

Introduction: The Two Oldest Stars of Hollywood.

“Here we are, thanks to a new crop of zealots,” I smiled at my friend Sam as a piercing beam of sunlight slipped through the maple’s fading leaves. “Who would think that after everything we have been through, this is what it would take to cancel our holidays?”

I worried about Sam in this state; flashbacks of being assailed by masked-wearing zealots in Jerusalem during the horror of revolt two thousand years ago, having our lives destroyed and our society decimated by a self-righteous few who infused fear into our souls and doused it with the flames of deception and death, how was this any different, how could my good friend not be, excuse my expression, shitting in his pants when he sees it all happening again?

But Sam merely laughed, big and deep, with his signature “Ho, ho, ho,” and he dropped his over-sized arm around my neck. “Yadel, if this is all the zealots can conjure up—staring at us for not pretending that flimsy cloth is God’ new instruments of salvation, and labeling our holidays a threat to everyone’s safety, God forbid past leaders made such proclamations when real dangers abounded, we’d be out of business!—then it’s well worth the price. Having a break from my travels after all this time is a welcome relief, especially if I get to spend it with my very best friend in all of eternity!”

Immortality has a way of washing away rancor between two old friends. Sometimes it takes a thousand years or so to iron out differences, and that’s about how long it took us. But, we did it. And thus, after so much enmity, Sam and I are united again at the edge of Hollywood, Florida’s Broadwalk. Over the past few decades we made a pact to meet here, under Sam’s favorite old oak tree, whenever Hanukah and Christmas fall on the same day, a rare event indeed. But this year, the geniuses of earth—zealots posing as leaders and scientists—said it was simply not safe to have our holidays, they’d have to be postponed. Human happiness fell prey to fear. That’s what zealots do; they twist fear to convince people to do their bidding. What can I tell you? This is the way of the world!

My entire life has been consumed by zealotry! That’s what made me and Sam into the men we are, that’s what almost had us killed during our many battles against zealotry—especially against our old friend Simon, who had become immortal like us—during our time together in Judea, it’s what gave us our powers and it is what, in the end, drove us apart. But here we are again, brought together by, of all things, a new crop of zealots, able to meet earlier than we had expected. How tantalizingly ironic!

Sam detests Florida; he is uncomfortable being in so warm a climate; it saps his strength and floods him with sweat. So, we sit under our oak tree upon a busy stretch of white sand amidst a sea of palms, the crashing of waves and chatting of children that all too often muffles our conversation. Sam gets distracted by kids; he likes watching them play and enjoying themselves, even if there is less of it now in this time of fear. I suppose I do too. It’s a nice place to relax at the start of another New Year.

“How is Yoshen, good friend?” Sam asked me. “Are you with her still?”

I nodded. *Always*. My eyes closed, and she softly touched my heart. “She says hello.”

“Thank her again for saving our lives all those times,” my friend laughed.

“I think she knows,” I said to him. A few tears welled up in my eyes. “She says to thank you for saving hers as well. After all, she is immortal like us, even if it is in a very different way.”

"I wonder, Yadel," he said to me, as sweat poured down his face and through his thick white beard. "Who of us is the luckier one? Because I had no attachments, I could put everything I had into my holiday. The results speak for themselves! Your holiday, well my friend, it's like a dead herring, flopping on the docks of the Mediterranean not quite sure where it's supposed to go. You always had Yoshen with you, she was your heart and soul. I never had love like you did, my friend, so I focused all that I was on my holiday. Who was the luckier one?"

I paused and I could feel Yoshen laugh. I laughed too.

"She says to stop blaming her for my own incompetence," I said to my friend. "What I did and didn't do with Hannukah was not her fault, it was my own. I always think too much, I never can make it simple; you know that about me! But that is who we are as Jews, is it not? Our history has not been a straight line. It has zig-zagged through the greatest of human crises, it has been pulled down by zealots and greedy kings, and has been propped up by the greatest minds the world has ever seen. Why should my holiday be any different? Here we still are, Sam. We have survived! It is nothing short of a miracle. That Hannukah is misunderstood, that I am not the celebrity that you are, that is not the fault of Yoshen's. She kept me alive during my darkest hours. She is my savior, not my burden. It is, rather, the story of our people. We are not destined to give birth to simple ideas and shiny celebrities like you. We are destined to forever grapple with the past, present, and future. We are born to struggle!"

Sam laughed and lifted a carton of green eggnog. "Then here to you, my friend! Here is to your continued anonymity and your continued struggles! May you never find peace! Ho, ho, ho!"

"We do want peace," I reminded him. "We are simply unwilling to give up who we are to get it. You used to be part of that very struggle, back when you were Clausius; do you not remember those days? When we hid out in Jerusalem during the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome, when we fought against Simon and his zealots, when we became who we are now, when Nicholas explained it all. That is who we are, Sam. If we can't find peace, it's because no one lets us. And that includes you, my friend, for a thousand years! How could we find peace in a world of such much, excuse my expression, crap?"

"Well, here we are, under your tree, so much happiness around, why bicker about details?"

Sam and I had moved in different directions over the centuries. While his people spread across the globe conquering and assimilating the masses, my people spread across the globe running away from his people. We had to move fast, so I had to stay in shape. Sam was happy just hanging out and watching it all unfold from his perch up North, so he got a little soft. In the world of immortality, the difference between those of us fit and clever and those of us indolent and fat means nothing. In fact, Sam, despite his laziness and his tendency to borrow his ideas from others, despite the fact that he sleeps all but one day of the year, has succeeded brilliantly. And despite my ingenuity and all that I had to endure, I have largely failed, at least to most of the people reading this book. All the world knows about Sam's exploits, while no one has heard of me. You want to talk about TV shows, movies, songs? It's all Sam. I have touched very few lives. Which is why I want so much to tell my story. His has already been told at nauseum; it's annoying already! But this is likely the first time you will ever hear about me!

I thought about our flight from Jerusalem in 70AD. Well, it wasn't AD then, it was the year 3831 in the Jewish calendar. No one knew about AD or BC or any such nonsense. That came later, when the Romans adapted Christianity as their official religion and turned the popular Roman festival of

Saturnalia—and the pagan winter solstice—into the birthday of Jesus. Sam came up with that idea, well after I had already put Hannukah on that very date, but still to this day people accuse me of trying to copy Christmas! “It’s all hogwash,” I told my friend.

“Bitter grapes,” Sam laughed. “Get over it. You hold a long grudge, my friend.”

I just shook my head.

“Don’t blame me for your troubles,” Sam said, sifting sand through his plump fingers, and then wiping sweat off his brow. “Blame John of Giscala! He was, after all, one of your people, not mine, and the nastiest person I ever met. Blame the Romans, their governor Gessius Florus who started it all, and General Vespasian and his son Titus for carrying out the war; blame the traitor Josephus who jumped over to their side and became Vespasian’s lap boy by promising he would one day be emperor. Heck, blame your hero Rabbi ben Zakkai, who snuck out of the city in a coffin and left you high and dry.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m not going to bad-mouth Yohanan ben Zakkai; what he did for me and my people, that was worth his escape. But yes, the Romans, and John and his Jewish zealots, yes, I’ll blame them. But mostly I blame Simon, and I do still blame you; you should have done more to stop what your people did to us. But, my friend, those were the old days, you are right about that. Today, today we celebrate a new zealotry that has brought us together! And a friendship that can never die even in a cruel and stupid world that we have done so little to change!”

Sam poured himself a drink of the eggnog. He lifted it toward me in a toast and laughed, “Ho, Ho, Ho,” he said. “Have a sip with me, my friend! We are lucky indeed!”

“No,” I told him. “No sips today.”

“What, are you afraid that I will spread my COVID germs to you?” he laughed.

“You know I don’t drink and fly very well. I don’t have a group of animals pulling me around. I have to do it myself.”

“Your problem, not mine,” Sam said, laughing. “If you had listened to Nicholas, you may not have stuck with that spinning Dreidel of yours. It’s is not exactly the easiest way to fly.” He slurped the eggnog quickly, and then poured another glass. “You never take the easy path, Yadel. Believe me, that is a path worth trying one day.”

The path we took in the year 3831 as we escaped from our home in Judea was hardly the easy path. Clausius was with me, as was our friend Simon. The great Jewish rebellion against Roman rule exploded upon us and our people three years earlier, in 3828, and for all that time we were entangled in the middle of it, wanting so much to escape from its clutches, but not knowing how.

That is when I met Yoshen, when I fell in love, and when I found a purpose in my life—the purpose of Hannukah and of spreading it to my people as they scattered across the world—that still defines me to this day. It is also how we obtained our powers, in an odd twist of fate, as we escaped from the city and only survived by the sheer luck of a salty, sulfuric pond and of the mutual hatred of others as they ignored us and massacred each other.

After that day, that day of our escape, we became who we are now, for better or worse. But now, having been banned from our holidays, sitting on a hot beach as hoards of masked zealots wander by, I

wonder why we should even continue. Is there still a need for us? Our tales, our lessons, have largely gone unheard. And our powers have finally started to fade. Mostly, although Yoshen lives within me, she too has become more shadow than real, and the loss of her would not be something that I could ever tolerate. So, why go on?

“Was it worth it?” I asked Sam. “Your holiday, it’s not what you hoped it would be, forgetting the success that you always gloat about. And mine, it is not anything at all, just a shadow of what I hoped. We have failed, my friend. Even as we live forever, it seems that we accomplished very little.”

Sam stood up. “It is quite a question you pose to me, just out of the blue, as though this is what I want to think about right now,” he said to me. “I cry when I think about our lives, Yadel; tears of joy and agony both. But my good friend, I need to pee. And so, I must interrupt your story for a moment.”

“If you didn’t drink so much of that sugar-laden fatty drink you could hold it in,” I chided him.

“Ho, ho, ho!” he laughed, as he walked toward the ocean. “It is worth it! I went to a doctor like you said, Yadel. The doctor told me I was too fat, and then said, ‘Sam, your cholesterol is too high, you better bring it down.’ And I said, ‘Doctor, I’m two-thousand years old. Is that really all you think is important, my cholesterol?’ The doctor looked at me, and I was waiting for him to say something profound, and he said, ‘Yes, it is. I’d like to start you on a statin.’ Ho, ho, ho! Who is to say we didn’t make a dent in the world when there are people like that running our lives! The faces changes, the titles do too, but the world is the world, it will always be that Yadel, we can’t change it. But maybe we can help a few people to find their own inner happiness, maybe we can make it a little better. I think we both accomplished that. Now, please don’t burden me with any of your horribly depressing observations! I am going to pee before I stain my red pants a horrid yellow!”

“You’re going to pee in there?” I called after him, pointing to the ocean where he was headed.

“It’s nature’s toilet,” he said. “And they won’t let me inside if I, God-forbid, don’t drape myself with their mask. Besides, I could use a bit of salt on my skin. Don’t tell the kids. It will ruin my image.”

“Your image?” I asked, standing up and following him into the waves. “I would say that you have bigger issues to worry about than peeing in the ocean.”

Sam looked at me. He smiled, and he kissed me on the head. “I am so glad we are friends again,” he said. “Best friends, friends linked together by our very souls. I don’t know why we let so much get between us. But the past is the past. I love you, Yadel. And I’m proud of all that you did.”

“If you are so proud, are you willing to help me to set the record straight?”

Sam laughed. “I will do one better,” he said. “I have a surprise for you! One that may give us a purpose after all. And which may set the record straight. But please, first let me pee!”

I watched my friend waddle through the water. So much had transpired since that night outside of Jerusalem. A year after our escape the great Jewish rebellion ended. Our Temple was destroyed, and the Jews’ reputation tattered within the Roman world. But we did have hope, we did have a new path upon which to trod, and I promised myself that I would help to forge a way forward that would ensure our people’s eternal happiness and success. But how? It gnawed at me. How to teach my people the lessons of our past and present so that we would not have to continue to suffer in the future?

“Let’s create a holiday to remind us of our sins and or strengths,” my dear Yoshen said to me. “You are a game maker, Yadel, you can make games for the holiday, I will write songs; this can be your purpose, my dear man! Our purpose, our passion! With Rabbi Yohanan and his new institute, with a new hope brewing after the horror of the revolt, this is our time! The hope of eternal light!”

And that is what I did. On that night, my idea was born for Channukah (Yes, it is spelled so many ways, what can I even tell you about that?)

Sam shook himself off like a wet rag; a few passing children giggled. If only they knew who he really was! He swigged down some more eggnog, and then dried off.

“What is the great surprise?” I asked my good friend.

He smiled, so enticing, so joyful, that it reminded me of our time together in Judea long ago. He had something up his sleeve, that’s for sure. And when Sam had an idea, it was always a good idea to pay attention. “I think it’s time for me and you to go on a little trip, Yadel. One by plane this time, not by magic. And one for a very different purpose than we are used to.” He let the next sentence dangle.

“What?” I begged him, laughing like a little boy.

“Yadel,” he said, laying his large paws on my shoulders. “We are going to India.”

I smiled and nodded up and down. “Yes,” I said. “That makes some sense. It’s time. It’s time we dig up the past for all it’s worth. The world needs that. They need us, all of us. Yes, my friend. What a brilliant idea for such a non-brilliant man like you!”

Yes, it was time to let it all out, to show the world who we really were. Our legacy was not all about giving out toys, about reindeer and spinning dreidels. Ours is a story of history itself. To pave a path to the future, we must first understand the past, and to me, that is what Hannukah has always been about.

After the great Jewish revolt, when Yoshen and I pledged our lives to Hannukah’s inception and perseverance, the journey ahead was difficult for us, as it was for Clausius while he still cared, and for my people too. We fought not only against hate and greed, against the Romans and soon the Christians, but also against a unrelenting tide of fear and zealotry, against the power amassed by Simon and his minions, sometimes it seemed against the whole world. Two more revolts lay ahead for us, and then eons of oppression, and all during those harrowing times, I tried my best to make Hannukah relevant, to explain it to my people, to understand it even myself. It took several years to create Hanukah, and several hundred years to try to save it from obscurity, even as my people lost their land, their direction, and often their lives. But I am proud of what I did. I am Yadel the Dreidel. This is my story and the story of Hannukah.