

A BOOK THAT
 WAS LOST

and Other Stories by
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THE TALE OF THE MENORAH

1

RABBI NAHMAN, THE keeper of the royal seal, was a man of great importance in the eyes of the king. Whenever he came to the royal court, the palace attendants gave him an audience with the king, for they knew how beloved Nahman the Jew was to the king.

It happened one day that Rabbi Nahman came to the royal court, for he had a matter about which he had to speak to the king. The king, too, had a certain matter that he had concealed from his closest counselors, his company of advisors. The moment he saw Rabbi Nahman, the king said, "This is the man I shall consult." So the king related to Rabbi Nahman the matter that he had not wished to tell a single one of his counselors. But he did tell it to Rabbi Nahman, the keeper of the royal seal.

The Almighty bestowed wisdom upon Rabbi Nahman, and he responded with intelligent advice. The king listened and did as Rabbi Nahman had advised. And it turned out to be a blessing for the king. Then he knew how excellent was the advice Nahman had given him.

After this Rabbi Nahman was summoned to the palace court. When the king heard that Nahman was in the royal courtyard, he commanded, "Bring him to me."

Rabbi Nahman entered the king's chamber. The king said to

him, "The advice you gave me was excellent. Ask of me now whatever you desire, and I will grant it to you."

Rabbi Nahman replied, "Blessed be the Lord who has shared His wonderful counsel with the king." But for himself Rabbi Nahman did not ask for a single thing. He said to the king, "I am unworthy of the least of all your kindnesses." These were the very words that Jacob our forefather spoke to Esau, and Rabbi Nahman said them to the king.

The king replied, "Because you have not asked for a single thing for yourself, I will make a holy donation to your God." Rabbi Nahman did not ask the king what it was he promised to give. And the king did not tell him.

2

IT CAME TO pass in those days that Buczacz built itself a Great Synagogue. Its community of Jews had grown to nearly two hundred and fifty householders, in addition to the women and the children and all the servants of the wealthy who had come from other towns and now lived in the city. So the people of Buczacz built themselves a large synagogue in which to worship. That is the same building that the Gentiles living in the city made into a church for their gods after the city fell into the hands of Chmielnicki and he had slain every Jew who had not fled in haste from the sword of his wrath.

The king commanded his metalworkers to make him a great brass menorah to place in the synagogue in Buczacz in honor of Nahman, the keeper of the royal seal and the leader of the community of Israel in Buczacz.

The king's metalworkers made a great menorah out of brass. There were seven branches in the candelabrum, the same number of branches that we had in ancient days in the holy candelabrum in the Temple, the house of our glory. The artisans did not know that it is forbidden to make a vessel identical to one that had been in the Temple.

When they brought the menorah, which was a gift from the king, to the synagogue, the Jews saw it and they beheld its seven branches. They said, "We cannot place this menorah in the synagogue." If we do, they said to themselves, we will sin against God; on the other hand, if we do not set it in the synagogue, we will insult the king and his gift." They did not know what counsel to take for themselves. Even Nahman, the counselor to the king, had no solution. He said, "This has all befallen us because I frequented the court of the king."

But God saw their distress, and He set the idea in their heads to remove one branch from the menorah and thus make it into an ordinary candelabrum. Then, if they placed the menorah in the synagogue, there would be no sin for them in doing so. And if someone mentioned it to the king, they could say, "From the day that our Temple was destroyed, we make nothing without marking upon it a sign in remembrance of the destruction."

So they removed the middle branch. Then they brought the menorah into the house of God and placed it on the ark and lit its candles.

The menorah stood in the synagogue. The six candles in the six branches of the menorah lit up the building on the eve of every Sabbath and holiday. And on Yom Kippur and on those holidays when the memorial prayer for the departed is recited in synagogue to remember the souls of the departed, they shone during the day as well. A Gentile watched the candles lest one fall out.

So the menorah stood there, and so it shone for the entire time this house of God was indeed a house *for* God, until the day Israel was driven out by Chmielnicki and the town's Gentiles made the house of God into a church for their gods. Then the Gentile who watched the candles, who was a millworker, took the menorah and hid it in the River Strypa, which was near the mill. The menorah lay at the bottom of the Strypa's waters, and no one knew where it was. As for the millworker, he died after his body got caught in the millstone's wheel; he was ground up and cast away, and his flesh became food for the fish in the River Strypa.

3

AFTER SOME YEARS, those who had survived Chmielnicki's sword returned to their homeland and towns. The few survivors from Buczacz also returned to the town, and there they built themselves a small sanctuary in place of the Great Synagogue, which the Gentiles had plundered and made into a house for their gods.

That year, on a Saturday night at the close of the Sabbath, on the night that was also the first night for reciting the Selihot, the penitential hymns, the young children were shining candles over the surface of the Strypa. They were doing this in order to make light for the slain martyrs who had drowned in rivers, streams, and lakes. On the first night of Selihot all the dead whom our enemies have drowned come to pray to the eternal God in the same synagogue in which they prayed during their lifetimes. The other nights of Selihot are dedicated respectively to those martyrs who died by fire, to those who were stabbed to death, to the ones who were strangled, and to those who were murdered. For on account of their numbers, the building could not contain all the slain at once. As a result, they divided up the nights between them, one congregation of martyrs for each night of prayer.

Now while the children were on the banks of the Strypa shining their candles, a great menorah such as they had never seen before suddenly shone forth from beneath the water. They said, "That must be the menorah of the dead; for the dead bring with them their own menorot when they come to pray." Their hearts quaked in fear, and the children fled.

Some grownups heard the story about the menorah that the children had told, and they said, "Let's go and see for ourselves!" They went and came to the Strypa. And indeed, there was a menorah in the Strypa! "The story is true," they said. "It is a menorah." But not a person knew that it was the menorah that the king of Poland had given to the old Great Synagogue before the Gentiles of the city took it over and made it into a church for their gods.

The Jews retrieved the menorah from the waters of the Strypa and brought it to the synagogue. There they placed it upon the read-

ing table, for another menorah already stood on the stand before the ark, and they had promised the donor of that menorah that no one would ever replace it. Besides, the stand before the ark was too small to hold the large menorah. And so they placed the menorah they had drawn from the waters on the reading table.

The menorah illuminated the house of God with the six candles that stood in its six branches. And for a long time the menorah lit up the house of God on the evenings of the Sabbath and the holidays. The candles of the menorah shone on the holidays during the daytime as well, and on the Twentieth of Sivan when the souls of the departed are remembered in the service. And when the sun came out in all its strength and reached into the house of God, then the menorah shone with the luster of burnished brass in sunlight.

4

MANY DAYS LATER, after that entire generation had died, a new generation arose that did not know all that had happened to their forefathers. After looking at the menorah day after day, one of them said, "We should repair the menorah; it shouldn't look like a vessel that is missing something." And they did not realize that their forefathers had already repaired the menorah when they cut off one of its branches to avoid sinning against either God or the king.

They made an eagle of glittering brass, and they placed a large amount of lead in the brass so that it would appear to be a white eagle. For a white eagle is the national insignia of Poland. They placed the eagle beneath the spot where their forefathers had removed the branch. Originally, it had been a menorah with seven branches, but our forefathers had repaired the menorah when they removed one of its branches. But the members of the next generation, those who brought the national insignia of Poland into our synagogue, said to each other, "Now we will let Poland know how truly attached we are to our country and homeland, the land of Poland. Out of our love for the homeland, we have even placed the national insignia of Poland in our house of worship!"

So the menorah stood on the holy reading table on which they used to read from the Torah of God. And the eagle—the Polish eagle—lay between the branches of the menorah. So stood the menorah: three branches on one side, three branches on the other, with the candles in the menorah shining on one side toward the reader's stand and on the other side toward the holy Torah ark. And in the center, the white eagle, the national insignia of the Polish kingdom, stood between the candles. So stood the eagle in the menorah in the synagogue for all the time Poland was a sovereign state ruling over the entire land of Poland.

5

SOMETIME LATER, POLAND was conquered. The country was divided up among its neighbors, each neighbor taking for itself all that it could, and Buczacz fell to the lot of Austria. The Austrian forces camped across the city—the soldiers, their officers, the entire army that had conquered the territory of Buczacz.

After summoning the town's rulers, the army generals ordered them to make a holiday now that the city had come under the rule of the Austrian emperor. They commanded the Jews to gather in their Great Synagogue to praise and glorify their Lord, the God of Israel, who had bestowed upon them the emperor of Austria to be their ruler. The heads of the city and of the Jewish community listened and did just as the generals said. For no one disobeys the orders of an army general; whoever does, disobeys at the risk of his life.

And so everyone in the city came to make a holiday that God had given them the Austrian emperor to protect them beneath the wings of his kindness. Many of the Jews offered their gratitude innocently and sincerely, for God had indeed liberated them from the oppressiveness of Poland and from the priests who handed Israel over to despoilment through the libels and plots they had devised against them, so as to persecute the Jews and take their money and lead them astray from God's statutes. Not a year had passed that righteous and

innocent men were not murdered because of blood libels and every other type of false accusation.

And so all the Jews of Buczacz came and filled the synagogue, even its women's section. Many of the city's leaders who were not Jews also attended, and at their head came the generals of the Austrian army.

The synagogue's cantor and his choir chanted from the psalms of David, from those psalms that David, king of Israel, had sung to the God of Israel when the people of Israel lived in their land and when David, our king, reigned in the city of God, in Israel's holy Zion. The generals and the city's rulers sat there and gazed at the synagogue building and its walls and the ceiling and the candelabra that hung from the ceiling. All of them were of burnished brass, the handiwork of artisans. They gazed at the holy curtain covering the holy ark of the Torah, and at the covering over the holy curtain, and at the lectern, and at the cantor and his choir standing in front of the lectern. They gazed at the raised platform made of hewn stone which stood at the center of the synagogue, and at the steps leading up to the platform, and at the table on the platform. Then they saw the great menorah that stood on the table with its branches and flower-shaped cups. And they saw how beautiful it was.

And as they were looking, the officers suddenly saw the Polish eagle on the menorah. They immediately became incensed at the Jews.

The synagogue president rushed off, grabbed the gavel that the synagogue's sexton used to rouse the congregants for morning services, and smashed the white eagle with the gavel. He hit the eagle with the gavel and knocked it off the synagogue menorah. And thus he removed the national insignia of Poland from the house of worship. The officers said to him, "You acted well. If you hadn't done this, we would have imprisoned you and the elders of the community, and we would have fined the Jewish community as punishment." Then the army officers ordered that a two-headed eagle be set on the menorah in place of the eagle they had removed. For the two-headed eagle is the Austrian eagle.

They immediately sent for Yisrael the Metalworker, summoning him to come. This was the same Yisrael the Metalworker whose wife received seven copper pennies every Friday, so that she could buy herself sustenance for the Sabbath during the period that the Austrian emperor imprisoned her husband and she had literally nothing with which to celebrate the Sabbath, as I related in my tale "My Sabbath."

Yisrael the Metalworker made a brass eagle with two heads, and they set that two-headed eagle on the menorah in place of the one-headed eagle. The young boys took the eagle that Yisrael the Metalworker had discarded, and they brought it to him to make dreidels for them to play with during Hanukkah. And those are the very same dreidels that our grandfathers told us about—the dreidels of burnished brass that Yisrael the Metalworker made for the children of Buczacz.

The menorah stood in the Great Synagogue for many days. With its six candles in its six branches the menorah lit up the synagogue. On Sabbath nights and the nights of the holidays, the menorah's candles were lit, as they also were on the Austrian emperor's birthday, which the country celebrated as a holiday, because he was a beneficent ruler. And so the two-headed eagle vanquished the menorah and its branches.

But the Polish people never reconciled themselves to the Austrian rulers who had stolen their land. They prepared war against them. They came out of every town and village to wage a war on behalf of their nation and homeland.

6

BUZACZ, LIKE THE other towns and villages, supported the uprising. Many Jews were also among those fighting on behalf of Poland. They held a heavy hand over their own brethren; indeed, they were particularly hard upon all those who sought peace and quiet, and upon all who remained loyal to Austria.

Certain Jews passed through the land of Galicia to rouse up their brethren in every town and make them come to the rescue of

Poland. They spoke of all the wonderful things Poland had done for the Jews, but they did not recall the wicked things. One of these men came to Buczacz. He was wearing a hammer on his belt just like those firemen wear when they go out to fight a fire. On the Sabbath morning he came to the Great Synagogue. The Jews there paid him much honor; they seated him next to the eastern wall of the synagogue and they called him up to the Torah.

And so it happened, as he was standing before the Torah, that the man saw the two-headed eagle. He began to scream: "This is an abomination! An abomination!" Then he grabbed the hammer from around his waist and struck at the two-headed eagle. He paid no attention to the other worshipers, not even when they pleaded with him to stop and not desecrate the Sabbath. He did not listen to them until he had broken the Austrian eagle from off the menorah and cast it to the ground.

The young boys took the eagle that had been removed from the menorah and brought it to one of the metalworkers to make into dreidels for Hanukkah, for they had heard that their forefathers had made dreidels for themselves from brass. But the metalworker did not make dreidels for them, because it is very difficult to make dreidels from brass. But he did make them dice, which children also play with on Hanukkah.

And all the days of the uprising, the menorah stood there with the eagle cut off.

7

EVENTUALLY THE UPRISING was put down and Austria returned to ruling over the country. Now, though, its rulers cast a wary eye upon every matter, large and small, in enforcing the law of the land and its ordinances.

It was then that the synagogue treasurers hastened to make for themselves an eagle with two heads, which they set on the menorah in place of the eagle that had been cut off and discarded.

The eagle stood there between the six branches of the meno-

rah, its one head turned to the three branches to the right, and its second head toward the three branches to the left. All the years until the Great War broke out, until Austria and Russia became enemies, the eagle stood there on the menorah, and the menorah stood on the holy reading table, the table on which the Torah was read.

8

AS CONDITIONS IN the war grew more difficult, it became harder for the soldiers to find weapons to shoot. So they took metal utensils, large and fine utensils, and they melted them down in order to make out of them weapons with which to destroy the country. These soldiers came as well to the Great Synagogue in Buczacz. They took the brass basin in which every man who entered the sanctuary washed his hands. They took the brass pitcher that the Levites used to pour water over the hands of the priests before they went up before the congregation on holidays to bless them with the priestly blessing. They took every utensil made of brass and lead. They took the charity box that was made of gold, the box in which people made secret contributions to charity. And the officers also fixed their eyes upon the great menorah. A certain metalworker was with them. For they had brought a metalworker in order to take the utensils from the synagogue and melt them down into weapons.

But just as they were about to seize the menorah, the sound of Russian tanks was heard. The Austrian forces immediately fled for their lives, and left behind all they had taken.

But the metalworker, the one who had come with the army officers when they came to take the brass utensils—he did not flee.

He took the menorah and hid it in a place that only he knew. No one else knew its place. And no one gave a thought to the menorah, for all anyone cared about was saving his own life from the Great War and from the heavy shellfire that fell continuously through the war until its conclusion.

Then the war ended, and the land of Poland that had been

fought over came under Polish rule. And the town of Buczacz was also given over to Poland.

9

A NUMBER OF the former inhabitants of Buczacz returned to the town. Many villagers from around Buczacz also settled in the town, for their houses had been stolen by their neighbors with whom they had fought on behalf of their homeland. They all came to worship in the Great Synagogue for, of all the prayer houses, the Great Synagogue alone survived the war.

And so it happened, when they could not find a single lamp to light up the house of worship at night, that they took some stones from the place, they bored holes in them, and then they set the stones on the lectern in order to place candles in them to make light for themselves when they stood in prayer before the Lord. Later, they made for themselves menorot out of tin and wood, because they were very poor. For they had been unable to recover anything of all they had owned. Whatever the war had spared the enemy had taken; and whatever the enemy had spared, the Poles took. So it was not within their means to make for themselves menorot from brass or from lead as they once had.

10

ONE MAN, WHO had been born in Buczacz, came home after being a captive in Russia. And it happened that, when he came to the Great Synagogue on Friday night and saw the menorot of tin and wood that were without any beauty, he remembered how he happened to be in the trenches with a metalworker, and how that metalworker had told him that, when the Russians advanced upon Buczacz, he had hidden the town's great menorah to keep it from falling into the Russians' hands. But before the metalworker was able to tell him where he had hidden the menorah, a cannon hit the trench

and the two never saw each other again. And now, when the man saw the synagogue, he remembered the metalworker and the trench that the cannon had blown up. For if the cannon had not blown up the trench, he would now have known the place where the metalworker had hidden the menorah.

The next morning, on the Sabbath day, the man was called to the Torah, for it was the first Sabbath since he had returned to his hometown. The Torah reading for that Sabbath was the portion called *Terumah*, which begins with Exodus 25. As the Torah reader read aloud the section in Scripture describing the making of the menorah that was used in the tabernacle, he came to the verse "Note well, and follow the patterns for them that are being shown you on the mountain" (Exodus 25:31). At that instant the man knew that the menorah was hidden on a mountain!

The town of Buczacz is surrounded by mountains; it sits on a mountaintop itself. And the man had no idea which mountain it was that held the menorah.

The man began to wander the mountains. There was not a mountain of all the mountains around Buczacz that he did not search. The man did not reveal to anyone that he was searching after the menorah, for he feared the riffraff that had joined the town and that, if they heard about the menorah, they would take it away. Every day the man went in search of the menorah, through cold and heat, until summer and winter had both passed. But he still had not found the menorah.

Now the days of cold, the winter season, returned, and the man did not return from his daily labors in the mountains. At the end of several days, after wandering in the mountains, he said to himself: Let me return home and no longer search after the menorah. For I am not able to find it.

11

AND IT CAME to pass that, as the man was returning home, another man was standing on the road, a man crippled in his legs and

missing an arm. The two of them stood there. They looked at each other in astonishment and exclaimed, "Blessed be He who resurrects the dead!"

Then the man who had been searching after the menorah said, "I told myself that you were blown up in the trench, and now I see you are alive!"

The metalworker said to him, "I too thought you were among the dead. Blessed be the Lord who has saved us from the Russian cannons and who has left us alive after the horrible Great War."

The man who had been searching for the menorah asked him, "Didn't you tell me that when the Russians first came to Buczacz you hid the great menorah? Well, where did you hide it?"

The metalworker replied, "That is why I have come."

"Where is it?" the other asked.

"It is hidden in the ground beneath my house," he answered.

"Where is your house?"

"It is destroyed," the metalworker said. "It no longer exists. But the place is still there. It is beneath a pile of snow. If I only had a shovel in my hand, I could already have cleared away the snow and the earth beneath it and dug the menorah out."

The two of them went off. They brought a shovel and worked there all day and all night and all the next day, for a huge amount of snow covered the mountains, until, finally, they had cleared the snow and the earth, and they found the menorah.

They removed the menorah and brought it to the Great Synagogue, where they stood it on the reading table where the menorah had once stood. And so the menorah stood on the reading table as it had in earlier days, in the days when there was peace in the land. The metalworker said, "Now I will cut off that bird with two heads, for Austria has ceased to rule over Buczacz. And if there are young boys in town, I will make dreidels from the brass eagle for them to play with during Hanukkah, just as our grandfathers did for our fathers." He added, "Let us also not make a one-headed eagle, like the eagle that is the national insignia of Poland. I have heard that the Ruthenians have revolted against Poland. If they see the eagle of Poland in our

synagogue, they will say that we have prepared to go to war against the Ruthenian nation."

The two men said to each other, "One kingdom comes and another kingdom passes away. But Israel remains forever." And they said, "O Lord! Have pity on Your people. Let not Your possession become a mockery, to be taunted by nations! How long shall they direct us however they wish? You, our God, are our rock and refuge forever. You alone we have desired; let us never be ashamed."

TRANSLATED BY DAVID STERN

THE TALE OF THE MENORAH

227/ *The Tale of the Menorah* In the Hebrew title, "Ma'aseh Hamenorah," *ma'aseh* denotes a historical occurrence, not a fictional story; *menorah* refers not to the Hanukkah lamp but to the candelabrum that originally stood before the tabernacle in the Temple courtyard.

228/ *"Blessed be the Lord who has shared His wonderful counsel"* Isaiah 28:29.

228/ *Words that Jacob our forefather spoke to Esau* Genesis 32:11.

228/ *Chmielnicki* See note to "Buczacz," above.

231/ *The Twentieth of Sivan* The date commemorating the Chmielnicki massacres.

233/ *Blood libel* The false allegation that Jews murder non-Jews, especially Christians, in order to use their blood for Passover and other rituals. From the early Middle Ages through modern times, accusations of blood libels led to trials and massacres of Jews.

234/ *Related in my tale "My Sabbath."* The story is found in *Eilu Ve'eilu* pp. 341–42. In the story, Yisrael is imprisoned for counterfeiting seven copper pennies so that he can buy food for the Sabbath and not desecrate the holy day; during the time of his imprisonment, a mysterious stranger, who is later revealed to be the spirit of the Sabbath (and whose name is Shabbati, "My Sabbath"), surreptitiously brings his wife seven copper pennies every Friday for her to buy food for herself.

240/ *"O Lord! Have pity on Your people"* Joel 2:17.

240/ *"How long shall they direct us"* Proverb 21:1.