

The Search

by Susan Kleinman

“Sixty-seven responses!” Al Edelstein announces at the first meeting of the search committee. It has been just two weeks since Rabbi Feldman dropped dead of a heart attack and just a week since the congregation ran the ad: “Help Wanted: Orthodox Rabbi. Immediate Opening.” And already, the résumés are pouring in. Edelstein waves a sheaf of papers above his head triumphantly and starts passing them around his dining room table to the other members of the committee. The résumés are printed on flimsy white copy paper and on stiff ivory bond, in Times New Roman and in Gothic Light. There are resumes from kids just finishing rabbinical school and from old men being pushed out of prestigious pulpits, and one from a man in mid-career whose cover letter states that, “For family reasons, I would like to relocate to the East Coast.”

Stuart Lifshitz tosses this last résumé onto the reject pile. “Family reasons?” he asks with a snort. “What do I look like, here, a goddamn shrink?”

As the committee members drink the coffee Sheila Edelstein made for them before she left for her book group, they eliminate the résumés that are riddled with misspellings (West Cloverdale is, after all, a community of erudite people), and the ones that boast PhDs in Jewish philosophy (even erudite people, after all, shouldn't have to work too hard to understand the sermon). They take a second look at a CV from a fellow in Miami, but discard it when Lifshitz points out that according to the cover letter, this Rabbi Josefson guy has eight kids, which means he'd probably be demanding all kinds of additions to the split-level parsonage.

“And what do I look like?” Lifshitz asks. “A goddamn bank?”

And so it goes, for hours. This cover letter is too wordy and that one is too terse. This rabbi is too self-effacing and that one — good God! — must have an ego the size of the Meadowlands.

When the last crumbs of rugelach have been polished off and the decaf is running so low that Edelstein is in imminent danger of

having to admit to the committee that although he holds two degrees from Harvard he can't figure out how to work the coffee machine, he makes a motion to extend invitations to the few candidates whose résumés have not yet been eliminated. The motion is seconded and passed, the meeting is adjourned, and the committee members all smile. Next Shabbos, when the congregation chants the blessing for "all those who serve the needs of the community faithfully, may the Holy One pay their reward," the congregation will be blessing *them*.

The next morning, Edelstein keeps his patients waiting even longer than usual so that he can personally call the candidates to invite them for auditions.

"Good morning," he says into the phone, in the deep voice that charms nurses and terrifies interns. "This is Dr. Alvin Edelstein, from the search committee at Congregation Beth Torah in West Cloverdale, New Jersey. Am I speaking with Rabbi Andrew Garlic?"

The candidate's actual last name, Garelik, is often mangled in just this way, and each time, he is painfully reminded that he was the kid everyone made fun of in elementary school.

"Please," he begs in a sleepy voice, "call me Andy." It is only 6:30 a.m. out in California, and Andy is only half-conscious. But Edelstein doesn't notice. He's too busy drawing a big star next to Andy's name; he likes this guy already. After all, he figures, a guy who says, "call me Andy" probably won't pull that *Well-I'm-the-Rabbi* crap that Feldman was so big on, telling them that they couldn't have mixed dancing at the annual Gala Dinner, and that if they wanted to use out-of-town caterers for special occasions they had to ask his permission so that he could double-check the kosher certification first. Surely, Edelstein figures, a guy who says, "call me Andy" will understand, without having to be reminded by the board of directors, that the rabbi is an employee of the congregation and not the other way around.

And so, rather than ask call-me-Andy even a single question about his background or his experience, Edelstein decides to invite him to

West Cloverdale for Shabbos straightaway. And rather than tell the candidate which Shabbos he can come for his tryout, take it or leave it, Edelstein offers him a choice of three weekends.

Andy scribbles the middle date and a question mark on a recycled-paper napkin and slides it across the kitchen table to his wife, Joni, who is reading the latest issue of *Mother Jones* and sipping a cup of Echinacea tea. She nods and Andy tells Edelstein that, "Actually, June 25th sounds best." Edelstein takes this, too, as positive sign: This Andy fellow is obviously not desperate; otherwise he would have jumped at the earliest opportunity to come to West Cloverdale. But neither is he uninterested in the position; if he were, he would have put off the tryout till the last possible Shabbos, hoping that he'd have a better job before then and would be able to cancel the interview altogether.

In fact, Andy *does* need a job very, very badly. But he has already promised to lead a special healing service for AIDS patients in Berkeley that first Friday evening. And, in fact, he *does* hope he will find something else, something meaningful, before he ends up at some wealthy suburban synagogue where people roll their eyes when you say words like "soul" and "spirituality," where they call you on your private phone line in a panic every time they accidentally dip a meat spoon into a dairy pot. But he and Joni have tickets to hear Ravi Shenkar on campus that third Saturday night.

Andy tries to sound enthusiastic as he and Edelstein discuss a few more details of the visit, and when all the particulars have been hammered out, Andy says "Thank you for calling, Mr. Edelstein. *L'hitraot* — see you soon."

"*L'hitraot!!!*" Edelstein answers, so pleased with himself for having picked such a winner right off the bat that he doesn't bother to point out, as he usually does, that, actually, it's *Doctor* Edelstein.

After they hang up, Andy walks over to the fridge, moves aside a flyer for his "Tao of the Talmud" study group and a fading little poster declaring that "It will be a great day when our schools have all the money they need and the air force has to hold a bake sale to

buy a bomber," uncovers his calendar and writes "AUDITION/WEST CLOVERD" across the dates of his upcoming trip east.

He tries not to read too much into the fact that his brand new pen has run out of ink halfway through "Cloverdale."

Two weeks later, Andy and Joni fly out to New Jersey. In Newark Airport, they search, as instructed, for a guy in a red baseball cap holding up a welcome sign: "Shalom!! Congregation Beth Torah!" When they finally spot him, they walk over and Andy offers his hand: "I'm Andy," he says. "Nice to meet you."

"And I'm Joni Schleiffer," says Andy's wife, and she, too, extends a hand.

"Good to meet you both," Joel Liebman says, and shakes Joni's hand exuberantly. The candidate he picked up from the airport last week had introduced himself as "Rav Mendelson," and when Joel had tried to shake the wife's hand she had held her arms stubbornly by her sides, apparently too pious to shake hands with a man other than her own husband. Joel had just stood there with his own hand flapping the air, feeling like a schmuck. The whole ride down to West Cloverdale, Mendelson's wife fussed with her frumpy kerchief, and she referred to her husband as "the Rav." "The Rav and I are soooo grateful to you for picking us up." "The Rav and I are soooo looking forward to meeting your *kehillah*." At shul that night, before Rav Mendelson even had a chance to wish anyone a Good Shabbos, Joel caught Al Edelstein's eye and drew a finger across his own throat, pantomiming an execution. Mendelson never stood a chance.

"So, Joan," Joel says now as he leads the way to the parking lot, trying not to stare at this second prospective rebbitzen's flowing red hair and her flying purple scarves, all caught and tangled in her long silver earrings, "how was your flight?"

"It was fine, thank you," she says. "Oh, and it's Joni," she corrects him, politely. "J-o-n-i."

"Ahhh, like Joni Mitchell?" Joel asks, hopefully.

"Yes. Exactly," Joni says for the hundredth — no, the thousandth — time in her life, with what she hopes is a gracious

smile. When she says “exactly” she is referring to the spelling of her name, and not the source. Her parents, both scientists, both tone deaf, actually named her for Jonas Salk. But in that one soft word, that “exactly,” Joel hears echoes of acoustic guitars and tambourines, of a high, haunting voice singing, “It's love's illusions I recall, I really don't know love at all.” And when Joni smiles at him, Joel is quite sure she sees beyond his big belly and his minivan, sees back to the Joel with long, glossy hair who used to play guitar on College Green all afternoon, the guy who knew all the words to every Seals & Croft song and every Judy Collins song and even Holly Near, and whose rendition of Cat Stevens' “Father and Son” made young poetry professors on their way to teach Whitman stop and listen to him and sometimes even grow misty-eyed.

As the light streams through the windows of the minivan and reflects off Joni's earrings, Joel remembers the way the late-afternoon sun used to glint on the river as he made his way back from class to his off-campus apartment... the way his heart used to pound whenever he caught a glimpse of his downstairs neighbor, a balalaika player named Clarisse. And so, even though Joel knows that part of his responsibility, as the official picker-upper-at-airports of prospective rabbis, is to interrogate the candidates informally, he spends the whole ride talking to Joni, listening with his head cocked slightly to the side as she responds politely to his questions about the airline food and the weather in California this time of year. He's tempted to take the most congested route into town so that he can have more time to talk to her, to listen to the sweet musical jangling of her silver bracelets, but he's afraid that if West Cloverdale seems too remote, Joni will convince her husband (what was his name again? Randy? Andy?) not to take the job. So, instead, Joel zips right down Wordsworth Avenue into town, and ferries his passengers directly to the home of their overnight hosts, Ruth and Stanley Haberman.

After polite choruses of “hello” and “welcome” and “thank you for having us,” Joel reluctantly leaves Joni and her husband in Ruth Haberman's care, and Ruth escorts the young couple to the guest

room. In preparation for their arrival, she has drawn the drapes and turned down the bed, set a small silver dish of dried apricots on the mahogany nightstand, filled a crystal carafe with water and set two small antique glasses on a gilded tray. She shows Andy and Joni where the closet is and how to set the Shabbos-light timer, how to open the window and where to find extra pillows. She hands them half a dozen fluffy, oversized towels and shows them an extravagant marble-lined bathroom. And then, before she heads into her own dressing room, which is only slightly smaller than the ballroom at the Pierre Hotel, she tells them to “Just holler if you need anything.”

Wondering what else one could possibly need in a world where old men sleep on subway grates and children go to bed hungry, they shower and head downstairs, where they are unable to find their hostess and afraid to call her name. Do they call her Ruth? Mrs. Haberman? Instinctively, they know that the wrong decision could be fatal, so they just tiptoe into the living room and across the lush Chinese carpets, trying not to knock over any of the crystal sculptures that sit on marble pedestals. Beneath a falsely flattering portrait of Ruth/Mrs. Haberman, they perch uncomfortably on the white silk sofa and speak in whispers, as a room like this seems to demand.

Half an hour later, Stan lumbers down the stairs and through the enormous entry hall, stopping short at the archway into the living room like a puppy trained with an electronic fence. He seems surprised and more than a little bit nervous to see anyone actually sitting on his wife's furniture.

“So,” he shouts affably in Andy's direction, “Ya ready to hit the road?” He is taken aback when Joni rises from the couch, as well. Here in West Cloverdale, wives never go to the evening service. But he supposes there's no harm in it. After all, she doesn't have any children to look after, and the maid set the table hours ago.

When they arrive at the synagogue, Stan shows Joni the door to the women's section of the sanctuary and personally leads Andy up to the *bima*. One by one, men traipse into the shul, and eventually a guy in khakis and a yarmulke embroidered with the words “Let's Go,

Mets!" walks up to the podium to begin the prayers: "*Ashrei yoshvei veytecha.*" Happy are those who dwell in Thy house. The congregation mumbles its way through the elegant poetry of the psalms, blah, blah, blah, and they zip right through *Lechah Dodi* as if they were greeting a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman, rather than the Sabbath Queen.

During Andy's brief talk on "Aqueous Imagery in the Sabbath Liturgy," he counts no fewer than seventeen men sleeping, their legs sprawled in the synagogue aisles, their ties loosened and their jaws slack. So he's surprised when several of the men — including one or two of the loudest snorers — come over after services and shake his hand. "Great *drasha*, Rabbi," says a big bear of a guy who claps Andy too hard on the back and introduces himself as "Gary Horowitz, gastroenterologist," leading Andy to wonder if he looks as ill as he is beginning to feel. Gary flashes him a wide and overly white smile. "Ya gotta love a rabbi like this," he whispers to one of his buddies. Andy has spoken briefly enough about the verse, "May the sea and its inhabitants tremble" that they'll all be able to hang out and talk baseball for a while without being greeted back home with "Where *were* you?! The kids are starving and the chicken's drying out!"

Who knows, he thinks, eyeing Andy's broad shoulders and trim physique, maybe this guy can even help Beth Torah's pathetic softball team end its three-year losing streak. Horowitz searches the crowd till he makes eye contact with Al Edelstein, and gives the thumbs-up sign.

The crowd thins out a bit and Stan introduces Andy and Joni to Dave Feldheim and Jerry Miller and Bernie Kranzler, and together, they all head back to the Habermans' for dinner. When they arrive, a wrinkled brown maid in a freshly-pressed black uniform shows them all into an oak-paneled library where the wives sit waiting, chatting about real estate and twiddling their pearls.

Ruth ushers everyone to the table. Stan sings *Shalom Aleichem* and chants the kiddush, making sure to hold the notes just long enough for everyone to notice that he's got pretty good pipes, for an

accountant. The maid ladles out cold curried squash soup and Ruth encourages everyone to begin eating; she is eager to hear their appreciative murmurs of, "Cold soup! How refreshing!" and "You must give me the recipe!" But the only comment is Stan's irritated "What *is* this?!"

A long and awkward silence ensues.

Before dinner, Andy had prepared himself for all kinds of questions from these committee members. He knows just how he'll answer questions about his position on women's prayer groups (strongly pro) and the West Bank settlements (vehemently opposed, but he and Joni have decided that he can understate his position a bit without sacrificing his integrity, as long as he still makes his opposition clear). But no one at the table asks him anything, as they chatter on about their newest grandchildren and their upcoming trips to Israel and the latest episode of "The Sopranos." Andy wonders whether this silent treatment is part of their interviewing strategy: "*So here's the plan: At dinner, let's nobody talk to the candidate. Let's see how he handles the awkwardness.*"

He tries in vain to think of something to say, but can't imagine what on earth he might have in common with these people. Finally, Joni steps in to save him. She turns to Barbara Kranzler, on her right, and asks, "So, what kind of work do you do?"

Bernie Kranzler stiffens. He hopes this Joanna or whatever her name is isn't one of those women's libbers who think there's something wrong with being a housewife. Bernie hopes this girl doesn't get Barbara all worked up again about how maybe she should get her Realtor's license or start a party-planning business. And when Barbara says, "I keep myself busy with volunteer work — the search committee, of course, and I actually just finished editing the shul's fundraising cookbook," Bernie hopes Joni does a better job of masking her disdain than the Kranzlers' own daughter, the big shot lawyer, usually does.

But Joni surprises him: "That must have been a huge undertaking," she says, hoping that the compliment will end this conversation before Barbara figures out that Joni herself doesn't

know how to cook, that Andy actually does all the chopping and sautéing in their household. Joni has a feeling that in this crowd, where the men don't so much as move their shoulders to make plate-clearing easier for the maid, a man whose domestic skills extend beyond barbecuing will not be looked upon favorably.

"A huuuuge undertaking," Joni repeats just to be on the safe side. "*Kol hakavod* to you!"

Barbara flashes the first genuine smile of the evening. So, for good measure Joni adds the only thing she can think of: "Fundraising cookbooks are such a fascinating window on a culture, don't you think?"

Barbara nods her head agreeably, although in all honesty, she has never thought of *The West Kloverdale Kosher Kooking Konnection Kollektion* that way at all. The shul needs a new roof, and the big givers never like to give for things like roofs, and most of the sisterhood women are terrified of the sort of people who might actually have to shop at a rummage sale, so a cookbook seemed like the best way to raise the money. Period. But in her relief that there is finally conversation at the table, Joni becomes more and more carried away, filling the Habermans' vast dining room with phrases like "ethno-sociology" and "culinary anthropology," and Barbara thinks, for the first time, about all the different kinds of recipes that she herself has Xeroxed and spell-checked: Hungarian goulash from Agnes Szabo, and Iraqi tabiyeh from Sharon Baghdadi-Bloomenfeld, and beignets from Daisy Marmelstein, who grew up in New Orleans. Who even knew there *were* Jews in Louisiana?!

My God!, Barbara thinks. When you look at it that way, this cookbook was practically a doctoral thesis on — what had Joni called it? — cultural history! And she, Barbara Kranzler, who doesn't even have a real estate license, had been in charge of it! This realization puts Barbara in such a grand mood that she praises Ruth's cold lemon chicken to the heavens — even though, as an expert culinary anthropologist, she thinks it could have used a bit more salt.

Hoping to make up for his infelicitous soup comment, Stan chimes in with his own compliments. All the other husbands agree with him:

“The chicken is delicious!” “And that wild rice salad, magnificent!” Their wives all look jealous of the attention Ruth is attracting, and so, in the end, Ruth isn't sorry she let Sheila Edelstein twist her arm into hosting the candidates, after all.

Andy expects that at a certain point, probably between the main course and dessert, his host will ask — with mock spontaneity, as if the thought has just popped into his head — whether the Rabbi would like to share a few words of Torah with the group. And for this, too, Andy has prepared, combing research books for insights into tomorrow morning's Haftorah reading until he found an interesting commentary by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and a relevant verse from the Baghavad Gita. Back home, he had jotted some notes down, but resisted the temptation to memorize those notes too carefully. For just as the invitation to speak will appear spur-of-the-moment, so would his hosts want to believe that whatever thoughts he shares with them are off the cuff. But the invitation to speak never comes, not after the main course and not after dessert. In fact, other than asking Andy if he wants sugar for his iced tea, no one acknowledges his presence the entire evening.

At midnight, when the Habermans and their friends all agree to say the Grace After Meals because they can barely keep their eyes open any longer, Dave Feldheim notices that Andy and Joni don't seem even the slightest bit fatigued. What energy! What vigor! he thinks — unaware, since he didn't see the resume and hasn't spoken to Andy and Joni all evening, that they have just flown in from California, so their body clocks have just barely struck 9 pm. That's what this shul needs, Dave decides: a whiff of youthful vitality, a breath of fresh air. All the young people are moving up to Westchester or out to Long Island, up to Teaneck or down to Highland Park. And so while he had originally felt that a prestigious shul like Beth Torah deserves a real elder statesman, someone with a political position in the Orthodox Union, he now wonders whether maybe bringing in a young guy like this Andy Whatsizname is just what West Cloverdale needs to grow the shul. Not that the synagogue is empty, at least not Saturday mornings and holidays.

Indeed, it is often so crowded that the last dozen or so men to arrive have to lean against the wall because there are no more seats. "But," Dave tells his wife when they are back home getting ready for bed, "it's like Woody Allen said: A shul is like a shark. It either moves forward or it dies."

All throughout services the next morning, Andy wishes he were back in Berkeley, where the silent *Amida* is really silent, where he doesn't have to worry that people will look at him like he's crazy if he suggests doing some deep breathing exercises before the *Sh'ma*. Well, the good news is, it's almost over. A lunch this afternoon, a little talk at the oneg, and then he and Joni will be on an airplane heading home. There has to be an opening at a Hillel House somewhere, or maybe at a hospice, he reassures himself.

When the skyline-of-Jerusalem clock at the back of the women's section reads a quarter past the Wailing Wall, a ten-year old boy ascends the bima to finish the service. No matter how many times Rabbi Feldman reminded the congregation, before he finally gave up and died on them, that the service does not conclude until the very last word of the very last prayer, the men start removing their *talleisim* and folding them up the second little Justin Lifshitz climbs onto the stepstool that will allow him to see the prayer book and starts singing *Adon Olam* to the tune of Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young," the way his father has been teaching him for weeks, night after night, with such intensity on his paternal face, such expectation in his eyes, that Justin has begun to wet the bed.

Justin finishes the prayer — cramming the eight syllables of "the Lord's with me, I shall not fear" into the last six notes of the pop tune so deftly, so much better than Aaron Aronoff led the prayer to the tune of Hatikva the previous week, that Stuart Lifshitz feels himself choking up with pride for the first time since Justin's bris. And when Andy puts an arm around Justin's shoulder, Lifshitz sees this not as the comforting gesture Andy senses this poor, trembling boy must need, but as a public endorsement that Stuart's first-born son is going to be the new Rabbi's little protégé, a young man to be reckoned with, a regular chip off the old block.

After services, Andy and Joni are surrounded by congregants who seem to want to touch them and smell them and check whether the whites of their eyes are clear — as if they were a pair of red snapper at the fish store — until the Cooper-Jaffes, their assigned hosts for lunch, inform them that it's time to go. Several other couples fall into step, and together they parade toward the Cooper-Jaffes' home with giddy anticipation that has nothing to do with their chance to check under the Garelik-Schleiffers' gills.

Brian Cooper-Jaffe is not the wealthiest man in West Cloverdale, and Nicole Cooper-Jaffe is not the most talented baker, but invitations to their home are highly coveted, nevertheless. “Going to their house is a true cultural experience,” the women in the community whisper to each other, “but without the hassle of shlepping into the city!!” Brian and Nicole are *ba'alei teshuva*, they have come to religious observance relatively late in their young lives, and their home still contains wildly exotic souvenirs of their previous existence: Organic zucchini plants grow in the backyard; nude portraits, signed by Brian himself, hang in the powder room.

Unlike most of their West Cloverdale neighbors, who go in for love seats that match the sofas and spoons that match the napkin rings, the Cooper-Jaffes like to mix things up. In the living room, an Eames lounge sits catty-corner to a bentwood rocker; on the dining table, jelly-jar tumblers are set next to Nicole's grandmother's sterling silverware. And although most of their peers in the community seem to believe that if you invite a doctor/lawyer couple with sons in the third and seventh grades to lunch, you are obligated to provide for their entertainment by including another attorney, married to another physician, along with *their* eight and twelve year old boys, Brian and Nicole think nothing at all of inviting teenagers to the same meal as senior citizens, and have even been known to have their non-religious relatives drive over on Shabbos to lunch with some of the more strictly Orthodox members of the shul.

Today, they've got the rabbinical candidate and the prospective rebbitzen; Nicole's search-committee colleague, Mel Rosenbloom, and his wife, Sandy; and the Blicks from across the street. Murray

Blick is the most obnoxious man Nicole has ever met, but Blanche is so sweet, always bringing the Cooper-Jaffe kids presents on their birthdays and leaving cakes and kugels on Nicole's doorstep like foundlings almost every week. "Oh, it's nothing," Blanche always says when Nicole thanks her. "I was already at the mall," or, "I was baking anyway." Blanche is always the one to collect cups off the floor and crumbs off the table at the end of kiddush after services, always volunteering to bring a casserole over to a shiva or when someone she doesn't even know gives birth. It's not right, Nicole thinks, that Blanche hasn't been asked to be on the search committee; she's lived in town longer than practically anyone. Well, Nicole has figured out a way to rectify this injustice: After all of the candidates have visited, she will ask Blanche whom *she* thinks should be hired as the new rabbi, and will name that prospect as her own choice when the vote is called.

When everyone is seated, Brian invites Andy to say the blessings. Nicole remembers to take a ceremonial bite of her challah before speaking and then, feeling somewhat compelled to prove that the search committee has not made a terrible mistake by inviting a newcomer like herself to join their ranks, she asks Andy about his education. He tells her — and only her, as everyone else is busy chattering about a local zoning-board fight — about his three years of Reform Hebrew School in Atlanta and his undergraduate work in comparative religion at Oberlin and his Masters in Jewish Studies from Oxford, and how, when that was done, he studied in Safed for seven years and was ordained by an Orthodox rabbi. A Bratslaver Chasid, actually.

"Kinda like being bumped from economy to business class," mutters Murray Blick, who has overheard the tail end of the conversation as he reached right across Andy's plate to grab another slice of challah.

"Oh, no," Andy says, in Murray's direction. "I don't believe that Orthodoxy is in any way superior. It just happens to be the way in which I have chosen to interface with the Divine." He smiles with warmth and sincerity to which Murray responds with a nasty scowl,

and Blanche, whose ears have perked up as they always do when Murray talks, so that she can make sure he's not saying anything for which she will have to call the hostess after Shabbos and apologize, lets out a deep breath she realizes she has been holding in for years. Three grown kids and not one of them religious. But if this lovely young man is right, if Orthodoxy really isn't superior, just different, then perhaps she hasn't been such a terrible failure as a parent after all.

Nicole heads into the kitchen to arrange some store-bought cookies on a hand-painted ceramic platter, and Sandy Rosenbloom subjects Joni and Andy to a few obligatory rounds of "Oh, you're from Berkeley, do you know my cousins the Bergs?" and "My nephew was on a post-college study program in Safed, maybe you bumped into him, David Markovitz?" and "Schleiffer with a C? Is Joni related to the Schleiffers up in White Plains?" After three strikes and she's out, the talk turns — as it invariably does around the Sabbath table in West Cloverdale — to work. Sandy complains that Mel has been keeping even longer hours than usual, and Andy asks him, "So, what is it that you do?"

"I'm a corporate litigator," Mel answers, and then adds: "and I write a little, too." As those last words leave his mouth, he wishes he hadn't said them. Andy is almost certain to ask, "Oh, might I have read anything you've written," and Mel will have to say no, he's actually never been published. There will be an uncomfortable silence, and on the way home, he'll torture himself with calculations and figure out for the hundredth time this year alone that if he were to add up all the time he's wasted on his pie-in-the-sky ideas about being a writer, it'd probably amount to half a million dollars'-worth of billable time, time he could have spent hustling for new clients and making partner instead of being passed over, or maybe he could have even opened his own firm.

Feeling like a fraud and a failure, Mel feels compelled to announce to everyone that he's been working on his silly little book for so long that the first chapters are on a five-and-a-quarter-inch floppy disk. Sandy puts her hand on his arm and says "Oh, don't

listen to my husband. He's really very talented." Mel tries to remember if she has ever said that about him — or to him — before. On the walk home, Sandy takes Mel's hand for the first time in a very, very long time and tells him that he shouldn't put himself down so much, that she read somewhere that Hemingway rewrote the opening sentence of *A Farewell to Arms* 37 times.

At the Oneg Shabbat in the Levinsons' backyard, Andy tries to make himself heard above the kids shrieking on the swing set and the buzz of men in Lacoste shirts and color-coordinated suede yarmulkes flirting with their friends' wives. No one, it seems, has much interest in his talk on the connection between the Kabbalistic *sefirot* and the chakras — which is interrupted, anyway, when little Shoshana Bender falls off the jungle gym and the personal-injury lawyers race the pediatric orthopedists to her side.

Just three more hours, Andy tells himself.

After Shabbos, Joel Liebman drives Andy and Joni to the airport, singing along with the *Ladies of the Canyon* tape he has unearthed from the back of his garage. Joni tells him he has a nice voice. Not that she would know, having inherited her parents' tin ears, but she can tell he's expecting her to say so and really, what's the harm? Joel parks in a lot rather than just let them off at the curb, waits with them until their flight is called and then drives around the airport aimlessly, singing "The Circle Game" until he sees Joni's plane ascend into the clouds. "We can't return, we can only look behind from where we came..."

Over the next few weeks, several other rabbinical candidates come to visit Beth Torah: rabbis who went to sleep-away camp with this esteemed congregant or that pillar of the community, rabbis recommended by Yeshiva University's placement department. Each one of these men feels so at home in West Cloverdale, fits in so comfortably, that when he gets back to Manhattan or Boston or Baltimore, he immediately starts researching what's involved in getting New Jersey license plates.

And then, when they've all come and gone, Sheila Edelstein puts on another pot of coffee and the search committee reconvenes.

“Let's get down to business and hold a vote,” says Al, who has to catch an early flight the next morning to a dermatology conference in Lugano. Ruth Haberman raises her hand and asks whether maybe it should be a secret ballot. She's not sure she wants to explain why she's voting for Andy, can't really explain it to herself. She is surprised at the readiness with which her colleagues concur: “Yes, a secret ballot is more democratic,” says Mel Rosenbloom, who has written ten pages of his novel this month, more than he wrote all last year. Joel Liebman and Barbara Kranzler and Stuart Lifshitz all nod vigorously, and Nicole Cooper-Jaffe, though still perplexed by Blanche's choice, feels bound to honor the promise she made to herself, and she nods, too; a secret ballot will eliminate a lot of questions and raised eyebrows.

Edelstein passes out blank sheets from his prescription pad, and the committee members all bow their heads and scribble. And when Edelstein finishes opening and sorting the ballots, he is as surprised as everyone to see that they have all ended up in a single pile.

Like everything Al Edelstein has ever proposed to the shul's board of directors, his search committee's recommendation is taken up with speed if not with pleasure. After all, prayer books and sponge cake just keep getting more expensive, and Park Avenue dermatologists still take in a lot of cash.

Andy is shocked when Stuart Lifshitz calls and informs him that he has been chosen as Beth Torah's next rabbi. He takes a deep breath, and is about to decline in a way that is firm yet apologetic, when Lifshitz — who can't bear silence of any kind—starts to speak again. “You were our first choice, by the way. In fact, the vote was unanimous.”

First choice? Andy can't believe it. Everything good in his life has come to him because another candidate had backed out unexpectedly and at the very last minute: His junior year in China, this apartment in Berkeley, even Joni's love, he knows — though she believes she has successfully concealed the truth from him.

But Beth Torah has chosen him unanimously, Lifshitz is repeating, now. He was their first choice. Andy takes another cleansing breath. When he looks up, he sees the “Tao of the Talmud” flyer on the fridge and he feels stung all over again that the last two sessions went entirely unattended. Well, he thinks bitterly, he guesses his Berkeley students' vote could be called “unanimous,” too. Even Joni had broken her promise to show up for the lecture. And suddenly, although she is right across the table from him, Andy's wife seems very far away.

As Lifshitz keeps babbling, Andy imagines that Stuart Lifshitz knows what it's like to have all the kids in school make fun of your name. He wonders whether Stuart still looks in the mirror every morning just as Andy himself does, taking in the lean, strong body he's earned by exercising and avoiding sugar, and still sees the fat kid who was always picked last for basketball.

And by the eleventh or twelfth time Lifshitz repeats the phrase “number-one choice,” Andy begins to wonder what it would be like to have a good friend like Stuie at his next job.

###

