

Chapter 9



MEETING RABBI LAPIN

SPRING 1985

IN THE SPRING I RECEIVED THE OVERSIZED, fat envelope holding my acceptance to the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern. I was thrilled and Jeff seemed relieved. After I'd gone, he'd get a break from my *hocking a chainik* (Yiddish for pestering, literally, "banging a tea kettle"). I assumed he would look for a more religious and less contrary girlfriend when I left town. Who could blame him? Our outings sometimes seemed more like debate team practices than dates. With one foot figuratively out the door, I went with Jeff to my first Thursday night Torah class in Rabbi Lapin's home.

The Lapins' living room and dining room area was packed with about fifty men and women sitting on folding chairs. Sweeping the room with my eyes, I studied the women's heads, silently counting the number of "open-air" uncovered heads versus those wearing wigs (although great wigs can fool you), scarves, or other head coverings. Most Orthodox married women covered their hair in public, and that was one law I knew I could never abide. I was glad to see some women who appeared to be both married and

bareheaded. As I sat down next to Jeff, I felt my jaw clench reflexively. For Jeff's sake I wanted to like Rabbi Lapin and this whole new world of Torah study and observance, but because the rabbi was both Orthodox and a white South African, I assumed he was racist and sexist, so I also really didn't want to like him.

In a well-cut gray suit and tie, Rabbi Lapin smiled and nodded at the people filing in. Presiding at a lectern in front of the fireplace, I noticed the bookshelves on either side of him were crowded with classic titles of English literature, a multi-volume history of Winston Churchill, and books about physics and nautical navigation. I had assumed his library might be Hebrew and Aramaic-only. After all, my own Papa Cohen, who wasn't even Orthodox, had bookshelves filled mostly with Talmudic tomes. I had assumed that Orthodoxy meant "narrow," and it was crucial to me that any Orthodox rabbi I listened to was broadly educated.

The Lapins' three daughters, ages two to five, sat in pint-sized rocking chairs in their pajamas next to their father. They were scene-stealing adorable, all with luminous blue eyes and blond hair. If all the other kids in this community were going to be this cute, I would fold like a weak poker hand. The living and dining room also opened to the kitchen, and alluring aromas wafted through the house as Rabbi Lapin's wife, Susan, cooked for *Shabbos* while listening to his class. What a surprise, I thought with a bit of irritation: the wife's in the kitchen; the husband's the star of the show.

Rabbi Lapin was a natural teacher, charismatic, exuberant, and commanding. That night he described the dramatic scene when the elderly patriarch Isaac plans to bequeath the blessing of the firstborn to Esau, the elder of his twin sons. Isaac has instructed Esau to "hunt some game" and prepare a meal for him before he gives the blessing. Apparently, this blessing of the firstborn is a very big deal. Whoever gets that prize also gets to pass down the spiritual DNA needed to forge Jewish destiny throughout the millennia.

But Isaac's wife, Rebecca, has other ideas and intervenes. She commands the younger twin, Jacob, to appear before Isaac and pose as Esau, presenting him with a meal she will prepare. Each parent has a favorite son, and Jacob is Rebecca's. She is convinced that this quieter and more reflective son must have the blessing.

This family feud could get nasty, I think, sitting and listening. This Esau is a rough guy, a hunter with a famous rap sheet for womanizing, theft, and even murder. I can see where Rebecca is coming from on this one, and Esau's personality is one she understands better than her husband, because she is the sister and daughter of men seasoned in the arts of deception. Both Isaac and Rebecca see that Esau could become a leader, theoretically, but only Rebecca understands that his potential for leadership will always be dwarfed by his bloodlust. With a goatskin on his arm, Jacob tries to pass himself off as his hairier, coarser brother when he stands before his nearly blind father. Jacob hadn't liked this stratagem and protested, pointing out the trickery involved and the risk of discovery. But even in the book of Genesis, mother knows best, and Rebecca insists that Jacob go through with the deception and assumes all responsibility for any price to be paid.

Jacob manages to convince his skeptical father that he is Esau, and receives the powerful, history-changing blessing. When Esau arrives shortly after, prepared with the meal he has hunted and cooked to his father's specifications, he discovers the deception. He cries out bitterly: "Do you not have a blessing for me?" It's a heart-breaking scene. His father loved him, and chose to see his son's potential more than his manifest flaws. Through her behind-the-scenes maneuvering, the matriarch Rebecca changes the course of Jewish history.

I was spellbound by the story. How had I never learned about this momentous episode through so many years of synagogue attendance and after-school Jewish education? I was shocked just trying

to imagine this family living out such a tumultuous power play. Rabbi Lapin's discussion showed that the biblical first families were actual flesh-and-blood people, with achingly poignant problems, conflicts, dreams, even marital disputes. In Hebrew school, biblical personalities had been presented as distant, fairy-tale characters.

I tried to follow along as Rabbi Lapin dissected the text line by line, revealing deeper layers of meaning as well as curiosities and inconsistencies in the Hebrew, a language whose exquisite distinctions I had never realized. These linguistic nuances of the text are hard enough to catch even if you are fluent in Hebrew. They are absolutely impossible to see reading a translation—any translation. Learning the text “inside,” he pointed out odd grammar and syntax, mismatched tenses, seemingly random jumps in the storyline, double entendres, and other clues to help unravel the mysteries of the biblical narrative.

For my entire life I had been passionate about the written word. I read and wrote in nearly all my spare time. I felt fortunate that I had a career where I could focus on and explore the world of language, always seeking more imaginative, precise, and evocative ways to tell a story, summon emotions, or make people laugh. As a journalist, I also loved figuring out what questions to ask that would reveal the story I needed to tell. That night I was jolted by the realization that the way Rabbi Lapin taught Torah had a lot in common with investigative journalism: he was digging for truth by asking why this unusual word was used instead of another, more common word; what message was being sent when the storyline was suddenly out of order; what the significance was of seeing a particular word used for the very first time. There were meaningful answers to all these questions. It took patient digging to find out the answers. Given all this, I knew I could not resist delving deeper to learn what these Hebrew words meant, and as a good journalist tries to do, to find the story behind the story.