

Bethlehem

She was buried on a beautiful spring day. The sun's magic had covered the trees in blossom and birds were busy building nests. The burgeoning springtime contrasted starkly with Joseph's sorrow. The long nights that he had spent by her sickbed had taken their toll and pale he was standing by her grave. He had torn his clothing as a sign of mourning. He watched his fellow villagers carrying the coffin to the grave, listening as they recited the familiar psalms although he himself could scarcely utter a word. The emotions of the last few days had been suffocating. Missing her was an intolerable burden. He loved her so dearly - how could he carry on without her? The ritual of washing and then dressing her in a simple white funeral cloth had been too much for him. He had hardly been able to do anything - putting stockings on her lovely slender feet had been all he could do. And now she was lying there in that coffin and the very idea that he would shortly have to throw three shovelfuls of earth on it made a shiver of horror run down his spine.

The cortège had now reached the grave. Joseph watched them lowering the coffin respectfully into the Earth. Now he had to say Kaddish, the traditional prayer for the dead. But he was still not able to speak properly. Then someone put an arm around his shoulders. He looked up and saw the encouragement in his father's face and heard him say the first words:

"May His great Name be exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed..."

His father gave an encouraging squeeze of his arm and Joseph's voice sounded husky as he took over: "...and may His reign last through your life and throughout the lives of all of the house of Israel, swiftly and soon. Now say Amen."

His fellow villagers answered with a respectful "Amen." With the help of his father, who stayed loyally at his side, Joseph continued the long prayer until it ended with them all saying "Amen". Joseph was relieved to put that part behind him. He picked up the shovel that was waiting for him by the grave. It had to be done, so best get it over with quickly. He shovelled three spadefuls of earth onto the coffin and then forced himself to watch as first his father and then his friends followed his example. The coffin disappeared slowly under the sand. Then the group left the cemetery. In the hall adjoining the synagogue, the villagers filed past to offer him their condolences. It was a long line: her cheerful nature had made her popular. Joseph had no idea how many hands he had shaken. When everyone had finally said farewell and he was alone again with his

parents and Rabbi Barachi who had led the service, he sank down onto a chair, overcome by all the emotions. His mother came to sit next to him and caressed his hand.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to come with you?” she asked sympathetically. “I think it would be better for you not to be alone right now. Or you could come with us - Nazareth isn’t all that far.”

But Joseph shook his head decisively.

“Being alone is just what I want,” he said firmly. “All those people today! They all meant well, but right now I don’t want to see anybody. Let me be - I’ll be fine.”

He held her hand for a moment, then thanked the rabbi and went home. And there in his own home, in the privacy of his own room, he let his tears flow, crying passionately until he had no more tears to give.