# Folklaw

*Ira Gold*

"VAT YOU VANT?" THE OLD BAKERY LADY SAID AS IF I CAME TO HOLD HER UP INSTEAD OF TO BUY SOME ONION ROLLS. HER BLACK EYES HADN'T CHANGED IN THIRTY YEARS. NEITHER HAD HER DIRTY yellow wig or splotchy white apron.

"Give me six of those," I pointed at the streaky, ancient glass showcase.

Muttering curses in Yiddish, Polish, and English, she shuffled to get a white paper bag.

While she did this I turned towards the wall behind me. Hung with scotch-tape were ragged sheets of paper with tear-off phone numbers advertising baby carriages for sale, apartments for rent, and household help available. Glancing over them, my eye caught a pencil sketch of a gaunt-faced, wide-eyed man who looked dangerous, criminal. Yet underneath the face were a few sentences that asked for information concerning his whereabouts, for he had left behind anxious parents, wife, and children. No name, only a telephone number was given.

I knew this person. Where I'd seen him I couldn't remember, but I wondered why those looking for him didn't use a clear snapshot instead of that absurdly fuzzy sketch. It was as if they weren't sure whether they wanted to publicize or conceal his identity.

"Boychick, vat more?"

I turned back. Her constant rage was no surprise to me. I had bought my first cupcake in her bakery, and I had never once seen her smile. The only time she discarded her hissing hostility was with a baby. As she

peered at the child, her perpetual fury would recede and—with a baleful look that often frightened the kid—she would hand it a small cookie.

I touched the poster. "Who's that?"

At first she was silent. She took a step backwards, nearly banging into her cash register. For a moment I thought that she might give me a civil answer. But then an elderly couple in hasidic garb walked in, and she said harshly, "Iz not my bizness who dat iz. My bizness iz here da customers. If you vant something more, say. If not, goodbye."

I paid and left her to survive another day.

Once a month I take the subway from my apartment on the Upper West Side to my mother's house in Brooklyn. It is the place I had grown up, and many stores have special significance. On one corner is the novelty shop where I had bought Mother a birthday present when I was seven—a paper napkin holder in the shape of a donkey pulling a cart. And though many facades have changed, enough of the shape of the neighborhood remains to inspire a sense of both utter safety at its seeming immutability and blind terror at passing time and unfulfilled potential.

I used my old key to let myself in. Millie, the day nurse, already had her coat on, but greeted me happily.

My mother—seventy, arthritic, though her doughy, sagging cheeks were nearly unwrinkled—hurried towards me as fast as she could push her walker.

The apartment's decor was *de rigueur*: wall-to-wall carpeting, floral wallpaper, plastic coverings on the couch and armchairs. I put my bag with my change of underwear in the bedroom where I would spend the night. Then I returned to the living room where my mother was sitting on the couch.

"So what's new?" she asked as if she had been thinking about the question for a month.

"What could be new since Friday?" We spoke twice a week.

She smiled with mock innocence. "Anything could happen in four days. Maybe you became engaged."

"No. I'm still a free man." I hated this topic, though I was finally able to put up with it. Unlike the bakery woman, my mother had not become embittered or despairing because of her suffering. When her first husband and child were murdered by the Nazis, she turned more fervently to a God she soon expected to meet. When she found herself miraculously spared, she became ruthlessly grateful. Today, her sole remaining desire was for me to continue the bloodline.

Indeed, my mother sniffed like an animal around the borders of my life, trying to gain entry. I wished I could tell her about Alison, my Boston Brahmin Episcopalian girlfriend, but the compromise I made with myself was that I would spare her that emotional trauma. On the other hand, if my mother did find out, I would not end the relationship, though she grieve unto death. A horribly, unsatisfying solution—though, so far, workable.

Because of this great, unspoken topic between us, conversation quickly veered off to one that was less strained. She had taught herself how to read the financial pages and annual reports, and invested in everything from mutual funds that focused on Pacific Rim companies to stock options on the NASDAQ exchange. Often she gave me tips and lately we were making money.

So we talked collegially about Syntex, a drug company that seemed to be undervalued, when my mother's voice jumped.

"Oh, I forgot! Nissen Litvak called. He's coming over."

"Nissen? Did he know I was going to be here?"

My mother sidestepped the question. "You used to be best friends."

"So? It's been years since we even talked."

Nissen and I had broken with some bitterness after I told him I was moving in with Alison. Half-joking, he said that *shiksas* were just for practice. Though he apologized, he wished to know nothing further about my relationship. Fair enough, but Nissen was my friend, not my mother, and we hadn't spoken since.

Again I changed the subject. "Well, then we should eat. Did you make the —"

"Sure, sure. You think I could forget?" She became excited in the way she did only with stock tips and food. "Just bring the rolls into the kitchen and I'll heat up the stuffed cabbage."

The walls had been recently redone to provide added insulation. With the oven on and the two heavy wooden doors on either end of the kitchen, it was stifling. But I said nothing, because for my mother it was never warm enough.

"So what does Nissen want?"

My mother wasn't eating, since all the foods were off limits to her. But she sat and watched greedily as I ate.

"What do these *grosser k'nockers* tell me, an old lady?"

If anything had changed since I had left for college, it was that the neighborhood had traveled backwards in time, towards the eighteenth century. Four Jewish bakeries, a half-a-dozen kosher restaurants and butchers, two fish stores, its own ambulance service, charity organizations, and now a *Beis-din*—law court, of which Nissen was its youngest member—had sprung up, a conscious recreation of the *shtetl.*

The meal over, we went back into the living room. After the heat of the kitchen, this room seemed as bracing as a mountaintop.

"Let me go into the bedroom to get you a sweater, Ma."

Just then the doorbell rang. My mother gripped the walker and hoisted herself up. "No, that must be Nissen. I'll go into the kitchen so you boys can talk."

The bell rang again. My mother started moving off, and I went to get the door. Strange. The last thing I would have thought she wanted to do was back off like that. She saw so few people that her over-zealous retreat indicated that she knew more than she had told me.

"Nissen." I found myself genuinely pleased. "How you doing?"

"Thank God. But it's been too long, Mark. Too long."

He shook my hand, and then took me by surprise by opening his arms and closing them around me in a hug.

Though at six-foot-three he was a giant by neighborhood standards, his long, black woolen overcoat seemed to be inhabited by air. When he took it off, I noticed the bones in his wrist, and wondered how such a muscleless figure had even the power to walk. His large head, miraculously balanced on a neck and throat so slim that it seemed it would choke on its own Adam's apple, was topped off by sandy, almost colorless hair, and the skin of his beardless face was translucently white, unable to hide the inner workings of the veins and arteries. And the pale blue eyes seemed not so much a window into the soul as a magnifying glass.

I was aware that many subcultures like to brag of the saints and geniuses secreted in their midst. They feel blessed that persons with the talents of a St. Francis, Michelangelo, Newton, Dostoyevsky wish to devote their gifts to the betterment of their small community rather than join the world where they might be more fully appreciated. In my youth I had heard that Judah Ha'levi was a greater poet than Dante and the learned Vilna Gaon a better mathematician than Pascal. And already the legends around Nissen were growing. He could carry on a phone conversation while writing complicated Biblical exegesis. Randomly stick a pin in any of the volumes of Talmud, open to that place and read ten words, and Nissen could tell you the volume, page number, line, and continue the passage until told to stop. It was said that he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and read books on astrophysics in the toilet (to keep his mind off sacred matters.)

I had known him since grade school where he had been treated as a prince for his precocious intelligence. He studied Talmud in Israel and had taken courses—mostly history, his main interest outside of religious studies—at Hebrew University and, later, Brooklyn College. His knowledge of Jewish law was encyclopedic, and he could discuss with a fair amount of sophistication many of the issues of the day.

Nissen folded his coat over the arm of the sofa and sat.

I took the wing chair across from him.

At that moment my mother came out of the kitchen. She just could not contain herself. "Let me get you some tea, Reb Nissen."

"Mrs. Ross, please, don't bother yourself."

But my mother just stood, gripping her walker.

"You know," Nissen said, "let me talk to Mark. It won't take long—and then we'll all go into the kitchen for something."

He spoke gently, and my mother went back, delighted in her anticipation.

"So, Nissen, what's going on?"

"I just had another son, *k'nein a'hora.*"

"Mazel-tov," I said, though this was his fifth boy, and his wife, though truly pious, needed to stop. The income of a scholar and writer of

Jewish books is not much, and someone had to provide for the family if Nissen was going to continue his work. Only if she had a girl would the rabbis grant his wife her request to take precautions, provided she not tell her husband.

"And what's new with you?" he asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Mark," he shifted on the couch, "we have different ideas about religion. You think it's a distraction that keeps people from living truly examined lives. I think the world needs a Jew's talents, his religious seriousness. The world will lose something if it loses the Jew."

"Alison would be willing to convert."

Nissen's body rocked back and forth as if he was praying. "Would she be willing to live according to *halakhah*?"

"If she did, she wouldn't be able to live with me."

Nissen, unexpectedly, laughed. "I'm sorry. You must love Alison if two years later you're still together. These days, even with the Orthodox, marriages aren't lasting forever. If I could convert her in a manner that would satisfy the law, I would. I'd like to bring you, Alison, and your mother together."

"Thanks, Nissen. Too bad not everybody has your true religious seriousness."

Nissen said nothing, but examined his elongated fingers. In the last two years, he had become even more ethereal, almost bodiless. A sense of melancholy, perhaps over the imperfectibility of the world, pervaded Nissen's skin and bones. He had never been arrogant, but now, maybe owing to his position as judge, he understood the limitations of any individual human action.

"How's your practice?" he asked me.

"Booming." I'm a psychologist. "There are a lot of unhappy people out there."

"Certainly." Nissen said. "My own business here tonight, though it has brought us together... have you heard about Eli Goldstone?"

"I haven't heard about Eli Goldstone in years. Why?"

"Hmm. Signs were even posted on the Upper West Side. Anyway, Eli Goldstone disappeared."

For a moment I said nothing. Then I murmured, "It's not that surprising if you think about it."

Eli—a chubby-cheeked kid with wavy black hair, deeply set dark eyes and thick lashes—had a voice which caused people to compare him to the legendary European cantors. He began giving private bar mitzvah lessons in his parent's finished basement when he was fifteen. Both Nissen and I were among some of the boys who were recipients of his sexual advances. As we would lean over the large, unvoweled Pentateuch studying the verses we would chant in synagogue on our thirteenth birthday, his hand would reach up to our crotch.

I know that it never went further than that for Nissen or me. Perhaps detecting our discomfort, he stopped. But others allowed things to happen, and the rabbis at our yeshiva found out. The lessons at Eli's house stopped immediately. Another bar-mitzvah teacher was found, and the next year Eli was sent to a yeshiva in Mexico City to finish his high-school education. But stories about Eli, stories of disappearing for a few days, or of being seen where he should not have been seen, were still spoken of very, very softly in the community.

"He left a wife and two kids," Nissen restlessly rose from the sofa and started to pace the room.

"It's sad," I said, maybe too harshly, "but these days you have to expect people to look at all their options. This isn't really the *shtetl*."

Nissen stopped at the dining room table and took some papers out his jacket pocket.

"Eli Goldstone's body was found on a backroad off the old route 17. Three weeks ago he left his job and drove a hundred miles. He put his wedding ring in the glove compartment, set fire to his identification, attached a hose to the exhaust and ran it into the back seat. Then he started his engine."

I went over to the table. "What do you want from me?"

He stood his ground. "The *halakhah* is that a person who commits suicide cannot be buried in the cemetery unless it can be proven that he is sick. So I have here the *gezairah* that gives witness to Eli's madness. As a mental health professional, it would be a great thing if you could find in your heart to sign."

I was tempted to shatter the silence with a scream. But I didn't

want my mother to hear. "I'm sure you're aware that homosexuality is not considered a mental illness."

His voice took on the familiar talmudic lilt, as if in homage to the sweet-voiced Goldstone. "But having homosexual feelings could make a person like Eli feel hopeless. And hopelessness can bring on depression. And depression, madness—thereby making Eli lose control and kill himself."

I was furious and went back and sat on the sofa.

"Please, Mark. This is difficult enough. *Halakhah* is an ancient way of life that may be too simple-minded for you, but it allows the Goldstone family and others to take part in a spirituality which would otherwise be out of their reach. And because of Hitler, it gives comfort and a measure of revenge."

"But it stinks, and you know it!"

I could not contain my voice, and the simultaneous clatter and clang of a dropped pot in the kitchen made it seem as if all hell was breaking loose.

"Are you all right, Ma?"

"Nothing happened," she called. "Is everything out there all right?"

"Couldn't be better."

Nissen pulled a chair away from the dining table and turned it around to face me. He sat and his body was nearly bent double as he whispered angrily, "Don't think that Eli was so brainwashed that he didn't realize his situation. He had been a lawyer and, like you say, had other options. I believe he saw himself as a martyr to something eternal."

"So why not find someone else? I'm not a rabbi."

Nissen nodded. "That's a good question, but it has a good answer. There is another new judge, Gruber, and not to speak badly of him, is a... You would call him a reactionary. He's only a little older than I am, but he goes for the most stringent interpretations of the law. To strengthen the community's morals, he wants to close what he sees as loopholes, even if he has to sacrifice a few individuals. He has a certain vocal faction behind him who would not have Eli buried in the regular cemetery unless I could find someone reliable who could testify to his madness. To say the truth, you are not my first try. I've been running for two days."

I could see now that part of Nissen's paleness was exhaustion. For Nissen, this was more than a simple case of making the tragedy of one family somewhat bearable. This was a matter that went to the heart of the durability of his religion. If the law could not accommodate the people who lived by it, then it would gradually devour them. Judaism as he knew it would not last if its adherents thought the law unbending.

"Nissen, the law must change."

"The law must survive. But it can also be studied and re-examined. Things may be hidden in front of our eyes."

He put the paper in his jacket pocket and went to get his coat. My mother came rushing from the kitchen. "Reb Nissen. Stay. Stay for your tea."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ross, but I can't. I have to see some other people. The police will deliver Eli's body tomorrow morning." Nissen spoke as if my mother knew everything, which, in the *sub rosa* way things spread in the community, she very well might have. "And we must have the funeral as soon as possible."

"But it's ready," my mother pleaded. "Don't go out into the cold without something warm inside you."

"Nissen, it's all right." He looked at me, but I couldn't meet his eyes. "There's no point in starting with others. Give me the paper."

Nissen put the coat back on the sofa and reached into his jacket.

Before I signed, I glanced at it. Nissen had hand-written it in Yiddish, but even I could make out the simple legal language. For laws unambiguously recorded three thousand years ago, this passed for flexibility. I closed my eyes as I added my signature to Nissen's. As a kid, as an idealist, I had fervently believed I would be able to avoid these hateful, necessary compromises.

We went into the overly-warm kitchen, and I realized that sitting in the living room had raised goose bumps of cold on my flesh. My mother, for whom even tea was not allowed, asked after Nissen's children, especially the oldest who was considered a genius and a true heir for Nissen. She was delighted to hear his latest exploits in the yeshiva. After that, she recommended he scrape together some money and buy two hundred shares of Syntex.

As I left to go into Manhattan the next morning—the gulf between my mother and myself another day wider—I strolled past the bakery. Like a child, I stopped to admire the cakes in the window. When I looked up, I saw

the old bakery women stationed behind the counter, staring out past me, keeping a careful watch of the street. Our eyes met, and she seemed taken aback. Then she raised a skeletal finger and indicated that I should come in. I was shocked as she had never acknowledged my existence before.

"So vat's for you today?"

Taken aback, I said, "You know what, give me half a pound of mixed cookies."

She folded the flat, white cardboard into a box and carefully chose the cookies. She weighed and tied string around it.

"How much?" I took out my wallet.

"No charge," she croaked.

I looked at her, uncertain who was going mad.

"A nosh for a customer once in a while is good for the bizness." She handed me the gift as a heavyset man walked in. She looked at him angrily and said, "Vat you vant?"

As I left the store, I smiled.

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