

BETWEEN TWO MOUNTAINS

(Between the Rabbi of Brisk and the Rebbe of Byale)

A Simchas Torah Tale

TOLD BY AN OLD TEACHER

I

Of course you have heard of the Brisk Rabbi and the Byàle Rebbe, but it is not everyone who knows that the holy man of Byàle, Reb Nòach'ke, was at one time the Brisk Rabbi's pupil, that he studied a good couple of years with him, then disappeared for another two, and finally emerged from his voluntary exile as a distinguished man in Byàle.

And he left for this reason:

They studied Torah, with the Brisk Rabbi, only the Rebbe felt that it was *dry* Torah. For instance, one learns about questions regarding women, or about "meat in milk," or else about a money matter—very well. Reuben and Simon come with a dispute, or there comes a maid-servant or a woman with a question of ritual, and that very moment the study becomes a delight, it is all alive and is there for a purpose.

But like this, without them, the Rebbe felt the Torah, that is, the body of the Torah, the explanation, what lies on the surface, is dry. That, he felt, is not the Law of life. Torah must live! The study of Kabbalah books was not allowed in Brisk. The Brisk Rabbi was a Misnagid, and by nature "revengeful and relentless as a serpent;" if anyone ventured to open a Zohar, a Pardes, he would scold and put him under a ban. Somebody was caught reading a Kabbalah-book, and the Rabbi had his beard shaven by Gentiles! What do you think? The man became distraught, fell into a melancholy, and, what is more wonderful, no "good Jew" was able to help him. The Brisk Rabbi was no trifle, I can tell you! And how was anyone just to get up and go away from his academy?

Reb Nòach'ke couldn't make up his mind what to do for a long time.

Then he was shown a dream. He dreamed that the Brisk Rabbi came in to him and said: "Come, Nòach, I will take you into the terrestrial Garden of Eden." And he took his hand and led him away thither. They came into a great palace. There were no doors and no windows in this palace, except for the door by which they came in. And yet it was light, for the walls, as it seemed to the Rebbe, were of crystal and gave out a glittering shine.

And so they went on, further and further, and one saw no end to it.

"Hold on to my skirt," said the Brisk Rabbi, "there are halls without doors and without number, and if you let go of me, you will be lost forever."

The Rebbe obeyed, and they went further and further, and the whole way he saw no bench, no chair, no kind of furniture, nothing at all!

"There is no resting here," explained the Brisk Rabbi, "one goes on and on!" And he followed, and every hall was longer and brighter than the last, and the walls shone now with this color and now with that, here with several, and there with all colors—but they did not meet with a single human being on their way.

The Rebbe grew weary walking. He was covered with perspiration, a cold perspiration. He grew cold in every limb, beside which his eyes began to hurt him, from the continual brilliancy.

And there came over him a great longing, a longing after Jews, after companions, after All-Israel. It was no trifle, not meeting a single soul.

"Long after no one," said the Brisk Rabbi, "this is a palace for me and for you—you will also, some day, be Rabbi of Brisk."

And the other was more terrified than ever, and laid his hand against the wall to help himself from falling. And the wall burnt him. Only not as fire burns, but as ice burns.

"Rabbi!" he gave a cry, "the walls are ice, simply ice!"

The Brisk Rabbi was silent. And the other cried again:

"Rabbi, take me away hence! I do not wish to stay alone with you! I wish to be with All-Israel!"

And hardly had he said it when the Brisk Rabbi disappeared, and he was left alone in the palace.

He knew of no way, no in and no out; a cold terror struck him from the walls; and the longing for a Jew, to see a Jew, if only a cobbler or a tailor, waxed stronger and stronger. He began to weep.

"Lord of the world," he begged, "take me away from here. Better in Gehenna with All-Israel than here one by himself!"

And immediately there appeared before him a common Jew with the red sash of a driver round him, and a long whip in his hand. The Jew took him silently by the sleeve, led him out of the palace—and vanished. Such was the dream that was sent him.

When he woke, before daylight, when it had scarcely begun to dawn, he understood that this had been no ordinary dream. He dressed quickly, and hastened toward the house-of-study to get his dream interpreted by the learned ones who pass the night there. On his way through the market, however, he saw a covered wagon standing, and beside it—the driver with a red sash round the waist, a long whip in his hand, and altogether just such a Jew as the one who had led him out of the palace in his dream.

Nòach (it struck him there was something behind the coincidence) went up to him and asked:

"Whither drives a Jew?"

"Not *your* way," answered the driver, very roughly.

"Well, tell me anyway," he continued. "Perhaps I will go with you!"

The driver considered a little, and then answered:

"And can't a young fellow like you go on foot?" he asked. "Go along with you, *your* way!"

"And whither shall I go?"

"Follow your nose!" answered the driver, "it's not my business."

The Rebbe understood, and now began his "exile."

A few years later, as before said, he emerged into publicity in Byàle. How it all happened I won't tell you now, although it's enough to make anyone open his mouth and ears. And about a year after this happened, a Byàle householder, Reb Yechiel his name was, sent for me as a teacher.

At first I would not accept the post of teacher in his house.

You must know that Reb Yechiel was a rich man of the old-fashioned type, he gave his daughters a thousand gold pieces dowry, and contracted alliances with the greatest rabbis, and his latest daughter-in-law was a daughter of the Rabbi of Brisk.

You can see for yourselves that if the Brisk Rabbi and the other connections were Misnagdîm, Reb Yechiel had to be a Misnagid, too—and I am a Byàle Chossid, well—how could I go into a house of that kind?

And yet I felt drawn to Byàle. You can fancy! The idea of living in the same town as the Rebbe! After a good deal of see-sawing, I went.

And Reb Yechiel himself turned out to be a very honest, pious Jew, and I tell you, his heart was drawn to the Rebbe as if with pincers. He was no learned man, himself, and he stared at the Rabbi of Brisk as a cock looks at a prayer-book.^[141] He made no objections to my holding to the Byàle Rebbe, only he would have nothing to do with him himself. When I told anything about the Rebbe, he would pretend to yawn, and yet I could see that he pricked up his ears, but his son, the son-in-law of the Brisk Rabbi, would frown and look at me with mingled anger and contempt, only he never argued; he was silent by nature.

And it came to pass on a day that Reb Yechiel's daughter-in-law, the Brisk Rabbi's daughter, was expecting the birth of her first child—well, there is nothing new in that, you say? But "thereby hangs a tale." It was well known that the Brisk Rabbi, because he had shaved a Chossid, that is, caused him to be deprived of beard and ear-locks, was made to suffer by the prominent Rebbes. Both his sons (not of you be it said!) died within five or six years, and not one of his three daughters had a boy, beside which every child they bore nearly cost them their life.

Everyone saw and knew that it was a visitation of the great Rebbes on the Brisk Rabbi, only he himself, for all his clear-sightedness, did not see it. He went on his way as before, carrying on his opposition by means of force and bans.

I was really sorry for Gütele (that was the name of the Rabbi's daughter), really sorry. First, a Jewess; secondly, a good Jewess, such a good, kind soul as never was known.

Not a poor girl was married without her assistance—a "silken creature!" And she was to be punished for her father's outburst of anger! And therefore, as soon as I heard the midwife busy in the room, I wanted to move heaven and earth for them to send to the Byàle Rebbe—if only a note without a money-offering—after all, it wasn't as if *he* needed money.

The Byàle Rebbe never thought much of money.

But whom was I to speak with?

I try it on with the Brisk Rabbi's son-in-law—and I know very well that his soul is bound up with her soul, that he has never hid from himself that domestic happiness shone out of every corner, out of every word and deed—but he is the Brisk Rabbi's son-in-law, he spits, goes away, and leaves me standing with my mouth open.

I go to Reb Yechiel himself, and he answers: "It is the Brisk Rabbi's daughter. I could not treat him like that, not even if there were peril of death, heaven forbid!" I try his wife—a worthy soul, but a simple one—and she answers:

"If my husband told me to do so, I would send the Rebbe my holiday head-kerchief and the ear-rings at once; they cost a mint of money; but without his consent, not a copper farthing—not a tassel!"

"But a note—what harm could a note do you?"

"Without my husband's knowledge, nothing!" she answers, as a good Jewess should answer, and turns away from me, and I see that she only does it to hide her tears—a mother—"the heart knows," her heart has felt the danger.

But when I heard the first cry, I ran to the Rebbe myself.

"Shemaiah," he answered me, "what can I do? I will pray!"

"Give me something for her, Rebbe," I implore, "anything, a coin, a trifle, an amulet!"

"It would only make matters worse, which heaven forbid!" he replied. "Where there is no faith, such things only do harm, and she would have none."

What could I do? It was the first day of Tabernacles, there was nothing I could do for her, I might as well stay with the Rebbe. I was like a son of the house. I thought, I will look imploringly at the Rebbe every minute, perhaps he will have compassion.

One heard things were not going on well—everything had been done—graves measured, hundreds of candles burnt in the synagogue, in the house-of-study, and a fortune given away in charity. What remains to be told? All the wardrobes stood open; a great heap of coins of all sorts lay on the table, and poor people came in and took away—all who wished, what they wished, as much as they wished!

I felt it all deeply.

"Rebbe," I said, "it is written: 'Almsgiving delivers from death.'"

And he answered quite away from the matter:

"Perhaps the Brisk Rabbi will come!"

And in that instant there walks in Reb Yechiel. He never spoke to the Rebbe, any more than if he hadn't seen him, but:

"Shemaiah," he says to me, and catches hold of the flap of my coat, "there is a cart outside, go, get into it and drive to the Brisk Rabbi, tell him to come."

And he was evidently quite aware of what was involved, for he added:

"Let him see for himself what it means. Let him say what is to be done!"

And he looked—what am I to say? A corpse is more beautiful than he was.

Well, I set off. And thinking, I thought to myself, if my *Rebbe knows that the Brisk Rabbi expects to come here*, something will result. Perhaps they will make peace. That is, not the Brisk Rabbi with the Byàle Rebbe, for they themselves were not at strife, but their followers. Because, really, if he comes, he will see us; he has eyes in his head!

But heaven, it seems, will not suffer such things to come to pass so quickly, and set hindrances in my way. Hardly had I driven out of Byàle when a cloud spread itself out over the sky, and what a cloud! A heavy black cloud like soot, and there came a gust of wind as though spirits were flying abroad, and it blew from all sides at once. A peasant, of course, understands these things, he crossed himself and said that the journey, might heaven defend us, would be hard, and pointed with his whip to the sky. Just then came a stronger gust of wind, tore the cloud as you tear a piece of paper, and began to blow one bit of it to one side, and one to the other, as if it were parting ice-floes on a river; I had two or three piles of cloud over my head. I wasn't at all frightened at first. It was no new thing for me to be wet through, and I am not alarmed at thunder.

In the first place it never thunders at Tabernacles, and secondly, after the Rebbe's Shofar-blowing! We have a tradition that after the Shofar-blowing thunder has no power to harm for a whole year. But when the rain suddenly gave a lash across the face like a whip—once, twice, thrice—my heart sank into my shoes. I saw that heaven was against me, driving me back.

And the peasant, too, begged, "Let us go home!"

But I knew there was peril of death. I sat on the cart and heard through the storm the moans of the woman and the crack of the husband's finger-joints: he wrings his hands; and I see Reb Yechiel's dark face with the sunken, burning eyes: "Drive on," he says, "drive on!" And we drive on.

And it pours and pours, it pours from above and splashes from below, from underneath the wheels and the horse's feet, and the road is swamped, literally covered with water. The water frothed, the cart seemed to swim—what am I to tell you? Besides that we lost our way—but I lived through it!

I brought back the Brisk Rabbi by the Great Hosanna.

II

I must tell you the truth, that no sooner had the Brisk Rabbi taken his seat in the cart than it grew still! The cloud broke up and the sun shone through the rift, and we drove into Byàle quite dry and comfortable. Even the peasant remarked it, and said in his own language: "A great Rabbi! a powerful Rabbi!"

But the main thing was our arrival in Byàle.

The women who were in the house crowded to the Rabbi like locusts—they nearly fell on their faces before him and wept—the daughter in the inner room was not heard, either because of the women's weeping, or else because she had no strength left to complain—Reb Yechiel did not see us, he was standing with his forehead pressed against a window-pane, as though his head were burning hot.

The Brisk Rabbi's son-in-law did not turn round to greet us, either. He stood with his face against the wall, and I could see plainly how his whole body shook, and how his head knocked against the wall.

I thought I should have fallen. Anxiety and terror had taken such hold on me that I was cold in every limb, I felt that my soul was chilled.

Well, did you know the Brisk Rabbi? That was a man—a pillar of iron, I tell you!

A tall, tall man, "from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people;" he cast awe round him like a king.

A long white beard, one point of it, I remember now, had tucked itself under his girdle, the other point quivered over it. His eyebrows were white, thick, and long, they seemed to cover part of his face. When he raised them—Lord of the world! The women fell back as though they were thunderstruck, he had such eyes! There were daggers in them, glittering daggers! And he gave a roar like a lion: "Women, be gone!"

Then he asked in a lower and gentler voice:

"And where is my daughter?"

They showed him.

He went in, and I remained standing quite upset: Such eyes, such a voice! It is quite another sort another world! The Byàle Rebbe's eyes are so kind, so quiet, they do one's heart good; he gives you a look, and it's like a shower of gold—and his voice—that sweet voice—soft as velvet—Lord of the world! it goes to your heart and soothes it and comforts it—one isn't afraid of *him*, heaven forbid! The soul just melts for love of him, she desires to escape from the body and unite herself to *his* soul—she is drawn as a butterfly (*lehavdîl*) to a bright flame! And here—Lord of the world, fear and trembling! A Gaòn, a Gaòn of the old days! And he has gone in to a woman in child-bed!

"He will turn her into a heap of bones!" I think in terror.

I run to the Byàle Rebbe. And he met me in the door with a smile:

"Have you seen," he said to me, "the majesty of the Law? The very majesty of the Law?"

I felt relieved. If the Rebbe smiles, I thought, all will be well.

And all was well. On Shemini Atseres she was over it.

And on Simchas Torah the Brisk Rabbi presided at table. I would have liked to be at table somewhere else, but I did not dare go away, particularly as I made up the tenth man needed to recite grace.

Well, what am I to tell you? How the Brisk Rabbi expounded the Torah? If the Torah is a sea, he was Leviathan in the sea—with one twist of his tail he swam through ten treatises, with another he mixed together the Talmud and the codes, so that it heaved and splashed and seethed and boiled, just as they say the real sea does—he made my head go round—but "the heart knoweth its own bitterness," and my heart felt no holiday happiness! And then I remembered the Rebbe's dream—and I felt petrified. There was sun in the window and no want of wine at table, I could see the whole company was perspiring. And I? I was cold, cold as ice! Over yonder I knew the Torah was being expounded differently—there it is bright and warm—every word is penetrated and interwoven with love and rapture—one feels that angels are flying through the room, one seems to hear the rustle of the great, white wings—*ai*, Lord of the world! Only, there's no getting away!

Suddenly he stops, the Brisk Rabbi, and asks:

"What kind of rabbi have you got here?"

"A certain Nòach," they reply.

Well, it cut me to the heart. "A certain Nòach!" O, the flattery, the flattery of it!

"Is he a wonder-worker?"

"Not very much of one, one doesn't often hear about him—the women talk of him, but who listens to them?"

"Then he just takes money and does nothing wonderful?"

They tell him the truth: that he takes little money, and gives away a great deal.

The rabbi muses.

"And he is a scholar?"

"They say, a great one!"

"Whence is he, this Nòach?"

Nobody knows, and *I* have to answer. A conversation ensues between me and the Brisk Rabbi:

"Was he not once in Brisk, this Nòach?" he asks.

"Was not the Rebbe once in Brisk?" I stammered. "I think—yes!"

"Ah," says he, "a follower of his!" and it seems to me he looks at me as one looks at a spider.

Then he turns to the company:

"I once had a pupil," he says, "Nòach—he had a good head, but he was attracted to the other side—I spoke to him once, twice—I would have spoken to him a third time, to warn him, but he disappeared—is it not he? Who knows!"

And he began to describe him: thin, small, a little black beard, black, curly ear-locks, a dreamer, a quiet voice, and so on.

"It may be," said the company, "that it is he; it sounds very like!"

I thanked God when they began to say grace.

But after grace something happened that I had never dreamt of.

The Brisk Rabbi rises from his seat, calls me aside, and says in a low voice:

"Take me to *your* Rebbe and *my* pupil! Only, do you hear? no one must know!"

Of course, I obeyed, only on the way I asked in terror:

"Brisk Rabbi, tell me, with what purpose are you going?"

And he answered simply:

"It occurred to me at grace, that I had judged by hearsay—I want to see, I want to see for myself, and perhaps," he added, after a while, "God will help me, and I will save a pupil of mine.

"Know, rascal," he said to me playfully, "that if your Rebbe is *that* Nòach who studied with me, he may some day be a great man in Israel, a veritable Brisk Rabbi!"

Then I knew that it was he, and my heart began to beat with violence.

And the two mountains met—and it is a miracle from heaven that I was not crushed between them.

The Byàle Rebbe of blessed memory used to send out his followers, at Simchas Torah, to walk round the town, and he himself sat in the balcony and looked on and had pleasure in what he saw.

It was not the Byàle of to-day: it was quite a small place then, with little, low-built houses, except for the Shool and the Rebbe's Kläus. The Rebbe's balcony was on the second floor, and you could see everything from it as if it all lay in the flat of your hand: the hills to the east and the river to the west. And the Rebbe sits and looks out, sees some Chassidîm walking along in silence, and throws down to them from the balcony the fragments of a tune. They catch at it and proceed on their way singing, and batches and batches of them go past and out of the town with songs and real gladness, with real Rejoicing of the Law—and the Rebbe used not to leave the balcony.

But on this occasion the Rebbe must have heard other steps, for he rose and came to meet the Rabbi of Brisk.

"Peace be with you, Rabbi!" he said meekly, in his sweet voice.

"Peace be with you, Nòach!" the Brisk Rabbi answered.

"Sit, Rabbi!"

The Brisk Rabbi took a seat, and the Byàle Rebbe stood before him.

"Tell me, Nòach," said the Brisk Rabbi, with lifted eyebrows, "why did you run away from my academy? What was wanting to you there?"

"Breathing-space, Rabbi," answered the other, composedly.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about, Nòach?"

"Not for myself," explained the Byàle Rebbe in a quiet tone, "it was for my soul."

"Why so, Nòach?"

"Your Torah, Rabbi, is all justice! It is without mercy! There is not a spark of grace in your Torah! And therefore it is joyless, and cannot breathe freely—it is all chains and fetters, iron regulations, copper laws!—and all higher Torah for the learned, for the select few!"

The Brisk Rabbi is silent, and the other continues:

"And tell me, Rabbi, what have you for All-Israel? What have you, Rabbi, for the wood-cutter, for the butcher, for the artisan, for the common Jew?—specially for the simple Jew? Rabbi, what have you for the *unlearned*?"

The Brisk Rabbi is silent, as though he did not understand what was being said to him. And still the Byàle Rebbe stands before him, and goes on in his sweet voice:

"Forgive me, Rabbi, but I must tell the truth—your Torah was *hard*, hard and dry, for it is only the body and not the soul of the Law!"

"The soul?" asks the Brisk Rabbi, and rubs his high forehead.

"Certainly, as I told you, Rabbi, your Torah is for the select, for the learned, not for All-Israel. And the Torah *must* be for All-Israel! The Divine Presence must rest on All-Israel! because the Torah is the soul of All-Israel!"

"And *your* Torah, Nòach?"

"You wish to see it, Rabbi?"

"Torah—*see* it?" wonders the Brisk Rabbi.

"Come, Rabbi, I will show it you!—I will show you its splendor, the joy which beams forth from it upon all, upon All-Israel!"

The Brisk Rabbi does not move.

"I beg of you, Rabbi, come! It is not far."

He led him out on to the balcony, and I went quietly after. "You may come too, Shemaiah," he said to me, "to-day you will see it also—and the Brisk Rabbi will see—you will see the Simchas Torah—you will see *real* Rejoicing of the Law!"

And I saw what I had always seen, only I saw it differently—as if a curtain had fallen from my eyes.

A great wide sky—without a limit! The sky was so blue! so blue! it was a delight to the eye. Little white clouds, silvery clouds, floated across it, and when you looked at them intently, you saw how they quivered for joy, how they danced for Rejoicing in the Law! Away behind, the town was encircled by a broad green girdle, a dark green one, only the green lived, as though something alive were flying along through the grass; every now and then it seemed as if a living being, a sweet smell, a little life, darted up shining in a different place; one could see plainly how the little flames sprang up and danced and embraced each other.

And over the fields with the flames there sauntered parties and parties of Chassidîm—the satin and even the satinette cloaks shine like glass, the torn ones and the whole alike—and the little flames that rose from the grass attached themselves to the shining holiday garments and seemed to dance round every Chossid with delight and affection—and every company of Chassidîm gazed up with wonderfully thirsty eyes at the Rebbe's balcony—and I could see how that thirsty gaze of theirs sucked light from the balcony, from the Rebbe's face, and the more light they sucked in, the louder they sang—louder and louder—more cheerfully, more devoutly.

And every company sang to its own tune, but all the different tunes and voices blended in the air, and there floated up to the Rebbe's balcony *one* strain, *one* melody—as though all were singing *one* song. And everything sang—the sky, the celestial bodies, the earth beneath, the soul of the world itself—everything was singing!

Lord of the world! I thought I should dissolve away for sheer delight!

But it was not to be.

"It is time for the afternoon prayers!" said the Brisk Rabbi, suddenly, in a sharp tone; and it all vanished.

Silence ... the curtain has fallen back across my eyes; above is the usual sky, below—the usual fields, the usual Chassidîm in torn cloaks—old, disconnected fragments of song—the flames are extinguished. I glance at the Rebbe; his face is darkened, too.

They were not reconciled; the Brisk Rabbi remained a Misnagid as before.

But it had one result! He never persecuted again.