

A HANUKKAH
MIRACLE

Nicholas Gordon

Copyright © 2007 by Nicholas Gordon

This story may be used free for any personal or non-commercial purpose. For commercial use of this story, please contact the author at webmaster@poemsforfree.com.

A HANUKKAH MIRACLE

Rabbi Joel Feigelman's congregation fired him in August, and, having no other source of income, he was forced to put together hurriedly a patchwork of part-time positions.

On the sabbath he conducted services Friday night and Saturday at the Daughters of Jacob Home for the Aged. Mondays and Thursdays he gave spiritual comfort to Jewish patients at Bauman Memorial Hospital, and Tuesdays at the Hospital of St. John of the Cross. Wednesdays he gave classes on Judaism at the Fort Dixon Hills Senior Citizens Center.

Not the life he had envisioned for himself thirty years earlier at Union Theological Seminary. But neither was his messy divorce after twenty-seven years of marriage, nor the embarrassing dismissal by his congregation in response to some admittedly inappropriate behavior with a married congregant in the aftermath of his sexual liberation.

One evening in the waning days of November he was listening to Dave Brubeck in his furnished room when the phone rang.

"Rabbi Joel Feigelman?" came a distant, slithering voice, strained through a cell phone.

"Yes?"

"This is Murray Rosenbaum. Sorry for the bad

connection. I'm in Singapore."

"Yes?" Rabbi Feigelman repeated.

"You *are* the rabbi for the Daughters of Jacob."

"Yes."

"Well, I cleared it with Ms. Kay. I'd like to pay you an extra fifty bucks a shot to light Hanukkah candles for my mother."

"Yes?"

"Fifty bucks. My mother, Rivka Rosenbaum. She's in hospice at the Home. It would mean a lot to me to know that someone was lighting the candles for her."

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman agreed.

"I gotta get back to a meeting. Yes or no, Rabbi. What do you say?"

"Yes!" said Rabbi Feigelman. Eight days at \$50 equaled \$400 – 20% of his credit card debt. For that he'd light Hanukkah candles for a corpse.

"My secretary will send you a check at the Home as soon as the holiday is over. OK with you?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman said one last time, and Murray Rosenbaum hung up.

After Havdalah services on the next Saturday evening, Rabbi Feigelman went over to the hospice wing of the Home to take a look at the woman for whom he was supposed to light Hanukkah candles.

As he entered the room, Rivka Rosenbaum seemed to be asleep, but soon she opened her eyes as wide as a child's and gave him a look of wonder.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman," Rabbi Feigelman said. "Your son called me from Singapore."

The words didn't seem to register.

Rabbi Feigelman noticed the tattooed numbers on her cadaverous arm. A Holocaust survivor, once again skin and bones.

The hospice nurse explained that Mrs. Rosenbaum had been given two or three months until a metastasized melanoma killed her, but her doctor and medical proxy had agreed instead to stop dialysis, which would end her life more swiftly and far less painfully in four or five days.

The likelihood of her making it even to the first night of Hanukkah was slim. The likelihood of her making it to the end was zero.

Please, God! Rabbi Feigelman prayed, just half jokingly. Two more weeks! I need the money.

On the first night of Hanukkah, Rivka Rosenbaum was still alive, though barely. Rabbi Feigelman showed up, menorah, matches, and candles in a plastic shopping bag.

The woman was in a coma, he was told, and would have absolutely no consciousness of what he was doing. Still, he was being paid, so Rabbi Feigelman set the menorah up on the little rolling table by her bed, lit the Shamos, and then with the Shamos the candle for the first night, singing the blessings as he did so.

He set the menorah on the window sill and looked over at his audience.

She turned uncomfortably in bed, breathing heavily, then turned again and moaned, as if in pain.

She opened her eyes and stared at Rabbi

the candles for Mrs. Rosenbaum. As he entered the room the hospice nurse drew him back out into the hall and whispered to him.

"Rabbi Feigelman, it's unbelievable! Mrs. Rosenbaum woke up and said it's time for the candle lighting and where were you? So I told her you were doing it for everyone else in the lobby and that then you would be coming over to do it privately for her, and she clasped her hands together with joy. With joy, Rabbi Feigelman! Her potassium readings are high enough to shut down an elephant's heart, and she seems healthier than she's ever been here at the hospice. It's a miracle!"

Oh, God! Rabbi Feigelman thought. He was happy for Mrs. Rosenbaum, but could it be that God was actually answering his ugly, venal, only half-serious prayer? It seemed ludicrous even to think so. Fear gripped his heart.

He came into the room and bowed to Mrs. Rosenbaum, who was waiting like a concert audience for the conductor. Then he lit the Shamos, and with the Shamos two candles while singing the blessings, then transferred the menorah from the rolling table to the window sill.

Mrs. Rosenbaum looked on with enthusiasm. Then she stared at the glowing candles.

"How beautiful!" she exclaimed, the first words he had heard from her, quite apropos and clear.

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it! And you sing the prayers so well! Excuse me, but your name . . ."

life, Rabbi Feigelman? Inexplicable beauty on the edge of nothingness. How grateful I am for it, even for a few extra days!"

Staring at the candles, she again fell into a sudden, deep sleep, while Dr. Hilton hurriedly pressed his stethoscope against her back and Ms. Raimondo slapped a blood pressure cuff around her left arm.

Rabbi Feigelman left the room shaking. He shook all the way home on the three buses he had to take, and then all the way up the three flights of stairs to his room.

"God, God, God, God!" he kept repeating. "What are You doing to me? Are You punishing me? Are You making fun of me?"

He had resolved not to go back to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room the following night when the phone rang.

It was Murray Rosenbaum, this time from St. Petersburg. He sounded like he was under water.

"I just spoke to Ms. Kay," he said enthusiastically. "The head of social services at the home?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman affirmed.

"She said it was a miracle! My mother's in a coma till about a half hour before you come. Then she wakes up and is all animated and actually happy! God bless you, Rabbi! Tell you what I want to do."

"Yes?" said Rabbi Feigelman.

"I'm gonna double your pay. One hundred bucks a shot. Eight hundred bucks total. That sound good to you?"

couldn't believe that the Lord would for one second concern Himself with so trivial a request, or would keep life burning in an old lady for eight miraculous days just to ease his financial situation.

It was the Hanukkah miracle replayed as farce. He felt guilty for using a dead woman for his own material advantage, and each time he saw her preternatural joy, he cringed inside.

On the last night of Hanukkah, the crowd was larger than ever. A local cable television station covered the event, as did a photographer and reporter from the Associated Press.

As usual, Mrs. Rosenbaum was animated and vigorous. She was interviewed by both the TV and print media before Rabbi Feigelman arrived, and to both she asserted her belief that she would die soon after the last candle on the menorah was lit, but that she was overjoyed at every opportunity to experience the beauty of light.

"You don't know what a miracle it is," she told them, "because you take it for granted. But for me every second of beauty is a second worth having, and I'm grateful that, for whatever mysterious reason, God has granted me eight more days of it."

When Rabbi Feigelman arrived, the media wanted to interview him as well, but he brushed right by them with a "no comment" and began setting up the menorah for the final candle lighting. As he lit the eight candles with the Shamos while singing the blessings, all eyes were upon him. But after he set the menorah on the window sill, all eyes shifted to Mrs.

"Her husband and children were killed in the Holocaust. She never remarried. That's why her attorney was her medical proxy."

"But didn't he ask you whether it as all right for me to – "

"Didn't who ask?"

"Her son Murray."

"How could he ask if he doesn't exist?"

A fair question, Rabbi Feigelman thought. He apologized for bothering her and hung up.

Then he realized: No Murray Rosenbaum, no \$800. And he began to understand just how divinely he had been had.