

An abstract, expressive painting with a rich palette of colors including deep blues, vibrant yellows, fiery oranges, and dark purples. The brushstrokes are thick and textured, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is vertical, with a central column of lighter, more saturated colors flanked by darker, more muted tones.

# The Blind Angel

**NEW OLD CHASSIDIC TALES**

**Rabbi Tovia Halberstam**

**Translated and Retold by Joshua Halberstam**



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*The Toby Press*

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# The Blind Angel

**R**ivka Parnes had recently returned to Brody from Vienna, where she had taken her daughter to be examined by the most prestigious cardiologist in all of Europe.

“There is nothing we can do,” the doctor had said. “She hasn’t much time.”

His words echoed in Rivka’s ears like the death sentence they were.

Half a mile away, in the rear of a hardware store on busy Lemberger Street, a young man named Yekhiel Tsurif was so absorbed in his silversmith’s craft he didn’t notice his friend enter the room.

Had he heard the news?

“The Tzaddik of Sassov is coming to Brody for Chanukah,” his friend said, bouncing on his toes. “He’ll be with us to light the first candle tomorrow evening. All the rebbe would say was that he was coming here to redeem a soul.”

Within an hour of the tzaddik’s arrival, long lines formed for men and women eager for a moment of his time. Waiting impatiently were Torah scholars and the scarcely literate, landowners with fur-lined coats and beggars wearing patches upon patches, venerable Chassidim who’d been to the rebbe a dozen times before and hopeful first-timers, unwavering devotees and curious skeptics – all seeking a word of advice, a message of reassurance, a blessing, or simply the chance

to tell their grandchildren they'd visited the Rebbe of Sassov. Among them was Rivka Parnes, wearing a black kerchief pulled down to her reddened eyes.

When her turn finally came, Rivka stood silently while the rebbe finished reading the petition she'd handed him. "As the tzaddik can see from my note, my daughter Bluma is deathly ill. The doctors say there is no hope."

"There is always hope," the rebbe said.

"Yes, of course. And if the rebbe would please pray for my daughter's health, then surely this wish will be realized."

The Sassover Tzaddik raised his palm and shook his head. "God hears your entreaties, Rivka. I assure you, your Bluma will live and thrive and marry and, God willing, you will enjoy many years together with your many grandchildren."

Rivka Parnes smiled for the first time in months, the weight lifted from her heart. She thanked the rebbe and prepared to leave when the tzaddik called her back.

"Oh yes, there is one thing. Just one thing. Your menorah."

"My menorah?" Rivka was startled. She owned several.

"The silver menorah, the one you inherited from your father," the rebbe said. Could she please bring it right away?

A few hours later, the shul was crowded with Chassidim thrilled to be with their rebbe on the first night of Chanukah. They also gathered around to admire the famed Parnes menorah, which stood on the table next to the rebbe.

"Yekhiel Tsurif!" the Sassover Rebbe called out. "Come here. You are an artisan. I'd like to hear your professional assessment of this menorah."

Yekhiel slowly picked up the menorah, uneasy with the attention now focused on him. "It's exquisite," he said. He ran his hand over the smooth lines and perfectly shaped knobs, appreciating the fine craftsmanship.

The rebbe's gaze fixed on Yekhiel. "I'm pleased you're fond of this menorah. I'd like for you to be at my side when I light the first candle tonight."

When the rebbe later completed the Chanukah blessings, the Chassidim roared "Amen" and, with one voice, sang the holiday melodies.

When the singing quieted, the rebbe turned to Yekhiel Tsurif, who'd been beside him throughout the ceremony.

"*Nu*, so what do you think of this Chanukah lamp?"

"As I said before, it is a true work of art. May the rebbe enjoy it until he is a hundred-and-twenty and greet the messiah with it in his hand."

"No, no," said the Sassover. "This isn't my menorah. It's yours. I will tell you why. And you will all understand why this is truly a festive Chanukah."

He asked that Rivka Parnes come to the front for she, too, must hear what he had to say. A hush descended as Reb Moshe Leib Sassover began his tale.

Years ago, there lived in Brody a devout Chassid by the name of Yekhiel Tsurif – your grandfather, Yekhiel, as I'm sure you've heard, was an outstanding silversmith admired throughout the region whose artistic skills you inherited along with his name. Well, Yekhiel Tsurif may have been a brilliant craftsman, but he was also a hopeless businessman and barely eked out a living.

Now, this Reb Yekhiel was a devotee of Reb Zusha and whenever possible would spend the holidays with his rebbe. As is the custom of many Chassidic rebbes, Reb Zusha distributed silver coins to his Chassidim when they set out to return to their families, and Yekhiel Tsurif prized these silver mementos above all other possessions.

When Reb Zusha died, Yekhiel Tsurif grew increasingly anxious about his treasured collection of coins. What if it were lost or stolen or inadvertently used to make an ordinary purchase? Yekhiel alighted on an inspired solution. He would melt the coins and use the silver to cast a menorah. As you can imagine, this became a labor of great love, fusing his artistic talent with his Chassidic devotion. The striking result stands before us on this table.

Affluent Jews beset Yekhiel Tsurif with generous offers to purchase his menorah. The most adamant of all was Nuchim Parnes, the richest Jew in Brody, who offered three times the highest bid. But Yekhiel rejected all tenders. The lamp was priceless, he said, and not for sale.



Years passed, and Yekhiel Tsurif's daughter reached the age of betrothal. An excellent match was arranged with a young man renowned for his piety and scholarship. There was, however, one hitch: money for a dowry. Yekhiel would have to support the young man in full-time Torah studies for several years, a cost Yekhiel Tsurif could certainly not afford. The poor man sought loans from friends and acquaintances, but the funds were insufficient to secure the marriage. Bearing the awesome responsibility for his daughter's future, Yekhiel Tsurif grew increasingly desperate, until one night he knocked on the door of Nuchim Parnes.

He explained his situation. He needed a loan to pay for a wedding and to subsidize his potential son-in-law in his Torah studies.

"A loan? A loan he wants." Reb Nuchim suppressed a chuckle. "And what do you intend to provide for security? The chickpeas in your kitchen cabinet? Your estate ... your hovel? Let's forget this loan business. Whom are we kidding?"

Yekhiel Tsurif wanted to flee then and there but understood that walking out empty-handed meant no marriage for his daughter. "Reb Nuchim, please. Without your help..."

"You want my help?" Nuchim Parnes said. "Okay, so let's talk business. You want something I have. Money. You have something I want."

Yekhiel Tsurif's temples throbbed, his chest constricted. He dreaded what surely would follow.

"Yes, your silver menorah. You're well aware I've been eyeing it for years."

Yekhiel Tsurif blanched.

"Why not be realistic for once?" Nuchim Parnes continued. "It's your good fortune I have such a craving for your menorah. In exchange for it, I am prepared to pay the entire cost of your child's wedding. So, do we have a deal?"

Yekhiel bit his lip. The menorah was his link to his beloved rebbe. It was the light of his home.

Nuchim Parnes pressed on. "I appreciate what this menorah means to you. And I also want to partake in the great mitzvah of helping a young Jewish woman celebrate a wedding and build a home. So I'll add to the bargain. Not only will I pay for the entire wedding, I'll

finance the first two years of your future son-in-law's studies. All for a menorah."

He stretched out his hand to consummate the arrangement.

An hour later, a heartbroken Yekhiel Tsurif returned holding a box in his hands. He loved his menorah, but he loved his daughter more.

Nuchim Parnes kept his end of the agreement. The wedding was a glittering celebration – a wealthy banker could do no better – and the dowry, too, arrived as promised.

The Sassoover paused and sipped from a glass of water, but the Chassidim did not stir. "Yes, there is more to the story," the rebbe said.

A few years after the wedding, Nuchim Parnes died, and his soul arrived at the heavenly tribunal. The lawyers for the defense presented his history of good deeds, his meticulous care in fulfilling the commandments, his record of philanthropy for the needy. But the prosecution presented a catalog no less compelling, filled with questionable business dealings and arrogant outbursts toward his employees. Back and forth the trial swung, tilting one way, then the other. When the arguments were closed, the scale tipped decidedly – against Nuchim Parnes. His soul would be sent to the region of the infernal.

But just as his sentence was to be pronounced, a commotion erupted in the rear of the heavenly courtroom. A blind angel stumbled into the room, shouting for a halt to the proceedings.

"I am the angel Nuchim Parnes created when he provided for Yekhiel Tsurif's daughter's wedding!"

The angel staggered to the front of the tribunal. "Place the weighty mitzvah of aiding a needy bride on the scale, and let's see where matters stand."

The scale was now tipped in the other direction. The soul of Nuchim Parnes was directed to enter Paradise.

Alas, this would not be the end of his trials. According to Kabbalah, each time we perform a mitzvah, we create an angel who will be our advocate, and with our most important mitzvah we create the angel who will escort us into the Next World. But the actions we commit in this world are rarely wholly good or evil. And when we perform a good

deed with flawed motivation, the corresponding angel is corrupted as well.

Nuchim Parnes performed the wonderful mitzvah of providing for a wedding, but his mitzvah was compromised. By demanding the menorah in exchange for his charity, he banished the light from Yekhiel Tsurif's home. And so the angel he created was also bereft of light; the angel was blind.

And all these years since the verdict, Nuchim Parnes and his blind angel have been seeking the entrance to Paradise. Two lost companions, they roam from place to place, hostages of the dark.

The Sassover picked up the menorah and handed it to Yekhiel. "Take this. It is your patrimony. Redeem the soul of Nuchim Parnes. Now that the mitzvah is made whole, sight will be restored to the blind angel, and he will be able to find the gate of heaven."

Yekhiel's hands trembled as he accepted the menorah, but the Sassover Tzaddik laughed as he clapped his hands. "Ah, to free a soul from captivity!" Rising to his feet, he called his Chassidim to join him in a dance.

# Trading for Paradise

**W**e're all familiar with the truism that success in business depends not only on skill, but also on luck. We also know that luck comes and goes. As a young man, Efrayim had luck on his side, along with a penchant for business, and quickly became a well-to-do merchant. But then luck waved farewell, leaving Efrayim with nothing. He accepted his fate without complaint. Such is life, he'd be the first to tell you.

Well, such stoicism is fine and good for oneself, but Efrayim had a family to support and the impending reality of having to marry off a daughter. Marriages were expensive propositions; there was no way he could afford the necessary expenditures. At a loss, he traveled to his rebbe, the Rebbe of Apt, to seek his advice.

"How much does one need to make a wedding?" the rebbe asked.

"At least a thousand rubles," said Efrayim.

"I see. And how much money do you have?"

"I earn a pittance, rebbe. My total savings I have right here in my pocket. A single ruble. That is all."

"*Nu*, Reb Efrayim, you are a merchant, are you not? So, with the help of God, go do business with the single ruble you have in your pocket."

"Rebbe, what sort of business could I do with one ruble?"

"Here's my suggestion," the rebbe replied. "Whatever someone is willing to sell you for a ruble, buy it. It doesn't matter what it is. Let's hope that the Almighty helps with the rest."

Efrayim left the rebbe puzzled but hopeful; after all, the rebbe implied that his single ruble would multiply a thousand-fold. What more did a Chassid need to hear?

Upon leaving the rebbe, Efrayim's first stop was an inn where local businessmen regularly gathered. On this particular day, a group of diamond merchants were exhibiting their wares. Packets of brilliant gems were displayed on the table and prices were named: five hundred rubles, a thousand rubles, five thousand rubles, twenty thousand rubles. Reb Efrayim stood silently to the side and fingered the single ruble in his pocket.

Reb Hershel, one of the wealthiest merchants in the group, produced a particularly brilliant stone, which he was proudly showing off to all assembled. A sparkling diamond, the largest Efrayim had ever seen, shimmered against Reb Hershel's palm. Noticing Efrayim's ogling, Reb Hershel could hardly contain his contempt.

"Impressive, eh? Perhaps you are interested in making a purchase?" Reb Hershel laughed.

Efrayim half nodded. "If the situation arises."

"And you have money?"

"Yes, I do." Efrayim clutched the coin in his hand.

"You do? Nice. And how much, if I may ask?"

"I have a ruble."

In unison, the merchants burst out laughing. "I have a ruble!" they repeated. "He has a ruble!"

Reb Hershel, of unusually good temper that day, took hold of Efrayim's lapel, and with feigned seriousness said, "You know what? Let's do some business. Obviously, with a lonely ruble you aren't buying a diamond, but I'll sell you something worth a bit less. How's this: For a ruble, I'll sell you my place in Paradise."

Efrayim, committed to fulfilling his rebbe's advice, agreed.

"It's a deal," he said. "Your Paradise for my ruble." Then, noticing the smirks all around him, he quickly added, "On the condition that we make this a legal, binding sale."

"What do you mean?" Reb Hershel asked.

"I mean a legitimate transfer. I want the contract in writing, signed and witnessed."

“That’s fine with me,” Reb Hershel said, unable to hide his amusement.

Paper and ink were quickly procured, the terms recorded, and the deal completed: For the price of one ruble, Efrayim now owned Reb Hershel’s share in the afterlife.

While Efrayim retired to a corner of the lodge to read a book, Reb Hershel used the ruble to buy a round of drinks for his fellow merchants who were still snickering at the stupidity of this foolish Chassid.

Not long afterward, Reb Hershel’s wife entered the lodge and quickly learned the cause of all the good humor.

“You fool!” she shouted at her husband. “You utter fool. Maybe, just maybe, at some point in your life, you managed to earn a tiny slice of heaven. And now you’ve gone ahead and sold it? What are you? A nothing in this life, and now, not even a possibility of anything in the afterlife. I’ve had it with you.”

Reb Hershel knew better than to interrupt her.

“A nothing. That’s what you are. I want a divorce.”

Reb Hershel urged his wife to compose herself, but she would not be calmed. Instead, she repeated her demand for a divorce.

“All right, all right,” her husband relented. “Since you’re so insistent, I’ll give that fool back his money and get back my share in heaven. So relax, will you?”

Reb Hershel walked over to Efrayim and with all the nonchalance he could muster, asked to undo their transaction. “Enough joking around. Here’s your ruble, now give me back that contract.”

Efrayim shook his head. “Sorry, but for me this was no joke. A deal is a deal.”

“A deal? You can’t be serious.”

“Absolutely, I am.”

Seeing the Chassid was entirely earnest, Reb Hershel replied with matching seriousness, “All right then. We’re doing business. Give me back the contract, and I’ll throw in a profit for you.”

Efrayim nodded his head in agreement. “That’s fair. A profit makes sense in a business exchange. I’ll take a thousand rubles. That’s how much I need for my daughter’s wedding.”

Reb Hershel exploded. “Are you crazy? A thousand rubles for what? For nothing. Well, then, you get nothing. A thousand rubles. Such chutzpah!”

But Reb Hershel’s wife, who’d been listening to the entire exchange, went over and whispered to her husband. “Listen, just get this deal done. Offer the man a hundred rubles and let’s be—”

“Forget it,” Efrayim interrupted. “I’m not negotiating. My rebbe, the holy Apter Rebbe, instructed me to use my single ruble to purchase the first offer extended to me and suggested this would get me the thousand rubles I need. I won’t settle for anything less.”

Reb Hershel’s wife called her seething husband aside. “Let’s be realistic. This fellow isn’t going to budge. Give him the thousand rubles, get back the contract and let’s be done with this.”

Reb Hershel realized he had no alternative, not if he wanted to remain married. He handed Efrayim a thousand ruble coin and bought back his contract.

His wife then approached Efrayim. “Who is this remarkable rebbe of yours? He must be unusual indeed. Can I meet him?”

Efrayim promised to arrange for her to visit the Apter Rebbe.

When the day of the meeting arrived, the woman told the Apter Rebbe with uncharacteristic humility how pleased she was to help make possible a wedding for the poor man’s daughter.

“But I’m truly curious,” she said. “May I ask the rebbe a question that’s been gnawing at me for the past several days?”

“Please,” said the rebbe.

“Tell me, was my husband’s lot in heaven worth a thousand rubles?”

The Apter Rebbe broke into a wide smile. “You know, both Efrayim and your husband were fooled. And both did well with this exchange. You see, when Efrayim gave your husband a ruble for his share in Paradise, he was wasting his money because at the time your husband’s share was not even worth that much. But now that he has performed the great mitzvah of providing for a wedding, your husband’s share in heaven is worth much more.”