

We Once Were Slaves

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THE GOLDFARBS, BEN AND HANNAH, WERE GOOD people, generous, caring, and tolerant, who took every opportunity to teach the three Goldfarb children the very best values. They just didn't know what to do with the homeless man in their living room.

The homeless man had knocked on the Goldfarbs' door twenty minutes earlier, right after Tobie, the youngest Goldfarb, had recited the Four Questions in both Hebrew and English, and right before Ben, swearing to himself that he'd allow his own father, Seth Goldfarb, to interrupt him exactly three times but no more, started to tell the story of the ancient Israelites' enslavement by and escape from the Egyptians.

"Who could that be?" asked Grandma Rose. The thought of company always cheered Rose up.

"Maybe it's Elijah," answered eleven-year-old Sarah, the middle Goldfarb child. She rolled her eyes and spoke in a singsong, sarcastic tone that she'd worked hard to perfect. This made Hannah feel a little sad and nostalgic because she remembered when the kids really did believe that the prophet Elijah came to every house during the Seder. They'd argue about who would open the door for him and then lean over the table and stare at the special cup Ben poured for the prophet as part of the Seder tradition. They'd shout, "I saw it! I saw it! He took a sip," and the excitement was for real; Hannah was sure of it. Then Grandpa Seth would peer into the glass and say, "I saw it too. There's definitely less wine in there now. Definitely." Hannah knew it was hokey and sounded a lot like Santa Claus for Jewish kids — one of her friends actually snuck presents under her kids' beds and claimed Elijah had left them there. Still, Hannah wished those sweet, eager faces back again.

The homeless man knocked again, then rang the bell. The Goldfarbs heard the first four notes of Pachelbel's Canon.

"I'll get it!" This was the same screech the oldest Goldfarb child used whenever the doorbell chimed or the phone rang. At thirteen, Jonathan assumed that the purpose of every visit or call, in fact every event in the universe, must naturally revolve, if not exclusively, certainly mainly, around him.

"Sit down, Jon," Ben said, sternly for him. He was still feeling the pressure of being the head of the household, of running the Seder. There was little advantage to being male in Ben's life, so when it happened, the testosterone just seemed to leak into his otherwise mild, equal-rights-for-everyone brain. Even so, when he opened the door, Jonathan, Sarah, and Tobie were packed in a tight circle at his sides.

"Hi," said the man at the door. He was tall and lanky with unwashed hair and the odor of old garbage about him.

"Yes?" The head of the Goldfarb household tucked Tobie behind his back.

The man stuck his nose through the doorway and made exaggerated sniffing noises. Ben backed up, pushing the kids with him.

"Sure does smell good in there. Name's Pete. Glad to know you."

The man stuck his hand out toward Ben, who shook the tips of Pete's fingers with the tips of his own. Like I'm the queen, Ben thought.

"Yes?" Ben said again, feeling discombobulated, out of his element somehow, but without knowing why.

"A Seder, right?"

Ben didn't answer, so Tobie piped up. "Yeah, we're having a Seder. We're Jewish. Are you Jewish?" It seemed to Tobie that this might be the most interesting thing that had ever happened in his entire seven years. Jonathan poked Tobie and told him to shut up.

"Look," said the man, and he pulled a chain out from under his shirt. "Oh, wait, give me a second." He reached up to the nape of his neck, exposing wiry, black underarm hair and a decidedly manly, musky smell through a tear in his shirt. The man slid a handful of pendants over his shoulder to the front of the chain and held them out to the Goldfarbs. "See?" he said. "I'm covered for anything." There were a gold cross, a Jewish star, a pentagram, a hammer and sickle, and two plastic My Little Pony charms that looked like they might have come out of a Cracker Jack box or a gumball machine.

“So, I’ve come for the Seder,” Pete said.

Ben cleared his throat. “Excuse me?”

“The Seder, brother,” the man said. “I lost everything a few years back...”

“Yeah, lost your mind, maybe,” Jonathan mumbled. Sarah giggled, putting her hand over her mouth and trying not to snort. She was a little scared but curious and excited too.

“...and I don’t have anywhere to go. Aren’t you supposed to invite me in?”

“Wow,” said Tobie. He hopped on one foot and then on the other.

Ben didn’t say anything. He heard getting-up noises from the dining room.

“No, you sit, Rose,” he heard Hannah say. “I’ll go.” Everybody has to get in on the act, thought Ben, running his hand through his hair and breathing out through his teeth. Still, he had no idea what to say to this man at his door and realized he could use some help.

When she saw the man, Hannah gasped audibly and told the kids to go back into the dining room. Other than some continued tussling among them, the kids didn’t move.

“Hi,” said Pete.

Rose, who had followed Hannah into the foyer, said hello back.

“Where is everybody?” they heard from the dining room, then the scrape of a chair and the shuffling of an old man in a brown suit, blue yarmulke, and red-and-black-checkered bedroom slippers.

“Look, brother, I’m not going to hurt anybody.” Pete got a little teary-eyed. “I just saw the mezuzah on your door, and I don’t have anywhere to go. I thought you were supposed to invite me in.”

“Invite? You? In?” Hannah touched the back of her head as if to make sure the man hadn’t stolen her hair. She turned to Ben. “Can I talk to you, please? In the kitchen.”

“You need to excuse me a minute,” Ben said to the homeless man, ducking a bit. As he felt the movement of his head, Ben thought about how ridiculous he must look, bowing that way as if the man were royalty.

“Sure, man. I’m not a...”

Ben shut the door. The lock sounded loud and selfish in his ears.

“Come away from the door, kids,” Ben said, and this time they

followed, along with their grandfather. They left Rose standing in the foyer.

Once the rest of the Goldfarbs were gone, Rose shuffled to the front door. She turned the lock slowly, feeling the hushed click as it disengaged. She felt like a safecracker. When Rose opened the door, Pete touched his forehead like it was the brim of a fedora and said, “Thank you, ma’am.” *What nice manners*, Rose thought. She brought him into the living room, where he sat, sharing his street filth and bodily odors with the Goldfarb’s extremely expensive and heretofore beautifully maintained couch. Rose hobbled into the butler’s pantry and ladled a bowl of soup. When she brought it to him, the man thanked her again, and he blew on it, hard.

“So, is it good? Does it need salt?” Rose asked.

“Mmm, mmm, good,” the man said. He smiled and took another spoonful. Rose watched the man’s Adam’s apple bob up and down as he swallowed. *He looks so hungry*, she thought.

“It’s my specialty. I make it every year, even though she,” Rose jerked her head toward the kitchen, “won’t let me do anything else.” She smiled and whispered, “She thinks I’m losing my marbles, Pete. It is Pete, isn’t it?” Rose heard her daughter-in-law asking where she was. “Deaf too,” Rose said. “Now don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.” The man winked at her but only made little, satisfied slurping noises.

The man had caught them unawares when he requested they follow the Jewish tradition of inviting anyone who had nowhere else to go, even strangers, to join the Passover Seder

Back in the kitchen the Goldfarbs were trying to decide what to do with the homeless man they thought was still on their front porch. Grandpa Seth wanted them to call the police. “It’s for our own protection,” he said. “And what about the kids? He’s probably been casing the joint for days.” Seth liked to use phrases from the old serials he’d watched every Saturday in his youth. Seeing rather than hearing the tut-tuts of his relatives, he added, “They’ll find him a nice, warm place to stay.”

Grandma Rose thought they should be more charitable. “At least give him a little something to eat first,” she said.

Ben and Hannah were caught between protecting their children, for whom both would gladly stand in front of a truck or stick hot needles in their eyes, and showing themselves up as hypocrites in front of those selfsame loved and yet feared offspring. The man had caught them unawares when he requested they follow the Jewish tradition of inviting anyone who had nowhere else to go, even strangers, to join the Passover Seder.

The kids thought the whole thing was a riot. They were savvy enough to know that irony was their best defense against the dark world around them. And the irony of the situation escaped no one, except maybe Rose, who sometimes forgot to take her pills or put a shirt on before leaving the house. At least she always looked down and scooted back inside when she felt a breeze on her naked chest.

Hannah was talking to the kids as much as to her husband when she said, "I know we all want to be kind to this man, but we need to be smart and realistic too."

"Just call the cops," Seth said again. "Everybody's got to take care of their own. That's the way the world is nowadays."

And then the family Goldfarb heard a voice from the living room. "Hey, I can hear you, you know. And you can stop calling me 'that guy.' It's Pete, remember?" The Goldfarbs didn't answer, but three faces were white with shock. "Pete," the man called out. "Did you get that?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ," said Ben.

"Now that's appropriate," said Hannah, Ben's usually loving but sometimes a bit snappish wife.

"Oh, please stop it, you two," said Rose.

"How did he get in here?" Ben's accusation was leveled at his mother.

"I let him in," Rose answered. "He's a person in need, Ben. I let him in and gave him some soup."

"He's a bum." Seth thought he was whispering.

Hannah looked at her children, who were smiling smug smiles and bouncing on the balls of their feet. "Now, Seth, we don't use those kinds of words here. Please."

"Well, he's right," called Pete. "I am a bum." And he made a half-cackling, half-grunting noise. "You got a roll to go with this soup?" And then, "Ha-ha, just kidding."

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not going to leave a guest sitting by himself," said Rose.

“You stay right here,” Ben said, pulling at his mother’s arm.

“Oh God, Ben,” Hannah said, “he’s alone out there. In our living room.”

Ben said he’d go keep an eye on the man, but Hannah wouldn’t have it. “You just don’t want to have any responsibility in this,” she said. “You want me to make the decision so you can feel superior about it later, no matter what we do.” She pulled at a strand of blond hair that had fallen out of her French twist and flopped into her eyes.

“I’m not a child, Ben,” Rose said. “I’ll go.” She shook off Ben’s hand, folded two hard-boiled eggs into a napkin, and walked away.

“Give him a towel to sit on,” Hannah called after her. “And some napkins.”

The adults kept arguing about safety and ethics and fear. Seth clutched the phone in his right hand. The kids crept out of the kitchen, one by one. They were surprised when no one stopped them. In the living room, Rose and the man were chatting about the presidential election. “Well, I vote absentee,” the man was saying.

“Oh, how does that work, being homeless and all? Don’t you need an address?”

For Tobie, the whole night was getting more exciting by the minute. “Are you homeless?” he asked. And when Pete said yes, Sarah asked, “So what does that mean exactly? How do you live?” The Goldfarb daughter perched on the edge of a pristine white Queen Anne chair and crossed her legs. Were it not for the seven-year-old jiggling beside her, she could have been a reporter, poised to take notes for an award-winning article on the plight of the homeless in suburban living rooms.

Rose went to get more eggs. Tobie asked if Pete wanted to see his Bionicles, then he ran upstairs to his room without waiting for an answer. Jonathan was quiet, but he watched with big, brown eyes.

When Ben and Hannah came into the living room, looking calm and pleased, Ben was carrying a bulging, canvas grocery tote. They saw Rose napping on the couch and the kids and Pete gathered on the floor playing out the Passover story. Tobie’s favorite Bionicle action figure was playing the part of Moses. Tobie was wiggling around and saying, “And then Moses says, ‘Let my people go, you evildoers.’ And those Egypt guys won’t do it, and Moses says he’s going to get them.”

Pete looked really and truly scared for the Jewish people. “Oh, no. So

what does Moses do?” he asked. This made Sarah and Jonathan laugh. Tobie waved Bionicle Moses around.

“First, he puts his mask on.” Tobie’s knees were bouncing up and down and his face was flushed. “And then, and then, they all get their Togo Blasters and they go pishhh, pishhh! and then, then they have their superpower, and they get those guys, right in their butts! Pishhh, pishhh,” Tobie hollered. When he saw his parents staring at him, he put Bionicle Moses behind his back. “But they had to, Mommy,” he said. “And they were sad after, like when we’re sad for the plagues and stuff.” Hannah sighed.

Pete stood up, his hands at his sides, palms facing out.

“Look, uh, Pete, is it?” Ben said.

“We packed up a dinner for you,” Hannah said.

“I mean, you’re not even really Jewish, are you?” Ben said. “And Seders well, they’re, you know...”

“Boring?” Sarah said.

“Exclusive?” Jonathan said.

“This way you can share your dinner with your friends,” Hannah said, looking at Ben, who added, “Right, Pete?”

“Yeah,” Pete said. “That’s right.” He looked at the kids and winked. Jonathan shifted his weight to one leg, as though about to stand, but then stopped. He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture learned or perhaps inherited from his father.

“But we’re not finished playing,” Tobie wailed.

“It’s not playtime now, Tobes,” his mother said. “We’re going to finish the Seder now. Mr., um, Pete probably has important things to do.”

“But...”

“Tobie, I guess it’s time for Uncle Pete to go.” Rose was awake after all and giving the assembled Goldfarbs one of her best withering stares.

“Okay, Pete? Here, take it,” Ben said. “Okay?”

“Yeah, sure, brother,” Pete said. “It’s all good.”

Each of the adults slipped Pete some cash when they thought no one else was looking. Jonathan was close to tears as he tried to give Pete a twenty. “Oh, man,” Pete said. “You keep that, okay?” But Jonathan pleaded with him. “Well, then I’ll pay you back; I promise.” Sarah gave Pete a picture she’d drawn in art class and wrote an inscription for him: *To my friend, Pete. Love, Sarah.* And Tobie put his best Bionicle in Pete’s pocket, immediately wishing

he'd given him one of his doubles instead.

"Bye, Pete," each Goldfarb said in turn.

On his way out the door, Pete palmed a small porcelain egg from the side table in the foyer. He held his bagged Seder meal close to his chest and started walking toward his part of town. Then he turned back to the Goldfarbs' mailbox and slipped the egg into it, together with his necklace of amulets and talismans.

The Goldfarb family was unusually quiet as they made their way into the dining room. Ben leaned back in his chair and started. "We once were slaves...."



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