

THE INTERCESSOR



*Over every blade of grass an angel
hovers, whispering, "Grow, grow."*

*E. Goldbard
2007*

ARLENE GOLDBARD

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Sharon Marks is a private investigator who has a sideline as a *melitz yosher*, someone who intercedes with higher powers to help a person who is ill or facing another challenge. She's a small person in late middle age who's sometimes told she bears a slight resemblance to Yoda.

Jonathan Fox is a Jewish Renewal rabbi who succumbed to COVID in 2020 at 62 years of age. His wife Judy died half a dozen years earlier, leaving him to raise his daughter Sarah. He was educated in Orthodox yeshivas, but was drawn to engage with countercultural spiritual movements, bringing both streams to his work as founding rabbi of the Or Chadash congregation.

Nomi Riordan comes from coastal South Carolina, where she was raised a blonde, blue-eyed Baptist. Since childhood, she was pulled toward Judaism without really knowing it. She completed her conversion at 34 in 2000 and left behind her former profession of librarian to start and run the Khegev Center, promoting inclusion in Jewish community.

Rivvy Rosenblatt is a Jewish Renewal rabbi, married to Sam Maimon, who teaches philosophy at Berkeley. She has an earth mother presence, a full figure, wears flowy clothes and jewelry. She is founder and head of a Jewish retreat and learning organization, the Rachamim Center.

Ken Simon—gray crewcut, freckles, wiry and typically dressed in black—is an early 70s writer of modest success, estranged from his mother and sister, who rejected him. His best friend is fellow writer Lucy Perelman.

Isamu Goodman, Iz to all, is a half-Okinawan, half-Ashkenazi graduate student with a double major in Asian and Jewish studies.

Anya Applebaum is the Shomer—essentially president—of Or Chadash, the Jewish Renewal congregation founded by Reb Jonathan Fox. At 77, she does her best to bridge the community's generation gaps, and isn't quite ready to retire.

SHARON

Imagine a doctor who must swallow some of her own medicine or else the patient won't get well. When I took on this work, I knew I'd be playing with a whole handful of wild cards. But this side effect has to be the wildest.

You see, people come to me for help. The sign on my office door says "Sharon Marks: Investigations," and mostly I make my living from the ordinary types of human troubles: insurance scams, missing persons, hidden assets. Those are the clients who come through referrals from attorneys or other satisfied customers.

But people also find me through a very different kind of network. You might call them spiritual seekers. They aren't exactly sure what they want. "A vague anxiety" and "a nagging feeling" are the two commonest presenting symptoms. They come to me because they've heard I have a way of looking beyond the complaint to discover what a person really needs and how to get it. My method doesn't always succeed, but a lot of the time it works in ways I never could have expected. For about half the cases, whatever remedy I prescribe, I have to do the same thing myself, swallowing some of the medicine I'm dishing out.

So that's how I found the answer to my family's secret.

But wait—I'm getting ahead of myself. *Start at the beginning, Sharon*, like my friend Nomi always says. "Take a breath, sugar, and start at the beginning."

Okay. Probably the beginning is before I can even remember. Maybe I overheard something in my mother's womb. But I'm going to start quite a while ago, a few years after I met Reb Rivvy.

I'm a spiritual seeker too. But instead of running off to India to find serenity in the lotus position, for the past couple of decades, I've been investigating my own tradition as a Jew. Rivvy is a local rabbi who has taught me a lot and become a friend along the way. She likes to categorize people. When we first met, she put me in the pigeonhole for "culinary Judaism": kids who were brought up eating chopped liver and chicken soup, whose families celebrated all the Jewish holidays with the same humongous meal, and who got sent to some kind of Sunday school for their weekly hour of Jewish education.

She's right, I admit, but just by one generation. Bubbe Fay, my Dad's mother, was observant if not entirely Orthodox. They kept kosher, Daddy said, which also included eating *treyf*—like the cheeseburgers he loved—off paper plates once in a while, blessing the Shabbos candles every Friday night,

and making challah French toast on Sunday mornings, a custom my parents carried on. All the Judaica in my parents' house came from her: a brass Seder plate from Israel with a special green patina, silver candlesticks that my parents lit maybe once a year; a *hanukkiah*, the menorah used annually for the faux Christmas my parents made out of that holiday. Now it all sits on my shelves along with things I've acquired—my *havdalah* set, a special candle and cup used to mark the division between Shabbat or holidays and ordinary time, my *tzedakah* box where I save coins for charity—and gets more use every season than my parents gave it in a lifetime.

Bubbe Fay died when I was two, so I don't remember her except to recognize her photograph. But I cherish my personal legacy from her: a tiny *kiddush* cup—a silver goblet for wine to be blessed on Shabbos and holidays. There is engraving around the cup's foot: "*yaldah tova*," "good girl" in Hebrew, and "*Shira*," my Hebrew name.

Still, I don't think Rivvy's pigeonhole tells the whole story. I also belong in the pigeonhole for kids whose families thought FDR was God, who were brought up believing that being Jewish was a guarantee of progressive politics. I don't think I knew there could be Jewish Republicans until the Reagan administration: Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol and all that gang—what a rude awakening that was!

Anyway, for me, actually learning the Jewish texts and stories and "spiritual technologies" (that's what Rivvy likes to call them, so I do too out of loyalty to her, even though it sounds a little more new age-y than I like), this has been as exotic and eye-opening as a trek to India was for my friend Steve. Two years of traveling by rail from ashram to ashram ended with Steve sitting in a cave while a teacher whacked him on the knee every time he began to show signs of drifting off. "You're sitting on a rock in a cave!" the teacher shouted each time, bringing Steve back to earth. Thinking he might as well be sitting on a chair in a house, he bought passage home.

Me too, at least home to my roots. So I investigate divorce cases and insurance claims by day, and by night I study, dipping my toes into the waters of *Zohar* and other mystical texts and practices. I want to tell you right now that I am not one of those Hollywood *kabbalah* fans: no magic strings, no magic potions—really no magic at all, in the sense of believing that buying something insures future happiness. But here is what I have discovered: there are things to be learned, real things, once you let go of the rationalist tic. What, you may ask, is the rationalist tic? Faced with anything mysterious, the mind

emits a prerecorded message that blocks all incoming information: *Whoa! it says, I don't believe in that kind of thing. I'm sure there's a rational explanation.*

Maybe so. I don't check my brain at the *shul* door. It seems obvious to me that we have these big brains to explore creation, to learn, and to repair the world. It doesn't take anything away from God or Spirit or Infinite Source or Mystery, whatever you want to call Him-Her-It-Them, to accept evolution or nuclear fission or the Big Bang as part of our reality-map. But mystery is mystery. How can spiritual certainty—including died-in-the-wool convinced atheism—be anything other than an act of faith? So, if you want to tie yourself in a knot coming up with alternative explanations for my experiences, knock yourself out. But as for me, I know what I saw, I know what I felt. I know what happened.

Ken Simon first arrived at my office by way of his friend Lucy Perelman, who was a member of the same Berkeley-style, Hasidism-meets-feminism (meets shamanism) community I belong to, Or Chadash. My office is pretty much what you'd imagine if someone said "one-person office." Filing cabinets, desk, chairs, a ficus plant that has just about outgrown its pot, overstuffed bookshelves, a tweedy carpet, tan walls. I don't like to be distracted. Ken had a no-nonsense look too: Gray crewcut, black T-shirt, black jeans, black sneakers. I bet myself he was an artist. We shook hands and he folded himself into the chair opposite my desk.

Rubbing one long hand across his freckled brow, he told me he was a writer. "I don't know what's happening," he said. "All I can say is I feel blocked. I sit and stare at the keyboard and my mind goes blank. It's as if a door has slammed shut and I can't find the way to open it." His watery blue eyes darted down at me, a wary sidewise glance.

I am not tall. Five-two on a good day, although in truth, I haven't peeked at my height reading for a long time, afraid that at 61 the doctor's scale will tell me I've shrunk even more than I imagine. I like to think of myself as heightless, the way some people seem ageless. But I suddenly saw myself through Ken's eyes. I looked like Yoda, if Yoda had gray-streaked brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. I could see how that might be unnerving. I sat up straighter, trying to look taller.

"I was telling Lucy—you know her, Lucy Perelman, the writer—that I'd felt blocked since my mother died two years ago," Ken continued. "She said maybe

my mother's death had something to do with the block. Normally, I wouldn't go there..." he paused, looking even more uncomfortable.

"You don't really believe in this sort of thing," I said.

"Yeah," he said, breathing freely for the first time. "Not really. But I'm desperate." A flash of panic crossed his face. "Do I have to believe for it to work?"

"No," I assured him. "You may not have to do anything at all. But if you do, you'll have a choice, and there won't be any penalty if you don't want to do it. So relax, okay? We'll just schmooze awhile."

How did I get here? Half a dozen years ago, in 2013, Reb Rivvy offered a course called "*Melitz Yosher: On Being an Intercessor*." I knew the root word—to intercede, to act on behalf of someone—but I had no clue what this meant as a Jewish practice. I had taken other courses from Reb Rivvy, but this sounded different. The tag line kept nagging at me: "take this course if you want to deepen your spiritual practice." So I did. It turns out there is a sizeable body of Jewish knowledge on interceding in higher realms for people who need help. (Time to do me a favor and put your rationalist tic in your pocket, please. You can always pull it out later.) Some people take this very literally. If you want to read a straightforward eighteenth-century account of how "the spiritual realm...contains courts of justice and deliberating bodies, with appropriate rules and procedures," pick up Luzzato's *The Way of God*.

It was raining as my friend Nomi and I drove to Reb Rivvy's, so the roads were clogged. Californians can only drive if there's absolutely no weather. Good thing we left early. Chapter six of Luzzato was our advance reading for the class. Nomi was newer than I to all this stuff and I knew just a little, but we both found it unnerving to read about heavenly courts, judges, and advocates, a feeling we attempted to discharge by making gentle fun of it. "What kind of outfits did the judges have in your vision?" Nomi asked. "I saw the whole place as kind of a Westminster Abbey set-up: high ceilings, stained glass," she sketched with her hands as she continued. "Lots of little pointy carvings, ranks of pews on either side of a rectangular space. People in funny hats and long black robes."

"That's your heritage coming through, my friend," I said. I knew I wasn't supposed to refer to the fact that Nomi is a convert. That is considered very bad form. But what can I say? We'd become best friends. We teased each other all the time, me about how she still preferred tuna salad with lots of mayo and

sweet pickles and thought of Rice Krispies treats as comfort food; Nomi about my tendency to eat pickled herring for breakfast, and the way I loved those little neon-colored half-moon jellies you can buy for Passover. “The whole cathedral thing,” I told her, “that’s the other team.”

“And what authentically Jewish imagery did you conjure, sugar? Educate me.” Even though she’d lived in Berkeley for ages, Nomi’s South Carolina accent tended to thicken when she was the least bit peeved.

“It was sort of vague,” I admitted. “Kind of like a class picture, three tiers of smiling people in ethnic finery. Not much décor.”

“Thirty-six Rivvies,” said Nomi. “Much better.”

Sitting in a circle in Reb Rivvy’s living room, peering at the ancient masks and musical instruments on her wall, trying to make out the Hebrew titles of battered leather-bound books on high shelves, I wondered what the hell I was doing there. Some kind of incense was wafting through the room. People were talking about their personal “councils” of the dear departed, how they used pendulums to get advice on life problems and presumably, on which shampoo to buy. *Whoo-whoo*, my rationalist tic said, *I don’t really believe in this kind of thing*.

A few minutes after the appointed hour, Rivvy’s sturdy hands adjusted the multicolored scarves wrapping her springy black curls. She straightened the gold and silver chains around her neck, making sure the charms hung properly, then smoothed the folds of her embroidered caftan over her knees as she sat. By that time, the room was silent. Closing her eyes and taking a deep, sighing breath, she said, “Shalom.”

“Shalom,” we chorused, seven women of a certain age and one plump, cheerful young man with a rainbow *kippah* perched atop his light brown hair, baby-fine wisps encircling his ears. Some of us sat on couches, others on big floor pillows. There were plants everywhere, some with long trailing vines that had been tacked to the ceiling molding with pushpins.

“If you are here,” said Reb Rivvy, focusing her black eyes on each of us in turn, “you have been drawn to this work enough to find out about it. What you find may seem like the answer to your prayers, or it may not be for you at all. After the course, you will know if you are moved to carry on. For now, just be here, Okay?”

We all nodded obediently.

“Did you do the reading?”

I guess enough of us nodded yes, because Rivvy plunged right in. “An intercessor,” she said, “in Hebrew a *melitz yosher*, is like a defense attorney. You go upstairs,” (this cozy expression mimics the Hebrew vernacular for higher realms, *l’malah*), you advocate for the person, you find out the price, you bargain.”

This produced some uncomfortable laughter. Evidently, some people had trouble parsing spirituality with the language of commerce. But that’s when I began to get interested. Midway through the second lesson, Rivvy asked us what qualities an intercessor needed. Taking notes, I filled a whole page with my fellow students’ offerings of sweetness and light: “courage, humility, strength, compassion, sensitivity, honesty, balance, desire to be of service...”

Something seemed to be missing. *What the hell*, I thought, raising my hand: “A talent for negotiation?”

“Bingo!” said Rivvy and for the first time, I thought, *Maybe this is for me*.

I was right. I’m not a lawyer, but people have told me I sound like one, which makes sense when I plead as a *melitz yosher*.

Ken settled in as he answered my questions about his situation. He seemed to subside a little and I seemed to grow, so we felt more face-to-face. “My mother worked very hard to support us after my father died suddenly,” he told me. “She’d been one of those Hadassah women, card parties with the girls, that kind of thing, and then one day my father dropped dead at his desk, and everything fell on her. She got a lot wrong: she coddled my little sister—I guess she knew what it was like to be a little girl—and even though I was only ten, she decided I had to be the man of the family. I had after-school jobs, weekend jobs, hours of chores around the house.

When I wanted to go off to a state university rather than staying home and taking a few courses at a local school, she felt betrayed. She told me I was abandoning the family. I think she took all that anger she’d suppressed with my father—how mad she was at him for dying—and dumped it on me.”

“I heard a voice in my head,” he said, scrubbing both hands over his gray crew-cut as if he had a headache that wouldn’t quit, “and it said *Run! Save yourself!* So I did. I worked two jobs the entire time I was in college, sending

every penny home that I could, but my mother never forgave me. She and my sister just hunkered down in that apartment....”

I could almost see the place as he talked, clean newspapers spread over worn, much-washed linoleum, that atmosphere of long habitation, curtains that had absorbed the smell of a thousand reheated meals, faded doilies on the arms of overstuffed chairs.

“Thank God it was rent-controlled,” Ken said. “They always had enough to eat, they always had warm clothes. When I lived in the east, I came home for every holiday and birthday. They treated me like an unwelcome guest. I started bringing dinner with me, takeout from a deli they liked; otherwise, I’d arrive at dinnertime on my mother’s birthday and they’d be sitting in front of the TV, nothing cooking on the stove, always pretending to be surprised to see me. Every year they looked more like twins, even though my sister Doris was nearly thirty years younger than Fanny.

“I tried to talk to them about it. But they acted like nothing was wrong. You know what my mother said?”

Looking into his reddened eyes, I shook my head no.

“Why are you making out like there’s something wrong with us, Kenny? I see families like us on the TV all the time. Why are you always picking on your sister? Doris is a good girl. Leave us be.” Ken’s laugh was bitter.

“In the end, my sister hung up on me every time I called. One time I got through to my mother—Doris must have been out getting groceries or something. We hadn’t talked in maybe two years, and Fanny said ‘Oh, hi, how are you?’ in the kind of distantly polite voice you would use with a friend who’d called the week before. I could hear the TV blaring in the background. I asked if she’d like me to come visit and she said ‘No thank you.’ Nothing more. Just ‘No thank you.’ Doris didn’t even phone me when my mother died. A cousin called a week later, wondering why I hadn’t been at the funeral. I phoned Doris, but she just hung up on me again. I was in New York a few months later and went to the cemetery. I’m not much for praying, but I said *Kaddish* all by myself. Then I went home.”

For me, all the stuff about the courts and judges upstairs is deep metaphor. I can’t quite wrap my mind around the idea that angels and sages sit in judgment, rendering verdicts with all the trappings of bureaucracy. But

the basic analogy to a court of law is sound. You use prayers and blessings to contact the higher authorities—whatever forms those energies may take—on behalf of the person you wish to help. If you get permission to go forward, you describe the situation, receive a message, and based on what it says, you negotiate for the help you seek.

Messages come in different forms. For me, it isn't like being struck by lightning. No voice booms out. The nearest thing I can say is that when I ask what the person needs, something arises in my mind—usually right after I have the thought *Nothing is happening*—and that it is almost always clear and specific. When I ask what it will cost, what the person has to do in return, usually another highly specific something arises in response. Sometimes I have to ask clarifying questions. For instance, an assignment may include reciting certain prayers or psalms and I need to ask how often or how long. But when the energy flows, there is no ambiguity. The task is clear.

Ken's assignment had a few parts, but the main one involved writing. It happened that he visited me a couple of weeks before Rosh Hashanah, the new year. It arose in my mind that to break the shell that had hardened around his writing, he had to write his own personal Torah between then and Simchat Torah, the final installment of the High Holy Days, when we celebrate by reading the end of one year's Torah, the final passages of Deuteronomy, and the beginning of the next, the beautiful opening section of Genesis.

Ken's assignment was to write the story of his personal awakening and exodus, faithfully representing his own feelings and experiences. It was to be addressed to his mother, he was to write at least a few lines each day, and he had no obligation to share it with anyone else. I advised him to write before sundown on Friday and after sundown on Saturday, because these repairs tend not to work if you do them on Shabbat. He was not to think of it as a literary production, I told him, but a repair of the fabric of his life.

I felt satisfied with the assignment as soon as I had given it. It seemed fitting. I pulled out a calendar to count the days before Simchat Torah. There were thirty-six. Hebrew letters have numeric values used in mystical interpretation to add a layer of meaning to words. The value of *chai*, the word for life, is eighteen. Ken's assignment was twice *chai*, a very auspicious number.

The intercessor has to be careful that her own weak spots don't distort or impede her work. Reb Rivvy taught me that as part of my preparation, I should always ask to be shown anything in my own life that relates to the

situation in which I am attempting to intercede. You ask that it be revealed to you, so you can proceed in awareness. You ask to be shown how to heal it, so it doesn't get in the way. So that's how I'd started. Then, before Ken and I were finished, I did what I always do to end the session: I asked if there was anything else, especially anything I personally needed to do to support Ken's work. That's when I understood I had to perform the same writing assignment he'd received, all 36 days of it.

I made sure again that Ken understood there would be no consequences if he decided to refuse his assignment, but if he accepted it, he would have to execute it faithfully or it would have no effect. He thought for a minute, looking much happier than when he came in, and said yes, extending his hand to shake on it. Thanking me, he took his leave, promising to call if anything came up that he needed to talk about.

That evening I sat down at home to write, choosing my big armchair—and the matching footstool so my feet wouldn't dangle. I felt very ready, the floor lamp casting a warm light, a glass of wine on the end table, a little dish of salted almonds if I got hungry, an extra pen if ink ran short. Softly, in the background, I played a favorite recording, "Echoes of Reb Shlomo Carlebach." Reb Shlomo had become a controversial figure, but there were tracks on this compilation that tuned my spirit to something higher than ordinary time, so I focused on the good. Rabbi Akiva Mann was singing Psalm 23. His deep, resonant voice always went straight to my heart.

But when I tuned in to my assignment, I discovered that I was a little uncomfortable with my part of it. In contrast to Ken's psychodrama of manipulation, my family story had been sort of normal: no huge betrayals, two parents who stayed married, both dying in their late seventies, one from a stroke, one from a heart attack. My big complaint about my parents had been that they'd always been a little distant, a little opaque. In contrast to the stereotype of the Jewish mother, Estelle didn't try to find out all my secrets, nor did she treat everything I did as a comment on her. If I was tempted to confide, she'd always be understanding. She generally had something useful to say. But she never opened up. Harry's life was shaped by routine: off to work after a bagel and coffee, home every day with the afternoon paper folded under his arm. Daddy liked to watch boxing on TV, also the six o'clock news. I never heard them fight, in the sense of knock-down drag-out, but sometimes a trickle of raised voices leaked from the bedroom door.

Born in 'fifty-eight, I was a little young for the sixties. But like Nomi says, since the sixties lasted till the late seventies, I managed to catch that counter-cultural urge.

I used to take Estelle and Harry out for her birthday every year, dinner and a movie. She adored anything with a Jewish subject or a Jewish movie star, like rooting for the home team. When I sat down to write the first entry in my personal Torah, one particular birthday came to mind, so that's what I wrote about.

Mom, remember when I took you to see *Running on Empty* for your birthday in 1988? I thought I'd found the perfect movie for us: you got Judd Hirsch, a bona fide Jew and your favorite from *Taxi*, and I got one of those stories of the sixties revolution that makes me nostalgic for what I never experienced. Sidney Lumet, cool movie stars running from the police, what more could we want? When we came out, I said "That family felt like us, didn't it? The same energy, almost as if we'd been living underground or in witness protection or something all these years."

You just shrugged and made a joke: "Oh, yeah, big revolutionaries we are." But I saw something flash in Daddy's eyes, a brief guilty look, like a petty thief caught in the act. I think he saw me watching, because he turned away and got real interested in something in a shop window. That made me remember a nagging feeling I'd had almost as long as I could recall: that you and Daddy had a big secret, something you always hid from me. "That wind is making me chilly," you said, hustling us into the car and turning on the radio.

When I was in therapy, I told my shrink about it. I couldn't come up with anything more concrete than a feeling, though. She said it might be akin to the sense some kids have that they're adopted. Maybe they find a shred of evidence. Or its lack. I had a friend who decided he was adopted because, leafing through family pictures, he saw his brother and sister in diapers, but he couldn't find his own photo as an infant. My therapist told me that people invent the adoption story because it resonates so strongly with something they feel deep inside: *I don't belong here*. She said that maybe the feeling that there are hidden secrets is what made me decide to become an investigator.

Starting with this sense of all that had been suppressed or unspoken, I found it challenging to write frankly to my parents, even if part of me doubted

they would ever know what I had written. (*Whoa! I don't believe in that sort of thing.*) But I have to live up to my reputation for bravery, so I made myself do it.

I wrote all the things I'd never said out loud: how I wished my mother had pried into my life a little more; how I wish she had taken me in her arms and told me secrets about how she'd felt when she was my age and experienced exactly the same sort of childish disappointments; how I would rather have heard the facts of life from her lips than be given a little printed booklet that described human reproduction in terms that were positively horticultural. Despite my reservations, once I started to say what hadn't been expressed, the writing flowed.

But after a while, reading over it, I began to feel annoyed with myself, like I'd been kvetching a lot, and kvetching into the silence to boot. I wondered what I was supposed to learn from the exercise. But an assignment is an assignment. If I stopped, Ken's task might have been affected. I had accepted the assignment, so I had no choice but to do it every day.

About three weeks after our meeting, Ken left a message on my voicemail. "Sharon," he said, sounding shaken, "something very weird happened. Could you call me back?"

He told me this story: he'd been writing daily, a little stiffly at first, but soon it began to hum, as if the story were writing him. "I realized that still, after all these years, I wanted my mother to understand. So each time I wrote, I found myself ending with a plea, 'Dear Fanny, please understand, please see it now from my side.'

"Nine days in, I heard a voice. Honestly, I can't say I remember my mother's voice, but I felt it was her. 'And if I see your side,' she asked, 'what will happen? You'll forget all about me again.'

"At first, I felt wronged. Why would I do that? My one Jewish observance is lighting a candle and saying Kaddish every year on her *yahrtzeit*, just like on the anniversary of my father's death. So I started to argue with her. Then I thought, *No, she's right, I don't think about her from one year to the next.* If I think at all, I think about my grievance, how righteous I was, how she hurt me. When I wrote my next entry, I apologized. I said I'd never thanked her for all her hard work after my father died, nor stopped much to think about how lonely and scared she must have been to need Doris so badly. I said that despite

the real hurt I still felt, I saw that I could have considered things from her side too, instead of sitting on my resentment all these years.

“The next day,” Ken told me, “as I sat down to write, I heard Fanny’s voice again. This time it was loud, insistent, and it had a simple message: ‘Go to the cemetery.’ The funny thing is, I had a conference in New York at the end of that week—I was flying the red-eye the next day. I thought, *Okay, I’ll go after the conference.* The entire six hours across the country, I swear, the airplane engines kept repeating it: ‘Go to the cemetery, go to the cemetery, go!’ I got off the plane and into a taxi. Instead of telling the driver to take me to Manhattan to check into my hotel, I asked him to drive me to the cemetery in Brooklyn. It took a while to find the section where my parents are buried. When I looked at the spot next to my father’s grave where Fanny’s temporary marker had been the one and only time I visited, there was nothing but grass. Empty grass.”

I could hear Ken’s quick intake of breath, a ragged scrap of choked-back sob. “I felt sick,” he said. “I told myself all sorts of stories: I’d gotten the spot wrong, she’d been moved, I didn’t know what. When I checked with the cemetery office, they told me that no one had ever ordered a marker. I called my old home number, hoping to speak to Doris. But someone with a West Indian accent answered; they’d had that phone number for a year and a half and they’d never heard of my sister. I called the cousin who phoned me after Ruth’s funeral. She said that Doris had sold off all she could from the old apartment and given the rest to Goodwill. Doris told my cousin she had enough in the bank from Fanny’s insurance and savings—this was the money I’d been sending all these years—that she could live on it the rest of her life. She said this was good-bye.”

He paused for breath. “My cousin is an old woman. She’d gone to the cemetery around the time she expected the unveiling, eleven months after my mother died. But like me, all she found was a patch of grass. She called Doris to ask when the marker would be ready. Doris said she didn’t owe Fanny a stone. She had given her mother her life; now *she* would be Fanny’s marker. The cousin said she’d put up part of the money to buy a stone that matched my father’s grave, that she’d call me to get the rest. Doris said that if she knew what was good for her, she’d do no such thing. If she went behind Doris’s back and put up a stone, Doris would find her grave after she died and spit on it.

“My cousin cried when she told me this. She was scared. I told her not to worry. I called the cemetery and ordered the marker. I was half afraid they’d tell me I needed Doris’s signature, but of course they were happy to take my

money so long as what was written on the marker matched their records. So now I'm waiting. It will take nearly three months to be ready."

"Oh my God," I said. *Oh my God.* I repeated it several times. "So how do you feel now?"

"That's the strangest thing," Ken said. "I feel good. Even though I sent Fanny money all those years and Doris absconded with it, even though I had to lay out more money I don't have for the marker, I feel like something has been completed. I feel like the past has settled into the past. I don't resent anyone anymore. It just feels over."

"I think you're right," I said, "but be sure and complete the assignment to wrap it up. Don't let it go."

Ken laughed out loud. "Are you kidding? I haven't written like this in years, it's just flowing out of me. I'm so glad I came to see you."

That night, when it was time to write an installment of my personal Torah, I went out to my tiny back yard to rest for a minute. It held a small patch of lawn, a few neglected garden beds, a concrete patio supporting a little table and two lawn chairs. Nothing much, but I loved it. It was one of those rare Bay Area nights when neither clouds nor city lights disrupted the blackness or blocked the brilliance of the moon and stars. I sat on cold metal and somehow didn't mind. I looked up until my neck threatened to lock, drinking it in. I could hear all kinds of night sounds, a barking dog here, music from someone walking past my place. Everything rose and fell, like breathing.

The garden was flooded with my favorite scent. They call it petrichor, that delicious smell when rain hits dry earth. It makes me feel like getting on all fours and sniffing the ground like a dog, just to take as much of it as possible into my lungs. I told myself I need to come out here more often instead of being busy, busy. I was forgetting to notice what lay around me, and I didn't want that.

When I went back inside, I did a meditation to focus myself, hoping to clear Ken's story out of my head. I sat in my armchair and closed my eyes, imagining that I could breathe light into my heart through the top of my head. I saw the top of my head opening like a flower. Light poured across the petals like spring rain, saturating the length of my spine. As I breathed in the light, my parents' images arose in my mind. I saw their heads from below, as if they were peering

over the petals. Their hands clasped the petals' edge, giving the whole scene the aspect of an excursion, mountaintop tourists holding onto a handrail to admire the valley view.

They were much, much younger than I remembered them—they looked like kids. My father wore his Navy uniform, but he'd gotten out of the service before I was born. My mother's hair was swept into a French twist with high, springy bangs. They both had sweet, tender expressions on their faces, two mouths echoing the shape of a coo. I imagined they must be gazing into my cradle, looking down at my baby face and baby tummy. I was flooded with the sweetness of being held like a baby, tears prickling my eyes.

Then my father said this: "What a brave little boy! Facing the *mohel* without crying a drop!"

My mother brought one hand to her eyes, dabbing with a sodden handkerchief. "Can't say the same about me," she whispered.

I felt a sizzle in my stomach. He? The *mohel*! They were talking about a *bris*, a ritual circumcision. One hand went to my breasts, the other to my crotch. Everything felt real, everything felt like mine. What could this mean? I took out my notebook and wrote:

Mom and Daddy, if that was real, then you already know what I saw. What 'brave little boy' were you looking at? My Torah doesn't have any brothers in it, does it? Is this the big secret? Tell me, please!

That's when I really got that finishing Ken's assignment also amounted to interceding for myself. I had been surprised to learn in Reb Rivvy's class that you can intercede on your own behalf so long as you follow proper procedure and you get permission to forge ahead. I had already discovered that you can ask too much. The penalty for that is not getting an answer to your inquiries. (I had a spate of tough cases for a few months last year. Then, after Nomi and I giggled about it, I asked if I should do online dating. It seems I asked once too often, temporarily wearing out my welcome upstairs. Still, I took that as a no.) So now I do my *melitz yosher* thing only when truly necessary. This seemed like one of those times. I called in the big guns: my parents, to be sure, but also a wonderful, holy man I knew who'd died some years before, and the ranks of colorfully costumed beings I'd described to Nomi that rainy night in the car on the way to Rivvy's first class.

I pled my case, and here's what arose in my mind: the image of a silver goblet, wrapped in cloth and stuffed into a large burlap bag.

My Jewish studies come in handy here, because the forces upstairs tend to communicate with me using a highly specific, symbolic lexicon. I immediately recognized this image as part of the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph's brothers were resentful of him on account of his being his father Jacob's favorite and having some dreams they found tremendously unflattering. So they sold him to traders who took him into Egypt and sold him in turn to Pharaoh's steward, Potiphar. Potiphar's wife lusted after Joseph, but he refused to cooperate. Spurned, she set him up for a prison sentence. The fabulously resilient Joseph made himself indispensable to the warden, also interpreting the dreams of some of Pharaoh's staff temporarily indisposed behind bars, thus ingratiating himself. When Pharaoh needed help with his own troubling dreams, Joseph was fetched. He did such a great job that Pharaoh made him overseer of all the land, shepherding Egypt through seven years of famine.

Meanwhile, thinking their brother long dead, Joseph's starving siblings traveled to Egypt from Canaan to see the grand overseer and plead for food. Servants ushered them into Joseph's opulent quarters where they were wined and dined. And intimidated. Joseph chose to conceal his identity, toying with his brothers, using deception to compel them to return for a second trip, this time with his youngest brother Benjamin in tow. One of Joseph's tricks was to hide a silver goblet in Benjamin's bag before the return trip to Canaan, then send a servant after his brothers to accuse them of stealing the goblet. Having forced his brothers back into his power, after toying with them a little more, Joseph revealed his identity and forgave them all. I'd like to say everyone lived happily ever after, but Joseph's brothers never stopped fearing him despite his late-breaking generosity. And as for the Israelites in Egypt, since Joseph's coziness with Pharaoh led to the population's eventual indenture and a few centuries of slavery, that's another story. As my friend Anya—she's Shomer of Or Chadash, Reb Jonathan Fox's congregation—says, the law of unintended consequences is never broken.

So I understood the image, but not what it had to do with the brother I was becoming increasingly sure had been the big secret at the heart of my family.

Intercession works in strange and indirect ways. When I took up my assignment to write to my parents the following night, I asked again for help.

Mom and Daddy, I am really confused. I have been thinking about this all day. I think I have (or had) a brother. I think Joseph's goblet has something to do with it. But more than that I don't know. Can you give me another clue?

Total air silence. I phoned Nomi, thinking that talking out loud about it might help. I told her the whole story.

“*Gevalt!*” she said (only it sounded like “Gev-a-a-lt” with that South Carolina drawl).

“*Gevalt* indeed. So I guess there was a big secret after all. It wasn’t just my imagination.”

“Yeah, but what is it?” Nomi’s words were muffled by the soggy sound she made chewing on the end of her long blonde braid, something she liked to do while thinking. “I mean, the poor baby could have died, right?” she asked. “That’s probably it, because if he hadn’t, you would have known him, wouldn’t you?”

“You would think,” I said. “But who knows? Maybe they gave him up for adoption for some reason, like when my father was in the war, maybe my mother couldn’t handle a baby alone.”

“Yeah,” drawled Nomi, thinking it over. “I guess there are quite a few possibilities. You’re an investigator. Isn’t there some way to find out?”

“Duh!” I slapped my hand on the desk. “I think I have brain lock.” I might like to see myself as fearless, but it takes everyone’s cooperation to keep a family secret, I’ve found. I had to admit the part of myself that was scared to learn this one had slowed me down. Would I find something I didn’t want to know? *Those are the breaks*, I thought. “Why don’t we start by googling ‘Joseph Marks,’ just for ducks?”

I found 833 entries, the typical *tzimmes* of genealogical records and links to doctors and insurance agents. If this putative brother had been born before me—if Daddy was still in the Navy at the time—he’d be in his mid-sixties, give or take. I clicked on the links that seemed promising, but no one whose picture I found appeared to be the right age or have the Marks family features: dark brown eyes, short noses, round jawlines.

“There is nothing as stimulating as sitting on the phone while someone else surfs the web,” said Nomi, her voice slightly thickened by a mouthful of blonde braid. “You just keep doing that all night, honey, and don’t worry a bit about me.”

“I’m sorry, Nomi. Unless he’s one of these CPAs in Dallas or he owns a florist shop in Encino, I don’t think any of these guys are likely to be him.”

“Don’t you have any old papers or scrapbooks or anything like that from your folks? I thought you told me you wanted to go through a few cartons of photos and stuff, but you never got around to it.”

This was really challenging my self-image as intrepid investigator. “Okay, I’m going to go through it all tonight.”

“Want me to come over and keep you company? I could bring a pizza?”

“Only if you promise not to scoff at the disorder of my garage.”

“Let me think that over,” she said. “Scoffing is most of the fun.”

“Okay, okay. But no hurtful scoffing, alright?”

“Agreed. Mushrooms and four cheeses, okay?”

Nomi slouched back in the old gray armchair, one foot resting on the opposite knee, dangling the point of a pizza slice just above her open mouth. She made such an orderly public self-presentation, hair combed back into her neat braid, crisp solid-colored shirts, ironed jeans, just a dab of lipstick on a cupid’s-bow mouth. “If they could only see you now,” I said. “Miss Manners in the flesh.”

“Who? Well, whoever *they* are, if they could only see you trying to investigate your own jam-packed garage. You know, I hear you can actually park in these things if you take the crap out.”

I knew that in theory, but since it was almost impossible for me to throw anything away, in practice the garage was a dumping ground for my past. To me, there was an order. If I knew what I was looking for, I could usually go straight to the correct corner, even the right layer of boxes if not the precise box. But to the outside observer, it was a chaos of cardboard and paper with patches of oil-stained cement floor peeking through.

I’d already dug through two battered cartons of family photos, failing to find a single bouncing baby boy, although I did stare at quite a few unnamed (and now forever unknown) sepia-toned cousins posed stiffly against drapery and moonbeam backdrops. Carton number three was piled with miscellaneous artifacts. Most of what Estelle had thought worth saving before she and Daddy moved to the assisted living complex had become my good dishes and silver, my knickknacks. The leftovers in this box included a trophy I’d won for an essay contest in tenth grade, a brown velvet jewel box containing a cameo brooch, and a folder with my father’s mustering-out papers from the Navy.

Fortifying myself with bites of pizza, I examined each object, laying them in turn on a towel I'd spread over the cracked gray floor. I was admitting to myself (but not yet to Nomi) that when I was done, I would put it all back in the box and stack the box exactly where it had been since I brought it home from my parents' place. I couldn't use any of it, but I wasn't about to throw it away either. I pulled out what appeared to be the last of the artifacts: a clouded plastic bag containing an old embroidered tablecloth; rather ugly, I thought, cross-stitches in shades of brown and gold, but hours of painstaking needlework for someone. But lurking in a corner of the box was one more object: one of those bags jewelers use to pack silver—soft gray flannel or moleskin with a little drawstring at the top.

When I picked it up, I felt a jolt, as if the bag had been wired with electricity. Whatever was inside was light, weighing less than an egg. Laying the bag on the palm of my hand, I extended it for Nomi's inspection.

"Well, well, well," she said. "What have we here?"

"I don't know, but I'm getting some kind of buzz off it."

"Open it up," she demanded, laying down her pizza crust and licking her fingers in preparation for wiping her hands on a wad of paper napkins.

Inside was a miniature *kiddush* cup, the twin of my own. It was so tarnished, I had to hold it up to the light and squint hard to make out the engraving. "*Yeled tov*," it read on one side, "good boy" in Hebrew, and on the other, "*Binyamin*," the Hebrew equivalent of Benjamin.

"Joseph's youngest brother," I said. "I guess I forgot to consider the obvious."

I put everything else back in the box while Nomi gathered up the scraps of dinner. We trooped upstairs to the computer. That first google search got me 442 links (which was interesting, because Joseph orders the goblet to be concealed in Benjamin's pack in Genesis 44:2, but I know, *you don't really believe in that sort of thing*). I'd like to say that Benny turned up in the first link, but it took me two whole days and all my investigative chops to eliminate a bunch of real estate agents, dentists, and stockbrokers. Nomi made the point that it was unlikely my brother would be alive and thriving in some profession: what then would have explained my parents' choice to keep him a secret? I gritted my teeth and started searching records of a different kind. It took me another two days to find a Benjamin Marks, 65, in a care facility for mentally disabled adults.

Nomi offered to go with me, but I decided to go alone. My plan was to face him if I could, or if I couldn't, at least to find out as much as possible about my mystery brother. I filled my briefcase with Daddy's mustering-out papers post-Korean War, a clump of family photos, my own birth certificate and anything else I could find that would substantiate to the powers-that-be that this stranger and I were related. Even if I didn't know whether I wanted us to be.

I needn't have bothered. The care home was cheery, pastel walls and silk flowers everywhere. A young woman with the characteristic features of Down's Syndrome was coloring with crayons at a small table. She welcomed me with a big smile, which I returned. I explained my errand at the front desk and a nice lady with glasses on a chain and a flowered blouse came out to greet me. I showed her the contents of my briefcase and filled out a few forms, wondering why these bureaucrats were being so cooperative. "Benny's room is right down this hall," she said. It was pleasant and comfortable-looking, painted a soft blue. There were the expected furnishings—a chest of drawers, a small table, a couple of upholstered chairs. But also a large open toy chest filled with dolls and cars and puzzle boxes.

As soon as I saw Benny, I realized it had been the photos that turned the key, making me welcome. Seeing him was like seeing my father, only the picture was slightly out of focus, the eyes didn't quite line up.

Benny took one look at me and his pupils dilated. He turned his head to the side and said "Mommy?" in a tentative, quizzical voice. I suppose he was wondering how Estelle could reappear as her younger self. I said I wasn't his mommy, but that we were family, and he could call me Sharon.

The doctor in charge told me that Benny had lived his entire life in the home, that my parents had set up a fund to support his expenses, and that they'd come to visit him at least once a month as long as they lived.

I don't expect I will ever know the real story, but I think I may have guessed one of the elements. Working out the dates, I think that my father was still in the Navy when Benny was born, and that when his profound mental deficits began to be apparent, my mother couldn't cope. Whether what she couldn't cope with was shame or disappointment or the obvious difficulties of being left alone with a fast-growing child whose mental age would never come close to his physical age, I can't say. Whether Benny was concealed from me with the idea of protecting me, giving me a "normal" childhood, or for some other

reason—some nineteen-fifties mental hygiene theory of what would be fitting and proper—I can't know. I think of my friend Ron, who grew up with a sister not so different in her abilities from Benny. He was left with a lifelong ambivalence: admiring his parents for their dedication and sacrifice, resenting them because everything went to his sister, there was no room for him to be anything other than responsible and self-denying. I don't think what my parents did was "right," but I can't see that makes any difference. What's done is done. Am I satisfied with understanding the big secret? Wouldn't you be?

So now I come once a month to visit Benny, bearing gifts of fruit and candy, small toys—he especially loves things that wind up and jump around, frogs and bunnies and like that. We sit for an hour. We play with blocks and dolls. We do a puzzle meant for toddlers. We look at pictures of Estelle and Harry. Sometimes I tell him a story, sometimes he tells me one. He hugs me when I leave.

The home has Benny's birth certificate, so I was able to learn his birthday. On the first birthday after we met, I brought him the little *kiddush* cup. I guess I was hoping for a spark of recognition as I took it out of the bag, as I showed him the Hebrew letters that spell out his name. In his plump hand, the cup looked like something you might buy for a doll's tea party. He held it up to his mouth and pretended to drink. Then he gave it back to me, saying, "Would you keep it for me, Sharon? I might lose it." I said I would. I put it on the mantle, right next to my own cup from Bubbe Fay.

Imagine a doctor who has to swallow some of her own medicine.

GLOSSARY

Ahavat Olam: Hebrew. Eternal love; the name of a congregation founded by Jonathan Fox.

Alav ha-shalom: Hebrew. Peace be upon him/her; Hebrew equivalent of rest in peace.

Al Chet: Hebrew. A prayer of collective responsibility for sins recited on Yom Kippur.

Aliyah, plural *aliyot*: Hebrew. Literally “ascend.” Being called to read from the Torah in synagogue. Also “making aliyah,” emigrating to Israel.

Ameyn: Hebrew/Aramaic. A word that ends a prayer or blessing, signifying “so be it.”

Amidah: Hebrew. Literally “standing.” A long prayer recited or davened silently while standing, part of every service.

Ashkenazim: Hebrew. Jews descended from European ancestors.

Assiyah: Hebrew. The most material of the four concentric worlds of mystical Judaism. Next is *Yetzirah* (formation/emotion), *B’riah* (creation/intellect), and finally *Atzilut* (emanation/spirit).

Avinu Malkeinu: Hebrew. Our Father, Our King. A key prayer key in High Holy Days liturgy.

Avodah: Hebrew. Service. Also the name of a part of the *Musaf* service on Yom Kippur.

Ba’al t’shuvah: Hebrew. Literally “master of repentance,” but used to describe a movement of secular Jews returning to Jewish observance.

Balagan: Yiddish. A chaotic mess. A circuslike brouhaha.

Balbusta: Yiddish. An accomplished homemaker.

Bar/Bat/B’nai Mitzvah: Hebrew. Son/daughter/children of commandment. Describes a rite of passage many Jews undergo at 13, taking part in ritual and reading from the Torah to signify entering adulthood.

Baruch HaShem: Hebrew. Blessed be God, usually an expression of gratitude.

Bashert: Yiddish. Literally, “destiny.” Often used to refer to a soulmate: “he’s my bashert.” But can refer to anything that feels foreordained.

Bet Din: Hebrew. Literally “house of judgment,” a rabbinical court, including the assembly of three Jews (who may or may not all be rabbis) who certify a conversion.

Beit midrash: Hebrew. Study house.

Bimah: Hebrew. Literally “stage” or “platform,” the raised surface on which the Torah service takes place.

Bris, brit: Yiddish, Hebrew. Covenant. Often used to describe the rite of circumcision, embodying a covenant with the Divine.

Bubbe: Yiddish. Grandmother.

Chabad: Hebrew. An Orthodox Jewish Hasidic dynasty founded in the 18th century. Its name is an acronym of *Chokmah*, *Binah*, and *Da’at*, three of the upper *sefirot* on the kabbalistic tree of life, representing wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. It is a sophisticated global movement with centers worldwide. Chabad recruits secular Jews to Hasidic study and practice.

Chavruta: Hebrew. The practice of engaging with a study partner or small group regularly to study Torah.

Chaya: Hebrew. To live, living person or animal. Also the fourth highest spiritual level of soul.

Cheder: Hebrew. Jewish religious elementary school.

Cheshbon hanefesh: Hebrew. Soul inventory, the process of searching one’s deeds and thoughts in preparation for the High Holy Days.

Chevra: Hebrew. Friends.

Daven, davenen, davening: Hebrew. Pray, praying.

Dreidl: Yiddish. A four-sided spinning top with a Hebrew letter on each side, used in a Hanukkah game.

D’var Torah: Hebrew. Literally “word of Torah.” Talk, essay, sermon.

Eco-kashrut: English and Hebrew. Also eco-kosher. Moving beyond traditional laws of *kashrut* such as separating meat and milk and eschewing pork and shellfish to take the human and environmental cost of food production into account, choosing organic, humanely, and sustainably raised food sources.

Elul: Hebrew. Hebrew month preceding the High Holy Days.

Erev: Hebrew. The evening that precedes a holy day. Jewish days start at sunset, so Friday night is Erev Shabbat, for example.

Frum: Yiddish. Highly observant, pious.

Gematria: Hebrew. Jewish numerology. Every Hebrew letter is given a numeric value, and words and meanings are drawn and often connected based on that value. The numerical value of the word *chai* (life) is 18; Many Jews give gifts or make charitable contributions in multiples of 18, thereby wishing long life to the recipients.

Ger: Hebrew. Stranger, also convert.

Gevalt: Yiddish. An expression of dismay or shock, *Oy gevalt!*

Gilgul neshamot: Reincarnation of souls.

Haftarah: Hebrew. A reading from the prophets assigned to each Torah portion, generally including something that resonates with the *parshah*.

Haggadah: Hebrew. The book that guides the order of the Passover Seder.

HaGilgulim: Hebrew. The reincarnated.

Halacha: Hebrew. Jewish law.

HaLev: Hebrew. The heart.

Hanukkiah: Hebrew. The nine-branched menorah used to kindle Hanukkah lights.

Haredi, *Haredim*: Hebrew. Literally “to tremble, tremblers.” Used to refer to the Ultra-Orthodox.

HaShem: Hebrew. Literally “the name.” A word for God.

Hasid, *Hasidism*: Hebrew. Members and practices of an Orthodox Hasidic sect such as Breslov or Chabad, marked by study, specific costumes, usually dynastic leadership, and ecstatic communion with the Divine such as dancing.

Havdalah: Hebrew. Literally “separation.” The ceremony that marks the passage out of sacred time, such as Shabbat or a holiday, into ordinary time.

Hazzan: Hebrew. Cantor.

Hechsher: Hebrew. A label or stamp indicating rabbinic certification of a kosher product.

Jewish Renewal: English. A Jewish grouping originating in the 1960s, typified by feminist egalitarianism, ecstatic worship, creative liturgy, and liberal/progressive politics. It is not a denomination like Conservative or Orthodox, although some communities use it as their identifier. The movement typically welcomes many different levels of observance.

Kabbalah: Hebrew. Jewish mysticism incorporating esoteric writings and practices.

Kaddish: Hebrew. Usually refers to the mourner's *Kaddish*, an ancient Aramaic prayer that mourners say three times a day for eleven months following the death of a parent. It is also included in daily services.

Kiddush: Hebrew. Literally, "sanctification." The blessing that sanctifies wine on Shabbat or a holiday. Can also mean a small meal following a prayer service.

Kinehora: *Yiddish*. A contraction of the Hebrew *keyn ayin hara*, no evil eye. *It's said as a charm against evil befalling someone who boasts of good fortune, expressing the hope that the evil inclination will pass by without responding to the provocation.*

Kippah: Hebrew. A skullcap worn by observant Jews.

Kittel: Hebrew. Literally, "shroud." A white garment worn over clothing on certain occasions such as marriage or Yom Kippur, also ultimately used as a burial shroud.

Kol isha: Hebrew. A woman's voice. Sometimes used to mean the Orthodox prohibition against women praying or singing aloud at services.

Kol Nidre: Hebrew. Literally, "all vows." An ancient sung prayer opening services on Erev Yom Kippur, the first night, annulling all vows made with the Divine.

Kosher: Hebrew. Literally "proper." Foods that are permitted and prepared according to Jewish dietary law. "Glatt kosher" literally means "smooth," referring to specific aspects of meat, but has taken on the

popular meaning of “super-kosher.” When dishes, pots, or utensils are rendered fit according to Jewish law, the verb is “koshered” or “kashered.”

Kvelling: Yiddish. Boasting, especially concerning family members; rejoicing and taking pride in accomplishments.

Lashon hara: Hebrew. Literally “evil tongue.” Evil speech, gossip, slander.

Latkes: Yiddish. Potato pancakes traditionally eaten on Hanukkah by Ashkenazi Jews.

L’chaim: Hebrew. Literally, “to life.” A common toast.

Leyn: Hebrew. To chant Torah, using a trope—tune, rhythm—appropriate to the occasion.

L’malah: Hebrew. Upstairs, also indicating a heavenly realm.

Machloket l’shem shamayim: Hebrew. Argument for the sake of heaven. A dispute animated not by the desire to win, but by the desire to find truth.

Magid: Hebrew. Retelling of the Exodus story as part of a Passover Seder. Also a storyteller or preacher.

Mazal: Hebrew. *Mazel*: Yiddish. Literally, “constellation.” *Mazel tov* means good luck, and also suggests an astrological origin.

Mechitza: Hebrew. Partition. The divider of cloth or other material that separates men and women in Orthodox synagogues.

Melitz Yosher: Hebrew. Intercessor. Someone who pleads for help from a heavenly court for a person who is suffering an illness or a problem.

Mensch: Yiddish. Literally “person,” but used almost exclusively to describe a good, honorable person.

Midrash: Hebrew. Stories, parables, commentaries that go beyond actual Torah text to add plot, color, interpretation. There are several volumes of compilations.

Mikveh: Hebrew. Ritual bath used to purify before holy days and for other purposes such as conversion to Judaism.

Mincha: Hebrew. Literally “offering.” Afternoon prayer service.

Minhag, plural *minhaggim*: Hebrew. Jewish religious customs such as how a community traditionally handles *aliyot*.

Minyan: Hebrew. A gathering of ten adult Jews deemed necessary for reciting many prayers, including the mourner's *Kaddish*. Many Orthodox communities will not count women in a minyan.

Mishegas: Yiddish. Craziness, outlandishness.

Mishpacha, *mishpocha*: Hebrew, Yiddish. Family.

Mitzrayim: Hebrew. Straits, narrow places, also Hebrew for Egypt.

Mitzvah, *Mitzvot*: Hebrew. Commandment, commandments. Sometimes used to denote a good deed: "he did us a mitzvah."

Mizrachim: Hebrew. Jews descended from North African or Asian ancestors.

Mohel: Hebrew. The person who performs ritual circumcisions.

Moshiach: Hebrew, Yiddish. Messiah.

Motzi: Hebrew. Literally "brings forth." The name of the blessing before eating bread, which ends with "*hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz*," who brings forth bread from the earth."

Nefesh: Hebrew. Soul. The most basic of five levels of soul.

Ne'ilah: Hebrew. Literally "closing." The concluding part of Yom Kippur services in which the gates of prayer are said to be closing.

Nephilim: Hebrew. Precise meaning unknown. Sometimes giants, sometimes hybrid offspring of angels and humans.

Neshama: Hebrew. Soul or spirit. The third of five levels of soul.

Niggun, *Niggunim*: Hebrew. Wordless spiritual tunes or melodies.

Nu: Yiddish. Many meanings such as well, what's up, go on.

Oneg: Hebrew. Literally "delight." Oneg Shabbat describes a gathering with food and blessings following a Shabbat service.

Parshah, *parshiot*: Hebrew. A section of the Torah assigned to be read for a particular Shabbat or holiday.

Payess: Side locks, long dangling curls worn in front of Hasidic men's ears.

Pesach: Hebrew, Yiddish. Passover. Jewish spring holiday commemorating the exodus from slavery in Egypt.

Pirke Avot: Hebrew. Ethics or Chapters of the Fathers, a compilation of ethical teachings and maxims.

Purim: Hebrew, Yiddish. Jewish spring holiday observing the rescue of the Persian Jews by Queen Esther.

Rachamim: Hebrew. Compassion, mercy.

Rachmones: Yiddish. Mercy.

Rosh Hashanah: Hebrew. Literally “head of the year.” New Year celebration, the first of the fall High Holy Days.

Ruach: Hebrew. Spirit, breath, wind. Also the second of five levels of soul.

Schmooze: Yiddish. Chat.

Sefirot: Hebrew. A configuration of ten Divine emanations or qualities used and studied in *kabbalah*. Each expresses a powerful quality emanating from the highest realms and suffusing existence, for instance lovingkindness/*chesed* and constraint/*gevurah*.

Sephardim: Hebrew. Jews descended from Spanish and Portuguese ancestors.

Shabbat, Shabbos: Hebrew, Yiddish. Sabbath.

Shabbaton: Hebrew. A multi-day event spanning Shabbat, featuring prayer, study, and celebration.

Shaliach Tzibbur: Hebrew. Literally “messenger of the community.” Can refer to anyone who leads prayer, including a cantor or rabbi.

Shalom: Hebrew. Peace, wholeness.

Shavuot: Hebrew. Spring holiday commemorating the receiving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

Shelshelot/shersheret neshamot: Hebrew. The chain or necklace of souls; the generations stretching into the past and future.

Shema: Hebrew. Literally “listen.” A foundational Jewish prayer asserting the oneness of the Divine.

Shiksa: Yiddish. A non-Jewish female.

Shmita: Hebrew. Literally “release.” Every seventh year, the land is left fallow, debts are forgiven, the enslaved are freed, holdings are returned to their owners, moving toward equity by keeping people from perpetually buying up others’ land.

Shoah: Hebrew. The Holocaust, mass murder of European Jews by Nazis and their allies.

Shul: Yiddish. Synagogue, school.

Shvat: Hebrew. A winter month on the Hebrew calendar.

Siddur: Hebrew. Prayerbook.

Simcha: Hebrew. Gladness, joy, celebration.

Simchat Torah: Hebrew. One of the last of the fall High Holidays on which the annual reading of the Torah scroll is completed and the new cycle begins.

Sinat Chinam: Hebrew. Baseless hatred.

Sitra Achra: Hebrew. The other side, the realm of evil.

S’micha: Hebrew. Ordination.

Ta’anit Esther: Hebrew. The fast of Esther, taking place the day before Purim.

Tallit: Hebrew, *Tallis*: Yiddish. Fringed prayer shawl.

Tanakh: Hebrew. A book containing the first five books of the Hebrew bible plus prophetic and other writings.

Tikkun: Hebrew. Repair.

Tikkun olam: Hebrew. Repairing the world. Current main usage describes social action. Can also refer to undertaking spiritual practices to repair the vessels of holiness shattered in the kabbalistic creation story.

Torah: Hebrew. Jewish sacred texts. Often comprising the first five books of the Hebrew bible. *Sefer Torah* is the Torah scroll, as opposed to a Chumash or Tanakh, a book holding the same content plus prophetic and other important writings.

Treyf: Hebrew. Non-kosher.

T'shuvah: Hebrew. Reorientation, repentance, the process of self-examination, apology, and forgiveness undertaken for the High Holy Days.

Tzimmes: Yiddish. Literally, a stew or braise with multiple ingredients. A brouhaha.

Tzitzit: Hebrew. Fringes, specifically the fringes on a prayer shawl or a *tallit katan*, an undergarment worn by many Orthodox Jews.

Tsofah: Hebrew. Watcher, sentinel.

Tzedakah: Hebrew. Righteousness, charity.

Unetanneh Tokef: Hebrew. An ancient and beautiful poem recited as a prayer on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Yahrtzeit: Hebrew. Anniversary, usually anniversary of a death.

Yasher koach: Hebrew. Traditional congratulations upon having an *aliyah* or completing other rituals. The equivalent of “more power to you.”

Yechida: Hebrew. The spiritual essence of the human soul. The highest of five levels.

Yeshiva: Hebrew. A Jewish academy of higher education.

Yetzer hara: Hebrew. The evil inclination.

Yetzer hatov: Hebrew. The good inclination.

Yikhes: Yiddish. Lineage or pedigree. Usually in terms of family, but also giving credit to others’ teachings. “That idea has *yikhes*.”

Yizkor: Hebrew. Literally “remember.” The memorial service for the dead recited on holy days.

Yovel: Hebrew. Jubilee. Every fiftieth year—after seven cycles of *Shmita* years—a year of complete rest for the land and remission of debts.

Yom Kippur: Hebrew. The day of atonement occurring ten days after Rosh Hashanah in the cycle of High Holy Days.

Zaftig: Yiddish. Plump, full-figured.

Zohar: Hebrew. Foundational books of *kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism.