

different way, and they wondered who had been correct. They mentioned the passage, and Danny nodded, immediately identified the tractate and the page, then coldly and mechanically repeated the passage word for word, giving his interpretation of it, and quoting at the same time the interpretations of a number of medieval commentators like the Me'iri, the Rashba, and the Maharsha. The passage was a difficult one, he said, gesticulating with his hands as he spoke, the thumb of his right hand describing wide circles as he emphasized certain key points of interpretation, and both men had been correct; one had unknowingly adopted the interpretation of the Me'iri, the other of the Rashba. The men smiled and went away satisfied. Danny sat down.

'That's a tough passage,' he said. 'I can't make head or tail out of it. Your father would probably say the text was all wrong.' He was talking quietly and grinning broadly. 'I read some of your father's articles. Sneaked them off my father's desk. The one on that passage in *Kiddushin* about the business with the king is very good. It's full of real apikorsische stuff.'

I nodded, and tried another smile. My father had read that article to me before he had sent it off to his publisher. He had begun reading his articles to me during the past year, and spent a lot of time explaining them.

The noise in the synagogue had become very loud, almost a din, and the room seemed to throb and swell with the scraping chairs and the talking men. Some children were running up and down the aisle, laughing and shouting, and a number of younger men lounged near the door, talking loudly and gesticulating with their hands. I had the feeling for a moment I was in the carnival I had seen recently in a movie, with its pushing, shouting, noisy throng, and its shouting, arm-waving vendors and pitchmen.

I sat quietly, staring down at the prayer book on my stand. I opened the book and turned to the Afternoon Service. Its pages were yellow and old, with ragged edges and worn covers. I sat there, staring at the first psalm of the service and thinking of the almost new prayer book I had held in my hands that morning. I felt Danny nudge me with his elbow, and I looked up.

'My father's coming,' he said. His voice was quiet and, I thought, a little strained.

The noise inside the synagogue ceased so abruptly that I felt its absence as one would a sudden lack of air. It stopped in swift waves, beginning at the rear of the synagogue and ending at the chairs near the podium. I heard no signal and no call for silence; it simply stopped, cut off, as if a door had slammed shut on a playroom filled with children. The silence that followed had a strange quality to it: expectation, eagerness, love, awe.

A man was coming slowly up the narrow aisle, followed by a child. He was a tall man, and he wore a black satin caftan and a fur-trimmed black hat. As he passed each row of seats, men rose, bowed slightly, and sat again. Some leaned over to touch him. He nodded his head at the murmur of greetings directed to him from the seats, and his long black beard moved back and forth against his chest, and his earlocks swayed. He walked slowly, his hands clasped behind his back, and as he came closer to me I could see that the part of his face not hidden by the beard looked cut from stone, the nose sharp and pointed, the cheekbones ridged, the lips full, the brow like marble etched with lines, the sockets deep, the eyebrows thick with black hair and separated by a single wedge like a furrow plowed into a naked field, the eyes dark, with pinpoints of white light playing in them as they do in black stones in the sun. Danny's face mirrored his exactly — except for the hair and the color of the eyes. The child who followed him, holding on to the caftan with his right hand, was a delicate miniature of the man, with the same caftan, the same fur-trimmed hat, the same face, the same color hair, though beardless, and I realized he was Danny's brother. I glanced at Danny and saw him staring down at his stand, his face without expression. I saw the eyes of the congregants follow the man as he came slowly up the aisle, his hands clasped behind his back, his head nodding, and then I saw them on Danny and me as he came up to us. Danny rose quickly to his feet, and I followed, and we stood there, waiting, as the man's dark eyes moved across my face — I could feel them moving across my face like a hand — and fixed upon my left eye. I had a sudden vision of my father's gentle eyes behind their steel-rimmed spectacles, but it vanished swiftly, because Danny was introducing me to Reb Saunders.

'This is Reuven Malter,' he said quietly in Yiddish.

Reb Saunders continued to stare at my left eye. I felt naked under his gaze, and he must have sensed my discomfort, because quite suddenly he offered me his hand. I raised my hand to take it, then realized, as my hand was going up, that he was not offering me his hand but his fingers, and I held them for a moment - they were dry and limp - then let my hand drop.

'You are the son of David Malter?' Reb Saunders asked me in Yiddish. His voice was deep and nasal, like Danny's, and the words came out almost like an accusation.

I nodded my head. I had a moment of panic, trying to decide whether to answer him in Yiddish or English. I wondered if he knew English. My Yiddish was very poor. I decided to answer in English.

'Your eye,' Reb Saunders said in Yiddish. 'It is healed?'

'It's fine,' I said in English. My voice came out a little hoarse, and I swallowed. I glanced at the congregants. They were staring at us intently, in complete silence.

Reb Saunders looked at me for a moment, and I saw the dark eyes blink, the lids going up and down like shades. When he spoke again it was still in Yiddish.

'The doctor, the professor who operated, he said your eye is healed?'

'He wants to see me again in a few days. But he said the eye is fine.'

I saw his head nod slightly and the beard go up and down against his chest. The lights from the naked bulb on the ceiling gleamed off his satin caftan.

'Tell me, you know mathematics? My son tells me you are very good in mathematics.'

I nodded.

'So. We will see. And you know Hebrew. A son of David Malter surely knows Hebrew.'

I nodded again.

'We will see,' Reb Saunders said.

I glanced out of the sides of my eyes and saw Danny looking down at the floor, his face expressionless. The child stood a little behind Reb Saunders and stared up at us, his mouth open.

'Nu,' Reb Saunders said, 'later we will talk more. I want to

know my son's friend. Especially the son of David Malter.' Then he went past us and stood in front of the little podium, his back to the congregation, the little boy still holding on to his caftan.

Danny and I sat down. A whisper moved through the congregation, followed by the rustle of pages as prayer books were opened. An old, gray-bearded man went up to the large podium, put on a prayer shawl, and started the service.

The old man had a weak voice, and I could barely hear him over the prayers of the worshippers. Reb Saunders stood with his back to the congregation, swaying back and forth, occasionally clapping his hand together, and the child stood at his right, swaying too, in obvious imitation of his father. Throughout the entire service, Reb Saunders stood with his back to the congregation, sometimes raising his head toward the ceiling, or raising his hands to cover his eyes. He turned only when the Torah was taken from the Ark and read.

The service ended with the Kaddish, and then Reb Saunders walked slowly back up the aisle, followed by the child, who was still clinging to his father's caftan. As the child passed me, I noticed his dark eyes were very large and his face was deathly pale.

Danny nudged me with his elbow and motioned with his head toward the rear of the synagogue. He rose, and the two of us followed Reb Saunders up the aisle. I could see the eyes of the congregants on my face, and then feel them on my back. I saw Reb Saunders go to the leather chair at the table near the end window and sit down. The child sat on the bench to his left. Danny led me to the table and sat on the bench to his father's right. He motioned me to sit down next to him, and I did.

The congregants rose and came toward the rear of the synagogue. The silence was gone now, burst as abruptly as it had begun, and someone started chanting a tune, and others took it up, clapping their hands in rhythm to the melody. They were filing out the door - probably to wash their hands, I thought - and soon they were coming back in and finding seats at the tables, the benches scraping loudly as they were moved back and forth. The singing had stopped. Our table filled rapidly, mostly with older men.

angregation - Saunders?

Reb Saunders stood up, poured water over his hands from the pitcher, the water spilling into the saucer, then wiped his hands, removed the white satin cloth that covered the chalah, said the blessing over bread, cut a section off the end of the chalah, swallowed it, and sat down. Danny got to his feet, washed his hands, cut two slices from the chalah, handed me one, took one for himself, made the blessing, ate, and sat. He passed the pitcher to me, and I repeated the ritual, but I remained seated. Then Danny cut the remainder of the chalah into small pieces, gave a piece to his brother, and handed the plate to the old man sitting next to me. The pieces of chalah disappeared swiftly, grabbed up by the men at the table. Reb Saunders put some salad and fish on his plate and ate a small piece of the fish, holding it in his fingers. A man from one of the other tables came over and took the plate. Danny filled another plate for his father. Reb Saunders ate slowly, and in silence.

I was not very hungry, but I made some attempt at eating so as not to insult anyone. Frequently during the meal, I felt rather than saw Reb Saunders' eyes on my face. Danny was quiet. His little brother pecked at the food on his plate, eating little. The skin of his face and hands was almost as white as the tablecloth, drawn tightly over the bones, and the veins showed like blue branches in his face and on the tops of his hands. He sat quietly, and once he began to pick his nose, saw his father look at him, and stopped, his lower lip trembling a little. He bent over his plate and poked at a slice of tomato with a thin, stubby finger.

Danny and I said nothing to each other throughout that entire meal. Once I looked up and saw his father staring at me, his eyes black beneath the thick brows. I looked away, feeling as though my skin had been peeled away and my insides photographed.

Someone began to sing Atah Ehad, one of the prayers from the Evening Service. The meal was over, and the men began to sway slowly, in unison with the melody. The singing filled the synagogue, and Reb Saunders sat back in his leather seat and sang too, and then Danny was singing. I knew the melody and I joined in, hesitantly at first, then strongly, swaying back and forth. At the end of the song, another melody was begun, a light, fast, wordless tune, sung to the syllables cheere bim, cheere

bam, and the swaying was a little faster now, and hands were clapped in time to the rhythm. Then tune followed tune, and I felt myself begin to relax as I continued to join the singing. I found that most of the melodies were familiar to me, especially the slow, somber ones that were meant to convey the sadness of the singers over the conclusion of the Shabbat, and the tunes I did not know I was able to follow easily, because the basic melody lines were almost all the same. After a while I was singing loudly, swaying back and forth and clapping my hands, and once I saw Reb Saunders looking at me, and his lips curved into a shadow of a smile. I smiled at Danny and he smiled back at me, and we sat there for about half an hour, singing, swaying, and clapping, and I felt light and happy and completely at ease. So far as I could see, Reb Saunders' little son was the only one in the synagogue not singing; he sat pecking at his food and poking at the slice of tomato on his paper plate with his thin, veined hand. The singing went on and on - and then it stopped. I glanced around to see what had happened, but everyone was sitting very still, looking over at our table. Reb Saunders washed his hands again, and others spilled what was left of the water in their paper cups over their hands. The introductory psalm to the Grace was sung together, and then Reb Saunders began the Grace. He chanted with his eyes closed, swaying slightly in his leather chair. After the opening lines of the Grace, each man prayed quietly, and I saw Danny lean forward, put his elbows on the table, cover his eyes with his right hand, his lips whispering the words. Then the Grace was done, and there was silence - a long, solid silence in which no one moved and everyone waited and eyes stared at Reb Saunders, who was sitting in his chair with his eyes closed, swaying slightly back and forth. I saw Danny take his elbows from the table and sit up straight. He stared down at his paper plate, his face expressionless, and I almost had the feeling that he had gone rigid, tense, as a soldier does before he jumps from shelter into open combat.

Everyone waited, and no one moved, no one coughed, no one even took a deep breath. The silence became unreal and seemed suddenly filled with a noise of its own, the noise of a too long silence. Even the child was staring now at his father, his

eyes like black stones against the naked whiteness of his veined face.

And then Reb Saunders began to speak.

He swayed back and forth in the leather chair, his eyes closed, his left hand in the crook of his right elbow, the fingers of his right hand stroking his black beard, and I could see everyone at the tables lean forward, eyes staring, mouths slightly open, some of the older men cupping their hands behind their ears to catch his words. He began in a low voice, the words coming out slowly in a singsong kind of chant.

'The great and holy Rabban Gamaliel,' he said, 'taught us the following: "Do His will as if it were thy will, that He may do thy will as if it were His will. Nullify thy will before His will that He may nullify the will of others before thy will." What does this mean? It means that if we do as the Master of the Universe wishes, then He will do as we wish. A question immediately presents itself. What does it mean to say that the Master of the Universe will do what we wish? He is after all the Master of the Universe, the Creator of heaven and earth, the King of kings. And what are we? Do we not say every day, "Are not all the mighty as naught before Thee, the men of renown as though they had not been, the wise as if without knowledge, and the men of understanding as if without discernment"? What are we that the Master of the Universe should do our will?'

Reb Saunders paused, and I saw two of the old men who were sitting at our table look at each other and nod. He swayed back and forth in his leather chair, his fingers stroking his beard, and continued to speak in a quiet, singsong voice.

'All men come into the world in the same way. We are born in pain, for it is written, "In pain shall ye bring forth children." We are born naked and without strength. Like dust are we born. Like dust can the child be blown about, like dust is his life, like dust is his strength. And like dust do many remain all their lives, until they are put away in dust, in a place of worms and maggots. Will the Master of the Universe obey the will of a man whose life is dust? What is the great and holy Rabban Gamaliel teaching us? His voice was beginning to rise now. 'What is he telling us? What does it mean to say the Master of the Universe will do our

will? The will of men who remain dust? Impossible! The will of what men, then? We must say, the will of men who do not remain dust. But how can we raise ourselves above dust? Listen, listen to me for this is a mighty thing the rabbis teach us.'

He paused again, and I saw Danny glance at him, then stare down again at his paper plate.

'Rabbi Halafra son of Dosa teaches us, "When ten people sit together and occupy themselves with the Torah, the Presence of God abides among them, as it is said, 'God standeth in the congregation of the godly.' And whence can it be shown that the same applies to five? Because it is said, 'He had founded his hand upon the earth.' And whence can it be shown that the same applies to three? Because it is said, 'He judgeth among the judges.' And whence can it be shown that the same applies to two? Because it is said, 'Then they that feared the Lord spake one with the other, and the Lord gave heed and heard.' And whence can it be shown that the same applies even to one? Because it is said, 'In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come unto thee and I will bless thee.'" Listen, listen to this great teaching. A congregation is ten. It is nothing new that the holy Presence resides among ten. A hand is five. It is also nothing new that the holy Presence resides among five. Judges are three. If the holy Presence did not reside among judges there would be no justice in the world. So this, too, is not new. That the Presence can reside even among two is also not impossible to understand. But that the Presence can reside in one! In one! Even in one! That already is a mighty thing. Even in one! If one man studies Torah, the Presence is with him. If one man studies Torah, the Master of the Universe is already in the world. A mighty thing! And to bring the Master of the World into the world is also to raise oneself up from the dust. Torah raises us from the dust! Torah gives us strength! Torah clothes us! Torah brings the Presence!'

The singsong chant died away. He was talking in a straight, loud voice that rang through the terrible silence in the synagogue.

'But to study Torah is not such a simple thing. Torah is a task for all day and all night. It is a task filled with danger. Does not

Rabbi Meir teach us, "He who is walking by the way and studying, and breaks off his study and says, 'How fine is that tree, how fine is that field,' him the Scripture regards as if he had forfeited his life"?

I saw Danny glance quickly at his father, then lower his eyes. His body sagged a little, a smile played on his lips, and I thought I even heard him sigh quietly.

'He had forfeited his life! His life! So great is the study of Torah. And now, listen to this word. Whose task is it to study Torah? Of whom does the Master of the Universe demand "Ye shall meditate over it day and night"? Of the world? No! What does the world know of Torah? The world is Esav! The world is Amalek! The world is Cossacks! The world is Hitler, may his name and memory be erased! Of whom, then? Of the people of Israel! We are commanded to study His Torah! We are commanded to sit in the light of the Presence! It is for this that we were created! Does not the great and holy Rabbi Yochanan son of Zakkai teach us, "If thou hast learnt much Torah, ascribe not any merit to thyself, for thereunto wast thou created"? Not the world, but the people of Israel! The people of Israel must study His Torah!'

His voice stormed the silence. I found myself holding my breath, my heart thumping in my ears. I could not take my eyes off his face, which was alive now, or his eyes, which were open and filled with dark fire. He struck the table with his hand, and I felt myself go cold with fright. Danny was watching him now, too, and his little brother stared at him as though in a trance, his mouth open, his eyes glazed.

'The world kills us! The world flays our skin from our bodies and throws us to the flames! The world laughs at Torah! And if it does not kill us, it tempts us! It misleads us! It contaminates us! The world is Amalek! It is not the world that is commanded to study Torah, but the people of Israel! Listen, listen to this mighty teaching! His voice was suddenly lower, quieter, intimate. 'It is written, "This world is like a vestibule before the world-to-come; prepare thyself in the vestibule, that thou mayest enter into the hall." The meaning is clear: The vestibule is this world, and the hall is the world-to-come. Listen. In gematriya, the words

"this world" come out one hundred sixty-three, and the words "the world-to-come" come out one hundred fifty-four. The difference between "this world" and the "the world-to-come" comes out to nine. Nine is half of eighteen. Eighteen is chai, life. In this world there is only half of chai. We are only half alive in this world! Only half alive!'

A whisper went through the crowd at the tables, and I could see heads nod and lips smile. They had been waiting for this apparently, the gematriya, and they strained forward to listen. One of my teachers in school had told me about gematriya. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is also a number, so that every Hebrew word has a numerical value. The words for 'this world' in Hebrew is 'olam hazeh', and by adding the numerical value of each letter, the total numerical value of the word becomes one hundred and sixty-three. I had heard others do this before, and I enjoyed listening because sometimes they were quite clever and ingenious. I was beginning to feel relaxed again, and I listened carefully.

'Hear me now. Listen. How can we make our lives full? How can we fill our lives so that we are eighteen, chai, and not nine, not half chai? Rabbi Joshua son of Levi teaches us, "Whoever does not labor in the Torah is said to be under the divine censure." He is a nozuf, a person whom the Master of the Universe hates! A righteous man, a tzaddik, studies Torah, for it is written, "For his delight is in the Torah of God, and over His Torah doth he meditate day and night." In gematriya, "nozuf" comes out one hundred forty-three, and "tzaddik" comes out two hundred and four. What is the difference between "nozuf" and "tzaddik"? Sixty-one. To whom does a tzaddik dedicate his life? To the Master of the Universe! La-el, to God! The word, "La-el" in gematriya is sixty-one! It is a life dedicated to God that makes the difference between the nozuf and the tzaddik!'

Another murmur of approval went through the crowd. Reb Saunders was very good at gematriya, I thought. I was really enjoying myself now.

'And now listen to me further. In gematriya, the letter of the word "trakin", hall, the hall that refers to the world-to-come comes out three hundred ninety-nine, and "prozdor", the

vestibule, the vestibule that is this world, comes out five hundred thirteen. Take "prozdor" from "traklin", and we have one hundred fourteen. Now listen to me. A righteous man, we said, is two hundred four. A righteous man lives by Torah. Torah is mayim, water; the great and holy rabbis always compare Torah to water. The word "mayim" in gematriya is ninety. Take "mayim" from "tzaddik" and we also have one hundred fourteen. From this we learn that the righteous man who removes himself from Torah also removes himself from the world-to-come!

The whisper of delight was loud this time, and men nodded their heads and smiled. Some of them were even poking each other with their elbows to indicate their pleasure. That one had really been clever. I started to go over it again in my mind.

'We see that without Torah there is only half a life. We see that without Torah we are dust. We see that without Torah we are abominations.' He was saying this quietly, almost as if it were a litany. His eyes were still open, and he was looking directly at Danny now. 'When we study Torah, then the Master of the Universe listens. Then he hears our words. Then He will fulfill our wishes. For the Master of the Universe promises strength to those who preoccupy themselves in Torah, as it is written, "So ye may be strong", and He promises length of days, as it is written, "So that your days may be lengthened." May Torah be a fountain of waters to all who drink from it, and may it bring to us the Messiah speedily and in our day. Amen! *amen! amen!*

A chorus of loud and scattered amens answered.

I sat in my seat and saw Reb Saunders looking at Danny, then at me. I felt completely at ease, and I somewhat brazenly smiled and nodded, as if to indicate that I had enjoyed his words, or at least the gematriya part of his words. I didn't agree at all with his notions of the world as being contaminated. Albert Einstein is part of the world, I told myself. President Roosevelt is part of the world. The millions of soldiers fighting Hitler are part of the world.

I thought that the meal was ended now and we would start the Evening Service, and I almost began to get out of my seat when I realized that another silence had settled upon the men at the tables. I sat still and looked around. They seemed all to be staring

at Danny. He was sitting quietly, smiling a little, his fingers playing with the edge of his paper plate.

Reb Saunders sat back in his leather chair and folded his arms across his chest. The little boy was poking at the tomato again and glancing at Danny from the tops of his dark eyes. He twirled a side curl around one of his fingers, and I saw his tongue dart out of his mouth, run over his lips, then dart back in. I wondered what was going on.

Reb Saunders sighed loudly and nodded at Danny, 'Nu, Daniel, you have something to say?' His voice was quiet, almost gentle.

I saw Danny nod his head.

'Nu, what is it?'

'It is written in the name of Rabbi Yaakov, not Rabbi Meir.' Danny said quietly, in Yiddish.

A whisper of approval came from the crowd. I glanced around quickly. Everyone sat staring at Danny.

Reb Saunders almost smiled. He nodded, and the long black beard went back and forth against his chest. Then I saw the thick black eyebrows arch upward and the lids go about halfway down across the eyes. He leaned forward slightly, his arms still folded across his chest.

'And nothing more?' he asked very quietly.

Danny shook his head - a little hesitantly, I thought.

'So,' Reb Saunders said, sitting back in the leather chair, 'there is nothing more.'

I looked at the two of them, wondering what was happening.

What was this about Rabbi Yaakov and Rabbi Meir?

'The words were said by Rabbi Yaakov, not by Rabbi Meir,' Danny repeated. 'Rabbi Yaakov, not Rabbi Meir, said, "He who is walking by the way and studying, and breaks off his study and -"'

'Good,' Reb Saunders broke in quietly. 'The words were said by Ray Yaakov. Good. You saw it. Very good. And where is it found?'

'In *Pirkei Avos*,' Danny said. He was giving the Talmudic source for the quote. Many of the quotes Reb Saunders had used had been from *Pirkei Avos* - or *Avot*, as my father had taught me to pronounce it, with the Sephardic rather than the Ashkenazic

rendering of the Hebrew letter 'tof'. I had recognized the quotes easily. *Pirkei Avot* is a collection of Rabbinic maxims, and a chapter of it is studied by many Jews every Shabbat between Passover and the Jewish New Year.

'Nu,' Reb Saunders said, smiling, 'how should you not know that? Of course. Good. Very good. Now, tell me—'

As I sat there listening to what then took place between Danny and his father, I slowly realized what I was witnessing. In many Jewish homes, especially homes where there are yeshiva students and where the father is learned, there is a tradition which takes place on Shabbat afternoon: the father quizzes the son on what he has learned in school during the past week. I was witnessing a kind of public quiz, but a strange, almost bizarre quiz, more a contest than a quiz, because Reb Saunders was not confining his questions only to what Danny had learned during the week but was ranging over most of the major tracts of the Talmud and Danny was obviously required to provide the answers. Reb Saunders asked where else there was a statement about one who interrupts his studies, and Danny coolly, quietly answered. He asked what a certain medieval commentator had remarked about that statement, and Danny answered. He chose a minute aspect of the answer and asked who had dealt with it in an altogether different way, and Danny answered. He asked whether Danny agreed with this interpretation, and Danny said he did not, he agreed with another medieval commentator, who had given another interpretation. His father asked how could the commentator have offered such an interpretation when in another passage in the Talmud he had said exactly the opposite, and Danny, very quietly, calmly, his fingers still playing with the rim of the paper plate, found a difference between the contradictory statements by quoting two other sources where one of the statements appeared in a somewhat different context, thereby nullifying the contradiction. One of the two sources Danny had quoted contained a Biblical verse, and his father asked him who else had based a law upon this verse. Danny repeated a short passage from the tractate *Sanhedrin*, and then his father quoted another passage from *Yoma* which contradicted the passage in *Sanhedrin*, and Danny answered with a passage from *Gittin* which dissolved

the contradiction. His father questioned the validity of his interpretation of the passage in *Gittin* by citing a commentary on the passage that disagreed with his interpretation, and Danny said it was difficult to understand this commentary — he did not say the commentary was wrong, he said it was difficult to understand it — because a parallel passage in *Nedarim* clearly confirmed his own interpretation.

This went on and on, until I lost track of the thread that held it all together and sat and listened in amazement to the feat of memory I was witnessing. Both Danny and his father spoke quietly, his father nodding his approval each time. Danny responded. Danny's brother sat staring at them with his mouth open, finally lost interest, and began to eat some of the food that was still on his plate. Once he started picking his nose, but stopped immediately. The men around the tables were watching as if in ecstasy, their faces glowing with pride. This was almost like the pilpul my father had told me about, except that it wasn't really pilpul, they weren't twisting the texts out of shape, they seemed more interested in b'kiut, in straightforward knowledge and simple explanations of the Talmudic passages and commentaries they were discussing. It went on like that for a long time. Then Reb Saunders sat back and was silent.

The contest, or quiz, had apparently ended, and Reb Saunders was smiling at his son. He said, very quietly, 'Good. Very good. There is no contradiction. But tell me, you have nothing more to say about what I said earlier?'

Danny was suddenly sitting very straight.

'Nothing more?' Reb Saunders asked again. 'You have nothing more to say?'

Danny shook his head, hesitantly.

'Absolutely nothing more to say?' Reb Saunders insisted, his voice flat, cold, distant. He was no longer smiling.

I saw Danny's body go rigid again, as it had done before his father began to speak. The ease and certainty he had worn during the Talmud quiz had disappeared.

'So,' Reb Saunders said. 'There is nothing more. Nu, what should I say?'

'I did not hear—'

'You did not hear, you did not hear. You heard the first mistake, and you stopped listening. Of course you did not hear. How could you hear when you were not listening?' He said it quietly and without anger.

Danny's face was rigid. The crowd sat silent. I looked at Danny. For a long moment he sat very still — and then I saw his lips part, move, curve slowly upward, and freeze into a grin. I felt the skin on the back of my neck begin to crawl, and I almost cried out. I stared at him, then looked quickly away.

Reb Saunders sat looking at his son. Then he turned his eyes upon me. I felt his eyes looking at me. There was a long, dark silence, during which Danny sat very still, staring fixedly at his plate and grinning. Reb Saunders began to play with the earlock along the right side of his face. He caressed it with the fingers of his right hand, wound it around the index finger, released it, then caressed it again, all the time looking at me. Finally, he sighed loudly, shook his head, and put his hands on the table.

'Nu,' he said, 'it is possible I am not right. After all, my son is not a mathematician. He has a good head on him, but it is not a head for mathematics. But we have a mathematician with us. The son of David Malter is with us. He is a mathematician.' He was looking straight at me, and I felt my heart pound and the blood drain from my face. 'Reuven,' Reb Saunders was saying, looking straight at me, 'you have nothing to say?'

I found I couldn't open my mouth. Say about what? I hadn't the faintest idea what he and Danny had been talking about.

'You heard my little talk?' Reb Saunders asked me quietly. I felt my head nod.

'And you have nothing to say?'

I felt his eyes on me and found myself staring down at the table. The eyes were like flames on my face.

'Reuven, you liked the gematriya?' Reb Saunders asked softly.

I looked up and nodded. Danny hadn't moved at all. He just sat there, grinning. His little brother was playing with the tomato again. And the men at the tables were silent, staring at me now.

'I am very happy,' Reb Saunders said gently. 'You liked the gematriya. Which gematriya did you like?'

I heard myself say, lamely and hoarsely. 'They were all very good.'

Reb Saunders' eyebrows went up. 'All?' he said. 'A very nice thing. They were all very good. Reuven, were they all very good?'

I felt Danny stir and saw him turn his head, the grin gone now from his lips. He glanced at me quickly, then looked down again at his paper plate.

I looked at Reb Saunders. 'No,' I heard myself say hoarsely.

'They were not all good.'

There was a stir from the men at the tables. Reb Saunders sat back in his leather chair.

'Nu, Reuven,' he said quietly, 'tell me, which one was not good?'

'One of the gematriyot was wrong,' I said. I thought the world would fall in on me after I said that. I was a fifteen-year-old boy, and there I was, telling Reb Saunders he had been wrong! But nothing happened. There was another stir from the crowd, but nothing happened. Instead, Reb Saunders broke into a warm broad smile.

'And which one was it?' he asked me quietly.

'The gematriya for "prozdor" is five hundred and three, not five hundred and thirteen,' I answered.

'Good. Very good,' Reb Saunders said, smiling and nodding his head, the black beard going back and forth against his chest, the earlocks swaying. 'Very good, Reuven. The gematriya for "prozdor" comes out five hundred three. Very good.' He looked at me, smiling broadly, his teeth showing white through the beard, and I almost thought I saw his eyes mist over. There was a loud murmur from the crowd, and Danny's body sagged as the tension went out of him. He glanced at me, his face a mixture of surprise and relief, and I realized with astonishment that I, too, had just passed some kind of test.

'Nu,' Reb Saunders said loudly to the men around the tables, 'say Kaddish!'

An old man stood up and recited the Scholar's Kaddish. Then the congregants broke to go back to the front section of the synagogue for the Evening Service.

Danny and I said nothing to each other throughout the service, and though I prayed the words, I did not know what I was saying. I kept going over what had happened at the table. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't get it through my head that Danny had to go through something like that every week, and that I myself had gone through it tonight.

The followers of Reb Saunders obviously had been pleased with my performance, because I could see they were no longer starting questions at me but were glancing at me admiringly. One of them, an old man with a white beard who was sitting in my row, even nodded at me and smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. I had clearly passed the test. What a ridiculous way to gain admiration and friendship!

The Evening Service was over quickly, and afterward one of the younger men chanted the Havdalah, the brief service that marks the end of the Shabbat. Danny's brother held the braided candle, his hand trembling a little as the molten wax spilled onto his fingers. Then the congregants wished one another and Reb Saunders a good week and began to leave the synagogue. It was late, and I thought my father would probably be worried about me by now, but I stood there and waited until the last congregant was gone and the synagogue was empty - except for me, Danny, Reb Saunders, and the little boy. The synagogue seemed to me suddenly very small without its throng of black-hatted, black-bearded, black-crowned men.

Reb Saunders was stroking his beard and looking at Danny and me. He leaned an elbow upon the large podium, and then the hand that was stroking the beard began to play with an earlock. I heard him sigh and saw him shake his head slowly, his dark eyes moist and brooding.

'Reuven, you have a good head on you,' he said quietly in Yiddish. 'I am happy my Daniel has chosen you for a friend. My son has many friends. But he does not talk about them the way he talks about you.'

I listened and said nothing. His voice was gentle, almost a caress. He seemed so altogether different now from the way he had been at the table. I glanced at Danny. He was looking at his father, and the rigid lines were gone from his face.

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Reb Saunders clasped his hands behind his back.

'I know of your father,' he said to me quietly. 'I am not surprised you have such a head. Your father is a great scholar. But what he writes, ah, what he writes!' He shook his head. 'I worry myself about my son's friends, especially if such a friend is the son of David Malter. Ah, what your father writes! Criticism. Scientific criticism. Ah! So when he tells me you are now his friend, I worry myself. The son of David Malter should be my Daniel's friend? But your father is an observer of the Commandments, and you have his head, and so I am happy you are friends. It is good my Daniel has a friend. I have many responsibilities, I am not always able to talk to him.' I saw Danny stare down at the floor, his face hardening. 'It is good he has acquired a friend. Just so his friend does not teach him scientific criticism.' Reb Saunders looked at me, his eyes dark and brooding. 'You think a friend is an easy thing to be? If you are truly his friend, you will discover otherwise. We will see. Nu, it is late and your father is certainly worried that you are away so long. Have a good week, Reuven. And come pray with us again. There will be no more mistakes in gematriya.'

He was smiling broadly and warmly now, his eyes wrinkling at the corners, the hard lines of his face almost gone. And then he offered me his hand, his entire hand this time, not only the fingers, and I took it, and he held my hand a long time. I almost had the feeling he wanted to embrace me. Then our hands separated, and he went slowly up the aisle, his hands clasped behind his back, tall, a little stooped and, I thought, a little majestic. His young son trailed behind him, holding on to the caftan.

Danny and I remained alone in the synagogue. It occurred to me suddenly that not a single word had passed between him and his father all evening, except for the Talmud contest.

'I'll walk you part of the way home,' Danny offered, and we went out of the brownstone and down the stone stairway to the street. I could hear the caps of his shoes clearly against the stone of the stairway, and then against the cement pavement of the sidewalk.

It was night now, and cool, and a breeze blew against the

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sycamores and moved softly through the leaves. We walked in silence until Lee Avenue, then turned left. I was walking quickly, and Danny kept pace with my steps. ^{level}

Walking along Lee Avenue, Danny said quietly, 'I know what you're thinking. You think he's a tyrant.'

I shook my head. 'I don't know what to think. One minute he's a tyrant, the next minute he's kind and gentle. I don't know what to think.'

'He's got a lot on his mind,' Danny said. 'He's a pretty complicated person.'

'Do you always go through that routine at the table?'

'Oh, sure. I don't mind it. I even enjoy it a little.'

'I've never seen anything like it in my life.'

'It's a family tradition,' Danny explained. 'My father's father used to do it with him. It goes all the way back.'

'It would scare me sick.'

'It's not that bad. The bad part is waiting until he makes the mistake. After that it's all right. But the mistakes aren't really very hard to find. He makes ones that he knows I can find. It's a kind of game almost.'

'Some game!'

'The second mistake tonight caught me off guard. But he made that one for you, really. That was very good, the way you caught it. He knew I wouldn't catch it. He just wanted to catch me, so he could tell me I wasn't listening. He was right. I wasn't listening. But I wouldn't have caught it even if I had listened. I'm no good in math. I've got a photographic memory for everything except math. You can't memorize math. You have to have a certain kind of head for it.'

'I hate to tell you what I think about that game,' I said, a little heatedly. 'What happens if you miss the mistake?'

'I haven't missed in years.'

'What happens when you do miss?'

He was silent a moment. 'It's uncomfortable for a while,' he said quietly. 'But he makes a joke or something, and we go into a Talmud discussion.'

'What a game!' I said. 'In front of all those people!'

'They love it,' Danny said. 'They're very proud to see us like

that. They love to hear the Talmud discussed like that. Did you see their faces?'

'I saw them,' I said. 'How could I not see them? Does your father always use gematria when he talks?'

'Not always. Very rarely, as a matter of fact. The people love it and always hope for it. But he does it rarely. I think he did it tonight only because you were there.'

'He's good at it. I'll say that much.'

'He wasn't too good tonight. Some of it was a little forced. He was fantastic a few months ago. He did it with Talmudic laws then. He was really great.'

'I thought it wasn't bad tonight.'

'Well, it wasn't too good. He hasn't been feeling too well. He's worried about my brother.'

'What's wrong with your brother?'

'I don't know. They don't talk about it. Something about his blood. He's been sick for a few years now.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Danny.'

'He'll be all right. There's a pretty big doctor taking care of him now. He'll be all right.' His voice had the same strange quality it had had when he had talked about his brother on our way over to the synagogue earlier in the day - hope, wistfulness, almost an eagerness for something to take place. I thought Danny must love his little brother very much, though I didn't remember his saying a word to him all the time they had been together. 'Anyway,' Danny said, 'these contests, as you call them, are going to end as soon as I start studying with Ray Gershenson.'

'Who?'

'Ray Gershenson. He's a great scholar. He's at Hirsch College. He teaches Talmud there. My father says that when I'm old enough to study with Ray Gershenson, I'll be old enough for him not to worry whether I can catch him at mistakes or not. Then we'll just have the Talmud discussions. I'll like that.'

I was restraining my delight with considerable difficulty. The Samsen Raphael Hirsch Seminary and College was the only yeshiva in the United States that offered a secular college education. It was located on Bedford Avenue, a few blocks from Eastern