



The Baker and the Beggar

Kadya Molodowsky

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1894–1975

Kadya Molodowsky was a poet, an educator, and the author of many works for children in both poetry and prose. She was born into a traditional family that saw to her religious education but also schooled her in “modern” subjects such as Jewish history and Modern Hebrew grammar. She earned a teaching certificate and continued her education in Hebrew-language acquisition at a specialized institute in Warsaw. She was displaced from the city by World War I and began teaching refugee children in various settings. After the war, she settled down with her husband in Warsaw, where she taught in the secular school system and began to publish her poetry in Yiddish journals. She also worked as an editor at literary journals during this period. In 1935, Molodowsky emigrated to New York, where her husband joined her in 1938. She spent the rest of her life in the States, except for a two-year stint (1950–52) in Tel Aviv, and she published several volumes of poetry.

“The Baker and the Beggar,” along with “Zelig the Rhymester” (in part 4) and “A Story of a Schoolboy and a Goat” (in part 6), appeared in a section called “Schoolboys” of her 1970 collection of stories and poems for children, *Martsepanes* (Marzipans). These stories, set in the vanished European shtetl, incorporate many folkloric elements and reflect a child’s-eye view whereby biblical figures are close at hand and keenly interested in the inner lives of children.

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Once upon a time, there was a baker with his own shop, who made bread, rolls, pretzels, bagels, and challah for Shabbos.

His wife would tie up her hair in a scarf and knead the dough, and the children would twist the bagels into circles.

The whole town delighted in their pretzels and bagels. Even the birds would swoop down from the sky in order to catch the crumbs, and their tail feathers twitched with pleasure.

Every Friday, poor Jews would come to the bakery to beg food for Shabbos. That was the custom of the time, the time of our grandparents. The baker would give them a roll, a bagel, a pretzel, whatever he could spare. And no one left empty-handed.

One of the poor Jews had very special eyes, so radiant that they sent forth beams of light. The baker liked him best of all, and each Friday, he would give the man an entire challah for Shabbos.

So it went week after week, Friday after Friday, over many years. The baker became so accustomed to the man's visits that he would look forward to them. He would hand the beggar the challah personally and say, "Eat in good health, and may all be well with you."

The man never thanked him; he just smiled with his bright eyes and replied, "May you live long, and may God repay you."

One Friday that happened to also be the eve of a holiday, the bakery was crowded with customers, who pushed and crushed against each other. This one wanted a challah with poppy seeds; that one, a loaf of white bread ("but make sure it's sweet!"). . . . The baker, his wife, and their children were so busy that by day's end, they could hardly stand.

Along came the bright-eyed man. He saw the great rush, so he didn't want to bother the baker just then. He stood there for a while and then left without saying so much as a word.

After that Friday, the beggar stopped coming. A week passed and then two and three. The baker thought of him many times and asked the other poor people about him—but eventually he forgot about the man. Who keeps thinking about a poor man? Perhaps God had helped him, and he no longer needed to beg.

The bakery prospered. The baker had built a fine house with a large oven. His wife had sewn herself a new woolen jacket, and their children now wore shoes without holes and flannel jackets. They had bought drinking glasses

and spoons by the half dozen, and they thanked God for providing these little luxuries.

But no one's good luck lasts forever. One Friday, a fire broke out in the bakery. It burnt up the sacks of flour, the shelves, and the whole house; everything the baker possessed disappeared with the smoke.

The baker stood there slumped with worry, staring at the cinders of the burnt walls. And near him stood his wife and the children like lonely sheep. The baker thought, "God in Heaven, why have you brought such a punishment upon us? Why must I endure such a bitter blow? Shabbos is coming, and we're left without a roof over our heads."

The neighbors came and echoed the baker's sadness: "Really, why should this have happened to the baker? He's such an honest man!"

While the baker was standing there worried and despondent, not knowing what to do—*just then*, along came the poor man who had not come to the bakery in a long time.

The baker was dumbfounded. Of all times to return, the poor man had to come now to see him in the midst of this great misfortune? He ran up to the man and said with a broken spirit, "You see, sir, what has happened to me! Everything burnt, lock, stock, and barrel! Now I don't even have challah for Shabbos for myself."

With eyes beaming, the man said, "I didn't come to ask you for challah. God has changed my luck and freed me from poverty. Now I have what I need and can repay the debts of what I have borrowed from generous people."

From his pocket, the man took out a bundled kerchief and handed it to the baker, who was astonished. "Here," said the man, "you have the repayment for all the challahs you gave me week after week, from Friday to Friday, over many, many years. I have added it all up and thought of everything, and my calculations are right. You may be certain I've made no error."

It was enough for a house and an oven and a bakery and even for a woolen jacket for the baker's wife and for flannel jackets for the children. The baker was absolutely amazed: the price of every challah was recorded: each and every loaf, from week to week, Friday to Friday, year to year—and not a crumb was missing.