

## Chapter Eleven

### And Pilegesh Makes Three

“Rabbi, can you predict what will happen if Abdi and Tamar perform *Yibum*, the Levirate marriage with one another and she remains here in this house as his second wife?” Judith, first of Abdullah’s wives asked me.

Abdullah watched me. “Asher,” he said. “If your eyes pop out any further you’re going to have to pick them up out of your coffee cup. Pull yourself together man.” He sat back, laced his fingers behind his neck and laughed out loud at my discomfiture.

I looked to Tamar. She was adamant. “I’m not leaving this house under any circumstances, it’s my home now.”

“Hhmmmm,” I mused. “Interesting question. Since no one would actually be performing the marriage ceremony, there isn’t one, is there now? So no one could accuse anyone of bigamy under the law... So, what you’re asking me about really, is what fallout you can expect in the Orthodox community if you try and take a second wife? We could talk about that. I could warn you which way to expect the doodoo to come flying from if that’s what you want.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand though, Abdullah. I’ve known you, what is it now, twenty-five years? Abdullah, this does not sound like you. Falling in *Ierv*, even with your widowed sister-in-law is not your style, is it?”

“Oh,” interrupted Tamar, shocked at my misapprehension. “You haven’t understood, Rabbi, I’m so sorry. This is not about Abdullah and me. I mean, I don’t want you to get the wrong impression or anything, I think he’s a wonderful man. I know you think so too. But this is about Judith and I. We want to live together, you know, and have babies and make a family.”

It began when I bumped into Abdi, actually, to be more accurate and to give him the honors due, Rabbi Abdullah Katanchi. He’s younger than me by a couple of years, of a large Persian family of émigrés from Kermanshah in Iran, and is named for his great grandfather, the legendary Hakim Abdullah Aghajahn, noble, scholar, healer and mystic. Abdi was accompanied by his wife, Judith, his brother’s widow Tamar, and her parents. They were walking out of a restaurant in Brooklyn, and together made a visually arresting group. I stopped to say hello, and found myself being introduced to Tamar’s father. He was a big wig, a very *groiser*<sup>1</sup> *macher*<sup>2</sup> in the Jewish Federation, a banker and financier, with connections all the way up the State Capitol steps. I’d heard of him, who hadn’t? He was very much the image of the elder statesman, immaculately attired in dove-colored morning suit, silk scarf and Abercrombie accessories.

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<sup>1</sup>Groiser: great, gross

<sup>2</sup>Macher: maker, mover and shaker.

Abdullah introduced me, “Rabbi Asher Schreiber, almost a childhood friend of mine, we did time together in yeshiva.”

All was murmured politeness and genial cordiality but I sensed tension, anger even, in the older man’s stance. Still, when you meet people out of context like that, in the middle of their day without warning, you’re likely to sense barriers, tensions and undercurrents that don’t have obvious or convenient explanations. You don’t know whether they’ve just been discussing a poor steak, a poor day on the stock exchange or even a poor prognosis from their oncologist, do you?

“Perhaps the reason Mr. Groiser Macher looks like a man who’s just had to swallow a spider,” I told myself, smiling all the time. “Is because he’s recently been on the receiving end of a genuine, Abdullah original, *Az Mah* - So What? He does not appear the sort of person to find it amusing.”

Abdullah, I love him like a brother but I’d be the first to admit he’s infuriatingly impossible to argue with, he has a maddening stock response to all questions, dismissing them with the Hebrew phrase, *Az Mah* - So What?

We spent years at study in the same room at the Yeshiva. He was so far ahead of me I didn’t even have to feel inferior. Some people have such brilliance it’s no ego burden to acknowledge the superiority. His Talmud skills were so far advanced it would have been presumptuous to compare our scholarship, even unfavorably, and risible too, he was absolutely the top boy in the Yeshiva. But, and this only added to the romantic aura surrounding him, you couldn’t get him cornered into any sort of debate.

How often I tried manipulating him into dispute over a passage in the Talmud in the yeshiva. We all did, to no avail Abdi would not be drawn in<sup>3</sup>.

I’d walk up to Abdullah in the Beis Medrash<sup>4</sup> saying ‘I think I understand the text now, I think I got it.’ He’d look up at me from his books without lifting his head, and cock his chin up in a gesture that said, ‘Come on then, if you’re going to give it to me, give it to me.’ I’d take the cue and advance my latest theory, the sentence means this or that. His face would be down into his books again and, without looking up, he’d raise his left hand, palm upwards and shrug it with a quick circular twist of the wrist, accompanied by the ubiquitous phrase, *Az Mah* - So What? I’d walk away non the wiser, still wondering whether he agreed or not?

The thing is, he listened. Whether his head was in his books, or he stood smoking a cigarette, staring out of the window, when you spoke you knew he was listening, you could feel him listening. He swallowed all your words, but always answered them with the

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<sup>3</sup>There’s no other way to study Talmud, you have to have someone, who becomes your instant adversary, to dispute it with. ‘Rubbish,’ he says. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’ ‘Ok then,’ you respond. ‘If you’re so clever, you say what the passage means?’ Back and forth, goes the bickering. Arguing the obscure into clarity.

<sup>4</sup> Beis Medrash: House of Study

identical phrase, *Az Mah* - So What? And you were left wondering what exactly he meant by that?

These days, I've heard, people look for it as a sign from on high, an eleventh hour reprieve, even as deliverance from the Angel of Death. A steady stream of petitioners wends towards Abdullah Katanchi's office seeking audience with him. He listens to them, makes a note of their names and promises to say a prayer on their behalf. But rumor down the grapevine is this. When reciting your list of woes to Rabbi Abdullah, watch him carefully out of the corner of your eye. If he makes the *Az Mah* - So What gesture while you describe your illness or impending doom, you may as well stop worrying, it's already taken care of.

If Tamar's father, the *groiser macher* had been trying to pressure Abdi into acceding a point or giving a straight answer to a question, it might explain his pained look. But, looking at the others in the group, I suspected other deeper issues were surfacing. My job is not always to be nosy or inquisitive, minding my own business is a large part of my spiritual path, so I refrained from indulging my burning curiosity with so much as a raised eyebrow.

All good things, they say, come to those who wait, and it didn't take more than a few days for the phone call to come; Mr. and Mrs. Groiser Macher requested the pleasure of my company. Tamar, their daughter was tragically widowed and there were a number of important matters that the Groiser Machers thought I might be able to help them sort through.

If Tamar's father was a trifle on the boardroom-formal side, the mother was not. She didn't need to be; she was pink. It was a short haired, full length beaver coat, and pink fur was all the rage that year, so it was very rich, but it was overly ostentatious for a quiet Brooklyn street. Her hair, with its pink velvet ribbon looked blond enough and thick enough and shiny enough to make her a trophy all on her own. Chainik sums it best. She manages to convey, says Chainik, a mostly-kosher-Scarsdale-home, anxious-Jewish-parent-from-the-Bronx angst, with a grieving-mother-in-law heartbrokenness, and all, marvelously, in the very same tragic smile she flashes you so wanly.

The purpose of the meeting was to discover whether I might prevail upon Abdullah to perform the *Chalitzah* ceremony for his sister-in-law Tamar without delay.

When Elishama, Abdullah's brother died without issue, Abdullah became legally obliged under ancient Jewish Law to perform the biblical levirate marriage, to perpetuate the name of the dead brother by marrying his widow.

The levirate marriage is no longer practiced these days, so the alternative *Chalitzah* is performed. Beis Din has a special shoe, built to a design handed down for thousands of years, which is worn by the *Choletz*, the man about to release his sister-in-law from her bond to her dead husband. Beis Din asks him, will you not marry your dead brother's widow and perpetuate his name? He answers, No. The widow removes his special shoe and spits into it. That's the Chalitzah ceremony, after which she is free to marry whomever she wants. Apparently, Mr. Groiser Macher was feeling thwarted, Abdullah did not appear

to appreciate the urgency of the matter. It was important to have closure on his daughter's marriage so she might move on in her life. It was not good, he felt, for his widowed daughter to be stuck and tied in a situation like this. Mrs. Pink delicately sniffed her agreement of the assessment.

I said I would do what I could. Which is how I came to be sitting with Abdullah and his wife over coffee listening to Judith and Tamar talk about their romance.

When our Rosh Yeshiva had hinted it might be time for Abdullah to start teaching at the Yeshiva, to take on a class of beginners, or perhaps tutor the post-graduates, he left abruptly and went to work with his father. One rumor had it the family brought their millions out of Iran in cash negotiable 1kg packets of Afghani heroin. Another version had it in the priceless rubies given his grandfather as a gift in recognition of discreetly understated services rendered to Shah Pahlevi. Abdullah says there were no millions. His family arrived penniless in the USA and went looking immediately for likely real estate to buy and sell. I'm inclined to believe him, but that did not alter the fact the Katanchi's were fabulously wealthy now.

A few months after leaving the yeshiva he published a book of photographs of rural and urban landscapes reflected in the shiny chrome hubcaps of old fashioned, American roadsters, all over the 50 states. The book was titled *Transience* and sold 30,000 copies. Next, he designed the layout of an immense animal cemetery in Queens, into which his father sank some two million of the family fortune. In the second year of operation it was sold for forty million dollars. He took to jamming in the evenings with musicians hanging out near the Blue Note in the village. His jazz, they said, was reminiscent of Fats Waller.

Then he left to go trekking through Africa and Asia and returned a year later with a wife he met in that horrible, anglicized synagogue in Nairobi where they all make believe Jewish worship should be a High Church ceremonial. She was as alike to him as a peach is to a banana. He was swarthy and dark eyed; she was fair and green eyed. He was built tall and broad and powerful; she looked as ethereal as a pre-raphaelite angel. He was obviously wild and elemental; she was serene, placid and collected. He and Judith were childless for many years. They lived, we heard, in Europe. Now in Krakow, Poland, now in Nice on the Cote D'Azur and now in London.

Then, as happens in life sometimes, there was a death. Elishama, his freshly married youngest brother, died in a car accident, leaving his childless widow, Tamar to her grief alone. She moved everything she wanted to keep out of their apartment and into the home of Abdullah and Judith, who had recently moved back to Brooklyn after a decade spent in Europe. There was not a lot of stuff for Tamar to move, clothes mostly and the paraphernalia of a newlywed couple.

"Nu," I asked Abdullah. "What are you going to do next?"

It had taken me quite a while to figure out what was odd about their home. I'm unused to Jewish homes not specifically designed for habitation by a parcel of small children. Abdullah and Judith; married for twelve years and recent builders of the home had

designed it to suit themselves. 'Building to suit oneself, what a strange and foreign concept,' I thought.

"Nu, Asher, tell us," he replied, looking at me lazily. "Where does the narrative lead us next? You're the expert."

I looked around the table again. Judith and Tamar might have been holding hands or not, I don't recall. But they were obviously a couple.

Judith answered. "Things here are complex, rabbi. I cannot conceive a child; that's one factor. Tamar and I are determined to live together; that's a second factor. And Abdullah must perform either a *Chalitzah* or *Yibum* ceremony to honor Elishama our dead brother's memory; that's a third factor. But there is no shortage of love in Abdi's heart, he can love Tamar too and make room for her, if I can. Then, if Tamar and Abdullah have children, our lives will be whole and joyful in a different and wonderful way. Don't you agree?"

"Different, certainly. What does your father say?" I asked Abdullah.

"He says he is too old to deal with it, for or against, and I should do what I decide," Abdullah answered. "I've decided to follow Judith's lead; we are a threesome. See what you can do, Asher, if there's anything to be done?" He and I looked at one another steadily. The years have made our differences seem part of our friendship. We are still not equals, his inner topography remains a mystery to me and I still feel somewhat gauche around him. But there is gentleness to his demeanor these days, his gaze neither chills nor sears; it warms and soothes. In fact Abdi has become a philanthropist. As many petitioners leave his office with a generous pecuniary souvenir of their visit as leave with assurances of health and salvation. We met each other's gaze in silent dialogue a while, and it seemed to me that for the first time in our acquaintance Abdullah was asking a favor; I nodded assent, and left.

I have seen men and women in rage, but the white knuckled routine exhibited by Mr. Groiser Macher was wonderful to behold. It was no less savage for being so tight-lipped, and no less frothily rabid for being the rage of someone with manicured fingernails. A man who climbs to the top of a metropolitan Jewish Federation, someone with practical aspirations to the chairmanship of the Elders of Zion, (what Chainik calls the World Jewish Congress) can probably pull a good many strings. He can wake people in the night and spread his misery around liberally.

And so it was. Having been perceived as a point of first contact, I was privileged to witness much of Mr. Groiser Macher's wrath at first hand. Tamar's father tried with all the means at his disposal to free his daughter from the clutches of that wicked, scheming Persian seducer; my supremely indifferent and impervious colleague, Abdullah.

The reason *Yibum* has been discontinued is interesting in itself: because of sexual desire and carnal interest. Believe it or not, the explanation for suspending the practice is that people don't perform the Biblical Commandment for its own sake anymore. A man about to have sexual intercourse with his brother's widow might have the wrong intention. He

may not be thinking of his obligation and commitment to his dead brother, he may be thinking of himself and his sister-in-law. And that would be incestuous, criminal and unforgivable. The children from such a union would be unholy, mamzers!

When word got about that not only was Abdullah not proposing to perform the Chalitzah ceremony, that he was planning to do Yibum with Tamar instead, there was a noisy and public rabbinic outcry. Rabbis hate being thwarted, and they hate being thwarted most when they have a stack of legal precedents and a library full of rulings in black and white to substantiate their opinions. And here Abdullah was flaunting his will right in their faces.

Mr. Groiser Macher's worst fears were realized and compounded by the very notoriety he had sought to avoid. It made him very mad indeed and the issue became a media circus.

"My sweet, beautiful and respected daughter is become a spectacle, a paradigm of aberrant and in-your-face behavior," he told me in that theatrical and hyperbolic way he adopts in the heat of passion. It was Jewish melodrama at its best or worst, depending on your point of view.

And it was fascinating to watch a man used to wielding boardroom powers, a man accustomed to have others execute his judgments, to call the sheriff, evict a trespasser or take control of company, find himself reduced to having the Beis Din, its rabbis and its rabbinical clerks his only and last resort.

Counsel advised him that as the Yibum marriage is a private transaction conducted in the bedroom between the parties involved without the need for legal or ecclesiastic sanction, there's really nothing the civil law can do to prevent its taking place. Here in the USA we do not police bedrooms, he was told. Bigamy under the law requires a marriage ceremony of some type to have taken place. Two consenting adults of either sex locking themselves into a bedroom do not a marriage ceremony make.

But he was not a man so easily deterred. He considered his daughter's course of action scandalous and was determined to prevent it by any means at his disposal. Abdullah's behavior was provocative, he said, unscrupulous and manipulative. Judith's existence was ignored for the time being.

Media turned it into a three-ring circus when a group of rabbis published an open letter in the local Jewish weekly newspaper denouncing the impending Yibum as a licentious act of the most indecent and offensive sort, a transgression of a Biblical prohibition, a wicked and despicable offence.

Well, you know how it is; I don't have to tell you. People love a wicked and despicable offence, especially if it also involves people engaging in sex with one another. Once the public caught on that there was some sexual drama being played out, their attention was riveted and the rumor-mill worked overtime.

The threat to invoke a *Cherem* of *Rabeinu Gershom* was the next unwieldy piece of ordinance brought to bear in the engagement. Gershom, a 10<sup>th</sup> century German rabbi

issued a ban on polygamy that was later enforced with the threat of excommunication. For three weeks many of the local synagogues had someone read out a letter threatening a ban of excommunication upon anyone in the community daring to defy the rabbis and enter into a polygamous marriage. People whispered loudly, demanding of the man reading the proclamation to be informed about the subject and circumstances of the case. But Abdullah's name was not yet common knowledge; the Groiser Macher was trying to apply pressure without publicizing his daughter's role in the affair, he was still trying to avoid scandal in his family.

To his chagrin and vexation, he discovered that the ban is not universally accepted. The Moroccan, Yemenite and of course the Persian Synagogues all declined to have the ban read from their lectern on the Sabbath and at public gatherings, each citing different excuses and reasons for their demurral. I suspect that to many North African and oriental Jews there is something frightening and monolithic about the Ashkenazi, western European attitude to customs and rituals, an unspoken assumption that Ashkenazi is the dominant paradigm and overwhelmingly replaces all the others. It is arrogant.

I met with Judith and Tamar. First Judith wanted my assurance that Abdullah would be in no physical danger if he continued to thumb his nose at the Jewish ecclesiastical authorities, that whoever the zealots were, out there in the world, looking for trouble, none would come looking for her husband. But I could not give her such an assurance. Zealotry is sometimes unpredictable and people often more so. I explained that the community sometimes encouraged hotheads who sought relief for their own frustrations by dishing out pain to others.

"You know," Tamar interjected. "Back in college I did history. I remember being so impressed with this bit of advice King Charles the first gave his son, later Charles the second. It's given in one of those sonorous almost Miltonian sentences, and it stuck in my head forever.

If any be Bible-mad, overmuch burnt with fiery zeal he may think it a service to God to destroy you, and bring an example of a king with a hard name from the Old Testament.

'Course, knowing that didn't help him save his own head when the time came. Beheaded just the same."

"Thanks Tamar," said Judith. "For that happy thought. Can you think of anything else encouraging?"

"Well," responded Tamar. "There was Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, plus the two concubines. And they seemed to have made a go of it, didn't they?"

"Actually," I reminded both of them. "The only happy marriage in the Bible was that of Isaac and Rebecca, precisely because it was just the two of them. The Hebrew word for second wife is *Tsara*, and it means trouble whatever way you translate it. But please, if you don't mind my asking probing and personal questions, I'd like to know who proposed marriage to whom here?"

They both giggled.

Judith was in her mid thirties, very fair skinned and Scandinavian looking, while Tamar was in her early twenties, very dark and Mediterranean. Sitting side by side the physical differences couldn't have been more obvious, but when they spoke those differences seemed much less noticeable.

Tamar looked amused. "You know," she leaned over towards me, saying, "Judith is so straight and honest and open, it's frightening to see her so clueless when it comes to romance and stuff like that.

"After Elishama died -and we'd only been married such a short time, he left the house to go and buy fish for Shabbat and never came home- I didn't know what to do or where to go to. You've met my parents. We are not the same culture. Daddy is a major communal figure and Mom is his helpmeet. They try hard to be parents, but they haven't a clue what I'm about. Daddy always wanted me to be what his mother was. I think she was famous as a busybody doing good works and sisterhood missions just to keep from murdering grandpa who was even more driven than my father, but daddy thinks she was like a Jewish Mother Theresa. So the whole family is caught up in this super achieving role model activity that no one is allowed to escape from. And I'm expected to crown it all with my accomplishments.

"So when I met Judith who has no clue what it means to be driven, who's so serene she seems like a Japanese garden or a Monet painting to me, I landed on my feet and discovered I can be, just *be*, without having to be doing all the time.

"Tell the truth we haven't really had that much time to deal with lust and sex. It's just a sort of a growing awareness that that's where our life is headed, that's how the story goes. Judith and I are a couple now, we simply see the world in those terms. We're a couple, that's it.

"And what Judith doesn't see is that she already a totally accepting and unshockable person. She has to be, she's married to Abdullah Katanchi. He's elemental like a weather pattern over North America, you know. Trying to get in his way and divert him from his path is like trying to stop a hurricane. And yet when he's with Judith he absorbs some of her serenity and becomes human, and she has no idea how beautiful and seductive that is, well, to me, anyway."

Judith stared at Tamar, amazed to hear herself so glowingly described. She just shook her head and looked across at me. For a long moment she held my gaze and I saw her come to a decision.

She said, "I think such a sweet speech deserves something in return, so I'll tell you this, Rabbi. Something I have never thought I'll tell another person. But when I see Tamar walking, when I watch her and she's not aware I'm watching, and I see her shape and her bones and muscles and flesh and skin and I see it all move under her clothes, I am overcome with such powerful feelings of sexual desire I think I will burst. My stomach starts churning over and over like a cement mixer and I have no idea what sort of serenity

Tamar refers to because I don't think I've had any of it since I became aware of these feelings I have for her."

The local Beis Din, acting at the behest of unnamed rabbinical leaders in the Tri-State region, summoned Abdullah to discover why he was refusing to do his duty to his dead brother by performing the Chalitzah ceremony. Abdullah would not be drawn into an argument, and did nothing beyond stating his intention to perform the Yibum marriage with Tamar, his dead brother's widow, with or without sanction of the Beis Din.

Tamar's parents attended the hearing. Judith and Tamar sat side by side, holding hands throughout.

When the chief Dayan or magistrate of the Beis Din began abusing Abdullah in no uncertain terms, calling him names, describing him as a lecherous betrayer of his brother's faiths, a thief of his brother's property and inheritance and an all round villain. Tamar stood up bravely, pulsating with wrath and indignation. Diminutive though she was in stature her presence dominated the room, as though she were the focus of every scrap of attention, and for the first time, demanded to be heard.

"No one has addressed me yet," she began. "You sit and judge without referring to me or inquiring about my wishes, as though Jewish law were still fixated on property and inheritance laws the way it was five hundred years ago in the time of Maran, while ignoring the basic ruling of Maran on Yibum."

The judges looked at her askance and avoided one another's eyes in embarrassment. She had put her tiny finger smack-dab on the biggest flaw in their procedure. According to the basic ruling of the Codes of Jewish Law the Yibum is still in force. It is only Ashkenazi custom that forced it into abeyance. They knew they were on shaky ground. The chief Dayan rustled his paper and cleared his throat as though preparing to respond, but Tamar did not give him room. She spoke quickly, enunciating her words with care. I was impressed with the way she gathered her thoughts and strung them together into speech. I wish I could think as swiftly on my feet.

"You proceed as though my opinion counted for naught, pretending you have power to make decisions about my life without my decisions having any weight or value. But I am here to tell you that you are all wrong. And how dare you speak to my brother in law that disrespectful and contemptuous way? Rabbi Katanchi has never so much as looked at me as anything other than his sister, let alone made improper advances to me. You should be ashamed of yourselves for having such prurient and unhealthy interest in our private life."

The rabbi holding the gavel began clanking it down onto the plinth, bang-bang, calling the court to order, "The court is adjourned," he announced. "Adjourned," and rose from his seat. But Tamar was not finished.

I will always look back with a smile and remember that day and consider myself privileged to have been, as Chainik calls it, 'Vouchsafed a vision of the Gnashing of the Teeth.' I may

never win the national lottery or see Earth from Space, but I was here when Tamar spun around and confronted her parents.

“I’m also here to tell you, daddy, that you must stop interfering, once and for all. Get out of my business. You have no idea how much damage you’re doing. You are willful and cruel. And you, Mummy, I know you have a lot to put up with and everything, but it is time you got it through your head that I am making my own choices; that I will not be or become an extension of daddy. Get it through your head once and for all that I am Lesbian. I’m a big, kosher, Jewish lesbian, mom, a really intensive, juicy one.” She smiled at her mother and sat down.

It didn’t all quite end there. Tamar’s father resorted to last resorts, the nuclear deterrent and mutually-assured-destruction weapon of matrimonial rabbinics; the Annulment.

Because they could not interfere with the Yibum or coerce Abdullah any other way, a deal was struck with the British rabbinical courts. The Chief Rabbinate of Nairobi, where Abdi’s marriage to Judith took place, bowed before the authority of the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire and colonies, and duly annulled the marriage.

“So,” Judith told me a few weeks later, “I’m the Pilegesh – concubine now. Isn’t that quaint? And, according to the local, very narrowly defined Jewish law, only Tamar is married to Abdi, while in civil law I’m the wife.”

Then Tamar conceived, and the phone calls from Mrs. Groiser Macher began. Would I, could I, might I facilitate reconciliation between her daughter and her? As a parent, surely I appreciate the depth of emotion and pain the rupture of their relationship was causing her?

“How does Tamar’s father feel about reconciliation?” I asked her. She was silent. I called him myself, at his office, and accepted his invitation to come and talk. His office is on the forty-seventh floor of a prestigious midtown office block. He stood at the window overlooking Central Park and greeted me guardedly, but without the chill he’d displayed at previous meetings.

“Thank you for coming to see me here in my office,” he began. “I understand my wife has called you for help with communication concerning my daughter’s confinement. Quite an old fashioned word, confinement, isn’t it. These days it’s all pregnancy and childbirth, ob-gyn, and midwifery. Confinement isn’t on the cards these days, is it?”

Listen, Rabbi Schreiber, I’ll be frank with you, let’s make no bones about it. I’m a powerful man, and I admit, I’m used to having my own way of things. Not used to having my will obstructed by the likes of your colleague Abdullah. I must also admit that when my daughter began dating her late husband, Elishama Katanchi, I did a little research into his family. Did you know,” he looked keenly at me, “were you aware the Katanchi family have friends in high places?”

“How high?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“High as you like,” Mister Suddenly-not-such-a-groiser Macher responded wearily. “I’ve tried to discover exactly what’s so important about him, but have been told firmly to mind my own business.”

“You’re not referring to high up in the Jewish Federation?” I asked just to make sure. He laughed coarsely at that, and stared out of the window a while.

“In the safe which is located behind the painting on the wall behind you,” he went on. “I used to keep a file, a dossier on your friend, Rabbi Abdi, as you call him. I paid large sums of money for the privilege of acquiring it. Shall I tell you what happened to it? Well, three large, neatly dressed men, agents of the U.S. Treasury, came into this office and told me to go to the safe. They gave me the exact combination, mind you. The very combination which only I have by heart, which I have not yet written down anywhere and do not intend to so long as my memory does not deteriorate. They gave me precise details of the dossier’s position, just to make sure I understood they could have extracted it at anytime without my knowledge. They asked me politely to remove it and hand it over to them and forget it ever existed.

“Shall I tell you what happened when I went to Israel for a very serious conversation with the Sefardi Chief Rabbi? I won’t hide it from you. I was hoping to his secure his assistance in isolating Abdullah from the rest of the Jewish community. I was invited to his office for a private talk. But as soon as I mentioned the name Abdullah Katanchi, he jumped up out of his seat and put on his hat and belted his robe. Do you understand, rabbi, the chief rabbi of Israel practically stood to attention at the mere mention of your friend’s name? He asked me if I had ever met Rabbi Abdullah face to face. His actual words were, ‘did you look upon him with your own eyes?’

“Now, tell me, Rabbi Schreiber, I’m a man who appreciates a mystery as much as the next man, is all this smoke and mirrors? Who am I dealing with?”

“You really want to know?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely. I want to know who this man is. Tell me what you know.”

“Why not just settle for knowing he’s the father of your grandchild?” I put it to him gently. And I’m glad to say he took my advice. Tamar delivered a baby boy, and her parents attended the *Bris* - Circumcision ceremony, where he was given the name Elishama.

Abdullah’s father was unwell, so the *Bris* took place in the hospital, at the bedside in his private room. The *Sandak*<sup>5</sup> was a stranger to me; a wizened man with a strong resemblance to Abdi. I watched Mr Groiser Macher take the child and place it lovingly on the *Sandak*’s knees. He stepped backwards and I saw his eyes meet those of the *Sandak* who was wrapped in a Tallit. They smiled at one another. ‘Mazal Tov’, they whispered. The *Sandak* remained throughout the short feast celebrating the circumcision that followed. I couldn’t

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<sup>5</sup> *Sandak*: The man holding the child on his knees while the circumcision is being performed.

shake the feeling that they were related somehow, but could not place him in Abdullah's family. The Katanchi's are not an extensive family, and I thought I knew them all.

Tamar's father greeted me warmly, and took me aside to regale me with another Abdullahism, as he now calls them. "I told Abdullah, the Sandak wished me such a cordial Mazal Tov, you'd think he was a relative. So, without blinking an eye, he says, 'Oh, that was Hakim Abdullah Aghajahn, he was probably greeting you as one grandfather to another.'

"It was my great, great grandfather," Abdi told me. "I invited him."

"Invited him?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, smiling. "No one may refuse an invitation to a Circumcision. Listen, Rabbi Asher, thank you for talking to my father-in-law. Helping make peace is the highest ideal, and you kept the lines of communication open."

"Your father-in-law shared with me some of the things he discovered about you, mostly by accident."

"Oh, did he?"

"Yes, he did," I replied. "Don't all these secrets weigh heavily on you?"

"What secrets?"

But Abdullah's response when I revealed the information his father-in-law had given me was fairly predictable. "The Secretary of State," I demanded of him. "You have the cell-phone number of the State Department?"

"*Az-Mah* So What?" he said.