whispered, pondering how to respond. "Yes. Heaven, if not even higher."

Glossary

<i>Amidah</i>	(Hebrew) central prayer of the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer services
<i>amud</i>	(Hebrew) prayer leader's lectern
<i>apikoyris</i>	(Hebrew) heretic
<i>Aron</i>	(Hebrew) Holy Ark, in which
<i>HaKodesh</i>	<i>Torah</i> scrolls are stored
<i>Ashkenazi</i>	Jews of Europe and their descendants
<i>Baal Shem Tov</i>	(Hebrew) Nickname given to Israel ben Eliezer, founder of the <i>Hasidic</i> movement in the 18 th century. Literally, "Master of the Good Name."
<i>Bat Kol</i>	(Hebrew) A divine voice from heaven. Literally, "daughter of a voice."
<i>beit</i>	(Hebrew) house
<i>Beit Hillel</i>	House/ School of Hillel
<i>Beit Midrash</i>	(Hebrew) House of Study

<i>Beit Shammai</i>	House/ School of Shammai	<i>Hasidic</i>	of or pertaining to <i>Hasidism</i> , a Jewish religious practice that arose in the 18 th century
<i>Benaiah</i>	King Solomon's trusted advisor and commander-in-chief	<i>Kabbalah</i>	(Hebrew) Jewish mystical text
<i>bentsht likht</i>	(Yiddish) recited the blessing and lit the <i>Shabbat</i> candles	<i>Kaddish</i>	(Aramaic) A prayer that praises God, it appears multiple times in daily prayer services.
<i>Birkhot Hashachar</i>	(Hebrew) blessings recited at the beginning of the morning prayer service	<i>Kiddush Levanah</i>	(Hebrew) blessing of the new moon
<i>bubbe meiseh</i>	(Yiddish) grandmother's tale	<i>King Solomon</i>	4 th monarch of the Kingdom of Israel and Judah, successor to King David
<i>Devarim</i>	(Hebrew) 5 th book of the <i>Torah</i> / Five Books of Moses (Greek: Deuteronomy)	<i>kosher</i>	(Hebrew) consistent with Jewish dietary law
<i>epes</i>	(Yiddish) something to take note of	<i>krekhtzn</i>	(Yiddish) groaning or sighing
<i>fleyshik</i>	(Yiddish) meat	<i>ma'ariv</i>	(Hebrew) evening prayers
<i>halakha</i>	(Hebrew) The Jewish legal tradition. Literally, "the way to walk."	<i>meshugas</i>	(Yiddish) craziness
		<i>minchah</i>	(Hebrew) afternoon prayers
		<i>milkhik</i>	(Yiddish) milk/ dairy
		<i>minyan</i>	(Hebrew) prayer quorum

minyanaire (Hebrew/ anglicized suffix)
one who regularly attends
the *minyan*

Moshe (Hebrew) Moses Our
Rabbeinu Teacher

Mourner's See *Kaddish*. The "Mourner's
Kaddish *Kaddish*" is a form of this
prayer recited by mourners.

motzi blessing recited before
eating bread/ at the
beginning of a meal

narishkeit (Yiddish) foolishness
nu (Yiddish) so

Pirke Avot (Hebrew) Ethics of Our
Fathers

Rabbi Akiva One of the greatest Jewish
scholars and sages of the
late 1st century CE and
beginning of the 2nd

Reb Zushya spiritual leader in the early
Hasidic movement, a 3rd
generation disciple of the
Baal Shem Tov

Rosh Beginning of the High
Hashanah Holidays. Literally, "head of
the year."

Sephardi Jews of Spain, Portugal, and
North Africa and their
descendants

Shabbat (Hebrew) Sabbath
Shabbat A wishful greeting for a
Shalom peaceful and restful
Sabbath. Literally, "Sabbath
Peace"

Shemot 2nd book of the *Torah*/ Five
Books of Moses (Greek:
Exodus)

shul (Yiddish) synagogue
siddur (Hebrew) prayer book
takeh (Yiddish) really/ indeed/
actually

Talmud (Hebrew) compilation of
Jewish interpretations and
rulings

Torah (Hebrew) Jewish bible