

## Where Do All The Jews Go?

There was a dead cat in the middle of the road. In the middle of the central New Jersey suburban road. The cookie cutter houses were lined perfectly—an exact 12 feet of space between each one. The city repaved the streets yearly. When Mr. Johnson died of a heart attack at 11:00 in the morning, his family waited until the neighborhood kids went to sleep that night to call an ambulance. Robby Cohen had never seen a dead anything, but now there was a dead cat in the middle of the road.

“Mom!” Robby yelled. He’d biked up to the cat because he thought it was the sweatshirt his brother lost. His brother had a lucky black Jets sweatshirt he hadn’t been able to find for three days and he desperately wanted to wear it for the game that Sunday. But it was no sweatshirt. It was bloody, matted cat fur and eyes that still looked alive.

“Mom!” Robby screamed again. He was straddling the bike seat, both feet resting on the even cement in front of his house, and he knew his mother was in the garage. Finally, she stuck her head out.

“What is it, sweetheart?” Robby couldn’t say anything but pointed to the fur ball at his feet. Robby’s mother hurried over, the smile falling from her face when she saw the dead thing and Robby’s bike wheel on the edge of its tail. “Oh, Robby,” she said. “Did you kill the cat?”

Robby cried. How dare his mother accuse him of killing the cat? He’d just seen his first dead thing and now his mother called him a murderer? He let his bike fall to the ground and ran into the house.

“Oh, Robby,” his mother called after him. “I’m sure it was an accident.”

She hadn't realized this was his first dead thing. Somehow the thought had slipped her mind.

Robby's mother found him in the upstairs bathroom, sitting on the lowered toilet seat with his feet pulled to his chest, tears falling down his cheeks and his bike helmet still on.

"I didn't kill that cat," was all he could manage to say.

"Oh, of course not," his mother said. "Of course you didn't."

"What's going to happen to it?"

"When your father comes home he'll take care of it. We have a shovel and some trash bags in the garage."

But Robby only cried harder, and his mother realized she had misunderstood his question.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, you mean what's going to happen to the cat's soul?"

Robby nodded. He wasn't really sure what he meant, only that he didn't know what happened to things when they died. His Sunday school class talked about it sometimes, but the rabbi was purposely vague.

"Well," his mother said. "I believe when things die they all go to Heaven. I like to think that one day I'll be in Heaven surrounded by everyone I love. Especially you." She kissed his nose and wiped his wet cheeks. "Sometimes I imagine Mr. Rogers, my neighbor from when I was a little girl, up in Heaven. I picture him floating on a cloud, gardening his tulips."

"So the cat's in Heaven?" Robby asked.

"Yes, sweetie, I think so." And with that, she carried him out of the bathroom, his helmet-covered head bumping the door frame.

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A week earlier, Robby had stayed late after Hebrew school. It was finally his turn to be assigned a Torah portion. He twisted the dispenser on the rabbi's desk and a blue gumball rolled out. He popped it in his mouth and sank onto the thick leather couch.

"How are you feeling, Robby?" The rabbi asked.

"I'm feeling all right," Robby said, his teeth blue with sugar. "I already memorized the Shema and the V'ahavta. And I decided on my party theme. Soccer."

"That all sounds wonderful," the rabbi said. "The Bar Mitzvah party is often the most exciting night in the life of a young boy. But don't lose sight of what's important—your connection with God."

"Sure, sure," Robby said.

"Well, should we get started?"

Robby nodded yes and the rabbi opened a binder. He flipped through pages, most of them covered in Hebrew, before stopping on one of them.

"Chukat Balak, the Statute of the Torah," he read, looking at Robby with a smile. "When Balaam curses the Israelites, God defends them." Robby wasn't exactly sure what that all meant, but it sounded good to him.

"Would you like to take a look?" Rabbi asked.

The Torah portion was printed onto white sheets of paper with dark, numbered lines of Hebrew letters followed by their English translation. Robby's eyes skimmed the rows of English; he could read Hebrew but not understand it.

*Those who touch a corpse, the body of a person who had died, and do not purify themselves, defile 'יהוה's (Robby knew that was pronounced Adonai) Tabernacle; those persons shall*

*be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on them, they remain impure; their impurity is still upon them.*

Then the English broke for more Hebrew, followed by its translation:

*This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be impure seven days;*

The Statute of the Torah? Robby thought. This was no statute—this was about death. And Robby hadn't known anything about death.

Then he saw the dead cat in the middle of the road. The one that looked like his brother's lucky Jets sweatshirt. The one his mother had accused him of killing.

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A week after being assigned his Torah portion, Robby was back at Hebrew school. He sat in one of the synagogue's upstairs classrooms, its white walls covered with posters that made Torah stories look like movie releases. One read *Jonah and the Whale* over a cartoon whale, his mouth wide open and a boy standing on the tongue. Another said *Noah's Ark* and had a drawing of a brown, wooden boat docked alongside an island with animals lined up from the sand to the deck.

Robby sat among other students, most of whom he'd become friends with over the years of Sunday school, as they recited the blessing for before reading the Torah.

"Baruch Adonai ham'vorach l'olam va-ed," their monotone voices stumbled in unison. They'd spent the entire afternoon on the prayer, someone always messing up one word or another. In class, there were no English translations to follow the lines of Hebrew.

"I think that's enough for today," the rabbi finally said. "Why don't we move on?"

There was a unified sigh and the students immediately began talking amongst themselves.

“Wait, wait, wait.” The rabbi glanced at the clock. “We still have fifteen minutes.”

Another sigh, this one not of relief.

“Oh, we’ll make it fun. Does anyone want to share what they’ve been working on for their speeches?”

One girl, Becca, raised her hand. “I’m writing about my brother,” she said. “Since my Torah portion is on Cain and Abel.” The speeches read during each Bar or Bat Mitzvah were supposed to relate to that week’s Torah portion, but with an added personal element. Robby had decided on his topic when his mother was comforting him in the bathroom.

When Robby raised his hand, the rabbi called on him.

“I’m writing about death,” he said. The rabbi’s lips shut and he looked at Robby with big eyes. “The only thing is,” Robby said, “I can’t figure out what happens after you die.”

With this, the class erupted—each of them had a different opinion on what happened. Apparently, they’d been thinking about this long before Robby had. But they probably lived in neighborhoods where the ambulance was called right away when someone had a heart attack.

“My mother says we all go to Heaven when we die,” Robby raised his voice above the others. The room got quiet. Then a boy named Max spoke.

“Isn’t your mother a *Catholic*?” He asked, spitting when he said the C-word.

Everyone looked at Robby.

“Well, sure, she’s a Catholic,” Robby said. “But what’s so bad about that? My dad’s Jewish.”

“My mother says you don’t even count as a Jew unless your mom is one!” Max said. His father was the president of the temple, and he thought that was equivalent to being king. Some voices supported this claim.

“But that’s not my *point*,” Robby said. “I am asking what happens after death? If my mother is in Heaven with everyone she loves, why can’t I be there, too?”

Again, the voices.

The loudest one said “Because you’re Jewish!” Another one said, “You should’ve thought about that before you went and had a Catholic as your mom.”

“Robby,” the rabbi cut in. “Why don’t we talk about this after class, okay?”

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“I’m not going to Heaven,” was the first thing Robby said when he got into his mother’s car. They’d barely pulled away from the synagogue and she slammed on her breaks.

“What?” She asked, really expecting an answer.

“I won’t be there,” Robby said. “But you have fun.”

“Robert Benjamin Cohen,” she said. “*What* are you saying?”

“The rabbi said Jews don’t go to Heaven.”

“He’s wrong. Don’t you ever mess with my idea of Heaven again.”

His mother drove away from the synagogue. When they pulled into the driveway at home the tires rolled over dried cement blood. His mother turned to Robby once more, inside the garage.

“Robby,” she said. He looked at her expectantly. “I told your father we could raise our children Jewish because it was important to him. But when we die, we are all going to be together, regardless of religion. Okay?” Robby nodded okay, but he wasn’t so sure.

During their conversation after Hebrew school, the rabbi had told Robby that Jews didn’t have so clear a picture of the afterlife like Catholics did (he also told Robby it was okay that his mother was a Catholic, he could still have his Bar Mitzvah). He said Jews had a different concept of Heaven; one that was on Earth. Then the rabbi invited Robby to the temple’s Yikzor service. The High Holy days were coming up, and he thought it might help Robby understand more about Jewish grief.

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The Yikzor service didn’t happen until late in the day on Yom Kippur. Robby found a seat next to his friend Julian whose grandmother had died in November. Robby’s father and brother didn’t have anyone to mourn, so they were at home preparing for the break fast. The rabbi and cantor stood behind the bimah, nodding at congregants as they found their seats. Finally, the service began.

“We gather here today to remember our loved ones,” the rabbi said. “Some of these wounds are fresh, grieving those who sat beside us this time last year. Others have had more time to heal; regardless, we pray together.”

Then everyone followed the individual dictionary sized Torahs to recite a bunch of prayers. Robby wasn’t sure how this was going to help his Bar Mitzvah speech.

After all the prayers, the rabbi said “May God remember,” then recited the names of every member of the temple who had died, seemingly ever. In New Jersey, that makes for a lot of dead Jews.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Robby whispered to Julian; the names were only on the F’s.

“What doesn’t?” Julian asked.

“All this,” Robby pointed at the bimah. “Why are we asking God to remember all these people?”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re all just dirt now. God doesn’t even care about the dead Jews. That’s probably why the Holocaust happened, anyway.”

Julian gave Robby a confused look. Robby leaned in even closer.

“They tell you it was the Germans, but really it was God.”

When the service ended, Robby followed Julian’s family out of the synagogue.

“Well,” the rabbi said, putting an arm over Robby’s shoulder. “What’d you think? You ready to write your speech now?”

The rabbi’s robe was loose and billowy; it made him look like a giant.

“I still don’t get it,” Robby said. “You never said what happens to Jews when they die.”

“That’s not what Yikzor is about, Robby. It’s about calling to remembrance those who we’ve lost.”

“But how will I know,” Robby said, “if it even matters to those people that God remembers them, if we don’t know what happens to them.” Robby paused. “What happens to the dead Jews, rabbi?”

“That’s a big question, Robby. And the only true way to get an answer, is to wait and find out for yourself. Don’t be in any rush, okay?” With that, the rabbi walked away.

But Robby wondered how close he could get to death to discover the afterlife, without actually dying.

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Robby thought a good time to put this to the test would be at the High Holy Days Carnival. Every year, the Sunday following Yom Kippur, the synagogue holds a fair to celebrate the Jewish New Year and raise money. The expansive parking lot hosts makeshift rides, a ferris wheel, and plenty of fair games. There are also booths for cotton candy, popcorn, hotdogs, and fried kosher everything. But Robby only had his eyes on the swing ride.

It was a huge orange circle with seats descending from the top, attached by sturdy cables. The swings went up and down as the orange piece circled, at the highest point raising them well above the third-floor roof of the synagogue. It was the only ride where the operator did not have control over the riders’ lap belts. Robby could unclip his at any time, and he was planning on doing so when the ride’s height was even with the second floor of the synagogue.

Robby had read in a school’s library book that most people could survive vertical falls of 23 feet, but that going higher was really a gamble. He figured if he could teeter on the line of survival and death, he might see the afterlife for just a few seconds and then come back.

“Does everyone have their lap belts fastened?” The operator asked through a microphone as he walked around to check. Robby clicked his into place. He was sitting next to Julian again, who didn’t have a clue about his plan.

The ride began to rise, people squealing and kicking off their shoes to the ground below. It's speed increased, as it circled up down up down, and Robby kept his eyes trained on their height. They passed the second floor on their way up and again on the way back down, but Robby couldn't bring his hands to his lap belt. He began to wonder how important it was that he figured out what happened after Jews died. Everyone else he knew seemed okay not knowing.

Again, up down up down, the ride passed the second floor and Robby didn't make a move.

"I thought about what you said," Julian screamed over the ride's noise.

"What?" Robby yelled back.

"About the dead Jews," Julian said.

"Oh!"

"I'd like to think my grandma is more than just dirt in the ground, you know?"

"Sure." Robby's eyes were following the ride's height as it ascended above the building again, his hands resting on the lap buckle.

"It's just, there's no way to know what happened to her," Julian yelled. "And it's kind of eating me up."

Robby jumped.

Or, really, he fell. Tumbled, even. He un-clicked his set belt and slid right out of the seat when the ride was even with the second floor window.

The other riders' squeals turned from joy to fear and the operator stopped them in mid-air. Everyone rushed to Robby. Max, Becca, the rabbi, his mother. Julian was still up high, his feet

dangling over Robby's body. Julian hadn't seen the cat, but if he had, he might've said Robby hardly looked better.

Robby wasn't dead and he wasn't going to die, not for awhile. But he thought he might be dead. He couldn't see anything, but felt like he'd sunk into the parking lot's asphalt. It had taken him in like a sponge and absorbed his little beat-up body. He imagined this is what it felt like to be dirt. Right on the Earth's surface, where anyone could walk over you.

When the paramedics came, Robby finally opened his eyes. Everyone was blurred together, but he saw his mother crying right in front. She got even closer when she saw his eyes blink. "Oh, Robby," she said. "My sweetheart baby Robby."

"Ma," he whispered. She grabbed his hand. "I think I wanna be a Catholic."