THE RABBI WHO COULD SMELL THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

BY STEPHEN G. BLOOM

For years, Rebecca was uncertain when she first heard her calling to stand on the bima and lead a congregation in prayer. Wherever the inspiration came from, it certainly hadn’t come from her parents, secular Jews who hadn’t stepped inside a synagogue for more than thirty years, save for Rebecca’s ordination at rabbinical college. To the best of Rebecca’s knowledge, the seeds to her destiny were sown when she was thirteen, invited to so many of her friends’ bar and bat mitzvahs. Each celebration was a mixture of envy and regret when Rebecca realized that she’d never get to stand front and center on the bima and read that week’s Torah portion. She had pleaded with her parents, but no, they said, such a religious celebration was not necessary, especially for a girl, and why in God’s name would she ever need to know all that Hebrew? You’d be better off learning Spanish, they told Rebecca. Study hard in school, that will be your mitzvah to us.

Her parents’ pronouncement thus rendered, Rebecca was consigned outsider status, an observer at these Saturday morning simchas. She’d sit mesmerized on the edge of the pew, shushing those around her. She’d turn testy with the boys, chafing in their blue blazers and gray wool pants, and scoff at all the gossipy girls whispering God knew what in their princess heels and crinkly pink party dresses. No one was paying attention at all to the ritual up front: the chanting, davening, sipping from the ornate silver goblet, the unrolling of the holy Torah, the lilting cadence of exotic Hebrew. And my parents want me to study Spanish, Rebecca thought, shaking her head.
If Rebecca’s desire to become a rabbi turned from fantasy to possibility that thirteenth year of her life, it would be an adult’s explanation, looking backwards for a motive, attempting to plumb a particular turn of events to explain when and why a young woman had decided to turn to the Lord. Truth be told, Rebecca had no earthly idea why she had chosen the rabbinate, and when someone would ask her about it (as they often did), she’d smile serenely and glide to another topic.

Actually, a far more interesting question, one Rebecca was asked many times, was what she liked most about being a rabbi. To this question, she had done a good deal of thinking and, while she knew her answer to be unorthodox, she also knew it to be fact. The smell—that’s what she liked most. The smell. Leading a synagogue, packed or empty, made no difference to her. Even in her most private moments (which weren’t many, given all her rabbinical obligations), Rebecca could neither recreate in her mind the congregational aroma she found so intoxicating nor could she describe it. The scent was singular, and each time Rebecca filled her lungs with it, she was transformed and transported. To exactly where she wasn’t sure. Her job as a rabbi wasn’t to question, but to affirm God’s covenant with the Jewish people.

All houses of worship are sanctuaries of symbolism. Catholic churches with their masses of crucifixes—the crown of thorns, the nails in the hands, the drops of ruby blood—are the most graphic. Yet synagogues have their own symbolic power to impress and intimidate: the flickering eternal light, the carved ark, the elaborate Hebrew lettering replicated throughout the sanctuary, the hand-inscribed parchment of the Torah, the silver finger of the yad. But all this Rebecca could plainly see; smell was wholly different. Every time Rebecca walked into the sanctuary she was struck anew with the confluence of scents through the dusty sun-lit air: from the stacks of prayer books with their thumbed wavy pages, the lingering presence of worshipers past and present, and, of course, the fabric—the lumpy seat cushions, the prayer shawls hanging lifelessly on racks waiting to be called into service on shoulders small and large, the scores of anonymous yarmulkes in wait to be plopped on a different head week after week.

These scents changed seasonally, and their intensity depended on how many congregants were in the sanctuary at any given time. During the High Holy Days, the smells took on a life of their own: the union of gaudy perfumes, the fresh-cut flowers on the bima, musky colognes, tacky hair sprays, lingering cigarette smoke, stale coffee, breath mints, not to mention the distinctive body odors of several elderly male regulars, particularly Harold Perlmutter and Alex Grobard. Rebecca knew the smell of each man, and had so attuned her olfactory skills that could tell whether either man had set foot in the sanctuary within the previous forty-eight hours.

Other rabbis might cringe from the onslaught of such aromas, but for Rebecca there was something incarnate about the multitude of smells wafting towards her as she stood in her flowing white robes leading the congregation in prayer. She imagined each human particle of scent rising from the body judaica before her, attaching itself to other similarly charged particles, forming a sort of spinning DNA model of odors, swirling tempestuously above the congregation, ascending high in the synagogue’s rotunda, and then in one resolute motion, heading down towards her in a turbulent whirlwind. From this jet stream, Rebecca inhaled deeply and contentedly, taking her spiritual nourishment. Sometimes, the commingling of so many smells
would be so great that Rebecca didn’t think she could withstand their onslaught. Other times, when just a few congregants showed up for the Saturday afternoon havdala service, the scents would be subtle, cooly sneaking up on her, tickling the fine hairs in each nostril, which caused her nose and eyes to water, sometimes prompting her to sneeze. Whenever that happened, it was both embarrassing and satisfying, sneezing, as she read aloud from the Torah. While it was an abomination to sneeze onto the holy parchment, to Rebecca, the sneeze consecrated the Torah with the viscera of her congregation, and for that, she believed such an act to be a mitzvah.

Rebecca had been among sixteen women out of one hundred and twelve rabbinical students at Hebrew Union College in the class of 1987. Her parents, Elaine and Sheldon Skorton, had not been happy when their only child announced her intention to attend rabbinical school. It was only to avoid World War III that Shelly had consented to attend Rebecca’s ordination. Religion had no place in Shelly’s universe. God, he said, on numerous occasions, was a goniff invented by holier-than-thou sons of bitches for one reason: to separate fools from their money. Secularists, rationalists, pragmatists were words neither Shelly nor Elaine understood, but this was what the couple was. Perhaps that’s why they were so pleased when Rebecca had majored in biology at Brandeis University as an undergraduate. Biology and religion were polar opposites. One demanded proof; the other required belief, which was the absence of proof.

When Rebecca graduated (summa cum laude), both Shelly and Elaine just about plotzed. “Summa cum laude!” Elaine kvelled to her friends in the lobby of the garden apartment she and Shelly leased on Normandy Isle in Miami Beach. “Not cum laude, not magna cum laude, but summa cum laude!” Elaine said as though the foreign words were a passkey to not just their daughter’s future, but to Elaine and Shelly’s, too. Rebecca’s professors at Brandeis said after the very nice graduation ceremony that Rebecca had been one of their finest students, someone with a limitless future. That was the word they used, limitless.

“Biology!” Shelly, a retired men’s clothing salesman, used to intone Elaine and Rebecca, then to anyone who’d listen. He said biology with a mixture of pride, celebration, awe and reverence, but most of all, with anticipation.

Shelly’s satisfaction turned out to be short-lived. When Rebecca decided to do nothing with her degree (at least, that’s how Shelly saw it), this biology of his daughter turned into embarrassment, then scorn. “She could be a doctor, even a scientist, maybe she’d find the cure to cancer, but instead she wants to be a rabbi?” Shelly would say to Elaine as the two sat at their table inside Arnie and Richie’s Deli on 41st Street, as Pilar, the waitress, filled their cups with more coffee than was good for them, especially Shelly, since his most recent PSA numbers were not good. “This makes sense? Our daughter, the rabbi. With a degree in biology?”

The problem was Shelly. Elaine’s husband of forty-one years hated organized religion. Truth be told, Shelly hated all religion, organized and unorganized. He was what the observant call a lox-and-bagels Jew. He loved Jewish food. He loved to talk Jewish. He identified himself first and foremost as a Jew, and was proud of it. But to get Shelly into a synagogue, even a synagogue led by his very own daughter, well that just wasn’t going to happen. “For the birds, that’s
what religion is,” was an expression Shelly had said several thousand times. Shelly had even given Elaine explicit instructions upon his death. No rabbi, no Kaddish, no Star of David, no religious mumbo jumbo. And he wanted to be cremated, he made Elaine promise on her mother’s grave. No Hebrew lettering anywhere—on or in the casket, the shroud, even the mourners’ book. “I’m a Jew, and every minute of the day and night I know I’m a Jew, so why do I need to wear my religion on my sleeve like I’m holier than the next schlepper?” were words Shelly had said to Elaine more times than she cared to remember.

Elaine was always the first to temper Shelly when it came to matters of Rebecca. “Who are we to judge? Is it so bad that she’s a rabbi? She could have done worse, believe me. Look at that Helene, the Stone’s daughter. Divorced three times and not even thirty! And with two children! With no help, no alimony, no child support! Three bums she married. Maybe Rebecca knows something we don’t know. Couldn’t that be possible, Shelly? Could it?”

“With all that education, I hope she knows something we don’t know!” Shelly shot back. “How many years, four plus five, plus the year on the Israeli kibbutz? All the tuition we paid, all the checks I wrote out, our savings? Whatever education she wanted, we gave her. Parents should give their children all the education they want. But when she turns out to be a rabbi? This is what we paid for? Our daughter, the rabbi, in that farhcadat synagogue where the more you pay, the better the seat you get for the High Holidays? This,” Shelly said, taking another sip of coffee, then putting down the cup, “I can do without.”

“We should be proud,” Elaine, always the peacemaker, offered.

Elaine didn’t like where Shelly was going with all this. She knew her Shelly. She knew when he was getting cagey. Elaine was no shmendrick Shelly was selling suits to. She took a sip. Even decaf was keeping her up at night.

“Lemme ask you this,” Shelly said, lowering his voice, looking toward the restaurant as though none of regulars at Arnie & Ritchie didn’t already know everything there was to know about Elaine, Shelly and Rebecca. “What man is going to marry a woman rabbi? What normal man is going to want a wife who’s a rabbi? This is such a silly question?”

“A man who falls in love with our daughter, that’s who,” Elaine replied as she spread margarine on a poppy-seed bagel toasted too much for her liking. Should she ask Pilar to toast another, which, chances were good would come back burned even more than this one?

“And where’s she going to find such a man?” Shelly asked. “One day, she’s going to look out into the congregation and her dreamboat will magically appear? This is how it happens these days?”

Shelly paused, sipping his coffee, making that slurping sound that used to drive Elaine crazy, but by now, she had gotten used to, had even grown to anticipate, if not appreciate. After four decades of marriage, Elaine knew exactly where Shelly was going with this. He was setting her up. This is how he did it. Elaine took another bite from her bagel.

“Our little Rebecca is getting old. I hate to say it, Elaine, but Rebecca-la is no spring chicken.”

Say what you will, Shelly had a point. Elaine knew all too well. Grandchildren, that wasn’t an issue any longer. At this point, all they wanted for their sole prodigy was for her to be happy. What every parent wants. But how happy could Rebecca be without a home? She lived in a tiny apartment down the block from the synagogue. It was a place for her to rest her head, no
more. Maybe you could make a home without children, but can a woman make a home without a husband? Can a fish walk?

“She’s everyone’s best friend,” Elaine said, nodding a little too forcefully for Shelly’s liking, but this, too, was a habit of Elaine’s that Shelly had grown accustomed to. “She’s a giver. Everyone comes to her with their problems. She listens.”

“She listens without giving away what she thinks,” Shelly said. It was a trait Elaine wished her Shelly would learn. Maybe Elaine could talk to Rebecca about how impatient and argumentative Shelly had become, but Rebecca would probably just sit there, taking it all in, that serene look in her eyes. Is that what they teach them in rabbinical school? Rebecca hadn’t always been like this. She used to be a girl who’d let you know what she thought. Frankly, she hadn’t been the easiest daughter to raise. Shelly and Elaine had had their moments.

“If she told people what they needed to hear, how long do you think she’d last in that hoity-toity synagogue of hers?” Shelly asked, a replay of the same discussion he and Elaine had had a hundred times.

“Let me ask you this,” Shelly said, now on a three-suit roll.

Let him talk, Elaine thought. Let him get it off his chest. Keeping things inside is no good.

“Who does Rebecca go to when she has a problem? She doesn’t come to us. She can’t go to members of her own synagogue, and she certainly can’t go to the other rabbi, her boss. What’s his name?”

“Rabbi Popov,” Elaine said, tightening the muscles around her mouth, another of his wife’s habits Shelly had grown more than accustomed to.

“Here’s a question for you, Elaine. Who helps the rabbi when the rabbi needs help? And who’s the rabbi supposed to see when she realizes that being a rabbi is what caused her her problems in the first place?”

At which point, Elaine, realizing she didn’t want to have this argument with Shelly the one-hundred-and-first time, said shrugging her shoulders, “She’ll manage. How she always manages.”

Elaine didn’t like Shelly’s tone. She hoped he’d get down from his high horse. Their relationship with Rebecca was not so good. No wonder. People don’t change, or if they do, they just get worse. Elaine occasionally would stop off at the synagogue to see Rebecca, but not once in the twelve years Rebecca had been at Beth Israel had Shelly ever been to services. Whenever she brought up that fact, Shelly said whatever problems Rebecca had stemmed from her wanting to be a rabbi, and why would he ever want to visit the place that had caused their daughter to have such problems in the first place? “It’d be like going to a whorehouse if your daughter was prostitute,” was Shelly’s retort. Where’d Shelly get such language, and why so angry?

For a passing moment, Elaine felt like she had led Shelly down this road and in doing so, had betrayed Rebecca, the love of her life (of Shelly’s, too), giving Shelly advantage to turn nasty at poor Rebecca’s expense.

Which by all accounts ended the discussion, as such discussions always ended, with Shelly and Elaine finishing their coffee, not saying another word, leaving Pilar a dollar tip, then exiting through the back door of the delicatessen to the parking lot with all the pot holes.

Fact is, Rebecca had little time, even for her parents. When it came to meeting eligible men,
God couldn’t begin to manufacture enough hours in her day. Once, Rebecca had consented to go with her friend Helene to a round-robin Jewish singles event at the Eden Roc on Collins, where you spent ten minutes with a bachelor, then someone clanged a fork against a wineglass, and you spent another ten minutes with another eligible man. The organizers guaranteed everyone at least twenty encounters (as they called them); if you didn’t meet someone you wanted to go out with, they’d give you your twenty-five dollars back.

Well, Rebecca didn’t. But how could she admit that and ask for a refund? She had met two attorneys, one accountant, three salesmen, a stockbroker, and six “self-employed” businessmen. She forgot about the other six, that’s how bad they were. Elaine and Shelly had been right when it came to men. It wasn’t that Rebecca was too picky. She had gotten over that years ago. As soon as frizzy-haired, brown-eyed Rebecca said what she did for a living, most of the men got this scared look. It was like saying she was a stripper. Men might go see a rabbi or a stripper a couple a times a year, but did they want to marry one?

She certainly couldn’t date members of the synagogue. Nor could she ask the congregants to be on the lookout for eligible men. Rebecca had made a separate peace with her condition of singlehood. It had probably been twenty years since she’d been out on a real date, back when she was an undergraduate at Brandeis. She’d had a steady boyfriend at Brandeis, and they had started sleeping together in her sophomore year (a stage in their relationship Rebecca had anticipated and encouraged), but as she became more and more observant, the more the young man, who was studying economics, pulled away. The student body at Brandeis was overwhelmingly Jewish, but once she began harboring plans to apply to rabbinical college, she found herself drawn into a smaller, more committed circle of Jewish students, those who didn’t just attend synagogue weekly, but formed a morning minyan daily. Rebecca took to wearing a **kippah** and **tallit** whenever she entered the campus chapel, and was overjoyed one Saturday morning when—finally—the rabbi called her to the bima to read from the T orah, the fruits of four years of studying Hebrew.

Rebecca started at Beth Israel in Miami Beach as the assistant rabbi when she was thirty-three. She’d been lucky to snare the appointment just three years out of HUC. The pulpit had brought her back home to where she had grown up. Some of her classmates from rabbinical school had had miserable luck finding jobs. Her roommate Maxine Gerson had been forced to accept a pulpit in a God-awful place, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, at the only reform synagogue within one hundred and fifty miles. At least Rebecca was in sunny Florida, at a large and prosperous synagogue, in the middle of a thriving Jewish community she was long familiar with, less than two miles from her parents (which was good and bad, depending on a host of factors that seemed to change weekly). After a decade at Beth Israel, Rebecca had ascended to Associate Rabbi, due in part to the retirement and subsequent death of her mentor, Senior Rabbi Henry Mayer. Rebecca oversaw youth education, and had officiated at hundreds of funerals, weddings, baby namings, bar and bat mitzvahs, even brises. In any given year, she wrote and delivered twenty-one sermons every other Friday night (Rebecca and the head rabbi, Aaron Popov, alternated.) She took on all
conversion training at the synagogue, and was proud to say that she’d been responsible for more than seventy-one Jewish converts, Jews by Choice, as the parlance of such things goes. There were myriad other obligations Rebecca took on—the trips to Jewish convalescent homes, preparing for the synagogue’s annual mitzvah day, the essential fundraising dinners for everything from Israel bonds to battered-women’s shelters. Rebecca liked to go to Israel as least once a year, but she was so busy she hadn’t made a visit now for three years, and for this she felt guilty.

Such duties were expected of a rabbi, but for Rebecca, this multitude of obligations constituted only two-thirds of what she did at the synagogue. What Elaine had said about her daughter, the part about Rebecca’s ability to listen (or really the appearance that she was listening) was true. This talent did not go unnoticed by those at the synagogue, and increasingly over the last decade, more and more congregants began appearing at her office door next to the sanctuary, unloading their problems, some of which were deeply personal and intimate. While at first Rebecca enjoyed the vicarious thrill of eavesdropping on the peccadilloes of synagogue members, Rebecca wasn’t sure she had the training (not to mention the time) to do all this counseling. She was a rabbi, not a therapist, yet a good three hours a day were taken up with therapy sessions for synagogue members. The synagogue members who booked weekly appointments liked Rebecca’s skill and tact, and it wasn’t costing them a penny. The more she counseled, the more counseling she was called upon to dispense. Such a deal! Rebecca thought more than several times.

Her senior colleague at Temple Beth Israel, Rabbi Popov, carried himself as the Talmudic scholar he was. While Rebecca certainly conceded that Rabbi Popov was a learned man, his demeanor (and reputation) scared away most congregants. How could they confide in him? Rail-thin, one skinny leg draped over the other, he sat so erect, peering at you in those half-frame glasses of his; he talked like he was always judging. No wonder everyone gravitated to Rebecca, who was as warm as Popov was cold. And recently, things had gotten worse. Rabbi Popov had started referring to himself in the third-person.

This ridiculous habit had started innocently enough. When his secretary buzzed him on the temple intercom and he didn’t want to be interrupted, he’d tell Marjorie, “Not now! Rabbi Popov is busy.” To Rebecca, that was insufferable enough. But Rabbi Popov had taken it further. In the monthly meetings with the Board of Directors he’d say things like, “This might be fine for Rabbi Miller, but for Rabbi Popov, this simply won’t do.” Who was Rabbi Miller, anyway? A straw man who was a rabbi? It was all Rebecca could do not to roll her eyes.

When Rebecca thought about it, she was convinced all of it was an act Popov had concocted. Rebecca had a phrase for it: feigned incompetence. Send the troubled congregants who were too cheap to see a shrink to Rebecca. Rabbi Popov had let it be known that he couldn’t help them—or worse, that he’d give them answers they didn’t want to hear. Rebecca’s father had been right on that score. Let Rebecca do the heavy lifting. Rabbi Popov was too busy poring over a particularly vexing line in the Talmud to counsel a husband and wife whose son had been diagnosed with leukemia or a wife who had just caught her husband sleeping with the Honduran maid.

So, for better or worse, Rebecca took them on, all of them, following what her mentor Rabbi Mayer used to do when called upon to counsel congregants. She nodded, thought pensively, asked...
a few open-ended questions, listened, occasionally reached for her Bible to read a line or two (along with her interpretation of the humash), and at the appropriate moment, she’d arise from her chair, guiding the troubled congregate to the door, lightly cupping his or her elbow, and always concluding with, “We are always here for you. Please know that."

Rebecca wasn’t sure why she used the first-person plural we, but it seemed like the right thing to do. After several years of automatically saying this, though, she realized that by intoning we, she implicitly was lessening the burden on herself. She was saying that if she didn’t—or couldn’t—help the congregant, perhaps the congregant or God shared some responsibility for things not working out right.

Her latest, and most time-consuming synagogue member was an irksome woman in her early eighties, Sophie Mendelsohn. Sophie had been a Rabbi Mayer special. For years Sophie used to hoke a tchynik to Rabbi Mayer, but since Sophie’s husband had been Abraham Mendelsohn, the Abraham Mendelsohn, the largest distributor of alcoholic beverages in South Florida and a member of the exclusive Eighteen Club of Israel Bonds buyers in the entire United States, tending for Sophie was part of doing business as the rabbi. The Mendelsohns’ care and feeding was critical to the continued financial success of the synagogue, American Jewry, and the state of Israel.

Rabbi Mayer certainly had had the touch with Sophie and Abraham. With his silvery hair, blue eyes, ruddy complexion and polished European accent, Rabbi Mayer could sell yarmulkes to the Palestinians. When Rabbi Mayer gave a sermon, you could hear a kippah clip drop. He was a classically trained biblical scholar, but unlike Rabbi Popov, delighted in extending his erudition to the congregation so that all could benefit. Rabbi Mayer had the trait that all great men share: everyone wanted to be his friend.

His one weakness, however incongruous it may seem, was cars—fast and most often red. He took particular pleasure riding with the girl or boy to be bat or bar mitzvahed each upcoming Saturday morning, taking them out to lunch, then the two of them would cruise along Collins Avenue in the rabbi’s red Mustang with the top down. The kids loved it, as did Rabbi Meyer.

An apocryphal story about Rabbi Mayer is that he and Rebecca went back some years. It may have even been because of Rabbi Mayer that Rebecca first toyed with the idea of becoming a rabbi; certainly he was the reason Rebecca came to Beth Israel. Their lives intersected one Saturday morning two decades ago, during the bar mitzvah of one sandy-haired Scott Krasner, on whom Rebecca had developed a massive crush. That crush stayed in tact until the day of Scott’s bar mitzvah, when it was clear for everyone in the sanctuary to hear that Scott had neither studied nor learned his Torah portion. Instead, Scott was reading the English phonetic version of that week’s parashat. Scott hadn’t even memorized the Hebrew.

Crushed, thirteen-year-old Rebecca looked up at the bima from her seat midway in the sanctuary, and in a blinding instant, her adoration of Scott Krasner transferred to Rabbi Mayer. At that very moment, he was nodding, scanning the congregation, barely smiling, but when his eyes reached Rebecca, he stopped. This, she was sure. His beatific gaze was directed at her. She never talked to Rabbi Mayer until years later when she came to the synagogue for the round
of interviews for the opening as assistant rabbi. After a grueling day with each member of the
temple’s Board of Directors interviewing her, Rebecca sat down with Rabbi Mayer. Whether
because she was exhausted or taken in (again) by his gaze, she relayed to Rabbi Mayer her
experience at Scott Krasner’s bar mitzvah years earlier, and the rabbi told Rebecca that he indeed
remembered that Saturday morning, of locking eyes with Rebecca and seeing her future telescoping
before him. Was Rabbi Mayer’s recollection bluster or truth? Rebecca couldn’t be certain, but it
seemed awfully hard for her to believe that Rabbi Mayer remembered a fresh-faced nameless girl
seated in the Beth Israel’s sanctuary twenty years ago. But would he lie? She thought not.

Whether what Rabbi Mayer said was true, exaggeration, or a case of mistaken identity, Rebecca
knew she had the job at that instant, and she was delighted when the president of the Board
offered it to her one week later. Rabbi Mayer fast became her mentor, and over the next five
years, it was from him that Rebecca learned almost everything about being a rabbi, including his
comforting habit of cupping the elbow of a bereaved or troubled congregant, as well as steadying
a benevolent gaze on each and every member of the congregation.

Even though he was modest to a fault, Abraham Mendelsohn gave away a fortune to the
synagogue (so much that the recently refurbished chapel had been renamed the Abraham
Mendelsohn Chapel) particularly because of Sophie’s fondness for Rabbi Mayer. A year after
Rabbi Mayer died, so did Abraham Mendelsohn, leaving Sophie with a colossal fortune and no
children. Rabbi Popov saw Sophie several times, but gracefully steered her to Rebecca, which
was good and bad from Rebecca’s point of view. Both women bonded by mourning the loss of
Rabbi Mayer. In doing so, Rebecca hoped Sophie would continue the financial legacy of her late
husband. But Sophie was no walk on the beach.

“I told them never to give me flowers,” Sophie said one Friday afternoon even before taking
a seat inside Rebecca’s study. “Never! Flowers make me think of dead people. Flowers make me
think of Abie. They make me think of a cemetery. This is so crazy? Why do they do something
they know sends me up a wall? And it was Mother’s Day!

“So, she picked them from her garden at that palace they live at. They need such a big house?
I must have told them a hundred times, and they still show up with flowers. On Mother’s Day!
And I hit the roof. This is wrong? When they know how I feel?”

Rebecca had to be careful. Sophie would never leave Beth Israel, of that Rebecca was sure,
although she could count on both hands how many rabbis in Miami Beach would love to have
Sophie in their synagogue, particularly the Lubavitchers in their black hats and their mitzvah tanks.

For just a moment, Rebecca was weighing the pros and cons of telling Sophie what Rabbi
Mayer had once told her when she had come to him to discuss her parents’ ongoing displeasure
over her becoming a rabbi. She had grown to cherish her time with Rabbi Mayer, sitting in that big
upholstered chair in his study, across from him. She never could imagine anyone else sitting in her
chair. After months of citing passages from the Torah, lending Rebecca book after book from his
personal library, holding her hand as she cried (“I think they’d be less disappointed if I’d become
a Catholic!”), during a rainy late afternoon, Rabbi Mayer quietly said, “When all else fails, I have
a motto and it’s FIDO.”
“FIDO?” Rebecca asked.
“FIDO,” Rabbi Mayer said nodding with the same serene smile Rebecca remembered that
day when she was thirteen, but now his skin had turned wrinkled, his steely blue eyes cloudy.
“Excuse me?” Rebecca asked, knowing full well that Rabbi Mayer must be having fun with
her. She felt like her mother, being set up by her father.
“You know what I mean, Rebecca,” Rabbi Mayer said. “You’re driving along the causeway,
having a perfectly wonderful day, looking at the water in the bay shimmering like glass, feeling
you’re the luckiest person in the world, when all of a sudden, someone cuts you off. A guy comes
zooming in a yellow Corvette, and you almost have an accident. And to make matters worse, after
he cuts you off, he flips you the bird. The nerve of this guy.”
Rabbi Mayer waited for Rebecca’s reaction and he got it. She was nodding, now smiling, as
much from his story as from sitting across from him and another one of his stories. She pictured
him in his red Mustang, tooling along the Macarthur Causeway.
“Your first reaction is outrage, that’s normal. But you also realize that such a reaction takes
you nowhere. That’s the moment when you think of FIDO.”
“Fido? Like Fido the dog?”
“No, Rebecca. Like “F-I-D-O,” he said, spelling out the letters.
Rabbi Mayer paused just so, another one of his trademarks, before delivering the goods,
whether in a sermon or a joke.
“Forget It and Drive On,” Rabbi Mayer said. “F-I-D-O. When you can’t do anything else,
I rely on FIDO.”
Rebecca paused as Rabbi Mayer paused, and then at the exact same moment, as though on
cue, they both laughed, and laughed hard. Behind all of the Parashat of the Torah, the elaborate
Humash, the dense commentaries from centuries of rabbis, this was the bottom line for Rabbi
Mayer: “Forget It and Drive On.”
At first, Rebecca was shocked by the simplicity and more so, such simplicity coming from
Rabbi Mayer, but then she understood. The moment was sublime for Rebecca. The rabbi was
trusting her, allowing his protégé behind the curtain. They had become equals. Don’t let conflict
destroy you, he was saying. Love your parents, love your fellow man and woman. Love God for
the bounty of life He has bestowed upon you. But when you can do nothing to change the
outcome, FIDO isn’t such a bad motto.
It was at this moment, as she mulled over the meaning of the sublimely ridiculous notion
of FIDO, in Rabbi Meyer’s study, when the aroma came to her. The scent shot deep into her
nostrils, and once she realized she was inhaling, she forced herself, against her will, to restrain
herself. The smell was dry parchment-like and scholarly, wholly pleasing, completely different
from what she discerned when Harold Perlmutter and Alex Grobard sat and davened in the
sanctuary. Rabbi Meyer probably knew more about Rebecca than Rebecca knew about herself,
but her olfactory pleasure was perhaps the only secret she had kept from him. The pure sanctified
aroma all around her was something to breathe in, to imbue her lungs with, to uplift her spirits.
She smiled at Rabbi Mayer, not wanting to let on, then took his veined hand, squeezed it, rose from
the chair and left the study.

Dazed and euphoric recalling that moment, Rebecca mused whether she should chance FIDO
on Sophie Mendelsohn. But before she could fully apprise herself of the fiduciary ramifications of
such a decision should it fail, the words had already come tumbling out of Rebecca’s mouth, even
though Sophie Mendelsohn hadn’t driven a car for years. Lord knows what Rabbi Popov would
think of such advice.

But the parable had the same magical effect on Sophie Mendelsohn that it had had on
Rebecca. “Yes, I like that,” Sophie said, first slowly, then gathering force and conviction. “Don’t
let minor issues get in the way. In my way. That’s what you’re saying?”

And again, just as Sophie was beginning to feel whole again, if not to greet the world, but her
son and daughter-in-law, Rebecca had the same sensation she had had in Rabbi Mayer’s study
that day. She smelled the scent of Sophie Mendelsohn. Not just the toilet water Sophie had dabbed
behind her ears, but the scent of her person, the smell of her being, the core of her existence.
By the time Sophie walked out of Rebecca’s study that afternoon, Sophie was positively floating,
as was Rebecca.

Rebecca’s life somehow took a turn that afternoon. She picked up the telephone at her desk
and dialed her parents’ number. Truth be told, she had been avoiding them. If she got her
father, he’d turn the conversation around, leaving Rebecca depressed for days. If she got
her mother, the conversation was usually so mundane (about shopping at Publix or mah jongg
with her friends) that it, too, would send Rebecca into a state for days.

“Please come to services tonight,” Rebecca said as soon as her mother picked up the phone.
“And bring Daddy.”

“Out of the blue, honey, why? We haven’t been to services for how many years I don’t know.”

Rebecca knew only too well. The fact that neither Elaine nor Shelly had ever attended even
one service led by their daughter—not one measly service, not even the Holy Holidays!—hurt
Rebecca to no end. They had never seen Rebecca on the bima, leading her congregation. Didn’t
they want to bear witness to their daughter, their only child, leading her congregation closer to
God? Talk about irony. Hundreds of congregants looked up to Rebecca for guidance, yet she
couldn’t even convince her own parents to attend a solitary service.

“Is there something special?” Elaine asked, sidestepping. Perhaps Rebecca wanted to
introduce them to a man she was going out with? Finally, our Rebecca was going to get married?

“No Mom, it’s not that. I just want you here. I want you to be part of what I do. I want you to
want to be here. Is that so much to ask of a rabbi’s parents?”

Easy, Rebecca said to herself. Don’t make this a make-or-break case. Rebecca had always
said they’d come on their own timetable, and if they never came, then they’d never come. Don’t
make this into a federal case. Remember Rabbi Mendelsohn’s advice, remember your advice to
Sophie Mendelsohn.
“But why tonight, honey? On such short notice. I’m not sure your father will be able to go. You know your father.”

“Try. That’s all I’m asking. I know how Daddy is, but see what you can do. I’d love to see both of you.”

“I’ll do what I can, honey. If not tonight, maybe next Friday. In just a couple of hours, I just don’t know,” Elaine said, trailing off.

At which point, Rebecca chose to say nothing. Silence, she had learned as both a rabbi and now a therapist, translated to guilt, and guilt was a powerful tool.

“If I can’t get your father to come, maybe I’ll come alone.”

“Surprise me. Both of you, surprise me,” Rebecca said as she hung up, deciding this was about as strong a plea as she could make.

Elaine went to Shelly, who was stretched out on the bed, alternating between the Marlins and Jeopardy on TV. “For the sake of Rebecca, you are going to put on a tie and we are going to see our daughter tonight.”

Shelly put down the remote. At that moment, he had Jeopardy on, and the category was HATS, a subject Shelly knew something about.

“Fine, we’ll meet her at Arnie and Ritchie’s. Friday’s special is Hungarian goulash. You don’t have to cook. Forget the cooking. It’s too hot, anyway. If we leave now, we can get there for the early-bird special.”

“No, Shelly, we’re going to see her at the synagogue. We’re going to see our daughter, the rabbi, lead the congregation.”

“Correction, Elaine,” Shelly said sharply. “You might be going to the synagogue, but I most certainly am not.”

But by then Elaine had pulled out Shelly’s blazer, gray pants, a white shirt, and one of four ties he still had, a blue one with little palm trees on it that Rebecca had given him for Father’s Day years ago.

“You are going,” Elaine said as she picked up the remote, zapping Alex Trebeck and his Botany 500 suit in mid-sentence. “That’s that. Put these on,” she said laying Shelly’s clothes on the bed. “We are going to see our daughter lead her congregation.”

Jesus, what had gotten into Elaine? They had gone over this before. This was still an issue after so many years? Elaine had been cranky lately, but this, this had come out of the blue.

“I think she has something to tell us. She specifically asked us, both of us, to come. When a dog barks, you go see what he’s barking at,” Elaine said, at once sorry for how she put it.

“Then tell her she can do all the barking she wants over dinner at Arnie and Ritchie’s.”

“She wants us to attend services, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

“I’m be damned if I’m gonna set foot in that temple of hypocrites. You don’t know the pain it’s caused me. The pain it’s caused Rebecca, even though she might not know it.”

“You are going with me tonight, Shelly. And that’s that!” Elaine unzipped Shelly’s gray pants, opened the waist and helped him get into them as he still lay on the bed. Then she picked up the white shirt, opened the buttons, and helped him into that, too.
By now whatever resistance Shelly offered was bravado. Whenever Elaine put her foot down like this, which honestly wasn’t often, Shelly had no recourse. “She gets a bug up her tochis that not even a proctologist can remove,” was how he might explain it, although even Shelly would recoil at his own characterization.

Elaine fished around in his leather jewelry box on top of his dresser, filled mostly with wrapped toothpicks from restaurants, found one, then the other cufflink, and threaded them through the cuff holes of Shelly’s shirtsleeves.

“But I’m not going to wear those leather shoes,” Shelly said, a sure sign of capitulation. “They give me blisters.”

“Wear whatever shoes you want to wear. No one’s going to be looking at your feet.”

Rebecca hadn’t really expected her parents to show up. Perhaps it had been impulsive to command them in such a unilateral manner. But it was time. They were getting older. She was getting older. They lived just three miles, not three thousand miles, away. Was being a rabbi so bad, was it something they ought to be ashamed of? After all these years?

Shelly let Elaine drive to the synagogue. His driving was none too good at night, but having Elaine drive gave Shelly the opportunity to rail on about the failure of modern religions, all of them. Elaine let him talk himself blue in the face.

Elaine was nervous about the evening, this momentous reunion of parents and daughter, and perhaps because of that, she took a wrong turn. She had to drive nine miles out of the way across the Julia Tuttle Causeway and back, which gave Shelly more time to rant and rave. By the time they got to Chase Avenue, parked, and made their way into the synagogue, they were late, the service inside had already started. The president of the sisterhood was lighting the Sabbath candles in front, on the bima. And right away, Shelly made a production about wearing a yarmulke. There was a box of them at the entrance, but Shelly would be damned if he was going to put one on his head. “I need this to pray? What happens if I don’t wear one?” Shelly asked the usher who handed Shelly and Elaine their prayer books and then shrugged his shoulders. Elaine grabbed Shelly’s arm and pulled him away.

Once settled in the seats, Elaine looked up and saw Rebecca. She was wearing a long white robe. How pretty she looked, Elaine thought. That strong chin of hers, her clear eyes. Rebecca had put her hair up. Did she do this every Friday or was it for us? Her hair was still so lush and thick, Elaine thought and smiled to herself, her hand absentmindedly going to her own hair.

Shelly, on the other hand, was not appeased in the least by what he saw—the four dozen supplicants around him, the grandiose setting, the gilt on the bima. He was a stubborn man, he knew that about himself. There was a reason he had avoided going to synagogue for so many years. And it didn’t have anything to do with Rebecca! She had chosen her calling in spite of everything Shelly believed in, and that which Rebecca knew Shelly believed in. He stared up at Rebecca, whom he had worked so hard to imbue with his ideals, his wisdom, his sense of right and wrong. She had to know what this had done to her him. She was smart, so smart she
could have been a doctor, a scientist. Shelly recalled the words of her professors, that she had a limitless future, that she could go as far as she wanted. Rebecca, they said, could make a difference in the world.

And just then, just as Shelly was repeating to himself all he felt and all he knew to be true, he noticed a huge bouquet of fresh-cut blooming flowers in the front of the bima, flowers of all kinds and sizes, and it was then that Shelly started to wheeze. Roses, irises, freesias, tulips, crocuses, lilies, begonias, snapdragons. It must cost a fortune every week to buy fresh flowers! Imagine, the synagogue has fresh-cut flowers! In a place that promised salvation, they had to shell out a hundred dollars every week for flowers. Flowers for people who prayed to an almighty God who guaranteed their problems would be solved only if they coughed up enough money. Did the flowers make the prayers sweeter, the worshipers worthier of redemption?

Shelly’s eyes suddenly started to tear. The flowers, the commingling of such strong competing aromas. Shelly took out the handkerchief Elaine had put in the pocket of his blazer and touched it to his eyes, which produced more tears. Shelly soon was wheezing, his nose running like a faucet.

At first, Elaine thought Shelly’s tears were tears of joy, and when she saw her feisty, stubborn Shelly crying, she started to cry, too. She took Shelly hand, and squeezed it, then looked towards Rebecca.

Rebecca, too, saw the tears of her parents. She nodded down at them, smiling from her chair on the bima. Her gaze said she finally understood. Cry as much as you want. You now understand what it is to sit in this house of the Lord, to breathe in the body judaica, as Rebecca closed her eyes and prayed to the Almighty for this miracle of reconciliation.

It was just as that moment that Rebecca sensed the aroma in the sanctuary air. She inhaled and there it was, a singular scent she had never before experienced. This was different from the cloying perfumes, the stale cigars the old men smoked, the hard candies the old woman sucked on. Yes, there was the usual aroma from the flowers, but that wasn’t what Rebecca noticed tonight. The aroma was salt from her parents’ tears. She was certain, there was no mistaking the singular scent. It was the same as the saltwater of Passover, the salt of the Red Sea, the salt the shochet used to leach blood from glatt carcasses. She inhaled deeply. The salt entered Rebecca’s nostrils, traveled to the back of her throat, and now lay on her tongue. She could taste it. It had traveled all the way from Elaine and Shelly’s seats, to the bima, to her, and for this Rebecca was thankful, and for this she closed her eyes and asked for God’s glorious blessing.