

April

Friday

Okay, here's the deal: most kids my age can barely remember kindergarten. But me? I've got THOUSANDS of memories--because my parents treat our living room like a top-secret training camp. They call it "Operation Chinuch," and it's all about giving me a real Jewish education while dodging spies who want me to believe there's no Hashem.

This morning, before breakfast, Tatty burst into my room in full "command mode."

"HILLEL! REPORT FOR CHINUCH DRILLS,  
IMMEDIATELY!"

His chinuch drills involve me reciting Hebrew letters, parsha stories, and the brachos for tefillin--all in under ten minutes. If I blow it, he frowns like I just spilled his special tea. (Unfairness rating: 8 out of 10.)

Mommy says the "Three Letters" (AKA GPU, NKVD, KGB) are everywhere, lurking behind curtains and uniforms--like giant button eyes

watching every move. But I call them "The Letter Guys," and I swear they sound like bad board-game expansions. "Hey, retake your parsha or face elimination!" --Yeah, right.

After drills, we transform our dining table into a secret cheder. Mommy smuggles in the sefer under a pile of mending work; I try not to sneeze on it (I heard the spies can smell Torah on you). Today's lesson was about how communist schools teach lies--like, "Hashem is a fairy tale." Even my little brother giggled: "If Hashem is a fairy tale, does that make me Peter Pan?"

I nearly spit out my cereal. Bravo, Sammy.

At 10:00 AM sharp, Mommy peeked out the window and barked, "CURTAINS! NOW!"

Apparently, the Letter Guys send out "courtyard inspectors" to ask neighbors, "Got any unregistered kids?" If you get spotted, you risk being shipped off to a place with no candy, no Shabbos, and definitely no tefillin. Worst. Summer camp. Ever.

I tried to help: I drew a blueprint for a hidden bookshelf door--like in the spy movies--but Tatty shook his head. "Nice idea, Agent Hillel, but we'll stick with curtains for now."

Sigh. My super-secret bookshelf is now just a doodle in my notebook.

So that's one day in Operation Chinuch. I got drilled, nearly discovered, and dreamed up secret passages--all before lunchtime. I didn't even have time to watch imaginary cartoons (not that I own a TV).

UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 14 out of 10 (because I'd trade Operation Chinuch for a normal day at recess any time).

But hey--if I master this drill, I just might be the world's first Torah-torpedoed, chinuch-trained, super-secret agent. Stay tuned.

Tuesday

Today was my first OFFICIAL mission in Operation Chinuch Defense--and it was a total disaster... until it was sort-of-not-disastrous.

Here's the scoop:

Mommy leaned in and whispered,

"REMEMBER, HILLEL: NO ONE CAN SEE YOU,  
YANKEL, OR RIVKA OUTSIDE. NOT EVEN YOUR BEST  
FRIEND. NOT EVEN FOR TWO SECONDS."

So our job was twofold:

- Keep Rivka home (she's now "school age") without looking suspicious.
- Make sure Yankel and I (school-aged since forever) vanish completely.

On the UNFAIRNESS SCALE, this ranks at least 17 OUT OF 10--because I still haven't ridden my bike this week, and Rivka gets to have recess in our courtyard... turning into a "secret" courtyard recess.

I stacked all our blankets and pillows in front of the back window, like a fluffy fortress. Then I told Yankel to crouch behind the couch and pretend he was a laundry monster.

YANKEL: "I'M THE LAUNDRY MONSTER! ROAR!"

ME: "SHHH! NO ROARING! WE NEED TO BE INVISIBLE!"

That lasted until Rivka tripped over a pillow and nearly face-planted into Mrs. Goldberg's rosebush next door. Mrs. G looks nice, but she'd squeal to the "Three Letters" in a heartbeat.

At exactly 10:00, Mommy peeked through the drapes and gave the all-clear nod. That's our secret signal that the "courtyard inspectors" have finished their rounds. If they see kids in someone's courtyard, they write down your name and your parents might never see you again.

Then we practiced our knock code for underground chinuch:

- KNOCK KNOCK
- (PAUSE) one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi
- KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
- (PAUSE) three-Mississippi
- KNOCK KNOCK

Yankel missed the second pause and Mommy shot him a look that could melt butter. He apologized by giving me his last chocolate-covered raisin. Fair trade? I think yes.

Half an hour later, we heard a timid knock--a REGULAR knock. My

heart went BOOM. Rivka grabbed my hand so hard her gummy bracelet snapped. We all flung ourselves behind the couch like top-secret ninjas.

It was only Mr. Petrovich from next door, asking if he could borrow some sugar. Note to self: adults are WEIRDER than spies. Also, sugar is more important than life, apparently.

After Mr. Petrovich left, Mommy patted my head. "You did very well, Agent Hillel."

ME (THINKING): AGENT HILLEL? THAT'S ACTUALLY KIND OF AWESOME.

I didn't get to bike today, and I'm definitely never getting into the professional hider hall of fame... but I did earn a new title: LAUNDRY FORTRESS ARCHITECT. I'll take it.

UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 17/10 (but secret agent titles help a little).

Tomorrow: Scheme #2--Operation Trap-Door Bookshelf. Stay tuned!

Wednesday

Today was the day I discovered that being "the new kid" and "the only Jewish kid" in music class is a recipe for disaster... and, weirdly, for secret stardom.

Tatty had no choice but to register me in a non-Jewish school after the neighbors "outed" me. He told Ms. Semyanova (my music teacher) I was a "delicate child" who needed rest on Saturdays--and she believed him! So I get to skip school on Shabbos. Advantage: catching up on cartoons... er, I mean, cartoons in my imagination. Disadvantage: being the oddball who's never around for party planning.

Today we were in the last period of the morning shift--Music Hour. Ms. S. marched in, switched on the old record player, and announced:

"CLASS, STAND AND SING OUR GLORIOUS SONGS TO MOTHER RUSSIA!"

Everyone belted out "Glory to the Party" like they'd been singing it since birth. Me? I stood there, sweating in my chair. On the UNFAIRNESS SCALE, this situation is a 23 OUT OF 10--worse than being forced to

eat cold kugel.

Ms. S. pointed at me and asked,

"HILLEL, WHY DON'T YOU SING?"

I panicked and blurted out:

"I DON'T LIKE YOUR SONGS!"

Silence. My brain went KAPUT. I realized I'd just insulted Mother Russia (and a lot of people holding sharp record needles). My heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

With that stern-teacher glare, she declared,

"THEN SHOW US YOUR SONGS! GO TO THE  
BLACKBOARD AND SING ONE OF YOURS."

Great. Now I had to actually perform... or be labeled "class traitor" forever.

I remembered our landlord's son, Pinchas, who blasts Rashid Baibutov on his gramophone. I know all those tunes by heart--thank you, secret



eavesdropping! So I marched to the board, cleared my throat, and started in:

□ "O-LE-LE-LE, O-LE-LE..." □

Ms. S.'s jaw dropped. The entire class stopped chanting about Stalin and stared. Then--plot twist--she LOVED it! She waved at the afternoon teachers peeking in the door, bragging,

"LOOK AT MY NEW STAR SINGER!"

Now they want me to perform at every Party holiday: May Day, Revolution Day, New Year's... SHUDDER. Part of me thinks: "Wow, I'm a secret pop star!" but the other part screams, "No way am I singing Bolshevik jingles on their stage!"

- UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 23/10 (but down to 15/10 because I'm secretly awesome at singing)
- SILVER LINING: I could totally rock Vegas--if only it weren't a million miles away and run by non-Jews.
- KID-SCHEME: Next time I'll show up in a fake Russian accent and claim I'm eavesdropping on my neighbor's record player. Then they

might think I'm a "cultural exchange student" instead of a troublemaker.

I didn't sign up for fame. I just wanted to avoid those Party songs. But now I'm the class's "Azerbaijani sensation." If Ms. S. ever figures out I only sing for Pinchas's records, I'll be toast.

Tomorrow's mission: figure out how to politely--yet firmly--decline the May Day concert request. Maybe I'll fake a sudden case of "Jewish Voice." Stay tuned!

## Thursday

Today I learned that wearing tzitzis to school is like carrying unpopped popcorn kernels in your pockets--one wrong move and you're in BIG trouble.

I tried a new trick this morning: I showed up an hour early and lurked outside the school gate, hoping my classmates would see me casually strolling and think, "Oh, look, Hillel is cool." Instead, I nearly froze to death in

the courtyard breeze. Unfairness level: 19 OUT OF 10--because freezing is worse than cold cholent.

I kept my Uzbeki-style cap on in class so nobody would notice my weird haircut or my tzitzis strings under my shirt. But every time Ms. Semyanova said,

"ZALTZMAN, PLEASE REMOVE YOUR CAP,"

I pretended I was scratching an imaginary itch. My hand hovered awkwardly over my head like a bird pecking at dry grass. I kept it there until I was sitting again, which is basically a two-minute bird routine. Let's call this bird impression a "Strong Start," but also "Majorly Awkward."

Recess over, it was time for the dreaded vaccine inspection. The plan was simple: lift my shirt JUST enough for the shot and jam the tzitzis strings back inside. Easy, right? Wrong.

I hiked my own shirt, squinted at the nurse's needle, and--SPLURT--tzitzis strings flew out like overcooked spaghetti. The nurse, a Bucharian Jewess with a kind smile, leaned in and whispered, "YOU ARE A GOOD BOY, ACHACHAMTCHIK."

She totally blew my cover in two seconds. My face turned tomato-red, and I swear steam was coming out of my ears.

After that fiasco, I never took tzitzis to class again. Instead, I invented BATHROOM SWAPÔ:

- Walk in with tzitzis on, shirt tucked in
- Dash to the bathroom
- Strip off tzitzis, hide them in my briefcase
- Clip on the red Pioneer "rag" (tie)
- Walk into class as "Comrade Hillel"

Then, before dismissal, repeat everything in reverse. It's like a secret costume change, only grosser because the bathroom floor is sticky. I almost slipped on spilled soap today, nearly inventing HILLEL'S HEAD-FIRST SLIDEÔ into the sink. Fun? No. Effective? 100%.

- UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 19/10 (but down to 12/10 because I'm now a bathroom magician)
- SILVER LINING: I'm the fastest tzitzis-swapping agent this side of Samarkand.
- SECRET PRIDE: My red tie is so bright, I bet Ms. Semyanova

thinks I'm top Pioneer recruit. Score one for camouflage!

Tomorrow's mission: find a way to carry candy through that sticky bathroom without it dissolving into a gooey mess. Because if I'm going to survive all these costume changes, I need a secret sugar rush!

Friday

So here's the problem: I've been off on Saturdays (Shabbos) and Sundays (no school) for weeks, which makes returning on Monday like showing up to the party two days late--except it's a party missing cake, balloons, AND Hashem. Not cool.

UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 22/10 (because everyone else already teamed up on the soccer field without me).

To avoid being stared at, I tried "Ghost Mode." I arrived 30 minutes early on Monday and hovered by the fence, pretending to tie my shoe really poorly so the kids would think, "Oh yeah, there's Hillel--just a normal Monday shoelace fail, nothing to see here." It sort of worked until

I tripped over my own foot and face-planted into a mud puddle. Classic.

Next up: headcovering. I refused to lose my Uzbeki cap because without it, people would see my crazy hair and probably spot tzitzis strings peeking out from under my shirt. When Ms. Semyanova barked,  
"ZALTZMAN--CAP OFF!"

I raised my hand to my head like I was scratching an invisible itch and slowly slipped the cap off \_\_just\_\_ enough so it looked like a head scratch, not a religious gesture. My "itch" act got an A+ for stealth, but a C- for comfort--my arm was cramping by second period.

Today was vaccine day. I had two options:

- Remove tzitzis and risk full exposure.
- Lift them under my shirt and pray for invisibility.

I chose Option 2. Big mistake. As soon as I yanked up my shirt, tzitzis strings popped out everywhere--like confetti at a surprise party (except nobody was happy). The nurse, a sweet Bucharian Jewess, leaned in and whispered,

"GOOD BOY, ACHACHAMTCHIK."

She knew my secret! My face turned scarlet, and I vowed never again to play tzitzis-tetris with my own shirt.

After that fiasco, I became a BATHROOM SWAPÔ specialist:

Morning routine:

- Dash into bathroom
- Strip off tzitzis
- Stash them in my briefcase
- Clip on the red Pioneer tie ("the red rag")
- March into class looking like a model Communist recruit

Afternoon routine (reverse):

- Race to bathroom
- Yank off tie
- Wrap tzitzis around my hand like a secret scroll
- Slip 'em back on before heading home

It's a twelve-step dance that makes me sweat more than dodgeball. Today I nearly left my tie in the sink and tzitzis in my lunchbox. Good thing I remembered--I'd rather be caught with bread than with my tzitzis

flapping in the wind.

- I am now officially the fastest tzitzis/tie changer in Samarkand.
- My ninja-like bathroom sessions might earn me a black belt in "Sneaky Sleeve Arts."
- And hey, I haven't missed a single shot at school... literally. I face the needle every time--just in style.

Tomorrow's mission: figure out how to carry candy through the bathroom without it melting into a sticky mess. Because if I'm going to master Bathroom Swapô, I need a sugar boost!

Monday

Today was the day I got "called in" by the Big Bad Trio: Principal, Assistant Principal, and Ms. Semyanova. I knew something was up when I showed up early and the classroom was EMPTY. Normally, I'd breathe a sigh of relief--extra recess!--but something told me this wasn't going to be fun.



They sat me down in a tiny room (no windows!) and glared like I'd mashed all their pencils. The principal's voice boomed:

"ZALTZMAN, WHY DON'T YOU ATTEND SCHOOL ON SATURDAYS? WHO FORBIDS YOU?"

My palms were sweaty. I remembered Tatty's "weak child" cover story and stuck to it like gum under a desk. I croaked,

"THE DOCTOR SAYS I NEED TWO REST DAYS A WEEK--SUNDAYS AND... SATURDAYS."

They exchanged looks that screamed, "Nice try, baby liar." Then they SCREAMED back:

"YOU CAN PICK ANY DAY EXCEPT SATURDAY!"

Seriously? That's like saying, "You can eat pizza every day--except on pizza day." Absurd!

Next, they hauled in Tatty for a "chat." I heard them threaten:

"IF YOU KEEP YOUR SON HOME FOR RELIGIOUS REASONS, WE'LL REVOKE YOUR PARENTAL RIGHTS AND SEND HIM TO A STATE ORPHANAGE."

I almost choked on air. A state orphanage is kid-worst-nightmare territory: no candy, no Shabbos, no tzitzis. Ever! Tatty swore up and down it was just my health. He begged me to go for one Shabbos to calm them down.

TATTY (WHISPERED): "JUST THIS ONCE, HILLEL. FOR ALL OUR SALES."

I knew writing on Shabbos was WORST-OF-ALL, so I refused. Instead, I pulled off OPERATION SNEAK-OUT:

- Wait until everyone is asleep
- Tiptoe to Michael's house (only a few blocks away)
- Hide there until school started
- Slip back home unnoticed

It almost worked--until Michael's cat yowled like a foghorn and I nearly gave us away. But I made it back in time. Mission: BARELY accomplished.

After that drama, Tatty found me a new school... an HOUR away! Walking through dark streets in winter? Unfairness: 27 OUT OF 10. At

least I got to see cool street murals and practice my "brave face."

Then Tatty tried a "reverse move"--transfer me to the Jewish neighborhood school. He handed in my papers but forgot to pick them up. Two weeks went by and NOBODY cared or asked where I was. I was essentially "home-schooled" without even trying. Best. Attendance record. EVER.

- UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 27/10 (but down to 15/10 because I avoided writing on Shabbos)
- KID-SCHEME: Next time I'll invent a "Doctor's note" that says I'm allergic to pencils.
- SILVER LINING: I'm now a LEGEND in Michael's house for my midnight cat-dodging skills.

So--no more principal summons, no more orphanage scares, and zero forced writing on Shabbos. I'll call that a small win... even if it means I'm the world's greatest long-distance walker.

Stay tuned for more Operation Chinuch adventures!

Sunday

Today was Day One of OPERATION SECRET CHEDER with the legendary R. Zushedershamash, AKA "R. Zushe Paz, the gartel-wielding ninja."

Mommy whispered:

"DON'T SNEEZE ON HIS SEFER, HILLEL. AND  
WHATEVER YOU DO, EAT EVERY CRUMB OF THAT  
BREAD."

Why? Because in 1944, bread was so scarce it was basically gold--and the tiny smears of butter R. Zushe scraped into the cracks were even more precious.

R. Zushedershamash is about 4 feet tall with a white beard that swishes like a mop. He doesn't hit us with a leather strap like the JURASSIC teachers before him. Nope--he uses his GARTEL (the soft prayer belt) to deliver a single, ZAP!--light enough to sting but not to bruise.

UNFAIRNESS RATING: 5 out of 10 (only because the gartel-slap is

faster than my homework disappearance).

Each morning, before any of the spy-... I mean, STUDENTS--arrive, R. Zushe lines up our famine-ration bread. Then, with one tiny dab of butter, he turns it into a "miracle snack." I swear that smear tastes like chocolate-covered marshmallow in a dream. My tummy went from "empty" to "I could conquer the world" in three bites flat.

After our "miracle snack" high, we marched into prayer practice. R. Zushe's singsong voice made every word feel like a secret code. When I led the minyan today, I enunciated each letter so clearly that R. Chaim Zalman Kozliner later nodded and whispered,

"YOU LEARNED THAT FROM R. ZUSHEDERSHAMASH, RIGHT?"

Score one for covert chinuch mastery!

Nobody paid R. Zushe a single kopek for risking his life teaching us. He used the money parents slipped him to buy more bread and butter instead. That's like trading your allowance for more candy--for starving kids.

SILVER LINING: I got up at dawn, sneaked through our "no-go" zone, and learned Torah AND got a breakfast so good it could fuel a tank.

- UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 5/10 (but drops to 1/10 when you factor in buttered bread)
- KID-SCHEME: Draw a secret map of the crumbs on my desk--so R. Zushe thinks I ate every bit.
- MISHEARD FACT: I asked Mommy if "gartel" was some kind of German candy she forgot to buy. She did NOT laugh.

Tomorrow I'll start OPERATION BUTTER SMUGGLE--stash extra scraps in my pocket for recess. Because in this cheder, butter is the new gold!

Stay tuned for more chinuch adventures with R. Zushedershamash, the bravest teacher and greatest butter dealer in Samarkand.

May

Wednesday

Today was cheder with the one and only REB BENTCHA MAROZ--AKA "Mr. Sacrifice," the Chassidic superhero who'd rather slice his own fingers than serve in the army. No big deal.

Mommy says the years 1946-49 with Reb Bentcha were the highlight of Operation Chinuch. He wasn't just a teacher--he was a MECHANECH, a full-on educator who actually cared if we learned. His secret weapon? MESIRUS NEFESH--total self-sacrifice.

Reb Bentcha once CROPPED his own tendons so he'd flunk the draft board and never have to shoot a rifle. Imagine that: cutting your fingers on purpose! On the unfairness scale, it's a 3 OUT OF 10--better than having to eat cold kugel, but still way cruel.

KID THOUGHT: If I cut MY fingers, I could skip chores forever! (Don't tell Mommy I said that.)

He told us about an army crossing a river by BECOMING the bridge--soldiers drowned, piled up, and the rest marched over them. I nearly choked on my buttered bread.

REB BENTCHA: "THE REAL HEROES ARE THOSE WHO SACRIFICED THEMSELVES FOR THE REST."

ME (THINKING): EWWW, SOGGY UNIFORMS!

On the "gross" scale, this story is a 12 OUT OF 10, but on the "inspirational" scale, it's a 15 OUT OF 10--which cancels out to "mind-blowing."

We learn in the Mishulovin courtyard apartment--safe, secret, and perfect for sneak-attacks with paper airplanes. After Reb Bentcha finishes teaching, he drifts off to chat with Dovid and Eliyahu (the older Mishulovin brothers). That's my cue for OPERATION WIGGLE-OUT:

- Whisper the day's parsha to Sammy
- Toss a folded note across the room
- Pretend it slipped from my pocket

Reb Bentcha never HITS us. If our prank is minor, he puts us in the corner. If it's major, he slaps our HAND--only faster than a slap from Mr. Kellman, the gym teacher. Advantage: no bruises!



Reb Bentcha insists we chant Gemara like a sweet melody so the meaning shines through. Today he stopped me mid-chant:

"HILLEL, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND IT. YOUR TUNE IS ALL WRONG!"

He made me explain the Gemara to my mother at home. If she understands, he says, THEN I really get it. I tried singing it like an opera--didn't help. Maybe next time I'll bring a karaoke machine.

I overheard him grumbling about a boy who "tried to commit sushi." I was horrified until I realized he said "suicide," not "sushi." Huge relief--but I do love sushi.

- KID-SCHEME: Trade my leftover crumb of challah for Dovid's extra pencil--call it "Operation Stationery Rescue."
- UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 7/10 (because slicing your tendons is brave, but I'd rather pass cheder than lose a finger)
- SILVER LINING: Secret cheder means I get buttered bread AND top-secret stories. Plus, I'm practically a parsha-expert now!

Tomorrow's challenge: invent a "Gemara rap" so Reb Bentcha can't say I don't understand the meaning. Stay tuned--this diary's about to go hip-hop!

Friday

Today started like any other secret-soccer day in the courtyard--until REB BENTCHA crashed our game like he owned the place.

Yankel and I were in the heat of a LIVELY SOCCER MATCH (score: me, two goals; him, one own-goal) when Reb Bentcha strolled in, hands on his head, looking horrified. We froze mid-kick and sat down on our heels. My heart was pounding like a war drum.

UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 14/10 (because nothing stops a good goal like a teacher glare).

Instead of scolding us right away, he said,  
"BOYS, I HAVE A STORY TO TELL."

He told how, earlier that morning, he'd passed by the big shul yard and saw THREE ELDER CHASSIDIM--R. Eliyahu Levin, Yerachmiel Chodosh, and Boruch the shochet--PLAYING SOCCER! He described Boruch the shochet launching the ball, Yerachmiel sprinting, and WHACK! the ball bonking R. Eliyahu on the head.

We couldn't help GIGGLE. I mean, watching your butcher and your mashpia goof around with a ball is pretty funny.

Then Reb Bentcha's voice went stern:

"WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM AND YOU? YOU'RE ALSO BOYS WHO LEARN TORAH. IF IT'S NOT FITTING FOR THE ELDERS, IT'S NOT FITTING FOR YOU."

Ouch! My cheeks felt like they were on fire--he hit us with a DOUBLE WHAMMY of guilt and confusion.

- KID THOUGHT: If elder chassidim can play, then why can't we?
- SCHEME: Next time I'll invent "TANYA-SOCCER," where every goal requires reciting a pasuk. That way it's educational, right?

- **SILVER LINING:** We got a private story time from Reb Bentcha--better than plain old cheder.

We left the ball in the corner and marched straight to learning, grumbling under our breath. But deep down, I admit it was **KIND OF COOL** that respected elders secretly love soccer too (even if they don't think it's "fitting").

**UNFAIRNESS RESTART LEVEL:** Dropped to 7/10 because at least we learned two new words: "mesirus nefesh" and "own-goal."

Tomorrow's mission: find a way to sneak in a quick game after cheder--maybe with a tiny rubber ball under our coats. Stay tuned!

Thursday

Today's cheder started with whispers about how all the "normal" kids someday go to university and become engineers or doctors. My friend Max bragged,

"MY MOM SIGNED ME UP FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL--NEXT

STOP, UNIVERSITY!"

I nearly choked on my challah. On the UNFAIRNESS SCALE, that moment was 31 OUT OF 10--worse than realizing the only candy in the house is sugar-free gum.

Before cheder, Tatty reminded me of R. Mendel Futerfas's famous words:  
"A CLEVER MAN IS ONE WHO ACTS IN A CLEVER MANNER."

Translation: Dad isn't impressed by fancy titles or diplomas. He wants me to learn at home and from our Chassidic masters--no secular shortcuts needed. So Max's brag felt extra annoying today.

Right then, Reb Bentcha swung open the courtyard door, heard Max's brag, and marched us straight into the lesson on Deuteronomy 13: "Follow the L-rd your G-d, fear Him... worship Him, and cleave to Him." He pointed his crooked fingers at Max and said,  
"EXPLAIN THIS VERSE."

Max gave the simple translation. Reb Bentcha frowned, made him repeat

it--twice. By the THIRD TIME, Max was pale as matzah, stammering,  
"FOLLOW HASHEM... DON'T GO TO... UM... PUBLIC  
SCHOOL?"

Reb Bentcha's eyes sparkled. Then he boomed the REAL meaning with a  
singsong melody:

"FOLLOW"--ONLY WALK AFTER THE L-RD.

'FEAR'--DON'T WANDER INTO MARXIST SCHOOLS.

'WORSHIP'--TURN YOUR BACK ON LENIN'S LIES. YOU  
UNDERSTAND NOW? NU, REPEAT AFTER ME!"

Max repeated it perfectly, his cheeks burning brighter than a yahrzeit  
candle. UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: down to 12/10, because getting  
schooled in front of everyone isn't my idea of fun--unless you call it "instant  
humility 101."

Later, Mordechai begged to dip his pen in my inkwell. I snarled,  
"GET YOUR OWN!"

Big mistake. Reb Bentcha caught me and asked out loud,  
"HILLEL, DID YOU SAY MODEH ANI TODAY?"

I gulped and admitted I had. He then made me explain the first prayer--MODEH ANI--and sniffed,

"MODEH MEANS SELFLESSNESS. ANI MEANS SHARING. IF A FRIEND NEEDS INK, YOU GIVE INK. GOT IT?"

Suddenly, a missing inkwell felt way more embarrassing than a missed soccer goal.

- Kid-scheme: Next time, I'll stash extra nickels in my pencil case so I can buy Mordechai his own inkwell. Then we'd both win!
- Silver lining: I'm secretly proud that my chinuch is so solid that even Max ended up repeating anti-communist verse. Take that, public school!
- Unfairness final rating: 15/10 (but down to 5/10 because I got a free life-lesson and no gartel slaps).

TOMORROW'S MISSION: Craft a "Modeh Ani" jingle to sing on my walk home--plus plan Operation Ink Rescue for Mordechai. Stay tuned!

Friday

Today I nearly starred in my own action movie--OPERATION: BULLET DODGER--and let me tell you, it was the SCARIEST thing ever.

Cheder is in the Mishulovin courtyard, right opposite the big gate. Reb Bentcha sits by the window like a lookout, scanning for intruders. Whenever he spots someone unusual, he gives us The Signal and we bolt for the side exit.

Most times I'm fast enough--zoom, I'm gone! But this time I hesitated, standing behind the door like a mannequin until Reb Bentcha shooed the surprise guest away. That felt like a decade.

Then came the real drama. The government was building something huge next door using PRISON LABOR, so they fenced the site with barbed wire and four watchtowers, each with a guard carrying a rifle.

One prisoner escaped, and all the guards went BERSERK, running through yards and firing shots into the air. It was like fireworks... only every boom was a bullet warning you, "Don't get caught!"



Reb Bentcha spotted the chaos and hissed,  
"GO HOME SLOWLY, BOYS--NO SPRINTING!"

Slow exit? No problem. I tiptoed out--until I saw a guard staring at me, rifle raised, charging like I was the escapee.

GUARD (SHOUTING): "STOP! HALT OR I FIRE!"

My brain short-circuited. KID LOGIC kicked in: "Run faster!" So I booked it, arms pumping like a cartoon character, until I rounded a corner and dove behind a pile of crates. I heard shots ring out--TWANG! TWANG!--bullets whizzing above my head.

UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 100 out of 10 (because running away made me a better target, not a better runner).

I crouched there, heart pounding so loud I was sure the guard heard it. After what felt like forever--ACTUALLY about two minutes--the guard stomped past and yelled,  
"FALSE ALARM!"

Then he stormed back to the fence and forgot all about little me.

When I finally got home, Tatty gave me "the look" (you know, the "you can't outrun a rifle" look) and said,

"THAT WAS BY MIRACLE ALONE, HILLEL."

SILVER LINING: I learned I'm surprisingly good at hide-and-seek... when the seeker has a big gun. Also, I now have the ultimate bedtime story: "The Day I Outran a Soldier."

- Practice parkour in secret--vaulting fences like a ninja
- Invent INVISIBILITY CLOAKÔ (still working on the science part)
- Carry a fake mustache to fool guards into thinking I'm someone else

FINAL UNFAIRNESS RATING: 100/10 (but 20/10 for the adrenaline rush and my new ninja skills).

Stay tuned for more "close-call" chronicles in Operation Chinuch!

Sunday

Today we moved cheder from the courtyard room into the CELLAR under the Mishulovin house--and let me tell you, it was GROSS, AWESOME, and TOTALLY TOP-SECRET all at once.

Reb Bentcha decided our summer hideout needed an upgrade after a bunch of "unexpected guests" (AKA spies and inspectors) nearly caught us. So he found us a cellar that used to be a STABLE for horses and donkeys. It was full of:

- Old GARBAGE
- Layers of DUST
- A generous helping of MANURE

UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 6/10 (only because manure is worse than Monday mornings).

Despite the smell, the cellar had three big advantages:

- INVISIBLE LOCATION - No one suspects a donkey den is now a cheder!
- GATE-VIEW WINDOW - One barred window looks right at the

courtyard gate. We can spot intruders early and VANISH.

- ESCAPE HATCH - A second window opens onto the street. When spies show up, we SCRAMBLE out, scratch our hands on rusty nails, and disappear like ninjas.

Plus, the draft through those two windows makes it COOLER THAN MY BEDROOM ON A FAN SETTING. Secret hideouts = instant mystique.

Reb Bentcha hired a cleaner to scrub out the manure and dust--STRICT ORDERS: nobody talk about cheder until the cellar's spotless. But I goofed. I saw Bentcha supervising and whispered (LOUDLY),  
"REBBI, WE'LL LEARN HERE?"

Big. Mistake. He shot me a glare that could melt steel. When cleanup was done, he gathered us and SHOUTED my error in full "lesson mode":

"I WARNED YOU NOT TO MENTION OUR LEARNING!  
YOU SHOUTED:

'REBBI, WE'LL LEARN HERE?

REBBI, WE'LL PLAY HERE?

REBBI, WE'LL EAT HERE?"

My face burned hotter than a coal in a tandoor oven.

After that, I mastered OPERATION LIP LOCK:

- STEP 1: Zip lips at the hint of "cellar" talk.
- STEP 2: Nod or give a thumbs-up (quietly!).
- STEP 3: If in doubt, pretend to sneeze--best secret-keeper trick ever.

UNFAIRNESS FINAL RATING: 8/10 (but drops to 2/10 now that I'm a stealth whisper-ninja).

SILVER LINING: I'm now better at keeping secrets than at hide-and-seek--and I didn't even have to slice any donkey manure to learn it.

Tomorrow's mission: figure out how to air out this place without alerting the spies. Bomb smell AND manure smell? That's a double defeat!

Tuesday

MISSION BRIEF: Today was our big FARBRENGEN (secret gathering) with Reb Bentcha. You know, the kind where you drink a little "L'chaim," clap on the table, and spill more secrets than tea at Mommy's chit-chat circle.

One of the chassidim grumbled about a guy who'd been forced into the Communist Party and "went cold" on mitzvos. He even called him a "gentile." My stomach flipped--how do you insult someone for surviving?

Before anyone could gasp, Reb Bentcha slammed his fist (gently!) on the table and barked:

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM HIM? WHEN EIGHT MILLION SOLDIERS STAND WITH RIFLES AND TRY TO STOP HIM FROM PUTTING ON TEFILLIN--AND HE STILL PUTS THEM ON--IS HE NOT A TZADDIK? A RIGHTEOUS HERO!"

Silence. Then--whispers of "Wow."

UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 3/10 (because nobody wants to be called a gentile, but I'll take a cool story any day).

Next, Reb Bentcha paced like a professor and said life is like a carnival fair. Everyone's racing here and there--buying cotton candy, winning stuffed bears, posting selfies 100 years ago... they didn't even exist! And 100 years from now, they won't be here either!

"WHY ALL THIS FUSS?" HE ASKED. "TRUE VALUE IS IN TORAH AND MITZVOS--NOT IN TOYS AND GADGETS."

He grabbed a scrap of paper off the floor and waved it at us:

"YOUR WORDS? WORTH LESS THAN THIS PAPER SCRAP!"

- **KID-SCHEME:** Next farbrengen, I'm bringing my own "Table-Knock Remix"--four knocks, a spin, and a pirate "Arr!" to keep everyone on their toes.
- **SILVER LINING:** Secret gatherings come with snack-sized "L'chaim" sips (grape juice, of course!) and stories that make me feel like a tiny hero.
- **TAKEAWAY:** If one tzaddik can face eight million soldiers just to put on tefillin, I can face my own "soldiers"--like math tests and cold showers--without quitting.

So there you have it: one little Jew, eight million soldiers, and a whole lot of courage. Now if only I had the guts to stand up in music class and declare, "I don't like your songs!" as boldly as that tzaddik. Maybe tomorrow...

Stay tuned for more Operation Chinuch adventures!

Thursday

Today's episode in Operation Chinuch takes us to ICY MADNESS--my brother Berel's quest for skates...and one VERY surprising condition from Reb Bentcha.

For weeks, Berel has been BEGGING Mommy for ice-skates. He's watched every kid at the public pond zoom around like penguins on steroids and wants in on the fun. But Mommy kept saying,

"BEREL, YOU'RE A TORAH LEARNER--SKATES AREN'T EXACTLY PART OF THE CURRICULUM."

UNFAIRNESS LEVEL: 18/10 (because how is sliding on ice MORE



distracting than singing silly Party songs?).

Mommy finally hatched a plan: wait for Reb Bentcha's private lesson at our house, then casually ask,

"REB BENTCHA, SHOULD WE BUY SKATES FOR BEREL?"

Berel nearly fainted--he was SURE Bentcha would say no and he'd be the only kid without wheels on his feet.

Mommy asked in her softest whisper while Berel hovered behind the sofa.

Reb Bentcha furrowed his brow, tapped his gartel, and APPROVINGLY said,

"BUY THE SKATES--GOOD IDEA!"

Berel's jaw dropped. Mommy blinked in shock. And I... I started doing a victory dance in my head.

Then (dramatic pause)... Reb Bentcha added with a twinkle in his eye:

"BUT ONLY ON ONE CONDITION: IF R. BORUCH THESHOCHET, R. ELIYAHUPARITCHER, AND R.

YERACHMIEL THE ELDER SKATE IN FRONT OF HIM,  
WHY SHOULDN'T BEREL SKATE FOURTH IN LINE?"

- KID-SCHEME: Recruit the ELDER SKATE SQUAD--send Berel a secret invitation: "Fancy a secret Saturday evening skate-off?"
- SILVER LINING: Berel will have VIP STATUS behind three legendary chassidim--talk about a power position!
- UNFAIRNESS FINAL RATING: 5/10 (because skating with heroes beats skating alone).

Berel ran off to measure his foot for size "like a serious scientist." I'm drawing up a FORMATION MAP in my notebook:

- R. Boruch the Shochet □
- R. Eliyahu Paritcher □
- R. Yerachmiel the Elder □
- BEREL (future skating champion) □

As for me? I'm thinking about... maybe I can join the SECOND DIVISION behind Berel. That way, I'm still in the action--and I get to practice my OPERATION ICE-SNEAK next winter.

Stay tuned: next time, I'll report on how to polish skates on Shabbos without getting caught!

Monday

Today during cheder, Reb Bentcha told us a story that sounded like something out of a superhero comic--except it was REAL!

He said that back when he studied in Lubavitch yeshiva, a new boy showed up--totally quiet, long peyos, not from any Chabad family. He sat by himself, never saying a word. The other boys teased him like crazy, but he just glared at them until they backed off.

Finally, he hollered at the bullies:

"STOP BUGGING ME AND I'LL TELL YOU A SECRET STORY ABOUT THE REBBE THAT NO ONE'S EVER HEARD!"

Of course, they agreed--because SECRET STORIES are better than chocolate cake.

Then he began:

"I'M A SLONIMER CHASSID. LAST YEAR, MY REBBE TRAVELED THE WORLD TO MEET TZADDIKIM IN EVERY COUNTRY. WHEN HE CAME BACK, HE HELD A BIG FARBRENGEN, AND MIDWAY THROUGH HE SAID: 'I'VE SEEN REAL TZADDIKIM, HOLY REBBES, AND HOLY JEWS... BUT THERE'S ONE LUBAVITCHER TZADDIK WHO OUTSHINES THEM ALL!"

He described this "real tzaddik" wearing TWO GOLDEN CHAINS on his coat and a GOLDEN WATCH--like superhero gear--but with MORE HUMILITY THAN ANYONE. The Rebbe said:

'HOW FORTUNATE ARE THE EYES THAT PEERED INTO THE EYES OF A REAL TZADDIK!"

Then they served food, and everyone rushed to grab leftovers--until the Rebbe turned to the Slonimer boy and said,

'THAT'S NOT FOR YOU. GO TO LUBAVITCH!"

That was the moment the silent boy finally joined the Chabad crew.

- UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 4/10 (because golden chains and a golden watch? That's almost as cool as my shiny sneakers--but some stuff is too fancy for cheder).
- KID-SCHEME: Next time I'll sneak in a toy spywatch and pretend I'm a "super-tzadik" in hiding.
- SILVER LINING: I realized that real greatness doesn't need bragging--it's all about HUMILITY. Plus, secret tzaddik stories ROCK!

I thought Reb Bentcha said "tzaddi-kim" once sounded like "taco kim," and for a second I wondered if tacos were involved. They weren't. Big disappointment.

So--lesson learned: even someone who looks like a king (gold chains, secret fame) is nothing without a humble heart. Now I just need to figure out how to rock those chains AND keep my ego in check.

Stay tuned: my next mission is "Operation Humble Hero"--but only after I buy those cool sneakers!

Friday

Today I turned 13, which usually means a huge Bar Mitzvah party with balloons, cake, and a crazy dance floor. Instead, I got a tiny gathering of eight people in our second-floor apartment at 6, Toopik 1--"toopik" means dead-end street, in case you wondered why our address sounds like a lost puppy's GPS.

1952 was a TERRIBLE YEAR for Soviet Jewry. Rumor had it Stalin planned to ship three million Jews off to forty thousand barracks in freezing Eastern Siberia. So throwing a party? Not exactly "top priority."

Only these brave (and crazy) folks showed up:

- Tatty and Berel (my singing-cohort big brother)
- Uncle Boruch Duchman
- Dovid & Eliyahu Mishulovin
- Moshe Nissilevich
- Berke Chein (hidden in our closet--true story!)

We quietly sang the LECHAIM tune and some slow Chassidic melodies. I almost fell asleep.

Then came GIFT TIME--sort of. Prayer books were all ragged and in the wrong NUSACH. Only one mint-condition TORAH OHR SIDDUR existed in town, owned by Osher Shlaif. He wanted 300 RUBLES for it--enough to buy me:

- A brand-new winter coat
- Five pairs of wool socks
- Or three months' worth of bread

Aunt Rosa begged,

"HILLEL, GET THE COAT. YOU'LL FREEZE TO DEATH!"

But me? I wanted that siddur. I pictured myself davening like a champion.

UNFAIRNESS SCALE: 28/10 (because who sets a price that high for a book without pictures?).

In the end, I WON the debate, and they bought me the Torah Ohr. I tore into the wrapping like it was candy--even though Aunt Rosa flipped through it and sighed,

"THREE HUNDRED RUBLES? I'D EXPECT AT LEAST ONE

## PICTURE IN HERE!"

- **KID-SCHEME:** Next year I'll draw little doodles in the siddur margins--instant "pictures included."
- **SILVER LINING:** I now own the coolest prayer book in Samarkand. No one else can say they've got a Torah Ohr siddur in perfect shape!
- **TAKEAWAY:** Sometimes you have to risk frostbite and Aunt Rosa's scolds to get what you really want.

So that's my Bar Mitzvah: eight secret guests, zero cake, and one priceless siddur. Best. Gift. EVER.

P.S. I'm already planning my BAR MITZVAH PART 2--code name "Operation Cake Explosion." Stay tuned!