

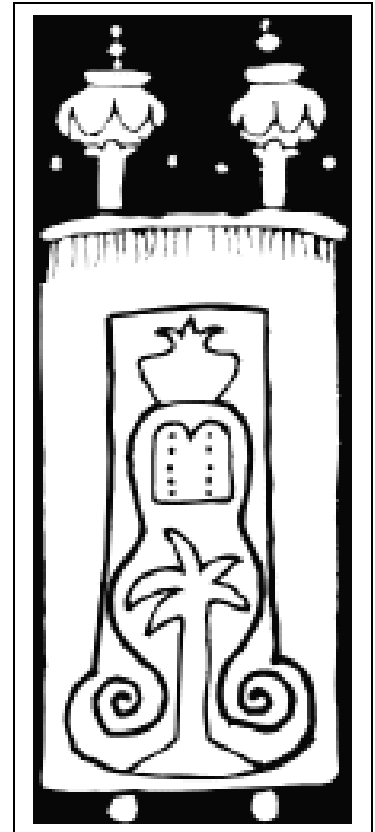
To Chagall

A droshky driver floats in a village painted red
where wooden houses lean on the sky's gates
davening
fields of canvas are windmill-blown in russet
where the settlement is a brew of straw, earth, and herring.
Chagall paints an archway to the past—
in memory of the *shtetl*, his Vitebsk.
A cow with a parasol walks across the sky
and a mezzotint man sprints through barley,
dances on Russian olive leaves of green and silver,
while a maiden—will they ever meet?—dances
in the wind, and starts to float over Bokhara clover.
What has anybody here? A few oxen. A few sacks.
A milk cow. No land deeds. Dreams. Wits and stories.
Maybe a handful of *groschen* in the pocket.
Little nothings to sell. A bisl grain. A chicken.
A prayer, a book, holy scrolls, memories,
and a life so sweet, so strong, so fragile,
so solid, so wispy, so everything, so nothing.

In summer the winds play a clarinet
teasing the dancing feet with balalaika brushes
and tickles of gold with splotches of paprika.
Wild flowers and clouds roll into the folds of grainy steppes.
The hills rise like braided Challah bread
where sunsets are an explosion of dahlia purple
mulberry red, ivory, raisin, and chicken yellow.

It's magic. A handful of spices and the song of the cantor, and suddenly
life becomes boundless blue woods
full of secrets and azure-flecked dreams
tied in satchels of wood hue.
All that is promised scrawls in the sky
for the roseate lovers tumbling upside down,
living on air.

Is it a weathervane? No, it is a fiddler.
He balances himself, and notices the patchwork clouds darkening.
Then he begins to play.
In the humble shul we can almost hear
worn out sighs, fervent prayers,
the despair that asks why, and the yes
to life. We feel the rough wood of the benches;



we feel solid wonder in the presence of the holy scrolls.
Shabbat candles in linoleum-cut windows
glow like squares of gold.
In the black Russian night,
we hear the howl of the borzoi.

Onion bulb domes protrude through a basket of trees,
punching and lancing the sky. They live there
with their crosses, rutabaga, potato fields, their animals,
their poverty, drink, and hovels. A stocky Russian soldier
drinks from a samovar, sucking tea through a sugar cube.
Field workers stomp and dance in wooden shoes.
They are swinish, and smell musty and bitter.

Snow carpets the villages in stark white. The sky darkens like coal.
With schnapps breath, Cossacks march like foxfire, soot eyes gleaming,
scourging our houses into hay piles of sticks and stubble.
How can snow be on fire?
The Cossacks leave behind a hermitage of terrifying silence.

A crucifix tilts in the village square
Jesus was a Jew the Man of Sorrows
acquainted with affliction.
Like scarlet gouache on wooden slabs—
so Jesus' kin in their wooden houses
engulfed in red flames.
The sun dips down, pales, and abandons
the moody Russian landscape.

Through a cobalt blue menorah comes a shaft of pale light.
A star bursts forth from a milky white cubist cloud.
Roots twist. Blue leaves fall.
Vines wander, and are trampled on Russian steppes.
Yet a remnant of the 12 tribes
will survive the crucible, ancient as gold,
fluid and flowing like a life-giving river.
And as the chronicles are told
as only Chagall can paint them in their infinite variety,
a lonely blue star finds its way,
sometimes dancing, across the sky.

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