

Broken Glass

By Mark Russ

"Mazl tov! Mazl tov. We should only meet for celebrations! May God bless you and your betrothed with good health and happiness all the days of your lives! L'chaim!"

The man's unkempt beard caught a few drops of Glenfiddich as he lowered the shot glass from his mouth and slammed it emphatically on the table. His beard, like those of the dozens of other black-hatted guests, added ten years to his appearance.

"Thank you, Reb Motl," the groom's father, Avram, responded to the man with whom he had just shared his third *l'chaim*. A smile was plastered on Avram's face. "And soon the same by you!"

Dovid, the groom, sat between his father and his father-in-law-to-be at the head of the *tish*, the table, at the event also termed a *tish*—the men's-only gathering before the wedding ceremony. Avram privately turned to his son. His smile was gone. "Did you take your medication?"

"Not today, Tatti. I fasted since morning. I'm not drinking."

Avram's elastic smile snapped back into place, but he could not stop his brow from furrowing.

The congratulatory ritual was repeated dozens of times, albeit with Avram lifting an empty shot glass after his fifth *l'chaim*. Dovid's father-in-law-to-be, Itzik, flanking Dovid at the table, stopped after six. The local rabbinic dignitaries from the Lakewood, New Jersey area, relatives from as far away as Detroit, fellow congregants, business associates, and even the occasional interloper working the crowd for charitable contributions offered their best wishes to the troika. Dovid attempted to show off his scholarly prowess by lecturing to the assembled, but was good-naturedly heckled, consistent with tradition. In short order, Dovid would be escorted by the fathers from the *tish* down a hall to a room where the *badekn*, the veiling of the bride, would take place.

Without gesture or pronouncement, lines of yeshiva students with interlocked arms, all Dovid's friends, faced the threesome and began walking backwards. The students pulled them along as if with divine magnetic attraction. A makeshift phalanx of men marched behind and nudged the trio forward; there was no turning back. As all parties fell into place, the frenzied sound of *badekn* music rose from the male chorus with riotous clapping and brass accompaniment.

The bride, Hannah, sat motionless on her throne next to the mothers and the female entourage, her face beaming. The women waited for the moment Dovid would greet his bride and place the opaque veil upon her face. The distant sound of singing grew louder. Young boys, like scouts approaching Canaan, excitedly ran ahead to the women, signaling the arrival of the main column.

The groom-embedded trio approached the bride and the throng of female guests. Itzik lovingly placed his hands on the sides of his daughter's head, repeating the blessing he had bestowed on her every Sabbath since her birth. Avram did the same for his son. The mothers wept on cue. Now it was Dovid's turn. He moved forward looking directly into the bride's face. They had not seen each other for days.

"This is not Hannah," Dovid said in a voice that could not be heard above the din of the crowd. He looked away. "This is not Hannah!" he repeated more loudly. Now his voice rose above the assembly.

Hannah's enraptured expression morphed to quizzical, then horrified. The attendees appeared stunned, and the singing stopped. Hundreds of pairs of eyes struggled to avoid each other.

Avram grabbed his son by the arm and rushed him into an adjoining room, escorted by a rising cacophony of disbelief.

"What is this?" Avram yelled through his clenched jaw. He squeezed Dovid's arms tightly.

Dovid said nothing. Avram shook him to force a response.

His son stared through his father's contorted face.

"It's not Hannah. Can't you see?" Dovid's voice was weak and desperate.

"Dovid." Avram's eyes glazed over, and his tone softened. "It's a *dybbuk*. He's back. The same you battled in the hospital last year. Don't you remember?"

Dovid was already gone. His body slumped onto a nearby chair. He sat with his eyes closed, no longer a part of this world.

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Dovid awoke in the Emergency Room of Monmouth Medical Center, the closest hospital with a psychiatry service. An IV had been inserted into his arm, delivering the Ativan that was helping him manage the catatonic state in which he found himself. He had been here before.

"Tell me, Dovid, do you know where you are?" asked a young woman in a white coat standing before him.

Dovid, though only able to move his head a few degrees, took in the IV pole with its attendant pump, the bed with siderails, and the blood pressure machine. Then he looked back at the woman with a large Monmouth ID clipped to the breast pocket of that long white coat. The initials "M.D." appeared after her name.

"I think I'm in a hospital," Dovid answered after a long pause.

"Yes. You're at Monmouth. And do you know today's date?"

Dovid's eyes shut with force, the pain in his brain showing through. Another pause.

"I was supposed to get married today."

"That's what I heard. What happened?" the doctor asked.

"They tricked me. I was supposed to marry Hannah, but it was someone else sitting in her chair. Just like Leah and Rachel."

The doctor's puzzled expression revealed she did not understand the biblical reference. Genesis relates the story of Jacob, the Jewish patriarch, believing he was marrying his true love, Rachel, only to discover after the wedding that it had been Leah, the older sister, under the veil.

"Who tricked you? Who was the woman in the bride's chair?"

"As if you don't know," Dovid answered, turning away from the doctor.

"Honestly, I don't. Who?"

"I have no idea who arranged for a strange woman to take Hannah's place. If you don't know, why don't you ask the people who were there?"

"You mean your father? He arrived with you in the ambulance."

"My father is dead. I don't know who you are talking about."

The doctor excused herself and searched for Dovid's father to obtain further history.

"They said he might be suffering from schizophrenia when he was hospitalized last year. Before he was hospitalized then, Dovid began to act in strange ways. He started *davening*...praying, night and day, without stopping to eat, without bathing, and without sleeping. It was like he was possessed. We went to our rabbi for advice, and he told us to take him here, to the emergency room. Then he went upstairs to the...unit...you know..."

"The Behavioral Health Unit?"

"Yes. That one. But we transferred him after a few days to a hospital outside our area that specialized in Orthodox Jewish patients.

"And they said he might have schizophrenia?" asked the doctor. "Was he showing other symptoms?"

"He became mistrustful of everyone. He said he could hear the voice of *Hashem*, God, just like you talking to me. He saw dead relatives in the dark, and he spoke to them. He said they spoke back. We were terrified."

"Because of the seriousness of his illness?"

"Yes, of course. But also because of what it means in our community. Who would marry such a man?"

"I see. Did they start him on medication?"

"Yes. Risperione, Risdal...something like that."

"Risperidone?"

"Yes. That's it. Dovid didn't like it. Made him drowsy, lightheaded. But it helped."

"How so?"

"In three weeks, we had our son back. He seemed back to normal. It was a *nes*...a miracle."

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"He's such a fucking loser."

"No shit. Have you seen the shnoz on that guy?"

"And *stuuupid*? No one wanted to be his study partner!"

"And...he smells. Quickest way to clear the *beys medresh* during study hall is to have him walk in!"

"That's a good one!"

"That's what happens when you play with yourself all day."

Dovid opened his eyes and looked around the sparingly furnished room. The desk, chair, and end table next to his bed were all bolted to the floor. He could make out the curtains, attached by Velcro loops to a flimsy curtain rod that could barely support the fabric, let alone a body. He took this all in and remembered he had been here before.

“Hey shmuck. Why don’t you just kill yourself?”

The voices in Dovid’s head would not stop.

“Who are you?” Dovid demanded, the question slipping from his lips at a barely audible volume.

No answer.

Dovid’s tone grew angry. “What kind of *dybbuks* are you? Stop lying about me!”

“Oh, no, he doesn’t like us. That makes me sad,” one voice said.

Dovid flew into a rage. “Get the fuck out of here, you assholes!”

“Did you ever hear such language?”

The door to Dovid’s room flew open.

“Are you alright?” The psych tech did not wait for an answer. “Who are you screaming at, man?”

Dovid turned to the Black attendant with the Jamaican accent and saw his eyes were kind. Dovid lowered a fist that he had not even been aware of and slunk down onto the edge of the bed.

“No one.” Dovid was glad for the intrusion of a real human being, but he was not ready to engage. He lay down and turned his body toward the wall.

“I’m just outside if you need me.”

Dovid said no more.

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“Crab grass syndrome?” Avram repeated what he thought he heard Dovid’s doctor say.

“No. Capgras Syndrome. It’s when someone believes family, friends, anyone, are not really who they are. People with Capgras Syndrome are convinced they are surrounded by imposters. It can occur in a variety of serious psychiatric illnesses, including schizophrenia.”

Avram listened intently to every word the doctor said. His brain, more accustomed to unraveling Talmudic conundrums, tried hard to digest this information, the effort reflected in a tic of the left eye that emerged only under stress.

"He didn't have this the first time around." Avram's tone conveyed the injustice of this additional burden.

"It happens. We don't know why," the doctor countered.

"So that's why he didn't recognize Hannah?"

"Presumably."

"Will he get better?"

"He should respond to the medication he was taking..." The doctor interrupted himself. "The medicine he was supposed to be taking."

"He told me he missed one dose. On the day of the wedding."

"That's highly unlikely," the doctor interjected. "More likely he stopped the Risperidone weeks or even months before. I will talk with Dovid about considering an injectable form of the medication that he can get at a doctor's office every month. That may be easier, and more dependable."

"Thank you, Doctor. Please make my Dovid better."

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"I would like to see Dovid Einhorn. He was admitted here last week. Eleven North."

The woman at the reception desk did not look up. "And you are?"

"Hannah Cohen. His fiancée."

"Has Mr. Einhorn agreed to see you?" the receptionist asked, though she knew the answer. The only visitors Dovid Einhorn had put on his approved visitation list were his parents. HIPAA regulations prohibited the staff at the Behavioral Health Unit of Monmouth Medical Center from even confirming a given individual was a patient in the hospital without authorization.

"He isn't expecting me," Hannah acknowledged. "But I'm sure he'll see me. Please." There was a hint of desperation in her voice.

The receptionist finally looked up. Hannah could see the woman was wearing a *shaytl*, a wig worn by married women in the Orthodox Lakewood community. Her expression suggested she knew the whole story. Lakewood, after all, is a *shtetl*. No secrets.

"Let me see what I can do." There was a drop of pity in her voice, as if she could imagine for an excruciating moment what it must have felt like to be stood up at the *khupe*. "Please take a seat in the lobby. I'll come get you."

The receptionist called the unit and asked the nurse to ask Dovid if he'd agree to see Hannah Cohen. He did. The receptionist, only four foot ten and wearing a long-sleeved blouse buttoned at the neck, a skirt down to her ankles, and white sneakers, retrieved Hannah from the lobby. "Take this elevator to the eleventh floor and follow the signs for Eleven North," she said, pointing to the elevator bank to her right. "The door will be locked. Ring the doorbell and a staff member will let you in."

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"Hello Dovid. How are you feeling?"

"Hannah...I was expecting Hannah..."

"I am Hannah, Dovid. Don't you remember?"

Dovid bolted down the corridor, away from her, his *tsitsit* flying behind him. "I don't know *who* you are." He stopped and turned back to face her. "What have you done with Hannah?" he demanded.

One week into the hospitalization, Dovid's voices were quieter. The degradation he had experienced at the hands of the two evil commentators had been silenced by the antipsychotic medication. But he was still far from well.

Hannah stood her ground. "I *am* Hannah, Dovid. *Your* Hannah. And I'm not going anywhere."

Dovid pivoted, marched into his room, and slammed the door.

Hannah did all she could to make it off the unit before bursting into tears.

She returned the very next day, confidently claiming she was on the approved list of visitors. This was not inaccurate. After all, it was Dovid who was in error, not Hannah.

"Oh, you're back. What *is* your name, anyway"?

Hannah knew better than to provoke Dovid again.

“Rachel.”

“Are you making fun of me? I am Dovid, not Jacob.”

Hannah resisted the temptation to say, “I am Hannah, your Rachel,” but thought better of it.

“No...I am Rachel...really.” She sat on a coffee-stained armchair with frayed upholstery opposite him and stared at the worn carpet between them.

“Well, believe me when I say that switching Hannah for *you* was no less cruel than switching Leah for Rachel.”

“I can understand that. It must have been quite a shock.”

Dovid did not anticipate someone, let alone this strange woman, taking his side. “Yes. Yes, it was an extreme shock. I just want to know what happened to her.”

“You are worried.”

“Yes.”

“You loved her very much.”

“I *love* her very much.” Dovid began to cry.

“I can see that.”

A patient entered the day room and sat down on the couch in front of the television. He reached for the remote control and turned it on. The volume had been left at a near-maximum setting.

“I’d better get going.”

“Will you come back to see me...Rachel?”

“I will. Tomorrow.”

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And so, it went, day after day. Hannah’s relentless compassion coupled with the blockade of dopamine receptors in Dovid’s brain worked together to bring him back from madness. The breakthrough came on the eighteenth day. The couple met in the empty day room as had become their custom.

“Good to see you, Hannah. I knew you would come.”

“You recognize me?”

“I may be crazy, but I’m not dumb. Of course, I recognize you. Good to see you after such a long time. You came to say good-bye.”

Hannah’s body stiffened. “Why good-bye?”

“Of course, good-bye. I sinned. At your expense.”

“What sin?”

“I humiliated you, in front of your family, your friends, *our* friends. I tripped us both on the way to the *khupe*.”

“You didn’t sin. You were sick.” Hannah began to walk around Dovid.

“Nevertheless. It doesn’t matter. I am damaged.”

“I love you, Dovid.” Her circling continued.

“I am broken!” Dovid’s voice grew loud but trembled at the same time. “The community will shun us. Children will laugh at our children. They’ll mercilessly be teased. Or worse, they could carry the genes of a *meshugene*!”

“*Hashem* will help.”

Dovid, fearful he would add blasphemy to his pile of troubles, did not respond.

“For us the glass is broken before the *khupe*.”

“We will join the pieces together.”

“We will bleed.”

“The mingling of our blood will strengthen us.” Hannah stopped before Dovid, having completed exactly seven rotations.

“Then it is in the hands of *Hashem*. *We* are in the hands of *Hashem*.”

Hannah and Dovid moved nearer to each other. Their faces were so close only a single ray of light from the secured window could pass between them.