



## 1. THE REBBE AND THE GUINEA PIGS: *Look differently at the world*

When I was a boy, my mother wouldn't let me have a pet dog. Though I begged, pined, and whined, she refused. It wasn't that she, a Chassidic scientist, was religiously pet averse. On the contrary, she'd often quote the Babylonian Talmud,\* which depicts the Creator's love of pisciculture. Apparently, although He is occupied with the foibles of man, He still plays daily with Leviathan, His pet fish.

“You can't have a dog because it might bother the women who use the *mikvah*,” she explained to me after my umpteenth time campaigning for a puppy.

For those who don't know, a *mikvah* is a Jewish ritual bathing pool used to achieve purity as recorded in the Biblical

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\* Tractate Avodah Zara, 3b. You can read more about Talmud in the glossary. But for those of you who are like me and rarely make it to the glossary, the Babylonian Talmud is a collection of Jewish wisdom and laws compiled when the Jews were exiled in ancient Babylon during the first and second century BCE.

book of Leviticus, Chapter Fifteen. Akin to a spa for the soul, the modern *mikvah* is primarily used by married women after their period,\* but it's also used for other purposes, such as conversions or making new cooking dishes kosher. Also, many religious men, especially devout Chassidic Jews, will dip in one before prayers or holidays.

Nestled quietly behind our modest home was the Berkeley community *mikvah*, a rustic redwood cottage housing a pool of natural rainwater lined with sparkling blue tiles. My mother was its caretaker. Our family didn't have enough money to own property so the local synagogue allowed us to reside in the house in front of the *mikvah* in exchange for my mother managing the daily upkeep. I could hardly blame her for not wanting anyone's "*mikvah* experience" to be spoiled by the barking of an overzealous pooch.

But blame her, I did.

"You had two dogs when you were a kid, so why can't I?" I pleaded. Like any entitled child who thinks the world revolves around them, I petulantly harassed her with what I thought were compelling arguments. But she never wavered. Instead, in an apparent attempt to satiate my zoological curiosity, she allowed me to keep all sorts of indoor (a.k.a. quieter) critters: salamanders from the backyard, frogs from Boy Scout camp, hamsters, parakeets, guinea pigs, and even a pet chicken named, Fwedwika. My mother encouraged

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\* More on this later. See Chapter Fifteen, titled, "Holy Menstruation."

me to take care of my pets, perhaps thinking it would teach me the meaning of responsibility, accountability, and even love.

There was just one problem: my guinea pigs had dutifully begun to breed. Not only that, but they diligently produced inordinate amounts of excrement. As soon as I began to smell like them, my mother told me to figure out an “outdoor solution.” Our neighbor Andy Grant — a kind retired architect — volunteered to design and install a customized guinea pig hutch in our backyard. With four legs sunk deep into the earth and a slanted mahogany roof, this sturdy wooden structure stood proudly at attention in front of a wall of leafy evergreen shrubs.

One Friday afternoon, I was out cleaning the hutch in preparation for *Shabbos*, the Jewish Sabbath and spiritual crown of the week. I was about nine years old. My T-shirt was splattered with feces from my beloved little rodents, and my hands were caked with a malodorous muck; but none of this mattered to me. I loved seeing my guinea pigs squeal with excitement as they scampered over the fresh newspaper bedding and frolicked in the scented cedarwood shavings I had laid down for them. I was so engrossed in the task at hand that I didn't hear the crowd speaking Yiddish until they were already upon me.

I looked up and saw an entourage of men walking down the pathway at the side of my house, headed toward the

backyard and the *mikvah*. At the center was a Chassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Hershel Yolles, who had come to visit the Bay Area. Like a startled guinea pig, my head jerked from side to side, looking for an escape route. But it was too late. The path to the *mikvah* snaked right by my location. I froze. I felt so embarrassed.

*Oh no, what is the Rebbe going to say to me?* I wondered.

I may have only been a boy, but I already knew how undignified it was to be caught on the eve of the holy Shabbos knee deep in rodent poop. And from an animal called a “pig” no less. *This is all my mother’s fault*, I thought to myself as my mind accelerated into crisis mode. *If she had let me have a dog, I’d be inside the house right now.*

At that moment, Rabbi Yolles’ sharp eyes flitted in my direction, and I felt the heat of shame flush my face. *Please, Hashem, make them not notice me. Please make them walk right by me.*

But the Samborer Rebbe, royal descendent of the great Chassidic masters, the Baal Shem Tov, Reb Elimelech of Lizensk, and the Sanzer Rebbe, stopped right in front of me. I clenched my fists and prayed for the ground to open up beneath my feet and swallow me whole as it did to Korach in the Bible\*. But Hashem had other plans.

“*Yingeleh* (young boy), what is your name?” the Samborer Rebbe asked.

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\* See the Bible, Numbers 16:32, where Korach and his cronies launch a rebellion against Moses, only to have the “earth open its mouth and swallow them.”

I felt my face go red as I stammered, “Levi. Levi Yitzchok Welton.”

“Ah,” he murmured as he stroked his pure white beard. “You’re the son of Rabbi BenTzion and Dr. Sharona Welton?”

“Yes,” I replied, desperately wanting the interrogation to be over. I was a shy kid, who craved but hated attention. The Rebbe’s followers stood in respectful silence, but they looked at me askance, confused as to why their spiritual guru had stopped to converse with a mere child. Then he asked the question I had been dreading, “And what are you doing here?” He pointed one of his long fingers toward the guinea pig hutch. Fingers I knew only touched the soft pages of the Torah\* or the tear-soaked lines of his *siddur* (prayer book).

In the blink of an eye, a million thoughts erupted in my conscience. If only he had caught me while *davening* (praying) or amid some other holy activity! I should be inside, studying the Torah in preparation for *Shabbos*, or helping my mother prepare the *Shabbos* candles. Anything but this! I knew having pets wasn’t popular amongst my fellow *Chassidim*.\*\* There’s even a Yiddish proverb that states, “If you see a Jew

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\* “Torah” has a range of meanings. It can refer to a physical scroll of the Five Books of Moses, the complete canon of Jewish scripture, or the Written and Oral Law in Judaism. It is the sacred text of the Jewish faith.

\*\* I would come to learn that there were a few reasons for this, one of them being that the Torah questions what right we, as human beings, have to strap a noose — a.k.a a leash — on an animal and parade it around solely for our emotional gratification. The great rabbis of Jewish history didn’t have pets, but animals who they worked alongside and who were also given a weekly day of rest, as it states: “Six days you may do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, in order that your ox and your donkey shall rest...” (Exodus 23:12).

with a dog, either it's not a Jew or it's not a dog.”

*And here I am, caught with a bunch of pigs!* Plus, how often did Chassidic Rebbes make the pilgrimage from Brooklyn, New York to Berkeley, California? *This is a historic moment and I'm ruining it.* Guilt gripped my heart.

“These are my pet guinea pigs,” I answered, feeling cold even though it was a summer's day. “I'm cleaning their hutch for *Shabbos*.” My eyes locked onto the tips of my feces-covered sneakers as I awaited the rebuke I knew I deserved.

Instead, the Rebbe began to laugh.

I looked up in shock. His laughter was soft and musical. Then he leaned towards me, the California sun glinting off his wrinkled face, as his warm, brown eyes cradled my soul.

“*Yingeleh*,” he whispered emphatically, “*Der Beshefer* (The Creator) made the world in six days and on the seventh day, He rested. Almighty G-d\* took care of all His animals before He entered *Shabbos*. You are doing the same.” He paused and smiled. “In this way, you are like *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* — the Holy One, blessed is He — a holy caretaker of the wonderful creatures in His beautiful garden.”

I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't speak. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and blushed again. The Rebbe didn't pry but just smiled and then as serendipitously as he had appeared, he and his entourage disappeared into the *mikvah*.

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\* This is not a typo. Jewish people often hyphenate the Name of G-d as a reminder to treat the Holy Name with deference and reverence. See the Talmud, Shavuos 35a and *Achiezer Responsa*, vol. 3:32.

I, on the other hand, proceeded to scamper up the stairs of my house and dash frantically from room to room until I located my mother, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows as she pounded the dough for the *Challah*\* bread. Chirping like one of my pet parakeets, I excitedly told her what had happened.

“Rabbi Yolles is right,” she murmured as my father swept the kitchen floor behind her. Tatty (Daddy) chuckled, paused mid-sweep-stroke, and kissed me on the head. I felt like a champion.

I was too naïve to see the bigger picture, too young to see that this was all my mother’s doing. Had it not been for her pet dog proscription, I never would have experienced this tender moment with Rabbi Yolles, which validated all I would come to love about Chassidism. While I didn’t receive a canine companion, the lesson I received that day was worth far more. For I would soon grow up to learn that many in the world would secretly and not-so-secretly judge me because I appear different. But it would be spiritual superheroes like my mother who would show me that being Chassidic means looking differently at the world. Like Rabbi Yolles, who focused on what I thought was different about me and celebrated it.

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\* *Challah* — A braided bread eaten on the Jewish Sabbath and holidays to recall the Manna from Heaven (see the *Tosafot* commentary to Talmud, Pesachim 100b). The author attests that his mother’s Challah did indeed taste heavenly but also acknowledges that others will accuse him of falsehood, for it was their mother’s Challah that achieved such holy status.

Throughout my life, I would learn hundreds of tales about Chassidic Rebbes. Many involved miracles of supernatural scale and deeds of extraordinary holiness. Mine involved guinea pigs. And that's kosher enough for me.