

Zlateh the Goat

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Read with a Purpose

Read this story to see how the bond between human and animal is displayed by a boy and the goat he has to take to the butcher's.

Preparing to Read for the selection is on page 399.

Build Background

"Zlateh the Goat" takes place around Hanukkah (HAH nuh kah), a Jewish religious festival usually observed in December. Hanukkah is an eight-day-long celebration of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 B.C., following the victory of Jewish fighters over a huge Syrian army. The Temple, which had been taken over by Antiochus, ruler of the Syrians, had been violated and damaged. While the Jews were purifying and repairing the Temple, a miracle occurred. A tiny bit of oil for the holy lamp—barely enough for one day—lasted eight days.

At Hanukkah time the road from the village to the town is usually covered with snow, but this year the winter had been a mild one. Hanukkah had almost come, yet little snow had fallen. The sun shone most of the time. The peasants complained that because of the dry weather there would be a poor harvest of winter grain. New grass sprouted, and the peasants sent their cattle out to pasture. **A**

For Reuven the furrier¹ it was a bad year, and after long hesitation he decided to

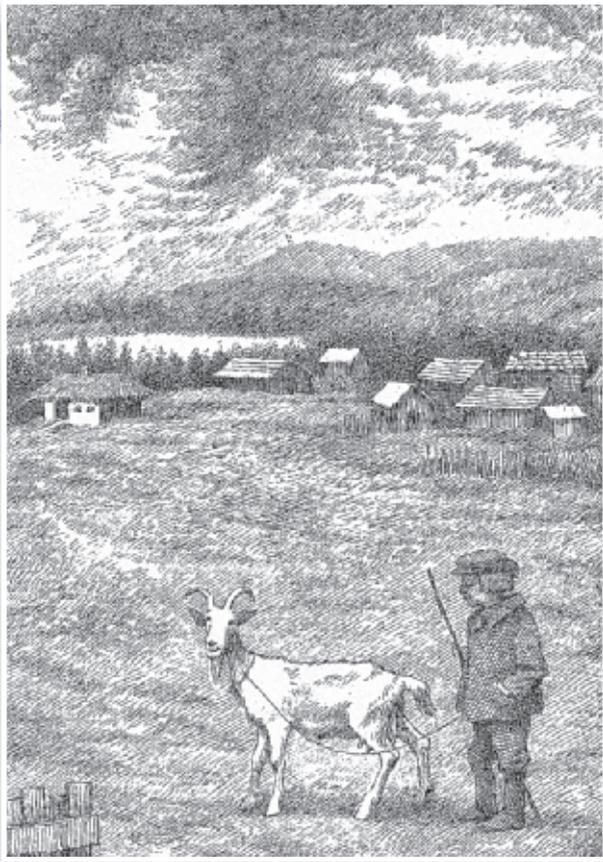
sell Zlateh the goat. She was old and gave little milk. Feyvel the town butcher had offered eight gulden² for her. Such a sum would buy Hanukkah candles, potatoes and oil for pancakes, gifts for the children, and other holiday necessities for the house. Reuven told his oldest boy, Aaron, to take the goat to town.

Aaron understood what taking the goat to Feyvel meant, but he had to obey his father. Leah, his mother, wiped the tears from her eyes when she heard the

1. **furrier** (FUR ee uhr): someone who makes and repairs fur garments.

2. **gulden** (GUL duhn): coins formerly used in several European countries.

A Read and Discuss What do you learn in this paragraph?



news. Aaron's younger sisters, Anna and Miriam, cried loudly. Aaron put on his quilted jacket and a cap with earmuffs, bound a rope around Zlateh's neck, and took along two slices of bread with cheese to eat on the road. Aaron was supposed to deliver the goat by evening, spend the night at the butcher's, and return the next day with the money. **B**

While the family said goodbye to the goat, and Aaron placed the rope around her neck, Zlateh stood as patiently and good-naturedly as ever. She licked Reuven's hand. She shook her small white beard. Zlateh

B Read and Discuss What is on the father's mind, and what is he planning to do? How does his plan affect the family?

trusted human beings. She knew that they always fed her and never did her any harm.

When Aaron brought her out on the road to town, she seemed somewhat astonished. She'd never been led in that direction before. She looked back at him questioningly, as if to say, "Where are you taking me?" But after a while she seemed to come to the conclusion that a goat shouldn't ask questions. Still, the road was different. They passed new fields, pastures, and huts with thatched roofs. Here and there a dog barked and came running after them, but Aaron chased it away with his stick. **C**

The sun was shining when Aaron left the village. Suddenly the weather changed. A large black cloud with a bluish center appeared in the east and spread itself rapidly over the sky. A cold wind blew in with it. The crows flew low, croaking. At first it looked as if it would rain, but instead it began to hail as in summer. It was early in the day, but it became dark as dusk. After a while the hail turned to snow.

In his twelve years Aaron had seen all kinds of weather, but he had never experienced a snow like this one. It was so dense it shut out the light of the day. In a short time their path was completely covered. The wind became as cold as ice. The road to town was narrow and winding. Aaron no longer knew where he was. He could not see

C Literary Focus Literary Criticism Singer suggests that Zlateh can think—that she can question and draw conclusions. Does this make her a more or less believable character? Explain why.

through the snow. The cold soon **penetrated** his quilted jacket.

At first Zlateh didn't seem to mind the change in weather. She too was twelve years old and knew what winter meant. But when her legs sank deeper and deeper into the snow, she began to turn her head and look at Aaron in wonderment.

Her mild eyes seemed to ask, "Why are we out in such a storm?" Aaron hoped that a peasant would come along with his cart, but no one passed by.

The snow grew thicker, falling to the ground in large, whirling flakes. Beneath it Aaron's boots touched the softness of a plowed field. He realized that he was no longer on the road. He had gone astray. He could no longer figure out which was east or west, which way was the village, the town. The wind whistled, howled, whirled the snow about in eddies. It looked as if white imps were playing tag on the fields. A white dust rose above the ground. Zlateh stopped. She could walk no longer. Stubbornly she

anchored her **cleft** hooves in the earth and bleated as if pleading to be taken home. Icicles hung from her white beard, and her horns were glazed with frost. **D**

Aaron did not want to admit the danger, but he knew just the same that if they did not find shelter, they would freeze to death. This was no ordinary storm. It was a mighty blizzard. The snowfall had reached his knees. His hands were numb, and he could no longer feel his toes. He choked when he breathed. His nose felt like wood, and he rubbed it with snow. Zlateh's bleating began to sound like crying. Those humans in whom she had so much confidence had dragged her into a trap. Aaron began to pray to God for himself and for the innocent animal. **E**

Suddenly he made out the shape of a hill. He wondered what it could be. Who had piled snow into such a huge heap? He moved toward it, dragging Zlateh after him. When he came near it, he realized that it was a large haystack which the snow had blanketed.

Aaron did not want to admit the danger, but he knew just the same that if they did not find shelter, they would freeze to death.

D Literary Focus Literary Criticism What details make this situation seem credible?

E Read and Discuss What is happening now? What is the author trying to tell us about Zlateh's and Aaron's thoughts?

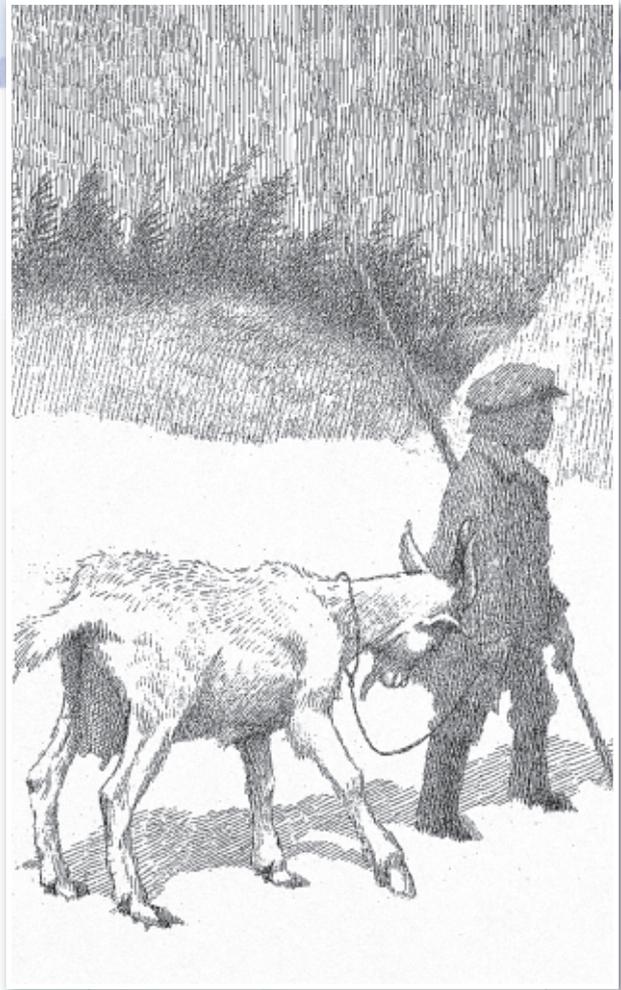
Vocabulary penetrated (PEHN uh tray tihd) *v.*: pierced; made a way through.

cleft (klehft) *adj.*: split; divided.

Aaron realized immediately that they were saved. With great effort he dug his way through the snow. He was a village boy and knew what to do. When he reached the hay, he hollowed out a nest for himself and the goat. No matter how cold it may be outside, in the hay it is always warm. And hay was food for Zlateh. The moment she smelled it, she became contented and began to eat. Outside, the snow continued to fall. It quickly covered the passageway Aaron had dug. But a boy and an animal need to breathe, and there was hardly any air in their hide-out. Aaron bored a kind of a window through the hay and snow and carefully kept the passage clear.

Zlateh, having eaten her fill, sat down on her hind legs and seemed to have regained her confidence in man. Aaron ate his two slices of bread and cheese, but after the difficult journey he was still hungry. He looked at Zlateh and noticed her udders were full. He lay down next to her, placing himself so that when he milked her, he could squirt the milk into his mouth. It was rich and sweet. Zlateh was not accustomed to being milked that way, but she did not resist. On the contrary, she seemed eager to reward Aaron for bringing her to a shelter whose very walls, floor, and ceiling were made of food. **F**

F Read and Discuss What does it mean that Zlateh “seemed eager to reward Aaron”? How does this fit with what you’ve already learned about Zlateh?



Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting

What scene in the story does this picture illustrate?

Through the window Aaron could catch a glimpse of the **chaos** outside. The wind carried before it whole drifts of snow. It was completely dark, and he did not know whether night had already come or whether it was the darkness of the storm. Thank God that in the hay it was not cold. The

Vocabulary chaos (KAY ahs) *n.*: total confusion or disorder.



Analyzing Visuals Viewing and Interpreting

How does this picture compare to the haystack refuge you see in your mind?

dried hay, grass, and field flowers **exuded** the warmth of the summer sun. Zlateh ate frequently; she nibbled from above, below, from the left and right. Her body gave forth an animal warmth, and Aaron cuddled up to her. He had always loved Zlateh, but

G Reading Focus Generalizations What generalization can you make from the way Aaron and Zlateh communicate? How does their relationship compare with Tito and Bimbo's?

now she was like a sister. He was alone, cut off from his family, and wanted to talk. He began to talk to Zlateh. "Zlateh, what do you think about what has happened to us?" he asked.

"Maaaa," Zlateh answered.

"If we hadn't found this stack of hay, we would both be frozen stiff by now," Aaron said.

"Maaaa," was the goat's reply.

"If the snow keeps on falling like this, we may have to stay here for days," Aaron explained.

"Maaaa," Zlateh bleated.

"What does 'Maaaa' mean?" Aaron asked. "You'd better speak up clearly."

"Maaaa. Maaaa," Zlateh tried.

"Well, let it be 'Maaaa' then," Aaron said patiently. "You can't speak, but I know you understand. I need you and you need me. Isn't that right?"

"Maaaa."

G

Aaron became sleepy. He made a pillow out of some hay, leaned his head on it, and dozed off. Zlateh too fell asleep.

When Aaron opened his eyes, he didn't know whether it was morning or night. The snow had blocked up his window. He tried to clear it, but when he had bored through to the length of his arm, he still hadn't reached the outside. Luckily he had his stick with him and was able to break through to the open

Vocabulary exuded (ehg ZOO dihd) v.: gave off.



air. It was still dark outside. The snow continued to fall and the wind wailed, first with one voice and then with many. Sometimes it had the sound of devilish laughter. Zlateh too awoke, and when Aaron greeted her, she answered, “Maaaa.” Yes, Zlateh’s language consisted of only one word, but it meant many things. Now she was saying, “We must accept all that God gives us—heat, cold, hunger, satisfaction, light, and darkness.”

Aaron had awakened hungry. He had eaten up his food, but Zlateh had plenty of milk.

For three days Aaron and Zlateh stayed in the haystack. Aaron had always loved Zlateh, but in these three days he loved her more and more. She fed him with her milk and helped him keep warm. She comforted him with her patience. He told her many stories, and she always cocked her ears and listened. When he patted her, she licked his hand and his face. Then she said, “Maaaa,” and he knew it meant, I love you too. **H**

The snow fell for three days, though after the first day it was not as thick and

the wind quieted down. Sometimes Aaron felt that there could never have been a summer, that the snow had always fallen, ever since he could remember. He, Aaron, never had a father or mother or sisters. He was a snow child, born of the snow, and so was Zlateh. It was so quiet in the hay that

his ears rang in the stillness. Aaron and Zlateh slept all night and a good part of the day. As for Aaron’s dreams, they were all about warm weather. He dreamed of green fields, trees covered with blossoms, clear brooks, and singing birds. By the third night the snow had stopped, but Aaron did not dare to find his way home in the darkness.

The sky became clear and the moon shone, casting

silvery nets on the snow. Aaron dug his way out and looked at the world. It was all white, quiet, dreaming dreams of heavenly splendor. The stars were large and close. The moon swam in the sky as in a sea. **I**

On the morning of the fourth day, Aaron heard the ringing of sleigh bells. The haystack was not far from the road. The

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H Literary Focus Literary Criticism How do the characters of Aaron and Zlateh change and develop during the time they are together in the haystack? How do their attitudes change? Explain whether the changes make them more or less credible.

I Read and Discuss How do you know that the writer’s statement that Aaron “never had a father or mother or sisters” is not literal? What is the writer trying to say here?

peasant who drove the sleigh pointed out the way to him—not to the town and Feyvel the butcher, but home to the village. Aaron had decided in the haystack that he would never part with Zlateh.

Aaron’s family and their neighbors had searched for the boy and the goat but had found no trace of them during the storm. They feared they were lost. Aaron’s mother and sisters cried for him; his father remained silent and gloomy. Suddenly one of the neighbors came running to their house with the news that Aaron and Zlateh were coming up the road.

There was great joy in the family. Aaron told them how he had found the stack of hay and how Zlateh had fed him with her milk. Aaron’s sisters kissed and hugged Zlateh and gave her a special treat of chopped carrots and potato peels, which Zlateh gobbled up hungrily.

Nobody ever again thought of selling Zlateh, and now that the cold weather had finally set in, the villagers needed the

services of Reuven the furrier once more. When Hanukkah came, Aaron’s mother was able to fry pancakes every evening, and Zlateh got her portion too. Even though Zlateh had her own pen, she often came to the kitchen, knocking on the door with her horns to indicate that she was ready to visit,

and she was always admitted. In the evening, Aaron, Miriam, and Anna played dreidel.³ Zlateh sat near the stove, watching the children and the flickering of the Hanukkah candles. **J**

Once in a while Aaron would ask her, “Zlateh, do you remember the three days we spent together?”

And Zlateh would scratch her neck with a horn, shake her white

bearded head, and come out with the single sound which expressed all her thoughts, and all her love. **K**

Even though Zlateh had her own pen, she often came to the kitchen, knocking on the door with her horns to indicate that she was ready to visit.

J Reading Focus Generalizations How have things changed from the way they were at the beginning of the story? What generalization can you make about the bond between humans and animals based on what has happened here?

K Read and Discuss How have events turned out for Zlateh, Aaron, and his family?