



Methusaleh A Jewish Horse

(An abbreviated excerpt)

Written by
Sholem Aleichem

Illustrated by
David Labkovski

Methusaleh- that was what he was called in Kasrilevka because he was so old.

He didn't have any teeth in his head except for two or three stumps with which he barely managed to chew whatever food came his way. He was tall, emaciated, with a mangy hide, a sway back, bad eyes— one had a cataract, the other was bloodshot—spindly legs, protruding hip bones, sunken flanks, a mournfully sagging lower lip, and a threadbare tail—such is his portrait. In his old age he worked for Kasriel the water-carrier, pulling a water cart.



By nature, Methusaleh was obedient and stoic and had long been overworked. After a full day of slogging through the Kasrilevka muck and providing the town with water, he was content to be unhitched from the water cart, thrown some straw and fed some slops that Kasriel's wife served him as if he were a special guest dining on a platter of fish or a bowl of holiday dumplings.

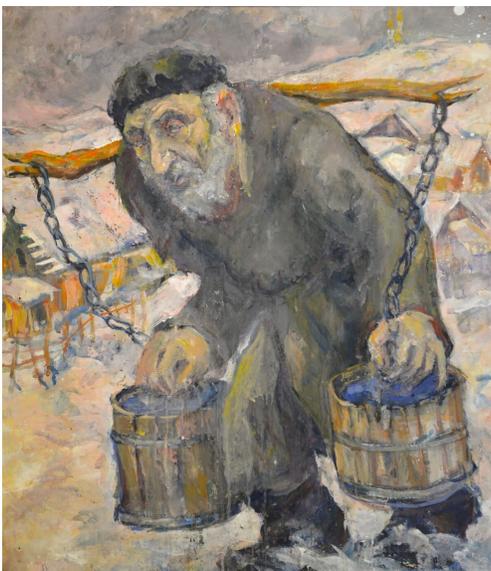
Methusaleh would look forward to the slops as if it were a treat, because he could always find in it a piece of soaked bread, some kasha, and other soft food that didn't require chewing. Kasriel's wife collected food for Methusaleh all day, throwing into the slop pail anything she could spare—let the poor horse have something to eat. And when Methuselah was finished eating, he would turn his head toward the water cart and his back toward Kasriel's wife as if to say: "Thank you very much for this meager fare," his sagging lower lip sagging a bit more, his seeing eye shut, he would sink into equine thoughts.

*Methusaleh is the name of a biblical character that was the longest-lived person.

But do not be misled into believing that life was always this way for Methusaleh. There was a time in his youth when he was still a colt running behind his mother's wagon, when he showed promise of becoming a top-notch horse. Connoisseurs predicted great things for him. "Someday," they said, "you will see him harnessed to a carriage among the finest and most excellent horses!"

When the colt became a full-grown horse, they threw a bridle on him and led him to the fair where, along with many other horses, he was run back and forth some fifty times for prospective buyers who carefully examined his teeth and raised his legs to check his hoofs. He was eventually sold.

That was the beginning of his long diaspora, his wandering from one place to the next, from one master to another, perpetually hauling large, heavy wagon loads and slogging through belly-high mud . . . Understandably enough, this revolving in ever-present dust ruined his health, one eye developed a cataract, the other became bloodshot, and his legs stiffened. These serious defects made him of no use to anyone. He was led to the fair with the thought of palming him off on someone. Kasriel the water-carrier, a broad boned Jew with a flat nose and a hairy face, was his own horse, lugging water himself.



He harnessed himself to the water carp and pulled tall over town. As much as Kasriel suffered all his life, he never envied anyone, but when he would see someone riding a horse, he would stop and look longingly after him. His one wish in the world was that God would help him obtain a horse. But no matter how hard he scrimped he was never able to come up with enough capital to buy a horse. Yet whenever the fair was in town, he never failed to stroll among the horses, just looking, as they say. One day, seeing a miserable mangy, dejected horse at the fair, without a bridle and not hitched up, Kasriel stopped. His heart told him this horse would fit his purse. And so it was.