

Hershel of Ostropol was a penniless beggar who never allowed bad luck or lack of money to get him down. “It’s no disgrace to be poor, but it’s no great honor either,” he would say. This Jewish folk hero from nineteenth-century Eastern Europe is celebrated in these ten Yiddish folktales, which include stories about battles of wits, greedy men made humble, and other well-loved village antics.



“As in the Caldecott Honor Book *Hershel and the Hannukah Goblins*, Trina Schart Hyman’s wild, beautifully detailed drawings capture Hershel’s farcical interchange with the village creatures and characters. . . . Like Coyote, Anansi, and B’rer Rabbit—this trickster belongs to all of us.”—*Booklist*

“Ten superbly retold Hershel of Ostropol tales.”—*School Library Journal*

“Kimmel . . . makes each of Hershel’s escapades an ingenious delight.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

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I

What Hershel's Father Did

One cold winter night Hershel of Ostropol found himself on the road far from home. He looked across the frozen fields and wondered to himself, "Where will I sleep? There isn't a village in sight." He continued walking. His stomach rumbled, for he hadn't eaten all day. His belly was as empty as his pockets.

Up ahead he saw the lights of an inn. "I'm in luck!" Hershel said. "Surely the good people in that inn will take pity on a poor wanderer." He hurried to the inn door and knocked.

The door opened. "What do you want?" the innkeeper said in a none-too-friendly voice.

"Kind Sir, have pity on a poor stranger," Hershel began. "I have been walking all day without so much as a crust of bread to eat. I'm cold, tired, hungry, and miles from my home. Would you have a warm corner where I could spend the night? Anyplace out of the wind will do. And could you spare a bit of something for me to eat? Heaven will reward you for your good deed."

The innkeeper was a tightfisted skinflint with a permanent frown nailed to his face. He looked Hershel over from head to foot and did not like what he saw. "I don't make the decisions around here," he told Hershel. "I'll have to ask my wife." He slammed the door in Hershel's face and went to speak to his wife in the kitchen.

"There's a man at the door. He wants a place to sleep and something to eat. What shall I tell him?"

"Does he have any money?" the innkeeper's wife asked.

"I doubt it."

"In that case," said the wife, "tell him he can sleep in the stable. But as for food, don't give him anything. I've seen his kind before. They always want a little bit of something. But once they get going, they eat like starving wolves. When the time comes to pay for what they've eaten, oh, well, that's a different story. 'I don't have any money,' is what they always say. He can sleep in the stable if he wants. But as for food, give him nothing!"

"What if he insists?"

"Tell him he got here too late. All the food is gone."

The innkeeper went back to the door and repeated these words to Hershel. "You can sleep in the stable if you want, but as for food, you got here too late. It's all gone."

"I've never heard of an inn without food," said Hershel. "Surely you have something. A bone? A fish-head? A crust of bread?"

The innkeeper folded his arms across his chest. "Didn't you hear me? I said we have nothing."

Hershel glowered. He pressed his face up close to the innkeeper's and said, "Maybe you didn't hear me. I'm hungry and I want something to eat. If I don't get something to eat, I'll do what my father did!" Hershel grabbed the innkeeper by his shirt collar and began shaking him back and forth, screaming at the top of his voice. "IF I DON'T GET SOMETHING TO EAT, I'LL DO WHAT MY FATHER DID! DO YOU HEAR ME? I'LL DO WHAT MY FATHER DID!" He shook the innkeeper, like a dog shaking a rat, shouting all the while, "I'LL DO WHAT MY FATHER DID! I'LL DO WHAT MY FATHER DID!"

The terrified innkeeper broke away and ran to the kitchen.

"What is going on out there? It sounds like a maniac is loose," his wife said.

"A m. . . m. . . maniac is loose!" the innkeeper stammered. "That fellow at the door . . . he's crazy! He said if we didn't feed him, he'd . . . he'd . . ."

"He'd what?"

"He'd do what his father did!"

"What did his father do?"

“I don’t know! And I don’t want to find out!” said the innkeeper. “Quick! Gather all the food we have in the house. Put it on the table. We must feed this man. Our lives depend on it!”

The innkeeper and his wife bustled around the kitchen. They gathered up all the food in the inn and piled it on the table. The innkeeper invited Hershel to help himself.

He didn’t have to ask twice. Hershel sat down at the table and began to eat. He ate his way through roasts and sausages, baskets of fruit, a duck, a chicken, a whole goose, loaves of bread, pastries and sweets by the score. He ate until he couldn’t hold another bite. He ate until his buttons burst. No one could eat like Hershel of Ostropol!

When Hershel finished, the innkeeper came up to him and asked very politely, “Would you like something else? Some pudding? A glass of tea?”

“Oh no,” Hershel said. “I’m stuffed. I couldn’t eat another morsel.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“In that case,” the innkeeper said, “I wonder if I might ask you a question.”

“Certainly!” said Hershel.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” the innkeeper said, “but my wife and I were wondering. What was it that your father did?”

Hershel laughed. “Since you have given me such a wonderful dinner, I will gladly answer your question. On cold dark nights when my father didn’t get anything to eat . . . he went to bed hungry!”