

THINK FOR YOURSELF

This is a story my grandfather told me and one that I would like to pass on to my grandchildren. Grandfather Isaac said it was the beginning of how he learned to think for himself.

He lived, at the time of the story, in a thatched-roof house in a *shtetl* in Poland, with his parents and his aunt Fanny. They were poor, naturally, but they had food. For Isaac it was never enough. Growing rapidly from the time he was eleven years old, he was always hungry. During the week the food was very plain, but on Fridays his mother usually managed something extra. On this particular Friday she was preparing a *cholent* (a bean stew) with a good piece of meat. The aroma filled the house, making him restless. He couldn't concentrate on his studies, his chores. He was intoxicated by the cooking smells.

Walking around outside, tossing stones into a bucket, he heard his mother scream. He rushed into the house. His mother was ringing her hands, asking God to forgive her. Aunt Fanny looked stunned. She had been cooking rice and milk. Mother had accidentally taken the milk spoon to stir the *cholent*. Mixing dairy and meat is strictly forbidden according to the laws of *kashrut*.

Isaac was afraid his mother, a pious woman, would throw away the *cholent*. He begged her to sit and be patient. He would go to the rabbi and ask for his advice. Although not agile, he ran the two miles in record time and blurted out the story to the *rebbetzin* (the rabbi's wife). She listened

respectfully but said he would have to ask the rabbi, as this was too important for her to handle.

It seemed forever until the rabbi arrived, buttoning his trousers. Isaac retold the story. The rabbi asked him such questions as "In what direction was the spoon facing? What time of day did it happen?" Questions that my grandfather, even at his young age of eleven, decided were foolish and irrelevant. Impatient as he was, he answered to the best of his ability.

Finally, the rabbi asked him how old he was. When he said he was eleven, the rabbi said he was too young, not yet a man, to deal with a matter of such importance. "Go home and tell your mother or father to see me about this," he told Isaac.

Isaac arrived home half-dead from exhaustion and anxiety. His mother asked him, "What did the rabbi say?"

He answered, "The rabbi said, 'Throw away the spoon and eat the stew.'"

He had decided, at that young age, that some rules were impractical and useless and that in this matter he would rely on himself to decide what was appropriate.