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If Not Higher

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I. L. Peretz  If Not Higher  Alan Stringer

Early every Friday morning at the time of the penitential prayers, the rabbi of Nemirov would

He was nowhere to be seen—
neither in the syn-a-gogue nor in the house of Stud-y

nor at a Min-yan. And he was cer-tain-ly not at

home. His door stood op-en.

who-ev-er wished could go in or out. No one would
steal from a rabbi.

But not a living soul was there.

In rhythm:

Where could the rabbi be? Where should he be? In

heaven, no doubt. A rabbi has plenty of business be-

fore the days of Awe.

Jews, God bless them need
live-li-hood, peace and health and good matches

They want to be good, but our sins are great.

Sa-tan of the thousand eyes watches the

whole earth from one end to the oth-er.
what he sees he reports. who can help us if not the
rabbi!
That's what the people thought.

Faster

poco staccato

But once a litvak came.

He laughed. You know the Lit-vaks. They think little.
of the Holy Books, but stuff themselves with Talmud

and the law. So this Litvak

points to a passage in the German

it sticks in your eyes— where it is written that
even mos-es did not as-cend to Hea-ven dur-ing his
life-time but re-mained sus-pend-ed two and a
half feet be-low.
Go ar-que with a bit-vak
Slow A tempo
So where can the rab-bi be?
"That's not my business," said the Lit-vah shrugging.

But all the while, he was scheming to find out.

That same night rall. into new tempo right after evening prayers, the Lit-vah steals in.
to the rabbi's room, slides under the rabbi's bed and waits. He'll watch all night and discover where the rabbi vanishes and what he does during.

The Penitential Prayers
Faster

Someone else might have gotten
drowsy or fallen asleep, but a Litvak

is never at a loss; he recites a whole

tractate of the Talmud by heart.

And at
dawn he hears the call to prayers.

The rabbi has already been awake for a long time. The Litvak has heard him groaning for a whole hour.
who-ev-er has heard the rab-bi of Nen-ber-rov
groan knows how much sor-row for all Is-ra-el
lies in each groan. A man's heart might
break hear-ing it.
Faster

But a lit-vak's made of iron;

he listens, and he remains where he is.

The rabbi, long life to him, lies on the bed,

and the lit-vak under it.
Then the Lit-vak hears the beds in the house begin to creak.
He hears people jumping out of their beds,
mumbling a few Jewish words,
pouring water on their fingernails, banging doors.
rit. + dim. — 15—

Everyone has left.

rit.

It again is quiet and dark. A little bit of light from the moon shines through the shutters.

A tempo

A tempo
Afterwards the hitzvuk admitted that when he found him-

self alone with the rabbi a great fear took hold of him.

Goose pimples spread across his skin.
But but

Litvak is stubborn.

So he quivered

like a fish in water

and remained where he was.

Finally the rabbi arises,

takes out a bundle of peasant clothes
linen trousers, high boots a coat, a big felt hat,
and a long wide leather belt studded with brass nails. The rabbi gets dressed.
From his pocket dangles the end of a heavy peasant...
-19- Fast again

rope. The rabbi goes out.

And the Litvak

Slow

follows him.

On the way the rabbi bends down, takes an ax from under the bed, puts it in his belt, and leaves the house.
The lit-vak trembles, but he continues to follow.

Days of Awe hang over the dark streets. Every once in a while a cry rises from some minyan reciting the
Penitential prayers or from a sick bed.

The rabbi hugs the sides of streets, keeping to the shade of houses. He glides from house to house with the Lit-vak after him. The Lit-vak hears the sounds of his own heart-beats.
mingling with the rabbi's heavy steps, but he keeps on going, following the rabbi to the outskirts of town. A small wood stands behind the town. The rabbi, long life to
him, enters the wood and stops by a tree.

The Litvak overcome with amazement

watches the rabbi take out the ax and strike down the tree

The rabbi chops the

ACcel.
He takes the axe and whacks the logs to split them and makes a bundle of the wood and ties it with the rope he carries in his pocket. He puts the bundle on his back and shoves the axe into his belt and hurries back to town.
He stops on a back street by a shack and knocks at the wind-

Freely

ow. "Who is there?" asks a frightened

voice. The lit-vak recognizes it as the

voice of a sick Jewish woman. "I," answers the
In rhythm:
Faster

rab-bi in the accent of a peasant.

staccato

"Who is I?"
Again the rabbi answers

speaking in Russian

"Vassil."
"Who is Vassil, and what do you want?"
"I have wood to sell very cheap."

And not waiting for her reply, he goes into the house.

The Litvak steals in after

Slightly slower.

him. In the grey light of morning, he

Double voice only if needed.
sees her miserable room. A sick woman in rags. She complains bitterly, "Buy?"

How can I buy? Where will a poor widow get any money?"

"I'll lend it to you. It's only six cents."

Archives
Ever pay you back?" she asks groaning.

"Foolish one," says the rabbi, "You are a poor, sick Jew."

I am ready to trust you with a little wood."

Solemn.

while you, who have such a mighty God.
and you don't trust him for six cents."

"Who will kindle the fire?"

"I'll kindle the fire,"

answers the rabbi. As the rabbi put the wood into the oven, in a groan, he recited the first portion of the

Archives
Penitential Prayers

As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he re-
cited, a bit more joyously, the second portion of the

Penitential Prayers
when the fire was set he recited the
third portion. Then he shut the stove
Faster
The Litvak who saw all this be-
came a disciple of the rabbi.
And forever after when a disciple tells how the rabi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the Penance Prayers, staccato

The

Archives
lit-vak does not laugh. He only adds

Very Slowly

PP quietly, "If not

Higher

PP

Ranv