



THE Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

Robert Avrech's unforgettable debut novel is a kaleidoscopic, utterly authentic story brimming with reverence, adventure, suspense, humor, memorable characters, and perhaps the unlikeliest minyan ever to witness a Bar Mitzvah! *The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden* is not just a tale about people who inhabit different worlds, but of our world and the myriad faiths that make it whole.

"Only Robert J. Avrech, an Emmy-winning screenwriter, could come up with such a fine novel of the old West. It combines a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy's search for his own place in the developing nation, an Apache heroine, Doc Holliday, and the famed Apache leader Victorio in its cast. The book moves swiftly, the Judaica is compelling and you will be rooting for a perfect bar mitzvah to complete the journey after all the blood and sweat and gun fighting is done."

—Jane Yolen, author, *The Devil's Arithmetic* and *Briar Rose*

"A wonderful, romantic and gentle children's fable of Jewish culture in the Old West."

—Jonathan and Faye Kellerman

"The perfect book for a Jewish teen to read on a Shabbos afternoon. Beautiful, funny, poignant—an exquisite novel."

—Michael Levin, author, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Jewish Spirituality & Mysticism*

"Set against the background of the wild west, Avrech's wise coming-of-age novel delivers memorable characters, page-turning suspense, dashes of humor, and lessons in life and love that bridge cultures and generations."

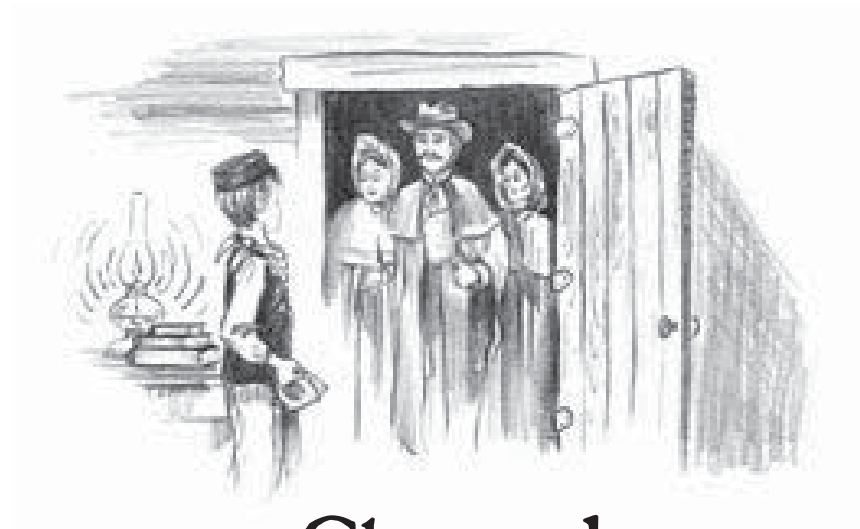
—Rochelle Krich, best-selling author of *Grave Endings*, a mystery in the award-nominated Molly Blume series.



Our Way™
Find Yourself in a good story

www.pjourway.org

Sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation



Chapter 1

— Into the Whirlwind —

The night the town threatened to burn us out, I was preparing for my bar mitzvah. More than anything, I wanted to be a man, to take my place in the community of Jews. Unfortunately, Papa had brought us to a place where there were no Jews.

Papa was saying Ma'ariv, the evening prayer, when they came knocking at the door. Rebecca looked up from the cooking pit where she was preparing dinner. Oblivious, Papa swayed to and fro. He did not hear the insistent knocks, the warped door rattling on its leather hinges. Papa was reaching out to heaven, and nothing could penetrate his spiritual shelter.

I opened the door.

The mayor of our town, Thomas Wilberforce, filled the narrow doorway. Mrs. Blake and Mrs. Slocum were right behind him; their sharp chins thrust out over the starched black collars of their coats.

"Is your Pa to home?" Mayor Wilberforce asked.

"He is davening—I mean, praying."

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

Wilberforce heaved a frustrated sigh. He claimed that he respected our faith, but whenever he was confronted with the concrete reality of our traditions, I could see the tense discomfort in his eyes.

“We’ll wait.”

“Would you like to come in?”

“We’re fine just where we are.”

In all the time we had lived in this small Arizona town, the mayor had never entered our home. Rebecca said that he was afraid of being tainted by the very air we breathed. Nobody could believe such foolishness, I said. Rebecca leveled a severe gaze at me and lifted a single eyebrow, silently telling me that I was a naïve and ignorant child. In my heart, I knew that she was right, but admitting such a thing was simply too awful; it was too painful to think that such things could be believed here in America, our new home, the Golden Land. I expected, even accepted as natural, such hateful attitudes back in Europe, but here in this, our marvelous new country? No, no, I did not want to acknowledge it.

Gazing at the grim figures, dark shadows barely shifting in the doorway, I could sense that they brought bad tidings. Papa had gone against the wishes of the town, and they were not going to stand for it. Least of all from us. Strangers. Foreigners. Jews.

Their breaths created small white clouds that formed, collided and disintegrated. Wilberforce and the good ladies looked like dark angels breathing white fire.

Into the Whirlwind

Papa took three small steps back and then three steps forward. He bowed to the east and then to the west. He was finished with the Shmoneh Esrei, the Eighteen Benedictions. I spoke in Yiddish.

“They’re here, Papa.”

He closed his eyes and dipped his head—just once—to let me know that he was well aware of their presence. He stroked his beard and said the Alenu, the final prayer of the evening service.

Rebecca stirred the cast iron cooking pot. She spoke in English. Some people said that Rebecca’s Russian accent could barely be detected. She had a talent for languages.

“You should know by now, you can’t hurry him. This shack could be falling down and he wouldn’t even notice. And speak English; we are in America now.”

Rebecca was angry with Papa. It seemed that she was always annoyed with him. “He needs,” she said, “to get his head out of the clouds and his feet back to earth.”

Papa smoothed his black caftan. It shone like sealskin under the rays of silvery moonlight that slipped through the cracks in the sod roof. He went to the door, straightened his shoulders. “Mayor Wilberforce, good evening to you.”

Wilberforce’s tone was cold as the air. “Mr. Isaacson.”

It made me so angry. Papa was given semicha, rabbinic ordination, from the great and pious Rabbi Velvel Soloveitchik. Why couldn’t they pay him the courtesy of calling him Rabbi? Whenever I complained about this, Papa just smiled and ran his hand over my cheek. “What does it matter?” he would say.

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

“Ah, Mrs. Blake, Mrs. Slocum, won’t you come in? Please, please, it is so very cold outside. Rebecca, my child, prepare some tea for our guests.” Papa was unfailingly polite.

Mrs. Slocum’s lips contracted into two white lines.

“This is not a social visit.”

“No, it most certainly is not,” chimed Mrs. Blake. The women were rigid and self-righteous.

Larke Ellen’s baby started to cry. I could hear Mama, in the bedroom, cooing to the newborn in Yiddish.

Mayor Wilberforce stiffened, hooked his thumbs into his vest pockets. Behind him the moon was thick and swollen, like a silver dollar nailed into the black sky.

“Now, Mr. Isaacson, we warned you about opening a business here.”

“But Mayor,” Papa said, “How can I make a living if I do not ply my trade?”

“We already got a boot maker,” said Wilberforce.

“Murphy sells dry goods and some shoes,” said Papa. “I am a custom boot maker.”

“Nevertheless...” said Wilberforce.

“Surely there is room for both of us. In fact, we complement each other. Murphy sends business my way, and I do the same for him.”

Wilberforce looked past Papa to the back room where Larke Ellen was resting on the rope bed.

“Is she in a bad way?”

“Recovering. Slowly recovering.”

“That’s another thing. No one holds with a Christian girl working for people like you.”

Into the Whirlwind

“Larke Ellen is a poor widow. She begged us for work. How else will she be able to eat, to feed her baby?” replied Papa.

Wilberforce said sternly, “The good citizens of this town are determined to set a good example for our children.”

“Is not kindness a good thing to show children?”

Wilberforce spit, releasing a squirt of tobacco juice into the hard-packed dirt floor, just beyond Papa’s foot. Papa pretended not to notice.

“We’re not here to argue, Isaacson. We know what’s right and what ain’t. We are trying to establish a decent society here. It’s hard enough contending with the Apaches, them redskin savages; we surely do not need your kind stirring things up. We want you and your family to be out of this community by sunrise, y’hear?”

Rebecca gasped. Papa frowned, as if he didn’t quite understand what he was being told. I felt my heart beating in my chest like a trapped bird.

“But Larke Ellen is terribly weak,” protested Rebecca. “It was a difficult birth. There was a great deal of blood, a great deal. You must know that she almost died.”

“We will watch over her,” said Mrs. Blake.

“Perhaps you should speak to Larke Ellen about this. Naturally, whatever she decides will be fine by us,” Papa said.

“If Larke Ellen got a lick of sense she’ll choose her own,” said Mrs. Slocum.

There was a long moment of silence.

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

“And if we do not go?” Papa finally said.

Wilberforce lit a cigar. He blew out a blue cloud of smoke, then stared at the burning match. The tense angle of his jaw looked sculpted from a wedge of marble.

“Got to be careful of fire,” said Wilberforce.

Wilberforce leveled his glance at Papa and continued very quietly, “One match can wipe out a lifetime of work.” The lit match fell from his fingers, flared brightly for a second before I stepped forward and stamped out the flame.

Papa didn’t answer the implied threat.

Without another word, Wilberforce and the women turned and marched away. They melted into dark, floating objects against the dusky northern sky. Papa shut the cabin door. It groaned on its hinges, battered by a gust of stiff wind. Sharp branches of cottonwood scraped against the outside walls, and somewhere in the distance a prairie dog howled. It sounded almost human, like a crying woman.

“Papa?” Mama’s voice was tense and helpless. She was standing in the bedroom doorway. Larke Ellen’s baby was cradled in her arms, sleeping peacefully. A tiny fist rose and fell. Papa turned around and faced Mama. Their eyes met. He shook his head helplessly.

“No,” cried Rebecca. “It’s not fair.”

“No, it is not fair,” agreed Papa.

“We should go to the sheriff,” said Mama.

Rebecca snorted. “The sheriff is a useless fool. He does what Wilberforce and the others tell him to do. The only thing he’s good for is shooting stray dogs.”

Into the Whirlwind

“And he’s not even good at that,” I said. “He’s usually too drunk to shoot straight.”

“What are we going to do, Papa?” Mama cried.

Larke Ellen’s baby wailed, startled by Mama’s outburst. To soothe the infant, Mama touched the baby’s little mouth with her forefinger, lips as smooth and shiny as boiled candy. As if by enchantment, the baby gurgled like a pigeon.

“I think we should pack,” said Papa.



Rebecca was flinging her clothing into the horsehair trunk. She brushed away the tears that streaked her face.

“It’s all his fault,” she said.

“Who?”

“Papa, who else? Opening the business, hiring Larke Ellen. I told him not to. I told him it was a mistake.”

“You’re not being fair. Papa was doing a mitzvah hiring Larke Ellen, and how else can he make a living but making boots?”

“He’s always doing mitzvahs, and we always end up suffering for it.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not true.”

“I knew this was going to happen,” she said. “I just knew it.”

I only had two shirts: a threadbare, butternut-colored

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

boiled wool shirt, which I was wearing, and a white one for Shabbos. I rolled my good shirt and shoved it into a corner of the trunk. Rebecca frowned.

“Can’t you fold? What’s wrong with you men? We’ve moved enough that you should know how to do it by now.” She pulled out my Shabbos shirt and gingerly folded it. “There, you little troublemaker,” she said. “Now it won’t get so creased.”

She turned and gazed into her looking glass. The mirror was aged, fractured like marble with spider webs of silver and gray. She scowled. “Look at my hair, I just did it and now it will get ruined.” Rebecca wore her hair divided in three sections, with a pewter comb at the back and, at the sides, a tangle of dense curls. She had patiently turned the ringlets with a hot iron, having first made her hair wet with a mixture of sugar and water. The curls would stiffen like the bark of a tree and the effect would last for about a week. Mama thought the style too fancy, meaning not modest enough, but Rebecca firmly insisted that it was the American style. It was the fashion, and my seventeen-year-old sister was determined to be a real American girl. Mama spit three times and murmured, “God forbid, God forbid.”

Rebecca put a hand to her hair and patted it into place. She had long delicate fingers ridged with pale blue veins. Her hands were soft and white in spite of all the sewing and cooking she did. So pale were her hands, they seemed to shine, smooth as ivory or alabaster. Every evening, to keep her skin smooth, Rebecca coated her hands with chicken

Into the Whirlwind

fat and then wore gloves all night long. My sister was proud of her hands; she vowed that someday she would go to an ice cream social, and all the young men would admire her beautiful skin.

After helping Papa pack the books—he handled each volume as if it were a bar of gold—I went to see if Mama needed my help with anything. She was wrapping the baby in a flannel blanket. Larke Ellen sat on the edge of the bed. Thread thin and freckled, she was flushed with fever. Her red hair lay in damp tangles over her shoulders. It was only twelve hours ago that she lay shrieking on the thin straw mattress. Her labor had been prolonged and painful. The baby was facing the wrong direction, but Mama had managed to turn it around. Finally, the baby was born in a huge surge of blood.

“Larke Ellen,” said Papa, “they have told us we have to leave.”

“I heard,” she replied.

“But you will be taken care of. They promised to take care of you and the baby.”

Larke Ellen shook her head from side to side.

“No, I ain’t stayin’ here. Please, let me come with you. You folks took me in and gave me work and showed kindness when no one else would.”

“But we must travel, and you are so weak.”

“You treat me good and fair; I may be poor Kansas trash to the rest of the good folks in this town, but you always treated me like a lady. I got faults, Lord knows, but

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

disloyalty ain't one of them. I'm coming with you and ain't nothing gonna stop me."

"But Larke Ellen," interjected Mama, "surely you want to stay with your own people, don't you?"

"They ain't my people. Never have been. You're my people now—if you'll continue to have me."

Papa and Mama exchanged questioning looks. Mama sighed and Papa shrugged his shoulders. Larke Ellen was right; she was one of us, in her own way.

Larke Ellen leaned over to button her shoes, but the effort was too much for her aching body. She winced, stopped by a solid wall of pain, sluggishly straightened up and gripped the edges of the bunk in order to regain her balance.

"I can't seem to manage," she murmured.

"Ariel, give Larke Ellen a hand." Mama ordered.

I kneeled and buttoned Larke Ellen's black boots. The leather was cracked, like parched desert clay, and at least two sizes too big. Papa was working on new boots for her.

"I'm sorry," said Larke Ellen, to no one in particular.

"Sha," Mama counseled, "sha-shtill, save your strength."

"Awful sorry," Larke Ellen repeated. Her voice was low and hopeless. "When Billy died the whole world seemed to go bad for me. Lord forgive me, but I even gave thought to taking my own life. But the good book says that taking your own life will send you on a freight train straight to hell. The preacher back home once said that even thinking of it is a mortal sin. You reckon he's right, Mrs. Isaacson? You reckon I'm going to burn in hell with all them evil sinners? Is that to be my fate, my final judgment?"

Into the Whirlwind

Mama heaved a sigh as she threw a woolen shawl over Larke Ellen's narrow shoulders. In Yiddish Mama said, "Who knows what God does with goyim?"



I carried a shuttered lantern outside and hitched the team to the wagon.

Memories came flooding back. The last pogrom drove us out of our village, out of Russia, out of Europe. It was during Yom Kippur that the Cossacks rode into our shtetl. They thundered in, mounted on screaming horses, hundreds of barbarous warriors. Their curved swords hacked and stabbed. Their guns let loose countless deadly volleys. "Hep, hep, hep," they cried. Men, women and children were slaughtered like animals. Our beautiful wooden synagogue, over seven hundred years old, burned like a torch. Orange flames and pillars of black smoke climbed to the sky. The Cossacks trampled on the holy Torah scrolls. The ground was soaked in innocent blood, and the mean stench of death filled our nostrils.

Somehow, we managed to escape into the woods. The Cossacks were too busy looting, raping and murdering to go after us. We survived in the forest for ten endless days and nights. We ate flowers, grass and tree bark. At night we slept in ditches, covered ourselves in leaves and shivered on the frozen earth. We dared not light a fire. Surely Cossack patrols were still in the area. We prayed. We

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

mourned the death of our friends, our many relatives, and our poor village. On the tenth day in the forest, Papa told us of his dream. He saw us traveling across a great ocean. To where? To the golden land of America. Mama was horrified. "America," she wept, "we cannot go to America. It's a treif land," she insisted. Rebecca said nothing. She was in a state of shock. Mendel, the boy she was going to marry, had been murdered along with his entire family.

Papa told us that there were no Cossacks in America. He told us that we would be safe in America. But Mama continued to beg and plead. "Mama," Papa said in his most gentle voice, "we are going to America. We are going to be free. America is a wondrous land."

"But it's only a dream," Mama cried. "Who listens to dreams?"

"I do," said Papa.

Secretly, I was thrilled.

After a long and arduous journey over countless lands and seas, in the Christian year of 1870, we landed on the shores of America.



The scrape of shoes against the hard earth brought me back to the Arizona Territory. I turned around to find myself face to face with Tucker, the mayor's fourteen-year-old son. He said, "Pa's runnin' you off, ain't he?"

I nodded.

Into the Whirlwind

“I’m real sorry. Ma’s real unhappy too. Thinks it ain’t Christian.”

He stepped forward into a bar of moonlight. I could see that his left eye was swollen shut.

“Did your father do that?” I asked.

Tucker didn’t answer. Instead, he handed me a carefully folded oilcloth. “Ma made some jerky and cornbread for Larke Ellen; will you give it to her?” I nodded and took the oilcloth. “Ma made plenty. Enough for you and your kin.”

“We can’t, Tucker. It’s not kosher. I’m sorry.”

Embarrassed, Tucker shook his head. “That’s right. I plum forgot. Can’t quite get the hang of them laws you got for food.”

I smiled. No matter how many times I explained kashrus to Tucker, he was never quite able to comprehend its intricacies.

“Well, maybe your Pa can bless it and make it okay.”

“That’s not how it works, but thank you just the same.”

Tucker frowned. He hesitated. Finally he came out with it. “Ma wants to know if Larke Ellen’s staying in the settlement.”

“No,” I told him, “she wants to come with us. We told her to stay, but she doesn’t want to.”

“Did Larke Ellen name the baby yet?”

I shook my head.

“Nobody in town treated Larke Ellen and her husband good. They was just white trash farmers, and that husband of hers fought for the Union. This settlement is solid Confederate.”

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

Papa and Mama also supported the Union, but we never said it out loud, not in a town where so many of the men were veterans of Robert E. Lee's vanquished army.

"Well, you take care; I hear tell that Victorio is awful riled up," said Tucker.

I shuddered. The very name of the fearsome Apache chief sent chills up my spine.

Tucker reached under his patched brown corduroy jacket and came up with a pistol. He offered it to me, butt first. I searched his eyes, questioning.

"Tucker?"

"Go on, take it."

"I cannot."

"You got to. How you going to make it through the territory without iron?"

"But Tucker, it is your gun."

"Aw hell, Ariel, you're gonna need it more than me. You can be darn sure of that. Look here, you're gonna protect Larke Ellen and your kin, ain't you?"

"I'm too young, Tucker."

"Too young? Hell, Ariel, ain't you heard? There ain't no boys west of the Mississippi."

I took the gun. Surprised by its considerable weight, I almost let it fall from my hands. Tucker grinned and slipped a handful of cartridges into my pocket. "That there's a Walker .44 caliber. Kicks like a mule. Remember to keep the chamber under the hammer empty so you don't go blowing your foot off. Shoots a might wide, about four

Into the Whirlwind

feet, but she's a good old cannon. You treat her good and she'll do right by you." A thought suddenly occurred to Tucker. "Tell me something, you Jewish folks, you got any laws against killing?"

"We are not allowed to murder," I said.

Tucker stared at me, puzzled. "Kill, murder, don't see the difference."

"We are allowed to kill," I explained, "but only when our lives are threatened. To kill without a reason is murder. That's the Sixth Commandment: You shall not murder."

Tucker seemed relieved. "That's real sensible. But don't you go waiting too long before deciding that you're being mortal threatened," he cautioned. I smiled and shook my head in agreement. Tucker had a good point. It was something the rabbis of the Talmud had discussed in detail over a thousand years ago.

"And Ariel, don't you be calling it a gun. This here's a pistol. Only sorry tenderfoots call them guns."

"But Tucker, I am a tenderfoot."

"Shoot, that ain't for no one else to know. Far as everyone else is concerned you're, let me see..." Tucker frowned, his mind racing. And then he chuckled. "The Hebrew Kid, that's who you are: The Hebrew Kid, terror of the Arizona Territory."

"Oy vey," I said.

We both laughed. But the truth was I had never fired a gun in my life. Tucker had offered to let me fire it, pointing out that I was twelve years old and more than ready to learn

The Hebrew Kid and the Apache Maiden

the art of gun shooting. However, I had always declined. Bullets were too expensive.

I slipped the Walker into my waistband. Its solid heft almost pulled my pants down. I knew how much the revolver meant to Tucker. It had belonged to an Indian-fighting uncle of his who was murdered by the Apache.

Nervously, Tucker glanced over his shoulder. He was terrified that he would be discovered talking to me. His tone turned somber.

He extended his hand, and I took it.

“Where you figure to be heading?”

“I’m not sure, but I hope it’s a place where I can have my bar mitzvah.”

