

Tuesday

Tatty says summer is "Registration Season," which is Soviet-speak for "FIND EVERY KID AND STUFF HIM INTO THE HERESY FACTORY." Translation for me: ZERO outdoor fun until Elul.

I tried arguing that sunshine is medically important, but Mommy just whispered,

"WE'LL BUY YOU EXTRA ORANGES. NOW BACK BEHIND THE CURTAIN."

Great. Oranges. Exactly what I wanted instead of fresh air.

Wednesday

Every family on our block uses the super-secret knock:

'Knock-Knock (pause) Knock-Knock-Knock (pause) Knock-Knock'

If you mess it up, three things happen:

- Mommy turns white.
- Tatty dives for his coat and passport.
- I drop whatever I'm eating (usually sticky) and it lands jelly-side down.

So before I leave my room I now practice on the wall like I'm auditioning for a job as DOOR-KNOCK SYMPHONY CONDUCTOR.

Thursday

11:05 a.m. - Spotted two schoolteachers with clipboards roaming our

courtyard. They look sweet, but Tatty calls them "velvet hammers." Yankel peeked out and announced,

"THEY'RE TAKING ATTENDANCE OF THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE."

I suggested my brilliant "Fake Mustache & Tall Hat" disguise again.

Rejected. So we hid in the pantry between the potatoes and a sack of onions. My eyes watered for two hours. If I ever smell borscht again, I might cry from trauma.

Friday

Every normal family hears a door knock and maybe says "Coming!" Mommy hears a knock and invents a brand-new Olympic sport called DOOR-DASH-HIDE-THE-KIDS. Today she set a personal record: both boys shoved behind the wardrobe in 4.6 seconds. New bruise on my elbow--souvenir of Soviet childhood.

Silver lining: I can probably fit in any suitcase on Earth by now. Spy career, here I come.

SUNDAY

Family meeting (whisper edition). Tatty says:

"IMPOSSIBLE TO HIDE EVERYONE. GOVERNMENT IS SNIFFING."

"SOLUTION: RIVKA WILL REGISTER FOR SCHOOL."

Rivka's face = the look you get when you realize the last piece of kokosh is gone AND your brother ate it. She still said "Fine" because she's older and apparently martyrdom is her hobby.

Meanwhile I'm thinking, YES! BOYS STILL INVISIBLE! and instantly feel 0.3% guilty. Only 0.3 though--because I didn't make the rules.

Monday

Rivka left early wearing the government-approved RED RAG scarf. I swear the rag glared at me.

I spent the whole morning inventing BRILLIANT PLAN #14: dig an underground tunnel to the far alley so Yankel and I can sneak a five-minute game of catch. Supplies list:

- Soup spoon (for digging)
- Potato sack (dirt removal)
- Extreme patience (uh-oh)

Plan scrapped when Mommy asked why I was measuring the kitchen tiles.

TUESDAY

I overheard Tatty whisper,

"IF THE PRINCIPAL SMELLS ANOTHER HIDDEN BOY,
THE K.G.B. WILL COME KNOCKING."

Wait--principals can SMELL? Like sniffer dogs?

Spent ten minutes smelling my own arm. Smells like onions (thanks, pantry). Panic rating: medium.

Wednesday

News flash: Principal accepted Rivka, asked no questions about brothers.

Tatty said we can "relax a bit"--which in our family means we can tiptoe to the staircase window for ninety seconds if no neighbors present. BEST 90 SECONDS OF MY LIFE. Sunlight, glorious sunlight! Unfairness rating drops to 34/10.

Thursday

What I've learned:

- KNOCKING CORRECTLY is more important than handwriting.
- Sisters = human decoys (who knew?).
- Principals might have super noses--needs more research.
- Potato-onion pantry doubles as safe room.
- Even when life is a giant hide-and-seek, you can still collect victories (today's sunlight = trophy).

End of mission log. If the K.G.B. finds this notebook, please return--after you finish being evil, obviously.

Monday

Guess what? My secret identity got BUSTED. The neighbors squealed to the principal: "Hey, that Zaltzman kid exists!"

So Tatty had to register me in a public school across town where nobody knows alef from beis. Extra-long walk, zero Jews, double yuck.

Tatty's survival speech to Ms. Semyanova (my new teacher):

"HE'S A DELICATE BOY. DOCTOR'S ORDERS--TWO REST DAYS A WEEK. SUNDAY AND, UH... SATURDAY."

Then he slid her a fancy gift. Bribery Level = Legendary. She nodded, totally clueless about Shabbos. Victory dance (quiet version).

Thursday

- Pros: I'm officially the mysterious new kid who only shows up five days a week.
- Cons: Every subject = "Hooray Mother Russia." Also the cafeteria smells like mystery meat.

Today in art, the class went wild over my doodle of a horse and carriage. I pretended my hand cramped and stopped drawing. NO WAY am I letting them label me "School Artist" and drag me into poster duty for May 1st rallies.

Tuesday

Period 6 = Music with Ms. S. Whole curriculum: songs praising Lenin, Stalin, and random tractors.

She waves her baton. Everyone sings like broken accordions; I move my lips like a fish, NO sound.

Ms. S spots me. Uh-oh.

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

"I... I DON'T LIKE YOUR SONGS."

Brain, meet Mouth. Mouth, meet Trouble. Whole room freezes. I realize:
I've basically insulted Stalin's Grandma.

Ms. S's eyebrow shoots to the ceiling.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOUR SONGS? SING ONE OF
YOUR SONGS--AT THE BOARD. NOW."

Sweat level = Niagara Falls.

- Walk to board in slow-motion.
- Heart tries escaping through ribcage.
- Remember Pinchas Pinchasov upstairs blasting Azerbaijani records 24/7.

I know those by heart!

I turn, gulp, and launch into Rashid Baibutov's hit song about blossoms on
the Caspian Sea (don't ask).

Miracle: I actually sound... good. Ms. S's jaw drops, class stares like I've
grown antlers.

End note--cheer. Teacher forgets my insult. Crisis averted! Thank you,
loud landlord!

Unfairness rating slides to 45/10 (still unfair, but at least I'm not in
Siberia).

The afternoon-shift teachers walk by, hear me crooning, and slip inside.

Ms. S beams:

"LOOK WHAT MY STAR PUPIL CAN DO!"

Great. Now I'm a "star."

After class she corners me:

"WE'LL NEED YOU TO PERFORM ON INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY AND REVOLUTION DAY. COMRADE TALENT!"

I nod like a bobblehead. Inside: screaming NOOOOO.

Pro-Performance Brain: "Spotlight! Applause! Maybe candy afterward!"

Anti-Performance Brain: "Do you really want to serenade pictures of Lenin? Also concerts on Shabbos = disaster."

Internal tug-of-war all week. My stomach learned gymnastics.

Final decision: HARD PASS. I skipped every rehearsal and "accidentally" lost my voice on holiday mornings. (Tip: stick a potato in front of your mouth and mumble, sounds convincing.)

Friday

I'm 11 now. Haven't sung a single Soviet anthem on stage. Ms. S finally gave up and sticks me with the tambourine (silent mode) during assemblies.

Perfect.

When I think about it, I'm kinda proud. It takes Olympic-level

self-control for a kid who loves performing to keep quiet for Hashem. Must be all that chinuch Tatty and Mommy drilled into me.

Silver lining: If Azerbaijan ever needs a Jewish lead singer who only works Sunday through Friday, I'm their guy.

End of entry. If Ms. S finds this notebook--remember, Comrade--potato-throat still acts up on socialist holidays.

Monday

I call Mondays "Re-Appear Day." After missing Shabbos and Sunday, I have to stroll around the playground BEFORE the bell so the other kids remember I exist and don't point like, "Whoa, mysterious ghost boy!"

Extra problem: my UZBEKI CAP + TZITZIS combo. Communists think "fashion" means a red Pioneer tie. Everything else = suspicious.

I slip into class. Ms. Semyanova barks,

"ZALTZMAN! CAP OFF!"

Can't argue, can't uncover. Solution: pretend to SCRATCH my head forever. I shuffle to my seat, hand glued to skull like I'm searching for fleas. Arm cramp level: volcano.

Teacher:

"CLASS! GOVERNMENT NURSE ARRIVING TO GIVE BACK INJECTIONS!"

Back? Not arm? Panic sirens! If I raise my shirt, everyone will see tzitzis

strings waving "Shalom!" Big no-no.

I decide: lift shirt QUICK, bend forward, tuck tzitzis inside waistband ninja-style.

Execution rating: 3/10. Strings pop out like spaghetti.

Nurse (surprise--Bucharian Jew) leans in and WHISPERS,

"YOU ARE A GOOD BOY, A CHACHAMTCHIK."

Boom--secret recognized, but she gave me the nicest wink. Crisis semi-dodged.

Post-needle trauma = new policy:

- Wear tzitzis from home to school gate.
- Dash to bathroom, stuff tzitzis in briefcase.
- Tie on RED RAG (Pioneer neck-thingy).
- Survive day without strangling myself on Red Rag.
- Afternoon: Reverse steps, pray nobody walks in mid-switch.

I'm basically Clark Kent, except my phone booth smells like Soviet plumbing.

Communists auto-registered me for the Pioneer youth cult. Received red tie whether I liked it or not (spoiler: NOT).

They claim the tie symbolizes "the blood of heroic workers." To me it symbolizes ITCHY NECK PLUS SPIRITUAL YUCK.

Still, bathroom-change routine runs smooth now. Stopwatch record: 47

seconds tzitzis-off-rag-on.

Silver lining: If Olympics add "Quick-Change Judaism Survival" event, gold medal coming my way.

Tuesday

Things I juggle before first period:

- Cap maneuver
- Tzitzis concealment
- Red Rag disguise
- Fake smile so no one sees terror

Other kids just worry about math homework. Unfairness confirmed: 62/10 still stands.

But hey--nurse called me CHACHAMTCHIK. That's like getting a secret badge of honor. So maybe Mondays aren't TOTALLY awful... just 99 % awful.

End of entry. If janitor finds my briefcase tzitzis stash, please return--after you finish wondering why a string garment is folded next to algebra homework.

Wednesday

Thought I'd already reached max panic with the back-shot fiasco.

WRONG. Today the Red-Rag Committee made random hallway inspections to be sure every kid was wearing the Pioneer tie. Translation: if they'd

caught me in my tzitzis and no rag, I'd be toastier than yesterday's black bread.

New life skill unlocked: tying a perfect knot in under eight seconds while balanced on the edge of a toilet seat. My record so far? 7.4 sec. Olympic judges, take notes.

Thursday

- Walk into class.
- Teacher says, "Cap, off, Zaltzman!"
- I go into World-Class Head-Scratch Routine (looks casual, saves kippah-mode).
- Yankel bet I can't keep my hand up there longer than the math period. I lasted 27 minutes, 12 seconds. Elbow = overcooked noodle.

Reward: zero detentions, plus 2 kopeks from Yankel. (He paid in stale sunflower seeds, but still.)

Friday

Schedule:

Step	Action	Time Goal
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1	Enter stall, lock door (double-check)	3 s
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2	Untuck shirt, remove tzitzis	9 s
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3	Fold, stuff into briefcase pocket A	4 s
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| 4 | Fish out Red Rag, shake crumbs | 5 s |

| 5 | Tie rag, rehearse "Yay Mother Russia" smile | 6 s |

| TOTAL | 27 SECONDS |

Today I nailed 25.8 s--new personal best! Almost cheered out loud, but someone was flushing in stall #2. Close call.

Monday

Comrade Misha (class busybody) asked why my tie knot always looks "fresher" than everyone else's right before assembly.

Me (thinking fast):

"SUPERIOR KNOTTING TECHNIQUE. MAYBE YOU SHOULD PRACTICE?"

He scowled and wandered off. Phew.

Note to self: invent messy-looking knot variation to blend in. Project Rag-Wrinkle starts tomorrow--need water, desk edge, maybe a quick stomp.

Tuesday

Discovered annoying math fact:

- Red Rag visibility ☐
- Cap-scratch time ☐
- Teacher suspicion ☐

Meaning: if rag slides, I use BOTH hands--one yarmulke-hand, one

rag-hand--and then can't write. Teacher: "Why zero notes, Zaltzman?"

Me: "Deep concentration, Comrade." She actually bought it. Win.

Wednesday

Mid-switch, principal stomps in. Heart leaps into esophagus. I freeze--shirt half-buttoned, rag hanging like limp tongue.

Emergency move: sneeze loudly, slam stall door, mumble something about "dust from ceiling." Principal grumbles and leaves. Crisis level: 9.9/10.

After school I rewarded myself with secret toffee (saved since Sukkos).

Totally worth sticky pockets.

Thursday

Janitor Babushka Svetlana found tzitzis strings peeking from my briefcase.

Thought for sure I was busted.

She whispered, "My husband kept same sacred strings in war. Be careful, little rebbe."

That makes TWO undercover supporters (remember the Bucharian nurse).

Maybe Hashem put secret agents everywhere, like in those spy novels.

Unfairness rating dips to 55/10. Progress!

Friday

| Challenge | Status |

|--|--|

| Monday re-appear without laughs | ☐ (only one snicker) |

| Cap-scratch endurance | □ New record |

| Rag-knot speed | □ 25.8 s |

| Detection incidents | □ Principal near-miss (doesn't count--no proof) |

| Allies collected | Nurse + Janitor = 2 |

Moral: Surviving Communist school is like juggling grenades while riding a unicycle--but if you hide the pins in your briefcase and practice really, really fast knots, you might just stay in one piece.

end of entry--if you see a red tie in this notebook, please burn it.

Thursday

Happy Chanukah? Not exactly. I got ambushed with a "See the Principal-- NOW " note before first period. That's like being served a bowl of latkes that turn out to be raw potatoes.

Walked into the office: Principal, Assistant Principal, and Ms. Semyanova sitting there like the Three Judges of Doom.

Principal booms,

"COMRADE ZALTZMAN, WHY NO SATURDAY ATTENDANCE? WHO FORBIDS YOU?"

Translation: We know you're a Shabbos kid, spill it.

I served them the classic "weak lungs" line. They yelled, I played faint kitten. They threatened to replace SATURDAY with any other day. Nice try.

Then they summoned Tatty. I watched him march in--braver than Judah Maccabee, only with less armor and more beard.

They threatened:

- Yank his "parent rights."
- Ship me to state orphanage (aka Brainwash Central).
- Force me to dorm where pens fly on Shabbos.

Tatty kept repeating, "HEALTH REASONS, HEALTH REASONS."
Assistant Principal's face turned borscht-purple.

They ordered: "Bring the boy THIS Saturday, or else."

I saw Tatty's hands tremble. Mine, too--mostly because the office smelled like burnt cabbage.

FRIDAY

Tatty begged:

"JUST ONE SHABBOS, HILLEL. I'LL STASH YOUR BRIEFCASE FRIDAY, BEG THE TEACHER--NO WRITING, I PROMISE."

My brain: "NOPE. Pens + Shabbos = automatic disaster."

I shook my head so hard the candles almost blew out.

House still snoozing. I tip-toe out, sprint to my friend Michael Mishulovin's place. We played "Who can chew challah quieter" for two hours. Came home "too late" for school. Oops.

Tatty sighed but didn't scold. Biggest miracle since the oil lasted eight days.

Monday

Tatty: "We'll hide you in a FAR district--non-Jewish area, new teacher, fresh bribe."

Result: School #7, almost an HOUR walk each way. Winter mornings = pitch-black, snow slush up to my ankles, wolves (okay, maybe dogs) howling. Still better than writing on Shabbos.

School #7 starts asking why I ghost every Saturday. Tatty flips the strategy:

- Transfer me to School #3 inside Jewish neighborhood.
- Ask staff nicely to ignore my absences.
- BUT--(genius level) ask old principal to hand him the file "so he can deliver it himself."

He "forgets" to deliver. Papers vanish into the black hole called Tatty's desk drawer.

Week 1: No teachers.

Week 2: Still nothing.

Week 4: Realize I'm a free agent.

I'm basically an official student of NOWHERE ELEMENTARY.

| Mission | Status |

||--|

| Survive Principal Inquisition | □ (still breathing) |

| Avoid writing on Shabbos | □ (0 letters penned) |

| Hour-long trek in snow | □ (feet thawed by Pesach) |

| Disappear from Soviet system | □□□ TOTAL WIN |

Unfairness rating drops to 15/10--still unfair, but at least I'm not doing multiplication tables under Lenin posters.

Tatty calls it "paperwork loophole"; I call it the GREAT DISAPPEARING ACT. Finally, a magic trick that even the K.G.B. can't explain.

End of entry--if any principal finds this notebook, please note: transferring me requires seven signatures, three stamps, and a miracle.

Sunday

You'd think being a fugitive from the Soviet school system would earn me a day off. Nope. Tatty enrolled me in the underground CHEDER--a.k.a. Basement Academy of Hide-and-Seek Torah. Totally illegal, totally awesome.

First period was with REB ZUSHE PAZ, nicknamed "REB ZUSHE DER SHAMASH."

Stat sheet:

| Stat | Score |

||-

| Height | Shorter than the bimah |

| Beard | Snow-white, reaches belt |

| Voice | Thunder meets accordion |

| Weapon | Soft GARTEL (but wow, it stings) |

Reb Zushe passed out BREAKFAST--real bread with actual BUTTER.

(Okay, "butter" = microscopic yellow freckles in the crust, but still.)

I did scientific calculations:

1 slice dark bread

- 0.0003 cm of butter

= 312% happier Hillel

I almost hugged him, but his beard looked like it would tickle-slap me back.

Rule of class: Every pasuk gets chanted like we're auditioning for a one-kid choir.

Reb Zushe:

"NU, PRONOUNCE THE KAMATZ LIKE A LION, NOT A SLEEPY GOAT!"

I roared "AAAH" so hard Yankel fell off his bench. Teacher grinned--then reminded me lions don't fumble the next vowel. Oops.

Classmate Shlomo whispered a joke during ASHREI. Reb Zushe whipped off his GARTEL--WHOOSH--gentle slap on Shlomo's wrist.

No bruises, but the sound alone convinced the entire room to become angels for the next ten minutes. I call it the "GARTEL OF DOOM."

Turns out the cheder is like a relay race of rabbis:

- REB ZUSHE - weekday mornings (breakfast + vowels + occasional whack).
- REB MOSHE VINARSKI - Fridays, teaches weekly PARSHA in turbo-Aramaic. My brain melts by verse seven.
- REB BEREL GUREVICH - cameo guest star; teaches fast, disappears faster.
- REB AVROHOM YOSEF ENTIN - calculates the Jewish calendar BY HAND. Basically a walking sundial.

Kid brain math: four teachers feel like forty. Still beats Communist School of Lenin Worship.

Reb Zushe made me lead PESUKEI D'ZIMRA. Weeks later, big chossid R. Chaim Zalman heard me daven and said,

"AH! MUST BE A REB ZUSHE STUDENT--HE HITS EVERY SYLLABLE!"

Secretly leveled up to PRONUNCIATION NINJA. Couldn't brag about it though--"Rule #1 of Underground Cheder: don't talk about Underground Cheder."

- Reb Zushe walked TWO HOURS each Shabbos in Moscow just to dunk

in the MIKVAH. That's farther than my entire disappearing-to-nowhere school commute.

- Bread with butter speckles is still the greatest breakfast since manna.
- A GARTEL can double as a disciplinary laser.
- Illegal schools give better snacks than legal ones.

End of entry--if K.G.B. agents find this notebook, please wipe the butter fingerprints before filing it under "Evidence of Excessive Carbohydrate Joy."

Tuesday

(That's LOW for Samarkand standards, because today's cheder was actually kind of epic.)

- Me
- Michael M. (master of stealth challah sneaks)
- Yaakov L. (can balance a Gemara on his head)
- Mottel G. (joke-teller, 50 % hit rate)
- Binyamin M. (owns a pencil that EVERYONE "borrows")
- Zalmen F. (future Kohen Gadol, calls dibs)
- Our teacher: REB BENZION "BENTCHA" MAROZ

Cheder is inside the Mishulovin family courtyard apartment--basically the Fort Knox of secret Torah. No nosy neighbors, perfect view of the gate. Code knock, door opens, and BOOM: breakfast.

Reb Bentcha hands out slices of dark bread plus what he SWEARS is butter. It's more like "butter freckles," but after Soviet porridge, it tastes like Gan Eden.

Today we finally asked about his right hand--three middle fingers bent like hook-shaped macaroni. He told us the story:

"BOYS, BETTER TO TWIST A FINGER FOREVER THAN TWIST YOUR NESHAMA IN THE RED ARMY."

He literally sliced his own tendons so the draft board would reject him.

Michael whispered, "Hardcore." I nodded, tried not to faint.

Mental note: next time I think walking 50 minutes to school is sacrifice, remember Reb Bentcha's DIY surgery.

Reb Bentcha launched into his favorite mashal:

- Army reaches river--no bridge.
- Commander yells "FORWARD!"
- Front soldiers drown; bodies pile into makeshift bridge.
- Remaining soldiers cross, conquer city.

Then he looks straight at us:

"WHO CONQUERED THE CITY? THE ONES WHO FELL FOR IT!"

Chills. Real, actual chills.

Yaakov asked, "So... we have to be the bridge?"

Reb Bentcha smiled. "If Torah needs it--yes."

Unfairness rating jumps to 28/10, but Inspiration rating hits 100.

After lesson, Reb Bentcha starts schmoozing with the older Mishulovin brothers--Dovid & Eliyahu. That's our unofficial recess. We're supposed to "review," but today we:

- Timed Mottel balancing two siddurim on his nose (6.3 sec)
- Played silent Alef-Beis charades (Binyamin's "tzaddik" looked like a chicken)
- Got caught exactly zero times--success!

Shlomo (younger kid) scribbled moustaches on a Rebbe picture. Big mistake. Reb Bentcha didn't yell. He quietly took Shlomo's hand, SMACKED it on the table--loud clap, zero bruises, MAX embarrassment. Whole room froze like wax fruit. Lesson learned.

My turn to chazar a sugya. I sang it with my best "learning tune."

Reb Bentcha stops me:

"HILLEL, IF YOU CHANT WRONG, YOU THINK WRONG! START AGAIN."

I tried, still wrong. He tells the Reuven/ Shimon "not a thief?!" story to show how a bad tune can change meaning. Homework: explain the Gemara to Mommy tonight. If she understands, I pass.

Pressure level: Mount Sinai.

Somebody mentioned a boy who tried to jump off a roof after not getting into university. Reb Bentcha fired:

"IF MY LIFE WERE THAT CHEAP, I'D FOUND A
HUNDRED YESHIVAS! LIFE'S PRECIOUS--THAT'S WHY I
RISK IT SMARTLY."

He says things so fiery, you feel your payos singe.

| Metric | Today's Score |

|--|--|

| Butter visibility | 2.1 % of slice (new high) |

| Gartel slaps witnessed | 0 (good) |

| Table-hand claps | 1 (R.I.P Shlomo's pride) |

| Inspirational chills | Multiple |

| Mischief incidents caught | 0.5 (Mottel's charade almost busted) |

- Re-learn sugya WITH correct "nah-nah-nah" tune.
- Teach it to Mommy--no yawns allowed.
- Decide which friend would volunteer to be "human bridge" (jury's out).
- Thank Hashem for butter freckles.

End of entry--if K.G.B. discovers this, please remember: crooked fingers still beat crooked souls.

Thursday

(Two points extra because getting caught mid-bicycle-kick is mortifying.)

Courtyard = our stadium. Michael "Lightning-Feet" Mishulovin versus Yaakov "Goal-Stopper" Lerner. I was official commentator / occasional ball-stealer. Score: 3-3. Tension: epic.

Suddenly a shadow looms. We spin around--and there's REB BENTCHA smack in the center circle, clutching his head like he just saw someone chew on a sefer.

Zero whistle, no words, just THE STARE.

We freeze. Mottel still has his foot on the ball; even the ball looks guilty.

We shuffle into class expecting the GARTEL OF DOOM. Instead, Reb Bentcha says,

"BEFORE WE LEARN, I SAW SOMETHING...

FASCINATING ON MY WALK."

No gartel? Interesting. Everyone leans in.

"I PASSED THE ALLEY," HE BEGINS, VOICE ALL DRAMATIC.

"AND WHO DO I SPY PLAYING SOCCER?"

- R. ELIYAHU PARITCHER ...

- YERACHMIEL DER ALTER ...

- AND BORUCH THE SHOCHET!"

Our jaws drop. Those guys are, like, the Mount Rushmore of Samarkand Chassidim. Imagining them in shorts juggling a ball = brain melt.

Reb Bentcha continues, totally straight-faced:

"BORUCH KICKS ... YERACHMIEL SPRINTS ... BOOM!
BALL SMACKS R. ELIYAHU ON THE HEAD!"

At first we try to hold it, but the mental picture is too ridiculous. Snickers escape, then a full snort-laugh from Binyamin. The room erupts.

Reb Bentcha slams palm to table--WHAM! Laughter vacuumed out of the air.

"WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT? FIVE MINUTES AGO I WATCHED YOU DOING THE SAME FOOLISHNESS!"

He scans us with laser eyes.

"TELL ME, IF IT LOOKS SILLY ON GEDOLEI CHASSIDIM, WHY IS IT SUDDENLY NOBLE WHEN YOU DO IT? TORAH BOYS KICKING LEATHER BAGS? THINK AGAIN!"

Gulp.

- Soccer ball: confiscated (temporary, we hope).
- Ego: bruised harder than Shlomo's table-hand.
- Lesson: When Reb Bentcha starts "story-mode," cancel all giggles until you're 100 % sure it's actually funny.
- Imagining elder Chassidim in a World Cup = hilarious, but only silently ... in my head.

- Next recess, switch to "Less Suspicious Exercise." Maybe invisible jump-rope?
- I still owe Yaakov a rematch--first to 4 wins, somewhere Reb Bentcha can't teleport.

End of entry--if future historians find this: yes, even secret-cheder kids sometimes just want to score a goal.

Monday

Communist rumor of the day: "If you don't go to university, you'll starve."

Tatty's counter-rumor: "If you DO go, your neshama will starve."

Who to believe? The guy with the beard who sneaks me buttered bread usually wins, but still... I kinda wanted a fancy diploma to hang on a future wall.

- STEP 1: Learn reading + math at home.
- STEP 2: Master Gemara + Chassidus = brain muscles of steel.
- STEP 3: Hashem sends parnasa.

PROOF: He opened a sign-making factory with Berel--zero college, 100 % income.

Conclusion: I'm apparently headed for the COMMERCIAL SIGNS SUPER-LEAGUE instead of rocket science.

TUESDAY

Our friend Shimon struts into cheder:

SHIMON: "GUESS WHAT, GENIUSES? MY MOM REGISTERED ME FOR SCHOOL-SCHOOL. I'LL BE EDUCATED. WHAT WILL BECOME OF YOU?"

I was mid-eyeroll when REB BENTCHA swept in.

He points to our chumash:

"EXPLAIN YOU SHALL FOLLOW HASHEM, FEAR HIM, WORSHIP HIM, CLEAVE TO HIM."

Shimon rattles off the plain translation. Bentcha's eyebrow climbs Mount Sinai.

Second try... third try... now Bentcha's bent fingers are an inch from Shimon's nose.

FINAL BENTCHA TRANSLATION (SHOUTED WITH DRUM-ROLL TUNE):

- "Follow Hashem" = Only Him, not Lenin.
- "Fear Him" = No Communist school.
- "Worship Him" = Actively DESPISE said school (plus a few Russian adjectives I can't repeat).

Shimon shrank to a pocket-size Pioneer. No more bragging. Revenge served kosher.

Wednesday

Mordechai forgot his ink. He asked to borrow mine. I said:

"SHOULD'VE BROUGHT YOUR OWN, BUDDY."

(Yes, not my finest moment.)

Bentcha didn't yell--just waited, which is scarier. Ten minutes later:

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

"OF COURSE."

He asks me to translate it. I give textbook answer. He frowns--here we go.

BENTCHA REMIX:

- MODEH = BITTUL - Be SELFLESS, share ink.
- ANI = I - Give your PEN too.
- Remaining words = treat your friend's needs like your alarm clock: answer immediately.

Mordechai got deluxe ink access. My ego got dunked in humility.

| Life Lesson | Status |

| - | - - |

| College □ automatic success | Memorized |

| Showing off about Communist school | Gets you roasted by bent fingers |

| Sharing supplies = actual Modeh Ani | Tattooed on brain |

| Commercial sign factory | Plan B (or A?) |

Unfairness rating dips to 30/10--still no diploma, but at least I now own the world's holiest inkwell.

End of entry--if future me ends up making neon signs instead of rocket ships, remember: Tatty called it, and Bentcha approved.

Thursday

Today I learned two things:

- I am NOT Olympic-sprinter material.
- Guards with rifles do NOT appreciate surprise cardio.

Let me back up.

Our classroom window faces the courtyard gate. REB BENTCHA sits there like Mission-Control, scanning for strangers. Rule is simple:

- Stranger enters → Bentcha waves "evacuate."
- We scatter faster than cockroaches at a kitchen light.
- Hide, pray, hope stranger loves gardens and not illegal Torah classes.

Usually works great. Emphasis on "usually."

Stranger suddenly steps through the gate. Everyone bolts--except me, Mister Slow-Shoelaces. I flatten behind the door. Heart drumming so loud I'm sure the guy can hear it. Minutes feel like three weeks of detention. Stranger finally leaves. I still can't feel my legs. Think I might be part chameleon now.

Important background: Soviet geniuses are building a giant government cube next door using PRISONERS as free labor. They fenced the site with barbed wire and added four watchtowers--basically a bonus level in a

war video game (if Chabad kids played video games--which we DON'T, calm down).

Today one prisoner ESCAPES. Sirens? Nope. Just guards sprinting around waving rifles like they lost their favorite babka.

He peeks out, sees the madness, turns to us super chill:

"KIDS, TIME FOR AN EARLY DISMISSAL. WALK SLOOOOW. NO SUDDEN MOVES."

Sounds easy. Spoiler: not easy.

I'm nine but built like a beanpole; apparently that equals "possible adult fugitive" to a panicked guard.

I step through the gate--BOOM! Guard spots me. Eyes lock. He yells something Russian plus my new least-favorite word: "СТОП!" ("STOP!")

My brain: "Good idea--STOP."

My legs: "LOL--RUN!"

Guess which won.

I take off down the dirt lane. Guard barrels after me, boots crunching gravel, rifle bouncing. He fires warning shots into the AIR. (Pretty sure my soul left my body and hid behind a tree.)

Me running commentary:

- "Why am I doing this?"
- "Legs?! Slow DOWN!"

- "Is this how you become a martyr? Because I didn't study that chapter yet!"

I round the corner, dive behind a woodpile, and hold my breath till I'm officially part of the scenery. Guard thunders past, still yelling "!!!!!" at nothing. Ten seconds later silence--except my heart, which is basically a hammer factory.

I tiptoe home taking alleyways only cats know. At lunch Yankel asks why I'm the same color as sour cream. I tell him. He says the guard's warning shots probably shaved three seconds off my future in-law speech. Thanks, Yankel.

Later Tatty explains: running made me look guiltier than pickles in Pesach. One wrong bullet angle and--well--no more diary.

Miracle Score: INFINITE. Also, my shoelaces are now double-knotted forever.

- When grown-ups say "walk slowly," WALK SLOWLY.
- Rifles > leg speed. Always.
- Hide-behind-door skill officially upgraded to Level 2.
- If you do run, try not to squeal like a scared goat (I may have).
- Thank Hashem for corners, woodpiles, and guards with bad aim.

End of entry--if future archaeologists find this diary, please note: I survived a Soviet guard chase and all I got was this ridiculous unfairness

rating.

Sunday

Latest tally of "uninvited guests" who wandered into our regular classroom:

- One tax inspector,
- Two K.G.B. clipboard guys,
- A woman looking for her runaway chicken (don't ask).

Result: BENTCHA'S NERVES: 0 / STRESS LEVEL: 100.

Solution? Move school into--drumroll--an abandoned HORSE STABLE.

Yup, Torah with a side of manure.

| Feature | Upside | Downside |

||--|-|

| Thick walls, zero windows street-side | Nobody suspects study hall |

Smells like "Eau de Donkey" |

| Two barred windows--front gate + back alley | Spy view & emergency exit

| Bars = scratch-o-rama |

| Natural cross-draft | Free A/C | Dust tornado 24/7 |

| Mystique level | 100 % "Secret Lair" vibes | 0 % normal-kid vibes |

We kids voted 6-0 in favor. Anything beats rifle chases.

Monday

Bentcha hires a grumpy janitor to shovel out buckets of hay, dust, and

Mystery Goo. NEW RULE: While cleaner's here, NO Torah words, NO

"Rebbi," basically NO TALKING AT ALL.

He repeats it five times. I nod five times...and forget in five minutes.

I tiptoe over--janitor's ten steps away, humming off-key. I whisper (which in cellar echo = not so whispery):

"REBBI, WILL WE LEARN HERE?"

Instant doom. Bentcha's face morphs to "Thundercloud Mode."

He shouts (in perfectly loud Russian for janitor's benefit):

"KID, OUT! NOW!"

I sprint so fast I nearly crash into a barrel labeled "Glue???"

Janitor leaves. Bentcha turns laser-eyes on me:

"I WARNED YOU--NO 'REBBI,' NO 'LEARN.' YOU HOLLER:

'REBBI, WE'LL LEARN HERE? REBBI, WE'LL PLAY HERE? REBBI, WE'LL EAT HERE?'

ONE SLIP = DUNGEON FOR ALL OF US!"

I sink lower than donkey manure pile.

Lesson Title: OPSEC 101 (aka "Shut Your Mouth, Hillel").

Tuesday

- Substitute code words:
- "Rebbi" → "Uncle"
- "Learn" → "Practice"

- Before opening mouth, count to Alef-Beis backwards.
- If cleaner present, pretend to be a lamp.

Scratched knuckles climbing out back window today--battle scars of Torah.

| Category | Points |

| - | - - |

| New hideout cool factor | +8 |

| Smell factor | -5 |

| My stealth rating | -□ (for now) |

| Lesson retention | Permanent |

End of entry--if anyone finds this notebook, please ignore hoofprints on the pages. That's just what happens when your yeshivah used to board donkeys.

(But Inspiration Rating blasts to 97 / 10, so it evens out.)

Ingredients:

- Tiny kitchen in Mishulovin house
- One samovar huffing like a train
- Five shot-glasses (for the grown-ups, RELAX)
- REB BENTCHA on turbo-mode

We boys got front-row seats on overturned crates. My job: keep the sugar bowl from "accidentally" refilling itself into Yaakov's mouth.

Local chossid (#NameRedacted) grumbles:

"THAT FELLOW WHO JOINED THE COMMUNIST PARTY... HE'S BASICALLY A GOY NOW."

BOOM--Bentcha smacks table, vodka does a mini-tsunami.

"EIGHT MILLION SOLDIERS BLOCK HIM FROM TEFILLIN; HE STILL STRAPS THEM ON--TZADDIK!"

Everyone freezes. I secretly imagine eight million soldiers squished into our courtyard. No room left for the samovar.

Conversation drifts to weather, prices, boring stuff. Bentcha starts rummaging, lifts a dusty scrap.

"THIS WORTHLESS? YOUR SMALL-TALK WORTH LESS!"

Cue immediate silence. Even the samovar stops wheezing out of respect/fear.

Bentcha story-time:

- He's standing in Red Square.
- Thousands rush like they're late for cholent.
- He thinks: "100 years ago--NONE of you. 100 years from now--ALSO none. Calm down."

Michael whispers, "Does that mean homework is meaningless?" I whisper back, "Nice try, he only cancels materialism, not Gemara quizzes."

After three "small" l'chaims, Bentcha belts a Russian lullaby: Jewish mom telling her son to stay faithful even when EVERYTHING crashes. Finger

knocks table like drumsticks.

Low-key catchy; I hum along. Years later my brother Berel will sing it for the Rebbe and--spoiler--the Rebbe won't clap. (Apparently lyrics about endless tragedies = not the Rebbe's playlist.)

I always thought Bentcha looked newer-model than the other elders--fancy beard trim, tie, stylish cane. Yet he chats with R. Boruch Duchman & R. Eliyahu Paritcher like bunk-bed buddies.

He finally notices our confused faces:

"WE LEARNED TOGETHER BACK IN LUBAVITCH!"

Translation: shared yeshivah = lifetime secret handshake.

Bentcha paints a scene:

- Rebbe Rashab delivers Shabbos maamar.
- Select students (including mini-Eliyahu) memorize every word.
- Shabbos morning, Eliyahu jumps on a TABLE to review it aloud--hair literally falling out from deep contemplation.

Yaakov whispers, "If hair loss = holiness, I'm doomed." (He's got curls like a lion.)

- One Jew vs. eight million = Jew wins (with tefillin).
- Small-talk < scrap paper < zero value.
- Life = fairground; grab mitzvos, not cotton candy.
- Stylish walking stick does NOT cancel hardcore mesirus nefesh.

- Be careful what lullabies you perform for the Rebbe.

Unfairness rating holds at 29/10 because I still have to memorize tomorrow's Gemara. But after seeing Bentcha turbo-preach, I kinda want to be the kid who one-handedly blocks eight million soldiers--preferably without losing all my hair.

End of entry--if anyone finds vodka stains on this page, they're from Bentcha's table-slap, not me!

Sunday

(That's my rating. Berel's rating soars to 73 / 10--just wait.)

- Berel = my older brother, 12 years old, proud owner of exactly zero sports equipment.
- New neighborhood craze = ICE SKATES on the frozen irrigation ditch.
- Mommy = believes Gemara + blades don't mix.
- Plan = blame/ask REB BENTCHA and see what happens.

Mommy tells Berel:

"WHEN REB BENTCHA COMES FOR YOUR PRIVATE LESSON, WE'LL ASK HIM. IF HE SAYS YES, I'LL BUY SKATES."

Translation: "Let the scary rebbi be the bad guy."

Berel gulps but nods. He's 99 % certain Bentcha will thunder "NO!" and

that'll be that.

Door creaks. Enter Bentcha with walking stick and winter beard in full glory. Before Berel can escape, Mommy pounces:

"REB BENTCHA, MY BERELE WANTS ICE SKATES.
GOOD IDEA?"

Berel stares at the floor like it suddenly turned into Rashi script.

Bentcha wrinkles his forehead, strokes beard... dramatic pause... then:

"SKATES? EXCELLENT IDEA! BUY THEM!"

Berel's jaw = drop. Mommy's eyebrows = fly off her face. I almost choke on my tea.

Bentcha raises a finger (uh-oh clause incoming):

"YES, DEFINITELY SKATES--ON ONE CONDITION.

FIRST IN LINE MUST BE R. BORUCH THE SHOCHET.

SECOND, R. ELIYAHU PARITCHER.

THIRD, R. YERACHMIEL THE ELDER.

THEN--AND ONLY THEN--BERELE MAY SKATE

FOURTH."

Room goes silent except for me shorting. Picture three white-bearded tzaddikim wobbling across the ice in long kapotas--then Berel zooming behind like their tiny bodyguard.

| Person | Facial Expression | Thought Bubble |

|--||-|

| Mommy | Half-smile, half-told-you-so | "Buying skates? Never happening."

|

| Berel | Mixture of hope & doom | "Find three elder Chassidim on skates? Impossible." |

| Me | Trying not to laugh aloud | "Where do you even buy a kapota-friendly helmet?" |

| Bentcha | Total poker face | Mission accomplished. |

- Skate request technically APPROVED.
- Logistical odds of it happening: 0.00001 %.
- Berel now researching if 80-year-olds can learn triple axels.
- Mommy silently thanks Hashem for classic Bentcha loophole.

Unfairness rating for me stays 22 / 10 (still no soccer ball back from confiscation). Unfairness for Berel? Let's say the ice just melted.

End of entry--if you ever spot three venerable Chassidim speed-skating through Samarkand, call our house immediately. Berel will need to lace up.

Wednesday

(It's actually a calm day--nobody chased me with a rifle--but the mystery level shot way up.)

Cheder door creaks open and in walks a boy who:

- Is way older than us, maybe 16.

- Has peyos so long they could double as jump-ropes.
- Wears a totally different style kapota.
- Speaks EXACTLY ZERO WORDS to anyone.

Naturally the class response = nonstop whispering + mild teasing (Mottel tried to lasso a peyeh--bad idea).

Older-peyos guy finally sighs:

"PROMISE TO QUIT BOTHERING ME AND I'LL TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT YOUR REBBE YOU'VE NEVER HEARD."

Instant silence. Even Shlomo's ink stopped dripping.

We make the pinky-swear. (Yes, I know pinky-swears aren't in Shulchan Aruch--but neither is lassoing peyos.)

Turns out he's a SLONIMER CHOSSID. Last year his Rebbe went on a "Tzadik World Tour," visiting holy rabbis everywhere. After the trip the Slonimer Rebbe said:

- "I saw a REAL tzadik in Lubavitch--gold watch, two golden chains, HUMBLE like nobody else."
- "Fortunate are the eyes that saw him."
- "Fortunate are the eyes that saw someone who SAW him." (Spiritual chain-reaction.)

Then, while everyone was snacking at the farbrengen, the Slonimer Rebbe

told Mister Peyos:

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

So he packed a bag and--boom--now he's in our manure-cellar classroom.

Respect.

| Kid | Reaction |

|--|--|

| Michoel | Whispered "Golden chains? Like treasure!" |

| Yaakov | Already drawing the Rebbe with double chains in notebook. |

| Me | Thinking "If even other Rebbes call our Rebbe 'real tzadik,' that's next-level bragging rights." |

| Mottel | Quiet for first time all week--miracle! |

- Don't judge a boy by his peyos length--he might have VIP intel.
- Apparently "humility" can come with fancy accessories.
- If your Rebbe tells you to move cities, you MOVE.
- Teasing upgrade: never tease the mysterious kid; he might drop legendary stories.

Unfairness rating holds at 24 / 10 because I still can't skate, but

Inspiration rating = shiny golden 100 / 10.

End of entry--if I ever get two golden chains, remind me to keep the humility part, too.

Thursday

Unfairness Rating: 35 / 10

Excitement Rating: 99 / 10

Tonight was IT--my official upgrade from Kid to Grown-Up-Who-Puts-on-Tefillin.

Venue: Apartment 6, second floor, Chudjumskaya St., Toopik 1.

Translation: Dead-End Alley #1. (Yes, my big night is happening in an actual "no-way-out." Couldn't be more Soviet if we tried.)

Backdrop: Stalin is supposedly packing 3 million of us onto a one-way train to Siberia. Forty-thousand frozen barracks already waiting. So, giant parties? Not trending.

- Tatty
- Brother Berel
- Uncle Boruch Duchman (smuggled half the food in his coat)
- Dovid & Eliyahu Mishulovin (security detail = two)
- Moshe Nissilevich (brought the quiet singing voice)
- Berke Chein (currently hiding in our house--bonus guest)

Total humans: 8. Total balloons: 0. Total heartbeats: about 8,000.

We sang the intro niggun to my Bar-Mitzvah maamar so softly you could mistake us for buzzing refrigerators.

- Option A: Super-warm winter coat (Aunt Rosa's pick).
- Option B: TORAH OHR SIDDUR--the Arizal-nusach prayer book

every Chabadnik dreams of, pristine copy owned by Osher Shlaif. Price tag: THREE HUNDRED RUBLES. (That's like trading a whole goat plus its winter boots.)

I threw all 13 years of stubborn power on the table: "SID-DUR OR BUST."

Tatty sided with me; Aunt Rosa rolled her eyes so hard they nearly left orbit.

Purchase completed. I hugged the siddur like it was a new puppy. Aunt Rosa flips through, frowns:

"THREE HUNDRED RUBLES AND NO PICTURES? AT LEAST A COAT HAS BUTTONS!"

Note to self: future printing idea--"Illustrated Torah Ohr" with sheep cartoons for the aunts of the world.

| Category | Score |

| - | - |

| Guests who danced (tiny shuffle) | 3 |

| Number of neighbors who noticed | 0 (victory) |

| Tefillin nerves | Maxed out |

| Cold Siberia thoughts | Sneak in every five minutes |

| Joy of owning siddur | Priceless--sorry, Aunt Rosa |

If Stalin really tries to ship us off, I'm packing my tefillin, this siddur,

and maybe one mitten. Everything else can freeze.

END of entry--if you find this diary under my mattress, please handle the siddur with clean hands; it cost us a winter coat!