

Jewish state was established. Only then would their sacrifice begin to make some sense; only then would the songs of faith they had sung on their way to the gas chambers take on meaning; only then would Jewry again become a light to the world, as Ahad Ha'am had foreseen.

I was deeply moved by the speech, and I was very proud of my father. It was wonderful to know that he would soon be standing in front of thousands of people, reading the same words he read to me that Shabbat.

The day before the scheduled date of the Madison Square Garden rally there was a violent snowstorm, and my father walked like a ghost through our apartment, staring white-faced out the window at the swirling snow. It fell the entire day, then stopped. The city struggled to free itself of its white burden, but the streets remained choked all the next day, and my father left in the evening for the rally, wearing a look of doom, his face ashen. I couldn't go with him because I had a logic exam the next day and had to remain home to study. I forced myself to concentrate on the logic problems, but somehow they seemed inconsequential to me. I kept seeing my father standing at the rostrum in front of a vast, empty hall, speaking to seats made vacant by the snow. I dreaded the moment I would hear his key in the lock of our apartment door.

I did as much studying as I could, hating Professor Flesser for springing the exam on us the way he had done; then I wandered aimlessly through the apartment, thinking how stupid it was to have all my father's work ruined by something like a snowstorm.

Shortly before one in the morning, I heard him open the door. I was in the kitchen, drinking milk, and I ran out into the hallway. His face was flushed with excitement. The rally had been a wild success. The Garden had been packed, and two thousand people had stood on the street outside, listening to the speeches over loudspeakers. He was elated. We sat at the kitchen table, and he told me all about it. The police had blocked off the street; the crowd's response to the speeches urging an end to the British mandate and the establishment of a Jewish state had been overwhelming. My father's talk had been wildly cheered. A senator who had spoken earlier had come up to him after the rally and

had enthusiastically shaken his hand, promising him his complete support. There was no question that the rally had been a success. It had been a stunning success – despite the snow-choked streets.

It was after three in the morning when we finally went to bed.

The rally made the front pages of all the New York papers the next day. The English papers carried excerpts of the senator's speech and briefly mentioned my father. But all the Yiddish papers quoted him extensively. I was the center of considerable attention on the part of the Zionist students and the target of icy hatred from the ranks of the anti-Zionists. I paid no attention to the fact that Danny did not meet me in the lunchroom. Between my fatigue over lack of sleep and my excitement over the rally, I did quite poorly in the logic exam. But I didn't care. Logic didn't seem at all important now. I kept seeing my father's excited face and heard his voice telling me over and over again about the rally.

That evening I waited for Danny more than half an hour just inside the double door of the school before I decided to go home alone. The next morning he wasn't in front of the synagogue. I waited as long as I could, then took the trolley to school. I was sitting at a table preparing for the Talmud session, when I saw him pass me and nod his head in the direction of the door. He looked white-faced and grim, and he was blinking his eyes nervously. He went out, and a moment later I followed. I saw him go into the bathroom, and I went in after him. The bathroom was empty. Danny was urinating into one of the urinals. I stood next to him and assumed the urinating position. Was he all right? I wanted to know. He wasn't all right, he told me bitterly. His father had read the account of the rally in the Yiddish press. There had been an explosion yesterday at breakfast, last night at supper, and this morning again at breakfast. Danny was not to see me, talk to me, listen to me, be found within four feet of me. My father and I had been excommunicated from the Saunders family. If Reb Saunders even once heard of Danny being anywhere in my presence, he would remove him immediately from the college and send him to an out-of-town yeshiva for his rabbinic ordination. There would be no college education, no bachelor's degree, nothing, just a rabbinic ordination. If we tried meeting in

secret, Reb Saunders would find out about it. My father's speech had done it. Reb Saunders didn't mind his son reading forbidden books, but *never* would he let his son be the friend of the son of a man who was advocating the establishment of a secular Jewish state run by Jewish goyim. It was even dangerous for Danny to meet me in the bathroom, but he had to tell me. As if to emphasize how dangerous it was, a Hasidic student came into the bathroom just then, took one look at me, and chose the urinal farthest from me. A moment later, Danny walked out. When I came into the hallway, he was gone.

I had expected it, but now that it had happened I couldn't believe it. Reb Saunders had drawn the line not at secular literature, not at Freud – assuming he knew somehow that Danny had been reading Freud – but at Zionism. I found it impossible to believe. My father and I had been excommunicated – not only from the Saunders family, apparently, but also from the anti-Zionist element of the Hasidic student body. They avoided all contact with me, and even stepped out of my way so I would not brush against them in the halls. Occasionally I overheard them talking about the Malter goyim. During lunch I sat at a table with some of my non-Hasidic classmates and stared at the section of the room the Hasidic students always took for themselves. They sat together in the lunchroom, and my eyes moved slowly over them, over their dark clothes, fringes, beards, and earlocks – and it seemed to me that every word they were saying was directed against me and my father. Danny sat among them, silent, his face tight. His eyes caught mine, held, then looked slowly away. I felt cold with the look of helpless pleading I saw in them. It seemed so incredible to me, so outrageously absurd. Not Freud but Zionism had finally shattered our friendship. I went through the rest of the day alternating between violent rage at Reb Saunders' blindness and anguished frustration at Danny's helplessness.

When I told my father about it that night, he listened in silence. He was quiet for a long time afterward; then he sighed and shook his head, his eyes misty. He had known it would happen, he said sadly. How could it not happen?

'I don't understand it, abba,' I was almost in tears. 'In a

million years I'll never understand it. He let Danny read all the books I gave him, he let us be friends all these years even though he knew I was your son. Now he breaks us up over this. I just don't understand it.'

'Reuven, what went on between you and Danny all these years was private. Who really knew? It was probably not difficult for Reb Saunders to answer questions from his followers, assuming there were any questions, which I doubt, simply by saying that I was at least an observer of the Commandments. But he has no answer anymore to my Zionism. What can he tell his people now? Nothing. He had to do what he did. How could he let you continue to be friends? I am sorry I was the cause of it. I brought you together, and now I am the cause of your separation. I am deeply sorry.'

'He's such a – a fanatic!' I almost shouted.

'Reuven,' my father said quietly, 'the fanaticism of men like Reb Saunders kept us alive for two thousand years of exile. If the Jews of Palestine have an ounce of that same fanaticism and use it wisely, we will soon have a Jewish state.'

I couldn't say anything else. I was afraid my anger would bring me to say the wrong words.

I went to bed early that night but lay awake a long time, trying to remember all the things Danny and I had done together since the Sunday afternoon his ball had struck me in the eye.

For the rest of that semester, Danny and I ate in the same lunchroom, attended the same classes, studied in the same school synagogue, and often rode in the same trolley car – and never said a single word to each other. Our eyes met frequently, but our lips exchanged nothing. I lost all direct contact with him. It was an agony to sit in the same class with him, to pass him in the hallway, to see him in a trolley, to come in and out of the school building with him – and not say a word. I grew to hate Reb Saunders with a venomous passion that frightened me at times, and I consoled myself with wild fantasies of what I would do to him if he ever fell into my hands.

It was an ugly time and it began to affect my schoolwork to a point where some of my college teachers called me into their offices and wanted to know what was happening, they expected better from me than they were receiving. I made vague allusions to personal problems and went away from them cold with despair. I talked about it with my father as often as I could, but there seemed to be little he could do to help me. He would listen somberly, sigh, and repeat that he had no intention of quarreling with Reb Saunders, he respected his position in spite of its fanaticism.

I wondered often during those months whether Danny was also going through these same dreadful experiences. I saw him frequently. He seemed to be losing weight, and I noticed he was wearing different eyeglasses. But he was very carefully avoiding me, and I knew enough to stay away from him. I didn't want word to get back to his father that we had been seen together.

I hated the silence between us and thought it unimaginable that Danny and his father never really talked. Silence was ugly, it was black, it leered, it was cancerous, it was death. I hated

it, and I hated Reb Saunders for forcing it upon me and his son.

I never knew myself capable of the kind of hatred I felt toward Reb Saunders all through that semester. It became, finally, a blind raging fury, and I would find myself trembling with it at odd moments of the day – waiting to get into a trolley car, walking into a bathroom, sitting in the lunchroom, or reading in the library. And my father only added to it, for whenever I began to talk to him of my feelings toward Reb Saunders he invariably countered by defending him and by asserting that the faith of Jews like Reb Saunders had kept us alive through two thousand years of violent persecution. He disagreed with Reb Saunders, yes, but he would countenance no slander against his name or his position. Ideas should be fought with ideas, my father said, not with blind passion. If Reb Saunders was fighting him with passion, that did not mean that my father had to fight Reb Saunders with passion.

And Reb Saunders was fighting with passion. He had organized some of the Hasidic rebbes in the neighborhood into a group called The League for a Religious Eretz Yisroel. The work of this organization had begun mildly enough in early March with the handing out of leaflets. Its aims were clear: no Jewish homeland without the Torah at its center; therefore, no Jewish homeland until the coming of the Messiah. A Jewish homeland created by Jewish goyim was to be considered contaminated and an open desecration of the name of God. By the end of March, however, the leaflets had become inflammatory in tone, threatening excommunication to all in the neighborhood who displayed allegiance to Zionism, even at one point threatening to boycott neighborhood stores owned by Jews who contributed to, participated in, or were sympathetic with Zionist activities. A mass anti-Zionist rally was announced for a date a few days before Passover. It was poorly attended, but it made some of the English papers, and the reports of what had been said were ugly.

The student body of the college was tense with suppressed violence. An angry fist-fight broke out in a classroom one afternoon, and it was only because the Dean threatened immediate expulsion to any future participants in such quarrels that more

fist-fights were avoided. But the tension was felt everywhere; it spilled over into our studies, and arguments over Milton, Talleyrand or deductive procedures in logic were often clear substitutes for the outlawed fist-fights over Zionism.

I took the finals in the middle of June and came away from them sick with despair. I had botched my midterms badly, and I didn't do too much better on my finals. My father didn't say a word when he saw my report card at the end of June. Both of us were by that time looking forward very eagerly to the quiet month of August when we would be together in the cottage near Peekskill. It had been a terrible time, these past four months, and we wanted to get away from the city.

But the cottage proved to be not far enough away. We took to it the horrifying news that the Irgun had hanged two innocent British sergeants in retaliation for the three Irgunists who were hanged on the twenty-ninth of July. My father was outraged by the Irgun act, but said nothing more about it after his first burst of anger. Two weeks after we left for the cottage we were back in the city. Urgent Zionist meetings had been called to plan for the coming United Nations session that was to discuss the Palestine problem. My father was on the Executive Committee of his Zionist group and had to attend the meetings.

For the rest of August, I saw my father only on Shabbat. He was gone in the mornings when I woke and he returned at night when I was asleep. He was filled with fiery excitement, but it was clear that he was wearing himself out. I couldn't talk to him at all about his health. He refused to listen. Our Shabbat afternoon Talmud sessions had stopped; my father spent all of Shabbat resting so as to be prepared for each coming week of furious activity. I haunted the apartment, wandered the streets, barked at Manya, and thought of Danny. I remembered him telling me how much he admired and trusted his father, and I couldn't understand it. How could he admire and trust someone who wouldn't talk to him, even if that someone was his father? I hated his father. Once I even went up to the third floor of the public library, hoping I might find Danny there. Instead, I found an old man sitting in the chair Danny had once occupied, staring nearsightedly at the pages of a scholarly journal. I went away

from there and walked the streets blindly until it was time to go home to a lonely supper.

In the second week of September, I returned to school for the pre-registration student assembly and found myself sitting in the auditorium a few seats away from Danny. He looked thin and pale, and constantly blinked his eyes. During the registrar's brief words of instruction concerning registration procedure, I saw Danny turn his head, stare at me for a moment, then turn slowly away. His face had remained expressionless; he hadn't even nodded a greeting. I sat very still, listening to the registrar, and felt myself get angry. To hell with you, Danny Saunders, I thought. You could at least show you know I'm alive. To hell with you and your fanatic father. I became so completely absorbed in my anger that I stopped listening to the instructions. I had to ask one of my classmates to repeat them to me after the assembly. To hell with you, Danny Saunders, I kept saying to myself all that day. I can live without your beard and earlocks with no trouble at all. You're not the center of the world, friend. To hell with you and your damn silence.

By the time the fall semester officially began two days later, I had promised myself to forget Danny as quickly as possible. I wasn't going to let him ruin another semester's work. One more report card like the one I had shown my father at the end of June and I wouldn't even be graduated *cum laude*. To hell with you, Danny Saunders, I kept saying to myself. You could at least have nodded.

But it proved to be a good deal more difficult to forget him than I had anticipated, mostly because I had been moved up into Rav Gershenson's Talmud class where Danny's presence was always felt.

Rav Gershenson was a tall, heavy-shouldered man in his late sixties, with a long, pointed gray beard and thin, tapered fingers that seemed always to be dancing in the air. He used his hands constantly as he talked, and when he did not talk his fingers drummed on his desk or on the open Talmud in front of him. He was a gentle, kindly person, with brown eyes, an oval face, and a soft voice, which at times was almost inaudible. He was an

exciting teacher, though, and he taught Talmud the way my father did, in depth, concentrating for days on a few lines and moving on only when he was satisfied that we understood everything thoroughly. He laid heavy emphasis on the early and late medieval Talmudic commentators, and we were always expected to come to class knowing the Talmud text and these commentators in advance. Then he would call on one of us to read and explain the text – and the questions would begin. 'What does the Ramban say about Rabbi Akiva's question?' he might ask of a particular passage, speaking in Yiddish. The rabbi spoke only Yiddish or English. I spoke English. 'Everyone agrees with the Ramban's explanation?' Rav Gershenson might go on to ask. 'The Me'iri does not. Very good. What does the Me'iri say? And the Rashba? How does the Rashba explain Abaye's answers?' And on and on. There was almost always a point at which the student who was reading the text would become bogged down by the cumulative intricacies of the questions and would stare down at his Talmud, drowning in the shame produced by his inability to answer. There would be a long, dreaded silence, during which Rav Gershenson's fingers would begin to drum upon his desk or his Talmud. 'Nu?' he would ask quietly. 'You do not know? How is it you do not know? Did you review beforehand? Yes? And you still do not know?' There would be another long silence, and then Rav Gershenson would look around the room and say quietly, 'Who does know?' and, of course, Danny's hand would immediately go up, and he would offer the answer. Rav Gershenson would listen, nod, and his fingers would cease their drumming and take to the air as they accompanied his detailed review of Danny's answer. There were times, however, when Rav Gershenson did not nod at Danny's answer but questioned him on it instead, and there would then ensue a lengthy dialogue between the two of them, with the class sitting by and listening in silence. Most often these dialogues took only a few minutes, but by the end of September there had already been two occasions when they had lasted more than three quarters of an hour. I was constantly being reminded by these dialogues of the way Danny argued Talmud with his father. It made it not only difficult to

forget him but quite impossible. And now it was also I and not only Reb Saunders who was able to listen to Danny's voice only through a Talmudic disputation.

The hours of the Talmud classes in the school were arranged in such a way that we were able to spend from nine in the morning to noon preparing the material to be studied with Rav Gershenson. We would then eat lunch. And from one to three we would have the actual Talmud session itself, the shiur, with Rav Gershenson. No one in the class knew who would be called on to read and explain, so all of us worked feverishly to prepare. But it never really helped, because no matter how hard we worked there would always be that dreaded moment of silence when the questions could no longer be answered and Rav Gershenson's fingers would begin their drumming.

There were fourteen students in the class, and each one of us, with the exception of Danny, sooner or later tasted that silence personally. I was called on in the first week of October and tasted the silence briefly before I managed to struggle through with an answer to an almost impossible question. The answer was accepted and amplified by Rav Gershenson, thereby forestalling Danny's poised hand. I saw him look at me briefly afterward, while Rav Gershenson dealt with my answer. Then he looked away, and a warm smile played on his lips. My anger at him melted away at the sight of that smile, and the agony of not being able to communicate with him returned. But it was a subdued agony now, a sore I was somehow able to control and keep within limits. It was no longer affecting my schoolwork.

By the middle of October everyone in the class, except me, had been called on at least twice. I prepared feverishly, expecting to hear my name called any day. But it wasn't. By the end of October, I began to feel uneasy. By the middle of November I still hadn't been called on again. I took part in the class discussions, asked questions, argued, raised my hand almost as frequently as Danny raised his in response to Rav Gershenson's 'Who does know?' – but I was not called on to read. I couldn't understand it, and it began to upset me. I wondered if this was his way of participating in Reb Saunders' ban against me and my father.

There were other things, too, that were upsetting me at the time. My father had begun to look almost skeletal as a result of his activities, and I dreaded the nights he came wearily home, drank his glass of tea, spent some minutes with me in my room, looking hollow-eyed and not really listening to what I told him, and then went into his study. Instead of studying Talmud with him on the Shabbat, I studied alone while he slept. The Palestine issue was being debated now by the United Nations, and the Partition Plan would soon be voted upon. Every day there were headlines announcing new acts of terror and bloodshed; every week, it seemed, there was another massive rally in Madison Square Garden. I was able to attend two of those rallies. The second time I went I made sure to arrive early enough to get a seat inside. The speeches were electrifying, and I joined in the applause and the cheering until my hands were sore and my voice was hoarse. My father spoke at that rally; his voice booming out clearly through the public address system. He seemed so huge behind the microphones, his voice giving his body the stature of a giant. When he was done, I sat and listened to the wild applause of the crowd, and my eyes filled with tears of pride.

In the midst of all this, Reb Saunders' League for a Religious Eretz Yisroel continued putting out its anti-Zionist leaflets. Everywhere I went I found those leaflets – on the streets, in the trolley cars, in my classroom desks, on my lunch table, even in the school bathrooms.

It became clear as November went by that the United Nations vote on the Partition Plan would take place sometime at the end of the month. My father was at a meeting on Sunday evening, November 29, when the vote was finally held, and I listened to it over the kitchen radio. I cried like a baby when the result was announced, and later, when my father came home, we embraced and wept and kissed, and our tears mingled on our cheeks. He was almost incoherent with joy. The death of the six million Jews had finally been given meaning, he kept saying over and over again. It had happened. After two thousand years, it had finally happened. We were a people again, with our own land. We were a blessed generation. We had been given the opportunity to see the creation of the Jewish state. 'Thank God!' he said. 'Thank

God! Thank God!' We alternately wept and talked until after three in the morning when we finally went to bed.

I woke groggy from lack of sleep but still feeling the sense of exhilaration, and was eager to get to school to share the joy with my friends. My exhilaration was dampened somewhat during breakfast when my father and I heard over the radio that a few hours after the United Nations vote a bus on its way from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem had been attacked by Arabs and seven Jews had been killed. And my exhilaration was snuffed out and transformed into an almost uncontrollable rage when I got to school and found it strewn with the leaflets of Reb Saunders' anti-Zionist league.

The leaflets denounced the United Nations vote, ordered Jews to ignore it, called the state a desecration of the name of God, and announced that the league planned to fight its recognition by the government of the United States.

Only the Dean's threat of immediate expulsion prevented me from engaging in a fist-fight that day. I was tempted more than once to scream at the groups of anti-Zionist students huddling together in the halls and classrooms that they ought to go join the Arabs and the British if they were so opposed to the Jewish state. But I managed somehow to control myself and remain silent.

In subsequent weeks, I was grateful for that silence. For as Arab forces began to attack the Jewish communities of Palestine, as an Arab mob surged through Princess Mary Avenue in Jerusalem, wrecking and gutting shops and leaving the old Jewish commercial center looted and burned, and as the toll of Jewish dead increased daily, Reb Saunders' League grew strangely silent. The faces of the anti-Zionist Hasidic students in the school became tense and pained, and all anti-Zionist talk ceased. I watched them every day at lunch as they read to each other the accounts of the bloodshed reported in the Jewish press and then talked about it among themselves. I could hear sighs, see heads shaking and eyes filling with sadness. 'Again Jewish blood is being spilled,' they whispered to one another. 'Hitler wasn't enough. Now more Jewish blood, more slaughter. What does the world want from us? Six million isn't enough? More Jews have to die?' Their

pain over this new outbreak of violence against the Jews of Palestine outweighed their hatred of Zionism. They did not become Zionists; they merely became silent. I was glad during those weeks that I had restrained my anger.

I received straight A's in my college courses at the end of that semester. I also received an A in Talmud, despite the fact that Rav Gershenson had only called on me once during the entire four-month period I had spent in his class. I planned to talk to him about it during the inter-semester break, but my father suffered a second heart attack on the first day of that break.

He collapsed at a Jewish National Fund meeting and was rushed to the Brooklyn Memorial Hospital by ambulance. He hovered tenuously between life and death for three days. I lived in a nightmare of hallucinatory dread, and if it hadn't been for Manya constantly reminding me with gentle kindness that I had to eat or I would get sick, I might well have starved.

My father was beginning to recover when the second semester began, but he was a shell of a man. Dr Grossman told me that he would be in the hospital at least six weeks, and that it would take from four to six more months of complete rest before he would be able to return to his work.

My classmates had all heard the news by the time the semester began, but their words of consolation didn't help very much. The look on Danny's face, though, when I saw him for the first time, helped a little. He passed me in the hallway, his face a suffering mask of pain and compassion. I thought for a moment he would speak to me, but he didn't. Instead, he brushed against me and managed to touch my hand for a second. His touch and his eyes spoke the words that his lips couldn't. I told myself it was bitter and ironic that my father needed to have a heart attack in order for some contact to be established once again between myself and Danny.

I lived alone. Manya came in the mornings and left after supper, and during the long winter nights of January and February I was all alone in the house. I had been alone before, but the knowledge that my father would return from his meetings and spend a few minutes with me had made the loneliness endurable. Now

he wasn't attending meetings and wasn't coming into my room, and for the first few days the total silence inside the apartment was impossible for me to take, and I would go out of the house and take long walks in the bitter, cold winter nights. But my schoolwork began to suffer, and I finally took hold of myself. I spent as much of the early parts of every evening as I could visiting my father in the hospital. He was weak and could barely talk and kept asking me if I was taking care of myself. Dr Grossman had warned me not to tire him, so I left as soon as I could, went home, ate, then spent the night studying.

By the time my father had been in the hospital three weeks, the evenings had become almost an automatic routine. The dread of his possible death was gone. It was now a matter of waiting out the silence until he came home. And I waited out the silence by studying.

I began especially to study Talmud. In the past, I had done all my Talmud studying on Shabbat and during the morning preparation periods. Now I began to study Talmud in the evenings as well. I tried to finish my college work as quickly as I could, then I would turn to the passage of Talmud we were studying with Rav Gershenson. I would study it carefully, memorize it, find the various commentaries – those which were not printed in the Talmud itself could always be found in my father's library – and memorize them. I tried to anticipate Rav Gershenson's tangled questions. And then I began to do something I had never done before with the Talmud I studied in school. After I was done memorizing the text and the commentaries, I began to go over the text again critically. I checked the Talmudic cross-references for parallel texts and memorized whatever differences I found. I took the huge volumes of the Palestinian Talmud from my father's library – the text we studied in school was the Babylonian Talmud – and checked its parallel discussions just to see how it differed from the discussions in the Babylonian Talmud. I worked carefully and methodically, using everything my father had taught me and a lot of things I now was able to teach myself. I was able to do all of this in real depth because of Rav Gershenson's slow-paced method of teaching. And by doing all of this, I was able to anticipate most of Rav Gershenson's questions. I

also became more and more certain of when he would call on me again.

He had never called on me since that day in October. And it was now the middle of February. As a result of my night sessions with Talmud, I had pulled ahead of the class by at least five or six days and was tangled in one of the most complicated discussions I had ever encountered. The complication was caused not only by the Talmud text itself, which seemed filled with gaps, but by the commentaries that struggled to explain it. The text consisted of nine lines. One of the commentaries on the text ran to two and a half pages, another ran to four pages. Neither was very clear. A third commentary, however, explained the text in six lines. The explanation was terse, clipped, and simple. The only thing wrong with it was that it seemed not to be based on the text it was explaining. A later commentary tried to reconcile the three commentaries by the method of pilpul, the result being a happy one for someone who enjoyed pilpul but quite strained as far as I was concerned. It looked to be a hopeless situation.

As we came closer and closer to this text, I became more and more convinced that Rav Gershenson was going to call on me to read and explain it. I didn't quite know why I was convinced of that; I just knew that I was.

I began painfully to unravel the puzzle. I did it in two ways. First, in the traditional way, by memorizing the text and the commentaries, and then inventing all sorts of questions that Rav Gershenson might ask me. I would ride the trolley, walk the streets, or lie in bed – and ask myself questions. Second, in the way my father had taught me, by attempting to find or reconstruct the correct text, the text the commentator who had offered the simple explanation must have had before him. The first way was relatively simple; it was a matter of brute memorization. The second way was tortuous. I searched endlessly through all the cross-references and all the parallel passages in the Palestinian Talmud. When I was done, I had four different versions of the text on my hands. I now had to reconstruct the text upon which the simple commentary had been based. I did it by working backward, using the commentary as a base, then asking myself what passage among the four versions the commentator could have had

before him as he wrote the commentary. It was painstaking work, but I finally thought I had it down right. It had taken hours and hours of precious time, but I was satisfied I had the correct text, the only text that really made sense. I had done it this way only to satisfy myself. When Rav Gershenson called on me, I would, of course, only use the first method of explanation. When my father returned from the hospital, I would show him what I had done with the second method. I felt very proud of my accomplishment.

Three days later, we came to that passage in our Talmud class, and for the second time that year Rav Gershenson called out my name and asked me to read and explain.

The class was deathly silent. Some of my friends had told me earlier that they dreaded being called on for that passage; they hadn't been able to make any sense at all out of it and the commentaries were impossible. I was a little frightened, too, but very eager to show off what I had learned. When I heard my name called, I felt myself tingle with a mixture of fear and excitement, as if a tiny electric shock had gone through my body. Most of the students had been waiting apprehensively to hear who would be asked to read. They had sat staring down at their texts, afraid to meet Rav Gershenson's eyes. Now they were all looking at me, even Danny was looking at me, and from one of the students at my right came a barely audible sigh of relief. I bent over my Talmud, put the index finger of my right hand below the first word of the passage, and began to read.

Every Talmudic passage is composed of what, for the sake of convenience, might best be called thought units. Each thought unit is a separate stage of the total discussion that makes up the passage. It might consist of a terse statement of law, or a question on the statement, an answer to the question, a brief or lengthy commentary on a Biblical verse, and so on. The Talmud contains no punctuation marks, and it is not always a simple matter to determine where a thought unit begins and ends; occasionally, a passage will have a tight, organic flow to it which makes breaking it up into thought units difficult and somewhat arbitrary. In most instances, however, the thought units are clearly discernible, and the decision on how to break up a passage into such units is a

matter of common sense and a feel for the rhythm of the argument. The need to break up a passage into its thought units is simple enough. One has to decide when to stop reading and start explaining, as well as when to appeal to the commentaries for further explanations.

I had broken up the passage into its thought units as I had studied it, so I knew precisely at what points I would stop reading and begin my explanations. I read aloud a thought unit that consisted of a citation from the Mishnah – the Mishnah is the written text of rabbinic oral law; in form and content it is for the most part terse and clipped, a vast collection of laws upon which are based almost all the rabbinic discussions which, together with the Mishnah, compose the Talmud. When I came to the end of the Mishnaic thought unit, I stopped, and reviewed it briefly, together with the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafists. I tried to be as clear as I could, and acted as if I myself were teaching the class rather than merely acting as a springboard for Rav Gershenson's comments. I finished the explanation of the Mishnaic text and read the next thought unit, which consisted of another Mishnah found in a different tractate from the one we were now studying. This second Mishnah flatly contradicted the first. I explained the Mishnah carefully, showed why there was a contradiction, then read from the commentaries of Rashi and the Tosafists, both of which are printed on the same page as the Talmud text. I expected to be stopped at any moment by Rav Gershenson, but nothing happened. I continued reading and explaining, my eyes fixed on the text as I read and looking at Rav Gershenson as I explained. He let me continue without interruption. By the time I was four lines into the passage, the discussion had become so involved that I had already begun to appeal to one of the medieval commentaries that were not printed on the same page as the text but were rather placed separately at the end of the tractate. I kept a finger of my right hand on the appropriate place in the text, flipped the Talmud to where the commentary had been printed, and read from it. I then indicated that other commentaries had offered different explanations, and I cited them by heart because they were not found in the Talmud edition the class used. Having said that, I returned to the passage

and continued to read. When I raised my eyes to explain the thought unit I had just read, I saw that Rav Gershenson had sat down – the first time since I had come into the class that he was sitting during a shiur. He was holding his head in the palms of his hands, the elbows on the open Talmud in front of him, and listening intently. As I continued with my explanation of the thought unit I had just read, I glanced at my wrist-watch and discovered to my amazement that I had been talking for almost an hour and a half without interruption. I had to utilize all the commentaries this time and was able to finish explaining the thought unit a moment before the three o'clock bell sounded. Rav Gershenson said nothing. He just sat there and dismissed the class with a wave of his hand.

The next day he called on me again, and I continued to read and explain. I spent two hours on seven words, and again sometime during the session he sat down, with his head in the palms of his hands. He said not a single word. The bell caught me in the middle of a lengthy explanation of the four-page commentary, and when he called on me again the third day I read the seven words quickly, briefly went through my explanations of the day before, then continued where I had stopped.

Between the third and fourth day, my mood jumped back and forth erratically from wild exhilaration to gloomy apprehension. I knew I was doing well, otherwise Rav Gershenson would have stopped me, but I kept wishing he would say something and not just stand or sit in complete silence.

Some of the Hasidic students in the class were giving me mixed looks of awe and jealousy, as if they couldn't restrain their feelings of admiration over how well I was doing but at the same time were asking themselves how someone like me, a Zionist and the son of a man who wrote apikorsische articles, could possibly know Talmud so well. Danny, though, seemed absolutely delighted over what was happening. He never looked at me while I read and explained, but I could see him nodding his head and smiling as I went through my explanations. And Rav Gershenson remained silent and impassive, listening intently, his face expressionless, except for an occasional upward curving along the corners of his lips whenever I clarified a particularly

difficult point. By the end of the third day, it began to be something of a frustrating experience. I wished he would at least say or do something, nod his head, smile, even catch me at a mistake – anything but that awful silence.

I was prepared for Rav Gershenson to call on me again the fourth day, and he did. There was by now only one more thought unit left in the passage, and I had decided in advance that when I was done explaining it I would quickly review the entire passage and all the commentaries, outlining the difficulties they had found in the text and showing the different ways they had explained these difficulties. Then I would go into the attempt of the late medieval commentary to reconcile the diverse explanations of the commentaries. All of that took me just under an hour, and when I was satisfied that I had done the best I could, I stopped talking. Rav Gershenson was sitting behind his desk, looking at me intently. It felt strange to me for a moment not to be hearing my own voice any more. But I had nothing more to say.

There was a brief silence, during which I saw one of the Hasidic students grin and lean over to whisper something into another Hasidic student's ear. Then Rav Gershenson got to his feet and folded his arms across his chest. He was smiling a little now, and the upper part of his body was swaying slowly back and forth.

He asked me to repeat a point I had made two days earlier, and I did. He asked me to make myself a little clearer on a passage in one of the commentaries, and I repeated the passage by heart and explained it again as best I could. He asked me to go over the difficulties I had found in the various commentaries, and I repeated them carefully. Then he asked me to show how the late medieval commentary had attempted to reconcile these difficulties, and I went over that, too.

Again, there was a brief silence. I glanced at my watch and saw it was two-thirty. I wondered if he would start on the next passage with only half an hour left to the shiur. He usually preferred to start a new passage – or inyan, as it is called – at the beginning of a shiur, so as to give the class time to get into it. I was feeling very satisfied with the way I had explained the passage and answered his questions. I promised myself that I

would tell my father all about it when I visited him in the hospital that evening.

Then I heard Rav Gershenson ask me whether I was satisfied with the late medieval commentary's attempt at reconciliation.

It was a question I hadn't expected. I had regarded the effort at reconciliation as the rock bottom of the entire discussion on the passage and had never thought that Rav Gershenson would question it. For a long moment, I felt myself wallowing in that dreaded silence that always followed a question of his that a student couldn't answer, and I waited for the drumming of his fingers to begin. But his arms remained folded across his chest, and he stood there, swaying slowly back and forth, and looking at me intently.

'Nu,' he said again, 'there are no questions about what he says?'

I waited for Danny's hand to go up, but it didn't. I glanced at him and saw his mouth had fallen slightly open. The question had caught him by surprise, too.

Rav Gershenson stroked his pointed beard with his right hand, then asked me for the third time if I was satisfied with what the commentary said.

I heard myself tell him that I wasn't.

'Ah,' he said, smiling faintly. 'Good. And why not?'

'Because it's pilpul,' I heard myself say.

There was a stir from the class. I saw Danny stiffen in his seat, throw me a quick, almost fearful glance, then look away.

I was suddenly a little frightened at the disparaging way I had uttered the word pilpul. The tone of disapproval in my voice hung in the air of the classroom like a threat.

Rav Gershenson slowly stroked his pointed gray beard. 'So,' he said softly, 'it is pilpul. I see you do not like pilpul. . . . Nu, the great Vilna Gaon also did not like pilpul.' He was talking about Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, the eighteenth-century opponent of Hasidism. 'Tell me, Reuven' – that was the first time he had ever called me by my first name – 'why is it pilpul? What is wrong with his explanation?'

I answered that it was strained, that it attributed nuances to the various conflicting commentaries that were not there,