

PASSOVER: 3960

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Aurelius Marcellinus and his wife Verica descended on Rabbi David's house like gods coming down from a sacred mountain. Aurelius was in the full regalia of a Roman centurion, while Verica was dressed Greek-style in a free-flowing white silk robe, her otherwise bare feet in leather sandals. Her face, neck, and ankles were covered with tattooed animals, and her shining copper hair was held in place by a golden crab.

"Welcome! Welcome!" Rabbi David greeted them in Aramaic as he ushered them through his tiny atrium and into his cramped dining room, which was set up for the Seder. Around the table were his wife Sarai, their seven daughters and six sons, and his brother Natan.

Aurelius and Verica sat to his right, Natan and Sarai to his left, with the children ranging down the table according to age.

"Let me explain the table," Rabbi David began, but Aurelius put him off with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"It isn't necessary," he said. "We've read that part of the new text. We understand."

Rabbi David nodded. He looked at Verica's savagely tattooed face and wondered, her, too? But of course he said nothing.

When dinner was finally served, between the second and third cups of wine, Rabbi David asked Aurelius what he thought of the Seder so far.

"It's very beautiful," Aurelius said, switching to Latin. "I'm very pleased with it."

The roasted lamb was passed around the table, and Rabbi David busied himself with making sure that his guests got the choicest pieces.

"I liked especially," Aurelius went on, "the emphasis on the here and now. That the Lord led *us* out of Egypt, that this was what the Lord did for *me* when *I* went forth out of Egypt. Very forceful. Very effective."

Rabbi David smiled as he sat back in his chair, relieved to hear the praise. Aurelius Marcellinus was, as a retired centurion, wealthy, and his renewed interest in Judaism after several decades on the frontiers of the empire boded well for a number of additional projects that Rabbi David had in mind.

"Delicious lamb!" Aurelius said, turning to Sarai.

Sarai blushed and bowed her head. Seated across from Verica she felt completely intimidated. It was said that in Britannia Verica's tribe, the Pictii, attacked the Romans naked, men and women equally, and that she had been first Aurelius' prisoner and then his slave before she had become his wife.

"It was," Aurelius continued in Latin, undoubtedly in deference to his wife, "an historic undertaking, in which I am grateful to have been able to play some small part."

"Yes, yes," Rabbi David said. "We have great hopes for it."

"I mean, of course, the entire Midrash, of which Verica and I have read only this small piece, about Passover, which I hope Jewish families will continue to celebrate for millennia to come. It's the anchor of Jewish identity, the exodus from Egypt, and remembering it through the ritual that you and your colleagues have written will help tie the Jews to Judaism even in the absence of the temple. Even in the absence of Jerusalem."

"If I might ask," Rabbi David said, his heart jammed into his throat, making it difficult for him to speak. It was ridiculous of him to say this, he might be blowing the whole thing, but he couldn't restrain himself. "If you feel so strongly about preserving Judaism, why do you continue to have idols in your house?"

Aurelius smiled indulgently. He was a sophisticated and cultured man, and it was impossible for Rabbi David to read anything into that smile other than a polished politeness.

"As you might know," Aurelius explained, "I do what I do for Judaism in honor of my father. His father died in the revolt, and he was raised never to forget that. But he fell in love with my mother, who was a Hellenized Jew, and so I was brought up with Yahweh on one side and Pan and Zeus on the other."

"And which do you believe in? I mean in your heart?"

"I see no reason to believe in one or the other," Aurelius said, spreading some charoseth on a piece of matzah. "So I believe in both."

"How can one believe in both?" Rabbi David asked, shocked by the nonchalance of his guest.

Aurelius laughed goodnaturedly. "Easy," he said. "But for my wife, it's a different story."

"Your wife worships –"

"I have my own gods," she said in a just barely intelligible Latin. "But they don't travel well."

And then she broke into her own language, a strange conglomeration of sounds unlike anything that Rabbi David had ever heard before.

"Her gods are back in Britannia," Aurelius explained. "They're not the kind that rule all over the world. For the moment, Pan and Zeus do her quite well, but she is very interested in Yahweh. Very interested. She is studying Hebrew. I translated parts of the Torah and the Midrash for her into Latin as we read them, but she says she wants to read all of the holy books in Hebrew."

Verica nodded vigorously at this explanation and flashed Rabbi David a smile that turned him red to his roots. He tried desperately not to imagine her naked, tattooed body storming Hadrian's wall spear in hand, but failed utterly.

"One God," she said in her rudimentary Latin. "For everyone."

And then she fell silent, helplessly, from the insufficiency of her expression rather than of her thought.

"But I still don't understand," Rabbi David pushed on. "To religious Jews idolatry is the ultimate abomination."

"To me the ultimate commandment is, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,'" Aurelius answered. "That means other religions as well as other people."

"But Jews ought not be idolaters."

"Jews ought to be whatever they wish."

Aurelius smiled in such a way as to end the conversation, and Rabbi David, painfully aware of his own rudeness, shifted the topic to the ongoing construction of a synagogue in nearby Tiberias, in which he hoped to interest his generous guest.

When the meal was over, they said grace, drank the next two cups of wine with the appropriate blessings, and prayed that in the following year Jews would once again be allowed into their holy city.

"Please tell Rabbi Ha-Nasi how wonderful this is!" Aurelius said when the last words were spoken. "It's one thing to read it and quite another to experience it. For which I am so grateful to you and to your wife for inviting us into your home."

"And to you, Aurelius," Rabbi David said, "for helping to make it possible."

"Money was necessary," Aurelius said, again with that dismissive wave of his hand, "and I am glad to have been able to contribute a little of it. But wisdom and faith are what create such masterpieces. Your Rabbi Ha-Nasi is a holy man, and his work will last for the generations."

Suddenly Verica began to speak in her own language, tears running down her face, and Aurelius seemed alarmed, attempting to calm her.

"She also thanks you," he said to the rest of the company, translating intermittently as her speech continued to cascade voluminously down the canyon of her thought. "For over two years now she has been separated from her gods and ancestors, and for her this has been a source of great sorrow. But now, in this one God, she has found a wonder the like of which she has never known. She, too, has been a slave, and she knows what it means to rejoice in one's freedom, and to be grateful, and to remember others still in slavery. And she believes that to love thy neighbor as thyself is the most beautiful thought she has ever come across."

"Please tell her—" Rabbi David tried to say, but his words were quickly drowned in her deluge.

"But the one God for everyone is the most wonderful thing!" Aurelius continued with his indirect translation. "All humankind at peace! She begs you to keep Judaism alive, not to let it die now that it has lost its temple. Her gods could never survive outside of their holy places, so she knows how difficult it will be. But one God does not depend on time and place. She begs you to let her help you keep such an idea alive, forever, even in exile, hers and yours, and —"

At this point Verica burst into sobs and could say no more.

Rabbi David looked in wonder at the wolf on one cheek and the deer on the other, the turtle across

her forehead and the twin snakes curling down the sides of her neck. Beneath the white silk of her dress he could barely make out the blue lines on her naked flesh.

"Amen," Aurelius said, looking at his wife with sympathy and awe.

"You must love idolaters as yourself!" she said to Rabbi David in her strange and clumsy Latin. "You must!"

Rabbi David, not knowing what to say, blushed and bowed his head.

"You must want to free all peoples from slavery!" she went on. "Gentiles, too! You must!"

Rabbi David said nothing.

"This is what this beautiful religion of the Jews means! One God for everyone! Peace! Freedom! Justice! This is what it means!" she went on rapturously, as though desperate to convert the rabbi to his own religion. "You must keep it alive forever! Forever! Because a world without it would not be worth living in!"

And again she dissolved in tears.