

Chapter Four

Avram and his *Tallit* - Prayer Shawl

The day after Yom Kippur my feet hurt like crazy. It was time for me to visit my favorite shoemaker. The corner of 47th and 18th is a bewildering Polyglotistan of Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian and English; billboards advertise everything from Persian maquillage to Lithuanian wide-bodied chickens, and tucked among the doorways is my man. I used to worry that ubiquitous plastics would force all the traditional wood and leather trades and practitioners out of business, but we are adaptable, in Avram's case, infinitely adaptable. Instead of antique trade-magazines laying around for customers to read as they wait on their shoe repairs, this little store quietly proffers dog-eared copies of the Zohar and the Mishne Be'rurah. The smells of leather adhesive and boot blacking are what you'd expect, and in the background there are always the complex tinny rhythms of the near eastern music issuing from a cracked cassette-tape player. Armed with nothing more than a piece of stiff polyethylene plastic, a candle flame and his calloused, stained fingers, Avram engineers superb orthotic miracles for collapsing arches and aching metatarsal bones.

It works like this: You walk into his tiny cubicle storefront. He looks at your face, watches you wince as you walk, observes your posture and, finally, carefully inspects the pattern of wear outside and inside your shoes. Or something to that effect, don't ask me how he does it, I'm just a customer. He gets down on his hands and knees and draws an outline of your foot onto a sheet of plastic with a grease pencil, that's as much of the process as I am given to understand. The rest is all magic of one sort or another, the less I know about it, the better.

I sat down on a chair, and he bent to help me off with my shoes and felt my toes through the socks.

"You have the big toe of a High Priest," he muttered, looking up at me. "How did you get the big toe of a High Priest?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He stood up and looked down at me almost accusingly. "What were you doing yesterday?"

"Same as you. I was fasting."

"No, you weren't. You entered the holy of holies. You're either a kabbalist, a cantor or a saint. Which are you?"

"All this you can tell from feeling someone's toes?" I asked, incredulous. "Tell me how."

He waved his hands dismissively. "Never mind that. You keep your secrets and I keep mine. Don't tell me; better I don't know. My family were always shoemakers. It is claimed

we are descendents of Rabban Johanan the Sandler. We don't just make shoes, we fix them," he said, as though that explained everything.

"My family are *Hazanim* - Cantors," I told him. "We are descended from the seers. We don't just see visions, we make them, Haha. And this, together with a token will get us on the subway," I quipped, lamely.

Here in America, it is said, anyone may join the meritocracy. Nevertheless, aristocracy is defined by how many generations one's family have been wealthy. More than ten generations and one is elevated to the peerage equivalent.

"Yes. If your feet will carry you up the steps to the tracks, that is" he retorted. "And if you bring me in your orthotics before Yom Kippur, next year, I will remove the leather patches and you can use them in your slippers."

"A High Priest goes barefoot," I said. "No orthotics."

He leaned over me and spun the *Open* sign on his storefront window to show *Closed* before continuing urgently. "You can make jokes, be my guest, rabbi. But I did not probe to be nosy. I have been making the inserts in your shoes for ten years now. You could say I know your feet better than my own. But until just now I never knew you were a Kabbalist. I need to know that I am not mistaken, because I have a confession to make, please, will you listen to me?"

"Yesterday was Yom Kippur," I replied laughing, "what possible sins could you have to confess today, Avram; there hasn't been enough time to do anything yet..." But Avram was not to be denied. It seems Yom Kippur was not a proper Day of Atonement for him, something very heavy weighed on his mind.

I was not comfortable hearing a confession from him. I'm not a holy man. Looks can be deceiving. Nor do I give advice. (I'd like to have a few friends left at the end.) Avram and I discussed his need to talk to someone urgently. I suggested a local rabbi with a lifetime of counseling experience, a very devout psychotherapist at the Maimonedes Medical Center, around the corner. I even suggested as a last resort, he do what I do when all other avenues had been explored to no avail, that he consult with my wife, Shulamis. But Avram declined the suggestions. He insisted on spilling his secret woe to me.

Years have passed, and I still wonder what it was about my feet that made him choose me to unburden himself to? Could he really tell by feeling or observing them that I had had a life changing spiritual experience the previous day?

"Listen," he began. "I have been married six years. My wife is also from a Georgian family; our parents were born in the same village, near Tbilisi. We have two beautiful children, praise God."

"Praise God," I agreed.

“We both know what is expected of us. We are both brought up in the ways of the Torah, we observe Shabbat, we keep a kosher kitchen, guard the laws of *niddah* - menses. Neither of us has looked at another man or woman. I swear, Rabbi, I swear, I have not looked at another woman. We have no television in the house.”

Avram wore a hunted look, as though I had just caught him in some shameful act. Just contemplating what he was about to tell me was wringing him like a mangle. His eyes flickered from side to side as though searching for an escape route. Looking through his store window without noticing the pedestrians outside, he passed his hand over his brow in a wiping motion, scratched his stubbly beard once or twice and sighed. He was a man laboring under an unbearable burden of guilt, but the urge to confess, as most of discover occasionally, can be primal. Staring at the overhead train clacketing and fritzing spark showers through the tracks, as it made its way down New Utrecht Avenue to Coney Island, he spoke distractedly.

“It’s the day after Yom Kippur. I should be feeling like it’s a new year, a clean beginning, but I don’t feel like that. I didn’t get rid of my sins yesterday. I have to tell someone. A man shouldn’t walk around with such feelings of being cut off from the community. You will keep my secrets private, I know, will you not?”

He turned to me again, searching my face for signs. Perhaps he looked for evidence of trustworthiness? Sometimes all you can do is sit and wait for a man to realize what he’s already decided. I waited. As his face took on a more resigned and thoughtful expression, I looked at him appraisingly for the first time. He was a handsome young man of the Sefardi, near eastern, ethnic persuasion, with short black curly hair, deep set, glittering and flashing eyes. His was at once a quick and intelligent face, full of humor and passion. Imagine yourself back in the Temple at Jerusalem, oh, say, 3000 years ago. Now visualize dark skinned, intense and passionate faces of priests. See them in their white linen shirts and pants, watch them hold an animal for slaughter. Look at their nimble fingers and the powerful muscles on their arms. Feel the intensity of their gaze as they look at you, burning you with their questions. “Would you have me spill the life of this mute animal instead of the life you owe, for the sin you committed? Would you ask me to slit its throat and watch the blood spread on the ground like water for the sake of your soul?” If you can see a priest in your mind’s eye, if you can sense the face, it is the face of Avram, my shoemaker from Brooklyn.

“I was brought up to wear my *Tsitsith* - Fringes all the time,” Avram continued “Even to bed, you understand?”

I nodded. This is the custom among Orthodox Jews, to sleep in a head covering and *Tsitsith*.

“My wife made fun of the *Tsitsith* at first, she said they do not belong in our bed. But I don’t pretend to be a sage. I have no wisdom. I do what I was shown, the way my father did it. I refused to sleep without them. I don’t know whether I did right or wrong; I didn’t even stop to think about it, really. I just do it like the tradition I was shown. And then, one time, my wife and I were, you know, what’s the word in English, which is not so coarse as that

other word? ‘Making Love’—I like this expression they use. It is a clean use of words, no? Yes, making love, we were, yes it is, making love. It is hard to tell you this in nice ways, you understand? The Tsitsith, my Tsitsith got caught. She said, “Avram, stop. Your Tsitsith it is hurting me.” But I wouldn’t stop, you see, I just wouldn’t stop. I was caught up in the love, you know. Maybe it is not love. I wonder about this. If it could be love why is it not with love always? I had reached the place in the love make where I couldn’t care, but if you don’t care, is this love? Is a philosophical question, no?”

“Avram,” I interjected. “I am happy to have a philosophical discussion with you, about any subject of your choice, but now is not the time.”

“Rabbi, I was ignoring her completely with the front of my mind but in the back of my mind I must have known what I was doing, because I did it harder, and I was then a bit ashamed, but not enough ashamed.”

He stopped and watched me. But I was not going to be drawn into a discussion of shame, not if it meant letting him off the hook, so, I continued regarding him without comment. He threw up his hands with a cry of despair, and, throwing all caution to the winds, continued.

“I don’t know whether she was just uncomfortable, my wife or whether she was angry and fed up with me, or what, but she reached down between us and she grabbed hold of the Tsitsith and she pulled very hard. You know? But by then it was wrapped and all entangled around me, you know? So she pulled very hard, rabbi, she pulled so hard her body was arching, but I would not stop what I was doing. I could feel the Tsitsith like sandpapering my skin, and I knew at that moment I was not going to give up no matter what happened. When I look back on that moment in time, I ask myself, why it is I did it, why is it?”

The noise of the telephone ringing was, to say the least, an anticlimactic disturbance. Avram excused himself and, reaching behind the counter, lifted the receiver off the telephone attached to the wall. The conversation began quietly enough. Soon, though, the conversation was a rapid staccato of exchanges that tapered off into his silence. He paused and placed the phone back on the hook thoughtfully.

“Rabbi, my wife is on her way here. I think she wants to see you. I told her I was talking to someone about my anxiety about our private life. She is not so happy about it, she says. I feel I need to make excuse to you. Perhaps I have offended you, have I offended you?”

“I think,” I said. “You should finish telling me what you had begun to tell me when the phone rang. Once your wife arrives there will be other constraints and embarrassments perhaps, don’t you think so?”

He nodded while nervously arranging and fussily tidying a few items on the shelves that hung on the wall; shoelaces, shoe polish and automatic and telescopic umbrellas. He nodded again.

“I should tell you before my wife arrives, yes of course. She pulled, and I remember looking into her eyes in that very second of time, I looked into her eyes and instead of listening to her I did the opposite, by doing what I was doing even harder. May God forgive, rabbi, I was like a mad man acting. More and more, more faster and more deeper, until I could feel my Tsitsith was hurting at her, my wife, also her most sensitive place, each time I did what I did. And so we came to what do you say in Yiddish, *Oi Gevalt*, yes? Both of us shouting and crying out and laughing, and it was crazy, rabbi, crazy, I tell you.”

Avram’s eyes were laughing, but his face was serious. Then he broke into a smile, looking at me.

“You know what happened, don’t you?”

I nodded. He didn’t need to draw me a map. “You couldn’t wait to do it again,” I suggested. “You felt guilty, but equally exhilarated. Your wife made you your favorite sandwiches to take with for lunch and she didn’t complain when you left the toilet seat up, right”

“How did you know about the toilet seat up?” Avram demanded to know. “I haven’t told anyone about this.”

In response I merely raised my eyebrows. It doesn’t pay to look amazed when you hit the jackpot, and sometimes a lucky guess is just that. Now, Avram’s voice dropped to the lower register and he leaned forward to address me.

“It was like you said. We did it again and again. I felt bad, but I made excuses. She never felt bad, rabbi. She said it was right. I don’t know what she said. It’s a lot of stuff, you know. Her mother’s a magic woman from the old country, you know, like a nature healer. I think she talked it over with her somehow. Rabbi, how do you talk this over with your mother? I can’t talk this over with my father; I envy her! And then it escalated higher. It got worse. I tried to stop. She said I shouldn’t, but I didn’t listen. She went to Mikveh and I took off the Tsitsith before going to bed. It was a disaster, a complete catastrophe. She asked me where are the Tsitsith. I phumphed around looking for an answer, I meant it for the best, but there was nothing there, you know what I mean. Dead, finished. So I put the Tsitsith back on. But you know, it was still dead. It’s a horrible feeling rabbi when you go from being alive to feeling dead. Two weeks previous I was rampant big.”

“Like a bull,” I murmured.

“Yes!” he said delightedly. “Exactly. Exactly like bull.” He sighed and shook his head in disbelief.

“Completely dead.”

“Do you know what I had to do?” he whispered. “I had to go fetch the big *Tallit* – prayer shawl, the one she gave me for our wedding. She made me go and fetch it like a servant, I had to go, and now I wear it to synagogue as well, and when I kiss the *fringes* I can smell

her. I can't do that, rabbi. I can't, but I love her and I do it. And she has warned me, rabbi, not to try breaking it again. She only had to whisper the word *Tefillin* at me and I froze like an icecube. How does she know these things to say?"

"So," I said sagely at him. "Your Yom Kippur was not a Yom Kippur and your Tallit is not your Tallit, and you've never dreamt of such a good sex life as you are having now after six years of marriage, right?"

"Right. Exactly."

"Have you tried to understand what's going on?" I asked him. "Have you done any inquiring or reading, spoken to anyone about it?"

"In the same building as me there lives that Professor Glickstein, the one with the goatee. He teaches in Brooklyn College. We usually stop to say hello and talk about the weather. I was passing him one day in the hallway. I don't know what possessed me, but I sort of blurted it out to him. I said, "What do you do if you find yourself behaving very strangely with your sex life?" And, do you know what he answered me? He said, "Young man, whatever you do, don't go talk to a psychiatrist. I should know because I'm one. Don't waste your time or your money. Sex is much too important to entrust it to the medical profession. Go talk to my daughter, Gloria Glickstein. She's a PhD, you know. If it's about sex, she knows about it." And he gave me her number. Have you ever heard of her, rabbi?"

Listening to Avram talk about his discovery, hearing the consternation and the bewilderment, I was moved to my first big/little decision. It was sitting there in the stuffy little storefront shore repair shop that JBDSM was born.

"Small world," I replied. "Yes, I know Gloria Glickstein, her married name is Brame. I talk to her from time to time. She's written books, you know."

At that moment Avram's wife entered the store from the street. The first thing I noticed about her was her diminutive size; the second most noticeable thing about her was her squint. She locked the door behind her before glancing at me. She and Avram exchanged remarks in an unfamiliar tongue, probably a Caucasian dialect, I thought. She unpacked sandwiches from a brown paper bag; setting a plate down in front of her husband, making sure he was eating before giving me her undivided attention. Avram looked at me, peering around his wife as she was fussing over him. His somewhat sheepish look seemed to say, 'we married men had better show support for one another, when a wife fusses like this.'

She was dressed very neatly, if not fashionably. Avram attends the Sefaradi synagogue across the road from my own and I often notice him walking with his small children to services on Saturday morning, and walking home later accompanied by his wife. Usually, when I see her she is pushing a child in a buggy. It was very different watching her interact with Avram absent the children. She was quick in her movements, and very self-assured, it was obvious she was taking charge of the situation. When she turned to look at me I saw she wore lipstick and mascara and she smelled perfumed. Her fingernails were trimmed

and neatly lacquered. In short, I thought, this is a woman who pays a good deal of attention and energy to looking attractive for her husband. She cares. When she looked at me her gaze was searching and evaluating. Her eyes met mine without reserve or timidity. She gave me the impression she would be outspoken and frank. She was.

“Who are you?” she asked me bluntly. But, before I could think of anything to say in reply, her husband leapt into the conversational gap and rattled off at her in a rebuking sort of tone, as though to say, “Look, I’ve already explained why I chose to talk to him. I have a right to talk to anyone I want to.” She shrugged, ignoring her husband and kept looking at me with the question in the air between us. I knew she wasn’t interested so much in what I was, as in what I was going to mean to her new marital relationship. I did not offer my hand for her to shake or introduce myself by name. In fact, sitting there without my shoes on, watching Avram, out of the corner of my eye, angrily or anxiously ripping nails out of a heel with a pair of metal pliers, I thought my position a trifle awkward.

“I’m just a passerby off the street,” I said. “Your husband has confided in me. I’m a little uncomfortable now at being asked to explain who I am.”

“My husband understands feet; no one better. But that does not mean he understands hearts. I understand how to make the home, how to care for my son and get him ready for school. I trust him when he talks about feet, but my husband says he knows from your feet that you are a true man. Is he right?”

“I know some things,” I admitted.

“What?”

The conversation was turning into a confrontation, and I wondered what I could do to defuse it. Avram muttered very quietly in the background while noisily sorting shoes from boots, or men’s from women’s or something. His wife was visibly preparing to defend her territory, or attack me as a trespasser, or something.

“From soup I’m not a maven,” I muttered under my breath.

“Pardon?” she asked. “I did not hear what you said.”

I was thinking of a story I often heard as a child, about a couple trying to be rid of an extremely unwelcome guest. They conceived of a plan. “This soup is terrible,” said the man to his wife. “How dare you speak so about the food I prepare for you, with so much love and care?” The couple glare menacingly at one another, and then, as one, turn to the hapless guest for his opinion on the soup. He has seen it coming from afar and recognizes the stratagem to be rid of him. For, if he agrees with the husband that it is a bad soup, she gets to throw him out of the house, while if he agrees with her...

“From soup I’m not such a big a maven¹,” the quick-witted guest replies, modestly.

¹ Maven: Connoisseur

Trying to explain to this woman, I felt, whose first language was not English, that I was not, in any way, shape or form, a direct threat to her hegemony over her husband or her sex life, was going to be an exercise in futility. I needed to change the subject rapidly.

“Gloria Glickstein,” I replied. “Your husband has the phone number. She’s the one to talk to.”

She turned to her husband and they began a heated exchange that went on a few minutes. She turned back to me.

“He didn’t say anything to me about her, he doesn’t know her. Who is Glickstein?”

I could already see that her questions had a certain rhythm to them, a peculiar logic.

“She has a name for everything. It has all been seen and done before, you see. Avram and you have not invented or discovered something previously unknown. Now, may I use your phone?”

Gloria picked up on the second ring.

“What are you wearing?” I asked without introducing myself. There was a prolonged silence on the other end. Then came a delighted squeal.

“Oosh! There’s only one man in North America would dare open a conversation with me on the phone using that phony pervert line. What are you doing?”

“Are you dressed Kosher?” I asked, thinking it best to introduce Gloria to this situation only if she was in low gear. Gloria in high gear is a lot for a newbie couple to take in at one go.

“I’m on 13th Avenue, at the Israeli pizza place, noshing with friends and flirting with the Yeshivah girls, I’m dressed more vanilla than a rebbetzin with 12 kids.”

“There’s someone I want you to meet right now, Gloria. This is a mitzvah situation. Think to yourself, if I have come to this world to spread the light to one single dark corner, this is where it needs to be shed.”

I gave her directions and put the phone down. We said nothing. I sat there while Avram kept on ripping soles off shoes. His wife stood looking out of the store door window. In less than ten minutes, Gloria walked up to the door. Avram’s wife unlocked and opened it to let her in.

The first, most obvious thing about Gloria is that she’s even smaller than Avram’s wife. The second is that she has more life dancing inside her than a wedding video. She is one seriously dynamic woman. After looking around the tiny storefront, to the dark back of the store where used shoes were stacked, at me, and finally, at Avram and his wife, (whose

name I was apparently never going to learn) the two women surveyed each other the way women do.

“Is this your husband?” Gloria asked, pointing with her chin at Avram. “He doesn’t look to be properly trained at all.”

As I bent down to tie my shoelaces, I grinned and reflected ruefully that Avram had no idea what was in store for him. We are mere men. How can we hope to fathom the mysteries of womanhood - better try writing a commentary on the Zohar.

I let myself out of the store without saying another word. The very last thing I heard as the door closed behind me was Avram’s wife complaining, “He leaves the toilet seat up.”

And Gloria replying, “O, not anymore he doesn’t.”