

Stories that resound across all emotions and across all cultures.

Shtetl In My Mind

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Stories by Martin A. David

## BENDL THE GONIFF AND THE GREAT BABY EXCHANGE

**B**endl, our shtetl's crafty thief, prankster, mischief-maker and carrier of clandestine messages, has stolen many things. However, let it be said in his defense, that he has never, ever stolen—or even really borrowed—a baby. In fact, he has never, as far as he knows and I know and the people of the town know, made a baby.

So then how did our dear Bendl get involved with more than a dozen babies? Well, it's not a long story, so if you sit and have another cup of tea, I might be able to tell you.

To begin at the beginning, it began with a wedding. Now a wedding is a good beginning—both for a story and for a life. When two people stand together under the bridal canopy and then make their marks on the *ketubah*, the marriage contract, it is cause for celebration. If the bride's parents are living, they feel blessed and relieved to see a daughter leave their room-and-board and go to join the mainstream of the community. Similar feelings can also be observed in the groom's parents. The community celebrates to welcome the couple over the threshold between childhood and the responsible existence of adults. The community, if the truth were known, also celebrates because life is not always easy and everybody likes a party.

The size and shape of the party depend on many things. If a rich man's daughter marries the son of a wealthy man, then the party becomes the subject of shtetl reminiscences and legends for many years to come. The daughter of a well-to-do father who is joined with the

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scholarly son of a great rabbi can also expect to see her parental house filled wall to wall with people on the day of her wedding. To be invited to eat, drink and dance at such a wedding is a great honor and is usually preceded by the construction of a huge appetite.

Another large wedding, one where everyone who is well enough to walk may assume himself or herself to be invited, is the uniting of the son or daughter of someone particularly beloved by the community. At such a wedding, there is also great feasting. It may not be on the same slaughter-the-fatted-calf level as the event hosted by the prosperous parents, but who wouldn't want to come and celebrate the joy of a well-loved rabbi or teacher? Of course, it is interesting to point out how the adored are not often affluent and the affluent are seldom adored, but that is the matter for another story.

A third kind of wedding is the joining of orphans or the offspring of families with little or no means. At these nuptial festivities, it is the guests and neighbors who supply most of the food and drink but the size of the feast never seems to shrink the magnitude of the joy.

It was the middle kind of wedding that provided a background for this story. The children of two beloved, learned, wise, compassionate and very poor rabbis were being brought together. The son of Moshe ben Beryl, the rabbi of our Narodny shtetl, was signing a marriage contract with the daughter of Rabbi Jacov ben Itzhak, from the town of Dołek, which lay over some rolling hills just several hours' wagon ride from Narodny. The most commonly heard blessing being bestowed on the engaged couple was "May your progeny bring forth a dynasty of great Talmudic scholars." The spouses-to-be had gotten a glimpse of each other at the betrothal ceremony and, although they both were too young to understand what marriage really meant, were neither frightened nor horrified by what they saw.

When we say the fathers, Rabbi Moshe and Rabbi Jacov, were poor, we do not mean they lacked for any of the necessities of life. Food and firewood, and used, but quite presentable clothing, all arrived on their doorsteps whenever such things were needed. Their neighbors, Jews and Poles alike, made sure that want never cast a shadow on them.

Piotr-son-of-Piotr, a Polish landowner for whom Rabbi Jacov had once helped settle a dispute, made sure the bride had a respectable dowry. Benesh-the-Merchant from our own shtetl made sure that barrels of wine stood ready, and that chickens and a well-fattened sheep arrived in plenty of time to be slaughtered in the ritual manner, koshered, and prepared to be served to the guests. Musicians arrived from all sides, ready to play just for the joy of playing. There were almost more volunteering hands than there were tasks to busy them.

And the guests. There was no lack of guests. It is a mitzvah, a good deed, to attend such a happy occasion. It was, if such a thing is possible, even more of a mitzvah to dance at the wedding linking the houses of two such prominent scholars as Rabbi Moshe and Rabbi Jacov. The guests came from every corner of the shtetl, they came from the surrounding countryside, and they came, in a long line of wagons, droshkies and ox carts, from the town of Dołek where the bride had grown up. Whole families came to share the joy. Fathers and mothers and older children sang songs in the fronts of wagons while old grandmothers and grandfathers held on tight and hoped their bones would not shatter from all the rattling. Younger children swatted and punched each other and ended up looking and smelling nothing at all like the clean little angels that had been loaded into the vehicles hours before.

Weddings such as this tended to last from early in the day to late into the night. The dancing and eating and drinking went on as long as there were supplies to be had and guests there to enjoy them. A few people from outside the shtetl stayed with relatives, others wedged into crowded spaces with strangers or, in the case of the more rambunctious drinkers, just slept where they fell. However most of the guests had work to do in the morning. Just before midnight there was the sound of horses being set in motion, wagon wheels creaking and goodbyes being shouted. The horses knew the way and the drivers dozed most of the way home. They arrived in time to gather in a precious few hours of sleep and then to say the morning prayers in their own, familiar surroundings. Of course, weddings like this took place only once every few years and so the arrangements were hardly ever a problem.

Hardly ever, but not never.

You may have met Bendl-the-Goniff. In a shtetl, there is usually someone for every task. Yochnan, the Polish miller made his living by grinding wheat and other grains into flour or meal, Menachem-the-Tailor made his living by sewing fine jackets and caftans, and Benesh-the-Merchant made his living by trading one thing for another. Our Bendl made his living by running in between the raindrops and never getting wet. Yes, it is true that the word *goniff* means thief and yes it is true, though shocking to admit, that Bendl sometimes took things that were not his. Mostly he lived on the small commissions he received for running the unpleasant errands that needed to be done. If one needed to carry three plump chickens to express one's friendship to a police magistrate, one merely gave them to Bendl and as quick as a puff of smoke, the two plump chickens arrived safely at their destination. Superstitious folk whispered that Bendl could shrink himself down to nothing more than his smile, slip through the crack in a door and materialize again on the other side. Others countered that it had more to do with doors and windows being left unlatched than with magic, but who's to argue with superstition?

Bendl-the-Goniff was both lazy and industrious, honest and dishonest, clever and foolish. He was also a prankster. His sense of humor knew no bounds and when he wasn't using sleight of hand to conjure up a few bits of food or a silk scarf to sell, he was plotting jokes and tricks to play upon friends and strangers alike. If Jews believed in leprechauns, Bendl would have been called a leprechaun.

The adventure of the babies started innocently enough. When darkness fell, while the parents were still dancing and drinking and the older children were standing on the edges of the merriment, struggling to stay awake, the little ones were tucked away in wagons and carts to sleep until it was time for the ride home. Bendl was wandering through the shadows, looking for bits of this and that when he encountered one of the children. The child, a little boy, had been roused by a bad dream, called out for his mama and, not finding her nearby, climbed, more asleep than

awake, out of the wagon. He was straying among the wagon wheels, munching horses and grunting oxen when Bendl found him.

“Well, well, well, little gentleman and what is your name?”

“Mama.”

“And who is this mama of yours?”

“Mama.”

“Do you know your papa’s name?”

“Mama.”

The conversation was not progressing well. Bendl studied the little face in the moonlight. Ah, he thought he knew whose child this was. This sleepy urchin must belong to Gittel-with-a-limp’s cousin Miriam who, with her husband, Red-headed Kuppel, had a farm a few miles out of town, by the river. Bendl knew their wagon. He gathered up the small creature and carried him to the wagon. He lifted the canvas cover and started to put the now sleeping boy in the wagon. One, two, three...there were already three breathing lumps asleep in the straw. Adding the boy would have made four and four was one more than Miriam and Kuppel had produced. The boy belonged elsewhere.

That is when the idea struck the impish Bendl.

Three was the proper number and three it shall be. He put the boy in the wagon and took one of the sleeping lumps out. The lump did not wake up. He carried the moist bundle to another wagon and set it there. Then, for the next hour, he tiptoed from one vehicle to another carrying his little packages, some of them dripping with the childish accidents of night, and depositing them here and there. Some woke up and complained, but Bendl charmed them back to sleep again with his rocking and lullabying until the mixture was complete. At the wedding, music was playing. Outside the wedding, Bendl danced to its melodies. Each of his little partners ended up in a different place from that in which he or she started.

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When the first sets of tired and slightly tipsy parents headed for their wagons and carts, Bendl was lurking in the shadows. The first cautious mother, in a scene that would be repeated many times, lifted the canvas that covered her family's wagon, counted the sleeping bumps in the straw, listened to make sure all were breathing, and climbed wearily into the wagon seat for the long trek home.

After a few families had headed home, Bendl faded into the shadows and disappeared. Some things are better pondered and imagined from a safe distance.

The first discovery took place some miles outside of town. Jacob-who-squinted stopped his wagon and climbed off to drain some of the extra liquid he had consumed. At the same time, he thought it might be prudent to wake his oldest child, a son, and have him perform the same act of discharge. He lifted the largest sleeping bump out of the back of the wagon and stood it on its feet.

“Kom, kom, gayn pishn,” he coaxed.

The sleepy child complied, but imagine Jacob's shock and consternation when the small creature beside him squatted down and did it like a little girl. It took only a quick glance to reveal that she was, indeed, a little girl.

His wife, Faygl, a very superstitious woman became nearly apoplectic.

“It is you, it is your fault,” she screamed so loudly that birds in trees a half mile away began to stir. “Because you are always drunk. God has decided that we are not worthy to have a son. He has taken away our son as punishment and given us another girl to try to marry off without a dowry.”

Similar scenes, some with more yelling and screaming, some with less, were taking place from Narodny to Dołek. Imagine going to wake little Herschel and finding out that he had transformed overnight to a little Hindeleh, or from a dark-haired boy to a red-headed one. Everything from sleep-walking to divine intervention was blamed. Some



of the exchanged children simply looked around at their new surroundings, new siblings and new situations and declared, "I'm hungry." Others of the temporary changelings began to squall for their mamas—their real mamas—and set up a wave of noise that could be heard almost all the way back to Narodny.

Soon there was a great traffic of wagons and carts heading back towards the scene of the transformation. Neighbors met neighbors on the road and inspected each other's children. By the time they all got to the Narodny marketplace, it was not a market day and the large, empty square seemed like an excellent place to meet, they all had realized that they were the victims of a colossal joke. An air of hilarity prevailed. It was annoyed hilarity, but hilarity nonetheless. Uninvolved townspeople stood around and roared with laughter, or whistled, stamped and applauded as groups of bewildered children were gathered in the marketplace and parents walked up and down holding joyous reunions with their own or bartering a child for a child as if they were trading goats.

At first, the happiness they felt in straightening out the tangled muddle was the only thing on their minds. After a while, thoughts drifted to questions of who might have been the perpetrators of such a scandalous practical joke. Could it have been a drunken Pole or a gang of young boys from the town? Were there demons lurking nearby whose earthly pleasure was causing great confusion? By late afternoon there was only one name on everyone's tongue. It was the right name; it was Bendl-the-Goniff. Nobody but Bendl could have played such a trick.

And where was our shtetl's goniff? He had made the very wise decision to go out and explore the countryside. At the moment he was lying out of the hot sun on the cool, moist earth under a bridge many miles from Narodny and chortling so loudly that any passersby would have thought he was mad. He often wandered out to live among the trees and hills. He would be back before the cold winds began to blow.

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