

CHAPTER



Chodesh Elul, circa 3809 - Yerushalayim

Like the full moon at the height of the *Chodesh*, the stool she is sitting on is a perfect sphere. She likes that it has a comfortable edge no matter at which angle she positions herself. The round tambour in her hand holds the bright green linen fabric taut as she adds a neat border of stitches in purply pinks. The murmur of voices in the other room also rises and dips in a kind of cycle.

Penina looks up from her needlework to the candle clock high on the shelf. It's right around the time in her father's evening learning session that a new argument should break out—

Bang!

There. That's her father's palm slapping the arm of his

chair as he makes an important point in his conversation. Her friend Batya, whose father is also in the room next door, is sprawled across the cushioned bench that lines the bedroom wall. Her auburn-hair friend looks up from her own work. Batya was waiting for it too. She drops her embroidery and hides her chuckle behind a plump fist.

After their knowing glance, Penina and Batya dive back into their newest project, concentrating on the intricate floral motifs on the long linen swaths as their fathers argue.

Every girl in Yerushalayim will be wearing the colorful scarves this *Yom Tov* season. As each year passes, the patterns and material seem to become more glamorous and expensive. Since the marketplaces seem full of only exorbitant prices and breaches of *tznius* these days, it is simpler, and wiser, to sew the decorations themselves.

And it is so much more fun to do it together!

The bright shades of pink, marine blue and gold flash in the stretched canvas as their needles wink in and out in fluid motion. The light drops below the neighboring rooftops and casts long shadows over the girls, and they edge closer to the door to catch the last glimmers of the fading sun.

They notice that the sounds next door no longer ebb and flow in their usual pattern. Penina gathers her spools in her apron hem and beckons silently to Batya. They peer curiously around the jamb.

The argument between the two men, partners in Torah study and business, has steered away from the weekly *sedra* and is heading in a different direction.

“I don’t believe it for a moment!” Sage and white-haired, Rav Yosef has leaned back in his throne-like armchair and is



staring at the younger and red-bearded Ben-David.

“What’s there not to believe?! You think his father, a wealthy king, could not afford to find him proper instruction in Rome? *Chachamim* exist outside of Yerushalayim, you know!”

But his assessment is not so quickly accepted. “Perhaps he was indeed taught Torah. But knowledge alone does not make you a *talmid chacham*.”

“Well then, what does?” Ben-David smacks his fist on the table.

“He rose to his position in the land of the gentiles. To maintain so much power in the cutthroat culture of Rome, it takes cunning, flattery, falsehood...” Rav Yosef stands up and he scowls, as if angry at himself for not being *dan l’kaf zechus* another Jew. As he turns around, he notices the girls.

Penina shifts uncomfortably under her father’s fiery blue stare.

“Sorry, Abba,” she reddens. They hadn’t meant to be eavesdropping.

He nods, and Penina and Batya hold their unfinished scarves close as they flee past the table, through the kitchens and out into the courtyard, sending the grazing geese into a honking clamor.

“You think they’re talking about the new King Aggripas?” Batya asks, all out of breath as she plops herself down on the large flat stone under the kitchen window. The geese rumble in protest at the intrusion of their territory, but eventually relocate to their pen.

“Yes, that’s what it seems.” Her embroidery loop abandoned in her lap, Penina pulls at the weeds that have encroached on the bricked foundation of their home.

“You don’t really think he could be a *tzaddik*, do you?”
Batya’s freckled face is a cloud of disappointment.

Penina is thinking. When they’d heard of the arrival of young Aggripas from Rome, the Jewish community had waited and watched, cautiously optimistic. Of Jewish lineage and pleasant bearing, their new king could ease the Romans’ barbaric and ruthless oppression of *Eretz Hakodesh*.

But she knows that to her father, the Romans’ stench rubs off on anyone who associates with them, and that would certainly apply to any ruler they appoint over the Jewish people. The Romans may have built bathhouses and bridges. But at the same time, they were causing irreparable damage to the fiber of Jewish *perushi* life, as the shine of their wealth swept so many of their friends into their depraved culture.

And in Abba’s opinion, this completely overshadows their glory.

“You know, honestly, King Aggripas’s appointment of Yishmael ben Pavi as the new *Kohen Gadol* instead of all those ridiculous phonies, I think made Abba very happy...”
Penina watches a sudden gust of wind scatter her pile of pulled grasses over the courtyard. Her eyes follow the path of a circling sprig of bellflower through the air until it lands some feet away and tumbles down the hillside toward the Pilgrim Road.

She is blessed that, with her father’s standing in the community, they live close enough to the *Har Habayis* to visit every Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh. The now magnificent House of Hashem, so tall and proud after its complete renovation only decades earlier by King Hordus, is practically in her own backyard. But that joy she feels upon beholding



the *Beis Hamikdash* is always tempered by seeing how corrupt the *Kehunah* has become under the control of their influential and assimilated brethren.

After witnessing how the *Tzedukim* disregard the *Chachamim*, the appointment of a righteous *Kohen Gadol* had been such welcome news!

“Yishmael ben Pavi? Who is he?” Batya asks.

“He is certainly a *tzaddik*. He is one of Kimchis’ sons!”

“Kimchis? Who is that? Wait! Is she the one...?” Batya closes her eyes and her soft smile appears. Penina remembers it too. It had been a balmy late summer morning the year before. Batya’s older brother, Elchanan, had been ill in bed, so Batya and Penina were helping haul flour sacks in the shop that day. As the sun began to lower in the sky, and there was a lull in the flow of customers, the door had softly opened. A regal-looking woman entered. There was something about the way she carried herself, the aura that seemed to surround her, that struck them; Penina noticed that even Batya had to stop herself from staring.

Batya’s mother had greeted their customer warmly and showed her their highest quality *soles*. It seemed she knew her well. “She’s beautiful!” Batya whispered to Penina as the woman slipped around the bend to pay.

Penina could only nod. The beautiful manner and refined conduct that shone from her face made her stand out among all the customers that had entered that day.

“Yes!” Penina exclaims now, eyes brightening for a moment. “It’s her! Kimchis is the new *Kohen Gadol*’s mother. My Ima says that each one of her seven sons seemed to be more righteous than the next...”

“Maybe we’ll finally have that big *seudah* after Yom Kippur this year?” Batya is always the first to line up for any celebration. Unfortunately, the *tzeduki* appointments of the recent past had generated a chain of *Kohanim* who had not survived the awe-inspiring but dangerous once-a-year visit to the *Kodesh Hakadoshim*.

Alas, the yearly *seudah* hosted by a *Kohen Gadol* who emerged joyfully alive is something that had not come to pass in a long while.

“Like a diadem placed on the forehead of a king... like the bright morning star shining in the eastern horizon...! So was the appearance of the *Kohen*.” Penina sings quietly. Batya’s eyes are gleaming too, like someone has already placed a platter of pomegranates and figs in front of her.

“Ima say she merits all this because she is scrupulous about covering her hair, even in her own home,” Penina adds, a tinge of awe in her voice. “It would only make sense. Her modesty in private earns her son the *zechus* to enter the most private place in the world, the *Kodesh Hakadoshim*.”

“Ahem, our mothers do the same!” Batya is quick to defend them. “My mother covers her hair at all times too! I mean, we are not *Kohanim*, but—”

Penina thinks of her own mother, dignified, beautiful, and modest. “It’s true. But since Ima pointed her out to me, it means there is something even more *tznius* about her that even my mother aspires to...”

“So if he appointed Ben-Pavi, then King Aggripas is surely righteous!” Batya gushes, getting back to the topic.

But Penina is staring at the swirls of leaves and buds decorating the green linen scarf in her lap, and her father’s



recent words echo in her mind. “...rose to a position of power in the land of the gentiles...cunning, flattery...”

So, Aggripas. Tzaddik or rasha?

Could anyone truly know the hearts of men except Hashem?

Suddenly, the needlework in her hands seems too bright and false, almost as if it is the *palla* of a Roman noblewoman. And isn't that the look all her friends are aiming for, with shawls edged in skeins of gold and color?

A sense of impending calamity hangs in the air, dulling the brilliant shades, blurring them into a mess of cross stitches and knots as the night's shadows creep in. Batya is gathering materials into her workbasket, getting ready to accompany her father home. She's quiet for once; she seems to notice that Penina is not in the mood to continue talking.

How much longer could life go on like this?

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Penina is setting the last plate on the table soon after Batya has left when she hears the sound of the front gate slamming. Within moments, her younger brother Yochanan appears in the threshold, tall and gangly and framed by the darkening sky. He is flush-faced, panting, dripping with mud and some other clumps of organic material she can't quite make out.

“Hi, Penina!” He lifts his foot to enter, but Penina is quicker.

“Excuse me, young man!” She grabs the straw broom from the corner and holds it out, barring the door like a Roman soldier at the city gates. Trust him to try to sneak in while Ima is busy in the kitchen!

“Entry allowed to clean *bachurim* only.”

He groans but turns and heads for the water barrel next to the fence that separates their yard from their neighbors’.



“My sister, my *chochmah*...” he mumbles. Penina smiles to herself. It’s his favorite line, an intentional misinterpretation from a *possuk* that he uses only when he knows she’s absolutely right... and he can’t bear it.

He must be coming from the Ben-David house, where he has a daily *chavrusa* with Batya’s brother, Shalom. Encouraged by their fathers’ partnership and her own closeness with Batya, her younger brother has become inseparable from Shalom. Neighbors and best friends, they also seem to have taken on their fathers’ passion for arguing, though at their age, it tends to get physical too.

After two full minutes of splashing and enough overflow that Penina sees rivulets streaming all the way out the courtyard gate, Yochanan marches noisily into the house, singing his favorite Tehillim tune, oblivious to the two *talmidei chachamim* already seated on the wood bench at their table. A warm “*Shalom Aleichem!*” from the shorter one startles him to their presence, and Penina feels sorry for him as he stammers out a response. Under their father’s stern gaze, he shakes each of their hands and meekly joins the rest of the family at the supper table.

Abba reverently places his hands over the bread and makes the brachah, and they begin their meal. Penina joins her mother at the end of the table as the two men enjoy an animated discussion with their father. They seem to be pleased to have ended up in this home where Torah wisdom flows clear and pure. Penina keeps one-year-old Yisroel babbling happily with bits of bread. He is crumbling them into a thousand small pieces, forming a siege of crumbs around his chair and chomping on the crusts with a toothless grin. She’s

eating extra slowly, trying to keep an ear on the talk, hoping her father might give more clues to the political situation. But she is not even halfway through her plate of vegetables when she feels an elbow stab straight into her stomach.

“Ouch!” She yelps, halting her father in middle of speaking, before realizing that it’s her brother trying to get her attention. And that he actually meant to do so discreetly. Boys!

“Sorry,” Yochanan looks down at his plate. The meal proceeds, and Penina waits until the conversation picks up again before she turns back toward him.

“What were you going to say?” she whispers.

“You know Shalom’s older brother, Elchanan?”

“Yes.” Penina used to see him on his way to the *Beis Hamedrash* every morning when she went out to feed the geese. Now that she thought about it, though, she hadn’t seen him in several weeks. “What about him, is he okay?”

“I was on my way back from my morning lesson with Rabbi Yitzchak at the *Beis Knesses*. I was trying to review *Mishnah*, and I hadn’t been listening so well in class, because...”

Their exchange is sure to soon be discovered—and shushed—by one of their parents, so Penina nudges Yochanan to get to his point.

“Right,” he says. “My head was busy, so I turned down the alley right before ours by accident and was almost at the end of the street before I realized I made a mistake. I turned around, but I was hearing loud, angry voices coming from Ben-Shmuel’s cellar. Then it suddenly went quiet and...”

“I don’t understand. What’s this to do with Elchanan?” Penina cuts him off.

“Shh! Just listen!” His voice is still hushed, but Penina can



sense his agitation. “Before I could even decide whether I should stick around, our other neighbor Yissachar bar Luga suddenly came out of the cellar.”

“Yissachar bar Luga...” Penina frowns. Abba’s former accounting assistant had been a familiar figure in their home. But then he had left business for good.

At first, she had thought that the abrasive lad just couldn’t get along with the others at the mill. She remembers how Bar-Luga had begun to argue with her father—no one had ever dared raise their voice at her learned and respected Abba the way he did.

But then she overheard the partners discussing it one night, the word “*Peritzim*” spoken louder than the rest. She knows this *chevra* as a political menace, a band of youth frustrated by the return of the Roman procurators’ rule over Eretz Yisroel. So Bar-Luga had joined those who had decided to take matters into their own hands. It made sense in a way, that a *bachur* like him, with his rash manner, would get swept up in the idealistic vim to re-establish Jewish control over their land.

The son of Gamliel, the quiet and serious boy who had replaced Bar-Luga, was a lot less capable and efficient, but at least his presence would not threaten the continuation of their trade under the Romans’ watchful eye.

She feels a sudden chill as Yochanan continues his story, though the evening fire continues to burn brightly behind her. What did he see at that house, and what was this to do with Batya’s brother? It doesn’t bode well, if Bar-Luga is involved.

“Maybe someone heard my footsteps, or they had a *bachur* on watch to tell them I was there. In any case,

after seeing who I was, Yissachar actually invited me to join them! He asked if I would want the *zechus* to help attack the Roman garrison outside of Beitar, because they are planning a hit-and-run attack and need some young children as a di- di... diversion!”