

The Rabbi and Mrs. Goldstein

by MaryAnn Diorio



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*“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men,
him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.”*

~ Matthew 10: 32 KJV

Chapter One

Cape May, New Jersey, Wednesday, April 6, 1870

At the sound of shouting, Miriam Goldstein tensed, fingered her gold wedding ring, and hurried from her office to the gift shop at the opposite side of the Cape May Jewish Culture Center. Rubbing her ring had a way of calming her down whenever she faced a trying situation.

The center occupied the first floor of a small building adjacent to the Beth Israel Synagogue and was an outreach of it. In addition to Miriam's office, it housed a museum of Jewish culture, three classrooms, and a gift shop to the right of the main entrance.

Her muscles tensing, she entered the gift shop. Two women from her synagogue wrangled over the last hand-carved wooden menorah for sale. If Miriam didn't intervene immediately, they might come to blows.

"I saw it first!" Dinah Hoffman screamed, holding on to the menorah for dear life while Leah Feldman attempted to pull it out of her hands. Their altercation rattled the shelves, threatening to destabilize the other items for sale.

"Ladies, please! What's going on?" Miriam scowled and planted her feet in front of them. With her days of child-rearing behind her, she had naïvely assumed that she had finished with disciplining. Yet even her own children, Rebecca and Asa, had behaved better than this. Now parents themselves and settled in Cape May, they had turned out well and had made Miriam a grandmother of five well-behaved grandchildren who frequently visited her and brought joy to her life.

The two women froze and stared at her.

As volunteer director of the center, Miriam would insist on maintaining order. "I will have none of this in our center, do you hear me? This is no way to behave in a public place, especially here where we focus on cultivating respect for the Jews. Do you want to create even more opposition for us Jews than we already have?"

The women grew silent and hung their heads in shame.

Miriam struggled to contain her anger. "I expect more from two grown women. And Jewish women at that. You have disgraced yourselves and our heritage." Miriam took in a deep breath and placed her hands on her hips. "Now, what is the problem?"

Dinah was quick to speak. "I want to purchase this menorah for my home, but Leah insists she saw it first, when I actually did."

Miriam turned to Leah. "Well, did you see it first?"

Leah locked eyes with Miriam. "Yes. I saw it first. Before Dinah even entered the gift shop. As I was removing the menorah from the shelf to purchase it, Dinah came along and wrenched it out of my hand."

Miriam considered first Dinah and then Leah. “So, how am I supposed to know which one of you is telling the truth?”

“I’m telling the truth.” Dinah clutched the menorah even more tightly.

Leah’s gaze riveted on Miriam. “With all due respect, Mrs. Goldstein, I am speaking the truth.”

As Miriam studied the two ladies, Solomon’s famous story of the two mothers and the baby flooded her mind “This is what I will do. I will break the menorah in half and give each of you one half.”

“No!” Leah’s hand flew to her mouth. “It’s too sacred to destroy. Let Dinah keep it.”

Miriam took the menorah from Dinah’s hands and gave it to Leah. “It’s yours for one dollar.”

Leah reached into her reticule, withdrew the required amount, and handed the money to Miriam. “Thank you.”

Miriam then looked at Dinah. “Until you are ready to behave like an adult, I must ban you from visiting the center.”

Dinah’s face turned red. “You have not heard the end of this, Miriam Goldstein.” With a humph, Dinah stalked out of the gift shop, slamming the door behind her.

Leah’s eyes filled with tears. “I am so sorry for the ugly outburst, Mrs. Goldstein. My husband, Aaron, is dying, and we want to celebrate what will be his last Passover next week with a menorah. Aaron has not been able to work for the last several months, so I have been saving up to purchase one.” Leah lowered her head. “I did not mean to cause a scene.”

Miriam’s heart clenched. “I am so sorry to hear about your husband.” She pressed the dollar back into Leah’s palm. “The menorah is a gift from the center to your husband. May it be a blessing to him in his final days.”

Tears rolled down Leah’s cheeks. “Thank you. I’m sure it will be.” She drew in a deep breath. “You know, Mrs. Goldstein, my husband’s parents were among the first German-Jewish immigrants to settle in Cape May. This center means a great deal to him.”

Compassion flooded Miriam’s heart. At the age of seven, she herself, together with her parents, now deceased, had emigrated from Germany to Philadelphia, along with hundreds of other German Jews. Later, her family had moved to Cape May where they’d remained ever since. “Please let me know if I can help in any way.”

Leah clutched the menorah to her chest. “Thank you. Aaron and I have been married only nine years.” Her voice caught. “Why would *Hashem* take him so soon?” Leah’s eyes pleaded for an answer, but Miriam had none to give her.

Leah took in a deep breath. “I don’t know what I’m going to do without him.” Another tear trickled down her cheek. “And our children. We have two young sons. They will be left without a father.” A sob escaped her lips. “But may the will of Hashem be done.”

Miriam’s stomach tightened. Was it truly the will of Hashem that this woman’s husband die so soon, leaving her alone with two small children? What kind of deity would do that? Her throat burned. If only she could offer Leah hope. But how could she when she herself struggled to find hope? The religion she had thought would bring her life had brought nothing but emptiness and despair. Her Jewish roots had become a chain, tying her to traditions that no longer held meaning for her. Traditions that had no power to bring life.

But had they ever brought her life? If Miriam were honest, no. Never. They had brought her only bondage. Only a rigid adherence to a set of rules that weighed her down rather than lifted her up. Rules that had become meaningless to her. Empty shells, full of death and hopelessness.

She dared not speak of this to anyone. Especially not to her rabbi husband, Jacob. She would be branded a heretic. A traitor to the Jewish faith.

Yet the questions persisted. For a long time she had asked them of herself but had found no answers.

Miriam took Leah's hand. "Yes. May the will of Hashem be done."

The words rang empty in Miriam's soul. They were nothing more than pious platitudes, meaningless words that seemed more to placate than to comfort. Her stomach churned as Leah left. So many unanswered questions. Questions her husband Jacob relegated to the area of blind faith.

Why couldn't she do the same?

But they were questions that, of late, she could no longer dismiss. Her faith—if she could call it that—had become a mere habit filled with pretense and pomposity, especially on the part of the rabbis who claimed to be the leaders of the people. More than once, she had seen through their hypocrisy. They preached one thing at synagogue yet did another in private. What about the old rabbi she had discovered eating pork at a restaurant when she was a child?

Her own Jacob—Hashem bless his soul—would preach kindness at synagogue yet berate her and speak harsh words to her at home. He'd preach strict observance of the holy day yet carry firewood from the woodpile to the house on a cold, wintry Sabbath.

Something was sorely amiss. And she would make it her aim to find out.

Pushing aside her disturbing thoughts, Miriam began to rearrange the gift shop shelf where the menorah had stood. A layer of dust covered the oaken shelf. What with doing the bookkeeping and the purchasing, she'd neglected cleaning the gift shop a bit too long.

She retrieved a dust cloth from the cabinet under the shelves and gave them a quick wipe. That would have to do for now. She would add a more thorough cleaning to her task list. Perhaps she could ask her assistant, Rachel Cohen, to work an extra morning a week. A dusty shop did not give a good impression to the center's clientele.

As Miriam dusted, her mind kept drifting back to Leah Feldman and her dying husband. There must be something she could do to help. The young wife and mother had been so distraught over her husband's imminent death, only to encounter the additional pain of Dinah's cruel behavior toward her here at the Center. Miriam shook her head. The best help for Leah would be a miracle.

But only Hashem could give that kind of help. Did not the *Tanakh* teach that salvation came only from the Lord? If so, why was the Lord not lifting a finger to save this young husband? Some salvation that was.

Miriam shuddered. Papa used to say it was a sin to question the Almighty. But was it?

She fought to quell her roiling stomach. Henceforth, she would be more careful.

* * * *

Wednesday, April 6, 1870

At the sound of footsteps behind her, Miriam turned. A middle-aged woman approached her. “Excuse me, but I happened to overhear the rather loud discussion between the two women a few moments ago.” The woman chuckled.

Heat rose to Miriam’s face. She fumbled with the small buttons at the top of her high-necked bodice. “I am so sorry. A visitor should never have to witness such a scene, especially not here.”

The woman gave a radiant smile and extended a hand. “I’m Clarissa Steubens.”

Miriam extended her hand in return. “I’m Miriam Goldstein. I’m the founder and director of the center.” Miriam waved a hand toward the main part of the center. It was a large, square room, visible from the gift shop. Thick, dark mahogany beams lined the century-old ceiling and framed the tall windows, lending a historic charm to the entire space. The room was divided into sections for paintings, textiles, needle arts, and books. She turned toward Clarissa. “I hope you are enjoying our facility.”

“Immensely. And what a blessing to meet you!” Clarissa’s eyes shone with joy.

Miriam instantly liked her. “Thank you. Likewise.”

“I must commend you on your competence in handling the situation. You used great wisdom.”

Miriam tried to laugh it off, hoping to end the embarrassing conversation. “I borrowed it from Solomon. He was the wisest man of all time.”

“Indeed, he was. And you demonstrated his wisdom in a marvelous way. Your handling of the situation reminded me of the two women who both claimed to be the baby’s mother.”

Miriam removed a speck of dust that had fallen on the embroidered edge of her sleeve. “That’s precisely what I was thinking.” Clarissa Steubens intrigued her. There was something different about this woman. She exuded a calm, a confidence, unlike anything Miriam had ever witnessed. “So, you are familiar with the story in the Tanakh?”

“Yes. I am a follower of Yeshua, and we read the Tanakh as well as the New Testament.”

Miriam’s jaw tightened. Oh, no. A proselytizer. Jacob had warned her against such people. *They will try to turn you from the truth of Judaism. Flee from them.*

But Clarissa did not seem like a proselytizer. On the contrary, she seemed like someone whom Miriam would like to have as a friend.

Miriam ventured a question. “May I ask what your following Yeshua has to do with the Tanakh?”

Clarissa broke into a broad smile. “It has everything to do with the Tanakh.”

Miriam furrowed her brows. Never had she heard in synagogue that there was a connection between Yeshua and the Tanakh. “We Jewish people are still awaiting our Messiah. He will free Israel from the rule of those who seek to subdue her. Perhaps then, all discrimination against the Jews will cease.”

Clarissa clasped her hands to her chest. “Indeed, one day it will.”

The woman spoke with an assurance that stirred something deep within Miriam’s heart. Curiosity overwhelmed her. “Do you come here often? I don’t recall having seen you before.”

“I come as often as I can. I love Jewish art and culture. I am an amateur artist myself. Whenever I come here, I get inspired.”

Miriam’s heart warmed. When she first started the Jewish Culture Center, her key objective had been to inspire visitors to develop their own creativity through art and craft classes while learning more about the Jews. She ventured a step further. “Are you, perhaps, of Jewish descent?”

Clarissa shook her head. “No. I am a gentile.”

Miriam studied her with interest. “I’m curious. We occasionally have Gentiles who visit the center. But why would a Gentile Christian like you visit a Jewish Culture Center? If I may be so blunt, Gentile Christians want nothing to do with Judaism. Besides, there are many other places to get inspired.”

“Simple. I come here because I love the Jews.” Clarissa’s voice bubbled.

Miriam tilted her head. “Well, you certainly are in the minority. The Jews have never been a well-liked people, let alone well-loved. Why that has been, I will never know.”

Clarissa’s gaze narrowed on Miriam. “The reason is that God chose the Jews to bring the Messiah into the world to save us.”

Miriam’s mind shifted. “To save the Gentiles too?”

“To save the Gentiles too.”

Why didn’t Miriam know this? “I have never heard this before. That the Messiah will save the Gentiles.”

Clarissa beamed. “He already has saved them. And He has saved the Jews as well.”

A shudder passed through Miriam’s soul. “I don’t understand what you mean. He has already saved the Jews? We are still hated and persecuted throughout the world. What kind of salvation is that?”

Clarissa leaned toward Miriam. “The salvation Yeshua came to bring was not an earthly one. He did not come to free you from worldly rulers. He came to free you from spiritual bondage.”

“But what good is that if we still suffer?”

“It is of the greatest good, for spiritual bondage is the worst kind of bondage there is.”

Miriam considered Clarissa’s words. “Why did your Yeshua want to free us from spiritual bondage?”

“So that you can live with Him forever after you die.”

Miriam’s heart stirred. Was this true? “But some Jews teach that there is no life after death.”

Clarissa placed a gentle hand on Miriam’s arm. “Sadly, they are mistaken. We were created to live forever. When we die, we will either be eternally united to God or eternally separated from Him, depending on what we decide about Yeshua. If we receive Him as the Messiah, we will be saved. If we do not, we will be condemned. It’s as simple as that.”

Clarissa’s words were too much for Miriam to take in. The kind and gentle woman before her disturbed Miriam’s heart. Clarissa raised too many questions in Miriam’s mind. Questions best left unanswered. “Well, it was very nice to meet you, Clarissa.”

“It was very nice to meet you, too, Miriam. I pray that the journey of your life will lead you to the truth that alone can set you free.”

Miriam's heart quickened. *The truth that alone can set you free.* That was what she wanted more than anything else. To be free. Free from rules and regulations that made her heart cold as stone. That imprisoned her spirit like a dove in a cage. That stole her joy and robbed her of her peace. Yes, freedom was what she wanted. And what she needed.

She hadn't found it in the Judaism she had clung to all of her life. Nor in the *Torah*, the *Tanakh*, or the *Talmud*. Was Clarissa right? Was freedom found only in Yeshua?

Miriam shook Clarissa's extended hand. "I do hope you return to visit us." And, to her surprise, Miriam meant it.

* * * *

Wednesday, April 6, 1870

Jacob Goldstein stood tall in front of the mirror in his bedroom. Despite his short height, he made it a daily practice of stretching his limbs as high as they could go, hoping that doing so would add stature to his lacking frame. He brushed aside the gray hairs on his head and covered them with his *kippah*.

At forty-nine years of age, he was fast approaching a possible promotion to the chief rabbinate. A role he would assume, if all went well, at the age of fifty, when Chief Rabbi Joel Koppel would retire.

If Jacob were completely honest with himself, he much preferred a more obscure position. A position in which he didn't have to answer tough questions, such as, *why are the Jews the chosen people? Couldn't God have chosen anyone else? When is the Messiah coming? We've been waiting for thousands of years. Why must Jews marry Jews?* And on and on the questions went. Enough to spin his head and tighten his stomach.

He hated confrontation. Had he possessed the courage to confront his parents when they'd urged him to become a rabbi, he'd now be managing the mercantile store he'd always wanted to own. But as a good Jewish boy, he'd yielded to his parents' encouragement—*arguments*, he preferred to call them. Especially his mother's. She had harped on him—and on his father—until Jacob had surrendered to her will just to keep his sanity.

There was nothing about being a rabbi that he liked except for the food the congregants would bring to him and his family during the high holy feasts. And, of course, the admiration he elicited from Miriam and his synagogue because of his venerable position. Admiration he thrived on. Other than that, his back ached at the constant bending backward and forward while praying. His head ached at the constant prayer incantations he'd memorized and could recite by rote. But his soul felt dry. Yet he had to keep up with appearances, didn't he?

Jacob would never admit as much to anyone. Not even to his wife Miriam. She would ask too many questions. She would probe him incessantly for reasons for his discomfiture. And she would refuse to stop questioning until she got her answers.

Just like his mother.

He shook his head. What did the Holy Scriptures say about the nagging of a wife? It was like the constant dripping of a water spout, enough to drive a man out of his mind.

But in spite of it all, he deeply loved his Miriam. No other woman would have put up with him the way she did. Jacob sighed. Yes, he was a very blessed man.

At the sound of the mantel clock striking the hour, he grabbed his coat and left for the synagogue. Rabbi Koppel was a stickler for punctuality. Once, when Jacob had been only a few minutes late, the rabbi had severely reprimanded him for his tardiness. "We are leaders, Jacob, and leaders must serve as examples to the people." His thundering voice had echoed throughout the synagogue, rattling Jacob's nerves for the rest of the day.

Jacob ran all the way, arriving just as Rabbi Koppel was leaving.

"Jacob. I am so glad you got here before I left. I have been called to Izthak Cohen's home. Apparently, the poor old man took a bad fall and is need of help. Cover for me while I'm gone. I'm not expecting anyone this morning, so you should be fine."

"I'm sure I'll be fine, Rabbi Koppel, even if someone does show up." If the elderly rabbi held any antagonism toward Jacob, he never showed it openly. But occasionally, his speech was seasoned with innuendoes containing a subtle barb or two.

The rabbi looked at him askance. "Regardless, just remember that you represent me, do you hear?"

Jacob drew in a deep breath. "Yes, Rabbi. I shall remember."

After Rabbi Koppel's departure, Jacob turned and climbed the steps to the synagogue entrance. The old building sat on a small plot of land about half a block from the Atlantic Ocean. Surrounded by a lovely garden, it offered Jacob a splendid view of the great sea, reminding him of Hashem's magnificence.

The large wooden front door creaked as he opened it. One good thing was that those inside always knew when someone entered.

"Shalom, Sarah." Rabbi Koppel's secretary sat at her desk just inside the main entrance.

"Shalom, Rabbi Goldstein." She barely raised her head from the ledger book in which she wrote.

"I will be covering for Rabbi Koppel this morning. If there are any problems, please call me immediately."

"Yes, Rabbi." Sarah continued writing.

Jacob walked the short distance to his office at the back of the synagogue. He would spend the morning studying the Torah in preparation for his message to the congregation on the upcoming Sabbath.

He removed his coat, hung it on the coat tree, and sat down at his desk. Although small, his office was quite comfortable and amenable to a man of his simple tastes. In front of his mahogany desk sat two winged chairs, each upholstered in royal blue, like the color of the blue in the veil of the ancient temple. In one corner stood a small fig tree in a large, gilded pot. The tree had been a gift from Miriam on their twenty-eighth wedding anniversary the previous October. Twenty-eight wonderful years. Yes, they'd had their ups and downs, but there had been more ups than downs. Jacob looked forward to growing old with his precious Miriam.

Making himself comfortable in his chair, Jacob opened the large Torah volume in front of him. No sooner had he started to read than Sarah appeared at his door.

“Excuse me, Rabbi Goldstein. But Dinah Hoffman is here to see you.”

“To see me? I don’t recall arranging an appointment with her.”

“Actually, she is here to see Rabbi Koppel but, since you are taking his place today, I told her she could see you. She’s quite angry.”

Jacob sighed. So much for his sermon preparation. “Please show her in.” As he collected his distracted thoughts, his stomach muscles formed a tight knot. Confrontation with a man was bad enough, but with a woman? He’d rather die.

“Rabbi Goldstein.” Dinah stood at the doorway, her eyes aflame.

Jacob rose to maintain some semblance of mastery over the situation. “Yes, Mrs. Hoffman?” Unwilling to prolong his discomfort, he did not offer her a seat. “What may I do for you?”

“May I come in?” Dinah did not wait for a reply but shoved herself through the open door.

“I suppose so.” Jacob resigned himself to her intrusion. Better to let her vent and get rid of her quickly than to argue with her.

“Actually, I don’t think you can do anything for me since the matter concerns your wife.”

A shudder coursed through Jacob’s veins. “Is she all right?” His voice caught.

“Yes. She is fine. But I am not.”

“Well, then, what does my wife have to do with your concern?”

Dinah pointed to a chair. “May I sit down?”

Despite his reluctance, Jacob acquiesced. It was going to be a long morning. Forget writing his sermon.

Dinah plopped her ample body into a chair and pursing her lips, she folded her hands on her lap. “I have just left the Culture Center and wish to report a complaint.”

Jacob took his seat behind his desk. “A complaint?”

“Yes. A complaint.” Dinah shifted in her chair. “Your wife took a menorah I was planning to purchase and gave it to Leah Feldman.”

Jacob scratched his head. That did not sound like something Miriam would do. “Can you tell me the circumstances surrounding Miriam’s—I mean, Mrs. Goldstein’s—confiscation of the menorah?”

“Indeed, I can. I was the first to notice the menorah on the shelf. But by the time I reached for it, Leah had already grabbed it.”

Jacob’s stomach roiled. The pettiness of women. Had they so much time on their hands that they could waste it over silly nothings? “Well, it seems to me that Leah acted more quickly and beat you to the purchase.” He smiled smugly.

Dinah’s jaw dropped. “How dare you say such a thing?”

Jacob clenched his teeth. “I just said it.”

Dinah scowled. “You are simply standing up for your wife.”

“Mrs. Hoffman, I am simply standing up for righteousness. Leah was the first to remove the menorah from the shelf. Hence, it seems right that she should be the one to purchase it.”

“But I was the one who saw it first.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Absolutely sure.”

“But what has your seeing the menorah first have to do with anything? If Leah removed it from the shelf first, it seems to me she should purchase it.”

Dinah’s gaze daggered him.

“So, tell me, Mrs. Hoffman, where does my wife enter into all of this?”

“When I explained to your wife what had happened, she offered to break the menorah in half and give each of us one half of it.”

Jacob beamed inwardly. That was his Miriam. “What did Mrs. Feldman say to my wife’s suggestion to split the menorah?”

Dinah lowered her lashes. “She was horrified and offered to let me have the whole thing.”

Jacob suppressed a smile. His wise and brilliant Miriam had exercised the wisdom of Solomon in the difficult situation. He was quite proud of her. Her action would go far in gaining him favor regarding the promotion he so eagerly desired. Having a wise wife showed that Jacob had good control of his household. He would reward her appropriately. “It seems to me, Mrs. Hoffman, that my wife acted with great wisdom—just as I would have done—and that you will have to live with her decision.”

Dinah narrowed her eyes. “I knew you would defend her.” She lifted her chin. “I believe she acted unjustly.” Dinah rose. “And, furthermore, Rabbi Goldstein, you can be sure that you—and the entire Jewish community—have not heard the end of my complaint. I will take it to a higher level. I will take it to Rabbi Koppel. And if he does nothing about it, I will take it to the Sanhedrin. And if they refuse to vindicate me, I will take it to the very throne of Hashem Himself.”

Jacob stifled a laugh. As if Hashem would approve of the misguided woman’s behavior. He stood. “I urge you, Mrs. Hoffman, to reconsider your decision. Matters like these are better alone. Otherwise, you could stir up a nest of hornets that will return to sting you.”

“The only thing that will return to me is the satisfaction of having your wife punished for her offense against me.”

An alarm went off in Jacob’s head. “And who, may I ask, will punish her?”

“As I said, if you and Rabbi Koppel do not, I will take matters into my own hands.” And with that, she stormed out of the office.

His equilibrium disrupted, Jacob sat down again, placed his elbows on his desk, and rested his head against his palms. Why, oh why, had he become a rabbi?

The Rabbi and Mrs. Goldstein

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