

Rabbi Shlomo Goren

# WITH MIGHT AND STRENGTH

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## *Chapter 1*

# Return in Mercy

**I** began running toward Lions' Gate. The battalion of paratroopers was spread out along both sides of the road, because artillery fire was raining down incessantly on the road itself. Stranded at the entrance to Lions' Gate was a bus engulfed in flames and one of our tanks was stuck.

Suddenly, I heard the battalion commander shouting at me, "Rabbi Goren, you'll get yourself killed. Come with us and stick close to the wall."

I felt as if I were flying. I walked out into the middle of the road. To my right, paratroopers from one company hugged one wall, and to my left, paratroopers from another company hugged the other. I heard the battalion commander send out his company commander toward me, telling him, "Go to Rabbi Goren and force him against the wall."

"I am the highest ranking officer here," I told them. "Don't force me against anything."

According to Jewish law, when Jews go out to battle they blow trumpets or shofars to assure their victory, as the Torah states: "And if you go to war in your land, against the enemy that oppresses you, then

you shall blow an alarm with the trumpets, and you shall be remembered before the Lord your God and you shall be saved from your enemies” (Num. 10:9). It was for this reason that I had brought a shofar with me. The moment we drew close to the gate, I began blowing the shofar, sounding it loudly in this battle for the liberation of Jerusalem. I continued to blow the shofar until we reached the tank that was stuck at the gate, blocking the entry to the Temple Mount. I quickly climbed up onto the tank and slid down the other side, finding myself at the entrance to the Temple Mount. As I made my way forward, I began to utter a prayer in between shofar blasts and shouted to the soldiers, “In the name of God, take action and succeed. In the name of God, liberate Jerusalem, go up and be successful.” I kept shouting until we were right on top of the Temple Mount, where I found Motta Gur standing surrounded by his soldiers. I had prepared a proclamation, which I then recited.

I decided that I was going to attempt to go down to the Kotel, which at that stage no one had yet reached. I was not familiar with the way from the Temple Mount to the Kotel, but there were two paratroopers who were. I took them and my driver with me and we exited from Mugrabi Gate. We reached a gate at the top of the stairs leading down to the Kotel, but it was locked with an iron chain and a padlock. I suggested forcing it open with our shoulders. The four of us began to push, and we broke the lock.

I went down to the area in front of the Kotel, and as if in a dream, a flash of light blinded me. An Arab suddenly appeared from a tunnel on the left and offered me a chair. I began to *daven* and recite the psalm for Wednesday: “A psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are of a clean heart. But as of me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may relate all Your works” (Ps. 73). I then blew the shofar once again, as more soldiers and paratroopers began descending from the Temple Mount to the Kotel, through the gate we had broken open.

As soon as there were ten men present, I began to *daven* for the memory of the fallen soldiers and recited *El Maleh Raḥamim*. I proposed that we *daven* Minḥa with Hallel and *Naḥem* beside the Kotel, which for nineteen years had not been the site of any Jewish prayers, but then

I realized that it was only half past eleven in the morning and we could not *daven* Minha yet. We began to recite psalms and sang, “This year in rebuilt Jerusalem.” By that time, the entire division had reached the Kotel. Motta Gur and Uzi Narkiss had also arrived and I repeated the service for the memory of the fallen while everyone cried. I found that I, too, could not hold back my tears.

## Chapter 2

# Poland: Zambrów, Warsaw

I was born toward the end of 1917, in the village of Zambrów, about ninety-three kilometers northeast of Warsaw. My parents, Rabbi Avraham Goronchik and Haya Tzipora (née Cziviak), had five children born in Poland: three sons and two daughters. One of my brothers died in Poland and after we immigrated to Israel, another brother was born there.

The Jewish population of Zambrów numbered about six thousand, most of whom were *mitnagdim*, although a few were Hasidim. All of our relatives were Hasidim. My maternal grandfather was even a Kotzker Hasid. He was the *shoḥet* in Zambrów and was considered a *tzaddik*. When people mentioned “the *tzaddik* of Zambrów” they were referring to him, even though he was not a rabbi.

My father was not from Zambrów, but rather from the Warsaw region. He loved to learn rabbinic literature and knew *Yoreh De’ah* by heart, but he had decided not to benefit from his Torah knowledge, preferring to earn his livelihood by the sweat of his brow. He was a merchant and a successful businessman. There were those who urged him to go to Warsaw and become an ordained rabbi, but he would not hear of it.



Later, when he immigrated to Israel, he said, "I am going to Israel only on the condition that I will not serve there as a rabbi, but rather will work the soil."

My paternal grandfather was very learned. As a Gerer Hasid, he lived in Warsaw and headed a yeshiva there. Rabbi Meir Simha of Dvinsk, author of *Or Same'ach*, met my grandfather once in St. Petersburg at a rabbi's conference, and after conversing with him on Torah-related matters, remarked, "This is the first time I have ever met a scholarly Hasid!" Several years ago, in 1985, I visited Warsaw and found my grandfather's tombstone. As he had passed away after we were already living in Israel, none of us had attended the funeral, nor did we have the opportunity to visit his grave. However, I knew that he had been buried in the large Okopowa cemetery in Warsaw. I asked a young Jewish man who was in charge of the cemeteries to find my grandfather's grave while I traveled the length and breadth of Poland. When I returned to Warsaw, I went back to the cemetery. The young man was standing there, and when he saw me he began to shout.

"He's found it!" I said to myself. Indeed, when I approached him he said, "Come, I will show you your grandfather's tombstone."

He led me to an enormous stone, a whole story tall, bearing the following text:

Here lies a man known far and wide, who studied Torah day and night. He taught Torah to the public. Young and old drank the word of the living Torah from his mouth. He educated exceptional *talmidei hakhamim*. Our father, the wonderful and exceptional rabbi, a very wise man and a famous Hasid. Our teacher, Rabbi Aaron, the son of the renowned rabbi, our teacher Rabbi Shlomo Eliezer Goronchik. Departed the world of the living, 14 Sivan, 5687. May his soul be bound up in the bonds of everlasting life.

Although we left Zambrów in 1920, when I was just two and a half years old, I still have a few memories of the village that are deeply engraved in my mind. One such memory is connected with the festivities of Lag BaOmer. On Lag BaOmer all the children were taken out to the forest

to play with bows and arrows. That's how we celebrated this day, in commemoration of Bar Kokhba's battles and the *yahrtzeit* of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai. I don't remember specifically if I played with a bow and arrows, but the older children made their own bows and practiced shooting arrows. Our parents told us that we had to know how to defend ourselves, in keeping with the words of King David, "To teach the sons of Judah the bow" (II Sam. 1:18). I remember everyone leaving the house to spend time in the heart of nature, because this was quite a rare event – only on very rare occasions were the children taken into the forests.

They didn't want to take me with them into the forest because I was just a toddler, but I cried and cried until my parents finally relented, and they took me with them to play with the other children. That day is deeply engraved in my memory, and I can still picture the forest where we played.

Not long ago, on my trip to Poland, I spent an entire day in Zambrów. I searched for the forest, but couldn't find it. Perhaps it had been chopped down, or had grown so large that I couldn't recognize it.

The second event that I remember from Zambrów is very significant for me, as it is connected with my mother.

My mother came from a family of Gerer Hasidim. Her father, Rabbi Nahum Eliezer, was renowned as a *tzaddik*. Her family was Zionist. They were passionate Zionists and nothing could sway their commitment to Zionist ideals. My mother grew up in Zambrów, a small village, but even so, she knew Polish. She even had a flair for writing. When we were living in Zambrów, it was quite common for men to go to America to seek their fortune and start a new life there. Their wives, who were illiterate, would come to my mother and ask her to write letters to their husbands. She was the letter-writer for the whole village, and her handwriting was exquisite.

Once, an emissary from Eretz Yisrael came to Zambrów. He organized Zionist meetings, which included fundraising efforts for national institutions in Israel. My mother went to one of these meetings. When she returned home, we all noticed that she wasn't wearing any of her jewelry, except for her wedding ring. We noticed that the jewelry was missing because we were used to seeing her wearing it, and it had great sentimental value for us, too. When my father asked her

where all her jewelry was, she immediately told him the truth: she had been so impressed by the emissary's words – describing the distress in Eretz Yisrael and the dire need for donations from the Diaspora – that she felt the need to help the farmers who were working the land and building settlements, and that she wanted to feel that she was a partner in their endeavors. For that reason, she explained, she had handed over all her jewelry to the emissary. My father's reaction is still fresh in my mind.

“Don't be sorry you gave away your jewelry,” he told her, “and don't worry. For this mitzva and for what you did, I will buy you new jewelry even nicer than you had before.”

These two events, Lag BaOmer and the story of my mother's jewelry, are my most significant early childhood memories.

In 1920, two years after World War I, my parents decided to move from Zambrów to Warsaw to develop their business. They rented a large apartment on Mila St. (the same street that during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943 was the site of the bunker headquarters for the ghetto fighters led by Mordechai Anielewicz). My father built and established a knit textile factory in specially equipped rooms beside our house and was very successful. He purchased new knitting machines and hired workers, and our economic situation improved considerably.

I remember that in Warsaw I began attending the Yesodei HaTorah *heder*, a Hasidic school run by my grandfather. There I began to learn *Humash* and *mishnayot*, which I remember to this day. I attended that school until we left Warsaw, when I was seven.

I have a number of good memories from Warsaw:

The buildings in Warsaw were very large, and every building was occupied by hundreds of tenants. Each building had a central courtyard, and the Jews would volunteer, work together, and dedicate themselves and their energies to helping the needy. Since there was an *eruv*, we could carry on Shabbat. Hasidic Jews wearing *shtreimels* and *kapotehs* would go from one courtyard to another and from one street to the next with large baskets, shouting in Yiddish, “*Yiddelach*, give us some challas, fruit, fish, or meat.” At that time and in those areas, everyone kept kosher, and

these Jews would collect basketfuls of food for the sick, the elderly, and the poor Jews of Warsaw.

I also remember that my mother would make sure not to wear her jewelry during *Bein HaMetzarim* – from the seventeenth of Tammuz until the ninth of Av.

The holiday I remember most from my years in Warsaw is Simḥat Torah. My father was a Gerer Hasid, and we prayed in one of the biggest *batei midrash* in Warsaw. I recall that it was on Nalewka Street. On Simḥat Torah, hundreds of Hasidim would come to that *beit midrash*. To this day, I can remember the sounds of the tunes they sang on that holiday, and especially one particular tune from 1924 or 1925. To this day, every Simḥat Torah we sing that tune and I reminisce about my past.

After the services and the festive meal at home that year, we decided to visit an uncle who lived in one of the suburbs of Warsaw. On the way, we passed the Great Synagogue in Warsaw, on Tlomackie Street. The Hasidim did not *daven* there, and the cantor was Moshe Koussevitzky, who had gained acclaim around the world.

From the Tlomackie synagogue we walked a long way to our uncle's home. Then we went to the *beit midrash* of the Gerer Hasidim, where there were barrels of beer. Hundreds of Hasidim were singing, dancing, and enjoying themselves. I still remember the joyful Hasidic tunes they sang. I also remember the bright streetlights of Warsaw as we walked home in the evening after Simḥat Torah.

During those years, a group of Hasidim from Yablona began to form, in preparation for making *aliya* to Eretz Yisrael. Although we were not members of that particular Hasidic group, since they were the first to actively promote *aliya* as a group, we decided to join them. They decided to organize a group that would establish a special village on Haifa Bay. Those Hasidim were able to make *aliya* because they were all middle and upper class, and could prove that they had a means of livelihood. Under the laws of the British Mandate, anyone who could prove that he had sufficient funds was allowed to immigrate to Eretz Yisrael. We were allowed to go because we were considered capitalists.

Once, my mother and father attended an assembly of the Yablona Hasidim, which was held in one of the big cinemas in Warsaw. It was there that my parents heard the organization's promises and

plans. The rebbe told the assembly that he promised a lifetime supply of bread and oranges to every Jew who immigrated with him.

My parents were very excited about their plans for making *aliya* and decided to buy twenty-five acres of land in the Haifa Bay area, for which they paid nearly ten thousand dollars – a huge sum of money in those days. They decided to sell our factory in Warsaw, join the first group of Hasidim (the community's *aliya* was divided into three stages), and participate in the building of the village. The village was supposed to be called Naḥalat Yaakov, in memory of the founder of Yablona *Hasidut*, Rebbe Yaakov Taub.

My father was a Gerer Hasid, and a Hasid does not do anything without the approval of his Admor. After he had already sold the factory and our apartment, my father went to see the Admor of Gur, to ask his permission and receive his blessing. It was known that the rebbe did not speak much and every word from him held weighty significance. When my father told him that he wanted to go with the Yablona Rebbe to Eretz Yisrael, the Gerer Rebbe asked, "What will you do there?" For some reason, the rebbe's Hasidim interpreted this to mean that my father had no permission to go. My father felt as if his entire world had tumbled down around him. He returned home broken and despondent. He had already sold everything and burned all his bridges.

"I have my own rebbe!" my mother said. "The Rebbe of Radzin. I will go to him."

The Radziner Rebbe had visited Eretz Yisrael in 1919 and was a great kabbalist and a *tzaddik*. My mother went to the rebbe and he gave her his blessing.

"Go and be successful, and may you be blessed with all the goodness in the world."

My mother returned and told my father, "I have my rebbe's permission and we are going!" It was that move to Eretz Yisrael that ultimately saved us from annihilation.

The preparations for our *aliya* to Eretz Yisrael were completed and we were ready to leave with the first group.

I remember our last Shabbat in Warsaw. Since we had already given up our apartment and sold the factory, for our last few days we moved in with my grandfather, Rabbi Yehuda Aharon Goronchik, who

was known in Warsaw as a Hasid and a very learned man. My father had six siblings, and they had children and grandchildren. The entire family came to say goodbye that Shabbat. Of that whole family, not even one survived the Holocaust. They were all murdered. A few of my mother's relatives survived, because they fled to Russia.

On Saturday evening, we went to the train station in Warsaw. Thousands of Jews came to the station to see us off. To pick up and leave Warsaw was considered quite revolutionary among the Hasidim. Among our group were some wealthy established families and many middle-class Jews, and they all lived very well in Warsaw. Suddenly, they had decided to liquidate all their businesses and move to Eretz Yisrael, plain and simple.

When we arrived at the station we were greeted with hugs and kisses, singing and dancing. It looked almost like some messianic event. As we boarded the train, our five years in Warsaw came to an end – we had moved to the city in 1920, and our *aliya* to Eretz Yisrael was in the winter of 1925. We traveled by train to Constantinople and from there by ship to Haifa. Since Haifa did not yet have a port, the ship anchored quite a distance from the shore, and we were transferred to the city in small boats. Our arrival in Eretz Yisrael was accompanied with the kind of rejoicing of which only Hasidim are capable. We were overjoyed and elated.