

## What Really Matters in Life?

- Where is Paradise—that place that has in it all that we need for happiness and satisfaction? And what does it take to find that place?
- In what ways can a person's attitude change?
- How does Torah teach us to point our shoes in the opposite direction and look at life differently?

## The True Artist

*Our parents and teachers always tell us to do our best. But few of us live up to that standard. Most of us get through life without putting forth our best effort, faking it more often than not. This is a story about what may happen when you take the easy way out.*



Once upon a time there was a king who built a great palace. It was a magnificent palace, each room and each hall greater and more impressive than the next. But there remained one hall that was bare and undecorated. It was a long and narrow room with high walls. "How should it be decorated?" wondered the king.

He decided to hold a contest, and he invited all the artists of the land to submit their works. Then the king picked the two artists whose works he liked most. He brought them to the great hall and showed them its bare walls.

"I propose a contest," the king declared. "I give you one year in which to decorate these walls. You may live here at the palace. You may have all the paints and other materials you need. You may hire all the assistants you require. You will paint this wall," the king said to the first artist, pointing to the wall on his right, "and you will paint that wall," he said to the second artist, motioning to the wall on his left. "I will return in one year to judge your work. Whichever one of you has done the better job I will reward with riches, with honor, and with fame."

The two artists accepted the challenge.

The first artist set right to work. He gathered his ideas and

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thoughts, and he began to sketch and plan. He hired a crew of assistants and built a scaffold against the wall. By the end of the first month, he had finished his design, and he began to block it out on the wall.

As for the second artist, each day he would come to the great hall and stare up at his wall. All day he would sit and stare with a strange look on his face.

By the end of the second month, the first artist was well into his work. His design was sketched out on the wall, his paints were mixed, and fresh plaster had been prepared. As the third month ended, his design was taking shape on the wall.

And each day the second artist would come to the hall, sit down, and stare up at his blank wall.

As the months went by, the first artist's genius was becoming evident. The inspired design, bold figures, striking perspective, and magnificent colors and textures assured the artist that this was indeed his masterpiece—something unique, something never before created. His work filled him with excitement and enthusiasm.

And still each day the second artist would come to the hall, sit, and stare up at his blank wall.

The end of the year approached. The first artist was busy putting the very last finishing touches on his magnificent composition. His assistants were busy putting away the paints and other materials and breaking down the scaffold. On the last day of the last week of the last month of the year, the artist invited his assistants to a celebration. Only one task remained—to sign the magnificent work. He invited each of his assistants to sign it, and then the artist himself signed his name. He looked up at his creation and knew he had created something exceptional.

As the evening's celebration came to an end and he prepared to leave the great hall, he turned one last time to look at the opposite wall. It remained as blank and empty as it had been on the very first day of the contest. And there was the second artist, sitting and staring up at the wall as he had done every day of the year.

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The next morning, the first morning of the new year, the two artists were summoned to the palace. The king asked them to wait in the antechamber as he entered the hall for the first time in a year.

The king looked upon the first artist's composition. His heart began to race, and tears came to his eyes. Never before had he seen a work of art so magnificent, so grand, so moving. Each figure and design had been executed with care, grace, and insight. He felt a distinct pride that he, the king, had sponsored and inspired so great a work of human creativity.

And then he turned and looked at the opposite wall. And there he saw something that shocked him. It was the same composition. Line for line, design for design, figure for figure, it was identical. Except on that wall he saw a king just like him staring back at him. Suspecting what the artist had done, he approached the wall and ran his hand across it. It was cold and hard and smooth. Yes, the artist had installed mirrors the length and breadth of the wall. Mirrors—so that everything that appeared on one wall was reflected by the other.

The king invited the two artists into the room. The first artist looked up at his work and felt his pride swell. Then he looked across at the other wall and became enraged.

"Who won?" they asked the king.

"Well, clearly both of you win!" the king replied. "Everything that appears on this wall also appears on that wall. The designs are identical. I declare the contest a tie, and each of you will be rewarded accordingly."

"But, no!" protested the first artist. "How can you? You see what he's done!"

"Silence!" commanded the king. "You must accept my decree! Return tomorrow to receive your rewards."

The two artists returned to the palace the next day—the first artist dejected and angry, the second elated and relieved. They were ushered into the great hall. And there in the middle of the hall was a mountain of gold—more gold than either man had ever seen or dreamed of in his lifetime.

The king spoke to the first artist: "You have created a masterpiece. Your work is profound and moving and beautiful. Your gifts are truly from God. And I am proud that I could be a part of so magnificent a work of art. You will therefore receive the reward you deserve. This gold is yours. There is enough to support you for the rest of your life. Now go and spread your gifts—bring beauty into the lives of others as you have brought it into my life."

The artist was surprised. He thanked the king again and again. "Wait just a moment," the other artist interrupted. "You said we had both won, and we would both be rewarded. Where is my reward?"

"Oh, yes," the king responded, "I did promise that each of you would receive your due reward. And I intend to keep my word."

"So if he receives all this gold," the second artist asked, "where is my reward?"

"Why, look there," said the king, motioning to the reflection in the mirror. "Do you see *that* mound of gold there in the mirror? That is *your* reward, the reward that you deserve. Now take your reward, and leave my kingdom!"

The second artist looked up at the king in shock. And he slowly left the room.



*Shortly before he died, the great philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel gave an interview on television, at the end of which the reporter asked if he had a message for young people. Heschel replied that he wanted young people to realize that life is a work of art. We decide its colors, its textures, and its design. Therefore, it is up to every one of us to make of life a masterpiece. Unfortunately, lots of people give up their chance to create their masterpiece. Instead, they put up mirrors. They reflect what others expect, what others value, and what others want. They miss the chance to earn the true rewards of life.*

- Why did the second artist put up mirrors? What are some of the ways in which people put up mirrors in their lives?
- Have you ever put up mirrors? Why or why not?
- What rewards did the second artist expect for his "work"?

## It's Not My Problem

*When we raise a glass of wine, we traditionally offer the toast l'chaim, "To life!" It is interesting that the phrase is in the plural. It literally means "To lives!" This quirk of the Hebrew language reflects our understanding of being human. No life should be lived alone, in isolation. We share our lives with those we love and care for. Rooted in the lives of our loved ones and our friends, we thrive. Relationships are the very essence of life.*



Once there was a kingdom everyone called Paradise. It was called Paradise not because it was any more beautiful or any richer than any other place but because of the way the people who lived there cared for one another. In this kingdom, if a friend needed something from a friend, someone always stepped forward to help—without even being asked! If a neighbor needed something from a neighbor, someone would respond cheerfully and graciously without ever asking for anything in return. If a stranger needed something, people came forward to help with hospitality, generosity, and kindness.

All this was because of the wise king. The king knew that his subjects would treat one another the way he treated them. So he was always careful and attentive and helpful. If he couldn't help someone, he would at least listen and express his concern.

At last the king grew old, and he appointed his son, the prince, to rule in his place when the time came. Soon the king died, and the prince assumed the throne. But the prince was not

wise like his father, nor kind, and he did not treat people the way his father did.

The royal ministers approached the prince and declared, "Your Majesty, we have a terrible problem. There is a famine in a certain corner of the land, and the people there are starving. We must do something!"

"They are starving?" said the prince impatiently.

"Yes, starving! They have no food to feed their children!"

"But I have plenty of food," responded the prince, biting into a big apple from the bowl of fruit before him. "If they are starving, I'm sorry. But it's not my problem!"

"Perhaps Your Majesty didn't understand. People are suffering, and they haven't any food. They'll die if we do nothing."

"Well I'm sorry, but it's just not my problem!"

The ministers shook their heads in disbelief and slowly walked away.

Just then another group of royal messengers approached the throne.

"Your Majesty, we have a terrible situation. A river has become poisoned, and the people who live along its banks have no water to drink! We must help them!"

"No water?" asked the prince even more impatiently as he poured himself a large glass of water.

"Yes, Your Majesty, there is no water! People are dying of thirst!"

"But I have plenty of water!" responded the prince, holding up his glass. "I'm sorry, but it's not my problem!"

No one in the royal court seemed able to move the prince. Every problem that was presented to him met with the same bothered look and the same response: "I'm sorry, but that's not my problem!"

Before long everyone in the kingdom was acting like the prince. When a friend needed help from a friend or a neighbor needed a hand from a neighbor, the one who was beseeched would look bothered and respond: "You need help? Well I'm sorry, but that's not my problem!" And since they refused to help one another, they certainly refused to help strangers.

Soon the kingdom had changed completely. It was no longer Paradise. It was a wilderness, a wasteland. Soon no one remembered the way things had been. No one remembered the Paradise that the kingdom once was. No one but Fisherman. Fisherman remembered the old king and the way things used to be. It hurt him that everyone had become as selfish as the young prince. If only he could remind the people and teach them. But what was one old fisherman to do?

Then one day he thought of a solution. He gathered all his money and bought tools and paint and materials. He set to work fixing up his old fishing boat. He would turn it into a yacht, the most beautiful yacht in the harbor.

Fisherman worked hard. Each day, people came by and admired his boat. "Hey, Fisherman," they'd say, "when you're done, will you take us for a ride on your yacht?"

"Sure!" he said. "Everyone will be invited!"

It took him a year to finish his work. When the yacht was ready, Fisherman made a huge sign and posted it for all to see. He invited everyone to come for a ride on the lake to celebrate the yacht's first voyage.

Everyone came that Sunday morning, even the prince! It was a splendid, clear day. The sun shone warmly, and the lake was calm. Fisherman guided his yacht out onto the lake. When he reached the middle, far from the shore, he dropped anchor and invited everyone to enjoy themselves. His guests brought out their picnic baskets and fishing poles, and everyone had a wonderful day on the lake. Late in the afternoon the wind picked up, and waves rocked the boat.

"Fisherman, can we head home now?" his guests asked.

"Sure," said Fisherman. "There's just one thing I need to do." He opened his toolbox and brought out a large hand drill. He walked to the exact center of the boat, positioned the drill on the hull, and began to drill.

"Say, Fisherman," people asked, "what are you doing?" "I'm drilling a hole."

"But why are you drilling a hole?"

"Why? Because it's a nice day for drilling holes!" he responded nonchalantly.

"But, Fisherman, if you drill a hole in the boat, water will rush in, the boat will sink, and we'll all drown!" they said.

As he continued drilling, the passengers began to cry and beg: "Fisherman, please! Please, stop! You must stop!"

"Nope. It's my boat. It's my drill. And I'm going to drill this hole."

Someone remembered that the prince was on board. "Get the prince!" he shouted. "Someone get the prince! He'll save us!"

The prince swaggered over. No lowly fisherman was going to ruin his afternoon. He stood over Fisherman in his royal robes, and a hush came over the frightened crowd.

"Fisherman, what are you doing?" he asked in his deepest, most commanding voice.

"I'm drilling a hole," responded Fisherman, moving the drill around and around.

"Why are you doing this?" asked the prince in his deep, princely tone.

"Because I feel like it," responded Fisherman without even looking up at the prince.

"Fisherman, if you make a hole in the boat, the boat will sink, and we will all drown," the prince reasoned aloud.

"Uh-huh," acknowledged Fisherman.

Small beads of sweat appeared on the brow of the prince, and his voice lost its commanding tone and took on that of a sincerely worried man. "Fisherman," he said, "I command you to stop!"

Fisherman ignored him and kept drilling. The prince was quickly losing his composure. Gone were the royal tone and all the royal trappings. Instead, he was just another frightened man. "But Fisherman, what gives you the right to do this?"

Fisherman explained slowly: "It's my boat. It's my drill. And I'm going to make a hole. Now, please, move aside. You're blocking my light!" And he continued to drill.

The prince began crying and pleading, like everyone else. "Please, Fisherman, please," he begged. "I don't want to drown. I don't want to get eaten by fish. Please, Fisherman! Please!"

When the prince began to cry, Fisherman at last stopped drilling. Yet again a hush came over the crowd. Fisherman looked up at the prince. "You don't want the boat to sink? You don't want to drown?" Fisherman echoed the prince's pleas. Then Fisherman slowly repeated the terrible words that had ruined the kingdom: "Well, I'm sorry, but it's not my problem!"

The prince cried desperately, "What do you mean it's not your problem? Anyone can see that if I have a problem, you have a problem. And if you have a problem, I have a problem. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem—because we're all on the same boat!"

He stopped. Like a man who had just figured out a great riddle, he repeated the words slowly: "If I have a problem, you have a problem. And if you have a problem, I have a problem. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem—because we're all in the same boat! Anyone can see that!"

"Yes," said Fisherman, "anyone can see that!"

"Yes," said everyone on the boat, "anyone can see that!"

Fisherman smiled. "Now we can go home!" He pulled the drill up out of the hull, turned the boat around, and sailed safely back to the harbor.

The people who got off that boat were changed. Never, ever again would friend turn to friend or neighbor turn to neighbor or anyone turn to a stranger and say those terrible words. Instead, whenever a friend needed help from a friend or a neighbor needed a hand from a neighbor or a stranger needed some kindness, and whenever anyone came before the prince, he or she would hear, "Please, let me help you. Because if you have a problem, I have a problem. And if I have a problem, you have a problem. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem. You see, we're all in the same boat!"

Once again the kingdom was Paradise.



*"Hillel taught: 'If I am not for myself, who is for me?  
But if I am only for my own self, what am I?  
And if not now, when?'"*

—Pirkei Avot 1:14

*It is important for me to be for myself (and you for yourself). The question is, What is "myself"? Do the boundaries of the self include only oneself, or are others included as well? A fundamental truth of the Torah is that the self includes family, community, and, ultimately, the whole world. That is why if I am only for myself—if my concern is only myself—I destroy myself.*

- Can you describe various situations in which people forgot this truth?
- Have you ever said, "It's not my problem"? If so, why did you say it?
- Why did Fisherman devise such an elaborate plan? What motivated him?

## Heaven and Hell

*When a child is only two years old, he or she learns the one word that changes everything: "me!" (or, sometimes, "mine!"). That's good for a two-year-old, but what happens when the child grows up and keeps on saying "me!" or "mine!?" What does it do to our world?*



According to Jewish legend, every person has a soul, which is stored in Heaven until the moment when he or she is destined to be born. Then it enters the body and lives in the world. And when the time comes for a person to die, the soul leaves the body and ascends to Heaven. There the soul is judged; the person's life is reviewed. If the life included more good deeds than sins, more kindness and other virtues than evil, the soul is welcomed to Heaven. But if the life included more sins than good deeds, then the soul is sent to Hell for some time.

Once there arrived before the Throne of Judgment a soul whose goodness and sins were exactly balanced. No one could figure out what to do. The soul could not be sent on to Heaven; it wasn't worthy! And the soul could not be sent down to Hell; it wasn't guilty! After much deliberation it was decided that this soul would be given the opportunity to visit both Heaven and Hell and choose its own destiny. And so an angel took the soul on a tour of the two realms.

They journeyed first to Hell. Hell wasn't anything like what the soul had imagined. It was beautiful, a magnificent mansion set on a luxuriant lawn. In the mansion the soul was taken through halls and rooms, each more splendid than the next, and

exactly what he was doing. And he waded out farther, until water covered his knees. His family screamed and shouted and begged him to return, but he went farther still, until water reached his waist. And now everyone stood in silence and watched. He waded even farther, until water covered his shoulders. And then a few more steps—and he disappeared under the water. And only when the water had covered his nostrils and Nachshon could no longer breathe, only when he began to drown—only then did the sea split and the Israelites cross in safety.



*For the rabbis of the Talmud, heaven and earth are not distinct. We human beings aren't just passive spectators to a divine drama. We are God's partners, sharing the work of bringing the world to perfection. God needs us. And every act made by a human being to advance the dream of a perfect world is a revelation of God's will in the world. In the poetic words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "All of human history as described by the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: God in search of man."*

- What's the difference between the way the Torah tells the story of the Red Sea and the way the Midrash tells it?
- What did Nachshon know that no one else knew?
- In our time, who are the Nachshons? Have you ever been a Nachshon?

## Challahs in the Ark

*Miracles happen all the time. Too often they go by unnoticed and unappreciated. What we lack is the vision to see them. We expect miracles to be momentous, history-shaping events that descend from heaven. But sometimes miracles are quiet, private moments when life is renewed and hope is rekindled.*



Once, many years ago in a small village, there lived Reb Chaim, the richest man in the village, and Reb Yankel, the poorest. Every Friday evening, Reb Chaim would come to the synagogue in his fine *Shabbos* coat and his exquisite fur hat. He arrived early so that he could exchange greetings with all the other men of the village.

As the service ended, Red Chaim would rise, wish the congregation a good *Shabbos*, and then stride up the hill to his magnificent mansion. His butler met him at the door and showed him into his regal dining room, where a table fit for a king awaited him. Reb Chaim would sit surrounded by the very finest china, flatware, and crystal. He would be served the most remarkable *Shabbos* meal, accompanied by the sweetest, most heavenly challah. But none of it brought Reb Chaim joy. For he was alone. Reb Chaim had no family and no one he could call a friend.

One *Shabbos*, Reb Chaim stared at the golden platters and the wonderful dishes set before him, and he suddenly realized what he needed: He needed to share his *Shabbos* feast with someone. But with whom? "Who is worthy of sharing *Shabbos* feast?" he wondered. "Only God!" he decided. "Let God share my wonderful *Shabbos* feast!" A plan took shape in his mind.

"Bring me the baker!" Reb Chaim called out.

The baker emerged from the kitchen. "Yes, sir?" inquired the baker. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No! Your challah is divine! Next week I would like you to make me two extra challahs. Make sure they're your very best! Pack them up for delivery before I leave for the synagogue."

"Yes, sir, my very best," replied the baker.

The next Friday evening, Reb Chaim left for the synagogue unusually early. He wore his *Shabbos* coat and his fur hat, and under his arm he carried a package still warm from the oven.

He entered the synagogue before anyone else and approached the Holy Ark. He stood for a moment in prayer: "Master of the Universe, each week I enjoy a magnificent *Shabbos* feast. This week I want You, God, to share my feast. I want Your *Shabbos* to be as good as mine. So I have brought You challahs. Even You, God, have never tasted challah so good! I hope You enjoy these challahs as I do! I wish You a good *Shabbos*!"

With that Reb Chaim opened the Ark, removed the challahs from the package, and tucked them behind the Torah scrolls. He closed the Ark, and as people began to enter the synagogue, he took his place by the eastern wall.

Reb Yankel also went to the synagogue that Friday night. But Reb Yankel, the poorest man in the village, always arrived late because he tried to squeeze every last bit of work into the waning minutes of every Friday afternoon. He always came to the synagogue in his dirty work clothes and always sat in the very back.

Normally Reb Yankel would hurry home after the service. He lived in a tiny hovel at the edge of the village with his wife, his children, his wife's parents, his wife's widowed sister, and assorted nieces and nephews, all of whom Yankel struggled to support. Normally he would enjoy the hugs and kisses of his family as he washed and readied himself for the *Shabbos* meal. No matter how meager the meal, Yankel cherished the spirit of his family's *Shabbos* table.

Tonight, however, Yankel was in no hurry. It had been a bad week, a bad month, a bad season. Each week, Yankel's family had

had less and less to eat. And tonight he could not bring himself to face his children over an empty table. So he sat in the synagogue as everyone left. And when he was alone, he approached the Holy Ark, stood a few minutes, and offered his prayer: "Master of the World, it's *Shabbos*! How can You let me go home to see my children hungry? You know how hard I work. And You know that I have nothing to bring home. Without Your help, dear God, I don't have the strength to go home and watch my family suffer! Without Your help, God, I refuse to leave the synagogue!" With that, he slammed his hands on the doors of the Holy Ark. The Ark opened up, and out rolled two beautiful, golden, warm challahs.

"It's a miracle!" shrieked Reb Yankel. "Thank You, dear God, thank You!"

Reb Yankel ran home and placed the challahs on the table. The family was astounded, and Yankel declared the challahs a gift, a miracle of God, an answer to his prayers. The family ate and celebrated.

It would be difficult to measure where there was greater joy that Friday night—in the tiny, poor home of Reb Yankel, whose children had never tasted challah so sweet, or in the mansion of Reb Chaim, who ate and drank and sang his prayers with a new spirit.

The following week, Reb Chaim again ordered his baker to make two challahs and pack them for delivery. And again Reb Chaim stood before the Holy Ark and offered his prayer: "Master of the World, You must have enjoyed those challahs because the next morning when we removed the Torah from the Ark, not a crumb was left! I'm grateful that Your *Shabbos* was as joyful as mine. And so I bring You two more challahs—challahs sweeter than those Your own angels bake. Enjoy these challahs, dear God, and I wish You a good *Shabbos*!"

At the end of the service, when the synagogue was empty, Reb Yankel humbly approached the Holy Ark. "Master of the World," he prayed, "I have come to give thanks for the joy You brought my family last week. I know that one miracle in a lifetime is more than a man has a right to ask for. And I know that I have no right to ask for another. But dear God, You Yourself heard our songs

last week. You know what a *Shabbos* You brought my children. Besides, in Your great Universe, what's a couple of challahs?"

With that he timidly opened the Ark, and out rolled two more golden challahs. Yankel shouted in joy, "A miracle!" and he danced his way home.

This went on for a full month. And another. And another. Until a whole year of challahs had gone by. Each week, Reb Chaim placed his gifts for God in the Ark. And each week, Reb Yankel accepted God's miracles. It was the greatest year in each man's life.

Then a terrible thing happened. The *shammes*—the man who cleaned the synagogue—had been detained and so was late preparing for the Friday-night service. Just before the service was about to begin, he ran to the synagogue to do his weekly sweeping. As he worked in the back of the synagogue, he witnessed the strangest thing: Reb Chaim, the richest man in the village, approached the Holy Ark carrying a bundle. He made a quiet prayer and then opened the bundle and placed two challahs into the Ark.

The *shammes* wondered whom the challahs were for, so he waited to find out. Sure enough, as the service came to an end, Reb Yankel, the poorest man in the village, approached the Ark. He whispered a prayer about miracles and then opened the Ark and removed the challahs that Reb Chaim had placed there.

The *shammes* began to laugh, startling Reb Yankel. "You fool!" he declared. "You simpleton! Wait, stay right here." And with that the *shammes* ran outside, caught up with Reb Chaim, and dragged him back to the synagogue.

When the two men faced each other, their faces dropped. The *shammes* laughed as he ridiculed them both. "You, Reb Chaim, do you really think God eats your challah each week? You fool! It is this beggar who takes from you! And you, Reb Yankel, do you really believe that God hears your prayers and miraculously feeds your family? You fool! It is this miser! You are the most foolish men! Wait until the village hears of this!"

The spirits of both Reb Chaim and Reb Yankel shriveled. Reb Chaim trudged up the hill to his home but refused even to taste his *Shabbos* feast. And Reb Yankel dropped the challahs, walked home empty-handed, and sat weeping during the *Shabbos* meal.

Just as *Shabbos* ended, each of the three men—Reb Chaim, Reb Yankel, and the *shammes*—received an urgent message summoning them to the home of the rabbi. Now the rabbi was a great and powerful mystic with deep, penetrating eyes. And to receive a summons to his home filled the men with great fear.

The three were shown into the rabbi's room. The rabbi sat at his desk, staring into a holy book, shaking his head, and groaning in sadness. He looked up at the men, and they could see the anger and pain in his eyes. "I had a terrible dream last night," he began. "God was terribly angry and was ready to destroy the whole world because something precious and holy had been destroyed. So I pleaded with God to let me try to repair the miracle before the world was destroyed.

"Reb Chaim," the rabbi continued, "your gifts did reach God. And do you know what joy God took from them? And Reb Yankel, what you found each *Shabbos* did come from God. And do you know that your children's songs reached higher than the songs of the angels? Did you know that this miracle had been foreseen since the Creation of the world? It was God's special joy to see it renewed each week. And only if the miracle is repaired will God let the world continue to exist!"

Looking at each other for the first time, Reb Chaim and Reb Yankel knew what to do. The following Friday night, instead of opening the doors of the Ark to his challahs, Reb Chaim opened the doors of his home to the family of Reb Yankel, and in turn the children of Reb Yankel's family filled the rooms of Reb Chaim's once lonely and empty mansion with *Shabbos* song and spirit. And so because these two found the way to repair God's miracle, the world continues to exist.

As for the *shammes*, his punishment was to leave the village and spend the rest of his days wandering the earth. And in every place where he found Jews who make *Shabbos*, he told them the

## It's Up to You

story of the miracle of Reb Chaim and Reb Yankel. When he died, his children continued to tell the story. And when they died, their children continued to tell the story, and so on until every Jew in every corner of the world had heard the story. In that way, the shammes repaired the miracle and helped the world continue. And now you've heard the story, too.



*When we enter a synagogue, we are drawn toward the Holy Ark. The Holy Ark is the focal point of the synagogue and its most holy place. In the Ark are the Torah scrolls, God's words and wisdom. But Torah isn't only a book. Torah is also a process of giving and taking. When we have wisdom and strength, we give. When we are in need, we take. Torah is a living connection among us. That's why the Torah is called eitz chaim, a living tree, a tree of life, a source of nourishment and renewal.*

- Why was Reb Chaim so unhappy when he consumed his sumptuous Shabbat feast? What finally brought him happiness?
- What did Reb Yankel truly want from God?
- Why did the shammes embarrass the two men? Do you think his punishment fit his crime?
- Why did the rabbi believe that the fate of the whole world rested on this miracle?

## Elijah's Stick

*Each of us has a hero within. Each of us is heroic acts, courageous acts, and acts of great heroism. Sometimes we need a shove to inspire us to act.*



There was once a very old man who lived in a village. The old man had no family and ran a small shop. He was sustained only by his love for Elijyah, the Prophet. Elijyah was his hero. The man knew every legend about Elijyah and recited them all with him. As he told each story, he would offer a prayer: "Life I could do something so wonderful." As he finished, he would shrug his shoulders, cast his glance to the floor, and say, "I am just an old fool filled with dreams."

Late one night as the old man dozed in his bed, he heard a knock on his door. He opened the door, he beheld a stranger—a tall man with a long white beard. The stranger wore an odd cloak and carried a walking stick.

"I am sorry to bother you," the stranger said, "but it seems I have lost my way in this village. May I trouble you to spare me a place to rest for the night? I can continue my journey?"

The old man stared in fascination and replied, "Come in. Rest by the fire. Let me fix you some food." The stranger asked, "Where are you from?"

"From far away," the stranger responded. "And where are you going?"

## Splitting the Sea

*What does it take to be a hero? Heroes aren't always famous, and they're not necessarily brave. To be a hero is to give your whole self to something of great importance. How can we become heroes?*



The most exciting, most suspenseful moment in the entire Torah has to be the story of the splitting of the Red Sea. Everyone remembers the story we tell each year at the Passover seder:

The Israelites escape from Pharaoh's cruel slavery after the terror of the Ten Plagues. They hastily escape from Egyptian bondage, fleeing to the desert without even taking the time to let their bread rise. And then, as they camp on the banks of the Red Sea, Pharaoh's heart is hardened one last time, and he resolves to pursue the Israelites and slaughter them. His charioteers come charging across the desert.

The Israelites find themselves trapped, the impassable sea on one side, the charging army of Pharaoh's charioteers on the other. They cry bitterly to Moses, who raises his eyes to God in prayer. God admonishes him: "This is not the time for prayer. Command the Israelites to move forward. And lift up your staff and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground" (Exodus 14:15-16).

According to the Torah, Moses did exactly that. The people crossed in safety. And when Pharaoh's troops followed them, the sea returned and drowned them all. Thus Israel was freed once and for all from the cruelty of Pharaoh. This is the greatest story

of redemption in all our literature.

But the rabbis of a later generation read the story more critically. They were disturbed that in the Torah's story, God does all the work while the Israelites passively watch the spectacle of redemption. God sends Moses and tells him what to say. God brings the plagues and hardens the heart of Pharaoh. God brings the Israelites out of Egypt and then saves them at the Sea of Reeds. Where are the Israelites themselves in the story? Where is the human role in the bringing of redemption? What part of redemption is our responsibility? To answer those questions, the rabbis, as they often did, inserted a different story between the lines.

According to the rabbis' telling, Moses leads the people to the banks of the sea. Then they hear the hoofbeats of Pharaoh's approaching armies. The people cry out to Moses. Moses prays to God. He is told to hold his staff over the sea, an act that will cause the sea to split. And all that he does, exactly as he is commanded—but the sea doesn't split. He tries again, but the waters still do not part. He becomes nervous. He tries to recall the exact words of God, the exact instructions. Once again he holds the staff over the waters. And once again they do not part. Moses panics. The people panic. Everyone is immobilized with fear. And no one knows what to do.

No one, that is, except one man. One man perceived what even Moses Our Teacher could not. His name was Nachshon ben Aminadav, one of the princes of the tribes of Israel. Nachshon understood that God was waiting. God had sent Moses. And God had brought the plagues. And God had led the Israelites out of Egypt. But now God was waiting for the people to take a role in their own redemption. God, Nachshon understood, would not part the sea until someone moved—until someone moved toward his or her own redemption, until someone was ready to risk his or her life to bring about salvation.

And so Nachshon ben Aminadav jumped into the waters of the Red Sea.

At first everyone looked at him in wonder and awe. "What are you doing?" his family shouted. But he paid no heed; he knew

## It's Up to You

exactly what he was doing. And he waded out farther, until water covered his knees. His family screamed and shouted and begged him to return, but he went farther still, until water reached his waist. And now everyone stood in silence and watched. He waded even farther, until water covered his shoulders. And then a few more steps—and he disappeared under the water. And only when the water had covered his nostrils and Nachshon could no longer breathe, only when he began to drown—only then did the sea split and the Israelites cross in safety.



*For the rabbis of the Talmud, heaven and earth are not distinct. We human beings aren't just passive spectators to a divine drama. We are God's partners, sharing the work of bringing the world to perfection. God needs us. And every act made by a human being to advance the dream of a perfect world is a revelation of God's will in the world. In the poetic words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "All of human history as described by the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: God in search of man."*

- What's the difference between the way the Torah tells the story of the Red Sea and the way the Midrash tells it?
- What did Nachshon know that no one else knew?
- In our time, who are the Nachshons? Have you ever been a Nachshon?