

The Gra The Vilna Gaon Author Yaakov David Schulman

# The Gra

The Vilna Gaon

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CHAPTER ONE:

RABBI ELIYAHU'S CHILDHOOD

The freezing rain slashed down in dark diagonal lines across the gray bridge. Below, the swollen black river was pricked with the endless fall of raindrops. A few huddled passersby hurried over the bridge. On the bank, the little town of Seltz seemed shapeless, its streets a dirty swamp of mud blending into patches of cobblestone.

A young woman crossed the bridge with a black, wet shawl clinging to her head, bent over a pillow. On the pillow, wrapped tightly beneath a white blanket whose edges were stained by the wet, lay a sleeping child, her black eyelids stark against her pale skin.

A peasant came up behind the woman, wheeling a load of potatoes, and she smelled their faint, earthy odor. The uneven barrow wheel slipped across a groove in the bridge floor. Cursing, the peasant jumped forward to keep his potatoes from spilling. His thick forearm barrelled into the woman's back. She was shoved against the railing, and with tragic dismay she watched the pillow that held her baby daughter plunge into the swollen Romnovah River.

She cried out, and the few people on the bridge and at the river bank gazed up at her. "My child!"

People ran to the embankment and looked at the small pillow on which the child lay, carried along by the rushing current. Men yelled to each other and ran along the river's edge. But no one dared jump into the water.

Jews ran alongside the river, keeping the small pillow in sight until, half a mile from the bridge, the river turned the bend. A bramble of stalks and reeds pushed into the water at the turn, and the pillow was caught by the reeds.

The men jumped into the murky water that pulled at their legs with numbing cold, and snatched the pillow from the reeds. The baby girl was wailing, her small face red and miserable.

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In a nearby house, she was wrapped in a dry blanket and placed in the brick oven that was used to heat the room. But in the rush to save the girl's life, she was placed too close to the coals and her feet were badly burned. The woman of the house snatched her out of the oven. "Quick, get butter for the burns!"

Years later, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin stood on the same bridge and gazed down at the water where the baby on the pillow had fallen into the water. He recited the blessing, "Blessed are you, Hashem, for having made a miracle for me in this place."

Later, in the unvarnished beis medrash, he explained to his students, "Her life was saved by a miracle that gave me her son and my great teacher, Rabbi Eliyahu. And so this was my miracle as well" (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 8).

The name of the girl was Traina. When she became a young woman, she married Rabbi Shlomo Zalman of Vilna.

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman was a pious Torah scholar who came from a family noted for its piety and knowledge. His great-grandfather had been Rabbi Moshe Kramer ("Storekeeper" in Yiddish). When Rabbi Kramer had joined the rabbinate, he had not wanted to make a living from the Torah, and so his wife had opened a store.

One day, Rabbi Moshe noticed that the house was filled with food, clothing was plentiful, and there was always enough wood for the fire.

"Are you taking money from the public funds?" he asked his wife.

"No," she said. "But because you are rabbi, people are flocking to my store."

"But what of the other shopkeepers?"

"Here is what I want you to do," Rabbi Moshe said. Make a budget of what you need for the week. As soon as you earn that amount, even if it is still Sunday, I want you to close the shop."

Rabbi Moshe Kramer was a strong public leader as well as a scholar, and his family recorded traditions of how he saved the community from blood libels and other threats (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 9 and note 9).

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In 5441 (1681), Rabbi Moshe died. As a mark of honor, a space of three amos was left about his grave. His son, Eliyahu, was also a dayan of Vilna, and he became famous as Rabbi Eliyahu Chassid (the Pious).

Rabbi Eliyahu Chassid married the granddaughter of Rabbi Moshe Rivkes, author of the glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch* entitled *Be'er Hagolah*. Like Rabbi Eliyahu, Rabbi Moshe Rivkes was also referred to in Vilna as "Chassid"--the only two such men to be given this title in the seventeenth century.

Rabbi Eliyahu had three sons: Rabbi Tzvi, Rabbi Moshe and Rabbi Yissachar Ber.

Rabbi Yissachar Ber fathered Rabbi Shlomo Zalman. He grew to be an outstanding talmid chacham who was supported by the community fund that his grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Rivkes, has established.

And on the first day of Pesach, 5480 (1720), Rabbi Shlomo Zalman's wife, Traina, gave birth to their first child, whom they named Eliyahu after the boy's great-grandfather. This boy too would become known as Eliyahu Chassid--the only person to be given this title in Vilna in all of the eighteenth century, for his sanctity and piety were beyond all measure. And he would also be known simply as the Gaon ("great rabbi"), for his scholarship, diligence and methodology placed him on a level of brilliance that can scarcely be conceived. In an age that produced people of the greatest and most intense dedication to the service of Hashem, Rabbi Eliyahu was in a category of his own. Today, he is referred to by the acronym, the Gra--the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu.

His life provided the most perfect example of his dedication to the ideal of Torah study. And this was utilized as a model by his most important student, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, when he founded the Yeshiva of Volozhin, which has functioned as a model of the yeshiva world and the yeshiva ethos.

Thus, the spirit of Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna is still alive in tens of yeshivas across the globe.

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From his earliest age, Rabbi Eliyahu seems to have been a mature and outstanding genius with an extraordinary memory.

By the age of three, he knew the Chumash and siddur by heart.

On Succos, he was brought to the synagogue with the other toddlers to begin his formal introduction to learning.

"Children," asked one of the rabbis, "where in the Chumash do we find the name of Avraham doubled: 'Avraham, Avraham'?"

"In the story of the sacrifice of Yitzchak," one of the children said.

"And where else?" the rabbi asked.

Eliyahu replied immediately, "In Toldos: 'These are the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham: Avraham'" (Bereishis 25:19).

Another rabbi with a thick, red beard, asked, "Where in the Chumash can we find a verse of eight words, each ending with the letter 'mem'?"

Immediately, Eliyahu replied, "In Vayishlach" (Bereishis 32:15).

There was a hum of pleasant excitement among the adults.

The rabbi with the red beard lifted Eliyahu in his arms. "And where can we find a verse that contains five words each composed of two letters?"

"There are three such verses," said Eliyahu: "one in Bereishis (Bereishis 5:32), one in Vayishlach (Bereishis 35:17), and one in Beshalach (Sh'mos 17:16)."

"Excellent!" The rabbis were smiling.

"Three letters are pronounced the same," the rabbi continued--"the samech, the sin and the sof. Bring examples of each."

"There is one verse that contains all three," Eliyahu said without hesitating.

"'Fools, when will you grow wise?' --'Uksilim, masai taskilu?'" (Tehillim 94:8).

It is said that when Eliyahu was four, the author of the Shaagas Aryeh picked him up and praised his knowledge of Kabbalah.

And it is also told that in the winter of 5485 (1725), when Eliyahu was four and a half years old, he and his classmates in the cheder were reviewing the parshah of Yisro. One of the other students said, "On the verse, 'And Moshe went

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out to his father-in-law,' Rashi adds that Aharon also went out. How did Rashi know that?"

Eliyahu replied, "The verse says that Moshe 'went out,' not that he 'went.' Our sages teach that when a tzaddik 'goes out' of a place, its glory leaves it. So the glory left the place. Now if Moshe alone left, Aharon was still there--and since he was a tzaddik like Moshe, the glory should have remained. Therefore, it must be that both Moshe and Aharon left; and only then did the glory leave the place."

While other children played soldiers or threw tops with nuts as prizes, Eliyahu learned. He refrained from playing a wrestling game where two boys sat piggyback on other boys and try to pull each other down because, he said, "I cannot pull down a friend of mine" (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 82).

The Jewish quarter of Vilna, where Eliyahu grew up, was cramped. Here lived over 3,000 Jews, most of them artisans: particularly tailors, furriers and jewelers. There were also workers in forty other professions, such as goldsmiths, weavers, glaziers, dyers, barrel makers, tobacco dealers, grain merchants, wagon drivers and musicians.

Jews were legally confined to a small ghetto consisting of three streets: Jatkowa (Slaughterers'), St. Michael's and Zydowska (Jews') Streets--but in actuality they had long spread beyond the ghetto limits.

The houses opened onto courtyards, and these opened on each side to a different street, and so these courtyards were in effect small side streets. Here, merchants sat by every doorway, window and niche selling old clothes, cheese, bread, pots, meat and shoes.

A mile away was a lush, green countryside. Farmland blended into the thick shadows of forests, where birds chirped and at night wolves and bears roamed.

In the Jewish quarter of Vilna, two and three story houses leaned against each other, and arches spanned the narrow, cobble-stone streets, lime crumbling from cornices. Here Jews lived in various degrees of comfort. Most of the apartments were small, with tile floors, metal shutters on the windows, and metal

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doors.

Some Jews lived well, and some in horrendous conditions--in particular, those who lived in windowless cellars with floors of packed earth, where at night, rats and mice leapt about. There were even some sub-cellars, two stories below the ground, illuminated by tallow candles whose odor seeped through one's hair and clothing.

In 5484 (1724), when Eliyahu was four years old, the Jewish quarter caught fire.

In the light of the hellish flames that belched forth suffocating smoke, firemen drew out buckets of water from the synagogue courtyard--the only source of water for the Jewish quarter--and brought in water from the Vilna River, half a mile away.

Not only did the wooden houses burn fiercely, but the brick houses were also scorched and gutted.

"Who will live and who will die"--the small hospital in the synagogue courtyard was filled with people who had suffered burns and inhaled the acrid smoke. Narrow pits were dug in the nearby Jewish cemetery, and in the city, desolated men wandered about the ruins, gathering blackened bricks.

Only Jews were allowed to repair their ruined homes; the municipal regulations forbade any Christian workmen from helping them (History of Jews in Vilna).

Eliyahu continued learning in cheder until he was six years old, and then his father began to tutor him.

When Eliyahu was six and a half, his father taught him a complex analysis of a piece of Gemara in the casuistic style known as chilluk.

One day, in the beis medrash to the left of the Great Synagogue, Eliyahu stood before a group of scholars. A row of pillars divided the room in two, and behind Eliyahu was the aron kodesh, its copper doors embellished with simple designs. From the L-shaped courtyard came the voices of other boys his age

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playing the button game and hurl the stick. The little boy stood before his elders and with great clarity presented the complex chilluk that his father had taught him.

When he finished, there was a murmur of appreciation. One man with round cheeks pinched Eliyahu's cheeks; another, taking a pinch of snuff from a box of carved ivory, whispered something in his father's ear.

On Shabbos afternoon, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman came with his son to the home of Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel, rabbi of Vilna. Scholars in black silk caftans were discussing Torah. At the head of the table, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel smiled at Rabbi Shlomo Zalman. "Please wash and join us for the third meal."

After Rabbi Shlomo Zalman and Eliyahu broke bread, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel turned to them. "Reb Shlomo Zalman, you have a brilliant son. His ability in giving over the chilluk this week was masterful."

A tall man with a sparse beard and coal-black eyes praised Rabbi Shlomo Zalman. "You have taught your son well. But his performance this week was no wonder. The boy merely memorized what you taught him."

"That is not so," said Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel. "I am sure that the boy understands what he learns and that he could come up with his own insights." He turned to Eliyahu, wedged among the adults at the table. "Eliyahu, what if we gave you an hour to prepare a sugya that we give you? Would you agree to come out and give over your insights?"

Eliyahu nodded.

Eliyahu went to the adjoining room and sat down with a copy of the tractate, Berachos. "Until what time may one recite the Sh'ma...?" He rocked back and forth over the volume, his legs too short to reach the floor.

An old man with a white beard turning yellow was the first to see the door open again and Eliyahu step into the dining room. The room was already dusky.

"Are you ready to begin, Eliyahu?" Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel asked.

Eliyahu nodded. "Yes, I am." He reviewed the contents of the sugya clearly and gave a talk stating his insights.

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Eliyahu's thoughts were not the clever efforts of a child to impress his elders, but true interpretations of the text. Many years later, Rabbi Eliyahu told a Torah thought to his son-in-law, Rabbi Moshe of Pinsk, and commented that he had thought of it when he was seven years old.

There was a silence after Eliyahu finished speaking, broken by the man with the sparse beard. "I take back my words," he said to Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel. "There is no one like this child" (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 10).

Eliyahu had a number of brothers. The most famous was Avraham, who later wrote the work, *Maalos Hatorah*. Rabbi Eliyahu praised his great piety, and it is told that Rabbi Yisrael Kagan--the Chofetz Chaim--said that he had "wrestled with the angel appointed over money and conquered him"--he had no desire for money. Rabbi Eliyahu's other brothers were Rabbi Yissachar Ber, Rabbi Meir of Yanishak, Rabbi Moshe, rabbi of Podzelve (near Vilkomir).

Half a year after this episode, Eliyahu was riding in a wagon with large, wooden wheels. Past the meadows where sheep and cattle grazed, the small figures of peasants stood in the orchards, collecting apples in canvas bags. A bay horse pulled slowly at the wagon, and the Jewish driver allowed it occasionally to veer to the side of the road and crop the grass.

And as the wagon crept slowly over the dusty road, Eliyahu and the man next to him discussed a sugya in the Gemara.

A month previous, this man, Rabbi Avraham Katzenelboygen, had spoken to Eliyahu's father in the crowded beis medrash. In the midst of the scholars' melodious chanting, Rabbi Katzenelboygen said, "I have heard great things of your son. I would like to take care of his education."

"You are such a great talmid chacham! Would you have the time...?"

Rabbi Katzenelboygen put his hand on the other man's forearm. "I believe that my father in Keidan might be interested in the boy."

Here on the wagon, a warm breeze blew across the meadow, carrying with it the scent of fresh-mown grass. A song-bird stood in the cut hay, wagging its tail and

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chirping, and it flew ten yards back as the horse trod along. Clouds sailed across the sky and large bands of shadow passed over the green and tan strips of farmland.

Keidan was a small town. The gentiles were mostly peasants and small merchants; the Jews artisans and merchants. In the beis medrash with its worn, wooden floor and chipped benches, a handful of scholars learned. Among them was Rabbi Katzenelbogen's father, Rabbi Dovid.

Eliyahu was introduced as well to another great Torah leader, Rabbi Moshe, who was writing a commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud entitled P'nei Moshe.

Eliyahu learned with these two outstanding scholars for three months. (However, some doubt that he learned with Rabbi Moshe.)

One morning, when a sharp wind blew through the streets and rattled the metal shutters of the beis medrash, Rabbi Moshe told Eliyahu, "I have tutored you as best I could. Now the time has come for you to learn on your own. You are free to return to your family."

In Vilna, Eliyahu again immersed himself in learning. By the age of nine, he had mastered Tanach and the Gemara, understanding their most difficult sections with the commentaries of the rishonim and acharonim, as well as their halachic ramifications. These extraordinary achievements are reported by his sons in their introduction to his commentary on Aggadah.

And then, his sons report, Eliyahu delved into the writings of the Ari. In half a year, he went through the multi-volume body of the Eitz Chaim, a work of almost incomprehensible complexity.

Eliyahu learned Gemara with a study partner, Aryeh Leib, who later became Eliyahu's student. And besides this, Eliyahu set aside a few hours each day to learn Kabbalah. In half a year, he went through the entire Zohar with its commentaries.

When Eliyahu was eleven years old, he set himself the discipline of learning the first four orders of the Talmud--Zeraim, Moed, Nashim and Nezikin--with the earlier and latter commentators, and with the accompanying works of halachah.

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Eliyahu also took upon himself other learning obligations.

On the eve of Simchas Torah, he recalled that he had undertaken to learn through Zevachim and Menachos, two of the most difficult tractates in the Gemara, and to complete them by the morning of Simchas Torah. So involved had he been in his study of the four orders of the Talmud that he had completely forgotten about this.

Rabbi Michal Datnoy, a great Torah scholar, was staying with Eliyahu's family for the holiday. When he awoke at midnight, he saw the glow of a candle and heard the voice of a child murmuring from the other room. Rabbi Michal washed his hands from the copper cup at the side of the bed, and slipped over to the door, where the lone candlelight shone on his face.

He stared in amazement at the sight of the boy sitting with his back to him, bent over a thick volume of Gemara. The boy turned a page, and a few minutes later turned the page again.

Rabbi Michal came up behind the boy and looked over his shoulder. He had reached page 50 of Zevachim.

"Eliyahu!" Rabbi Michal exclaimed. The boy turned around and quickly stood.

"I saw you take out this tractate after the evening meal and begin to learn from the first page," Rabbi Michal said. He tapped a finger on the tractate. "And now you are on page 50?"

Eliyahu said nothing.

"I thought that you are a worthy young scholar. But now I have my doubts. Are you playing a game, my little man? How do you come to race through fifty of the most complicated pages in the Gemara?"

Again Eliyahu did not reply.

"Now tell me this," Rabbi Michal said. And he began to ask Eliyahu questions on the most difficult sections of the sugyas that Eliyahu had learned.

Eliyahu answered each of Rabbi Michal's questions with clarity, until Rabbi

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Michal exclaimed, "Now I know that you will be a great scholar, for your light already outshines the sun and moon!"

Rabbi Michal went back to bed. Early in the morning, when a pale, gray light filtered through the bedroom, Rabbi Michal awoke again. And he still heard the murmur of the boy's voice from the other room. Rabbi Datnoy again went to the room. The volume of Zevachim lay on the table closed, and the boy was now more than half-way through another thick volume.

Rabbi Michal came up behind Eliyahu and looked over his shoulder. Menachos! And the boy was more than half-way through!

Next to Eliyahu were the stumps of a couple of candles that had burned all night. A third candle still was burning, pale and unneeded in the brightening dawn.

Rabbi Datnoy's big hand came down on Eliyahu's shoulder. "Young man, you do exaggerate! You don't mean to say that you have finished Zevachim and begun Menachos?"

Eliyahu looked up at the talmid chacham. "I have."

Rabbi Michal frowned. "This is too much!" He began to shoot questions at the boy on the most difficult sugyas in Menachos, and again Eliyahu answered them precisely and without hesitation.

"Your abilities are staggering!" Rabbi Michal at last exclaimed. "May you and your children be blessed with all good and with all knowledge of Torah."

Before the morning prayers began, Eliyahu completed the last page of Menachos, and entered the Great Synagogue joyfully.

From outside, the synagogue was merely one of the many houses crowding the courtyard, for Christian regulations prevented it from being higher than any of the other houses. An iron door led to the vestibule where only a few lofty windows could be seen covered with iron shutters. But the synagogue was built below street level, and when one came down a row of steps, one entered a magnificent synagogue with four massive pillars sweeping up to a cupola in the style of the Italian Renaissance, creating a mood of awe and contemplation. The aron kodesh

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was reached by two sets of stairs to the right and left; and beneath it, before its base of black stone, stood the place of the prayer leader, sunk lower than the rest of the floor.

In this imposing, stately synagogue, surrounded by men wrapped in white tallises who appeared like heavenly beings, Eliyahu prayed in joy, celebrating Simchas Torah--the joy of the Torah.

A year passed. In the beis medrash, on the second floor overlooking the synagogue courtyard, a group of Vilna's scholars met every day for half a year to learn the laws of Rambam on calculating the date of the new moon. These laws are complex and the astronomical calculations difficult to visualize, and so they had hired a craftsmen to make a celestial globe on which the movement of the heavenly bodies could be traced.

When twelve-year-old Eliyahu entered the beis medrash one morning, the scholars were sitting at the table before the globe.

Eliyahu recalled how four years ago he had spent half an hour a day, when he came home to eat lunch, studying Techunas Hashamayim by Rabbi Rafael Hanover, one of the handful of science and math books available in Hebrew. Applying his intellect to deduce as much information as he could, he too had constructed a celestial globe in order to understand the laws that govern the movements of the heavens and the halachic regulations of the calendar.

Now Eliyahu listened to the scholars attempting to correlate the information on their globes with what they had learned in the Rambam. Each argued his point and tried to make sense of the information they had. But they came to a standstill.

Eliyahu stepped forward. "If I may say a few words," he said--"not for my own honor or to decrease anyone else's honor, for our sages have said, 'When a person increases his own honor and decreases the honor of heaven, he is despised by others and the honor of heaven is increased.'"

The scholars signaled him to continue.

"I myself have made a celestial globe," Eliyahu said, "and I believe that the

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man who made your globes erred.” Eliyahu picked up the globe and showed how the craftsman had miscalculated.

When he finished speaking, the scholars nodded in satisfaction. The boy’s clever explanation had resolved their difficulties.

Eliyahu continued his phenomenal studies. He learned the mystical Sefer Yetzirah in depth. Comparing various versions of the text, he deduced the correct readings.

A person who has the right version of the text may, if he is sufficiently pious and heaven-fearing, attempt to create an artificial man, a golem.

One day, Eliyahu began to create such a golem. As he was in the midst of doing so, an image swept over his head. Immediately, Eliyahu stopped his efforts for, he thought, “this is a sign that the powers of heaven are opposed to my continuing, because of my young age.”

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CHAPTER TWO:

RABBI ELIYAHU'S YOUTH

When Eliyahu became bar mitzvah, he took on the entire force of his mature piety. He did not gaze past his four amos, and he slept no more than two hours a day. He wore a tallis and tefillin throughout the day. He never spoke idle talk but only discussed Torah.

For the next six years, Rabbi Eliyahu concentrated his learning on the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, as well as on the other collections of the sages such as the Tosefta, Mechilta, Sifra and Sifri.

Rabbi Eliyahu's primary drive was to learn the truth of Torah. To this end, he eschewed all approaches to the texts that, no matter how appealing, did not contribute to a clearer understanding. And this meant that Rabbi Eliyahu did not concentrate on the complex pilpul style that was widespread in his time, because too often it was employed as an end in itself without regard to clarifying the intent of the Torah.

Related to this, Rabbi Eliyahu began another of the important aspects of his life-long work in coming to the truth of the Torah. Over the years, copiers' errors had caused many corruptions in the texts of the oral Torah. This was especially true for the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud, the last because it was secondary to the Babylonian Talmud in its importance for halachah. With his knowledge of the many parallel texts that existed on a given passage, he was able to compare them and determine which was most likely to be correct. Then he would mentally review the entire Gemara and see how his corrected version fit into a variety of Talmudic discussions. If his emendation clarified the Talmud, he would note it down. But if it were weak in even the slightest way, Rabbi Eliyahu would not make a strained effort to justify it. Although he might have spent days of concentrated effort on his insight, he would discard it if it seemed in the slightest way untrue.

This was just one of the measures of Rabbi Eliyahu's life-long and

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unbending dedication to the Torah and to the truth as he understood it, whose intensity drove his life and shaped all his actions and decisions.

In 5594 (1734), when Rabbi Eliyahu was fourteen years old, the Russian army invaded Lithuania and entered Vilna. Poland, which then included Lithuania, was under constant attack by its neighbors, and Lithuania was particularly vulnerable to attack.

For decades, the gentile governors of Vilna had tried through legal and economic sanctions to damage the Jews and even drive them out of Vilna.

Now Russian troops marched through the lanes and streets of Vilna. They lodged and took food as they pleased.

The municipal government ordered the Jews to provide food for the Russian soldiers for a fortnight, as well as an even larger supply when the Russians would leave.

The governor of Vilna now saw an excellent chance to harm the Jews. He went to see the Russian general: "Sir," he said, "come with me to the banks of the Vilna River, and I shall show you a fearsome sight."

Along the water's edge, the governor pointed at the current. "Look. This is where the Jews cast the bodies of the Russian cossacks that they exhumed from their graves alongside the Jewish cemetery."

The Russian general gazed at the flowing current, and though he could see nothing he was inflamed with wrath.

"And here is more evidence of the Jews' treachery," the governor stated. He handed a sheet of paper to the general.

"What is this?"

"It is a list of the Jewish merchants and rabbis who have supplied the Polish troops with vital information about your troop movements."

The general glanced at the list, then folded it and stuck it in his jacket.

The next day, the Jewish shtadlan was summoned to the general. "I have been notified that the Jews have desecrated the bodies of our Cossacks and sold

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secret military information to the Polish army....”

It was only with a bribe of 25,000 gulden that the Kahal (the Jewish self-government) was able to keep the Russian general from instigating a pogrom.

That year, another fire broke out in the Jewish quarter. And again, the Jews were prohibited from making use of Christian labor to help rebuild their ruined and damaged homes.

Meanwhile, terrifying news reached Vilna from the provinces of Kiev, Volhynia and Podolia. Detachments of haidamacks--Polish criminals under the leadership of Cossack commanders--were murdering Jews, as well as Polish lords. As had occurred in the dreadful massacres of 1648 and 1649, entire communities of Jews were being slaughtered. Villages ceased to exist. The haidamacks rampaged across the countryside, murdering and tormenting whomever they found, and the Jews who were left alive were homeless and desolate.

Three years passed. In 5497 (1737), when Rabbi Eliyahu was seventeen years old, the Jewish quarter suffered a fire worse than ever before--a disaster known as the Great Fire. Many homes were ruined beyond repair. Among the destroyed buildings were the Great Synagogue and the large beis medrash.

The community leaders called for help to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, where Rabbi Moshe Rivkes had once lived, appealing for funds “to restore the crown, to uplift the house of our Lord by rebuilding the glorious synagogue and the batei medrash that were consumed in an instant by the flames.”

The German communities of Amsterdam contributed 400 guilders to repair the damage, and the Sephardim 150.

It was at about this time that Rabbi Eliyahu married a young woman named Channah, the daughter of the wealthy Rabbi Yehudah Leib of Keidan. (Some, however, say that Rabbi Yehudah Leib was poor.)

Rabbi Eliyahu went to Keidan to live with his father-in-law.

In the muddy streets of Keidan, artisans, peddlers and sievemakers vied for customers. In one corner of the market, two women worked as chicken pluckers.

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Next to them, a fat girl sold rolls, halvah, and rye bread sprinkled with caraway seeds.

It was summertime. Peddlers stood in the market, selling fragrant apples. Sometimes a leaf remained attached to the stem, reminding the buyer of the world of orchards and meadows that lay beyond the town's boundaries.

But Rabbi Eliyahu saw none of this. During the day, he closed his shutters and learned by the light of a candle so that he would not to be distracted by the outside world.

Rabbi Eliyahu afflicted himself in various ways. He ate little more than a small measure of dry bread soaked in water twice a day, swallowing it whole in order not to taste it. Whenever he felt a desire for something, he would say that it is not true goodness, and he would restrain himself. He tormented his body with lack of food and lack of sleep.

In later years, however, he no longer afflicted himself, and discouraged others from doing so.

Rabbi Eliyahu found a hut in the forest outside Keidan, and in the summer months he would spend days there studying Torah and contemplating Divine matters. Here, far from the paths of men filled with the vain desires and delusions of this world, Rabbi Eliyahu served Hashem with an unsullied soul. The Zohar talks of scholars who "entered the orchard amidst the trees and sat." On this, Rabbi Eliyahu commented that "whenever the early authorities gathered to be under the influence of Hashem's presence, they did not want to be in a house, which is a human artifact, in fear that someone might have committed an act there without holy intent. And so they gathered among the trees amidst the handiwork of heaven, for Hashem's presence rests only on a righteous act."

Here, in the unbroken meditative state enhanced by solitude, Rabbi Eliyahu cleaved to the Torah and to Hashem. Later, he taught that "it is better to remain in a house of meditation with folded hands than to go in the streets seeking mitzvos."

Only his wife, Channah, knew where his hut was, and she would bring him

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food.

Then, in the long winter nights, Rabbi Eliyahu learned in an unheated room and put his feet in a bucket of cold water to keep from falling asleep.

In addition to his intensive Torah studies, Rabbi Eliyahu also became an expert in the sciences. But when he began to study medicine, his father dissuaded him, telling him, "If you will be a doctor, people will summon you constantly to heal them, and you will lose time from learning Torah."

Rabbi Eliyahu never forgot the supreme imperative: learning Torah. Everything else revolved about that.

Although Rabbi Eliyahu was a young man, he was already attracting students drawn by his extraordinary abilities, diligence and purpose. His piety and scholarship were well-known, and Rabbi Eliyahu was allowed to conduct a private minyan in his home.

Here in Keidan, Rabbi Eliyahu formulated his philosophy of education. First, he said, a child should become acquainted with Tanach, with its vowels and musical taamim.

And he should learn grammar as well.

A number of times, Rabbi Eliyahu visited the Talmud Torah to examine the education of the children. He complained to the melamdim, "These children must be taught grammar--at least the elementary principles of placing the accent on the proper syllable (the laws of mil'eil and milra)." Jokingly, he said, "These children have never uttered a true word in their lives"--for, as is customary in Ashkenazic pronunciation, they pronounced many words on the wrong syllable. (Many Hebrew words are meant to be pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, such as YisraEL, and are customarily pronounced with the accent on the next to last syllable, as in YisRAel.)

Rabbi Eliyahu also urged the teachers to pay attention to the ability of the students to absorb the material. "Just as in training someone, one must teach him a clean and easy craft, so too in teaching the Torah must one teach in a way that will

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be easily understandable. Otherwise, if the student is overwhelmed by the material, he may come to reject it."

After mastering Tanach, Rabbi Eliyahu said, the student should go on to learning Mishnah by heart, together with the principles governing it.

Then he should learn Talmud carefully, paying particular attention to Rashi. When learning Tosafos, he should do so with a love for clarity and an abhorrence of creating unnecessary questions.

One Friday afternoon, Rabbi Eliyahu walked through the streets of Keidan surrounded by a number of his students, following the eiruv line that looped from pole to pole and made it possible for the Jews to carry objects outside on Shabbos.

Behind one house, the line was connected in a manner that Rabbi Eliyahu found doubtful. "I don't like that eiruv," he said.

"Maybe I can fix it," said one of his students.

"There's no time for that before Shabbos. It would be better to have no eiruv at all than to let this unkosher eiruv remain."

Immediately, the student leaped up and pulled the eiruv down.

On Friday night, the rabbi of Keidan was told, "The eiruv was torn down by one of Rabbi Eliyahu's followers."

"He tore down the eiruv?" The rabbi's black sidelocks quivered. "What for?"

"Rabbi Eliyahu told him to."

"Why?"

The man shrugged, raised his hands in the air.

"Just like that?"

"I don't know."

Early Shabbos morning, when dew was still slick on the cobblestones and a few gray birds hopped along the rooftops, two men entered Rabbi Eliyahu's beis medrash. Pushing aside the thin mantle of the aron kodesh, they confiscated the Sefer Torah that Rabbi Eliyahu had been permitted to use for his minyan.

Later that morning, Rabbi Eliyahu and his followers filed into Keidan's

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central synagogue. From a window, a pillar of light shone into the dark wooden interior. Rabbi Eliyahu nodded “Good Shabbos” to the rabbi and sat down at a pew. For the rest of Shabbos, Rabbi Eliyahu and his students prayed in the central synagogue. Rabbi Eliyahu said nothing about the sefer Torah that had been taken from him, acting as though nothing had happened.

On Sunday, the rabbi was convinced by Rabbi Eliyahu’s appearance at the central synagogue that his destruction of the eiruv had not been impelled by personal motives. That morning, the two men who had confiscated his Sefer Torah brought it back, and Rabbi Eliyahu was allowed to keep his minyan (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 227).

During these years, Rabbi Eliyahu concentrated his learning on the halachic writings of both the earlier and later authorities. Now he began to emphasize a different facet of what would become a trademark of his teachings, particularly as recorded on his commentary to the Shulchan Aruch. He traced the origin of every halachah to its exact source in the oral Torah--in the Gemara, or as deducible from the words of Rashi or Tosafos.

Only by knowing the source of halachah, Rabbi Eliyahu maintained, could one understand and remember it correctly. “When a person does not learn the sources of halachah but only the works that list the halachah, in order to show that he knows the law,” Rabbi Eliyahu later taught, “he forgets the laws as well because he does not know where they come from. But when a person learns the halachah together with its source, and knows each law precisely, he becomes wealthy in his knowledge of Torah” (commentary on Mishlei 10:4).

According to one tradition, Rabbi Eliyahu said, “People say that learning works of halachah without the Gemara is like eating fish without spice. But I say that it is like spice without the fish.”

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CHAPTER THREE:

RABBI ELIYAHU IN EXILE

When he was about twenty years old, Rabbi Eliyahu decided to go into exile--"praven golus," as the practice was called in Yiddish. Many pious people uprooted themselves and wandered across the face of Europe to atone for their sins, or to (so to speak) partake of the pain of Hashem's presence, which had followed the people of Israel into exile. Others travelled in order to learn Torah: "Exile yourself to a place of Torah" (Pirkei Avos 4:18).

Some of the wanderers were directed by a rabbi to experience exile in order to atone for a specific sin. These people would often be forbidden to remain more than two consecutive nights in the same town, and so they travelled constantly for a year or more, like the camp of Israel that had wandered in the wilderness. Others, like Rabbi Eliyahu, went of their own volition.

And so Europe was criss-crossed with thousands of wandering Jews. Some were simply beggars, often travelling in groups from town to town. Among these were the simple-minded and the insane. There were the people who were wandering in a search for holiness. There were simple Jews searching for piety, young Jews experiencing the adventure of the road; there were learned people and hidden tzaddikim.

Seeing a ragged, dusty beggar with his possessions wrapped in a torn rag, who could tell which of these he was: a simple man, a madman, a rascal or a tzaddik? One must always be charitable, for the beggar one gave a bowl of soup to might bless one with good fortune or a talmid chacham for a son. The beggar might even be Eliyahu Hanavi himself.

Rabbi Eliyahu wandered in exile for five to eight years. Toward the beginning of his wanderings, he would return home for the holidays.

His family began to grow. His first child was Shlomo Zalman, who was his only son until the age of five or six.

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One holiday, when Shlomo was already a small boy, he fell ill. His mother ran to the doctors, who came and examined the boy. Aunts and uncles and the boy's grandparents came to see him, to feel his brow and spoon warm gruel into his mouth; and on doctors' orders, his sheets were changed regularly and disinfected in boiling water.

The house was in a fever of worry and activity, at the center of which lay the boy, encased on a large bed like a doll in its cotton box.

Rabbi Eliyahu saw that the boy was being cared for. With complete trust in Hashem, he went out to his hut in the forest in order to be able to learn without distraction. Here the overwhelming force of holy insight burst open and poured through him like a clear wellspring. In the midst of this inspiration, Rabbi Eliyahu remained day after day oblivious to all else.

A month passed. One day, he entered a small village to use the bathhouse. Sitting for a time in the bathhouse, where it is forbidden to contemplate words of Torah, Rabbi Eliyahu recalled that he had passed through this town on the way to the hut. And then the details of this-worldly life returned to him. He recalled his sick child, and feelings of love and pity rose up in him.

Immediately, Rabbi Eliyahu left the bathhouse. In the narrow marketplace, he hired a wagon and hurried home to see to his child's well-being.

Rabbi Eliyahu's second son was Yehudah Leib, who later married the daughter of Rabbi Avraham Danzig, author of the Chayei Adam. Then he had Avraham, whose education Rabbi Eliyahu took especial care of. He kept a melamed in the house who taught the boy until he married at about the age of twelve (Aliyos Eliyahu, p. 115).

Rabbi Eliyahu had three daughters as well: Channah, Toybe and Paseh Basyeh. (Since the name of his wife was Channah, perhaps his daughter Channah was born in later years to his second wife.)

In addition, Rabbi Eliyahu had another son and daughter who died in his lifetime.

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Rabbi Eliyahu wandered through Lithuania and through Poland, to the southwest of Lithuania. Continuing southwest, he travelled to Prussia (the northern part of Germany), where he visited Berlin and Hamburg, and to southern Germany, where he went to Munich. It is possible that he went as far as England.

In the great cities of Germany, he apparently visited the scholarly libraries and studied unpublished manuscripts of midrash and rishonim, the knowledge of which was particularly important to him in his determination of the correct readings of texts.

Wherever he went, Rabbi Eliyahu kept his identity a secret, and when his greatness grew apparent, he would quickly leave.

The mishnah teaches, "Who is wealthy? He who is content with what he has."

Many times in later years, Rabbi Eliyahu would tell his students and children about an old man he had met on his journey who had achieved contentment. Rabbi Eliyahu would sigh and say that he still had not arrived at such a level as that holy old man.

It was a Thursday when Rabbi Eliyahu arrived at the small town on the Polish countryside. A light dusting of snow had fallen and alongside the road, the small prints of bird claws and rabbit feet formed delicate hieroglyphics.

The shutters of the beis medrash rattled in the early winter wind that blew down from the northwest. In the yellow light of a smoking candle, Rabbi Eliyahu sat at the chipped table and learned all night, stopping only three times to take half hour naps. Then he would arise, wash his hands and return to his learning, chanting the words in a strong, sweet voice.

The autumn frost permeated the beis medrash until, early in the morning, the shammash arrived and lit coals in the black, cast-iron stove at the back of the beis medrash, from which radiated some feeble heat.

After the morning prayers, the men removed their tefillin and talleisim and hurried into the chill air to begin the day's work.

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An old woman in a babushka and a shapeless dress entered the beis medrash. At the back of the room, she gave food to a blind old man who still wore his tallis and tefillin, sitting and learning in holiness and purity.

The old man leaned over to the woman and with a shaking finger pointed in the direction of Rabbi Eliyahu. "Go and see who that man is here in the beis medrash. He stayed up learning the whole night. I do not know his voice, so he must be a traveller. I think he is a kosher man, and I would like him to eat with me."

The old woman went up to Rabbi Eliyahu, who was also wrapped in a tallis and wearing his tefillin. Even on his journeys, Rabbi Eliyahu wore his tefillin the entire day long. "Sir, my husband invites you to join him."

Rabbi Eliyahu rose from his seat and went over to the old man.

"Please," the old man said, "sit down and eat with me."

"Thank you, I cannot."

"Why not?"

"You may not have enough for yourself."

"No, no, we have much food--a great deal!"

"How is that?"

"Listen, and I will tell you." The man held out his bowl and his wife took it from his hand and put it on the table. "Every day, my wife goes to the mill where she has the miller's permission to gather the grain dust. Thank heaven, we eat all we need from this and we even support other poor people."

Hearing this, Rabbi Eliyahu sat down next to the old man, and the woman brought him a tin bowl filled with a thick farina in steaming hot water.

That evening, the old man approached Rabbi Eliyahu and took hold of his sleeve with a trembling hand. "You must come and spend the holy Shabbos together with me."

"And do you have enough that you can take me as a guest?"

"Certainly. I have many guests at my Shabbos table. My wife helps the

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chicken slaughterers pluck the chickens and so they give her the feet and heads of the chickens. From this, she makes all sorts of dishes together with the wheat dust. Thank heaven, we have a great deal of good food."

The following day, Rabbi Eliyahu spent Shabbos at the house of the blind old man. The table was surrounded by many poor people, learned and pious. They ate of his food and rejoiced over it as though it were a feast given by Shlomo Hamelech, and they learned the words of Torah at the table so that the sanctity and joy were palpable. And Hashem's presence rested on the shining face of the blind old man.

For the remainder of his life, Rabbi Eliyahu recalled this holy scene. "And I am still struggling to attain the level of contentment that the blind old man attained."

There was another man whom Rabbi Eliyahu met on his travels and whom he recalled with great affection as a master of humility:

After the long, humid heat, the first drops of the thunderstorm were a welcome relief. Dark clouds turned the entire landscape a dark, tinted gray and the cool damp that blew up shook the heads of the trees. The rain began calmly at first, with a distant, rumbling thunder and streaks of brilliant lightning striking down near the horizon. The warm, big drops of water awakened a fresh, earthy smell that one could almost taste.

By the time the storm burst in its fury, Rabbi Eliyahu was already in the beis medrash. Water rushed down the sloping, wooden roof. The bursts of thunder and sudden illuminations of the sky no longer concerned him, and he spent the hours immersed in learning.

Late at night, when the rain continued its heavy beating, leaving a stain in the ceiling that began a slow, steady drip, the rabbi of the beis medrash invited Rabbi Eliyahu to come eat supper with him.

They ate together in the small kitchen and then the rabbi told Rabbi Eliyahu, "It is past midnight, and the rain is still falling hard. Please sleep here tonight."

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The rabbi himself made Rabbi Eliyahu's bed. And when Rabbi Eliyahu lay down, the rabbi covered him with a sheepskin cover.

In the adjoining room, the rabbi sat down to learn. Glancing back at his guest, he noticed that the sheepskin had slipped to the floor. He got up and went into the shadowy room, and again covered his guest.

The rabbi returned to his seat and continued his learning. But a few minutes later, he saw that the sheepskin was again on the floor. Again, the rabbi patiently rose and covered Rabbi Eliyahu.

But after he sat down again, he saw Rabbi Eliyahu deliberately cast the sheepskin onto the floor.

The rabbi went over to Rabbi Eliyahu. "Please keep the sheepskin on the bed. When I have to get up and cover you, my learning is disturbed."

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "I am afraid that this sheepskin constitutes shaatnez."

"I'm so sorry." The rabbi took the sheepskin off Rabbi Eliyahu. In the other room, by the light of the candle, he took a knife and laboriously cut the linen threads binding the sheepskins. Although the majority of halachic authorities say that such a cover does not constitute shaatnez, the rabbi, in his great modesty, wished to honor his guest.

The rabbi looked forward to discussing Torah the next morning with his guest, who, he realized, is a man of learning. But in the silent darkness before the dawn, Rabbi Eliyahu had already left so that he might not be identified.

And in later years, Rabbi Eliyahu often told this story with sorrow, for such a level of unaffected modesty is so difficult to attain.

As a result of his deep knowledge of the Torah and his lucid, simple analyses, Rabbi Eliyahu reached conclusions of halachah and custom that in hundreds of instances differed from the usually accepted practice. Sometimes people had abandoned a practice spoken of in the Gemara, and Rabbi Eliyahu adopted it; other times, a custom had changed from its original form, and Rabbi Eliyahu went back to the older sources.

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One erev Pesach, Rabbi Eliyahu entered the town of Zalkava, in Galicia (in the south of Poland).

He had ridden through fields, forests and past windmills.

Pesach was coming. Little leaves were forming on the trees, and the orchards of gooseberries, currants and cherries were freshly green. Birds chattered on their branches and hopped about in the newly-plowed fields.

In Zalkava, housewives and girls stood on line before a cast-iron urn on the street, underneath which a wood fire burned. A man with a fan-shaped beard stood over the steaming water, dipping pots and silverware in a metal net. On balconies, books were laid open and their pages flapped in the wind, and tablecloths and blouses billowed on clotheslines.

On a side street, steps led down into the basement of a white-washed building, whose metal doors were flung open. A hot, burning smell wafted out, and men and boys rushed in and out, carrying round, flat shmurah matzahs.

Rabbi Eliyahu stepped before the building and asked a man standing at the entrance of the bakery, carefully examining one of his matzahs, "Where is Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev?" Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev was the rabbi of Zalkava.

The man looked Rabbi Eliyahu up and down with a quick glance. "He is making his matzah now. A traveller, eh? From where does a Jew come?"

But at that moment, a large man climbed up the steps, and the man Rabbi Eliyahu had questioned motioned with his chin. "That's him."

Rabbi Eliyahu went up to the man. "Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I am a traveller. I would like to eat at your table for the sederim."

"There are many fine Jews in Zalkava. Why choose me?"

"Because since you are such a great talmid chacham, I am sure that I can rely on your matzah and food as being unquestionably kosher."

Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev agreed to Rabbi Eliyahu's request, and invited him to stay for all of Pesach.

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That night, as the men sat down at the table, Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev asked Rabbi Eliyahu, "Would you like to arrange your own seder plate?"

"If it is all right with you--for, as our sages say, one must do whatever one's host tells one."

As Rabbi Eliyahu arranged his plate, Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev looked on with surprise. Rabbi Eliyahu used only two matzos instead of three, and he did not follow the usual manner of arranging the objects on the plate.

Everything he did had a source, Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev knew, but it was not the usual custom.

Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev did not say anything. But as the seder progressed, he saw with growing displeasure that his young guest was making many changes in the accepted customs of the seder. It was not right that such a young man should be changing the ancient, holy customs of the community.

And perhaps in the back of his mind, Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev thought of the pernicious sect of Shabsai Tzvi, who kept their sectarian beliefs secret but practiced subtle variations of the accepted halachah.

"And at the very least," he said the next day to his fellow scholars after shacharis, "what is the authority of such a young person to take it on himself to pick and choose his customs?"

One of the other men said, "Put the man to a test to see how learned he is. If he is an ignoramus who is acting out of conceit, we shall decide how to punish him."

At the noon meal, Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev's wife had brought out the chicken.

"Would you honor me with some words of Torah?" Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev asked.

But Rabbi Eliyahu did not reply.

"Just a few words," Rabbi Mordechai Ze'ev pressed him. "Very well, then," he continued after a short silence, "I will tell you some of my recent Torah thoughts,

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and perhaps you will respond.”

Rabbi Mordechai Ze’ev delivered a complex pilpul discourse in the style of the Polish learning of the time. After he drew to a close, Rabbi Eliyahu remained silent.

“Do you have nothing to say?” Irritation and surprise tinged the edge of Rabbi Mordechai Ze’ev’s voice. “If you didn’t understand what I said, I will repeat it.”

“There is no need,” Rabbi Eliyahu said. “I can do that as well.”

Rabbi Eliyahu reformulated the entire pilpul, rearranging and condensing it so that it formed a shorter and more tightly logical structure. He added nothing new to the insights, but Rabbi Mordechai Ze’ev realized that only an outstanding Torah scholar could have understood what he had said and reorganized it so effectively.

“He is a great man,” Rabbi Mordechai Ze’ev thought, “but he does not want to be honored for his knowledge.”

For the remainder of Pesach, Rabbi Mordechai Ze’ev treated Rabbi Eliyahu with great respect.

On the morning of the day following Pesach, Rabbi Eliyahu’s room was empty. He had left Zalkava before dawn. On the table was a receipt listing the amount of money that Rabbi Mordechai Ze’ev had spent on feeding him, and neatly stacked next to it was a number of coins.

The weeks and months slid along and the towns and villages slipped by. Rabbi Eliyahu continued his passage across the face of Europe. One spring, he saw lumberjacks riding down a broad, slow river, riding a raft made of tens of logs, with a little hut and a dog that barked furiously at the people on shore.

In Slutsk, Rabbi Eliyahu stayed at the house of a family where a young woman took on the responsibility of caring for his needs. Outside the house grew a tree that bore tiny, hard pears, and these, dried until they turned as sweet as sugar, were cooked with a stick of cinnamon so that their fragrance filled the house.

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When Rabbi Eliyahu was ready to go, he pressed payment upon the woman.

"No, we cannot take it. It was our mitzvah."

"May you be blessed with Torah and greatness," Rabbi Eliyahu said.

After he left, she found full payment for all the days he had stayed tucked under the tablecloth.

Her grandson was Rabbi Shalom Lampert, and the family attributed his Torah knowledge and wealth to the blessing of Rabbi Eliyahu.

A folk tradition tells that once on his travels, Rabbi Eliyahu came to a village inn. Situated at the top of a hill, the inn faced an expanse of orchards and fields of grain and vegetables through which ran a narrow river. All of these, as well as the inn, were owned by a poritz--a Polish squire. Because of the vast view that the inn afforded, it was known as The Outlook Inn.

The innkeeper was a broad-chested Jew wearing a padded jacket and polished boots. In the yard to the side of the house stood a chicken coop, and two boys in ragged knickers were running about, playing goat and wolf.

"Welcome, honored guest!"

In the clear air, the innkeeper's voice rang out clean and loud.

Behind him the door opened a crack and from the dark interior appeared a broad, tanned faced underneath a maroon kerchief; and then the door closed again.

"I see you are a scholarly man. My wife will fix up the bed in the best room."

Later on, Rabbi Eliyahu sat in his bright, airy room. The walls had been whitewashed and the bedding was fresh. Outside the window, clouds sailed high in the light blue sky. Hawks hovered, their tufted wings floating on the shifting air currents; and far away, a wagon pulled by two oxen crawled across a rough bridge that had been thrown over the narrow river.

Rabbi Eliyahu closed the bright green shutters and in the darkened room opened a Gemara and glanced rapidly at its pages. He paid no heed when he heard, a half hour later, the sound of a wagon rolling up before the inn and, in the room below, raised voices.

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The squire, Pani (Sir) Miskeitovich, entered the inn. "Feivish!" he called out.

The innkeeper stepped out of the kitchen. His face was pale. "Pani Miskeitovich. I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow."

"Well, here I am today." Miskeitovich drew off his kidskin gloves and tucked them into his belt. "Just bring the horses around and make up my room, will you?"

"Your room." Feivish swallowed. "Yes."

The room that Rabbi Eliyahu was staying in was supposed to be reserved for Pani Miskeitovich so that it would be ready for him whenever he came. But for years, Miskeitovich travelled through his property and to the market in Lublin on regular days. On those days when Feivish knew that the squire was not coming, he had begun renting it out to Torah scholars.

Behind him, he heard a rustle, and he knew that his wife must be standing by the door, listening in.

Feivish realized that while he still has a chance, he must rush upstairs and tell the guest to change his room immediately. If the squire knew that the room had been rented out--and to a Jew--Feivish might lose the inn altogether and be forced off the estate.

But on the other hand, could he allow himself to disgrace a Torah scholar by chasing him out of his room? Would he make all his decisions based on fear?

Feivish raised his eyes to Miskeitovich, his face chalky. "Your room is--occupied, Pani Miskeitovich."

Miskeitovich gazed back at Feivish. Astonishment blended into wrath. "Occupied! Occupied by whom?"

"A great scholar, whom I am obligated to honor."

"A great scholar," repeated Miskeitovich scornfully. "You mean a dirty Jew, don't you, Feivish?"

"He is a Jewish scholar, that is correct, sir."

"How dare you put a Jew in my room? Get him out, immediately!"

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Miskeitovich's face had turned red, and blue veins stood out on his temple.

Feivish felt a queer combination of sensations: he had lost all his strength, yet he was calm. The room spun about him and he said in a voice that seemed to issue from his mouth of its own accord, "I am afraid that I cannot insult my guest, Pani Miskeitovich."

"You throw that dirty Jew out or you'll live to regret it!" "I will not throw him out," Feivish said in a brave voice that quavered on the final syllable--"not even if you fire me."

Behind him there was a rustle, the creak of a door and his wife's low, desperate voice: "Feivish!"

"Well then, I'll throw him out myself. And believe me, by all the saints, I will fire you. I'll make you sorry you ever set eyes on me. And don't think you'll ever find work within a hundred versts of here."

Behind him, the door creaked again. "Feivish!"

The squire pounded up the stairs. He threw open the door and the light from the hall shone onto the face of Rabbi Eliyahu. The anger of the squire evaporated suddenly. "I--beg your pardon." He softly shut the door and stepped backward. Feivish and his wife heard his steps, hesitant and soft, coming back down the stairs.

At the foot of the stairs, Miskeitovich looked at Feivish. "You are right," he said in a sober voice. "This is a holy man of Hashem. It will be my honor to have him stay in my room."

Rabbi Eliyahu travelled southwestward until he came to Prussia. The sky was almost continuously covered by a low cover of clouds, and everything seemed a dirty gray. It was already the afternoon of the fast of Esther. Tonight would be Purim, and Rabbi Eliyahu was miles from a town where he could find a minyan to read the Megillah. Behind him, the road emerged from the darkness of a forest, and ahead, it curved around a stony hill. A bright patch in the clouds, like a silver coin, shone over his left shoulder: the sun, sinking into the west.

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Then, out of the forest came a wagon. Rabbi Eliyahu hurried back to meet it. The driver had a wizened face with a wisp of a white beard, and he wore a faded, yellow vest and a round cap. Behind him, balanced precariously on the wagon, were tens of whiskey jugs.

"Can you take me to a town with Jews?" Rabbi Eliyahu said. "I'll pay you well."

The man hesitated and scratched his sunken cheek.

Rabbi Eliyahu took out a coin and held it up in the metallic light.

The man pulled on the reins and the black, mange-ridden horse stopped and pawed at the air. "All right. Get on and mind you don't let any of the jugs fall."

Rabbi Eliyahu climbed onto the back of the wagon. They travelled on slowly and were now going over a stretch of road filled with small stones. The sun had already sunk to the horizon, and a gray darkness was seeping over the land. "Do we have far to go?"

The peasant didn't turn around. "Not more than a mile or two--Hey!"

Something had snapped, and the wagon lurched over. "Hold onto the jugs!"

The front of the wagon crashed into the ground, and beneath Rabbi Eliyahu, the jugs of whiskey hurtled onto the rocky road. Rabbi Eliyahu was hurled off the wagon and fell amidst the smashed jugs. Fumes of vodka permeated the air as the peasant yelled, and the horse skittered.

As Rabbi Eliyahu picked himself up, the peasant rushed at him. "You fool, couldn't you hold the jugs? Look at this, it'll cost me hundreds of gulden!" He was still holding the horsewhip, and he struck Rabbi Eliyahu across the chest.

Without reacting, Rabbi Eliyahu took hold of his bundle and hurried away from the driver, who ran after him for a hundred feet, before he turned back to his wagon.

Rabbi Eliyahu hurried on the darkening road, limping painfully, only concerned that he reach the town in time to hear the Megillah with a minyan.

It was a small town, where maybe fifty Jews lived and twice the number of

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gentiles.

"A happy Purim!" Rabbi Eliyahu said to a Jew in a cap with a short visor and high boots. "Where is the shul?"

The Jew looked at Rabbi Eliyahu curiously. "That way, about five houses down."

Rabbi Eliyahu hurried along the dirt road to a building outside of which men were talking and children raced about.

He entered the synagogue, but services were over. He had missed the Megillah reading.

Rabbi Eliyahu came out and said to the men at the synagogue entrance, "I haven't yet read the Megillah. Could you come in to make a minyan?"

But they laughed.

"I'll pay you," Rabbi Eliyahu said. "Look, I'll give you two gold coins."

This had an effect on the men. "Well, if you pay us in advance..."

"Certainly."

Rabbi Eliyahu took two coins out of his purse.

"Good. Let me round up a few more guys."

Ten minutes later, nine men walked into the synagogue. "Here we are," said the man who appeared to be their leader.

He nodded significantly, and Rabbi Eliyahu handed him the two golden coins--a considerable sum.

Taking the Megillah out of its case, Rabbi Eliyahu made the blessing and began to read.

"Oho!" one of the men called out. "I like your accent!"

"That's because he's a Litvak," another man echoed. "Litvaks have a spessel way of talking."

"Oh stop," said another man. "You're saming him."

"Oh, yes, he's a Litvak--a sarp-tongued Litvak!"

Laughing, the men poured out of the synagogue. "When you're finished,

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lock the sul!"

Rabbi Eliyahu had to continue reading alone.

Many years later, whenever Rabbi Eliyahu told this story, he would cry at length over the sorrow he had felt at having to read the Megillah without a minyan.

Rabbi Eliyahu continued his journeys, until he came to Hamburg. Here, he visited Rabbi Rafael Hacoen, author of Toras Yekusiel and rabbi of the three communities of Altona, Hamburg and Wandesbak, known by the acronym of Ahu.

According to this story, after Rabbi Eliyahu discussed Torah with Rabbi Rafael for a while, Rabbi Rafael realized that his guest is a giant in Torah.

"My whole life," Rabbi Eliyahu confided to Rabbi Rafael, "I have not been able to understand a certain sugya in Kodshim, the order of the Talmud dealing with sacrifices. Perhaps you could help me."

When Rabbi Rafael examined the difficult question, he realized from its style who his anonymous guest must be.

"You are Eliyahu of Vilna, whose name is famous all over the world!" Rabbi Rafael exclaimed. "If you do not understand something, how can I be expected to do so?"

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "Every day, we await the coming of the Moshiach and the reinstatement of the Beis Hamikdash. Then you, as a cohen, will be called up to serve and offer sacrifices. And so how can you not be an expert in Kodshim?"

And before Rabbi Eliyahu left, Rabbi Rafael promised that he would learn Kodshim in great depth.

A folk tale tells that at one inn where he was staying, Rabbi Eliyahu was suspected of having stolen silver. A search of his belongs turned up nothing, but he was severely beaten nevertheless. And at last, the stolen object was discovered elsewhere.

Another story tells that one night, when the branches of the trees seemed like hands raised to receive a white benediction of lightly falling snow, Rabbi Eliyahu came to a remote mountain village. Although it was very late, he did not

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want to lodge in the inn, but instead asked a peasant if any Jews lived in the village. The peasant pointed out a house at the far end of the street. Walking in the soft, wet snow, Rabbi Eliyahu made his way through the small village and knocked at the door.

“Who is it?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied in Yiddish, “A Jew.”

The man opened the door, and looked Rabbi Eliyahu up and down. “Why should a Jew be travelling so late at night?” he asked suspiciously. Behind the man, a girl strode up noiselessly. “Who is it, father?”

“It’s a stranger, Masha. He wants lodging for the night.”

The girl looked over her father’s shoulder at Rabbi Eliyahu. “Why don’t you let him in, father?”

The man shut the door. Rabbi Eliyahu could hear their voices. “Because I don’t know who he is!”

“But father, you can see that he is a refined man. He looks like a scholar. It’s freezing outside, and he’ll catch his death--!”

There was a pause. Then--“Very well, Masha. Because you want it.”

The chain rattled again, and the door opened up. “Come in,” the man said. “Please forgive me for not having let you in right away.”

The next morning, Rabbi Eliyahu woke with a fever, and he could not get out of bed. He learned that the man lived here alone with his daughter. For a few days, the dedicated girl took care of Rabbi Eliyahu, bringing him food and making sure that he was warm enough.

One day, Masha listened to Rabbi Eliyahu tell her father how important it is to be aware of the specialness of being a Jew--even while one lives in the midst of gentiles.

“All of the good that comes to the nations is only for the sake of Israel,” Rabbi Eliyahu explained. “And this is because the essence of creation and goodness is for the sake of Israel. The verse in Bereishis says, ‘The earth was void’--on which

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our sages comment, 'These are the deeds of the wicked' (Bereishis Rabbah 2:7). That is to say, according to the deeds of the wicked, the world should have been devoid of all good.

"But the chumash continues, 'And G-d said, Let there be light.' These are the deeds of the righteous. That is, for the sake of Israel--the righteous--light was created. And in Israel's merit, even the wicked gentiles make use of it" (Rus 1:6).

Masha was inspired by Rabbi Eliyahu's words, and she timidly brought out a poem that she had written, in which she expressed her love for the people of Israel in her own untutored words:

A heart that beats more strongly  
Than the tides of the world,  
An arm which embraces my people,  
Eyes which seek G-d...  
Without these, how can a Jew speak?

My people, you are candles  
And your hearts are flaming.  
The wicks are charred  
But how beautiful their light.

For the next few days, the young girl prepared warm and nourishing food for Rabbi Eliyahu--at first rice boiled in milk and, when his strength returned, noodle pudding and bread on which chicken fat was spread.

At last, Rabbi Eliyahu recovered his strength. One morning, when the rays of the distant sun caressed the countryside with a cold, golden glow, Rabbi Eliyahu took his leave of his host. "Your daughter took care of me in my illness. With what sort of husband shall I bless her: with a man of wealth or a Torah scholar?"

The man replied, "The Torah is better than any wealth."

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Rabbi Eliyahu gave the girl his blessing, and she soon was engaged to a young man who became one of the leaders of the generation.

Another folk story tells how Rabbi Eliyahu one day passed the castle of a squire. The squire was a man who took pleasure in abusing Jews, and he sent his servants out to take hold of the passing Jew and bring him into the castle. When Rabbi Eliyahu stood silently in the large room, the squire commanded him to sing the zemirah, Mah yafis.

This was a demand that Christian landlords often made of their Jewish subjects in order to humiliate them. Jews who would subserviently try to please such masters became known as "Mah yafis Jews." And this is why, although the zemirah is still printed in the siddur, it is never sung.

Rabbi Eliyahu began to sing in a tone of voice that brought fear into the squire's eyes. The man's calm self-assurance disappeared like a stone thrown into a lake. He stood motionless, then rolled his eyes until only the whites showed and fell to the tile floor. From behind him, in the flicker of the fireplace, his two servants rushed forward nervously to pick him up.

As they lifted him, the squire opened his eyes. He shook off his servants and begged Rabbi Eliyahu to forgive him. "I promise," he urged Rabbi Eliyahu, "that from this moment on, I will always act well to the Jews."

And not only did he do so, but his descendants as well.

Rabbi Eliyahu travelled from village to town, from town to city, amidst Jew and non-Jew, pious and worldly, learned and ignorant. He saw the conditions of life in all their hues: all aspects of courage, sadness, resolution, charity and restraint. He saw how human beings create environments of goodness and evil, of breadth and suffering. Always he was wrapped in his tallis and tefillin, which surrounded him with a nimbus of purity, and words of Torah were always on his lips and in his heart. Once, it is told, a tired driver asked Rabbi Eliyahu to take over the reins, and the surprised Jews of the town stared at the saintly figure in tallis and tefillin that rode a rude wagon onto their streets.

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On one journey between cities, Rabbi Eliyahu passed fields on which were planted long rows of red and orange peppers shining amidst dusty leaves. In the late afternoon, the wagon driver drifted into sleep, and the horse turned onto the field and began nibbling the succulent leaves.

The farmer, a thick gentile in a torn jacket and gray, peaked cap, came running to the wagon, leaping between the vegetable rows. He reached the back of the wagon where Rabbi Eliyahu was sitting, and with a calloused, grimy hand slapped Rabbi Eliyahu. "Stupid Jew! Look what you've done to my vegetables!"

Rabbi Eliyahu had the impulse to respond, "It is not my fault. The wagon driver is responsible." But he restrained himself and sat mute before the peasant's tirade.

In telling this story in later years, Rabbi Eliyahu said, "I remained silent, for to blame the wagon driver would have made me an informer. And then I would have had to suffer being reincarnated as a barking dog, and nothing--neither my Torah learning nor my mitzvos--could have saved me."

In Lissa, Rabbi Eliyahu ended his anonymous wanderings. When he announced his identity, the people were awed, and tremulously they came before him to gaze upon his countenance. In great honor, Rabbi Eliyahu was escorted from the city upon a carriage with white silk cushions.

Rabbi Eliyahu's passage would take him through Berlin, the capital city of Prussia. The community leaders of Lissa sent a messenger to Berlin announcing the imminent arrival of the great scholar.

One of the leaders of Berlin's Jewish community was Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi, a wealthy man who supported the poor and those learning Torah. For years after his death, his name was mentioned in synagogues on his yahrzeit in gratitude for his charity.

When Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi received this letter, he sent a message to the toll taker on the bridge into Berlin: "When a man named Eliyahu arrives, inform me as quickly as you can, for I wish to bring him to my home."

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Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi meanwhile sent word to all the Torah scholars of Berlin.

Berlin had three great universities whose rector lived near Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi and was on good terms with him. When the rector heard that Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi was making elaborate arrangements, he grew curious.

In Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi's receiving room, with its gold-leaf cornices and murals of birds of paradise amidst puffy clouds, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi told the rector, "Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna is famous as a man who is expert not only in our Torah, but who fully comprehends all the sciences. And he is in addition a man of extraordinary piety."

The rector, a man with a flattened, bald skull ringed with white tufts of hair, brushed snuff off his vest and returned his snuffbox to his tight vest pocket. "Fascinating."

Rabbi Eliyahu arrived in Berlin that Friday afternoon, and the toll taker directed him to the home of Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi.

Rabbi Eliyahu's carriage rolled down broad streets between gray mansions, with rows of tall windows behind which showed tulle curtains.

On Friday night, Rabbi Yaakov gave a feast which all the Torah scholars of Berlin attended.

From his window, the rector looked with excitement at the Jewish intellectuals who had come to see the visiting rabbi. Could this man really be as brilliant as Yaakov Tzvi had made him out to be?

The rector donned his formal coat and top hat, and went into the vestibule. "Hans, I am going out." His servant placed a silver-headed cane into his hand.

In of Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi's dining room, the guests sat on chairs whose legs were carved to look like an eagle's claws clutching a round ball.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi came up to the rector. "It is a happy surprise to see you on our Sabbath."

"You said that your visiting rabbi is a great scholar and scientist."

"Yes."

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"There is an astronomical conundrum that we in the university have been struggling with for three years. Perhaps your rabbi could shed some light on it."

"I will ask him if he will see you," said Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi, "but I cannot do so right away. On the Sabbath, he prefers to consider holy matters."

Throughout Shabbos, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi was afraid to disturb Rabbi Eliyahu. But at the third meal, he told Rabbi Eliyahu of the rector's request. "And," he added, "I believe that were you to answer the rector's question, this would sanctify the name of heaven and raise the status of the Jews."

And Rabbi Eliyahu acquiesced.

As soon as Havdalah was over, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi sent a message to the rector.

Putting on his white gloves, the rector rushed out on short legs to the mansion of his neighbor across the boulevard.

With a translator standing between them, the rector presented his question to Rabbi Eliyahu. The translator, a learned Jew, described the rector's question. As he spoke, Rabbi Eliyahu traced figures and diagrams on a sheet of paper. As soon as the translator finished speaking, Rabbi Eliyahu responded at length, pointing out various elements of his diagram. As he spoke, the rector's eyes shone and his cheeks flushed with joy.

His body trembling with excitement, the rector bowed stiffly and curtly before Rabbi Eliyahu. "Thank you so much, Herr Rabbi! I am most grateful for your astonishing help!"

Yaakov Tzvi and a few other men accompanied the rector out of the house. As the rector was half-way down the marble steps, he told Yaakov Tzvi, still holding his top hat in his hand and his eyes still shining with delight, "Do not think that your guest is a man. He is an angel of the Lord, a heavenly being! In a few words, he has enlightened my eyes and solved a problem that we had thought might never be deciphered."

That night, the rector sent messages to all the members of his academy. A

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few professors met that evening in the rector's library. They decided that tomorrow morning, the entire staff and student body of the university, holding torches, would march to Rabbi Eliyahu and pay him homage in the German custom.

But the next morning, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi sent a message to the rector: "Rabbi Eliyahu is no longer in Berlin. At dawn, while I was still asleep, he left the city."

It is told that on the journey that took him back to Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu stayed in one village at an inn whose keeper was known as a pious and heaven-fearing man.

It was the custom of Rabbi Eliyahu to investigate the melamed, the children's teacher, wherever he arrived. "Just see the difference between a slaughterer and a melamed," Rabbi Eliyahu used to say. "Before a slaughterer is allowed to practice his craft, he is tested seven times. He must prove that he is fit to slaughter the animal or fowl, he must present a document signed by a known rabbi, and he must show himself to be a heaven-fearing man. But when a man claims that he is a melamed, children are placed in his care without any investigation if he is fit to engage in such a demanding and holy work."

The melamed, a man named Rabbi Moshe Iviyer, lived in the inn. When the inn-keeper took Rabbi Eliyahu to Rabbi Moshe's room, Rabbi Eliyahu instantly recognized him to be a hidden tzaddik.

Rabbi Eliyahu closed the door behind him, and the men spent a few hours together.

The next morning, Rabbi Eliyahu summoned the inn-keeper. "Please summon Rabbi Moshe Iviyer. I want him to take me to the mikveh."

"A simple melamed?" said the inn-keeper. "I would consider it a great honor to accompany you myself."

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "Know that this melamed, whom you believe to be simple, is greater than you and I."

When the melamed came to Rabbi Eliyahu, Rabbi Eliyahu told him, "Rabbi

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Moshe, the time has come for you to reveal yourself.”

And from that time forward, Rabbi Moshe Iviyer became well-known.

In later years, Rabbi Moshe occasionally traveled to Rabbi Eliyahu. One of Rabbi Moshe’s followers asked him, “Why do you trouble yourself?”

Rabbi Moshe replied, “I think of myself as a man who knows the Torah. But that is only until I come to Vilna. When I stand on Rabbi Eliyahu’s threshold, I have a sense of what knowing Torah really is.”

Rabbi Eliyahu was weak and in a hurry to return to Vilna, and he hired a wagon driver to carry him day and night. With a few extra coins, he persuaded the driver to stop every time he had to pray.

One afternoon, as Rabbi Eliyahu stood by the side of the road reciting Shmoneh Esrei, the wagon driver pulled away, carrying all of his belongings.

When Rabbi Eliyahu opened his eyes, he was alone on a deserted stretch of road. The wagon had not even left tracks in the hard, cold earth, as though it had never existed at all.

Rabbi Eliyahu returned at last to Keidan by foot--weak and empty-handed. He was now about twenty-five years old.

From Keidan, he travelled with Channah, his wife, and their children to Vilna.

Here he moved into the apartment that he would live in for the rest of his life, in the complex of buildings surrounding the Synagogue Courtyard.

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CHAPTER FOUR:

RABBI ELIYAHU SETTLES IN VILNA

Rabbi Eliyahu, secluded in his study room, lived in the heart of Jewish Vilna.

Here was the Great Synagogue that the entire community prayed in, and here were a number of study halls--kloizen. The most famous of these was called the Old Kloiz, which had been built three hundred years earlier. The scholarly and wealthy YEhudah, SOfer veDayan (Yehudah, Scribe and Judge), known by his initials as Yesod, was in the process of having a new beis medrash built, which would open up to the old one.

In the courtyard was a slaughterhouse and nearby a public bath and toilets. Here the sole source of water for the Jews of Vilna was brought in through wooden pipes from the Vingari wells, owned by the Dominican monks, and waste water was piped out to the river.

The Jews of Vilna were governed by a set of officers known as the Kahal. In an office abutting the beis medrash, they held their meetings.

One of the synagogues near the home of Rabbi Eliyahu was known as "Seven Called," for no more than seven people were allowed to be called up to the reading of the Torah on Shabbos morning. It was in this building that the beis din met in judgement, and a prison cell was located in an attic. Besides this, attached to the wall in the vestibule directly outside the entrance to the Great Synagogue was a pillory: a metal band called a kuna that could fit about a man's neck.

In these buildings, there was also a hekdesch: a combination hospital and hostel for the poor, where between ten and twenty people could be cared for.

Opposite, were other kloizen and chaderim where children learned.

The courtyard was always filled with merchants, scholars, porters drawing water, and people on the way to and from prayer.

Here were men of passion and judgement, fools and travellers, luftmenschen and men of wealth, artisans selling their wares, Kahal officials and

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visitors to the public bath. In this crowded, treeless warren of courtyards and alleys seethed a microcosm of Jewish life filled with poverty, whose inner wealth shone from the faces of its inhabitants.

A sign over double doors read Gemillas Chesed; an old woman dozed in a chair, resting her hands on a cane; in a synagogue, an old man learned over a shtender, wearing a shiny, bulky leather cap with a shiny, straight visor, white hair flowing over his shoulders.

Outside Rabbi Eliyahu's house, in the cobblestone yard, a little girl in shoes with broken straps drew water from a well; a yeshiva student in a cap skipped past; plaster was peeling off a building, exposing the bricks.

Amidst the milling crowd, a toothless beggar wrapped in rags, a shawl over his head, held a cap in his hand. And on the other side of the court, a woman organ grinder was accompanied by a twelve year old boy, who was beating a tambourine with a stick.

Outside the bathhouse, puddles riddled the ground. A watercarrier bore a straight yoke across his back, from which two wooden buckets hung on poles.

And here, in his private study, Rabbi Eliyahu continued his learning. He learned alone, for he had no students until the age of forty. (Once, Rabbi Moshe Koerner of Zlatve, author of Zera Kodesh, asked Rabbi Yoel of Amtzislav, one of Rabbi Eliyahu's students, why the sages' dictum, "A man may learn only with others," is not cited as halachah. Rabbi Yoel replied that nowadays we learn from seforim, and there is no greater comrade than they. But Rabbi Eliyahu also taught that "To understand something, one should have a good comrade, so that one may speak the matter out.") It was during this time as well that he wrote his many works.

However, Rabbi Eliyahu did teach a number of shiurim.

One day, after Rabbi Eliyahu delivered his shiur on a difficult sugya in the Gemara, the other scholars asked him a number of questions. Rabbi Eliyahu repeated his shiur, adding a hint that this should answer their questions.

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The other scholars weren't satisfied.

Rabbi Eliyahu again repeated his shiur without addressing himself to their questions. And again the scholars were dissatisfied.

Rabbi Eliyahu repeated the shiur ten times. At last, the scholars realized that he had addressed and answered all their questions from the very first time.

Rabbi Eliyahu would sleep three times during the night for no more than half an hour, even when he was ill. And even when he slept, his lips moved, murmuring halachah and aggadah. He used to say that Hashem created sleep only so that a person might attain that which he could not reach while the soul is tied to the body. These matters are revealed to a person in his sleep, when his soul is free.

Then Rabbi Eliyahu would immediately rise like a lion. Standing before Hashem in fear, he would wash his hands. Continuing to stand, he would learn for more than eight hours until daybreak, reciting the Gemara and halachah in a sweet and awesome, fiery voice that filled whoever heard it with awe and feelings of holiness.

Rabbi Eliyahu would then wash his hands for the morning prayers. With his own minyan, he recited the Sh'ma in a melodious voice, pronouncing the words clearly and exactly, having in mind the most exalted spiritual meditations. He was even careful about pronouncing the meteg correctly. Whoever heard him pray, whether on a weekday or on Shabbos, was filled with a spirit of knowledge and fear of heaven that would last for years. Even if a person's heart was as hard as a rock, it would melt like wax when he heard Rabbi Eliyahu's prayer.

After prayers, Rabbi Eliyahu learned the parshah of the week together with the accompanying Targum. Then he ate breakfast and slept a bit. And then he immediately rose, as though a king were awakening him. In great awe, he sat down to learn the entire day until minchah.

Every day, Rabbi Eliyahu reviewed a hundred pages of the Gemara, and every month he went through the entire Babylonian Talmud. During each holiday, he learned the tractate on the holiday, and every Shabbos he went through the

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tractates of Shabbos and Eiruvim.

He reviewed each chapter and tractate that he learned hundreds, even thousands, of times. One night in the winter month of Teves, when the nights are long, he spent the entire night going over one mishnah.

And he learned Kabbalah with equal diligence. He reviewed the section of the Zohar called Raya Mehemna times without number until he could literally count its letters.

If he wasted even a minute from the learning of Torah, he marked it down in a book. Then, on the eve of Yom Kippur, he would take out the notebook and, weeping and confessing, he would count up the minutes that he had, in his own estimation, wasted. The total never came to three hours.

Rabbi Eliyahu said that when a person awakens in the morning and wholeheartedly accepts upon himself for that day the yoke of Torah, deciding that he will not let anything get in his way, then all barriers will fall before him that day.

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that one should learn Mikra (Tanach), aggadah and midrash, for they contain the treasure house of fear of heaven.

He also taught that one should learn ethical works a few times a day. He loved Menoras Hamaor and Chovas Hel'vovos (in place of its section called Shaar Hayichud, he substituted the first section of Hakuzari, which contains some of the essential teachings of the Jewish faith).

Rabbi Eliyahu also had words of praise for Mesillas Yesharim. After he learned the sefer, he said, "A great light has passed from the world" (the Ramchal passed away in 5506--1747). He learned this sefer 101 times. He said that usually a book is greater than its author, but in this case, the author is several times greater than his book. "If the Ramchal were still alive," Rabbi Eliyahu said, "I would go to him by foot to learn ethics and good character."

Rabbi Eliyahu continued his practice of meditating during the summers in a hut in the forest, outside of Vilna.

By 5507 (1748), Rabbi Eliyahu was, among other leaders of the community, a

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member of the Chevra Kaddisha, the burial society.

Rabbi Eliyahu continued to wear tefillin throughout the day and he held that everyone should do so, even while engaged in business. He was sorry, he said, that people were nullifying the essence of the mitzvah of tefillin, which are meant to be worn the entire day. "Today," Rabbi Eliyahu said, "no one should be afraid that he will be suspected of showing off his piety. To the contrary, as long as one is not totally different from others, it is good to publicize this mitzvah--as long as everything one does is for the sake of heaven."

As for those who were afraid of showing off, he said, they should at least wear the hand tefillin. "But it is better," he said, "to make small tefillin that one can cover."

Another halachah that Rabbi Eliyahu wanted to restore to full observance was the blessing of the cohanim, which is said daily in Eretz Yisrael, but outside the land only on the major holidays. "There are two things for whose sake I would travel from town to town and give up my regular learning and prayer schedule," he said. "And one of these is to influence people to say birkas cohanim every day." (The other concerned one of the charamim of Rabeinu Gershom [Hagaon Hachassid, p. 107, note 65].)

Rabbi Eliyahu kept all the halachos with all their strictures. He even kept those customs that were discussed in the Gemara but not cited as halachah by the Shulchan Aruch.

He said that if the sages have taught that something should be done for a particular reason, one should do it even if the reason is no longer applicable, for the sages had many hidden reasons that they did not reveal.

Fearing that as a first-born he may not have been properly redeemed by a cohen, Rabbi Eliyahu had himself redeemed from a number of cohanim, in particular from Rabbi Meir Hacohen Rapaport, who came from a family with a very reliable genealogy. He also changed the custom, giving a number of coins--six rubles--as an actual present to the cohen (unlike the custom that the coins originally

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belong to the cohen).

There were other things that Rabbi Eliyahu did in regard to cohanim. He bought a first-born animal and gave it to Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Romshishak, a cohen, making the blessing of "shehechiyanu."

He had a calf slaughtered and gave the cohen's portion (the maw, foreleg and jaw) to a cohen, again making the blessing of "shehechiyanu."

"Please carry these about in public," he told Rabbi Aryeh Leib, "so that everyone may see."

Rabbi Eliyahu also went out of his way to keep the mitzvahs of farming. Once he asked Rabbi Aharon of Virshipeh to give him a parcel of land four amos square. He had a fruit tree planted here. For three years, he kept orlah by not eating the fruit, and in the fourth year he kept neta rev'i by redeeming the fruit.

Rabbi Eliyahu also bought a field of wheat that was specially guarded for shmurah matzah. In the early spring, he travelled with the members of his minyan to reap it. He left unreaped stalks at the end of the field as peah; he did not pick up stalks that fell, leaving them for the poor as leket; and he gave a tenth to the poor as maaser.

Rabbi Eliyahu received a stipend from the fund that his great-great-great-grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Rivkes, had created for full-time scholars. Shortly after that, he was tested by the scholars of the Kahal and received an additional weekly payment. In addition, he received presents and food parcels for Shabbos and holidays.

But with all of this, Rabbi Eliyahu lived in poverty.

In 5507 (1748), another great fire broke out in Vilna. Three separate fires had started almost simultaneously, and they raced along the streets, spreading quickly along Main Street, German Road, St. Michael's Street, Jewish Street, Glazier's Street, and along the courtyard thoroughways. Joining together, the flames formed one fierce conflagration that burned in the Christian streets and swallowed up the entire Jewish quarter. The Synagogue Courtyard was engulfed in sheets of flame

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and all the buildings about the courtyard were seriously damaged: the Great Synagogue, the main Beis Medrash, the Chevra Kaddisha synagogue, the hospital, baths and many other buildings.

Among these, presumably, were the home of Rabbi Eliyahu.

Many homes and shops were ruined, and Jews were burned to death and suffocated in the thick, hot smoke.

There was also great damage in the Christian quarter. After the fire, the damage was assayed at 469 homes, 15 mansions and 12 churches destroyed.

In the aftermath of the fire, Christian anti-Semites blamed the Jews, because at the time another fire had begun in the house of a Jew--who, however, lived on the other side of the River Vilia. A bureaucrat, Jachimowitz, who was commissioned by the city to draw up a list of the damage, wrote in his official report, "The fires are set by the Jews--those whom we are good to but who rebel against us."

Before a full year had passed and before the charred remnants had been fully repaired, another disastrous fire broke out in 5509 (1749). This fire was largely confined to the Jewish quarter, again ravaging the Synagogue Courtyard, and destroying all the Jewish stores--although most of the merchandise was saved.

This time, the anti-Semites could not say that the fire had been deliberately set by the Jews.

And as though to mark the onslaught of disasters that these years had brought, in 5509 (1749), Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel--who had served as rabbi of Vilna since 5473 (1713)--passed away.

But these disasters were no reason for Rabbi Eliyahu to stop learning. To the contrary, as he wrote, "The first thing is that a person must know that the Torah is our life. Just as fish live in water and die if they are separated from it, so if a person is separated from the Torah for even a minute, he is like a dead person. And that is why the blessing that we say on reading from a Sefer Torah includes the words, 'You have planted within us eternal life'" (Dikdukei Torah).

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It was at this time that another fire burned--a small fire at the foot of the city. On the second day of Shavuot in 5509 (1749), when Jews celebrated the descent of the Torah to Mt. Sinai amidst thunder and lightning, a soul ascended to heaven in the midst of flames.

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that a convert is higher than a born Jew. It is known that a Jew is higher than an angel. An angel is given permission to pronounce the name of Hashem only after saying three words--the word 'holy,' in 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.' A Jew says Hashem's name after only two words: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord...' But a convert says Hashem's name after only one word: 'And Yisro said: 'Blessed is the Lord.'"

On this day, Avraham ben Avraham, formerly Count Valentin Potocki (pronounced Pototzki), was burned at the stake for having converted from Catholicism to Judaism.

Only a few years earlier, Count Valentin Potocki had been a promising young nobleman of a celebrated family. Together with a friend named Zaremba, Potocki went to Paris to study in the university. He was expected to return to Poland with a knowledge of French and an exposure to the most sparkling culture on the Continent.

One day, the two friends entered a wine shop so that they might spend the night inebriated. But they fell into conversation with the owner of the shop, a scholarly Jew who was studying a volume of the Talmud.

The Jew amused them at first, then fascinated them. His wise and pithy sayings so impressed the two young men that they returned to him day after day and finally asked him to teach them the Holy Tongue.

At last the two friends decided that the Jew's wisdom exceeded that which they had found among the priests and professors.

One evening, they clasped each other's hands. "Zaremba," Count Potocki declared in a charged voice, "let us make a pact that if we are convinced that the Christian doctrine is in error, we shall travel to Amsterdam and openly embrace the

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Jewish faith."

Zaremba gazed back into Potocki's eyes. "I swear," he said, and pressed Potocki's hand.

The two young men split up. Potocki travelled to Rome, where he studied in the papal academy. When he recalled the wisdom of the Jewish wine shop owner, the doctrines taught by the prelates seemed forced and disputatious. Potocki travelled to Amsterdam, where he was circumcised and became a Jew.

Zaremba meanwhile had forgotten his youthful vow. He returned to his family in Poland and married the daughter of a rich nobleman. But when he heard the reports, which had spread throughout Lithuania, of the mysterious disappearance of Count Valentin Potocki, Zaremba recalled their talks and his commitment. With his wife and baby boy, Zaremba travelled to Koenigsburg and from there sailed to Amsterdam, where the three of them converted to Judaism. Ultimately, Zaremba settled in Eretz Yisrael, where he passed away.

Avraham ben Avraham, meanwhile, returned to Lithuania and wandered from town to town, finally settling in Ilye, a small town near Vilna.

He spent all his days in the beis medrash, supported together with other Torah scholars by a society of "righteous women."

One day, a little boy disturbed Avraham ben Avraham's prayers and learning. "Quiet, you scamp!" But the boy spoke back impudently and continued to disturb Avraham ben Avraham.

Angrily, Avraham ben Avraham dragged the boy out of the beis medrash. "You crazy coot!" the boy yelled at him. "I know who you are: you're just a convert!"

The boy hurried home on his small, thin legs and angrily told his father, who was a poor tailor, how Avraham ben Avraham had treated him.

The boy's father was incensed. "Who is this former Christian to mistreat my son? I'll fix him!"

The coarse tailor hurried to the mansion of the local squire. "I want to tell

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you, most noble lord, that Count Valentin Potocki, who disappeared some years ago, is in our village as a convert to Judaism....”

When Avraham ben Avraham learned that the tailor had denounced him, he fled Ilye. According to tradition, he cursed the tailor that neither he nor his offspring should be spared affliction for ten generations. A visitor to Ilye in about 1930 reported that all of the tailor’s offspring had some physical defect--being either deaf, mute or lame.

Avraham ben Avraham fled to an inn some miles away, where the innkeeper recognized him. Afraid that he might be arrested for harboring the convert, he scribbled a message and gave it to his servant to deliver to the squire. “The man whom you are seeking....”

The squire’s servants arrested Avraham ben Avraham, placed chains upon his hands and feet, and brought him to the prison in Vilna.

Here he was imprisoned for many months. He was tortured but did not recant his Judaism. His family came to him and pleaded with him to return to Catholicism. But he refused.

According to legend, his mother gained pardon for him from either the pope or the king. But by the time it arrived at the jail, it was too late.

Rabbi Yisrael Kagan--the Chofetz Chaim--told Rabbi Aharon Kotler that after Potocki was sentenced to be burned, Rabbi Eliyahu sent a messenger to his cell. “Rabbi Eliyahu is prepared to use his heavenly power and make use of holy Names to save your life.”

But Avraham ben Avraham shook his head. “Ever since I have recognized the true Lord, I have prayed for the moment when I might fulfill the mitzvah of martyrdom. And now that it has come to me, I do not wish to give it up.”

There is a folk tradition that Rabbi Eliyahu himself visited Avraham ben Avraham in Vilna’s municipal jail. There he found Avraham sitting on his cot, his elbows on his knees and his head bent forward.

“Do not be worried,” Rabbi Eliyahu consoled him. “In a few days you will

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come to the high level for which Rabbi Akiva himself prayed and gave his life. You will go to a world that is all good. A place has already been set aside for you in the heavenly palace of those who sanctify the name of heaven."

Avraham ben Avraham shook his head. "I am pained because I have no holy lineage."

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "Hashem says, 'I am the first and I am the last.' He is the Father of all those who have no lineage."

With these words, a stone rolled off Avraham ben Avraham's heart.

On the second day of Shavuot, Potocki was taken out to be burned. All the Jews of Vilna remained indoors but one, named Leiser (Eliezer) Zhiskes, who had a few days earlier bribed the executioner. Now dressed in peasant clothing and with his beard shaved, he circulated amidst the crowd at the foot of the fortress of Vilna.

Avraham ben Avraham was brought out to the stake before the jeers of the crowd. He was tied to the post and the wood at his feet was set afire. As the flames engulfed his body, he called out the blessing, "Blessed are You, Hashem...Who sanctifies Your name before multitudes."

After the gruesome execution was over, Leiser Zhiskes pushed his way up to the executioner, who handed him the remains of the righteous proselyte: ashes and an unburned finger.

These were later buried in the Jewish cemetery. Over this grave grew a tree with a sinuous double trunk bending over in two opposite directions, with branches that resembled hands and feet. (For over a hundred years, vast numbers of Jews came on pilgrimage to the grave of the ger tzeddek. But Polish vandals repeatedly hijacked at the tree until legionnaires at last chopped it down, and a black mausoleum was erected in its stead.)

When Leiser Zhiskes came to report to Rabbi Eliyahu that he had saved the remnants of Avraham ben Avraham's body, Rabbi Eliyahu blessed him with long life, and he lived to be over a hundred years old--some say, to 112.

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that our service of heaven is not done in order to

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receive reward--for how can we have the audacity to request a reward for serving Him? Hashem took us out of the house of bondage and made us His slaves. It is unthinkable that a life-long slave should ask his master for a reward, when he is completely his master's property. But a person who was not redeemed from Egypt--that is, a convert--does have the right to ask for a reward for his service, for he chose it himself (Commentary on Rus 2:12).

Within a few years of his return to Vilna, by 5510 (1750), Rabbi Eliyahu was known in Vilna as the Chassid--the pious man. This term was given only to the most outstanding men.

When Rabbi Eliyahu heard himself referred to as Chassid, he grew upset. "The only person who can be called a Chassid," he said, "is one who acts before Hashem more strictly than is required. But a person who does everything that is in the Talmud and the four sections of the Shulchan Aruch is called not a Chassid but simply a kosher Jew. Anyone who does less than that has not fulfilled his obligations as a Jew."

It is also said that Rabbi Eliyahu claimed that his brother, Rabbi Avraham, is fit to be called a "Chassid."

One of the "kosher Jews" of Vilna was Rabbi Shmuel ben Avigdor, son-in-law of Rabbi Yehudah Sofer Vedayan (Yesod). In 5509 (1750), he became official chief rabbi of Vilna.

In actuality, Rabbi Yehudah held the post for two years while his son-in-law completed his studies.

This year, there was more tragic news from the haidamacks. They continued their bloody rampages, and destroyed many towns and villages in Kiev, Volhynia and Podolia, murdering thousands of Jews and Polish squires.

And at about this time, Rabbi Eliyahu's income dwindled until he and his family did not have enough to eat.

Every week, a shammash brought Rabbi Eliyahu his stipend.

One week, the shammash took some of the coins and slipped them into his

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own pocket.

When Rabbi Eliyahu saw that part of his pay was missing, he said nothing. He had total trust in Hashem. And he did not want to shame the shammash, who had earned his right to the post through his learning and good standing in the community.

The shammash was emboldened, and every week he kept some of Rabbi Eliyahu's pay.

One day Channah told her husband, "There is nothing in the house to eat. The children are hungry."

Rabbi Eliyahu responded, "At meal time, go to the neighbors with the children. When they see other children eat, they'll ask to eat too, and that way they'll be fed."

For several years, Rabbi Eliyahu and his family suffered. Then one day, the shammash fell ill. On his deathbed, he made his confession, and Rabbi Eliyahu again received his full pay (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 207).

A short while later, two litigants stood before Rabbi Aryeh Leib Kartinge. One was one of the outstanding men of Vilna, Rabbi Leibele ben Rabbi Bers. Opposite him stood a woman, the wife of Rabbi Noach Mindes, who was called Leah Hagedolah (Great Leah).

Rabbi Leibele said, "Now that we have learned about Rabbi Eliyahu's poverty, I wish to support him."

"But I wish to support him," said Leah Hagedolah.

"And this is your argument?" asked Rabbi Aryeh Leib Kartinge. They nodded at him.

Rabbi Aryeh Leib was unable to bring the two to a resolution, and the matter was given over to the official Vilna judges. (Their decision has not been recorded.)

A number of years passed. In 5515 (1755), Rabbi Eliyahu received a letter from Rabbi Yehonasan Eibeshutz. Rabbi Yaakov Emden had for many years been accusing Rabbi Eibeshutz of being a secret follower of the false moshiach, Shabsai Tzvi. Rabbi Emden claimed that he had opened a few amulets that Rabbi Eibeshutz had written and had found

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indications of belief in Shabsai Tzvi.

Four years previously, the community of Vilna had written an official letter defending the honor of Rabbi Eibeshutz.

Now Rabbi Eliyahu's fame had grown so great that even though he was not an official member of the Vilna rabbinate, Rabbi Eibeshutz wrote to him, asking for his aid. "I have heard of you as a particularly pious, holy and pure light of the Jews, containing all wisdom, understanding and complete knowledge of Kabbalah. Your praise is known across Poland, Berlin and Lissa, and wherever you have been, great things have been told about you. And I now ask you to examine my explanatory commentary [on five amulets] and give your testimony that it is good."

But Rabbi Eliyahu declined to enter the argument. He responded, "These are true and holy commentaries [explaining the meaning of the amulets]...Would that I had the wings of a dove. I would fly over to make peace so that the blazing fire, the strange flame of controversy which is improper, would die down. But who am I, young and from a distant land, that people should listen to my words?"

In 5515 (1755), a second beis medrash, or kloiz, was built by Rabbi Yehudah Sofer Vedayan, the Yesod. It became known as Beis Medrash Yesod.

Meanwhile, the belief in Shabsai Tzvi continued to create trouble. Although Shabsai Tzvi had been dead seventy-five years, there were still many pockets of Jews, particularly in the Volhynia and Podolia districts, who secretly subscribed to his corrupt doctrines and believed that he would be resurrected.

In the same year, Jacob Frank appeared in Podolia and began recruiting followers to a new sect, based on belief in Shabsai Tzvi.

A year later, after his group had engaged in scandalous activities, Frank was arrested by the government and deported to Turkey, and his followers were given over to the Jewish authorities.

In the town of Satanov, scores of followers of Shabsai Tzvi publicly confessed their sins. The rabbis of Eastern Europe excommunicated all those followers of Shabsai Tzvi who

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had not repented. In addition, because their ideas were based on twisted interpretations of Kabbalah, no one was allowed to study the Zohar or the writings of the Ari until he reached the age of forty.

And Jews continued to suffer from Christian persecution.

In Vilna, the gentile municipality continued to press the Jewish community, proposing draconian economic measures.

In 5516 (1756), a crowd of Christian burghers swarmed into the courtyard of the Great Synagogue, right outside Rabbi Eliyahu's house. "Give us our money, Jews!"

A soldier who was standing guard came at the Christians, his face hard and frightened. "Disperse!"

But the burghers jeered. One picked up some old clothing and threw it at the soldier. And then the burghers tore through the Jewish quarter, looting shops and houses.

But gradually, the Jews' economic situation improved.

It was during these years that Rabbi Eliyahu's children were growing.

In 5516 (1756), one of Rabbi Eliyahu's daughters was engaged. For her wedding, she received 300 gold coins from the charity funds of Rabbi Eliyahu Peseles.

But she died before the wedding, and the money was returned to the care of Rabbi Eliyahu's father.

There is also a tradition that one of Rabbi Eliyahu's daughters married Rabbi Yechezkel ben Rabbi Shmuel of Amdur (or Rabbi Yechezkiel ben Rabbi Shmuel Halevi of Boibrisk), but they ultimately divorced--possibly at Rabbi Eliyahu's command, because they had no children (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 379).

At the wedding of one of his sons, Rabbi Eliyahu urged the men to dance before the bride. One man replied, "You dance too." But Rabbi Eliyahu said, "I will dance when the Moshiach comes."

And the followers of Jacob Frank continued their dance of destruction. They turned to Bishop Dembovski in Kamenetz-Podolsk, and in 5517 (1757) demanded to debate the rabbis.

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The church forced a number of rabbis to face Frank in the presence of church officials.

The rabbis were hampered by their fear of offending the priests in their arguments against Frank's hybridization of Catholicism. And so Dembovski and his fellow priests judged that the Frankists had won.

This led to a desolating conclusion. Catholic priests gathered many volumes of the Talmud and burned them in huge bonfires in the market place of Kamenetz.

Two months later, Dembovski died suddenly. This was widely seen as Divine retribution, and the Talmud burnings ceased.

Through all these momentous times, Rabbi Eliyahu continued his learning. On such an exalted level did Rabbi Eliyahu learn that heavenly beings came to instruct him. Once, on the first day of chol hamoed of Succos, Rabbi Eliyahu sat in his succah, his face suffused with a greater joy than usual. Every day a different patriarch is ceremonially invited into the succah; today was the turn of Yaakov Avinu.

"Why are you so happy?" his father asked him.

Rabbi Eliyahu did not want to respond.

But his father insisted, "I command you with the respect that you owe me as your father to tell me."

Rabbi Eliyahu answered, "Very well. Yaakov Avinu was with me today in the succah."

And there is a tradition that Yaakov Avinu kissed Rabbi Eliyahu.

In his writings, Rabbi Eliyahu at times noted insights that had been given to him by Yaakov Avinu, Moshe Rabeinu, Eliyahu Hanavi and others. Every night, Rabbi Eliyahu's soul rose to the heavenly yeshiva where he learned with these exalted figures. And sometimes, they came down to earth while he was awake to learn with him. (Yalkut Reuveni teaches that Yaakov Avinu, like Eliyahu Hanavi, has been special permission to take on physical form and teach Torah to those who fear Hashem.)

Once, someone asked Rabbi Avraham Yishayahu Karelitz--the Chazon Ish--who

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Rabbi Eliyahu's teacher was. The Chazon Ish responded, "Eliyahu Hanavi--and he is a good teacher."

In 5519 (1759), Rabbi Eliyahu's father passed away.

And in the same year, Jacob Frank continued his activities. Returning to Podolia from Turkey, he persuaded the church to summon the rabbis to another public debate. The Frankists brought up six points of belief. And the seventh point was the ancient, anti-Semitic charge that "the Talmud considers the use of Christian blood obligatory."

With the end of this debate, the Frankists converted to Catholicism. (But the Catholics were not satisfied with the beliefs of Jacob Frank. In 5520 (1760), Frank was arrested in Warsaw and after a cross-examination, he was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel, where he remained until 5532--1772.)

And there was more trouble in Vilna. In this year, Vilna suffered another fire, although not as disastrous as those of former years.

One of the houses that burned down belonged to a wealthy and charitable man. Someone asked Rabbi Eliyahu, "Why didn't the mitzvah of having guests protect this man?"

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "This man gave food and drink--achilah and sh'tiyah. But when his guest left, he did not accompany him out of the house--leviyah. The acronym of these three activities is eshel--inn. But without leviyah, the acronym is eish--fire."

As for Rabbi Eliyahu himself, whenever he had guests, he himself would serve them, give them to eat and drink, prepare a place for them to sleep (linah), and, when they left, he would accompany them out.

With fire came poverty, and Rabbi Eliyahu gave all he could to help others.

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that "whoever gives a tenth of his money to charity is assured that he will not be harmed at all. And whoever gives a fifth is assured that he will become wealthy" (Kesser Rosh).

"Charity saves a person who goes on the way in simplicity" (Mishlei 13:6). Charity, Rabbi Eliyahu taught, "protects a person who goes on a path of simplicity. The charity that he does protects him so that he will not stumble" (Mishlei 13:6).

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“When a person is careful in giving charity and opens his hands to the poor,” Rabbi Eliyahu taught, “in the world-to-come, everyone is his friend” (Commentary on Mishlei 19:6).

In addition, “in accordance with how much charity one gives, one’s place in the garden of Eden is broadened” (Mishlei 18:16).

And so, Rabbi Eliyahu taught, “It is good for a person to have some this-worldly dealings and save money and give charity, for when a person has some money, he can easily fulfill his obligation to give charity, and even more” (Mishlei 16:8).

Rabbi Eliyahu never gave less than a fifth of his income to charity.

One day, Rabbi Eliyahu received a letter from Yaakov Sofer of Keidan. Rabbi Sofer had eight or more daughters, and no money. “My first daughter is now ready to get married, and I have no friends or relatives who can help me.”

Rabbi Eliyahu himself collected the dowry and clothing for the girl.

There was another pious scholar, a very private man, in Slutzk who married off all his daughters by imploring Rabbi Eliyahu for help.

And there were many other such cases. When Rabbi Eliyahu was not able to raise enough money himself, he would go to the girl’s relatives and demand that they contribute all that she needed to get married.

Even when Rabbi Eliyahu did not have enough for himself, he gave liberally to others. Often Rabbi Eliyahu would give away his last meal or items in the house, so that he was left with nothing for himself.

There were poor people ashamed to ask those they knew for help, and so they came to Rabbi Eliyahu. And at times, Rabbi Eliyahu was told of prisoners who needed to be redeemed.

Rabbi Eliyahu would summon the relatives of these people and speak to their hearts about the importance of giving charity, not letting them leave until they had promised to help their relatives.

“A person has two goals: to fulfill the verse, ‘fear Hashem and guard His mitzvos,’

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and to do good to people and treat them with kindness, for ‘the world is built on lovingkindness’--and these are the two foundations of the Torah.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE:

### RABBI ELIYAHU GOES TO LAND OF ISRAEL

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that the source of the Torah, its dwelling place and revelation are rooted in Eretz Yisrael. Among the blessings in the parshah of Ki Savo, the chumash says, “you may be superior to all the nations that He has made, for praise, a name and beauty” (Devarim 26:19). Rabbi Eliyahu taught that the Jews are superior to the other nations in the wisdom of the Torah--and this is achieved when the Jews live on their own land, which is blessed with all the blessings and qualities listed in that parshah (Aderes Eliyahu, Devarim 1:6, in Hagaon Hachassid).

Rabbi Eliyahu said that all blessings that come into the world have their source in Eretz Yisrael.

And he said that those who settle in the Holy Land have great merit. “There is a tree of life--for those who cling to the Torah; and the garden of Eden--for those who keep the mitzvos and settle the land” (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 238).

At some point after his father passed away, and while only one of his daughters was married and he still had small children in the house, Rabbi Eliyahu set out for Eretz Yisrael.

He told his family, “When I get to the land, I will send for you.”

Rabbi Eliyahu accepted money from several people to pay for his expenses.

As he had many years ago, Rabbi Eliyahu set out again from his home. Last time, he had gone into exile. Now he was on his way to the promised land.

Rabbi Eliyahu travelled through Prussia and Hungary.

A story is told that along the way, Rabbi Eliyahu passed the village of a hidden tzaddik named Reb Leib the Holy Animal, because he acted wild, like an animal. He didn’t care what people thought of him. He had given away all his money to charity, and so he had been reduced to working in a vodka factory.

Rabbi Eliyahu wrote a letter to Rabbi Leib and gave it to a messenger to deliver. When the messenger entered the small village, he went to some people in the street and told

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 them, "I have a letter for Rabbi Leib."

One of the men replied, "I'm afraid you've come to the wrong village, my friend. There is no Rabbi Leib here."

"But I know there!" the messenger insisted.

One of the men said, "Maybe he means Leib in the vodka factory?"

But the others laughed him down. "Leib in the factory getting a letter? Impossible!"

The messenger searched throughout the village, and at last came to the owner of the vodka factory. "I am looking for Rabbi Leib."

This man too burst out laughing. "There is no Rabbi Leib here, friend, only my Leib the Vodka Maker!"

"All right," said the messenger. "Maybe that's whom I want. Where can I find him?"

"What do you want to talk to him about?" the man asked.

"That's private."

The man looked the messenger up and down. "You look like a learned man. What do you want with Leib?"

"Just tell me where I can find him."

"I'll tell you, but first you tell me why you want to talk to him."

The messenger sighed. "I have a message for him."

"A message? For Leib? From whom?"

"From the Vilna Gaon, who is passing by here on the way to Eretz Yisrael."

The man's face paled. "You're making it up. Let me see the outside of the letter, at least."

The messenger drew the letter out and held it in front of the man.

"To the Rabbi, the man of the Lord, Leib," he read aloud, and he looked back at the messenger soberly. "He works for me in my vodka factory. I'll show you how to get there. But before you go, I want you to tell me how he acted. How can it be that this simple Leib is a man of the Lord...?"

The messenger followed the man's directions to the wooden vodka factory. Inside, a

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 simple-looking man was sitting next to the blazing oven, reciting Tehillim.

“I have a letter for you!” the messenger said, but Leib merely looked up at him. “It’s from Rabbi Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna!”

“The Gaon of Vilna?” muttered Leib. He took the letter and tore it open, read it quickly, and threw it into the fire.

“But what is your answer?” said the messenger.

Leib sat back down and continued reciting Tehillim.

“You have to give me an answer,” the messenger begged. “If I come back with nothing, Rabbi Eliyahu won’t believe that I delivered the letter to you, and I won’t get paid!”

Leib looked up at the messenger. “Tell him that it isn’t necessary.”

“What isn’t necessary?”

But Leib said no more.

As he had promised, the messenger returned to the factory owner and told him what had happened.

The owner hurried down the village main street to the factory.

“Leib!” he called.

Leib was still sitting next to the oven, reciting Tehillim.

“Reb Leib, I want you to tell me what was in the letter that the messenger sent you.”

Leib continued saying Tehillim.

The owner pressed him, and he finally said, “If you don’t tell me what was in the letter, I will take away your job!”

Then Leib replied, “Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna asked me to travel together with him to Eretz Yisrael. But I said that I don’t have to go with him, because he too will come back without getting there.” (A slightly different version appears in Hagaon Hachassid.)

In a similar story, Rabbi Eliyahu is said to have sent a messenger with a letter to a hidden tzaddik named Reb Yaakov, who worked as a water drawer and wood chopper. After Rabbi Yaakov read the letter, he told the messenger, “Tell Rabbi Eliyahu to go outside at midnight and gaze at the sky.”

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Rabbi Eliyahu did so, and he saw an awesome sight: coffins were being carried into and out of Eretz Yisrael. Rabbi Eliyahu understood what the vision meant: those who are fit for Eretz Yisrael will come there even after their death; and those who are not fit will be expelled even after their death.

Rabbi Eliyahu continued travelling and arrived at Koenigsburg, where he wrote a letter to his family in which he expressed his loving and demanding personality:

Please do not be at all sad, as you promised me that you would not, and do not worry.

People go on years-long trips for the sake of earning some money. They leave their wives behind and wander about without anything. But as for me, I am thank heaven travelling to the Holy Land that everyone desires to see, the beloved of all Israel and the beloved of Hashem.

And I am doing well, thank heaven.

I have left behind my children for whom my heart yearns. I have left behind all my precious seforim. Like a stranger in a strange land, I have left everything behind.

But we know that the entire world is no more than vanity, that all of its pleasures are like nothing and that no good will come to those who chase after empty things that can give them nothing.

Do not care for wealth. "There is a wealth that is guarded for its owner for his evil." "As one goes out of the belly of one's mother naked, so will one return."...

And do not desire illusory honor, which is vanity.

Time is also a traitor. It can be compared to a scale, raising that which is light and lowering that which is weighty.

As for the things of this world, people think that they can quench their thirst with them, but it is like drinking salty water: the more one drinks, the more thirsty one becomes. "No one dies without half his desires in his hand" (Koheles Rabbah I)...

In the end, one returns to the dust, to insects and worms, where all one's pleasures

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will turn in the grave to bitterness.

And what is this world itself? All of one's days are filled with anger and pain. At night one cannot sleep, and death is no hope.

One will even be judged for every comment one makes--not even the slightest word will be overlooked.

So I admonish you to dwell alone as much as possible, for the sin of slander is everywhere....

Our sages have said that all of a person's mitzvos and learning do not suffice to make up for his gossip. "What is a person's craft in this world?" ask our sages--"to make himself like a mute" (Chullin)....

In the other world, for each empty word one spoke, one is shot from one end of the universe to the other.

This is merely for unnecessary words.

But as for forbidden words such as slander, scoffing, oaths and vows, controversy and curses--particularly in the synagogue and on Shabbos and holidays--for these one must descend deep into Sheol....

So do not leave the house. When you need to buy something, send a messenger to get it for you, even if you must pay two or three times as much. "Is the hand of Hashem short?" (Bamidbar 11:23). Hashem gives sustenance to all.

On Shabbos and holidays, do not say anything that is not absolutely necessary, for the holiness of Shabbos is very great, "and only with difficulty did they allow one to say Shalom on Shabbos" (Yerushalmi Shabbos and Tosafos Shabbos 113)....

Honor Shabbos as much as when I am with you. Do not scrimp at all, for "all of the food a man will have is determined for him between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, except for Shabbos and holiday expenses" (Beitzah 16).

And I also urge you to guide your daughters to never curse, swear, lie or speak contentiously. Everything must be with peace, love, friendship and softness.

I have a few seforim of ethics in Yiddish. Make sure that they are read constantly,

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particularly on Shabbos. Involve yourselves in nothing but reading such seforim, and always guide the girls with books of ethics....

Guide the girls as well in other things: not to gossip or slander, not to eat and drink without the proper blessings, to recite birkas hamazon and Sh'ma, and to do everything with the proper intention.

The most important thing of all is that the girls not go outside the house, heaven forbid. They must heed and honor you and my mother and all those older than they, and they should do everything that is written in the ethical books.

As for your sons, raise them in a straight and calm manner. Pay the money for their education. Hire a teacher to come to the house and do not scrimp on his salary....

I have also left you seforim. For the sake of heaven, guide the children with goodness and calm.

Take care of their health and make sure that they have enough to eat.

They should first learn all of Chumash, until they know it practically by heart. Do not force it on them, but teach it gently, for a person learns only when he is taught gently and calmly.

Give them pocket money and the like....

Woe! Everyone thinks of leaving his children an inheritance. But there is no advantage to sons and daughters besides their Torah and good deeds.

Read this letter every week, in particular on Shabbos before eating and in the midst of the meal, so that the children do not speak empty words, heaven forbid, and certainly not gossip and the like.

And every moment that a person keeps silent, he merits the hidden light that no angel or any creature can imagine (Midrash).

...For this, a person will be forgiven every sin and saved from the depths of Sheol...

And the best way to be able to do this is to be alone. Do not go out of the house, heaven forbid. Even in the synagogue, it is better that you stay a little while and then leave. It is better to pray in the house, for in the synagogue it is impossible to avoid jealousy and

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hearing empty words and gossip. And one is punished for this...

And particularly on Shabbos and holiday, when people gather to speak, it is better not to pray [there] at all.

Be careful not to go to the cemetery at all, for unclean forces cling there to a person--especially to women. All troubles and sins come from this....

Desire the fear of Hashem.

Do not say, How shall I be able to gain the world to come? "It does not matter if one does much or little, as long as one sets one's heart to heaven" (Berachos 17).

And for the sake of the Lord, donate a fifth of your income--but no more--for charity, as I have commanded and admonished you. When one gives less than that, one transgresses at every moment a number of negative and positive commandments. It is as though one has denied the holy Torah, heaven forbid.

Among my seforim is a Mishlei with a Yiddish translation. For the sake of the Lord, the children should read it every day. It is better than all other works of ethical instruction. They should also always read Koheles in your presence, for there Shlomo Hamelech dismisses the matters of this world.

But the main thing should not be the reading alone, heaven forbid...for this is like one who plants without plowing....

My son-in-law: read before the [children the seforim that] I have mentioned above. And all your learning should be for the sake of heaven....

Learn Avos and in particular Pirkei Avos Derabbi Nasan and Maseches Derech Eretz.

Honor your mother-in-law and honor her mother very much. Treat everyone with good manners, calmly and respectfully.

My dear mother: I know that you do not need my instruction. I know that you are modest. Nevertheless, let the others read this letter to you, for these are words of the living G-d. I ask you very strongly, do not trouble yourself for my sake, as you have promised me.

If Hashem wills and I merit to be in the holy city of Jerusalem by the gate of heaven,

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I will plead for your sake, as I have promised. And if I merit and the Master of Compassion so desires, we shall all see each other.

My wife: honor my mother, as the Torah teaches. It is a criminal transgression to trouble a widow in the slightest way.

My mother: let there be peace between the two of you...

Even if one of you acts incorrectly, forgive one another and live for the sake of Hashem in peace.

My mother: guide my sons and daughters with soft words that they will accept. And take care of them.

My sons and daughters: I command you to honor my mother.

And may there never be heard contention and anger among you, but only peace.

And the Master of Peace will give you, my sons and daughters and my son-in-law and my brothers and all Israel life and peace.

But in Koenigsburg, Rabbi Eliyahu turned back and returned to Vilna.

Many times in the coming years, Rabbi Eliyahu was asked why he did not continue his journey to Eretz Yisrael. Only once did he reply, saying that "I did not have permission from heaven."

Many conjectures have been made. It was clear to Rabbi Elijah, av beis din of Kalish, on the basis of various signs that Rabbi Eliyahu was a spark of the soul of Moshe Rabeinu. And just as Moshe Rabeinu could not enter the land, neither could Rabbi Eliyahu. (But it has been pointed out that others, such as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who were also sparks of the soul of Moshe Rabeinu, did enter Eretz Yisrael.)

Some say that Rabbi Eliyahu wished to go to Eretz Yisrael in order to reinstate rabbinical ordination--semichah. Realizing that he would be unsuccessful, he turned back.

Others say that Rabbi Eliyahu was afraid that on board ship, there would be a danger of wormy bread, and thus he might have to spend Shabbos on the ship without being able to eat three meals with bread.

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Some consider that Rabbi Eliyahu's first Rosh Hashanah in Eretz Yisrael would be on Shabbos. He held that in Jerusalem one blows shofar before a beis din. He was afraid that the other rabbis would not agree with him, and so he would not be able to keep the mitzvah of blowing the shofar for the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

Some believe that Rabbi Eliyahu wanted to be strict regarding the obligation of giving tithes--ma'aser--on land owned by gentiles. But because the Beis Yosef decided otherwise, he felt that he had to return home rather than disagree with the Beis Yosef.

Others say that Rabbi Eliyahu learned that Ashkenazi Jews were being persecuted in Jerusalem, where he wanted to go.

Some months after he had set out for Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Eliyahu's carriage rolled back into Vilna. He was home again.

He sought out those people who had given him money for the trip and returned it to them.

But Rabbi Eliyahu's stress on the importance of making aliyah had a profound impression on his followers. Hundreds of his followers, among them such talmidei chachamim as Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov and Rabbi Yisroel of Shklov, author of Pe'as Hashulchan, moved to Eretz Yisrael both during and after Rabbi Eliyahu's lifetime. Their unified movements for aliyah, along with a similar movement among Chassidim, helped revive the Ashkenazi communities in Eretz Yisrael.

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## CHAPTER SIX:

### RABBI ELIYAHU BEGINS TO TEACH

In 5520 (1760), Rabbi Eliyahu began to teach students.

One can conjecture that this is a possible reason that he was directed from heaven to return from his trip to Eretz Yisrael, where his influence might have been much less.

At this time, Rabbi Eliyahu also ceased to write. From now on, his students took notes from which additional seforim were produced. Ideas and insights came to Rabbi Eliyahu in such profusion that he could not write them all down himself. Once, Rabbi Eliyahu told his students that he had 150 comments on one verse of Shir Hashirim. There was no one who could write everything down, and he himself did not want to devote his time to this.

Rabbi Eliyahu composed more than seventy works on all aspects of Torah knowledge, plus a work on trigonometry. All of his writings were written in a terse style. His students said that his comments are like stars in the sky that appear to be small points of light but which are in actuality great worlds.

Once, a student asked Rabbi Eliyahu, “Why do you write so briefly?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “The Gemara states that the oral teachings may not be written” (Gittin 60b). So Rabbi Eliyahu wrote as little as possible.

Rabbi Eliyahu wrote on all aspects of the Torah: perhaps his most famous work is his Biur Hagra, a commentary on the four sections of the Shulchan Aruch; Aderes Eliyahu on Chumash and commentaries on Nach; the Mishnah (Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin said that Sh’nos Eliyahu contained insights that had not been thought of since the sealing of the Talmud); and on Tosefta, Mechilta, the Talmud, Sifri, Sifra, Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer, Pesikta, Seder Olam Rabbah and Seder Olam Zuta, the Haggadah, and so on.

Of the seventy works that Rabbi Eliyahu wrote, half are on Kabbalah. Once he said that he would not be embarrassed to teach his comments on Kabbalah before the author of the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

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These were commentaries on Sefer Yetzirah, Sifra Detzniusa, the Zohar, Tikkunei Zohar, Pirkei Heichalos, Raya Mehemna, Idra Rabbah and Idra Zuta, Midrash Ne'elam and Zohar Chadash.

And he wrote works on various topics: Maaseh Torah, listing numbered items in the Torah; Dikduk Eliyahu on grammar; Ayil Meshulash on trigonometry; and other works.

But there was one work that Rabbi Eliyahu did not write, despite his desire to do so. He said that there were two things he had wanted to do but his Maker did not agree with him. One was to go to Eretz Yisrael. The other was to write his halachic decisions in a sefer similar in style to the Shulchan Aruch.

Rabbi Eliyahu desired with all his heart to teach others. However, he found only a small coterie of students who would learn with the proper diligence. Rabbi Menashe of Ilye wrote later that “those who claim to have been Rabbi Eliyahu’s students are not telling the truth. Besides the shiurim he gave in the new beis medrash (Yesod), Rabbi Eliyahu did not learn Torah with anyone.”

Even Rabbi Eliyahu’s closest students only spoke with him occasionally, at which time they would present their questions to him and he would answer them.

At about this time, Rabbi Eliyahu’s son, Avraham returned from learning under others and served his father.

One of Rabbi Eliyahu’s daughters was married to Rabbi Moshe of Pinsk (presumably Channah, but if so, she was named after her mother, which would be unusual); Toybe married Rabbi Uri Shraga Feivish of Dobrovna; and Paseh Basyeh married Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Donchin.

Rabbi Eliyahu had a son who married the daughter of Rabbi Yisrael Kisin of Vitebsk. Rabbi Eliyahu and Rabbi Yisrael agreed that Rabbi Kisin, who was very wealthy, would support the couple for three years, and then Rabbi Eliyahu would support them.

According to some, the couple died in their youth in Vitebsk.

In 5522 (1762), Rabbi Yehudah Sofer Vedayan (Yesod), the father-in-law of Vilna’s chief rabbi, Rabbi Shmuel ben Avigdor, passed away. Rabbi Yehudah had served as acting

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chief rabbi for two years and had donated a total of 24,000 gulden to the Kahal, besides another 1,000 gulden for the chevra kaddisha. And he was most remembered for the beis medrash he had built, which was named after him.

The same year, a bitter dispute arose over the rabbinate. Charges were brought that Rabbi Shmuel ben Avigdor was unfit to be rabbi. This dispute continued to rage for almost thirty years, tearing the community into two camps: the officers of the community, the Kahal ("The Community"), who opposed Rabbi Shmuel; and a group that called itself the Hamon ("The Populace"), which supported him.

Although Rabbi Eliyahu stood by the side of the Kahal, he avoided getting embroiled in the controversy.

At that time, there was another commotion amongst the Jews of Lithuania: news spread that the king would soon decree that Jewish men could not marry until the age of 25 and women until the age of 30. Many parents rushed to marry off their children, even if they were very young. A halachic storm broke out over the attempted marriage of a nine-year-old boy. As part of the halachic debate, Rabbi Eliyahu was cited as allowing the practice.

And even as the Jews had to deal with these issues, the next year, there were more outrages against the Jews. In the fall, two military officers who were members of the nobility ordered their servants to seize two Jewish tinsmiths who had come to their courtyard looking for work and to force them to eat unkosher meat.

A year later, a mob of poor Christians entered the Synagogue Courtyard. "Give us money!" they demanded. The terrified Jews paid them and the mob dispersed. Another group followed--"we want our money too!" But this time, the Jews refused to give them anything. The gentiles were enraged. Yelling anti-Semitic slogans, they attacked the Jews and injured several of them.

The thoughtful Jews of Vilna did not allow these troubles to divert them from their focus on Torah. In the fall of 5528 (1767), Rabbi Eliyahu Peseles, a wealthy man, bought an apartment and converted it into a kloiz. Here Rabbi Eliyahu was given permission to have a minyan during the week, Shabbos and holidays (although the minyan could not meet on

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holidays when Rabbi Eliyahu was not present). Rabbi Eliyahu was not, however, allowed, to hold his minyan on the yomim noraim.

Such special consideration showed how highly Rabbi Eliyahu was thought of.

Although he was not an official judge, the judges of Vilna would at times bring him their difficult cases.

Besides this, Rabbi Eliyahu would at time make his opinion on halachic matters known, such as his stance that men should not go to the mikveh on Shabbos and that circumcision should be performed as early in the day as possible. But he did not give written directions, and he did not force others to follow his opinions.

Sometimes, rabbis from outside of Vilna brought their difficult cases to him.

One case involved a woman who had been an agunah for fourteen years.

The delegation of rabbis from Minsk came to consult with Rabbi Eliyahu. And back in Minsk, the agunah awaited his decision anxiously.

It had begun fifteen years ago, when life had been simpler and happier. Reuven was a wealthy man, and he had found a husband for his daughter. Rachel was only thirteen years old, and her bridegroom, Shimon, hardly older. But it was a handsome wedding; Rachel in white, wearing a gold chain so heavy she could barely wear it, next to her bridegroom beneath the velvet chuppah, their parents circling them with lit tapers.

The boy came to live with Rachel in her father's house, of course. In a few years, he would go into business and support his family himself.

Shimon was barely past bar mitzvah and little more than a boy. But here he was, living with a father-in-law who was more of a disciplinarian than his wife's father; and his wife herself was more a girl he barely knew than a woman he had chosen to have a family with.

For a year and a half, the couple lived together in Reuven's house (according to another version of the story, they lived together only a few weeks). In the house, there were rugs on gleaming floors, draperies on the windows, even tapestry. On glass-fronted bookcases stood leather and silkbound books, and small objects of silver, ivory and mother

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of pearl lay on the mantelpiece.

In a shining silk caftan with a silver chain that dangled across his silk vest, Reuven sat in his office to which visitors came all day long, and conducted his business. And his wife, Sarah, sat in a carved rocking chair, leafing through a Tzena Rena.

But Shimon would gaze from the courtyard at the distant meadow, where he watched with longing a group of boys playing on a pile of stacked logs next to a farmhouse.

Reuven grew upset and frustrated with Shimon. Rachel still showed no signs of becoming a mother, and the boy was as unruly and childish as ever. Words passed between the two; Reuven even cuffed the boy, but Shimon grew no better. And now Rachel quarreled with him too.

One day, Reuven threw Shimon out of the house with angry words. "Get out, you loafer, you good-for-nothing rascal!"

Shimon had the last word: "A burning in your belly!" he cried bitterly, "a pain in your heart!" And he ran in his scuffed shoes out of the broad courtyard.

Shimon disappeared entirely. It was as though the earth had swallowed him up. "Good riddance!" said Reuven and his wife, Sarah. And Rachel too cursed him, "May he break an arm and a leg!" But when she was alone in her room, her eyes overflowed with tears, and big red blotches covered her cheeks.

For the next fourteen years, Rachel lived with her parents. Now she was 28 years old. All the girls that she had grown up with already had families--they were even looking for husbands for their own daughters. But Rachel lived alone in the same room she had always lived in.

And then one day, a man appeared at Reuven's house, tall and with a thick beard, carrying a travelling bag across his shoulders. "Reuven!" he cried when he came into the courtyard.

Reuven looked at the man unsmilingly. "Who are you?"

"Don't you remember? I'm Shimon, your son-in-law!" And he rushed up to Reuven and threw his arms around him.

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The returned son-in-law came into the house, greeted everyone by name: Reuven's wife, even the servant. He babbled on about all their experiences. It was as though he had only left the house for a few days, so well did he recall all the events of those far-away days.

Reuven and Sarah slowly warmed up to the man. True, at first he did not seem to look like Shimon--but he had left so many years ago, when he had not even had a beard. And now he had returned, a full-grown man....At last, their daughter could be married--and give them grandchildren.

When Rachel came into the house, her father greeted her with shining eyes. "Rachel, I have wonderful news for you: Shimon is back!"

With slow steps and her face chalky white, Rachel let her father lead her into the dining room. As she came in, the man leaped up. "Rachel! I'm so happy to see you!"

Rachel looked at him and shook her head. "This is not Shimon."

The man had a smile on his face. "I've grown older. But you look as young as ever. I recall when..." and he again began telling stories of things that they themselves had almost forgotten. Reuven and Sarah laughed along with the man, but Rachel watched him with careful eyes.

"He is your husband, Rachel," her father told her that evening. "Why must you be so suspicious?" But Rachel insisted, "He is not Shimon!"

Reuven sent the man to speak to Rachel privately. He told her of things that they had said and done together when they had been alone. Who else could he be but her husband? She was being silly....

Rachel wavered, but she refused to accept him as her husband. "I will not live with him unless the rabbis say that I may do so."

And so Reuven, embarrassed before the man and angry at Rachel, had gone to the rabbis of Minsk.

And they in turn had come to Rabbi Eliyahu to ask for advice.

Rabbi Eliyahu began to speak. "On the Shabbos after the wedding, Reuven and Shimon went to the great synagogue of Minsk together. Have Reuven bring this man to

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there and then ask him: Where did I stand and pray? If the man remembers everything else so well, he must surely remember this. But if he is a fraud, he will not know what to say.”

One of the rabbis said, “But Rabbi Eliyahu, if he is a fraud who has somehow found out all the details of Shimon’s life, he will know this as well.”

“That is not so,” said Rabbi Eliyahu. “If he is a fraud, he is an evil man who wishes to defile a married woman. Such a man would not think of learning about anything having to do with the synagogue, for thoughts of holiness will not enter a mind filled with evil and uncleanness.”

A few days later, when the rabbis returned to Minsk, they spoke to Reuven, and he did as Rabbi Eliyahu had directed.

“Come,” he told the man, “let us go to the large synagogue.” The unsuspecting man accompanied Reuven. When they stood in the doorway, Reuven stood still. “You go ahead to where I stood on the Shabbos after your wedding.”

The man took an uncertain step. He looked back at Reuven, but Reuven gave him no hint of where to go. He took a step to the right, then looked back at Reuven; he tried stepping to the left. “It’s been so many years,” the man said. “I’m afraid my memory isn’t so good...”

The man was arrested, and he confessed that he had met the real Shimon in a tavern and drawn the entire story out of him.

A little while afterwards, the real Shimon returned to his wife. This time, Rachel recognized him and welcomed him back.

Another tradition tells of Rabbi Eliyahu’s great keenness in interpreting a letter correctly.

Once, Rabbi Eliyahu received a letter signed by the author of *Levushei Sered*, declaring that a shipment of hard cheese coming into Vilna is kosher. When Rabbi Eliyahu looked at the letter, he saw that the date was given as the words, “Masneichem chagurim,” “your waists will be girded” (Sh’mos 12:11). (Since letters in Hebrew have numerical equivalents, one can write a phrase and emphasize those letters which, when added together,

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will form the date.)

Rabbi Eliyahu looked up at the man who had brought the letter. “The cheese is unkosher.”

“But why?” the man exclaimed.

“The author has hinted in writing the date that this letter was given under duress. The date is given as ‘masneichem chagurim.’ Why should he write the date that way? But the Aramaic translation is ‘chartzeichon yehon asirin’--which can be read as ‘your cheese should be forbidden.’”

Another time, Rabbi Eliyahu saved a woman from an ignominious charge.

A relative of Rabbi Eliyahu came to him with a distressing tale. “My daughter has been accused of violating her marriage vows.”

“What do you mean?”

“Two men claim that they saw her in the company of a man who is not her husband. They claim that”-- Suffused with rage, the man halted. “But I know that these men are liars. My daughter has been faithful. These men are trying to destroy her life!”

“Have they already given testimony?”

“Yes. The beis din has accepted their words and ordered my son-in-law to divorce her. Rabbi Eliyahu, surely you realize that my daughter is a good woman. If you tell them to, the beis din will withdraw their order.”

“I am not a prophet,” Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “and I cannot judge a case this way. But bring the judges and witnesses here, and let them repeat their testimony to me.”

A few days later, the members of the beis din stood to Rabbi Eliyahu’s side. The first witness was brought in, and he began to speak. “I saw the woman in question walk down the street and stop before the doorway of the house belonging to...”

For half an hour, the witness spoke clearly and to the point. His testimony was credible, and the judges occasionally glanced at Rabbi Eliyahu to see what effect it was making on him.

The witness was sent out of the room, and the second witness was brought in. He too

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began to speak: "I saw the woman in question walk down the street and stop before the doorway of the house belonging to..."

He too spoke clearly and believably. And his facts coincided exactly with those of the first witness.

Suddenly, Rabbi Eliyahu leaned forward and proclaimed, "Lying witnesses! Lying witnesses!"

The other rabbis were stunned. But before Rabbi Eliyahu's blazing countenance, the witness dropped his head and in a new tone of voice--hesitating and so soft that they could barely hear him--he admitted that his story was false from start to finish, that he had been bribed.

"But how did you know?" the rabbis asked Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "The Mishnah in Sanhedrin (29a) teaches, 'After [the first witness], they bring in the second witness; if his words are found to be in line, the testimony is accepted.' The words 'found to be' are superfluous. They come to teach us that the content of the witnesses' testimony must be equal; but the style will be different, for each witness will naturally speak in his own words.

"When I listened to these two witnesses, I realized that their testimony not only agrees in the facts, but that each one, speaking for half an hour, used almost exactly the same words as the other. So it must be that the two men had collaborated ahead of time and rehearsed their testimony carefully."

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## CHAPTER SEVEN:

### STUDENTS OF RABBI ELIYAHU

The year 5528 (1768) brought great suffering to the Jewish people. The haidamacks were still raging through Poland, almost unchecked. This year, they broke into the city of Uman in the Ukraine, where they murdered with savage exaltation over 20,000 victims, mostly Jews, as well as Poles.

But in Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu continued his learning of Torah, in which all of creation is contained. Rabbi Eliyahu taught that “whatever was, is and will be is included in the chumash, from the first word to the last. Everything is included: not only generalities but even the details of every species and every human being; whatever happens to one from one’s birth to death, all his incarnations to the last detail; and also details of every type of animal and beast, of every creature in the world, of every grass, plant, inanimate object in all their particulars of every individual in the species; of what will happen to them and to their root source.

“And also, whatever is written about the patriarchs, Moshe Rabeinu and Israel occurs in every generation, for their ‘sparks’ reincarnate in every generation, as is known. And similarly, all their acts, from Adam to the end of the Torah, occurs in every generation; and so does this apply to every individual” (Sifra Detzniusa 55a).

Whenever someone came to learn from Rabbi Eliyahu, Rabbi Eliyahu would tell him to review some material many times. And the more times the person reviewed, the more was Rabbi Eliyahu pleased.

The following are a number of episodes involving some of Rabbi Eliyahu’s students and talmidei chachamim under his influence.

One of Rabbi Eliyahu’s first students was also his greatest: Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. Rabbi Chaim was known for his sharpness, diligence and great memory.

At the age of nineteen, Rabbi Chaim heard that Rabbi Eliyahu would be travelling to

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a wedding in a nearby town.

The wedding took place on a Friday, and Rabbi Chaim waited all day for the chance to talk to Rabbi Eliyahu. But Rabbi Eliyahu stayed closed in his room, learning.

Rabbi Chaim heated a bucket of water and brought it to Rabbi Eliyahu's door. When after a long while, Rabbi Eliyahu opened the door, Rabbi Chaim said, "Rebbe, perhaps I can serve you with hot water to wash in honor of Shabbos."

"Thank you."

So after that, Rabbi Chaim asked Rabbi Eliyahu to take him on as a student. As they discussed learning, Rabbi Chaim said, "I have reviewed the order of Moed fourteen times, but it is not completely clear to me."

"And do you expect clarity after reviewing it only fourteen times?"

"Then how much should I review?" asked Rabbi Chaim. "101 times?"

"There is no measure whatsoever," Rabbi Eliyahu said. "Your entire life, you must review."

As Rabbi Chaim listened to Rabbi Eliyahu's words of Torah, he was deeply impressed. Rabbi Chaim had previously learned with the method of pilpul, but now he saw that there was another path, deep and yet clear, and he determined to remain with Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Chaim had a younger brother, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman--known as Rabbi Zelmele--who was famous for his extraordinary intelligence, memory and holiness. He too became a student of Rabbi Eliyahu--perhaps this same year, at the age of thirteen.

When Rabbi Zelmele was fourteen, he learned in the large beis medrash of Vilna.

One day a simple man entered the beis medrash and told Rabbi Zelmele, "I want to tell you a good explanation of a mishnah in D'mai." D'mai is doubtful food which has possibly not had the gifts for cohanim and leviim taken from it.

Enthusiastically, the man told his insight, which was in fact naive and mistaken.

Rabbi Zelmele was irritated. "You said you have a good insight," he said--a "peirush

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tov,” which in Litvak pronunciation (peiros tov), would mean “good fruits.” Rabbi Zelmele said scornfully, “I won’t deny that your fruits are nothing else than d’mai--very questionable.”

The man immediately closed his mouth, and a bright red seeped across his face. Silently, he turned and walked out of the beis medrash.

After the man left, Rabbi Zelmele grew upset with himself. “What have I done? How did I speak to this man? Even if what he said was wrong, it wasn’t out of wrong-headedness, but out of a lack of knowledge. I should have corrected him kindly and not treated him with contempt, as though I am better than he because I sit and learn Torah and he doesn’t.”

Rabbi Zelmele rushed out to find the man, but he was gone. Every day, Rabbi Zelmele went to all the synagogues and batei medrash; he walked through the streets and courtyards of the Jewish quarter, but he couldn’t find the man.

So mortified was Rabbi Zelmele at having insulted the man that he grew heartsick. “What have I done?” he moaned. “Unless I gain this man’s forgiveness, how will I ever rectify my sin?”

Rabbi Zelmele went to the synagogues and batei medrash and publicly confessed his sin, asking for absolution if the man should happen to hear of his apology.

When Rabbi Eliyahu heard of this episode, he called Rabbi Zelmele to him and spoke consoling words to his heart until Rabbi Zelmele calmed down.

Rabbi Zelmele was one of Rabbi Eliyahu’s favorite students. Once, when Rabbi Eliyahu was teaching a group of students, among whom was Rabbi Zelmele, he told his servant to bring him a copy of Nazir so that he could look at a braisa. When the servant was delayed, Rabbi Eliyahu turned to Rabbi Zelmele: “Perhaps you remember it.” Rabbi Zelmele repeated the braisa by heart, and Rabbi Eliyahu said to him, “My son, it is about you that the verse says, ‘My Torah is in the people’s heart’ (Yishayahu 51:6).”

Another time, Rabbi Eliyahu gave a simple explanation of a verse in Iyov and Rabbi Zelmele rejoiced to hear it. The next day, when Rabbi Eliyahu began teaching another

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explanation of the verse, he saw that Rabbi Zelmele was upset. Rabbi Eliyahu stopped his explanation. "What's wrong?"

Rabbi Zelmele replied, "I still haven't reviewed your first explanation 101 times. So how can I listen to another explanation?"

When Rabbi Eliyahu's daughter reached marriageable age, people proposed to Rabbi Eliyahu that he marry her to Rabbi Zelmele. But Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "I cannot do so. The Torah says that one must give one's daughter to a man, and I am afraid to marry her to an angel."

One evening, when Rabbi Zelmele was in Rabbi Eliyahu's house, he grew tired. Putting his head down on the table, he fell asleep. Rabbi Eliyahu came over and supported Rabbi Zelmele's head with his hands. Someone came into the room, and Rabbi Eliyahu said, "Quiet! The entire Torah is resting in my hands."

Rabbi Eliyahu taught his students that they must learn by heart at least one tractate--"so that when you are travelling or in a room without light, you will still be able to learn."

One of the students who heard this set himself the goal of memorizing the tractate of Succah. He tested himself before other students until he was sure that he knew it perfectly.

And then he came to Rabbi Eliyahu, ready to be tested.

"Do you wish me to ask you questions?" Rabbi Eliyahu said to him.

"I am ready."

"Very well," said Rabbi Eliyahu. "How many disagreements are there in Succah between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah?"

The student didn't know what to say.

"And how many disagreements between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael?"

Again the student stood silent.

"And between Rabbah and Rav Yosef? Between Abaye and Rava? Between Rav Pappa and Rav Huna, son of Rav Yehoshua?"

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Rabbi Eliyahu continued asking questions. Some the student could answer, some he could not. He could not find his hands and feet.

Rabbi Eliyahu then gave the answers to his own questions and analyzed the tractate in detail: the disagreements, the halachah, the number of sugyas, the number of laws in the tosefta and Jerusalem Talmud. Rabbi Eliyahu said, “Unkosher succos are mentioned in the mishnah and Tosefta in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds 85 times. Kosher succos are mentioned 91 times. 85 is the numerical equivalent of the word succah spelled imperfectly, without a vov. 91 is the numerical equivalent to ‘succah’ spelled with a vov.”

Another time, Rabbi Eliyahu was discussing the section of the chumash about the menorah with his son-in-law, Rabbi Feivel of Dobrovna. Rabbi Eliyahu said, “According to the Kabbalah as regards our tradition, this parshah should contain so many yod’s and so many vov’s,” and he immediately began to count them out by heart.

Once at the end of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Eliyahu had just made Havdalah. He sent for Rabbi Dovid Shmuel Feiges of Brode and told him, “It is the custom to begin a succah right after Yom Kippur. So let us do so as well.”

Rabbi Eliyahu led Rabbi Dovid Shmuel to his study, and they began learning Succah. They learned together the entire night, until they completed the entire tractate.

For a time, Rabbi Eliyahu taught the Mechilta between minchah and maariv. When he came to the laws of damages in Mishpatim, Rabbi Chaim ben Rabbi Tuvia Katz of Parkai joined the shiur. Every day when he would leave the shiur, Rabbi Chaim would say, “Yesterday, I did not know who the gaon is, for every day he gives me new understanding with which to recognize his greatness.”

Another student of Rabbi Eliyahu was Rabbi Leib Chassid of Telz, who was known as Rabbi Leib Chassid.

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It is told that when Rabbi Leib's eldest daughter was ready to marry, Rabbi Leib heard of a student in Vilna who might be right for her.

Rabbi Leib travelled to Vilna to meet the young man. But the minute he entered the Jewish quarter, he set aside his thoughts of the match and went to see Rabbi Eliyahu.

When the shammash allowed Rabbi Leib into Rabbi Eliyahu's room, Rabbi Eliyahu and some others had just finished eating and were about to recite the birkas hamazon.

As Rabbi Leib waited, he noticed that Rabbi Eliyahu replied "amen" to the end of the fourth blessing.

Rabbi Leib was astonished--he had not known that one is supposed to do such a thing.

"I cannot stay here another minute," he thought. "I must go home immediately and tell my family about this, so that they do not lose the opportunity of answering an 'amen.'" And after Rabbi Eliyahu finished the birkas hamazon, Rabbi Leib took his leave and hired a wagon.

The next morning, Rabbi Leib joyfully entered his house. His wife and children hovered about him. "What's wrong? Why are you here so early?"

"Quiet, nothing is wrong. Please set the table."

"All right." His wife was still puzzling, but she dutifully set the table, and they sat down to eat. After Rabbi Leib made the blessing on the bread, he looked around at his family. "I have good news for you--wonderful news!"

"Oh father!" said his daughter, and his wife dabbed at her eyes with a kerchief.

"I learned a wonderful halachah from Rabbi Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna. When we say the birkas hamazon, we answer amen to the fourth blessing." His family gazed at him. "As soon as I learned this, I could not stay any longer and keep you from missing even one amen."

Rabbi Leib's wife put the kerchief down from her eyes. "And what about our daughter's match?"

"There is no need to worry about that. That will come about, sooner or later."

Another student of Rabbi Eliyahu was Rabbi Moshe Halevi Horowitz, who was a maggid in Vilna and who taught Rabbi Eliyahu's children. He too was known as a very pious man.

When he was living in Eishishok, he organized a group of pious and scholarly men called kibbutz haperushim. This group of men used to learn together all night on Friday night.

One winter's night, a freezing wind blew and a thick, blinding snow fell. In the beis medrash, the coal stove emanated pale rays of heat among the scholars, who noticed in surprise that Rabbi Moshe was not with them.

The next morning, when the shammash came to the beis medrash, his boots making the first prints in the plain of snow that covered the village and countryside, he discovered the figure of a man, covered with snow and ice, leaning against the door of the beis medrash.

The shammash rushed up to him. "Hello! Are you all right?" He grabbed the man's arm and pulled him from the door. Then he said in surprise: "Rabbi Moshe! What are you doing here?"

Rabbi Moshe said to the shammash in a weak voice, "It was so bitterly cold and windy last night that I was afraid that the learning in the beis medrash would be disturbed. And so I stood out here all night fighting with the wind so that it would not push open the door."

Rabbi Eliyahu could be stern and restrained. Once, a young man came to see him. "I am Menachem Eliezer. My father is the author of Ateres Rosh and I have just finished a commentary on the mishnayos of Kinim, which I call Yair Kino."

"Very well, leave it with me and I will have a look at it."

Rabbi Eliyahu spent the entire night learning this work, which explains a very difficult tractate.

The next morning, when one of Rabbi Eliyahu's students came to the beis medrash,

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Rabbi Eliyahu told him, “A young man has come here, the son of the Ateres Rosh. He has written a wonderful work that has been inspired by heaven, for he has written a truthful commentary on a tractate that even the rishonim did not find their way in.”

The student hurried to repeat Rabbi Eliyahu’s praise to Rabbi Menachem Eliezer.

Rabbi Menachem Eliezer was pleased. “Really? Did he say that about my work?” With a glad heart, he went to see Rabbi Eliyahu, picturing that Rabbi Eliyahu would treat him with respect.

When he entered the beis medrash, Rabbi Eliyahu looked up at him and silently handed him the manuscript. Rabbi Menachem Eliezer took it from his hand, and Rabbi Eliyahu looked back down at his sefer.

It has been conjectured that Rabbi Eliyahu wanted to keep the young genius from growing proud.

Other important students of Rabbi Eliyahu included Rabbi Saadia ben Rabbi Nasan Nota, who served Rabbi Eliyahu for many years, especially in communal matters, and Rabbi Yisrael of Shklov, one of Rabbi Eliyahu’s greatest students, author of Pe’as Hashulchan.

Even as a teacher, Rabbi Eliyahu focused on his learning with tremendous concentration.

Rabbi Hillel of Shklov was the son of one of Rabbi Eliyahu’s students, Rabbi Binyamin. Once, when Rabbi Hillel entered Rabbi Eliyahu’s room, Rabbi Eliyahu was pacing back and forth deep in thought. A few times, he almost walked into Rabbi Hillel, who had to move out of his way.

At last, Rabbi Eliyahu looked up from his concentration, and only then did he notice Rabbi Hillel. “Shalom aleichem. How is your father doing?”

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Simiatitz served Rabbi Eliyahu for many years. Because of his great piety, he was known as Hirsch Chassid. He had a very sharp mind, and Rabbi Eliyahu

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once found it necessary to warn him that pilpul can make a person proud.

Once, when Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch came for a visit, Rabbi Eliyahu was sitting at a meal.  
“Please join us.”

“Thank you,” said Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, “but my doctor has told me not to.”

Rabbi Eliyahu looked at Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch and replied, “The Rambam was indeed a doctor.”

Rabbi Eliyahu had understood immediately that Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch was concerned that Rabbi Eliyahu does not have enough food. And the Rambam--who was physician to the sultanate of Egypt--teaches in his Mishnah Torah that one may not eat a meal at the house of a person who does not have enough food. In order not to embarrass Rabbi Eliyahu and still avoid lying, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch had spoken as he did.

With some students, Rabbi Eliyahu concentrated on teaching Kabbalah. He learned Zohar and Sefer Yetzirah with Rabbi Shlomo of Tlatshin, hiding a number of mystical matters from him. When Rabbi Shlomo died, Rabbi Eliyahu lamented, “Why did I hide these things from him? With all his might, he feared Hashem from his youth.”

Another student of Rabbi Eliyahu who died early was Rabbi Shlomo of Vilkomir. At first, he had been rabbi of Kalvaria and led a yeshiva there; but when he became a follower of Rabbi Eliyahu, he gave up his post and became rabbi in near-by Vilkomir in order to be close to Vilna.

One night, the departed Rabbi Shlomo came in a dream to his son, Avraham Horadaner of Vilna.

Rabbi Avraham asked his father, “Why have you not appeared to me until now?”

Rabbi Shlomo replied, “Because of the sins of the generation, the air of this world is not pure. And so it is hard for souls to descend, because we are afraid that the atmosphere will cling to us. But now I have been sent down from heaven with a message to Rabbi Eliyahu explaining some of the secrets of the Torah, and heavenly guardians of purity are accompanying me.

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“And while I am down here, I came to visit you as well.”

When Rabbi Avraham awoke, he went to Rabbi Eliyahu and told him the dream.

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “Your father will no longer visit you in dreams.”

It has been conjectured that in his modesty, Rabbi Eliyahu was not pleased that Rabbi Avraham knew of Rabbi Shlomo’s mission.

Rabbi Menashe of Ilye came to see Rabbi Eliyahu once a year. Once, Rabbi Menashe interpreted the Gemara in Shabbos and Eiruvim in a manner different than did Rashi and the other commentators.

“What makes you interpret the Gemara that way?” Rabbi Eliyahu asked him.

Rabbi Menashe replied, “There is a passage in Kesubos...”

Immediately, Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “That may be very well, but how will your interpretation fit in with another sugya?”, which he mentioned.

Rabbi Menashe remained silent, awed that in his tremendous breadth of knowledge, Rabbi Eliyahu had instantly referred to far-flung passages in the Gemara to refute his interpretation with simple and compelling logic.

Rabbi Heschel of Reisin, an accomplished Torah scholar, once came to Vilna. When he visited Rabbi Eliyahu’s beis medrash, the students were reviewing a lesson that Rabbi Eliyahu had been teaching regarding a statement of the Rema on Pesach.

Rabbi Eliyahu had brought up a question that he had left unresolved. After some thought, Rabbi Heschel told the students, “I believe I have an answer to the question.”

“Excellent!” said a student. He got up and approached Rabbi Eliyahu. “There is a scholar here from Reisin who has an answer to the Rema.”

“Call him to me.”

Rabbi Heschel came over to Rabbi Eliyahu. “Let us review the Gemara and the halachic authorities,” said Rabbi Eliyahu. In concise and clear words, Rabbi Eliyahu reviewed the material. When Rabbi Heschel heard Rabbi Eliyahu’s statement of the issue, he

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realized that his pilpul did not really address the question, and he returned to his place in embarrassment.

One of the great Torah scholars of the generation was Rabbi Dovid of Sharshov, author of Chomas Yerushalayim. In Adar, the month of Purim, Rabbi Dovid made the stunning announcement that the Jewish calendar was off by one day.

He proclaimed that Megillas Esther should be read for two days: the fourteenth as well as the fifteenth of Adar.

And his student, Rabbi Ze'ev, rabbi of Prozan in Slonim, did the same as well.

Rabbi Dovid then announced that the new month of Nissan should be celebrated for three days, rather than two.

But other rabbis objected. And Rabbi Dovid agreed to seek the approval of Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Dovid came to Rabbi Eliyahu's beis medrash together with one of his students.

As Rabbi Eliyahu stood surrounded by his students, Rabbi Dovid explained what he had done. "Following my calculations, I celebrated Purim for two days. And my student here read the megillah in my house on Shushan Purim."

When he said these words, Rabbi Eliyahu looked at Rabbi Dovid's students with piercing eyes, until the student was seized with fear and trembling.

"And now," Rabbi Dovid, "I have come to ask you if I am correct."

One of Rabbi Eliyahu's students burst out, "First you act, and then you ask advice?"

But Rabbi Eliyahu turned to him. "Silence! You must act with respect!"

Rabbi Eliyahu turned back to Rabbi Dovid. "You have not acted correctly, my friend. This is not done among the Jews." Rabbi Eliyahu patiently described where Rabbi Dovid had erred in his calculations. His explanation was clear and direct, and showed Rabbi Eliyahu's thorough grasp of the literature on the topic. Rabbi Eliyahu demonstrated how Rabbi Dovid had based his calculations on an error of Rabbi Rafael of Navarre, and he

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explained how the Meor Eynaim too had erred in this matter.

When Rabbi Eliyahu finished speaking, Rabbi Dovid exclaimed, “It is unbelievable that here is such a man with the spirit of Hashem in him, who understands everything. Nothing is beyond you!”

Rabbi Eliyahu would give each student a tractate that he was supposed to complete each month. Rabbi Eliyahu would himself at the beginning of every month celebrate the completion of a round of studies both in the revealed Torah and in Kabbalah.

One rosh chodesh, Rabbi Eliyahu stopped in the middle of an exposition of Kabbalah. “Until here, I have permission to reveal these matters to you in this world,” he said. “But in the world-to-come, I will reveal the entire matter.”

Rabbi Meir Raseiner spoke up: “In this world, we are sitting here together with you. But in the world-to-come, where will we be and where will you be? We will be as far from each other as east from west!”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “Those who learned with me in this world will learn with me in the world-to-come as well.”

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## CHAPTER EIGHT:

### TALES OF LEARNING

Rabbi Menashe of Ilye taught that in his generation “there is much error because everyone is drawn after non-literal interpretations, and they do not pay any attention to the simple meaning of the texts, as I heard the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu say. And if not for Rabbi Eliyahu, the Torah itself would have been forgotten, for with his great sharpness and breadth of knowledge, he applied himself to deriving the simple meaning of the texts.”

And Avraham Simchah of Amtzislav, whose teacher had been a student of Rabbi Eliyahu, said that for over 200 years, the Torah had not been taught in a clear and straightforward manner until Hashem shone down a new light: Rabbi Eliyahu; “and he has given to this generation and the generations to come a light to illumine the straight path in learning Torah. His holy spirit has evaporated the clouds of confused learning.”

Although Rabbi Eliyahu was extraordinarily sharp, he applied himself only to a straight path in learning, and his approach has become the mainstream method.

Rabbi Eliyahu opposed chidudin (pilpul) that had no basis. He taught that in general young students should not be exposed to such mental pyrotechnics. Rabbi Eliyahu lamented that “from the first day that a student begins learning, he shouts and moves about as though he is already a great scholar.”

“It is sweet to come up with new interpretations that are not correct in order to be praised, but afterwards, one’s mouth is ‘filled with stones’.” There are those, Rabbi Eliyahu said, who engage in pilpul yet who do not know how to read even one mishnah correctly.

“When a person changes about the order of learning, and first learns pilpul and does not yet know how to read a mishnah correctly, he will forget even that small bit of Torah that he learned in his youth” (Biur al Kamah Agaddos 3a).

Rabbi Eliyahu did not oppose the technique of pilpul when it is used to investigate the truth of the text. He taught that “one must first thoroughly learn Tanach, Mishnah, Gemara, Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Tosefta, Mechilta, Sifra, Sifri and the braisos.

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Then one can engage in pilpul with others, and that is the beauty of Torah” (Biur Al Kamah Aggados 3a).

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that “a person needs two things: to learn the simple meaning of the Torah and to constantly review and also to engage in pilpul in order that the topic be clarified without any confusion whatsoever” (Mishlei 14:4).

Rabbi Eliyahu said that his students should learn two pages of Gemara a day and review them well; two pages of the Rif every day and review them well; Orach Chaim of the Shulchan Aruch every day and review it well; and the halachah on every holiday.

Rabbi Eliyahu told one student, Rabbi Pinchas of Polotzk, to learn the Rif with Rashi’s commentary and review it constantly with great diligence until it is absolutely clear to him. “Do this for a year or more,” Rabbi Eliyahu told him, “and you will see a wondrous result.”

When Rabbi Eliyahu’s student, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Simiatitz, received a copy of Rabbi Yehonasan Eibeshutz’s Urim Vetumim, he was delighted with its sharp pilpul. Repeatedly, he praised the work to Rabbi Eliyahu.

One day, Rabbi Eliyahu told Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, “Choose a sharp chiddush from the Urim Vetumim and repeat it to me.”

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch repeated a brilliant teaching.

“If we have come to that,” Rabbi Eliyahu said, “I can add my own chiddushim.” Rabbi Eliyahu began to create his own pilpul, and spoke so rapidly that Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, who was famous for his brilliance, could barely keep up.

Rabbi Eliyahu concluded, “When one learns in this way, one can fool oneself into thinking that one is growing great, to the point that one can even speak against the rishonim, the early authorities. But when one learns with true depth, as the rishonim did, then one accustoms oneself every day to recognize the smallness of one’s worth in relation to them. After toiling in some matter for a long time, we find that Rashi or some other rishon was sensitive to that point and answered it in a few short words.”

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Margolies, av beis din of Lissa and later Frankfort de Main,

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used to travel from city to city and give public talks.

Once in Cracow, Rabbi Margolies heard people speaking of the great Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu. And so Rabbi Margolies decided that he would come before him.

Rabbi Margolies had many questions that he wished to ask Rabbi Eliyahu.

When Rabbi Margolies arrived in Vilna, he made his way through the narrow alleyways and ancient streets to Rabbi Eliyahu's beis medrash.

Here in the corridor, he waited outside the door of Rabbi Eliyahu's room. Behind Rabbi Margolies stood an old man whose silver sidelocks bunched up under a beaver hat.

The old man asked Rabbi Margolies, "Is this the first time you are seeing Rabbi Eliyahu?"

"Yes."

The old man raised a little notebook that he was holding. "Listen to what I tell you, or you will not have a chance to ask your questions."

"What do you mean?"

"When you start discussing Torah with Rabbi Eliyahu, the minute you mention your topic, he begins reviewing the sugyas of the Gemara by heart. As you talk, Rabbi Eliyahu will be murmuring the Gemara. And then, before you get a chance to present your own questions or insights, he himself will answer all the questions that might occur to a person in those sugyas.

"Look here." The man lifted his notebook. "That's why I've written everything questions down."

"What are your questions about?"

"Someone has attacked the commentary of the Mordechai on a sugya in Shavuot, and I have written this to defend the Mordechai. You see, as long as I have this in writing, Rabbi Eliyahu will read it. And you should do the same. Write down all your questions and hand them to Rabbi Eliyahu."

The door opened, and a young scholar stepped out. The shammash came to the door and asked, "Who's next?"

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Rabbi Margolies turned to the old man. "Please go in first, and let me come in with you."

The two men entered the room and stood before Rabbi Eliyahu.

The old man handed his notebook to Rabbi Eliyahu, who read it through. Finally, Rabbi Eliyahu handed the notebook back. "It is a pity that you wanted so much time," he said, and the old man paled. "The whole question is due to a printer's error in the Mordechai."

Rabbi Eliyahu reached up for a volume of the Gemara Shavuot. He flipped through the pages to the Mordechai. "You see," he said, "a few words were left out over here." He turned the page over: "and here they are, put in the wrong place." Rabbi Eliyahu closed the Gemara. "And so there was no question on the Mordechai in the first place." Rabbi Eliyahu turned to Rabbi Margolies. "Shalom aleichem. What would you wish to discuss with me?"

When Rabbi Margolies saw how Rabbi Eliyahu had responded to the old man, he was stunned, and he didn't have the heart to ask the list of questions that he had prepared. Instead, he asked a question on a midrash that had been puzzling him. Rabbi Eliyahu gave an immediate response in short, simple words. Rabbi Eliyahu's answer was so commonsensical that Rabbi Mordechai felt himself grow red with embarrassment that he had not thought of that solution.

Although Rabbi Eliyahu urged students to memorize material, he taught that in reviewing Gemara, it is more important to know the general content than the exact words.

Once, years after Rabbi Eliyahu had passed away, a question was brought to Rabbi Yisrael of Vilna, who had been a student of Rabbi Eliyahu.

A sick cohen had been advised to carry with him the bone of a dead man as a segulah, a charm. But as a cohen, he was forbidden to be in contact with such a bone, for it transmits ritual uncleanness.

Rabbi Yisrael replied, "He can carry a tooth, for the mishnah teaches that a tooth does not transmit ritual uncleanness" (Ohalos 3).

Another former student of Rabbi Eliyahu, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, was asked about this

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question. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch stood silent a moment, not certain how to reply. Rabbi Yisrael was standing close by, and he said to Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, “Don’t you remember? There is a clear mishnah in Ohalos...” And now Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch recalled the mishnah.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch exclaimed, “How great are the words of Rabbi Eliyahu. When Rabbi Eliyahu was alive, I and your father learned mishnayos. I concentrated on memorizing the exact language of the Mishnah, whereas your father reviewed its contents. We went together to Rabbi Eliyahu and asked him which was the better way to review. Rabbi Eliyahu replied that knowing the contents of the mishnah is preferable to knowing the exact language.

“And now I, who memorized the mishnah’s exact language, was not able to call this mishnah to mind” (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 58). (Ruach Eliyahu quotes the Gemara that Rabbi Yochanan is said to have carried a tooth of one of his dead sons--Bava Basra 116a and Berachos 5b. The Aruch explains that the tooth had fallen out while the son was still alive.)

There is a folk tradition that one day a strange porter appeared on the streets of Vilna. He was not a beggar like the poor men in rags who huddled in doorways or Chaimke who walked along the cobblestones on the stumps of his knees. Nor was he like one of the madmen of Vilna, such as Gedalka the cantor, whose feet were bound in huge mounts of rags and who sat on the steps, chanting sections of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy.

Yet he was not one of the regular workers either. He did not speak with the other porters, nor with the scissors sharpener, the glazier who worked steadily at his shop even in the cold snowfall, or with the blacksmith, whose auburn beard ended in two sharp tufts.

Where had he come from? Where did he lay his head at night? Was he a madman or a fool? Or was he merely unfriendly?

One day, when Rabbi Eliyahu had made a halachic decision, a slip of paper appeared the next morning in the door of the beis medrash, covered with a thick, blunt handwriting. The shammash looked it over and then handed it to Rabbi Eliyahu. It was a terse and learned criticism of Rabbi Eliyahu’s decision, punctuated with stinging comments. Rabbi Eliyahu handed the paper back to the shammash. “Find out who wrote this.”

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The next week, Rabbi Eliyahu gave another public decision. And in the early morning, even before the most pious scholars were making their way to the mikveh, the shammash saw the porter slip a piece of paper into the doorway. "Wait!" But the porter slipped into the blackness of the street.

The shammash picked up the page and in the beis medrash, glanced at it: the same, thick, black letters, the same stinging comments--

With daybreak came the commotion of the streets of Vilna and the Synagogue Courtyard, filled with water carriers, scholars, a girl carrying home a dozen bagels tied together on a string like a bracelet that she twirled around her arm.

The scholars of Rabbi Eliyahu's beis medrash had read the remarkable new criticism of Rabbi Eliyahu's words: a blend of Talmudic sharpness and strong words, almost invective. Who was this mysterious porter?

In the other room, Rabbi Eliyahu too had read the note. He stepped out of the beis medrash and strode through the courtyard, the shammash at his side.

They passed the marketplace, where a worn woman sold fish from a straw basket, and peasant women witting on the ground sold vegetables and flowers. Before a small storefront, a thin Jew soldered new bottoms onto worn pots and buckets.

"There he is!" The shammash pointed to a man with a tough, square face and blue eyes. He was carrying a maple chair across his back.

Rabbi Eliyahu strode up to him. "Porter!"

The porter looked up at Rabbi Eliyahu with uncomprehending eyes. "Yes, rabbi!" He stood more erect, the chair weighing on his shoulders.

Rabbi Eliyahu took the sheets of paper out of a pocket and held them out before the porter.

The porter looked at the sheets of paper and then slowly into the eyes of Rabbi Eliyahu. "Rabbi, you know I am only an ignorant porter. I cannot read."

Rabbi Eliyahu glanced at the shammash. The shammash nodded at him.

"I command you in the name of our holy Torah to tell me immediately who you are,

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and what permission you have to comment on my decisions, whether criticizing them or supporting them!”

The porter brought the chair over his head and put it down on the ground.

“I will tell you,” he said. “Yesterday, when you created your insights, you created such a stir in heaven that entire universes were overcome. You yourself felt this, and you were self-congratulatory.

“So in order to prevent a heavenly accusation against you, I went out of my usual way to prove that even the great Gaon of Vilna is a man of flesh and blood who can make mistakes.”

People had meanwhile noticed Rabbi Eliyahu standing in the street, speaking to a ragged porter, and they began to crowd about the men. The porter looked around. “I have to go.”

Suddenly, he wasn’t there. “Where is he?” the shammash called out.

But the porter had disappeared. And no one saw him again.

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that, like circumcision, the Torah is a covenant of love between Hashem and man. “This is similar to a person who has a beloved friend. He doesn’t want to leave him, but he cannot remain with him. So he gives him an object that is very dear to him, and the two are bound by that object. The word ‘covenant’ tells that there is a promise that via this object, the two friends will not separate. It is a ‘carved covenant,’ for the friend so to speak carves out of himself this object and gives it to his friend.

“Similarly, Hashem gives the Torah--and circumcision--to the Jews. These objects form a go-between between the Creator and Israel, because it is not possible for us to attain Him Himself” (Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah).

““It is more precious than pearls and all that you own cannot equal it” (Mishlei 3:15). Rabbi Eliyahu taught that a person will ordinarily pursue and acquire an object for one of two reasons: because it is precious and rare, such as precious stones (and he does this for his honor); or because he needs it very much, such as wheat and so forth.

“Similarly, one must run after the Torah, because it is so precious, more precious

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than pearls, and because one needs it so much, for it is more necessary than anything else in the world. 'It is your life' (Devarim 30:20)--and what is more necessary than one's life?" (Commentary on Mishlei 3:15).

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 CHAPTER NINE:  
 GREAT EVENTS

In the decade that had gone by since the passing away of the Baal Shem Tov in 5520 (1760), Chassidism had spread across Eastern Europe and penetrated into Vilna.

A century earlier, under the strain of persecution that culminated in the massacres of 1648-1649, many Jews had sought to escape an unbearable reality by believing the messianic claims of Shabsai Tzvi. This venture had ended in disaster and broken the spirit of entire communities.

And still, many Jews continued to be touched by despair, oppressed by poverty, and in constant fear of anti-Semitic attacks. The church burned the Talmud, the haidamacks still were murdering entire communities, and there was no region without its outrages and petty tormenters.

The rabbis taught that the Jews could make their lives meaningful primarily through learning Torah. But many Jews were ignorant. Even in Vilna, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin testified, most Jews were--for reasons of poverty--unable to learn.

In response to this dismal situation, the Baal Shem Tov initiated a movement that sought to revive the spirit of the Jewish people through joy, prayer, yearning for Hashem and song. This was Chassidism.

The Chassidic masters intended to make the Torah accessible even to the most simple Jew, revealing a living sense of Hashem's presence in every aspect of one's life.

They intended to give every Jew, regardless of his intellectual attainments, the feeling that he is close and precious to Hashem.

To do so, they adapted their own siddur, unique customs, and prayed with intense enthusiasm in their own synagogues. They stressed prayer and related values so much that these seemed to be encroaching on the primary position of Torah study. Tzavaas Haribash, for instance, stated that "The Baal Shem Tov reached the heights not because he learned much of Talmud and halachah, but because he prayed with feeling."

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The misnagdim--those who opposed Chassidism--were concerned that Chassidism seemed to be a divisive social movement with its own charismatic leaders who did not always heed traditional authority.

They were afraid that the stress on joy and prayer subverted the primary value of Torah learning, and led to light-headedness and treating sages with disdain.

The Chassidim stressed the importance of one's intent, even if one's accomplishments were limited: the essence of serving Hashem, they taught, is in purity of thought and clinging to the upper worlds.

But the misnagdim were afraid that such an attitude would lead to a lowering of values and attainments. They taught that the essence of serving Hashem is in learning Torah and observing the mitzvos correctly.

The misnagdim were especially alarmed by the activities of two extreme Chassidic groups: the Tolkier Chassidim, who followed Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk, and the Chassidim of Rabbi Chaim Chaikl of Amdur. These groups used to somersault in the synagogue and in the street. Rabbi Chaim Chaikl's Chassidim would shout out as they did so, "For Hashem's sake and the rebbe's sake!" They explained this practice by saying that "When a person is filled with pride, he must throw himself over."

And so the misnagdim were very wary of Chassidism. Many viewed it as an avenue whereby non-Torah values would permeate the Jewish people.

In 5521 (1771), a terrible tragedy struck Vilna. A plague swept through the city, and in a population of about 4000 adult Jews, several hundred children died.

The leaders of Vilna met to discover why Hashem's punishment had fallen upon them so heavily. And in 1772, they announced that the cause of the plague was the change in values precipitated by the spread of the Chassidic movement (cherem of 5532, Chassidim Umisnagdim, p. 41).

The leaders of Vilna, headed by Rabbi Eliyahu, composed a cherem (excommunication) against Chassidism.

The cherem charged, "The Chassidim say: Heaven forbid that one should spend

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one's day learning! Instead, they spend their time praying.

"And heaven forbid that they should conduct themselves with gravity! Instead, they are always laughing and happy, for they claim that sadness nullifies one's clinging to Hashem.

"And heaven forbid that they should be steeped in sadness for any sin that they have committed! Instead, they claim that this would bring them to depression."

In the winter of that year, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, a central figure of the Chassidic movement, decided to travel to Vilna and meet personally with Rabbi Eliyahu. Rabbi Menachem Mendel took along with him Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lubavitch, who was known for his genius and scholarship.

But for his own unfathomable reasons, Rabbi Eliyahu did not wish to meet with the two Chassidic leaders.

The leading rabbis of the Kahal urged Rabbi Eliyahu to speak to them. "Certainly you will defeat them, and then the Jews will have peace."

But Rabbi Eliyahu rejected their appeal. And when the Kahal rabbis became insistent, Rabbi Eliyahu left Vilna (letter of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, Chassidim Umisnagdim, p. 196).

By refusing to see the two representatives of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Eliyahu crystallized the controversy that would be synthesized only many decades later. Thus was created an energy-filled polarity that contributed to the shaping of both the Hasidic and misnagdic points of view. Just as a diamond can only be shaped by another diamond, so were these two movements influenced by each other.

Now, Rabbi Eliyahu decided that together with some students, he would travel to Serhai, where he had relatives by marriage and where, he was certain, no one would follow him (Oros Hagra, p. 332).

And so Rabbi Eliyahu slipped out of Vilna. His carriage jolted over the pitted road. Here between towns, there was only wilderness, punctuated by farms where men with scythes walked through fields, half of which were already littered with shocks of grain. At

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the side of a stream, they passed a water mill, and in the middle of the field, they saw tall, white beehives, whose honey was used for brewing mead. Cattle grazed and goats with unkempt goatees nibbled at the bushes.

The wild road stretched on for miles. Now and again they traveled into a forest of thick-limbed trees from which vines hung down. About them scampered squirrels, and birds fluttered in the branches and pecked amidst the dead leaves.

When they emerged from one stretch of forest, the sun was setting, tingeing the fields as though they were in the midst of a silent fire.

“Rabbi Eliyahu,” one of his students told him, “by nightfall, we will only make it to Meretz.”

The sky turned a profound indigo and stars shone in the sky by the time the dim shadows of Meretz appeared in the distance. Bats barrelled clumsily through the evening sky. Two of Rabbi Eliyahu’s students hurried ahead of the wagon, which still lumbered ponderously over the pitted road.

In the beis medrash, the shammash was striking a flint to a tallow candle. He looked around at the students.

“Shalom aleichem! Our teacher, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, will soon be here. Please have a room made up for him.”

“I will go speak to the rabbi right away!” The shammash paused at the door. “How long will the Gaon be staying?”

“Only through the night,” the student said. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll be travelling to Serhai.”

“You’ll be needing passports to get across the Russian border. I’ll speak to the rabbi about it.”

When Rabbi Eliyahu’s carriage rolled into town, he was directed to a two-story house owned by Reb Zalman, a wealthy merchant who did business in Germany. Reb Zalman wore a coat of striped woollen cloth, and his leather hose was fastened with brass buttons. “Come in!” he said as Rabbi Eliyahu stepped into his house. “You must be hungry. I

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will give you to eat, and then show you to your room.”

“I would prefer a room on the second floor, where I can learn without being disturbed.”

“Of course.” Reb Zalman rubbed his hands and looked around. “Zelda! Please bring soup to the dinner table.” Zalman led Rabbi Eliyahu and his students into a bright dining room, at the end of which a fire burned in a broad fireplace. Zalman gestured at the table. “Sit! I ate already, but feel free to eat as much as you like.”

A maid brought out a bowl of soup and placed it before Rabbi Eliyahu. Steam rose from it with a delicious scent. “Please eat!”

Rabbi Zalman left the room. Rabbi Eliyahu took a spoonful of the soup but his stomach was upset, and he brought up the food into his handkerchief.

Zalman came back into the room. He looked with concern at the bowl of soup. “Please, Rabbi Eliyahu, eat!”

Rabbi Eliyahu again took a spoonful of soup, and Zalman, satisfied, left the room. Almost immediately, Rabbi Eliyahu brought up the soup.

When Zalman returned to the room, the plate was still full. Two more times, Zalman urged Rabbi Eliyahu to eat, and two more times, Rabbi Eliyahu took a spoonful, and then brought it up again.

Finally, one of Rabbi Eliyahu’s students leaned over to him. “Rabbi, if you cannot eat, why are you doing this to yourself?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “Our sages teach us that ‘whatever your host tells you to do, you must obey.’ And whenever the Gemara says ‘you must obey,’ one must carry it out to the point of death.” (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 43 and Ruach Eliyahu, p. 3, place this episode at the time of Rabbi Eliyahu’s period of exile. But Oros Hagra notes that one of his greatest students was with him, implying that the story took place later--p. 338-9).

Word spread throughout Meretz that the great Gaon of Vilna was in town. Everyone was filled with excitement. Everywhere, people gathered: how can we get to see the great Gaon? Everyone knew that the Gaon learns all night. How could they see his face and learn

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his holy ways? No one dared go to Rabbi Eliyahu and disturb him.

Finally, a few men came up with a plan. They would bring ladders that reached up to the second floor, and from here they would be able to gaze into Rabbi Eliyahu's room.

All the people gathered on the street: the men in front, and the women and children behind them. Despite the excitement, everyone whispered, and the crowded street was eerily silent. Ladders were handed forward across the crowd, and in utter silence, they were raised into place.

People climbed the ladder and gazed rapturously at the sight of Rabbi Eliyahu sitting and learning. And everyone who did so thought himself the most fortunate person in the world.

Everyone had a chance to climb the ladder and look at Rabbi Eliyahu for a minute before making way for the next person. Despite the excitement, everyone was filled with a profound awe. The people making way for each other, the holy silence that blanketed the commotion of hundreds of people climbing one after the other to gaze into the lit window where Rabbi Eliyahu sat learning made an impression of rapture that lasted for years after.

After midnight, a frightening report spread among the Jews. Rabbi Eliyahu had lain down for his usual half-hour nap and those who had been on the ladders when he awoke reported that Rabbi Eliyahu had said in a shaking, frightening voice, "In Meretz, sleep has grabbed me, for I have slept ten minutes more than usual. Woe is me, I have lost ten minutes of serving Hashem!" And with a broken heart, Rabbi Eliyahu exclaimed, "In Meretz, one falls asleep!"

As the report spread throughout the crowd, the hearts of the people were filled with sorrow.

But later, when Rabbi Eliyahu returned from Serhai, he again stayed overnight in Meretz. And this time, he slept about ten minutes less than usual. And when Rabbi Eliyahu saw that Hashem had helped him, he rejoiced in his heart, and all the city rejoiced as well.

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## CHAPTER TEN:

### BLESSINGS AND KABBALAH

Rabbi Eliyahu's son testified that as great as Rabbi Eliyahu was in the revealed Torah, he was even greater in the Kabbalah: "more than he was wise in the revealed Torah, the gates of understanding were opened for him to understand and explain to all Jews the words of the Zohar, the Tikkunei Zohar, Sifra Detzniusa, Raya Mehemna, Sefer Yetzirah the Heichalos, the secrets of the Torah, the work of Creation and the work of the Chariot" (Introduction to Sh'nos Eliyahu).

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that the revealed Torah and Kabbalah complement each other. Sometimes the Gemara and Zohar might seem to disagree, but they could be reconciled. Rabbi Eliyahu thus created a bridge between these two aspects of the Torah (Hagaon Hachassid, pp. 140-1).

Rabbi Eliyahu's Kabbalistic knowledge was inclusive and profound. He did not teach the simple meaning of a verse in chumash or of a mishnah until he knew its Kabbalistic meaning (ibid.). At times, he would emend a text based on Kabbalistic reasons (ibid., p. 108).

Here, as in the revealed Torah, Rabbi Eliyahu worked very hard. He used to say that it is impossible to understand a statement in the Zohar and Tikkunei Zohar without having toiled over it for several few weeks (Introduction to Sifra Detzniusa).

Rabbi Eliyahu's greatness in the realms of Kabbalah was extraordinary. He told some of his students that he was revealing things that had not been taught for generations. Rabbi Eliyahu told Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov that one of the great rishonim fasted a great deal in order that he might learn from heaven the secret of an aggadah in Succah until at last, a bit of it was revealed to him. "But," Rabbi Eliyahu said, "I know this matter perfectly." And he added, "If I had been created only to attain this, it would have been enough for me."

The Ari himself revealed to Rabbi Eliyahu that he had set aside a place for Rabbi

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Eliyahu to transmit these teachings.

Rabbi Eliyahu said that all the writings of the Ari are only symbolic. “But I, thank heaven, also know what the symbols refer to.” Rabbi Eliyahu also said that Rabbi Chaim Moshe Luzzatto understood the meaning of the Ari’s symbols. And he promised Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin that he too would be able to do so. (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 140, note 11 and 143, note 23). He said in addition that for a period of time, he had thought that Rabbi Chaim Vital, who had written down the Ari’s writings, did not understand the deeper meanings of the Ari. But then he saw from one passage that Rabbi Chaim Vital did understand, but hid his understanding.

Sometimes, Rabbi Eliyahu would fast and even grow ill until a secret was revealed to him by heaven.

From those things that Rabbi Eliyahu spoke about with Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Rabbi Chaim said that he was sure that every night, Rabbi Eliyahu’s soul rose up to heaven, and great beings such as Yaakov Avinu and Eliyahu Hanavi came and taught him. But it was not clear to Rabbi Chaim if these things would happen on a regular basis while Rabbi Eliyahu was awake, for he was very secretive about these matters.

Rabbi Eliyahu himself sometimes would write that a particular insight had been taught him by Yaakov Avinu or Eliyahu Hanavi. For instance, he wrote such things as, “Eliyahu Hanavi gave me an explanation of the statement in Eiruv (13), ‘These and these are the words of the living Gd.’” And a student of Rabbi Eliyahu noted in his Sefer Hadrash Kodesh, “The following explanation was given to me by Rabbi Eliyahu in the name of Yaakov Avinu.”

Once, Rabbi Eliyahu was sitting at the table for the first day Pesach meal, together with two of his senior students, who were great talmidei chachamim in their own right. On Pesach, Rabbi Eliyahu’s face usually shone with great joy. Yet today, his features were clouded.

“What is wrong, Rabbi Eliyahu? Why is your joy not as great as usual?”

Rabbi Eliyahu did not want to reply, but his students pressed him.

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At last, Rabbi Eliyahu could not restrain himself. “I am forced to reveal to you something that I would usually keep a secret, in order to fulfill the verse, ‘When a man has a worry in his heart, he should speak it to others’ (Mishlei 12:25).

“Last night, I learned from one of the heavenly yeshivas (or from Eliyahu Hanavi) awesome and limitless secrets regarding the great 12-letter Name of Hashem as revealed in the verse, ‘Go up through the south’ (Bamidbar 13:17). (Another version says it was the 42-letter Name of Hashem.)

“When I awoke, I was filled with such joy that I could not help from thinking about these insights before making the blessing on the Torah.” Rabbi Eliyahu held that one is forbidden even to think about words of Torah before making the blessing. “And as a result, I was punished, and I immediately forgot the insights.”

Rabbi Eliyahu’s students consoled him, and they blessed him, “May Hashem return your loss to you.”

After some time had passed, one of them asked Rabbi Eliyahu if he had regained his insights, and Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “Thank heaven, they were revealed to me a second time.” Rabbi Eliyahu continued, “These were altogether 6,620 avenues of understanding. When I learned why they were hidden from me, I realized why they were again revealed to me. With the insight of one of these avenues of understanding, I know the powers of all creatures and the purpose of every bodily limb.”

“What is most astounding,” Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin wrote, “is that Rabbi Eliyahu experienced all these matters in a natural manner, without having to prepare himself with special intentions and meditations. And this makes sense, for he was constantly involved with Torah” (introduction to Sifra Detzniusa).

Rabbi Eliyahu once told Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, “I was once shown from heaven the greatness of prayer.

“I had worked very hard for twelve weeks to understand a statement in the Torah regarding rosh chodesh, but I still could not explain it correctly. Then, on the first day of rosh chodesh, while I was in the middle of the morning prayers, I was inspired. I saw seven

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ways that I could answer my question.

“But how could I interrupt my concentration on the prayers?”

Rabbi Chaim interjected, “Perhaps you could interrupt your prayers just a moment to arrange your thoughts--if that would not be considered an interruption.”

“That is exactly what I did,” Rabbi Eliyahu said. “I took about a quarter minute and arranged the answers in my mind, and then I returned to my prayers.

“After I finished praying, I went back to the insight, but I recalled nothing--nothing at all! I was very upset. It took me about half an hour to restore my equilibrium, and then I recited Hallel.

“Then, when I was in the middle of the musaf prayer, the seven answers came into my mind again. But this time I ignored them.

“And when I finished my prayers, they were still arranged clearly in my mind, true and sweeter than honey.”

In general, Rabbi Eliyahu did not think highly of and even rejected heavenly teachings of angelic heavenly teachers, or *maggidim*. Many times, Rabbi Eliyahu confided to Rabbi Chaim, *maggidim* came to him, telling him that they wished to teach him secrets of the Torah without any work on his part. But he would refuse them.

One of the *maggidim* begged him a great deal. “Nevertheless,” said Rabbi Eliyahu, “I told him that I do not want my achievements in Hashem’s Torah to be accomplished through any go-between. My eyes are lifted to Hashem alone for what He wishes to reveal to me as my portion to be attained with my toil and hard work. He will give me wisdom, knowledge and understanding, a heart to understand and kidneys like two wellsprings. Then I will know that I have found grace in His eyes. I want nothing but what is in Hashem’s mouth. And I have no desire for attainments via angelic preachers and ministers of Torah for which I do not have to toil.”

He told Rabbi Chaim many times, “I only want to turn to Hashem. He will reveal to me my portion in His holy Torah that I can attain with my strength.”

Once, Rabbi Eliyahu summoned Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin and told him, “Go tell

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your brother, Rabbi Zelmele, that in a little while a maggid from heaven will come to teach him. But tell him not to listen to him.”

Rabbi Chaim was surprised, and Rabbi Eliyahu continued, “It is true that Rabbi Yosef Kairo, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, had a maggid. But that was two hundred years ago, when the generations were as they should be. And besides that, Rabbi Yosef Kairo lived in the Holy Land. But today, there are many people who act wrongly. And particularly, outside the Holy Land, it is impossible that an angelic messenger will be entirely holy without any admixture” (introduction to Sifra Detzniusa).

As for revelations that did not relate to the Torah itself--such as knowing what is going on elsewhere--Rabbi Eliyahu’s soul rebelled against such matters, and he thought nothing of them.

Rabbi Eliyahu said that although a soul attains great and awesome things when a person is asleep and his soul rises in joy to the heavenly yeshivas, he did not consider this so essential. The learning that is essential, Rabbi Eliyahu said, is that which one attains in this world via hard work and study. That is what pleases his Maker. But when the soul attains matters while one is asleep, without hard work, without free will and without desire, it is only receiving the reward of the world-to-come that Hashem is now giving one a taste of now.

A number of times, one of Rabbi Eliyahu’s students, Rabbi Shaul Katzenelboygen, looked at the face of Rabbi Eliyahu as he slept. And he saw Rabbi Eliyahu grimacing, as though he were suffering a great deal.

When Rabbi Eliyahu awoke, Rabbi Shaul questioned him. Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “I am in pain because I cannot bear the sorrow of the dead souls who come to me to be rectified, and particularly those souls who have died recently, whom I knew and spoke with when they were alive.”

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin was once asked, “When you hear people telling wonder stories about rabbis, you get upset. So why do you yourself tell wonder stories about Rabbi Eliyahu?”

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Rabbi Chaim replied, “Our sages tell us about a man whose wife died and left him an infant. Hashem performed a miracle, and the man was able to suckle the baby. This was certainly a miracle. Yet Abaye said, ‘How low this man was, for whom the order of creation had to be changed!’ (Shabbos 53).

“This is certainly strange, for the Talmud tells us many wonder stories about the sages themselves. And it never said ‘how low they are’--heaven forbid!

“The answer is that when a person is known as great in Torah and holy, it is no wonder that Hashem does his will and bends nature to his desire.

“But the story in the Gemara speaks of a ‘man’--not a ‘pious man.’ When Hashem does a miracle for an ordinary man, that man is ‘low.’

“All this applies to Rabbi Eliyahu. We already know how great he is. And so any miracle story about him only emphasizes that Hashem does the will of those who fear Him.

“But we are not supposed to believe that a person is great in Torah because of miracles that have occurred!” (Ruach Eliyahu, pp. 38-9).

When Rabbi Eliyahu completed his commentary on Sifra Detzniusa, he invited others to join him in a celebration. A number of those people later testified that as part of the festive meal, they ate a fatted bird that was sent to them from heaven. (Some say that the bird was a pheasant; and some say that Rabbi Eliyahu had finished his commentary on Tikkunei Zohar.) (Hagaon, Hachassid, p. 254, 377).

One day, Rabbi Eliyahu’s daughter, who was living in Disna, came to his beis medrash to see him. She had already had a number of sons, and they had all died as infants.

“Save me, father!” she cried. “Have mercy!”

“What is it?”

“Father, I am again with child. How can I see another baby die before me?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied in a few short words. “You will hav a son. Give him two names: the first name should be his own, and the second name should be that of the last boy who died.”

Rabbi Eliyahu did not want to say any more to his daughter, and he returned to the

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beis medrash.

After the child was born, he was named “Zalman Ber” (the last child who had died had been named Dov Ber). This child lived, as did all the other children who were born after him.

And when other people with this problem heard of what Rabbi Eliyahu’s daughter had done, they followed her example and they too were helped (Aliyos Eliyahu, note 51).

A number of people lived long lives after being blessed by Rabbi Eliyahu.

It was Rabbi Eliyahu’s custom to be especially joyful on Succos. On chol hamoed, scholars would come to rejoice with him, and he would speak to them about the importance of setting aside time to learn Torah regularly, and about making a living.

One Succos, a man came into Rabbi Eliyahu’s succah to speak with him. But Rabbi Eliyahu was so steeped in concentration that he didn’t notice the man.

The man felt terribly insulted, and he bitterly left the succah.

“I don’t understand how a man like Rabbi Eliyahu could ignore me like that!” he complained to a friend.

The friend replied, “Let us go together to speak with Rabbi Eliyahu, and we will ask him if he has anything against you.”

In the succah, Rabbi Eliyahu listened to the two men.

“Heaven forbid!” he replied at last. “Should I have something against a man who has come to join me in my happiness? May Hashem lengthen his days to a hundred years!”

Many years passed, and this person remained strong and healthy. When he was 98 years old, he grew ill. His children and grandchildren were deeply troubled, and they wanted to call a doctor.

“There is no need for a doctor,” the old man said. “Rabbi Eliyahu promised me 100 years. I have 2 years and a few days left, and I am not conceding even a bit of them!”

And so it was that the man lived his full 100 years (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 79).

One day after prayers, Rabbi Eliyahu paced back and forth in the beis medrash, immersed in thought. There was a boy who also prayed in that minyan, and he too walked

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back and forth in the beis medrash, reciting Tehillim with great feeling.

Suddenly, they met in the middle of the room. The boy unwittingly stepped on the fringe of Rabbi Eliyahu's tallis. And then in great awe, he stood frozen before Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu realized the boy's fright and confusion. He lovingly put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Length of days to you, my son. Please let my tzitzis go."

When people in Vilna learned of the blessing that Rabbi Eliyahu had given the boy, they looked on him as an exalted soul. His father made a festive meal and donated money to charity. This boy, Binyamin of Lubitsch, grew up to be a noted Torah scholar.

In his old age, whenever someone would tell him to watch his health, he would say that he isn't concerned, because he is protected by the blessing of Rabbi Eliyahu.

And he lived to be almost ninety years old (Ruach Eliyahu, Hagaon Hachassid).

One of Rabbi Eliyahu's young students became blind. But he continued to learn diligently, and he became an outstanding talmid chacham.

When the student reached the age of marriage, Rabbi Eliyahu found a bride for him. The girl's father promised to support the young couple on condition that the student would continue to learn Torah.

On the wedding day, in the Synagogue Courtyard, Rabbi Eliyahu was filled with joy. His happiness overflowed its borders when the bridegroom was brought to the bride, a diminutive figure, to have her face covered by the veil that was thrown back over her head.

Rabbi Eliyahu turned to the groom and said, "Our sages have said that it is forbidden for a man to marry a woman until he has had a chance to look at her!"

At that moment, light flooded into the bridegroom's eyes--he could see again! He looked upon the face of his bride.

And the happy couple grew to have children and grandchildren (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 259-60).

Not too distant from Vilna lived a famous "dybbuk of Novardak" who spoke wonders and told of hidden things. One day, speaking through the man whom it possessed,

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the dybbuk proclaimed that Rabbi Eliyahu was the third of the 36 tzaddikim of the generation. “Why the third and not the first?” someone asked.

“Because,” the dybbuk answered, “Rabbi Eliyahu has become known, and this has taken away from his stature” (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 168).

Before Rabbi Eliyahu had his own kloiz, he learned in the beis medrash Yesod that adjoined Vilna’s large beis medrash (the following episode thus took place before 5527 (1767), and is presented here a few years out of order).

One day, a dybbuk entered a man who was sitting in the large beis medrash. He twisted, jumped up from his seat and yelled out, spittle spraying from his lips.

The other men started yelling. “What is going on? Reb Meir, what’s the matter with you?”

From the man’s throat came unearthly sounds: a cackle, a deep voice, a girls’ hysterical laugh, then a cry as though a calf were being led to the slaughterer.

“A dybbuk has entered into him!”

“Woe, what of his wife and children?”

“Reb Meir, sit down! Are you all right?”

Reb Meir’s thin, stubbly cheeks had turned red, and his eyes were wild. “Stand back. I am not Reb Meir!” The dybbuk snapped back his head and rolled his eyes so that only the whites appeared, and he howled like a wolf.

People rushed out of the beis medrash. “Woe is us! A dybbuk has entered Reb Meir!”

Reb Meir stood in a corner. Wild phrases and curses flew out of his mouth. One moment he talked with the croak of an old widow, the next minute he bellowed.

A crowd gathered about him: boys jumped about excitedly, sticking their tongues out at him, rabbis tried to calm him down. Reb Meir’s wife stood at the entrance of the synagogue. “The evil one has entered him! What will become of me and the children?”

Rabbi Eliyahu, in the other room, opened the window that opened into the beis medrash. “What is going on?” he called out in a loud voice, and everyone turned and fell

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 silent. The Gaon is here!

Reb Meir stared wildly at Rabbi Eliyahu. The dybbuk began to yell, “Rabbi, it is you about whom they say in the upper worlds, ‘Beware of Eliyahu and his Torah.’

“If you decree only with your word, without even using oaths and holy Names, that I must leave this man, I will do so.”

Rabbi Eliyahu gazed impassively at the possessed man. “I have never wanted to have anything to do with you. And now as well, I don’t want to speak to you at all.”

And he closed the shutter.

This reply of Rabbi Eliyahu became known in the shadow worlds where dybbuks wander, unable to go to heaven or return to earth.

Some time later, a dybbuk entered a boy in Novardak and spoke great and awesome things, telling of wonders in the upper worlds, proclaiming the future, and telling what people had done behind closed doors.

He remained in the boy a long time, and in vain rabbis tried to drive him out.

Once a few people came to the possessed boy and said to him, “We will take you to Vilna. If he wants to, Rabbi Eliyahu Chassid will surely be able to drive you out!”

The boy shivered, and the dybbuk’s unearthly voice forced its way through his lips. “True, we have much to fear from the Gaon, but we have been promised by him that he will have nothing to do with us.”

One of the people said, “Then why do you fear him? He does not mortify himself with fasts like the pious men do, but eats” (this took place when Rabbi Eliyahu was older, for in his youth he did mortify himself).

The dybbuk replied, “Woe to us from his eating. That harms us as well, for his every bite is like sacrifices brought to the beis hamikdash!” (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 83).

There was in Vilna a woman who went out of her mind. She turned her head to the side, listening to voices that talked to her. “No, no, leave me alone!” she wailed, wandering from room to room. She dressed in rags and tramped through the streets, muttering back to the voices. Sometimes she would talk to a passerby. “Did you see? There was a white cloud,

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then a brown bird. It's a message to me...."

Her husband and children came to Rabbi Eliyahu. "Please, rabbi, heal this suffering woman."

But Rabbi Eliyahu said, "It is difficult for me to implore heaven to rectify this woman before her time."

From day to day, she grew worse. She snapped at others in her family, "A black day when I first saw you!"

"My dear wife," her husband pleaded with her, "what can I do for you?"

She stopped and tilted her head. She was listening again to her voices. "No, no, no...!" She turned from the room, holding her head in her hands.

One Friday afternoon, the madwoman walked into the large beis medrash, a ragged dress trailing on the floor. Her son and daughter followed, their faces white.

"Please, Mama, come home, Papa has brought flowers for you for erev Shabbos."

"Enemies! Persecutors! What do you want from me?" "May you be swallowed up in a dark pit, may you burn a thousand years!"

From the end of the room, a door opened, and the imposing figure of Rabbi Eliyahu appeared in the doorway.

"Woman!" he called out to her in a thundering voice.

She turned to him. "Enough of this, woman. You have spoken and done enough. Finished!" Rabbi Eliyahu closed the door behind him.

The woman, shrunken, deflated, turned from him, looking back at her children. In her eyes, they saw again recognition, sanity. "Ber! Leah!"

She was healed.

Near Vilna, a villager began to proclaim that Moshiach would soon be coming. He showed wonders and he walked through the streets, calling on the people to repent.

Excitement rippled through the village and spread across the countryside. Prophecy had arisen in a village! This must be a sign of divine favor. And they spoke great things of this villager. He had seen things beyond the horizon. He had foretold a fire; he had stopped

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anthrax among the cattle.

When Rabbi Eliyahu heard about this man, he dismissed him. “He is an ignoramus, and this is nothing but a minor evil.”

Another man began to prophesy in the town of Kavna. When excited people brought the great news to Rabbi Eliyahu, he responded, “Why are you so surprised? This is a small demon.”

Rabbi Eliyahu sent a messenger to him: “Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna orders you to cease your prophesying.”

For a few weeks, the man was silent. But then, he said, the spirit of prophecy was rising up in him, and again he began to speak great things.

A townsman brought the news back to Rabbi Eliyahu. Rabbi Eliyahu this time sent a message back to the townspeople: “You are forbidden to listen to the man.”

For a few days more, the man continued his preaching, but no one paid him any mind. “People, a sword shall rise in France and fall upon the heads of the nobles!” A woman went by, carrying a string of rolls. “The hornet shall fly from the east and the Turk shall suffer a downfall!” A man walked by with a sefer under his arm. “As the floods overflow their boundaries, so will Russia flow to the west!” A girl carrying a bucket of buttermilk hurried by, her eyes on the ground before her dusty shoes.

A short while later, the man ceased to prophesy, and returned to normal.

There were other people who could do marvelous things.

In a beis medrash in Shklov, a group of awestruck people watched a man with a thick beard. Someone placed a closed sefer on the table before him, and he began to recite its contents. That was easy--it was a Mishnah, and he might have known it by heart anyway.

Another sefer was brought--one filled with abstruse pilpul. A group of men and boys crowded over the sefer at one end of the table. And at the other end, the man wagged his beard. “Are you ready?”

“Yes!”

The man gazed into the air and began to recite. The men peering into the book were

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 breathless. He really was reciting the contents of the book, word for word...

When Rabbi Eliyahu was told about this remarkable man, he said, "Let him try to read a sefer that's been bound together."

Rabbi Eliyahu's words were carried back to Shklov. A thin sefer was bound together with heavy thread. The man sat at his seat in the beis medrash, his eyes calm and confident. "All right, go ahead!"

He opened his mouth--but no sound came out. "I--I cannot read it."

A scholar brought the news back to Rabbi Eliyahu. "But how did you know?" the scholar asked.

"It is a clear Gemara in Chullin: 'WHatever is bound and sealed...'"" (Chullin) (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 265).

There was a man in Vilna that everyone was afraid of. In his dreams, he saw the most secret things that people did. "Reb Simchah, you told your wife that you were going to deliver a table to Antokli. But I saw you in the woods, crying out to Hashem. And Aharon, I saw you staying up until one in the morning, helping your wife take care of your baby, Leib Dovid. But was that a reason not to go to minyan the next morning?"

Rabbi Eliyahu heard about this man and had him summoned.

When the man walked into the beis medrash, he said, "Rabbi, two weeks ago on Thursday, you sat right over there"--and he pointed to a seat at the table--"and you were interpreting such-and-such verses in the parshah of Haazinu. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was sitting at your right side, and the Ari was sitting at your left."

Rabbi Eliyahu was stunned. "Where does this person know all this?" he murmured. "I recall that I had sent the gabbai out of the house." He looked back at the man. "It is true. I made awesome interpretations at that time." Remembering them, Rabbi Eliyahu's face shone.

As Rabbi Eliyahu gazed at the man's face, he understood what had happened. "You are a melancholiac," he said, "and that is why you have been having such dreams." He looked at the scholars in the room. "The dreams of such people are sometimes correct. But

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they are not the portion of Yaakov.” And he told the gabbai to take the man out of the beis medrash (Orchos Hagra, p. 347).

Rabbi Yisrael Kisin of Vitebsk once spent a Shabbos in a town, where he was told about a great teller of wonders, a man “who tells the future and sees distant places.”

After Havdalah, Rabbi Yisrael went to the man’s house, a wooden building lit by thin strips of resinous pine stuck into the chinks of the wall.

The light of the moon shone through an open window onto the man, who stood leaning on his cane. He gazed keenly at Rabbi Yisrael. “I see that you intend to go to the Gaon of Vilna. When you arrive, you will see that he is learning the first mishnah in Taharos, and he has the following question on the mishnah.” The man quoted the mishnah by heart, then asked a question on it and answered it as well. “Bless him in my name and give him the answer in my name.”

Astounded, Rabbi Yisrael left the man’s house. Overhead, a black cloud sailed across the face of the moon.

The next day, Rabbi Yisrael travelled back to Vilna. When he entered Rabbi Eliyahu’s beis medrash, he immediately asked Rabbi Eliyahu, “Are you learning the first mishnah in Taharos?”

“Yes.”

“I had a remarkable experience last night.” Rabbi Yisrael began to tell about the man he had seen--

Rabbi Eliyahu interrupted him. “I am willing to listen to the man’s statement of my problem, but I don’t want to hear his answer. I can see by the expression on your face that you were very impressed by him.”

“I was.”

“Now think back,” Rabbi Eliyahu said. “When he spoke to you, did you see the light of the moon shining into the house?”

“Yes.”

“Was he leaning on his staff?”

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“Yes, he was.”

“Do not be impressed. This is a low level of magic, of which is said, ‘My people ask questions from a stick of wood, and their staff tells them an answer’ (Hoshea 4:12). In Egypt, even the four and five year old children knew this. Open your eyes and look at the words of the Ramban on the verse, ‘Do not engage in magic and divination,’ and you will see that this is the way of magicians” (Hagaon Hachassid and Aliyos Eliyahu, compilation).

A student, Rabbi Gershon, brought another remarkable story to Rabbi Eliyahu. “There is a girl named Rivkah who is wise beyond all measure. She speaks with wisdom and inspiration on all subjects.”

Rabbi Gershon himself had gone to the young woman, for she had acquired a following. He caught only a glimpse of her in the house where she taught, a thin girl with silky, yellow hair. And as the group of men and teen-agers sat down in the dimly-lit room, she began to speak from the adjoining room. She spoke of marvelous things, and she expounded with the greatest wisdom on Kabbalah and the text of the holy Zohar.

“And I marvelled,” Rabbi Gershon reported to Rabbi Eliyahu, “for her teachings were true and her insights profound.”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied laconically, “When she marries, this spirit will leave her.”

A little while later, the girl did marry, and although she retained her native intelligence, she lost her remarkable ability, and her following disbanded.

It is told that a scholar--perhaps Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin--once spoke with Rabbi Eliyahu about how the chumash contains within itself information about the entirety of the universe.

Rabbi Eliyahu said, “Each of the parshiyos of Devarim hints to a hundred years of the sixth millennium. There are ten parshiyos corresponding to ten centuries, for Nitzavim and Vayeilech are considered one parshah.”

“If that is the case,” Rabbi Chaim said, “where are you and I hinted at in the parshah of Ki Seitzei?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “My name is hinted at in the words Ehven sh’leimah

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vetzedek--a true and just measure. The first letters of Ehven sh'leimah stand for Eliyahu ben Shlomo."

When Rabbi Chaim told this story to others, he said that the source of his own name in the parshah is hidden. And his listeners were not sure whether Rabbi Eliyahu had hidden it from Rabbi Chaim, or whether Rabbi Chaim was hiding it from them.

One Purim, Rabbi Chaim was sitting at the table in his house. People were coming in throughout the day, and whenever anyone asked Rabbi Chaim for charity, Rabbi Chaim gave him some money.

An old man came up to Rabbi Chaim, and Rabbi Chaim gave him a coin.

"Give me another coin," the man said, "and I will tell you something original about Purim."

Rabbi Chaim put another coin into his hand.

"The medrash says that Mordechai was able to nullify the decree of destruction against the Jews because it was sealed not in blood--"

"But rather in clay."

"So the question is: Where do we find a hint of that in Megillas Esther?"

Rabbi Chaim thought a moment, and the man continued, "The verse says, 'Haman, son of Hamdasa, troubler of the Jews, intended to overturn the Jews and to destroy them.' The word 'to destroy them,' 'la'abdam,' can be read as two words: 'lo badam': not with blood."

Rabbi Chaim nodded his head. He was impressed.

The next time that Rabbi Chaim came to Rabbi Eliyahu, he told him what the old man had said.

Rabbi Eliyahu was moved, and replied, "These words were told to you by the same old man who revealed this to Mordechai himself--Eliyahu Hanavi."

It is told that one of Rabbi Eliyahu's daughters, who was married to Rabbi Moshe of Pinsk, used to send her father a regular shipment of yashan barley (until Shavuot, Rabbi Eliyahu only ate grain from the previous year). She would send the grain along with a

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merchant.

This year as usual, the merchant pulled his wagon up before the entrance to the Synagogue Courtyard, and tied the horse to a metal ring. The wagon was packed with burlap bags that contained wheat that one could roll through one's hand like gold, almost liquid to the touch. As soon as he dropped off the barley for Rabbi Eliyahu, he would be hurrying to the marketplace.

The merchant leaned over his wagon and with a grunt pulled out a bulky sack of grain. It seemed heavy--heavier than it had ever been before. He glanced down at his belly, underneath his jacket. He was eating too much--this would never do.

The merchant carried the sack into the courtyard. His shiny leather cap slipped to the side of his head as he struggled over the bag of grain.

There was a Jewish village boy, dressed in a dirty blouse and ragged shoes, at the entrance of Rabbi Eliyahu's beis medrash. And now Rabbi Eliyahu stepped out.

"Rabbi Eliyahu, I've brought you your barley!" He lowered the bag onto the ground. His face was red and he breathed out stertorously.

Rabbi Eliyahu didn't even glance at the wheat. "Listen," he said. "I want you to take this boy to the mansion of one of the squires. He will show you how to get there."

"But Rabbi--"

"The squire put his father in jail for not paying rent. Now the boy has collected the money, and the sooner he gets back to the squire, the better. And the more you hurry, the better will it be for your body and soul."

"But Rabbi Eliyahu, if I take this boy to the squire, I'll have to stay at a village overnight. I'll miss the fair, and I won't be able to sell any of my wheat."

"Redeeming captives is a great mitzvah," Rabbi Eliyahu said. "Do this, and the merit of the mitzvah will help you."

"Very well, rabbi." The merchant couldn't help sighing. He looked at the boy with a combination of pity, affection and irritation. "Come along, then."

"Thank you!"

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The merchant knew he was doing a great mitzvah, but he was also upset. After all, would an extra few hours have mattered? And couldn't someone else have taken the boy? The gaon stayed sequestered in his beis medrash all day. Perhaps he did not realize what it meant to miss the market day: the merchant had hoped to earn enough money to pay for the next few months, until the spring market. But on the other hand, the gaon had talked of the merit of the mitzvah....

The merchant had somehow hoped that he could still make it to the fair on time. But by the time he dropped the boy off at the squire's mansion, he saw that it was impossible. Purple shadows were stretching across the fields, and the damp evening wind was blowing.

The next day, when the merchant came to the fair, the gates had already been closed. Peasants were driving home their goats and cows, and parsley leaves were crushed into the dusty fair grounds.

The merchant gazed glumly ahead of him. The grain had suddenly become useless.

But a few days later, the price of wheat went up suddenly. The merchant took advantage of the new demand, and he sold the wheat at a much higher profit than he would have done had he come in time for the market.

Yes, he thought, riding home in his empty wagon, bumping emptily on the rutted road, Rabbi Eliyahu's blessing really did come true.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN:

### THE SCIENCES

In Teves, 5538 (1778), Rabbi Boruch of Shklov came to see Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu gave him the task of translating into Hebrew the mathematical writings of the Greek geometrician, Euclid (circa 300 BCE).

In his introduction to that work, Rabbi Boruch wrote, “I was in Vilna with the rabbi, the light, the great gaon, my teacher and master, the light of the eyes of the exile, the famous Chassid, Eliyahu, in Teves of 5538. At that time, I heard him say that according to the degree that a person lacks knowledge of other sciences, he will correspondingly lack a hundredfold in understanding the wisdom of the Torah, for Torah and all the sciences are inter-related.

“Rabbi Eliyahu told me to translate into our Holy Tongue whatever I could of the sciences. Then, he said, knowledge will spread among our people. We will be able to refute the derision of the nations, who censure us for lack of wisdom, as a result of which the name of heaven is desecrated.”

Another student, Rabbi Avraham Simchah of Amtzislav, wrote that Rabbi Eliyahu said that he wanted to translate scientific works into Hebrew in order to help make the works of the sages more understandable. He gave as an example the writings of Josephus, which provide a great deal of historical, social, geographical and architectural information that help one understand the nature of the Holy Land and of the beis hamikdash.

The above passage by Rabbi Boruch later became the subject of contention. Did Rabbi Eliyahu really make such a statement? After all, he also said that “All the wisdoms are included within our holy Torah.” And another student quoted him as repeatedly saying that “one should learn nothing in addition to the Talmud but grammar. And he said that he learned the secular sciences only in places where one is not allowed to learn Torah” (Yad Eliyahu).

Particularly at the beginning of the haskalah, when Maskilim were eager to claim

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that Rabbi Eliyahu sympathized with their aims, exactly what Rabbi Eliyahu had to say about learning the sciences was of great importance.

But at least it is clear that Rabbi Eliyahu commissioned Rabbi Boruch to translate scientific works into Hebrew and that he himself composed a work, *Ayil Meshulash*, on trigonometry.

In the days of the Vilna Gaon, any scholar interested in the most rudimentary scientific knowledge had almost no literature to study. Most scientific writings were in Latin--the language of the church, and one that few Jews could be expected to, or would wish to, learn. And there were only a handful of books, often centuries old, in Hebrew--works such as *Tzuras Haaretz*, *Yesod Olam*, *Kiddush Hachodesh*, *Nechmad Venaim* and *Techunas Hashamayim*. Perhaps the most important was *Sefer Ha'eilim* of Rabbi Yashar of Kandia, containing simple and spherical trigonometry and astronomy, which served as a source of study for hundreds of years. From these books one could draw a picture, to a greater or lesser extent, of the structure of the world and the movement of the heavens.

In the midst of a Europe that seethed with scientific and mathematical discoveries, such a limited body of knowledge about the physical world seemed increasingly constricting. The problem was not only that gentiles mocked Jews' ignorance of scientific advances. Many young Jews were fascinated by the scientific knowledge, and the nascent Haskalah movement often claimed their loyalty. At such a time, Rabbi Eliyahu's call for the translation into Hebrew of scientific texts was particularly apropos.

Rabbi Eliyahu's affinity for numbers and computations contributed to a few of his insights into the Torah.

Three examples follow:

1) When Avraham negotiated with Ephron for the land that contains the *machpelah*, Avraham offered to pay 400 silver shekels.

How large a plot of land did Avraham need? On the basis of a few statements in the Gemara, Rabbi Eliyahu concluded that there must be room for 600,000 to be present when one is buried.

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Therefore, Avraham Avinu needed a plot of land large enough to hold 600,000 people.

Our sages say that a person takes up the space of one square amah. So Avraham Avinu needed an area of 600,000 square amah.

This is equivalent to 8 beis kurim.

We learn in a mishnah that a beis kur is valued at 50 shekel.

8 beis kurim would therefore be worth 400 shekel.

And that is exactly the price that Avraham Avinu offered for the plot of land.

2) Megillas Esther tells us that Achashveirosh showed his greatness for 180 days. Why this particular amount of time?

The midrash says that Nevuchadnezzar had 1080 treasures, which he sank into the river. Hashem revealed them to Koresh because he oversaw the building of the beis hamikdash, and they then were inherited by Achashveirosh.

Achashveirosh made a banquet to show his glory, and he went to show off his treasures. Every day, our sages say, he showed six treasures, according to the words in the Megillah: wealth, honor, kingship, preciousness, beauty, greatness.

And when one divides 6 into 1080, one gets 180--the 180 days.

3) The mishnah teaches us that the curtain in the beis hamikdash was 40 amah long and 20 amah wide, and 300 cohanim used to immerse it (Shekalim 8:5).

Why 300 cohanim?

The paroches had an area of 120 square amah. The amah of the beis hamikdash was 5 tefachim. (A tefach is a handbreadth.) Therefore, the paroches had an area of 600 tefachim.

As many cohanim as possible ran to take part in the mitzvah of immersing the paroches. Each cohen grabbed it with two hands--2 tefachim. So 300 cohanim would be able to grab it for a total of 600 tefachim.

In biology, Rabbi Eliyahu, it is said, "preceded modern science by five generations. He mapped out the nerves of the eye and revealed anatomical details that only the new science has since then confirmed" (Rabbi A. Marcus, in Hagaon Hachassid, p. 220, note 4).

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Rabbi Eliyahu had little respect for philosophy. Once when he was speaking to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov, he said that “There is no doubt that Aristotle was a total heretic. If he would come to me, I would show him the movement of the sun, the moon and the stars, shining on this table just as they shine in the heavens. And then how could he claim that the world is ruled by nature?”

“In his day, certainly it was possible for Shimon Hatzaddik to show him the many wonders of Hashem’s power. So from here, we see that Aristotle knew of Hashem’s power, but he intended to rebel against Hashem.”

When Rabbi Menachem Mendel heard these words, he trembled and fell back.

“Why are you so shocked?” Rabbi Eliyahu asked him. “I could do all this with one Name, and the gaonim after the time of the Gemara could do so as well” (introduction to Avos).

Rabbi Eliyahu disparaged the Rambam’s respect for philosophy and his denial of the reality of various supernatural phenomena. He wrote in his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, “All those who came after the Rambam disagreed with him, for many incantations are mentioned in the Gemara. But Rambam was drawn after the accursed philosophy...Philosophy caused him to interpret everything in the Gemara [on this topic] mockingly and to uproot it from its plain meaning...The Torah must be understood according to its simple meaning. It has an inner meaning as well, but this is the inner meaning of the Kabbalah, and not of the philosophers.” (The authenticity of this passage was for some time disputed, but has since been confirmed by a manuscript.)

But Rabbi Eliyahu continued to have tremendous respect for the Rambam.

Once, Rabbi Oshaya Treitel came to Rabbi Eliyahu in tremendous agitation. “Someone has begun teaching a shiur in the Rambam’s philosophical Guide to the Perplexed!”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “Do you dare speak against the honor of the Rambam and his writings? Would that I might merit to enter his portion of Paradise!”

One Succos, Rabbi Eliyahu was rejoicing with Rabbi Shaul Katzenelboygen on

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Simchas Beis Hasho'eivah. He confided to Rabbi Shaul, "I wish that I could after my death be admitted to the portion of the Rambam, or at least that of the Ralbag" (Hagaon Hachassid, note 11, p. 224).

In 5541 (1781), the first official Chassidic Sefer, Toldos Yaakov Yosef, was published. Certain passages in the sefer upset the misnagdim. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef wrote, for instance, "Do not accustom yourself to be constantly learning, but also mix with people." This statement was seen as a challenge to the doctrine that there is nothing more important than the constant study of Torah.

A different movement was also emerging: one that meant to challenge, rather than revive, the traditional spirit of Judaism. In 5542 (1782), Naftali Hertz Wessely of Austria published a book entitled Divrei Shalom Ve'emes (Words of Peace and Truth) advocating a major change in the way Jewish children were taught. The cheder system must be revamped, he said, and a new spirit of scientific inquiry and secular knowledge be introduced into the curriculum.

This work was an important manifesto of the burgeoning Haskalah movement.

Rabbi Eliyahu realized that this book contained the seeds of a spirit of disrespect for the sages and their interpretation of the Chumash.

He ordered that the book be ridiculed by having it placed in the kuna, the pillory, outside of the Great Synagogue. And then it was publicly burned.

The following story gives one a sense of how people of the time understood the conflict between Rabbi Eliyahu and the Maskilim. It also illustrates the naive view people had of science--a weakness that Rabbi Eliyahu tried to ameliorate.

The curators of the Russian Museum owned a small stone that was reputed to possess remarkable powers. Many scientists came to experiment on the stone, but no one could discover its abilities.

The museum committee decided to ship the stone to Germany, the cultural and scientific center of the world.

But the German scientists--among whom was Moses Mendelssohn--too could not

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discover the properties of the stone, and decided to return the stone.

At that point, Moses Mendelssohn stood up. “Gentlemen! There is a certain Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna who is renowned for his wisdom and attainments. Before we return the stone to Russia, let us send it to him and see if he can unveil its mysterious powers.”

A delegation of two German professors--short bald men with bulging waistcoats and brown, leather leggings--made their way to Vilna. Soon they were standing before Rabbi Eliyahu in rapt silence as he examined the stone, rolling it about in his fingers. At last, Rabbi Eliyahu looked up at his visitors. One of them took a pinch of snuff; the other sneezed.

And Rabbi Eliyahu spoke.

“Reb Hirsch, bring in a glass of water.”

The men stood waiting in silence. When the gabbai brought the water, Rabbi Eliyahu took the stone and dropped it into the glass. There was a fizzing noise, a cloud of steam and then--nothing. The water had disappeared!

One of the professors picked up the glass, looked at it from all sides and handed it to his colleague. This was wonderful. The glass was stone dry! But where had the water gone? The two professors looked back at Rabbi Eliyahu. “You must explain!” Rabbi Eliyahu said, “This stone is a sapphire. When placed in water, it immediately breaks the water down to its chemical elements: the gases of hydrogen and oxygen.”

The two professors were astounded at the scientific genius of this rabbi living in a remote Lithuanian town, and they took their leave with great respect.

When the scientists returned to Germany, they reported on Rabbi Eliyahu’s incredible insight. Moses Mendelssohn was present at the meeting, and he stood up and exclaimed excitedly, “If so, we have discovered a naturalistic explanation for the splitting of the Red Sea! The sages of the Talmud tell that the staff of Moshe was made of sapphire. Obviously, when Moshe raised the staff over the sea, it had to dissolve for purely natural reasons, settling into its basic elements of hydrogen and oxygen.”

When Rabbi Eliyahu heard of Moses Mendelssohn’s statement, he was outraged. “Heretic!” he proclaimed. “The Torah says that Hashem told Moshe Rabeinu, ‘Lift your

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staff.' The word for 'lift,' 'hareim,' means 'set aside.' And the verse continues 'and raise up your hand.' In other words, Moshe Rabeinu set aside his staff and only lifted his hand above the water. And this was indeed the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea!" (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 375).

In those days, a leading maskil wrote a remarkable letter telling of his encounter with Rabbi Eliyahu. Abba of Hlusk, who had been a maggid in Hlusk (in Minsk), and who had become a maskil, had written this letter to Moses Mendelssohn.

Abba of Hlusk wrote, "Three years have passed since you and I have seen each other in Berlin, the capital city. When I parted from you, my last words were that there is not even one rabbi who understands the sciences, because they only learn the Talmud, day and night. And so I went on my travels. And when I came to a certain town, I heard people praising a great man, a gaon, named Eliyahu of Vilna, who besides his infinite wisdom in the revealed Torah and in Kabbalah is also an extraordinary expert in all the sciences, such as mathematics, physics and music. They said that he is even expert in Hebrew grammar--which the rabbis generally do not study!

"Since I know how people exaggerate, I paid no attention to any of this. But when I heard people continue to talk about him--even intelligent, reliable people--I rejoiced. I said, Maybe this is the man whom I am seeking among our people, a man great in Torah who also knows the sciences, as was the case in previous generations.

"Although I am already old, I decided to let nothing stand in my way, but to see this man of G-d, to hear his wisdom and to put my questions before him. No hardships could stop me. And so I went on the road. And while I was travelling, I always stayed at inns with Jewish travellers in order to discover all I could about him.

"Now when I was fifteen pears outside of Vilna, I stayed at a crowded inn where many people were staying, including a number of Torah scholars. During the meal, when it is their custom to discuss their thoughts on the Torah, they told over many insights in the name of the Gaon of Vilna, and these were wonderful in their hitting at the truth...."

In his excitement at hearing these insights, Abba told the men at the table, "The only

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reason I am traveling is to go to the Gaon of Vilna and to discuss all my questions with him.”

There was a short silence at the table, and then the scholars burst out laughing. “Look at you!” one of them exclaimed. “You are clean-shaven. You have cut off your sidelocks. You wear a short coat and gentile clothing. Do you imagine that the Gaon will even allow you to cross his threshold?”

When Abba heard this, he was deeply upset. All his life, he had searched for men of Torah who also knew the sciences, as had the Rambam, the Ramban, the Maharal. Because he had not found such men, he had gone after the maskilim--for their goal, they said, was to investigate the Torah in the light of science, and to make that science available to all Jews. But among the Maskilim were scoffers, doubters. Among them were many blinded by the culture of the gentiles, embarrassed by the beliefs and customs of the Jews. And so Abba had gradually left behind his Jewish dress, which had made him such an object of ridicule in the eyes of even the enlightened gentiles.

Abba could not sleep the entire night. Would he be denied entrance to Rabbi Eliyahu because of the way he looked? Would his life end in frustration and incompleteness? No! There must be a way that he could see Rabbi Eliyahu.

Abba did not think of simply changing his clothes and letting his beard and sidelocks grow. Perhaps he had moved so far from his Lithuanian roots that he could not conceive of this without humiliation. Instead, that night he concocted a plan--an adventure, almost a Purim hoax.

Abba decided that he would pretend to be a rabbi of Padua. He would say that he had come as the representative of all the rabbis of Italy on a mission of life and death. “Then,” Abba thought, “the Gaon will have to speak with me!”

The next day, Abba began his deception. He concocted fifteen letters, each from an Italian rabbi. He wrote each letter in a different hand and with a different literary style, addressed to him as a noted Paduan rabbi and author of a book on Biblical synonyms.

The tenor of the letters was as follows:

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“As you know, we have taken counsel regarding the decision of the Italian government to expel all the Jews. And you know how our efforts to bribe the government were in vain, because their hatred of us is based on our religious beliefs.

“But one of the Italian leaders told us that if we can provide intelligent and acceptable responses to their questions about our religion, it is possible that they will let us remain. At first we didn’t know what to do, for there is no one here who is great enough to take on this responsibility. But then we heard of a holy and great Jew known as the Gaon of Vilna, who is said to be an extraordinary genius in all fields of knowledge, in addition to his holiness and greatness in our Torah. We have therefore looked to him as being our delivering angel who will fight our battle. He will reply to those who disparage us and our religion; he will close the mouths of our enemies, so that they will have nothing more to say.

“It would not suffice to exchange letters with him, for there would be no end of pages that would have to be filled, and we could not communicate properly. We have therefore turned to you, rabbi of Padua, for you are learned and also because, having been born in Poland, you are familiar with the Polish Jews and their language.”

With these letters, Abba came to Vilna. After he pushed through the crowded courtyard, he was surprised when he opened the door to a beis medrash that was so well-cared for.

Abba told the shammash, “I wish to speak with the Gaon.”

“Stay here and I will see if he will receive you.”

The shammash disappeared into Rabbi Eliyahu’s room, and at length returned. “The Gaon wishes to know what you want to discuss with him.”

Why should I spend my time arguing with this man? Abba asked himself. He handed his forged letters to the shammash, who again went to Rabbi Eliyahu.

A quarter hour passed. And then the shammash came out: “Rabbi Eliyahu will see you.”

Abba stepped up to the door, where he saw a man with an awesome face, wearing tefillin on his head, holding the letters in his hand. Abba was deeply impressed at the sight of

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Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu continued standing in the doorway, his eyes cast downwards. He did not greet Abba nor raise his eyes to look at him.

When Abba stepped into Rabbi Eliyahu's room, Rabbi Eliyahu asked him in the Holy Tongue about the list of questions he had brought with him.

Responding in the Holy Tongue, Abba recited one of his questions.

"And what else did they ask?"

Abba mentioned another question, then another.

What else can I ask him? Abba thought to himself. He asked all the questions about Torah whose answers had eluded him.

And still, Rabbi Eliyahu said nothing.

"Those are all the questions," Abba concluded limply.

"You have asked me 73 questions," said Rabbi Eliyahu, "but in reality they are only 15. The first, seventh, twenty-fifth and forty-seventh are really the same question repeated four times." And he went on to categorize all the other questions.

Abba was amazed. This man's brilliance was almost superhuman.

Rabbi Eliyahu then answered the fifteen questions.

When he finished, Abba said, "Perhaps the gentiles will respond, saying so-and-so."

"You haven't understood my words," Rabbi Eliyahu replied. "Listen again." Rabbi Eliyahu repeated his words exactly, and Abba realized that his questions had already been answered.

On another point, Abba said, "Perhaps the gentiles will respond with such-and-such an argument."

Again, Rabbi Eliyahu responded, "Listen to my words carefully." He again repeated his words until Abba understood his intent.

When Rabbi Eliyahu finished answering all of Abba's questions, Abba saw that he was not pleased, and got up to leave. He was about to put his hand on the door handle when Rabbi Eliyahu asked him, "Is it true that you composed a book on synonyms?"

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Abba rejoiced in his heart, saying to himself, The Gaon considers me worthy of engaging in an intellectual discussion. “Yes, rabbi.”

“Explain the difference between the different synonyms for joy that are found in the Tanach.”

Abba told him what he thought the differences were.

Rabbi Eliyahu objected, “You have forgotten ditzah.”

“Ditzah does not mean joy.”

“But it does,” said Rabbi Eliyahu. “There is a verse in Iyov. ‘His joy overwhelms his fear’” (41:14).

Abba responded, “One of the commentators explains the word here as meaning ‘to trample--’his fearfulness tramples down.’”

Rabbi Eliyahu responded, “Doesn’t Rashi explain that ‘ditzah’ means joy?”

“Yes, he does,” Abba replied, “but Rashi did not do well in explaining the simple meaning of Tanach.”

Rabbi Eliyahu trembled visibly and replied in a strong voice, “Didn’t our holy rabbis, the authors of the Midrash, explain the word ‘ditzah’ to mean joy?” And he quoted the midrash: “There are ten expressions of joy--including ditzah.”

Abba stuck to his position. “It is well-known that the authors of the Midrash were also not concerned with teaching the proper, simple meaning of the text.”

When Abba said this, Rabbi Eliyahu dismissed him.

Abba left the beis medrash and set out for his inn. What could he think of this interview, which had begun so successfully, yet ended on such a strained note?

While he walked on the street, two scholars came up to him. “You are summoned to appear before the beis din.”

Abba stopped and stared at the men. “What am I accused of doing?”

“Come with us, and you will find out.”

Firmly, Abba accompanied the men back into the Synagogue Court and into the Kahal chamber.

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Seven scholars were standing in the room, wearing talleisim and tefillin. When Abba entered and stood before them, one of them said, “Are you the man who blasphemed against the rabbis of the midrash and against the words of Rashi?”

“I did not blaspheme,” Abba declared.

“Then what did you say to the Gaon?”

“I merely said that they do not translate according to the simple meaning of the text.”

The man made a sign with his hand. The two men took hold of Abba and led him out of the room. There they waited for about half an hour until Abba was summoned back before the beis din, flanked by the two men.

The head of the beis din declared, “We find you guilty of insulting Torah scholars. You are sentenced to forty lashes.”

One of the two men guarding Abba took a belt and whipped him.

Abba was then led to the Kuna, the pillory, at the entrance of the Great Synagogue. The brass ring on the wall was placed about his neck and a poster was plastered above his head: “This man is being punished for having mocked the words of our holy rabbis.”

When the time came for afternoon prayers, all the men of Vilna came to the Great Synagogue. As they passed Abba, each, young and old, called Abba a sinner and spit at him, until the saliva ran down his face and formed a puddle on the ground.

After minchah, Abba was escorted from the city and sent on his way.

“And despite all these evils that befell me,” Abba concluded his letter to Moses Mendelssohn, “I must tell you in truth that among all the gentile scholars and all the nations that I am familiar with, there is no one like Rabbi Eliyahu” (Aliyos Eliyahu, pp. 79-82).

A folk tradition emphasized the importance of learning Torah in combatting the Haskalah.

Rabbi Chaim had three students who left the path of Torah. One had a distinguished genealogy going back seven generations. The second had very good manners. And the third liked to learn.

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Rabbi Chaim suffered a good deal at what had happened to his students. One night, Rabbi Eliyahu came to him in a dream and told him that nowadays having a good genealogy does not help a person, because every Jew has a genealogy. Only Torah helps.

In the end, the man with the distinguished genealogy converted to Christianity. The man with good manners became a philosopher and he too converted. But the man who loved learning became a professor and eventually returned to Torah.

The routine of Rabbi Eliyahu's life continued: learning and teaching, being visited by students who brought their questions to him and dictating his works.

Once Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin came to Rabbi Eliyahu with a terrible experience. One evening, the letters in his sefer had looked like a gentile script. Rabbi Chaim cried from midnight throughout the night, but still saw only the foreign script. Finally, with the coming of morning, he again could see the holy letters.

Rabbi Eliyahu told him, "This happened because you talked a great deal about taking on some holy practices before you actually did so. As a result, the side of evil grew jealous of you. But now that you have stood firm in your holy practices, you are assured that you will be able to stand firm."

From then on, Rabbi Chaim had no more trouble (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 73).

For over twenty years, Rabbi Chaim visited Rabbi Eliyahu three or four times a year, staying in Vilna a month at a time.

Rabbi Eliyahu answered all his questions in learning, and then Rabbi Chaim returned home.

Once, Rabbi Chaim was unable to come to Vilna for a full year.

When he was at last able to go, he wrote his questions, filling a notebook. He hired a wagon and arrived in Vilna on Wednesday.

Rabbi Chaim entered the beis medrash eagerly. But the other students told him, "You cannot see Rabbi Eliyahu. For the last few weeks, he has shut himself in his room, deep in learning."

Rabbi Chaim decided that no matter what, he would not leave Vilna without seeing

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first Rabbi Eliyahu.

On Friday afternoon, Rabbi Chaim went to the bathhouse. As he was crossing the synagogue courtyard, one of Rabbi Eliyahu's students hurried up to him. "Rabbi Eliyahu has come out of his room."

"Thank you!"

Rabbi Chaim hurried back to his room, took his notebook and went to Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu greeted Rabbi Chaim warmly. "Why have you stayed away so long?"

"I had to take care of other matters. But I finally decided that I have to come."

"You must have questions for me."

Rabbi Chaim took out his notebook, and began asking Rabbi Eliyahu questions from all areas of the Torah. For a full hour, Rabbi Eliyahu answered Rabbi Chaim's questions without hesitating. At one question, Rabbi Eliyahu said, "Bring me a Gemara."

"But surely you know the Gemara by heart."

"Yes, I do. But this is a very subtle matter, and I may not grasp it properly without looking at the text."

Rabbi Chaim asked about a passage in the Zohar where the word *chesed*--lovingkindness--appears in the middle of a phrase, and doesn't seem to make sense.

Rabbi Eliyahu smiled. "A few lines are missing. When the person copying the text came to that passage, he wrote, 'choser--words missing.' And the printer misread the manuscript and instead of 'choser,' he printed 'chesed.'"

Rabbi Avraham Karelitz, the Chazon Ish, said that this exchange typified the relationship Rabbi Eliyahu had with his students. They would visit him a few days a year, and bring him their questions.

Whenever Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin mentioned the name of Rabbi Eliyahu, he would tremble and his entire appearance would change.

Once, when Rabbi Chaim was preparing to go to Rabbi Eliyahu, his son, Yitzchak (who was then a boy), told him, "Father, I want to go as well."

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Rabbi Chaim repeated, trembling, "You want to go to the Gaon as well?"

Yitzchak too grew frightened, but he repeated, "Yes, Father."

Rabbi Chaim hesitated, but at last gave his consent.

As they rode on the wagon to Vilna, Yitzchak looked at his father and saw that his face had turned pale with awe, and that he was trembling. The closer they came to Vilna, the more pale did Rabbi Chaim grow, and by the time they entered Vilna, Yitzchak found it difficult to recognize his father.

Again, Rabbi Chaim turned to his son and asked him, "You want to go as well?"

Yitzchak gathered his strength. "Yes."

Then, as they stood in the beis medrash before Rabbi Eliyahu's door, Rabbi Chaim trembled so violently that his knees actually shook together. Once more, he turned to Yitzchak and said, "You want to go in?" And in this way, they entered.

So great was the awe that Rabbi Chaim had for the Gaon that he wrote in later years, "I have heard that people mention me in conjunction with my great rabbi, who is known to all Israel, the holy light of Israel, the gaon Eliyahu, the Chassid of Vilna. People call me his student. I therefore feel it my obligation to tell everyone that heaven forbid that I should damage the honor of the great and holy rabbi by having my name mentioned in connection with his. I know full well that whoever says that I was his student is completely mistaken. The Gaon knew the entire Torah clearly: Tanach, mishnah, Talmud Bavli and Jerusalem, Mechilta, Sifra, Sifri, Tosefta, midrash, Zohar, and all the words of the Tanaim and Amoraim that we possess. In all of them he resolved questions and added new interpretations on halachah, aggadah, homiletics and Kabbalah.

"And how can I shamelessly raise my face to be called his student? I did not receive even a drop of his glory. I have not merited to learn even one tractate clearly, for there are so many questions and so few definite decisions.

"In the few days that I merited serving him, all I gained from him was to know the shape of the halachah after a great deal of work. And this is [not an achievement unique to me, but] the inheritance of all Jews. As our sages taught, 'If a person says, I toiled but I did

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not find, do not believe him.”“

“But I did not match the hard work of the great rabbi, for his toil over every single detail of the Torah until he understood it clearly is unbelievable and unimaginable” (Aliyos Eliyahu, p. 89-90).

Tragic outside events threatened the tranquillity of the beis medrash.

In 5543 (1782), the Jews of Vilna again suffered an organized outrage when Christian barley vendors, with the aid of soldiers, broke into Jewish homes, destroyed grindstones, scattered grain and beat a number of Jews.

That same year, on the fifth of Kislev, Rabbi Eliyahu suffered a crushing personal tragedy. His mother, Traina, passed away on the fifth of Kislev, 5543 (1782).

Three days later, his wife died as well.

On Traina’s tombstone were inscribed the words, “Who can tell her praise, the saintly Traina.”

And on his wife’s grave was inscribed, “She left no equal, and there is no way to tell her praise.”

Rabbi Eliyahu said in his eulogy over his wife, “Just as the stars of heaven cannot be counted, so can her charitable acts not be counted.” And he said as well, “How can I dwell at length on her praise? But this I will tell: her portion is greater than mine, for she knew how to bear her financial suffering with strength.”

Rabbi Eliyahu then married a woman named Gittel, the sister of R Eliyahu Krazer, a wealthy man known for his good deeds.

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CHAPTER TWELVE:

RABBI ELIYAHU IMPRISONED

In 5543 (1783), the ghetto of Vilna was officially annulled. Jews could live in any part of Vilna, with the exception of two streets. In addition, Jews were allowed to work at any occupation, and the Jewish poll tax was eliminated.

The Jews had struggled for these rights for 250 years. Now, due to the efforts of the shtadlan, Aryeh Leib Meitess, and with the help of the Vice Chancellor, Joachim Chreptowicz, the Royal Court had decided in their favor.

But a battle still raged amongst the Jews of Vilna: the thirty year war between Rabbi Shmuel ben Avigdor, helped by the Hamon, in opposition to the Kahal, regarding his role as chief rabbi.

Rabbi Eliyahu too was drawn into this fracas. He received a stipend from the Kahal, and in 5546 (1786), a complaint by members of the Hamon was lodged against him to the gentile government, claiming that “he does nothing, for he pays no tax to the Kahal. He gets a free apartment, plus 28 gulden a week from the Kahal’s account, as well as other emoluments, such as fish.”

A man named Yoel led a campaign to have Rabbi Eliyahu’s income stopped. The Kahal had Yoel placed in the pillory and then imprisoned.

More accusations against the Kahal were sent to the gentile government, denouncing the members of the beis din, the shammashes and the community scribe. In one of these letters, Rabbi Eliyahu was accused of blackmailing people into giving him money.

Since Rabbi Shmuel ben Avigdor was aligned with the Hamon and Rabbi Eliyahu with the Kahal, they were on opposing political sides. But there is no sign that they had any personal conflict, for the bitterness and contentiousness were the product of “the little foxes that have spoiled the vineyard.”

Folk traditions tell how Rabbi Eliyahu and Rabbi Shmuel maintained a friendly and respectful relationship.

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According to one tradition, Rabbi Eliyahu and Rabbi Shmuel once went for a walk. As they strolled alongside the Vilia River, they discussed the kashrus of various types of fish.

“I know all the fish of the river except for one particular kind,” Rabbi Eliyahu said.

There was a thrashing in the water, and the two rabbis looked down.

Rabbi Shmuel pointed. “That’s the very fish you were talking about.”

The fish hovered at the surface of the water, allowing Rabbi Eliyahu to examine it. When he turned away, the fish dove back into the murky water, leaving behind a momentary trace of tiny, silver bubbles.

There is another folk tradition that tells of the good relations between the two men.

It was a Friday afternoon. Chaim the tailor had made raisin wine, cooking the raisins over the stove and squeezing the liquid through a cloth. His wife, Malkah, was using the oven next door, first dipping a feather in the yolk of an egg and spreading it over the braided loaves.

The girls, Esther and Menuchah, were at the table, preparing the noodle pudding and candied carrots. Chaim made sure that the cholent was in the oven, its door sealed with dough. He glanced at the chicken in the pot. One of the wings was discolored.

Chaim turned to the table. “Esther, run to Rabbi Eliyahu.” Chaim described the discoloration and finished, “Ask him if the chicken is kosher.”

Esther ran out of the house. A few minutes later, Rabbi Chaim went to the bathhouse.

When Malkah returned to the house, she looked in the pot. “Menuchah, go quickly to Rabbi Shmuel! Tell him I have a question about the chicken. It has a stain...And hurry!”

In his beis medrash, Rabbi Eliyahu told his shammash, “It isn’t my custom to make decisions like this. But it is almost Shabbos. Tell the girl that the chicken is not kosher.”

Esther hurried home. But by the time she rushed into the house, she was too late. The chicken was boiling on the fire. “Mama! The chicken is treif!”

“What are you talking about, my child?”

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“Papa sent me to ask Rabbi Eliyahu about the spot on its wing--”

“But I sent Menuchah to Rabbi Shmuel! And he said that it’s kosher.”

A minute later, Chaim returned from the bathhouse, his beard and sidelocks shining.

A smell of cinnamon from the noodle pudding was wafting through the house.

“Chaim, there’s been a terrible mistake!”

A few minutes later, Chaim was hurrying to Rabbi Shmuel: “My apologies, Rabbi Shmuel, but there was a slight confusion. While my son was asking you about the chicken....”

When Chaim finished speaking, Rabbi Shmuel answered, “I have decided that the chicken is kosher. Go home and tell your wife to cook the chicken. Tonight I and Rabbi Eliyahu will come to your house and we will both eat from the chicken.”

Rabbi Shmuel went to Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu was surprised to see him. “What brings you here?”

Rabbi Shmuel explained the mix-up, and he added, “Rabbi Eliyahu, you have decided that the chicken is unkosher and I have said that it is kosher. I know that I am no more than the dust beneath your feet. But in making kashrus decisions, I am the rabbi of Vilna. So I ask you to come with me tonight to the tailor, and we will eat the chicken together. This will make it clear to everyone that I have the authority to make such decisions.”

“I will do so,” Rabbi Eliyahu replied humbly.

That evening, the two Torah scholars entered Chaim’s home. The room was lit by a chandelier that hung above the table.

They men sat down at the table. The girls stood in the corner of the room, and Malkah brought the pot of chicken to the table. “Esther, bring plates for the two rabbis.”

There was a clatter. One of the candles fell from the chandelier and into the pot. Now no one would be able to eat the chicken, for the tallow had made it unkosher.

And so Rabbi Shmuel’s authority was upheld, as well as the honor of Rabbi Eliyahu.”

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The conflict between the Hamon and the Kahal grew increasingly heated.

Jews from both sides fought so fiercely that a number were imprisoned.

This contentious period, filled with excommunications, denunciations to the gentiles and imprisonment of political enemies, was deeply destructive to the structure of Jewish self-rule.

The leading member of the Kahal was Rabbi Abba ben Ze'ev Wolf. Some members of the Hamon spread slanderous rumors about him: "Fifty years ago, this graybeard converted to Christianity before returning to the faith!"

The charge was investigated by the bishop's court, which summoned both Jewish and Christian witnesses. Rabbi Abba ben Ze'ev Wolf also brought the case to the Lithuanian Supreme Tribunal.

In response to this slander, the Kahal urged the officers of the government--the Voivode--to act against leading members of the Hamon.

In response, officers of the bishop had Rabbi Abba ben Ze'ev Wolf arrested.

In the midst of all this ruinous contention, Rabbi Abba ben Ze'ev Wolf suffered a devastating personal tragedy.

It was a cold and snowy morning. A door creaked, a teen-age boy stepped forward through the dark house, holding his boots in his hand. At the doorway, he put on his boots, then silently swung open the door and slipped into the street.

A dense shower of snowflakes fell about him. He could see the figure of an old Jew, wearing a fur cap and holding a cane, crossing the market place.

Hirsch, the son of Rabbi Abba ben Ze'ev, hurried down the street and through a courtyard. Behind him he heard a clang. He turned around and he saw a man in a ragged coat opening his door. Hirsch saw that his big boots had stamped prints in the thin layer of snow. They were like arrows, pointing after him: There he goes! Catch him!

Hirsch lowered his head against the swirling flakes and marched through the courtyard on the snow that would be dirty slush by mid-morning.

He hurried out the Jewish quarter and down the street, where the houses were larger,

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richer. He passed a gentile with a clean-shaven, pointy jaw, in a lamb-fur jacket and pants. The gentile gave him an unpleasant glance. Hirsch shrunk from the glare; then glee mixed with dread fluttered in his chest. Oho, soon I won't be afraid of you! he thought.

At the wrought iron gate that opened into a narrow courtyard, two men were waiting for him.

"I'm Hirsch!"

One of the men opened the gate. Hirsch entered, and the gate was quickly closed.

"Father Kamerski is waiting to see you."

In the apartment on Jatkowa Street, Hirsch's mother had risen from bed and washed her hands. "Hirsch! Wake up and get ready for shul!" There was no response. "Lazy boy," she said to herself, with affection. "He has a wife and child in Tikotzin, and yet when he comes to visit us, he is still a child." She padded into his room. The bed was empty. At the foot of the bed, the water for washing his hands had been left untouched. "Hirsch....?"

Outside the monastery window, the thick snow fell. The sky was white, and all that could be seen were the black lines of a sloping roof.

Hirsch had taken off his coat. He was a thin boy of seventeen with blond, curling sidelocks. Before him stood Father Kamerski, a man with a barrel chest and hard, shrewd eyes.

"I want to be a Christian," Hirsch said. "I'm sick of the fighting among the Jews. They denounce each other, they throw each other into prison. My own father was thrown in jail! You Christians preach love and turning the other cheek. That's what I believe in."

Father Kamerski smiled at the boy. "Rabbi Abba's son, eh?" he mused. He reached forward and patted the boy stiffly on the shoulder. "We will have to talk more. In the meantime, Brother Stanislav will show you to your room."

"Can I"--the boy rubbed his hands on his jaw, as though he had more than wisps of a beard--"come to mass this morning?"

Father Kamerski smiled and nodded his head. Hirsch looked at him admiringly. The man seemed so compassionate. This is what Hirsch wanted: unreserved love--not judgement

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and threats of punishment!

“Of course,” said Father Kamerski. And Hirsch thought that he saw such love in the man’s face that he blindly, awkwardly, took the priest’s thick hand and kissed it gratefully, as tears welled from his large, black eyes.

A few days later, two Dominican monks strode through the streets of the Jewish quarter. An icy slush lay on the ground. Next to some fires that kind-hearted Jews had lit on the street, vagrants warmed themselves and roasted potatoes.

The news they brought the Kahal threw the rabbis into a turmoil. “Rabbi Abba’s son is in the monastery and is about to be converted!”

It was impossible, unthinkable! Rabbi Abba was outraged and dismayed. His wife did not come out of the house.

They said that Hirsch, his son, had gone to the priests and asked to convert. Rabbi Abba, disgraced and grieving, could not believe this. It was a slander, a plot.

A few days later, he announced that the members of the Hamon had kidnapped the boy and brought him by force to the monastery, and he brought his accusation to the gentile government.

But letters came from Hirsch that he had acted of his own accord.

The Kahal made a special fund for a committee of seven to do whatever they could to save the boy. Rabbi Eliyahu offered his aid as well, although his usual practice was to stay out of community affairs.

On a Sunday, Hirsch was baptized in the Dominican Church in the presence of many important Christians, and given the name, Wicenty Neumann.

The Kahal committee called an emergency meeting. “Gentlemen!” one of the members said. “There is no limit to what we must do to save a Jewish soul. He is not responsible for his actions.”

“Not responsible?” This from an old man whose brown-spotted hands on the table top trembled continuously.

“Don’t you see? Hirsch has been corrupted by the Christians to believe in their faith.

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This is not Hirsch at all. It is as though a dybbuk has entered into him.”

“A dybbuk!” exclaimed another man.

“Like a dybbuk. There is only one solution. We must kidnap the boy from the monastery and talk to him.”

There was a commotion. “Kidnap the boy? It’s too dangerous, it could start a pogrom!”

“Where is your faith, gentlemen? Where is your courage? We cannot abandon young Hirsch!”

A student was sent to summon a young Jewish apostate named Kwiatkowski who had access to the monastery.

“Eh? What do you want from me?” He was clean-shaven and wore a tall hat with a turned-down brim.

“We have a job for you. You could make good money.”

“How good?”

“Come tomorrow to the Kahal meeting room, and the rabbis will tell you.”

Kwiatkowski met with the rabbis and agreed to kidnap the youngster from the monastery. The rabbis didn’t trust him, and sent him to speak with Rabbi Eliyahu.

Three times, Kwiatkowski stood before the Gaon. Rabbi Eliyahu urged him to fulfill his mission faithfully and not denounce them to the church. “If you save Hirsch, your reward in heaven will be great.”

Speaking with passion, Rabbi Eliyahu urged the apostate to consider the evil of his own ways and return to the faith of his fathers.

Kwiatkowski began going to the monastery, and he befriended Hirsch--”I too have left Judaism to embrace the teachings of the New Testament.” And one day, he invited Hirsch for a walk.

“Where are we going?” Hirsch asked as they passed out of sight of the monastery.

“Just a little ways. What are you worried about?”

Kwiatkowski’s eyes sparkled and Hirsch, feeling embarrassed, continued to walk,

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vaguely uneasy.

They passed under an arch and into a shadowy courtyard. Two Jews jumped out of a doorway. “Hey! What’s--help!” Hirsch’s cry was cut off, and he was bundled into the building.

A short while later, a wagon left Vilna for the town of Dünaburg. In the back of the wagon, hidden under a black, woollen blanket, lay Hirsch, trussed and gagged.

But the tactic did not succeed. “I am a Christian,” cried Hirsch, “and I don’t want to have anything more to do with Jews. Is kidnapping me all you can think of? How about before I converted? Why didn’t you show me that you care about me then?”

The Kahal members grieved to hear the boy’s words, and they allowed Hirsch to return to the monastery.

In the meantime, Rabbi Eliyahu, who had always yearned for cohanim to be able to give the priestly blessing every day, decided that come what may, this week he would begin the custom in his synagogue.

The next day, soldiers arrested Rabbi Abba, along with 22 other prominent Jews, on charges of having kidnapped Hirsch.

One of the rabbis who was arrested was Rabbi Eliyahu.

He said later that he saw this as a sign from heaven that he not institute the custom of daily cohanim’s blessings.

Rabbi Eliyahu was in prison for almost a month, during Shevat and Adar of 5548 (February, 1788).

The authorities arraigned Rabbi Eliyahu and questioned him about the Torah’s attitude toward apostasy. Rabbi Eliyahu gazed back silently, as though he did not understand Polish. They questioned him in a few languages, but he still did not respond.

“Why did you give a rabbi permission to travel on the Shabbos in connection with this case, if that is against the Torah?”

Rabbi Eliyahu did not respond.

“Well, look here,” said one of the interrogators. “Do you admit that the phrase ‘be

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killed rather than transgress' is found in the Talmud?"

Rabbi Eliyahu nodded.

"At last we're getting somewhere. And now, would you be kind enough to explain the meaning of that phrase?"

But again, Rabbi Eliyahu did not respond.

"Send him back to his cell," the interrogator said with a look of disgust.

During Rabbi Eliyahu's imprisonment, Rabbi Zelmele (the brother of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin) passed away on the ninth of Adar. But no one told Rabbi Eliyahu.

The interrogators asked the other rabbis, "Is it true that Rabbi Eliyahu has the power to threaten other prisoners with excommunication if they speak? And has he in fact made such threats?"

One of the prisoners, Rabbi Shmuel ben Yosef, told the tribunal, "It is true that Rabbi Eliyahu has the power to excommunicate people. In Vilna nothing can be done without his permission, especially in the realm of religion. But I know of no such threats."

On February 13, Rabbi Eliyahu was freed.

When he was told that Rabbi Zelmele had passed away, Rabbi Eliyahu rebuked the people for not having told him earlier.

Rabbi Eliyahu had been imprisoned during Adar, when the "four parshiyos" are read. When he returned home, he got someone to read him these parshiyos.

In Tishrei 5549 (1788), Kwiatkowski was arrested. Under questioning, he admitted his role in Hirsch's kidnapping. "Yes, Rabbi Eliyahu talked to me three times. He told me that if I kidnap the boy, I will have a reward in heaven, and he offered me a hundred coins...."

Rabbi Eliyahu and a number of other members of the Kahal were again arrested.

The Kahal members pleaded for clemency. "Rabbi Eliyahu is almost seventy years old. And he is very pious. He must have a quorum to pray with."

The tribunal member allowed Rabbi Eliyahu and nine of the other rabbis were confined to stay in a hostel where they would be able to pray together.

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“But they will have to spend twelve weeks in jail and pay a fine of 500 gulden.”

Rabbi Eliyahu entered prison on a Shabbos, 18 Elul 5548 (September 20, 1788).

During his imprisonment, a visitor brought him new fruits on which to recite the blessing, “shehechiyanu.” Rabbi Eliyahu held that one makes the blessing when one sees the fruit (rather than immediately before eating it). Rabbi Eliyahu made the blessing, and left the fruits on the table.

One of the men guarding Rabbi Eliyahu was an apostate. When he entered Rabbi Eliyahu’s room and saw the fruit, he took some for himself.

Rabbi Eliyahu said to him, “When you eat the fruit, remember to recite the proper blessing.”

“Rabbi, I have changed my religion!”

“Fool!” Rabbi Eliyahu replied. “What does one have to do with the other? By becoming a convert, you have not removed your obligation from keeping any detail of the slightest mitzvah. You are still considered to be a complete Jew. For your sins, you will receive the appropriate punishment. Your apostasy won’t help you escape them. Even if you deny the entire Torah, you will be punished until you are purified and remain a Jew, for the seed of Avraham cannot be cut off.”

When the man heard these words, he repented and he soon became a kosher servant of Hashem.

(According to other versions of this story, the apostate was a young man whom Rabbi Eliyahu summoned to his beis medrash--or whom Rabbi Eliyahu met when he was learning in Pastroi--perhaps during his years of exile. There, he gave the man a drink of water and told him to make a blessing before he drank.)

The Kahal members continued to agitate for Rabbi Eliyahu’s release, and the tribunal agreed to call Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu entered the courtroom with his tallis over his head. When he threw back the tallis, his tefillin were revealed and the tribunal members, who had earlier been hostile, grew friendly. The Jews recalled the verse, “All the nations shall see that the name

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of Hashem is called upon you, and they will fear you.”

Tishrei came: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Succos.

Rabbi Eliyahu held that one is not allowed to sleep even temporarily outside a succah on Succos. So on the first night of Succos, he ran back and forth in his room, holding open his eyelids and doing all he could to keep himself awake. At last, the prison guards allowed him out of the room so that he could spend the night in a succah.

There is a tradition that when Rabbi Eliyahu was imprisoned, one of his students had permission to visit him every day.

One day, Rabbi Eliyahu was concerned at the appearance of his student. “Why do you look so upset today?”

The student barely looked at Rabbi Eliyahu. “The synod of priests has met and decided to give you three choices of punishment.”

“What are they?”

“The first is that you be cut into four pieces, and that these pieces be hung up at the four corners of the city.”

Rabbi Eliyahu was impassive. “And is it such a terrible thing to die in sanctification of Hashem’s name?”

“The other punishment would be to make you swear on a sefer Torah that you did not have a direct hand in the actual planning of Hirsch’s kidnapping.”

“I did not. And therefore, I would not shrink from swearing on a sefer Torah.”

“The third alternative is that they would carve a cross on your head where you place your tefillin.”

A shudder ran through Rabbi Eliyahu’s body. “No! This shall never be!”

When the student went back and told others of Rabbi Eliyahu’s response, they were pacified. Apparently, Rabbi Eliyahu was sanguine about being able to leave prison unharmed.

In the end, Rabbi Eliyahu made an oath before the tribunal of his non-involvement in the details of the kidnapping, and he was released early.

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In later years, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin said that Rabbi Eliyahu kept the entire Torah, including the rabbinical positive commandments. The Semag counts making a true oath as a rabbinical positive commandment. From heaven, Rabbi Eliyahu was given the opportunity to keep this commandment as well.

On the phrase in the Shmoneh Esrei prayer, “to the informers let there be no hope,” Rabbi Eliyahu commented that “the greatest curse that an informer suffers is that he gets no hope--no success--from his informing” (Oros Hagra, p. 304).

Rabbi Eliyahu is said to have once come across an apostate who denounced Jews to the gentile government. Rabbi Eliyahu told him, “You will sicken and not be able to redeem yourself!”

That same day, the apostate grew deathly ill. He sent a messenger to Rabbi Eliyahu, pleading for mercy. “My master is ready to donate all of his goods to charity.”

But Rabbi Eliyahu did not reply, for a person who sins, makes others sin and desecrates the name of heaven is not given the chance from heaven to repent.

On another occasion, Rabbi Eliyahu and one of his students entered an inn where they could hear music from the accompanying room. The student went to see what was happening. Musicians were playing, and a few couples were dancing--among them was a Jew dancing with a gentile woman.

The student went back to Rabbi Eliyahu and told him what he had seen.

Rabbi Eliyahu said, “In the world-to-come, this evil man will have to defend himself for not having been learning the deepest Kabbalistic secrets. How much suffering will he have to endure and how much purification will he have to undergo before he rises to the level that all he lacks is the level of delving into those Kabbalistic secrets.”

Rabbi Eliyahu noted that “as long as a person believes in Hashem’s oneness, even if he has sinned numerous times, he is not considered to deny the entire Torah. Although he sinned, he is still a Jew and can join a minyan, and his prayer is included in the prayer of all of Israel.”

And Rabbi Eliyahu held the opinion of the Rambam that one must charitably aid an

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apostate who was impelled by his passions (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 67, note 19).

When a person acted wrongly against Rabbi Eliyahu, he reluctantly sent a gabbai to rebuke him. He let the person know that he is angry so that the person would accept rebuke. But even though Rabbi Eliyahu was obligated to do so in order to uphold the honor of the Torah, it would cause him pain.

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that repentance can bring a person to the highest levels. A verse in Tehillim states “‘I have sinned’ shall I tell You, my transgression I have not hidden; I have said that I will confess my wrongdoing to Hashem, and You forgave the wrongdoing of my sin” (32:5).

After the “I have sinned,” there is a mark in the verse indicating a pause. King David had wanted to continue the standard statement of confession, “I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have done wrong.” But in the middle of reciting the confession with a broken heart, at the word “I have sinned,” the power of the heavenly accuser drained away. And then, “You forgave the transgression of my sin” (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 177-8).

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

## BLESSINGS AND REPENTANCE

Rabbi Eliyahu's family continued to grow.

One year, he sat at the pidyon haben of a grandchild.

A scholar brought up the Rambam's statement that the name of every Jew and every great incident in Jewry is hinted at in the Torah.

Another scholar turned to Rabbi Eliyahu: "Is it true that the Kabbalah teaches that all the mitzvos and important incidents in Jewish history are hinted at in the parshah of Bereishis?"

Rabbi Eliyahu nodded.

"If so, where in Bereishis do we find the mitzvah of pidyon haben?"

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "In the word Bereishis--In the beginning. The word Bereishis is an acronym (B-R-Ai-Sh-Y-S[T]) for the phrase, Ben Rishon Achar Shloshim Yom Tifdeh--the first son after thirty days redeem."

One year, Rabbi Eliyahu and his brother, Rabbi Dov Ber, stood at their mother's grave.

Rabbi Eliyahu turned to Rabbi Dov Ber. "Do you see, my brother, how happy our mother is to see us here at her grave?"

Rabbi Dov Ber was stunned at Rabbi Eliyahu's words, and said nothing.

When he later repeated Rabbi Eliyahu's comments, all of Vilna was in an uproar.

A few days passed. One day, Rabbi Eliyahu said to Rabbi Dov Ber, "I am very sorry that I went to the cemetery and our mother's grave."

"I don't understand! Didn't you yourself tell me that our mother was so happy that we were there?"

"Yes, she was happy," said Rabbi Eliyahu. "But I remain unhappy, and I regret having gone." In general, Rabbi Eliyahu taught that a spirit of uncleanness rests in a cemetery, and that one should avoid making unnecessary visits to gravesites. (Some say,

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however, that he was not against visiting the gravesites of tzaddikim.)

After this episode, for the rest of his life Rabbi Eliyahu no longer visited the cemetery.

There is a tradition that Rabbi Eliyahu's mother once came to him in a dream and rebuked him for mourning too much over his son and daughter who had died in his lifetime. She told him, "You shouldn't mourn beyond the official period of mourning."

And she continued, "A person must be happy that he is still alive and can correct the things that he spoiled, for the punishments of Gehinnom are great and merciless" (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 341).

One time, Rabbi Eliyahu gave a talk describing the torments of Gehinnom. "The burning...the screaming...the torment..." So graphic were Rabbi Eliyahu's words that one of the men listening to him went home and fell ill.

Rabbi Eliyahu visited the man's home. He comforted him, "The pain that one suffers in this world in regret at having sinned does a great deal to ameliorate the punishment of Gehinnom. When a person dies and his soul goes up, his merits and sins are put in the balance. His suffering in this world causes many of his sins to be forgiven, and he is assumed to be righteous. At that point, he grows joyous, and he thanks Hashem for all that he experienced."

Rabbi Eliyahu also taught, "At times, Hashem sends a person poverty in His great love to save the person from reincarnation and death in the world-to-come, for a poor person is considered like a dead person. Sometimes in this way he is also saved from punishments that he deserved" (Hagaon Hachassid, p. 180).

There is a folk tradition that a simple Jew one day spoke insultingly to Rabbi Eliyahu.

A respected member of the Kahal, Rabbi Leib, glowered at the Jew. "Outrageous!" His red beard trembled. "You have the nerve, the chutzpah, the...the...the gumption...! Do you know who the gaon is? And who do you think you are?"

The simple Jew was a small old man wearing an oversized caftan that reached down

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to his upturned boots and a black conical hat. With his thick gray beard, he seemed like an gnome. But there was nothing gnome-like about the tears of anger and humiliation that glinted in his eyes.

“Reb Leib,” Rabbi Eliyahu said, “how do you have the temerity to insult this simple Jew? How can you be so proud in your wealth and position when you do not even know whose shrouds you will be buried in?”

Rabbi Leib turned pale, and his hand trembled as he lifted it to his heart.

In his house, his wife was still wearing her Shabbos dress, trimmed with gold and silver lace.

“Reb Leib, what’s wrong?”

“The Gaon told me that...” Rabbi Leib sat in his chair, leaned his elbows on the table and told his wife what had happened.

“Woe is me!” she cried. “You, Reb Leib, are going to die, and I will be left with the children. Who will pay the rent? Where will we have money to buy food? We shall be driven into the street, I and the children! My father always said: It is better to flay carcasses than to take alms. And now...!”

The children rushed out of their room when they heard their mother wailing, and they too began to cry. “Papa, don’t die, don’t leave us! Papa, have mercy on us!”

The tea and preserves on the table were ignored. His wife and children wailing about him, Rabbi Leib returned to Rabbi Eliyahu.

In the beis medrash, Rabbi Eliyahu sat giving a shiur. One of his students was writing his words down with a goose quill, occasionally wiping the ink on his skullcap.

“Rabbi Eliyahu,” Rabbi Leib uttered in a broken voice. He stopped and looked at Rabbi Eliyahu with pleading in his eyes.

“Dear Rabbi Leib,” Rabbi Eliyahu exclaimed. “Do not be upset at my words. You will live a good long life and die a wealthy man.”

Rabbi Leib went home at peace, and pacified his frantic family.

With the passing of the years, Rabbi Eliyahu’s words faded. Rabbi Leib’s beard

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turned white, wrinkles appeared on his face.

One Yom Kippur eve, Rabbi Leib and the other Kahal leaders made the customary visit to the cemetery to see that the gravesites were in order.

When Rabbi Leib returned home to prepare for minchah and the last meal before the fast a wave of weariness overcame him. Suddenly he found himself crumpled on the floor. How had he gotten there? He was filled with lassitude. His wife and children were yelling, carrying him to his bed. He wanted to tell them, "It's all right! I am fine." But he could not move his lips, he could not make signal with his eyebrows. Still, it was all right. He was comfortable.

A few minutes later, Rabbi Leib passed away.

Hurriedly, Rabbi Leib's body was taken to be buried before the start of Yom Kippur.

When the chevra kaddisha brought the body to the cemetery, they saw that in their haste, they had forgotten to take Rabbi Leib's linen shroud.

Dark clouds were floating in the sky and the cemetery was covered in a dun light. "It's too late to get his shroud. We'll barely have time to bury him before Yom Kippur."

The chevra kaddisha dressed the body in one of the simple shrouds that were kept for the use of the poor.

Even as the first few large raindrops hit the ground, filling the air with the smell of spring, the mourners shoveled the earth over Rabbi Leib's grave.

And so did all of Rabbi Eliyahu's words come true.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

HOLY CUSTOMS

Four years had passed since Rabbi Abba ben Ze'ev Wolf had been slandered with having once converted to Christianity.

Rabbi Abba had sued, and in 5550 (1790), he was awarded a sum of 8,000 gulden (the costs he had spent on litigation), which he collected from a priest, Krushevsky.

A year later, in Teves 5551 (January, 1791), Rabbi Shmuel ben Avigdor passed away. The battle over the rabbinate of Vilna was over. Despite the bitterness of the struggle that had raged, Rabbi Shmuel had been respected as a talmid chacham, and he was buried with great honor.

The cycle of life turns constantly. That same year, Rabbi Yechezkiel Halevi Landau (who was later to become the rosh av beis din of Vilna), was fifteen years old, and renowned as an “ilui,” a young genius.

A well-known man of wealth, Rabbi Leibele Bers, chose Rabbi Yechezkiel to marry his daughter.

Rabbi Leibele was one of the men in Rabbi Eliyahu's minyan. On Succos, he and Rabbi Yechezkiel entered Rabbi Eliyahu's succah so that Rabbi Eliyahu could bless the young man.

Rabbi Eliyahu placed one hand on Rabbi Yechezkiel's head and blessed him, “May you have a good, long life.”

And Rabbi Yechezkiel lived in strong, good health for over ninety years.

Others say that Rabbi Eliyahu blessed Rabbi Yechezkiel during his wedding. And people asked, “Why do you only place one hand on his head?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied that “the only place we see that a blessing is given with two hands is the blessing of the cohanim in the beis hamikdash.”

Rabbi Eliyahu was now seventy years old. But he continued to learn with the same fire and diligence as he had all of his life.

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Once, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin entered Vilna on a Friday at noon.

Before going to see Rabbi Eliyahu, Rabbi Chaim hurried to the bathhouse. In a doorway, a man wearing a tattered vest sat on a stone step, holding a bowl between his knees in which he ground tobacco into snuff with a huge pestle.

In the bathhouse, it was hot, dark and moist. Steam seeped through everything, and even the benches were slick. Rabbi Chaim took off his hat and hung it on a peg.

“Rabbi Chaim?”

It was one of Rabbi Eliyahu’s students.

“Yes?”

“Rabbi Eliyahu heard that you are here, and he wishes to see you.”

Rabbi Chaim stepped out of the dense atmosphere of the bathhouse. In the courtyard, the air was also damp with the rain that had fallen that morning.

Rabbi Chaim walked with the student across the courtyard, and up the steps that he knew so well, leading to Rabbi Eliyahu’s room.

Rabbi Chaim looked at Rabbi Eliyahu in consternation. A kerchief was wrapped about Rabbi Eliyahu’s head, and he looked pained. “Rebbe, what is wrong?”

“Please help me, Reb Chaim. There is a question in the Jerusalem Talmud that I have not been able to solve for a few days.”

“But rebbe, if you cannot solve it, how can I help?”

“Nevertheless,” said Rabbi Eliyahu, “two are better than one.”

Rabbi Eliyahu recited the passage of the Gemara and explained his problem.

Rabbi Chaim considered the question. “I see the beginning of an answer. I am sure that you will be able to bring it to its logical conclusion.”

As soon as Rabbi Chaim began to give his explanation, Rabbi Eliyahu’s face shone with joy. He took the kerchief off his head and told his shammash to bring him food.

Rabbi Chaim slipped out of the beis medrash and into Rabbi Eliyahu’s house. “Why did Rabbi Eliyahu just ask for food?”

A few members of Rabbi Eliyahu’s family replied, “It is three days now that Rabbi

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Eliyahu hasn't eaten."

In 5551 (1791), when Rabbi Eliyahu was 71 years old, he fell weak and ill. He did not want to see any doctors. From time to time, he had invited Rabbi Yaakov Krantz, the Maggid of Dubno, to see him. He would listen to his allegories and ask him for rebuke.

Now as well he sent a letter to Rabbi Yaakov: "I ask you, my beloved friend, to come to me. I am surprised that you have not come for thirteen years, so now I am reminding you."

The last time Rabbi Yaakov had seen Rabbi Eliyahu, Rabbi Eliyahu had had all his strength. Now he saw, Rabbi Eliyahu was an old man.

Rabbi Eliyahu asked Rabbi Yaakov, "Tell me how you think up an allegory so quickly and then find just the right verse to end it with."

Rabbi Yaakov laughed. "I will answer you with an allegory.

"Once there was a squire who wanted to learn archery. He spent many years practicing until he could hit the bull's eye almost every time. But of course, he could not hit it a hundred per cent of the time, because such perfection is beyond human ability. And he was satisfied with his achievement.

"One day, this squire passed through a small village and he was astounded at what he saw. All over the village, there were targets. And an arrow had been shot through the eye of each one. This was extraordinary. Could such a brilliant marksman live unknown in such a tiny village?

"The squire asked after the incredible archer, and the villagers showed him to the man's house.

"Now the squire wondered more than ever, for he saw that the villager was a clumsy yokel.

"Yet the man boasted, 'I never miss a bull's eye!'

"Teach me how to do this,' the squire asked him.

"The villager took the squire out to a field. 'You see,' he said, 'this is what I do.' He put a bow to his arrow and shot into the air. The arrow narrowly missed hitting a sheep and

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buried itself in a tree trunk.

“‘Now come with me.’ The villager went to the tree. He took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and drew rings around the arrow. ‘You see,’ he said. ‘First I shoot the arrow, and then I draw the target around it.’ And the squire laughed.

“And so,” concluded Rabbi Yaakov, “I do the same thing. First I have a verse in mind, and then I think of an allegory to tell about it.”

“Very good,” said Rabbi Eliyahu.

“And now, I would like you to rebuke me.”

Rabbi Yaakov sighed. “If you insist.” He thought a few moments. “Rabbi Eliyahu, just consider how praiseworthy a pious Jew is. He does his business honestly, not cheating others even if he had the chance. He pays his workers on time, without finding excuses and self-justifications for paying them late. He mixes with others and yet he avoids gossip. His every day is filled with pitfalls, and yet he avoids them and in fact carries out many mitzvahs regarding business dealings and acting correctly to others.

“And we learn that a person should always fear heaven both in public and in private.

“As for you, Rabbi Eliyahu, your fear of heaven in private is well-known. But what about your fear of heaven in public? If you had to experience what these honest Jews experience every day, would you treat people justly and fairly?”

Rabbi Eliyahu responded, “I am afraid to undertake such a dangerous experiment, for when a man leaves Torah and engages in this-worldly matters, danger lies in wait.” (There are various versions of this conversation.)

In the course of this conversation, Rabbi Yaakov asked Rabbi Eliyahu, “In what way does a Torah leader influence others and fill them with his own spirit?”

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “This is comparable to a large vessel that has many smaller vessels surrounding it. The large vessel is the Torah leader, and the smaller vessels are other people. One must pour water into the large vessel without stop, until it is filled to the top. Then whatever spills over will reach the small vessels. But as long as the large vessel is itself not full, nothing will reach the other vessels around it.”

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Rabbi Eliyahu recovered from his illness, and he returned to his regular learning schedule.

One day, Rabbi Eliyahu's sister came to see him. More than fifty years had passed since they had last met: children had been born, grown and married and began their own families. She looked forward with joy at seeing her great brother and talking with him.

Rabbi Eliyahu came out of his room. He greeted his sister pleasantly. His happiness at seeing her was so great that he recited the blessing, "He Who revives the dead," which is said when one sees a beloved friend or relative after a long while.

"How are you? How is your family?" he asked.

His sister began to tell him about everything that had happened in her life. But she soon saw that Rabbi Eliyahu was in a hurry to return to his learning.

"Please stay and talk with me for another fifteen minutes," she pleaded. "It gives me such pleasure to see you. I will never forget this moment, for the light of your face has renewed my life. And I want to tell you everything that has happened to me and my family since we parted."

Rabbi Eliyahu took hold of the hair of his head and beard. "Look, my sister," he said, "my hair has turned all white. This is my last warning from the heavenly court that I will soon have to go to the other world and give an account of all my acts. So how can I spend any time speaking empty words, when the minutes are passing by relentlessly?"

Rabbi Eliyahu went back to his room to continue learning, and his sister returned to his apartment to speak with his wife (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 2).

One day, Rabbi Eliyahu received a letter containing ten coins. Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Khotovitz had grown ill, and sent a letter asking Rabbi Eliyahu to pray for his health, enclosing the money as charity for the beis medrash.

Rabbi Eliyahu took the money in his hand and looked at the coins. He picked out two of them and put down the other eight.

Rabbi Menashe of Ilye was present, and he couldn't understand why Rabbi Eliyahu did this.

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Later, Rabbi Saadia, one of Rabbi Eliyahu's closest students, explained, "Rabbi Eliyahu immediately realized that the coins are slightly worn, and he recalled a discussion in the Talmud about whether slightly worn golden coins may be kept, because they may be mistaken for unworn coins (Bava Metzia 52). Eight of the coins, he felt, were an unacceptable weight, but two were all right.

"Rabbi Eliyahu considered that he might take the eight coins and have them melted for their metal. But he didn't want to do that either, because this was not what Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik had intended. And so he had the messenger take them back."

Succos was special to Rabbi Eliyahu, and he was very strict about acquiring an excellent esrog.

Months before Succos started, messengers traveled to the warmer regions where esrogim are grown.

One year, the messengers returned empty-handed, and there was a great commotion in the beis medrash. Could there be a Succos on which the Gaon would not have an esrog? Two other messengers were sent out. "Spend as much money as you need to," they were told, "as long as you don't tell whom the esrog is for."

The messengers traveled southeast across Europe. Then, in a seagirt town where the gulls cried throughout the day circling above the whitewashed houses, and where the bright, fresh streets were tinted with the shadows of lemon trees, the messengers found an owner of an esrog grove.

They walked amidst the trees in the morning, where the shadows thrown by the trees were bleached by the rising Mediterranean sun.

And in his shop, the messengers picked through his esrogim.

"That one over there!" The messenger took down an esrog from a shelf and turned it in his hand. It was perfect: a pittam with a small round button that rested at the point of a golden fruit, long and elegant, with ridges like the cords of a spine.

"We'll take this one."

The merchant smiled. "That one's not for sale. I'm saving it for myself."

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“But of course it’s for sale. How much money do you want for it?”

The grove owner grew unpleasant. “I told you it’s not for sale. Now put it down.”

The messenger continued to hold the esrog. “I’ll pay you three times what you could get for any other esrog.”

“No.”

“Four times.”

In the shadows of the storage room, a gecko skittered across the wall.

“I told you, I’m not selling it.”

The messenger put the esrog down. “Look. This is important. We need that esrog.”

“What for? Who’s it for?”

“I can’t say.”

“Then I can’t sell it.”

“Five times--six times as much!”

“First tell me who it’s for.”

“Well”--the messenger lowered his voice. “The Gaon of Vilna.”

“The Gaon of Vilna!” The burly grove owner looked at the messenger with excited eyes. “You can have the esrog--”

“Thank you!” The messenger reached for the fruit. But the grove owner grabbed his arm with a beefy, powerful hand.

“--on condition that the reward of the Gaon’s blessing on this esrog will come to me.”

The two messengers looked at each other. The second messenger said in a guttural voice, “We can’t promise that. How do we know if the Gaon--?”

“Then the deal is off. Good day, gentlemen.”

The first messenger cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose we could speak with the Gaon. Perhaps he would--”

“Not perhaps,” the grove owner pressed. “For sure.”

The two messengers glanced at each other again. “Very well,” said the first one. “For

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sure.”

The two messengers traveled back from the Mediterranean lands where farmers knocked olives down from silver-green trees, back through summer fields rich with grain and vegetables. And for the entire journey, the two men were filled with trepidation. “The Gaon will be upset with us. Maybe he will not agree to this condition. Perhaps he will even tell us to return the esrog.”

At last, they were again amidst Slavic peasants. In the inns they heard the accents of other Jewish travelers speaking Yiddish.

A few days later, the messengers stood before Rabbi Eliyahu. From outside the shuttered window came the noises of the courtyard.

Rabbi Eliyahu turned the esrog back and forth. It was beautiful! “So the man who sold it to you wants the merit of my blessing....”

The two messengers hardly dared look at the stern Gaon of Vilna. But there was a long silence, and they slowly lifted their eyes. To their amazement, Rabbi Eliyahu’s face was radiant.

“My whole life,” he said, “I have been waiting for the opportunity to do at least one mitzvah correctly without desiring a reward. Now, Hashem has given me this valuable mitzvah and I can serve Him according to the dictum of our sages, ‘Be like a servant who serves the master not in order to receive a reward.’”

There is another folk tradition that one year no good hadassim could be found in all of Vilna.

One of Rabbi Eliyahu’s relatives saw a few stems of beautiful hadassim growing in a windowsill planter of an apartment where a Christian woman lived.

The Jew offered to buy the hadassim for a handsome price, but she refused, saying that her daughter would soon be marrying, and she meant to weave the hadassim into her daughter’s headpiece.

He told the woman that he wanted to buy the hadassim for Rabbi Eliyahu, whom the Christians respected.

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“If that is the case,” the woman said, “I will give you the hadassim for free--but the rabbi must let me have the reward of his deed.”

The Jew offered her a great amount of money, but she stood firm.

And Rabbi Eliyahu joyfully agreed to her conditions....

And that year, the elders of Vilna later told, Rabbi Eliyahu was more joyous with the lulav and esrog than he was other years. “For this time,” he said, “I am keeping the mitzvah only for the sake of serving Hashem.”

In general, Rabbi Eliyahu was strict about keeping others from stumbling.

Once a Jew entered Rabbi Eliyahu’s beis medrash, carrying a bundle of hadassim. “Where can I find Rabbi Eliyahu?”

“I am Dov Ber, his brother. What do you want?”

The messenger showed the bundle of hadassim. “I am delivering these as a present from Chaim Yehoshua of Slonim.”

Rabbi Dov Ber’s face lit up. He took the hadassim and examined them. “They are beautiful! Where did he get them?”

“They come from Koenigsburg.”

Rabbi Dov Ber carried the hadassim to his brother.

Rabbi Eliyahu took the hadassim joyfully. But as soon as he looked at them, he cast them to the ground. “These are grafted and unkosher! Please get me a knife. I am going to cut them up so that the messenger will not be tempted to sell them to anyone else.”

Rabbi Eliyahu would be unusually joyful on Simchas Torah. There was a custom in Vilna to say selichos--penitential prayers--on Hoshannah Rabbah.

One year, Rabbi Eliyahu canceled this custom. The entire night, the atmosphere in his beis medrash was filled with the joy of the holiday. But suddenly, there was an outcry from the other room. Someone in Rabbi Eliyahu’s house had suddenly died.

And from then on, Rabbi Eliyahu again allowed the saying of selichos.

The following are a few of Rabbi Eliyahu’s customs on the holidays:

Rabbi Eliyahu was strict about the need to eat and sleep in a succah.

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One year, the eighth night of Succos was freezing cold. Normally, such cold would exempt one from having to sleep in the succah. Besides, the eighth night is only a rabbinical, not a Biblical, obligation.

But Rabbi Eliyahu commanded his students to dress warmly and sleep in a succah in order that they would understand how important the mitzvah of the succah is.

In Vilna, Simchas Beis Hasho'eivah was celebrated on the second day of chol hamoed.

The elder scholars danced before the children and asked them riddles. When a child knew the answer, the elder lifted him onto his shoulder and danced with him, as the other elders surrounded them.

Rabbi Eliyahu was filled with joy on Simchas Torah and especially on Shmini Atzeres, because according to the Kabbalah, it is more a day of joy than all the days of Succos. On the eve of Simchas Torah, he himself had an aliyah. Sometimes he was called up in place of the cohen, even if a cohen was present.

On Simchas Torah, the men would sing various piyutim, such as Haaderes V'ha'emunuah. They would circle the bimah more than seven times. During the circling, they sang and rejoiced. Rabbi Eliyahu went before them holding the Torah scrolls, filled with joy and his face burning like fire. He himself did not hold a Torah scroll, but he clapped and danced with all his strength.

On Simchas Torah, during aleinu, the aron kodesh was opened and Rabbi Eliyahu prostrated himself on the floor.

After the prayers, he had a festive table arranged with food and drink, and the scholars sang songs of praise.

On Shabbos and holidays, Rabbi Eliyahu had the Haftorah read from a scroll of Nach, written with the same care as a Torah scroll. This scroll was used by many communities as a source of the correct version of Nach.

Rabbi Eliyahu was very strict about eating melave malkah with warm bread.

One motz'ei Shabbos, Rabbi Eliyahu was ill, and when he began to eat, he vomited.

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Later that night, he fell asleep. When he awoke, he asked the other people in the beis medrash to see if it was still before dawn. And if it was, they should give him bread.

Another time, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin came after Shabbos to Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu asked him, "Have you had melave malkah?"

"I don't feel well. I'll just have a piece of honey cake."

But Rabbi Eliyahu laughed and told Rabbi Chaim to come to his house immediately to eat a meal.

Once, Rabbi Eliyahu's wife wanted to engage on a week-long fast. Right after the third Shabbos meal, she lay down to rest.

When Rabbi Eliyahu heard what she was planning to do, he sent one of the members of his family to her with a message: "An entire week's fasting will not make up for the loss of one melave malkah." And so she got up and ate.

Rabbi Eliyahu was very strict about shmurah matzah. One year, he was speaking with a friend, Rabbi Leib Bers, an hour before Pesach would begin.

Rabbi Eliyahu asked, "Where did you buy your matzah shmurah?"

Rabbi Leib told him.

"If so," said Rabbi Eliyahu, "your matzah is chametz--leaven."

Rabbi Leib was stunned. What would he do without matzah shmurah?

Rabbi Leib hesitated, and Rabbi Eliyahu told him, "Rabbi Leib, it is almost Pesach. The chumash says that leaven 'may not be seen and may not be found'!"

Hearing this, Rabbi Leib left Rabbi Eliyahu and hurried home. "Hurry!" he told his family. "All the matzah shmurah and all the food that was cooked with it--it isn't kosher!"

His wife and children threw all the precious food into a sack.

Rabbi Leib picked up the sack and hurried out of the Jewish quarter.

On the bridge over the Vilia River, Rabbi Leib cast the sack into the water, and the food was swept away by the current.

When he returned home, his wife had a wan smile on her face. "Rabbi Eliyahu has

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sent us thirty of his own matzos.”

No one knew why Rabbi Eliyahu had made Rabbi Leib do this, and no one ever dared to ask him.

On Pesach, Rabbi Eliyahu was strict about eating the afikomen before midnight. One year, Rabbi Eliyahu went on at length reciting the Haggadah. When he looked up at the clock, he saw that it was almost midnight.

Although the meal had not yet been eaten, he immediately said that everyone should eat the afikomen. And the food remained untouched.

At the end of the seder, Rabbi Eliyahu used to send everyone out of the room and remain alone.

One year, someone stayed behind to see what Rabbi Eliyahu did.

Rabbi Eliyahu recited Shir Hashirim with great feeling, until his soul left his body and clung to Hashem.

The man watching was filled with terror. Would Rabbi Eliyahu die? He came out of his hiding place and woke Rabbi Eliyahu.

Rabbi Eliyahu was very strict regarding food and water that had been left uncovered overnight or unguarded.

For a time, Rabbi Eliyahu was served by a student named Rabbi Pinchas. Rabbi Eliyahu admonished him, “Only bring me water from the pump--not from the uncovered barrel.”

One night, a lashing rain fell. Rivulets of water streamed through the courtyard and down the sides of the houses. Pinchas looked into the pitchblack courtyard, where the rain was pouring wildly. But how could he get to the water pump without soaking his meager garments and thin shoes?

Pinchas instead filled a pitcher from the barrel of water that stood alongside the house, and brought the pitcher to Rabbi Eliyahu.

The next day after morning prayers, Rabbi Eliyahu called Pinchas. “Why did you bring me uncovered water? An image confused me all through the morning prayers, and that

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 was caused by your having brought me the uncovered water.”

Rabbi Eliyahu said that if a person is completely careful about uncovered liquids and water, he will not have strange thoughts in prayer.

Rabbi Eliyahu was also very careful about food that had been under someone's bed.

Once, Rabbi Eliyahu went to a town called Ashmineh, to an engagement ceremony.

One of the servants brought Rabbi Eliyahu a glass of wine. As soon as Rabbi Eliyahu took the glass, he put it down. He quoted the language of the Gemara, “Food and water that were under a bed...”

The rabbis at the table sent the servant to find out where the wine had come from.

He came back and reported, “The wine had been stored under somebody's bed.”

Another time, Rabbi Eliyahu found out that sugar had been placed in a chest on which someone had slept, and he commanded that the sugar be cast into the river.

Although Rabbi Eliyahu had mortified his body in his youth, he ceased to do so in later years. Rabbi Eliyahu once rebuked Rabbi Shaul Katzenelboygen for mortifying himself with such practices as long fasts.

Rabbi Shaul replied, “But we have heard that you yourself mortified yourself in your youth.”

“Yes, I did,” Rabbi Eliyahu replied, “and now I regret it.”

“Well, then,” said Rabbi Shaul lightheartedly, “I also wish to regret it.”

“No,” said Rabbi Eliyahu. “My case is different, because I had a strong constitution. Even when I afflicted myself, I could continue to serve Hashem, and I did not transgress the commandment of ‘Guard your souls well.’”

Rabbi Eliyahu taught that “A person can elevate his table to the level of the altar in the beis hamikdash, as our sages said.” Rabbi Eliyahu noted that there are four ingredients of the incense specified in the Chumash: Sh'cheiles, L'vonah, Chelbanah and Nataf. Their acronym is ShuLChaN--table.

And he taught that one should rather afflict oneself with learning Torah and vows of silence. If one wished to practice fasting in order to repent, one could never fast enough,

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even if one lived a thousand years. Instead, the essence of repenting is learning Torah.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

### THE PARTITION OF POLAND

In 5553 (1793), Russia annexed the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from Poland.

Russians overran the countryside, and Polish patriots organized ragtag armies to fight the invader.

It is told that during the upheavals of the time, a group of peasants set out to kill Jews, carrying scythes and pitchforks. At the time, Rabbi Eliyahu was in a beis medrash in Zaretshe. From a window, he saw the mob surging onto the bridge, waving their scythes and yelling anti-Semitic slogans.

Rabbi Eliyahu began to pray, “Guardian of Israel, save the remnant of Israel!”

With a rending noise, the metal struts of the bridge gave way and the mass of pogromists, flailing and terrified, fell into the water.

A year passed. Then, in the winter of 5554 (1794), a new tension broke out in the conflict with Chassidism.

A Chassidic sefer--possibly Tzavaas Harivash--had been published.

Tzavaas Harivash contained the passage, “In the world, there are holy sparks. Nothing is empty of these sparks, even trees and stones. In all of a person’s actions--even in his sins--there exist sparks of the primal cosmic catastrophe. And what are these sparks? They are repentance.”

Responding to the popularization of such ideas, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin wrote in Nefesh Hachaim, “That which was fine for previous generations is no longer fit for now. Today there are many who go about without a teacher, and every person chooses that which is right in his eyes, going after his own intellect. People only think of having meditative experiences and claiming that this is their Torah experience. They are always saying--so that the statement has become debased in the mouths of fools--that everything and everywhere is total G-dliness.

“They spend their entire lives on this theme until even their children think of nothing

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else. But this is a dangerous doctrine to spread amongst the masses, for if a person does not take great care in his meditation upon this concept, he can start to permit things that the Torah forbids, such as thinking words of Torah in unclean places, since he has already decided that everything and everywhere is total G-dliness.”

Meanwhile, a Polish revolution broke out against the Russians. Thaddeus Kosciuszko (Kosh/chus/ko), a man who had been exposed to the ideals of the French and American revolutions, led the Polish battle against Russian domination.

Russian troops poured across the countryside. Terrified, the Jews of Vilna listened for information, grasped at every rumor.

One day, the dreaded Russians came, long lines of troops with guns, dragging cannons. The Polish rebels tried to hold the city, but they were overwhelmed. Cannons shot artillery into the city. Shells fell in the Jewish quarter, shattering walls and striking down people. And then the Russians overran the streets of Vilna, shooting wildly and looting.

A few weeks later, Kosciuszko’s troops attacked the Russians. From within, Christians and Jews spied on the Russian troops, and the Polish rebels attacked the Russians mercilessly.

Kosciuszko’s men drove the Russians out of the city.

The Jews rejoiced. But the war was far from over. Meanwhile, the Vilna Kahal swore its loyalty to Kosciuszko’s temporary government, and took an active role in helping him.

On Iyar 17 (in May), a well-known physician of Vilna, Dr. Polonus, gave an impassioned talk in the Great Synagogue on Shabbos. He described the terrible cruelty of the Russians, and he urged the Jews to give Kosciuszko’s officers any information they could about the movement of the Russian army.

The Kahal donated 25,000 gulden to the uprising. Noach ben Feivish Bloch, a prominent member of the Kahal, volunteered to supply the Polish rebels with gunpowder, and the Jewish tailors offered to furnish 200 military uniforms. And some Jews were involved in the actual fighting.

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The summer of 5554 (1794) came. Russian troops surrounded Vilna and positioned cannon in a circle about the city.

In the Russian's first furious attack, the streets of Vilna were filled with the whistling of shells and explosions of gunpowder. Gray smoke blew everywhere, and a burnt gunpowder smell pervaded the city.

The shells fell wildly into the city. Rabbi Eliezer Ginzberg, the baal korei and baal tokeia in Rabbi Eliyahu's synagogue, was hit and killed on 17 Tammuz (July 15)--the fast day commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem.

Rabbi Eliyahu mourned deeply for his friend. He tore his clothing and recited the blessing, "Blessed are You, Hashem, the true Judge."

The siege lasted for thirty days. Sniper fire ripped through the city: shells dropped indiscriminately, hellfire from the sky.

In one day alone--the twenty-first of Tammuz--thirty Jews in one of the suburbs of Vilna were killed by a heavy bombardment.

Not even the mass funerals outside the city were safe from attack.

On the fifteenth of Av, in August, the Russians began a heavy volley of shells. Kosciuszko's men responded with their own cannon and gunfire. Houses shook with the explosions, and the streets were a chaos of smoke, noise and the acrid smell of fire and gunpowder.

All the Jews of Vilna gathered in the Great Synagogue, including the children, and the women's section was packed. For once, the dark, tall chamber with its stately pillars and imposing aron kodesh did not fill the Jews with the quietude of calm prayer.

Instead, the Jews cried out to Hashem--"from the depths have I called to You." A great weeping arose as the Jews beseeched Hashem for surcease and compassion.

Rabbi Eliyahu himself opened the aron kodesh. He began to lead the people in reciting Tehillim, calling out, "May Hashem answer you on a day of trouble."

The congregation responded in a roar, "May Hashem answer you--"

Seven times, Rabbi Eliyahu cried out the words of this chapter and after each verse,

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the congregation called out after him with a broken heart. “May the name of the G-d of Yaakov lift you up....”

There was the whistle of a shell--very close by, right above their heads. In that instant of silence as the Jews listened, there was a clatter directly overhead. The cannon shell had landed on the roof of the synagogue! When it exploded, the ceiling would fall down on their heads. Bricks and fire would rain down upon them, and hundreds of them might be maimed and die.

In a loud voice, Rabbi Eliyahu cried out, “Nullified, nullified!”

And miraculously the artillery shell did not explode. Shaken, the Jews filed out of the synagogue.

At the same moment, the commander of the Polish forces directed his troops to open the gates of the city, and the siege came to an end. Kosciuszko’s rebellion was being crushed by the Russians. But the lives of Vilna’s Jews were saved.

Every year, the anniversary of this miracle was celebrated in Vilna: in the synagogues, the Jews recited Shir Hayichud.

And the artillery shell remained embedded in the roof of the Great Synagogue until the synagogue was destroyed by the Nazis.

On a Shabbos, 4 Elul 5554 (October 30, 1794), Catherine II, ruler of Russia, issued a manifesto forgiving the Polish rebels, and she repealed a number of anti-Semitic edicts. This beginning of Russian rule was benevolent and promising. But it did not take long before it became clear that the Russians were hostile to the Jews.

In 5555 (1795), Vilna became an official part of Russia, a section of what was to become known as the Pale of Settlement, a strip of land beyond which Jews were not permitted to live.

These were difficult days. And that Succos of 5556 (1795), on the second day of chol hamoed, Rabbi Eliyahu was not in his usual joyful spirit.

One of the people in the succah noticed that Rabbi Eliyahu was upset and made a joke to cheer him. But Rabbi Eliyahu grew even more despondent.

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After minchah, Rabbi Eliyahu summoned the man to him. He cried out, “What have you done? I wanted you to alleviate the suffering of my soul, and instead you troubled me with a scoffing that I find so abhorrent. You prattled on and I was so affected that my prayers were polluted. By filling my heart with your scoffing, you have done evil both to yourself and to me.”

And Rabbi Eliyahu rebuked the man until he felt better (Ruach Eliyahu, p. 38).

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

### RABBI ELIYAHU FALLS ILL

Rabbi Eliyahu continued his life-long dedication to Torah learning.

“There are three levels [of learning],” he taught in his commentary on Shir Hashirim. “When a person learns from his teacher, he is on the level of ‘daughter,’ like an infant nursing from its mother. He receives from his teacher like a daughter who receives from her father.

“Then, when he becomes wise and no longer needs his rabbi, he is like a comrade to his rabbi in his wisdom--now he is like a sibling, like a brother and sister.

“This stage is referred to in the statement of our sages, ‘A woman speaks with her husband’ (Berachos 3a).

“The Torah is called ‘a woman.’ We see this in the sages’ comment, ‘The Torah is our inheritance--morashah--meaning, it is our betrothed--m’orasah’ (Berachos 57a).

“The Torah sees the man and speaks with him, teaching him. But still he doesn’t see the Torah--he doesn’t teach out of his own inspiration. And so she speaks with him, but he doesn’t speak with her.

“Then we come to the third level. Now a person becomes a wise man, teachings others and having an influence on them. He is like a mother who influences her son. And so he is now called a ‘mother’” (Commentary on Shir Hashirim 3:11).

Rabbi Eliyahu had long since passed through these three stages.

Now, in his old age, Rabbi Eliyahu learned only Chumash (Aliyos Eliyahu). In it he found hints and references to the entire oral Torah.

One erev Pesach, Rabbi Eliyahu came to the end of his commentary on Shir Hashirim. He was in Serhai with a few people, including his relative by marriage, Rabbi Chaim of Serhai, Rabbi Chaim’s son, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov.

He told them, “Close the door.” They closed the door shutters and lit many candles.

When Rabbi Eliyahu finished dictating his commentary, he lifted his eyes to heaven

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with great holiness, with blessing and thanks to Hashem, Who had allowed him to attain the light of all of the Torah in its revealed and secret aspects.

Rabbi Eliyahu said, “All the wisdoms are necessary for our holy Torah, and they are all included within it.” He said that he knew all the sciences perfectly, and he named in particular trigonometry and geometry. He praised music highly, saying, “Most of the reasons of the Torah, the secrets of the songs of the Leviim and the secrets of the Tikkunei Zohar cannot be understood without music. And one can be so inspired by the sweetness of music that one can literally die of yearning. One can even revive the dead with the secrets of music hidden in the Torah.

“Moshe Rabeinu brought a few tunes and a few scales from Mt. Sinai. All other tunes are mixtures of these.”

Rabbi Eliyahu went on to explain the value of all the sciences. “I have learned them all completely,” he said, “except for medicine. I know anatomy and everything related to it. But when I wanted to learn how to make drugs, my father of blessed memory told me not to, because as a doctor, my time would be taken away from learning Torah.

“I know all the types of magic that were known by the tana'im and members of the Sanhedrin. The only thing I do not know is how to prepare herbal formulas, because this is known only by the gentile peasants, and I was too particular to go learn it from them.”

Rabbi Eliyahu then talked of philosophy. “I have learned all of philosophy completely. And from all of philosophy, I learned only two good things.” One of these, he said, are the seventy forces within a human being that Rabeinu Yishaya talks of in his commentary on the verse, “And a shoot went out of Yishaya.” “And the rest of philosophy must be thrown away.”

Rabbi Eliyahu continued, “Thank heaven, I know perfectly all of the Torah that was given at Mt. Sinai. I know how all of Nach, Mishnah and oral Torah are hidden in the chumash. I have no doubt left regarding any halachah or any sugya in the entire Torah in my old age.

“I know all the oral Torah and all the halachic authorities on the Shulchan Aruch.

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“In my emendations, I have drawn light out of darkness, and made them like clean, fine flour.

“And I have also corrected the texts of Kabbalah: the Zohar, Tikkunei Zohar, Sefer Yetzirah, the writings of the Ari, the Pardes. I went through them and know them completely. There are only two passages in the Zohar that are difficult for me to understand. And if I knew someone who understands them, I would travel to him by foot and wait until the coming of the Moshiach.”

Rabbi Eliyahu continued, “There are, as is known, 620 pillars of light whose names and place are not revealed. I have learned the names of each one and where they are concealed in the written Torah. This has not yet been revealed to the world. I myself have not told anyone nor written it down anywhere.”

Rabbi Chaim of Serhai cried out, “Write it down so that the secret will remain in the world!”

But Rabbi Eliyahu did not want to do this.

“I am keeping this with me so that I may reveal it in my first discourse in the world-to-come. And I adjure you not to reveal this matter.”

There were two Kabbalah insights that Rabbi Eliyahu refrained from teaching, saving them for the world to come. When a person comes to the heavenly yeshiva, he taught, the tzaddikim there wish to hear insights in the Torah, and a person is given 180 days to speak of what he had learned while in this world.

(Only after Rabbi Eliyahu passed away was the episode of this siyum revealed by his student, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov--Oros Hagra, 341.)

In 5556 (1796), Rabbi Eliyahu fell ill again, more seriously than before. Again, he did not allow doctors to see him. On the day before Pesach, 5556, he wrote to Rabbi Yaakov Krantz, the Dubno Maggid, to come to him: “Come to my house. Do not hesitate to restore my soul and give me joy, as you have in the past.” And Rabbi Eliyahu’s son, Rabbi Avraham, wrote at the end of the letter, “My master, my father, calls to you with great affection. So, my dear friend, beloved of Israel, come and do not tarry. You know my

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father's desire. There is no greater mitzvah than to do as he wishes, for he wishes deeply to see you.”

At this time, Rabbi Eliyahu made his last public declarations about Chassidism. Some Chassidim had claimed that Rabbi Eliyahu had changed his mind and now was supporting them. Among other criticisms, Rabbi Eliyahu wrote, “They reveal wrong meanings in the verse, ‘Blessed is the glory of Hashem from His place.’”

Rabbi Shneur Zalman understood that Rabbi Eliyahu was objecting to the Chassidic view that Hashem's glory literally fills the entire world, based on the verses that Hashem “fills the world” and that “there is no place empty of Him.”

“In the Gaon's eyes,” wrote Rabbi Shneur Zalman, “it is total blasphemy to say that Hashem is to be found literally in low things. And he instead interprets the verse to mean that it is Hashem's providence that fills the earth. And I wish that I might be able to present our case to him.”

In later years, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin maintained good relations with Chassidic leaders and students. Rabbi Chaim accepted Chassidic youngsters as students in his yeshiva and treated them kindly, even as they continued their Chassidic customs. He would often host a travelling Chassid, asking him to repeat some Torah insight that Rabbi Shneur Zalman had talked of.

Rabbi Chaim's student, Rabbi Dovid Tevel, met and had a good relationship with the third Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Tzemach Tzedek.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel had great respect for Rabbi Eliyahu, and Rabbi Eliyahu's commentary on the Shulchan Aruch was always on his table.

There is a tradition that Rabbi Menachem Mendel said, “If not for the opposition of Rabbi Eliyahu to Chassidism, there would have been the danger of Chassidism slowly leaving the path of Torah. There was reason to fear that the fiery enthusiasm of the early followers of Chassidism might have eventually led to the abandonment of Talmud study and its replacement with study of the Kabbalah. So the great controversy over Chassidism in fact was a shield before approaching damage and an iron barrier before the floodwaters” (Makor

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Boruch).

Some dispute the authenticity of this quotation, which comes from Makor Boruch, whose author heard it from secondary sources.

Rabbi Eliyahu continued to teach.

And he always recalled his beloved student, Rabbi Zelmele, brother of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin.

Once, Rabbi Eliyahu taught something to Rabbi Shaul Katzenelboygen, and Rabbi Shaul, astonished at its genius, repeated it two or three times. Rabbi Eliyahu cried out, "Oh, and where is Rabbi Zelmele, who would review something 101 times?"

And when Rabbi Yechezkiel Feivel, author of Toldos Adam, told Rabbi Eliyahu that he intended to publish the customs of Rabbi Zelmele, Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "Rabbi Zelmele was a wonder!"

It was perhaps at this time that Rabbi Eliyahu's nephew got married. This was Rabbi Elijah, son of Rabbi Avraham. He received some gold and silver jewelry as a wedding present, but during the seven days of the wedding feast, it was stolen.

The bridegroom told no one, but immediately after the sheva brachos, he investigated and determined that the thief must have taken it to Vilna.

When Rabbi Elijah came to Vilna to look for the stolen jewelry, he paid a visit on his uncle, Rabbi Eliyahu.

"Why are you here?" Rabbi Eliyahu asked him.

Rabbi Elijah explained the reason for his visit, and Rabbi Eliyahu rebuked him: "Can it be possible that someone in our family will give up his time from learning Torah in order to look for lost money?"

At the end of 5557 (1797), Rabbi Eliyahu again fell ill. His family pleaded with him to see a doctor.

But Rabbi Eliyahu refused. "I have never gone to a doctor or taken medicine my entire life."

Rather, Rabbi Eliyahu taught, when a person is always joyous, even if he grows ill,

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he can be healed with his joy (commentary on Mishlei 18:14).

But the members of Rabbi Eliyahu's family grew insistent, and Rabbi Eliyahu gave in.

There were a number of famous doctors in Vilna, and the family sent for Dr. Yaakov Lubavitch.

When Dr. Lubavitch he put his ear to Rabbi Eliyahu's chest, he heard Rabbi Eliyahu murmuring the mishnah.

And when he came out of the room, all the members of the family crowded about him. "Where is he holding?" they asked in the Yiddish idiom.

Rabbi Lubavitch raised his hands and smiled slightly. "He is holding in the tractate of Keilim."

There is a tradition that Rabbi Eliyahu needed an eye doctor. When the doctor came to see him, Rabbi Eliyahu asked, "Can you enumerate the nerves and veins of the eye?"

"No," the doctor admitted.

"Then how can you treat such a sensitive and complex organism whose anatomy you do not even know?" And Rabbi Eliyahu said that there are seventy veins (others say, nerves or layers) in the eye, corresponding to the word ayin (eye), which also means "seventy."

Rabbi Eliyahu's students came to visit him.

One of his students, Rabbi Pinchas, said to him, "I wish that Hashem would bless me with your evil inclination and guard everyone else from my good inclination."

The other students gazed at Rabbi Pinchas in amazement. He said to them, "Why are you staring at me? Think of how the evil inclination can tempt Rabbi Eliyahu. It can tell him: You dedicate every minute to serving Hashem and clinging to Him. But the Torah also commands us to 'guard your souls well.' So shouldn't you at least take a moment to rest?"

"But my good inclination tells me: the whole day you wasted your time, you did nothing, you filled your heart with the empty things of this world. So shouldn't you listen to my rebuke for a moment to at least take a sefer in your hand and learn for a few minutes?"

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“So you see, Rabbi Eliyahu’s evil inclination tells him to learn the whole day and rest just one minute, whereas my good inclination tells me to learn for a minute.”

When Rabbi Pinchas finished speaking, Rabbi Eliyahu groaned and said, “May the Compassionate One guard all men from my evil inclination. What can you know?”

And he said as well that even the sound of his wife’s slippers in the other room disturbed his learning.

Rabbi Eliyahu’s family hired a carriage to take him on a ride in the fresh air. They loaded the carriage with seforim and other things Rabbi Eliyahu might need, and it was brought to the entrance of the Synagogue Courtyard.

Rabbi Eliyahu was now an old man with white hair. As he made his way across the Synagogue Courtyard where he had lived for almost his entire life, he was surrounded by his family and students.

Since he had come back here from Keidan fifty years ago, generations had passed. The old storekeepers he had seen then had long since died. Now their children ran the stores. The boys who had years ago run through the streets were now gray-haired grandfathers. The bathhouse attendant, the water carrier who always recited Tehillim--they had died, and new generations had taken their place. Now there were new families, new dramas, new worries.

But despite the fires and bombardments, the invasions and rebellions, the Synagogue Courtyard remained the same--with the same water pump, the bathhouse, the houses with their crumbling facades, the uneven cobblestones.

A girl hurried across the yard, wearing thick, torn socks. So had her mother looked twenty years ago; and in twenty years, her daughter would be hurrying across the courtyard, looking just like her, with an unruly wisp of hair floating up behind her ear.

Fifty years ago, Rabbi Eliyahu had been a powerful young man. He had been able to afflict himself with fasts and lack of sleep until he had with an iron will learned the Torah and attained heavenly visions. Now he was old, feeble and white-haired.

“A generation goes and a generation comes, and the earth eternally stands. The sun rises and the sun sets, and it yearns to shine again in the east. It tends to the south and tends

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to the north; around and around blows the wind, returning to its place. All the rivers flow to the sea, but the sea is not filled, and the waters flow back to the rivers. All things grow weary, and no one can speak it; no eye can see it all, and no ear can hear it all. For that which was is that which will be, and that which was made is that which will be made; and there is nothing new under the sun” (Koheles 1:4-9).

Rabbi Eliyahu was escorted to the carriage. But as soon as he raised his foot to step into it, he turned back and cried out, “This is the carriage of the evil inclination! It is lined with shaatnez” (the forbidden mixture of sheep wool and linen).

“No, it is not,” the others around him Rabbi Eliyahu soothed him. “The seat is made of camel wool.”

But Rabbi Eliyahu refused to go in the carriage.

And his reason was that afterwards, sheep wool would be substituted for the camel wool and people, not being aware of this, would continue to use the material.

Rosh Hashanah of 5558 (1797) arrived--beginning with the days of awe, when it would be decided who shall live and who shall die.

It is told that because Rabbi Eliyahu was so ill during the ten Days of Awe, his doctor forbade him to fast on Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Eliyahu sat up in his bed. “Doctor, how many muscles did I use when I sat up?”

“I don’t know,” the doctor said.

“Well, in that case, you aren’t an expert physician, and I don’t have to listen to your prescriptions.”

On the eve of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Eliyahu was very ill. Many people were at his house, celebrating a pidyon haben of Rabbi Eliyahu’s grand-nephew.

Late in the day, Rabbi Eliyahu called his children and grandchildren, and he blessed them one by one. When he put his hand on the head of his son, Rabbi Avraham, he began to cry.

Everyone was stunned. Rabbi Eliyahu had never before acted this way. But no one

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dared say anything or ask him anything.

The last person whom Rabbi Eliyahu blessed was his grand-nephew, Binyamin Wolf, who was already a young man. It is told that Binyamin Wolf was the last person to receive a blessing from Eliyahu. And he lived almost to the age of ninety.

On Yom Kippur, it became clear that Rabbi Eliyahu was deathly ill. He didn't have the strength to pray with the minyan, and he remained alone in his room. He only came into the beis medrash for Shmoneh Esrei and the reading of the Torah.

And he grew sicker from day to day.

Two days before Succos, Shmuel Yudes came to Rabbi Eliyahu. Every year, Shmuel Yudes brought an esrog to Rabbi Eliyahu. His heart this year was happy, and he considered that Rabbi Eliyahu would bless him for his good news.

Shmuel Yudes told Rabbi Eliyahu, "This year you will have a beautiful esrog from Prussia."

But when Rabbi Eliyahu heard this, he turned his face to the wall and wept bitterly.

Everyone in the room was stunned, and Shmuel Yudes left the room in shame and sorrow.

(Some say that he brought the esrog with him, and that Rabbi Eliyahu took it in his hand and burst into tears.)

On the day before Succos, Rabbi Eliyahu directed that his bed be moved into the succah.

On the third day of chol hamoed, Rabbi Eliyahu took the lulav early in the morning and recited the blessing over it with great joy. It was his custom (like those who live in Jerusalem) to carry the esrog the entire day, and he did so as well today.

As Rabbi Eliyahu lay in bed, he took his tzitzis in his hand and said, tears pouring from his eyes, "World, world, how fine you are, how beautiful you are! How hard it is to leave such a world. Here, with such an easy mitzvah which costs only a few coins, one can rise to stand before Hashem's presence. But in the world-to-come one could not get such a thing, even if one gave all one's strength for it."

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Rabbi Eliyahu asked for a glass of wine. "My whole life, I mortified my body. Now I wish to conciliate it."

Later that morning, the holy soul of Rabbi Eliyahu slipped away from its body and returned to its Maker.

When Rabbi Avraham, Rabbi Eliyahu's brother, learned the news, he broke out in a groan. But in honor of the holiday, he contained his sorrow. And when Shmini Atzeres was over, he fainted in his grief.

When the sad news raced through the synagogues and courtyards of Vilna, everyone poured into the streets. The day of joy had been turned to mourning, dust replaced beauty, and the streets were filled with crying and wailing.

The bier was bought into the beis medrash, and the funeral took place that afternoon. The governor of Vilna sent seven soldiers as an honor guard.

It is told that there was a man in Vilna who was possessed by a dybbuk. When Rabbi Eliyahu died, the dybbuk announced that he must flee because of the holiness and purity that filled the air. This was because the souls of all the tanaim, amoraim and gaonim came down to receive the soul of Rabbi Eliyahu, who had devoted his life to illuminating their words.

Rabbi Eliyahu had told his student, Rabbi Saadia, that although the tallis that a person is buried in is usually torn and made unfit, he wished to be buried in a kosher tallis.

Rabbi Saadia was in a suburb of Vilna. By the time he hurried to the funeral, he was too late. And so the wide-spread custom was upheld.

No eulogies were recited, because it was chol hamoed.

But many eulogies were composed later, and poems of mourning. One of these, written, by Rabbi Edil of Slonim, read as follows:

Torah of Moshe, remember My servant, Eliyahu. When you find something hard, ask it of him. I was with you and with also with him, to answer all questions.

Assembly of prophets and men of the spirit, command the clouds not to give forth water; for

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the testimony of living waters has been sealed, in a land as weary as darkness.

The Mishnah wails, pained like a woman bearing her first child. She stretches out her hands over the death of her husband, the beloved of her youth; for now he is gone.

The Babylonian Talmud cries out bitterly. The light of Israel wishes to shine, but the sun has been darkened. And Hashem says that He will dwell in the dark cloud.

The Jerusalem Talmud rushes through the streets: nobody seeks me. Do not be silent for my sake; my breasts are dry, do not call me fortunate. Say rather, How has the mighty staff been shattered!

The wise men who composed Sifrei and Sifra cry out, Woe, master! Without him, no one can understand us. Now he is in the ground, on the day that Hashem has lowered the exalted.

The Hebrew tongue and the tradition mourn. Who is the master of our language? Who can tell the correct spelling of our words? No one is left who can say. None knows how to pronounce our words.

The secular sciences cry like doves, they beat their breasts and lament. He understood so clearly the paths of the heavens, like the Greeks and stretching as far as Assyria--but now he has fallen before all his brothers.

The secrets of Hashem and His covenant mourn. Where has my beloved disappeared to, he who reveals the depths? Amidst the [heavenly] musicians, he plays the harp; and I am in exile on the banks of the Kevar.

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Streams of water, currents of tears, flow together, for the nation of Hashem has been sent into exile. Our master Eliyahu, we are the small flock in the wilderness, and to whom have we been abandoned?

Yehudah tells his brothers: The water has overwhelmed us. But my friends, let us raise our eyes to Hashem; may He bless us and raise His countenance to us. May the light of Hashem and of Eliyahu shine upon us, we who sit in the darkness.

In the following years, many eulogies and encomiums of Rabbi Eliyahu were written. One of the most eloquent of these was not a formal document but a talk that Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin gave. This talk also revealed the greatness of Rabbi Chaim's brother, Rabbi Zelmele.

One Shabbos, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin was sitting at the table with his son, Rabbi Yitzchak, Rabbi Ber of Turetz, Rabbi Dovid Tevel of Minsk and others.

They were discussing the statement in the Gemara that "Rabbi Yehudah said, If a public leader who rules with a high hand over the community, not for the sake of heaven, then his son will not become a Torah scholar" (Rosh Hashanah 17).

Rabbi Chaim said, speaking Hebrew as he always did on Shabbos, "From this statement, we can infer that if he rules with a high hand for the sake of heaven, then he will have a son who is a Torah scholar.

"My father is an example of this. He was a community leader who ruled with a high hand in a proper manner, in accordance with the Torah and the government laws. He knew that the officers below him were liable to mistreat the poor Jews, because these Jews were not likely to complain. And so he went out of his way to be fair to them--not to tax them unfairly and so on.

"Although the people trembled before my father, when he acted firmly it was only for the sake of heaven. And so he merited to have a son who became a Torah scholar: my brother, of blessed memory, Rabbi Zelmele. Even in the days of the tana'im and the

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amoraim--the sages of the Gemara--he would have been considered a Torah scholar” (but not necessarily on the same level as a tana or amora).

Everyone at the table fell silent at this audacious comparison.

At last Rabbi Ber spoke. “If this was true of your brother, what about the greatness of Rabbi Eliyahu, of blessed memory?”

Rabbi Chaim replied sharply, “If my brother, Rabbi Zelmele, lived a thousand years, he wouldn’t even reach the ankles of Rabbi Eliyahu!”

Again there was a stunned silence. One of the students said, “Perhaps you mean in sharpness.”

Rabbi Chaim said, “No, in breadth of knowledge as well.”

Again, there was a silence--for everyone knew that Rabbi Chaim never exaggerated.

Rabbi Chaim switched to Yiddish. “Why are you surprised?” he said. “We all say Ashrei (Tehillim 144) three times a day and everyone, great or small, scholar or layman, knows it by heart.

“I tell you that my brother, Rabbi Zelmele, was an expert in all the words of the tana'im and amoraim, the Bavli, Yerushalmi, Zohar, Eitz Chaim and so on and so forth, and he could recite them by heart like Ashrei. Isn’t this an extraordinary Torah scholar?

“Now let us say that we are speaking to someone who knows Ashrei by heart. We mention a verse and ask him to tell us the last word in the previous verse. He will have to take a moment to mentally recite the previous verse until he comes to its last word. This holds true for Ashrei, which is alphabetical. And if we asked such a question about other parts of the prayerbook, such as Aleinu or the grace after meal, he might get confused and have to look in a siddur.

“But imagine a person who knew Ashrei so well that he wouldn’t even have to pause for a second. That was the level of Rabbi Eliyahu regarding the entire Torah. Not only did he know all the words of the holy Torah--both revealed and secret--but every word stood before his eyes, so that he could find anything immediately” (Aliyos Eliyahu).

Rabbi Chaim also said that it became clear to him that the level which his brother,

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Rabbi Zelmele, achieved before his death, Rabbi Eliyahu attained when he was thirteen years old. Rabbi Zelmele removed himself from all things of this world so that he appeared obviously other-worldly and angelic. But Rabbi Eliyahu was able to act like other human beings even as he purified his powers until they became angelic. And this is the intent of creation: that one act like a man and purify matter like an angel.

Rabbi Avraham Karelitz, the Chazon Ish, said that “we relate to Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna as being in the line of Moshe Rabeinu, Ezra, Rabeinu Hakadosh, Rav Ashi and the Rambam. The Torah was revealed through him as a chosen, holy man. He illumined those things that were not clear until he came and took his portion. He is to be considered like a rishon. And this is why he disagrees with them at times very strongly, even against the Rif and the Rambam. His level of holy inspiration, piety, great understanding, toil and broad, deep knowledge are all beyond our ability to comprehend.”

The Shaagas Aryeh said of Rabbi Eliyahu that “although he acted like a human being, he purified his powers until he reached the level of an angel of Hashem.”

Rabbi Shlomo Elyashav, author of Leshem Shvo Vaachlama, said that “in every era, there are unique men, but not in all fields. Rabbi Eliyahu Hagaon, however, reached a unique level in his generation in all fields: in revealed and hidden Torah, in piety, holiness and purity, in the highest levels, in every wisdom and science.”

“Rabbi Eliyahu achieved knowledge which has only been known of in relation to the sages of the Gemara,” wrote Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin in his introduction to Rabbi Eliyahu’s commentary on Sifra Detzniusa.

“He was unique in these generations, and there was no one like him for a few generations before him,” wrote Rabbi Menachem Mendel in the introduction to his commentary on Avos.

“There were revealed to him chambers and secrets that had been hidden away since the earliest days, and his wisdom and Torah knowledge was greater than all the generations before him, for since the time of the gaonim, there was no one who could connect the written Torah with the oral Torah” (introduction to Pe’as Hashulchan).

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Once, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin was asked, “If Rabbi Eliyahu lived in the time of the Amoraim, would he be considered to be like one of them?”

Rabbi Chaim replied, “Perhaps he would be like the Rif and the Rambam”--or, according to another version, “perhaps like the Ramban and the Rashba.”

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin said that Rabbi Eliyahu appeared when he did because the generation was on a very low spiritual level. And so Hashem had mercy and sent us the pious gaon to strengthen and encourage us in the love of Torah.

When Rabbi Elchonon Bunim Wasserman heard that Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin had said that Rabbi Eliyahu might be as great as the Ramban, he asked Rabbi Yisrael Kagan--the Chafetz Chaim--how such a great person came to that generation. After all, said Rabbi Wasserman, the Gemara teaches “that every generation has the leader fit for it.”

Rabbi Kagan replied that each generation is slipping down a slope, and the leaders of the generation work to slow the slippage. But at times the slippage is so drastic that Hashem sends an especially great soul from earlier generations so that with his great powers he can keep the generation from falling too rapidly.

“The mouth of the righteous is a source of life” (Mishlei 10:1). Rabbi Eliyahu taught that “The Torah and the mitzvos are life for those who do them, as we learn in the verse, ‘for it is your life’ (Devarim 30:20). The righteous man teaches others to always learn and perform mitzvos. And therefore, the mouth of the righteous man is a source of life.”

“The righteous man is the foundation of the world” (Mishlei 10:25). “Even after a righteous man dies,” commented Rabbi Eliyahu, “he is the foundation of the world, for he protects the world.”

Rabbi Eliyahu was a royal figure. Perhaps comparable to Shaul Hamelech, he was a man who preferred to spend his life “hidden among the vessels” (Shmuel I 11:23)--the vessels of Torah.

His influence, like that of a wellspring, began modestly. But it ultimately spread across all of Jewry. Yechezkiel had a vision about life-giving water flowing from the Beis Hamikdash: “And behold water”--the water of Torah--“flowed from the doorsill of the Beis

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Hamikdash"--the center of Torah. "At a distance of a thousand amah, it reached the ankles. A thousand amah further, the water reached the knees. A thousand amah further, the water reached the waist. And a thousand amah further, it was a river that one could not pass, for the waters had risen. And the river gave life to whatever creature came to it, and it sweetened all the briny water that it touched" (paraphrase of Yechezkiel 47).

There were those among Rabbi Eliyahu's students who even described him as playing the role of the light of Moshiach ben Yosef: the earthly moshiach who will precede Moshiach ben Dovid, the heavenly moshiach (Kol Hator, p. 463).

Rabbi Eliyahu was a towering genius of Torah, a man whose relentless drive for truth allowed him to tolerate no compromise and impelled him forward in his learning and holiness.

And his spirit still motivates those who appreciate his genius until the final days when "lovingkindness and truth will have met" (Tehillim 85:11).