

*A book about Jewish sexuality, even one so outré as this, must surely climax in a glut of weddings. Nonetheless, I should not have wagered a chicken schnitzel on the odds of being invited to dance at either of these weddings. And that's the whole point. Marriages aren't made in computers or kitchens, they're made in heaven...*

## Chapter One

### The Tattooed *Kallah*<sup>1</sup>

Mendel, the groom, is nineteen years old, and Chana, the *Kallah*, has just turned seventeen. It's a match made in heaven. Well, Izzy, the *Shadchan*<sup>2</sup> thinks so anyway, and who can gainsay him?

The facts: It's no more than three weeks to the wedding and Chanele is calling the whole thing off because she, the bride, has tattoos she must prevent anyone from discovering.

I'd have difficulty believing it even if I'd seen with my own eyes, which of course, I haven't. Mrs. McCloud, the tattooist, says it all started with one small tattoo. But then, if you can believe this whole debacle began with one small tattoo, why should it be so difficult to credit what's there now?

Chana was being prepared for her wedding in the traditional, Hasidic manner, with *Kallah* classes at her local *Rebbetzin's*<sup>3</sup>. To her ever-increasing dismay, she learned that going to the *Mikveh* bath the night before her wedding would necessitate her disrobing in front of a woman bath-attendant to have her body examined for any impediments to a proper, kosher dunking. She was terrified of being seen naked. With no one to talk to about it, she thought hard how avoid the *Mikveh* altogether, and the only guaranteed solution was to call off the whole marriage.

Mendel and Chanele only met once, for two hours, in her parents' house. They'd conversed in the halting, awkward way young people, constrained by custom to avoid even glancing at the opposite sex, must do in such circumstances. They made a deep and lasting impression on one another and agreed, eagerly, to be wed. Mendel is the sweetest.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kallah*: Hebrew, a) Bride, b) Daughter-in-law, c) Destruction.

<sup>2</sup> *Shadchan*: Matchmaker. Let's just be nice and say it takes a special type of person to want to know so much about the private lives of others *only to help them*.

<sup>3</sup> *Rebbetzin*: Women Rabbis are not *Rebbetzins* just as pharmacists are not alchemists. *Rebbetzins* are the wives of authentic, which is to say, male rabbis. Classes attended by young wives-to-be, cover the laws and customs of Jewish marriage, sex, menstruation, *Mikveh* - ritual bath and all the other secrets of femininity—I kid you not.

Throughout their engagement, he called Chanele faithfully on the telephone every Friday afternoon, one hour before the beginning of the Sabbath, to enquire after her health and mood, and to wish her a good-*Shabbes*<sup>4</sup>. Now, with increasing alarm, she watched her wedding date loom closer, terrified of the inevitable exposure scene with its shame and disgrace. She could not let it happen. Instead she began telling Mendel she was unhappy at the prospect of marrying. When he pressed her for details she said it was because she was unhappy at the prospect of marrying *him*. When that would not convince him, she changed her story to say she did not want to marry at all.

Poor Mendel did not know what to do. He looked haggard. She asked him to stop calling her on *erev-shabbes*<sup>5</sup>. He refused, and persisted in his courting of her. The story might have ended on a very sour and recriminatory note, but for God who is busy making weddings happen, sowing the seeds of the Messiah, they say. The cure is always prepared before the illness, and Chanele's savior was a part of her own family circle. His name is Pesach, and he has problems.

Pesach's mother ran away from home when she was eighteen. Not her parents' home, her husband's. She'd been married in Flushing, Queens, according to the laws of Moses and Israel, in a ceremony conducted by her uncle, the rabbi. So, when she bore a baby boy three years later to someone other than her husband, the status of the child was that of a *manzer*, a bastard. He was named Pesach after his father's maternal grandmother, Doris<sup>6</sup>; such are the vagaries of fate.

I first met Pesach when I was a young rabbi, teaching Hebrew in evening classes. Pesach, a student at my class, had just been informed that he would not be allowed to marry his girlfriend in a Jewish ceremony. He'd had been educated to Bar Mitzvah in a typical Conservative-Jewish, Sunday school fashion. He'd gone on to do some summer volunteer work in Israel as a student, and found his roots in activist Judaism in college. He was also doing pre-med at Columbia University. Yet, he remained an up-and-coming mamzer, and mamzers may not marry into the family of Jews.

Pesach was not stoic about it at all; he was heartbroken, bitter and resentful. When he asked for my advice, there was precious little I could tell him to cheer him up. It was an unmitigated tragedy. His mother, the runaway from the seventies, is first cousin to Chanah's mother, and Pesach moved into his aunt's home out of anger at his mum for not obtaining a divorce before his conception. His relationship with her was to remain strained by his rage for many years. Chanah, the toddler in his aunt's house, was just two years old when he moved in, and he became like an older brother to her.

He moved away from the community, and I heard through the grapevine that he was doing poorly. Disappointment, resentment and other factors drove him to drugs and alcohol. He was on a mission. I bumped into him in 1986 in Battery Park. President Ronald Regan was

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<sup>4</sup> Shabbes is to the Sabbath what a pack of Tartars on horseback tenderizing a dead sheep are to a polo team.

<sup>5</sup> Erev-Shabbes: Sabbath eve, shortly before sundown on Friday.

<sup>6</sup> A play on the name Doris, which sounds like Door - One of the Hebrew words for door can be pronounced Pesach, but only if you are the most ignorant, Ashkenazi-Hebrew speaker on Earth. Luckily there is an embarrassment of candidates trying for this award.

rededicating the Statue of Liberty. It was July 4<sup>th</sup>, and the fireworks were ostentatiously spectacular. The waterfront park was jam-packed with sightseers, gifters and pickpockets all oohing and ahhhing madly, and there was Pesach, furtively selling his tush, poor man. An addict ought to realize he's hit bottom when he's peddling his for a fix. I smiled at him, but he was too embarrassed to acknowledge my smile.

I met him again a year later, at a weekend retreat for Jews practicing the 12 Steps of AA. He looked much better. And that's where I first heard his laughter - it reminded me of the fireworks down in Battery Park in 1986, a booming, rollicking sound, from somewhere deep inside his guts. He started talking to me about his life, and we found ourselves catching up on the interrupted mamzer-dialogue from all those years ago.

"When I was in rehab," Pesach said to me, "there was a young hasid from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, recovering from an addiction to snowballs<sup>7</sup>. We shared a room and got to talking, you know, and I told him of my mamzer status, and he said there was something called the *Shifcha-Mamzer* marriage, a way of being rid of the stigma. Is that really true?"

"Well," I said. "Technically it's true. There is a solution for a mamzer to have children with a non-Jewish woman. Then, once she's passed child bearing years, she converts with her children to Judaism, so the children start life as Jews with a clean slate, so to speak, and are converts and not mamzers. But Orthodox Judaism doesn't recognize or allow marriages or any sort of sexual liaisons between Jews and non-Jews, as you well know. So that's not an option. The solution is to find a woman who is both Jewish and non-Jewish, and the only nominee is the slave woman, the *Shifcha*. If you own a slave man or woman they have to be converted to Judaism but without having status as Jews, sort of like a halfway house."

"Hello? I'm not sure if you're up on the latest news, rabbi," he reminded me, half laughing, half serious, "but at the last call, I believe, all slaves were actually emancipated? Didn't the rabbis hear about the emancipation yet; it happened back in the nineteenth century, you know?"

"As you so astutely put it," I acknowledged. "The *mamzer-shifcha* marriage is no longer an available option."

Pesach popped in and out of my life during the next decade. Now there's a diamond stud in his ear, now his head is shaven bald. Now there's a pirate's fat golden hoop in his ear, and now there's a sense of maturity and responsibility about him. If we survive we age.

And then came the phone call which changed my career.

"Rabbi Schreiber?"

"Yes."

"I'm the man whose been writing to you about the *Shifcha-Mamzer* marriage."

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<sup>7</sup> Snowball: Intravenously administered concoction of heroin and cocaine.

Now, as soon as I heard him on the telephone I knew it was Pesach; his voice is unmistakable. All of a sudden the bits and pieces all dropped into place.

“Now wait a minute! Pesach,” I said. “If I’d have known it was you asking all those questions via Email I’d have been more cautious, Haha! How are you doing?”

“Actually, rabbi, I’m doing well. I’m in town for my cousin Chaneleh’s wedding,” he replied. “Doesn’t time fly? She was just a couple of years old, back when you and I first met. Breakfast, tomorrow? Berger’s On the Avenue - is ten o’clock OK?”

“OK.”

Berger’s On The Avenue is a traditional American greasy-spoon Diner. It isn’t situated in a railroad car but in all other respects it fits the bill. There is one short order cook, a Mexican émigré of indeterminate legal status named Jiminez who speaks fluent Yiddish, like Mamma spoke in Budapest. Without seeing the gefillte fish on the menu and the Sabbath candle lighting times advertised at each table next to the charity box, you’d never know it is owned and operated by a hasid who waits the tables and who also does black velvet skullcaps and prayer shawls as a sideline.

It was Pesach who told me that Chaneleh was in trouble. “Rebbe, I need you to meet my cousin Chanele, I’m in town for her wedding, but she’s in such a mess, I think she may be about to call it off.”

“Let me know what you want me to do,” I said. “Are you sure it’s something I can help with?”

Pesach had put on weight liberally. He was running a successful business organizing parties. You’re having a garden fete or wedding? Well then, you’ll need a tent, tables, waiters, waitresses, portajohns and drinks to go in them. In short, you’ll need someone who hauls it all to your place on a truck and removes it when it’s over. You need a party organizer. It seems Pesach won prizes for his innovations in the arcane field of connecting the portable toilets to one another in such a way they don’t topple over, even when erected on a steep slope. He gives demonstrations and sells videos of his technique all over the country - he’s an entrepreneurial success story.

“I’m the one who’s been writing to you anonymously this past year. Sorry to have hidden my identity for so long. So many years in AA, I guess it’s become second nature. But I really wanted to learn up about the *Shifcha-Mamzer* marriage, as much as I could.”

“You know more about it than I do, that’s for sure,” I said. And he did. I’ve never met, nor hope to meet, anyone so well informed on one particular subject as was Pesach.

“Now that I come to think of it,” I continued, “you’ve been educating me, too...”

He was familiar with the literature on the subject in its entirety; he had it down pat. He could quote Talmudic sources and Gaonic responses from the ninth and tenth centuries. He knew all the historical documents describing the *Shifcha-Mamzer* marriage ceremony through the late middle ages and into modernity. He knew far more about it than I did. It's not that uncommon to find lay people with particular interests in an abstruse area of Jewish study, not that there will ever be a shortage of such areas of scholarship. Still, it can be unnerving to talk to someone who knows ten times as much as you do about areas in your own field.

"Well, rabbi," Pesach concluded, "you know I'm a mamzer, and I'd really appreciate it if you would perform a marriage for me and my slave."

I gulped. "Such weddings aren't performed anymore these days, Pesach, you know that."

"There hasn't been one for the last hundred and ten years, so far as I know. It'll be something for your resume then, won't it?" he said, chuckling.

I believed him implicitly—if he said one hundred ten years, then one hundred and ten it was.

"I'm not sure if you're up on the latest news, sir," I reminded him. "But the last I heard, all slaves were emancipated back in the nineteenth century."

Pesach only chuckled.

Had he been austere, intense, morbid, solemn, or in any way down and depressed, I should not have given him the time of day, let alone performed his ceremony. But Pesach is cheerful, exuberant even. He's fun to be around and always kind, generous and gentle with everyone including his slave. In a word, Pesach is a man in love with every minute of his life. He's full of joy, and to me joy's a sign of the highest spiritual eminence.

"If I know you, rabbi - and I've known you on and off these thirty years or so, right? - you're thinking, he's found a Shikseh and is about to try passing her off as his property, right? Admit it, you're thinking that, right?"

"You know in your bones there's no such thing as slavery in this day and age, right? Ha-ha. So you're proly also thinking that anything Pesach might have done to acquire a slave is merely an elaborate pretence, right, like double-entry bookkeeping or something?"

"Though I know nothing of this double-entry bookkeeping to which you refer, I don't see how you can get around it though," I admitted; he had summed up my response more or less succinctly. "A woman may be very loyal and devoted, she may even call herself your slave, Pesach, but she would have to be doing it of her free will and volition. This is the USA, after all. Where's the slavery in that?"

"Would you object very much if I attempted to convince you otherwise?" he asked me, laughing. I agreed. I like a challenge as much as the next rabbi.

Which is how I came to attend the ‘collaring’ ceremony at the Jagged Petal, an S&M meeting place, frequented by Jews in the ‘scene.’

When I arrived for the ceremony, it was to be a disappointment on many levels.

“You led me to believe this was a den of vice and *iniquity*,” I complained to Pesach. “But this is just a den. The paint is peeling off the walls, the stuffing is leaking out of all the sofas and chairs. It smells of mildew and the plumbing is... well, frankly, there doesn’t seem to be any...”

“Trust me,” replied Pesach. “Jacob-Joe, the owner, spent thousands getting the dungeon to look and smell like this. You wouldn’t believe the trouble he had with the zoning people. In the end we had to register it as an amateur performance club for experimental psychodrama. It was all mahogany parquet before we put the concrete rubble and smashed brick floor down. I won’t tell you how we arranged the smell. Authentic, isn’t it?”

One was obliged to concur with him, it smelled authentic. Looking around me with disfavor, I saw a Salon furnished with a bizarre agglomeration of stuff. At first I thought the chair was out of a dentist’s office, but the stirrups disabused me of that misapprehension. I walked around inspecting the array of menacing and tragicomic paraphernalia. I mean, who uses crucifixes anymore, crucifixes? A small spray-bottle of disinfectant and a roll of tissues next to each piece of equipment, and the politely written request that patrons disinfect apparatus after using it, told me, obviously, I was wrong about that too.

When forty or so people, Pesach’s friends all, had assembled at the Jagged Petal, the collaring got under way. Pesach's slave (Her name is Bassie) knelt on a cushion with her hands held quietly behind her back throughout the ceremony. She wore a simple, and probably very expensive, white silk sheath type dress. Pesach shaved her head and cradled it while a tattoo artist (in a t-shirt announcing to the world that tattooists do it with needles) etched a barcode onto the nape of her neck just above the hairline.

While everyone was nibbling small chunks of kosher cheese on sticks and drinking purple or crimson fruit juices out of improbable glasses with parasols, I stood talking with Pesach’s slave. There was not the slightest hint of servility in her demeanor. We chatted inanely for a few minutes, as though there were nothing untoward about the circumstances of our meeting. As though tattooing and shaving heads and such were the staples of every rabbi’s diet.

“And what, may I ask, is your name?” I asked, at my most urbane.

“I am Pesach’s slave.” She spoke simply, smiling as though she could read my thoughts, which for all intent and purpose might as well have been writ large upon my face. The problem is that I tend to get stuck inside my own frame of reference. I tried leading her through a series of linguistic mazes, like a rat in an experiment designed to force her admission that her slavery was notional, imaginary; a pretence. I made a damned fool of myself, of course. There I was, a rabbi who makes his living teaching people how to be God’s slaves, teaching my children how to pretend we, ourselves, were slaves in Egypt – using the Socratic method to trap this woman into admitting that slavery does not exist

unless the US constitution acknowledges it. She could see each of my disingenuous questions coming from a mile away. But she remained gracious and more than a little amused. She did not laugh at me, so eventually I had to laugh at myself and admit that slavery does not depend on the existence of a police force to enforce slave-ownership and send runaway slaves back to their masters. Legal enforceability of ownership is not what decides the thing. Like all spiritual conditions, you are what you do. As our conversation drew to a close, she suddenly asked me, “Rabbi, is it true now that I have a tattoo I can’t be buried in a Jewish cemetery?”

When she saw the look of incredulity on my face, she burst out laughing. She chuckled with such mirth and good humor I could not help but laugh along with her. It broke the ice between us and we have never stood on ceremony with each other since. My chagrin had already dissipated when she chuckled, “Just kidding.”

I don’t know how many times I have been asked the same question, “Rabbi, is it true if you have a tattoo they won’t bury you in a Jewish cemetery?”

Jewish mothers, bless ‘em. You have to acknowledge the power of their love, ha ha. Into the grave and from beyond, they have it all sewn up. No tragic or noble Greek mythic ever had a Jewish Mamma or they could not have gone on to acts of great virtue or mischief, could they? Imagine the clean underwear syndrome exploited exponentially unto the nth degree. Imagine dying, and then having the holy brother- or sisterhood come to perform the mosaic rites, only to leave abruptly in disgust, after they undress you and catch a sight of your tattoo...

Pesach reminded me that I’d promised to help Chaneleh if I could. “She called off the wedding, but I persuaded her to see you before making it a public thing. Please, do a mitzvah, talk to her, won’t you?”

Which is how I became acquainted with the McClouds, Sailor Sid and his wife Angelique, a bright and cheerful woman with almost white, blond hair and yellow, nicotine stained fingers; how I came to know their infernal color catalogue, a bestiary of tattooed monstrosities; how I came to be lectured on the history and ubiquity of the tattoo, with an apparently bottomless well of facts. Sailor Sid has the most intensely blue eyes I have ever stared into, with no visible pupil. Of course, his name is not McCloud. He was born in London during the Blitz. His name was Levi Dringlebaum, but his is a whole other story. He acquired his skills as a tattoo artist in the South China Seas, where he did time as a cook and mechanic on a tramp steamer. He was probably tough, I imagine you’d have to be, but he didn’t look like a tough. He didn’t look like a bouncer or anything. He reminded me of the janitor in my apartment building, a small, wiry, sixty year old wearing lace up sneakers and an open necked short sleeved shirt, with khaki pants. McCloud was his wife’s surname. He felt it better suited him as a professional name. And the fact she ruled him with an iron will probably didn’t hurt either.

Chanele had come to my house to talk about her problem, about her tattoos. I was at that time a complete ignoramus on the subject of ‘body art & modification’. I felt I needed a quick education. So, calling the place where Chana had gone, I made an appointment with the artists responsible.

They obliged me by offering to come to my house to talk. Theirs was a horror story, a nightmare and a classic black fantasy. Angelique McCloud, the woman who sat chattering ceaselessly in front of me, had tattooed a young Hasidic girl.

“They say it’s not a great tat unless you were too drunk at the time to make decisions—if you can recall any of the circumstances surrounding the night you had it done, you weren’t. But then again, they say so many things about tattoos, who knows what’s myth and what’s merely, you know, fable, anymore?”

Mrs. McCloud chattered on and on. But after two full hours being on the receiving end of her facts and figures, I was in data overload and could absorb no more. I only caught every sixth or seventh sentence. My mind wandered. Who knew there was so much to know about tattoos? There are times when I’m simply appalled at the vastness and profundity of my own ignorance.

“... on your face.”

“I beg your pardon,” I interrupted. “You lost me there for a moment. What did you say about the face?”

“Tattoos on your face are a very loud statement,” she repeated. “And we’ve found, in our experience, that someone who wants it done on his face is usually trying to atone for a guilt, you know, like if they’ve done something bad.”

I sat back in the chair and raising my hand, palm outward, in the internationally recognized symbol for "stop this ceaseless babble instantly, I can’t absorb another fact," asked for a moment of silence. It worked.

“This young woman was underage,” I said, gathering my thoughts. “It puzzle’s me. How could you tattoo her without the consent of an adult? Isn’t there some code of ethics or professional conduct, or something?”

There was silence, the sort of silence that comes after the avalanche.

“Don’t judge,” said Mrs. McCloud. “Just do what you can for that young woman, she needs your help.”

I went to bed and dreamed of girls with tattoos of green, violet and blue dragons on their faces and slaves fleeing the branding iron and of motorbikes.

Bainish, Chana’s father, is a wife-beater. If we’re looking for a beginning to the whole sorry mess, I guess this is where it has some sort of a beginning. But doctors and psychiatrists say the fact that both Bainish’s parents are concentration camp survivors has bearing on the subject. It’s true, but not relevant here. Bainish has been a wife beater for as long as he’s had a wife. Now, Chanele says that when she was fifteen, walking back from the library with her homework in a bag after a night of listening to her father batter her mother, she wandered into a side-street off the parkway instead of taking the bus home. She ended up walking into a tattoo parlor and started talking to the woman in charge. And surprise,

surprise, it's the tattoo artist, Angelique, a woman, not a man at all. If Chanele is to be believed, the decision to get a tattoo was an act of revenge against her father, Bainish. The long and short of it is, she had Mrs. McCloud put a small tattoo of a rose, on the top of her right thigh, where no one would see it.

Chanele is a big, raw boned, serious minded young woman, six foot one, two hundred twenty, thirty pounds. It's not that surprising she managed to pass herself off as much older than her fifteen years. But, frankly, I don't know how she had the gall. Then again, my dad never slapped my mom around in their bedroom, what do I know about what drives a kid nuts?

A month later she had a blue-black sunburst done around the belly button and then got hooked on the actual pain of being tattooed and the adrenalin rush that followed. Six months into the story it wasn't just the secret act of revenge on her father, Bainish, driving Chana - an addiction had kicked in. Did you know pain could be an addiction? You'd better believe it! Kids cut themselves, dose themselves with laxatives puke until they're hanging on for their dear lives to toilet bowls, getting high with control and pain and the secrets and the madness of it all.

It's a year and a half later, three weeks before her wedding to Mendel, and Chanele has tattoos on thirty-five percent of her body, and she has just called the wedding off.

"Chanele," I asked her for the millionth time, "But why did you do it?"

Some of her reasons make less sense than others, but this one stuck with me:

"D'you know, Rabbi, I was the only one in our Bais-Yaakov<sup>s</sup> class who knew Devorah was cutting herself, did you know that? No, of course you didn't. And I decided there and then, somewhere inside of me, that I would do anything but cut myself to death. Did you know her father was abusing her?"

Yeah, I knew. We all knew. Her death was classed an accident. Well, it was, wasn't it? She'd slashed her arms so many times without dying, why should that time have been different?

OK, so Chanele got herself tattooed because she wasn't going to cut herself. I guess that makes as much sense as any of the other crack brained reasons she's given for doing it.

In the years since Chanele, I've learned quite a bit about tattoos. It's mentioned in the Bible, so it must have been fairly common back then. There were family and tribal markings in which earths or ash or pigments were pushed under the skin with a special needle or stylus in different places on the body. Then there were the grieving rituals, for parents and such, which required something similar, usually on the face.

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<sup>s</sup> Unlike orthodox theorists on the education of Jewish girls who profess the common belief that education, per se, is toxic to women; that it rots the female brain, hyper-stimulates their sex glands and undermines women's faith in God and men, Bais Yaakov (Heb. Jacob's House) high schools are founded upon the radical idea that brain rot, hyper-stimulation of the sex glands and the loss of faith are preferable to ignorance. The jury is still out.

“Weren’t you afraid of being found out when you went swimming with your friends?” I asked Chanele. “Did you think no one would see your body, ever?”

She looked at me blankly for a while. “You haven’t been to a hasidic women’s swimming beach, have you? Obviously, or you wouldn’t ask that question...”

I admitted that I had never had the privilege.

“We are made to go swimming in long swim suits and with housecoats on top of them,” she said, adding, “My mother says that her mother boasted she never, her whole life long, ever got undressed or dressed with the lights on in the room, even in a bathroom.”

“So you assumed that if Mendel was only ever going to touch you when the lights were off you could keep it a secret for the rest of you life?” I asked her incredulously. She merely shrugged.

When a young woman, from an abusive home with secrets the magnitude of this one tries to tell the truth, things tend to grow more, not less complicated. But she was very lucky. Weddings are arranged in heaven, for sure.

After talking to Chanele and the McClouds, I spoke to her fiancé, Mendel, who displayed none of the indecision I’d expected, but knew instinctively what needed to be done. True marriages are made in heaven.

“My grandmother, the Babbe Odil, she’ll know how to fix this. Please tell Chanele, everything is taken care of. Tell her not to worry. Tell her I’ll be in touch.”

I conveyed her fiancé’s message to her and Chana burst into tears again; she was afraid, she said. When she arrived at I thought she was sailing on that sea of disembodiment way beyond panic and terror. She trembled quietly. Mendel arrived with his grandmother in tow. Almost eighty years old and with an accent you’d be proud to own in Bratislava. She twinkled as she spoke to us in Yiddish, but the shrewd, appraising look told me this was not a senile woman in her dotage. Mendel took me for a walk around the block and we did not talk about the tattoos. He wanted to know what I thought of the merits of Flatbush over Kensington as a place to live in Brooklyn. He wondered what I thought about the work of a particular wedding photographer. We left the women alone for an hour. When they emerged, Chanele’s eyes were still puffy from crying, but she was smiling for the first time in weeks. We dropped her off near her home.

“What did you say to her to cheer her up, so?” I asked the old lady when we were alone on her doorstep as I was dropping her off. “What did you say to give her the confidence to go through with it?”

She looked quizzically up at me and pursed her lips, as though weighing up the pros and cons of telling me her secrets. “Here,” she said, handing me her walking stick. “Hold this a minute, will you, young man.”

Solemnly, using fingers turned and knobbed with age and arthritis, she rolled and pulled back her left sleeve, showing me the veined and wrinkling skin under her arm.

“Look here, see my tattoo, I told Chanele, I have a tattoo also, number 2736-1845 ‘Til this day I ask myself why God gave me this tattoo when I was fifteen years old, in Bergen Belsen, and now I have the answer. You’ll marry my grandson, I told her, Mendel is a good boy and he wants you to marry him. Please, I said, please let me take you to the mikveh, sweetheart. I know what it’s like. Just you and me; no one else has to know.”

I assembled a Beis-Din of friends, and we took Pesach’s slave to the Mikveh bath and dunked her on the very same day as Chanele’s wedding. I gave Pesach a certificate attesting that the slave woman he named Bassie was dunked into slavery in front of us, in a Mikveh, kosher for that purpose, and that she is the property of Pesach, her master.

Apparently the barcode assigned to Bassie is registered with an international registry at [www.slaveregister.com](http://www.slaveregister.com). Go figure.

Well, and did you know, tattooing your slaves to prevent them escaping is practically the only permissible tattoo on the Jewish statute book, and Pesach got it? Lucky Pesach.

And so it was, two weddings I danced at. And to this day I wonder whether Mendel has ever looked to see.