

BEREL THE TAILOR

A Short Story

By I. L. Peretz

IT was Yom Kippur eve and the synagogue of the famous Berditchever Rav, Levi Yitshok, was filled to capacity. The rabbi had taken his position before the altar and the Jews were waiting for him to begin the *Kol Nidre*. But Levi Yitshok stood motionless and quiet at the altar, and people began to wonder what he was waiting for. The rabbi raised his head suddenly, bent it to the side a little and strained hard to hear something in the air above.

Immediately there was a stir in the synagogue. Prayer shawls began to rustle as Jews turned to one another with fingers to their lips. Sh! Sh! Everything must be quiet, for Levi Yitshok was in communication with heaven!

"This is how he usually stands when he talks directly to God," someone whispered.

"That's the way he always cocks his head to the side," said another, "when he listens to the angels."

"Shhh!" came from a number of people. "Quiet!"

The synagogue became absolutely quiet. When Levi Yitshok was getting ready to speak to God, to plead with him man to man in simple Yiddish—when the rabbi was about to call God's attention to the needs of the people, everybody practically held his breath. The rabbi lowered his head suddenly and turned to look at the congregation. After a moment he pointed toward the door in the rear of the synagogue and to a man the congregation turned its head slowly, fearfully, not knowing what to expect.

"*Shammes*," the rabbi called out, "has Berel the Tailor arrived yet?"

Berel the Tailor? A puzzled look came to the eyes of the Jews and the named bounced from lip to lip. Was it possible that an ordinary man like Berel the Tailor could be the subject of communication between Levi Yitshok and God? The *shammes* and everybody else looked round the room, but it was quite clear that Berel the Tailor was not in the synagogue. What? Not in the synagogue! A hard look came into the eyes of the worshippers, and low, angry muttering began to be heard. What kind of Jew was this Berel the Tailor, not to be in the synagogue on Yom Kippur eve!

"So he has stayed at home," said the rabbi gently, not accusingly. "Go and bring him here, *Shammes*. Tell him that I, Levi Yitshok, ask him to come."

WITH EVERY MOMENT THE MYSTERY SEEMED TO GET DEEPER and deeper. A Jew absents himself from the synagogue on Yom Kippur eve and instead of a curse he gets a special invitation from the rabbi! True, Berel was an independent

person, but why did a Jew need an invitation for *Kol Nidre*, the bewildered Jews asked one another. And when Berel arrived, the congregation was even more amazed, for the man wore no *talis* and no Yom Kippur gown; he was dressed in his everyday, weekday, workaday clothes!

Berel walked with firm step up the aisle to the rabbi, disregarding the angry looks of the people. "You sent for me, Levi Yitshok, so I have come. For you," he said with emphasis, "for no one else."

Levi Yitshok nodded his head understandingly. "I know it is not for God that you have come," he said in a gentle voice. "There is a lot of talk about you in heaven, Berel. You seem to have created quite a stir there."

"Good!" said Berel with a vehement shake of his head. "It's about time!" His eyes began to shine with excitement.

"What has made you such an important topic of conversation in the heavenly court?" asked Levi Yitshok. "You have been complaining about something, Berel?"

"I certainly have," said Berel.

"Against whom?" asked the rabbi.

"Against God!" said Berel firmly.

There was a gasp in the synagogue, followed by shocked cries of protest, but Levi Yitshok was unperturbed.

"Is it something you could tell me about, Berel? I speak not as your rabbi, but as one human being to another. Of course, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"I don't mind at all," said Berel. "I'll let you be the judge. You will see I have a right to complain."

"Go ahead, Berel," said Levi Yitshok. "I am listening."

"IT ALL STARTED LAST SUMMER," SAID BEREL EAGERLY, LIKE A man with much on his chest. "There was not a stitch of work to do, not the whole summer. Believe me, you could die from such a living."

"You know we don't let people die of hunger, Berel," the rabbi interrupted. "You should have gone to the community council and told them your troubles."

"Berel the Tailor doesn't go around crying about his troubles," said Berel, his head high and proud. "I don't ask charity from people. All I ask is that God give me a chance to earn my bread. I have just as much claim on the Master as anyone else."

Once again angry muttering broke out in the synagogue, so much of it that the rabbi had to turn and quiet the congregation. Then he nodded to Berel, who continued.

"So I sat all summer at my work bench to see what God would do, but not a soul opened my door until just before

the end of summer and then in came a messenger from the Baron. They wanted me at the palace to make a full lining for the Baron's overcoat. Fine! God is taking care of his Berel again and I was happy. I rode back with the messenger and they took me to a special room to do the sewing. You should have seen those skins of fur, Rabbi. Each one handpicked, nothing but the best."

Berel sighed and fell silent. A nostalgic look came into his eyes as he recalled the skins of fur he had held in his hands.

"I hope the story won't take too long," said the rabbi quietly. "It's *Kol Nidre* time, you know. What happened at the palace?"

"A mere trifle," said Berel with a shrug of his shoulders. "After I finished the lining there were three skins left over."

"I begin to understand," said Levi Yitshok, smiling. "You kept the three skins for yourself."

"You think it's so easy to take things out of the Baron's palace? There's a guard at the door and he searches you all over when you leave. And if he finds the skins on you—ai, ai, ai! It could really be bad. The Baron has dogs, big dogs, and if you try anything they would show you no mercy." Berel broke into a smile and squared his shoulders. "But they are dealing with Berel the Tailor! And I knew what to do. I went to the kitchen and asked the cook for a loaf of bread, a large one for my family."

"But, Berel!" said the rabbi, shocked. "That was not kosher bread!"

Berel chuckled. "Who said I was going to eat the bread? I just took it back to the sewing room, cut it open and pulled out all the soft dough. I kneaded the dough over and over in my hands and fed it to the dog that sat with me in the sewing room. A dog likes the sweat of a human, so he ate up all the dough and there wasn't a scrap of evidence left. Then I carefully packed the three skins into the hollow bread and squeezed the two halves together. I stuck the bread under my arm and left. The guard searched me carefully but paid no attention to the bread. When he let me go I walked away as if nothing had happened, but once I was out of sight I started to hurry. I took short cuts through the fields, I danced for joy. Now life would be worth living. Now I would have an *essrog* for Succoth, and a *lulav*, and food and—what's the use! My happiness was short-lived.

"I wasn't too far away when I heard the clattering of a horse's hoofs on the road, and I knew immediately who it was. They must have counted the skins in the lining and noticed that three were missing and now they were coming after me. I hid the bread behind a bush and made a mark so I would be able to find it again, and went on walking until the rider called out my name. It was the Baron's messenger all right, but what do you think he wanted? Nothing. I had merely forgotten to sew a bit of tape on the collar of the coat for a hanger. For that they had to send a messenger after me! The man pulled me up on the horse and took me back to the palace. I said a prayer of thanksgiving to God, sewed on the hanger and

then hurried back to the field. I found the place I had marked off—gone! The bread had completely disappeared! And I knew who took it. No human came through the field that time of day; it wasn't a bird—no bird could lift such a heavy load; and no animals came so close to the road."

"So who did take it?" asked the rabbi.

Berel pointed his finger toward heaven. "He did it, God! It was His handiwork. And I know why, too."

THE WHOLE CONGREGATION LEANED FORWARD, FOR BEREL'S voice had dropped.

"The Master did it because He didn't want His servant, His Berel the Tailor, to keep the three skins."

"Can you blame Him for that, Berel?" said the rabbi. "You had no right to take the skins. It's against the law."

"Where does law come into this?" demanded Berel angrily. "Tailors have always kept the leftover skins. It is an old and accepted custom. And custom is above the law. You know it and so does God. It isn't Berel the Tailor that started the custom."

Levi Yitshok began to say something but Berel stopped him.

"If the Master is so proud that He does not want His servant to take the leftovers like all other tailors, then let him provide me with a decent living. Then I wouldn't need the leftovers. But what did I get?" said Berel with annoyance. "No leftovers, and no living! That's why I no longer want to serve the Master!" He folded his arms across his chest. "I've taken an oath on this. I am no longer a servant of God. I eat without washing, I don't lay *fillin* in the morning. My wife became so horrified she ran away to her father's house. But I didn't stop her; it was not her affair, this business between God and me. I am Berel the Tailor, you understand. I am not afraid to carry on a strike against God!"

The mounting anger of the congregation exploded. Jews jumped up and surged toward Berel to lay hands on him. It was quite some time before the rabbi could get the people quiet and into their seats again.

"Is there anything else you wish to say?" the rabbi asked Berel in a patient, sympathetic voice.

"It hasn't been easy, Rabbi, that I can tell you," said Berel with a sigh. "Before Rosh Hashonah, when people passed my house at night for the *'slichos'* prayers in the synagogue, my heart went with them, there was such a tugging inside me. But I had made up my mind; Berel the Tailor was on strike! So I pulled the covers over my head to shut out the footsteps. And when it came time for the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashonah, I thought my heart would break altogether. But I stuffed cotton in my ears so I would not hear it. You have no idea, Rabbi, what a yearning I had to be in the synagogue. I was sick of myself, unwashed, uncombed—I even had to turn the mirror to the wall so I wouldn't see what I looked like. But I am right, Rabbi!" said Berel, his fists clenched. "I will not retreat!"

"BUT WHAT IS IT YOU WANT FROM GOD, BEREL?" SAID LEVI YITSHOK.

Berel looked intently at the rabbi. "Answer me a question first. If I admit it is a sin—I don't admit it yet, you understand—but just suppose it is a sin to take the leftovers. Is it true that such sins are not forgiven on Yom Kippur?"

"For a sin against man," said the rabbi, "You must seek forgiveness from the man. On Yom Kippur you are face to face with God and He can forgive only your sins of the year against Him. If you wish forgiveness for the skins, that is a matter between you and the Baron."

Berel's eyes fell. He thought of the Baron's big dogs, and of the tall guards with their stout riding whips. How could he, a Jew, come empty-handed to the Baron to ask forgiveness? He would be treated like a common thief and made sport of to boot.

Berel raised his head. He stood up tall and declared in a ringing voice: "Berel the Tailor is not ready to make peace! I will accept God's ruling about the leftovers, that it was a sin to take them, even though it is a custom of long standing among tailors. The Master seems to insist upon his point, so all right, I will agree. But before I become His servant again, He must agree to my demand: let Him make an exception on this Yom Kippur! On this Yom Kippur let Him forgive the sins of man against man too."

Berel looked at the rabbi hopefully. "I have a right to ask for this special ruling, have I not, Rabbi?"

Levi Yitshok stroked his beard thoughtfully. "There may be something in what you say, Berel," the rabbi said. "Let me see what they think of it up above in the heavenly court."

The rabbi cocked his head to the side, raised his eyes toward heaven and stood intent, listening with his whole body.

There was a hush in the room, and the congregation sat tensely waiting. They saw the rabbi nod his head once; then he nodded again and yet again. His body began to relax and he turned to Berel with a smile of relief.

"Go and fetch your talis, Berel," the rabbi repeated, "We 'You have won your case.'"

Tears welled up in Berel's eyes. He buried his face in his hands and swayed from side to side, holding back the tears.

"Go and fetch your talis, Berel," the rabbi repeated, "We are waiting to say *Kol Nidre*."

Berel dashed out of the synagogue. There were wet eyes in the congregation but none made a sound. Levi Yitshok slowly returned to his place at the altar. He opened his prayerbook and adjusted his prayer shawl. Soon the door in the back opened and in walked Berel in *talis* and Yom Kippur gown. The soft, sad tones of *Kol Nidre* began to fill the room. It was a late beginning, but never before was a more beautiful *Kol Nidre* sung in the Berditchever synagogue.

(Translated and adapted from the Yiddish)

The Rosenberg Committee "Investigation":

THE UN-AMERICAN COMMITTEE STAGES A FLOP

WITH signs of a subsidence of the witch-hunt breaking out all over, the House Committee on Un-American Activities frantically stepped up its "investigative" operations this summer. One of its targets was the Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case, which went out of existence some time ago and has been replaced by the Sobell Committee. The Un-American Committee, presided over by Rep. Francis E. Walter, co-author of the racist immigration law, announced that its interest in the Rosenberg case was that the Rosenberg Committee was a "front" for the Communist Party and that funds collected were diverted to the Communist Party. Some 23 persons, who were active in the campaign to save the Rosenbergs in the local committees and the national office, were subpoenaed.

The fact is that not a shred of a scintilla of evidence to back up the Un-American Committee charges was produced at the hearings. The Rosenberg workers presented a magnificent resistance to the witch-hunt and the whole affair turned out to be a dud, if not a boomerang. A few stool-pigeons boringly droned away their stale stories, naming names.

The Un-American Committee was robbed of a minor sensation when it tried to make it appear as a

sinister fact that Louis Harap, managing editor of JEWISH LIFE, had been a "secret" president of the committee. In his testimony, Harap exposed this attempted fraud by freely stating that he had signed the original document setting up a bank account for the Rosenberg Committee in the line marked "president" simply because that was the only line that required another signature to fulfill bank requirements, and that he had not acted as president.

He affirmed his belief that anti-Semitism was involved in the case essentially because the Jewish judge, Irving Kaufman, had leaned over backward to show his 100 per cent Americanism in appeasement of the anti-Semites and gave the Rosenbergs the death penalty.

One ominous note in the proceedings was the open fawning cooperation with the Un-American Committee given by Dr. S. Andhil Fineberg, Community Relations director of the American Jewish Committee, who was present at the hearings and admitted to having supplied "background material" for the "investigation." We shall have more to say on this later.

One conclusion can be drawn from this unseemly affair: more energetic work to have Morton Sobell transferred out of Alcatraz and to obtain a new trial for him.