



4. HERSHELEH AND HANUKKAH

Four lights burned in old Rabbi Berish's hanukkiah. It was very quiet in the Beit Midrash, the studyhouse, as Rabbi Berish said: "Children, when one lives as long as I do, one sees many things and has many stories to tell. What I am going to tell you now happened in the very small village of Gorshkow, here in Poland. Fields and forests surrounded the town on all sides. A man by the name of Isaac Seldes had worked hard and managed to acquire a large estate in the area. The peasants who worked in his fields growing vegetables, or in his dairy making butter and cheese, or cared for his hundreds of hens or his beehives, all loved him and were loyal to him as he was kind and treated them well.

"Isaac and his wife Kreindl had everything except children. The medications that the doctors of the city prescribed for Kreindl never did any good. However, the couple invited the children of poor relatives to come and live with them in their big house and they took good care of them. Hanukkah was always a joyful occasion in the house. After lighting the candles and saying the blessings Isaac gave Hanukkah money to all the children and they played the dreidel game. Kreindl and her maids fried potato latkes, which they served with jam and tea. Often poor people would come to the door during daylight hours and whoever came barefoot and hungry and in tattered clothes left with a full belly, warm clothes and proper footwear.

"One Hanukkah evening Isaac heard a scratching at the door. A deep snow had fallen outside. He opened the door and to his amazement, on the other side of the threshold stood a fawn, still without antlers. The young fawn seemed to have lost his mother and was hungry and cold. Isaac stared in wonder and then drew the animal inside. When the children saw the fawn, they forgot about their dreidel game. They were thrilled with the charming animal. Kreindl asked the maids to bring a bowl of

milk, which the fawn drank and lifted up its head as if to say, "I want more please." This little creature brought much joy to everybody in the house. All agreed that the fawn should not be let out again in the woods, which teemed with wolves, foxes, and even bears. A debate began as to what to name the fawn. Almost everyone wanted to call it Hersheleh, the Yiddish word for fawn, but for some strange reason Kreindl said, "You are not going to give this name to the animal." "Why not?" the children, and even the grownups, asked in astonishment. "I have a reason." Then she said, "Children, I have it!"

"What is it?" they all asked. And Kreindl said, "Hanukkah!"

No one had ever heard of an animal called Hanukkah, but they liked it. Only now did the children continue with their game, and they played until almost midnight. When Isaac and Kreindl went to bed he asked her why she had not liked the name Hersheleh for the fawn. She replied, "It's a secret, but is one that will reveal itself." Isaac had never heard his wife speak in riddles but it was not in his nature to insist on an answer.

"Now, dear children, I am going to tell you the secret, even before Kreindl told it to her husband," old Rabbi Berish said. "A few weeks earlier, an old man with a white beard had come to the house with a sack on his back and a cane in his hand. When Kreindl gave him food to eat he took a large book out of his sack, and while he ate, he read it. Kreindl had never seen a beggar behave like a rabbi and a scholar. She asked him, "Why do you carry books on your back? Aren't they heavy?" The old man replied, "The Torah is never heavy." His words impressed Kreindl and she found herself sharing with him that she could not have children of her own. "I see that you are a holy man," she said. "Please pray to G-d for me and give me your blessing." He answered, "I promise you that in about a year's time you will have a child. Some time before your child is conceived an animal will enter your house. When the child is born give it the name of this animal. Please remember my words." He lifted his hands over her head and blessed her. Then he left as quietly as he had come. Kreindl pondered his words in her heart for many weeks.

"That night when the fawn came into the house Kreindl understood that this was the animal the beggar had mentioned. She believed that she would give birth to a male child and would call his name Hersheleh. Her words to Isaac that the secret would be revealed came true for she became pregnant. Isaac agreed that the child should be named Hersheleh. Winter passed and spring had come. Hanukkah was growing and had sprouted antlers. Soon they realized that they needed to set him free in the forest. Not long after, Kreindl gave birth to a healthy little boy with dark hair and brown eyes. Everyone celebrated with great joy.

"The summer drew to a close and it became cool again. After the Sukkot holiday the rains, the snowfall, and the frosts began. The feast of Hanukkah approached. It was a hard winter. The whole estate was buried in snow. On the first night of Hanukkah, Father Isaac said the blessing for the first light and gave coins to the children to play dreidel. The baby, Hersheleh, was asleep in his cradle. They were all wondering, but Hanukkah did not arrive that night. Isaac comforted Kreindl saying, "Miracles don't happen every day." She shook her head and said, "I hope to G-d that Hanukkah is not hungry and cold." On the second night of Hanukkah, the children were playing dreidel and Kreindl was clearing the table when they all heard a scratching at the door. Kreindl ran to open it and cried out with joy. At the door stood Hanukkah already a half-grown deer, his body silvery with frost. He had not forgotten them; he had come to stay for the winter. Hersheleh woke up and when he saw Hanukkah he stretched out his little hand to him. The deer licked it, as if he knew that Hersheleh was his namesake. From then on, the deer came to the estate every year and always at the time of Hanukkah."

Rabbi Berish paused for a long while. The lights in the brass menorah were still burning. Then a boy asked, "Did the old beggar ever come back?"

"No, I never heard that he did. But, you can be sure that the man was not just an ordinary beggar."

"What was he?" asked another boy.

"The prophet Elijah," answered Rabbi Berish. "It is known that Elijah is the bearer of good tidings; like an angel. He never comes as an angel. People would go blind if they looked into his dazzling light. He always comes disguised as a poor man. Even the Messiah will come in the disguise of a poor man, riding on a donkey."

Old Rabbi Berish closed his eyes and it was hard to know whether he was dozing or contemplating the coming of the Messiah. He opened them again and said, "Now you can go home and play dreidel."

"Will you tell us another story tomorrow?" they asked, and old Rabbi Berish replied, "With G-d's help."