

## Sins of the Father

The two maintenance men stood by the pile of freshly dug earth next to the open grave. According to the schedule, this was the Greenstein burial. They would work the apparatus which lowered the casket into the grave where the remains of Mr. Greenstein would rest eternally. The workmen knew nothing about Mr. Greenstein, but as they watched the passengers emerge from the cars in the funeral procession they knew that this funeral was special. Why else would there be a military honor guard in full dress uniforms complete with white gloves?

Later, after the brief ritual under the open-sided tent next to the grave, they watched, fascinated, as one of the soldiers lifted a bugle to his lips. The mournful notes of “Taps” echoed over the silent gravestones. That, they were positive, had never happened before in the old Jewish cemetery.

The doorbell rang. He glanced at the battered alarm clock on the dresser. It was only 6:15. The sun had risen barely above the horizon. He clucked in irritation as he placed the blue velvet bag containing his phylacteries beside him on the bed and pulled himself up. Wondering who could be at the door at this time in the morning, he shuffled into the living room. Whatever it was about, it could not take much time or he would be late for the morning service.

“Yes?” he inquired through the double-locked front door.

“Does Rabbi Isaac Greenstein live here?” The deep voice sounded youthful.

“This is Isaac Greenstein,” he said. “How can I help you?”

“It’s David Greenstein . . . your grandson.”

Isaac suddenly felt weak. He slumped heavily against the door, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. One hand clutched at the doorknob for support.

“Grandfather?”

Isaac waited until the rapid beating of his heart abated. With an effort he pulled himself erect. He stared at the door a moment, reached for the knob with a trembling hand, then stopped. “No,” he said firmly, “I have no grandson.”

Ignoring the continued inquiries from the other side of the door, Isaac made his way back to the bedroom. He could still hear the tapping on the door as he picked up the phylacteries from the bed and made ready to place them in the blue velvet bag. The phylacteries he would put on at the synagogue in a ritual he had been performing since his thirteenth birthday when his father presented these same *teffilin* to him along with a *tallith*. That original prayer shawl he had given to his own son upon his *bar mitzvah*, a tradition he had hoped young Simcha would continue. But, he reminded himself, Simcha was dead, and any son that Simcha might have had would not use a *tallith*, much less *teffilin*.

Issac listened for a moment, but the tapping on the door had ceased. He removed his skull cap and placed it, too, into the blue velvet bag. In the mirror his reflection gazed back at him, a sorrowful old man. He smoothed his white beard and straightened the collar of his shirt. Donning his felt hat and suit jacket, he walked to the small, neat kitchen and prepared a cup of tea. Ten minutes later he left the apartment, his velvet bag under his arm.

The synagogue was just two blocks away, and Isaac began to retrace the steps that had taken him there on every well day of his life for as long as he had lived in that house on Clara Avenue--more than forty years. On, Sabbath mornings, Rochel had accompanied him (he still could not think of her as Rachel, the Americanized version of her name). For the past ten years, however, after she of blessed memory had passed away, he had walked alone.

The early morning sun, a little higher in the sky now and behind him, lit up the awnings over the storefronts ahead on Easton Avenue. He walked slowly, stepping into the darkness of his own shadow on the sidewalk. He heard footsteps moving up quickly behind him, then alongside, slowing to match his pace. Isaac kept his gaze straight ahead, but he could see a second shadow beside his of a person taller than he and, as he very well knew, much younger.

At Oak Street, he began to step off the curb when he felt a restraining hand on his arm. A car squealed around the corner in front of him. He was trembling now, not so much from the closeness of the turning car as from the touch of the hand that still gently held his arm.

“Grandfather, please look at me. I am your grandson, David,” the voice said.

Isaac said nothing. The trembling continued, and he could feel a mounting panic as if some dark force from the “Kabala” had been loosed upon him. He stepped off the curb once more. Please, God, he thought, know that I am not encouraging this. As you can see, I am trying to keep from looking, even though--oh yes--even though I want to look at him. But a vow to the Almighty is a vow that must be kept. What kind of righteous man would go back on his word to God?

“I came here to discuss something very important to us both,” the young man named David said. “My plane landed early this morning and I took a cab to the only address I had, hoping you would still be living there.”

They reached the steps leading up to the synagogue. Isaac moved up the stairs, one step at a time. As he reached the front door, he said without looking directly at his unwanted companion, “This is a house of worship. Only those who come to pray in Hebrew should enter here.” He felt a pang of shame as he uttered the words.

The taller figure hesitated, looking at the faded Hebrew lettering on the worn wood plaque above the door. Isaac passed through the doors alone.

For Isaac, the morning prayers were strangely unsatisfactory. They did not bring the comforting serenity which the familiar liturgy usually evoked in him. Instead, he became disconcerted by shadows--those of this morning and others of the past.

On that terrible day that was everlastingly etched by pain in Isaac’s memory, Simcha had come to see him in the small room off the kitchen which Rochel jokingly called his study. It was, in fact, a converted pantry in which he had just enough room for his desk, chair, lamp and books.

“You look so serious, Simchala,” he said to his 20-year-old son, now in his final year before ordination as a rabbi to join his father in a rabbinic tradition that extended back for four generations. “Is anything wrong at the Yeshiva?”

Simcha didn’t seem to know where to begin. “Papa, I have a problem,” he said finally.

“A Talmudic problem?” Isaac asked, ever thinking in terms of study.

“No, a personal problem, one which I have thought about for a long time. The Talmud teaches that honesty is a virtue above others, so to you I must make a confession.”

Isaac looked into his son’s eyes. It was quite apparent that he was troubled. This obviously

was no trivial thing. “Nu?” he prompted. “What is it?”

“I’ve met a girl.”

Instantly, Isaac was on guard. Where girls were concerned a rabbi-to-be had to walk a very narrow path. The girl must be pious, from a pious family. The double burden of keeping faith and pleasing a congregation was heavy.

“This girl,” Isaac began, “she is from an orthodox Jewish family?”

“No, Papa”

“Conservative? Reformed? What?”

“Papa, she’s not Jewish.”

Isaac could not believe what he had just heard. This from Simcha he had never expected. “Not Jewish? You talk to me about meeting a *shicksa*?” Isaac said, his voice rising. “I tell you there is only one answer to your problem. You--will--not--see--this--girl--again!” On each word of the final sentence, Isaac pounded his fist on the desk top.

“Papa, I have agonized over this, believe me. It is not a casual thing. I have been seeing her for eight months. I . . . I love her.”

A wave of rage overwhelmed Isaac, choking him. “You love her?” he shouted. “Preposterous! Impossible. You are the son of a rabbi, grandson of a rabbi. You must not see her again. I forbid it.”

“Papa, please, listen to me.”

“There is nothing more to be said. Nothing. You will end this nonsense and continue with your studies.”

“She’s a wonderful girl. I want you to meet her.”

“Meet her?” Isaac cried. “Never in this life.”

“Papa, I am going to marry her.”

The words hung there, echoing inside Isaac’s head. The fury within him ended as suddenly as it had erupted, replaced by an icy dread which filled his entire being. His Simcha marrying out of the religion? His entire life would change. No more Yeshiva. His chance at being a rabbi gone forever. No, it could never be. Never!

Isaac spoke to Simcha without looking at him, his voice barely a whisper, “Hear this from me, your father. In the name of the On High, I swear that if you marry this . . . this . . . woman out of your faith, I will no longer recognize you as my son. You will be from that day on dead to me. I will never want to see you again. Do you understand this, Simcha?”

Isaac, his eyes tightly closed, heard someone sob and suddenly realized that the cry had been his. He looked around the sanctuary. No one in the small group of worshipers had noticed. As the elderly men progressed through the morning service, other images of Simcha came unbidden to torment him. Simcha as a little boy beside him on the hard wooden bench. Simcha chanting from the Torah in his clear boyish soprano. Simcha. Simcha.

When the service ended, Isaac knew he must forgo the usual, after-service chatter. The deep melancholy which the fleeting images had provoked would make him poor company. He bade his fellow worshipers a good morning and closed himself in his small office next to the sanctuary. Here, he tried to concentrate on work as he had been doing for many years, shutting out as best he could the memories that tormented him. When finally he looked up at the clock he

discovered it was just past noon, time to walk back home for a bite to eat. He passed through the synagogue doors into the warm sunshine.

God is pleased, today, Isaac thought. He has created such a pleasant morning, but the sun somehow cannot penetrate the gloom that surrounds me.

He stopped short as he saw the young man sitting on the lower steps of the synagogue. Even though his mind cried out to look away, he let his eyes rest on him. There was a strong resemblance, not to Simcha, but to himself as a youth of nineteen. Isaac forced himself to look away as the young man rose and turned.

“Grandfather,” David said. “Ignore me if you want to, but you can’t deny that I am the son of your son. You are my grandfather.”

“My son is dead to me,” Isaac said softly.

“And to me, also,” David said. “I never met him, you know. He was killed in Viet Nam shortly after I was born. My mother has tried to tell me about him. They knew each other too short a time for her to really know him. Not like a father would know his son.”

Despite his resolve, Isaac looked hard at the young man. There was a deep sadness apparent in the dark brown eyes, the same sadness he knew projecting from his own.

“My son was dead to me even before Viet Nam,” Isaac said haltingly.

“My mother told me about that, but I never could understand it.”

“You were not raised as a Jew. You could not possibly understand.”

“Grandfather, my father was raised as a Jew. You raised him. But my mother said that he, too, could never understand.”

Isaac’s shoulders slumped. He sank down to sit on the step. David sat beside him. “No, your father would not understand why I could not accept him to marry out of his faith and destroy his future. It was a great *shonda*, a terrible sin against God.”

“Grandfather,” David said, looking into Isaac’s sad eyes. “We pray to the same God, you and I. We aren’t so different. Jews, after all, brought the concept of a universal God to all people. And the God of Judaism is a God who forgives.”

“You have read about our religion?” Isaac asked, surprised.

“I made an effort to learn all I could,” David answered. “I was raised in a Lutheran home, but I always knew that part of my heritage is Jewish, and that’s why I am here. It’s about my father, and whatever your past decisions were, please hear me out.”

Isaac began to raise himself from the step, but David gently restrained him. “Please, listen to me. I could have written all this to you in a letter, but you have never answered any of my mother’s or my own letters.”

It was true, Isaac thought. He could never bring himself to open the letters, and although Rochel read them, he forbade her to talk about their contents or to answer them. Slowly he sat back on the cement step.

“I know you received news of my father’s death in Viet Nam, but I don’t know if you received all the details,” David continued. “The government officially declared him “missing in action” after his chopper crashed in enemy territory. Unofficially, witnesses said he could not have survived, but since his body was never recovered he was listed as MIA”.

Isaac nodded. He remembered Rochel telling him the terrible news that had reached them through both the wife and the government. He remembered the anguish he felt when he realized

that his faint hope of seeing his son again would never flower.

“Last week we received word that after all this time my father’s remains had been recovered and were being shipped home for burial. That’s why I came to see you.”

“You wish me to be on hand when your father is buried in your family cemetery?” Isaac began to shake his head.

“No,” David said, “I want you to be on hand when your son is buried in *your* family cemetery.”

Isaac was bewildered. “But your mother . . .”

“At first she did want him buried in the family plot, but I convinced her that it would be wrong. My father was Jewish.” David dipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a weathered pair of dogtags on a chain. These he handed to Isaac who took them with trembling fingers. “Captain Simcha Greenstein” they read. Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes.

“I believe he would have wanted to be buried in a Jewish cemetery,” David continued. “In your cemetery, near his family. And I think he would have wanted his father there. I’ve thought about you and my father for a long time. You called what my father did a sin, and I think you believed with all your soul that you had no choice. But is marrying out of your faith really a sin? It seems to me he did no worse than King Solomon, one of Israel’s greatest kings. And please remember that my father lived and died a Jew. He never denied his God.”

David paused a moment, then continued, the words tumbling out in a rush, “And even if you do consider what he did a sin, by denying me aren’t you punishing *me* for something my father did? I know the Torah says that the sins of the father shall be visited upon the children, but doesn’t the Torah also show how God forgave His children many times for worse transgressions? I wasn’t able to know my father, but I would like to know my grandfather while there’s still time. Grandfather, please, isn’t it time to forget the bitterness of the past and forgive?”

The old man stared at the young face which reminded him so much of himself, at the tears like his own, tracing their way down the unlined cheeks. Was it time? All that pain. The grief he felt at Simcha’s final loss. Not being able to express the aching sorrow he felt. Rochel’s sadness which hurt him all the more because she steadfastly stood by him in his resolve. Was it worth it? Was it nothing but stiff-necked pride that kept him from breaking a vow that God had never demanded? He knew it was more than that. It was a burden molded by the deep convictions which guided his life. Yet the simple, heartfelt words from this young man touched him deeply. Certainly Simcha had made a choice which was anathema to every religious Jew, especially to the rabbinical tradition. But Simcha had remained true in his heart of hearts. He did live and die a Jew. And now that he was coming home for his final rest, wasn’t it time to bury the bitterness, too? Would God approve?

With eyes tightly shut, Isaac turned his tear-stained face up to the sun. Its warmth seemed to flow deep within his soul, filling even that icy void he had carved for himself so long ago. And with the warmth came a strange, permeating sense of peace, strange because he had not felt such complete serenity for many years. Simcha’s face came to him then, and he relished the memory without the recrimination he had always felt. Simcha, he thought, please forgive me as I forgive you.

He opened his eyes to see Simcha’s son--his grandson--watching him with apprehension.

“Here . . .David . . . help me up.” He grasped the firm young hand and pulled himself up from the cement step in front of the synagogue. “ You are named for my father, your great grandfather, did you know that? Well, come, we have work to do, you and me. Arrangements to make. Then I will show you photographs and tell you stories about *my* son, and you will tell me all about *his* son. Okay?”

Isaac smiled as he saw David’s expression change from concern to relief.

“Okay,” David said as he took the old man’s arm.

Together they walked slowly back up Easton Avenue, sunlight warming their faces, their shadows now behind them.

END