

The Roar of a Lion

The life and times of the Kol Aryeh,
Rav Avraham Yehudah Hakohein Schwartz,
the Beregszaszer Rav, one of the greatest *talmidim*
of the Chasam Sofer and the Sanzer Rav

compiled and narrated by
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CHAPTER ONE

The Chasam Sofer's Talmid

On a bright summer day in 1838, a young boy arrived in the Jewish quarter of the Slovakian capital city of Bratislava. Situated on the Danube River in the southwestern corner of the country, bordering on both Hungary and Austria, Bratislava was known among the Jewish people as Pressburg, its German name. The boy was not quite fourteen years old. His name was Avraham Yehudah Hakohein Schwartz; people called him

Avraham Leib. He was all alone and almost two hundred miles distant from his home and family in Måd, Hungary. He had been traveling for months, and now he had finally arrived.

With a bag of his meager belongings slung over his shoulder and his cap pulled low over his forehead, he strode along the Judengasse. The crowded, narrow, cobblestoned street snaked through the Jewish quarter between long rows of tall buildings that stood shoulder to shoulder like soldiers at attention. The buildings cast shadows across the people in the street, but they did not muffle the clamor of excited voices arguing, bargaining, laughing or just talking aloud so that they could be heard over the cacophonous noise.

Avraham Leib passed the Beis Haknesses Hagadol, the main *shul* of Pressburg, and eventually found his way to the Pressburg Yeshivah. This was the famous *yeshivah* of Rav Moshe Sofer, known as the Chasam Sofer, who had established it in 1807, a year after he became the *rav* of Pressburg. Since then, thirty-one years had passed, and many hundreds of young *talmidim* had passed through its doors and gone on to become some of the leading *rabbanim* and community leaders of the generation. Avraham Leib looked up at the imposing building of the Pressburg Yeshivah. He had finally arrived at his ultimate destination.

Avraham Leib was an extraordinary boy. Many people in his hometown and district already knew of his precocious brilliance, the shining star of the *yeshivah* of Rav Yitzchak Nassan Lipschitz, the *rav* of Måd. Just about everyone had heard about how this young prodigy had formulated his own intricately argued *derashah* for his *bar-mitzvah* on the *sugya* of *chazakos* with no help from anyone else. But that brilliance alone would not have foretold his future as one of the great *gedolei Torah* of his time. He was also dedicated to his learning with intense concentration and perseverance, supremely confident in his own abilities and amazingly fearless and courageous for a thirteen-year-old boy in the pursuit of his goals.

Shortly after Avraham Leib's *bar-mitzvah*, Rav Yitzchak Nassan

Lipschitz left Måd, and no one immediately took his place; in fact, the position would remain unfilled for a number of years. With no one to lead it, the *yeshivah* soon closed down, and Avraham Leib continued his learning under the tutelage of his father, Rav Pinchas Zelig Schwartz, a worthy and serious *talmid chacham* who supported his family through investments.

Avraham Leib understood full well that his growth in Torah would be stifled if he remained in his hometown with neither a *rav* nor a *yeshivah*. He knew he had to seek his destiny beyond Måd, and as soon as the winter was over, he set off all by himself to find a *yeshivah* and a great *rebbe* who would guide his progress in Torah.

The destination of his dreams was Pressburg, where he could meet and learn from the illustrious Chasam Sofer. But he was also a realist. He understood that it was quite possible that another *rav* and *yeshivah* might be more suited to him. And while the Chasam Sofer was the acknowledged *gadol hador*, Avraham Leib had no guarantee that his own aspirations in Torah would be best served by learning in the Chasam Sofer's *yeshivah*. Accordingly, he resolved to meet with every prominent *rav* he encountered in the course of his travels in the direction of Pressburg and investigate every *yeshivah*. And so he spoke with many *rabbanim* about the *sugyos* he had studied thoroughly, and he invariably impressed them with his knowledge, insights and originality of thought. He also spent time in the *yeshivos* he encountered and considered their different approaches to learning Gemara. But in none of these cities did he feel that this was where he truly belonged.

The only place he even considered was Lakenbach, where the great Rav Shalom Ullman, author of *Divrei Rash*, led an important *yeshivah*. The *yeshivah* really impressed him, and he felt drawn to the *rav*. But after a short while, he decided that Lakenbach was, after all, not the place for him. He wanted to live and learn in a city with a high level of *kedushah*, and he feared that the *kedushah* in Lakenbach was not high enough for him. He had discovered in his learning that the forces of *tumah* and *kedushah* were

always in balance, and when the force of *kedushah* is strong, a corresponding force of *tumah* will emerge to counteract it. But he noticed that no church spire rose above the rooftops of Lakenbach, a sign that the force of *tumah* in the city was weak. If so, the force of *kedushah* must also be weak. This was not a place where he could grow. And so he moved on.

When he entered the *beis midrash* of the Pressburg Yeshivah, Avraham Leib had a feeling that this was where he belonged. This was where he would fit in perfectly. It did not matter that at fourteen years of age he would be the youngest *talmid* in the *yeshivah* by far, most of the *talmidim* being at least eighteen years old. It did not matter that he would be very far from home and that he would have to survive on the small amounts of money his father would send to him. This was where he belonged. But the first order of business was to gain acceptance to the *yeshivah*.

The people in the *yeshivah* looked at the young boy skeptically, but when he insisted he was serious about joining the *yeshivah*, an appointment with the Chasam Sofer was arranged. After waiting apprehensively, he was finally ushered into the Chasam Sofer's presence.

The Chasam Sofer was seventy-six years old at the time. His beard was long and white, and his piercing eyes glowed with wisdom. Avraham Leib was overwhelmed by a feeling of immense awe, but he quickly regained control over himself. If he showed weakness and immaturity, he feared, the Chasam Sofer might not accept him into the *yeshivah*. He took a deep breath and confidently approached the table and extended his hand.

"*Shalom aleichem,*" said the Chasam Sofer. "What is your name?"

"Avraham Yehudah Hakohein Schwartz from Mád."

"I understand that you want to join the *yeshivah*."

"With all my heart."

"Aren't you a little young?"

"I think I can keep up."

"We will see. So tell me something you've learned recently."

Avraham Leib proceeded to say the *derashah* he had said at his *bar-*

mitzvah. He spoke with strength, confidence and clarity, as a mature *talmid chacham* would be expected to do. The Chasam Sofer listened with enjoyment.

The Chasam Sofer was impressed. “An excellent piece,” he said. “Where is it from?”

“It was my *derashah* at my *bar-mitzvah*.”

“And who prepared it for you?”

“I did it myself.”

The Chasam Sofer’s eyes widened, and he looked carefully at the determined young boy standing before him. A genius of this caliber was a rare find, especially one with the character and determination to achieve true greatness.

The Chasam Sofer nodded. “You are accepted into the *yeshivah*. Speak to one of the supervisors to help you make sleeping and eating arrangements.”

Avraham Leib hesitated.

“What is it?” said the Chasam Sofer.

“Could I have an older *bachur* assigned to learn with me?” said Avraham Leib.

Those that requested older *bachurim* to learn with them were usually in need of tutoring to keep up with the *yeshivah*.

“You don’t need an older *bachur*,” said the Chasam Sofer. “Your learning is perfectly fine. You will have no trouble keeping up.”

“I was merely asking for a good *chavrusa*,” said Avraham Leib, “someone who will challenge me and argue with me so that we will both gain and grow.”

“Of course.”

Avraham Leib was thereby assigned two *chavrusos*, both of them reputed to know the entire *Sefer Urim Vetumim* practically by heart. One of them was Aharon Greenberg, who would one day become the *rav* of Mihailovitch; he would author the famous *Daas Sofer*. The other was Dovid

Katz Bistritz, who would one day become the *rav* of Milchdorf; he would author *Beis Dovid*. These two young men would be his *chavrusos* during the entire time he was in Pressburg, and they maintained a close relationship for many years after.

The rule in the *yeshivah* was that *talmidim* could not come into the *beis midrash* with simple cloth caps. Instead, they had to wear tall stovepipe top hats called cylinders, the customary headgear of the religious Jews of the Pressburg community. A *bachur* without a top hat was not allowed into the *beis midrash* during *shiur* or other times when a hat was required.

So Avraham Leib had to buy a top hat, but he only had three *gratzer*. He spent one *gratzer* on a bag of prunes, which he could eat when his hunger pangs became too strong to ignore. That left him two *gratzer*, much less than the price of a new hat. He, therefore, had only one option. He had to buy a used hat. The only hat he could find was two sizes too big for him, but he had no choice. This old hat was his passport into the Chasam Sofer's *shiur*.

The hat was so enormous on him that when he put it on it fell down all the way to his nose, completely covering his eyes. But he discovered that if he inserted his bunched fingers between the hat and his head it remained in its proper place.

With his hat firmly upon his head and his fingers wedged in to hold it in place, he entered the *beis midrash* and took his seat. His heart beat with eager anticipation. He was about to hear a *shiur* directly from the legendary Chasam Sofer himself.

The *shiur* began, and it wasn't long before it sparked an uproar in the *beis midrash* as the *talmidim* asked questions and then engaged in heated arguments with each other about the point the Chasam Sofer had raised. Avraham Leib listened in fascination for a while, and then he felt a powerful urge to express his own views on the issues being discussed. Despite his relative youth and the newness of his arrival in the *yeshivah*, he plunged right into the fray with fire and passion. Soon he was in the thick of

the battle, defending his own ideas and arguing against those with which he disagreed.

In the heat of the moment, he instinctively punctuated his argument with a jab of his right thumb in the air. His fingers no longer wedging his oversized top hat in place, it fell down over his head until only his mouth was visible. The sight of the young boy sitting in the *beis midrash* with half his head buried in his top hat was so hilarious that the other *talmidim* burst into laughter. Avraham Leib's face flushed with shame, but the fallen top hat prevented the others from seeing the extent of his discomfiture. The interlude lasted only a brief moment, and then the discussion resumed where it had left off.

After the *shiur*, the Chasam Sofer summoned Avraham Leib to his study.

"You did well today," said the Chasam Sofer as he smiled benevolently. He handed a few coins to the boy. "Please use this money to buy yourself a hat that fits you."

Avraham Leib settled into the rhythm of the *yeshivah* with determination and diligence that were almost as impressive as the extraordinary quickness and sharpness of his mind and the originality of his thoughts. The Chasam Sofer took a great personal interest in him and showed him unusual favor. For his part, Avraham Leib hung on every word spoken by the Chasam Sofer and committed it to memory. In a short time, he became one of the shining stars of the *yeshivah*. This rising prominence brought him a useful side benefit. He was assigned to the group known as the *Shabbos bachurim*.

As was the custom in those days, the *yeshivah* did not provide food or accommodations for the *talmidim*. They had to sleep in rooms and alcoves they rented from the householders. As for food, the householders would take turns feeding the *talmidim*, who belonged to one of two groups, the *teg bachurim* and the *Shabbos bachurim*. The *teg bachurim* would go the home of a different householder every day. This was called eating *teg*, which

means days in Yiddish. The *Shabbos bachurim* would go the home of a different householder every week.

It was a great privilege to be a *Shabbos bachur* for two reasons. One, they were spared the bother and discomfort of coming to a new home every day. In addition, the householders who hosted *Shabbos bachurim* were usually better off, and the food they served was more ample and nourishing. Avraham Leib's elevated status in the *yeshivah* earned him a place among the *Shabbos bachurim*.

Almost from the beginning, the Chasam Sofer exhibited a strong love for his new young *talmid*. Over the years, he had produced many *talmidim* of the highest caliber, and he could see that this intense young boy would one day rank among the elite. He spoke to him often and always with love and endearment. And on Friday nights, when the *talmidim* came over to the Chasam Sofer to say, "*Gut Shabbos*," he always bestowed a special glowing smile on young Avraham Leib.

As an indication of his favor, the Chasam Sofer gave Avraham Leib a privilege very rarely extended to a *talmid*. He gave him free access to his study where he kept *sefarim* not available in the *beis midrash*. Avraham Leib liked to go to the Chasam Sofer's study before the *shiur* and browse through the *sefarim* unobtrusively while the Chasam Sofer sat at his table immersed in his preparations. He particularly enjoyed learning the *Yeshuos Yaakov*, which had just been published. He also liked looking through the Chasam Sofer's personal writings, both *teshuvos* and *chiddushim*, that lay piled on a table in the study. The Chasam Sofer did not reprimand him for it. On the contrary, he took pleasure in his young *talmid's* insatiable curiosity and thirst for knowledge.

Avraham Leib was not content to grow in Torah knowledge alone. He also wanted to grow in his *avodah* and come closer to the Ribono Shel Olam. Here in Pressburg, by learning the Torah of the Chasam Sofer and observing his *avodah*, he would have the opportunity to accomplish both. He drew particular inspiration by watching the Chasam Sofer's *tefilah*.

During Shemoneh Esrei, the Chasam Sofer would stand against the wall, immobile as a stone, his lips moving silently. The look on his face kept changing according to the ebb and flow of his emotions, sometimes going from pale to fiery red and back in moments. Avraham Leib watched the venerable sage in awe. Sometimes he even feared for the Chasam Sofer's life, and he had to restrain himself from running to his rescue.

A fellow *talmid* once saw him staring at the Chasam Sofer intently and said, "Did you ever try saying Shemoneh Esrei like that, without moving a limb? I did."

Avraham Leib shook his head. "That kind of thing is not for ordinary people like you and me. Only someone who is on a high level of *dveikus* can do that. Everyone else has to sway back and forth in the customary way. The rule for us is *kol atzmosei tomarnah*, let all my bones express it."

One time, a stranger came into the *yeshivah*. He sought out Avraham Leib and introduced himself.

"I'm from Hungary, not too far from Mád – your family knows me well. I've been learning for years to be a *rav*, and I've come to get *semichah* from the Chasam Sofer."

Avraham Leib was puzzled. "That's a very good idea," he said carefully.

"I need your help."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm very nervous," he said. "I mean, I tremble when I think about talking to the Chasam Sofer."

"So what can I do?"

"You can bring me in," he said, "and present me as someone acquainted with your family. It will make me more comfortable. Would you?"

"Of course."

Avraham Leib made the arrangements, and presently, the time for the *semichah* examination arrived.

"I have two questions for you," the Chasam Sofer said to the man. He

then presented two situations not addressed directly in the Shulchan Aruch.

A blank look appeared on the man's face. Clearly, he had no clue regarding how to answer the questions. He closed his eyes and concentrated hard, groping in his memory for some recollection of such a topic being discussed, but he was not successful. He sighed in defeat.

"I don't know," he said quietly.

Avraham Leib cleared his throat. "Aren't these questions discussed by the Acharonim?" he said, and he went on to quote several sources.

The man was dismayed at his failure to have seen those sources.

"I am really sorry I didn't know that," he said shame-facedly. "But I would never rely on my memory of what I've learned. I would never decide a *shailah* without going through all the sources meticulously until the answer was perfectly clear."

"And do you think I rely on my memory?" said the Chasam Sofer. "Do you think I remember the entire Shulchan Aruch by heart? But I did learn everything, and when a question arises I know where to look. But if you've never learned all the sources, how would you know where to look?"

Once, when Avraham Leib sat unobtrusively in a corner of the Chasam Sofer's study, he saw the Chasam Sofer opening and reading letters from all over the world, asking for his opinions and decisions on numerous difficult questions. The Chasam Sofer extracted each and opened it without looking at the handwriting that covered it. Then he folded the top portion onto itself so that he could only see the body of the letter and not the salutation. He knew that people began their letters with long and elaborate praises of his greatness, and he did not want to read them. Avraham watched him for a minute or two, and then he plunged back into his *sefarim*.

Suddenly, he heard a loud cry. Startled, he looked up and saw the Chasam Sofer weeping, his head down on his chest, his shoulders heaving.

Avraham Leib jumped up and ran to the Chasam Sofer's side.

"What happened?" he cried in alarm. "What can I do?"

The Chasam Sofer looked up at him through his tears. He held a letter in

his hand. There were no folds in the letter.

“I forgot to fold this one,” he said, “so I saw what was written on top. Look at what it says here.” He thrust the letter at Avraham Leib and waited for him to glance at the salutation. “If that is what people expect of me, if that is what I should have become, then I’ve failed miserably.”

“But it is just a custom,” said Avraham Leib. “That’s how people begin their letters. They don’t really mean it. It’s just a style.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said the Chasam Sofer. “But tell me, do you think there is even a little bit of truth in it?”

Avraham Leib gulped and nodded.

“Perhaps, perhaps,” said the Chasam Sofer, and his sobbing subsided.

During the *shiur*, the Chasam Sofer had Avraham Leib stand close by his side with his new top hat firmly on his head so that his hands were free for debate. He would look at Avraham Leib when he was explaining a particularly complex idea and derive pleasure from the light of understanding in the young *talmid’s* eyes.

After the *shiur*, Avraham Leib remained at the Chasam Sofer’s side as an older *talmid* reviewed the *shiur* for the rest of the *talmidim* while the Chasam Sofer listened.

On one occasion, Avraham Leib leaned over to the Chasam Sofer during the older *talmid’s* review and said, “According to this new idea, a difficult passage in Rashi is resolved.”

The Chasam Sofer nodded in agreement. After the review was over, before the *talmidim* dispersed, the Chasam Sofer announced to them, “There is one thing I would like to add to the *shiur*. As Avraham Leib pointed out, this is how we can now resolve a particularly perplexing piece of Rashi ...”

From time to time, the Chasam Sofer would invite a visiting dignitary to deliver a *derashah* to the *yeshivah*. One such visitor was Rav Moshe Pereles, the *rav* of Bonyhàd, Hungary, the author of *Bayis Ne’eman*. During his *derashah*, he connected the rule of *ein eid naaseh dayan*, that a judge

cannot rule according to testimony he himself has given, and the rule of *eid zomem lemafrea nifsal*, that an exposed perjurer becomes retroactively ineligible to bear witness. The audience was very impressed with this novel idea.

“This idea has already been suggested,” Avraham Leib called out. “The Mordechai brings it in the name of the Sar Mikutzi.”

There was a moment of silence, and then one of the older *talmidim* demanded that this claim be substantiated. A young *talmid* was sent off to bring the text, and indeed, it was exactly as Avraham Leib had said.

Rav Pereles smiled at him. “Amazing!” he said. “I’ve never seen a young boy who had such quick mastery of the Mordechai.”

“That’s not exactly right,” said Avraham Leib. “I did not see it in the Mordechai. I saw it brought down in the *Ketzos Hachoshen 7:5*.”

“And do you know that *sefer*?” asked the rav.

Avraham Leib nodded. “I learned it. I review it by heart all the time.”

“How about the *Shev Shemaatesa* by the same author?”

“That too.”

One time, a beggar in bedraggled clothing walked into the *beis midrash*. Some of the *talmidim*, Avraham Leib among them, went over to him and greeted him, “*Shalom aleichem*.” Others paid him no heed, while yet others snickered about him behind his back.

Just then, the Chasam Sofer came in and saw the beggar. He walked over and welcomed the beggar warmly. Then he led the beggar into his private study and stayed closeted with him for a very long time. Finally, they came out, and after a few parting words, the beggar took his leave.

“Do you know who that was?” the Chasam Sofer said to his *talmidim* after the beggar had left. “That was Eliahu Hanavi. Those of you that greeted him will become great *rabbanim* and *poskim*. They will teach Torah to the Jewish people. Those who ignored him will also become *talmidei chachamim* if that is where they are already heading, but they will not be *rabbanim* or *poskim*. Those who mocked him will abandon Yiddishkeit.”

Then he turned and walked back into his study.

Although the Chasam Sofer himself followed the Ashkenazic customs of Pressburg and upper Hungary, he recognized and acknowledged that his beloved Avraham Leib was rooted in the Chassidic traditions. One time, he was telling an amazing story about his *rebbe*, Rav Nassan Adler. Knowing the propensity of the Chassidim to tell wonder stories, he pointed to Avraham Leib and said, “Do you hear this story, Avraham Leib? Remember it. It will be useful to you in the future.”

On the first night of Pesach, the Chasam Sofer invited Avraham Leib to join him at the Seder. The young boy sat in awe as the Chasam Sofer performed the ancient rituals and imparted inspiring insights into the Haggadah. From time to time, when a discussion arose, Avraham Leib too offered his thoughts and opinions, eliciting smiles of pleasure from the venerable sage.

Finally, the meal began. Part of the main course was a *kugel* made of *matzah*, rendering it *gebrokts*. The young boy sat in silence, staring at the *kugel*. Everyone was eating, and he remained sitting immobile. Finally, he burst into tears. The Chasam Sofer looked at him in shock.

“Avraham Leib!” he exclaimed. “Why are you crying?”

“Because I don’t know what to do.”

“What is it?”

“I’m caught in a dilemma,” the weeping boy replied. “In my father’s home, we do not eat *gebrokts*. But the *rebbe*’s custom is to eat it. I’ve never eaten *gebrokts* in my life, and I don’t know what I should do. Should I follow my father’s custom and not eat it? Or should I eat it so that it will not appear as if I’m belittling my *rebbe*’s custom? I just don’t know what to do.”

“Avraham Leib,” said the Chasam Sofer, “with me you can eat it.”

Relieved, Avraham Leib immediately put a bite of the *kugel* into his mouth. As he chewed it with pleasure, he considered the exact wording of the Chasam Sofer’s reply. It was clearly not meant to release him from his

father's custom. The key words were "with me." Here, in the presence of the Chasam Sofer, it was permissible for him to eat *gebrokts*. But when he returned to the home of his father and when he would one day establish his own home, he should honor the custom of refraining from *gebrokts*. And this is what he resolved to do and eventually did. For the rest of his life, he never again ate *gebrokts*.

It was not easy for a young boy like Avraham Leib to be all alone so far from home, having to fend for himself without parents to help him other than by sending him some money from time to time. During his entire stay in Pressburg, he never returned home for a *yom tov* or a visit; the journey was simply too long and arduous. His only contact with his family was through periodic letters, which were not always delivered in a reliable and timely fashion, and it was often a cause of frustration. The following is the text of one of his letters home:

Monday, the 15th day of Sefirah 5599 (1839).

First, I want to let you know [he wrote in Hebrew] that, *baruch Hashem*, I'm in good health and that, praise be to Hashem, I am learning with great intensity. I am looking forward to hearing soon that all is in order with you as well.

I am really puzzled, dear father, that such a long time has passed since I received even the briefest note from you. It causes me great distress. You had written that you would send me letters and money, and I have received nothing. Although I was getting three guilders a month until Rosh Chodesh Adar, I haven't received a penny since then. I simply don't know what to do. I am two months behind in the rent for my room.

Please let me know as well if you forwarded the letter I sent you for Reb Shmuel of Saneta. Send him my best regards and ask him to respond.

Your son who awaits your speedy reply,
Avraham Leib from Måd

Please forgive me [he added in a Yiddish postscript] for writing so

poorly. I'm writing this at night in a great hurry, because my learning keeps me so busy.

As the year of Avraham Leib's stay in Pressburg drew on, the Chasam Sofer became weaker and weaker. It became increasingly difficult for him to deliver the *derashah* on Shabbos, and finally, he turned that duty over to his illustrious son Rav Avraham Shmuel Binyamin. The attendance at the *derashah* began to suffer. Avraham Leib, however, made it his business to attend without fail, and usually, he participated in the comments and discussions relating to the topic of the *derashah*. The Chasam Sofer's son was very pleased and encouraged by his attendance, as he would one day write in *Ksav Sofer*, "... he came to listen to my *derashah* every single Shabbos, and he always engaged me in a heated discussion."

The Chasam Sofer's condition worsened, and on 25 Tishrei 5600 (1839), he returned his *neshamah* to its Maker. He was seventy-seven years old. Avraham Leib, along with the rest of the *yeshivah*, the city of Pressburg and all of Klal Yisrael, mourned his passing deeply. At the same time, Avraham Leib offered a prayer of gratitude to the Ribono Shel Olam for the gifts he had received in Pressburg. He had enjoyed a close relationship with the *gadol hador* for almost a year and a half, and the benefits to his growth in Torah and his life as a faithful Jew were inestimable.

The time had come to move on. He was still only fifteen years old, and he needed to find a new *rebbe* who would continue to guide him towards the highest levels of Torah and *avodah*. He found this *rebbe* in Verbau (Vrbové), also in Slovakia, about forty miles from Pressburg.

The *rav* of Verbau was Rav Binyamin Wolf Lev, author of *Shaarei Torah*. Rav Binyamin Wolf was a famous *gaon*. His *yeshivah* was also well-known as a magnet for the finest *talmidim*.

Rav Binyamin Wolf took an instant liking to Avraham Leib, and he went out of his way to make the arrangements for the young prodigy. He introduced him to a wealthy widow and encouraged her to do what she could to promote the learning of this newcomer; it would be a great *zechus*

for her to have a share in his Torah. Seeing how impressed her *rav* was with the boy, she undertook upon herself to provide him with a private room with a bed, table, chair and lamp. She also prepared meals for him and made sure he did not want for anything. Avraham Leib was thrilled that he would be able to concentrate completely on his learning, and he was eternally grateful to her. Years later, when he heard that she passed away, he learned Mishnayos for the memory of her *neshamah* for the entire year.

Happy with his new situation, Avraham Leib progressed rapidly under the tutelage of Rav Binyamin Wolf, who engaged him in discussions constantly. The two became very close, and Rav Binyamin Wolf embraced him as if he were his own son.

Although Avraham Leib had composed the *derashah* for his own *bar-mitzvah* two years earlier, the focus of his subsequent learning had been on the accumulation of knowledge and on learning how to penetrate the intricacies of the *sugyos* he was learning. In Verbau, his inherent originality blossomed, and he began to offer novel and complicated interpretations that stunned and delighted his *rebbe* and the other *talmidim*. He began to write feverishly, and over time, accumulated piles of closely written notes filled with his brilliant insights. Years later, when he became a celebrated *gaon* and published his *Sheilos Uteshuvos Kol Aryeh*, he incorporated many of these insights from his time in Verbau when he was only fifteen years old.

During one of his *shiurim*, Rav Binyamin Wolf offered a novel insight, and not unexpectedly, the young Avraham Leib, who sat nearby, began to argue the point. The debate raged for a few minutes.

Finally, Rav Binyamin Wolf said, “All right, we’ll see. Bring me a Rambam, Hilchos Me’ilah, the Laws of Desecration.”

Avraham Leib sprang to his feet and turned to go, but the *beis midrash* was so crowded that he would have had to climb over many *talmidim* to get to the *sefarim* in the back. Having no choice, he asked the *talmidim* behind him to relay the request to the back of the *beis midrash*. Words passed from mouth to mouth, and a volume of the Rambam was brought to the front.

Rav Binyamin Wolf opened the Rambam and smiled. “I said I needed Hilchos Me’ilah,” he said to Avraham Leib. “This volume contains Hilchos Milah, the Laws of Circumcision. It’s not what I need.”

Avraham Leib was momentarily taken aback, but he recovered quickly.

“There is a proof from Hilchos Milah, too,” he said. “In fact, the Rambam in Hilchos Milah supports my point of view.”

Then he went on to construct a brilliant argument that extrapolated certain principles from the Rambam’s rulings in Hilchos Milah that could be applied to the subject under discussion. Rav Binyamin Wolf could not believe what he was hearing. His heart beat with excitement at this dazzling display of broad knowledge, quick and original thinking and pure intellectual power. It would have been stunning in a mature *talmid chacham*, let alone in a fifteen-year-old boy. When Avraham Leib finished his argument, Rav Binyamin Wolf stood up and went over to him. He kissed him on the head and pressed a gold coin into his hand.

Rav Binyamin Wolf would often take Avraham Leib along with him when he went for a walk. One time, they were taking a walk just after Rav Binyamin Wolf had published the third volume of his classic *Shaarei Torah*, the volume dealing with the topics of credibility and testimony. Rav Binyamin Wolf was extremely pleased with the final form of the *sefer*.

“This is my best *sefer* so far,” he told Avraham Leib. “Now that it’s been published I won’t be embarrassed when I meet the *talmidei chachamim* of earlier generations in the next world.”

“Does the *rebbe* allow me to express my opinion?” said Avraham Leib.

“Of course. I want to hear it.”

“In my opinion, the *rebbe*’s first volume, the one that deals with the topic of ownership and possession, is the superior work. They’re both wonderful, of course, and the *rebbe* has the right to decide which his favorite is.”

Rav Binyamin Wolf shook his head. “The new volume is superior.”

The conversation moved on to other matters, both *rebbe* and *talmid*

convinced that they were right. In later years, when Avraham Leib was a famous old *rav*, he still insisted that the first volume of the *Shaarei Torah* was superior to the others.

After a year in Verbau, Avraham Leib reluctantly told Rav Binyamin Wolf that it was time for him to go home. He'd been away for two and a half years, and his father wanted him home in Mād. It was time to consider the future.

Rav Binyamin Wolf nodded. "I understand," he said. "Come in to me tonight, and I will give you a letter of *semichah*."

That evening, Rav Binyamin Wolf handed Avraham Leib the cherished letter, a prestigious affirmation that very few were privileged to receive. Avraham Leib thanked his *rebbe* profusely and left the room without looking at the paper. Once outside, he wasted no time in reading the words Rav Binyamin Wolf had written. Immediately, he saw an error. Instead of describing him as *yelid Mād*, a native of Mād, Rav Binyamin Wolf had written *abdek Mād*, the *rav* of Mād. Avraham Leib quickly went back into the room to point out the oversight and request that it be corrected.

Rav Binyamin Wolf read the words with a bemused look on his face, then he smiled at Avraham Leib. "If that's what I wrote," he said, "then let's leave it that way."

Many years later, when Avraham Leib did indeed become the *rav* of Mād, he retold this story in his first *derashah*.

