

"But if it was only a midrash that he was repeating, what is his great accomplishment?"

Shakhne halted and turned earnestly to his companion:

"First of all, you Belz fool, no one is obliged to be original. 'There is no anterior and posterior in the Torah.' The old is new and the new is old. Second, he revealed why it is that we recite the Haggadah, even the catalogue of plagues, in a mournful, melancholy chant. And third, he explained the verse 'Israel does not rejoice in the manner of the nations.' Don't engage in vulgar celebration like a barbarian. You are not a peasant! Vengeance is not Jewish!"

1900 (translated by Ruth R. Wisse)

BETWEEN TWO MOUNTAINS

You have certainly heard of the Brisker rov and the Bialer rebbe.¹ But not everyone knows that the saintly rebbe of Biala, Reb Noahke, had originally been a distinguished pupil of the Brisker rov, and only after studying with the rov for many years had he disappeared, remaining in self-imposed exile for several years before surfacing again in Biala.²

Reb Noahke had left for the following reason: At the yeshiva of Brisk, they had studied Torah, but the rebbe felt that the Torah they studied was sterile. For instance, they learned the laws governing the conduct of women, or the regulations for meat and dairy, or those pertaining to commerce. Very good. Comes X or Y for a ruling, or a servant to ask a question, or a woman with a problem—in that moment Scripture comes alive. It bursts into life and has authority in the world. But without these questioners, the Torah—that is, the revealed part of the Law—is arid. This was not, the Bialer rebbe felt, the living Torah. And Torah must live!

In Brisk it was forbidden to study any kabbalistic texts. The Brisker rov was a misnaged, and by nature as vengeful as a snake. If anyone was found with a Zohar or a Pardes, the rov would curse, and threaten the miscreant with excommunication. Once, when a student was caught with a book of kabbalah, the rov allowed Gentiles to shave off his beard. What do you think happened? The man lost

his mind and fell into the blackest despondency. And what was more amazing, no miracle worker could help him! There was no monkey-ing with the Brisker rov! On the other hand, how could anyone leave the Brisker rov's yeshiva?

In fact, for a long time Reb Noahke could not make up his mind to go, until one night he had a dream. He dreamed that the Brisker rov came to him and said, "Come, Noahke, I will lead you to the earthly paradise." He took him by the hand and led the way. They came to an enormous palace. In the palace there were no doors and no windows, except for the door by which they entered. In spite of this, the palace was full of light, because the walls were made of crystal—or so it seemed to Reb Noahke—and gave off a luminous gleam.

The two men walked on and on, endlessly.

"Hold on to my caftan," said the Brisker rov. "In this place there are so many chambers that should you break away from me you will be lost forever."

The rebbe did as he was told and they walked farther and farther, but nowhere along the way did the rebbe see a single piece of furniture, not even a bench.

"This is not a place for sitting," explained the Brisker rov. "Here you must keep walking forward." Each chamber they passed was larger and brighter than the one before; and the walls gleamed here with one color, there with another; some rooms were multicolored, others were all the colors of the rainbow. But they encountered no living person on their way.

The rebbe grew weary of walking. He broke out in a cold sweat and felt a chill in every limb. His eyes began to ache from the constant glare. He was overcome by a powerful longing, a yearning for his fellow Jews, for friends, for the people of Israel. This unpeopled world was no laughing matter!

"Do not wish for anyone," said the Brisker rov. "This palace is only for me and you. One day you too will be the Brisker rov."

The rebbe grew even more frightened and grasped at the wall in order not to fall. But the wall scalded him—not like fire, but like ice.

"Rabbi!" he cried. "The walls are not crystal, but ice, plain ice."

The Brisker rov did not answer.

Again the rebbe cried: "Master, lead me out of here! I don't want to be alone with you. I want to be with the people of Israel."

No sooner had he uttered these words than the Brisker rov disappeared, and Reb Noahke was left all alone in the palace.

He had no idea in which direction to go. A cold fear came at him from the walls. And the yearning to see another Jew, even if he were a cobbler or a tailor, grew ever more intense, until he burst into tears.

"Master of the Universe," he pleaded. "Take me away from here. I would rather be in hell with the rest of Israel than remain here all by myself."

At that very moment there appeared before him an ordinary little Jew with a coachman's red belt tied around his hips and a long whip in his hand. Silently, the little Jew took hold of the rebbe's sleeve and led him out of the palace. Then he disappeared.

This was the dream that had appeared to Reb Noahke.

When he awoke before dawn, just as the sky was turning gray, he understood that this had been no ordinary dream. He dressed quickly, intending to run to the study house to have his dream explained by the scholars who lodged there. As he passed through the marketplace, he noticed a covered wagon standing in the square. It was a large, old-fashioned, horse-drawn covered wagon, and next to it stood the driver, wearing a red belt around his hips and with a long whip in his hand—just like the little Jew in his dream.

The rebbe realized that something lay behind this. So he approached the driver and asked, "In which direction are you headed?"

"Not in yours," the driver answered quite brusquely.

"Even so," entreated the rebbe, "perhaps I could come along?"

The driver hesitated a moment before answering. "Why couldn't a young fellow like you go on foot?" he asked. "Do your own traveling."

"And where would I go?"

"Wherever your eyes lead," the driver answered, turning away. "It's no concern of mine."

The rebbe understood, and set out on his self-imposed banishment.

As I have said, he surfaced again several years later in Biala. (The story of how this happened has been passed down by word of mouth, so I won't retell it here, although it would set your ears on fire.) About a year, more or less, after the rebbe's reappearance, Reb Yekhiel, a prominent citizen of Biala, hired me as a tutor for his children.

At first, I did not want to take up the position. Reb Yekhiel, you must understand, was one of those old-fashioned, wealthy Jews. He endowed each of his daughters with a dowry of a thousand gold

pieces, and he married them into the most distinguished rabbinical families. In fact, his last daughter-in-law was the Brisker rov's daughter.

From this you may conclude that if the Brisker rov and the other in-laws were enemies of Hasidism, so Reb Yekhiel must of necessity be an enemy too; whereas I was a Hasid, a disciple of the Bialer rebbe. How, then, could I have dealings with such a house?

Nevertheless, I was drawn to Biala. To be able to live in the same town as the rebbe was not a small consideration. I turned the matter over in my mind—and I went.

Reb Yekhiel turned out to be a truly unassuming and decent man. I would even vouch for the fact that his own heart was powerfully drawn to the rebbe. Because, to tell the truth, he was not much of a scholar. He looked at the Brisker rov, as they say, with the blank eye of a rooster contemplating a human being. So he did not forbid me to follow the Bialer rebbe, but he himself kept his distance. Whenever I brought up the subject of my rebbe, he pretended to yawn, although it was obvious to me that he was listening with both ears. But his son, the Brisker rov's son-in-law, frowned and gave me a look of anger and derision. He did not argue with me, however, being by nature a man of few words.

The day came when Reb Yekhiel's daughter-in-law, the Brisker rov's daughter, was about to give birth. Certainly, there is nothing out of the ordinary about a woman giving birth; but that was not the whole story. It was known that because the Brisker rov had once ordered a Hasid to be shaved—that is, to have his beard and sidelocks shorn by Gentiles—the rov's good name had been tarnished in the eyes of the saintly men of his generation. Both his sons died within five to six years after the event—may God protect you from such a fate! And none of his three daughters had male offspring. In addition, all three of his daughters, poor souls, were prone to painful labor, during which they were each time closer to the next world than to this one. But since it was the will of heaven that there should be disputes between misnagdim and Hasidim, everyone knew that this was a punishment imposed by the holy men of his generation on the Brisker rov. But the Brisker rov himself, despite his luminous eyes, did not see it! And perhaps he did not want to see it. He continued to carry on his campaign of opposition to the Hasidim with an iron fist, with excommunications and denunciations, just as in former times.

I felt very sorry for Gitele (that was the name of the Brisker rov's

daughter)—first, because she had a Jewish soul, and second, because her Jewish soul was virtuous. Not a single poverty-stricken bride got married without her assistance—that was how generous she was.

To think that such a saintly being should have to pay for her father's severity! That was why, as soon I noticed that the midwife had begun to hurry about the house in preparation for the delivery, I set about moving heaven and earth to persuade the family to send for the Bialer rebbe. Let them send a note without a fee—as if he wanted or needed the money! The Bialer rebbe did not believe in fees.

I tried first to talk to the Brisker rov's son-in-law. I knew that his soul was bound up with Gitele's, since no matter how they tried to conceal it, the harmony between husband and wife radiated from every corner of the house and from all their gestures and expressions. Nevertheless, he was the Brisker rov's son-in-law! He spat and walked away, leaving me standing with my mouth open.

So I approached Reb Yekhiel himself. He answered: "She is the Brisker rov's daughter! I would not do such a thing to the Brisker rov, not even if her life depended on it, Heaven forbid."

I tried Reb Yekhiel's wife—a good woman, but common. She answered me as follows: "If my husband told me to, I would instantly send the rebbe my best holiday headscarf and my earrings, both of them treasures that cost a mint. But without his say-so, I wouldn't send even half a penny; not even a crumb."

"But just a note. What harm can it do?"

"Without my husband's knowledge, I do nothing!" she responded, exactly as a decent Jewish wife ought to answer. She turned her back on me, but I noticed that it was only to hide her tears. A mother's heart knows, and her heart had already sensed the danger.

So it was that as soon as I heard the first scream, I myself ran for the rebbe.

"Shmyeh," he said to me. "What can I do? I will pray for her."

"Give me something, Rebbe," I pleaded, "anything to help the woman in her labor. A charm, a coin, a talisman . . . something with your blessing."

"God forbid! It will only make things worse," he replied. "Without faith such things can do harm. And she has no faith in these things."

What could I do? These were the first days of the Sukkot holiday. Gitele was having a difficult childbirth, but I could be of no help. I might as well stay in the rebbe's house. I was quite at home there; so I thought that if I spent every moment of my time gazing imploringly at the rebbe, perhaps he would take pity and relent.

Word came that things were bad. Gitele's pains had already lasted three days. Everything that could be done had been done: there were prayers in the synagogue; they had measured the graves in the cemetery; they had burned a hundred pounds of candles in the synagogue and in the study house, not to mention collecting a fortune in charity!¹³ What more is there to say? All the clothes closets stood open, a mountain of coins of all kinds lay on the table. The poor came in and helped themselves to as much as they wanted. I took the whole thing very much to heart.

"Rebbe," I said. "After all, it is written, 'Charity saves from death.'"

He answered as if he had not understood: "Perhaps the Brisker rov will come."

At that very instant Reb Yekhiel entered the room. He ignored the rebbe, as if he did not see him, but turned instead to me. "Shmyeh," he said, catching hold of my lapel. "There is a wagon waiting out back. Get in and drive to the Brisker rov. Tell him to come." Obviously, he already sensed what was at stake, because he added: "Let him see for himself what is going on. Let him decide what to do!"

His face bore such a look—how else to describe it? Corpses have been known to look better.

So I set off, thinking to myself that since the rebbe knew that the Brisker rov was returning with me, something was bound to come of it, perhaps a reconciliation. That is to say, a reconciliation not between the Brisker rov and the Bialer rebbe, since the two of them had never fought each other, but between their two factions. Because, after all, when the Brisker rov came to Biala, he would see for himself how things were. He had eyes, after all.

But, obviously, Heaven does not encourage easy solutions. We had no sooner driven out of Biala than a large cloud suddenly surged across the sky, a cloud as heavy and black as pitch! Suddenly, there arose such a gust of wind as if demons were flying in every direction at once. A peasant like my driver understands such things, so he crossed himself and, pointing his whip at the sky, announced that we were going to have a difficult journey, Heaven help us. Even as he spoke, the wind increased, piercing the cloud as if it were tearing apart a sheet of paper. The wind began to chase one piece of cloud into and over another, as if herding ice floes on a river. Clouds, two and three stories high, were already hovering over my head.

At first, I was not even afraid. Getting drenched was nothing new

to me and I am not afraid of thunder. First, because it never thunders at Sukkot time, and second, what evil could befall me so soon after Rosh Hashana? We Hasidim of Biala knew that for an entire year after the rebbe had blown the ram's horn for the New Year, thunder could do us no harm. But suddenly I felt a smack across my face, as if I had been struck with a whip. Once, twice, three times, and the color drained from my face. It was clear to me that the heavens were slapping my face, that they were driving me back.

And the driver added his plea: "Let's turn back."

I knew, however, that I had been sent on a matter of life and death. Sitting on the wagon in the thundering storm, I could hear the groans of the woman in labor and the cracking knuckles of the Brisker rov's son-in-law as he wrung his hands; and I saw before me Reb Yekhiel's dark face with its sunken, burning eyes. "Drive on," he pleaded. "Drive!" So on we drove.

Still it continued to pour. The water streamed down from above and splashed from beneath the wagon wheels and the horses' hoofs. The road flooded, until it was entirely submerged, and a foam hovered over the water. It seemed as if the wagon were beginning to float. And as if this were not enough, we had also lost our way. But I made it through!

I returned with the Brisker rov on Hoshana Raba, the seventh day of Sukkot.

If truth be told, as soon as the Brisker rov climbed on the wagon, the storm subsided. The clouds split apart and the sun shone through the crack, so that we drove into Biala hale and dry. Even the driver noticed the change in the weather and remarked in his language, "A mighty rabbi." Or perhaps he said, "A great rabbi." I don't remember which.

But the main thing was our arrival at Reb Yekhiel's house.

The women fell on the Brisker rov like a swarm of locusts. They virtually prostrated themselves before him and wept. There was no sound from the next room, where the woman in labor lay, either because she could not be heard above the lamentations of the others, or—I suspected the worst—because, Heaven forbid, she no longer had the strength to groan. Reb Yekhiel did not even notice us. He stood with his forehead pressed against a windowpane, apparently to cool his burning head. Nor did the Brisker rov's son-in-law turn around to greet us. He had his face to the wall, and I could clearly make out his body and his head trembling against it.

I thought I would collapse with tears and sorrow. All my limbs, my very soul, seemed to shiver with cold.

But we are dealing here with the Brisker rov! Here was a pillar of steel, I tell you! He was very tall, with stature "from the shoulder and up," as they once said of King Saul.⁴ He could inspire the awe of a king. His beard was long and white. I remember as if it were yesterday how one tip of his beard was tucked under his belt, while the other quivered above it. His eyebrows—white, thick, and long—hid half his face. When he raised his brows—God in heaven!—the women fell back as if they were retreating from thunder. Such eyes he had! Knives, naked butcher knives, glinted in his eyes. He roared like a lion: "Women, out of the way!" Then more softly: "And where is my daughter?"

He was shown to her room, and I was left utterly overcome. Such eyes! Such a look! Such a voice! He was altogether different from anything I was used to. The Bialer rebbe's eyes shone with such kindness and such mildness that they brought joy into your heart. When the rebbe looked at you, it was as if you were being showered with gold. And his sweet voice—God in heaven!—it caught at your heart and caressed it so tenderly, so soothingly. No one was afraid of him—Heaven forbid. Instead, he melted your soul with the sweetness of love, so that it yearned to leave your body and unite with the rebbe's soul, like a butterfly drawn to bright flame. But the Brisker rov was fear and trepidation. The majesty of ancient times. That such a man should enter the room of a woman in labor!

I was terrified. "He will reduce her to a pile of bones," I thought. So I ran to the rebbe.

The rebbe greeted me at the door with a smile. "Did you see?" he asked. "Did you see the glory of the Torah?"

I calmed down. If the rebbe is smiling, I thought, then all must be well.

And, in fact, all was well. Gitele delivered her child on the eighth day of Sukkot. And the day after that, Simkhat Torah, found the Brisker rov expounding the Torah at the table. I would actually have preferred to have been elsewhere, at someone else's table, but I was afraid to leave, especially since I was needed for the quorum. They were about to recite the blessing NivraKh Aleynu.⁵

How can I describe for you the Brisker rov's commentary on the Torah? If the Torah is a sea, then the Brisker rov was the leviathan in that sea. With one plunge he swam through ten tractates; with one sweep he encompassed the Talmud and the Commentaries. His words resounded and surged, sizzled and boiled, just as the real sea

is said to do. He made my head swim. But it is written, "The heart knows the bitterness of the soul."⁶ My heart did not rejoice in the holiday. That was when I remembered the rebbe's dream, and I froze. The sun shone through the window and there was no lack of wine on the table; I saw that the entire company was perspiring. And I? I was as cold as ice. I knew that over there, at the rebbe's table, they were expounding another kind of Torah. There it was bright and warm. Every word was interwoven with love and steeped in ecstasy. One could sense the angels fluttering around the room; one could almost hear the rustle of their large white wings. O God of the Universe! But it was not possible to leave.

Suddenly, the Brisker rov interrupted himself and asked: "What kind of Hasidic rebbe do you have here?"

"A certain Noah," someone answered.

It cut me to the quick to hear this "a certain Noah." Ah, the fawning flattery of such a response!

"A miracle worker?" the rov asked again.

"Very few miracles. We don't hear of them. The women say he performs wonders, but who listens to them?"

"He just takes money and performs no miracles?"

So they told him the truth, that the rebbe seldom took money and gave a lot of it away.

The Brisker rov grew thoughtful. "Is he a scholar?"

"They say a great one."

"Where is he from, this Noah?"

No one knew, so I was obliged to answer. This led to a conversation between me and the Brisker rov.

"Was this Noah, by any chance, ever in Brisk?" he asked.

"Was the rebbe ever in Brisk?" I stammered. "I think he was."

"Aha!" the rov exclaimed. "One of his followers." And I had the impression that he looked at me as if I were a spider.

He turned back to the company. "I once had a student," he said, "whose name was Noah. He even had a good mind. But he was drawn to the other side. If I told him once, I told him twice. . . . And I would have told him a third time. I would have warned him, but he disappeared. Could this be the same man?"

"Who knows?"

So the rov began to describe his student: a thin man, small, with a black beard, curly black sidelocks, a dreamy type with a soft voice, and so on.

The company answered that it was possible that this was he; it was very likely.

I thanked God that at that moment they began the blessing. But after the blessing something happened that I would never have dreamed possible.

The Brisker rov rose from his chair, took me aside, and whispered: "Take me to my former student, your rebbe. But take care! No one must know."

Obviously, I obeyed. But on the way I asked with trepidation, "Brisker Rov, with what intention do you pay this visit?"

He answered me plainly: "It occurred to me during the blessing that up to now I have judged him behind his back. I want to see—I want to see with my own eyes. And maybe," he added after a while, "God will help me and I will be able to rescue my pupil."

"You know," he continued jestingly, "if your rebbe is the same Noah who once studied with me, he could become one of the great men of Israel. He might even one day become the rov of Brisk."

Then I knew for certain that my rebbe was the same man, and my heart began to pound.

So the two mountains converged. And the fact that I was not crushed between them I consider to be a miracle from heaven.

It was the habit of the Bialer rebbe—may his memory be blessed—to send his Hasidim out for a walk around the city on Simkhat Torah, while he himself sat on his balcony and looked on with pleasure.

Biala was not then as it is today. It was, at that time, still a little town. All the houses were small and built low to the ground, with the exception of the synagogue and the rebbe's study house. The rebbe's balcony was on the second floor, and from there he could see everything as clearly as if it were on the palm of his hand—the hills to the east, and to the west the river.

The rebbe would sit on the balcony, surveying the scene. When he noticed that a few of the Hasidim were strolling about silently, he threw them the beginning of a melody. They caught it up and walked away singing. One group after another would then pass before the balcony on their way out of the town, singing with true joy, with genuine delight in the Torah. And the rebbe never moved away from the balcony.

This time, however, the rebbe apparently heard a different kind of step; so he arose and went out to meet the Brisker rov.

"Greetings, Rabbi," he saluted him humbly in his sweet voice.

"Greetings to you, Noah," the Brisker rov responded.

"Please sit down, Rabbi."

The Brisker rov sat and the Bialer rebbe stood before him.

"Tell me, Noah," the Brisker rov said, raising his eyebrows, "why did you run away from my yeshiva? What did you lack there?"

"What I lacked, Rabbi," Noahke answered with composure, "was air. I could never catch my breath."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about, Noah?"

"It was not I," explained the rebbe in a soft voice, "but my soul that lacked air."

"Why, Noah?"

"Your Torah, Rabbi, is nothing but law. It is without pity. Your Torah contains not a spark of compassion. And that is why it is without joy, without air to breathe. It is nothing but steel and iron—iron commandments, copper laws. It is a very refined Torah, suitable for scholars, for the select few."

The Brisker rov was silent, so the rebbe continued: "Tell me, Rabbi, what have you got for ordinary people? For the woodchopper, the butcher, the tradesman, the simple man? And, most especially, for the sinful man? What do you have to offer those who are *not* scholars?"

The Brisker rov maintained his silence, as if he had not understood what was being said. Still the Bialer rebbe stood before him and continued speaking in his mild voice.

"Forgive me, Rabbi, but I must speak the truth. Your teaching was rigid and dry, because it dealt only with the body, not with the soul of the Torah."

"The soul?" asked the Brisker rov, rubbing his high forehead.

"Certainly. Your Torah, as I have said, is only for the privileged few, for the learned, not for the ordinary man. But the Torah must be for all. God's emanation must rest on everyone, because the Torah is the soul of all the people of Israel."

"And your Torah, Noah?"

"Would you like to see it, Rabbi?"

"See the Torah?" The Brisker rov was astonished.

"Come, I will show you. I will show you the glory and the joy that radiate from it and touch all of Israel."

The Brisker rov remained motionless.

"Rabbi, I beseech you. Come. It is not far." He led him out on the balcony. I followed silently.

Nevertheless, the rebbe sensed my presence. "You may come along, Shmyeh," he said. "Today, you too shall see. And the Brisker rov will see. You will both witness Simkhat Torah, a true rejoicing in the Torah."

And I saw the same thing that I saw every Simkhat Torah, but this time I saw it differently, as if a curtain had fallen from my eyes.

The sky stretched above us, enormous, infinite, and of such a brilliant blue that it was a delight for the eye to behold. Across the sky floated white silvery clouds. When you looked closely at them, the clouds actually seemed to be trembling, as if they were dancing in joy at Simkhat Torah. Below, a broad green belt girded the town. Its color was a dark green, but so vibrant that the breath of life itself seemed to waft from the blades of grass. Now and again, little flames appeared to dance among the tufts of grass, each time in a different spot, as if embracing and caressing them.

Across the meadow with its many little flames strolled group after group of Hasidim. Their satin caftans, even those caftans made of cheaper cotton, glittered like mirrors, the tattered ones as well as the whole. The flames between the blades of grass flickered up around the shining holiday coats, so that they seemed to be dancing around each Hasid with love and ecstasy. And all the groups of Hasidim looked up at the rebbe with an extraordinary passion. I saw clearly how their thirsty eyes sucked in the light that shone from the rebbe's face as he stood on the balcony. The more light they absorbed, the louder they sang, ever louder and louder, ever more joyful, more holy.

Each group sang its own melody. But in the air, all the melodies and all the voices merged, so that only one tune reached the rebbe's balcony, as if they were all singing one song. Everything sang—the sky, the constellations above, and the earth below. The soul of the world sang. Everything sang!

God in heaven! I seemed to be dissolving in sweetness.

But it was not to be.

"We must say the afternoon prayer," the Brisker rov suddenly announced in his harsh voice—and everything vanished.

Silence fell. The curtain closed again before my eyes. Above me, an ordinary sky, and below, ordinary pasture; ordinary Hasidim in torn caftans murmuring old tattered fragments of song. The flames were extinguished. I looked at the rebbe. His face too was somber.

They did not reach an understanding. The Brisker rov remained a mismanaged, just as before. And that was how he left Biala.

Yet their meeting did have some effect. The rov never again persecuted Hasidim.

1900 (translated by Goldie Morgentaler)