

The Kornitser Rebbe surveyed his Sabbath table with satisfaction. To his right sat one of the most prominent families in all of Kornitz. To his left, his two most promising students. But despite the difference in their stations, each of his guests held their beloved Rebbe in high esteem. Quick-witted and learned, but patient, the Kornitser Rebbe led his flock faithfully, inspiring them so much that he had become known by great rebbes throughout Poland. The rebetsin, Gitl, had been the daughter of the Slutsker Rebbe; but during her 20 years of marriage to the rebbe, she had become as revered for her modest piety as her husband had for his intellect and spiritual leadership.

The Rebetsin Gitl was one of the finest cooks in all of Poland. The rebbe patted his belly in satisfaction, still savoring the tsimes, the roast goose, the golden broth, the potato kugl and his favorite treat of all: Gitl's extraordinary pickles, which she brined the year round in their root cellar. For many years now, Gitl's cooking had been the only thing to arouse any hunger in her husband. For the rebetsin was as barren as she was good. That such a great rebbe had no heir... well, it must have been God's will.

The Rebbe grew discomfited by the direction of his thoughts. As Gitl bent to fill his glass with tea, his gaze took in the stray, wiry gray hairs that had escaped the confines of her scarf. His nose was filled with the smells of cooking that clung to the Rebetsin – goose fat and most strongly, the garlic from her pickles and he thought, “how can it be that an aroma can be so appetizing on the plate, but not on the skin?”

Almost in guilty compensation, the Rebbe praised his wife's modesty, her hospitality and her extraordinary cooking to their guests – taking great care to single out her pickles - to such an unusual extent that he could detect a flash of confused pleasure in Gitl's look to him.

But another word about the rebetsin and her pickles! Uniformly crunchy, a deep, rich green, garlicky, salty and sour, each was as perfect as a pickle could be. Every morning but the Sabbath, Gitl lit a candle and gingerly descended the roughhewn stone steps to the pitch-black cellar to please her husband. Every day, the Rebbe gobbled up these pickles, swallowing the juice with relish. It was only on the Sabbath that he forced himself to leave half of the plate for the next day. For Gitl could not make fire on the Sabbath and thus, could not go down into the cellar.

One morning the very next week, the Rebbe supervised a joyous event – the bris of the newest member of the Jewish community. As was his custom, he sent up a prayer of thanks to the Almighty for this joyous simkhe. The overjoyed grandfather embraced the Rebbe, reminding him that he had also officiated at the young father's bris so many years earlier – l'dor va dor! From one generation to the next!

L'dor va dor... As the Rebbe walked home, he became aware of a heaviness weighing on his heart. Could so many years have passed without his noticing? Had he grown so accustomed to the idea that one day, there would be no one to say Kaddish for him? Was he destined to pass from boyhood to old age, with none of the joys of a man in-between?

The Rebbe continued to wonder to himself, what would have happened had it not been so? How many children might he have had? Perhaps one of his daughters could have made an important match to a Rebbe herself. Perhaps his own son would have been groomed to be an important Rebbe, marrying a wealthy merchant's daughter. Why, that was the stuff of dynasties.

Over the next few weeks and all through that winter, the Rebbe found himself increasingly turning to the Almighty for answers. Hadn't he seen Kornitz through a terrible Cholera epidemic? Hadn't he appealed so eloquently to the local authorities that there had not been a pogrom in over twenty years? Hadn't his reputation reached beyond the borders of his town? And hadn't he led the 1600 Jewish souls of Kornitz with wisdom, patience and firmness? No, it was not fair, it was not right, and it couldn't be what the Almighty himself intended. These thoughts bedeviled him.

That following spring, a wealthy merchant from Horodok passed through Kornitz with his family, and it was only fitting that they stay with the Rebbe and Rebetsin for the Sabbath.

The merchant alit from his carriage with his wife and their 15 year-old daughter. And what a beauty was she! Chaya was flaxen-haired and buxom, she was rosy-cheeked. As would soon become apparent, she was also refined, modest and quiet... she was everything a woman of valor should be. The plumpness of her arms and the firmness of her bosom, as suggested by the cut of her modest dress, all hinted at her fertility. Why, even her name meant life!

All throughout the Sabbath meal, the Rebbe found it difficult to keep his eyes and thoughts away from Chaya. How daintily she chewed, how shyly she praised Gitl's cooking, why, she even offered to help serve as if she weren't an honored guest.

That night and into the next day, the Kornitser Rebbe found it difficult to contemplate anything but Chaya. He led morning services almost by rote. He wondered whether there had already been a match, whether she was promised and it was too late... Why, he was not that old. If only he were free, the merchant would most certainly be delighted to make such a match for his beloved daughter. And what a dowry she would bring, enough to build a new synagogue.

But he was not free. And soon enough, morning services were over and it was back to the house for the afternoon meal. This time, the Rebbe determined to not so much as glance at Chaya. He and the merchant engaged in a spirited discussion about Talmud and the Rebbe could see how much respect the merchant had for him. He sent up a thoughtful query to the Almighty – could it have been any accident that the merchant was sent to him? Sent to Kornitz with his wife... and Chaya?

The Rebbe's musings skittered to an abrupt halt when the merchant's next words reached his ears, "Let me ask you, Rebbe, for your wise council. The time has come for us to make a match for our Chaya. Now, as you know, I am a wealthy man. I say that not to boast, but so you will know that the dowry is no matter to me. What matters is that it's a proper match, perhaps with a Talmudic scholar. Can you help me find such a bridegroom?"

And at this, the Rebbe wondered whether God was not telling him something. The Rebbe coughed and fiddled with his glasses so the merchant couldn't see the light that had come to his eyes as he searched for the right response. "To find such a bridegroom would indeed require skill... that is, a son-in-law worthy of a man such as yourself would have to be learned and wise, perhaps even a Rebbe... I can endeavor to offer guidance." That is what he said. What he thought was, "A man of forty could not be considered old."

The merchant and his family left that evening to return to Horodok, but they left behind them a changed man. Every day, the Rebbe thought about Chaya and about the Almighty's many mysteries. Every day dragged inexorably, as the Rebbe realized the merchant would expect his answer. Every day hurtled past, as he sensed the last traces of his youth vanishing in wisps, like smoke.

And every day, the Rebbe found it harder and harder to look at Gitl, even when she thoughtfully set out a dish of his beloved pickles for him in his study. He could not look directly at the sole source of his unhappiness. Since the merchant's visit, whenever Gitl descended to retrieve the Rebbe's pickles, up above the root cellar a dark idea began to take root in the Rebbe's thoughts. It hunched, apelike and vaguely indistinct, while his mind was both drawn and repelled by it.

Then the Rebbe received the message he'd been both dreading and eagerly anticipating: The merchant from Horodok would return to Kornitz in a week and had something very

important to discuss with the Rebbe. The subject could not be in doubt. Galvanized by this news and a newfound sense of urgency, the Rebbe prayed feverishly for a sign from Above. In the darkest recesses of his mind, the ape-like thing stretched and revealed itself in all its glorious, hulking brutishness. And the Rebbe hatched his plan. Could this be God's answer?

It was the Sabbath night, and the house was quiet. The dinner guests had left, the kitchen had been cleaned and prepared for the next day, and the exhausted Gitl barely made a lump under the quilt as she muttered and frowned in her sleep. Slowly, carefully, the Rebbe got out of bed, taking care not to awaken his wife. Gingerly, he felt his way downstairs to the kitchen. He found a candle and involuntarily winced when, for the first time in his 40 years, he struck a match on the Sabbath – but he needed light to see what he was doing. A part of the Rebbe remained detached from the devilry afoot, almost as if he himself were not doing it. As he proceeded with his plan, he wondered whether God would answer his prayers.

In the larder, he found the pot of fat that Gitl preserved from each goose, hen and duck, the shmaltz that rendered her latkes delectable. The Rebbe took the pot of shmaltz and by the light of the candle, he carefully descended halfway down the stone steps to the root cellar. He then began systematically coating each step with the shmaltz, moving upwards as he applied the grease as thoroughly as Gitl might clean it. Satisfied with his labor, he returned the shmaltz to its rightful place and disposed of the candle so as to hide the evidence of his transgression of the Sabbath. He stealthily returned to their marital bed, taking care not to rouse his wife until

he was under the covers.

Then he began to toss and moan. "Oi, the hunger, my stomach!", he groaned, until Gitl sat up next to him.

"Husband, what is wrong?"

"Oi, Gitl... I am starving!"

Gitl frowned. "But dinner was only a few hours ago. Surely, if you go back to sleep, in a few hours it will be morning. And then I will prepare your breakfast."

"No, Gitl! I must have a pickle!" Then he added, shamefaced, "And I ate them all at dinner. Now we have none and that is the only thing that can satisfy me. I tell you, I cannot get through the night without a pickle!"

Gitl frowned again. "Husband, you know I can't light the candle to go down to the root cellar. Surely for one day..."

And the Rebbe lay back, rigidly, almost as if his body was locked in spasm. "I tell you, Gitl, I am desperate! If I don't get a pickle right now, I... I will be unable to sleep, and then I will be unable to lead services in the morning! No, there's nothing for it. I must have a pickle and I must have it now. I beg of you."

Gitl searched her husband's face, but his eyes were clenched shut. As he knew she would, she rose from their bed without complaint, donned her shawl, and headed downstairs. As he heard her light steps descend, he sent up a silent and momentary prayer of thanks to the

Almighty for sending him this plan, this plan that was working so well. Then he got up to follow her.

To the Rebbe's consternation, Gitl had managed to navigate down the slick steps in total darkness and complete safety and was making her way back up, a jar of pickles tucked under her arm. He stood at the top of the steps, openmouthed, unable to believe that his plan was falling apart, that he had committed a sin in his heart and broken the Sabbath for nothing.

Gitl looked up just then and saw her husband standing at the top of the steps. In his eyes was a greed and desperation that had nothing to do with pickles. And as the veil of perception lifted and she saw her husband of twenty years for the first time as he truly was, she hesitated. It was her hesitation that caught her off-balance. And that's when her foot slipped.

Her eyes locked on his but she did not cry out. The Rebbe saw that Gitl understood what he had done. The look of – what was that, compassion? - in her eyes caused the Rebbe to take a step backward just as she began her own journey backward – down and down she tumbled, cracking an elbow, bruising a shoulder here, fracturing a vertebra there, until at last, Gitl lay at the bottom of the steps, neck broken, limbs akimbo, eyes wide open and unseeing. In her arms, she cradled the unbroken jar of pickles.

The Rebbe stood at the top of the steps, gazing down at the broken body of his wife and the broken bonds of his marriage. Hands shaking, he wiped his brow. It was done. He hastened to get a rag, and then quickly wiped the shmaltz from the steps. The Rebbe returned

to bed, where he slept soundly and without dreaming.

The burial society lovingly prepared the Rebetsin's body for burial, saying prayers as they washed, purified and dried her spare frame and wrapped it in a shroud. If only Gitl could have felt the tenderness in their hands and heard the mourning in their raised voices! The Rebbe tore his right sleeve. Gitl's funeral brought out over a thousand mourners. The residents of Kornitz's Jewish quarter wanted their rebbe to know how revered he was, how the Kornitser Rebetsin's reputation as a woman of valor rendered the Rebbe's loss a loss for them and for the world. The gentile authorities even closed the main street so the seemingly endless wave of Kornitz's Jewish mourners could walk directly through the city to bury their Rebetsin. The Rebbe walked quietly, propped up by his most devoted students, accepting the love and support of his community. Behind him walked the Stoliner Rebbe and the Lizhensker Rebbe, both of whom had come to pay their respects.

The Shiva was a well-attended and respectfully solemn affair and every evening, fifty ardent young men – forty more than were needed - stood to say Kaddish for poor Gitl. As the bereaved husband, the Rebbe was exempted from praying or performing mitsvot. So he nodded bravely, accepting muttered words of condolence here and there, and thought about the Almighty. And he began to think more and more that perhaps the Almighty might indeed answer his prayers.

Once the Shiva was over, life resumed for the Jews of Kornitz. Trading resumed heartily

in the Jewish marketplace. The young men at the Yeshiva returned to their studies. And the Rebbe resumed his leadership of the community, whose love and sympathy for his stoic and dignified demeanor had grown even greater than it had been before the loss of the Rebetsin. And day by day, the pain of their loss of the Rebetsin eased for the people of Kornitz. Eleven months after Gitl's death, the community gathered once again for the unveiling of her headstone.

The merchant, his wife and Chaya came from Horodok to pay their respects. The Rebbe knew that it was more important than ever to give no hint of his desire for Chaya, just as he knew how much closer he was to winning her. When the merchant and his family were leaving, the merchant gripped the Rebbe by the forearms and looked at him searchingly... and there was something calculating in his expression. The merchant could not have failed to observe the outpouring of respect and reverence for the Rebbe. The Rebbe smiled inwardly, knowing that all would go as the Almighty had ordained. And the following month, the merchant paid the Rebbe another visit, this time without his wife and Chaya. The two men sat alone at the Rebbe's table and came to an understanding.

The second wedding of the Kornitser Rebbe was a relatively modest affair (in deference to the recent loss of Gitl) but it was nevertheless an event of great celebration and quiet expense. The finest klezmers from Minsk played as the bride was veiled, they played as the bride and bridegroom were escorted to the wedding canopy, and they played when the Rebbe

stomped on the glass and everyone cried “Mazel Tov”. There may have been a few whispers here and there – it had been barely a year... the bride was so young... Gitl had been such a good woman... but most people were happy to see their esteemed Rebbe granted some small bit of happiness after having gone through so much. The bride’s parents, who were the same age as the Rebbe, were delighted. Everyone – including the Rebbe – felt that the Almighty was carefully watching over them that day.

On their first night together as man and wife, the Rebbe and Rebetsin walked slowly upstairs to their bed chamber. Chaya was sweet and shy, but the Rebbe was no blushing schoolboy. He commanded Chaya to remove every item of clothing until she stood before him, naked and glorious – her breasts full and high, her waist narrow, her limbs plump, her overall beauty indescribable. The Rebbe controlled his own desire; he had waited so long for this moment that Chaya’s pleasure was everything. And pleasure his surprised wife he did. And as he lay beside her, finally spent himself, her dear little head tucked into his shoulder, he sent up a silent prayer of thanks for the Almighty’s bounteous gift.

And as if there had not been enough proof of God’s benediction, that very same night, the young Rebetsin became pregnant with the Rebbe’s child.

Had a husband and wife ever known such happiness? Every morning, when the Rebbe awakened to say his morning prayers, he thought of his good fortune and his heart swelled with gratitude – gratitude to the Almighty, gratitude for the love of his exquisite bride and gratitude

for the largesse of his father in-law (who had just financed the construction of a large new synagogue). In his happiness, the Rebbe even found within himself a sense of gratitude to Gitl, who had served him so well in life and even better in death.

The congregants had embraced their sweet Rebetsin and clamored as before for invitations to Sabbath dinner, although it was more for their company than her cooking. This Rebetsin was not gifted in the culinary arts. Her goose was always either pink and undercooked or charred, her khale tough and unrisen. And certainly, she had no knowledge of how to make a pickle – no matter, the Rebbe found he cared less for food, for it was his heart and soul that had been starving before, and every day with Chaya was a feast.

Chaya grew charmingly plump as their baby grew, and the Rebbe encouraged her to eat more, both to nourish their child and to revel in her firm young lushness. He made love to her tenderly and conscientiously every night, taking care to hurt neither her nor the baby. The construction of the new synagogue was proceeding rapidly. And his father in-law had just proposed building a fine new house for his daughter, son in-law and grandchild befitting their station. Things continued in this direction until Chaya's 9th month of pregnancy.

A midwife will tell you that many changes befall a woman towards the end of her term. Chaya's lack of appetite, her pallor and most inexplicably, her suddenly sour breath could all be explained by the changes in her blood and humors, and because this was a first birth. What woman doesn't have her pains, her little rebellions from her own body – but they all subside once the baby has been brought into the world, as the midwife assured both the Rebetsin and

the Rebbe.

But Chaya grew increasingly withdrawn as the life within her became more demanding. The growing baby moved restlessly, increasingly cramped in the confines of her womb. The midwife recommended chewing mint leaves for the breath, and a visit to the bonesetter for cupping, which pained Chaya tremendously and did little to alleviate her symptoms. The Rebbe's heart went out to his sweet wife, who was enduring so much to bring his child into the world. And soon it was time for the Rebetsin's laying in.

The Rebbe felt like a child himself in his nervousness about the wellbeing of his precious little family. He prayed with ardor, beseeching God to protect his innocent child, the product of his loins, his desires and his mortal sins. It was in the middle of one such entreaty that he heard Chaya, upstairs in their bed, let out a frightened cry. He ran upstairs to find her water had broken. The water was viscous and foul-smelling – this couldn't be the water of life. Even the Rebbe, in his ignorance of women's reproductive systems and the birthing process, recognized that something was very wrong. He reassured his frightened wife to the contrary and then ran to fetch the midwife.

The baby may be in serious trouble, warned the midwife. A quick examination had determined that it might be in breach. Throughout the examination and the many hours of labor, Chaya's agony was like a knife in the Rebbe's heart. There was so much blood. The Rebbe called for a special minyan to pray for the safety and health of the Rebetsin and their unborn

child. The Rebbe fretted and wept, pulling at his beard, begging the Almighty to give him his heart's desire. Unable to eat or sleep, he paced downstairs in agony. Throughout the next day, Chaya moaned and writhed on the bed, the midwife soothing her, massaging her stomach to urge the baby into the right position and replacing the blood-soaked sheets as often as possible.

And then it was all over. Chaya's moaning stopped and there was only silence from above. The Rebbe knew in his heart that his Chaya had died before the midwife could come to tell him. He raced upstairs to find his beautiful young wife, legs splayed apart on the bed, her head at an odd angle as her eyes stared open and unseeing. She looked uncannily like Gitl in death.

The midwife had not yet begun to clean up – she was busy working between Chaya's legs, and the Rebbe started with the knowledge that all may not be lost as the midwife pulled and he realized that his child may still live. The Almighty had heard him! And the Almighty had answered him!

And then the baby slid out. The midwife screamed in horror as she beheld the thing in her arms. There were no ten little fingers to count, as it had no arms. There were no little toes to nibble, as it had no legs. The head and torso were long, and there was something about its pallor, a certain greenish cast, seeming all the greener due to the carbuncles and misshapen, tumorous lumps that covered its skin. "Gottenyu, it's an abomination!", she screamed. She threw the thing on the bed and backed out of the room. Once clear of the door, the midwife

fled down the steps.

Cautious and terrified, the Rebbe approached the thing on the bed and as he did, it gave a little shake, a hiccup, and then emitted a lusty cry. A cry that said, "I am as you made me."

The Rebbe beheld his son and knew that the Almighty had been listening all along. And the Almighty had given His answer.

## GLOSSARY TERMS

Bris – ritual circumcision of an 8 day-old male infant

Kaddish – the mourner's prayer for the dead

Khale – egg bread eaten on the Sabbath; similarly, challah

Kugl – pudding

Latkes – fried potato pancakes

Rebbe – Khasidic rabbi

Rebetsin – the Rabbi's wife

Shmaltz – animal fat (usually hen, goose or duck)

Shiva – ritual week-long period of mourning

Simkhe - celebration

Talmud – The central text of Judaism. It contains rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history. The Talmud is comprised of two components: the Mishna (c. 200 CE), the first written compendium of Judaism's Oral Law; and the Gemara (c.500 CE).

Tsimes – stewed compote of dried fruits, sweet potatoes and carrots; a side dish

Yeshiva – religious school