

The Kugel Story



by
Michael Wex

On a Friday afternoon in the winter of 1877, Mrs. Yoshke Furmanovsky, a stout *hausfrau* of Praga-by-Warsaw, opened her oven door and plunged her fork into the kugel baking within, to see if it were ready. Her husband looked forward to nothing so much as his Friday night kugel—indeed, it was one of the great sorrows of Mrs. Furmanovsky’s life that he looked forward to the kugel with somewhat more enthusiasm than to certain other Friday night activities. He would rush home from shul, gobble down the whole kugel, along with some chicken and fish, and then fall straight to sleep, in despite of rabbinic injunctions concerning private duties.

Mrs. Furmanovsky, *nebekh*, tried everything. She put in fewer potatoes, hoping to make the meal lighter, but her Sabbath frock was fancy enough without a kugel tiara. She purchased herbs guaranteed to wake the dead; her husband, *nebekh*, spent the night in the outhouse. She made the tea extra strong, the soup extra weak, the chicken extra lean, but by the time the weekly glimmer stole into Mrs. Furmanovsky’s eye, old Yoshke—*nebekh*—would be stretched out on the bed, as level and as useful as a bench in the ritual bath.

So Mrs. Furmanovsky decided to avenge herself on the whole cursed race of kugelen in the only way she knew how: whenever she went to test one, she would thrust her fork murderously into the kugel’s tender, yielding flesh, twisting it so hard that she could almost hear the hapless concoction screaming for mercy. “Zuln ale kigelen geyn tsu di ale shvarts-yorn,” she would mutter. “Let every kugel go to hell. They’ve ruined my life...I sweat, I toil, I break my back like a slave in Egypt six days a week, and shabbes, instead of a little *nakhes*, a little pleasure like everybody else, what do I get? A kugel bowl to be washed out with my tears. They say that on shabbes you’re supposed to get a *neshomeh yeseireh*, an extra soul. Nu, how can I get when my extra lies there as useful, as useful *vi bankes* a *toytn*, as cups on a corpse. A plague on every kugel, and may the Lord deliver us from them speedily and in our day, amen.”

She was otherwise a very nice woman.

And her husband? A purblind tailor with the mind of a goose. Shortly after their marriage, Mrs. Furmanovsky began to suspect him of infidelity, so weak and inconsequential was his desire. But when could he have had the time? He spent all day in the shop, which was the front room of their meagre apartment, and he spent all night chomping and shnorkhing. She began to think that perhaps he was punishing her; perhaps she had sinned against him in some way and he was taking his revenge by denying her. She bought potions and philtres, perfumes, negligees like the Polish women wore—all they produced were snores. Where some men had such powerful evil inclinations as to be veritable mad dogs for the bed regardless of the time of month, Yoshke Furmanovsky wasn't even inclined.

She sought reasons, excuses. A whole week he works from dawn to dusk, shut up in an airless and stifling room—ok, he's too tired. But Friday, Friday when he stops work at two o'clock, goes to the ritual bath, has a little time to relax and a day of relaxation to look forward to—Friday night stuck in her craw. Many women shared her problems during the week, but Friday night? Why else had God invented it? And Yoshke, after she finally found the courage to ask him, on their eighth anniversary, Yoshke merely answered that he ate so well that he could think of nothing but sleep. And that kugel—so heavy and hearty, it warmed him so, that the vapours shot straight up to his brain, telling it to close his eyes so that Yoshke might savour the taste and aroma—undistracted.

“A-nu,” said Mrs. Furmanovsky. “From now on, no more potato kugel. It's coming between us. I have my rights as a wife.”

“Wife,” replied Yoshke, “If you should fail even one Friday night to fix me my favourite potato kugel, you will lose all your

cherished rights. Oys wife! I will divorce you forthwith, and then we'll see about your wifely rights.”

So Mrs. Furmanovsky, who, when all was said and done, did love her husband, began to hate his kugel. Every Friday afternoon was a war between her, the potatoes and the spices, with Mrs. Furmanovsky always the loser. Loudly she lamented the fate which had kept her from being born in Ireland.

On the Friday afternoon in question, in the winter of 1877, Mrs. Furmanovsky stuck her fork into the kugel with her usual vigour, gave it a twist and gleefully removed it, studying the tines for traces of kugel blood. Disappointed as always, she was about to shut the oven door, when the kugel, with an alacrity shocking in an inanimate object, leapt from the oven straight to the floor, and sank its teeth into Mrs. Furmanovsky's ankle.

Mrs. Furmanovsky was more shocked than pained; the kugel is known for its blunt, yielding teeth, and she had no trouble shaking it loose. Bits of kugel clung to her ankle, but no tooth marks were to be seen. Hungry for vengeance, she kicked at the errant pudding, only to see it leap cackling onto the table, where it sat smugly, humming “The British Grenadiers.”

A woman of valour, this Mrs. Furmanovsky. She grabbed her broom and set after the kugel like a hound to the fox. She cursed, she shrieked, the sound of the broom slapping the floor re-echoed through the kitchen, but the giggling kugel was always one step ahead, baiting her, egging her on in a heimishen, geshmakenem yidish, a down-home, *tasty* Yiddish; “Me ret fun Aleksandr, un oykh fun Herkules,” until Mrs. Furmanovsky, no Hercules, threw down her broom and sank to the floor in despair.

Casting her eyes heavenward, “Why me?” she cried. “What did I ever do to deserve this? The rest of the world lives in peace and quiet, while I, Khayke Furmanovsky, am

condemned to do battle with a dancing kugel. If potatoes can sing, it's the end of the world. The Messiah must be on his way. Soon all calves will have two heads and a stillborn child will assume the throne. Men will walk on their hands, horses become rabbis, and I...I will be murdered to death in my own kitchen by a kugel from hell."

"And this is how you say thank you?" asked the kugel angrily. It was reclining peacefully in one of the chairs, and fixed Mrs. Furmanovsky in its gaze. "I come here to help you, and this is the thanks I get? Poked like a pig, chased like a thief, and cursed like a Cossack. I've got a good mind to get up and go right now, except that once I'm finished here maybe I can get out of this kugel and go back to the Garden of Eden where I belong. Kugel from hell! A shvarts-yor af dir, lady, I'll give you a kugel from hell!"

Mrs. Furmanovsky's eyelids grazed the ceiling. "Oh my God, it's possessed yet."

"Possessed, shmossessed. If you'd shut up and listen for a minute, you'd understand the whole thing." And the kugel began its story. "When I was still on earth, I was a famous man. The Rebbe of Dlugaszow, perhaps you've heard of me?"

The Rebbe of Dlugaszow? Who hadn't heard of the holy Rebbe of Dlugaszow? A saint, a wonderworker. He made the dumb to speak, the lame to walk, the barren to give birth. It was said that merely touching his walking stick or the hem of his garment was sufficient to ensure a man's prosperity all the days of his life. A dwarf who looked upon the Rebbe's face one Yom Kippur night awoke the next morning a giant.

The Rebbe of Dlugaszow. Sweet-tempered, kindly, modest. He was never known to have lost his temper or to have uttered an angry word. And what people didn't know, didn't hurt them. Once, shortly after his marriage, the future rebbe made the mistake of attempting to explicate certain rather complicated cabbalistic ideas to his wife. She was a

simple, pious girl who wanted only to serve her husband, and she rapidly became lost in the chain of emanations he was describing. The young scholar looked at her bewildered countenance and spat in contempt. “The brains of a kugel, that’s what you’ve got.” Her tears so affected him that he vowed never again to insult or speak ill of any living creature.

This vow was never broken. But after a hundred and twenty years, when the Rebbe came before the heavenly court, the katorgor, the accusing angel, held this one incident up before the Judge as proof that the Rebbe was not worthy of Paradise. What would scarcely have been noticed on any other record was the sole blemish on this one, and as such, deserved to be treated with appropriate severity.

The judge disagreed. True enough, the Rebbe’s sin *had* been a grievous one; true enough, his wife *had* been left with a nervous tic for the rest of her life as a result of the outburst; still, he did not merit Gehenna. Rather, the Rebbe’s soul was to be returned to earth in the very form with which he had insulted his wife, *id est*, a kugel, and was there to wander about until such time as the Rebbe, in the form of a kugel, was able to repair a breach of domestic harmony and thus counterbalance his own sin on the scales of judgement.

“And so,” continued the kugel, “Ot bin ikh. Here I am, lady. Your cries have reached the ear of heaven, and it has been decided that the nature of your problem makes your household particularly well-suited to my mission.”

“Some kind of help you’ll be,” said Mrs. Furmanovsky. “My husband will come in, take one look at you and gobble you up before you can say Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanos, and I’ll be back where I started from. Do me a favour and go somewhere else. Go to St. Petersburg and poison the Czar for all I care, just leave me in peace.”

“Lady, I didn’t ask to come here, so let’s try to make the best of it. If I mess up here—straight to hell. And remember,

lady, I was a rebbe; I don't *know* anybody in hell." The kugel wept so piteously that Mrs. Furmanovsky finally gave in. What did she have to lose?

The kugel paced the room for an hour or so, wracking its brains to come up with a solution. Paced and wracked and wracked and paced until, "Hey, Mrs.! I got it! We'll scare your husband out of ever wanting kugel again for the rest of his life. We'll make him so scared of kugel, that the merest mention of the word will set him to trembling and begging for mercy. And I know just how to do it..."

Yoshke Furmanovsky found everything in order when he returned from the synagogue that night. The soup was on the table, and just as he was lifting the last mouthful to his lips, his wife came in with the kugel. Yoshke gazed at it affectionately, saliva dripping onto his beard as he prepared to consign it to his belly. He reached over, pulled the bowl towards him, and almost dropped dead of a heart attack when it told him to keep his hands to himself.

"I've had just about enough of you and your gluttony," barked the kugel. "Every Friday the same story. Wolf down the kugel so you can avoid your duty to your wife. Well, we kugelen are sick and tired of being made an occasion for sin by the likes of you, and we've decided to take matters into our own hands, so to speak. From this day forth, if you so much as try to swallow even a single morsel of any kugel whatsoever, that same morsel will tear your throat into a thousand pieces and scatter them to the four winds. Furthermore, if word should ever reach us that you have been...remiss...in your duties as a husband, a group of picked kugelen will see to it that you are deprived of your manhood. And remember, Yoshke, there are some things that grow, but don't grow back."

With that, the kugel leapt up, smacked him in the face, and strode over to the window. It sprouted wings and flew off, never to be seen again.

When Mrs. Furmanovksy came in with the chicken, she found her husband pale and trembling. So sickly was he feeling, he averred, that he had lost all his appetite for food. And for food alone. He led Mrs. F. from the kitchen, and they lived normally ever after.

Nu. How the Rebbe's soul came to lodge in a kugel, which is not, after all, an animate, organic unity, is a mystery that will never be solved. But that it did, and that in so doing saved the married life of Mr. and Mrs. Furmanovsky, this cannot be questioned. I have the story straight from Mrs. Furmanovsky herself, and can see no reason to doubt it. For Mrs. Furmanovsky, the sainted Mrs. Furmanovsky, the Mrs. Furmanovsky who realized her destiny as woman through the agency of a bunch of crushed potatoes to which the proper heat was at long, long last applied—Mrs. Furmanovsky was my mother.