

THE LAST JOURNEY

A GIFTED CHILD

Chaim¹ was a young boy born to G-d fearing and pious parents in the city of Zhorevitz in White Russia. Already at his tender age, it was clear that he had a special gift. His mind bordered on sheer brilliance; whatever he was told or taught was understood immediately and was never forgotten.

When he looked at the alef beis for the first time, young Chaim remembered each letter together with the nekudos, and before long he was reading. When other children had barely begun taking their first steps in Alef-Beis, he had finished Chumash and was moving on to Mishnayos. By ten years old, he knew many Masechtos by heart, and when he reached Bar Mitzva, rumor had it that he was a Baki B'shas.

A CRACK IN THE WALL

One day, Chaim's father came into his room and saw him reading a small booklet over an open Gemorah. When he noticed that the booklet was an informational pamphlet from the Haskolah (Enlightenment) movement, he began to rebuke his son for reading it. But Chaim claimed innocence, using the excuse that he had found it lying around and wanted to know how he could refute the information inside.

His father accepted the story and left the room, hoping that his son was speaking the truth, but fearing deep inside that he hadn't.

A few weeks later, Chaim was caught again reading texts from the Haskola movement, and his father warned him sternly against any more contact with the Maskilim and their books. This time though, Chaim remained calm and didn't try to deny his involvement.

The scene repeated itself a few more times, and the

boy finally admitted that he was entranced by the Maskilim and wanted to follow their ways, ignoring his father's pleading and begging to remain loyal to his faith.

THE BIGGEST FOOL

A week later, Chaim went to sleep earlier than usual and awoke a few hours later. Dressing quickly as though he was about to travel, he turned to his father with contempt:

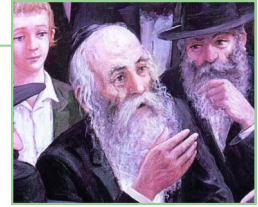
"I have been thinking recently about what is wise and what is foolish, and I have come to the following conclusion: The biggest fools in the world are in Russia, and in Russia itself they are in White Russia, more specifically near Mohilov of White Russia, and to be more specific: in Mohilev itself. And the biggest fools in Mohilev are in Zhuravitz, and in Zhuravitz itself, our neighborhood is the most foolish, and even more so our street. And on our street, foolishness is at its strength in this house, and out of all the fools in this house, you father are the biggest fool. And in that case, I have nothing more here."

With his brazen words still sinking in, Chaim took a small sack of cloths and hurried out the door to an awaiting carriage, which took him to Berlin – the capital of Germany and 'enlightened' thinkers.

TWO BOOKS

Chaim was soon recognized for his brilliance and was accepted into a university. Within a year, and before he was even twenty years old, he was known as the top student in the university. He would travel to different cities to further his research and studies, and he relished in the honor accorded to him.

Mathematics and medicine were his primary subjects and he began to write a book on each topic, explaining the theories behind math and discussing the human



anatomy with regard to medicine.

He invested countless hours into his research and writing, and before publishing them, sent a copy of each to his professors to look over. After hearing their commendations he sent copies to several experts abroad, and their response was the same; the academic community was singing his praises. Yet, for some reason, Chaim resisted from publishing them.

Life was slowly moving on and Chaim was offered many high-profile marriage proposals, but despite the allure of wealth and power that accompanied these propositions, he turned them all down. He first wanted to return to his parent's home and re-spin the wheel; having matured in his studies, he came to regret the sour manner in which he had left his home. He wanted to go back and right his wrong, as well with the intention to convince his parents of his new and enlightened way of

thinking.

THE JOURNEY HOME

At the first possible opportunity, he took a vacation from his university and traveled back to Zhorevitz. During the journey, however, a thought entered his mind: "How will my father understand the philosophies that I have learned? He is too simple to appreciate the depth of these studies. Better I should go to his Rebbe, the Alter Rebbe, who is renowned for his extensive knowledge in the sciences – I will show him my books and certainly he will appreciate my wisdom, and he will then tell my parents and they will listen to him."

And so, with his mind made up, he changed course for Liozna.

GONE!

When he arrived in Liozna he entered the zal and



WITH HIS BRAZEN WORDS STILL SINKING IN, CHAIM TOOK A SMALL SACK OF CLOTHS AND HURRIED OUT THE DOOR TO AN AWAITING CARRIAGE

looked around. Men were sitting in front of large books and learning diligently. His appearance attracted the attention of some of the Chassidim and one of them, Reb Moshe Meizlish, who had learnt in Berlin and spoke German, French and Italian, greeted him. Chaim told Reb Moshe why he had come and Reb Moshe arranged for him to go into Yechidus, which at that time was a great exception.

Chaim stayed with the Alter Rebbe for a long time and when he exited the room his face wore a deep shade of

red. He paced back and forth in the zal, seeming oblivious to his surroundings. Some Chassidim tried speaking to him but he didn't respond – it was as though no one or nothing existed.

Suddenly, he grabbed one of his books, and, walking briskly to the fireplace, threw it inside. The flames licked at the book and it soon caught fire; the years of his research and writing were going up in flames.

A dubious sense of calm enveloped him and he continued pacing the room.

After several minutes he took his second book and flung it into the fire, and he stood staring for a moment as his two books burned and fell to ash. And only then did he sit down.

SOUND LOGIC

Reb Moshe approached him and asked what had transpired in the Alter Rebbe's room. Chaim motioned for Reb Moshe to take a seat beside him and began his recount.

"I showed the Rebbe my two books and he flicked through the pages of the book on math, crossing passages out with a pencil.

"The Rebbe then turned to me and said, "Your book is developed with sound logic and your theories are comprehensive, however, the premise of your theory is a mistake."

"Showing me what he had crossed out, the Rebbe concluded, "Since the entire book is based on a mistake, then the entire theory is false."

"The Rebbe made pencil markings throughout my second book as well, telling me that the premise of my theory was contradicted by a particular Gemara. I tried to defend my theory but when he explained the Gemara to me I realized that the Gemara was correct, rendering my second book worthless as well.

"I left the room shocked and embarrassed. In my mind I tried to defend my opinions but the more I thought about what the Alter Rebbe had said, the more I realized that he was right. I was amazed that none of the great scholars of Europe had noticed my mistakes.

"Needless to say, the books were no longer of any use so I tossed them into the fire. And now I'm left with nothing."

THE STUDY PARTNER

Chaim's shoulders hunched as he sighed audibly. Reb Moshe watched him for a moment and then broke the silence.

"So what will you do now?"

"I wish I could speak with the great Rabbi once more."

"Do you want to learn with him?"

Chaim looked Reb Moshe in the eye. "That would be the greatest thing to ever happen to me."

Reb Moshe assured him that he would do all he could to arrange a study session with the Alter Rebbe, and in fact, when he told the Alter Rebbe the young man's story, the Alter Rebbe agreed to learn with him.

The Alter Rebbe's son, the Mittlerer Rebbe, heard about the special study sessions and asked to join, but his father refused him, promising him that he would understand everything in seven weeks.

Seven weeks later, Chaim fell ill and passed away shortly thereafter.

A COMPLETE TESHUVAH

The Alter Rebbe then explained what had happened:

This man's Neshoma was a Gilgul of Reb Eliezer Ben Durdaya, which had already come back to this world a number of times. Sadly, however, each time, the person was frum in his younger years but rebelled as he grew older, requiring the Neshoma to return to this world yet again.

"This time," said the Alter Rebbe, "when he came to me, I was determined not to let him go until I would be able to help his Neshoma achieve its proper Tikkun."

Afterwards, the Alter Rebbe gave the writings that he had learned with Chaim to the Mittlerer Rebbe, and based on these papers, the Mittlerer Rebbe wrote his famous sefer on Teshuvah – "Derech Chayim."² ■

1. Not his real name, but for the sake of the story we will call him Chaim.

2. See 'Pninei Hakeser' vol. 2 "Tikkun Hasholom"