

If Not Higher
Isaac Loeb Peretz

And the Rebbe of Nemirov, every Friday morning early at Sliches-time, disappeared, melted into thin air! He was not to be found anywhere, either in the synagogue or in the two houses-of-study, or worshipping in some Minyan, and most certainly not at home. His door stood open, people went in and out as they pleased--no one ever stole anything from the Rebbe--but there was not a soul in the house.

Where can the Rebbe be?

Where *should* he be, if not in heaven?

Is it likely a Rebbe should have no affairs on hand with the Solemn Days so near?

Jews (no evil eye!) need a livelihood, peace, health, successful match-makings, they wish to be good and pious and their sins are great, and Satan with his thousand eyes spies out the world from one end to the other, and he sees, and accuses, and tells tales--and who shall help if not the Rebbe? So thought the people.

Once, however, there came a Lithuanian--and he laughed! You know the Lithuanian Jews--they rather despise books of devotion, but stuff themselves with the Talmud and the codes. Well, the Lithuanian points out a special bit of the Gemoreh--and hopes it is plain enough: even Moses our Teacher could not ascend into heaven, but remained suspended thirty inches below it--and who, I ask you, is going to argue with a Lithuanian? What becomes of the Rebbe?

"I don't know, and I don't care," says he, shrugging his shoulders, and all the while (what it is to be a Lithuanian!) determined to find out.

The very same evening, soon after prayers, the Lithuanian steals into the Rebbe's room, lays himself down under the Rebbe's bed, and lies low. He intends to stay there all night to find out where the Rebbe goes, and what he does at Sliches-time.

Another in his place would have dozed and slept the time away. Not so a Lithuanian--he learned a whole treatise of the Talmud by heart!

Day has not broken when he hears the call to prayer.

The Rebbe has been awake some time. The Lithuanian has heard him sighing and groaning for a whole hour. Whoever has heard the groaning of the Nemirover Rebbe knows what sorrow for All-Israel, what distress of mind, found voice in every groan. The soul that heard was dissolved in grief. But the heart of a Lithuanian is of cast-iron. The Lithuanian hears and lies still. The Rebbe lies still, too--the Rebbe, long life to him, *upon* the bed and the Lithuanian *under* the bed!

After that the Lithuanian hears the beds in the house squeak--the people jump out of them--a Jewish word is spoken now and again--water is poured on the fingers--a door is opened here and there. Then the people leave the house, once more it is quiet and dark, only a very little moonlight comes in through the shutter.

He confessed afterwards, did the Lithuanian, that when he found himself alone with the Rebbe terror took hold of him. He grew cold all over, and the roots of his ear-locks pricked his temples like needles. An excellent joke, to be left alone with the Rebbe at Sliches-time before dawn!

But a Lithuanian is dogged. He quivers and quakes like a fish--but he does not budge.

At last the Rebbe, long life to him, rises in his turn.

First he does what beseems a Jew. Then he goes to the wardrobe and takes out a packet--which proves to be the dress of a peasant: linen trousers, high boots, a pelisse, a wide felt hat, and a long and broad leather belt studded with brass nails. The Rebbe puts them on.

Out of the pockets of the pelisse dangles the end of a thick cord, a peasant's cord.

On his way out the Rebbe steps aside into the kitchen, stoops, takes a hatchet from under a bed, puts it into his belt, and leaves the house. The Lithuanian trembles, but he persists.

A fearful, Solemn-Day hush broods over the dark streets, broken not unfrequently by a cry of supplication from some little Minyan, or the moan of some sick person behind a window.

The Rebbe keeps to the street side, and walks in the shadow of the houses. He glides from one to the other, the Lithuanian after him. And the Lithuanian hears the sound of his own heart-beats mingle with the heavy footfall of the Rebbe; but he follows on, and together they emerge from the town.

Behind the town stands a little wood. The Rebbe, long life to him, enters it. He walks on thirty or forty paces, and then he stops beside a small tree. And the Lithuanian, with amaze, sees the Rebbe take his hatchet and strike the tree. He sees the Rebbe strike blow after blow, he hears the tree creak and snap. And the little tree falls, and the Rebbe splits it up into logs, and the logs into splinters. Then he makes a bundle, binds it round with the cord, throws it on his shoulder, replaces the hatchet in his belt, leaves the wood, and goes back into the town.

In one of the back streets he stops beside a poor, tumbledown little house, and taps at the window.

"Who is there?" cries a frightened voice within. The Lithuanian knows it to be the voice of a Jewess, a sick Jewess.

"I," answers the Rebbe in the peasant tongue.

"Who is I?" inquires the voice further. And the Rebbe answers again in the Little-Russian speech:

"Vassil."

"Which Vassil? and what do you want, Vassil?"

"I have wood to sell," says the sham peasant, "very cheap, for next to nothing."

And without further ado he goes in. The Lithuanian steals in behind him, and sees, in the gray light of dawn, a poor room with poor, broken furniture.

In the bed lies a sick Jewess huddled up in rags, who says bitterly:

"Wood to sell--and where am I, a poor widow, to get the money from to buy it?"

"I will give you a six-groschen worth on credit."

"And how am I ever to repay you?" groans the poor woman.

"Foolish creature!" the Rebbe upbraids her. "See here: you are a poor sick Jewess, and I am willing to trust you with the little bundle of wood; I believe that in time you will repay me. And you, you have such a great and mighty God, and you do not trust Him! Not even to the amount of a miserable six-groschen for a little bundle of wood!"

"And who is to light the stove?" groans the widow. "Do *I* look like getting up to do it? And my son away at work!"

"I will also light the stove for you," said the Rebbe.

And the Rebbe, while he laid the wood in the stove, repeated groaning the first part of Sliches.

Then, when the stove was alight, and the wood crackled cheerily, he repeated, more gaily, the second part of Sliches.

He repeated the third part when the fire had burnt itself out, and he shut the stove doors....

The Lithuanian who saw all this remained with the Rebbe, as one of his followers.

And later, when anyone told how the Rebbe early every morning at Sliches-time raised himself and flew up into heaven, the Lithuanian, instead of laughing, added quietly:

"If not higher."