



# **Biography of the Balebosteh**

**by Irv Tunick**

**WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM**  
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 820  
New York, NY 10115

CAST: Three people  
A NARRATOR (female or male)  
A FEMALE VOICE  
A MALE VOICE (if possible)

SET: Bare stage with three stools. Music stands may be used to hold scripts of readers.

MUSIC may be added between speeches and behind narration.

# BIOGRAPHY OF THE BALEBOSTEH

By Irve Tunick

NARRATOR: You will forgive me if, by way of prologue, I discuss Semantics. Now Semantics, the study of the meaning of words, is a serious area of research. Its application to linguistics is to prove—incontrovertibly—that what you say is not what you mean; and what you mean is precisely what you didn't say. However, when you apply Semantics to Yiddish, it is altogether a different story. Yiddish is a very cunning language indeed. Words are so precise that they not only defy translation but leave no room for argument over meaning. It is the psychology of word construction that is so beautiful.

Take the word "ba'al." It is Hebrew for owner. And the word "bayit" means "house." So through usage in Yiddish, you have *balebos*, owner or master of the house. That's fine. That makes the man feel good. That upholds the father-image, so basic to Jewishness. But see what happens. The word "*balebos*" is there, all right, but who ever uses it? What happens is this: the man is flattered, but, in actual usage, the feminine Yiddish ending "*teh*" is applied. *Teh!* What a difference! The master or owner of the house is the woman, the *balebosteh!* And who can deny it?

So our intent tonight is to demonstrate that in the tide of Jewish history, the man hangs out the shingle, but the woman runs the house!

NARRATOR: Our story begins at the beginning.

And, on the sixth day God created man from the dust gathered from the four corners of the earth. When man opened his eyes, his first words were:

MALE VOICE: How great are Thy works, O Lord!

NARRATOR: God then led Adam through the Garden of Eden...

And God said to Adam: "Whatever I have created was made for your sake. You must care for My world."

FEMALE VOICE: Seeing how Adam turned out, God resolved to give Adam a wife to help him tend the earth. So He caused Adam to fall into slumber. And the Lord reached closest to man's heart. And from Adam's rib He formed the shape of a woman.

The Lord whispered to Eve: "Help Adam. He needs all the help he can get."

NARRATOR: For the times, the Jewish woman of Biblical Days enjoyed considerable status. The daughters of Zelophechod whom we must certainly account the first suffragettes—extracted a modification of the inheritance laws from a most reluctant Moses. The song of Moses and the sons of Israel is counterpointed by that of Miriam and the daughters of Israel. Deborah organized an army, planned a military campaign and led the hosts of Israel to triumph. The usurper, Abimelech received his just desserts from the hands of a woman. Hulda, the prophetess, was the power behind the throne. It is not until you come to the period of the exile that masculine supremacy takes on a more emphatic form. Let's face it. There are woman-haters in every age. Trying to explain this type of prejudice is like trying to explain bagels and lox to a French chef. Actually, the sages of the Talmud tried to balance off the pros and cons. In one passage we are told:

MALE VOICE: When a male is born, all rejoice; when a female, all are sad.

NARRATOR: In another:

FEMALE VOICE: Women were the first to receive the Torah!

NARRATOR: Now followed the era of wandering the splaying out of Judaism from its heart core to the dim and distant echolands. Men and women with bundles and babies pingponged across the table of earth. No matter how far, the bond of Israel stretched and lost neither strength nor memory. And when, finally, the wanderers found their way to the shtetls of Eastern Europe, the pattern of Jewish family life was well established.

MALE VOICE: Father, the *balebos*, the patriarch, the *sheyner yid*, was the Citadel of Learning above and apart from the mundane chores of the home. The Torah was his edifice; the *shul*, his palace.

FEMALE VOICE: And the window to this sometimes austere, sometimes aloof, always commanding edifice was the *balebosteh*. She let the light in and kept the noise out.

MALE VOICE: And then on the lips of the wind, the call was heard: "WOMEN of the world, unite!"

FEMALE VOICE: In America, the struggle for female freedom, equality, and suffrage took on the color of a crusade.

NARRATOR: It was far from easy going. Women marched, protested, chained themselves to the White House fence, and charged up the steps of the Capitol, routing a host of Guards with a deadly umbrella charge.

MALE VOICE: The world of women—once glasslike and placid, an enforced serenity—stirred and heaved. Even in so remote a world as the inner world of the *shtetl*, there was movement and change.

FEMALE VOICE: The *balebosteh* moved from a step behind to a step beside her husband. And when the young sons looked beyond the Pale, to the new freedoms of the West, it was the *balebosteh* who untied the knot on her kerchief and found the few precious coins for escape.

For the Jewish woman in the Outer World beyond the *shtetl*, the new identity, the new fulfillment, was irresistible.

NARRATOR: In Germany, a young girl brought up in the Jewish Orphan Home in Breslau, Mathilde Roth, symbolized the "New Purpose of Womanhood" of her time. Her will was to teach, but in all Germany there was no woman's college. So Mathilde Roth, quite alone, went to England.

In England, she changed her plans. She met a young man with bright brown eyes and brown curly hair. His name was Solomon Schechter. He was a student in Jews College; brilliant, pious, strong.

As your grandmother might have said: a match made in heaven.

FE MALE VOICE: In a way, it was a strange proposal. In those days, it was still the lovely custom for the man to proffer his love tenderly; the kneeling position was considered a *la mode*.

Somehow, I never could imagine Solomon proposing in that manner. So I wasn't a bit surprised when he didn't. Rather, we sat together. I remember it was on a bench in one of those lovely little London parks, and he asked me if I was prepared to conduct a household in such a manner that his pious parents could eat there. I said, "Yes, I would."

This, I know, would be the easiest part. Perhaps not quite so easy would be subordinating my deep interest in art and literature to the life-interests of this profound young scholar who would be my husband. I would be living in a shadow, the shadow of a genius.

MALE VOICE: In those days, a wife was expected to be demure, retiring, modest, self-effacing.

Somehow, I never thought Mathilde would be this way. And she wasn't.

She was, of course, a most devoted mother to our three children, an impeccable *hausfrau*, a hostess that the host took pride in. But there was a special magic about Mathilde.

In 1903, I accepted the call to become President of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. Mathilde, then, could have taken on the respected role of rebbetzin—in a sense, become my social better self. Some of my best friends agreed that I needed one.

Mathilde did well at this, of course. But she went on to do more.

FEMALE VOICE: What I did was no more than needed doing. I admit it. I fell in love with the students. They were so ardent, so full of Judaism. With them, I walked with tomorrow. Then one boy so truly gifted unhappily passed away. It was a minor operation, but he was overworked and undernourished, and he lacked the strength.

I had nightmares over this. I knew why—there was no proper place to stay, nowhere to get good Kosher food.

MALE VOICE: There was Louis Brush, a great humanitarian, a *Sheyner Yid*. *He was at the house often, of course. Mathilde was one of his favorites. How she managed it, honestly, to this day I don't know. But when Louis Brush died, his will provided the funds for the Brush Dormitory at the Seminary, a place where young Jewish scholars could live, work, eat, and think together. You see what I mean about "special magic."*

FEMALE VOICE: Magic? Since when is it magic to show a good man how to be good?

NARRATOR: Solomon Schechter was a Traditionalist, but not iron-bound. He left the cloistered calm of Cambridge for the clatterland of America because he sensed the spirit of transience, of change, in this burgeoning, beckoning land. He wanted, more than anything else, to have his children live and grow in this new and vigorous garden of Jewry.

A disciple of traditional Judaism, yes, but not its prisoner. So, no sooner was he installed in his less-than-plush office at the Seminary, then he began to remold the character of American Judaism. He gave it a universality, a broadness it somehow had lost during the grinding years of the Diaspora. In essence, what he did was to make it a family religion. Not monolithic, with papa at the top and all below running errands. Not a hand with one finger pointing heavenward, but fully fingered, so that the love of God could be grasped and held tight.

FEMALE VOICE: Mathilde Schechter believed in this purpose passionately. She reflected the hunger of the Jewish woman to participate, to share, to help nourish and sustain Judaism.

In 1913, she founded the National Women's League, now the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, as a sister organization to the United Synagogue of America, as a force to maintain and spread Historical Judaism. Its success was rooted in all the generations of Jewish women that were once, are now, and always will be. And The Jewish Theological Seminary was uniquely receptive to the woman's touch. And let me tell you why.

NARRATOR: The Seminary in New York and the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles are the source of Conservative Judaism in America. From their halls come the rabbis who are the spiritual leaders and counselors of our Jewish communities, come the professors of religion and Judaism with chairs at leading universities around the country, the men and women who touch our children during the critical, formative years. From these institutions of learning come the teachers, men and women, who are responsible for the underpinning, the solidarity of our Jewish life.

MALE VOICE: The Seminary and the Ziegler School are the stalwarts; in a world orbiting between fear and chaos, they are faith and warmth. They never command, they suggest, and by their own example, lead.

But the Seminary and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism and after its founding the Ziegler School knew it was not enough for women to be mere custodians of the *pushka*, the little tin can of charity.

FEMALE VOICE: It was not enough, never near enough, to read a little, pray a little, and count the windows in the Synagogue during religious services.

There was solid work to be done and millions needed to do the work. This is the pulsebeat of the Torah Fund which knotted into a single effort many diffuse activities of Women's League; Torah Fund, which shares responsibility for the continuance and expansion of the Seminary and the Ziegler School's many vital programs, and for Residence Halls projects providing a home for students, who will live and work together, absorbing the spiritual and academic atmosphere of The Jewish Theological Seminary and the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies.

NARRATOR *Ba'al* for owner.

MALE VOICE: *Bos* for house.

FEMALE VOICE: *Teh* woman.

NARRATOR: *Balebosteh* a proud title. Ancient, yet with a modern change. More than a shareholder in Judaism, today a full partner!