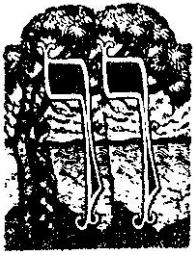


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As engaged in the communal life as he was, Josef was nevertheless lonely. He first sensed this loneliness in the evenings, following a day of hard work. When he came home, he found the house empty. He was alone. His brother Zalman had married. His youngest sister, Cirla, understood Josef better. She was proud of the activity to which he was bound. But she, too, Cirla, had found herself a young man - an important activist in the party, by the name of Michał Alter - and had wed him. All at once, Josef felt completely alone.

He met Mirl frequently. Mirl was also fond of Josef, with his intelligence and the notoriety he had in town. In the free hours in the summer evenings, they would take long strolls. It was not long before they became very close. In Josef, Mirl found someone close with whom she could share her experiences and, Josef, in his loneliness, felt as if God Himself had sent her to him. Later, among the newly-arrived schoolmistresses, there was also the young teacher named Rywka [Cuker].

She was tall of stature and shapely, with a pair of shrewd, jet-black eyes, which let everyone know that she knew what she wanted. Rywka was the exact opposite of the delicate Mirl. Rywka possessed a strong character. But there were also moments when she could bedazzle one with her Jewish charm, no less than Mirl. This Rywka possessed a rare combination of wisdom and beauty. Over time, Rywka and Mirl became close girlfriends.

In due course, Rywka, too, became not indifferent to Josef. As one often finds between close girlfriends, who share the same taste in clothes, manners of speech and knowledge, both Mirl and Rywka saw in Josef their ideal young man, who would sooner or later - [or] so each of them thought - be her future husband. A silent race was underway between the two girlfriends to win Josef's heart. In that respect, Mirl was more assured of Josef's love, so that she was prouder and more restrained. Rywka, on her part, with all the charms of a newly-arrived, beautiful young woman with a ringing voice, often sang songs to Josef, and he was increasingly drawn to her. With Mirl, Josef would talk, have discussions and spend hours in silent adoration. But with Rywka, he spent time differently. Rywka awakened in him such passions, as he had never had earlier.

At about this period, Josef suddenly fell ill. Doctors recommended an operation. He was operated upon. Josef's life was hanging by a thread. Following the operation, his critical condition intensified. It was a question of twenty-four hours - should the patient survive the [next] twenty-four hours, there was a hope he would live. Comrade Szyja Nirenberg, who had not left Josef's bedside during the whole night of his operation, was unable to relay what the doctors had told him. Szyja started speaking, but began to faint in the middle of what he was saying. Everyone already understood how critically ill Josef was. He needed [Heavenly] compassion. The Jews at *shul* [Yid., synagogue], who were acquainted with Josef and had known his father Reb Duwid Szalit very well, recited Psalms and prayed for Josef's health.

Throughout the twenty-four hours of Josef's critical condition, the family and close friends did not leave his bedside. The two girlfriends, Mirl and Rywka, particularly nursed and served

Josef. When Josef opened his eyes, once the crisis was over, he asked, "Where is my sister Cirila?" This did not affect Rywka, but it pained Mirl.

Once Josef had recovered and started becoming once again active in the party, he was required, on one occasion, to travel to a nearby *shtetl* for a lecture. Rywka already saw to it that it would be she - and not Mirl - who joined Josef on his trip.

Mirl saw the two of them off. In her heart, Mirl felt as if something was being torn inside her then. She kissed her friend Rywka in an ostensibly cheerful manner and pressed Josef's hand firmly, as if saying goodbye to him for the last time. Something in her heart told her that, by this journey that Rywka and Josef were now making, she was losing Josef forever.

Josef and Rywka returned from the *shtetl* couple of days later - and not on the following day, as Josef had planned. Josef's speech had been so successful, that the people [there] did not wish to let him go. Rywka stayed with him, without leaving his side for a minute. Everyone in the *shtetl* understood that the beautiful Rywka was Josef's wife.

Following his return from the *shtetl*, Josef felt guilty in his encounters with Mirl. Mirl saw clearly that something had occurred there between Rywka and Josef, which would already hold the two of them together, and that her love towards Josef, as her heart told her, would continue being as modest and innocent as it had been, but that Rywka would marry Josef and not her, Mirl - which is what happened.

Months later, when Josef told Mirl that he was compelled to marry Rywka due to the child that was soon to come to this world, it was already no secret to Mirl. Rywka herself had informed her of this. Mirl suffered deeply, and, as always - as was her nature - she concealed her suffering inside her heart. She took it as a thing that was destined. That was already her destiny. It is strange - she bore Josef no hard feelings. In her heart, she forgave him and cast the entire blame on her girlfriend, Rywka. She fell out with Rywka, but the friendship with Josef was not interrupted. On the contrary —her love towards Josef became even stronger. Nevertheless, Mirl felt that she could no longer remain in town any longer.

Mirl and Rywka had always been surrounded with the friendship of comrades of both sexes. Josef's wedding [in 1922] was a great happening for them. Two sides were formed. One side was embittered with Josef for having broken up with Mirl – and this side was even angrier at Rywka, who had caused such pain to her close friend, and had taken her beloved from her in such an unexpected manner. Another side, however, justified Josef's actions in marrying Rywka in haste, due to the child that Rywka was due to bring into the world.

With Mirl leaving the city, Josef sensed a great longing for her. Rywka was obviously his wife, and he would provide for her all her needs - but, in his heart, he felt Mirl's destiny would always involve him. His yearning for her grew from day to day. Josef would meet her during his visits in Warsaw and when Mirl was teaching in other cities, Josef would frequently come to see her.

Mirl's life changed course. She had made new friends. She wanted to take revenge, as it were, on the destiny that had found her and Josef. It was as if her frustrated love demanded this of

her. But, when Josef came to her, she forgot everything and everyone and spent every free minute she had only with him - with Josef.

Josef became a father. Rywka bore him a beautiful, fine baby girl. They named her Sure'le. Josef enjoyed strolling in the beautiful *Aleje* in the city with the child. Sure'le was then about two years old and would run about on the green grass in the *Aleje*, accompanied by her mum and dad. One time, Josef and Rywka came upon Mirl on one such walk. Rywka remained standing [there], not knowing what to say. But Mirl embraced her as with an old friend and kissed the child. Mirl complimented Josef and Rywka on how well they were both looking and praised the beauty of the child. With stifled sorrow, Mirl pressed the child to her heart. The friendship between Rywka and Mirl was renewed, and Josef's heart gushed with joy at seeing Mirl cheerful and vivacious.

* * *

Mirl had great success with men. She made the acquaintance of a certain Yiddish writer. It appeared she would stay in Warta and marry him. However, one fine morning, she met Josef and told him of her disappointment in that cheerful, supposedly noble writer, who had a name in town. It turned out that this writer actually had a sweetheart in Warta, from whom he had not yet separated. Mirl left Warta for the second time. She arrived in the city of Grodno and, there, lived a quiet and lonely life. She taught the little children in school and, silently, yearned for Josef. And then, a well-known Jewish artist from Warsaw, a painter, who had met Mirl back in Warsaw, came to the city of Grodno. This painter was truly enraptured by Mirl, but she remained cold to his declarations of love, and ordered him to leave her room, when he, the bohemian, became importunate and treated her, not at all, in a gentlemanly fashion.

There was also a Jewish teacher in Grodno - a married man and the father of a child. He falls in love with Mirl, and Mirl is also not indifferent to him. She is fond of his appearance and fine demeanour. She enjoys talking with him and spending time with him in her free hours. But, when Mirl senses she will not be able to withstand the test, and will embroil herself in a family conflict, she leaves Grodno. She is even more lonely, alone with her longing. The figure of her old friend Josef, whom she cannot forget, swims up once again.

On one occasion, Mirl journeys to Warta to see her parents. Travelling on the train, she makes the acquaintance of a young man from America - Symcha Krauze, an entrepreneur of a Yiddish theatrical troupe touring in Europe. The word "America" is bewitching. She likes the young man. He promises her all the joys. He, too, likes Mirl's appearance, her beauty, her grace and her healthy laughter. He falls in love with Mirl and decides to take her with him to Vienna, where he has to attend the Zionist Congress in the coming days. Mirl seeks a way out - she must forget Josef. A hasty marriage is celebrated between the Jewish American bachelor and Mirl, the Yiddish teacher.

Josef and Ester [sic Rywka] attend the wedding. Josef is the whole *mechyten*¹. There are mixed

¹ [TN: Heb. "fellow in-law" (e.g. the groom's father is the "mechyten" of the bride's father); viz. co-celebrator, or one of the main parties at a festive occasion.]

feelings in his heart. He rejoices at Mirl's joy and is sad she that is travelling away. He will never see her again.

Mirl prepares to travel to America, the golden land. She now dreams of starting a new life, and forgetting all the bitter disappointments that have befallen her - one after the other. Her husband travelled away and Mirl needed to remain in town and await the formal papers, which Symcha, her husband, was to send her from New York.

Mirl happily received the papers. The day of her journey to America arrived. Josef, Rywka and dozens of other friends in town accompanied Mirl to the train. They gave her gifts to take along and wished her all the best. Josef's last words to her, [spoken] into the carriage window, were, "Mirl – don't forget to write!"

Mirl's first letters from New York are filled with joy and anticipation. She is surrounded by new, interesting friends. She frequently visits the Café Royale on Second Avenue. She makes the acquaintance of Yiddish poets and writers, contributors to the New York Yiddish newspapers. She frequently visits the Yiddish theatre, and meets all the famous Yiddish actors. She also studies English. "Simply doing nothing", Mirl writes in a letter to Josef, "is not a plan." In another letter, she writes to Josef that she is once more a Yiddish teacher in a Jewish kindergarten in the Bronx. She is not too enthusiastic about the American Yiddish schools. They do not compare at all with the Yiddish schools in Warsaw or other cities in the Polish provinces. Yes, she sometimes yearns strongly. She writes the word "yearn" with multiple little dots. Looking at the dots, Josef knew well what she meant. Rywka noticed Josef's sad face as he read the letter.

In a letter, sometime later, Mirl writes that she is more than happy, that she will soon see her friends once again. Her husband Symcha is coming with her back to Poland. He is travelling there to prepare a theatrical performance for a group of actors, who will perform Yiddish theatre in Warsaw. She is so happy! Mirl spares her words, but Josef reads the joy between the lines.

Mirl's arrival on a visit to Warta was, for Josef, a great festive occasion. Rywka also ostensibly rejoiced with her although, in her heart, Rywka felt differently. She saw Josef's and Mirl's joy when they sat and did not tire of speaking to one another. A stream of words surged from both of them, as if they wished to still their yearning for one another with words.

The poor actors from New York experienced a great failure. The Yiddish literary circles in Warsaw welcomed the actors very nicely, but the cashbox was empty. Whether this was the fault of her husband Symcha, whose great plans and fantasies of making money always came to nothing, or whether the public had stopped coming to the theatre due to the high prices of the tickets – this Mirl did not know. Symcha travelled to New York with the Yiddish actors and Mirl, meanwhile, stayed for a couple of months in Warta, until Symcha would be able to obtain money from somewhere to send her for homeward expenses.

During the couple of months of Mirl's stay in Warta, Josef went about a cheerful man, and everything he did came out well. Once again, she brought, into his home, the joyous

atmosphere that had reigned in the times when she had not yet been married, when she was friends with Rywka and would come to spend time with them at home.

Josef sensed that, after all these joys, Mirl felt no great inclination to travel back to America.

Nevertheless, the ship ticket and money arrived and Mirl, sorrowfully, bade her friends farewell. This time, her departure was much sadder than in those days after her marriage.

"I will write", she whispered in Josef's ear. Her voice had the sound of a silent sob.