

Expecting the Best

Herman burst in through the front door, twenty minutes late as usual, but services hadn't started yet, as usual. He had been talking out on the lawn with Israel, who had just woken up fifteen minutes before and was still half in his pajamas and half in his dress clothes, wandering slowly and awkwardly around the perimeter of the house like a small, overweight dinosaur, searching and scrounging for something and oblivious to everything and everyone around him.

Even though Herman had just come, everyone inside already knew he was about to enter because of the loud conversation he was having with Israel. It was hard to make out what they were saying exactly, partially because they were outside, but mostly because their accents were a thick mix of urban New England and rural Eastern Europe, accompanied by bad grammar, incomplete sentences, and a general lack of logic. They were like two chickens, one who had been pecking about the farm and another just appearing, both with grotesque bobbing heads, and upon seeing one another had started an impromptu cock fight. After a few rounds of sparring like this, Herman apparently had enough of Israel, and yielded the field by escaping into the house.

Although Herman had attempted to end the conversation, Israel seemed unaware of this and continued jabbering loudly and gesticulating in his nervous, chicken/dinosaur way. Herman, now safely inside, was redirecting his attention to Tom, the good-natured, hard-of-hearing, selfless to a fault owner of the house, who was as usual puttering away in the kitchen and preparing lunch in anticipation of all the guests he hoped would stay to eat after services were over. Herman peeked into the kitchen from around the small wall that divided it from the front hallway, and said, with a little spittle coming out of his mouth "A gut Shabbos, Tom."

Tom did not answer, being that his worse ear, the right one, was pointed towards Herman, and the rest of his head was pointed the other way. Herman, a little annoyed and forgetting that Tom couldn't hear well, yelled at least ten decibels louder "A gut Shabbos, Tom." Tom was at that very moment bent over with his head in the oven putting in a tray full of barbecue sauce-laden chicken in order to reheat it from the night before.

"Oh, gut Shabbos, Herman" Tom replied as he turned slightly away from the oven to see Herman, and at the same time was still trying to slide the oven tray into the correct grooves of the inner oven walls. As he said this, he gave a half-toothless smile, having lost many of his teeth from years of neglect of them and himself. "Just a second, Herman. I have to get this in the oven."

Herman took in a long, noisy inhale and said excitedly "Ooh, that is going to taste good, Tom. You're a real *baalebuste*." That was the Yiddish word for a housewife. Tom heard this and chuckled in short, spasmodic bursts, and after successfully shoving the tray into the oven and closing the door, slowly bent up as far as he could, which was about three

quarters of the way, and walked over to Herman and slap shook his hand. “Heh, heh. If I’m a *baalebuste*, you’re a monkey’s uncle.”

It was one of those jokes that Tom told that didn’t quite make sense and was probably first heard from the mouth of a vaudeville comedian back in 1915, the year that Tom was born. Herman actually didn’t hear the joke because he was also hard of hearing and had already continued to speak even as Tom was finishing the joke. He said something in Yiddish, making a play on words with *baalebuste* and how it sounded in English. Tom looked at him quizzically and said, turning his good ear to Herman and tipping his head closer “What? Say that again?” Herman yelled “I said...” then repeated the Yiddish joke. Tom smiled broadly and laughed spasmodically again but didn’t understand a word Herman had just said.

Having heard both this noisy exchange and the equally loud conversation with Israel out in the yard, tall, lanky, nervous Bertram Stein shot out from the living room (which also served as the *schul*, or synagogue) into the kitchen to see who had just arrived. As he ran over to the kitchen, he announced to the other four people who were sitting toward the front of the *schul* “Oh, I bet you that that’s Herman.”

The four people inside the *schul* (Beryl, Jeff, James, and the other Bertram) all looked at each other with raised eyebrows, everyone having already heard Herman babbling half-way down the block. But of course, this was nervous, babbling Bertram Stein talking. Bertram was the big, tall *cohen*, a descendant of the priestly class of *cohanim* (hence his nickname, the *Cohen Gadol*, the big *cohen*), who looked as if he had been sleeping in his clothes for weeks and his pants had shrunk in the wash years before. Every Shabbat morning, he arrived for services at least twenty minutes later than the official 9:30AM starting time. This morning he had beaten Herman by only a few minutes. Experience had taught the *schul*-goers that they should never start services until Bertram had arrived. In a regular synagogue where there were plenty of people attending, services would start as soon as there was a quorum of ten people (a minyan). Since they didn’t have that luxury here, they would start with fewer than ten, but usually no less than three people. Not too long ago they had started without Bertram at about 9:40, hoping that the services would end at a more decent time than usual. Bertram arrived shortly afterwards to see this and in an angry rage threatened to leave and never come back again. He said, “I walked 45 minutes to get here and you started without me!?” Being that he was one of the core seven or eight people who normally attended, they all knew from then on that it was best to wait to start only until Bertram arrived. This practically guaranteed that every Saturday morning service would end not before 12:30.

The late hour didn’t particularly bother most people in the *schul*, except for Jeff, who lived fifty minutes walking time in the opposite direction from where Bertram came. The later he had to stay here the later he would arrive home, and the more his wife would resent his having gone in the first place. And as things weren’t so harmonious back at Jeff’s home, this made him stressed and resentful that he had come here in the first place.

With Herman having now arrived, Jeff and Beryl made a quick count out loud together in the traditional style for counting individuals. Not one, not two, not three, not four people outside and in the kitchen, and not one, not two, not three, not four people waiting in the *schul*, for a total of not eight. There were only two more to go to make the minyan, but it was already about 10:00. Bertram would probably be ready once he would stop talking with Herman, so Jeff gave a quick look at Beryl and James, indicating that it was time to move things along and start.

Beryl and James both were both “temporarily” living in Tom’s house. Beryl was separated from his wife with custody of their son, with her having custody of their daughter. Tom let him stay in his house while he was trying to get his life in order during the divorce process. James somehow had changed from a semi-permanent weekly guest into a permanent resident until he could “get his act and a little money together.” It mattered very little to either Beryl or James when they would actually start services as they had no other place to go afterwards. After summing up the situation in his mind, and with the usual sigh, Jeff got up and half-jokingly and half-angrily called Bertram, Herman, and Israel to come into the living room so they could start already.

Aside from Beryl and James, there was also the other Bertram, Bertram Jones, who was sitting cuddled in the corner in his crumpled prayer shawl, ready for services to begin for a good part of a half hour, obviously letting everything go on around him. Bertram was a lawyer who would show up every week and barely speak to anyone, letting all the craziness go on around him. When spoken to, he was very polite and obliging, and after arriving each week he always waited quietly and patiently for services to begin.

One Shabbat, in an unusually tranquil and sane moment, Jeff asked Bertram the lawyer why he came to this *schul* at all when he could have easily gone to one of the more mainline synagogues in the area. Bertram recounted how when his father (of blessed memory) was ill in the hospital shortly before he died, Tom organized the regular *schul*-goers to meet at the hospital rather than at Tom’s house so that Bertram’s father would have services to attend every Shabbat morning. Bertram swore that afterwards he would only attend Tom’s *schul* whatever the circumstances. Even now, when every week it was touch and go whether there would be ten people attending, Bertram would not hear of going anywhere else.

Jeff was the youngest adult attending the *schul*, in his mid-30’s. Before he and his wife moved to this suburb located about an hour’s drive north of the main city, he researched all of the synagogues in the immediate vicinity. The closest one turned out to be this small *schul* that was being run out of Tom’s house, and he decided that the estimated long walk to get there on a Shabbat morning would be bearable. Moving to this area was a compromise he made with his wife because she wanted out of the city and to live in a better apartment with a more affordable rent. The flip side of this was that there were no easily accessible synagogues by foot and the Jewish community was much smaller than in the city. His wife wasn’t quite as concerned by this, so Jeff considered this a big compromise on his part. He kept trying to convince himself that this would somehow improve their

marriage, but his fretting about getting home on time every Saturday was probably an indication that it wasn't really working.

Jeff entered the kitchen and waited for an opening in the animated conversation between Bertram and Herman. They were all talking loudly and quickly and didn't notice that Jeff was trying to get their attention. Jeff finally saw his opportunity when Herman turned his head slightly, and Jeff blurted out "I think it's getting late. We're going to start now. Can you guys come into the *schul*, please?"

Herman, who was retired for many years now and didn't appreciate being pressured, said "What, we have a minyan already? No, so what's your hurry?"

"We have eight people" said Jeff.

"You mean not eight people," Bertram said, and chuckled nervously.

"Yes, not eight people," said Jeff. "So, if we start now, by the time the other two come we should be okay to say kaddish later." Kaddish was one of those prayers that required ten people in order to be recited.

Bertram, losing the point about starting on time, did what he did best and started ruminating on the minutia.

"Wait a second, how many people do we have here?" he said. "We have me, Herman, Tom, you, who else?"

Jeff was getting impatient, but he felt he had to indulge Bertram in order to get things moving. "Israel, Beryl, James, the other Bertram. That makes eight."

"Oh, that's good. But is Jacobs coming? What about Jacobs? And what about Beryl's son Baruch?"

"I think Lou Jacobs is supposed to be here," Tom suddenly piped in. "If not, I'll walk over to his house."

"Tom," Jeff pleaded. "Please don't go yet. If you leave, then someone else might come and then we'll have to wait for you." This slapstick routine had already happened a number of times before.

"No, no, don't worry. If all else fails, I can usually get someone off the street. You know, there are many of our people who live around here that you wouldn't think were Jewish at first. But I can tell every time."

Jeff was starting to get that feeling in his stomach when the stress was getting to be too much.

Beryl's son Baruch was a month or so shy of his thirteenth birthday, when he would become a Bar Mitzvah. Normally, a boy under thirteen could not be counted in a minyan. However, there was an allowance that was established by some Jewish communities where if the boy was very close to thirteen, and there was no other way to make a minyan, if a boy stood during services holding a printed copy of the Torah (a *chumash*), he could be counted in the minyan. Beryl frowned upon this, quoting rabbis who did not approve of this practice. After being frustrated after so many weeks without a minyan, Beryl once conceded to do it, but afterwards regretted it. On this particular Shabbat, Baruch was in his room on the far side of Tom's house, avoiding the outside chance that his father would change his mind and make him participate.

In any case, whether Baruch could be counted would be moot if another person didn't show up. Jacobs, who lived only a few blocks away, was pivotal now. While everyone called him Jacobs, Jacobs was insistent that people refer to him as Professor Jacobs. Professor Jacobs taught mechanical engineering at the local community college and would occasionally show up at the *schul* when he didn't feel like walking the long distance to the next nearest Orthodox synagogue, which ironically was near to where Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* lived. Tom would often walk over to Jacobs' house to try to persuade him to come, and Jacobs very often would agree to come, though not without paying the favor back by being judgmental, derisive, and downright rude when he arrived. Jacobs let it be known that he thought this group at Tom's *schul* was a motley bunch, and took every opportunity to especially berate one of its founders, Dov Be'er Glickstein, who officially held the title of president, even though he rarely, if ever, showed up. Whenever Tom would ask Jacobs to come, Jacobs would always ask if Dov Be'er was there before agreeing.

Jeff reluctantly agreed to let Tom walk over to Jacobs' house as this seemed the best chance of getting a minyan. Before Tom left, Beryl made sure to remind Tom how to handle Jacobs.

"Now Tom, don't let Professor Jacobs give you 'no' for an answer or make any conditions on you. Tell him that it is his religious obligation to come if he lives in walking distance of a *schul* that needs a minyan."

"Don't you worry, Beryl. Why, I spoke to him just this week and he said that he would show up for sure."

"So why isn't he here already?"

"He probably just woke up late. Don't worry, I'll be right back."

As Tom put on his jacket and started his way out the door, Jeff said to Beryl "You know, maybe we should just start now. We have more than three people, and by the time Tom comes back with Jacobs it will be very late already."

"Jeff, we don't even know if we are going to have a minyan or not, and we still need one more person."

“Well, what about Baruch?”

“Let’s not get into that again.”

“I know you don’t like doing this, but he is only a month or two from his Bar Mitzvah and this is getting pretty ridiculous not having a minyan here. Is there nobody else we can depend on? If it keeps going on like this, it’s no wonder nobody wants to come anymore.”

“Like I explained to you, Dov Be’er is out of town all of the time during this time of the year.”

“Well, I never actually met him, and I’ve been coming here for more than a year now. So, it doesn’t seem like he’ll ever be an option.”

“Oh, remember I told you about Bill? He’s willing to come regularly if he can just get out of the mess he is having now.”

“You mean the one with the restraining order? Do you really think that’s a real option? And even if his ex-wife stops the restraining order, is that who you want coming here?”

“It would be lashon hara to say it, so I won’t, but some time I’ll sit you down and tell you what used to go on here just a couple of years ago.”

Lashon hara meant the “evil tongue,” or derogatory speech about another person. Whenever they started to discuss something interesting that could help Jeff better understand the goings-on of this *schul*, Beryl would invoke the prohibition of lashon hara and the conversation would come to a dead stop. Frustrating as this was, it still was interesting each time Beryl dropped a new clue.

Jeff came back to the matter at hand when he looked at his watch and saw that it was 10:15. Whether there was going to be a minyan or not, they would need to start already to end at a “reasonable” time. Even if they started now and went full speed ahead with no more interruptions, Jeff couldn’t see them ending earlier than 11:45 or noon. They needed to start now no matter what, and no matter if no one but them was paying any attention. “Beryl, we can talk about all of this afterwards, but I think we should just start already, minyan or not.”

Beryl shrugged his shoulders and said cheerily “Okay, you’re right. Let’s start.” Beryl stood by the reader’s prayer stand to the right side of the Torah ark and began leading the preliminary service while Jeff ran to the kitchen where Bertram, Herman, and now Israel, were discussing some new topic quite loudly and animatedly. Jeff threw aside all propriety and timidity and said, almost as loudly as the babbling threesome, “We’re starting now, everybody in.”

“But there’s no minyan. What about a minyan?” Bertram fretted, as Jeff expected him to do.

"Tom went out to get Professor Jacobs, we have Beryl's son in case, and who knows, maybe someone else will show up. In any case, we have to get a move on."

"Oh, it's going to be another week without reading from the Torah. I don't know if this is a good idea," Bertram fretted some more.

"It's either that or nothing is going to happen. I vote for something."

Beryl was grateful that he could now regularly rely on Jeff to help organize the otherwise disorganized mess. With each passing week, Beryl yielded more responsibility to Jeff. Before long, he knew, Jeff would entirely be running the show (that is, if Jeff didn't wise up suddenly and start attending a different *schul*), and it was in Beryl's best interest to let this happen as he was basically stuck in this house for the foreseeable future.

James, who had been studiously ignoring the tumult all this time, was sitting in his usual seat and reading the commentary of the weekly Torah portion from one of the *chumashim*. While he had his strong opinions that he would sometimes privately share with Jeff or Beryl, he was opinionated and would privately let Jeff know what he thought was wrong with this *schul*, James always let the *ba'al ha'basim* (heads of household), as he liked to pretentiously refer to them, make the decisions while he happily would sit and wait for instructions. He usually tried to keep a low profile and not stir up too much trouble lest someone suddenly start asking too many personal questions. Many months before, he had first shown up at Tom's house one Friday night, stayed over that night sleeping on one of the couches, and now he was apparently a permanent resident.

As Beryl had explained it to Jeff, during the week every morning and evening, Tom attended the synagogue near where Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* lived. That past winter, because evening services were very early and it was hard to get a minyan, someone suggested to Tom that he contact a fellow living in a nearby town who was willing to come but had no means of getting to the synagogue. This turned out to be James. Tom asked for James' phone number, and before long Tom was driving him back and forth to evening weekday services. One conversation led to another, Tom invited James to stay at his home one Shabbat, and the rest is history.

Being only a few years younger than James, and he had few acquaintances his own age in this suburb other than Beryl, Jeff tried to become more friendly with him. They had a common interest in history and literature, but the conversation usually didn't go much further than the intellectual. Beryl was interested in being on good terms with James because they were now house mates, but in truth Beryl didn't trust him at all. Both Jeff and Beryl had tried to start calling him a friendlier "Jim," to which James replied in his faux-Anglo accent that his name was "James." In this vein, he even went so far as to refer to Jeff as "Jeffrey," and Tom as "young Tom."

Because there was still a tumult in the kitchen, it was hard to hear Beryl at all as he was chanting out loud, and he started to raise his voice at each subsequent passage. When this didn't get a reaction, he banged a few times on the prayer stand. This caused James to

suddenly raise his head from the *chumash*, and he looked quickly at Jeff and said “Oh, we started already? I then suppose it’s time for me to open my prayer book now.” He began fiddling around with his prayer book to open it to the correct page. Bertram the lawyer, who had been obediently following along when Beryl started, was already chanting in a not too low undertone. This cacophony of Hebrew prayer suddenly roused the interest of the babblers in the kitchen, and Bertram the *Cohen Gadol*, Herman, and Israel all burst into the *schul* to find out what was going on.

“But we don’t have a minyan yet,” cried out Bertram.

Jeff said “Like I said before, Tom is eight, he’s getting Jacobs who is nine, and if Tom doesn’t get anybody else, we may just use Baruch after all. We have to get moving already or we’ll be here until sundown.”

“Well, whatever you say. I don’t know.” Bertram begrudgingly found his normal seat, found the appropriate page in the prayer book, and then noisily started davening.

Beryl, who normally would not rush when leading services, realized he needed to move things along a little quicker than usual. Just as they all spoke loudly, they all davened just as loudly, with Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* almost yelling out each word as he read quickly. As each person finally sat down and began participating, the aura of the room changed from a chaotic free-for-all to an organized free-for-all. Jeff finally allowed himself to sit down for a brief moment, not worrying about anything but concentrating on the prayers. His mind started wandering to vague dreams he had of breathing life into this *schul*, maybe making it into a place that others his own age might want to attend. Maybe his wife could be reconciled to such a thing, and they could once again share something together. Talk about the miraculous.

As Beryl was leading and chanting, he kept looking back at the front door to see if Tom, and hopefully Jacobs with him, had arrived. Jeff every now and then also looked back, fighting the urge to get nervous and destroy the otherwise peaceful moment.

After about 20 minutes, Beryl finished with the preliminary service, arriving at the beginning of the morning service proper. At this point there were a number of prayers which only could be recited with a minyan, and as there were still only eight people in the room, everyone looked at each other, and then at Jeff and Beryl, to see if they were going to continue, regardless. As there still was no sign of Tom and Jacobs, Jeff made a quick announcement that they would continue with the service, and Beryl obliged. This was no different than any other week when they had no minyan, so it really was a foregone conclusion, but by some unwritten protocol they were required to make an official announcement. Because they were able to skip a number of prayers, things went smoother and they were finished with the morning service at about five minutes to eleven. It now was time for the Torah service.

Jeff made a new announcement that they were expecting Professor Jacobs and Tom to arrive, and they were going to wait for them before starting with the Torah service. Herman

started to rumble about why Jacobs hadn't yet shown up. Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* was still incredulous that they would get the last person for the minyan and asked why they should even wait if Baruch can't be counted. Beryl decided to stall for time by giving an impromptu speech about that week's Torah portion that they were waiting to read out loud.

Israel, who normally was one of the biggest complainers, was actually quite calm and apathetic at this point. In addition to Beryl and James, Israel was also staying over this Shabbat and he took advantage of the current lull in the action to go into his bedroom to finally fully change out of his pajamas. He was a relative newcomer to this *schul*, having only started attending a few months before, and because he lived a good hour's drive away, he always stayed over Tom's house when he came. The reason that he was coming at all was because he was attempting to make contact with his estranged brother, Zvi, who lived near Tom's house. Together they owned the home they grew up in, and over the course of the years they argued more or more over it and other family matters, to such a point that Zvi didn't want anything to do with Israel. After Israel kept trying to restart their relationship, often by just showing up unannounced at Zvi's door, Zvi finally obtained a restraining order against Israel. Israel was now showing up at Tom's house every other week, using Tom's house as a base from which he could "accidentally" meet up Zvi by either casually walking past his home, or showing up at his niece's school when Zvi came to pick her up. When Jeff heard Israel explain this story to him, he offered a few suggestions and thoughts, and then quickly realized from the types of replies he received that the restraining order was definitely warranted.

After Israel came back fully dressed and ready to continue, Beryl was still giving his speech. Israel didn't have much patience for this, and promptly got up from his seat and headed for the kitchen, yelling out "Call me back in when we're starting."

In addition to all the other functions Jeff had taken upon himself, his main claim to fame was that he was reasonably capable of chanting from the Torah. Aside it being a large amount of text to read every week, the biggest difficulty was that it had no vocalization marks and no punctuation. Jeff would spend many free hours during the week and late at night preparing the Torah reading for each week just in case. As Beryl intoned on and on with his makeshift speech, Jeff took the opportunity to review the Torah reading yet one more time.

It wasn't long after Beryl started speaking that they heard a couple of voices approaching the house. Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* called out "I think Tom actually got Jacobs to come. Oh, maybe we'll have a minyan after all."

Jacobs walked in first and was immediately greeted by Herman, who also had gotten up in the middle of Beryl's speech. "Well if it isn't Lou Jacobs. Where have you been all this time? You don't like coming here no more?"

Jacobs replied "Do you think I'd come here on my own if I really wanted to? I'm only doing this for Tom's sake. Dov Be'er isn't here, right?"

"No, he hasn't been around in I don't know how long."

"Do we even have a minyan? How come I don't hear any davening going on? Why the heck did I come here?"

Tom had come in right behind him and heard Jacob's last remark. "With you we have not nine. So, there's one more."

"One more?!?" Jacobs said exasperated. "Where the heck are you going to get someone now? Maybe I should have gone to the other *schul* after all!"

"I thought I'd wait on the corner and get someone. You know I'm always good at finding someone."

At this point, Jeff ran out of the *schul* and out towards the front hall. "Hello, good Shabbos," he said, looking quickly at Jacobs. Then, just as quickly, he turned to Tom and said "Please don't go out just yet. We'll have Baruch hold a *chumash* and we're all set." They had an opportunity to actually conduct a proper Torah service, and Jeff wasn't going to let the opportunity slip by. He was so put out and stressed at this point that he threw all inhibitions aside and decided he was going to argue this point, however nicely, with Beryl. The last time he agreed to Tom going out on the street corner to grab the next Jew that came along, nothing became of it and they wasted a good part of an hour just waiting. The other times before that when Tom was successful in finding someone, they waited a half hour, and then started reading the Torah so late that the entire service ended well past 1:00.

Jeff was not going to tolerate that again, so he pointedly said to Beryl "Look, I know you disagree, but Baruch is so close to Bar Mitzvah age, there is a precedent in doing this, and we are in a jam. I think it would be a real shame to not agree to this now."

Beryl was stalling to give his answer, but then Professor Jacobs made it easier for him to decide.

"Look, you guys either should make a decision now, or I'm out of here. What kind of operation is this? I think you should just close up shop now!"

Beryl was doing all he could to control his emotions and preserve the small iota of dignity that he still wished to instill in this *schul*. Jeff may think that he is the one who came to save the day here, but it was he, Beryl, who was the real force that kept this place afloat. It was he that helped Tom keep the wolves from circling in on him, trying to take his home by registering it as part of a non-profit organization and somehow manipulating it out of Tom's control. It was he that kept Tom from going into utter despair over his failed relationship with his son, who never contacted him over the years because of numerous arguments and claims of mental abuse when growing up. It was Beryl who ensured that the Rabbi who had lent them the Torah scroll wouldn't take it back because it was never actually being used. He replied to Lou Jacobs in his most compromising but direct tone of voice, attempting not to embarrass Jacobs in public. "Professor Jacobs, if you stay, we will have a minyan."

Baruch is almost Bar Mitzvah and he can be counted in an emergency. If you can wait a few minutes, I'll go bring him in now."

"He can count in a *minyan*? Why didn't you ever do that before? You could have saved yourself a lot of hassle up until now."

"Baruch is now close enough to 13 that we can do it. I'll be right back."

And with that, Beryl went through the door at the back end of the living room to the other side of the house. This was where Baruch and Beryl had their own rooms, as well as their own kitchen and bathroom. This was the part of the house where Tom's now deceased brother had lived, and which had not been occupied for some years.

Over the din of the loud conversations in the *schul*, Jeff could faintly hear the argument between Beryl and his son. While Baruch was a diligent yeshiva student and very much ready to take on his religious responsibilities as a Bar Mitzvah, he was taking advantage of these last weeks before his coming of age to avoid any ritual obligations he would soon have to perform for the rest of his life. He enjoyed sitting in his room and reading and playing games, and only made it out to services when his father forced him to. This was one of those times, and he whined at every prodding and pushing from Beryl. Finally, in a bit of a huff, Baruch suddenly appeared through the door, with Beryl continuing his barrage of parental coaxing.

"You're going to be Bar Mitzvah in a few weeks, and you don't even make an effort to come in when I ask you to. This is how you show you are ready to take on your responsibilities as a Jew?" Baruch harrumphed and whined some more and walked quickly away from his father and found himself a seat that didn't seem occupied. Beryl then went to the bookshelf in the back of the room and pulled out a *chumash* and handed it to Baruch. "Here, now stand up with the *chumash* opened to this week's portion." Baruch harrumphed some more but did what he was told. Beryl then called out in a loud voice to make himself heard "The Torah service will now begin. Please rise."

It had been months since the last time he had read directly from the Torah scroll, and Jeff was getting nervous about it. Beryl walked over to the Torah table and began to sing the prayers for the start of the Torah service. Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* shushed Jacobs, and James shushed Israel, slowly raising his hand up to beckon Israel to rise. Beryl pointed to Bertram the lawyer and then pointed to the Torah ark, meaning he was inviting him to the honor of opening it and removing the Torah scroll and to parade it throughout the *schul* for everyone to kiss it as it went past them.

As Beryl led Bertram and the Torah around the room and everyone was struggling to sing in unison and on key, Jeff scanned every face in the room: Baruch, Beryl, the two Bertrams, James, Israel, Tom, Herman, and Professor Jacobs. Each of them was reverently attentive to the Torah marching back and forth, reciting the prayers by heart, and respectfully following the scroll as Beryl brought it to its resting spot on the Torah desk. It had been so long since they had conducted this part of the service, Jeff could sense in everyone the

same excitement he was feeling. This had been their goal for weeks, and now that it was finally happening after all of this effort, it was almost exhilarating. It was as if all the yelling, fretting, and stressing of the last two hours had never occurred.

As the Torah reader, Jeff took his place at the Torah desk in front of the scroll. Even though he wanted to a good job, because the clock was constantly ticking in the back of his mind, he couldn't help but read the text as quickly as possible, with less care for accuracy. Each weekly Torah portion was split up into seven parts, with a different member of the congregation called up to recite a blessing and stand by the scroll as the reader chanted. With each subsequent part, Jeff sensed he was going faster and faster, and it was becoming harder for Beryl to catch and correct any mistakes Jeff was making. While he was reading, he heard Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* turn to the other Bertram and comment "He's going really fast. Can you keep up with him?" At one of the breaks in the reading, Jeff asked Beryl if indeed he was reading too fast, to which Beryl replied "Well, a little. But keep going. We have to keep moving. I wouldn't put it past Professor Jacobs to suddenly get up and leave."

As they were getting nearer the end of the Torah reading, it was already past 12:00. Jacobs started looking at his watch more often and said to Tom "It's getting late, when are we going to finish?"

Tom assured Jacobs by saying "Oh, don't worry, we'll be finished really soon." As Jeff finished the Torah reading and Beryl with the next part of the service, he could hear the continuing negotiations between Jacobs and Tom.

"You can wait until the *kedushah*, and then leave if you want."

"Okay, but maybe you can make them go a little faster. At this rate it will be close to 1:00 and my wife is waiting for me for lunch."

"Now don't you worry, Lou. We're almost there."

Jeff smiled to himself when he heard Tom say "Lou," an image of Bud Abbot talking to Lou Costello flashing through his mind.

After the *kedushah* prayer was recited, Jacobs unceremoniously excused himself to Tom. Within two minutes, Bertram the *Cohen Gadol* noticed that Jacobs was gone, and he exclaimed to Tom "Jacobs had to leave just now? He couldn't wait a few more minutes?!?"

Beryl turned around from the reading desk and gave Bertram a good-natured smile, shrugged as he mumbled the prayers, and started skipping those final parts of the service that otherwise required a minyan. When it became clear to everybody what was going on, the davening quickly degenerated into a raucous set of debates about Jacobs. Beryl did all he could to sing loudly enough over the noise to finish the final lines of the final prayers. At this point, no one was really paying attention anymore. Meanwhile, Tom ran into the kitchen to check on the food in the oven. He then started asking everyone if they planned on

staying to eat. Everything had decayed into its regular chaos. Any attempt to build on the momentary high they experienced before was shattered in an instance.

Beryl did eventually finish the last prayer, but only Jeff and James even acknowledged this. As everyone started squeezing their way into one of the side rooms for the kiddush blessing over the wine, and for the lunch to follow, Beryl asked Jeff if he was staying this week, at least for the kiddush. Jeff politely declined and gave his usual answer “My wife made lunch. I don’t want to spoil my appetite.” What he meant to say was “If I don’t get home as soon as possible, my wife probably won’t even be there to greet me.

He put on his jacket and extracted himself as quickly as he could. As he breathed the damp, chilly air of fall-time New England, he could still hear the cacophony of voices inside the house, growing dimmer as he continued to walk. He turned north in the direction of his home and started his usual brisk pace, hoping to arrive as quickly as he could. It was about 12:45, and if he walked fast enough, he might shave down the time to forty-five minutes. The streets led him past suburban homes with lush green lawns, most of them weathered from the harsh New England climate. At a fork in the road he walked up a street lined with old beech and ash trees that straddled a golf course which finally led to a curve in the road that brought him alongside the southern portion of the bay. He always loved walking past this point, spying out the harbor further north with its quaint display of sailing vessels and yachts surrounded on either side by old colonial homes. As he stared out at the water and the winds started blowing against his face, he imagined leading the crew of a schooner, with all of the members of the *schul* making up the rest of the crew. With this image in his mind, he wondered to himself how long would it take with such a crew before the ship sank?