

ARI BARAK

AND THE FREE-WILL PARADOX



SHAUL BEHR

PROLOGUE

The old rabbi lay propped up with pillows on his deathbed, smiling serenely. His children and several of his older grandchildren were gathered around. Tears glistened in their eyes. Tears of laughter.

“Abba¹, you really are unbelievable,” wheezed Gavriel, his eldest son, recovering long enough from his conniptions to speak. He himself was in his late sixties. “One might think that when a nonagenarian *gadol hador*² passes away, he might do it gracefully, with gravitas and maybe some deep wisdom in his parting words. But you’ve done nothing but have us splitting our sides for the last half hour!”

“Good,” pronounced the old man in a creaky voice. “If there should be anything that you will remember me by, it’s that I was never too old to have a sense of humor.”

“But Abba,” protested his daughter Avigail, “you should rest! Aren’t you in pain? Can’t I give you some painkillers?”

“Of course I’m in pain!” replied her father. “The cancer is consuming me. I can feel the *Beis Din shel Maala*³ calling me. But you think I should spend my last few minutes in this world drugged out, unable to feel, think, or be present with those I

¹ Daddy.

² Literally, “a Great One of the generation,” a term reserved for only the most senior, learned and saintly Rabbis.

³ The Heavenly Court, which judges a person after his death.

love? *Chas veshalom*⁴! The pain is temporary!” He winced. “But this time now is irreplaceable!”

He turned to another of his sons. “Speaking of which, Uriel, has the doctor arrived yet? I need to speak to him.”

“I’ll check, Abba.” He shuffled over to the door and poked his head outside, then called back in. “Yes, Abba, he’s here. Shall I bring him in?”

“No, I think he’s quite capable of walking in by himself,” called back the old rabbi drily. His offspring burst out laughing again, several wiping their eyes as the uproar died down.

In walked a thin, neat man of around sixty. He surveyed the gathering with a wry smile. “Well, this certainly is the most cheerful farewell I’ve ever seen. But laughter is the best medicine, after all, isn’t it? Rebbe⁵, you sent for me?”

“Yes, Doctor, I did. I have something important to tell you that is for your ears only.”

A curious and awkward silence descended over the room. The old man looked around at his family. “I’m sorry, am I slurring my speech? I said, what I have to say now is for the doctor’s ears only. Go on, now.” He motioned feebly with his hand to usher everyone out.

“But...Abba...” protested Gavriel.

“Oh, *feh*, don’t worry.” He waved dismissively. “I’ll keep myself alive until you get back. Trust me, you’ll get your chance

⁴ Heaven forbid!

⁵ Rebbe is a term used to address one’s personal teacher, as distinct from rabbi, which is a more general, objective term.

to say good-bye. But now I must have private words with the doctor.”

Reluctantly, his offspring trudged out of the room and closed the door behind themselves. The doctor sat himself in an upright chair near the head of the bed.

“I knew you would come,” said the aged rabbi.

“It was fortunate that I was able to be here now. I just got back from speaking at a conference in London, and only have a day at home now before the next one in Singapore.”

“And yet, I knew with complete certainty that I would see you again before I die. I cannot *allow* myself to die yet. Not until I have entrusted you with a sacred mission.”

The doctor leaned closer, brows furrowed. “A sacred mission, Rebbe?”

“Yes. I could be dramatic and say the whole world depends on it. But it doesn’t matter what I say, because I know you will do it anyway. And, all going well, you could even be back here before I shuffle off this mortal coil, to tell me you succeeded. But even if not, I know you will succeed.”

“Thank you for your confidence in me, Rebbe—I *think*.” The doctor raised an eyebrow. “What is this mission?”

“I wrote it down for you. Look in the top drawer of my bedside table. There’s an envelope there, addressed to you.”

The doctor obediently opened the drawer and found the envelope. He tore it open and scanned the note inside. As he read it, he blanched. His eyes widened in disbelief, and his jaw dropped.

“Rebbe...are you...*serious*? This is...quite, ah...how shall I say it? *Unexpected?*”

“Much of the time, my dear Doctor, I am not too serious. My cancer is very serious, so I do have to counterbalance it. But on this occasion, I am *dead* serious. Which is appropriate for someone who is soon to be seriously dead.”

The doctor shook his head, blinking, breathing deeply, coming to terms with his task and all it entailed. After about half a minute of reflection, he looked the dying man in the eyes. “Rebbe...you never told me...”

The old man nodded weakly, a smile playing on his lips. “It wasn’t necessary before. But it is true, and now you know what you have to do.”

“My wife...” the doctor mumbled, still in shock.

“You need to do this alone,” instructed the rabbi. “Mostly. The professor will help you as necessary. Don’t worry about your wife; she won’t miss you. You’ll be back within the hour, anyway, possibly sooner, depending on how good your aim is.” He gave a conspiratorial wink, then winced involuntarily in pain.

The doctor took a deep breath, composed himself, and stood up. “Of course I will do it, Rebbe. Right away.”

The old man’s face lit up. “Good man. I knew you would.”

“Apparently so,” replied the doctor drily.

“One more thing,” said the rabbi. “Please give me that little notepad and a pen.”

The doctor obeyed, holding the notepad upright in the old man's lap with one hand, and helping him grip the pen in the other. With limp movements, the dying rabbi scrawled a sentence on the pad, then tore off the page and handed it to the doctor with a mischievous smile.

The doctor accepted it with a raised eyebrow. "I could have made one myself, you know."

"I know," said the rabbi with a twinkle in his eye. "But I couldn't resist. By the time you get back you'll understand why."

"All right, I'll take your word for it," replied the doctor, folding the note along with his instructions and tucking them into his pocket. He turned as if to leave, then paused for a couple of seconds, took a deep breath and turned back. "Rebbe, this is an unbelievable honor for me. Of all your *talmidim*⁶, why me? I'm certainly not the biggest *talmid chacham*⁷..."

The rabbi smiled a knowing smile, but did not reply.

"Of course," said his student, divining the answer himself. "It has to be me. I understand. Well then, farewell for now. And thank you—for *everything*."

"No," said the old man. "Thank *you*. What you are about to do means my *life* to me."

⁶ Students.

⁷ Eminent student.

He held out his hand. As the doctor took it, the old man pulled him with surprising strength into a tight embrace. He only released his grip when the pain from his body forced him.

Without another word, the doctor bowed his head, then turned and strode purposefully from the room.

1. MEET ARI

Ticktock, ticktock.

It was an old-fashioned, wind-up pendulum clock mounted on the wall opposite him. Ari knew it well from his previous visits to Rabbi Kahn. It was strategically positioned there, Ari figured, opposite the chair outside the principal's office, relentlessly ticking away. There were no books laid out for people to read, neither religious nor secular, much less any magazines. *It's because he wants you to have nothing else to distract you from reflecting on why you've been "invited" here*, he thought. *Which is, of course, why he always makes you wait at least five minutes before he opens the door.* The only other decorations in the waiting area were a few portraits of great rabbis: Rav⁸ Moshe Feinstein, Rav Aharon Kotler, the Chazon Ish, and several other severe-looking men with great white beards whom Ari did not recognize. He was mildly interested to know who they were, but somehow, whenever the circumstances led to him being in this section of the yeshiva⁹, it never seemed appropriate to ask. *Would they have approved? As eighty-year-old men, probably not*, reflected Ari. *But nobody ever tells the stories of what they did when they were seventeen...*

⁸ "Rav" is a shortened form of "Rabbi"

⁹ A yeshiva is an institution of Jewish religious learning, where students study many sacred texts, primarily Gemara (Babylonian Talmud), but also Chumash (the Five Books of Moses), Nach (the remaining 19 books of scripture), and a host of commentaries written throughout the ages.

Ari looked down at his hands and forearms, which had several fresh scratches over the old ones. He was a fairly ordinary-looking teenager: dark-haired and swarthy-skinned, slightly below average height, and slightly more than averagely unkempt. And he had a small rip in the knee of his trousers, which he was pretty sure hadn't been there that morning.

He heard Rabbi Kahn's footsteps approaching the door, and stood respectfully as he heard the handle turn. The principal arched his eyebrows and gave him a smile that was halfway between formal and amused.

"Ari Barak. *Such* a pleasure to see you again. Please, come inside and take a seat."

Ari tried to appear nonchalant as he obeyed, forcing a pleasant smile, though he felt his palms becoming slightly clammy. He sat in the ball-and-claw chair facing Rabbi Kahn across the desk and waited for the invitation to speak.

Rabbi Kahn was smooth, Ari had to admit. He never lost his temper, never raised his voice. And he always had this way of drawing you to say things that you swore you wouldn't let him make you say.

"So, Ari," said the principal in his smooth, even tones. "Would you care to give me your version of events?"

Ari took a breath. "Okay, well it was like this. So...at recess we're playing a game of soccer with Akiva Milstein's ball. And Yo—" He caught himself before revealing the name. "And *someone* takes a power shot at goal. Only he *totally* slices it up into the big oak tree next to the building, like *way* up into the branches above the roof. So—"

“Pardon me interrupting,” said Rabbi Kahn, steepling his fingers, “but specifically which section of the roof are we talking about? The low part on the side, which is only one floor up, or the section above the third-floor dormitories, which is, oh, about thirty feet above ground level?”

“Yeah, that part. The high part. Like I said, he totally skied it.”

“Thank you for clarifying. Do proceed with your account.”

“So anyway, Akiva gets pretty upset with...with the guy who kicked it, and tells him that he has to buy him a new ball, and the other guy is like, ‘No way! You knew the risks when you let everyone play with your ball, and anyway the ball wasn’t new’... And they start getting really mad at each other, and everyone else is taking sides, and it’s starting to get ugly. So...I look up at where the ball went, and I see the tree’s got nice big branches and lots of space to move, so I figure I can solve the problem for everyone.” Ari paused for the principal to take this in.

“So...you decided to climb the tree?”

“Yes, Rabbi.”

“The tree, which overhangs a roof of the building, which stands thirty feet above a brick-paved driveway.”

“Yes, Rabbi.”

“I see. Please continue.”

“So I start climbing the tree, and at first nobody notices ’coz they’re all arguing, but then someone shouts, ‘Hey, look at Ari!’ So at least they stop arguing, and they all come to the bottom of the tree.”

“It is my understanding,” interjected Rabbi Kahn, “that they attempted to dissuade you from continuing.”

“Maybe.” Ari shrugged. “To be honest, I couldn’t hear what they were saying. I was mostly thinking about which branch I was gonna hold on to next. Hyper-focus, you know. Comes with the Ritalin.” He grinned. The principal’s expression remained impassive. “So...anyway, I get up to the branch where the ball is stuck. It’s quite a thick branch, but I’m not sure it’ll take my weight. I’m standing on a branch lower down, and the branch with the ball is just about my chest height. So I figure I’ll shake the ball out. So I shake, but it’s not enough to dislodge the ball. And then I shake harder, and the ball starts to move, and just then I feel the branch under my feet give a big *CRACK!* And I feel it start to give way. So I quickly pull myself up to the branch I’m holding—the one where the ball is—and I’m hanging on there with my arms, and my legs are just kind of swinging underneath me...”

Rabbi Kahn grimaced and rested his forehead on his right hand, covering his eyes.

“Rabbi, are you feeling okay? Can I get you some water or something?”

The principal looked up sharply and scanned the face of the young man sitting before him. But there was no mockery there, only earnest concern. He reflected on this for a few moments, then replied, “No, no, I’m fine. Please carry on with your story.”

“Okay,” said Ari. “So I swing my legs up onto that branch, and it seems to be holding my weight, so I take my bearings and I look down the branch, and I see the ball is still there, about six

feet away from me. Now I'm not gonna try shaking this branch again now that I'm lying on it. So slowly, slowly I start crawling down the branch, no sudden moves, but I can feel it's starting to bend a little under my weight. And I'm still about three feet away. So I think, how am I going to reach that ball now? And then I look at the branch I'm holding onto, and there's a long, thin branch coming off it, must be a good seven feet long. So I break off that branch and reach out and poke the ball so that it falls down.

"Next thing, I hear this crazy noise, and a whole bunch of crows come flying up past me. I guess the ball must have surprised them when it fell. And one of them flaps its wings right in my face, and I managed to protect my eyes with my hands, but I lost my balance and I slipped around the branch, so now I'm like hanging upside down with my legs crossed around the branch, and... Rabbi, are you sure you're okay?"

"Actually, I think after all I *would* like a glass of water, please."

Ari bounced up and bolted to the water cooler down the hall, returning a minute later with a tall drink. Rabbi Kahn drank down half the glass, mopped his brow with a tissue, and motioned for Ari to continue.

"So there I am hanging from this branch and thinking what to do next. I could pull myself back up to the branch, but I feel like this branch is sagging, and I'm not sure this is the best way for me to get back down. Then I look in the other direction towards the building, and I remember the rope that's tied to the window bars."

Rabbi Kahn held up his hand to signal Ari to stop. He took a few moments to collect his breath, then whispered,

“Why...pray tell...was there a *rope* tied to the third-floor dormitory window bars?”

Now Ari blushed slightly. “I...I use it for climbing practice. I know I shouldn’t, ’coz sometimes it leaves muddy footprints on the outer wall, but you can’t see it from far ’coz it’s mostly hidden by the tree, and the rain always washes it away, so I figure it’s not causing any real damage...”

“I see,” said Rabbi Kahn.

“So anyway, I know the rope is there, and I’m still holding onto the stick—you know, the long one I used to push the ball down—and I figure the stick is just long enough to snag the rope and bring it up to me.”

“Bring it...*up* to you?”

“Yeah, I was above the level of the window. So I reach out with the stick, but it’s *just* out of my reach. So I shimmy just a little bit further down the branch, and that makes it sag a little more, which makes me even closer to the rope, and now I reach out with the stick, and I just manage to hook the rope and slowly, slowly I pull it up towards me. So I get the rope in my hands and loop it around my wrist, and then I let go of the branch with my feet so I can swing down towards the wall. And...”—he swallowed nervously—“and that’s how I broke the window.”

“The...the window?” stammered Rabbi Kahn.

“Yeah. I made a mistake judging how much slack to give the rope. I thought I would catch myself with my feet on the wall, but instead I swung straight into the window, and my foot went through it.”

“But...the window on the second floor also has bars on it. How did your foot go through the bars?”

“No, no, not the second floor; the *first* floor. That window doesn't have bars. I was aiming to rappel off the wall below the second-floor window, but I gave myself too much slack, and that's why I went through the first-floor window. I'm really sorry about that, and I'll pay for it... I don't have much of my own money, but I—”

Rabbi Kahn raised his hand again, shaking his head. “Just... back up a few steps, okay? I'm not an expert at geometry, but if your seven-foot stick was long enough to hook a rope from the third-floor window...and you swung down to reach the first floor...then you must have fallen *straight down* a few yards before the rope became taut and swung you back towards the wall. Or am I missing something?”

“Yeah, but it wasn't exactly free fall. The leaves and branches slowed me down a bit, and I was kinda counting on that.”

Ari cocked his head a little. “Rabbi, you're looking kinda pale. Are you okay?”

Rabbi Kahn was, indeed, looking several shades lighter than usual. His mouth was hanging slightly open, and his eyes, while physically directed at Ari, were unfocused.

“Rabbi?”

“Yes?”

“Everything okay?”

“Hm? Oh...yes...”

“Did you want to ask me anything else?”

“No...that’s all... Thank you very much.”

Ari stood up and moved to the door. As he turned the handle, he looked back at Rabbi Kahn, who was finishing his glass of water and fumbling for another tissue.

“Rabbi?”

“Mm-hm?”

“Well... I was just wondering... I thought that was why you called me here, and you didn’t ask me about it...”

“About what?”

“About the S-bend, the shoe, and the pot of spaghetti Bolognese that Mr. Colman was cooking for the yeshiva’s lunch.”

Rabbi Kahn looked blankly at Ari for a few seconds, then spoke. “No, Ari, that will be all, thank you.”

2. ANOTHER MEETING WITH RABBI KAHN

“Tuck in your shirt, Elchanan!” snapped Zahava. “Your tie is crooked! And my goodness! When’s the last time you dusted your hat?”

Elchanan straightened out his clothes and started picking the cat hair off his black fedora, simply allowing the scolding to wash over him.

“Honestly, did you forget that this is the *principal* of the yeshiva we’re going to see? What kind of an impression are you trying to make on him?”

Elchanan said nothing as he continued flicking bits of dust off his hat.

Zahava, clearly unsatisfied with Elchanan’s appearance even after his attempts to correct it, moved in on him, tucking here, pulling there, straightening, prodding, and pushing, until finally she stepped back with an approving eye. “Much better. Now let’s go.”

They drove to the yeshiva, Elchanan sitting in moody silence while Zahava prattled on about the importance of this meeting and how they needed to make the best impression possible. Every now and then, Zahava would prompt him with, “You do understand that, don’t you, Elchanan?” or “You agree, right?” which was his cue to grunt something that could be interpreted as a yes, which was good enough for Zahava to move on to her next diatribe.

Eventually they arrived at their destination and parked outside the office building. They exited the car and walked toward the double doors, Zahava still hissing last-minute instructions in Elchanan's ear. The receptionist greeted them and showed them to the waiting room outside Rabbi Kahn's office.

"Remember, sit straight up in your chair, smile lots, and let me do the talking. Okay, you got that, Elchanan? Ssh—here he comes!"

They stood up as Rabbi Kahn opened his office door and smiled warmly at them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Barak! Thank you so much for coming in this morning. Please, come in! Can I get you something to drink?"

"Thank you," beamed Zahava, with what she hoped was a winning smile. "Water will be fine for us."

Elchanan spoke for the first time in nearly an hour. "Do you have Turkish coffee? That would—"

His brief foray into speech was cut short by a withering glare from his wife, angled carefully so that it was out of Rabbi Kahn's view. But Rabbi Kahn was already obliging. "Absolutely!" he exclaimed, and called cheerily down the hall to his secretary. "Faigie, please could you arrange a cup of Turkish coffee and two glasses of water?" He ushered them into the chairs facing his desk, then seated himself facing them. He took a deep breath for what he was sure would be a difficult discussion.

"So, as you know, I wanted to talk to you about Ari."

“Yes,” gushed Zahava, taking the gap, “he’s always telling us how much he *loves* the yeshiva, and what good *friends* he has, and how much *Torah* he’s learning, and how much he *enjoys* his classes, and he’s *growing* so much and *Baruch Hashem*¹⁰, he’s a *good* boy, and I’m sure all his teachers *love* him, right, Rabbi Kahn?”

“Well, yes,” said the principal, guardedly, “he certainly has a lot of good things going for him—”

“Absolutely!” Mrs. Barak pronounced triumphantly. “A *wonderful* boy he is!” She launched into another diatribe singing the praises of her son, who, by her account, would surely and inevitably become a great *talmid chacham*, a wonderful husband and father, and a credit to the Jewish people.

Rabbi Kahn at first thought he might just wait her out, consciously closing his body language to hint that he was waiting to speak, but as the drinks came in (Elchanan started drinking his coffee unperturbed, as if this was completely routine), she showed no sign of letting up. A different course of action was called for. He suddenly extended his right hand in the universal sign for “stop!” Mrs. Barak, surprised at being interrupted, fell silent.

“Mrs. Barak, I am sorry to interrupt; your son is undoubtedly talented and has a heart of gold. My concern, however,” he interjected quickly before she could segue from vigorous nodding into yet another soliloquy of praise to her son, “my concern is that this might not be the right yeshiva for him.”

¹⁰ Thank God.

Zahava was mortified. “What? How can that be? He’s—”

“He’s broken about half the yeshiva rules and another host of rules we hadn’t even thought of making because we never thought we’d have to.”

“Like what?” challenged Zahava, bristling.

“Did he tell you about the incident with the ball in the oak tree last week?”

“Oh, that!” smiled Zahava, with a forced, high-pitched laugh. “He’s such an *adventurous* and *fearless* boy, *Baruch Hashem!*”

“I would venture to say that *fear* would have been a very *appropriate* response to the idea of pulling a soccer ball out of the top of a three-story oak tree. But let’s leave that aside. In class his teachers are having a very hard time working with him. Rabbi Daniels, his homeroom rebbe, describes him as ‘a rubber ball to which the law of conservation of momentum does not apply’. Mr. Jackson—his English teacher—praises his creativity as ‘something not of this universe,’ yet wishes Ari could spend more time in *this* universe. And Dr. Foxman, the science teacher, has been unable to get Ari to follow instructions and control his urge to experiment with the interactions of whatever compounds he sees on the lab shelf, which frequently results in the room being evacuated under clouds of billowing purple or yellow smoke, and on one occasion resulted in a call to the fire department. And then...there was the incident with the S-bend, the shoe, and the spaghetti Bolognese... None of this is malicious, I am certain, but I just do not think this is the right place for him.”

Zahava blanched. “But... but then what can we *do* with him? He’s already been expelled from so many other yeshivos! Where can he go?”

Rabbi Kahn sighed with some relief as he discerned the conversation at last moving onto his prepared turf. “Fortunately, I have done some research, and I believe I have found a place that will be much more appropriate to his...*energy* level.”

“Where is it? Here in Monsey¹¹?”

“No. It’s in *Eretz Yisrael*¹². Ramat Beit Shemesh, to be exact.”

Zahava’s face dropped in horror. “What? You want me to send away my little Ari to another *country*? Unthinkable! I won’t have it! It’s absurd!”

As she drew her breath to begin a fresh tirade, Elchanan, who had distractedly been sipping his coffee throughout the exchange, clunked down his now-empty cup and spoke emphatically. “It’s a great idea.”

Zahava, for the first time, was speechless. She gaped in shock at her husband, either at the fact that he had had the temerity to speak, or worse, to venture an independent opinion.

Elchanan continued. “I think it’ll be good for him to get out of the house. Take some responsibility for himself. He’s seventeen, already, *yalla*, let him go and be his own person.”

¹¹ Monsey, New York, is a town with a very large Jewish population.

¹² The Land of Israel

“My thoughts exactly,” said Rabbi Kahn, grateful to have an ally in the discussion.

“But...but what if they don’t have good beds?” protested Zahava. “And what if they don’t feed him properly?”

“*Fehl!*” Elchanan dismissed this with a flap of his hand. “He’s a *boy*. He could sleep on a straw mat on the floor if he had to. And if you’re worried about food, he can go to my sister Orna for Shabbat¹³; she’ll fatten him up nicely with some good Moroccan food. She’ll be excited to have him. So *nu*, Rabbi, tell us about this yeshiva. And what makes you think they’ll take our ADHD bouncing ball of a son?”

“Well, it’s a curious thing. I hadn’t heard of it before last week,” admitted Rabbi Kahn, “but out of the blue, I got a call from the Rosh Yeshiva¹⁴. He said he’s running a yeshiva for—how did he put it?—‘Students gifted with energy and creativity,’ I think. I immediately thought of Ari and mentioned him to the Rosh Yeshiva. I daresay, he actually sounded *excited* to have him. He said he’s just the kind of boy that they want in the yeshiva. So he’s practically accepted already.”

“What’s the name of this yeshiva, then?”

“Interesting name: *Yeshivas Nekudas Habechira*¹⁵. The Rosh Yeshiva is Rabbi Tuvia White. He was most charming on the phone, and his yeshiva sounds like a wonderful place for Ari.”

¹³ The Sabbath day (Friday night/Saturday).

¹⁴ The head of the yeshiva.

¹⁵ The Yeshiva of The Free Will Point.

“Because it’s not *here?*” asked Elchanan slyly, head slightly cocked to the side. Rabbi Kahn flushed and seemed about to protest, but Elchanan flapped his hand dismissively again, continuing with disarming frankness. “Don’t be embarrassed; I completely agree with you. The further away that boy is from here, the better he’ll do. Now give me this Rabbi White’s details, and we’ll take it from here.”

3. WELCOME TO ISRAEL

Ari was in a good mood as he disembarked from the plane at Ben Gurion Airport. It had been a pleasant flight, as flights go; he had found himself with an aisle and a window seat to himself, on what was otherwise a full flight. It hadn't started that way, to be honest; he had been given the window seat next to a gentleman in his sixties. They had started out well enough, Ari immediately introducing himself to the man, Mr. Max Jacobson. He was going to visit his children and grandchildren who had made *aliya* to Ramat Beit Shemesh several years ago.

“Really?” Ari had exclaimed. “I’m also going there, to yeshiva! Is it nice?”

So Mr. Jacobson had told him about the town and about the area, and Ari had listened with great interest, asking more and more questions. And telling stories of his own exploits at yeshiva and about his mom and dad and his brothers and sisters. Without his mother to stop him, Ari had ordered and consumed four cups of Coca-Cola from the drinks cart, and during the course of the conversation he had climbed over Mr. Jacobson five or six times to get to and from the facilities. Each time on his return, he had resumed the conversation from where they had left off with undiminished gusto, despite Mr. Jacobson’s decreasing participation and increasing determination to feign sleep, watch a movie, or read the in-flight magazine, or the emergency safety card. On Ari’s seventh return from the toilets, Mr. Jacobson was nowhere to be found. After about half an hour waiting for his co-passenger, he had asked a flight attendant if everything was

okay with Mr. Jacobson; she replied that he was fine and was now sitting in business class, and no, it would *not* be all right for Ari to go and sit with him for a bit so they could continue their conversation.

Ari had been disappointed, but it did come with the upside of having two seats to himself. So he had *davened*¹⁶ *Maariv*¹⁷ in his seat, popped some melatonin pills, and curled up to sleep with his legs stretched out, appreciating one of the advantages of being shorter than average.

He had been woken by the cabin lights going on and the crew serving breakfast. After visiting the bathroom and doing *netilas yadayim*¹⁸, he had found his way back to his seat blocked by the breakfast cart. Quickly noticing that the two people in the aisle seats on the right-hand side of the cart were engaged in conversation with the people to their respective right sides, and to the horror of the stewardesses, Ari had vaulted onto the arm rest of the front seat, hopped over to the arm rest of the one behind and deftly alighted behind the cart, to find his double-wrapped hot breakfast waiting on his tray table.

Not wanting to eat before *davening*, Ari had pulled out his *tefillin*¹⁹ from his overnight bag, then looking at the flight map,

¹⁶ Prayed.

¹⁷ Evening prayer service.

¹⁸ Ritual washing of hands, required upon waking up, or before eating bread.

¹⁹ Black leather boxes containing parchments scribed with certain sections of the Torah, tied with leather straps onto the arm and head, usually worn by men during morning prayers. Some people translate this as “phylacteries,” though it is unclear how this translation helps

realized with a sickening lurch in his stomach that they were now flying over Greece, and he had missed *sof zman k'rias shm'a*²⁰; it was already time for *mincha*²¹.

Darn time zone squish, he thought. *Oh, well, learn for next time.*

Now, sauntering through the corridor leading from the plane, Ari paused at the glass windows looking down on the departure lounge. The fountains were doing some really cool stuff, dropping sheets of water in different shapes from the ceiling to the pool beneath. Then the word SHALOM appeared in the droplets, first in Hebrew, then in English.

Niiice, thought Ari, then continued down the ramp toward passport control. His progress through passport control and luggage retrieval was uneventful; passing through the green customs channel, he wondered who would be there to meet him.

He didn't have to wonder long. As he came through the double doors into the arrivals hall, his attention was immediately drawn to a man standing behind the barrier. The reason his attention was thus drawn was the same as the reason why the collective gazes of most other people in the arrivals hall were transfixed on this man. He was simply *enormous*, almost too big to be allowed. Easily seven and a half feet tall, maybe eight. And powerfully muscular. Which is probably why

anyone, because anybody who doesn't know what tefillin are doesn't know what phylacteries are, either.

²⁰ The time limit for reciting the *Sh'ma* (Deut. 6:4-9), a proclamation of faith required to be said every morning and evening.

²¹ Afternoon prayer service.

nobody dared snicker or even whisper any kind of witty comment about his appearance. He was wearing matching pants and tunic that seemed to be made of cheesecloth. On his feet were simple leather thong sandals, and perched almost comically atop his completely hairless head was a white knitted *kippa*²² with a pom-pom on top. His ice-blue eyes were fixed impassively on the doors through which Ari had just passed. And in his left hand, he held up a huge cardboard sign with the name ARI BARAK written in permanent marker.

With some apprehension, Ari approached the giant. The top of Ari's head came just about level with his chest; the huge man continued staring over Ari at the doors, not noticing the teenager standing in front of him.

Ari cleared his suddenly parched throat. "Excuse me," he ventured cautiously. The giant noticed him for the first time and looked down at him with those unsettlingly pale-blue eyes. "I'm Ari Barak."

The giant took this in for a second, then pointed his right hand at Ari's chest. Ari looked first at the enormous finger, which was nearly as thick as his own wrist, then followed the line it was pointing, at his shirt pocket, where his passport was sticking out.

"Oh, you want to see my passport? Sure, here you go!" The gigantic hand accepted the passport and flipped to the photo page, which the inscrutable eyes scanned and compared with the boy before them. With a curt nod, the giant wordlessly returned Ari's passport, then hoisted his fully laden suitcases off the cart as if they were empty boxes, and turned toward the

²² Skullcap.

exit with great, lumbering strides. Ari was half running to keep up with him as the hulking figure crossed the road and, after briefly stopping at a pay station, made for the car park. Soon he stopped next to—Ari couldn't believe his eyes—a red BMW two-seater sports vehicle.

“No way!” Ari exclaimed. “This is your car?”

The giant did not react. He set Ari's bags down on the sidewalk, then positioned himself behind the trunk of the sports car. He leaned over the trunk, reached his enormous arms in a kind of embrace around the back of the car, and gripping it firmly, he lifted it clear into the air. Ari goggled as the giant pivoted and staggered about twenty meters over to a vacant parking space, and gently lowered the BMW into the space. He then returned to where Ari was standing, and producing a key from his pants pocket, opened the cargo doors of an old and somewhat white Renault delivery van that had, until recently, been parked in by the BMW. He deposited Ari's suitcases in the back of the van, closed the cargo doors, and got into the driver's seat. Throughout this exercise, he hadn't even broken a sweat.

Ari was still rooted to the spot, his brain frantically trying to process what he had just seen. The giant leaned out the driver's window, pointed at him, then at the passenger seat. Ari, still in a daze, complied with the obvious nonverbal command.

As Ari sat down in the car and closed the door, the giant started the engine, turned to him and signaled him to fasten his seat belt. Ari hurriedly complied; this was clearly not someone to mess with. The giant maneuvered the van out of the parking space and started driving away from the airport building.

As Ari's heart rate returned more or less to normal, he started taking in his surroundings. For one thing, he noticed that the driver's seat of the van had clearly been modified to allow this particular driver to fit between the steering wheel and the back of the chair. It was sitting just about where the rear seat of a similar vehicle would have been. Then he saw the key chain dangling from the ignition. There was a decorative nameplate hanging from the chain, with ornate cursive writing spelling out the name "Igor" in white on a red background.

Ari nearly laughed, then remembered the size and power of the person who appeared to be named Igor, and discreetly decided against testing whether he had a sense of humor. Instead, he ventured an innocent question.

"Igor? Is that your name?"

The giant, his eyes never flinching from the road, gave a small, curt nod. Ari followed his natural inclination to make conversation.

"Where are you from? Russia?"

Igor said nothing and simply kept driving.

"Just a guess, because Igor is a Russian kind of name, so I figured you might be from Russia. How long have you been in Israel?"

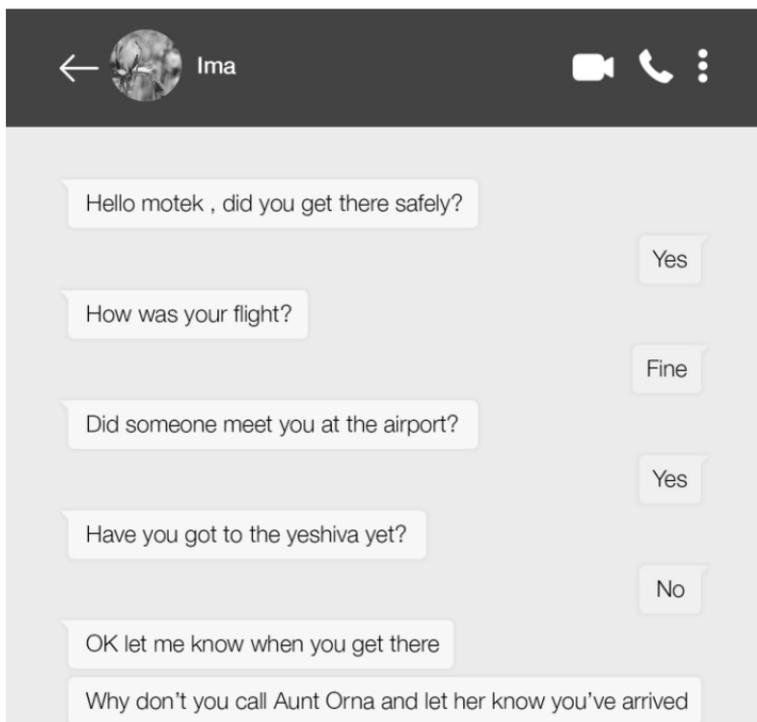
Still no response.

Not much of a talker, is he? thought Ari. Then he noticed a wide, skin-colored Band-Aid stuck across Igor's forehead. *Brain surgery? Maybe the speech part of his brain doesn't work so well? Either way, not much point trying to make conversation...*

“Would you mind if I listen to some music on the radio?”

Igor responded simply by stabbing the power button of the radio, still never taking his eyes off the road. The powerful opening chords of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony thundered through the sound system. Ari had hardly ever listened to classical music, but somehow he didn’t feel like asking to change to something more modern.

Just then his cell phone played its “message received” tone, reminding him that his parents had paid for him to get a roaming SIM so that he could keep in touch with them. He opened his messaging app.



Remember to wish her mazal tov for Avishai's barmitzvah

And when you go to her for Shabbat, make sure you get her a nice bottle of wine

Take some melatonin tonight so you can sleep properly from the jet lag

And try not to climb to the roof of the yeshiva on the first day

And stay out of trouble

I don't want to hear you've been expelled in the first week

Not the second week either

Ari sat back and watched the advice and admonitions pinging through, then silenced his phone and put it back in his pocket. He took in the scenery passing by them as they drove: in the distance, the cement factory of Ramla, with its playground-like structures of tubes and slides; the elevated railway bridge near Modi'in; the rolling green hills as they approached Latrun and the Jerusalem district. All the time, Igor drove with single-minded focus. So focused was he, it seemed to Ari that he was almost of one mind with the van. In fact, Ari slowly grew aware, Igor hardly seemed to touch the brakes. His timing of his acceleration and steering was such that he took every corner at the perfect speed, and even seemed to anticipate when drivers ahead of him were about to brake; he had already moved into another lane before they slowed. It was almost as if he were weaving through the afternoon traffic as an Olympic skier might weave through the slalom gates. All the time, his speedometer needle was practically glued to a hundred and ten kilometers per hour—exactly the speed limit.

“Look out!” Ari yelled, as a slow-moving Toyota suddenly changed lanes in front of them to overtake a truck, apparently without checking the side mirror.

Igor, impassive as ever, veered the van into the space vacated by the Toyota, overtook it on the right, and then cut back into the left lane between it and the truck.

Ari was wide-eyed, his heart palpitating. Igor looked for all the world as if nothing untoward had just happened.

They turned off the main highway toward Beit Shemesh, and continued without further incident. As they came into the southern suburbs of Beit Shemesh, Ari was struck by the number of construction cranes. Whole hilltops were being bulldozed and built up. It was onto a road leading to one of these hilltops that Igor turned. The asphalt turned to sand, and they bumped their way along through rows and rows of construction sites. Finally, Igor stopped the car outside a long, rectangular structure planted in the sand that looked like a forty-foot shipping container, only it had windows and a door. A lone electrical cable stretched from its roof to a nearby wooden pole.

Ari looked out his window in disbelief at the sign above the door, which stood in stark distinction from everything else about the structure, because it appeared to be new. It said, in plain sans-serif English and Hebrew fonts:

Yeshivas Nekudas Habechira

ישיבת נקודת הבחירה

4. ORIENTATION AT THE YESHIVA

Igor, in his no-nonsense way, climbed out, retrieved Ari's bags from the trunk, and made for the entrance of the building. Ari opened his door, climbed out of the van, and stood still, taking in his surroundings. Outside the air-conditioned vehicle, the air was hot, dusty, and dry. One good thing he could say about this place, though, was that the views were spectacular in all directions. In one direction he could see the more established neighborhoods of Ramat Beit Shemesh; in the other was a glorious panorama of the Emek Ha'Ela valley: rolling green hills with small settlements dotted here and there.

"Welcome, Ari!"

Ari turned back to the yeshiva to see a tall young man of about his own age striding toward him, grinning broadly. He had light-brown hair, dark eyes behind his thick glasses, and a pretty bad case of acne. He was wearing sneakers, denim jeans, and a light-green golf shirt. As he approached, he extended his right hand in greeting.

"I'm Howard. Howard Segal."

Ari shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Howard!" he said. "Are you also learning at this yeshiva?"

"Ya. I think we're going to be *chavrusos*²³. Come inside, man, it's hot enough to melt lead out here."

²³ Learning partners.

Ari agreed, and they walked together into the building. It was furnished with two small tables, a few plastic chairs, and thankfully, a very effective air-conditioning unit. On the back wall was a bookshelf loaded with *seforim*²⁴; Ari guessed this was the *beis midrash*²⁵. In one corner a water cooler stood next to a little wash basin. To his left was a door leading to a bathroom, to the right was another door from which Igor was just emerging. He was stooped over to keep his head from hitting the ceiling, and walked right past without acknowledging either of them. Bending down even lower, he ducked through the doorway, took one step to the side, and stood at attention, sentry-like, beside the entrance.

Ari looked at the strange sight of the hairless, blue-eyed giant in his odd cheesecloth garments, standing as stiff as a statue in the late afternoon heat.

“I don’t mean to be rude, or anything,” he ventured, “but is that guy okay? He never says anything, and now he’s standing out in the sun and not moving.”

Howard was pouring water from the cooler into a couple of disposable cups. “Ya, he seems okay enough. I think he’s mute, you know, can’t talk. Maybe a little simple. But dead useful to have him around.” He brought the water over to Ari, who gratefully accepted a cup.

“Maybe we should also offer him a drink?” suggested Ari.

²⁴ Religious texts.

²⁵ Study hall.

Howard shrugged. "I tried earlier this morning, took him a cup. He just stood there staring ahead like he is now, as if I hadn't said anything."

"You know, his name is Igor."

Howard laughed. "Don't be rude!" he chided. "Actually, I was thinking the same, he looks like he's come out of some monster movie, but I don't think we should *actually* call him that."

"No, no," said Ari, "his name really *is* Igor. Didn't you see his key ring?"

"No, you being serious? I didn't see any key ring. To tell you the truth, I was mostly looking at the road and trying to control my bodily functions every time he managed to avoid having an accident. And he didn't even blink. Never seen anyone drive like that before, like he was in a dream, but totally in control. Like the AI of an autonomous vehicle."

They sat down with their water at one of the tables.

"You've got a different accent," said Ari. "Where are you from?"

Howard laughed. "No man, *you're* the one with the funny accent. I speak *normally*. You must be from America; only Americans expect everyone else in the world to speak English like them. New York, right?"

Ari blushed slightly. "Well, yes and no. New York state, not New York City. I'm from Monsey. So where are you from, England?"

"Nope. Guess again."

Ari thought a few seconds. "Australia?"

"Tsk. Two strikes, as you would say. Lemme give you a clue. Here, have a snack." Howard picked up a small paper bag from the table containing some shriveled little pieces of... What was that? Meat?

"Thanks...uh... Is that beef jerky?"

Howard shook his head in mock horror. "*Jerky!*" he spat contemptuously. "This is the *real deal*—BILTONG!"

"Bull tongue?" said Ari, instinctively leaning back and screwing up his nose in disgust.

This was too much for Howard, who burst out with a hearty laugh. "*Ach*, no man! Not bull tongue! BILTONG! BILTONG! One of South Africa's greatest gifts to the world!"

Ari smiled. "So you're South African?"

Howard laughed again. "At last, you got it! And before you ask: no, I'm not black, I didn't ride to school on an elephant, and I don't know anyone from Ethiopia or Nigeria."

"Glad you told me; I was about to ask about the elephant."

Howard stopped laughing, and looked in disbelief at Ari. "Seriously?"

"Sure. We New Yorkers are all ignorant fools who think the Third World starts a few miles south of the Hudson." He winked at Howard, who lit up with another hearty laugh, and gave Ari a high five.

"You're all right, Ari; I think we're gonna get along just fine!"

They finished their drinks, and Howard stood up. “Come, let me show you where you’re sleeping.”

“Cool,” said Ari, and started moving toward the exit.

“Where are you going?” said Howard. “Our bedroom is here.” He gestured toward the door on the right side of the room.

Ari looked at Howard, scanning his face for signs of a joke in the making. He was serious. Without further comment, Ari followed Howard through the doorway into a small bedroom. There was just enough space in the room for a metal-framed double bunk bed and a two-door cupboard with two drawers below. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling. The window had heavy blue curtains partially obscuring a view of the Emek Ha’Ela valley. Ari’s bags were on the floor.

“The cupboard space is for us to share. You can have the top drawer. If it’s all the same to you, I’d like the bottom bunk,” said Howard.

“Top bunk suits me fine,” said Ari hesitantly, still coming to terms with the accommodation. This was several rungs down from his dorm in Monsey, but he didn’t want to say so, for fear of offending Howard.

“So tell me, Howard,” Ari began as he opened his suitcase and started unpacking into the little cupboard, “how do things work around here? What are we learning, what’s the food like, how many other people are learning here, and all that stuff?”

Howard shrugged. “Beats me. I just got here this morning.” Ari stopped in shock and stared at him. Howard continued. “Igor met me at the airport and brought me here. Rabbi White was here to meet me. He showed me the room and told me

you were coming this afternoon. Then he said he had to go out and do some stuff, so he went. The big guy brought me some lunch, which was really good, then he went to pick you up, and I've just been sitting here and reading since then. As far as I know, you and I are the only students in the yeshiva."

Ari let out a low whistle. "Holy red cow, I did *not* expect that."

"No? What did you expect?"

"I dunno... Something more like my old yeshiva. Big building, hundreds of students, big grounds, lots of trees, whatever. My parents just took me aside a couple of weeks ago and told me they'd decided that I needed to go to a different yeshiva in Israel. So I'm like, okay, whatever. I liked the old yeshiva, but I was excited to come to Israel, and they told me this place would be great for me. So here I am."

"So you've been to yeshiva before? This is my first time in yeshiva, so I didn't know what to expect."

"Really, you've never been to yeshiva before? But you must be like seventeen or eighteen? What were you doing till now?"

Howard shrugged. "I was just at a regular school. My family isn't *frum*²⁶ at all. They're not at all happy that I'm here."

"So how did you come to be here?"

"I was on a journey of discovery. I'll tell you more about that some other time. I felt I needed to find some place where I could go learn some Torah. There are a few yeshivos in Jo'burg, but I wanted to come to Israel, honestly 'coz I need

²⁶ Religious.

to get out of my parents' space. But I don't have much money of my own, and my folks aren't gonna pay for anything. So I asked my rabbi, and he checked into it and found this place and spoke to Rabbi White for me, and I'm hardly paying anything to be here. It's nothing like my bedroom at home, no maids, but if you knew the kind of arguments we keep getting into at home, plus the kitchen isn't even kosher... I'm telling you, I would take this *any* time."

Howard paused, then asked, "What about you Ari? You FFB²⁷?"

"Yeah," said Ari. "FFB for as far back as our family tree goes. My parents are originally from Israel, but they moved to America after they got married."

"So do your grandparents still live here?"

"No, three of them died, and my mom's mom is living with them in Monsey. My dad's sister still lives here, though, in Beit Shemesh, and I've got a couple other uncles and aunts around the country. I'm supposed to go to her for *Shabbos* some time. She'll kill me if I don't. Moroccans are very touchy about that kind of thing."

"Oh, you're Sefardi²⁸? So do you eat rice on Pesach²⁹?"

²⁷ Frum from Birth, i.e., born into a religious family.

²⁸ Literally, "Spanish;" usually used to refer to Jews descended from communities that lived under Muslim rule.

²⁹ Passover, when all leavened grain products are prohibited. Ashkenazim (Jews from communities that lived under Christian rule) generally do not eat rice or legumes either; most Sefardim do.

“Actually, no. Lots of Moroccans also do like the Ashkenazim when it comes to rice. But we don’t go crazy about stuff like corn and peanuts.”

“South Africans eat peanuts on Pesach, too. But hold on—just a minute ago you said you were going to your aunt for ‘*Shabbos*.’ Not ‘*Shabbat*.’ How come you use the Ashkenazi pronunciation?”

Ari smiled and shrugged. “I guess that’s what happens when you go to an Ashkenazi yeshiva. I’ve been ‘Ashkenized.’”

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and a voice called out, “Hello?”

Howard and Ari came out the bedroom, and in the doorway of the yeshiva stood an older man—sixty, perhaps. He was of average height, but very thin, with a close-cropped, salt-and-pepper beard that could have been painted on his face, it was so neat. He wore dark-gray pants and a white shirt, and his jacket was folded over his left arm. On seeing Ari, his face lit up.

“You must be Reb Ari!” He extended his right hand, and as Ari took it, the newcomer pulled him into a full hug. He was surprisingly strong. “So happy to have you here!” he exclaimed with a strong British accent that even Ari could identify. Then he released Ari and stood back, still beaming at him. “Welcome to Israel! And welcome to our yeshiva! I’m Rabbi White. Did Reb Howard show you your room?”

“Yes, Rabbi, thank you, I just started unpacking.” Ari was a little taken aback at Rabbi White’s use of the respectful title “Reb” for himself and Howard. His previous teachers had all

simply addressed him by his first name, or sometimes as Mr. Barak. And occasionally as “You, nutjob.”

“Excellent! Excellent!” continued Rabbi White. “Why don’t you take a break from that right now, though; we need to go for *mincha* and *maariv*. Come along, now.” He turned and led the way out the front door.

On the way out, he turned to Igor. “Could you take us to *shul*³⁰, please, Igor?” Igor gave his signature curt nod and lurched over to the driver’s seat of the Renault. Rabbi White took the front passenger seat and gestured for Ari and Howard to go in through the cargo door of the little van. Inside, Ari noticed that a little cushioned bench had been improvised in the back, bolted along the side wall of the car behind the passenger seat, with space for two. There were even seat belts installed. “Buckle up, gentlemen; the roads are bumpy here!” called Rabbi White cheerily.

He was right. For about five minutes they bumped and jolted along the dirt road until they reached asphalt again, then drove on for another minute or so until they reached a little building made from light construction material. They all climbed out of the van, except Igor; Rabbi White turned to him. “Please can you pick us up again in forty-five minutes? Thank you so much!”

Igor nodded again to acknowledge his instructions, then drove away. Ari wondered why Igor didn’t need to daven. *Perhaps he’s not Jewish? Mind you—how would he daven, if he can’t talk?*

³⁰ Synagogue.

They entered the shul and washed their hands. They were just starting *mincha*, and Ari started mumbling *Ashrei*³¹ before suddenly remembering that he had already davened *mincha* on the plane somewhere over Greece. Rabbi White noticed Ari stopping and looked at him, his face a question mark.

Ari whispered to him, “Already *davened* on the plane.”

Rabbi White nodded and picked a *sefer* off a nearby bookshelf. He handed it to Ari, motioning that he should read it while everyone else was *davening mincha*. Ari looked at the cover: *Derech Hashem—The Way of God*, by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. He nodded and found a chair and table at the back of the little *shul* where he sat down and opened the book as the *kehilla*³² was starting *amida*³³. He looked at the first page, then got distracted by someone in front of him who was gesticulating in intense concentration on his *Sh’moneh Esrei*. He looked back down again.

Bezzzt!

There was an ultraviolet insect-killing lamp hanging on the back wall behind him; it had just attracted and terminated a large fly.

Ari looked back at the *sefer*. The letters danced before his eyes on the page, not forming coherent words. *My Ritalin is wearing off*, he realized. *And my pills are in the yeshiva. Oh well, not much point in forcing the issue...*

³¹ A chapter of Psalms preceding the afternoon prayer service.

³² Community.

³³ Silent prayer, said while standing. Also called *sh’moneh esrei*.

He closed the book, got up as quietly as he could manage, and slipped out the back door of the *shul*. There was a small commercial center across the road to which he found himself drawn. The mouthwatering smell of a bakery, the sound of tired children whining at their overwhelmed mother, a hardware store that smelled of oiled metal, the sun was hanging low in the sky, and orange-pink clouds streaked across the sky. That would be a magnificent sunset, if only he could see it properly... He just needed somewhere high enough to be able to see it well...and there was the perfect spot! Just across the road, in that construction site.

He jogged over, slipped through a gap in the construction fence, and climbed up and up, until he could see the sunset to his satisfaction. It truly was spectacular—red, pink, orange, and gold—as the sun slowly sank down to the horizon.

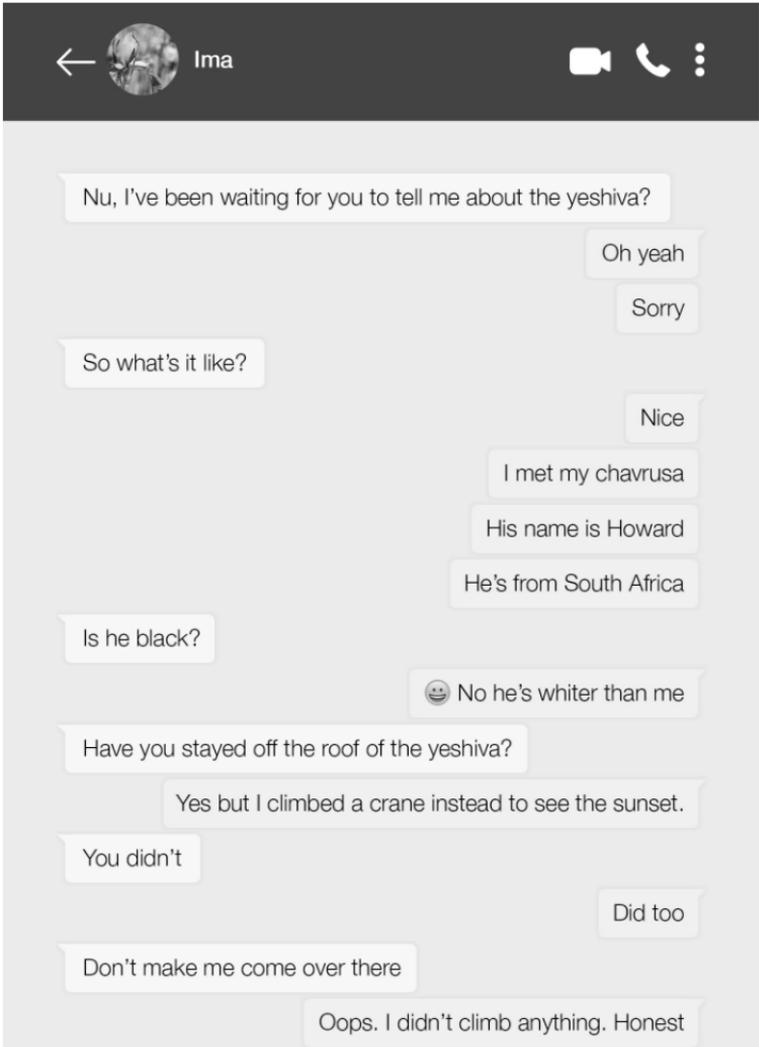
Just then he became aware of some commotion below him. Someone was yelling at him in Hebrew, which he understood, since his parents spoke Hebrew at home.

“Boy! What are you doing up there?! Get down immediately, before I call the police!”

Oh yeah, he thought. Perhaps they don't allow just anyone to climb up these cranes.

Ari clambered agilely back down the ladder, where a small crowd had gathered to see who or what was causing the disturbance. The man who had called him down was still shouting words like dangerous, reckless, and foolish at him. He mumbled a “Sorry, won't do it again,” and escaped back in the direction of the *shul*.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.



hmm

Gtg maariv

The *kehillah* was just finishing *mincha* as Ari returned. The copy of *Derech Hashem* was no longer on the table; he looked toward the shelf where it had come from and saw Rabbi White returning it. As Rabbi White turned from the shelf, Ari met his eyes, half expecting some expression of disapproval at his absence, but the Rosh Yeshiva just gave him a warm smile.

Between *mincha* and *maariv*, someone got up and gave a *devar Torah*³⁴ that Ari barely heard; his mind was buzzing with different thoughts. Howard was focusing hard, but eventually he seemed to give up, too. He turned to Ari and shrugged, mouthing, “I don’t understand Hebrew.” Ari smiled and stifled a laugh.

After a few minutes of Ari’s mind flitting from thought to thought, and Howard apparently sitting patiently doing nothing, the *devar Torah* finished, and they *davened maariv*. They left the *shul* and found Igor sitting waiting in the Renault for them. They climbed back into their seats, and Igor trundled them back to the yeshiva. As they were disembarking, Rabbi White again gave Igor instructions. “Igor, be a good chap and prepare us some dinner, please. Bread, roast chicken, peas, and rice. Some strawberries for dessert. Thank you!” With that, Igor drove off again.

“Unfortunately we don’t have a kitchen in the yeshiva,” apologized Rabbi White, as they re-entered the yeshiva. “Our

³⁴ Exposition on a Torah concept.

resources are somewhat limited, so he has to go over to my apartment to prepare the food. The *beis midrash* also has to double as our dining room. Anyway, Reb Ari, why don't you go and finish unpacking? Reb Howard, you can set this table here with three places."

Ari went back to the bedroom and continued unpacking, still digesting the meal of strange and unexpected things that had happened to him today...a mute giant who can lift entire cars and drive like a Formula One professional...a yeshiva with two students in a shipping container in the middle of a construction site. What other bizarre things could he expect in this place?

He didn't know it yet, but the answer was...plenty.

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