

# Tsipke

by Salomea Perl

TRANSLATED BY RUTH MURPHY

**H**er name was Tsipke. She was dark, dark as the night, and thin as a broomstick. Whether she was young or old—no one could tell. Her face was pockmarked and wrinkled, and her tiny, frightened eyes were those of a hunted animal. She had a head of hair, though—black as coal, long, thick, disheveled. The butcher called her “Elflocks,” and whenever he flew into a rage, he would grab her head and drag her by her hair to the ground.

Tsipke was a divorcée and worked as a servant for Hatskel the Butcher. Her husband had abandoned her the morning after their wedding night. Tsipke chased after him for three days; she barely managed to get him in front of the rabbi. There, before the rabbi’s wife, he gave the excuse that he couldn’t live with her. He gave her the divorce, but as for the few groschen she had saved, those he kept for himself.

At Hatskel the Butcher’s, Tsipke toiled like a horse. The household there, no evil eye, consisted of ten people, and each one of them screamed and yelled. From the minute the sun came up, she scraped and scoured, washed and polished. From daybreak on, she heard only blistering curses and a stream of abuse. Filth flowed from her in streams, and her hands were black and as bony as two sticks.

The butcher called her a common tramp, and the butcher’s wife sent her running a hundred times a day: from the cellar to the butcher shop, from the butcher shop to the attic, from the attic to the barn, and from the barn to the cellar, as if she had legs of iron and the strength of a Russian soldier. Tsipke dared not open her mouth; the butcher’s wife was a real gem, and she would grab Tsipke—for the tiniest little thing—by the head and fling her to the devil himself.

Tsipke never cried. No one had ever seen her weep with tears nor ever heard a sob. Tsipke clucked. She would wedge herself into a corner and cluck for long periods of time, just like a hen that was being kept from sitting on her eggs. The clucking was a type of groan, like a hiccup, like a heart breaking.

Itsikel Badchen,<sup>1</sup> who lived upstairs in the attic room, had his little saying about this: “The mistress crows, and the maid clucks.”

The first time that Shmerl, the old yeshiva bachelor, heard Tsipke cluck he stopped and stood still, listening. Tsipke was sitting on the ground, her head buried in her lap, trembling as if with fever. She had one hand pressed to her heart; in the other, she held a wet scouring pad. Around her stood buckets and barrels, all copper and brass.

Shmerl felt his heart constrict. He could see that there would be no dinner for him that day. Quietly, he went over to the oven and stood there, warming himself.

The kitchen was a scene of true devastation. The butcher’s wife, flame-red, was shrieking as if a fire burned inside her. The children were whistling and stomping their feet, and Tsipke remained sitting on the ground clucking, without a whimper, without a tear, without a sob

“Get out of my house, you peasant! And you too, you do-nothing!”

Shmerl moved reluctantly toward the door. He had not even warmed up properly yet, and his stomach was clamoring for food. But he was well aware that the mistress could also send a few curses his way, and he quietly opened the door.

In the doorway, he looked around one more time. Tsipke, breathing in gasps, her scouring pad in hand, was already scraping the large holiday keg, the one with the wide, brass hoops.

Shmerl, the yeshiva bachelor, received a meal each day from the rich householders in town. He slept either on a bench in the study house or in the attic. Twice a week he was permitted to go to Hatskel the Butcher’s house for a bit of hot food. For Hatskel the Butcher, hot meals were never in short supply; food and drink were available in abundance. Hatskel the Butcher was a Jew who contributed to charity and interest-free loans; it was not for nothing that he was president of the synagogue.

Until now, Shmerl had never even really looked at Tsipke. He never looked at anything; he would sit down, consume his dinner, and be out of the house without even a “good day” to anyone. “A fine guest!” the butcher’s wife would sneer. “He doesn’t lift a finger for us. He should at least empty a bucket! Gorging and swilling—that’s all he does.”

That same day, a few hours later when it was almost time for evening prayers, Shmerl was once again in Hatskel the Butcher’s house. His heart felt as if it were being pinched and squeezed, and his throat was dry. He had spent the whole day sitting in the dark study house, swaying over the Gemara.<sup>2</sup> His clothes were full of holes, and he shivered from the cold.

The butcher was in the shop all day, and by then the butcher’s wife had also left the house. Shmerl felt a bit relieved. The kitchen exuded warmth, as if in paradise. The glow of the oven could be seen from afar, and the odor of onions and garlic, of braised lungs and liver, almost lifted him off his feet. Supper was already cooking in the oven.

Shmerl eased farther into the kitchen.

Tsipke stood before the oven, peeling potatoes. With her left foot, she rocked a cradle that held the wailing, shrieking little Mendele. Behind her on a bench stood Yosele, beating her shoulders with his little hands as if she were a drum.

Shmerl took up a spot by the oven. He felt a bit resentful toward Yosele. He could not himself understand how it was that Tsipke could stand there quietly, peacefully, lost in thought, as if Yosele’s blows were not meant for her. Her left foot was her only reaction, still rocking the cradle.

Shmerl looked at her. He was suddenly seized with the desire to chat with her. Certainly he was no great orator; in the study house his friends had to pull the words out of him. He said everything in sign language, and for as long as he had been a bachelor, he had never started up a conversation with a female. Now, however, he felt a stream of words push up out of him.

“Why is he bawling like that? Is he hungry?” he asked, moving a bit closer to the cradle.

“Do I know? May I know so little of misfortune . . . maybe he wants to suckle, but what can I do about that? Do I have milk?”

“Oh, and why don’t you go eat, young man?” Tsipke remembered. “There it is, right there in the pot, the clay pot. I set it aside.”

Then, bending over the cradle, her thin arms embraced the child and her face pressed closer, closer to the pillow. In a loving voice, she coaxed him, “Don’t cry, Mendele! Don’t cry.”

Mendele let out a wail and closed his eyes. Yosele stretched out on the floor and kicked the door with his little feet. Tsipke, bent over the cradle, her breast pressed to the child, in a tearful voice filled with affection, pleaded: “Don’t cry, Mendele! Don’t cry! Sleep then, sleep!”

Shmerl had already finished his meal and said grace. It was already quite late—time to recite the evening prayers. Shmerl stood by the door, holding the door handle. He wanted to say something, but even he himself didn’t know what . . . he no longer had the urge to talk. The abundance of words he’d had inside him had now flown away somewhere, as if by magic. He did so much want to say something, but he knew not what, even if someone was to pull out his tongue.

“Sleep then, Mendele, sleep! My little boy!”

It somehow sounded so tender, so very tender, just as if Tsipke were the child’s mother, just as if she were holding him close, kissing him, suckling him . . .

Shmerl felt overtaken by vertigo. He turned his head away, as if he were ashamed to see the thin, sunken chest . . .

“Well, enough already! She’s lulled herself to sleep. Just look at that nutcase!” The butcher’s wife carelessly slammed the door.

Tsipke jumped up from the cradle and, frightened, both hands went to her head. Her bonnet lay on the ground and her long, black hair spilled across her shoulders. Quaking, Shmerl left the kitchen.

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Itsikel Badchen was a prankster, a jokester. He loved to make fun of Tsipke and was constantly ridiculing her. This was a great source of enjoyment to the butcher’s wife, and many times Itsikel received payment from her for his jokes: a fish for Shabbos, or even a piece of the entrails. Tsipke would tremble with fear in front of Itsikel, as if he were fire.

“Tsipke! Tsipke, when will you become a bride?” Often, he would spring this question on her. “When, God willing and with happiness and good fortune, will I be celebrating your wedding in song?” he joked. “Tsipke! Tsipke! My pretty little bride!” Then he would go up to her, screw up his face, and stretch out his arms as if he were veiling the bride.

Tsipke would back up against the wall, her head cowering between her shoulders and squirming in fear like a cornered chicken. “Like the Yom Kippur chicken,” the butcher’s wife quipped.

“So, then, Tsipke! Tsipke! What do you say, then?” Itsikel would not let her go. “Perhaps you already have a bridegroom? Yes?”

“Is that your business? Why are you so concerned about it? Worry about your own wife and your own children,” she flared, furious. “Why do you mock me? What am I, a crazy person?” Then, panting and trembling with fright, she would slam the door and, with a cluck, run down the steps, all the way into the cellar.

“Down she goes to the cellar, to cool off,” Itsikel continued to heckle her. Hands at his sides and keeping time with his foot, he sang to her:

*“Why won’t you believe me,  
That I love you so,  
To our righteous rabbi,  
Both of us shall go.”*

Out of breath, Tsipke would sit down on the doorstep, rest her head on the cellar door, close her eyes, and cluck, cluck without words, without a voice, without a tear.

“It’s some sort of dybbuk,”<sup>3</sup> the neighborhood women trembled. “That a person doesn’t cry but clucks instead . . . who knows! Maybe she really does have a dybbuk inside her . . . it happens—would that it didn’t, as it does.” Afraid, the women would shuffle farther away from the steps.

Shmerl was not such a coward; he had no fear of dybbuks. Many times he stood on the stairs, leaning on the banister and listening attentively.

He had somehow managed to gain entrée with the butcher’s wife, and he came into the kitchen nearly twice a day. As the holiday

approached, he even became very useful. The butcher's wife could not stop marveling how Shmerl had become a completely different person. He chopped wood, carried out a bucket, and ground matzo—just like one's right hand. He was at least no longer gorging himself for free.

Just before the holiday, the household was up to its neck in drudgery. Tshipke could not keep up with the dirt. The butcher's wife now spent her entire day in the butcher shop, as the butcher couldn't manage on his own. The butcher boys would rob him blind, but they were terrified of the butcher's wife.

Day and night Tshipke scraped and koshered, and again scraped and koshered. The kitchen looked like a barn, and the dirt kept rising like leavening bread. The chickens had gotten out of their cage and ran around underfoot, flying over people's heads. The turkey was always chasing after them, puffing himself up, as red as Esau and as ferocious as a pirate.

Right before Passover, the butcher's wife quarreled with the water carrier. By then they needed six times as much water as before, and he was apportioning it out drop by drop as if it were medicine. "May he be seized with convulsions! The maidservant isn't sick; she can carry the water herself, and I'll do without a water carrier."

Tshipke clutched her head in her hands. "I'll carry the water?" She began clucking. "Am I a porter? I didn't agree about the water, I . . ."

In fury, the butcher's wife jerked the door open. "Who's keeping you here, then? Go to hell! Just look at this oaf! She's telling me what to do!"

Tshipke squeezed herself into a corner, her head once again hidden in her lap, and sat that way for a half hour. Then she quietly crawled out of her corner, found the kegs, picked up the pails, and, head hanging, set off to fetch the water.

"So, it's already settled!" Itsikel scoffed at her, incensed. "It's a case of 'Don't drag me; I'm going willingly. She's doing me a favor.' Of course Shmerl is standing at the well, how very sad for him! What a way to end up, such an outcome for a young man. "

Itsikel Badchen happened to be a relative of Shmerl's, a sort of great-great-uncle. Shmerl was an orphan. His family consisted mainly of indigents and paupers, but they were all good Jews and able Torah

students. Shmerl himself was once known for his brilliant mind and as an extraordinary Talmudist, but a little strange, a little twisted. The whole town had thought that he would turn out to be a great scholar, a rabbi, a man of great virtue and devoutness. Back then, Itsikel Badchen had believed in him without reservation and had his eye on him.

In those days, Itsikel's daughter, Hinde, was of marriageable age. Although a charming girl, she had not had any luck in finding a husband. It occurred to Itsikel to arrange a match with Shmerl, and little by little, bit by bit, he began broaching the subject with Shmerl. He promised him all manner of beautiful gifts and room and board for life. Shmerl said neither yes nor no, and Itsikel, thinking the matter concluded, invited guests to the engagement party. Shmerl and his bride were both brought to the party; Shmerl was seated close to her table so that from time to time, he could glance over at her. It was quite a joyous occasion; the bride looked like a princess, and Itsikel stroked his beard in satisfaction and kept going over to the other table to see whether Mendel the Beadle had finished writing up the marriage contract.

A scream and pandemonium came from inside the house. People jumped up, turned around, jostled each other. The pot lay ready to be broken to seal the engagement; where is the groom? Let him come sign!—Shmerl was nowhere to be found; the earth had swallowed him up.

Itsikel ran out of the house like a madman. He spent the entire night searching for Shmerl, and he only caught up with him the next day in the study house. Shmerl looked pale, his eyes bleary, his voice hoarse. Choking, he told Itsikel that he would not marry, he could not, that he would never marry.

“Damn you to hell! Stay a bachelor until the day you die!” raged Itsikel, and he ran out of the study house. Furious, he had wanted to bring Shmerl to trial before the rabbi, but fortunately another bridegroom was found, as if he'd dropped out of the sky, and Itsikel's anger slowly abated. Shmerl, however, did indeed never marry, and now sat in the study house, an old yeshiva bachelor.

Years went by. The householders who fed Shmerl were ready to be rid of him. The matchmakers still ran after him with propositions, but

Shmerl would neither hear of nor consider any match. A dark cloud had descended on him; he was always distracted, silent, melancholy. People in town said that one night he had had an encounter with a young girl who had long black hair and burning eyes. The girl was a corpse, the corpse of his very own sister, Rokhel, who had once fallen in love with a modern Jew. After that, she too refused to ever marry. It was with long, gray hair—her braid completely gray—that they laid her in the grave.

Itsikel well knew the whole story, but he kept it to himself and never divulged the secret to anyone; after all, it was his family, his honor, and his shame. Beat me and throw me among my own folk! Itsikel Badchen happened to be Shmerl's great-great-uncle.

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It was now very late. The mistress was long asleep in her bed; the butcher sat at the slaughterhouse awaiting the ritual slaughterer. Tsipke grabbed the buckets and, barefoot as she was, ran out to the well. She wanted to do all the water carrying at night; in the daytime she felt ashamed, as if she were a thief. The water carriers mocked her and wouldn't let her come up the well, and the town servant girls swore at her and berated her that she allowed her mistress to ride roughshod over her, and that no servant girl was ever allowed to fetch water, no matter what.

The street was very dark. A thick fog lay over the entire town like a white veil. Tsipke's teeth were chattering, both from cold and from fear. One time, several years ago, she had seen a demon, and ever since then, in the darkness something behind her always seemed to be tugging at her dress and hair. She couldn't recite the bedtime prayer since she'd never been to heder, but from the butcher's wife she had picked up a few words that went "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob."

A light was still shining at the baker's wife's, where matzo was being baked, and over there, in that corner, a candle was also burning, a very small candle. The candlelight came from the study house, and as she came closer to it, Tsipke saw some of the yeshiva students sitting with their heads lying on the table while others swayed back and forth over a volume of the Talmud. Shmerl alone paced back and forth, back and forth,

from one wall to the other.

There was no one at the well, and Tsipke hastily drew the water. The buckets were so heavy that several times she had to stop and lean against a wall. Her shoulders ached dreadfully, and a splinter in the toe of her left foot stabbed her like a knife. She had no idea when she'd gotten a splinter. It does happen sometimes that one finds a bluish mark on one's body—the dead sometimes pinch people when they're asleep, and she had a great many such marks—but where had she gotten a splinter in her toe?

More dead than alive, she dragged herself to the house, set down the buckets, and almost fell on the stoop amid the kegs. She longed to stretch out her legs, straighten her spine, and rest her head on the banister. At the baker's wife's it was now dark, but there, in the corner, a light was still shining, shining so beautifully, so warmly. Tsipke couldn't turn her eyes away; one candle had now become many candles, lamps, Hanukkah menorahs, a splendid moon, magnificent, beckoning stars. The stars were shining with a holiday joy! . . . On such a night there were no demons about; on the eve of a holiday, they rested.

She felt her eyes closing and her head was spinning, as if she were drunk. The kegs tumbled from her to the ground. Tsipke opened her eyes . . . Shmerl was standing next to her.

Embarrassed, she got to her feet. "I wasn't sleeping," she said defensively.

Then: "May I be as free of pain as what I'm telling you is true . . . it was just something . . ."

As she was about to pick up the kegs, Shmerl moved closer to her, very close, and took her by the hand. His eyes looked as if he was lost in a dream, dazed, and his face was pale, contorted.

Tsipke emitted a soft cluck. Her hands trembled and her teeth began to clatter, one against the other. Something took hold of her as if she were in the throes of a terrible fever.

"Young man! Go, young man!" she protested weakly. Shmerl leaned toward her. His eyes were downcast and his lips were quivering.

"I will treat you well, Tsipke! I want us to make a formal commitment to each other . . . you are my bride."

She let out a wail and looked at him, shuddering, scared. She clasped her hand to her heart. Shmerl quickly untied his neckerchief and took Tsipke by the hand.

“I hereby agree . . .”

“Just look at this couple! They deserve each other!”

Hatskel the Butcher stood in front of the doorstep, having returned from the slaughterhouse.

1 (Yiddish of Hebrew origin): an entertainer at traditional Eastern European Jewish weddings who would amuse guests during important ritual moments with songs, jests, and poetry.

2 (Hebrew/Aramaic): one of two parts of the Talmud, the other being the Mishnah.

3 (Yiddish): An evil spirit: the wandering soul of a sinner who takes possession of a person’s body and refuses to leave it until exorcised.

“Tsipke,” [yiddishbookcenter.org](http://yiddishbookcenter.org), August 2017