

The Old Rosh Yeshiva Engages in Idle Speculation

by Michael Orbach

“So, this is what it’s like, being dead,” the Old Rosh Yeshiva thought to himself.

His long black frock was worse for wear, small tears in the thick fabric like little paper cuts. His back ached from sleeping on the hard-tiled floor, but he was back in the beis midrash. In that, the Old Rosh Yeshiva was pleased. It had been seven years since the diagnosis (“It’s in the stomach,” the young unfriendly doctor had said, as if there was nothing else but it there), six since the sickness, and four since the funeral. It had taken him a long time to find his way back. Of course, the beis midrash, the study hall, had changed: a new building with stone white arches and marble pillars, a silver ark, and an oval skylight; his son-in-law now sat in the carved wooden chair where he used to sit. But at its heart, the beis midrash was still the same, eternal and unchanging even in his absence. In that, the Old Rosh Yeshiva was pleased. He spent so much of his life in the wood-paneled auditorium, fitting, he thought, he should spend his death there as well.

He walked by the students, huddled together in pairs, discussing the ancient texts, and he softly mumbled an answer to some old question, his voice drowned out in the loud hum of dialectical arguments. He rifled through some of the yellow books on the shelves, not understanding the Aramaic text anymore but enjoying the feeling of the rough pages on his fingertips. When he tired, he pulled up a plastic chair near the entrance, under a dedication plaque, closed his eyes and fell into a small gentle sleep.

And so, it was.

It went without saying that the rabbis and the students couldn't see him, that the Old Rosh Yeshiva was invisible like all the spirits in the stories that his wife told their grandchildren about. "A *dybuk*," he chuckled to himself, "After all this, a dybuk!" But, he wasn't particularly displeased.

Sometimes he wondered if this was all a dream: that he would wake up and find himself in bed. His wife the rebbetzin, already up, her bed already made, and the Styrofoam head where she kept her wig already empty. But he doubted that and instead wondered if the students or the teachers didn't see something when he passed them by; perhaps a piece of lint hanging mid-air (clinging to the Old Rosh Yeshiva's frock) or a scuff mark on the linoleum hallway floor (caused by the Old Rosh Yeshiva's worn black shoes), but that again was idle speculation, which he never tolerated through the course of his long life.

The students could feel something as he passed them, not a chill but a sudden itch, like the onset of a rash around their necks or ears.

The only person who saw him was the old janitor, George, whom he hired long ago when George was a troubled teenager in the heart of the city.

"What you still doing here Rabbi?" George said as he replaced the paper towels in the bathroom. "What you want? You're dead already," then his voice dropped, and he added, not unmercifully, "Time for you to go. You can't meddle here anymore."

Sometimes he stepped into the classrooms when the doors were left open and a breeze blew him in. He heard snippets from the lectures, but he couldn't focus on the words.

“The final redemption will be slow in coming; we experience the birth pangs of the Messiah, day by day.”

“Impurity cannot spread through a barrel or an open space; a priest can walk down the pathway of a cemetery even if a tree hangs over it.”

“The argument between the Re'eh and the Rambam is not an argument but a difference of perception: What is fire? Light or heat? Illumination or warmth? Luxury or necessity?”

“The blue is to remind you of the sky, the sky of the sea, and the sea reflects the blue stones surrounding the Almighty's throne of glory.”

The logic was lost on the Old Rosh Yeshiva's woolly ears. He felt like he was Moses in the old midrashic story: God didn't require Moses to die but let him live, only now in the study-houses of the desert he could no longer understand anything. This was too much for Moses and he lifted his hands for God's final kiss of death before his body was covered by the desert sand.

Seasons changed, leaves fell, and the slow creeping of winter began. Sukkoth, the Holiday of Booths, arrived and he watched through the windows as the students assembled a Sukkah on the parking lot, building the walls with two-by-fours and

covering the roof with a thatched bamboo mat. He heard the Hallel prayer in the early morning and watched them shake the palm branch and the yellow citrus fruit. On the first night, he heard the call for Abraham, the first night's guest, to come to the Sukkah. And he waited for the last night, when they would call him. But they did not.

“How temporary it all is,” the Old Rosh Yeshiva said.

Russian beggars wrapped in rags took soup from the yeshiva kitchen and hung and dried their wet clothes by the boiler. The old Rosh Yeshiva wandered among them, the steam, like threads, wrapped around him.

One day, he realized there was a new guest in the hub of the yeshiva—a short, ruddy boy. The boy followed him into the beis midrash, hanging at the edges, glancing uncomprehendingly at the commentary, his ghost fingers wiping the dust off—creating the ghost of dust—covering the book in a heavy golden sheen. But the boy fled whenever the old Rosh Yeshiva tried to talk to him, as if he were frightened of rabbis, or ghosts, or both.

Late at night the beis midrash emptied out. The heat stopped and the Old Rosh Yeshiva breathed in small clouds. He walked to the New Rosh Yeshiva's table in the front of the beis midrash. The small ruddy boy watched from the women's balcony. The New Rosh Yeshiva nodded at him, his head bowed before a volume of the sacred Talmud, illuminated only by a small desk light. What happened, the New Rosh Yeshiva

asked rhetorically, one hand scratching his thin brown beard, as if he knew the Old Rosh Yeshiva was there.

It's a different world, the New Rosh Yeshiva explained. We needed a yeshiva for different people.

A yeshiva is a place, not for the lost, or the outcasts (the Old Rosh Yeshiva had made it a habit of bringing everyone he could to the beis midrash, irreligious bikers, angry Israelis, high school junkies, picking them up and carrying them to salvation, tight together, sticks in a bundle), but for those already found, the New Rosh Yeshiva continued.

Those who didn't ask troubling questions or had troubling answers. Those who always believed and will always believe. We have a new building, new students, new bookshelves and new books, the New Rosh Yeshiva added, glancing cautiously around and it was true; everything was new, unstained and untainted. We can't deal with those that aren't looking to be found, the New Rosh Yeshiva said.

The Old Rosh Yeshiva shook his head, the green smoke that were his eyes darkening.

Death couldn't stop the process of old age. The Old Rosh Yeshiva felt his joints creak like an old rocking chair. His hands shrunk and his nails curved. One Sabbath, he found a colony of black insects burrowing deep into the soft part of his elbow.

Memory drifted in and out of him: the short ruddy child he could tell was his grandson—years later after the failures, after the pills, after the silences at the dining

room table, the pills again, the tattoos like birthmarks trailing over his shoulders and arms—some sounds and messages even the dead, deaf as they are, still heard. The boy ventured further into the beis midrash during the year, and he now sat three tables away from his father, hidden behind a stack of books. He still looked the same, the baseball cap twisted to the side, the rumpled white shirt, the black Dickey pants. The Old Rosh Yeshiva pulled a twig out of his long beard.

Memories of the dead were not the same as the memories of the living. Each day was a new day fresh and unfazed by disappointment. Each day, the Old Rosh Yeshiva awoke and remembered and forgot and remembered to forget.

He remembered the funeral.

Suicides weren't allowed to be buried in Jewish cemeteries, but the Old Rosh Yeshiva pulled strings, and the boy was buried in a cemetery in Israel. The funeral was held outside an airport terminal as they sent the boy's body to Israel. Airplanes flew above like technological angels, their wings long and powerful. No one had seen him jump after all, maybe he had fallen? The Old Rosh Yeshiva wondered during the eulogies. Maybe the path to damnation could be stopped with doubt? Maybe the angels with swords of fire who guarded the revolving doors would turn you away with a question mark? Maybe the gaping mouth of purgatory would be already satiated? Perhaps, the Old Rosh Yeshiva wondered and forgot and dreamt in doubt.

On Shavous, the Festival of Weeks, the beis midrash filled up as all the students spent the entire night learning. Some learned straight for days, a marathon. Their eyes haggard, cheeks drawn, plastic cups empty and filled with strong cheap black coffee; books open, splayed like captured birds. There was another old story, that exactly at midnight, on the night of Shavous, the heavens in the sky opened up and one saw straight to the majesty of the Throne of Glory, straight through the heavens.

But the Old Rosh Yeshiva realized that the heavens were not in the sky. The locked double doors that led from the beis midrash to the gym were really the doors to paradise and George was in front of them mopping the hundreds of loose pages and lost souls that fell from the Hebrew books on the shelves.

“Come on Rabbi,” George said, squeezing the dirt of lost souls into the water.
“It’s time to go.”

The Old Rosh Yeshiva floated to the door and heard the sounds of lyres and harps playing; trumpets sounding as the next world called to him. But behind him, the Old Rosh Yeshiva saw his wayward grandson hesitate and walk the other way, to the other door, the gray door between two potted plants that was supposed to lead to the cafeteria, but was really the gray door to Gehinnom, to the last rings of purgatory.

After one last sigh that caused the entire beis midrash to look up from their books, the Old Rosh Yeshiva turned and took his grandson’s small hand inside his own and walked with him to the gray door that swung open at his approach as if it had been waiting for him all this time.