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THE SHABBES GOY

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The rabbi of Chelm, in ragged fur cap and tattered satin robe, a tiny Jew with a prominent Adam's apple and laughing gray eyes in a shriveled face.<sup>1</sup> . . . Between one talmudic problem and the next, the cheerful, gray-headed rabbi gets up, surveys with confidence the open Gemara through glasses on the tip of his nose, his shawl popping out of his chest, and, as his rightful share of worldly pleasures, takes up the wooden snuffbox.

A softhearted person, a being contented with his lot, he smiles at the snuffbox and taps on the cover, drumming lightly with his small fingers as though asking: Is there a little something there?

And when the snuffbox replies softly, "There is a bit left, there is!" he opens it leisurely, takes a crumb of a morsel between his fingertips and brings it to his nostrils, presses gently to the right, gently to the left—and then again. His eyes brighten, his heart

gladdens, he strolls about the House of Judgment almost dancing, and gives praise to the world's Creator in singsong: "Ay, ay, Gottenyu, dear God, what a sweet world you have created!"

"What splendid creatures walk about in your dear world! Jews, and—to be exact—others. Ay, people made of gold, of velvet, of satin. . . ."

Suddenly, someone drops in: "Rebbe, help!"

He is alarmed.

"What happened to you, Yankele? Yankele!"

He recognizes him. The rabbi knows everyone in Chelm, for he has been godfather to almost all. And when he sees Yankele's bloodied mouth: "Oy, Yankele, who wronged you so, Yankele?"

Yankele is already seated on the bench in front of the table of justice holding on to his cheeks with bloodstained hands and rocking away without stopping, from left to right, this way and that.

"Oy, Yankele, who wronged you so, Yankele?"

"Oy, oy, the Shabbes goy, Rebbe."

The rabbi of Chelm stares in amazement. "In the middle of the week, how do you come to the Shabbes goy, Yankele?"

"A destined thing, Rebbe Leyb. I'm walking as usual in the marketplace. Just walking. And do you think, Rebbe Leyb, that I have the Shabbes goy in mind? I have nothing else to think about but the Shabbes goy? A Jew thinks about making a living, that's what he thinks about. Soon I'll be going home with empty hands—and I don't stop worrying. What will my wife have to say? That shrew of mine . . . but you know her well, Rebbe Leyb! So he comes toward me, the Shabbes goy, and I look and see he's eating pumpkin seeds . . . and with such skill! He throws a handful right into his mouth—a single crack and already he's spitting out the shells, to the right and to the left. So I stop and observe this great dexterity.

"He becomes friendly, like an equal, and says, 'Yankele, come on, open your mouth, Yankele!'

"Well, seeing that a goy pleads, I open my mouth supposing, Rebbenyu, dear Rebbe, that he wants to throw some nuts into it. I open wide . . . so he takes his fist, and—bang!—right into my mouth!"

"At this, Yankele starts crying afresh: "Oy, the murderer, the murderer. . . ."

But this does not please the rabbi of Chelm at all. He draws nearer and reproaches him: "That I don't like, Yankele. How can you say such a thing, just so, about one of God's creatures—*murderer*?"

"But take a look, he knocked out three of my teeth," sobs Yankele, and shows him the teeth.

The rabbi looks closely, shakes his head and says incredulously, "Tell me the truth, Yankele, are these *your* teeth?"

"Whose then, Rebbe? Here, Rebbe, look!"

The rabbi looks and marvels.

And Yankele opens his mouth wide to show him the holes.

"Wonder of wonders," says the rabbi after a pause, "that a Jew should have such teeth. . . ."

"What kind of teeth, then, should a Jew have?" asks Yankele, by this time alarmed.

"Here, look!" answers the rabbi and shows him the old "furniture" in his aged mouth. "Some have no teeth at all—in any case, not *such* teeth! After all, I wasn't born yesterday. Never have I seen such teeth in a Jew's mouth!"

And the rabbi proceeds to ponder two questions at once: How does a Jew come to have such large, strong teeth? As to the Shabbes goy, what impels him to knock out strange teeth?

He ponders and ponders, and then jumps up. "Aha! That is to say, solved!"

"It's all very clear, Yankele! The one depends upon the other. Just like that, you say 'murderer.' About one of God's creatures, *murderer*? There's no such thing. If there were murderers in the world, would God permit the world to exist? So what then? But since you are relating an incident that happened, after all, and I believe you, and I see with my own eyes the knocked-out teeth, I must conclude, you understand, thus . . ."

He pauses to catch his breath and expounds: "The guilt, Yankele, in reality belongs to your teeth!"

Yankele leaps up to his full height. "How is it possible, Rebbe—my *teeth*? And the goy?"

"Wholly innocent he is not, Yankele, that's not what I'm saying! The basic fault, however, lies in the teeth; that is to say, not *your* teeth. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen with attention, Yankele! By nature the goy is an amiable creature. He was eating pumpkin seeds, he saw you, he really wanted to be hospitable and give you some, so, 'Open your mouth!' he says, and wants to throw nuts into it—after all, they're fond of doing favors and little tricks. But when you, Yankele, obeyed and he saw such fine teeth, that is to say, *his teeth in your mouth* . . . you understand, a goy, and his teeth in your mouth, so naturally he becomes excited. And since he's a goy, what else can he do when he gets excited? So he hits out with his fist.

"Do as I tell you, Yankele," the rabbi concludes. "Don't make a fuss about it. Go home to your wife and tell her I told you, that I explicitly told you, she should make you a mouthwash out of figs. . . ."

As Yankele submissively departs, the rabbi calls after him: "And the next time a goy tells you to open your mouth, open just a little bit, not more than a bit—a crack! He doesn't have to see anything, that a Jew has teeth. . . ."

The rabbi of Chelm returns to his books, studies with gusto, and derives much joy from the holy Torah—and from time to time helps himself to a pinch of worldly paradise from the wooden snuffbox. His heart expands with joy!

"Oy, a dear world, a sweet world. . . ." And he glances again through the ancient, moldy pane of the House of Judgment's narrow window into the marketplace.

"Such precious people, Gottenyu, silky, satiny. . . ." But he does not finish his praises, for here comes Yankele again. A full month has not yet elapsed.

The rabbi stares in wonder. "What I dreamed last night, just the other night . . . What happened this time, Yankele?"

"The Shabbes goy, Rebbe! The Shabbes goy again!" yells Yankele, and collapses on the bench.

Benignly the rabbi scolds him, "What a pest you are, Yankele! Still bothering with the Shabbes goy? A murderer, God forbid, he's not, but what do you need him for?"

"He stole up on me from behind," explains Yankele, "*from behind*, Rebbe Leyb! I'm walking through the alley, I'm on my way home. I'm carrying a loaf of bread for my family, I bought a loaf of bread for my wife and little ones, his Dear Name destined a loaf for me! Under my arm I'm carrying it when suddenly, from behind, a blow on my head. I fall down, I faint, I've scarcely come to, and I see the Shabbes goy walking away with a full mouth, chewing—and the loaf of bread lies at my feet, bitten off. Here, look, Rebbenyu. Oy, my head, my head!"

He shows the rabbi the loaf and grabs his head.

The rabbi examines the bread and says, "The head is a triviality; from a blow, God forbid, one doesn't perish! But consider, Yankele, who was in the right? Here, take a look—*teeth!* A goy, as you see, has teeth! Do you see? One bite, and half a loaf gone at once! I couldn't do it!"

"Yes, Rebbe," admits Yankele, "but what's to be done with the murderer? All Chelm is in danger!"

"And don't think, Yankele"—the rabbi turns to him—"that I'm not suffering on account of this. I know what half a loaf of bread means to a person like you, with so many mouths in your house to feed, I know what it means. Alas, there won't be enough to go around. If it depended on me, and I tell you this in confidence, I would positively request that the community compensate you for half a loaf. Why not? True, the community is poor, but still, a Jew has suffered a loss from *everybody's* Shabbes goy. And half a loaf is not merely blows—the community wouldn't be impoverished—but you know yourself, Yankele, that I have no say."

Yankele starts screaming, "So that's how it is? It means only one thing—there is no judge and there is no justice in this world—the murderer goes about scot-free!"

"'Murderer,'" replies the rabbi serenely, "is not necessarily the proper word. I explained that to you once before; if it were so, the world would not be permitted to exist. There are no murderers!"

"So what then?"

"The guilt, I tell you, Yankele, lies in the bread. In the holy books it is written, 'A man sins because of bread.' You know the small print yourself. 'A man sins on account of a crumb of bread.' And all the books say that there are times when a Jew transgresses the commandment 'Thou shalt not covet'—sometimes even 'Thou shalt not steal.' A goy, to make a distinction, may transgress 'Thou shalt not steal'—sometimes even 'Thou shalt not kill.' But this too, however, not by nature. It's all the fault of the bread. You have no idea, Yankele, of the evil impulse that lies hidden in bread. Basically—now tell me your opinion frankly, Yankele—why should it exasperate the Shabbes goy when he sees that Yankele walks about on the street, feeds his little ones, and praises God? Hah? But when he sees *bread*, that Yankele is carrying a loaf of bread! Yes, Yankele—I see you comprehend me now. Chew it well!"

And the rabbi goes over to him, puts his arm about Yankele's shoulder, and says with great compassion, "You know what, Yankele? After all, you know that I am a humble person, by nature a humble person, and I don't like to do such things. However, I will do it for you, for your sake. I will pray to God especially for half a loaf on your account."

"Thanks, Rebbenyu!" Yankele jumps up overjoyed and starts to leave the hut.

But the rabbi detains him. "Listen carefully, Yankele. Don't ever carry bread exposed and uncovered that his Dear Name has destined for you! It is forbidden to tempt the evil impulse. You have a coat—cover it!"

A pacified Yankele takes leave of the rabbi and, after a short while, returns for the third time with a cry for help; again the Shabbes goy.

"It is now beyond comprehension," says the rabbi, "that in the course of a single season a Jew should meet with the Shabbes goy three times—and three times get beaten up! It doesn't stand to reason.

"There's something more to this than meets the eye!" he says, wrinkling his forehead, and proceeding to cross-examine. "Did you show him the teeth?"

"God forbid, Rebbe! Since you told me not to!"

"Did you keep the bread uncovered?"

"What bread, when bread, Rebbe?"

Ah, if he'd only had bread, he would not have come to this pass. He was on his way home without bread . . . his wife had met him with the poker . . . so he ran away, she ran after him . . . he ran beyond the town to the bathhouse . . . a Jewish wife doesn't run outside the town . . . finally he reaches safety on the slope behind the bath, where the Shabbes goy is reclining on the grass. He jumps up and wants to kill Yankele. With his bare fists he'll kill him dead, he says, and punches away. He could barely tear himself away. . . .

"Do you know what, Yankele?" the rabbi says softly after a contemplative pause. "You will forgive me, but I don't believe you."

Yankele pulls off his coat. "Rebbe, I wish you pieces of gold as big as the blue marks I have."

And he wants to disrobe completely, but this the rabbi does not permit.

"Little fool, that's not what I mean," says the rabbi. "It's not the least bit necessary to undress. I'm only acting in harmony with my conviction. I can't possibly believe that the Shabbes goy, one of God's creatures after all, should, just like that, without a reason, be a murderer. The concept lacks reality. Tell me, Yankele, does it make sense—a murderer? Could you be a murderer?"

"No!"

"Nor I," says the rabbi.

He falls into a trance, and after a while comes to. "A-ha! That is

to say, solved!" and he breaks into a smile. "You know what, Yankele? Listen carefully to what I have to say!"

And he stands up, the better to savor each of his words.

"I tell you, Yankele, in the rear of the bath must be the place where Cain, as it says in the holy Torah, killed his brother Abel. The place itself, more or less, is capable of murder, but particularly is it a dangerous spot for 'an offspring of Noah' who cannot by nature control himself."

Yankele opens mouth and ears. "Ah!"

"What do you say?" smiles the rabbi. "It makes sense? Apparently, that's how it is! And I maintain that the goy doesn't even know he is guilty.

"So listen to me, Yankele, and forget about the whole thing! If you wish, call an apothecary; if not, apply cold compresses yourself.

"And on the Sabbath—it's true I don't mix in community matters, but still in times of danger—on the Sabbath, God willing, I will announce in the synagogue and in the study house that everyone should avoid going to the rear of the bath.

"And perhaps the council will decide to move the entire bath into town, into the marketplace. Why not? Wouldn't it be better? But that's already outside my sphere. A good day to you, Yankele."

Hardly a month had gone by when Yankele showed up again.

He had no teeth to exhibit, he hadn't been to the rear of the bath, but he did have broken bones. The Shabbes goy had come upon him behind the synagogue.

This time the rabbi had to admit: "What a bandit! Indeed, quite a bandit!" And "A peril for all of Chelm. . . . For me personally, no. I hardly ever step outside the door of my house. . . . Why should I? But, the rest of Chelm!

"Why," he queries, "how are you in greater danger than any other Chelmer? *Your* name is Yankele, another is called Groinem. It has nothing to do with the name. And I don't even know if the Shabbes goy is acquainted with people's names—how that one is called, whose candlesticks he is taking down. . . .

"We must," he sighs, "call a meeting right away, yes. . . . And do you know for what purpose? Can you guess my fear, Yankele?"

"What, Rebbe?"

"On Yom Kippur, when the goy comes into the synagogue to light the candles before the final prayer, he can destroy all of Chelm. He can at that moment, God forbid, wipe out the entire community at once!"

And with the rabbi of Chelm it's this way: when he comes to a decision, he acts without delay.

On the Sabbath, in all the houses of prayer, large signs with glaring letters are already hanging: "A MEETING WILL BE HELD! THE WHOLE TOWN IS IN DANGER!"

Danger? The notables gather, the ordinary citizens come running, they sit packed together, cheek by jowl.

"Now tell us everything; what's it about, Rebbe Leyb?"

"Let Yankele say," says he.

So Yankele tells his story. Then the rabbi tells how the supposition was revealed to him, but that, nevertheless, Yankele is in the right throughout.

"A murderer," yells Yankele, "a murderer!"

"So what's to be done, Rebbenyu?"

The rabbi does not keep them in suspense and speaks as follows. "Were I," he says, "to have a say in the community, if I were to be asked in all sincerity, this is what I would say: In the first place, and before anything else—to satisfy the Divine Name—in fact, right away, tomorrow before dawn, Yankele should go away, someplace else, because on him the Shabbes goy has a claim already—more than a claim—a *fixation*.

"Now, in order to appease his resentment, and with the object of redeeming the entire community from dire peril, let us give the Shabbes goy a raise: a larger portion of the Sabbath loaf and *two* drinks of brandy instead of one. And what else? Perhaps he'll have compassion!"

You're laughing?

Still, there's a little of the rabbi of Chelm in each of us.

1894(?) (translated by Etta Blum)

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