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INTRODUCTION

The *Haggadah shel Pesach* speaks of four sons at the Seder table. At our family's annual Passover gathering in my Aunt Sophie's Long Island home, I as a child would wait impatiently for Pop, my Yiddish-speaking grandfather, to finish reciting the incomprehensible Hebrew and move on to the chicken soup with matzoh balls, that I did understand.

The four sons, though, were nonetheless engraved in my memory.

From the cartoon illustrations in the glossy little English-language *Haggadah* booklets provided by Manishevitz Wine, you could tell what they were like: one son was bad and one was good. One was stupid and one was smart.

The youngest of four sisters, I took it for granted, of course, that I was the least significant child. But who was I? The good one? Or the bad one? Was I stupid or smart?

A decade or so later, when religiously observant Jews introduced me to Judaism and reintroduced me to the Seder, I noticed that actually, the four sons didn't represent two distinct pairs of opposites. Their characteristics intertwined and merged, like some sort of Havdalah candle:

One is wise.

One is evil.

One is innocent

and one doesn't know to ask.

Through the half-century that followed – when it was I, now, in Aunt Sophie's role, cooking and serving at home in Jerusalem – my vague puzzlement about those passages persisted. But dinner was still the Seder's most urgent feature.

Seventy years altogether have passed, yet I'm not too old to wonder, and to ask. And one commentary, in particular, sheds light for me upon the sons in question. The four repetitions of

the word “one,” wrote Rav Yoel Teitelbaum *zt”l*, may be understood as a hint that there are not four sons but one.

They are one and the same child.

With our myriad inner contradictions and inconsistencies, each son, and each of us, is both wise and innocent. We’re generous, insightful, ignorant and kind. Selfish, indifferent, lazy and afraid, we try hard to do what’s right, and to give. We deceive ourselves. We’re foolish, naive, truthful, self-serving. We avoid people, and sincerely try to connect, and ease other people’s pain. We struggle sincerely, humbly, to find favor in G-d’s Eyes, and crave egotistically for honor from our fellows. We hide from our Creator, and exult in His Presence.

Our ideal selves strive to do and be good, but human perfection does not stay put in this world.

As another Pesach nears and the earth is reborn, set to music by birdsong and adorned with leaves and blossoms, a brutal war is being fought in Israel, involving unimaginable torture and torment. To find a way to go on living amidst such suffering is to spend one’s days on an invisible inner battlefield, where the joys and troubles that fill a normal life can seem reprehensibly small in our own eyes. To carry on, we have to fortify ourselves with the belief that there’s no such thing as a small struggle, an insignificant joy, an experience that doesn’t matter.

How we perceive and interpret a thing impacts upon it, and changes it. As Rabbi Zelig Pliskin has said, “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.” Had the science of quantum mechanics not proven that reality doesn’t exist independently of an observer, writers could have told us so.

The original inspiration for *The Our Lives Anthology*, whose first volume appeared in 1991, was something I heard from Rabbi Nachman Bulman *zt”l* in the late 1980s: “What the *frum* world needs,” he said, “is its own genuine literature.”

His words still apply.

What might such a literary canon consist of? At this point in my life, my ever-evolving definition goes something like this: a body of literature that portrays by way of the written word – *words: the human being’s distinctive hallmark* – our efforts as individuals and as a People to prevail over our G-d-given weaknesses. If we, like the animals, came

into the world as our perfected selves, there would be no need, and no way, to grow emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually. “The most beautiful thing in all Creation,” declared Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus, *zt”l*, “is the *yetzer ha ra* (the evil inclination), for without it, life would have no meaning.”

In the grand tapestry of which we are part, darkness – no less than light – is a Divine creation. With all the apparently random suffering and emptiness that enter into any normal life, the larger context for our ongoing transformations from infancy to old age is that our sojourns on earth, in all their mundane detail, are significant beyond our fathoming.

It’s generally accepted as a tenet of literature that a story’s every word should be there for a reason, and every sentence should be moving the story towards its ultimate flowering. But far more than in any human being’s artistic creation, our lives on earth bloom purposefully, moment by moment, in an orderly fashion, from seeds planted at the beginning. And our beginning foreshadows our end.

“Sarah, if you’d just take out the Jewish stuff,” a close Jewish friend and writer advised me many years ago about an early attempt at a complete manuscript, “I really think you could try my agent.” But “the Jewish stuff” was what the book was all about, and was my writing self’s *raison d’être*.

In one of the stories that follow, author Mordechai Bistriz learns from his high school History teacher that “the main question is *Who are you?* If you get that one right, a lot of the others won’t need answers.”

With our countless unique variations on the theme of being human...and with our diversity of personality, family history, genealogy, education, environment, and culture across the wide spectrum of experiences that comprise this collection, from birth to death, our stories may be taken together – with our commonality and our differences – as the account of one soul’s travels through life in this world.

Sarah Shapiro
Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5784
April 9, 2024
Jerusalem

Laiky Schnell **THE BOTTOMS OF THE CREMBOS**

I remember standing in a warm bathroom as my mother sang silly songs while giving me a bath and brushing my wet hair, and the feeling of her cracked, dry hands. She was inextricably woven into my day-to-day life, so my memories of her, from early childhood on, are as mundane as sleeping and showering.

She can tell you about my first school party, and at what age I smiled, talked, and walked. She can do so for every child in the family.

She didn't seem to want anything for herself. She never looked for shortcuts or comforts. She was almost never sick; she wasn't allowed to be. On the rare occasion that she did fall ill, the whole family walked around whispering, not knowing how to behave.

As a child from a poor home, my mother wanted all of us to have what she as a child hadn't. She sent us to the music lessons, art classes, and dance groups that she as a child had dreamed of, and when no such groups were available, she would organize them, to give each of her children something new and interesting.

To this day, my mother does what she thinks is right, and doesn't fall to pieces when times are difficult.

She doesn't ask for respect. I stepped over it enough times to know.

One Shabbos morning we woke up, ran to get our Crembos, our weekly Shabbos treat, and discovered all the bottom cookies missing. We were shocked when my mother said that she was the one who had eaten them, that they were her favorite. She laughed and said she couldn't stop herself.

I remember how we sat there with our mouths hanging open. We

couldn't believe it. Our mother never took anything for herself, and here she'd eaten all twenty-eight Crembo bottoms.

Now that I'm a mother, I'm always trying to emulate her, but I notice how many times I take things away from others in order to satisfy myself, how many times I could give more but stop to make sure I have. And so I remember, with relief, the bottoms of the Crembos.

Esther Cameron **DUET**

for Sarah Kohn z"l

A mother brought her little boy to hear
Great Paderewski play. She took her mind
Off him to greet a friend. He disappeared.
In that split second he had managed to find
A door that said "No Admittance," and slipped through.
From there to the concert grand was not far,
So when the curtain rose he came in view –
He was playing "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."
Then Paderewski came on stage. He smiled,
Sat down on the bench, whispered to the boy "Don't stop,"
And improvised, sitting beside the child,
A bass, and then a treble on the top.
So, if we humans make our little start,
God will complete it with his greater art.

Naomi Lobl RUBY

When I was small, we lived in an apartment house. The janitor of the building was an elderly Afro-American named Ruby.

The building's heating system was fueled by coal, and Ruby supervised its delivery. He was also responsible for making any minor repairs in the apartments.

Ruby was a very taciturn man. When he came in to make a repair, he would say, "What's broken?" but beyond that, he never really talked to any of the tenants.

He hardly spoke a word.

My mother, an immigrant from Europe and a survivor of the Holocaust, was a little afraid of him, and it was quite all right with her that he never spoke with any of us.

As a child, I had very long, very nice blonde curls. At some point my hair was growing kind of unwieldy, and my mother felt that it needed some trimming and styling. She took me to a local beauty parlor and told the girl who was available that she wanted my hair to be trimmed and styled. But my mother, unable to express herself well in English, was misunderstood. The girl thought my mother wanted my hair cut, and she proceeded to do just that.

By the time my mother realized what the girl was doing, it was too late.

On the way home, my mother was beside herself. She had been so proud of my golden curls, and she so regretted taking me to that beauty parlor.

As we got to our apartment building, there at the entrance was Ruby. When Ruby saw me, he started yelling. "Now what did you do

that for! She had such beautiful hair and you went and cut it! Why? Why did you do that!”

My mother started crying. She'd been telling herself the same thing.

Nobody – much less my mother or I – ever would have dreamed that Ruby had noticed me. He had never given the slightest sign, never smiled at me or acknowledged me. But he, too, apparently, took pride in my golden curls.

My mother hastily ran inside to our apartment and slammed the door, locking it behind her as if to protect herself from the terrible deed that she had done, and from Ruby's harsh words. It took her hours to recover.

My hair eventually grew in, but there was never any other indication that Ruby took notice of us.

We lived in that apartment house for another few years.

And Ruby was silent.

Yedida Miriam Levy THE VEGETABLES

I don't like it.

Please. Just finish up.
No. Everything. Everything on the plate
Ice cream afterwards.

I don't like it.

Don't you want to get tall?
Vegetables make you tall. They have vitamins.
Don't you want ice cream?

All right! So three bites of carrots, three bites of peas.
Then you can have ice cream.

Juliette!

Just eat it!

Brenda Malkiel **THERE WERE NO PEAS
IN WLODOWA**

I am eight years old. Born in suburban Massachusetts, I have learned in school about the virtues of a balanced diet, with the four food groups. When I inform my father, born in rural Poland, that people are supposed to drink a glass of milk at every meal, he insists that I've misunderstood. "The teacher probably said a glass of milk a day," he tells me.

My father grew up on a diet of bread and potatoes, and as far as he's concerned, the expression "to break bread" means precisely that. His gastronomic philosophy is that the only foods essential to human life are those that are on the menu, as was the case in Wlodowa. As long as you don't go hungry, the body will take care of itself.

One spring Sunday, I'm having lunch at the kitchen table with my mother and her brother, my Uncle Teddy, who is on a rare visit to our house. On my plate is a mound of mashed potatoes and a pile of peas. I dig into the potatoes, blithely ignoring the other vegetable.

My mother instructs me to eat my peas. While I don't refuse exactly, I don't cooperate, either. A few minutes later, Teddy points out that my pea pile is still as high as it was when the meal began.

My mother turns to me: "Why don't you mix the peas in with the mashed potatoes? You'll hardly taste them."

Gingerly, I put two peas on a forkful of mashed potatoes, swallow, and leave the table.

I have never eaten another pea.

It's a miracle that I still eat mashed potatoes.

One might claim that it's time to give the pea a second chance, but I'm standing my ground