PAPOTAGE

REBBE OR NOT by Lisa Lipkin

I recently found myself in a Talmudic dilemma. It all began when a friend of mine gave me a series of postcards with Chassids on them. You know the types, men with long beards and timeless faces, dressed in black hats with fur striemels. Each one was labeled on the back: "The Rebbe of Vilna," "The Rebbe of Uzghorod," "The Rebbe of Brooklyn." These were the big boys.

After receiving the cards, I chuckled, stuffed them in a cabinet and forgot all about them. Until last month, when my flamboyant decorator found them while redoing my apartment and insisted I frame seven of them and make a rabbi series on my kitchen wall.

At that time, whatever my decorator said, I did. So, off I trudged to the "99 cents store" to buy picture frames for my Chassids. Unfortunately, the only ones in stock were furry, leopard-spotted frames, which, to my surprise, my decorator loved. The frames were so cheap, though, they had no hook in the back, so I asked Joseph, my superintendent, who is normally quite handy, to help me. He created a makeshift device out of tape and string, and hung seven of my rebbes in a long horizontal line over the refrigerator. I was ecstatic.

That night, I was awakened from a deep sleep by a startling sound. One of the rebbes had crashed to floor, leaving a trail of glass shards behind him. I dragged myself out of bed, cleaned up the mess, and went back to sleep. An hour later, I was jolted from my dreams by the exact same sound. Another rebbe had fallen. The others soon followed. Every hour, on the hour, like clockwork, each rebbe took a suicidal leap, until the wall was bare, and my clergy lay in a sad pile on the floor.

What was the deeper meaning here? I pondered this question for the rest of the night, too agitated to fall asleep. The next day, I asked everyone I ran into, or spoke with, to give me their interpretations. My mother, a no-nonsense pragmatist said, "I'll tell you what it means! It means your superintendent is lousy. The man can't even hang a picture frame!" My atheist father had a different take altogether. "It's a reflection of your own lack of faith, dear. Clearly, you cared little about the way you were hanging these men." My friend, Bertha, a hard-core vegetarian, told me they

didn’t like my cooking. My friend, Steve, a hard-core sex addict, told me the Chassids "weren’t well hung."

Later that afternoon, I emailed my ex-boyfriend, Zev, and asked him for his analysis of the situation. He's a poet and sensitive to symbolism. "It wasn't a metaphor," he replied. "It was a message from GOD. He was telling you in no uncertain terms, DON'T BE CHEAP! BUY BETTER FRAMES! Life, you see, is how you frame it." Julia, my Russian friend (and a femme fatale) said, "Out of sight. Out if mind. I don’t worry about anybody who doesn’t worry about me."

Steve Zeilin, a folklorist, told me it isn’t uncommon for ritual masks to fall off of the walls in museums or in the homes of collectors. It has to do with their power. I started to get nervous, until my cousin Steven, a garment worker, reassured me. "Relax, Lisa. The Chassids were probably ecstatic. They were jumping for joy. They finally get to replace their mink shtreimels with leopard ones."

The sun was beginning to set. A shadow fell across the fallen rebbes on the floor. Just then, my phone rang. It was my friend, Jack Gabriel, a Jewish Renewal rabbi from Colorado, the kind of guy who plays guitar during services and sways a lot. "Did you say there were seven Chassids on your wall?" he asked, eager to help me make sense of the situation. "Well, that seems obvious. It’s a Kabbalistic mystery. Clearly, each Chassid embodies one of the Seven Supernal Attributes: attraction, rejection, synthesis, competition, devotion, communication, and reception. You were being too shallow. You were treating them as decorative objects. They want you to reach deeper within yourself, to start again, and try to obtain those states of being."

In the end, we see what we need to. What started out as decorator’s whimsy became my conscience. I rehung the rebbes, with better tape and stronger nails. To my surprise, no one jumped. Most of the time they ignore me, and I ignore them, but every once in a while, I catch one of them smiling at me. And I can’t help but smile back, inspired by that joy that can only come from the intermingling of the secular with the spiritual. Or maybe they like my cooking, after all.

LISA LIPKIN is a professional storyteller and freelance writer. She is the author of "Bringing the Story Home: The Complete Guide to Storytelling for Parents" (WW Norton) and a weekly columnist with NIW (Nieuw Israelitisch Weekblad), Holland's only Jewish newspaper.