

A CUP OF TEA

Tales of Grandpa Eli
(Part 2)





Life in Grandpa's house was a definite improvement over the one I had led in Dimona. My grades improved. I made friends who did not smoke so I cut down on my cigarettes. My father phoned every Friday although we did not have a telephone in the flat. He used the public one outside our makolet, or grocery store. My mother was being let out of the rehabilitation center for Passover. They would come to Grandpa's house for Seder Night. I cleaned the house and rearranged the clothes in my cupboard. I was worried that my mother would not be completely cured and the four cups of wine drunk during Seder service would start her off on a drinking spree again. Perhaps Grandpa had the same doubts. He purchased bottles of Carmel Grape Juice over which the blessings for 'fruit of the vine' can be said.

Passover is the time Jewish homes undergo a thorough cleaning. All the clothes are washed but first all their pockets are turned inside out to remove any leaven that may linger there. Mattresses and carpets are beaten. I do not know how much leaven flies out but dust certainly does. Bedding is hung in the sun. Kitchen cabinets are emptied and cleaned. Every effort is made to prevent leaven from remaining in the house during Passover week.

Grandpa took down all his books from the shelves and wiped each one with a dry cloth. My cousins had been sent to help clean Grandpa's house. Batiya began to grumble about the work. Aunt Erusha had made her wash all the windows at home and now she was doing the same for Grandpa. Ronit added that Passover is a hard time for the women of the house. When the men help they never return things to their proper places.

I listened as I polished the brass candlesticks and the channukiya Grandpa had brought from India. I could understand Batiya's annoyance at having to clean windows but Ronit's grumbling began to get on my nerves. The aspersion she cast on men's abilities rankled. She knew that I had done all the cleaning at home and my mother was the person who never put things in their proper places. I might have got into an argument with her if Grandpa Eli had not spoken.

"You think that it is difficult to observe Passover here, in Israel," he said. "Try and imagine what it was for us in India." He then told us, this story. We later called it his 'Cup of Tea,' story.

The Jewish women of Jwalanagar began their preparations for

Passover immediately after Purim. The cleaning was not much of a problem because almost every household employed an ayah. This 'servant-woman' worked harder than usual before this festival for an additional monetary compensation. There were no washing machines or dishwashers in those days, so the ayah scrubbed, scoured and washed to help the Jewish family get ready for its important festival. The children were expected, if not forced, to help too. In spite of all the help the heaviest work fell to the Jewish women.

Making matza was a tedious task if it was performed alone. The women got together for this. Laughter and gossip made the work enjoyable. Less attention was paid to aching backs and sore muscles. It also gave the ladies, who did not have much of an opportunity to leave their homes except in the company of their families, a chance to get together in an informal atmosphere. In the absence of men, the women used language and told jokes that they normally would not have done in male company.

Eli's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Bhonkar came to Jwalanagar around Passover time in search of a Jewish bride for their son. His mother thought that the best place to watch a girl without making her nervous was at the matza making sessions. The girls would be their natural selves in the company of other girls and women they knew well. There would be no strange male presence to distract or restrain them. The future mother-in-law would evaluate every word and gesture of the prospective brides. Choice of words, modesty of dress even when only in feminine company, and the cheerfulness with which heavy and repetitive tasks were performed would be judged as evidence of a girl's nature.

Mrs. Jacob Bhonkar was a guest in the town so she was treated with respect and curiosity. She arrived early at the kitchen they had decided to meet in and looked around with a critical and experienced eye. Everything was clean and tidy. Hand-mills from several Jewish homes were placed on the floor near the window. The mud and brick stoves had been white washed with chuna, or lime paste, the evening before. A young woman sat on the stair just beneath the kitchen verandah with a hammer and chisel. Mrs. Bhonkar watched her make dents on the upper and lower stones of the hand-mills, wash them carefully and then replace the wooden pegs in their centers.

"Hello, I'm Ruth Bhonkar. When will the other ladies arrive?"

"Good morning. My name is Malka David. It is still early. The others will only arrive after breakfast. Can I make a cup of tea for you?"

"David? Isn't this the Samson house?"

"Yes, it is. I just came in early so that I can get the uninteresting work out of the way before the others arrive. If there is no taki on the millstones, it will be difficult to grind the wheat. Nobody likes to do it. The man, who usually comes around to the Jewish houses to do this work, did not come this year. I thought that I'd finish this. Shall I make you a cup of tea and get you something to eat?"

Mrs. Bhonkar looked at the girl. The absence of a wedding ring and a mangal sutra were signs of an unmarried state. There was willingness to work and an intelligence that made her see the real character of people. Her age seemed just right too. She judged Malka to be around twenty years old. But no! This was not the girl for Eli. She was not pretty enough. In fact her skin was dark and marred with small-pox scars. She seemed to have poor eyesight too. Ruth Bhonkar had her heart set on a beautiful bride. To her it was as important as the other qualities she was seeking. Being proud of her own beauty she wanted a girl who her son would not be ashamed to be seen with. Mrs. Bhonkar realized that the girl was looking at her for an answer so she said, "I've not had my breakfast but we'll eat together a bit later. Can I help you in any way?"

"Not yet. I've almost finished. You can light the primus stove and put on the kettle. There is Mrs. Samuel coming through the garden. She will definitely have brought something to eat. She has three small children and lives at the other end of town, yet she is always the first to arrive. I don't know how she does it. We will have to use the dining room so as not to get any khametz or leaven into the kitchen."

"The girl knows how to appreciate, not only criticize. It is a pity she has no looks to talk about," Mrs. Bhonkar thought.

One of the Samson daughters-in-law came out of her house and went to the gate to meet Mrs. Samuel. The four ladies finished their breakfast before the others arrived. Mrs. Bhonkar asked questions about the Jwalanagar Beni Israel community. "I did not know that there were Jews living in this town. When did the first families arrive?" she asked.

"In the late eighteen hundreds," Mrs. Samson answered. "Three Beni Israel soldiers decided to start a new community here. Subhedar Bension Moses and Havaladar Joseph Nawgaonker were friends since the war in South Africa and they bought houses here soon after they returned. Mr. Samson, my father-in-law, was a contractor who supplied the army with meat and vegetables. He came to this area during the Great War and

liked it here. He got this house through some other contractor he knew. Subhedar Major Herman Kilekar settled here after the Great War too. For some reason he did not wish to return to his village. He sold his land there and now he lives near the textile mill. Other Jews came in with the Railways, the Banks or the Post and Telegraph Services and stayed on. We have a lawyer, a few policemen and a medical student too. The Ordnance Factory and Textile Mill employ a few more of our men. This is a nice town and life is better than in the crowded cities. Soon we will be an even larger community." Pride was palpable not only in the words but the tone in which they were spoken. Mrs. Jacob Bhonkar tried to keep the conversation on the community and away from herself in order to avoid raising suspicions that she was 'bride-hunting,' but she was not too successful. Questions about her family were asked as a matter of politeness not of curiosity, although there was a trace of that too. She managed to side step the issue by saying that her children were all grown and living away from home. The women naturally assumed that they were all married.

When the girls arrived she watched them and picked out three girls as 'possibilities.' Nina Jirad was a bit shorter than Eli would like, but she had a pleasant face and an open expression. She seemed intelligent and obedient. Tikva Aaron was good looking but she seemed haughty. Perhaps her parents' wealth had gone to her head. If it had, Mrs. Bhonkar would reject her but she would keep an open mind until she was sure that it was not just her intuition. The girl had to say or do something to confirm the older woman's suspicions. Leah Joseph seemed to be a bit too young to manage a house, but since she came from a large family she must have learned a lot while helping around the house. Mrs. Bhonkar was careful not let the girls sense that they were being watched, appraised and judged.

Tikva kept shirking the heavy work and pretending to be busy with things that really should have been offered to the women who sat at the hand-mills grinding the flour to relieve them from the hard work. One woman turned the heavy upper stone round and round over the lower one with the help of the wooden peg that was fixed in the upper stone. A second woman poured a handful of grain at a time into the hole at the center. The biggest hand mill had two women holding the peg and turning it around. The flour was collected and only a little bit at a time was kneaded into dough with cold water drawn from the well. Mrs. Bhonkar noticed the smirks on the faces of the women, each time Tikva spoke about how difficult the work was and what fun it was to be together. Nobody

seemed to want to say anything to her. Obviously she was unpopular. Mrs. Bhonkar could see the reasons for it.

Eventually Nina Jirad spoke up. "Come on Tikva. It is your turn to grind now."

Tikva seemed surprised. "I can't do that work. I can't understand why we don't send it to the chakki at the crossroad."

"You know the answer to that. The miller does not do agalla to his grindstones the way we do. Any flour left over from a previous grinding may have khaneetz in it and it would not be kosher for Passover. We all work together. Now it is your turn. Milkha has been grinding since morning and deserves a break."

Mrs. Bhonkar was pleased with Nina. The girl had a sense of justice and fair play. She was not intimidated by wealth.

Mrs. Aaron came to the defence of her daughter. "I am sure that Milkha does not mind. She is used to hard work. My daughter isn't."

"Milkha may not mind but I do. It is not right to push everything on to her. Your daughter will not be too delicate to eat the matza, I am sure," Nina said.

"Let somebody else relieve the girl but leave my Tikva alone," Mrs. Aaron said.

"You will have to get her married to a lord so that she will not have to work," Mrs. Samuel said. "I will grind the wheat now. I too am used to hard work and I am proud of it."



Mrs. Bhonkar crossed Tikva off her list of 'possibles.' The girl was spoilt. Even worse, her mother fought her battles for her. Mrs. Bhonkar put her down as one of those wives who run home to their mothers each time they fight with their husband. Quarrels and misunderstandings were bound to arise in any marriage. Instead of leaving the young couple alone to work out their problems by themselves, Mrs. Aaron would try and run the show there too. The daughter would be one nuisance and the mother another. "Only a fool will marry that girl," Mrs. Bhonkar decided and moved from her seat to sit beside Mrs. Joseph.

"Your daughter has a pretty dimple when she smiles," she said. "She reminds me a bit of my daughter at that age. Some young man is going to fall pretty hard for her."

"Thank you," Mrs. Joseph replied pleased with the compliment. "I only hope that it will be a nice Jewish boy so that no hearts will be broken. In any case Lily will have to learn to cook and sew if her young man is to get a competent wife. This matza making is one of my ways of teaching her. She has two elder sisters who spare her most of the work. It just won't do for a girl who will have to leave her parents home and manage one of her own."

"How old is the child?" Mrs. Bhonkar asked.

"Fourteen."

"She has plenty of time. You don't have to worry. With a mother like you she is bound to learn."

"I hope so," Mrs. Joseph replied.

That was the end of Leah Joseph as a prospective wife for Eli. His mother had thought that the girl was at least seventeen. "That figure is going to run to fat," she decided. "The mother is on the plump side too. It may run in families. Besides that she is far too young for my son." She turned her attention to the work and the small talk that her companions made.

Charcoal fires were lit and new earthenware bowls were turned over it. This served in place of the usual tava on which the bread is baked. The convex surface helped in preventing the bread to rise. Some women rolled the bread into fine chapattis, others pierced holes in them, while still others pressed the bread with clean cloths to prevent any air bubble from rising. Nina seemed quite accomplished. She smiled and joked as she worked. She asked about members of other families without being inquisitive. By the end of the day Mrs. Bhonkar was pleased to think that she had found the girl who would suit her son and adjust to his family. She relaxed and began to enjoy herself. She told the local women about life in Poona and the quarrels that the Beni Israel who worshiped at different synagogues had among themselves. They discussed recent films and Mrs. Penkar, who had a fine voice, sang a few film songs with the others joining in from time to time.



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By evening, all the women had their share of matza tied up in clean pieces of cloth and placed in new baskets. Malka offered to make something for everybody to eat at her house. "It is not far and I will have everything ready in no time at all," she said.

"You have done a lot already," one of the older women said.

"We don't often get a chance to get together," Malka's mother said. "Come over and we will sing a few more songs and gossip for just a bit longer."

"You go home Malka and make the special tea you always make for us. We will clean up here and join you soon," Mrs. Samson said. "I'll bring some of the phenis that I made last week. Let the men make their own tea today," she added with a wink.

At the David house Mrs. Bhonkar contrived to sit beside Nina. She wanted to speak a bit more to the girl so that she would have something more concrete than "I feel that—" to say to her son when she gave her reasons for choosing the girl.

"You did not make too many matza for your family," Mrs Bhonkar said pointing to Nina's basket.

"My father wants hot chapattis so we usually make fresh ones from rice flour for breakfast and dinner every day during Passover."

"I see that you enjoy it all," Mrs. Bhonkar said with a smile.

"Not at all," Nina replied. "It is something that has to be done so I do it the best I can. The food is fine for two or three days but then it becomes boring. No fried food because the oil presser does not have kosher vessels. Everything is cooked in coconut milk. No sugar for the same reason. The only spices used are those we grow in our gardens. I often go to visit a friend just in order to get a cup of coffee with milk and sugar and a samosa made in the Punjabi style. I hope I have not shocked you," she added when she noticed the expression on Mrs. Bhonkar's face. "Your children must have done the same thing."

"I hope not," Mrs Bhonkar said.

Malka came up to them with a tray. "The cup with the bamboo design is yours," she said to Mrs. Bhonkar. "I used different cups so that they do not get mixed up. You said that you like

massala chai. Here it is. One and a half spoonfuls of sugar if I remember right."

Mrs. Bhonkar was surprised. This was her favorite tea but she did not remember mentioning it. Malka had ginger tea for Mrs. Samson and she had added lemon grass to Mrs. Samuel's cup. Samosa, Bhajia and chaklis were served as accompaniments. The women all laughed and joked and had a good time. Mrs. Bhonkar joined in. 'Hen parties,' as her husband described them, could really be fun.

Six months later Eli Jacob Bhonkar came to Jwalanagar to marry the girl his mother had chosen for him. He did not have the usual Haldi and Menhdi ceremonies because he did not have much leave. The day after the wedding he went up to his mother and asked her the reason she had chosen that particular bride for him. He was surprised when he heard her answer.

"She cared enough to give me the best cup of tea I had in Jwalanagar," she said.

"Oh! Come on, Grandpa," Batiya laughed. "You want us girls to be proficient cooks but you do not have to describe Grandma as scared and half blind to prove a point. We know that caring about people is more important than being beautiful but we simply can't believe this story."

"Imagine finding a bridegroom because of a cup of tea," Ronit added. "You must think we are really stupid if you think that we would believe all this."

"Marriages have been made for stranger reasons," Grandpa replied. ✧

The colorful tales of the fictional Grandpa Eli will be featured in future issues of *Asian Jewish Life*.

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