

October

Thursday

Today I overheard Dad telling Mom about "how it all began back in 1917" and let me tell you, I think this is the WORST origin story EVER. It's LIKE LEARNING THAT THE WORLD's most evil ice-cream villain decided to erase all flavors. Except it's NOT ICE CREAM--It's religion! Unfairness rating: 47 out of 10.

"AFTER THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION... A RUTHLESS BATTLE TO ERADICATE RELIGION."

My brain went POOF--"eradicate" sounds like they want to press a giant delete key and POOF--no more mitzvahs!

Then Dad said there was this scary police called the NKVD--except that was just one name. These secret-police groups kept changing names like my cousin changing soccer teams. We Chassidim call them "DI OSIYOS"--Hebrew for "the three letters" (GPU, then NKVD, then KGB). Or "A KNEPL," which means "a button" (like the button on their uniform).

ME: "SO BASICALLY, THE BAD GUYS HAVE SUPER-POWER CODE NAMES AND BUTTONS?"

DAD (WHISPERING): "AND LOTS OF CELLARS AND SIBERIAN CAMPS."

ME: ...CAN WE GO BACK TO TALKING ABOUT CANDY?

Then Mom said any parent who taught Jewish stuff was branded an "enemy of the state." They said Judaism was "poison of the masses."

POISON. OF. THE. MASSES.

If Judaism is poison, what does that make cold broccoli? Because I'd actually choose broccoli over poison.

Worst of all, they'd snatch kids away to "re-educate" them in orphan homes. I tried to imagine an orphan camp: no toys, no parents, just terrifying guards teaching "no Hashem allowed." I nearly choked on my juice.

- STEP 1: Build a secret fort under my bed.
 - STEP 2: Hide my siddur (prayer book) and Megillah in a shoebox.
 - STEP 3: Use the special knock-knock code to let the "Torah spies" in.
- (Theory: If I become a secret agent, maybe the bad guys will think I

don't exist. Genius!)

Except Dad says: "We're not building forts today."

Adults always ruin perfectly good plans.

- I can't brag to my friends that I know secret-police code names.
- I'd rather be learning cool stuff in cheder than drawing blueprints for a tunnel.
- I miss my hockey stick.

But hey, at least I get to write this diary in SECRET, so I'm basically a super-secret spy too. If only I could get credit for that.

UNFAIRNESS RATING FOR TODAY: 50 out of 10 (because if Bolsheviks had to wipe out religion, why didn't they at least leave a little candy behind?)

September

Monday

Today was MISSION #1 in the War for Jewish Education: HIDE THE CHILDREN FROM THE NEIGHBORS. Unfairness rating: 99 out of 10.

I woke up to Tatty whispering, "Remember, do not let anyone see you before registration is over." Registration is when the government sends teacher-spies door to door to ask, "Any children of school age here?" If they spot you playing ball or even peeking out the window, they snitch--and then your whole family gets in trouble.

Mommy gave us a refresher on our secret knock:

- Knock knock
- (Count to three in your head)
- Knock knock knock
- (Pause three seconds)
- Knock knock

If any visitor (like our melamed, Reb Mendel) uses that exact pattern, we know it's safe. Otherwise, we vanish faster than a popsicle on a hot day.

Then Mommy set up "Operation Giant Houseplant." She plopped a HUGE

potted fern by the window. I tried hiding behind it, but my sneakers stuck out the bottom. Banana peel! Not exactly MISSION SUCCESS.

At 10:15 AM, I saw Teacher #1 hoofing down our alley with her clipboard. My heart did a triple-somersault. She stopped at Mrs. Levin's door and chirped, "Good morning! Any children who should be in school here?"

I ducked behind the fern. Yankel dove under the table and squeaked when he hit his elbow. (Sorry, Yankel.)

Mrs. Levin mumbled, "Not that I know of," and slammed the door. I nearly fainted from relief.

Five minutes later, Teacher #2 strolled by our front gate. I tried my brilliant disguise: I wrapped our old tallit around me like a blanket and tiptoed behind Tatty's chair. But the fringe dragged on the floor and I tripped--CRASH! Mommy shot me "the look" and shoved me into the kitchen pantry.

While hide-and-seek was happening outside, we had to do our cheder lessons

inside. I sat cross-legged on the rug. Mommy taught us the Parsha and new niggunim. Honestly, whispering Torah through the pantry door felt like being in a secret mission control. Kind of cool--silver lining!

After lunch, Tatty peeked out the window. "Registration is done," he whispered. "You can breathe."

I crept to the front gate and poked my head out. The street was empty! I hopped down the steps like a king returning from exile.

I've been thinking up better hiding spots:

- Hollow out a tree stump for a secret bunker.
- Build a pulley system to lower us through the basement hatch.
- Invent an invisibility cloak out of old curtains.

Dad says, "Let's NOT START WORLD WAR III WITH THE NEIGHBORS." BUT I'll keep designing my cloak on paper--just in case.

At least now I'm officially the "Hide-and-Seek Champion" of Samarkand. Nobody can find me! I even beat Yankel once--though he says I cheated because I hid in the oven. (That was a cooking mishap more than a cheat.)

I overheard Tatty say, "If they come back, we'll HAVE TO SEND RIVKA TO PUBLIC SCHOOL NEXT YEAR." I THOUGHT HE MEANT SEND RIVKA AWAY FOREVER! TURNED OUT HE MEANT ENROLL HER SO THE SPIES WON't notice the boys. Man, I almost started packing her backpack!

MISSION STATUS: SUCCESS

Children are hidden. Neighbors are none the wiser. Cheder lessons completed in secret.

Next up: Mission #2--Invent the Invisibility Curtain. Stay tuned!

Thursday

So remember how IVE BEEN HIDING FROM SCHOOL ALL THIS TIME? WELL, AT AGE NINE MY "RESPIRE" ENDED WHEN MRS. PETROV's cat saw me sneaking a peek outside and the neighbors tattled. Next thing you know, Dad is getting nasty phone calls from the principal. He warned Dad, "Send Hillel to school--or you lose your parenting

rights, and he goes to a Soviet orphanage!

Orphanage = No Torah. No Shabbos. No gefilte fish. NO THANK YOU.

Dad reluctantly registered me in a non-Jewish neighborhood school, because he figured those teachers wouldn't KNOW I'd be MIA every Saturday. He bribed Ms. Nina Semyanova (Grade 2 teacher) with a fancy pen, told her I was a "weak child" who needed rest two days a week (Sundays and Saturdays). She bought it. I got to skip Shabbos school--but I still had to trudge there Monday through Friday.

UNFAIRNESS RATING: 73 out of 10

Friday

Today was my first music class in public school. Everything was fine... until it wasn't.

SCENE: The music teacher played a patriotic Soviet song praising

"Mother Russia, Father Stalin, and Lenin's brave Party." My lips twitched--I HATE singing those songs.

TEACHER (POINTING AT ME):

"ZALTZMAN, WHY DON'T YOU EVER SING?"

Without thinking, I blurted:

"I DON'T LIKE YOUR SONGS."

IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES:

- My face turned tomato-red.
- I broke out in a cold sweat.
- The teachers EYES WENT HUGE--LIKE SHEd just seen a chicken tap-dance.

TEACHER:

"WHICH SONGS ARE YOURS AND WHICH ARE MINE?
GO TO THE BLACKBOARD AND SING ONE OF YOUR
SONGS!"

My brain did a backflip. Me, sing a song? In front of my new classmates?

Yikes. But then I remembered our landlord's KID, PINCHAS, BLASTING AZERBAIJANI RECORDS NEXT DOOR. I KNEW ONE OF THOSE TUNES BY HEART--RASHID BAIBUTOV's mega-hit.

So I marched to the blackboard, heart pounding like a drum. I opened my mouth and... SANG.

Guess what? The teacher's JAW DROPPED SO FAR SHE COULD've swallowed a pencil. She loved it! She thought I was showing off my own music. Crisis averted.

Saturday

At recess, rumors flew: "Did you hear Zaltzman's AMAZING VOICE?" BY AFTERNOON, THE TEACHERS FROM THE NEXT SHIFT PEEKED IN AND BEGGED ME TO PERFORM ON MAY DAY, REVOLUTION DAY, NEW YEARS... all of it.

Inside me, a TREMENDOUS BATTLE raged:

- PART OF ME: I LOVE applause. I'm ready for a standing ovation!
- THE OTHER PART: These are THEIR holidays--praising a system that hates my family's beliefs.

In the end, I refused every invite. I didn't attend their celebrations or sing for them again.

SILVER LINING: I walked away proud. My chinuch--my Jewish upbringing--gave me the courage to stand firm, even when it hurt.

UNFAIRNESS RATING FOR THIS WEEK: 88 out of 10 (but at least I discovered I can sing!)

NEXT MISSION: Figure out how to use my "secret agent voice" so I can whisper Torah tunes in music class--without getting caught!

Sunday

Today's assignment: REMAIN JEWISH WHILE DISGUISED AS A SOVIET KID. Unfairness rating: 82 out of 10.

I arrived at school thirty minutes early--too scared of classmates laughing at my "mystery boy" routine. I circled the playground like a lost puppy so everyone would think I live nearby. Sneaky, right?

I wear my Uzbeki-style cap inside class to hide my kippah. But sometimes Ms. Karina (the teacher) commands:

"ZALTZMAN, REMOVE YOUR HAT!"

Instead of defying her, I press my hand on my head and pretend to scratch an itch. I keep scratching until I sit down--no bald kid here!

Under my shirt, I wear tzitzis--my secret mitzvah-fringe. They stick out like rebellious shoelaces.

Today a nurse marched in for our "back jab"--injections are supposed to go in the arm, but this time it's the back! My brain screamed: HOW DO I HIDE TZITZIS STRINGS FROM A NURSE?

At the last second, I lifted my shirt and tried to tuck the tzitzis

underneath. Of course, the strings poked out like little tentacles. The nurse, a kind Bucharian Jewess, spotted them and leaned down:

"GOOD BOY, ACHACHAMTCHIK (LITTLE RABBI)!"

I nearly fainted--and not from the shot.

After that, I swore off tzitzis at school. Here's my new routine:

- Enter school wearing tzitzis and kippah.
- Run to the bathroom, pull off tzitzis, shove them in my briefcase.
- Clip on the red Pioneer tie--instant Soviet cool.
- Before going home, repeat steps 2-3 in reverse.

Rinse and repeat daily.

I overheard Ms. Karina telling another teacher:

"THAT ZALTZMAN IS EITHER THE QUIETEST PIONEER EVER OR A MASTER OF HIDE-AND-SEEK."

I decided she meant MASTER OF HIDE-AND-SEEK. Booster to my secret-agent ego!

- My bathroom dash is now Olympic-caliber speed.

- I've become a tie-tying pro--top 5 in Samarkand (in my mind).
- The nurse's "achachamtchik" made me feel like a mini-celebrity--if only she knew why!

NEXT MISSION: Invent a tzitzis with a built-in tie so I can wear both at once. Think about it--ultimate disguise!

Friday

Today's mission was REMAIN JEWISH WHILE LOOKING LIKE A PIONEER. Unfairness rating: 65 out of 10.

I snuck into school before the morning bell--got there 15 minutes early so nobody would stare at my "mystery boy" arrival. I circled the playground like a stealthy raccoon, hoping the other kids would just think I moved here.

My Uzbeki-style cap hides my kippah, but Ms. Karina still sometimes orders,

"ZALTZMAN, TAKE OFF YOUR HAT!"

Instead of looking like a clueless bald kid, I press my hand on my head and scratch "my scalp" until I sit down. Works every time--SCRATCH 'til seated, mission accomplished.

Today we had "back shots" with the school nurse. I knew there'd be a problem: tzitzis strings stick out like shoelace fireworks. If I took them off, everyone would spot my secret.

At the last second I lifted my shirt and tried to tuck the tzitzis under my shoulder--only three strings escaped, waving goodbye. The nurse, a nice Bucharian Jewess, leaned in and whispered (in Russian),
"GOOD BOY, ACHACHAMTCHIK (LITTLE RABBI)!"

I almost fainted--and not just from the shot.

After my "little rabbi" moment, I decided:

- Arrive at school wearing tzitzis + kippah.
- Hustle to the bathroom, yank off tzitzis, stuff them in my briefcase.
- Clip on the red Pioneer tie ("the red rag")--instant Soviet uniform.
- Before heading home, reverse steps 2-3.

I trimmed 12 seconds off my bathroom dash today--personal best!

I overheard Ms. Karina telling another teacher,

"HE'S EITHER THE BRAVEST PIONEER OR THE SNEAKIEST ORPHAN!"

I chose to think she meant BRAVEST PIONEER. Ego boosted by 30%.

- NEXT IDEA: Sew tzitzis into the lining of the briefcase so they never get lost.
- BONUS IDEA: Make a tie with tzitzis sewn on--two birds, one cloth!

Dad says those are "too inventive." He's no fun.

- I'm now a bathroom ninja--no tie stays untied.
- Nurse called me "little rabbi"--best compliment EVER.
- I can slip in and out of Jewish mode faster than a chameleon.

MISSION STATUS: SUCCESS

Tomorrow: figure out how to wear tzitzis and tie at the same time. Spoiler:

It may involve velcro.

END OF TODAY'S NOTEBOOK PAGE. NOW TO HIDE IT--MAYBE UNDER THE TIE DRAWER?

Wednesday

Today was THE WORST. I got called to the principals OFFICE--AND YOU KNOW THATs never good unless youRE EXPECTING A TROPHY (Im not).

I strolled in at my usual super-early time and saw no Ms. Fidasya in class. A minute later, a nasty note whispered my name:

"REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE."

My stomach did cartwheels. In the office sat the principal, the assistant principal, AND my teacher--three adults staring at me like I'd turned their chalk into candy.

PRINCIPAL (FIRM VOICE): "ZALTZMAN, WHY DON'T YOU ATTEND SCHOOL ON SATURDAYS? WHO TELLS YOU TO STAY HOME?"

I stuck to Dad's script:

ME (WEAK VOICE): "UH... THE DOCTOR SAYS I NEED REST TWO DAYS A WEEK."

They howled,

"PICK ANY DAY BUT SATURDAY!"

Then they threatened to yank Dad's parental rights and ship me off to a Soviet orphanage--no cheder, no Shabbos, no gefilte fish ever again.

UNFAIRNESS RATING: 100 out of 10

Thursday

Dad spent all night pacing like a worried dog. Next morning he announced:

"WE'RE MOVING YOU TO A DIFFERENT SCHOOL--FAR FROM HERE!"

He chose a school in the non-Jewish part of town, thinking they wouldn't notice my Shabbos magic tricks.

PROBLEM #1: The new school was a 50-minute trek each way. In winter, that's a stairway to frozen toes.

PROBLEM #2: No buses. Just me, my briefcase, and a million puddles.

By Day Three I looked like a drowned squirrel. My legs burned, my bag felt like a suitcase made of rocks, and I almost slipped on black ice--TWICE.

Silver lining: I'm now a walking legend. My calves could moonlight as anvils.

Friday

After a few weeks of me stumbling through snowdrifts, Dad had another plan. He told Principal #2,

"I'LL TAKE CARE OF TRANSFERRING HIS SCHOOL PAPERS MYSELF--NO PAPERWORK FOR YOU!"

Principal #2 beamed and handed Dad the WHOLE stack of documents.

Dad tucked them under his arm and... forgot to deliver them. Two weeks passed. Then four.

I kept going to school...? No. I kept staying home! Neither school checked on me. I was unregistered, unseen, and suddenly SCHOOL-FREE.

UNFAIRNESS RATING: 1 out of 10 (because I got my own personal stay-home solution.)

- Next time: invent a "briefcase drone" so I don't have to carry it through blizzards.
- Or train Mr. Whiskers (our cat) to deliver my homework--he already

sneaks in and out.

I overheard Dad tell Mom,

"HE'S SAFE NOW--LIKE A SECRET FILE UNDER THE KREMLIN."

Now I feel like state secrets.

- I never have to carry a schoolbag again (unless I want to).
- My snow-walking skills are Olympic-level.
- I can sanctify Shabbos without missing a beat.

MISSION STATUS: COMPLETE

NEXT MISSION: Figure out how to keep being home all week without anyone noticing. Maybe I'll need a secret calendar...

October

Monday

Today I learned that being good at hiding from school is great, but being

good at hiding from my stomach is even harder. Unfairness rating: 73 out of 10--because I have to dodge drab public school AND pretend I'm not starving.

Mommy and Tatty risked EVERYTHING to send me to an illegal cheder (Jewish school) in our apartment building. I felt like the world's TINIEST SECRET AGENT. EVERY KNOCK ON THE DOOR MADE MY HEART DO BACKFLIPS--WHAT IF IT WASN'T Reb Mendel but NKVD spies?

My first cheder teacher was R. Zushe, known to us kids as "DER SHAMASH" (the attendant). He was short, with a big white beard that looked like a cloud on his chin. He didn't smack us with a leather strap--nope, he slapped us gently with his GARTEL (prayer belt).

ME: "OWW!"

R. ZUSHE: "PAY ATTENTION TO EVERY LETTER, HILLEL!"

He was TERRIFYING... and AWESOME.

After cheder, I'd slump down to the kitchen table, and there it was--tiny blobs of butter melting into the dark bread. In those famine days, it was like discovering buried treasure. My belly rumbled so loud I thought it might alert the neighbors, but that buttered bread was INSTANTLY revitalizing. Silver lining: I could almost forget I was living under Communism.

R. Zushe made us pray in a singsong tune--every word got its own oomph. One day, R. Chaim Zalman Kozliner (a big-shot visitor) heard me lead davening and whispered,

"HILLEL, YOU MUST HAVE LEARNED FROM R. ZUSHE!"

I puffed out my chest--like, did I just get a secret-agent promotion?

I overheard Mommy say, "R. Zushe walks two hours each way to mikvah." I imagined him trudging through blizzards in his long coat, humming a niggun. Adults are drama queens sometimes.

- R. Moshe Vinarski taught us Torah reading every Friday--he was Lithuanian and had a pencil behind his ear like a real scholar.
- R. Avrohom Yosef Entin supplied our community with hand-written

calendars. He was so precise that even my math teacher would be jealous!

Each one left a mark, but only R. Zushe had the gartel and the bread.

MISSION STATUS:

Survived another day of secret cheder, gartel slaps, and butter rations.

NEXT MISSION:

Invent a stealth snack--something even Der Shamash can't confiscate!

Monday

Unfairness rating: 37 out of 10--because I LOVE cheder, but this guy is INTENSE.

Today I started learning with a new teacher, Reb Benzion Maroz, but everyone calls him BENTCHA. He's SHORT, WITH A BEARD SO BIG IT COULD HIDE MY ENTIRE HOMEWORK. HE DOESN'T smack

us with a strap--he gently slaps our hands with his GARTEL (prayer belt). Somehow that's even more terrifying.

Bentcha told us how he once mutilated his own fingers so he'D BE EXEMPT FROM THE DRAFT. HE PULLED HIS TENDONS, TIED THEM TILL HIS FINGERS CURLED UP, AND MARCHED TO THE DRAFT BOARD. THE ARMY DOCTORS SAW HIS CROOKED FINGERS AND SAID, "YOU CAN+ shoot a rifle--go home!"

ME (THINKING): THAT'S DEDICATION! SOMEONE GET THIS GUY A MEDAL... OR MAYBE A HAND LOTION.

He said it's better to have crooked fingers than to be forced to break Shabbos. That sounds heroic, but also ouch.

Then he launched into his epic "river of heroes" story:

"AN ARMY MUST CROSS A RIVER, NO BRIDGES, NO FERRIES. COMMANDER SAYS, FORWARD MARCH! ONE BY ONE, SOLDIERS DROWN AND PILE UP UNTIL THEIR BODIES BECOME A LIVING BRIDGE. THE REST MARCH ACROSS AND WIN THE CITY."

Bentcha shouted, "Who's the real hero? The ones who drowned to save others!"

ME: THAT'S THE WORST GAME OF RED ROVER EVER.

I was half-wondering if I could sign up for the drowning team--then remembered I can't swim.

Bentcha rents a tiny apartment in the Mishulovin courtyard--no nosy neighbors, perfect spy headquarters. The windows face the gate, so

Bentcha can spot KGB spies before they spot us.

He teaches two groups: us pre-Bar-Mitzvah kids, plus the big Mishulovin boys. When the older boys show up, Bentcha grabs a chair and chats Chassidic stories for ages. That gives us BONUS RECESS for mischief. Silver lining!

Worst mischief? I once dropped my pencil under the table and pulled my neighbor's sleeve to help me fish it out. Bentcha saw it. He said:

"HILLEL, DO YOU THINK TORAH IS A PENCIL BOX TO BE RUMMAGED THROUGH?"

Then he made me stand in the corner for SEVEN MINUTES. Seven minutes is EXACTLY enough time for me to plan four more pranks.

He never yells, but if it's SERIOUS, HE'LL SLAP YOUR HAND on the desk--hard enough that you remember. My palm still tingles from last week's session.

Bentcha insists we learn GEMARA with a melody. One day I tried to freestyle-chant a passage. He stopped me:

"HILLEL, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND IT!"

We replayed it like a broken record until I got the tune--and the meaning--just right. Now my Gemara chant could win "Cheder Idol."

- FINGER EXPERIMENT? I considered stretching my own tendons to avoid army--then figured, nah, I'd miss playing soccer.
- HUMAN-BRIDGE TRYOUTS: I tried stacking my friends in the bath to see if we could cross the tub. It failed spectacularly. Water everywhere. Sorry, Mom.
- BEARD-TENT HIDEOUT: I thought about asking Bentcha if I could nap under his beard during lessons. He said, "No naps in cheder," but I'm still counting it as a plan.

I heard Bentcha tell Mr. Mishulovin:

"CHILDREN WHO WON'T RISK THEIR LIVES FOR
TORAH ARE LIKE SOLDIERS WHO REFUSE TO MARCH."

I thought, GREAT--SO IF I DONT MARCH, ILL NEVER BE
IN GYM CLASS AGAIN! Then I realized he meant spiritual marching.

- I learned that sacrifice can be big (crooked fingers) or small (standing in a corner).
- I get free extra playtime when the older boys are around.
- My Gemara melody is now officially "the tune Bentcha likes best."

MISSION STATUS: Survived Day One with Bentcha.

NEXT MISSION: Figure out how to get my own gartel--maybe I'll slap

myself in the corner for extra practice!

THE END (of today's page)

Friday

Unfairness rating: 55 out of 10--because one minute weRE HAVING FUN, THE NEXT WEre in BIG trouble.

This morning during our secret cheder break, me and the guys--Michael, Yaakov, Mottel, Binyamin, and Zalmen--turned the Mishulovin courtyard into a mini soccer stadium. We used a rolled-up sock as the ball (perfect for no-break-window policy) and drew goal lines with chalk.

I was on Team "Tzitzis Tornadoes"--because I nearly tore my tzitzis once chasing a wild kick.

- KICKOFF: I booted the sock-ball so hard it almost bounced over the wall.
- MOTTEL'S MOVE: He did a fancy spin that made me spit out my gum.

- YAAKOV'S GOALIE SAVE: HE DIVED SO DRAMATICALLY I THOUGHT HE'D broken his elbow. Silver lining: I scored anyway.

We were so into it, we didn't notice BENTCHA standing there--arms crossed, beard flaring in the breeze.

BENTCHA (STERN): "WHAT'S ALL THIS RACKET?"

We froze like deer in headlights.

Instead of shouting "Get back to your Gemara!" he said:

"I SAW R. ELIYAHU PARITCHER, YERACHMIEL CHODOSH, AND R. BORUCH THE SHOCHET PLAYING SOCCER JUST LIKE YOU!"

We burst out giggling--imagining those old tzaddikim kicking a sock around.

BENTCHA (RAISING VOICE): "WHAT ARE YOU

LAUGHING AT? THESE ARE HOLY MEN! IF ITS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR THEM, ITS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR YOU!"

Ugh. Mixed messages much? First he lets them play--and now he scolds us for playing too.

- THE SNEAKY SOCK-BALL PLAN: I considered sewing my tzitzis into the sock so if Bentcha confiscated them, at least I'd still have my fringe.
- ELDER DISGUISE: Next time, I'll plaster a fake gray beard on myself and pretend to be R. Boruch--maybe then Bentcha will LET me play!
- SILENT SOCCER MODE: We might chant Torah verses while kicking to make it a "moving davening." Then no one can complain.

I caught Bentcha whispering to Mr. Mishulovin,

"THOSE ELDERS WERE TRULY CROSSING RIVERS."

I thought he meant they swam across rivers--talk about extreme soccer training! Turns out he meant spiritual rivers.

- We got extra review time on the Parsha while Bentcha told stories. (Cheder Idol: bonus episode!)
- I practiced my goal celebration dance--perfect for next time.
- I learned that if elders can play soccer, maybe I can argue my way into an after-cheder match.

MISSION STATUS: Semi-success. We played soccer, survived Bentcha's SCOLDING, AND I'm still the undefeated champ of sock-ball goals.

NEXT MISSION: Develop a "tzitzis-friendly" soccer uniform. Maybe velcro-only fringes? Stay tuned!

Sunday

Unfairness rating: 42 out of 10--because sometimes being clever as a Jew means NOT going to school, and that's just weird.

So here's what Tatty keeps saying:

"A CLEVER MAN ISNT THE ONE WHO SAYS CLEVER THINGS--HES THE ONE WHO DOES THEM."

Tatty insists that secular school is full of "Marxist fairy tales" and that I can learn reading, writing, and arithmetic at home. The rest--history, science, geography--can come from the Talmud and Chassidus!

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT BECOMING AN ENGINEER," HE SAYS. "BETTER TO WORK WITH YOUR HANDS AND KEEP YOUR NESHAMA STRONG."

He even set up Berel with a factory job making signs so our family wouldn't STARVE. EVERYONE IN SAMARKAND FOLLOWED SUIT. SILVER LINING: BASED ON DADs advice, I'm EXCELLENT at counting screws and bolts.

Today, my friend Yossi beamed:

"MY MOM FINALLY REGISTERED ME FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL! I'M GOING TO BE EDUCATED!"

He looked at me like I was missing out on free candy. Bentcha Maroz (my crazy-good cheder teacher) happened to walk in. We were learning Devarim and had reached:

"FOLLOW THE L-RD YOUR G-D, FEAR HIM ... WORSHIP HIM, AND CLEAVE TO HIM."

Bentcha turned to Yossi:

"EXPLAIN THAT VERSE!"

Yossi rattled off the straight translation. Bentcha glared and said, "NO, THE REAL MEANING. REPEAT IT!"

On try #2, Yossi still got it wrong. By #3, Bentcha pointed his bent finger so hard it shook:

"FOLLOW HASHEM--DONT CHASE SECULAR SCHOOLS!"

FEAR HIM--DONT JOIN THE COMMUNIST YOUTH.

WORSHIP HIM--BE ASHAMED OF THEIR HERESY.

CLEAVE TO HIM--STAY LOYAL TO OUR CHAIN FROM AVRAHAM!"

Yossi's FACE WENT TOMATO-RED. I NEARLY SNORTED WITH LAUGHTER--UNTIL BENTCHA's eyes sliced across the room. Lesson learned: don't brag about public school in cheder.

Later, during Hebrew writing, Mordechai forgot his inkwell. I wouldn't share mine because I needed it. Bentcha watched my mini "ink hoarding."

After class he asked:

"HILLEL, DID YOU SAY MODEH ANI THIS MORNING?"

When I said yes, he ordered:

"EXPLAIN IT."

I stuttered out the usual "thank You for restoring my soul..." spiel. He slammed his gartel on the desk and growled:

"MODEH MEANS SELFLESSNESS! ANI MEANS BROTHERLINESS! IF A FRIEND NEEDS INK OR A PEN, YOU GIVE IT!"

I nearly dropped my pen. Suddenly sharing my inkwell didn't seem so scary.

- "INK-EXCHANGE PROGRAM": Swap a pencil for ink with a secret handshake--then nobody goes dry.
- "VERSE M.C.": Wear a cape and a mic so Bentcha can't ignore my REAL explanations.
- "CHAIN GANG": Try to recruit Yossi to learn with me--then he won't brag about public school!

I overheard Tatty whisper,
"EDUCATION IS ENGRAVED FOREVER."

I imagined giant letters carved in stone--like Titanic but less watery.

Then I realized he meant Torah lessons stick in your soul.

- I got schooled on REAL sacrifice--crooked fingers or selfless ink-sharing.
- My bolt-counting skills are now second to none.
- Yossi won't BRAG AGAIN--HE's too busy practicing his "Follow Hashem" verse.

MISSION STATUS: Operation "Stay True to Torah" continues!

NEXT MISSION: Figure out how to build a "selfless inkwell" delivery drone--no more chasing pen requests!

Wednesday

Unfairness rating: 999 out of 10--because running from a real soldier with a rifle is way worse than stepping on a Lego!

We learn in a tiny apartment right next to the courtyard gate. Bentcha sits by the window, staring down the lane like a hawk. Whenever he spots someone suspicious--KGB or mailman--he waves us out the back door in two seconds flat.

One day I wasn't quick enough. The door swung open, and I dove behind it like a ninja--only my sneakers stuck out. I stood there for five whole minutes (felt like five years) until Bentcha shooed the stranger away.

That afternoon, giant construction fences went up around the yard. Turns out the new building was made by prisoner workers under armed guard. Barbed wire, watchtowers, rifles--this place looked more like a fortress than our cheder!

Then all heck broke loose: one prisoner bolted for freedom. Guards scrambled with rifles raised, shouting, "Stop him." Naturally, they stampeded through every nearby courtyard--including ours.

Bentcha yelled,

"WALK HOME SLOWLY, BLEND IN!"

Sure--like blending in helps when you're tall, nine years old, and carrying a briefcase! I tiptoed out, trying to look like a bored tourist.

But a guard spotted me and took off, rifle in hand. My face went ICE COLD. He yelled "Halt!" and then SHOT into the air--BANG BANG!

My only thought: RUN FOR YOUR LIFE.

I bolted so fast my legs felt like pogo sticks. I turned a corner, flattened myself against a wall, and listened as the guard thundered past, muttering, "Wrong boy..."

-
- OPERATION INVISIBLE HOODIE: Next time ILL WEAR OUR OLD GRAY HOODIE--SUDDENLY Ill be "Anonymous Kid,"

not the runaway!

- PERIMETER PATROL PLAN: I might sneak a mirror to see around corners before sprinting.
- SPEED BOOST TRAINING: Practiced running twenty laps around our courtyard--faster than bentizol (whatever that is).

I heard Bentcha tell Mommy,

"HILLEL RAN LIKE A SCARECROW IN A TORNADO."

I thought, GREAT--SO I'M BOTH STIFF AND SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL? Turns out he meant my arms were all over the place. Nice.

- I discovered I have Olympic-level sprint potential--move over, Jesse Owens!
- I'm now a certified hide-behind-door expert.
- The guard never noticed my giant kippah flapping in the breeze.
Stealth level: 0%, but I survived!

MISSION STATUS: Close call, but SUCCESS.

NEXT MISSION: Invent a "camouflage kippah" so I can go from cheder to street without dripping in obvious Jewishness. Stay tuned!

Thursday

Unfairness rating: 12 out of 10--because now I have to learn Torah in a MANURE-FILLED DUNGEON.

Bentcha decided our cheder needed a stealthier location after too many near-misses with government goons. So we packed up our siddurim and slid down into the cellar of the Mishulovin house--aka the "ultimate underground hideaway."

- Smell: Eau de horse manure. Lovely.
- Floors: Covered in dust, garbage, and some mysterious straw.
- Windows: Two barred windows--one facing the gate (prime spy lookout) and one facing the street (easy escape hatch).
- Bonus: Drafty breeze keeps us from sweating over the Gemara. Silver

lining!

I tried peeking out the escape window once and shredded my hands on rusty nails. My thumb still glows slightly red. I'm basically a secret agent with battle scars.

Friday

Bentcha hired a guy to clean the cellar before we moved in. He told us in a VERY SERIOUS VOICE:

"IF YOU SEE HIM, DO NOT APPROACH OR ASK QUESTIONS. UNDERSTOOD?"

I nodded so hard I almost dinged my own head.

Of course, I forgot. I tiptoed over and whispered,
"REBBI, WE'LL LEARN HERE?"

Bentcha's eyes shot fire bolts. He shoved me outside until the cleaner left.

After the cleanup, we finally sat down to learn. Bentcha glared and recited my mistakes like a rap battle:

"YOU YELLED: REBBI, WELL LEARN HERE? REBBI, WELL PLAY HERE? REBBI, WELL EAT HERE?"

Yikes. He even mimicked my voice. I think my ears are still burning.

Lesson learned: NO MORE PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS IN THE DUNGEON.

-
- SILENT ENTRY DOOR: Rig up a rope-and-pulley so we lower ourselves in through the street window--no creaky cellar door!
 - CAMOUFLAGE CLOAK: Drape myself in dust rags so I blend into the garbage piles. Instant invisibility!
 - SECRET KNOCK UPGRADE: Add a third sequence: 2-3-2-4 (just to confuse spies).

I overheard Bentcha mutter,

"IF YOU CANT KEEP A SECRET, YOU'LL NEVER KEEP TORAH!"

I thought, GREAT--I'LL NEVER KEEP MY LUNCH HIDDEN FROM MY SIBLINGS! Then I realized he meant learning secrets, not samosas.

-
- The cellar is COLD, so I can actually stay awake during long Parsha lessons.
 - I feel like a real spy when I peek out the barred window.
 - I now know exactly where all the hidden rats scurry--excellent "intruder" intel.

MISSION STATUS: Secret cheder is operational. No more yelling in the manure dungeon!

NEXT MISSION: Perfect my "dust camouflage" technique so even Bentcha can't spot me sneaking snacks.

November

Tuesday

Unfairness rating: 27 out of 10--because fighting with words is harder than stepping on a Lego!

Today Bentcha held one of his legendary FARBRENGENS--that's OUR SECRET CHASSIDIC GATHERING IN THE COURTYARD. EVERYBODY SQUEEZES AROUND, SIPS TEA (AND SOMETIMES A TINY Lchaim shot), and shares stories about courage and faith.

One of the older Chassidim started yapping about a fellow Jew who'd been forced to join the Communist Party and barely kept his mitzvahs. He sneered,

"HE'S BASICALLY A GENTILE NOW!"

My stomach did a backflip--how could someone insult another Jew?

Bentcha slammed his fist on the table (it rattled the candlesticks) and roared,

"WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM HIM? EIGHT MILLION SOLDIERS WITH RIFLES ARE TELLING HIM TO DROP HIS TEFILLIN--AND HE STILL STRAPS THEM ON EVERY MORNING. THAT MAKES HIM A TZADDIK--A REAL HERO!"

Suddenly, even the wind felt still. I thought, EIGHT MILLION SOLDIERS? That's LIKE THE ENTIRE WORLD's toughest army!

Then Bentcha grabbed a crumpled scrap of paper from the table and held it up under the late-afternoon sun. He said,

"YOU HEAR PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT THE LATEST GOSSIP LIKE IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD. DOES THIS PIECE OF PAPER HAVE ANY VALUE? YOUR

WORDS ARE WORTH EVEN LESS!"

He crumpled it into a single, dusty ball. We all stared--our jaws practically scraping the ground. I half expected the paper to pop back open and shout, "I'M IMPORTANT!" But nope--total silence.

Before the farbrengen ended, Bentcha leaned on his stylish walking stick and sighed,

"LIFE IS LIKE A FAIR. PEOPLE RUSH FROM BOOTH TO BOOTH, THINKING THEY'LL WIN BIG. BUT IN A HUNDRED YEARS, NONE OF THESE BOOTHS WILL MATTER. ONLY TORAH MATTERS."

I glanced at the ferris wheel lights across the street. IVE NEVER EVEN BEEN ON ONE, BUT HE MADE ME WONDER IF Id ever care about it after today.

Then came the best part: after three little shots of vodka (just enough to warm our hearts, not to spin our heads), Bentcha banged the table and burst into a Russian lullaby. It was about a Jewish mother telling her son to stay loyal to Hashem--even when the world dumps sorrows on him.

He knocked out the melody so loudly everyone joined in. Our voices echoed down the gate and I swear the barbed wire fences wiggled in surprise.

- "PAPER-PROOF" NOTEBOOK: IM GOING TO CARRY A SCRAP OF PAPER IN MY BAG ALL DAY--JUST TO SHOW PEOPLE Im IMPORTANT. Then Ill crush it in their faces.
- "TINY TEFILLIN CHALLENGE": Ill dare my friends to strap on tefillin under my heavy winter coat--like an undercover mitzvah mission.
- "FAIR ESCAPE PLAN": Build a miniature ferris wheel INSIDE the pantry so I never have to go outside. That solves the entire commute problem!

I caught Bentcha say,

"WE ARE ONE JEW AGAINST EIGHT MILLION
SOLDIERS."

I thought he was recruiting me for a dodgeball game with the army! Turns out he meant spiritual courage.

- I learned that real heroes aren't ON TV--THEY're the ones slipping on tefillin under threat of guns.
- My scrap-of-paper trick is now ready for testing in the schoolyard.
- I can sing a Russian lullaby so dramatically, even the walls tremble (or at least the dust does).

MISSION STATUS: Farbrengen Face-Off--COMPLETE!

NEXT MISSION: Master the "one Jew vs. eight million soldiers" pep talk so I can scare off playground bullies.

Thursday

Unfairness rating: 34 out of 10--because my brothers REQUEST FOR ICE SKATES TURNED INTO THE WORLDs most complicated conga line!

Today Berel marched up to Mommy and said:

"I NEED A PAIR OF ICE SKATES. ALL THE KIDS AT SCHOOL HAVE THEM!"

Mommy gave him the "serious face" and replied,

"YOU LEARN TORAH EVERY DAY--SHOULDN'T THAT BE ENOUGH FUN?"

So she deferred to Bentcha: "When he comes, we'll ask him."

Later, when Bentcha arrived for Berel's private cheder, Mommy whispered

in his ear. Bentcha scrunched his forehead like a question mark and said,
"BEREL WANTS SKATES? OF COURSE BUY THEM!"

Berel jumped up and down like he'd won the Olympics. □

Mommy smiled--until Bentcha added with a grin:
"BUT THERE'S ONE CONDITION..."

Bentcha casually explained:

"IF R. BORUCH THE SHOCHET SKATES FIRST, THEN
R. ELIYAHU PARITCHER SECOND, THEN R.

YERACHMIEL THE ELDER THIRD--WHY SHOULDN'T
BEREL SKATE FOURTH IN LINE?"

I nearly choked on my crumb cake. FOURTH IN LINE behind grandpas
on ice? Berel's face turned lobster-red.

UNFAIRNESS RATING FOR BEREL: 45 OUT OF 10
(HES ABOUT NINE, THEYRE OLD ENOUGH TO USE

CANES!).

- "HUMAN PYRAMID SKATES": Berel could stand on our shoulders so he's TECHNICALLY FOURTH IN LINE--EVEN IF HE's next to the elders.
- "SECRETFAKE-BEARD PLAN": We'll glue cotton wool beards on three friends so they pretend to be R. Boruch, R. Eliyahu, and R. Yerachmiel. Then Berel skates FIRST--no waiting!
- "HOCKEY RINK GARAGE": Convert our garage into a mini-ice rink so Berel can practice alone. Cheap DIY winter wonderland!

I thought Bentcha muttered,

"FOURTH IN LINE OR LOSE YOUR SPINE!"

I panicked--DID Berel risk his spine on ice? Turns out he meant STANDING fourth. No spine-harm intended. Phew.

- Berel learned humility (and patience) in record time.
- Our garage-turned-rink idea might actually work--no elders required!
- Mommy agreed to buy VELCRO SKATES instead of lace ones--for speedier entry.

MISSION STATUS: In progress. Berel's skating destiny now depends on three honorary elders--and a possible cotton-beard caper.

NEXT MISSION: Recruit my best friends for "Operation Fake Elders," then test-drive the garage rink. Stay tuned!

Wednesday

Unfairness rating: 15 out of 10--because teasing a new kid only to get an AMAZING secret story feels like the world's meanest bait-and-switch!

Today a MYSTERY NEWCOMER showed up at cheder--an older Slonimer Chassid with payos so long they nearly tripped him. He didn't CHAT OR JOIN GAMES; HE JUST SAT BY HIMSELF, LOOKING LIKE A STATUE. NATURALLY, THE REST OF US COULDN'T resist teasing:

- "Hey payos-guy, did a bird build a nest in your curls?"
- "Nice sideburns--did your barber use glue?"

He ignored us at first--cool move--but then finally sighed and offered a deal:

"PROMISE TO STOP BOTHERING ME, AND ILL TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT THE REBBE YOUVE NEVER HEARD!"

Of course we all crossed our hearts.

He began:

"MY REBBE TRAVELED THE WORLD VISITING TZADDIKIM, HOLY JEWS EVERYWHERE. AFTER MONTHS ON THE ROAD, HE CAME BACK AND SAID: I SAW A REAL TZADDIK IN LUBAVITCH!"

Our jaws hit the floor. A real tzaddik, right here? He described him:

- Two GOLDEN CHAINS draped on his waistcoat
- A GOLDEN WATCH gleaming on his wrist
- Yet the humblest person imaginable--more modest than anyone else on earth

We all whispered, "NO WAY..."

Then the Slonimer Rebbe said:

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

I half-expected my eyes to sprout fireworks.

After that, at the Rebbe's gathering, they served the usual little snacks. As everyone snatched the last crumbs, the Rebbe tapped the Slonimer on the shoulder and said:

"THIS ISN'T YOUR PLACE--GO TO LUBAVITCH."

That was the final zinger. The story ended with the Slonimer packing his bags and joining our yeshiva!

I nearly choked on my grape juice--talk about a plot twist.

- GOLDEN-CHAIN DETECTOR: IM MAKING A "TZADDIK METER" OUT OF TIN FOIL--IF I SEE A GOLDEN CHAIN, Ill instantly bow.
- SECRET SIDEBURN DISGUISE: Maybe Ill grow my own payos so I can deliver Breaking Tzadik News someday.
- EYE-TO-EYE TRAINING: Practice peering dramatically into

mirrors--so I'm ready if the Rebbe spots a real tzaddik in me.

I thought Bentcha mumbled,

"EYES THAT PEERED INTO TZADDIK EYES ARE PRICELESS."

I imagined trading my entire comic collection for magic glasses! Turns out he meant a spiritual blessing--still pretty cool.

- Now I know there COULD be a genuine tzaddik next to me--no need to roam the globe.
- The newcomer earned instant respect--so teasing payos-guy ONCE was worth it.
- IVE GOT A BRAND-NEW EXCUSE TO GROW MY OWN PAYOS: "ITs for the Golden-Chain Detector test!"

MISSION STATUS: Secret story unlocked--COMPLETE!

NEXT MISSION: Befriend the Slonimer payos-guy and see if he's got more legendary Rebbe tales.

Sunday

Unfairness rating: 47 out of 10--because having a Bar Mitzvah in Stalin's favorite year of terror is both awesome and terrifying.

Today was my Bar Mitzvah--held right here in Apartment 6, on Chudjumskaya Street (Toopik 1 means dead-end street #1). Nobody in their right mind was planning a party in 1952. Stalin might've been ready to ship all of us off to Siberia--40,000 barracks for 3 million Jews! So only eight "trustworthy" guests showed up (in secret):

- Uncle Boruch Duchman
- Dovid Mishulovin
- Eliyahu Mishulovin
- Moshe Nissilevich
- Berke Chein (hiding from who-knows-what)

- Tatty
- Berel (my brother)
- Me (the Bar Mitzvah boy, obviously)

We squeezed onto the couch, sang the QUIETEST Chassidic melodies ever, and whispered the traditional discourse tune so nobody in the hallway would hear. Felt like a spy movie, except with more yarmulkes and less popcorn.

Next came the big question: WHAT DO YOU GET THE BAR MITZVAH BOY?

- Aunt Rosa: "Buy him a winter coat! It's FREEZING out there."
- Me: "I want a real siddur--the Torah Ohr edition in Arizal rite!"

There was only one copy in town, owned by Osher Shlaif. He wanted 300 RUBLES for it. That's enough rubles to buy a whole sheep... or at least a gigantic loaf of challah.

After heated hushed arguments (and me insisting I needed THAT siddur), they coughed up the 300 rubles. I unwrapped my gift, eyes gleaming--until Cousin Faiga flipped through its pages and sniffed, "FOR 300 RUBLES? I THOUGHT THERE'D BE PICTURES IN IT!"

I nearly fainted. PICTURES?! In a siddur?!

- SKETCH-SWAP PLAN: Next time I'll offer to sketch pictures inside the siddur--creative value adds for free!
- WINTER-COAT BACK-UP: Maybe I'll wear the siddur as a hat so it doubles as a coat. Multi-purpose mitzvah!
- LOAN SHARK MOVE: I'll charge my friends 10 rubles each to peek at my new siddur--pay yourself first!

I overheard Tante Rosa mutter,
"HE'LL FREEZE WITHOUT A COAT."

I panicked--was I expected to practice Torah in snow? Then I realized she meant outside, not in our cozy living room. Crisis averted.

- I got the only top-notch siddur in town--no ripped pages or missing lines!
- My secret-agent Bar Mitzvah was epic (even if only eight people came).
- Now I can read my leining in REAL Arizal tune--without worrying about pictures or coats.

MISSION STATUS: Bar Mitzvah completed--Soviet-style!

NEXT MISSION: Figure out how to smuggle that siddur into cheder without everyone drooling over its gold-leaf edges.