

## CHAPTER



### ***Chodesh Elul, circa 3809 - Yerushalayim***

In the home of the respected *talmid chacham* and miller, Rav Yosef, there's a lull at the table as the Torah discussion between host and guests concludes. Penina watches Yochanan pierce the last piece of his stew and chew it as he waits for his father to ask their guests to join *Birchas Hamazon*. Though Penina is bursting with nerves to hear the story's end, she can't help but admire her brother's nonchalant demeanor. Their zealot neighbors choose their troopers well.

"Before I could even answer the young zealot, a group of *bachurim* came up from the cellar." Yochanan is sweeping up his little brother's crumb ramparts as he concludes his accounting under the murmur of the adults' goodbyes. "I guess the meeting was over. Penina!" His voice suddenly



risers. “The third one out was our own neighbor Elchanan!”

Elchanan? A member of the *Peritzim*?

Penina barely conceals her anguish. She sees this reaction reflected in her brother’s eyes as they betray his shock and confusion.

“Did you mention it to Shalom?”

“Yes, I was there this afternoon watching them roll the bales for transport and he said it’s true.”

“And what did he have to say?”

“Well, he sort of seemed to defend him...”

“Shalom defends him? What does his father say?”

This time, she’s a little too loud. Abba has returned after accompanying the *talmidei chachamim* to the door, and he stretches his arms to rest a hand on each child’s shoulder. He is looking down at them, his expression serious, the afterglow of his delight in the *divrei Torah* swiftly dissipating. Even Ima abandons her cleanup efforts and approaches to hear what he has to say.

“*Yeladim*, what exactly is going on here? First, I hear the word *Peritzim*, and now you’re talking about defense? An explanation, Yochanan, please.”

Yochanan jumps up and pulls at his *peyos* nervously. He stares down at the floor, avoiding his father’s face.

“He, uh... he, Shalom, said that Elchanan explained it to him properly! And..and...that enough is enough. We can’t allow this *cherpah* to continue—”

“Wait, Yochanan. This is what Shalom told you?”

Yochanan nods twice in succession. “He said it’s a disgrace that we are not standing up to the Romans. It takes courage to fight, but it’s a huge embarrassment when we just take

it that they make crazy laws and arrest our friends left and right. We can't just wait and hope for peace. Where is our *geon Yaakov?*..."

The words are tumbling, messy. Yochanan scratches at a blob of mud on his shirtsleeve that his haphazard washing-up had failed to dissolve.

Abba leans closer to Yochanan and Penina. They each push away their plates and focus, for they know that Abba's words are always wise. "To fight does seem wise and courageous, my children. It is difficult to see our enemies rule with such flagrant mockery of our holy Torah, and their persecution of those who fight to keep the words of Hashem. We all feel that. But despite the Roman taxes and curfews, we are, as a whole, surviving as a people. Our priorities are, as always, the *avodah* in the *Bais Hamikdash* and the continuation of our holy *Mesorah*.

"On the other hand, rebellion and dissent against the vast Roman army only spells disaster. This kind of insubordination will incite them to even more terror and a reprisal of potentially massive and devastating proportions. It could lead to...*Rachmana litzlan*—" Abba's lips close into a straight red line. He would never spell out the misfortune that could potentially befall his beloved nation. But his meaning is clear as he searches his children's faces to make sure they understand.

Penina watches her brother absorb their father's words. As she does, she suddenly notices he seems taller, more focused, as if this morning's experience, its recounting at supper, and Abba's subsequent *mussar* speech have all caused him to grow up in one day.

A loud knock on the door interrupts them. An uncomfort-



able silence prevails as they glimpse Mrs. Ben-David step through the doorway. Ima rises and leads her to their storage room for the extra set of candles she's come to borrow.

She smiles gracefully at them and steps out the door. How much of the conversation did she hear? Penina's not sure, but maybe they were lucky? Her stance had seemed light and unassuming as she left.

Penina gets up to help her mother and brother empty the table and package the leftovers for the poor family visiting down the road. If Batya's mother had heard anything and it led to a confrontation in their neighbors' home this night, she'd surely find out from her friend tomorrow.

## CHAPTER



“Shalom just pushed me!”

“Hey, relax! I was shoved by that kid over there!” Shalom defends himself.

The two boys are at it again.

Penina and Batya stand next to each other with their families amidst the bustling gathering heading up the wide pathways towards the sparkling *Beis Hamikdash*. Penina holds onto Yochanan’s sleeve so he doesn’t stray too far, and even more importantly, to make sure his arguing with Shalom won’t end in another fistfight, here of all places.

“Will you stop bickering, boys!” Batya glares down at them. “We might end up missing the whole thing!” They quiet down at her words, but not for long.

“You’re breathing down my neck!”



“And you’re stepping on my toe!”

On and on.

“Well, actually, the main problem is that Aggripas comes from slaves,” Yochanan says. “It is not respectable that a *melech* should descend from such lineage.”

“As if it matters what we have to say. The *Sanhedrin* don’t even gather in the *Bais Hamikdash* itself anymore!”

This new argument has Penina’s attention in a whole different way. She notices that Batya isn’t bothering to shush them either.

Yochanan doesn’t seem to be listening to Shalom, though. He delves deeper into his own *drasha*. “Furthermore,” he adds, mimicking the tune their fathers use when learning. “Aggripas is not from *Malchus Yehuda!*”

Shalom is quick to defend: “At least he’s not a Roman, Yochanan!”

“But he’s *not* from *Dovid Hamelech*.” His friend is persistent.

“When was the last time we had such a king? Long before even the *Chashmonaim*...”

“You have a *very* good memory.” Yochanan rolls his eyes upward as if waiting for Divine assistance for his best *chaver*. “That was a hundred years ago!”

“So you agree, because there were other kings who were not from Yehuda!”

“Of course not. As the *Chachamim* say, if you do something wrong enough times, you start thinking it’s actually allowed.” Yochanan is sounding more and more like Abba.

“It doesn’t mean Hakhel is not supposed to happen.”

“Of course it does!”

“No, for Hakhel, we don’t even need an actual *melech*.”

Remember Ezra Hasofer.” Shalom folds his arms and turns his head away. There’s a commotion as some strong young men argue about the placement of a big red velvet chair on the grand *bimah* that is attracting his attention.

The great debate is over, at least for now.

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Penina twists her finger through her embroidered scarf as she waits in her place high up in the balcony of the *Ezras Nashim*. Batya reaches over to still her hand and shakes her head. It’s only then that she realizes she’s unraveling the threads and ruining her handiwork. The two of them have finally sent off their younger brothers to stand with Elchanan, who probably won’t care much if the arguing starts up again. She hopes those standing around them will be able to concentrate on why they are really here—the Hakhel!

But their fears are unfounded, because as soon as King Aggripas arrives, the room breaks out in an awesome cry, the shout of the brachah “*shechalak mikvodo*” upon catching a glimpse of their king. Then silence sweeps the room. Even the youngsters and babes present are completely taken by the intensity of the moment and the young king’s noble presence.

With slow strides, he crosses the vestibule, watched by thousands of expectant faces, and begins to ascend the high wooden platform that is set up in the center of the women’s courtyard. Tap... Tap... Tap... his footsteps echo, majestically deliberate, up the steps. The hems of his robes undulate behind him, flashes of gold thread glinting in the faint sunlight, as he reaches its center. *Hamelech!*



A huddle of solemn-faced dignitaries gather behind him, and Penina can't help but gaze searchingly at their authoritative faces. Who here is truly a servant of Hashem in His palace and who is a servant to riches and fame? It is hard to tell.

She tries to ignore these thoughts and focus on the fact that it is *Zman Simchaseinu*. Since the beginning of Tishrei, long before the sounds of the *Kohanim's* trumpets blew through the streets and alleys and beckoned them to Hakhel, Abba had described the awesomeness of this event and what is about to take place.

Those standing next to the king at this moment are of spiritual stature, a majestic row of men preparing themselves for this great mitzvah. She imagines Yochanan checking their roles off in his head as they come forward.

“...*Chazan Hakneses, Rosh Hakneses...*”

Then comes the *Segan Kohen Gadol*, the assistant in charge of all the *Kohanim*, who stands at the ready. Eyes closed, he is whispering a *tefillah* to himself. And then, all the way closest to the king stands the noblest figure of all. Graced by the gleaming *bigdei Kehuna*, it is the *Kohen Gadol* himself!

“Rabi Yishmael ben Pavi!” Batya whispers in amazement, and Penina wonders if she's still thinking of fruit salad and date bread from last week's *seudah*, but then banishes the thought as too mundane for the occasion. She focuses instead on the flowing beard framing Rabi Yishmael's holy face, how his stately bearing bespeaks wisdom and grace.

The beautiful Torah scroll is passed reverently from hand to hand, from the *Chazan Hakneses*, to the *Rosh Hakneses*, *Segan Kohen Gadol* to the *Kohen Gadol*...



“Hamelech!”

King Aggripas accepts the scroll, ignoring the royal seat behind him, and remains standing in his place. A ripple of approval passes through the crowd, especially where the *Chachamim* stand. She wants to share the moment with her mother. But Ima’s eyes are glued to the king as he unrolls the Torah to the correct place. Penina knows it is from the book of Devarim, *parshios* that will inspire them to keep true to the Torah and Hashem’s ways. She watches silently as he begins to recite the brachos.

“*Barchu es Hashem Hamevorach!*”

“*Boruch atoh Hashem... nosain hatorah!*” Aggripas’ voice rings loud and clear, echoing through the hearts of the gathered people. Even before he begins, a sense of awe settles within Penina. His words, when they emerge, are like perfectly round droplets of morning dew gently softening dry earth, preparing it for new life.

Among the dignitaries behind the king, there is a wave of movement, as they all lean forward in concentration, despite the fact they must all know these sections of the Torah as fluently as little Yisroel does his *Alef-Bais*. She focuses her heart, as Abba has told them countless times before, and tries to visualize herself standing before *Har Sinai* about to receive the Torah from Hashem Himself.

The words flow, cresting and falling over the men, women and children: unspeaking, absorbing, experiencing. Moshe’s words of reflection, reprimand, and direction, in a time so reflective of their own, takes on a deeper meaning, and she senses the stirring of an ocean of hearts around her.

They are only some time into the third section when



the once-strong voice begins to tremble and then breaks completely. She opens her eyes to a shocking sight. The composed and equanimous king's face is flushed, tears flowing down his youthful cheeks. The people are too flabbergasted to even respond to what is transpiring. King Aggripas... crying?

Could it be that his heart has responded to what he is declaring? Penina tries to review what he has just recited.

*"When you come to the land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you..."*

It is the *pessukim* about appointing a king, and it is the last sentence that seems to have hit home. *"You shall set a king over you, ... from among your brothers, ... you shall not appoint a foreigner over yourself."*

A foreigner...

Shalom and Yochanan's earlier argument flashes in her mind. Is Aggripas sensing his lack of inherency as a Jewish king? Is he realizing, at this pinnacle of his rulership, that he is not truly fit for this position over a *mamleches Kohanim*?

Before she can even collect her own thoughts fully, to weigh right from wrong, a cry breaks out from the crowd, originating from those standing behind Aggripas—the *Chachamim*.

*"You are our brother! You are our brother!"* They call out en-masse, enwrapping their king in supportive sanction. *You are a Jew and that is the main thing!* their words seem to imply.

The crowd ripples in response, the sounds breaking like bubbles at the surface so that she can make out no more words.

Penina is desperate to see her father's face, for his reaction to this turn of events. Is he joining the *Chachamim*

in supporting Aggripas? Or has he changed his mind about their king? She wonders, also: Are the *Chachamim* truly giving their stamp of approval or is this is an attempt to appease a Jew in his time of pain?

The feelings swirl, a cloudy soup of them in the pit of Penina's stomach, and she searches deep inside for the clarity she had known just a few moments before.

If only they would be *zoche* to a true *melech*, all this confusion would be avoided! A real, holy, noble king—the one promised by Hashem through His *Navi*, a *melech* from *zera Dovid*, chosen by Hashem. No questions, no doubts, no incertitude. Could it happen in her lifetime? A picture of *Melech Hamoshiach* rises in her imagination, lifting her heart, and her eyes glaze over, threatening to spill.

It's how she'd always imagined Hakhel.

But until then? For how long would they wait?