

REGINALD,
THE JEWISH
REINDEER

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REGINALD, THE JEWISH REINDEER

Reginald was a Jewish reindeer who lived in the frigid taiga near the northern tip of Lapland.

Like most reindeer, he idolized the chosen few who pulled Santa's sleigh and dreamed of someday joining them. But he knew that since he was Jewish, there wasn't much chance of that. He didn't even celebrate Christmas. In fact, theoretically he didn't even believe in Santa Claus.

So how could he ever be hitched to Santa's sleigh?

His parents, Schmuel and Rivka, were quite upset about his ambitions, and blamed themselves for having given him such an un-Jewish name and for having neglected to provide an observant Jewish home as a counterweight to all the non-Jewish influences of the world outside.

But there it was, too late for regret.

Belatedly, they decorated their little grove of fir trees for Hanukkah and lit candles, giving Reginald little gifts each night. But while Reginald enjoyed the beauty of the candles and appreciated the gifts, they were no substitute for the ultimate glory of pulling Santa's sleigh.

He was, after all, a reindeer.

Since Reginald's was the only Jewish family in the neighborhood, all of Reginald's friends dreamed of

being chosen to pull Santa's sleigh. At Christmas time they pranced through the deep snow, pretending they were flying through the air with Santa ho-ho-ho-ing behind them.

Suddenly they would stop, Reginald along with them, as though alighting on a rooftop, and wait for Santa to go down the chimney, drop off some presents, and come back up to resume his journey. Then off they would go again, flying high across the full moon as they staggered through the snowdrifts, stopping at the next roof, and the next, until the brief winter afternoon was over, and it was time to go home.

Requisite for being one of Santa's reindeer was, of course, the ability to fly, which was, as you may imagine, rare in reindeer. Reginald and his friends tried many times, leaping skyward off little mounds and hillocks without success, knowing that, alas!, their failure meant their dreams of pulling Santa's sleigh would remain a fantasy.

On Christmas Eve they all gathered in an open, snow-covered field to watch the sleigh take off from the nearby North Pole, their heroes, Dancer and Prancer and the rest, pulling the heavily laden sleigh rapidly across the full moon and on southward to where the children of the world lay fast asleep, dreaming of the gifts they would unwrap the following morning.

They would all sigh inwardly, but Reginald most sadly of all, since he was Jewish and therefore shut out more than the others from imagining that he

could ever be one of those dark, gigantic figures galloping majestically across the large yellow disk of the rising moon.

One Hanukkah Reginald's parents decided to take Reginald south, where some Jewish herds of reindeer had settled, hoping that if he could celebrate the holiday with some Jewish reindeer his age, he might enjoy it more and be drawn away from his non-Jewish longings.

While there, they consulted Rabbi Reuven Reindeer, a sage with a particular reputation for success with younger reindeer, who nodded his head silently as they told him of their woe.

"Ah, yes!" he would sigh as they told him this, and "Yes, I understand," as they told him that. "A typical case," he said finally, when they were finished. "What else would you expect when you raise a child away from other Jews in a home without the barest essentials of Jewish life? And name him Reginald, to boot?"

"Is it too late?" Reginald's mother cried.

"We will see," Rabbi Reuven said. "Send him to me, and we will see."

So Reginald was sent to see Rabbi Reuven on the evening after the lighting of the fifth candle.

"Come with me," Rabbi Reuven said to Reginald, and turned to walk deep into the forest. They walked silently for about an hour to a field on top of a wide plateau, where under the sparkling stars the snow seemed ghostly and the world hardly real.

"So you want to pull Santa's sleigh," Rabbi Reuven said.

"Yes," Reginald admitted, expecting to be admonished. But to his surprise, the rabbi smiled and nodded his head.

"Yes, of course," he said. "Every reindeer would like to pull Santa's sleigh. I also wanted to, when I was your age."

"You did?" Reginald asked, surprised.

"Yes, yes. I was young once, you know. But you can't do it unless you can fly."

"I know," Reginald said sadly. "I can't fly."

"We'll see, we'll see," Rabbi Reuven said.

He turned and, prancing just above the heavy snow, took off across the field without a footprint behind.

Reginald watched the old rabbi in amazement as he circled the field and came back to where Reginald was standing stock still.

"Come on, come on!" the rabbi called joyfully. "Follow me! Just start prancing above the snow. Go ahead! Whooopee!!!"

And off he went, prancing around the field again.

Reginald stood motionless until the rabbi got halfway round for the second time, and then decided he'd better try it before the rabbi got all the way around to him again. So he leaped up and brought his front hoofs down just above the snowline.

To his astonishment, instead of falling back into the deep snow, his hoofs seemed to hit something

lighter, springy like the most delicate moss, yet invisible, and in moments he, too, was prancing around the field, for the first time flying.

In moments the rabbi passed him and took off, up, up, up, up into the night sky, and Reginald followed, climbing high up above the forest and field, up into a cold blackness glittering with stars.

Up, up, up, up they went to a place where the darkness began to pale, and an unearthly and beautiful light seemed to draw them on from impossibly far away.

"Rabbi Reuven! Rabbi Reuven! Where are we going?" Reginald tried to shout. But no sound came out as on and on they went.

The heavens were soon suffused with a mysterious glow, as though they had entered the enormous flame of a gigantic Hanukkah candle, orange leaping up into yellow. Reginald became aware that they were surrounded by a multitude of others, an infinite crowd staring right at the bewitching light – all sorts of animals, not only reindeer, as well as humans, and other creatures so sublime that they could not have come from Earth.

On and on and on they flew into the heart of the light, into a cornucopia of colors, as the multitudes became thicker. Suddenly Reginald spotted Dancer and Prancer, with the others not far behind, and Santa just behind them, all gazing in adoration at the light.

In a moment Rabbi Reuven was at his side. "You see, Reginald? You see?" he shouted.

Reginald nodded.

"We must go back now. If we go any closer, we won't be able to return."

"I don't want to return," Reginald said.

The rabbi shook his head indulgently. "Of course not," he said. "But you can come back here whenever you like."

So they turned and flew back, away from the source of light, through the multitudes of Heavenly worshipers and back through the glittering stars, back to the snow-covered field on a wide plateau in the middle of the forest.

As he stood in the field, hooves buried in snow, Reginald couldn't stop shaking, barely aware of who or where he was.

"Easy!" Rabbi Reuven said. "Easy. That was something it takes a few moments to recover from."

And after a moment of silence: "You see, Reginald? You see what you are lighting when you light a Hanukkah candle?"

Reginald nodded, unable to speak.

"You can go back as often as you like, now that you can fly. But remember: Don't go too close or you'll never return."

"But Rabbi Reuven," Reginald said, finally getting back his voice. "I saw Santa there and all his reindeer, and all sorts of animals, and humans, and creatures not of this Earth. What does what we saw have to do with lighting Hanukkah candles when so many gathered around the one Heavenly light are not Jewish?"

"Are Jews the only ones who can see the light?" the rabbi answered. "God forbid! There is but one God and one light, not a different God and light for each creature and each religion."

"Then what's the point of being Jewish?" Reginald asked.

"You are Jewish," Rabbi Reuven pointed out. "What's the point of not being Jewish?"

Reginald thought about that. "I could pull Santa's sleigh," he said. "Especially now that I can fly."

"And not light Hanukkah candles?"

"And light Hanukkah candles, too?" Reginald asked hopefully.

"If you want to pull Santa's sleigh," Rabbi Reuven said with a twinkle in his eye, "who am I to stop you? Come, Reginald! Tomorrow night you will light the candles and say the blessings. Your parents are waiting."

And so Reginald and Rabbi Reuven took the long, slow walk back through the frozen forest, talking of the beauty of lighting Hanukkah candles and of being a Jewish reindeer.