The Teacher Is A Goy

by Henry Saltzman

On this particular day, the focus of the lesson was geography.

The textbook, *The Geography of the United States*, with a special section on New York State, was still being used in 1952 by New York City's elementary school children in the middle grades. This surprised him because he too had suffered through the very same text in Public School 84 back in 1939. It was a large, squarish book, an odd size as textbooks went in those days. The covers were a dark, lush green, like the glowing color of the leaves of high summer. It was a maturely and well-written book. Its vocabulary was uncompromisingly precise and scientific, challenging its young readers with many technical terms. It was illustrated with black and white photographs, pastel-colored maps and a multitude of charts and bar graphs. It made little compromise to the young, immature readers who were commanded by higher educational authorities to absorb the geography, economy, and natural history of their state by means of this formidable guide.

The authors presented their subject by combining geography, meteorology, geology and economics. "To learn geography," they seemed to be saying, "a good citizen needs to know what lies *under* the surface as well as what goes on *above* it." They expected their young readers to gain extensive knowledge of all the different ways human beings produced their food, clothing, and everything else they made from the earth.

He and his students slogged their way into this weighty text, wading through all kinds of "trivia"—at least as far as he was concerned—about the climate, mountain ranges, rivers, plains, harbors and the lakes of fair New York State. They galloped through chapters chockfull of brain-numbing information about the wonders of the state's agricultural, industrial, and commercial life with each sector neatly linked to the state's richly diverse geological, topographical, and climatic phenomena.

Mr. Saltzman was so bored by this material that he barely bothered to keep more than a page or two ahead of the class, spending no more than a few seconds scanning the next day's lesson to make sure that he wouldn't be totally helpless or surprised by the expected volley of questions the students would surely be firing away at him. It was amazing what inquiries they managed to tease out of the text, charts, maps, graphs, and photos.

After a few weeks of droning along together, they had arrived at chapter eight, "Geology," which included a section on New York City. As a freshman at City College, Mr. Saltzman had been required to take a course on the geology of the city which, to his surprise, he had actually enjoyed. He had loved the field trips to the scattered outcroppings of Inwood marble and mica schist, the minerals which form the city's foundation. So, when they reached the section dealing with the impact of the Ice Age on the city, he roused himself out of his usual, geography-induced lethargy. As the children read along, he found himself experiencing the special pleasure of recalling information he had long thought forgotten.

They began reading the new chapter on a dismal winter afternoon. The sky was leaden, heavy. The sunlight leaking through the overcast had a steely, cold quality that added to the frigid feel of the day. In their warm room, the day's grayness dispelled by the flat fluorescent overhead lighting, the boys read aloud about how the earth's natural events and forces—earthquakes, volcanoes, glaciers, oceans, winds, cold, and heat—had sculpted the land upon which they now lived.

They were two pages into the chapter, and all was going well enough, he thought. The children were completely absorbed by the descriptions of the earth's powerful forces. Power in all forms fascinates children, especially the power of nature. The yeshiva boys were no different. They were enthralled by the explanations of how the solid, massive, apparently unchangeable world around them could be so dramatically reformed and refashioned time and again. The immense forces which the book described only reinforced their awe and belief in God's power over the earth and all the living things thereon.

At one point we came to the explanation of how the very ground they were living on, now called Brooklyn, had once been covered by a mountain of ice, a glacier.

"How big vas that glacier, titcher?"

"Mr. Saltzman to you, please."

"Awright, how big was that glacier, Mr. Saltzman?"

He hadn't the foggiest idea. If dimensions had been given in the text somewhere, he had missed them. In a mild panic of being exposed as being less than omniscient, Mr. Saltzman skimmed desperately through the next few pages for some appropriate information, but without success. So, he improvised.

"Very big, like a mountain."

"Like de Ketskills?" a boy called out.

"Bigger, much bigger."

"Like de Endes, Mr. Saltzman?"

His head snapped around in astonishment to look at Tibor, the fourteen-year old, was waving for attention from his corner of the room.

"It's Andes, Tibor, Ah-Ah-Ah-ndes and how come you know about the Andes Mountains?"

Slowly Tibor's sweet, modest smile glowed across his pimply face. His cheeks flushed with pride at having surprised and impressed his teacher. By the time he rose to explain, he was beaming. From the unusual silence in the room, Henry realized that no other boy in the room knew what the "Endes" were, much less where they were.

Tibor swelled with an unaccustomed sense of importance. He, the poorly educated child from the DP camps, who rarely took part in class discussions, finally had realized that he knew something that the Amerikanishe kinder didn't!

“Ven I vas…”

“Tibor, wh-wh-when I w-w-was, alright?”

“Sure, Mr. Saltzman. Wh-wh-ven I w-w-vas in the kemp in Hungary, nokh dem krig…”

“After the war, Tibor, say it in English.”

“Efter de var. OK?”

The teacher nodded, deciding that enough was enough. Let the boy enjoy his triumph without interruption, no matter how well deserved.

“OK, Tibor, OK, tell us the story.”

“Vun day a men came to de kemp lookin’ for me. He said dat he vas a brudder fun a cousin of my fadder….”

Upon uttering the word “fadder,” Tibor’s eyes suddenly filled with tears. They all saw it. Tibor stopped. His throat worked convulsively, his Adam’s Apple bobbing as he gulped down his memories along with the tears that were now running down the back of his throat. But not a tear spilled out onto his cheeks. The room was utterly still. The boys looked down at their desktops, anywhere but at Tibor.

No questions. No explanations. The teacher and his students waited silently and respectfully, each with his own thoughts and memories, until Tibor was ready to go on.

“De man told me dat er voint,” he caught himself, “that he lives in a beautiful city in South Amerike, en dat he looked for me for two years already…”

The teacher felt compelled to break in with, “Not *looked*, Tibor, *has been*, *has been* looking for you.” He blinked at Mr. Saltzman in confusion, genuinely puzzled. “Has been looking? Not looked? So vot’s the difference?”

Henry tried to explain, “If your father’s cousin’s brother had *stopped* looking for you, we would say he *looked* for you. But because he was *still* looking for you, we say *has been looking* to show that the looking had not stopped.”

The poor boy rolled his eyes heavenward, murmuring “Oy a brokh!” which very, very roughly translated, means, “Woe is me!” Literally, it means, “God, I need a blessing, please!” He shook his head in despair over ever learning to speak this impossible language.

Once before, Tibor had moaned in frustration in a similar situation, “Vot kind of lenguage is dis enyvay? De sounds jump around like meshuge (like crazy) an *ay* becomes a *ah*, an *e*becomes an *eh*. Oy a klug!”

But this time he wasn’t about to allow his confusion to stop him. He was going to tell his story or die in the attempt. So, the boy ignored his teacher who was already feeling guilty for having interrupted him with such trivia.

Sighing with despair over ever getting command of this mind-bending language, Tibor resumed

his narrative. "Awrright, my fadder's cousin's brudder HAS BEEN"—finger up in the air for emphasis, he turned toward Mr. Saltzman as if to say, *Nu, satisfied, teacher?,* "looking for me for two years and he vas telling me that everyone in his femily vants me to come live mit dem in Sout Amerike. I was so heppy, I thought I vas, w-w-was going here, to Amerike 'cause I never heard"—"had heard," Henry whispered reflexively to Tibor who quite sensibly ignored the correction—"vun a Sout' Amerike. So, he took me to Mendoza in Argentina. And in Mendoza you ken see de Endes Mountains, big, big mountains mit snow on de tops, de biggest, beautifulest mountains in de world."

(Hah, a small victory! He got the *w* sound in *world* right!)

"En dose big mountains," he brought his recitation to an end with a flourish, his arm thrust out toward the back of the room as if all you had to do was look across Keap Street to see them, "Dose big mountains are called de Endes Mountains, like I just said before!"

He sat, exhausted by this outstanding recitation. And the hands started waving and the questions started flying.

"End just how high are they?

"Where exectly are they?"

"Where is Mendoza?"

"Where is Argentina?"

"Never mind dat, where is South America altogether?"

It was a wonderful explosion and Tibor was rewarded for causing it by being given the honor of being allowed to go to Mr. Lieberman's office for the atlas.

"Atlas, Tibor, ah-ah-ahtlas. Understand?"

He nodded joyously and sped across the front of the room, passing behind the teacher and out the door, returning moments later, triumphant and astonished. In his hands was a thing he had never imagined, a book that held the whole world. He handed it to Mr. Saltzman reverently.

"Here's de etlas. En dis hez de Endes in it?"

"Oy," Saltzman thought to himself, but aloud he patiently reminded Tibor, "Ah-tlas, ah-tlas, say it correctly, Tibor. Say like me, *ah* like in the word *at*!" He did, forcing his jaw down to allow the unaccustomed sound out. "Good, now say Ah-ah-andes."

By now, the class was dying to get their hands on the book and could wait no longer and was beginning to get restless. Mr. Saltzman knew what they were thinking: "Imagine such a ting, instead of paying attention to us, undzer (our) titcher sits there doing his *ah, ah, ah* stuff with that Hungarian *shtumi* (dope) while we wait!"

"Vey iz mir! (Woe is me) Vat a vaste of time!"

"Mr. Saltzman, genug shoyn!" (Enough already!)

“Oy, oy, oy. Mit a new book we never seen before, which must hev de enswers to qvestions about the glaciers…”

One even managed to say, “Please…”

They were shaking their heads and smacking their foreheads in disbelief at the teacher’s delay.

So, to keep the lid on them, Saltzman finally shooed Tibor back to his seat, stood up and opened the book. Immediately, they fell silent, the boys in the rear seats crowding forward, their eyes fixed on the green and yellow-covered wonder that he was holding. Then, after a brief pause during which he made sure that no boy’s attention had wandered, suddenly, dramatically, he closed the book with the loudest bang he could make, much to their shocked and noisy dismay.

“What?” “Vus is dus?”

“Oy, a brokh!”

“Nu! Vus tit er yetst?” (What’s he up to now?)

“Open your notebooks for the vocabulary words,” he ordered, and the boys groaned at yet another delay in the consummation of their curiosity about those “Endes” mountains. But, ignoring their requests, he wrote *atlas*, *dictionary*, *Andes*, *Mendoza*, *Argentina*, and *South America* on the board.

As he wrote, he glanced over at Tibor. The boy was in a state of near ecstasy. He sat there, painstakingly copying the words from the board, his lips moving as he pronounced each word to himself, syllable by syllable, so absorbed that he didn’t realize that half the class could hear him.

As Mr. Saltzman turned to sit down, little Sroel L, utterly unable to wait a second longer, hurled the first question.

“Teach—uh, Mr. Saltzman, why did you write *dictionary*? What has a dictionary got to do with geography?”

“Later, Sroeli, we’ll talk about it later. But first,” he picked up the atlas again, pushed his “desk” aside, and walked up the middle aisle to the center of the room. Squeezing into a quickly emptied seat, he commanded them, “Come and look with me,” and all the boys left their desks to crowd around so they could see the pages from all sides, even upside down.

Like so much else he had been doing with them, moving out from behind his desk and sitting with them wasn’t so much a conscious move as an act of instinct. He could have called them to come to the front of the room and crowd around the desk. But Saltzman was learning that a teacher also needed to be part-actor. He was learning that knowledge wasn’t enough to make someone a teacher. A real teacher wraps his content artfully with gesture, intonation, and body language. Every good teacher’s work gets conveyed through a unique and magical combination of body and voice. These make up a teacher’s individual “signature,” his style, and are the reason why one is a delight while another is a soporific bore, even as they teach the same thing! The act of sitting down among them was Saltzman’s wordless message of trust in them and of confidence in himself. He was saying that he didn’t have to tower over them from the front of the room, the

power position. In Henry's mind, inviting them to stand over *him* was a gesture of collaboration.

Seated here, confidently and securely in the center of that little room, with his "scholars" surrounding him, Mr. Saltzman took them on their first tour of an atlas. He started them off by reading the listings in the table of contents and, from there, jumped to the Index. Of course, they immediately wanted to start working with the "meps." He asked each boy to name a country or a city where his parents or relatives had lived. Then he let them search the Index to find the right map. They worked with tremendous excitement. They acted like novitiates being inducted into arcane secrets and mysteries.

Unfortunately, the atlas was a very abbreviated one so only the larger cities were listed. Most of the boys' families had come from places that were not shown, and this was a huge disappointment to them. But the fact that they found the countries was of some comfort.

"Teacher, de Index doesn't show Bryzdowiczer. Vat should I do?" asked Morris G.

"Do you know what city it was near, Morris?"

"My fadder told me dat they used to go to Lvov to sell their vegetables."

"Does the Index list Lvov?"

He dug back into the pages and shrieked with pleasure when he "had him." "But how come it also says here *Lemberg*?"

And with that question, voilà! European history made its entry into that dreary room, and now Henry could explain, pointing to the map of Eastern Europe, that many places in Poland had shifted back and forth between being Polish or Russian or Austrian, according to where the border with Russia was placed by wars and politics. After the end of World War II, Lvov, a Polish city, once again returned to belonging to the Ukraine and became Lemberg once again.

"Ikh farshtey," Morris said, looking downcast, as he slipped back to Yiddish to indicate his understanding, "but I still want to find my parents' home."

Saltzman suggested to them that these smaller places could be found in the master atlas in the public library. At once, he saw that his advice had made them uncomfortable. For these children, the library building was foreign territory.

Surprised, he asked, "What's the problem?"

Mendel explained defiantly, "Ve ain't allowed to go dere, Mr. Saltzman."

"And why not?" the teacher asked in mock innocence.

Another, Chaim G spoke up. "There's books there that yeshiva boys are not allowed to see."

"And how do you know this if you never go to look?"

"Ve don't *have* to *see* dem!" snapped the ever-hostile Mendel, "It's enough our parents and teachers tell us not to go. Yeshiva boys listen to their parents, Mr. Saltzman! Maybe other boys don't but ve do! Besides, de goyim who woik dere would only make fun of us!"

“Ah,” thought Saltzman, “the self-fulfilling prophecy. Dress like strangers so you will remember to keep apart from the outside world. Then, when the world recognizes your difference, make it into an ‘Aha, you see, they hate us’! What a system.”

“Fine, Mendel,” the teacher said aloud, “I know that you are a good boy and of course you should obey your parents; I’m just telling you where the information is.”

Tibor, of course, wanted to find Mendoza. When he finally located the map of South America, he let out a loud “Hoo-hah!” of triumph followed immediately by a frown of total confusion. “Mr. Saltzman, vi kon dos zayn?” (How can this be?) Henry jabbed him in the side with his elbow and the boy caught himself. “Ok, I mean, so how is it that such a big country looks here so small?”

The other boys roared with laughter causing poor Tibor to turn beet red. Mr. Saltzman wriggled his way out of his seat and rushing up to the blackboard while angrily admonishing the boys to shut up.

“So, if you are so smart that you can make fun of Tibor, maybe you are smart enough to explain *scale* to me?”

“And what has a scale to do mit de etlas, teacher?” asked the ever-puzzled Shmuel A.

“Not *a* scale, just *scale*! You?” he pointed at one of the laughers who had flushed into embarrassed silence. “You? Or you? How about you? or you? Maybe you?” They got the message.

“So, let’s not be so quick to make fun…” after which lecture, he found a ruler, and returned to the seat next to Tibor. He showed the boy, with the class watching breathlessly, how to work with the scale of miles on each map.

“Aha!” Tibor beamed after a while, as the true dimensions began to emerge. “You see, it’s not such a *pitskele* (a tiny object)”. Saltzman jabbed him again, “er… not such a little place after all.”

Tibor’s pride in Argentina’s size was restored when, after some laborious multiplication, the country’s length clearly made it one of the largest on the continent. But Tibor still couldn’t find Mendoza until another kid reminded him that there were individual maps for each country, and, with a rush of excitement, Tibor triumphantly found the one for Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.

Here the Andes were much more easily identifiable, and the boy took great delight in measuring their height on the altitude color scale. As a final exercise, Mr. Saltzman made them convert the measurement of heights into miles by using the traditional rule of thumb of the New York City street kids—twenty city blocks to the mile. The boys ooohed and aaahed as they began imagining the stacking up of the streets of Williamsburg and the rest of Brooklyn to equal the peaks of the Andes Mountains!

It had been a wonderful learning hour, growing out of the joyous pursuit of an answer to just one simple question, “How big is a glacier?” Finally, sated with all these new discoveries, the class went back to their geography book, with new and dramatic images of the Ice Age firmly planted in their minds, experiencing the mind-bending spectacle of ice mountains of Andean heights moving through Brooklyn, even over “Villiamsboig, ken you imagine!” and down into Prospect

Park!

Returning to his desk, Mr. Saltzman noticed the vocabulary words he had written earlier and forgotten in the excitement. So, he called on little Sroeli L first. “Now, can you tell me why I wrote the word *dictionary* next to *atlas*?”

The little fellow thought and thought and finally just shrugged in defeat. But nine others were quite positive that they could explain and, as usual, were already offering their opinions simultaneously as they waved their arm s wildly over their heads for recognition. He shushed them and let big Shlomo K have the honor of explaining.

“De atlas is *not* a dictionary like de vun mit de woids in it, it is like a dictionary vun places. In de atlas you can find where de places are and how dey fit in with each udder. In the dictionary you find where de words are, where dey come from and what they mean.”

After this admirable explication, Mr. Saltzman went on. “Now you understand why a good reader and an educated person should always keep *two* reference books (quickly adding *reference* to the words listed on the board)—a dictionary and an atlas. In this way, a person can refer to them when he needs to look up new words, some of which, like Andes, can be places. Why is this important?”

Before he could call on someone, Tibor stretched himself to his feet and gave the answer.

“BECAUSE” he stressed the teacher’s favorite word, “because you loin much more vun de etles en de dictionary ven you take de time to look it up. It takes time but I agree like Mr. Saltzman always says, it’s woit it TO LOOK IT UP!”

Good feelings and a high level of learning energy filled the room and the boys continued reading how the glaciers carved out Brooklyn, including the place they knew as Prospect Park, which the text called a “terminal moraine.” So far, so good. If only the authors had stopped there! But, unfortunately, the editors had decided that their young readers deserved to have some physical evidence to demonstrate the immense power of those glaciers. So, they included an exquisite black and white photograph of striations left on the surface rocks in Prospect Park! But what really did the damage was the caption beneath the photo:

Four million years ago, an Ice Age glacier left these grooves in rock found in the terminal moraine in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.

WHAM! Moshe, sitting directly in front of Saltzman, angrily slammed his book shut. WHAM! BANG! SMACK! A staccato of outraged echoes filled the air as every child in the room imitated him. Mendel, of course, was up on his feet, shouting in his usual way, but this time he wasn’t alone. The others joined in!

“Apikorses!” (Heresy!)

“Lign! Lign! Lign!” (Lies, lies, lies!)

“Shande, shande” (shame).

In the blink of an eye, the placid, enthusiastic, tightly focused class had erupted: Some were up

in their seats, some were out in the aisles and some were just sitting there, pounding their little fists on the green cover of the heretical textbook and shaking their little heads in disbelief. Saltzman couldn't believe his eyes! He had never seen them this angry and out of control before. And, he hadn't a clue as to what was going on!

"Stop it!" he shouted furiously, rising to his feet. He was not putting on an act this time.

"Stop this right now! What are you screaming about? Shame on you! Where is the *derekherets* (respect for the teacher)?" Even though they recognized he was genuinely bewildered by their behavior, still it took them awhile to simmer down.

The children finally got a grip on themselves. Mr. Saltzman had not written the book, after all. It was the book, not Mr. Saltzman who apparently had insulted them, their faith, their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their families and, indeed, the immediate Jewish universe, by putting such an offensive sentence before the eyes of yeshiva boys.

As usual, the burden of enlightening their theologically deficient teacher fell upon the thin shoulders of Moshe Lieber, Wisdom's child. His face still flushed from his shock and dismay, he sat there with his right hand grasping his chin and his left hand supporting his right elbow, the posture of the thinker, perhaps as ancient as the Torah itself. Beginning his gentle back and forth rocking, Moshe explained the facts of Jewish history to this teacher whose ignorance was so profound that he had not realized what a shattering challenge that sentence hurled at his students.

"Mr. Saltzman, what is written here is not just *shtus* (offensive nonsense). It is a *sin* to say this. Everybody knows that the earth is *no*t millions of years old. It's *narishkeyt* (foolishness). God, borekhashem (blessed be His Name), says in the Torah that the earth was created exactly 5,712 years. You understand? To say something different is to go against God. We should not be learning such wrong things."

Here was yet another clear and unambiguous collision between faith and science. That innocent photo had dropped a perfect teaching opportunity into Mr. Saltzman's lap. He understood immediately what he had to do—but carefully.

"Alright Moshe, of course, I should have known. Last Rosh Hashona we marked the beginning of the Jewish year 5,712. So how could anything be older than that, right?"

"Correct," he nodded approvingly.

"But whether we *agree* with something or not doesn't mean that you shouldn't *learn* about it. After all, *somebody* believes what is written here or it wouldn't be written, no? Isn't that right?"

They wouldn't budge. "Sure, dat's OK only if something isn't an insult, an *apikorses*, it's alright. But *this* is not allowed. We must not learn such things!"

"Wait a minute. I'll show you that there *is* something for yeshiva boys to learn here. Let's look at that picture again. Everybody, just open the book,"

He held up the textbook, open to the offending photo. "Now put your hand or your notebook over the bottom of the picture, *azoy* (like this)," blocking out the offending caption.

Reluctantly, most of them did, although a few, like Mendel, sat angrily with their arms folded across their chests, determined to show what good Jewish boys they were. But their natural curiosity got the better of most of them and Saltzman could see them, including Mendel, sneaking a look at their neighbor's book anyhow.

"Now, everybody, look very, very carefully at the picture. Is that a rock?"

Suspicion billowed up like a cloud. What was Saltzman up to now? The boys looked at Moshe. They looked at each other. Finally, Moshe shrugged, nodded in agreement and opened his book. The others promptly followed his lead. After all, as was plain to see, it *was* a rock. That, at least, could not be denied. Saltzman knew that they wouldn't deny the obvious. The interpretation would be another matter!

"Now look at those lines in the rock." Their heads bent over their books, studying the photo. "A rock is not soft, is it?" They didn't bother even to answer, shrugging his question off. Every dummy knows a rock is hard. So what?

"Well, children, if that *is* a rock then it *is* very hard, of course. The scientists who study such things"—there! he had managed to get the word *scientists* into the air of A. H. perhaps for the first time! Triumphantly putting the word on the board, he continued—"these scientists tell us that when the ice came, many years ago"—he wouldn't dare use the forbidden, dirty word *millions*—"it cut through the rocks leaving those marks."

They didn't get it. So what?

"If you were trying to make such marks, it wouldn't be easy, would it? It would take a long time for such a thing to happen just from rocks rubbing together. See how straight the lines are? Wouldn't it take very heavy force to make such lines in rocks?"

They were in a fighting mood with so much at stake.

"Oh yeah?" Shlomo Karapinsky shouted out. "And who says the scientists are right! Was anybody there? And who says that's the *only* way the marks could come there?"

Israel Ungar chimed in. "Shlomo's right! The book's wrong. It's a bunch of lies. *Shtus*! Nonsense. *Apikorses*!" WHAM, BAM and again the books were slammed shut.

"Alright, my *khakhomim* (wise ones), let us consider *how* those lines got made in the rocks in Prospect Park—and, not just in Prospect Park, either, but in many, many other places all the way from here to Canada and in other places all over the world?"

That was a dangerous question that could have gotten him back into serious trouble again. But he was only dealing with matters in a book the school itself had given him to teach. That would be a good defense, if challenged.

As he waited, he was imagining Orthodoxy's response. "What's to ask about? The book is wrong. The scientists are wrong. The Torah is right. Teacher, just move on and don't push our children in such dangerous ways. And, Lieberman, get another geography book! And maybe also another teacher!"

As utterly abhorrent as was the notion to them that the Bible could be wrong, these children still could not resist the challenge of the question. They wouldn't, couldn't simply ignore an issue like this. Henry had come to depend on their well-developed reflex to attempt to find a solution to any problem put before them. They would reason something out, an answer, if not *the* answer he wanted.

But, in the process of figuring out an answer, they would have had to confront a wholly different worldview! This was his job. The only way they could come at the problem as ten-year-olds was within the framework of the rabbinic teachings and such halachic law as they knew. After all, God gave us questions to be answered. Even though Mendel yelled out, "Don't answer such *apikorses*!" the others were silent. The question was a fair one. If the scientists were wrong, then how did it happen?

"God made it happen!" growled Mendel.

"Of course," the teacher answered him, "But how? God's Hand is in everything. But don't we want to understand as much as we can about how He makes the world work? Don't we, Mendel? The more we know, the more we can appreciate God's work, isn't that so? I don't think it is an insult to God when you try to understand His world. Do you?"

The boy sulked. If looks could kill, Mr. Saltzman would have been a corpse.

"The teacher is right," Shmueli H. piped up, speaking directly to Mendel. "He didn't say you have to *believe* what is written. Moshe, is just knowing a wrong thing, a sin?"

The boy wrestled with the question and then admitted, "I don't know."

Saltzman was amazed. It was the first time the boy had owned up that he couldn't solve a problem. "But I'll ask my fadder tonight. Maybe the sin is in wasting time learning foolish things instead of true things. I don't know."

The question hung there, suspended. How *did* those lines get made in the rock?

The sounds of the building seemed to fade, muffled by the intensity of the concentration in the room. Twenty-one minds—or well, maybe fifteen—were straining themselves to the utmost, delving silently into the furthest reaches of their childish knowledge, experience, reasoning powers, and imagination. The teacher waited. Each passing second seemed like minutes. No one moved or spoke. Finally, Israel U. could no longer restrain himself and he burst out in frustration with, "Nu, Moshe, so, how could it be with those lines in the rock?"

The children turned to their leader in wisdom and learning to find the answer that was escaping them. But Moshe just sat, unmoving except for that slight rocking back and forth as he thought his way into the problem, his ten-year-old brow wrinkled in his usual concentrated gaze. After what seemed a long, long time, he finally smiled and held up his hand. I could hear the children catch their breaths in anticipation.

"It could be," he said, his voice beginning to rise triumphantly, "that there was once a terrible, terrible hailstorm that was so strong," here he swung his small fist down on the desk, BANG! "that it made those marks in the rocks!"

He looked at the teacher with a broad smile of satisfaction and the class sighed in relief. Their faith in him and in his Talmud-sharpened wisdom had been justified yet again. "Of course, of course," they chattered admiringly to each other, "Who could say different?"

"Hail?" the teacher challenged him, "Hail? Who ever saw such a hail that could make lines in rock?"

"Mr. Saltzman, who ever saw a flood that covered the whole woild? After all, if God could have made such a flood, so He could also have made such a hail! Why not?"

The class was delighted and overjoyed. The boy had outsmarted the teacher… and the geography book!

But Saltzman was not giving up so easily. He wanted to force them to think and to think again. For some masochistic reason, he just couldn't leave well enough alone.

"Indeed, but the Torah tells us about the flood. The Torah doesn't say anything about such a hailstorm!"

"Mr. Saltzman, since when does God have to tell us everything that happened? He, *borekhashem*, makes the rules, not you or us or the scientists!"

The boys cheered his logic. Ha! See, the geography book is wrong! They were safe. The earth was still 5,712 years old and Mr. Saltzman and those scientists had better not try any more of their *shtikelekh* (tricks)!

It was the first time that Henry had witnessed an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between absolute faith and science. That photograph in the textbook and his challenge to them had pushed them toward an abyss which, up to that moment, they had no reason to suspect even existed. The children knew, vaguely, that there was "science" in the world (and written into their notebooks), just as they knew there were unbelievers—the infamous, all-encompassing goyim. They knew the restrictions which the rabbis had put on using the products of science and technology on the Sabbath. For example, they knew that you couldn't turn on or turn off "the electric" on Shabbos. They knew that you weren't supposed to drive a car or take a train or use a telephone. New sets of rules had been devised by the rabbis to permit their followers to use the *products* of science and technology even as they rejected the very methods and thinking that produced these wonders. Ever adaptable, Orthodox legal minds had no problem advising the children and their parents about how to take full advantage of the fruits of the modern world while preserving the old mandates which had been created by thinking processes that could never have produced those very conveniences!

Saltzman imagined what the students would have said to him about this: "Our parents and teachers told us there was *apikorses* in the world—but here? in the schoolbook? in a yeshiva? Can you believe it? Can you imagine that there are so-called educated, respectable people who can really be so blind that they question something so true and obvious as the age of the earth! Our parents and teachers are right! The world is a dangerous place. That a disgusting idea like the world being millions of years old could sneak right into our classroom under our noses, jumping out at us from the pages of a schoolbook like a wild animal from the jungle! If such a thing can happen in a safe place, like a yeshiva, just imagine what it must be like *outthere!* Oy,

how lucky we are! It doesn't matter what *apikorses* the world tries to make us believe. Just like all those good Jews who came before us, the ones who practiced Judaism the right way, the way we do, the way Rebbe Grunwald taught us, we will never give the goyim the chance to change us. No, sir, Mr. Teacher. "Such things only remind us of how much we must listen to and obey the wise men who understand so much more than those people whom you seem to respect so much, those so-called educated men, those outrageous heretics, the scientists. What do you expect? They didn't have the Torah to learn from."

Eternal God, we thank You for blessing us with great and holy teachers who are willing to study and teach in order to protect us from such sins and mistakes. How wonderful it is, O Lord our God, that you were willing to give us Torah and our Rabunim who understand and explain God's Mysteries and Commandments to us! Amen, amen, amen!

The children relaxed. Once again, Moshe had put things right for them. They were safe once more within their accepted boundaries. With smug smiles of satisfaction and much derisive laughter at the foolish error in the text, they could now turn back to the chapter with renewed confidence. They were confident that they could deal with any other theological difficulties which might come along, none of which could possibly be as formidable as challenging as the age of the Earth.

It troubled them a little that a nice young teacher like Henry Saltzman, who claimed to be a Jew (what kind, they still couldn't *quite* make out!), could believe in such a silly and dangerous idea as the earth being millions of years old.

"Imagine, not only does he take off his yarmulke in the street, but he even thinks the world is more than 5,712 years old! Oy, oy, oy, what a goy!"