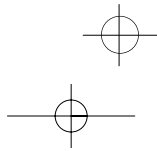
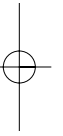
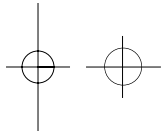
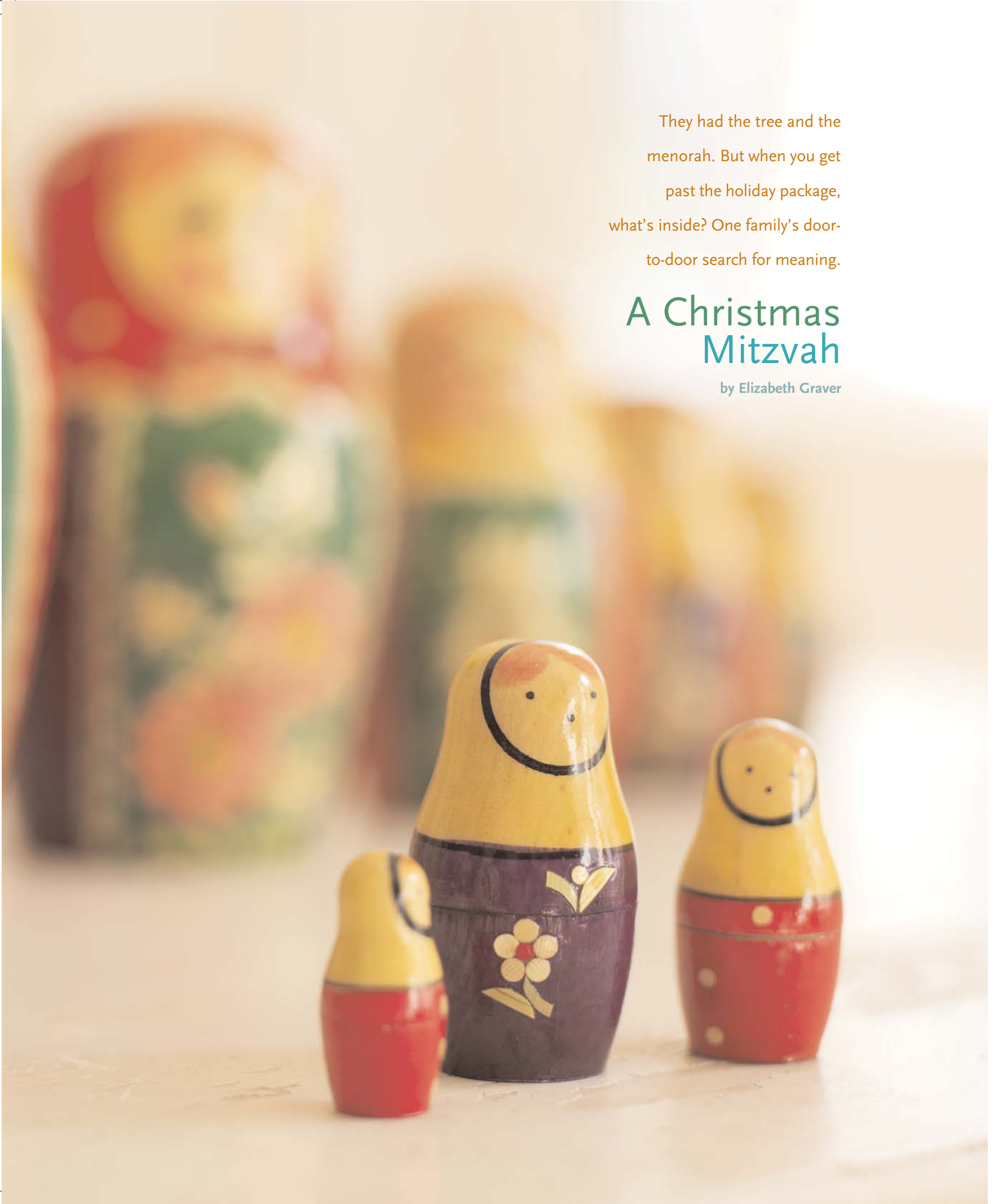
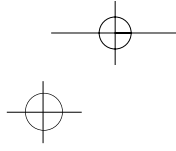


They had the tree and the menorah. But when you get past the holiday package, what's inside? One family's door-to-door search for meaning.

## A Christmas Mitzvah

by Elizabeth Graver





**“It’s like Santa’s workshop!”**

says my daughter Chloe, as she peers into the meeting room at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center, where hundreds of gift bags are lined up on tables, their contents peeking out.

Volunteers circle the room with clipboards, gathering bags, checking names off lists. An old man in a wheelchair navigates between tables, his lap piled with bags. Three boys fly by us, a blur of energy, yarmulkes on their heads. My younger daughter Sylvie grabs my hand.

We know nobody here. I don’t think our two girls, 4 and 6, have ever seen a yarmulke before. “Excuse me, dahling,” says someone behind us, and for a moment I am startled, the voice so familiar. It could be my Grandma Rose, years ago in

the Bronx, Grandma Rose who gave me candy orange slices, who kept kosher, who called me “bubbeleh.” I turn around. A petite elderly woman steadies herself on her cane as she moves past us. “Aren’t you pretty?” she says to the girls, who wear smocked red Christmas dresses, hand-me-downs from cousins on their father’s side. “Are you here to do a mitzvah?”

Chloe and Sylvie look up at me. I nod. They nod.

“Mazel tov,” the woman says.

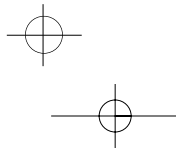
The girls look up at me again.

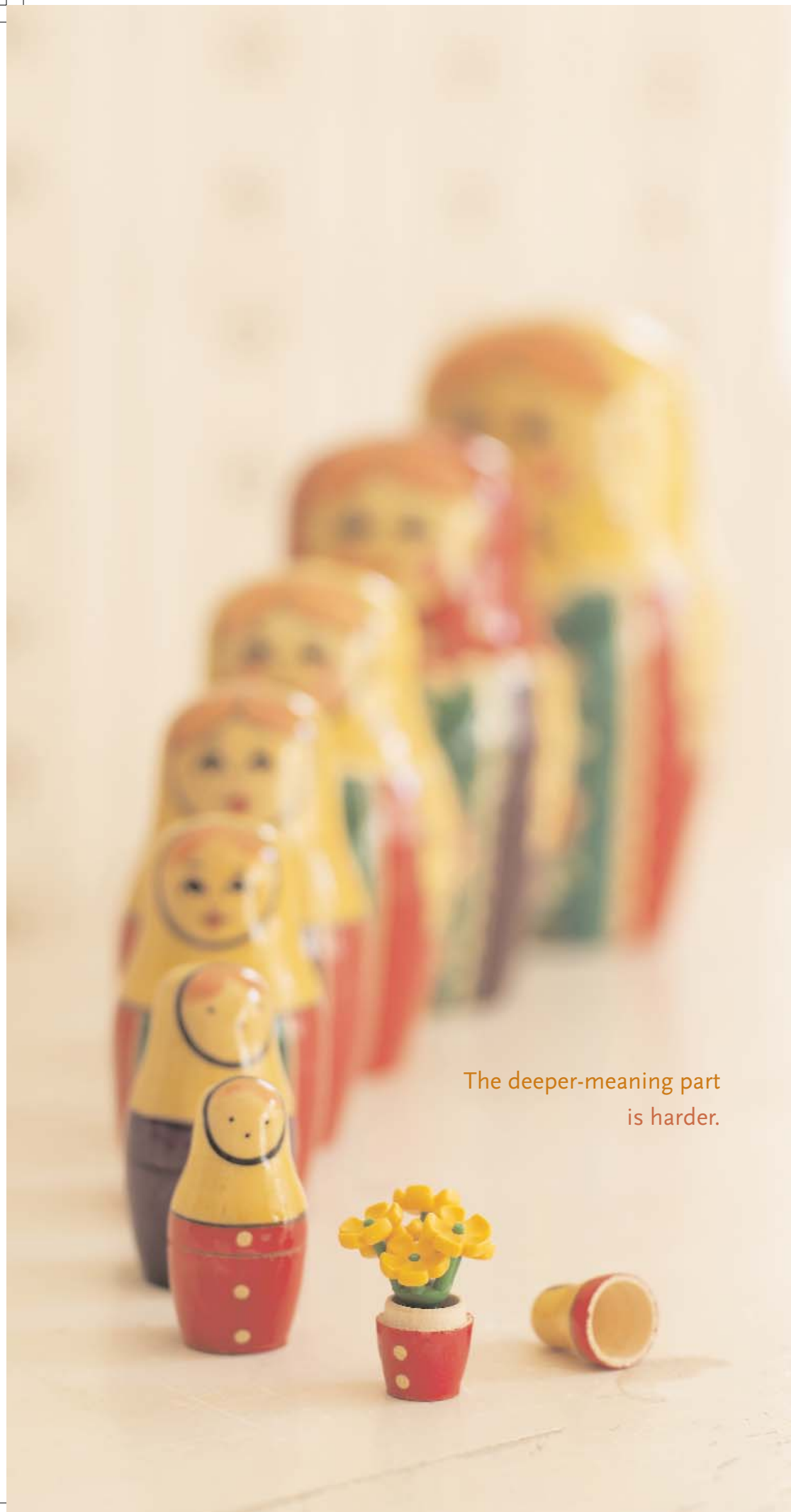
We have come here to deliver Hanukkah gift bags to homebound seniors, to do a “mitzvah,” a good deed. I found the program not through a synagogue, but—where else?—Google, after I searched for “Volunteer Family Hanukkah.” I picked this particular program because it would allow for one-on-one contact, because the idea of my small girls in a soup kitchen full of boiling pots

and crowds was overwhelming, because visiting the elderly felt like a link to my own grandparents, who died before my daughters were born.

I also chose the program because it was Jewish. I was raised as, and still am, a secular Jew; my husband Jim was raised as, and still is, a secular Christian. Our girls receive small gifts when we light the candles and say the blessing (which contains about as much Hebrew as I know) on each of Hanukkah’s eight nights. Their Yiddish is limited to *oy vey*, *schlep*, *kvetch*, and *tush*. On Christmas day, they wake to stockings stuffed by Santa, and more gifts. On our tree we hang the usual things, along with a Star of David and delicate animal bones strung on yarn that Jim (who, if he worships anything, worships nature) has found in the woods.

Spiritually, ethically, we are raising our girls—how? Without a concrete notion of God, that’s for sure. Without an organized religion: no prayers, no Sunday school, no synagogue or church. And yet when the holidays come around, we still want to ►





The deeper-meaning part  
is harder.

draw meaning from them, a tricky task. The surface part is easy. I love rituals. We all do—lights, sparkle, presents, age-old words. *Baruch atah adonai*, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” I love the Hanukkah menorah, and guiding each girl’s hand to light a candle. I have even come to love our Christmas tree, its heady green smell, how it brings the outside in.

The deeper-meaning part is harder. Jesus, I tell my girls (as my mother told me), was said to be born on Christmas day, and many people believe he was the son of God. The Jews’ oil, I tell them, is said to have burned for eight whole days. “But was Jesus the son of God?” asks Chloe. And “How did the oil last so long?” And the hardest question, one both girls have asked earlier and more often than we’d have expected before we became parents: What do you believe?

I hoped volunteering would be a way to add a spiritual element to the holidays. “We’ll be visiting old people who can’t easily go out on their own,” I told the girls. “We’ll bring treats to their doors, kind of like the opposite of Halloween. And we’ll chat with them if they want to.”

“Why wouldn’t they want to?” Chloe asked.

At the Hebrew Center, we are given five large gift bags and a list of names and addresses. Chloe lugs two bags to the car; ►



CMYK

*More blessed to give than to receive. Which Testament does it come from? I don't know.*



Elizabeth Graver (top, with Sylvie and Chloe) is the author of three novels, most recently *Awake*. Below, Iosif Levitin and the girls have a mitzvah moment.



Sylvie, Jim, and I each take one. We drive to a 12-story senior-housing apartment building, where we buzz Apt. 4A. After a staticky exchange we're let in and take the elevator up (a thrill for our suburban kids). Four A is a white door on a long hallway; "Mrs. Lily Dinnerstein" is the first name on our sheet. Despite knowing that Mrs. Dinnerstein has signed up for this delivery, I am struck with sudden shyness.

"Go ahead—ring the bell," I whisper to Chloe.

"You," she says, just as the door begins to open.

"Say 'Happy Hanukkah,'" I whisper. We rehearsed in the car after examining the contents of the bags: a small menorah, candles, frozen latkes, applesauce, a dreidel. Now Sylvie hides behind Jim. Chloe offers forth the bag, and her voice is clear and brave and sweet: "Happy Hanukkah."

Mrs. Dinnerstein takes her gift with a trembling hand and

thanks us. "Hold on," she says and closes the door, only to open it again and give each girl a dollar. Then, before they can thank her, she shuts the door. Chloe and Sylvie spin around, giddy, holding up their cash.

"That was nice of her," I say, but inwardly I am slightly disappointed: What about a conversation, contact, though of course we're strangers, she's frail, an old woman living alone. And the money? Will the girls expect it at the next door, too? What kind of lesson does that teach? Our next three stops are all to elderly ladies. Each one gives the girls something—lollipops, quarters, stuffed animals grabbed from the top of the couch. ("I've been dying to get rid of those!" the woman says over the children's heads.)

**It is not until our fifth** and final stop that we are ushered inside, by Mr. Iosif Levitin, who says, "Sit, of course you sit," and brings out chocolate truffles and oranges, and tells us his wife is asleep in the bedroom; she'd come out if she could. The apartment is small and pin-neat, with artwork and painted dishes on display. The couple is from



Russia, like my Grandma Rose. They came here eight years ago, our host tells us, following their sons. The girls sit on the edge of the couch and watch as Mr. Levitin takes out a Russian nesting doll, red-cheeked, rotund, and opens it, lining up the pieces on the table.

"Matryoshka dolls," Sylvie announces softly.

"You know!" He reaches out a hand to her. "Come see."

*More blessed to give than to receive.* Which Testament does it come from? I don't know. I do know that Jim and I try, not always successfully, to braid empathy and compassion through our daily lives. But our kids are ... kids. They love candy, adventures, dollar bills. Sometimes they fight: "Mine!" "No, mine!" Other times, their kindness takes my breath away.

We stay for half an hour, maybe more. Our host tells us about how he was an engineer-mechanic in Russia, and his wife a mapmaker. He shows us pictures of his grandchildren. He apologizes for his English, which is excellent. He refills our coffee, pours more juice for the girls. When, finally, we get up to leave, he shakes hands with Jim and me. Then—in a gesture as surprising as it is somehow familiar—he plants a silent kiss on the top of each girl's head. ●