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Fictional Story: An Evening in Kairowan

Francesca Reznik

The day had been long, and Schmucl the Merchant from Baghdad was tired. He felt blessed to have found the quarters of a local Jew to stay in so rapidly; he had been nervous lodging would be difficult once he reached Kairowan, but alas it seems he had fretted for naught. The Jewish community in Kairowan was as plentiful and kind as he had heard.

Exhausted from his travels, Schmucl put down his belongings beside his cot in the small room, and paused for a moment to reflect on his surroundings. How strange was Africa in comparison to the bustling streets of Baghdad! People in the street had stared at him when he arrived. Schmucl wondered if they thought he looked funny or strange. Perhaps it was his clothes? Both Baghdad and Kairowan were under Muslim rule, so Schmucl was anticipating similarities in culture and architecture. Tomorrow, he resolved, he would explore the prosperous city. He had heard the Great Mosque was breathtaking. While the merchant was lost in his thoughts, there was a knock on his door.

“Enter!” called Schmucl, standing up.

It was the servant Schmucl had encountered earlier. He couldn’t have been more than 14, dark skinned and thin. Schmucl assumed he was Muslim, but they were in a Jew’s home, and he did not know the laws of this foreign city. For all Schmucl knew, he could be a polytheist!

“Sir,” began the servant. What was his name? Schmuel could not remember. “If you would like some food, the cook downstairs is preparing some game for two other travelers who have recently arrived. If not, I could bring up some ale and bread, perhaps some cheese, if that pleases you.”

“No, I’ll come down in a moment, thank you.” The servant nodded and exited, and a few minutes later, Schmuel collected himself and followed.

Downstairs the dining area was empty except for two men sitting at one of the round wooden tables, chatting and sipping ale. Schmuel ambled over to the two new lodgers, glad for the opportunity of some company—especially the company of two fellow Jews, which he felt he had long been missing during his travels. As his father used to say, no matter where they were from, a Jew is a Jew is a Jew.

“Evening, gentleman,” Schmuel said in his home language. “Mind if I sit?”

“He does not speak Judeo-Arabic,” said one of the men, nodding his head towards the gentleman beside him. The man who spoke to Schmuel was olive-toned with dark hair and a peculiar mustache. “We must speak in Hebrew, for his benefit, if you’re familiar with the tongue.”

“Of course,” replied Schmuel, easily switching to the language of their fathers. “May I join you gentlemen for supper?”

“We would be delighted,” replied the other gentleman in Hebrew, with a shy smile. He was fair skinned, with amber curly hair and a rather large nose that spread across his face when he smiled. “What is your name, sir?”

“Schmuel,” he replied, taking a seat. The olive-toned man quickly poured him a glass of ale. “Many thanks. I am a merchant here on business from Baghdad.”

“A merchant!” exclaimed the first gentleman (he had clearly had his fair share of ale before Schmuel had arrived). “We, too, are merchants!”

“What a coincidence!” Schmuel replied. Truthfully, it was not much of a coincidence at all—Kairowan was a hub for merchants and there were

not many Jewish lodging facilities. But his new companions had visibly been drinking for some time before Schmuel had arrived, so he played along with a grin.

“My name is Samuel fijo de Salamon Cardeniel. I am a merchant of Cordova.” His Hebrew had a slight accent, and Schmuel thought that if he had spoken for a little bit longer, Schmuel may have been able to guess he was from Moslem Spain. His mustache moved like a caterpillar when he spoke, and Schmuel tried very hard not to laugh. He seemed far younger than the other two gentlemen. “And this drunk over here is my new friend Gershom, from Speyer.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Gershom, miming tilting a hat on his head.

“Speyer!” remarked Schmuel. “I’ve never been. What is it like?” Schmuel was generally curious — he had never ventured that far West before. It was not only this far off Western land that intrigued Schmuel, but the idea of living under Christian rule. There were Christians in Baghdad, sure, but the people in charge were Muslims, and Schmuel was granted certain rights and protections. What was it like for his co-religionist in Speyer? He had heard the Christians were less tolerant.

“That is a vague question,” laughed Gershom. “Speyer really is a lovely place — not yet crowded and dirty, as I am sure your Baghdad is.” Schmuel laughed at the truth of his statement. Baghdad was a true city, in that sense. “There is a nice sized community of Jews, and it continues to grow,” Schmuel went on. “I am sure, word reached you of the pogroms and fires in Mainz?” The two men nodded. They had heard of the misfortune. “Many Jews fled and came to Speyer. They treat us well, as well as a Jew can expect. Better than many Jews can expect in other lands, really. This past year a, how you say,” Gershom hesitated, searching for the word in Hebrew. “A charter! Yes, a charter was created for the Jews by a Bishop from Speyer by the name of Rüdiger Huzmann. He granted the Jews many privileges, in an effort to build

Speyer up economically, and I think it has been a good thing, both for the Jews and for Speyer.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Samuel began tentatively. “Is it true that in Speyer, they make the Jews lived in a walled off community?”

“They do,” Gershom acknowledged. “But it is not as bad as it sounds. It’s rather nice, to be with my people without the interference of Christians. I almost prefer it. Understand, dear Samuel — it is for our protection, not segregation. The Jews are prospering, and left alone. What more could we ask for? It’s certainly worse for our brethren elsewhere. Of course, I do not deny that in other Christian lands, the Jews are mistreated. This is a fact. But in Speyer, it is not so. We have the right to trade, to own servants. I have no complaints. It is not so different from what you have in Baghdad, no?”

Schmuel nodded. Though in Baghdad he did not live in a walled off quarter, they had a similar legal status as that of his new friend. “At home, I receive protection from the Moslem government because I am a *dhimmi*.”

“*Dhimmi*?” questioned Gershom, with his brow furrowed.

“It means people of the book,” Samuel explained. Schmuel nodded, figuring Samuel was familiar with the concept due to his time in Cordova. “It refers to monotheists,” Schmuel clarified. “In the scripture of the Muslims, the Qur’an, we are to be respected. For the last 300 years or so, this has been the way of the Muslim lands. I pay a poll tax and a land tax, and besides that, I am largely left alone. They respect and value the Torah, and Moses, and Abraham. We are a people with a history. They don’t get give us full roaming freedom, but they don’t bother us either.”

“Sounds like a fine deal to me,” laughed Schmuel, taking a sip of his ale. At that exact moment, the servant came over with their suppers, and they all began to dig in, famished from their travels.

“Baghdad is not the way it used to be, sadly,” Schmuel sighed. “In my father’s father’s time, we were the pinnacle of the world. I fear we are losing our place and influence on the greater Jewish community.”

“I would be inclined to agree with you,” chimed in Gershom. “Though I never much cared for the *Gaonim* and their fancy academies. Who were they to tell the rest of the Jews how to live from their comfortable perch in Baghdad?”

Schmuel paused and took a swig. He was not in the mood to argue the merits of the old academies. Schmuel’s great-grandfather had studied at Pumbedita — one of the academies of the *Gaonim* — an honor for the family. Schmuel appreciated having a set of people to provide clear answers to religious questions, and felt the Jewish community was lacking now that the academies’ influence had faded.

“Enough old man reminiscing. Let us not waste time on the past, for it is passed. What about you, Samuel?” Schmuel questioned with sincerity. “How do you find Cordova? I went once, and found it to be a mesmerizing city.”

“Isn’t it spectacular?” Samuel answered, a twinkle in his eye. “It is an accomplishment of our times. Jews, Christians, Muslims, living, working, learning side by side. A cultural gem. Do you know what the best part of Cordova is?”

“The ladies?” asked Gershom with a sly grin. Schmuel laughed a deep belly laugh.

“Those are certainly in large supply,” Samuel conceded. “But truly—the poetry!”

“I studied much poetry as a boy,” Schmuel commented. “I have read some of the Judeo-Spanish poets. I believe my son memorizes and recites them at school.”

“Be careful,” Gershom hiccupped. “Some of them are quite naughty!” The other two men laughed loudly and Gershom blushed. “Or so I hear,” Gershom mumbled.

“Cordova is good, overall. As you said, Schmuel — the Muslim ruling class largely leave us alone. We cannot build our synagogues higher than their

mosques, as I believe the rule is also in the Christian world, and other small persecutions such as this one,” Samuel added. “But overall, Cordova is a peaceful and joyous place.”

“That may be, but I must tell you – I sense bad times nearing,” Gershom confided in the men, eyes heavy with drowsiness and ale yet wide with conspiracy and worry. “This harmony will not last. I believe God will soon punish us for our father’s sins.”

“Nonsense!” cried Samuel. “It is a time of prosperity for the Jews. Just you wait.”

“I don’t know,” mumbled Gershom, slightly dejected by the quick rebuttal. “But with the Muslims in Jerusalem, taking more territory every day? How long do you think the Pope will stand for that? Not long, is my guess.”

“And what will they do?” questioned Samuel, his voice dripping with condescension. “Drive them out by force? Wage war on the brutes? The Christians may be cruel and they may be daft, but they will not directly attack the Caliphate. That’s rubbish.”

Gershom shrugged, spilling his ale. Talking badly about Christians didn’t sit well with him, for to him and his they had always showed kindness. “Just you wait,” he warned, throwing Samuel’s words back at him. Samuel rolled his eyes.

“Well, on that optimistic note,” Schmucl laughed, “I think it’s high time I retire for the evening. It was a pleasure to chat with you, gentleman. If you ever find yourselves in Baghdad, please do not hesitate to look me up!”

The men all shook hands and went their separate ways. As Schmucl dropped onto his cot, he could not stop thinking about what Gershom had said. Could there be a modicum of truth in his words? Would the Papacy eventually tire of the Muslim occupation of the Holy Land? Would the Pope execute a call to arms?

The thought made Schmucl’s stomach twist. He had learned the hard way that Jews tended to get caught in the crosshairs of violence, and he hoped

Gershom was wrong. As his eyes began to close, Schmuel wondered if he would ever see these two fine merchants again. He sincerely hoped he would. Little did he know, a mere 11 years later, the first Crusade would begin. The three of them would never again cross paths and Schmuel, safe in Baghdad, would be the only one to survive 1096.

Francesca Reznik is a junior in the College majoring in Religious Studies with minors in English and Political Science. She is originally from Mexico but grew up in New Jersey. If you are looking for fun facts about the New Testament, medieval Jewish history, or religious politics in the U.S., she is the one to ask.