

The Rabbi

By: David Lettis

It never ceased to amaze him, the people he met on planes. The young mothers too numb to care about their unruly children causing a commotion; the overweight smokers unaware that both their stench and girth invaded the privacy of their neighbors; the troubled youth ordering alcoholic beverages at ten in the morning while the tattoos from under their shirts screamed for attention. These are all the types of people Rabbi Ben Jacober at one point tried to help. Now he saw them all as lost causes, the embodiments of weakness that reminded him of his failure as both a man and as a servant of God.

The crowd on his current flight was no different than usual. He found himself seated next to an elderly woman who placed her white fur coat behind her in such a manner that it crept into Ben's seat space and occasionally knocked the yarmulke from his head. On the other side sat an abnormally tall black man who at one point must have been a basketball center but now appeared homeless. Somewhere a baby screamed and he was fairly certain he could smell curry emanating from the Indian family a few rows up.

Every week for the past two years, Ben had flown to New York on a Monday and returned home to San Francisco on a Wednesday or Thursday to prepare for the Sabbath. After six months, the flights continued even though he stopped leading the Friday services. After a year, he stopped opening the Tanakh that his father had given nearly twenty years earlier, and the Talmud he obtained during Rabbinical training began gathering dust on a bookshelf shortly thereafter.

“Oh, there I go again,” the woman next to him squeaked as she pulled her jacket back into her seat. Ben feigned a smile and readjusted his yarmulke. “I’ve grown so clumsy in my old age.”

“Ah,” Ben said.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” a woman’s voice projected across the plane. “The captain has informed me that we should have very smooth flight conditions and you should be expecting a very pleasant Saturday morning once we land in the Big Apple.”

Ben cringed at the thought. God purposely did this to him, killing his father on a Wednesday and forcing a funeral on Saturday morning. One last jab at his life decisions. Ben reached down to his briefcase and checked to make sure the sealed will remained where he had placed it. He then reached in and removed the Tanakh. He leaned back and held the book to his chest. He didn’t open it. The words no longer held the meaning to him that they once did. He just held it against his chest, against his heart, and closed his eyes as his head rested against the seat. His fingers could feel the old leather binding and the oils on the cover that had accumulated from two decades of daily handling. When the plane rumbled to life, he clutched at the book more tightly. The jet engines then roared and thrust him back into the seat. He felt the ground beneath him fall away as the plane lifted into the air.

Ben had never seen John F. Kennedy Airport on a Saturday morning and he grasped the Tanakh against his chest like a shield as he wheeled his luggage off the plane. He had stopped allowing the Sabbath to dictate his Saturdays around the same time that he left his duties at Temple Beth El, but old habits die hard and navigating an airport on Saturday morning made his heart

rate rise. When he finally pushed open the exit door to enter the baggage claim area, small beads of sweat had formed on his forehead even though he could now make the walk from Gate 61 with his eyes closed. This time, he half expected to find his sister waiting for him. The past two years had been trying for the entire family, but surely she would greet him on the day of the funeral. Or maybe, as he stood still with only his neck rotating to scan the terminal, some bridges are too burned to repair. This was hardly akin to the return of the Prodigal Son, but even making the comparison seemed unfair. The Prodigal Son was greedy and selfish, Ben left to answer a calling.

A stranger bumped him as he stood alone in the terminal, knocking the back of his shoulder and forcing him to take a step from falling. It was a heartless act, perhaps one folded into the fabric of the universe by the Almighty himself to remind Rabbi Jacober that it's a heartless world, an unforgiving world. Rather than confront the man and demand an apology, he gripped his Tanakh and took another step forward so he could hail a cab. Once inside the taxi with a television screen in front of him blaring news about the day's latest pop star, his inability to sleep on planes—even cross-country red eyes—got the better of him. He closed his eyes for what seemed a second and opened them an hour later in front of a rundown apartment complex in Brooklyn.

The façade of the six-story complex was constructed out of old yellow brick that provided a perfectly neutral canvas for the rusted iron fire escapes. The red stairwells zigzagged from the roof to the road, culminating atop the “Red Velvet Cleaners” and a sparsely filled grocery mart. This particular neighborhood hadn't yet caught up to the gentrification of other parts of Brooklyn, so the cracks in the sidewalks hadn't been properly patched and trash

accumulated in the corners of concrete stairwells. Ben noticed some of this trash as he walked up the stairs between the cleaners and grocery mart to let himself into the lobby. He used his key to open his father's mailbox. The Postal Service had not yet caught wind of his father's death, so Ben made a mental note to have it forwarded to his California address. He pulled the mail out—a few bills and advertisements tucked between *National Explorer*, *Outside Magazine*, and *Playboy*—and walked two more flights of stairs to let himself in to his father's condo.

Ben's actions and movements continued out of pure motor memory. He threw his bag on the kitchen table in the dining room, which doubled as the foyer. He put on a pot of coffee and immediately went to the half bathroom off of the kitchen to relieve himself and to wash his hands and face. When he emerged, he expected to greet Franny, his father's day-nurse. Franny, a rotund Slavic woman who left her smile in the glory of Yugoslavia, would usually grunt a hello and remind Ben that he is a bad son. "Rabbi, pfft. Man of God would care for his father, pfft. Rabbi." She would then withdraw to the rocking chair and read magazines, emerging with meals, water, and pills.

Franny's absence reminded Ben that his routine no longer suited the situation. Regardless, he poured two cups of coffee, topped them both off with the half-filled bottle of Irish whiskey stashed above the refrigerator, and walked into the single bedroom.

The sheets of the double bed were soiled and rumped. Ben could see the outline of his father's body in the mattress in the exact spot he had passed away. Franny found him when she arrived early Thursday morning. There were still dishes on the bedside table and the light from the bathroom flickered as it began to burn out after remaining on for three straight days. Above the bed, a large golden crucifix watched over the room. Franny insisted on putting it up

when she discovered the Rabbi's father was a catholic. As Ben held the two mugs of coffee and stared at Jesus on the cross, he heard a knock at the front door. He placed one of the mugs on the kitchen table and walked to the door to answer it. When he opened it, his sister stood with her arms crossed and an eyebrow raised.

"I figured I'd find you here."

"Yeah, came straight from the airport... to clean myself up."

She contorted her face. "You flew in this morning? On the Sabbath?"

Ben swallowed. "It was the first ticket I could get."

"The first ticket you could get from San Francisco to New York was this morning?"

Sensing her skepticism, he said accusingly, "I'm not the one who arranged his funeral on a Saturday morning."

"Dad isn't a Jew, *Rabbi*. The rules don't apply. And it's not like I'm exactly practicing."

She barged in and found the cup of steaming coffee on the table. She picked it up and smelled it. "Whiskey?"

Ben nodded and held his mug up. "To dad."

They clinked glasses and let the hot coffee and harsh whiskey warm their spirits and then they both took a seat at the table and stared at one another.

"I'm sorry. Franny told me that you... It's good that you've gotten to spend time with him."

"Did you or mom ever come by?" Ben asked, knowing the answer but wanting to hear it from her.

"You guys didn't talk about me and mom during your little visits?"

Ben shook his head.

“We talked about... the Mets.”

His comment made his sister laugh out loud. “So you got into the important stuff?”

“I know. I know it doesn’t seem very deep, but it was really nice. I had never really talked to him about the Mets, or about anything other than...”

“The fact you abandoned the family to run off and become a fucking rabbi?”

Ben laughed and looked at the ground. “Yeah, something like that.”

“You know, I know that it’s the day of his funeral and we’re supposed to be putting hard feelings aside to show our love for him and remember him for the loser dirt bag that he was, but I want you to know, I blame you. I won’t be able to move forward until I know that you know that. I blame you. As soon as you ran off to play Judaism in San Francisco, dad went downhill. I blame you for all of this. For everything.” She stopped to search her brother for any sense of emotion or understanding or regret.

“Dad started drinking long before I left. You were too young to remember.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“It’s the truth. That’s half the reason I went to Rabbinical school, to help people like him.”

“Oh, Jesus. You know what, if you can even pretend to be a Rabbi and you care about helping people, then do me this favor. Tell me that you acknowledge it’s your fault.”

The words pierced Ben’s heart and soul like a sword. He had come to terms with his guilt months ago, but hadn’t actually said it out loud.

“It’s my fault.”

His sister nodded once, a curt acceptance of her brother's atonement. "Did you bring the will?" Ben reached for his bag and pulled the will out and slid it across the table. "I'm sure he left it all for you, but I'll bring it to the attorney. Never mind the fact he had two grandsons he never saw."

"I don't want anything. I'll renounce my rights to it."

"How noble." She got up with the will and walked for the door. On her way out, she said, "Don't be late for the funeral."

Ben hadn't set foot in a church since he was twelve, during the time of his childhood that he spent Friday nights in Temple and Sunday mornings at St. Joseph's. Every Sunday his father would drag Ben in and then make him wait in the pews after the service ended while he gave his weekly confession. His father always seemed the happiest in those few minutes after church, marching proudly down the sidewalk to Casper's Donuts and then leaving Ben with his mother while he went to watch football at Little Pete's Sports Bar. He would stumble home drunk late at night. He wasn't abusive, he just lacked the moral rectitude that a twelve-year-old boy could reasonably expect from a father.

As he stood in front of the red brick church that looked more like a schoolhouse from the 1800s (he was always jealous of the more imposing gothic-style churches that were literally a block in every direction), he looked up at the lime green pillar and the large, circular stained-glass window. That pillar, reaching up to the clouds as though it spoke directly to God, and that window, with the Mother Mary so beautiful and welcoming, were sources of great pulling as he decided which spiritual path to follow. Perhaps if it had been a gothic church, the pull might

have overcome the internal truth of his call to Judaism. Regardless, his father's gift of the Tanakh when he announced his decision to attend Rabbinical college was the single kindest act he had ever experienced, particularly when he was feeling so vulnerable and guilty of betrayal.

When Ben walked in, the musty smell of old wood and incense washed over him, transporting him back to his childhood. On instinct, he walked to a middle pew and sat along the aisle, exactly where he sat with his father. He saw his sister speaking with the priest, but other than a few strangers who must have been his father's friend, there were plenty of seats to choose from. Not even Franny chose to show up.

The service began with a prayer by a new priest Ben had never met before. The priest then spoke of the deceased, honoring a life and sending him to God. He spoke of how he knew Ben's father only briefly, but in that time had forged a true connection with a conflicted man. Those confusions would be resolved in heaven where God himself would lead him to peace. Ben had spoken at many funerals over the past twenty years. He had comforted the aggrieved and helped guide surviving family members through the mourning process. He found it to be one of the more meaningful aspects of the profession. He helped people live moral lives. He helped counsel the members of his Temple through marriage and pregnancies. He helped develop Jewish youth through guided study. But above all, he lay his members to rest and reminded their families that they are not alone. He hoped he came off as more sincere than the priest.

When Ben's sister rose to speak, he noticed the tears in her eyes. She tried not to smear her mascara when she delicately wiped off her cheek with the pad of her finger. She walked to the podium and looked at the crowd. She gave no indication that the church was

virtually empty, turning her head to make eye contact with everyone in the room. She finally settled on Ben, staring at him with a distant gaze, much as a captain of a ship would squint to see the vague shape of land, or as a damaged soldier will stare at nothing and everything at the same time. She then made a weak smile for her husband and two kids and began her eulogy.

“Thank you, Father Branson. I think when you say my father was conflicted, it was a euphemism for saying his life veered off course many years ago. Liver failure was actually a blessing. It’s how the story had to end. There was no saving him.

She once again looked at Ben. He could feel it coming. He could sense her forming the words into a weaponized slur and firing relentlessly.

“My brother, Rabbi Benjamin Jacober, certainly tried, though. Visiting him every week for two years, sitting and talking to him for days, I think the only reason he survived as long as he did is because of how much he enjoyed their conversations. There was no saving him, Ben, but thank you for trying, and for giving him the opportunity to feel like a man and a father.”

Ben didn’t know why she said it. Maybe she rejoiced in the fact that he renounced his rights to the will. Maybe she felt comfort that he accepted fault for all of her father’s shortcomings. Or maybe she just knew it was the right thing to say. As he listened to her words, he finally relented to his feelings. He put his head into his hands and wept.

Ben walked out of the church alone. He would have time to express his gratitude for his sister’s comments and to be an uncle to her kids at the reception. He needed fresh air, though, and felt stifled in the confines of the church. Walking down the sidewalk was the first act of normalcy he had felt since before he boarded the plane the night earlier. Around this time on the

Sabbath, he would walk around the community and greet his neighbors and answer questions about archaic meanings hidden within Judaism. The sun now high overhead, he greeted no neighbors, but his legs could at least feel comfort in returning to the routine of his late-morning walks.

He didn't make it far before he felt the presence of a man walking beside him. With his eyes puffy and bloodshot, he looked at the man and saw a familiar face, albeit one he had not seen in many years.

"Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Jacober," Rabbi Greg Lieberman said, his hands reflectively clasped behind his back.

"Rabbi Lieberman," Ben said, sniffing to calm himself, "what a surprise. How are you?"

"Fine, fine, thank you. I should be asking you the same thing."

"You heard?"

"The father of one my most popular students passes away, I hear about it."

Ben nodded. Rabbi Lieberman was a major influence on his rabbinical development, encouraging Ben to pursue the Judaism that spoke to him. While most of his classmates remained conservative, Rabbi Lieberman and Ben helped promote the reform movement, calling it Judaism for Americans. Americans don't speak Yiddish, Rabbi Lieberman had taught him, and they don't speak Hebrew. They want their rabbis to know those languages, but they also want to be able to relate to their rabbis. Ben didn't just agree with his mentor, he saw no other way of connecting to his future congregation. He took the teachings all the way to San Francisco where he joined a synagogue and developed a strong community under Lieberman's ideals.

When Ben didn't respond, Rabbi Lieberman said, "Rabbi Meyer called me to inform me you are no longer leading services and you've even stopped your Jewish instruction."

It wasn't a question, just a statement of fact to see where the words fell and how his former pupil would respond. It was a purposeful prodding, a last-ditch effort to rescue a man of God.

"It began to feel hypocritical," Ben finally said. "It felt wrong. I couldn't continue in good faith."

"Ah, good faith. As opposed to bad faith. As opposed to faith in general."

"That's not what I mean."

"Isn't it, though?"

After a pause, Ben stopped walking. "I was flying back every week. I couldn't give the congregants the time they deserve."

"Excuses. They all supported you. Rabbi Meyer told me as much."

"What can I do for you?" Ben said, not feeling the need to continue the discussion that reminded him all too well of the weekly reviews Rabbi Lieberman would conduct in Rabbinical college.

Rabbi Lieberman placed his hands on Ben's shoulders and forced him to make eye contact. "I'm a friend, Ben. That's it. I'm checking in on a friend. How are you?"

Ben felt his eyes tearing up again, but he took a deep breath to fight it. "I'm good. I will be good. It's just..." He trailed off, but no words were necessary.

"Have you considered moving back here permanently?"

"No, my life is in San Francisco."

“Is it? Ben, the real question is why you didn’t move back in the first place. You flew back to sit with your father all week only to return to the city where you are no longer working.”

“It’s still my life.”

“I understand, it’s difficult to drop the vanguard mentality, the excitement, only to move back to your roots. So then, is it too soon to ask if you’ll return to your post?”

It wasn’t an unfair question. Ben had been thinking about it for months. Now standing in front of his mentor, he finally shook his head. “I don’t think so. I, I just, the truth is, I can’t at this moment tell you that I believe in God anymore.”

Rabbi Lieberman laughed, making Ben crane an insulted eyebrow. “Oh, Rabbi Jacober, you were always stubborn. It’s what made you so good at what you do, but it also is a fatal flaw. I thought you’d grow out of it. Learn, even. I thought your soul would settle, but you wanted to change the world and the hearts of men and women.” Rabbi Lieberman sighed. “Ben, you’ve just spent the past two years proving you’re a man of God. You have dedicated your life to God. You don’t need to be a Rabbi to prove your worth. Even if you have lost faith and no longer believe, God still has faith in you.”

When Ben turned down Rabbi Lieberman’s invitation to join him for a post-Shabbat dinner, he and his old teacher parted ways, with Rabbi Lieberman eventually turning right to follow the path back to his synagogue. Ben continued walking along the damaged sidewalk, kicking trash when it was in the way, and occasionally closing his eyes while he rolled his head to crack the vertebrae in his neck. The sun felt no warmer than before, even though it broke through the

thick cloud cover and shone upon his face. A soft breeze blew at his back, but it brought him no more comfort or agony than the cold breezes of San Francisco. It all just was, as it was before and as it would be tomorrow. Nothing changed other than his excuse to fly home every week.

As the church grew smaller in the distance, Rabbi Ben Jacober passed a homeless man sitting against the wall of a recently established Charles Schwab Financial Center. He didn't pay him much attention, other than a purposeful effort to walk around him. The man—with light brown skin, a scruffy beard, and unwashed sweats that were likely donated from the local shelter—had a smile on his face as he watched the passers-by. He asked for no money and had a half-drunk McDonald's orange juice sitting beside him.

“Hey, my man, you got one of those funny hats!”

Ben stopped to process the words. He wasn't offended. The unbiased, pure-of-intention observation actually amused him.

“Yes, I do. It's called a yarmulke.”

The man's smile broadened excitedly as he appreciated either the information or the indulgence.

“A Yarmulke? That sounds like a motorcycle, ha!”

“Yeah, I guess it does a little bit,” Ben laughed.

“So you one of them religious folks?”

“A rabbi. Yes I am.”

“A rabbi. You know, my father used to wear one of them hats.”

“The yarmulke? No kidding?”

“It’s true. He was all spiritual.” The man began to laugh hysterically. “Oh, he was a good man.”

“He sounds like it. Well here.” Ben takes his yarmulke off and hands it to the homeless man, who accepts it knowing that it was a significant gesture. Ben then takes his wallet out and pulls out five dollars and hands it to him as well. “Go get yourself something to eat.”

“I will indeed!” He joyfully puts the yarmulke on his head and stuffs the money into his pocket.

“Take care now,” Ben said as he began to walk away.

“And God bless you, sir!”

The comment momentarily startled Ben, but he composed himself, nodded a goodbye, and continued on his way. It didn’t feel freeing to have his head exposed to the sky. It didn’t feel as though a weight had been removed. He was surprised at how quickly he had offered to give away his yarmulke, but it felt natural and the man’s gracious acceptance made Ben feel better if only for the minute. He didn’t think that the gesture held any bearing over his future. He assumed he would return to San Francisco and have a frank conversation with his synagogue’s board members. But that was for a later date. He had to get back to his father’s apartment. He never got to finish tidying up.