

When the caravan drifted to a stop, the traveler alighted. Brushing the dust off his linen robe, he scanned the group of stone houses. Near one a camel ambled, heading for a herd in the distant muddy fields. Arab farmers hoed the stubborn earth, while beyond them was a chain of hills, dwarfing the town and shielding it from the desert winds.

While the caravan driver and his crew dismounted, the traveler again surveyed the town proper. One of the few paved roads twisted, ending near a modern building with a British flag perched on the balcony. (It was the year 1921 [5681], and the British had controlled Palestine for three years, since the end of World War I.) Veiled women carrying buckets hurried toward a well, while somewhere a donkey brayed furiously.

Still watching, the traveler bit his lip in thought. Warily he tossed his head, so that his hood fell back, revealing the dark hair of a man in his thirties. His dark eyes flashed pools of light in the

midday desert sun, and he blinked rapidly with curiosity and intelligence.

At last he saw him. A lad of about fifteen dressed in similar attire hurried over to him. Olive-skinned and dark-haired, the lad had a face that was as gentle as the traveler's, its smooth, unlined complexion

bespeaking days spent indoors in study and prayer, and not in fields and taverns.

The boy bowed. "Shalom u'vrachah, Rav Yisrael."

The traveler exchanged the greeting. "How fares your father?"

"He is well, thank G-d. He is waiting."

The boy seized the baggage and motioned forward.

They trudged up the paved road. At the sound of rumbling he and his companion pressed themselves against the side. An auto cruised by, while its British chauffeur poked his head out the window, barking at the pedestrians to get a move on.

At last the two came to a brick cottage. A child of five gazed at the stranger. Clapping her hands in delight, she ran indoors, then emerged with a middle-aged gentleman.

"Shalom, Rav Yisrael," he declared. "Welcome to the town of Tiberias."

Rav Yisrael bowed. He glowed with the satisfaction of one who had finally

The twentieth of Teves marks the 110th anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera, grandfather of the Baba Sali, Rabbi Yisrael Abuchazera. This story is a dramatization of a true story concerning the Baba Sali and his grandfather.

A LITTLE TOWN AMIDST GIANTS

By CHAYIM S. CHASAN

arrived at his true home.



It was late afternoon. The little girl had drifted to sleep amidst a pile of carpets, which she shared with three other siblings. Her mother, clothed in cotton, entered the main room with a tray of tea.

There her husband reclined with the traveler. An electric fan rotated weakly, mustering up more hot air, and a lamp threw off particles of light within the shady interior. After thanking his wife, the host poured the tea into small glasses.

"So, Rabbi Yisrael," he said, leaning against the cushions, "have you had a difficult trip?"

Silently the younger man nodded. "It was begun with great fear," he answered. "Since I was a young boy, I have dreamed day and night of touching our sacred soil. Tiberias, in particular. After hearing of the holy men buried there . . ." His voice rose, then dropped modestly. "If only I would merit to follow in my grandfather's footsteps."

"Your grandfather . . ." echoed the host. Yes, he, Rabbi Chaim Yaluz, knew well of this man's grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera. The latter's Kabbalistic teachings had catapulted their author to glory.

Rabbi Yaakov had not passed away in Tiberias, or in the Land of Israel, for that matter. In fact, he had never managed to set foot on the holy soil. Like his grandson, Rabbi Yisrael, he had longed to

spend the remainder of his days in the Holy Land, and had left his North African town of Taphlilat in that direction. But the Heavenly Father had had a different plan. Rabbi Yaakov had gotten as far as Damanhur, in Egypt, when he contracted the illness from which he never recovered. He was buried there, and his grave attracted pilgrims from miles around — often themselves on the way to the Holy Land.

Rabbi Chaim Yaluz, himself a rising star in Jewish scholarship, studied the grandson, who seemed to display the traits so typical of his family. The Abuchazeras had been blessed with a line of rabbis, which could be traced back 400 years. In Rabbi Yisrael's serious demeanor Rabbi Chaim Yaluz detected a spitting image of his saintly grandfather. In time, in fact, Rabbi Yisrael would become a saint in his own right. Jews from miles around would flock to the "Baba Sali" — as Rabbi Yisrael would later be known — in much the same way they had flocked to his grandfather.

But for the time being, Rabbi Yisrael was merely an inquisitive student, eager to learn in Tiberias.

Rabbi Chaim Yaluz calmly sipped his tea and replenished his glass.

"Rabbi Yisrael," he said, "just by looking at you I can tell that you bear the legacy of your grandfather's blessed soul."

Rabbi Yisrael laughed. "You flatter me. I only wish that I had been granted the honor to know him. Then I would feel able to contradict you."

"I *did* have the merit of seeing your grandfather," said Rabbi Chaim

Yaluz, "when I was ten." He toyed thoughtfully with the glass's handle. "That was, shall we say, my first encounter."

"Your *first*?" Rabbi Yisrael perked his ears. "You must have had an extensive acquaintance, then."

"Not exactly." Rabbi Chaim put down his glass. "But from what I was exposed to I have profited."

Rabbi Yisrael sipped his own tea. "Then he must have left quite an impression."

"Quite," answered the rabbi. "Mine was somewhat more . . . indirect. But a number of people have felt the same reaction, and many towns were influenced by him."

Silence. Rabbi Chaim continued playing with the glass, his eyes focused on the fan. Then he cleared his throat.

"I must confess a . . . certain sin I had committed."

"A sin?"

"A sin committed by youthful folly. I am no longer young, but I remember it today, and as vividly as ever, thanks to your visit."

"What was this . . . sin?" asked Rabbi Yisrael, putting down his glass. "Did my grandfather ever know?"

"I am sure that he did, Rabbi Yisrael:

As I said, I was a young man then. This was still during the days when the Turkish Ottoman Empire ruled the land. I was only twenty-six, and spending my studious days in Tiberias. Life was a joy. Morning, noon, and night I

spent in the yeshiva, sharing my thoughts with wise men and mystics, the same mystics whose graves you will visit here.

When you live here, you don't wish to leave. Whatever for? I had everything I needed. I was a promising student; I had a serene but promising future here. Tiberias was definitely my home.

But when your adopted town needs you, and you are asked to fulfill a certain mission, have you any right to say no? Although a place seems above space and time, Tiberias and its yeshiva are unfortunately regulated by mundane considerations. The yeshiva needed money, and money it set out to find. I was appointed *shaliach* — emissary. I had to embark for the west in order to seek out philanthropists.

With great reluctance I boarded the ship, which transported me along North African shores. Egypt, Libya, Morocco . . . I was determined to seek out towns where there were Jews. With G-d's help I was quite successful.

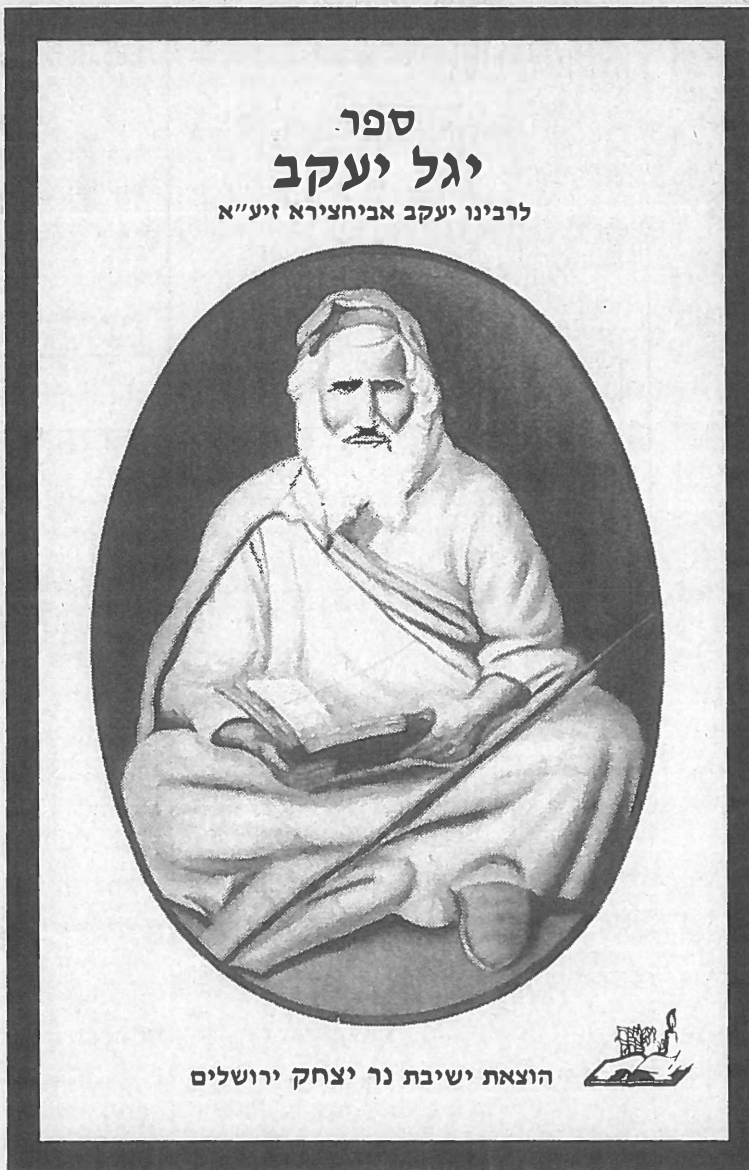
Everywhere I was welcomed by the chief citizens. Upon hearing where I came from, and that I was representing the yeshiva, they showered me liberally with funds. And fanfare. Never in my life had I received so much attention, and I praised G-d that good Jews lived everywhere.

Unfortunately, I hadn't realized how much I had been inundated with honor, for it had blown up my youthful head. I became quite haughty. I continued my merry path, collecting funds, until I came to a town called Shukura.

Shukura was a typical Arab town. But I had heard of a Jewish community, and as usual sent word ahead of time that I was arriving.

No sooner did I step off the boat than I searched in vain for the welcoming committee. No one. Well, not exactly no one, for a few Jews did come to see me. A handful, I should say, since I could have literally counted them on one hand. They weren't at all dressed like wealthy men. Rather, they wore the simple clothes of farmers and craftsmen. They stared at me nervously, as if they would much rather have returned to their farms or pottery barns, which they had had to leave in order to see me.

I couldn't help



Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera, zt'l

110th Anniversary Of His Passing

comparing this diverse group to those who had greeted me so majestically in other places. I felt that the town was showing disregard not only for me, but for Torah scholars in general.

I shook my fist. "What kind of town is this?" I shouted. "No enthusiasm for a student who comes all the way from Tiberias, from the Holy Land, the land of learning? Why, this is an affront. No, worse than that. It's a desecration of the Divine Name. You are shaming the Torah and all of its wise men!"

The handful of Jews looked at me, then at each other. Finally one of them hurried away, not daring to turn his back, but facing me all the while as he retreated behind the others. I definitely must have looked quite interesting.

At last the man returned. He approached me and bowed. "Sir," he began, "I bring a message on behalf of our rabbi. Unfortunately, he is ailing, and too old and feeble to pay the respects that are due to a person like you. But he wishes that you might honor him with a visit."

Grudgingly I followed, while another man helped with my baggage. I cynically observed the city streets, considering them far too primitive for my tastes — or any civilized person's, for that matter.

When I entered the chamber of Rabbi Mas'oud Amarah, I trembled and nearly fainted. Though pale and confined to bed, the rabbi emanated the very fire of holiness. Propped up by pillows,

his body illuminated the room, which was filled with anxious attendants. Some of them were dressed in finery, making me realize why all the wealthy people had not come to the port. They were here to tend to the rabbi.

At the sight of me, Rabbi Mas'oud motioned to the others, and they solemnly withdrew. I was afraid to be left alone with this man, for I thought I might be consumed by his very voice.

But the rabbi spoke softly, like a grandfather.

"You are Rabbi Chaim Yaluz, from Tiberias?"

Quickly I nodded.

Rabbi Mas'oud heaved a sigh, throwing his bony frame back on the bed. "Such wonderful things I have heard about your town," he said. "Of course. It is in the Holy Land. Its splendor makes any gem in the Diaspora look like a piece of brass."

He lay there for a minute, leaving me to feel nearly naked. Then he coughed and continued. "When I was a young man, I would have longed to be in your shoes, to sit and revel in Kabbalistic mysteries all day long. But I was destined to remain here. I have served this town faithfully for many years. Nothing much happens here, I must say. Nothing on a par with any occurrences in Tiberias."

Then he smiled — somewhat slyly, I might add. "But occasionally we do get visitors. Perhaps you have met the crown of our heads, Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera?"

"Have I!" I exclaimed. "I have had the good fortune to see him! I was a child then, only ten. He came to our town. When he passed through the streets, all the women would flee

inside their homes and hide themselves — so great was his holiness. Why, he could inspire the most humble of men."

Rabbi Mas'oud softly answered, "I too had the merit to meet him. He once came to this town as well. It was a visit I shall never forget."

And with that Rabbi Mas'oud began his own tale:

It was a late afternoon when he arrived. Like you, Rabbi Chaim, he had come to raise money. I really can't say whether or not he had intended to stop here. No one ever does. I'm afraid ours is one of those places that one easily bypasses, on the way to somewhere else.

Nevertheless, he did come to Shukura, but G-d planned that it be during one of our worst rainstorms. Water came down in buckets. You would have sworn it was all a reenactment of the Flood. People hid indoors, fearing they would either drown or get swept away.

I was in the synagogue at the time. I was trying to study, but was listening instead for the sound of thunder and the water that pounded against our roof, which threatened to cave in.

Just then the door burst open, and in walked the sexton, accompanied by two men. Drenched like sponges, they shivered and wrapped themselves even more tightly in their wet garments. I could not even make

out their faces. Nevertheless, I rose, and ushered them near the *bimah*, where it was warmer.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Taphlilat," one of them answered. His voice was gruff, and he hovered near the other protectively.

"When did you arrive?" I continued.

"A half-hour ago," the same man answered.

"You are certainly brave to come all the way to the synagogue on a day like this," I said.

"We wanted to pray *minchah*," replied the other, more gently.

I smiled apologetically, wondering if I could even gather a *minyan* in such weather. I bade them wait and questioned them about their home town. When I asked how long they were staying, the second man answered, "If it would please you, we would very much like to spend the night in Shukura. We are *shluchim*, wandering from town to town to collect money for our yeshiva. Once we have completed our mission, we will be on our way."

His very gracious demeanor seemed incongruous with his simple clothing. The sexton said, "I shall speak to Naftali the

blacksmith. He lives in a hovel near the end of town. But if I recall, he has a spare room. I am sure he shall accommodate you."

No sooner had the sexton spoken than Naftali walked in. He too was soaked. After we exchanged a few words, he agreed to take in the two

arrived, much to my relief. Apparently I was going to have a *minyan*, after all.

Just then my servant burst into the room.

"Rav Mas'oud!" he cried. "I have wonderful news! The saintly Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera is here!"

"Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera!" I repeated in shock. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," panted the servant. "He left the boat awhile ago. He came here from Taphlilat."

I turned to the two drenched travelers. "Does either of you know Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera?"

The larger man nodded, then pointed to his companion. "That's him."

I gasped. The companion smiled, then calmly rubbed his chapped hands. Although I might have sensed this man's bearing from the start, I now was fully cognizant of its nobility. He had a wide, broad expression of warmth that not even the raindrops could dampen.

Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera rose. "I do believe the hour for *minchah* is getting late?"

Once word spread through the town that such a holy man was

"I don't know," panted the servant. "He left the boat awhile ago. He came here from Taphlilat."

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travelers.

"I relish this chance to do a *mitzvah*," he said.

One by one other congregants

there, people vied for the honors of feeding and accommodating him. The wealthy, hearing of the man's charity appeal, came armed with gold, filling the rabbi's packet of money.

Of course, having mistaken them for ordinary travelers, the sexton had arranged for them to stay with an average townsman. Once the rabbi's true identity became known, I naturally tried to place him and his friend with the town's wealthiest citizen.

But Rabbi Abuchazera wouldn't hear of it. "I shall be honored to stay by Naftali the blacksmith," he said. "Such a man as he deserves to fulfill the mitzvah of hospitality."

That night was one no one ever forgot. The storm had died down, and the air was freshly clear, as if purified by the luminary's presence. All the Jewish men of Shukura flocked to Naftali's hovel to hear Rabbi Abuchazera's words of Torah. And what words! The angels themselves came down to listen, and left in envy. The walls of the hovel nearly burst with joy. And none, I think, was more radiant than Rabbi Yaakov himself.

But the mood was short-lived. That night, after the callers had left the rabbi, a gang of robbers sneaked into the hovel and made off with his packet. The whole town was stunned. Not only had that packet contained the accumulated money, but also the rabbi's *tallis* and *tefillin* — and most of all, a collection of writings which the rabbi had composed on the secrets of the Torah.

The entire town fell into deep grief, with the wealthy passionately promising to repay the rabbi. But the financial loss was minor compared to the shame of having allowed a thief to roam freely and causing the rabbi to lose his life's work.

Rabbi Yaakov raised his hand benevolently. "Fear not, gentlemen. Do not despair over such an event. If anything, you should rejoice. This act was clearly a sign from Heaven."

"But Rabbi," exclaimed one of the men, "your writings! Surely they are as precious to you as all the gold and silver!"

The rabbi chuckled. "Nonsense. Foolish ramblings are hardly worth even copper coins. I can certainly attest to that, for I know now that my prayer was received."

Noticing the bewilderment, he explained:

"As you know, gentlemen, many books have been written on our sacred Torah. I tried to contribute my own as well. But how could I know if they were truly written with the agreement of the Creator, or if they were the wanderings of a weak mind? Therefore, I asked the Creator for a sign that they be truly worthy of publication. I prayed that if they did not deserve to be published then they should be lost.

"When I discovered that they had been taken from me, I thanked G-d that I was prevented from placing a stumbling block before the blind!"

To everyone's surprise, no less mine, the rabbi's face was beaming.

Just then, four men wandered in. Dressed in rags, they bowed their heads, shamefaced and miserable. As I noticed them, it occurred to me

that they had not come the previous night to pay their respects to the rabbi; they didn't look like the most moral of men.

One of them approached the guest and threw himself on the floor. "Forgive us, Rabbi," he cried. "We have erred greatly."

"Why, what has happened?" exclaimed Rabbi Yaakov.

The man continued to sob. Then he raised his head and said, "We have tried to rob a holy man!"

The whole room hushed. I thought I might gasp even more when one of the other three men stepped forward and presented the rabbi's packet. Inside lay the rabbi's *tallis* and *tefillin*. But most importantly, there were his writings, snug and intact.

Finally calm, the man on the floor raised himself and said:

"It was not our intention to rob the holy rabbi of his religious belongings. Oh, no! We had only desired the money, which this town and others so graciously gave. What better opportunity than last night, while everyone was away? We took the money, then decided to discard the evidence.

"Together the four of us went to the river. My friend here hurled the packet into the depths of the river." He pointed to the largest of the men, then continued.

"But just then a wave formed. Coming from the center of the water, it increased in size and intensity. With a mighty roll, it hurled back the packet, depositing it at our feet. Instantly the water subsided.

"My friend tried again. Again

an enormous wave formed and tossed the packet back, as if it were a stick or a leaf. Need I remind you that there was no wind? The storm had long ago passed. We could not understand this occurrence.

"My friend tried several more times, and each time the packet landed on the shore. We realized at last that this was, after all, the possession of a holy man. To hurl it into the river would be akin to throwing the holy body of the rabbi, G-d forbid, into the waves."

The thief clasped his hands. "We realized the enormity of our sin, and its intent, and we knew that to even attempt to hide it would be a further stain on our souls. So we have come to return the packet and the money — and to ask the holy rabbi for atonement."

The thief lowered his head. The rabbi calmly fingered the packet, oblivious to the money inside. Obviously something else lay inside, of greater worth.

"Your apologies are accepted, but hardly necessary; for you have not wronged me. On the contrary, you have made me doubly happy. It is not just that the money for charity has been returned; something greater has happened. For just as I had blessed G-d for the Heavenly sign indicating that my works should be discarded, so too has He returned the blessing, in changing His decision. Apparently, He has willed that my works be published!"

□

Rabbi Mas'oud finished his story, and fell back again between the covers.

"Rabbi Yaakov departed from town amidst great happiness and honor. But none was as honored as I, or as happy. All this happened many years ago. But I can still feel his kind words, his deference to such a small town as Shukura.

"And isn't it strange, Rabbi Chaim?" For the first time since my arrival he gazed at me intently. "Rabbi Yaakov Abuchazera, the crown of our heads, came here under the worst conditions possible. A miserable storm. His clothing was drenched and reduced to rags. He was mistaken for some kind of beggar. He was placed in the home of one of the town's poorest men. On top of that, he was robbed of his most precious possessions. Everything pointed to gross insult.

"Yet he bore it all calmly and with faith. He saw every indignity as a lesson from G-d. He treated every citizen of Shukura, from the richest to the poorest, admirably, not scorning or turning any away. He expected nothing. Yet he left with the highest regard for humanity, and the understanding that sometimes life's events don't happen as neatly as we like."

The eyes of Rabbi Mas'oud darkened. "But you, Rabbi Chaim, what have you done? You have displayed anger because the townspeople were not able to welcome you as befitting a 'Torah scholar.' Your wounded vanity has caused you to scoff at us. Apparently you can't tolerate the frailties of human behavior, or even common mishaps. Because you come from Tiberias,

you have somehow placed yourself above us all."

Sadly the rabbi shook his head. "I pity you, Rabbi Chaim. If only you had learned something when you had the merit of meeting Rabbi Abuchazera. He had taken a similar journey as you. He too had visited the same towns. But his trip had a more productive outcome."

□

The glass of tea had long since grown cold. Rabbi Chaim placed it near the electric fan.

"To say the least, I needed the lecture," he said. "As harsh as they were, the words of Rabbi Mas'oud were spoken with conviction. More than that, they carried the spirit of a man who had recognized the proper path to Torah and good deeds. All that time I was more concerned with a physical life, filled with boats and trains. I later saw much of the western world, and was truly amazed by its magnificent cities, with their outstanding architecture. But no city ever left the same impression on me as did the little town of Shukura."

He stared at the grandson, whose face rested placidly. "After leaving Shukura — with, I might add, sufficient funds and honor — I resolved to take a more spiritual path, to go in the way of your grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov. Were he alive today, I think he would agree: Humility and a good dash of resiliency must accompany a person on his way to acquiring Torah." JR

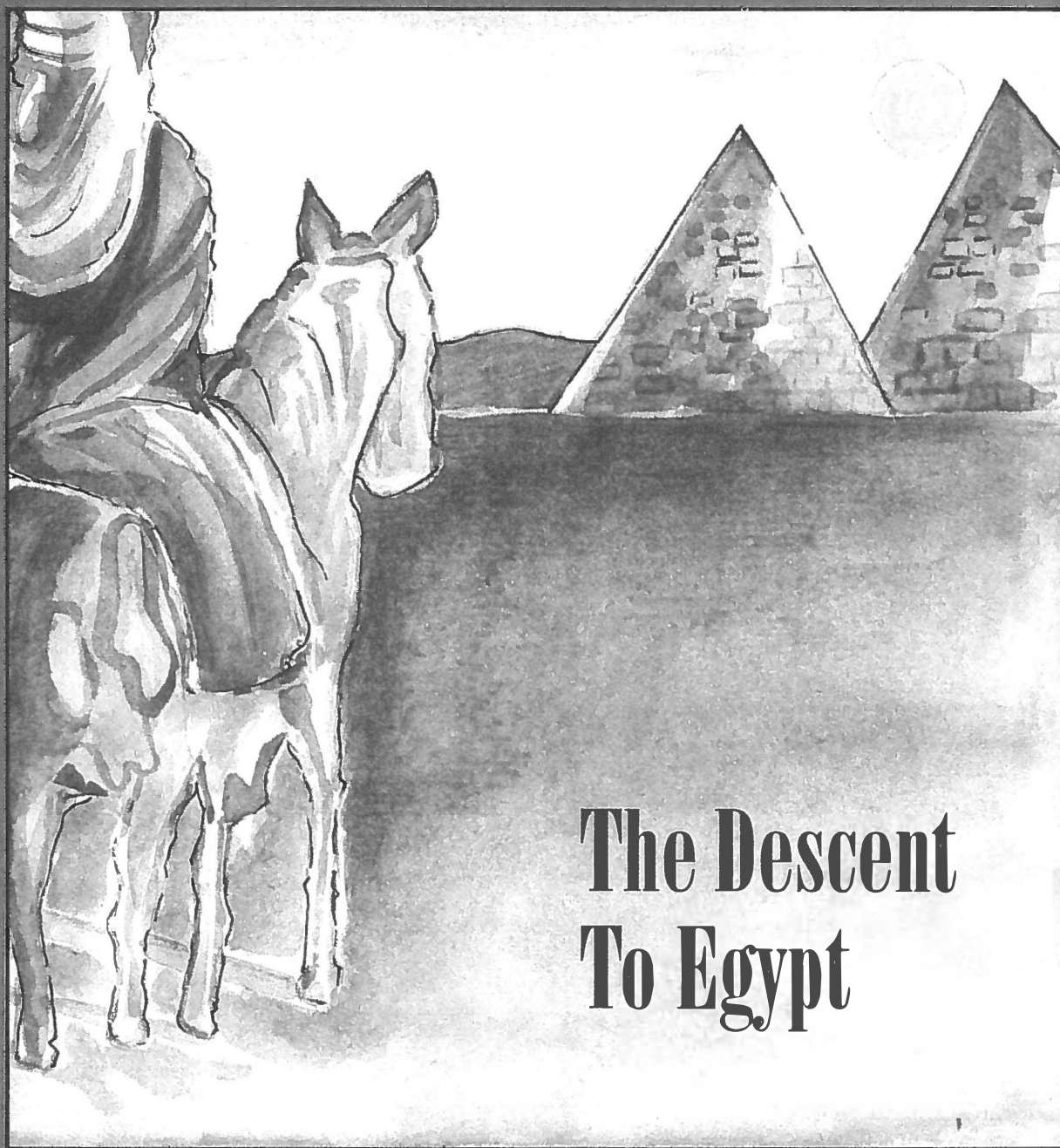
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TO OUR READERS

Hashem told Avraham Avinu that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land for four hundred years. We are taught that the four hundred years began with the birth of Yitzchak, but the main period of suffering was in Egypt. The descent by Yaakov Avinu to Egypt is the subject of this month's cover, and of "Torah Highlights."

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews revolted on several occasions against the Roman occupiers. The greatest revolt was that of Bar Kochba, but even that was doomed to defeat. In this month and next month's "Our Story," the sad history of that time period — including the military defeat of Bar Kochba and the subsequent religious persecution of the Jews by the Emperor Hadrian — is related. The Romans prohibited the practice of Judaism, but some great men and women would not be deterred from serving G-d. "The Law" is the dramatization of an episode that demonstrated this faith — the circumcision by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel of his son Yehuda.

One of the great Sephardic leaders of the nineteenth century was Yaakov Abuchazera, who passed away in Teves of 1880. "A Little Town Amidst Giants" is a story about Rabbi Yaakov and his grandson, Rabbi Yisrael, popularly known as the Baba Sali.

And due to popular demand, the Torah Quiz, with a \$50 dollar prize, is back. Get your thinking caps on, and let us hear from you!

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MAIL

ROOM

I enjoyed "Torah Highlights" in the current issue (Cheshvan) very much. It was interesting to find out different things about the Aleph-bais, since we are not really taught this in our school.

I also liked the story about the immigrants who had to walk through a bad neighborhood in order to be taught by their rebbe ("A Challenge for Angels"). For kids like me it's very easy to walk or ride to yeshiva. We don't have to worry about getting beaten up with every step we take. I

was shocked to find out that there was a time when this was not true in America. My compliments to the author of the story.

Moshe Katz, Brooklyn, NY

I really enjoy "Our Wonderful World" and "News In Review." These two sections help keep us informed about events that are happening in the world and about science. Please keep up the good work.

Miriam Goldberger
Miami Beach, FL

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