



The Lord Is My Shepherd

*Memories of a Third-Generation American Assimilated Jew
and How She Found Her Way Back to the Land Her Soul Calls Home*

My father doesn't sit and say Tehillim, humming the words the way his father did. Still, there is one chapter of Tehillim he remembers. He doesn't call it Tehillim Kaf Gimmel. He calls it Psalm 23, and it manages to escape from the chambers of his heart where all that was forgotten is remembered.

Sometimes he recites it on our long drives to the New Jersey Shore. I sit behind him in the backseat with my instructions to tell him every so often "two hands on the wheel" in case one of his hands wanders off.

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.*

*He lays me down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul. . . .*

My father rises above himself, the '57 Chevy, the Jersey Turnpike, the toll booth and the Jersey Shore looming ahead. He is being shepherded by God. From where he stands, the saltwater taffy and peanut stands are smudges in

Varda Branfman is the author of I Remembered in the Night Your Name (Jerusalem, 2003) and creator of Virtual Writing Retreats, which she conducts in cyberspace with individuals all over the world.

the distance. The waters are tranquil and deep blue.

*Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup runneth over . . .
And I will dwell in the House of the
Lord forever.*

"Two hands on the wheel," I sing out, relishing each one of my words and loving the sound of my voice.

When they send me to school, I discover that the teacher intones what I know as Psalm 23. She doesn't seem to care about the meaning of the words she says so solemnly. It comes after the Pledge of Allegiance, and she has us sit with our hands folded in front of us on the desk. She tells us to bend our heads and say The Lord's Prayer. They are the same words from the beginning to end, but it is not the same Psalm 23 as my father's.

I am the only Jewish child in the class. I might be the only one in the whole school. My parents are concerned that I am being forced to pray to a god other than the God of the Jews. They receive permission from the school office for me to just sit quietly while everyone else says The Lord's Prayer.

I think it strange how The Lord's

Prayer and Psalm 23 have exactly the same words. It must be so beautiful that everyone wants to use it. I also wonder why I can't just say Psalm 23 along with everyone else. God will know that I am me, and they are them.

This is just ten years after the Holocaust, when millions were slaughtered for just being Jews. But this is America. They let me have the silence. They let me participate in the lessons and in the games that everyone plays in the schoolyard.

What is this word "Jew" that has so many layers of ambivalence and fear? I turn to my mother, who is hanging up the laundry. I am four years old, and there is something bothering me. I've heard them tell frightening stories about "Jews" and then look down at their hands resting on the kitchen table. I want to know who these Jews are and where they live. Are there still some alive after all those stories? Innocently, I ask, "Mommy, what's a Jew?"

She stops and looks at me over the wash line: "You."

That one word without explanation feels like a hot brand on my skin. I don't want it. Why do I have to be a Jew, one of an endangered species? I'm

something problematical fighting to exist. Why this darkness suddenly wedged into my life?

After school hours, I climb up the fire escape and look into the window at the empty classrooms. The words of the Passover Haggadah ring in my ears. "I am a wanderer and a sojourner."

I am a sojourner.

But Hashem is my shepherd. I shall not want.

In school, I learn to fold my hands for many hours of the day. I adjust to the rules and regulations in this exile. I endure the bark of the gym teachers and their commands. My gym suit is not ironed and folded in their way, and they threaten to mete out a punishment.

When they take me to school on the first day, I kick and scream. For many days after that, I refuse to go. Then, finally, I am broken in. The little child, who knows very well what she needs, is stuffed back inside. But



a cry of defiance is engraved in my throat muscles, and my hands scurry into my lap, where they secretly tear off the skin of my fingers.

What I really hate is something hateful, and it is far too big to defy, and there is only me, alone, in this frail child's body, to feel the pain. What I hate is this whole joyless System that stretches as far as my eyes can see, and further. No one speaks about it. Everyone tries to fold their gym suits in the prescribed manner and apply the white shoe polish without forgetting the tongues of their sneakers.

In the Presence of My Enemies

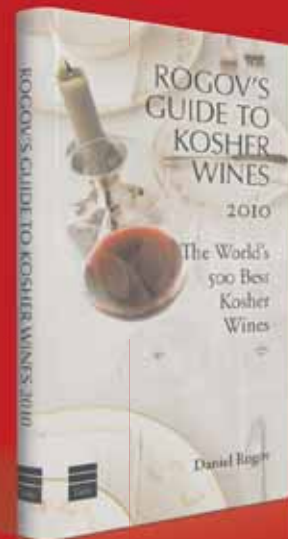
In the photo of their honeymoon at Niagara Falls, my mother stands looking ethereal with pearl buttons on her blouse. Standing next to her, my father leans on the rail of the boat. He is now portly, but in the honeymoon picture he is lean and has a grace and, with his jet-black hair, a stunning handsomeness.

But the most wonderful part is his eyes. They are twinkling, and that twinkling continues to enchant me time after time, when he turns to greet me after washing the black of machinery from his hands and sits down to be a king at his table and to eat his evening supper.

When he sings out Psalm 23 to me, his own memories rush into the spaces between the words, and in the silence at the end, I hear him exhale the pain from his parents' and sister's deaths.

I hear him exhale with the joy of being a father after marrying late in life and seeing his children born. It is all together, in one long breath, exhaled. His life is the table set before him by God, even though he walks in the valley overshadowed by death when his beloved sister and father pass

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The stories that breathe life into their names return to haunt me when I lie in bed at night. My grandfather's stern demeanor. I can taste my mother's fear when I eat the soup. The soup, alone, is full and satisfying, the clang of the spoon against the china. The fear of breaking—of being pushed too hard and then breaking.

Or was it something she knew about my grandfather? The same stories I had heard, but for her, their echoes remain in the empty rooms after the furniture is given away to the sons and daughters-in-law. The rest of the clothing and furniture to charity. The silver spice box and menorah to our mahogany drawer under the linen tablecloth and napkins.

children. They tell the story, and they bring back Shabbat as they describe wrapping the hot cholent in a towel and carrying it to the oven in the corner bakery.

Once again, they slide it in between all the other pots where it cooks slowly through the night. The word "cholent" remains, stuck between the familiar American words like a secret code. It isn't simply a pot of stew. It is cholent, and the taste is not like anything you've ever known.

The sweet slivers of onion will be remembered for two generations of non-observance. The barley and beans will sit in a sauce whose flavor can never be replicated. And the story will get warmer and warmer.

We will take our spoons. We will

He walks down a side street in Lower Manhattan on his way to the cheap boarding house where he rents the space of one bed against the wall. An assailant springs out from the night shadows and pins his arms behind him. My grandfather smells the whiskey breath and feels a knife blade at his throat.

"Swear you're not a Jew!"

Where does my grandfather find the strength to refuse? Was it from his ancestor Yaakov Avinu, who was also alone and pitted against a strange culture? Yaakov wrestled with an angel in a standoff that was resolved when the dawn broke. Even when the angel admitted his defeat, Yaakov held on until the angel agreed to bless him.

My grandfather's life is inseparable

His children do not keep Shabbat the way it should be kept. But over and over again, they speak of the cholent to their children.

She didn't have to fear him. It was not her presence that he fought, but the specter of total assimilation, of children and grandchildren who didn't learn the Torah or know Shabbat, of lives spent yearning for university degrees and walking across the thick cream carpets of the rich and educated.

My grandfather was a warrior. He took a hammer and climbed up to the sculpted face on the lintel of the entrance to his building on New York City's Lower East Side. And he smashed in the face until it was no longer considered a graven image.

The same hands stroked his beard and turned the pages of his *sefer*. His children do not keep Shabbat the way it should be kept. But over and over again, they speak of the cholent to their

stir and taste. We will be sent to pick up the cholent on Shabbat morning, and we will recognize which pot is our grandfather's pot, even though he died well before we were born.

Because he was a warrior, it remains in our blood to be warriors. We will break the secret code.

My grandfather brought with him ten or fifteen pairs of *tzitzit* when he left his home in Lithuania and moved to the Lower East Side. He was only fourteen years old when he ran away from home after his mother had died.

He was shocked when he saw that no one was interested in buying the *tzitzit*. But he had spent all his money on a one-way ticket and couldn't go back to Europe.



from his Jewishness. He is Reb Moshe Chaim, the son of Reb Eliyahu, who is the son of a Talmudic scholar, and behind him stand many generations of beautiful Jewish souls, both fathers and mothers, whose lives were spent grasping for God.

My grandfather cannot struggle free, but he stands firm in his silent defiance until a door opens, and light streams onto the street. The light frightens the angel/assailant, and he runs away, back into the night.

When Reb Moshe Chaim looks up past the buildings on either side of him, past the latticework of fire escapes and laundry lines to the patch of night sky, he faces God, who is the only witness to his miraculous escape. And he asks for a blessing. Whatever happens, he asks that God never abandon him, that he will have enough to eat and somewhere to live, and that there will be an end to his loneliness. And that his new beginning will be blessed with success.

My grandfather begins collecting empty burlap sacks after the last potatoes are sold. He will sell the sacks back to the farmers and manage to make a living. Out of a few used burlap sacks, he will build a thriving business that manufactures new burlap bags. His sons will be courted by Indian merchants with stocks of burlap to sell on ocean liners anchored on the Manhattan docks.

But now my grandfather bends down to pick up the used burlap bags. What anguish he must feel at seeing that his whole magnificent Jewish heritage may not survive the translation it suffers in the New World. The smell of burlap. The scratchy feel on his fingers.

He puts the *tzitzit* away. The knotted strings are a shorthand, each string dangling into the air. He pulls all the strings inside to the folds of the garment to keep them from getting tangled. He folds the *tzitzit* smaller and smaller till only the smooth white wool shows.

At the Western Wall, in the thousands and thousands of white papers pressed into the pockmarks and crevices of stone, I imagine my grandfather's *tzitzit* folded smaller and smaller. It is a wordless prayer that God protect his generations and return them.

He wears one pair of *tzitzit* under his garments, and the others he holds in safekeeping with all the compelling reasons for wearing them, for them and all the 613 *mitzvot*. He puts them together with his *Chumashim*, *mishnayot*, *sugyot*, *Gemaras* and *Tehillim*. They flow underground in a river of holy words, of black letters on white fire.

One *perek* of *Tehillim* Kaf Gimmel, Chapter 23 of Psalms, smuggles itself out in the garments of High Clerical English.

The strict public school teacher hits my father's hands with the back of a ruler when "*koppel*," a single Yiddish word, escapes his lips. It's her holy mission to make him an American, and she stands vigilant to remove all traces of the Jew in my father.

She proudly sings out the words of Psalm 23 as if it were hers. She doesn't see through the disguise. The words go straight to my father's heart, and he never forgets them.

Potatoes wrested from the earth of Aroostook County, Maine, at home in the burlap weave. Burlap that grows in India purified once, purified twice and then woven into these sacks that will make our fortune in the New Land.

My grandfather tests the weave of the burlap. He sews back down the seams that have stretched open from fifty pounds of Maine potatoes. His hands get black from oiling industrial sewing machines. But he kisses the tips of the *tzitzit* and lets them dangle out into the future, where the granddaughter he never met will grab hold of them.

And I will dwell in the House of Hashem forever. ■

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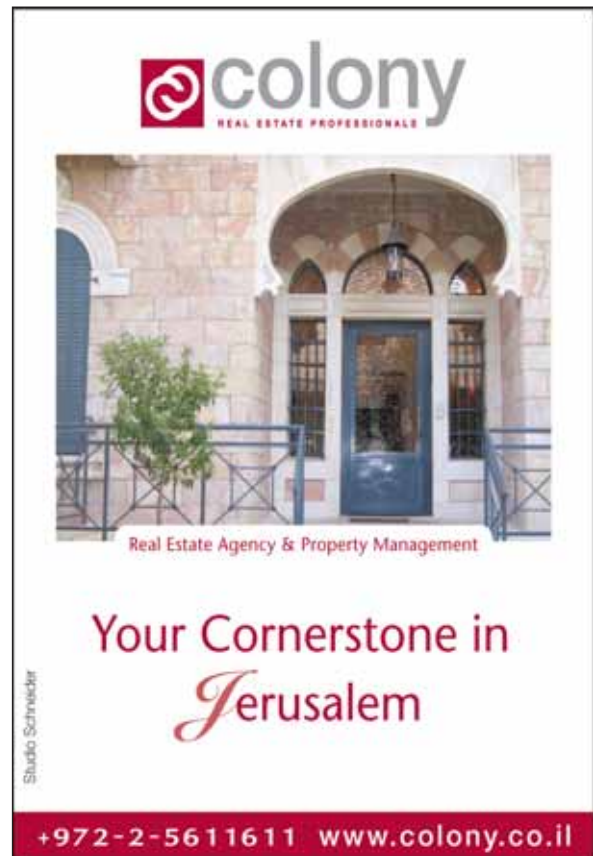
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