

## Chaim

by Alice Sheba

Nature – trees, grass, sky, and all that lives in it – has always been for me a sign of G-d's creativity. After my five children were of an age to walk, I took them to botanical gardens, zoos, and outings to experience nature. A favorite place to visit was the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge in Queens. It is one of the largest bird sanctuaries in northeastern U.S, consisting of over 9,000 acres.

A choice time to visit the sanctuary was during Passover vacation when birds return from a warm climate, and my children did not attend school. On a sunny day they would climb into my nine-passenger Ford station wagon, called a "Country Squire" (a pretentious name that matched the fake wood trim, which was really plastic, on the exterior decoration of the car doors.)

In addition to my children and their friends, I packed Pesach treats, like red, yellow, green fruit jells, macaroons and water. I wanted to accommodate the need for quick energy on the one and a half-mile trail.

We wore long sleeve shirts and pants to protect ourselves from bugs and brush, and waterproof hiking shoes in case of slippery marshes under foot. Once we arrived at the sanctuary, it was a world away from suburbia. The only reminder of our own habitat in Lawrence, Long Island, were the low-flying air planes circling to land at JFK airport.

After signing in at the Visitors Center, we were told which species of birds to look for and received our free hiking permit; there are no entrance fees or parking charges. Once we were on the hiking trail there was a sense of adventure which was heightened by the challenge of who would first spot an exotic bird. We took turns raising binoculars to our eyes as we looped around the grounds smelling the salt air and hearing the bird's calls. Our excitement mounted when we could identify and name a songbird and hear the difference between it and a warbler.

Occasionally there was an unexpected surprise like when walking through low-lying vegetation we saw what we had only seen in Israel – sabra fruit, or prickly pear cactus, growing in the islands of Jamaica Bay!

When the sun started to lower and the sky turned gray, chill air reminded us that our excursion to the Wildlife Refuge was coming to an end. We hurried to my car and as I drove home, the children and I called out the varieties of birds that we saw: Yellowthroat Warbler, a Snowy Egret, and a rare Blue Heron.

No one was late for dinner when I called. It was simple: leftovers from two Seders, matzah ball soup, brisket with potatoes and vegetables, and baked apples with sliced mandelbrot for dessert. The boys went to their rooms and my daughter, Jenny, and I were clearing the table when we heard a weak chirping sound coming from outside our house. It sounded like a call for help.

I took a strong flashlight and we went out and listened to the chirping. It led us to a deep well near the basement windows of our house. I flashed the light down the well and saw a bird lying on its side. Jenny climbed down and carefully scooped the bird into her nine year old hands. She brought it into the house while I found an empty shoe box and lined it with shredded newspaper. Jenny placed the bird into the shoe box and cooed to it, telling it that it was safe and would get better. We both thought it resembled a Redstar Warbler like we saw at the sanctuary. Jenny said, "We have to feed it or it will die." She was right.

What food was I to prepare for a sick bird? I didn't have birdseed in my pantry. I did have honey, and milk in the refrigerator. I took some of each, warmed it up and put it in a saucer. I found a medicine dropper in a cabinet and returned to the basement where Jenny was keeping a vigil next to the patient.

We took turns feeding the bird with the dropper carefully placed down its beak. That is when I remembered the story my mother told me about the time her own mother was gravely ill as a child in Minsky

Gubernia, Russia. The rabbi was called, visited the patient and changed her name to "Alta", which means old in Yiddish. That became her name and she lived to become my grandma.

Jenny looked at me and said, "Let's give this bird a Hebrew name."

"Such a good idea," I said.

We didn't know if the bird was male or female, this seemed less important than the ritual of giving the bird a name. I suggested Chaim, since "chai" means life in Hebrew. We told the bird, "Now your name is Chaim and you will live."

The next morning we looked at our patient and were relieved to see that he was still alive. We were jubilantly shouting "Chaim lives!" and hugged and pranced around the bird which was trying to stand on its legs. It seemed to us that he had injured a wing.

Jenny continued feeding Chaim and I called the Sanctuary. I was told that I could bring Chaim there for better care. Jenny and I tearfully lifted Chaim in the shoe box as we placed him in my car, we assured him that he would have a long and happy life.