The Water Carrier

There were two wells in our town. One in the center of the market place for the peasants to water their horses; the other in the residential area. These were used largely by those living sufficiently near to carry the water in two buckets hanging from the two sides of a yoke. The yoke rested on the shoulders of the man or woman carrying the buckets. The rest of the people, including our family, had the water brought two times a week by a water carrier.

Our water carrier was a sturdy jolly Jewish man. (There were several such in the town and each had his special customers.) He had a huge water barrel resting on a contraption with four wheels. In front of this barrel was a platform on which he sat. Nearby he had a yoke, two buckets, and a huge wooden funnel. From under this platform was extended a shaft to which his horse was harnessed. The back of this barrel had a huge round hole at the bottom into which was stuck a large wooden cork. A similar hole was on the very top of the barrel, equally corked. On each side of the contraption was a wooden step.

I don’t remember whether he was supposed to bring the water from one of the wells, and perhaps he did. But the several times that I went with him, he brought the water from the river. I sat by his side as we rode into the river at quite a distance from the shore. He waited a while until the stream was running clean again after it had been disturbed by our riding in.

He opened the top hole of the barrel and replaced the wooden cork with the wooden funnel. Thereafter, he took one of the buckets and stepped on the step on the side of the barrel and poured buckets full of water from the running stream into the barrel. Of course, it took much less time to fill the barrel this way than it would if he had to draw the water bucket by bucket from the well. After the barrel was filled he turned the horse around and got out of the river.

His next task was to fill the barrels of his customers. These barrels were considerably smaller than his own barrel. We stopped at some houses before we got to ours. When a customer’s barrel was still half full he merely added a few buckets, pouring them in gently so as to stir the water in the barrel as little as possible.

When a barrel needed filling, I helped him clean out the sediment. This required a brisk shaking of the unused water in the barrel and pouring it out in the street. He then poured a bucket of fresh water from his own barrel into the smaller barrel for rinsing. When this was emptied, the barrel was returned to its place in the hall.

He next filled both buckets with water from his big barrel. After hooking the filled buckets to the sides of the yoke, he carried them to the barrel in the hall. He walked straight, without holding the buckets with his hands, and without spilling any water, until he got to the door of the hall, when he turned sideways. This he had to do because the door was not wide enough to admit him otherwise.

After the barrel in the hall was filled, it was covered with a wooden top which, at some time in the past, was itself either the top or bottom of a barrel of the same size. This cover had a wooden handle on top for easy removal and replacing.

Throughout all these activities the water carrier sang songs from synagogue prayers. The songs from weekday prayers differed from those of the Sabbath, and the latter differed from the songs of Holiday prayers. He would start each song with the Hebrew words and ended by humming the melody because he was a simple man and didn’t know the rest of the words. He would ask me to accompany him with the words he didn’t know. When I took the liberty of joining him at the beginning of the song he objected. When he knew the words he wanted no interference; I was to join him only when he started humming the melody. He also had special songs to fit his several activities. For riding to and from the river he had several songs which lent themselves to keeping time with the clop, clop of the horse’s hooves. For the splash made by the bucket as it hit the water, for pulling the bucket up to the barrel and for pouring the water into the funnel, he had a song which lent itself to keeping time with the splash (by raising his voice), with the quiet few moments when he raised the bucket to the barrel (by lowering his voice) and with the different kind of noise from pouring the water into the funnel (by keeping his voice not too high and not too low). When he walked straight with the yoke on his shoulders and a filled bucket on each side of him, his singing could keep time with the horse’s hooves, as well as with a soldier’s march. When he was obliged to turn sideways in order to get through the door, he would continue singing in exactly the same way as he did when he walked straight as if to prove that turning sideways with the yoke on his shoulders was just as easy for him as walking straight.

After examining and almost admiring the simple, carefree, easy lives of woodcutters, and water carriers, my father’s predictions that I would end up being one of them (unless I devoted all my time to studying, etc,) held no threats for me.

By David B. Schreiber

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