

States of the Union

A MOVING VIOLATION

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

ON THE EVE of our wedding anniversary—known to some as the second *Seuder* night and to others as Easter weekend—Diane and I were smitten by the 11th plague. Of course you remember the 11th plague. That was when the Lord gave Pharaoh's charioteer a speeding ticket for going 70 cubits an hour in a 40 cubit zone.

The punishment in those days tended to fit the crime: "And He took off their chariot wheels and made them to drive heavily...." Pharaoh may have considered it a bum rap. He had earlier suffered all manner of unlooked-for indignities, including frogs in his bed, hail on his lawn and flies in his soup. As he saw it, the Angel of Death should have been his final misfortune—but now this. "Let us flee from the face of Israel," he was heard to complain in perfect King James Aramaic, "for the Lord fighteth for them against the Egyptians."

Our own escape that Saturday night was via U.S. I-95. It would carry us from a family *Seuder* in Massachusetts to the Lighthouse Inn in New London, Connecticut. On the morning of our 33rd anniversary we hoped to awake to the sound of the sea—not Red as in Exodus, but gray as in Atlantic.

The Passover ceremonial dinner at our niece's house had been edifying as usual, yet not entirely to my Reform taste, which runs toward the *Hagadah* recounting the exodus from Egypt assembled by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations as opposed to the sacred version issued by Maxwell House and Manischewitz. As I told Diane, when the leader holds up the matzoh, he's supposed to say, "Lo! This is the bread of affliction...." He is not supposed to say, "Look here, this is the unleavened bread...."

Diane favored me with a tolerant yawn. "He didn't say 'look here.' He said 'behold.' Anyway, you make the same complaint after every Passover."

We had furlongs to go before we slept. Our route resembled that of the Israelites—out of bondage, around Providence and into the wilderness of eastern Connecticut. Diane, who takes her copilot duties seriously, glanced at the speedometer. "Aren't you driving a bit fast?" she asked.

I was going 80 in a 55-mile zone. "Not to worry," I said. "I'm keeping a weather eye."

The cop, his rooftop lights flashing blue and red, stopped us a few miles east

of New London. Watching him debark and approach, I decided to strike the first blow. "Officer," I said as I rolled down the window, "would you mind turning off your spotlight? It's flashing in my mirror."

He was as low-key as the guy in *Dragnet*. "Yessir," he said. "When I get back to the car. Right now may I see your registration and driver's license.?"

In due course he handed me a summons. "What does this say?" I wanted to know. I was playing the Wicked Son, who inquires in a mocking spirit: "What mean ye by this service?"

"It's a ticket," the cop said. "You'll have to appear in court on the 12th."

"Hey, officer, have a heart. Tonight's a holiday."

"Eighty miles an hour on a holiday weekend," he said. "That's not exactly a light offense."

"But the traffic is light," I insisted.

Who cared? The trooper's back was already turned. "You can tell that to the judge," he said, and vanished from our lives.

Diane and I drove for awhile in silence, with the summons lying between us. When Diane spoke, it was to assess my overall performance. "You showed no remorse," she concluded. Worse: "You didn't tell him about our anniversary." Worst: "You encouraged him to be mean. As soon as you mentioned the spotlight I knew we were in trouble."

In my heart I figured she was right. Clearly I had chosen the wrong son to emulate. Any of the other three would have served me better. The Wise Son did not complain; he asked shrewd legal questions: "What mean the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances...?" The Simple Son at least had the sense to be noncommittal. And the son who was "unable to inquire" was also unable to offend.

"Well," I finally countered, "at least I didn't tell him we'd been to a *Seuder*."

Diane asked, "What would have been wrong with that?"

"You never can tell. He might have heard something about the ritual. You know—those four full cups of wine."

At the Lighthouse Inn we had cognac nightcaps and munched on limp melt-

ed-cheese canapés left over from the Happy Hour. A middle-aged piano player was on hand to entertain us. She played ancient favorites like *Musica, Maestro, Please*.

Diane and I were the only customers, so we applauded strenuously. "Everyone's probably gone home to hug the Easter bunny," our gray-haired waitress speculated.

The next morning we awoke to sounds of surf and rain. On a clear day, we'd been told, you could see the far side of Long Island, maybe even Riverhead; on this Easter Sunday we could barely see our own balcony.

"In such weather," I wondered out loud, "with the Red Sea invisible, what would Moses have done?"

Diane's reply was instructive: "He would have kept a weather eye."

Back home in New Haven, I had nine days to worry about the summons. Some small print on the bottom said I was "entitled to be represented by an attorney," so I called my friend Myrna. I had forgotten what Myrna specialized in.

"Don't tell me you and Diane are getting a divorce," she shrieked. "Not after all these years."

"No no, it's just a minor traffic violation." I gave her the details.

Myrna seemed impressed. "You were actually driving 80 miles an hour on Easter weekend? Wow! You don't need a lawyer, you need a shrink. You know what my advice is? Go in there and take your medicine."

"Yeah, but what's my medicine likely to be?"

"How should I know? If it's not alimony, it's out of my jurisdiction."

ON THE morning of April 12 I donned a buttoned-down shirt, tie and jacket (the better to impress the judge) and returned to the scene of the crime—I-95. My approximate destination was justice; my unaccustomed pace was judicious. Carefree charioteers passed me in whoosh after whoosh. I envied them their innocence: They had never been "made ... to drive heavily."

The courthouse in New London was perfect of its kind—noisy, crowded and

full of plaster dust. Its empty courtrooms with their tall windows and long wooden benches retained a certain dingy panache. They reminded me of chapels awaiting reluctant worshippers. I kept wandering from room to room, not knowing where I was supposed to be, until a woman with a clipboard in hand and a pencil in her ear came to my rescue. "Are you a moving violation?" she asked.

"I guess so."

"Then you belong over there." She pointed to a queue of alleged offenders that stretched down a long corridor and around a bend. I got in line behind a young woman; she was wearing a red sweatshirt and a white visor cap.



"Are you a moving violation?" I asked.

"Not me, my uncle. He got a ticket for being overweight." I must have looked confused. "Not my uncle," she explained, "but his truck. We're in the gravel business." I asked her if the state suffered overloads lightly, and she rolled her eyes heavenward. "It'll cost us moocho money," she said. "Maybe \$500."

Our moving-violation line hardly moved, but that didn't seem to matter. We'd been waiting more than an hour when someone told us we must go to Courtroom B, where a judge would see us. We shuffled along like prisoners in a chain gang. Considering our speedy

reputations, we were at that moment remarkably slow-of-foot.

The judge watched us file in. He had a bald head and a bristling beard, and his eyes were very sad. I felt sorry for him.

"If any of you wish to plead not guilty," he said, "please go now and talk to the prosecutor. The rest of you can stay here." None of us moved. We were all guilty as hell.

One of the nice things about being a commonplace defendant is that you get to see how your colleagues manage similar legal predicaments. Each minitrial may be a preview of your own, so it pays to listen.

The first defendant was a young man accused of driving 60 miles an hour in heavy city traffic. The judge had read the man's highway *vita* and he was not amused. "Seven speeding violations in less than two years," he mused. "Perhaps you can explain."

"If you're thinking of suspending my license," said the young man, "I need it to get to my job."

The judge sighed. "You are correct. I am thinking of suspending your license. I'm going to fine you \$330 plus court costs. I am also going to take away your license for 30 days. Does that sound fair to you?"

"Fine," said the poor fellow. "Just fine."

The next case involved a truck driver arrested one night for driving without headlights. The fine was \$200. Two speedsters followed, then an overloader (not my queue-mate) and after him a man who apparently had swerved when the road had not. Everyone confessed to a temporary and wholly uncharacteristic lapse in judgment. Everyone paid.

I was next, and I said only three words, the first of which was "Guilty." The lugubrious judge found me interesting. He praised me for my otherwise spotless record and scolded me for my moment of recklessness. "Please," he concluded, "for the sake of your family and your loved ones, slow down." I said "Thank you" to the judge, for his mercy endureth forever.

The fine and court costs totaled \$156. I left New London with all deliberate speed.