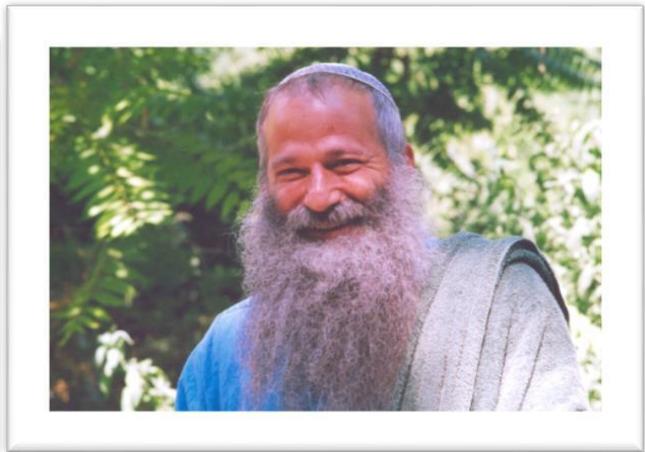


# Hollywood to the Holy Land



**A Spiritual Odyssey**

**Tzvi Fishman**

Am K'lavi - Jerusalem

With heartfelt thanks to the Almighty for guiding me on my journey; to my parents, of blessed memory, for their patience, love, and support; and to Daniel Dayan for his question on the beach.

HOLLYWOOD TO THE HOLY LAND

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This book is dedicated to Rabbi Yehuda Hazani, of blessed memory, whose towering love for Torah, for *Am Yisrael*, for *Eretz Yisrael*, for *Yerushalayim*, and for the Holy One Blessed Be He, remains an ever-shining beacon in my life.

## Introduction

One of my sons asked me to write a book about how a totally assimilated screenwriter from Hollywood, like me, ended up living happily ever after in Jerusalem - a religious Jew, the father of seven children, may they all be healthy and well - along with all the other children of *Am Yisrael*.

Because my book, *The Kuzari for Young Readers*, and my novels, *Tevye in the Promised Land*, *The Discman and the Guru*, and my collections of short stories, *Days of Mashiach*, found a wide audience among young people in Israel, these same young people will probably be interested in reading this book as well. Because of this following of young readers, and because many of them are religious, I will have to be careful with my words. After all, my life in America during the height of the “hippie” and “free love” era wasn’t the most modest of times. And my sojourn in Hollywood, rubbing elbows with the stars, and trying to climb up the ladder of fame and success, isn’t exactly the material young religious girls learn for their high-school *bagrut* matriculation exams. Therefore, I will have to follow the example of Rabbi Eliezer by revealing a *tefach* and covering two.

Fortunately, after thirty-five years of learning Torah and living a new life in Israel, the old tapes of my past, tapes of the Beatles and the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, and “The Star Spangled Banner,” have been replaced by the songs of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and the “*HaTikvah*.” The writings of Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and Dostoyevsky have been replaced by the writings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook. I have forgotten more of my life in America than I remember. For example, a short time ago, one of my older boys called me into his room

to take a look at a movie on YouTube -after having asked my wife to lower the level of the “Rimon” filter. It was some kind of American action film about a Black boxer. I gazed at the computer screen, having absolutely no idea why my son wanted me to see what looked like a very low-budget film. Then, after another few minutes, staring at the idiotic characters on the screen, I suddenly realized that I had written the movie! It was a dumb, complete waste-of-time story about a tough, street-fighter who beats up all the bad guys in town. Thank G-d, the movie had been completely erased from my memory after the ups and downs of raising seven kids in Israel; after taking care of sick and aging parents who followed after me on *aliyah*; after a few Intifadas and wars; a decade of *miluim* army-reserve duty; after angry demonstrations against Oslo and the evacuation from Gush Katif; after nights spent studying Torah, and immersing myself in hundreds of purifying *mikvahs* and the cleansing spiritual rehabilitation of taking a part in the rebuilding of the Jewish Nation in *Eretz Yisrael*. The *Gemara* teaches that Rabbi Zera purposely forgot all the Torah he had learned in Babylon when he came to live in the Land of Israel. When I turned my back on the American dream of making it big in Hollywood to come on Aliyah, I too wanted to forget the darkness of my 34 years in exile, trying to be some impostor of myself. As Rabbi Chanan Porat once told me, when we return to the Land of Israel, the exile seems like it was all a bad dream, as King David says, “*When the L-rd brought back the captives of Zion, we were like those who dream.*” Thank the good L-rd, most of the nightmare of growing up in a foreign country, in a place I didn’t belong, has faded from my memory - but even the few scraps of memories which remain in the cobwebs of my brain could cause a young religious girl in Israel to turn red with shame, so, in telling my story, I will have to leave out more than I include.

The Reader will notice that the narration alternates from present tense to past, back and forth, throughout the recap of the story. While a general rule of writing cautions against this technique, lest the reader become confused, the rules of prose are not like the rules of Torah which must always be followed. A person should also prudently obey traffic rules and the laws of the government, but when it comes to creative writing, liberties are allowed, so long as the reader doesn't get lost.

I hope what I recount won't embarrass my family. I am certain they will discover many revelations not to their liking, and I apologize to them in advance. *HaRav* Tzvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook, of blessed memory, often taught that the greatest *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of G-d) comes out from greatest *Chillul Hashem* (Desecration of G-d). I hope this will be the case with my story.

“With each passing day, powered by the lofty light of t’shuva, the penitent’s feeling becomes more secure, clearer, more enlightened with the radiance of sharpened intellect, and more clarified according to the foundations of Torah. His demeanor becomes brighter, his anger subsides, the light of grace shines on him. He becomes filled with strength; his eyes are filled with a holy fire; his heart is completely immersed in springs of pleasure; holiness and purity envelop him. A boundless love fills all of his spirit; his soul thirsts for G-d, and this very thirst satiates all of his being. The holy spirit rings before him like a bell, and he is informed that all of his willful transgressions, the known and the unknown, have been erased; that he has been reborn as a new being; that all of the world and all of Creation are reborn with him; that all of existence calls out in song, and that the joy of G-d infuses all. Great is t’shuva for it brings healing to the world, and even one individual who repents is forgiven, and the whole world is forgiven with him.”

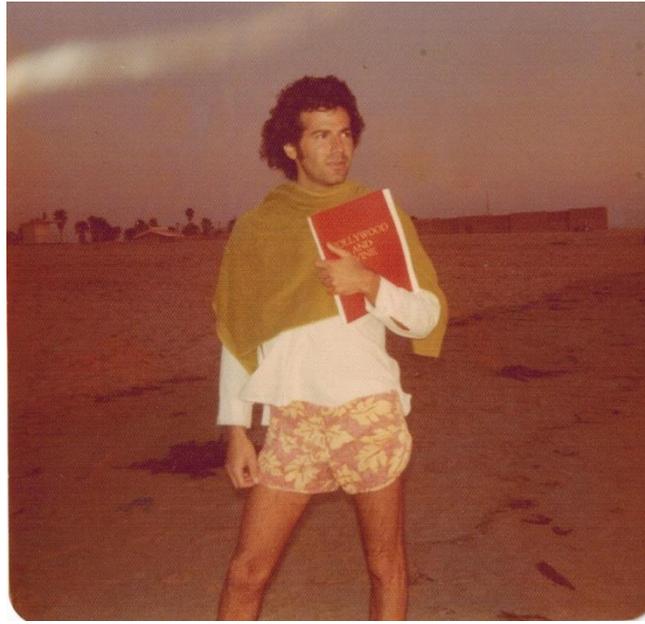
“Lights on T’shuva” – HaRav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook

*“For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all countries, and I will bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all of your impurities, and from all of your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart will I also give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My spirit in you, and cause you to follow My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments and do them. And you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and you shall be My people, and I shall be your G-d,” (Ezekiel, 36:24-28).*

HOLLYWOOD  
TO THE  
HOLY LAND

## Chapter One

### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A HOLLYWOOD JEW

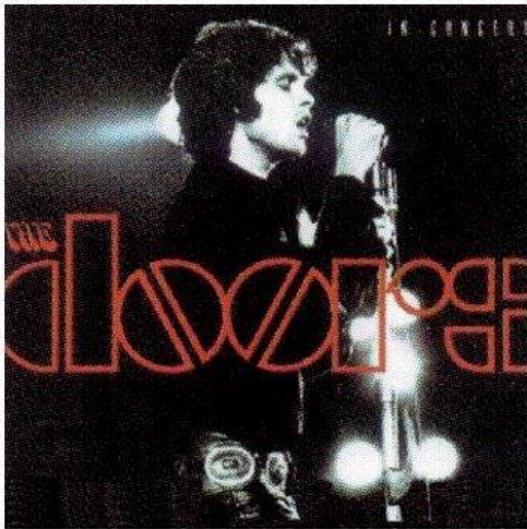


I am 30 years old. I wake up at six-thirty in the morning. The first aerobics class at the Santa Monica Sports Connection health club begins at seven, and I don't want to miss the fun. All the young, South California beauties will be there before they go off to work: the models, aspiring actresses, the coffee-shop waitresses who are waiting for their big chance to make it in the movies; the blonds and the brunettes and the redheads who live with the dream of meeting the writer, or director, or producer, who will open the door to fame; the skinny girls, over-plump girls, tall girls, short girls, girls hard to get, and girls who are easy....

Today, in Jerusalem, what seems like a thousand years later, first thing in the morning, I hurry to *shul* and put on *tefillin*. Back then in Hollywood, I would roll a joint with the same care and precision that I now wrap my

*tefillin* strap around my arm. A joint was also known as a reefer - a cigarette made out of Cannabis, better known as marijuana, or grass. Like everyone in California in those days, and probably also today, I always had a stash on hand. Marijuana was easy to get and not very expensive. The joint paper comes in a pocket-size package on sale at any drugstore. You simply sprinkle some marijuana on the small piece of paper, roll it up into the shape of a slender cigarette, lick an edge as if you were sealing an envelope, twist the two ends with a flick of the wrists, and light up. If there are seeds in the grass, they are likely to crackle and burn the back of your throat, so it's a good idea to sift the seeds out of the weed before rolling a joint. Inhale deeply for as long as you can, give your veins a chance to circulate the fumes to your brain, then let the smoke float out of your mouth in pretty little curls. Good morning, California!

Probably, I put on some music. In my teenage years, I had attended the first concert of "The Doors" in New York, at the Fillmore East in Greenwich Village, in the heart of Hippie-Land.



They were my favorite rock group, so I probably turned on one of their albums or tapes. I still remember the words to one of their most popular songs:

"You know the day destroys the night, Night

divides the day.

I tried to run,

I tried to hide,

Break on through to the other side.

Break on through to the other side.

Break on through. Break on through. Yeeeeeh!”

My little MG sports car is waiting down on the street. It’s a cool, yellow convertible, with room for the driver and a friend. I roll back the roof, put on my shades, and zoom off, waving hello to the Pacific Ocean just down the street from my Venice Beach bachelor’s pad on the outskirts of Santa Monica.



Soon I’m on the highway, speeding east toward L.A.’s #1 health club, “The Sports Connection.” At that hour of the morning, traffic is moderate, so I make good time while the car stereo blasts: “Do do do do do do; do do do do do do. And here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson...” from the movie, “The Graduate,” starring Dustin Hoffman, who I had once met in New York, hoping he would agree to act in a screenplay I had written. Big deal.

Up in the sky, the familiar dark orange cloud of pollution hangs over the smoggy L.A. basin. Los Angeles and neighboring Hollywood are surrounded by mountains, and the pollution of LA’s congested freeways hangs over the city like a funeral shroud throughout the day, until evening winds blow the poison out to sea.

A year later, after my “Magical Mystery Tour” of Judaism had started, my good friend, Daniel Dayan, told me that a holy Rabbi from Jerusalem was in town, and he took me to meet him. He was none other than Rabbi Yisrael Odessa, the elderly Breslov *Tzaddik* who had received the famous *petach* (letter) from *Rebbe* Nachman, after the Hasidic master’s death.



He had flown into “Tinsel Town” to raise money to publish pamphlets and books on *Rebbe* Nachman, “Na Nach, Nachman from Uman.” At the gathering, someone asked him why Los Angeles was always so polluted. The old, white-bearded sage thought for a moment and said an amazing thing:

“Everything physical in the world has a spiritual counterpart. Here in Hollywood, people’s lives are very impure, so there is a great deal of spiritual impurity in the air, which takes physical form in the clouds of pollution which blanket the city.”

“Now that was an interesting answer,” I thought. Obviously, this holy Rabbi hadn’t been hanging out in Hollywood’s sports discos and bars. How did he know that the city was such a big cesspool of sin?

“When somebody sanctifies himself like he has,” my friend, Daniel, explained, “He develops spiritual radar. He doesn’t have to see things. He senses them on his spiritual radar screen.”

Daniel Dayan is an Israeli. Raised in a religious family, he was born in Morocco and moved to Israel when he was eight. At the age of thirteen, he saw his first Charlie Chaplin movie and decided, then and there, that he wanted to be an actor. So, a few years after he finished his army service in Israel, he took off to seek his fame and fortune in America. In those days, I had just graduated from the New York University Film School. I had an apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood, with a spare room that I rented out to Daniel when he arrived in New York, fresh off the airplane. He was tall and good-looking, with even more muscles than his childhood movie heroes, Tarzan and Hercules.

He spoke broken English, but his charming, half-Israeli/half-French-Moroccan accent was the hit of the jazz bars and Greenwich Village cafes I took him to, especially when he said that he was born in Casablanca, the city made famous by the legendary Humphrey Bogart named after the city. The way his listeners reacted you would have thought he was Humphrey Bogart himself!



Here's a photo of Daniel back then, with my parents, outside their tourist boutique in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, where we lived for 25 years.

In those early days of our friendship, I acted as his guide, introducing him to the life of a young bohemian writer in the “Big Apple,” the nickname for the forbidden fruit you can find so easily in New York. Right from the start, he called me Tzvi, my Hebrew name. “What kind of name is Ken for a Jew?” he asked. “It sounds like can. Like a garbage can.” A few years later, when I moved out West to Hollywood, Daniel acted as my guide to “Sin City,” where he had re-located to pursue his dream of becoming a famous Hollywood star. Today, he has a flowing white beard, a lot longer than mine. He lives in Tzfat and has probably been to Uman in the last thirty years more times than anyone in the world. In the movie, “*Ushpizin*,” he played the role of the Rabbi. In fact, it was Daniel who influenced the Israeli actor, Shuli Rand, to become a *baal t’shuva*, which means, “a master of return” – someone who returns to religious observance.



But I'm jumping ahead of the story. Back to the Sports Connection, which was to L.A. what the *Beit HaMikdash* is to Jerusalem – the place where everything was happening, baby!

Sure enough, after I change into my stylish, gym clothes in the locker room and hurry downstairs, the slimnastics room is packed. As I mentioned in the introduction, California isn't the most modest place in the world. The exercise room is filled with rows and rows of suntanned arms and legs, sticking out from tight-fitting leotards. May the L-rd have mercy on the souls of the sweet Jewish guys like me who were there, trying to look as gentile as we could, and exercising along to the pulsating music with Sally and Susie, Betty and Brenda, Carol and Cathy, Maggie and Mindy, Patty and Priscilla, Debbie and Donna, Lena and Lana, Jill and Judy, Tina and Toni, Randy and Rena, and all the other lonely, single girls looking for fame, love, or at least some fantasy and make-believe romance.

It's a giant exercise room, jam-packed with beautiful youths, maybe a hundred-and-fifty in all, but with the wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor, mirrors on all four sides of room, it looks like a crowd of 600, all dancing and jerking and moving their hips to the blasting rock music, "Move your body! Do your thing! Move your body! Do your thing!" and other stupid lyrics which I don't recall. *B'Kitzor – Gan Eden!* Paradise on Earth!

Up front on the small stage, Zevi, the good-looking, musclebound, Israeli exercise instructor is leading the class. "One, two, three, four," he calls out while making perfectly smooth motions for everyone to follow. "One, two, three, four!"

I wonder if he can count any higher. He's a nice guy, but no genius by any means. Suddenly a scream fills the room.

"SHAAAA!" my friend, Daniel, shouts out. Daniel is also Israeli, good-looking, with muscles all over his body. Eyes dart his way.

"SHAAAA! SHAAAA! SHAAAA!" he yells, like a martial arts expert, kicking a leg high in the air while his arms shoot back in forth in karate-chop blows.

Zevi, the class instructor, frowns. He doesn't like anyone stealing his spotlight. There are enough girls in the class for everyone, but he wants them all to himself.

"SHAAA!" I scream out from my side of the room.

"SHAAA!" Daniel yells.

"SHAAA!" I repeat, making the most perfect motions I can in time to the pulsating beat.

“SHAAA!” “SHAAA!”

Now Zevi looks really annoyed. He’s lost the class’s attention. Instead of looking at him, everyone is now looking at Daniel and me. In one of the mirrors, I notice a pretty new girl gazing my way.

“SHAAA!” I shout.

“SHAAA!” Daniel echoes.

“Stop it!” Zevi calls out, red in the face.

Daniel laughs. So do I. Like good little boys scolded by the teacher, we stop disturbing the class. But we’ve succeeded in our mission. Now we’re the stars of the show, not Zevi. If he wanted to, the muscular *Sabra* could beat me up for sure. But Daniel is a lot stronger and tougher than Zevi, and I’m Daniel’s buddy, so outside of glaring angrily at us after class, he mumbles something to Daniel in Hebrew (which I don’t understand at all) and sulks off into the locker room.

When the hour-long aerobics class is over, there’s a traffic jam at the door. Sure enough, the pretty new girl shows up beside me. I flash a friendly, million-dollar, Hollywood, Paul Newman, smile, and say good morning. Actress that she hopes to be, she reacts with a look of surprise, as if getting hit up by a guy in exercise class in Los Angeles is the most unexpected thing in the world.

“This is a bigger traffic jam than out on the freeway,” I quip, motioning to the crowd of sweating bodies trying to get out the door, while a fresh line of exercisers eagerly waits to come in for the start of the eight-o’clock work-out.

“Is it always crowded like this?” she asks. “I’m new here.” She slips into her training jacket so she won’t seem so scantily attired.

I wrap my towel around my shoulders. "At this hour, yes," I reply. "The early-bird special is the day's most popular class."

"You and your friend certainly make a lot of noise with all of your shouting," she remarks.

I smile. "Daniel? He's a lot of fun. We like to get Zevi off balance."

"Why?"

"He takes himself too seriously."

Rubbing shoulders in the squeeze, we're finally out the door and in the corridor.

"I'm a screenwriter," I say. "What do you do?"

"I'm an actress."

"That's great. Working in a film right now?"

"Not this moment. Right now, I work in a department store, but I've got some auditions at the end of the month."

"Good luck," I reply, already bored with the same conversation I've had a hundred times before. "There's a lot of competition out there."

"Yes, I'm discovering that. But I starred in a lot of shows in college. What movies have you written?" she asks.

We reach the lounge area. There's a health-food bar where you can get vitamin milkshakes packed with fruit, wheat germ, bee pollen, and other energy boosters. To the left is the stairway leading to the woman's locker room. To the right is the stairway leading to the men's. She has to get to work, so I have to score fast.

“My first film was called ‘Law and Disorder’ with Carroll O’Conner, Ernest Borgnine, and Karen Black for Columbia Pictures. Then I wrote a black-exploitation movie about a boxer that I’m sure you haven’t seen, and a horror film for Filmways that’s coming out this summer.”

Chances are that she hasn’t seen “Law and Disorder” either. The movie received good box-office reviews, but it wasn’t a blockbuster.

Nevertheless, I knew she’d be impressed by the name of the lead actor. At the time, Carroll O’Conner was the most famous star on television. And every would-be actress in Hollywood wanted to be like Karen Black, who had a small role in the film. I didn’t bother to mention my novel, figuring I’d save that card for later.

“You wrote ‘Law and Disorder?’ she exclaimed. “Wow! It’s a great movie!”

In my mind, it’s an OK film, but nothing to get excited about. But if she’s happy meeting the movie’s young, handsome screenwriter, I’m not about to discourage her. Her eyes are shining. As the song says, “Another one bites the dust.”

“I just sold my latest script to Carelco Pictures for \$1,200,000. But I co-wrote it with a friend, so I only get half,” I modestly tell her.

I could sense her knees wobbling. Casually, to hide her nervousness, she holds onto the counter of the health bar. On Daniel’s way to the weight room, he looks over and gives me a wink.

“Maybe there’s a role for me?” she says with a small, cover-up laugh.

“Maybe, but I’m only the writer. I could introduce you to the director. That’s his call.”

“Really?” she asks, gazing at me like I was the Prince Charming she’s dreamed about all her life.

“We’re only just signing the deal this afternoon,” I tell her. “Carelco hasn’t chosen a director yet for the film. They are talking about Arnold or Sylvester Stallone for the lead, but it’s all movie talk at the moment.”

“Arnold Schwarzenegger?” she asks with awestruck eyes. “I’ve seen him here in the lobby a few times.”

“Hey, can I buy you a fruit shake?” I ask.

“Thanks for the offer,” she says. “I’d really love to, but I don’t have time. I have to hurry to work.”

“Maybe we can meet for a drink later tonight,” I offer.

“Maybe,” she replies, remembering to play a little hard to get. “I have to look at my calendar. I don’t remember if I have anything planned for this evening.”

“No problem,” I say. “Here’s my number. Give me a call later if you like.”

I always wear tennis shorts to aerobics class because they have pockets. I slip out one of my business cards and hand it to her. It’s a simple card with just my name and phone number for the business of picking up aspiring actresses at health clubs, coffee shops, supermarkets, and discos.

“Nice to meet you, Ken,” she says, looking up from the card.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Wendy,” answers. “My card is upstairs in the locker room. If you like, I’ll bring you one.”

“No need,” I tell her. “If you want, you can call me around noon. I’ll be at home writing.”

“Groovy,” she replies with her best Hollywood smile. She sways her curvy blond hair with a small swing of her head and flashes a Colgate commercial of shiny white teeth – a look she’s practiced thousands of times.

I give her another Paul Newman grin, wave a little goodbye, and hurry off for the stairs, as if I have somewhere important to go. What bullshit. But at least I won’t be all alone in L.A. tonight. I’ll take her to a disco, buy her a few drinks, get her stoned on some strong marijuana in the parking lot, and give her an “audition” in my apartment by the beach. A day in the life of a Hollywood bum.

Next is a body-building workout in the weight room, before enjoying a relaxing Jacuzzi, breakfast, a few hours writing at home, then another reefer, and my ritual, sun-tanning session on the beach.

The weight room is for both sexes. Except for the locker room, everything is like that. That’s just the way things are in California. Not just California – all over America. Except for the exclusive, private high school I attended (and I’ll write about that later), there was no public separation of sexes. I never thought twice about it. Therefore, some three years later, the first time I walked into the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva* in Jerusalem to join the dancing on *Simcha Torah*, I was blown away by what I saw – 500 joyous males dancing round and round and round in spirited, high-powered circles which generated enough voltage to fuel an atomic-energy plant - far more wired than any aerobics class in L.A. But the main, mind-blowing thing was the fact that they were all men. Only men! Dancing! Holding hands! With incredible joy on their faces, as if everyone was soaring on Acid!



Arnold is already pumping iron in the spacious, co-ed, weight room, where he practically lives.



Grunting, he lifts a heavy barbell to his chest. His massive biceps tremble. His arms look like a caveman's club. His back muscles bulge. Mr. Universe, Arnold Schwarzenegger, looks over at me and flashes his soon-to-be, world famous, German-Hollywood smile. "Hey, Fishy," he says in his heavy Austrian accent. "When are

you going to put a little muscle on those skinny legs of yours?"

"When are you going to learn to talk English?" I ask in response.

With another loud grunt, he raises the heavy dumbbell over his head. He's shorter than me, but his "world's most beautiful body" is muscle upon muscle upon muscle upon muscle. To me he looks grotesque. He's so pumped up with steroids, he looks like he's about to explode. He's just

starred in his first successful Hollywood movie, “Conan,” and he’s about to become one of the biggest box-office stars of all time. With another loud grunt, he lets the bar of weights crash to the exercise mat on the floor.

“Spot me,” he says, lying back on a bench and lifting a humongous weight.

“Too heavy for me,” I tell him.

“Try steroids,” he moans, holding the enormous barbell over his head.

“They aren’t healthy,” I reply.

“Who cares whether they are healthy or not. They make you look good and that’s all that counts in this town.”

The wisdom of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

It was known that Schwarzenegger’s father had been a Nazi official. After Arnold became famous in Hollywood film industry, which is loaded with Jews, I’m sure he packed away any German memorabilia he might have had in his home. Back then, even though I was proud of being a Jew (because we were smarter than everyone else), my Jewish identity was an undeveloped, almost non-existent part of my life, so I wasn’t going to get into a punching match with big Arnold over a rumor that he didn’t like Jews. Even if it were true, his biceps were about twenty times bigger than mine, so I wasn’t about to challenge him to a fight.

After my mini-workout on a few Nautilus machines, I head back downstairs for a refreshing pineapple, banana, carrot juice, health shake before treating myself to a relaxing Jacuzzi.

Behind me, a deep voice calls out, “Hey, Fish, my man!” It’s Wilt Chamberlain, one of the most famous professional NBA basketball players of all time – all two-and-a-half meters of him. He towers over me, and with his

goatee, he looks pretty scary. Plus, he's gripping a paddleball racket in his hand, as if his ready to use my head as a ball.



“Hey, my man,” he says in his cool, Black-Afro accent. “How about a quick game of ball?”

“Sorry, Wilt. I’m exhausted,” I tell him.

“One game, brother. I’ll even let you win a few points. If I don’t exercise my body, my joints get all stiff, and my arthritis kicks in, and then the doctor’s gotta give me a cortisone shot which can cripple me even worse, can you dig it?”

How could I say no to Wilt Chamberlain – the guy who scored 100 points in one game? He was a legend in American sports. And I was a big sport nut like everyone else in America. The truth is, when he was still active, I hated his guts. He played for the Philadelphia Flyers, the arch rivals of my favorite team, the Boston Celtics. To give you an idea how crazy I was about sports, I will list, right now, without looking at Google, the star

players of the Celtics champion teams of the late Fifties and early Sixties, which will be forever ingrained in my memory: Bob Cousy, Bill Sharman, Tommy Heinsohn, Frank Ramsey, K.C.

Jones, Sam Jones, John Havlichek, and their great center, Bill Russell, whose contests against Wilt Chamberlain were among the greatest highlights of my youth. And to give you another example of how totally inundated I was in American culture, here are the names of the starting line-up for the 1956 Brooklyn Dodgers World Series Baseball Champions – once again without looking them up on Google:



Catcher, Roy Campanella; first base, Gil Hodges; second base, Pee Wee Reese; shortstop, Junior Gilliam; third base, Jackie Robinson; left field, Sandy Amaros; center field, Duke Snider; right field, Carl Furillo, pitchers, Johnny Padres, Don Drysdale, Don Newcomb, and the up-and-coming star, Sandy Koufax, the famous Jew who refused to pitch when the World Series fell on *Yom Kippur*. Today, I have trouble remembering *Mishnaot* by heart, but this kind of meaningless sports garbage is still engraved in my soul as if they were Tablets from Mount Sinai. That shows the importance of childhood education, what's called,

*"Girsa D'Yankuta."* What you experience as a kid, you never forget. Today, looking back on my journey, remembering how seeped I was in American sports and movies, I can honestly say that the Land of Israel was further away from my consciousness than the moon. I knew almost nothing about Jewish History, nothing about Zionism, nothing about Torah, and maybe ten Hebrew words. Years later, when I became a close friend of the former Soviet Prisoner of Zion, Rabbi Yosef Mendeleovich, I told him, "You were lucky. In Russia, you knew you were in prison. In America, I was in prison too, but I didn't know it. I couldn't see the bars."

"OK, Wilt," I tell famous basketball legend. "I'll get my racket from my locker."

I was an excellent tennis player, and I probably could have beaten him out on a full-size court. But in the small, indoor, racket-ball cage, surrounded by four walls, I'm no match for big Wilt. With his giant frame dominating the center of the cramped court, and his incredible arm reach, he runs me back and forth without mercy. I'm breathing so hard, I start to wheeze. His arms are so long, he hardly has to move. And if he does, he's amazingly quick, like a sleepy alligator that suddenly pounces after an unwitting prey. When the game is over, I lean against a wall with my heart pounding, as if it's about to explode.

"Hey, man," he says. "You've got to stop smoking weed. It's killing your lungs."

While I'm on the subject, I'll tell you another story. Once, when I was living in New York City, before I moved to L.A., I walked out of a Third Avenue cinema at the conclusion of a movie, and discovered that I didn't have bus money to ride across town to my apartment. Since it was cold and raining, I decided to hitchhike, which is something you never see in Manhattan. Almost immediately, a big Mercedes Benz stops and I jumped in the front

seat. The driver was a young black man. His head reached the roof of the car, and his knees straddled the steering wheel on both sides. I never saw bigger hands in my life. His fingers were gigantic. And the whole car smelled like hashish.

“I’m going to West 87<sup>th</sup> Street,” I told him.

“No problem, brother,” he answered. “I’m just driving around the city, if you can dig it. I grew up here.”

“Where are you living now?” I asked.

“Milwaukee,” he answered.

Immediately, I realized that I was sitting next to the great basketball player, Lew Alcindor, who later changed his name to Kareem Abdul Jabbar, when he became a Muslim after the team left Milwaukee to become the Los Angeles Lakers.

“I like the smell of your car upholstery,” I told him, hinting at the smell of hashish, and hoping he’ll offer me a smoke.

“That’s my body oil,” he answered. “I’m a big man and I need a lot of cologne, if you know what I mean.”

“It sure smells like hashish to me,” I insisted.

“No way, man. I’m clean. When I come to New York, it’s a big bummer. All my old high-school friends are junkies. Some killed themselves with heroine, and the others just hang out all day on the street, looking for hand-outs so they can buy their next fix. Drugs are poison, bro. Dope is for dopes. I never touch them. Neither should you.”

He's right. Drugs are really poison. But as the saying goes, "When in Rome do as the Romans do." Everyone smoked hashish and marijuana, so I did too. I knew enough to stay away from hard drugs like LSD, heroine, and cocaine, but I smoked grass practically every day. I began during my last year in high school, and ever since, it was a regular part of my life, like a glass of orange juice in the morning, and another supposedly "healthy" habit of a young men in America which the Torah condemns. If you ask me, America shouldn't be called in Hebrew, "*Artzot HaBrit*." It would be far more accurate to call America, "*Artzot Pagam HaBrit*" instead.

Once, when I was living in New York, I set up a good friend of mine from high school on his very first date. Lou was terribly shy with girls and never dated. So I found him a sweet, quiet girl, and we went out on a double date to a concert of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in Lincoln Center. We had seats way up in the balcony, and every time the lead violinist energetically drew his bow over the strings of his violin, Lou would jerk his head back out of the way in a very exaggerated and noticeable fashion. When his unusual behavior continued, his date starting looking at him strangely. I leaned over and, in a whisper, asked him what was happening.

"Don't you see it?" he asked in wonder, as if I were blind.

"See what?"

"The flames."

"What flames?" I asked.

"The flames shooting from the violin every time the violinist moves his bow."

“Uh oh,” I thought. “Come on, Lou, what drug did you take?”

“LSD,” he answered, flashing me a sheepish grin and shrugging his shoulders, as if to say, “What do you expect from a guy on his very first date?”

Eventually, some years later, Lou got over his shyness and married a gentile woman. He said Jewish American Princesses made him nervous. Typically, he gave his two kids Jewish names from the Bible and raises them to believe that they’re Jews. But the problem of assimilation in America is a whole other story – practically ever Jewish friend I ever had married out of the faith, not to mention all my cousins – and while I will write about this later, the main point I wanted to make by this digression in time is that drugs are for losers. Grass leads to hashish, and hashish to cocaine, and cocaine to psychedelics and heroin. And even with marijuana, you can never tell if it’s been “doctored” or “spiked” with some dangerous chemical that can wipe out millions of brain cells and worse. One friend of mine took his very last ride on his motorcycle when he was stoned, ignoring a sign signaling a “curve in the road up ahead.” He checked out of the world, flying high over a roadside cliff. And another good friend was so spaced out when he jumped out of an airplane, he forgot to open his parachute. Not to mention Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Elvis Presley, Bruce Lee, Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison, the boxer Sonny Liston, John Belushi, Lenny Bruce, and the list goes on and on....

Now back to our story. After finishing my morning “prayers” at the health club, I head back home to my apartment. I say “prayers” because the sports emporium is very much like a house of worship, only instead of worshipping G-d, people worship themselves. Sometimes, before going home, I meet Daniel for breakfast at the hip “Santa Monica Café,” where

we sit amongst the young and beautiful, looking over the day's "Hollywood Reporter" to see what's going on in the "business." But today, Daniel has a job hanging up wallpaper in somebody's home, so I drive straight back to Venice Beach and eat a bowl of "Wheaties" before starting to write. I'm tempted to light up another joint, but I don't like to write when I'm high, and I have to be at the Carolco Pictures offices at three in the afternoon to sign our screenplay contract and pick up the first payment of \$200,000, of which, Bob, my writing partner, gets half. But now that the calming influence of my morning reefer has worn off, and now that I'm not busy exercising at the health club, or relaxing in the Jacuzzi and steam room, or blowing my brains out with deafening, hard-rock music at some disco, a familiar feeling of anxiety returns and settles over me like a sackcloth, or a cloak of thorns.

The truth is, the main reason I smoke marijuana (back then) is to silence the uncomfortable sense of uneasiness I feel in my body and brain. It's a feeling I've lived with for years, ever since college, and maybe before – a vague inner tension, a feeling of angst, what psychiatrists call "general anxiety," bordering on depression - a feeling of constant uneasiness that getting stoned seems to soothe, until the high wears off and you need another joint, or beer, or tranquillizer, or valium, or anti-depressant, or woman, or fix, or some kind of "high." What the "Rolling Stones" call "Mother's Little Helper," the "Beatles" call "Norwegian Wood," and "Jefferson Airplane" immortalizes, singing, "One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small. And the ones that mother gives you don't do anything at all. Go ask Alice when she's ten feet tall."

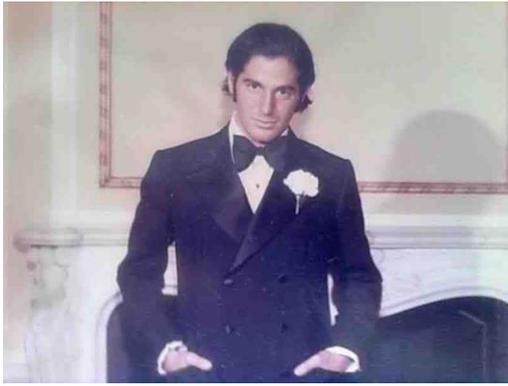
The truth is, back in that something is matter whatever new whatever new whether selling dating another initial high wears off, I that if I sell a script for even more beautiful woman, or have a bigger write-up about me in the “Hollywood Reporter,” or purchase a fancier sports car, or rent a more expensive apartment on the beach, then I will finally be happy and the anxiety will cease. But it never does. It never goes away. With every conquest and success, I need another conquest, and another success after that.



those days, I always feel missing in my life. No attainments come my way, successes I achieve - another screenplay, or beautiful girl - after the feel empty. At first I think more money, or date an even more beautiful woman, or have a bigger write-up about me in the “Hollywood Reporter,” or purchase a fancier sports car, or rent a more expensive apartment on the beach, then I will finally be happy and the anxiety will cease. But it never does. It never goes away. With every conquest and success, I need another conquest, and another success after that.

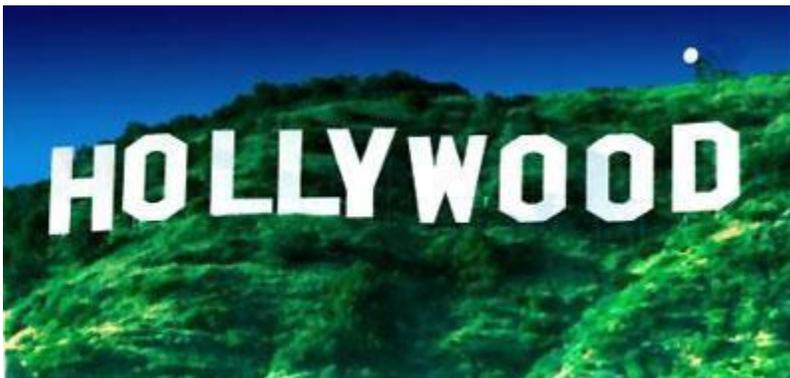
Wherever the emptiness comes from, I can't fill it up. It is like some kind of monster that won't be satiated. So I get stoned to alleviate the bummer feeling, as Simon and Garfunkel sing, “Feeling groovy, la la la la la la la. Feeling groooooovy.”

Now I know what was missing. My holy Jewish soul wasn't getting the spiritual nourishment it needed. Zero. Whatever worldly treasures I fed it, they didn't mean a thing to my soul. Because, as the book, “*Mesillat Yesharim*,” explains, the soul belongs to a totally different world. The holy Jewish soul doesn't receive any enjoyment from fancy sports cars, beautiful women, money, and other material pleasures. To put it simply, I was playing a role in a movie, trying to be someone else, and my holy soul



was screaming out in silent anguish. Not only that. Geographically I didn't belong where I was. My holy Jewish soul belonged in the Holy Land, not in Hollywood - in the Land of Israel, not in L.A. But, of course, I didn't know any of that at the time. I had no inclination that the source of my inner malaise was spiritual. If someone had told me back then, I wouldn't have had any idea what the hell he was talking about. I would have thought he was crazy. So I lit up another joint and inhaled deeply, once, twice, three times... "Feeling groooooooooooooooooooooovy."

I get to the meeting with the lawyers on time. I'm so used to getting stoned, I can drive stoned, walk stoned, talk stoned, in a completely normal manner, so that no one would ever suspect I was bonkers inside. Truth is, they are probably all stoned too, the lawyers, the vice-president of Carolco Pictures who sat in on the meeting, the young secretary with long legs who took notes, and my friend, Bob, who always wore rose-tinted glasses, so you couldn't see the red blood vessels expanding in his eyeballs, because he's always as high as the Hollywood sign, 24 hours round-the-clock. That's Hollywood.



Bob and I had been in Film School together, at NYU. He he had moved out to L.A. several years before me, and he had a lot of connections, which is the key to success in Hollywood. So I teamed up with him on an idea I had for a screenplay about a hunchback (like the Hunchback of Notre Dame) who lives in the tower of the Chrysler Building in New York City, and who swings from skyscraper to skyscraper with magical powers to save damsels in distress down in the city jungle.

This was years before Batman and Spiderman hit the big screens, and way before Walt Disney did their animated version of the “Hunchback of Notre Dame.” By the way, my friend, Bob, ended up marrying a non-Jewish, as did all of our other Jewish classmates from the Film School at NYU. Apparently, I had some angel looking out for me, because I stayed single until I reached the shores of Israel at the age of 34. In America, I never thought about getting married. As an uncle of mine used to say, “Why buy a cow when the milk is free?”

With the first bank check for \$100,000 in my hand, I walk out of the meeting in a very good mood, remembering to leave one of my business cards on the desk of the secretary with long legs, before shaking hands with the lawyers and saying goodbye. Sure enough, when I get back to my apartment, there’s a message from her on my telephone answering machine. “Hi,” she says. “It’s Debbie Davis from Carolco. When would you like to go out?”

There’s also a message from the girl I met that morning at the health club. “Hi,” she says. “It’s Wendy from the Sports Connection. I checked my calendar and I’m free tonight. Let me know when and where you’d like to meet.”

Instead of smoking another joint, I drop a small piece of hashish into a small pipe and light up. I don’t have the energy to take her to dinner and

sit through a long conversation, so I call her back and tell her to drive over and meet me at ten in the evening at popular disco by the beach, just a block from my apartment. That way, when she leaves my place in the middle of the night, I won't have to drive her home. She can take her own car, as Jim Morrison sings, "Don't you love her when she's walking out the door?"

The next morning I wake up alone in bed. Sure enough, she's gone. There's a piece of paper sticking out of my typewriter (remember this was B.C. - Before Computers) with a one sentence note: "Thanks. I had a great time!" My head hurts from last night's booze and drugs. It's seven o'clock, but the last thing on my mind is a noisy aerobics class at the club. And who wants to see her again? She's a nice person, but two dates is already a relationship in Hollywood, and who can handle something as heavy as that? I decide to go to the late afternoon exercise class so I won't have to see her. Right now, I'm going back to bed. But first I have to go to the bathroom. I sit down on the toilet and have the surprise of my life. Nothing but blood pours out. Bright red blood. Blood and blood and blood. As the Dylan song goes: "It's all right, Mom. I'm only bleeding!"

## Chapter Two

### Christmas Trees, Chanukah Candles and a Church Bar Mitzvah

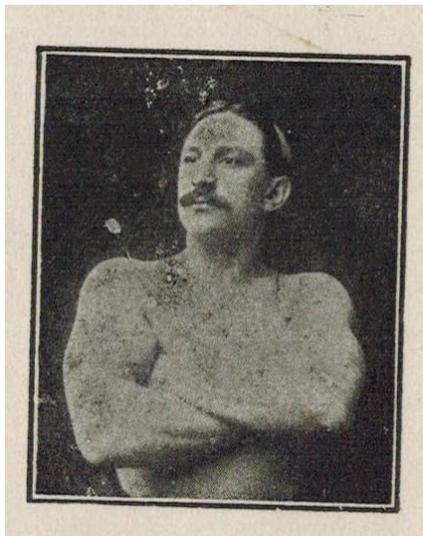
That's right. My *bar-mitzvah* was held in a church!



But let's go back to the beginning. My childhood was probably a Jewish-American childhood like many others. So I'll only mention some of the main happenings, and the things which may have bearing on how I became a bleeding Jewish screenwriter in Hollywood, who knew almost nothing about Judaism.

I was born in Syracuse, New York, in the northern part of New York State, up near the Canadian border. A few thousand years ago, the original Syracuse was a powerful city-state in Greece, the country that once upon a time, in the days of the Maccabees, tried to conquer the whole world and force the Jewish People to accept their Hellenistic and heathen ways,

which is precisely what I had done in America, along with all the other assimilated American Jews. I only remember the two years we lived in Syracuse from old photos of an infant bundled up in the snow. In one of the pictures, my grandfather, Benjamin Harris, is sitting on a sled, holding me in his lap. At my *brit*, I was given the Hebrew name, Tzvi, after his father, Harry, the Americanized alias for Tzvi Hirsh. You can see from old photos that my great grandfather was a powerful man, with large biceps and shoulders broader than Arnold's.



My grandfather bragged that his father could lift up the front end of a car, not one of the compact cars of today, but a big heavy Buick, the kind you see in old Hollywood gangster movies. In fact, to bring home some extra money during the difficult Depression years in

America, my great grandfather was a professional wrestler, the first "Masked Marvel" in the ring. In those days, anti-Semitism in America was rampant, and Jews were barred from many professions, including sports. So to hide his big Jewish nose, my great grandfather put a ski-mask over his head and called himself the "Masked Marvel." One time he was pitted against some German known as the "Bruiser from Berlin." After World War One, Americans hated the Germans, and the large crowd at Madison Square Garden was thrilled to watch the "Mask Marvel" pound the German to the mat time after time. Finally, Tzvi Hirsh captured his opponent in a crushing head lock, squeezing the blood from his forehead until he turned white. "*Rachmonis*," the German gasped in Yiddish, barely able to breathe. "I'm a Jew too."

That was my "*yichus*" on my Mother's side of the family. My grandfather, Benjamin, was a strong man too, a Jack-of-all-trades, who could fix almost

anything. He was a good-looking man with a pencil-thin moustache, proud to be an America and proud to be a Jew. But his pride in being Jewish didn't stop him from divorcing my grandmother, when my Mom was still a young girl, in order to marry a pretty *shiksa*, telling her he was an Arab prince, because being a devout Catholic, she would never have agreed to marry him if she had known beforehand that he was one of the tribe who killed Jesus, as all good Catholics are taught. My Mom's grandmother, Anna (Hannah Gittel), was a little old Jewish lady who used to find rubber balls in the gutter and give them to me and my brother when we came to visit her apartment, which always had the smell of old clothes. Her husbands kept dying, so she married four times to support her three daughters and an assortment of other relatives who all lived together in her always cramped quarters in Brooklyn. When my grandmother was a young girl, Grandma Anna couldn't manage to feed her daughters during the Great Depression and a several year lapse between husbands, so she placed them in a public orphanage, where they grew up without any Jewish education at all. So from my mother's side of the family, I didn't receive any *Yiddishkeit* as a child, except for my grandfather, Benjamin, the "Masked Marvel's son, telling me with a threatening look, "Always remember you're a Jew, and marry a Jew!" even though he himself didn't.

On my Father's side, my grandfather, Julius (Yehuda), was born in Austria. A decade before World War One, he came to America with his father



when he was fourteen years old, but his father, my great grandfather, died on the boat before setting his eyes on the Statue of Liberty. Debarking at Ellis Island with other Orthodox Jews, he didn't know any English. A Jewish Immigration official helped him fill out the new-immigrant form. Not wanting

to sign his name X, which resembles a Christian cross, he drew a little circle (“*kikele*” in Yiddish), which is how the Jews earned the derogatory epithet, “Kike.” Alone in the city, my fourteen-year-old grandfather worked in the “sweat shops” of the garment district in Manhattan, sending his earnings back to Austria until he could bring his mother and siblings to America, thereby saving them from the Holocaust. To keep a job in those days, many Jews chose to compromise and work on the Sabbath. Loyalty to the commandments often gave way in the struggle to survive, necessity of surviving, at a time when anti-Semitism in America was at a peak. Jews were barred from many professions and places, along with “colored people” and dogs.

My grandfather, Julius, and my grandmother, Dorothy (Devorah), spoke Yiddish when they didn’t want me and my brother to understand. Granny kept a kosher home. *Shabbos* night was *Shabbos* night with candles, *challah*, and chicken soup. Their apartment smelled like *schmaltz* the whole week. Granny was born in America, in the very *goyisha* state of Rhode Island. If I had any real sense of Jewish identity as a child, it mostly came from her. She would often say, “A curse on Columbus,” for having discovered America and the assimilation it eventually caused. Pouring a glass of milk, she would encourage me to drink it, saying, “Finish your milk and a Jew-hater will die.” If an airplane crashed, she would read through the list of victims in the newspaper and, when she came to a Jewish name, she would cry.

My Father, of blessed memory, was the oldest of three brothers. He went to *heder* as a boy and put on *tefillin* until he was drafted into the United States Army and sent overseas in World War Two to fight against the Germans. He knew most of the synagogue prayers by heart, but he didn’t know what they meant, because none of his teachers bothered to explain their meaning in English. That’s one of the reasons a lot of Jews in America

abandoned Orthodoxy and opted for Conservative Judaism, which relied more on English. As odd as it may seem, nobody bothered to explain to a generation of Jewish immigrant children what it was they were learning in Talmud Torah. By the time I was a child, my Mother insisted that we join a Reform temple, because she didn't understand any Hebrew at all, and she wanted to know what she was saying when she prayed. My Dad didn't protest. During his three years as a soldier in North Africa and Italy, he stopped eating kosher, and whatever early attachment he had to Torah Judaism gradually faded out of his life in the struggle to support his family and keep up with our gentile neighbors. So while an Orthodox Rabbi presided over my Father's *bar mitzvah*, the Rabbi's son became a Conservative "rabbi" and he presided over my brother's *bar mitzvah*. The year I reached thirteen, our Reform temple was in the midst of being expanded to accommodate the growing numbers of Jews who wanted Judaism to be less and less Jewish. During the building's renovation, the temple was closed, so my *bar-mitzvah* service was held in a Unitarian Church, which, to me, is a great metaphor for growing up Jewish in America.

My Mom first spotted my Dad when she was fourteen, while he was playing handball in Brooklyn Prospect Park. She asked her cousin, Peachy, to introduce them, and it was love at first sight. My grandmother, Dorothy, didn't like my Mother because her parents were divorced, which was a big *shanda* for Jews in those days. Plus, my Mom's mother had natural blond hair, and that was some kind of scandal too. Added to all that, my Mom's father remarried with a *shiksa*, so in my grandmother's eyes, my Mother was *traf*. But in my Father's eyes, my Mom was the most beautiful woman in the world, and judging from her photos, he wasn't exaggerating. They dated for several years, then, when my Father was drafted at the beginning of World War Two, and sent to North Carolina for

his boot-camp training, my Mom followed after him and they secretly eloped, getting married by the local Justice of the Peace.



A few months later, before Dad was shipped overseas, they had a traditional Orthodox wedding back in Brooklyn, at my grandmother's insistence, on the roof of granny's Ocean Avenue apartment building, with a *Chuppah*, *Ketubah*, and Orthodox Rabbi presiding, as an old black-and-white movie shows.

Here in Israel, when my sons are in the army, if they don't get to come home for *Shabbat*, they complain. Sometimes, if the *yetzer* overcomes them, they may even curse. I remind them that when their grandfather was in the U.S. Army, fighting against the Nazis, he didn't get home for over three years. And if my sons grumble that the food in the army stinks, I remind them that the food which *Tzahal* gives them is a lot better than what their other grandfather, my wife's father, was given in Auschwitz.

Anyway, my Father didn't see his beautiful young wife for over three years. Instead, he wrote her three letters a day, called V-mails, not to be confused with the E-mails of today. During the war, he wrote her over a thousand epistles, and I still have many of them, bound together in stacks of little books. All of this Hollywood romance may not have anything to do with my *baal-t'shuva* story, but it's worthwhile to tell a little of it because we are all, in one way or another, products of our past.

My older brother was born in Brooklyn after the war. Like I already mentioned, I was born in upstate New York. When I was two, we moved Hamden, a small town in Connecticut, not far from the city of New Haven

and Yale University. I first fell in love when I was four years old. Her name was Debbi Radcliffe, and she was the prettiest girl in the entire kindergarten. Don't tell my grandmother, but I don't think she was Jewish. I don't remember much else. Once, when I was walking home from school, a scary German Shepard jumped over the fence of its yard and chased me all the way home. Screaming, I climbed up the trellis of vines by our front door and kept hollering until my Mom hurried outside and beat the hell out of the beast with a broom. I also remember that one time when I was playing baseball, some kid walked too close behind me while I was at bat, and when I swung, I knocked out his teeth. We had a gentile babysitter named Brenda Riley who was the star of a girl's-softball team. I probably fell in love with her too. And then there was Cindy Gancartz, another miniature *shiska*, who moved into the neighborhood when I was in the second grade, but now, more than a half a century later, I only remember her name and that I loved her madly. As for my early promiscuous adventures, I will omit all that. All I can say is that in America, every kid's dad had a few "Playboy Magazines" stashed away in some dresser drawer, and playing doctor-nurse with the neighbor's daughter was as popular as baseball.

When I was eight, we moved to Framingham, Massachusetts, a lovely, picturesque New England town, with dozens of old churches topped with tall steeples and bells. The area was famous for its history during the Revolutionary War in America, dating back to 1778, and my elementary school would go on frequent field trips around the region to learn about American history. A short distance away was the large city of Boston, the site of the famous Boston Tea Party, which triggered the war against the British. The city was also the home of the Boston Celtics, my favorite NBA basketball team.

When it came to baseball, I stayed true to the Brooklyn Dodgers, my Father's favorite home team, until they moved out to L.A. Then I switched my allegiance to the local Boston Red Sox, who were led by the legendary Ted Williams. Once again, to show you how hooked I was on American folklore, when it was announced that Ebbets Field, the famous baseball stadium of the Brooklyn Dodgers, was going to be demolished to make room for an apartment complex, my Dad drove us to New York so my brother and I could dig up some of the earth in centerfield where Duke Snider used to roam. Returning home, we added the "holy" soil to our living room planter, as an eternal memorial to the immortal "Brooklyn Bums."

My Father worked as a traveling salesman, and he was away from home most of the week, traveling around New England and New York State to sell rubber heels for the "Cat's Paw Rubber Company." On Fridays, I would wait down the road for him on my bicycle, looking forward to seeing him, and looking equally forward to receiving the full box of baseball cards he always brought back from one of his trips. It will mean nothing to my children, and to the girls in *ulpanot* and the guys in *yeshivot*, but I was a wizard in leaners, toppers, and sliders, sliding a baseball card the closest to a wall – maybe a little like the "*poogim*" a decade ago in Israel.

Memories are nice, but they are not the true meat of this story. What was it like growing up Jewish in America? Let me tell you things that I remember. Come Christmas time, we had a fresh-smelling Evergreen Xmas tree in our house like everyone else, decorated with colored glass balls, red-and-white candy canes, streams of silver tinsel, and a shining star at the top. My parents didn't want my brother and I to grow up feeling different from the *goyim*, so we lit Chanukah candles, played with the *dreidel*, and rushed eagerly downstairs on Xmas morning to discover the gifts which Santa had brought in his bulging sack while his sled, led by

Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, waited up on the roof. Just like it says in the song, we had stockings filled with candy, hanging from the fireplace, and I would go outside at night, the whole week of before Christmas, singing carols with the kids of the neighborhood to spread the spirit of brotherhood and joy, "Peace on Earth and goodwill to men!" Even today, I still remember the words to the songs: "Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way..." and, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin, mother and child..." and, "We wish you a merry Xmas. We wish you a merry Xmas. We wish you a merry Xmas and a happy New Year!" I knew the songs were about Jezeus. I also knew that it was all a big lie, like Santa Claus, because that's what my parents told me, or my grandmother, or my Jewish friends. Somehow the word got around, so we knew the Christmas story was make believe, and that the brotherhood business was phony because the *goyim* really hated the Jews and that they had slaughtered millions of Jews in the name of their savior. But when most of the pretty girls in school are Catholic and Christian, and when your parents are friendly with all the Gentile neighbors, and when everything for a month on TV is filled with Christmas love, and Christmas decorations illuminate all the streets and stores, I would be lying to say that I wasn't influenced, and that my attachment to Judaism wasn't weakened. Not only was it weakened – it was smashed. Not that I believed all the Christmas hype. I didn't. To me, the best thing about Christmas was that "Playboy Magazine" always came out with a fat, double-issue, filled with immodest Christmas girls, but even though I didn't believe in the Virgin Mary, America's nationwide celebration of Xmas made Chanukah seem like little-league baseball at best. If you were a Jew, you were a minority, a second-class citizen, despised and untrustworthy people who had killed their hero on the cross. So I tried to look and act the least Jewish that I could, so I could pass myself off as a *goy* like everyone else.

Easter was the same. We always had a Passover Seder and read from the *Haggadah*. Our *matzot* were probably *chametz*, but we broke one in half and put a piece away for *Afikomen*. Being the youngest of two kids, I would recite the “Four Questions,” and I loved the song, “Dayanu,” but when Easter came, we had colorful Easter eggs and chocolate bunny rabbits, and always watched the Easter parade, as if to say to our neighbors, “Hey, we didn’t kill Christ. He was a Jew! It was the Romans who killed him, not us!”

Wanting so hard to be like all of my Gentile friends, of course I hated Hebrew School. It was the bummer of bummers! I had to go three times a week, twice in the afternoon after regular public school, and once on Saturday morning – the exact times when all the sport teams at school had their basketball, baseball, football, and hockey practice and games. In America, unlike in Israel, sport is the number one pastime. For a kid, it’s everything (save for girlie magazines). Every season of the year has its particular sport, and teams are organized with great seriousness, with fixed practices and schedules, and keen competition with other schools and towns. Because I had to go to Hebrew School, I couldn’t be on any varsity team because I had to miss two of the practices every week, and sometimes even a game when it fell on Saturday morning.

Plus the learning was so watered down, it wasn’t Judaism at all. Many readers of the Hebrew translation of this book may not be familiar with Reform Judaism because it is very insignificant in Israel. First of all, while the people who belong to the Reform congregations may be Jewish (many are not), what they teach and practice has almost nothing to do with Judaism. First, they don’t believe that the Torah was given to the Jewish People by G-d. Stemming from that, they don’t believe the commandments are mandatory, so they don’t do them at all. They don’t

keep kosher, and they don't observe the *Shabbat*. Reform "rabbis" don't believe in the Torah, so they aren't rabbis at all. But they insist on calling themselves rabbis, and everyone goes along with the charade.

Even though I was only a kid, and even though I didn't know anything about being an Orthodox Jew, I sensed that being a Reform Jew was all a big lie – like Santa Claus and Christmas. In the eighth grade, as I was approaching my *bar mitzvah*, I could have made the starting team in basketball, football, and baseball, but I had to go to Hebrew School, so that killed my childhood and my chance to win the attention of some cheerleaders and the girls who liked jocks who were good in sports.

What battles I fought with my parents about not going to Hebrew School! I threatened not to get *bar-mitzvahed*. What did I care? It was meaningless to me. I remember the "rabbi" who was supposed to *bar-mitzvah* me, teaching our Hebrew School class about the Exodus from Egypt. He said there hadn't been any miracle at all when the Jews reached the Red Sea. Rather, there hadn't been any rain for months, and the sea was a dry sandbar which the Jews crossed easily on foot. Just when they reached the other side, and the Egyptians were still in the middle of the way, a thunderstorm started by chance, a sudden heavy rain which often occurs in the wilderness. The downpour, he maintained, caused a massive flash flood which returned all the water to the sea and drowned the Egyptians before they could flee. A chance accident! G-d wasn't a part of the story at all!

"What nonsense!" I thought. "If this is Judaism, I want nothing to do with it."

But my parents put up a storm, greater than the storm at the Red Sea, so, for their sake, I agreed to learn my Torah portion by heart from a record and to participate in the meaningless ceremony of entering Jewish

manhood. But after the Saturday morning service in a church across the street from the Reform temple which was under construction, and after the lavish luncheon at the non-kosher restaurant which everyone drove to on *Shabbos*, and after I was the hit of the show by impersonating President John Kennedy, whose thick Massachusetts accent I had mastered, after that great, expensive farce of a bar-mitzvah, I didn't continue to have any connection to Judaism whatsoever, until that fateful day on a beach in Santa Monica, when my friend, Daniel, asked me why I didn't know anything about being a Jew. But we'll get to that later.

As I mentioned, growing up Jewish in assimilated America is like having a *bar mitzvah* in a church. I didn't want to be Jewish if it meant being different from everyone else. I wanted to be an American. I wanted to be as cool and unfeeling as Paul Newman and Marlon Brando. George Washington was my nation's founding father – not Avraham *Avinu*. Washington D.C. was my capital city – not Jerusalem. My flag was red, white, and blue – not blue and white. I cried when I heard the Star Spangled Banner, America's national anthem, and I didn't even know if Israel had a national anthem of its own. If it did, it was probably "*Hava Nagilla*," the only Israeli tune I knew. My inoculation into America life and cultural brainwashing was so deep, I still remember all of its national hymns: "My country tis a be, sweet land of liberty, land that I love." "America the beautiful, G-d shed His grace on thee." "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, I will fight our country's battles, on the land and on the sea." "O, when the saints go marchin' in, O, when the saints go marchin' in..." "My eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the L-rd," and all of the other lyrics that are fine for the Christians and Protestants in America, but poison for the Jews. But I didn't know any of that then, and I didn't care to. I wanted to be a red-white-and-blue blooded American like everyone else. No. That isn't quite true.

Precisely because I was a Jew, I wanted to be better than them. I wanted to be more Gentile, more famous, more beautiful, more successful, more talented, more loved. Like the great Jewish writer, Arthur Miller, who married America's most beautiful goddess, Marilyn Monroe. I wanted to be famous and successful like him!



## Chapter Three

### The Virgin Islands

Our Sages teach that even the path of leaf falling from a tree to the ground is directed by G-d. The Master of the Universe directs everything. EVERYTHING!



So what was the reason that He had my family move to the Virgin Islands after my *bar mitzvah*, to St. Thomas, a small, beautiful, tropical island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea? What was the reason? I really don't know. Maybe because the high school was terrible there, which caused my parents to send me to what was considered the best, most competitive, private school in America, Philips Andover Academy, in Andover Massachusetts, where instead of being a top student and athlete like I always had been, I was just an average student amongst America's most intelligent and athletic youth, which made me seek out the talent that was

truly special in me, which turned out to be artistic sensitivity, moviemaking, and writing.

Maybe that was G-d's reason. Maybe not.

It's not every day that somebody moves to a beautiful tropical island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, so I will tell you a little about it, even though I don't know how it fits into this story. It turned out that my family lived there for 28 years. Mainly my parents. After a year at the local high school for white people, a tiny population amongst the overwhelming majority of local, Black, Calypso-speaking natives, I finished the rest of my schooling in what we called "the mainland," meaning America proper. First I went to boarding school at Philips Academy, and then to college, at the Film School of New York University, located in the heart of Greenwich Village during the heart of the hippie era and the mass, nationwide, student protest against the Vietnam War. So, after my initial first year of high school on "the island," I would only come home on school vacations, three times a year.

Here's how we got there. My father had two brothers. One of them married a woman whose father was connected to the "Jewish Mafia" during the "hey days" of Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel. In fact, at my uncle's wedding, when my Father was overseas in the army, Bugsy made a pass at my Mother, and even gave her a pinch on the *tush*, a story she often recounted. During the Second World War, the United States Government put a restriction on grain, which was needed in the manufacture of munitions, forbidding its use in making alcohol for whiskey. So a thirsty and whiskey-loving America searched for some replacement, and the solution was rum, made from the sugar canes that grow on Caribbean islands. My uncle's father-in-law quickly moved his family to St. Thomas, built a rum distillery, and the rum which he produced

became America's most popular alcoholic beverage during the War. With the revenue from the rum operation, the family built the first big hotel on the island, and opened other local businesses, so that when shiploads of tourists started arriving, the family had its hand in just about everything. My Father's other brother moved down to the island and opened a jewelry store, and years later, when my Father was fed up with being a traveling salesman, his brothers helped him open up a perfume and liquor store, one in the popular Virgin Isle Hotel, and one on Main Street in Charlotte Amalie, where the tourists all flocked to buy duty-free goods like liquor, jewelry, and perfume. My first year on the island, I helped my parents get both stores started, and I was a regular salesman, learning everything there was to know about liquor and perfume. In fact, I would venture to bet that I know more about women's perfume, toilet water, and cologne than any other Orthodox Jew in Israel.

I started to drive at the age of fifteen, a light blue Mustang convertible. When I wasn't in school, or helping out in the store, I spent my time playing tennis, lying on the island's magical, pristine beaches, and hanging out at night in the lowlife bars and discos, as well as cruising by the hotels to see if any teenage girls had arrived who might like to take a breathtaking spin around the moonlit island in my Mustang convertible. As I grew older, the teenage girls became stewardesses on their layover for the night, but if truth be told, I was really a sensitive, shy guy under my John Travolta exterior, so many of my nights I spent alone reading the classics of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky, and the more modern novels of Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway, and Mailer.

That's about all I can think of to tell about life on St. Thomas. There wasn't anything Jewish there except the white people who ran the island, and a very old synagogue with sand floors, dating back to the time of Columbus,

who was rumored to have been a Jew, and who supposedly had received the founding for his voyage from Spain's Minister of Finance, the famous Rabbi, the Abarbanel, in the year 1492, the year of the infamous Spanish Inquisition, when the Jews were chased out of Spain, and Columbus discovered America.

Later, after graduating from college, I returned to the island to write a novel which was published by the Dell Publishing Company, America's biggest publishing firm at the time. It was a saga about a Jewish family who moves to an island in the Caribbean, filled with all of the intrigue, corruption, and trashy romance that those types of novels have. It took me two years to write, and it was going to be the novel which was certain to propel me into fortune and fame. More about that later.

## Chapter Four

### What's a Nice Jewish Boy Doing in a Place Like This?

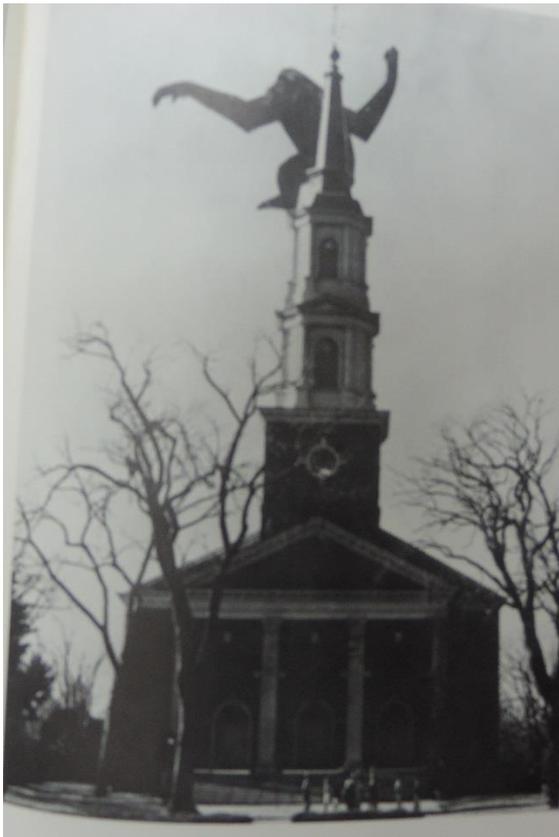
My parents have tears in their eyes when they say goodbye. Me too. I won't see them for another three months. They are now living in the Virgin Islands, almost two-thousand miles away from my new boarding school in New England. Philips Academy has the reputation of being the best private school in America, excelling in both intellectual scholarship and sports.



The school's motto is, "The real end and business of living." You were supposed to come out of Andover the ideal American man. For example, President George Bush, Senior, studied at Andover. In contrast, Humphrey Bogart got himself kicked out. Each year, out of a graduating class of 200, three-fourths of the students go on to study in the top Ivy League colleges: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and Brown. I am the only one to go to the NYU Film School, where I sit in the dark, get stoned, and eat popcorn for the next 4 years of my life.

In the eyes of the Andover faculty, I am a failure, a big troublemaker, a waste of time and money. What could I do? From my very first day I feel like I don't belong there.

The campus itself is beautiful, as rustic and panoramic as Harvard's. Some of the buildings date back two-hundred years to the Revolutionary War. The athletic fields and facilities are the best in the country. A majestic church with a tall steeple towers over the spreading green lawns. But if you walk on the lawns, you are punished. At Andover, you have to walk on the paths. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I have never been much of a path walker. As the famous New England poet, Robert Frost, wrote, "Two paths diverged in a snowy wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that made all the difference." There are rules for getting up in the morning, and rules for going to bed. There are rules for eating and rules for getting to class. There are so many rules, I can't keep up with them, so I am always getting into trouble.



For example, when I make a photo montage of the campus church with King Kong hanging onto the steeple, the Headmaster doesn't think it is funny. He takes away one of my free weekends for my "excessive and distasteful creativity." The three years I'm there, I never see the guy crack a smile. In another photo montage, when I put his head on the body of Popeye the Sailor man, and hang it up in the school's very proper art gallery, he personally makes sure the incident gets recorded on all my college

recommendations to make certain that I don't get accepted in any top school of my choice. In revenge, late one night, I sneak into the office of the history room, through one of the fourth-floor windows which a janitor neglected to shut. The year's most important final exam is locked safely in a desk drawer, which I manage to open without breaking the lock. I steal the test, make dozens of copies, return the original to the drawer, and sell the copies to anyone who isn't afraid of getting caught. So many students pass the exam with flying colors, the outstanding grades smash all previous school records. The faculty is stunned. The Headmaster calls me into his office, accusing me of foul play, but he admits that he has no proof of his suspicions.

You can see from the photos of me in the graduating class album that I wasn't very happy during those James Dean rebellious years.



In addition to all the stupid rules and the phony, "We're better than everyone else" attitude, there are no girls at the all-boys academy, and we have to wear sports jackets and ties to class, as if we are already successful businessmen on the Forbes Magazine top 100 list. Out of the 800 students, there are about fifty Jews, and while there isn't open anti-Semitism, I always feel a distinct "stinking Jew" attitude from the faculty. Everyone has to take a class in Bible Studies from the always smiling

Reverend White, and though we were supposed to study the “Old Testament” too, almost all of the classes were devoted to the life of Jesus. And while the main student body attends Sunday service in the spacious and resplendent church chapel, the prayer service of the Jews is relegated to a small room in the church basement, because behind all the phony Abraham Lincoln platitudes about how “all men are created equal,” Jews are second-class citizens and Christ killers to boot. The Americans hate Jews even more than they hate Blacks. Hussein Obama is proof. A Black man can be President of the United States, but no President has ever been a Jew.

Another observation. Inside the sports building at Andover, the shower room isn't like, for example, the shower rooms of *Tzahal*. When you're a soldier in the Israeli army, you're just another one of the guys, like everyone else. But at Andover, in the crowded shower room after sports practice, the Jews stick out amongst the uncircumcised Philistines who have foreskins like horses. The Jews seem to glow. People could easily point a finger and say, “That's a Jew, and he's a Jew, and there's another one,” by the glaring physical distinction of being circumcised. The sign of the Covenant makes you stand out in the crowd, proclaiming you are DIFFERENT. Another species of human. A Jew. For someone like me, who is trying to be like everyone else, as *goyish* as I can be, my *schmekel* gives me away.

Don't misunderstand me. I wasn't such a proud Jew that I walk around wearing a big *kippah* and a Star of David around my neck. No way. But the place is so “Waspish” that I instinctively feel out of place. Besides being a nasty type of bumble bee, the letters of the expression “Wasp” stand for W.A.S.P. - a White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. They were they original pilgrims who came to America from England, searching for religious freedom. In the process, these wholesome, freedom-loving pioneers

slaughtered, massacred, and annihilated about 10 million Native American Indians, stealing their country from them until the poor Indians were nearly extinct - all in the name of religious freedom, democracy, equality, and, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," for the White Man, that is.

I don't know how I survived those three long years. The truth is, I was confused. Deep down, I sensed that the Andover version of, "The real end and business of living" wasn't for me, but I didn't know what was. So I withdrew into myself and became a loner. Fed up with the competition to get into Harvard or Yale, and baffled by chemistry and physics, and I switch my major to Art. Whatever free time I have, I spend in the darkroom of the photography lab, developing and printing hundreds and hundreds of photos. On free weekends, I take my camera wherever I go and shoot sensitive photo essays. On one vacation to New York, I spend several days in Coney Island, ended up with a book of poignant, black-and-white photographs of America's legendary amusement park, most often capturing the sad side of life, the bums and bizarre people who hang out in the shadows of the Cyclone roller coaster and towering Ferris wheel. In addition, I become a budding writing, probably inspired by my love of reading. To escape from the cold, competitive, unfeeling world of Andover, I find shelter in the world of literature. I read everything, from all of the James Bond thrillers of Ian Fleming, to all of the great classics: Victor Hugo and Proust, Melville and Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and Dickens, and all the great stage plays from Aeschylus to Albee. But with all the hours I spend vicariously traveling through other worlds and ages, and with all the creative satisfaction I find in the darkroom, I'm crying inside my cocoon. Apparently I wasn't alone. There's a giant, new spirit brewing amongst American youth, who are fed up with Establishment lies and with America's worship of power, money, and success. This new generation of

“The Beatles” and Bob Dylan want to give love and revolution a chance.  
So, to be like them, I become a hippie too.



(my senior year at Andover, bottom right)

## Chapter Five

### Bye Bye, Big America Lie

Certainly, from a Divine point of view, one of the greatest events in modern times, if not the greatest, was the Six-Day War and the return of the Jewish People to all parts of Jerusalem, and to Judea and Samaria, the heart of Biblical Israel.



To be absolutely honest, back in 1967 when it happened, I don't think I knew about it. When I gaze backward in time, I don't remember anything about Israel's historic victory. But that isn't so surprising. At Andover, I

hardly ever listened to the news. There was a TV in what was called the “commons room,” but no one had time to watch. In fact, nobody cared what was happening in the world. Everyone was too busy trying to get into Harvard.

Today, in the perspective of *Emunah*, when I look back at that time in history, the Six-Day War, with our miraculous conquest of Jerusalem, the *Kotel*, and the ancient hillsides of the Land of our Forefathers, where the stories of the Torah took place, seems to be the event that revolutionized the entire world, triggering an explosion of spiritual waves, like ripples in a pond, whose invisible influence spread across the ocean to England and America, inspiring a youthful generation with a new spirit of enlightenment and a thunderous demand for change.

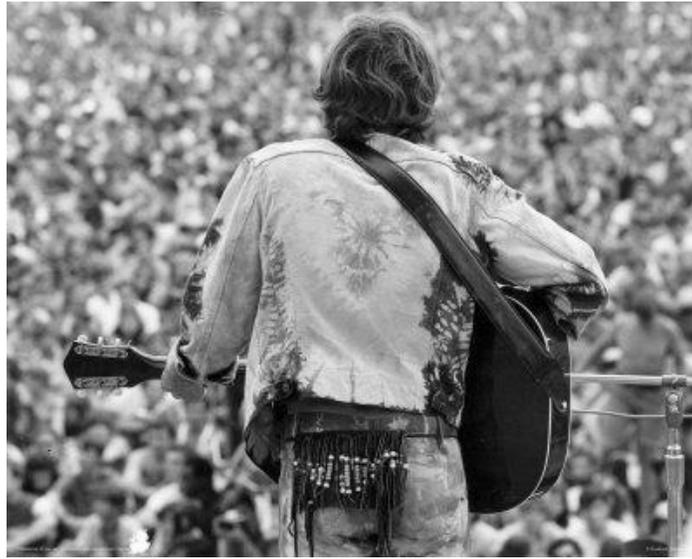
This Divine spirit, in its descent from Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, picked up a lot of pollution and filth in its encounter with the secular world, but a spark of G-d touched all of the change that was taking place from Liverpool to Greenwich Village. As summarized by the popular song, “Aquarius,” from the musical, “Hair”:

When the moon is in the seventh house  
And Jupiter aligns with Mars  
Then peace will guide the planets  
And love will steer the stars

This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius  
The age of Aquarius, Aquarius  
Harmony and understanding  
Sympathy and trust abounding  
No more falsehoods or derisions  
Golden living dreams of visions  
Mystic crystal revelation

And the minds true liberation

Aquarius, Aquarius



On the East Coast of America, Greenwich Village in New York City is the heart of the hippie revolution, and I'm right there, in its center, in Washington Square Park, on the New York University campus, where I'm enrolled in the Film School of the School of the Arts. Finally, after three years of a strict and rigid, New England, boarding school, I, along with millions of young people all over the world, discover FREEDOM! Freedom in New York City, where Janis Joplin is singing, "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." 500,000 strong are gathering in "Woodstock" to hear the prophets of the day: Richie Haven, Ravi Shankar, Jefferson Airplane, Joan Baez, Santana, Grateful Dead, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Crosby-Stillis-and-Nash, not to forget the two, clean-shaven Jewish boys, Simon and Garfunkel and their non-Jewish wives. A new, wonderful, innocent, angry, and uninhibited generation is breaking all of America's once-sacred rules, where everyone over thirty is not to be trusted, and anyone who doesn't do dope is square and probably an informer working for the cops.



With his acoustic guitar and harmonica, the sensitive Jewish lad, Bob Dylan, is singing: “The Times They Are a Changin’.”

“There’s a battle outside, and it’s ragin’

It’ll soon shake your windows, rattle your walls. Come mothers and fathers,  
throughout the land. And don’t criticize what you can’t understand.

Your sons and daughters are beyond your command.

Cause the times, they are a changin’.”

Out on the street, it’s the hippies against the “pigs” because far, far away,  
across the Pacific Ocean in Vietnam, young American boys are getting  
killed in a vain and senseless war, and we’re screaming at the U.S.  
President, “Hey! Hey! LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?”  
Even those nice, clean-shaven boys from England, “The Beatles,” are  
singing, “We want a revolution, oh oh, right now.”



When four students are killed by police at Kent State University during a demonstration against the war, we shut down New York University, taking over all of the buildings. The police are the enemy. The Government in Washington is evil. We want peace and love, NOW!

I go to the meat market on 14<sup>th</sup> Street and West End Avenue and buy bags of cow blood, fresh from the slaughter house. With some actor friends from the Film School, we stage a little “street theater” at a protest in Washington Square. With blood splattered all over our faces and hands, some of us play the role of Vietnamese children getting napalmed by American soldiers. Others are young American soldiers getting killed by the Viet Cong. The climax comes when I put on a policeman’s hat and, with toy rifle, “gun down” four students whose blood-stained hands reach out for mercy, as photographers from all over the world flash away with their cameras.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't become a hippie for any passionate ideological reasons, but because the coolest girls liked the hippiest guys, and I didn't want to be left out of the action. So I go to an anti-war rally at Columbia University with Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, two nice Jewish boys who are leading the struggle. And the new spirit sweeping America hits the Black people too, who also are shouting for freedom in the Black Power Movement. I read the writings of Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X, and join a support rally up in Harlem to hear the angry and passionate speech of Angela Davis and listen to James Brown sing out the popular anthem, "Say it loud – I'm Black and I'm proud!"

When the President announces that the war effort will be accelerated with a compulsory draft, I join the 500,000 angry students who march on the White House to protest. The draft is conducted by lottery. Every young man between the ages 18 and 25 is given a number, and everyone with a number under 250 is to be drafted by law. My number is 72. But, hell no! I won't go! No way, baby. It isn't my war. I ain't going to some jungle to kill Vietnamese children. None of them are threatening America, so what business is it of mine?

But the law is the law, so if I don't hurry up and do something fast, I'll either be sitting in a penitentiary, or stalking after "gooks" in the trees in Vietnam, with a very good chance of getting a poisoned arrow shot through my neck, and coming home with the Stars and Stripes flag draped over my coffin.

I hear about a Jewish shrink who writes letters for a fee of \$500, to help guys like me get exempted from military service.

"Do you hate your father?" he asks me when we meet in his office.

"No," I reply.

“Do you hate your teachers?”

“Not really,” I say.

“Are you prone to outbreaks of violence?” he wants to know, holding a pen in his hand to write down my answers.

“No.”

“Do you use hard drugs like heroin and cocaine?”

“No.”

“Do you have homosexual feelings?”

“No.”

“Listen,” he tells me. “I have to write something down.”

“Oh!” I say, suddenly understanding. “OK. OK. Ask me the questions again.”

“Do you hate your father?” he repeats.

“Yes.”

“Do you hate your teachers?”

“Yes. I despise all other authority figures. I feel like I want to kill them.”

“Are you prone to outbreaks of violence?”

“Very often. I don’t know what comes over me. I go crazy.”

“Do you have homosexual feelings?”

“Yes.”

“Do you use hard drugs like heroin and cocaine?”

“Yes.”

“How often?”

“A few times a week.”

“Good,” he says, approving my behavior. “What about nervous twitches? Do you have twitches?”

“Twitches?” I ask.

He demonstrates by twitching his head and his shoulders, as if he has some kind of neurological disorder.

“Yeah. Now that you mention it. I have twitches too.”

He writes down my case history, I give him \$500, and we agree that I’ll come back in another six months for another letter, just before my army physical, to insure that I have a history of being a patient with severe and sustained psychiatric disorder.

Because my home address is the Virgin Islands, my army-induction physical examination is scheduled to be held in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I arrive with my two letters in hand and demand to see the army psychiatrist.

“Why do you want to see the psychiatrist?” the induction officer asks.

“Because I’m in therapy,” I tell him with a nervous twitch of my head. After having seen thousands of movies, and studied acting in Film School, and practiced a variety of twitches for the past few months, I could win in an Academy Award for twitching.

“Psychiatric meetings are at the end of the day,” he replies.

It's going to be a long day of twitching, I muse. The first station is a blood-pressure check. When the guy in front of me is tested, the red mercury in the meter shoots up to the top of the scale.

"You feel, OK?" the medic asks.

"I never feel OK," the guy says.

"Before I flunk you, come back at the end of the day, and we'll do it again. Maybe you're just nervous."

When we're a safe distance away from the medic, I ask the guy how he did it.

"I took some speed fifteen minutes ago," he replies with a grin.

"What are you going to do when you have to go back?" I ask.

"Don't worry," he says. "The heel of my shoe is hollow. I have enough of the stuff for a week."

At every examining station, I go through my best display of psychotic twitches and demand to see the psychiatrist. Finally, I have my chance at the end of the day. I don't have to give him the two letters I'm holding – they are already in my induction file. He reads them over and looks up, white in the face. In New York, the shrinks at the army induction centers see a lot of bogus letters, but here on the sunny island of Puerto Rico, where almost all of the inductees are Spanish or Blacks, letters from psychiatrists are extremely rare. My twitches are so spasmodic he starts to twitch too.

"I don't think the army's for you," he concludes.

That's it. The performance is over. I don't have to twitch anymore, but I'm so used to it, the jerk reaction happens by itself, a sudden spasm of the shoulders and a double twitch of the head.

He writes something in the file, and tells me that I can go back to the group. That's the end of the story. I receive a 4F exemption, on psychiatric grounds, stating that I am unfit for any military service whatsoever.

[By the way, 12 years later when I came on *aliyah* to Israel, I gladly joined the Israel Defense Forces with great happiness and pride.



Rambo Fishman. In the photo, I'm doing morning guard duty near the settlement of Beit-El, a decade after the American army decides that I'm nuts. My parents agree with them, convinced that drugs have made me bonkers.]

Without the threat of imminent, army service in Vietnam, I could concentrate on my film learning and focus on my career in the movies. Actually, my dream was to become a Great American Novelist, but scriptwriting came easy to me, and since I had to finish college to please my parents, why not get a college degree by watching movies all day?

New York University isn't Harvard, but its Film School is the best in America. Also learning in the program are Martin Scorsese and Oliver Stone, who are to become top directors. To fill out my B.A. requirements, I also take classes in literature and creative writing. On many Friday evenings, for a feeling of family, I visit my grandmother, Dorothy, who's now living alone in Manhattan, where her sons have moved her, since her old neighborhood in Brooklyn has become a slum. There are so many elderly Jewish grandmothers living in the new condominium tower by Lincoln Center that by the time I arrive, the whole building smells like chicken soup and *schmaltz*.

Granny lights the Sabbath candles and serves me the traditional Friday night meal, complete with *challah* and chopped liver.

After supper, she turns on TV to watch the "Perry Mason Show," and I'm not allowed to say a word until it's over. On Sunday mornings, I often take the subway to Brooklyn to visit my other grandmother, who also lives alone. She takes me out to eat at Garfield's Cafeteria, and my aunts Libby, Blossom, and Peachy often stop by to cover my face with wet kisses. They are all dressed up in the gaudy, overdone fashion that Jewish aunts in New York seem to like. Afterward, I join Nana for a train ride out to the horse track where she wastes a few dollars betting on longshots that don't win. In the evening, I escort her to a bingo parlor, where she sits with friends, playing bingo to pass the time. In my last year of Film School, I write a screenplay based on my bingo-playing grandmother. Impressed by the depth of characterization, one of my teachers passes it onto a new arrival in New York City, the award-winning Czechoslovakian film director, Ivan Passer. He isn't able to find funding to make a movie from my script, but we become friendly, and he invites me

to write a different screenplay with him, which becomes my first produced movie, “Law and Disorder.”

All this time, I share an apartment on the Upper West Side with a good friend named Dave. He has his room, and I have mine. We eat most of our meals together at the Greek coffee shop on the corner, breakfast and dinner, and never cook at home. He’s Jewish, a quiet, sensitive soul, who wants to be an actor. Like me, he loves movies. On his walls are big posters of Marlon Brando and Paul Newman, two of our favorite idols.



One entire wall in my room is a crazy, abstract painting that I created by splashing paint off a brush. A portable Smith Corona typewriter and Webster’s Dictionary sit waiting on my desk, under a poster of the legendary actor, Humphrey Bogart (who, as I previously mentioned, was kicked out of Andover for punching a teacher in the jaw.)

Dave sees a psychoanalyst, not to get out of the draft, but because his father insists. Twice a week, for a price of \$500 per visit, Dave sees a traditional Freudian “shrink” who sits silently at his desk waiting for Dave to utter a word. Dave lies silently on the traditional psychiatric couch, trying to think of something to say, but nothing comes into his mind. The psychoanalyst waits in silence, just as he’s been trained. Dave doesn’t speak, so the doctor doesn’t speak either.

Often, the entire hour passes in total silence. When the hour is finished, Dave thanks him and writes out a check.

“How did your appointment go today?” I ask him.

“Fine,” Dave responds. “I think we’re making progress.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t say a thing,” Dave confides.

“What did he say to you?” I ask.

“He didn’t say anything. If I don’t speak, he doesn’t either.”

“You pay him for that?”

“Five-hundred dollars per visit.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little weird to you?”

“It’s my father’s money. Just because I don’t want to be a banker like he is, he thinks I have a problem.”

I met Dave’s father. He’s an economist, very serious, with a noticeable lack of emotion.

“I want you to know something,” he tells me when I visit their home.

“What’s that?”

“Economics,” he says.

“Economics?” I ask, not understanding the message.

“Economics is everything.”

I nod my head.

“Economics makes the world go round,” he explains. “Money. Without money you don’t exist. I want you and my son to remember that. My son thinks he can live on art. Just like a lot of young people these days think they can live on love. But you can’t. When all is said and done, the whole thing comes down to economics. That’s what life is all about. The sooner you boys learn that, you’ll both be a lot happier, I assure you.”

I’m sure he means well. His own father probably had to work hard to survive and didn’t have a time to give him any love, so he doesn’t have any love to give to his son. Only money to pay the psychoanalyst.

But Dave doesn’t need a “shrink,” to have his mind shrunken. He needs to have his mind expanded. He doesn’t need to be analyzed. He needs love. Dave’s father didn’t love him, so he doesn’t love himself. Instead, he tries to be like Paul Newman and Marlon Brando. But he can’t be like them, tough and unfeeling, because that isn’t him. He’s a sensitive spirit with a deep Jewish soul, but his father never taught him about Judaism. He’s father doesn’t believe, so Dave doesn’t believe. His Jewish psychoanalyst doesn’t believe either, because Sigmund Freud, the father of psychiatry, didn’t believe. Sigmund Freud said that man created G-d to deal with his fears, and Sigmund Freud became ill with cancer of the mouth, and, interestingly, suffered through a dozen operations until he begged his physician to give him an overdose of pain-killing morphine, in order to end his pain forever.

It isn’t Dave who is sick. It’s America. But Dave doesn’t realize this. Either do I at the time. Instead of realizing that America is sick, Dave blames himself. If he doesn’t fit in, then he’s the one who’s screwed up, not America. Poor Dave. Eventually he gave up trying to be an actor and married a nice, non-Jewish woman. Today, they reside in mid-America and I haven’t been in touch with him for years.

In many ways, I too am a lot like Dave. Unhappy with myself, I too want to be as cool and cold-hearted as Marlon Brando.

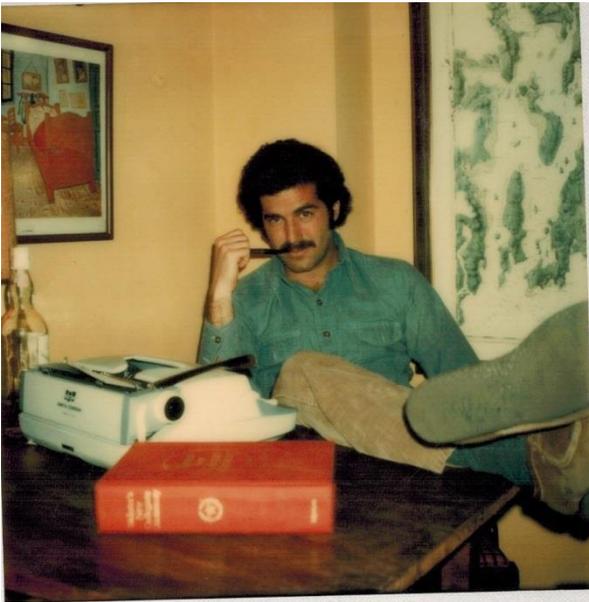


Now I realize that we felt screwed up, because we were living lies. Holy Jewish souls like ours shouldn't have been living the kind of lives we were living in America. Holy Jewish souls like our should have been living a life of Torah in the Land of the Jews, where Jews belong – not in Gentile America, England, or France- but no one ever told us, and if they had, the glitter and glamour of America is so loud and attracting, we wouldn't have listened.

## Chapter Six

### “Paradise”

Like I mentioned, my dream is to become the next “Great American Novelist.”



The first novel I write is about a teenage boy (like me) in a snobbish boarding school in New England (like Andover). I called it “Digressions” because I jump around in the book without any order, as a protest against the standard rules of good writing, just like the main character of the book and the youth of America are rebelling against all the rules of the Establishment. An editor at McGraw Hill, a big publishing company, like the refreshing, creative style of the novel, but he wants me to restructure the story and make it more ordered. Convinced that the novel is a work of genius, I refuse and that’s the end of that.

As every aspiring novelist finds out, you need a literary agent to get a book published, so I shop around and become very friendly with a bright, fun-loving, young agent, Francis Greenburger, who has taken over a literary agency which his father began, and which has since become one of the most successful in New York, with bestselling authors like Dan Brown leading their list. Francis doesn’t have any more success than I had in finding a publisher for “Digressions,” but we have a ball hanging around

together, crashing the “in” literary circles, rubbing elbows with the famous, and enjoying the decadent bohemian life of New York. We attend parties and award celebrations with bestselling Jewish writer, Philip Roth and his non-Jewish wife; with the famous Jewish author, Norman Mailer and the latest of his eight non-Jewish wives; and with Jewish actor/director, Woody Allen and his non-Jewish wife.



[With Francis Greenburger today]

A gala party celebrating the publication of a new Philip Roth novel sticks out in my memory. The bash is held at the fancy St. Regis Hotel. Waiters wear tuxedos. Chandeliers light the banquet hall. New York’s social elite hold champagne glasses in their hands and sip on the sparkling bubbly amidst bursts of light chatter and laughter. It’s a scene out of the Fitzgerald novel, “The Great Gatsby.” Of course, there are a dozen pretty young women wandering around in attractive gowns, as if they have been hired as a part of the ambiance.

“This is bullshit,” a friend remarks. He’s an aspiring writer like me, another one of Francis’s clients. Born and raised in Amsterdam, he’s come to the shores of America to win riches and fame. In the meantime, he doesn’t

have a dime to his name, no publisher has shown in interest in his first novel, and he's got nothing to lose.

"Let's take off our clothes and strut around naked," he suggests. "To show all of these phonies what bullshit this is."

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught his students a story that possesses a very great message. Once upon a time, there was a king whose son went crazy and started acting like a turkey. The prince threw off all of his royal garments, climbed down naked under the king's table, and started to eat the crumbs which fell to the floor. Needless to say, the king was most distraught. How was he going to heal his son and return him to his place at the table alongside the nobles of the palace court?

The king is a metaphor for the King of the Universe, and the son who throws off his royal garments and acts like a turkey under the table, eating the crumbs which fall to the floor, symbolizes Jews who have abandoned the Torah to copy the ways of the nations. A few decades later, I will direct a movie based on the story. But for now, at the gala party at the St. Regis Hotel, I am the turkey. Following my friend's example, I strip off my clothes and parade naked around the elegant banquet hall. "Gobble, gobble, gooble."

When production is ready to begin on the film, "Law and Disorder," the producer tells the director that he doesn't want me on the set. Usually, the screenwriter is welcome, in case an actor's lines have to be rewritten during the shooting. But the producer is a young, creative and good-looking guy, and I am younger, more creative, and better looking, and he doesn't want me around competing with him for the attention of the pretty women who hang around film sets like flies around garbage.

Needless to say, I am very disappointed and peeved off, but there is nothing I can do but lick my wounds and sail off to Europe on the luxurious ocean-liner, the “S.S. France,” on a romantic, literary pilgrimage that many great American authors had traveled before me, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and Henry Miller, to name just a few.



On the five-day voyage across the Atlantic, I become friendly with a guy my age from Denmark. The ship docks at the northern French seaport of Cherbourg, but instead of traveling immediately to Paris by

train with the other passengers, we decide to spend the night in Cherbourg, where a gala, beer festival is being held. In those days, I am clean-shaven with the long hair of a hippie. My Danish friend has long blond hair down to his shoulders. We certainly don't look Jewish. As we are walk along the dock with our backpacks, a Mercedes Benz passes by and the driver sticks his head out the window.

“Hail Hitler!” he yells. The first words I hear on European soil.

“Hail Hitler!” he shouts out again.

Like I mentioned, my blond, Danish friend certainly doesn't look Jewish, and neither do I. The incident leaves me shaken. Coincidence or some kind of omen, I wonder?

That evening, we go to the beer fest. It's held in a giant tent filled with a few thousand people gulping down large mugs of beer. A German band is playing loud German songs. I have the feeling that if somebody jumps up and starts screaming, "Hail Hitler!" then everyone in the place will leap to their feet and join him in yelling out praise to the Fuhrer.

Sitting at the table behind me is perhaps the most adorable girl I have ever seen in my life. Suddenly, I am in a French movie with Catherine Deneuve. I turn to her and ask her why people are singing German songs? I had learned French in Andover, and my accent is pretty good. "I thought France and Germany were enemies," I say.

"That was in the past," she replies with shining cheeks. "Now we're friends."

In a flash, I remember learning that in the Second World War, France had collaborated with the Nazis in rounding up French Jews when the Germans occupied Paris. I experience a brief unsettling feeling, but since the pretty French girl is still staring at me with her pretty French smile, I stop philosophizing. It doesn't enter my mind that she might be the daughter of a Nazi sympathizer. Like she herself said, that was the past. After a few mugs of beer, I am singing songs in German too. "Do you want to see my hotel?" I ask her.

"*Oui*," she replies, looking so sweet and innocent, and so excited to have found a handsome American boy who can rescue her from her boring life in Cherbourg for the thrill of being in Paris.

The point is – I didn't become religious because I couldn't make it in "real life." I tasted success and the pleasures that money can buy. I wasn't a

stranger to women. But still I felt empty inside. Even with the prettiest girl in Paris, something was missing, so I told a teary-eyed Catherine goodbye.

In Paris, the City of Light, “Belle Paris,” I visit all of the famous cafes that Hemingway had written about, pretending that I am on my way to becoming a Great American Novelist too. But I hate the French and their snobby, love affair with their language, just as much as they hate Americans, who have usurped their place as the most glamorous people in the world.

“*Un Perrier*,” I tell a waiter, ordering the most fashionable, bottled, mineral water of the decade.

“*Quoi?*” the stuck-up waiter invariably answers. “What?” as if he doesn’t understand my American accent.

“*Un Perrier*,” I repeat in the best French I can muster.

“*Quoi?*” the frog snorts again, sounding like a duck.

This humiliation is bad enough when I am alone, but when I am with a damsel, it is really embarrassing.

“*Un Per-ri-er*,” I slowly pronounce, breaking the name into syllables.

“Ohh!” the waiter exclaims, as if suddenly understanding. “***Un Perrier!***” he says loudly, pronouncing it exactly like I had at the beginning of the exchange.

Throughout my stay in the country, I hate France. The people are phony. The churches are phony. The famous art museum, the Louvre, is just a big excuse to display hundreds of paintings of naked women. With the money I received for the “Law and Disorder” screenplay, I rent a penthouse apartment and spend most of my time writing the beginnings of a novel

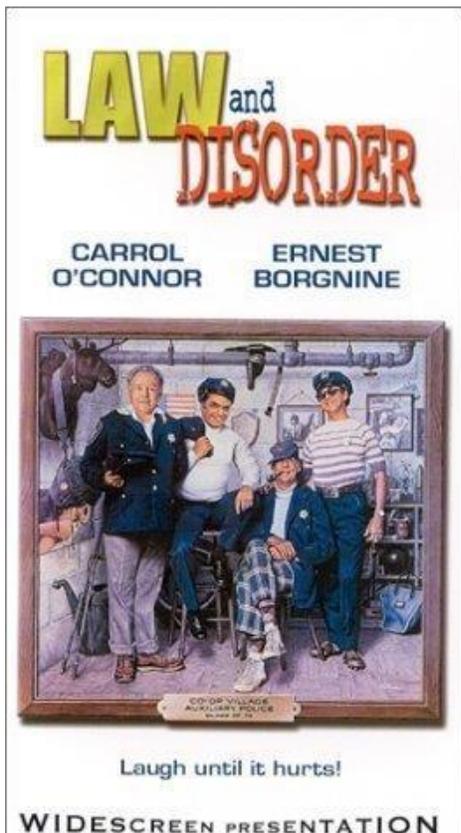
about a New York Jewish family who moves to an island in the Caribbean during World War Two, transforming the sleepy paradise into a tourist haven. More about that later.

Before returning to America, I kill some time in London and Amsterdam, then tour Italy with my friend, Francis, who has taken a break from his literary agent to join me for the last leg of my trip. Israel is only a swim away, but it never occurs to me to visit. Whatever for? Besides, the country is too Jewish to spark my interest.

Back in the “Big Apple,” my movie is playing in the theaters. America’s most prestigious newspaper, *The New York Times*, gives the film a respectful review, saying:

“Ivan Passer's ‘Law and Disorder’ is a gentle, touching, sometimes disruptively funny movie about - among other things - ignorance, prejudice, rape, larceny, the failure of small dreams, about people trying desperately to cope and often coming apart... The film is not perfect but I couldn't care less. ‘Law and Disorder’ is thoughtful about people, even vicious hoods. It's also very, very funny.”

Audiences laugh in all the right places, but the film isn’t a huge box office success, even with its popular star, Carroll O’Conner, the man who made TV’s Archie Bunker famous.



When the director, Ivan Passer, asks me what script I would like to write next, I tell him I want to write a film adaptation of the book, "For Those I Loved," a runaway bestseller in France. The book recounts the true heroic story of a young boy who survives the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Poland. When the producer of "Law and Disorder," learns about my choice, he bluntly replies, looking me straight in the face, "I will never make a movie where the hero is a Jew." That's my last meeting with them.

I continue to work on my novel. To make a living, I begin to teach creative and dramatic writing at the New York University Film School, where my talent is appreciated, and also to give tennis lessons in Central Park. My most famous student is the actress, Faye Dunaway, who starred in the movies, "Bonnie and Clyde" and "Chinatown."

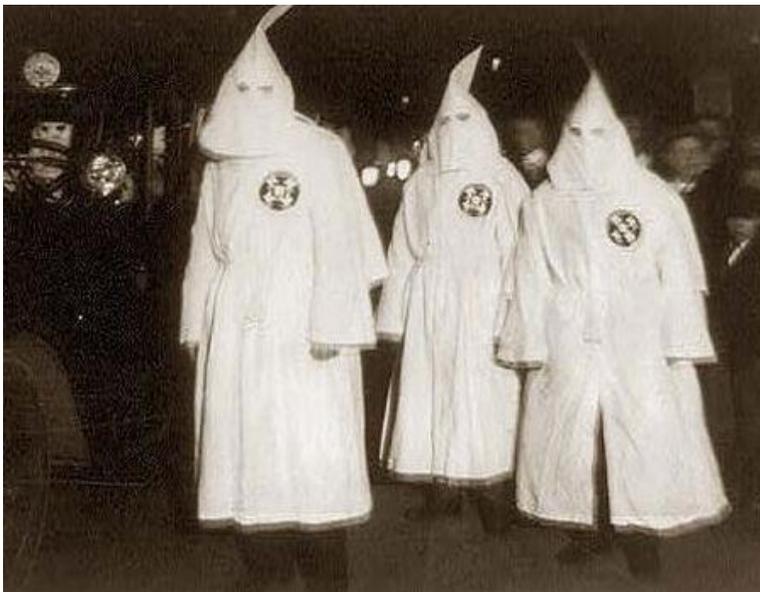
Jacqueline Kennedy, wife of the assassinated President, also takes lessons in the Park, but her bodyguards, and the head tennis instructor, won't let me get anywhere near her.

The Yom Kippur War is fought sometime during the Seventies, but I don't recollect hearing about it at all. I'm sure on one of my Friday night visits to my grandmother, she must have said something about it, or watched a news report on TV, but I don't remember. It didn't make any impact on my life - that's how far away I was from Judaism. Since my *bar mitzvah*, I had absolutely nothing to do with anything Jewish in any kind of organized way. If I heard about a war in Israel, I'm sure I would have said, "I hope the

Jews win,” the same way I always wanted the Boston Celtics to win the NBA basketball championship. As far as I was concerned, Israel was some faraway planet that I had absolutely no desire to visit.

Now that I think about it, there was another little incident that aroused my sense of Jewishness.

One time during the Seventies, I visit my brother in Atlanta, Georgia, where he is working as a lawyer. There’s a big Ku Klux Klan gathering that night, so for the fun of it, we decide to go. The KKK is a militant, white-supremacist organization against the Blacks in American, known for dressing up in white gowns and hoods which cover their faces.



The meeting takes place on a dark night on a park hillside of a park outside the city. Loudspeakers magnify the passion of the speeches, and a white-hooded clan priest is yelling at a crowd of about 1000 people. His hood has holes so he can see, and a hole for his mouth. No

doubt, FBI agents mingle with the crowd, dressed in clan outfits like everyone else. A tall flaming cross burns at the top of the hill.

“If we don’t wake up, the Blacks will destroy our great country!” the speaker shouts to the cheers of the crowd. “They will rape our wives and get our daughters pregnant with their negro babies! They will infect us with their diseases! They will rob our businesses and loot our stores! It is

our duty as loyal, peace-loving Americans to stop them now, before they take over this country!”

There are shouts of agreement and unanimous applause.

“But Blacks aren’t the worse problem facing our country,” the speaker goes on to say. “Our greatest enemy is the Jew! These Christ-killers pay the Blacks to rape our women! Their greedy hands are in everything, wherever you look, stealing our money. The question facing us tonight is – who will we be destroyed first? The loyal, Heaven-fearing, white citizens of America, or the Jews?”

“THE JEWS!” a voice hollers.

“THE JEWS!” another assents.

“KILL ALL THE JEWS!” a guy next to us shouts.

I look at my brother and whisper, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Trying to look as Christian as we can, we casually walk away from the mob. When we are a safe distance away we start running.

One other thing before continuing with my story. Just a few years before, my brother had been a part of the “peace and love generation” like most everyone else under thirty years old. But when the Vietnam War ended, the peace movement gradually ran out of gas, and everyone quickly forgot about changing the world with love. The most diehard hippies shaved off their beards, got themselves haircuts, made peace with the Establishment, donned pin-striped shirts and ties, and became lawyers, and stockbrokers, and financial consultants, organization men. Sometimes, I think I’m the only hippie still left on the planet. After all, I believe in “*Ahavat Chinam*” which means gratuitous love, as well as peace and justice for all the world, just like the Prophets of Israel all taught three thousand years before Joan

Baez was born. In fact, it turns out that the real “Age of Aquarius” is actually the “Age of *Mashiach*,” and that all of the ideals which the hippies so yearned for are all contained in the Torah, just as the “Aquarius” song envisions:

Harmony and understanding  
Sympathy and trust abounding  
No more falsehoods or derisions  
Golden living dreams of visions  
Mystic crystal revelation  
And the minds true liberation,

Mashiach! Mashiach!

When the incredible “high” of the hippie era wears off, naturally there follows a big, equal down – even a crash. [Interestingly, a similar thing happened in Israel, when the great “high” of the Six-Day War wore off, there followed the tremendous low of the Yom Kippur War, with its numerous casualties and tragic loss of life.] I too am on a “downer.” My writing career hasn’t skyrocketed like I hoped, and my five years as a teacher at New York University have become routine and boring. To keep in the cash, I ghostwrote a book about compulsive gambling, called, “The Billion Dollar a Day Habit.” A fellow writing instructor at the Film School and I decide to write a low-budget horror film, the kind which is very popular at the time. We watch a few gory movies together to learn the formula, then co-write a screenplay about a crazed youth who sets up home in a shopping center. When a young security guard allows a high-school class to celebrate their graduation party in the shopping mall after closing hours, the crazy kid thinks they’ve come to evict him from his home. So he goes about killing them all, one by one, in all kinds of surprising and terrifying ways. My favorite scene is when a girl wanders

into a storeroom filled with mannequins. Little does she know that the killer is hiding there, frozen in a pose just like the other statue-like figures. When she passes them by, suddenly, hands dart forward and grab her by her neck, slowly strangling her to death. Hee hee hee! My friend's favorite scene took place in the shopping center bowling alley. While a group of high-schoolers are bowling, the mechanism that lowers the pins gets stuck, and one of the boys walks down the bowling lane and disappears behind the end of the alley to fix the problem. Sure enough, the mechanism resumes working, and a new set of pins comes down into place. A few moments later a bowling ball rolls down the chute toward the youngsters, but it isn't a ball – it's the head of the boy who went to fix the machine!

We sell the script to a company in Hollywood for \$100,000, which is a respectful sum for a trash horror flick in those days. I won't mention the name of the movie, because I wouldn't want anyone to see it. And don't bother to search for it on YouTube or Google because I wrote it using a fictitious name, like with the stupid boxing movie I wrote.

True, it's another film sale, but it isn't the type of classic Hollywood feature film that I long to make, with a big budget and top stars.

Like my friend, Dave, I begin to be depressed. Humanistic psychologists call the period, "The Age of Anxiety." People in America are simply unhappy and uptight. To escape the "bummer" feeling, some people smoke grass and take drugs; others fill their bathroom cabinets with an assortment of "uppers" and anti-depressant pills; others drink themselves into a stupor; and almost everyone with money has a psychiatrist. A famous *Life Magazine* photo of the time shows a group of people on a street corner, waiting for the traffic light to turn green. What is so remarkable about the picture is that the people, who all look frightened

and stunned, have not just witnessed a dreadful car accident, but, as the text explains, they are merely normal citizens going about their business.

So to figure out why I'm experiencing the heebie-jeebies, I begin to read a books about psychology: Rollo May's, *Love and Will* and *The Meaning of Anxiety*; Erich Fromm's, *Escape from Freedom* and *The Art of Loving*; Karen Horney's, *The Neurotic Personality of our Time*; Thomas Harris', *I'm OK, You're OK* about transactional analysis; Eric Ericson's, "*Childhood and Society*"; Carl Yung's writings on psychoanalysis; and several books by Sigmund Freud.

I even make an appointment to meet with a shrink myself. He answers the door barefooted, wearing a stylish Nehru jacket and baggy yoga pants. His apartment is decorated to look "cool" with ferns all over, fancy lighting, and aromatic incense burning, to give the place a "spiritual" atmosphere. After a few meetings, he smiles at me and announces he knows what my problem is.

"Yes?" I ask, waiting to hear the diagnosis.

"You are a homosexual," he says with great certainty.

I don't say a word. Just stunned silence. "A homosexual?" I think to myself. Wow! I hadn't expected to hear something like that.

"You have definite homosexual feelings towards me," he declares.

Sitting there, trembling, I try to judge myself as honestly as I can. But I can't remember having had any homosexual feelings in my life.

"No," I answer. "I'm sorry, I don't think I feel that way at all."

"Denial is always the initial reaction," he states.

“No. I’m sorry. It’s never entered my mind. If anything, I’m overly active in the other direction.”

“Well, I have homosexual feelings towards you,” he admits, gazing at me with sad, puppy-dog eyes.

Boy, do I ever want to get out of there fast! Obviously, the guy’s a charlatan, trying to pass himself off as a hip, Age-of-Aquarius healer.

Needless to say, a never go back to him again. The next shrink I try is a young student studying to be a psychiatrist in the traditional school of Sigmund Freud. He wants me to bring him my dreams so he can interpret them. According to Freud, dreams hold the key to our subconscious. Each passing week, he becomes more and more irritated with me for not bring him my dreams, but don’t remember any. Do I ever feel like a lousy patient! Finally I have a dream. Eagerly, he picks up a pen and listens, beginning to write it down in his notebook.

“I dreamed we were in your office talking,” I tell him. “You felt very insecure and wanted to sit in my lap. When I said no, you started to cry like a little baby and beat your fists on your desk.”

“WHAT?!” he screams, jumping up from his chair. “WHAT KIND OF DREAM IS THIS?! ARE YOU IMPLYING THAT I FEEL INSECURE?! ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY THAT I’M INCOMPENTANT?!”

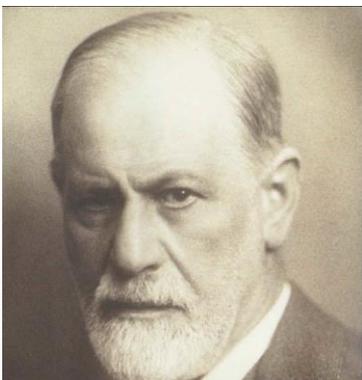
I didn’t mean to imply anything. I was just relating my dream. That’s what he wanted, wasn’t it?

Red in the face with anger, he smashes his fist on his desk. “The nerve of you!” he exclaims. “Who the hell do you think you are?!”

Obviously, this bird is more screwed-up than I am. So, instead of searching for a psychiatric solution to the amorphous cloud of anxiety that surrounds my life, I pour myself into my writing with even more fervor. Now, more than thirty-five years later, after having studied the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, illuminated in his book, "*Orot HaT'shuva*," I know where depression comes from. It doesn't stem from anxiety over being separated from the womb, nor from Oedipus complexes, sexual repression, or the fear of death. While these factors, and other family and childhood traumas, can influence a person's life, the root cause of depression is a separation from G-d. As Rabbi Kook writes:

"What is the cause of melancholy? The answer is the overabundance of evil deeds, evil character traits, and evil beliefs on the soul. The soul's deep sensitivity feels the bitterness which these cause, and it draws back, frightened and depressed... All depression stems from sin... The source of the general pain in the world derives from the overall moral pollution of the universe, resulting from the sins of individuals and nations... Every sin causes a specific anxiety of the spirit, which can only be erased by *t'shuva*."

*T'shuva*? What in the world is *T'shuva*? Of course, at the time, I had never heard of the word. In fact, I believed the exact opposite! I thought that the reason I was unhappy was because I wasn't sinning enough!



Sigmund Freud



Rabbi Kook

[If both of these men had a used car to sell, which of them would you trust more?]

Finally, my 500-page novel, "Paradise," is finished. I can't show you a picture of the book, because the cover featured a pretty woman in a bikini. I don't like the artwork, but the publisher thinks it will help to sell books, and since he purchased my novel, he is the boss.

Initially, my agent sold the book to a prestigious, New York, hardcover publishing firm called Thomas Crowell Publishers. But the editor who acquired the novel had a problem with the management and was either fired or quit. He took my book with him to his new company, a giant, mass-market conglomerate, where he was made a senior editor.

So I won't get sued, let's call the name of the company - Globe Publishers. They publish paperback novels, comic books, and a long list of popular magazines. I'm very disappointed, because I want to have a hardcover novel, like all other serious novelists. On the other hand, instead of the 5000 copies that Thomas Cromwell would have printed, Globe is going to print 250,000, with the promise it will get my book, not only into every bookstore, but into every drugstore, department store bookrack, and in airport and train terminals as well. Plus, instead of the \$7000 which Thomas Cromwell intended to pay, I will get \$25,000 at Globe. That's the situation. Francis, my good friend and literary agent is opposed to trying to place the book at some other hardcover company, saying that my editor likes the book and he will give it strong backing at Globe.

Once a book is bought in America, it takes at least a year before it is published. So, while I wait for the big day with great excitement, I start writing another novel, so I will have another book ready to follow my certain first-novel success.

Am I ever in for the surprise!

The month my book is to be published, Globe has another 25 books on their list. Only 5 of the books, chosen by all the editors, will get the company's full advertising support and nationwide publicity. My book isn't on the list. Furious, I demand an appointment with the publicity department to state my case.

"Who watches all of the popular, morning interview shows on TV?" I ask their PR person "Women, right? Housewives at home. And what do women like to watch best? A good-looking guy." I set my glossy, publicity still on the table.



“Send this out to TV stations, and I guarantee you that every talk-show host will invite me to appear on his show.”

To get rid of me, the guy agrees to send the photo, along with a copy of my novel, to five TV stations in sunny state of Florida, since the fictitious Caribbean island of “Calypso” where the story takes place isn’t far away. Sure enough, all 5 stations call Globe immediately to book me on their talk shows.

When I fly down to Miami, I look for my book in the airport terminal newsstand, but it isn’t there. Globe has reserved a room for me at a second-rate Miami Beach hotel, but my book also isn’t to be found in the hotel gift shop. Feeling a little panicky, I hurry over to a nearby shopping center, and my novel isn’t there as well. Flipping through a phone book, I locate another bookstore nearby and hurry over in a taxi, certain I will see copies of my book filling the store window. Nothing. Zilch. Not one single book, and here I am scheduled to appear on Florida’s top talk-show in the morning!

Back in my hotel room, I angrily call up my editor to complain. He sounds sincerely sorry and promises me he will check things out, suggesting that in the meantime I call up the company’s vice-president of sales, since marketing the book is not my editor’s responsibility. Still boiling, I call my literary agent and blame him for having let my book end up at Globe. When I get a hold of the vice-president of sales, I warn him that if my book isn’t in all of the bookstores by the following morning, then I am going to appear on the talk show and reveal all of the smut I know about the Globe Publishing Company.

“Please, Mr. Fishman,” he stammers. “I’m sure there’s been some technical slip-up with the shipping of the book. Give me time to find out what happened and I promise to call you back.”

“I don’t care what happened,” I answer. “I want my book in the stores!”

I feel like crying. Getting the novel published was my dream. Not only has it taken several years and thousands of hours at the typewriter to write, my entire identity and worth as a human being is tied up with its success.

By morning, the books still haven’t arrived in Florida. I appear on the talk show and start badmouthing the publisher. The host of the show loves it! He lets me ramble on and on, happy to have such an enthusiastic guest, with so many nasty things to disclose.

When I return to my hotel room, I discover a phone message from the vice-president of sales, apologizing for what he terms, “an error of the shipping department that’s being corrected.” He says that he wants me to come see him as soon as I return to New York.

I continue my publicity book tour without any books, continuing to slander Globe Publishing Company on another talk show in Miami, and on subsequent TV appearances in Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, and Tallahassee. When I return to New York, I meet the vice-president of sales in Globe’s tall skyscraper building.

“I’m truly sorry,” he says. “I know how disappointed you must feel.”

Disappointed isn’t the word. I am crushed with rage and mourning.

“What the hell happened?” I ask him.

“I’ll be honest with you,” he says. “I read your book and I like it very much. In my opinion, it’s the best novel we have on our list this month.” I waited to hear the rest.

“The problem,” he says, “is your name.”

“My name?” I wonder. What’s the matter with my name?

He looks at me, giving me time to figure things out for myself.

“The name Fishman?” I ask. “You mean because I’m a Jew?” I was astounded!

“My name isn’t Matthews,” he confided “My real name is Shapiro, but to get a job at this publishing company, I changed it to something not Jewish. There are over 800 people on the payroll at Globe, and only a handful are Jewish.”

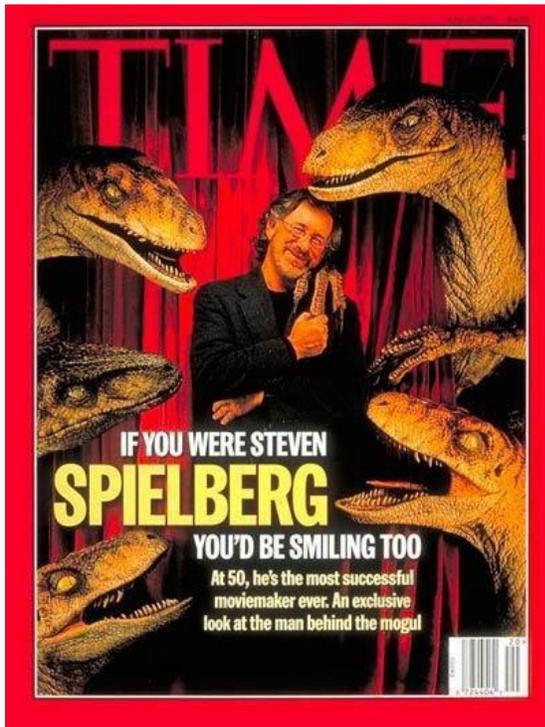
“Then why did Globe buy my book?” I ask.

“Your editor brought it over with him from Crowell. They wanted him on the staff, so they didn’t have a choice.”

I sit stunned. This is New York City – not at meeting of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia.

My book eventually made it into the bookstores, but without the backing of the publisher, it disappeared from the bookshelves within a few short months. There were no more talk shows. No gala book signings. No author parties. No sale to the movies. No bid advance on my next book. Nothing. Gone with the wind. Depressed isn’t the word. I was demolished!

Today, I realize that it was all for my good. The Holy One Blessed Be He was looking out for me, even back then before I realized that He existed. If the book had become a bestseller, and if I had become celebrity, for certain I would never have discovered Torah. I would never have discovered Jerusalem and the Holy Land. I would never have come back to G-d.



Success can be the worst kind of prison. Once, *Time Magazine* did a feature story on the director, Steven Spielberg, after the great success of his movie, "Jurassic Park." He was pictured on the cover of the magazine surrounded by the dinosaurs he had created. They were glaring at him, as if he was all theirs, trapped in the lure and limelight of Hollywood, like an animal trapped in a cage. If I had become as famous as Steven Spielberg, I'd still be in Hollywood too.

But, like I've said before, I didn't understand any of that at the time. Feeling like I had been stabbed in the back, I break off my friendship with my literary agent and say goodbye to my dreams of becoming a famous novelist in New York. Look out Hollywood, here I come!

## Chapter Seven

### **Bleeding in Hotel California**

For three straight days, I bleed and bleed and bleed. I have to rush to the bathroom with diarrhea up to 20 times a day, but only blood comes out. I don't measure the precise amount, but it looks like a cup of blood each time. Finally, realizing that the bleeding isn't about to stop on its own, I go to see a doctor. He says that it sounds like colitis, but that I need to be checked out by a gastroenterologist to make sure.

Colitis. The word rings a bell. There's a popular song by the hard-rock band, "The Eagles," called "Hotel California," about being trapped in a life you can't escape - like life in California. Or like drug addiction:

On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair  
Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air.  
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light  
My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim  
I had to stop for the night.

True, the word in the song is "colitas" which is a slang expression for the most potent part of a marijuana leaf, at the tip of the branch. Anyway, it sounds just like colitis, and the resemblance in such a spooky song gives me the shivers. The lyrics continue:

There she stood in the doorway;  
I heard the mission bell

And I was thinking to myself  
“This could be heaven or this could be Hell.”  
Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way  
There were voices down the corridor,  
I thought I heard them say

“Welcome to the Hotel California  
Such a lovely place, such a lovely place  
Such a lovely face.  
Plenty of room at the Hotel California  
Any time of year, any time of year, you can find it here.”

How true. How prophetic. How frightening. How real when you are bleeding  
out your guts in sunny California and you don't know why.

Last thing I remember, I was  
Running for the door  
I had to find the passage back to the place I was before  
“Relax” said the night man,  
“We are programmed to  
receive.  
You can check out any time you like,  
But you can never leave!”

I wait in the gastroenterologist's office for an hour. After asking me some  
general questions, he says that he wants to do a proctoscopy examination.  
A cute, young nurse escorts me to the examining room. She tells me to  
take off all my clothes and put on a hospital gown, open in the back, then  
hands me a plastic bottle with a long, thin spout. She explains that it's an

enema designed to make me go to the bathroom and clean myself out. I tell her that I don't need it – after bleeding for a week, I am already as clean as could be.

“I'm sorry, but that's the procedure,” she says with a sympathetic smile. In her eyes, I can see a glimmer of interest in me, but, gripping the enema in my hand, I'm too depressed and bummed out to think twice about it. She instructs me how to administer the enema, then leaves me alone. Thirty minutes later, after the nasty solution has sent me twice to the bathroom, she returns and leads me to the examining room proper, where the doctor is getting the proctoscope ready, a long cylinder tube, about the circumference of a five-shekel coin, which he is going to insert you-know-where. To say that the examination is uncomfortable is a glaring understatement. Even worse, the young nurse is there all the time to assist the doctor in the messy procedure. I try to take it like a man, but I can't keep from groaning. Plus, my bowels are inflamed from the illness, making the pain even worse. It could be that the examination is only five minutes, but it seems like an eternity in Hotel California. By the time it's over, my whole body is sweating and trembling, as if I've just spent an hour on the racket-ball court getting run back and forth by Big Wilt.

“Sorry, fella,” the doctor says, giving me a pat on the back.

The nurse tells me to change back into my clothes. After another hour wait, the nurse summons me into his office. Once again, I ignore her flirting glance. The doctor informs me that I have an inflammation of the lower bowl tract called Ulcerative Proctitis. In order to determine if the inflammation extends along the walls of the colon as well, he wants to do a colonoscopy on me in another few days, and a type of X-ray called a barium enema which will allow him to see the entire 8 meter tract of the small and large intestines.



In the meantime, he writes me a prescription for cortisone enemas, plastic bottles like the enema I just took, but filled with the powerful anti-inflammation medicine, cortisone, in order to counteract the disintegration of the intestinal wall and stop the bleeding. I am to self-administer two a day, one in the morning and one at night before going to bed.

Driving home, I can still feel the discomfort of the barbaric exam. There's a message on my telephone answering:

"Hi. My name is Rachel, the nurse from Dr. Arnold's clinic. I hope you're feeling better. If you'd like to go out on a date, give me a call. My home phone is ...."

"Oh, man," I think. This tops them all! But I'm on such a down, I can't even begin to think about dating. Can you imagine telling a chick in a bar, "Excuse me, I have to go take my nightly enema."

Further testing reveals that in addition to ulcerative proctitis, I also have ulcerative colitis, a severe inflammation of the upper colon. To treat the

deteriorative condition, I have to take cortisone pills for two months. The first week, eight pills per day. Second week, seven pills each day. The third week, six pills.... After the third week, the bleeding begins to lessen, but in reaction to the cortisone, my face swells up to the size of a volley ball. Looking in the mirror, a round, bloated, even grotesque mask of myself stares back at me. I am amazed. Astounded. Crestfallen. I look more like Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, than a good-looking Hollywood screenwriter.



“Hey, Fishy, what’s happened to your face?” Arnold Schwarzenegger asks in the weight room. “Taking steroids?”

He knows about steroids because his Mr. Universe body is pumped up with enough steroids to kill a gorilla.

The girls in aerobics class cease glancing my way. I stop shouting out with Daniel, not wanting to draw attention to myself. Soon, I stop going to the health club altogether, so no one will see how I look. Instead, to stay in shape, I swim 100 laps in an Olympic-size pool in my neighborhood. In the

water, all by myself, I have plenty of time to think. “What the hell is happening to me?” I wonder. I wasn’t born with this disease. Why, all of a sudden, do I have it now?

In those days before Internet, there’s no Dr. Google from whom you can find out everything you didn’t want to know about every ailment on Earth. So I go to a library and read about colitis in a “Merck’s Manuel” – a doctor’s guide to diseases. Ulcerative colitis is a severe inflammation in the walls of the colon. Its cause is unknown. For some patients, cortisone works to stop the bleeding. But for many sufferers of the disease, once the cortisone treatment is stopped, the colitis returns, and another two months of medication is needed. In really severe cases, when the bleeding can’t be controlled, the inflamed section of the colon is surgically removed, and instead of going to the bathroom, the patient moves his bowels into a disposable, plastic sac attached to a hole in his abdomen.

Learning that I am not going to die affords me little consolation. I can imagine the bedroom scene when the film-studio secretary asks, “Oh my – what is that strange bag attached to your belly?”

According to the book, some researchers believe that the disease is stress related, but, in the absence of clinical research, there is no definitive proof to substantiate the theory.

Do I have stress, I wonder? Having recently sold a screenplay, I have enough money to last a few years. Am I over-stressed trying to climb up the ladder of success in Hollywood? Maybe – though I am not aware of it. Is the bleeding my way of crying over the publishing disaster of my novel? Are the drops of blood my tears?

I decide to give psychology another chance. My gastroenterologist doesn’t believe that there’s a connection between the body and the mind, but it’s

OK with him if I want to seek out psychological counseling. He recommends a social worker who has apparently helped one of his other patients. He's a nice, elderly Jewish man, who works a lot with teenage drop-outs. He doesn't go into anything deep, mainly just offers a sympathetic ear. With fatherly concern, he tells me an interesting thing:

"Look at your situation as if you've stepped into an elevator in a skyscraper, and somebody has pressed all of the down buttons. There's nothing that you can. You just have to go down for the ride, all the way to the bottom. When you get there, the elevator will begin to ascend. Don't worry."

So I tried not to worry. "Don't worry. Be happy!" It's easy for the social worker to say. He isn't bleeding like I am. But I give it a try. How? By getting stoned. When you're stoned, everything is supposed to be groovy. That's true at the beginning. But when you imbibe a great deal, things change. Marijuana enhances how you feel, so if you're depressed, you'll feel even more depressed when you're stoned. And if you are feeling uptight, when you get high, whatever anxiety you have may disappear for an hour or two, or it may multiply sharply until you feel like you're freaking out. Realizing that marijuana isn't the solution, I give up smoking all together, hoping to clean out my bloodstream, my body, and my brain.

We've entered the "New Age" in America, and bookstores are filled with self-help books on happiness and healthy living, with titles like: "Overcoming Stress," "Joy in Twelve Easy Lessons," "Nature's Healthy Diet," "Dr. Frank's Secret to Better Living," "Meditate Your Way to Success." I read them all.

By the eighth week, my bleeding has stopped. Am I ever relieved! I won't have to spend the rest of my life having bowel movements through a hole in my stomach. Imagine how funny that would look on the beach!

“Hey, Fish! What’s that bag attached to your stomach?”

“Bag? What bag? Oh, that bag! That’s my toilet, man. I take it with me wherever I go!”

“Wow! That’s so cool!”

Unfortunately, after two weeks without the medicine, the bleeding returns. I’m back at the doctor’s for more gruesome examinations. There’s nothing else to do but to try cortisone again. But we have to wait two weeks. You can’t take it all the time because it will kill you faster than the disease. It’s a powerful drug, too poisonous for the kidneys and liver to absorb, so it has to be given only in intervals, in gradually lesser and lesser doses, so the metabolism won’t be overwhelmed.

Once again, I start with eight pills every day, then seven each day the following week, then six, then five.... This time, the doctor also puts me on another medicine called sulfasalazine, which was thought to help at the time. My face looks like a blowfish. I can’t show you a photo, cause I threw them all away long ago, wanting to forget the whole bloody nightmare.

To make a long story short, I repeat this discouraging cycle four times, for a period of eight months, taking the cortisone until the bleeding stops, but then having to start all over, once more, when the bleeding returns. Finally, when my doctor mentions surgery, I realize that conventional medicine doesn’t have a solution to my problem. Not wanting to have my colon removed, I start shopping around, almost desperately, for some alternative cure.

Down the street from my Venice apartment, close to the beach, there’s a popular New Age health store. Little Indian charms ring when you walk in the door. Immediately, the pungent scent of incense fills your nostrils, and the exotic, mystical chords of a sitar fill your ears, as if you’ve been

transported to Bangladesh. The place is a supermarket of all the latest fads, with organic food and body oils, psychedelic lights and posters, yoga clothing, Taro cards, mystical literature, spiritual music, paperback books written by dying people who were miraculously cured, and a bulletin board plastered with the flyers and business cards of dozens of fortune tellers, masseuses, reflexologists, chiropractors, yoga instructors, meditation classes, macrobiotic counselors, acupuncturists, herbal drops, Silva Mind Control courses, Scientology meetings, séances, Zen Buddhist retreats, spiritual enlightenment weekends, authentic California ashrams, vitamin therapy, colon irrigation, hypnosis, ozone treatments, anti-stress seminars, and so many other charlatan healers and nirvana cures that I don't remember them all. As the Woody Guthrie song says: "You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant..."

I'm open to everything, and a lot of the stuff makes sense. For instance, the back cover of a book called, "Your Miracle Diet," states: "Every human will experience the pain of inflammation at some time in his or her life, so this book is for everyone. Inflammation is an immune response to injury, toxins, allergy, or infection, and causes pain, redness, heat, and swelling in the affected area. Since more than 70 percent of our immune system cells are found along the lining of our digestive tract, your immune response is hugely affected by the foods that interact with your stomach and colon."

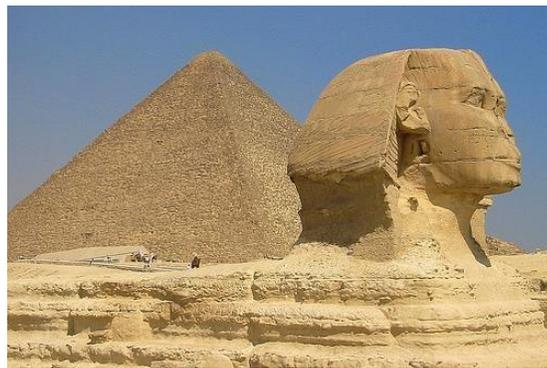
So I revamped my whole diet. No more sugar, Coke, hamburgers and French fries; no more salami, pastrami, and corn beef sandwiches; no more white bread or bagels. Instead, I only eat brown rice and a list of selected vegetables, soya, tofu, bean sprouts, alfalfa, seaweed, queen bee honey, natural Indian curry, Japanese minsu soup, and herbal tea.

When that doesn't seem to be helping, I try a highly recommended carrot juice fast, drinking only organic juices for a week.



At home, I stop listening to “The Doors” and other rock music, and now only listen to peaceful and relaxing, “spiritual music” and specially-created tapes featuring the sounds of the sea, raindrops on leaves, and footsteps in a forest.

To give my bedroom a more exotic look, I buy a few ferns. I take down the posters in my apartment of the writer, Norman Mailer, the rebel actor, James Dean, and the poster of Paul Newman from the movie, “Cool Hand Luke,” and replace them with psychedelic posters of New Age art, and a picture of the Sphinx.



At night, drowning in loneliness, I’m still to be found at some disco. Being with a woman doesn’t seem to be the answer, so one night I try two. But that doesn’t stop the bleeding either. After a while, I don’t have the head to meet new partners, so I dance by myself with a wild, almost super-human energy, as if trying to cast off the demon inside me who is making

me bleed. Tired of playing the the pick-up game, more often than not, I prefer to go home alone.



In one of the dozens of miracle-healing bestsellers that I browse through, I learn that: “Life energy, in the form of cerebrospinal fluid, flows within, through and around the body over three inter-related and interconnected energy systems that interface with each other, called the nervous, the meridian, and the chakra systems.”

So I try acupuncture, reflexology, psychic healing, and Shiatsu massage. Instead of the aerobics class at the health club, I buy some yoga pants and go to the morning yoga class instead, where I learn how to stand on my head, and bend my body into a lotus, a cobra, a bridge, an extended triangle, a pigeon, a peacock, a sphinx, and a tree, as well as mastering Kundalini breathing techniques which I practice each day at home.



A master swami from India comes to Hollywood to teach advanced yoga techniques and raise money for his ashram in New Delhi, so I eagerly drive over to hear one of his lectures and wait after class to tell him about my bleeding. The dark-skinned and turbaned wise man tells me to drink a liter of freshly-squeezed lemon juice in the morning. Then I have to take a neck tie and tie it into small knots, tilt my head back and insert the tie down my throat until I gag. After slowly removing the neck tie from my throat, I am to stand on my head in the bathtub and throw up all of the lemon juice. This will clean out my colon. Faithful to the bearded swami's instructions, I manage to do the procedure two days before I break down. But I'm still willing to give yoga a chance, so when a famous guru from India comes to L.A., my friend Daniel and I sign up for a co-ed, yoga and massage weekend which the holy man is conducting in a Santa Barbara mountain retreat, where the smog of L.A. doesn't reach.

The guru is billed as a colleague of the world famous, peace loving, Dali Lama. The posters advertising the weekend reports that after the Six-Day War, the guru and the British actor, Peter Sellers, had flown in a private airplane over Israel, dropping flyers protesting Israel's "occupation" of Arab lands.



The weekend is being held in a rustic hotel in the hills. The lobby is packed with young spiritual seekers, and there are a lot more women than men. After check-in, we are to get to know one another by pairing off and giving each other massages. People tell me they feel energy coming out of my hands, and I put three women into a relaxing sleep to kick off the weekend. My dashing pal, Daniel, who gives massages for extra income, is casting a spell over a prospective future client who looks ready to sign up for a series of treatments. Afterwards, the celebrity guru appears in a long white robe and turban. He speaks an excellent English with a rich Indian accent that sounds like singing. He puts his assistant through a display of the yoga exercises we will be doing and gives the poor guy a whack with his stick every time he doesn't do the pose to perfection. After our first outdoor session, we have free time to relax in the dozen Jacuzzis spread out on the hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean. That's when Daniel and I spot the aloof mystic meditating peacefully in a Jacuzzi all by himself.

"Let's go over and see where this joker is really at," Daniel says, hinting that the enlightened guru is just another actor in Hollywood, like all the rest. He pulls out a joint and lights up. I haven't smoked for a while, but I figure, why not? When in India, do as the Indians do. Stripped down to a loincloth, the guru's a skinny guy, looking like he hardly eats. We ask if we

can join him, and he nods his head. So we wade into the hot, bubbling Jacuzzi with the star of the show.

“Can I ask you a question?” Daniel says.

“What kind of question?” the guru asks. “Ten-dollar question? Fifty-dollar question? Hundred-dollar question?”

Apparently, the dude has a Bollywood sense of humor.

“One-hundred-dollar question,” Daniel answers.

The guru graciously nods his head.

“If yoga leads to health and enlightenment,” Daniel asks, “How come so many millions of people are starving to death in India and dying from all kinds of diseases?”

Suddenly, the Indian’s face seems to change and we’re looking at the face of a distinguished English professor.

“They don’t follow my system of yoga,” he answers in a very dignified British accent. I remember that he’s a good friend of Peter Sellers, the English actor of “Pink Panther” fame, whose specialty is playing several different roles in the same film.

“Why don’t you teach your yoga system to them?” I ask.

When he turns towards me, his face changes into the face of a streetwise pimp from Harlem. His voice too sounds like it’s coming out of some cool hipster. “They don’t have the money to pay, brother,” he says.

“Why don’t you teach them for free?” Daniel asks.

His head turns back and forth between us, as if he's watching a tennis match. He squeezes his face into a ball and speaks with a Chinese accent. "Confucius says, 'When you give something free, no one values its worth.'"

"You still haven't answered my question," Daniel says, as if pinning him down in his corner of the Jacuzzi. "If the religion of the East is so enlightened, how come India is one of the most backward countries in the world with people dying in the streets?"

"Sometimes backwards is forwards," he replies with a cynicism hard to figure out.

"Your country is filled with poor and starving people," I note.

"Poor is rich and they are starving for Nirvana. Dying brings man closer to G-d."

"Answers like that aren't worth even fifty cents," Daniel tells him.

Like I mentioned, Daniel is a big, strong-looking guy. While I have a sweet, baby face, Daniel looks serious and tough, as if he could lift up the guru in one hand and toss him out of the Jacuzzi. And with his Israeli accent, he sounds like he possesses his own wisdom of the East. In short, he's a formidable opponent.

"The fault is not in the mouth that speaks wisdom, but in the ears of the listener," the still calm yogi answers.

"When the Dali Lama was here, tens of thousands flocked to hear him," I say. "Not the mere dozens at this weekend."

Suddenly, the guru's peaceful expression turns angry. His eyes flash. The water in the Jacuzzi starts to boil from his rage.

“The world didn’t want to listen to Hitler!” he barks, raising his voice.  
“They didn’t want to listen to Stalin!” he yells.

Suddenly, the old bird is red in the face. People gaze over from other Jacuzzis. A small crowd starts to gather to watch the guru freak out.

“The world didn’t want to listen to Nietzsche and Mao Tse-tung! If the world won’t listen to me, a terrible nuclear war is coming! Remember my words!” he shouts. “Atom bombs will wipe out the West!”

Talk about rotten karma! There is such negative energy pouring out from this guy, you can feel it. I glance at Daniel, and he looks at me, and we climb out of the Jacuzzi to get away from the loony maniac. More people run over to see what’s going on.

“Hundreds of millions we be destroyed!” he rants. “The oceans will turn into blood. Birds will fall out from the sky and the sun will turn crimson if the Jews aren’t prevented from taking over the world! If the world doesn’t listen to my teaching, a great disaster will darken the planet! ”

We can still hear him screaming as we hurry away toward the hotel.

“What a bummer,” Daniel says.

Later that evening, the guru doesn’t show up for his scheduled talk. His assistant apologizes and suggests that everyone take another dip in the Jacuzzis until the master arrives. But when we head back outside to the Jacuzzis, they’re not working. The guru’s bad energy has short-circuited the electricity. None of them work!

The guru never showed up again. He canceled all of his appearances at the weekend. The hotel was forced to return everyone’s money.

Another swami bites the dust. But I wasn't yet ready to give up on all of the wisdom of the East. Next, I read the popular book, "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Racing," and I try to discover the root of my problem by throwing the "I Ching," a book, also known as "The Book of Changes," based on an ancient Chinese system of divination. It's sort of like being your own oracle. There are 64 hexagrams containing six lines each, and each one is associated with a different teaching or saying, like, "Difficulty at the beginning works supreme success." The figures are called things like: the Creative, the Joyous, the Gentle, the Abysmal, and depending on how your six sticks fall when you throw them, you get answers to your questions like, "Acquiring wisdom," "Perseverance," "Great boldness needed," "Time for repair." What my grandmother would call in Yiddish, "*Narrishkeit*," or foolishness.

While my spiritual search is underway, I still do a little writing. A friend asks me to write a low-budget, exploitation film for Black audiences, and I knock off the boxer script in a week, bringing in some extra cash. I'm scheduled to receive a more money from Carolco, but the company is having financial problems and the second payment is delayed. A trans-Alaskan pipeline is being built to increase oil production in America's snowy, 49<sup>th</sup> state, so I write an adventure script set in Alaska, hoping to cash in on the boom, but by the time I submit it to my agent in Hollywood, he tells me that he's already seen a half dozen pipeline scripts just like mine.

Another six months have transpired on my "Magical Mystery Tour," but the bleeding hasn't let up. My body is being slowly poisoned with cortisone, and my doctor again mentions that a colostomy may be the only alternative, by simply surgically removing the diseased segment of my colon and throwing it into the trash.

Maybe a song by “The Beatles” is the salvation I’m searching for: “All you need is love, all you need is love. All you need is love, love, love is all you need.”

From a flyer posted on the New Age store bulletin board, I learn about a summer holistic-health week in San Francisco. An American guy I met in Paris has an apartment in nearby Berkeley, and we agree to exchange apartments for the week. On the flight up north, a pretty Black stewardess brings me a complimentary glass of wine, along with all the other passengers. Ten minutes later, she returns with another glass, only for me.

“I didn’t order another glass,” I tell her.

“Compliments of the house,” she says with a smile.

“Whose house?” I wonder. Hers or mine?

Sure enough, in another fifteen minutes on the short hour flight, she’s back with another glass of wine for me.

“Love, love, love is all you need,” I hear the words singing in my head, which is already spinning from the high atmosphere and light wine.

“I don’t like to drink alone,” I tell her.

“I’ll be happy to join you when we land,” she says.

“Are you flying back to L.A. today?” I ask.

“No. I have a layover in San Francisco.”

“Then I’ll save the third glass for later,” I replay.

“Where are you staying?” she asks.

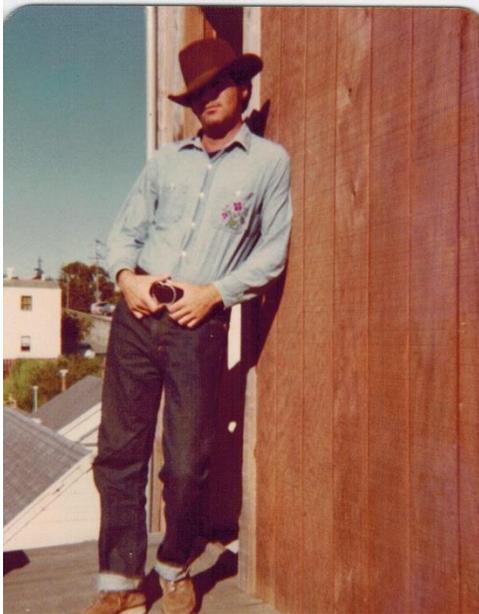
“I have an apartment for a week in Berkeley.”

“Dynamite!” she answers. “I’m tired of hotels.”

Remember that old hippie classic?

If you're going to San Francisco  
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair  
If you're going to San Francisco  
You're gonna meet some gentle people there.

For those who come to San Francisco  
Summertime will be a love-in there  
In the streets of San Francisco  
Gentle people with flowers in their hair  
If you come to San Francisco  
Summertime will be a love-in there.



At the holistic health seminar, I don’t learn anything new. Renting a car, I drive back down toward L.A. along the picturesque Pacific Coastal Highway. Stopping at a gas station every half-hour to rush to the bathroom, I make my way south. To break the long drive, I pull off the road to catch a little sun on one of the nudist beaches along the way. Breaking my health-food binge, I stop off in Malibu and order a hamburger and fries in a popular singles bar. The next morning, I’m back at the beach in Santa Monica with Daniel, staring out

across the Pacific Ocean toward the meditation ashrams and Buddhist temples of Japan.

That's when he asked me the one simple question which changed my whole life.

## Chapter Eight

### The Million Dollar Question

“Hey, Tzvi,” Daniel asks me, as we sit on the beach in Santa Monica. “Why don’t you know anything about Judaism?”



When I was a kid, my Uncle Louis had a friend who was the official doctor of the famous sports arena, Madison Square Garden in New York City, home of world championship prizefights, the Ringling Brothers Circus, and the N.Y. Knicks. When I was about eight years old, my uncle received a gift from his friend which he passed on to me and my brother – the boxing gloves used by Ingmar Johansson and Floyd Patterson in their heavyweight boxing championship fight. The first time we used them, my brother, who is four years older than me, gave me a right hook that made me dizzy and knocked me to the floor.



Daniel's question on the beach has the very same impact, leaving my head spinning.

"I know about Judaism," I defensively argue, but I instantly sense that he is right. I know absolutely nothing about the very thing that is closest to me – my own religion! I had studied almost everything there was to study – biology, chemistry, and physics; mathematics and languages; philosophy and world history; literature and the Arts; sociology and anthropology; mysticism and comparative religion... but nothing at all about Judaism and what it meant to be Jew! From my readings on psychology, I remember that Freud wrote that if a person avoids something close to him, then he has, what Freud termed, a "psychological block." Afraid to face the thing that frightens him, the person uses avoidance and denial to run away from it. The only way he can overcome his fear is to face his phobia straight on, and then he will realize he his fear is ungrounded. The Hasidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, further illuminates the phenomenon by teaching that it is precisely the barrier which is the gateway to a better future.

In high school I had learned about Christianity and Protestantism. In L.A., I had studied Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, transcendental meditation, and New Age spiritualism – but nothing about Judaism. Ever since my *bar*

*mitzvah*, outside of eating bagels and lox, and gefilta fish, I had absolutely no connection to my very own faith.

Back in my Venice Beach apartment, I look up Jewish bookstores in the phone book. There's one on Fairfax Avenue in West Hollywood near the famous Canter's Deli. I jump in my car and drive right over.

It turns out to be a bookstore run by *Chabad*. I tell the salesman I want to learn about Judaism and he sells me a *Chumash* in English, a book about Judaism for beginners, and a layman's guide to the "*Tanya*."

Immediately, I return to the beach, open the Bible, and begin to read:

*"In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth."*

My head shoots up towards the heavens - sky and white clouds and a sparkling sun. I'm blinded. "Uh oh," I think. "There's really a G-d, and I've ignored him all my life!" Oh, man, am I ever in trouble!

It is impossible to describe the sublime certainty of that moment, but my sudden awareness of the Creator's existence is absolute, infusing me entire being. At that moment, and forever afterward, there is no question at all in my mind that, indeed, G-d exists, and it is He who created the world and me within it. Once upon a time, when I was a child, I had a natural belief in G-d, reciting "*Shema Yisrael*" when I went to bed at night and offering a few prayers of my own. In that flash of a moment on the beach, gazing up at the heavens, that pure and childlike faith returns. Just as the rock group, "The Monkeys," sing, "I'm a believer!"

I approach the Bible with the same open-mindedness and belief with which I approached all the other subjects I had encountered during my spiritual quest. I set off on this new journey with the same concentration and zest.

I sit reading on the beach for hours. For the first time in over a year, I forget about running to the bathroom. From my childhood, I remember the Story of Creation, Adam and Eve, and the Snake. For his transgression, Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden, just like I have been expelled and am trying so hard to get back. The generations of the Tower of Babel and Noah remind me of life in L.A., and all of a sudden, I realize why I am bleeding. The blood that I am drowning in is my very own flood! And it has come to wash me clean!

*Gevalt! Gevalt! Gevalt!*

Yiddish words from childhood visits to my grandparents flash into my mind. I remember going to temple on *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur* with my parents, lighting *Hanukah* candles and reciting the *Haggadah* on Passover night. I'm a Jew, and I've been living like a Gentile for years, not paying any attention to G-d!

I hadn't smoked any marijuana that day, but I feel stoned out of my mind. There's a G-d! He's real! And He's sent me my colitis to wake me up set me off on a quest which will bring me back to him! Suddenly, it's as simple as can be. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind. G-d does not only exist –He's the King. He's the Director of all directors. He is the cause behind everything.

Exhilarated, frightened, joyous, and confused, I go for a walk on the beach. Now what do I do, I wonder? One thing is clear. I can't continue living the life I've been living. And I have to keep learning. I have to study as much as I can. I have to learn about G-d, about the Jewish People, about who I am, and about what I'm supposed to do on this planet.

I return to my beach towel and small treasure of books, picking up the book on the "*Tanya*," which means "teaching." According to the author,

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, and the secrets of *Kabbalah*, I have two souls – an animal soul and a Divine soul. It turns out that I've been following after my animal soul, in an insatiable and never-ending quest to satisfy my physical pleasures and lusts. But I haven't given any nourishment at all to my Divine soul, things like Torah study, prayer, and performing the Divine commandments, handed down at Mount Sinai. Nonetheless, I learn, the Divine Spark remains within me, like a diamond in coal, or the Burning Bush of the Bible, ready to be brushed off and polished, until it turns into a towering flame.

During those ecstatic first moments of my revelation, and during the days which followed, I realize the whole world is like a curtain, hiding the presence of G-d. Nothing exists by itself. There is a Divine Spark in everything. Everything is a product of G-d's will. At every moment, the world continues to exist through a caveat of the Creator. If G-d turned off the electricity, so to speak, if He took away the Divine Spark in all things, then everything would vanish. Including me.

Wow! I'm familiar with some of these concepts from my readings on Zen, and maybe that's what makes it so poignant. Talk about psychedelics! The Torah is mind-blowing stuff!

Suddenly, as I'm walking back to my apartment from the beach, everything seems fake - the cars, the stores, and the buildings all seem like a Hollywood set.



For people who haven't seen what a movie set in Hollywood looks like, let me explain. The town you see in a cowboy movie looks like a real place, but it's completely fake. The buildings are merely painted facades. If you were to walk around the other side, you would discover that they weren't buildings at all, but rather just the outside walls of the buildings, with nothing behind them.

Another, more recent example, will make matters more clear. In the film, "The Truman Show," the hero thinks he's living in a real world, until he discovers that it's all make believe, that's he's being held captive in some kind of geodesic dome, where he is being filmed in some movie by some unseen DIRECTOR up in the sky.



Only when he journeys to the very brink of the set and discovers a door in a wall of the dome, does he realize that his world isn't the real world at all.



“Oh, man,” I think with a shiver. The world is one big “Twilight Zone,” where what seems to be real isn't real at all! Suddenly, the people on the

street seem like extras on a movie set. “Who am I?” I wonder. “What’s my role in this film?”

Back in my apartment, I turn on some of my spiritual music and read a few more chapters about the “*Tanya*.” My number-one task is to continue the work which Abraham started – to reveal the Presence of G-d on Earth, and to make the profane world we live in holy.

Daniel phones. He asks if I want to go to a movie.

A movie? Who has time for a movie? “No, thanks,” I tell him.

“I’m reading a book about the ‘*Tanya*.’”

“The ‘*Tanya*?’” he asks. “Where did you get that?”

“At the Jewish bookstore on Fairfax,” I tell him.

“Take it easy, brother,” he says. “The Torah is powerful stuff. You have to go slowly.”

I don’t know what slowly is. Everything I do, I do with all of my heart and energy.

My mother calls to find out how I am feeling. My parents are worried about my health. They probably blame themselves for my condition. I tell her not to worry, but I know that she does. She invites me to come home to the island for a vacation.

“Maybe soon, Mom,” I tell her.

“Everyone on the island is reading your novel,” she informs me. “At least here you’re famous.”

It’s nice to be famous somewhere. I may still be an unknown screenwriter in Hollywood, but at least in the Virgin Islands I’m famous!

In the morning, I'm sitting on a bench on the Santa Monica Pier, in the shade of the amusement-park Ferris wheel, reading the commentary on the "*Tanya*," when someone wearing a hat, dark sports jacket, and tie, walks over and sits down beside me. After a few moments, he says hello. He looks a little older than me, with a kind smile and sincere demeanor. In Los Angeles, when a total stranger sits down on a bench beside you and starts to talk, chances are that he's gay. But this guy looks like he's just walked out of the *shul* near the beach. He's carrying a bulging leather briefcase, which probably contained his *tallit*, *tefillin*, and *siddur*.

"What are you reading?" he asks.

I hold up the book.

He whistles. "How long have you been studying Judaism?" he asks. Obviously, by the way I look, and the clothes I'm wearing, a loose-fitting, Hawaiian beach shirt and no *yarmulke* on my head, I'm a novice to Judaism.

"About a week," I answer.

"If I can give you a word of advice, at the beginning, it's wise to go slowly. The "*Tanya*" is based on the secrets of the Torah. First, you have to start off with the ABC's. It's the same thing when you want to construct a tall building. First you have to build a strong foundation. Without a deep and sturdy foundation, the building will fall down."

His advice is the same advice as Daniel's – go slowly.

"Have a nice day," he says, standing up from the bench. Waving goodbye, he walks down the pier toward the beach. Is he really a human being, I wonder, or an angel whom G-d has sent to warn me about diving into water over my head?

So, setting the “Tanya” aside, it’s back to the beach and the Bible. I’ve reached the Torah portion of “*Lech Lecha*.”

*“Now the L-rd said to Avraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, and go to the Land that I will show you.”*



That was interesting. Avraham is the father of the Jewish People, and there is a special Land where G-d wants him and his descendants to live, as it says again and again in the coming Biblical chapters.

The Bible I am talking about is the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the Torah. I read it like a screenplay, except that I take every single word as truth, just like I did with yoga and all of the other disciplines I tried along my spiritual journey, in order to give the teachings a chance, to see things from the inside, without a doubting or skeptical eye. I remember saying to myself, “Take off your own American, assimilated Jewish head, and put on the head of Avraham *Avinu* in its place, in order to understand what the Torah is saying.

Of course I have questions. When I learn that the world is 5744 years old according to the Torah, I go back to the Jewish bookstore and ask the bearded and *yarmulke*-wearing salesman, “How can the Rabbis say the world is 5744 years old when scientists maintain that it was created billions of years ago?”

“That’s a very good question,” he replies. “First, we start our count with the creation of the first man with a Divine soul, Adam, and that occurred 5744 years ago. That’s what’s important to us, not the dinosaurs or the monkeys. Some Sages explain that when G-d created the world, he created it to look like it was already billions of years old. Others say that during the Flood, the whole geology of the earth changed, something which the carbon dating and radiometric testing of geologists can’t measure.”

His answer was good enough for me. After my initial “Revelation” on the beach, I was a full-fledged believer. I didn’t need scientific proofs. I just wanted to know that the answers to all of my questions were contained somewhere in the Torah and in the wisdom of the Sages of Israel. I also asked him if Jews really believed in the story of the talking snake in the Garden of Eden.

“It’s no problem for G-d to make a snake talk,” he answered.

“But, in general, the Rabbis teach that the story of Creation isn’t a scientific document, but rather an allegory which comes to teach us basic moral lessons. The important thing to know is that G-d created the world, has connection with His creation, and wants mankind to live according to His word as recorded in the Torah. All the latest discoveries and theories of science will be replaced in another few years by newer discoveries, proving that the previous ones were in error. So you shouldn’t let scientific theories get in your way in your path to believing in the Torah.”

“I have another question,” I say.

“Ask as many as you please.”

G-d tells Avraham that he wants him to live in the Land of Israel, along with all of his descendants. G-d repeats the same thing to Yitzhak and

Yaakov, and afterward to Moshe and all the Children of Israel. If that's the case, how come you and so many other religious Jews, who supposedly believe in the Torah, are living here in L.A.?"



That's a question that really puzzles me. Knowing almost nothing about Judaism, I am very perplexed. If the Torah is the book of Jewish law, and if Jews are supposed to live their lives according to the Torah, how can Jews, especially religious Jews, chose to live in California and New York, when they could just as easily be living in Israel? I couldn't figure it out at all.

"The time hasn't come," the salesman answers.

"What do you mean?" I ask. "There already are millions of Jews living in Israel."

"A person can live there if he wants, but right now, it isn't a requirement," he says. "It's not the time. Only when *Moshiach* arrives."

He pronounces the word with an O instead of an A. I assume he's talking about *Mashiach*, but says the word with a Yiddish accent. To tell the truth, I really don't know who the *Mashiach* is, but I figure I've asked the fellow enough questions for the day, so I drive back to the beach.

Back home in my beachfront apartment, the questions still bothers me. After all, the very first time, G-d appears to Avraham, he doesn't tell him to keep *kosher*. He doesn't tell him to observe *Shabbat*. He doesn't tell

him to put on *tefillin*. G-d tells him to go to the Land of Israel, as if to say, “Avraham, if you want to get closer to me, there’s a special place you have to be – in the Holy Land, in the Land of Israel.”

From my simple, straightforward reading of the Torah, it seemed to me that if G-d instructs Avraham to live in Israel, along with all of his descendants after him, then that’s the right thing to do. Either the Torah is the truth, or it isn’t. You can’t have things both ways. At least, from my novice point of view, if the Torah and G-d’s commandments were eternal, like the Rabbis maintained, it seemed to me that all the Jews in America should pack up their bags and move to Jewish Homeland. Confused, I go to ask one of the Rabbis of the little,

Orthodox *shul* that is located, of all places, right on the Venice Beach boardwalk, directly across the sidewalk from the outdoor weightlifting yard, called “Muscle Beach,” where Arnold and other muscle-bound beach bums spend the day, pressing heavy iron dumbbells and showing off their bulging biceps.



I walk over to the tiny house of worship. One of the Neanderthals working out in the “pit” recognizes me from the health club and gives a wave. Stripped to their gym shorts, the gorillas look as big and mean as gladiators. Women body builders, looking as strong as the men, are

working out in bikinis right across from the *shul*. This is California, so the Judaism is Disneyland Judaism. Showbiz Judaism. Opening the door to the synagogue, I remember that a Jew should wear a skullcap on his head whenever he's in *shul*. Luckily, there a box inside the entrance filled with black silk *yarmulkes*.

A Rabbi is giving a class to a few old men. They all have large tomes opened on the table where they are sitting, but no one seems to be paying a whole lot of attention as the Rabbi explains what's written on the page. I wait till the class is finished, opening a prayer book and trying to pronounce the Hebrew words I barely remember how to read from my years in Hebrew school. It's the first time I've been inside a synagogue since my *bar mitzvah* – well almost. Since my *bar mitzvah* was held in a church, my last synagogue (or temple) appearance was probably at some *Yom Kippur* service, who knows when? Somewhat sheepishly, I approach the neatly bearded scholar when the older men shuffle out of the *shul*.

I tell him that I've just started to read the Torah and that it seems to me that G-d wants the Jewish People to in the Land of Israel.

“The Torah isn't only the Five Books of Moses,” he explains. “The Oral Torah which Moshe also received on Mount Sinai is made up of the *Mishna* and *Gemara*. Then we have the *Rishonim* and *Achronim*, the early and later *Halachic* authorities who define the details of all the laws. And, of course, there's the *Mishna Torah* of the *Rambam* and the *Shulchan Aruch*.”

I haven't heard of any of these things, so I keep my mouth shut.

“In the Talmudic tractate of *Ketubot*, *Tofesot* clearly states that the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel does not apply in this time, based on the ruling of Rabbi Chaim. According to the Three Oaths which G-d made

us swear when we went into exile, we are forbidden to return to Israel en masse, in opposition to the Gentiles. So, until G-d sends the *Mashiach* to redeem us, may it be soon, we are supposed to be here, spreading the light of Torah to all of the non-Jews wherever we live.”

It sounded like a good answer. I had never heard of *Tosefot* nor the Three Oaths, so I wasn't about to argue with him. The business about the Oral Torah was new to me too. At that point, I didn't know the difference between the *Rambam* and the *Ramban*, and I only learned much later that Rabbi Chaim was a mistaken student whose opinion is rejected by the *Pitchei T'shuva*, a compilation of all the *Rishonim* and *Achronim*. And as far as *Mashiach* was concerned, I wasn't sure who he was, but it seemed like “the good life” in sunny California would be spoiled for a lot of Jews if the *Mashiach* indeed did show up in order to whisk them off to the Holy Land.

“I have to make some telephone calls in the office,” the Rabbi says, “But you can hang around, make yourself a cup of coffee, and look over some of the books in English in the bookcase at the back of the *shul*. If you have any more questions I'll be happy to answer them for you.”

There are all kinds of books in English. A set of large reddish volumes catches my eye. It's the Talmud in English. I find the tractate of *Ketubot* which the Rabbi mentioned and flip through the pages looking for something about the Land of Israel. The Hebrew side of the page is, of course, totally indecipherable, with all kinds of columns and scripts. After a while I get lucky and spot a section on page 110 which mentions the Land of Israel. It reads:

“For all time, a person should dwell in the Land of Israel, even in a place where the majority of residents are idol worshippers, and not dwell outside of the Land of Israel, even in a place where the majority are Jews, for everyone who dwells in the Land of Israel is like someone who has a G-

d, while everyone who lives outside of the Land of Israel is like someone who doesn't have a G-d, as it is written in the Torah, '*To give them the land of Canaan to be their G-d.*'"

If somebody named Rabbi Chaim disagreed, it must have been written in one of the tiny Hebrew scripts on the side of the page, because I couldn't find it in English.

The Rabbi reappeared, carrying a briefcase. Quickly, I close the large tome, feeling like a spy gathering secret information to expose some great cover-up and conspiracy.

"I suggest you continue reading the *Chumash* and try your hand at the *Gemara*," the Rabbi said. "We have some classes here during the week and on *Shabbos*. I will give you a schedule, and I can try to find you a study partner if you like."

I take the schedule of classes and thank him for his time. He asks where I live, and when he hears that my apartment is in easy walking distance of the *shul*, he tells me to come for Friday evening services, and he will arrange for a family in the neighborhood to invite me for all the Sabbath meals. Then, ready to close up the synagogue, he removes a ring of keys from his pocket and remembers to turn of the electric, hot-water percolator.

Thanking him again, I walk out the door to the beach, passing the boardwalk's constant parade of bikinis, and the groaning body builders just across the sidewalk. It may be that the Rabbi's more scholarly explanation is right, but it seems to me that the Holy Land must be something quite different from Venice Beach and Hollywood. Knowing absolutely nothing about Israel, I still can't understand why any Jew who

believed in the Torah would prefer to be in L.A., when he could be in Jerusalem instead. Putting the Talmud aside and all the other scholarly books he mentioned, it seems to me that if you gave the stories about our Forefathers in the Book of Genesis to any eight-year old to read, and asked him where G-d wanted the Jewish People to live, he would immediately answer, "In Israel" without thinking twice - in spite of what any *Tosefot* said. But what do I know?

When I ask Daniel what he thinks, he tells me not to take every word in the Torah literally, and that everyone interprets its meaning in the way that best suits them. "Live and let live is my motto. Just be careful you don't end up becoming religious," he advises me. "It's good to know about our heritage, and even to keep some of the *mitzvot*, but it's not healthy to exaggerate." Of course, today, if you meet Daniel in the middle of the night, learning Torah at the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai in Meron, he will give you a totally different answer.



Even in Hollywood, he won't eat a cheeseburger, and he won't eat shrimp, like he was raised. On Friday nights, he lights Sabbath candles. Many times I see him put on *tefillin* and pray, though I never try it myself. So before coming to conclusions, I decide to keep learning and to experience some Judaism "live," like showing up at *shul* for Sabbath evening prayers. I ask

people questions and seek out their guidance, filled with a conviction that I have to dig all the way down to the root of all roots, and be as honest in pursuing the truth as I can, letting nothing stand in my way, or discourage me, in order to discover G-d, and, in consequence, to discover who I truly am.

The next morning I return to the *shul* on the beach and hang around outside by the weight-lifting cage until the guy I met on the pier walks out of the Venice Beach Synagogue after the morning prayers. I say hello, and we walk together along the boardwalk. I tell him that it seems to me that G-d wants the Jews to live in Israel, but that the Rabbi said something else, and I was confused.

“There are differences of opinion,” he answers. “Everyone agrees that the day will come when G-d will bring us all back to Israel. The disagreement is when it will happen. Some people say that it is already happening, through the efforts of the Zionists, while others says we don’t have permission to leave the exile until G-d brings us back in a miraculous way, with the coming of *Mashiach*, may it be soon. *Bezrat Hashem*, I hope to move to Israel as soon as I can. Right now, since I’m an only child, I have to look after my mother and father, may they live long, but I don’t plan to live here forever.”

A voice from my past comes back to me – the voice of Stephen Dedalus, the hero of James Joyce’s novel, “Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man,” a book I identified with in my youth:

**“When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.”**

Later that day, I return to the Jewish bookstore and buy a five-volume set of the *Zohar* in English. It’s supposed to be “the” book of Jewish mysticism,

and since I've been studying the "mysticism" of all kinds of Oriental religions, I figure it's time to brush up on my own mystical roots. The holy teachings found in the *Zohar* were compiled by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai during the twelve years he spent in a cave, hiding from the Roman legions which had conquered Israel. Legend records that the Prophet Elijah would visit him in the cave and reveal to him the secrets of Torah. The first thing I look up in the book is the first verse in *Lech Lecha* where G-d commands Avraham to pack up his bags and journey to Israel. There I discover a basic foundation of Torah that is to guide the rest of my journey.

At the very end of the previous Torah portion of *Noach* (Noah), Avraham has already left Ur Kasdim on his way to the land of Canaan. The *Zohar* explains: "We learn from this that whoever makes an effort to purify himself receives assistance from Above. For no sooner is it written, 'to go to the land of Canaan' (at the end of *Noach*), we read immediately afterward, 'Now the L-rd said to Avram, Get thee forth from your land to the Land I will show you....' This command was not given to him until he made the first move himself, for the upper world is not stirred to act until an impulse is awakened in the lower world below."

That was interesting. A person first had to act, and then G-d would bless the action.

The *Zohar* goes on to explain that Avraham's foremost craving was to serve the Creator. To fulfill this desire, he searched for the place where he could achieve the most intimate closeness to G-d. The *Zohar* relates that with his Divine Inspiration, Avraham was able to make a radar sweep of the globe and get a read out of the spiritual character of each location in the world. He discerned that G-d had appointed a different celestial angel to rule over each country. But when Avraham fixed his gaze on the central point of the world, and tried to zero in on its character, his spiritual radar

failed. He couldn't get a reading. The Celestial Influence ruling over this one place was recondite and hidden. This zone was so exalted and remote, no matter how fervently he meditated and concentrated on it, he could not fathom the origin of the Providence which presided over the place. Instinctively, he understood that this was the very place he needed to reach, since all other lesser celestial powers emanated from there, and the power that ruled there, ruled over all other spheres. When Avraham attained this recognition, G-d said to him, "*Lech lecha – get thee forth from your land to the Land that I will show thee*" – to this unique and secret place – the Holy Land, *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel.

Talk about a high! I feel like Rabbi Shimon is speaking directly to me, as if I were Avraham. The *Zohar* continues:

"When G-d perceived Avraham's efforts and desire, He straightaway revealed Himself to him and said, '*Get thee forth,*' in order to know your true self; '*from thy land,*' from that side of the world to which you were attached up to now; '*and from thy kindred,*' from that wisdom that you relied on from the calculation of constellations; '*and from thy father's house,*' that you not heed the teachings of your father's house, even if you could hope to receive from your father prosperity in the world. Therefore, abandon this wisdom and this consideration.... And I shall show you that which you were not able to discover, the power of that recondite and obscure Land." (*Zohar, Lech Lecha, 78a*).

This, ladies and gentleman, is mysticism at its very best. Am I ever turned on! But Israel is far away and no one around seems as excited about going there as I am, so I take Daniel's advice and try to keep cool, recognizing that I still have oceans and oceans of learning ahead of me, more vast than all the waters of the Seven Seas together.

The holiday of *Rosh HaShanah* comes around, and I read about the custom of *Tashlich* in my beginner's guide to Judaism. In the late afternoon, I walk



down to the beach and stand by the water's edge, facing the ocean.

I open my container of cortisone pills, pour the little tablets into my hand and throw them into the sea. Too small to make a splash, they disappear beneath the waves.

"Please G-d," I pray, "Let these pills be considered my sins. Forgive me for all the things I have done to displease You. I didn't know better. Please heal me from my bleeding, just You alone, without any medicines. Let this be my *Tashlich*. This *Rosh HaShanah*, let me begin my life anew.

Lead me in Your truth and guide me in Your path. Let not the illusions and false pathways of this world deceive and confuse me. Show me the true way and teach me how to be Your servant. Amen."

I stroll over to the *shul* by the Venice Beach promenade, passing the usual crowd of body builders at the Muscle Beach workout pit. I enter the synagogue to say a few prayers with the congregants, but I feel estranged, as if I don't belong, as if they are on their trip, and I am on mine.

I walk home, light up a joint, and pray by myself. I have cut down on my smoking almost completely, but once and a while, I take a puff to help me slip behind the heavy and oppressive curtain of the material world to taste the sweetness of the spiritual. I imagine that the angel that G-d has appointed over America must look like Arnold Schwarzenegger, all

physical muscle and brawn. America is the most material place in the world, dominated by physical lusts and the quest for power and money. I want to get beyond all that, to knock down this gold-plated curtain, and to reach out and touch G-d.



Employing all of the meditation techniques I have learned, I imagine I am flying beyond all the barriers, beyond the silver screen of Hollywood and the skyscrapers of New York, on my way to Jerusalem.

I bought a prayer book with the *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur* liturgy, so I pray by myself in my apartment, listening to the serene and mystical strands of Ravi Shankar's music. I'm hovering in the air somewhere between India and the Land of Israel, which to me isn't a real place with buses and cars, but still the Land of the Bible, a Holy Land where prophets and camels roam. Later in the day, to break my loneliness, I drive over to the health club for a yoga class. I'm still very far away from doing *mitzvot*. What interests me is getting closer to G-d and feeling His love, not the practical side of Judaism, which in my mind can wait, if I get to it at all.

After I throw away my cortisone pills, the bleeding increases. Interestingly, on *Yom Kippur* day, I don't bleed at all. I fast, like I did when I was a kid. When my family still belonged to a Conservative synagogue, until I was about ten, we spent most of *Yom Kippur* morning in *shul*. My brother and I would argue with our parents, not wanting to attend, but we would tag along in the end and sit toward the back of the synagogue just to show we were there. After we joined the local Reform temple, the services were shorter. Still, on *Yom Kippur* we fasted. After that, when I left home and went away to boarding school and college, I can't remember if I fasted on *Yom Kippur*. Maybe yes, maybe no. All that time, Judaism wasn't important to me. And G-d, at least in my consciousness, wasn't a part of my life. Now, gazing back, I understand He was there all the time, incognito, directing everything from backstage.

After a few weeks without taking the cortisone, the bleeding becomes very severe. But I don't want to do back to the medicine. I have the feeling that I will never get down to the root of the problem if I rely on cortisone. I want G-d to heal me alone. I learn in a Talmud class I attend in the *shul* by the beach that even the path of a leaf that falls from the branch of a tree is guided by G-d. That means G-d gave me the colitis, and He can take it away. Like it says on the dollar bill, "In G-d we trust." I am determined to trust in G-d, and in G-d alone. Not on doctors and not on pills. So I hold out as long as I can. Finally, after losing a lot of weight, and afraid that I might bleed to death without the medicine, looking pale and weak, I return to my doctor and tell him I stopped taking the cortisone a month ago.

"That was stupid," he exclaims. "Why the hell did you do that?"

I don't want to tell him the real reason. "Up till now, the medicine hasn't helped, so I wanted to see what would happen without it."

"I hope you've learned your lesson," he says. "You're anemic."

You need a blood transfusion fast.”

Without bothering to examine me, he writes out a request that I be hospitalized. In my condition, pills won't help. I have to receive the cortisone intravenously, straight into my veins.

Faced with no alternative, I drive over to the hospital. Maybe the next time, G-d will answer my prayers. Maybe He is testing me. Not knowing the rules of the game, I do what I have to in order to stay alive. Within a few hours, I'm lying in a hospital bed, receiving a liter of blood in one arm, and a small bag of liquid cortisone in the other.

I have two books with me to help pass the time – the Psalms of King David, and a book about advanced techniques of yoga meditations, with photos of a bearded and loin-clothed yogi posing in difficult yoga positions. I sit in a lotus position with infusion needles in my two outstretched arms, repeating over and over like a mantra:

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I*

*will fear no evil,*

*For Thou art with me.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I*

*will fear no evil,*

*For Thou art with me.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil,*

*For Thou art with me.*

I don't tell my parents that I'm in the hospital. Why worry them? Daniel comes to visit. He's upset to see me like this, but being a tough Israeli

soldier on the outside, he doesn't let his emotions show. But when I tell him I stopped taking the cortisone, I can see that he's angry.

"You can't do that," he says. "I told you not to exaggerate. There are laws in the Torah, and one of them is to be very careful to guard your health. Your body belongs to your Creator, not to you. You can't do whatever you please. If a doctor says you have to take medicine, then you have to listen to him."

He stands by the head of the bed and recites a few Psalms he knows by heart. Swaying back and forth with deep concentration on his face, he looks like some kind of modern-day holy man, a New-Age spiritual warrior in his breezy white yoga pants and t-shirt. Because of his fluent Hebrew, it isn't hard to picture him against a background of the Judean Desert in Israel. I know he dreams of playing King David in a movie, instead of the small, insignificant roles he's been getting now and then as a Mafia hit man, because of his husky shoulders and dark, Mediterranean looks.

"I will light a candle in the memory of '*HaAbir Yaacov*,' a famous Kabbalist from Morocco, and ask *Hashem* to heal you in his merit. And I will ask my brother in Israel to visit the *Baba Sali* to pray for your health, *blee nader*."

I don't know who the *Baba Sali* is, but I suppose he's some holy Rabbi.

"Tzvi, correct?"

That much I remember. I was given the Hebrew name Tzvi at my circumcision ceremony in memory of Harry Hirsh, my great grandfather, the Masked Marvel, Hirsh in Yiddish means a deer, which in Hebrew is Tzvi.

"What's your mother's Hebrew name?" Daniel asks.

“Naomi.” Naomi is a Hebrew name itself, like in the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Daniel prays at my bedside: *“Yihe ratzone sh’riheyeh min hashamayim refuah shelama, refuat hanefesh refuat haguf, l’Tzvi ben Naomi, bitoch kol Bnei Yisrael!”*

“Amen,” I reply, not knowing what he’s said, but hoping that it will stop my bleeding.

Three days later, I’m back at home. I swim. 100 laps each morning, repeating my mantra the length of the pool, up and back, up and back, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”* I eat healthy foods, I pray to G-d on the beach, and I decide not to go back on the cortisone. It’s against the doctor’s orders, I know. It’s against Daniel’s advice. Once again, I’m supposed to be taking eight tablets a day. But I don’t. If G-d doesn’t heal me, then I’ll go back into the hospital if I have to. If my doctor doesn’t like it, I’ll find myself a new gastroenterologist. I have to get to the bottom of this illness. I am fiercely determined. I sense that I will never be able to attach myself to G-d as long as I am dependent on medicines, and not on G-d alone.

By the way – I don’t recommend this for everyone. In fact, I don’t recommend it for anyone at all. It’s wise to follow a doctor’s advice, or at least to consult with several before doing something dramatic. The Torah has given permission for physicians to heal, and while doctors and conventional medical practice are far from perfect, they can also be the conduit of the “Creator of Healings,” as we say in our morning prayers: “For He alone performs mighty acts; brings new things into being; the Master of wars; the Sower of justice; causing salvation to flourish; Creator

of healings; revered and renowned; Master of wonders; who renews the act of Creation every day in His goodness, constantly....” .

I continue on with my Scripture reading, following Yaakov and his family down to Egypt, where the Jews become slaves to the wicked Pharaoh. It's the first time I read about the story in detail. When Moses sees the burning bush in the wilderness, G-d tells him to take the Jews out of Egypt because He is going to bring them to the Land of milk and honey, *“I will bring you up out of the afflictions of Egypt to a Land flowing with milk and honey”* (Shemot, 3:17). A Land of milk and honey. Is this California? Is it New York?

What a story! What a drama! What tension and suspense at the sea!



What action! What stunning characterization! What a great writer and director G-d is! In university literature classes, they teach that the principles of drama and storytelling were learned from the Greeks. But here, in the story of the Exodus, two-thousand years before Aristotle and Homer, I discover all of the foundations of drama – conflict, tension, suspense, complication, surprise, and climax. I studied Western Literature.

I taught dramatic writing at NYU. I know what good drama is. And this is drama, true drama, not a make believe story, at its very finest.

Finishing the Book of Exodus or *Shemot*, as it is called in Hebrew, I read through the books of *Vayikra*, *BaMidbar*, and *Devarim* as fast as I can. Not one portion per week, but in a long sprint, as if with one breath, like it's a marathon race. A race against time. Cause I'm bleeding....

I'm bleeding out my guts. As Dylan sang, "Something's going on, Mr. Jones, and you don't know what it is."

Of course, there are many things I don't understand upon my initial reading of the Bible, like all the details of the *Mishkan*, the sacrifices, and many of the commandments, but they don't interest me for now. I want to understand the main themes of the narrative, and to figure out what G-d is telling the Jews. The details can wait. The Rabbis say that the Torah is eternal, that its messages and commandment don't change. That means what was true for the Jews back then in Biblical days is true for me right now. If it's true for all time, then it's true for all time. Period. The truth is the truth. That's how I look at it. When I finish the Five Books of Moses, I start reading it once again from the very beginning. "*In the beginning, G-d created the Heaven and Earth.*" That means He created me too. If He created me, then He can heal me – it's as simple as that.

When I reach Sinai the second time around, I can't help but notice that for all of the excitement and greatness of the giving of the Torah amidst fire and shofar blasts, the mountain of Sinai isn't the final stop for the Jews. They are to continue their journey. The Torah isn't meant to be lived in the wilderness. G-d commands Moses to take the Jews to the Land of Israel, over and over and over again:

*“You have dwelt long enough in this mountain, turn and take up your journey....”*

*Behold, I have set the Land before you; go in and possess the Land....”*

*“Behold, the L-rd your G-d has set the Land before you; go up and possess it, as the L-rd G-d of your fathers has said to you; fear not, nor be discouraged.”*

I know this book is not a textbook or a commentary on the Torah by Tzvi Fishman. But I want readers to understand my deep and genuine confusion as I read the Torah on a beach in Los Angeles, a city in America which is populated by a million Jews, and I encounter verse after verse stating, in clear black-and-white, that the Torah is meant to be lived in the Land of Israel. For example, in the *Book of Devarim* alone, here’s a very partial list:

*“Moshe began to explain the Torah, saying, the L-rd our G-d spoke to us in Horev, saying, ‘You have dwelt long enough in this mountain – turn and take up your journey – behold, I have set the Land before you, go in and possess the Land that the L-rd swore to your fathers, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaacov, to give them, and, to their seed after them” (Devarim, 1:6-8).*

*“Now therefore, hearken O Israel, to the statutes and to the judgments which I teach you to do them, that you may live and **go in and possess the Land** which the L-rd G-d of your fathers gives you” (Devarim, 4:1).*

*“Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the L-rd my G-d commanded me, that you should act accordingly **in the Land** whither you go in to possess” (Devarim, 4:5).*

*“And the L-rd commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might do them **in the Land** into which you go over to possess” (Devarim, 4:14).*

*“Thou shall keep therefore His statutes and His commandments which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and that thou may prolong thy days **upon the Land** which the L-rd thy G-d gives thee, forever” (Devarim, 4:40).*

*“I will speak to thee all of the commandments and the statutes and the judgments, which thou shall teach them, that they may do them **in the Land** which I gave them to possess” (Devarim, 5:27).*

*“You shall walk in all the ways which the L-rd your G-d has commanded you, that you may live, and that it be well with you, and that you may prolong your days **in the Land** which you shall possess” (Devarim, 5:30).*

*“Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments, which the L-rd your G-d commanded to teach you, that you might do them **in the Land** into which you go to possess it” (Devarim, 6:1).*

*“Hear therefore, O Israel, and take care to do it, that it may be well with thee, and that you may increase mightily, as the L-rd G-d of thy fathers has promised thee, **in that Land** that flows with milk and honey” (Devarim, 6:3).*

*“All the commandments which I command thee this day shall you observe to do, that you may live and multiply, and **go in and possess the Land** which the L-rd swore to your fathers” (Devarim, 8:1).*

*“Therefore shall you keep all the commandments which I command you this day, that you may be strong, and go in and possess the Land, into which you go to possess it; that you may prolong your days **in the Land**, which the L-rd*

*swore to your fathers to give to them, a Land flowing with milk and honey”*  
(Devarim, 11:8)

***“in the Land...in the Land... in the Land....”***

One morning I’m so weak, I can hardly get out of bed. Instead of swimming my usual 100 laps, I can only manage 20. I have to stay close to my apartment because I have to race to the bathroom every half hour with sudden spasms. The amount of blood is frightening!

That night I have a startling dream.

In my dream I walk into a store that sells second-hand clothes. As I’m walking around, browsing through the merchandise, I notice a door leading to another room. Curious, I walk through the door and find myself in a room filled with holy Hebrew texts, shelf after shelf after shelf of old Talmudic tomes and scholarly commentaries, which I can’t understand at all, because I don’t know how to read Hebrew. But just being in the room with such a library of holy volumes gives me a sense of overwhelming serenity and peace. Immediately, all of my anxieties and worries vanish. I feel totally calm and blissfully happy. If there truly is a state of nirvana, I am experiencing it now in my dream.

Suddenly, the owner of the store appears in the doorway, disturbing my joy. He tells me he is closing the shop for the day, and that I have to leave.

“Please give me five minutes more,” I beg, wanting to be there with the books for as long as I can.

“OK,” he replies. “Another five minutes and that’s all.”

When he withdraws, I notice another doorway leading to another inner room. Once again, curious to see where it leads, I walk through the

doorway. The room is completely empty, except for a large black box on the floor, maybe a meter square. Instantly, I realize that it's a *rosh tefillin*, the box, called phalacteries in English, which a religious Jew wears on his head during morning prayers. But this *tefillin* is gigantic, the kind of exaggeration you'd find in a Woody Allen comedy.



“WOW! I need to have this *tefillin*!” I say out aloud in my dream.

Suddenly, I hear a thunderous Heavenly VOICE from out of the sky:

**“THIS IS THE ANSWER!!” the VOICE declares. “YOU HAVE TO ATTACH YOURSELF TO G-D!!”**

Startled, I awaken from the dream. Startled isn't the word. I'm stunned. Flabbergasted. Blown away out of my mind. Shocked. Never, never, in my life have I had a dream like this. The Voice out of Heaven was more real than real. The dream was a dream, but the Voice was as real as could be.

The dream's meaning is certain. G-d wants me to put on *tefillin*. He wants me to start keeping the commandments of the Torah. That's how I can attach myself to Him. That's the connection. That's the ladder.

The dream is coming to tell me that Judaism isn't like Hinduism or Zen Buddhism, where the goal is to reach nirvana by escaping from this world. Judaism is the absolute opposite. The goal of Judaism is not to abandon the world, but rather to sanctify and uplift the world and everything that's in it. The goal is to attach everything to G-d, like I am to attach myself to G-d, and that is done through the practical performance of the commandments!

A few years later, when I am finally sitting in a yeshiva in Jerusalem, studying Torah, surrounded by the library of holy books which I encounter in my dream, I am surprised to discover that Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's classic treatise on Jewish Faith, "*HaKuzari*," begins in exactly this fashion. It tells the story of a Gentile king in the land of Kuzar who desires to serve G-d. He performs all of the rituals of his people's pagan religion, but doesn't feel he is getting any closer to his goal of serving the Creator. Twice, an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him that his yearning is pleasing to his Maker, but not his deeds. The angel commands the king to embark on a quest to discover the deeds which please the Creator. After meeting with a philosopher, a Christian priest, and a mufti of Islam, the king approaches a Rabbi and finally finds the answer to his search – that the commandments of the Torah are the one and only ladder to G-d.



The next morning after my dream, I drive over to a *Chabad* synagogue in Santa Monica and ask the Rabbi if he will put *tefillin* on me. Since he was a *Chabadnik*, it might have been the first time in his career that a person came to him asking to put on *tefillin*, rather than the other way around. Glad to help a fellow Jew, he shows me how to put on his

own *tefillin* and tells me to say the “*Shema Yisrael*” prayer, the first paragraph of which I remember by heart from my childhood. I don’t know what *tefillin* are, so when I get home, I read a little about them in my beginner’s guide to Judaism. Every morning, I follow the same routine, driving over to the *shul* in Santa Monica and putting on the Rabbi’s *tefillin*, until he suggests that I order a pair of my own, which Daniel insists buying for me, in order to have what he calls a “big *mitzvah*.”



With the straps of the *tefillin*, on my arm and on my head, I’m tied up to G-d, but I’m still bleeding. I’m tired of the health club, I’m tired of the beach, I’m tired of the façade of Hollywood living, I’m tired of being a hunter in the jungles of L.A. discos, I’m tired of being sick, and I don’t want to see my doctor and hear him berate me for not wanting to imbibe the poison he recommends. So I decide to pack up my bags and return to the far more ethnic New York. Compared to the cowboy land of Hollywood, New York City is Jewish. It may not be the Land of Israel, but it’s a lot closer to Jerusalem than Venice Beach. I still have an apartment there with a closet filled with the winter clothes I didn’t need in L.A. If I had to go to a gastroenterologist, I had one in Manhattan who still had my records. Maybe the same young nurse still worked there, and we would get married and have gastrological kids. So saying *shalom* to Daniel, I give him a big, brotherly hug, and say, “See you soon in the Holy Land, brother.”

“*Sovlenut*, my good friend,” he tells me. “Go easy. *La’at, la’at*. Slowly, slowly. The Torah is like a powerful drug. Be careful.”

That's exactly what I'm looking for – a powerful drug to replace cortisone.



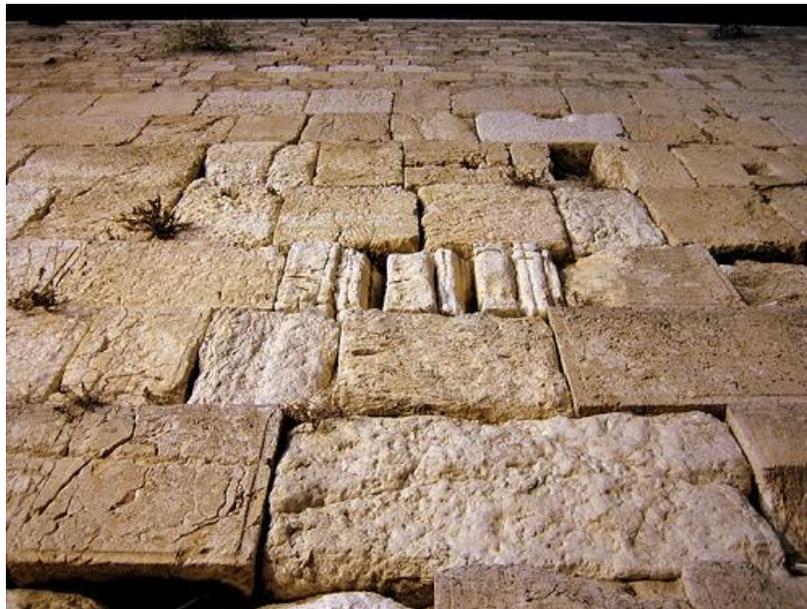
Watch out, New York! Here, I come!

## Chapter Nine

### Miracle on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street

My small, rented, studio apartment was on East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, close to Gramercy Park. When I moved out to L.A., my parents asked me to keep the apartment so they would have a place to stay on their more and more frequent visits to New York, now that my grandmothers were aging. I suspect they also wanted me to have a place in Manhattan to return to, hoping that I wouldn't want to stay in L.A., so far away from the Virgin Islands.

One of the first things I do is go to a Jewish bookstore to buy some more books and a poster of the *Kotel* which I put on the wall of my apartment, facing east.



In the mornings, I walk over to a synagogue on West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street which is a mixture of Conservative and Orthodox. After *shacharit*, I have a cup of coffee and eat some crackers and herring with the good-natured Rabbi and the octogenarian *gabei* of the shul, and other old-timers who, like me, have nothing to do. I think about teaching at NYU again, but I don't rush to speak with the head of the Film School, who is reserving my place. For the most part, I wander around Manhattan, listening to the soulful melodies of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach on a Walkman, instead of Ravi Shankar and the hard-rock of the "Doors." The earphones block out the noise of the city, filling my ears with more ancient, Biblical tunes. The stories *Reb* Shlomo tells in his honey-sweet voice, and the depth of his yearning for G-d that I hear in his whistling, pierce my brain and my soul, transporting me back to a different time and place, when prophets roamed the hillsides and valleys of the Holy Land.

"Save me, *Hashem*," I pray. "Save me, dear Father, and bring me to Israel as fast as you can."

I hesitate to give old girlfriends a call. I'm back in New York, but I'm not back. My body is in New York, but my soul is in Jerusalem.

"Don't let me lose it," I pray day and night in Manhattan. "Don't let me lose the connection." It's no longer the "Sports Connection," the name of the health club in L.A., it's now the "G-d Connection," affording health to both body and soul. Ever since the moment I encountered G-d on the beach in California, I understood with a flash of crystal clear knowledge, during those first head-spinning seconds when G-d enters your consciousness with a ROAR and lights up your life like the sun, I understood in that one eternal moment, when time stood still, that in order to hear the voice of my soul, in order to discover who I really was, and find healing for my ailing body and spirit, I would have to chase

after G-d with the same passion that I had been chasing after success, money, women, and fame.

In that flash of Divine Revelation, when the Almighty opened my eyes and enabled me to see, I understood that all of the world, with all its lusts and enticements, was merely a mask hiding the presence of G-d. Life without G-d was empty. In Shakespeare's words:

Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player  
Who struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Yes, I realized, life without G-d was as fake as any Hollywood studio. G-d lets people think that they are in charge of the show, or that Nature runs the world, but when He pulled open the stage curtains for me to get a glimpse of the Truth, I realized that he was the one, and the only one, in charge, directing EVERYTHING.

In that split second of piercing awareness on the beach in Venice, California, I joined the Exodus of my forefathers leaving the darkness of Egypt, when the sea miraculously split in half before them, and the sky opened for everyone one to see the Divine Hand behind all of Nature and history. Like my Forefathers at the Red Sea and Sinai, I was blessed to see that G-d was One and Everything.

Now, in New York, the biggest, and noisiest, and most materialistic city in the world, I strive with all of my might, with all of my heart, and with all of my soul, to keep that revelation alive, to remember and never forget it, to set G-d always before me, illuminating the darkness of Times Square and Fifth Avenue, lighting up my path, like the lights of a train light up the

track in a subway tunnel. So I listen and listen to the songs of Shlomo Carlebach, and I pray and pray, standing in front of my poster of the *Kotel* on my apartment “wall” – “Please G-d, bring me to Israel. Please G-d, bring me to Israel.” And still, I am bleeding.

Finally, I can’t continue. The bleeding is too severe. I tried my best. I gave the Almighty a chance to heal me. Maybe the next time around. But for now, in order to keep living, I decide to start taking cortisone once again.



Back in New York, visiting my Uncle Stu at his country home.

Only this time, I don’t want to go to a doctor. I can’t face the medieval examinations I always have to endure. Just then, almost the moment I make the decision, the telephone rings. It’s my Uncle Stu. He has to have laser surgery the following day for a cataract in his eye, and he needs someone to drive him home from the hospital. I’m glad to help out. His wife, my aunt, is a dermatologist, so I tell him that I am having a problem with my colitis, but that I don’t want to go through more examinations and tests, so can he please ask Aunt Harriet to write me out a prescription for the cortisone I need? I give him the exact quantity and dosage.



Immediately, I know it's a miracle. I feel like G-d has taken His finger, so to speak, touched my belly, and thrown my colitis into the Hudson River. It's gone! It's over! I sense it will never return.

Am I dreaming? Can this be? Perhaps I have hypnotized myself with too much religion. Maybe it's all an illusion. But, no, I know that it's real. G-d has done a miracle for me. I am absolutely certain that the bleeding has ended forever.

The prescription for the cortisone is still in my pocket. The bleeding has stopped without any pills. To this day, when I tell doctors, they shake their heads. It isn't medically possible. Chronic bleeding doesn't disappear just like that. Even a powerful drug like cortisone takes weeks to work. And here, in my case, a severe bout of colitis ended, without any medicine or surgical intervention, without rhyme or reason.

As long as I prayed only for my own recovery, nothing happened. But when I prayed for my uncle, G-d healed me as well. It's quite a lesson. Later on when I begin my new yeshiva career, I discover that it's something that happened to Avraham as well.

I'm so happy I sing. I dance around my apartment. I cry. I tremble. G-d is real. G-d watches. He hears. He answers our prayers!

I believe it completely, even though it's beyond human logic. G-d isn't just some abstraction or intellectual concept. He's real.

The bleeding doesn't return. Not that evening. Not the next morning. Not the following day. It's gone!

*"Ode Avinu chai! Ode Avinu chai!"*

I look at the poster of the *Kotel* and shiver. The Torah isn't a fairytale legend. The Torah isn't mysticism. The Torah is real. The Torah is true.

Somewhere, there is a real place called Jerusalem, and a Wall, and a G-d who answers prayers.

But now what am I supposed to do? After such an incredible miracle, how can I go back to living the same life I was living? After G-d has entered my life in such a profound and dramatic fashion, where do I go from here?

Where do I go from here?

## Chapter Ten

### Jerusalem, My Chosen

Sure enough, all the next day I don't bleed. I hardly have to go to the bathroom. When I do, I check the bowl afterward, but there's no sign of blood. Not even the slightest stain of pink. I can't begin to describe how happy I am.

There's a Psalm we say every morning. Suddenly, all of the words are true. It is like King David is speaking to me over the boundaries of time, only now I realize that the boundaries aren't boundaries at all, that, for G-d, past, present, and future are all the same, and that the very same G-d who was with King David is here with me now in New York, guiding my life, listening to my prayers, working wonders.

*A Psalm, a Song for the dedication of the Temple, by David.*

*I will praise Thee, O L-rd, for Thou hast lifted me up, and have not let my enemies rejoice over me.*

*L-rd, my G-d, I cried out to Thee and **Thou didst heal me.***

*O L-rd, Thou hast raised me up from the grave;*

*Thou hast let me live, that I not go down to the pit.*

*Sing to the L-rd, you who are godly, and give thanks to His Name.*

*For His wrath lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime.*

*Weeping may find a place in the evening, but in the morning there are shouts of joy.*

It was like King David had written the words of the Psalm for me!

*To Thee, O L-rd I called; I appealed to my Master.*

***“What profit would there be in my blood, if I went down to the grave?***

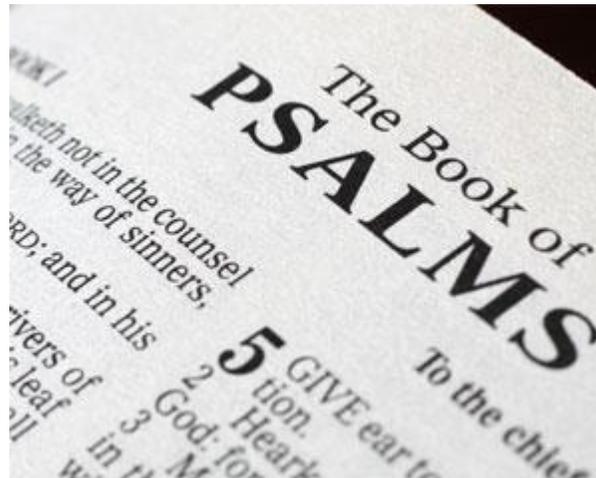
*Will the dust praise Thee? Will it declare Thy truth?*

*Hear, O L-rd and be gracious to me, L-rd be my helper.”*

*Thou hast transformed my mourning into dancing;*

*Thou hast removed my sackcloth and girded me with joy, so that my soul  
might praise Thee and not be silent.*

***L-rd my G-d, I will thank Thee forever!***



In the light of the miracle, I realize that not only is the message of this Psalm the literal truth, all of the Psalms of King David are the absolute truth. I had searched in bookstore after bookstore for a guidebook to happiness and to healthy living; a book that would teach me how to build a living connection to G-d, without knowing that the very book I longed to discover was a part of my own Jewish Heritage – the Psalms of King David!

***The L-rd is near to all who call upon Him; to all who call upon Him in truth.***

*He fulfills the desire of those who revere Him; He hears their cry and saves them.*

Why did *Hashem* perform such a great miracle for me? I don't know. It isn't a problem for Him to make miracles. He wants His children to be happy. We only have to call upon Him, to call upon Him in truth. Maybe it was because I threw my cortisone pills into the ocean and was willing to depend on His salvation alone. Maybe my willingness to suffer had something to do with it and my readiness to risk myself to the very edge. Maybe. I don't know.

And what if a person prays and *Hashem* doesn't answer? King David has an answer to that question as well. Let him or her pray again:

*Hope in the L-rd; be strong and let your heart be courageously brave, and hope in the L-rd.*

I face the poster of the *Kotel* on my wall and recite the words of King David:

*One thing I ask of the L-rd, one thing I desire – that I may dwell in the House of the L-rd all the days of my life, to behold the pleasantness of the L-rd, and to meditate in His Sanctuary.... You said to my heart: "Seek My Presence." Thy Presence, O L-rd, do I seek.*

That night before going to sleep, I say a prayer out loud:

"Dear G-d, and G-d of my fathers, thank You for the miracle You did for me, and thank you for coming into my life. I don't know why You did it, just like I don't know why I was sick in the first place. If it was because of my sins, then forgive me. If it was to tap me on the shoulder and bring me back to You, then thank You for making me ill. Thank You for everything – for being able to see, and think, and hear, and walk. I know now that

everything is from You, and that without You, I couldn't exist. Help me to serve you. Help me to please You. Help me to do what You want. Help me to be like King David. When I read the Torah, it seems clear that You want the Jewish People to live in the Land of Israel. So if You want me to go there, give me some kind of sign and I'll go. If You want me to stay here in New York or Hollywood, I'll do that too. If you want me to write books and movies about Judaism, then I'll write books and movies. If you want me to write for a Jewish newspaper, I'll write for a Jewish newspaper. Help me to know what you want. Give me a sign from Heaven, and I'll do it."

The very next morning, when I return from morning prayers at the synagogue and walk into the lobby of my apartment building, I notice that I have some mail in my mailbox. It's a large travel brochure. On the cover is a big picture of the Western Wall. The caption reads: "JERUSALEM, MY CHOSEN."



Goose pimples break out all over my body. Once again, my head starts spinning in dizzying circles. The very morning after I asked G-d for a sign whether to go to Israel or not, I find this travel brochure in my mailbox! Never in my life have I ever received any kind of mail from any kind of

Jewish organization or synagogue. And suddenly, the very morning after I pray, this clear sign out of Heaven is delivered to my home. "There is a director greater than Steven Spielberg!" I think in ever-increasing amazement.

Not only did G-d answer my prayer for a sign, He obviously knew in advance that I would make such a request, because He had to arrange for someone to mail me the brochure, so that it would arrive in my mailbox the very morning after my midnight prayer! Halleluya!

Jerusalem, here I come!

## Chapter Eleven

### *Get Thee Forth to the Land*

My decision is final. I'm going to Israel. But first, I decide to visit my parents in the Virgin Islands, to wish them goodbye. Who knows how long it will be before I come back to the shores of America?



Visiting St. Thomas – on my way to Israel.

My parents are happy to see me. They're overjoyed to hear that I'm cured. I don't know how much they believe in my miracle story, but the main thing is that I'm no longer bleeding. But they're also distressed. First, they're worried that I'm becoming religious. Instead of talking about books and movies, now all I talk about is G-d. Day and night, I stand on the terrace of the house, praying to G-d.



I'm so excited about what is happening to me, and the great blessing I've discovered, I try to convert everyone I meet. Becoming religious parents are freaked out that I'm going to Israel.

"Aren't there enough Jews in New York?" my Mother asks, not understanding the sudden transformation in her son. "Why do you have to go to Israel?"

"I want to see where we came from," I reply.

"My father came from Austria," my Father says. "My mother was born in America. Your Mother's parents were both born in America as well."

"You're an American," my mother insists. "Not an Israeli like your friend."

She is referring to Daniel. She thinks he's influenced me, and she's not happy with the outcome. A year before, he came along with me on a vacation to St. Thomas, spending the week at our home on a juice fast,

declining my Mother's cooking and my Father's offer of barbecued steaks. Needless to say, my Mother was offended, wanting to offer her son's best friend the best hospitality she could.

"What do you expect to find in Israel?" my skeptical Father wants to know.

"G-d," I answer.

"G-d is everywhere," he says.

"Kenny, are you on LSD?" my Mom inquires, looking very worried.

"No, Mom," I assure her. "Unless you consider G-d to be LSD."

"Listen, son," my Father says, trying his best to figure out the situation from his point of view. "I know you were disappointed by the fate of your novel. You dreamed it would be a big success, and, except for here in St. Thomas, it never took off. And I can understand your discouragement with Hollywood. If you want to stay here on St. Thomas, I'll set you up in a business of your own. I'll buy you a car. If you don't want to live here at home, we'll get you a nice apartment. You can live like a playboy. Writing isn't a livelihood you can count on. It's a hit or miss thing. If you stay here on the island, your Mother and I will help you get started. What do you say?"

In addition to running two liquor stores, my parents have a successful perfume store and leather shop on Main Street in downtown Charlotte Amalie, the shopping area where the tourists all flock when they disembark from their cruise ships for a day of sightseeing and duty-free shopping.



We live in a beautiful house in the mountains, overlooking the turquoise blue waters of Magens Bay and the sparkling Caribbean Sea. My Father is trying to make me an offer I

can't refuse.

"I'll think about it, Dad," I tell him, to help calm them down. "When I get back from Israel."

"Whatever you do," my Mother says. "Don't grow a beard and cover up your beautiful face. That would break my heart even more."



“I won’t grow a beard, Mom, don’t worry.”

The very next morning, while I am sunbathing out by our pool, my Father calls on the phone. I answer the call in the pool house. My Father says he bumped into an old friend of mine at the bank and told him that I was visiting the island. My friend wants me to phone him. I decide to drive down the mountain to town and stop by the bookstore where he works. While I am telling him about my blossoming interest in Judaism, and my plans to go to Israel, an attractive woman, about forty-five years old, walks into the store.

“She’s an Israeli,” he informs me, catching me glancing her way. “And divorced.”

“That’s funny,” I say. “Just when we’re talking about Israel, a nice-looking Israeli woman walks into the store. What a coincidence!” Only I no longer believe in coincidence. Now I know that G-d orchestrates everything.

After strolling along an aisle or two in the shop, the stylishly dressed woman walks over to the cash register, carrying a layman’s guide to “Mysticism and *Kabbalah*.” That’s also interesting, I muse. Who in St. Thomas cares about *Kabbalah*? As I mentioned, my novel, “Paradise,” was

a runaway bestseller in the Virgin Islands. Because my family was well known there, people rushed to buy the book, trying to figure out who were the real people upon whom my fictional characters were based. Needless to say, Mrs. Golan (let's call her) is thrilled to meet the young author of the novel when my friend introduces us. Outside the store, she excitedly invites me to drive over to her condominium to sign her copy of my book.

Now that's an offer that's hard to refuse.

She drives in her car, and I follow in mine. She lives at the eastern end of the island, in a vacation and condominium colony, highlighted by a towering grove of palm trees and a breathtaking beach with sparkling emerald waters. When we're in the apartment, she smiles and excuses herself, saying she wants to put on something more comfortable.

You don't have to be Albert Einstein to figure out what's on her mind. Already, back in the bookstore, by the way she was smiling at me by the cash register, I knew what she was thinking. Needless to say, on the long drive out to her apartment, it was on my mind too. Waiting in her living room, sitting on her very comfortable couch, I still haven't made up my mind. On the one hand, I want to start living a more holy life – on the other hand, even Kings David and Shlomo made mistakes.

“Hi!” she says with a big smile when she returns to the room. She's wearing a silk bathrobe. “How about a drink?”

“No thanks,” I say.

“That's not like a writer,” she comments in her half-Israeli, half-European accent. “I should know. I was married to one.”

To tell the truth, I'm nervous. For some reason, I feel like I'm ready to commit a big transgression.

"How about some grass?" she asks.

I shake my head no.

"Hashish?" she offers.

"No thanks," I say, feeling my whole body tremble.

"Oh, don't be a party pooper," she says.

She walks to the bar and pours herself a glass of wine.

"Maybe a little wine?"

"I'm becoming religious," I say.

"What?" she asks in astonishment.

"I've been learning about Judaism recently. Like the book you bought."

"That's really fascinating," she says, adopting another course.

She drinks down the wine, walks over, and sits by me on the couch. Her leg touches mine. She puts her hand on my knee. "Maybe we can learn some things together," she says seductively.

I feel paralyzed. Scared. This isn't like me.

"I loved you novel," she says.

Agitated, I stand up and walk away from the couch. "I'll sign your copy if you like. Then I have to go."

“Do your parents worry if you come home late?” she teases, hinting at my age.

“I have an appointment.”

“Oh, stop playing games,” she says, swinging her legs onto the couch. “You didn’t drive all the way here just to sign your book for me.”

“You’re right,” I admit. “I wasn’t sure. But now I’ve made up my mind. I appreciate your interest, but I want to act in a way that pleases G-d.”

“You can become religious tomorrow. Pour yourself a drink and loosen up a little.”

“I’m sorry. You’re very attractive and very nice. We can be friends if you like, but that’s all.”

“*Yosef HaTzaddik*,” she says in Hebrew. “Just my lousy luck.” She stands up from the couch. Maybe Daniel is right, I think. Maybe I am exaggerating. Maybe I really am crazy, like my Mother fears.

“OK,” she says. “You win. If you’re so serious about it, I don’t want to be the one to corrupt you. Wait another minute and I’ll put on some clothes.”

She turns out to be a very nice person. Before I leave, she writes me a list of her friends in Israel, with their phone numbers, saying they will be happy to show me around. Because she was married to a popular writer, she’s friendly with writers, and artists, and singers, and the cream of Israel’s bohemian crowd. Before I leave, she insists on taking me over to another building to visit a friend, an elderly woman also from Israel.

“What about signing your book?” I ask her.

“I don’t know where it is,” she says. “I think I lent it to a friend.”

So we walk over to her friend's apartment. I never knew there were so many Israelis on St. Thomas. The woman's name is Leona. She says she has a sister in Jerusalem who is one of the 36 secret *Tzaddikim* in the world. She writes down her name and phone number.

"When you get to Jerusalem, don't bother to check in to a hotel. Call up my sister, Serafin, and she will invite you to stay for free at her place. I guarantee you. If you really want to become a good Jew, that's the address."

I thank her. Once in a while today, I visit her grave in the Har HaMenachot cemetery in Givat Shaul, to say thank her for the kindness she did me.

At my car, Mrs. Golan gives me a smile and a last longing look.

"If you change your mind about becoming religious," she says.  
"You know where I live."

I spend most of the week by our pool and at the beach, reading a book I brought along on the trip, called, "Advice" (*Likutei Etzot*) by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. His words are like injections of faith, straight into the veins, page after page of clear and wonderful teachings which I underline in red, in order to help me remember their truths. When I return to New York, I phone Daniel to tell him that I'm on my way to Israel.

"No, Tzvi, what are you doing? You're going too fast!" For five minutes, he tries to persuade me not to go. "A little study is good. It's important to know who you are. But you've taken everything way out of proportion. The Torah was appropriate 3000 years ago, not today. It's holy, its teachings are wise, but it's a history book, not a guide to practical living. You have talent. You were born to be a writer. Don't throw that away. I know what I'm talking about. I've seen a lot of talented people get

involved with religion, then turn their backs on the talents and gifts that the Almighty gave them, as if they were impure. No. That's not the way. Maybe you think you can say stop when you want to, but the Torah is like a magnet, pulling you in deeper and deeper. It has no end. A person can learn Torah forever and still never finish. That's why I just put on *tefillin* and say a few prayers. It's enough. Tzvi, brother, please listen."

"I appreciate your worry, Daniel," I answer. "And I promise to keep it in mind. But I already bought a ticket. I'm just going for a visit, that's all."

I didn't tell him that it was a one-way ticket, because I really didn't know how long I would stay.

At the end of our conversation, he gives me his mother's phone number. She lives in Kiryat Yam, near Haifa. "My home is your home," he says.

Who was it who sang the song, "I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again." Was it, "The Mamas and the Papas?" I don't remember, and it's too insignificant to look it up on Google now.

On the plane ride to Israel, I read Abraham Joshua Heschel's book, "Israel - Echoes of Eternity," which proclaims that G-d is still very much alive in the miraculous return of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel and in the rebuilding of the Jewish State. I also listen to El Al's track of Israeli songs over and over and over again on my earphones, maybe 50 times. I dance in my seat, soaring through the heavens in a far different world than all the other passengers. Though everyone is flying, I'm really "flying" – like in outer space. Flying without marijuana or hashish. I'm high on the real thing. I'm high on G-d, and getting higher, and higher, and higher, to the point where it seems that I'm losing sight of Earth. At least that's how it appears to my parents, and how it looks to the passengers around me who are glancing me way.

I think there is some kind of rule that everything which goes up must eventually come down. At least, that's what happened with the airplane, and with me. I feel goose bumps all over my body when El Al plays the famous "*Halleluyah*" song as the aircraft lands safely and taxis down the runway. When I disembark from the plane, I drop down to my knees and kiss the ground. But when I gaze around, it looks like New Jersey. What a downer. What a bummer. I was actually expecting to see white-caftan prophets riding on camels, and Moses waiting to greet me when I step down from the plane, but all I see are a few low buildings, what looks like a factory, a highway, and cars.

"This is the Holy Land?" I wonder.



The taxi ride is even less inspiring. There are a few orange groves, but nothing more holy than that. At that time, I don't realize that the oranges are a miracle in and of themselves, suddenly growing in a Land that had lain desolate and fallow during the nearly 2000 years that her children were exiled from her borders. We also get stuck in a traffic jam on the way to Tel Aviv. Today, when I'm stuck in a traffic jam on the way to Jerusalem, I'm thrilled, remembering how joyous Moses or Rashi would have been to even glimpse the Holy Land, let alone be stuck in a traffic jam of Jews on the way to the Holy City! In fact, each time I return to Jerusalem from a trip outside the city, I sing, "*Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim,*" with as much joy as I can, in order not to take the incredible privilege for granted. Even if I'm stuck in a traffic jam on the Ayalon Freeway in Tel Aviv, how wonderful

it is to be stuck in a traffic jam in a bustling metropolis in Israel, and not in New York or L.A. Thank G-d there are highways in Israel and so many Jews with so many cars. What a miracle! What a wonder!

My airline ticket includes five free days at a Tel Aviv hotel, which turns out to be a crummy, three-star dump by the beach. The air-conditioner leaks in my room. Feeling a little discouraged and knocked out from the trip, I read some Psalms to rekindle my faith, and pray to G-d out loud, asking Him to let me feel His Presence and closeness here, no less than I did in Manhattan, in spite of the noisy and dripping air conditioner. Feeling a little lonely, I glance over the list of names that Mrs. Golan gave me, encouraging me to contact them when I arrive in Israel. The name at the top of her list is her first husband, before she married the writer. When I speak to him on the telephone, he invites me to join him for dinner that evening at a restaurant he owns in the old port of Yafo. It's a small, intimate place, set atop the picturesque hillside overlooking the Tel Aviv beachfront with its half-dozen modern hotels. He assures me that the food is *kosher*, though I'm not overly concerned since I haven't started to observe the kosher laws completely. I'm pretty sure I wasn't wearing a *kippah*. I bought one in Jerusalem, something Bordeaux-colored and made out of velvet, like a Persian Jew might wear, but I only wore it when I was at the *Kotel*, or praying in a synagogue, and the few times Rabbi Schuster *schlepped* me over to some yeshiva, or to eat by at the home of some Ultra-Orthodox family on *Shabbat*.

Mrs. Golan's ex was a nice, simple guy, busy managing things at the restaurant, but he made sure I ate like a king on my first night in Israel. Before going to sleep, I call another name on list, call her Shula, an important woman journalist, who, according to Mrs. Golan, knows everyone in Israel and who can introduce me to all the right people. I tell

her a little about myself, that I'm a published novelist and Hollywood screenwriter, and we agree to meet the following afternoon at a sports club in Ramat Gan.

She's waiting for me at the entrance. Right away, I can see that she's a tough cookie, a former Israeli soldier, no doubt, and at least fifteen years older than me.

"Did you bring a bathing suit like I told you?" she asks in very good English. She kind of barks out the question as if she's used to giving orders and getting her way. Everyone seems to know her. Escorting me past the guard at the entrance, she points out the men's locker room and tells me to meet her at the bar by the pool. I get there first and have a chance to look around at the beautiful, suntanned bodies, not so different than the crowd you find at Venice Beach, except that everyone is speaking in Hebrew. Even though this is the Holy Land, I can't help but notice the enticing Israeli women parading around the pool. On the one hand, the scene is so fantastically cool – I'm in an all-Jewish sports club in Israel, where everyone is speaking Hebrew and having a wonderful time, with hot-looking Israeli beauties all around me – and on the other hand, I wonder, "If this is what the Holy Land is all about, what's the difference between being in Israel or being in L.A.?"

My host appears carrying a beach bag and wearing a summer robe over her bathing suit. We sit at a table by the bar and the waiter hands us menus.

"What do you want to drink?" she asks. Usually, it's a question that the man asks the woman, but she's flipped things around. But she's the host, and she's probably just trying to be friendly. Anyway, she's not my type, and I don't think I'm hers, so we make small talk and glance around at the

action around us. In a way, I'm embarrassed. If I wanted to look at girls in bikinis, I could have stayed in California, or at home in the Virgin Islands.

"Why don't I interview you for one of the newspapers I write for?" she says, taking a notebook and pen out from her beach bag.

I'm taken by surprise. Wow! An interview! I wasn't expecting that. Writers love interviews. It's the best way to sell books, and though I don't have a book in any bookstore in Israel, the publicity will surely help me if I want to write a script for the small, and not very serious, Israel film industry. Maybe that's what G-d has in line for me – to write some solid movies that will put Israel on the map.

The truth is, my money is running out, and I will have to find a job soon. Before I embarked on my journey, the head of the NYU Film School phoned me, after hearing that I was back in New York. He said that my place on the faculty was waiting for me, and because I was actively working in the field, with several movies to my credit, as well as a published novel, they could offer me an assistant professorship, with all of the benefits, salary increases, and tenure that came with it. It was an attractive offer, hard to refuse, but since my future was up in the air, I told him that I would consider it seriously and let him know my decision as soon as I could.

For the time being, the production of my screenplay at Carolco seems to be stalled, along with the money they owe us. The director they wanted for the project signed to do some other film at some other company. Then the producer who was hooked up with the project took off to make a Kung-Fu movie in Japan. And they were still shopping around for a star. The last time I spoke on the phone with my co-writer, Bob, he sounded worried. Many times, deals in Hollywood collapse in a moment, like a house of playing cards when one card is removed. People rush on to other

projects, anxious to be attached to a winner. In the film business, loyalty to a project doesn't exist. All that matters is money and fame.

My interviewer removes a camera from her beach bag and takes a few pictures. People look over, probably wondering who the young stud is whom Shula is interviewing. That by itself wins me points at the pool.

She asks about the stars of my movies, and about my novel.

"With a career like yours just beginning to take off in Hollywood and New York, what brings you to Israel?"

Briefly, I tell her about my ulcerative colitis and the miracle that ended my bleeding.

"Maybe you hypnotized yourself into thinking it was a miracle," she says skeptically.

"G-d healed me, I'm certain," I say. "After a miracle like that, there was no way I could continue to live the bohemian life I was living in Hollywood and New York, so I decided to come to Israel to learn more about my roots and about Judaism."

"You aren't thinking about becoming religious, are you?"

She says the word "religious" as if it's a disease worse than colitis.

"Que sera, sera," I answer. "What will be will be."

"What a waste. One of our best film directors became religious, and today, he wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this with women walking around in bikinis."

She motions around the swimming pool.

"It doesn't sound as if you like religious people very much," I comment.

“What’s there to like about them? They think that they’re holier than everyone else. They don’t work, they don’t pay taxes, and they let us and our children go to war while they sit in their *yeshivot*, make babies like rabbits, and collect charity from a government they think is *traf*.”

“I’ve seen photographs of Israeli soldiers with *kippot* and *tallises*, praying alongside their tanks.”

“Those are the settlers. I don’t know how religious they are. Whatever you do, don’t become like one of them. They’re the worst.”

I’ve heard a little about the settlers, but, like most things about life in Israel, my knowledge is very sparse.

“What’s the matter with them?” I ask, as if I’m the one conducting the interview.

“They’re like messianic Nazis with big, knitted *kippot* and *Uzi* machine guns, who are only interested in uprooting the Palestinians from their land.”

The Arab-Israeli conflict was another subject that I knew absolutely nothing about. To my naïve way of thinking, Israel belonged to the Jews.

“G-d gave Israel to the Jews, not to the Arabs,” I answer. “It’s says so dozens of times in the Bible.”

“Oh boy,” she answers. “I see you’re hooked already. What a shame.” She closes her notebook. “Why don’t you go for a swim?” she suggests, and adds, “Before you become religious and won’t go into a pool anymore because it’s contaminated by the menstrual blood of women.”

I don’t understand her remark, but swimming sounds like a good idea to me. After sitting twelve hours on the plane ride to Israel, I can use some

exercise. Plus, the noisy and leaking air conditioner kept me up most of the night reading Psalms. And with jet lag setting in, I need something refreshing to wake me up. More than that, this lady was filling me up with negative vibes, like the guru who short-circuited all the Jacuzzis at the massage-and-yoga weekend in Santa Barbara.

I swim a lap, then two, then three, then four. Most of the people at the club are sun-tanning their bodies in lounge chairs, so the lap lanes of the pool are open. I swim five laps, then six. "Please G-d, let me find you," I pray between breaths. "Please G-d, let me find you." Seven, eight, nine, ten. I'm hoping she won't still be there when I finish, so I continue swimming. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. "Let me find You, G-d, please let me find You." Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. When I reach thirty, I come up for air, grab onto the end of the pool, and look over to the bar. Sure enough, she's gone. In my range of vision, I see an attractive young woman gazing my way, as if I were the champion Jewish swimmer, Mark Spitz. But I've had it with sports clubs and women. I haven't come to Israel for this. I lift myself out of the pool, fetch my shirt from the chair where we were sitting, and head back to the locker room. I still have four free nights at the crummy hotel, but I've had enough of Tel Aviv. *Yerushalayim* here I come.

## Chapter Twelve

### Jerusalem

Have you ever felt goose bumps seeing a sign on the highway? That's what I feel in the taxi on the way to Jerusalem. Seeing the name written on a highway sign crystalizes in my mind the realization that the city of Jerusalem is real, and not merely a dream.



The sign is written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. "I'm on the way to Jerusalem," I tell myself. "I'm on the way to Jerusalem," I repeat, feeling greater and greater excitement as we near the city. I decide to take a taxi because I want

to get out of Tel Aviv as quickly as I can, and I don't want to search around for buses.

I pick out the name of a low-priced hotel in a magazine for tourists and instruct the cab driver to take me there. When I get to my room, I call up Serafin, the old woman whose sister lived on St. Thomas.

Here's a photo of Serafin, on my right, and my worried Mom who flew to Israel during my visit to make sure I hadn't been hospitalized in some psychiatric ward for manic depressives.



“Where are you?” Serafin asks me in excellent English.

“I’m at some hotel,” I tell her.

“Are you a millionaire that you want to throw away your money? Come to me. You can stay here. I have a spare room.”

I feel a little strange and embarrassed to barge in on someone I don’t know at all, but, like I mention, I am short on cash, and if I want to stay as long as I can in Israel, I will have to minimize my expenses.

“Don’t think twice about it,” she says, as if reading my thoughts. “My sister wrote that you were coming, and your room has been waiting for you ever since.”

Not only is G-d the best doctor and director, He’s the greatest travel agent too.

She gives me her address on *Rehov HaPalmach* with directions how to get there. I tell the clerk at the front desk of the hotel that I am dissatisfied with the room, and that I will be staying elsewhere.

Serafin lives in a ground floor-apartment, located at the back of a small apartment building. There are always piles of large plastic bags in her yard, filled with second-hand clothes. In the rainy months of the winter, she covers them with canvas. The “*Tzaddakes of HaPalmach*” is famous in the neighborhood for her non-stop good deeds, and people are always dropping old clothes in her yard, knowing she will bring them to the needy, especially to the Jews from Ethiopia who are filling the absorptions

centers around the country. The frail-looking old lady is hunchbacked from carrying heavy sacks filled with clothes as she hurries about her daily rounds. Twice a week, she's out of the house by five in the morning, in order to catch the first bus to Tel Aviv, where she scurries around the "*shuk*" and garment district, convincing merchants to donate new clothes to needy immigrants. Other items she buys at cost and sells to neighbors, to make a little "*parnassa*" for herself, stubbornly refusing to take money from her grown and married children. The woman is a non-stop *mitzvah* machine, and the best teacher I could find to introduce me to the true essence of being a Jew. She's the epitome of kindness and self-sacrifice, with a flaming Zionist spirit which shines in her eyes, who would give her life gladly for *Am Yisrael*.

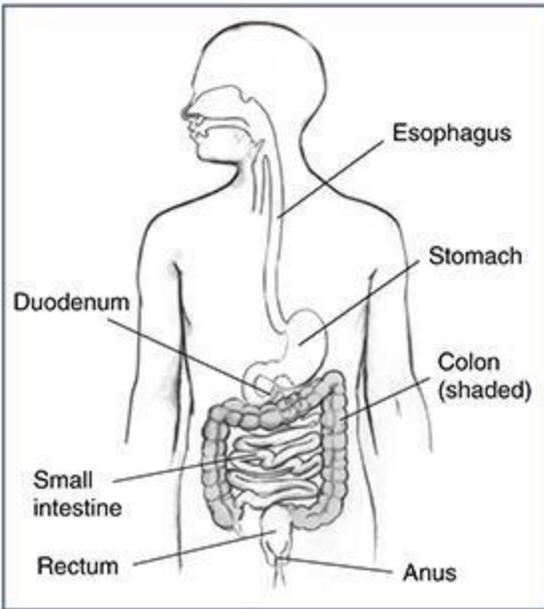
In a way, she reminds me of my great grandmother, Hannah, who used to collect rubber balls from the gutter and give them to me and my brother whenever we came to visit. Her wizened and heavily wrinkled face looks like a map of Jewish history. Her blue emerald eyes sparkle like sapphires, aglow from some deep inner fire. No doubt, if reincarnations exist, she was once a prophetess, or maybe even *Rachel Emanu* in her towering love for the Jewish People.

To me, she looks a hundred years old, but she's probably only eighty. Nevertheless, she's a ball of constant energy, like a perpetual motion machine. The only time I ever see her body at relative rest is when she is bent over her sewing machine, repairing the endless garments which need fixing before she gives them away, and when she is standing by her gas range, cooking me something for dinner. Her kitchen is narrow, cluttered with jars of spices and exotic smells. Dishes and pans look like she's used them for decades. Her fridge is always filled with vegetables she *shlepps* home by herself from the market in *Macheneh Yehuda*. Even before the

city established discount bus fares for old people, Serafin traveled on buses for free. All the bus drivers know her.

Her bedroom is more crowded with piles of clothing than her yard. The main room in the house is tiny with just enough room for a small table and chairs, a television, and an easy chair piled with bundles. There's an old gas stove in a corner for warming the house. My room is actually the salon which contains a regular dining-room table, also piled high with the garments she brings from Tel Aviv. There are some pictures on the walls, and a plain "*mitat noar*" or youth bed with throw pillow, which serves as my bed for the three months that I board there for free.

First thing in the morning, before the sun rises, she wakes me up like an army general, and chases me out of the house to go pray in the first *minyana* in the nearby *shul* where her late husband prayed. I haven't yet learned about washing my hands in the morning in the ritual way. I see that there's something written about it in my prayer book, but I pass over it, not wanting to go overboard, doing everything all at once, as Daniel has advised. Sitting up from bed, I say, "*Modeh ani l'fanecha....*" I like the blessing, reminding me that I'm not alone in my journey through life, but that G-d is with me. He gives me the gift of my soul every morning, and by thanking Him for His kindness, I'm reminded not to take life for granted, and not to think that my ability to get out of bed in the morning comes from my own power and strength.



Another blessing which I've adopted is "*asher yatzar*," which, given my bout with colitis, has special meaning to me. How amazing that the Sages of old fashioned a blessing to be recited after going to the bathroom, thanking G-d that everything is working in the proper fashion. In truth, I've learned the hard way that good health isn't something a person can take for granted! And how

incredibly down to earth, emphasizing to me that G-d isn't to be found by separating oneself from this world and becoming a recluse in a monastery, or in an ashram on top of some Himalayan mountaintop, but by seeing G-d's presence in the smallest details of everyday life. So when I say the blessing, I try to concentrate on the words and not recite it by rote.

"Blessed are You, *Hashem*, who has fashioned man with wisdom and created within him many openings and orifices. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if but one of them were **to be ruptured**, or but one of them be **blocked**, it would be impossible to exist and stand before You. Blessed are You, *Hashem*, who **heals all flesh** and acts wondrously."

When I return from the synagogue, breakfast is waiting on the table: a few slices of Israeli "black" bread, which is white as can be, some soft cheese, slices of tomato and cucumber, and the flattest omelet I've ever seen, sprinkled with red paprika and parsley.

Night after night, I listen as Serafin recounts her eyewitness memories of the pioneer days of Israel, and her memories as a fighter for the *Haganah*,

and then for the more radical *Lechi*. Because she speaks fluent Arabic from her childhood in the Old City, she posed as an Arab and spied on the British. She tells me about the War of Independence and the Six-Day War, and about a dream that she had on the third day of the battle, showing the way to the Western Wall through the Moslem Quarter, where she had grown up. The neighborhood, once densely populated with Jews, became judenrein after the pogroms of 1929 and 1936, when marauding Arabs had massacred Jews and forced them to flee from area. Serafin recounted how she heard Ben Gurion declare over the radio the birth of *Medinat Yisrael*. Although, the Israelis won the War of Independence, the Old City of Jerusalem fell to the Jordanians, and up till its liberation in the Six-Day War in 1967, no Jew had prayed at the *Kotel*, or even had the privilege to gaze upon its ancient and holy stones. Awakening from her dream in the midst of the Six-Day War, Serafin drew a map of the winding route she had seen through the narrow, cobblestone alleyways of her childhood, and passed it on to her son, a paratrooper in the IDF division fighting against the Jordanians in Jerusalem. Knowing that his mother was no ordinary person, he delivered the map to Moti Gur, the commander who led the fierce fight over the Holy City. When the order finally arrived to conquer the Old City, the paratroopers charged forward through the alleyways sketched on the map until they reached the Temple Mount and liberated the *Kotel*, restoring the Old City to its true and rightful owners.



In addition to her tales about the pioneer building of the country, Serafin gives me an education on current events. Every night, at eight o'clock (except on *Shabbat*), she watches the Channel One News on TV while she's sewing garments by hand. I don't understand Hebrew, so she translates and gives me a running commentary. When Shimon Peres or Shulamit Aloni appear on the screen, she makes a sour face and calls them the enemies of the Jews, in their constant efforts to turn Israel into a secular country like any other. She respects Menachem Begin, but believes he made a terrible mistake in giving away the Sinai to Egypt. She thinks that the military hero Arik Sharon is dangerous and not to be trusted. In contrast, she approves of "Rafal" and hopes that he'll enter politics when he finishes commanding the army because he is a simple and honest man. She identifies with the settlers who are fighting to remain in Yamit and

says they are the best and most idealistic people we have. She calls Rabbi Meir Kahane a brave man, and maintains that people are against him because he tells the truth. And when Israel's leftist politicians agree with Egypt's call for a Palestinian State inside the borders of Israel, she accuses them of loving the Arabs more than they love the Jews.

I don't know whether there are pubs or discos in Jerusalem. I don't bother to find out. Instead of going out on the town, I spend my nights at home with Serafin, getting a doctorate in Jewish History and Thought. Every midnight, at the conclusion of the day's TV programming, I'm blown after by the deep Biblical voice of the TV narrator, reciting the "*Shema Yisrael*" prayer, as a long, silver pointer follows the words in the text. That's something they don't do on TV in America! Also, over the radio, the very first thing in the morning, in a voice which still echoes from Sinai, the announcer reads out the words of the "*Shema*" - as if granting permission for the sun to rise and for people to get out of bed. The State of Israel may seem secular on the outside, but it's the Holy of Holies within.

Anyway, back to my first day in Jerusalem. After I set my bag in my room and eat a piece of home-baked cake, Serafin pushes me out the door of the house, telling me to hurry to the *Kotel* to thank G-d for bringing me to Jerusalem. I walk past the President's residence, past the stately King David Hotel, up toward the historic walls of the Old City, through the Yafo Gate, and down into the bustling Arab *casbah*, as if I'm entering the enchanted, faraway world of, "A Thousand and One Nights of Arabia." As I walk past the Arab merchants selling aromatic spices, water pipes, wooden carvings, long caftans and robes, I feel a force pushing me along, as if I'm caught in a rapids, like a raft being swept forward by a torrential mountain stream. My paces quickens as the invisible force sweeps me forward down the long alleys and stairways of the *casbah*. Before I know it, I'm facing the Kotel, a hundred meters ahead of me across the Western

Wall Plaza. A dizziness fills my head. The rest I don't remember. The truth is, I've been to the *Kotel* so many hundreds of times since first touching the Wall, I don't remember my fingers' first encounter with its stones. I know I felt incredibly close to G-d, because I hung out there for most of the week. The Wall drips with holiness. You can reach out and touch it. Sometimes I stand for an hour with my forehead pressed against one of the giant, ancient boulders, my fingers clutching onto the cracks between stones, giving myself a spiritual "Jacuzzi," trying to clean out my head from the cultural pollution of America, meditating as deeply as I can in order to transcend all material barriers so I can absorb the holy energy beaming out from the Wall, as if the *Kotel* is a gigantic ozone box, a giant bio-feedback machine, a year's worth of healing massage. I pray for G-d to bless my parents, my brother, my family, Daniel back in Hollywood, and all of my friends. I pray that he bless Serafin, her family, all the people of Israel, and all the Jews in the world. But most of all I pray that G-d bring me closer to Him. I want to get closer and closer, higher and higher. I sense that the miracle He has done for me is just the beginning. As Bob Marley sang, "You think it's the end, you think it's the end, but it's just the beginning." G-d's kindness is infinite. I know there must be more.

The "regulars" who visit the *Kotel* every day, seeing me glued to the Wall, must think I'm another flipped-out American tourist, probably high on drugs. But I'm not taking drugs any more. I'm high on Heaven.

A Rabbi with a black hat walks over to me and says hello with an American accent. "What's your name?" he asks.

"Tzvi," I answer.

"Tzvi what?"

"Tzvi Fishman."

“Nice to meet you,” he says. “My name is Meir Schuster.” He holds out his hand. “Where are you from?”

“New York,” I say to make things simple.

“You have any family in Israel?”

“No. I’m just visiting.”

“Maybe you’d like to learn in a yeshiva?” he asks.

“A yeshiva?” I think to myself. Now that’s a preposterous idea. Why would I want to learn in a yeshiva? I’m looking for G-d.

“No thanks,” I answer. “Right now, I’m traveling around the country.”

“Well, if you’d like to attend some interesting classes and learn more about Judaism, meet some nice people, and get some free meals on the house, give me a call. Here’s my number.”

He hands me his business card. Tipping his hat, he walks away toward another young American type who’s snapping photographs of the Wall.

I put his card in my pocket. For me, the word “yeshiva” is a turn-off that I automatically associate with the strange-looking Hasidic figures in black who scurry around the diamond district in Manhattan, as if they are still a part of the Middle Ages. No. Yeshiva isn’t for me. I’m looking for the Judaism that I’ve read about in the Bible; a Judaism that unfolds on the windswept hillsides of *Eretz Yisrael*, graced by terraced vineyards, ancient valleys, and vistas of olive trees. If I’m looking for Judaism at all, it’s the Judaism of King David, not the Judaism of the ghetto, the enclave of frightened, guarded, Yiddish-speaking Jews, disconnected from the modern world around them. I’m searching for a Judaism of brave warriors, soldiers, statesmen, and powerful kings; a Judaism of poetry,

music, and song, filled with emotion, idealism, and a longing for greatness and joy, and for a Torah that smashes ghetto walls to bring more light to the world than all of the movies of Hollywood together!

The whole time I'm in Israel, there's a tent set up in the *Kotel* plaza, near the tunnel leading into the Moslem Quarter. An Israeli flag waves from the top of the tent, posters are taped to its sides, and there are always a few people with big, knitted *kippot* sitting in chairs outside. I never bother to ask what's going on. It turns out to be a *Gush Emunim* prayer vigil for the settlers of Yamit, a settlement located in the Sinai Peninsula, which the Israeli Government has agreed to evacuate in the Peace Treaty with Egypt. The director of the campaign to "Stop the Withdrawal" from Yamit is *Gush Emunim* activist, Rabbi Yehuda Hazani, who I will only meet several months later, and who is destined to become my mentor in my journey into the world of Torah. *Torat Eretz Yisrael*. Torah on a national level which places as much importance on settling the Biblical hilltops of Judea and Samaria as it does on *kashrut* and *tefillin*. But I know none of this now, and I'm too busy searching for my own personal connection G-d to get involved with politics and the struggle for "Greater *Eretz Yisrael*" - not yet knowing that the struggle over the Land of Israel is precisely the place, in our day and age of Redemption, where G-d is most to be found.



While I am on the subject, I should mention a related matter. Come *Purim* night, not having anything else to do, I break down from my self-imposed abstinence, strip off my tight-fitting “*Yosef the Tzaddik*” costume, and go to a disco party being held at Hebrew University. I am totally unaware that at the very same time, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, *Rosh Yeshiva* of the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva* in Jerusalem, and the spiritual founder of the settlement movement in Israel, is dying. *HaRav* Tzvi Yehuda is the only son of the Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, who taught the pioneer builders of the Nation to see G-d’s hand in the return to the Jewish People to the Promised Land, in fulfillment of ancient prophecy. I have never heard of Rabbi Kook, nor of his son, just as I have no real idea of what is happening in Yamit, other than the brief TV news reports which Serafin translates for me while we eat dinner. A decade later, I will publish several books in English on the teachings of Rabbi Kook, using my writing skills for holier purposes than those which I had been pursuing in Hollywood. Since I am a newcomer to Torah, just out of the woods, I teamed up with one of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda’s students, Rabbi David Samson. The books, *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, *The Art of T’shuva*, *War and Peace*, and *Eretz Yisrael*, available on Amazon Books, explain eye-opening concepts of Torah in the light of Israel’s Redemption, the ingathering of the exiles, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the rebirth of Jewish settlement in the Biblical heartland of Judea and Samaria after a hiatus of 2000 years. *Baruch Hashem*, over the years, the books have influenced many people to return to Torah, make *Aliyah*, and live a true Torah life in the Land of Israel.

Since this biography doesn’t cover my life in Israel after my first few months as a new and happy citizen of the holy Jewish State, I will emphasize an important point now before getting on with the story. Many people think that becoming religious means living in a closed and

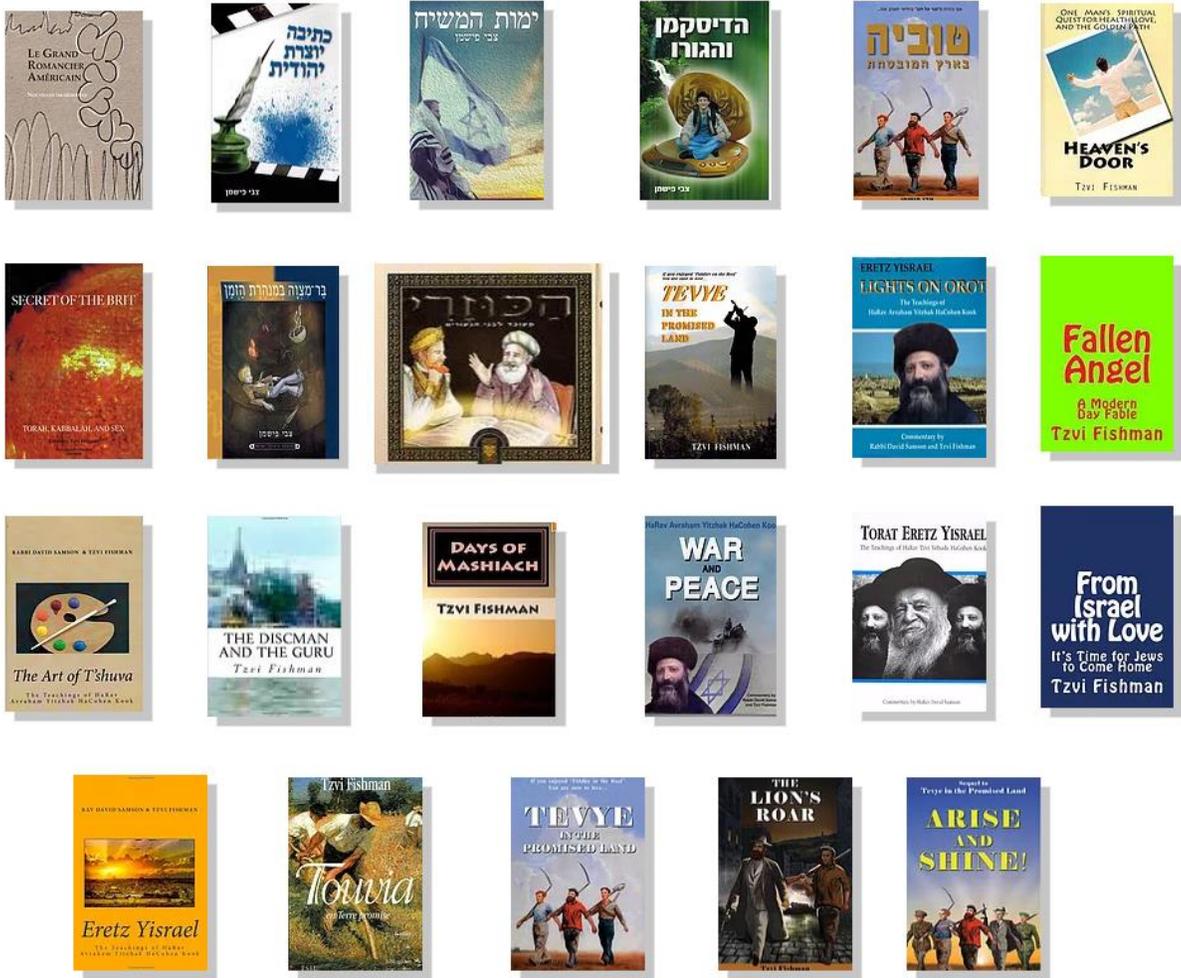
oppressive world, where you have to suppress your natural personality, creative talents, and gifts. I think this was part of my parents' fears when I started becoming religious, and, certainly, this was the basis of the poolside journalist, Shula's, criticism of Uri Zohar, a popular Israeli filmmaker who stopped directing movies when he became a *baal t'shuva*. However, the truth is the very opposite. Religion needn't stifle creativity. G-d wants us to express and develop the talents and gifts that He gives us at birth, all in His holy service. That's why He bestows them upon us – not to use them to make ourselves famous, but to praise His greatness and Kingship over the Heavens and Earth.

In my case, after studying for a year in yeshiva, I felt a powerful inner need to express all the new and wonderful things I was learning, in order to share them with my brothers and sisters all over the world. So I went to Rabbi Shlomo Aviner and asked him what to do.

He said that, of course, I should write, but that I was still “*boser*,” meaning, ripe, a Hebrew word I didn't understand at the time. “The more you sit and learn Torah now, the more powerful and creative your writing will be when you resume your writing. The Torah tells us that the Jews left Egypt with “*richus gadol*” (great wealth). Your great wealth are the skills you learned in film school and Hollywood. G-d wants you to use them. But try to learn as much as you can first, then whatever you write will have added power and depth.”

Since becoming a *baal t'shuva*, in addition to the commentaries on the teachings of Rabbi Kook, I've published an illustrated book, *The Kuzari for Young Readers*; several novels, including the popular *Tevye in the Promised Land* series, a handful of other books on Jewish themes, several translations, hundreds of Internet blogs emphasizing the great difference between Jewish life in Israel versus the Diaspora, an assortment of Jewish

videos, and I directed a feature film, “Stories of Rebbe Nachman” – so you can’t say that religion stunts creative freedom or artistic expression.



Now back to my life-changing visit to the Holy Land. During my first week in Jerusalem, I hop on an Egged bus to Hevron. In those good, old, pre-Oslo days, before the tunnels and by-pass road were opened, the road traveled through Arab villages, passing by Rachel's tomb, Beit Lechem, and the refugee camp of Dahashia, where I would sit years later with Rabbi Moshe Levinger, protesting the rampant stone throwing along the road, which threatened the lives of the Israeli motorists. Looking out the bus window at the vineyards and terraced hillsides between Efrat and Hevron, I fall in love with the Land of Israel.



Don't get me wrong. Jerusalem is beautiful. Jerusalem is a dream. The Talmud states that ten measures of beauty were given to the world and that Jerusalem received nine of them. But for me, it is the Biblical landscapes on the way to Hevron that makes me feel that I must live in Israel. The awareness comes over me like a moment of Revelation that I know will last forever, just like my discovery of G-d on the beach. This is where I have to live. The hills speak to me. The vistas where the young shepherd boy, David, herded his sheep, beckon to me like the arms of a lover. My eyes are enchanted, like a man who sees a woman on the street and knows, in a split-second of certainty, that he wants to marry her, love at first sight, like the love I will feel for my future Israeli wife. Cornball that

I am, and movie-junky from birth, I hear the words of the song, "Exodus," crescendo in my ears.

This Land is mine  
God gave this Land to me  
This brave and ancient Land To  
me.

And when the morning sun  
Reveals her hills and plains  
Then I see a Land  
Where children can run free.

So take my hand  
And walk this Land with me  
And walk this lovely Land  
With me.

Though I am just a man  
When you are by my side  
With the help of G-d  
I know I can be strong  
To make this Land our home.  
If I must fight, I will fight  
To make this Land our own.  
Until I die, this Land is mine.

Until I die this land is mine. That's exactly my feeling. Like I said, at this point of my life, I didn't know the difference between the Rambam and the Ramban, nor this *Tosefot* or that, nor how to study the intricacies of Jewish Law, but gazing out the bus window on the way to Hevron, I don't understand how there can be any question or doubt regarding a Jew's belonging in Israel. Of course, a Jew should live in Israel. This is the Jewish

Land. This is the Land of the Bible. This is where Jewish History took place. This is the Land that *Hashem* promised to our forefather, Avraham, and to his offspring after him. This is the Holy Land, the inheritance of the Children of Israel.

Yes indeed. Beyond any doubt whatsoever. This is the real thing! To put it like an American - this is the Big Leagues. The World Series. This is Yankee Stadium. The Super Bowl. The Heavyweight Championship of the World in Madison Square Garden. The Olympics. The highest place a Jew can reach. Higher than Everest. Higher than the moon.

Gazing out the bus window at the Biblical landscapes, it seems so simple and obvious. How could a Jew want to live anywhere else? Now that we can return to Israel, how can a Jew choose to remain in some foreign Gentile land? I can't understand it. Los Angeles never talked to me. New York City never sang in my ears. The Virgin Islands are pretty, but what do they have to do with the real me, with Jewish Destiny, and with the Almighty's world plan?

I'm home. I realize I'm home! This Land is my home! I belong here! This is where G-d wants me to be! I feel it in my bones, in my blood, in my heart, in my soul.

I'm in Hevron! The City of the Patriarchs! Right here where I'm standing, in this very field in front of the towering Tomb of the Patriarchs, *Maharat HaMachpelah*, the history of the Jewish People began. Thus like it says in the Bible. If you need proof that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jews, just open the Bible. It's our deed to the Land!



When I was in grade school in Massachusetts, we went on field trips to battle sites from America's War of Revolution, sites 200 years old. My children, and now my grandchildren, go on school field trips to Hebron, to see the field and cave that Abraham purchased 4000 years ago, just as it states in the Torah.

I walk up the long flight up steps to the great mausoleum, as if I am walking up a ladder to Heaven. What an overwhelming feeling of reverence and awe. I'm about to meet my Forefathers for the very first time, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as they are called in English. My Father's Father's Father's Father's Father's Father's Father's Father's Father. And my Foremothers as well, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. We passed the Tomb of Rachel along the way to Hebron.

For the first time in my life, I am discovering where I came from. I am encountering who I am. I am meeting the Avraham in me. His genes and chromosomes are mine. The same holy seed which was passed on to

Yitzhak and to Yaakov has found its way to me. And along with that seed, and that birthright, comes the promise and Covenant of the Land. G-d's gift of the Land of Israel to Avraham, and to his children for all generations, is also a gift to me! "*Lech lecha!*" G-d commanded Avraham. "*Go forth!*" "*Go forth for yourself – for your benefit.*" Leave your place of birth and your father's house, and journey to the Land of Israel. In Israel, your offspring shall become a great Nation. That same command of "*Lech lecha*" echoes over the hills of Hevron, calling to me. "*Lech lecha!*"

Up until this moment, I thought George Washington was the founder of my Nation, but he isn't. It may say on my passport that I am an American, but that is only a technicality owing to the place I was born. I'm really an Israeli! A child of Israel, of *Bnei Yisrael*. My great, great, great grandfather is Avraham, and Yitzhak, and Yaakov, not George Washington, Davy Crocket, or Daniel Boone.

It's mind-blowing to discover that you are not who you thought you were all of your life, and to realize that you are somebody else!

I sit down and I pray. I pray to my father, Avraham. I pray to my father Yitzhak. I pray to my father, Yaakov. I pray to the Matriarchs, the great, great, great grandmothers of my Mom. I pray, not to them, but in their merit, asking G-d to answer my prayer to continue my journey and never stop.

I don't mean to turn this book into a travelogue, but that's what I do for the next two weeks. I travel all around the country, like a man who wants to find out everything he can about the woman with whom he has fallen madly in love.

In Ein Gedi, I walk up the verdant mountain trail in the footsteps of King David as he flees from the jealous rage of King Saul.

In the Dead Sea, I float happily on my back while recalling the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, gazing around to see if I can spot Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt.

At sunset, I walk up the long, winding Snake Trail to the peak of Masada. The national park is closed by this hour. All the visitors and guards have left, so I climb over a stone wall and spend the night on the starlit, windy plateau, where Jews staged a valiant rebellion against Rome's occupation of Israel, finally taking their own lives rather than fall into the hands of the cruel enemy.

Never in my life have I seen so many constellations of stars – seemingly millions of them. It's as if I can reach out and grab myself a handful of stardust to keep as a lucky charm in my pocket. Who but G-d could create such a wonder?

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Israeli fighter jets roar over the ancient ruins of Masada, so close to where I am standing, I instinctively duck, as if they are flying low enough over the mountain to hit me.



After my initial fright from their thunderous roar, a tremendous pride and joy swells in my heart. I know that G-d is talking to me through the fighter planes, letting me know that He is with me in my journey to find Him. Yes, in this magical Holy Land, G-d isn't only at the *Kotel*. He isn't only in Hevron watching over the Patriarchs. G-d is also in the jet fighters of the Israeli Air Force. Just thirty-five years ago, the Jewish People were burning in the crematories of Auschwitz and today we have one of the most powerful armies in the world! If that isn't G-d's doing, whose doing is it? How can any religious Jew look askance at the Jewish State that G-d has given us and reject it as not being the child they hoped for? G-d gave birth to this child. It didn't spring up from the desert by chance. *Medinat Yisrael* is His creation, nobody else's – with the help of all the brave pioneers who worked alongside with Him, secular and religious alike.

Back at the *Kotel*, Rabbi Schuster walks slowly towards me, as if he has all the time in world. One thing you learn from Jewish History is patience.

“How about coming with me to a yeshiva to get a little lunch?” he asks, figuring if he can’t appeal to my mind, maybe he can catch me with some tasty bait at the end of his hook.

“I’m on my way to Mount Sinai,” I tell him. “Maybe when I get back.”

“Sure thing,” he says. “Enjoy your trip.” Giving me a wave, he walks slowly away in search of a hungrier victim, knowing that my turn will come.

“Why on earth would I want to go to a yeshiva?” I think to myself. “I’m trying to get closer to G-d.”



It’s the end of March and the evening’s Channel One News reports that the movie, “Chariots of Fire,” has won the Oscar for Best Picture at the Academy Awards presentation in Los Angeles. It’s the first time I haven’t watched the gala show for as long as I can remember. In Israel, the major Festivals of the year are *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*. In America, they are the World Series, the Super Bowl, and the Academy Awards. What a difference!

When I tell Serafin that I’m going on a Sinai excursion and that I need a sleeping bag, she calls one of her sons, a commander in the army reserves, and asks him to bring a sleeping bag to her apartment on his weekly Sunday night visit. I take a bus to Eilat and transfer my stuff to the

command car waiting to transport our group of fifteen into the Sinai. A cute girl from Holland gives me a friendly smile, but I choose a seat a safe distance away from her. The trip is long, but exciting. I'm amazed that I'm in the same wilderness through which the Children of Israel wandered on their way to the Promised Land after the Exodus from Egypt. For lunch, we open cans of sardines, kernel corn, and pickles, and munch on tomatoes, cucumbers, and bread. In the evening, there's a probably, not-very-kosher barbeque, and we eat around a campfire, listening to our guide's rehash of the Sinai Campaign in the *Yom Kippur* War. I try to overcome my jealousy when the Dutch girl strolls off for a romantic, moonlit walk through the desert with one of the other guys on the journey. Hollywooder that I am, I spend the night under the heavens with the stars. The following morning, we reach the Santa Katerina Monastery and begin to climb up Mount Sinai, along a natural path of "stairs" which has been formed from the footsteps of so many previous climbers. The mountain itself isn't that high. Our guide quotes a *Midrash* which says that G-d chose Mount Sinai precisely because it wasn't the highest mountain in the world, and therefore possessed the praiseworthy trait of humility. Near the peak there's a small mosque. It seems that wherever there's a site holy to the Jews, the Christians and Muslims build a shrine of their own nearby.

I remember that someone took a picture of me standing on top of the mountain, but I don't have it. The whole time I'm in Israel, I don't have a camera, which is strange because I love taking pictures and even sold some of my photographs to magazines. But on this spiritual odyssey, I don't want any screen between me and G-d, including the screen of a camera.

The experience is indescribable, even for a seasoned writer like myself. At the summit, perhaps on the very spot where Moses received the Two Tablets of Law, I feel I'm standing at the top of the world. G-d is



everywhere. There are no trees or vegetation anywhere in sight, as if nothing has been able to grow there since a Celestial Fire descended upon the mountain upon the giving of the Torah.

Back at the *Kotel*, the indefatigable Rabbi Schuster approaches me once again with his offer, and this time I agree to make him feel good. Why not? I have nothing but free time on my hands. And maybe I'll learn something I didn't know before.

Unfortunately, my pre-conceptions are confirmed. The Ultra-Orthodox yeshiva reminds me of old photos I've seen of Jewish ghettos in Poland. Not that the building is old – in fact, it's pretty modern. But the whole feel of the place seems very foreign to Israel, like some Wax Museum of Eastern European Jewry frozen in time. My brain has been so influenced by movies, the guys learning in the yeshiva look like FBI detectives from the Thirties with their dark suits and black hats.



The class I attend on Jewish Philosophy is intellectually stimulating. The university-educated Rabbi speaks with a Brooklyn accent and intersperses the lecture with jokes, like a polished stand-up comic. Then I sit in on a class about the week's Torah portion, the "*Parshat HaShavuah*," in the light of Rashi's commentary, learning a lot of things that I never would have known from the simple reading of the text. The elderly Rabbi keeps his Detective hat on in the classroom. He sits behind a pile of books which looked like they've been read and reread. He is more serious than the first lecturer, and he obviously knows his stuff, quoting a lot of commentaries by heart, as if it's all one open book before him.

I look at him and ask myself if I want to be like him? Or like the first lecturer, who's more like a regular person than the dry Talmudic scholar I'm listening to now. Could I go around in a dark suit and hat, cutting myself off from the outside world? On the one hand, you have to give these people credit. They're the ones who preserved Judaism for the 2000 years the Jews were in exile, in alien lands, clinging to the Torah and the hallowed traditions of our Forefathers, in the face of almost non-stop persecution, poverty, and endless wandering from place to place. Perhaps, the dress codes which seems unnatural to me, their closed and guarded lifestyle, their penchant for speaking Yiddish, and their rejection of everything new, were their secrets of survival, defending them, and the Torah they guarded, from the permissive and unholy cultures around them. I could understand that. Didn't I know from my own life that if you live in Rome, and behave like the Romans, you end up a Roman yourself? In a way, these people are heroes, the guardians of Jewish tradition. Indeed, if they weren't the way they were, maybe all of the Jews would be

assimilated today and the Torah forgotten. But there is something too uniformed and inflexible in their manner and lifestyle that makes it hard for me to imagine myself becoming one of their life-long members. Plus, it seems to me that for all of their obvious erudition in Torah, something is missing. To me, the Torah is supposed to be lived on the hillsides and valleys of Israel, as the holy Constitution of a great and holy Nation, with soldiers and politicians, scientists and farmers, an Israelite Nation which is destined to replace America as the #1 power in the world, like in the days of Kings David and Shlomo. To me, that's the real Torah, not this exile version, preserved in closed and frightened communities, cut off from and rejecting the world around them.

Lunch is pretty good, and no doubt as kosher as can be. I'm seated with a bunch of friendly young American guys, who are all dressed in the same team uniform of their Rabbis, which makes it hard to distinguish one of them from the other. Some have been studying at the yeshiva for three and four years. Two of them are married. They try their best to be as hospitable as they can, gladly welcoming a newcomer to the clan, asking me questions, and wanting to know all about the movies I've written, as if my Hollywood career is a big Talmudic achievement. I ask a happy-looking guy named Aryeh if he's planning to serve in the army. "I'm already in the army," he replies. "The army of *Hashem*."

"I mean the Israeli army," I clarify.

"Why would I want to serve in the army of the *Tzeonim*?" he asks, using the pejorative Hebrew term for the Zionists, pronounced with a Yiddish accent and employed by the Ultra-Orthodox when talking about the country's secular Jews. Unfamiliar with the history and politics of the matter, the little knowledge I have derives from my discussions with Serafin and her stridently Zionist reactions to the evening TV news which

is dominated by politically Leftist views. I find Aryeh's hostile attitude confusing. After all, can there be any higher service of G-d than the willingness of an Israeli soldier to sacrifice his life defending fellow Jews? Can there be something more Ultra-Orthodox than this? If not for the soldiers of the Israeli army, these ghetto lovers would have their throats slit by the Arabs who live two minutes away in the Sheikh Jarach neighborhood just down the street.

It seems to me from my reading of the Torah that G-d Himself is a *Tzeoni*," I answer. "Throughout the Torah, He keeps telling the Jews to live in Zion."

"He doesn't want us living here like *goyim*. The State of Israel and its *chiloni* army are *traf*."

I've been in Israel long enough to know that *chiloni* means secular. And I remember from my Granny Dora's home that *traf* is something not *kosher*.

"Do you forget that Israel is surrounded by a billion Arabs who don't want the Jews living here?"

"The Torah protects us," another guy says. "We don't need an army."

"The Torah didn't protect the Jews in Germany or Poland from the Nazis, or the Jews in Russia from Stalin and Lenin," I remind them.

"A Jew is supposed to learn Torah day and night," Aryeh says. "If there's a need to fight, the Master of the World, the *Rabenu Shel Olam*, will do the fighting Himself."

"You know more than I do, but in the little that I've learned, Moses fought in the wars of the Children of Israel, Joshua was the leader of the army, and King David didn't just study Torah and pray. He led the Jews in battle

and chopped off the foreskins of his enemies until he had no more enemies left.”

Aryeh stands up. I can see he’s bothered by our debate. “Who wants to play some hoops before our next class?” he asks the others, picking up his tray and walking away from the table.

“Times were different then,” one of his buddies says, as if to nullify my argument.

They all stand up from the table. “Want to join us for a quick game of basketball?” one of them asks me.

I tell him I have an appointment in town. So much for that yeshiva. The guys are all well-meaning but I’m not ready to don a black Fedora hat and wear a costume like everyone else. I’ll keep searching for King David.

Rabbi Schuster doesn’t give up. Back at the *Kotel*, he says there’s someone he wants me to meet, a Breslov *Hasid* who traveled around England with “The Beatles” before having his spiritual epiphany. The guy invites people to his house on Friday nights, and Rabbi Schuster thinks I’ll hit it off with him.

Because I learned a lot from reading *Rebbe Nachman’s book, Advice*, and because my host sounds like an interesting guy, I agree to *daven* at the *Kotel* on Friday night, where the Breslov *Hasid* will be waiting to meet me. Serafin says she’ll leave her door open, so I can come home whenever I wish. Friday night is about the only time I see the old lady sleep. During the week, she works at her sewing machine, bent over the spindle into the wee hours of the night, long after I go to bed. I don’t feel bad about leaving her alone for the Sabbath meal, because every Shabbat, one of her three grown children comes to visit on a rotating basis. They are far less

religious than she is. In fact, they are not religious at all, in the strict sense of the word. Both sons are commanders in the IDF Reserve, and the daughter works for the Mossad. “What can you do?” she says with a sigh. “They all have hearts of gold, and each one would give his life for this country. That’s more than a lot of seemingly pious Jews can say. Let them all be well.”

*Davening* at the Wailing Wall on Friday night is an incredible high. Holiness shines off the ancient white boulders. Overhead, swallows swirl in frenzied circles, as if they are doing a *Hasidic* dance. Rabbi Schuster is there to introduce his week’s catch of newcomers to their Sabbath-meal hosts. He has about thirty people to send on their way, and then he has an hour trek on foot to his home. But the inconvenience doesn’t bother him. We are in this world to do *mitzvot*, and this is his.

My exuberant host, Yitzik, turns out to be Israeli, but he speaks English well with a noticeable British accent. He has long *peyes* and wears a satin black frock and a round, furry *Streimel*. He welcomes me with a hearty handshake, saying, “*Baruch Hashem! Baruch Hashem!*” Leading me and his two other guests through the dark, cobblestoned passageway of the Muslim Quarter, he points out a few buildings, once owned by Jews when the neighborhood was known as the Jewish Quarter, before Arab riots forced the Jews to flee. Several of the buildings, he explains, have been purchased back from the Arabs squatters so that Jewish families can live there again. He stops before another building and shows us a small cavity in the doorway where a *mezuzah* was once housed before Arabs pulled it out to erase all evidence that Jews once lived there. Every fifty meters or so, two tough-looking Israeli soldiers stand guard with their rifles, so that the devout Jews who *davened* at the *Kotel* can make their way home safely to Mea Shearim. Outwardly, in their green army uniforms, they soldiers look spiritual worlds away from the devoutly dressed *Hasidim*, but

I recall the songs of Shlomo Carlebach, where he calls them “Holy, holy, oh so holy soldiers,” and I can understand why. If not for them, these same devout *Hasidim* wouldn’t be able to walk ten meters in the dark and spooky neighborhood without getting knives wedged into their backs. But our host doesn’t seem to be worried at all. “*Shabbos, Shabbos,*” he repeats with great joy, never ceasing to smile.

By the time we reach the Ultra, Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, worshippers have already returned home from *shul* and the narrow street is deserted. I feel like I have walked back into time to the Middle Ages, or onto studio back-lot in Hollywood where they are filming the Yiddish classic, “*The Dybbuk,*” set in Poland two-hundred years ago. There are Hebrew signs plastered on the walls of the old buildings, and a few are in English, one in bold black letters warning women to dress modestly, another cursing the “Zionist Satan” for waging a war against the Torah.

“This is going to be an interesting evening,” I think to myself.



Yitzik lives with his wife and five small children in a cramped, dark apartment that looks as old as the street. The only lights in the house are candles, small cups of oil lit with a wick. Over the dining room table is an oil chandelier, which serves as the main light in the room. I've never seen anything like it. His wigged and kerchiefed wife keeps in the background by the kitchen. She wears some kind of long dress that covers her legs to her feet, with sleeves that reach her hands. Yitzik blesses his kids like I've seen Tevye bless his daughters in the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof." Their ages are one, two, four, five, and six, as if his wife is a baby-making machine. In her baggy gown, I can't tell if she's pregnant again. "Is this the kind of life I want to have?" I wonder. Before reciting *Kiddush* and leading his guests through the washing of our hands from a vessel with two handles, Yitzik tells us a little about his past. In his late twenties, he took off for England to meet the new rock sensation, "The Beatles," and ended up carrying their equipment their tours so that he could be a part of the action. He talks about Paul, John, George, and Ringo as if they are still his good friends. Without going into details, he tells me and his two other guests that when he hit rock bottom with the world of non-stop drugs and groupies, he realized that his life was going nowhere fast. That's when he met a follower of *Rebbe* Nachman in London and discovered real joy. He takes our hands and starts to dance us happily around the table, joyfully singing, "*Mitzvah gedolah l'hiot b'simcha tamid.*" He sings the simple tune again and again until we all catch on to the lyrics. "It is a great mitzvah to always be happy." Around and around we go, when we'll stop nobody knows. I like his spirit and join in with his enthusiasm. I want to be happy too. His older kids sit quietly looking at picture books by candle light, as if they are bored by the crazy shenanigans, no doubt witnessing the same routine every week.

All in all, I have a wonderful evening. Yitzik's wife hardly says a word, but he's a fun guy, getting us up from the meal every twenty minutes for another round of dancing and singing, putting on a show that could put "The Beatles" and "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" to shame.

Before, wishing us a farewell, "*Shabbat Shalom*," Yitzhak invites each one of us to be his guests again. Escorting us out of the serenely quiet neighborhood, he points out the Breslov Yeshiva where he studies every day, inviting us to drop by and learn with him whenever we can. I never do. I like the spirit and wisdom of *Rebbe Nachman*, but not the Broadway theatricals that come with it. In addition, Yitzik also seems to have a negative attitude towards the Israel Defense Forces which turns me off. He says we only have to be happy and *Hashem* will do the rest. No need for an army or government of our own. No need to build houses, no need for a plumbing system, or for hospitals, highways, factories, and industry for the millions of Jews who are returning to Israel from all over the world. According to Yitzik, all we have to do is pray to *Hashem*, learn Torah, and do all the commandments with joy, "*Mitzvah gedolah l'hiot b'simcha tamid*."

I rent a car and I'm off to Tiberias, via the winding descent from Jerusalem down through the Judeans Mountains, where Bedouins live in hillside tents, like in the days of Avraham *Avinu*. Passing a sign marked Sea Level, in the distance I can see a shimmering cloud of haze hovering over the Dead Sea. I drive through the sleep village of Jericho, immortalized for me in the Negro ballad, "Joshua and the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho; Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumblin' down." This visit transpires before the Oslo Accords when Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, two tired and spiritually bankrupt leaders, give away the ancient city to the arch terrorist Arafat, and the world awards them with great honor on the White House Lawn and a Nobel Prize for Peace – while over

a thousand Jews are slaughtered in the terrorist bloodbath which follows. At the time, my head is as far away from politics as the Earth is from the moon, so I just enjoy the scenery along the way up north. The Jordan Valley is breathtaking with the same stark, Biblical landscapes as when the Children of Israel miraculously crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land after their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness.



While the Sea of Galilee is tiny compared to the lakes in America, in my love-struck eyes, it is the most beautiful sea in the world. My guidebook directs me to the tombs of Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Akiva, and the Rambam, who is known as Maimonides, the fabled physician and scholar after which a hospital in the New York City is named. Don't Ultra-Orthodox Jews know that Rabbi Akiva, the greatest Torah Sage of his time, also carried the weapons of Bar Kochva into battle when they led the rebellion against Rome's conquest and occupation of Israel?

From Tiberias, I'm off up into the mountains to Tzfat, where I find my way to the gravesite of the holy Kabbalist, the Ari, where I pray for hours, not

noticing time go by, pleading with G-d to forgive me for my past, and to guide my path to a new life in Israel, where I promise to serve Him, and His People, *Am Yisrael*, with all of the talents that He has given me.



It's almost dusk by the time I enter the dark hillside cavern where the famous *Ari mikvah* is beckoning to me to be cleansed and reborn. From my guide book, I know the legend that anyone who immerses himself in the *mikvah* which the Ari has blessed will become a true penitent during his life. At that hour, no one is there. I take off my clothes and can't help but observe how very different this cold barren cave is from the comfortable locker room at the Santa Monica Sports Connection! When I put a foot in the underground pool, I can't help but think how far I have come from my California jacuzzis. Could it be that I'm crazy? Have I somehow lost my mind? The raw chill of the underground stream takes my breath away. The water is literally freezing. The pool is surprisingly shallow and I have to bend over slightly to immerse all of my body. Once, twice, three times...four, five, six. When I reach ten, I keep going. I don't know how the process of *t'shuva* works. These waters are said to be connected to the waters of the Garden of Eden. I am returning to the womb. Do I have to dunk myself in this mystical pool, measure for

measure, the same number of times that I sinned? If so, I'll be here till morning. I expect the water to get warmer the more I immerse, but instead of adjusting to the temperature, I feel like I'm going to faint from the cold. "You've healed my body, G-d, now heal my soul," I pray. Twenty times, twenty-five, thirty. Moses was on the mountain forty days, so when I hit forty, I stop. It seems like a good enough number. Trembling, I hurry back to my clothes. I'm freezing, but I feel as light as the wind, as if two tons of darkness have been removed from my life. I feel liberated. I feel cleansed. I feel free!

I stay in a small hostel in the Old City of Tzfat. The ancient mystical village is still a quiet town with nothing to do at night, so I walk around enjoying the clear, cool mountain air of the Galilee. The next morning, I'm back at the Ari *mikvah* for another bout of purification. There are a few *Hasidim* getting undressed, their heads shaved bald and long *peyes* hanging down under their ears – not the kind of guys you see at the Sports Connection. I let them immerse before me, then take my turn, hurrying down the two natural stone steps into the freezing, mountain stream water, untouched by the sun. Do the *Hasidim* glance over when I hit fifty dunks and keep going? Maybe they're used to seeing fervent penitents from Hollywood. But I'm determined to hit 100. If I can swim 100 laps in Santa Monica swimming pool, then I can dunk myself 100 times in the holy Ari *mikvah*. I make it 101 for good measure. What a great way to start the day!

I continue on to Meron, a short drive along the winding, mountainous road. Like in Tzfat, there aren't many people here either, at the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai, the author of the holy *Zohar*. Once again I pray that G-d let me get close to Him, that He open my eyes to the secrets of his Torah, and that He lead to the path that will let me use my the talents he gave me in order to serve Him.

I now recognize that Israel is the place I must be. I know that G-d is here, everywhere, more than anywhere else. But I don't know how I'm supposed to do to go forward. I can't speak or write Hebrew. I don't know the first thing about making movies in Israel. I have no connections. And I can't seem to find a spiritual path which combines a love of the Torah, with a love for the Land of Israel, and a love for the modern secular State and its secular army, whose soldiers are, in the songs of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, holy, holy, holy. While the ultra-religious have a different take on Zionism, I feel a natural sense of joyous appreciation toward G-d for giving the Jewish People, after nearly two-thousand years of exile, our own sovereign State in Israel. To me, any path of Judaism which doesn't recognize the incredible miracle of the reborn State of Israel, and doesn't acknowledge G-d's hand in its rebuilding, is a Judaism encased in the past, and not a true understanding of Torah at all.

I ask G-d to show me the way, because after He miraculously healed my bleeding, and after, out of the blue, He sent me a travel brochure pointing His "finger" toward Jerusalem in answer to my prayer for guidance, I now understand that everything that occurs in the world, not only big miracles, but also the joys and struggles of day-to-day life, come from G-d as well. While the next few years of my life aren't filled with obvious miracles which transcend the natural order of life, like with my healing; and while there aren't any mind-blowing signs out of Heaven, like the brochure in my mailbox, or like the Heavenly Voice in my dream, I know that whatever happens to me is from *Hashem*. Everything, in a sense, is a little miracle. I can see because G-d lets me see. I can think because G-d lets me think. My hearts beats, not because I tell it to, but because G-d keeps the activate button turned on. So I begin to walk around each day with "G-d glasses" over my eyes, knowing that whatever happens to me, and whoever I meet, it's all been planned and directed by G-d.

For example, lo and behold, while I'm praying in the tomb of Rebbe Shimon Ben Yochai, on the other side of the world from Hollywood, who should appear at my side but the guy I met on the pier in Santa Monica who advised me not to study books like the "*Tanya*" before learning the basic stuff first. He glances at me, and I glance at him, and we both cry out in recognition, as if we're long lost friends!

His name is Aaron. It seems to me that he's wearing the same dark hat which he was wearing when I first met him by the beach. He's visiting Israel, traveling around to all of the holy places, praying that G-d will send the right woman into his life. He says he'd love to live in the Holy Land, but right now, he has to stay in Los Angeles and care for his aging parents, survivors of the Holocaust. (Six years later, I "bump into" him again at a *brit* in Jerusalem, where he's now living with his wife and three children, now that his parents are resting at peace in the Heavenly Jerusalem.) He asks me if I want to learn something.

"Sure," I answer.

"How about something from the *Zohar*, in honor of its author, Rebbe Shimon?"

"You advised me to stay away from the secrets of the Torah," I remind him.

"In general, that's true, until you've learned a lot of *Gemara* and *Halachah*. But here, at Rebbe Shimon's tomb, it's a *mitzvah* to learn something from his teachings."

There are already a few volumes of the "*Zohar*" on the table where we sit. He pushes one my way. "Open it," he says.

I wonder if it's like the "*I Ching*," the book of Chinese fortunes, possessed with a mystical power of revealing exactly what you need to know, at the exact spot on the page you flip open.

"You should be aware, in general," Aaron says, "If you study translations in English, they don't really capture the exact meaning of things. This is especially true of works like the *Zohar*, which, in addition to being in Hebrew and Aramaic, is filled with mystical codes and metaphors describing the spiritual worlds and their channels of influence, called *sefirot*, which G-d uses to bring down his blessings to us. Though I've studied in *yeshivot* all my life, I haven't yet learned how to decipher the language of the *Kabbalah*, which the Sages say should only be learned after a person is married and has children to ground him down to Earth, so he won't fly off into outer space like an astronaut without a safety tether when he tastes the mystical secrets.

I open the book at random and pass it to him. In the ancient burial vault, a few other people are bent over the tomb of Rebbe Shimon, praying, and over the nearby tomb of his son, but no one pays any attention to us. Aaron translates for me as he reads:

"Rebbe Shimon taught: There is nothing which so arouses the zealotry of the Holy One Blessed Be He as the sin of transgressing the *Brit*, as it says, '*And I will bring a sword upon you that shall avenge My Brit*'"

Aaron looks up and explains like a patient and experienced teacher. "The word *Brit* means 'covenant,' like the expression, '*brit milah*,' the covenant of circumcision. Here, it's referring to sexual transgression."

"What kind of things are considered sexual transgression?" I ask, not really knowing how Judaism defines the matter, since I haven't studied Jewish Law at all.

‘There are a lot of things,’ he replies. “Relationships with non-Jewish women, pre-marital sex, all forms of incest within family members, homosexuality, masturbation, looking at arousing images, violations of the laws of family purity, called ‘*niddah*.’”

“What does ‘*niddah*’ mean?” I ask, already feeling the coals of hell simmering under the soles of my feet.

Aaron glances around, as if to make sure that our conversation is not overheard.

“*Niddah* is the term used to describe the spiritual state of a woman during her menstrual period, when relations between husband and wife are forbidden, and when even embracing and touching is not allowed. In brief, normal relations only become permitted again after the wife has immersed in a proper *mikvah*. Since women don’t start going to the *mikvah* until they get married, all unmarried women have the status of *niddah*, and thus even kissing and ‘making out’ with them is forbidden.”

“Oh boy, am I ever in big trouble!” I tell him.

Aaron grins reassuringly. “Nothing can stand in the way of deep and sincere penitence,” he says. “*T’shuvah* when it is motivated by an ardent love for Hashem cleanses everything. Rebbe Shimon teaches that as well.”

“Sounds like it’s a good thing that I left Los Angeles,” I remark, maybe to lessen the seriousness of what I am hearing, and to shield myself from its direct implication on the life I have been living. It’s heavy stuff to hear. In upside-down America, sexual promiscuity is the norm. Anyone who’s a virgin by the age of twenty is considered either demented or a square. And masturbation is as common as brushing one’s teeth.

“A giant tidal wave is just waiting to wash Hollywood into the ocean,” Aaron remarks. “Everyone there knows that California is seated on deep geological fissure, and that a catastrophic earthquake is only a throw-of-the-dice away, but everyone continues on with their unholy, permissive ways.”

While I had already started to be abstinent ever since discovering Torah in Hollywood, it was more out of a general feeling that in order to get closer to G-d I needed to start living a purer and holier life, but it wasn't founded on any concrete understanding or knowledge of Jewish Law.

“What is so bad about masturbating?” I ask in an embarrassed whisper.

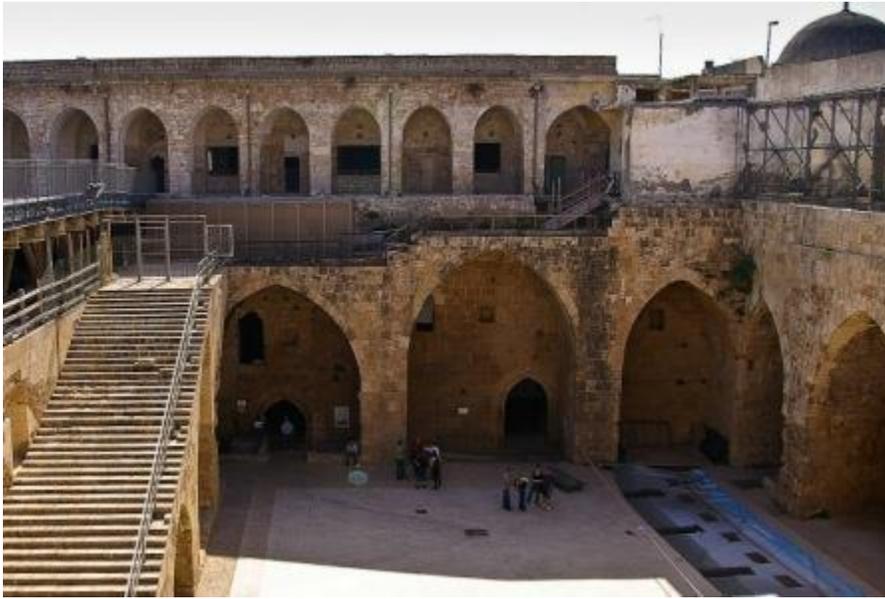
“Semen contains the seed of life,” Aaron explains. “It contains myriads of souls with the potential for human existence. When someone wastes his seed, all of that potential for new life is destroyed with it.”

I've heard enough. I don't want to know more. But then and there, in the tomb of Rebbe Shimon, I make a conscious decision to stop my erring ways. From this moment on, come hell or high water, I am a “Guardian of the *Brit*.”

From Meron, I'm off to the small Mediterranean town of Kiryat Yam to visit Daniel's mother. I offer to give Aaron a lift, but he's headed back to Jerusalem, where he's spending the last night of his visit to Israel before flying back to L.A.

On my way to Kiryat Yam, I stop in the old and picturesque, port city of Acco, to see the impressive fortress and prison which the Ottomans built in the late 1700's during the Ottoman conquest of Palestine, as Israel was called in those days. Later taken over by the British during the period of the British Mandate, the massive, stone-walled prison became a symbol of

what my guidebook calls, “the heroic spirit of the Jews to liberate their ancient Homeland from British rule.”



In the aftermath of World War One, after Britain defeated the Turks, who were ruling over Palestine, the British took upon itself the task of establishing a Jewish State in the region, which was to become a homeland for the millions of oppressed and scattered Jews around the world. But instead of facilitating the creation of a Jewish State, the British soon began to turn away the refugee ships which were reaching the shores of Palestine, like the S.S. Exodus, with its boatload of persecuted and homeless Jews. A Jewish Underground rose in response, empowered with a spirit of Jewish bravery and self-sacrifice which the Land of Israel hadn't known since the rebellion of Bar Kochva, Rabbi Akiva, and Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai against the Romans.

Touring the bare, stone cells where captured Jewish revolutionaries were incarcerated, I relive their story and watch a film depicting a daring escape. I stand silently in the gallows room where nine Jews were hanged by the British authorities, secular Jews who sacrificed their lives so that all Jews could live as free men in their own Jewish State. Throughout all of my

childhood, teenage years, and early manhood, I grew up believing that the Boston Tea Party and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address were the foundations of my history. But during my visit to Israel, I begin to realize that American History is not my history at all. In fact, I realize that I am an America only because I was born on America soil. My genes are the genes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and my chromosomes match those of Joshua, King David, Rabbi Akiva, and the heroes and holy martyrs of the Lechi and the Irgun who fought to free the Land of Israel from British rule.

A concerned, but somewhat frantic, seven-page, handwritten letter is waiting for me from Daniel when I arrive at his mother's small apartment in Kiryat Yam. Like our last telephone conversation, he repeats his warnings about me getting too involved in Judaism, in my pursuing what may seem to be some romantic adventure, but which is merely running away from reality, and abandoning my G-d-given talents instead of developing them, as well as shutting myself off from the world because of my sickness which, he theorizes, broke my spirit and shattered my self-confidence, causing me to seek solace in religion.

I wonder if he is writing just to me, or writing to fortify himself and to justify his own lost and sordid life in Hollywood.

Daniel's mother is a wonderful woman from Morocco. Like all Jewish mothers, she worries about her "baby boy," so far away in America. She doesn't know any English, and I don't know Hebrew, so we communicate through the little French that I remember. In her salon, she shows me a blow-up, family photo. Between her three sons and three daughters, I see that my face has been cut out from a photo which Daniel has sent her and inserted into the picture, as if I am already one of her children.

*“Mon fils,”* she says in French with a happy smile. *“Mon nouveau fils. Ce maison de mon Daniel, il est de maison de toi.* My new son. The house of my Daniel is your house. *Bienvenu, baruch haba, welcome.”*

When we lived together in New York and Los Angeles, Daniel took me to a few exotic Moroccan restaurants, where we sat on the floor, on colorful pillows, feasted on all kinds of Oriental delicacies, and sipped on aromatic tea which was poured from a teapot held high in the air. Now, at Daniel’s home in Israel, I’m in a Moroccan restaurant for three meals a day. His mother does her best, in the finest Moroccan tradition of hospitality, to make me feel, not only like a son, but like a visiting king as well - first and foremost because she is a good person, but maybe believing in her heart that if I decide to stay in Israel, this will draw her baby boy, Daniel, back to Israel too.

Not only is the spicy cuisine new to my Ashkenazi palette, the sights and sounds at the neighborhood Sefardi synagogue, where she sends me to pray in the morning, are a big discovery. Not only is there a difference in the sound and style of the prayers, with far more singing and Mediterranean flavor, but even the dark-complexioned Jews look different, as if they haven’t left Israel since the time of King David. After all, it doesn’t seem to me that King David wore a fur Streimel and long black coat. In fact, it dawns on me that the Ultra-Orthodox Jews of Brooklyn and Mea Shearim, for all of their piety and show, may not be the original Jews of Biblical times, but rather, a much later, Europeanized version, while these simple, far more natural-looking Jews in this small Sefardi synagogue – maybe their traditions are a lot closer to the traditions handed down by our first forefathers who dwelt in the Land of Israel. Avraham, after all, came from Mesopotamia, which is a long way from Brooklyn, New York.

I meet Daniel's brothers and sisters and spend a whole week in my new home in Kiryat Yam. When Daniel hears that I will be spending Seder Night there, some two weeks away, he decides to come home for a visit and join us, instead of spending the holiday in L.A. with people he hardly knows.

When my parents hear that I am extending my visit, they decide to visit Israel too! For them, it won't be such a big trip. Twice a year, they fly to Florence, Milan, London, and Paris to buy merchandise for their perfume and leather gift shops on St. Thomas. While it never occurred to them to stop off in Israel in the past, now that their own baby is there, they wouldn't miss the chance, even if the country was at war. So as I drive back to Jerusalem, I have lots to look forward to.

Once again, Rabbi Schuster ambushes me at the *Kotel* and asks if I want to learn a little something in a nearby yeshiva for Americans in the Old City, just a minute walk away. Because lunchtime is approaching, I accept the offer. With his customary happy smile, he himself leads me up the long stairway to the renovated Jewish Quarter and introduces me to the exuberant young Rabbi who's in charge of new students. It's a more casual version of the yeshiva I visited two weeks earlier, and while the food is bland compared with the Moroccan delicacies which Daniel's mother prepared, the learning is interesting. The atmosphere is so American, it almost smells like ballpark hot dogs, mustard, and Budweiser beer. I don't want more of America – I want something Israeli. But for an English-speaker in Jerusalem, this seems to be all that there is.

I spend a wonderful Pesach with Daniel and his family in Kiryat Yam. It's the longest *Seder* I've sat through, and Daniel puts on a great show. I'm given the honor of leading the recitation of the "Four Questions," which I remember by heart from my childhood, singing it aloud in the best Hebrew I can muster to show everyone that I'm a real Jew too. After the

second cup of wine, I'm as free as can be, feeling that I've been liberated from the darkness and bondage of America, where I was a prisoner in a foreign land, enslaved to a foreign culture, just as the Jews were in Egypt. I do my best to keep pace with the others, following along in the *Haggadah* with the help of my Art Scroll translation. The meal is fit for a king and the wine doesn't stop to flow. When we reach the song "*Dayanu*," my voice rises over everyone else's, and I surprise even myself when it turns out that I know most of the concluding Seder songs by heart as well.

Now that Daniel knows I plan to return to New York, he stops lecturing me, and we enjoy our time together in Israel. The first day of *Chol HaMoed*, we drive to Tzfat where we immerse ourselves with passionate fervor in the Arizal's mountainside *mikvah*, as if we are leading a class of aerobics at the Sports Connection in L.A. The next day, I drive south to the Ben Gurion Airport and pick up my parents, who have come to Israel to make sure I haven't become a Hasidic Jew.

"Thank G-d that you don't have a long beard and *peyes*," my Mother says after hugging me, as if she hasn't seen me for years. They stay at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which, of course, only serves *matzah* during the week of the *Pesach* holiday. I introduce them to Serafin, take them to the *Kotel*, and give them a tour of the Holy City, as if I'm an experienced guide. They too relax when they hear that I plan to return to New York and start teaching again at the Film School at NYU. We visit the Dead Sea and Tiberias, and then I take them to Kiryat Gat, where Daniel and his family welcome us like royalty. My Dad's a big hit with his instant Polaroid camera, which most of them have never seen. Here's a snapshot with Daniel seated between the two *kvelling* mothers.



Before my parents fly back to New York, my Dad repeats his offer to set me up in business if I come home to St. Thomas, but I still have the bug to be a writer, not of Hollywood trash, like before, but a serious writer who tackles more serious themes.

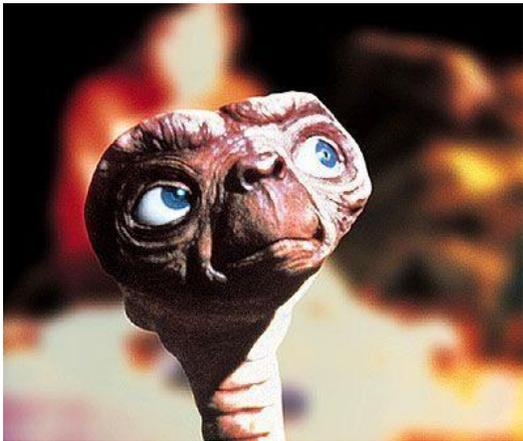
Two weeks later, with tears in my eyes, I kiss the stones of the *Kotel* goodbye, as if I am saying farewell to a lover, promising to return to embrace her again, but not knowing how or when.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Volunteers for Israel

I crash land when I return to New York. I feel like an astronaut who has re-entered the Earth's atmosphere after a trip through outer space. Only it's the other way around. In Israel I felt at home, and in New York, I feel like I'm on a foreign planet. Everything looks Gentile – the people, the architecture of the buildings, the Roman columns, the friezes, the statues in the park, the signs in English, the language, the American flags.... In addition, I feel like there isn't any air, as if it's hard for me to breathe; that if I don't get myself a spacesuit with a helmet and air tanks filled with the air of the Israel, I'm going to wither away and die, just like E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial, who couldn't survive in the atmosphere on Earth. It's because I've just spent three months in the Holy Land, breathing its holy air and walking on its holy soil, and there's no holiness in New York. None

whatsoever. Like E.T., I want to go, "Home."



I experience a tremendous down. Even when I go to a synagogue, it feels empty, as if the prayers have no meaning, like the chattering of nightingales, surrounded by worshippers who ask G-d to gather them from the four corners of the earth and

bring them to Jerusalem, but who stay in New York instead of buying a ticket and hopping on the first plane home to the Promised Land.

How can I stay here? How can I live here, I wonder? Facing the poster of the *Kotel* on my apartment wall, I pray, “Please G-d bring me back to Israel,” over and over. “Please G-d bring me home.”

My feeling of alienation doesn't go away. Even my apartment seems strange. I grew up in America, and I've spent years in New York. A few months ago, it was my favorite place in the world, filled with action, excitement, culture, movies, attractive and intelligent women, and suddenly I feel like I don't belong. Like the Albert Camus novel, “The Stranger,” I wander the streets, aimlessly, in existential angst, disconnected from everything around me; or in the words of Simon and Garfunkel, America's assimilated prophets, “And I only kiss your shadow. I cannot feel your hand. You're a stranger now unto me...” Even the Jews don't seem to be Jewish. They're Jewish, but they don't know what's really happening. “Wake up!” I feel like shouting at them. “The Diaspora is over! G-d has brought us back to Israel! The Torah isn't about making money! It's about building a holy Jewish Nation in the Land that *Hashem* promised to our Forefathers! Wake up! Open your eyes! Haven't you heard about it? Hurry! Get on a boat! Buy an airplane ticket! We all have to pitch in and do what we can to help our brothers and sisters who are rebuilding the Holy Land!”

But if I actually say this to someone, he looks at me as if I'm crazy. “We're American Jews,” he answers. “Israel is for the Israelis.”

Yeah, sure, we're American Jews, just like the Jews in Germany believed they were German.

“Stop being a fanatic,” they tell me. “This is America. The same thing could never happen here.”

But it's already happening with the assimilation that's ravaging Jewish ranks all over America. My cousins all marry non-Jews. My friends from high school and college marry Catholics and Protestants and Episcopalians, but none of them marries a Jew. Just like my old friend, Dave. The Jews of America are being wiped out with acceptance and "love." On a simple Bell Curve of statistics, there's no hope for them. Intermarriage is bound to get worse. The only solution is moving to Israel where assimilation hardly exists. But no one sees the message on the wall. And I am another deranged prophet on the streets of Manhattan. There are dozens of psychos like me scrawling messages on subway walls. The Jews who do care out a Jewish future believe the solution is to strengthen "Jewish Identity," but in the midst of the Gentile culture around them with its Super Bowls, Academy Award Presentations, and co-ed dorms, they're fighting a losing battle.

I decide to take the subway to Brooklyn, to visit the Lubavitch neighborhood in Crown Heights. Surely, I'll find holiness there. Surely, in a neighborhood with so many *frum* Jews, I'll be able to breathe. But when I reach the Crown Heights station and exit to the street, it looks like any other neighborhood in New York, except here the New Yorkers are dressed up like *Hasidim*, in black frocks and black hats. But I still can't breathe. There's no holiness in the air. There's no holiness to the street, to the trees, to the sky and clouds above. Just another neighborhood in America. If I had been holding a Geiger counter that registered holiness, I don't think it would have made the slightest beep. The needle wouldn't have risen at all.

That's the feeling I have in the neighborhood. The *Rebbe* himself is totally different. I ask where I can pray *Mincha*, and I'm directed to the famous brick building at 770, where the *Rebbe* is expected to join the *minyan*, in a small prayer room adjoining the main building. There's a feeling of

excitement in the air, which grows more intense as the minute hand of the clock on the wall points towards the hour when the famous leader of *Chabad* is scheduled to appear. Suddenly, there's an excited murmur, and a rush and bustle in the prayer hall as the *Rebbe* nears. Compare it to popcorn kernels exploding in a popcorn machine, or the fusion of atomic particles in a nuclear reactor. People bounce off one another to get as close as they can. When the white-bearded *Rebbe* appears in the doorway, I feel a laser beam of holy energy shoot out from his face, speed across the room, hit me in the chest and send me tumbling backwards into the wall. Maybe it's caused by the frenzy and passionate shoving of all the *Hasidim*, but it feels like an actual ray of holiness which emanate from the saintly *Rebbe*, the likes of which I have never experienced since.

But, aside from the *Rebbe* himself, in the Geiger counter of my soul, the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn feels like anywhere else in New York. There is no *Kedusha* in the air. Nothing compared to the towering holiness of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Inspired by the greatness of the *Rebbe*, I give *Chabad* a few more chances. I return to 770 to attend a *Frabrinaga* gathering. 5000 *Hasidim* pack into a large hall to hear the *Rebbe* speak. I wait my turn to drink the small cup of wine that everyone is given, waiting until the *Rebbe* turns toward me from his seat far across the hall, gazing directly into my eyes and nodding his head slightly, giving me permission to imbibe, as he does with everyone in the over-packed hall. But I'm disappointed when the *Rebbe* speaks in Yiddish. I can listen to the translation in the earphones I was given, but I feel like the harsh-sounding Yiddish language is strange, almost German in my ears. I'm looking for the Judaism of King David, for the melodious Hebrew of the Psalms, for the vistas of the Bible, where the holidays and commandments are observed in the Land of Milk and Honey, not in a

ghetto in Brooklyn, New York. I attend a few classes in the neighborhood, but, to me, it's not the real thing. Why be here, when a Jew could be in Israel? Their answers don't seem to make any sense. G-d is building a great Jewish country in Israel, just like the Prophets foretold; He is gathering the Jews home from all around the globe, just as G-d promises to do in the Torah; yet the Jews here in Brooklyn prefer to stay where they are in America. In a short time, I am to meet Rabbi Yehuda Hazani from Jerusalem. "*Am HaReka*," he calls America - "the empty nation."

Back in my apartment, I face the poster of the *Kotel*, longing for the smell of its stones, and I pray, day after day, "G-d please bring me home. Please, G-d, bring me home. Bring me home, G-d, please!"

Finally, G-d answers my prayer! *Tzahal* invades Lebanon. In a swift and stunning drive, the IDF has the PLO pinned down in Beirut. I am sitting in a Hebrew *Ulpan* in the Jewish Agency building on Park Avenue and 59<sup>th</sup> Street when two Israelis enter the classroom and ask to speak to the class. One is a Rabbi with a bushy beard and a large knitted *kippah*. He wears pants that need to be lengthened and sandals and socks. The young Israeli who addresses the class in rough English is clean-shaven and tough, as if he's a commander in the Israeli army.

"*Shalom*," he begins in a gruff voice. Turning to our Hebrew instructor, he asks in Hebrew, "Can I speak in Hebrew?"

"English is better," she answers. "They're just starting out."

He turns to the group of fifteen students. "My name is Meir Indor from Israel. I am a lieutenant colonel in the Israeli army. This is Rabbi Yehuda Hazani from the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva* in *Yerushalayim*."



[Three years later, Meir Indor and Rabbi Yehuda Hazani look over my wedding album.]

The Rabbi stands absolutely still without saying a word. Behind his thick eyeglass frames, I can see his eyes carefully survey the students in the room.

“As you know,” Indor continues, “Israel is at war. Our soldiers are fighting in Lebanon, and the reserves have been called into action to help them. We need volunteers to help on the home front, working in the fields of the Golan to make sure the summer fruits are harvested. We also need people to work in army warehouses to organize the supplies being sent up north to our soldiers. This is a time of emergency for our Nation, and every Jew must do his and her share to insure our victory....”

“This is exactly what I’m looking for,” I think to myself, making up my mind on the spot.

“The first planeload of volunteers will depart in ten days. The government of Israel is subsidizing tickets, so the cost will be only \$500 roundtrip.

Every volunteer is expected to work for a month. We need all the help we can get. Tell your family and friends. I will leave a phone number that you can call for more information. We are setting up an emergency recruitment office at the *Jewish Press* building in Brooklyn. Does anyone have a question?"

"Is there any danger involved?" a young woman asks.

"No more danger than living in New York," the Israeli answers. "This is not a time to think of personal safety. What matters now is the safety of your brothers and sisters in Israel."

I'm convinced. The very next morning, I hop on a subway train to Brooklyn and make my way to the big, windowless building of the *Jewish Press*, a popular Orthodox version of the *New York Daily News* which is published weekly before *Shabbat*. Assuming that it's some kind of religious institution, I put a *kippah* on my head, which I am never to take off again.

I ring the security bell and a voice asks what I want. I tell him I've come to volunteer.

"Volunteer for what?" he asks.

"Volunteer to help out in Israel," I answer.

"This is a newspaper, pal, not a recruitment office."

"I was told to come here to sign up."

"Wait a minute," he says.

A minute later, a buzzer rings, and I push the door open. The block-long building has three floors. The ground floor houses the printing presses, and I walk around asking the workers in a loud voice, over the roar of the press, where I can find the volunteer recruitment office, but no one knows

what I'm talking about. Nobody on the second floor knows what I'm talking about either. In short, it's a "*balagan*," a word I am to learn only later, but it's the word which best describes the next two years of my life. Finally, I wander into a big room filled with tables and insistently ringing telephones, but no one is around to answer them. So, I start to take the calls, which are all from people who want to volunteer in Israel during the war. "I can't give you any details right now," I tell everyone. "But if you leave your name and telephone number, someone will call you back as soon as possible."

For the next two hours, I sit and write down the name of a long list of callers. The whole time, the only person I see is a fellow with a *yarmulke* who peeks in the doorway and walks away without bothering to say hello. Late in the afternoon, Lt. Col. Indor and Rabbi Hazani show up and ask what I'm doing? I hold up the pages with the list I've made.

"I've been writing down the names and numbers of people who want to volunteer."

Indor takes the papers from me. "Very good," he says. "The news about the volunteer drive is getting around."

Another phone rings. Rabbi Hazani picks up the receiver. "*Shalom*," he says. He listens and, without saying anything further, hands the phone to me.

"*Mi zeh ha'adam hazeh?*" he asks Indor in Hebrew.

"*Ananee yodayah*," Indor replies.

After a month of studying Hebrew, I sort of understand what they've said, but in general, when Israelis talk fast, I don't comprehend a word. I heard lots of Hebrew during my visit to Israel, but if two Israelis are having a

lively conversation, to me it sounds like Chinese. After I write down the name of the latest caller, Indor starts to interrogate me as if I'm a captured terrorist. What's my name? Where do I live? What do I do? What am I doing in the office? Why do I want to go to Israel? Have I ever been there? Is there some Rabbi who knows me?

When I mention that I'm a Hollywood screenwriter, he looks very pleased. "That's good," he says, with a twinkle in his eyes, already composing a newspaper story in his mind about the Hollywood screenwriter who is volunteering to help Israel in its time of need.

Suddenly, as if he's remembered something important, Rabbi Hazani scurries into a small adjoining office. "*Hadashot! Hadashot!*" he calls out. Indor hurries after his buddy. The Rabbi and his buddy, the soldier, sort of remind me of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, or Batman and Robin, but at this point in our acquaintance I can't tell who is who. Later it turns out that



while Rabbi Hazan is a noted Torah scholar and teacher at the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva in Jerusalem, he is also a soldier; and that Lt. Col. Indor is not only the commander of an anti-terrorist division in the Gaza Strip, Torah verses flow from his tongue whenever he is called on to speak. The long-bearded Rabbi stands on a chair and switches on the wall TV to watch the evening news. The screen shows an Israeli jet fighter soaring over the skies of Beirut and firing a barrage of missiles which explode in towering clouds of smoke. To my surprise, the quiet and stern-faced Rabbi jumps excitedly up and down on the chair,

yelling out instructions for the pilot of the plane.

“Mah hu omer?” he asks.

Indor translates the newscaster’s report into Hebrew. When white flags are seen flying out of PLO headquarters, the Rabbi jumps down from the chair and begins to hug Indor, swirling him around in a circle. Indor grabs my hand and pulls me into the *hora*. Above us, the TV broadcaster relates that the United States is working feverishly to have a ceasefire declared before Israel’s belligerent Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon, can lead his troops into the besieged and defeated city to wipe out Yasser Arafat’s PLO organization for the liberation of Palestine.

“Terrorist organization!” Indor yells back, correcting the TV announcer.

The Rabbi continues to jump up and down in excitement, yelling at Indor to call someone immediately in Israel. “*Raful!*” he yells. “*Titkasher l’Raful!*”

“*Ech ani yachol l’hitkasher l’Raful?!*” Indor shouts back.

“*Titkasher!*” the Rabbi insists. “*Tagid Raful ligmore otam! L’Azazel im haAmericaim!*”

I’m amazed and excited as well. I’ve finally found my Rabbi.



*"Tagid lo!"* the impassioned Rabbi screams.

*"Ananee yocol!"* Indor yells back in an outburst of anger.

I figure out that Rabbi Hazani wants Indor to phone Raful Eitan, Commander-in-Chief of *Tzahal*, to tell him to finish the job. Obviously, in the middle of a battle, the commander-in-chief of an army is a difficult person to reach, but as I am to discover, nothing is impossible in the minds of Rabbi Yehuda Hazani's and Meir Indor.

Later I learn that at the start of the war, Indor raced to the front to meet with his former commander, Raful, and win his endorsement of the plan to bring volunteers from America to help out in the war effort, not because they were genuinely needed, but as an excuse to inspire American Jews to form a stronger connection to Israel. With Raful's OK, Indor was able to set up the recruitment drive, win a measure of financial support of the Jewish Agency, and convince El Al to offer cheap tickets and

to award priority space to the volunteers. Next, he dragged the gifted Hazani out of his yeshiva to travel with him to New York, in order to create the “*balagan*” needed to awaken the Jews of America and turn the “Volunteers for Israel” Emergency Recruitment Drive into headline news from Manhattan to L.A.

In addition to being a top Torah scholar at the Rabbi Kook, *Mercav HaRav Yeshiva*, Hazani is a media genius and one of the leading masterminds of the *Gush Emunim* settlement movement which is changing the map and spirit of Israel. Hazani is also the powerhouse behind the mass demonstrations on behalf of Israeli settlement in the “West Bank.” Indor is no small media wizard himself. Together, they are a dynamic and unpredictable team. As the very scholarly-looking Rabbi and stern Israeli army officer scream loudly at each other in the offices of the “*Jewish Press*,” they remind me of a comedy team, but there’s also something incredibly serious and electrifying in their reaction to the war report on TV.

“*Sheket!*” Indor calls out, fixing his gaze on the screen, where Israeli soldiers are running toward a waiting helicopter as they carry a wounded soldier on a stretcher.

“But the approaching Israeli victory has left many dead and wounded on the Israeli side,” the announcer reports. “Like this pilot whose plane was shot down over Beirut, and who later died on the operating table in the Rambam Hospital in Haifa.”

“Shit!” Indor says.

The Rabbi collapses into a chair and slumps forward, his forehead on the table, his arms at his sides, his body bent over and broken in mourning.

“The pilot. Do you know him?” I ask.

Indor doesn't answer, as if it's a totally meaningless question.

What difference does it make if they know him or not? He's a Jew. A hero. A holy hero who was killed while fighting for his country.

The news report ends. Rabbi Hazani stands up. There is a time to mourn and a time to cease from mourning.

“*Yalla,*” he says to Indor. “*Yesh avodah l'asot.*”

“We're going to make more publicity, and we have a meeting with El Al and the Jewish Agency in Manhattan,” Indor informs me.

“What should I do?” I ask.

“Keep answering the telephones and writing down the names. When we come back later this evening, we'll set up a team of volunteers to call people back. And we need to write up an interview form for applicants to fill out. In the meantime, find a typewriter and write an article about what you know so far. Write it from your point of view, as a writer from Hollywood who's signing up to volunteer in Israel. Maybe we can still get it into the newspaper before they close the press. I'll tell the editor that the story's on the way.”

Suddenly, he straightens and stops speaking, as if a green light in his brain has switched to red. “I haven't put on tefillin today!” he recalls.

Looking this way and that, he hurries around, searching through the different offices on the floor, unable to remember where he left his tefillin. “Where did we daven *shachrit* yesterday?” he asks Rabbi Hazani.

“At the Young Israel in Forest Hills. Maybe you forgot them there.”

“Let's go,” he commands.

“Hey! Wait a minute!” I feel like yelling, as they hurry out of the room, leaving me all alone once again with the ringing telephones. I stay there another eight hours, taking a break to get something to eat. Finding a spare typewriter, I write up a story, mostly describing my emotions as a volunteer for Israel, including the few pieces of information I know. The managing editor of the paper, Yehuda Schwartz, shows up and asks me if it’s ready, because he’s saving room on the front page for the story which Indor told him I was writing, and the printing deadline is nearing.



[With “Jewish Press” managing editor, Yehuda Schwartz, at a volunteer sign-up meeting.]

Rabbi Hazani and Indor show up again at nine o’clock. They’re still full of energy, as if jet lag doesn’t affect them at all. They’re like soldiers who don’t rest until the campaign is over. As for me, I’m exhausted after answering over two-hundred phone calls.

“Have you eaten?” Indor asks. “Pizza is on the way.”

Harry, a young American guy wearing a *kippah*, arrives carrying four boxes of family-size pizza from a *kosher* pizza parlor called “Flatbush Falafel and Pizza.” Within a half hour, more Israelis show up, members of the volunteer recruitment-drive delegation which Indor has brought with him

to spearhead the campaign. There's Chanan, a handsome, long-haired major in the army reserves, who doesn't wear a *kippah*; Shmuel, a more middle-aged man, also secular, who Indor introduces as the former mayor of Kiryat Malachi; Reuven, the head of religious *moshav* in the Jordan Valley; Elimelech, a commander in the army reserves who's always smiling; and Baruch, a good-looking, young American *oleh* with a *kippah*, short-orange beard, and eye-patch he has to wear temporarily until the wound he suffered in the first days of the Lebanon invasion has a chance to heal.

Rabbi Hazani takes a slice of pizza and withdraws into the TV room, where he opens a *Gemara* and begins to study, as if he's all alone in a cave in the mystical mountains of the Galilee, a picture of concentration and holiness. Harry leaves and returns a few minutes later carry two mattresses on which Indor and the Rabbi are planning to sleep. The first few days in New York, they were guests at the home of Baruch's parents who live in Forest Hills, but Indor prefers to sleep at the "*Jewish Press*," now that the founder and chief-editor of the newspaper, Rabbi Shalom Klass, has made it their field headquarters.

"Wow!" Harry says to me as he gazes at Rabbi Hazani studying in the side office. "What an honor to be here with a Torah scholar like Rabbi Yehuda Hazani. He is *Rav* Tzvi Yehuda Kook's right-hand man, and the man who started the flag-waving parade to the *Kotel* on Jerusalem Day."

Harry has a way of speaking in phrases that sound like dramatic TV news headlines, enunciating each word for added emphasis, like the sportscaster, Howard Cosell.

Indor looks over the list I've made. He takes out a small notebook and starts making phone calls to Israel, speaking excitedly in a loud Hebrew that sounds like the bursts of a machine gun.

“Meir,” Baruch reminds him, “It’s four in the morning in Israel. You can’t call up the director of El Al Airlines at four in the morning and expect him to do what you ask.”

“We’re at war!” Indor shoots back. “Our soldiers in Lebanon don’t have the luxury of sleeping – why should he sleep in his comfortable bed in Tel Aviv?!”

Indor continues screaming into the phone. After one call, he makes another call to Israel, then another, waking up the whole population.

Harry laughs and explains what the fireworks are about. The local director of El Al in New York has refused to set aside cheap seats for the thousands of volunteers that Indor hopes to send to Israel. While the Jewish Agency has indicated that it will put up the difference between a regular, full-priced ticket and the low subsidized airfare that Indor wants, El Al in New York won’t reserve hundreds of seats without an agreement in writing. For Indor, the key to the project’s success is the cheap \$500 airfare, in order to attract as many volunteers as possible. Idealism is wonderful, but what Jew doesn’t value a good bargain? After waking up the El Al chief in Tel Aviv, demanding that he give his personal OK to his people in New York to grant the volunteers special charter rates and bookings in advance, Indor wakes up the Jewish Agency Aliyah Department chief, Raphael Kotlovitz, in Jerusalem, demanding that he get a letter over to El Al, first thing in the morning, guaranteeing to subsidize the tickets. As soon as he hangs up the phone, he calls the Jewish Agency director in New York, Aryeh Dolzin, and tells him that Kotlovitz has given his OK. Then as everyone finishes the pizza, and Rabbi Hazani continues to learn peacefully in a side office, Indor makes another two calls to Israel, as if he’s the commander-in-chief of the war, waking up Knesset members, Rabbi Chaim Druckman and Chanan Porat, not letting them go back to bed until they agree to speak with

Kotlevitz themselves in the morning, to make sure the guarantee letter gets sent.

Indor stands, claps his hands together, jumps up and down to ward off his tiredness and jet lag, as if it's forbidden to rest, sings out a few verses of a prayer, like a cantor at *shul*, then sits back down at the table and makes two more phone calls, speaking in a serious, no-nonsense voice to the head of the Jewish Agency's Israel Aliyah Department in New York, Moshe Shechter, whom he calls a "*Betarnik*," and then to Israel's Consulate General in the city, Naftali Lau, a survivor of the Holocaust like Indor's father. It seems to me that an ever-fresh memory of Auschwitz must be the key to Indor's incredible passion and drive to help the Jewish People. It's obvious from my initial encounters with him that he's on a totally different wavelength than normal human beings. For him, personal life has no meaning. The only thing that matters is helping *Am Yisrael*. At first, his towering Zionism seems to be overly myopic in its focus on the Jewish People. In this worldview, everything else is subordinate to the greater goal of serving the Jews. Thus, he has no qualms of conscience whatsoever in waking up twenty people in the middle of the night if it will help bring more Jewish immigrants to Israel. Only much later, after deep, one-on-one conversations with Rabbi Hazani do I learn that in the Creator's "Great Plan for the World," mankind will only attain peace and maximum blessing when the Jewish People as a whole are once again dwelling as a sovereign Israelite Nation in all the Land of Israel, as the Prophet declares:

*"And it shall come to pass at the end of days that the mountain of the House of the L-rd shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above all the hills, and all of the nations shall stream unto it. And many people shall go and say, 'Come and let us go up to the mountain of the L-rd, to the House of the G-d of Jacob, and He will teach us*

*his ways and we will walk in His paths,' for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem. And He shall judge the nations, and shall make decrees amongst many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore," (Isaiah, 2:2-4.)*

Next, Indor turns to me and asks my help in writing a flyer to publicize the volunteer drive and the cheap, subsidized flights.



"Meir," Elimelech warns him, "You can print 50,000 flyers and spread them all over New York, promising cheap airfares when you don't know if you'll be able to pull it off."

"If we distribute the flyers, and everyone starts talking about us, then the Jewish Agency will have to subsidize the cost," Indor reasons.

That's Indor's style. Like Arik Sharon, he charges forward, without hesitation, full speed ahead toward the goal, and lets other people worry about cleaning up the mess he leaves behind.

"Meir, you can't do that," Baruch insists. "This is America!"

Harry laughs. "You don't know Meir, yet," he tells Baruch. Harry has worked with Meir before, on the Israeli's first trip to America to establish the "Hebron Fund," to help further the Jewish settlement of Hebron. Harry will also work with him in the future, when I am no longer in New York, on another ingenious project called "*Shomer Yisrael*," which Indor establishes to bring yeshiva high-school kids from America to Israel to do a week of

army training and then two weeks of guard duty on settlements, in another effort to inspire young American Jews to plant their roots in the Jewish Homeland.

Suddenly, like a magician, there's a small wooden flute in Indor's hands and he starts playing some happy tunes. A minute ago, he was screaming at half-asleep people in Israel, Knesset members and Jewish Agency heads, and now he's prancing around the room like a Pied Piper who is going to lead all of the Jews in America back home to Israel.

Just as suddenly, I hear the blast of a ram's horn. Rabbi Hazani stands in the doorway of the small, side office, holding a *shofar* he's found. He blasts away, skillfully sounding the barrage of notes used to vanquish the Satan on *Rosh HaShanah*. The echoes of his "*techiyot*," "*teruyot*," and "*shavarim*" reverberate through the building, like a trumpeter leading an army to war.

Are these two Israel lunatics or geniuses, I wonder?

When their concert is finished, and the wording of the flyer ready, Indor calls Rabbi Hazani to have a look. The Rabbi wants something more creative to express the idea visually - the picture of a kid thinking about what he's going to do in the summer. Indor likes the concept, but until the graphics can be put together, he wants to print a simple flyer immediately. Even though the newspaper building is closed for the night, and there's no one around to do the graphic work and printing, Indor insists that the flyer be printed **NOW**, so that the delegation can spread it before *Shabbat*. So he calls the managing editor of the newspaper. After five minutes of Indor's badgering, Schwartz agrees to ask Rabbi Klass for his OK. Sure enough, eager to help the State of Israel in a time of need, the saintly Rabbi Klass sends over an employee to run one of the smaller printing machines.



Rabbi Shalom Klass

Indor tells the scholarly newspaper chief that Hazani will do the graphics. Later, I learn that among his many talents, Rabbi Hazani is a skilled graphic artist, the creator of all the posters of “*Gush Emunim*,” from the original idea, to setting up the plates by himself if need be, even mixing the flour and baking soda to make the glue and then paste up posters with a bucket and a brush, in the middle of the night, all over the streets of Jerusalem.

When the printer arrives, Rabbi Hazani goes off with him to the printing room downstairs. Then, after handing out instructions to his troops, who disperse for the night, Indor sits with me until we produce the questionnaire and application form which will be used to register volunteers. Then he has me write an article about the delegation and about how he came to start the campaign. It’s obvious he knows his way around a written page, and it turns out that he did some journalism before his career in the army. My pride as a novelist and screenwriter is a little pricked, taking orders from this Israeli, but I put my ego aside, instinctively feeling that these guys know the business of running war campaigns better than I do. Happy to help out, I humbly accept my role as an apprentice, using my talents for Israel, which is exactly what I have been praying for every day for the last half year, ever since the miracle which changed my life.

As I mentioned, Indor is the son of Holocaust survivors. His father lived through the horrors of Auschwitz, which, as I mentioned, is probably one of the primary factors behind Indor's all-consuming drive to help the Jewish State. Active in the Gush Emunim Movement to build more and more settlements throughout the country, he is convinced that the Jews of the Diaspora must abandon their comfortable lives in foreign Gentile lands and come home to Israel to play their share in the rebuilding of Zion, just as religious Jews constantly repeat in their daily prayers: "Gather our exiles to Your holy courts to observe Your laws, and to do Your will with a perfect heart," and in their Festival *Musaf* supplications: "Unite our scattered people from among the nations; gather our dispersed from the four corners of the earth."

Indor's fervor makes a great impression on me. His idealism, coupled with the fact that he is the first Israeli soldier I met, distinguishes him from all the Jews I know in America. He was one of the first commanders of an IDF anti-terrorist unit in Gaza, where he was wounded, and fought in the Six-Day War, the "War of Attrition," the Yom Kippur War, and the Litani Campaign, where he was wounded again. Rabbi Hazani also has a rank of reserve commander in the army, and, in years to come, he is to be my commander, or "*mifaked*," when he has me transferred me to a special, army-reserve, rescue division which he establishes in Jerusalem, like the IDF's elite rescue unit which flies all over the globe to help countries which have been devastated by earthquakes and other disasters.



From the two of them I learn that, when it comes to the obligatory Torah commandment of defending Jews from enemies, then a rifle becomes as holy as a pair of *tefillin* - if not even holier!

I can understand how an army man like Indor would get involved in a volunteer project like this to bring Jews to Israel – the more Jews in a country, the stronger it is. But I can't figure out how a Torah scholar like Rabbi Hazani would be willing to leave his yeshiva and family of seven children to run around New York distributing flyers to bring Jews to Israel. During a *Shabbat* at Harry's home, in a rare moment of rest when Rabbi Hazani isn't running with Indor from *shul* to *shul* to publicize the volunteer campaign, I have an opportunity to ask him. Since, Rabbi Hazani doesn't speak English, at least not on this first trip to America, Harry does his best to translate his answers.

"The Rabbi says that the Torah was given to the Nation of Israel, not to individual Jews," Harry explains. "The *Shechinah* only appears in its wholeness in the life of the Israeli Nation in *Eretz Yisrael*, which is the reason why *Hashem* tells Moshe and Joshua, over and over again, to bring

the Children of Israel to the Land of Israel, rather than keeping the Torah in the wilderness outside of the Land like the Spies wanted to do.”

“He doesn’t know what the *Shechinah* is,” Indor reminds him. “He’s a screenwriter from Hollywood, not a yeshiva *bocher*.”

“I think the Rabbi means that the Presence of G-d, the light of G-d, meaning His Divine blessing, only comes down to the world through *Am Yisrael*, the Nation of Israel in *Eretz Yisrael*,” Harry clarifies.

Rabbi Hazani nods his head in approval, and I nod mine, concentrating on his every word, as if I’m hearing them from the heights of Mount Sinai.

The Rabbi continues, stopping every few sentences for Harry to translate.

“In *galut*, the Israeli Nation is shattered, scattered like the bones of a body tossed away in all directions, until the bones turn into dust and the body rots.”

“*Galut* means the exile,” Harry explains. “Like right here in good old America the beautiful, land that I love,” he adds with a smile.

“In the Diaspora, instead of being a proud, holy, and powerful independent Jewish Nation, like in the time of King Solomon, we become persecuted minorities in foreign lands. Without the vessel of *Am Yisrael* in *Eretz Yisrael* to contain the powerful light, the *Shechinah*, G-d’s Presence, departs from the world. In order for it to return, and for the holy Kingdom of G-d to be established in the world, the Jewish People have to return to the Land of Israel and rebuild their national life. This is called the ingathering of the exiles, the stage of Redemption that we are experiencing now with the rebirth of the State of Israel and the great return of the Jews from all over the globe. The more Jews live in Israel,

and the more the Nation is rebuilt, the *Shechinah* returns to the world, as it says, 'For from Zion will go forth the Torah, and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem.' We have to bring this about by our efforts, by bringing all the Jews back to Israel, and by building a strong national vessel that will be able to house the great light as the *Shechinah* returns in its wholeness. Judaism is more than putting on *tefillin*, enjoying *Shabbos*, and keeping *kosher*. It means establishing a Jewish kingship, a Jewish army, Jewish courts, an agricultural system according to the laws of the Torah, and a spiritual center around the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, all of which can only be done in the Land of Israel. That's why the Torah commands us to live in *Eretz Yisrael* and not in New York."

I can't say that I understand everything Rabbi Hazani said, but I got the gist of it. This was certainly a bigger picture of Judaism than I had encountered till now. I always felt that Judaism had to be something more than eating gefilta fish and lighting candles on *Shabbat*. But I still have a question about the Ultra-Orthodox. "There are religious Jews who maintain that the State of Israel is *traf*," I observe, hoping he will clarify this point of contention.

Harry starts to translate my question, but the Rabbi holds up a hand, indicating that he understands.

"The Talmud teaches that the process of Redemption unfolds gradually, slowly, slowly, a little at a time, in stages, like the dawning of a day. It's the same in the life of a man. First, a child is born, then his body must be strengthened and developed before his intellect forms, and before his spiritual understanding comes into being. Only at the age of thirteen, at his *bar mitzvah*, does he undertake to fulfill the commandments of the Torah. Like with the Ark of the Covenant, first the vessel is built and then the Torah is placed inside. Now we are in the stage of building the vessel,

the physical side of the Nation in Israel. As *Medinat Yisrael* continues to grow, our unique holy nature will begin to appear, more and more. Already today, new Torah centers and religious communities are being built in Israel wherever you look.”

“Why don’t the *Haredim* see things in this light?” I ask.

Rabbi Hazani laughs and speaks to Indor in Hebrew. “He wants to learn all of the Torah while standing on one leg.” Then he speaks to me and Harry translates.

“The Rabbi says you should first learn the book, ‘*Orot*,’ and then he’ll answer your questions.”

“How can he learn the writings of Rabbi Kook when he can’t even understand a sentence of Hebrew?” Indor asks.

“When he comes to Israel, I’ll find him a *hevruta*,” Hazani answers. “A Torah scholar with whom he can study. Someone who speaks English.”

(True to his word, when I make *Aliyah*, Rabbi Hazani asks Rabbi David Samson to teach me the writings of Rabbi Kook, and we write four commentaries on Rabbi Kook’s writings in a clear and easy-reading format.)

Back to our story. After my first very long day at the “Volunteers for Israel” *Jewish Press* headquarters in Brooklyn, at two in the morning, on the long subway ride back to my apartment in Manhattan, I sense that my life will no longer be the same. The next morning, I’m back on the subway, and back to answering the constantly ringing telephones, telling people to come for an interview at our Brooklyn office. On Indor’s instructions, I tell volunteers from outside of New York that they need to send a Rabbi’s

recommendation along with their application forms which I send out by mail – so we can verify that candidates are Jewish and emotionally stable.

Yehuda Schwartz, the newspaper's managing editor stops by and asks who I am.

"Just a volunteer answering the telephones," I tell him.

"If you're going to have volunteers coming here to sign up, I don't want a *balagan*," he says. "I'm with you guys 100%, and so is Rabbi Klass, the publisher of the newspaper, but we don't want to do anything that may get the State Department in Washington upset, as if we're sending Americans to fight in the Israeli army."

What business is this of the United States government, I wonder, not knowing anything about Israel's complicated relationship with the U.S.

The applications get printed and the flyers go out to synagogues and Jewish organizations in all the five boroughs of New York, Long Island, and Jewish communities in New Jersey. Come Friday morning, I find myself squeezed between the red-bearded Baruch and the long-haired, Major Chanan Sorek, in the back seat of Harry's old and rattling Oldsmobile, heading up to the Catskill Mountains where a big, Jewish singles *Shabbat* is being held at the *glatt kosher* Homawack Hotel. Meir Indor and Rabbi Hazani sit in the front seat, with Harry doing the driving. I've noticed that every day, Indor fluctuates between being happy and angry, alternating moods like ocean tides. Now, he's in his angry phase, furious with the Jewish Agency for releasing a press report claiming that they created the volunteer program.

"What *chutzpah!*" Indor says, holding a New York Jewish newspaper in his hands. It's a widely-read, secular newspaper appealing to New York's liberal Jewish population.

“What do you care?” Harry says. “The newspaper is read by a couple hundred-thousand Jews in the New York area alone. With that headline article, the volunteer drive is on the map.”

“You tell him, Yehuda,” Indor says to Hazani, but the Rabbi is silent. He doesn’t like to say bad things or criticize, as Rabbi Kook teaches: “The pure and saintly of heart don’t complain about evil, but rather increase righteousness; they don’t complain about heresy, but rather increase belief; they don’t complain about small-mindedness, but rather increase wisdom.”

“I will teach all of you a great rule of success, which HaRav Hazani can confirm,” Indor says in English on my behalf. “While a leader has to always go forward in the led, he has to keep an eye out to the rear to see who is going to give him a kick in the butt and try to take his place. Right now, there are people in *Tzahal*, in the government, in the Jewish Agency, and in El Al who are semi-supporting our efforts, because they see we are going forward whether they approve of the program or not. But when we succeed, they will all try to take the credit for themselves and run things the way **they want**, not necessarily for the good of the cause. In their eyes, Rabbi Hazani and I are a couple of *Gush Emunim* fanatics. They don’t want a couple of religious idealists in charge of the campaign. For all of its multi-millions, the existing programs of the Jewish Agency hardly draw young people to Israel. Take my word for it, when a handful of religious activists from the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva* start a new program that sends thousands of Jews to Israel, there are a lot of people who will do everything they can to get rid of us. Isn’t that right, Yehuda?”

The Rabbi still doesn’t answer.

“He doesn’t want to say anything negative,” Indor explains. “But both of our rumps are black and blue from all the *batot* (kicks) we’ve received in thanks for successful projects we started.”

From my unpleasant experience with the producer of the film, “Law and Disorder,” who didn’t want me around the set while the movie was being produced, I can identify with what Indor is saying, even though I don’t understand why factions in Israel would compete over a project that’s good for the country. I keep my mouth shut, reminding myself that G-d has miraculously transported me into this car, just like the Hertz Rent-a-Car ad of a customer flying into a Hertz rental. I realize that with all of my worldly knowledge, I am like a baffled, awestruck hitchhiker in a country he doesn’t know.



“Hey, Fishman,” Harry says. “How about telling us some stories from Hollywood? What do you say, *Rav* Yehuda? Do you want to hear some stories from Hollywood?”

Once again, the somber Rabbi doesn’t answer. Later, I discover that the bearded

Torah scholar is generally a powerhouse a joyous *simcha* and faith. Indor explains his silence.

“His son is getting his *bar-mitzvah* soon, and *HaRav* Yehuda is upset that he isn’t at home to teach him his Torah portion. He’s angry that I *shlepped* him here to New York.”

Today, the Homawack Hotel doesn’t exist, but then it was a classy, *kosher* resort in the mountains for Orthodox Jews, boasting a golf course, tennis

courts, swimming pool, bowling, and buffet tables laden with every Jewish taste treat under the sun. Rabbi Hazani insists that it isn't enough to post our flyer on the hotel-lobby bulletin board. He sends each of us to a different floor and wing of the hotel with orders to slide a flyer under every hotel-room door. Saying "*Shabbat shalom*" to the good-looking American-turned-Israeli, Baruch, and to the charismatic, Israeli army-major, Chanan, we drive on to Grossinger's Hotel, an even larger *Shangrila* for Jews, *frum* and non-*frum* alike. Once again, Hazani insists we slide a flyer into every room. How amazing it is to see this long-bearded Rabbi from the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva* in Jerusalem scurrying along the carpeted Grossinger's corridors to bend over and slide flyers under the doors of the rooms. He does it without any thought at all for his ego, or feelings of self-importance. I learn from this what it truly means to, "*set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*" This is no menial task. By sliding the emergency, Israel volunteer-campaign flyers under the doors of hotel rooms, we are helping to return the *Shechinah* to Zion!

On the drive back down the highway toward Monsey, one of the rear tires of the dilapidated Oldsmobile booms like a bazooka blast, and Harry has to pull the wobbling car to the side of the road. *Shabbat* is only an hour away, and Harry estimates that we have at least another half-hour drive ahead of us before reaching Monsey, where we are scheduled to spend the holy day, when driving is forbidden. As Harry opens the trunk, Rabbi Hazani takes over, pushing him out of the way. He easily lifts the jack and spare tire out from the car, and quickly sets to work changing the tire with the dexterity and speed of a pit-stop worker at the Indianapolis 500 Speedway.

"Let me do it!" Harry insists, but Hazani motions him away, as if there's no time to argue. Holding up the jack, he immediately understands how it works. I'd have to figure the thing out for five minutes before getting

started, but as Indor plays a lively, accompanying tune on his flute, the Rabbi changes the tire in a jiffy, enjoying the work as much as he enjoys learning a difficult page of *Gemara*. In a way, he reminds me of my grandfather, Benjamin, who was also a strongman and jack of all trades, and maybe that's one of the reasons I feel such a powerful attraction to him.

"I hope this big piece of *"rema"* makes it," I remark, as Harry drives toward Monsey as fast as the car can travel.

The Rabbi and Indor both laugh. *Rema* means worm."

"That's a good one!" Indor says. "That's exactly what this car is! How come you know the word *rema*?"

I couldn't remember. King David refers to himself as "*a worm and not a man*," but he uses the Hebrew word, "*tolaat*," not "*rema*." After that, both Hazani and Indor call the car "*rema*" as well."

A little after candle lighting, we reach the house where we will be spending *Shabbat* – what turns out to be early for the impulsive and unpredictable, Indor, who is notoriously late to everything, not because he is disorganized and easily distracted (which is also true), but because at any moment he can unexpectedly drop everything and get totally wrapped up in some other *mitzvah*, like suddenly rushing off to the funeral of some simple Jew he doesn't know, even though there's already a *minyán*.

Our host takes us to Rabbi Wein's *shul* for the Friday Night service, and the Rabbi invites Indor to address the congregation. Though Indor's English is only passable, when he speaks, his idealism and emotion capture everyone's attention. He prefaces his call for volunteers by recapping the

Torah's account of the cattle-rich tribes of Reuven, Gad, and half the tribe of Menashe. They wanted to claim their inheritance in the Land of Israel on the eastern side of the Jordan River, which was suitable for grazing their cattle, rather than joining the rest of the Nation in conquering the principle area of settlement on the western bank of the Jordan, which was filled with fierce enemies. Hearing their request, Moshe rebukes them: "*Shall your brethren go to war, and you sit here?!*" Indor's inference is clear to everyone. Should the comfortable Jews of Monsey sit peacefully in their lovely ghetto while the Jews in the Land of Israel are at war? No! They, like the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe, should rise up and volunteer to lead the way! After the *davening*, Indor is mobbed with people who want to meet him and sign up for the project, all of whom he sends over to me. "Kenny Fishman, a screenwriter from Hollywood, will be running our volunteer office in New York," he announces.

That's news to me. I'm planning on being on the first volunteer flight to Israel, not staying in New York. In the meantime, Rabbi Hazani keeps to the background, observing the scene with his keen, Talmudic eyes. This is his first trip to America, and, like a soldier, he's on a reconnaissance mission, collecting information and learning about the terrain. The next time he comes back, he will be like a division of tanks, full speed ahead, making the hyperactive Indor look like he's standing still. His goal isn't just to bring volunteers to Israel to help out during the war – he wants to bring all of the Jews in America on *Aliyah*. He can't understand how any Jew would prefer to remain in America when he can simply hop on an airplane and be in Jerusalem the very same day. After all, that's what the Jewish People have prayed for, day after day, for almost two-thousand years. Especially the religious Jews. Hazani can't understand the Orthodox Jews in America at all. In his eyes, they're like a different species, Jews who select the commandments they're comfortable with, but who ignore the

main thrust of the Torah, which is building a holy ISRAELI TORAH NATION in G-d's Holy Land, which is something you can't do in Monsey or Boro Park, so he uses this first visit to America to study this mutant variation, to listen, and to figure out what makes them tick.

*Shabbat* morning is a replay of the previous night. This time, Indor gives his rousing speech at the *shul* of Rabbi Moshe Tendler. After the service, while the congregation enjoys a very sumptuous and lively *Kiddush*, I watch as Rabbi Hazani and Rabbi Tendler, two Talmudic geniuses, lock antlers like two battling mountain rams, arguing a *halachic* question dealing with the opinion of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of America's foremost Torah authorities, and Rabbi Tendler's father-in-law, that making *Aliyah* is not a Torah obligation at the present time for Jews who were born outside of the Land of Israel. When I finally make *Aliyah* myself, and spend *Shabbat* after *Shabbat* at the home of Rabbi Hazani, I notice that not only are all the covers of his twenty-volume set of *Gemara* faded and chaffed with use, his volumes of "*Igrot Moshe*," the *halachic* decisions of Rabbi Feinstein, are also worn thin from study, but Rabbi Feinstein's opinion Diaspora Jews are not obligated move to Israel is something that Rabbi Hazani cannot fathom at all, with all of his respect for Rabbi Feinstein's greatness in Torah. As far as I am concerned – never having studied a page of *Gemara* – there isn't any question at all. Of course, a Jew is supposed to live in Israel. That's what is says over and over and over again in the Torah. And when I visited Israel, that conviction became even stronger. Just like fish belong in water, Jews belongs in the Land that the Almighty bequeathed to them.

When *Mincha* approaches, Rabbi Hazani wants to walk over to the neighboring town of Spring Valley to see the big *Satmar* community of

Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Indor, who is scheduled to speak at another *shul* in Monsey, insists that Hazani is wasting his time, but when Hazani decides to do something, there's no persuading him otherwise. Harry leads the way into what seems to me a total fantasy world, as if we've entered the old TV show, "Twilight Zone" or some imaginary world created by Jules Verne or Tolkien. It's a huge neighborhood of Ultra-Orthodox Jews, dressed in their *Shabbos* finest, with long black frocks, dangling *peyes*, and giant fur "*Spodiks*" on their heads. In a way, the community reminds me of the Indian Villages, Frontier Towns, and Cowboy Ranches for tourists, on the way up to Lake George in upstate New York, where my grandfather would take my brother and me on summer vacations.

"Why are they here when they could be in Mea Shaarim or Bnei Brak?" Rabbi Hazani asks out loud, observing the incredible sight.

"Don't get into any arguments," Harry advises. "They hate Zionists."

But Hazani can't help himself. After a thunderous, and impressive *Mincha* with a few thousand Jews, Hazani approaches a pair who haven't joined the crowd at *Seudah Shlishi* with the *Rebbe*. Once again, Harry does his best to translate the argument. While Rabbi Hazani is dressed in the simple, Shabbat style of a *Mizrachnik* from Israel – tieless white shirt, jacket, and white knitted kippah, it is obvious that he knows a lot more *Gemara* than the elaborately-dressed *Hasidim*. His enthusiasm toward *Eretz Yisrael* doesn't seem to convince them. Harry explains that their *Rebbe*, or the father of their *Rebbe*, stated that because of something called the "Three Oaths," the Jews of the Diaspora are not allowed to abandon the exile and return to the Land of Israel en masse, in defiance of the Gentile nations. Rabbi Hazani insists that condition was annulled when the United Nations voted in favor of establishing the State of Israel. Once again, not being familiar with the *halachic* sources, I instinctively agree

with Rabbi Hazani. But I wonder, if one Rabbi says one thing, and another Rabbi says something else, who are you supposed to follow? Here I am, still at the beginning of my quest, looking for a Rabbi, or some kind of spiritual guide, who will steer me in the true path of Torah, and I discover that big Rabbis don't always agree, to the point of having totally opposing opinions. How do you know who's right and who's wrong? Like I've mentioned on several occasions, not having learned Torah in its great breadth and depth, I decide to trust my gut feelings, and it seems to me that Israelis like Hazani and Indor are a lot closer to Joshua and King David than these Polish-looking *Hasidim* who have built their own private *shteitl* in America, which, to the best of my limited knowledge, is not mentioned even once in the Torah.

"They're the Twentieth Century *Meraglim*," Harry observes.

The *Meraglim* were the Spies in the Wilderness who Moses sent to check out the Land of Israel after *Hashem* had delivered the Jews from bondage in Egypt. They returned with a negative report of the Land which discouraged the Jews from journeying on to the Promised Land. Instead of enlisting in the army and setting off to war to conquer the Holy Land, they wanted to remain in the wilderness, where they were miraculously protected by the Clouds of Glory, and miraculously fed by the *manna*, so they could study Torah without having to worry about all the down-to-earth chores involved in building a nation. In His anger over their rejection of the Cherished Land, *Hashem* called them rebels and non-believers, and wiped out the entire male generation, teaching, once and forever, that He wants His People to live in the Land of Israel and not in Spring Valley or Monsey, New York.

Come *Motzei Shabbat*, we're back in Rabbi Tendler's synagogue to sign up a big crowd of volunteers. However he feels about his father-in-law's

halachic opinion about the obligation to make Aliyah, Rabbi Tendler is here to help in any way he can. There's a tangible excitement in the hall, like the excitement before a big rock concert or heavyweight championship fight. The Jews who crowd around me to sign up for the first flight to Israel may view themselves as Americans, but there is no question about their love for the Jewish Homeland. They haven't turned out just because of the cheap, subsidized ticket - they've come to help out their brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. And here I am, a screenwriter from Hollywood, in the center of everything. Everyone asks me questions for which I have no answers:

"Where will we be staying?"

"Will there be sightseeing trips around the country?"

"Is the food kosher?"

"What's the *hechsher*?"

"Is health insurance provided?"

"What if I want to stay longer? Can the ticket be extended with no additional fare?"

"Can I go if I'm over ninety?" an old man asks, standing stiff at attention, as if he's ready to enlist in the Paratroopers.

I look around for Indor and Hazani, but they are nowhere to be seen. By this time, I realize that they don't have the answers themselves. They came to America to get Jews on airplanes, but no one bothered to figure out what the volunteers would do once they arrived. So I start making up answers. Most questions I manage to deflect by saying that an information sheet will be sent to everyone who signs up for the program. People take out checkbooks, ready to write out their checks, but I don't know who

they should write them out to, so I tell them to write their checks for \$500 to the synagogue, figuring it won't be a problem to have the *shul* transfer the money to El Al or wherever else it has to go. My main concern is to try to hide my total ignorance and give people the feeling that everything is under control. The application forms we printed turn out to be a lifesaver, giving volunteers the feeling that responsible people are behind the program, and that a representative of the project will call them to answer their questions.

Forty people sign up that evening. It turns out that Indor and Hazani have overtaken the *shul office*, setting up a temporary emergency headquarters, where they make non-stop phone calls to Israel to get things prepared for the waves of volunteers who will be coming. It's after midnight when we arrive back in Manhattan, so I invite them to sleep in my small studio apartment. Harry drives home to Forest Hills for the night. Indor is pleased to find a *mezuzah* on my door, a *mitzvah* that I attended to just a few months before. Seeing the poster of the *Kotel* on my wall and some Jewish books on a shelf, Rabbi Hazani nods and immediately enlists my telephone in the cause, speaking to Israel, even though it's just daybreak there.

"What's that?" Rabbi Hazani asks, looking at a metal bar stretching across my closet doorway.

"A bar to hang upside down," I tell him, bending to pick up my pair of "gravity boots." The boots have a metal hook attached to them. I put them on, snap the lock shut, grab the bar, raise my legs up to my head, catch the hooks over the bar, and hang upside down like an opossum with my head swaying above the carpeted floor.

"It stretches the vertebrae, releasing the trapped energy," I explain. "It also sends a fresh supply of blood to the brain and harmonizes metabolic

equilibrium, which gets bent out of shape during the course of the day. Hanging two minutes upside down releases all of a person's tensions and pressures."

When I start to feel dizzy, I raise myself up, grab the bar, and swing back to an upright position.

"Let me try," Hazani says.

While Indor screams away on the telephone, I take off the boots and hand them to the Rabbi. Following my example, he lifts his legs up, latches the hooks of the boots onto the bar, and hangs upside down, with his beard reaching down to the floor. Happily, he calls out something to Indor, who looks over and has a big chuckle.

"*Zeh tov*," the Rabbi says.

I don't remember if my tiny kitchen was *kosher* at the time. I don't think that it was. Living alone, I didn't eat very much at home, and got by with cereal for breakfast and sandwiches. For *Shabbat*, I would buy pre-cooked *kosher* food and heat it up on a hot plate called a "*blecht*." At some point, I bought a toaster-oven to heat up take-home *kosher* meals, and later I had a *Chabad* Rabbi come to my apartment and *kasher* the stove, but being a steadfast bachelor, I'm not sure that I ever used it. Plus, I was still far away from adhering to the detailed laws of *kashrut*, something which only gradually developed. So when Indor and Hazani realize they are hungry, and that they haven't yet eaten a "*Malave Malcha*," I have nothing to offer them except some Celestial Seasonings herbal tea and a bag of pretzels that doesn't have an OU *kosher* certificate. Indor says he wants to check out a *kosher* dairy restaurant which Harry had told him about, located near Broadway and 72<sup>nd</sup> Street. Remembering to take a bagful of flyers with him, so he can hand them out to anyone who looks like a Jew,

we walk from Lexington to Seventh Avenue and take the subway uptown. The coffee shop is still open. Sitting at the counter is an overweight New York Jew, about sixty-five years old, with a thick New York accent, a lonely, sad sack, melancholy and cynical, a bachelor type, who never married and has nowhere else to go to kill a few hours – the type you can find in just about every coffee shop in New York City past midnight on Saturday night. His name is Menachem. When he hears Indor and Hazani speaking Hebrew, he glances up from the copy of the “*Jewish Press*” on the counter in front of him, and happily greets the Israelis in Hebrew, which he learned when he was in Israel twenty years before. When he discovers that these are the guys he’s reading about in the newspaper, in the article I had written, his face lights up in joy, and he gets all excited as if Zev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin have just walked into the restaurant. I mention this meeting with Menachem, of blessed memory, because he became one of the New Yorkers who helped me run the volunteer office for the next two years. He calls over the restaurant’s owner and tells him who we are, and before we know it, we’re treated to a royal feast, on the house. From that night on, every day at the volunteer office, a delivery arrives from the dairy restaurant with four free meals for the staff.

Come morning, my Israeli guests walk over with me to the local synagogue, where I regularly participate in the lackluster *shacharit* prayer. With my two reinforcements, the eighty-year-old *gabi* doesn’t have to go looking for someone to complete the *minyan*. After *davening*, Indor corners the Rabbi and puts him through a tough interrogation, wanting to know all about me, as if I’m on the most-wanted list of the *Mossad*. After the Rabbi gives me his clearance, Hazani and Indor head off to meetings at the Jewish Agency and El Al, and I’m back on the subway to Brooklyn to answer the ringing telephones at the *Jewish Press*.

Once again, I'm all alone. Harry is in college. Baruch and the other Israelis are all running around, drumming up publicity for the emergency campaign. In between phone calls, I glance over a copy of the newspaper which is packed with ads for Jewish wines, kosher chickens, kosher vacations, kosher hats, kosher funeral homes, concerts featuring famous cantors, and dozens of other advertisements catering to America's large Orthodox community. The front page has some hard-hitting exposes, in the style of journalistic sensationalism, and, in between the ads, are articles about the Orthodox world, some news from Israel, *frum* comics for children, short essays about the weekly Torah portion, and Rabbi Klass's series on Midrashic tales. But what grabs my attention is an article by Rabbi Meir Kahane about the hypocrisy of America's non-Orthodox Jewish leadership in preferring Gentile wives over Jewish women, along with a humorous and well-written swipe at the Orthodox for their great love of baseball, basketball, Bloomingdale's and Brooklyn, and their failure to make *Aliyah*. It's the first time I discover an American Rabbi who not only sees things the way I do, but also expresses them with the creativity and craft of a seasoned novelist. Wow! I'm not the only person in the world who sees glaring shortcomings with being a Jew in America. I look around the hallways of the building, and sure enough, I find stacks of back issues of the newspaper with Rabbi Kahane's weekly column. From that day on, I look forward each week to reading his articles, which are often scathing in their honesty, while being, at least to me, very humorous as well, in his uncanny ability to hit the Jewish nail on its kippahless or skull-capped head.

Around noontime, the unemployed Menachem shows up. He tosses his cap on a table, takes off his vest, and asks how he can help. The guy's a real character, right out of a Woody Allen movie, the stereotyped New Yorker who knows everything and takes no crap from anyone. While I try

to be polite on the telephone, apologizing for not being able to answer every question, Menachem doesn't mince words with people who give him a difficult time.

"Listen, lady," he tells a female caller. "I told you five times already that I don't know if the volunteers will be able to visit Jerusalem. This isn't a vacation excursion, so stop breaking my chops. Either you want to help the Israelis or you don't. We don't need spoiled Jewish princesses, and Israel's got enough wackos of their own, so if you're looking for a tour of the country, this isn't the program for you."

When other callers badger him with questions, he tells them that for security reasons, we aren't allowed to disseminate details of the trips.

With more and more applicants calling, I start to write up a departure list for El Al, putting my name down first. Second is a young college student, Johnny Behar, who lives today in the settlement of Har Bracha. Third is Leon, who is living today in Maale Adumim. Fourth is Lisa, who lives today in Har Nof. Fifth is Roger who lives today in Kiryat Moshe. Six is Joey from Brooklyn, now living in Givat Shaul. At least thirty-five of the volunteers who were on that first flight ended up living in Israel, which was the real goal behind the "Volunteers for Israel" project – what later became known as "*Sarel*." Years later, after "*Sarel*" became one of Israel's most successful organizations, bringing tens of thousands of Jews to Israel from all over the Diaspora, other people took credit for starting the project, just as Indor prophesized, but I was there at the very beginning, and I can vouch that Meir Indor and Rabbi Yehuda Hazani were the founders and builders of the entire undertaking. Just as Indor predicted, when the volunteer campaign began to bring more Jews to Israel than all other *Sachnut* programs combined, and Indor's friend, Raful, retired from being Chief-of-Staff to enter politics, the secular Leftist powers that pull the strings in

Israel found a way to oust the dynamic, *dati* duo from running the expanding operation. Indor and Hazani returned from one of their trips to America to find that their names had been removed from the door of the office in the Tzrefim army camp where the project was headquartered. On a trip to Israel, after running the show in America for its initial two years, I met with Rafal, Rabbi Chanan Porat, and other members of the Knesset in an effort to prevent the coup to get rid of the program's two "religious fanatics," but my efforts were futile. In a meeting in Tel Aviv with Defense Minister, Moshe Arens, I detailed how Indor and Hazani had initiated and built the entire campaign, both in Israel and New York, but aside from listening politely, Arens did nothing to stand in the way of the dirty politics to take the spirit of Torah, and the letter of Torah law, out of the project. For instance, while Indor and Hazani insisted on keeping non-Jews off the project, the secularists saw no reason to exclude anyone who wanted to volunteer, even though it might lead to a case of intermarriage or two, or ten, even twenty.

Anyway, that battle is still two years in the future. In the meantime, my image of Israel is all idealism and brotherly love, just like in the idyllic Israeli film, "The Troupe," about a group of beautiful young singers and musicians in *Tzahal*, which I watch over and over again, dreaming about the day when I too will be a proud and happy Israeli, singing happy Hebrew songs and falling in love with a dark-skinned, exotic Israeli.

To help Menachem and me handle the crowds of people who are showing up for interviews at the *Jewish Press* building, *HaKodesh Baruch Hu* sends Roz, Florence, and Bernie, three retirees and passionate lovers of Israel to man the telephones. I concentrate of the interviews, on setting up working connections with El Al, on writing press releases, and speaking on

the phone late into the night with Rabbis and reporters from Jewish newspapers all across the country.

At the end of the day, if I don't sleep on a floor mattress at the *Jewish Press*, I take the train back to Manhattan and crash out on my bed, while Indor sleeps on my convertible couch, and Rabbi Hazani sleeps on a fold-out cot that I have stored in the closet. Invariably, at some point during the night, Indor is on the phone, yelling orders to people in Israel, but I get used to his barking, and soon I no longer hear it, like the barking of dogs out on the street.

The three of us are crowded in the small one-room apartment, like soldiers in an army tent. We take turns sharing the bathroom where my great miracle occurred. But another miracle, perhaps less dramatic, but no less life-changing, is taking place in my small studio apartment in Manhattan, in answer to my prayers beseeching *Hashem* to show me the way to get close to Him by revealing the path that would lead me to a new life in Israel. Living with these two nuclear-powered, religious Zionists, my metamorphosis into an Israeli is beginning to take place, like a silkworm which sheds the cocoon of its past, on its way to becoming a beautiful butterfly.

One morning, Indor asks me to accompany them to a meeting downtown near Wall Street. A man is waiting in the lobby of a big office building on Worth Street. We ride up the elevator to the fourteenth floor and follow the man to an empty four-room office - no desks, no furniture, no telephones. Indor announces that this is to be the new volunteer office, generously donated by a sponsor who wants to remain anonymous.

"Why leave the *Jewish Press*?" I ask. "They're giving us great publicity."

“One reason is that the *Jewish Press* is read mostly by Orthodox Jews and we want to attract Jews of all kinds,” Indor explains. “The other reason is that the American director of the Volunteers for Israel, Kenny Fishman, lives in Manhattan and this office is closer to his home.”

The real-estate agent hands Indor the key to the office, which he passes to me.

“Kenny Fishman, screenwriter from Hollywood, is now the official director of Volunteers for Israel in America,” he announces.

“No I’m not,” I say. “I’m booked on the first flight to Israel.”

I look over at Rabbi Hazani for his support, but he shakes his head no.

“You can do more for Israel here, sending us volunteers, than picking apples in the Golan,” he says in a much improved English.

“Wait a minute,” I protest.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Indor declares. “You want to be an Israeli, right? Then consider this part of your three-year, Israel army duty, like everyone else. I am your commander, and he is your Rabbi. We have to go back to Israel and get things ready for the volunteers. We can’t be in two places at once. You will run things for us here, and when everything gets organized, then you can come to Israel yourself. Right now we have to fill this place up with desks, cabinets, chairs, and some beds, so we can sleep here on our trips to New York. Is that understood, soldier? Let’s go!”

I’m dumbfounded. A few months ago I was a screenwriter in Hollywood, and now I’m the director of Volunteers for Israel, following the orders of two religious Herzls, who have the whimsical dream of bringing all of the Jews in America to the Holy Land!

We spend the rest of the day pounding the streets of Lower Manhattan and Canal Street, going into every used office-supply store we can find that has a *mezuzah* on the doorpost, asking the Jewish owners to donate furniture to the Israel emergency campaign drive. By evening we have collected enough office furniture and equipment to fill up all the empty rooms. By the following evening, the four-room office is fully furnished, including a small kitchenette, beds for Hazani and Indor, a battery of telephones, desks for Roz, Bernie, Florence, Menachem and me, and a sign on the door. I work day and night, sending out press releases and flyers to hundreds of synagogues and Jewish organizations across the country, with a list of flight dates to Israel. Before Indor and Hazani leave New York, Indor introduces me to a local Rabbi and businessman, Irwin Pechman, who will be in charge of our bank account and general finance flow.

That's how it all started. In the course of the day, I'm on the telephone to the director of El Al in New York, while also negotiating for charter flights on Tower Air, in addition to answering angry calls from Jewish Agency department heads, who are upset with us for stealing their spotlight, since we are doing ten times more with our peanut budget and volunteer spirit than they do with all of their millions. I speak to dozens of Rabbis from Boston to L.A., write daily articles about the volunteers and the program, and do my best to keep my volunteer staff from going crazy, due to the unnerving fact that they are sending people off on a mission nobody knows anything about. I speak to Indor several times a day on the telephone, receiving orders that keep getting changed from one moment to the next. At Kennedy Airport, I give a briefing to the first group of 150 spirited volunteers who fly off to Israel, still not knowing where they are going to be when they land. The following week, after I call every newspaper, radio show, and TV station in New York, upon Hazani and Indor's seemingly exaggerated instructions, another 200 volunteers gather

at the El Al departure gate, where a crowd of reporters is waiting to interview them. The coast-to-coast headlines results in non-stop phone calls from people who want to sign up. The next week, another full flight flies off to the Holy Land, and El Al starts to complain that they can't handle the demand. When Indor announces that he and Hazani are returning to New York with the Israel Army band for a series of publicity concerts, I call up the Film School at New York University two weeks before the Fall semester begins and tell them that I won't be able to teach there as planned.

Meanwhile in Israel, it's a big *balagan*, but except for a few complainers, the volunteers love it. Most of them call it the greatest experience of their lives. Everyone falls in love with the country and with the crazy Israelis whom Indor and Hazani have enlisted to run the volunteer operations in Israel. Most of the Americans are housed in *Tzahal* bases, where they are given IDF uniforms and put to work cleaning tanks and working in army warehouses, sleeping in army barracks and eating in the mess hall along with the soldiers. Others are sent to *moshavim* in the Golan Heights where they help with the harvest. From one day to the next, no one knows what's going on, but everyone has a great time, along with a feeling that they are really helping out the country in its time of need.

The High Holidays arrive, and on the first night of *Rosh HaShanah*, when I show up at the *shul* where I pray on weekday mornings, I'm shocked to find men and women sitting together! On weekday mornings, there is barely a *minyan* of men, most of them over seventy, and we usually have to drag someone in from the street to say *Kaddish* which can only be recited in the presence of ten men. Sometimes a woman shows up after *davening* to speak with the Rabbi, but they don't pray with us. Not that I would think twice about sitting next to some lady, but running around with Rabbi Hazani and Indor, I learned that mixed prayer services are

forbidden, if there isn't a kosher *mechitza* to make sure the men keep their eyes on their prayer books, and not on the women. It turns out that while the Rabbi of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street synagogue has an Orthodox rabbinic ordination, he has chosen, for whatever reason, to be the Rabbi of a Conservative *shul*. So I find myself another place to pray, a small Orthodox congregation on Lexington Avenue and 28<sup>th</sup> Street. At the time, I still don't go to services on *Shabbat*, but rather light candles at home, recite some prayers from my English-Hebrew *siddur*, make *Kiddush* over a glass of sweet Manischewitz wine, and celebrate the holy day in my own fashion by not watching TV or going to the movies. Many times, I take the train uptown to my visit my grandmother's and to eat a traditional Friday night meal. After Jewish-smelling meal, I stay away from bars and discos, and return home alone to study Torah. To show how far I still am from following the *Halachah*, when the festival of *Sukkot* arrives, I set up four poles on the roof of my seven-floor apartment building and drape a blanket over the top. It looks more like an Indian buffalo lento, or a wedding *chuppah*, than a halachic *sukkah*, but it seems to me that when G-d gazes down on the rooftops of Manhattan, He is as happy with my makeshift *sukkah* booth as He is with all of the *kosher sukkot* in New York City – if you could find one. During the holiday, I walk all over Manhattan and don't see a single *sukkah* out on the street, or up on someone's terrace. In a city with hundreds of thousands of Jews, the only real *sukkah* I find is a cramped little booth, near the restroom, in the narrow alley behind the dairy restaurant on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street and Broadway. What a difference from the festival of *Sukkot* in Jerusalem, where you see beautifully decorated booths in every direction you look, on every single street of the city, on apartment terraces and rooftops! So even though my rooftop *sukkah* is totally non-*kosher*, my *miserut nefesh* for the *mitzvah* is almost immediately rewarded – a young Jewish reporter from a TV station in Florida, with whom I have been in connection, has gotten the OK from

his boss to do a four-part story on the Volunteers for Israel campaign. He and his film crew will be accompanying a group of eight retirees from Dayton Beach and Fort Lauderdale, who have signed up for an upcoming trip. The TV station wants me to come along as their escort, and they're willing to pay for my airfare and hotel.

Naturally, Indor and Rabbi Hazani agree. (Interestingly, the next time I pick up *Rebbe Nachman's* book, "Advice," written by his trusty student, Rabbi Natan, I see that I have underlined in red his teaching that intense prayer, the Land of Israel, and the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* are deeply interconnected in a mystical way. Still today, in a carton in one of my closets, I have a copy of the four-part story of the volunteer trip to Israel that was broadcast on TV in Florida. You see me, young and beardless, meeting the group of Florida retirees at Kennedy Airport in New York for a briefing session. Then we are met at the airport in Israel by the flute-playing Indor and four of his young daughters who welcome the volunteers with flowers and a "Baruch Haba" welcome sign. Then we're off to the army base, Julas, where the elderly, but enthusiastic volunteers are giving Israeli army uniforms and sent off to clean dust-covered tanks. There's a party at Indor's house, an interview with me at the *Kotel*, and lots of footage of the happy volunteers at work, eating with Israeli soldiers, and touring around the country. When I'm not with the TV crew, I'm traveling around the country with Indor and Hazani, seeing the different army bases and *moshavim* where the volunteer groups are housed, and meeting the people who are helping them run the Israeli end of the operation. The Floridians are spending a month, but I have to fly back to New York to keep the campaign going. Of course, I make sure to visit dear old Serafin twice while I'm in Jerusalem. Before boarding the plane, I take a deep breath to fill up my lungs with as much holy air as I can. I fall to my knees and kiss the holy runway, beseeching the Almighty to bring me back soon to His cherished Land to stay forever.

Once again, when I return to New York, I crash. I'm busy day and night with the volunteer office, continuing to build a staff of loyal workers, retirees who give up everything else to interview people and man the always ringing telephones. Plus there are constant money problems with El Al, and endless calls arranging charter flights on Tower Airlines to handle the growing numbers of applicants, and an assortment of other personal issues with this volunteer and that, making sure that everyone is Jewish, writing new press releases, putting out new flyers, and organizing publicity events at synagogues and Jewish community centers. Even with all of this constant activity, I feel like I've left the love of my life behind me in Jerusalem, across a wide, wide ocean, probably like my Father felt when he was away from my Mother, his beautiful new bride, for the almost four long years of his army service overseas during the Second World War. One night, feeling terribly lonely and seeking to fill up a chasm of yearning, I do something I shouldn't do.

While the miracle that healed my bleeding was a dramatic bolt of Heavenly lightning that changed my whole understanding of life in one incredible instant and flash, it took two years before I was practicing all of the intricate details of Jewish Law. First, I stopped eating cheeseburgers, bacon, ham sandwiches, lobster, crab, and shrimp, all of which I grew up on and loved. If I grill a steak, I won't drink the blood that flows into the pan like I used to, but, for a long time, the steak itself still isn't *kosher*. "*Lahat, lahat,*" they say to new *Olim* immigrants in Israel, "Slowly, slowly."

Dear brothers and sisters. If you are lucky enough to connect with the Holy Internet in the Sky, even if you fall down, you can always get up again and renew the connection. *Hashem* doesn't expect us to be perfect. But He does expect us to do *T'shuva*, to admit our mistakes and try again. That's

what life is – *T'shuva* – falling down and returning to G-d; falling down and returning to G-d, again and again and again. As Rabbi Kook teaches - it is the striving for perfection which is perfection itself. *T'shuva* never stops. Life is a big computer keyboard with BACKSPACE, DELETE HISTORY, RESTART, and HOME. I'm sure I ate a cheeseburger here and there. And, more likely than not, I wasn't always 100% with *Shmirat HaBrit*, nor with the laws of *Niddah*, though I tried my best, as director of the project, not to take advantage of the young Jewish women who flocked to volunteer for Israel.

Whenever I fall, I follow *Rebbe Nachman's* advice and tell myself that the main thing is not to let my mistakes get me down. Depression can be worse than a sin, because depression causes a person to sin again. The main, *Rebbe Nachman* teaches, is to always be happy. Each time I suffer a lapse, I pour my heart out to G-d, begging for His forgiveness and compassion. "Remember, Tzvi," I tell myself, "You have a loving Father, who is always ready to forgive." As King David assures: "*The L-rd is near to all who call upon Him; to all who call upon Him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who revere Him; He hears their cry and saves them.*" I keep praying and set my sights forward. Be happy! "*Serve the L-rd with gladness!*" When a Jew strives to get closer to G-d and to shake off the soiled clothes of his past, the evil inclination rises up with all off its power, putting all kinds of passions and obstacles in his way. The temptation comes as a test, to make him into a real champion of holiness. Like a rodeo cowboy trying to tame a wild bronco, I fall off time and again, but always climb back on the horse, determined to hang on for the ride and master the raging and tireless beast. If you don't want to keep getting bruised, you have to be as adept as a skilled bullfighter who knows how to step gracefully aside to avoid the charging beast without getting gored - but to get to that stage, you have to learn a lot of Torah.



Having been “touched by an angel,” I now know that there is a reality far more real than the surface appearance of life, and that a seeker of holiness who longs to stay connected to the G-d must ignore all of the illusions and luring temptations of this fleeting “Matrix” existence, and keep his eyes focused on the true everlasting world of the World to Come, the World of Souls, where the soul of a person lives on forever. For example, in the normal way of looking at things, giving up my teaching job on the faculty of New York University wasn’t the wisest thing to do. Even though I was working up to 20 hours a day on the volunteer campaign, I wasn’t getting paid a *shekel*, let alone a dime. My parents sent me a check to get through October, but by the beginning of November, I was broke. Just then I get a call from Moshe Shechter, director of the Israel Aliyah Center at the Jewish Agency in New York. He’s impressed with the work that I’ve been doing with the volunteer program, sending planeloads of Jews to Israel, in far greater numbers than any Jewish Agency program, and he wants me to come work for him, doing public relations at the Aliyah Department, with my own office, a respectable monthly salary, and benefits if I make *Aliyah*.

“Tell him yes!” Indor tells me when I speak with him on the phone. “You’ll keep working for us from your office inside the Jewish Agency, and you’ll get paid by them! It’s from Heaven!”

Before agreeing, I tell Indor that I want to know Rabbi Hazani’s opinion. After ten minutes, Indor calls back from Jerusalem. The Rabbi agrees that I should accept the offer, so I take the job in the stately-looking, security-tight building on Park Avenue. Each day, I sit in on some boring meeting, write a few press releases for the Aliyah Center, speak to some Jewish newspapers, and after a few hours I’m free to devote the rest of my time to expanding the volunteer drive. I decorate a wall of my office with a poster of the Rebbe and a framed picture of Herzl.



The director of the Aliyah Center knows what I’m doing and doesn’t protest, preferring that I run the volunteer program out of his office than as an independent maverick. Long after all the other Jewish Agency employees have gone home for the day, I’m still in my office, making phone calls to *shuls* and Rabbis and Jewish organizations and newspapers

all over the United States - not to mention long conversations with Jerusalem, writing down barrage of orders that Indor commands me to take care of immediately. More often than not, before going home for the night, I take the subway downtown to the volunteer office, where I sit with Menachem going over the lists of prospective volunteers, looking over the doctor reports and Rabbi recommendations that candidates must send in with their application forms and checks. There are always a dozen problems and complaints that have to be addressed, and since I'm the boss, the buck stops with me. Many nights after midnight, instead of taking the train uptown to my apartment, I decide to walk, taping up flyers along the way, on lampposts, telephone booths, mailboxes, and walls, like someone possessed with a mission, thinking that each flyer is a potential Jew who I can save from the Twilight-Zone of the Diaspora and bring him home to the Land where he or she belongs. The energy I once had in aerobics class now goes into posting flyers for the volunteer program along the streets of New York City in the wee hours of the morning – my "*Tikun Hatzot*." I'm driven with such a powerful energy, it's difficult for me to sleep. And all the while I'm putting up flyers, I keep praying, over and over again, like a mantra, "Please G-d, bring me to Israel. Please G-d, bring me to Israel. Please G-d, bring me to Israel...." My body is in New York, but my heart is in Jerusalem.

Weeks and months pass. Hundreds and hundreds of volunteers fly off to Israel, and here I am still in New York. Every few months, Rabbi Hazani and Indor return to America for a wild publicity campaign, and that's always an injection of spirit straight into my veins. Like the time they *shlepp* the entire Israel Defense Forces band to New York, with all of its 30 musicians, and its flamboyant conductor, Graziano, for a whirlwind concert tour, sponsored by *Tzahal*, the Jewish Agency, and the *Jewish Press*. And then, around Israel Independence Day, they "parachute" into the city for the

annual “Salute to Israel” parade up Fifth Avenue to a bandstand filled with celebrities and dignitaries near the Central Park Zoo. All kinds of organizations, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, with high school bands from New York and New Jersey, participate in the festive march, while thousands of spectators line the sidewalks, cheering the marchers. Indor has decided that the volunteers will march at the head of the parade, but the Jewish Agency and local Jewish leadership have already made other plans. Indor is so insistent, he manages to get himself and Hazani kicked out of the Jewish Agency building, and security guards are given orders not to let the energetic pair back inside. I tell Indor to forgo his demand and settle for the position we’ve been assigned in the middle of the parade, but there’s no reasoning with him when he’s fixed on some seemingly crazy idea. Rabbi Hazani is busy ordering special “Volunteer for Israel” t-shirts for our contingent of marchers. He also convinces the Jewish owner of a scrap-metal lot to let him work with his equipment to fashion a long pole that our lead marcher will carry, topped by a unique and skillfully sculptured Star of David that the Rabbi has designed as our emblem.



When the day of the parade arrives, Indor has our group of sixty marchers meet, not at the beginning of the parade route, but in the middle. We hide around a corner, just off of Fifth Avenue. When the parade approaches, he plans to send everyone forward to the front of the line so that the volunteers will reach the bandstand first and steal the media attention and limelight. “You’re crazy!” I tell him. “You can’t do this! People here in New York have

worked on this parade for months! You'll spoil it for them and get everyone angry at the volunteer program."

He nods his head, but I can tell he's not listening. Harry is supposed to give a signal when he sees the parade down the street, but something has gone wrong in the *balagan*, and Harry's disappeared. I keep arguing with Indor. Meanwhile, parade music sounds, and the first marchers file by on Fifth Avenue to the applause of the crowd. Pushing me away, Indor raises his arm in the air and yells out, "Charge!" Like loyal soldiers, the volunteers run out from their hiding place, a motley contingent of overweight women in their sixties and seventies, proud seventy-year old men, happy teenagers, and young men and women in their twenties and thirties, all wearing the white-and-blue "Volunteers for Israel" t-shirts which Rabbi Hazani has designed. The disorderly riffraff bursts into the neatly-organized ranks of the marchers and runs up elegant Fifth Avenue toward the front of the parade. Commander-in Chief Indor waves his troops on, shouting, "*Kedema!* Forward! *Kedema!*" through a megaphone he holds to his lips. I see the surprised, horrified, and angry looks on the faces of the parade organizers, who don't understand what the hell is going on. But it's too late for them to stop the takeover. Indor and Hazani have hijacked their parade! Puffing from the wild sprint, the volunteers file into a clumsy order at the head of the marchers, with Johnny Behar carrying the gleaming Star of David at the very front of the march. We reach the bandstand first in line and proudly salute the dignitaries, guests-of-honor, and press. Cameras flash. In Jewish newspapers all over the country, the front-page photo of the "Salute to Israel" parade features the Volunteers for Israel. We're the most famous Jewish organization in America!

As always, Indor and Hazani have to return to their families and duties in Israel, making sure the volunteers are assigned productive work and also

have a good time touring the country and being hosted at the homes of religious families on *Shabbat*. They leave me to clean up the mess they've left behind in New York, like the litter and debris left on the sidewalk and street after a festive parade featuring horses and elephants. In this case, with all the anger they aroused in the local Jewish establishment, I had a lot of dung to clean up. But their ingenious and *chutzpadik* ploy kept the telephones ringing at an even more furious pace than before.

Indor's brashness in commandeering the parade, and his blatant disregard for the American Jewish Establishment, causes problems in our volunteer office as well. Since I am working in a different location, uptown in the Aliyah Center, most of the angry calls of complaint from the "Salute to Israel" parade organizers are directed against the staff of retirees who are manning the phones in the office. They are all wonderful people, proud Jews, proud Americans, and lovers of Israel, but they aren't accustomed to Indor's unpredictable, off-the-wall talents. They all love him, think he's a media genius, but they are all good, liberal American Jews believing in law and order, polite behavior, and respect for the Establishment. Florence, a very affluent, proper, and cultured, doctor's wife in her seventies, begins to think that Indor isn't the best person to head the growing organization, especially when some big-shot president of a local Jewish organization, who was supposed to lead the parade, threatens to use his influence to close down the volunteer program as being in violation of American law. Florence appeals to me to keep Indor under control, but while I understand her frustrations and worries, I side with Indor and Rabbi Hazani, wanting to be an Israeli myself, and realizing that most of the local anger stems from jealousy at our staggering success in creating a spirited program which is sending thousands of volunteers to Israel, while other mainstream organizations are hardly attracting people at all. Naively, I'm confident that the incident will be forgotten, forgetting the axiom, "When

the cat's away (from the office), the mice will play." Soon, without my knowledge, Florence is on the phone, speaking with Jewish Agency people in Israel, and people in the IDF who would also like to see the two, over-rambunctious (and religious) *Gush Emunim* activists removed from the successful and highly-publicized program. A putsch is in the making.

Working in the Aliyah Center over the course of the year, I get to meet a lot of Israelis who are involved in all kinds of projects for Israel: Knesset members, businessmen, journalists, Aliyah activists, lecturers, army commanders, and Rabbis. One of the projects is called, "*Mivtzah Elef*," an operation spearheaded by Rabbi Moshe Levinger and *Gush Emunim*, which has the grandiose hope of bringing one-thousand Jewish families from America to live in the settlements of Judea and Samaria within the coming year. I say grandiose because the numbers are against their expectations. In the two years that I work at the *Sachnut* in New York, the Israel Aliyah Center reports that some 13,000 new immigrants from North America (which includes Canada) make *Aliyah* each year (the real figure is closer to 11,000.) Today, the figure is down to maybe 1,500 a year, out of the approximately 6 million Jews living in North America, almost 70% of whom are assimilating, underscoring the failure of Jewish Education in the United States, which tries to strengthen the Jewish communities in Gentile America, rather than encouraging them to pack up their bags and go home to the place they really belong. So the hopes of the "*Mivtzah Elef*" program to convince 1000 Jewish families to abandon the comfortable life of America for a true Jewish life in *Eretz Yisrael* seems most unlikely to me. But I try to do whatever I can to help these idealistic, religious Zionists who have heard from Indor and Hazani that they can use my office for whatever they need.

One of the leaders of the "*Mivtzah Elef*" project is Yaakov Sternberg, who invites me to spend the first night of *Sukkot* with his family in their

apartment in Queens, where they will be living during their year of *shlichood* in New York. The weather forecasters have predicted a rainy evening, and on the subway ride to his home, Yaakov explains that after the evening prayers at the synagogue, we will make the Festival *Kiddush* in his *sukkah*, but if it rains, we will eat the meal in the house.

“Not me,” I say. “I’m eating in the *sukkah* and sleeping there too.”

“Hopefully,” he responds, “we will be able to eat in the *sukkah*, but if it rains to the point where it’s unpleasant to sit under dripping *schach*, then you’re not allowed to remain in the *sukkah*, because you are supposed to enjoy the holiday, not suffer. The same thing applies if it’s too cold.”

I know from my pre-holiday studies that the word “*schach*” refers to the roof of the *sukkah* which has to be made out of things that grow naturally like palm branches or sticks of bamboo. “A little rain won’t hurt me,” I insist.

“Probably not, but if it rains a lot, a person could get sick, and the Torah commands us to be very careful in guarding our health.”

“*Rebbe* Nachman says that the *sukkah* is a *segulah* for coming to Israel, and that if you observe the *mitzvah* of dwelling in the *sukkah* with great joy and love, then you will merit to dwell in the Land of Israel, and since I want to be in the Land of Israel as soon as I can, I am going to stay in the *sukkah* even if it rains.”

Yaakov doesn’t bother to answer, probably believing that that all Americans are crazy.

Sure enough, after *maariv*, as we walk back to the ground-floor apartment they are renting, a burst of lightning illuminates the dark street, and thunder rumbles in the heavens. Yaakov quickens his pace. Once home, he

barks out orders in Hebrew and rushes his wife and three young children out to their *sukkah* in the small yard at the back of the house. Quickly, *Kiddush* is arranged, the blessing recited, the wine poured, and everyone sips from the small cups the family has brought from Israel. Rain pours down with a fury. Water begins to drip onto the table from the flimsy *schach* over our heads, and a roar of thunder makes their little, one-year-old cry.

“Back to the house!” Yaakov commands, but I’m not budging. His wife, Rachela, herds the kids out from the *sukkah*. A heavy wind blows gusts of rain into the shaking booth. “We have to eat inside,” Yaakov declares.

“If you don’t mind, I want to stay here,” I reply.

“It’s against the *halachah*,” the Israeli Torah scholar insists.

What do I care about the *halachah*? It’s *Sukkah* time, when you are supposed to eat and sleep in the *sukkah*, and that’s what I’m going to do. I’m not a Breslov *Hasid*, but if *Rebbe* Nachman says that the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* has the power to bring a Jew to Israel, then I’m spending the night in the *sukkah*, come rain or snow!

“Kenny, please come in the house!” Yaakov’s wife calls out, but I’ve made up my mind. Reluctantly, they bring me food, and when the meal is over, I return to the house to dry off. My sport jacket is drenched. Yaakov lends me a pair of dry pants and a sweater. I tell the kids the story of David and Goliath, even though they hardly know any English, and when it’s time to go to bed, I head back to the *sukkah* for the night. Yaakov tries to convince me of the foolishness of my stubbornness, but it is merely drizzling now, so I decide to go for it. Putting three chairs side-by-side, I spread a blanket across the seats for a mattress and cover myself with another blanket that Rachela kindly provides.

“I’ll leave the back door open if you decide you want to sleep in the hiouse,” Yaakov says, wishing me, “*Lyla tov.*”

I spend the whole night in the chilly and dripping wet *sukkah*.

Now listen to this. The very next evening, after we return to the apartment from *shul*, the moment Yaakov finishes reciting *Havdalah*, marking the end of the first day of the holiday, the telephone rings. It’s Meir Indor calling from Jerusalem. “Where is Kenny Fishman?” he asks.

“He’s here with us,” Yaakov tells him. “He spent the first night of the holiday with us, but he has to keep the second day of *Yom Tov* as well, so he can’t speak to you on the phone.”

The Israelis only had to observe the laws of *Yom Tov* on the first day of the holiday, so Yaakov could answer the phone, turn on lights, listen to the radio, and drive around town if he wanted, but as a Diaspora Jew, I have to observe the second day of *Sukkot* as a full holiday just like the first.

“Tell him there’s a free ticket waiting for him at El Al in Kennedy Airport, and that he’s going to be flying to Israel on *Chol HaMoed.*”

After a few more exchanges with Indor, Yaakov hangs up the phone, then translates the message. I’m sure a big, broad smile lit up my face. I don’t remember the details, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I jumped up and down with great joy.

“You see!” I tell the Sternberg family. “*Rebbe Nachman* is right. Someone who keeps the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* with ardent love is rewarded with the *mitzvah* of coming to *Eretz Yisrael.*”

I am not advising people to sleep in the *sukkah* when it rains. I'm just describing the Divine Providence which blesses your life when you give your heart completely to G-d.

Either the flight is late upon my arrival in Israel, or Indor is late in picking me up – I don't remember. It's late afternoon, just before the start of *Simchat Torah*. Since the holiday is only two hours away, you would expect Meir to be in a hurry to get to Jerusalem, but first he wants to see if the director of the Ben Gurion Airport is still at work in his office, because Meir wants to make a big welcome celebration at the airport when the 10,000<sup>th</sup> volunteer arrives next month, with politicians, schoolchildren, and the Israel Army band. We waste a lot of time looking for the airport chief, but, of course, he's already gone home for the holiday. Since my flight left New York around midnight, and I didn't bring a *lulav* and *etrog* with me on the plane, I didn't wave the four-species that day. Fortunately, Meir has a set in his dilapidated Volkswagen "Beetle," so, after getting down on my hands and knees to kiss the holy soil, I perform the *mitzvah* of waving the *lulav* in the parking lot of the airport, while he plays a happy *Sukkot* song on his flute. By the time we reach the big curve at Motza, at the bottom of the steep ascent to Jerusalem, the sun has already disappeared behind the hilltops. Meir keeps driving for a few minutes, then pulls the car to the side of the road, stops, tugs on the hand brake, and turns off the motor in a deserted spot on the highway, about where the Sakarov turn-off is located today.

"We'll walk the rest of the way," he announces. "The holiday has started. Leave your suitcase in the car. We'll get it tomorrow night. Come on!"

"What about my *Tefillin*?" I ask, hesitant to leave such a valuable item unguarded in the car.

“You can’t take it with you. It’s *muktzah* during the holiday. Don’t worry about leaving them in the car. This is Israel – not New York.”

He starts off up the final ascent to Jerusalem. I tag along after him on another Indor adventure. By the time we reach the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva* in the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood, near the entrance to the city, the *Maariv* prayer has ended and the large *Beit Midrash* is rocking with a mind-blowing, high-powered energy, far more electrifying than the wildest rock concert at the Fillmore East. Stunned, I stare at a scene of incredible joy, as if all of the exuberant spirit of Woodstock was cleansed by holy rain and compressed into the four walls of the yeshiva. There are no musical instruments, but the sound of the singing is thunderous. To me, it’s a scene of spiritual ecstasy, transcending time and space. The high-ceilinged hall is jammed packed with men, young and old, who are all singing and dancing around the hall in joyous circles, following heavy-bearded Rabbis who embrace Torah scrolls in their arms with looks of fervent passion. Indor shoves me into the madness. In my light blue, denim work-shirt, I am the only one present who isn’t wearing a white shirt, and no doubt, I stand out. When Hazani sees me, his face lights up like the sun, and he hands me the Torah which he is carrying. I’m surprised by its weight. But caught up in the whirlpool of the dancers around me, I feel as if they, or the Torah scroll itself, lifts me up off my feet. I’m pressed so hard between the hundreds of joyous bodies and faces all around me, that I feel like I’m being pulled along by their energy, without having to move my feet on my own, no longer an individual Jew but part of a Nation, feeling like I suddenly have hundreds of new friends and a gigantic family of people who all love me, and who somehow know who I am, the screenwriter from Hollywood who has been helping Yehuda Hazani and Meir Indor bring Jews to Israel – what makes me a Jerusalem star.

When Indor tells the story, he insists that after the Torah scroll was passed from me to someone else, I started to dance freestyle on my own, as if I were back in a Hollywood disco. It could be. I don't remember. All I know is that, swept up in the collective trance around me, I lose all sense of my individual self. For the first time in my life, I feel that I am part of a gigantic organism, something much greater than myself, as if my ego is ZAPPED and MORPHED and metamorphosed into a member of *Clal Yisrael*, into the dizzying whirlpool of energized souls of the Jewish People. I sense that Kenny Fishman is becoming someone much bigger than himself, the very opposite of Alice, who became smaller as she fell into Wonderland, whereas I am getting bigger and bigger as I am swept up in this raging spiritual rapids, this cyclone of joy, this core of nuclear power, at the center of the world, in the most powerful atomic-energy plant on Earth, caught up in a fusion of human atoms and molecules of Hebrew letters, dancing with our holy Torah, on this holy Holiday, in our Holy Land, in our Holy City after an exile of two-thousand years.

I don't know how to describe it, but that night I receive a new soul. I become a different person. After an hour of joying dancing, Rabbi Hazani leads me to his home. No cars are traveling along the streets. There are hundreds of people wearing knitted, white *kippot*, and hundreds of black-costumed *Hasidim* dressed in their holiday finest, all walking the streets together, on their way home for the holiday meal. On the way, dozens of people came over to us and shake my hand, as if I'm some celebrity. Everyone knows Hazani, and everyone knows about the volunteer program, and somehow, everyone knows about me. I'm more famous here than I ever was in Hollywood or New York! I don't even live in Israel, and suddenly I have dozens and dozens of friends. More than that – I'm one of them. I'm an Israeli too!

I'm home! As Paul and Simon used to sing:

“Home, where my thought's escaping  
Home, where my music's playing  
Home, where my love lies waiting  
Silently for me.”

I join the Hazani family for the festive *Simchat Torah* meal. His walls are covered with bookshelves and holy Jewish books. A window looks out at the twinkling neighborhood of Ramot on a faraway mountainside, one of the hillsides surrounding the city of Jerusalem, as King David described it, “*The mountains are round about Jerusalem, and the L-rd is round about His People, now and forever.*” Like most of the modest apartments in Jerusalem, his dining room and living room are combined, with a plain couch the only touch of something resembling a salon, but in spite of its small size, the room expands miraculously in the family's love for the Jewish People, and many times I will be there for meals with over thirty and forty guests, like the festive Purim meal which I will spend with the Hazani family for the next twenty years. After the meal, Hazani herds me and his children back to the yeshiva, where the frenzied dancing continues, around and around, increasing in fervor, each person glued to the next, and I'm happily lost in the middle, as if being swirled around and around in a whirlpool of holiness, drunk on pure joy and the unearthly power of Torah and attachment to G-d.

Up above, in the balcony, as if up in Heaven, are rows and rows of women, who stand watching the men dancing below. Their faces are too far away for me to see clearly, but maybe one day soon, I will meet my heavenly mate and companion for the rest of my life.

The next morning, in the middle of the *davening*, the dancing with the Torah continues, as passionately and fervently as in the night, and though

jet lag is beginning to hit me, the centrifuge of joyful dancing makes me that I can go on dancing forever with the fervent Jews around me who seem to possess more stamina and strength than Olympic decathlon champs.

At a break-time for *Kiddush*, Meir Indor shows up after an hour walk to the yeshiva from his home. He and Rabbi Hazani lead me to a side room to join in the *Kiddush* of the *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Avraham Shapira, who is also the Chief Rabbi of Israel. With his snow-white beard and happy smiling eyes, he reminds me of Santa Claus. Indor tells him who I am, and asks if I have to keep two days of *Yom Tov*, since I am planning to make *Aliyah* as soon as I can. The Rabbi replies that I don't have to keep the second day of the holiday like the Jews in the Diaspora, but that I should stay in Jerusalem and not travel around, which meant that according to the Chief Rabbi of Israel, I was almost an Israeli!

The joyous dancing with the Torah scrolls continues on till four-o'clock in the afternoon. When the holiday is over, Hazani takes me to the old house where Rabbi Kook used to live, just off Jaffe Road in the heart of downtown Jerusalem. There, in a room far too small for the hundreds of students who show up, the dancing continues, round and round with Torah scrolls, now to the accompaniment of a lively fiddle and clarinet, sardined between hundreds of fellow Jews until I can no longer differentiate between them and me, between their bodies and mine. The crowded room is like a sweat-drenched steam bath. Sometime after midnight, Indor shows up with his car and my luggage. Hazani insists I spend the night at his home, and Indor insists I spend the night at his, arguing over the *mitzvah* of hospitality until both are tugging at my arms in opposite directions as if they will divide me in half. Finally, Indor wins out. Rabbi Hazani has seven children with one more to come, and Indor's wife is expecting their sixth out of seven daughters, *blee eyin hara*, but in

Jerusalem, even though people have small apartments, there's always room for a guest.

It turns out that they have brought me to Israel, first and foremost, to show me a good time, in gratitude for the work I've been doing, and, second, to strengthen their side in a fierce battle to keep the volunteer project in their hands. In the eyes of America's Jewish leadership, and the volunteer staff in our New York office, Indor is a *balaganist* who refuses to follow the rules of etiquette, doing what he wants, when he wants, as if he is still commandeering an anti-terrorist unit in Gaza, only this time waging guerilla operations on the streets of New York. And while the polite and scholarly Hazani is a figure evoking respect, his partnership with Indor marks him as someone equally unpredictable, and thus a *persona-non-grata* in New York, where things have to be done the American way, without rocking the boat of American Jewry, which would rather sink in a sea of illusions that assimilation can be stopped, rather than jump aboard lifeboats to Israel.

And as for the powers-that-be in Israel, cabinet ministers, generals, Jewish Agency committee heads - how can they allow two, messianic, *Gush Emunim* activists to head the most successful Zionist project in Israel? So while I'm visiting the Holy Land, Indor brings me to the Knesset to meet with leading politicians from the Left and from the Right, religious and secular, to describe the breakthrough work that he and Hazani are doing in the United States, by rallying the Jews of American to take an active part in strengthening Israel, as well as inspiring them to make *Aliyah*. I meet with Rafal Eitan, the former IDF Chief of Staff who gave Indor the go-ahead to establish the project, before his own army career came to an end, partially because he was due to retire, but mainly because of the media backlash to the Lebanon War, and the uproar over the massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shitila, which the anti-Israel world, and

the anti-Israel political Left in Israel, blame on Rafal and Ariel Sharon. Sensing that their days are numbered, Indor and Hazani have me meet with Israel Defense Minister, Moshe Arens, to describe, in English, the revolutionary success of the volunteer drive and Indor's and Hazani's essentialness to the growth and spirit of the project.

Beyond the issue of stepping on the sensitivities of Jewish organization heads in America, and not wanting to give two settlement activists credit for doing such a good Zionist job, certain secular powers in Israel don't like the idea that the volunteers are carefully screened to make sure they are halachically Jewish (we demanded letters of recommendation from Orthodox Rabbis so that Bernie doesn't fall in love with Bridgette on the plane), and they don't like that volunteers are placed with religious families for *Shabbat* and given tours of the country led by religious guides, visiting places like Bet-El, Shilo, and Hevron, where our Forefathers lived, and where the stories of the Bible took place. The people I call the "powers-that-be" have names, but some of them have departed already from the world, so why mention them in a pejorative way?

While it is interesting meeting with so many important people, and flattering to my ego, my biggest thrill is meeting Rabbi Meir Kahane, not only because he is a such a dynamic Jewish leader, a man of conviction and truth, nor for all of the breakthrough actions he did to commence the struggle for Soviet Jewry, but because he is such a great writer - not like the bestselling, assimilationist, Jewish writers of America, who I so idolized once upon a time, yearning to share their acclaim, but a Jew who is bursting with a passionate love of Torah, and a selfless devotion to *Am Yisrael*, who also knows how to put words and sentences together just as expertly as all of the clever, Jewish self-hating authors, who "*The New York Times Magazine*" always pushes to the top of their list, precisely because they are self-hating Jews. Knowing a little about writing myself, and having

ambitions in that direction, I'm thrilled to meet this Rabbi and Knesset member, who understands that the "Volunteers for Israel" project should continue to be led by religious and Zionist Jews.

Back in New York, a young lawyer, who was an admirer of Rabbi Kahane, helped me to register the organization with the United States Government, and apply for status as a charitable organization so we could raise money more easily in America. But in the brewing struggle for control of the organization, he started to side with Florence against Indor, with ambitions of replacing me as the American director when I made *Aliyah*, so after hearing my tale, Rabbi Kahane said he would speak to the lawyer and set him straight on the deeper issues involved.

That's enough about the battle to preserve the Torah spirit of the volunteer project. The whole matter was very unpleasant to me, discovering how the wars between Jews themselves could be as fierce as our wars against enemies. I wanted to believe that religious Jews and secular Zionists could get along for the sake of the country's benefit, fulfilling the prophecies of brotherhood and peace, innocently believing that everyone would work idealistically together, "One for all, and all for one," in rebuilding the dream of our country. But that's not the way things are. *Mashiach* doesn't appear out of the sky like Superman and make everything perfect with a wave of some magic wand. *Hashem* wants us to do the work of building the Nation, even if it means getting mud on our shoes, and wading into malaria-infested swamps, and fighting for every inch of our holy soil, and every letter and law of our Torah. True Torah Judaism isn't an escape from the world, but a battle to invest it with holiness.

Of course, while I am in Israel, I take time to visit with Serafin, and I travel to Kiriath Yam to visit Daniel's mother. I spend *Shabbat* in Hebron with

Rabbi Moshe Levinger, who I had met in New York, and I am inspired by the spirit and valor of the Jews who live in the City of the Patriarchs, surrounded by a hundred-thousand hostile Arabs, guarding over the Tomb of our Forefathers. I am amazed by the pioneer spirit of the Levinger family and their eleven children, living in cramped quarters, in a former Jewish house that Arabs had turned into a sheep pen, selflessly restoring Jewish life to Hevron, whose Jewish community had been slaughtered and destroyed by marauding Arabs three decades before. Then, once again, I have to fly back to New York to try to rescue the volunteer project from the grasp of the usurpers who all believe they can run things better than the Israelis, Indor and Hazani.

As the great Yiddish storyteller, Sholom Aleichem, would say, “To make a long story short,” it turns out that we are fighting a losing battle. I follow all of the instructions I receive from Jerusalem, doing my best to thwart the coup, but it’s all to no avail. I’ll skip over the unpleasant details. After months of haggling, Indor is kicked off the project. Rabbi Hazani is allowed to stay on, but the usurpers are not lovers of Judaism by any means, and the new, non-religious leadership and spirit of the project has Hazani in the dumps. Finally, I tell him that I can’t take it anymore in New York, and that I want to come to Israel. Realizing that the fight is lost, he gives me his blessing, and I arrange for my free, one-way, Jewish Agency ticket to a new life in Israel.

One evening, a week before my scheduled *Aliyah*, I go to visit Era Rappaport in the house where he is residing in Queens during his work with the “*Mitzvah Elef*” project. I discover his wife, Orit, crying in the living room.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“Haven’t you heard?” she sobs.

“Heard what?”

“There’s an arrest warrant out for Era in Israel,” she tells me. “The *Shabak* thinks that he’s part of the Jewish Underground.”



Here’s a photo of Era back then (on my right). Before the first Intifada, the Arabs were already making life hell for the settlers of Judea and Samaria, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at cars, and firing at the settlers as if they were ducks

in a shooting gallery. When the Government of Israel did nothing to quell the unrest, a group of concerned and passionate settlers got together to protect their lives and families. Clandestinely, they planned a series of attacks on key Arab targets, and succeeded in planting a car bomb which blew the legs off the mayor of Shechem, who had vowed to dance on Jewish graves and chase the settlers out of the Land. The *Shabak* (Israeli *Shin Bet* Security Agency) believed that Era was involved in that attack. When a plan aimed at blowing up the Islamic shrine on the Temple Mount was foiled, a dozen settlers, who became known as the “Jewish Underground,” were arrested and thrown into jail. Now the police were looking for Era Rappaport, who was taking care of his dying mother in New York, and helping to bring families to Israel on the “Mitzvah Elef” campaign. He couldn’t be extradited because of his American citizenship.

Era arrives home that evening well past midnight. He holds a small note in his hand from Rabbi Moshe Tendler, whom he has just visiting in Monsey, trying to get the respected Halachic authority to declare that the actions of the “*Machteret*” (Underground) were within the boundaries of Jewish

Law. Not knowing all the details of the case, Rabbi Tendler had written a sort of vague “*Haskama*” quoting the Jewish Law that states: when confronted with a murderer who comes to kill you, a person is allowed to rise up and kill him first.

“It isn’t much, but it’s all we have,” Era says to me.

“Why don’t I write it up into a more serious-sounding document?” I offer.

“Why not?” he agrees. “Tomorrow morning, we can take it to the *Jewish Press* and get it printed.”

So I write a serious piece out of the three-sentence note, adding dramatic background that Era gives me, and we drive into Brooklyn first thing in the morning. Era also knows Rabbi Klass and Yehuda Schwartz very well, and the two newspaper chiefs, who were always ready to help Israel, welcome us into their offices.

Era fills them in on the background of the story and suggests that I be the *Jewish Press* reporter assigned to the case. Rabbi Klass and Yehuda Schwartz agree.

“I’m putting Fishman in charge of the front page of the newspaper!” Rabbi Klass declares. “As long as the Jewish Underground is in jail, every week I want Fishman to write our lead, front-page story. These people are heroes! Their imprisonment is a total injustice. Rabbi Tendler’s letter is front page news!”

When the meeting is finished, I stop Era in the corridor.

“Listen Era,” I confess. “I’d like to help out, but I have an airplane ticket to make *Aliyah* this week.”

“No problem,” the bigger-than-life idealist replies without batting an eye. “You go to Israel. That’s more important than anything. You can send in your stories from there. I’ll call Israel today and tell them you’re on the way.”

So I write up a powerful story about the Underground, with Rabbi Tendler’s accompanying “letter,” and leave it with the paper’s managing editor, Arnie Fine. A few days later, I fly off to Israel, along with a gigantic, refrigerator carton that Era has dropped off at my apartment, filled with toys and clothing for the children of Shilo. When I arrive in Yerushalayim, I drop off my bags and the giant box at Serafin’s, where I plan to stay until I find a place of my own, then head to the *Kotel* to thank G-d for the unsurpassable kindness He has bestowed upon me in answering my prayers and bringing me home to Israel. On the way, I pass the house of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, not far from Serafin’s HaPalmach neighborhood. Across the street, there’s a small group of settlers demonstrating. Walking over, I inquire what’s going on. Amazingly, one of the protestors is holding a copy of that week’s *Jewish Press* with the front-page article I had written. “Kenny!” he calls out happily, remembering me from the Shabbat I spent with his family in Hevron. His name is Ephraim, and he’s the son of Rabbi Moshe Levinger who has been arrested for suspected involvement with the Jewish Underground.

“Meet Kenny Fishman,” he says to his fellow demonstrators. “The *Tzaddik* who wrote the article in the newspaper.”

Everyone in the crowd takes turns shaking my hand.

“Fantastic!” Ephraim says. “Hurry to the Russian Compound prison now! There’s a big demonstration there, demanding the release of my father and all the Underground prisoners.”

So I hurry downtown and make my way up a small incline to the old, barb-wire-enclosed building that houses the Jerusalem Police Headquarters and the local prison, where Rabbi Levinger is being held with the members of the "*Machteret*." Suddenly, Meir Indor runs up to me holding a copy of the *Jewish Press* in his hand.

"It's great that you're here!" he exclaims, handing me the newspaper. "We'll squeeze you in between Yosef Mendeleovich and *Rebbetzin* Levinger. Get up on the roof of my car and read the letter as the special messenger of Rabbi Tendler to the demonstration on behalf of the '*Machteret*.'"

I gaze toward the place where Indor is pointing. Yosef Mendeleovich, a famous Prisoner of Zion who had spent eleven in Soviet prisons for trying to hijack an airplane to Israel, is speaking into a bullhorn while standing on the roof of Indor's dilapidated Volkswagon "Beetle." Behind the large crowd are photographers and TV cameramen from Israel and around the world. Up on the roof of the prison, police photographers stand snapping pictures.

"*Gevalt!*" I think to myself. "My very first day in Israel, and my mother will turn on the TV in America and see her son making a protest speech against the Israeli Government on behalf of the Jewish Underground!"

Before I can bolt, Indor introduces me to the crowd as the special *shaliach* of Rabbi Tendler, announcing that I have just this minute arrived in Israel with the Rabbi's letter which gives Halachic sanction to the activities of the arrested prisoners. Hands lift me up to the roof of the car. Holding the bullhorn, I read out the letter in a loud angry voice, just like Yosef Mendeleovich had rallied the crowd before me. The letter (which I myself had liberally expanded upon) is in English, and I can't tell how much of it

the crowd understands, but everyone applauds enthusiastically, crying out, “Free the *Machteret*! Release the prisoners! Arrest the Arab terrorists instead!”

“Uh oh,” I think. “My mother’s going to have a heart attack!” That was my first day in the Holy Land.



For the next few months, I keep sending front-page stories via telephone to the *Jewish Press* in New York as the trial progresses. I still have copies of the newspapers stashed away in a closet.

Rabbi Levinger is released from jail, but the other members of the Underground are charged with serious felonies and given long prison sentences. Little did I know that I’d soon be working once again with Rabbi Yehuda Hazani on a nationwide campaign which he initiated to free them from jail.

Rather than remaining in America where the Israelis couldn’t touch him, Era Rappaport flies back to Israel to be with his friends. The police are waiting for him at the Ben Gurion Airport when he steps off the plane.

“Why’d you come back to Israel?” a reporter asks him.

(Maybe a reporter asked him – or maybe I just made it up for the story I wrote for the *Jewish Press*.)

“As a Jew, I’d rather sit in a prison in Israel than be a free man in America!” Era answers.

Anyway, that’s what I wrote that he said. Because I believe that it’s true. And certainly, Era does too. A Jew can only be considered a free man when he is living in his own Homeland – not in the land of some alien nation, pretending he is American, or German, or Russian like everyone else.

So the minute I arrive in Israel, I’m in the center of things, just as busy as I was in New York. A friend of Era’s picks me up at Serafin’s apartment, carries the giant carton that Era has sent with me to his waiting van, and we speed out to the hilltop settlement of Shilo, the ancient site of the *Mishkan*, where I’m given my own apartment on the ground floor of Era’s home - the community’s newest resident, a settler on the “Wild West Bank,” and, “an obstacle to peace.”

But it isn’t long before I’m back at Hazani’s apartment in Jerusalem, helping him make a series of posters demanding the release of the Jewish Underground prisoners.



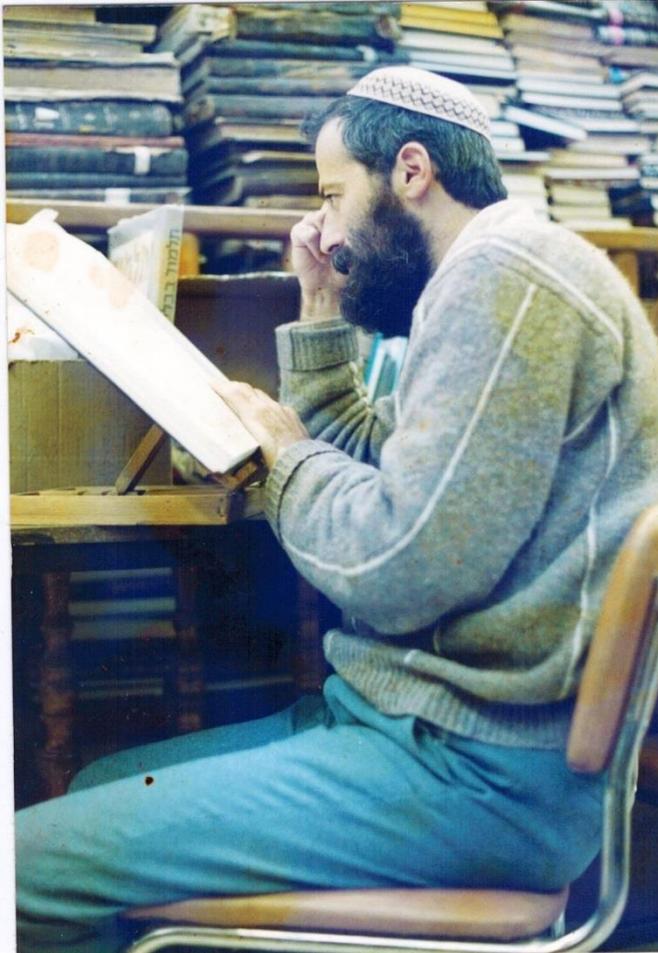
Not a person to wallow in depression, Hazani has put the disappointment of the volunteer project behind him, and he’s now frantically busy organizing a national campaign to free the “*Machteret*,” getting over a million citizens to sign a petition on their behalf. But besides my taking the photos for a few posters, he doesn’t want me to help him, and he won’t let me get involved with Indor’s new project, “*Shomer Yisrael*,” bringing young Americans to Israel for a month of real army training and guard duty. Instead, my spiritual mentor drags me

over to the *Machon Meir Yeshiva* in Jerusalem's Kiryat Moshe neighborhood, introduces me to Rabbi Dov Begun, the *Rosh Yeshiva*, and tells him not to let me leave the yeshiva for at least a full year.

Me in a yeshiva? You've got to be crazy! But I love it! The moment I enter the *beit midrash*, which is filled with shelves of *Mishna*, *Talmud*, and other holy Jewish tomes, I am overwhelmed with a feeling of *déjà vu*. An incredible feeling of serenity and calm fill up my being – the very same feeling of inner peace which I experienced in my dream of the thrift shop filled with Jewish books which I had back in Hollywood. The dream becomes reality. This is where I belong!

*Machon Meir* is a yeshiva for *baale t'shuva*, Jews who have returned to religious faith and observance. For over three decades, I studied English, mathematics, science, American history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, chemistry, biology, physics, French, cinema, and art, and finally, I am studying my own language, my own history, my own culture, my own religion, my own roots. Surrounding me are enthusiastic young people wearing colorful, knitted *kippot*, and speaking Hebrew with Israeli, English, French, Spanish, Ethiopian, and Russian accents - Jews from all over the world, the ingathering of the exiles, prophecy come true! Everyone here has either been in the Israeli army, or is getting ready to serve in it. With a light of holy happiness shining on his face, Rabbi Begun speaks to the student body, exclaiming, what great pride we all should feel being able to serve in our own Jewish army after being at the mercy of the Gentiles for nearly 2000 years. What great honor we should feel being a part of the rebuilding of Yerushalayim, in fulfillment of our prayers. *Machon Meir* is a Zionist Yeshiva, fostering a love for the Torah, a love for the Jewish People, and a love for *Eretz Yisrael*. If one letter of a Torah scroll is missing, the Torah isn't complete.

So too, the love for the Jewish People, religious and non-religious alike, must be complete, in the same way that G-d loves all of His children. And our possession of the Land of Israel must also be complete, so that the *Shechinah* will rest on us completely. Through the wholeness of the Torah, of the Israelite Nation, and of *Eretz Yisrael*, all mankind will come to know that they too have to serve the *Hashem*, not only as individuals, but as nations as well. Suddenly, in the study hall of the yeshiva, the very place I didn't want to be on my very first visit to Israel, precisely there I discover who I am, and I am overwhelmed with an incredible feeling that I can only describe as the Presence of G-d. His light is everywhere. It radiates from the books. It shines on the happy faces of the students. I can feel it



glowing within my soul. From that moment on, I'm hooked.

For months on end, I learn in classes for English-speaking students and continue studying with Israeli "*Hevrutot*" study partners in the *beit midrash* up to twenty hours a day. After all, I have to catch up on thirty years of Jewish education I never received. I have to erase all of the false identity tapes that were implanted in my brain, tales of George Washington and Betsy Ross, David Crocket, Abraham Lincoln, Mickey Mantle, Walt Disney, the Star

Spangled Banner. I have to replace, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the

United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands..." with, "I pledge allegiance to the Torah." Rabbi Hazani insists I learn Hebrew, even though I'd rather learn Torah in English. He says I'll understand the Torah much better when I can learn it in Hebrew, so I sit in the Hebrew *ulpan* classes in the yeshiva, battling to learn a new language, my own language, the language my children will grow up speaking naturally as full-fledged Israelis. Rather than hang out with the American guys at the yeshiva, and talk only English, I ask that my dorm roommates be Israelis, and I eat with the Israelis, and spend *Shabbat* with the Hazani family or with the Indors, or with families I have come to know in Shilo, or with Serafin, where I speak only Hebrew. Come summertime, I enroll in an intensive Hebrew *ulpan* at the Hebrew University, in order to improve my comprehension and speech, but a secular girl in class takes a liking to me and shows up in outfits which could distract a lion from devouring freshly killed prey. One day, she sits down in a seat in front of me with absolutely nothing covering her bare and suntanned back. That's my last day at Hebrew University. Their intensive *ulpan* is too intense for me!

The first time I meet the *Rosh Yeshiva*, he asks me, "How old are you, Tzvi?"

"Thirty-four," I answer.

"It's time you got married," he says.

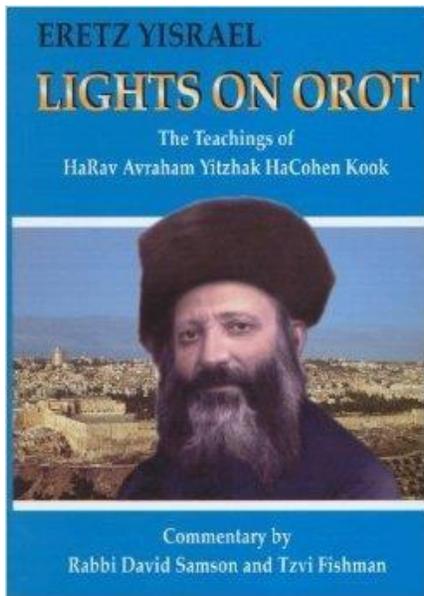
In contrast to the life I had been living in America, in the religious world in Israel, the custom is to marry early, around the age of twenty, sometimes before. If young people hit twenty-five without being married, they start to worry. At my age, there were people who had already *bar-mitzvahed* a child. As the saying goes, "When in Jerusalem, do as the Jerusalemites do." Well-meaning people start to arrange me blind dates, called *shidduchim*.

The trouble is - while my body is in Jerusalem, a big part of my head is still in Hollywood. The matchmakers assume I am a big “*Tzaddik*” because of the work I did for Indor and Rabbi Hazani, so they set me up with women who are “*Tzaddikeses*” too. In other words, they set me up with saintly women who have sterling character traits, and who would certainly be wonderful mothers, raising their children with a love for the Torah, but who aren’t necessarily Hollywood beauties. Wherever I travel in Israel, I see beautiful women, but none of the matchmakers ever sets me up with one, so, superficial creep that I am, I stay single for almost a year.

On “*Yom HaAzmaut*,” Israel Independence Day, the yeshiva holds a special holiday prayer service and celebration in honor of G-d’s having given us the State of Israel after our long generations of wanderings in foreign, Gentile lands, where we were defenseless minorities forever beholden to the whims of the *goyim*. Though Indor and Rabbi Hazani can be among the most strident opponents of government policy, organizing mass demonstrations against government proposals to relinquish portions of the Land of Israel to the Arabs, they both believe that the State of Israel is a holy gift from *Hashem*. Come Jerusalem Day, I discover that Rabbi Hazani originated and annually organizes the festive, flag-carrying parade to the *Kotel* from the *Mercuz HaRav Yeshiva*, attended by tens of thousands of Jerusalem lovers from the Religious-Zionist camp from all over Israel. It’s one of my life’s greatest thrills when he calls me up to the bandstand, set up in the *Kotel* plaza, hands me a microphone, and has me read out a Psalm in English before the huge, flag-waving crowd. Every year since, when I am up on the bandstand on Jerusalem Day at the *Kotel*, it’s like I’ve won an Academy Award on Oscar night – only a million times better.



On *Shavuot* night, in the wee hours of the morning, I walk to the *Kotel* with Rabbi Hazani and thousands of Jews converging on the Old City from all over Jerusalem. It's an exhilarating spiritual experience you sure can't find in Los Angeles or New York. On the half-hour walk back to the Hazani home in Givat Shaul, I ask the Rabbi all kinds of questions about the ingathering of the exiles, the Redemption, the State of Israel, the stance of the Ultra-Orthodox camp, until he says in a definite, end-of-conversation voice, "Learn *"Orot."* The book, *"Orot,"* was written by Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook. Written in a very literary and difficult Hebrew, it's a closed *sefer* to me. Since there isn't a translation in English, Rabbi Hazani asks a brilliant young Torah scholar at the *Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva*, Rabbi David Samson, to teach the contents to me. It's the start of a successful collaboration that will lead us to publish four books on the teachings of Rabbi Kook.



After almost a year of intellectual bliss, catching up on all the Jewish learning which I had avoided all of my life, my parents phone me from the Virgin Islands, insisting I come back to New York for a big family gathering celebrating their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. For two weeks, I debate whether or not to go. On one hand, honoring one's parents is a supreme *mitzvah*, one of the Ten Commandments. But learning Torah in Israel is considered even greater. Finally, after many guilt-laden calls from my mother, I decide to make my parents happy and fly to New York for a quick visit. Now get this. Fasten your seat belts so you don't fall out of your chairs. When the plane lands at JFK, and I head to the luggage area to pick up my suitcase, I feel like I have to go to the bathroom. I locate the nearest lavatory in the terminal corridor and walk inside. Believe it or not, when I sit down in the stall, my bowels burst open and a raging torrent of blood pours out. Blood, blood, blood, until the toilet bowl turns crimson.

"Oh no!" I gasp with a shudder. "Oh no! Why did I come back to America?"

That's my immediate thought. To me, it's a clear sign that G-d wants me to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that America isn't for me. In that startling moment, I understand, now more than ever before, that the one and only healthy place for a Jew, physically, mentally, and spiritually, is in Israel. My parents are anxiously waiting for me in my former apartment in Manhattan, which they have continued to rent, hoping I will return to live in New York. After hugs and kisses, my Mother asks me why I insist on growing a beard. "Can't you be religious without having a beard?" she

wants to know in an annoyed tone of voice. "You have such a pretty face – why cover it up?"

I tell them that I'm going back to Israel immediately after their anniversary party. The next day, when I come home from morning prayers, I discover a note on the kitchen table, in my father's scribbled handwriting, saying that my mother had felt pains in her chest, and that he had rushed her to the nearby NYU Hospital. When I reach the emergency room, after telling a nurse who I am, a young Jewish doctor comes out and says to me, "Do you know what you are doing to your mother?"

As if I'm to blame! Needless to say, I'm shattered.

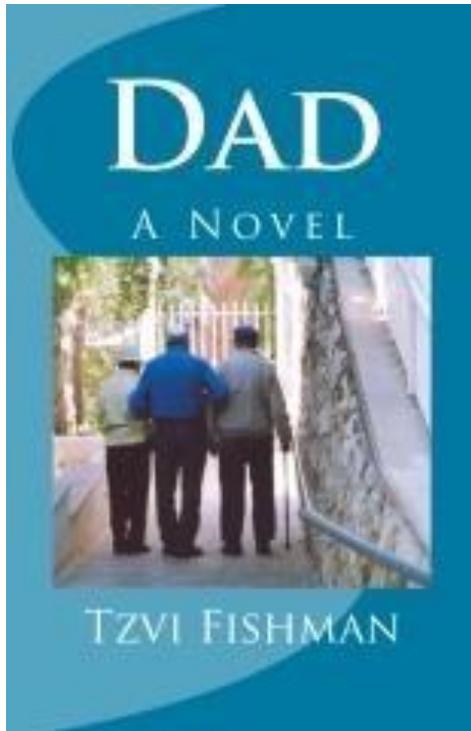
"She's all upset that you are moving to Israel," the doctor explains.

"What can I do?" I respond. "I'm almost thirty-five years old. I have my own life to live."

He looks at me sternly, then smiles. "Don't worry," he says. "Your mother will be fine. It's just a case of palpitations, maybe some angina, nothing serious. Her heart is as strong as a lion's. The truth is, I once wanted to move to Israel. But my mother was against it, and I didn't have the backbone to stand up to her. So if you have the courage to go, then go. Your mother will be fine."

Some eighteen years later, when it will become difficult for my parents to get by on their own, I will travel to Florida, where they retired, to pack up their bags, put their house up for sale, and take them home with me to Israel. My mother will be showing the first distressing signs of Alzheimer's Disease. I will tell her that I am taking them to my son's *bar mitzvah*, which will be true, because one of our six boys will be turning thirteen. Arriving in Israel, a friend will pick us up in his van and drive us to Shilo where I will

be living, before moving together with my parents to Jerusalem so they can be closer to the battery of physicians they need. Gazing around the lobby of the airport after their ten-hour plane ride to Israel, my mother will say, “For Florida, there sure are a lot of signs in Hebrew.”



That’s the starting point of my bittersweet novel, “Dad,” which tells the story of a baal t’shuva like me with aging and ailing parents, who is torn between his filial obligations, and duties toward his wife and their brood of hyperactive kids. It didn’t become a bestseller, but it sure beats writing trashy movies in Hollywood.

## Chapter Fourteen

### **Happily Ever After**

When I arrive back in Israel, the bleeding doesn’t stop. One of the basics of Torah is to pray for *Hashem* for all of our needs, but not to rely on miracles. So I make an appointment with a gastroenterologist. The Almighty can heal a person through a miracle from Heaven, or He can heal him through the miracle of medicine, which also comes from G-d. Thank

the good Lord, after a week of mild, anti-inflammation suppositories, the bleeding ceases and doesn't return.

A Rabbi at the yeshiva arranges a *shidduch* for me with a girl who weighs around two-hundred pounds. Either he's from a different planet, or I'm still in Planet Hollywood. I begin to realize that blind dates aren't for me, so I heat up my prayers, hopping on a bus to the *Kotel* several times a week to ask *Hashem* to be my matchmaker, figuring that He knows me better than anyone else.

One afternoon, after a long prayer at the *Kotel*, I get off the bus near the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood and start walking back to the yeshiva when I spot a pretty girl with long curly hair, walking along the sidewalk. She wears a long, modest skirt, and carries a book in her hand. The truth is, I had gotten a glimpse of this same girl a few days before, on *L'il Shabbat*, after the meal, when Rabbi Hazani had taken me to a "*Shalom Zachor*" celebration at the home of a friend. She was in the kitchen, helping out the wife who had just given birth. Now, seeing her again, I sense that it's more than a coincidence. Curious, I follow behind her at a distance to see where she's headed. Interestingly, she enters an apartment building which also serves as a dormitory for the girls who study at *Machon Ora*, the women's division of the *Machon Meir Yeshiva*. Quickly, I hurry to the yeshiva and go straight to the office of Rabbi Yaacov Shimon, who's in charge of student affairs at both schools. In addition to having a dozen children of their own, he and his wife are known for personally helping the hundreds of students who pass through the yeshiva each year, especially when it comes to *shidduchim*. I describe the girl to Rabbi Shimon, and when he hears that she has curly hair, he instantly knows who she is, an Israeli girl from Askelon. I'm sure he would have helped me in any case, the way he tries to help everyone at the yeshiva, but also working on my behalf is that fact that I just arranged a \$10,000 donation

to one of his pet projects – a new yeshiva that he is helping to establish in the Yosef's Tomb in the city of Shechem, a large and dangerous Arab stronghold in the Shomron. The donor is a very distant relative of mine, who owns a lucrative *shmatta* business in the garment district of Manhattan, and who had contributed money in the past to the Volunteers for Israel project. He was happy to help out once again, only needing to hear that it was for a worthy cause in Israel.

Rabbi Shimon speaks to the girl, fudging over the fact that I am 11 years her senior. In her wildest dreams, she never imagined dating an American, and it takes all of the Rabbi's powers of persuasion to convince her. Out of respect for him, she agrees, but even before meeting me, she decides that it will be our last date.

I don't understand her Hebrew, but I nod my head as if I do. Fortunately, she knows English pretty well, so we manage to communicate, more or less, in a primitive, caveman-like fashion. For about an hour and a half, or two hours, we stroll around the Givat Ram campus of Hebrew University, which is close to the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood and *Machon Meir*. We talk about the general, amorphous matters you speak about on a first date, and about Rabbi Kook and his teachings about Redemption. I want to see her again, but she informs Rabbi Shimon that she isn't interested in pursuing my acquaintance. He tries his best to cajole her into giving me another chance, but she is adamant - she isn't interested in marrying an American, period.

But I'm not about to give up so readily. Doing a bit of detective work, I discover that she attends a class, one night a week, at the home of one of the more popular Rabbis. So I plan an ambush for her, as if I just happened to be there when the class ends and the girls head back to their dormitory.

I stand in her way, look her straight in the eyes with my most practiced Hollywood grin, and asked her to go out with me on one more date. She's embarrassed. Plus, she doesn't want to hurt my feelings – that's the kind of person she is. So she agrees.

For our second date, I borrow Rabbi Samson's car and take her to Serafin, who gives us packages of clothing to deliver to the immigration absorption center in Kiryat Arba for new arrivals from Ethiopia. After dropping off the bundles, we drive down the dark, winding road to Hevron, where we visit friends I made when they came to New York as part of the "Mivtza Elef," program. Afterward, we say hello to her brother, who learns in the yeshiva located near the Cave of the Patriarchs. Then I take her to the *Kotel* to meet Rabbi Hazani, who is doing a few weeks of army reserve duty in one of the security stations overlooking the Wall. The whole tour is to show her that even though I'm from America, I'm almost an Israeli. It works! She agrees to see me again. On our third meeting, I take her to a hotel restaurant, and I am absolutely charmed to discover that it is the first time she's ever been to a restaurant in her life! Talk about purity and innocence. We're like Little Miss Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. After another two dates, she's definitely interested, but still unconvinced. After all, there is an eleven year gap between us, and a culture gap as big as the Atlantic Ocean, and she quickly realizes that I barely know Hebrew. Luckily, a friend of mine at the yeshiva is engaged to one of her roommates, who convinces her to go out with me a few more times and to value my deeper side, under my Hollywood playboy exterior.

To keep our love story short, we go out for two weeks, and things seem to be flowing, but I'm not sure myself. In many religious circles in Israel, two weeks of dating is already dragging things on too long. But for me, after only two weeks, how can I make a commitment to love somebody for the

rest of my life, when in the past, the average span of my love was two hours?

It's Purim night and I'm happily pickled. There's a party at the yeshiva, and bottles of vodka and wine are flying from hand to hand. In the middle of the festive dancing, Rabbi Samson's five-year old son, Meir, appears and tells me that his father wants to see me. So I stagger out of the building, get my bearings out on the street, and head off in a drunken and wobbly fashion toward the apartment building where Rabbi Samson lives, just around the corner from the yeshiva. On the way, I look up at the heavens and pray:

"Dear G-d, I'm sorry to bother you at such a happy time, and I don't mean to be a *nudnik*, but, as you know, I've been going out with a girl, and I don't know whether to marry her or not. It's not such an easy decision, and I don't really know, so, please give me some kind of sign from Heaven, and I'll do whatever You want me to do."

Somehow, I find my way to Rabbi Samson's door. I knock and lean against the corridor wall, feeling dizzy in my head. The door opens and who is standing there? The girl I've been dating, holding Rabbi Samson's baby daughter in her arms! She's babysitting for the family.

Now is that a sign, or is that a sign? If that isn't an answer to my prayer, I don't know what is.

"Will you marry me?" I say.

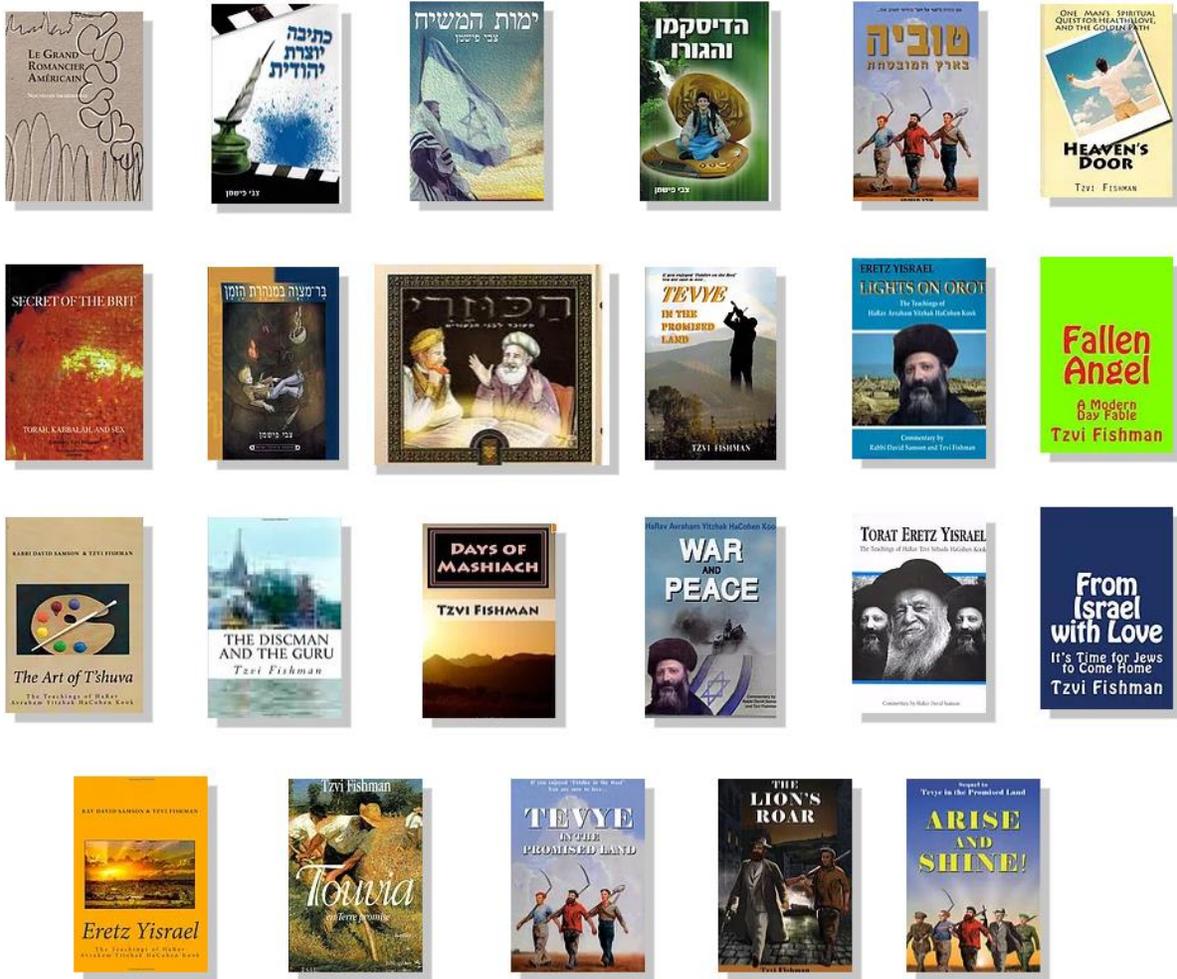
She looks at me quizzically.

"Will you marry me?" I repeat.

"You're drunk," she says.



## Books by Tzvi Fishman



English books available at Amazon