

TWO SCHOLARS WHO
WERE IN OUR TOWN
AND OTHER NOVELLAS

S.Y. AGNON

NEW AND REVISED TRANSLATIONS
FROM THE HEBREW
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Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town



“Reb Shlomo was standing and sermonizing and his voice was like that of the humble nightingale on a summer night.”

Illustration by Avigdor Arikha for *Kelev Hutzot*

I.

THREE OR FOUR GENERATIONS AGO, when Torah was beloved by Israel and the entire glory of a man was Torah, our town was privileged to be counted among the most notable towns in the land on account of its scholars, who endowed our town with a measure of grace through the Torah that they learned. It goes without saying that Torah had already found pleasant enough accommodations among the elders of our old study house, yet the other study houses that had been built one after another enhanced wisdom even more. And even in the marketplaces and the roads of our town study fulfilled the verse “Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares.” And if people stood around in the marketplace, appearing to haggle with one another over questions of real estate and loan collection and dissolution of partnerships and financial compensation and so on, they weren’t really arguing over the monetary issues themselves, but rather about the laws pertaining to them in Hoshen Mishpat. And even those who filled their buckets at the well, used to fill their hearts with words of Torah. Particularly noteworthy was the new Kloyz, which from the fifteenth of the month of Av until the seventeenth of Tammuz never once shut its lights at night. This was the very same Kloyz for which one of the rich men of the town had dedicated space in his courtyard, to ensure that the residence would continue to belong to his lineage throughout coming generations, inasmuch as any dwelling that has a holy place dedicated to Torah and prayer remains in the hands of the family, from generation to generation, for eternity. But, let us now leave aside these matters that will not reappear until the arrival of the Redeemer and tell a little something of what our elders used to tell, about two great scholars who were in our town back in the days when everyone made Torah the essence of their being, because they understood that the saying “the joy of the Lord is our Fortress” refers to the Torah.

2.

One day, between the Passover and Shavuot holidays, a man arrived at our new Kloyz carrying with him a large loaf of bread, the kind that villagers bake for themselves which is large enough to last a man six days, and in his pockets a few fruits and a few vegetables. Since he walked in and saw the bookshelves that lined all four walls, he knew that this must be the place he had coveted and for which he had yearned. But he wondered how this Kloyz, which was reputed to carry on uninterrupted Torah learning both day and night, could be totally deserted. Except on that particular day one of the notables of the town had written a nuptial agreement for his daughter, who had become engaged to the son of an important man from another town, so the entire town had gone out to greet the bridegroom and his scholarly father and not a soul had remained in the Kloyz.

The man put down his belongings, took himself a Gemara, sat down and stayed put, not so much as lifting his head from the Gemara until the men of the Kloyz had returned. People approached him saying, "This is my seat" and "This is my Gemara." He responded that Torah is not a birthright, to be treated as private property. They realized that he was a difficult sort and let him be. From that point on, he did not move from his place until mid-day on Friday. And on Sunday, with the rising of the sun he came back, toting a loaf of bread and a bit of fruit and vegetables, and he sat and learned until the following Friday at noontime, when once again he left off studying and departed for his village. Until Sunday, when with the first gleaming of the sun, he would return to his learning once more. He carried on in this fashion over the course of several weeks, which turned into several months. Every Friday afternoon he would set off for his village and every Sunday return to the Kloyz.

3.

Now we will call him by his name, and tell a little of what we know about him. This man was named Moshe Pinchas and he was a villager, a miller's son. Throughout his childhood he had studied together with

the sons of the head of the village, who had maintained good tutors for them. Since the sons grew up and became focused on their various affairs, their father discharged the tutors and Moshe Pinchas was left to study on his own. One time Rabbi Gabriel Reinush came from the nearby city to make the millstones kosher for Passover. This is the great sage Reb Gabriel Reinush, author of *Horeh Gaver* on Yoreh De'ah. One night, during the evening meal, the miller said to the rabbi, "Would the rabbi agree to test my Moshe Pinchas on Gemara?" The Rabbi called to him affectionately and asked him, "My son, what have you studied?" He told him. He tested him and saw that he knew his studies. He told the miller, "Your son learns well. Send him to me in the city and I'll keep an eye on him." So Moshe Pinchas went off to the city and studied under the Rabbi's tutelage. And when there was a lot of work at the mill, he'd leave off from studying to help his father. After a while, a rabbinical post was arranged for the Rabbi in another town. The Rabbi would travel from his city to that other city and leave his student. Moshe Pinchas began to wonder, "Why am I sitting around here?" Just about then, his father died, the mill was sold and the new miller did not need the services of Moshe Pinchas. Meanwhile the Rabbi was totally preoccupied with going back and forth to deal with the demands of his rabbinical post. Moshe Pinchas picked up and came to our town, which is the Torah capital for all the surrounding area. And since a man needs a piece of meat and a spoonful of soup and a clean shirt on his back, and a woman needs to hear Kiddush and Havdalah, every Friday afternoon he would go to be with his mother in the village and she would provide all that he needed for the next six days.

And thus Moshe Pinchas would remain all week long in the Kloyz and on Friday afternoon would return to his mother in the village. When he happened by chance upon a carriage, he'd go by carriage; if not, he'd go on foot. It was a walk of about three parsas from the town to the village and it is nice for a man who is sedentary for six whole days to exercise his legs a bit. In summertime he took off his shoes and went barefoot, and when he got to the river he would take his clothes off and bathe; and in winter he'd rise early and immerse himself in a warm mikveh and enter the Sabbath while

ritually pure and observe the Sabbath day with his mother in the village, and after the Sabbath return to the Kloyz. The beadle, who cherished scholars, used to bring him something hot to drink and a pillow to sleep on. If the beadle doesn't exaggerate, we can believe him when he says that Moshe Pinchas didn't drink the hot drinks he brought him until they were tepid and, that as far as the beadle knew, he would never even place his head upon the pillow that had been furnished. So drawn was he to his studies that he would never take a break, neither for a hot drink nor for sleep.

4.

Our mothers, who had heard from people who knew him, used to say that he was of medium height, with broad shoulders, and a squarish face with small wisps of facial hair that didn't quite mesh into a full beard sprouting on his chin. His earlocks were curled and tucked in tightly at his hairline, his eyes were grey, his forehead arched and he wore a green cloak in both winter and summer. And despite his bulky stature, he was light on his feet. He would pray standing to the right of the Torah podium and during the Shemoneh Esreh prayer he would wave his hand in front of his face because, due to his tremendous diligence in Torah study, conundrums and elucidations kept popping into his head and he would flail them away so that they would not distract him from his prayers. When studying, he would stay put like a stake driven into the ground, never rising except to get a drink of water from the basin, where he would place his mouth near the spigot with one hand on his hat lest it fall off his head, and drink half a sink's worth. They also say that a smile had never crossed his face, and that when anyone so much as made a jocular remark in front of him, he would crinkle his brow, shake his head at him and declare, "Myriad are the needs of your people!" If a householder invited him to dinner, he would decline. And if the householder persisted, Moshe Pinchas would say, "I have what I need and require nothing more." They called him, but not to his face, *der vochndiker bukher*, that is to say "the weekday boy," because they never saw him in the Kloyz except during the days of the week.

5.

Now let's leave aside Moshe Pinchas and go back to the son-in-law of that notable of our town. Not even a year had passed before he had married the youngest daughter of Reb Mordechai Scheiner, an iron and copper merchant, son of wealth, from the line of Rabbi Mordechai Yafeh, Ba'al HaLevushim. This is neither the time nor the place to tell the story of the wedding itself and all of the honor we garnered as a result of that marriage, because of all the rabbis and revered ones who came from near and far. The son-in-law himself, Reb Shlomo HaLevi, was a Horowitz, from the Horowitz family, a direct descendant of the Holy Shelah. It is said that for twenty-six generations back, and some even say thirty-six generations, they were never disconnected from Torah, and that there was not a town in our lands in which one of them had not held the rabbinical seat. And our town was privileged enough to count among its rabbis the sage Rabbi Pinchas Ba'al Mofet, a member of that family. They say that at the time of his death Rabbi Pinchas had said, "I promise you that someday someone very special from our family line will come to reside here." And they also say that he ordered them not to bury anyone next to him until after a hundred years had passed, and that even then the deceased had to be someone from his lineage. Reb Shlomo, the groom, was a son worthy of his ancestors. At the age of sixteen he had already received rabbinic ordination from two of the greatest scholars of that generation. And when he had come before them he had not revealed who he was until they had finished testing him. Unlike most of the well-connected snobs in our land who have made it only on the merit of their fathers.

Already during the seven days of wedding feasts, every single study house in our town was vying for Reb Shlomo to affiliate himself with them. Our old study house, on account of its numerous books; the new study house on account of his father-in-law and his father-in-law's father, both of whom prayed there; the men of the old Kloyz, because it is suitable for a man to pray in the place where his ancestors had worshipped and it was time-honored tradition that the great scholar Rabbi Pinchas Ba'al Mofet used to pray in the old