

# 1

*And on the Shabbat, the priests would sing a song for the future that is to come, for that day which will be entirely Shabbat and for the repose of eternal life.*

Mishnah Tamid 7:4, recited during the Saturday morning service

By the first Sabbath after the festival of Simchat Torah, Rav Krushka had grown so thin and pale that, the congregation muttered, the next world could be seen in the hollows of his eyes.

The Rav had brought them through the High Holy Days, had remained standing during the two-hour service at the end of the Yom Kippur fast, though more than once his eyes had rolled back as though he would faint. He had even danced joyfully with the Torah scrolls, if only for a few minutes. But, now those holy days were over, the vital energy had departed from him. On this sultry, overripe September day, with the windows closed and sweat beading on the brow of every member of the congregation, the Rav, leaning on the arm of his nephew Dovid, was wrapped in a woollen overcoat. His voice was faint. His hands shook.

The matter was clear. It had been clear for some time. For months, his voice, once as rich and clear as red kiddush wine, had been hoarse, sometimes cracking altogether into a harsh little cough or a deep fit of retching and choking. Still, it was

hard to believe in a faint shadow on the lung. Who could see a shadow? What was a shadow? The congregation could not believe that Rav Krushka could succumb to a shadow – he from whom the light of Torah seemed to shine so brightly that they felt themselves illuminated by his presence.

Rumours had spread across the community, passed at chance meetings in the street. A Harley Street specialist had told him all would be well if he took a month's rest. A famous Rebbe had sent word that he and 500 young Torah students recited the entire book of Psalms every day for Rav Krushka's safe recovery. The Rav, it was said, had received a prophetic dream declaring that he would live to see the first stone laid of the Bais HaMikdash in Jerusalem.

And yet, he grew more frail day by day. His failing health became known across Hendon and further afield. As is the way of things, congregants who might once have skipped a week in synagogue, or attended a different service, had become fervent in their devotions. Each week, more worshippers attended than the week before. The clumsy synagogue – originally merely two semi-detached houses knocked together and hollowed out – was not designed for this quantity of people. The air became stale during services, the temperature even warmer, the scent almost fetid.

One or two members of the synagogue board suggested that perhaps they might arrange an alternative service, to cater for the unusual numbers. Yitzchak Hartog, the president of the board, overruled them. These people had come to see the Rav, he declared, and see him they would.

So it was that, on this Shabbat in Tishri, the synagogue was over-full, each member of the congregation fixing their attention more, sad to say, on the Rav himself than on the

prayers they were addressing to their Maker. Throughout that morning, they watched him anxiously. It was true that Dovid was by his uncle's side, holding the siddur for him, supporting him by his right elbow. But, one murmured to another, perhaps the presence of such a man would hinder rather than help his recovery? Dovid was a Rabbi, this much was admitted, but he was not a Rav. The distinction was subtle, for one may become a Rabbi simply through study and achievement, but the title Rav is given by a community to a beloved leader, a guiding light, a scholar of unsurpassed wisdom. Rav Krushka was all these things without doubt. But had Dovid ever spoken in public or given a magnificent d'var Torah, let alone written a book of inspiration and power, as the Rav had? No, no and no. Dovid was unprepossessing to the sight: short, balding, a little overweight; but more than that, he had none of the Rav's spirit, none of his fire. Not a single member of the congregation, down to the tiniest child, would address Dovid Kuperman as 'Rabbi'. He was 'Dovid', or sometimes, simply, 'that nephew of the Rav, that *assistant*'. And as for his wife! It was understood that all was not well with Esti Kuperman, that there was some problem there, some trouble. But such matters fall under the name of lashon hara – an evil tongue – and should not even be whispered in the holy house of the Lord.

In any case, Dovid was agreed to be no fitting support for the Rav. The Rav should be surrounded by men of great Torah learning, who might study night and day, and thus avert the evil decree. A pity, said some, that the Rav had no son to learn in his name and thus merit him a longer life. A pity too, said others, more quietly, that the Rav had no son to be Rav when he was gone. For who would take his place? These thoughts

had circulated for months, becoming more distinct in the synagogue's dry heat. And, as the Rav's energy had drained from him, Dovid too had become a little more bowed with every passing week, as though he felt the weight of their stares upon his shoulders, and the force of their disappointment crushing his chest. He rarely looked up during the service now, and said nothing, continuing to turn the pages of the siddur, focusing only on the words of prayer.

By mid-morning, it was clear to all the men that the Rav was worse than they had seen him before. They bent their necks around the corners where fireplaces and built-in ladders had once stood and shuffled their plastic chairs a little closer to him, to observe him more exactly, to will him on. Through the morning service of shacharit, the room grew warmer and warmer, and each man became aware that, even through his suit trousers, he had begun to stick to his seat. The Rav bowed low during modim, and straightened again, but they could see that his hand gripping the bench in front of him was white and trembled, his face, though determined, faltered into a grimace with every movement.

Even the women, observing the service from the upper gallery built around three sides of the room, peering through the net screen, could see that the Rav's strength was almost gone. When the aron was opened, the Torah scrolls exhaled a fragrant cedar breath into the faces of the congregation, which seemed to rouse him and he stood. But when the cabinet was closed his sitting seemed a surrender to gravity rather than a decided motion. He released the energy which had supported him and fell into his seat. By the time the Torah portion was half read, every member of the congregation was willing Rav Krushka to take each rasping, painful breath. If

Dovid had not been there the Rav would have slumped over in his place. Even the women could see that.

Esti Kuperman watched the service from the women's gallery. Each week a place of honour was reserved for her in the front row, by the net curtain. In truth, the front row was never occupied at all, even at such times as these, when every seat was needed. Women stood at the back of the gallery rather than take one of those front-row seats. Each week, Esti sat alone, never bending her thin neck, not showing by any word or glance that she had noted the empty seats to either side of her. She took the position in the front row because it was expected. She was Dovid's wife. Dovid sat next to the Rav. If the Rav's wife had not passed on, Esti would have been at her side. When, God willing, they were blessed with children, they would accompany her. As it was, she sat alone.

Further back in the women's section nothing could be seen of the service at all. For the women in those seats only the melodies penetrated, as in the chambers of heaven whose doors open only to voices raised in song. Esti, though, could observe the crowns of the heads below, each covered by an oval of hat or decorated with a round circle of kippa. Over time the hats and kippot had become individual to her, each blotch of colour representing a different personality. There was Hartog, the president of the board, solidly built and muscular, walking up and down even while the prayers continued, occasionally exchanging a word with another congregant. There was Levitsky, the synagogue treasurer, swaying in a nervous pecking motion as he prayed. There was Kirschbaum, one of the executive officers, leaning against the wall and constantly dozing off and waking with a jerk. She watched

them come and go, ascend the steps to the bimah, and return to their places, stand and sit, rock gently in place, with a strange sense of disconnection. At times, staring down, the movements seemed like some game played on a chequered board – round pieces advancing purposefully, but without meaning. In the past she had often found herself becoming lulled into a trance-like state by the familiar melodies, the unchanging pattern of movement below, so that she would scarcely notice when the service was over and would be shocked to find the women around her already wishing her a Good Shabbes, the men below already drifting from view. Once or twice she had found herself standing in what seemed to be an empty synagogue, afraid to turn around for fear that some of the women might remain behind her, whispering.

On this Shabbat in Tishri, though, she retained herself. Like the rest of the congregation, she sat when the Torah scrolls, clothed in regal velvet, were returned to the aron at the front. Like the rest, she waited patiently for the leader of the shacharit service to step down from the bimah and the leader of the next service, mussaf, to step up. Like the rest, she began to be puzzled when, after five minutes had passed, mussaf had not yet started. She peered through the net curtain, trying to discern what was happening below. She blinked. On her husband's arm, the hunched figure of the Rav, clad in his black overcoat, was making his way slowly to the bimah.

In earlier times, the Rav would have addressed them at this point in the service, taking the Torah portion they had just read and weaving it, with other sources, into an intricate and beautiful lesson. But it had been many months since he had spoken to them like this. This week, as for so many weeks now, a copy of one of his previous sermons had been left on

each seat. The Rav was not well enough to speak. And yet, in the men's section beneath her, he was ascending the three steps to the podium. A rustle of voices rose up around the synagogue and fell silent. The Rav would speak.

The Rav raised his arm, thin and pale in the sleeve of the coat. When he spoke, his voice was unexpectedly strong. He had been an orator all his life; the people did not need to strain to catch his words. 'I will speak,' he said, 'only for a moment. I have not been well. With Hashem's help, I will recover.'

There was a vigorous burst of nodding around the room; several people clapped and were swiftly quieted, for theatre-applause has no place in a synagogue.

'Speech,' he said. 'If the created world were a piece of music, speech would be its refrain, its recurring theme. In the Torah, we read that Hashem created the world through speech. He could have willed it into existence. We might read: "And God thought of light, and there was light." No. He could have hummed it. Or formed it from clay in His hands. Or breathed it out. Hashem, our King, the Holy One Blessed Be He, did none of these things. To create the world, He spoke. "And God said, let there be light, and there was light." Exactly as He spoke, so it was.'

The Rav broke off, coughing violently, a sickly bubbling sound in his chest. Several of the men strained to move to him, but he waved them back. He supported himself on Dovid's shoulder, gave three sharp coughs and fell silent. He breathed heavily and continued.

'The Torah itself. A book. Hashem could have given us a painting, or a sculpture, a forest, a creature, an idea in our minds to explain His world. But He gave us a book. Words.'

He paused and looked around the hall, scanning the silent faces. At the moment that the pause had gone on just a little too long, the Rav raised his hand and banged it loudly on the lectern.

‘What a great power the Almighty has given us! To speak, as He speaks! Astonishing! Of all the creatures on earth, only *we* can speak. What does this mean?’

He smiled faintly and looked around the room once more.

‘It means we have a hint of Hashem’s power. Our words are, in a sense, real. They can create worlds and destroy them. They have edges, like a knife.’ The Rav brought his arm around in a sweeping motion, as though wielding a scythe. He smiled. ‘Of course, our power is not Hashem’s power. Let us not forget that either. Our words are more than empty breath, but they are not Torah. Torah contains the world. Torah is the world. Do not forget, my children, that all of our words, all of our stories, can only, at best, amount to a commentary on a single verse of the Torah.’

The Rav turned to Dovid and whispered a few words. Together, the two men walked down from the bimah and back to their seats. The congregation was silent. At last, gathering himself, the chazzan began to pray the mussaf service.

The Rav’s words had clearly weighed with the chazzan leading the prayers, for the man seemed to be paying peculiar attention to each letter, each syllable of every word. He spoke slowly, but clearly and with power, as though he were hearing and appreciating the words for the first time. ‘Mechal-  
kel chayim b’chesed,’ he said simply, ‘He sustains all living



things with kindness, He gives the dead life with abundant mercy.'

The congregation responded in kind, their responses becoming louder and clearer until they were speaking with one great voice.

As the chazzan reached the kedushah, he began to sweat, his face was pale. 'Na'aritzecha veNakdishecha . . .' he declared.

'Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh,' the people responded, raising themselves on to the balls of their feet, many feeling a little light-headed, perhaps through the heat, 'holy, holy holy is the Lord.'

And it was at that moment, when all were reaching up on their tiptoes to the Almighty, that a crash resounded in the hall, as though one of the mighty cedars of Lebanon had fallen. The men turned and the women craned. The congregation saw Rav Krushka, lying on his side, by his seat. He let out a long moan, but there was no movement in him except his left leg, twitching against the wooden bench, the knocks sounding loud and hollow around the synagogue.

There was a moment of quiet and a sensation of pressure beating at the temples.

Hartog was the first to recover. He ran to the Rav, pushing Dovid to one side. He loosened the Rav's tie and took his arm, shouting, 'Call an ambulance and bring blankets!' The other men looked confused for a moment. The very words 'call an ambulance', uttered in the Rav's synagogue, on the Sabbath, seemed unreal, as though they'd been asked for a slice of bacon, a pint of prawns. After a long moment, two of the young men started up and dashed towards the door, racing for the telephone.

High above, Esti Kuperman stood still although some of


the other women were already making their way downstairs to see what should be done.

Esti watched her husband take his uncle's hand and pat it, as though to comfort the old man. She noticed that Dovid's hair was thinner, seen from this angle, than she had thought. Some part of her noted, almost without intending to, that Hartog had already left the Rav's side, leaving his care to the other medical members of the congregation. That he had pulled three or four men of the synagogue board to one side, that they were in conversation. She looked at her own bony fingers, curled around her siddur, the nails very white.

And for an instant, she felt heavy damask wings stirring the air against her face. The beating wings might have surrounded her, moving more slowly, more heavily, circling and ascending infinitely slowly, bearing a far greater burden than the soul of one old, tired man with a shadow on his lung. The breath had gone out of the room, and the beating wings were a pulse, growing fainter and fainter.

Esti felt exhausted, unable to move. Dovid raised his head to the women's gallery, looked to her accustomed place and shouted out, 'Esti!' plaintive, frightened. Esti started back from the rail, and turned to stumble across to the door of the stairwell. She was faintly aware that some of the women were touching her, reaching out their arms to . . . Stroke her? Support her? She wasn't sure. She continued towards the exit, thinking only that she must go now, that there would be something she should do.

And it was only when she was running down the stairs towards the men's section that a thought awakened in her mind – a thought at once shocking and joyful, a thought of which she felt instantly ashamed. As she raced down the stairs,



the rhythm of her steps echoed to the beat of her repeated thought: if this is so, then Ronit will be coming home. Ronit is coming home.