Rabbi Nechemya Seldes had his back turned to the entrance of the Machane Yehudah market. Or more accurately, in keeping with his religious convictions and obligations, he had his back turned to the immodestly dressed woman next to him in a tank top and shorts, selecting tomatoes. He thus did not see the bomber, a bearded young man carrying a large shoulder bag, when he entered from Jaffa Road. Nor did Rabbi Seldes see the man as he hurried down the center lane between the stalls which sold vegetables and fruit and beans and dried pasta and baked goods and pickles and many other sorts of foods favored by Jerusalemites, all much sought after this Friday morning. Having just completed selecting and bagging a number of potatoes for the *cholent* his wife Liba would make later that afternoon in preparation for the Sabbath, Rabbi Seldes was at that moment watching the vendor to be sure he weighed them honestly. He did, however, see the sudden flash of light, and the force of the blast pushed someone or something into his back, so that he was thrown over the vendor’s table and onto a ground suddenly littered with oranges and eggplants and apples and peppers.

For just a moment, there seemed to be utter silence, or perhaps the explosion had temporarily banished all other sound, but then the screams and cries began, and already Rabbi Seldes could hear a siren approaching. The black cloth of his pants leg was sticky and his hand came away crimson when he touched it, but he felt no pain. Had he, he wondered, landed on a pile of tomatoes as he fell? But looking around he saw that it was indeed blood, not his own but that of a woman – the woman he had avoided looking at just moments earlier – who lay face down and unmoving under the table he had gone over. Her arm was stretched out toward him as if she had meant to grasp his ankle and be pulled to safety with him. Rabbi Seldes had no medical training; nonetheless, he grasped the woman’s wrist, knowing enough to check for a pulse. But the arm pulled away from the body, and he saw that it was nearly severed. He saw then the blood already congealing in her hair, which lay over the neat hole in the back of her skull, and he knew she was dead.
What immediately followed this moment was blank in his memory. He did not recall the explosives experts and the bomb sniffing dogs and the police and the intelligence agents who swarmed through the area. Certainly the teams of Orthodox men, who took upon themselves the duty to recover every bit of human blood and tissue that could be found so that it could be buried in accordance with Jewish law, must have been present at their task, but they were nowhere in his memory. Once the dead had been removed and the more seriously wounded tended to, Rabbi Seldes himself was put into an ambulance to Hadassah Hospital in Ein Kerem to be sure he was not hurt in some way not immediately visible. This also was hazy in his memory.

He did, however, have clear recollections beginning from the time his wife Liba arrived at the emergency room. The hospital had been respectful enough of Rabbi Seldes’ religious sensibilities to assign a male nurse to take his vital signs and stitch up a small but ragged-edged cut over his left eye. When Liba entered the curtained off area, the man had turned to cleaning the abrasions on Rabbi Seldes’ knees, which had been scraped rather severely when he hit the ground, and was preparing to administer a tetanus shot.

“Oh, baruch hashem” Liba said as soon as she saw that her husband was not severely injured. Her hair was covered by a large scarf rather than the combination of wig and beret she usually wore when venturing outside their flat, and streaks of floury whiteness adorned her hair and her clothing. As Liba approached, she brought with her the scent of bread dough and roasting chicken. For a moment, seeing her this way, he thought surely it was he who had come home to find her, immersed in her Sabbath preparations, busy and beautiful, as if she were chief lady-in-waiting to the Sabbath Queen herself.

How happy he was to see her! But when she came to stand by his bedside, he saw that her eyes were red and her cheeks streaked, and he realized that she had been crying. His immediate thought was to reassure her.

“I’m fine, Libaleh, hardly a scratch. A few stitches, skinned knees, like a child at the playground.” He reached to take her hand, found himself briefly grasping her wrist before she pulled it away.
“Chemya, you forget yourself,” she said, switching into Yiddish. “It is forbidden. I am impure, I am menstruous.”

He recalled now that it would be several more days before she could ritually purify herself and physical contact between them be permitted again. “Of course, Liba, you are right, just with everything that has happened…”

“I understand, Chemya. You could not be expected to remember.”

He nodded as she said this, yes, he had simply forgot himself. But…her skin was warm; a lively pulse, one he didn’t have to seek out, beat beneath it. And he had known that it would be thus, had reached for her for just that reason. He realized that even having been reminded of her impurity, he wanted to take her wrist in his hand again, and hold it, hold it there for a good long time. This thought disturbed him, but the sting of the antibacterial ointment now being applied to his knees banished it from his head.

It was well past nightfall when Rabbi Seldes was formally released from the emergency room, and as the Sabbath had now begun, he and Liba had no choice but to walk home from the hospital. Jerusalem on a Friday night, a Sabbath eve, is a city becalmed. Car traffic is significantly reduced; the buses do not run. Shops are shuttered and offices emptied. An uncommon quiet, but a proper quiet, not like the quiet in the first seconds after the blast, lay over the streets as Rabbi Seldes and Liba passed through them.

He found that his desire to touch her had returned; he ached to hold hands as they walked. Just a simple gesture of living connection between them, he told himself, but he could not help recalling the early time after they had first become married when they had been hardly able to resist such gestures of affection (once permitted and only at those times of month when permitted, of course). He should be talking to his wife, Rabbi Seldes thought. Indeed, when he glanced at Liba, Rabbi Seldes could see that she was waiting for him, unsure what to say, how to address him, or even whether to address him at all. Like in the house of mourning, where one must wait for the mourner to speak first, for perhaps he does not want to speak just yet. Only they were not in mourning, he was not dead, and surely there must be something to speak of between them.
She would want to know, first, about the events in the market. Yet, words, it seemed, words that could describe what had happened, were as lost to him as his memories of the hours of the afternoon. He managed to say, “I was buying potatoes.”

“For the cholent.” Liba said.

Rabbi Seldes nodded.

“Who from?” asked Liba, who knew all of the vendors by stall, by quality, by price.

“I didn’t recognize him. He had a good price, decent merchandise, so I stopped.”

And here Rabbi Seldes stopped again; he could not, just then, remember what had happened in the blast to the man selling those potatoes.

“I don’t know what happened to him, the seller – if he was injured. Perhaps not?

No, I would have been, I think, standing between him and…and the one who blew himself up. I was” – the recollection came to him now – “watching him weigh the potatoes. So I had my back turned. I must have been saved because I had my back turned. Because I was watching him – to be sure he weighed the potatoes correctly. Because,” he said, a disturbing realization growing in his mind, “I doubted a man’s honesty.”

“Well, now, it’s not a nice thing to have to say about another Jew, of course,” Liba responded, “but it’s true they aren’t all honest there in Machane Yehudah.”

No, they weren’t, but Rabbi Seldes had not bought from this vendor before, had had no particular reason to suspect the accuracy of his scale. He told Liba so.

“Well, but he sold vegetables in the market. That’s reason enough, Chemya, isn’t it? You didn’t actually say anything to him, right? You didn’t accuse him of anything.”

Rabbi Seldes shook his head; no, he hadn’t said anything.

“Well, then,” Liba asked him, “tell me, what’s the harm done?”

But, he wondered, had he looked at the man in a certain way? Had his posture, his expression, indicated his suspicion? If the man had died – would he be going now before the Heavenly Tribunal carrying the judgement of Rabbi Seldes’ ungrounded doubts against him?
It was well into the evening when they arrived home, and the flat was quiet. The children had been sent to Liba’s sister’s house for the Sabbath meal, and by that hour had certainly been put to bed there as well. No Sabbath candles were burning on the side table as would normally have been the case, but someone – Liba’s sister, perhaps, or one of the neighbors downstairs – had left a full Sabbath meal for the two of them, chicken and two kugels and loaves of hallah and wine.

Liba shooed him to the bedroom to change out of his torn and soiled clothing, and stood briefly in the doorway so that for a moment he thought – he hoped – that she meant to come in and help him. Let her change out of her cooking clothes, let them tend to and undress each other! He felt the beginnings of an erection. But she turned away, calling back to him that she would go prepare the table for their meal. He sat on his bed, separated for the time being from Liba’s by several feet, embarrassed by the stirring within his pants and ashamed by the forbidden thought that had provoked it. He found himself unable to remove the pants until his flesh subsided.

Holding the bloodied garment in his hands, it occurred to Rabbi Seldes that Jewish law demanded that the blood be buried, preferably with the body of the dead woman from whom it had come. But he did not know who she was – who she had been, he emended his own thought. Were she to miraculously return to life and appear now at his door, would he be able to recognize her? All he had seen of her, alive in the market, was the bare arms, the bare legs, and he had turned so quickly away from the sight, offended by the immodesty. Who, he thought now, looking down at his unclothed body, his almost but not quite flaccid penis, was he to judge immodesty?

They went to bed almost as soon as they had done eating, Liba taking time only to stack and soak the dishes in the sink for washing after the Sabbath ended.

Lying alone in his bed, Rabbi Seldes closed his eyes. Red, distended shapes formed behind his eyelids. He opened his eyes again.

Liba was chuffing lightly in her bed, but Rabbi Seldes was not sure if she were asleep yet, for sometimes she began this light snore of hers while still only drowsing. When the beds were permitted to be together, he could tell the moment she slept by feel, by the relaxing of her limbs where by chance they touched his.
But now he heard her move about; she was not asleep.
“Libaleh?” he whispered across the gap between them.
“Chemya?”
“I can’t sleep.”
“Does something hurt you? I’ll get you a cold compress if you need…”
“No, no, my body is fine. I just wish…I wish I could come into your bed,” he found himself saying. “Just so you would hold me,” he added, to reassure her, but as he said it he felt stabbed by the knowledge that it was not the whole truth, and that he was not being honest with her. “Just so I could sleep next to you.”
She let out a single laugh, a rueful, sad sound. “Like one of the children after a bad dream, Chemya?”
“No a dream, Libaleh. What happened to me was very real.”
She sighed. “I know, Chemya, I know. But it is forbidden.”
“I could have died. A woman died right at my feet.”
“What can I say, Chemya? The Kadosh Baruch Hu did not save you so that you should sin.”
This was very basic logic, and irrefutable. Soon he heard the chuffing begin again from Liba’s bed, and this time she did not move. He hoped that she slept. As for him, he lay awake a long while, hearing again what he had said, what Liba had said, what he had not said, all reverberating in his head.

When Rabbi Seldes entered the synagogue the next morning, heads turned and eyes followed him as he made his way to his regular seat. Even through the lace curtain that ringed the balcony above, where the women sat, he could feel the stares. It should not have surprised him that word of the previous day’s events had already passed through the community, yet he found himself entirely unprepared. He was reminded of those occasions during his days in yeshivah, when one of the teachers would direct a question about a particularly difficult Talmudic text at him, not really expecting him – or any of the other students in the class – to be able to answer, and yet he had felt shame at his stammering attempts at an answer anyway.
Rabbi Seldes tried to shake this feeling off, telling himself that the congregation’s scrutiny came out of their concern on his behalf, on his and Liba’s and their children’s behalf. He covered himself in his prayer shawl and took up a prayer book, hoping to immerse himself in the words and thus create a realm of privacy between himself and the One to Whom the words were directed, but this was not to be. A man stood politely by his elbow, waiting for him to finish whatever particular prayer he was saying at the moment, preempting any chance Rabbi Seldes might have had to listen for an answer.

“Reb Seldes, shalom aleichem, good Shabbes to you.”

“Aleichem shalom.”

“You will come to the Torah for the fifth aliyah, okay?” And seeing Rabbi Seldes’ confused look, “So you can say ‘gomel,’” – the blessing for one saved from great danger.

“Yes, thank you.” The man stepped away to do other, similar errands, and Rabbi Seldes returned to his own prayers, but the concentration he had been seeking now eluded him, if indeed it had ever been within his grasp to begin with.

He adjusted his prayer shawl as a corner slipped off his shoulder. He recalled that Liba had, as was traditional, given it to him as a wedding present, and he pulled it around himself as if it could mimic her embrace. He ran one of the corner fringes over his fingers, thinking as he did so of Liba’s hair when she returned each month from the ritual bath, soft and still slightly damp underneath when he put his hands through it. He imagined how her hair would look spread out over the water as she, entirely naked, immersed herself. Would that he could take her there tonight, now, and perform the whole ritual with her: gently and thoroughly wash her body and nails and hair for her, examine each inch of her skin to be sure nothing remained that would come between her and the water, watch that her soft belly, flush breasts, rounded buttocks submerge fully in the water, and then…then, to be in the water with her, touched by her and its warm, flowing, living caresses...

But the fringes of the shawl were meant to remind him of God’s commandments, which his thoughts at this moment most certainly violated. That he could take purifying holiness of the mikvah waters and make them into a site of these most sinful imaginings!
He let the fringe fall from where it lay across his palm and refolded the cloth over his shoulders with a sharp snap of his arm and wrist.

The communal gaze, which had abated, returned in full force as Rabbi Seldes stood when his name was called out – *HaRav Nechemya ben HaRav Avidan* – and approached the velvet covered lectern in the center of the room, upon which the Torah scroll was spread open. He touched the fringe of his prayer shawl to the words indicated by the reader. He said the blessing aloud and forced himself not to cringe in embarrassment at the loud response from the assembled men. There was no normal undertone of conversation as the reader’s sing-song chant floated out into the room, not even, he thought, from the women’s balcony. Still the words seemed to go by him, over him, around him perhaps, wherever he could not discern them.

There was a silence, and he realized the reading had finished. He stuttered out the words of the blessing for after the reading. Someone placed a prayer book into his hands, open to the page of the blessing for one saved from danger.

He looked at the words of the blessing. “Blessed are You, King of the Universe, who bestows good things on…” Rabbi Seldes stared at the next Hebrew word on the page, *hayavim*. The guilty, the unworthy, the undeserving.

Only yesterday afternoon, he had felt worthy to doubt a man because he sold potatoes in the market, to turn away from a woman because she did not cover her arms and legs. And yesterday afternoon it had been he upon whom good things – the Good Thing above all good things, life – had been bestowed. And yet it was he who could think now only of sin, of the forbidden. Tears of shame and despair welled in his eyes, but he wiped at them as if the stitches above his left eye were bothering him, and choked out the last few words of the blessing.

A tide of voices broke forth as the congregation gave the ritual response, “May He who bestowed goodness upon you continue to bestow goodness upon you always.” And even now he longed to lay his head on Liba’s bosom like one of the children, her arms encircling him, and cry until he had only hiccups left.

Rabbi Seldes slept poorly and fitfully again that evening. Several times he woke to watch Liba, moonlight through the window illuminating her turned back in the other
bed, and had to hold himself back from waking her, from importuning her to something forbidden, something shameful. Or from simply moving across to lay his body down around hers, uninvited.

He rose as it began to grow light. His discarded pants lay on the dresser, folded over so that the blood was not visible, but he could not so easily fool himself as to its presence. He had touched a dead woman, he now carried tumat ha-met, the impurity of contact with the dead. Although he knew that on a certain level, everyone did – the purification ritual, sacrifice and sprinkling of ashes from the burned carcass of a red heifer, had been lost with the destruction of the Holy Temple so very long ago – nonetheless he felt now the impurity like a physical presence on his skin. He had worn her lifeblood against his body.

He dressed, and without either disturbing Liba or saying his morning prayers first, left the flat. He walked along the streets of the neighborhood in the pre-dawn half-light. It was too early even for the earliest Morning Prayer services to be meeting; he saw no one but the vendors in the news kiosks. Their racks were filled with the variety of religiously oriented newspapers and magazines sanctioned by the variety of rabbinic authorities that held sway with the residents of this area.

He kept walking until he came to a larger thoroughfare, the boundary between his own religious neighborhood and the outside world. Here the newsstands he passed carried the regular Israeli dailies – and magazines whose covers displayed women with plunging necklines, or bared midriffs, or both. Still Rabbi Seldes kept walking, until he was well past the bounds usually traveled by his neighbors and acquaintances.

And still he glanced around side to side before stopping at a kiosk, fishing the shekel notes from his pocket, and selecting a few newspapers from the racks. The vendor grinned at him as he handed over his money. “Need to stay in touch with the outside world, eh, rebbe?” And when Rabbi Seldes did not respond, he continued, “Don’t worry, some religious guys come in and buy things a lot more interesting than newspapers, if you know what I mean.”

The transaction complete, Rabbi Seldes folded his purchases in a bundle, and pressed it close to his chest before moving on. He found a small park, hardly more than
an empty lot, but it had benches, and they were empty at this early hour. The sun crept over the horizon, but the streets were still quiet.

Opening the first newspaper, Rabbi Seldes read that there had been six people besides the bomber killed in the marketplace. Three men (two of them regular vendors in the market, but Rabbi Seldes could not be sure if one of them might be the potato vendor), an infant (dear God!), a woman of fifty-two and a woman of thirty-four. His own presence during the attack and its aftermath was not noted. Surviving is not remarkable, the secular press assured him, but he did not believe it.

He found what he had not even realized he had been looking for on the third page of the second paper. He tore out a small rectangle containing the funeral information. After a moment, he tore out the photo too, folding it around the first scrap of paper.

He stood, sheltering the newspapers against his body again until he found a waste-bin into which to toss them. With the grainy, ill-reproduced photo of the woman who had died at his feet tucked into the breast pocket of his shirt against his heart, he turned for home.

The pants were in a plastic grocery bag by his side, wedged between his hip and the inside wall of the bus. He had not told Liba where he intended to go. She would be aware of the obligation to bury the blood, of course. But how could he admit or explain to her the need that impelled him to return the blood to its rightful place himself, the need he felt to restore something – what little he could – to the dead woman, the need he felt for an act of atonement?

It was a dry, summer day, and despite the many open windows, the air in the bus tasted as if it been through too many other mouths and noses and lungs before. Even in what breeze there was from those open windows, the plastic of the bag did not breathe like a cloth or paper bag might have; it seemed to Rabbi Seldes that the odor of the blood congealed inside the bag like the blood itself had on the pants. When the bus made a sharp turn or stopped short and his moving body jostled the bag, he sensed the odor trying to escape, and it smelled to him like a reminder the impurity as yet lingering in his soul. He avoided looking at the other riders around him lest they identify him as the source of the strange odor.
The bus deposited Rabbi Seldes at the entrance to the cemetery and went on, leaving behind it a dying rumble and the scent of gasoline fumes. Past the gates, a hush prevailed. Gravel pathways radiated in several directions from in front of him; he did not know where the gravesite was. He was used to attending funerals in the company of others of his community, and without that anchor, Rabbi Seldes did not entirely know how to proceed. There was no one about to follow. Only the blood must go to its destination. He grasped the bag tightly, wrapping his arms around himself as if to protect himself, or the thing he carried with him, and headed up the central path into the thicket of the dead.

Finding the gravesite proved not to be difficult. Several news agencies had sent photographers, and Rabbi Seldes could see them standing in a knot by a nearby pathway as he advanced. Closer in, a small crowd gathered near the open hole in the ground, and he was relieved to see that the ceremony had not yet begun. A woman seemed to sense his approach and turned to look at him. He recalled again how he had looked away from the woman in the market, the dead woman. Who had he been to decide she did not deserve to be seen? He willed himself, against years of habit, not turn away from the gaze of this woman here in the cemetery.

And looking clearly at her, Rabbi Seldes recognized from her facial features that she could be none other than the sister of the woman whose picture he still had tucked in his pocket. He did not remember clearly what the dead woman looked like otherwise, had an impression from what he little he had glimpsed of her that she had been trim, and on the tall side. The sister, on the other hand, had a figure reminded him of Liba’s, at least insofar as she had the soft, rounded belly, and the soft, rounded hips, and the soft, rounded breasts that he associated with maternal love and nurturing.

He came up to the woman, and indeed, a boy of about ten and another about eight stood nearby. She gathered the younger one protectively under her arm as he approached, and he nearly stumbled in a moment of surprisingly intense jealousy for the boy, followed by the now familiar wave of shame. Was there any forbidden woman he did not desire?

The sister of the dead woman did not wait for him to introduce himself. “If you’ve come over here to tell me that I have to cover my arms,” – she wore a sleeveless dress
against the heat that sent rivulets of sweat down Rabbi Seldes’ back inside his jacket –
“or that a woman can’t stand next to the grave at her own sister’s funeral…”

“No, no,” he said quickly, “I have nothing to do with the funeral. That is, I…” She looked at him, puzzled. Every word he had fought back saying to Liba in the night – his wife, his sleeping wife who would not hear anyway – rushed into his head. Not what he was here to say. Yet, even the most simple words he needed to explain what had happened to him and why he was here… Where to find the audacity to say to one whose loss was so fresh and irreversible, I, the guilty, the unworthy, am here alive to return the blood of your sister who is dead?

There was nothing to do but tell it.

“I was standing next to your sister, in the market. When the terrorist exploded himself.”

He could see her focusing on the bandage above his eye now, studying it for a moment. He touched a hand to it.

“A piece of debris grazed me,” he said.

“You’re very lucky you didn’t lose your eye. But then another centimeter or two in the other direction and you wouldn’t have a scratch on you.”

Of course, there were the abrasions on his knees and a line of dark bruises which had risen up along his thigh and hip where he’d taken the brunt of his fall. But even if she felt comfortable with her bare arms and unstockinged legs and open-toed sandals, he found it embarrassing, impossible, to speak to her about what lay invisible underneath his suit. And soon enough those marks really would be invisible, no, gone: skin would heal, bruises would fade. How could he offer them to her as proof of his suffering? He looked down, scuffing the toe of his shoe on the dusty ground.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That sounded like an accusation. Maybe it was. I know I’ve got no reason to be angry at you, but…” She began to cry. A few of the photographers stirred, decided to wait for the true out-pouring at the burial. “…I’m just angry at everyone and everything right now,” the woman said through the tissue with which she was wiping her eyes.
“Though the gates of prayer be locked, the gates of tears are not locked,” he found himself saying, quoting the Talmud. He himself had pushed away his tears the morning before.

“Is that so?” she said. “And what of it? My sister is still dead.”

He had no good way to answer her. “I’m the one who should be sorry,” he said. The words felt like they might open a window onto all the vastness of what he had to be sorry for. He could only rush out more words, a screen. “I only came to give you something, something for the funeral. I didn’t mean to intrude on you, at this time of sorrow.” He held the bag out towards her. He smelled the scent of blood wafting on the dry air.

“What is this?”

“My pants. I mean, your sister’s blood…that is, it got on my pants when she fell beside me.” The woman drew back a step, shaking her head, no. But Rabbi Seldes pressed forward, holding the bag open now to her, “It has to be buried with her, the blood has to be buried with her. Every bit of the body, together, so she can be whole again, in the World to Come.”

The woman stepped back again, holding her hands in front of her face as if to ward him off. Another man stepped forward from out of the mourners, and the woman turned to him, hands over her eyes and truly sobbing now. She buried her against his body and he encircled her in his arms. The woman’s shoulders heaved. A damp spot spread on man’s shirt, snot mingled with tears, and he took no notice, but only continued to stroke her hair and hold her to himself. Over her back he glared towards Rabbi Seldes.

His heart pounded and his blood rushed, but Rabbi Seldes did not know where it headed. To express desire, or to express shame? He did not know anymore how to tell them apart.

The woman’s voice was muffled, and she was not speaking to him, but Rabbi Seldes missed none of what she said. He stared at the woman being held by someone who loved her, ached to be held as she was being held, and heard her say, “Whole? He wants her to be whole? Nothing is whole. Nothing will be whole again.”

He dropped his hands to his sides, the bag and its bloody burden bouncing against his shins. The woman from the market was dead and he was not. There was no sufficient
human explanation for or response to this fact. There was only blood, which might or might not be buried, and the lingering scent, which never would be. Wordlessly, he placed the bag on the grass between himself and the woman, and turned to leave the graveside.
i Women in Judaism’s First Annual Writing Competition, First Place winner in Short Fiction.