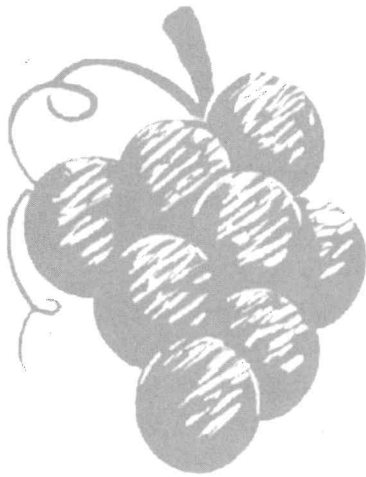


## The Floating Law

(a story from my grandmother)

*Joshua Cohen*



His grandmother had warned him that if he didn't go to shul today of all days, the day he was to accept the law, that the Law would then, instead and for the first and last time, come to him — this warning coming after weeks of skipping lessons in Hebrew and voice — but, as is to be expected, that morning he woke early, and, stealing money from his mother's stash in a hollowed volume of Goethe, decided that he would leave for America.

The large old house was quiet but he was quieter, darkgreen-slithering down the stairs and out the door while in the shul, across town, a torah scroll unfurled its way out of the ark and began teetering down the aisle and out the door of the cold, empty shul.

He knew it would follow but he would be faster: him running in youth and the old torah hobbling from leg to leg, intent on surrounding him, on winding around him (he thought) and smothering him to death. And it kept gaining on him, nearer and nearer on its spindly legs, its *spindles!*, rolling thin past trams and rare automobiles, unfurling and refurling itself down muddied streets and across morning intersections...but how could it be gaining so fast?

He finally approached the port and the torah was there right behind him, seeming to dance, no, actually dancing in victory, but really beginning its slow, final approach.

The boy, almost a man, thought fast and grabbed an old barrel, and, as the torah closed in and teetered itself back for a last pounce, the boy held out the barrel and the torah against its will but not its purpose — jumped inside as the man banged down the lid but the barrel was bouncing uncontrollably and it is here that the man — nameless in the versions I've heard — made his first true decision, his first great sacrifice: knowing he had

to get rid of the scroll, that if he didn't it would stalk him forever, he quickly invented a nonexistent address in New York, America, and paid with all his stolen money, the passage for this jitteryjumping, bumptious barrel across the ocean.

And so the man returned to a shul without a torah to accept the Law he had already saved, but that isn't the end of the story as I've heard it every Passover now since I was born 12 years ago.

Because the ship the barrel was on sunk, in the middle of the Atlantic — sunk because of the barrel's jumpbumping, a disturbing detail of last year's version — and seven or six or nine days later a Scandinavian whaling vessel found the only seven survivors, an entire family, floating there, half-starved and dehydrated, floating on the torah scroll, text up and fully unfurled — having presumably burst its barrel — and the mother of the family was using one of the spindles to steer in the direction she thought was America.

But how she knows the origins of her salvation, I've never been able to understand and I always prepare to ask only to fail in my nerve at the latest opportunity. But I know the story is true because that woman, the mother steering, was my grandmother. My mother, however, the youngest of the seven onboard, when pressed admits that she has retained no memory of these events whatsoever. And so that's why I write this down, and will write down next Passover's version, to divine how the details might shift like the ocean's winds as my mother prepares the brisket and my grandmother, steering still, always ends with a promise to stay alive for next year.



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