

THE FINEST SUKKAH IN THE WORLD

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A LONG TIME AGO, in a small town in Europe, there lived a rabbi and his young daughter, Rachel. The rabbi was rich in learning and wisdom, but he had little money. To support himself and Rachel, he worked as a scribe, copying holy works on parchment.

One day a jeweler came to the rabbi to purchase a parchment scroll. As payment, he offered the rabbi a choice of one of two necklaces.

“Each of these is worth at least as much as your fee,” the jeweler said, “but one is worth much more. It’s your choice.”

“Ah,” the rabbi said, “you’ve given me a test.” He smiled and turned to his daughter. “Rachel, you choose.”

Rachel examined the necklaces carefully. She was pleased to have her father’s trust and anxious to make the right decision. One necklace had a large blue gem set in the middle of an ornate gold setting. The other had a small green stone suspended on a plain silver chain. Rachel thought the choice was easy.

“The fancy gold one,” she said confidently.

The jeweler smiled. “An understandable choice, but a poor one.” He pried the blue gem from the necklace and held it up. “The blue stone is glass,” he said. “The green one is an emerald and much more valuable.”

Rachel started to cry.

Her father laughed and comforted her. “What you learned today is of greater value than both necklaces combined,” he said. “Remember, never judge either the quality of a gem, or the quality of a person, by the richness of its setting.”

Years passed. At the rabbi’s side, Rachel grew in beauty and knowledge. Then one cold winter, the rabbi became very ill.

“My dearest Rachel,” he said to his daughter, “it was my duty to arrange a marriage for you, but now I must entrust you to your uncle Jacob and his wife. Promise me that after my death you’ll go to them and let them choose a husband for you. I trust them to act wisely.”

Rachel hesitated. She was reluctant to put her future happiness in the hands of people she barely knew, but she could not refuse her father.

“I promise,” Rachel said softly.

The rabbi soon died, and Rachel made the long journey to the city where her uncle and aunt lived. Her only luggage was a small bag of her belongings and a large crate filled with her father’s books.

Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther welcomed Rachel’s gentle presence, their own children having married and moved away. Though they did not understand her love of learning and reading, they were good-hearted and very kind to her. For one year they let her mourn for her father in peace. But when that year was over, Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther decided it was time to find a husband for Rachel.

“He must be handsome,” Aunt Esther said, “and rich—at least as successful as your uncle Jacob.”

“And well connected in the city,” Uncle Jacob added.

“I would prefer a man who is learned and pious and kind,” Rachel said.

Her aunt and uncle laughed.

“What does a young girl know about picking a husband?” Uncle Jacob said. “Your father, may he rest in peace, knew what he was doing when he put the matter in our hands.”

Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther considered all the eligible young men in the city. In the summer, they decided on Mr. Bloom, a handsome and wealthy merchant.

“Remember, he’s the best catch in the city,” Aunt Esther instructed Rachel the evening Mr. Bloom was to come for dinner. “Make him want to marry you.”

Mr. Bloom was indeed a striking figure with his elegant clothes and graceful manners. As Rachel watched him talk with Uncle Jacob about his complicated business ventures, she could easily picture herself as his wife—meeting the important men and women of the city, discussing life and learning, making generous donations

to charities. It was a very pleasant picture. When Mr. Bloom cast admiring looks her way, she blushed and smiled back.

But when Rachel and Mr. Bloom were left alone to talk, she found it difficult to find a common interest. Mr. Bloom pleaded ignorance to anything involving religion or literature or philosophy or history.

“What do you like to read, Mr. Bloom?” Rachel asked.

Mr. Bloom shrugged. “Financial papers,” he said. “For men of talent and ambition, reading anything else is a waste of time.” He smiled. “Of course, I have nothing against a woman reading something now and then, as long as she doesn’t fill her head with nonsense and neglect the running of her household.”

Rachel felt a chill. “But a successful man like you must have other interests, like philanthropy.”

Mr. Bloom snorted. “Give my hard-earned money away to charity? That’s for fools. Let me tell you about my latest venture”

Rachel let him chatter on. The pleasant image of herself as Mr. Bloom’s wife evaporated.

Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther were delighted with Mr. Bloom’s interest in Rachel, and they were thrilled when he became a frequent visitor. Mr. Bloom was always courteous to Aunt Esther and politely deferential to Uncle Jacob. He was particularly attentive to Rachel, complimenting her appearance and bringing her small gifts, like flowers and chocolate. But each day Rachel discovered less and less to admire in him. He laughingly dismissed her contributions to the beggars on the street as “womanly weakness,” he was rude to shopkeepers and insulting to his servants, and he delighted in telling stories about his competitors’ misfortunes.

Rachel tried to express her misgivings about Mr. Bloom to her aunt and uncle, but they refused to listen.

“Mr. Bloom is a great man,” her uncle insisted. “A little nervousness in a young girl is to be expected, but after all we’ve done for you, I know you would not shame us by refusing him.”

The summer ended, and Mr. Bloom declared that he would take Rachel as his wife. Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther were overjoyed and agreed to finalize the marriage plans

after the High Holy Days. Rachel, bound by the promise she had made to her father and her obligation to her aunt and uncle, felt doomed.

She paced her room, talking to herself. “I know if Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther could see Mr. Bloom for the man he truly is, they would not make me marry him,” she muttered. “But how do I do this? Oh, Papa, I wish you were here to guide me!”

Not having her father, she turned to his books for guidance and spent the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur poring over their contents. One of the books concerned the celebration of Sukkot and described how five days after Yom Kippur, Jews are commanded to build a *sukkah*, or hut, and dwell in it for seven days. This is to remind them of the huts their ancestors lived in when they wandered the desert. According to Jewish law, Rachel read, while the walls of a *sukkah* may be made of many different kinds of materials, its roof may be made only of materials that have grown from the ground. This roof must be thick enough to provide more shade than sunlight inside the *sukkah* during the day, but open enough so the stars are visible at night and rain can come through. Then she turned the page and noticed a comment in the margin in her father’s elegant script: *Taking a man from his house and putting him in a sukka is like removing a gem from its fancy setting. His quality becomes known.*

Rachel stared at the words. Her heart pounded. “That’s it!” she said. She closed the book and kissed its cover. “Thank you, Papa. Now if only Mr. Bloom will oblige.”

That night when Mr. Bloom called, she was ready.

“Sukkot is just a few days away,” Rachel said to him. “And I told my aunt and uncle that a man like you, with your wealth and exquisite taste, would build a remarkable *sukkah*.”

Mr. Bloom looked very pleased. “I’ve never built a *sukkah* before,” he said, “but this year I shall build the finest one anyone has ever seen. I’ll have artists create murals and gilded decorations; I’ll serve the finest food, the most excellent wines. Everyone in the city will admire it and envy me.”

Five days later, on the eve of Sukkot, Rachel and her aunt and uncle dined with Mr. Bloom in his *sukkah*. The early autumn night was cool but not cold, and a gentle breeze rustled the changing leaves. When Rachel saw how magnificent the *sukkah* was, she thought she had made a terrible mistake. In the midst of all that splendor,

Mr. Bloom sparkled like a diamond. Uncle Jacob and Aunt Esther could not have been more impressed. They did not seem to notice Mr. Bloom's snide remarks to his friends about some absent business associates or the harsh way Mr. Bloom spoke to his servants.

But then the wind changed. No longer gentle, it blew hard and cold and whistled through the branches on the sukkah's roof. The walls creaked, and the candle flames sputtered.

"It's going to rain," one of Mr. Bloom's friends said. The other friends agreed and hastily departed.

"Those weaklings," Mr. Bloom said. "Afraid of a little wind. No wonder I can always take advantage of them in business deals." He chuckled to himself and ordered the servant girl to bring more wine.

Rachel whispered to her uncle, "Is this the loyalty a great man shows his friends?" Uncle Jacob shrugged, but looked uneasy.

"Perhaps we should go, too," Aunt Esther said. "It's getting cold, and I feel some raindrops." She shivered and pulled her cloak around her shoulders.

"Nonsense," Mr. Bloom said. "I'm perfectly comfortable and I want to finish my wine."

Rachel whispered to her aunt, "Is this the regard a great man shows others?" Aunt Esther frowned.

At that moment there was a crash as the wind brought down an old tree nearby. The servant girl jumped and spilled some wine on Mr. Bloom.

"Wretch!" he shouted at her. "Clumsy oaf! You're fired!"

The servant girl ran out in tears.

"Please reconsider, Mr. Bloom," Uncle Jacob said. "We all jumped at the noise, and there is no harm done."

"You who can afford only two feeble servants," Mr. Bloom said coldly, "are hardly in the position to tell me how to treat mine."

Uncle Jacob turned bright red. Aunt Esther turned pale.

Rachel said nothing.

At that moment, the few drops became a torrent.

The sukkah walls groaned. The goblets and candelabra toppled over. The roof was blown away.

“Hurry!” Rachel cried. “We must get out before the sukkah collapses!”

They were through the sukkah’s painted door when the wind roared over them, and with a tremendous splitting and shuddering, the sukkah crashed to the ground.

“No!” Mr. Bloom shrieked. “My fine things! Ruined!”

He turned to Rachel, his face twisted and ugly, and shook his fist in her face. “I spend a fortune, and this is your Lord’s reward!”

“Enough!” Uncle Jacob shouted. “Tonight you have shown us the kind of man you truly are—disloyal, selfish, tyrannical, and blasphemous. We will have no more to do with you!”

“What a miserable husband he would have made,” Aunt Esther said when they were safely home.

“Dreadful,” Uncle Jacob agreed.

“My father, of blessed memory, would have found a lesson in this night,” Rachel said softly. “To judge the quality of a man, we must be like jewelers valuing a gem—remove him from his fancy setting and set him in a sukkah.” She laughed and added, “And pray it rains!”

Uncle Jacob smiled. “From now on, all your prospective husbands will be so judged,” he said. “And you, dear Rachel, shall act as the jeweler, for you have your father’s wisdom.”