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### III

## A Gift

"Masters mine, the Holy Presence dwells not among the sad of heart!" The old man was shouting, a strange fire gleaming in his deep eyes. " 'V'samahta b'hagecha!—And thou shalt rejoice in thy festivals!' A command from the Torah, my masters, a commandment we fulfill at its proper time, no matter where we may be. Today is our festival, the festival of Sukkot—let it be so! I demand the holiday air, for the heavens have decreed that today we rejoice. Too difficult, my masters? Let it be seven times difficult, no one will dampen our joy. We alone determine when to rejoice, when to accept our affliction in love and in silence. What, does it require skill to dance when the heart is glad? No, no, I say just because we cannot raise our heads we must make manifest our gladness, we must utter song with all our being! You have heard me, my masters? Have you understood? If there is no joy, let us create it from nothing, and bestow it as a holiday gift upon our Lord!"

I was in a small Sukkah\* somewhere in Lenin-grad. About a hundred hasidim\*\* had pushed their way in to hear an old Jew, his face glowing and his heart raging with heat, his aristocratic features giving transient bodily form to the angel of hope. Everything he touched took fire. When you shook his hand, you felt strengthened and purified . . . protected.

I couldn't take my eyes away from him. I had heard that there were hasidim in Russia, but not like him. I watched him in wonder: A Jew who refused absolutely to submit. Such Jews had celebrated the festivals of Israel in the concentration camps of Europe, in the shadow of the ovens.

The old man spoke. "Moshe! I request you, Moshe, sing us a tune."

Moshe was embarrassed. Unlike the old man, who wore a black kapota\*\*\*, Moshe was dressed in a heavy coat. He was evidently a laborer or low-ranking bureaucrat who had somehow managed to take the day off. An observant Jew, he would stay home tomorrow, too, to celebrate the second day of Sukkot. He would come here to pray, to join his companions in song, and to forget. But he would not sing alone. Perhaps his embarrassment

\* Booth or tabernacle, hung with fruit of the harvest; commemorates years when Jews lived in huts in the wilderness. T.N.  
\*\* Adherents of Hasidism, a form of orthodox Judaism that stresses enthusiastic piety. When first established by the Baal Shem Tov in the eighteenth century Hasidism defined itself in opposition to the rigid legalism of much Eastern European orthodoxy. T.N.

\*\*\* Black robe worn by hasidim. T.N.

was a result of his not wearing a beard or not having a black kapota like the old man.

"I want you to sing." This time it came as a command. "I want our guest to tell the Jews of the world that in Leningrad we know how to sing! Did you hear, Moshe? They must know!"

"Yes, but . . ."

"No buts; not today. The rest of the year is for buts. Not on a holiday, Moshe, not in the Sukkah, not in the presence of a guest from across the sea. Let him be the one to say but. Let him go home and report that the Jews of Russia live under such and such conditions, but they still know how to sing."

"What shall I sing?" Moshe's voice took on the tone of an obedient child.

"You know. The Yiddish song I love so. But slowly now, don't hurry it. Slow and gentle, so we hear every word, every note. . . ."

Moshe closed his eyes and began to sing something in Yiddish, an old tune about a young Jewish boy who went to Heder\* and did not want to learn Torah. Now he has a new master, a dog named Balak, who speaks a different language and teaches a different law. But then the young man returns to the days of his childhood. Is it too late? No, the rebbe\*\* still waits for him. The song was a simple one, a song of experience, its symbolism and its moral transparently clear.

\* Jewish elementary school. T.N.

\*\* Yiddish diminutive of Hebrew rav, used primarily to designate a Hasidic rabbi. T.N.

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Moshe sang and the old man wept. "Again," he begged him. Moshe began again, afraid to disobey. And the old man continued to weep. "Again, Moshe, again!" Five times, twelve times. The old man wept in silence, holding his breath, as if hoping the song would change, would achieve by repetition a different ending. Disappointed, his tears flowed down into his beard.

Hoarse with the effort, Moshe's voice became weaker and weaker until his strength left him altogether. He finished the refrain of the last stanza and stopped. No one moved; nobody uttered a sound as a heavy silence crept over the room. It was as if they feared to revive the present. Even the old one seemed to have become calmer, seemed to be dreaming a distant dream, listening perhaps to a new song, or an old one, from a new world or an old. He may even have entered the Temple of Melody, where now he rested, satisfied.

Suddenly he awoke with a start. "What's happened to you all? Silent again? We must not submit, I tell you! I order you to rejoice, I command you to create a disturbance! A tabernacle in the desert, is that what you say? I want to see a tabernacle within a tabernacle! A festival within a festival! Well, masters mine, what do you say? My good friends, what are you waiting for? Shame! We have a guest, do we not? A guest from across the sea, a messenger! Is this our gift to our brothers? No! I tell you, no! A song of gladness for our guest, let him tell of the gladness in our hearts! Do you hear? I tell you . . ."



The sentence unfinished, his head fell forward on his chest and he sobbed like a child.

I stayed with them for a few hours, and I admit I envied them. Where did they get their prodigious courage, where did they find, how did they ever preserve, the hidden power of their faith? What great and terrible mystery has prevented their complete disintegration? Certainly the degree to which they have suffered and the nature of their torment far exceed our own experience. We suffered at the hands of the Nazis, but their oppressors are of a different breed entirely, one apparently devoted to a pure and humane ideology. The tortures inflicted upon us were brought to an end somehow, while they remain caught in an unending ring of terror.

Think a minute. Who were the first, the principal victims of the pogroms? They were. The first to be eliminated in the communist purges of the thirties. And the first to be murdered by the invading Germans. These first, hundreds of thousands of Jews, old men, women, and children, in the Ukraine and White Russia, from Minsk to Kiev, from Lvov to Vilna. Murdered or thrown alive into mass graves, long before the ovens of Auschwitz began to cover heaven and earth with human ashes. And in Stalin's last years, who were the victims of his mad liquidation programs? They were. The first to be victimized, the last to be redeemed.

Years pass, governments change, patterns of

life are altered. But for them, only for them, nothing changes. Or almost nothing. Our nightmare, somehow, was buried; not theirs. Somehow we have grown accustomed to living in abundance and freedom, even in luxury, but especially in freedom. And they? They have grown accustomed to their fear.

Still they have not yielded to despair. In spite of everything, they sing, and they think of us, the Jews outside. They are alone in their battle; yet in their attempts to overcome isolation and terror they work not only for themselves, but for us. For our sake they sing, and to us alone they present this gift of their own making.

I sat with them through their holiday "banquet." Bread, fish, and homemade wine. Nobody missed the meat, and we did nicely without other delicacies. I don't know precisely how, but the Jews sitting around me in that Sukkah managed in some way to overcome their melancholy. They grew flushed and lively, began to tell jokes; it was as if they had just liberated themselves from the dark threat that pursued them. They began to sing, louder and louder; despite the narrow quarters a few began to dance. "O purify our hearts to serve Thee in truth." They accented truth. And for that, too, I envied them.

So as not to insult them, I did my best to participate in their happiness. I drank the wine they offered me, ate the bread they sliced especially for me, joined them in their singing. But I was unable to rid myself of the depression that had overcome my spirit. As if in a dream I asked my-

self over and over, "Why them and not me?" No answer. I knew that tomorrow I would be leaving and they would stay. I promised myself not to forget them—at any rate, not quickly—but I knew already that no matter how I told their story or how much I might try to help them, I could never fulfill my obligation.

"You will tell the Jews outside that you saw us dancing?" The old man's face radiated pride, or perhaps an excess of pain.

"I will tell them."

"And that you heard us singing?"

"I will."

"And were a witness to our rejoicing? You will tell them how we fulfilled the commandment of joy?"

"I will tell them, yes."

Except, I am not sure we deserve their gift, or their joy. Or this story.

They did not complain, they didn't criticize the regime or lament the hard conditions of their lives. It was from other sources that I learned of that, and of the attempts being made to annihilate the Jewish soul by eradicating all memory of its historical identity. Of all this I was informed in other circles, where I learned too that contrary to well-placed rumor, Gedaliah Pecharsky\* was still in prison, that Leningrad, too, has its share of informers, and that it is impossible to combat the assimilation being forced on Jewish youth. There

\*Lay leader of Leningrad Jewish community, arrested and sentenced to prison in 1961 on charges of espionage. T.N.

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is simply no one to teach young children the Hebrew alphabet. Many are not even circumcised. The ornate room in the local synagogue which was meant for wedding ceremonies is rarely used for that purpose anymore. There are three hundred thousand Jews in Leningrad but less than ten weddings a year in the synagogue, and no more than five Bar Mitzvah celebrations. "And the situation here is considered good. At least," one told me, "I can die as a Jew. In Moscow there is no longer a Jewish cemetery."

The hasidim do not talk; they only sing. But their song comes up from a great depth to smash your heart. In their presence you feel moved to emulate them. Not for their sake, but for your own.

I met them in Moscow, too, and Kiev. They are associated with various hasidic houses, not just the Lubavitch. And they all pray in the same synagogue, indeed in the same room, each group according to its own liturgical formulas. Standing in the prayer hall you hear the Karlin version with one ear and the Bratzlaver with the other. Yet their hearts are united in true brotherhood. You find no trace of the dissensions that plague most hasidic houses, rather an infinite and uninhibited love of Israel, a pure solidarity of spirit, and a sanctity which hasidic leaders in Jerusalem or Williamsburg would do well to study.

How many of them are there? No more than a few thousand, scattered throughout the country, mostly in large cities. Their children grow up in



a Jewish atmosphere and receive a traditional education. Some of them wear earlocks, and I saw a number of young men with beards. They gather in a private home to study Talmud. On Sabbath they attend a lecture on the Bible, and during long winter evenings they tell hasidic wonder tales, passed on from generation to generation like an underground Oral Law.

What about observance, I asked one of them, certain he would tell me that in light of extenuating circumstances (which one need not go into) it had become necessary to adopt a more lenient attitude toward the commandments. Not at all. On the contrary, he had become stricter than ever in his observance, stricter than Jews elsewhere. His children, for instance, stayed home from school on the Sabbath, although he knew that the consequences were likely to be unpleasant. But there was no alternative, he told me. Perhaps God will take pity; if not, not. His children might suffer, but they will not have desecrated the Sabbath. I quoted him the law: preservation of life supersedes observance of the Sabbath. Not here, he replied. Once we forfeit this commandment, or another like it, the next step is to forfeit all of them. Better not begin in that direction.

How they have managed to live by their sacred tradition, without books, without outside help or encouragement, without the hope of a new generation, is a mystery to me. What supports them? How do they overcome the threat of a petrifying rigidity on the one hand and onrushing assimilation on the other? What hidden forces operate

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among them? It is all a riddle. The prophet Elijah, the rabbis say, will answer all questions when he comes. But let him come soon, while there are Jews in Russia who still await him, and who will be able to recognize him. If he delays much longer, it may be too late—not only for them, but for us.