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5490 from Creation/1730 CE
Vitebsk, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

"Chaim…Chaim, wake up! Can you hear me? Where are we now?"

Voices hummed around him, far away and muffled. *Why is it so dark?* Chaim wondered.

"Chaim, where are we?" The question was more insistent now.

Where are we? Chaim asked himself. He was the assistant navigator on Columbus's ship in the midst of a raging storm, and it was his responsibility to keep watch on their location and shout out the coordinates to the navigator. "Twenty-two degrees north, twelve minutes, and seventeen seconds!" he responded.

His answer was greeted by muffled snickers, and his brow wrinkled in confusion. One at a time, he eased his eyes open, and slowly the scene before him took shape. Sunlight streamed through the window. His *melamed* towered over him with a look that mixed disappointment with weary resignation. Gradually, the full realization of what had just happened thundered in his head. *Oh, no*, Chaim thought. *Did I really fall asleep in cheder again? But the dream…this time it felt so real*.

"Chaim," said Reb Zalman, stroking his salt-and-pepper beard, "were you sailing the seven seas again?"

The other boys erupted in laughter. Aharon whispered loudly, "Maybe he discovered America this time!"

"I'm not sure…" Chaim stammered, still disoriented. "No, not daydreaming…I think something else happened."

Reb Zalman sighed deeply, the sound of a man who had weathered many storms with his *talmidim*. "Never mind, Chaim. Just try to stay with us in this century if you would."

Meir leaned over and whispered, "What's our heading, Captain?" which set off another round of giggles.

Chaim rubbed his eyes and shook his head but couldn't shake the vivid memory of salt spray and creaking timber. He genuinely wanted to do well. He loved Reb Zalman, a gentle soul whose disappointed expression could reform even the most mischievous boy.

"What is happening to me?" he whispered to himself.

He was in his cheder in Vitebsk, not on a ship bound for the New World. He looked around in a daze at his classmates, who were still snickering.

Shimon stage-whispered, "I think our navigator is lost at sea."

"At least he didn't shout *Land ho!* this time," added Yossel with a grin.

Chaim couldn't blame them for laughing. While they were capable of good behavior when they chose to be—which was, admittedly, not often—his shouting nautical coordinates during Talmud study was certainly worth a chuckle. But this hadn't been an ordinary dream. The details were too sharp, too real.

It wasn't only his mid-cheder naps that distracted him. Chaim's mind constantly buzzed with questions that had nothing to do with their lessons. Why did shooting stars streak across the sky? Why did rainbows all share the same perfect arc and colors? How did birds manage to fly? Why did leaves change color in autumn? And what lay beyond the furthest stars? Before he could even give one question some thought, three more would take its place. This endless curiosity made it nearly impossible for him to focus on Talmudic discussions that seemed disconnected from the natural world, which fascinated him so deeply.

Over the years, most *melamdim* had given up on Chaim. His classmates were a feisty bunch, and the *melamdim* didn't hold out much hope for them, either. "These boys just can't be tamed," they would say with resignation. But not Reb Zalman. Day after day, he endured their pranks and restlessness with remarkable patience. Some days he even succeeded in capturing their attention completely. But even his gentle persistence

couldn't entirely tame their wild spirits. And recently, Reb Zalman's wife had fallen ill, so he was often absent to care for her and manage their home, and various substitute *melamdim* had taken his place. Aharon kept a private tally scratched into the back cover of his Gemara—not of the lessons learned, but of the substitutes driven away. The current count was eleven. None lasted more than a few days.

Each boy had his particular gift for disruption. Just last week, Meir had smuggled a frog into the cheder in his coat pocket. It had escaped at precisely the wrong moment—mid-sentence, during the substitute *melamed*'s most serious point—and sent the entire room into chaos. The *melamed* had not returned the following day. Shimon possessed an uncanny ability to throw his voice—not just to disguise it, but to make it seem to come from somewhere else entirely. A corner of the room. Behind the bookcase. Beneath the floorboards. He could make himself sound like a creaking old man, a wailing infant, or a crow that had somehow found its way indoors. More than one unsuspecting *melamed* had spun around, or dropped his pointer, or stormed into the hallway searching for the phantom source of the disruption—only to turn back and find Shimon sitting perfectly still, eyes fixed innocently on his Gemara.

Chaim tried to focus on Reb Zalman's words, but the dream clung to his thoughts like morning mist. The adrenaline still coursed through his veins as he recalled the terrible storm, how he'd gripped the rope so tightly his knuckles went white, fighting not to be swept overboard. He could still see the faces of his shipmates—Captain Columbus, Moshe the Jewish pirate, and the other sailors, who were secret Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition.

Glancing to his right, he caught Meir grinning and winking at him. Chaim had to admit the scene must have been amusing—their *melamed* asking for the place in the text while he responded with maritime coordinates.

But why does it always have to be me? he thought ruefully.

Tonight, he would discuss this with his sister, Chaya. Though two years younger than he, she was a thoughtful listener who often provided insights that surprised him with their wisdom.

After cheder, as the boys walked home through the winding streets of Vitebsk, Aharon hurried to catch up, walking backward so he could face Chaim.

"You know, my friend, one day your dreaming will land you in real trouble. You're fortunate Reb Zalman has so much patience, but next year we'll have Reb Leibel, and he won't be nearly so understanding."

"I just don't understand it," Chaim said, shaking his head. "It felt completely real. I remember every detail—the smell of the salt air, the sound of the rigging, even the taste of the ship's biscuits."

Meir jogged up to them, interrupting their conversation. "There's still plenty of daylight—let's go down to the river and watch the real ships while you tell us about your imaginary voyage. Besides, I have something interesting to show you."

Their group consisted of nine boys: Chaim, Meir, Shimon, Yossel, Dovid, Aharon, Boruch, Zusha, and Elimelech, whom everyone called Eli. Zusha and Eli, despite being brothers only a year apart, were in the same group due to Eli's quick mind. Today they had to head straight home to help their mother. Boruch, the most serious *talmid*—partly because Reb Zalman was his father, but mostly due to his natural studious temperament—also went home to assist with household duties while his mother remained ill.

The remaining boys headed through the forest toward the Vitba River, for which their city was named. Vitebsk had grown into a substantial port, with ships regularly stopping to trade goods, make repairs, and take on supplies. On the outskirts of town, massive oak trees stretched their branches over the flowing water, providing perfect perches for watching the river traffic. The long Vitebsk winter had finally begun to loosen its grip. For months, the forest paths had lain buried beneath snow and ice, inaccessible to all but the hardiest travelers. But now the air had softened, and the first signs of spring were quietly returning to the world. Meltwater trickled through the roots of the trees, patches of green pushed stubbornly through the thawing earth, and for the first time in many weeks, the boys were once again able to make their way to their favorite place in the forest.

As they walked, Meir pulled out what appeared to be a brass tube from his pocket. His father was a traveling merchant who dealt in all manner of curiosities, and Meir frequently brought fascinating items to show his friends.

"Behold," he announced dramatically, "a genuine spyglass!"

Chaim stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes widening as if he'd spotted a viper. "A spyglass? Truly? May I examine it?"

As Meir handed over the brass instrument, Dovid peered over Chaim's shoulder. "What's its purpose?"

"It magnifies distant objects, making them appear much closer," Meir explained proudly.

"But how does it work?" Dovid pressed.

"Haven't you seen the microscope in Shia's apothecary shop?" Chaim answered, turning the spyglass over in his hands. "He uses it to examine his medicines closely. There are several glass lenses arranged inside that make distant objects seem nearer. When light passes through these lenses, it's called refraction, and that's what creates magnification."

"What exactly is refraction?" asked Meir.

Chaim was well-read and possessed a wealth of knowledge about unusual subjects. Ironically, it was only during formal lessons that his attention wandered.

"Light bends when it passes through glass," Chaim explained eagerly. "Have you noticed how different things look when viewed through a window or a glass of water? That's refraction. Depending on the type and arrangement of lenses, objects can appear closer or farther away."

He paused, frowning slightly. "You know, this looks remarkably familiar. I'm certain I've seen one before, but I can't recall where."

"Are you sure?" Meir asked. "My father has never carried one before. This just arrived from Prague this week."

"I'm positive," Chaim replied, raising the spyglass to his eye. "Wait…now I remember. I saw one exactly like this in my dream during cheder today."

The boys burst into laughter, and even Chaim couldn't help but join in.

"No, wait—I'm serious! This wasn't an ordinary dream. It was different. None of you understand…it felt absolutely real."

While most of the boys scrambled to claim spots on the spreading oak branches, Chaim walked slowly along the bank, scuffing his feet through the smooth river stones. The boys enjoyed waving to passing ships and barges, occasionally receiving return waves from sailors or the cheerful clang of a ship bell, which never failed to make them laugh. They made a game of guessing each vessel's place of origin, destination, and cargo.

Chaim climbed onto a sturdy branch, lost in thought about his dream, until Meir interrupted his reverie.

"All right, Chaim, confess—what books have you been reading from your father's shop lately?"

This brought more laughter, and Chaim chuckled along, knowing Meir had hit the mark. His father had spent years traveling from town to town selling *sefarim*, but as Vitebsk grew, he'd opened a permanent shop instead of hauling heavy loads from place to place.

While most of his stock consisted of Jewish religious texts, customers increasingly requested books on history and science, so he'd begun carrying those as well. With printing presses spreading across Europe, books were becoming more affordable, and people were eager to learn about the wider world.

Chaim constantly borrowed books from his father's inventory. Recently, he'd read about the Jews of Spain and their expulsion during the Inquisition, which likely inspired today's dream. His nighttime reading inevitably influenced his daytime fantasies. Another recent book about inventions had set his imagination to work overtime.

Yossel, the tallest and strongest among them, picked up some boards from the ground and carried them up their makeshift ladder. His father owned a lumber mill and provided them with scrap wood, so they decided to build a treehouse in one of the larger oaks. After several weeks of after-school work, their project was taking impressive shape. The growing structure filled them with pride and strengthened their friendship as they worked together to realize their shared vision.

During a quiet break from building, Aharon stood on their platform and gazed through the spyglass at the river traffic. Suddenly, he lowered the instrument and stepped backward with a gasp.

"What is it?" asked Meir.

"That's strange!" Aharon exclaimed. "I was watching someone quite far away—too far to see me, I thought. But he looked directly at me and waved!"

"Impossible," said Meir. "Are you certain? We're much too far for anyone to spot us clearly."

"I'm telling you, he saw me," Aharon insisted.

"Let me look." Meir took the spyglass and aimed it where Aharon indicated. After a moment, he gasped and quickly lowered it.

"Incredible! I see him, too. Wait…" He looked again. "He's looking right at me and waving as if he knows I'm watching!"

Everyone suddenly wanted a turn with the spyglass.

"Can you identify him?" asked Shimon.

"Someone with reddish hair," offered Dovid after his turn. "I think it's Yisrolik—you know, the simple-looking fellow who hangs out with the town beggars, the one who gathers the younger children each morning and walks them to cheder, singing with them in the street."

"Are you certain?" asked Shimon. "It's quite distant. How can you be sure?"

"I'd recognize that orange beard anywhere. He actually smiled and waved at me. Oh, dear—now he's heading this way. Should we run away?"

"Why would we run?" countered Chaim. "We've done nothing wrong. We'll stay here and see what he wants. Besides, I haven't finished telling you about my dream."

Chaim spent the next ten minutes sharing the rest of his adventure while the boys took turns with the spyglass.

"I wonder if the dream has any meaning," Chaim mused aloud.

"Fascinating," said Yossel. "Which books did you say you've been reading lately?"

Chaim's face reddened. "About the expulsion of Jews from Spain and the Inquisition that hunted secret Jews, plus stories about the great scholars of that era."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, a book about Jewish pirates, and another about maritime navigation," Chaim added with a sheepish grin.

"I've heard that our nighttime dreams usually reflect what we read or experience during the day," said Yossel thoughtfully, "but this is the first time I've seen someone dream during the day about what he reads at night!"

Everyone laughed good-naturedly. They were close friends, and Chaim wasn't offended. He joined in their laughter, knowing they meant no harm—just friendly teasing that reminded him of the camaraderie among the sailors in his dream.

Footsteps approached through the trees, and the redheaded man appeared below, smiling and waving.

"Hello, boys," he called out cheerfully. "I'm Yisrolik."

"We didn't mean to spy on you," Meir said quickly.

Yisrolik's smile widened. "I'm not upset. I know you weren't spying."

"But I saw you wave at me," said Aharon, puzzled. "How did you know I was watching from so far away?"

"Sunlight reflects off glass," Yisrolik explained. "I saw the glint and realized someone in the trees had a glass instrument, so I waved even though I couldn't see who it was. Curiosity got the better of me, so I decided to investigate."

He looked around admiringly at their treehouse. "Did you boys build this yourselves?"

They all nodded proudly.

"Very impressive work," he said with genuine appreciation.

"My father provided spare wood and nails from his mill," said Yossel, his chest swelling with pride. "We like spending our free time here."

"Does the roof keep out rain?" asked Yisrolik, examining their construction.

"Certainly does," Yossel replied confidently.

"Remarkable—truly professional craftsmanship."

The boys beamed at this praise from the first adult to see their creation.

As they introduced themselves, Yisrolik commented with a knowing smile, "I've heard about you boys. What do they call you?"

"The wild ones," said Meir with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Most *melamdim* don't want to deal with us," added Shimon matter-of-factly.

"Is that so?" asked Yisrolik thoughtfully. "Perhaps I should give it a try."

"Don't waste your time," said Shimon with a laugh.

"You're spirited and honest, which is wonderful. But don't underestimate me—or yourselves," Yisrolik replied warmly.

The boys exchanged uncertain glances, unsure how to respond to this unexpected confidence.

"May I see that glass instrument?"

Meir handed over the spyglass, and Yisrolik climbed their ladder to examine it properly. He peered through it toward the river for several moments before returning it.

"A fine spyglass indeed," he said admiringly. "You know, I spend considerable time in the forests around town, but I don't believe I've ever explored this area. It seems perfect for meditation and contemplating Hashem's wonderful creation."

"Aren't you afraid to wander the forest alone?" asked Shimon.

"When I was young, my father lay dying, and he told me to fear nothing and no one except Hashem. I've lived by those words ever since. And you know what? When you show no fear, you often discover there was nothing to fear in the first place."

"Yisrolik," Chaim said suddenly, "may I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know anything about dreams? I had one today that felt incredibly real, and I'd like to understand if it has any meaning."

"Dreams? I can't interpret them like Yosef did for Pharaoh, but I'd be happy to listen and share my thoughts."

Aharon groaned and climbed down the ladder. "Oh no, not again! I've already heard this tale, so I'll take my leave now."

Dovid and Yossel joined Aharon, leaving only Meir, Shimon, and Chaim with Yisrolik.

"Don't forget to mention the Jewish pirates!" Aharon called over his shoulder as he headed toward town.

Yisrolik chuckled softly, watching Aharon disappear down the path toward town.

"Jewish pirates," he repeated, still smiling. "There's nothing wrong with that, you know—a well-placed wisecrack." He turned to the remaining boys with a warm look. "As a matter of fact, the Sages of the Talmud had a healthy sense of humor themselves. The word *bedichusa*—a joke, a witticism, a humorous remark—appears seventeen times in the Talmud. Seventeen times our Sages saw fit to let humor into the most sacred of texts. That tells us something. And it doesn't end there. Both *Rashi* and *Tosafos*, in their commentaries, point to additional instances throughout the Talmud where the Sages were being humorous, even where the word *bedichusa* itself doesn't appear. They recognized that humor was woven into the fabric of the discussion, not merely tolerated but embraced."

Yisrolik paused and looked at the sky. "Don't you all need to return home soon?" he asked.

"We should," replied Chaim, "but I don't need to rush. If you'd like, we can continue talking as we walk home." Yisrolik gestured toward the path and began walking slowly, the boys falling into step beside him.

"The Talmud tells us that the great Sage Rabbah had a remarkable practice. Whenever he lectured in Talmudic law, he would always begin with a joke, causing his students to laugh—and only then would he continue with his serious, in-depth analysis." Yisrolik glanced at the boys. "Now, you might think he did this the way a public speaker uses humor to capture an audience's attention. But Rabbah's students were dedicated scholars, ready to receive his teachings with full concentration. He didn't need a trick to keep them focused. So why the joke?"

Chaim furrowed his brow. "To put them in a good mood?"

"Precisely—but it goes deeper than that. Our Sages teach us that simchah—joy and happiness—breaks through walls. We all carry symbolic fences and barriers surrounding our minds and hearts. These walls create our inhibitions, keep us inside our comfort zones, make us reluctant to grow or change. When we are sad or downcast, those walls grow stronger, our energy drains away, and we slip into apathy." He paused. "But joy tears those fences down. When we are upbeat and positive, we become

more flexible, more confident—willing to test fresh ideas, challenge old habits, think in ways we never had before. In moments of real joy, our inhibitions fall away, and our minds are freed to soar."

He looked at each boy in turn. "Rabbah didn't just want dedicated students. He wanted creative ones. He wanted them to ask challenging questions, to approach the material from unexpected angles, to think beyond their natural ability. The laughter at the beginning of each lesson opened their minds to do exactly that." He smiled. "Personal growth and real learning can only happen in the context of optimism and joy. So yes, keep laughing. It breaks through walls."

He paused one final beat. "Of course, one still has to know when humor is appropriate. And it also has to be funny."

Chaim grinned. "Was Aharon's funny?"

"Borderline," said Yisrolik, his eyes twinkling. "Now—you wanted to tell me about this dream of yours."

"It was an amazing dream," Chaim began, "but it felt completely real. I was a *talmid* in Seville, studying with Rabbi Avraham Zacuto—the famous rabbi and astronomer—just before the expulsion of Jews in…I'm not certain of the exact year."

"The expulsion was in the year 5252," replied Yisrolik, "or 1492 by the secular calendar."

Chaim nodded and continued. "Rabbi Avraham was renowned for making maps and mathematical tables for ocean tides and stellar navigation. Ship captains bought their charts from him before major voyages.

"The dream began with me studying under Rabbi Avraham. One day, Captain Columbus arrived, requesting a private audience. After a while, they emerged, with Columbus holding various maps, and Rabbi Avraham asked if I wanted to join the captain as assistant navigator on a voyage to find a new route to India. After convincing my parents that it was time to leave Spain, I received their approval, and, making preparations, I joined Columbus's expedition.

"There was trouble with Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, who suspected Columbus of smuggling something aboard his ship. After a tense confrontation and thorough search that revealed nothing suspicious, we

finally sailed. Once in open waters, I discovered that Captain Columbus was secretly Jewish, as were all his sailors—they were escaping Spain to live openly as Jews again. That was their secret.

"During the voyage, I befriended the sailors. Since they'd been forced to hide their Judaism, they knew little Torah, so I taught them what I could. They were eager to learn.

"Days later, we spotted a pirate ship approaching and prepared for battle. When the pirates boarded, we discovered that they were also Jews, led by Moshe Cohen Henriques, who was feared by all Spanish captains. Upon learning we were Jews, he became friendly and helpful. He was grateful we could help him form a minyan to say *Kaddish* for his father.

"Then we encountered a massive storm. My responsibility was tracking our coordinates so we could navigate if blown off course. During storms, I had to call out our position to the navigator every few minutes. As the ship pitched wildly and I shouted coordinates, a huge wave crashed over me, and everything went dark. The next thing I heard was a voice asking if I knew where we were. That's when I called out our last known position, but then I heard laughter and realized my eyes were closed. When I opened them—"

"You found yourself in Vitebsk!" Shimon interjected with a laugh.

"Exactly," Chaim smiled. "I was back in cheder, with my classmates laughing and my *melamed* looking frustrated."

"What a fascinating dream, Chaim," said Yisrolik thoughtfully. "Some dreams carry messages, while others are simply dreams without deeper significance. Let me consider this, and I'll share my thoughts with you. Do you remember any other details?"

"I recall building a complex device with many gears alongside Rabbi Avraham. I can't remember all the details, but it was an instrument for calculating time, direction at sea, and other astronomical events."

"That sounds intriguing. If you remember more details, I'd like to hear them."

Soon they reached town and parted ways. Meir waved as he headed down the narrow alleyway toward his home. Chaim glanced back at

Yisrolik, wondering whether he would truly consider his dream or was merely being polite.

Shimon kicked a stone along the cobblestones, and they took turns attempting to reach it first, laughing and jostling playfully. Suddenly, Shimon stopped and pulled Chaim into a shadowed doorway, pressing a finger to his lips. His eyes darted nervously as Chaim followed his gaze, both boys watching and listening intently.

Finally, Chaim could no longer stand the suspense and gave Shimon a questioning look while remaining silent.

"What's wrong?" he whispered.

"Shh…I thought someone was following us. Just…wait…"

After several tense minutes, Shimon took a deep breath and whispered his reply.

"The other day, community leaders came to speak with my father. I overheard them talking in our garden outside my window. Did you know there's trouble brewing here in Vitebsk?"

Chaim felt his skin prickle. "Trouble? No, I didn't know. What kind of trouble?"

"It seems certain people in town are planning problems for the Jews. I heard them mention two names—Kuzitzki and Nikolaiev—both known troublemakers. And apparently, the local Catholic priest, Father Wozniak, is somehow involved."

Chaim's eyes widened as part of his dream suddenly became relevant. The evil inquisitor Torquemada had been relentless in hunting those called "New Christians," who were actually secret Jews. He used torture to extract confessions, then had them burned alive publicly as a warning to others. The Church confiscated their wealth and shared it with the king. He'd even boarded Columbus's ship before departure, demanding to inspect everything. He found nothing suspicious, never suspecting that all the sailors were really Jews smuggling themselves and their gold out of Spain—the gold melted and hidden in the bottoms of water barrels.

"What else did you hear?" asked Chaim.

Shimon shrugged. "Not much more. They spoke in whispers, so I only

caught fragments. But I think we should stay alert and see what we can discover."

Chaim leaned against the limestone wall, nodding. "Again and again, this happens to Jews throughout history. Don't you think it's time we found ways to stand up and fight back? In my dream—"

Shimon rolled his eyes and resumed walking. "You and your dreams! What does this possibly have to do with what I just told you?"

"Wait," Chaim replied, grabbing Shimon's arm. "Just listen for a moment."

Shimon stopped and crossed his arms, cocking his head impatiently.

"Listen—in my dream, Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, sought to eliminate Jews from Spain using horrible torture to expose conversos who pretended to be Christian but secretly practiced Judaism. But Captain Columbus bravely opposed him, protecting and saving many Jews by smuggling them out on his ship disguised as sailors. Do you see what I'm suggesting?"

Understanding dawned on Shimon's face, and he rolled his eyes. "That perhaps we should also smuggle Jews to safety?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes—I mean, no! Stop being silly," Chaim responded. "What I mean is that maybe we can do more than simply keep our heads down while certain people degrade us and make our lives miserable. Perhaps it's time we fight back and show them we can defend ourselves."

"You know," said Shimon, his expression growing serious, "every time there's trouble and community leaders gather to discuss responses, they always do the same thing—wring their hands and ask, 'What will be?' I think they're asking the wrong question. They should ask, 'What are we going to do about it?'"

This was why Chaim valued Shimon's friendship—he always took initiative. Instead of waiting for things to happen, he wanted to make things happen.

"Should we tell the others, or perhaps Yisrolik? He seems trustworthy," suggested Chaim.

"For now, it's probably best we keep this to ourselves. Besides, we don't really know much yet. But let's start by trying to learn more about what's

happening. We must be extremely careful not to endanger anyone. You know these people are always seeking excuses to blame Jews for anything."

With determination in their eyes, they headed home.

When Chaim arrived, he found his sister, Chaya, hanging laundry in their yard. He was pleased to find her alone—he didn't want to tell his parents about his dream, as his father might restrict his late-night reading.

After listening to Chaim's account of the day's events, Chaya smiled and shook her head knowingly. As they prepared to go inside, she asked, "Chaim, you mentioned sharing interesting Torah insights with the sailors in your dream, correct?"

Chaim nodded, uncertain where she was leading.

"Well, you probably read those somewhere, too, right? Where did you encounter them?"

Chaim stopped walking. Where had he read them? Everything jumbled in his mind, making it difficult to separate dreams from memory.

"Umm…I'm not sure," he answered, hurrying off to his room to investigate. "Thanks, Chaya," he called as an afterthought.