

## THE CANDLEMAKER • 1

**Z**ELIG CHAZAN AND HIS friends were enjoying cups of steaming tea in the back room of Alter Schneider's tailor shop. It was early evening, and the room was illuminated by a single candle that cast undulating shadows on the walls. Zelig's brows were knitted together in an unhappy scowl. The others waited expectantly for the tirade that was sure to come.

"I'm upset," said Zelig. "Do you know why?"

"Not yet," said Itzik Fishbein the fishmonger. "But we'll know soon enough."

"I'll tell you why," said Zelig. "It just gets me so mad."

He took another sip of his tea and glowered into the cup.

"All right, Zelig," said Motke Schusterman the shoemaker. "Enough with the dramatics. Do you want to tell us or not?"

Zelig crinkled up his nose and shook his head from side to side. "What do you think, eh? That I don't want to? I want to. I want to. Of course, I want to. Why do you think I brought it up?"

"We're losing patience, Zelig," said Gershon Levine. "If you have nothing to say, I'll just go back to my inn. I've got plenty to do."

"Let's everyone calm down," said Alter. "This is my shop, and you're all my guests. Drink your tea and relax. This is just Zelig being Zelig. He always takes his time to get to the point. You all know that."

“Oh, really?” said Zelig. “You think I take my time? Well, I’ll just blurt it right out. I want to be a wealthy man. That’s what’s on my mind.”

Alter laughed. “That’s why you’re upset? Because you want to be wealthy but haven’t managed to do it yet? The year is 1644. War is raging not so far away from Poland. Look at the bright side, my friend. Be happy with what you have. You make a nice living. You provide for your family. What more can you want?”

“I want to be wealthy!” Zelig declared. “I want a big house and plenty of money, so much money that I never have to worry about money again.”

“Well, don’t we all want the same thing, Zelig?” said Motke. “But it doesn’t look like any of us is going to become wealthy anytime soon by selling candles or shoes or pants or fish or schnapps to the peasants.”

“Bah, we’re just wasting time here,” said Gershon. “What’s the point of idle dreaming? Alter is right. Be happy you have a roof over your head and food on your table. If we have nothing else to talk about, I’m going back to the inn. I have things to attend to.”

Zelig squared his shoulders, took a deep breath that puffed out his chest and looked around the table. “It’s not idle dreaming, my friends. I have a plan!”

Gershon snickered. “Did you hear that, everyone? Zelig has a plan. Is it a secret plan, Zelig? Or can you share it with us? We would all like to be wealthy, too, you know.”

“It’s not a secret plan,” said Zelig. “And it involves you all.”

“Really?” said Gershon. “Are we supposed to rob the royal treasury?”

“Calm down, Gershon,” said Motke. “Give the man a chance to talk.”

“I agree,” said Alter. “Let him talk. Zelig brought up the

subject, so he obviously intends to tell us. Let Zelig tell it in his own way and his own time. If you must get back to the inn, we'll tell you about it later."

"Nah, I'm not in such a rush," said Gershon. "I just don't have the patience for long, drawn-out stories."

"But you must admit," said Itzik, "that Zelig's ideas are always interesting."

Gershon grunted and fell silent.

"Good," said Zelig. "I believe I have everyone's attention. I am going to become wealthy. I have a plan, but I need your help."

He paused for effect, leaned forward and lowered his voice. This year, on Yom Kippur, I, Zelig Chazan, the candle-maker of Pulichev, will get Maftir Yonah!<sup>1</sup>

"What are you talking about?" said Motke.

"What the matter with you, Motke?" said Zelig. "Were you born in a barn? Didn't you ever study Torah? Don't you know that the one that gets called up for the Torah reading for Maftir during Minchah on Yom Kippur is blessed with wealth?"

"Really?" said Motke. "Where does it say that? Is it in the Chumash?"

"No, I think it's in the Gemara," said Zelig. "Or maybe in the Midrash. But it's somewhere. Everyone knows it."

"Everyone except for me," said Motke.

"So now you know, too," said Zelig. "It's a *segulah*, a thing you do that brings you good things. You get Maftir Yonah, you become wealthy. That's how it works. It's a Jewish tradition."

"Is it a guarantee?" asked Motke.

"It's not a guarantee," said Alter, "but Zelig is right. It's a respected Jewish tradition. It actually doesn't say so in the

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1. Traditionally, the entire Book of Yonah is read after the Minchah prayer on Yom Kippur.

Torah. It's just an oral tradition, but they say that many people who got Maftir Yonah have become wealthy. Or at least wealthier."

"All right," said Motke. "I'm convinced, sort of. So, Zelig, how do you get Maftir Yonah? And what does it have to do with us?"

"That's the problem," said Zelig. "On Yom Kippur, they sell all the honors to the highest bidders to make money for the shul. So practically every year, as you might have noticed, it goes to either Mattis Falk or Peretz Friedman, the two wealthiest merchants in Pulichev."

"So how is someone else supposed to get a chance?" said Motke.

"Aha!" Zelig banged on the table and jumped to his feet. "That is exactly why I'm upset. It's just not fair! How can anyone become wealthy by getting Maftir Yonah if those who are already wealthy can afford to outbid us for it?"

"I hear you loud and clear, Zelig," said Itzik. "If you go out with a small fishing boat and your neighbor goes out with a big boat and a huge net, how can you expect to catch any fish?"

"Exactly, Itzik! The rich can afford to buy Maftir Yonah, and it makes them even richer. But regular people like us, how are we supposed to get rich if we can't afford to buy Maftir Yonah? Does it make sense that only the rich should get richer? Is it fair?"

"You've got a point," said Gershon grudgingly. "I have to admit it. So what's your plan?"

A smile erupted across Zelig's pudgy features. "Wait till you hear this, my friends. Here's my plan. I've been thinking about this for a long time, and this is what occurred to me. Believe me, I've prayed to the Almighty to give me ideas and

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"Zelig, have pity," said Gershon between gritted teeth.

“Please don’t do this. Just get to the point.”

“Fine,” said Zelig. “The five of us here, we form a secret syndicate.”

“What’s a syndicate?” said Motke.

“My dear Motke,” said Zelig, “you never heard of a syndicate? Don’t you know anything that doesn’t go into a shoe?”

“That’s enough, Zelig,” said Alter. “Leave Motke alone or your next pair of shoes will be really tight. Just tell us what a syndicate is.”

“Well, for those who don’t know,” said Zelig, “a syndicate is when a group of people put their money together to do something they can’t do by themselves. Does everyone understand that? Motke, do you understand?”

“What do you think? You think that’s too hard for me to understand? I’m just as smart as you are, you fool!”

“Okay, okay,” said Alter. “Everyone, calm down. Zelig, be nice.”

“What are you talking about, Alter? I’m always nice.”

“Yeah, well sometimes you’re nicer than others. Let’s have the nicer Zelig. Come on, we want to hear your plan. Tell us about your syndicate.”

Zelig sat down and straightened his collar. “This is what we do. The last few years, the bidding for Maftir Yonah reached about forty-five *groszy*, sometimes a little less, never higher.”

“You’ve been keeping track?” said Gershon. “You remember?”

“I remember it very well, because it upset me so much. I could never get into the bidding. The most I could afford was fifteen, maybe twenty *groszy*. But this year will be different. We will have our syndicate.”

“Explain,” said Alter.

“We will each contribute ten *groszy* to the syndicate. The syndicate will have fifty *groszy*. Fifty *groszy*! That’s a fortune.

This year, we'll be able to outbid Mattis Falk and Peretz Friedman. The syndicate will buy Maftir Yonah!" He sat back and fixed his friends with a triumphant smile.

Motke cleared his throat. "Maybe I'm not so smart, Zelig. Who is going to have Maftir Yonah?"

"The syndicate."

"The syndicate?"

"Exactly."

"The five of us are going to go up to the Torah together?"

"Of course not, my dear Motke. I will go up to the Torah."

"You? We're supposed to put in ten *groszy* each so that you can go up to the Torah instead of Mattis Falk or Peretz Friedman? That's what we get for the ten *groszy*? That's a lot of money, my friend. You know that I love you like a brother, but I wouldn't give such a huge gift even to my own father."

"Motke's right," said Gershon. "I'm not putting in ten *groszy* for you to get Maftir Yonah."

"Neither am I," said Alter.

"Nor I," said Itzik. "I don't know what you're thinking."

Zelig rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Here is the last and best part, my friends. I will get Maftir Yonah. The syndicate will buy it for me. And when I become wealthy, I will pay each of you thirty *groszy*. You invest ten *groszy* and you get back thirty *groszy*. Isn't that a good investment, eh? Come on, you triple your money!"

The men looked at him with grudging admiration.

"Zelig, that is a brilliant idea," said Gershon. "But I have one objection. Why should you get rich while the rest of us just get twenty extra *groszy*?"

Zelig bristled. "Who thought of this idea, Gershon? Did you? If it was left to you, none of us would get anything. It's only fair that I get it."

"I agree," said Alter.

Gershon relented. "I suppose so. But next year we do it

again, and then I go up to the Torah.”

“Why should you go next, Gershon?” said Itzik. “I want to be next.”

“So do I,” said Itzik.

“Me, too,” said Motke.

“Okay, listen carefully, everyone,” said Alter. “Here’s what we’re going to do. This year, Zelig goes. He deserves it. Next year, the rest of us draw lots. And the year after. And the year after. And the year after whoever hasn’t had a chance goes.”

“The same arrangement?” asked Motke.

“Same arrangement.”

“Wait a minute,” said Zelig. “Why would I want to join the syndicate next year? I’ll already be wealthy.”

Alter glared at him. “Zelig! If we don’t all stay in the syndicate every year until everyone has a turn with Maftir Yonah, there will be no syndicate. Does everyone agree?”

Gershon, Itzik and Motke nodded.

Zelig shrugged. “All right. I accept. By then, I’ll have plenty of money to invest in the syndicate, and I’ll make a handsome profit on my investment. More than handsome.”

“Your solemn word?” said Alter.

“My solemn promise.”

“Do we have everyone’s solemn promise?”

They all promised.

“Then we have a syndicate,” said Alter. “*Mazel tov!*”

He brought out a bottle of slivovitz and five tiny glasses. He filled the glasses halfway with the liquor and handed them around. The men raised their glasses and wished each other *l’chaim*. Then they sipped the liquor to make it last and chatted.

The hour grew late, and Alter drew the gathering to a close.

“We’ve accomplished a lot here tonight,” he said. “This is very exciting, my good friends. This Yom Kippur we all

start on the path to becoming wealthy. Zelig will go first, as agreed, and the rest of us will have to settle for a good return on our money for the time being. Congratulations, Zelig. Enjoy your Maftir Yonah this year.”

Zelig beamed from ear to ear. “Oh, I will. I will. Can you imagine? Me, Zelig the candlemaker, going up to the Torah on Yom Kippur to Maftir Yonah no less. My wife will be watching from the women’s gallery as I stand in front of the Torah in my white *kittel*, my *tallis* over my head, and make the blessing in a loud and clear voice. My wife will tell me that I looked like an angel, and I’ll just bow my head modestly and smile.”

Motke scoffed. “You, Zelig? An angel?”

“What’s the matter? I’m not good enough to be an angel even on Yom Kippur? All of us are angels on Yom Kippur. Even you, Motke.”

“Even me? What’s wrong with me?”

“All right, enough of this,” said Alter. “All of us are holy on Yom Kippur. The Almighty cleans our sins. As for you, Zelig, this will be your moment of glory. I hope you enjoy it.”

“You’re right, Alter. This will be my moment of glory. And I’m going to savor every single moment of it. Imagine me standing in front of the whole shul for Maftir Yonah, a simple candlemaker in the place where only the richest merchants stand. What an honor! And they’ll have to get used to it, because once I get rich I’ll bid against Mattis Falk and Peretz Friedman every year.”

Gershon grew red in the face. “Really? You’re going to buy it every year? And what about us?”

“Don’t worry,” Zelig said magnanimously. “I won’t bid against any of you. But after you all get your chance, if you want it again you’ll have to outbid me.”

“Don’t forget,” Gershon grumbled. “You made a solemn



promise to stay in the syndicate until we all get Maftir Yonah.”

“I won’t forget. But right now, I’m just thinking of how wonderful it will be. I’ll be standing at the Torah in front of everyone, and Shima’le Ungar will be reading the story of Yonah slowly and clearly in his beautiful voice, each word like a drop of honey. A drop of the most delicious honey. And I’ll savor each and every word. Oh, I hope my moment of glory stretches out for as long as possible. I can’t wait for Yom Kippur to come.”

“We’re all happy for you, Zelig,” said Alter. “But it’s time to go. Sweet dreams, Zelig. Sweet dreams.”

“Not so fast,” said Gershon. “We still have to work out some details. What if the bidding goes over fifty *groszy*?”

“Then we stop,” said Motke.

“No, we can’t stop,” said Zelig. “We’ll be so close. A few more *groszy*, and we get it. We’ll just have to squeeze out a few more *groszy*.”

“But how much more?”

“Maybe five *groszy* more,” Zelig offered tentatively, “Fifteen *groszy* each in total if the bidding goes to seventy-five, which it won’t.”

“What if it goes higher?”

“Are you joking? It won’t even get close to seventy-five.”

“But what if it goes higher?” Motke persisted.

“It won’t.”

“But what if it will?”

“Let me make a suggestion,” said Itzik. “If it goes over seventy-five, Zelig will look at the rest of us. If we give him the nod, he goes ahead. If we don’t, he stops. We’ll make the decision at the time. We don’t want anyone to know about our little arrangement, but we can signal Zelig without anyone noticing. Just a little shake of the head if you don’t agree or a little nod if you agree. The decision will be ours at the time. If even one of us doesn’t want to go forward, the whole

thing stops.”

“I can live with that,” said Gershon. “How about the rest of you?”

They all nodded gravely, intimidated by their venture into high finance.

“Then that’s straightened out,” said Gershon. “Two more things. First, our syndicate is a secret. That means we tell no one. We don’t need other people forming syndicates to bid against us. It must be absolutely secret. Am I right? We’re all agreed?”

They all nodded.

“We don’t even tell our wives,” added Gershon.

They all nodded again. Except for Zelig.

“Look,” he said, “there’s no reason you four should tell your wives. There’s nothing to be gained. They’ll just give you a hard time. You know that, don’t you?”

“That’s for sure,” said Motke.

The others murmured their agreement.

“But my case is different,” said Zelig. “If I don’t tell my wife beforehand and then I bid against the rich men, my wife will throw me out of the house. I have no choice. I must tell her. I’ll swear her to secrecy. She won’t break her word.”

“Zelig is right,” said Alter. “He has no choice. But the rest of us have a choice. We don’t tell our wives. We keep it a secret.”

“So we’re all agreed,” said Gershon. “Excellent. There’s just one more thing. We have to ask the rabbi if this syndicate is permitted.”

“We tell him our secret?” said Motke.

“The rabbi won’t tell anyone,” said Gershon. “He doesn’t want chaos in the shul. He won’t even tell his wife. No worries. But we really don’t have a choice. We must know if our little plan is kosher. In effect, we’re lending the money to Zelig, and when he becomes rich, he will repay it with a lot of

interest. Twenty *groszy* interest on a loan of ten *groszy*. And if the bidding goes higher, triple whatever we lend him for the bidding. Is that allowed?”

“Good point,” said Zelig. “Let’s go ask him tomorrow.”