

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

LISTENINGtoGOD

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN

Maggid Books

Contents

Acknowledgements xix

Author's Note: Somewhat of a Disclaimer xxi

Introduction: Life as a Series of Divine Messages xxiii

PART I:

CHILDHOOD MODELS 1940–56

Chapter One: My Grandmother – The First Angel in My Life 3

Chapter Two: Grandma and “The Goy” 9

Chapter Three: West Point and Kosher Muscle 13

Chapter Four: Elijah the Prophet on Willoughby Avenue 15

*Chapter Five: From Budapest with Love
(A Letter to My Communist-Atheist Grandfather)* 19

Chapter Six: Being One of the Gang 27

Chapter Seven: Shabbat with My Mom 31

Chapter Eight: Harry's Place 35

Chapter Nine: Tante Sadie 43

*Chapter Ten: Rav Menahem Manus Mandel:
The Consummate Rebbe* 49

*Chapter Eleven: The Shtiebl on Hart Street and
a Lesson in Human Relationships* 53

Chapter Twelve: My Bar Mitzva Suit and an Uneaten Knish 57

*Chapter Thirteen: The Beth Moses Beit Midrash:
My First Lesson in Zionism* 59

PART II:

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE YEARS 1956–60

Chapter Fourteen: Harvard or YU? 65

Chapter Fifteen: Rav J.B. Soloveitchik 69

Chapter Sixteen: My Greek Professor Helps Me Decide to Be a Rabbi 81

Chapter Seventeen: A Mother's Gift 85

Chapter Eighteen: Ordination – How to Learn and to Lead 89

PART III:

ISRAELI INTERLUDE 1960–61

*Chapter Nineteen: Rav Kahaneman –
Dreams of a Giant Builder of Torah* 97

Chapter Twenty: Israel: Mirrors of Diversity 101

Chapter Twenty-One: A Nun, a Monk and a Jerusalem Professor 105

Chapter Twenty-Two: A Dilemma: One or Two Days Yom Tov? 109

*Chapter Twenty-Three: Finding My Bashert: Zion and
a Synagogue Director Share in Shadkhanut* 113

PART IV:

TEACHING MINDS &

TOUCHING SOULS:

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY 1963–77

*Chapter Twenty-Four: Power Lunches with a
Power Educator: Rav Moshe Besdin* 121

Chapter Twenty-Five: “Thank God It’s My Leg and Not My Hand” 127

Chapter Twenty-Six: Rav Akiva Eiger Calls Out to His Progeny 129

Chapter Twenty-Seven: They Are All Isaacs 131

PART V:

LINCOLN SQUARE SYNAGOGUE:

THE BIRTH OF AN OUTREACH SYNAGOGUE 1964–83

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Three Rebbes and a Mehitza 135

Chapter Twenty-Nine: He’s the Rabbi Because She’s the Rebbetzin 143

Chapter Thirty: Location, Location – and More on the Mehitza 147

Chapter Thirty-One: There’s One in Every Shul 155

*Chapter Thirty-Two: Moshe Hayyim Tiefenbrunn:
Ne’ila and Faith after the Holocaust* 159

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Cry of the Torah Scroll 165

Chapter Thirty-Four: A Tale of Two Sandaks 167

Chapter Thirty-Five: A Holocaust Survivor and His Two Mistresses 171

Chapter Thirty-Six: A Rabbi Is a Johnny Appleseed 175

- Chapter Thirty-Seven: A Kohen Gadol with an Etzba Elokim* 179
- Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Power of a Mezuzah* 183
- Chapter Thirty-Nine: Zalman Bernstein: The Most Unforgettable Person I Ever Met* 185
- Chapter Forty: A Grave Business* 189
- Chapter Forty-One: Women, Torah Scrolls and Three Rabbinic Opinions* 193
- Chapter Forty-Two: A Meeting with Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky: How to Take Criticism* 197
- Chapter Forty-Three: Everybody Needs Shabbat* 201
- Chapter Forty-Four: The Rabbi and the Butcher* 205
- Chapter Forty-Five: The New Shul Mehitza – and a Rabbi Learns to Fundraise* 207
- Chapter Forty-Six: Jewish Genes* 211
- Chapter Forty-Seven: A Miracle in My Pocket? Not This Time...* 213
- Chapter Forty-Eight: A Rabbinical Lesson: How to Prevent Burnout* 217

PART VI:

SOVIET JEWRY 1962–75

- Chapter Forty-Nine: The Miracle of the Soviet Jewry Movement* 221
- Chapter Fifty: The Moscow Rav Visits New York* 225
- Chapter Fifty-One: The Search for a Sho'et and the Discovery of a Melamed Dardeke* 229
- Chapter Fifty-Two: "I Am Searching for My Brothers"* 235

<i>Chapter Fifty-Three: The Anger of a Moment, the Satisfaction of Eternity</i>	239
<i>Chapter Fifty-Four: The Faith of the Young, the Faith of the Old</i>	243
<i>Chapter Fifty-Five: Torah Overcomes in Leningrad – Despite Lenin’s Best Efforts</i>	245
<i>Chapter Fifty-Six: A Tale of a Tallit</i>	249
<i>Chapter Fifty-Seven: A Vort about Vodka</i>	253
<i>Chapter Fifty-Eight: Circumcision, Riga Style</i>	259
<i>Chapter Fifty-Nine: A Departing Message from Vilna</i>	261
<i>Chapter Sixty: For the Sake of a Torah Scroll</i>	263

PART VII:

AVINU SHEBASHAMAYIM:

AIRPLANE STORIES

<i>Chapter Sixty-One: The Pastor’s Son</i>	271
<i>Chapter Sixty-Two: There Is No Atheist in a Foxhole</i>	275
<i>Chapter Sixty-Three: “Promise Me the Plane Won’t Crash”</i>	281
<i>Chapter Sixty-Four: For the Sake of a Woman</i>	285
<i>Chapter Sixty-Five: Tateh</i>	287

PART VIII:

ISRAEL BOUND, BUT RIDING ON A DONKEY

<i>Chapter Sixty-Six: Bumps on My Road to Aliya</i>	293
<i>Chapter Sixty-Seven: Paving the Way for the Messiah via Two Kibbutzim</i>	299

*Chapter Sixty-Eight: The Opportunity of
Change, the Sanctity of Renewal 305*

*Chapter Sixty-Nine: The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Begin
and Herzl Join Hands to Rescue Efrat 311*

PART IX:

COMING HOME 1983–PRESENT

Chapter Seventy: Central Park West Bank and a Promise Fulfilled 317

God is My Partner in Building Torah

*Chapter Seventy-One: The Birth of Ohr Torah Israel: God
Is My Partner in Institutional Fundraising 323*

*Chapter Seventy-Two: Horodenke Hasidim Picket –
Ohr Torah Gains a Beit Midrash 333*

*Chapter Seventy-Three: The Lubavitcher Rebbe Still
Keeps Watch: A Rabbinical Seminary Is Born 337*

Chapter Seventy-Four: Ohr Torah Receives a Last Name 341

*Chapter Seventy-Five: Changing Fate into Destiny:
Make Schools That Make a Difference 345*

Embattled in My New Home

*Chapter Seventy-Six: A Rebbe's Warning,
a Donor's Support 347*

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Rav Moshe Feinstein Saves My Rabbinate 351

*Chapter Seventy-Eight: A Second Crisis, with Rav
Mordekhai Eliyahu to the Rescue 357*

*Chapter Seventy-Nine: Women Advocates for Divorce
Courts, Women Officers in the IDF 361*

Chapter Eighty: A Rabbi without a Beard 367

God Appears in Unlikely Settings

Chapter Eighty-One: A Beard without a Rabbi 371

Chapter Eighty-Two: His Most Precious Possession 375

Chapter Eighty-Three: Their Most Precious Mitzva 377

Chapter Eighty-Four: When It Is a Mitzva to Gamble 379

Chapter Eighty-Five: God Loves the Prisoner, Too 381

Chapter Eighty-Six: Miracle at Efrat's Shopping Center 387

Kiddush Hashem in Efrat

Chapter Eighty-Seven: For the Sake of a Hill in Efrat 391

Chapter Eighty-Eight: Pizzeria Efrat: Kosher Pizza, Holy People 397

Chapter Eighty-Nine: Amikam 399

Chapter Ninety: Israel and Jerusalem Will Comfort Us 401

Chapter Ninety-One: "Tikkin Olam" 405

The Palestinians Among Us

Chapter Ninety-Two: Efrat's Palestinian Neighbors: What Unites Us 409

Chapter Ninety-Three: Take Heed of an Enemy's

Warning: What Divides Us 415

Jews and Christians

Chapter Ninety-Four: Let the Messiah Decide 419

The Eternity of Israel

Chapter Ninety-Five: The Berlin Memorial and Tractate Pesachim 423

Chapter Ninety-Six: From Lvov to Efrat: Journey of a Parokhet 427

Chapter Ninety-Seven: The Apostate and the Convert 431

Special People Rise to the Occasion

Chapter Ninety-Eight: The Huppah on the Tennis Court 435

Chapter Ninety-Nine: Love and Remembrance 437

Chapter One Hundred: Responsibility of Love 439

Afterword: Open Your Eyes 441

About the Author 445

Part I

Childhood Models 1940–56

Chapter One

My Grandmother – The First Angel in My Life

I had amazing grandparents, on both sides, and they had a strong impact on my early life.

My maternal grandmother was Haya Beila bat Rav Shlomo HaKohen and Mindel, but everyone called her Baltcha, a diminutive of Beila. She was, indeed, a diminutive woman, this matriarch of the family, and gentle, but very strong-minded and deeply respected by my grandfather and all of their progeny. They had seven children, but, as was typical for that generation, not one of them was observant.

It was the first half of the twentieth century in America. There were few day schools and therefore, despite her piety, none of her children had the opportunity to study Torah properly, a Torah that they identified with the old world they had left behind and wanted to trade in for America. But she prayed three times a day and she was very learned. I grew up thinking that all European women were learned, indeed, even knew Gemara (Talmud)! I grew close to her in a very special way.

We lived in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, in a small one-bedroom apartment at 103 Hart Street, between Tompkins

and Marcy. Today it looks like a burnt-out war zone. The neighborhood has degenerated into street gangs and racial “warfare.” My parents were quite poor, but they sent me to a Jewish day school because it was much better than the local public schools. I was the oldest son of the youngest of my grandmother’s seven children.

My grandmother lived two blocks away at 128 Vernon Avenue, corner of Tompkins, in a house that my uncle had purchased for her. He was the one uncle who was very successful in business – Uncle Dave. My grandmother lived in that house from the time that she joined my grandfather in America until perhaps ten years before her death, at age ninety.

Grandma saw a unique opportunity when I started attending yeshiva day school. She offered to supply the meat for the house if my mother would keep a kosher home. So my mother became the only one of the seven children to keep a kosher home. My grandmother took me to yeshiva every morning herself, and picked me up from there every afternoon.

When I was eight, my grandfather had a massive stroke, and was moved to a convalescent home. Because I was really the light of her life, the family felt strongly that I should at least spend Friday evening with my grandmother, thinking that perhaps that would get her out of the doldrums over my grandfather’s illness and she would eat something, as she was almost on a food strike.

From ages eight to sixteen I spent every Friday evening and every festival evening with her. As the only grandchild who attended a yeshiva, and as her only progeny involved in the Jewish religion, I naturally became the *naches*, the joy of Grandma’s existence. Friday evening was our special time together: I would arrive about half an hour before candle-lighting, help her remove the Yiddish newspapers from the scrubbed linoleum floor, and gaze intently as she would *bentsh licht*, bless the candles, for at least twenty minutes. Her face framed by the flames, her eyes shut tight, I watched Grandma speaking to God, happily mentioning the successes and tearfully mentioning the problems of each family member in turn. I once thought of writing a book about her; I would call it, “God Was My Psychiatrist.” She spoke to Him, she remonstrated with Him, she cried to Him, she argued with Him, she

thanked Him. She seemed to be talking to a very beloved and respected friend for twenty minutes every Friday evening just before sunset.

Then we would sit and pray together, sitting on opposite sides of the candelabrum. We went through *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Ma'ariv*, the welcoming of Shabbat and the evening prayers. And then we ate together and sang *zemirot* (Shabbat songs) together between each portion, which she would bring to the table with a flourish, declaring, "In honor of the holy Sabbath" ("*likhvod Shabbos Kodesh*"). During the delectable meal ("*Shloimele, tayere, dear one, take my kneidl. I don't need to get fat, and you need the strength to study Torah,*" this eighty-pound woman would say to me in Yiddish), she would reminisce about life in the *shtetl* Lubien, and, after a while, its streets and inhabitants became more real to me than those of Bedford-Stuyvesant. My great-grandfather Shlomo HaKohen, her father, was a Dayan, a rabbinical judge, in the small town of Lubien. According to the family story he lived to be 115.

After dinner we would study the biblical portion of the week with *Yiddish Teitsch*, a marvelous translation-commentary, replete with miracle stories and moral lessons culled from midrashic literature. I treasured those personal Friday evenings even more than the gala family gatherings, when I was merely one of many – and one of the younger ones at that.

I went back to Lubien much later, in 1994. There I found an elderly woman, Helene Michallak, who knew the whole family because her father had been the mayor of Lubien. She didn't tell me that my great-grandfather lived to be 115, but she said, "Oh, Rabina Kowalski. Rabina Kowalski was a very, very old man. Even the Gentiles in the area came to him for a blessing for long life." He had three consecutive wives, as he had been widowed twice. My grandmother was the eldest daughter from the first wife and there were three other daughters who came after her; in the absence of sons, my great-grandfather taught Baltcha. First he taught her *Humash* (Pentateuch), then the commentaries on the *Humash*, then Mishna. He saw she had an open mind and so he began to teach her Gemara as well. She always smiled when she told me the secret, the special privilege she had to study with him. She said it with *hislayves*, with enthusiasm – the fact that she had learned that which only men learned in those days. As a result, my first Gemara teacher was Grandma Baltcha.

My great-grandfather Shlomo dealt in oats and hay, *huber* and *hey* in Yiddish. He never took a salary for his communal position as the Dayan in Lubien. At that time there were three hundred families in the town, half of which were Jewish. There was a rabbi, Rav Petrovski, and the “*Rabbiner* over the *rabbiner*” who was my great-grandfather (according to Helene Michallak), the Dayan.

My great-grandfather was apparently a great scholar; there were always four young men from neighboring towns who would work and learn with him. And as my grandmother would tell me, they would wake up at twelve o’clock at night for *tikkun ḥatzot* (midnight prayer), after which they would study until daybreak. Just before sunrise they went to the *mikveh*, the ritual bath, after which they would *daven* (pray), reciting the *Amida* precisely at sunrise. Then they would labor with the hay and oats, more or less till midday. Apparently their compensation for the work was the learning. Among the young men was a gentleman named Ḥayyim Valter from Wloclawek, a city much larger than Lubien. He was from a wealthy family of very good pedigree, a direct descendant of the son-in-law of the Sefat Emet, and a devoted Gerer Hasid. My grandmother also studied with my great-grandfather in the afternoons when he had finished working and learning with his students, but she was always anxious to study more. So she would lie in wait after *tikkun ḥatzot*, not far from where my grandfather would study with the young men, and she would listen to the Torah, hoping she would not be noticed.

She saw that when the young men studied, they put their *tefillin* (phylacteries) on a sheet spread out on the ground. She felt this was disrespectful to the holy objects, so she strung out a clothesline and she would hang the *tefillin* up on it every night. Apparently Ḥayyim Valter noticed her and he fell in love. He had been engaged to a very wealthy young woman, who also lived in the big city of Wloclawek, whom he had met only once. As my grandmother would blushing tell it (at age eighty plus), he loved her sensitivity to the *tefillin* and he loved her interest in learning Torah. She was also a very beautiful young girl. He told his father he wanted to marry Rav Shlomo Kowalski’s eldest daughter, and – despite a considerable financial loss – the previous engagement was broken. My grandmother always told me that she really believed that whatever good fortune she had in life was because of her sensitivity

to the *tefillin* and her love of Torah. And she did have a very profound love relationship with my grandfather all their lives.

When my grandfather was in the convalescent home after his stroke, I remember my grandmother saying to my mother that she wanted to buy a dress. My mother was a little bit surprised; Grandma was hardly eating and she wanted to buy a new dress? That wasn't like her at all. I tagged along and saw my grandmother pick out a flaming red dress. My mother said to my grandmother: "Mama, *es past nisht*, it's not appropriate. How can you wear a dress like this?" With the tears rolling down her cheeks, my grandmother said, "*Mayn Ham*," (she always called *Hayyim*, her husband, 'Ham'). "*Mayn Ham* always liked me in red. Maybe he'll see me in the dress and he'll wake up from the slumber he is in." I do not remember either of my grandparents speaking a harsh word – not to each other nor to anyone else. And until my grandfather became ill, I cannot remember seeing them apart from each other. I learned from my grandmother how important it is to teach women Torah. Indeed, she probably inspired my own dedication to women's learning – Ohr Torah Stone's women's *yeshivat hesder* and school for women-advocates in the religious courts. I learned from my grandmother how important it is to love and respect the person you marry. I also learned from her much more. She was undoubtedly the most dominant influence in my early life.

Chapter Two

Grandma and “The Goy”

More than a decade of Thanksgivings ago, my eldest daughter, Batya, announced her plans for aliya, immigration to Israel, and her intention to join the Israeli army. Since I did not know when next she would be in America for a protracted visit, and especially since the rest of the family was already planning its move to Efrat, Israel, I took my first-born on a ride back to Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Brooklyn neighborhood where her father had been born and raised.

Batya was named after my maternal grandmother. I wanted my daughter to walk through the house of her namesake, to catch the remnant of the sounds and the smells, the tastes and the tunes that had made the Jewish tradition alive and meaningful for me during my formative years.

But Thomas Wolfe was right: you can't go home again. Today the neighborhood most resembles a battleground, and grandmother's house, reduced to rubble, has become a playground for a local public school. So, no sounds, no smells, no tastes or tunes: just a vignette, here offered as a memorial to Grandma and her world, in the spirit of the Talmudic dictum: "The righteous require no monuments: their deeds are their most enduring monuments."

We thought of Grandma's house as the family home. My grandmother lived on the first floor, my aunt lived on the third floor, and on the second floor there was an apartment for family members or cousins who were just starting out in life and needed a place to live.

There was one room on that second floor that was occupied by an individual whose name I never knew. Everybody called him "*der goy*" (the Gentile). My grandmother also called him "*der goy*." I can picture him: short with very long ears and a vacant smile. When I was a child I thought at first he was a deaf-mute because he was at every important family or religious function, but he never spoke. Each Friday afternoon when I would arrive at my grandmother's house, I would meet "the goy" carrying his rent-envelope with a modest sum for his one room on the second floor, with bathroom (but no kitchen) privileges. He would always smile at me warmly, but he never spoke to me.

All my grandmother's seven children were married. Everyone had children and some even had grandchildren. The whole family would gather at my grandmother's home for Purim *se'uda*, for the Pesah *seder*, and on at least one day of *Hol HaMo'ed* –the intermediary days – during Sukkot and Pesah. We all got together for major birthdays. Whenever we had these very large family gatherings, "*der goy*" always sat in a place of honor, to the left of my grandfather (my grandmother always sat to her husband's right), and, after my grandfather's stroke, next to my grandmother. But obviously he never joined in the prayers or the family gossip. In fact, at these family gatherings he never spoke at all.

I eventually realized that he only spoke Polish because I heard him sometimes speaking to my grandmother or grandfather in this dialect. I understood that he was a Polish man who had needed a place to live. He put whatever payment he gave them in an envelope once a week. But I couldn't quite figure out why he was invited to all religious and family celebrations and why he had such an honored place. Perhaps he was the prophet Elijah, in masquerade, or a *gilgul*, a reincarnation of Balaam, the Gentile prophet of the Bible. I do remember, at one particular *seder*, watching him very intently as we opened the door for Elijah.

Anyway, I was about eleven and a half, and the neighborhood was becoming increasingly dangerous. One Sunday afternoon, when I

was with my grandmother in the living room, my Uncle Dave sat my grandmother down and said that the neighborhood was impossible, that certainly she had to move and that he would arrange to move my grandmother, my aunt and my uncle to a much better site in a nicer area of Brooklyn. I heard him suggest Bensonhurst, on Bay Ridge Parkway. He had even located an apartment with an efficiency room because he knew my grandmother would always insist on cooking for herself. So she would have a room with a kitchenette, and my aunt and uncle would be able to live in much better accommodations while seeing to it that grandma would not be alone.

My grandmother thanked him very much, but said, “You have to give me a little time. I have to think about it.” My uncle was a bit taken aback. “What do you have to think about?” he asked her. “The neighborhood is terrible, especially with old people being mugged left and right. What do you have to think about?” She said again, “I appreciate it, but you have to give me a little time.”

After my uncle left, she explained herself to me: “Shloimele, of course I would like to move and it’s important for your aunt and uncle to move, but what will happen to the Gentile? He’s been living with us for forty years. He doesn’t speak English. We’ll have to find a place for the goy and then I can move. Come to me Friday after school.” We were always dismissed from school early on Fridays, so that Friday I went straight to my grandmother’s house.

We started combing the neighborhood, searching for “To Let” signs. There we were, an odd couple if ever there was one, a woman in her eighties and her grandson who was not quite twelve, looking for a room for “*der goy*.” We climbed up high flights of stairs in houses, some of whose owners hardly seemed reputable. I was the translator because my grandmother didn’t speak English. “I have to take care of the goy,” she told me. “After all, I am a *tzitizen* (citizen). I love America; I love President Rosenfeld [*sic*]. I know my rights and I also know my obligations. America is a free country, but Judaism teaches that we must watch over each other. The goy is all alone. He only has me to help him.”

We did it for four Fridays – an old Jewish woman and her young American grandson. It was the winter. It was cold, sometimes even icy,

PART I: *Childhood Models 1940–56*

and difficult. But we continued seeking a home for “*der goy*.” For me this was a lesson in what Judaism is really about. And I think it was that experience more than anything else that made me realize that her lifestyle and life values were exactly the kind of life I wanted to live myself.