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Here are eighteen stories from the Jewish tradition that challenge you to answer a question or solve a puzzle. When you’ve done your best, the authors give you answers that have come down through time. Can you outthink the sages, or will they help you out of a tight spot?

- Winner of Belgium’s prestigious 1996–97 *Prix Versele*
- Winner of a 1996 Anne Izard Storyteller’s Choice Award

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The Grand Inquisitor

✎ For centuries, large numbers of Jewish people lived in the city of Seville in Spain. By 1378, the town had twenty-three beautiful synagogues and had become a center for Jewish learning. But in the fifteenth century, the kings and queens of Spain were trying to unite their land and make it a Catholic country. They forced many Jews to convert to Christianity on pain of death. Some were killed, but others continued to practice their religion in secret. The Spaniards suspected this, and in 1481 they enacted the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisition gave them the power to investigate these converts, or conversos, as they were called. Any Jews who were still practicing their religion secretly were to be burned at the stake. To put this cruel policy into action, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella appointed

inquisitors all over Spain. More Jews were killed, and in 1492, the year Columbus sailed for America under the Spanish flag, the remaining Jews were expelled from Spain. In 1991 the government of Spain finally apologized to and honored the Sephardic Jews it had expelled five centuries before.

Once, in the city of Seville, a terrible crime was committed and no one knew who did it. Looking around for someone to blame, the Grand Inquisitor decided that the Jews must be at fault. Of all the Jews in Seville, he decided to go after Rabbi Pinkhes, rabbi of the largest congregation in the city. The rabbi was the man the Jews listened to and respected the most. If he was convicted, the Jews would surely suffer. The Grand Inquisitor put the rabbi on trial and tried to convince a jury that he was guilty. The jury told him that there was not a shred of evidence to support his charge. But there was no stopping the Grand Inquisitor. He came up with a new plan to convict the wise man.

“We will put this matter before God,” he said. “I have decided that the fairest way to decide this is to draw lots. I will place two rolled-up pieces of paper in a box. One will say ‘guilty,’ the other ‘not guilty.’ If the esteemed rabbi picks the piece that reads ‘guilty,’ it will be a sign that he and all the Jews are guilty as charged. The rabbi will be executed on the spot. If he

draws the piece that says ‘not guilty,’ we will have to let him go.”

But the Grand Inquisitor was a wicked man. He wanted to see the rabbi dead, and he was not about to let him go. The rabbi knew this and suspected that the cunning inquisitor would write “guilty” on both pieces of paper.

The Grand Inquisitor laughed wickedly and told the rabbi, “Now, pick one.”

If you were standing in the shoes of Rabbi Pinkhes, wise leader of the largest synagogue in Seville five hundred years ago, what would you do? How would you escape from the Grand Inquisitor’s wicked trap?



Rabbi Pinkhes knew the Grand Inquisitor well. He understood his devious train of thought. He smiled at the gloating judge. “How kind of you,” he said, “to allow me a chance to go free. How fair and just to leave this matter up to God.” Then, with a quick motion, he reached his hand into the box, drew a piece of paper, and before anyone could tell what he was doing, swallowed it!

“Why did you do that?” exclaimed the inquisitor.

“Now we will never know which piece of paper you drew. This is sure death for you.”

“I was inspired by God to swallow the paper to prove my innocence! If you have any doubt, any doubt whatsoever,” said the rabbi, “just look at the piece of paper in the box. If it says ‘not guilty,’ then the one I swallowed must have said ‘guilty.’ But if it says ‘guilty,’ why, that must mean that the one I swallowed said ‘not guilty.’”

The Grand Inquisitor gulped. Try as he might, he could not find a reason to disagree. So he reached into the box and read what the piece of paper said. Just as the rabbi suspected, it said “guilty.”

“You see?” said the rabbi. “The one I swallowed must have said ‘not guilty.’” The Grand Inquisitor’s face turned red, but he had to set the rabbi free.

