

Seeds of Strength

Brocha Miller

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TORAH UMESORAH

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Seeds of
Strength

A decorative flourish consisting of a stylized leaf or feather-like shape on the left, with a curved line extending downwards and to the right, framing the letter 'I' of the title.

Introduction

Dear Readers,

For the typical American student, Shmitta is just a vague concept and you wonder why such a big deal is made for the farmers who observe it. The Seventh Year usually passes with a wide discrepancy: Farmers heroically relinquish a year's worth of income to live in transcendence of nature, yet those of us across the ocean are oblivious to their incredible strength. We are also quite ignorant of the extraordinary mitzvah that these farmers are *zocheh* to observe, representing all of Klal Yisroel. On a practical level, most of us have no idea of what keeping Shmittah truly entails. Farmers encounter the arduous challenge of watching their precious fields grow wild, the very same fields that they have spent the last six years taming and tending with utmost care. Yet, they shoulder on, without any source of income, with no plan of how to sustain their families during the upcoming year. All of us who live in Chutz La'aretz cannot fully relate to this *nisayon*. The concept of relying solely on Hashem, and not putting in any effort is something that although a fundamental in *yiddishkeit*, it's barely given any thought.

Imagine if you would be a farmer living in Eretz Yisroel. Do you think you would be one of the farmers who has the strength to keep the *shmittah*? Or would succumb to financial and social pressures and harvest your crop?

In our ongoing effort to upgrade Jewish education, the Torah Umesorah Brooklyn Teacher Center is proud to present this novel, entitled *Seeds of Strength*. It is our hope that this novel will bring the greatness of Shmittah into your life. Written as a real-life account, this story of a family's strength throughout the challenges of Shmittah observance will paint a picture of the far-reaching ramifications of keeping Shmittah according to halacha. The unwavering *emunah* woven within the characters' struggles should inspire those of us who are far from the soil of the Holy Land.

GIVAT TIKVAH VINEYARD
ERETZ YISROEL
THE PRESENT DAY



Michali preferred driving through the night. She couldn't see the landscape outside the dark window, but her mind painted the picture that she knew was rushing past the car windows.

The fields lay in patchwork squares, blanketing the hills and fading into the forest of pine trees further up the mountains. The fields were bare of greenery in these winter months. The stark vines of her family farm, Givat Tikvah, were left standing like stick statues. Behind her closed eyelids, Michali Kaufman could see the clouds scudding across the sky, pausing to frame the mountaintop in a pouf of white and then coasting on.

The Kaufmans' van swung around the curves of the roads, and Michali's body rocked in motion with the mountains. She thought about the twisted paths leading to the caves. They had gone on a *Chol Hamoed* outing many years before, when Michali had been too frightened to step into the dark holes in the side of the mountain. Instead, she

sat on the picnic bench with Ima and Yehuda, who was just a baby then. Together they snacked on Bamba and watched the blue-grey heads and orange feathers of a family of rock thrush birds.

The next time, Michali was determined to follow Abba into the caves, just so as not to endure days of teasing from Nachi. She knew that it was not unusual for brothers to tease their sisters, but as the only girl in a family of boys, Michali thought she sometimes received an unfair amount of teasing.

“Margo was so glad to see us,” Ima said.

Michali heard Abba’s answering grunt, and she wondered if it meant that her father was tired or that he just didn’t want to talk right now. Like when Gadi gave a moaning Be-eeeh sound, it usually meant to leave him alone. Sometimes though, it meant that the goat wanted to be scratched right behind his ears, and when Michali did that she got a contented whinny in reply.

Ima continued, her gentle voice as warm as the soft hair on Gadi’s belly.

“Your sister knows it was a big trip for us to come all the way to Yerushalayim. She was very appreciative that we could be there for the *simcha*.”

Michali agreed with Ima. She had seen the wide smile that had cracked Doda Margo’s face when the Kaufmans entered the wedding hall. Doda Margo had kissed Ima and pinched Michali on her cheek, not gently at all.

“Shoshana, look how big she is getting!” Michali’s aunt spoke about her as if she wasn’t standing right there.

Michali watched her father wish *Mazel Tov* to his Uncle Eliezer. Abba’s brown fingers enclosed his uncle’s slim palm in a firm shake. The folds of his knuckles were dark, wrinkled from the

sun, speckles of earth buried into the creases of his hands. Never did Abba look so much the farmer as he did tonight, with his blunt and broken fingernails a stark contrast to his crisp white shirt.

Michali had ignored Doda Margo's chattering as she watched her father's hands reach out to his family members. They were hands that cradled and moistened the earth, coaxing forth the delicate vines and luscious fruit. Michali thought that if she watched closely enough, she could actually see the vines sprouting within his palm.

Now, those work-roughened hands were resting atop the steering wheel, as Abba used the tips of his fingers to turn the wheel, swiveling in smooth circles.

Tonight, the moon was a sliver, a pale, glowing crescent. Michali rested her cheek against the car window, drifting into a dream. She decided that the next *Rosh Chodesh*, when Morah Chagit would call for a *chazzanit*, she would raise her hand. It would not matter what Leah or the other girls said, or what she imagined they said.

Ima had switched topics. She was telling Abba now about the delivery tomorrow. "Mr. Azoley said he will come before noon with the wire."

"That's good," Abba replied. "We need to get the fencing up before the goats escape again. If I hadn't caught them last week, they would have eaten through the entire first dunam."

"At least my tomatoes escaped this time," Ima chuckled.

"Just barely," Abba replied. "I think you put too much effort into those plants, Shoshana."

Ima's soft sigh sounded tired. "Can there be too much of

an effort?” she wondered.

“The children can pitch in,” Abba said. “There’s no reason why Michali can’t take more responsibility. She can take care of the weeding, at least.”

Michali dug her fingers into her ears. If she had to go near her mother’s garden, if she was put in charge of the family vegetable plot, she was sure, she was convinced, that they would not be having salad or side dishes for a very long time.

“If she would only focus,” Abba was saying. “If she just tried harder.”

Michali turned from the window as Yosef began to whimper in his car seat.

She suddenly wished it was morning.



Mornings at Givat Tikvah dawned noisy and bright. Alarm clock rings ushered Abba and Nachi out the door to *Shacharis*, Yosef’s cry of “Ma-ma” brought Ima scurrying to his crib, and Yehuda’s joyful whoops pulled Michali from bed and got her started on her busy day.

Aside from school work and helping Ima with the little boys, Michali was also tasked with refilling the fresh water trough for the goats and taking them out to browse in the brush in the back field.

She would run to the *makolet* for Ima to pick up a bag of sugar or buy some more couscous. She would even accompany Ima on occasional shopping trips to Yerushalayim to help with the packages and carry Yosef’s stroller on and off the bus.

When Michali came back from those expeditions, though, after helping to put away the groceries, she always told Ima that she needed to go outside, just for a little bit. She needed to breathe the crisp mountain air. She yearned to run down the path between the goat pens and the garden and feel the dirt beneath her sandals, as opposed to the harsh stones of the city pavement.

Michali couldn't picture living on a crowded street with stone walls fencing her in. She had been seven years old when her family had moved out to their farm, but she could not imagine living anywhere else. Michali recalled the brown cardboard boxes stacked to the ceiling of their small apartment in the city. She remembered how small the tower of boxes seemed once it had moved to the front room of the farmhouse.

"Do you remember all that new space?" Michali once asked Nachi. "Do you remember that first day, how you just wanted to stretch out your hands and soak in all that air and light?"

"No," Nachi scowled. "I just wanted to be back in my regular home. I wanted everything back to regular."

But Michali had a feeling that the "regular" which Nachi had been pining for was not as wonderful as he had remembered it. She didn't know much of the details. She knew that Abba had worked part time, first in the fish market and then in other stores.

Nachi remembered his friends taunting him, "Here comes the fisherman," and his burning shame. His father did not even have the accomplishment of bringing home a freshly caught cod. He only delivered fillets, slimy pallets of flesh and skin, deboned and glistening, ready to eat. There was no pride in that.

After the fish store came the small appliance store and then the hardware store, never for long, it seemed. When a great-

great-uncle died, the remaining portion of his land, Givat Tikvah, was left to his surviving relatives. It was Abba who received the inheritance. It was seen as a gift from Hashem, a sign that this was the chance for Abba to make something of himself.

Now Abba was a vintner, growing and harvesting bushels of grapes and selling them to the Shomron wineries, to be made into Merlot and Cabernet. Michali was the daughter of a farmer and landowner, which was far better than anything she'd been before.

GIVAT TIKVAH VINEYARD
ERETZ YISROEL
THE PRESENT DAY



It's not going to work out for today," Ima scooped out the chocolate leben, talking over her shoulder.

"But you said..." Michali stopped herself before her voice changed into a trembling whine. She cleared her throat. "But I thought we were going to work on the garden together."

Indeed, the plan had been to make the vegetable garden a mother and daughter project, at least in the beginning. Ima was going to show Michali how to work the grains of fertilizer into the soil and how to pull the weeds from in between the leaves without damaging any plants. She was going to teach Michali how to keep the netting snug around the seedlings to ward off any pests.

When Abba had first informed Michali that she would be put in charge of the vegetable garden, Michali balked at the idea. Last year, when she had tried to help with the tomatoes, she had overwatered the plants. At first, the tomatoes had grown rapidly, but then the skin split, and the vegetables were ruined before they could be of any use. That season, the Kaufmans had salads that were only green leaves and green peppers, bland and dull. No one said anything about the missing tomatoes. But Michali knew that

it was her fault that the salads were lacking that colorful burst of juicy freshness.

Michali had promised herself to stay far away from the vegetable garden after that. It was too risky.

But now she did not have a choice. Spring was coming. The herd was expanding for Givat Tikvah's growing cheese business, and Ima had her hands full caring for the herd of goats, mixing the cheese, and forming the cakes. Ima's cheeses were dry and flavorful, and they took extra time to cure and prepare.

Abba decided that this left Michali in charge of the vegetable garden. Seeing Michali's look of dismay, Ima had assured Michali that it would be a joint project. But as it turned out, Yehuda was running a fever, Yosef was teething, and one of the kid goats had swollen legs.

"It could be a virus," Abba said, as he spread chummus on Yehuda's cracker.

"I feel fine," Yehuda insisted. He took a bite and gave a wide grin, "Now can I go play?"

Abba gave Yehuda a gentle push towards the couch. "You stay right there, young man," he said. "And I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about the kid. If the goat's legs are swollen, it could be a sign of infection."

"How can we tell?" Ima tucked her shawl around Yehuda, effectively trapping him in its folds.

"If a goat has an infection, its muscles can waste away. The leg joints become painful." Abba's tone was serious. "These infections can be contagious. We'll have to keep an eye on this one so he doesn't infect the rest of the herd."

While her parents discussed the plan for bottle-feeding

the young kid in order to keep it from infecting the fourteen other goats, Michali slumped her head in her hands. There was no way Ima was going to help her now. She was on her own.

ALONE IN THE VEGETABLE PATCH, Michali stared at the rows of seedlings. There was no reason to feel overwhelmed by the task at hand. There were only twelve rows in front of her, twelve straight lines of green leaves and tiny buds. Why, it was no different from the rows of desks in her classroom! For a moment, Michali imagined herself standing in front of the thirty girls in the eighth grade.

“*Boker tov,*” she said to the vegetables. And then with a countenance as stern as Morah Chagit, she bent down between the curling tendrils of cucumbers.

Michali took her time, first digging one finger into the soil to check for moisture. Then she examined each plant, checking for yellow patches or misshapen leaves. As she stepped carefully down the rows, Michali’s motions fell into a rhythmic pattern: Bend, scoop, lift, and check; bend, scoop, lift, and check.

She was on the second to last row of peppers when the school bus came barreling down the road. She dashed back inside the house for her briefcase, rinsed her hands in the sink, and then ran out to the bus, wiping her dripping hands on her skirt.

Her best friend, Leah Sapir motioned, to the empty seat next to her.

“Why the rush?” she asked.

“Don’t ask,” Michali rolled her eyes. She was embarrassed to tell Leah about how much time the garden was taking her. Leah had been pruning the Sapir family fruit trees for over a year, and

she also helped make the jams and preserves that her family sold to the stores in Zichron Yaakov.

THE GOATS DID HAVE A VIRUS, and Abba had caught it just in time. In time to discover that two of the kids were infected and needed to be separated from the rest of the herd. But not in enough time to rescue those two sick goats. They died the following week.

The Kaufman children were no strangers to the cycle of life on a farm. Animals were born, and some animals died. Among the fields and vineyards, some plants thrived and blossomed while some withered and died. No matter how much effort one put in, no matter how many hours were spent in the field, so much depended on external forces: On days of rain and days of sunshine. On cool winds and hot sun. On strong roots and weak insects. There were seasons of rain and seasons of drought.

But the death of these two goats brought an extra level of tension to the household. Michali noticed it in the set of Abba's shoulders as he sat at the dining room table, reviewing the ledgers. Michali saw it in Ima's anxious smile as she added the rennet to the cultured goat milk, stirring in the enzymes to help the curds congeal into cheese. Michali wanted to ask what was wrong. Did it matter if they were missing two of the goats? But she couldn't find the right time to pose the questions.

Michali also did not want to admit to herself that she was afraid of discovering the answer, and so she did not ask.



Every task at Givat Tikvah took just five minutes. It took just five

minutes to sweep out the goat pen. It took Ima five minutes to milk each one of the goats. Nachi and Abba spent five minutes on every vine, pruning the new shoots from each cordon of branches.

Michali was having trouble finding the five minutes that she needed to care for each row of vegetables. She kept thinking, *I'll get to the peppers tomorrow. Or I must check on the cucumbers today.* But somehow she never got around to it.

And yet, the vegetable garden was thriving. Most of the plants were still in their budding stage, but some of the cucumbers were developing early. A few plants were already showing crisp green skin, having grown to the full twelve centimeters.

Abba brought in the first ripe cucumbers of the season, and Ima sliced them on a platter and presented them at the table with an announcement: "Thanks to Michali for all her work with the vegetables."

Michali coughed as the piece of cucumber stuck in her throat. "I ...I didn't..." she stammered and then broke off.

"Are you all right?" Ima asked "What's wrong?"

"I didn't do it!" she blurted out. "I didn't do anything."

"We know that it is Hashem who makes the vegetables grow," Abba said. "We are grateful for His *Hashgacha* from *Shomayim*. And we are also thankful to you, Michali, for helping to care for the vegetables."

Michali's cheeks burned with shame. "But I didn't do anything, I... I just couldn't. I got so busy that I forgot about the garden. I didn't check on the irrigation system and I didn't weed it or check for bugs." She pushed the plate away from her. "I don't know how these cucumbers grew so well, but it had nothing to do with me."

“You did not do the job I assigned to you?” Abba’s voice was grave.

“I didn’t have time!” Michali burst out.

Abba looked at her. “If something is important to you,” he said, “then you make the time for it.”

THE NEXT MORNING found Michali up bright and early. Nachi met her outside on the way to *Shacharis*. He watched her march resolutely up and down the vegetable patch, muttering to herself.

“That’s one, and two, and three.”

“What are you counting?” Nachi asked her.

“I’m counting rows,” Michali explained. “There are four rows of cucumbers, four rows of peppers, and four rows of tomatoes. That’s twelve rows all together.”

“Impressive math skills,” teased Nachi with a grin.

“This is serious business!” Michali retorted. Nachi had missed the scene at *aruchat erev* the night before. He had missed her humiliation of praise for a job that she did not do. He had not seen the disappointment in Ima’s eyes, had not heard the scolding from Abba.

“I know that.” Nachi squatted down into the dirt and pulled an errant weed from a sprout. “That’s why I did it for you,” he explained.

“You what?” Michali said.

“I weeded it for you,” Nachi said, scuffing the dirt with his shoe, the dress shoe that he wore to yeshiva every day which was now muddy and stained. “I added fertilizer and checked the irrigation pipes. The usual stuff.” Nachi gave a shrug.

Michali was dumbfounded. This was not usual for her at all. “But why?” she asked her brother. “This was my job. Why did you do it for me?”

“I knew that you didn’t want to,” Nachi said. “I knew that the vegetables would die if no one checked on them, and Ima and Abba were too busy. So I did it.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “No big deal.”

“But it is a big deal,” Michali said. “It’s a big deal to me. You saved me from ruining the vegetables for this year; you saved me from my own laziness.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Nachi said, “I’m happy to help. Just don’t expect the same kind of cover when it’s time to harvest.”

“Thank you,” Michali said. “I’ll make sure that it does not happen again.”

GIVAT TIKVAH VINEYARD
ERETZ YISROEL
THE PRESENT DAY



There was never a convenient time for parents to get sick, Michali decided. Last fall, Ima had come down with the flu. Michali remembered those days as an endless cycle of baked fish and rice, the simplest meal for Ima to prepare in her weakened state. She remembered caring for the little ones while Abba and Nachi spent hours and hours in the vineyard; harvesting, sorting, and crating away the full crop.

For weeks after that tumultuous time, Michali had spent an extra minute at the end of her *tefillos*, thanking Hashem for the well-being of every member of her family.

Months later came the spring, and instead of heading out to the vineyard at first light, Abba was sick in bed, flush with fever. He had tried to get up, but his knees folded under him, just like little Yosef who was learning how to walk.

“You’re staying in bed today,” Ima said firmly.

“But I have to get to the vineyard,” Abba said. “The bare root plants are ready for the south field.”

“The plants may be ready, but you are not,” answered Ima. “You can barely stand up! Do you think you can go outside and start planting?”

“No...” Abba admitted. “But if we don’t get those plants in the ground soon, the buds will start to swell and it will be too late ...”

There was no choice. Nachi and Michali stayed home from school in order to plant the new vines across the southern edge of Givat Tikvah. Abba had already prepared the site by weeding it carefully and then digging in fertilizer. Nachi and Michali worked together to burrow the individual holes for each vine and then insert the young plant. After each plant was placed into the fresh earth, they tied the young vine to the wire support that was strung along the rows.

They made a good team, with Nachi scooping shovels of dirt and Michali patting that dirt into place. Nachi twined the green vines around the support, while Michali handed him the wire to wrap around the young shoot. They worked carefully, but continuously, only stopping for a short break of drinks and snacks. By *Mincha* time, Michali’s back was cramped, and her arms were aching. Some kind of insect had bitten Nachi in the leg. It was puffy and red where he had scratched it.

The two of them were soaked with perspiration and streaked with dirt. A stray leaf was caught in Michali’s ponytail, and Nachi had a piece of wire poking out of his back pocket. And yet they could not stop grinning as they turned to look at the long row of vines; neatly inserted into the earth, patiently trained to the waiting wire, ready to take root.

“We did it!” Michali clapped her hands.

“*Baruch Hashem*,” Nachi said. “Now if we can only make it home in one piece! My leg feels like it is on fire.”

Ima greeted them with cool drinks and warm kisses. She applied lotion to Nachi’s bite and sent him off to *Mincha*, while she served Michali *aruchat erev*.

“How does Abba do it?” Michali asked her mother. “How does he go out every day with a smile and a spring in his step?” She stretched and felt her muscles creak. “I’m helping out for just one day, and I feel like I’m going to collapse. And I know that I didn’t do close to what Abba does in a day.”

“You did plenty,” Abba said from the doorway. He was leaning against the door jamb, but his feet were supporting him.

“Abba!” Michali jumped from her seat and ran to get her father a chair. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling very, very proud,” Abba said, sinking into the chair. “Very proud of my two budding farmers. I hear that you accomplished a lot today. How was it?”

“It was..” Michali broke off. She was about to give an automatic answer, to say, “Oh it was fine.” But she was suddenly filled with a burning desire to know, a need to understand; so instead she said, “It was hard. It was really hard work.”

Abba nodded encouragingly, and Michali continued. “I can’t imagine how you put in all this effort day in and day out. And then... then even after all this work, so much depends on other factors: On the rain, or the wind, or the health of the crop, or the price of the grapes...I just... I just never realized how much work goes into it.”

“There is no substitute for experience,” Abba answered. “Now that you’ve actually done it, you can understand a farmer’s

work. You see the effort, care and attention that go into every single plant.”

“That’s right,” Michali said.

“But I hope you saw more than that,” Abba continued. “I hope you also saw that when you dig your fingers into the soil, you are handling our inheritance, touching our Holy Land. Every step is an opportunity; every act is a chance to fulfill the *mitzvos* of Eretz Yisroel.

“And yes, the outcome of the crop is as much dependent on rain, wind, disease, or outside markets as it is on the work I put into it.” Abba pressed a thumb to his chest. “But that does not make the effort any less worthwhile when I have the chance to work this land, to be a partner with *Hakadosh Boruch Hu*.”



It is the unspoken agreement that belongs to siblings everywhere: I will help you out when you need it, and you will help me out as well.

Michali was studying her math problems one evening when Nachi approached her.

“I got a letter in the mail today from our cousin, Yanky, in Brooklyn.”

“You did?” Michali jumped up to take it from his hand. “Why on earth is he writing to you?”

“He has an English assignment. He has to correspond with a pen pal. Rather than write to a perfect stranger, his teacher gave him permission to write to his cousins in Israel.”

“That’s great!” Michali said. “Why do you look so glum?”

Nachi's usual grin was masked by a scowl. "Because now I have to write back to him - in English! Ima said it would be good for me to get to know my own cousin, and we are the same age. But she said I have to write the letter myself."

"I can help you with that," Michali offered.

Nachi smiled in relief. "I was hoping you would say that. Here is the letter we have to answer."

Michali read the English words carefully:

Dear Nachi,

Hi, Cuz!

You have been selected for the special position of pen pal to your very own second cousin, Yanky Kaufman of Brooklyn, NY, in the US of A.

We have an English assignment to write to a pen pal, and I chose you because, hey, why not? Although we've never met, my father has told me a lot about your family. He got to know your father when he was learning in yeshiva in Israel. Maybe one day I can meet you in yeshiva, too!

Life here is good. Dull, same old, go to school, go home. I try to squeeze in a ballgame on Sundays, when my mother is not after me to clean my room. Regular stuff.

I'd love to hear more about life on the farm. I'll bet you have so much fun with all kinds of animals there. I've been begging my mother for a pet, but she says no, not even a goldfish. It's enough that I have three little sisters. Who is going to take care of a pet?

Michali finished reading aloud,

*“Love, your cousin,
Yanky.”*

Her eyes scanned the words again, bemused.

“So much fun?” Michali looked at Nachi, and they both burst into giggles. “Try chasing down the goats after they run off with Doda Margo’s favorite shawl and chew it to pieces. That’s fun!”

“Let’s tell him about that.” Nachi reached for a pen to write his response. Together, they spelled out the English words carefully. They wrote about how Doda Margo had come to visit, to check up on this “*meshugait place*” as she called it. She had tasted Ima’s cheese, gingerly nibbling at the edges.

Abba had taken Doda Margo down to the fields to show her the vineyards.

“This one looks scraggly,” she announced. “There will never be enough grapes!”

Michali bristled at Doda Margo’s critical tone, but Abba was as calm as ever.

“The grapes actually grow much better when the leaves are thinned,” he explained to his sister. “The major work of the summer is to thin the leaves so that the fruit gets more direct sunlight.”

Doda Margo harrumphed in reply.

“I would let you taste for yourself, but we’re not quite

ready for that.” Abba gestured to the greenish orbs which were slowly ripening to a dull purple. “We have even hired an official taster.” Abba winked at Michali, who was hovering behind her aunt’s broad back.

Indeed, Michali was the first taster. When the time came to taste if the grapes were ready for harvest, Abba waited until Michali came home from school and Nachi was home from *Mesivta*.

After *aruchat tzaharayim*, the entire family headed out to the vineyard, even Ima with little Yosef in her arms. Abba took out a pair of shears and cut down the first branch. His fingers twisted the brown stem, careful not to touch the purple grapes or ruin the bloom.

“The honor is yours,” he told Michali. Michali held the branch high and recited the words carefully. “*Baruch atah...*” She bit into the purple disc, and the sun-warmed flavor burst onto her tongue. There was earth in her toes, sun in her hair, and juice on her chin. And she was happy.



YERUSHALAYIM, KINGDOM OF YEHUDAH
ERETZ YISROEL
YEAR 3213/ 547 BCE



Machla was aware that this was not the first time, nor the second, that the nations had invaded Eretz Yisroel. She had heard the stories from her grandmother: How the nation of Ashur had risen against their Holy Land. How they had conquered fenced-in cities and scattered towns, first in the lands of Zevulun and Naftali, and then, in a second wave of attacks, in the territories across the *Yarden*. The *Shevatim* of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe were scattered, their lands and worldly goods destroyed.

This had all happened before Machla was born, but she knew the stories. Ima was too soft-spoken to tell the tales of horror, but Savta did not hold back, especially when she wanted to frighten Machla into submission and make sure she behaved.

“The soldiers will get you!” she would threaten, “you had better mind now.”

As a child, Machla had pictured the soldiers as giants, fierce and tremendous, toting a huge net, with which they scooped up errant children and carted them away. Now, at the mature age of thirteen, Machla understood that soldiers did not

need to actually catch you to get to you. All they had to do was surround the city walls and block all the entrances and exits. Then you were as good as caught. Then you were finished, just as if a giant's net had swooped down tightly around you.

The army of Ashur had approached the land of Yehuda before. Led by Shalmanesser, King of Ashur, the soldiers had swept across the northern kingdom of Yisroel, leaving death and devastation in their wake. All that remained was Machla's tribe of Yehuda and a portion of Shevet Binyamin.

The only way the Kingdom of Yehuda had been able to stop the force of Ashur was with a tremendous tribute to Sancherev. King Chizkiyahu, the king of Yehuda, had agreed to make himself a vassal to the foreign king. He had paid the exorbitant sum demanded by Sancherev. The tax had emptied the national treasury of Malchus Yehuda, all the wealth that had been accumulated by the previous kings. Even the gold plating of the doors to the *Beis Hamikdosh* had been scraped off and melted down, used to pay off Ashur.

YET LIFE IN YERUSHALAYIM continued. Outside the stone walls of Yerushalyim, fields were desolate and forests were destroyed. Within the city, however, wherever there was water, there was life. The farmers sowed their seeds and set forth oxen to thresh their grain. Donkeys carried loads of finished produce to storage places.

Cool and clear water flowed through the tunnels, bringing water from the springs of Gichon into the reservoir within Yerushalayim. The water collected in a cistern, which Machla and her family used daily. Machla was responsible for drawing

the water. Together with the servants, she filled the long-necked flasks which the household used throughout the day.

The first drops were sprinkled over hands in the morning, “*Al netilas yadayim...*”

The water was used in the courtyard for boiling up stews and soups. The small flasks were for drinking.

Abba used their cattle to haul the larger jugs of water to the vineyard. There, the liquid flowed in trickles, then rivulets, up and down the trenches to soak the roots of each plant.

This was Machla’s favorite time of the day. She usually joined Abba in the vineyards, bringing him his midday meal of fig cakes or vegetables. She liked to watch Abba and the servants pour the water. She would watch the life-giving liquid drench the thirsty plants.

Her favorite time of *Aliyah L’Regel* was the *Simchas Beis Hashoelah*, the celebration of the drawing of water in the *Beis Hamikdash*.

Every morning at daybreak, a group of *Kohanim* and *Leviim* went down to the Shiloach stream at the base of Har Habayis. With trumpets and singing, the water was drawn, brought to the *mizbeach*, and poured over it.

Every evening at dusk, there were musical celebrations, singing and dancing in thanks and praise to *Hakadosh Boruch Hu*, the Giver of life, the Provider of water. Machla loved standing on the balcony, watching the great Torah scholars juggling amidst the dancing circles of celebration.

Recently, it seemed to Machla as if the sounds of celebration had become muted with worry. The reports had come from outside of the city and had spread from house to house, from

family to family. Shimon, Machla's younger brother, seemed to be a sponge, soaking up every report and rumor he could find.

"The army of Ashur has conquered Lachish," he announced at the evening meal, with his mouth full of fish.

Ima sat up straight, "Where did you hear that?" she asked. She looked at Abba for confirmation.

Machla watched her father nod his head. "It is true," he said. "I did not want to tell you. I did not want you to worry."

Ima pursed her lips. "I would have found out, regardless." She said. "Better I should hear it from you than from rumors in the marketplace."

Abba set his goblet down on the wooden table.

"It is true," Abba repeated. "The army of Ashur has conquered Lachish. But it is worse than that. They are approaching Yerushalayim." Now that he was allowing himself to speak, it seemed as if the words were tumbling out.

"They are threatening us. The evil Ravshakeh stood at the city gates. He shouted that there is no way that he and his army can be defeated. He spoke against our King Chizkiyahu. He spoke against Hashem. He claimed that no one can stop the destruction that Ashur will bring upon us."

Ima's mouth was open in a silent gasp. "What was the response?"

"When they told this to Chizkiyahu Hamelech, he tore his garments and dressed in sackcloth. He went straight to the *Beis Hamkidosh* to pray for salvation. He also sent a delegation of noblemen to Yeshayahu Hanavi to ask him to pray on our behalf."

"I heard that there are thousands upon thousands of soldiers," Shimon piped up. "Golden chariots are carrying princes

from all across the land.”

Machla gave her brother a kick underneath the table. Couldn't he see that he was frightening Ima? It was better not to discuss it.

But the numbers of soldiers camping against Yerushalayim grew along with the rumors. There were 185,000 soldiers. 80,000 of them were encased in glistening steel armor. 60,000 of them were running swordsmen with polished spears.

Shimon counted the soldiers as diligently, as carefully, as his father counted the plants in the vineyard.

One vine, two vines, three vines.

Four clusters, five clusters.

Six thousand soldiers. Seven thousand warriors.

MACHLA HAD UNDERESTIMATED her mother's strength. True, the gasp of horror across the table had been a real expression of fright. But since the evening when she had first discovered the news, and in every conversation thereafter, Ima did not panic. Machla marveled at the way she responded to the news of the approaching army. She wished she had her mother's fortitude, her mother's strong faith.

“The *navi* will guide us,” Ima said. “Yeshayahu Hanavi will tell us what Hashem wants us to do.”

ABBA WAS A MAN of action. He was not one to sit around and discuss the news, rumors, and gossip. Thankfully, this year's harvest had been bountiful. Where normally Abba would have saved some of the grapes for himself, to be crushed

and made into wine for their family, this year, he decided to sell the entire crop.

“We have to sell it all,” he told Ima. “It is better that we should have the coins in our hands than the wine in our bellies.”

“Do you have a buyer?” Ima asked.

“Yes, I arranged the matter with Kalman from the family of Isaac, of Shevet Binyomin. He found a trader who is interested in purchasing all of our crop. He offered 15 silver coins for each bushel.” Abba’s voice was warm with pride and with satisfaction. “With this money we can be protected from whatever lies ahead of us.”

“With Hashem’s help,” Ima answered.

ON THE DAY OF THE transaction, Machla watched Abba load the wagons for the final delivery. Instead of excitement at the completion of the harvest, the joy of the bounty that Hashem had provided for them, she felt a hollow in the pit of her stomach. All of the bushels of grapes were loaded for delivery to the buyer, except for one.

After her father left, Machla stopped by the final stretch of the vineyard, where the grapes still sat in their woven baskets. She picked up one purple grape and pressed it between her fingers, squeezing until there was nothing left but pulp and empty skin.

It took another day for the feeling of dread to simmer within Machla, a day of waiting for Abba to return from his delivery. When he finally did come home, the storm of worry and anger broke upon them.

He went into the bedroom and closed the door, sealing

Machla away from the depth of his anger, shielding her from his despair. But she heard him anyway, talking to Ima, pacing back and forth.

“They are false coins.” Abba said. “That scoundrel paid me in tin! The first few coins that he showed me were real. But the rest of the sacks were full of worthless coins. And now we have nothing!”

Machla listened to her father’s steps stomping across the floor.

“An entire season of work. The majority of our fortune, all the profits from our land, gone in an instant! There is no chance of receiving a hearing from the judge without a large bribe. And with what money? Will a judge take this?” Abba gave a short laugh. It was not a happy sound. “I think not.”

“The only way is to appeal to the Master of all things,” Ima said. “That is the only way to truly be protected.”

“I should have known.” Abba groaned. “I should have realized that the man was not to be trusted. I should have known that the deal was too good to be true. He offered me 15 silver coins per bushel, and I thought... I thought this would be the making of us. I thought that, finally, this would give us peace of mind. Come what may from the outside, we would have our fortune secured, we would have our profits. And now this!”

Machla heard a tinkling sound. Her father must have picked up the tin coin and thrown it. It bounced against the dirt wall with a soft plop. It was a false sound, a light and useless noise. He threw another and another. Plop. Plop. Plop. Not the heavy clink of metal, the strength of secure silver. Rather the empty clang of lies and fakery.

THE SIEGE ON YERUSHALAYIM was a drawn-out and slow suffering, as stores of food were depleted with no chance of refilling.

This is not war, Machla thought to herself. She imagined war like a scythe, as her father would use to hack at the weeds in the fields, cutting down and destroying. This was a drought, a drying out, until the very roots of the plant would wither and die. This was how the siege felt to Machla.

And yet, the Navi Yeshayahu told the people not to despair. He promised the people of the Kingdom of Yehuda that, if they turned to Hashem for protection, He would answer their prayers and nothing bad would happen to them.

“For the nation will remain in Tzion.... You will not cry, for He will graciously answer your plea.” The Navi promised. *“And this will be a sign for you. The food for this year is wild growth; and in the second year, after-growth of wild growth; and in the third year, you will sow and harvest. And you will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.”*

The Navi assured the people of Yerushalayim that, if they kept the *Shemittah* and relied only on Hashem, their salvation would come from their Creator.

MACHLA HAD ACCOMPANIED her father to the marketplace. She thought it would be a chance to escape the confines of the house, where worry swirled in clouds, stifling her. But she had made a mistake. The marketplace was no better. The stalls were empty. Any food within the city was hoarded in storehouses, not put out for sale. The only trade people were offering was talk and discussion about the threat of the coming

army and about the promise of the *Navi*.

“Does the *Navi* want us to keep the *Shemittah*?” Abba asked a friend. “Is that what will save us from death and famine—to leave the land fallow for an entire year?”

“It does not make any sense,” declared another man. “How will we survive?”

“We need to ask for help,” said a third man. Machla thought she recognized the reddish beard of her friend Batsheva’s father. “We can send a delegation to Miztrayim. The Egyptians will come to our aid.”

By the time they returned home, empty of wares but full of arguments, Machla was exhausted. Her stomach was empty, her mouth dry and parched. She poured water from her flask into a bowl and dipped her fingers into it, splashing the cool liquid across her cheeks to refresh herself. A few drops scattered on the rushes on the floor. Machla cried out and then knelt in the reeds, trying to scoop up the escaping liquid. It was impossible to collect the water once it had dispersed.

Had she wasted those precious drops? Would her family now go thirsty, go hungry, because of her? Machla trembled, and then her cheeks were moist, not with the fresh, sweet water, but with the salt of her tears.

MACHLA MET UP WITH Batsheva, her friend and neighbor, the following day. They had both arrived at the *Beis Medrash* to walk home with their fathers. As the girls stood in the courtyard, waiting, they overheard voices raised in discussion.

“How much more time do we have?” one man said. “How long can we hold up under this siege?”

“The *Navi* has promised us salvation,” said another. Machla thought it was her father’s voice. “We are to keep the *Shemittah*, to rely on Hashem’s protection.”

“It makes no sense,” another man cut him off. “Do you think now is the time to stop planting? We need all the food we can gather and we must stockpile it in the city!” That was Batsheva’s father speaking. Machla glanced sideways at her friend.

Batsheva caught her friend’s eye, and she shrugged. “He’s afraid,” she whispered. “My father was ready to bring a burnt offering to an idol, but my mother convinced him out of it. He does not know what to do. He just wanted to make sure, he said. Just to be safe.”

Machla’s eyes widened. She almost turned away, but she was distracted by the voice of her father from inside the building.

“I don’t think that is correct. The *Navi* has said-” Abba’s voice was cut off by another.

“You cannot mix religion and politics. It’s very well for the *Navi* to continue his preaching, but this is a military question, an issue of political strategy.”

“Indeed,” said another. “We should be sending a delegation to Miztrayim to reach out for their aid.”

“That’s right,” Batsheva’s father’s voice agreed. “We must use diplomacy and proper planning.”

Abba did not give up. “It may not be logical, but if this is G-d’s will-“

The furious voice of Batsheva’s father interrupted him. “Take G-d out of this!”

THERE WAS A SHUFFLE and then the sound of wood knocking over, as one of the benches in the *Beis Medrash* was shoved to the floor. Machla saw her father stride out the door, his face grim, his mouth set in a firm line.

Machla ran towards her father and grabbed onto his hand.

“What is it?” Abba looked at her ashen face. “What is wrong?”

Machla could not repeat the words she had heard. They were hurting her ears, pounding within her head. If she said the blasphemy, if she said the words, would they burn her tongue as well? Singe her soul? She could only blurt-

“They are saying to leave G-d out of this! Yet, what is our life without Him? Will a molten idol protect us? Will the work of our own hands give us food? There is nothing without him! Nothing! We are nothing without Him.” She could not catch her breath. She clutched her father’s hand. “We must do this. We must do as the *Navi* says. We must!”

Machla could not argue. She had none of the smooth words, only the strong belief, the impending dread that if they wouldn’t listen to the words of the *Navi*, there would only be darkness and despair. She could not think the words, she could not say the words, she could only stop in the middle of the dusty road with people and donkeys streaming by. She could only stop and say to her father, “Please, we must, we must listen. This I know.”

Abba could not argue. He could not speak against tears. There were no words to argue with belief.

“We will keep the *Shemittah*,” he said.

ONCE THE DECISION HAD been made, once the family members were ready to put their lives in the hands of the Giver of All Life, a certain calm settled over the household. They went about their preparations for the upcoming *Pesach* holiday with a determined energy. Baking the *matzah* and bringing the *Korban Pesach* were accomplished with sanctity and joy.

They sat together on the first night of *Pesach*, singing *Hallel*, praise to Hashem. “*Yisroel b’tach b’Hashem, ezrum umagenum Hu..*” Machla sang along with her family.

The strength of that *bitachon*, the promise of the *Navi* came to the forefront on the following day. On the first day of *Pesach*, the news arrived.

Shimon came bounding into the house, shouting, “It is over! The army has been destroyed!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Ima. There had been no sounds of battle last night, the walls of the city had not been breached.

“They are dead, every single one of the soldiers is lying out there,” Shimon pointed towards the walls.

“It is a *nes!*” Ima cried, “*Hodu l’Hashem ki tov!*”

“And Sancherev is gone,” Shimon shouted gleefully. “He has run back to Nineveh, like a dog that has been beaten, with his tail between his legs!”

They ran out to see for themselves. Machla, her father, her mother, her brother. Even Savta clambered up to the wall to witness the miracle.

The fields surrounding Yerushalayim were covered with fallen soldiers. Thousands upon thousands of bodies lay lifeless, still in their armor, with swords and spears collapsed at their side,

useless.

“Praise be Hashem,” Abba said. “It is only Hashem who can save us.”

Machla felt the thanks and joy spreading through her, as sweet and refreshing as a sparkling drink of cool water. Now she knew for certain. We can rely only on Hashem to protect us. Only Hashem can support and feed us during this year, the *Shemittah* year. Only He can protect us next year, after our fields have been empty, our vineyards untended.

And only He can help us every year after that.

GIVAT TIKVAH VINEYARD
ERETZ YISROEL
THE PRESENT DAY



his growing season, Michali was determined to try to plant the tomatoes on stakes. Until now, the tomatoes had been growing, sprawling in every direction. Now that Michali was more experienced, she thought that she could get her vines to grow in cages and thereby produce more vegetables.

Leah had been cultivating the Sapir family tomatoes for a few years, so she came over to help Michali get started. The two girls worked together, digging and then inserting the cages deep into the soil. It took an hour to finish one row, and then the girls stopped for a rest and cold drinks.

“Thank you so much for helping me,” Michali said to her friend as she poured her a cup of iced tea. “My mother is doing herb cheeses today, so she’s busy rolling the curds in spices. I tried offering to help so that she would have time to help me later, but the pepper kept making me sneeze.”

“Sounds yummy,” Leah said, reaching for the plate of cookies. “My mother decided that we have to start selling fig jelly.

Right now, she is elbow deep in baking soda, so I was happy to have an excuse to escape.”

The two girls giggled. Michali knew, though, that this was not the giggle of a young girl trying to escape her responsibilities, to see what she could get away with. Leah worked hard on her family’s farm, and she deserved the occasional break and time together with friends.

For that matter, so did Michali. Over the past year, she had taken on more responsibility. Aside from the garden, Michali also volunteered to help Abba monitor the vines. She joined him in checking the leaves for the powdery coating which meant mildew or other hazards. She also practiced *kriah* with Yehuda and took turns watching Yosef so Ima could rest.

Looking at her friend sitting across from her, it suddenly hit Michali. “We’re growing up,” she said to Leah.

“What do you mean?” Leah asked her.

“Look at us,” Michali said.

Leah looked down at her splattered skirt and her shirt streaked with mud. Then she looked at Michali. Her arm had a scratch from a broken piece of wire, and her braid was escaping in loose tendrils around her neck.

“Very grown up,” Leah answered. “We look like little kids let loose in a sandbox!”

Michali laughed along with her friend. All joking aside, though, she knew that she was right. There was something mature about the time they spent working together, the mutual effort followed by refreshments. Leah may not have realized it, but the two girls were, indeed, growing up.

The following week, Abba was using the spin weeder on

the tractor. The weeder wheels spun around the base of the vines and ripped up the weeds continuously, until the machine stalled and then ground to a halt. Abba detached the spin weeder from the front of the tractor and then called the kids over to watch him repair it. Michali peered over Abba's shoulder, and Nachi stood with his arms crossed as Abba unscrewed the sharp wheel from the base.

"Did you ever think," Abba said, "how much we try to be like this machine? We try to do more and more and more. We want to be more efficient, to put in more hours, to make more money so that we can buy more things, it is an endless circle."

Abba paused and asked Michali to pass the can of oil to him. He squirted grease onto the cog and rubbed it with his thumb. "Do you think this is enough?" he asked Nachi. Nachi almost shrugged, but then he could not help himself and pointed, "Here, this spot needs more grease."

"Ah, yes," Abba said, and he dabbed his oily cloth across the dull metal.

"But are we machines?" Abba continued his train of thought, and his rhythmic tone matched the rubbing of the hardware. "We use mechanical tools, and we try to imitate the machine. As long as the motor is running, there is a pressure to keep going and going and going. But this pattern creates a weariness. You don't stop to rest, to take a look at the world around you. You never take the time to consider the miracle of the human body. A person is not a machine. He is a unique combination of organs and limbs - a body. And most importantly, a person has a soul."

Abba looked up and smiled at his children.

“We don’t have endless endurance. Our bodies don’t, and neither do our souls. We need to stop our machines, to take a break from the endless cycle of productivity. We need to reconnect with our *neshomos*, ourselves, and our families.”

“You mean the *Shemittah*,” Nachi said.

“That’s right,” Abba answered. “It’s a chance for us to stop this cycle of work and remember who the real Creator is.”

IN HIS NEXT LETTER TO YANKY, Nachi wrote about his family’s preparations for the *Shemittah* year.

Dear Yanky,

Our regular farm schedule is especially hectic this season. Because of the upcoming Shemittah, we are doing all that we can to prepare the fields. All field work is forbidden during Shemittah, except for the types of work that are necessary to keep the plants alive.

Still, in order to be extra careful, we are putting in as much effort as we can during the sixth year, so that our vineyard will be ready for Shemittah. This includes fertilizing, removing stones, and spraying pesticides.

You know how your mother makes you clean up your room and take a shower on Friday so that you’ll be fresh and ready for Shabbos? That’s kind of what we are doing here for the whole vineyard.

My father is putting in extra time in the fields, using every last hour of the day. But he says there will be plenty of time to rest once Shemittah is here.

IN SCHOOL, MICHALI'S CLASS began to study the halachos of *Shemittah* as well.

As the teacher handed out the new workbooks, Michali turned to whisper to Leah. "Do you remember the last *Shemittah*?"

Leah was the born and bred farmer, these rules should come easily to her.

"A little bit," Leah whispered back. "I remember all the flies around the pach *Shmittah*!" She wrinkled her nose.

"Is there something amusing in this booklet?" Morah turned a stern gaze to Michali, who tried to stifle her grin.

"No, Morah, not at all." Michali arranged her features into a more somber expression, as befit the serious subject matter.

At home, *Shemittah* was a serious subject as well. The Kaufmans set up a learning schedule. Every day after *aruchat tzaharayim*, Abba took out a *sefer* and reviewed another one of the *halachos* for the coming year. During the *Shemittah* year, their vineyards will be *hefker*, and anyone may take grapes from it. The family members themselves may take some of the grapes, but only enough for a day or two, and not in the usual method of harvesting.

"It's a lot to remember," Michali commented to Nachi as they stood outside, waiting for their bus one morning.

"There's a lot to prepare," Nachi said. "Did you hear Abba talking about the *Otzar Beis Din*?"

"No," Michali said, "what about it?"

"Any grapes that grow during *Shemittah* have *Kedushas Shviis*, so we can't harvest or sell them as we normally would. Instead, we will turn them over to the *Beis Din*. The workers for

the *Beis Din* will take some of the grapes and have them delivered to special *Shemittah*-supervised stores.”

“So we will be doing some harvesting?” Michali wondered.

“Not really,” Nachi answered. “It’s the *Beis Din* who is taking the fruit. And we’re not selling it to them. We can’t make a single *shekel* on it.” He kicked a stone that was lying in the path. His foot missed, and he kicked it again, harder this time.

“This is it,” Nachi said. “This will be the making of us. Or the unmaking.”

“What do you mean, the unmaking?” Michali demanded.

“Don’t you know that we’re barely turning a profit?” Nachi said. “Don’t you realize how stressed Abba is? We’re still making payments on the tractor and on the new conveyor for the grape bins. The bank doesn’t recognize *Shemittah* - they don’t give you a year off to pay back your debts!”

Michali felt the skin on her arms tighten. “But it’s a *mitzvah*...”

“Of course it is,” Nachi said. “That doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy.”

“In school, we learned that Hashem takes care of those who keep the *Shemittah*,” Michali protested. “About the *bracha* that Hashem promised to those who keep *Shemittah*. He will provide for them and for us.”

“We are in *galus*, Michali.” Nachi sounded old. “Do you think there is going to be an open miracle, where money will just come pouring down from *Shamayim*? Who knows what’s going to happen to us?” He stared at the mountains on the horizon. With his hand shading his eyes and his brow furrowed, Nachi looked exactly like Abba, if only just for a moment.

There were no clouds in the sky, but suddenly, Michali felt chilly.

THE VISIT FROM DODA MARGO did not make Michali feel any better. It was a Sunday afternoon, and Abba's sister had come from the city. Michali thought she liked to come to Givat Tikvah, just to give Abba a piece of her mind.

Today Doda Margo was feeling nostalgic. "A fisherman," she announced over the table. "That's what you should have been, a fisherman. I have a neighbor whose nephew makes a very good living that way."

"Could be," Abba's answer was noncommittal.

"A steady job, with steady money." Doda Margo was firm.

"I used to have a job. And in a fish store no less," Abba said mildly. "It didn't work out so well for me."

"At least you had a salary," Doda Margo shook her head. "What do you have now? With *Shemittah* around the corner, what do you have?"

"I have an opportunity," Abba said. "I can do a *mitzvah*, not for one hour, one day, or even one week. For an entire year, I have the chance to do a *mitzvah*."

Doda Margo had no answer to that.

Abba tried to change the subject, "How is your family doing? How is Uncle Eliezer?"

"Business is fine, *Baruch Hashem*. And the family, nu nu. With one daughter out of the way, you would think we could relax. But no, Aliza is starting *shidduchim* now, and oh, how I worry..." Doda Margo launched into a long list of troubles regarding her

daughter, her daughter's chances of finding a shidduch, her daughter's chances of finding a shidduch that both she and her parents would agree on...

As the conversation wore on, Michali smiled to herself. Her aunt would find something to complain about, no matter what happened at home or at Givat Tikvah. She wouldn't let Doda Margo's dark perspective ruin her own view of their beautiful world.

THE SETTLEMENT OF TIKVAS YISROEL
PALESTINE
1880s/5640s

 Nachman Margolis had not been sick throughout the entire journey.

Not on the wagon ride through Russia to the train station in Warsaw. Not on the train to the port in Trieste, Italy. Not on the boat to Jaffa, Palestine. For the miles upon miles that their little group traveled, there was not a single time when Nachman felt nauseous, when his stomach twisted and rebelled against him.

The others in the group of settlers were not so lucky. Elchonon Lansky, tall and broad, strong as an ox, who could lift a broken plow over his shoulder singlehandedly, was melted into a seasick puddle as soon as they had stepped onto the boats.

Shmuel Bloch was the leader of the small group of people who, for months, could not stop talking about their journey to Eretz Yisroel and about the opportunities that awaited them. Shmuel Bloch had worked tirelessly. He had written to the government officials to secure their visas and had acted as a liaison with Baron Rothschild, the group's generous benefactor,

and his administrators. He had made careful notes of the funds channeled towards their little group and how they were being used. Food, transportation, train tickets, and boat passage, Shmuel attended to every detail. He even prepared bribes for the officials to let them into the Land.

When it came time for the voyage itself, however, Shmuel was immobile. His normally ruddy face was pale and sickly, and he could barely take two steps on the rolling deck of their ship.

But not Nachman Margolis. Perhaps it was his age. He was the youngest of the group, only 14 years old. Perhaps it was the excitement, the chance of seeing the world beyond the village of Radom, where he had grown up. Nachman kept his eyes and ears open, reveling in the strange sights and sounds of the journey as the ship passed through the foreign countries on its way to Eretz Yisroel.

Nachman's father, Zalman Margolis, did not fare as well. He was a man in love with the earth, enamored with the feel of ground beneath his boots. He loved turning the soil and planting seeds deep within, tending, watering, harvesting, and threshing. He was not a man made for long journeys, but this one journey was a dream come true, a once in a lifetime opportunity. And so they went, suffering through the jolts of the wagon and the rocking of the ship, just for the chance to kiss the holy soil of Eretz Yisroel.

It was only once they arrived at the settlement that Nachman felt the tiniest twinge of nausea, the rumbling of sickness in his belly. He stood alongside his father and the rest of the settlers, surveying the property which was to become their new home, Tikvas Yisroel. The land was rich and heavy, perfect

for growing crops. But it was absolutely bare. There were no homes and no buildings, no water and no trees.

The emptiness seemed to energize the men around him. They strode up and down; beards waving, arms wide, staking out the property, making plans. But for a moment it made Nachman queasy. How much work needed to be done to make this place livable? How much energy would it take for them to create a sustainable farm and repay the Baron for his generosity? How much effort would they need to invest until they could turn a profit and sustain themselves? How much longer would it be until they could afford to send for Mamme and his two younger sisters, waiting back home?

Only while thinking of how many years it would take, did Nachman feel his stomach clench.

But there was no way he could be sick. Not here, in front of all these men. Here he must act like the man he had promised to be. Nachman swallowed thickly and pressed his hand to his roiling stomach. There was no room for sickness or cowardice in this land. There was work to be done.

And work they did. From sun up until sun down, the settlers worked at a continuous and steady pace. They put up tents and then constructed houses. They built barns for their animals. The money from the Baron was used for fifteen pairs of oxen, three horses, four mules, and two wagons. They dug a well with a pump attached to it to irrigate the fields.

If Nachman thought that his father was hardworking before, in Radom, it was nothing compared to the strength and vigor he applied to his new farmland.

On the first day of plowing, Nachman helped his father

hitch the beam to the oxen, coupling the animals with the plow. His father was radiant with joy, his face glowing with perspiration and pride.

“We are part of something much bigger than ourselves,” Zalman told his son. “We are not just tilling the soil to feed our family. We are paving the way for future generations to settle in our Holy Land. We are building Eretz Yisroel for us, for Mamme, and for generations to come.”

It was tremendously hard work. First there was plowing the fields to prepare the soil. Next came the planting of the wheat and the hoeing to keep the weeds from choking the plants.

Yet there was a trembling grandeur that overrode the aching muscles, the tired backs and worn-out feet. There was beauty and joy in the daily work, as hands faithfully tilled the soil, while eyes and hearts were uplifted to their Father in Heaven, davening for success, all the while.

After *Maariv* on most nights, the group’s members sipped steaming cups of coffee, and sat, hunched over their seforim, singing the age-old chant of *Torah* learning. There was a *shiur* in *Yoreh Deah*, and Nachman studied *Mishnayos* with his father.

ONE EVENING, the learning seder was interrupted by the news that Shmuel Bloch had received a letter from Joseph Sokolow, the administrator of the benefactor, Baron Rothschild. The men gathered around him as he stood by the *bimah* and read the letter aloud.

“We have received the report of your progress in the field. The news that the settlement has commenced plowing has made the Baron extremely pleased. There is no doubt that you are

pleased as well, now that you are in a place of your very own.”

The men reacted to the letter with a rousing cheer. Zalman walked home with his arm around his son’s shoulder. “Our dream is being fulfilled,” he sang out. “Praise the Hand of Hashem!”

IN THE WEEKS to come, the fields grew taller as the wheat stalks grew. The rows of plants turned from green to yellow, and the soft and doughy grain slowly hardened into kernels.

Nachman stood together with his father, surveying their handiwork. He glanced at his father and noticed that his cheeks were wet. Had the sight of the strong stalks of grain moved him to tears? He had never seen his father act with so much emotion.

“There is something in my eye,” Zalman said, using his sleeve to pat the lids. Nachman peered closer at his father, and he noticed that his eyes did, indeed, look pink and puffy.

“What’s wrong?” Nachman asked

“Just a fly,” his father answered, “that’s all.”

This was not a surprise, as the oxen were always surrounded by a cloud of flies. It was hard to escape the buzzing swarm of insects anywhere in the swampy land surrounding Tikvas Yisroel. Zalman rubbed his eyelids one more time. “I’m fine,” he said. “Let’s get to work.”

THE NEXT MORNING, Zalman had to pry his eyelids open, as they were crusty with discharge. He did not say anything to Nachman, but his son noticed anyway. He watched as his father leaned over the porcelain washing bowl, splashing water across his closed eyelids.

“Perhaps you should see a doctor,” Nachman suggested.

“And take a day off of work to travel all the way to the clinic?” Zalman shook his head. “There is too much to do.”

That night as he lay down on his cot, Nachman watched his father take a rag and dip it into the wash basin. He folded it into a rectangle and then lay it across his brow, covering his eyes. But he did not say a word, did not look in Nachman’s direction. So Nachman kept quiet.

AFTER TWO MORE WEEKS, there came a point where Nachman could no longer ignore his father’s condition. His father’s eyes were completely distorted. It was taking him longer and longer to hook up the plow each morning. The chores of milking the cows and preparing the meals fell to Nachman. He cut bread into pieces, poured boiling water over them, and seasoned them with salt, pepper, and a teaspoon of oil. He worked silently as his father struggled, fumbling with slow fingers.

Nachman did not know what to do. He thought about writing to Mamme but then decided against it. What could Mamme do, all the way out in Radom? By the time the letter would even reach her, it would be too late.

IT WAS ELCHONON LANSKY who forced the issue. He was working together with Zalman in the field, collecting prickly shrubs to be used as fuel in the ovens. Their wagon was almost full when Elchonon noticed a long shape slithering towards them.

“A snake!” Elchonon cried out, reaching for their ax. Zalman froze and then took a careful step. His feet moved blindly, not to the left, to the safety of the wagon, but rather to the right, directly into the path of the poisonous creature.

With a shout of alarm, Elchonon yanked Zalman by the back of his shirt. Zalman fell to the ground as Elchonon raised his ax and brought it down, sharp and fast, cleaving the snake in half.

Zalman got to his feet, trembling. He tried to explain, "I'm sorry, I didn't see..."

But Elchonon would have none of it. "Get into the wagon," he said grimly. "We are going to the clinic."

THEY RETURNED FROM the clinic to Zalman's hut, where Nachman sat, waiting for his father. Zalman said one word in greeting to his son: "Trachoma."

Nachman blinked his own eyelids in response. He was silent. There was no cure for the eye disease. It was a steady sickness that ate away at the eye until it was blind and useless.

"Do not despair, Nachman," his father said, gripping his shoulder. "We will manage."

"But how?" Nachman cried out. "How can we possibly survive?" Even with the two of them working a full day's labor there was barely enough strength to do all the work.

"We are *shelichim*, fulfilling the holy *mitzvah* of settling Hashem's land. He will protect us." There was no question in Abba's red-rimmed eyes, and therefore Nachman would not allow himself to cry or question either.

SHMUEL BLOCH SAT Nachman down that night after *Maariv* to talk.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father's diagnosis." He shook his head sympathetically. "Now that your father is... is unable to

work, perhaps you need to reconsider.”

“Reconsider what?” Nachman asked.

“Perhaps you need to think about your options. You could go to Yerushalyim to find a job. Or to Jaffa,” Shmuel suggested. “Or you could go back to Radom. I’m sure your mother and sisters would be happy to see you.”

“I thank you for your concern.” Nachman tried to speak slowly, to stay in control. “I appreciate that you are looking out for us, but that is not what we came for. We came to build up this Holy Land, to make a place for our family. My father may not be able to fulfill his mission, but we did not give up years of our life, all that effort and toil, just to turn back.”

“But what about your father?” Shmuel asked. “You realize that your father cannot do the work of a healthy man.”

“But I can,” Nachman replied. “I can do enough in the field. I will take his place. There is no going back for us. We came here to grow the fruits of the land, and I will help my father to do just that.”

Shmuel’s face was still, his lips set in a straight line. “What will the Baron say?”

“Why should the Baron care if it’s one man or another tilling the land? So long as it gets done.” Nachman’s eyes glinted with determination.

Shmuel decided that they would let the Margolises be for now. For now, they would just wait and see.

And see they did. They saw Nachman arise early each morning and join the whispered tefillos of the *neitz minyan*. They saw him lead out his team of oxen, gentle and patient with the big beasts. They saw him pace the rows of wheat, checking for weeds

and insects with careful diligence. Shmuel Bloch, Elchonon Lansky, and all of the men in Tikvas Yisroel saw the effort that Nachman put in, and they were very impressed.

Everyone except for Zalman Margolis, Nachman's father, who could see nothing at all.

NACHMAN DECIDED THERE was no joy that could be compared to harvest time. The wide valley of Tikvas Yisroel was enveloped by fields of tawny grain. The wind blew ripples in the stalks, which swayed back and forth. To Nachman, the sound of the sheaves whispering in the wind was a song, a tune of thanks to Hashem Who had bestowed life upon their land.

The busy harvest season did not leave much time for introspection. The men in the field were in constant motion, *payos* and *tzitzis* swaying, as the sickles moved back and forth, laying sheaves of wheat to the ground. Nachman followed the group, tying the loose stalks into bundles together with two other men, then heaving them onto his shoulder and piling them in the barn.

On the final night of the harvest, Nachman whispered the words of *Shemonah Esrei* slowly and carefully, "*Borech alenu es hashana hazos v'es kol minei tevuasah..*"

The harvest was complete. Some of the wheat was put aside to feed the settlers' families, and some of it would be sold to begin repaying the Baron. Perhaps next year, or the year after that, the Margolises could begin saving up money to bring over the rest of their family. Nachman saw the grains of wheat, full and bursting with life, and he whispered a silent thank you to

Hashem.

There was a mini celebration after davening. Elchonon Lansky's wife had prepared a cake. Some of the men made a L'chaim. Nachman was exhausted after the long day's work, but before he could leave, Shmuel Bloch put his arm around him. "Sit with us," he commanded, "you've earned it." The men all gave a cheer as Nachman took his seat among them.

NACHMAN WOULD HOLD on to that feeling of camaraderie, of accomplishment and mutual satisfaction. He would savor it for the weeks to come, because it was the very next day's mail delivery that brought a hint of the impending storm.

The letter came from Joseph Sokolow. The administrator of the Baron had been in steady contact with the farmers, to disburse funds and advice and to stay abreast of their progress. This letter was written in a way similar to the previous one. It mentioned that funds were being allocated for the building of two new houses for the men who wished to bring their families over. It praised their work of the past season and offered encouraging words about the results of the harvest.

It was the last paragraph, which Shmuel Bloch read aloud, that caused the first whisperings:

"The Baron is aware that the approaching year is a *Shemittah* year. Letting the land and its workers lie idle for a full year will destroy what we have built thus far. The Baron has consulted with the great rabbis of Europe. They have ruled that, according to the *heter mechirah*, the land can be sold to gentiles for the year of *Shemittah*. Thus, it is permitted to work during the *Shemittah* year. The Baron does not wish to support you

indefinitely and expects you to take full advantage of the *heter mechirah*. I expect that arrangements will be made with the local Arab farmers, so that next year will be as productive and fulfilling as this past one has been”

Elchonon Lansky was the first to speak. “How can he tell us to work during the *Shemittah*? Who is he to demand that we violate Hashem’s commandments?”

“Why did you decide this is a violation?” demanded his neighbor, Gedaliah Weinstein. “There are *rabbonim* that do permit the *heter mechirah*. We have to listen to the Baron’s instructions.”

“Who is to say that this is what the Baron wants?” said another man. “Joseph Sokolow is not a supporter of *Torah* and *mitzvos*. Should he decide what the policy is for the Baron?”

“He is our administrator,” argued another. “He has the ear of the Baron, and he decides what money goes to which area. If we disobey him, any funds that we have been receiving up until now will stop. And then how will we survive?”

“This land belongs to Hashem.” Elchonon Lansky shouted. “Not to us and not to the Baron. We are entrusted with the care of the Land only because we keep the *Torah*. Disobeying Hashem’s command will do nothing to help our condition.”

“Who is supporting us?” Gedaliah banged his fist on the table. “We are only here because of the Baron’s generosity. How can we turn our backs to him?”

Voices were raised in volume, and hands were raised in gestures, agreeing or dissenting.

Finally, Shmuel Bloch stood up. “*Rabbosai*,” he said, “this is not a matter to be decided right here. Let us all go to our homes. We will send a delegation to the *rav* in Yerushalayim, to ask a

shailah. His response will be the deciding factor, not yours and not mine.” Shmuel pointed around the room. “We will go to the *rabbonim* of the Land, and they will decide what is to be with the Land.”

ZALMAN GREETED HIS son upon his return home. “What kept you so late?” he asked.

“There was a discussion..” Nachman began. Then he stopped. How much should he tell his father? Would it help him or hurt him to know that the farmers were discussing *Shemittah*? Would he feel included if Nachman repeated the details of the debate? Or would he feel even worse, knowing that he had not been part of the initial discussion?

“Nu, about what?” Zalman was hungry for news. Nachman realized that there was no way he could keep this from his father in any case.

“The *Shemittah*,” Nachman answered. He told his father about the discussion in shul; how Gedaliah had insisted that it was impossible to keep the *Shemittah* and how Elchonon had argued that it was impossible not to.

“And what do you think, Nachman?” Zalman asked his son.

Nachman did not know what to think. He sat down on his cot and put his head between his hands. He felt very old and very young at the same time. He felt old with exhaustion. With the weeks of hard labor finally taking their toll on his muscles. His very bones were aching. He felt young because he did not feel worthy to be the one to decide what was right for Tikvas Yisroel. How could he know what to do?

THE DELEGATION RETURNED from Yerushalyim two days later. Both Gedaliah and Elchonon had made the journey to the *rabbonim*, each to present his side. The ruling from the *rabbonim* of Yerushalayim was definitive. Any type of work during *Shemittah* was forbidden, except anything needed to protect fruits and grapevines from dying.

Still, the conversation stormed on. One the one hand, the Baron was their patron and benefactor. How could they hurt the man who had provided for them? Yet, how could they go against the will of their Father in heaven?

Gedaliah refused to be swayed by the ruling from Yerushalayim. “According to the *heter mechira*, it is permissible to work the land if it does not belong to a Jew” Gedaliah said. “Those who want to work can proceed in good conscience. It is an individual decision. Let it be every man for himself.”

NACHMAN LEFT THE shul and began walking down the muddy path. He could not go home. He could not face his father’s empty eyes, and his face full of questions. As if on their own accord, his feet took him to the fields, which stood bare for now, shorn of all their wheat.

How could Nachman give up working the fields for a full year? Who knows what damage would happen? Would the fields that he had struggled to tame revert back to the wild desert they had been? Would he be able to continue a healthy cycle of crops after a year of no work at all?

And what about the Baron? If he joined the group of men who were staunch supporters of *Shemittah*, how would their great benefactor react? Would he see this as a rebellion? Would he cut

off all support and encouragement? Nachman knew that they were barely making ends meet in their current situation.

Nachman's father would not express his opinion.

"It is up to you, Nachman," Zalman had said to him. "You are the one putting in the work. You get to be the one to decide."

The weight was heavy on Nachman's shoulders. For a moment, he wanted to be a little boy again, to sit on his father's knee, to feel strong arms around him. He yearned to be told, "Don't worry, you will be safe, I will take care of you."

But now he was on his own, standing in his empty field, facing his future.

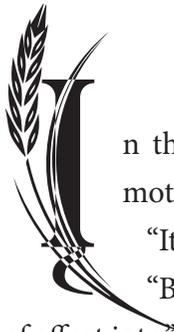
NACHMAN TURNED IN a slow circle. "Every man for himself?" The words echoed in his ears. But were they true? A farmer does not work alone. He works with the land, with the animals and with the crops. He works with the soil, and he works with the grain. And Who is it that controls all of those elements? Who is the One to decide how much will grow or how much will be struck down? Who is the One who determines success and failure? Who is the One who opens a man's eyes to the path of truth?

There is no man for himself, Nachman realized. *Man relies on Hashem.* It dawned on Nachman then that there was no debate at all. There is every man, and there is Hashem; and the only way forward is to do Hashem's will and to keep the *Shemittah*.

This was the future of Tikvas Yisroel. The only hope for the Land and its people was to cling to Hashem's *Torah* and its laws.



GIVAT TIKVAH VINEYARD
ERETZ YISROEL
THE PRESENT DAY



In the first month of the new year Michali asked her mother straight out: “How much are we losing?”

“It’s not for you to worry about,” Ima answered.

“But it is,” Michali said. “It’s my garden that I put years of effort into.” She did not say: “It’s my Abba who is on the phone with the bank, asking for an extension. And it’s my Abba staying up late at night, poring over the ledger, while ruffling the hair in his beard which is now grey.” But she thought it.

She thought it quite often. Ever since Michali had overheard her parents talking in worried whispers, she could not stop thinking about it.

“The bank called today,” Abba’s voice was steady, but there was an undercurrent of urgency, of fear and desperation. “They refused to refinance our loan. If we do not continue to make regular payments, they will repossess the tractor. And without our regular equipment, we are lost!”

“How can we possibly make the payments?” Ima’s words were tight.

“We must be strong,” Abba replied. He cleared his throat, and then he continued. “Hashem has helped us to reach this

point. He surely will not desert us now.”

A pensive silence followed.

“It will not be easy.” Ima sounded tired.

“Shoshana, this is a true test,” Abba said. He spoke clearly, his voice strong now with conviction. “We often speak with the children and between ourselves about trusting in Hashem. This is our first opportunity to display that emunah openly for a year, a full year! Let’s not fall into self-doubt. We have to do ours. We are trying to expand our cheese business. Let’s try to think of what else we can do from our end. But, in truth, it is Hashem who sustains us when we work hard. He will surely sustain us when we hold back to do His will...”

Michali knew that this was a *mitzva* in the *Torah*, and she had faith in the bracha of *Shemittah*. But she wanted reassurance from Ima. She wanted to know how they would survive.

Would faith soothe the wrinkles on Abba’s forehead? Would faith give strength to her exhausted Ima after a day spent turning cheese? Would faith alone put bread on their table?

“How much are we losing?” Michali repeated. “Please tell me.”

“It will not be easy,” Ima admitted. “But Hashem will provide. Baruch Hashem, the last harvest was our best yet. We have some savings from that crop. With our cheese business, and the stipend from the Ministry of Agriculture, we’ll make do.” Ima’s voice was calm and soothing.

Michali didn’t know how she felt. On the one hand, she was frightened of the unknown. To do nothing for a whole year? After time spent struggling, sweating, and taming the earth, to suddenly

let it all go would take a tremendous amount of willpower. And the financial difficulties were very real to her, as real as the rows of cheeses on the shelf and Abba's struggled calculations to make the finances add up.

Michali knew the *pesukim*, she knew the *bracha* promised to them. She just had to figure out how to make that knowledge real to herself.

Michali was not the only one struggling with the realities of *Shemittah*. Her friend Leah told her that it was a challenging year for her family as well.

The Sapirs had contracts with major fruit exporters. After taking the year off for *Shemittah*, there was no assurance those exporters would renew their contract for the following year. Plus, Mr. Sapir had to find jobs for his non-Jewish workers for this year, and he had no guarantee of getting them back.

"Will we be all right?" Michali asked her mother. "What about the Sapirs? How can we know?"

Ima took a *Chumash Bereishis* off the shelf and opened it to the first page. "Read this," Ima pointed to the *possuk*. "*Bereishis bara...*" Michali read aloud.

"Do you know that Hashem created the world?" Ima asked her. Michali nodded yes. There was a lump in her throat. She did not know if it was from fear, frustration, or anger.

"Do you know that Hashem gave us the *Torah*?" Ima asked. "How do you know?"

Michali pointed to the words on the page, and Ima put an arm around her shoulders. "And because when you were a little girl, when you used to lay in bed at night, I told you the story of *Moshe Rabbeinu* and the little sheep. I told you how *Moshe* took

care of the baby sheep that had run away. Hashem then decided that he would be the best leader for *Klal Yisroel* and Hashem ultimately gave the *Torah* through him. Do you remember the story?”

Another nod. Of course Michali remembered.

“And I know the story,” Ima began to chant, “because my mother told me that story. And my mother knew the story from her mother, who knew it from her mother. The chain goes all the way back to our parents, who stood at *Har Sinai*. We know this is true.”

The lump was larger. Michali remained silent.

“It is in the *Torah*,” Ima said finally. “Therefore, we know. Can there be any other way to know anything?”

Michali could only nod; she could not speak for tears.

AFTER THE FIRST FEW MONTHS, Michali became accustomed to her family’s *Shemittah* status. There were certain parts of it that still felt strange. It was strange having Abba home in the afternoons, studying *Gemara* with Nachi or helping her with her math homework.

The family operated at a different pace. It felt almost like *Yom Tov*, with the relaxed calm of *Chol Hamoed*. There was work to do. Abba still did the basic watering of the vineyards, just to maintain the health of the vines. Ima made cheese, and the children went to school. The whole rhythm of the family had settled into a peaceful calm.

ONE MORNING, ABBA HAD an announcement. “*Shmittah* is a time for the land to rest,” he said, “and for the

farmer to rest as well.”

“Is that why you’re up so early?” Ima teased, “You were up at dawn, same as always. This is what you call rest?”

“I can’t help it,” Abba said, “it’s automatic. Besides, the *rav* gives a *shiur* after the early *minyan*, and I like to go now that I have more time.” Ima beamed with pride.

“Don’t change the subject,” he wagged his finger at Ima. “I have decided that I’m taking you on vacation, Shoshana. You’ve worked hard, and you can use a break.”

Michali clapped her hands in agreement. “Do it, Ima! I’ll watch the boys. Go and have a good time.”

After much laughter and protesting, Ima agreed to go on a day trip to the seashore with Abba, on the condition that he allow her to cook some chicken and rice for the children first.

THE VACATION FOR MICHALI’S PARENTS ended on a surprising note. Abba called Michali from the road. “I just received a phone call from Doda Margo,” he said. “Cousin Aliza is engaged. They are having an engagement party in Yerushalayim tonight.”

“*Mazal tov!*” Michali exclaimed. “You should go to the party, Abba. You’re on the road anyway.”

“I would,” Abba said, “But Ima says she’s not dressed for a *simcha*.” In the background, Michali could hear her mother’s laughing protest.

“Tell Ima that she looks beautiful, no matter what she wears,” Michali said. “And you definitely should go to the party. Everything here is under control. The boys are already in pajamas.”

“Are you sure?” Abba asked her.

“Absolutely,” Michali said. “And I want a full report when you get back. I want to know about the *chassan*, how Aliza looked, and what Doda Margo is worried about this time.”

“I can tell you that already,” Abba answered, “She’s worried about where they’re going to make the *chasuna*. The engagement is in her house, but they need to reserve a hall for the wedding ,and it’s so expensive. I already got an earful.”

“So they can make the wedding here.” The words were out of Michali’s mouth before she thought of them. “We have plenty of room.”

“You know, Michali,” Abba said, “I just might suggest it.”

DODA MARGO LOVED THE IDEA, and so did Aliza and her *chassan*. It was decided that the wedding would be held in Givat Tikvah.

The Kaufmans went from a peaceful lull into a frenzy of activity, getting the vineyard ready for the upcoming *simcha*. Doda Margo hired the caterer and the band. It was up to the Kaufmans to prepare the setting. Cousin Yanky from Brooklyn flew in with his father, Avi Kaufman, to celebrate their cousin’s wedding. Abba and Nachi put up a tent for the *seudah* and built a *chuppah* out of an old wooden trellis.

Michali labored together with Ima, draping the gates of the vineyard in yards of white tulle. When they were finished, they stepped back to admire their handiwork.

“It looks beautiful,” Ima said.

“Like a *kallah*,” Michali agreed. “The vineyard is like a *Shabbos* queen.”

“Indeed she is,” Ima said.

THE MORNING OF THE WEDDING dawned clear and bright.

“It’s a beautiful day for a *simcha!*” Michali sang out as she entered the kitchen.

“It is.” Ima looked harassed. She had the phone in one hand and was trying to mix a pot on the stove with the other. Yehuda was tugging at her skirt, begging for a piece of the cake that was cooling on the counter.

“What can I do to help?” Michali asked immediately.

“You can take Yehuda out, please,” Ima answered. Her tichel was slipping down her forehead, and she pushed it back. “I just need to finish up in here, and then we can get dressed for the *chasuna.*”

“Of course.” Michali took her younger brother’s hand and led him out to the fields. She figured it was best to let him run around now and work off all his extra energy before the wedding guests arrived.

As they drew closer to the vineyards, Michali noticed a group of tourists standing by the gate. They were gesturing at the *hefker* sign and jabbering away excitedly. It sounded like French or some other foreign language. Michali just nodded and smiled as the group passed through the gate and began walking up and down the rows, reaching between the veins for the few clusters that had been left over by the *Otzar Beis Din* workers.

“What are they doing?” Yehuda’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as the strangers made their way through the vines.

He knew the general *halachos* of *Shemittah*. He had brought home a chart which was now hanging over the kitchen

sink. It showed how to dispose of *Shviis* fruits. But he did not realize that *Shemitah* meant people could come and take away his things. He watched the strangers in horror.

“But they’re our grapes.” He tugged at Michali’s arm. “They’re picking our grapes!”

Michali searched for the right words. “Not really,” she said. “They’re *hefker*. They belong to no one. Anyone can take them.”

“What does that mean?” Yehuda’s cheeks were bright red. “They are, too, ours! We worked so hard. You know how much time we spent weeding and watering? You know how hard Abba worked on pruning and cutting? All of a sudden they’re not ours?”

Michali was struck with the enormous task in front of her. She needed to break down an idea that she herself was struggling to internalize into small, bite-sized pieces. She had to take the concept, the words of the *Chumash*, and make them real and whole within herself in order to give them over to her brother.

“Look, Yehuda.” She bent down to the dirt and scooped up a handful of crumbling soil. “Who does this belong to?” She asked her younger brother.

“It belongs to us!” He shouted the words. “It’s ours!” Louder now, with a chin tilted in defiance at the strangers in his field.

“But think for a minute, Yehuda,” Michali said. “Who made this earth?” She pointed to an ant crawling across her palm. “Who made this bug? Who made this leaf?”

The answer was on his tongue, in his mouth, but Yehuda was too stubborn to say it.

“Who made this?” Michali pointed to herself. “Who made

this?” She poked a finger into Yehuda’s ribs. Against his will, he let out a small giggle.

“Well, who did, Yehuda?” Michali pressed him, “who made all this?”

“*Hakadosh Boruch Hu.*” He knew the answer.

“And He gave it all to us,” Michali said. “And along with giving us this land, He gave us this *mitzvah*. We may not understand all of it, but it is for our benefit.”

Could Michali explain to her brother the peace and serenity that fill their family, knowing that their future is in Hashem’s hands? Could her five-year-old brother understand how the rhythms of daily life on the farm may have been affected, their lives may have changed, but it was a change for the good?

Could Yehuda understand that while they may be disconnected from the land, they are indeed connected to everything that is real and important in their relationship with Hashem and His *Torah*?

Michali knew she understood these facts. She had learned them. Now she had acted upon them, internalized them; and they became one with her. She didn’t know, though, if Yehuda was ready to hear her explanation yet.

Already, he was distracted by a large bird that was swooping into the left corner of the field, and like a shot he was off, racing to see the color of its feathers.

Michali looked down at the dirt in her hand and curled her fingers around it. This was her earth, her father’s earth. But, in truth, this earth belonged to her Father in heaven. She bent down one more time, and she let the brown crumbs fall between her fingers and settle gently into a mound in the dark earth.

Then she stood up and brushed the dirt from her fingers. “Yehuda!” she called out to her little brother. The cars were starting to pull into the driveway. She saw Ima, welcoming Doda Margo and Uncle Eliezer into the house. Abba stepped out of the van, followed by a tall man with a trimmed beard and then a teenage boy.

“Look,” Michali told Yehuda, “it’s Uncle Avi, who came all the way from New York!”

“We don’t have an Uncle Avi.” Yehuda’s arms folded.

“Well, he’s not really our uncle. He’s Abba’s cousin, but we just call him uncle. I’ll bet you he brought presents,” Michali hinted, “just like a real uncle would.”

At that prediction, Yehuda took off for the house at a run, with Michali trailing behind.

She arrived in the driveway at the same time as Nachi. Her brother ran up to clasp the hand of his pen pal. “*Shalom Aleichem,*” he said to his cousin. The boys grinned at each other.

“Let me show you where you are staying.” Michali started to lead the way, then stopped in her tracks. Instead of following her, Uncle Avi was standing in middle of the driveway, turning in a slow circle. His hand shaded his eyes from the sun, and he was drinking in the scene. Michali wondered what he was looking at. She glanced around at the house, the barn, and the fields.

Then she noticed that Uncle Avi’s shoulders seemed to be shaking. His form began to shudder. Michali ran around to the back of the van, where Abba was heaving suitcases out of the trunk. “Something is wrong,” she whispered.

Abba looked up at his cousin. He was crying, his shoulders trembling, moist tears trickling down his face.

“Avi!” he put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “What is the

matter?”

“I never...” Avi paused for a breath. “I never could have imagined this. Do you know that for years, I used to listen to my grandmother tell over stories. They were stories that she had heard from her mother about her older brother, Great-Uncle Nachman, who had immigrated to Palestine to settle the land. She used to talk about how the family sat at home in the shtetl, waiting for the letters. When they finally came, those letters were beyond belief. They were filled with lines describing the hardship that Nachman had endured, the *tzaros* he had gone through to work this farm.”

They were standing in a group, listening raptly as Uncle Avi told his tale. Michali and her father, Nachi and cousin Yanky. Even Doda Margo and Uncle Eliezer were listening.

“And then when it came to the *Shemittah* year,” Uncle Avi continued, “Nachman risked everything to keep the mitzvah. If he could just see this now...” Uncle Avi swept an arm across the fields. “If he could see how the seeds he planted have grown, how much *nachas* it would be for him! And what a *nachas* this must be for *Hakadosh Baruch Hu!*”

The group fell silent. Michali imagined, for a moment, that she could sense the presence of her ancestors watching from *Shamayim*. And she could feel her Father in heaven watching over them all.

Doda Margo broke the silence. “And for this you cry? We’re having a *chuppah* in two hours, and the *kallah* isn’t nearly ready. Now there is a reason to cry!”

Laughing together, the family headed inside to prepare for the *simcha*.

EPILOGUE:



Michali awoke to a bright ray of late morning sunshine. She sat up and stretched, still shivering with the sheer delight of the excitement of the night before. Cousin Aliza's wedding at Givat Tikvah had been a truly joyous celebration. The *kallah* was floating on a cloud of happiness. Doda Margo, unbelievably, was rendered speechless, as she and Uncle Eliezer beamed with *nachas* all night long.

Indeed, the whole family could not stop smiling at each other. Long after the wedding guests had departed, the family members stayed behind for an impromptu *kumzitz*, savoring the feeling of the close-knit *simcha*. Even Abba and Ima, who had spent the entire day rushing from one hosting errand to the next, took a few moments to sit and enjoy.

Michali watched her brothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles. The rows of grapevines stretched out behind them, dark and quiet, in their *Shemittah* state. Michali could not think of a better place to lay the foundation of a *Bayis Ne'eman B'Yisroel* than right here, on Givat Tikvah, the land sanctified by her family's hard work and by the *mitzvah* of *Shemittah*.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Ima poked her head into Michali's room.

"*Boker Tov*. I'm glad you had a chance to sleep in. You worked very hard last night." Ima's face beamed with pride. "We got so many comments about the beautiful arrangements, thanks to you."

"Oh, Ima, it was a dream!" Michali bounced on her bed. "I

enjoyed every minute of it! I wish we could do it again!”

“Funny you should say that,” said Ima with a playful wink. “I just got a phone call from Naava Ben-Chaim. Her daughter, Sarit, just became a *kallah*. She heard about the absolutely beautiful wedding held last night at Givat Tikvah. She wanted to know if she could book us for her daughter’s wedding!”

“What?” Michali gasped.

“It seems that the guests at Aliza’s wedding could not stop talking about what a beautiful *simcha* it was. And news travels fast! I have already received two more calls this morning from people asking to book their *simchas* with us.”

“Book their *simcha*?” Michali asked. “Do you mean here, at Givat Tikvah?”

“Yes,” Ima announced. “I discussed it with Abba, and we have decided to establish a new business. We are now the proud proprietors of Ulamei Givat Tikvah, the newest venue for a beautiful and meaningful *simcha*!”

THE NEXT FEW MONTHS WERE a dizzying whirlwind of happy activity as word spread that a *simcha* hosted by the Kaufman Family at Ulamei Givat Tikvah was beyond compare. Bookings came in from all over the country. Abba and Ima handled every *simcha* with the same personal touch and attention to detail as they did their very first hosted affair.

Late one night, after she had finished folding the last of the tablecloths, Michali heard her parents speaking quietly to each other. Abba and Ima were seated at the table with the appointment book in front of them, reviewing the accounts.

“We have to mark down that the Steins ended up with two more tables than they had planned.” Ima made a note in her book. “Their cousins from the *Negev* did end up coming at the end. Mrs. Stein told me how glad she was that every relative was able to make it. The entire extended family was so moved by our “*Shomer Shviis*” vineyard. You know, she had tears in her eyes when she thanked me. Even I found it inspiring!”

Abba looked up from his ledger. “The Stein wedding was the tenth *chasunah* that we were *zocheh* to make here at Givat Tikvah in the past few months. I’m looking over our accounts, and it seems that our income has tripled in the past year! I checked and double-checked the math, but it seems right. *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* has blessed our efforts with three times the profit.”

The smile which spread across Michali’s face was a mirror image of Ima’s satisfied expression. It was just as she had been taught all those months ago: “*V’tzivisi es birchasi.*” Hashem had indeed commanded His *brachos* upon them.

NOTES AND APPENDIX:

For the teacher:

Footnote to Page 16:

Include timeline of *Malchei Yehuda* and *Malchei Yisroel*.

Include timeline of the stages of *Galus Bavel*.

Footnote to Page 17:

“He who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life.”

Talmud Bavli: Sukkah 51a and b

Include quotes from the gemara describing the celebration.

Footnote to Page 18:

See Melachim Beis Perek 18 or Yeshyahau Perek 36

Footnote to Page 20:

For the words of the Navi’s promise, See Melachim Beis, Perek 19: Posuk 29. Or see Sefer Yeshayahu Perek 37: Posuk 30.

“And this will be a sign for you. The food for this year is wild growth; and in the second year, aftergrowth of wild growth; and in the third year, you will sow and harvest, and you will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.”

Rav Shimon Schwab explains:

After Sancherev's conquest of *Malchus Yisroel* and most of *Malchus Yehuda*, the entire country was devastated. The fields and orchards were destroyed, and people were starving. The Navi promises that, after the fall of Sancherev, there will immediately be an adequate food supply.

"*This year*": immediately after the siege will be lifted, and before the land can be cultivated to produce food, the wild growth which was available will be miraculously sufficient to sustain the people.

"*And in the second year, aftergrowth of wild growth*": In the second year, food will miraculously come from wild, uncultivated growth. The Ralbag explains that this second year was a *Shemittah* year, and all agricultural work was forbidden.

"*And in the third year*": Finally, the conditions will return to normal, and food will be successfully produced by normal means.

Footnote to Page 23:

The miracle of the fall of Sancherev

See Sefer Yeshayahu 37: 36 and 37 or Melachim Beis 19: 35 and 36

Footnote to Page 27:

Definition of *pach Shemittah*

Include short summary of *halachos* of *Shemittah*.

Footnote to Page 28:

The promise of *bracha* for those who keep *Shemittah*: Vayikra 25:

21: “I will command My blessing for you...”

Footnote to Page 30:

This fictional story is based on true accounts of the settlers of Mazkeret Batya who were moser nefesh to keep *Shemittah* during the years 1888 – 1889.

Baron Edmond James de Rothschild (1845 – 1934) was a French member of the Rothschild banking family. He sustained many of the early settlers in Eretz Yisroel. Baron Rothschild helped to finance many of the early settlements and was a strong supporter of economic development in Eretz Yisroel. The early settlers of Palestine referred to him as *Hanadiv Hayadua*, “The Famous Benefactor.”

Footnote to Page 36:

Heter Mechira

Rav Yitzchok Elchanon Spektor issued a ruling that allowed land in Eretz Yisroel to be sold to gentiles during the *Shemittah* year. This would allow non-Jewish laborers to perform work that was rabbinically prohibited to Jews during *Shemittah*. Whether through miscommunication or misunderstanding of the psak, the Baron became a staunch advocate of his farmers’ working during *Shemittah*. His administrators insisted that the ruling gave full permission to the farmers to continue their regular work cycle.

Rav Shmuel Salant and the rabbonim of Yerushalayim ruled that *Shemittah* should be observed. The differences of opinion and the discussion of the ramifications of each ruling led to tremendous discord among the many factions of Jews within Eretz Yisroel and across the world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt hakaras hatov...

To **Hakadosh Baruch Hu**, who causes the ideas and concepts to grow within the writer's mind, just as the produce grows within the fields.

To **my family**, for their invaluable support and encouragement. Special thanks to my husband, Tzvi, and my children, Yeshaya, Sara'la, Yehuda Leib and Yosef Shalom, for living through Shemittah with me over the course of seven weeks, instead of seven years.

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The final text of this novel is only a fraction of the work invested. Hours of research, interviews with Israeli farmers, and an in-depth study of *Hilchos Shviis* were required before the author could put pen to paper. **Thank you Torah Umesorah Brooklyn Teachers Center Staff** for your ambition, extensive research, and superior project management.

It is our sincere prayer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that our efforts will bear fruit by bringing the lessons of *Shmittah* to the heart and mind of every student and they should gain wisps of the farmers' incredible strength and *emunah*. May the *zechus* of studying the *mitzvah* of *shemitta* bring us closer to the promise of *chazal* - "*B'motzei shiviis Ben Dovid ba.*"

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