

A BASKET OF BERRIES • 1

FISHEL UNGARISHER STEPPED ON a rock and twisted his ankle. A sharp pain shot up his leg as he struggled to sit down without overturning the basket of red berries he carried on his shoulder. Having secured the basket, he lowered himself gingerly to the ground and allowed himself to groan. Perhaps if he waited a while, the pain would subside, and he'd be able to lift the basket and bring it to market in Pulichev. His wife was waiting at their stall in the marketplace. If he could just manage to get the basket to her, he could go home and tend to his ankle.

A half hour passed, and the pain did not subside. In fact, the ankle became swollen, and the pain grew worse. Becoming impatient, Fishel tried to stand, but the shooting pain was too excruciating. Even if he could somehow hobble home, he would have to leave the berries behind. The work of the whole morning would go to waste.

As he sat and stewed, he heard the faint strains of a familiar shul song, and presently, he caught sight of Leizer Knobel, one of the water carriers of Pulichev. A heavy wooden yoke lay across Leizer's shoulders, with two large pails of water, one at each end. Leizer walked carefully so as not to lose a drop of the precious water. When he saw Fishel sitting on the ground, he lowered his pails and slumped to the ground beside him.

“What’s doing, Fishel?” he said. “Are you all right? Or are you just stopping for a little rest?”

“I twisted my ankle. I’m waiting until the swelling goes down.”

“Let me have a look.”

Leizer put his hand under Fishel’s ankle, and Fishel cried out in agony. Leizer shook his head.

“It could take hours for the swelling to go down.”

“So what should I do?”

Leizer shrugged. “Not much. You have to go home and soak it in hot water. Keep it elevated.”

“How am I supposed to go home?”

“I’ll rummage around and find you a heavy branch. You can use it as a cane and hobble home. Otherwise, you’ll have to stay here all night with the animals. It’s not safe.”

Fishel sighed. “I guess you’re right. And all these berries I gathered all morning, I guess I’ll have to leave them for the animals. My wife will be disappointed. She’s waiting in the marketplace. We need the money.”

Leizer chewed on his knuckles. “Listen, Fishel. I have an idea. You stay here and keep an eye on my water pails, and I’ll bring your berries to your wife. I’ll also bring you a stout cane and maybe a couple of people to help you get home. It shouldn’t take me that long to go and come back.”

“Would you really do that for me, Leizer?”

“Sure, why not? We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“But the basket is really heavy.”

Leizer chuckled. “Why don’t you try lifting two big pails of water? Then you’ll really know what heavy is.”

“Leizer, you’re really a good friend.”

Leizer ripped out a tall blade of grass and chewed on it.

“Listen, Fishel. We have to think about the future. Life is really hard for most of us, and we’re so busy thinking about making ends meet for ourselves and our families that we don’t

give enough thought to others. But times are changing. Oh yes, times are really changing. Mashiach is on his way, and he'll soon make it all the way to Poland. Our troubles will be over. We'll all be rich as kings. We won't have to struggle anymore. So we might as well start right now. It'll make me happy to take a break in my workday and bring your berries to the marketplace in Pulichev."

"Do you really think we'll all be rich as kings?"

"For sure."

"Will we all have nice houses?"

"Palaces. I can just see my house now. It's a white villa on a hilltop with a breathtaking view of the Beis Hamikdash."

"The Beis Hamikdash? You mean it's already been rebuilt?"

"Nah, I don't think so. But I'm sure it won't take long once Mashiach puts his mind to it."

"Do you really think we'll have palaces?"

Leizer laughed. "If it's better than what we have now it's a palace. Yes, I'll have a white villa on a hilltop with a veranda. Separate rooms for eating and for sleeping. Maybe even a special bedroom just for the children. We'll have meat every Shabbos and on the festivals, and on regular days, we'll have chicken a few times a week."

"And we won't have to work?"

"No more work, Fishel?"

"That would be wonderful. Are you sure?"

"We're talking about Mashiach, Fishel. No more work."

"How will we get things like food and clothing?"

Leizer snapped his fingers. "You get everything without working. Peasants and noblemen will come from all over the world and beg for the privilege of becoming our servants. They won't ask for pay, only to be housed and fed. I won't accept too many of them, no more than fifty or a hundred, and I suggest you do the same. During the day, they'll till my fields, tend to my livestock and do the housework in my villa

on the hilltop, and in the night, I'll house them in decent quarters at the foot of the hill. I'll treat them with kindness and respect, and everyone will be happy."

"You paint a beautiful picture, Leizer."

"That's because life will be beautiful. Oh yes, life will soon be absolutely wonderful. Just a little while longer and it'll all come to pass."

"My ankle feels better already."

"Good. Now, just stay here and rest it. I'll be back soon."

Leizer shifted the heavy basket onto his shoulder and stepped onto the main road into Pulichev.

A shimmering sun adorned the high blue sky as the water carrier passed through a vast field of lilac blossoms. The road slipped through the soft gray shade of a stand of oaks, and Pulichev came into view.

The small city lay nestled among wooded hills alongside the Grizdna River, its neat little houses sparkling in the sunlight. Sheep and cattle grazed in the rolling meadows of the lower valley.

Leizer sighed and shook his head. He had lived all his life in the lovely river valleys of southern Poland. He knew their beauty, but he had also seen their dark side. He had seen the violent hatred of the Poles, the persecutions and pogroms, death riding on Cossack horses. Poland could never be home to the Jewish people. Nor Germany nor England nor anywhere else. Only Eretz Yisrael. Just a little while longer, thought Leizer. Just a little while longer.