

## Seeds of the Pomegranate

“A trip to a cemetery in Prague to the grave of Rabbi Lowe?” Leah muttered angrily on her way to the bookstore. She had just left her weekly visit with her grandfather. They’d been discussing places to visit on her upcoming vacation. “I can’t believe that’s where you want me to go, Grandpa,” she told him. “How could you think I’d want to stumble over some crumbling gravestones for some foolish folklore? A golem? A mystical creature who’ll lead me on a spiritual journey back to Judaism? Grandpa, you have to stop finding ways to lure me into believing again.”

“Leah, my dear,” he said, taking both her hands, “you’ve denied your faith for too long. There’s a whole heritage that’s lost to you.”

“I’m not interested in a heritage of pogroms and persecution and annihilation. I don’t want to hear about all the suffering of the Jews. And why should I have faith in a God who allowed my father to abandon me and my mother? And mysticism? A bunch of nonsense.”

“It’s part of our tradition.”

“No, Grandpa,” Leah said. “It’s just a way to fool people into believing.”

Her grandfather leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know what to do with you anymore,” he sighed

In the bookstore Leah went straight to the information desk. “I want to travel to a place that will open new doors for me,” she said. “Somewhere that will dazzle and amaze me.” And somewhere where there are no reminders of Judaism.

“Then you should go to Istanbul,” said a young woman browsing nearby. Her pretty face was framed by a colorful scarf that covered her head completely. “There you will find what you are looking for.” The young woman said her name was Filiz. She began to describe the city of her birth, leading Leah to open travel books of Istanbul whose pages spilled out its bewitching allure. She was immediately seduced by photos of the imposing city rising along the bluest waters of the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara, uniquely divided between Europe and Asia. She was eager to discover the endless treasures waiting for her at the Grand Bazaar and wooed by the stunning elaborate Topkapi and Dolmabache palaces that reflected the glory of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. She was particularly enchanted by the grandeur of the city’s mosques, especially the Sulyemaniye Mosque built by the famous architect Sinan, and the Blue Mosque that announced the glory of Sultan Ahmet I. Their graceful minarets, immense domes, stained-glass windows, marble carvings, delicate chandeliers, and vast interiors instantly beckoned her. In these places there surely would be no traces of Jewish suffering.

“Yes, this is exactly what I’m looking for,” Leah told Filiz. “I’m going to make plans right away.”

“I’m truly delighted,” Filiz smiled. “As a matter of fact I’m going back to Istanbul in two weeks to visit my brother and his family. If you should arrive by then I would be happy to show you my favorite places.”

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“We’re nearly there,” Filiz said as she and Leah made their way through the narrow winding streets of old Istanbul. Coming upon a bustling marketplace she paused

to wipe her brow as the heat of the day began to build. “Just wait a moment more,” she told Leah, “I want to say hello to my friend Umit.”

Filiz surveyed the stalls of dried fruits and nuts and sandals and pots and pans and linens and all sorts of vibrantly colorful fabric. Amidst the chatter of bargaining she called out to a man selling pistachio nuts. After he scooped half a kilo of plump green nuts into a brown paper bag for a customer, he waved as he saw Filiz. The two friends embraced and spoke a while in Turkish.

“We welcome you to our mosque,” Umit grinned, showing many spaces between his teeth. Then he made a sweeping gesture to the building behind them, unobtrusively tucked away.

Turning around Leah saw a small sign against a stone wall that read Rustem Pasha Camii. “Oh my,” she said, squeezing Filiz’s hand. “The start of an amazing adventure.”

As they climbed the stone steps to the mosque, smoothed and worn down by thousands of feet on the way to worship, Leah’s anticipation grew. At the top an astounding view lay before them. Along the railing of the colonnaded terrace were flower boxes filled with purple hydrangea that spilled over the balcony. Several stone benches allowed people to sit and remove their shoes before entering the mosque. Flanking the massive wooden doors were panels of exquisite tiles. Leah stood for a while absorbing the intermingling colors from the marketplace below.

“I’m ready to go in now,” Leah said, taking a deep breath while putting on a headscarf. The women both slipped out of their sandals, leaving them on a rack near the door.

“It is not time for prayer now so the mosque will be empty,” Filiz said. She pulled on an ornate brass handle and the doors opened wide. In an instant the heat of the day gave way to a cool stillness of an enchanted garden, overrun by thousands of flowers. “These are Iznik tiles,” Filiz pointed to the breathtaking beauty of the tiles that lined the walls from floor to ceiling, “the finest in the world. The famous design is the tulip. The Tulip Period was born in Turkey around the sixteenth century. You will see tulips everywhere, in gardens, on tapestries, on embroideries, in sculptures and paintings, and of course on tiles.”

Leah stood for a moment absorbing the tranquility of the setting and then quickly followed Filiz who was already walking toward the central area of the mosque, stepping lightly across the red-and-black Turkish carpet. Leah went straight up to a tall intricately carved wooden chair. “Our imam gives his sermon from this seat on Fridays,” Filiz explained. Leah reached out to touch the high slope of the chair but Filiz pulled her hand away. “No foreigner is permitted,” she told Leah, tilting her head in apology.

“This mosque was built for Rustem Pasha,” Filiz continued, drawing her arm in an expansive arc. “He was the son-in-law of the great sultan Suleyman the Magnificent back in the sixteenth century. When the Ottoman Empire was at its height and glory.”

“Oh,” Leah sighed, “how I wish I could have lived then. To be part of the court at Topkapi Palace, surrounded by luxury. To have all the beautiful clothing and jewelry I could wish for.” Leah closed her eyes, caught in her imagination.

“And yet always under the sultan’s rule,” Filiz reminded her.

“Well maybe so. But I envy you feeling like royalty each time you enter such opulence.”

“I’m afraid I enter here humbly. It is simply where I come to pray.” Filiz bowed her head.

As Leah looked at the beautifully carved flowers in the immensely high ceiling of the mosque and its glorious arched stained-glass windows that threw rainbows of light on the carpet, a long-hidden childhood memory suddenly sprung open before her. She saw herself climbing the creaky wooden steps to the women’s balcony in the old synagogue where her grandparents worshipped, holding her mother’s hand. While her grandmother poured over her prayer book young Leah peered through the balustrade whose luster had dulled, and looked down on the men and boys in the sanctuary below, crowded together on benches that longed for repair. There was her grandfather standing and swaying to his own rhythm and her father sitting beside him. The rabbi was leading the service hunched over the *bima*, mumbling the prayers softly. Compared to the extravagance of the mosque there was not even one thin shining sliver of splendor to be found.

“My grandmother would tell me that. In synagogue, a long time ago.”

Filiz looked surprised. “You should have told me you are Jewish,” she said.

“There are synagogues in the city that would welcome you.”

Synagogues? Jews in Istanbul? Leah swallowed hard, feeling her heart race and her face flush. “But I’ve already been welcomed here,” she managed to say.

“But you should have the opportunity of praying with those of your own faith. I insist. Come,” she said, leading Leah out onto the patio. “Umit has a friend who can take you to his synagogue. We’ll ask him.”

“Not to bother, I can take you,” Leah heard someone say. She turned to see a Turkish man suddenly standing beside them. Dark-haired, clean-shaven, and simply

dressed in an open-collared white shirt and tan trousers, he smiled pleasantly. His eyes shone like slick black olives.

“Who are you?” Leah asked cautiously.

“Someone who knows the way. Please allow me to escort you to the Ahrida Synagogue in the old Jewish Quarter, just along the Bosphorus. It is not far from here.”

The Turkish man took a breath and then continued. “We Turks are known for our hospitality, so please, I would like to extend mine.”

“Leah, the fates are with you,” Filiz exclaimed with joy. “It would be rude not to take advantage of this man’s kindness.”

Leah stood stone-like, her determination to deny her Jewishness holding her fast, unable to say a word.

“So you are tongue-tied with happiness,” Filiz said. Then it’s settled.” And then she turned to the Turkish man. “My friend will be happy to go with you,” she told him. “And afterward,” she said to Leah, “we will meet for a special Turkish dinner at the home of my brother. Now go with blessings,” and she kissed Leah on both cheeks.

Leah still couldn’t move. She could barely believe what happened. She would never have allowed anyone to make such a decision for her, and yet here she was giving her hand to a stranger to take her where she willed herself never to go. What had come over her?

The Turkish man led Leah to the shore of the Bosphorus. Thirsty from the heat, they bought bottles of water from a vendor nearby. As they walked along the river bank, watching the many ferries glide by from shore to shore, they stopped at the Mirsir Carsisi, the Egyptian Spice Market.

Inside the covered market the stalls exploded in bursts of color, with bushels and barrels of spices and teas and chocolates and dried fruit that teased the senses. Leah inhaled the warm spicy aromas of cumin, cloves, cinnamon, saffron, and mint which brought to mind the forgotten taste of the spring lamb stew her grandmother made for a holiday where each family member took turns reading from a special book. She recalled being permitted to drink several cups of wine.

As they left the bazaar the Turkish man pointed out another imposing mosque. “The Yeni Camii,” he explained. “This mosque is the symbol of the valide sultans, the mothers of the sultans who were in power,” he continued. “They had special status in Topkapi Palace and were in charge of the harem, wielding their influence over all who lived there. They were leaders in architectural patronage, building mosques, religious schools, hospitals, soup kitchens, bath houses, and extensive courtyards and gardens for the people of their empire. However, a valide sultan was still under the ultimate autocratic rule of her son. It was he who allowed her to use his wealth for her good deeds.” Leah envisioned the powerful presence of elegant women in velvets and silks striding through the corridors of Topkapi Palace commanding attention to their orders.

“We should be going now,” the Turkish man urged. “We want to get to Balat.”

They continued their walk along the water passing fishing boats, ferry docks, and cruise ship ports along the way. Climbing a steep hill away from the water, they entered Balat. The streets were narrow and winding and seemed to converge upward. On either side were small shops with few customers.

“Doesn’t look very appealing,” Leah said, already beginning to regret coming. “It’s pretty run down.”

“The people who live in Balat now are migrants from the area around the Black Sea. They came here for a new life,” the Turkish man explained. “Just like the Jews who came more than five hundred years ago.”

“Five hundred years ago?” Leah was startled.

“When the Jews were expelled from Spain by the edict of Ferdinand and Isabella, the great sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Beyazid II, extended his hand and welcomed them to live under his rule. The Sephardim, as they were called, settled in Balat where there was already a Jewish community that dated back to Byzantine times.”

“Byzantine times. Fascinating,” Leah said, “But there’s nothing exciting here now.”

“You’re not listening,” a whisper floated by Leah’s ear.

“Of course I’m listening,” Leah said.

“Yes I know you are,” the Turkish man smiled.

“Then why did you ask me if I was listening?”

“I didn’t.”

“I heard you.”

“I’m sorry. But let’s continue, shall we?”

He led her up the cobblestone streets passed wooden houses in disrepair. Children played ball in the middle of the street as mangy dogs romped at their heels. Women in colorful head coverings bargained for fruit at the open stalls and began to line up at one of the storefronts. The Turkish man stopped to look in the window where stacks of fresh Turkish flat breads were piled high and shelves were neatly filled with sheets of sweet biscuits, honey-soaked pastries, and rich rice and fruit puddings.

“Come see all these wonderful sweets,” he said to Leah.

Leah stepped up to the window and all at once saw nothing but the image of a beautiful young woman with wide eyes and a sweet smile looking back at her. She reminded Leah of Filiz. Simple pearl earrings hung in her ears and gold bracelets adorned her wrists which she held out as she beckoned Leah to come closer. She wore a purple velvet jacket with braided frogging over a colorful caftan of green and gold stripes. Two long black plaits fell over her shoulders and her face was framed by a bright red and blue embroidered cap held in place by a band of gold braid. Leah blinked twice, unsure of what she was seeing, but the image disappeared in an instant. Leah’s mouth fell open in surprise.

“I see your mouth is watering already. Let me buy some pastries to enjoy while we rest for a while. Which ones would you like?”

“I think I’ll let you choose. I’ll sit under that tree and wait for you,” Leah said, an eeriness descending about her. She said nothing about seeing the young woman. It was an illusion of course, she thought, just an image of the way Turkish women looked centuries ago that pushed its way through the reality of the women about her as they bargained for the fresh fruits and vegetables. She quickly dismissed her unsettling feeling and watched the women walk by with their string shopping bags.

“They’re pomegranates,” again a sudden whisper brushed her ear as she wondered what the women were carrying. A cool breeze touched her shoulders, yet all else about her remained still. And then from nowhere appeared the beautiful young woman, her gold bracelets tinkling as she reached out to Leah. “Come,” was all she said. As quickly as the twirl of a whirling dervish, Leah was being pulled into the intrigue of the vanished

Ottoman Empire. As she succumbed to the otherworldliness of the moment, she took the young woman's hand. In an instant the streets of Balat were transformed.

The old wooden Ottoman houses came alive, with lace curtains in the windows of their enclosed balconies and doors with polished brass knobs. Men in enormous white turbans and blue silk trousers and striped caftans with long full sleeves gathered to discuss the business of the day. Women in similar colorful garb threaded themselves around their children and shepherded them to school, gently dancing along in their kid slippers with upturned toes. Leah saw many booksellers, rug and silk merchants, and shops filled with copperware that gleamed in the sun.

“Who are you and why did you bring me here?” Leah asked in amazement.

“To make your wish to live in Ottoman times come true,” she answered. “My name is Nisya. You're in Balat, in the Yehud Mahallesi, or Jewish quarter, the way it was when Jews arrived here from Spain. Sultan Beyazit II graciously welcomed us and gave us refuge from our persecutors.”

“This isn't what I wished for. Why didn't you bring me to the opulent court of the Sultan at Topkapi Palace? ”

“In Balat you will come to see what is more valuable than Topkapi's riches,” Nisya said. “I've been chosen to clear the way for you.” She took Leah by the hand and led her to a house down a winding street. “This is my home. Please come in.”

As Nisya opened the door, a rash of color exploded before them. A multitude of pillows lay on lavishly draped sofas covered in green and blue silk. They were also strewn on the floor around small intricately carved wooden tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl. A magnificent walnut cupboard held blue and white decanters and delicate flasks.

Silver candlesticks stood prominently on a side table next to a backgammon set. Blue, green, and red glass lamps hung from filigree brass hooks on the walls. A large copper bowl filled with ruby red fruit sat on a round brass table with ornate wooden legs.

“Pomegranates,” said Nisya with her enchanting smile. “I will open one for you.” She slashed the fruit with a silver-handled knife and gave a section to Leah.

As soon as Leah spread the seeds apart and put a handful in her mouth, a fleeting memory of her grandmother’s Rosh Hashanah table came before her. She saw cakes and wine and pomegranates piled high in a porcelain bowl. It was on that holy day that her father had chosen to disappear from her life. On that holy day Leah herself declared that anything Jewish had no meaning for her. The taste of these pomegranate seeds was tart, and as their velvety texture slid on her tongue she recalled her grandfather explaining why the fruit was special, although she refused to listen to his words.

“Turkey is a country rich in pomegranates. We are lucky, don’t you think, to be able to eat them all the time?” Nisya asked. “The pomegranate is very special to the Jews. It has the same amount of seeds as the commandments God asks us to perform – 613. And did you know that King Solomon’s crown was fashioned after the pomegranate?” Nisya smiled again, lifting the fruit and displaying the crown-like points on top. “Carvings of pomegranates were depicted on the Temple in Jerusalem.”

“King Solomon’s Temple was destroyed,” said Leah, toying with the seeds of the pomegranate. “But Topkapi Palace is still standing in its glory and so are the all the splendid mosques. Maybe Balat was once a flourishing neighborhood, but there’s certainly nothing grand about it now.”

“Then I will have to open your eyes.” Nisya snapped her fingers and

in an instant they were facing a pair of wooden doors flush with the street.

“What is this place?” Leah asked, disappointed. “Surely you don’t expect me to compare this paltry entrance to the gates of the Imperial Court at Topkapi,” she said.

“This is the Ahrida Synagogue,” Nisya told her, her large dark eyes mysteriously aglow. “What you will find behind these doors more than matches Topkapi’s majesty. Now cover your head with this scarf.” She placed her hand on the handle of the massive door and in seconds it opened wide. Leah stepped inside.

A radiant glow burst forth from all corners of the synagogue, enveloping her in a flash of brilliant light. In contrast to the calm, cool, mystical interior of the imposing mosques she so admired, a spreading warmth emanated from the every surface of the sanctuary. Light streamed in from stained-glass windows decorated with Stars of David. The highly polished wooden ark that held the Torah gleamed with floral and geometric patterns of inlaid mother-of-pearl, and the gold leaf on the Ten Commandments above the ark shone in spiritual splendor. As she raised her eyes to the richly painted domed ceiling from which hung flickering chandeliers, Leah noticed the carved balustrade of the women’s gallery above. In the middle of the sanctuary, surrounded on three sides by Ottoman-style wooden benches with cushions, stood the imposing pulpit, the likes of which Leah had never seen before. It was in the shape of a ship’s prow, elegantly carved and painted in warm orange and burgundy.

“You are admiring our *teva*, what we Sephardic Jews call the pulpit from which our rabbi leads us in prayer,” said Nisya softly. “For some of us it represents Noah’s Ark and for others it symbolizes the Ottoman ships that brought us to Turkey from Spain.

When our rabbi reads the Torah from the tip of its prow, we remember the journey that brought us to freedom.”

Leah reached out to touch the lustrous wood and could almost hear the cries of the persecuted Jews who were forced to flee. She vaguely remembered her grandfather talking about Torquemada and the Inquisition when she was a young child learning about Columbus discovering America in 1492. Fourteen-ninety-two was a momentous year, he said. For our people it wasn't only about the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, he told her, but if it had anything to do with Jews she didn't care to hear why.

“So was it Sultan Beyazit II who had this synagogue built?” Leah asked.

“Oh no,” Nisya said emphatically. “The Ahrida was built by Jews from Macedonia who lived in Balat before we Sephardim arrived. They welcomed us into their community and we became a part of their congregation. Together we enriched and beautified the synagogue. They also built the nearby Yanbol Synagogue where there are paintings of that Macedonian town inside its dome. Unlike the towering mosques built to honor the glory of the sultans, the Ahrida is more than a display of power and glory. It was built to honor God and is a testament to what Jews have accomplished in Turkey. Now I would like to introduce you to an even finer testament – several Jews of great influence and importance to the Ottoman Empire that lasted for 300 years.”

“Jews were important to the Empire?” Leah leaned in to hear more.

“Absolutely. Close your eyes and you will see,” Nisya commanded and clapped her hands.

At once before them like a mysterious genie from a lamp came an array of people in silks and brocades and furs and turbans and jewels, who bowed their heads before Leah. Just like it must have been in the court at Topkapi Palace, she thought.

Five bearded men in white turbans stepped forward to address Leah. “We are court physicians to the Sultan. I am Hakim Yacoub, and with me are Joseph and Moshe Hamon, Daniel Fonseca, and Gabriel Buenaventura. We were responsible for the health and well-being of the sultan and his family.” The men bowed their heads and sat in the chairs of honor beside the *teva*.

“*Merhaba*, welcome,” said the next two men who stepped forward. “We are David and Samuel ibn Nahmias,” said David the taller of the two. “We introduced printing to Turkey when we operated the first printing press here in 1493, certainly a most significant contribution to the Turkish-Jewish community. This beautiful prayer book is one we have printed. It contains much loved songs, in Ladino, of course, the language of Judeo-Spanish Jews.” He produced an elegantly embossed leather book with pages adorned in gold-leaf.

“And I am Joseph Nasi,” a tall man with black penetrating eyes spoke with authority. “I was expelled from Portugal during the Inquisition, and through my diligence I became a high-ranking diplomat and minister to Sultan Selim. I was made the Duke of Naxos and I had an immense influence on the foreign policy of Turkey.” Bowing low before Leah, Nasi, in his turban set with jewels, sat next to the others.

“My name is Dona Gracia Nasi Mendes,” a stately woman stood before Leah. “They call me La Senora, and I am the aunt of Joseph Nasi. When my husband died, I managed the House of Mendes, his powerful trading company across Europe, and then I

fled to Turkey during the Portuguese Inquisition. Here, happily and openly able to practice my Judaism, I used my wealth to build synagogues, yeshivas, and hospitals.”

Dona Gracia, in velvet robes, extended her bejeweled hand to Leah who held it in awe.

“And now,” Nisya spoke for the last important figure, “I introduce to you Rabbi Samuel de Medina, one of the most prominent Ottoman Jewish scholars, whose impact on rabbinic literature is enormous.” The rabbi modestly took his seat.

Nisya proudly swept her arm across the panoply of esteemed Jewish figures as if to enhance their display of accomplishments for Leah. “These noble Jews, who have enriched the Ottoman Empire in a myriad of ways, are among the Turkish-Jewish community’s most valuable treasures. They are among the many Sephardim who have contributed to an important long tradition in Turkey.”

“I didn’t know,” Leah felt her face flush.

“Then you must learn, my dear,” Dona Gracia spoke. She graciously stood before Leah. “All of us faced the horror of being persecuted in our own countries,” she said, “but we had the strength to make new lives for ourselves and to contribute to the land that made our freedom to express our beliefs possible. Perhaps we didn’t leave behind buildings as monumental as the palaces and mosques of the sultans, but we’ve left our strong Jewish faith and heritage within our synagogues, many like this one which are still standing, for future generations.”

Rabbi Samuel de Medina also stood up to speak, “For you Topkapi Palace is a display of the wealth and grandeur of the Ottoman Empire. But only the shell of Topkapi exists now in your time. Walking through its splendid gardens and grand halls with exquisite tiles and various courts with immense rooms you can only imagine what life

was like within its walls. But that way of life is long gone for you. For the Sephardic community, however, although our dress is not the same and our language has changed, life within the Ahrida Synagogue is still the way it was hundreds of years ago. Our beliefs and traditions have carried us through from my time to yours.”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Leah said, her eyes growing moist. “But aren’t there the same traditions in the mosques?”

“Of course, but again, remember, the splendid mosques you have visited were built to praise the glory of the sultan who ruled at the time. The Ahrida and the other synagogues throughout Istanbul were built to praise the glory of our One God who rules forever.”

“You have seen the riches I promised to show you in Balat,” said Nisya. “So now when you go back to your own synagogue you will carry our long heritage with you. And you will feel me beside you reciting the same prayers and singing the same songs as you do.”

“I haven’t been to synagogue in many years and I don’t remember any prayers and songs,” Leah said, feeling ashamed. “I walked away from Judaism a long time ago.”

“Then I hope your visit here will encourage you to return,” Dona Gracia spoke up.

“Speaking of return I’m afraid I must return you to your own world now,” Nisya said to Leah. “It’s time for you to take back what you’ve learned and let that knowledge open up a new exploration of your own Judaism. Although once you may have forsaken your faith, you are now able to savor the seeds of the pomegranate and let them grow in your heart. Come.” Nisya held out her hand. As soon as Leah reached to take it Nisya disappeared and Leah found herself back on the bench under the tree, sitting alone.

The vibrant world of Jewish Balat had vanished. No more did colorful caftans sweep across the streets, nor turbans bob in crowds of energetic discussions. No more did the marketplace thrum with exciting exchanges. The streets were dull now, with just a few migrant women bargaining at the fruit seller's stall, and others trudging home with bulging satchels, followed by straggling children who expected their dinner. The only remnant of the once flourishing community was the synagogue. It stood as a reminder of enduring faith in the face of suffering. Its mystical presence held Leah fast, charming her into believing again.

Suddenly the Turkish man appeared, carrying a green pastry box. "*Kadaif, baklava, and tulumba,*" he said. "There is nothing richer and sweeter in all of Turkey."

Perhaps, Leah thought, still savoring the taste of the pomegranate. She decided to tell him of her trip back in time. "I've already visited the Ahrida," she said, waiting for his disappointment.

But instead he said, "I'm happy for you."

"But I thought *you* wanted to take me there."

"It was best that you find your own way," he smiled. "So now it is getting late and we should take these pastries to Filiz and her family. They are waiting for us."

Evening was descending as they walked back along the Golden Horn, the lights of the city shimmering in the calm waters. The Sulyemaniye Mosque with its elegant minarets loomed magnificently over the city, blessing its Muslim believers with their own heritage. And over Leah shone the light of the Ahrida.

"Tell me," she said to the Turkish man, "have you ever heard of a golem?"

“A golem? I don’t think so. But listen,” he told her. And she stopped to hear the sound of gold bracelets tinkling above her head.

END