



5. THE SQUIRE AND THE HANUKKIAH

Five Hanukkah lights burned in the Hanukkah lamp in the Beit Midrash, the study house, as well as the large candle called the Shammash. In the oven, potatoes were roasting and their smell tickled everyone's nostrils. Old Rabbi Berish sneezed and the boys around him wished him good health. He wiped his nose with a large handkerchief and said, "Some people think that in olden times miracles were more frequent than today. That is not true. The truth is that miracles were rare in all times. If too many miracles occurred, people would rely on them too much. Free choice would cease. Our Father in Heaven wants people to do things, make an effort, not to be lazy. But there are cases where only a miracle can save a man.

"Something like this happened when I was a boy here in Bilgoray about eighty years ago, perhaps even a little longer. Our village was much smaller than it is today. Lublin Street was only an alley. Where we are sitting now there was a pasture for cows. There lived then in Bilgoray a wealthy young man by the name of Falik, a Torah scholar. He was the owner of a dry goods store. He had other businesses as well. His wife, Sarah, came from the city of Lublin, from a fine family. Suddenly the couple's good luck changed.

First, the store burned down. There was no fire insurance in those years. Then Sarah became ill. There was no doctor in Bilgoray. Sarah died and left three orphans, a boy by the name of

Mannie, short for Mannashe, and two younger girls, Simmie, short for Simcha (Joy) and Tammie, short for Tamar (a date palm).

"Not long after Sarah's death, Falik himself became mortally sick. He grew pale and thin, and after a while he became bedridden and it seemed he would never recover. They tried chicken broth, barley soup, and goat milk. Nothing changed. First of all, Falik lost his appetite, and second, he was left without any income. Nowadays people are selfish, they don't care about others, but in former times people helped one another when in need. They tried to send bread to Falik and meat, butter, and cheese, but he refused to accept charity. The community leader came to him and offered him help secretly, so that no would know, but Falik said, 'I would know.'

"It happened the first night of Hanukkah. As always there was a great deal of snow, frost, blizzards. Things had reached such a stage in Falik's house that finally there was not even a loaf of bread. In better times Falik had possessed a number of silver objects - candlesticks, a spice box, a Passover plate - but Mannie, the oldest child, had sold them all. There was one precious article still in the house, the antique Hanukkah lamp made by some ancient silversmith. Mannie wanted to sell the Hanukkiah, too, but Falik said to his son, 'Wait until after Hanukkah.' There were a few pennies left in the house, but instead of buying bread Mannie bought oil and wicks for the Hanukkah lights. The girls complained that they were hungry, and Mannie said to them, 'Let's imagine that it is Yom Kippur.' I know this story, because Mannie told it to me years later.

"Since Falik could not leave bed any more, Mannie brought the lamp to his father on the first night of Hanukkah and Falik said the blessings and lit the first light. He also hummed the song 'Rock of Ages,' and kissed his children. Then Mannie took the Hanukkah lamp to the living room and put it in the windowsill. The children sat at the table hungry, without having eaten supper. It was cold in the house. Only a year before, Falik had given his children Hanukkah money to play dreidel and Sarah had fried latkes for the family. Now everything was gloomy. The children looked at each other with eyes that seemed to ask, 'From whence cometh my help?'

"Suddenly someone knocked at the door. 'Who could this be?' Mannie asked himself. When he opened the door he saw a rich, city nobleman - a squire - tall, broad shouldered, in a long fur coat down to his ankles and a fur hat sprinkled with snow. Mannie became so frightened that he lost his tongue. It almost never happened that a squire came to a Jewish house, especially in the evening. A squire often rode in a carriage harnessed to eight horses, and his valets rode in front and blew trumpets to announce that the great lord was coming. To Mannie the squire said, 'I passed by in my sleigh and I saw a little light in a silver lamp the likes of which I had never seen in all my life; with goblets, flowers, a lion, a deer, a leopard, an eagle, all beautifully done.

Why did you kindle only one light if there are eight holders? Is this some Jewish Holiday? And where are your parents?' Mannie knew Polish and how to speak to an important man. He said, 'Come in, your excellency. It is for us a great honor.'

"The squire entered the living room and for a long time while he stared at the Hanukkah lamp. He began to question Mannie, and the boy told him the story of Hanukkah - how the Jews fought the Greeks in ancient times in the land of Israel. He also told him of the miracle that had happened with the oil for lighting the menorah in the temple: how after the war there was barely enough oil left to light the menorah for one day, but a miracle happened and the oil was sufficient for eight days. Then the squire saw a dreidel on the table and asked, 'What is this?' Although the children had no money with which to play, they had put a dreidel there just to remember former times. Mannie explained to the squire that Hanukkah is the only holiday when children are allowed to play games with money. He told him the rules of dreidel. The squire asked, 'Could I play with you? My driver will wait with the sleigh. It's cold outside, but my horses are covered with blankets and the driver has a fur jacket.'

"Your excellency', Mannie said, 'my father is sick. We have no mother and we don't have a penny to our name.' The squire said, 'I intend to offer you a thousand gulden for your magnificent lamp, but I don't have the whole sum with me, so I will give you five hundred gulden in advance and with this money you can play.' As he said this, he took a large bag of gold coins from his coat and threw it on the table. The children were so astounded that they forgot their hunger. The game began and the greatest unbeliever could have seen that the whole event was a wonder from Heaven. The children kept winning and the squire kept losing. In one hour the squire lost all his gold and the children won every coin. Then the squire cried out, 'Lost is lost. My driver and my horses must be cold. Good night, happy Hanukkah, and don't worry about your father. With G-d's help he will soon recover.'

"Only after the squire had left did the children realize what had happened to them. Not only had they gotten five hundred gulden as an advance on the lamp, but the squire had lost additional money. Half the table was covered with coins. The girls, Simmie and Tammie, burst out crying. Mannie ran outside to see if the squire, the sleigh, the horses and driver were still there, but they had all vanished without leaving any tracks in the snow. Usually horses harnessed to a sleigh have bells on their necks and one can hear the jingling from far away, but the night was quiet.

"I will make the story short. The moment the squire left, Falik opened his eyes. He had gone to sleep near to death and he woke up a healthy man. Nothing but a miracle could have saved him, and so the miracle occurred."

"Who was the squire? The prophet Elijah?" the boys asked.

"Who knows? He certainly was not a Polish squire."

"Did he ever come to get the lamp?"

"Not as long as I was in Bilgoray," the old man replied.

"If he had been the prophet Elijah, he would have kept his promise," one of the boys remarked.

Old Rabbi Berish did not answer immediately. He pulled his beard and pondered.

Then he said, "They have a lot of time in Heaven. He might have come to their children's children or to their grandchildren. I married and moved to another village.

As far as I know the Hanukkah lamp remained with Falik and his children as long as they lived. Some rabbi said that when G-d works a miracle, He often does it in such a way that it should appear natural. There were some unbelievers in Bilgoray and they

said that it was a real squire, a rich spendthrift who was in a mood to squander his money. Those who deny G-d try to explain all wonders as normal events or as

coincidences. Oh dear, I'm afraid the potatoes are already burning," he added. He

opened the door of the oven and with his bare fingers began to pull out half-burned potatoes from the glowing coals.