A Rabbi's Northern Adventure

From the Heights of Alaska to the Golan Heights



Rabbi Yisrael Haber

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by

Rabbi Yisrael Haber

Me'or Menachem Publications

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Me'or Menachem Publications

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A Rabbi's Northern Adventure

Contents

Preface		vii
1	The Big Trooper	1
2	Uncle Meir Moshe	6
3	Crown Heights	11
4	Basketball Coach	15
5	You're in the Army Now	31
6	The Mixer	39
7	A Gentleman and An Officer	55
8	Destination: Alaska	64
9	On The Road	70
10	Rosh Hashanah	78
11	Tragedy On Yom Kippur	98
12	America's Northernmost Sukkah	107
13	Alert	110
14	Fly Me To The Mikvah	119
15	Spreading The Light	127
16	Work On The "Mixer" Begins	137
17	A Confrontation With The Archbishop	149
18	Alaska's First Mikvah	157
19	The Mailman Keeps Knocking	163
20	Pesach In Alaska	169
21	A Letter From The Rebbe	175
22	Shabbat And The Midnight Sun	185

23	Jewish Alaskana	190
24	Bar Mitzvah North Of The Range	199
25	Tradition On A Galaxy	203
26	Tokyo Rabbi	206
27	The President Comes To Alaska	211
28	Quake!	219
29	How Do You Say Rabbi In Yupik?	224
30	Kibbutznik On Wheels	229
31	Crash Landing	240
32	Spanish Encounter	249
33	"The Rebbe, The Rebbe, The Rebbe"	254
34	Epilogue	277
35	Appendix	281

PREFACE

We are proud to present *A Rabbi's Northern Adventure—From the Heights of Alaska the Golan Heights*, the autobiography of Rabbi Yisrael Haber, presently the Chabad-Lubavitch emissary to the Golan Heights, Israel.

Born in Brooklyn New York, Rabbi Haber served as a chaplain in the United States Air Force in the 1970s, and, as a religious Jew, had a most extraordinary experience being stationed on an Air Force Base in Alaska.

Without question, not many can claim to have had experiences of the sort recorded in this book: to serve as a rabbi "on the frozen rooftop of the world," to transmit Judaism to those both far and near, and to uncover hidden Jewish sparks.

In later years, Rabbi Haber and his family have relocated to the Golan Heights in Israel, establishing a Chabad House there. Once again, he has demonstrated his commitment to spread the timeless message of Jewish identity and survival, against all odds.

Although not raised in a Chabad-Lubavitch home, Rabbi Haber's encounters with Lubavitch sufficed to influence him in expressing love and concern for fellow Jews, wherever they may be.

Rabbi Haber's phenomenal memory and extensive diary does much in recalling precise events and detailed conversations, making his memoirs unique and thrilling. To read his story and to trace his footsteps is indeed a most thrilling experience.

The Publishers

1

The Big Trooper

It is Friday morning, September 14, 1973, exactly two weeks before Rosh Hashanah, 5734, according to the Jewish calendar. For three hours, my wife, Miriam, and I have been traveling along a beautiful route in Northern Idaho on our way to Seattle, still hundreds of miles ahead of us. Also awaiting us is Shabbat, only a few hours away. But in this part of the country, evening comes very late, so we are not feeling pressured to arrive at our destination before the holy day sets in.

The beauty of the scenic road is keeping us enthralled. The views around us are breathtaking. Towering mountain peaks reach into the sky. Never-ending forests embrace ice-covered lakes. In front of us, are clear, pristine vistas as far as the eye can see.

Only our future remains obscure.

Before long, we are passing Spokane, the second largest city in the State of Washington. Thank G-d, our car is handling well as we speed along the highway.

A few miles away from the city, I suddenly notice in the rear-view mirror that a car is following uncomfortably close behind us. Back in Brooklyn, I learned that when a car is glued to your tail, it's best to widen the gap as quickly as possible—if you don't want to get yourself killed. So

I step on the gas. The car behind us speeds up too. I press the gas pedal to the floor, but our escort stays right with us, nearly fender to fender.

Unsuccessfully, I try to make out the face of the driver in the rear-view mirror. Our car is flying. If it had wings, it would have already taken off. My wife looks at me with a worried expression, as if to say, "What's going on?" Never have I seen the needle of the speedometer climb so high. But, just our luck, the car on my tail has a more powerful motor. In the side view mirror, I see him overtake me. What now? Is this the way to start a new chapter of my life? With a highway robbery? Or an attempt on my life? At the very same moment, I think to myself, "How can this happen? I said the '*tefillat haderech*' prayer for travelers before starting on my trip."

Then in a moment of both relief and distress, I watch the driver of the pursuing car lower his window, thrust out his left hand, and place a blaring highway patrol siren on the roof of his car. *Mazel* from Heaven! It's a cop. I am going to live! But wait, what kind of good fortune is this? He's going to bust me for reckless speeding. While my thoughts begin to race over this new predicament, the wail of the siren is piercing the air. I slow down my car and watch as he passes by, flashing me an angry glance. He brakes in front of me, stopping at an angle so that I don't escape, should such a crazy thought enter my head.

He gets out of his unmarked sedan, and, with heavy strides, walks over to our car. The butt of his revolver sticks out of his holster. "Please G-d, save us," I think. In all my years of driving, this is the first time I am confronted face-to-face with a tough-looking highway patrolman. He leans on the car door and stares down at me with eyes as cold and gray as lead. Like a true trooper, he sizes me up

in a glance. After a long pause, he spits out a command:

"Show me your driver's license."

"Of course," I mumble. "Immediately, Officer."

I can almost feel my face whiten. My lips are dry. With trembling fingers, I begin to search for my license. Normally, it's in my wallet in the pocket of my pants. But where is the pocket? Where is the wallet? Out of the corner of my eye, I see him watching me closely. The masochist obviously enjoys seeing me squirm as I try to locate my wallet. Undoubtedly, I've made his day. Probably his month. I mean, how many Orthodox Jews does he get to bust on the highways of Washington State? Finally, I find my wallet, remove my license, and hand it over to this Cossack on wheels. He doesn't bother to give it a glance. What difference does it make to him if my name is Moishe or Yankel? The main thing is that he has caught himself a Jew.

The trooper looks straight in my eyes, narrows his eyebrows, and asks: "Why were you driving at such a reckless speed?"

Can it be that I discern a tinge of humanity in his voice? Certainly not. In this part of the country, where Jews are kangaroos, state troopers are not to be trusted.

"You see, Officer," I attempt to explain, "all of the way, I have driven within the speed limit...."

"Sure, sure," he says, not believing a word.

"Suddenly, I saw a car behind me, following right on top of me," I stutter. "The truth is, I panicked, and that's why I began to speed. And the faster I drove, the car behind me... that is... you... well you tailgated even more, which convinced me that I had to get away as fast as I could."

The cop nods his head. No doubt he hears stories like

this every day. Mine is nothing new.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"To Alaska," I answer quickly. "I am a rabbi in the Air Force, and I'm on my way to my first commission."

He looks me over curiously, as if I were an exotic looking creature in a zoo. Then he orders me to wait and walk back to his car, carrying my license. I look at my wife and frown. Here comes my first ticket, I think. The cop gets into his patrol car and talks into his radio phone. After a few minutes, he returns to my car. The only thing he has in his hand is my license—no ticket. I can't believe it. His face is suddenly different, graced with a friendly smile and shining eyes.

"Please rabbi," he says with sudden respect, "from now on, drive slower, and may the two of you have a *Gut* Shabbat."

I look up at him stunned.

"What did you say, Officer?" I ask.

"I said *Gut* Shabbat."

When he smiles, he doesn't seem to be a policeman anymore. He's a Jew meeting another Jew in the middle of nowhere.

"Tomorrow is my son's *bar mitzvah*," he explains. "How can I give a rabbi a speeding ticket the day before my son reads from the Torah? Understand?"

"Sure thing. Thank you. *Mazel tov*," I stutter.

He grins, waves good-bye, gets back into his patrol car, and drives off. Long after he disappears down the road, I sit waiting for my shock to subside. Finally, I start up the car, and, keeping a watchful eye on the speedometer, we continue our journey. Neither my wife nor I utter a word. A minute passes before my wife breaks the silence.

"Tell me, Yisrael, what was all that about?"

"I have no idea."

"Well perhaps you can tell me how many Jewish highway patrolmen there are in the State of Washington?" she asks.

"I'd be awfully surprised if there was more than one."

"Interesting that out of all the policemen we could meet, this Jew is the one who appears to watch over us and guard us on our way."

Miriam and I both know that the real guardian is not the highway patrolman. The real Guardian is chief of all highway patrolmen, and to Him all thanks are due.

With the comforting knowledge that G-d is with us, we headed north toward the tundras of Alaska. We arrived in Seattle an hour and a half before Shabbat.

2

Uncle Meir Moshe

Before getting to Alaska, let's backtrack east to the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where I was born in May, 1948, two weeks after the modern State of Israel came into existence. While we didn't belong to one of the Ultra-Orthodox or *Chasidic* sects which Brooklyn is so famous for, we were a strictly Orthodox family. My parents also were born and raised in Brooklyn, so I and my two younger brothers were already proud, second-generation Americans. In addition to generous portions of *Yiddishkeit,* my parents heaped lots of warmth and love on their children. A spirit of *shalom* filled the house like the delicious aromas of my mother's Friday cooking.

My grandparents, who all immigrated to America prior to World War I, lived nearby, and they contributed greatly to the strong sense of family and religion which all of us shared. The special care and attention which Jewish *bubbies* and *zeidis* are so fond of giving to their grandchildren nurtured us like a soup steeped in Jewish history. And we were happy to give them the *nachas* and joy which our company brought them.

Like an expert juggler, my father balanced two educational paths in our home, emphasizing both the golden

tenets of Judaism and the value of a general program of secular studies. For him, education was the key to success. His father, after whom I am named, died at a young age during the Depression.

My father worked while enrolled in college at the same time. He graduated among the top in his class with a degree in European History. So certain was he that education was the building block of success, he proceeded to attain a Master's Degree in Business Administration.

The family connection to the United States Armed Forces began in 1941 when my father became an accountant for the military. Sometime later, he transferred to the Department of Defense where he worked at the Pentagon, editing journals on military spending. My mother, a true woman of valor, enabled him to devote himself to his work by lovingly assuming command of the house. Through their example, my brothers and I learned that deep joy and satisfaction can be achieved through honest, industrious labor.

Along with my parents, another dynamic figure greatly influenced my blossoming world view—my father's brother, Uncle Meir Moshe Haber. Today, with my Brooklyn childhood long behind me, I recognize that much of my character was patterned after the vivid role-model he set.

In truth, our relationship was more like an older brother, younger brother friendship than uncle and nephew. In his youth, many people predicted that he would have an illustrious future. He immersed himself in the world of books, absorbing all of the Torah learning and liberal arts that he could, often fallen asleep with a tome in his arms and the light still on in his room. With dreams of being a great educator, he came to navigate through the sea of

Talmud and the stacks of the New York Public Library with an unquenchable thirst for more and more knowledge. While charisma is not usually associated with bookworms, Uncle Meir Moshe was a dynamo of learning, a gifted writer, and a riveting speaker on just about any subject you could name. After receiving rabbinical ordination, he began teaching Jewish studies in a yeshiva day school. At the age of 27, he was awarded the important position of principal of the *Beit Yaacov* girl's high school in Baltimore. He wasn't only a skilled administrator—his house was open to all of the school's students. The special warmth that emanated from his home, along with his wife's freshly-baked cakes and unending patience, made their modest residence a center of community life. While he was honored and praised for his many contributions to Jewish life in Baltimore, he felt he could do more to spread the light of Jewish tradition to communities around the country which had drifted away from a deep and meaningful connection to Judaism. His most fervent concern was for the many young Jewish women who were growing up without any exposure to the beauties of their religion. Thus, with whatever free time he had, he traveled throughout the South, lecturing, meeting families, convincing parents to send their daughters to the Jewish academy in Baltimore.

Through the force of his sincerity and love of Torah, he brought scores of young women and their families to the joys of Judaism. Under his tutelage, the graduates of *Beit Yaacov* left the school, not only with a high school diploma, but with a vision of life based on the principles of holiness and faith which have blessed Jewish family life for thousands of years.

My uncle's influence also had a profound impact on me. Following his example, I too took off on a journey to

bring a *shtickle* of Jewish life to faraway communities. True, my Alaskan destination was as far north as you could get from Uncle Meir Moshe's visits to Atlanta and Nashville, but it was his trailblazing willingness to set off to faraway places that guided me in times of frustration and doubt. And while being a Jewish chaplain in the United States Air Force is different from educating young girls, I did everything in my power to build a kosher *mikvah* in Alaska to safeguard the ritual purity of Jewish women and Jewish families in America's forty-ninth state. As an Air Force buddy joked, until the *mikvah* was built, the most Jewish thing in Alaska was an Eskimo eating smoked salmon!

One thing that struck me about my uncle—no matter how busy he was, the minute someone needed a sympathetic ear to talk to, my uncle found time, as if he were a carefree retiree. He never gave a person the feeling that he was intruding on his frantic schedule. He made himself available to everyone, not begrudgingly, but with genuine empathy and love.

Frequently, he spoke about the dangers facing the Jewish people in the Diaspora of Jewish communities scattered around the world; and just as frequently, he extolled the great hope and challenge of *Eretz Yisrael.* He didn't merely speak about the Promised Land, he applied for the postion as educational director of a yeshiva in Jerusalem, and he was accepted! But, tragically, in G-d's great plan for the universe, it wasn't to be. At the age of 31, in the prime of his life, he was invited to join the great yeshiva in Heaven. No one in the family could digest this incredible blow. No one could understand why this decree had fallen on such a righteous being. Why? Especially when he was so young? Sure, there were deep, mystical answers, but the

void of his smile, his laughter, his wisdom and warm touch remained.

At the time of his death, January, 1961, I was a few months away from my *bar mitzvah*. Suddenly, a black cloud surrounded what was to have been a completely festive celebration. Uncle Meir Moshe was gone. Uncle Meir Moshe, who had been like an older brother to me. How could it be? Who would continue his work? Who would take the time to sit with family after family?

I don't remember my exact words, but in my *bar mitzvah* speech, as a thirteen year old youth standing nervously before all of my family and friends, I promised that I would follow in my uncle's path, journeying wherever G-d sent me to bring Jews closer to Torah.

But did it have to be Alaska?

3

Crown Heights

In my youth, I was a member of the *Bnei Akiva* Youth Movement, which fostered a love for the Torah, for the Jewish people, and for the Land of Israel. Later, when I was seventeen, I joined the *Agudat Yisrael* Youth Movement, where I was voted the head of our local chapter. When I graduated yeshiva high school, I enrolled in college and undertook a course of study which ultimately led to a Master's degree in psychological counseling. During that period, I continued my Talmudic studies and received my rabbinical ordination. By the time I was twenty-three, I was already the principal of a Jewish day school. The decision to channel my energies in the field of Jewish education was inspired by the role models of both my father and uncle. However, much of my success must be attributed to the long and endearing relationship I enjoyed with my *Rosh Yeshiva*, the Talmudic scholar par excellence, Rabbi Herschel Kurzrock, currently the Head Administrator of the *Beit Din HaGadol* of the Rabbinical Alliance of America. Throughout my youth, he was my teacher, my mentor, and my guide. For a time after my *bar mitzvah*, he was even my personal study partner—my *chavruta*. What progress I made learning with him one-on-one!

As amazing as it seems to me today, even though we lived only a few short Brooklyn blocks away, throughout my youth, I had no connection whatsoever with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Though all of my childhood was spent in Crown Heights, the world of Chabad was foreign to me. There's a Talmudic teaching which states that sometimes you have to go out of your way to get where you are eventually going. That certainly was true in my case. To meet up with the Rebbe and the Lubavitch organization, I had to go all the way to Alaska!

As a boy, the only glimpse I had of the Rebbe was on the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* when Jews flock to the nearest body of water to "cast" their sins away in the ceremony known as *Tashlich.* In Brooklyn, Jews from the Crown Heights and Eastern Parkway neighborhoods would gather in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens by the pastoral reservoir. People from Flatbush, coming from the other side of the sprawling park, would arrive all through the afternoon until the lake was surrounded by Jews. Men, women, and children, dressed in their holiday finest, arrived in non-stop droves to pray at the water's edge. Police annually estimated the crowd at 150,000! An innocent park-goer sitting on a nearby bench would have thought that *Rosh Hashanah* was some kind of weird water festival.

"Hey, brother, 'scuse me, but what's flying here? Some dude fall into the lake? No? Well, how come everyone's staring at the water? What? You're throwing your sins away? Hey, that's cool. That's all it takes? Move over. Give me some room. Watch out for the splash. I'm hauling a heavy load."

The last contingent of people who would arrive in the park were the Lubavitcher Rebbe and his *Chasidim.* They

would march down Eastern Parkway from the Rebbe's headquarters, which was about two miles away from the reservoir. Singing, and escorted by the New York City Police Department, their parade was a festive event by itself.

Each year, we were told not to stand too close to the water when the *Chasidim* arrived with the Rebbe, because with all of the pushing and shoving to get close to the revered *tzaddik*, we might end up in the drink. Indeed, on one *Rosh Hashanah*, two unfortunate souls got knocked into the lake with the sins. I always followed my father's advice and backed away from the bank when the Chabad battalion showed up.

One *Rosh Hashanah* afternoon in the mid-fifties, when I was still a young boy, I stood gazing out our living room window at Eastern Parkway. A torrential downpour was flooding the neighborhood. Whenever there was a storm, our congregation would do *Tashlich* the following day in the park, so I was very surprised to hear joyous singing outside. Sure enough, down on the street, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was leading his *Chasidim* in a long, joyous march toward the Botanical Gardens. They were literally *singing in the rain*!

Two days later, when I returned to my yeshiva on Crown Street, I found out what happened. When the *Chasidim* reached the park entrance, the towering iron gate was closed. Figuring that no one who worked for the New York City Parks Department was going to come to the Botanical Gardens in a rainstorm, the guard locked up and went home early. Sizing up the situation, the Rebbe began scaling the gate. In those days, the devout *Chasidic* leader was in his fifties, and with holy resolve and agility, he hoisted himself up and over. Without having to hear a

command, all of the *Chasidim* followed, including long-bearded rabbis well into their seventies. The younger men helped the older men, and everyone went over the fence. A few years ago, I read about this adventure in the Chabad newspaper in Israel. I also spoke with a *Chasid* who had been there, and he provided an interesting punch line. When the group returned to the "770" headquarters, word spread that the Rebbe would be making *"L'Chaims"* with everyone who had accompanied him in the rain to the reservoir for *Tashlich.* Hundreds of followers flocked into line to meet the Rebbe and receive a small cup of vodka. Seeing such a long line, the Rebbe reached out and touched the hat of the first *Chasid* to feel if it were damp. Only people with wet hats would be graced with a drink! Immediately, half the line disappeared. Obviously, because of the heavy downpour, not everyone had been in such a great hurry to cast off their sins. And no one wanted to pass by the Rebbe with a dry hat!

Later in my life, I was to witness firsthand, time and again, the special powers of the Rebbe, but for now, as a youth growing up in Brooklyn, *Tashlich* at the Botanical Gardens was the closest I came to meeting this incredibly holy man.

4

Basketball Coach

In 1972, I married my wife Miriam. We celebrated our "honeymoon" in a most original fashion—a week after our wedding, we set off on an eight-week trip, not alone, but with thirty young Jewish students. We were the leaders of a study tour that took us to England, France, and Israel. For both Miriam and myself, the visit to the Promised Land was our third. Both of us were lovers of the Land, but we had no idea that we would one day make the Golan Heights our permanent home. And who could even dream of the uncharted path we would have to journey to get there!

For instance, our first stop was Dallas, Texas. Before our wedding, we had flown to the Lone Star State after learning that the Jewish day school in Dallas was looking for a new assistant principal. We both agreed that spreading *Yiddishkeit* in a center of Jewish life like Brooklyn was no great innovation. Our youthful idealism and yearning for real challenge—which, thank G-d, we both still feel today—drove us to seek out distant pastures, far removed from America's Orthodox bastions. In Dallas, we were interviewed by the Jewish community leaders and by the educational directors of the school, Akiva Academy. A short while later, I was notified that I had been awarded

the job. Thus, after returning from the Israel leg of our long study trip, Miriam and I bought a new photo album and began filling it with pictures of our new home in Dallas, Texas.

The study year commenced at the end of August. At the orientation meeting, I wished the faculty a year of success, and included my wife and myself in the blessing. Miriam was to teach in the school's kindergarten. In addition, she enrolled in Texas Women's University in Denton, some 25 miles north of Dallas, in order to complete her Bachelor's Degree. We soon discovered that the course she was taking in speech therapy and special education had practical application for us in our work with Jewish community leaders, where dialogue was often fractured and where communication was often shut down.

My game-plan in starting the new year was to avoid routine and make education exciting. I saw no reason why Akiva shouldn't compete with the other private schools in the city, not only scholastically, but athletically as well. The sad truth was that a great many Jewish parents preferred sending their children to non-Jewish schools for the simple reason that Akiva's sports program was back in the Middle Ages. In sports-minded Dallas, if you didn't have a winning team, you weren't on the map.

Even though phys-ed was a regular part of the school's eight-hour day, no champion athletes ever graduated from Akiva. The educational emphasis was on the academic learning, unlike the situation at other schools where students hopefully learned something between basketball practice and swimming. Not that exercise isn't important—in Judaism it is vital to serve *Hashem* with both a healthy body and a healthy mind. Therefore, to attract more Jewish students to Akiva, I realized that the sports

department needed a beefing up. In order to persuade parents to send their kids to a "Jewish" school, I needed a solid sports program behind me. If it was basketball that would give a Jewish kid a chance to learn about his heritage, then basketball it would be.

Since basketball was my best sport, I decided to coach the team and enter our school in the city-wide basketball league. It was truly a "mission impossible" to take a group of kids who had never played basketball in any organized fashion and mold them into a winning team. Furthermore, my goal wasn't just to get five Jewish guys out on the court, I wanted the audience to know they were Jewish. So I insisted that the Akiva line-up would play with skullcaps on their heads. This wasn't a simple matter in Dallas. In those days, one didn't see too many *yarmulkes* outside of a synagogue. Most Texans had never seen one at all. Maybe on the head of the Pope, but certainly not on a Jew. "Well," I decided, "That's all going to change." In the tradition of the valiant Rabbi Akiva, who defied the decrees of mighty Rome, the Akiva starters would cover their heads. If Blacks could be proud—so could Jews!

Though there were only a few months to organize things before the winter basketball season, we managed to put together a team. With lots of hard work, training, practice, and hours in the gym when I might have been home, the kids learned how to sink a jump shot and rebound with elbows outstretched. After several tries, we managed to fashion a *kippah* which would stay on the head during the game. One of our players felt embarrassed wearing his *kippah* in front of a gym filled with non-Jews. He even threatened to quit the team. Since he was a talented player, his absence would have been a blow to the team, but I decided that greater damage would have been

caused if an exception was made to the rule. I told him that if he left us with this ultimatum, I would sorrowfully have to accept his departure from the team. True to his word, he quit, but already by the second game of the season, after our first dramatic victory in front of hundreds of screaming fans, he was back—this time with a *kippah* fastened securely onto his head.

I don't know if he was inspired to return because he came to understand the importance of standing up for what you believe in, or because our victory in the first game of the season created a city-wide stir. Similarly, I wasn't sure if spectators jammed the gymnasium to watch some good basketball, or to see the Jewish beanies flying down the court. Whatever the crowd's motivation, they cheered to see us win. Not once or twice, but seven out of nine games ended in Akiva Academy victories!

Dallas had a new winning coach besides Tom Landry. The *Texas Jewish Post*, the local Jewish newspaper, wrote up each of our games and plastered pictures of the team on the front and back pages of the paper. The reporter raved: "The team not only enjoyed the blessings of its rabbi, the rabbi himself coached the players." All during the basketball season, the school received more publicity and renown than it ever had for its outstanding academic achievements.

When it came time for the league's end-of-season celebration, who stepped up to the dais to hand out the trophies? None other than Roger Staubach, the famous Dallas Cowboy quarterback. Praising our team, he said: "The school league has always been an outstanding example of sportsmanship and excellence, but it never reached the exemplary level which it attained this year. The reason—the addition of the Akiva Academy basketball team to the

other fine squads in the league, and the dynamic enthusiasm of all of their supporters. The team was superlatively trained and managed by Rabbis Haber and Lazarus. I have to admit, you don't often find rabbis on the basketball court, and if you do, they come to watch from the side. This time, we are speaking about two rabbis who did an outstanding job in coaching this year's most successful basketball team." With players, he added, "who wore beanies on their heads."

In addition to the famous quarterback's praises, I received a congratulatory letter from the Director of the Dallas Sport Department, a former star player for Rutgers University. He noted that he had never before encountered a rabbi in sports, and he wondered if the city could look forward to Akiva baseball and football teams too.

Compliments came from within and without the Jewish community. Usually, rabbis are congratulated for performing a *bar mitzvah* or *brit milah*, and here I was, being praised for a winning basketball season. One shouldn't ever let praise go to one's head, and especially not over basketball, but my strategy worked. Akiva was on the map. If you talked about basketball in Dallas, you had to mention the Jews. We were "in." If you were looking for a good education and good basketball, Akiva was the address. Jewish kids no longer had to enroll in non-Jewish schools. There was a choice. Now when I sat down with a prospective family, I had a winning season to sell. Within two weeks of the championship, nine Jewish families called the school office to enroll children for the following year. All during the upcoming months, the wave of enrollment continued. Because of the basketballs which whizzed with a "swish" through the nets of our gym, students distant from Jewish tradition found themselves sitting in

classrooms, listening to classes in Bible and Talmud.

One of letters I received during all of the hoopla was addressed to "The Reverend Yisrael Haber." The letter was sent by an educational foundation which assisted students in need. "Dear Father," it read.

This by itself was enough to grab my attention, but to add to the mystery, the letter was signed, Ronald Schwartzman, a name which sounded unmistakably Jewish. How sad, I thought, that my fellow Jews could lack such elementary knowledge of their faith and call a rabbi, "Father." I was reminded how far Dallas was from the Jewish mainstream. Well, wasn't this why Miriam and I had decided to come? To educate the uneducated? Not that every Jew in New York is a Talmudic scholar, but there, surrounded by millions of Jews, if only by osmosis, something rubs off. In Dallas, back in the seventies, and maybe still even today, if you stopped a Jew on the street and asked him who Abraham was, he probably would have answered, "President Lincoln, of course."

With the memory of my Uncle Meir Moshe guiding me, I wanted to do more. Even though I had my hands full with Akiva's 250 students, I asked permission of the school's directors to teach an evening course in Israeli History at a local Dallas college. When my request was approved, I felt pleased, not just for the additional income I would receive, but, more importantly, for the opportunity of spreading the great light of Judaism to a new group of students.

Slowly, and largely because of my basketball success, the school's Board of Directors saw me as a new key player in the Jewish community of Dallas. My stock in the community continued to climb. I was chosen to represent the school in a conference of principals on the subject of

Jewish education which was held in Charleston, South Carolina. On my return, students and parents alike showed surprising interest in the themes which were discussed. Suddenly people wanted a solid Jewish education for their children. Had something like this ever occurred before in any Jewish community in Texas? Probably not. But then again, what city in Texas could boast a champion Jewish basketball team in its midst?

Since I could do no wrong, I organized a special Shabbat for the upper grades which was to be held in Denver, Colorado. My wife and I, and the Lazarus family went along as chaperones. Our goal was to give our students a chance to meet with Jewish high school students from another part of the country. When young people see that other Jewish youngsters share the same common culture and history, this gives them a deeper respect for their roots.

The trip was a joyous event for everyone. The scenery was breathtaking, and the interaction livelier than I had dreamed. Jewish students attended from over ten different cities: Phoenix, Cleveland, Corpus Christi, Houston, San Antonio, San Diego, Santa Fe, Seattle, Cheyenne and places even more remote—that is, remote to someone who had grown up in the Jewish *shtetels* of Brooklyn. There was even one girl from Alaska!

"Alaska?" I thought. "Can there really be Jews in Alaska?"

Little did I know, that in a very short time, I myself would be a Jew from Alaska! Who can fathom the wonders of the Almighty?

Although my workload at school was heavy with teaching and administrative responsibilities, a feeling of satisfaction accompanied everything I did, giving me the

strength to take on more and more duties. Deciding to go for a doctorate, I enrolled at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas, 75 miles south of Dallas. I studied there twice a week in the evenings, always enjoying the long, scenic highway bordered by broad Texas prairies and cowboy-movie skies. Akiva's Board of Directors backed my wanting a doctorate, knowing that when doctors spoke, people listened! Since it would be a feather in their cap to have an assistant principal with a Ph.D., they encouraged my decision. Baylor was one of the country's top Baptist universities. Even though most of my fellow classmates were already working professionals in a variety of sociological fields, for many of them, I was the first real, live Jew they had met. And a rabbi to boot!

The state's most popular Jewish newspaper, the *Texas Jewish Week*, with a circulation of 20,000, reported that: "Rabbi Yisrael Haber, the assistant principal of the Akiva Jewish Academy, participated in a seminar of educators this week at Baylor University's School of Education. Rabbi Haber is studying toward a doctorate in Educational Psychology at Baylor, specializing in Jewish Education in America. During the seminar, he lectured on the theme of Jewish Day Schools in America."

The article went on to give a little of my history. With the generous use of hyperbole which local Jewish newspapers are known for, I was made out to be a Pied Piper of Jewish Education. All I had to do was whistle and kids flocked to study Torah! I was an advocate of the "most contemporary techniques in Jewish education," whatever that means, and emphasized "individual sessions between teacher and student, geared to the student's own pace." While the article compressed my opinions into a few cramped columns, you could tell they were indeed talking

about me, and, once again, my standing went up around town, especially since I was learning toward a doctorate at Baylor.

Generally, I arrived at the verdant Baylor campus at six in the evening. One day, however, I arrived early to study for final exams. Without the cover of darkness, my skullcap stuck out like a flashing neon light. On my way to the library, a group of three college students approached me from the opposite direction. Seeing the *kippah* on my head, the tallest of them said in the loud, hefty voice of a linebacker, "What does this clown think he's doing here? He doesn't belong here."

I heard his voice clearly.

"Quiet," one of his friend's told him. "He'll hear you."

"What do I care if he hears?" the first responded in a threatening manner. "Doesn't he know this is the Baylor University campus? He's got to be put in his place."

"Uh oh," I thought. "Here comes an incident."

The three strode closer. The tall one who didn't like my *kippah* continued to complain. "What a lot of nerve. Doesn't he have any sense of respect? How can he walk around with that thing on his head?"

"Stop causing trouble," his pal urged. "So what if he has a beanie. Why is it your business? And stop talking so loudly."

"Why is it my business?" the football player asked, even more agitated. "I'll talk as loud as I please, and none of you are going to tell me what to do. To heck with this goon. Let him go back to the Vatican where he belongs."

"The Vatican?!" his friend responded. "He isn't a Catholic. He's a Jew!"

Our paths crossed at that very moment. Everyone stopped.

"You're a Jew?" the big guy asked.

"That's right," I answered proudly. "I'm a Jew."

"Oh, then that's okay," he muttered, suddenly unsure of himself. "I apologize. I thought you were Catholic."

With a look of embarrassment, he quickly led the others on down the path.

"That's interesting," I thought. Apparently, I had stumbled upon the one place on earth, outside of Israel, where a Jew wasn't on the bottom rung of the ladder.

I have to point out that, aside from this unpleasant occurrence, I encountered no other anti-Semitic incidents during all of my time in Dallas. It turned out that the people of Texas were as sincerely polite and friendly as legend has it.

Ironically, although my achievements in the community were increasing, I felt somewhere deep in my heart that being an assistant principal in Dallas was not what I was destined to do. Though I received a Texas-sized load of respect and recognition, and though the Board of Directors was considering making me the principal when the incumbent stepped down that coming September, still I had the feeling that the yellow rose of Texas was fast losing its color.

I remember the times Miriam and I would drive along the highway by-passing the Academy and wonder together out loud how much longer we could stick it out. The reason wasn't because we were tired from the workload, rather it became clear to us that our dream to bring Jews closer to Judaism hadn't materialized in the way we had hoped. More specifically, the problem wasn't the Jews, but rather the Jewish establishment.

You might have thought that the following year, as principal of Akiva Academy, I would be in a position to institute meaningful changes in the overall program of the

school. But it was hinted when I was offered the job—no, it was stated straight-out—that the prestigious position would be mine on condition that I would "stretch some of my unbending religious practices." Of course, in our personal lives, my wife and I would be perfectly free to follow the tenets of Jewish faith in any manner we wished. No one was proposing to tell us how to live our lives at home. But publicly we would have to accept the standards of the school, which were not always in adherence to the rules of Orthodox Judaism. In other words, we weren't supposed to upset the boat by being too *frum.*

In addition, to avoid misunderstandings, the Board of Directors informed me that if I became principal, I would not have to appoint an assistant to help me with the work because "the president and vice president of the board would stop by my office every day to provide whatever assistance was needed."

It was as simple as that. If I agreed to their daily inspections, I could have the job. I just had to make sure that the Jewish Day School wasn't overly Jewish!

Though I didn't have a hearing problem, I could not believe my ears. The representatives of the board repeated their conditions, just to make sure that no problems would arise in the future. Of course, addressing me, they spoke with great respect and politeness. With smiles on their faces, they informed me that my judgment in educational matters should be guided by the fact that Dallas was not New York. "When in Rome..." the board president said, not finishing the sentence.

"For instance," he added, "Occasionally, it is politically correct not to notice that a school fundraising dinner is being held in a restaurant not known for its strict kosher standards."

"A principal," the vice president explained, "Has to take part in social events, and he can't make parents feel bad by acting holier than everyone else."

In other words, to their way of thinking, it was okay to eat in places not adhering to the strict standards of *kashrut* not to spoil the party.

"This is Texas, rabbi, and everything should be taken in stride."

Then to sweeten the bitter pill, the president of the board concluded with the following fateful sentence: "You should understand, rabbi, that not many people at such a young age are offered the sought-after position of school principal."

I understood all right. I understood that if they had offered the job to an educator twenty years my senior, they would never had dared to tell him how to teach. Nor would they have dared to suggest that inspectors patrol the school halls every day censoring things that were too Jewish to their taste. This approach was the very reason that general Jewish education was failing in America. Once upon a time the rabbi taught the unlearned. Now the roles had changed. The unlearned told the rabbis what to do. I was being asked to be a social director on a cruise ship, not a Jewish educator. Members of the board, a wealthy contractor and a divorce lawyer were to decide school policy. People who knew nothing about the book of Genesis were going to save our children from the scourge of assimilation. Indeed, the Sages of the Talmud warned that the wealthy would come to own not only their businesses, but the academies of learning too. I had never appreciated the depth of this insight until my brief tenure in Dallas. When this happens, education flies out the door, and the main topic at monthly board meetings is whether or not to fire the rabbi.

I have not done statistical research on the subject, but it seems to me that the rabbis who stood firm in upholding the sacred principles and commandments upon which Judaism is eternally based are the people who most succeeded in preserving the integrity of the Jewish nation, generation after generation.

It is also true, and I have witnessed it myself on several occasions, that the rabbis who look the other way and surrender to the demands of the Board of Directors, overlooking principles and rules, are the ones who enjoy a longer professional career. Clearly a flexible reed which bends in the wind can withstand more storms than a reed which stands stiffly. However, when you turn a rabbi into a puppet, you remove all of the deep inner life from Judaism, and after a while, people become tired of the show.

Both Miriam and I knew that the curtains had closed on my rabbinical career in Texas. Staying would have meant abandoning my beliefs in order to receive a monthly pay check from the board. I understand the need for a governing body, but when it comes to observing Jewish law, there can be no compromises or sell-outs. When it comes to Judaism, G-d is the Chairman of the board. All of the riches in the world cannot change the truth of the Torah.

The situation I found myself in reminded me of the story told about a rabbi and his congregation. It isn't a reflection on Dallas, nor Akiva Academy, but something which can occur in any place where the passing fancies of modern life confront age-old tradition.

Long ago, a wandering rabbi who traveled from village to village delivering sermons came to a small and remote Jewish community not known for its scholarship or piety.

On one matter, however, the villagers were very strict. Every Shabbat they would all gather into the synagogue to pray. The traveling rabbi approached the head of the community and asked to speak to the congregation after the Shabbat prayers. After all, Jews enjoy a good sermon.

The community leader agreed, but not wanting any surprises, he asked the rabbi what topic did he think to lecture about.

"I thought I would speak on the importance of keeping Shabbat," the rabbi answered.

"Do me a favor," the community leader said. "Don't talk about the Sabbath."

"Why not?" the rabbi asked in wonder.

"In our community not everyone keeps all of the laws of the Sabbath. In fact, no one does. Right after prayers, everyone who has a business rushes to go to work. So why make people feel bad?"

The rabbi reflected over the situation and said, "Very well, I won't speak about the Sabbath. I will speak about the laws of keeping kosher."

"No, no!" the community leader responded. "Certainly don't speak about that!"

"Why not?" the rabbi asked in amazement.

"You must understand. Our community tries to keep kosher, but when kosher food is unavailable, and this occurs a lot, we make do with what we have."

The rabbi thoughtfully stroked at his beard. "Then I will speak on the laws of family purity."

The leader of the community spun his *kippah* around on his head. "*Gevalt*!" he exclaimed. "This is the last thing in the world that people want to hear. Who even thinks about such things?!"

"Then what do you want me to speak about?" the rabbi asked in frustration.

"I'll tell you," the community leader answered. "Why don't you speak about...*Yiddishkeit*?"

Like the rabbi of the story, I wanted to speak about *kashrut*, about observing Shabbat, about the importance of *taharat hamishpachah*—the very things which make up real *Yiddishkeit.*

What could I do? The community leaders and I simply did not see eye to eye. Thus Miriam and I began to ponder what to do next with our lives. And as strange as it may seem, I decided to dedicate the next chapter of my life to the institution that has the most stringent chain of authority possible—the United States military. I decided to become a chaplain in the Air Force. At least there, I could help Jews in faraway places without having to deal with a Jewish Board of Directors.

The truth is, the decision was not made on a moment's notice. Serving as a rabbi in the Air Force had been a youthful dream. My old yeshiva in Brooklyn was located directly across the street from an army induction center. Outside the door was a poster of a lovely young couple, he in his Air Force blues, she with a cocktail in her hand, surrounded by a background of palm trees. The caption read: "You Too Can Be in This Picture." The next month, the same couple would be sailing on a yacht, looking even happier: she looking admiringly up to her husband—her hero—and again, "You Too Can Be in This Picture." It looked like a pretty good picture to be in, I used to think. Passing those posters as a teenager, I longed to put on that same magical Air Force uniform. If you are looking to reach Jews the world over, the United States Air Force can get you there. Now that the Akiva Academy Board of Directors had K.O.'d my enthusiasm for Dallas, the posters reappeared in my mind. That old feeling of wanderlust

struck again. Enlisting presented an opportunity to break away from the usual, and meet new challenges. Miriam and I spent long hours weighing the pros and cons of a military career. The more we debated the matter, the more convinced I became. True, it wasn't the most usual path for a *yeshiva bachur* from Brooklyn, but, as my basketball coaching proved, I wasn't the most usual rabbi. So off we went into the wild blue yonder, flying high into the sky.

Why not? Wasn't Uncle Sam Jewish?

5

You're in the Army Now

In the spring of 1973, after eight months in Texas, I found myself in downtown Dallas at 6:45 in the morning. I had been downtown before, but never at this address. The sign on the building read: United States Army Induction Center, Medical Division. The rather worn-down building had been constructed before World War Two, but for me it symbolized a new beginning and new battlefields to conquer.

I spoke to myself out loud to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Here I was, Yisrael Haber, from Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, yeshiva bred, dressed in *tzitzit* and *kippah*, waiting for the doors of the Army Induction Center in Dallas to open so that I could enlist in the Air Force. Do I really want to be here, I wondered?

The reader will not be surprised to learn that conflicting thoughts raced through my mind during the drive from my house to the center. Was I crazy, or was this some sort of important *shlichut*, some predestined mission from Heaven? Was I on my way to stimulating work, or merely running away from a life of compromise at the school? One way or the other, I was certain that some unknown adventure awaited me beyond the doors of the building. No one I knew had ever traveled this route before, so I

couldn't ask anyone, "Hey, Yankel, tell me, what is it like?"

As to what the future would bring, I didn't have fears. As the Psalmist says: *The L-rd is my shepherd; I shall not want.* Plus, I was never the type to know where life would find me. Sure, I had dreamed of joining the Air Force as a kid, but my game plan was flexible. At the *bar mitzvahs* of some of my childhood friends, they predicted what they were going to be when they grew up, and sure enough, their prophecies came to pass. My *mazel* was always more of a mystery. Dallas, Alaska, the Golan Heights.... With my luck, tomorrow, I could be on the moon.

After a few months at Akiva, when things were going well, I thought Dallas would be our home for years, yet here I was at the induction center. A few days before my medical examination, I had received a phone call at home. The voice at the other end of the wire was terse and official. "Mr. Haber, if you are still interested in enlisting in the United States Military, you must report on Monday morning, seven o'clock, at the examination center. Thank you."

When I told Miriam about the call, she became very emotional. After our many discussions, she was ready to be the wife of an Air Force chaplain in some remote part of the world. But at this point neither of us knew what that involved. And I had to first pass the examinations and interviews. Who knew—maybe I would turn out to be too Jewish for them too. After all, did the United States Air Force need the headache of an Orthodox rabbi?

To begin my military career correctly, I arrived fifteen minutes early, at 6:30, or rather, 06:30. I was the only one there. Perhaps I was the only enlistee? Shortly, however, a line began to form behind me. Looking at the faces of the volunteers, I realized that with all of my 25 years, I was the oldest person present. Nor did I spot anyone who looked

like a Talmudic scholar. Most of the group was high schoolers, either upcoming graduates or drop-outs. Whites and Blacks were mixed together. All of them were unmistakably Texans. Several wore ten-gallon hats. And there was one Jew—me. Just as I made an inspection of them, they were eyeballing me. I was wearing my *kippah*, and since it was a few weeks into the *Omer* period when shaving is forbidden, I sported a scruffy beard. In their eyes, I was surely an oddity. The army was known to attract its share of weirdos, and I was no exception. They were probably happy that I was standing at the front of the line. That way, compared to me, they would seem normal.

The door of the Center opened exactly at seven. A young soldier appeared, dressed in a clean and pressed uniform. Inviting us into the building, he told us to read the instructions posted on the wall of the corridor. Being the first in line, I carefully read the detailed directions, knowing that the others would mimic everything I did. Accordingly, I informed all of the newcomers that the small white paper cups we received were *not* for drinks at the water cooler down the hall.

At the next station, a sign told us to remove our shirts. Everyone followed my lead. Though we were all in t-shirts, all eyes were on me—not to see what I would do next, but because of the funny strings which dangled from the t-shirt on top of my t-shirt. By their whispers and looks, it was clear that no one had ever seen *tzitzit* before. One fellow ventured to ask: "Whatever are those strings?" Explaining the purpose of the ritual fringes, I felt that my task as an educator in the army had already begun. While my two minute lecture didn't make them experts in the Bible, at least they stopped whispering and looking at me like I was some kind of creature from Timbuktu.

A barrage of examinations followed: hearing, vision, x-rays, dental, blood pressure... until my military folder started to swell. Then we were told to enter a small, narrow room and stand behind the gleaming white line. This freshly painted line was a striking contradiction to the dilapidated state of the building. One of the doctors who passed by saw me gazing at the peeling wall paint and assured me that in a few weeks a new induction center was being opened. He said that we were to be one of the last groups enlisted there, as if it were something of which to be proud. Then he strode out of the room, leaving me and thirty other guys standing behind the white line, not knowing what to do.

After a considerable wait, the side door suddenly opened and a soldier stepped into the room. Raising his voice, he commanded us to march in quick, precise military order to the other side of the building, mount the stairs to the floor above, turn left, pass two sets of doors, mount to the next floor, turn left again, pass another two doors, ascend another stairway, and assemble in the general examination room.

"Is that clear to everyone? Good. On the double!"

Since I was the first on line, it was my job to lead the way. The young soldier had barked out the directions at a furious pace, and the map he described was still a jumble in my head. But an order is an order, so I took off at an army pace with thirty guys behind me.

Since I had never done any military marching, my steps would have stuck out at any parade. Exploding with anger, the soldier started cursing me for disgracing the Corps. "Listen you little pipsqueak," I wanted to tell him. "I'm not in the army yet, so don't go yelling at me." I burst into the stairwell, thinking that at this very hour at Akiva, I was

usually organizing the morning prayer. There, in the school, no one would dare rebuke me like this headstrong soldier, not even the bigshots on the board! Wouldn't my students have loved to have heard him chew me up and spit me out like that.

As I was making my frantic, comic way along the next corridor, a uniformed officer ordered me to leave the race and stand to the side. "Great!" I think. "I've flunked!" Even before I was officially a soldier, I was singled out for punishment. What was I? A student that I had to stand at the back of the room? So what if I marched like a duck? Had anyone bothered to teach me? After I had signed the papers, they could stick me in a stockade, but now, I was still a civilian. "So if you don't want me turning around and walking out the front door," I fumed to myself, "back off you thick-headed soldiers."

I didn't know whether the guy who yanked me out of line was a sergeant or a general. But when the young soldier turned to him with deference and respect, and called him by his rank and name, I learned that he was a major.

Turning to me, he asked, "Are you planning to join the Chaplain Corps?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, thinking that finally someone had realized that I was enlisting as an officer, and not as an ordinary grunt.

"I figured," he said. "Those yo-yo strings give it away."

I look down at my *tzitzit*. "All religious Jews dress this way, not only rabbis," I answered, always acting the part of the teacher.

The major nodded and motioned for the young soldier to follow him into a nearby room. The door closed and the major started to holler at him. As a future officer, I was supposed to receive preferential treatment. I didn't belong

with the others, and the soldier should have realized it from the start. Was he blind? Couldn't he recognize a rabbi when he saw one? After piling on a good two minutes of abuse, the major stalked out of the room and stood stern-faced in the corridor. Embarrassed, the soldier stepped over to me, and with a completely different tone in his voice, he said, "I request your forgiveness, sir."

It seemed that my ears were playing tricks on me. Just minutes before, as we were racing up the stairs, this gung-ho sergeant had cursed me with the choicest of words, and now he purred like a pussy cat. The major added his apologies as he led me upstairs.

"Why the apologies?" I asked.

"In the military, there is a way that things should be done, and a way that they shouldn't. Why didn't you say you were enlisting as an officer?"

"No one asked me," I answered.

The major shook his head with displeasure. "Not everyone in the army has the personal initiative to think for himself, and not everyone is an Einstein," he explained, leading me to the doctor's office.

"It's forgotten," I said.

He smiled and opened a door. "Please enter, sir," he said "I'll wait outside until you finish."

With my self-respect restored, I walked into the doctor's office for a private examination. Unlike the run-down look of the building, this room was surprisingly modern and equipped with the latest medical equipment. I had been to the usual assortment of doctors, but this office topped them all for professionalism and style. The doctor himself was a lieutenant colonel. He sat at a large attractive table, glancing through a folder. When I walked into the room, he looked up over his spectacles and told me to please enter.

Sitting down opposite him, I saw he was looking over my medical records. He was in his late fifties, slowly but surely on the way to a respectable army pension. Though I had only undergone a half-dozen examinations that morning, the file was loaded with papers.

"You want to fly, is that right?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I said. "I want to join the Air Force as a...."

"Yes, yes," he said, not listening to me. "That certainly is a special thrill—to sit back in the cockpit and to soar off into the air."

"No, doctor," I began, hoping to clear up his confusion. "I am enlisting in the Air Force as...."

"I'm sorry, but there could be a problem," he continued, cutting off my words. "Because you're nearsighted, they may not let you fly."

"That's why I don't want to be a pilot," I said. "I want to be a chaplain."

"A chaplain?" he repeated, finally catching the point. Quickly he glanced over his papers. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Well, I...."

"What church are you with?"

"I'm not," I answered. "I'm Jewish."

"Jewish?" he said. His face lit up. "Years ago, when I was in medical school, I knew a few Jews. They're good people."

"I agree," I said.

A complete physical followed, and when I left the doctor's office, the major was still waiting in the hall.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Thank G-d," I answered.

"Would you care to see the place you were headed before I fished you out of the line?"

My curiosity was aroused. "Sure. Why not?"

We walked upstairs to the top floor of the building. There in a large room, my friends from the line were standing dressed in their *birthday suits* as two doctors examined them from head to toe, as if checking parts in a long assembly line.

Before leaving the building, I was told that the results of my examinations would be analyzed, and in two weeks time, an answer would arrive at my house.

The very next day, I received a letter from Rabbi Victor Solomon, Director of Field Operations for the National Jewish Welfare Board in New York. In his long and encouraging epistle, he wrote: "Your decision to enter the military chaplaincy is a commendable gesture translating noble ideals into tangible facts. The purpose of the Jewish chaplaincy is to serve the religious needs of Jewish servicemen and their families in the Armed Forces wherever duty may call them. We always hope that the experience will be enjoyable, creative and fruitful for the chaplain. However, it can often entail hardship and sacrifice. This is what makes the Jewish chaplaincy, as I see it, a great *mitzvah* and *Kiddush Hashem*. I am confident that you will sanctify the Name of G-d in your work...."

A feeling of excitement swept over me as I finished his letter. The whole adventure was becoming more real. It was almost as if I were boarding the yacht in the poster. Where would they send us? Hawaii? San Juan? Japan? Miriam and I could hardly wait to find out.

6

The Mixer

Come Pesach, we invited the whole family to join us—my parents, grandparents and siblings, as well as Miriam's mother and cousins. For our first Pesach celebration after our marriage, it was really a family affair. In the middle of the week-long holiday, I received a rabbinical endorsement from the Commission of Jewish Chaplaincy of the National Jewish Welfare Board. This important recommendation was also forwarded to the Chief of Chaplains, Field Extension at Randolph Air Force Base near San Antonio, Texas. Within a week, I received a letter from the command chaplain at Randolph, informing me that he had received my endorsement. He requested that I fill out several forms, which I sent back the very same day.

My new career in the military was on the way to becoming a reality, but I still had my hands full with programs and ceremonies at the school, including Israel's 25th Anniversary. There were special dinners, sporting events, speaking engagements, and a Salute to Israel Parade. The holiday of *Lag B'Omer* came and we put on a school play in honor of Rabbi Akiva, the great teacher of Torah during the time of the *Mishna*. Rather than give in to the harsh decrees of the Romans who banned the learn-

ing of Torah, he had continued teaching his students until he was imprisoned and led to a martyr's death. Watching the play, I couldn't help but wonder how Rabbi Akiva would have reacted if asked by a Jewish Board of Directors to compromise on upholding the principles of his faith.

In the midst of all of this activity, I received a letter from the Jewish Welfare Board, inviting me to attend an orientation conference for new chaplains in mid-June. The realization that I was joining the Air Force was still only a fantasy since so much was transpiring at the school. Teacher reports and student grades were being written, and the graduation ceremony had to be planned. Who had time to think about the yachts and exotic locales?

Nonetheless, it seemed that a giant hand had come out of the sky and flipped the sand-clock of my life upside down. As summer approached, the sand began pouring out in a frantic pace. On May 29, which happened to be my 25th birthday, I opened my mailbox and discovered a most flattering letter of thanks and praise from the Akiva Academy president. The graduation ceremony was held in the elegant Fairmont Hotel in Dallas, and I handed out the diplomas with feelings of great emotion and pride. In a strange way, these students whom I had only known for a year seemed like my children.

As the weeks passed and I failed to receive my final clearance from the Air Force, I telephoned Randolph Base to learn about my status. I was told that several weeks of background investigation was conducted on every officer candidate, and that I would just have to be patient. "Listen, guys, I'm clean," I felt like telling them. "What does a nice Jewish boy have to hide? The only thing in my closet is a pair of rubber boots and an umbrella to keep me dry in the rain."

Since I had already started my doctorate studies in Texas, I asked the Jewish Welfare Board to assist me in being stationed in the state, preferably at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, so that I could finish my degree at Baylor. I guess you could say I was innocent of what a career in the military entailed. I could request the sun and the moon, but it was some officer in the Pentagon who would decide where my wife and I would spend the next few years of our lives.

In the middle of June, without having heard from the Air Force, I flew to Manhattan for the orientation meeting, where I met four other candidates who were hoping to become Jewish chaplains. Three were headed for the Army and one for the Air Force like me. Of course, we all had a lot of questions about the role of a military chaplain, about our responsibilities, about the chain of command, and what kind of living conditions we could expect for our families. In addition to answers, we received a lot of valuable tips on how to get by in the military. The main question on everyone's mind, however, was where we were being stationed. No one in New York could give us the answer.

One day, one of the rabbis at the conference, Rabbi Aryeh Lev, who was Director of the Commission on Jewish Chaplaincy, asked if any of us had seen the beautiful scenery of the Pacific Northwest. A few of the candidates said yes, they had traveled through the region. Indeed, they agreed, it was magnificent country.

"What about you, Yisrael?" the rabbi asked.

"No, I haven't," I answered with some surprise at being singled out.

"I understand that Alaska's mountain ranges are the most beautiful in all of North America," Rabbi Lev asserted.

Why was he looking at me, I wondered?

Alaska? Oh no, I thought. It couldn't be. Yes, I was ready to travel, but not to some other planet. It was simply out of the question.

"Rabbi Lev," I said quickly. "I'm sure the countryside must be very beautiful, but if this has anything to do with assignments, since I am in the middle of my doctorate, I requested Texas so that I can continue at Bayler. If not, I could finish my studies in Southern California."

I didn't tell him that I had done some investigating on my own and discovered that there were only twelve Jewish chaplains in the Air Force worldwide. Since the jobs in the Northeast were already filled, I asked to be assigned to a base which had had a Jewish chaplain in the past. California was one of them.

"Nothing has been decided, Yisrael," he answered. "I just wanted to know."

His assurance didn't put me at ease. Why would he ask about Alaska if he didn't have a reason? "Alaska?" I kept thinking. Doesn't he know I'm from Brooklyn? I wanted to spread *Yiddishkeit*, not freeze to death.

"Don't take it so hard, Yisrael," one of the other candidates joked as we were taking a break in the hall. "Alaska isn't so bad, if you don't mind having icicles stuck to your *tzitzit*."

I laughed along with the others. No sense panicking. Like Rabbi Lev said, nothing had been decided. It could be that he was just making small talk when he spoke about the scenery. No doubt it was a beautiful place. But maybe I should have told him that mountains make me dizzy, or that my hands bleed with the first sign of frost. The Catskills Mountains, all right. Mount Zion in Jerusalem, okay. But Mount McKinley? The tallest mountain in America? Who needs it?

After some time, I convinced myself that I had nothing to worry about. There was a pay phone in the building, so I thought to call Miriam to let her know what I wasn't worried about. But since she was alone in Dallas, I figured it was silly to upset her with something so uncertain. It was probably my imagination getting the best of me. Soon I was laughing at the very thought of being Rabbi Yisrael Haber from Anchorage, Alaska. I chuckled, saying it out loud. It was absolutely ridiculous, ha, ha. But I kept worrying all the same.

When the conference wrapped up, a nervous feeling remained in my heart. So on my way back to Dallas, I made an unexpected stop in Washington D.C. My last visit to America's capital had been several years before, December 12, 1971, the date Miriam and I were engaged. Before that, as a child, I had visited my uncle and aunt in Baltimore, and they gave me a tour of the Smithsonian and the Congress. Rather than wait in the long line outside the White House, we stood by the fence along Pennsylvania Avenue and gazed at the President's home from across the broad lawn. "It is good to be an American," my uncle said. "But never forget you're a Jew." Later, when my father was assigned to the Pentagon, he took me on a more in-depth tour of the city, and I myself led a group of students from Spring Valley on a study trip there, so I knew the town pretty well.

"Bolling Air Force Base," I told the taxi driver at the Washington National Airport.

A short drive later, I was standing in front of the building which housed the Office of the Chief Chaplain of the Air Force. Inside, several workers greeted me, "Hello, rabbi," without knowing who I was. After all, dealing with rabbis was a part of their job. A chaplain colonel working

in the personnel office escorted me into his room. Telling him that I just happened to be passing through the neighborhood, I asked if he knew where I was being assigned. He said that the matter hadn't been decided, but that I had nothing to worry about.

A story is told about a sick man who went to a doctor. After the doctor finished his examination and told the sick man about all the ailments he had, the doctor said, "But don't take it to heart. If it were me, I wouldn't worry."

"To be truthful, I wouldn't worry either," the man responded, "if it were you who were sick and not me."

I felt the same way. From his seat in the personnel office in Washington, it was easy for him to keep calm. I was the one who might be going to Alaska—not him.

Then, to reassure me before sending me off, he continued: "Regarding the Alaskan mountains, they really are magnificent. It's true that we are scheduled to send someone up there, but the die hasn't been cast. In any event, my guess is that if anyone is sent to Alaska this year, it will be a Reform rabbi. Since the nearest kosher butcher is 2000 miles away, it might be going beyond the call of duty to assign an Orthodox fellow like you to the region."

The chaplain called a base taxi to drive me back to the airport. Leaving the building, a few workers called out "*Shalom*" in Hebrew. Two officers on their way to the Pentagon already sat in the car when it drove up. Riding with them made me feel like I was in the Air Force already. Back in the air, on the plane ride to Dallas, I tried to catch a little shut-eye, but my mind wouldn't rest. A ping-pong ball kept bouncing back and forth in my brain. "They are sending me to Alaska—no, they are sending someone else. They are sending me to Alaska—no, they are sending someone else."

Returning home, I told Miriam about the orientation meeting and the subjects which had been discussed. I mentioned Alaska, but only in passing, not wanting to cause her alarm.

The following week, I phoned Randolph Air Force Base and asked where things stood. Be patient, I was told. These things take time.

"I have to know what kind of clothes to buy," I told them.

"You will be issued suitable military attire," I was informed.

"I don't know whether to buy a bathing suit or thermal underwear."

"If you need thermal underwear, we will supply it. However, we don't stock bathing suits."

"What about for my wife?"

"We're sorry, but the Air Force doesn't provide clothing for spouses."

"You see, it's important I know."

"The moment we hear something, we'll give you a call."

Ten days later I received a phone call. It was Randolph Air Force Base on the line. This was it. "Miriam, come quick!" We huddled together next to the receiver.

"Rabbi Haber?"

"Yes, this is Rabbi Haber," I sputtered.

"Did you ever take a physical for Air Force acceptance?" the voice on the other end of the line asked.

"Of course I did. Way back in April," I responded, confused.

"Well, sir, you see the examination center moved to a new location in Dallas, and they must have misplaced your file."

Was this a joke, I thought?

"Would you be so kind to report for another physical? Once we have your medical report, we can issue your orders."

The next day I showed up at the new modern building and went through the whole rigmarole from the start.

To calm ourselves down, I took Miriam on a little vacation to Kansas City. What does a rabbi do on vacation? He visits another rabbi. So we stopped in on our friends, Rabbi Radzik and his wife who had recently moved from Dallas.

We returned home and waited. I would have been happy to go through a third round of examinations if that would have helped them decide. Finally, on the second of August, a letter arrived from Randolph Air Force Base. I opened the seal with trembling fingers. "The Secretary of the Air Force has directed me to inform you that, by the direction of the President, you are tendered an indefinite appointment as an officer of the Air Force.... "

Hooray! The suspense was over. We were in the Air Force now.

If the President himself wanted me aboard what could I do but accept? Naturally, we were very excited. I would start my career as first lieutenant, then be promoted to captain when I finished chaplain school. The next day, I recited the oath of office before a notary public and signed all of the required documents, pledging to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; to bear true faith and allegiance to the same... to capably and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter, so help me G-d."

Finally, I was a military man. I had put myself in that Air Force poster of old, but the background scenery was

still unclear. That evening, we were phoned by a "reliable source" on the East Coast saying that my appointment would probably be in California. For the first time in months, I relaxed. I put Alaska, like a bad dream, out of my mind. I wouldn't have to buy thermal underwear after all. And I could easily transfer from Baylor to a California state college to finish up my doctorate.

Another day passed and THE CALL finally came. I yelled for Miriam to answer it, but remembering that she had gone out, I walked into the kitchen and raised the receiver.

"Is this Rabbi Haber?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Good afternoon," he said. "This is Colonel Johnson calling from the Pentagon. I have your assignment."

"Great," I said. "Where are we going?"

"Rabbi, I want to tell you that you and Mrs. Haber are indeed a fortunate, young couple. We are going to send you to a place where the mountains are majestic."

"Thank you very much," I said.

"We are going to send you to a place where the air is ecologically pure."

"Thank you, sir," I repeated, waiting to hear the good news.

"You'll be going to a place where the challenge is unique and monumental."

"That's just what we want, sir."

"We are happy to tell you that you and your wife will be going for the next three years to...Alaska."

I stared at the phone. Maybe an old yeshiva buddy, Yingy, was playing a trick on me, I thought. "Yingy? Is that you?" I asked.

"What?" the voice answered. "This is Colonel Johnson from the Pentagon."

"Yes, sir. I mean, could you repeat that once again? Where are you sending us?"

"Alaska. Good luck."

Just like that, he hung up the phone.

The butterflies in my belly returned. Alaska. I was most fearful. Not so much because of having to go to Alaska—I was fearful because I knew that in ten minutes time Miriam would be home. What was I going to tell her? That we'd be selling our car and buying a team of Huskies?

When she came home, I greeted her with a big smile.

"Guess what? We have our assignment," I said.

A smile lit up her face. "Where are we going?" she anxiously asked.

"Uh...sit down," I requested.

She sat down on the sofa, and with a dumb smile on my face, I said, "You know, Miriam, we are a very fortunate, young couple."

Her smile grew bigger.

"They are going to send us to a place where the mountains are simply majestic, and where the air is ecologically pure."

She nodded, eager to hear more.

"It is going to be a great challenge for us," I told her.

"*Nu*?" she said. "Where are we going?"

"To...to...uh...Alaska."

While I stood there with the same stupid grin on my face, her grin disappeared. She looked up at me—not exactly the way the wife in the poster looked at her husband...

"*You* may be going to Alaska," she said. "I'm not going to any Alaska."

As abruptly as Colonel Johnson had hung up the phone, Miriam stood up and took flight to the bedroom.

A half hour later, her mother called. Obviously, the two had already spoken.

"Where are you taking our daughter?" she asked.

"Alaska, Mom, it's great."

"What's so great about it? The snow?"

Needless to say, I couldn't convince her. In the first place, she had wanted her daughter to marry a doctor. A poor rabbi was already a blow. But a poor rabbi in Alaska? That was a tragedy.

"It isn't so bad, Mom. I'll be the Chief Rabbi of the nation's biggest state."

I didn't mention that I would also be...the only rabbi.

"A very big deal," she replied. "I don't believe this...Alaska!"

That night I couldn't sleep. How was I going to get out of this mess? Then, all of a sudden, a light bulb went off in my head. Of course! That's it! Why hadn't I thought of it sooner? I was sure it would work. I could hardly wait for the morning to come. At precisely nine o'clock Washington time, I was on the phone to the Pentagon.

"Colonel Johnson, please," I requested.

"One moment, please," the receptionist answered.

Almost immediately, Colonel Johnson was on the phone.

"Colonel Johnson, sir. This is Rabbi Haber. You remember from yesterday?"

"Yes, rabbi."

"Your offer was very nice, I don't know *how* to thank you, but I'm calling to tell you that my wife and I won't be able to accept the assignment to Alaska. We can't go."

The Colonel laughed over the phone. "What do you mean you can't go? You're going."

"No, we can't go. You see, we are a Jewish couple, and

you won't understand what I am talking about, but for a Jewish couple there is something missing in Alaska."

"What's missing?" he asked.

"You won't understand this, but there's no *mikvah* in Alaska, and because there's no *mikvah*, we can't live there."

"Stay on the line," he commanded.

Certain that I had given him an impossible problem, I relaxed in my chair and waited for him to return. Thank G-d, I had gotten out of it. Maybe he knew what a ritual bath was, maybe he didn't. The main thing was that there wasn't a single *mikvah* in all of the state. I had checked up on the matter when the monster had first raised its head, and now my homework was coming in handy. In the past, all of the Jewish chaplains in Alaska had been either Conservative or Reform. Occasionally, an Orthodox chaplain had chanced through the state, but none had ever been married. Up until this moment in time, an Orthodox couple had never been sent to the land of majestic mountains and pure ecological air.

Five minutes later, at the expense of my phone bill, Colonel Johnson was back on the line.

"Rabbi Haber, are you still there?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"It's no problem," he said with military curtness. "Whatever you need, you'll get." And once again, he hung up the phone just like that.

I couldn't believe it. The Pentagon was going to build me a *mikvah*? I felt like calling up my rabbi friends around the country. "Hey, Yossi, you need a *mikvah*? Call Colonel Johnson at the Pentagon. The Pentagon's building *mikvaot* this month!"

G-d certainly works in mysterious ways. All that sleepless night, unknown to me, that in far away Alaska, the

stage was being set for my *mikvah*. The Jewish Community Council had met with the U.S. Senator from Alaska, Mike Gravel, who was up for re-election. They reminded him that the rabbi of Alaska had, since World War Two, always been the Air Force chaplain. Traditionally, he was the rabbi for both the civilian and military Jewish communities of the state. Since the Vietnam War was winding down, the council was worried about a cut in military spending, including the elimination of the Jewish chaplaincy in Alaska. Since the Jews were the largest contributors to the Democratic Party in the state, and since Senator Gravel was in need of campaign funds, the council was appealing to the senator to make sure that Alaska got a new rabbi. "No problem, gentlemen," Gravel answered. True to his word, Gravel immediately called the Pentagon and put in a Congressional Order commanding the military to get a rabbi up to Alaska, at whatever the cost.

So when I called that morning demanding a *mikvah*, Colonel Johnson, a good Protestant who had no idea what I was talking about, discovered that there was a Congressional Order in place, requiring the Pentagon to give me whatever I needed, and told me no problem—whatever you need we'll give you. You see, the colonel had no idea what I was really asking for—he didn't have a clue. He thought I asked—not for a *mikvah*—but rather, a "mixer," and after all, how much can an electric mixer cost the government? I only understood this many months later when I finally got to Anchorage, Alaska, where we were greeted by the mayor of the city, the Governor of the State, and other community leaders. Everyone had come out to meet Alaska's new "Chief Rabbi."

After I had shaken hands with some two dozen people,

a quartermaster came over to me and said, "Rabbi, would you prefer a Westinghouse or a G.E.?"

"A Westinghouse what?" I asked

"A mixer," he said.

"What kind of mixer?"

"Beats me. That's why I am asking you. Here," he answered, holding up a military order. "It says you're to get a mixer along with your regular issue."

I took a look at the paper. Sure enough, the supply order said: MIXER, and then in parenthesis (Mikve.) They thought "mikve" was a brand name!

"That mixer is going to cost you about forty thousand dollars," I said.

Back in Dallas, I had three major problems to deal with. Number one, I was stuck. They weren't asking me to go to Alaska—they were ordering me. The punishment for refusing a military order can be a court-martial and prison. So, like Colonel Johnson had said, like it or not, we were on our way. The next problem was convincing my wife.

"Miriam, guess what?" I said, with yesterday's dumb smile still on my face.

"What?" she growled, going about her morning chores.

"The Air Force is going to build us a *mikvah*."

"Great," she said with no enthusiasm whatsoever. "Bully for the Air Force."

"You know what this means? It will be the **first** *mikvah* in Alaska! We are already bringing *Yiddishkeit* to the state."

"Well, they don't have to build one for me. I'm not going."

Fortunately, by evening, her feelings had changed. Seeing how downcast I was all through the day, she came

over to me, and said, "Wherever you goest, I goest too." For the first time in two days she was smiling. In fact, she suggested we go to a bookstore and try to find a nice album of photographs on Alaska. Like the wonderful wife that she is, she sat down beside me to make a list of things to do in preparation for our big move.

"What about your mother?" I asked.

"At the beginning, she wasn't thrilled about our moving to Dallas either," she answered. "She'll get over it. Mothers always do."

That solved problem number two. Problem three was the *mikvah* itself. I certainly didn't know how to build one, and I was positive that no one at the Pentagon did either. All that afternoon, I had been on the phone with different rabbinical organizations in New York. Everyone said they would look into the matter and call me when they found a solution, but none of them ever called back. When I called back a few days later, they said they were working on the problem, and that I should call them when I get to New York. When we got to New York before setting out to Alaska, it was more of the same: "Yes, Rabbi Haber, we are very interested, very interested, very interested," like a broken record. To this day, almost thirty years later, I have never heard back from one of these groups.

Once we knew that we were really on our way, Miriam and I began calling friends with the news.

"**Alaska**?!" everyone responded. "You mean to say there are Jews in Alaska?"

A letter from the Air Force detailed the adventure ahead of us:

> Dear Chaplain Haber,
>
> Welcome to the Air Force Chaplaincy! Your extended active-duty orders will direct you to report to the

> Air Force Chaplain School, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, on 27 August, 1973. Your stay at Maxwell will be for five days. From Maxwell you will be directed to proceed to the Jewish Welfare Board in New York. Upon completion of your stay in New York, you will be directed to McChord Air Force Base, Washington, for a flight to Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska. Do not begin traveling until you receive the official orders indicating the effective date of departure. We wish you every success in your ministry to our Air Force Personnel. May it be most fruitful and rewarding for you."

"Wow, are they into order or what? What if we are late for a flight?" Miriam asked. "Will we be court-martialed?"

I laughed at her humor. One of the tips we had learned at the orientation meeting for new candidates was not to be scared by the mechanical letters we would receive from the Air Force. There was a robot ring to them that could get on your nerves: tie your left shoe, then your right shoe, then stand up and comb your hair.... That was part of the military. Once we were on the plane, they told us, things would lighten up, and most of the time, we would be our own bosses. I shared this with Miriam.

"We'll see," she said in her practical manner.

Finally, we were on our way. I drove to the nearest military installation, the Naval Air Station in Grand Prairie, an hour from Dallas, to arrange for movers to ship our belongings to Alaska. Saying good-bye to our many friends in Dallas, and then, just like Sergeant Preston of yore, with a crack of a whip, we set our compass toward the Klondike frontier.

7

A Gentleman and An Officer

Our faithful Chevy brought us to my parents' home in Monsey, New York, as we began our journey to Alaska. My mother was not exactly thrilled with the idea that her son would be living on the other side of the continent, a lot closer to Russia than to New York.

"But, Mom," I argued, "The mountains are breathtaking."

"That's wonderful for mountain climbers," she answered.

"The air is ecologically pure."

"Ecological, shmicological. Fancy words don't fool me. What's the matter with the air right here in Monsey?"

"There are already a dozen good rabbis in Monsey. Alaska is a challenge."

"If it was such a great place, there would be a dozen rabbis there too. I wasn't born yesterday, darling. Let's face it. No one else wanted the job."

What could I say? She was right. My father, however, regarded my new career with high esteem. After all, he himself worked for the Pentagon, and the challenge of bringing *Yiddishkeit* to the Alaskan frontier represented the type of educational ideals which he cherished.

After a short visit, we traveled on to Brooklyn to say

farewell to Miriam's parents. Though Miriam's mom had calmed down, she looked at me like I was crazy the whole time we were there. After Shabbat, we spent an enjoyable few hours in an Israeli supper club in Manhattan. It was hard to believe that come morning, I would be leaving the comfortable hub of American Jewry for a Columbus-like adventure into uncharted seas.

Sunday morning, August 26, 1973, I boarded a plane at La Guardia Airport on my way to the Chaplain School in Montgomery, Alabama. After saying the *tefillat haderech* prayer for travelers, I prayed to G-d to grant us guidance and success in my new position. Every day a Jew asks G-d in his prayers to gather His scattered children from the four corners of the earth, and here I was, headed for one of the most remote.

Arriving at the small Montgomery Airport, the passengers descended from the airplane onto the landing grid a hundred yards from the terminal. When we walked over to the outdoor baggage area to collect our luggage, two distinct groups stood waiting for their bags to arrive: a group of white passengers and a group of black passengers, clearly separated one from the other. While integration had made considerable inroads in New York, where people of different races mixed freely, here in America's Deep South, segregation was clearly the rule. In the short period of an air flight, America's sociological differences were visibly noticeable. Now, a Jew with a *kippah* walked into this scene. Where should I stand, I thought to myself—in the middle?

Since it was a Sunday, the next military bus to Maxwell Air Force Base was hours away. Luckily, a visiting colonel also arrived at the same time, and there was room for me in the military vehicle which was sent to drive him to the

base. Interestingly enough, a sign that times were a-changing—the colonel was black.

The driver said he would let me off at the billeting office, and then drive me to the "B.O.Q."

"Fine," I said, not having the slightest idea what "B.O.Q." meant.

When the car stopped and the colonel got out, I decided to follow his lead. Inside the lobby of the building, a clerk stood behind a hotel check-in counter. Putting two and two together, I figured out that a billeting office was air force jargon for officers' quarters.

"I understand that you have a room waiting for me," the colonel said, giving his name to the clerk.

"Yes, sir, colonel. You will be in the VIP section," the clerk answered, handing over the key to the room.

If it worked for him, maybe it would work for me, I thought. I strode over and with a cool, military manner said, "I understand that you have a room waiting for me."

"Nope," he replied, searching his list for my name. "No one has made a reservation for you."

An unpropitious beginning, I thought. I proceeded to fill out a card, and, after showing my Air Force ID, I succeeded in receiving a key to a room in a less prestigious housing facility. Before leaving, I reserved a room for Chaplain David Sobel, a Reform rabbi who was due to take the chaplain course with me. Then the driver took the colonel to his VIP residence and dropped me off at a three-story building marked B.O.Q.—Bachelor Officers' Quarters.

I thanked the driver, took my belongings, and found my room on the second floor. I was in luck—the room had a refrigerator where I could store the food and kosher meat which I had brought along from New York. There

was also a nice desk in the room, a dresser and bed, but to my chagrin, the floor was flooded. Since I had signed on for the Air Force and not for the Navy, I had not brought along a boat to navigate through the room. Using the phone in the hall, I spoke to a gentleman in the billeting office who apologized and said that he would have me transferred to another, dryer room.

"Just come back over and I'll give you the keys," he told me. "It's no problem at all."

That was easy for him to say. He was sitting in an air-conditioned office, while I had to make the ten-minute trek back to the billeting office in the punishing 100-degree Alabama sunshine. At that hour, the base looked like a ghost town. Not a soul was in sight.

After a breather in the air-conditioned office, I walked back to the B.O.Q. I was looking forward to meeting Rabbi Sobel, who was the only other candidate attending the special course for incoming chaplains.

Evening arrived without any sign of my fellow classmate. I decided to familiarize myself with the base which houses the Air University campus. Leisurely, I strolled along Academic Circle, where four military schools of higher learning are located. The dignified Air University Library in the center of the campus is the largest military library in the world. The chaplain school is housed a half mile from the library and nearly a mile from the B.O.Q.

I looked around for Rabbi Sobel, but no one had seen him. Back in my room, I read until ten-thirty before sleep overcame me. I woke up early in order to *daven* before the class at 7:30 a.m. While I was finishing my prayers, someone knocked on the door. A pleasant looking fellow stood in the hallway, carrying a guitar. He was short, with a professorial goatee.

"Hi, I am Dave Sobel," he said.

"Welcome," I answered. "When did you get here?"

"Late last night. I was really impressed that the billeting office had a room waiting for me."

"I hope it wasn't flooded," I said, not bothering to tell him that I was the one who had reserved him a room.

"Flooded? No. Why?"

I told him about my first room with its indoor pool and invited him in while I took off my *tefillin* and *tallit*.

"I just finished *davening* myself," he said. "Even though I am Reform, I come from a traditional background, so I always bring along my *tefillin* when I travel. Also my guitar!"

He played a few familiar folk songs while I got ready to go off to class. When he began singing a song based on the Psalms, I motioned to my *kippah*. Good-naturedly, he withdrew a *kippah* from his pocket and placed it on his head.

We walked together to the chaplain school where we were greeted by the staff—the commandant, assistant commandant, two teachers, two sergeants and a secretary. The commandant explained that the course was only one week because the Air Force wanted us to begin our duties before the High Holy Days. At the termination of the course, the two of us would be heading to different ends of the world—David to Thailand, and I to Alaska.

Before the learning began, in good military tradition, we were taken to the barber for military haircuts. When David's goatee was whisked off his face, he looked like a young college student.

Interestingly, the Catholic and Protestant chaplains on the staff enjoyed the opportunity to meet with two rabbis, especially two rabbis with such very different customs,

and different answers to their questions. At meal time especially, they couldn't seem to figure us out. For instance, the first day, I left my lunch in my room, not knowing that lunch had to be eaten in a campus cafeteria near the school. While everyone else ate a hearty meal, I munched on some peanuts. The gentile chaplains looked from David to me, puzzled by our eating preferences. In their eyes, I was the peanut-eating rabbi, and David the normal rabbi. I explained that I kept kosher because that was the law of the Torah. David said he also kept kosher, but to a less stringent degree. To their question why I wore a *kippah,* I said out of respect for G-d, who is constantly present above us—a sign of humility. David said that he respected G-d too, but didn't need an outward sign to express it.

One of the teachers announced that he would drive us to a kosher restaurant for lunch the next day. I thanked him, but said that it was unnecessary since I had brought a supply of kosher food from New York. He insisted, however, and the others agreed that they would enjoy going on an outing together to a real kosher restaurant.

I felt uncomfortable with the thought that the group was going to the trouble of driving a long way to a "kosher" restaurant to make things pleasant for me, when I probably wouldn't eat there anyway. The teacher might have thought the place was kosher, but in Alabama, deep in Dixie, the chances of finding real kosher food were one in a million.

To my great surprise, upon entering the small delicatessen, I was introduced to a man wearing a *kippah* who addressed me in Yiddish. He informed me that he had been a *shochet* in Europe. Making his way to Montgomery after World War II, he continued being a kosher butcher

for the few Orthodox Jews in the area. He invited me into the kitchen to inspect the *kashrut* of the food and the utensils. Indeed, they were beyond reproach. He smiled broadly as I ordered a chicken sandwich on rye. Who would have thought that such a kosher oasis could be found so far away from New York?

In class, we learned about military rank insignias, proper military dress code, how to salute and how to march. Undoubtedly, in a normal sized class of thirty-five chaplains, the marching is far more impressive than the sight of two Jews marching behind a Protestant minister in a small classroom. It was a little silly, two highly educated men learning how to march like real soldiers. Certainly, no one could have confused us for West Point cadets!

In addition to the learning, we were taken to a clothing store on the base to purchase uniforms and miscellaneous accessories. We brought the trousers to the base tailor and were told to return the next day.

On Wednesday morning, the third day of our crash chaplain course, David and I got behind schedule and had to run across the base to a distant building in order to make our next class. Hoping to save time, we took a shortcut through a large paved zone between the campus buildings. Dashing across the deserted lot, we were surprised to see an Air Force truck traveling toward us at a dangerous speed.

"Where are you guys going?" the driver asked as the truck braked to a stop. His uniform belonged to the military police. Without waiting for an answer he said, "Crossing the airfield is a serious infraction."

My heart lost a beat. I looked up in the sky, fearing that a B-52 would swoop down on us right then and there. When we explained to him that we were brand new chap-

lains trying to get to a class on time, he invited us into the truck for a lift. Dropping us off at the building we needed, he made us promise never to take a shortcut across the landing strip again.

That day's classes dealt with military etiquette, Air Force history, administrative programming, and more marching practice. At the end of the day, we went back to the tailor and picked up our waiting uniforms.

On Thursday morning, we were told to report to class in uniform. Bye, bye civilian clothing. We woke up extra early to put on our insignias and pins in the proper manner. We had borrowed a tape measure from the school to assure military accuracy down to the smallest millimeter. As Jewish chaplains, the identifying insignia on our uniform was the Star of David atop tablets representing the Ten Commandments. When we were finished, David and I complimented each other on our spiffy appearance. It seemed that the uniforms had been especially tailored for us, even before the first six days of Creation! I was beginning to look like the officer on the Air Force enlistment posters! Standing there in my uniform and *kippah,* it would have made a good puzzle for first-graders—"Color the object in this picture which doesn't belong."

We were on our way to the chaplain school when our first crisis faced us. Walking in our direction were six men in uniform. Since we still weren't able to recognize military insignias at a glance, we decided to salute everyone we passed. It was a very surprised group of privates who were saluted by two captains in passing!

"Well, I'll eat my cap," one of them said in a drawl.

It was a good thing for the Air Force that we only had one more day on the base. If we had stayed, we would have messed up military protocol completely!

The chaplains at the school all smiled broadly when they saw their two rookie officers in uniform for the first time. The sergeants on the school staff saluted us with all due military respect. David and I glanced at each other with grins as if to say, "Would you believe it? It works!"

After a small graduation ceremony on Friday morning, the two of us were driven to the airport. Changing planes in Atlanta, we each flew off to our respective destinations. Making plans to meet at the Jewish Welfare Board in New York the following week before we flew off to our assignments, we wished each other a "Shabbat *shalom*," knowing that we had shared a fun five days together. We had been civilians on Monday, and by the end of the week we had turned into "officers and gentlemen." Though we looked at Judaism in very different ways, we were brothers at heart. As I was to learn later in my dealings with the Rebbe, just as *Hashem* is one, the Jewish people must always be one.

At Newark Airport in New Jersey, my father smiled proudly when he met his son, the Air Force captain, who was dressed head-to-toe in freshly-pressed, Air Force blue. We drove home to Monsey for Shabbat. My wife, Miriam, my brothers, and my maternal grandparents, were waiting at the house to greet us. Knowing it was going to be the last family Shabbat for a long time, Miriam and I soaked in all of the love and family *nachas* that we could. In a way, it was like eating a final, hearty meal before a long fast, for the following week we would be off to Alaska.

8

Destination: Alaska

All the next week, while we were visiting Miriam's parents in Brooklyn, a steady stream of brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins and second-cousins came by to bid farewells and wish us luck on our venture. It wasn't only a family reunion. Seeing people who were setting off for Alaska was an unusual oddity, something like saying good-bye to Admiral Perry as he set off to conquer the North Pole. Family, friends, neighbors, former teachers, well-wishers, passers-by, and even our postman stood on the sidewalk to wave their good-byes as our Chevy left Brooklyn behind.

At the beginning of the summer, long before I had set off to Alabama for my course at the Air Force Chaplain School, I had spoken to two major rabbinical organizations in New York about the *mikvah* problem. Though the Pentagon was willing to provide funds for the *mikvah's* construction, I had no one to build it for me in the proper *halachic* fashion. Both organizations expressed great enthusiasm when they heard that a young, idealistic Jewish couple was going off to bring *Yiddishkeit* to Alaska. Sometimes, it seemed to me that a few of the rabbis wouldn't have been so happy if they were the ones who were going to Alaska in our place. At any rate, they said

that they would do everything they could to help solve our problem. Now, several months later, when I passed through New York on our way to America's northern frontier, I stopped by both places to see what progress had been made. To my chagrin, I received a lot of vague answers and promises, but nothing *tachlit*, as they say. Realizing that a real problem awaited us in *mikvahless* Alaska, my wife and I left New York and headed cross-country.

In Chicago, we stayed with relatives who couldn't get to New York for the send off. Leaving the Windy City, we traveled to St. Paul, Minnesota, to visit Sam and Adele Goldberg, the wonderful couple who had taken in Miriam's mother, then a young girl of seventeen, after she had survived the Auschwitz death camp at the end of the Second World War. The childless couple had welcomed and cared for the orphaned girl as if their daughter, brought her to St. Paul and gave her a loving home and education. When the elderly Goldbergs heard that their "granddaughter" Miriam was traveling across the country on the way to Alaska, they insisted we come for a visit, and we were happy to oblige.

Little did we know that this detour along the route wasn't only a happy family reunion, but a key part of G-d's great, unfathomable plan. The couple was thrilled when we showed up on their doorstep. That alone was reward enough for all the traveling we had been doing. Sam, who always called me "grandson" whenever we had spoken on the phone, proudly introduced me to his neighbors and friends. Wanting to do everything he could to please us, he suggested that we eat our meals at the newly opened Chabad House. Though he and his wife kept kosher, he doubted it was the standard we were used to, and he want-

ed us to feel at home. So he drove us over to meet the two young Chabad rabbis who had opened St. Paul's first Lubavitch center.

Of course, I had heard of Chabad and the Rebbe, but, as I mentioned, even though I had grown up around the corner from the famous 770 headquarters in Brooklyn, I had not had any meaningful connection with the world of Chabad *Chasidim*. Their joyous *Tashlich* celebration on the first day of *Rosh Hashanah*, and their ecstatic dancing on *Simchat Torah*, were the extent of my contact with them.

Nevertheless, like every religious Jew, I had read about the work which the Chabad organization was doing throughout the world. It seemed wherever there were Jews, a Chabad House was being opened to bring *Yiddishkeit* to the area. Wandering Jews, wherever they might be, knew they could find a good kosher meal and a joyous Shabbat *minyan* at the nearest Lubavitch way-station. Not only in cities and on college campuses throughout America, but also in places as far away as Sydney and Johannesburg, the organization was working to foster Torah values and religious traditions. In that way, we had something in common. After all, in our own little fashion, Miriam and I were trying to spread the light of Judaism also. So when Sam Goldberg suggested that we stop by the Chabad House to get something to eat, I was curious to meet the two young rabbis who had relocated their families from Brooklyn to St. Paul. Maybe I could pick up some tips about opening shop and learn what made Chabad so successful.

We were greeted by Rabbis Moshe Feller and Gershon Grossbaum and their wives.

"*Shalom aleichem*," they said, warmly shaking my hand.

"Where are your travels taking you?" they asked.

"To Alaska," I answered.

"No, seriously," they said. "Where are you off to?"

"We're going to live in Alaska," I insisted.

"Are you a fisherman?" Rabbi Feller asked.

Miriam laughed.

"Why are you going there?" they insisted in knowing.

"I'm going to be the rabbi in Alaska—the 'Chief Rabbi.'"

"The Chief Rabbi of Alaska?" they said simultaneously, as if it were beyond all belief.

If these guys don't believe it, I thought to myself, maybe we really are getting ourselves into a mess.

"The Rebbe knows about this, of course," one said.

"What?" I asked.

"The Rebbe knows you are going to Alaska?"

I said that I didn't think so.

"You are going to Alaska and the Rebbe doesn't know?"

They both looked amazed.

Their interrogation was making me feel uncomfortable, so I asked if my wife and I could get something to eat. It was probably the first time in the history of a Chabad House that a Jew had to ask for food.

"How is the Rebbe going to know?" Rabbi Feller asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"You should write to the Rebbe and tell him."

"Write to the Rebbe? Me?"

"Of course."

They looked at me in wonder. I mean what kind of Jew would travel to the end of the world without writing the Rebbe?

"Now?" I asked. "You want me to write him now? Before dinner or after?"

"Now, of course."

I said, "Okay, give me a piece of paper quick." I was very hungry.

The way these two young, sincere rabbis were staring at me, it looked like my life depended on this act. So I sat down and wrote to the Rebbe. In the last sentence I said, "We have one problem—we have the money to build the *mikvah*, but we have no one to build it for us." I signed my name and put the letter in the envelope they handed me.

"How can we help you?" Rabbi Grossbaum asked.

Having seen their modest set-up in St. Paul, it didn't seem to me that these nice gentlemen could help in the least. After all, they were just getting started in Minnesota, and they had their own community to worry about.

"*Baruch Hashem*, we have everything we need. We just have one particular problem. There isn't a *mikvah* in Alaska. The government is giving us the money for one, but we have no one who knows how to build it."

"You need someone to build a kosher *mikvah* for you in Alaska?" Rabbi Grossbaum asked.

"That's right."

"Then you don't have a problem," he said.

"That's not a problem?"

"That's right. I will build the *mikvah* for you."

Here I am in St. Paul, Minnesota, looking at a twenty-five year old guy who is telling me that he is going to build a *mikvah* for me in Alaska! I'm a Jew, and a Jew believes in miracles, but this was too preposterous to believe.

"You are going to build me a *mikvah*?"

"That's right," he repeated.

"I know you're a rabbi, but what do you do for a living?" I asked him.

"I build *mikvahs*," he said.

All over America I was searching for someone to build me a *mikvah*, and I walk into a Chabad House for supper in St. Paul, Minnesota, and one of the people I meet tells me he will build me the *mikvah*! And—"Wow," I thought, "they're really amazing. They don't even put on a stamp and mail the letter to the Rebbe. All you do is write to the Rebbe—as I did—that we're looking all over and need someone to build us a *mikvah* and then—presto—I find him."

And sure enough, a *mikvah* he would soon build.

9

On The Road

Looking forward to seeing Rabbi Grossbaum in Alaska, we bade a fond farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg, thanking them for their hospitality and kindness, and for introducing us to the two young Chabad rabbis. Little did my wife and I realize how this seemingly chance meeting would influence the rest of our lives.

It was fortunate that we had stocked up on kosher food in Chicago, because, for all practical purposes, once we left St. Paul, the next Jewish oasis we found wasn't until Seattle. Driving through North Dakota, we were treated to the beauty of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park and its badlands. We stayed in a motel in the western part of the state and journeyed into Montana the following morning. Towards late afternoon we were experiencing the scenic beauty of the Rocky Mountains. All our lives, we had heard about them, and here they were towering over our heads, declaring the awesomeness of G-d's Creation. Exhausted from driving, we pitched camp at a motel in a picture-book town near the Idaho border. How many Orthodox Jews from Brooklyn ever get to Montana and Idaho? I was beginning to feel like a Jewish Columbus. Only now, when people asked us where we were headed, when we answered Alaska, they didn't bat an eye.

Apparently, the place really existed and we weren't so far away.

Our next stop, Seattle, was almost 400 miles away, and we had to get there before Shabbat. As I recounted at the beginning of the book, our run-in with the Jewish highway patrolman was the highpoint during this stretch of our trip. It came to remind us that the Almighty's Providence wasn't limited to Brooklyn, but extended all over the world, even to Montana, Idaho, and Washington State.

We reached the city limits of Seattle ninety minutes before Shabbat. Friday's heavy rush-hour traffic had started, and it took us forty-five minutes before we approached the downtown area. Not having time to try to locate some Jewish families and ask for directions to the closest synagogue, we exited the highway at 42nd Street. Why 42nd Street? In my mind, 42nd Street was the heart of the city. That's how it was in Manhattan, so of course, that's how it must be in the rest of the world.

"Yisrael, this isn't Manhattan," Miriam reminded me. "New York is on the other side of the continent. Where are you going?"

"I don't know," I said. "But we have to find a motel before Shabbat."

Fortunately, we chanced upon a nice-looking motel, adjacent to the University of Washington campus. We were given the keys to the last vacant suite. "*Baruch Hashem*," we both said, racing to the room to set up the candles before the quickly approaching Shabbat. The suite was spacious with a kitchenette, dining room and parlor. Moving in fast-motion, Miriam set the Shabbat table with her portable candlesticks, tablecloth, Israeli wine, and two *challot* which we had purchased in a Chicago bakery. We

used the few remaining minutes to freshen up and change into our holiday finery in order to welcome the Shabbat Queen.

I finished unpacking the food and opening the boxes and bags we would need for the day just in time to watch my beloved wife light the holy Shabbat candles. She recited the blessing, and then in a whisper, her lips hardly moving, she said a personal prayer. I didn't have to hear it to know that she was asking the Almighty for children.

While a television blared from an adjoining room and cars whisked by on the street, we enjoyed the tranquility and spiritual peace which Shabbat has granted to the Jewish people throughout all of their generations and wanderings. Early Shabbat morning, I set off to find the new Seattle Chabad House about which Rabbis Feller and Grossbaum had told me. I located the building along Fraternity Row, but the construction had not yet been finished. Only after the High Holy Days would services begin.

After learning that the nearest synagogue was on the opposite end of the city, I returned to the motel room to *daven*. In the afternoon, after the morning's *Kiddush* and a satisfying Shabbat meal, we took advantage of the sunny weather to stroll through the peaceful, tree-lined campus. Suddenly, the pastoral calm was interrupted by a boisterous throng of humanity. More than fifty-thousand people were heading for the campus stadium and the first football game of the season against the University of Hawaii. Miriam and I looked at each other as hordes of high-spirited rowdies headed our way.

"Maybe we should head back to the motel," Miriam suggested in her low-key manner. It was an understatement to say the least. The armies of Ghengis Khan could-

n't have looked more frightening on such a sunny Shabbat day. So we made an about-face and headed back to the more Shabbat-like atmosphere of the motel.

On Sunday evening, we left the motel and traveled south to Fort Lewis in Tacoma, where we were met by Chaplain Sanford Dresin, the post's Jewish chaplain. After enjoying a snack with Sandy and his wife, he showed us to our very temporary quarters. We were scheduled to take an Air Force flight to Alaska that very night at four in the morning from the nearby McChord Air Force Base.

Rabbi Dresin kindly drove us to the terminal long before sunrise. To our chagrin, we were informed that the flight had been canceled and that everyone traveling to Alaska would be rescheduled on a late-afternoon flight leaving the Seattle Airport. Sleepily, we lugged our luggage and the twelve cartons of frozen kosher meat which we had purchased in Seattle back into the car, and later, back into the Ft. Lewis chapel freezer.

Finally, that afternoon, after leaving our car at the military dock for shipping, we were driven to the Seattle Airport where we boarded a flight to Anchorage, Alaska—the final leg of our journey!

Flight time for the eighteen-hundred-mile trip was three-and-one-quarter hours. The navigator informed us that we were headed northwest, and we were surprised to learn that Anchorage was as far west as Hawaii! Talk about out of the way!

An hour-and-a-half into the trip, we gazed out the window of the aircraft and feasted our eyes on the splendor of Alaska's towering mountain ranges. All of the passengers pressed their noses to the portholes to "ohh" and "ahh" at the spectacle of nature's beauty. There is a blessing one says over seeing the wonders of G-d's Creation, and we

took the opportunity to say it.

The mountain tops were frosted with snow, and in many places the snow extended far under the peaks. As we came closer to our destination, we wondered if Anchorage could be covered with snow in the beginning of September. Neither of us had taken our winter jackets on the plane.

Our worries subsided when we circled over the Gulf of Alaska's Cook Inlet as the pilot prepared to land. Down below was a snow-free, normal, honest-to-goodness city. There were tall buildings, highways, automobiles, ships in the harbor—and not one igloo in sight! For people like myself who had a lot of wild notions about Alaska, the pilot informed us that there was no longer a single igloo in all of the State of Alaska.

This was it. We had made it. We were here. Alaska here we come. We fastened our seat belts for landing, swooped low over the water and touched-down smoothly on the airstrip that jutted out into the inlet leading to the terminal of the Anchorage International Airport.

A crowd of people were waiting to greet us at the modern terminal building. The welcomers included the Mayor of Anchorage; the Attorney General; my new boss, Chaplain Colonel Luther Gabrielsen and his wife, Dee; several other Protestant chaplains and their wives; military officials from Elmendorf Air Force Base; and Jewish community leaders from Anchorage. They had all come out to meet Alaska's one-and-only rabbi.

One woman who greeted us on behalf of the Jewish personnel stationed at Elmendorf and the nearby Army base, Fort Richardson, briefed us by saying, "There are Jews here who don't observe the laws of Judaism, and they want to make certain that no one else does either.

However, my family and I are very happy that you have both arrived and we hope to learn many things from you."

It was during the proceedings that a military quartermaster came up to me to ask if I wanted a Westinghouse or General Electric mixer. As I mentioned, an order had been sent from the Pentagon to provide Chaplain Yisrael Haber with a mixer upon his arrival in Anchorage. It was only when I looked at the official requisition form that he showed me did I realize that the "mixer" he was talking about was the *mikvah* which I had requested!

"I need a *mikvah*, not a mixer," I said.

"What's a *mikvah*?" he asked.

With so many important people around, I didn't have time to explain. After the welcoming ceremony, Chaplain Clay Kennedy, a Baptist chaplain, and his wife, Monica, drove us through Anchorage to Elmendorf Air Force Base which was located three miles from the center of the city. Anchorage, home of half the state's population and scenically set between the Cook Inlet and the Chugach Mountain Range, boasted two universities, luxury hotels, a new museum, and several large shopping malls—in other words, we hadn't left civilization.

"You look surprised," the Baptist chaplain said.

"I had no idea the city would be so modern," I answered. "I figured we'd be met at the airport by a dog team and sled."

"In some places in Alaska, that may happen, but Anchorage is a modern city just like any other. We even have two daily newspapers, three television channels, and ten radio stations."

I asked him where the famous Anchorage mountains were.

"When the clouds lift and the sun comes out, I'll take

you on a tour outside the base, and you'll see them in all of their glory."

He drove us to the quarters which would be our home for the next three years. We were thrilled to discover a two-story house with three bedrooms and a very large basement. The house was a short, five-minute walk from the chapel where Jewish services were held. That would facilitate getting to *shul* on Shabbat when traveling is forbidden. I had requested such an arrangement, and I was happy to see that my request had been fulfilled. The house was also directly across the street from the building where my office was located. That was also a good deal, I thought, anticipating the heavy winds and snowstorms which would come.

As evening began settling over America's largest state, we *shlepped* our perishable food to the chapel freezer for storage until our furniture and household appliances arrived by moving van. The temperature was in the mid-fifties as Miriam and I walked along the base, enjoying each other's company. We had done it. We had arrived. Smiles graced our faces. What a wonderful wife I had for following me to this faraway corner. What a patient, loving woman, I thought. What a helper and friend. Who else would have taken off with me on such a preposterous adventure? And what a crazy husband I have, she must have been thinking. But I could see in her eyes that she was happy. She was proud of me and proud of herself. After all, she was the wife of Alaska's Chief Rabbi! But much more than that, we were together, and that made this strange, beautiful new place feel like home. Even if our dream house was on an Air Force base. Even if our furniture was still on the way. Even if we were further away from our families than we had ever been in our lives. After our long

journey, we were closer together, united in life, helping one another along the wonderful and mysterious pathways of the Master of Heaven and Earth.

10

Rosh Hashanah

I stayed awake most of my first night in Alaska thinking about my new position and all of the things I wanted to accomplish. Whatever services and innovations I could provide to the Jews of Alaska, it would all have to be my doing, from the idea stage to the execution of the project. I was no longer an assistant principal with a well-oiled Jewish framework around me; up here in the woods I was the whole team—center, quarterback, running back, tackle and split end.

When morning arrived, with almost a holy awe, I carefully dressed into my blue slacks, blue shirt, blue jacket, blue tie, and blue hat. In my new Air Force uniform, I felt more like a New York City policeman than a rabbi. But no, this wasn't New York; this was Alaska, and I was an officer in the Air Force.

"Is it Purim today?" Miriam joked, gazing at me from the doorway.

"Very funny," I said.

"You look great."

"You really think so? It isn't too tight?"

"Mottel the tailor couldn't have fit you better."

Satisfied that I passed the test, I rolled up my sleeve to put on *tefillin*. That morning's prayer came deep from the

heart, and I took the occasion to ask that G-d help me succeed in this strange and foreign location.

Miriam stood at attention and saluted as I walked out the door on my way to my first day of work. "Good luck," she said. "And remember, I'm proud of you."

She must have read my mind, because walking to the chaplain's office I had some second doubts.

"Hey Yisrael, do you realize that you are the only *kippah*-wearing Jew in a distance of two-thousand miles?" I thought. The reflection caused me a shudder of loneliness. On the base of thirty-five thousand servicemen, there were nine Protestant chaplains, three Catholic chaplains, and myself. Out of that group, I figured I might be able to work up a bridge game, but I might not be seeing a *minyan* for an awful long time. But if my wife was proud of me, that was a sign that what I was doing was right.

I straightened my gait as I headed for the chapel a short walk away. Practicing the military greeting which I learned in my course, I walked into the building, determined to be not only a rabbi, but a first-class officer as well. Walking as erect and military-like as I could, I strode confidently through the office as if I had been there a dozen times before.

I knocked on the door of Colonel Gabrielsen's office, about to meet the head chaplain on the base.

"Come in," a voice said.

Opening the door, I stood at attention and saluted.

"Chaplain Haber is reporting for duty, sir."

There, I had said it. The immortal words were out. History had been made.

My fantasy was shattered immediately. The office looked nothing like the recruitment advertisements for the Air Force on television. Instead of a large desk with

American flags all around it, and a view of the United States Capitol outside the window, Chaplain Gabrielsen's office was tiny, flagless, with a view of a truck parked in the lot outside. The chaplain was reading a newspaper, his legs propped up on his desk. He looked up at me, and without saying a word, he picked up his phone and dialed another office in the building.

"Hello, come in here a minute," he said, still looking at me. "There's something I want you to see."

He stood up and smiled. "At ease, chaplain," he said.

A moment later, a master sergeant came into the office. Looking at me up and down, both men enjoyed a good laugh. "What's the matter?" I thought. "Had I put something on wrong? Had I forgotten to close one of my buttons? Was my hat tilted in the wrong direction?" Then Colonel Gabrielsen apologized and welcomed me to Elmendorf. Patting me on the shoulder, he said, "The first thing we are going to do is to get you out of that uniform. You look like a poster for Air Force recruitment. This is Ron Applegate, our section's head N.C.O."

I remembered that N.C.O. stood for non-commissioned officer. "Chaplain Gabrielsen," I began.

"Call me Lou," he said.

"Thank you, but I would like to know what was so funny."

"*Izrel*," he said, "it has been years since I have had the chance to meet someone fresh out of chaplain school so slickly dressed and polished. And your official greeting was most refreshing. But it won't be necessary here. Ron will take you over to the Base Exchange where you can purchase a more casual zipper jacket, a more casual flight jacket, a more casual flight cap, and some authorized open-collar summer shirts. We only wear full uniform on special occasions.

The Lutheran chaplain didn't stand on ceremony. He was friendly, experienced, and genuinely eager to assist his new rookie rabbi. He introduced me to the staff and turned me over to Ron and Chaplain Kennedy, who helped me with my processing. We went to many buildings and filled out many forms. In addition to receiving a more informal uniform, I was issued a parka and a full wardrobe of Arctic survival gear, since I would be traveling throughout the state in all kinds of weather.

That evening, as some of our packages were being brought into out lodging, there was a noisy knock at the door. A soldier came in with an order.

"You are requested, Chaplain, to meet with Lieutenant General Gamble tomorrow morning at 0900 hours."

Quickly, I make the calculation in my head: 0900 hours is nine o'clock in the morning.

"Very well," I said, returning his salute.

A few minutes later, the base chaplain, Colonel Gabrielsen, came running frantically up to the door.

"Izrel," he said in a Southern twang, "there is a serious problem with you."

"What problem?" I asked. "I've just been here a day."

"You have to meet the Lieutenant General tomorrow morning."

"Fine with me."

He stared at me in wonder. "You've been here only **one** day and you are given appointment with a Lieutenant General. I have been in the Air Force for twenty years and I don't even know what a Lieutenant General looks like. What's going on?"

"Beats me," I said.

"Well, I am going to find out what this is about," he promised before hurrying away.

Fifteen minutes later, he came back out of breath.

"It's about the Congressional order," he said. "I want to know everything there is to know about this mixer."

"*Mikvah*," I corrected

"That's what I said—mixer."

"Why do you want to know about it?" I asked.

"It's the subject of tomorrow's meeting with the Lieutenant General."

"In all due respect, sir," I hedged, "a *mikvah* concerns many intricate laws of ritual purity, and I've just arrived from a very long trip."

What could I say? How could I begin to explain? The man was a Lutheran minister. Was I supposed to sit down with him with an opened *Shulchan Aruch* and start to explain Jewish law?

"I have to know everything," he insisted.

"It's all codified in the Jewish law books. I'll need them to explain all the details."

"You've got them don't you? I'm not leaving. I'll sit here while you unpack.

Fortunately, or unfortunately as the case may be, I had taken a lot of my books along on the plane, in order to have a basic Jewish library until all of our possessions arrived. There were boxes of Talmud, *Mishna* and Jewish law. Colonel Gabrielsen watched as I opened the boxes and set a few large volumes of Talmud and the *Shulchan Aruch* on the table. Unable to contain his curiosity, he opened them up and stared like a blind man at the Hebrew and Aramaic texts.

"Explain to me," he commanded.

"On one leg?" I thought. It had taken me many, many long months to learn the laws of *Niddah* and family purity, and he wanted it all in five minutes.

So as Miriam went about unpacking our things, I sat

for four hours with the Lutheran minister, delving into the intricacies of Jewish *Halacha.* He sat with his mouth opened, totally impressed. He had heard about the Talmud, but he had never actually seen a volume in his life. His eyes seemed to say, "Not only are all of these laws written here, but here are a husband and wife who actually live in this way!"

When the crash course in *mikvaot* was finished, he said, "Listen, Izrel, when we go in to see the Lieutenant General in the morning, do me a favor. Don't say anything. Just let me do the talking."

He was my boss, so I said okay.

Next morning, I dressed in my new casual uniform, not realizing that as a three star general and the highest commanding officer in the region, Lieutenant General Gamble was responsible for American security against military attack from Soviet territory which was only a few miles away from the tip of Alaska. In fact, just the day before, he had been in Washington for a personal pow-wow with President Nixon.

Chaplain Gabrielsen came to get me first thing in the morning. As he led me into base headquarters, I immediately sensed that Elmendorf wasn't just a backwoods base of little importance, but a vital component of the country's defense. Uniforms were starched and stiff. Personnel performed their duties with a no-nonsense officialness down to the tiniest detail of military protocol. Before we got through to the Lieutenant General's second-floor office, we had to pass through two secretaries and the major who acted as the Lieutenant General's chief aide.

"Good morning, chaplain," they all said, greeting me politely. "By all means, please step inside. The Lieutenant General is expecting you."

If, back in Brooklyn, someone had asked me how a Lieutenant General looks, I would have answered, "Exactly like Lieutenant General Gamble." He was the picture of an Air Force commander. Tall, broad shoulders, square jaw, short haircut, gray at the temples, icy blue eyes—a double for John Wayne. His jacket was top-heavy with medals.

Walking over to me, he gave me a smack on the back.

"Welcome aboard, rabbi," he greeted. "Please, have a seat. You too, Chaplain Gabrielsen, glad you're along."

So there we sat—the Catholic general, the Lutheran minister, and the Jewish rabbi—what might have been, in another situation, the start of an off-colored joke. Though you would think the base commander had more serious things to worry about than the new Jewish chaplain, he looked uncomfortably nervous to me.

"Is Mrs. Haber well?" he asked politely.

"Yes, thank G-d, she's fine. Thank you for asking, sir."

"I am asking because I have been requested by the Congress to issue emergency orders for your wife."

"Emergency orders?" I asked.

"That's right. I have been asked to approve that your wife fly alone once a month to Seattle on one of our transport aircraft. Normally a spouse can only fly if she is traveling with her husband in his official Air Force capacity. For a dependent to fly without her sponsor, she needs emergency orders cut out by the highest ranking officer on the base, which in this case happens to be me."

I nodded my head. What could I say? Was it my fault that there was no *mikvah* in all of Alaska, compelling my wife to travel every month to the nearest *mikvah*—nearly two thousand miles away?

The Lieutenant General was staring at me with a look of displeasure.

"Well you see...," I stuttered.

"Izrel," Colonel Gabrielsen warned, cutting me off. "I can explain, sir," he said, facing the Lieutenant General. "I spent the better part of last evening with the rabbi, and believe me, sir, do yourself a big favor and—just sign the papers."

"I think I should know what this is about," the base commander answered.

"Please sir," Colonel Gabrielsen said. "This is a religious matter. I am the base chaplain, and I advise you to sign without further protocol."

"Well Lou, you are my head chaplain," the Lieutenant General said. "If you think it's the right thing to do."

"Absolutely. Take my word for it. Just sign the order."

Nodding, the Lieutenant General signed the paper and handed it over to me.

"Have a Happy Mikvee," he said.

I realized that he thought it was a holiday.

I said thank you, and before I could make some small conversation, Colonel Gabrielsen grabbed my arm and escorted me out of the office.

The military, I gathered, was willing to put up with chaplains, as long as their demands weren't too off the wall. At least until our *mikvah* was built, my wife had permission to fly off to Seattle. That, of course, meant flying back to Anchorage the next day. Considering that the cost of flying a large Air Force transport plane from Anchorage to Seattle runs into the tens-of-thousands of dollars, my wife's *tevillah* had to be the most expensive in the world!

Every month, I would drive her to the airfield and stand out on the runway waving good-bye. Each time, I was confronted with the irony of the scene. True, I had joined the Air Force for ideological reasons, but I also liked the idea

of Rabbi Yisrael Haber, dressed in his sharp Air Force uniform, looking just like the young, good-looking officer in the posters. Even though I was enlisting as a chaplain, there was a macho element that appealed to the soldier boy in me. And here I was standing monthly at the flight line, not gazing up at a poster of me in the cockpit of the C130-Hercules transport, but looking up at my wife in the cockpit instead. Ready for take-off and gallantly dressed in her helmet and goggles, she looked just like the dream poster co-pilot. And to top off the picture, she would raise her hand to the window and give me a "don't worry" thumbs-up salute, just like the pilots in the movies.

Of course, when Miriam was in Seattle, she stocked up on a supply of kosher food. Since she flew every month, she got to know most of the fight crews. Like the good soldiers they were, they did their job without asking questions, though they could never quite figure out why this woman had to go all the way to Seattle "just to buy some kosher food."

Right away, the issue of the *mikvah* became a top priority on the base. Back on my very first day, when I was introduced to Sergeant Reggie Holcomb at Chapel Number Two, he said, "Hi, rabbi, glad to meet you. Now maybe I can find out what a mixer is."

"That's easy," I said. "A mixer is a machine that you use to prepare foods."

"That I know," he said. "I'm talking about the kind of mixer that Washington keeps inquiring about. We have been receiving reports that you need a mixer."

"I need a *mikvah*, not a mixer," I told him.

Briefly, I explained what a *mikvah* was all about, but I could see he was lost. He told me to write up a detailed report about the uses of a *mikvah*, including a blueprint

for its construction, so that all of the chaplains could help it get built as quickly as possible.

Getting the *mikvah* built was to be my first major task on the base, but I still had another community to worry about—the civilian Jews of Alaska. Right off the bat, a meeting was set up at the Reform synagogue in Anchorage so that the members of the board could get to meet me.

"Uh oh," I thought. "Members of the Board." If they were anything like the board members in Dallas, my job wasn't going to be easy. It was obvious at the meeting that the board members of the Reform temple were wary about the new Orthodox rabbi, especially since the last acting rabbi in Alaska had been devoutly reform. During a break, several people who were not members of the temple spoke to me in private, informing me that there were many Jews in Anchorage who were not affiliated with the temple and who were eager to have an observant rabbi in their midst. I explained that I had come to Alaska to be a military chaplain and would try, as best as I could, to serve the needs of the Jewish community in general.

One of the people trying to "fill me in" was a very prominent Anchorage businessman considered to be one of the most observant Jews in the area. Before I returned to the meeting, he wanted to warn me that many of the people on the board were "*goyim*."

"If a Jew isn't Orthodox, it doesn't make him non-Jewish," I answered.

"Rabbi," he continued, "I mean that some of the board members are literally gentiles."

For a moment, I had a difficult time digesting his bizarre information. No matter how Reform the temple was, it was still Jewish, wasn't it? Why should there be gentiles on the board?

One week before Rosh Hashanah, the heavy cloud-cover lifted, the sun shone brightly and the Chugach Mountains appeared in the distance. From almost every window of our house, we could see the snow-capped peaks. On that pleasant Autumn day, when many of the trees on the base were turning a dazzling gold, I received a phone call from a Jewish fellow, new to the area, informing me that his wife was due to have a baby any minute.

"Do you do circumcisions?" the future father asked.

"Circumcisions? No, why?"

"If the baby is a boy, he's going to need a *brit*."

"Of course," I said. "No question about it."

The truth was, I had thought about the problem. Not only did Alaska not have a *mikvah*, there was no one in the state who knew how to perform a *brit milah*! A *mohel* hadn't been brought in from outside of the state for years, and so all of the circumcisions were done at the hospital, not on the eighth day and not according to Jewish law. Flying a *mohel* in from Seattle would cost a family up to three-hundred dollars for plane fare alone, and not many families in Alaska were committed to tradition as that. How was I going to deal with the problem? I decided that all of the babies born during my time in Alaska would simply have to be girls!

Seventy-five congregants turned out for my inaugural Shabbat service. Since the total Jewish population of Anchorage was four hundred, with half of them children, the turnout was considered tremendous. I was cautious not to be too optimistic, because the weekly average attendance was reported to be about twenty. It could have been that everyone just wanted to see who the new rabbi was!

A man lingering after the services and *kiddush* introduced himself as Bernard Schecter.

"I spoke to you on the phone last night," he said with a wide smile on his face. "You arrived just at the right time. This time you can wish me an official *mazel tov*. My wife had a baby! A boy!"

"A boy?"

"That's right."

"Wonderful," I said. "*Mazel tov*!"

Miriam wished him a mazel tov too. Immediately, she inquired about the mother. How was she? Where was she? How could we help?

His wife was fine, he said, in the hospital. Right now he was worried about the *brit*. He agreed that a professional *mohel* should be sent for, but he didn't have enough money to pay for his trip.

"Don't worry," I assured him. "Things will work out for the best. You just take care of your wife. We will take care of the rest."

We still hadn't unpacked all of our luggage; our car and furniture were still in transit; and on top of everything, I had to conduct High Holiday services and prepare for a *brit*!

Miriam and I decided that we would pay for the *mohel* to fly to Anchorage, and that the Schecters could pay us back at their leisure. The main thing was to teach the Jewish community that the word of G-d didn't stop at Seattle—the commandments of the Torah included the Jews of Alaska as well!

On Saturday night, I received several phone calls from "concerned individuals" advising me that the best thing for the Schecters would be to have a local Jewish doctor perform the circumcision. I told them that I had already arranged with a genuine *mohel*, Rabbi Solomon Maimon of Seattle, to fly in to perform the *brit*. The callers

expressed surprise that we were going to do things "the old way" when geographical considerations made such a small thing into a costly production.

Another fine gathering came to the chapel at midnight to partake in the special "*Selichot* Prayers" when Jews ask for forgiveness before the upcoming New Year. On Sunday morning, I visited the Sunday school program at Congregation Beth Shalom, where I assisted two men and five teenage boys to put on *tefillin*. The men said that they hadn't worn the phylacteries since their bar mitzvah. They thanked me profusely, and I assured them that we would do the same every Sunday—and hopefully on a daily basis with the passing of time.

On Sunday afternoon, as I sat down at my desk to prepare Wednesday night's Rosh Hashanah sermon, Colonel Gabrieson called on the phone.

"Izrel," he said, "I forgot to tell you that you have to attend the Alcom Conference which begins tonight at Fort Richardson."

"Tonight?" I asked, beginning to feel pressured with all of my rabbinical duties and commitments.

"Tonight," he repeated.

"What's Alcom?" I asked.

"The Alaskan Command. It's the conference for senior chaplains in the entire Alaskan Command, Air Force and Army together. We will be meeting for several days to outline the program for next year. You are likely to be the only captain, since you're the only senior Jewish chaplain we've got, but I won't let the other chaplains pull rank. I'll pick you up at six-thirty."

I wore my combination "A" uniform in honor of the conference's opening dinner at the Fort Richardson Officer's Club. Chaplain Gabrielsen showed up at our

home with Chaplain-Colonel Ed Puseman, who had arrived in Elmendorf shortly before we had. He was the new command chaplain for the Alaskan Air Command. When I asked him what was on tap for that evening's session, he said he didn't know, but it turned out that he was the center of attention at the festivities.

All of the chaplains I met told me how happy they were that a rabbi was back in action. Seated next to me was a Catholic chaplain-colonel who came from New York.

"Isn't there something you can eat?" he asked me as I sipped on a glass of water all through the delicious-looking, four-course steak meal.

Colonel Gabrielsen apologized for not having had the foresight to order me a kosher dinner.

"That's alright," I told him, "I love the water here in Alaska. It's one of the reasons I came."

The conference continued for the next several days. Each day, I would show up with a sandwich in a brown paper bag like a schoolboy going off to school. While everyone else was feasting on sumptuous meals, it was a chance for me to lose a little weight. Finally, I was excused on Tuesday afternoon to attend to all of the last-minute details before the Rosh Hashanah holiday.

A few days earlier, I had called for a meeting of the Jewish military and civilian communities for Tuesday evening at the chapel. Thirty-five people attended and everyone was surprised to hear that our services would have a *mechitzah* separating the men from the women. Though I knew that most Orthodox chaplains in the military were able to rationalize side-stepping the traditional law by finding some sort of alleged rabbinical permission to allow mixed seating, I was not able to do so in good conscience. Throughout the ages, the implementation of a

mechitzah, and the holiness it represents, has always been a foundation of synagogue prayer, and I was not about to compromise my convictions on this matter, Board of Directors or not. By explaining the importance of separate seating, and by answering questions in a patient, friendly manner, I was able to win the understanding of the people at the meeting.

"Face it," I said, addressing the men. "Most of you work outside the house. For eight hours a day, you're not with your wives. You survive it, don't you?"

Most of the men enjoyed a good chuckle, but not everyone was so quick to agree.

"On Rosh Hashanah, I want to sit with my wife," one man insisted.

"Why?" a supporter of mine challenged. "Do you take your wife along when you go fishing?"

"Fishing is different."

"Do you take her along when you go hunting?"

"Hunting is different too."

"Well, do you take her along when you play golf?"

"You know that I don't."

"And when you go down to the grill for a drink with the guys, do you ask your wife to come with you?"

"So what if I don't."

"So why can't you be without her for a few hours in *shul*?"

Everyone laughed.

"Yeah, Harry," another man said. "It isn't the end of the world. She'll be right across the room."

Harry grumbled, but the majority was against him. By the end of the meeting most people realized that opposition to a *mechitzah* wasn't against the dividing partition itself, but against the notion that it was something

"Orthodox." In fact, when approached one-on-one in a rational fashion, most men and women agreed that they could probably concentrate better on their prayers if they didn't sit alongside their mates.

The last hurdle was the habitual one, known to congregations all over the world. Someone wanted to know who was going to pay for the cost of installing a *mechitzah* in the chapel. But I had already figured that out. It wouldn't cost anyone a penny, I said. I had brought a simple, folding partition with me from New York which was easy to set up and simple to take down.

When the motion in favor of the *mechitzah* passed by an overwhelming majority, I felt like Admiral Perry planting the American flag into the frozen North Pole. Though the latitude was similar, the flag I was planting was Torah. After the meeting, locking the door to the chapel, I thanked G-d for having given me the strength to safeguard the traditions of Judaism without bowing to public pressure.

In my spare time leading up to the holidays, I put together a special twenty-page High Holiday Anthology which I had printed by the base's reproduction plant. I distributed the basic primer to the one-hundred-and-twenty-five congregants who came to our evening Rosh Hashanah services. We all prayed that the year 5734 of the Jewish calendar would be filled with joy, health, and peace.

Miriam and I enjoyed the company of the many people we invited to join in the holiday meals at our home. We filled them up with generous portions of food and Torah. Three-hundred-and-fifty people attended the evening and morning services during the Jewish New Year, undoubtedly a Guinness world record for Alaska! On the second day, attendance slackened because many of the people chose to

observe only one day. Perhaps for the first time in history, the *Tashlich* ceremony was held along the banks of the picturesque Ship Creek River which flowed through the golf course adjacent to the base. The *Congregation Beth-Shalom Bulletin* described the memorable scene:

> Adults and teenagers joined Chaplain and Mrs. Haber at Ship Creek on Elmendorf Air Force Base on the first day of Rosh Hashanah *Tashlich* services. According to notes in the Birnbaum *Siddur*, the service, dating from the fourteenth century, is the custom of symbolically casting sins into a running stream. It is mentioned for the first time in the *Sefer Maharil* by Rabbi Jacob Moelin (1355-1427) the leading Jewish authority of his time. When told that the service had taken place, Mrs. Robert Bloom, an early Alaskan pioneer, now residing in Seattle, who observed it as a child in Dublin, Ireland, noted: 'I think we would be pretty safe in saying that Ship Creek is the first flowing water in Anchorage that received Jewish sins.'

I remembered the *Tashlich* ceremony in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens when I was a boy, and how the *Chasidim* had flocked after the Rebbe. Our scene wasn't the same in numbers, and no one got pushed into the water, but it was an encouraging beginning for the Alaskan frontier.

Rabbi Maimon arrived from Seattle on Sunday night and performed the *brit milah* on the eighth day from the child's birth, just as it was written in the Torah. The Torah was read that Monday morning during the *davening* since a *minyan* was persent for the *brit*. Bernie Schecter named his son Tuvia (Gil) and a lovely *seudat mitzvah* breakfast was enjoyed by all of his guests. During the feast, the men joined hands and danced in a joyous circle. Even some of

the anti-*mohel* detractors admitted that the affair was a lot of fun. Thus, in the short weeks that we had been in Alaska, many firsts had been tacked up on the bulletin board of the chapel.

Later that day, I received a New Year's card from Dave Sobel, my friend from chaplain school who was stationed in Bangkok. Compared to Thailand, Alaska seemed like a suburb of New York! I kept the card on a bureau in my office to remind me when things got tough in Alaska, that being Jewish was probably a lot tougher in Thailand!

The first issue of the new, monthly Alaskan Jewish Bulletin was printed from my office and mailed to Jews throughout the state. It joined the *Congregation Beth-Shalom Bulletin* and the *Juneau Jewish Journal*, the other Jewish periodicals in Alaska.

I was so busy, I had little free time to deal with the *mikvah*. Then, after the holidays, I received a letter from Rabbi Grossbaum regarding our discussion in S. Paul:

> October 3, 1973
> Dear Rabbi Haber:
>
> The enclosed plans are for a *mikvah* which is being built in La Crosse, Wisconsin. They should suffice in giving information for preliminary discussions regarding a *mikvah* on Elmendorf Air Force Base. They were drawn up by myself to aid the construction which I am to oversee in La Crosse. I believe you will want to show the enclosed blueprints to the base civil engineer. The size of the *mikvah* is flexible. A minimum would be (app.) three-and-a-half feet by six-feet-eight-inches deep. This would consist of a lower storage section and an upper pool. Tolerance of seepage is zero. Water enters the pool by means of a small trough as shown in the plans.

As for the plumbing necessities: hot and cold water supply is small, so that one of the tested methods of heating the pool would be necessary; a pump for emptying the pool since draining by gravity is not possible; aquastat and relay unit with the necessary valves, fittings and pipes.

I should add that the list of materials would basically include the following: app. four yards of concrete (4000 lb. test after 28 days, 2-3 in. slump) app. 300'-½" reinforcing rod; form materials (6 pcs. ¾" ext. grd. Plywood, 20-2x6x10' beams, bracing) much of which is salvageable. A bath and/or shower is desirable. Also a vanity and mirror.

I trust that the above should be sufficient for now. If I can be of further assistance, please feel free to ask.

With a blessing of *G'mar Chasimah Tova* to you and your wife, I remain,

Sincerely yours,
Rabbi S.G. Grossbaum
Lubavitch House
S. Paul Minnesota.

When it came to the technical details, I didn't understand what he was talking about, but I relied on his expertise in the field. I brought the letter and the enclosed drawings to the civil engineer, Colonel Brame. His office had been informed about the need for the *mikvah*, and he was most cordial and willing to help. In addition, he assured me that plans for the thirty-five seat *sukkah*, which I had submitted to him the day after our arrival at the base, were proceeding on schedule. The holiday of Sukkot was just one week away. Throughout the week-long holiday, Jews all over the world eat their meals in temporary booths, the *sukkah*, constructed of wood or canvas, with leafy tree

branches serving as roof covering. G-d's command to dwell in the *sukkah* is written in the book of Leviticus. Rather than just having my own private *sukkah*, I wanted a large *sukkah* for the community, something that people could take pride in and want to use.

Sure enough, upon returning from Colonel Brame's office, I noticed three sergeants from the civil engineering squadron hard at work constructing the *sukkah* adjacent to my office building, just across the street from my house.

11

Tragedy on Yom Kippur

Alaska isn't exactly the hub of the world, so when an Orthodox rabbi shows up in town, the story makes news. I was interviewed by most of the local media, including the Alaskan Forces Radio Network, and both the *Anchorage Times* and *Daily News*. The editors wanted material for their religious sections, and I used the opportunity to explain as much as I could about the traditions and rituals centered around the Jewish holidays, especially aspects which dealt with the Jewish family. In the rush of modern living, the family unit can be brushed aside as everyone concentrates on their individual aims. Judaism, and the holidays in particular, offer a framework for a richer family life. The editors picked up on this angle and made interesting human-interest stories out of my interviews.

On Thursday, October 4, Miriam wished me a safe trip as I traveled north to Fairbanks, where I was to conduct the Yom Kippur services beginning at sunset, Friday night. Taking along my portable *mechitzah*, I must have looked like a traveling salesman off to sell lumber to the Eskimos. It seemed strange taking along a heavy parka in the fifty-degree temperature in Anchorage, but I began to understand why my contact in Fairbanks had recommended it

when the airplane flew over the snow-covered mountains during the one-hour flight up north.

Besides being the home of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks was a military and satellite-communications center. Weather-wise, it was a city of extremes. In the summer, the sun went down around midnight, and in the winter, temperatures stayed below zero. When I arrived, the temperature was in the low twenties. At the airport, workers on the Alaskan pipeline were waiting for transportation to Alaska's North Slope and Prudhoe Bay, giving the city a real taste of frontier. I was greeted by Captain Lance Lipton, a doctor stationed at Fort Wainwright, a fifteen-minute drive from the airport. When I picked up the folding, accordion-shaped *mechitzah* out from the baggage ramp, he gave me a puzzled look. Nobody had ever seen a *mechitzah* before in Fairbanks. Once again, I would have to explain the importance of the partition to a congregation, which was undoubtedly accustomed to mixed seating in *shul.* Captain Lipton bent over to give me a hand lifting the awkward package, but luckily, Sergeant Holcomb had thoughtfully prepared a tape handle for the *mechitzah,* making it easier to carry.

I received special permission to be billeted at the nurse's B.O.Q. since it was only three blocks away from the Fort Wainwright Chapel. While this might have seemed strange—an Orthodox rabbi with a *mechitzah* under his arm bunking down in a women's dormitory—nobody batted an eye. The other B.O.Q.'s were more than three miles away—a punishing walk in adverse weather conditions. Fortunately, at the nurse's facility there was a special set-up for men, so my sleeping there didn't present any embarrassing problems.

Early Friday morning, retired Sergeant Sid Klevins, a

resident of Fairbanks, escorted me around the city and drove me to Eilson Air Force Base, thirty miles south of Fairbanks. Meeting with the chaplains at Eilson, I was informed that both the military and civilian Jewish communities would be attending the monthly Shabbat services that I would be conducting in Fairbanks.

Returning to my room on the base, I began recording a cassette tape to mail to my grandparents. They were living in Bnei Brak in Israel, and I thought they'd get a kick out of hearing from their grandson the rabbi, who was stationed in one of the authentic far corners of the earth. In fact, in a way, the fate of the whole Jewish people that year depended on me. Because of our time zone, our Yom Kippur service in Fairbanks would be the last Yom Kippur service in the world. With two outs and the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth, our prayers could decide the game. What grave responsibility rested on our shoulders! And I was to be the chazzan, leading the prayers the whole day.

A few short hours before the solemn *Kol Nidre* prayers were to begin, I thought about my family in New York, where Yom Kippur had already begun, and about my wife back in Anchorage. Fortunately, she had two guests in the house, Laurie Green, who had attended the Jewish girls' high school in Denver, and her sister, Debbie. The daughters of Alaska's foremost furrier, they had decided that the Orthodox life was for them. I knew that their enthusiasm for Judaism would keep Miriam's spirits soaring throughout the day, even though I was a lot more than a *mechitzah* away.

Though Yom Kippur is a day of almost uninterrupted prayer, it had always been an important family holiday for me. I felt melancholy alone in my room. This was a Yom

Kippur I wouldn't forget, I thought, not knowing at the time how tragically prophetic my feelings would turn out to be.

Not having a kosher kitchen, I made myself a couple sandwiches and sat down to eat a good meal before the long fast. Then I rested until sunset. I would need all the strength I could muster. Besides the twenty-five-hour fast, I would also deliver a *Kol Nidre* sermon, chant the entire service, read the Torah portions and give another two sermons during the day, and blow the final *shofar* blast. Rosh Hashanah in Anchorage had given me experience as rabbi, cantor, *shofar* blower, and *shamash*, in charge of prayer books and seating, but Yom Kippur would really put me to the test.

The Fairbanks community was so happy to have a rabbi with them, they didn't protest about the separate seating at all. No doubt, the special holiness of the day also had an affect. Before services, as I was greeting people in the lobby of the chapel, a youngster ran out of the sanctuary. "There's a folding fence in the synagogue," he announced. "And the men and women can't sit together because the rabbi is an Orthodox Jew!"

The people in the lobby grinned as I extended my hand to the lad. "Hi, I'm the Orthodox rabbi," I said.

"Hi, I'm Arie," he said all excited. "My grandfather is an Orthodox rabbi in New York."

Over one hundred people attended the *Kol Nidre* service. In a town totaling less than two hundred Jews, the percentage was very impressive. While chanting the age-old prayer, I thought once again of the great responsibility the prayer leader has. Slowly, I sang the solemn melody, softly at first, then with growing fervor. The people responded with deep-felt prayers of their own.

At the end of the evening service, Gail and Quentin Fisher, formerly of Brooklyn, introduced themselves to me. Gail, who had attended a girl's yeshiva as a youth, said she was thrilled to find a traditional Yom Kippur service in Fairbanks. Quentin was a doctor working with the Public Health Service in Point Barrow, the northernmost Eskimo settlement in Alaska. From November to January, the sun doesn't appear above the horizon; and from the middle of May for eighty-two days, the sun never sets at all! That made the Fishers the northernmost Jews in the world! They had flown more than seven-hundred miles to Fairbanks to join the Jewish community in prayer on the holiest day of the year.

Yom Kippur day was sunny and in the mid-thirties with occasional flurries of snow. I remembered the debates in New York during the High Holidays about air-conditioning the *shuls* in the event of hot weather. That wasn't going to be a problem today! After praying all morning, we took a short break before continuing with the afternoon prayer. But before services could resume, the shocking news reached us. A sergeant who worked in the chapel walked up to me and said, "Rabbi, a war seems to have broken out in Israel."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

I was dumbfounded. A war? How could it be? I hadn't heard about any preparations for war or conflict in the Mideast. The media hadn't been talking about it. Not only that. It was Yom Kippur when all of Israel's reserve soldiers were fasting in *shul.*

"That's what I heard on the radio," he told me.

My heart sank. I did not want to believe it. A war meant the Jews were in danger. The country of Israel was so small, every war proved painful and costly, even when

Israel won. Trusting that G-d would stand by the soldiers of Israel, I urged the congregation to pray with the highest devotion. At the start of the afternoon service, the chapel was less than half full. After a long morning of prayer, many people felt that they had *davened* enough and decided to conclude the fast at home. But by the middle of the service, the chapel filled to capacity as the news of the war in Israel spread. Jews flocked to express solidarity with the people of Israel. When we began the final *Ne'ilah* prayer of the day, I beseeched everyone present to pray with all of their hearts. As day's end approached, with the gates of Heaven ready to close, this was our last chance to join in the battle and stand side-by-side with our brothers and sisters in Israel.

"We are the last congregation in the world," I reminded them, "to offer our prayers before G-d on this awesome day. The gates of prayer are still open for us. Let us strive with all of our hearts to pray for the safety of the soldiers of Israel."

Everyone stood throughout the final prayers and prayed with great conviction. Many people cried. My voice trembled with emotion. People who had never held a *Machzor* in their hands in their life burst out in tears. A journalist who had rushed to the synagogue to record my reactions to the news of the war picked up a prayer book and prayed with intense concentration. When we reached the concluding "*Shema Yisrael*," people's eyes were filled with tears. The journalist later confessed that when he called out the ancient prayer along with everyone else, it was the first time in his life he felt proud to be Jewish. Then, with a mighty blast of the shofar, directed against the enemies of Israel, the Yom Kippur prayers were sealed. After *maariv*, the congregants gathered in the social hall

for a break-the-fast meal. I said the *Havdalah* prayer, signifying the departure of the holy Yom Kippur day. Then, after answering some questions of the journalist, who was to become a regular at services every time I was in Fairbanks, I hurried to find a radio. Since Fairbanks had no "all-news" station, I had to wait for the news on the hour, another forty minutes away. Eager to learn what was happening, I phoned the radio station and asked the announcer to read me the latest news off the wire. Hearing that I was a rabbi, he told me that he would personally call me at my quarters on the hour throughout the night. In the meantime he confirmed that an all-out war had erupted in Israel.

Dazed, I tried to sort out the terrible news coming from Israel. It was monstrous. While Jews were attending Yom Kippur services throughout the country, the surrounding Arab states had launched an all-out attack, catching the Israeli Army by surprise. It was an act of ghastly barbarity. Since Alaska was twelve hours behind Israel, the war was already in its second day. Who could tell how many soldiers and civilians had fallen?

When I phoned Miriam to wish her a healthy year, she told me that the neighbors had come to the house while she was praying to tell her the distressing news. Though I was exhausted from fasting, I couldn't get to sleep. The long Fairbanks night seemed never-ending. True to his word, the announcer from the radio station called me throughout the night to read me the latest news breaking over the wire. But the reports only served to distress me more and more.

Flying back to Anchorage first thing in the morning, I was treated to a spectacular view of the 20,300-foot Mount McKinley, North America's highest peak. The

morning sun reflected off its snow-covered cliffs, creating a brilliant red aura. Like a museum of nature, the surrounding national park spread out for miles and miles, resplendent with mountains, rivers, glaciers, and vast tundra plains. But my heart wouldn't let me fully appreciate this beautiful sight, since I knew that in Israel, at that very moment, young soldiers were dying.

Miriam met me at the airport and dropped me off at the Sunday school, where I was to teach a class. Naturally, everyone there voiced his or her worries and fears regarding the situation in Israel.

On Monday, with the possibility of the war lasting far longer than Israel's miraculous six-day victory in '67, I called up Sergeant Applegate in the personnel office to ask how much leave time I had accumulated.

"About half an hour," he sarcastically replied.

He wasn't that far off. Having been in the Air Force slightly more than a month, I only had three days leave to my credit. With the outbreak of war in Israel, I desperately wanted to fly there and offer whatever help I could to my beloved Jewish homeland. Back in '67, I had volunteered to go to Israel as the Israeli-Arab conflict heated up. My departure was scheduled for the sixth of June, but air travel was suddenly cut off to Israel, so I was left stranded back in New York. Thank G-d, *Tzahal* triumphed without me, but I made a commitment to myself that if war broke out in Israel again, G-d forbid, I would overturn heaven and earth to be with my land and my people.

Vacation days or not, I put in an immediate request to take a leave of absence from the base. "I'm sorry, sir," came the official reply. "No United States military officers are permitted to fly to the Middle East at this time." The commitment I had made in 1967 was not going to be fulfilled.

I wasn't my own man. I was U.S. Air Force property. What a frustrating feeling. Here I was, a strong and healthy Jew and I couldn't help. The only way I could help defend Israel was by living there permanently, I realized. Who could tell? Maybe that was the next great adventure.

Colonel Gabrielsen arrived at Elmendorf that afternoon, three days early from a conference in Denver.

"Izrel, thank goodness you're here," he said, out of breath.

"Sure I am. What's wrong? How come you are back so early?" I asked.

"I heard a rumor that you were on your way to *Izrel*, and I was told by a command chaplain to make sure you didn't go at this time. If you were seen there, our enemies could claim that we were sending military personnel to help Israel, and that could prove most embarrassing to the United States and Israel as well."

"So I've been told," I replied. "Though I would have thought the opposite. America should be honored to send its troops to help the Jewish people in Israel."

The Lutheran chaplain was silent. That wasn't a matter for the chaplaincy to decide. There were Presidents and Congresses for that.

"I saw your tabernacle booth on the way in," he said, changing the subject. "It looks really nice."

"Yes, it is," I answered.

Indeed, the base engineers had done a professional job constructing the *sukkah*. The upcoming holiday promised to be a happy time on the base, but that year, only a part of me took part in the festivities in the *sukkah*. My heart was with my beleaguered brethren in Israel.

12

America's Northernmost Sukkah

A day before the holiday of Sukkot, I was officially authorized, along with a sergeant in our unit, to drive an Air Force truck to the woods near Elmendorf. We weren't going for a picnic, but to gather branches for the *schach* roofing of the *sukkah*. Overnight snow flurries and a frost made our work much more difficult, but since the snow wasn't deep, we were able to load up the truck with lots of foliage and greenery. After two hours of cutting branches, we traveled back to the base. News came over the truck radio that Vice President, Spiro Agnew, was stepping down from office. The war in Israel wasn't mentioned. Though the battle was still raging, with Israel's survival at stake, other news stories were grabbing the headlines.

For me, it was the first time I ever had to knock the snow off my shoes before entering a *sukkah*. Several families joined us in our beautifully decorated booth on the first night of the weeklong holiday. Miriam's homemade *Yom-Tov challah* was the treat of the night. Everyone had lots of questions, and I was happy to answer them as best as I could. Sukkot was integrally bound with the Land of Israel, I told our guests. In Israel, this time of year is the season of the harvest. Precisely at the time when we fill up

our homes with the bounty of the harvest, the Torah tells us to leave our comfortable dwellings for the open-air *sukkah*, to remind us to put our faith, not in material wealth, but in G-d, who provides us with all of our needs. I spoke a lot about Israel that night, and throughout all of the holiday. In a way, it was therapy. Since I couldn't be there to assist in the battle, at least I could try to make people understand the importance of *Eretz Yisrael,* not only as a place of refuge for persecuted Jews, but as the place where the holidays come to life in all of their original meaning.

During the whole week, I walked around carrying the "four species" unique to the holiday—the *etrog* fruit, *lulav*, myrtles, and willow. Meeting a Jew, I would hand him the set and invite him to recite the special blessing. I brought the "four species" or *arba minim*, to the Sunday school and passed them around to all of the kids. When the gentile chaplains on the base asked me what I was doing, I had them open their Bibles to Leviticus 23 which described the holiday of Sukkot. What surprised looks registered on their faces to find that Rabbi Haber's newfangled customs were explicitly recorded in their very own Bibles! "Hey look," they called out, "Izrel's going to the chapel carrying Leviticus 23!"

One day during the holiday, the base commander noticed the *sukkah* on his daily inspection. Immediately, he called Colonel Gabrielsen and asked, "Isn't it a little early to have a nativity scene set up by Chapel Two?"

"The nativity scene?" the chaplain asked. "We don't have a nativity.... Oh, oh, you must be referring to the soo-kaah."

"A soo-kaah? What's a soo-kaah?" the base commander wanted to know.

"Rabbi Haber said he needed a soo-kaah booth for a Jewish holiday. He showed us in the Bible exactly where G-d commands it, so we have a soo-kaah for the rest of the week."

"I see. Well, if G-d commands it, what can I say? As long as it is all right with you, then it is all right with me. But make sure it comes down when the holiday is over. And in the future, if there are any more Jewish holidays, try to keep me posted in advance."

On *Shemini Atzeret*, the eighth day of the holiday, we had a *minyan* at services. That was another first for Alaska. As was the joyous *Simchat Torah* dancing. The children were especially pleased to receive flags and prizes as they joined in the celebration expressing the Jewish people's everlasting love for the Torah.

13

Alert

Sunday, October 21, was United Nation's Day in Anchorage. Groups from different national and ethnic backgrounds were to perform folk dances from many of the countries belonging to the UN. The festive occasion was scheduled to take place at the Sydney Lawrence Auditorium in the heart of the city. The modern building was named after Alaska's most famous artist.

The group of Jewish teenagers who were scheduled to perform approached me that morning with a dilemma. They asked me whether it was all right for them to dance at a time when Jewish soldiers were dying in battle in Israel. I suggested that they should definitely appear on stage dressed in their blue and white costumes. However, instead of dancing, they should explain to the audience how they felt in their hearts at this difficult and sorrowful time for the Jewish people. A vote was taken, and the group decided to follow my advice.

All that afternoon, my phone did not stop ringing. Friends of the teenagers and angry parents criticized my advice and the group's decision to cancel the dance performance. When I asked them to explain their objections, they all expressed the same basic fear—how will the non-Jews react?

That evening, the auditorium was filled to capacity. Anxiously, I sat in my seat beside Miriam, wondering what would transpire. After the group representing Ireland performed, the Israeli contingent was next on the program. When the curtain opened, the teenagers stood poised in their blue and white costumes. The boys wore blue and white yarmulkes. A large flag of Israel was stretched out in the background. The audience applauded even before a word was spoken. It gave me chills knowing that not only the Jews were feeling Israel's struggle and pain, but that a majority of Americans were feeling it too. The crowd continued to cheer, expressing their solidarity with the people of Israel, as if the embattled Israelis could hear their applause. No doubt, the teenagers on the stage were greatly inspired by this spontaneous outburst of empathy and support.

When the group leader, Laurie, stepped forward to the microphone, silence descended over the hall. In a most beautiful and sensitive manner, she explained that the group truly wanted to entertain the audience with Israel's exciting and traditional folk dances, but asked them to please understand the pain they all felt over the peril that their brothers and sisters in Israel were experiencing. The Jewish nation, she said, was being forced to sacrifice the best of its youth. At that very moment, when Israeli soldiers were falling on the battlefield, how could they dance? She prayed that with the help of G-d, peace would soon prevail. When that hope-filled day arrived, Laurie said, the group would feel privileged to dance before the gathered crowd with a double portion of Israeli spirit and joy.

As Laurie stepped back to her place with the other Jewish teenagers on stage, the audience broke out in triumphant applause. Hundreds stood up on their feet to

honor the Jewish teenagers and the country they represented. I stood up too, proud of the people of Alaska and proud of the brave youngsters standing straight and tall in front of the Israeli flag. Cameramen from the local media ran down the side aisles, taking pictures of the group. The audience continued to give them a rousing ovation. When I went backstage to congratulate them, they showered me with thanks. Many told me how hard it had been for them to stand up to the pressure of their families and friends. Ironically, during intermission, parents told me how pleased they were with the brave, moral stance of their children. It turned out that even the staunchest critic was happy with the outcome of the evening. They even insisted on taking me over to meet the Mayor of Anchorage, George Sullivan, who was greeting people in the lobby. The Mayor clasped my hand warmly and told me again and again how much he respected the boys and girls who had displayed their convictions so poignantly.

On Veteran's Day, I had a holiday from the base, so I took Miriam on a trip to see Portage Glacier. Alan Bianco, an Israeli who worked in Anchorage as a policeman and a photographer, traveled with his family and us to the scenic spot. Leaving the outskirts of the city, we drove along the two-lane Seward Highway. On one side of the road was the picturesque Cook Inlet, and to our right was a range of rugged Alaskan mountains. Like in a children's picture book, the sun sparkled off the glassy water and the snow-capped peaks, making time seem to freeze. The fatigue which had mounted over a month of hard work, and the tensions of the faraway war, faded from our minds as we became absorbed in the stunning surroundings. Passing the famous Alyeska ski resort, we turned up the hilly path toward the glacier, located about fifty miles from the city.

Stopping our cars at the edge of a river, we watched a floating chunk of glacier drift by. The rays of the sun made its color appear a deep icy blue. A tall green mountain served as a backdrop, heightening the colors of the scene. It was time for another blessing praising G-d for the beauties of His creation.

I had another vacation day scheduled and awaited it eagerly. It was a chance to break the routine, spend some time alone with my wife, and study some Torah. I retired early that evening, hoping to get a full night's rest. After sleeping an hour, I heard Miriam talking with some friends who had stopped by to visit. Drowsily, I dressed and joined in the conversation. Minutes later the phone rang. Sergeant Holcomb requested me to report to the chapel—on the double and dressed in full uniform. I felt sure he was kidding until the sounds of heavy traffic disturbed the peaceful night. Suddenly, Elmendorf was transformed from a sleepy base into a bustling, lit-up city. The sound of plane engines filled the air as aircraft took off with great frequency. The flight line's floodlights turned the darkness over the runway into day. When I rushed to my office, the sergeant told me that the base had been put on alert.

"On alert for what?" I asked in surprise.

"Beats me," he said. "Usually, practice alerts begin in the morning. I can't remember ever having a base-wide alert at ten in the evening."

We waited in the office for a half-hour until we received a call to report to Chapel One. I was advised to bring along essential personal items in case I was transported to some other location.

Back home I stuffed my *tallit* and *tefillin* into a bag while Miriam watched with great concern.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied, slipping a prayer book into the pocket of my parka. "I'm just doing what I have been told. I'll call you as soon as I can."

Driving the few blocks to Chapel One, I met a line of traffic consisting of military personnel who lived off the base. Entering the "*Kiddush* room" of the chapel, I joined the other base chaplains and chapel N.C.O.'s in a discussion about the alert. Being the rookie among them, I was treated to a bunch of scary Vietnam tales. There was nothing to do until Colonel Gabrielsen arrived with our orders. He was attending a briefing at headquarters and would fill us in on the details when the bigger picture was explained to all of the department commanders. I telephoned Miriam, and she told me that the security police at the main gate had called, instructing our friends to leave the base immediately. All civilians were being asked to evacuate Elmendorf.

Meanwhile, all of Anchorage knew that something out of the ordinary was taking place at the base. The local radio reported that a military alert had been sounded. It seemed to me that I was the only person in the chapel who was excited. The other chaplains and sergeants were playing cards and drawing up hypothetical scenarios. One opinion had American troops flying to the Middle East to bring an end to the war. That didn't seem likely to me since in the past two weeks, the battle had shifted dramatically to Israel's favor. The Israeli Defense Forces had Egypt's crack Third Army surrounded in the Sinai. Syrian forces were on the run. Why should the United States enter the conflict now?

"I bet it's the Reds," the Protestant chaplain said. "They've probably marched into China."

"Could be that they've fired a couple missiles our way."

"They'd be crazy to. We've got enough firepower in the air to wipe Moscow off the map."

After an hour of wild speculation, the base chaplain finally arrived. Sitting at the head of the conference table, he got right to the point.

"This isn't just a local exercise, gentlemen. The entire United States military all over the world is participating in this alert. Lieutenant General Gamble is in direct contact with Washington. We are to remain on alert until we receive further instructions."

While he was speaking, I looked around the table. There we were, a group of commissioned and non-commissioned officers, all dressed in uniform, sitting around what could have passed for a table in a war room in any Hollywood movie. And there I was, the rabbi from Brooklyn, feeling like I had fallen out of the sky.

"Who knows?" I thought. "Maybe I'll get to go to Israel after all, as a chaplain in the United States Air Force."

The truth is, I hadn't really given much thought to this aspect of being in the Air Force. Most of my military training dealt with how to salute and pin on my insignias. I had been involved with *mikvahs* and holiday services, but who really thought about an actual war? Being whisked out of my house, not knowing where I was heading, put a different light on my adventure. This wasn't a little-league game, I realized. This is the big time. The World Series. I was no longer watching an exciting John Wayne movie. I was in it.

"Colonel Gabrielsen, sir," the Seventh-Day-Adventist chaplain began. "If it should be the Middle East, perhaps we should accept volunteers who have a special interest in that area of the world."

He looked at me as he spoke. He was a lieutenant colonel who had served in Vietnam. In just two weeks, he would complete his twenty years of military service and be ready to retire with a comfortable pension. Obviously, he wasn't gung-ho about flying off to war.

Before Colonel Gabrielsen could answer, the Catholic chaplain spoke up. "Since we all are religious people, I would think that all of us have a special interest in the Middle East."

"If chaplains are needed, there won't be any volunteering," the chaplain commander declared. "I will personally make all decisions and appointments."

That ended the briefing. We remained at the chapel. Some chaplains tried to get some sleep. Others continued playing cards.

"Hey, rabbi," one of the sergeants quipped. "Do you know how to use a gun?"

Everyone laughed. A chaplain patted me on the shoulder and assured me that I had nothing to worry about. Chaplains weren't required to engage in actual combat. They didn't even have to carry a weapon. In any front-line situation, an N.C.O. always went with them, and he did the fighting.

"What are you talking about," another N.C.O said. "Rabbis make the best soldiers in the world. You've seen the pictures of the Israeli army. Every other soldier has a beard."

"Not quite," I said. "It's just that the religious soldiers are more photogenic. But it's true. In Israel, a lot of rabbis are soldiers like everyone else."

A few hours later, we were told that we could return to our quarters, but to be near a telephone. Miriam was thrilled when I walked in the door. To tell you the truth, so

was I. It was like I was returning from the front line and months of grueling hand-to-hand combat.

In the morning, while listening to the radio, we were informed by Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, that the alert was called in response to sudden military movement in the Soviet Union. The United States wanted to make it clear to the Russians that there was to be no further interference in the Middle East.

I didn't get the extra sleep I had been longing for that night, but I figured that the soldiers in Israel weren't sleeping very soundly either. Things returned to normal. An Anchorage radio station invited me to participate in a question and answer show dealing with the Yom Kippur War which was to be broadcast Sunday night, a few days away. I immediately accepted, happy to have a platform to explain Israel's position, which was sometimes unfairly portrayed in the media.

Just before Friday night services, Chaplains Fuseman, Gabrielsen, and a major who headed the base information office greeted me unexpectedly. Warily, I approached the trio of serious-faced men.

"I have the feeling that you gentlemen haven't come here to pray at our Shabbat service," I said.

My feeling was right. Colonel Gabrielsen invited me into his adjacent office.

"What are you planning to speak about on the radio?" the major asked.

"Oh, you've heard about the upcoming show?" I said, suddenly understanding.

"Yes. The station has been promoting the show throughout the day. What is it you want to say?"

"I don't really know. They said they would be asking me questions about the war."

"What kind of questions?"

"They didn't say."

"Chaplain," he said. "We would be happy to permit you to participate in the program, but you may not say anything at all about the war in the Middle East."

"Excuse me, sir," I replied. "I am the only Jewish clergyman in the state of Alaska. My opinions will be those of a rabbi and a Jew. I'm sure nobody will consider my remarks as being official Defense Department policy."

"We know that and you know that," the major answered diplomatically. "But the host of the show might try to have his listeners believe it is *Captain* Haber of the United States Air Force behind the microphone, and not *Rabbi* Haber. Therefore, if you want to speak about Judaism in Israel, fine. Anything related to the war, however, will be viewed by our office as the words of a United States military officer."

Once again, I was handcuffed. Gagged would be a more fitting expression. I called up the radio station on Sunday morning and told the station manager that I couldn't appear on the show. After all of the publicity which he had given the upcoming program, he was rightfully upset. However, I couldn't appear and answer "no comment" to all of his questions. I asked Alan Bianco, my Israeli friend, to fill in for me, and he did a wonderful job.

In any event, the incident spoiled my Shabbat. Friday night, as I sat brooding over my roast-chicken dinner, Miriam asked me what was the matter.

"I'm beginning to learn about military conformity," I answered.

"What do you want, Rabbi Haber?" she asked. "You are in the United States army, *not* the Israeli army."

My wife, G-d bless her, hit the nail on the head. She was right. What did I expect? I was an officer in the United States Air Force, not in *Tzahal*, for now.

14

Fly Me To The *Mikvah*

While I ran into problems with the military, when it came to the *mikvah*, they did everything they could to meet our requests. Colonel Brame had a civilian engineer visit me to discuss more advanced plans for the *mikvah*. He inquired about every detail until he understood what was needed, and he ordered the required materials. In the meantime, Chaplain Gabrielsen acquired emergency leave orders for Miriam's first *mikvah* trip to Seattle. After receiving the signature of the base commander, he still had to convince the senior officer of the military airlift command. As previously mentioned, wives are only allowed to fly on military aircraft while accompanying their husbands. The colonel at military airlift wanted to know what the emergency was before he okayed the order. Chaplain Gabrielsen arranged a meeting between us, and after a detailed explanation, the airlift colonel exclaimed, "If that's not an emergency, then I don't know what is." Immediately, he signed the papers.

After being outfitted with helmet, sunglasses and walkie-talkie, Miriam flew off to McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma, fifteen hundred miles away, on a military-chartered flight, sitting in the cockpit. I stood out on the runway, waving goodbye. The snow, which had been falling

throughout the day, blew in every direction as the jet's engines started. I watched the plane soar into the sky until it disappeared into the clouds. "This was not exactly like the induction center poster," I thought. Later, I drove over to Anchorage Providence Hospital to visit a few Jewish patients.

Late that evening, Miriam called from Tacoma. She had been to the *mikvah* in Seattle and had picked up some *glatt* kosher meat at the kosher butcher store.

"It's nice returning to civilization," she said. "But compared to Alaska, the traffic here is frightening."

"A real woman of valor," I thought.

The following afternoon, I received a phone call from the military flight desk at McChord informing me that, "Mrs. Haber will be traveling back to Elmendorf on a C-130 Hercules cargo mission." That evening, I watched the propeller plane land as I stood by the brightly lit flight line. Returning home from her three thousand-mile trip to the *mikvah*, a smiling Miriam emerged triumphant from the rear of the Hercules. It turned out that she was the only passenger on board!

She explained that since the scheduled flight had been canceled, she was invited to travel on a C-130 along with the crew. At first, she was strapped into a side seat in the cargo section of the noisy aircraft, along with crates of food and equipment. After take-off, she was escorted to the cockpit where she sat for the remainder of the trip. The pilot explained the instruments on the flight panel and gave her headphones so she could listen to messages from the flight tower.

"After flying for nearly four hours through darkness, suddenly the lights of Anchorage twinkled magically down below," she said. "Sitting in the cockpit was incredi-

ble as the plane swooped over the runway, and watching the pilot set the plane down was really a thrill."

"I bet no girl from your old neighborhood ever did that—at least not on a United States Air Force C-130 Hercules!" I remarked.

Throughout the early part of November, I was in daily contact with Rabbi Grossbaum of St. Paul, and the base's civil engineers, concerning the proper site and the technical construction of the *mikvah*. Rabbi Herschel Kurzrock, Dean of the rabbinical college I attended in New York City, also gave me considerable advice during our long-distance phone calls.

With all of the activities I was involved with in Alaska, I kept a daily watch on the newspapers for news coming from Israel. My private war for the *mikvah* was dwarfed by the gravity of the Yom Kippur War. I did everything I could to make the Jews in Alaska feel involved. More than forty thousand dollars was raised for the Israel Emergency Fund. Contributions were sent to my office from as far away as Whitehorse in the Yukon Territories, and even from several villages north of the Arctic Circle.

Since Shabbat morning services had not been held in Alaska for many years, I was especially interested in encouraging the Jews of the area to play an active part in instituting regular Shabbat prayers. On Shabbat, November 10, we had a morning *minyan*, another historic event! Having broken the ice, so to speak, Shabbat *minyanim* became a regular feature of Jewish life in Anchorage.

I began to learn that with a lot of good natured resolve and energy, things could be changed for the better. For example, the fallacy that "Alaska is too far away to keep kosher" was to be buried as well. I ordered kosher provi-

sions from Seattle for the thirteen brave families who wanted to give kosher living a try. Kosher meats and cheeses were barged in from the "Lower 48." The price was more expensive than local, non-kosher products, but the spiritual satisfaction made up for it. A Jew is a Jew whether he eats kosher food or not, but when you follow the dietary laws, your Jewishness is deepened and enhanced. Not by accident, these same families became the mainstay of synagogue services and took an active part in developing better Jewish education throughout the state. Some of them wrote articles for our monthly bulletin, and the women organized an informal sisterhood to help Jewish families in need.

On my second visit to Fairbanks, I experienced the frozen winter weather that Alaska is famous for. Walking to the chapel on Friday evening, I wore a hooded parka, arm-length wool and leather gloves, Alaskan "mukluks" (high boots), insulated socks, and "long-john" thermal underwear to protect me from the temperature which dipped to minus fifty-seven degrees Fahrenheit. It also wasn't easy plowing my way through a newly fallen foot of snow. My glasses fogged from my frosty breath, literally blinding my way. I couldn't remove them from my face and carry them, because on Shabbat carrying is not allowed. Thus, holding my arms out in front of me for balance, and looking more like the abominable snowman than the rabbi, I staggered through the drifts to the chapel.

When I arrived in the lobby and thirty-five hearty souls greeted me "Good Shabbat," I was spiritually warmed. Despite the intense cold and frozen terrain, they had left their warm houses to pray. Come Shabbat morning, with the sun shining and the temperature in the high twenties, an even bigger crowd showed up to join in the services.

Seeing that the candle of faith still burnt in Alaska, I was inspired to increase my efforts to reach out to the Jewish community. In December, I launched a *tefillin* campaign. Several teenage boys throughout the state began putting on their phylacteries daily.

What was going on with the *mikvah*, Miriam wanted to know? During the first week of December, the economic committee of the base met to review ninety-five project proposals. The *mikvah* was listed as the sixty-third item for discussion. Thanks to Chaplain Gabrielsen's insistence, the committee, presided over by the base commander, heard our report seventh. The board approved the proposed "Jewish *mikvah* ('mix-ar')" and we finally had actual funds to go ahead with the building.

We felt like celebrating the news, but not in the way it turned out. It was time for the Officers Winter Ball, and Miriam and I were coerced into attending. We tried to offer excuses, but orders were orders. Chaplain Gabrielsen made sure that the Officer's Club provided us with kosher airline dinners. We were actually "ushered" to the head table with high-ranking dignitaries.

"Why?" I asked.

"The Chief Rabbi of Alaska must sit with the state's dignitaries," I was answered.

Needless to say, the couples seated at our table were curious to see what was inside the tin-foiled boxes which we were served. Their eyes gazed wonderingly at the separate plastic utensils, which were packaged with the meal. To their credit, no one got up and left the table, even though they probably thought we had some infectious disease.

I wore the mandatory mess dress, the military version of a tuxedo, topped by a white *kippah*, matching the color

of my jacket. Miriam looked beautiful in her gown. The wives of the other chaplains were surprised to learn that Miriam's hair was a wig. She explained that rules of modesty set down in the code of Jewish law required married Jewish women to cover their hair. The gentile women listened with great attention. In fact, she was a more convincing speaker than I was. For that reason, she was invited to give lectures at a variety of gatherings, and her talk on "The Jewish Woman and the Sabbath" led many families to make Shabbat a part of their lives.

With Chanukah on the way, I was appointed chairman of the Holiday Food-Basket Project, providing assistance for needy military families. In addition, I was asked to coordinate the Judaic Culture Seminar scheduled for Chanukah featuring my good friend, Rabbi Avraham Radzik of Kansas City, whom I convinced to come for a visit.

Chanukah candles and menorahs were sent to Jews throughout Alaska, made possible by the generosity of the Women's Division of the National Jewish Welfare Board. Then, ten days before the holiday, I produced and narrated a thirty-minute Chanukah radio program in cooperation with the Alaskan Armed Forces Radio Network. The show, entitled "Chanukah—The Festival of Lights in Story and Song" was broadcast throughout Alaska on Chanukah Eve. I was gratified to receive letters and phone calls from Jewish military personnel at Air Force sites such as Galena, Fort Greely, Shemya, and Adak, a naval installation located sixteen hundred miles southwest of Anchorage on the Aleutian chain. The Chanukah program was even heard by Jewish personnel in Greenland!

On the first night of the eight-day holiday, *The Anchorage Times*, Alaska's largest newspaper, sent a

reporter and a photographer to our home. We were photographed lighting our menorah by the living-room window. The photographer stood outside looking in to capture the scene. Miriam served holiday *latkes*, and the newspaper people joined the many guests who started to arrive.

To our great astonishment, we discovered ourselves lighting the Chanukah candles in a large front-page picture in the newspaper. We were statewide celebrities! Funny, but because of the publicity, several Jewish couples whom we had not as yet met came to Shabbat services to meet us, the media stars, in person!

On the home front, I was pleased to hear that my father was going to make his first trip to Israel, where he would visit with my grandparents and youngest brother, Alan, who was studying at a Jerusalem yeshiva for a year. Interestingly, because of the war, an Arab oil boycott was in effect and so Elmendorf was put under an energy conservation order. Though this interfered with the holiday season and with the various non-Jewish celebrations which had been scheduled, no one blamed Israel, and we never heard an anti-Semitic or anti-Israel remark.

Chaplain and Mrs. Gabrielsen hosted a holiday season party for all of the chaplains and their families. They thoughtfully printed their invitation to include a Hebrew translation for Miriam and myself, and they went out of their way to avoid any Christian prayers or symbols which might be offensive to us. The Chief of Air Force Chaplains, Major General Roy Terry, and his deputy, Chaplain Brigadier General Henry Meade, sent us a Chanukah card and their best wishes as well.

Many notes of thanks were mailed to my office from the needy recipients of funds in the Holiday Food-Basket Project. Expressions of sincere appreciation came from

Jews and non-Jews alike. One of the letters read:

> Dear Chaplain Haber,
>
> Our heartfelt thanks and most sincere appreciation to the kind individuals who donated funds toward the Holiday Food-Basket Project. It came at a time when we were quite disheartened by the military, and this showed us that people really do care. Your thoughtfulness will never be forgotten. G-d bless you!

15

Spreading The Light

Though my wife and I were living about as far north as a Jew could live, our hearts were in the east, in Israel. Three times a day, when a religious Jew prays, he faces the Land of Israel. A main part of his prayer is the plea asking G-d to gather the scattered exiles from the Four Corners of the world and bring them home to Zion. In all of our prayers, we pray for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. After eating a meal, when we feel satiated and content with our lives, we say the Psalm, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem...." During the course of a regular day, a Jew is reminded to keep his connection to Israel alive in his heart. How much more so during a war, when the Jewish homeland is under attack?

For this reason, when I organized our first Alaskan Jewish-Learning Seminar, I chose the topic: "The State of Israel—The Heroic Struggle to Survive and Develop in the Middle East." There were lectures, slide shows and movies. Rabbi Radzik, a Kansas City educator and radio host, was the guest speaker. One of his most popular classes focused on the development of Jewish music throughout the ages, accompanied by an audio-visual show. In line with the agreement of the Alaskan Command, Rabbi Radzik and I traveled north and south of the Alaskan Range, giving

Jewish people all over the state a chance to participate in the seminar. Instead of people coming to the seminar, the seminar came to them.

The *Rebbetzin*, Barbara Radzik, spent Shabbat with Miriam at Elmendorf, while Rabbi Avraham and I visited Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks. We recited *Kiddush* and feasted on the food which Miriam had prepared for our trip. We both felt uplifted, realizing that this was probably the first time that two Orthodox rabbis had spent a Shabbat together in Fairbanks!

Since daylight in Alaska did not last very long, Shabbat candle-lighting time in Anchorage was 2:28 p.m. and in Fairbanks at 1:29 p.m. Thus our Friday night meal began at 2:30 in the afternoon! Since Rabbi Radzik's sermon was scheduled for eight o'clock that evening, we had lots of free time to *shmooz* (talk) and *shnooz* (sleep).

"You must really feel lonely on these long, dark Shabbat evenings when you are off traveling by yourself," he noted.

"To tell you the truth, I was hoping to get a post in Southern California," I confided. "But what can you do. That's the life of a Jew."

By three o'clock the next day, Shabbat was already finished, and the audio-visual program began. The entertaining lecture was as much of a success as it had been in Anchorage several days earlier. The turnout was standing-room-only. As we packed up the slides and equipment, people lingered to ask dozens of questions. We both could feel everyone's disappointment when the time came to leave. But we had reservations to keep on an evening flight back to Anchorage, where Rabbi Radzik was scheduled to give a morning lecture on the base.

On the last day of the Radziks' week-long visit, Miriam and I took them on a sightseeing tour of snow-covered

Mount Susitna, known as "The Sleeping Lady" because its peak is wrapped in a blanket of snow the year round. Both Miriam and I regretted having to bid them farewell. Back at our house, we realized how difficult it was to be the only Orthodox couple around for thousands of miles. But we hardly had time to feel sorry for ourselves. There were lectures to prepare, letters to write, classes to teach, phone calls to make... and before we knew it, we had to get ready for Shabbat again and another battalion of guests.

The night that the Radziks departed, our spirits were boosted by a call from my father, who had returned to New York from his visit to Israel. He said he had loved the country immensely and couldn't wait to go back. The "Israeli" side of the family were doing just fine. My brother was happy with his learning and with the friends he had made at his school, and the country was recovering from the terrible, initial shock of the war.

Early in January, the Dean of Alaska Methodist University interviewed me. I had applied to teach a full-time evening course entitled, "The History of the Modern State of Israel." Several days after the interview, I was accepted as an instructor at the university.

Then, finally, *shehecheyanu v'kimanu*, I had a week's leave! Miriam flew to New York one day ahead of me since I was booked on flights by the military. Departing from Anchorage at eleven-thirty p.m., I arrived in Seattle at four-thirty in the morning. I *davened* at the airport at sunrise and then boarded a flight which arrived in New York at five p.m. Ironically, it took less time to fly overseas to Europe than to make the *shlepp* from Alaska to the East Coast.

Our trip wasn't only a long-awaited chance to stock up on family warmth and good times, the Jewish Welfare

Board's Chaplains Conference was being held all week long in the city. It was a time to exchange notes, hear what other people were doing in different parts of the world, and get an infusion of team spirit. During the week, several synagogues invited me to address their congregations and speak about my experience in Alaska. People listened in rapt attention, and I realized that for them, just as it had once been for me, Alaska was as mysterious and as faraway as the moon.

Being the rabbi of Alaska not only attracted the attention of New York Jews; it made an impression on Broadway. Toward the end of our stay, both of our families got together to attend the popular musical, "Irene," starring Debbie Reynolds. After enjoying the performance, I was ushered backstage. Dressed in uniform, I was introduced as the Chief Rabbi of Alaska. The stage manager asked if my family and I would light to meet Miss Reynolds, since he learned that I was flying back to Alaska the following day. Naturally, we expressed our appreciation. He asked us to wait at the door. A minute later, he returned with a big smile on his face and invited the whole family to come into the actress's dressing room. Greeting my grandmother with a kiss on the cheek, Miss Reynolds said she was flattered that we had chosen to see her show after traveling all the way from Alaska. Being "The Rabbi of Alaska" had its privileges after all.

A day later, I was as far away from the glitter of Broadway as a rabbi could be, back in the land of Eskimos, doing whatever I could to spread the light of Torah. A month before, a Jewish girl from Anchorage had called me, asking where she could learn about the role of women in Judaism with other young women her age. I suggested that she spend her winter vacation at the Chabad House in

St. Paul, which was holding a Women's Winter Institute of Jewish Learning. Returning home, she informed me that she had had a wonderful time experiencing real Jewish living. She had begun to light Shabbat candles and had convinced her mother to keep a kosher home. At the same time, our young friends, Laurie and Debbie Green, decided to take part in the National Council of Synagogue Youth's West Coast Convention in Southern California. The Jewish youth of Alaska was beginning to seek after their spiritual heritage!

Toward the end of January, I received a letter that gave us fuel to keep on with our work through the freezing cold winter. It was from a Jewish family new to the state:

> Dear Rabbi Haber,
>
> We met you in Fairbanks at the Yom Kippur services which you conducted. Since then, we have left Fairbanks, and after doing some traveling, we have settled in Petersburg—a small fishing community in Southeast Alaska. Your bulletins have been forwarded to us and are always most welcome. There is no Jewish community here at all, and I would greatly appreciate anything you could mail us to keep us in touch with Jewish life. I would like to begin teaching my son Hebrew but find no resources here at all. We have been lighting Shabbat candles, and of course, Chanukah candles too. We made a *menorah* that was just beautiful. I'll try to photograph it and send you a picture. I wanted to let you know our address and I hope you will continue to include us in your mailings. We trust that you and your wife, Miriam, are enjoying Alaska. I loved her article about preparing *chulent* for Shabbat. I have many memories of that from my early childhood....

The letter made me realize that there were probably many more people out there in the snowbound wilderness who would enjoy having a constant connection to Judaism. I began taking a census of the Jewish population of Alaska so that I could distribute our bulletin and other learning materials to Jewish families throughout the state. Soon I could hardly keep up with the mounting mail I received. Though letters lay on my desk for days on end, I tried to answer all questions as soon as I could, sometimes in a sentence or two, and sometimes in letters which flowed on for pages.

Miriam began full-time study toward a Master's Degree in Special Education at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. I was busy at college too. Twenty-seven students registered for my course, making it one of the largest evening classes in the school. The first three-hour meeting began with a film depicting the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. Many of the students were shocked. Though some were in their forties, they hadn't fully comprehended the extent of the cold-blooded slaughter of European Jewry and their terrifying plight. The university informed the press that I was teaching the course, and the *Anchorage Times* turned it into a story:

> An American-born rabbi whose life has been closely attached to the State of Israel, will bring firsthand information and observations to a new class at Alaska Methodist University. The class entitled "The History of the Modern State of Israel" will be taught by Rabbi Israel Haber during the eleven-week spring session beginning February 4th. Haber, a newly arrived chaplain at Elmendorf Air Force Base, was named Israel after his late grandfather and after the Jewish State because he was born twenty-five years ago in the same

month, May of 1948, when Israeli independence was proclaimed.

Haber's course will cover the Holocaust of European Jewry, which led to the establishment of the State of Israel by a vote of the United Nations. Other topics include: emigration of Jewish refugees; the concept of *kibbutzim*; the systems of education, both Arab and Jewish; and the four Israeli wars since 1948. Haber says he will discuss the daily life in Israel, including a survey of the arts, theater, sports, and political system. Special attention will be given to Jerusalem, and the lectures will be illustrated by audio-visual presentations.

Haber is in a unique position to discuss these aspects of Israeli life because he receives regular correspondence from a wide variety of relatives who live there, including his grandparents who emigrated to Israel from America fourteen years ago. In a letter-tape from his brother who is a student there, one can hear the emergency sirens announcing the call-up of soldiers at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, the most recent Mid-East conflict.

Since there is no other rabbi in Alaska, Haber's congregation includes all the Jews in the state. Through the cooperation of the Air Force, the rabbi-chaplain travels the length and breadth of Alaska to lead Jewish prayer services and give classes. Whether to marry a Jewish couple or teach a family how to keep a kosher kitchen in Alaska, Rabbi Haber always has his suitcase packed and "ready to go."

Being so isolated, I always had to think months in advance. For instance, three months before Pesach, I already filled out the official documentation needed to

have the base commissary stock kosher food items for the holiday. Fortunately, the commissary staff responded to my requests with a spirit of willing cooperation.

Two *Bar Mitzvah* celebrations took place during February. The congregation (even as reported in the Reform synagogue's bulletin) enthusiastically enjoyed the services:

> It was a traditional Orthodox, Sabbath morning service which included all of the prayers in the prayer book. After what must have seemed an eternity, the *Bar-Mitzvah* boy was called to the Torah for his *aliyah.* He said his first *brocha*, then the rabbi recited the *maftir* (the seventh section of the weekly portion) and the *bar-mitzvah* boy followed with the second blessing. Suddenly, the rabbi and the father of the *bar-mitzvah* boy on the pulpit started to clap rhythmically and sing, "*Simin tov u'mazel tov*," and everyone joined in. Then, at a signal from the rabbi, the boy's mother distributed mini-bags of candy, filled with raisins, nuts, and sweets, representing a sweet life of Torah, to family and friends sitting in the front rows. The bags were thrown toward Evan, as he stood with his back to the congregation (none hit him too hard!) and everyone laughed and sang as the joyousness of the occasion filled the chapel.

Another great miracle occurred in the wilderness of Alaska—Miriam began teaching Hebrew to adults on Elmendorf. That wasn't really a miracle, she said. The miracle was that so many people signed up.

One day, I received a phone call from a woman whom I had never met. She said she was getting married and she wanted me to perform the ceremony.

"*Mazel tov*!" I wished her. "What's the groom's name?"

"Ray Smith," she answered.

"Is he Jewish?" I asked.

"No," she responded.

"You want me to marry you to someone who isn't Jewish?"

"What's the problem?" she asked. "You're a rabbi, aren't you?"

When I explained to her why I couldn't officiate at a marriage which revolted against Jewish law, she threatened to a have a Reform rabbi in Hawaii perform the wedding.

"Have a good trip," I told her.

What else could I say? I felt sorry for the young woman and for the unfortunate thousands like her.

At the same time, the Fishers from Barrow walked into my office. Dr. Quentin Fisher had been reassigned to Ketchikan, located in the southern part of the state. That meant there were only three Jews left living in Barrow. Ketchikan called itself "The Salmon Capital of the World." It was also known for its paper industry, and for the totem poles which filled the gardens and parks of the city. While Jews love to eat smoked salmon, there weren't a whole lot of them in Ketchikan, the place where you can get the freshest lox in the country. To help them on their way, I gave them a supply of Jewish books to read and promised to send them additional literature in the mail. A week later, I received a letter from Gail Fisher describing their travels:

"Many thanks for a lovely evening shared in your home and for sending gefilte fish along with us—yum. Our trip has been filled with the multitude of Alaska's grandeurs. What a gorgeous country, especially the quietude of the Haines Highway in the whiteness of winter. Glistening mountains falling off into snow-covered flatland and low flying clouds. Ethereal!

"We would like to ask a favor if we might. Quentin is planning to write a short article for *Alaska Magazine* about a recent *brit* in Barrow. What we could use is a brief paragraph describing the origin of the ceremony."

The Jews in Alaska didn't know much about Judaism. In fact, a lot of them knew nothing at all. But many of them were eager to learn. That's why I accepted invitations to speak at public high schools and all kinds of civic gatherings. Most of the students and adults had never met a "real rabbi" before. And I knew that among the non-Jews, there usually were one or two Jews in the crowd. Even when I knew that there would be no Jews in the audience, I went all the same. For instance, when a large group of Southern Baptists asked to come out to the base to meet me, I welcomed them and had passes waiting for them at the gate. Addressing them for an hour regarding the various Jewish holidays, they were genuinely surprised that many of their negative beliefs about Jews and their practices had no base in reality. That too was spreading the light—by being a light to the Jews and a light to the nations as well.

16

Work On The "Mixer" Begins

Normally, if a chaplain wants to bring a lecturer, religious educator, or specialist to Alaska from the lower states, he has to file his request with the Alaskan Command six months in advance. When I received word that the base engineers had gathered all of the material needed for the *mikvah's* construction, I phoned Rabbi Grossbaum, and he assured me that he would be ready to come at a moment's notice. Immediately, I asked Chaplain Puseman for permission to bring the *mikvah*-builder to Elmendorf. Explaining that the holiday of Purim was just two weeks away, I suggested that Rabbi Grossbaum could visit Fairbanks at that time and be the guest lecturer for the Jewish Teenage and Adult Encounter Program, which I had been organizing. In that manner, the rabbi's trip could fall under the education budget, and he would be able to spend most of his time directing the building of the *mikvah*. The Colonel agreed and said that he would handle the arrangements personally. Calling in his command staff, he told the chaplain in charge of programming to put the machinery into operation.

"Just give me a few weeks," the chaplain said.

"A few weeks?" I asked in surprise. "Rabbi Grossbaum

is ready to come immediately."

"Immediately? These things take time."

"I'm sure you can work something out," Colonel Puseman told him. "Rabbi Haber, just write up a schedule for the Purim encounter program and present it to my staff as soon as possible."

Despite the fact that I was leaving for Fairbanks that afternoon for a weekend visit, I told him that I would write it up and bring it to his office within an hour. It was amazing how the wheels of bureaucracy spun smoothly when a little grease was applied. A task normally requiring a six-month notice was miraculously accomplished in three working days. Realizing that Colonel Puseman acted upon my request in respect of my religious beliefs, I extended my sincere thanks to the entire staff of the chaplain command.

During Shabbat services at Fort Wainwright, I announced that the Fairbanks Jewish community would have a guest rabbi in their midst to conduct the upcoming Purim program. The congregation responded to the announcement with happy applause. It was good news to warm the heart, especially in light of the radio weather report on *Motzei* Shabbat:

"Clear and cold with ice fog tonight through Sunday. High today near thirty below freezing. Low tonight near forty below. High Sunday near thirty below. Calm winds throughout the period. The outlook for Monday is clear and cold. It is currently thirty-six below. The record high for today's date is thirty-nine degrees in 1948. The low, minus sixty in 1934."

Sunday through Tuesday that week, Miriam and I hosted Major Burton Bright, a Jewish officer who was the chief camp commander of the Sparevohnn Air Force site, one-

hundred-and-eighty miles north of Anchorage. After having spent one year at the remote station, he was on route to his new assignment at Offut Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska. Happily, he put on *tallit* and *tefillin* during his stay and expressed regret that he had not had an opportunity to visit us sooner. But he had read every line of our monthly bulletins and thanked us for having thrown out a Jewish lifeline to his barren stretch of the Alaskan wilderness.

The following day, we said goodbye to Major Bright at the Anchorage International Airport. Twenty-four hours hadn't passed and we were back at the airport again to welcome Rabbi Shalom Gershon Grossbaum to Alaska.

After watching my wife fly off to Seattle six times to go to the *mikvah*, I was thrilled that Rabbi Grossbaum had finally arrived. He was a sight for sore eyes. A bearded *Chasidic* figure, dressed in a black suit and sporting a wide-brimmed black hat. Needless to say, he stuck out a little from the rugged Alaskans and their rustic Arctic clothing.

"*Shalom aleichem*, Yisrael!" he said, smiling at me as we shook hands.

"*Aleichem shalom*, Gershon," I answered. "I can hardly believe that you are finally here."

"What an airplane ride," he said. "What mountains! What views! What beauties the *Ribbono Shel Olam* has created for man to enjoy."

As we drove him home in our car, the Lubavitcher *Chasid* enjoyed his first views of Alaska from the ground. At the house, we helped him unpack the boxes of kosher food, which he had ordered for us, including *Chalav Yisroel* dairy products. Growing up in New York, I was accustomed to using only milk and cheese products which

had Jewish supervision at the time of the milking. I stuck to this stringency even when I found myself in places where *Chalav Yisroel* products couldn't be found. After some coffee and cake, even though he was exhausted from his trip, Rabbi Grossbaum insisted we show him the site of the projected *mikvah*. Walking across the street in the below freezing temperature, I showed him my office and the room down the hall, which was to be converted into the *mikvah*.

Back home, we continued to speak late into the night. I explained that he would be meeting with Colonel Brame the following morning. The Colonel was the head of civil engineers for all of Alaska. For months, I had worked with him on the plans, which Rabbi Grossbaum had sent, but the time had come for the two men to meet to carry on with the actual *mikvah* construction. Though the Colonel had spoken many times on the telephone with the rabbi in St. Paul, he had no idea what the Lubavitcher looked like. To ease the shock for both of them, I thought it proper to educate the visiting rabbi about the protocol involved in going into a public facility on a military base. The first thing he had to master was the dress code.

"This is the military," I told him. "People aren't used to black Fedora hats."

His eyes shot up to look at the brim of his hat.

"Watch," I said, demonstrating with my flight cap. "When I walk into a building, I take my cap off but still have my *kippah* on underneath. When I leave the building, I put my cap back on."

I told him to try it. "Pretend you are entering a building."

Good-naturedly, he took off his hat.

"Okay, now you are leaving the building."

Patiently, like an obedient soldier, he squared the Fedora back over his *kippah.*

"Wonderful. You've just passed officer training. Tomorrow, when we go into the headquarters, that's what you have to do."

"No problem, Captain Haber," he said with a joking salute.

The next day, when we walked into the building, Rabbi Grossbaum looked around at the men and women soldiers, put his hand to his hat and secured it in place.

"Uh oh," I thought. "Now what am I going to do?"

People were gazing at us curiously. Many of them probably had never seen a *Chasidic* rabbi before. With his black hat, black suit, and long black beard, Rabbi Grossbaum looked as much a part of the Anchorage military scene as a polar bear would have looked in a Miami Beach hotel. Wanting to draw as little attention to us as possible, I led the way down the hallway, not bothering to remind him to take off his hat. I figured it was better to transgress a detail of military etiquette than to upset the man who was going to build me a *mikvah.*

When I opened the door to the Colonel's office, I was in for a shock. Even before I could introduce the two men formally, Colonel Brame came around his desk and gave Rabbi Grossbaum a happy embrace. They were like brothers reunited after a long separation. For six months, the Methodist Midwestern Air Force colonel and the young Lubavitcher rabbi had spoken on the telephone about *mikvahs,* and now they hugged one another as if they had known each other for years.

A major and a sergeant from the engineer corps sat at a table observing the unusual greeting. Behind them, tacked to the corkboard on the wall, were blueprints and sketch-

es of the proposed building and *mikvah*. Immediately, the engineers got down to work, explaining in technical jargon their plan for the "mixer." In the middle of their discussion, Rabbi Grossbaum stood up, still with his hat on, and said, "Excuse me, may I say a few words."

"*Oy vay*," I thought. "Why does he have to speak?"

"I have a few suggestions, if you don't mind. I think you've made some mistakes."

"*Oy a broch*," I thought, moaning to myself. "Why is he telling them that they made mistakes?"

From his back pocket, he removed a piece of graph paper and unfolded it as everyone watched. As if he were teaching a class, he stepped forward and stuck it up on the corkboard on the wall. Talking just like one of the engineers, he spoke in technical terms, which I couldn't follow. I noticed that Colonel Brame was very impressed. As Rabbi Grossbaum continued to explain what sounded like a doctorate's thesis in *mikvah* construction, the Colonel flashed the major and sergeant disapproving looks for having made so many mistakes in their plan. When Rabbi Grossbaum finished his professional presentation, the engineers were speechless. Silently, they stared up at their drawings and began asking Rabbi Grossbaum questions.

Motioning me with his head, Colonel Brame stood up and took me aside.

"Chaplain," he said. "There's something about that rabbi I have to talk to you about."

Okay. Here it comes. A violation of the dress code. I knew what he was going to say.

Glancing back at the table where the black-hatted rabbi sat with the engineers, Colonel Brame whispered in my ear, "You see that rabbi there? Now *he* really looks like a rabbi."

What could I answer? He was right. In my *kippah* and uniform, I looked like an overgrown Bar-Mitzvah boy at a Purim party, while Rabbi Grossbaum looked just like a rabbi should look. In Colonel Brame's eyes, Rabbi Grossbaum could do no wrong. He dismissed the team of engineers whom he had brought to the office and said, "Rabbi Grossbaum, you and I are going to build that 'mixer' together."

The actual work on the "mixer" began on Sunday, March 3rd. Along with two friends, Bernie Schechter and Dr. Paul Liebman, Gershon and I set to work ripping up the floor of the proposed *mikvah* located in the building where my office was housed. Doctor-Captain Liebman was a newcomer to the base, assigned to the Elmendorf Hospital. He and his wife quickly became our close friends, and he was happy to lend a hand in the historic project. After several hours of backbreaking labor, Rabbi Grossbaum announced that we had encountered our first major obstacle. The four of us stared down at old pre-World-War-Two pipes that weren't supposed to have been there. The following day, plumbers arrived to remove the pipes so that work could progress. While Rabbi Grossbaum continued on with the digging, I prepared publicity material concerning his upcoming Purim appearance in Fairbanks. Flyers were distributed on the university campus and announcements highlighted the event on the local radio.

With Congressional orders backing him up, the rabbi from St. Paul dedicated himself to the work on the *mikvah* for the next thirty days. Each day, my admiration for Rabbi Grossbaum continued to grow. How many people would leave their families for an entire month to help build a *mikvah* that maybe only one Jewish woman would

ever use? For me, it was a pleasure having him as our guest. Finally I had a yeshiva *bocher* to talk to, someone who spoke the same language, someone who enjoyed a good Talmudic discussion and who knew the difference between the Rambam and the Ramban. Also, it was a chance for me to learn more about *Chasidus* and about the special *Chasidus* of Chabad. At first, I was a bit skeptical about the *Chasidic* approach. After all, I had grown up in yeshivas where *Chasidus* wasn't taught. Yet here he was with a suitcase filled with scholarly books and dazzling new insights into the Torah. It was a whole other philosophy within the mainstream of Orthodox Judaism about which I knew absolutely nothing.

One night, to probe deeper into the mystery surrounding him, I asked him what he was doing here building a *mikvah* in Alaska. "What do you guys really want? I mean, you hardly know me, and I don't belong to the Lubavitch movement. Why is your boss from the Chabad House letting you stay here for a month?"

You have to remember that I never heard back from the rabbinical boards in New York who had promised to help me. These guys from St. Paul were the only Jews who had been willing to donate their time and energy. I couldn't figure them out.

"First thing," he said with a smile. "Wherever there is a needy Jew in the world, we try to be there to help. And secondly, we know the Lubavitcher Rebbe is deriving a lot of *nachas* from what we're doing here, building a *mikvah* in Alaska."

"You mean to tell me that the building of this *mikvah* in Alaska is giving the Rebbe *nachas* in Brooklyn?"

"That's right," he answered straightforwardly.

As the weeks progressed, I became more and more

impressed. Once night, Rabbi Grossbaum called a Rosh Yeshiva in Montreal, Rabbi Yitzchak Hendel, and arranged for him to fly to Anchorage for twenty-four hours to inspect the *mikvah* when it would be finished come spring. The elderly Rabbi Hendel was one of North America's top *mikvah* specialists. He would decide if the completed *mikvah* was constructed according to all of the intricate laws set down in the *Shulchan Aruch*.

Indeed, when the *mikvah* was finished, Rabbi Hendel flew across the continent to make the all-important ruling that the Elmendorf *mikvah* was kosher. Imagine, three Orthodox rabbis together in Alaska...a *beit din*...a *mezuman*...history had been made.

All during this time, in addition to her non-stop job making sure our endless stream of guests felt comfortable in our home, Miriam was learning in graduate school several hours a day. My class at the university was in its fifth week, and attendance consistently bordered at over ninety percent. Many of my students came from remote sections of Alaska, including Eskimo villages. To them Anchorage was a faraway city, let alone Jerusalem and Tel Aviv!

Certainly, it was no coincidence that the work on the *mikvah* began in the Jewish month of Adar, a time of great happiness for the nation of Israel. The following article appeared in the *Anchorage Times*:

> Today, Jews observe the Fast of Esther, followed tonight by the festive feast of Purim, with services scheduled in Chapel Number One at Elmendorf Air Force Base. During the one-day holiday, Rabbi Israel Haber will conduct services tonight and tomorrow morning, when Jews give charity, gifts to friends, and enjoy a boisterous Purim feast. Purim celebrates the victory of the Jews over King Ahasuerus who ordered

that all of the Jews of his kingdom be put to death. Rabbi Haber said that this was a time of great joy, Jewish fellowship, and charity. Purim is especially beloved by children who are allowed to interrupt the reading of the *Megilla*, the Scroll of Esther, with special noisemakers called *gragers* whenever the name of Haman, the archenemy of the Jews, is mentioned.

In Alaska, to conduct Purim and Shabbat services at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks, is Rabbi Shalom Gershon Grossbaum, a member of the Lubavitcher Hasidic sect. He will return to Anchorage next week to direct the building of a ritual chamber called a *mikvah*, to be located at Chapel Number Two. Rabbi Haber said that this will be the first ritualarium in Alaska.

The *Fairbanks Jewish Bulletin* announced in a special Purim edition:

PURIM COMES TO FAIRBANKS!

Yes, the Fairbanks community will celebrate Purim this year. You remember Purim—the reading of the Book of Esther, the noisemakers at the mention of the wicked Haman, boo, and all the fun. This is truly a time to bring the children to the services. Rabbi Haber has arranged for Rabbi Shalom Gershon Grossbaum of St. Paul, Minnesota, to be here to conduct services for Purim and the Sabbath. Rabbi Grossbaum is a hasidic rabbi and a staff member of the Chabad House in St. Paul.

Dozens of congregants participated in the Purim services both north and south of the Alaskan Range. Once again, Alaskan Jewish history was made with two Orthodox rabbis in the state conducting services in two different cities!

On Saturday night, Gershon called from Fairbanks wishing us a "*Gut voch*," meaning a "good week" in

Yiddish. He thanked us for supplying him with warm, Arctic clothing, and said he didn't know how I withstood the long, lonely stretches of time between services. He had met many Jewish students from the university and they were surprised how much fun being Jewish could be! The *Fairbanks Daily Miner* had interviewed him and headlined the story, "The Rabbi Wore Mukluks."

"On Friday night after *davening*, I invited some people to my quarters," Gershon related. "Sitting in the living room by the Shabbat candles, I spoke about *Chasidus* and Jewish philosophy. After a half-hour, two Air Force policemen entered the room, asking what we were doing. Introducing myself, I asked if we had done anything wrong. They immediately apologized. It seems that one of the nurses residing on the other side of the hall saw us sitting in a darkened room by candlelight, since we left the apartment door open a crack to let light in from the hallway. She phoned the base police and informed them that a drug party was taking place."

"*Oy vay*!" I said, laughing into the phone. I could picture the headlines in my mind: HASIDIC JEW NABBED IN ALASKA DRUG BUST!

"Anyway, Yisrael," Rabbi Grossbaum concluded. "Tonight I am giving a talk that should last a few hours, since there will be questions and answers at the end. See you back down south tomorrow."

One of the base engineers volunteered his free time on Sunday to assist Bernie, Paul, and I construct the mold for the *mikvah* at the wood shop on the base. Miriam was supposed to pick Gershon up at the Anchorage Airport and bring him to us, but hours passed without any sign of the rabbi-engineer. Exhausted from his Purim, Shabbat, and late-into-the-night question and answer marathon, he had

overslept his early morning flight out of Fairbanks! But soon, he was back on the job in Anchorage, working at a furious pace to finish the *mikvah* before he had to fly back to St. Paul. What a joy it was to see him standing with his black hat in the doorway of Chapel Two, directing the plumbers, electricians, carpenters, cement layers, and painters who arrived at each step of the project. And what fun it was to see the looks on their faces when they discovered that the construction-site boss was a real-live, bearded *Chasidic* rabbi from Minnesota!

17

A Confrontation With The Archbishop

While the non-stop work on the *mikvah* continued, the office of Chaplain Command informed me that Clergy Day activities were scheduled for March 14th at noon. The Catholic Archbishop of the Northwestern United States was featured as guest speaker. I did not receive the formal invitation which was mailed to all Christian clergy in the Anchorage metropolitan area, but rather an oral invitation several days before the event. I didn't think twice about this apparent breach of etiquette until I saw a notice in the newspaper announcing that the topic of the archbishop's luncheon address would be: "Present and Future Situations in the Holy Land with Specific Relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict." This struck me as an unusual subject for a Clergy Day talk delivered by a civilian archbishop at a military installation. I decided to look further into the matter, especially since the chaplain office secretary had not mentioned the subject of the speech when she spoke with me on the phone.

Before approaching my boss with my questions, I received a telephone call from a woman serving on the board of the Anchorage synagogue. She had seen the

advertisement in the morning newspaper regarding Clergy Day activities and was very upset upon learning that the archbishop was going to speak about the situation in Israel. I asked her why she was so concerned, and she told me that even the Reform rabbi who had been in Alaska before me had a running argument with the Catholic authorities.

"The bad feelings between them even made the editorial page of the newspaper," she said. "I'd be on my guard if I were you. The archbishop is known for his anti-Semitic remarks."

On a hunch, I asked my doctor friend, Paul Liebman, to check back east with acquaintances in the Anti-Defamation League regarding the luncheon's guest speaker. Sure enough, the archbishop was on their list of people who had uttered anti-Semitic remarks in the past.

At that point, I told Colonel Gabrielsen about my findings and about my concern. Since the senior Catholic chaplain had invited the archbishop as the featured speaker, the Colonel invited him into the office.

"Why is your archbishop planning to speak about the Arab-Israeli conflict at a function that traditionally calls for prayer and ecumenical fellowship?" I asked the Catholic chaplain point-blank. "Why talk about something political at a time when clergymen of all faiths are uniting in a gathering devoted to brotherhood?"

"The archbishop is considered to be somewhat of an expert on the subject," the chaplain calmly replied.

"Is that so?" I asked, fighting to control the tone of my voice, "I didn't realize that the purpose of Clergy Day was to afford an individual who has uttered controversial remarks in the past about Jews, an opportunity to continue in that vein from an Air Force podium."

The Catholic chaplain's smug smile got me heated even more. I turned to Colonel Gabrielsen, who was diplomatically keeping out of the argument.

"Obviously, Colonel, you did not know of the archbishop's sentiments. However, I am surprised that a delicate political matter like this will be discussed, one-sidedly, under your auspices on Elmendorf."

Colonel Gabrielsen turned to the Catholic chaplain. "Do you know the archbishop's feelings on this topic?"

"I only know that he is considered an authority on the Middle East," he repeated, still with an unruffled look on his face.

"If you so desperately wanted an expert on the Middle East to address your audience," I retorted, "all you had to do was telephone Alaska Methodist University and have them put you in touch with their instructor on Middle East Affairs."

"Who would that be?" he asked.

"Me," I answered.

"Rabbi Haber," Colonel Gabrielsen interjected, "It's too late to do anything about it now. I suggest that if anything troubles you about the speech, then you can raise your hand during the question and answer period and say whatever you have to say."

When Clergy Day came, I attended the luncheon gathering at the N.C.O. Club with my guest, Dr. Paul Liebman. Since I wasn't eating the non-kosher meal, we arrived shortly before the speaker's address. The hall was darkened to let the 200 civilian clergymen view a slide show presenting the variety of religious activities on the base. A sergeant from the chaplain squadron greeted us warmly and escorted us to unoccupied seats in the rear of the banquet hall.

After the slide show, the senior Catholic chaplain introduced the archbishop to the crowd. When the master of ceremonies mentioned that the archbishop had been personally decorated by King Hussein of Jordan, Paul and I looked at each other with looks that said, "Uh oh, here we go."

Throughout the archbishop's speech, one "fact" after another was presented with a pro-Arab slant. All of his presentation was constructed on falsehood. Among the outright lies was that no Jews had lived in the Holy Land until this century. He said that all Israelis under fifty would not object to Arab rule over the country. Furthermore, according to his "firsthand" knowledge, he reported that Jerusalem would not be a free city for all religious worshippers until it was put under international rule.

Despite the fact that Paul and I had known in advance that the speech might be filled with distorted statements and prejudice, neither of us were emotionally prepared for the venomous misinformation we heard. Both of our hands shot up in the air after the biased diatribe was finished. The senior Catholic chaplain rose to the podium, thanked the archbishop and said, "Since I don't see anybody in the audience with questions, we wish to thank our esteemed guest for being...."

"Excuse me," Chaplain Gabrielsen interjected. "I see two hands raised in the back."

He motioned to the back of the hall where we were frantically waving our arms.

"Oh...oh...yes," the M.C. mumbled, somewhat unnerved.

The archbishop sat up and peered out over the rostrum at the crowd to see where the questions were coming from.

I casually moved my *kippah* over the top part of my forehead so that he was certain to notice. Surprised, he immediately sat back in his chair. (Later I learned that he didn't know that a rabbi would be in the audience.)

The clergymen in the hall turned their looks to the rear. Paul rose and began to speak with a voice ringing with emotion.

"I now understand how Dreyfus must have felt when he had to listen to anti-Jewish slander. You speak of refugees. What about the thousands upon thousands of Jewish refugees who were evicted without their belongings from Arab lands upon the establishment of the State of Israel? The displaced Jews never let themselves fall into a "refugee problem" because they worked together to better their lot while rebuilding the land. Why haven't the Arab countries, drowning in their petrol dollars, seen fit to assist their brothers from their plight? Why? Because it would be politically unwise. Refugees make good headlines. Squalid refugee camps are exploited to make bad guys out of the Jews. Israel did not drive out the Palestinians. They left by themselves in 1948 when the Arab countries surrounding Israel told them to leave so that they could invade the country and drive the Jews into the sea. They told them that they would march home great victors; that Israel's destruction wouldn't take long; that they could then plunder all of the Jewish spoils. The Arab countries turned their own people into refugees, while the Arabs who remained in Israel have become full Israeli citizens and are represented in a democratic parliament. Excuse me, but these are the real facts. Why weren't they in your expert presentation?"

The audience was silent. The archbishop sat on the podium, red in the face. Paul continued to refute the other

misleading remarks that the featured speaker had made. He didn't leave one point unchallenged. Without any mercy, he threw all of the lies back in the archbishop's face. I could see that many of the Protestant clergymen in the audience were nodding their heads in agreement with Paul.

Suddenly, the archbishop jumped to his feet. Without addressing any of Paul's arguments, he yelled out, "Are you a clergyman? If not, sit down!"

I immediately stood up and replied, "Dr. Liebman is a captain in the United States Air Force and is here as my personal guest. And I, sir, am a clergyman!"

The archbishop sat down without answering. When Paul finished, I raised my hand, and the Master of Ceremonies pointed to me with no enthusiasm at all.

"I am a Jew under fifty years of age," I began. "Many of my Israeli relatives and friends are also younger than fifty. I have yet to meet any Jew in this category, or in any other, who would agree with your assertion that Jews want the Arabs to rule over Israel. Who are these people? Where can I meet them? From where do you get your facts? You speak of Jerusalem. It is very interesting that now, for the first time in centuries, when under Israeli law all peoples may freely worship in the places holy to them that you call for an international city. Where was your concern, or the concern or your Pope, before the Jews regained control over Jerusalem? Under Jordanian rule, you did not press for international status. After all, you were content. You could worship where you wanted. So could the Moslems. Only the Jews weren't allowed to worship where they wanted. They weren't allowed even to touch the stone's of the Western Wall, which still stands from the days of the ancient Jerusalem Temple. Where was your empathy for

humanity then? Where was your humanitarian concern when under Jordanian rule, synagogues hundreds of years old, filled with Jewish Torah scrolls and relics, were destroyed? Where was your humanitarian concern when under Jordanian rule, the headstones of Jewish graves were torn up from cemeteries to make military latrines? I don't remember hearing you then! It is only now, when the Holy Land is under the flag displaying the Star of David, when all religions can pray in freedom, that you demand international status for Jerusalem."

Much more needed to be said, but I stopped at that point. Silence fell upon the entire hall. Eyes turned back to the rostrum for a reply. None was forthcoming. The archbishop didn't budge from his chair. The only remark that was heard was, "There wasn't supposed to be questions and answers," and "I'll never speak here again!" It seemed that the esteemed "expert on the Middle East" was not accustomed to facing the truth. Disgraced, he rose and made a dash for the exit.

Flustered, the master of ceremonies approached the microphone and announced the schedule for the rest of the day. Clergymen rose from their seats in lively discussion. A group of Protestant ministers walked over to Paul and me. Within minutes, over seventy clergymen had gathered around us, asking us to speak to their Sunday school students. They had no knowledge, they confided, about the Israeli position at all. Many wanted to shake our hands. They sensed that the guest speaker had been one-sided in his talk, but they lacked the factual information to challenge his thesis. One clergyman told me, "I'm certainly happy that you and the doctor spoke up. Otherwise, I would have preached half-truths this coming Sunday." On our way to my car in the parking lot, I heard a minister say,

"That was the most interesting luncheon I ever attended."

Several Catholic priests spoke to us after the archbishop's departure, and others called by phone to assure me that not all priests shared the same view as the archbishop. I preferred to believe the archbishop spoke for himself and not for the gamut of Catholic clergymen.

Back home, we had our own luncheon. Miriam, Rabbi Grossbaum, and Paul's wife, Patty listened with satisfied smiles as we detailed our rebuttals to the archbishop's speech. Everyone enjoyed a good laugh. However, I couldn't help but wonder about all the similar speeches which go unanswered all over the country. If two hundred clergymen go out after hearing incitement like the archbishop's and preach misinformation to thousands of churchgoers, who's on the scene to correct the damage? That's why we all knew that Israel had to be strong.

"Not only Israel has to be strong," Gershon added. "The Jews living all over the world have to be strong to defend Israel from all of her detractors. The Rebbe is especially fervent on that."

For some reason, all the rest of the day, I thought about the Rebbe. When, I wondered, was I going to meet this great *tzaddik*?

18

Alaska's First *Mikvah*

The work on the *mikvah* continued. I worked alongside Rabbi Grossbaum in the evenings, helping out wherever I could. Finally, in the middle of March, the *mikvah* was at a stage where a Torah authority could come to determine if its construction met all of the specifications set down in Jewish law. Rabbi Grossbaum made arrangements for Rabbi Yitzchak Hendel of Montreal, Canada, to travel to Elmendorf for the inspection.

Jewish history was made the day that Rabbi Hendel arrived. Not just once, but twice! Not only was the *mikvah* approved, it was the first time that three Orthodox rabbis were in Anchorage together!

The media in Alaska made note of this significant milestone. *Mikvaot* have been used by the Jewish people since Biblical times until today. In Israel, archaeological digs have uncovered ancient ritual baths all over the country, including on top of Masada and at the entrance to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In Communist Russia, ritualariums were banned, yet many Jews risked their lives to frequent secret *mikvaot*. Now, "*mikvah* fever" had hit the Alaskan frontier.

The Elmendorf Air Force Base newspaper, *The Sourdough Sentinel*, published the following report:

"Alaska's first and only *mikvah*, a Jewish purification bathing chamber, is nearing completion in Chapel Two. According to Chaplain, Captain Israel Haber, this will be the first permanent *mikvah* to be constructed on any United States military installation in the world. Built to serve Jewish military and civilian populations, the *mikvah* will be used in accordance with the laws in the Old Testament, which state that a woman must immerse herself each month in natural water.

"Chaplain Haber noted that large Jewish metropolitan areas are likely to have many *mikvahs*. Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum of St. Paul, Minnesota, developed the plans for the chamber. He spent three weeks up here working on the structure and supervising its construction.

"Commenting on the support he has received for the project, Chaplain Haber said, 'It's been a Herculean effort by the civil engineers on the base. Many, many people have been involved. My special thanks go to Chaplain, Colonel Luther Gabrielsen, Colonel H.L. Brame, Colonel John S. McKean, and Art Reinikha of the Corp. of Engineers for their help.'"

Several days later, the same paper reported:

"Local observances will include the following activities in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Air Force Chaplaincy: A dedication of Elmendorf's new *mikvah* (Jewish ritualarium) will take place at Chapel Two. Chaplain Israel Haber will speak on the role of the Jewish chaplain in Air Force History."

The *St. Paul-Minneapolis Jewish World* ran the following article:

U.S. AIR FORCE AND LUBAVITCH JOIN TO BUILD ALASKAN *MIKVAH*

At the request of Chaplain Israel Haber, Jewish chaplain at Elmensdorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska, Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum of the Twin City Lubavitch House was flown to Anchorage to construct a *mikvah* in the base chapel. The *mikvah*, the first to be built in Alaska, will serve the Alaskan Jewish community which numbers four hundred families, and of which Chaplain Haber is the spiritual leader.

Chaplain Haber met Rabbi Grossbaum when he and his wife were guests at the Lubavitch House on their way to Alaska last September. At that time, Rabbi Haber mentioned to Rabbi Grossbaum and to Rabbi Moshe Feller, area director of Lubavitch, that he would need help in building a *mikvah* at the base, since the closest *mikvah* was in Seattle, a three-hour plane ride from Anchorage. "If the Air Force will fly Rabbi Grossbaum to the base, we will certainly cooperate and send him to Alaska," replied Rabbi Feller.

Rabbi Grossbaum, a rare synthesis of halachic knowledge and mechanical, technological ability, had built two *mikvahs* in the past. Working with a crew of Air Force engineers, he constructed the *mikvah* in two-and-a-half weeks. When the *mikvah* was completed, Rabbi Isaac Hendel, Dean of the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Montreal, was flown to Alaska to inspect the *mikvah* and give his "Hechsher," or rabbinical approval. On his arrival in Alaska, Rabbi Grossbaum was met by Myra Haertel of Anchorage, who was a student at the Beth Chana Women's Institute held during winter vacation at Lubavitch House.

A follow-up story stated:

> Believe it or not, there's a St. Paul connection with the *mikvah* built in Alaska, in the person of Captain Israel Haber's mother-in-law, Agnes. She was one of the two young girl survivors of the Holocaust who lived in the St. Paul area. She was tutored by Mrs. Sam (Della) Goldberg in the years following World War Two, to ease her transition to schools in America. Agnes' daughter stopped by St. Paul with her husband, Chaplain Haber, on their way to Alaska. They came to visit the home of "Grandma Della" and "Grandpa Sam." Because Rabbi Haber is Orthodox, the couple stayed at the Lubavitch House, where plans for the Alaskan *mikvah* were formulated.

The story was also printed in Montreal, New York City and Anchorage newspapers with picture coverage as well. The *mikvah's* construction was of such great interest in Alaska that even the state's lavish geographical monthly magazine printed a story with a picture of the *mikvah*. Radio stations in Anchorage and Fairbanks also ran spots on the *mikvah*. If the Jews of the region were unfamiliar with the laws of *mikvah* before it was built, they and their non-Jewish friends were certainly well acquainted with the subject upon its completion. The event received so much press that even Eskimos in the farthest reaches of the state could probably tell you what a *mikvah* was if you asked them!

The *mikvah* was finished, but there was still one problem to be solved. Water. Not just any tap water would do. Pure natural water was needed to fill up the *mikvah*. It was "break-up" time in Alaska, when temperatures reached the high fifties and snow banks had started to melt. Just the week before, seventy blue Air Force dump trucks had gathered all the remaining snow from the airstrips and the

base and hauled it away to the nearby forest. You can imagine the surprise of thirty thousand Air Force personnel when a long line of dump trucks drove onto the base, returning the snow! A caravan of dump trunks, one after the other, drove through the streets of Elmendorf and parked at Chapel Two.

"Why in Heaven's name are they bringing the snow back?" everyone wanted to know.

"It's for the mixer!" one guy yelled out.

Rabbi Grossbaum stood outside the building, directing traffic like an airfield controller. One by one, he had each truck back up to the side of the Chapel where a wide board was sticking out of a gaping hole in the wall like a slide. When the trucks dumped the snow onto the board, it slid through the hole in the wall straight into the seven-foot deep *mikvah*. Inside, a large heating fan melted the snow. Thus, thanks to the United States Air Force and its entire fleet of Anchorage dump trucks, the water in our *mikvah* was as natural and pure as could be. If you are ever asked how many dump trucks are needed to fill up a *mikvah*, you can feel safe in answering—seventy!

Once the *mikvah* was filled with water, the hole in the wall was repaired. The room was painted and carpeted, and decorative wall paneling was added. Chaplain Gabrielsen proudly assisted with the history-making labor. Carpenters built a carpeted wooden cover for the *mikvah*, to serve when the ritualarium wasn't in use. The electricians installed an aquastat, and an attractive vanity table gave the room a feminine touch. Elmendorf didn't just have a *mikvah*; it had a *halachic* and aesthetic showplace. Miriam felt like a queen. Many Jewish women began practicing the laws of family purity. Project *Mikvah* had become a reality!

During Rabbi Grossbaum's visit, I asked him many questions about *Chasidus* in general, and Chabad in particular. I was tremendously impressed by the willingness of these two rabbis to help Jews so far away. Seeing them in action taught me what it meant to love your neighbor like yourself. These rabbis didn't merely preach the words, they lived them. Being in their company, you could feel the care in their hearts for all of the Jewish people all over the world.

Before the two Lubavitch rabbis departed from the base toward the end of March, I gave them a tour along Seward Highway from Cook Inlet to the Portage Glacier. Many times during the trip, as he gazed at the majestic scenery, Rabbi Hendel called out, "*Ma'asay B'reishis*," the works of creation! Later that evening, the rabbis left Alaska, after having made many lasting friends. Once again, returning from the airport to the base, I felt like Gary Cooper, the *High Noon* sheriff—the lone rabbi of Alaska.

The next day, Colonel Brame asked to see me in his office.

"Do all rabbis know about engineering?" he asked, still impressed by Rabbi Grossbaum's technological knowledge.

I assured him that not all rabbis were as mechanically inclined as Rabbi Grossbaum.

One of the colonel's co-engineers remarked, "I really liked Rabbi Grossbaum. He's the type of man I wouldn't mind having on the staff. Do you think he would cut off his beard and put his strings (his *tzitzit*) in his pants and join the Air Force?"

"I might be able to convince him to join the Air Force, but, I'm afraid, the beard and *tzitzit* would have to stay."

"Too bad," the engineer answered. "The Air Force lost a great civil engineer."

19

The Mailman Keeps Knocking

Although getting the *mikvah* built was my major campaign, I was busy on many other fronts as well. After all, I had not been given an Air Force commission just to build a *mikvah* in Alaska. And though I was the Jewish chaplain on the base, my work was multi-denominational as well. For instance, the Catholic and Protestant congregations invited me to give a luncheon lecture at the N.C.O. Club. The topic of my speech was to be, "Israel, Past and Present." The invitation announced that: "Alaska's foremost authority on Israel, Rabbi Israel Haber, will speak at a luncheon to be held in the Yukon Room of the N.C.O. Club at noon on Wednesday, March 28. Come join us to hear this interesting speaker and enjoy a delicious meal. Tickets are available at Chapel Two."

I am not certain if the archbishop received the invitation. In any case, he was not present. Though word had gotten around that two Jews had made the archbishop look like a fool after his "expert" lecture, I never received any flack. On the contrary, the luncheon was packed with Catholics and Protestants eager to hear my version of the situation. Three hundred people turned out for the slide show and lecture. Not everyone might have been pleased with the things that I said, but they certainly learned a lot

of new things about the Jewish people and its attachment to Israel.

Interestingly, hardly a week passed without my receiving inquiries from people who were interested in converting to Judaism. Jewish law states that non-Jews should be initially discouraged from converting, in order to test their sincerity. Judaism isn't a passing fancy or whim. It isn't a new outfit that can be bought and thrown away the next season when fashions suddenly change. Judaism is a complete way of life. Only a person who does not let any dissuasions stand in his way can begin to be taught. Only after a long period of study, an oral examination, *brit milah*, and *mikvah*, is a candidate permitted to convert to Torah-true Judaism by fully accepting Shabbat and *Kashrut* observance, the laws of Jewish family purity, and all of the other commandments which non-Jews look upon as impossible burdens.

Accordingly, the people who wanted to convert because, "We enjoy eating bagels and lox on Sunday morning," or because, "The Jews get all the best jobs," or because, "My fiancé is Jewish and he wants me to convert for his mother," were startled to learn that they would have to give up skiing on Shabbat and forgo the eating of Alaskan king crabs. If an Episcopalian liked eating bagels and lox, I informed him that he could continue to do so without becoming a Jew.

There were, however, people who were very serious about converting to Judaism. I received numerous letters and phone calls from non-Jews throughout the state. For instance, a young woman who taught elementary school in Nome wrote me the following deep-hearted confession:

Dear Rabbi Haber,

Our short telephone conversation last Tuesday was

the highpoint of my trip to Anchorage because I viewed it as the first step in my official conversion to Judaism. I wish I could have met with you in person, but maybe that can be arranged sometime soon.

You asked why I wanted to convert. My personal religious convictions conform more closely to Judaism than Christianity. I do not believe in the divinity of Jesus, or in a three-part deity, the Trinity. I do believe in one G-d, the G-d of Abraham, and feel that the Jews have a special destiny to fulfill. I want to be a part of that destiny.

By some accident of birth, I was born into a Methodist family. We were regular churchgoers and active in all of the social, educational, and religious aspects of our local Methodist church in upstate New York. Up till today, I have been a registered member. I was a convinced Christian. My faith remained strong throughout my first year of college, but then it waned, as I became interested in other things. My first contact with Jews was in college. Many of them seemed to be very special people, and I had several Jewish friends, but their religion, or any religion, was of no interest to me at the time.

I still occasionally went to church and kept hoping for a spiritual rebirth, or a divine message, or a dramatic turnabout of some sort, but I couldn't help feeling that Christianity was just a myth designed to pull the wool over trusting minds. The Trinity seemed like something a mature adult should outgrow, along with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Then Christian history began to disturb me. Many Christians were murderous people. Thousands were killed by the Christian Crusaders. The Dark Ages was a distinctly Christian era. The Inquisitions, witch burnings, and the

Conquistadors were all Christian ideas. Thousands of Christians supported Hitler and actively participated in the Holocaust. They also played a leading part in the pogroms in Russia.

Last summer, I started reading books about Jews that were available at the local bookstores. They tended to be novels that just touched the surface of real Jewish life. I believe that I am now ready for more in-depth study.

It is a new world to me, so I would certainly appreciate any guidance that you could give me in my reading. I would also like to know what is required to receive an Orthodox conversion. I already "feel" Jewish and very removed from my Christian background. I want my conversion to be valid in the entire Jewish world, as I may one day wish to settle in Israel.

I received another letter from a woman residing in a small village near the Alaskan-Yukon boundary:

Dear Rabbi Haber,

I have a problem I hope you can help me with. I need some answers. Neither of my parents were religious, but my father's ancestors were Jewish. My mother's were Christian. For that reason, I figured I could go either way. I chose Judaism. I've never lived in an area where there was a Jewish community, so everything I know about Judaism I had to learn from books. My husband is not Jewish, but he agreed when I married him that our children would be raised as Jews. I have a nine-year-old daughter, and a six-year-old son. I have taught them what I can about the Jewish religion and history, and we celebrate most of the Jewish holidays. They both think they are Jews and they are proud of it.

A few months ago, I met a man at a friend's house. He is a Baptist minister, but he seemed to know a lot about Judaism. He asked me many questions about my family. Then he told me that I am not Jewish because my mother wasn't Jewish, and because my father didn't really identify as a Jew. He said I should send my children to church and teach them to be Christians because they are not Jewish at all. Is what he said true? I went to the Baptist Easter service, and they were very nice to me, but when they read their scriptures, every time they mentioned the Jews, I felt like they were talking about me.

Rabbi, I don't want to be a Christian. If I am not a Jew, will you convert me?

Another example of the many conversion inquiries which I received came from a gentleman who resided in Fairbanks.

Dear Rabbi Haber,

It was with great disappointment after talking with the Chamber of Commerce here in Fairbanks that I learned that there is no rabbi in the area. At their advice, I am writing to you.

I greatly desire to convert to Judaism. This decision comes after eight years of thought and delays. The similarity of my personal beliefs and the beliefs of Judaism led me to study, and now study has led me to make this decision.

I accept the Kingship of G-d, and I intend to live a Jewish life, observing the commandments. I understand the rituals of *brit* and *t'villah*. I hope you can help me as this is of greatest importance to me. I can meet you at any time you suggest.

Some of the people who studied under my tutelage trav-

eled to the nearest rabbinical tribunal court, located in Seattle, for a Torah-true conversion. Others journeyed to Los Angeles and San Francisco. All have become Orthodox Jews, and two of them have become *Chasidim.*

Two weeks after Purim, another letter arrived. It wasn't about conversion. It wasn't about religion. A feeling of shock seized my soul when I read it. My colleague, Chaplain David Sobel, had been killed in a traffic accident in Bangkok. My dear friend, David, with whom I had studied in chaplain school, was gone. David, who had endeared himself to all the people he had met in Bangkok, who was always happy to take out his guitar and sing a spirited song, David was suddenly gone. I remembered the special times we had shared while learning the proper way to march and salute. I recalled our ongoing correspondence between Alaska and Thailand, exchanging reports on our successes and disappointments at the start of our new careers. His service had ended abruptly, and I was still fortunate to be carrying on. I decided that anything worthwhile that I could achieve in my chaplaincy would be in the name of Chaplain David Sobel, of blessed memory, as well.

The saddening news made me realize how precious life was indeed. I set myself to my work with added commitment and drive.





1949, Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY. As a toddler, with my grandfather R. Chaim Yitzchak Schwartz.



1955, Uncle Meir Moshe's wedding. From r. to l.: Uncle Meir Moshe, myself, grandfather R. Dov Meller, my father R. Chaim Haber.



1959, Brooklyn, NY. Our family: My father R. Chaim (Herbert), my mother Elka (Eleanor), myself and my two brothers Shraga Feivel (Phil) and Avraham Peretz (Alan).



Miriam Haber's parents, R. Zalman Tuvia (Sydney) and Aidel (Agnes) Schwimmer, Holocaust survivors.



1973. At our home on Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska.



1973, Alaska. Outside the world's northernmost *sukkah.*



Building the mikvah in Alaska.
From r. to. l.: Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum, Rabbi Yitzchak Hendel,
myself and Air Force building crew.



Alaska, 1974. The *mikvah* crew. From r. to l.: Chaplain Gabrielsen, Colonel Brame, Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum, Captain engineer Robinson, and myself.



A *Beit Din in Alaska.* From r. to. l.: Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum, Rabbi Yitzchak Hendel, and myself.



1974. Rabbi Hendel and I at the Chugach Mountains.



1974. The Tefillin Campaign "atop the world's roof":
Donning Tefillin with Captain Burt Bright.



1975. Miriam in the center of snow-covered Anchorage.



1975. With my father outside the US Army administrative headquarters at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, where he worked.



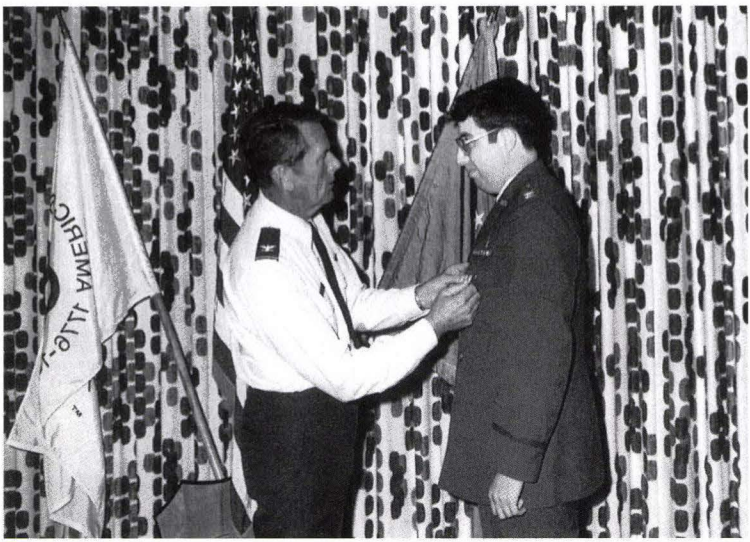
1975. With Rabbi Solomon Maimon at the entrance of an Eskimo school in Bethel, Alaska. (The wording on the sign is in "Yupik.")



1975. The building crew of the world's northernmost sukkah.



Air University, Maxwell A.F.B., Alabama, 1976. Convention of Religious ministers of the US Air Force. I am in the middle row, third from right.



1976. Receiving the USAF Commendation Medal upon arrival at Travis A.F.B., California, for my accomplishments in Alaska.



1978. Farewell ceremony with chaplain staff before taking leave of the Air Force.



1978. With my Grandmother Malka Meller during a visit to Bnei Brak, Israel.



Alaska, Summer 1976. I am visited by two Lubavitcher Rabbinical students from New York, Rabbis Lipa Brennan and Nechemia Kessler.

1975. The Morning Prayer on a Galaxy C-5.





1977.
At our son
Meir Moshe's
pidyon haben.

1976. The
tefillin
campaign
on a
Phantom
F-4.





The Haber children in the Golan Heights. From top to bottom: Meir Moshe, Yitzchak, Yonatan Yekutiel, Menachem Mendel.



1978. Flying into Ben Gurion International Airport, Israel, by Starlifter C-141.



As an emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to the Golan Heights, Israel.

As a chaplain in the United States Air Force.





Tishrei, 1990. Receiving dollars and blessings
from the Lubavitcher Rebbe.



Tishrei, 1990. Receiving Kos Shel Bracha from the Lubavitcher
Rebbe.



At the dedication of the Chabad House on the Golan Heights. From r. to l.: Myself, Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Yisrael M. Lau, Rabbis Meyer Gutnick and Lipa Brennan of New York.



Upon presenting a copy of the Hebrew edition of this book to Israeli Minister Ariel Sharon.



The Habers at home on the Golan Heights.

From right to left (*opposite page*): Yitzchak, Menachem, Yisrael, Miriam, Meir Moshe, Yonatan.







THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

September 4, 1974

Dear Chaplain Haber:

It was kind of you to express your good wishes as I begin my duties as President.

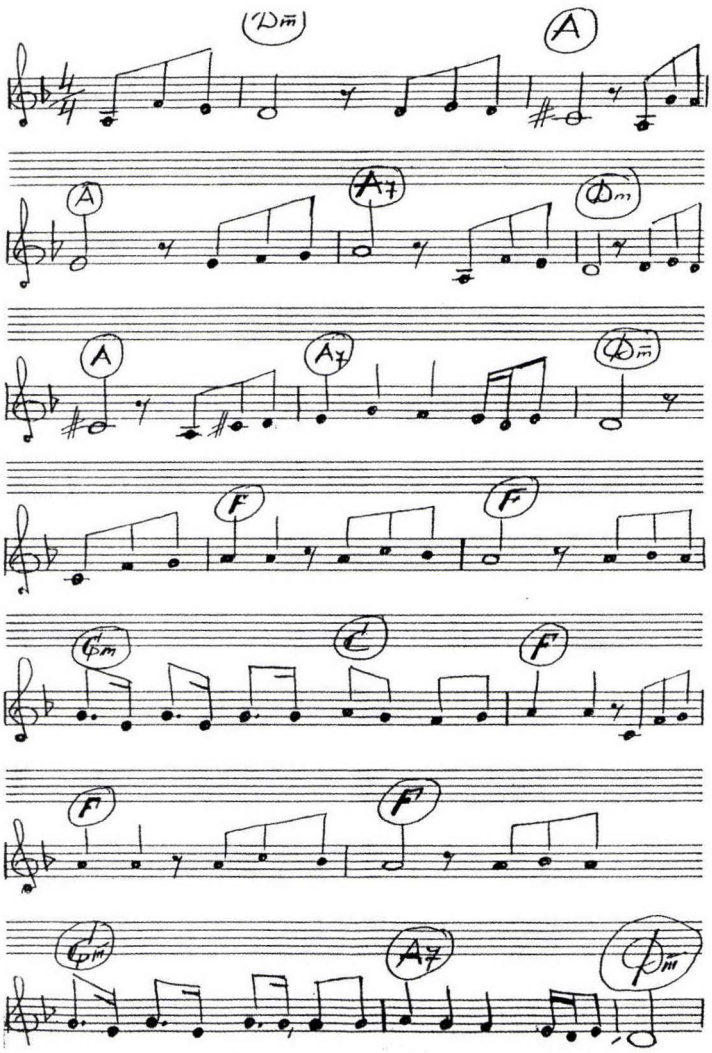
While I did not seek this great responsibility, I will not shirk it. Having the support and prayers of fine people like you is a source of strength and encouragement to me.

With kind regards and appreciation for your thoughtfulness,

Sincerely,

Gerald R. Ford

Chaplain Israel Haber
Captain, USAF
21 Air Base Group/HCA
APO Seattle 98742



A tune I composed in Alaska, 1974,
to the words from Psalms 24:3-4.

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, N. Y. 11213

Hyacinth 3-9250

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

By the Grace of G-d
Rosh Chodesh Sivan,
5734. Brooklyn, N.Y.

Chaplain Israel Haber
Elmendorf Air Force Base
Alaska.

Greeting and Blessing:

Due to a very crowded schedule, this is my first opportunity of congratulating you on your extraordinary Zechus of initiating the project of the first Mikveh in Anchorage for the Alaskan Jewish community, which you accomplished, with G-d's help, as I am informed by our mutual friends, the Rabbonim who flew in to participate in this great event.

As for the importance of this matter, I need hardly emphasize it to you, since your own initiative is best proof of being fully aware of it.

However, on the basis of the dictum of our Sages, "Encourage the energetic," I wish to express my confident hope that you are doing all you can to make the Mikveh a busy place, frequented regularly not only by the women who directly benefit from your good influence, but also by their friends and acquaintances who will be induced by them to follow their example. And while this kind of religious inspiration is a "must" wherever Jews live, it is even more so in the City and State where the Mikveh has just been established for the first time. It is well to bear in mind that a "Jewish heart is always awake" and responsive to Torah and Mitzvoth.

It is significant in this case that the one who merited the great Zechus of establishing the Mikveh is a person in military service. For, military service, by definition and practice, very aptly illustrates the basic principle of commitment to Torah and Mitzvoth, namely, naaseh ("we will do", and then) v'nishma ("we will understand").

Moreover, the soldier's duty to carry out the orders of a commanding officer, and carry them out promptly and to the best of his ability, is in no way inhibited by the fact that in civilian life the soldier may be vastly suprior to his commanding officer in many respects. Nor does such a circumstance diminish in the least the soldier's self-esteem in obeying the order. On the contrary, by not allowing any personal views to interfere with his military duties, he demonstrates his strength of character and integrity.

The same is true in the area of Torah and Mitzvoth. One may be a very rich man - in the ordinary sense, or rich in knowledge of the sciences, or in other achievements in public life. Yet, when it comes to Halachah, the Law of Torah conduct, he accepts it with complete obedience and dedication, on the authority of a fellow-Jew who had consecrated all his life to Torah study and Torah living and is eminently qualified to transmit the "Word of G-d - the Halachah."

A further point which characterizes military discipline also has a bearing on the subject of Torah and Mitzvoth. In the military, no soldier can claim that his conduct is his personal affair; nor can he take the attitude that there are many other soldiers to carry out military assignments, but he will do as he pleases. For it has often been demonstrated in military history how one action of a single soldier could have far-reaching consequences for an entire army and country.

Every Jew is a soldier in the "Army of G-d," as is often emphasized in this week's Sedra - kol yotze tzovo, "everyone going forth as a soldier." And he is bound by the same two basic rules: To carry out G-d's commandments promptly and fully, without question (naaseh before v'nishma), and to recognize his responsibility to his people ("All Jews are responsible for one another"), hence the consequences of one good deed. To quote the Rambam: "Every person should always consider himself and the whole world as equi-balanced. Hence, when he does one Mitzva, he tips the scale in favor of himself and of the whole world" (see it at length in Hil. Teshuvah, 3 hal. 4).

May you go from strength to strength in all that has been said above, in all aspects of Yiddishkeit, which includes also influence to promote among non-Jews the observance of the basic Seven Mitzvoth, with all their numerous ramifications, which are incumbent upon all mankind and the foundation of human society.

At this time before Shovuos, I wish you and all our brethren at the Base as well as the community, a happy and inspiring Festival of Receiving Our Torah, with the traditional Chasidic blessing - to receive the Torah with joy and inwardness.

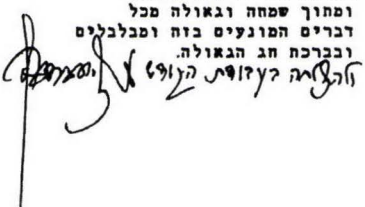
With esteem and blessing, M. Schneerson

כולל גם - ועיקר - להשפיע על הזולת ובהסביבה כולה, שממנו יראו וכן יעשו רבים,

וגדול זכות והצלחת העוסק עם הרבים והצבור כמפורש בדברי חז"ל,

ועי"ז גם מרבים השלום, כלי מחזיק ברכתו של הקב"ה, כולל קיום היעוד: ונתתי שלום בארץ גו' ואולך אתכם קוממיות.

בברכת הצלחה בכל האמור
ומתוך שמחה וגאולה מכל
דברים המונעים בזה ומבלבלים
ובברכת חג הגאולה.



ובלשונו: במכתב מס"ו סיון התרפ"ח (בסה"מ תש"ח, ע' רסג). בשם ישראל יכונה: ואינו עיקר שמו (ראה מפרשים ריש נדרים. ובכ"מ). מבלי התחשב..ותורתו: ראה רמב"ם הל' גירושין סה"ב. לבו תמים: כמש"נ (שה"ש ה,ב) אני ישנה (בגלותא, זח"ג צה,א) ולבי ער (ראה לקו"ת שה"ש לד, א. לה,ב. ובכ"מ). המבצעים: להעיר מס' פרה"כ (לבעהמ"ס סדה"ד) ובס' קה"י: בצע אותיות השניות דאברהם יצחק יעקב. ומצינו למעלותא: עצוה לבצוע (סנה' ו,ב). תורה: דמגנא ומצלא (סוטה כא, א). וראה סיום ההפסק מים רבים, תרל"ו. קונטרס עה"ח בתחלתו. תפלין: דע"י תש"ר ויראו ממך (ברכות ו, סע"א), ותש"ר זקוקה ל(הקדמת) תש"י (מנחות לו, סע"א). וראה תורת הבעש"ט על מרז"ל תפלין דמארי עלמא (סה"ש קיץ ה"ש"ת ע' 133). מזוזה: שעי"ז ה' ישמר צאתך ובואך מעתה ועד עולם (זח"ג רסג, ב). ובירושלמי פאה פ"א ה"א דאמר רבי לארסבון חפציך וחפצי לא ישוון בה. וראה ההוספה בשאילתות קמה. ועייב"כ בכתבי האריז"ל (סידורו בתחלתו סוף כוונת המזוזה בין קרוב לסופו. ש' ההידמות ד"ו בכניסת המוחין בתחלתן ובסופן) דמציל מיצה"ר, לא ישלוט השטן בבית, הבית ינצ. עשדים ורוחות רעות, מגין מן המזיקין, מבריח את הקליפות, אין נאחזות (ינקו) שם. צדקה: עפמש"נ בתנחומא משפטים טו: והחיית אותו חייך כו'. וראה סידור (עם דא"ח) עה"פ צדיק הוי'. קונטרס יט"כ חש"ס. ספרי..בית: ראה במרב"ר ר"פ קורח: בית מלא ספרים. ובאוה"ת (ע' תרסב) ע"ס דאצילות. וזריזות..מעלה: אגה"ק סוס"ד. וראה ליקוטי לוי יצחק בהערות לשם. ונשנה..כו': אגה"ק סכ"א. כלליים הם: התורה (ספרי קודש) כוללת כל המצות וח"ת כנגד כולם. תפלין הן לשעבד המוח והלב (שו"ע אדה"ז תאו"ח סכ"ה סי"א). מזוזה כוללת כל המצות (סידור שער החנוכה רפה,א). צדקה שקולה כנגד כל המצות ובכל תלמוד ירושלמי היא נקראת מצוה סתם (תניא פל"ז). ובאו"ת להה"מ ס"פ ראה: הדבק במדותיו ר"ל מה הקב"ה משפיע אף אתה תהי' משפיע (עד"ז - באגה"ק סי"ז). שכשיהודי מחליט בתוקף כו' הקב"ה עוזרו לקיים כו' לפרות כו': וי"ל שזהו מש"נ (תהלים עג, כח): שתי באד' הוי' מחסי לספר כל מלאכותיך. ראוי..ענינו: מכתב הנ"ל. ולאחרי שפתח..דרך לכל אחד: "וכאשר פתח הציור ונמשך כו' עי"ז ביכולת כאו"א כו'" (סד"ה כי כאשר השמים, תרע"ח). בדברי חז"ל: אבות פ"ב, מ"ב. ובכ"מ. ד"ה עשרה שיושבים תרפ"ח (בסה"מ שם). השלום..הקב"ה: ראה עוקצין בסופה. ונתתי..קוממיות: בחוקותי כו, ו-יג. קוממיות: בקומה זקופה (תיב"ע ותו"כ, הובא בפרש"י שם).

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
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Hyacinth 3-6250

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

ב"ה, מחילת חודש תמוז, חודש הגאולה, ה"חשל"ד
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוו"ח אי"א נו"נ עוסק בצ"צ כו'
מו"ה הרב ישראל שי"

שלום וברכה!

נתקבל המכתב מיום ה' תמוז (והמצו"ב) והקודמיו, ותגי הקיצור.

ובעמדנו לפני ימי הגאולה יב- יג תמוז, גאולת כ"ק מו"ח אדמו"ר, ובלשונו:

לא אותי בלבד גאל הקב"ה בי"ב תמוז, כי אם גם את כל מחבבי תורתנו הק', שומרי מצוה, וגם את אשר בשם ישראל יכונה, כי כל איש ישראל (מבלי התחשב במצבו הפרטי בשמירת וקיום המצוות) לבו חמים עם ד' ותורתו,

ועל פי האמור במכתבו האמור – ברכה וחיזוק לב כאו"א "להוסיף אומץ בהרבצת תורה והחזקת היהדות",

הרי זה מזכיר ומעורר עוה"פ בהענין אודותו הי' הדיבור של חיבה ושל חובה מצוי במשך שבועות האחרונים – ענין חמשת המבצעים: מבצע תורה, מבצע תפלין, מבצע מזוזה, מבצע צדקה ומבצע ספרי קדש בכל בית. ולא נצרכה אלא, כנ"ל, לתוספת התעוררות "וזריזות יתרה ביתר שאת ויתר עז כפולה ומכופלת למעלה מעלה"מבשאר ענינים,

שהרי בכל עניני תורה ומצותי' גדולה מעלת חזריזות, כנאמר ונשנה בדברי רז"ל לעולם יקדים אדם לדבר מצוה כו',

על אחת כמה וכמה בחמשת הענינים המוזכרים לעיל, אשר כלליים הם, כאו"א מהם מגנא ומצלא, בכאו"א מהם – כל יום ויום דיו שיפקיע את עצמו, שמזה מובן איך שצ"ל בכל יומא ויומא עביד עבידתי'.

וכמו שאחת מהוראות ימי הגאולה הבע"ל היא שכשיהודי מחליט בתוקף המתאים בענייני תורה ומצותי', יקב"ה עוזרו לקיים ההחלטה בפועל למרות כל המניעות וקיכובים, וכמו שראינו אשר בעל הגאולה התגבר על ההתנגדות של כו' ונצח ועד אשר, ונהפוך הוא, שע"י המאסר שנסחיים בגאולה נתוסף יום אשר "ראוי הוא" ומסוגל "לקובעו ליום התועדות והתעוררות לחיזוק התורה והיהדות בכל אתר ואתר לפי ענינו",

מכל שכן בהקופחנו ובמקומות שאין התנגדות כלל וכלל, או – רק התנגדות הכי קטנה ובודאי ובודאי שאינה בערך כלל להתנגדות שהיתה לבעל הגאולה בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

כי לאחרי שפתח בעבודה האמורה, הרי על ידי פתיחה זו סלל דרך לכל אחד ואחת לעשות מעין האמור, בחיזוק התורה והיהדות ובאופן דמוסיף והולך וכחוך התלהבות ואור וחיות,

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
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מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

B. H. 28th of Elul, 5735
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Chaplain, Captain & Mrs. Israel and Malka Haber
7-730H J Street
Elmendorf AFB
Alaska 99506

Greeting and Blessing:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter and enclosures, as well as previous material.

I was gratified to read about the various activities. I am confident that the accomplishments in the past will stimulate even greater ambitions in the future, in accordance with the saying of our Sages that "He who has 100, desires 200; and having attained 200 desires (not merely another 100) but 400." If this is human nature in material things, how much more so should it be in regard to real and eternal values of Torah and Mitzvos.

Wishing you and yours, and all our brethren in your sphere of influence, a Kesivo vaChasimo Toivo for a good and sweet year,

With blessing, M. Schneerson

Receipt is enclosed for your Tzedoko, and may it additionally stand you and yours in good stead.

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, N. Y. 11213

Hyacinth 3-9250

ב"ה, כה' ניסן תשל"ז
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוו"ח אי"א נו"נ וכו'
מוה' ישראל שי'

שלום וברכה!

במענה על הודעתו אשר נולד להם בן
למזל טוב,

הנה יה"ר מהשי"ת שיכניסוהו לתורה
ולחופה ולמעשים טובים, ויגדלו ביחד עם זוג'
תי' מתוך הרחבה.

בברכת מזל טוב

היבער) קאליפ.

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, N. Y. 11213

Hyacinth 3-9250

ב"ה, ה' מנ"א תשל"ו
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוו"ח אי"א נו"נ עוסק בצ"צ הרק
מוה' ישראל שי'

שלום וברכה!

במענה על הודעתו אודות מצב זוג' תי',

השי"ת ימלא ימי הריונה כשורה ובנקל
ותלד זחו"ק בעתה ובזמנה כשורה ובקל.

בכבוד ובברכה להצלחה בהפצת היהדות
החום"צ ובאופן דמוסיף ואור

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn. N. Y. 11213
493-9250

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש
770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

By the Grace of G-d
In the Beginning of Cheshvan,
5738. Brooklyn, N. Y.

Chaplain & Mrs. Israel Haber
108 Bradley Blvd
Travis AFB, Cal. 94535

Greeting and Blessing:

I appreciate very much your thoughtful expression of concern and your good wishes for a speedy and complete recovery.

With the help of G-d, the Healer of All Flesh Who Works Wondrously, my health has improved satisfactorily and I am, thank G-d, able to continue my work and activities.

In accordance with the Divine promise, "I (G-d, the Source of all blessings) will bless them that bless you,"

May G-d bestow His generous blessings on you and yours, materially and spiritually.

With esteem M. Schneerson

P.S. Thank you for foto of your son Meir Moshe שי
Have much true Yiddish Nachas from him.

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, N. Y. 11213
Hyacinth 3-9250

האבער-קאליפארניא

ב"ה, כד' אד"ר תשל"ח
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוו"ח אי"א נו"נ עוסק
בצ"צ כו' הרב ישראל שי'
ומרת מלכה תי'

ברכה ושלום!

במענה על ההודעה אודות מצבה,

השי"ת ימלא ימי הריונה כשורה ובנקל
ותלד זהו"ק בעתה ובזמנה כשורה ובקל.

בברכה

הפ"נ שבמכ' יקראו בעת רצון על הציון הק'.

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
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493-9250

ב"ה, כ"ו אלול תשמ"ג
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוו"ח אי"א נו"נ וכו'
מוה' ישראל שי'

שלום וברכה!

במענה על ההודעה אודות מצב זוגי תי',

השי"ת ימלא ימי הריונה כשורה ובנקל ותלד
זהו"ק בעתה ובזמנה כשורה ובקל.

בברכת כתיבה וחתימה
טובה

התמונה נתקבלה, ותייח.

הפ"נ שבמכ' יקראו בעת רצון על הציון הק'.

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
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770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, N. Y. 11213
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מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש
770 איסטערן פארקווי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

By the Grace of G-d
Rosh Chodesh Elul,
5742. Brooklyn, N.Y.

Rabbi Israel Haber
P. O. Box 611
Teverya

Greeting and Blessing:

I am in receipt of your letter of the 22nd of Av, with enclosure. As requested, I will remember you in prayer for the fulfillment of your heart's desires for good with regard to yourself and all the members of your family.

There is surely no need to remind you - except in the sense of "encourage the energetic" - that there is always room for advancement in all matters of Yiddishkeit, Torah and Mitzvoth, especially as you have the great Zechus of living in the Holy Land, "The Land on which G-d's Eyes are continuously, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year."

Receipt is enclosed for your Tzedoko, and may the Zechus of it additionally stand you all in good stead.

It would be advisable to have the Tefillin and Mezuzoth checked to make sure they are Kosher, if this has not been done within the past twelve months.

Wishing you and all yours a Kesivo vaChasimo Tovo, for a good and sweet year.

With blessing M. Schneerson

Tel. (212) 493-9250 Cables: LUBAVITCH NEWYORK

מזכירות
כ"ק אדמו"ר מנחם מענדל שליט"א שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

SECRETARIAT of RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
the Lubavitcher Rabbi
770 EASTERN PARKWAY, BROOKLYN, N. Y. 11213

ב"ה, כ"ו תמוז תשד"מ
ברוקלין, נ.י.

מרת מלכה תי'

ברכה ושלום!

הם"נ שלה מיום כ"ו סיון

נתקבל,

ויקרא בעת רצון על ציון כ"ק מו"ח
אדמו"ר זצוקללה"ה נבג"מ זי"ע.

מזכיר

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ברוקלין, נ. י.

ב"ה, יא' מנ"א תשמ"ז
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוו"ח אי"א נו"נ עוסק בצ"צ
הרב ישראל שי'

שלום וברכה!

במענה על ההודעה אשר נולד להם בן למזל טוב,

הנה יה"ר מהשי"ת שיכניסוהו לבריתו של אברהם אבינו, וכשם שיכניסוהו לברית כן יכניסוהו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים, ויגדלו ביחד עם זוג' תי' מתוך הרחבה.

בברכת מזל טוב

מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
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בייה, זי ניסן תשמייט
ברוקלין, נ.י.

הוויח אייא נויינ עוסק בצייצ וכוי
מוהי ישראל שיי

שלום וברכה!

מכי והתמונות נתקבלו,

ולקראת חג המצות, זמן חירותנו, הבא עלינו ועל כל ישראל לטובה, הנני בזה להביע ברכתי לחג כשר ושמח ולחירות אמתית, חירות מדאגות בגשם ומדאגות ברוח - בכל דבר המעכב עבודת ה' בשמחה ובטוב לבב.

ולהמשיך מחירות ושמחה זו בימי כל השנה כולה.

ובפרט שעבודת השם, כמצווה עלינו בתורתנו תורת חיים, הרי היא בכל ענייני האדם ובמשך כל היום וכל הלילה, וכמו שנאמר בכל דרכיך דעהו.

בברכת החג

תייח על הברכות. וכבר מלתיי אמורה בתוהייק: ואברכה (הי מקור הברכות) מברכיך, בברכתו של הקבייה שתוספתו מרובה על העיקר.

20

Pesach in Alaska

With Pesach approaching, Miriam was asked to write an article about the holiday for the Totem Topics, a magazine published by the Officers' Wives' Club. While I had been busy with a never-ending assortment of activities on the base, she had been creating her own niche. In addition to her studies at the university, she was a popular speaker at all kinds of women's gatherings and luncheons. She organized her own Jewish Studies classes, and she was constantly on the phone, giving advice on subjects as diversified as setting up a kosher kitchen, matters of Jewish family purity, and *shiduchim*. Along with everything else, she made sure that we always had freshly baked cakes in the house to serve to the steady stream of guests that came by to visit. For a housewife, the weeks before Pesach are the busiest of the year. Every cabinet and corner is scrupulously cleaned to make sure that no crumbs of *chametz* are lurking around. The week before Pesach, no sane Jewish husband dares to come home and inform his wife that he has invited thirty people to the house for a party. But that's exactly what I did, and my dear wife didn't protest. True, she looked at me like I was crazy, but she didn't throw a pot or pan my way.

"A party for thirty people?" she asked.

"Just something small," I answered with a big smile on my face.

"A week before Pesach?"

"We have to use up the *chametz*, don't we?" I said.

That must have made sense, because she said nothing more. The guests included the command chaplain and his staff and all of the wives, as well as the base chaplains and their spouses too. Miriam prepared all kinds of Jewish delicacies including blintzes, latkes, *kugels*, and tasty desserts. One of the Catholic chaplains who came from New York explained to everyone that blintzes should be eaten with the cream that Miriam set out on the table. The evening turned out to be a rousing success. While the clergymen on the base were very open-minded, the hospitality they enjoyed at our home obviously made an impression, bringing them closer, not only to us, but to the Jewish people as a whole. And, of course, it gave me a chance to clear up some of their misconceptions about Pesach.

The chapel staff pitched in to assist me in mailing "solo-*Seder* kits" to Jewish servicemen in remote U.S. military positions. Issued by the Jewish Welfare Board, the kits provided a meaningful holiday for lonely Jewish men and women serving in the Armed Forces. In addition, I tried to help as many people as I could in obtaining leave time to celebrate the holiday in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

I was always impressed to see how eagerly servicemen wanted leave time for the holiday. Of course, every serviceman likes time off from his job, but most everyone I dealt with wanted the vacation because it was Pesach. Even Jews who had almost no religious upbringing stridently expressed a desire to be with a Jewish family for the *Seder*. It showed me that no matter how far a Jew is from observing the Torah, there is always a little light burning which

can be kindled into a flame.

Several days before Pesach, I distributed boxes of poultry and other kosher food products to military personnel. I made certain that the commissary was stocked with Pesach supplies, and I spent many hours at the Anchorage International Airport unloading kosher meats which arrived frozen from the "Lower 48." I transferred boxes of food to commercial trucks, carefully writing out the addresses of Jews throughout the state. The Lubavitch Youth Division sent *shmurah matzah* to Alaska as well.

All civilian and military personnel both north and south of the Alaskan Range were provided with *Seder* invitations. On top of everything else, I was asked to prepare a Passover message to be delivered by the Army's commanding general of Alaska.

Two Israeli army officers were in Alaska to observe United States cold-weather training at the Northern Warfare Training Center at Fort Greeley. Located two hundred and fifty miles north of Anchorage, the fort is one of the coldest sites in Alaska during the winter. I telephoned Lieutenant and Mrs. Weinbaum of Fort Greeley with news of the special guests who would be in their midst. The Weinbaums always spent Shabbat at Fort Wainwright during my monthly visits there. They were very excited about hosting the Israeli officers at their desolate location.

The two Israeli captains were sent by *Tzahal* to study military snow operations and high altitude conditions because of the heavy snowfalls and freezing temperatures encountered on Mount Hermon and the Golan Heights. Arriving at Fort Greeley in early spring when the "breakup" had already begun, they were surprised to find melting snow and mild temperatures. Nonetheless, they spent four days at the northern site, and then flew to Anchorage

where they visited with the Jewish community and attended our Pesach *Seder*. Interestingly, it is precisely on the Holiday of Freedom that Jewish women have to work the hardest. Miriam prepared ninety-five place settings throughout the festive first days. For me, the high point of the *Seder* was eating the *matzot*. One *matzah* may look like the next, but the *matzot* tasted different this year. I mean, anybody can eat a *matzah* in Brooklyn. But a ***matzah*** in Alaska—that's really a treat!

On both nights of the *Seder*, we finished at two o'clock in the morning. On each night, our many guests experienced the unique feeling of taking part in the "last *Seder* in the world." When it came time to open the door for *Eliyahu Hanavi* (Elijah the Prophet) to join us for his cup of wine from the special goblet which we had prepared, we held the door open longer than usual, wanting to give *Eliyahu* a chance to linger at our table and rest from his tiring, worldwide travels. With our new Israeli friends at the table, the declaration, "Next year in Jerusalem!" had a very deep meaning that all of us felt.

The holiday passed. My non-Jewish neighbor was relieved when I bought back the ton of *chametz* I had sold to him before the holiday. He didn't really understand the legalities involved, but he was happy to do a neighborly deed. I had been teaching at the university. At the end of April, my students at the university completed the course and took their final exam. The same day, roles were reversed, as I had to answer three hours of questioning in the university's public relations office for a story they were writing about me in the campus journal.

I continued to enjoy working with young people, just as I had in Dallas. Portage Glacier was the scene of the Jewish Youth Group's spring outing. Chunks of glacier ice floated

in the cold blue water. Snow melting down the mountains created a waterfall effect. Springtime in Brooklyn never looked as beautiful. True, every year, Ebbets Field offered fresh springtime hope, until the Dodgers deserted their fans for Los Angeles, and the historic ballpark became a bittersweet memory.

While on the subject of baseball, just to emphasize how "out of it" Alaska was in those days, the game in which Hank Aaron hit his 715th record-breaking home run was televised in Alaska—one week late. The World Series was broadcast on a thirty-six hour tape delay. News telecasts were seven hours behind in Anchorage, and a day old when shown on Fairbanks TV.

Sergeant Bob Ungar, an energetic member of the Elmendorf Jewish community, retired from the Air Force at the end of April. After meeting me, Bob wore a *yarmulke* with his uniform whenever he was on duty. He confided to me that he had been wary of how his co-workers would react, but he said they treated him with earnest respect. Embarking on a civilian's life in California, Bob planned to pursue a course of Torah studies while going to graduate school. In fact, his desire to learn more about Judaism played a large role in his decision to retire early from the service.

Just as Alaska was out of the way, many out of the way things seemed to happen. Flying into Fairbanks on my monthly trip to Fort Wainwright, I was greeted by a friendly limousine driver at the airport. Hearing that I was a chaplain, he reacted with unbounded joy. Since I was dressed in a hooded parka, with my *kippah* covered, and not in my uniform, he didn't know I was a Jew.

"Praised be the L-rd," he exclaimed. "He continues to favor me and show me the way!"

Fairbanks was a center for newborn Christians, so I wasn't surprised to hear his greeting.

"Oh, man of G-d," he continued. "Providence has indeed shined upon me, yes indeed. Today is the sixth day in a row that I've had the good fortune and honor to transport a Christian holy man, a man of the true religion...."

"Excuse me, but I'd like to tell you something," I said.

"Speak to me. Shed your light on my limo. Imbue me with knowledge and trembling."

"I am not a Christian," I said. "I'm Jewish. I'm a rabbi. As a matter of fact, you have the honor of driving the state's only rabbi, in your very own car."

"Well, that's all right too, I guess," he started to stammer. "You...you do believe in G-d, don't you?"

"The Jewish people believed in G-d long before Christianity started."

"You don't say."

"In fact, Jesus himself was a Jew."

"I heard that, but I never believed it was true."

"That's how he learned about G-d."

"Well I never knew that," he said, looking into the rearview mirror to see if I had horns.

As I departed from the limousine at the Fort Wainwright chapel, I consoled him.

"Don't worry, you still had a good week. Five Christian chaplains and only one Jew. But remember, you were the only limousine driver in Fairbanks to have Alaska's only rabbi all to yourself."

"Why thanks, rabbi," he said, looking down at the cash in his hand. "If you come back to town, just give me a call, and I'll be happy to pick you up at the airport. Nothing I like more than to be of service to a true holy man of the cloth—who gives me a nice tip."

21

A Letter From The Rebbe

Every new season brought a new confrontation between military regulations and the customs of Judaism. We had overcome the problems of *Sukkah*, *mikvah*, *kashrut*, Shabbat, *mechitzah*, and *kippah*, and now I had to find a solution to the *minhagim* surrounding *Sefirah*. Needless to say, it was a big no-no for an officer to walk around unshaven on a United States Air Force base, even up in Alaska. The weeks from Pesach until *Lag B'Omer* are a period of mourning for the Jewish nation, commemorating the death of Rabbi Akiva's students during Rome's brutal occupation of Israel. One of the signs of mourning is the prohibition against shaving. So off I went to explain another aspect of Judaism to Chaplain Gabrielsen, informing him in advance that he could expect to see me unshaven for the next seven weeks. After listening in interest for almost an hour, this very kind man said that he would see what he could arrange.

A few days later, he told me that he had spoken on the telephone with a few Orthodox rabbis who indicated that the matter was not so very crucial.

"It isn't like the law of *mikvah*," he said. "In fact, they said that there are situations where a person is allowed to shave just like he does the whole year."

"There may be people who take advantage of a lenient ruling, but I have to be an example," I answered. "I have never shaven during the *Sefirah* period, and I have no intention of shaving now. If there is a need, I am prepared to take the case before an Air Force court to protect my rights of religious freedom."

"No, no, no," Gabrielsen said. "There's no need for that. I suppose, if you're so insistent, I can arrange some kind of unofficial permission. The problem is that you can't be unshaven while you're wearing a uniform. If you agree to dress in your civilian clothes for the next month and a half, then I'll try and back you up."

"What if I have to attend a formal military ceremony?" I asked.

"I don't have an answer," he said, shaking his head. "Let's just see how things go, and we'll play it by ear."

As things turned out, I wasn't invited to participate in any official ceremony the whole time that I was unshaven. In order that my appearance wouldn't be a breach of military etiquette, I wore civilian attire throughout the period.

I almost made it to *Lag B'Omer* when I was ordered to take part in an important briefing of Air Force officers. All of the chaplains were required to appear. What could I do? With a stubby beard, and dressed in civilian clothes, I entered the briefing room and took a seat in the rear. Everyone present had to introduce himself to the executive officer in charge of the meeting. When my turn came, I stood up and identified myself the way I had learned in the chaplain academy.

The executive officer squished up his eyes, as if he were looking at Big Bird from Sesame Street. "What's this?" he asked.

I was about to respond, when Chaplain Gabrielsen rose up from his chair.

"Commander," he said. "It's a well-known fact that the rabbi is an avid hunter. Just this morning, Chaplain Haber returned from a hunting trip and a two-week leave of absence. He didn't even have time to shave and change his clothes. He could have taken the time he needed at the expense of this discussion, but he absolutely refused to miss the opportunity of meeting with you."

The commander relaxed and smiled. "That's very encouraging to hear," he said. "I commend you, Captain Haber, on your insistence on being here today for this briefing."

With a breath of relief, I sat in my chair. "Wow," I thought, "How did Chaplain Gabrielsen come up with that one?" I wondered in surprise. Once again, I had entered the record books. Chances are that I was the only Air Force officer on active duty who ever grew a beard.

On the first day of May, I entered the base clinic for my annual medical check-up. The sergeant filling out my health records looked up at me and asked, "Are you on active duty?"

"Yes, I am," I replied.

A surprised look flashed over his face as he looked at my beard. "Just come back from a hunting vacation?" he asked.

"No. Not at all," I replied, not knowing if the story of my hunting trip had made its way around the base.

Suddenly, an enlightened smile lit up the sergeant's face. "I get it. You're in the Navy, right?"

"No. I get seasick on boats," I told him. "I'm in the Air Force."

He looked at me like I was a nut. "OK, I give up. What's

your excuse for the beard?"

"I have a very contagious skin disease, and I am not allowed to shave."

Without further small talk, he ushered me into the doctor's office. The physician was none other than my friend, Dr. Paul Liebman.

"Now *you* are beginning to look like a rabbi," he told me.

Briefly, I explained to him about the *Omer* period between Pesach and Shavuot, and how Colonel Gabrielsen had given me unofficial permission to grow my beard.

"You think I could get permission to grow mine?" he asked me.

"I'm not sure," I answered. "They'd probably look upon us as if we were part of some secret society planning to take over the military."

We both enjoyed a good laugh. I answered a few more of his questions about the *Omer* and the upcoming Festival of Weeks, then we got down to the medical business at hand.

So many extraordinary events occurred in Alaska, I began to take the unexpected in stride. However, I was caught off-guard when I answered the phone one Friday morning in the beginning of May and an Israeli voice inquired, "What time does Shabbat begin tonight in Fairbanks?"

"Who is this?" I asked, pleasantly surprised by the question.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that the caller was none other than my friend, Rabbi Avraham Radzik, playing a joke on me from Kansas City.

"OK, Avraham," I said. "Cut out the Israeli accent. How are you?"

"Avraham?" the caller replied with a puzzled voice. "My name is not Avraham. It's Kalman...Kalman Wilner."

He explained that he was an Orthodox Jew from Israel, temporarily based in Chicago. When his firm wanted him to work in Fairbanks for three weeks, he balked, imagining it was the end of the world. He was a physicist, in the midst of devising an instrument that the Air Force wanted to install in the Fairbanks area. After reading an article about me in the *Jewish Press* newspaper, published in New York, he stopped worrying about spending time in the wilderness. Knowing that an Orthodox rabbi lived in Alaska, he decided that he could continue to be a scientist and a practicing Jew—even in Alaska.

I told him what time Shabbat candles had to be lit in Fairbanks and how he could find the cans of kosher food which I kept stored in the Fort Wainwright chapel. We spoke at some length, and before saying goodbye, I promised to send up a package containing *matzah*, gefilte fish, meats, soups, and candies. It was a good feeling knowing that Miriam and I wouldn't be the last Jews in the world to say *Havdalah* that Shabbat. Shabbat in Fairbanks ended a good hour later. When Dr. Wilner completed his work assignment in Fairbanks, Miriam and I hosted him at our home, giving him a tour of Anchorage.

"How do you do it?" he asked, as we got back to the base.

"Do what?" Miriam asked.

"Live in this wilderness," he said. "New York, OK, there are two million Jews living there. Chicago, maybe. But Alaska? You've got to be crazy."

"Is it our fault that G-d scattered His children to the far ends of the earth?" I asked, answering his question with a question in return. "Look at it this way. If we hadn't been

here, who would have sent you gefilte fish?"

We all had a good laugh. But seriously, if it's gefilte fish that makes a Jew feel a little more Jewish, then that jar of gefilte fish is doing a *mitzvah*. I've heard more than one story how a Jew became more observant after receiving a *matzah* from the Rebbe in the mail. The Torah tells us to love our neighbor just as we love ourselves. It's not just a pretty saying. It's a *mitzvah* that one has to work at with all of his heart. Sure, it wasn't always easy being the only Orthodox Jews in the state. Once in a while, the feeling of isolation would really get me down. Until Miriam would remind me, "You're doing a big *mitzvah*, Yisrael. Cheer up!"

In the middle of May, I conducted mid-week *minyan* services on the *yahrzeit* of the late David Green, a prominent Alaskan, and the state's foremost furrier. His sons, Jerry and Perry, recited the mourner's *kaddish* after the prayers. The morning service was held in the family fur store, located in downtown Anchorage. A similar service was also observed for Paul Liebman's mother. Thus weekday *minyanim* were initiated in the community.

Also at that time, I addressed sixty students at Anchorage's East High School. The subject of my talk was—you guessed it—Israel. Interestingly, the more I was in Alaska, the more I felt connected to *Eretz Yisrael*. I thought about the Land of Israel all through the day. Perhaps the Yom Kippur War got me started. The lives of the people of Israel were threatened, and there I was in Alaska, unable to take part in the war. Also, I spent a lot of time preparing the course on modern Israel, which I taught at the university. I put a lot of energy into the class, wanting to give my students a real taste of the country. In addition, the media often turned to me as the local expert

on the subject. But even in free moments, and especially in my prayers, I felt myself facing Zion. Little did I know at the time that I would be living in Israel one day. On the Golan Heights no less! The coldest place in Israel. In retrospect, Alaska was like a training exercise along the way!

The graduation exercises at Alaska Methodist University were held on Sunday, May 26th. The temperature was in the high sixties. The sun sparkled off the deep green grass and campus foliage. Dressed in university cap and gown, I delivered the benediction. I must have done a good job, because several days later, I was invited to give the invocation at the Dimond High School graduation ceremonies before fifteen hundred people. If anyone in Alaska still believed that the Jewish people had horns, my appearance helped set them straight.

Finally, after the fifty day *Omer* countdown, the Shavuot holiday arrived. Time and again, in lectures, radio interviews, and meetings on the base, I had to explain how the festival celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Customarily, on the first night of Shavuot, people stay up learning Torah all night. That Shavuot, another Jewish record occurred in Alaska when five brave souls studied with me to the wee hours of the morning. Actually, because of Anchorage's early sunrises, the morning service was conducted at 3:45 a.m. But nonetheless, it was another Alaskan first.

The holiday recharged our batteries for the summer months ahead. But the thing that gave us both a super spiritual shot of adrenaline was the personal letter which we received from the Lubavitcher Rebbe a few days after Shavuot. I waited for Miriam to come home, and we read the letter together:

By the Grace of G-d
Rosh Chodesh Sivan,
5734. Brooklyn, N.Y.

Chaplain Israel Haber
Elmendorf Air Force Base
Alaska.

Greeting and Blessing:

Due to a very crowded schedule, this is my first opportunity of congratulating you on your extraordinary Zechus of initiating the project of the first Mikveh in Anchorage for the Alaskan Jewish community, which you accomplished, with G-d's help, as I am informed by our mutual friends, the Rabbonim who flew in to participate in this great event.

As for the importance of this matter, I need hardly emphasize it to you, since your own initiative is best proof of your being fully aware of it.

Nonetheless, on the basis of the dictum of our Sages, "Encourage the energetic," I wish to express my confident hope that you are doing all you can to make the Mikveh a busy place, frequented regularly not only by the women who directly benefit from your good influence, but also by their friends and acquaintances who will be induced by them to follow their example. And while this kind of religious inspiration is a "must" wherever Jews live, it is even more so in the City and State where the Mikveh has just been established for the first time. It is well to bear in mind that a "Jewish heart is always awake" and responsive to Torah and Mitzvoth.

It is significant in this case that the one who merited the great Zechus of establishing the Mikveh is a person in military service. For, military service, by

definition and practice, very aptly illustrates the basic principle of commitment to Torah and Mitzvoth, namely, *naaseh* ("we will do", and then) *v'nishma* ("we will understand.")

Moreover, the soldier's duty to carry out the orders of a commanding officer, and carry them out promptly and to the best of his ability, is in no way inhibited by the fact that in civilian life the soldier may be vastly superior to his commanding officer in many respects. Nor does such a circumstance diminish in the least the soldier's self-esteem in obeying the order. On the contrary, by not allowing any personal views to interfere with his military duties, he demonstrates his strength of character and integrity.

The same is true in the area of Torah and Mitzvoth. One may be a very rich man—in the ordinary sense, or rich in knowledge of the sciences, or in other achievements in public life. Yet, when it comes to Halachah, the Law of Torah conduct, he accepts it with complete obedience and dedication, on the authority of a fellow-Jew who has consecrated all his life to Torah study and Torah living, and who is eminently qualified to transmit the "Word of G-d—the Halachah."

A further point which characterizes military discipline also has a bearing on the subject of Torah and Mitzvoth. In the military, no soldier can claim that his conduct is his personal affair; nor can he take the attitude that there are many other soldiers to carry out military assignments, but he will do as he pleases. For it has often been demonstrated in military history how one action of a single soldier could have far-reaching consequences for an entire army and country.

Every Jew is a soldier in the "Army of G-d," as is

often emphasized in this week's Sedra—*kol yotze tzovo* "everyone going forth as a soldier." And he is bound by the same two basic rules: To carry out G-d's commandments promptly and fully, without question (*naaseh* before v'*nishmah*), and to recognize his responsibility to his people, ("All Jews are responsible for one another"), hence the consequences of one good deed. To quote the Rambam: "Every person should always consider himself and the whole world as equi-balanced. Hence, when he does one Mitzva, he tips the scale in favor of himself and the whole world" (see it at length in Hil. Teshuvah, 3 hal. 4).

May you go from strength to strength in all that has been said above, in all aspects of Yiddishkeit, which includes also influence to promote among non-Jews the observance of the basic Seven Mitzvoth, with all their numerous ramifications, which are incumbent upon all of mankind and are the foundation of human society.

At this time before Shovuos, I wish you and all our brethren at the Base, as well as the community, a happy and inspiring Festival of Receiving Our Torah, with the traditional Chasidic blessing—to receive the Torah with joy and inwardness.

With esteem and blessing, M. Schneerson

22

Shabbat and the Midnight Sun

The people of Fairbanks were especially looking forward to my May visit since I had informed them that Miriam would be making the trip with me. The new 360-mile Anchorage-Fairbanks Highway provided a scenic trail and smooth driving. More than halfway along on our journey, as we approached the state park named for the mountain, we were treated to a view of Mt. McKinley. The "grand-daddy" of North American peaks, and the mighty snowcapped range surrounding it, appeared to be close by. A park ranger informed us, however, that the scene we were viewing was more than one hundred miles away. The air was so clear; it seemed like we could reach out and touch McKinley's silvery slopes.

Continuing along the highway, we saw moose grazing near the roadside. The forests were filled with wildlife, including grizzly bears and wolves. We became fully aware that the temperature was climbing when we had to turn on the car's air conditioner for the first time since our arrival in Alaska. Enjoying our vacation together, we thoroughly appreciated the great expanse of the wonders that makes Alaska so special. The further we traveled, the more we realized that the 49th State was indeed America's "Last Frontier."

Crossing the flowing waters of the Tanana River, we began passing through tiny villages. It struck me that the people living here had probably never encountered a rabbi in their lives. Upon arriving in Fairbanks, we both had the feeling that we had made it to "civilization." An electric sign adorning a local bank indicated that the temperature was a sweltering 83 degrees above zero! The Fairbanks area was known to have the coldest Alaskan winters and the hottest summers. It was hard to believe that I had been in the very same place, experiencing a desolate, wintry Shabbat, when the temperature was a freezing fifty degrees below. Brrrr... just thinking about it gave me the shivers.

Miriam and I checked into the nurses' quarters at Fort Wainwright, but this time I didn't feel all alone. On Friday, we toured the impressive University of Alaska campus located in the Fairbanks suburb of College. Word of Miriam's visit had spread through the Jewish community, and the congregants we met on our walk hurried over to meet the "famous" wife of the rabbi, whom I often mentioned in the course of my Friday night sermons. Many local Jews attended evening services, and people were most happy to finally meet the rabbi's wife. After singing the final *Adon Olam* prayer, a crowd of women rushed over and engaged her in a lengthy discussion.

The weather throughout Shabbat remained very warm and sunny. The Shabbat day actually ended at 12:06 a.m.—Sunday! Once again, we had to chuckle at Shabbat extremes in Alaska. In the wintertime, Shabbat began at 1:30 in the afternoon, and ended at 2:30 the next afternoon. There are twenty-five hours of Shabbat, but it is daylight-wise very short. When Miriam started working in the special education department of the elementary school in Anchorage, she had to ask the principal's per-

mission to leave early on Fridays to get ready for Shabbat. Needless to say, the principal wasn't pleased. He suggested she light Shabbat candles at school. "But I won't be able to drive home after that," she told him. In the end, he agreed.

Though the Alaskan Shabbat took time to adjust to, it wasn't without its pluses. For instance, we were the only Orthodox couple I knew who could go shopping in department stores on Saturday "afternoon" in the winter as Shabbat concluded before the stores closed at five p.m. In the summertime, Shabbat began twenty minutes before midnight, Friday night. It was over around 12:45 Sunday morning. Thus, we had fifteen minutes to say *Havdalah* until the sun would come out at one o'clock and morning prayers could begin. This too had its advantages. We were the only Orthodox couple in America who was able to watch the Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson on Friday night because Shabbat had not yet arrived!

Therefore on our trip to Fairbanks, after reciting *havdalah* just after midnight, Miriam and I took a stroll on the Army post and watched the new day break over the mountains a few minutes later. Sunday morning, we drove to the North Pole! The small suburban village midway between Fort Wainwright and Eilson Air Force Base takes pride in a very tall, red, white, and blue-painted totem pole displaying the sign: NORTH POLE. We didn't see signs of anything Jewish—not even a Chabad House—(which shows you how remote the place really is!) but we did see the world famous "Santa Claus" House. After visiting the Eskimo Museum, we began our return trip to Elmendorf. Since we were as far north as a person could be on the highway, we turned our car around and headed back south.

In those days, the first fifty miles of roadway was still

under construction. As the car slid through the mud and bounced over rocks, we traveled at around ten miles per hour. What a relief to reach the main road and speed up to seventy miles per hour. Just as we had marveled at the wealth of beautiful scenery on our way to Fairbanks, we did so again on our trip home. Endless mountain ranges suddenly gave way to panoramic green pastures and bubbling blue and white streams. One hundred miles north of Anchorage, we stopped at a small roadside grocery store boasting a gasoline pump. The proprietor, a part-time farmer, dressed in overalls and suspenders, began filling our car with gas. Noticing my *kippah*, he asked, "Where d'ya get that little hat from, mister?"

"New York City," I answered.

"No kiddin'? Is that what they wear in New York nowadays?"

"Just the Jews."

"So how come you're wearin' one of them?" he wanted to know.

"I'm Jewish," I informed him.

His mouth opened wide, revealing two missing teeth. "Well I'll be," he exclaimed with surprise. Excited, he turned toward the small grocery.

"Martha, Martha," he called. "Come out here quick. There are some Jews I want ya to meet."

His overweight wife waddled out of the store and stood on the porch, holding her hands in the pockets of her apron.

"This is my wife, Martha." he said, introducing us. "I'm Ed."

As I introduced Miriam and myself, Martha's head tilted this way and that, as she sized up the strange looking creatures that had stopped by for gas.

"We never have met any Jewish people before," her husband explained. "Have we Martha?"

The dumbfounded woman shook her head no.

"But we know our Lord was a Jew, so that makes you all right with us. Isn't that right, Martha?"

"I reckon," she said, staring at us as if we had crash-landed down from the moon.

Driving away, Miriam and I both burst out laughing.

"Did you see how she stared at us?" Miriam asked.

"It's a good thing I left our horns in the trunk," I said.

All during the last leg of our journey, whenever we thought of Martha and Ed, we shared a giggle. Later, I found myself thinking that maybe I should have taken more time to talk with the man and his wife. After all, the Rebbe had encouraged me to be a beacon of light to non-Jews as well. Maybe I wasn't doing as much as I could. But why was I thinking so much about the Rebbe, I wondered?

23

Jewish Alaskana

Ever since my appearances in the local media during the Yom Kippur War, I was considered the local authority on Israel. Since I was the only rabbi around, it was only natural that people considered me to be an expert on all Jewish matters as well. Accordingly, all types of institutions and groups turned to me with a wide range of requests. For example, I was asked by several Jewish publications to compile a census of the Alaskan Jewish community. The findings were as follows (military not included):

City	Jewish Population
Adak	66
Anchorage	447
Barrow	2
Bethel	4
Clear Mews	30
College	30
Cordova	12
Eagle River	6
East Kodiak	4
Fairbanks	208
Fort Greely	5

Galena	3
Girdwood	4
Hope	4
Juneau	63
Ketchikan	8
Kodiak	5
Nome	2
Petersburg	2
Seward	14
Sitka	16
Sparrevohn	1
Tatalina	1
Valdez	8
TOTAL	945

I began researching Jewish Alaskan history for the *American Jewish Yearbook*, published annually by the Jewish Publication Society. The information documents prominent Jewish contributions to Alaska. Miriam Dreyfuss notes in the *American Jewish Archives* of November 1963, that in 1869, only two years after the United States purchased the territory of Alaska from Russia, a Sitka Jew told the Jews of San Francisco that there were Jews living close to the North Pole. The year before, Emil Teichman, a non-Jewish businessman visiting Sitka, had found an assembly of twenty Jewish men holding their Shabbat services and reading their prayers under the leadership of the oldest man present. To this visiting businessman, whose diary was published in 1925, it was a memorable thing to witness such a religious gathering in so remote a setting. He felt it said a great deal regarding the persistence with which the Jews all over the word practiced their religious devotions.

Descriptive data relating to a most illustrious couple,

Robert and Jessie Bloom, is documented in the *American Jewish Archives* periodical of November 1963, as well as in the *Fairbanks News Miner*. Robert Bloom arrived in Dawson, Yukon Territory, in 1898, and participated in High Holiday services held that year at the Yukon Pioneer Mall. Upon the discovery of gold in Fairbanks in 1902, many people left Dawson to follow the "gold rush." Bloom joined them in 1904, and with other Dawson Jews, established a congregation. He opened a general store in Fairbanks which was in business from 1906 until 1941. He married Jessie in Ireland in 1912 and journeyed back to Alaska that year. The Blooms carefully observed the traditions of Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. Bloom's store became a favorite meeting spot, the place where many homesteaders would gather when they came into town. Robert Bloom was appointed to the University of Alaska's Board of Regents in the early 1920's and received an honorary membership as a University Alumnus in 1961. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Bloom was asked to assume the position of Chairman of the Jewish Welfare Board in Alaska. The Jewish military personnel who came to Alaska went to Bloom with their problems. Among their many contributions to the Jewish community, the Bloom family hosted the first public Pesach *Seder* in Alaska at the Fairbanks Masonic Hall in 1942. Pesach supplies were flown in by the Jewish Welfare Board in New York.

Among her many humanitarian contributions, Jessie Bloom organized the first kindergarten in the Territory of Alaska in 1916. It proved to be great success and continued until the establishment of a public kindergarten in 1922. She also formed a Girl Scout troop in 1925. Without benefit of uniforms, hats, badges, or official cooking kits, Mrs.

Bloom put the girls through the traditional scouting practices as outlined in the Girl Scout manual, *How Girls Can Help Their Country.*

Late in life, Robert and Jessie Bloom moved to Seattle, Washington, where Robert died at age ninety-five in 1971. Jessie passed away a decade later as she was approaching her one-hundredth birthday.

Among the many interesting items I discovered while doing my research, was a 1947 index of *Who's Who in Alaska and Alaska Business*, published in Juneau, and a 1955 pamphlet entitled *The Loussac Story* by Evangeline Atwood, that provided information about Zachary Loussac. He was born in Russia in 1882 and immigrated to New York City at the age of eighteen. Penniless and knowing very little English, he headed west in 1901 while working as a drug clerk. At Great Falls, Montana, he stopped his trek across the country to work in a drugstore for nine months. Shortly thereafter, in order to become a full-fledged druggist, he headed back east and attended New York College of Pharmacy, which later became part of Columbia University.

In 1907, Zachary Loussac settled in Unalakleet, Alaska. In 1910, he moved to Iditarod and worked hard to pay off several unsuccessful business ventures. Finally, in 1916, he decided to open a drugstore in Anchorage. This time Zachary succeeded, both in his profession and in establishing roots in the tiny community. With the passing of years, he became a motivating force in the growth of the town.

Loussac served as mayor of Anchorage from 1947 through 1950, and as president of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce. He belonged to the Pioneers of Alaska, the Alaska Yukon Pioneers, the Bnai Brith, and to

the Zionist Organization of America. In addition, he was the founder and first president of the League of Alaskan Cities. In recognition of his service to the community, Loussac was named "Outstanding Citizen of Alaska" by the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce in November of 1946.

As an expression of his love for learning, Zachary Loussac contributed the funds to build the Loussac Public Library. In setting up the library foundation, Loussac expressed the wish that the property be operated for the benefit of the citizens of the newly-formed state.

Searching through the 1952 Alaskan Jewish Archives at Elmendorf Air Force Base, and conversing with the editor of the *Beth Shalom Bulletin*, Miss Bernice Bloomfield, I learned much about Isadore Bayles, another prominent Jew who contributed to the territory's development. He was born in Libau, Kurland, Lithuania in 1876. He arrived in the tent city of Anchorage in 1915, after being in business in Dawson, Yukon Territory, Canada, Iditarod, and Fairbanks, all gold mining communities. A friend of the Blooms of Fairbanks, his name appears on a list dated October 4, 1908, along with other Jews who contributed funds to help defray expenses for the High Holiday services for that year.

Bayles opened his retail clothing business in a tent in 1915. A store, built soon afterward, remained in operation until 1950. He served on the Anchorage City Council and school board, and was the first president of the company that published the *Anchorage Times*, Alaska's largest newspaper. In 1950, Bayles moved to San Francisco where he resided until his death in 1956. In 1957, his children donated their father's Torah to the Anchorage Jewish community. During my commission in Alaska, it was on loan

to the Jewish Chapel at Elmendorf Air Force Base.

Did you know who was Anchorage's first mayor? That's right—a Jew! Leopold David was the first elected mayor of Anchorage after its incorporation on November 2, 1920, and he was re-elected for a second term. A native of Brooklyn, New York, he was appointed United States Recorder at Knik, Alaska, in 1911, after serving in the Spanish American War. In 1915, he and his family moved to the tent city of Ship Creek, as Anchorage was called in those days. He practiced corporate and mining law, and later served as a judge.

Jews were also successful fur trappers and furriers. In addition to the fur business that Charles Goldstein started in Juneau in the early 1920's, David Green made a name for himself in the growing Alaskan community. Green was born in Austria in 1903 and immigrated to New York City as a very young boy. After completing religious and secular education in New York, he headed for Seattle in 1922. He continued on to Cordova, Alaska, and began trapping furs in the Washington and Alaskan forests. He opened his first fur store in Seattle and established another in Cordova. A few years later, he opened branches in the cities of Fairbanks and Ketchikan as well. In the mid-1950's, his company, *David Green and Sons Master Furriers*, opened their headquarter store in downtown Anchorage, the site of two stores today.

During Green's half-century in Alaska, he became advisor to Governors Gruening and Egan during their administrations. He was one of the leaders of the Alaskan Democratic Party and was elected to the Anchorage City Council in 1963-1964.

For many years David Green and his family were known as the most traditional Jewish family in

Anchorage. His store was always closed on the Jewish High Holy Days. Many VIP's visited him and his wife in Anchorage. While Golda Meir was Israel's Foreign Minister, she stayed with the Greens while touring the 49th State. Bob Hope, General Westmoreland, Senator Hubert Humphrey, and the royal Japanese family, are some of the guests who were hosted by the Greens in Anchorage. Green was a member of the Masons, the Shriners, the Elks, B'nai Brith, and the American Zionist Organization. He died in 1971 after having established himself as the foremost furrier in Alaska.

Other prominent Jewish contributors to Alaska's growth from pioneer days include Samuel Applebaum, a Chicagoan who lived in Alaska since 1898 and operated mines in Flat and Otter Creek. He resided in the Eskimo village of Bethel. During that era, the only Jewish residents of Tiekel, a town near Valdez, were George Loewe and his wife, who for fourteen years operated a roadhouse for trappers and fishermen.

Isadore Goldstein served for six years as mayor of Juneau and established the first children's playground in Alaska. Solomon Ripinski, a Polish Jew, built a government school at Chilkat in the 1880's and opened a general store, around which the town of Haines grew up. The 3,400-foot Mount Ripinski became his memorial.

Alaska's Gerstle River was named for Lewis Gerstle who popularized the use of sealskins. With the help of his associates, he developed steamboat transportation in the territory. He also financed some of Alaska's first mining ventures. David Shirpser arrived in Sitka in 1867. By the following year, he owned general stores at sixteen locales. His relative, Herman Shirpser, was Kodiak's postmaster. Other early settlers in Sitka were Sam Goldstein, merchant; Sam

Stover, acting mayor in 1869; J.A. Manase, tobacconist; and Lazar Caplan, saloon keeper.

A 1915 photograph of Ship Creek shows the business section located on Fourth Avenue, the heart of Anchorage's downtown today. One prominent storefront sign reads "Finkelstein and Sapiro," a business which sold sportswear and tent equipment.

Dr. Joseph Silverman, a surgeon, founded and directed the hospital in Valdez and practiced medicine in Alaska from 1902 to 1922. William Gross opened the Alaskan Territory's first movie houses in the early 1900's.

Other public figures included Edward Seidenverg, mayor of Nome in the 1930's; Herbert Greenberg, builder of Alaska's first radio station in 1922; Nathan J. Gerson, a prominent Fairbanks businessman; and Rex Swartz, mayor of Nome in the forties.

Upon Alaska being proclaimed a state in 1959, Ernest Gruening, a former territorial governor, was elected United States Senator. In 1964, Jay A. Rabinowitz was named to Alaska's Supreme Court, of which he became chief justice. Avrum Gross of Juneau was appointed Alaska's attorney general by Governor Jay Hammond in 1974.

Jews contributed not only to Alaska's proud past, but they were active in the present as well. At the time of my research project, many Jews were recognized statewide for their valuable professional contributions. To name but a few: Dr. Mickey Eisenberg, Alaska's only epidemiologist; Dr. Quentin Fisher of the Public Health Service; Dr. Michael Krauss, the Chairman of the Alaska Native Languages Center for Northern Educational Research and Professor of Linguistics at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks; Dr. Paul Liebman, Director of Emergency

Medical Technician Program at Elmendorf Hospital, and innovator of several medical instruments; Dave Rose, Anchorage City Councilman; Carol Schatz, Administrator at Alaska Methodist University and Director of the Office of Institutional Grants; and Bernard Schecter, Alaska's only forensic chemist and expert in spectroscopy.

During the pioneer days in the 1860's, the largest community of Jews in Alaska was located in Southeastern Alaska, primarily in Sitka and Juneau. With the advent of the "gold rush" when Alaska's population began settling areas further north, the few Jews in the territory did likewise, making Fairbanks their home.

Before World War II, there were hardly more than one hundred Jews in Alaska. They were widely scattered from the Panhandle in the south, to the Seward Peninsula facing Siberia in the northwest. After the war, the Jewish population began growing, largely due to the servicemen and civilian personnel assigned to military installations. Several Jewish professionals moved to the state as government employees, working on technical projects. Anchorage and Fairbanks, the centers of military activity, boasted the majority of Alaska's Jews.

I ask you, if it weren't for the Jews, where would Alaska and the rest of the world be today? Truly, we have been a light to the nations.

"You know, Yisrael," Miriam said with a grin. "In the future, someone will update the research you've done, and they will write about you—the rabbi of Alaska, pioneer builder of the Alaska's first *mikvah*, the man who brought *Yiddishkeit* to the Alaskan frontier."

"Yeah, right!"

24

Bar Mitzvah North of the Range

A good part of my mornings were spent answering the many interesting letters I received every week. For example, in early June, I received a letter from Gambell, Alaska. It was written by Leonard Kamerling, a talented documentary filmmaker whose work has gained nationwide acclaim.

Dear Rabbi Haber,

Hi, remember me? I'm the guy from Brooklyn who drove you to your quarters after Yom Kippur services last fall in Fairbanks. I've been receiving the Alaskan Jewish Bulletin out here in Gambell, on St. Laurence Island, way out in the Bering Sea, thirty-eight miles from the coast of Siberia, so I've been keeping in touch with what's going on.

We're working here with the community, producing a documentary film about village life. We are using a new approach to making films about different cultures, letting the people of the village participate in the decision-making about how the film will be made and what will be in it. The results produce a more authentic film.

We're having a great time as well, and were able to witness and film a very exciting whale hunt and many

traditional observances that do not exist anymore in other Alaskan locales. I'll be back in Fairbanks in a few weeks to begin editing the film and hope to have it finished by September. I'm looking forward to seeing and talking with you again, soon. Enclosed is a check for the Jewish Chaplain's Fund. I hope it helps the community.

On June 9th, the Air Force community held a post 4th of July picnic along Six Mile River that runs through the base's recreational facilities. The outdoor festivities honored the new Chief of Air Force Chaplains, Brigadier General Henry J. Meade. While everyone else feasted on barbecued hot dogs, Miriam and I made do with the sandwiches we had prepared at home. However, we enjoyed the spirited outing, and we had the opportunity to converse with the Chief Chaplain at length about Alaskan Jewish activities—and the famous "mix-ar" that he remembered from his days at the Pentagon.

Throughout the winter and spring, I had been teaching Michael Parks of Fairbanks his *Bar-Mitzvah* lessons by telephone. We reviewed his studies in person during my monthly visits up north. His big day was scheduled for the morning of June 29th at Eilson Air Force Base. Arriving at the installation on the preceding day, I decided to billet at the regular B.O.Q. rather than the nurses' quarters. Even though it would require a long walk to the chapel, I did not mind since the weather had been constantly warm and sunny.

I was awakened Saturday morning by the pounding of raindrops against the window. Outside, a torrential downpour covered the base. Holding on to my hat, I jogged as fast as I could to the chapel. Because of the distance, I had to stop in doorways to catch my breath. One very soggy

rabbi entered the chapel on that very special *Bar-Mitzvah* Shabbat. Technical sergeant George Parks and his family didn't seem to mind. They were happy to have any rabbi, even a wet one. Michael chanted his *Haftorah* expertly and everyone was proud of his long distance learning. Kosher food from Seattle was served at the lavish *Kiddush*, hosted by the Parks' upon the completion of the service. As usual for Fairbanks, Shabbat ended at 12:40 a.m., Sunday. The *Havdalah* I recited was the very last *Havdalah* recited at the completion of that Shabbat—in the world.

Traveling back to Anchorage, I attended the Anchorage Glacier Pilots baseball game as Perry Green's guest. A week earlier, the famous Midnight Sun Baseball Game had been played in Fairbanks. The annual game, which begins at ten o'clock p.m. and continues past midnight, is played without lights. During the Anchorage night game, as I sat in the box seat section of Mulcahey Field, the sun's heat became more intense as the double header continued. When the ninth inning ended, many of the fans went home sunburned, including myself. From a night game! But this is Alaska.

Throughout the entire summer, tourists flocked to Alaska at a phenomenal rate. Jewish vacationers were among the group too. Our house became the hotel and restaurant for Jews of all sizes and shapes. Of course, Miriam was always the perfect hostess, despite her own heavy schedule at graduate school.

Many of our guests hailed from the East Coast. The men who stayed at our home put on *tefillin* daily, and the women lit Shabbat candles on Friday evening. As one law student summed up, "I live in New York City and haven't put on *tefillin*, recited *Kiddush*, or gone to *shul* on Shabbat since my thirteenth birthday. I come thousands of miles to

Alaska and end up, not only performing the rites, but actually enjoying them as well."

Another young medical student had always attended Jewish schools and had thus worn a *kippah* growing up. Since he was beginning to study medicine in a southwestern college, he had decided that the *kippah* would have to come off. I gave him a pep talk and related many of my own experiences. Several months later, I was greatly gratified to learn from him that he indeed was wearing a *kippah* at school—and was respected for doing so by his non-Jewish friends.

In mid-July, we closed our "hotel" and went traveling with our neighbors, the Newcombs. First, we toured Arctic Valley and then drove some twenty miles to the Eklutna Glacier, where we enjoyed the hidden wonders of Alaska's back roads. We traveled along Eklutna Lake for thirteen miles until meeting up with the glacier at road's end. Hiking and climbing along the rocky hillsides, we approached the glacier itself. The temperature dropped noticeably as we ventured closer to the wonder of nature. Bending down by the lake, we scooped up ice cubes from the icy, white waters. Mother Nature's ice cubes on an 80-degree day.

On *Tisha B'Av*, another Alaskan record was set, as we smashed the previous year's attendance record. We had a *minyan* for the reading of *Eicha* (Lamentations) and many adults and teenagers participating in the daylong fast. Remembering the destruction of Jerusalem in Alaska! Now that's really something! As our Sages teach us: "He who mourns the destruction of Jerusalem will merit experiencing the joy of its rebuilding." May it be soon in our days!

25

Tradition on a Galaxy

On the morning following *Tisha B'Av*, I boarded a C-5A Galaxy, the world's largest airplane, on my way to attend a conference in New York City. Thus I traveled from Elmendorf to Dover, A.F.B., Delaware on one of the planes that had brought needed ammunition to Israel during the Yom Kippur War.

The C-5 stretches almost the length of a football field and stands as high as a seven-story building. The cargo compartment is large enough to carry six standard Greyhound busses, or 106 compact autos. Each Galaxy holds enough fuel for the average car to make one hundred and thirty round trips between New York and Los Angeles, or thirty-one trips around the world. In other words, the plane is like a city in the sky.

Shortly after take-off, I began looking around for a place to stand while reciting the morning prayers. One of the crew assigned to assist the eighty passengers on-board asked that I follow him. He said he would be happy to find a private place on the aircraft for my needs. We climbed down the long ladder from the passenger section to the main cargo area, where I noticed an army tank and several jeeps among many other items being transported. I selected a wide-open space near a window to set up my

one-man chapel. Donning my *tallit* and *tefillin*, I prayed from my *siddur* for thirty minutes with the crew sergeant standing nearby. He said he had to stand by me to catch me from falling in case of sudden turbulence, since I had no object nearby to grab on to for balance.

Praying, I hadn't noticed that two other crew members were watching my actions. When I concluded the *Shacharit* service, I saw them looking my way. As I took off the *tefillin* and placed them back into their special cloth sack, one of the crewmen exclaimed, "I know what you're doing! Tradition! Right? I saw it in the show Fiddler on the Roof!"

Smiling, I commended him for his perception and briefly explained the reasons for wearing the religious items while praying. Thanking the crew sergeant for his assistance, I climbed back up the ladder and remained in the passenger section for the rest of the trip. Since all the passengers were seated facing the rear of the plane as a precaution against whiplash, the landing was unique. It actually felt like we were landing backwards.

My father was waiting for me at the airport, and we drove north to Monsey. Besides the conference, my trip was especially meaningful since my grandparents traveled to New York from their home in Israel to visit the family for a few weeks. Seeing both them and my Brooklyn-based grandparents was the highlight of my trip. During the visit, I met by brother Philip's fiancée, Deena, as well. Of course, everyone was eager to learn about life on the other side of the world. I brought along many movies of Alaska, which I had filmed. Sergeant Holcomb and I had produced a thirty-minute travelogue on Anchorage in June, and my family and friends in New York were surprised to view pictures of Alaska with absolutely no snow on the ground.

On August 8th, my father drove me to Dover Air Force Base, only to learn that my flight had been cancelled. Not wishing to spend more time away from Miriam, I decided to drive back to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport in time to catch a flight to Anchorage via Chicago. The many hours of travel became bearable as soon as I saw Miriam waiting for me at the airport in Alaska.

The next morning Anchorage television carried the inauguration of President Gerald Ford by satellite. I took the opportunity to write him a letter, wishing him success and blessing him in advance for doing whatever he could to strengthen America's ally, Israel, the only true democracy in the entire Middle East. Little did I know then that I would soon be meeting the President himself, not in the White House, but five minutes away from my house—in Alaska!

26

Tokyo Rabbi

Jewish tourists to Alaska continued coming throughout August. With Miriam's summer schedule of classes ending in mid-August, and my having attended the annual Alcom Conference on August 19th and 20th, the two of us decided to do some touring ourselves. On a bright, warm morning, Miriam and I strolled over to the flight terminal just several blocks from our quarters. Having applied for leave several days earlier, we boarded a C-141 Starlifter, bound for Yokota Air Force Base, Japan. Eight other passengers were seated with us near the windowless cargo section. The nine-hour, Trans-Pacific flight illustrated to us what a time machine must be like. We stepped into the bowels of the aircraft in Alaska and disembarked in the Orient the next day, having crossed the International Time Line, a difference of nineteen hours.

We received guest quarters at the air base where we remained overnight. The only English language radio station was American Armed Forces Radio. In frustration, I tried listening to the Japanese broadcast of the Tokyo Giants baseball game. The crack of the bat and the roar of the crowd were the only things I understood.

We awoke, *davened*, ate some bread and food which Miriam had packed from home and set out to explore

Yokota Air Force Base. First, we greeted the base chaplains at the chapel and were given a tour of the facility. We were informed that the Jewish chaplain had recently been reassigned. His replacement was due to arrive before the High Holy Days. The civilian rabbi in Tokyo was visiting relatives in Brooklyn, and the Navy's Jewish Chaplain was on leave. For the time being, I was Japan's only rabbi.

I made reservations at the U.S. Military Sanno Hotel in Tokyo. Before traveling the twenty miles to the city, we decided to stop at the base commissary and perhaps see if the store stocked any kosher products. We were in luck. In the freezer case was a stack of kosher airline meals that were ordered for Pesach. We purchased several and happily set out for Japan's capital city.

The chapel staff had warned us that the subway system was very confusing. Obviously, none of the fellows on the staff had grown up in New York City. Armed with a subway map, we figured out the routing system in no time. I had asked the civilian Japanese secretary at the chapel to jot down a few sentences on a paper with the name of the hotel in Japanese. Exiting the subway, I presented the note to a taxi driver. The cabby glanced at us and, without even reading the message, said "Sanno Hotel, best place for you."

The comfortable hotel housed a small government BX and Club. Upon our arrival, we sought out the Japanese maitre d' and asked him to place our kosher dinners in a freezer. He nodded his head politely as we explained the reason for our request. Though I am sure he didn't understand a thing, he nonetheless honored our wishes.

While we were riding on the Tokyo subway on Friday morning, a young Caucasian woman greeted us as she entered the train.

"I haven't seen many Americans since arriving a few days ago in Japan," she informed us.

Happy to converse with fellow countrymen, she told us that she and her husband were completing the last leg of a one-year, around-the-world tour.

"It must have been a very exciting year for you," I said. "Tell us, which place on your travels did you enjoy the most?"

"Actually," she answered, "you probably have never heard of it, but a particular kibbutz we stayed on in the State of Israel for a few weeks was the highlight of our trip. Do you know what a kibbutz is?"

Miriam and I looked at each other with great surprise.

"Yes...yes we do," I replied.

"I don't suppose you can answer my next question being tourists yourselves, but you see, I'm Jewish... and I really would like to meet a rabbi while in Japan."

"A rabbi?" I asked in great wonderment.

"Yes, you know that's a Jewish clergyman," our new acquaintance explained.

In a city that boasts a population of twelve million during a single working day, in a crowded subway car, in a country where there was only one visiting rabbi, I slowly removed my golf cap and displayed the *kippah*, which I wore beneath it.

"I am a rabbi," I said.

The young lady's mouth opened wide. She couldn't believe it.

"Instant rabbinical assistance at your service, Mrs...."

"Oh...Mrs. Feinberg...but wow!"

Miriam and I both laughed along with the amazed Mrs. Feinberg at meeting one another in what amounted to a twelve million to one chance.

Her question concerned an aspect of the laws regarding *mikvah*. Normally, one wouldn't discuss such a personal matter on a crowded subway car, but since the Japanese passengers around us didn't understand a thing that we said, I was able to give her the information she needed. Mrs. Feinberg had to exit the train several stations before us, so we exchanged addresses before wishing one another an upcoming "Shabbat *Shalom*."

Returning to the Sanno Hotel several hours before Shabbat candle lighting, we gave the maitre d' specific instructions regarding our meals.

"Please heat the meal in its present aluminum container without breaking the seal, and have it brought to our room about 7:30 tonight," I requested.

That evening was the first time we ever had a Shabbat meal served by a Japanese waiter. With a courteous bow, he handed us our aluminum packets on a tray, looking just a bit puzzled.

Well, finally the time had come. For a year, we had been the last Jews in the world to welcome Shabbat. That night, we were among the first. Reciting *Kiddush* over the Israeli wine we brought along on our trip, we were now in the very opposite time zone from Alaska.

We walked around the Diet Building governmental area on Shabbat and enjoyed touring the Tokyo metropolitan area until Wednesday, August 28th. During that time, we visited the Tokyo Jewish Community Center, meeting several European Jewish couples who remained living in Japan after fleeing the Nazi murder regime prior to World War Two.

After waiting for thirty-six hours at the Yokota A.F.B. Passenger Terminal, we were fortunate to board a C-141, on a non-stop flight to Elmendorf. Loaded to the hilt with

supplies, the plane just managed to accommodate one other passenger and us. Strapped into side hammocks, we slept throughout the long flight. Arriving in Elmendorf on the same afternoon as the night we departed Yokota, we walked home from the terminal—door-to-door service from Japan to the Haber house in Alaska. As the song says, "It's nice to go traveling, but it's oh so nice to come home."

27

The President Comes to Alaska

On September 2nd, Labor Day, it seemed as if all of Anchorage's citizens traveled one hour north to picturesque Hatcher Pass, for a picnic and a hang-gliding exhibition. Riding in Paul and Patty Liebman's large Winnebago camper, we made our way along the hilly, winding path called Hatcher Pass. After several enjoyable hours, we stopped off in Palmer to take in the Alaska State Fair. One exhibit boasted a seventy-pound cabbage grown in the Matanuska Valley. The vegetable crop grown in the area was always unusually large due to the many hours of sunshine during the summer months.

We experienced an honest-to-goodness traffic jam on the road back to Anchorage. An accident had brought cars to a standstill along the twenty-five mile, one lane highway. People stood outside their cars, trucks, and campers, conversing with each other, and some even continued their picnics, setting up tables and chairs along the road. Since we were stopped directly in the middle of the lovely Matanuska River Bridge, I used the opportunity to photograph the scenery. The pictures were among the best I have ever taken.

Throughout the first two weeks of September, many people traveling through the state called my office inquir-

ing about the High Holy Day schedule. Jews from California, Utah, Washington, and Nevada attended Rosh Hashanah services at Elmendorf. Among the many guests Miriam and I had at our house during *Yom Tov* included the Fishers, now living in the Eskimo village of Bethel, Alaska, located five hundred miles west of Anchorage. Dr. Fisher worked at the public health hospital. The *Tashlich* service was attended by more than fifty people. Everyone gathered at Elmendorf's Ship Creek, a long way from Prospect Park, Brooklyn, but the feeling of atonement and cleansing was exactly the same. Many non-Jewish onlookers were impressed upon learning that on *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jews pray for the welfare of the whole world, not only for the Jewish people.

It was announced that Miriam and myself would conduct the first annual Alaskan study tour of Israel in May, in conjunction with Alaska Methodist University's intensive study spring program. Four college credits were to be granted by the university upon completion of the course. Once again, the class I taught at the university on Modern Israel met with high enrollment.

I received a phone call from Avrum Gross of Juneau, informing me that his son was to have his *Bar Mitzvah* in the spring. I mention the fact because the occasion would go down in the annals of history as the first *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony in the state's capital.

On September 25th, just before Yom Kippur, Miriam and I flew to Fairbanks with the famous "portable *mechitzah*." The Liebman's traveled by Winnebago to Fort Wainwright, in Fairbanks, leaving on the preceding day. They wished to observe the Day of Atonement with us. The good doctor assisted me in conducting parts of the lengthy service. Everyone remembered the horror we had

all experienced the previous year when news came of the surprise attack on Israel. Thank G-d, we had survived that great danger. Certainly the memory made our prayers flow from our hearts with great gratitude and fervor.

Returning home, I received several telephone calls from my Anchorage congregants letting me know they were happy I was back in the area. They informed me that the temple board had arranged for a Reform student rabbi from California to conduct Yom Kippur services. It had been my understanding that Jerry Green would lead the services as he had in the past. Instead, the visitor concluded prayers and the Yom Kippur fast in the early afternoon, to the chagrin of the more traditional members of the congregation, many of whom continued the *davening* by themselves. Conferring with the base chaplain, I made certain that if in the future any services were to be held on the base in my absence, the schedule which I had arranged would be strictly respected.

Soon after the holidays, the following article appeared in the Anchorage Daily Times:

> FORD WRITES TO LOCAL RABBI
>
> Rabbi Israel Haber of Elmendorf Air Force Base is the possessor of a letter from President Gerald Ford, thanking the rabbi for offering a Jewish prayer in his honor.
>
> Rabbi Haber wrote Ford on behalf of the Jewish community in Alaska, telling the new President they had offered a special Jewish prayer for him upon his inauguration.
>
> Rabbi Haber said the letter from Ford thanked him for the prayer and wished him a good New Year.

Letters flooded my office. I tried my best to answer them all as promptly as I could. A young serviceman stationed

on an island in the Aleutian chain, some fifteen hundred miles southwest of Anchorage, wrote me an S.O.S.:

> Dear Rabbi,
>
> I'm a lost Jew. Up until three years ago, my parents told me that I was a Protestant. They suddenly informed me that I am a Jew and that I should start acting like one. When I asked why they kept from telling me sooner, they wouldn't answer. I guess they had their reasons. However now I want to learn, and learn I must. I have some books that the visiting chaplain gave me to read. Rabbi, please help me. I want to learn. As far as I know there are only one or two other Jews here. I need your help."

I contacted the young man, sending Jewish literature to him and keeping the line of communication open. The same day that his letter arrived, I received a thank-you note from a Jewish couple, who had been stationed by the Navy in Kodiak, on the Alaskan Peninsula. They offered their thanks for the care packages of literature and kosher food items that had been sent out their way.

Once again, the base civil engineers assisted with the construction of the *sukkah*. Fortunately, it didn't snow early, making the cutting of the *schach* a much easier task. However, the sunny and warm Indian summer ended abruptly on the first night of the holiday. The temperature dropped drastically and seventy-mile-per-hour winds uprooted trees, ripped up signs, and tore down power lines. Despite the stormy weather conditions, more than twenty adults and youngsters enjoyed eating in our *sukkah*. The booth withstood the mighty winds in fine shape, and the holiday candles that Miriam lit did not blow out. We couldn't help but feeling that G-d was watching over America's northernmost *sukkah*.

The weather went from bad to worse. On October 3rd, Anchorage was surprised by a snowfall. Many motorists had not yet switched over to snow tires. A mammoth traffic jam paralyzed the downtown area all morning long. Having received a teaching position at the Chugach Elementary School in Anchorage, Miriam was stuck on her way to work. Since I was driving her, I was stuck too. Slipping and sliding along, I parked the car and escorted Miriam on foot for the remaining mile. I think it was the first time in my life that I called in late for work in early October because I was stuck in the snow.

At the end of the month, I presented a special program, entitled "The Holocaust: Thirty Years Later," to a class of adults at the Fairbanks campus of the University of Alaska. The thermometer was already hovering at 18 degrees, a marked contrast from the forty-degree weather in Anchorage. That's why the citizens of Fairbanks enjoyed calling the large city to the south, the "Banana Belt," alluding to the relatively easy winters experienced by the residents of Anchorage.

After returning from Fairbanks, I received a phone call from Jews living in Talkeetna. They saw my census project and informed me that they had recently moved to the town and wanted to be "put on the Jewish map." The same day, the Fishers let me know that they had spent Shabbat in Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island, population two hundred and fifty people. Talk about the wandering Jew!

For the first time in Alaska's history, the World Series was telecast live by satellite. In addition, one football game per Sunday was televised live as well. Unfortunately, the usual week delay was continued with all other games. The Catholic and Protestant chaplains were not at all pleased, since games coming from the East Coast were broadcast at

eight o'clock a.m. in Alaska. Needless to say, the attendance at Sunday morning prayers decreased dramatically whenever the Giants or Patriots battled rivals at home.

With the enormous gathering of Jews at the United Nations Plaza in New York City on November 4th, rallying against the PLO and Yassir Arafat's scheduled appearance there, I wanted to be kept up to date. Placing several calls to a friend stationed by a telephone booth at the UN, I was able to provide a full account of the happenings to the Jewish people of Alaska. In most instances, my congregants received my information earlier than the local news broadcasts.

Throughout early November, I presented slide showings on Israel, held seminars, and counseled Jewish and non-Jewish military personnel. The days were extremely busy for both Miriam and myself, and our evening activities at Alaska Methodist University and University of Alaska kept us booked at night. In addition, the "Banana Belt" was getting snowed upon almost daily.

On Sunday, November 17th, the national and international news spotlight fell upon Alaska, even if only for a few hours. President Ford, along with Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, and a planeload of journalists, landed at Elmendorf Air Force Base to refuel Air Force One on their flight to China. For days, the base had prepared for the short visit. Sunday morning, excitement was in the air. At 10:15 a.m., Miriam and I drove to Hangar Number Five, about five minutes from our quarters. The structure had been converted into a huge auditorium, complete with stage, media area, bandstand, VIP section, and thousands of seats and bleachers for the crowd. To give civilians a chance to welcome the President, the base was open to visitors. A long line of people, bundled in hooded parkas,

braved the nippy, minus one-degree temperature. After a half-hour of waiting, the line finally the line began to move. Upon entering the mammoth hangar, we noticed that the general bleacher area set aside for the general populous was very far from the podium. The special VIP section was set directly in front of where the President was to deliver his address.

Guiding Miriam to that section, I introduced myself to one of the security guards. He invited us to sit up front with Anchorage's civic leaders. Before I could pat myself on the back, he said, "Your wife and my wife attend the same class at the university. I'm sure my wife will be happy to know that Miriam got a good seat."

While the excited crowd waited, the Air Force Band played patriotic selections. I spotted many prominent, national television news anchormen and correspondents walking around through the press section, including Tom Brokaw and Harry Reasoner. Finally, Lieutenant General Hill introduced the President of the United States. Everyone rose and cheered for many minutes. The Secretary of State stood by the President's side, smiling and waving to the crowd. Throughout the President's fifteen-minute message, mostly concerned with environmental matters important to the 49th state, Sergeant Newcomb kept asking me in a whisper why Kissinger kept glancing at me. I'm sure he must have noticed my *kippah* and was probably wondering what a religious Jew was doing in Alaska. I looked at him as well, wondering how an individual steeped in Jewish religious tradition could stray so far from Torah and even marry a Gentile woman. (A year later, I received word that Secretary of State Kissinger would be stopping at the base on a Friday night on his way to China. I quickly sent a letter over to the base

command, inviting Kissinger to spend Shabbat with us. On Friday evening, I had a non-Jewish soldier deliver the letter to Kissinger's quarters. P.S. I still haven't received his response.)

Upon completion of his speech, President Ford walked along the first row of people and nodded happily while shaking my hand. The next day, I caught a great deal of ribbing from Chaplain Gabrielsen who said, "We all spotted a young man wearing a *kippah*, sitting directly in front of the President yesterday. We colonels had the dubious honor of sitting in the bleachers, while other people, especially one captain I know, got VIP treatment."

"Yes," I replied. "We had great front row seats. The President really likes rabbis."

Being the rabbi of Alaska had its advantages—but being Miriam's husband had more.

28

Quake!

At the end of December, the chaplains and their families hosted an evening at the Military Airlift Command Chalet, located in the wooded area of the base. The beauty of the snow-covered trees that overhung the road leading to the Chalet created an enchanting winter scene.

Fourteen inches of new snow fell the following day. In the outlying suburbs, wind conditions created twenty-five-foot drifts. A stillness fell over Elmendorf, as if the base had been cushioned with bales of cotton.

Suddenly, it happened. No warning. No preparation. Suddenly, we felt a rumbling vibration. Suddenly, as it says in the *Hallel*, "The mountains danced like rams, the hilltops like sheep." At five o'clock p.m. our entire home began shaking. For close to half-a-minute, Miriam and I stood under a doorframe, as we had been instructed to do during an earthquake. Then, thank G-d, the rumbling ceased as suddenly as it had begun. I had read that in addition to the physical damage caused by an earthquake, psychological terror and traumatic fears affect many people. I could understand why. One's sense of security vanishes when one's feet no longer feel firmly planted on earth. Suddenly, the ground is no longer solid, and you realize,

neither are you. Turning on the radio after the longest thirty seconds of our lives, we listened to encouraging reports that only minor damage had resulted from the quake measuring 5.3 on the Richter Scale.

Later, after the shock had passed, I called my insurance agent and applied for earthquake insurance. Watching our glass bookcases vibrate during the tremor was all the motivation I needed to secure a more comprehensive policy. Of course, to most of the "old timers," the quake was truly minor compared to the devastating earthquake of 1964. Actually, the Jewish community referred to it as the "Passover quake," because many Jewish families were left homeless for the holiday. People spent the *seder* with Jews whose homes had been spared. Talk about "*kol dichfin*"! You couldn't find more needy guests.

All that night the snow continued falling. Miriam left for New York the next day to help her sister, Debbie get ready for her upcoming marriage. The mercury plummeted to twenty below zero Fahrenheit, delaying her flight for fourteen hours. All during the week, the frigid weather brought record lows to the city—minus forty degree at night, and "highs" of twenty below at midday. Fairbanks reported in at minus fifty-five. Other villages in the state were hit as hard as seventy degrees below zero!

Before joining Miriam on the East Coast, I had several counseling appointments. Three individual couples were experiencing problems with their marriages. All were intermarried. Two of the women had been "converted" by a Reform rabbi, and all three couples had married under the auspices of the Reform "rabbinate." Ironically, whereas Jews throughout centuries of persecution and killing had fervently maintained their devotion to Torah, here in America, the land of freedom, the rate of assimilation was

staggeringly high. While I tried to help the people establish healthier channels of communication, I found the situation very distressing. After all, Judaism was the most important thing in my life. I couldn't help but wonder what would be in the future. Every decade, the rate of assimilation grew higher and higher. True, concerned groups like Chabad were working day and night to stem the tide, but according to the figures, thousands of Jews were still being lost.

My parents joined Miriam in welcoming me at Kennedy International Airport when I arrived for the wedding and the J.W.B. Chaplain's Conference. It was always "a breath of fresh air" to see the many observant Jews of New York. Sometimes in Alaska, I felt how an Eskimo must feel in Florida. But here, in New York, I felt like one of the guys. What a joy to go to a real kosher wedding! Standing alongside the *chuppah*, I lovingly watched Miriam as she walked down the aisle as the lovely maid of honor. It seemed like only yesterday that we were married ourselves.

Arriving home at Elmendorf at the end of January, we marveled once again at Alaska's ever-present beauty. The differences were so great between Brooklyn and Anchorage, it was hard to believe that they were both on the same planet. But if we thought that Anchorage was the end of the world, we were wrong. Patty Liebman was our houseguest for the first Shabbat we were back. Paul had been sent by the Air Force to the island of Shemya, known as the "Black Pearl of the Aleutians." He was the island's only physician, substituting for the regular doctor while he was on leave for three weeks.

Dr. Liebman called us after Shabbat from a time zone, which was even two hours earlier than ours. Describing

the isolation on the island, he suddenly ceased talking and said, "Oh my G-d...." Needless to say, when the phone went dead on his end, we were alarmed. What happened out there, we wondered? We listened to the radio and heard that a strong earthquake, measuring more than 7.0 on the Richter Scale, had jolted Shemya. All telephone communication had been cut off. An hour later, we were informed that the island's flight line had been severed in half by the quake. Reports said that no serious casualties had been reported. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, Paul put through a call, letting us know he was safe, thank G-d. He said the majority of people who arrived at the clinic were suffering from shock. Fortunately, no lives had been lost. He reconfirmed the damage suffered on the flight line and to a lot of facilities, but all military personnel and the residents of the island were safe.

"When I was talking to you before the room began shaking, the wall unit bookcase almost fell on my head," he explained. "We were lucky we didn't need to evacuate any wounded to Elmendorf, because with the shape the flight line is in, that would have been impossible."

By the next day, repairs on the island had begun. When Paul arrived back in Elmendorf, I was able to witness the devastation caused by the quake in the photographs Paul had taken. That made for two powerful earthquakes in the span of a month. Was the earth angry at something, we wondered? I couldn't help but think that maybe it was time to move on.

Much to our relief, life went on as usual. I was busy on the base, and Miriam was undoubtedly the most active Jewish woman in Alaska. During a social encounter, several chaplains and their wives viewed the film that was photographed at our wedding in 1972. So excited were they to

witness the highlights of a Jewish marriage that they immediately asked us to share the movie with the Protestant and Catholic Women's Chapel organizations.

Dozens of women attended the presentation. Viewing the lavish smorgasbord; the welcoming of the bride; the ceremony where the groom veils his bride; the emotional wedding ceremony under the *chuppah*; and the lively *Chasidic* and Israeli music and dancing of nearly four hundred wedding guests, provided the Protestant and Catholic ladies an insiders look at a "real Jewish wedding." Some of the women actually wept. Miriam received many letters of thanks from her audience. The reaction was so positive, it gave us the idea to use the film to interest young Jews in the traditions of Judaism. Miriam tried it out on some young women in their twenties and it worked! They didn't stop asking questions. So here we began by showing our wedding film to a group of non-Jewish people, and we ended up inspiring young Jews to explore their Jewish roots! The wonders of G-d never cease!

29

How Do You Say "Rabbi" in Yupik?

Every day of my Air Force service in Alaska had its stories and experiences. One particularly unforgettable story took place during *Sefirat haOmer*, April 1975. My friend, Dr. Quentin Fisher, called me one day from his home in Bethel, a town in western Alaska. He was very excited.

"*Mazal tov*!" he shouted with joy. "We had a boy!"

"*Mazal tov*!" I wished him with all my heart. After he told me that his wife, Gail, was feeling fine, I asked him where the *brit* would take place. The pause at the other end of the line told me that although the new father knew for the last nine months that there was a 50% chance that the issue would arise, he still hadn't made any plans.

Getting a *mohel* to Bethel would be no simple matter. First of all, there were no roads from Anchorage to this remote village; the Kuskokwim River was frozen and the Eskimos made their way by sleds, as in days of old. In short, the only way to get there was by air. I told Quentin not to worry; he should leave it to me; I would take care of everything.

I called the *mohel*, Rabbi Solomon Maimon, the head of the Sephardic community in Seattle. Thankfully, he agreed to the adventure. Why adventure? Because in order

to get to Bethel, he first has to reach Anchorage. From Anchorage there is only one flight a day to Bethel which returns that very night.

Operation Brit had commenced.

On the seventh day after the birth, Rabbi Maimon arrived at our home and slept over. The next day we went to the airport. The small plane to Bethel was already on the runway. We loaded all the food for the *Kiddush* which would take place after the *brit*—bundles carefully wrapped in packages and cans. Freezing the food wasn't a problem, as Mother Nature sufficiently took care of that! Miriam had worked the last few days preparing delicacies for the guests. After all, even if the child was born at the end of the world, there was no reason that his *brit* should be different than that of a child born in Brooklyn.

We buckled up in our seats in the plane of Alaska Airlines, said *tefilat haderech*, and after a flight of about an hour and a half of white scenery, we landed in Bethel. To our surprise, as we got off the ramp of the plane, we were met by a pack of local reporters and photographers. The TV cameras zoomed in on us. With all our paraphernalia, we must have looked like Israeli Paratroopers swooping down from out of the blue. Rabbi Maimon and I assumed that there was some local VIP on the flight—maybe even the governor—and out of curiosity we turned our heads back toward the plane to catch sight of him. But then, as we approached the reporters, we noticed that they were focusing on us! We were the local sensation.

It soon became clear that not every day, month, or century, do two rabbis reach Bethel.

To our increasing surprise, "parked" nearby was a sled with no fewer than 8 Alaskan Huskies attached to it. The only way to get to the local terminal was by sled. However,

before we could even climb into the contraption, questions were hurled at us in Yupik, one of the 11 languages of the Indians and Eskimos. Since our command of Bethel's official language was far from perfect, we suggested they ask whatever they want in English, but quickly please, because it was very cold outside. What were we planning to do to the baby, they asked?

Answering as succinctly as we could, we sat down in the sled. Our welcoming committee put thick blankets on us, gave a sign to the dogs, and off we sled to the terminal. And what a terminal—a shack a few meters long. We were greeted there also with great respect and honor. It became clear that the whole village knew of the arrival of two bearded rabbis for some religious ceremony in the house of the doctor. "Passport" inspection went quickly and within minutes we were on our way to Gail and Quentin's house. On the way we saw that Bethel was a city like any other city, just more frozen. The inhabitants actually lived in homes and not in igloos. Although people travel mainly in sleds, there are also many cars. And for those who like walking, there are special wooden paths for pedestrians raised above the sidewalk to prevent people from sinking in the deep snow.

All along the way to the Fisher residence, people clapped when they saw these two bearded fellows—Rabbi Maimon with his permanent beard and me with my *Sefirah* stubble. Bethel almost turned into its namesake, *Bet El*, during a wild Purim atmosphere. At that time there were about 5000 people living in this Eskimo village, most of whom made their living by fishing. We must have been an interesting catch!

We arrived at the home of Gail and Quentin and immediately began to arrange the Kiddush. Rabbi

Maimon went to check the baby and to prepare the materials for the *brit.* I was introduced to the mayor, who had come to the doctor's house to honor him in his *simcha.*

What a wonder! There was most certainly never a *minyan* in Bethel, until now!—Gail's father; Quentin's father; two Jewish lawyers; and two Jewish doctors who were on hand during the construction of the Alaskan gas pipeline; Quentin's brother; Quentin; Rabbi Maimon and myself—exactly ten. Who would miss a chance like this to pray *Shacharit* with a *minyan*? The non-Jewish guests—the city's respectables and the neighbors—were curious when they saw our *tefillin* and *talit.* After the prayers, we explained to them what they were. Rabbi Maimon gave everyone a quick lesson on *brit milah* and explained (not in Yupik) the meaning behind the mitzvah and its reasons. The baby was named Daniel. Following the *brit,* I put on a tape of Jewish music and everyone gathered around the table which was packed with gefilte fish, cake, sweets, wine, and a few bottles of hardy heart-warming schnapps. The fireplace in the room radiated its own pleasant warmth throughout the house. Uplifted by the celebration, everyone present joined in a rousing Eskimo dance.

The celebration was over but we still had some time before our flight back to Anchorage. We used the time to visit the local school, and upon returning to Gail and Quentin's home, we finished off the last of the leftovers. Exactly at 6 p.m. they turned on the English news on the local TV, and, lo and behold, what story opens the news? Two rabbis coming off the plane at Bethel Airport! The newscaster announced in a voice filled with great fanfare "For the first time ever, two rabbis came here to Bethel to perform a circumcision." As if we were astronauts returning from the moon, reporters flocked around us for an on

the scene interview right on the snowbound runway.

When we wanted to get ready for our return trip to the airport, our hosts told us to wait a little longer and watch the news at 6:15.

Why wait? "We have just seen the news!" we said, quite in wonder.

Gail said that on the 6:15 news there would be something special. Indeed it was. It turned out that this news broadcast was in Yupik, and we didn't understand a word. All of a sudden we saw the same news item about us, however, this time Rabbi Maimon and myself spoke perfect Yupik! I must admit that although it was dubbed, I was quite impressed with myself. I wanted to call my Rosh Yeshiva in New York and inform him that *I* was the only student he ever had who could explain the laws of *brit milah* in...Yupik!

30

Kibbutznik on Wheels

While the non-Jews in Bethel now knew what *brit*, *tefillin* and *Kiddush* were, I later encountered a young Jew who was tragically ignorant of his Jewish heritage. One summer Friday afternoon, I received a call from base security that a person had arrived who wanted to see me. I gave the OK, assuming it was another of the hundreds of tourists who had come to see me during my service at Elmendorf. Being the only rabbi in Alaska, I was inundated with visitors who wanted to get a taste of *Yiddishkeit* after their long travels on the road. Others sought a free place to sleep, which they gladly received, thanks to the ever-gracious hospitality of my wife. But this visitor topped them all.

A few minutes after the call from the guardhouse, I heard the roar of a heavy motorcycle. I looked out the window and caught a glimpse of an Israeli flag flapping in the wind at the back of a giant motorbike. That already raised the stock value of the driver. Off the cycle came a swaggering youth who headed straight for my office.

"Shalom Rabbi Haber," he said, striding boldly into the office. "My name is Chaim and I am a *kibbutznik* from Israel."

"Shalom Chaim," I answered happily. "Welcome. What

will you have to drink? Maybe you are hungry?"

Chaim spoke freely as if we had known each other for years. He said he was in the middle of a journey on his motorcycle from Argentina, South America, to Alaska! When he reached a city called Tok, he said, he had met a missionary who took interest in the Israeli flag.

"That missionary," Chaim said, "started talking to me and tried to convince me to become a Christian. As simple as that, just like in the books. A real missionary. He was very intelligent and his words became more and more convincing. The truth is, I had nothing to answer him. Any little piece of information I did have on Judaism, he immediately refuted."

"How can it be that you have no knowledge of Judaism?" I asked.

"Look," said Chaim, "I'm 24. I was born and raised on a *kibbutz* of *Hashomer Hatzair*. Judaism and *mitzvot* weren't relevant—not to me, nor to my friends. I served in the army in a combat unit like most of my buddies and went the route of a typical kibbutznik. I finished the army, returned to the kibbutz, and decided to go on this trip. I got all the equipment I needed, but I didn't know I would need information about dealing with a missionary. And even if I had been forewarned, I doubt if anyone on the kibbutz could have helped me."

"You know what, Chaim," I said to him. "It is almost Shabbat. Come stay with us. We'll spend the day together and afterwards you should have some good answers for the missionary. It will be a Shabbat like it's supposed to be, with *kiddush*, *tefillah*, and...."

"Excuse me," Chaim cut me off. "What is *Kiddush*?"

Only then, when I heard his question, did I realize the extent of his ignorance. I was appalled. A youth from Israel

who didn't know what *Kiddush* was?! Even the Reform Jews in Alaska knew that! Not only me, but also all the members of the community in Alaska, religious or not, were convinced beyond doubt that the Israelis knew much more about Judaism than they did.

On the way to shul, I explained to him the concept of *Kiddush*. Fortunately, no one noticed that this was the first *Kiddush* this Israeli had ever heard in his whole life.

After prayers, we returned home. The Shabbat was wonderful. Hidden fountains opened in the boy's heart as he was exposed to the special spirit of Shabbat. He was pleased and we were pleased with him. He felt so good that on *Motzei* Shabbat he asked if he could stay on with us a little longer in order to learn more about Judaism. Of course we said yes.

Chaim stayed with us for a month, in which time he became not only like a member of the household, but also learned the basics of Torah. Ironic as it may seem, he had to travel half way around the world to discover his roots. When the time came for him to return to Israel, he said to us very emotionally: "I am quite upset by the fact that in Israel I knew nothing about Judaism. I had to travel thousands of kilometers, all the way to Alaska to hear about my religion and about who I really am."

I was also amazed, but who am I to know the workings of the Almighty? Chaim zoomed off on his motorcycle, but the connection between us did not end there. Shortly after his return to Israel, we received a letter from him in which, besides thanking us for the hospitality, he wrote that his curiosity about religion and faith had not subsided. In another letter, he wrote that one day in the kibbutz lunch room, he heard unfamiliar music, coming from outside. He looked out the window and saw a strange

automobile with blaring speakers tied onto the roof. When he stepped outside to see what was going on, he realized it was a few *Chabadniks* who had come with their Mitzvah-tank, wanting to enter the kibbutz. The head of the kibbutz said no with a capital "N", but they did not give up. They stayed by the gate and played their songs just the same.

"Wait here," Chaim told them, "I'll get you in."

He ran to the head of the kibbutz and convinced him to allow the visitors to enter the gate. Within minutes, the members of the kibbutz were stunned to see the tank driving slowly through their community, with Chaim sitting calmly beside the driver.

A while later I received yet another letter, in which he wrote that he left the kibbutz and joined a Yeshiva for *baalei teshuva*.

And to think that all this began from a conversation with a missionary who had seen the Israeli flag on his motorcycle!

Another unique event from the land of infinite possibilities and from its northernmost state, came by way of symphonies and opera. A rabbi has to play many roles, but I never thought I would be called upon to be an advisor on opera, until one certain very musical day.

It was at the end of November 1975, when a senior professor from the University of Anchorage called me and said: "Rabbi Haber, we would be very happy if you would help us out with an operatic quandary."

"Excuse me"—I exclaimed—"Help you in what?"

"In an operatic quandary!" was the answer.

"Me?!"—I was still not sure I heard him correctly. "Don't tell me you are looking for a singer? Soprano? Tenor? Base?"

"No, no," laughed the professor. "We are preparing the opera '*Jeremiah*' which has a few verses in Hebrew—and besides you, no one in the area knows Hebrew."

I was relieved. An hour later, I found myself on the stage directing 70 musicians, actors and singers. To someone looking on from the side, and to myself, the scene was quite surreal, but life often has its surprises. Afterwards, they sent Miriam and me a pair of honorary tickets for the first performance and sat us next to the mayor of Anchorage.

In Alaska, Jewish history was made at a rapid pace. For example, in October 1975, when Mrs. Shechter was about to give birth, it was important to her that in the maternity ward she would eat only kosher food. Unfortunately, the staff there did not exactly know what was kosher, but they were willing to fulfill the request. Who would tend to this? Of course, the local rabbi. And so, in a quick operation, we received portions of kosher food from the Alaskan airlines, even *chalav Yisrael*, not only for Mrs. Shechter, but also for whoever else requested. For the first time in history, it was possible to receive kosher food in the maternity ward of an Alaskan hospital.

At this opportunity, I had to explain to the staff what kosher food was. Often, because of the low profile of Judaism in Alaska, I was called upon to explain the basic tenets of Judaism. There was a lot of curiosity on the topic. Thus, for example, in May 1976, I was invited to the largest high school in Anchorage—non-Jewish, of course—which had more than 1000 students, in order to say some inspiring words at their graduation. Beside me on stage sat Senator Ted Stevens. I took the opportunity to discuss the situation in Israel. History was made again, since this was the first time a rabbi had spoken at the school's graduation ceremony.

Apparently, the school board enjoyed my short speech, because a few months later, I was invited again, this time to speak about Judaism. I obliged willingly. I also agreed that writers from the American Air Force Magazine who wanted to hear me speak would attend. They were interested in seeing how a non-Jewish high school received a rabbi-chaplain.

As soon as I walked in, I realized that this was the first time that this audience was seeing a real-live rabbi. More than one commented openly that they were sure that there were no Jews in the United States. They figured that all Jews lived in Israel. It was my job to give them the real facts about Jews and Judaism. I started talking about the Jewish laws, and when they heard about the prohibition to eat meat with milk, they couldn't believe it. They had never heard such a thing before.

Upon hearing this, one of the students stood up and asked: "Wait a minute. I don't understand. If that's so, how can Jews eat cheeseburgers?"

"Observant Jews don't eat cheeseburgers," I replied calmly.

The student didn't understand: "What? You mean there are people that are willing to give up that pleasure?"

Then the topic of Shabbat came up. A very serious student got up and said: "You know, I always wondered how come we don't observe what it says in the Bible, to rest on the seventh day. It always bothered me that our day of rest is Sunday, and not Saturday, the way G-d rested."

After some more explanations about Jewish Law, some of the pupils asked to hear about the Holocaust. They were interested in hearing if my family, immediate or distant, had been through the Holocaust. The truth is that the discussion could have gone on for many hours, but time was

limited. At least, I was able to convince them that the unbelievably horrible massacre of the Jews did indeed occur, and that in itself was a substantial accomplishment.

When the lecture was over and everyone had left, I overheard one student say to another: "You know, I'm beginning to believe that it wasn't the Jews who killed Jesus."

"Why?"—asked his friend.

"If these people could refrain from eating meat and milk together, from driving on the Sabbath, and even lighting a light the whole day—if they observe such small things so meticulously—they certainly wouldn't kill someone like Jesus for nothing! And after what the rabbi told us about the Holocaust, it's clear to me that the opposite is true. The Christian world helped slaughter Jews and not the other way around."

When I heard that, I reached the conclusion that I had done my day's quota.

By the way, the article in the Air Force Magazine was very complimentary. Even some Jewish papers copied it for their readers to enjoy.

Maybe here is the place to mention that a little while before this, at the end of 1975, Miriam's parents stayed with us for the whole summer. My father-in-law, Zalman Tuvia Schwimmer, a Holocaust survivor, was also recruited to Jewish teaching activity. He spoke twice at the base: once before the Jewish soldiers, and once before the non-Jewish officers. Both times the topic was the same—the Holocaust.

I should mention another instance on the base which started as a lecture on the Holocaust and went well beyond that. It was in spring 1976. I invited Rabbi Radzick to Alaska once again to give a seminar to the Jews on the

Holocaust. He came and stayed with us. Very late Friday night—the sun hadn't set yet—we got ready for sleep.

All of a sudden, in the middle of the night, I heard the phone ring. Naturally I didn't answer, and the bothersome ringing ceased after a while. In the morning, well before the time for *Shacharit*, I went downstairs and found Rabbi Radzick ready and dressed in his Shabbat clothes.

"Good Shabbat, good morning," I greeted him happily. "Nu, let's go to shul?"

"Wait a minute. Sit down," he said.

"Something the matter?!"—I asked surprised and curious.

"Sit."

I sat on the couch and heard one of the strangest stories that ever happened on the base.

"Do you remember, last night, when we went to sleep?" he asked. "The sun was still over the horizon. I couldn't fall asleep so I decided to go out for a walk. This walk turned into a not too-pleasant-experience..."

It turned out that in the midnight sunlight, Rabbi Radzick saw the runway near our house and his curiosity led his feet there. All of a sudden, as he approached the runway, his stunned eyes saw a gigantic C-5 Galaxy, the largest plane in the world. There were no barriers in his way, no guards, so he walked right up to the belly of the plane. Radzick was very impressed by the unbelievably massive aircraft, and after a satisfying look, decided to return to our house. Maybe he was tired enough now to fall asleep.

But there was something else planned for him. He just began to step out from under the plane when suddenly he was blinded by rays of light. Giant projectors were directed at him and jeeps filled with soldiers sped his way. Rabbi

Radzick stood terrified as he watched a soldier finger the trigger of his rifle, and take careful aim at him. Still wondering what he had gotten himself into, he heard a commanding voice call out on a loudspeaker: "Don't move!"

Radzick called out in panic: "Don't shoot!"

A sergeant called out to him: "What the heck are you doing here?"

"I'm a guest!" said Radzick. "I am an American citizen!"

"How did you get to the runway?"—called the threatening voice.

"I went for a walk," Radzick answered, "I just took a walk, that's all!"

"Fine," the sergeant said. "We'll see what you're doing here."

The jeep came closer and the sergeant ordered him to get in. He intended to take the midnight trespasser to security in order to check out his story. But things are never so simple for an Orthodox Jew. Rabbi Radzick was not among those who travel on Shabbat. He answered the sergeant, "I am sorry, but I am not getting into the jeep."

"You are not getting into what?" the sergeant said forebodingly.

"I am not getting into the jeep," Radzick said decidedly.

"What does that mean you are not getting in?" the sergeant asked. "I order you to get in!"

"I am a religious Jew and do not travel on Shabbat, therefore I am not getting into the jeep—it's Friday night!"

The sergeant scratched his forehead. That was all he needed, a religious conflict. He asked Radzick: "You said you were a guest here, right? Can I ask, a guest of whom?"

"A guest of Chaplain Haber."

"Fine, we'll check that out immediately."

"How do you plan to check it out?"

"There is an invention called the telephone."

"I know, but he will never answer it on Shabbat—it's Friday night!"

"We'll see about that."

The sergeant called, and that was the ringing we heard and didn't answer. We had no idea what predicament our guest was in at that moment. When the sergeant gave up on the phone, he asked: "Who else knows you here?"

"Maybe the chaplain's boss. I think he knows me."

The sergeant immediately called Gabrielsen.

When Radzick told me this, I couldn't believe it. "You want to tell me the sergeant called Gabrielsen at 2:30 in the morning?!"

"Yes," answered Radzick, "and not only did he wake him, but Gabrielsen came down immediately wearing pajamas and slippers."

"No," I cried, holding my head. "In pajamas!"

"And slippers," added Radzick quietly.

Gabrielsen arrived, looked at the runway trespasser, recognized him and said: "Yes, I know him. He is the guest of Rabbi Haber. It's OK."

Gabrielsen got Radzick out of the unpleasant situation, and our guest hurried back to the house. If before this event he couldn't fall asleep, now he certainly could not. So, it wasn't surprising that I found him dressed and waiting when I came downstairs that Shabbat morning.

"Avraham!" I exclaimed. "I can't believe it—we all said 'Good Shabbos' last night and instead of going to sleep you went and woke up the entire air force base!"

"I'll probably be court-marshalled" I thought. "Lets go to shul," I said, burying my face in my hands. As we came near, who was waiting for me by the door if not Gabrielsen!

"Tell me," Colonel Gabrielsen said without any greeting, "why do your guests walk around here at midnight? If they have trouble sleeping, maybe you could tell them some nice bedtime story!"

I apologized, explained, stuttered, and who knows what else, just so that Gabrielsen should leave me alone. He good-naturedly dropped the whole thing, but an inquiry commission was set up to investigate. The commission's conclusions brought about a change in the security procedures surrounding the runway so a thing like this should never occur again. The truth is, those responsible for security were shocked to see how easy it was for a citizen to get within reach of one of the biggest and most expensive pieces of military aircraft in the world.

31

Crash Landing

Alaska is not only lectures on Judaism and strange midnight mishaps. It is also a place of natural wonders. And so, on a February night in 1976, our neighbors woke us up and called us to immediately come outside. We didn't know what all the alarm was about, but if the neighbors were so excited, we figured it must be important. A few hours before, a powerful snowstorm had hit, leaving 75 cm. on the ground. We hurried outside, looked up at the heavens and saw the breathtaking sight of the *aurora borealis*—the fairytale-like northern lights.

It was one of the most unbelievable sights I had ever seen. When I was young, I read about the aurora borealis, and once I even saw it in a film. But until you experience it for yourself, you cannot imagine how marvelous, spectacular and wonderful it really is. "How great are Your creations, O G-d!"

What is the aurora borealis, you wonder? Many colored lights, shining the whole width of the night sky like giant arches, which seem to be constantly in motion. Sometimes the light rays spread upward like a fan, and they are like the rays of giant beacons searching the northern sky, or like rays going up and down, called the "joyful dancers." At other times the aurora borealis seems like an enormous

curtain hanging above the horizon, and colored flames go up and down on its giant folds, moving like a curtain in the wind.

The source of these "northern lights," whose scientific name is "aurora" (meaning "shining light" or "dawn"), was for many years an unexplained phenomenon. Ancient cultures formulated many myths about these mysterious, colorful lights, and connected them with battles between the gods. That was the easy way out, but not so serious. More intelligent was the thought that the aurora borealis was actually the sun's light reflecting from the snow and ice of the far north. That was already an attempt at a scientific explanation, but was not quite *the* explanation.

According to scientists, the true source of the northern lights is stormy eruptions on the sun's surface. These storms are the cause of the sunspots we see. A flow of tiny electric particles emanates from these spots, and when these particles reach the upper atmosphere of Earth, they interact with various gases, creating the colors of the aurora.

We experienced northern lights of a different kind completely a month later, at Purim. This time, I decided to enlist Rabbi Grossbaum, the *mikvah* engineer, to come for two reasons. One, to check and see if the *mikvah* was OK, and that no *halachic* problems had arisen; and two, in order to read *Megillat Esther* for the Jewish soldiers. Since the soldiers were in bases far apart, I had a helicopter take him from place to place. He used the opportunity to find Jews who did not put on *tefillin*, and invited them to experience this very special *mitzvah*.

Remote places, I later found out, were not unique to Alaska, but could be found in other more central locations. After an emotional send-off by our many friends

and acquaintances in August 1976, I began serving on an Air Force base in Northern California. I was, as usual, the only Jewish chaplain, and part of my function was to visit the Azores Islands. These islands belong to Portugal and are in the middle of the Atlantic—10,000 km from California. What brought me there? Jews, what else? Is there any place in the world without Jews?

I had a special place in my heart for these islands, because during the Yom Kippur War, the giant Galaxy transport planes landed there to refuel on their way to airlift ammunition to Israel. These islands, which are like a little paradise, are inhabited by the Americans serving there and the local Portuguese-speaking population.

During the three days I spent on the Azores Islands, I met seven Jewish men and one Jewish female soldier who was very interested in lighting Shabbat candles. We prayed together and spoke about Jewish topics. We also discussed issues affecting Israel, deliberated over them, offered solutions, and above all, we experienced a great feeling of camaraderie. At the end of the short visit, they expressed their deep gratitude to me that a chaplain bothered to come to such a remote place to be with them.

I also met with non-Jewish soldiers, and the night before I left, I lectured to 200 soldiers about the Jews in Portugal's history. The next day I decided to visit the local Jewish cemetery. After a little searching, I found an old woman that had the key to the cemetery gate. She was happy to give it to me, and I entered, quite emotionally, assuming I was the only Jew to visit this place in years. I walked around, read the names, and said a quiet prayer for the souls of those buried there.

I returned to the routine activities at my California base. Routine is not the right word, since routine is

beyond me, maybe due to my character, but certainly due to the job. Although both Miriam and myself were saddened to leave our home in Anchorage and the many good friends we had made there, we both felt that we had contributed as much as we could to furthering a love and respect for Judaism in the region. The idea of returning to "civilization" appealed to both of us. After the wilderness of Alaska, California was a welcome change, though it too had its share of extraordinary occurrences.

For example, in April 1978, shortly after Pesach, a Jewish officer in the control tower called me on the phone. A few days earlier I had told him that if he ever hears of any Air Force planes flying to Israel, he should notify me. Who knows, maybe I'd hitch a ride with them, since Command required that every chaplain fly at least twice a year. After all, a member of the Air Force, whether a chaplain or an administrator, must know what a plane looks like, even if he himself can't fly one.

"Rabbi Haber," the officer in the tower said. "An air convoy of Galaxy C-5's and C-141's is leaving in twenty-four hours to the Middle East to bring equipment to the UN forces in the area, and they are making a stop in Israel."

I decided that this is my chance. The will was there, but there was one problem. The advance warning was too short and there was so much to do. Within a few hours, I had to get all the vaccinations required of anyone who traveled out of the US to that area, and I had to get a flight-crew suit that would fit me. This whole procedure usually takes a week. Could I manage to squeeze it into a few hours? I began the race against the clock.

I had a lot of luck. First of all, almost all the medical staff was Jewish, and what wouldn't a Jew do for his rabbi?

Therefore, the problem of the inoculations was quickly dispatched. The tailor on the base, of course, was also Jewish. He knew me from my speeches in the shul. All he had to do was determine my shoulder and leg measurements. He did so at the speed of sound—the sound of my voice, that is, which was requesting he fit the suit on the spot.

Meanwhile, I called Miriam and notified her that I was flying to Israel in a few hours. She wasn't too surprised, since many times life had brought us unexpected developments like these. Miriam, who was no longer just a wife but also a mother, rushed to the canteen to get that necessity which was, at that time, unavailable in Israel—"Pampers."

Why Pampers? Because we had decided to move to Israel, and we wanted to be sure that our baby, Meir Moshe, had the very best diapers available. After many long discussions, we had both come to the conclusion that the greatest way we could help rebuild the Jewish nation was by living in Eretz Yisrael where the Jewish people were regathering after an exile of nearly 2000 years.

And so, twenty-four hours later, dressed in air-crew garb and carrying giant packages of Pampers, I got on to the Galaxy. I took my place between the pilot and co-pilot. The plane, loaded with hundreds of tons of military equipment and my far more important Pampers, made its way down the runway, raised its nose and lifted off. The route did not take us directly to Israel. First, we landed at an Air Force base in New Jersey, where we had a ten hour stop over. I took advantage of the stop to visit my parents and Miriam's parents, and even managed to get some sleep before I returned to the base.

I had flown many times in my life, but not in this type

of aircraft. The Galaxy was not meant for pleasure trips but was simply a husky workhorse whose acoustics could hardly be compared to London's Albert Hall. In other words, the tremendous noise tears the eardrums. That is why the aircrew—including me this time—spoke to each other through the internal communication system. Earplugs kept out the heavy noise while we spoke to each other with tiny microphones. We were to fly to Torrejon Air Base near Madrid, Spain, before continuing on to Tel Aviv.

After a few hours of flight over the Atlantic, I became tired and searched for a place to rest my head. Indeed, every member of the crew has a bed in a certain part of the plane, but it was too noisy for me. Therefore I went down to the storage compartment which was full of new trucks for the UN. Then it occurred to me: I opened the door of one of the trucks, entered, and closed the door behind me, cutting off the noise. I spread out on the wide seat and fell asleep like a baby, thus becoming the first Jew in history to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a truck.

A few hours later, rejuvenated from the sleep, I returned to my place in the cockpit. Suddenly, as we were coming down for landing, I became frightened upon hearing the navigator's announcement: "I have a problem with the instruments. I don't know where the heck we are."

"Now you tell me?" the pilot responded in an amazingly calm voice. "In the middle of our descent?"

"What can I do, the limbo has just gone," the navigator answered.

The co-pilot's voice was filled with trepidation. "What do we do? Elevate?"

"We continue with the landing," the pilot stoically responded. "Que sera sera."

"You're taking a tremendous risk," the co-pilot warned.

"Who is in charge here?" the pilot barked.

I looked from one to the other. To my way of thinking, it was time to say Shema Yisrael, instead of wasting time arguing.

"You're in charge, sir," the co-pilot affirmed.

"So just sit still, and do what I tell you. Is that clear?" the pilot answered, securing command.

"Yes, sir."

"You see the runway?"

"No, I don't see anything. It's all in a haze."

"We'll go for a blind landing."

"Isn't there any other choice?" I ventured.

The pilot turned to me: "Rabbi Haber, do you see anything? Can you make out the runway?"

"If you both can't see, how can I? Maybe it's better to fly around and land when conditions improve?" I suggested.

"Red light went off by the altimeter!" the navigator called out in alarm.

"That's all we need now."

"How does the rolly read?"

"Yellow! Yellow!"

"I don't believe it!" the pilot cried out.

"Also the napoli is going crazy." the navigator exclaimed.

I was sweating. Plus, I didn't know what they were talking about. Whoever heard of a napoli or a rolly?

The pilot turned my way. "Okay, chaplain, this is what you get paid for. The time has come for you to use your influence up above."

"What?!" I was petrified. "Is the situation that bad?!"

The crew stared at my pale face. Then, as if with some agreed-upon signal, they broke into laughter. At that

moment we saw the lights of the runway. No fog and no limbo, no rolly, and no napoli—terms they had made up on the spot. The joke was on me. Then I remembered that aircrews teased the inexperienced chaplains that flew with them, but I never thought it would happen to me.

The expression I flashed at them was clear as the runway below. I wanted to kill them.

"OK," said the pilot. "Tonight the beer is on the rabbi."

The landing in Madrid was smooth. We stayed that night at an Air Force base, and the next morning took off for Ben Gurion Airport. The landing this time took place without any tricks by the crew. When the doors opened, an Israeli liaison officer awaited us—customary at USAF plane landings in Israel. He was quite surprised to see a captain in the Air Force with a *kippah* on his head. He stared for a while and could not restrain himself any longer: "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the Air Force rabbi chaplain," I answered in Hebrew, "and I want to know if you can help me."

"Help you," responded the office. "*Ain bayah.* What would you like?"

"Listen," I said. "I only have seven hours here, and then we take off for Spain."

The agreement between the Americans and Israelis was that no American soldier could stay overnight in Israel, so that the Arabs wouldn't say that the US had its soldiers stationed there.

"I have to get to my grandparents, Dov and Malka Meller, who live on Rav Kook Street in Bnei Brak. How do I get there?"

The officer looked at me with a perplexed expression. Off of the Galaxy steps a uniformed officer with a *kippah* and packages of Pampers whose only request was to get to

his grandparents in Bnei Brak.

He promised to help and he did. I quickly passed customs and called my grandmother. I told her I would be by her in 20 minutes. She thought she was dreaming. Meanwhile, I got into the army car the officer secured for me. When I arrived in Bnei Brak and walked towards my grandmother's house, people stared at the strange phenomenon: an American Air Force pilot's uniform topped by a *kippah*. In short, they were sure I was some sort of UFO that had come to visit from another planet. Or else Purim had come early that year. My grandmother, however, recognized me and was happy to host me for a few hours, and to store the Pampers for a few months until I could bring my family home to the Promised Land.

Seven hours later, I was once again aboard the Galaxy on the way back to the western coast of America, via Spain and the North Pole. Above the North Pole, I again felt at home. After all, I was an alumnus of Alaska.

32

Spanish Encounter

A few days after returning to my base in California, during *chol hamoed* Pesach, I again received a call from the officer in the tower. What, another surprise flight to Israel? No. This time it was something totally different.

"Rabbi," he said, "In one hour, a Hercules of the Israeli Air Force is going to land here!"

I thanked him for the information and immediately enlisted the Jewish community. They packed boxes of matzot, gefilte fish and other kosher-for-Pesach goodies for the boys from Israel. When the plane landed we were already on the runway waiting for them.

The pilot came up to us and I said to him: "In the name of the chaplain and in the name of the Jewish soldiers and civilians on the base, I wish to greet you and present you with kosher-for-Pesach food packages."

The Israeli pilot gave me a look and said: "Leave us alone with all that kosher-for-Pesach stuff. We just want to get to San Francisco as soon as possible to have some fun. How do we get there?"

I was quite shocked with his reaction, but I didn't say a word. From the corner of my eye, I saw that the other younger members of the crew didn't know where to hide

themselves. They were clearly embarrassed with his behavior. But they couldn't protest. After all, he was the pilot.

I asked the others if they were interested in staying with us or to go on to San Francisco?

"The truth is that most of us are traditional Jews," they answered. "On the way, we were worried about how we would find kosher food for Pesach. Now that the problem is solved, why should we go to San Francisco? We prefer to be your guests for the holiday."

That night at the Friday night prayers, I told all those attending, soldiers and civilians, that we had with us important visitors from the Israeli Air Force. Everyone warmly accepted them with love and respect. After the prayers, when we got home, they saw the picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on my wall.

"Interesting," one of the youths said, "We get to all sorts of places all over the world—and everywhere we go, the Lubavitcher Rebbe gets there before us!"

The Israelis stayed with us only a short time because they had to continue on their way. But before they left, the officers who went to San Francisco returned looking sad. Why? The places they wanted to go to were closed due to some American holiday. They also saw the emotional good-byes of their crewmembers who had stayed with us, and they understood that it would have been better to have spent the holiday with our family.

This was indeed verified several years later, in 1981, when I was already living in Tiberias. Even though I had already been an Israeli citizen for three years, I received a telegram from the US Air Force requesting I fly to Spain. They wanted me to organize the High Holy Days services at the large American base near Madrid in the framework of my reserve duty. Always happy to bring American Jews

closer to *Yiddishkeit*, I answered affirmatively.

In those days, there were no diplomatic ties between Israel and Spain, and also no direct flights between the two countries. I therefore flew to Rome and from there to Madrid, on Iberian Airlines. It was a most interesting flight. I must have looked strange to the passengers sitting on my left and right—here I was with a baseball cap on my head. Not exactly flight dress.

The man on my left started talking to me and said that from my clothes he gathered that I was an American. When I affirmed his astute observation, he told me that his mother lived in Spain and that he was traveling from Khomeini's Iran.

"How is the situation there?" I asked.

He looked to the left and to the right, as if searching for hidden spies, and said: "The situation is very serious. Very serious."

"If that's the case," I suggested, "why don't you stay in Europe? Or fly to America? Why go back to Iran?"

"My wife and kids are there. They won't let them leave. If I don't go back to Iran, I don't want to even think what would happen to them."

During the flight, the conversation became more open. When I told him that I was Jewish, he said, "I have Jewish neighbors, but lately I haven't seen them. They simply disappeared. There are rumors that the Iranians executed them."

At that point, I asked no further questions. I took the opportunity to turn to my neighbor on the right. He was wearing an exquisite and finely tailored suit, a gold watch and rings on his fingers. All this testified that sitting next to me was a very wealthy fellow. It was clear from the look on his face that he wanted to end his silence and share a few words.

"Are you an American?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said, "and you?"

"I am from Saudi Arabia," he answered. "Or more exactly, from Jeddah."

Even though I had never spoken to a Saudi Arabian, it was easy to understand that all that gold hanging on him had come from petrodollars. He continued speaking to me because he had no idea that I was Jewish, or especially an Israeli—a double tragedy by his standards. He was telling me about the wonders of the new airport in Saudi Arabia when the stewardess came up to me and said: "Rabbi Haber, may I begin serving you the kosher meal you ordered from Tel Aviv?"

I noticed how my friendly neighbor turned pale. That's all he needed. A Jew, an Israeli, and a rabbi to boot sitting next to him. His response was forthcoming. From that moment until we landed in Madrid, he hid his face in a newspaper and didn't utter another word.

From the airport, I took a bus to the Torrejon Air Force Base, where I was received by a squad of representatives. They informed me that all the kosher food I had ordered for the Jewish soldiers for the endurance of the holidays had arrived. I must admit, it was a nice feeling being a chaplain again in the USAF after three years of being just another rabbi in Israel.

A day after I arrived, the day before Rosh Hashanah 5742, I met in Madrid with the Chabad emissary, Rabbi Yitzchak Goldstein. He was visibly proud to show me the new Chabad house, which had just recently opened. In addition to the soldiers on the base, Jewish diplomats serving in foreign embassies in Madrid also participated in the Rosh Hashanah services.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, I traveled to

Toledo, visited the old Jewish Quarter, and walked in the footsteps of the Jews of the Golden Age of Spain. This place, whose air I was breathing and whose sights I was seeing, was where Jews prospered but then suffered, were tortured and killed during the Inquisition, all because of their religion and belief. How lucky I was that I lived in Israel. Ironically, centuries after the Inquisition, Israel was a more powerful country than Spain. I don't think that the Jews who were exiled from Spain could have even dreamt of that.

Afterwards, as these philosophical thoughts still occupied my mind, I went to the observation point on the mountain opposite Toledo and took in the breathtaking view. Suddenly a bus of tourists passed. By the noise and commotion I understood immediately that they were Americans. The bus stopped to give the tourists a chance to look at the scenery from their window, and some of them, without knowing if I spoke English, and without any idea who I was, asked me from the window: "Excuse me, maybe, by chance, do you know where we can pray the *Kol Nidrei* prayers in Madrid?"

To their great surprise, I answered, "By chance I happen to know exactly where and when the Yom Kippur prayers are being held, since I am the rabbi who is organizing the prayers for the US Air Force."

It soon became clear that all the passengers on the bus were Jewish and they all came to the Yom Kippur prayers.

33

"The Rebbe, The Rebbe, The Rebbe"

I served in Alaska for three years. Three years full of experiences and stories. However there is one day I shall never forget, which occured at the end of summer '76—just several weeks before completing my service at Elmendorf and moving to Travis Air Base in Northern California.

I was sitting in my office when all of a sudden there was a light knock on the door. Before I managed to answer, the phone rang. In the doorway stood two young *Chabadnikim*, which in Alaska was not so usual.

I was amazed. I didn't know who they were. No one had told me that two *Chabadnikim* were coming to Alaska. Usually, even the most secular Jew notified me from thousands of kilometers away that he was coming, a week or two before he arrived. Or, at least, they notified me from the gate of the base that someone wished to see me. This time, even from the gate no notification was forthcoming. What was going on here?

As I looked at them in amazment, the phone on my desk rang. I begged their pardon and answered the phone, still standing. It was Miriam. As I looked at them in amazement I heard Miriam's voice on the phone, "Yisrael," she said, "I think we'll be having a guest for Pesach!"

"For Pesach?"—I was in wonder—"Now you are planning for Pesach? We didn't start yet with the guests for Rosh Hashanah and you're already talking about Pesach? Did your parents tell you they are coming for Pesach?"

Miriam was quiet.

"Miriam?" I asked.

"Yisrael," my wife said quietly, "the guest I am referring to is... a baby. Our baby! With G-d's help, we are going to have a child!"

I was shocked. I fell back into my chair. I couldn't talk. My throat was choked with emotion, my eyes with tears. Digesting her words, I started crying. Crying out of joy, without inhibitions. It was what we had been waiting to hear for almost four years! And as I listened to the good news, I was looking at two emissaries of the Rebbe—realizing that not only does the Rebbe give a *brachah*, he actually sends his *Shluchim* at the time of its fruition! And now, these boys, having traveled for three weeks, finally meet me, and see this uniformed officer wearing a *kippah* look at them—and begin crying.

The two angelic harbingers of the good tidings, *Michael and Gavriel*, who stood by and watched all this, were Rabbis Lipa Brennan and Nechemia Kessler, my dear friends throughout the years, until this very day. One of them approached quietly and offered me a cup of water to calm me. Their *mazel tovs* fortified me. After pulling myself back together, I asked them to come with me to the shul to pray the *Minchah* service together and celebrate the good news. We didn't have a *minyan*, but we prayed with much emotion.

I have to admit that if Martians had landed in front of me when Miriam called and gave me the news, I would have been less stunned than I had been by the timing of

the *Chabadnikim*. Seeing them, I flashed back to the night I had met the Rebbe. Miriam's announcement was the fulfillment of the blessing of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, assuring us that we would have children.

Actually, my connection with the Rebbe began long before. As I mentioned, when the Rebbe heard about the construction of the *mikvah*, he sent me a letter in which he wrote: "It is significant in this case that the one who merited the great *zechut* of establishing the *mikvah* is a person in military service. For, military service, by definition and practice, very aptly illustrates the basic principle of commitment to Torah and *mitzvot*, namely, *naaseh* ("we will do", and then) *v'nishma* ("we will understand")."

That was the first connection. Several months later, in December 1974, Miriam and I traveled to New York. In a conversation with Rabbi Grossbaum, the engineer of the *mikvah*, prior to that trip, I told him we were planning to come to the city.

"If so," Rabbi Grossbaum said, "you have to come for a *yechidut* (private audience) with the Rebbe!"

I knew what the term meant, but I never dreamt that I would ever have a private conversation with the Rebbe. I had never met the Rebbe, and outside of the many interesting things I had learned from Rabbi Grossbaum about Chabad, I wasn't quite sure what to do when I would get to 770, the Rebbe's headquarters.

After my acquaintance with Rabbi Grossbaum, and after the Rebbe's letter about the *mikvah*, I was very excited about the *yechidut*. And there was another reason. Miriam and I still had no children after four years. We had heard that many couples had had children after receiving a blessing from the Rebbe.

Late one night, one month later, past 11 p.m., we drove

up to 770 Eastern Parkway at the exact time we were instructed to be there. One of the Rebbe's secretaries, who knew in advance about our visit, pulled us from the end of the line and put us up front. Due to the special atmosphere surrounding the famous brick house, we started to get excited. I must emphasize, this was the excitement of a *Chasid* about to visit his Rebbe, an excitement I had never known before.

Suddenly, standing in the building, Rabbi Groner, the Rebbe's personal secretary greeted us, "*Shalom Aleichem* Rabbi and Mrs. Haber from Alaska. When the people come out, you're next."

I asked about the room in front of us. "Who's in there? Who's room is that?"

He answered, "The Rebbe's room, of course."

"What?!" We were about to go in to see the Rebbe! What does one do? How does one act? What does one say? Where were my Chabad friends to greet me as I stepped out of the car outside—to instruct me? I went into a total freeze! Panic!

Just then I realized that with us on line was Reb Leibel Bistritzky. I had first met him when I was in yeshiva high school, on New York's Lower East Side, when I used to go to his kosher store for dairy products and cake at every recess. Now, as we were waiting on line, I asked him to help me. "I'm nervous. What do I do inside? Help!"

Reb Leibel answered in a voice that only all of Greater Crown Heights could hear. He laughed, "Tell me Haber, you had to go all the way to Alaska to finally come in to 770! Sure—they built you a *mikvah*—so now you're here.

"Will you listen to my advice if I give it to you?"

I said, "Yes, yes, please!"

He told us what to do and what not to do. "But the

most important thing," he said, "is not to leave the room until you hear the blessing for children come from the Rebbe's lips."

Now I was trembling even more. "Yisrael, take hold of yourself, calm down," I thought to myself, "after all you're the...*Chief Rabbi of Alaska*!"

The door opened and we were directed inside. The first thing that impressed me was the almost ascetic simplicity of the office. This was the office of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who had an army of *Chasidim* all over the world? At the far end of the room sat the Rebbe behind a table. His look was unforgettable—a countenance which radiated an incredible holiness, commanding unquestioning honor and respect. I shook his outstretched hand, which I was later told was the wrong thing to do. I didn't know it then, but it was not customary for the *Chasidim* to take the Rebbe's hand. He held it out more as a gesture of acknowledgment and *shalom*. At that moment I didn't feel my legs, it was as if I were hovering in the air. I had grown up in a religious home, but mysticism wasn't a part of my upbringing. Yet here I was, Yisrael Haber, standing opposite the Rebbe, feeling the radiance of his face as if the glow was flowing from Sinai directly through him to me. Later Miriam told me that she had experienced the same feeling. Exactly.

The Rebbe began speaking to her, asking about her "morale" in Alaska—and if there was anything the Rebbe could do to help her personally he wanted to be called upon. Apparently, this was due to the fact that Alaska had a *mikvah* in her merit. The Rebbe asked her if she were willing to take upon herself the mission of bringing all the older women to the *mikvah* so the grandchildren would have a ritually pure grandmother. She agreed on the spot,

and I wondered how she consented? Though we had made the *mikvah* as feminine and decorative as possible, could it attract vast crowds? The Jewish women of Alaska were as far away from a *mikvah* as Anchorage was from New York. Without asking her what her occupation was, the Rebbe outlined a detailed education program for special children. I stood there wondering how the Rebbe knew that her field was special education, and how he knew exactly about her work. This was a subject the Rebbe seemed familiar with even its most intricate aspects.

The Rebbe told us to do everything possible for the education of the children and youth of Alaska—introducing them to the Hebrew alphabet, prayer book, and laws of Shabbat and *kashrut*. I stood listening, totally tense. In addition, the Rebbe suggested that I begin monthly visitations to all correctional facilities in the state, to inquire if Jewish inmates needed the direction and assistance that only a rabbi could offer. The Rebbe hadn't said a word yet about giving us a blessing for children. Could it be that we would walk out of the Rebbe's office without receiving one? I wanted to ask for one, but I was too nervous to speak. Since Rabbi Bistritzky told us not to leave until the Rebbe himself instructed us to do so, we stayed and waited.

Just as I summoned the nerve, the Rebbe smiled and blessed us. "You should have boys who become Torah scholars." We had heard it. "Boys, children"—from the Rebbe's mouth. The Rebbe's smile as he blessed us was "total." Looking at the Rebbe's face, it was as if I was looking upon the sun in the middle of a mid-winter's night.

The Rebbe requested that we stay in touch and with that the *yechidut* came to an end. Upon leaving the room, we were greeted by amazed expressions since a private visit

of twenty-seven minutes was quite unusual. Immediately, a crowd gathered around us, wanting to know what the Rebbe had said.

We were both emotionally high as we left the room—but brought down to earth somewhat soon after. A large group of Lubavitcher rabbinical students looked at me as we came out of the room. One called out, "Eh, he's no big deal," and they all walked away. I asked the Rebbe's secretary if that was directed towards me. He answered to the positive. I exclaimed, "But I don't even know anybody here." He explained, "You see Yisrael, when you were in *yechidut* the news spread in the study hall that the Rabbi from Alaska—for whom the *mikvah* was built—was in *yechidut*. The boys took a ten-minute recess to see you. You see they thought that you were an... Eskimo! When you came out and looked the way you do—like them—they said you were no big deal!

Emotionally charged, we traveled to my parents in Monsey. It still wasn't clear to us—at least not as much as it is today—that "the *tzaddik* decrees and G-d fulfills." When half a year passed I told people who knew the Rebbe that I was worried. They calmed me down, saying, "What are you worried about? If the Rebbe blessed you that you will have children, you will have children!"

And then these *Chabadniks* showed up at the base the very moment that Miriam phoned with the news of her pregnancy! We wrote to the Rebbe, of course, telling him about the recent development, and we received a response signed by him personally, "In response to your message concerning your wife's condition, may G-d grant that all shall go well with the pregnancy and that a healthy child shall be born. With respect and blessing for success in spreading Torah."

We received an additional letter from the Rebbe several months later, addressed to "Rabbi Yisrael Haber and his wife," concerning issues relating to the month of Elul. At the end of Shevat, we received yet another letter for a healthy birth.

In the beginning of the eighth month of Miriam's pregnancy, one Shabbat, Miriam felt something was wrong. She was rushed to the air force hospital. Though it was a big hospital, I met no other Jews. The doctors checked Miriam immediately, and the monitor showed what is called "fetal distress," which meant for us that the baby was in discomfort.

Doctors rushed in and out of her room for several hours. Finally, one approached me.

"Rabbi Haber, there seems to be no choice, your wife will have to undergo surgery."

Surgery! That's all we needed! But what could we do? The doctors knew more about delivering babies than I did. Then I remembered the Rebbe's blessing. He had blessed us with a healthy baby and safe birth! Yet here they were talking about an operation.

The doctors requested that I sign a paper authorizing them to perform emergency surgery. After speaking with Miriam, I asked that they allow us time for consultation. As soon as Shabbat was over, she insisted that I call the office of the Rebbe. The secretary of the Rebbe answered the phone. I identified myself and said the matter was urgent.

"Everything is urgent," said the secretary.

"I'm talking about surgery!" I screamed into the receiver. Though New York was 7000 kilometers away, they probably could hear me without the receiver.

"Wait on the line," said the secretary hurriedly.

He put the receiver down on the table and went into the Rebbe's study. I waited impatiently, totally worried. A few minutes later, which seemed like eternity to me, the secretary returned and said: "Rabbi Haber, what exactly is the medical problem? Tell the doctors to tell you exactly, and call me back."

I ran to the doctors and asked for the medical details and all the names and professional terms. They were quite surprised. After all, not every day does a layman in medicine request a professional report. But they gave me all I wanted, and with that information, I ran back to the phone. After I gave the Rebbe's secretary the details, he went in to the Rebbe's office. After a few moments, he returned to the phone and said: "We have an answer from the Rebbe: Tell the doctors that they should not do any surgery! We are waiting for good news! All the best!"

I ran back to the ward where the doctors awaited my signature. I asked first to speak to Miriam. She heard the Rebbe's answer and with no hesitation accepted his advice. Now it was my job to explain to the doctors.

"The Rebbe said not to do any surgery," I told them.

They became quite upset with me: "With all due respect to your Rebbe, we are the doctors and not him. We are here and he is in New York. We know what to do, and what has to be done now, at this minute, and that is—surgery. Do you understand? Surgery, now!"

"I am sorry," I said quietly, "I cannot do it. The Rebbe said no surgery, so no surgery."

They were sure that, even though I looked like a modern American and spoke native English, I must have come down from the trees just this morning with my Rebbe. The truth is, I was amazed at myself. Why, all of a sudden, did I have such a firm conviction that the Rebbe's advice was

correct? Without knowing it, ever since having met the Rebbe in person and experiencing his special incredible holiness, I had become a follower.

"You know what," said the head doctor, "let's wait another half an hour at most and see what happens."

Meanwhile, I sat in the corridor and read *tehillim*. All of a sudden, as my lips uttered a prayer, I saw the doctors running in and out of Miriam's room with pages of the fetal-monitor graphs. Alerted, I jumped up and ran over to them.

"What's going on? Did something happen to Miriam, Heaven forbid?" I thought.

One of the doctors took me aside and said: "Look, Yisrael, there is something unclear here. A little after we gave you the medical report, and you went to call your Rebbe, the monitor suddenly showed that everything was OK and that the fetal distress had stopped. I thought that the fetal monitor must be broken. So we brought all 15 monitors we have, and they all showed the same result: the problem had disappeared. I conferred with all the other doctors, and we still can't believe it!"

I too was in shock, even though I knew what had happened. Clutching my book of *tehillim*, I knew that it was the prayers of the Rebbe. The doctor, still unconvinced, said: "Let's wait another twenty-four hours and see how things develop."

The truth is, I had heard many similar stories from others about the miracles of the Rebbe. But I never imagined that it would happen to me as well. And yet it happened. Again, I was not one who runs about and tells how angels fly around the house of his Rebbe. I was a logical, realistic American. Miriam too was shocked to have something like this happen to her. All of a sudden, after an appeal to the Rebbe, the problem disappeared!

Since they decided to wait another twenty-four hours, we had time to analyze the whole situation. Then we realized that the unexplainable things had already began in Alaska. For instance, the sudden appearance of the two Chabad rabbis in my office, the moment Miriam called to tell me she was pregnant. Even more unexplainable was how he told her, against all the odds, to convince all the older Reform women to go to the *mikvah*, a mission which seemed impossible. One night Miriam invited all the Jewish women in the area, and got right to the point: "I want to talk about the *mikvah*. The Lubavitcher Rebbe said it is important for you to keep family purity." After explaining the matter, not one of them said a word to the contrary. They all joined the list of "subscribers" to the *mikvah*! Can this be explained with simple logic, or even sophisticated logic?

Our Meir Moshe was born healthy on the tenth of Nissan, 5737 (1977), several hours before the Lubavitcher Rebbe's own birthday. The *brit* took place and our son was named after my beloved uncle. The *mohel* was, predictably, Rabbi Solomon Maimon, who came on a special flight from Seattle. This time, for a change, he did not come on a sled and did not speak in Yupik.

We notified the Rebbe about the birth and a few days later we received an answer: "In response to your message about the birth of your son, *mazal tov*, may it be the will of G-d that you succeed, together with your wife, in raising him to Torah, *chuppah* and good deeds, amidst prosperity. *Mazal tov*!"

A year later, we received another letter shortly after the Rebbe recuperated from a worrisome illness. One of the first letters he wrote after his recovery was to me, in which he wrote:

I appreciate very much your thoughtful expression of concern and your good wishes for a speedy and complete recovery.

With the help of G-d, the Healer of All Flesh Who Works Wondrously, my health has improved satisfactorily and I am, thank G-d, able to continue my work and activities.

In accordance with the Divine promise, "I (G-d, the Source of all blessings) will bless them that bless you,"

May G-d bestow His generous blessings on you and yours, materially and spiritually.

With esteem

M. Schneerson

At the bottom of the letter, the Rebbe added: "P.S. Thank you for foto of your son Meir Moshe. Have much true *yiddish nachas* from him."

Indeed, as Meir Moshe grew, we wanted to get true *yiddishe nachat* from additional children just as the Rebbe had blessed us in the *yechidut*. The problem was, though, after that first birth, the doctors said it would be difficult and even dangerous for Miriam to become pregnant again. Without telling me, Miriam wrote to the Rebbe asking for a blessing that all the dangers and complications would disappear. Sure enough, she got the blessing from the Rebbe, and it helped. The Pampers I had brought in the Galaxy to Israel were put to use by our second son Yitzchak, who was born in Israel. He was named after my grandfather and Miriam's grandfather. Our third son was named Yehonatan since he was born on Chanukah. Our fourth son is called Menachem Mendel, and it is not hard to guess why. After the Rebbe's blessing, our first son was born in the United States and the next three were Sabras, born after our settling in Eretz Yisrael.

But before we made *aliyah*, we had another *yechidut* with the Rebbe. It was in the summer, a month before we took the dramatic step of moving to Israel. Even though this time we were with the Rebbe for "only" 5 minutes, we were nevertheless very satisfied. Among other things, we asked for a blessing regarding our move to Israel. We brought our son Meir Moshe with us, and the Rebbe took great interest in the infant, asked about Alaska and the *mikvah*, and gave us a blessing for our *aliyah*. A month later we were in Israel.

Two years later, in 1980, already being Israelis living in Tiberias, we flew to America, where I had an assignment in Alabama for the U.S. Air Force. On the way, we visited New York and merited another private session with the Rebbe. At that time, we already had two sons, Meir Moshe and Yitzchak, who was born on *Hoshana Rabba*. When we entered the Rebbe's office, I said something in English to Meir Moshe and he answered in English. The Rebbe noticed and asked immediately why we were speaking English and not Hebrew to a child being raised in Israel. After that, the Rebbe took the child by the hand to the *tzedakah* box, which was near the small *Beit Knesset*, gave him a coin, and showed him how to give *tzedakah*.

Before we left the *yechidut*, the Rebbe told me to be his emissary to Alaska to check the *mikvah* and "to fix whatever needs fixing." Truthfully, I was quite bewildered by this. Why did he have to send me from such a distance? Certainly someone who lived closer to Alaska than an Israeli visitor to New York could do this. But, I wasn't about to ask. Since when does a *Chasid* ask his Rebbe for explanations?

"How long should I stay there?" I asked.

The answer seemed strange: "Even for one hour...."

I didn't really understand the answer. What could I do in an hour? I thought to myself that something amazing was destined to happen, if the Rebbe was sending me so far. I decided to keep my eyes open in order to catch the moment it occurred.

I got to Alabama, did a brief chaplain-military stint, and on Friday flew to Alaska—a long and tiring trip. I landed in Anchorage and stayed for Shabbat by friends, the Green family. At that time there was no rabbi in Anchorage. When I came on Sunday to check the *mikvah*, I was happy to hear that it was in use, in spite of the absence of an Orthodox rabbi. I checked the *mikvah* and found everything to be in order. I still wondered: for this I had to come all the way to Alaska?

Sunday night, I was supposed to fly from Anchorage to New York where Miriam and the kids were waiting for me. From there we were to return to Israel. An hour before the flight, as I was preparing my luggage by the Green's, two Jewish lawyers who were brothers from Philadelphia showed up. After a few amenities, they said they had heard that an Orthodox rabbi was in town, so they had hurried over to ask advice. What was the problem? They had to be in Alaska for a year on business, but since their father passed away recently they had to say *kaddish*, and *kaddish* prayer requires a *minyan*. In short, they wanted to know if there was a *minyan* in the area and if not, how they could organize one.

"You know what?" I said. "This is an extraordinary opportunity to organize a *minyan* every Shabbat in Perry Green's living room so you can say *kaddish*, and once a day at their fur store in downtown Anchorage. I'll take care of everything: prayer books, a Torah scroll, *chumashim*, etc.!"

But before I started getting things going, I asked the

Green's if they agreed. They concurred on the spot. The brothers said, "With all due respect for your good will, how do you expect to do all this when you are leaving in less than an hour for Israel?"

I scratched my head. They were right. Then Green said: "Just a moment. I know the guys who run the airline. If I arrange that they delay the flight, will that be Okay?"

"That would be wonderful," I said. "That will definitely enable me to organize a *minyan*, and we'll begin by *davening Maariv* right now—with a *minyan*!"

Green called, the flight was delayed, and meanwhile I called some friends in Anchorage, asking them to complete a *minyan* for the two brothers. I arranged the Torah scroll, prayer books, *chumashim*, and all that was necessary. The whole thing took less than an hour. I rushed to the airport so as not to miss my delayed flight. At the last minute, I boarded the plane that took me back to New York.

Monday night I arrived at the Chabad center in New York. The flight to Israel was scheduled for late, and the Rebbe was supposed to arrive at 10 a.m, giving me ample time to wait and see him. Indeed the Rebbe appeared exactly at the set time. A crowd of *Chasidim* gathered around him. All of a sudden, the Rebbe's gaze caught my eyes and he saluted me in military style with a fatherly smile full of meaning. The *Chasidim*, who caught the gesture, ran to me and asked what it was all about. I told them the story, and then, all at once, I understood the Rebbe's cryptic remark on the eve of my mission to Anchorage, "One hour is enough." That was the one hour it took to organize a *minyan*—which, by the way, is still active. The *minyan* took place not only at Perry Green's, but also at the home of his son-in-law and daughter, the lawyer David Grashin and his wife, Debby. It remained an active *minyan*

until the advent of a Chabad House being established in Anchorage!

We returned to Israel and lived in Tiberias. I worked for the Ministry of Education supervising guidance counselors in schools in the northern region. After that, we moved to Chispin in the Golan Heights. I continued in the capacity of supervisor and also headed the school where UN officers' children learned in Tiberias. Following that, the Rebbe had me head the Chabad school in Yavne'el, and take on the role of *Shliach* in the Golan Heights.

In Chispin, when we were already the parents of three boys, another event-filled labor pregnancy took place. Miriam was in her fourth month when she had a routine ultrasound check. The facial expression of the doctors showed that they were wary about the health of the baby. They called us in and told us that there was strong reason to assume that there was reason for concern.

We were stricken with worry, even though in the beginning of the pregnancy we had received the blessing of the Rebbe. What were we to do now? In cases like these, when there seemed to be no hope, one turned to the Rebbe. Thus, in the summer of 1987, we sent an urgent letter to the Rebbe, describing Miriam's apprehension regarding the birth. A few days later we received a phone call from the Rebbe's office, informing us that a letter from the Rebbe was on the way, in which he had erased the words "she is apprehensive of the birth" and in their place wrote: "There is no reason or basis for fear." Further on in the letter, the Rebbe told me to check my *tefillin* and *mezuzot*.

The Rebbe's assuring words regarding the upcoming birth upraised our fallen spirits. Regarding the checking of the *tefillin* and *mezuzot*, it seemed superfluous, since only recently I had checked the *tefillin*, and the *mezuzot* were

brand new. But I knew the advice of the Rebbe wasn't given in vain, so I sent the *tefillin* to be checked by an expert scribe in Kiryat Chabad. To my amazement, he found a mistake in the *tefillin* of the head, and also the *mezuzot* needed a basic correction.

After the *mezuzot* were made perfectly kosher and the *tefillin* fixed, we decided to do another ultrasound, hoping the results would be different. Unfortunately, the additional check in the Rambam Hospital in Haifa showed that the situation was still very bad. The doctors maintained that the problem was still there, presenting a very grave danger. Again we wrote to the Rebbe. He responded: "There will be good tidings." We were happy but wrote back that the doctors insisted that the situation was serious. The Rebbe remained firm in his faith-filled reassurance: "The birth will be easy, in its proper time, and all will go well." He told us to "worship G-d with joy and a good heart."

Nevertheless, the doctors were not convinced. Before them were the ultrasound results, not the blessings of the Rebbe. They told us not to live with illusions. Hearing that, we called the Rebbe's office and told one of the secretaries to relay the information. He promised to do so and to call back when he had an answer. Only a few hours passed and the secretary called saying: "The Rebbe said to gather the neighbors and make a *L'Chaim*, since everything will be OK."

We did what the Rebbe said immediately. We gathered the neighbors and made a *L'Chaim*—with a heavier heart than the Rebbe instructed. We hoped for the best. The next check at the Rambam Hospital was in the middle of the ninth month, near the birth. The doctor checked and told us to be prepared for the worst. I called the Rebbe

right away and told the secretary the doctor's opinion. A few hours later, I received the response: the Rebbe's letter was on its way in which he repeated the order to make a *L'Chaim*, not to worry, promising that it would be an easy birth, and that we would meet on joyous occasions. It was indeed a strange situation: the doctors were steadfast in their warnings based on their tests, yet the Rebbe continued to encourage us the whole time, assuring us that all would go well.

When I told some *Chabadniks* they asked: "How come the Rebbe blesses your wife all the time? Has she done anything exceptional?"

I told them about the *mikvah* and the older women, and they attributed everything to that.

The expected date of birth approached. We spent the Shabbat at a hotel in Haifa in order to be close to the hospital if Miriam should have to give birth. That Shabbat, we prayed from the depths of our hearts that the birth would be successful. In the middle of the week, Miriam had strong labor pains and was rushed to the hospital. I sat outside the delivery room saying *tehillim*. Miriam concentrated on a photo of the Rebbe—totally—as if she were in *yechidut*.

Why drag out the story? A completely healthy, 4-kilo baby was born. The doctors were astounded. I asked one of them why they predicted such gloomy results when in the end the baby was perfectly healthy?

"Look," he answered. "Don't suspect us with bad intentions. That's what we saw based on the ultrasound results. Apparently there was some mistake. It's only a machine...."

The next day, a letter arrived at our home. It was from the Rebbe, wishing us a *mazal tov*.

Indeed, in Chispin, where we live, we are the emissaries of Chabad. Once, before I traveled to the Rebbe, I announced in shul that if anyone wanted to send a message to the Rebbe, he or she could do so through me. Many people came to my home to give me letters, which I promised to deliver. The night before I left, a young man from northern Israel came to me with a letter for the Rebbe.

"Please," he requested. "Keep this a secret. I don't want my wife to know about it because she laughs at things relating to the Rebbe and *Chasidim*. She is a *mitnagid*. Please, deliver the letter to the Rebbe."

He stuck the letter in my hand and disappeared as suddenly as he had arrived—maybe before his wife could catch him. I put his letter with the others addressed to the Rebbe. The next day, who showed up at my door? The young man's wife! Of course, I didn't say a word about her husband.

"Listen, Rabbi Haber," she said, holding out a letter. "My husband and I are *mitnagdim*, so please don't say a word about this. I want you to deliver this letter to the Rebbe."

By the way, they both received positive responses to their requests from the Rebbe.

Another incident happened once when we returned from shopping in Katzrin, the main city on the Golan Heights. A reserve soldier with a knitted *kippah* was on the road hitchhiking. When we stopped to pick him up, the conversation quickly turned to the topic of the Rebbe.

"I wonder if the Rebbe could help me too," said the soldier.

He spoke frankly with us about his personal affairs. "My wife and I have been married thirteen years now and we still have no children. Do you think the Lubavitcher

Rebbe can help us?"

Instead of answering him, I told him our story. We were still talking when we arrived near our destination, but we remained in the car to continue the conversation.

"If so," he asked, "what do you suggest I do?"

"I suggest a most simple thing," I said. "Write to the Rebbe about your predicament."

He thought for a moment and then asked: "Can I send the letter to you, and have you send it to the Rebbe?"

"I would be glad to do so," I answered.

A few days later, I received a letter addressed to the Rebbe. Immediately, I sent it to 770. A year later, I received a call and did not recognize the name of the caller. When he said he was the hitchhiker from Katzrin, I remembered the whole story.

He brought me up to date: "A while after you sent the letter to the Rebbe for me, I received an answer. The Rebbe wrote that I should study Tractate *Niddah* daily with a *chavruta*. I did what the Rebbe said...."

"*Nu*?!"—I urged, impatiently interrupting his words.

"*Nu*," he said, "This week we had a baby!"

"*Mazal tov*!" I enthusiastically exclaimed. "*Mazal tov*!"

There was another exciting happening in 1987. My wife's good friend, Sherry Miller, an American now living in Jerusalem, told us that her husband wanted to buy her something special on Mother's Day but didn't know what to get her.

"Look," Sherry told her husband. "The truth is that I have everything I need. But there is one thing I lack."

"And what's that?"

"A dollar from the Rebbe."

"A dollar? From the Rebbe?" Her husband lifted his eyebrows in wonder. "Since when are you a Lubavitcher *Chasid*?"

"You asked me what I want. That's all that I'm missing."

She persisted. One day, she picked up and drove to 770 and stood on line for the dollar with hundreds of others. Patiently, she waited at the end of the line of women, which was advancing slowly. In order to be fair, the secretaries of the Rebbe had arranged that the two separate lines for men and women would go up to the Rebbe in turns—half an hour for the women, then half an hour for men.

When Sherry's turn finally came to approach the Rebbe, the fence went up and the sign was given for the men to begin. But Sherry, with a youthful sprint, ducked under the fence and went up to the Rebbe, who accepted her with a smile.

"Shalom, Rebbe," she said, "I am Sherry Miller, a friend of Miriam and Yisrael Haber."

The Rebbe smiled and said: "Oh, the air force chaplain...."

After that the Rebbe gave her the dollar. Sherry called us that very day to tell us what happened, how she had gotten her "something special" on Mother's Day. It was nice to know that the Rebbe, with all the thousands of visitors who flocked to see him each week, remembered us immediately.

As the principal of the Chabad school in Yavne'el, I received an additional blessing from the Rebbe during the dollar distribution on the 18th of *Tishrei*, 5751, when I presented the Rebbe with a picture of the students of the school.

"This is a picture of the Chabad school in Yavne'el," I said.

"Is it for me?" the Rebbe asked.

When I answered that it was, the Rebbe gave me an

additional dollar.

"Thank you so much for everything," the Rebbe said. "You should be successful in having a house full of *tzedakah*, Torah, worship, prayer and good news. Yavne'el means that G-d *(E-l)* is part of the city. That is the simple meaning of the name. You are insuring that the name be fulfilled in practice. All the best."

"We thank the Rebbe for all of his blessings," I answered, always feeling a little tongue-tied when standing in the presence of this great, holy man.

"A blessing for success and good tidings," the Rebbe repeated.

Now regarding the Rebbe and the Golan Heights: The council of the settlements on the Golan got together and sent the Rebbe a parchment scroll with a key to the Golan attached. The scroll read, in part: "Our prayer and request is that the honored Rebbe come in good health to the Land of Israel and lead us to the holy city of Jerusalem and the building of the Temple in the complete Redemption."

When talk started about the possibility of giving away the Golan Heights and the uprooting of settlements in exchange for a peace treaty with Syria, I sent the Rebbe a letter relating the feelings of the residents and asked for encouragement and guidance for all the future. The Rebbe's answer was short and to the point:

"To all the residents of the Golan Heights—don't be afraid and stay in your places."

The day after I received his response, I got the Rebbe's permission to publicize that he called upon all residents of the Golan to be strong—not to be afraid and to stay where they were, continuing with their mission of settling the whole Land of Israel until the coming of the Mashiach.

I came a long way from Brooklyn to Texas, Alaska,

California, Tiberias, and the Golan Heights. In each of those stops, I saw—and I am certain that I will see even more in the future—how "*Good will come from the North.*"

34

Epilogue

My dream was to present the Rebbe with the first copy of the Hebrew edition of this book in 1995, but I did not merit to fulfill that ambition.

The Rebbe was taken to the *Beit Midrash* on High, and we were left orphaned.

Not only Jews respected the Rebbe, but also non-Jews. After the Rebbe passed away, I received a letter from Carrol and Phil Scott. Phil is a Protestant minister, whom we knew in the Air Force. "We heard the news today of the passing of Rabbi Schneerson, and we immediately thought of you," he wrote. "How you spoke of him and respected him. We know that now you are going through a difficult period in which your heart is heavy with feelings of awful emptiness. We send our condolences. We know that Rabbi Schneerson was a great man and that his prayers and blessings were full of meaning, influence and practical results. He granted you the gift of belief—to you and other millions—and that will last forever. We are convinced that his Torah and wisdom, which he passed to you and his *Chasidim* the world over, will give you all the wisdom to rise up to the great challenge of spreading the Torah all over the world."

On the *shloshim* (thirty days after the Rebbe's passing),

during a sad and painful gathering in Chispin, Rabbi Amnon Sugarman, the head of the Golan *Hesder Yeshiva*, requested that I address the assembly. With a broken heart, I said that we never knew a situation where the Rebbe was not physically with us. Just like there was the sun in the sky, so too, there was the Rebbe. Just like there was the moon, so too, there was the Rebbe. Just like there was air to breathe, so too, there was the Rebbe. We had become so accustomed to his presence, Jews in all corners of the world, North, South, East and West, from Chernobyl and Anchorage, to Jerusalem and Melbourne. Tens of thousands of Jews began and ended their day with thoughts of the Rebbe. The very knowledge that the Rebbe was in the world was enough to strengthen and encourage Jews the world over through difficult times.

It is hard to understand how one man could be the Rebbe of everyone. It is hard to understand how one man could write hundreds of books, and personally know each of his *Chasidim*. How could one man approaching 90 years of age stand on his feet for 6 hours and teach thousands of Jews waiting on line the mitzvah of *tzedakah* by giving them a dollar and a personal blessing? And all of this without taking a break to rest or to drink. How could one man be loved by both old people and young, all of them seeing him as a father figure, leader and guide? Like a magnet, the Rebbe attracted Torah scholars, heads of state, scientists and artists—people from the spectrum of professions, politics, and beliefs. As the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, said: "Our Rebbe had no children, but no one else in the world left so many orphans."

To explain the faith of *Chasidim* in the Rebbe, I told those gathered on the Golan about something that hap-

pened when I was working at the Jewish school in Dallas, Texas. Once, I was in an airport in South Carolina, on my way to a conference of principals and educators. Together with me was Rabbi Shalom Ber, a *Chabadnik*. Near the airport was a base of the Marines. It was no secret that among the macho Marines, and in the general area, there were few, if any, Jews.

Two hundred Marines from the nearby base were waiting with us for the flight. We were still in the terminal when all of a sudden R. Shalom Ber said to me that he was going over with his *tefillin* to the Marines.

"For what?" I asked. "You know that the Marines are a tough, unfriendly breed. I doubt that of all places, here in the south, they have a positive feeling toward Jews."

He answered: "Look, Yisrael, I want to approach them; maybe there are Jews among them."

"Jews? Among them?" I said with great suspicion.

"Maybe. Who knows?" Rabbi Shalom Ber replied. Smiling confidently, he walked over towards them.

The truth is I was afraid they might assault him, a bearded Jew in black garb. I even stood next to the public telephone to call the police for help if need be. The *Chabadnik* was swallowed up in the crowd of the tall Marines. I could no longer see him. A few minutes passed, and to my astonishment, I saw Rabbi Shalom Ber emerge from the group of Marines escorted on both sides by two giant soldiers.

A smile of victory graced the bold rabbi's face.

The three of them turned towards a table in the middle of the terminal. The rabbi looked like a midget between them. Sure enough, the Chabadnik took out his tefillin, and the two marines rolled up their sleeves. Shalom Ber helped them put on the tefillin and made the blessing with them.

Who would have imagined—in the middle of an airport terminal in South Carolina, Jewish Marines!

Later, when Rabbi Shalom Ber returned to me, I asked him where he had gotten the conviction and guts to enter the lion's den of the Marines and pull out two Jews.

He didn't even understand my question. "I knew it would give the Rebbe pleasure, so I did it."

At that eulogy gathering in Chispin, I also related that when the issue of the *mikvah* in Alaska came up, the Jewish organizations I approached discussed it at length without ever responding. In contrast, when the people at Chabad heard of the problem, they immediately sent people to Alaska, to the end of the world, to give not only advice, but to help in the building. Not because they knew me, but because it was a mitzvah to help fellow Jews! They only had to hear that in some place in the world a Jew needed assistance—and assistance was sent—immediately!

That is the Rebbe's essence. Whenever a Jew anywhere in the world, needs help—he or she has an address where help is a phone call or letter away.

The Rebbe led Lubavitch, leads Lubavitch, and will continue to lead Lubavitch until the coming of the Mashiach. Until then we have to fulfill all of his instructions with security and faith, for we have only the words of the son of Amram: "Do all you can possibly do, literally." This is our call to infuse in the Nation of Israel the belief in the coming of the Mashiach. And G-d will help with a blink of the eye that we should merit the true and complete Redemption, with the Rebbe at the helm!

35

Appendix

Many interesting experiences and events have taken place in my life since the publication of this book's Hebrew edition almost a decade ago. the book was written by me in English—so naturally it was printed in...Hebrew! Don't ask me why—I'm still not sure. While two printings sold out totally in Israel, I knew at the outset that it would meet with a totally different response in the United States and England. Upon visiting a Jewish community in the American mid-west I brought the Hebrew edition to a young Jewish family as a present. The twelve-year-old son of that family glanced at the book, held it in his hands, turned the pages quickly and called out to his parents, "Hey look Mom and Dad, a Siddur with pictures!" I knew that one day the book would have to be published as originally intended—I just didn't think it would take a decade!

During that time a physical *Beit Chabad* (Chabad House) facility became a reality here on the Golan. It took place during the very turbulent mid-90's when all residents of the Golan Heights lived under a "political cloud."

Fifteen Hundred people from throughout Israel and abroad attended the *Chanukat Habayit* (dedication cere-

mony) of the Chabad House. Dignitaries assembled for this exciting event included over two hundred rabbis from Israel and around the world headed by the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the Rebbe secretary Rabbi Leibel Groner, and Guest of Honor Rabbi Meyer Gutnick of New York. Members of Israel's knesset, political leaders, and the Governor of the Golan Heights came to see and be seen. This gala extravaganza, including a ribbon-cutting ceremony, a program of speeches, a video of the Rebbe, and the Piamenta band and singers, followed by a full-course dinner, was not an everyday occasion in our settlement. The entire preparation: seating, security, decorations, transportation—by buses and even private airplanes arriving at a nearby landing strip—refreshments, sound-system, dinner-planning, was entrusted to my *entire* staff at the Chabad House—my *entire* staff—Miriam and our "four sons," G-d bless them.

(The special highlights throughout the years of Chabad programming on the Golan includes visitations to IDF bases—especially on Chanukah and Purim. These activities and our annual *Lag B'Omer* Parade attended by children throughout the Golan have always been organized by Meir Moshe, Yitzchak, Yonatan and Menachem, to their great credit, and provides Miriam and myself with much *nachat.*)

The following day I found myself in the office of Minister Ariel Sharon who personally offered his congratulations upon the dedication of the new Chabad House on the Golan. I took that opportunity to present him with a copy of this book's Hebrew edition (at least *he* appreciated the Hebrew) and explaining the Rebbe's blessing for the Golan—which he said was very important for him as well. (He even gave his famous laugh at two Alaskan stories I told him which he found humorous.)

The United States, European and even Israeli Governments were of the opinion that for "peace," the historical *Bashan* (Golan) of the Torah, the source of one-third of Israel's water resources, and the strategic "eyes and ears" of Israel's north, should be given away to our enemies.

The fact that there has always *been* peace on the Golan since 1973 didn't seem to matter. It was during this time—already in early 5752 (Autumn 1991) that we were privileged to receive the Rebbe's blessing mentioned earlier, for the Golan residents "not to be afraid...and to remain in their places...."

In 5756 (Autumn 1995), I was honored upon being requested to address all assembled at the banquet of the International Conference of the Rebbe's Emissaries in New York. Immediately after the conference, the new Chabad Speakers Bureau asked me to be their first speaker, and in January, 1996, I found myself speaking in twenty-seven venues throughout the US and Canada—in thirty days!

They say that I'm funny.... They say that I pause seconds before the punchline and then "dead-pan" the joke. That's what they say. If that be so, then I'm gratified. Many hours during my youth I listened over and over and over to the comedy records of Milton Berle, Don Rickles, Shelly Berman, Jerry Lewis and Jackie Mason. So I'm gratified that those many hours immersed in *gashmiut* has permitted me to speak about topics such as *taharat hamishpacha* (Jewish family purity) and matters of Judaism and *Eretz Yisrael* in a humorous vein.

Thank G-d I've had the unique honor of having been invited to speak in more than two hundred communities

throughout the United States, Canada, Europe and Israel—communities headed by Shluchim of the Rebbe—in big cities, and small backwaters. The prophetic vision of the Rebbe, coupled with the Rebbe's great dynamism keeps Chabad institutions around the world growing and growing—helping Jews from all walks of life, throughout the world.

Throughout the past eight years of intensive public speaking, people would ask me after my presentation, "Rabbi, you're a nice guy, we like you and of course, we respect the Rebbe, but at the end of the day they're going to give away the Golan—it's been documented and signed... they've drawn up the maps...." And each time I would remind them of the Rebbe's blessing, and that with G-d's help Jews will stay on the Golan forever.

The greatest challenge of the Rebbe's blessing for the Golan Heights was put to the test just a few years ago. I was addressing a large group of N'shei Chabad women one evening in Israel's largest southern city, Beersheva. After completing my "one-man-show," I heard the familiar questions, only this time more intense—more compelling. One woman cried out: "Rabbi, but tonight, this very moment as we are all here, United States President Bill Clinton is in Geneva, Switzerland, having flown all the way on Air Force One, and is meeting with President Assad of Syria with the blessing of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, to give away the Golan! Rabbi, this is it! Clinton would not travel all the way on Air Force One from Washington if he didn't know that it's a done deal!"

I listened, and then holding a copy of the Rebbe's blessings, I replied, "Everything you reported about that meeting is accurate. However, all I know is that we have the

Rebbe's blessing and with G-d's help everything will be alright—and the Golan will stay rightfully with us."

While travelling home that evening, journeying about five hours, I stopped at a gas station for a "fill-up." As I was speaking to the attendant, the midnight news bulletin was being broadcast on radio: "United States President Clinton and President Assad of Syria abruptly ended their meeting with nothing accomplished."

It seemed that the Syrian leader not only asked for the entire Golan Heights, but also wanted a large area of the Sea of Galilee (*Kinneret*) thrown in to the bargain for good measure! Clinton knew that even the Israeli left wouldn't agree to such an outrageous proposal—and so meeting over, ballgame over—the good guys win!

"How amazing," I thought. "Even in the ninth inning, when all looked lost, the Rebbe's blessing, and the adamant prayers to G-d from the Golan residents and from Jews around the world came shining through. The Golan continues to be built, cultivated, and with the help of G-d, grow and flourish for all time by its Jewish residents. The work that half the tribe of Menashe, from the time of the Bible, commenced upon settling the Bashan (Golan), continues to this very day!

It is with the words of the Rebbe's blessing and by that message, that my work in the Golan proceeds. I have been privileged to take up the challenge.

My concluding statement of the address I delivered before all of the Rebbe's emissaries from around the world at that International Conference holds up true today as it did then, almost ten years ago.

In conclusion I said, "I am reminded of the time when a great American general, Douglas MacArthur, upon

speaking before the Corp of Army Cadets at West Point, said that throughout his career he was always energized, morning, noon and night, due to *his* contact and thinking about the Corp, the Corp, the Corp.

"We, as Shluchim, members of the greatest spiritual force in history, are energized at all times due to *our* contact with the Rebbe, the Rebbe, the Rebbe."



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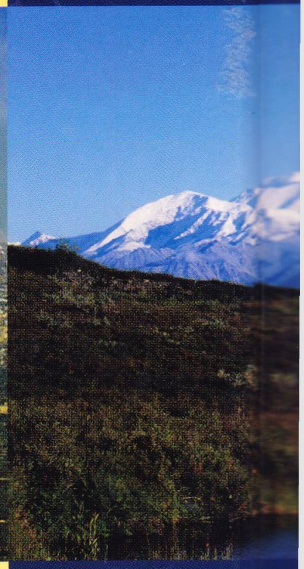
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Rabbi Yisrael Haber is a native New Yorker, and served in the United States Air Force Chaplaincy as Alaska's only rabbi. Today, Rabbi Haber and his family are residents of Israel's Golan Heights, where he serves as the director of Chabad activities.