

# The Shomer

by [Shai Afsai](#) (December 2018)



1.

When he departs from this world, a man discards not only the possessions he has gained through years of honest or deceitful toil, but also the physical instrument of their acquisition. According to Jewish custom, this well- or ill-used body is to be buried without delay. It takes time, however, to arrange a funeral, notify relatives, gather the late man's acquaintances, and attend to other details surrounding a burial. During this period between a person's death and the return of his body to the earth, the remains are to be watched over. Why, and what for, we can come to later.

In the past, before my time, a relative or associate of the deceased probably discharged this duty. But so vast is the disintegration of familial and societal ties that has beset mankind, not leaving even the sphere of religious obligations untouched, that a person can no longer be confident family or friends will console him in this manner after the hour of his passing. If this does not mean much to you now, such matters gain in importance the more one gains in years.

Sometimes it happens that family or friends are unavailable, are busy, are away—but even when they are not, I think we can admit that guarding a corpse is a task many people would rather avoid. So varied and numerous are the ways by which a man is capable of winning the bread he eats in this world, that a person may be salaried to watch the dead. This was the case with Ganzenberg.

Before continuing, let me first assure you I am not the kind to invent the things you will hear out of the

air. But whether or not you choose to believe this tale, what does it matter to me? A man reaches an age when he tells stories even if he knows no one is listening. At least I have an audience.

## 2.

In a one-bedroom basement apartment, equidistant from a kosher Chinese restaurant and a Jewish funeral home, lived Josh Ganzenberg. At these two places of business, he, twenty-seven years of age, made his modest living. At the restaurant he was a *mashgiach*—a religious supervisor; at the funeral home he was a *shomer*—a guard or watchman.

This restaurant, called The Cho-Zen, was owned by two Koreans, managed by a Hmong, and employed several undocumented Cambodian cooks. The Cho-Zen was under rabbinic supervision and required Ganzenberg's services in order to maintain its kosher credentials. From the first cook's arrival at dawn until the last soy-soaked bag of trash was removed at night, Ganzenberg or a fellow *mashgiach* was there, ensuring that the restaurant's operators adhered stringently to Jewish dietary laws on the premises. None were allowed to so much as boil a noodle without the presence of a supervisor, lest the Orthodox Rabbinic Council revoke its certificate. And I don't have to tell you what happens to a Chinese restaurant outside of China if Jews stop frequenting it.

Being a *mashgiach* meant that Ganzenberg had a good deal of spare time on his hands in a workday. True, he could not leave the restaurant, but his duties there were few. Occasionally he was called upon to crack eggs ("You crack egg") and verify that there was no blood in them. Sometimes he would be asked to rinse broccoli, bok choy, or some other leafy green ("You wash vegetable") and determine that no insects remained. But for the most part Ganzenberg spent his

days at The Cho-Zen reading, watching the preparation of Chinese food, and eating it free of charge. What he read we can come to later. What he ate is less important.

At night, and sometimes during the day, Ganzenberg also worked as a *shomer*—a guard or watchman, as I mentioned—at Schwartz's Memorial Chapel, the Jewish funeral home near his one-bedroom basement apartment.

Now, if you ask me how I know so much about Ganzenberg, I will tell you that if you are an old man, you find yourself spending an inordinate amount of time at funeral homes bidding farewell to people you cared about. There comes a day when you know more people inside the cemetery than out of it. And if you are an old man who did not know what it was to make so much as a cup of tea during all his married years, and whose wife has passed away, you also find yourself having many meals at The Cho-Zen. At those places I met Ganzenberg and learned about his life.

### 3.

It is said that a person seldom anticipates the hour of his own death. Yet Ruben Katz, age twenty-seven, awoke on Friday morning from a fearful sleep, one of the worst he could remember, feeling deeply that perhaps on this day it would be wise to stay at home and avoid the world. Such is mammon's pull on man, however, that thirty minutes later Ruben was heading to work, stepping briskly onto a bus, and reaching into his pocket to pull out the quarters and dimes needed for the fare.

As exact change revealed itself in his open palm, he complemented himself on disregarding his earlier premonition and allowed himself to believe that maybe this would be a great day after all. And indeed it would be for someone, somewhere, but alas, not for Ruben Katz.

Ruben moved toward the back of the bus and seated himself across from an attractive young woman—Vietnamese or Laotian, perhaps, or Cambodian. He could not tell for sure. She wore a little black one-piece dress over black stockings, and black pumps. Ruben made sure she was not looking before taking in her legs and thighs for a long moment. She was beautiful and her beauty set his mind to dreaming.

They fell passionately in love. She did not speak English very well, but that was no impediment to communicating the intensity of their feelings for each other. In fact it helped. He was in her parents' kitchen at a table laden with Asian cuisine, which he ate respectfully with chopsticks as her family chatted in Khmer. After the meal, he squatted with her father and uncles—short, lank, wiry men with dirt under their fingernails—and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes in the living room with them while the women cleaned up in the kitchen. Although hesitant, at first, the family quickly grew to like the American she had brought home, who was curious and respectful of their customs, though woefully incapable of picking up even the most rudimentary elements of their language. Her plump mother, in particular, became as fond of him as of her own sons.

The bus came to a halt, waking Ruben from his reverie, and the woman disembarked. Re-buttoning his coat, Ruben prepared to get off at the next stop. His final thoughts were of how he would like to have a hot dog, heavy on the relish, and maybe a milkshake, before work. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, a young man built like a linebacker, who was running to catch the bus, accidentally plowed him down. Ruben was knocked into the curb, head first. Seconds later he was dead.

Thus concluded Ruben's life, a promising career in advertising, and plans for breakfast.

4.

At eleven a.m. Ganzenberg was awakened from a Friday morning nap by Isadore Schwartz, the funeral director, who informed him that one Ruben Katz had died earlier in the day.

Ganzenberg took an active interest in his work, whether at the restaurant or the funeral home. "What did he die from?" Ganzenberg asked.

"A man trying to get the bus pushed him over and cracked his skull. He had few living relatives, but a great-uncle is taking care of the costs. This uncle is in Chicago and when he flies in on Sunday we'll have the funeral. Until then, I need a *shomer*."

"I'm your man, Mr. Schwartz."

Ganzenberg's shift would begin about an hour before sundown on Friday evening, and conclude shortly after the end of *Shabbos*, when another *shomer* would relieve him. This was a lengthy shift, but Ganzenberg's duties were few. He was to read psalms in order to comfort the deceased, who still maintained a connection to his body and was concerned over it, and elevate his soul. What Ganzenberg did with the rest of his time, so long as he kept inside the funeral home, was up to him. Mostly he read.

In the past it used to be that a person was needed to physically protect the dead from rodents or body snatchers, but these are now less of a problem—except on Staten Island, I am told. Still, it is essential that even after death, a Jew should not be left without another Jew to console him.

Now, Ganzenberg had a girlfriend, a pretty young lady twenty-four years of age by the name of Rebecca Leipan. Even a person who would miss the sun in the morning or the moon in the middle of the night could not help but notice that

this *meydle* was getting it into her head that Ganzenberg should soon be proposing. Given that the theme of both of Ganzenberg's professions was constant observation, Rebecca's new proclivity did not escape him either.

When a young woman starts to acquire such matrimonial sentiments, she sets about trying to make the man she has selected into someone she can live with. You understand what I am saying. My own wife did so with me; Eve did this to Adam. Here is the man, she says to herself, as he is: he dresses like this, he acts like that, he has these goals, and he has those hopes. Then she tries to transform him, to alter him like a pair of ill-fitting trousers with all the tools of her seamstress-sex. Sometimes she succeeds. With Ganzenberg, Rebecca was not succeeding. The man appeared content to live in his basement apartment, eat Chinese food, and watch the dead until the day when someone would have to watch him. This did not suit Rebecca. For that reason, also, Ganzenberg did not mind having to spend *Shabbos* in the funeral home. He would have a little peace from her.

## 5.

Ganzenberg arrived at Schwartz's Memorial Chapel a good half-hour before *Shabbos*. Schwartz was in his office, on the phone, trying without success to ascertain the whereabouts of a shipment of eight hundred *yarmulkes* that was to have arrived a week before. He motioned for Ganzenberg to take a seat across from him.

"Look, you bastards, I ordered those *yarmulkes* fourteen days ago. Two weeks. I have a funeral here on Sunday and I don't have my *yarmulkes*. What kind of circus are you clowns running?"

The woman on the other end said something that made Schwartz roll his eyes. He leaned back in his faux



leather desk chair and gestured for Ganzenberg to bring him a cup of water from the cooler.

“Lady, an employee of mine is getting me a cup of water. By the time I finish drinking the water in that cup, I better have word from you that my *yarmulkes* will be here on Sunday even if old man Jakobowitz has to drive them down himself Saturday night. Is that clear?”

Ganzenberg handed Schwartz the cup.

“She has me on hold,” said Schwartz, sipping the water slowly. “Business isn’t business anymore, Ganzenberg. You remember what I’m saying. Jakobowitz roasts in the Florida sun with his mistress, leaves his fool of a son to steer the ship, and I don’t get my *yarmulkes*. Family isn’t family and business isn’t business.”

The woman said something and Schwartz nodded. “Good. You do that.” He hung up the phone and finished his water. “Well, Ganzenberg, let me show you your charge.”

Although Schwartz was almost universally regarded as an unpleasant man—except perhaps by the dead with whom he worked, and from whom, he often repeated, he had never heard any complaints—and in turn seemed to find the bulk of mankind detestable, he did not dislike Ganzenberg. Maybe it was his utter lack of financial aspirations that somehow made Ganzenberg tolerable, his air of complete indifference to worldly matters. Schwartz had been ambitious as a youth and had had lofty dreams. What did they get for him, those ambitions and that dreaming? Reordering *yarmulkes* at four-thirty on a Friday afternoon at the age of seventy-six? Getting divorced from a weary wife who was no longer willing to share him with his work? Owning a business that his children had no interest in entering?

“Here he is,” said Schwartz, opening the door of the refrigerator room. Ruben Katz lay on his back, clad in a

white burial shroud, sleeping the sleep of death. "He was only twenty-seven. Worked in advertising. A real shame. Don't forget to set the timer in your room, Ganzenberg. You don't want to sit in the dark all *Shabbos*. We had a *shomer* who worked here once who did that, you know—forgot all about the *Shabbos* timer."

Ganzenberg had already heard the sermon-like story of this *shomer* several times, and hoped Schwartz would not repeat it now. With each prolonged narration, new vile and contemptible traits attached themselves to the careless *shomer's* personality, while Schwartz's keen powers of prognostication, allowing him to realize the watchman's true nature even before the moment of his hiring, grew in kind. *Shabbos* would be starting soon and Ganzenberg wanted to settle in.

"The man was absent-minded, Ganzenberg," Schwartz began. "I could tell this the second I saw him. I knew right away he was one of those fellows who would forget his own name if people weren't always calling him by it. He had a sleepy, sloppy look about him, like an alcoholic or a . . . "

Schwartz paused, distracted by something on the carpet. "I just had the cleaners in here yesterday," he said, bending to pick it up.

Upon rising, Schwartz held a narrow piece of red string, the length of a paper clip, between his forefinger and thumb. He inspected it contemptuously. "What is this? What are they doing? Bringing the dirt in with them instead of taking it out? I hire them to remove the filth and the bastards spread it around? Business isn't business, Ganzenberg."

Schwartz put the string in his pants pocket and unlocked the door of the *shomer's* sleeping quarters, which contained a long couch, a small refrigerator, a table, and two chairs.

"How's your lady friend, Ganzenberg?"

"Rebecca's fine." Ganzenberg tossed his duffel bag onto the couch, and began placing his stock of Chinese food, beer, and soda into the fridge. A few books—a prayer book, *The Living Torah*, a Book of Psalms, *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, a tattered copy of *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones*, and a couple of Yiddish fiction chapbooks in English translation—lay among a change of underwear and socks at the bottom of the bag.

"You hold on to that one. She's a real beauty. Alright, you have a good *Shabbos*, Ganzenberg."

"You too, Mr. Schwartz. Good *Shabbos*."

## 6.

After Schwartz's departure, Ganzenberg set the table in his room, covering it with a white tablecloth and placing on it two candlesticks, two candles, two *challahs*, and a bottle of wine. His preparations complete, Ganzenberg lit the candles. Having prayed *mincha* earlier in the day—which I mention only so that you should not think he was the kind to miss *davening*—Ganzenberg now sang the *kabbalas Shabbos* service softly to himself. He did not have a bad voice, Ganzenberg, but even when alone he always sang softly and hesitantly.

He had concluded *maariv*, and was about to recite *kiddush* and begin his meal, when he heard knocking at the side door of the funeral home. At first he ignored the knocking, but it persisted, becoming louder and more determined.

As the night had grown quite cold, Ganzenberg found Rebecca Leipan shivering when he unlocked and opened the door. She smiled through chattering teeth.

"Good *Shabbos*, Josh. I thought you might like some company."

True, it was nice of her to show up. At the same time, a man wants some peace, and if he cannot find it at night in a funeral home, then where?

“Are you going to keep me shivering out here or are you going to invite me in?”

So Ganzenberg let her in and set a place for her, but conversation was sparse during the meal. On the one hand, he did not want to make her feel uncomfortable for visiting; on the other hand, he did. He spoke only when she addressed him and figured this was an acceptable compromise.

As they ate, Rebecca spotted a book on the couch. “*The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*. Are they good?”

“I haven’t started it yet. I was going to read a little before going to sleep. I’ve always liked ‘The Overcoat.’ Pass the lo mein, please.”

Ganzenberg read a good deal, as I said. He also had a bachelor’s degree in comparative religion, and several of his college professors had communicated a hope that he would pursue graduate studies, although Ganzenberg had no inclination to do so.

This too troubled Rebecca, who made no secret of her disappointment. She voiced it on numerous occasions, including this one.

“You read so much, you should be a professor.”

Ganzenberg put down his plastic fork and knife. “Now every man who reads should become a professor?”

“A man with a B.A. in Comparative Religious Studies should not be watching Cambodians cook.”

“That’s religion. I watch the cooks. I watch the dead. I compare them too.”

"So clever! Can you compare your salary with a professor's?"

"Rebecca, not everything is money."

"With you nothing is money. My father wants to know who will support us. How we will eat."

"You need to eat? Here, have an egg roll. There are more in the fridge."

Dinner progressed in silence and Rebecca excused herself after *bentshn*. Ganzenberg escorted her to the side door of the funeral home. Outside, she turned and faced him. "I don't mean to pressure you or fight with you, Josh. I just want you to think a little long term, that's all. Good *Shabbos*."

"Good *Shabbos*, Rebecca."

He followed her with his eyes, admiring her gait as she walked down the street.

On a recent evening, unbeknownst to Rebecca, Ganzenberg, with melancholy fingers, had begun typing a resume for graduate school. The following morning, as resigned as a piece of cloth to the seamstress's sewing needle, he had phoned three professors for letters of recommendation. Then, in the afternoon, pulling himself away from the philosophy section of a bookstore, he had quietly purchased a tome on nursing home administration, the Leipan family business, leaving behind a collection of Spinoza's writings for which he had been saving.

After shutting and locking the door, Ganzenberg decided to check on Ruben Katz.

Ruben Katz's arms rested at his sides and his eyes were tightly shut. Despite the visible traces of a violent wound to his head, he looked peaceful to Ganzenberg, as though taking a much needed nap. How we all ignore the exhaustion of living. Even the aged, even the critically ill, fail to take full notice. Like tired children refusing to go to bed, we resist the slumber of dissolution, throwing every tantrum at the world to ward it off. I resist it too.

Ganzenberg pulled a chair up beside Ruben's body and opened his Book of Psalms. He looked at Ruben's face, and concentrated on comforting him and elevating his soul.

Ruben's eyes opened slowly and he blinked hard several times.

"It's bright in here," he said.

Ganzenberg dropped the Book of Psalms and fell backward in his chair, smacking his head firmly on the floor. The intense pain muffled some of his shock.

"Sorry I scared you," Ruben said, rising into a seated position.

Full terror set in on Ganzenberg and he shook uncontrollably. He tried to stand, but his legs refused to support him. He held one hand to his head and with the other groped around the floor for the Book of Psalms as for an amulet, his head aching in a way he had not previously thought possible. He searched his confused mind for some intimation of what the many religious texts he had studied might suggest he do in such a situation, but all he could summon was a story of two Zen monks who met a beautiful woman on the road as they traveled one day.

"Please, don't be afraid."

Ganzenberg was by now sweating wildly. Having

located the Book of Psalms and opened it at random, he recited its verses hurriedly, believing they offered the best protection under the circumstances. He had difficulty making out the words, his hands were trembling so, but he kept his eyes on the pages of the book. He could hear Ruben shifting on the table where he had lain dead only moments before, and as though through water, Ganzenberg gradually perceived what Ruben was saying.

“Try breathing slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Good. Good. In through the nose . . . out through the mouth. In . . . out. Good. I see you’ve hurt your head.”

His fear turned to awful resignation. Ganzenberg thought of Akaky Akakievich wanting to shout for help as he was being robbed of his overcoat in Gogol’s story, but instead getting knocked unconscious to the ground. By the time he managed a yell, the coat was gone and the watchman and police did nothing. They were of no use. They did not help.

Ganzenberg touched his head again. It was bleeding. He remembered the day when he was five or six years old and had a terrible fall from the swing set at the park near his house. His knees and hands took the brunt of the fall, but he had also hit his head, and as much as the pain, it was the amount of blood that had frightened him. Hearing his cries, Shoshana, his older sister, had come running. “If you don’t try to swing so high, you won’t fall so hard,” she scolded as she brushed him off and led him home. He never played on the swings again.

Ganzenberg examined the blood on his fingers. He wondered what he would never do again after this.

“You’re bleeding,” Ruben said.

“It’s okay.”

Ruben glanced around the refrigerator room. "I want to thank you for watching over me."

"It's my job."

Avoiding the area of his own wound, Ruben felt his face and ran his hands through his hair. "I'm not sure what's happening to me. I'm being flung here and there like a pebble. I'm still here somehow, but headed somewhere else. I'm not sure it's an entirely pleasant place." He paused. "I made commercials, you know. I was on my way to work this morning when it happened. Just getting off the bus. Unbelievable."

"Mr. Schwartz, the funeral director, told me."

Ruben recounted the circumstances of his premature death, beginning with his troubled sleep the night before and ending with the fatal bus ride. Shaking his head, he concluded, "I can't believe this has happened to me."

"I'm very sorry, Ruben."

"Yeah. Well." Ruben glanced around the room again and then fixed his gaze on Ganzenberg, on his *yarmulke* and *tsitsis*. "You're Orthodox, huh?"

"I am."

"I wasn't a very religious person. I had a bar mitzvah and was confirmed, but I don't know much about our religion. I suppose I'll be finding out a lot more soon. What do you do when you're not on duty at Schwartz's Memorial Chapel?"

"I'm a *mashgiach* at a Chinese restaurant. I make sure that the food is kosher."

"I love-loved-East Asian food. East Asian women too." Ruben sighed. "You plan to do this for the rest of your life?"



"You too? I already get that from my girlfriend."

"You look like a smart guy. Maybe she has a point. It seems kind of a waste. Look what happened to me. I can tell you, there's a lot I wish I had the chance to do now."

"What would you do?"

"Quite a few things with East Asian women, for one." Ruben laughed sadly. "But that's not here or there anymore."

"Look, Ruben, I don't mind what I do. I harm no one. I even help people. I have time to read. Don't worry, though, I'm making plans to change."

"The girl you're with, you plan on marrying her?"

"Rebecca? It might be time. I don't know. She's a good woman. Very patient. My family really likes her."

"That's important." Ruben hung his head and stared at the floor. "I'm being flung around, Ganzenberg. Flung around. I'm on my way somewhere. It's the advertising that has me most nervous. The piper might be coming around to collect. I feel it." He shuddered slightly. "You may be right about what you said. You help people. My job was to manipulate. And now I'm here."

"Do you have someone to say kaddish for you?"

"My uncle, maybe. I'm not sure."

"I'll say kaddish for you if you'd like."

Ruben nodded. "I wonder what'll be with my cat now. You know, your head's bleeding pretty badly. You should probably put something on that. Go get some ice. Maybe you can get me a little water too. I'm thirsty, if you can believe that. I think I'd like a drink of water."

Perhaps Ganzenberg should have gotten water from a closer faucet, but he thought it only proper to bring Ruben water from the cooler—a man wakes from the dead, he wants a good drink—and this cooler was located at the other end of the funeral home. Ganzenberg staggered painfully to the bathroom, retrieving a cold pack and a bandage from beneath the sink, and made his way to the cooler. As he walked quickly back to the refrigerator room, drink in hand, ice pack on his head, his mind was ablaze with the many questions he wished to ask Ruben. Ganzenberg had been graced with a visitation from beyond the grave. The implications were astonishing.

“Ruben, you were right. My head feels better with the ice,” Ganzenberg said, entering the refrigerator room. “Here’s your water.”

Ruben did not answer.

“Ruben, your water,” Ganzenberg repeated. “Ruben?”

Ruben had returned to a supine position, his eyes again tightly shut. Ganzenberg picked up the fallen chair and sat down beside him. Studying Ruben’s face and body, he opened the Book of Psalms and concentrated on comforting him and elevating his soul. He read the Book of Psalms twice before falling asleep in the metal chair.

## 8.

You probably expect me to tell you that soon after this encounter Ganzenberg enrolled in a university and was on his way to becoming a professor, a great scholar, or some such thing; that he proposed marriage to Rebecca, who was delighted by his newfound seriousness and readily accepted, with her father’s blessing; or that Ruben Katz had imparted to Ganzenberg an enthusiasm and ambition that led him to embrace what he might otherwise have continued avoiding, such as

nursing home administration.

No. In fact, Ganzenberg still lives in the same one-bedroom basement apartment that is between the restaurant and the funeral home, making his living as a *mashgiach* and a *shomer*, though now he shares that apartment with Sushi, Ruben Katz's cat. After Ruben's burial, Ganzenberg said kaddish for thirty days, as for a brother, often coming for that purpose to the *minyán* at Petach Tefilah, the synagogue where I usually pray.

Some say Schwartz has hopes for Ganzenberg to carry on the funeral home business when he is himself taken to the next world, but even if this is the case, I doubt Ganzenberg is interested. There is an unmistakable seriousness in his approach to his current employment, particularly as a *shomer*, and also as a *mashgiach*. How can I claim he is wrong? There is no shortage of regrets about one's younger years when one has aged, but not having selected a more lucrative profession is seldom among them.

And Rebecca Leipan? What should I say? A woman's grip, when she wants to hold on to something, is tighter than the Gates of Heaven when they are closed before the wicked. Sometimes, above, there is mercy—the hinges will loosen, the Gates will open—but with a woman . . . So Rebecca has not let go of Ganzenberg. Still she wants him to propose; still she waits for him to become a professor.

Now, if you ask why Ganzenberg chose to share with me the events of that Friday night, I will tell you that for one thing, you can usually trust an old man with a secret. When he tells you that he would sooner die than reveal it, there is an uncomfortable certainty to the promise. More than that, though, after living on this mysterious earth for so long, there is little that can be said to an old man that he will not believe—if a person whose word is true imparts it to him. Maybe this does not mean much to you now, but such

matters gain in clarity the more one gains in years.

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Shai Afsai's writing has been published in *New English Review*, *The Forward*, *Haaretz*, *Arutz Sheva/Israel National News*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Providence Journal*, *Anthropology Today*, *Underground Voices*, *Jewish Quarterly*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *Midstream*, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, *Rhode Island History*, *The Jewish Link of New Jersey*, *The Times of Israel*, *CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism*, *Heredom*, and *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*.

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