



7. REUBEN AND ZLATEH THE GOAT

At Hanukkah time the road from the village to the town is usually covered with snow, but this year the winter had been a mild one. The sun shone most of the time. For Aaron the furrier it was a bad year, and after long hesitation he decided to sell Zlateh, the family's goat. She was old and gave little milk. Feivel the town butcher had offered eight gulden for her. Such a sum would buy Hanukkah candles, potatoes and oil for pancakes, gifts for the children, and other necessities for the house. Aaron told his oldest boy Reuben to take the goat to town.

Reuben understood what taking the goat to Feivel meant, but had to obey his father. Leah, his mother, wiped the tears from her eyes when she heard the news. Reuben's younger sisters, Anna and Miriam, cried loudly. Reuben put on his quilted jacket and a cap with earmuffs, bound a rope around Zlateh's neck and took along two slices of bread and cheese to eat on the road. Reuben was supposed to deliver the goat by evening, spend the night at the butcher's, and return the next day with the money. As they prepared to leave and the family said their goodbyes, Zlateh stood as patiently and good-naturedly as ever. She licked Reuben's hand as he placed the rope around her neck. Zlateh trusted human beings. She knew that they always fed her and never did her any harm.

Reuben and Zlateh set off on the road to town. They passed fields, pastures, and huts with thatched roofs. The sun was shining when they left the village but suddenly the weather changed. A large black cloud with a bluish center appeared in the east and spread itself rapidly across the sky. A cold wind blew in with it. The crows flew low, cawing loudly. It was early in the day, but it became dark as dusk. It began to hail and, after a while, the hail turned to snow. In his twelve years Reuben had seen all kinds of

weather, but he had never experienced a snow like this one. It was so dense it shut out the light of the day. In a short time their path was completely covered and Reuben no longer knew where he was. The wind was as cold as ice and the cold soon penetrated his quilted jacket. Zlateh too was twelve years old and she knew what winter meant, but as her legs sank deeper and deeper into the snow she began to look at Reuben in wonderment. Her mild eyes seemed to ask, "Why are we out in such a storm?"

The snow grew thicker, falling to the ground in large, whirling flakes. Beneath it Reuben's boots touched the softness of a plowed field. He realized he had gone astray and was no longer on the road. He no longer knew which was east and west, which way was the village, the town. The wind whistled, howled, whirled the snow about. Zlateh stopped. She could walk no longer. Stubbornly she anchored her cleft hooves in the earth and bleated as if pleading to be taken home. Reuben did not want to admit the danger, but he knew that if they did not find shelter they would freeze to death. This was no ordinary storm. It was a mighty blizzard. The snow had reached his knees. His hands were numb and he could no longer feel his toes. Zlateh's bleating began to sound like crying. The humans in whom she had trusted had dragged her into a trap. Reuben began to pray to G-d for himself and for the innocent animal.

Suddenly he made out the shape of a hill. What was it? Who could have piled the snow into such a heap? When he came near, he realized it was a large haystack which the snow had blanketed. He happily realized that they were saved. He was a village boy and knew what to do. He dug through the snow and when he reached the hay he hollowed out a nest for himself and the goat. No matter how cold it may be outside, in the hay it was always warm. And hay was food for Zlateh. The moment she smelt it she became contented and began to eat. Outside, the snow continued to fall and quickly covered the passageway Reuben had dug. He bored through the hay with his stick and made an opening so that air could reach them.

Zlateh, having eaten her fill sat down on her hind legs and seemed to have regained her confidence in man. Reuben ate his two slices of bread and cheese, but after the difficult journey he was still hungry. He noticed that Zlateh's udders were full. He lay down next to her, placing himself so that when he milked her he could squirt the milk in his mouth. It was rich and sweet. Zlateh was pleased to reward Reuben for bringing her to a shelter whose very walls, floor and ceiling were made of food!

Reuben peered through the small window opening he had made and saw it was completely dark outside. He did not know whether night had already come or

whether it was the dark of the storm. Thank G-d that in the haystack it was not cold. The dried hay, grass, and field flowers exuded the warmth of the summer sun. Zlateh's body also gave forth warmth, and Reuben cuddled next to her. He had always loved Zlateh, but now she was like a sister. He was alone, and missing his family, so he began to talk to Zlateh. "What do you think about what has happened to us?" "Maaaaaa," was the goat's reply. "If we hadn't found this haystack, we would both have been frozen stiff by now." "Maaaaaaaa." "If the snow keeps falling like this, we may have to stay here for days!" "Maaaaa, maaaa." "You can't speak, but I know you understand. I need you and you need me. Isn't that right?" "Maaaaaa," Zlateh nodded sleepily. Reuben made a pillow out of some hay, leaned his head on it, and dozed off. Zlateh, too, fell asleep.

When Reuben opened his eyes, he didn't know if it was morning or night. He pushed his stick through the snow that had blocked up the window opening and saw it was still dark outside. The snow continued to fall and the wind wailed. Zlateh, too, awoke and when Reuben greeted her, she answered "Maaaaa." She seemed to be saying, "We must accept all that G-d gives us - heat, cold, hunger, satisfaction, light and darkness." Reuben had awakened hungry and he was grateful that Zlateh had plenty of milk. And she ate frequently; she nibbled from above, from below, from the left and right.

For three days Reuben and Zlateh stayed in the haystack. Reuben had grown up with Zlateh and had always loved her, but in these three days he loved her more and more. She fed him with her milk and helped him keep warm. She comforted him with her patience. He told her many stories and she always cocked her ears and listened. When he patted her, she licked his hands and face. Then she said, "Maaaa," and he knew it meant, "I love you too." By the third night the sky became clear and the moon shone, casting silvery nets on the snow. Reuben dug his way out and looked at the world. It was all white, quiet, dreaming dreams of heavenly splendor. The stars were huge and close. The moon swam in the sky as in a velvet sea.

On the morning of the fourth day Reuben heard the jingling of sleigh bells. The haystack was not far from the road. The farmer who drove the sleigh pointed out the way to him - not to the town and Feivel the butcher, but home to the village. Reuben had decided in the haystack that he would never part with Zlateh. Reuben's family and their neighbors had searched for the boy and the goat as well as they could during the storm but had found no trace of them. They feared they were lost. Reuben's

mother and sisters had cried for him; his father remained silent and gloomy. Suddenly one of the neighbors came running to their house with the news that Reuben and Zlateh were coming up the road. There was great joy in the family. Reuben told them how he had found the haystack and how Zlateh had fed him with her milk.

Nobody ever again thought of selling Zlateh, and now that the cold weather had really set in, the villagers needed the services of Aaron the furrier once more. When Hanukkah came, after lighting the lights Reuben, Miriam and Anna played dreidel. Zlateh sat near the stove watching the children and the flickering of the Hanukkah candles. Once in a while Reuben would ask her, "Zlateh, do you remember the three days we spent in the haystack together?" And Zlateh would seem to smile as she nodded her white head and came out with the single sound that expressed all her thoughts and all her love: "Maaaaa!"