

Translator's Preface

SHOLEM ALEICHEM (Solomon Rabinovich, 1859–1916) is one of the best-known, most widely republished Yiddish writers of all time. Today he is often remembered for his bitter-sweet stories of Tevye the dairyman, set in the author's native Ukraine, but those were a small part of his prolific output.

The three Passover tales in this book show just some of his versatility. We begin with a satire: "An Early Passover" follows a poor Hasidic refugee from Eastern Europe who suddenly finds himself living in a middle-class Reform Jewish community in Germany. The second story, "A Village Passover," is more poetic: set in the Ukrainian countryside, it explores the idyllic friendship between a little Jewish boy and a little Christian boy, through whose eyes we observe tensions between their families on Passover and Easter. "The Lovebirds" is practically a genre unto itself: a sometimes gruesome Passover horror fantasy involving food and death. The book concludes with excerpts from the author's own Passover letters to family members, expressing his long-

ing to always have “everyone, absolutely everyone, together at the seder.”

These new translations follow the original Yiddish closely, with minor adjustments to accommodate wordplay. For instance, in “The Lovebirds,” some mentions of Native Americans and a Turkish scarf are now references to Turks and a Moroccan scarf, for reasons that will become clear when reading the story. These English versions were created for a planned 2021 anthology of Passover texts from many countries. At this writing, that project is on hold because research libraries have been closed for almost a year amid a global pandemic. When it becomes safe to use libraries again, work on that collection will resume.

For now, though, please enjoy these wonderful tales by Sholem Aleichem, one of our greatest Jewish storytellers.

Steven Capsuto
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An Early Passover

A story that could happen
anywhere in the world

I

THE WORLD-FAMOUS German town of Twitberg is an old Jewish town. And not just a Jewish town: it is a pious, God-fearing town. Its Jews have earned a reputation everywhere for having never pondered, examined, philosophized about, or shown the slightest curiosity about any matter concerning God. These are no-nonsense Jews.

To be honest, their Judaism consists of just three traditions that came down to us probably from Abraham, if not all the way from Adam: 1) yortsayts, 2) bar mitzvahs, and 3) Passover. They consider these three dogmas enough to sustain the Jewish people for thousands and thousands of years. Now, don't think they came up with this idea on their own. They have heard it again and again from their rabbi: a scholar and preacher whom the Twitberg congregants honor and venerate, much as the Catholics (forgive the comparison) venerate the Pope. They call this leader, this scholar, this preacher simply "the rabbi" or "our rabbi," and the Twitberg congregation is convinced that there is no one more learned in the entire world. In his holiday sermons at synagogue, he throws around so many Hebrew words that only the author of the prayer book, if he were

to rise from the dead, might stand a chance of understanding them, but then again he might not . . . The Jews of Twitberg tell wondrous tales of their rabbi, as people do about the holiest of Jews. For instance, they boast that in the twentysome years since he became their rabbi and preacher, he has never made a mistake: every holiday, he gives the same sermon on the same verses from the same Bible, with the same explanations and same parables. I think, though, that this is a slight exaggeration. In any case, their rabbi, their scholar, their preacher holds such great authority in the town that only he may determine the date for observing any yortsayt, any bar mitzvah, and any holiday. Every Jew in Twitberg has a Jewish calendar at home, just as surely as all Jewish women of Twitberg use a white bird for kapores on the eve of Yom Kippur. But when a holy day is approaching, no one trusts the calendar, and they all go to the rabbi to ask, “When is our holiday?” And what festival would they ask about more than our sacred Passover?! I’d wager that Twitberg celebrates Passover more sumptuously, more magnificently, and more strictly than the strictest orthodox community in the world. Twitberg housewives—always virtuous—take Passover so seriously that they own a separate set of Pesach opera glasses to

take to the theater during the holiday. And even the male Twitbergers, not usually sticklers for tradition, constantly ask the rabbi if it is acceptable on Passover to drink Munich beer with their Prague ham.

So, now that we've learned a little about the Twitberg Jews as Jews, we can get to the heart of the story, which happened in the town of Twitberg in the year 1908, which is to say the year 5668 counting from the creation of the world, as reckoned by our Hebrew calendar.

II

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY of Twitberg relies on its own products and manufacturing except for Jewish literature. They used to import Jewish literature from abroad, mostly from London and Warsaw. But now, amid the turmoil of war, revolution, constitutions, and pogroms, the mighty waves of emigration have deposited into that oasis of Twitberg—among so many other souls—a wandering peddler of Jewish books named Pinchas Pinkus.

Pinchas Pinkus is a vivacious little Jew with one small eye and one big eye. When he talks, the small eye looks at the big eye as if to say “Go ahead!” and the big eye seems to reply “Tell me more!” . . . After he had suffered enough, starved enough, and tolerated enough harassment, pain, and torment from his German Jewish brethren, he eventually returned to his former profession: selling Jewish books from door to door. Broke, desperate, naked, and hungry, he had left his native country and with great effort found his way to a free land—to Twitberg, where he was safe from pogroms but not safe from starving to death. In this free country, begging is strictly prohibited, even among one’s own people. Everybody is expected to do something.

Nonetheless, our battered exile, Pinchas Pinkus, could find no work in that free land. It was not so much his fault as a matter of language: he didn't understand their language and they didn't understand his. At first, when he strolled the streets of Twitberg and observed the town and its people and the sky and the ground, it looked like the same homes, the same people, the same sky, and the same ground as back home. But something was different: The Jews here looked so relaxed. No one was afraid of being struck by a rock from above, a bullet from in front, or a knife from behind. Happy people! A blessed land! . . .

But over time, his enthusiasm for the place decreased because of his stomach. In an argument, a stomach always wins: When it's time to eat, it refuses to hear about politics or philosophy. "Can you feed me or not?" is the sole argument of an empty stomach. "For all I care you can beg, steal, and plunder, as long as you give me what I need. Spare me the details!" Unfortunately, if you want to beg for charity, you must either be a born beggar or have the soul of a beggar. Our hero haunted the streets of Twitberg for a long time before he could bring himself to stop the first person, not to beg—Heaven forbid—but to pour out his heart a

little. Pinchas Pinkus spoke to the first German as follows:

“Excuse me, dear German neighbor, I’m a stranger here and don’t understand the language. I am fleeing from a new Constitution, yes I am. And having fled, I have fallen, as it were, face down in the dirt. Believe me, I wouldn’t bother you except that I am, as they say, in danger of ‘the waters flooding in even to my soul.’ I’m not begging for a handout, God forbid, but I want work, any kind of job that will keep body and soul together. Have pity . . .”

The German heard him out, apologized that he had never heard of a street with that name, and walked away. The second German listened to the same speech but left without saying a word. The third German, irritated that someone was taking up his time, yelled at him and called him a damn fool. The fourth German interrupted him mid-sermon, brandished a cane, and threatened to have a *Schutzmann* arrest him if he didn’t *fortgehen* immediately.

Our hero quickly revised his opinion of Germans and their free country, which he now hated, and he became a mortal enemy of all Germans!

END OF FREE PREVIEW

Sholem Aleichem

Three Passover Tales