

from Holy Beggars, Chapter 29 – Shomer

Half Moon Bay, California – October 1997

When the phone rings I feel annoyed at the interruption of my dinner.

Having moved out of my house when my marriage broke up, I'm living in a "temporary" apartment near the beach, eating by myself, sitting at the little round table near the sliding glass door, looking out at the sunset over the ocean.

I listen as the answering machine takes the call. It's Marty Potrop. I get up quickly and go to the phone.

After Shlomo passed away three years ago, and after following Reb Zalman's recommendation to pray for guidance, I decided to join the Aquarian Minyan's board, which we call the Council. I like the feeling of being connected in this way to the community.

Marty chairs the Council. He holds the title of Shomer. In Hebrew, *shomer* means guardian, keeper, protector. One of God's names is *Shomer Yisrael*, Guardian of Israel.

I pick up the phone. "Marty, what's up?"

"Aryae, I'm glad you're there," he says. "Listen, there's some stuff I really need to talk to you about."

"I think I can guess," I say.

Marty laughs a gallows humor kind of laugh. "Look, we've got Victor and Nadya Gross coming to be our new rabbis, right? Reuven couldn't persuade them to delay coming here, so they're on their way!"

I take a deep breath. "It's crazy—at this point we can't agree on anything!" I say. "How are we going to get it together to welcome them?"

"Aryae, I swear to you, I'm getting a dozen Minyan calls a day, at least! I've been spending hours on the phone listening to anger, shouting, sadness, tears, outrage—you name it!

"I'm also getting calls from people who say that this whole conversation is destructive and unfair. Shlomo's dead, he's not here to defend himself, all these stories are 2nd or 3rd party hearsay—the whole thing is lashon ha'ra."

Lashon ha'ra—literally "language of evil"—refers to a body of Jewish law which prohibits injuring people or destroying their reputations by making derogatory statements about them. Lashon ha'ra is taken especially seriously when applied to people who are dead and can't defend themselves.

We're both silent for a while. Finally Marty speaks. "Aryae, can I ask you something?" he says, a little tentatively.

"Sure," I say, "What?"

"You were close to Shlomo. During those years, just between you and me, did you know about any of this stuff that people are talking about? Did you ever witness any of it?"

I think for a moment. "Okay Marty, here's the truth: when I was at the House, what I knew was what everyone else knew, about the stories of Shlomo calling women late at night. That's it."

"Aryae, between you and me, what about those phone calls?" Marty says. "I mean, this was a guy in his 40s, a rabbi, making suggestive, late night phone calls to women. How did you deal with that? How did you put that behavior together with someone who was your spiritual teacher?"

I sigh. "That's a fair question." I close my eyes and try to go back to my feelings about Shlomo 30 years ago. As a 24-year-old in the 1960s in San Francisco, it was a different world. Our gatherings at the House, like other spiritual communities in San Francisco, were filled with love energy, and that love energy was laced with sexual energy. As young people we were all swimming in it ourselves.

"Look, if I could travel back in time as the guy I am today with what I know now, it would all be a lot clearer, right? It would be easier. I could say, 'Shlomo! What are you doing calling up women late at night like that?! Are you crazy? What's going on with you?' Looking back at it now, I wish I could have said that to him..."

We talk about Victor and Nadya. How will the community come together to welcome our new rabbis when they arrive? It's only two weeks away.

With all the animosity and distrust that people are feeling, neither of us can figure out how to do it...

Half Moon Bay, California – December 1997

Hanukah is late this year, falling on the last week in December, between Christmas and New Year's. Noe and Adam and I are in my living room, sitting on the floor at the low table, playing dreidel while we watch the flames on the candles in the big wooden hanukiah. Through the window right in back of the candles, we can see the black night sky filled with stars. Around us, where we're sitting, the floor is strewn with paper, torn wrappings of Hanukah presents.

The phone rings and I answer it.

"Aryae?"

"Hi Marty. Listen, I'm with my kids and we're doing Hanukah. Could we talk another time, maybe tomorrow?"

"Aryae, I know. I'm sorry about the timing, but I really need to talk to you. This will just take five minutes, I promise. If there's more to say, we can finish tomorrow." Marty's not normally this insistent. Something's wrong. I tell Noe and Adam I need to take this call for five minutes. Noe looks at me knowingly, then rolls her eyes and shrugs. "Whatever," she says.

I go into my bedroom, close the door, put on the reading light and sit on the bed. "Marty what's up?" I say.

"Between you and me," he says, "I'm really not doing so good."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"I'm quitting as Shomer," he says. "I'm going to announce it at the Council meeting in January."

"Quitting? Why?"

He laughs. "Do I need to spell it out?" he says. "Between the demands of my graduate school program, my work, and this, I just can't handle it anymore!" Marty is in the midst of a masters degree program in organizational development at Cal State Sonoma, which is about an hour's drive from Berkeley. He goes into the latest details from the Minyan, about who's shouted at him, who's pleaded with him, who's tried to manipulate him. He needs to get away from it all.

"Marty, I totally understand," I say, "but we're still in the middle of this thing, and the community needs you. You're the steadiest and sanest one around. Without someone strong to hold the center, the Minyan will fall apart."

"Thank you," he says, "I appreciate that vote of confidence, I really do. And believe me, if I felt that I could do any good at this point, I'd try to hang in there longer. But I know of one other person who's strong enough, and has the respect and trust of everyone, who could handle it."

A couple of seconds of silence. "Marty, no way!" I say. "Besides, what about Reuven? He's much more of a pillar of the Minyan. He can do it!"

"Aryae, you're forgetting one little thing, and that is, he decided to take a hiatus from the Council and isn't a member this year."

I tell Marty there are two reasons I don't want to be Shomer. The first is it's hard enough to juggle being a single parent with all my other responsibilities. I hate leaving Noe and Adam alone in the evening to drive to Berkeley, and being Shomer would make it worse. The second is that I'm not neutral when it comes to Shlomo.

"Look Aryae," he responds, "Reb Zalman started this holy community over 20 years ago and—you're the one who said it!—without a strong Shomer now, it just won't hold together. You know it, and I know it. I gave it my best shot, and I just can't do it. It's that simple. Now it's your moment to step up."

"Okay, Marty, thank you for your vote of confidence in me." I laugh. "I'll think about it, pray about it, and get back to you tomorrow, okay?"

Noe and Adam have turned on the TV set in the living room and are laughing at some kind of comedy show. I struggle to get their attention and

it takes a while, but eventually the TV is off and we're back to the game of dreidel...

I call Marty the next morning. I'll do it, I tell him. If the Council wants me to be Shomer, I'll do the best I can.