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IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

By Ruth Seldin

An old woman was taking her daily constitutional and ruminating about the House of the Lord. A verse from Psalms, one they sang in synagogue, had quite caught her fancy. Something about wanting to spend one's days in the house of the Lord, to see his pleasant countenance. She knew it was irreverent to think about the Lord actually dwelling in a house, and totally frivolous to wonder if the Lord did live in a house, what kind of house would it be? A ranch? Colonial? A McMansion with turrets and a heated pool?

But she was tired of a life in which, it seemed, she had done everything-- had swum with sea lions in the Galapagos, photographed elephants up close, gone helicopter skiing in the Rockies, taken part in adventure travel, attended black-tie openings of museums and concert halls in exotic locales. She'd raised children, grandchildren and shih tzu puppies, been successful professionally, been president of her shul and her country club and her new condo. Still she felt dissatisfied. There was a great emptiness inside: something was missing. None of the gurus she watched or read offered help. No, she decided, she had to go the top, to the one who had all the answers to her spiritual yearnings—to the creator of all. The words from Psalms flashed into mind: All I ever wanted, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. The house of the Lord: the ultimate tourist destination.

Given this frame of mind, she was not too surprised when she came across a printed sign, on a post, that said "Lord's House." A little box on the post contained cards with printed directions; she took one and proceeded on her way.

The walk turned out to be much longer than anticipated; she was sorry she hadn't brought along a water bottle and a sandwich, because in fact she was on the road for days—and the days stretched into weeks, and then into months and ultimately into years. It took her through cities and towns and tiny villages, across high mountains and wide

rivers, through parched deserts and verdant forests. She endured the cold of many winters and the heat of many summers; drenching rains and winds knocked her to the ground.

One day, she found herself alone, climbing a hill, a beautiful hill covered with wild strawberry and blueberry bushes, against a backdrop of tall pines and birches. Then there was a clearing, and a sign with an arrow: God's House. And there it was: not surprisingly, a mansion made of marble that gleamed in the sun. Coming closer, she saw that the place looked a little rundown—half the front gate dangled from a hinge--the grass needed mowing—and she began to worry. Perhaps this wasn't where the Lord dwelled after all. When she arrived at the front door, she was sure it was all a mistake. Thumb-tacked to the door was a hand lettered sign: Gone Fishing. Be back—don't know when.

As she turned away, heart-broken that her arduous journey had ended like this, the door opened. There stood a woman who could have been around her age—her strawberry blond hair made it hard to tell—wearing a denim skirt, Birkenstocks on her feet and a tee shirt that said “Jews for Exegesis.”

I've come to see the Lord, said the traveler. “My name is Ishah.”

“My name is Shekhinah,” said the other. “But people call me Princess. As for meeting the Lord—I can't promise you anything. He wanders—he's everywhere and he's nowhere, all at the same time.”

Tears came to Ishah's eyes. It sounded so appealing—to dwell in the house of the Lord... “Then how will I ever find him? Or learn how to live my life in a good way?”

Princess came close and put an arm around her shoulder. “I'm afraid there are no pat answers. You just keep searching, all the time. All we can offer are guidelines.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out, along with some damp crumpled tissues, two small printed cards. “Like these, for example—here, take them. Keep them on you: one in a right-hand pocket, the other on the left.”

Ishah took the cards and read the typed words. On one: FOR ME WAS THE WORLD CREATED. On the other: I AM BUT DUST AND ASHES.

Ishah's first impulse was to laugh, to throw the cards on the floor. For this puerile pap she had endured a killer journey?

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Princess. “But give it a try. It’s a first step. Others will follow.” Princess studied Ishah’s face, measuring her. Isha felt her cheeks flush. “And one day the Lord may appear...you never know.”

So there was reason to hope after all.

“I’m not sure what I was thinking, said the traveler, but I’d like to look around, if that’s okay.” She peered into the house’s gloomy interior. “And Sabbath? Do you do Shabbat?” Ishah had a sudden yearning for the familiar rituals.

“The high point of the week. No work, of course. Computers all turned off. But it’s pure joy, from the moment the Sabbath Queen appears...”

“You mean, she comes here, in person?”

“Of course. This is her home too. We all put on our finest clothes and eat the finest meals; and we *daven* and we sing...”

“Oh I like Shalom Aleichem and those other shabbat songs...”

“The Lord isn’t crazy about ya ba ba nigguns, but we’re all tolerant here-- we take turns giving d’var torahs; we discuss, we study. But first you must be examined...”

“I just had a physical-- mammogram, full-body X-ray, the works.”

“No, this is a different kind of examination—a spiritual self examination—we even provide an admonisher, someone who helps to jog your memory. We’re all too good at denial and rationalization, don’t you agree?”

Ishah sank into a broken wicker chair. Why not? she thought. She’d already tried 28 varieties of yoga....

“Why not try it?” said Princess. “Stay around for a while—join a committee—you can leave any time. And who knows? One day God may appear....”

It was too tempting an offer to refuse. She’d have time to learn to play a decent game of mah jong And so Ishah decided to stay on, a temporary sojourn. This adventure was all a hoax, of course, but it would give her a chance to rest her weary limbs and prepare to carry on.

Only this time she’d be better prepared for a demanding journey. She’d be sure to take along a sandwich and a bottle of water.