



THE CITY IN THE
MOONLIGHT

STORIES of the OLD-TIME LITHUANIAN JEWS



DOVID KATZ

TRANSLATED by BARNETT ZUMOFF

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by

Dovid Katz

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Filling A Gap In Modern Yiddish Fiction: Introducing the *Misnagdic* (Litvak) Tale

by Barnett Zumoff

Dovid Katz, one of the most prolific writers of Yiddish belletristic prose today, was born in New York into a deeply literary family: his father, Menke Katz, was a noted poet in both Yiddish and English, and his sister, Troim Katz Handler, is also a poet and translator. He received a yeshiva education and became steeped in the history, mores, religion, and languages of the Eastern European Jewish communities, particularly his own Lithuanian Jewish heritage. He has published dozens of linguistic studies on the origins, dialects, and stylistics of the Yiddish language, as well as a massive folio volume titled *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Revised edition, 2010). For two decades, he has been crisscrossing the lands of his ancestors in search of the last survivors, whom he records and for whom he has become a noted advocate. With this background, and his own literary talent, he has been able to re-create, with remarkable accuracy, the by-gone world of the Jews of his great-great-grandparents' time and place through his fascinating, charmingly wrought short stories, written in the language of those Jews, Yiddish, in the specific rich hearty dialect that they spoke. The current volume comprises my translations of thirteen stories selected from this oeuvre.

The English subtitle of this book, "Stories of the Old-Time Lithuanian Jews," has been substituted for the original Yiddish title, "Tales of the *Misnagdim*" in order to make the subject matter understandable to contemporary readers who may not be knowledgeable about Jewish religious history; the English title locates the subjects of the stories in time and space while the Yiddish title locates them in the spectrum of Judaic religious observance. In reality, however, the title change represents a distinction without a difference, for the *misnagdim* were largely to be found in the geographical area formerly known as *Lite*, literally Lithuania, corresponding to various stages of the political evolution of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and now encompassing modern-day Latvia, Lithuania, northeastern Poland, Belarus, parts of northern and western Ukraine, and western Russia.

Who were the *misnagdim*? The word means "opponents," but opponents of what? They were opponents of the widespread Jewish religious movement called *khasidizm*, which arose in the early 18th century. The thrust of *khasidizm*, as formulated by its founder, the Bal Shem Tov (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer [c. 1700-1760]) was to supplement, or even replace, what the *khasids* considered the sterile over-intellectualism of the rabbinic Judaism of the time, which emphasized Torah and Talmud study and more or less disparaged unlettered Jews, with a Judaism of joy, direct engagement of the individual Jew with God, and equality of all the Jews in the community, whether learned or not; they

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also incorporated certain pantheistic tendencies and changed certain prayers and practices. *Khasidizm* also introduced a feature new to Judaism: the development of more or less autonomous localized Jewish communities headed by hereditary, dynastic spiritual leaders known as *rebbe*s, sometimes referred to as *tsadikim*¹, who ruled as virtual kings in their communities, were considered infallible (in the religious sense), and were often credited with magical powers, especially for healing.

The new doctrine had great appeal to the masses of ordinary Jews, and it spread rapidly, especially in Poland, Galicia, and Hungary. However, many religious Jews, especially those living “up north” in the area of *Lite*, were vigorously opposed to the movement, particularly to its de-emphasis of study of the Holy Books and its near-deification of the *rebbe*s. They feared that the institution of the *rebbe*s might evolve into a messianic movement, the idea of which was anathema to them, especially in light of the previous widespread cult of the false messiah Sabbetai Tsvi a century earlier. So strong was their opposition to *khasidizm* that their great spiritual leader, the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo – Zalmen [1720-1797]), excommunicated the *khasidim* in 1772 and urged other rabbis to do the same.

Despite the condemnation, the *khasidic* movement spread and flourished throughout the central and southwestern parts of the Eastern European Jewish world. Perhaps because they were considered colorful and interesting, the *khasidim* became celebrated in song and story, to the point that many Jews equated them with all Orthodox Jews—*misnagdim* virtually disappeared from the popular imagination. It was partly to remedy this disproportionate emphasis on *khasidim* that Dovid Katz set out on his mission of writing stories about the lives, customs, and beliefs of the *misnagdim*.

All of the stories I have translated in this volume transport us almost magically to a world of long ago and far away in which the *misnagdic* community was the norm, and depict various aspects of their lives, loves, and struggles. Five of the stories touch directly, to a greater or lesser degree, on differences and conflicts between *misnagdim* and *khasidim*.

In the title story, *The City in the Moonlight*, the originally *misnagdic* residents of a village are beset by the importunities of proselytizing *khasidim* (and also *musr-niks*, a sort of puritanical “ethical” movement that arose in nineteenth century western Lithuania). To solve the problem, the rabbi organizes an exodus of his followers to a distant site where they build a new village that is illuminated at night by beautiful moonlight that creates a scene of transcendent beauty. There the transplanted Jews live peacefully and productively, studying the Scriptures and making candles.

The story *If Not Even Wiser* is a respectful reverse takeoff on I.L. Peretz’s famous story *If Not Even Higher*, in which a skeptical *litvak*² visits a *khasidic*

1. Saints or saintly persons

2. Lithuanian Jew—a *misnagid*, of course

village that boasts that its *rebbe* rises to Heaven on days when he disappears from the village; the *litvak* discovers that the *rebbe's* disappearances are to perform anonymous charity to the sick and needy; after that, when the *khosids* say that the *rebbe* rises to Heaven, the *litvak* murmurs: "If not even higher", and he remains in the village as a *khosid*. In Katz's story, a *khosid* visits a *litvak* village, is charmed by the friendly rabbi's patient explanation of the Holy Scriptures, which the *khosid* had never studied or understood before, and observes the rabbi secretly visiting an old, paralyzed woman to bring her joy by reading her the weekly Torah portion; overcome, he remains in the village as a *misnagid*, and when the local Jews say that their rabbi is as wise as King Solomon, the former *khosid* murmurs: "If not even wiser."

In the story *The Idol-Worshiper*, an old rabbi dies and the community disregards his wish that his son be designated to replace him. The son goes insane with grief, is invaded by a *dybbuk*³, and turns to idol-worship. The community imports several *khasidic rebbes* to exorcise his *dybbuk* but they fail; they then bring in a distinguished *misnagdic* rabbi who succeeds, by getting the community to adhere to its moral duty to appoint the old rabbi's son as its new rabbi.

In *Abba Ella's Mission*, a reclusive Torah scholar in a village is summoned by the community to a public mission: to resolve a roiling conflict between the village's original *misnagdic* population and a group of newcomer *khasidim*. In the story, the doctrinal differences between the groups are amusingly capsuled and over-simplified in descriptions of the conflicting "catechisms" that the respective *khasidic* and *misnagdic* teachers use to indoctrinate their pupils. In the end, Abba Ella gathers the villagers, summarizes for them the respective virtues and failings of the *khasidic* and *misnagdic* approaches, orders the leaders of both groups to leave the village, and institutes a calm, compromise approach to religious practice.

In *Rivtshe of the Tanye*, the protagonist is a poor woman who has endured a hard life, including the unexplained disappearance of her husband; she ekes out a meager living by selling mushrooms. At the end of her long life, in a sort of dying declaration in the synagogue, she lashes out at philosophical errors in the *khasidic* treatise *The Tanye*, leaving the local *khasidim* embarrassed and abashed for a number of years thereafter.

The other eight stories in the book are also colored by religious issues and practices but don't directly address that *khasidic-misnagdic* dichotomy; it is simply taken for granted that the Judaism of the protagonists has a *misnagdic* cast. The central narrative in each story is straightforward, but the writing is gracefully textured, with colorful background and details that seize and hold the reader's attention; the quality of the storytelling is remarkably high: *If Not Even Wiser* compares quite favorably with I.L. Peretz's famous *If Not Even Higher*, which is considered one of the finest stories by one of the finest of all Yiddish storytellers. Reading these stories by Dovid Katz will broaden the reader's

3. In this instance, a malign spirit

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perspective by opening a window into a fascinating, unfamiliar world. That is a prime objective of serious literature, and Katz achieves it.

Many well known Yiddish literary figures have praised his work in the original Yiddish; it is appropriate to cite several of them:

Hirsh Osherovitch (1992): “His prose is the work of a full-blooded and refined writer. It is a pleasure to read.”

Mordhke Tsanin (1993): “An original canvas and a remarkable Yiddish...an authenticity as if he had grown up in a Jewish town in Lithuania of old.”

Yehuda Elberg (1994): “Hirshedovid Menkes (i.e. Dovid Katz) is a storyteller born with a blessing on his pen.”

Hirsh Reles (1995): “I am amazed how someone born and raised in a city that is part and parcel of Western civilization (i.e., New York) could so richly describe the inner life of the exotic characters of the old world—it is a virtuoso feat.”

Khonon Kiel (1996): “He has ‘lived himself into’ another era , to those distant types of the little shtetl.”

Elie Wiesel (1996): “These ‘Tales of the *Misnagdim*’ are wonderful. Now, if a *khosid* says it, you had better believe it!”

The Idol-Worshiper

In Shupran, the rabbi, Reb Shloyme-Yankev Palan, died. This was the Shupran that was located between Sul and Baran, right near the Ashmanke River, which finally empties into the Vilye. His wife, the rebbitsin, had breathed her last many years earlier, after a long, drawn-out illness. Every Friday evening, Reb Shloyme-Yankev went to the cemetery to remind her that it was time to light the Sabbath candles.

Reb Shloyme-Yankev had never been ill; even when he was well on in years, he walked straight as a telegraph pole, with the dignified pace of a rabbi. He drew on the strength of his soul to sustain his body. When he lay down to sleep on the night he died, he sensed that he would never wake up again, and he recited the *moyde ani*⁴. A Litvak remains a Litvak—whatever can't be done tomorrow should be done today. He took his will out of his copy of *khoyves halvoves*⁵ and laid it on the table. It was written with tiny cursive letters and shiny ink on a small piece of parchment.

People didn't send rabbinical questions to Shupran from distant places, nor did Reb Shloyme-Yankev write about the 'mysteries of the Torah.' He was a genius at expounding orally—his sayings reverberated throughout the vicinity. In his hometown of Shupran, they considered him the King Solomon of his generation. In truth, while Reb Shloyme-Yankev was the rabbi in Shupran, people didn't complain to God or to other people. They didn't sue and they didn't go hungry. It was like sitting in one's own vineyard.

But dead is dead. When the thirty-day mourning period was over, there was only one thing to do: appoint a new rabbi in Shupran.

In his will, the Shupran rabbi had written that his only son, Reb Elyokem-Alter Palan, whom people called Lokemalter, should be appointed

4. *I confess*—prayer of confession

5. *Obligations of the Heart*, a well known book of moral instruction

rabbi. He added five words: “As the community shall decide.”

Reb Lokemalter had been ordained in Volozhin, just like his father. He himself was already past sixty. He reminded people of his father, but he was not a likable fellow.

He greeted people in the street with an inscrutable smile and hardly said a word to anyone. Chatting with ordinary people about trifles was not his thing. Furthermore, Lokemalter didn't look at all like a rabbi. He was short and skinny, only as tall as a thirteen-year-old boy. Jokesters called him “shorty.” He had remained a bachelor. Though his silvery beard was long, like that of an old man, it was stringy and sparse, like the strings of a mandolin. When a breeze came up, the individual strings flew every which way, each on its own. His voice sounded like that of a bleating lamb; with such bleating sounds, a rabbi couldn't give a sermon in the synagogue.

The community officials had a discussion about the matter. The Shupran rabbi, in the cemetery, would forgive them. After all, he himself had written: “As the community shall decide.”

The son was appointed assistant rabbi, and they wrote him a contract that would pay him good wages till the age of a hundred and twenty. He threw the contract back in the officials' faces, not at all like a rabbi, and blew them off with two words: “No, thanks.”

They brought in a young rabbi from Belarus, all the way from Vitebsk province. He was a Lubavitsher *khosid*.⁶ The people of Shupran liked him very much. He spoke sweetly to everyone and listened thoughtfully to everything that a person had on his mind. When he gave a sermon to the Shupran community, their spirits were exalted. He let them know right away that he agreed to their continuing to pray in the Lithuanian style. If he as an individual added *khassidic* prayers when he prayed to the Almighty, that wouldn't hurt either. About that, he said, gently and pleasantly:

“If *khassidim* and *misnagdim*⁷ don't pray together, how will the Messiah come? And didn't the Tsemakh Tsadik⁸ from Lubavitsh travel to St. Petersburg together with Reb Itsele, Khayim Volozhiner's son,⁹ to plead for the Jews?”

The young rabbi immediately began to ensure that Reb Lokemalter's

6. A follower of the Bal Shem Tov, whose style of observance emphasized joyful singing and dancing and de-emphasized study of the Scriptures

7. Anti-*khassidic* Orthodox Jews from Lithuania and neighboring areas

8. A well known *khassidic* rabbi (or rebbe, as the *khosids* called their rabbis)

9. A well known *misnagdic* rabbi

honor was not infringed on. He cancelled the whole procession in which he was to be escorted to the synagogue by horses bedecked with bells and ordered that no musicians should play and that his certificate of appointment as the rabbi should not be read aloud to the congregation in the synagogue.

* * *

Lokemalter fell into a deep depression. The new rabbi was very good about according him every honor: he constantly consulted with him about community matters. But it was a waste of effort. Lokemalter's mother had died, his father had died, and he himself was an old bachelor without an heir or anyone to say *kadish* for him. No need to say how lonely he was. And here a group of community officials had come by, hypocrites with God in their pockets, and had undertaken to interfere with the rabbinical appointment that should have been his by inheritance. To them, his father's will meant nothing. In Shupran, where he had lived all his life, they considered him a nothing.

Lokemalter took to wandering around in the cemetery in the middle of the night; since he had nothing to say to the living, he might as well converse with the dead. He didn't find any consolation there either. A hot sweat broke out all over him even though it was wintertime. He complained angrily to his father for having brought shame upon him in the world. When the eleven months of mourning had passed, he began to behave very weirdly. In Shupran, they said that the previous Shupran rabbi's son had "strange ways."

His senses became vastly sharper. He was able to hear sounds from very far away that had nothing to do with him. In the middle of the street, his ears would prick up as if driven by some external force, and he would hear someone drawing water from a well far away. In the house, he would listen for hours to a mouse running around beneath the floorboards. Another time he stood frozen, staring at a puddle, as if there were who knows what there. He would shake with fear when he looked at a bench, as if the slats had become poisonous snakes. Someone gave him a book to look up something and he got angry because the columns were entirely black, just plain ink that was mocking him.

In the end, he became a convert to spitefulness. He went around in the street without a hat, bareheaded. A Jewish woman screamed out on the Sabbath that she was prepared to swear by all that's holy that she saw him

light a candle in the house two hours before *havdole*.¹⁰ He never went into the synagogue at all.

The citizens of Shupran saw the hand of God in everything under the sun. “There is a God in the world. It’s fortunate that Lokemalter didn’t accept the position of assistant rabbi. A fine thing that would have been! And it’s fortunate that Rabbi Shloyme-Yankev, may he rest in peace, and his rebbitsin, may she rest in peace, didn’t live to see all this! The Almighty is indeed merciful!” In his presence, they were very careful, but among themselves they started calling Lokemalter, distinguished ancestors or not, the “tra-la-la-la-la.”

He hardly left his house. He was sure that he could upset Shupran if he sat by his window and gnawed an apple slowly on *tishe bov*,¹¹ but nothing happened. One doesn’t ask a crazy man questions—he’s to be pitied, after all.

From sitting in his house for days on end, his skin grew as white as a shroud. He got even shorter and skinnier. Anyone who saw him in the window got frightened: a skeleton from the cemetery was shuffling around under its own power in his house. Every morning he vomited into a basin and trembled lest the people in the street should hear it.

The people of Shupran tried to come to the aid of the pitiful fellow. They brought him presents and tasty dishes. From Marasheyski’s factory in Svintsian they brought an expert on healing herbs. But he didn’t let anyone in.

Nevertheless, every Sabbath Lokemalter tried to pull himself out of his craziness. He remembered how his father used to sit with him in the same house, at the same table, and study Torah with him. He saw in his mind’s eye how his parents’ faces had brightened when their only son came back from Volozhin, ordained. They had waited for the wagon all night.

Nothing helped. When one slides down into an abyss, one falls in deeper and deeper. He had exhausted the list of his imaginary sins—where would he go to constantly find new ones? He no longer said any blessings and no longer put on *tfiln*.¹² He mixed dairy and meat dishes in the same pot and tasted them, but he immediately vomited. A Jew

10. *Havdole* is the prayer that ends the Sabbath—she was saying that he lit the candles two hours early, while it was still the Sabbath and one is forbidden to light candles

11. *Tisha b’Av* (the 9th day of the month of *Av*), commonly referred to as *tishe bov*, is a day of mourning and fasting in memory of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, so gnawing an apple would be a breach

12. A set of leather strips wound around the left hand and fingers and a small prayer-containing box strapped to the forehead. Observant Jews put these on during certain prayers

remains a Jew. With all his sins, he had accomplished nothing. One day, at the time of “third meal”¹³, he saw before his eyes the face of his father sitting *shiva*¹⁴ in Paradise, weeping, his heart aching for the soul of his only son in Lithuanian Shupran.

* * *

The mind of every crazy person clears somewhat during Tammuz.¹⁵ On the summer Sabbaths, when the very air was redolent of Scripture, Lokemalter tried to achieve clear understanding of all its hidden details. Just as in the fleeting moments when the red glow of a setting sun breaks through from its near-death with wondrous strength, a window of clarity opened for him in his misty craziness. He leafed through the last chapters of his Talmud. This time the letters were waiting for his Volozhiner eyes with love. The joy he derived from looking into a holy book returned with a vengeance. He tarried for quite a while at an eight-fold commentary on *Nedarin*.¹⁶ He burst out into arrogant laughter and started giving the priestly blessing to the wall. What would that scholarly, dear young man, the little rabbi in Shupran, say about something like that, hah? What did it have to do with anything? At the same time, Lokemalter understood that because of all his anger and his spiting of God and Shupran, he would never get into Paradise!

And Shloyme-Yankev’s son Lokemalter openly considered becoming a heretic; a clear mind can lead to anything. There was just one problem: becoming a heretic was not an easy path to take. The more sins he committed, the more they thought of him as a wise-guy know-it-all. Not for nothing did the wise men say that an ignoramus cannot be a heretic.

Heresy is a school of thought too. One must look into such a school of thought, study it! After all, everything has to do with Torah. He took down the *shulkhan orukh*¹⁷, turned to the laws concerning idolatry in the *yoyre deye*¹⁸, and looked at the text. Nothing. To worship the Christian idols in town was not permitted, but to enjoy them because they

13. A small meal eaten during the early afternoon in synagogue by observant Jews so they won’t have to go home to eat between morning and evening prayers

14. The seven-day period of mourning for a deceased family member

15. The 10th month of the Jewish calendar.

16. A chapter of the Talmud

17. The Set Table—a compilation of Jewish religious laws and practices

18. A volume in the *shulkhan orukh*

were beautiful was all right. If one found smashed crosses and idols, one could use them for some purpose (at a fair celebrating their holiday, for example,) as long as one could see neither an arm nor a leg. All of that was beside the point.

He skipped to the last paragraph, which describes real heretics--real and not imaginary: worshipping idols and denying the Torah and the prophets. True, those who commit sins for spite are also heretics, but Lokemalter considered them small change, like little ants. A real heretic has to worship the idol with all his heart and soul, with devotion and love, but Lokemalter knew very well that God was the Creator of the universe, so that was no good either.

He leafed through Maimonides' *The Way of Repentance*, which says that anyone who doesn't believe that the Creator knows what goes on in a man's heart is a heretic, and anyone who believes that there is a single word in the Torah that doesn't come from God is also a heretic. Fine heretics! Such ideas that occurred to Maimonides! He converted all of heresy into trivialities. Following that path, it would end up that every Jewish person was a bit of a heretic.

And Lokemalter, the son of Rabbi Shloyme-Yankev Palan, a man of Shupran in the district of Vilna, decided that he would become a heretic. For the love of it. By the book, the way one should. He sang out the word *ke-hil-kho-so-o-o*¹⁹ with prayerful exaltation. He took out a dusty bottle of Lintuper whiskey from a small knapsack that had been lying around since his father was alive and slurped it down like a baby nursing.

Maimonides and the *shulkhan orukh* had confused trifles with real heresy. Besides, both of them, Maimonides and the *shulkhan's* author, had in mind the Gentiles of their day, the Arabs and Christians, but they were not real pagans at all because they included some worship of the true God in their devotions. An addition is not a subtraction.

"Seek the idol where it can be found." The prophet Elijah made war on the false prophets on Mount Carmel, but which false prophets? The prophets of Ba'al, as everyone knows. False or not false is a matter of opinion, since all men are false. To make things worse, try to find Ba'al in Shupran! You'll sooner find Moyshe Rabeynu's staff in Varnian.

Lying to one side was an old Amsterdam edition of *Prophets and Writings*. Its pages were very thin. Despite that, they were whiter than those of the Vilna and Sloviter books. The letters were delicate and charm-

19. According to the Law

ing. Studying *Prophets* and *Writings* was crazy! Besides, it was entirely without commentaries other than Rashi's, in an ancient Yiddish. There were words there that even his great-grandmother herself didn't really understand .

So for the first time in his life, Lokemalter began to read a book--read, not study. Like a women's Sabbath storybook, *l'havdil*²⁰. With compressed lips and the expression of a prankish *kheyder*-student, he began: "And it was after the death of Moses that the Lord God spoke to Joshua ben Nun, Moyshe's servant, and said----"

It didn't take long before the children of Israel were drawn to Ba'al. The angel of God came from the Heavenly spheres to castigate them because when the entire generation of Joshua had died there was no one left to remember the deeds of the Lord and "they worshiped the Ba'als." Not just one Ba'al, but a bunch of Ba'als! When he was alive, Joshua ben Nun had conquered the Ba'al-Gad—he was nobody's fool, after all—but after that, the Jews made the Ba'al of the Covenant into a god. And when the Hivites inhabited Mount Lebanon, from Mount Ba'al-Hermon to Havat, that was one more Ba'al. And didn't King Solomon have a vineyard on Mount Ba'al-Hermon? He, too, knew exactly what he was doing. What more do you need than that Hezekiah, King of Israel, when he fell out of his attic, you shouldn't know from that, immediately sent emissaries to Beelzebub (Ba'al-Zevuv), the god of Ekron.²¹

The mixture of craziness and clarity is preferable to just craziness. Lokemalter became agitated. His head felt stung by tongues of the fires of Hell. He stared at the sky. He saw visions: Joshua ben Nun, King Solomon, King Hezekiah in his attic, and the Ba'als. Here a Ba'al, there a Ba'al. In a split second, he understood the essence of his heresy. The name of the Ba'al in Shupran was nothing else than Ba'al-Shupran.

Lokemalter howled like a female prayer-leader in the month of Elul. It was the time of the afternoon prayers. Not in any particular *misnagdic* style, he began to recite the afternoon Sabbath prayers, as it were. He began to cry out the *amida*, not at all like the quietness of *shmone-esre*: "Blessed be Thou, Ba'al of Shupran, our Ba'al and the Ba'al of our ancestors, Ba'al of Abraham, Ba'al of Isaac and Jacob, great, valiant, awesome Ba'al"

20. To be separated. An expression used to separate the sacred from the profane

21. A main city of the Philistines

A gush of sweat ran down from the top of his forehead over his whole body. He didn't squint at all—his eyes grew very round. His right eye suddenly grew red like a sun facing the pale moon in the late Spring sunset, when the contrasts in the sky become manifest on the Earth.

His voice resounded loudly throughout Shupran. It was a hot summer day. The rabbi was teaching a chapter from the Scriptures to the audience in the synagogue. When the prayer to the Ba'al of Shupran rang out, things got out of hand. They banged on the table with laughter. Several strapping young men in the street, meanwhile, decided to "straighten out" the crazy man who was bringing shame on Jews and on Shupran. When he heard the commotion, the young rabbi ran out to dissuade them from the serious sin. First of all, it was Sabbath, and second, had they not been taught that one must have pity on a crazy person?

Lokemalter took the books down from the closet and carefully rearranged them in the form of a "B" and a "Sh." He bowed and almost kneeled before the hastily formed Ba'al-Shupran.

In Shupran, they were no longer laughing. If that's the way things were going to go, then people would no longer talk about Sodom and Chelm. This was virtually a desecration of the name of God! The Gentiles would have something to mock them about, and Jews from Palush to Kapule would start calling Shupran the "crazy city." That's all they needed!

As many times as the rabbi of Shupran approached Lokemalter kindly, that's how many times he was coarsely driven from the house with just these four words: "Get away from here!" The young rabbi realized that he had to take things into his own hands; after all, the man was reciting his distorted prayers three times a day to a Shupran Baal that even Jereboam ben Nabat didn't know about. The rabbi realized that a *dybbuk*²² had entered Lokemalter, no one should know from such a thing! To a *dybbuk*, a few thousand years means nothing. A *dybbuk* of a bitter bridegroom creeps into a virgin, and that of a bitter pagan god creeps into an old bachelor son of a rabbi. Go question a *dybbuk*!

It was just that one had to know how to drive out a *dybbuk*. The young rabbi was not lacking in will. When Sabbath was over, he sent an emissary a long distance at night to bring back holy *tsadiks*²³. Till the emissary got to the places where the real *khasidim* lived and got back with the *tsadiks*, it was already into the 10 Days of Awe.²⁴ A sign from

22. This word is explained later in this story

23. Variouslly translated as saintly persons or *khasidic* rebbes; here, the latter

24. The 10 days between *rosh hashone* and *yom kipur*

the Almighty, the young rabbi concluded, that they had to drive out the dybbuk before the Day of Judgment.²⁵ How would it look if on the day of *kol nidre*²⁶ the crazy voice of a Jew rang out, begging for forgiveness from Ba'al Shupran?

The emissary came back with five men: three senior *khasidic* rebbes, each one an old man with distinguished features, and two servants, strong as oxen. The senior *khasidim* wore fur hats, twisted sidecurls, long silk coats, and white socks. The servants carried big white candles, big black candles, amulets, a gigantic *shofar*²⁷, and an enormous number of booklets.

It was immediately apparent that this was a group that knew its business. First, the servants broke down Lokemalter's door, took him by the arms, and tied them with rope.

The three *khasidic* rebbes marched in, singing, praying, and wailing. They fastened the shutters and lit the white candles and the black candles. They started praying under their breath, in Hebrew and Aramaic, to this or that angel. Finally the eldest of them went up to the *dybbuk*-infested man. He was a big, strong man with a beard that fell below his waist. As is the custom, he began to cross-examine the *dybbuk*:

"Dybbuk—speak! Who are you?"

"Bandits! Get away from here!"

"What is your name?"

"Bandits! Get out of here! Are you deaf?"

"Where do you come from?"

"Scamps! Go away!"

"Why did you enter the rabbi who is the son of a rabbi, Reb Elyokum Alter, son of Reb Shloyme-Yankev Palan?"

"Foul products of menstruation! Sons of whores!"

The *dybbuk*-expellers from a distant land conversed and muttered under their breath, with kabbalistic phrases and signs. They waved candles raised high and made war using the amulets, to threaten the *dybbuk*.

A day passed, then a night. On the second day, the five men who had come went back to where they had come from. They promised that they would return after the holidays. But they were afraid to remain on

25. Here meaning *yom kipur*

26. A prayer chanted on the eve of *yom kipur*

27. A ram's horn, blown in synagogue on important ceremonial occasions, such as *rosh hashone*

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yom kipur in a place where a *dybbuk* of *dybbuks* had not allowed them to drive him out.

Lokemalter gave thanks, so to speak, that Ba'al Shupran had liberated him from all those devils.

* * *

There was at that time a clever Jewess in Shupran. Her name was Khantshe. She was a pudgy widow who wore a checkered purple apron and a green head-kerchief. People in Shupran liked her.

This Khantshe wasn't at all enthusiastic about the fact that they had brought the young rabbi from Belarus. She had nothing against *khasidim*, but, as she had asked at the time, with a half-smile: "Why have *Khabad*²⁸ in Shupran?" And when Lokemalter went completely off the rails, she didn't understand at all why they had brought, from distant places, *khasidim* with white socks, when there were, all around them, so many renowned *misnagdic* scholars with the finest credentials, some from Mir, some from Kletsk, some from Svintsian, and some from Volozhin.

From her Yiddish version of the Scriptures, she remembered that "...when there is no other person to do so, one must himself (or herself) step up to the challenge." She went on foot to Sul. She arrived in the evening and went to see the rabbi of Sul. The "disorder in Shupran" was well known everywhere. She told him everything in sequence, told him that Shupran had become a disgrace.

The Suler rabbi was an old man. He had been ordained in Volozhin, and as a young man he had been friendly there with Reb Shloyme-Yankev Palan. He listened to her in silence, with sad eyes and drooping shoulders. After that he said that if the rabbi of Shupran called him he would come. One couldn't just interfere in some else's community.

Khantshe stayed overnight with a relative, and in the morning she went back home to Shupran. She went to see the young rabbi and told him she had been to see the Suler rabbi. If they called him to Shupran, he would not refuse. The young rabbi agreed.

The Suler was invited to a conference in the Shupran synagogue. All this was after *simkhes toyre*. After *minkhe*²⁹, the first frost appeared. They turned on the oven, enough to heat a whole town. After all, it was a special occasion when the Suler came visiting.

The Suler arrived with his secretary. Immediately it seemed to every-

28. Lubavitsher *khasidim*

29. Afternoon prayers

one that the cries of “Blessed be Thou, Ba’al of Shupran” by the deranged man had diminished slightly. When a rabbi who was ordained in Volozhin comes to visit, after all, one can say of the populace: “The air of the land of Israel makes one wise.”

The Suler sat down at the head of the long table between the *bima* and the ark. The men of Shupran had almost forgotten what an old rabbi looked like. He asked each person to tell about Elyokum-Alter, poor fellow. The old men remembered him from since he had come into the world. They spoke up first.

Sunset came, and then nightfall. After the evening prayers, they told him more about Lokemalter. The Suler listened to everything in silence.

When everyone had gotten things off his chest, the Suler stood up. He stood next to the lectern and began to speak to the Shupran rabbi before the wax candles, as follows:

“People, this is how it is. A *dybbuk* has indeed entered into Reb Shloyme-Yankev’s son, may he live many years. It’s just that the *dybbuk* comes from his own soul, not from some stranger, not from someone from the past. And absolutely not from Beelzebub, may the shakes afflict him! Bringing *khasidim*, with their *shofars*, was a waste of effort. *Shofars* are blown on holidays.

“If a Jew who is in his right mind goes mad, you shouldn’t know from such things, the former soul of that Jew becomes a wanderer while he is still alive. A wandering soul struggles with inconceivable strength to liberate itself from its wandering. That’s just common sense. If the person in whom it had been is still alive, still breathing, and still walking around, it’s quite logical that it is drawn to that person, the very same person. It’s as clear as can be! If the soul cannot overcome the evil spirit, it becomes a *dybbuk* in the previous body. The *dybbuk* feeds on everything that is evil and vile in the world: on envy and begrudging, on hatred and mistrust, on not keeping promises, and on all the other sins between human beings. If one deprives the evil spirit of its food, it becomes weak and is no longer a *dybbuk*. It becomes healthy again, a soul that lives in peace with its body.

“Your distinguished young rabbi, the one from Belarus, may he live a hundred and twenty years, did the right thing. The *khasidim* who were brought here from distant places aren’t guilty of any wrongdoing either. It’s Shupran that’s guilty! People here have to fast for three days. Repent, Jews, repent! How could you dare to bring in a rabbi from far away when the holy Shupran rabbi, of blessed memory, the Torah sage Reb Shloyme-

Yankev, may he have a bright Paradise, left a will! Reb Shloyme-Yankev, after all, gave Shupran a reputation! 'A good name is more important than great wealth.' Is your reputation worth nothing? Have you already forgotten who gave you that reputation?

And is a will considered a mere soap-bubble in Shupran? Granted that he added at the end: 'As the community shall decide'---so he added that, so what?! He was putting his community to a test. The Talmud says clearly, in *Gitin*, in the chapter *Hameyve*, that Rabbi Judah the Prince quotes Rabbi Yankev who quotes Rabbi Mayer: 'He who fulfills the words of a dead man earns a mitzvah.' There they are speaking about money matters, but how much more so does that apply here: that the will of the Shupran rabbi about his son's becoming the rabbi is as holy as holy can be. Holy, do you hear?!

"Gentlemen! Consider a Jew, an ordinary Jew walking along. He probably has brothers and sisters, a trade, a wife and children. May he live and be well! But Elyokem-Alter, may he be completely healed, has nothing! He was probably inscribed in Heaven, in the Beginning, in the Book of Life, even before he was born, to be the rabbi in Shupran. Why did he study and why was he ordained, hah? And why did he live so many years in his father's house as his assistant?

"In brief, the only thing that Jew had, you took away from him. The story of David and Bathsheba—have you not heard that story in Shupran? He had many wives, King David, for that was before Rabeynu Gershom instituted monogamy among the Jews. Uriah the Hittite had only one wife, Bathsheba. King David took that one and only wife of his away from him and sent him away to the wars so he would be killed. What did the prophet Nathan say when he castigated King David? 'There were two men in a city, a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had innumerable sheep and cattle, but the poor man had only a single lamb that he had bought and raised.' So, what remains for him, Reb Shloyme-Yankev's son, from all his studying, from his ordination in Volozhin, from being his father's assistant?

"You didn't like what was written in the will of the genius Reb Shloyme-Yankev Palan, of blessed memory? You didn't like his son? First you carry out his will; then if the match doesn't work out, you remove him and appoint another rabbi. Being the rabbi of Shupran isn't like being the czar, after all!

"You drove him insane. You converted his soul into a *dybbuk*. He is, after all, not a heretic or a pagan. What say you—he converted in church?

So what! In the Greek Orthodox Church? He went to the Turks like Sabbetai Tsvi³⁰? Don't start with me! He believes in the Ba'al of Shupran like I believe in the Ba'al of Sur! If he had made a crucifix out of his books, God forbid, things would be very bad for him, but he didn't do that!

"Secretary, go tell Elyokem-Alter to come to the synagogue! Tell him that the rabbi of Sul is calling Rabbi Elyokem-Alter, son of Rabbi Shloyme-Yankev Palan, to the synagogue."

* * *

The Suler rabbi's secretary banged on Lokemalter's door with an open fist. When Lokemalter heard that the Suler, a friend of his father's from their years in Volozhin, was in Shupran, and that he was calling him to the synagogue, he immediately went with the secretary.

As soon as Lokemalter reached the synagogue, it could be seen on his face that the *dybbuk* had left him, as if the Suler's straight talk had healed him from a distance. At the moment when a wondrous word of Torah is brought to a man's lips, it flies up to Heaven and places itself before the Almighty, and the Almighty takes the word and kisses it. And from Heaven, as we learn, it continues to fly to where it needs to go.

The head of the synagogue led the Suler to the *bima*. They kissed each other in the rabbinic manner and began to converse quietly. The Suler then stood at the lectern once more and spoke to the audience as follows:

"People! Whoever is upset by a misfortune and is then made whole again through the help of the Almighty need not do an act of penance, need not give blessings for his good fortune. And now, my fellow Jews, in brief—the decision! This very night you shall give the position of Rabbi to Reb Elyokem-Alter, son of Reb Shloyme-Yankev Palan. The certificate of rabbinical appointment shall be written now and read to the congregation. After that, he'll go to Sul with me for a month, or even two months; after such a business, one needs to rest up thoroughly. But take my word for it, he'll recover completely—it's nothing. The young man from Belarus, the Torah scholar, shall be given the position of assistant rabbi, and after Reb Lokemalter's hundred and twenty years, he will yet be the rabbi in Shupran. Be careful! Be careful! Good-bye!"

30. Sabbetai Tsvi, a self-proclaimed Messiah of the Jews in the 17th Century; he converted to Islam in Turkey under threat of death

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Lokemalter was blessed with wisdom and long life. While he was the rabbi of Shupran, in accordance with his father's will, he also gradually became very amiable. His voice became clearer. He gave everyone wise advice. The assistant rabbi from Belarus supported him in all his actions. There was no envy between them. When the Shupran rabbi occasionally was not in his right mind for a while, no one said a word about it and no one entered a word about it into the Shupran record book. But the Suler's secretary wrote down everything in the Sul record book. He called the story *Honoring a Will*.

Rivtshe Of The *Tanye*³¹

When Reuben-Isser's daughter Rivtshe was born in the village of Kazan, no one gave her a second glance. She was the eighth child of poor people. Let her just be well. When they put up the four poles and the canvas³² for her, again no one paid attention. After all, the bridegroom was also a poor man from Kazan, from Vidzer Street. Let the match just be a lucky one. And when it turned out that she was barren, it was a pity but there was nothing to be done about it. But when her husband disappeared, then Kazan buzzed, and not only Kazan.

It was the eve of *yom kipur*. From morning prayers on, Rivtshe had been puttering around the fireplace. The "ladders"³³ to break the fast can't be baked just any old way; she had put in flour, salt, sugar, eggs, and yeast, and kneaded the dough. When the dough had risen, she had torn the challah: two thick slices, then two strips of dough, one thicker, one thinner. Meanwhile, her husband had gone for a walk.

Nothing very holy remained of the holiday--in Kazan, they called it "the disrupted *yom kipur*." They pleaded with the Almighty to have pity on Rivtshe, Reuben-Isser's daughter, and her husband, to have pity on his faithful people, Israel.

They looked for him everywhere: in Kazan and in Sharovsh, in Yod, in Vidz, and in Malagan. Nowhere to be found. Rivtshe, Reuben-Isser's daughter, became "Rivtshe the *Aguna*."³⁴

A year passed, and Rivtshe Reuben-Isser's daughter decided she would search for her husband in all corners of the province. No sooner said

31. A major source book of practice and doctrine for the Lubavitsh Jews

32. The bridal canopy

33. Specially baked ladder-shaped *khales*

34. An *aguna* is an Orthodox Jewish woman whose husband has left her—she cannot marry till they are legally divorced or he is declared dead

than done! All of Kazan started to give her money, clothes, and provisions for the road. The rabbi of Kazan gave her a letter saying that people everywhere should help the *aguna*, Rivka, daughter of Reuben-Isser the Levi, of blessed memory, any way they could.

No one received a letter from Rivtshe—they feared that something bad had happened to her. If one person can go missing, then two can go missing.

Three years later, Rivtshe turned up in the Kazan marketplace. She was even wearing the same short dress as before, but with patches all over it. They hardly recognized her. She was only in her thirties but her hair had turned white. She had gotten fat. She had become an old woman in the three years. Trouble can tear pieces out of a person even more than a mortal enemy can. But she seemed not to age any further—she remained the way she was.

When she was wandering around during the three years, she had walked through all of the Antonovsky Forests. She had walked through the forest grasses and the plants and the mushrooms. And when she returned to Kazan, she made her living from mushrooms. She gathered more and better ones; she understood how to take care of them so they would last till the following year.

She sold the best white mushrooms to Gentiles; Jews wouldn't put them in their mouths, lest there might be little worms in them. To Jews she sold the 'Jewish mushrooms', small yellow ones, which they called *fikselekh*. They didn't have any worms. She didn't get rich from the mushrooms, but she wasn't poor either. Every now and then, she gave alms to Jews who went around begging. Rivtshe the *Aguna* became "Rivtshe of the Mushrooms."

* * *

Rivtshe's family were Kazan *Khabad*-niks—they prayed in the *khasidic minyan*. Shneyer-Zalmen of Lyadi had established the *minyan* when he passed through Kazan on the way to Svintsian. In Svintsian he established three more *minyans*—that's a story all by itself.

That Rivtshe had returned peacefully to Kazan after wandering around for three years, that she had found an honest way to make a living by the sweat of her brow, people thought showed the hand of the Almighty. They made Rivtshe of the Mushrooms their pet. They gave her a worthy place in the women's shul³⁵ and they gave her a Yiddish prayer-book that could be locked with a key.

35. The women's section of the synagogue

The rabbi of the *khasidic minyan* told people that through the wonders of God, her husband might yet show up. Despair is not the way of the faithful, after all. In any case, she would meet him when the Messiah came and everyone would be resurrected and go to Israel.

Rivtshe was by no means a saintly person. Nevertheless, she started to go to the women's shul every Sabbath. She had no head for prayer. She found the sermon the most charming part. All week while she was sitting in the market and selling her two kinds of mushrooms from two baskets, she was thinking about everything the rabbi had sermonized.

Every Sabbath, the rabbi of the *khasidic minyan* told about what was written in the *Tanye*, the *Tanye* that the old rebbe, Shneyer-Zalmen of Lyadi, had written himself and given a manuscript of to the people of Kazan when he established the minyan there. The rabbi had been holding that copy of the *Tanye* in his hand as he was sermonizing.

With a heavenly voice, beautiful and exalted, he told how the author of the *Tanye* had explained that there were two kinds of people in the world. The ordinary Jew has to attain purity any way he can; the one who is born a saint has to attain purity in his way. Each in his own way, according to his abilities.

* * *

Rivtshe lived to be very old, as if yearning and waiting could push the Angel of Death away. Throughout the years, on Friday nights and when breaking the *yom kipur* fast, she put two dishes on the table. If that husband of hers should suddenly come into the house, he would see what kind of a woman of valor his Rivtshele was.

But the end of days finally comes. A human being is only a human being.

One hot month of Tammuz, she got sick. It was obvious that she was near the end-- familiar angels were waiting for her, calling out: "Rivtshe, daughter of Reuben-Isser."

Nevertheless, she kept going. On *yom kipur*, Rivtshe of the Mushrooms ascended the *bima* just before *kol nidre*. She barely crept up to the reading desk, holding onto the rail like an infant taking its first steps. Everyone stared at her. What kind of wrong could she, Rivtshe, complain of, and to whom? After all, everyone comforted her, considered her a righteous person, pious in the eyes of the God of Kazan.

Rivtshe's lips trembled but not a sound could be heard. That she

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needed to pull herself together was not to be wondered at. It was quite something to be on the *bima* in Kazan for *kol nidre*.

Down below, in the men's section, they figured that she was going to complain to the Lord of the Universe. Let her complain, as long as she didn't overdo it. Let there be no desecration of the Sabbath in Kazan, God forbid!

In the women's section, they interpreted it differently—that before she died she wanted to curse her husband the way he deserved. The educated women were very much afraid that she might be mistaken--maybe something had happened to him. After all, anything can happen.

Gently and sweetly, the rabbi started to move toward Rivtshé. He intended to calm her quietly so she wouldn't have to stand at the lectern and complain for everyone in Kazan to see. He stood next to her while the audience remained innocently silent. Imminent death was engraved on her face, It was as if the *khasidic minyan* had ascended to the Heavenly Academy at *kol nidre*.

Suddenly Rivtshé began to speak, with a strong voice, not at all the voice of an old woman, and said:

“People! Everyone knows about my misfortune, of course. There's one more thing you should know, that I was never one of those foolish women. I've seen what goes on in the world outside. When one wanders around for three years looking for something in vain, one sees plenty! Plenty! Next year on yom kipur, I'll be in my grave, so I've come to say good-bye, my dear ones! To let you know, dear people! Listen to me carefully, carefully! Shneyer-Zalmen, he should pardon me, made a big mistake. My mushrooms in the market are indeed of two kinds, but a person is not a mushroom! A person is not born a saint! A person must first become a saint! There are those who consider themselves born saints but they are in fact great scoundrels, and there are simple people who are real saints! People! *Kol nidre!*”

Rivtshé died on the ninth day of Tevet. The *khasidim* didn't forget her; Rivtshé of the Mushrooms had raised questions about the author of the *Tanye*, doubts that lasted a thousand and one nights. The *misnagdim* didn't forget her either. Using the example of her mushrooms, Rivtshé had refuted the author of the *Tanye* completely. To both of them, she remained forever none other than Rivtshé of *The Tanye*.

If Not Even Wiser

In a village in the suburbs of Berditshev, there was a miracle-rebbe. He healed the sick and made barren women fertile. People there lived in houses with stone walls. Everyone made a living. They took joy in God and in the rebbe (might he live and be well for many years.) It was said that people there were already dancing in their mothers' wombs. If some one died, God forbid, they continued to dance around his grave. Who can understand *khasidim*?

But--even the moon has a dark side. Whenever something went wrong, they knew right away whom to blame. If someone spoke with a nasal voice, they said he spoke with a Litvak twang. If someone didn't observe a commandment properly, they called him "Litvak *tseylem-kop*"³⁸. A contrary child was a "Litvak *sheygets*"³⁹. And ever since the Vilna Gaon⁴⁰ had excommunicated the *khasidim*, they even used a curse, if needed, that someone should fall into the hands of the Litvaks.

One day, a Litvak dropped in, a real one and not a make-believe one. He was a wagon-driver, with the assignment to travel to distant places. He didn't believe in railroads; if he had to go to Istanbul, he would drive his old nag there. A stubborn Litvak.

36. The title and subject-matter of this story constitute a respectful reverse take-off on a famous story by I.L. Peretz, "If Not Even Higher," in which a skeptical Litvak visits a *khasidic* community that boasts that its rebbe rises to Heaven on days when he disappears. He finds out that the rebbe's disappearances are to perform anonymous charity to the sick and needy. After that, when the *khasidim* say the rebbe rises to Heaven, the Litvak says: "If not even higher," and he remains with the community as a *khasid*.

37. Litvak refers to a Jew from Lithuania and vicinity; the *khasidim* used the word as a general pejorative, because most Lithuanian Jews were anti-*khasidic misnagdim*

38. Literally 'cross-head', meaning that he thinks like a Gentile, insists on his own interpretations of everything

39. Literally a Christian boy—used generally to describe any mischievous, disobedient boy

40. Literally 'Gaon' means 'genius.' The Vilna Gaon was a great scholar who was the leader of the *mishnagdim* of his time and a strong foe of the *khasidim* (he excommunicated them as a group)

41. The caretaker of the synagogue and assistant to the rebbe

The village *shames*⁴¹ allowed the stranger to sleep overnight in the synagogue. People came to look at the amazing sight. He had a little beard, the Litvak, wore a short jacket, and had no side-curls whatever. His hat was indeed a 'Jewish hat,' with a visor, but instead of a flat top it had a peak. In the streets, children yelled after him: "Blowhard Litvak!" He just smiled and told them that one blows a *shofar*.

In the synagogue, the Litvak took down a volume of Talmud from the shelf, *Khagiga*, I believe, or maybe *Psokhim*. He held onto the volume as if he were holding reins. That created a buzz: a Litvak wagon-driver had driven into town and was sitting in the synagogue studying a page of Talmud by himself. They suggested a private audience with the rebbe. He responded, that *misnagid*, that he had to finish the page. There, in the Talmud he was studying, he had run across a passage that said: "He who studies a passage a hundred times doesn't know it as well as he who studies it a hundred and one times." Apparently it was indeed *Khagiga* that he was studying.

But you know *khasidim*--they never give up. So a second one interrupted him, saying that he could make up later for those few minutes, with the Almighty's help; a private audience with the rebbe took precedence.

The Litvak took down the tractate *Sabbath*, and found there a passage in which Rabbi Judah the Prince had said that the punishment for contempt of the Torah is a harsh one: one's own sons might die, God forbid!

After that, the *khasidim* remained silent. But a Litvak, you know, has to have the last word on everything. Forget about Hebrew! About the question of whether one can make up for wasted time, he said to them in plain Yiddish: "Here today and gone tomorrow."

The *khasidim* left. The assistant *shames* quietly turned up the wick of the kerosene-lamp for the guest. The Litvak took pleasure in the lamp--the letters glistened like a fiery sunset in the sky.

Later, when they were praying *mayrev*,⁴² everyone looked around at the Litvak. No one asked him any more questions--if a Jew refuses a private audience with the rebbe, there's nothing more to say.

After the prayers, the Litvak again sat down with the Talmud, by the light of the kerosene-lamp. Into the synagogue came a young son of the richest man in town; he was about eleven years old. The boy, with his side-curls flying, sat down eagerly, right next to the Litvak. He didn't interrupt the stranger's studying with so much as a peep.

42. Evening prayers

The *misnagid* abruptly laid a friendly hand on the boy's shoulder and started to interpret the Talmud for him, according to Rashi ⁴³ and the supplementary commentators. His Litvak accent cast a magic spell on the little boy: straight as a rail, fast as a train, sharp as a hack-saw.

Finished with one topic, the Litvak took a break. He asked the boy what his name was, and the boy asked the Litvak where he came from.

"From Narat--not far from Garan."

"Is that a city?"

"A tiny village, much smaller than this one and much poorer."

"About how far is it from here?"

"Why do I need to tell you 'about how far?' From here, it's exactly nine hundred and sixty-four viorsts." ⁴⁴

"Where is it?"

"Have you heard of Vilna province?"

When he heard "Vilna province," a chill ran through the little boy with the side-curls. He remained silent. No *khosid* can remain indifferent when a Jew from Vilna province, a *misnagid* Litvak, is standing next to him.

"Do you have a rabbi there?"

"What then, a priest?"

"Does he do miracles?"

"Little boy! In a man, wisdom is the greatest miracle. He is as wise as King Solomon."

"Doesn't he go into religious ecstasy with his people? Are they really sad there?"

"Little boy! Artificial joy is sadder than any sorrow. A student's sorrow is more joyful than any joy. When you get older, you'll understand that. Narat--not far from Garan."

The following morning, before *shakhris*, ⁴⁵ the little boy went into the synagogue with his little friends to look for the Litvak. There was no sign of him.

* * *

Even a *khosid* can be nagged at by eagerness to get to the bottom of things. Oh well-- there was no hurry.

Fifty years passed. The little boy became a man with a big belly and gray side-curls. He was one of the richest men in the village. He married off his nine children. His wife died in childbirth and he did not

43. The greatest of commentators on the Jewish Holy Scriptures (11th century)

44. viorst is about one kilometer

45. Morning prayers

re-marry. He gave almost all his profits to the rebbe's court--after all, the rebbe could do more good deeds with a penny than an ordinary man could do with thousands.

Then he had a dream about the Litvak, how he had sat in the synagogue next to the kerosene-lamp. He heard him saying, with his Litvak accent: "Have you heard of Vilna province? When you get older, you'll understand. Narat--not far from Garan."

He went to the rebbe, now the grandson of the rebbe from that earlier time, for among *khasidim* the position descends from father to son. He told the rebbe that he had dreamt about the Litvak who had stayed overnight in the synagogue some fifty years earlier, a wagon-driver who was capable of studying a page of Talmud. Both in the dream and in the synagogue, the Litvak had invited him to look him up in Vilna province.

When he heard "Vilna province," a chill passed through the rebbe too. He knew very well that in that place studying Torah was something everyone did. So the rebbe answered thus:

"It's from Heaven! There's no such thing as 'accidental.' The Bal Shem Tov⁴⁶ has expounded on the topic of Divine supervision of individual affairs: when a breeze carries a tree-leaf from one place to another till it comes to rest someplace, it's all a matter of Divine supervision of individual affairs, and that certainly applies to the Almighty's sending the Litvak here fifty years ago. You were born for this mission! Take along khasidic brochures and the *siddurs*⁴⁷ of Ar"i Hakodesh⁴⁸ and set out for Vilna province. Warm their souls there! I bet you'll get everyone in the city to become a *khosid*. Don't forget to say your prayers along the way."

The *khosid* set out. He took a wagon to Berdichev and there he got on a train. He rode through Slovita, Rovno, Brest-Litovsk, Bialystok, Horodne, and Landvarov. It was after *shvues*. Through the window, he saw the fields getting poorer and poorer--Lithuanian earth really was good only for raising potatoes.

At first morning light, the train arrived at the Vilna railroad station. Wagon-drivers were waiting for the train. The once-upon-a-time wagon-driver had long since gone to wagon-driver's heaven, so the *khosid* picked out a driver who looked like him.

"Where to?"

"Narat--not far from Garan."

46. The founder of khasidism

47. Prayer-books

48. Rabbi Isaac Luria, a 16th century rabbi in Tsfat who was the codifier of *kabala* (Jewish mysticism)

“Narat? Garan? That’s the end of the world! There’s nothing there!

“You don’t have to take me--I’ll go with someone else.”

“No, no! To Narat!”

The driver called out to the horse. The horse, a strapping chestnut stallion, pulled the wagon along the exit road and out into the city along Molo-dechno Street--all that with just one tug at the reins by the driver. Along the way, the *khosid* thought to himself that the horse was a Litvak too.

* * *

They arrived in Narat, which was not far from Garan. The *khosid* got down from the wagon. In the middle of the street, he started laughing. All of Narat consisted of a few wooden cottages, half-sunken into the ground. Some city!

In the blink of an eye, all of Narat had gathered there. They enjoyed the stranger’s weird Yiddish accent and the silk and satin clothing ‘from beyond the Sambatyon’⁴⁹

They greeted him.

“Can a Jew stay overnight in your synagogue?”

“God forbid! What do you mean, synagogue--you’ll stay at my house! You can sleep in the bedroom! In my house!”

“What do you need him for? In my house, you’ll feel as if you were in Glubok.”⁵⁰

“I’ll pay for my night’s lodging.”

“Your money’s no good here--here we don’t take money from a Jew who’s traveling through! Narat is Narat and Sodom is Sodom!”

The village baker didn’t believe in niceties--he took the *khosid* by the hand and took him to his house. The other Narat inhabitants heard just three words: “I’ve got him!”

The baker’s children ran home ahead of him. When their father came in with the guest, they sang out three times: “*Sholem aleichem, malakhey hashores, malakhey elyon*”⁵¹ (greetings, angels of God, angels of Heaven), just like on the Sabbath. It was a poor cottage with an earthen floor. In the middle stood a stone oven that also served to divide the house in two. The baker brought a bottle of whisky and had a drink with the guest. *His wife served tegglerk and stewed prunes.*

49. A faraway legendary river that guards the location of the Lost Tribes of Israel

50. A large town near Narat

51. A phrase from the Friday night services with the guest. The baker’s wife served *teyglekh* (a confection made with dough and nuts boiled in honey) and stewed prunes

Later all the men went to the synagogue for *minkhe-mayrev*⁵² prayers. The *khosid* had never seen such a poor little synagogue, made entirely of wood. The rabbi approached him--he rejoiced that a Jew from a distant land had come to pray in his synagogue. The *khosid* asked him quietly how he could pray without a prayer-belt.⁵³ The rabbi put a hand on his shoulder:

“A belt is something we place around the mantle of a blemished *seyfer toyre*.”⁵⁴

The *khosid* questioned him further, about why some of the Jews walked around in the street bare-headed.⁵⁵

“There’s no law about that--so the Gaon has ruled. Look it up in *Rules For Washing The Hands Before Meals, Section 8, Paragraph 2.*”

When he heard the word “Gaon,” a chill ran through the *khosid*, just as it had fifty years earlier when as a boy he had heard the words “Vilna province.” Here he was in the land of the Vilna Gaon!

Between the *minkhe* and *mayrev* prayers, the rabbi gave the men of the town a lesson in *yoyre deye*, with the commentaries of Rabbi Joseph Caro and Rabbi Moses Isserles. He constantly cited the commentaries of the *Taz*⁵⁶ and the *Shakh*,⁵⁷ and concluded each paragraph with the interpretation of the Vilna Gaon. The rabbi looked each person in the eye and explained each item till he saw that the audience understood it precisely. The *khosid* broke out into a sweat--suppose someone recognized that he knew very little about the ‘tiny letters’!⁵⁸ In the end, however, he understood everything. For the first time in his life, he understood the ‘inner meanings’ of the conflicts between passages.

Later that night, the baker said to him:

“Know that the rabbi of Narat is as wise as King Solomon.”

“Do tell! That’s what they told me about a previous rabbi of Narat fifty years ago.”

“Really?”

52. Afternoon and evening prayers. Pious Jews normally stay in the synagogue between them, taking a small meal there

53. When praying, *khasidim* wear a belt around the waist, to separate the upper (‘sacred’) parts of the body from the lower (‘profane’) parts

54. Torah scroll. ‘Blemished’ meant not fit for use because of tears, smudges, etc.

55. Without a *yarmulke* or other head-covering

56. *Turey Zahav*, a 17th century book of commentaries by Rabbi Dovid ben Shmuel Haleyvi

57. Rabbi Shabbetai ben Meir Hacoheh, a 17th century commentator

58. The Jewish Holy Scriptures

Early the next morning, the baker left for the bakery. The *khosid* hadn't closed his eyes all night in any case, so he went out too. He saw the rabbi set out for the forest, and he followed him at a distance. What business could a rabbi have in the forest?

The rabbi soon spotted the *khosid* following him.

"Are you going for a walk in the forest too? So come along with me-- it's more pleasant with two."

"Where are we going?"

"A sick woman lives not far from here. In the village."

"Are you taking her medicine?"

"The *feldsher*⁵⁹ gives her medicine."

"I have some money with me--I'll give her some."

"Not necessary--for that there is a Benevolent Society. Give it to them instead and they'll distribute it to all the poor people."

"Are you taking her a blessing? Our rebbe heals with a blessing."

"My blessings haven't healed anyone yet."

There was no further conversation between them. Both of them got soaked from the dew-laden branches. In the distance, the cottage where the widow lived came into view. The rabbi of Narat went inside. The *khosid* stood silently in the doorway and watched.

"Rachel, my dear, why are you crying?"

She had been unable to speak for years. Only from her wise eyes was it apparent that she was in full possession of her faculties. From his breast-pocket, the rabbi took out a booklet. It was the Torah portion for the week, with commentaries that had been published in Vilna. To read the difficult Hebrew was beyond her strength; she held the booklet, caressed it, and leafed through the pages.

The rabbi began reading to her from the weekly portion, in his hurried Litvak voice. The sick woman started to brighten up. Then he told her what Rashi had said, now with a melody. The sick woman managed to mouth the words: "Oh, how good!" Then he began to tell stories from the *midrash*,⁶⁰ in the manner of a wedding-entertainer, with both laughter and tears. The sick woman began moving her head back and forth in rhythm with the stories.

59. A partly trained medical person (often an ex-military 'medic'); sometimes referred to as a "barefoot doctor"

60. Collection of Jewish legends about Biblical subjects

The City in the Moonlight

Then the rabbi told her parables from the *musr-sforim*,⁶¹ in the manner of a preacher. Finally he talked to her about a passage of Talmud that expanded on the weekly Torah portion. The sick woman could hardly understand what it was all about, but just the Talmudic melody alone, there deep in the forest in her little house, made her feel a whole lot better. With her twisted mouth, she smiled with great joy.

* * *

The *khosid* remained in Narat as a *misnagid*. Whenever anyone mentioned that the rabbi of Narat was as wise as King Solomon, he would quietly say:

“If not even wiser.”

61. Books about *yidishkeyt* meant for unschooled readers, particularly women.

The Einstein Of Svir

(Vele Schwartz, a man from Svir—dedicated to the radiant memory of Reb Israel)

Reb Zanvil-Benyomen Greynim—in Svir they called him Zanome the watchmaker—was considered a man with bad luck. We are talking about Svir, not far from here, on the road from Svintsian to Vileyke, a hop-skip-and-a-jump from the crossroads where it meets the highway from Kamay to Vilna.

He had divorced two wives, but that had been many years ago. Now he was a man past eighty. In a big city, one quickly forgets the stories of long ago and moves on, but in a small town things don't move that fast. He had divorced both of the 'ill-fated' wives, probably even before the time of Czar Alexander, after ten years of marriage, because they were barren. But when both of the divorcees later got married and each of them became a happy, successful mother of sons with the new husband, that was the end of that (true, both of them married elderly widowers, who had long since gone to their reward, but that's another story.)

In his old age, Zanome was as alone as a stone. The only voices he heard in the two dark little rooms behind his shop on Fish Alley were not those of an old bachelor and not those of children and grandchildren coming to see their father or grandfather. What then? Day and night, without interruption, the clocks all around him played their demonic melodies: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, some with a drawn-out sound, some with a choked sound, some hoarsely, as if they had a cold, and some sweetly, like a woman's voice, may you never be tested by temptation! There were all kinds of clocks and watches on all sides: 24-hour clocks, 8-toned wall clocks, musical clocks, sundials, and shadow-and-water clocks, and, more than anything else, just plain watches. When people owed Zanome money, he was not one of those cruel people who constantly hounded them, so quite a few of them left him their clocks and watches in their wills.

For decades, he was tormented during his sleepless nights by thoughts about the first wife and the second wife, about their handsome children, and about the dark fate that he had brought on himself. Even an enemy can't outdo what a person can do to himself! He was plagued by the memory of the terrible arrogance he had shown during the two divorces, thinking that he, the only watchmaker in Svir of Lithuania, would soon marry again, that beautiful women from Smargon and Svintsian would come running to grab him. So he thought, but it didn't happen.

But never mind the nights—the days were even more difficult for him. Fish Alley in Svir is not Alexandrovsky Boulevard in Vilna; all through the years he had had to look at his former wives and their husbands and children--it was like pouring salt in his wounds.

But he wasn't an unlucky tradesman. On the contrary. Man himself, after all, is a world in microcosm, and his current business was a complete Universe, with people, customers, families, and close and distant people from recent times and from long ago. The extent of his influence could be appreciated in every house where one could hear a repaired clock working: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. He had a golden reputation in those places, did Zanome the watchmaker. People come to love a fine artisan, some times even more than an ordinary person (but don't tell anyone.) He was renowned.

Usually a man goes by an affectionate nickname in his youth, and his formal *aliya*-name⁶² may be reserved for his old age, but in his case it was just the opposite. When he was a young man and had just returned from Mikhaleshik, where he had studied the trade for several years with the famous master Reb Avrom Guberski (Avromke the watchmaker), they called the young apprentice Zanvil-Benyomen. When he opened his own shop for the first time, they changed the name to Zane-Yome. During the years when he was married to his second wife, he became Zanome, and so he remained in his old age. And there was only one Zanome in Svir. They mentioned his name with a certain mixture of awe and affection for an old master watchmaker.

From near and far, Jews and gentiles, rich men and poor men, brought Zanome all kinds of watches in his old age. His customers remembered his sharp proverbs fairly well, especially: "Remember—a watchmaker is a doctor, but he doesn't serve the Angel of Death!" Zanome used to go around wearing two pairs of *tsitsets*⁶³, and

62. The name used when a person is called to the *bima* in synagogue

63. A garment with ritually knotted tassels at its four corners, worn under outer clothing by observant Jews

liked people to ask him, for the umpteenth time, why, so he could answer, in his own way: “Why? A dog is afraid of a stick and the Devil is afraid of *tsitses*.”

Zanome the watchmaker was a short little man with a head that was too big for his body. His snow-white beard had merged with the remaining little side-hairs on his head, giving the appearance of a white circle that surrounded his too-round face like the pale rim of a wagon-wheel. His skin was darker than that of most Jews; it somewhat resembled that of a Gypsy. In fact, prankish children, disrespectful like little *shkotsim*,⁶⁴ *l'havdil*,⁶⁵ would call after him: “Gypsy Zanome—about his wives a moaner.” In the evening, in the street, the man looked like some weird eclipse of the sun here in the world: a dark, round face surrounded by a glowing white ring. From close up, in daylight, one didn't notice that so much—a Jew is a Jew, after all.

When someone came into his shop there on Fish Alley, which leads down to the Svir ocean, he would be astounded by the vast array of clocks. Zanome had screwed hooks into the rafters, and from the hooks hung all the kinds of tools that were to be found in a watchmaker's shop. They swayed peacefully to the rhythm of the breezes that blew through the old and now-twisted beams of his cottage. Like little angels at prayer that looked like cantillation symbols, they swayed slowly to the rhythm of the wind: little hammers and scissors, tweezers and pincers, pliers and screwdrivers, and little jars of diamond dust and oil.

* * *

Even toward the end, one likes to try something new; until life has played itself out, all is definitely not lost.

When Zanome could be considered a really old man, people came to Svir to seek him out, and not only about a broken watch. No! From all corners of the province, they came to Svir just to take a look at the man they had started calling, not Zanome, not Zane-Yome, and also not Zanzil-Benyomen, but “the Einstein of Svir,” which begs a story to explain it. What did Einstein have to do with a watchmaker from Svir? Svir is Svir and Einstein is Einstein—how did it all happen? Here is the story.

Newspapers in Vilna had begun to trumpet, with big headlines and smaller sub-heads, that in Svir, 80 viorsts away, there lived an old watch-

64. Literally, a Gentile boy, but used to mean any disrespectful boy

65. May they be separated—used to distinguish between sacred and profane, or between things one approves of and things one does not approve of

The City in the Moonlight

maker whom Vilna sages considered the only man in the province who understood Einstein's theory. He was the only one and there was no other.

Never mind Svir—so what if people in a small town boast, though in the case of Svir, they took it rather seriously. In the Vilna fish-market, they cursed quite expertly: “You should swell up like the mountain of Svir.” After all, the flat-topped mountain in the middle of the town hadn't been made by God during the six days of Creation; Napoleon's troops had brought it there one bucketful at a time during their war. So people came from far and near to look at the wonder of such a mountain. Ascending it was like going from one world to another.

The end of Fish Alley opened onto the shore of the Svir ocean. Actually it was a lake, but one couldn't see to the other side, so people called it no more or less than an ocean. And if there was no difference to them, to whom should there be a difference? Where and how in poor Lithuania, with its flat earth, good only for growing potatoes, could one find a town like a Paradise, tucked away between a mountain from which one could see in every direction and an ocean that stretched far, far southward toward Smargon.

That Svir considered itself a small town didn't prove that its inhabitants were small-townish rustics, milksops, and peasants. In fact the road to Vilna had just been beautifully paved with cobblestones of all the colors of the rainbow over the Svir ocean. Such a road was very useful to the wagon-drivers of Svir. Vilna and Svir were like a house and a bedroom—from the Svir mountain to Kuritsky's entry house on Little Stefan Street in Vilna, a wagon-driver could drive his steed like a prince from ancient times in a storybook, on cobblestones and not through mud puddles.

So all right—where does Einstein come into it? “Einstein” was even one of those surnames that no one had ever heard of, and here it was suddenly echoing everywhere!

Sometime in the summer of 1916, all the newspapers began to trumpet the fact that somewhere on the other side of the world an Englishman named Eddington had sailed months earlier all the way to an island near Africa (some trip!) to observe an eclipse of the sun there that the astronomers knew would last a full seven minutes. He and his associates had gone to all that trouble to measure and test whether Einstein's theory of relativity was correct or completely wrong. Eddington, who had traveled to the end of the world from Cambridge to test Einstein's predictions with his instruments, did in fact find that that the sun's rays bent by precisely the amount that Einstein had predicted in his theory of relativity. Now there was a theory! It was the approach of a genius in the field of physics.

As time went by, the world began to echo with stories about this outstanding Jewish genius, not with ill-intentioned libels but with admiration. Not for many generations had we had such a rare privilege. It didn't take long for what was in the Gentile newspapers to make its way into the Yiddish press. That's how things went: what the gentiles did, the Jews did.

But try and understand what all of that meant! They said in the newspapers, with all the details, that years earlier, sometime in 1913 approximately, the Jewish genius from Germany had claimed that with his relativity theory he could predict that the starlight that touched the sun would be bent by so and so many seconds of arc, which could be observed during a total, not a partial, eclipse of the sun. So Eddington and his shipmates had girded their loins and set out for distant Africa, where even the Tatars hadn't been⁶⁶, and with their careful photographs, irrefutable evidence, had brought the news back to England that the Jew's theory was so correct that one could use it to make accurate predictions about exactly what the world's wise men had been saying.

One leading writer in a Yiddish newspaper in Vilna publicly stated his opinion that there hadn't been anything like this since the prophet Amos had prophesied, according to the word of the Almighty: "I will go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight." And now the Almighty had sent the world a genius who had made the most detailed prophecies about an eclipse of the sun, using the new approach of relativity. If only he were a Litvak! Why one of those German Jews?! But even a cold, dried-out Litvak wouldn't dare question the Almighty's actions.

Einstein, relativity, hogl-mogl, bending of light, eclipse of the sun, Buckle⁶⁷, civilization, London and Cambridge---if the whole world says that a certain Jew from Germany, Einstein, is the genius of geniuses, we have to believe it, and that's all there is to it. And if the world and the antisemites concoct a story that Israel will not survive, I say No, with a capital N!

But that still wasn't enough. A Litvak remains a Litvak, after all. He has to get to the bottom of the matter. He goes to any extreme to do so. Nothing can stop him. Furthermore, whenever one such Litvak raises his head, two more appear simultaneously. And when two Litvaks stubbornly insist on getting to the bottom of a single matter, there will be arguments. Even some Litvaks won't deny that. They'll whisper a secret

66. Implying that the place was very out-of-the-way

67. Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1862); English historian and moral philosopher; best known for his *History of English Civilization*

into your ear, as if it were a word of wisdom that only Litvaks were capable of: “Arguments bring out the truth.”

It was sometime between *tu b’shvat*⁶⁸ and *purim*, probably in 1920. It was a frosty, icy, wintry Shvat⁶⁹--“Shvat is not my friend, and in Adar, a blood vessel bursts.”⁷⁰ It’s no wonder that the cemetery monuments like to celebrate Sabbath with Adar--“The Angel of Death’s favorite months” they were called throughout the Pale.⁷¹ This time, it was even worse. The great armies of both empires, the Czar’s and the Kaiser’s, had retreated and the empires themselves had collapsed like over-wound watchsprings. But people learned that it was better to be in the hands of the lion than in those of the lion-cubs, and better the bear than the bear-cubs, for the little villages fell into the hands of the “peasants who would be kings,” and murder and robbery spread throughout the land.

So the whole story about Einstein gave the people much pleasure and allowed them to breathe more freely. The Vilna editors began to editorialize about what the world was based on and went on and on, but no one got any smarter. What relativity and where relativity?! Eddington-Shmeddington, Africa-Shmafrica! An eclipse of the sun for the prophet Amos and, *l’havdil*, one for Eddington!

Suddenly, one of the Vilna editors published a headline in bold letters on the front page that said they were giving out a prize of 18 Imperials⁷² to the reader who could explain relativity simply and straightforwardly to the public. Nothing to sneeze at—18 prials! (that’s what they called the poor Kaiser’s gold Imperials in that region.) All the paper money that rich people had secreted in their attics had become as worthless as dirt, but gold Imperials don’t become worthless—they were now circulating wherever they were needed.

His competitor, the editor of the other newspaper, couldn’t throw around Imperials, but he couldn’t stay silent about such a sensation either, so the next day he came out with a headline, also in bold letters, saying that the person who could explain Einstein’s theory to the pub-

68. An arboreal holiday, usually in February

69. The name of the month in which *tu b’shvat* occurs

70. This expression contains two plays on words in the original: “*Shvat ne brat*,” in which the Russian word “brat” (brother)” rhymes with Shvat, and “*In Adar platst an oder*” (In Adar, a blood vessel bursts), in which “Adar” is pronounced the same as “oder” which means “blood vessels Presumably the blood vessel bursts from excessive drinking and revelry on Purim

71. The area within Lithuania and the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to live

72. Imperial was a designation for several coins—here, probably a 10-mark coin

lic simply and straightforwardly would receive a deluxe edition of the Romm Publishing House's *Shas*,⁷³ bound in leather with gilt letters.

Naturally, neither of them dared to mention his competitor—after all, the other fellow was someone beneath mention—so of course they couldn't sign an agreement that the lucky winner was forbidden to turn over his words of wisdom to the other editor too, God forbid.

* * *

To make a long story short, a large number of pseudointellectuals and complete nuisances wrote in to the two editors, not only with stock nonsense but with such foolishness as the world had never heard before. In truth, neither the first editor nor the second one understood anything about the physics and what it was all about. Both of them, in the way of editors, thought they could read German (what Jew doesn't know any German?), and they looked into German books more and more, but it did them absolutely no good. They could hardly understand a word there to save their lives.

A few days passed, and each of them separately got really frightened that there would not be any words of wisdom to make the hungry, cold, suffering populace feel better. Even worse, the first editor was concerned that people would suspect that it had all been an absolute lie, and that he had never had any intention of giving away the 18 Imperials. His competitor, the other editor, was afraid that people would suspect him of trying to fool them, and that he had had no intention of giving away the deluxe edition of *Shas*, not even a soft-cover edition. After all, newspapers are prepared to fool people as long as it sells papers!

But both of them waited and waited. Amid the mountain of letters that both editors received, there was a letter from Reb Zanvil-Benyomen Greynim, the watchmaker of Svir. As a young man, he had studied for a while in a yeshiva in Svintsiyan, and you could tell that from his language in places. The letter read as follows:

Einstein's theory is about relativity and about time across and among worlds and among the stars that can be seen in the Lithuanian sky and the stars that are not seen but are there nevertheless. The one among ordinary Jews who understands time is the watchmaker. After all, a watch is a miniature model of the Universe. It is a simple matter: the simpler the truth, the simpler and truer it is. So here

73. A six-volume set of the Talmud

is the point: a simpleton believes that all seconds, minutes, and hours are the same length as all other seconds, minutes, and hours—that's why he's a simpleton and that's why he's wrong. Einstein has discovered that even time itself is relative and depends on the place, on light, and on things that are not time. Gentlemen! These are things I've learned very well in my life: time in a person's life is relative too—that is self-evident. When one is young, time creeps slowly, and when one gets older, it starts to race like a railroad train. The same 24 hours by the clock goes a lot slower as a young man than as an old man. The seconds and the hours and the days are dependent on the stage of a person's life. For a young man, they creep like tortoises, and for an old man they start to race like crazed rabbits. That by itself doesn't mean that it's bad to be old—on the contrary, the Almighty gives different blessings at each age. That is the true interpretation of King Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." By "under heaven," he refers to our few years here in this world. It remains true, gentlemen, that an old man has to be a wise man to make the most of each day that the Lord of the Universe gives him, for time flies. It wouldn't hurt young people either to do likewise; after all, it takes quite a few years till a young man begins to notice that the days are racing by faster and faster. He who rejects the moment, whether he is young or old, and says: "Would that it were already tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, next week, next year" is committing a sin, violating the commandment: "Thou shalt not be hard on thyself."

Your devoted reader, Zanvil-Benyomen Greynim, known as Zanome the Watchmaker of Svir.

He had written the same letter twice and had sent it to both editors. Both received it on the same day, the eve of Purim. The next day, each of them printed the letter from the Svir watchmaker on the front page of his newspaper, together with a big announcement that Reb Zanvil-Benyomen Greynim of Svir had received the prize for the best explanation of Einstein's theory.

Both of them were astonished to see the same letter from the Svir watchmaker on the front page of his competitor's newspaper. That day, they happened to meet in the street. Somewhere near Zavolve Street. After a moment of angry silence, both of them burst out laughing, like schoolboys. Neither of them had said that it was not permitted to send

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the same answer to the other fellow. “Well—he’ll get the 18 prials, and the Vilna edition of Shas in addition. Let him live and be well!” one of them said to the other in a friendly way.

The story about the Jew who had interpreted Einstein to the populace echoed all over, in Svintsian and Smargon, in Eyshishok and Ostravets, in Buavits and Bisterets, and in Podbrozh and Paberzhe.

And Zanome celebrated in his old age with the 18 Imperials and the beautiful Vilna edition of *Shas*, a leather-bound *Shas* and not a little soft-cover *Shas*.

The Golem⁷⁴ of Glubok

(To the eternal memory of Yankl Pelkin, a man of Glubok.)

“From *peysakh* to *peysakh*.” Thus do we speak of the days of our lives. But not in Glubok. There they say it differently: “From *khol-hamoed*⁷⁵ to *khol-hamoed*.” And they aren’t talking about *sukes*—and therein lies a tale.

We’re talking about Glubok in Lithuaniaia, in the district of Polotsk, between Danielevitsh and Luzhik, where the Berezovke, which empties into the Disne, which empties into the Dvina, which runs all the way to the great ocean, takes its origin from a spring in the ground.

An old time of danger—holidays in general and *khol-hamoed* in particular—a time when one must be on guard lest a fire break out. That *khol-hamoed* they weren’t careful. My mother had been puttering around with her mortar and her sieve, making ginger candy. On the second day of *khol-hamoed*, rather late at night, the house suddenly caught fire like a haystack in Tammuz. It was said that the children were so happy with the smell of honey that they completely forgot about the kindling wood that was burning next to the wall. And the wall of a cottage, after all, is made of beams, and beams, in the end, are made of wood, and old wood burns fiercely.

Everyone in the vicinity knew about the old catastrophe. The people of Glubok had never seen such a fire. Burning pillars of fire with demonic peaks of hellish flames suddenly shot the roof into the sky like a comet. Bundles of glowing straw flew in all directions and everyone ran to stamp them out. The house itself was already beyond salvation.

Since that “black *khol-hamoed*”, they have been on guard in Glubok more than anywhere, and from then on not even an extra match has caught fire.

74. The Golem was a legendary artificial man, created from clay by Rabbi Yehuda Leybar Bezalel of Prague in the 16th century, and given life so that it could defend the Jews. The term is also used idiomatically to mean a very stupid person

75. Refers to the days between the days at the beginning and the days at the end of the long holidays of *peysakh* and *sukes*

But that didn't lessen the great catastrophe. A dozen pious Jews left the world in the blink of an eye on that *khol-hamoed* of *peysakh*. But a certain only son there was fated to survive. Samson Shpunt happened to be standing outside, near the door, so the fire spared his life. But people in Glubok said about that: "Better to be in the cemetery than to be 'spared' like that." But it's not that simple, because as long as a person lives, he keeps living, and his mission in life is simply to improve himself.

* * *

At the time of the catastrophe, the young man Samson Shpunt was studying in Vileyka, in the 'little yeshiva' there. When he, their only son, came home for *peysakh* to his parents, it was fated to be the last *peysakh* that he would celebrate with a father and a mother, of blessed memory.

Briefly, Samson was left with a face so badly burned, no one should know from such things, that people couldn't bear to look at him. He couldn't speak and could barely hear. It was only through God's help that his vision had remained almost intact and his mind was practically entirely intact. It was just unfortunate that as badly as he wanted to remain mute, something in his throat constantly rumbled spontaneously with a sickly gargling noise.

He remained in the asylum for two years, did Samson. The *feldsher*⁷⁶ gave him a white ointment whose major ingredient was whiskey from the Lintuper whiskey factory. His suffering almost led him to do himself in, but whenever he thought of doing so he began repeating from memory a couple of chapters from the tractate *Semakhot*, and he took strength from that.

The community raised a goodly sum for him to travel to Warsaw to see medical professors. There was plenty of money in Glubok; "the rich city," they called it. The community owned the 'Jewish pasture,' and in addition a large number of shops in the marketplace. Almost everyone had his own meadow. In other places, there was a market once a week, but Glubok was too fancy to call it a 'market,' so every Thursday they had a 'fair.'

Samson, however, wouldn't allow them to exile him somewhere. "I was born in Glubok and here in Glubok is where I'm going to die." That's what he wrote on a piece of paper that he showed to each of the chari-

76. The local "medic"—a partly trained medical person who was the local "physician" in rural and small-town areas

table townspeople who wanted to send him who knows where, for his own good. The rabbi ruled that they must absolutely not force the unfortunate fellow. Furthermore, they mustn't force him to stay in the asylum--what was a yeshiva student, a former scholar, a completely sane man, doing there among the deranged people, in a place where the town crazy thought he was King Darius and a poor crazy woman announced every few days that she was none other than Deborah the prophetess.

But for him to walk around in the streets with his horror-face was also no good. It would be a pity for the community, especially the children. Besides, they had to protect him from mischievous children and coarse young men. So they ordered from the harness-maker a hood that would cover his head, face, and throat, with just holes so he could see and breathe. The Glubok harness-maker was good at making harnesses for horses, even the czar's bell-bedecked royal horse, but making one for a suffering young man was something his harness-maker ancestors had never even dreamed of. Even an expert seamstress could have figured out a better-looking covering, but they needed a hood that would withstand the rains and the frosts in that northern climate. So the harness-maker looked around his shop: here some thread and there some patches; various straps and braces; long strips of dried leather that hung from hooks hammered into the two rafters in his workshop.

When a cobbler becomes a baker, the *khales* are made of leather and the soles are made of dough. No artist from Betsalel's⁷⁷ school would become a harness-maker, after all. The hood was itself a horror, with a mouth that was as weirdly large as that of a wild animal in the distant forest. But there's no limit to what one can get used to. However strange the hood looked, they knew very well in Glubok what was going on inside it. Nevertheless, a man who neither speaks nor hears and goes around wearing such a strange hood could only be called by the Glubok residents: "The Golem." When Jews give someone a name, that's it, even when it's not a nice name. Perhaps he did indeed look like the Maharal's⁷⁸ golem, but "golem," in Yiddish, means fool, and they knew very well that poor burned Samson Shpunt's brain was sound--sound as an iron bar, one might even say. But they were talking about his appearance and not his inner being. They no longer called a fool in Glubok a golem; now there was only one golem in the town, the unfortunate Samson Shpunt, the Glubok Golem.

77. Designer of the holy tabernacle in the Sinai desert during the Jews' wanderings

78. Acronym for Rabbi Yehuda Leyb bar Bezalel, the creator of the Golem

Not for nothing did Glubok have a reputation in those parts for its beautiful *minyans*, each of them considered not just a holy place but a little world unto itself. The Glubokers had the habit, when someone came into town, of insisting on only one thing from the stranger, that he learn the names of the nine *minyans*, as they were known in the ‘metropolis’ of Glubok, and precisely in this order: the first one was the tall *minyan*; the second was the Lubavitsh *minyan*; the third was the house of study; the fourth was the tailors’ *minyan*; the fifth was the early-morning *minyan*—it had the earliest services, for those who had to go out of the town early to make a living: merchants, peddlers, and cloth-makers; the sixth was the Lyadi *minyan* (in Glubok, a stranger coming into town could be harshly criticized for confusing it with the Lubavitsh *minyan*; in both places they said: Lyadi is Lyadi and Lubavitsh is Lubavitsh—enough said; the seventh was the red *minyan*; the eighth was the one near the bridge; and last of all, the ninth was the blue *minyan*.

The blue *minyan* was the most peaceful one of all, a bit away from the center of things. It neither showed off with its treasure and its wealthy people nor did it push away poor people who approached looking for alms. Yeshiva students who hadn’t completed their studies because “life had interfered”, as they say (they were called “Pharisees” in those parts) were drawn to it; they had been trying to make a living from wealthy families by telling them stories, and now, in their old age, they were drawn to the blue *minyan*, where people sat and studied day and night, in the cold and in the heat, in good times and bad. The students in the blue *minyan* didn’t ask for any money from the community—they asked for just one thing: light, from either tallow or wax candles, so they could study in the light and not in the darkness. Why the ninth *minyan* in the town was called the blue *minyan* is a whole other story, which is recorded in detail in the second volume of archives of the Glubok scribe, Reb Yankev Pelkin.

Not in a day and not in a year, but amid the old men the soul of the Golem of Glubok, the horribly burned Samson Shpunt, healed. He started going to the *minyan* two years to the day after the fire on *khol-hamoed peysakh*. The old men studying in the blue *minyan* got used to him. The youthful fire victim with the hood, who couldn’t speak and couldn’t be entirely mute either, understood everything in his studies. When he wanted to ask something or say something, he just wrote it

down on a piece of paper. He wrote with a yeshiva student's handwriting, with long *lameds*⁷⁹ and sloping *kufs*⁸⁰; it was a pleasure to look at it. Such a mutilated man, poor fellow, and his handwriting was the handwriting of someone with a beautiful face.

Everyone in the town called him "the Golem," not with mockery but with compassion, but in the blue *minyán* they only called him Reb Samson, and there he passed his days eagerly devouring books and booklets, and wonderful commentaries with wonderful insights. Meanwhile his sense of hearing gradually improved.

They gave the fire victim a neglected old cottage. It stood diagonally in the woods, near the cemetery next to Lake Berezvtsh. Every morning, exactly one hour before the first rays of dawn came racing from across the Voron Forest, the golem left the house. Every step echoed with a golem-like crashing sound, like an ancient railroad train starting up slowly, not at all like a Jew who was hurrying to the blue *minyán*. Half-awake people in their beds listening to the steps of Reb Samson Shpunt would have a first morning thought: day is beginning and there goes the Glubok Golem. To the workers who went to the first services, it was obvious that the Glubok cocks had learned to give their first crow according to the golem's steps.

* * *

And, as can happen, a man accepts the nickname that people give him and gets quite used to it. Indeed, as the years go by he makes it part of himself: he was a disfigured burn victim who lived all alone in a ramshackle cottage in the woods near the lake and spent his days studying in the blue *minyán*, and they called him "golem," not, God forbid, because they considered him a fool but because with his covered head he seemed like a real golem in the imagination of the people.

And if I'm like the Maharal's golem, he told himself, then be the very best—so Reb Samson Shpunt of the blue *minyán* began to research here and there about golems: where a golem and what a golem. He began using his beautifully written notes to ask questions of a rabbi or a bright student, in his own *minyán* and in other *minyáns*, in his own Glubok and

79. The Yiddish-Hebrew letter for the sound of "l"

80. The Yiddish-Hebrew letter for the sound of "k"

from passing preachers, rabbis, and all kinds of holy men. One could learn from all sorts of teachers, after all.

In the end, Reb Samson Shpunt outlived King David by a little more than ten years. When he died peacefully in his eighties and they took him to be buried in the old Glubok cemetery, they found all sorts of notes in his house. One sheet of paper, white with narrowly spaced blue lines, was filled with pretty curlicues. At the top, in big letters, was written:

A Letter From The Glubok Golem, May The Almighty Protect Him

(We haven't been able to reproduce exactly everything that was written there, but we've tried hard to copy it word for word, in honor of the golem, without altering it or correcting the style, and certainly without changing the meaning.⁸¹ Where we've failed, let the Glubok golem pardon us, and where we've succeeded, may things go well for him in Paradise.)

The letter read as follows:

"Once upon a time, many years ago, I dreamed about the unfortunate fire, no one should know from such a thing. But the Almighty was merciful and brought me another dream in which the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Leyb bar Bezalel, may the memory of the holy saint be blessed, came to me. He sat in the sky on a tall rabbinical throne and began to speak to me thus:

Reb Samson ben Reb Zalmen Eliezer Shpunt of Glubok--I am Rabbi Yehuda Leyb bar Bezalel of Prague. Concerning what is written in Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 65b, that the great Rabbi Raba created a man and sent him to Rabbi Zeyre, and concerning all the permutations about that in the Book of Creation and Barzilai's commentary on it, and the golem that I, using God's secrets, made--know that the books and commentaries are simply wrong in saying that Man can create a golem out of dust. It has never happened. A man can create a wagon, and even a watch, but only

81. The text from the Golem is full of contorted expressions, archaisms, misspellings, Hebraisms, and passages from the Talmud. The translator has not attempted to reproduce them faithfully, but has rendered them straightforwardly

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God can create a living creature. And that is the law. Nevertheless, all the golems that were created from the time of Raba until today did actually exist—they were not just imaginings or delusions.

The explanation is that an additional soul can be readily blown into a man who is damaged; this is called an ibur, in the kabala. It's an added soul that may tend toward good or evil, not in place of his own soul, a dybbuk, God forbid—may no one know of such things--but together with it. Two souls, one confronting the other. When the added soul enters one who does not speak or hear or is plain deaf-and-dumb, then the damaged one is called a golem.

But into what kind of damaged one—that is the question, since at first glance the sages consider all three--deaf, foolish, and immature--as the same. But actually they are clearly not the same. For example, it is stated unequivocally in Gitin 5a, that a deaf-mute may agree to a rabbinical divorce even though he can't say the necessary words: "It is written in my presence and signed in my presence", if it was indeed written and signed in his presence. Rabbi Joseph says that that applies to a healthy person who has given the divorce and then has suddenly become mute and can't say the words. And right there the Talmud says that it is hardly conceivable that one would lose his speech at precisely that moment.

*But the Tur, in the volume *The Breastplate of Justice*, explained the law of the deaf-mute as follows: the actions of the deaf and the mute are not valid if it hasn't been determined that they are in their right mind, but if they are in their right mind, then they are permitted to do everything. According to halakha⁸⁴, the deaf and the mute are permitted to do anything as long as they are in their right minds. And according to the kabala, all souls, not just that of a damaged person, are capable of taking on an ibur. When*

84. The body of Jewish law

The Golem of Glubok

an ibur is blown in, the result is a good golem, a capable golem--such a golem that it is a privilege to be such a golem. But the main thing is that it should be a damaged person who is greatly in need of an ibur, that is a new soul that comes to strengthen the first one.

After the great fire, I, in the sky over Prague, took pity on you, Reb Samson of Glubok, and I blew into you an additional soul, an ibur, so you shouldn't have to stay in the poor-house with the sick people and the insane people, God save us, but should go study in the ninth holy minyan of Glubok and become a golem among the Jews. That too was during khol-hamoed peysakh.

"That was the dream I dreamed. A good dream. A good dream. I extend a great blessing for all the residents of Glubok and I ask you to say kadish for me. And I adjure you to be especially careful during khol-hamoed."

Samson bar Zalmen Eliezer Shpunt, known as the Glubok golem.

* * *

The golem's letter to the people of the town was discovered precisely during *khol-hamoed peysakh*. On *khol-hamoed peysakh* the fire, on *khol-hamoed peysakh* the second soul that turned him into a good golem entered him, and on *khol-hamoed peysakh* the letter was discovered. That's why they started saying in Glubok: "From *khol-hamoed* to *khol-hamoed*."

And that's the end of the story.

The Apostate Of Klushan

Where could Klushan have gotten an apostate? Who knows? But anything can happen.

They called him “Khayim-Yoyne the Little Jesus.” He was a handsome man with broad shoulders, was of medium height, and had a beautiful black beard and curly hair. He had arrived as a young man and, for a pittance, had bought a rather run-down cottage across from the poor-house. He had plastered the cracks between the boards with a mixture of mud and pebbles, which he called “cement.” In Klushan he became an ‘immigrant.’ Almost. One doesn’t become a real Klushaner one-two-three. He made his living by selling all kinds of toys, trinkets, and colorful rags, which he collected from all over, from towns and villages. In other words, he was a peddler, the “immigrant peddler.” He never went into the synagogue. People hardly noticed. A peddler is a peddler, especially an immigrant peddler.

But who knows what’s going on inside someone else?

* * *

Once, in the month of Tevet, a severe frost developed. That was the usual thing in Tevet, of course, but Khayim-Yoyne made it memorable. A certain horse, an ill-tempered gray horse, was dragging an overloaded sleigh near the poor-house. He got frightened and kicked Khayim-Yoyne in the belly. He was just standing there and—Pow!

The immigrant peddler fell down in the snow, dazed. When a big horse kicks you, it makes no difference whether you’re a great scholar or a peddler in Lushan. A couple of strong young men quickly took him to the town doctor, the *feldsher*. They laid him on the sick-bed, near the oven, and the *feldsher* unbuttoned his jacket. When he did that, a little cross on an antique gold chain fell out of a pocket of the patient’s vest.

The doctor immediately fainted dead away and the patient woke up. He stood up and walked out without a word. He didn’t even ask whether

he owed the doctor a fee, as if the doctor was supposed to make a living just from doing good deeds.

The story about the cross immediately spread throughout Klushan. That Sabbath, “Khayim-Yoyne of the Trinkets” was renamed “Khayim-Yoyne the Little Jesus.” And if they give you a name in Klushan, you know, that’s that!

When it became known in Klushan that this was a Jew who went around with a little cross in his vest pocket, people began to shun him. Children were told to say hello to him from a distance and then go on their way.

* * *

Many years passed. Khayim-Yoyne was now in his sixties. One day in the month of Tishrei, somewhere between *yom kipur* and *sukes*, it occurred to him, in his old age, to get married. Tevet⁸⁵ is Tevet and Tishrei⁸⁶ is Tishrei.

Strange what occurs to a man, but most likely it’s better to live out one’s life as part of a couple. That’s what both Gentiles and Jews say. After all, he was always traveling around among the villages, buying one kind of merchandise and selling another kind, exchanging his trinkets for other trinkets. Begrudging tongues spread the gossip that he had ‘lady-friends’ in the villages—Gentile girls. So let him have them and enjoy them, as long as he didn’t do it in Klushan!

But now, in his sixties, he had decided to get married according to the laws of Moses and Israel. Nothing less than a Jewish wedding. Ay!

For a long time, not in a village but in Klushan itself, he had had his eye on the divorcee Khaye-Peshe and not on a Gentile woman. This was the Khaye-Peshe whose husband had divorced her for being barren after ten years. Now she was a well rounded, pudgy woman. How old she was no one knew for sure, just that she was past seventy—of that there was no doubt.

Here in this month of Tishrei, the fact that in that long-ago Tevet the *feldsher* had sent away an immigrant with a little cross in his vest pocket hardly mattered. As long as he wasn’t a native-born Klushaner—that wouldn’t do at all in the city where Ze’ev-Wolf the Slaughterer had long ago written the *Book for All*.

But hearing that the *treyf*⁸⁷ old bachelor was going to make a match

85. A month in late summer

86. A month in early Fall

87. “*Treyf*” normally is used to mean “not kosher,” but here it is used closer to its basic meaning of “foul”

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with such a kosher⁸⁸ divorcee—the barren Khaye-Peshe, poor thing—unleashed a flood of jokes in Klushan. Prankish children began to sing out in the street: “Sixty he and seventy she,”⁸⁹ to the tune of “Saul slew thousands, but David—tens of thousands,” *l’havdil*.

But in fact Khaye-Peshe began to look quite different. It was indeed nice to see that it was still possible, even in old age, for joy to emerge from life’s sorrow.

But what a catastrophe!

The truth was that people were afraid to say anything to Khaye-Peshe, or even to hint to her, let alone speak out. After all, a lonely old lady “somewhere in the seventies” was going to become a bride—why make a big deal about that? It was a big nothing. Every place has its crazy people, they say. And if “they” say so In any case, people were preoccupied at that time with penance for their own little sins, with the Days of Awe, and with the soul-searching that takes place in the temples.

So Khayim-Yoyne, Khayim-Yoyne the Little Jesus, on one fine Friday morning, a somewhat warm, somewhat cool morning in Tishrei, went to the rabbi, no less! A veritable Arabian Nights tale: no less than asking the rabbi to conduct his wedding ceremony.

And here comes the other shoe!

The Klushan rabbi was not one of those doubters who torment themselves and other people about everything and everyone. Barely stopping for breath, he questioned the unshaven man standing in his court:

“Reb Khayim-Yoyne ben Ezriel! May you live and be well! A Jew remains a Jew. Is the gossip about you, that you go around with a little cross in your pocket, true?!”

A peddler who travels among the villages doesn’t scare easily.

“Here it is, rabbi!” and as he was saying that, Khayim-Yoyne was undoing the button on his pocket and taking out his tiny jewel, so to speak. He started chattering something about the Messiah.

The rabbi likewise kept his cool:

“Khayim-Yoyne ben Ezriel! Repent! As long as you’re alive, you can still repent! And especially in Tishrei! In Tishrei—don’t make light of that! For our ancestors came into the world in Tishrei and they died in

88. Here used to contrast with “*treyf*”—the intended meaning is that she was a pure, decent woman

89. A slightly altered version of a well known “folk song” by Mark Varshavsky; the original words are “*akhtsik er un zibetsik zi*” (eighty he and seventy she)

Tishrei—so says the Talmudic passage in the tractate *Rosh Hashone*, at the end, on page 10b. What's this business of carrying a cross with you?! Feh! Repent while it's still Tishrei! Tishrei means repentance!”

“Is it written anywhere, rabbi, that one may not carry a cross with him?”

“Of course! Why not?” and saying that the rabbi quickly turned to his book cabinet. He was about to take out the *yoyre-deye*, but his fingers froze when Khayim-Yoyne suddenly shouted:

“Then they're wrong!”

“That's enough! Silence! I won't allow you to commit any more sins here! Furthermore, until you repent, until you get rid of that foul thing in your pocket, there will be no wedding for you here in Klushan! Klushan is Klushan and Sodom is Sodom!”

“But I'm a Jew and I believe in the Messiah, that he is God's son!”

When the rabbi heard “God's son,” a chill as sharp as a slaughterer's knife immediately passed through him. He stood up—a sign that Khayim-Yoyne should please leave.

But nothing bothers a crazy man who gets even nervier during Tishrei. Khayim-Yoyne remained seated on the chair, frozen, almost like Lot's wife. Not only didn't he leave, he took the rabbi to task:

“But rabbi—you yourself just said that a Jew remains a Jew, didn't you? Ah—you consider me a sinner? So consider me a sinner! I give you the right! Completely! Be my guest! And where is it written that only saints can get married in Klushan, huh? In *Bava Basra* or *Bava Toltse*?⁹⁰ And she's only getting married anyway, so why such a fuss, rabbi, hah?”

For long moments, they sat there facing each other, silent, the pious rabbi of Klushan and the sinner Khayim-Yoyne, in the court in the rabbi's house right next to the synagogue on Shul Street. Finally Khayim-Yoyne broke the frightful silence and asked the rabbi the following question:

“And if I give away my little cross and tell you a lie, that I don't believe in God's son as the Messiah, will you then marry me to my fiancée?”

“No! Emphatically no! Repentance, my good man! Repent! Tishrei! With all your heart! With all 248 limbs⁹¹! With.....!”

90. *Bava Basra* is the name of an actual tractate of the Talmud; *Bava Toltse* is a made-up, pun-like pseudo-name for a tractate, based on the name of the mythical *Bobe Toltse*, who was a teller of tall tales. Khayim-Yoyne is asking: “Is that really in the Talmud or are you just making it up?”

91. Of the Biblical 613 mitsves, 365 represent the days of the year and the remaining 248 represent supposed ‘limbs’ in the body

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“Rabbi! Tishrei shmishrei! Good-bye!” and with that Khayim-Yoyne, angry, stood up, turned toward the door, and rushed out of the place as if he were running from a fire.

The door hadn’t even closed yet and already a terrible regret was flooding the Klushan rabbi because he hadn’t tried hard enough to convince the man, with a kind approach, to abandon his path toward conversion or, if not, at least to talk him out of ruining a kosher barren widow in the holy community of Lithuanian Klushan.

* * *

Friday turned into Sabbath and Sabbath turned into Sunday. Children in the town saw Khayim-Yoyne and his Khaye-Peshe, all dressed up, coming out of the old church on the Klushan marketplace. The Gentiles were rejoicing about them. Indeed, one might have thought that their own Messiah had arrived in Klushan to look with amazement at the two Jews.

And in Klushan, in the very month of Tishrei, between *yom kipur* and *sukes*, on that very Sunday, it became like *tishe bov*⁹² for the Jews. It was clear that Khayim-Yoyne and Khaye-Peshe had converted there. That morning, no one had noticed them going into the church, so who would have thought of going to the church to watch? Who would do such a thing?

So they wouldn’t have to put up with indignities by the Jews, the priest made them a gift of a tiny cottage on the “street of the church,” which was what the Jews, at least, called their little street.” Khayim-Yoyne spoke ‘goyish’⁹³ fairly well—after all, he had that kind of occupation, traveling among the villages. Khaye-Peshe couldn’t speak a word of it to save herself, but all the Gentiles in Klushan could chatter a bit in Yiddish—“speaking Yiddish like a Gentile,” it was called—so she could converse with them as much as she needed to. Khayim-Yoyne and Khaye-Peshe were blessed with a peaceful household, everyone conceded. It didn’t bother them that Jewish ‘*shkotsim*’⁹⁴ yelled at them:

“Apostates! Feh! Everything you believe is not true—it’s all lies and nonsense!”

92. The ninth day of the month of Av—the supposed anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem—the day of deepest mourning for the Jews

93. That is, the language of the local Gentiles, in this case Lithuanian

94. Literally, Gentile boys, but here used to mean mischievous Jewish boys

The Klushan rabbi had been reduced to a pile of ashes. A Jewish sinner had come to him to ask him to marry him, in his old age, and he had refused him, hadn't tried to convince him with a kind approach, had sacrificed him—so he had gone and gotten converted and had taken with him on his sinful path a poor old Jewish divorcee who hadn't been satisfied all those years with the three women's *mitsves*.⁹⁵ She was constantly praying from her Yiddish prayerbook according to the *halakha*, with terrible wailing.

In later years, people began to say that Khayim-Yoyne had probably come to Klushan already half an apostate, and from half an apostate to a whole apostate wasn't much of a leap. But that such a kosher Jewess should be ruined for the sake of a man.....

But the rabbi, in his court, consoled himself that the man was already bitter at the community because of the indignity they had inflicted on Khaye-Peshe in Klushan when the previous rabbi had immediately agreed that her husband could divorce her because she was barren. It was a disgrace that a woman should be called "the barren one" in Klushan till the end of her days, and that she should have to look at her former husband in the street every day with his new missus, the mother of beautiful children—a man happy with sons. The whole story was really not nice, not Jewish—but what can you do?

Now, when her former husband had gone off to the next world and the other missus was a desolate widow who could barely creep around with a cane and had only a pittance remaining to her from her husband's possessions, Khaye-Peshe had lived to have her revenge. Let the widow watch her going around in her old age with a new husband, younger than she by ten years and very handsome to boot.

* * *

For years on end, the Klushan rabbi was tormented by that Friday morning in Tishrei. "My sin was a hundred times greater than his," he kept repeating, "and a thousand times greater than hers" he would add. The anger about himself didn't lessen as the years passed, especially since the people involved were still around in Klushan.

95. Taking a bit of the *khale* dough and burning it in the oven, abstaining from sexual intercourse during menstruation and for seven days afterward, and lighting the Sabbath candles

When the rabbi grew old and feeble and sensed that he was coming to the end of his days, he wrote a letter to the convert. He quietly gave it to a Christian he knew, to take to Khayim-Yoyne. This was in Tishrei too, between *yom kipur* and *sukes*, just like the time, ten years earlier, when the two residents of Klushan had converted, you shouldn't know from such things!

Looking at the beautiful cursive Jewish letters, Khayim-Yoyne felt a twinge in his heart. Ah, the hidden strength of cursive Jewish letters!

He immediately went to see the rabbi. They sat facing each other in the synagogue court, the rabbi and the convert, exactly as they had ten years earlier, then too in Tishrei, just like this.

"Rabbi, you should live and be well!"

"Reb Khayim-Yoyne, I have called you because I want to beg your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness for what?!" Khayim-Yoyne the Little Jesus responded in amazement.

"Because I wouldn't marry you on account of the little cross. I myself have already begged forgiveness from the Almighty many times because I caused you to convert and caused a *kosher* widow to commit the sin of sins."

"So what? We're happy in our old age, after all. And it's all the same God, isn't it, rabbi? But you know what? The truth be told, we've probably been among the Gentiles long enough. A Jew remains a Jew to them too, don't you think?"

"Then you can still repent, both repent, both together, be good and happy Jews! Why should you remain happy converts when there's no true happiness in that?"

"How?"

"A Jew remains a Jew, so repent in your hearts!"

"Just a minute! You've just said, rabbi, that you want to beg forgiveness from me, so you too have to repent!"

"Right as rain! So we'll both repent! What am I saying, both? All three of us! Let it be the whole group!"

For a moment, silence fell on the rabbi's court. The only thing audible was the crickets' autumnal chirping outside.

"So let's do it this way: if you'll marry me and Khaye-Peshe regardless of your suspicions about what's going on in my vest pocket, we'll return, one way or another."

"Done!" the Klushan rabbi cried, slapping his hand on the table.

The rabbi quietly performed the marriage that very day in his court.

For witnesses, he took the students in his *beys-medresh*⁹⁶, discreet old men who wouldn't spread the information.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that they wouldn't be able to stay in Klushan after all that. It was totally impossible—not among us and certainly not among them. The rabbi gave them a bag of money and called the wagon-driver, who drove them to the rabbi's cousins far, far away, on the other side of the Sambatyon,⁹⁷ all the way to Ruzhan, which is Ruzhenenye in the district of Brisk, not far from Pruzhan, which is Pruzhenye.

In Klushan, they didn't write down a single word about the matter in the town record- book, but the Ruzhan scribe did write down the story. In Klushan itself and the villages around it, when someone wanted to say: "Thou shalt not be righteous overmuch," they would say: "It's like the story about the apostate of Klushan."

96. House of study, usually used interchangeably with synagogue

97. Here used figuratively to mean very far away. The Sambatyon is a mythical river that is supposedly the boundary of the land where the lost Ten Tribes of Israel live

The Flat Peak

On a mild *yom kipur* eve, it suddenly got dark several hours before the usual time. In the twinkling of an eye, a howling wind blew up out of nowhere and began driving a galloping rain that was out of this world. Gusts of water drove through the air like arrows. When the congregation arrived for *kol nidre* in the Svir synagogue, they told one another that this was not just a rain but a fearsome sign of God's burning anger against Svir.

The synagogue staff, who had been sitting in the building since before the rain and had been partaking of the 'third meal' in the anteroom, were just as frightened as the soaking wet congregants who were gradually starting to come in. They looked up at the high windows and saw that the wind was picking up water from the Svir lake and slamming it against the Svir mountain above. On the tall slant-roof of the synagogue, the pounding water was beating out a seemingly endless heavenly accompaniment to the cantor's singing.

The eyes of shameless jokesters widened with penitential innocence. Wealthy property owners put on a submissive expression. Women with jutting, compressed lips hugged their Yiddish prayer-books to their breasts like shields against the weather. Khayim-Mayer the beggar kept mumbling under his breath:

*May everyone have grace in the next world,
such grace as does not exist in this one.*

Only the Svir rabbi, Reb Benyomen-Meylekh, a short man with a broad, square, white beard, sat calmly on the *bima*. He was wagging his head forcefully back and forth, to the rhythm of a *peysakhdik* "and God is only one," not at all like *yom kipur*. At the corners of his thin-lipped mouth, one could see a sort of smile. The rabbi's weird equanimity made the congregants even more uneasy, as if this rain of rains were just a little

joke that he was playing so the congregants should know that there was a rabbi in Svir and a God in Heaven.

Reb Benyomen-Meylekh remembered that the *Tree of Life* cites Ar"i Hakodesh⁹⁸ about the difference between demons and everything else. In everything else, every inanimate thing and every growing, living, or speaking thing, all four elements are woven and mixed together: earth, air, fire, and water, so much so that no one of them can be recognized separately—they constitute a single entity. Among demons, on the other hand, the bodily stuff consists only of air and fire, and because of that they are invisible, in contrast with the corporeal entities in the world, which can be seen with the naked eye. And the face of each demon is the face of a different element: those whose face is fire remain fire; those whose face is air remain air; those whose face is water remain water; and those whose face is earth remain earth. Ari Hakodesh got that far, Benyomen-Meylekh thought. The rabbi looked at the wet weather that could be seen through the windows and looked at the congregation in the synagogue. He had no doubt that this was nothing less than the work of a demon that was walking in God's ways, a demon that had come on the kind of mission that good angels used to carry out when the Holy Temple stood on the Temple Mount and *sinas khinem*⁹⁹ had not yet seized the populace.

The oldest of the congregants, who was also the rabbi's secretary, was Ber-Zane the Crowbar, as they had called him since his youthful days when he used to go around with a crowbar to use against evil spirits. He looked at the rabbi and walked over to him with quiet, stocking-footed steps. He didn't say a word, so as not to interrupt the rabbi's thoughts. Nevertheless, just by walking over to him Ber-Zane was hinting that the rabbi should explain the action of the Higher Power, an action that the residents of Svir remembered from then on in the saying: "with the murderous rage of *kol nidre*." The rabbi was unhappy that he had to interrupt his fruitful thoughts, but letting Ber-Zane stand there while he himself continued to pray would be insulting, so he began to speak, and at the same time decided that he would express his conclusion in the conversation.

"Reb Ber-Zane! No one dies from a downpour! Not even from a rain like today's. What, then? People get very frightened by anything that is out of the ordinary. Water is flying from the lake up to the mountain.

98. Rabbi Isaac Luria

99. Envy, hate, and bickering for no good reason

Saying that that has something to do with *yom kipur* is like saying that water is wet. That's not the question. Why did the Almighty send the rain precisely today and not, let's say, on last year's *yom kipur* or next year's *tishe bov*? That's the question!"

"So why, indeed, Reb Benyomen-Meylekh?"

"Why, why! Just to frighten the congregation on *yom kipur* is not God's way. Among the Gentiles and our common people, everything falls under the catch-all of 'that's what happened and that's all there is to it,' and among the Vilna heretics it's called 'accidental'"

"So what can it mean, Reb Benyomen-Meylekh?"

"You remember, of course, the angry argument between Kiva-Dan, the assistant shames, and Velfke the heretic at the beginning of Tammuz?"

"Why shouldn't I remember? After all, the story echoed throughout the city."

"So consider this: all year long they walk around straight as an arrow, with the stride of a lord or a prince. They have God on their side, after all. The other fellow tried to get the Evil One on his side but was unsuccessful. Things had first gone wrong when Berke the heretic was living as a guest in Mikhalishek, while still a young man. You know, of course, what Berke the heretic did?"

"No rabbi. Is he the one who went over to the *maskilim*¹⁰⁰ in Vilna?"

"May you live and be well! Whom else would I be talking about? To spite both God and Man, he used to go through the *shmone esre* prayer with his legs separated.¹⁰¹ Our Velfke learned from him. One might consider that one of the minor sins, but the minor sins that a Jew commits when he wants to spite an apostate immediately fall into the category of sinning for the sake of sinning."

"So what do you conclude from that?"

"What I conclude is this: in Heaven they consider a hundred years to be less than an instant. The day that Berke the heretic confused the young Velfke into turning to heresy, it was inscribed in the Book of Memory in Heaven. And the argument between Velfke and our great *tsadik*¹⁰² Kiva-Dan was too much—it was blasphemous on both their parts, after all; it gave the Gentiles something to laugh at, so naturally it too was recorded

100. Followers of the Jewish Enlightenment, whom pious Jews considered heretical

101. In the response part of *shmone esre*, the one who is praying normally raises both legs together, mimicking the folk-image of angels as having a single central leg

102. Saint or saintly person

in Heaven. And now see what has happened: a few months later, just at the time of *kol nidre*, the Almighty has sent one of his demons to teach both of them a lesson. That the congregation gets frightened in the process—that won't hurt anyone. On the contrary, just look: people are earnestly asking forgiveness of one another, and not just for show. I'm going to make peace between the two of them. Stand here and watch. If they make up, give the cantor a sign."

Old Ber-Zane stroked his long, two-pronged beard, which had remained as black as coal. His head was whirling, and he felt within himself a sense of warmth and exaltation because the rabbi had entrusted him with the secret of the great rain. He looked at the far corner of the room and watched the rabbi speak first to Velfke and right after that to Kiva-Dan. He couldn't hear the words from afar, but from their facial expressions he understood that the rabbi had appeased both of them. A moment later, the enemies hugged and kissed each other. No one was going to yell *yasher koyekh!*¹⁰³ before *kol nidre*, but every resident of Svir breathed a sigh of relief. All of them just looked at the rabbi and at the enemies who had kissed each other—it was one of God's miracles! When they looked through the tall windows just a moment later, the rain was now just an autumn rain, a this-worldly rain that was coming down from above like any rain.

"Mighty Samson after his locks were shorn!" cried an old woman from the women's aid society, pointing to the windows.

Water-birds suddenly appeared in all their glory. They whirled around faster and faster over the lake below, meowing like marmosets. The shadows of the mountain and the lake played in the *kol nidre* sunset.

B.

After *yom kipur*, the rabbi of Svir boasted to his children that he had been God's partner in making peace between the mortal enemies Kiva-Dan the assistant *shames* and Velfke the heretic.

Kiva-Dan the assistant *shames* was called "the pious fool." He was a short, bony man with brown eyes, a large bald pate, and a long, scraggly beard that looked either white or yellow at various times. He had almost

103. Thank you—well done!

no eyebrows—the whitish eyebrow hairs got lost against his whitish skin. He had earned his nickname as a youth when he used to kiss every mezuzah in a city where they didn't always kiss them. When a stray thought interfered with his praying, he prayed again by himself after everyone else had left. His first wife, whose name was Rade, was quite a person and he loved her deeply, but he divorced her over a perceived wrong to him: he thought she had told him more than once that she had gone to the *mikve*¹⁰⁴ when she hadn't. After the divorce, Rade poisoned herself with vinegar. Kiva-Dan the Fool took another bride, fat as a barrel and ugly; her name was Sime. She promptly gave birth to a little daughter for him. He insisted that she be named Rade, after his first wife. From then on, there was no peace in the house.

Velfke the heretic, in contrast, was a tall, chubby man with grayish-black hair and a tiny, carefully trimmed Van Dyke beard that looked as if two stripes had been painted on his chubby face. He wore a pince-nez. As a youth, he had worked for lumber merchants near Mikhalishek and had stayed in the house of his boss, who lived right next to the town marketplace. Every morning he was taken to work with the peasants. They crossed the Vilya by ferry and turned left onto the road to Kamelishk. In Zhukoyn, they turned left again and crossed an ancient wooden bridge. They drove to the Sorotsk mountain, which was on the opposite bank of the Vilya. From the Sorotsk mountain, they rolled the logs, which had been brought by wagon many times a day, into the Vilya. There strong peasants wearing high boots and carrying hammers in their hands immediately hammered the logs together into rafts. In the evening, they set out on the Vilya toward Vilna on rafts tied together with rope.

Velfke didn't work too hard and didn't go anywhere. He sat all day and watched the peasants hammer nails into the logs to make rafts. His job was to catch any log that had floated away. For that purpose, he had two 'catchers,' sticks with iron claws at their tips, and with them he ran into the river, got soaked, and caught the log that had floated away. The peasant workers knew very well that they had no real need of the young man with the catchers, but the boss had hired him to see to it that they didn't loaf or steal anything.

As he was sitting there that way, idle, on the bank of the Vilya near the Sorotsk mountain, near the three steps that led down into the river, the young man was often approached by Berke the heretic, who would tell

104. Ritual purification bath

him that in Vilna, where he had gone to live as a guest in the house of his father-in-law in Mikhalishek, there were bright, modern Jews, 'enlightened ones,' who didn't tremble about every little thing and who studied science according to common sense. Berke of Mikhalishek, who later achieved a great reputation as the author of Hebrew songs in Vilna, had indeed earned his nickname 'the heretic' because he used to say *shmone esre* with his legs spread apart.

Velfke's youthful encounters with Berke the heretic remained fresh in his memory. He never met another Jew like him. Years later, in Svir, he too began to say *shmone esre* with his feet spread apart. Mikhalishek lost Berke the heretic, who went to live in Vilna, and Svir gained Velfke the heretic.

Even about God Himself there were arguments between the skinny, short, pious Jew and the tall, fat heretic. The people of Svir, however, understood very well that the kind of hatred that existed between the two of them doesn't just happen, not on the part of an enlightened person who envies an excessively pious person, and not on the part of a pious Jew who envies a spiteful person. It was told that as youths they had both fallen in love with the same girl, Tema, Israelke's daughter. Israelke was a wealthy man, a furrier, who was an international merchant. One Tuesday, the furrier called in his daughter and asked her to open her Yiddish volume of *Prophets and Writings* to *1 Kings*, to the story of the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al. Israelke the furrier asked her to read aloud what was written in Chapter 18, Verse 20, which he knew by heart from the Haftorah.

"Why should I read it aloud, father?"

"If your father tells you to, isn't that enough?"

"All right," and she looked at the passage and read slowly:

And Elijah came near to all the people and said: 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him, but if Ba'al, then follow him.'

"Well?"

"What do you mean, well?" her father asked angrily, and continued with the words that he had prepared in advance. "Either Velfke or Kiva-Dan! Tell me this minute and we'll write the marriage contract today. Today!"

People will stop saying bad things about ‘Tema and her two young men.’”

“Father! What do you mean--‘Tema and her two young men’? Am I supposed to decide right now?”

“What then? After *shvues*?”

“Velfke! He’s tall! Handsome!”

“God bless you, Temka! I’m going to Yerukhem the scribe right now, and we’ll write the contract, and may everything be for the best. That I’ve already spoken to both their fathers---well, what’s the difference? Your father’s no fool!”

“I love you, father.”

“And I hate you, my child?” and Israelke hugged his daughter with great love.

The main points were agreed to that evening, and the matter got under way. Tema chattered about it to her girlfriends—how her father had opened the Yiddish volume of *Prophets and Writings* and had ordered her to read aloud the words of the prophet Elijah. On the same day that Velfke and Tema got married, Kiva-Dan ‘took his revenge’: he married the beautiful Rade, the town beauty, who, with God’s mediation, had been eyeing him secretly for a long time anyway.

Kiva-Dan’s revenge did not bring him happiness. Even as he was lying with his wife, he kept imagining that Tema, in bed with her husband, his enemy Velfke, was regretting her answer to Elijah’s question. He imagined that she was imagining that lying next to her was none other than Kiva-Dan.

The years began to race by. Velfke celebrated a *bris*¹⁰⁵ every year—not a single daughter was born to him. Kiva-Dan had only two children, a son and a daughter. After that there were the crazy complaints to Rade that she was deceiving him with respect to family purity, the divorce, Rade’s poisoning herself with vinegar, the second marriage, and the quarreling because he gave his second wife’s daughter the name of his first wife, Rade. He barely made a living from his job as assistant *shames*.

Velfke, on the other hand, lived happily. He was a hopeful and joyful person. He rented out rowboats at the bank of the Svir lake and spent his summer days at the waterfront, just as he had spent them, as a youth, at the Vilya, in the shadow of the Sorotsk mountain near Zhukoyne. His wife, Tema, whom the townspeople called “the little heretic,” ran a little shop where she sold felt boots, gloves, and coats in the winter-time.

105. Circumcision

During the warm months, he worked at the waterfront—during the cold months, she worked in the shop. They considered themselves partners.

Whereas Velfke's nickname "the heretic" was understood matter-of-factly, or even with a good-humored smile, the nickname "the assistant *shames*" was applied to Kiva-Dan as if they were calling him "errand-boy," or "half-baked" all his life, and it also contained an element of pity. More than anything else, they called the man who wouldn't wrestle with a rabbinical question even when the rabbi told him that it was all right, that it came from none other than "the pious fool."

He was even afraid to stay home, where his wife often beat their daughter Radke, whom she hated. In Radke's innocent face, Tema saw only her husband's first wife, Rade, looking at her with curses, whether from Paradise or from her grave near the fence in the Svir cemetery. Both of the children of the first wife called her 'the fat little witch.'

C.

Several times a year, Kiva-Dan the assistant *shames* tried to convince the rabbi to call Velfke the heretic to a rabbinical court because he prayed *shmone esre* with his legs spread apart, which was the sin of sins. The rabbi always blew him off with the same answer:

"May you live long, Reb Kiva-Dan! So far, he hasn't seduced anyone. And you want to punish him for that sin?! Undeserved hatred is a greater sin, assistant *shames*! One could look at the matter in just the reverse way: since the time the craziness with the legs entered his mind, the whole town is even more rigorous about saying the *shmone esre* with their legs together. So that's one thing. Besides, it isn't a sin of a man against God—it's just a sin of a man against another man. To send him a summons is just undeserved hatred. Do you hear, Reb Akiva-Dan? And in addition to all these reasons, there is no rabbinical court here. There's a rabbinical court in Svintsian! Let us rather pray hard, since no one knows what's going on in someone else's heart. Leave the man alone! Enough!"

Kiva-Dan went out into the street. He remained standing next to the synagogue for a moment and overheard two of the congregants talking:

"Did you hear the rabbi tell him off? One gets the impression that he himself prays without much enthusiasm, or he wouldn't get so involved with someone else's legs! And the words today about undeserved hatred—it's not because of his legs but because of Israelke's daughter Tema

The City in the Moonlight

that he wants to accuse him! He still has that on his mind after all these years! What a shame! Some fine assistant *shames!*”

Kiva-Dan’s quiet hatred of the rabbi gradually overtook his hatred of Velfke. He decided that the rabbi had a mortal hatred toward him, a hatred that was absolutely unwarranted. When Itse-Mikhl the *shames* had died, at the age of ninety-nine, the rabbi had appointed another *shames* and had kept him, Kiva-Dan, as the perpetual assistant *shames*. Only the *shames* received favors from the townspeople—only once in a while were there any scraps for the assistant *shames*.

An accumulation of rage must finally find expression. One hot day in the early part of Tammuz, in the year of the great *yom kipur* storm, *kheyder* students ran to the banks of the lake to play skipping stones. Velfke was standing nearby and puttering with his rowboats. When he heard the boys talking about the Sambatyon, Jerusalem the Holy City, and Paradise, he explained to them that those three things were not at all alike, because the Sambatyon and Paradise are to be found in the Holy Books whereas Jerusalem is a city in Israel where a few Jews still live.

There were no secrets in Svir. Velfke’s words reached Kiva-Dan. He ran to the rabbi, for the first time with a brand-new complaint. The rabbi, Benyomen-Meylekh, answered him in his usual way:

“My dear assistant *shames*, may you live and be well! There is indeed something about the Sambatyon and Paradise in the Holy Books, and if he told the children that Jerusalem is today a city in Israel where a few Jews live, where’s the sin in that? Arguments should be avoided. Avoided!”

Kiva-Dan left hastily. The rabbi’s answer enraged him. He concluded that Satan himself had secretly joined forces with the heretic and the rabbi of Svir.

The next day, the story of Kiva-Dan’s conversation with the rabbi reached Velfke. He had a burning, arrogant desire to bring down the “pious fool,” to provoke him to a furious rage in which he would do himself in. When he was puttering around his rowboats and again listening to the children playing, he heard that the rabbi had taught them that the Svir mountain, the weirdly tall mountain that rose in the very center of the city, was a remnant of Mount Ararat, where Noah’s Ark came to rest, and that the lake was left over from the Biblical flood, as God’s sign of eternal survival.

Velfke used to go to Vilna several times a year. There he stayed with Berke the heretic’s son (Berke had long been in the *maskilic* Heaven).

From him, Velfke heard that the Svir mountain had been built by Napoleon's troops for military purposes, so they could shoot downward in every direction at the Russian soldiers and could see as far as a spyglass could see. A long time ago, Velfke had returned from Vilna with a Russian book about Napoleon's war against Russia, in which the whole story about the Svir mountain was recorded. The book contained beautiful woodcuts that showed how the soldiers had carried buckets of earth and stones and had erected the mountain. Velfke told the *kheyder* students:

"Your rebbe doesn't know what he's talking about! Napoleon made the mountain! You've heard of Napoleon, haven't you? A French king—he was here when he was making war against Russia, about a hundred years ago. It was Napoleon and not Noah! Svir is not Ararat! There's a difference! Tomorrow I'll bring the book with the pictures and you'll see for yourselves! Napoleon! Napoleon!"

When word of the newest 'provocation' reached him that night, even before evening prayers, Kiva-Dan breathed more easily. He had waited and waited, and now his time had come: he would be rid of the heretic who had told the *kheyder* students that the rebbe didn't know what he was talking about. A fine how-do-you-do! He had disrespectfully misled the children with his harmful interpretation, had brought them the views of a disgusting Gentile book!

Kiva-Dan ran to the rabbi's house. As soon as he looked at the unexpected guest, the rabbi realized that he had again come to pester him about the heretic.

"Well?" the rabbi welcomed the assistant *shames* coldly.

Kiva-Dan told him the whole story, as if he were a spy bringing the enemy's military secrets: the *kheyder*-students, the mountain, Napoleon, the words about the rebbe. The rabbi paced back and forth, thinking about just one thing: how to get rid of this nuisance.

"My dear assistant *shames*! Did you witness all of that? Actually witness it?"

"No, I heard it from the son of Zalme the baker---"

"You should live and be well! This is just junk! Junk! You hear? That same Velfke will call you to a rabbinical court because you are defaming him! The baker is not a witness, after all—you heard it from his son, a minor. After all, he knows himself where the rabbi of Svir lives! He knows himself! The baker knows! Good night, assistant *shames*! Good night!"

"Good night," Kiva-Dan answered with a squeak like a beaten dog, and went out into the street with hasty steps.

D.

The next morning, when the little assistant *shames* saw the tall Velfke in the street in the middle of the town, he couldn't restrain himself. He went up to him and grabbed him by the lapels:

"Damn you! You'll burn in Hell! When our teacher was teaching about the mountain, he was teaching. Along comes the sinner Velvele the heretic and teaches the Torah from a Gentile book-shmook! You and the shmook will both be roasted in Hell! Roasted!"

"Ha-ha!" Velfke replied, with contempt rather than anger. "The perpetual assistant *shames* now considers himself the town judge! Ha-ha! If Tema had married you, you wouldn't have waged war on me! You've never forgiven me, and now you come with your overly pious, hypocritical judgment and boast that you're a veritable *tsadik*. You're really a man who outlives his wives--you murdered your Rade, and now you're murdering your new wife! Murderer! You're a murderer! You deserve---"

Velfke didn't manage to finish his list of punishments because the little assistant *shames* let go of his lapels and started beating him with a stick that he had picked up off the ground. Velfke gave this interpretation of the blows:

"They don't think very highly of you in Heaven as one of God's punishers! You're just a miserable assistant *shames*! An ignoramus about the Torah! Jews!"---he turned around toward the crowd that had gathered in the open, on the corner of Fish Alley, right in the middle of the town---"Jews! Just look at him! God's assistant *shames* is preaching in Svir with the wisdom of Chelm! Just look at him!"

Little Kiva-Dan became even wilder. He gave Velfke's beard a pull with all his might so he saw stars and screamed with great pain. Velfke, in turn, tore at the assistant *shames*' beard, and they began beating each other as hard as they could.

From houses and alleys, people streamed out, Jews and Gentiles. They rocked with laughter, slapped one another with love-taps on account of the meaningless argument. Above the tumult, one could hear two words from the warriors themselves:

"Fool!"

"Impure person!"

"Fo-o-o-l!"

"Im-pure per-son!"

E.

After the great fight, the opponents avoided each other like the plague. The assistant *shames* no longer bothered the rabbi. The whole neighborhood echoed with the story of the fight. People told about it and exaggerated, and there was something to laugh about. But right before *kol nidre*, to the rhythm of the fearsome, frightening rain, Rabbi Benyomen-Meylekh made peace.

The joy of the rabbi, that God had sent the watery storm at *kol nidre* time so he could make peace between two mortal enemies in the town, was the beginning. After that, all of Svir started to look at the rabbi, Benyomen-Meylekh of Svir, with different eyes. He was a miracle-maker!

After *yom kipur*, people saw Kiva-Dan and Velfke the heretic going for long walks in the woods. They became bosom buddies. Only a true emissary from the Almighty could have accomplished that. The rabbi felt wonderful. He walked nearly upright and with quick steps, nothing like the old man he had been. But at night, before lying down to go to sleep, the rebbetsin kept warning him that something wasn't right here:

"Yome, things are too good to be true. From such hatred---after all, everyone saw them come to blows---to such close friendship is....After all, the Messiah hasn't come to Svir yet."

The rabbi straightened up in front of his wife, despite the fact that his crippled legs hurt him a lot when he did so. He looked slightly above her head at an upper windowpane and answered in a rabbinical fashion:

"Leyke, my darling! When Benyomen-Meylekh makes peace, and in partnership with God to boot---after all, the Almighty sent the great rain, not I---that's a real peace! Why are you looking for trouble?"

Several days after the holidays, late on a cold, starless night, the first frost arrived. The rebbetsin told the rabbi that Kiva-Dan and Velfke had come to talk to him---together. With hopeful steps, the rabbi rushed to welcome them at the door. He brought them into the library. The rebbetsin gave the unexpected guests square Svir bagels and strong tea. After several minutes of small-talk, the rabbi realized that they had come to thank him, but the former enemies couldn't find the words. So he himself began:

"Gentlemen! Where there is peace there is also blessing! Eat! Drink! To your health!"

"Amen!" the former enemies answered as one.

After that chorus, there were a few minutes of awkward silence. Velfke, swaying back and forth in the old armchair---it was not quite the kind

of swaying that one does while praying or studying—started moving his lips, but no sounds came out of his mouth. The rabbi told them that he was going to put up the oven. He put in some sticks that were lying to one side, placed them artfully among the logs that had been in the oven from before. He set the thinnest stick afire with a quick swipe of his hand and then threw the match into the oven and quickly closed the two glass doors, all with the gestures of a *feldsher* placing a cup¹⁰⁶ right after setting its contained alcohol afire.

When the oven was already making crackling noises, Velfke started speaking:

“Rebbe! Rabbi dear! It’s no secret in our town that the two of us hadn’t been behaving Jewishly for many years. At *kol nidre*, when the great rain was falling, you made peace, so we say to you, from the depths of our hearts: ‘Thank you.’ Since then, during the holidays, we’ve started to make up for the lost years. We’ve realized, and it won’t surprise anyone, that the arguments began when my father-in-law, may he rest in peace, gave my wife, as a girl...well, everyone knows the story about Elijah’s question, so to speak. From then on, there was a mortal hatred. We both understand that. From that mortal hatred, there came arguments about piety. Don’t you think I know that they call me ‘the heretic’ in town because I pray *shmone esre* according to the custom of Dov-Ber of Mikhalishek, may he rest in peace? In Vilna, they called him every kind of bad thing, after all, but he still rose to glory. To our great sin, it came to blows, you know, in Tammuz, when I was working with my rowboats at the lakeside and I overheard the *kheyder* students telling the fairy tale that our mountain is a leftover from Noah. Now we are friendly opponents whose argument, by virtue of your peace-making, rebbe, has definitely become an argument about Heavenly matters. Well, rebbe—what’s it about, Reb Benyomen-Meylekh? It’s about---the Svir mountain. The story that women tell, from the peddlers’ pamphlets, comes from the marketplace--one should teach children Torah and not fairy tales. Here’s the point: we’ve come to you to plead our case, and we both give you our word that we will consider your judgment to be a correct....”

“There’s nothing to plead,” the rebbe interrupted abruptly and sharply, the moment he noticed that Velfke had stopped to catch his breath for

106. The procedure was to put a little alcohol into a cup, set it afire, and quickly turn it over and place it on the skin as the alcohol burned away and left a vacuum that sealed the cup to the skin. This was believed to provide a counterinflammatory stimulus to heal internal inflammation

an instant. “He,” the rabbi turned his head toward the silent assistant *shames*, who was sitting there happily, “may indeed think the mountain has been standing here from the time of the six days of Creation, and you,” he turned toward Velfke, “may think that it isn’t even here now. May nothing worse befall the Jews! There’s nothing to plead! That’s not the sort of thing for which one convenes a rabbinical court!”

“Excuse me, rabbi,” Velfke answered immediately, with a dignified voice such as one encounters only in heretics, “if both of us are willing, with love, to accept your decision....”

“May you live and be well!” Benyomen-Meylekh of Svir shot back, as was his wont when he got angry, “in the *Laws of Judgment*, in the first chapter of the 4th volume, it says clearly that here in the Diaspora a rabbi can render a halakhic judgment only about affidavits, loans, marital contracts, legacies, gifts, and the Devil Mammon¹⁰⁷. Where there has been no money lost, only a rabbinical authority who was ordained in Israel can render judgment. In Israel! You’ll have to go visit the Turks, the Turks!”¹⁰⁸

Out of respect for the rabbi, Velfke restrained himself for a moment. When he started speaking, he used an entirely different voice, the voice of an old ordained rabbi before whose words one had to tremble.

“Excuse me, Reb Benyomen-Meylekh—at the end of that same chapter, in paragraph 22, I think, it says very clearly that ‘shaming with words’ is included among the things that can be judged halachically by our rabbinic courts here in the Diaspora. It says that the one who has been insulted must be paid what is necessary to mollify him. According to my friend Kiva-Dan, I unjustly insulted the teacher Zusman by laughing at him publicly because he had said that the Svir mountain was left over from the great flood. If, after hearing our arguments, the rabbi judges that I was in the wrong, I’ll pay him, down to the last rowboat.”

Nauseating hot liquid regurgitated into the rabbi’s throat. He felt like a wild animal caught in a peasant’s trap. Various thoughts came to his mind: an ignoramus cannot be a heretic, after all; Velfke had once studied in the Yeshan Synagogue in Vilna with old rabbis; he had been friends with a reclusive scholar from the Gaon’s synagogue. This sly heretic had ensnared his old enemy, the foolish assistant *shames*, in his spider-web. The assistant *shames* was taking pleasure in the fact that the rabbi, for whom he had no respect, was falling deeper and deeper into the trap of the heretic, whom

107. Money

108. The Ottoman Turks controlled Israel (Palestine) at that time

he, the “pious fool,” had been railing against for many years.

The rabbi was speechless. He tried as hard as he could not to let his accursed guests notice. He turned around immediately to the shelves behind him and took out one gigantic tome after another: here a *shito mekubetses* and there a *Maharik*; here a *Rambam* and there an *Alfas*. He laid all of them on the table, leafed through one and then another, as if he were looking for a certain page. He understood very well that if he postponed the matter all Svir would know that the rabbi was not the equal of the heretic in matters of the Torah. Slowly he closed the last book he had taken down, questions and answers by the inscribing author, and said to his guests:

“Gentlemen! If such a matter is indeed appropriate for a rabbinical court, you have to go to Svintian. There they have a rabbinical court with three judges. A single rabbi can do nothing with such a matter.”

He didn’t know that Velfke was expecting that kind of excuse. This time, Velfke didn’t hesitate—he sprang like a sly cat who has been playing with a bird and is finally ready for the sudden fatal pounce.

“Excuse me, Reb Benyomen-Meylekh. The rabbi must surely remember that in Section 3, in the same chapter *Laws and Judges*, in paragraph 2, I believe, it says that if both complainants accept a judgment, then the judgment stands, even if it is only that of a single rabbi. True, they are talking about a *post facto* judgment, but the Taz says right there that if it is acceptable to both sides, then even from the beginning it is possible to have a single rabbi as a judge, and Mordecai¹⁰⁹ says so too, after all.....”

“Yes, yes---I know!” the rabbi interrupted him angrily.

“After all, you were ordained in Volozhin. Both of us are ready this very moment to sign that we will accept your judgment with love.”

By that time, the rabbi was no longer listening. He was trying to recover from each stab to his heart that the heretic had given him by constantly saying “after all.” Every “after all” smelled of insult. Old Benyomen-Meylekh couldn’t stand any more that night.

“Bring your evidence and your witnesses next Wednesday. Precisely at noon. Right here. That’s all.” and he started quickly closing every open book on the table, a sign that his unwelcome guests should leave.

With compressed lips and hasty steps, like prankish *kheyder* students that have played a trick on their rebbe and are just trying not to laugh in his face, the two former enemies went out into the street.

109. A famous medieval commentator

Benyomen-Meylekh went into the kitchen. His wife was still puttering around near the oven. She got frightened—his legs looked more crippled than ever. In the light of the kerosene lamp, beads of sweat were sparkling on his forehead.

“What’s the matter, Yome?”

“Do you remember, Leyke, the great rain before *kol nidre*?”

“Why shouldn’t I remember it?”

“That was the Lord’s punishment against me, probably because I had been quietly shaming the assistant *shames* all his life.”

“I don’t understand at all!”

“So sit down and we’ll talk. I can’t talk to you while you’re running around. It was like this...”

F.

The story of the rabbinical court echoed throughout Svir--not only in Svir, but everywhere around it. A rabbinical court about the Svir mountain! Zalke, the “queen of the asylum,” said that her former lover, a Gypsy who had left her a tin crown and a bastard, had erected the mountain himself, by Gypsy magic. She expounded further that an angel from Heaven had ordered the Gypsy to erect the mountain so there should be something by which to curse--so one could curse properly from Polotsk to Volozhin: “You should swell up like the mountain of Svir!”

Benyomen-Meylekh was used to listening to women who were asking whether a pot was kosher, and sometime to men who were quarreling about money matters or contracts. That they would come to plead before him about the mountain of Svir, the rabbi, who was past eighty, would never in his life have imagined. More than anything else, he trembled lest the heretic should show himself to be a scholar, and that the “pious fool”—who cared nothing about the matter of the mountain—should take revenge on him, the rabbi! In the middle of the night, his wife heard him talking to himself and pacing around in the house. He kept repeating, over and over:

“Thou shalt not be sure of thyself¹¹⁰ till the day of your death.”

One morning she heard him murmuring, half to himself and half to her:

“If only they had remained enemies! Whom was it bothering?”

110. i.e., that everything will turn out all right in the end

The days crept by like tortoises, as if the same Lord of the Universe who had loosed the *kol nidre* rain, as they called it in town, had now started drawing out the minutes and hours; as if it had been written by the ancient scholars in Heaven that in the distant autumn God would render heavenly judgment against Svir of Lithuania. Deep in his heart, the rabbi had concluded that no human could bring arguments about when a mountain had become a mountain, so he would say: “The question remains open” and drink a glass of whiskey with the complainants. And that would be the end of it. What then---get involved in a foolish investigation about a mountain? That was no business for a rabbi of Svir. For that purpose, there’s a Chelm¹¹¹ in the world.

G

Wednesday morning no shopkeeper sold anything and no customer bought anything. They talked about only one thing: What would the rabbi decide about the origin of the mountain? When the clock got to the time of the mid-day rabbinical court, the whole town assembled in front of the rabbi’s house next to the synagogue. From afar, his secretary, Ber-Zane, saw the plaintiffs try to come into the little street where the synagogue was located, but the crowd wouldn’t let them get through. He went out, and with his resounding voice he yelled that they should make way. Zusman the teacher soon arrived. Velfke the heretic was carrying two big books, and it was clear that they were not holy books.

The rabbi got sick to his stomach. From Kiva-Dan’s hopefulness, it was as clear as day that he had spoken out to him, the rabbi, only in order to live to see revenge—that neither the mountain nor the honor of the children’s teacher mattered to him; that the heretic was only concerned with boasting about his scholarship and with mocking and shaming the Torah and its pious guardians; that the only innocent person who had been pulled willy-nilly into the mud was the teacher, Reb Zusman, who was quaking in mortal fear. Ber Zane asked the two complainants and the single witness to sit around the big oak table in the rabbi’s library.

From the outside, one couldn’t see how the rabbi was trembling lest the heretic introduce teachings from who knows where, lest he start to bring up citations from Mordechai and the Taz and the Gaon. He was

111. Chelm was a real city with a normal population, but in folk-legend it was inhabited exclusively by fools

afraid that he himself would be struck dumb. So he was the first one to speak, in a severe tone that wasn't at all his usual one.

"Gentlemen, you're sitting here and that's good. Reb Zusman! What did you teach the boys about the mountain?"

"The same thing I used to teach the girls when I was their teacher."

"Namely?"

"Namely, that the Svir mountain is from Mount Ararat, the place where Noah's Ark came to rest after the great flood; that the lake is left over from the great flood itself. After all, it is explicitly written: 'And the Ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the mountain of Ararat. And the waters were...'"

"You should live and be well! I know what is written! But where is it written that that was in Svir? And where does it say that our lake comes from the Great Flood? Why not the Lake of Pashkun and the Hill of Strunoyts? What have I done to deserve all this...?"

"The rabbi is certainly right. I only taught what I inherited from my father and grandfather. Probably they too inherited it. 'A custom of the ancestors in their hands.'"

"Reb Ze'ev Volf!" the rabbi turned quickly toward the heretic, whose lips were moving like those of a preacher who is dying to give his prepared lecture, "Reb Ze'ev Volf! Zusman the teacher is the son of a teacher and the grandson of a teacher. That he teaches such a thing to the boys is already a custom in the town. The customs of Israel are Torah!"

"That custom is to be found only in *Bava Zusman*!¹¹² Soon he'll find a new way to teach the cantillation marks: that the note called "svir" means Svir, that the dot in its half-moon represents the mountain of Svir, and that the half-moon represents the lake! And the note "dargo", he'll teach us, represents the nearby shtetl of Dugaleshik," and Velfke the heretic gave a triumphant laugh. "Waa! What a stroke of genius! What an idea! May you live and be well! Does anyone know for sure that that's not true? Blockhead! The teacher Reb Zusman has accepted that interpretation with straightforward enthusiasm."

"Stop fooling around!" the rabbi interrupted the discussion with a trace of fear lest they get him all mixed up with a rabbinical judgment about cantillation marks. "Reb Ze'ev Volf, please stick to the point."

"Excuse me, rebbe. I'll stick to the point. Since that is definitely not a custom, but just a false thing, a fairy tale, people might draw the con-

112. Sarcastically referring to Zusman's teachings as if Zusman thought they were a tractate of the Talmud

clusion that everything they teach in the *kheyder* is false! That would be the sin of sins! In the big cities, many young people walk in evil paths. Irresponsibility reigns. From one error, doubts arise, and----“

“All right, all right. Just a minute!” the rabbi interrupted him, astonished that the heretic had started chattering in the language of a *tsadik* and was not presenting any citations. For a split second, the rabbi wanted to tell the heretic off, tell him that it was he who was the one that was spreading all the doubts in Svir, but he caught himself and realized that that was probably a trap. If he took that tack, that’s when the heretic would first shame him with his scholarship. So he started speaking to him kindly:

“Reb Zéev Volf! What Reb Zusman teaches the children, what his father, may he rest in peace, taught them—whom did it bother?”

“So far, no one.”

“One can’t make an argument from something that hasn’t happened!”

“In our sinful generation, it’s a big job to educate correctly.”

“And if Reb Zusman were to stop teaching the story about Mount Ararat—would you consider that a remedy?”

“Most certainly. It’s the principle, not the details.”

“You can’t dam the Vilya with a splinter” the rabbi quickly dusted him off.

The rabbi was now sitting there calmly. He turned his head again and looked at Kiva-Dan, who had been sitting silent the whole time.

“Reb Akiva-Dan! What is your answer to what Reb Zéev Volf just said?”

“You don’t think there’s an answer?”

“Well?”

“Well, maybe there’s no evidence that our Svir legend about Mount Ararat is correct, but Reb Velfke also has no evidence that Napoleon erected the mountain, as he says. After all, he himself knows that the old peasants who say they remember how they carried bucketfuls of sand and stones are not believable witnesses, not kosher witnesses. So the story about Napoleon is also a legend, and among the Gentiles there is a custom that they teach their children that story. So why do we need their custom when we have our custom?”

“Their ‘custom,’ as you call it, is the truth in this case,” Velfke answered him, not waiting for a word from the rabbi. “Here—take a look here, in this book I borrowed from an acquaintance of mine in Vilna.” And Velfke immediately leafed through the book to the page where it said in Russian that Napoleon’s troops erected the mountain for military pur-

poses. Both Kiva-Dan and the teacher Zusman were astonished that the heretic had managed to dig up such evidence from who knows where.

But there was one thing that only the rabbi knew: once a week, on Monday, he played chess with the Svir priest, and that Monday he had told the priest the whole story; the priest, who had studied for the priesthood in Warsaw, told his chess-friend that the Svir mountain had already been used for military purposes by the Polish king Stefan Batory, more than two hundred years before Napoleon was there; the priest had shown the rabbi a book in which that was written.

Velfke began leafing through the other book he had with him, and started speaking again:

“Here, again. Here—see? Napole--“

“Just a minute!” the rabbi stopped him, “you have a book here and a book there, and in those books it says that the mountain was erected a hundred years ago. But last Monday, I looked at the priest’s book, where it says unequivocally that the Polish king Stefan Batory had already used the mountain for military purposes in the year *shl”g*¹¹³ (1578) “*Shl”g*” means “snow”, after all, and snow is clear and white, after all, just as it is clear that the mountain was standing there two hundred years before your Napoleon! A book here and a book there! So why is Reb Zusman’s legend any worse than all the Gentile books, where one says this and another says it’s just the opposite!”

That, Velfke wasn’t expecting. He started stuttering, waving his hands, and fussing with the two books. Finally, he came out with an answer:

“I didn’t come here to argue about Napoleon, okay?! Whether it’s this version or that version, the point is that human hands erected this mountain. It’s not from God and it’s not from the flood.”

“How do you know that? The priest didn’t say that Stefan Batory made the mountain, only that he used it! There’s a difference!”

“Come now! I beg of the rabbi—let’s all go up the mountain right now, and there the whole matter will become clear.”

“God in Heaven! What could become clear there?”

“Hearing is not the same as seeing, the rabbis teach us!”

“All right!” the rabbi sighed, getting up. All five of them went out: the rabbi; his secretary, Ber Zane, who had been sitting there and writing the whole time; the complainants, Velfke and Kiva-Dan; and the teacher Zusman.

The crowd standing outside hadn’t expected the rabbi and his secretary to come out with the complainants. They asked aloud what the decision

113. Dates are usually represented by combinations of Hebrew letters

had been. Ber-Zane told the crowd that no decision had been made yet, and that they were going to go up the mountain, and that people should immediately make way for the rabbi of Svir and the complainants. People started talking again:

“Unbelievable! A greater miracle than the *yom kipur* rain! An Arabian Nights story! An Arabian Nights story! The heretic is leading the old rabbi up the mountain! If you live long enough, you’ll get to see everything!”

They marched up to the mountain with soldier-like steps, the five interested parties first, followed by the whole townful of Jews. Creeping up onto the mountain, they found a path on which the rabbi, with his crippled legs, walked very slowly. His four companions tried to support him. He allowed his secretary and the teacher to do so, but favors from the complainants were not welcomed.

Finally they reached the peak. The rabbi stopped for a long time to catch his breath. He hadn’t crept up there for some forty years. He gazed in all directions at the wonderfully beautiful landscape. From the golden cupola of the church to the ‘forest of bats’ in the cemetery, Svir looked no different from Jerusalem—it was the holy city in miniature. The rabbi slowly turned his gaze from the distance to nearby, and began smacking his lips over the autumnal aroma of the roses that grew only near the peak of the mountain. He asked his companions whether they didn’t smell it too. The whole mountain was now covered with Jews who had just wanted to listen to a trial about a mountain that was being conducted, not in a rabbinical court but on the mountain itself. They couldn’t help wondering at the story that was unfolding before their eyes. In one place on the mountain, you could hear: “Tickets to watch!” and in another place, you could hear: “It’s worth buying tickets to see this” and “People! Don’t believe stories—just look!”

The rabbi opened his mouth and the crowd grew very quiet. But he didn’t talk about the argument—he made the traditional blessing about the sweet aroma: “Blessed be Thou, O Lord, Ruler of the Universe, who hast created the sweet-scented grasses!”

The entire crowd responded with a thunderous “Amen!” and it seemed as if it were the voice of the mountain.

Velfke was the first to get back to the matter at hand.

“People—here is the evidence! Look and see! The top of the mountain is flat! A real mountain has a peak, after all! Soldiers poured it so they could stand here and shoot downward at the enemy below. One can stand here and see what is happening for who knows how many viorsts

into the distance!”

“So you mean that your evidence is the flat peak, Reb Velfke?” the rabbi asked, now in good spirits.

“Exactly!”

“What has Kiva-Dan got to say about that?”

“I don’t understand anything about mountains.”

“And what does the teacher think?”

“Most likely the last waters of the flood sheared off the peak.”

For a moment, there was silence. The rabbi stepped back a few paces on the broad flat area at the top of the mountain. He said something quietly to Ber-Zane. The secretary, who was greatly enjoying the whole show, called out loudly:

“The rabbi of Svir will now render his decision. Silence!”

All the whispering and rustling stopped in the blink of an eye. The rabbi looked around him for a long time, and then started speaking:

“Let the Gentiles teach according to their custom and we’ll teach according to ours. And may there be no greater problem in Svir!”

And Ber-Zane recorded all the other details of the trial in the great record-book in the Svir synagogue.

The Trial of the Angel of Death

Lithuania, they say, is a country not of three great holidays but of four. How happy we were when we erected the *suke*, how delicious were the first two days, and how sad we were during *khol-hamoed*.

Khol-hamoed sukes—the anniversary of the Gaon's death. Anyone who was alive at the time of that catastrophe has always kept in his mind's eye an image of the "black *khol-hamoed*," as they called it. Wagon-drivers in every village drove their horses wildly. With quite uncharacteristic tears, they cried out sobbingly: "The Gaon has died!"

In all the 'seven provinces,' there wasn't a single Jew who didn't remember, just as when something happens today, where he was standing and what he was doing at the moment the news of the death reached him. For innumerable children, it was their earliest memory.

There was a certain Jew in Svir, Elye-Leyzer bar Abraham Abba Hachohen. For short, they called him Elye-Leyzer bar Abba—they didn't shorten his name any more than that, for at that time there were seven men named Elye-Leyzer in Svir. This Elye-Leyzer was a powerfully built miller, a handsome Jew with broad shoulders. His beard was light brown and rounded to the shape of a half-moon. He owned the old water-mill in Stratshe, near Svir, on the road to Shimenishk. He also dealt in wine and spirits, but he was first and foremost a miller. On weekdays, he walked around looking snow-white from the flour covering him. The Almighty blessed all his accomplishments.

Elye-Leyzer bar Abba was quite old. He knew it wouldn't be long before he joined his ancestors in the Svir cemetery near the big Svir lake. While he was still alive, he gave the water-mill to his eldest son, Yisroel Yoysef, whom they called Yeyske the miller, and blessed him thus:

"Yeyske! May they smell the fruit of your labors all the way to Vilna! All the way to Vilna!"

All his other businesses, even the houses, and he had many houses, he sold. At the same time, he bought himself a beautiful old house in the

nearby village of Ritan, between Nikrashun and Litvan. The house stood on a hill. Cloudlets lowered themselves to the hill as if to raise the house to them. On the hill was a little woods with chestnut trees, and around it were peasants' fields, where they grazed animals, some cows and some sheep, and they also sowed, some potatoes and some beets.

At that time, it was the custom for rich philanthropists to support the heads of yeshivas with funds so they could build study houses in which men could continue their studies after they got married. Elye-Leyzer bar Abba didn't like that—he believed that only old men should study. “Better that the young men should look out for their families,” he said. “Praising the Torah is for old men and no one else.”

So Elye-Lazar bar Abba arranged for old scholars to live out their years in the beautiful house on the hill in Ritan—just sit and study; no worries about making a living; far away from all the tumult and nearer to the Lord. He thought that the idea had come to him when he was a little boy in Svir and heard: “The Gaon has died,” as if the Gaon himself, when he was traveling through Svir in Elijah's chariot, had said it to him “deep into his bones.”

All his life, while he was traveling around, Elye-Lazar bar Abba kept in mind whom to bring to the house in Ritan. Using charitable funds deposited in the Kaznatsheystner Bank in Svintsian, he provided enough to support them till past 120 years. He searched out a mute servant girl so as not to interrupt anyone's studies.

There were twelve rooms in the house, so Elye-Leyzer bar Abba decided that to set things in motion he had to find twelve students, like the twelve tribes of Israel. Almost everyone refused him; moving to the mountains of darkness in their old age, to the peasants' field where no synagogue had ever stood, and leaving their closest friends behind, was something for which they had no appetite.

Attracted to the house were *kabalists* who could cause worlds to be turned upside down through the secrets of the *kabala* and men who lived alone: widowers, divorced men, or old bachelors. Apparently when the Gaon died he implanted a holy spirit in the little heart of a boy so that when he grew up he would become very wealthy and in his old age would attract, with his wealth, the first signs of the Messiah's advent. Not with a rabbi, not with a courtyard, but with going up and studying.

And when the twelve rooms in the Ritan house were inhabited and he had settled the mute servant in Litvan, not far away, Elye-Leyzer bar Abba was gathered to his ancestors in Svir.

The eldest of the twelve old men in the house, whose name was Yisroel-Vile, was over ninety years old, had broad shoulders, and had a beard with a thousand little points, which reached to his hips. He ordered that no one should speak a sound on Sabbath because any words detracted. This was no old-age home in Ritan—from all the studying and fasting, they were lively and fast-moving.

In Sabbath conversations, at one Imperial a word, they reached the secrets of the Universe, secrets that delved into the highest mystical realms, the spheres¹¹⁴ and the heavens.

Anyone who constantly fasts and doesn't suffer from hunger succeeds, in the late evenings when no birds twitter and the owls hoot, in connecting himself with the pure souls of the Universe; some connect with the soul of Simeon bar Yokhai, some with Ar"i Hakodesh, some with Chaim Vital, and some with Yehuda-Leyb Pakhovitser.

Each of the old men studied and took care of his needs in his own room. Yisroel-Vile, the eldest, directed that only their fasting would be conducted jointly. They fasted for thirty-six days in a row, only drinking a glass of water in the mornings—two glasses on Sabbath and holidays. On the thirty-seventh day, the mute servant served them a dairy meal—they never touched fish or meat in the Ritan house.

The youngest student was a Jew in his seventies, Sender Sharkovshiner by name. He was unsuccessful in connecting with any distant souls during the nights. During the days, he doubted whether he was correctly interpreting difficult passages in the *kabala* texts. He was a Talmudist.

Sender Sharovshiner entered into a prolonged fast. If he couldn't reach the souls of *kabalists*, let alone angels, at least he would take the Angel of Death to task. What sort of world is it when the Angel of Death is murdering absolute saints, the best of the best of all Israel? Since they don't deserve that, he should by all means be brought to trial. He tossed and turned for many nights. He listened to the owls. On the thirty-fifth day of his fast, he touched the Angel of Death.

From conversations on Sabbath, he had come to realize that when a *kabalist* connects with a pure soul, it is a pure joy for him, but at the moment he realized that the Angel of Death was really there with him in his room in the "*kabala shul*," as they had started calling the house in Ritan, he grew mortally afraid. No small thing—alone with the Angel of Death, just the two of them!

114. The ten emanations from God, a *kabalistic* concept

It seemed to him that the Angel of Death was getting angry.

“Mister Jew! If there is nothing to say, don’t call me! Silence! Good-night!”

Sender bowed his head in shame. He squeezed his lips together..

That Sabbath he told his colleagues what had happened. They were fascinated. Sender Sharkovshiner had succeeded in bringing the Angel of Death down to his room in Ritan! They had no lack of questions to ask him. No little thing—calling the Angel of Death to Ritan!

Yisroel-Vile didn’t like the inquiry at all but he couldn’t prevent it, so he asked Sender Sharkovshiner to call the Angel of Death down again on the Sabbath and they would all sit around him silently.

And so it happened.

Among the twelve favored ones, from Yisroel Vile, the eldest, to Sender Sharovshiner, the youngest, there was a feeling of *hakores neshome*¹¹⁵. The Angel of Death was really among them in the room! They were seized by a terrible dread. No little thing—being in the presence of the Angel of Death!

They weren’t afraid that the Angel of Death might suddenly kill someone—they had no doubt that when one shakes off one’s mortal form, he just enters another stage of existence. On the day of one’s death, the soul flies free because it is purified.

Sender Sharkovshiner took heart. He was the first one to question the being in the room:

“Angel of Death! Where is the sense in the fact that a human being has to die? Does it make no difference whether his soul was purified while he was alive, whether he did good or was an evil person?”

“Mister Jew! It was better when you were keeping quiet!”

Each of the old men heard something like that, not in a real voice but in an oracular ‘voice’ of wordless speech, real and clear like that of the *kabala* masters of the past.

Sender bowed his head in shame. He compressed his lips. He had been trying to show off but he had revealed himself to be a fool: in the ‘*kabala shul*’ it was disgraceful that the youngest of the company should speak to the Angel of Death in an inappropriate manner.

A second student began to complain:

“If not forever, why not a little longer? If not everyone, why not those who are instruments of good?”

“All of that is none of my business!” they all sensed the response to-

115. The recognition of being in contact with the soul of a departed person

gether, clear as a wordless wind when Kislev is going on to Tevet.¹¹⁶

Seeing that a second student had also misspoken, Yisroel-Vile realized that the concept “where there is no man, you go and be that man” applied; it was necessary to speak ‘man to man.’ This was no Simeon bar Yokhai, no Yehuda-Leyb Pakhovitser. This was an angel whose mission--no one should know from it--was to kill people! So one should speak to the Angel of Death in his own manner. When Yisroel-Vile was getting ready to say something, he let people know with a loud hum. After the hum he was silent for a while, and after the silence, he started speaking:

“Thank you for coming down to Ritan. When we call you the Angel of Death, that’s shamefully impolite, but impoliteness grows out of ignorance. Great guest! Distinguished guest! What do they call you?”

“Now there’s a wise Jew! They call me Neshmiel. I liberate purified souls from their bodies. That’s my mission.”

“An important mission, even a blessed one! ‘Purified souls,’ you say? That suggests that other souls do not get liberated. That means that in those cases the Angel Neshmiel murders their bodies and souls together.”

“God forbid! What an idea!! In the case of most people who die, the matter is none of my business. My good man—when a body wears out, it’s worn out. After all, a person is just made for a few of your earthly years. My God! In one of them a heart gives out, and in another one, the blood vessels. Everyone different. A clock can live forever—if a main-spring breaks, you put in a new one. But when a body wears out, the doctor can only watch!”

“From which I conclude that in the case of most of the people who die, it’s not your work at all, Angel Neshmiel.”

“Right!”

“They die because their bodies have broken down, and that’s all there is to it.”

“And that’s all there is to it.”

“And what happens to their souls?”

“Many of them don’t have a real soul--just a stump, a little thing, a big nothing, you know.”

“So in them the stump dies with the body?”

“Anything can happen. After all, I can’t know anything that doesn’t fall within my mission. An angel has only one mission, after all!¹¹⁷ Only

116. In the winter

117. A concept adduced by the scriptural commentator Rashi

among humans does every arrogant person think he knows everything!”

“So let me understand. In any case in which there is a purified soul, the person dies by your hand, Angel Neshmiel?”

“Would that that were so! But it happens not infrequently that a body is affected by an illness; in such cases, the soul goes lost unless it can liberate itself by means unknown to me.”

“So that means that a soul, even a purified soul, is liberated by death solely and only when you kill the body properly, and if you don’t, if an illness interferes, it probably goes lost just as with an unpurified soul, just as with those who have no more than a stump of a soul?”

“Man, you do speak well!!”

“But wait a minute! If the soul of a human keeps getting purified and no illness has affected the body, why do you have to tear away the soul from the body if the person can still do good?”

“What I have to do, I have to do! After all, the body is just a machine made for a few years anyway. It will get worn out in any case. The essence of my mission, after all, is that I rescue the soul before illness can damage it! Humans think that I send illnesses—that’s just nonsense! My greatest enemy is an illness in a person with a purified soul. I am supposed to get involved when the soul is connected with a healthy body—it can’t be any other way.”

“Really? That’s the story? So that means, Angel Neshmiel, that when you liberate a soul from a body, the good deeds that the person would have been able to perform if you had liberated his soul a bit later nevertheless go lost?”

“My dear man—if anything at all goes lost, it’s very, very little. You can believe me—everything that a person hasn’t accomplished during the life of his body on Earth, he would most likely not accomplish if he hung around a little longer. It’s quite different, quite different: a purified soul gets very tired of being imprisoned in a body that keeps deteriorating; it calls to me, wanting to get out, and pleads for mercy, that I should liberate it. Liberate it! An angel can’t do everything! Here all of you together just recently called me down to Svir and Smargon—so I showed up in Svir, but in Smargon? Well, an angel can’t do everything.”

“It’s also likely that when the power of the divine match, the essential connection of the soul and the body, gets exhausted, the separation should take place even without an illness.”

“That, already, is up to you. I only know about my mission.”

“I understand. And how does the Angel Neshmiel kill?”

“Suddenly! I embrace the soul as a whole, gently and with love so as not to hurt it. Whenever it happens that a person is walking around as usual and is suddenly found dead, it’s probable that that is my work. When I liberate the soul, the body immediately stops.”

“So that means that all of your deaths are sudden but not all sudden deaths are yours.”

“You’ve got it! In case of sudden death, it’s most likely that it’s me, or if not me, then one of my people--sometimes I send an emissary from among human beings. When a person kills a person out of the blue, by piercing him with a spear, shooting him with a gun, or hacking him with an axe, it could be one of my emissaries.”

“I understand that this may not be your problem, Angel Neshmiel, but think of this: in the case of all the purified souls that you don’t liberate from their bodies yourself—for instance, if you haven’t had the chance to, or because an illness has developed, or for some other reason entirely—does there remain a possibility that other holy angels may liberate a soul in a different manner?”

“I don’t know.”

“May I ask a final question?”

“By all means.”

“Your mission, holy angel, consists of liberating purified souls from their bodies; at the same time, the body is killed immediately. Why suddenly? Why is that relevant?”

The room grew silent, as if the angel was thinking about the answer. The twelve *kabalists* continued to sit there in motionless exaltation at being connected to an angel. The minutes dragged on like hours, and when the Angel Neshmiel started to speak, he digressed somewhat.

“You do understand that I am the Lord’s emissary, but it’s not a simple mission. I do the most noble work, and everyone thinks I’m a murderer. And it’s not a pleasant thing for me, either. Here a man is enjoying his children, a book, a crust of bread, a glass of whiskey, and then I come on the scene and bring him sudden death. His near and dear ones think it’s the end of the world—they sit and wail. It’s a disgusting occupation!

“So I listen carefully. In most of them, it’s not just that there is no purified soul—there’s no soul that is capable of being purified. There’s just a little tiny thing, a stump.

“The seeds of a soul are not like the seeds in a field. Those thirst for a quiet splash of water, and then they sprout. The dew every day, the

rains—all that can be compared, in human language, to education, to everything a child learns gradually. The education can nourish so that the child grows up to be a scholar, but that has very little to do with the soul.

“A purified soul can come to be that way via one of two divine pathways: either it is a soul that has already been purified previously and enters the body of a person, for example into its mother’s womb, as a reincarnation, or, in contrast, it can be just a stump that ignites.

“And how does a stump ignite so it becomes a soul that is capable of being purified? Huh, Mister Jew? When one watches the sudden death of a person with a purified soul and that person is very close to him, right next to him, in the twinkling of an eye the soul suddenly bursts into flame and burns with the fires of purification.

“Incidentally, my friend, a sudden death is a way of securing both ignition and reincarnation—not the kind where a soul is reincarnated in a child in its mother’s womb, but a real reincarnation where a soul immediately jumps into a healthy body.

“In any case, you people don’t see anything on your world. It’s precisely in our world, in the spheres, where there is a tremendous flash of lightning. And then we celebrate that a soul has caught fire. Such a thing has apparently been seen by only one man, Ezekiel ben Buzi Hacohen, who described it explicitly: “An appearance of brightness, like the color of amber.”

“Now, Reb Yisroel-Vile, I’m going to return to my mission, because even as we’re talking, purified souls are going lost. Good night, my distant friend.”

“And a good-week, my nearby oracular voice.”

* * *

And the men of Ritan judged the Angel of Death to be entirely right, as right as can be. They had learned that one should die in the quarters of someone close. If his soul is sufficiently purified and the Angel Neshmiel suddenly liberates it, let it be a wick to ignite the soul of the close one at the same time, or itself enter the close one directly. One way or another, let there be an appearance of brightness, like the color of amber, in the heavens.

Of the twelve men of Ritan, eleven went back home, each to his own family and his own home. Only Yisroel-Vile, the eldest, continued to live, now all alone, in the house on the Ritan hill. It was easier for him

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to further purify himself by praying alone, far from people and tumult. It was easier for him to think that if he would only purify his soul it would someday enter a new person as a reincarnation, perhaps a thousand years from now.

The mute servant drew fresh water for him from the well every day. She gave him two more glasses on Sabbath, and once every thirty-seven days she prepared a dairy meal for him. He wrote everything down. He began with: "The history of Reb Eliyohu Eliezer bar Abraham Abba Hachohen, from the holy community of Svir in Lithuania." He reached "The words of the angel Neshmiel, the so-called Angel of Death, which he spoke in the house of the *kabalists* in Ritan."

When they called Reb Yisroel-Vile's soul up to the highest heavens over Lithuania, he was a hundred years old. They took his notebook to Vilna, to Romm¹¹⁸, where it was published under the title: *The Sayings of Ritan, Compiled by Reb Yisroel-Vile*. Some of the rabbis were very displeased by it, so they printed very few copies. Today it is a very rare book.

118. A famous publisher of the time

*Rabeynu*¹¹⁹ Gershom of Shumsk

When the Shumsk rabbi, Reb Gershom Ragbime, returned to Lithuania from Warsaw after a month and a half, he looked like a brand-new corpse that had rolled off the washing-board and was going for a last walk, from life to death. As soon as the rich carriage drove into Shumsk, they saw on his face the despair of those who know that they have lost.

Rabbi Gershom was in his seventies, tall and handsome and very strong. His long and mighty beard normally sparkled regally with red, gold, white, and shades of tan--beautiful like the rainbow of Salok. Now he descended from the carriage a broken man, and shuffled to his door with halting steps. He was emaciated. His exquisite rabbinical garments hung on him as if he were a skinny pauper whom someone somewhere had given the clothing of a deceased fat banker. The faded colors of his beard had joined into a single dirty color like that of freshly trodden earth on a muddy path.

It wasn't necessary to ask what had happened in Warsaw. Rabbi Gershom had divorced three wives because they had borne him only daughters, two from each of them. The fourth wife, who was a seventeen-year-old virgin when he married her at the age of fifty, remained barren. He had angrily scolded both the Shumsk *feldsher* and the best Vilna doctors when they told him the barrenness was apparently his fault. For a long time, the Vilna doctors had told him that in Warsaw there was a professor in these matters, by the name of Maximovich--wealthy men from all over Russia came to his sanatorium. If Maximovich couldn't help, nobody could. The professor did all the tests on the rabbi and gave him various potions to drink, pills to swallow, and ointments to rub in. When he said good-bye to the Lithuanian rabbi, he gave it to him straight:

119. "*Rabeynu*" means "our rabbi" or "our teacher." The term is normally applied by the community to a rabbi for whom they have great love and respect. The first to receive this appellation was Moses, who is universally referred to as "*Moyshe Rabeynu*" (Moses, our teacher.) The term is not normally applied by a rabbi to himself, and when Gershom does so after writing the new ruling (see later in this story), that would be considered an act of hubris

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“If my sanatorium is well known in Vilna, it’s not because I’m a charlatan. It pains me to tell you that you will not have children any more. You’re a man past seventy, and you have to accept that, I’m sure in your religion too, as God’s will.”

Those words were a mortal blow to him, and not just because of his masculine shame about diminished virility. Though he loved his six daughters very much, there was no way to explain to the Gentile doctor why this matter was so important to him.

* * *

The Shumsk family Ragbime’s pedigree ran all the way back to *Rabeynu* Gershom, the Light of the Diaspora. The family name was an acronym for Rabbi Gershom ben Yehuda, the Light of the Diaspora. Nearly nine hundred years earlier, in the year 4772¹²⁰, *Rabeynu* Gershom’s only son had failed the great test and had allowed himself to be converted in Mainz, out of terrible necessity; he didn’t get the chance to return to Judaism before he died. But *Rabeynu* Gershom, the Light of the Diaspora, nevertheless fulfilled the rites of mourning, that much the Or Zaru¹²¹ knew about and mentioned in his writings: *Rabeynu* Gershom sat *shiva* for two weeks, one for his son’s body and one for his soul.

This only son left three converted orphan sons, grandsons of *Rabeynu* Gershom, the Light of the Diaspora. When *Rabeynu* Gershom was called to Heaven, in the year 4788¹²², still in the fifth millenium¹²³, all three of them openly returned to Judaism. They agreed among themselves that they would set out for distant parts and say good-bye to one another forever. The time was a time of evil decrees, and they consoled themselves with the thought that the Merciful One would have mercy on at least one of their families. The eldest son, Anshel, sailed to Palestine on a ship, but was drowned on the way. The second son, Gabriel, lived out his life in a village not far from Mainz, but his grandchildren died during an epidemic. The youngest son, Zalmen, while still a young man took the manuscripts his grandfather had left and traveled to the east, to Rotenburg. There he was a successful merchant and there he found a bride, a relative, descended from an uncle of *Rabeynu* Gershom’s. Many sons and daughters were born to him.

120. By the Jewish calendar—equivalent to 1012 C.E.

121. Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, one of the greatest rabbis of the Middle Ages

122. Equivalent to 1028 C.E.

123. The fifth millennium of the Jewish calendar ended in the year 5000, equivalent to 1238 C.E.

The years turned into generations. About two hundred years later, a once-in-a-generation genius was born to the Rotenburg family. His name was Tankhum, of the house of Ragbime. He was considered the number one young man in the Rotenburg Maharam's¹²⁴ new yeshiva, which the Maharam had founded with the gold donated by wealthy men of the Ragbime family so it would sparkle with the beauty of the Torah. With great affection, the Maharam made the young genius, descended from *Rabeynu Gershom* and his converted son, his protégé. The Maharam quoted about him the passage from the prophet Amos: "A log rescued from the conflagration."

When Tankhum had finished studying for twelve years, the Maharam gave him "*yodn, yodn*,"¹²⁵ a sack containing a hundred gold nuggets from the gold that the wealthy men from the Ragbime family had donated for the Torah, a splendid carriage with two white horses, and a map on which was marked out, with bright blue ink, a long road to somewhere in the East. The Maharam directed him to set out with his family, to take along *Rabeynu Gershom's* manuscripts, which the family had guarded religiously all those years, and to travel the marked-out road till he came to a round palace in a forest. There he was to buy the palace and erect an eternal monument to *Rabeynu Gershom* and establish a village, which he was to call *Shum* as an eternal remembrance of the Shum communities of *Rabeynu Gershom*: Shpira, Vermeyzo, and Magentso.¹²⁶

Along dusty, sandy roads and through fearsome forests in which wolves reigned and forest brigands lurked, Tankhum traveled the road that the Maharam had marked out. A holy spirit guarded the carriage against all evils. When Tankhum finally espied a big, round palace in the forest, he submissively approached the Lithuanian prince who lived there, gave him several splendid presents, and asked whether he would be willing to sell the castle for pure gold. The prince asked to look at the gold. Tankhum had prepared a separate sack in which there were twenty-three gold nuggets. The nobleman immediately realized that with that much gold he could buy a larger palace, so he took the sack and gave the round palace and the surrounding forest to the weird stranger who had come to him unexpectedly from a distant land.

Tankhum of Rotenburg, as they called him, named the palace and the forest "*Shum*," as the Maharam had directed. Using other gold nuggets,

124. An acronym for Rabbi Mayer ben Borukh, a 13th century sage

125. An especially high grade of ordination

126. In Yiddish, the first letters of the names of the three communities form the acronym Shum

he had trees chopped down, hired peasants, and sowed the virgin fields with all sorts of good things to provide future nourishment till the Messiah came and established his glorious realm in the land of Israel. Together with his sons, Tankhum studied Torah. The son who was the best student he didn't allow to go into trade—he taught him day and night till he ordained him at the age of forty.

That was the way things continued for generations among the Ragbimes in the round palace. In every generation, the rabbi of Shumsk chose from among his sons the one who was the best student of Torah, taught him to the age of forty, and then ordained him. In the earliest times, they arranged marriages with people from far away. Later on, when Lithuania became a Torah center and people considered its nearby capital¹²⁷ “the Jerusalem of Lithuania,” they found sons-in-law and daughters-in-law in the vicinity. Jews and Gentiles came to Shumsk, as they had begun to call the village that had grown up around the round palace, and they lived together in peace: on one side, Dainovik developed, and on the other side, Kalvl. When they extended the Ostrovetz road through Shumsk, things went better and better for its people.

The Vilna rabbis were less than enthusiastic about the whole Shumsk business, in part because the Ragbimes stuck to ancient, outmoded customs: they put their *tfiln* on with the slit the other way around¹²⁸, and when a girl was born, they held a *holekraysh* ceremony.¹²⁹ The Ragbimes, in turn, didn't have a high opinion about the Lithuanian rabbis, not even the Gaon himself, and they never set foot in any of the Lithuanian yeshivas.

Over the centuries, the intelligence of the Ragbimes gradually declined, probably from constantly sticking to their own ways. People said that the teachers of Talmud not far away in Sadinishek and Satrinek were better teachers than the rabbis of Shumsk. In order to avoid bringing shame upon themselves, the rabbis of Shumsk didn't issue any rulings about Torah law and didn't respond to religious questions, not even about whether a pot was kosher. When necessary, they sent people elsewhere—there were plenty of places to send them. They claimed that their mission was Torah for Torah's sake, to guard the house of *Rabeynu Gershom*, the Light of the Diaspora, not to deal with local rabbinical matters. Shumsk was the only village in those parts where there was a rabbi but no synagogue. When someone pointed out something broken,

127. Vilna

128. A medieval practice differing from the modern standard practice

129. A naming ceremony that had been retained in Western Europe but abandoned in Eastern Europe

a doorknob without a door, people used to say: “Like the rabbinical affairs in Shumsk.”

More than once, strict Vilna rabbis wanted to question the rabbis of Shumsk to make sure that the rabbinical status that was passed from father to son there hadn’t deteriorated. Others threatened to excommunicate them for improper rabbinical procedures. But their defenders always prevailed. First of all, the rabbis of Shumsk never responded to religious questions, didn’t liberate any *agunas*, and didn’t accept any requests for a rabbinical court proceeding. Secondly, every rabbi of Shumsk really sat at the Torah with his most learned son—they were no ignoramuses. But the silence of the Vilna rabbis was actually due to a third reason: the Ragbimes possessed the manuscripts of *Rabeynu Gershom*, the Light of the Diaspora. They had guarded them faithfully from governmental decrees, conflagrations, and panics for nearly nine hundred years, from Mainz to Rotenburg and from Rotenburg to Shumsk. Whenever there was an erasure in a copy of the Talmud, or some twisted phrase that looked like an error in a holy book, to say nothing of all the mistakes in printed versions of the *Shas*, the only place to straighten things out was in Shumsk. Scholars came to Shumsk from all over the Pale¹³⁰ and submissively asked for access to *Rabeynu Gershom’s* Talmuds. They were received hospitably, with *teyglekh* and tea, and were invited to go up to the highest floor in the rabbinical courthouse. The guests would be taken up the narrow, twisting staircase that closely followed the curve of the round stone walls; they would hold onto the marble banister that was supported by an endless chain and oaken posts carved with lion-cubs and giants. Small, round windows overlooked fields, villages, and forests in all directions. More than one scholar who went to Shumsk thought, as he was creeping up the staircase, that he was climbing up to Heaven.

Finally they would reach the courtroom where they answered no religious questions and settled no quarrels, the place where every rabbi of Shumsk had studied Torah with his sons. The rabbinical guests were not used to creeping up so high on a staircase—they would be gasping from the exertion. But in no more than a moment, the heavy breathing would be transformed into a mixture of wonderment and exaltation as soon as they saw the golden parchment manuscripts that *Rabeynu Gershom* had arranged so there would forever be an accurate Talmud and not one

130. The Pale of Settlement: the area of the Russian Empire where Jews were permitted to live, which included parts of Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, White Russia, Russia, and Ukraine

that was full of errors. The letters were in old-Germanic style, something like Yiddish letters. The black ink shone with a shine that could not be found in any new manuscript. The parchment smelled of holiness, like the best spices that King Solomon brought to the land of Israel from distant lands. Here and there the sheets were sprinkled with tiny holes that had been bored by ancient little worms. In manuscripts and in books, rabbinic authors knew to write what Rabeynu Gershom himself had determined was the correct text--they would use the expression: "in the ancient manuscripts at Shumsk."

* * *

The house of *Rabeynu* Gershom had remained standing for about seven hundred years from the time that Tankhum of Rotenburg bought the round palace with the gold nuggets that the Maharam had given him. Each rabbi of Shumsk had had at least one son who was worthy of becoming the new rabbi. Suddenly, all the good years had come to such an ugly end! Rabbi Gershom's three wives had borne him only daughters, and with the fourth wife, a healthy young woman, he, at King David's age, was infertile. The biggest professor in Warsaw hadn't been able to do anything for him.

When Rabbi Gershom returned from Warsaw, he barely said hello to his wife, whose name was Shprintse. He went right up to the highest part of the courthouse and asked the servant girl to make a bed for him there. He no longer slept with his wife. Everything he needed for his meals and his bodily needs he arranged for somewhere up there in the high rooms. For weeks he didn't come down.

In Shumsk, people started saying that the rabbi had fallen into such a severe depression that he had gone out of his mind. In the vicinity, they started referring to him as "the attic in Shumsk."¹³¹ His wife and daughters and sons-in law remained silent when people asked them how the hidden one was doing—they didn't want to encourage any nasty gossip about the family. Besides, they themselves didn't know how he was doing. Shprintse was a great beauty, but anguish made her smooth face twitch. She neither had a husband nor was she divorced; she was not a widow and not even an agunah. She hardly went outside; it seemed to her that everyone wanted only to say to her: "Golddigger! You got what was coming to you!"

131. Where his hideaway was

Rabbi Gershom slept for only a few hours a day, an hour here and an hour there. He was plagued day and night by the thought that he had brought the house of Rabeynu Gershom to such a dismal end. Woe, woe—a rabbi of Shumsk, and one named Gershom to boot, for the first time in seven hundred years couldn't bring a single boy into the world! A disgrace for his ancestors and a disgrace for the generations as yet unborn!

A month passed, and Rabbi Gershom began to consider calmly whether there wasn't some solution after all. For hours at a time, he paced the length and breadth of his courtroom, walking near the outer walls. Downstairs, the children heard his footsteps. They felt better—at least he wasn't just sitting and weeping for days on end. The servant girl who took care of his daily needs told Shprintse that God was a father and that her husband was gradually coming around to himself—she just had to be patient.

Late one night, Rabbi Gershom got hold of himself. His courtroom was lit by gigantic candles; the tallow was dripping down onto the silver candlesticks and the copper pans. The notion came to him to skip a generation and start teaching a chosen grandchild, but he realized immediately that it was not a good idea—the grandchild, after all, was a son of a father who had come into the family and was not of the seed of *Rabeynu Gershom*.

He paced around and around in the round courtroom at the top of the big Shumsk palace, where he had locked himself into a bright, holy prison, far from material things, surrounded by the Talmuds of *Rabeynu Gershom*, the Light of the Diaspora, and by ancient holy books with leather, wooden, or canvas bindings. He started to think less and less about himself and his unborn son and more and more about *Rabeynu Gershom*, the Light of the Diaspora, himself. His name had to resound, and not only in Shumsk--it had to resound forever, not only now but nine hundred years from now as well, just as they remember everywhere the halakhic rulings from the Shum cities. That was when they had designated him the new Leader of the Diaspora in Germany--no more sending questions halfway around the world, to who knows where on the other side of the Sambatyon.

The simpler the truth, the deeper the secret. After all, *Rabeynu Gershom* hadn't known that most of his holy books would go lost, and that people would remember only: "It is not permitted to marry two wives." But you know what? The Maharit had cited the Rashbo to the effect that

Rabeynu Gershom's prohibition was valid only till the end of the Fifth Millennium, which meant that it had now been completely null and void for nearly seven hundred years. Apparently, they had had to issue the ruling to quiet the local Gentile population of the time. Now that was no longer relevant—the peasants of Shumsk wouldn't care if a Jew married two wives, or nine wives for that matter. On the contrary, they would seize on that idea for themselves without any prompting. If *Rabeynu* Gershom, the Light of the Diaspora, had known that his ruling would lead his own family to its downfall, he wouldn't have issued it under any circumstances. But it wasn't only a question of pedigree—one can only imagine how many Jews there would be in the world if Jews could marry more than one wife. That it was all right for King Solomon to do so but it was forbidden for ordinary men was illogical. That people were still obeying a ruling nearly seven hundred years after it was no longer valid according to the one who issued it, was not honoring the issuer; on the contrary—in this era, it would be a *mitsve* to replace the old ruling with a new one that returned things to the way they had been. In even less than a hundred years, the Jews would become a substantial nation in the Pale—nobody would bother them after that. A poor Jew wouldn't marry two wives anyway, but those who could afford to raise all those children properly should not have stumbling blocks placed in their way. How many scholars, how many geniuses, how many saints, what kind of-----

It took less than an hour for the matter to become as clear as clear could be to Rabbi Gershom. For the first time since he had returned from Warsaw, he laughed to himself. He slapped himself on the forehead good-humoredly and pulled on his beard-of-many-colors for having been such a fool all his life and never straightening the matter out. Apparently only when practicing meditation in a room filled with the Divine Spirit, alone with the Talmud volumes that *Rabeynu* Gershom had arranged for posterity, could he become enlightened with such clarity, up there in the courtroom of the round Shumsk palace. If only he had reached this conclusion as a young man, he would have had sons, but it was too late now. On the other hand, there are no accidents, including his existence in the world and his not having any sons—everything comes from the hand of God. Only now did he correctly understand the end result of it all. Furthermore, he made a calculation that *Rabeynu* Gershom's old ruling had expired just when Tankhum of Rotenburg bought the palace—what other evidence did one need? There remained only to proceed for the sake of all Israel and the house of *Rabeynu* Gershom.

Slowly and delicately, Rabbi Gershom cut out an empty page that had been bound at the end of one of the ancient holy books, and on it he wrote his ruling, briefly and to the point, in the manner of all rulings: “The prohibition that *Rabeynu Gershom of Mainz*, the Light of the Diaspora, issued—that it is not permitted to marry two wives—was issued for the period till the end of the fifth millennium. Now it is permitted, and the more the better. This is the ruling of Rabbi Gershom of Shumsk, in Lithuania, a descendant of *Rabeynu Gershom*, the Light of the Diaspora.”

Rabbi Gershom immediately ran downstairs at his old pace, three or four steps at a time. It was late at night, but the whole palace was awakened in the blink of an eye by the joyful jumping down from above, a sign that the Rabbi of Shumsk had come out of his depression and was now returning to his old self. When he had jumped all the way to the great hall below, they began to hear rustling and whisperings. There was a squeak of the mighty oaken doors on which were carvings of a horse and carriage and the coat-of-arms of the Lithuanian prince who had sold the palace to Reb Tankhum of Rotenburg for twenty-three nuggets of gold nearly seven hundred years earlier.

The daughters and their husbands and children hastily threw some clothes on. They walked around with candles till the servant-girl lit the kerosene lamps. Shprintse was the last one to come in. She wasn't as happy as the others—a wife senses that things are not the way they should be. Nevertheless, she became filled with hope when she saw her husband. It seemed to her that he looked almost like his old self, before he had gone to see Professor Maximovich. Rabbi Gershom was standing as straight as an oak-tree and was glowing with firm self-confidence.

“Shprintse, my dear!!”

“Oy! Gershke! I thought I'd never see you alive again!”

“What are you talking about?! I was busy with the Torah.”

“Let it be only for the best. Well? It's the middle of the night—go to bed! You've been locked up upstairs long enough!”

“Soon, Shprintse, soon. You'll always be my first wife, the most beloved one!”

“Beloved, not beloved—I don't know, but I won't be your first wife! After all, I'm your fourth wife, more's the pity!”

“Silly—I'm talking about the future—the future! You'll remain my wife and I'll marry another wife, maybe two more wives, or maybe even three! I have to be the first one to fulfill the new ruling by the new *Ra-*

beynu Gershom, *Rabeynu* Gershom of Shumsk! People don't realize that the old ruling was issued almost seven hundred years ago!"

"Tra-la-la-la on your head! We have to take him to the insane asylum in Vilna! Marry whomever you wish, but give me a divorce! A divorce!! I've suffered enough from your craziness about your pedigree! Better the pedigree of a dog! A cat! An otter! Woe is me!"

Shprintse fainted. The servant-girl ran to revive her. Rabbi Gershom was furious at her outburst—he yelled that everyone should go to bed.

In the morning, Shprintse caught a carriage to Vilna. She went to the house of her sister, who had married a Jew of German background. The two sisters went to the Great Synagogue and ran up to the first rabbi they saw. They told him what had happened in Shumsk. The rabbi was upset, and immediately took them to the *va'ad harabonim*.¹³²

It didn't take long till they called the rabbi of Shumsk to come to the *va'ad*. He neither came nor answered. Meanwhile, he arranged a marriage with a second wife, a poor orphan girl from Bolnik. He lived with her in the round Shumsk palace, from which all the children and the servant-girl had fled as if from a conflagration. People thought that the rabbi had simply gone mad as a consequence of all his troubles.

The Vilna rabbis didn't just let it go--they immediately pronounced *kheyrem*¹³³ on Rabbi Gershom, had announcements printed, and sent a courier with a horse and wagon to paste the announcements on the doors of the synagogues in all the villages around Shumsk. The rabbi of Shumsk paid no attention whatsoever to all that.

A year passed and Rabbi Gershom married again, also with an orphan girl, from the village of Sviransk. She believed him when he said it was permitted--what more do you need than that a rabbi said it was permitted? Shortly after that, he married a third wife, also a village orphan girl, from Kurkul, near Svir. People said he had inveigled an acquaintance of his, a man who helped out in the Vilna orphan asylum, into giving him a list of poor Jewish orphan-girls in the province. He told all three wives, over and over again, that they were together with him to fulfill the greatest possible *mitsve*.

No more children were born to Rabbi Gershom, but to him the matter of "his own" was now no longer the issue. The main thing was that in the end, in a hundred years or so, the new ruling by *Rabeynu* Gershom of Shumsk, which would give the people of Israel a remedy for all the per-

132. Council of rabbis

133. Excommunication

secutions and evil decrees, a path to the eternal survival of Israel, would resound everywhere.

Rabbi Gershom now dealt only with Gentiles, and he also spoke only to Gentiles. The Jews in the area started calling him ‘the Gentile rabbi.’ The Vilna excommunication was not lifted. When Rabbi Gershom died, in his eighties, there was no funeral—the three wives buried him near the round palace and that same day they disappeared into thin air.

A wealthy scholar from Vilna, an old Jew who had been close to the most distinguished rabbis, came to Shumsk, to the round palace, together with Rabbi Gershom’s six daughters and their husbands and two Russian policemen. An old Christian who had remained there as a guardian didn’t put up any resistance—he crossed himself and left without being forced. The heirs immediately arranged to have all the manuscripts and holy books that were in the courtroom transferred to a room in the Great Synagogue in Vilna.

On Rabbi Gershom’s table, the scholar immediately saw the single page with the ruling that permitted marriage with more than one wife. The words were overwritten, in Rabbi Gershom’s handwriting, with all kinds of blessings in the name of God—this was Rabbi Gershom’s way of ensuring that the sheet wouldn’t be thrown away or torn up after his death. The scholar saw a stone house being built nearby, so he gave the paper to the mason, who immediately cemented it between the bricks in a wall. And there it lies to the present day.

The rich scholar from Vilna, together with Rabbi Gershom’s heirs, sent workers to raze the round palace of Shumsk to the ground, stone by stone. The stones were then ground into sand. No sign remained of the great round palace that Tankhum of Rotenburg had bought for twenty-three gold nuggets.

Noah-Anshel From the Next World

On the Marran¹³⁴ mountain, near Palush, which is between Shulin and Ignalina, there was a small cottage. In the cottage lived an old anchorite¹³⁵ named Noah-Anshel. He ate fruit from the trees in his little garden on the mountain and drank the pure water from the little springs whose water flowed down the mountain, first to the peasant village of Marran below and then to Jewish Palush, about two viorsts farther on.

Christians from Marran brought Noah-Anshel logs to heat his oven, kindling-wood to light his cottage at night, and occasionally some milk and honey. What he paid them with, no one knows. Besides, the people in Marran were not just ordinary peasants—on Friday evenings they lit candles. True, it was long after sunset. Nevertheless. In those parts, people said that these were converted Jews who had emigrated from Spain in the days of the Expulsion, some five hundred years earlier in the year 1491, about which the prophet Nathan had said: “The Lord is a jealous God and avenging.” The name people gave them, Marranos, is derived from the name of their village in Lithuania.

In the summertime, the Jews of Palush used to go to refresh themselves at Lakes Lushe and Dringe, on the road to Antalkon. Along the way, in Marran, they would see Noah-Anshel on the mountain from time to time. He wore a ‘Jewish hat’ with a broad brim, a black vest, and patched trousers. His flannel shirt had a pattern of blue checks. His white beard was not too long, but it was thick and shiny, like three moons lying on top of one another, like a cloud in Sivan.

One doesn’t live forever. On a frosty day in Shvat, which is the Angel of Death’s favorite month, a Christian, one of the Marran Christians, came running into Palush and announced to the Jews in the synagogue court-

134. As the second paragraph of the story makes clear, this word is a (pejorative name applied to the Jews of Spain who were forced to convert during the Inquisition but remained covertly Jewish. The name for this group in Yiddish is “maran,” and in English and Spanish it is “marrano”

135. One who renounces the world to live in seclusion, usually for religious reasons

yard, in a choked-up voice, that the ‘rabbi’ on the Marran mountain had died. The day before, he had been walking around and now he was dead. That’s how it was with Christians and that’s how it was with Jews.

There was no cemetery in Palush at that time, so they called the burial society from Ignalina, which was not far away. They didn’t know his father’s name, so on the small headstone they inscribed: “Here lies the scholar Noah-Anshel” and the date of death, and that was all.

* * *

People forgot Noah Anshel. Other people from Marran lived in his cottage. They gave his books to the synagogue in Palush. Finally the cottage collapsed in a windstorm. Only Kalmanezzer, the scribe of Palush, who kept the town record-book, had recorded the date of his death.

On the seventh anniversary of that date, in the middle of the day, a stranger arrived in the Palush synagogue. His face was the face of Noah-Anshel and his walk was the walk of Noah-Anshel. People began whispering over their open Talmuds:

“We saw that man on the Marran mountain, but from afar everyone looks alike—‘all stars look alike.’ An old recluse comes to our synagogue and we should expect the coming of the Messiah?! There would be no justice in the world!”

“Yes--really no justice. But maybe the Messiah got tired of delaying endlessly.”

“Don’t be silly!”

“Why should we just talk about it when we can ask him? Mister Jew! Welcome! Where do you come from?”

“From Marran. Don’t you know Mount Marran? It’s not far at all!”

Everyone looked up, and there were audible gasps.

“What is your name?”

“My name is Noah Anshel bar Leyzrosher. Could I take a look at a Talmud in your town of Palush? My old books must be here.”

Loud gasping ensued.

“Let it be Reb Noah-Anshel bar Leyzrosher, in good health!” the *shames* answered him like a close friend, and promptly explained to him what all the gasping was about. “The thing is this, Reb Noah Anshel bar Leyzroshr: seven years ago, and I think today is precisely the anniversary, the thing is that a person, may you live long, who looked exactly like you died. Could he have been a relative of yours? He lived in a cottage on

the Marran mountain, and his name, too, was Noah-Anshel; we didn't know his father's name, so that's what we inscribed on his headstone. He's buried in the Ignalina cemetery, may he be a good pleader for us, a good pleader—“

“That's me! I've come down from the next world on a mission.”

Panic broke out in the synagogue. People went out into the street to tell everyone what had happened. A woman in the marketplace started yelling at the top of her lungs:

“A demon, a demon is here in the city! We have to drive him away by blowing the *shofar*!”

Khaye-Sarah the seamstress was considered the smartest person in Palush. She and her lady-friends came into the synagogue and started taking the guest to task:

“Not a dead man and not a demon! He's a charlatan! A rogue! Perhaps a cousin or he could even be a twin brother—who knows!? If he wants to dance with dead men, let him go to Glubok! They believe everything in Glubok! They even have religious cats. If he doesn't like Glubok, let him go to Warsaw! There they believe absolutely everything plus! Everything! What sort of nonsensical excitement is this? ‘He didn't die and he didn't rise!’”¹³⁶

Noah-Anshel started speaking in a still, small voice:

“Worthy lady, I beg forgiveness from you and from all of Palush if I've wronged anyone. I was asked where I came from and I answered truthfully. I would only ask you what the prophet Samuel asked the re-incarnated one: ‘Whose ox have I stolen? Whose ass have I stolen? From whom have I stolen? From whom?’”¹³⁷

There was no rabbi in Palush at that time. The rabbi of Ignalina used to walk over on the Sabbath—there was an *eruv*¹³⁸—and give his sermon in Palush. Shmiye the *dayen*¹³⁹ was considered the leader of the students in the house of study. Everyone looked at him—what do we do now? The *dayen* got angry, and not at Noah-Anshel:

“A Jew comes to the city, sits down in the house of study without

136. A variant of the Yiddish expression: “*nisht geshtoygn un nisht gefloygn*” (he didn't rise and he didn't fly) which is applied to something the speaker considers complete nonsense. Originally, the expression refers to Jesus, and it constitutes a denial of his resurrection

137. In brief idiomatic English, one might say: “Whose ox have I gored?”

138. A rabbinically sanctioned extended area within which one could walk on a Sabbath
139. “Judge”—a rabbi's assistant charged with judging minor disputes—not a civil or criminal judge

making a fuss and starts to study, and they start bothering him about dead people! Let him alone! Open your books! Study! This is a house of study, not a fair! Ladies—outside you can talk about anything you like, but this is a house of study, a house of study!”

They listened to Shmiye’s words and took a deep breath—someone had kept a cool head and had told them to continue. They opened their Talmuds, but their eyes twisted with the effort of trying to look at both the Talmud and Noah-Anshel at the same time. And Noah-Anshel studied furiously.

Shmiye the *dayen*, who was a fire-and-brimstone *misnagid*, had asked what all the fuss was about, but even as he was speaking, he had been thinking about how to get to the bottom of the matter. He went out of the synagogue and caught a wagon to Ignalina. There he went to the cemetery and searched till he found the gravedigger. When he saw him, he asked him to come back with him to Palush.

“Reb Shmiye *dayen*! Jews are dying in sin—there’s work to do here! What will happen if I go to Palush, hah?”

“It’s a matter of life and death!”

“All right—if the Palush *dayen* says it’s a matter of life and death, I’ll go. Let’s go!”

Almost all of Palush was assembled in the synagogue courtyard. Shmiye *dayen* went into the synagogue. The Talmuds had remained open, but the Jews were sitting there, frozen. Only Noah-Anshel was really studying, because he was a man who knew very well how time keeps ticking, knew very well how foolish it was to waste it.

With a delicate, *dayen*-like wave of his hand, Shmiye called Noah-Anshel over to him. The eyes of all the Jews there followed every one of Noah-Anshel’s expressions—they had never seen a man from the next world in Palush.

Then Noah-Anshel got the urge to creep back up the Marran mountain, so the three of them, Reb Shmiye, the Palush *dayen*; the gravedigger from Ignalina; and Noah-Anshel from “Mount Marran,” as he called the mountain; all went to Marran. All Palush followed them: “the Exodus from Palush,” someone said snidely, half-laughing as if to soften the foolish remark.

Along the way only Khaye-Sarah spoke aloud:

“Fools! They don’t see that this is a charlatan! What will they find in Marran among the peasants, Hah?! What an idea! If they really believe that this is someone who has risen from the grave, then where is the joy that the Messiah is about to come? This is like one of Sabbetai Tsvi’s stories.”

The wintry sun warmed the people of Palush as they walked. When they got to Marran, the locals there ran up to them. Seeing Noah-Anshel, they started yelling as loud as they could: “Jesus and Mary!” while tearing their hair out. A second Jew had risen from the grave, not three days but a full seven years after his death! Not in Jerusalem but in Marran!

The Ignalina gravedigger suddenly remembered that when he buried the dead man from the Marran mountain, there had been a scar in the shape of three twigs below the left elbow, so he asked Noah-Anshel: “Please don’t take offense, but could you roll up your left sleeve?”

Noah-Anshel took off his coat and rolled up the left sleeve of his flannel shirt. Seeing the twig-shaped scar, the gravedigger started howling loudly:

“Woe is me! And he’s walking around! The dead man is walking around! A demon! A devil!”

The gravedigger fainted dead away on the snow. His hair was standing on end like closely cropped grass. The men of Marran quickly brought whiskey and smelling-salts. They unbuttoned his collar and poured the whiskey into his mouth. He started coughing. They laid him on a sleigh and quickly drove him to the Palush *feldsher*.

The *feldsher* burst out laughing:

“All his life he’s dealt with corpses, and today of all days he decides to get frightened! Tsk, tsk, tsk. This guy needs to get the steam treatment!¹⁴⁰ That’s something my wife takes care of.”

He sat the patient on the examining chair and after a few moments his wife came running with a pot of hot water that was green from the healing herbs that she had boiled in the water. She placed the pot on a little table next to him so the steam would rise into his nostrils and quickly set a few sugar cubes on fire in a tin pan on the floor. She then draped a big white sheet over everything: the man, the pot with the hot green water, and the pan with the burning sugar. In the blink of an eye, the man threw the sheet off and said he was cured of his fright. The *feldsher*’s wife was paid her fee for healing him and they took him home.

140. Exposure to steam—a common treatment for getting rid of demons or paranoid delusions

* * *

Meanwhile a messianic fervor had developed in Marran among both the Marran Christians and the Palush Jews. Whether it was Moshiakh ben Yoysef or Moshiakh ben Dovid or Jesus Christ again, the vision before their eyes was a vision of the Holy of Holies.

Noah-Anshel went up the Marran mountain. The mob followed him. As if from a yearning desire, he started to pray *minkhe* there in the little garden where he had prayed alone with God all those years. He started saying *ashrei*, not with a cantorial voice but with a soft, heavenly voice. On the mountain, there was such silence that people could hear every word. After every *Amen* that the Jews said, the Christians emulated it with their own *Amen*, as if the Jews from neighboring Palush were fortunately acting as their representatives to the Almighty on the day when the seven-years-dead Noah-Anshel had returned to Marran.

* * *

They all went back to the courtyard of the Palush synagogue. Shmiye *dayen* went inside. He let in Noah-Anshel and the Jews that used to study there every day between *minkhe* and *mayrev*, but nobody else.

The first question was asked by a little Jew with a red beard and a flat head:

“Don’t take offense, Reb Noah-Anshel, but were you really in the next world?”

“Where else—in Molodetshne?¹⁴¹”

“Then did you eat of the ox¹⁴² and the Leviathan?”¹⁴³

“May you live and be well! Those are all fairy tales! In the next world, we don’t eat! We are pure spirit! The soul doesn’t bother with such trifles! This world, after all, is a place of torment and plague—here you get toothaches and here you speak nonsense.”

“What are you saying?! After all, Reb Yehuda quotes Rav in the chapter *The Seller*! Don’t you in the next world know about *Bava Basra*?¹⁴⁴ A fine how-do-you-do! The Almighty denounced the memory of the Leviathan, slaughtered the creature, and salted it as a meal for the saints in the next world!”

141. A small, rather insignificant village in White Russia

142. Legendary gigantic animal prepared as food for the saints in the next world

143. Legendary gigantic whale-like fish prepared as food for the saints in the next world

144. A Talmudic *trastate*

The City in the Moonlight

“You should live and be well! First of all, never mind what he said—even a Torah sage can make a mistake! Besides, the book is talking to humans in the language of fables, but it’s not literally so.”

A second Jew began to speak. He was dark, had a beard that was black as coal, and was as thin as a reed:

“Reb Noah-Anshel! What do you do all day there in the next world?”

“But there’s no day or night there!”

“So what do you do without days or nights?”

“What do we do, what do we do? The soul doesn’t do anything, it just is. Understand that, absorb it. It understands. It thinks. Its thought is pure thought, bright understanding, eternal joy.”

An old scholar was puttering over his books of secret knowledge, and wanted to know just one thing:

“Do reincarnations exist?”

“They exist.”

* * *

Shmiye began asking his questions energetically, as if he were afraid that the window of opportunity wouldn’t remain open very long:

“Noah-Anshel bar Leyzrosher! You testify that the soul in the next world understands, absorbs, comprehends--is it not capable of pleading for the good, accomplishing something for the benefit of the world?”

“Capable, not capable--the soul is indifferent to it! Except once in a very long while! Why should it care when everything is going well for it? To give an example in your language: if a man is removed from a dark, dusty cave, a cave in which reptiles and other ugly creatures are crawling around, and has been rewarded with well-being in the sunny air above, would he go back down into the cave? Hah?”

“In that case, is there no compassion? With all the suffering here in this world—“

“I can see that wasting more time with all of you makes no sense. Everything is frittered away among you anyway! When you fix things, you just make them worse!”

“Reb Noah-Anshel! ‘All Jews own part of the next world!’”

“What sort of nonsense are you spouting?! Of a hundred people that die, ninety-nine lie in the ground and rot. Only the highest souls get to the next world.”

“Reb Noah-Anshel bar Leyzrosher! Of all the people of Palush who have died, didn’t any get to the next world?”

“None.”

“Rabbi Reb Abraham Mayer, of blessed memory, surely?”

“Not there.”

“The scholar Reb Yoshe Binyomen, of blessed—“

“Not there.”

“The synagogue President Reb Lyokem Moyshe, of blessed—“

“Not there.”

“So who from Palush did get there?”

“Since there has been a Palush in the world, three Jews altogether (I count myself a man from Marran): the *kabalist* Reb Areleybe; the *reb-betsin* Gitele, who was the director of the girls’ *kheyder* here; and Khayke the pauper, who used to go around healing sick hens.”

“And no one else?”

“And no one else.”

“And they were all saints?”

“Who’s talking about saints? They devoted themselves only to the beautiful things: beauty and exaltation—not to allow any stain on their souls.”

“And they don’t care to come down here either?”

“What for? Boring as boring can be! Nothing can be more boring than being with you people here. That’s why the world is an antechamber, a vestibule.”

* * *

People started coming into the synagogue for *mayrev*. They prayed with especial fervor till the end of *shmone esre*. Immediately after the *amidah*, a tumult developed—Noah-Anshel was gone! It was a moonlit night, so they searched every corner of Palush. A few men went out on the road to Marran and a larger group went to the grave in the Ignalina cemetery. The headstone, which was tiny, had long been slightly bent over. Long icicles were hanging like spears from its diagonal top. They found no trace of Noah-Anshel anywhere.

* * *

The people of Palush talked about Noah-Anshel for many years. On his death-anniversary, they went to the Ignalina cemetery. Marran Christians also came to the grave every year, on the anniversary according to

their calendar. The Jews from the study-house believed that the recluse from the Marran mountain had indeed come down from the next world on a short winter day. Others continued to believe it had been a demon, an evil thing that had come to make the Jews atheists. A few agreed with Khaye-Sarah that it had been a charlatan, perhaps a twin brother, or just a joker who had made a scar like the one on the other man to fool everyone. To her, it was very simple:

“If the world is so boring for him and no one in the next world wants to come down here, why did only he come to drive us crazy?”

Some of Khaye-Sarah’s people suspected that the Ignalina gravedigger had done it all as a joke—a gravedigger has to have a little fun, too, so he pretended to faint so they would take him away to be steamed. He knew how to make people’s hair stand on end!

Shmiye *dayen* believed all his life that this had something to do with the Marran Christians who lit Sabbath candles in memory of a memory of long-ago Jewishness. He believed that if other Christians had returned to the ways of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, others would have been resurrected too. He didn’t confide that idea to anyone, even his wife.

Among both the Palush Jews and the Marran Christians, it became the fashion to wear flannel shirts with blue checks.

And among all of them, a permanent sorrow remained: that it could certainly be true that even the few souls, the minority that reached Paradise, would have less interest in this world than in last year’s snow.

* * *

Kalmanezer the scribe recorded everything about Noah-Anshel and what had happened with him in Palush and in Ignalina in the great book of records. He called the story: *The Recluse From Mount Marran*.

The City in the Moonlight

When they strike you from all sides, there's only one thing to do: flee, like a *dybbuk* from the shofar.

Things got bitter in Kamay. *Khabad*-niks¹⁴⁵ arrived from White Russia and they made the place a *khasidic* colony. When they saw a Jew in the street, they drummed into him that he had to pray completely differently. For them, there was no *kadish* unless one added the words: *yismakh purkoney*¹⁴⁶ (may salvation blossom up). Of course! If the Messiah just heard that, he would delay no longer, and would come right down to Kamay even before the next Sabbath! And when they said their afternoon prayers, they added who knows how much, and by the time they finally got to *shmone esre*, all their enthusiasm was gone. Furthermore, they had one answer to everything: “the rebbe.”

God decided that in that same year a group of *musr*-niks¹⁴⁷ should come to the city too, all the way from Zamet, though they taught in Navaredok. You know what *musr*-niks are like: everyone else is evil, and only they have a pipeline to God; this one has bad habits and that one is in a bad state. Apparently, if they lectured some ordinary Jew, the Messiah would come that very evening.

The *khabad*-niks in Kamay were considered “white rascals”; the *musr*-niks were considered just plain crazy. They too had a single answer to everything: “change your ways,” and that's all. So they would go to the pharmacy and ask for nails. Why? To boast that they didn't get frightened if people laughed at them. Who cares what people think?!

The natives of Kamay were being driven out of their minds. There was one thing they didn't understand: why had the two kinds of *nudniks*¹⁴⁸, as they called those who had come to the city, picked precisely Kamay to ‘honor.’ Apparently they didn't think Sverdun and Dizhorits would do—they had to put their hooks into Kamay, and that was that!

145. *Khasidim* who follow the Lubavitsh rebbe

146. A phrase used by *khasidim* but not by *misnagdim*

147. Moralizers; self-appointed teachers of ethics

148. Nuisances, pests

The poisonous quarrels clouded the air everywhere. Everyone tried to make peace, but it didn't work. The rabbi of Kamay, Reb Markil Kaminpol they called him, was disgusted by all this. A year passed, and he roused his congregation in the middle of a sermon:

“People of Kamay! It's like this: Not just once but twice did the prophet Jeremiah say: ‘Peace, peace,’ but there was no peace. Why twice? Once for Jerusalem and once for Kamay! Here there will be no peace—there's a sect here and a sect there. By all means! If you have a different tradition, fine! If you come from a town where the High Holiday prayers are said every Wednesday all year long, go ahead and say them! Will anyone tell you not to? But here's the problem—that's not enough for them, so they gang up on us. Quarreling leads to baseless hatred for no reason. We're losing this world and we'll lose the next world too! If the Holy Temple was destroyed by that, then certainly Kamay will be too. People! Better to sell your homes. There's still hope--they'll grab everything, those newly arrived ones! What's there to talk about, hah? Today it's as it was with our Father Abraham: God said to him: ‘Go forth from the land of your birth,’ so he got up and went! We'll build a new village! Let's go!”

And the congregants cried out in unison: “Let's go!”

People would walk through fire if Reb Markil Kaminpol told them to. After all, there had been rebbes from the Kaminpol family for ages.

It didn't take even a full month. Buyers for the houses were not lacking—here a *khabad-nik*, there a *musr-nik*.

When they were about to leave Kamay, people started whispering, without meaning any malice: “Let the new arrivals stay here and climb all over one another.” That was the only curse-word in Kamay at that time: “new arrivals.”

The people of Kamay followed Reb Markil the way the children of Israel had followed *Moyshe Rabeynu* in the desert. He was not an old man, but he had trouble with one leg, so he used a cane. Those who remained in Kamay, the *khabad-niks* and the *musr-niks* and a number of peasants as well, all stood in the streets, astonished, as the rebbe led his community away to the Devil knew where. He insisted, did Reb Markil, on leading them on foot. A north wind blew his long, black beard up over his face. He kept looking out into the distance through the bare areas in his beard, and put his hand above his eyes like a visor.

They took everything with them on their way: the *seyfer-toyres*¹⁴⁹ and

149. Torah Scrolls

their crowns and the pointer, the holy books, and all their household goods. Everything was put on the wagons. Women drove the hens, to the sound of *pleh-pleh-pleh*. Children led the cows by ropes. Swirls of sand blew up all around them, like restless clouds.

For generations, Kamay had been called “the village of candles.” The townspeople were called the “candle-blessers,” and sometimes, jokingly, “the candle-cursers.” They made candles, some from tallow and some from wax, some for the Sabbath and some for *havdole*, some for the holidays and some for the peasants. Customers from as far away as Vilna bargained for Kamay candles.

When they reached their ‘sandy Red Sea,’ a great pile of candles lay on the wagons—big and small, fat and thin, simple and colored. The wax candles were considered the best ones. They raised enough bees in Kamay to send an eleventh plague for Pharaoh. They had dragged all the equipment for bee-raising along with them: boxes, cages, and bee-hives. The lambs were sounding “ba-a-a,” the horses were whinnying, the bees were buzzing. It was a hot day in Iyar.¹⁵⁰ Everything is recorded in the *Archive of the Exodus from Kamay*.

As if guided by one of God’s daytime guiding stars, the rebbe knew where to go. He led the Jews in the direction of Postev. They came to a village, Butsevich. There the rebbe announced to the peasants that they had to put up cottages for a new community a bit farther on; meanwhile the Jews needed a place to bed down for the night. When the peasants saw the wagons full of Kamay candles, they demanded to be paid in advance with candles. Enough candles to light Alexandrovsky Boulevard in Vilna were given away on the spot. Candles had hardly any value for the people of Kamay!

That very same day, Reb Markil crept off with his cane to a corner of the forest, near Dvartshan. He stood there in his new ‘Land of Milk and Honey,’ right up till sunset. A fiery red moon battled with a dying sun. He had never in all his life seen a more beautiful moon. He went back to his horde in Butsevich and proclaimed the good news to his community:

“We’ll build our village not far from here, near Dvartshan. There they have the most beautiful moon in the world. What shall we call our village? Let it be called not Danielevich, and not Avarevich but Levonevich!¹⁵¹”

To this very day, the name “Levonevich” appears on the signposts on the highway between Kamay and Dvartshan.

150. A late-Spring month

151. Literally “Son of the moon” equivalent to “Moonville” in English. We have rendered it as “The City in the Moonlight”

The peasants of Butsevich, strong as Philistines, started chopping down the gigantic trees the following day, on the spot that Reb Markil had designated. They peeled off the bark, squared the edges flat, and put them up on two big sawhorses so they could be worked on all sides. Ropes were wrapped around them so they could be pulled and smears of black ashes were used to indicate where they should be cut. Two peasants held the saw, one above and one below. The peasants in those parts could work at building things for a month—they had the strength of Esau, after all.

The people of Kamay then left Butsevich and moved to their newly prepared ‘Canaan.’ The place where wolves had reigned and foxes had run and owls had hooted at night became Levonevich of Lithuania.

The Levonevich rabbi, Reb Markil, studied Torah day and night. He very much liked to study late at night, by the light of two big candles, watching the dancing of the shadows from the bright moonlight.

Their moon, people said, was more beautiful than the Salok moon, which was renowned throughout the land. Reb Markil was an ardent *misnagid*—he liked to emphasize “people said,” so he went and traveled to Salok, which is between Duksht and Novy Alexandrovsk. He looked at the moon there for a whole night and came to understand that the beauty of the Salok moon did not derive from the moon itself. What then? It derived from its reflection in the Salok lakes. It couldn’t hold a candle to the Levonevich moon, whose beauty was intrinsic.

Reb Markil Kaminpol started studying books of *kabala* more and more; after a while, he started writing a treatise of his own, in Aramaic, that he called *The Small Light*.¹⁵²

And when there is a world-class beauty of a moon in a village of candle-makers, only one thing can come of it. In the early days, when Levonevich was first established, people hardly noticed that they stayed awake later and later into the night, and stayed asleep in bed later and later into the day. When the days started to grow shorter in the winter, they realized what was happening. They, “the moonlit ones,” as the people of Levonevich were called, liked to work by the red light of their homemade candles, which blended with the white nocturnal rays from the sky.

The rabbi ruled that it was all right to daven *shakhris* right after sunrise, even though it was just before they went to sleep. Everyone got up in time to daven *minke*. On Sabbath and holidays, they stayed awake with difficulty for 24 hours, and the next day they slept themselves out thoroughly.

152. Biblical term referring to the moon

The years raced by, and in Kamay the Russian *khasidim* intermarried more and more with the *musr-niks* from Zanet. The people from Lyadi joined hands with those from Salant, despite the fact that they each insisted on attaining the Lithuanian Heaven in their own way.

No one from the vicinity of Levonevich thought the residents of that village were anything to wonder at. Candle-makers live in the light from their candles, so why make a fuss about it? Besides—let them do things as they see fit. After all, it's their business and no one else's. But the new residents of Kamay did wonder about the fact that the former residents had adopted such strange ways in the new village. "They weren't exactly right in the head when they were here, either," they explained in Kamay.

The *dayen* of Kamay, a Russian *khosid*, screwed up his courage and sent a rabbinical question to Levonevich: How could they so contradict the rules of the Universe by making day into night and night into day? Even in early childhood *kheyder*, students learn that God said that the light was good and separated the light from the darkness.

The Kamay *dayen* boasted about his question. The *misnagids* had considered themselves real scholars, and here they had fled like deer and established a village of their own in the forest and had turned the world upside down.

When they brought the Kamay *dayen*'s question to Reb Markil in Levonevich, he was, if anything, pleased. By this time he was an old man. Since he had removed his community from the quarreling so they could live out their lives in peace, he had continued to live happily with his people.

"What audacity!" Reb Markil thought to himself. "People come and disrupt a community and drive away its inhabitants, then many years pass and they're still asking questions! Go understand what goes on in a person's heart!"

Reb Markil sent his reply to Kamay. The essence of it was brief:

"The Bible does indeed say: 'God said "Let there be light" and there was light.' But after that, it says unequivocally 'God created Man, male and female He created them, on the sixth day of Creation,' and 'God created Man in His own image.' What does 'in His own image' mean? *Rabeynu Bakhya* says, in his *Gate of the Unity of God*, that it means 'having heavenly attributes, like those of God Himself.' And what do we understand from Bakhya's words? That in this world Man is only flesh and blood, so what can he accomplish? He can only try to imitate the Holy One, blessed

be He. In imitating the Almighty, he has indeed done mighty deeds, to the best of his ability. That's as far as Bakhya went. Everyone knows that God wrote the Torah. Matching that is quite something else. Elevation of one of God's minor creations to the level of a major creation would constitute a great accomplishment. God created the big light, the sun, and the small light, the moon. The residents of Levonevich found the strength to make an even smaller light with their candles, but together with the moon it sufficed for studying Torah, for making a living, and for living in peace with God and with Man. And how do we know that God is pleased with that? We have evidence in the Talmud, which says that they used to sacrifice the buck in the Holy Temple on the first day of the month¹⁵³, as expiation of a sin by none other than God Himself, because the Almighty regretted having made the moon little, so as part of Creation He beautified Levonevich. At the same time, He was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: 'The light of the moon shall be like the light of the sun.' So what's the fuss about?"

The response was well received. In both Kamay and Levonevich, people began to say that everything had happened so that that response could be made. Do you think that it occurred to both the *khasidim* from the East and the *musr-niks* from the West at the same time and out of the blue to pick Kamay to move into? And don't you think that the exodus from Kamay was the direct cause of the rise of Levonevich, so Reb Markil could issue his response in his old age? This was God's plan—to teach all three tribes that everything is predestined.

153. The beginning of each month in the Jewish calendar corresponds to the time of the new moon, i.e. the first reappearance of the moon

Abba-Ella's Mission

It was like this. Abba-Ella the scribe's son—his family name was Vayngartn—had been a resident of the community all his life. He sat at home and wrote commentaries on the *shulkhan orukh*. That was in Shimenishek, when Shimenishek was still Shimenishek, a place of Torah. Later, after the great conflagrations, it became a city of peasants. To be precise, Abba-Ella's commentaries were commentaries on the *Magid's*¹⁵⁴ commentaries on the *shulkhan orukh*. Here and there, for the sake of appearances, he added replies to the questions in the *Magid's* commentaries. Those who knew Abba-Ella well knew that his driving force was passion about the *Magid's* commentaries. Why that was more important to him than anything else is hard to say, but apparently he had developed that passion way back in his years at the Vilna yeshiva. It was his contest with eternity.

When was all this supposed to happen? When Abba-Ella died. Everything had been prepared in advance. All the details were written into the will. The manuscript with his commentaries, the *gan hagofen* (Vineyard—a play on his name, Vayngartn), would be sent to the Romm Publishing House in Vilna immediately after *shiva*. They would print it in a deluxe edition with old-fashioned Amsterdam letters. On the title-page would be a woodcut of a synagogue with a Star of David under the peak of the roof, a hint that in succeeding generations they should start calling the *gan hagofen* “gag” for short, for in Hebrew, “gag” means “roof.” The Romm Publishers would distribute 2500 copies as gifts to the greatest rabbis and scholars from Riga to Odessa. Fifteen years later, they would publish a new *shulkhan orukh* with the *Vineyard* printed ‘inside’ in a column parallel to the commentaries of the *Taz*, the *Shakh*, the *Sm”E*, and the *Gro*¹⁵⁵. All together, they would surround the author Joseph Caro's *shulkhan orukh*. That would be eternity! In the process, they would res-

154 The *Magid* of Dubno, Jacob ben Wolf Krantz, a famous 18th century itinerant preacher among the Jews in Eastern Europe

155 Well-known Biblical Commentators

cue the *Magid's* commentaries themselves from their lonely place at the end of the book; they would put the commentaries in order according to the numbered topics of the *shulkhan orukh* and print them inside, so the *Magid's* commentaries would also have joy in this world. And why not? Did the *Shakh* begrudge the *Magid's* commentaries?

There was already more than enough money in the Vilna bank to carry all this out. All the arrangements with Romm had already been signed in front of kosher¹⁵⁶ witnesses. An appointed commission the city's rabbis was in charge of the whole matter, and it had been arranged that in case one rabbi died, another one was to be appointed immediately in his place.

Abba-Ella indulged himself in his lifestyle and his plans for the next world. As a young man, he had had a reputation as a once-in-a-generation genius. A match had been arranged for him with the daughter of very wealthy Vilna Jews. He lived in the house of his in-laws for many years. When he was about thirty, he and his wife, Khanke, built a house in Shimenishek, where Khanke's family had lived for a long time. Khanke opened a shop there. She was quite equal to being the wife of a scholar and author. She considered it important to keep things on an even keel in the house every day so Abba-Ella could go into his library and work. Abba-Ella usually slept late in the morning, but he used to work on his commentaries till two or three o'clock in the morning. He believed that the Divine Spirit was strongest at night; it was terribly quiet everywhere and the Divine Spirit was near.

Khanke was barren, but Abba-Ella didn't care. He would beget his *Vineyard* rather than flesh-and-blood children, who could turn out badly these days. He tried to put the bad thought out of his mind, but more than once it occurred to him that the Almighty had kept his wife barren so children shouldn't interfere with his studies, so all the worries about their respect and earning a living shouldn't divert him from his mission. After all, even an angel has only one mission, so all the more is this true of a person. A human being is only a human being, after all.

His will made it clear that after his death the version of the *Vineyard* that was on his desk at that time was the one that should be printed. In order that there should be no confusion, he always tore up and burned the previous versions. In his fondest dreams, Abba-Ella saw unborn generations of scholars quarreling at every step about what the *Vineyard*,

156. Legally and religiously acceptable

perhaps referred to as the “gag,” was about, not knowing anything about Abba-Ella or “the scribe’s son” or the *Vineyard*. In his dreams, he saw himself sitting in Paradise and looking down to see yeshiva students all over the Pale struggling with a difficult commentary by the Magid and an even more difficult *Vineyard*. Oh how he would enjoy the next world! He pitied the people around him, both the Jews and the Gentiles, who lived for this world. Oh, if they only knew what a happy life he was leading at his desk, what was waiting for him in the next world, and how well he had arranged that everything should get under way after his death—then they would better understand both this world and the next world.

Abba-Ella also pitied rabbinical authors who wrote ten mediocre books instead of one eternal one. He looked with contempt at those who wanted to submit their works to the printer precisely while they were still alive. “The arrogance of scribes,” he called it. Aside from everything else, he realized that it was not practical. A man who studies all his life doesn’t lose his acuity in his old age, after all, so why publish something that could later be more complete, more capable of making an impression? The version that sees the light of day should be the version that is lying on his desk the day a man dies. Any other way makes no sense.

But one thing he did do: every few years he had Romm in Vilna publish booklets as test runs that he sent to great rabbis for their approval. The approvals also remained on his desk, waiting for the fateful day when everything would be taken to Vilna to be published. Those booklets that were published during Abba-Ella’s life are great rarities today.

B.

Abba-Ella carried out his life’s work according to a strict schedule he had figured out while he was still a yeshiva student living in his father-in-law’s house. According to the plan, he would finish the *Vineyard* when he was the age of King David when he died, and if the Almighty should grant him additional years, he would continue to correct and embellish his commentaries until he breathed his last. Now he had just turned sixty and he had no problems with his health, thank God. In about ten years, the commentaries would be finished.

Man proposes and God disposes. The peace and quiet that had so faithfully served Abba-Ella’s work in Shimenishek was suddenly disrupted. What happened, everyone knows. The rabbi of Shimenishek, Reb Yisroelke, died, and the congregation brought in from the yeshiva

of Svintsian a young rabbi, Reb Leybe-Aharon Kagan. A few months passed and who should show up in Shimenishek but the deceased rabbi's eldest son, Khiel-Isaac, who had gone to Podolye twelve years earlier to become a town rabbi. He returned to Shimenishek an ardent *khosid*. When he came back, he brought along a slew of copies of *shivkey habesht*¹⁵⁷ and *sipurey mayseyes*,¹⁵⁸ and a large number of story-books. He spoke day and night about some "Rabbi of Kalodezh," told of his miracles, how a dying man had been healed after the rabbi's blessing, how a plague had subsided after the rabbi's words. Not a word about the Kalodezher rabbi's scholarship, his new interpretations, or even whether he was ordained. Finally, it turned out that Khiel-Isaac had brought along some "Poison of Life," a certain substance that one wrapped into cigarettes and smoked, and immediately, on the spot, felt calm and exalted; one's soul rose up out of him and one celebrated spiritual union with the Holy One, Blessed be He.

It wasn't long before Shimenishek became divided into two camps that were at sword's-points. Those who had previously been ordinary Jews became *misnagids* and those who adhered to Khiel-Isaac became *khasidim*. When Leybe-Aharon said a pot was *treyf*, Khiel-Isaac said it was *kosher*. Instead of one rabbi in charge, there were two who were immersed in the kind of minor arguments that a rabbi is supposed to smooth over. They couldn't pray from the same *siddur*, so Khiel-Isaac distributed to everyone a *siddur* in the style of Ar"i. He started building his own shul, and he didn't lack for money. Leybe-Aharon's people spread the rumor that fancy rich men from distant Podolye had given their emissaries loads of money to go and capture cities, towns, and villages in Lithuania. Turning Litvaks into *khasidim* was a big deal for them. There were now two shuls, two slaughterhouses, two ritual baths, and two *kheyders* in little Shimenishek.

In both *kheyders*, they quizzed the boys every day. Note-Psakhke the teacher, who had been the Shimenishek teacher all his life, became the *misnagdic* teacher in his old age. Early in the morning, he quizzed each boy and the boy was supposed to reply with the answer he had learned. If he didn't, Heaven help him!

"To whom are you faithful?"

"To the Almighty."

"Who else?"

"No one else."

157. Book about the Bal Shem Tov

158. Collection of stories by Rabbi Nakhman of Bratslav

“Are you a *misnagid* or a *khosid*?”

“A *misnagid*!”

“Why are you a *misnagid*?”

“Because we behave according to the holy Torah.”

“What have you got against the *khasidim*?”

“They are followers of Sabbetai Tsvi, they make an idol of their rebbe, like the pagans, and they give everyone poison to smoke.”

“Who is a rabbi?”

“One who is ordained.”

“Would you marry a *khasidic* girl?”

“God forbid!”

But Khiel-Isaac was also human, and because there was as yet no separate *khasidic* teacher in Shimenishek, he himself assumed the teacher's duties. That alone attracted a lot of families. Who in Shimenishek had ever heard of a rabbi's becoming a teacher of children? Khiel-Isaac had the following style:

“Are you a *khosid* or a *misnagid*?”

“A *khosid*!”

“Why?”

“Because only through *khasidic* practices can one draw close to the Almighty.”

“How?”

“Through cleaving to God, through spiritual awakening, and through exaltation.”

“What do you think of the *misnagdim*?”

“A gang of heretics.”

“Why?”

“They are unwilling to allow all Jews to get close to God.”

“To whom are you faithful?”

“To the Lord of the Universe and His special emissary, the rebbe of Kalodezh.”

“Would you marry a *misnagdic* girl?”

“God forbid!”

C.

Late at night, in the blessed hours when Abba-Ella had been in the habit of sitting next to a candle and writing, erasing, rewriting, changing words, or starting a new chapter, he was now sitting idle. The pen wouldn't stay in his hand and his thoughts were not on the *Magid's* commentaries. He be-

gan to realize how lucky he had been all his life that it had been peaceful and quiet in Shimenishek, that nobody had bothered him with anything.

It had long been clear to everybody that by virtue of Abba-Ella's *Vineyard* the whole world would know some day that there was a Shimenishek in the world. Khanke used to mention that the author's name on the title page would read as follows: 'By Rabbi Abba Eliyahu bar Dov Leyvi the scribe, from the holy community Shimenishek of Lithuania.' So what if it was important to Abba-Ella himself that his name be forgotten as soon as possible so people would talk about such and such disagreement between the *Magid's* commentaries and the *Vineyard*?

Suddenly the Jews in the area, who called Abba-Ella simply "the genius of Shimenishek," were questioning him, not only about the future but about the here and now. Except for fanatics, practically the whole community wanted him to straighten things out. How did it look for a Jewish city to be divided into two enemy camps? What kind of education could there be? And what would the Gentiles say? The whole business was a desecration of God. Someone had to put an end to the foolish incitements in the *kheyders*. The long and short of it was that all Shimenishek seized on Abba-Ella Vayngartn. He was the only one who could make peace. He had been sitting in Shimenishek for thirty years already, and in those thirty years no one had asked him any rabbinical questions because they knew he was writing his commentaries. Now, however, things were very bad, very serious. Everyone would respect his words. He was the only one who could rescue Shimenishek from the abyss of quarreling, bring peace. After that, he could by all means go on with his commentaries, till the age of 120.¹⁵⁹ Nobody would bother him after that—they could guarantee that.

Abba-Ella himself began to realize that he had fallen into the situation of "where there is no man, go ahead and try to be that man." He understood for the first time what is expected from a village rabbi by his congregation. No one cared now that his mission for the Almighty was to finish the *Vineyard*. They didn't care. All day they came to bother him so he could settle matters between those who were arguing different points of view. It was not only two people who had a difference of opinion—the whole city was 'litigating.' Woe and alas! Khanke kept closing the store and announcing to her husband every person who came in and bringing him or her to him in the library. Abba-Ella told everyone the same thing: he would consider it.

159. The Biblical age of Moses when he died—figuratively, till the end of a long life

Finally he sent polite letters to both of the town's rabbis, Reb Leybe Aharon the *misnagid* and Reb Khiel-Isaac the *khosid*, asking both of them to come see him in his library on the following Monday, right after evening prayers. People trembled at Abba-Ella's words, so they came. There was a strong wind that night. He asked them to shake hands. They did it for his sake. But he hadn't been born yesterday, Abba-Ella, and he knew very well that as soon as they went out into the street they would again be mortal enemies. Both the *khosid* and the *misnagid* knew that one word from the genius Abba-Ella and every resident of Shimenishek would obey. The *misnagid* came prepared with a large number of citations from the Talmud and passages against the *khasidim*. The *khosid* came with a stack of citations from *The Book of Creation*, *The Zohar*, and *The Angel Reziel*¹⁶⁰. Abba-Ella said to both of them curtly: "Bring it to me in writing and I'll read it. I haven't the time to sit here and listen to you arguing."

Shimenishek rang with the news that both sides had been to Abba-Ella's place at the same time. They sensed that the matter had started moving off dead center—it was on its way. They started calling Abba-Ella, quite simply, "the genius." They knew that in seven days the two town rabbis would bring their expert opinions. Each of them would cite an authority, in one case the Bal Shem Tov, in another case the Vilna Gaon. Khanke let everyone know that Abba-Ella would give his answer in about one month.

D.

The idea of one month developed from the fact that Abba-Ella wanted to achieve a time of tranquility for his own sake, so the matter would come to a conclusion as quickly as possible, not drag on and on, and he could then immediately go back to his mission. Abba-Ella was deathly afraid. He had been sitting for decades and writing his *Vineyard* for eternity, and he hadn't ruled on a single rabbinical question, hadn't issued a single decision. He hadn't convened a single rabbinical court. What did they want from him? The words "*khosid*" and "*misnagid*" grated on his ears. In his mind, they were in the same category as "gang" and "clique." If the matter didn't come to an end, all the pious Jews would waste their energy against one another, and the Berlin heretics of Moses Mendelssohn's circles would be able to boast about their logicity and thoughtfulness. This wasn't just a matter of rescuing Shimenishek—it was a matter of rescuing the whole Jewish people!

160. Books of Jewish mysticism and *kabala*

But he had very little confidence in himself. He knew large parts of the Talmud by heart and was an expert on the medieval and later commentaries and on halakhic matters, but here, between the *khasidim* and *misnagdim*, there were issues of opinion and *kabala* in which he, the “genius of Shimenishek,” was definitely not an expert. On the other hand, what would be so terrible if, during the month, he read the *shivkey habesht* and the *misnagdic* responses? OK, he’d figure something out—after all, there was a God in the Universe. Furthermore, his field of scholarship, searching through a matter for a brief, straightforward answer, could be an advantage here. He would use his sharp mind, and instead of dealing with arguments about whether a certain plate was *kosher* he would turn his energy to problems of the Universe.

From the very first day, it began to become clear to Abba-Ella that the *khasidim* were right that joy was an important trait. They were right that ordinary Jews, both men and women, needed to have more spirituality in their lives so they could converse with the Almighty with just as much fervor as the greatest scholar. Where they had stumbled was in making the rebbe a sort of God—that, already, was a desecration of the Holy Name. What bothered him more than anything else was that the rebbehood could descend from father to son regardless of whether the son was a genius or a fool. “*Khosid-fool*,” he thought with his rarely expressed Litvak humor, and smiled for the first time there in his library. And where had the *misnagdim* stumbled? In that they looked down on anyone who wasn’t a complete scholar.

All these thoughts ran through his mind in the middle of the night when he was sitting at his table next to a candle. An owl was hooting in the distance. Closer by, a woodpecker was pecking.

E.

Abba-Ella turned to some dusty books that he hadn’t held in his hands for years. He studied *The Zohar*, *The Book of Creation*, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, *The Obligations of the Heart*, *The Gates of Holiness*, *The Road of Life*, *The Prophets*, and *The Angel Reziel*. Again he had peaceful days and creative nights. For the first time in months, he took his pen in his hand. The pen wrote. If it had been a matter of measuring the amount of ink used, it would have been clear that now things were going better for him than ever before. In halakhic matters, each word was gold, especially in a commentary that would be printed ‘inside.’ Here, in matters of

the essence of Jewishness, where there shouldn't be constant footnotes, where one shouldn't boast about citations and about 'catching' a discussant in an error, here he wrote rather well. The so-called expert opinions of the two town rabbis were pretty sad. Abba-Ella understood very well what he needed to do. It hurt him. He hesitated. Three weeks passed, and Khanke told everyone that he was now writing his opinion and that he would read a summary of it to the community publicly on Tuesday, after afternoon prayers. He would stand in front of his door and speak. He had no other choice--if he read it in the 'old shul' (the *misnagdic* synagogue) or the 'new shul' (the *khasidic* synagogue), that would more or less mean that he agreed with one or the other. OK, he would stand and speak to his audience next to his own house.

During the past week, he hadn't been able to get to sleep at all. After all, he had never had anything to do with the people, the mob, and now he was supposed to bring peace between the *khasidim* and *misnagdim* in Shimenishek? What would happen? He hadn't written anything in Yiddish, only Hebrew and Aramaic, since he was a boy in *kheyder*. How should he speak? Simply, for everyone, or in a complicated way, for the scholars? With citations or just with simple explanations? Briefly or at length?

Tuesday after afternoon prayers, all Shimenishek was closed down and locked up. A big crowd was standing in front of Abba-Ella's house. People came not only from Shimenishek but from Strunoyts, Svintsian, and Svintsianke. From the other direction, people came from Vidutin, Svitaralishek, Klushan, Shponde, Kostievich, Stratshe, and Svir. Some also came from Mikhalishek. After four rainy days, the sun was shining warmly. It felt like mid-summer, not autumn.

Reb Abba-Ella appeared in front of his door. He looked pale, as if seized by the fear of making a public appearance. Genius or no genius, he had never in his life preached in front of an audience of ordinary people. Everyone stood motionless and quiet. Both town rabbis were standing with their heads bowed submissively—not at all like their usual fire-breathing selves.

Abba-Ella opened the notebook in his hand and took a magnifying glass out of his pocket. He looked around him for a long time. Then he closed the notebook and put both it and the magnifying glass in his pocket. He began to speak from the heart. Here is what he said:

The City in the Moonlight

People—you know that I am not a dayan or a town rabbi. My mission in the world, in my opinion, is my commentary on the shulkhan orukh. Now, when our beloved town of Shimenishek has been torn apart and disrupted by quarrels, you have come to me to solve the problem. So here are my thoughts:

*First, anger is pagan. Anger stems from arrogance, and if one proceeds on the path of anger against someone, one is proceeding on a false path. The holy kabala, over which nothing takes precedence among either the khasidim or the misnagdim, speaks about that very straightforwardly. The holy Rabbi Khayim Vital, in his book *The Gates of Holiness*, wrote that arrogance in people derives from Fire. And anger comes under the category of arrogance. Out of arrogance, a man grows angry when others don't do as he wishes.*

Second, both of our town rabbis, may they live and be well, can carry out their missions properly somewhere else and not in Shimenishek. He who calls himself khasid should be the rabbi in a town where everyone is a khasid. He who calls himself misnagid should be the rabbi in a city where everyone is a misnagid. It sometimes happens that a saintly person finds himself in a place where his behavior can only bring evil to others. So, my children—don't take offense, but your destiny is somewhere else and not in Shimenishek.

With respect to the matter at hand, you give the answer every day during shakhris, when you recite Reb Ishmael's Thirteen Virtues, one of which, after all, is that if there are two writings that disagree with one another, you should present a third citation to decide between them.. That agrees with the Rambam's¹⁶¹ words about the "Golden Mean." The simplest Jew can become exalted with true spirituality, can approach the Lord of the Universe. In that regard, the khasidim are right. On the other hand, only an ordained

161. "Rambam" is an acronym for Maimonides

rabbi can render judgment on rabbinical questions; in that regard, the misnagdim are right. A khasidic rebbe can be the Almighty's emissary just like any pious Jew—no more and no less.

If both town rabbis go away, I am prepared to serve as the town rabbi, but only until you bring in a new rabbi who can guarantee to us that he doesn't belong to any faction. Let us all be careful about our love for Israel. Good-day.

G.

The moment Abba-Ella finished talking, the entire crowd let out a loud cheer, not an ordinary cheer but the kind of extraordinary cheer that one voice after freeing oneself from a *dybbuk* that had entered not an individual but a whole community. Girls and older women wept.

Abba-Ella went back into his house. In less than a week, both town rabbis had left Shimenishek. Leybe-Aharon went to his father in Svin-tsian, where *misnagdic* practice was as firmly established as in Vilna. Khiel-Isaac went to say goodbye to his father in the cemetery. He then went back to Podolye, to the court of the rabbi of Kalodezh.

Several months passed and a new rabbi was brought in from Litvan. Now everyone again prayed together in the old shul. It didn't bother anyone that some of the congregants still prayed in the Sephardic style of Ar"i's *siddur*. The building of the new shul was converted into a poor-house. The new rabbi brought together the former enemies. Shimenishek was once again Shimenishek.

Abba-Ella started writing a new book, *The Garden of Justice*, a book of moral teaching, far from *halakhic* matters. He finished it in exactly a year. Shortly after that, he died in his sleep. He never went back to the *Vineyard*. *The Garden of Justice* was printed immediately, and became famous throughout Lithuania. Some thought that it was by virtue of that book that the *musr-niks*, headed by Rabbi Israel Salanter, became prominent. But that's another story. And what happened to the unfinished manuscript, *The Vineyard*, about the commentaries of the *Magid*, on which Abba-Ella had worked hard all his life and on which he had based his claim to eternity? That too is another story.

Zalmora of *The Prophets*

People in those parts started to call “those who have compassion for all living creatures”¹⁶² “Salokers.” That comes from something that happened in Salok, a town between Dukst and Antalept, on the highway to New Alexander, the so-called Senderke, which was nearby.

There, not far from the old synagogue (which the Salokers called “the *klayzl*”), a recluse lived out his life close by the lake that reflected—and even beautified—the Lithuanian moon. It’s not for nothing that people describe a beautiful woman or one of Romm’s splendid volumes as “beautiful as the moon in Salok.”

Reb Zalmen-Aaron, the man was called. He was of medium height with a rather large head, and he limped with one leg. His disheveled gray beard was as broad as it was long. Black streaks stubbornly persisted in it. His oval face with the long, black, tallis-like streaks in his beard threw somewhat of a fright into strangers.

Zalmen-Aaron studied almost all day long, but very little of Talmud and its commentaries. He immersed himself in *The Prophets* and knew the later prophets by heart, from the visions of Isaiah to the last passage of Malachi, with whom Jewish prophecy ended. He studied everything in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish. He also studied innumerable commentaries, from Rabbi David Kimchi to the Vilna Gaon.

They called him “Zalmora of *The Prophets*.” When ordinary Jews who smelled of all the good things of the earth came to the ‘*klayzl*’ to hear the rabbi teach Torah during the *minkhe-mayrev* services, they looked at Zalmora joyfully: so deeply immersed in his book that you couldn’t see his face—just a hat with a visor, the streaming gray beard with the black streaks, and the edge of the book on the oak table. All in all, a vision of ancient Jerusalem in the time of the prophets.

162. We will abbreviate this lengthy expression to “compassionate ones” in the rest of this story.

But people didn't have much to do with him. Loneliness, after all, leads to "strange habits," as they called them there. Loneliness is loneliness. Among the women, he was called "the Aramaic beard." How he made his living, they didn't know, and they didn't ask. If someone is not dying of hunger and is not begging from anyone, one shouldn't get involved. Is there any lack of poor people, after all?

Several times a year, Zalmora went to Vilna, but for what purpose they didn't know.

Whether they are destined to reach the sainted Joseph's hundred and ten years or only the seventy years of King David, people don't live forever. Zalmora died full of years and was buried, and all his possessions were given to charity. His books were taken to the synagogue and the world went on, as always.

* * *

Seven years passed. On a pleasant Spring day after peysakh, when a breeze was caressing all 248 of the congregants, the *melamed*¹⁶³ of Salok, Reb Itse-Isaac Galanter, took down a book of the later prophets from the top shelf to look something up. It was one of the books that had belonged to Zalmora of *The Prophets*. As a way of honoring a deceased person, though such a rule was not written down anywhere, people in Salok used to wait quite a few years before going to his books. "After all, they explained, "the books won't get any older from waiting."

When the *melamed* laid the book on the table (a *Isaiah-Jeremiah* it was,) an envelope sealed with purple sealing-wax fell out. On the envelope there was writing in large black letters. You could tell that it had been written reverentially, though it was obvious from the poor handwriting that the one who had written it could never have aspired to scribe holy books.

Curious, the *melamed* looked at the words on the envelope more closely, as if to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him: "This is the will of Shloyme-Zalmen Aaron, son of Tsvi Joseph Haleyvi of Salok."

He sprang back in fear. This was no little thing: the sealed will of a Jew, a recluse, which had been lying hidden in a book for seven years. That was the difference between a person and an envelope, he thought to himself: an envelope has patience.

163. Children's teacher

He had to give the envelope to someone—such a matter was not for him. Let him not fall into sin, for the gates of Hell lurked nearby! When you get up in the morning, who knows what kind of test you might face?

Who to take it to? Take it to the rabbi!

The rabbi, Reb Shimen (Shime, they called him), a skinny old Jew, berated the *melamed* amiably: “What are you afraid of, hah? You be the one to open it, OK?”

If the rabbi says so, it’s an order. Itse-Isaac the *melamed* cut open the edge of the envelope with a knife, carefully as if handling a delicate old jewel. He tried to hand the rabbi the single sheet that was inside.

“Why are you giving it to me? I don’t have my glasses. *Melamed!* You read it out loud so we can hear it. What did the recluse of Salok leave to the community, hah? Maybe some great, hidden treasure?”

Trembling, the *melamed* drew out the sheet, which was folded in four to the size of a playing-card, and looked at it. He almost fainted on the spot, and his eyes widened like those of someone who was looking at something frightful. The sheet fell to the floor. The rabbi called his wife to revive the fainting man with smelling salts and a shot of whisky. A rabbi’s wife knows how to do those things.

Reb Shimen picked up the sheet of paper and immediately began plowing through the tiny, nearly illegible letters. After all, a rabbi is also eager to find out.

He too was astonished. He understood one thing immediately: that the Lord of the Universe had put him to a veritable test. A rabbi, after all, is no children’s teacher—a rabbi has to know what to do, that’s why people rely on him.

The will was written in very difficult commentator’s language, more like the language of Rashi than plain Hebrew, but the rabbi understood immediately what it was all about. After all, he too had once been a young man in the yeshiva of Mir. He immediately understood the essence of the will of Zalmora of *The Prophets*, namely that the Messiah was tarrying because Jews were sinful; that sacrifices had been discontinued after the Holy Temple was destroyed because of our great sins; that we pray from the *siddur* instead; that there were no differences of opinion about that; that the prophets had commanded seven times seventy times that no living creature should be killed in the future, and certainly shouldn’t be eaten. After all, it says in black and white in Isaiah that in the time of the Messiah there will be universal peace; that a wolf and a lamb will dwell together; that a leopard will lie down with a kid and a child will

lead them; that they will do no harm to one another and will not kill on God's holy mountain, so if animals won't kill, humans certainly won't kill any living creatures, and that will be the time for the coming of Jesse's descendant, the Messiah of the House of David, who will bring salvation.

The citations from *Isaiah* and from *Micah*, and from the commentaries, were mentioned by Zalmora in the will, all with the tiny curlicues that embraced one another like little blades of grass on a mountain that no foot has ever trodden.

Reb Shimen, the rabbi of Salok, read all of that calmly. After all, the man had been a 'compassionate one.' The will was a curious document, and that was all there was to it.

Till he got to the last lines, which now were written aslant, almost as if the one who was writing them sensed that now he had to hurry, that no time remained. It was written there that in such and such a bank in Vilna, on Zavalne Street, there was a large sum of cash and silver, all of which was to be used for "...the education of 'compassionate ones'" in order to bring the Messiah as soon as possible, so the beginnings of salvation would be seen in Salok of Lithuania. They were to use the money to pay out the Salok slaughterer so he wouldn't slaughter any more, pay out the Salok butcher so he wouldn't touch meat any more, and pay all the people of Salok regularly, every month, so they wouldn't touch anything that had seen with its own eyes, that is, they would eat no meat or fish. If all the people of Salok followed Isaiah's words, the Messiah would come immediately, in honor of Salok, and liberate the whole world almost immediately.

It didn't take long for Reb Shime, the rabbi of Salok, and the synagogue officials to realize that Zalmora had secretly been an extremely wealthy man, a sole heir, and that the money that had been put away, which would have increased during the seven years there in the bank on Zavalne Street, could definitely sustain the Jews of Salok so they would never again suffer from poverty, never have any worries about making a living. Ah, but avoid meat and fish? They would do that for the sake of the benefit, because they they would quickly realize that in a city without killing or slaughtering, salvation would be near at hand.

Reb Shime, the rabbi of Salok, thought about the matter carefully: that it was a gift from the Almighty; that the honor had befallen him to be the special emissary of such a saint as Zalmora of *The Prophets* had been in Salok; that through his mediation, so to speak, a hidden saint would be revealed to everyone; and that because of all that, Jews would know about Salok forever, just as they know about Volozhin, Damir, and Radin.

He had just one small regret: that he hadn't accorded Zalmora sufficient respect while he was alive. But who can know in what guise a saint will quietly arrive? Who can understand everything about the world and the Universe? It was just their good fortune to live long enough to re-think and remake themselves while they were still alive.

The rabbi ran around full of hope and joy, with an expression of satisfaction that he had received all he asked of life. He called the Jews of Salok together, husbands and wives, and told them all about the will that had been discovered after seven years, and about the money in the Vilna bank that they could withdraw if they became 'compassionate ones.'

In the great vestibule of the synagogue, however, there was an explosion of laughter on all sides, as on Purim when people tell each other wild stories so they can have a good laugh.

"And if Zalmora is sitting up there in Paradise already," wheezed Berlinisn the town fish-merchant, "would he also deny us a single piece of herring on Sabbath?"

"And who will stand guard lest someone grind a little meat into the *tsholnt*,¹⁶⁴ or is *tsholnt* also a sin now? What a crazy world!" cried Yoshke the wagon-driver.

Treyne the market-lady, who sold all kinds of things in the market, added to the commotion as much as she could: "And if they catch you with some chicken soup, will they send you to jail?"

"Don't worry," roared Khonke the chimney-sweep, who was even blacker than usual, as if he were speaking about the importance of Torah to each person of Salok separately, "when people come here to repent on *yom kipur*, they'll beat their breasts for the sin of grinding some meat into the *tsimmes*."¹⁶⁵

The rabbi sensed that he was becoming a laughing-stock, that his Salok Jews thought he had gone out of his mind.

The smartest person in Salok at that time was the widow Khaya-Sarah, who was a teacher's daughter. "Smarter than her father," they said about her. On holidays, she was the reader for the women in the shul. The people of Salok turned to her for advice.

"Just a minute," she cried out, with a voice like that of the prophetess Deborah. "Be still for a moment! Shush! People!"

164. A stew made, variously, of beans, potatoes, and cabbage, and sometimes meat—it could be heated before the Sabbath and would stay warm enough to eat throughout the Sabbath, without the need to light a fire

165. A mixture, variously, of fruits, carrots, potatoes, and sometimes meat

It got very quiet in the synagogue. Reb Shime, the rabbi of Salok, looked at her respectfully, hoping that she could rescue him, no less, from the quagmire he had fallen into.

She was tall and thin, with sharp blue, youthful eyes that had taken on more and more of a heroic look with the passing years.

“Yes, there was a saint living among us in Salok. Nothing to sneeze at—Zalmora of *The Prophets*! It makes no difference that we didn’t know it. He lived out his years with us near the lake, with his books, like a poor man, like a *lamed-vovnik*¹⁶⁶ from the old days. He didn’t spend his money on a family full of needy people who would waste it or give it away, nor on a big headstone for his own grave. No! He gave it to bring the Messiah! The Messiah! So the Messiah should ride through Salok on his donkey before our eyes, on his way to Jerusalem! And you, the gang of mockers, are laughing at him. So laugh, and laugh yourself sick, wiseguys that you are—demanding that the Messiah not come! Now you’ve ensured that he won’t ride into Salok in any case! What an accomplishment!”

Khaya-Sarah burst into tears, not waiting for any reply or smart-alecky remarks.

The crowd was dumbstruck, and no one was laughing any more.

The rabbi muttered something about the matter: that he didn’t know what the people could say about the bank in Vilna anyhow. Who knows? Perhaps after so many years Zalmora had no longer kept up his project, which he told the people of Salok about in his will. He ended his remarks to the crowd in his usual evening manner: “Good night, people, and sleep tight!”

From that day on, the rabbi, Reb Shime, and the widow Khaya-Sarah never again touched meat or fish, which they referred to as “dead bodies.” Slowly other “compassionate ones” joined them. In the vicinity and all around, they were called “Salokers.” So much for that.

When the leading men of Salok went together to the bank in Vilna with all the papers of the will, translated into Russian by government authorities, they learned that Zalmora of *The Prophets* had left not only a large sum of money for the people of Salok, with the condition that they become “compassionate ones,” but also a manuscript, with a request that some of the money be sent to the Romm Publishing House in Vilna to publish it as a brochure. The title of the brochure was to be *The Book of Love for All Life*, and right on the title page was to be this passage from Isaiah:

166. One of the 36 hidden saints in every generation, upon whose goodness the continued existence of the world depends

The City in the Moonlight

A wolf shall dwell with a lamb, and a leopard shall lie down with a kid, and a calf and a young lion and a fat ox shall rest together, and a young child shall lead them. A cow and a bear shall graze together; they shall make their young lie down together and a lion shall eat straw like an ox. A suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp, and a weaned child shall put his hand into an adder's den and shall not be hurt. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. On that day, the progeny of Jesse¹⁶⁷ shall emerge as a standard-bearer for the people.

In the *Book of Love For All Life*, the author, Reb Shloyme Zalmen Aaron of Salok, "Zalmora of *The Prophets*," as they called him, drawing on his Talmudic logic, wrote that men had a duty to make peace with "the compassionate ones" first, so the Messiah would come. Only then, claimed Zalmora in the book, would the abnormal animal behaviors described in Isaiah, and all else that is written there, come to pass.

The emissaries from Salok had the brochure printed in Vilna, by the publishing house of the widow and brothers Romm. Among the things Zalmora had written in it was that Adam and Eve and their contemporaries ate no meat, and that there was only a temporary compromise on grain and fish for the spoiled generation of Noah and the generation of the tower of Babel after that. He also wrote about the signs of the coming of the Messiah that the Lord put into words in Deuteronomy, paragraph 11:14-15:

And I will bring rain to your land at the appropriate time, early rain and late rain, and you will gather your grain and your wine and your olives, and I will give the grass in your fields to the cattle, and you will eat and be sated.

He also wrote of the deep secret about sparing the animals and the fishes, and what that had to do with the Messiah. But I can't go into all of that here.

Finally, in his book, Zalmora gave citations from the Bal-Shem of Mikhlshtot, Reb Zekele (Yitskhok Leyb) of Worms, may his merits protect us.

167. i.e., the Messiah

Zalmora of The Prophets

* * *

Of course, many people took great exception to Reb Zalmen's *Book of Love For All Life*, and very few read it. One finds only a few, even among the Salokers dispersed throughout the world, who are trying to bring the Messiah by not touching any meat or fish. One could call them "Salokers" or just "compassionate ones for the Messiah's sake."

If a person comes to Salok and looks into the Salok lake on a moonlit night, that person, they say, immediately, as if out of nowhere, thinks about Zalmora's method of helping the Messiah come by observing compassion for living creatures and living on all the good things from the fruitful earth that the Lord has given.

Dovid Katz has written dozens of short stories that depict the life and culture of the old-time Lithuanian Jews (Litvaks), especially their misnagdic religious tradition and psyche, which differed greatly from that of the khasidim, whose culture is far more familiar to most American Jews. He set himself the task of redressing the balance by masterfully and immersing himself in the long-lost milieu that he brings to life on these pages. The present volume comprises 13 of his most compelling and accessible stories, translated into English by Barnett Zumoff, America's leading translator of Yiddish literature.

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