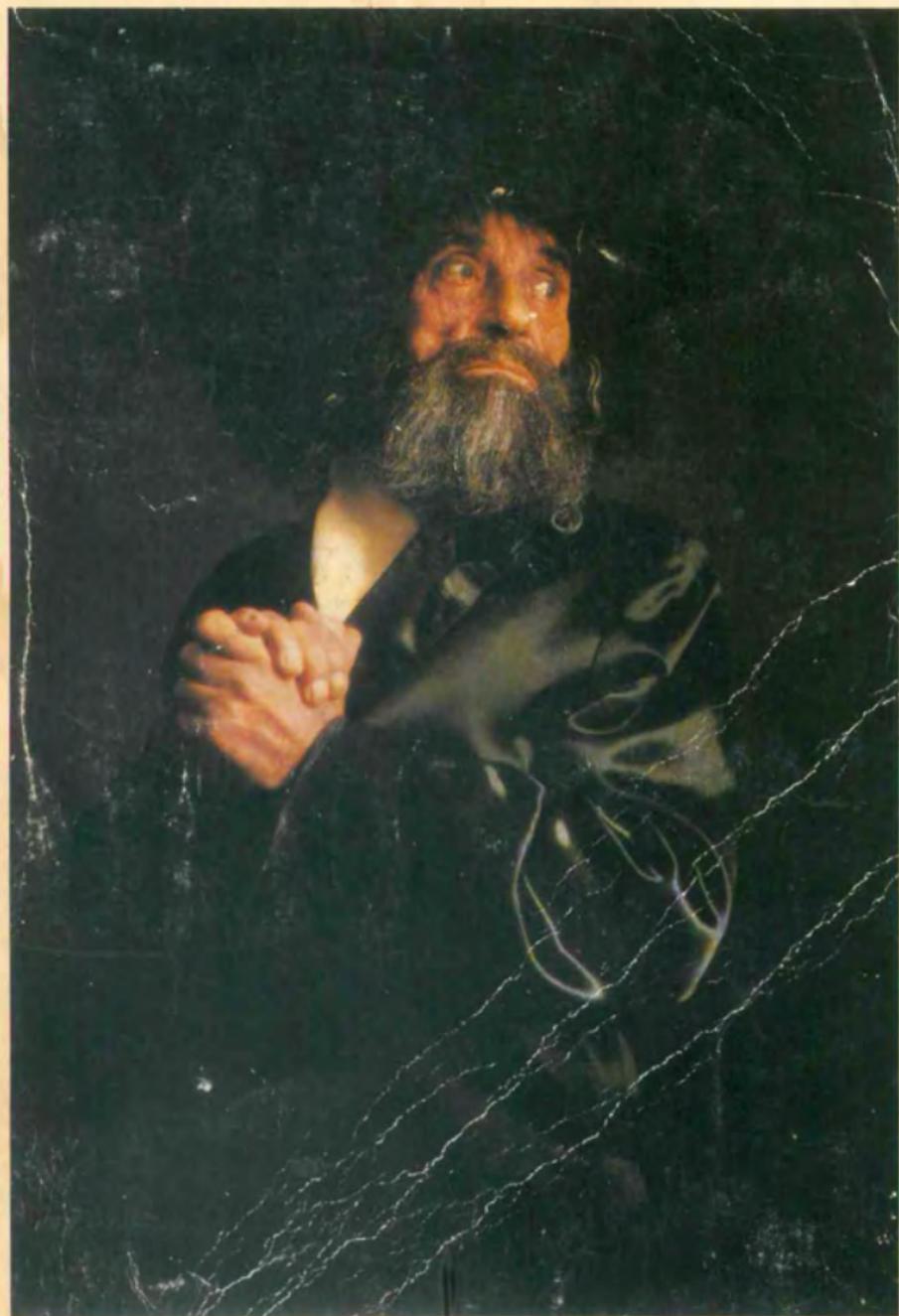


Winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature

# Isaac Bashevis Singer

Passions and Other Stories



# Passions

'When a man persists he can do things which one might think can never be done,' Zalman the glazier said. 'In our village, Radoszyce, there was a simple man, a village peddler, Leib Belkes. He used to go from village to village, selling the peasant women kerchiefs, glass beads, perfume, all kinds of gilded jewelry. And he would buy from them a measure of buckwheat, a wreath of garlic, a pot of honey, a sack of flax. He never went farther than the hamlet of Byszcz, five miles from Radoszyce. He got the merchandise from a Lublin salesman, and the same man bought his wares from him. This Leib Belkes was a common man but pious. On the Sabbath he read his wife's Yiddish Bible. He loved most to read about the land of Israel. Sometimes he would stop the cheder boys and ask, "Which is deeper – the Jordan or the Red Sea?" "Do apples grow in the Holy Land?" "What language is spoken by the natives there?" The boys used to laugh at him. He looked like someone from the Holy Land himself – black eyes, a pitch-black beard, and his face was also swarthy.

'Once a year a messenger used to come to Radoszyce, a Sephardic Jew. He was sent to collect the alms that were given in the name of Rabbi Meir the Miracle Worker, that he should intercede for them in the next world. The messenger wore a robe with black and red stripes and sandals that looked as though they were of ancient times. His hat was also outlandish. He smoked a water pipe. He spoke Hebrew and also Aramaic. His Yiddish he had learned in later years. Leib Belkes was so fascinated by him that he went with him from house to house to open the alms boxes. He also took him to his home, where he ate and slept. While the messenger stayed in Radoszyce, Leib Belkes did no work. He kept on asking questions

like "What does the Cave of Machpelah look like?" "Does one know where Abraham is buried and where Sarah?" "Is it true that Mother Rachel rises from her grave at midnight and weeps for her exiled children?" I was still a boy then, but I too followed the messenger wherever he went. When could one see such a man in our region?

'Once, after the messenger left, Leib Belkes entered a store and asked for fifty packs of matches. The merchant asked him, "What do you need so many matches for? You want to burn the village?" And Leib said, "I want to build the Holy Temple." The storekeeper thought that he had lost his mind. Just the same, he sold him all the matches he had.

'Later, Leib went into a paint store and asked for silver and gold paint. The storekeeper asked him, "What do you need these paints for? Do you intend to make counterfeit money?" And Leib answered, "I am going to build the Holy Temple." The messenger had sold Leib a map, a large sheet of paper showing the Temple with the altar and all the other objects of ritual. At night when Leib had time he sat down and began to build the Temple according to this plan. There were no children in the house. Leib Belkes and his wife had two daughters but they had gone into domestic service in Lublin. His wife asked him, "Why do you play with matches? Are you a cheder boy again?" And he replied, "I am building the Temple of Jerusalem."

'He managed to build everything according to this plan: the Holy of Holies, the Inner Court, the Outer Court, the Table, the Menorah, the Ark. When the people of Radoszyce learned what he was doing, they came to look and admire. The teachers brought their pupils. The whole edifice stood on a table, and it couldn't be moved, because it would have collapsed. When the rabbi had word of it, he too came to Leib Belkes, and he brought some yeshiva boys with him. They sat around the table and they were dumbfounded. Leib Belkes had constructed out of matches the Holy Temple exactly as it was described in the Talmud!

'Well, but people are envious and begrudge others their

accomplishments. His wife began to complain that she needed the table for her dishes. There were firemen in Radoszyce, and they were afraid that so many matches would cause a fire and the whole town might go up in flames. There were so many threats and complaints that one day when Leib returned from his travels his temple was gone. His wife swore that the firemen came and demolished it. The firemen accused the wife.

'After his temple had been destroyed, Leib Belkes became melancholic. He still tried to do business, but he earned less and less. He often sat at home and read Yiddish storybooks that dealt with the land of Israel. At the study house he bothered the scholars and yeshiva boys by asking them questions about the coming of the Messiah. "Will one huge cloud take all the Jews to the Holy Land, or will a cloud descend for each town separately?" "Will the Resurrection of the Dead take place immediately, or will there be a waiting period of forty years?" "Will there still be a need to plow the fields and to gather the fruit from the orchards, or will manna fall from the sky?" People had something to scoff at.

'Once, late in the evening, when his wife told him to close the shutters, he went outside and did not return. There was an uproar in Radoszyce. Some people believed that the demons had spirited him away. Others thought that his wife nagged him so much that he ran away to his relatives on the other side of the Vistula. But what man would run away at night without his overcoat and without a bundle? If this had happened to a rich man, they would have sent out searchers to find him. But when a poor man disappears, there is one pauper less in town. His wife – Sprintza was her name – was deserted. She earned a little from kneading dough in wealthy houses on Thursday. She also got some support from her daughters when they married.

'Five years passed. Once on a Friday, when Sprintza was standing over the oven and cooking her Sabbath meal, the door opened, and in came a man with a gray beard, dusty and bare-footed. Sprintza thought it was a beggar. Suddenly he said, "I was in the Holy Land. Give me some prune dessert."

'The town went wild. They all came running, and Leib was taken to the rabbi. The rabbi questioned him, and he learned that Leib had gone on foot to the Holy Land.'

'On foot?' Levi Yitzchok asked.

'Yes, on foot,' Zalman said.

'But everyone knows that to get to the Holy Land one must travel by ship.'

Meyer Eunuch clutched his chin where a beard should have grown and said, 'Perhaps he lied?'

'He brought letters from many rabbis, as well as a sack of holy earth that he dug himself at the Mount of Olives,' Zalman said. 'When someone died he placed a handful of it under the corpse's head. I saw it myself; it was as white as crumbled chalk.'

'How long did the trip take him?' Levi Yitzchok asked.

'Two years. On the way back he went by boat. The rabbi asked him. "How can a man do a thing like that?" And he answered, "I yearned so much that I could not bear it any more. That night when I went out to close the shutters and I saw the moon running among the clouds I began to run after it. I kept running until I reached Warsaw. There, kind people showed me the road. I wandered over fields and forests, mountains and wasteland, until I arrived at the land of Israel."'

'I am astonished that the beasts did not devour him,' Levi Yitzchok half asked, half stated.

'It is written that the Lord preserves the simple,' Meyer Eunuch said.

For a while all three were silent. Levi Yitzchok took his blue glasses off his nose and began to wipe the lenses with his sash. He suffered from trachoma. One of his eyes was milky white, and he could not see with it at all. Levi Yitzchok owned a cane that once belonged to the preacher of Kozenice. Levi Yitzchok never parted with it even on the Sabbath. He limped, and a crutch is not forbidden. For a long while he rested his chin on this cane. Then he straightened himself and said, 'Stubbornness is a power. In Krasnystaw there was a tailor by the name of Jonathan. He sewed for women, not men. As a

rule, a women's tailor is a frivolous person. When one sews a garment for a female, one has to take her measurements, and sometimes she may be in her unclean days. Even if she is in her clean days, it is not proper to touch a woman, especially if she is married. Well – but there must be tailors. You cannot make all garments by yourself. This Jonathan happened to be a pious man but uneducated. However, he loved Jewishness. On the Sabbath he read the Yiddish Bible with his wife, Beila Yenta. When a book salesman came to town, Jonathan bought from him all the tomes and storybooks in Yiddish. There was in Krasnystaw a congregation of psalm reciters and a society of Mishnah students. Jonathan belonged to both of these groups. He listened to the lectures, but he was afraid to say anything, because whenever he uttered a word in Hebrew he mangled it and the scholars made fun of him. I see him before my eyes: tall, lean, pockmarked. Gentleness looked out from his eyes. It was said that one couldn't find a better tailor even in Lublin. When he made a dress or a cape, it fitted like a glove. He had three unmarried daughters. When I was a boy I used to see him often, because a friend of mine, Getzel, an orphan, was his apprentice. Other masters mistreated their apprentices, beat them, and did not give them enough to eat. Instead of teaching them the trade, they sent them on errands, and ordered them to rock the babies or to carry the slops so that they should never learn the skill properly and have to be paid a salary. But Jonathan taught the orphan the trade, and, from the day he learned to make a buttonhole and to sew on a button, Jonathan paid him four rubles a year. Getzel had studied at a yeshiva before he became a tailor's helper, and Jonathan used to ask him all kinds of impossible questions – like “What was the name of the mother of Og the King of Bashan?” “Did Noah take flies into the Ark?” “How many miles between paradise and Gehenna?” He wanted to know everything.

‘Now, listen to this. Everyone knows that on the day of the Rejoicing over the Law the honored citizens, the learned, the affluent are called to carry the scrolls first – before the laborers, the simple people, those of little income. This is the

way it is all over the world. But in our town the head of the synagogue was not a native. He knew very few people, and someone had to give him a paper listing the order of those to be called. There was another Jonathan in town, a scholar and a rich man, and the head of the synagogue confused the two men and he called Jonathan the tailor first. In the study house there was murmuring and giggling. When Jonathan the tailor heard that he had been called first, along with the rabbi and the elders, he couldn't believe his own ears. He realized that it was a mistake, but when a man is summoned to carry the scroll he dare not refuse. Among the workers and the apprentices praying at the west wall there was laughter. They began to push Jonathan and to pinch him good-naturedly. It was in the time before the government took over the sale of vodka, and vodka was cheaper than borscht. In every half-decent home, one could find a keg of vodka, with straws for drinking, and over it hung a side of dried mutton to munch afterward. On the day of the Rejoicing over the Law, people allowed themselves to take a sip before prayers, and almost everyone was tipsy. Jonathan the tailor came over to the reading table and was given the scroll. Everybody stared, but only one person said anything – Reb Zekele, a usurer. He exclaimed, "Who calls up an ignorant to carry the scroll first?" And he returned his own scroll to the beadle. It was beneath his dignity to carry the scroll with Jonathan the tailor.

'In the study house a commotion arose. To give back a scroll was sacrilege. The head of the synagogue was bewildered. To shame a person in the presence of a whole community is a terrible sin. No one sang and danced with the scrolls this time. The same simple people who had laughed at Jonathan and the honor given to him now cursed Reb Zekele and gnashed their teeth. When the ceremony was over, Jonathan the tailor approached Reb Zekele and said in a loud voice that all could hear, "It is true that I am ignorant, but I swear to you that in a year from now I will be a greater scholar than you are."

The usurer smiled and said, "If this happens, I will build you a house in the marketplace for nothing." Reb Zekele the

usurer dealt in lumber. He owned mortgages on half the houses in town.

Jonathan stood for a while in perplexity. Then he said, "If I am not a greater scholar than you are. I will sew for your wife – and for nothing – a fox-fur coat reaching to the ankles, lined in velvet and with ten tails."

'What went on in the town that day is indescribable. In the women's section of the synagogue they heard about the bet and there was bedlam. Some women laughed, others cried. Still others quarreled and tried to snatch the bonnets off each other's head. There were many poor people in town and a few rich ones, but in those times no one skimped on a holiday. Every third citizen invited guests to his house for a drink. There was dancing in the marketplace. The women had cooked huge pots of cabbage with raisins and cream of tartar. They had baked strudels, tarts, all kinds of fruitcakes. The burial society gave a banquet and mead was poured like water. One of the elders who had special merit in the eyes of the community was honored by having a pumpkin with lighted candles placed on his head, and being carried on the shoulders of the people to the synagogue yard. Bevies of children, the holy sheep, ran after him baaing. There was in town a he-goat that was not allowed to be slaughtered because he was first-born, and urchins put a fur hat on his horns and led him into the ritual bath. On that particular day there was only one topic of conversation – Jonathan the tailor's oath and the usurer's promise. Reb Zekele the usurer could easily afford to build a house for nothing, but how could Jonathan become a scholar in one year? The rabbi immediately announced that such an oath was not valid. In times of old, the rabbi said, Jonathan would have been hit thirty-nine times with a belt for breaking the commandment "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." But what could be done today? The town became divided into two parties. The scholars maintained that Jonathan should be fined and that he must come in his stocking feet to the synagogue to repent in public for giving a false oath. And if he refused, he should be excommunicated and his shop should not be patronized. The rabble threatened to burn

the usurer's house and drive him out of town with sticks. Thank God, there are no Jewish robbers. In the evening of the holiday everybody became sober. It began to rain, and everyone returned to his bundle of troubles.'

'Did they forget the whole thing?' Zalman the glazier asked.

'Nothing was forgotten. Just wait,' Levi Yitzchok said.

Levi Yitzchok took out his wooden snuffbox, opened it, sniffed, and sneezed three times. His snuff was famous. He put into it smelling salts used at the Day of Atonement to revive the fasters. He wiped his red nose with his large kerchief and said, 'If Getzel the apprentice had not been my friend I would not have known all the details. But Getzel boarded at Jonathan's, and he told me everything. When Jonathan came home that evening, the moment he opened the door he exclaimed, "Beila Yenta, your husband has died! From today on you are a widow! My daughters, you are all orphans!" They began to cry, as on the Ninth day of Ab, "Husband - Father - how can you leave us?" And Jonathan answered, "From today until the day of the Rejoicing over the Law next year, you have no provider."

'He had hidden behind his Passover dishes a nest egg of one hundred guildens saved as a dowry for his oldest daughter, Taube. He took the money and left the house. There was in town a man called Reb Tevele Scratch-me. Scratch-me was of course a nickname. In his young years he had been a Talmud teacher. Like all teachers, he had in front of him on the table a hare's leg attached to a leather thong. Yet he did not use it to whip the children but to scratch himself. He suffered from eczema on his back. When it began to itch he handed the hare's leg to one of his pupils and ordered, "Scratch me." That is how he got his name. In his old age he gave up teaching and lived with his daughter. His son-in-law was a pauper, and Tevele Scratch-me lived in dire poverty. Jonathan the tailor went to Reb Tevele and asked him, "Do you want to earn some money?" "Who doesn't want money?" Tevele asked back. And Jonathan said, "I will pay you a gulden a week if you will teach me the whole Torah!" Tevele burst out laugh-

ing. "The whole Torah – even Moses did not know that! The Torah is like tailoring, without an end!" They spoke a long time, and finally it was decided that Tevele would teach Jonathan for a whole year and make him a greater scholar than Zekele. Jonathan calculated that if one studied seven pages of the Talmud each day of the year, all the thirty-seven tractates would be learned. It was said that Zekele had not gone through even half of this. Well – but the Talmud isn't enough. One had also to study Midrash, the Commentaries. Why draw it out? Jonathan the tailor became a yeshiva boy. He sat at a table in the study house day and night and studied with Tevele. In the middle of the week, when the women's section was empty, they carried their volumes up there in order not to be disturbed. If I tell you that they studied eighteen hours a day, this is no exaggeration. All week long Jonathan slept on a bench in the study house. He went home to sleep only on the Sabbath and holidays.'

'What happened to his family?' Zalman asked.

'What happens to all families when the provider goes? They did not die of hunger. The girls all went into service. Beila Yenta was a seamstress and she accepted light work. My friend Getzel slowly became the master. Jonathan did one thing – he studied. Such diligence the world has never beheld! Two or three nights a week he didn't sleep at all. The story soon spread to neighboring villages, and people came to stare at Jonathan as though he were a miracle worker. At the beginning, Reb Zekele laughed at the whole business. He said, "If this simpleton can become a scholar, hair will grow on the palms of my hands." Later on, toward the end of the year, people began to speak of the wonders of Jonathan's acquired knowledge. He recited by heart whole sections from the Gemara. He could anticipate the questions of such commentators as Rabbi Meir of Lublin and Rabbi Shlomo Luria.

'Now Zekele the usurer grew frightened. He too began to burn the midnight oil to overtake Jonathan. But it was already too late. Besides, he was up to his neck in business, and he was in the middle of a lawsuit to boot. His wife, Slikka, a greedy creature with a big mouth, was terribly eager for Jona-

than to make her a fox coat with ten tails without cost, and for the first time in her life she drove her husband to study. But it did not work. I will make it short. On the eighth day of Sukkoth, the seven elders of the town and a number of other scholars gathered at the house of the rabbi, and they examined Zekele and Jonathan as if they were yeshiva boys. Zekele had forgotten a lot. For years he had studied only on the Sabbath – and there is a proverb that says, “He who studies only on the Sabbath is only a seventh part of a scholar.” As for Jonathan, he remembered almost all of the Talmud by heart. His teacher, Tevele, had remarked that in teaching Jonathan he himself became erudite. Not only did Jonathan show knowledge but he showed astuteness as well. The rabbi’s house was jammed with people. Others had to stand outside to hear Jonathan discuss the Law with the rabbi. At the beginning, Zekele tried to discover flaws in Jonathan’s answers, but soon the tables were turned and Jonathan corrected Zekele. I wasn’t there, but those who saw Zekele wrangle with Jonathan the tailor about some difficult passage of Maimonides or about the meaning of an obscure sentence of Rabbi Meir Schiff swore that it was like the fight between David and Goliath. Zekele screamed and gasped and scolded his opponent, but to no avail. No, Jonathan the tailor did not swear falsely. The rabbi and the seven elders unanimously gave the verdict that Jonathan was more of a scholar than Zekele. Jonathan’s wife and daughters were sitting in the kitchen, and when they heard the verdict they fell upon each other wailing. The town seethed like a kettle. Synagogue Street was full of tailors, shoemakers, combers of pig bristles, coachmen, and such. It was their victory.

The next day, Jonathan was called to take the scroll first – not by error this time. The most honored people invited him for a drink. There was talk that now Jonathan could become a rabbi or an assistant rabbi, or at least a ritual slaughterer. But Jonathan let it be known that he was returning to his scissors and iron. Zekele tried to avoid payment by contending that he did not swear but only promised, and a promise does not have to be kept. But the rabbi ordered him to build a house for Jonathan, quoting from Deuteronomy: “That which is gone

out of thy lips thou shalt keep.” Zekele procrastinated as long as he could, but after the Feast of Shevuot the house already had a roof. Only then did Jonathan make it known that he didn’t want the house for himself but as an inn for yeshiva boys and poor travelers. He signed a document giving the house away to the community.’

‘He remained a tailor, eh?’ Zalman the glazier asked.

‘To the end.’

‘Did he marry off his daughters?’

‘What else? There is no Jewish cloister.’

All the time Levi Yitzchok was speaking, Meyer Eunuch was making gestures. His yellow eyes filled with laughter. Then he closed them, lowered his head, and seemed as though he was dozing. Suddenly he straightened up, clutched his beardless chin, and asked, ‘How did the village peddler know the road to the Holy Land? Most probably he asked. I guess he wandered over the Turkish lands. Egypt, and Istanbul. How did he manage to eat? Most probably he begged. There are Jews everywhere. Most likely he slept in the poorhouse. In warm countries one can even sleep in the streets. As for Jonathan the tailor, I assume that from his childhood he craved for learning, and the power of will is strong. There is a saying, “Your will can make you a genius.” When you are idle, a year is nothing, but if you study day and night with diligence, you sop it up like a sponge. He did well not to accept the house from Reb Zekele, because it is forbidden to make a spade for digging from the Torah. As it was, he gained in addition the virtue of hospitality. Leib Belkes and Jonathan were both simple people – though not completely so. But it also happens with great men that they get an obsession in their minds. There is a saying, “Greatness too has its share of insanity.”

‘In Bechtev there was a cabalist, Rabbi Mendel. He was descended from the renowned Hodel, who used to dance in a circle with the Hasidim. She did not, God forbid, hold their bare hands directly. She kept a kerchief over each hand, and the Hasidim held on to the kerchief. Rabbi Mendel could have had a large following, but he disliked crowds and discouraged

them. Even in the High Holy Days he didn't get more than a few score in his study house. His wife died young, and she didn't leave him a child to take his place after his death. Many matches were proposed, but he refused to remarry. His followers argued with him: What about the commandment "Be fruitful and multiply?" But the rabbi answered, "I am going to get so many whips in Gehenna that a few more won't matter. Why are they so afraid of Gehenna? Since the Almighty created it, it must be paradise in disguise." He should forgive me, but he was a devious kind of saint – but a great spirit just the same. There was much gossip about him, but he didn't care a fig. It even happened that he uttered sharp words against the Lord of the Universe. Once when he was reciting the Psalms, he came to the passage "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh." Rabbi Mendel exclaimed, "He shall laugh – but I am crushed!" When those who opposed him heard of this blasphemy, they almost managed to have him excommunicated.

The disciples of the Baal Shem did not believe in fasting. Hasidism was exhilaration, not sadness. But Rabbi Mendel indulged in fasting. He began by fasting only on Mondays and Thursdays. Then he started to fast from one Sabbath to the next. He also immersed himself in cold baths. He called the body the enemy, and he would say, "You don't have to appease an enemy. Of course, you are not allowed to kill him, but neither are you obliged to pamper him with marzipans." His old Hasidic followers died out gradually. The younger men joined the courts of Gora and Kotzk. There remained in Rabbi Mendel's court only twenty or thirty persistent followers, in addition to a few hangers-on who stayed with him all year and ate from the common pot. An old beadle, stone-deaf, cooked porridge for them every day. A charitable woman went from house to house for them and collected potatoes, groats, flour, buckwheat, and whatever else she was offered.

'One Rosh Hashanah the rabbi had no more than twenty people in his study house. The following Yom Kippur he had only a quorum, including himself, the beadle, and the hangers-

on. At the pulpit Rabbi Mendel recited all the prayers – Kol Nidre, the morning prayer, the midday prayer, and the closing prayer. It was already late when they finished the night prayer, and they blessed the new moon. The beadle offered the fasters some stale bread with herring and some chicken soup. None of them had any teeth left, and their stomachs had shrunk from undernourishment. Rabbi Mendel was older than any of them, but his voice remained young. His hearing, too, was good. The rabbi sat at the head of the table and spoke: “Those who run after the pleasures of the world don’t know what pleasure is. For them gluttony, drinking, lechery, and money are pleasures. There is no greater delight than the service of Yom Kippur. The body is pure and the soul is pure. The prayers are a joy. There is a saying that from confessing one’s sins one does not get fat. It’s completely false. When I confess my sins I become alive and vigorous. If I could have my say in heaven, every day would be Yom Kippur.”

‘After the rabbi said these words he rose from his chair and exclaimed, “I have no say in heaven, but in my study house I do. From today on for me it will be a perpetual Yom Kippur – every day except for the Sabbath and Feast Days!” When the people of the village heard what the rabbi was about to do, there was pandemonium. The scholars and the elders came to the rabbi and asked, “Isn’t this breaking the Law?” And the rabbi replied, “I do it for purely selfish reasons, not to please the Creator. If they punish me high up, I will accept the punishment. I also want to have some pleasure before I go!” The rabbi called out to his beadle, “Light the candles; I am going to recite Kol Nidre.” He ran over to the pulpit and started to sing Kol Nidre. I wasn’t there, but those who were present declared that such a Kol Nidre had not been heard since the world began. All of Bechtev came running. They thought that Rabbi Mendel had lost his mind. But who would dare to tear him away from the pulpit? He stood there in his white robe and prayer shawl and recited, “It shall be forgiven” and “Our supplications shall rise.” His voice was as strong as a lion’s, and the sweetness of his singing was such that all

apprehensions ceased. I will make it short. The rabbi lived two and a half years more, and those two and a half years were one long Yom Kippur.'

Levi Yitzchok took off his dark glasses and asked, 'What did he do about phylacteries? Didn't he put on phylacteries on weekdays?'

'He put them on,' Meyer Eunuch answered, 'but the liturgy was that of Yom Kippur. Toward evening he read the Book of Jonah.'

'Didn't he eat a bite at night?' Zalman the glazier asked.

'He fasted six days of the week unless a holiday fell in the middle of it.'

'And the hangers-on fasted with him?'

'Some left him. Others died.'

'So did he pray to the bare walls?'

'There were always people who came to look and wonder.'

'And the world allowed something like this?' Levi Yitzchok asked.

'Who was going to wage war against a holy man? They dreaded his irritation,' Meyer Eunuch said. 'One could clearly see that heaven approved. When a man fasts so long, his voice grows weak, he doesn't have the strength to stand on his feet. But the rabbi stood for all the prayers. Those who saw him told how his face shone like the sun. He slept no longer than three hours – in his prayer shawl and robe, with his forehead leaning on the Tractite Yoma, exactly like at Yom Kippur. At midday prayer he kneeled and intoned the liturgy concerning the service in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem.'

'What did he do when it actually was Yom Kippur?' Zalman the glazier asked.

'The same as any other day.'

'I never heard this story,' Levi Yitzchok said.

'Rabbi Mendel was a hidden saint, and of those one hears little. Even today Bechtev is a forsaken village. In those times it was far away from everything – a swamp among forests. Even in the summer it was difficult to reach it. In the winter the snow made the roads impassable. The sleighs got stuck. And there was the danger of bears and wolves.'

It became quiet. Levi Yitzchok took out his snuffbox. 'Nowadays something like this would not be permitted.'

'Greater transgressions than that are allowed in our day,' Meyer said.

'How did he die?'

'At the pulpit. He was standing up reciting, "What can man attain when death is all he can gain?" When he came to the verse "Only charity and prayer may mitigate death's despair," the rabbi fell down and his soul departed. It was a kiss from heaven – a saint's death.'

Zalman the glazier put some tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. 'What was the sense of it?'

Meyer Eunuch pondered for a while, and then said, 'Everything can become a passion, even serving God.'

*Translated by the author and Dorothea Straus*