

## A. Chrobolovsky

# Reb Dwojra Masz

She went by the common woman's name of Dwojra Miriam, but her "other half", her husband Josel Szternberg, had, with great deference and respect, given her the title of *Reb* \* Dwojra Masz", because she, Dwojra Miriam, in matters of livelihood and piety, was the man [of the house] and her husband was actually the "woman".

Dwojra Masz and her husband Josel live on the edge of the forest and drew their livelihood from the city and the countryside. "Reb Dwojra Masz" rises very early in the morning. She runs about among the villages and peasants' houses and buys whatever she can find - a fowl, a calf, a little milk, a quart of berries, a bit of butter, a cheese [etc.] and she later sells them to the people in country-houses or in town to her regular housewives. With every peasant, every cottager and every housewife in the city, she has nine times the loquacity given to her by God. She pours her bitter heart out to everyone and she mixes fire with water, performing all her tasks at once - she trades, walks, buys and sells and is also a bit of a matchmaker to boot.

In addition to all this, she does not, Heaven forbid, miss her prayers. Be it in town or on the road, she never misses a *mincha* or a *ma'ariv*. For instance, she can be sitting with a whole crowd of Jews or with Gentiles in a wagon - unperturbed, she positions herself, rubs her hands on her dry headdress\*\* and prays. After the prayer, she resumes her trading and there is never a break in her chatter, nor has it an end.

When "Reb Dwojra Masz" sets out in the early morning with her packs and sacks, over the villages and in the city, her husband Josel Szternberg, a Jew with a long, yellow beard, takes his prayer-shawl pouch under his arm, kisses the *mezuzah*, says "Good morning" to the goat on the porch and, when he returns from the prayer service, he busies himself with breakfast and the housekeeping. Afterwards, he takes the goat by its leash to graze in the field and, there in the open field, he recites Psalms by heart.

When [Józef] Haller's troops went on the rampage immediately after Poland had again become a kingdom, and they expressed their joy by beating up Jews and ripping their beards out, our Reb Josel "the wife" also fell victim to their hands. The hooligans noticed a goat in the meadow and Josel's waist-long, yellow beard. A hunt after the beard ensued. Josel ran [and] tore himself from the soldiers' hands, but it was all to no avail. He left half his beard with Haller's men.

When "Reb Dwojra Masz" returned home in the evening and saw Josel with half a beard, for the first time in their life [together], she gave him a good talking-to, [saying] that he was no man at all. Had this happened to *her*, she would have gouged Haller's men's eyes out, before allowing them to touch her beard.

These were not just a woman's idle boasts. She was a truly formidable woman - she could do anything. And besides the prowess of bearing children, raising them and providing an entire

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\* [TN: Religious Jewish equivalent of "Mr," not necessarily a rabbi.]

\*\* [TN: According to Halacha, one must wash one's hands with water before praying, but if there is no possibility of doing so, one may rub one's hands on a clean cloth.]

household with sustenance, "Reb Dwojra" even managed to marry off her son Fiszel, who was mentally disturbed, the poor lad. Fiszel had a pair of eyes as blue as the rye flowers [or those] which are called *nieszapominajki* [forget-me-nots]. He had a gentle face and a sharp mind. Fiszel became deranged, poor lad, in his adolescence - from excessive study. For years, Fiszel studied in *yeshivas*, wandering about in unfamiliar places, eating "days" and studying continuously, until he lost his mind.

But Fiszel had a loyal mother, who was called "Reb Dwojra Masz", who listened to the council of sagacious individuals, who advised her that the best remedy for Fiszel would be to get married. "Reb Dwojra" did not rest until she had found a betrothed for Fiszel and, one golden evening, the wedding was officiated.

They talked Fiszel into it by telling him that the "*rzqd*" [government] had ordered that he get married and Fiszel feared the government. He sat at the table and, from time to time, burst out laughing and showed the wedding guests his tongue. When under the *chuppah*, Fiszel the groom was told to smash the glass, he said that it would be a shame to break the glass, as it was a useful thing. No arguments or pleading were to any avail. Fiszel stood under the *chuppah* and refused to smash the glass, until one strong Jew took him by the collar and yelled "*Break it!*". Fiszel panicked. He stamped his foot - and the whole congregation shouted "*Mazel tov!*"

Following Fiszel's nuptials, Dwojra took even more courageously to earning a living, because she now needed to provide, not just for her husband and children, but also to give board to her son and daughter-in-law. She hoped that, very soon, she would come to see from her Fiszel fine grandchildren, [may they live] to one-hundred-and-twenty.