

# Converging PATHS

Acclaimed novelist and mechaber sefarim Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman shares the chapters of his own life story

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman, also known as Avner Gold, is truly a phenomenon. He is exceedingly famous as the author of the Strasbourg Saga, a series of electrifying adventures widely recognized as masterpieces of historical fiction. At the same time, in Torah circles, especially at the higher levels, he is well-known for his classic *sefarim* on Gemara, which are also widely acclaimed as masterpieces. Somehow, he has managed to travel two separate roads and arrive at the pinnacles of both.

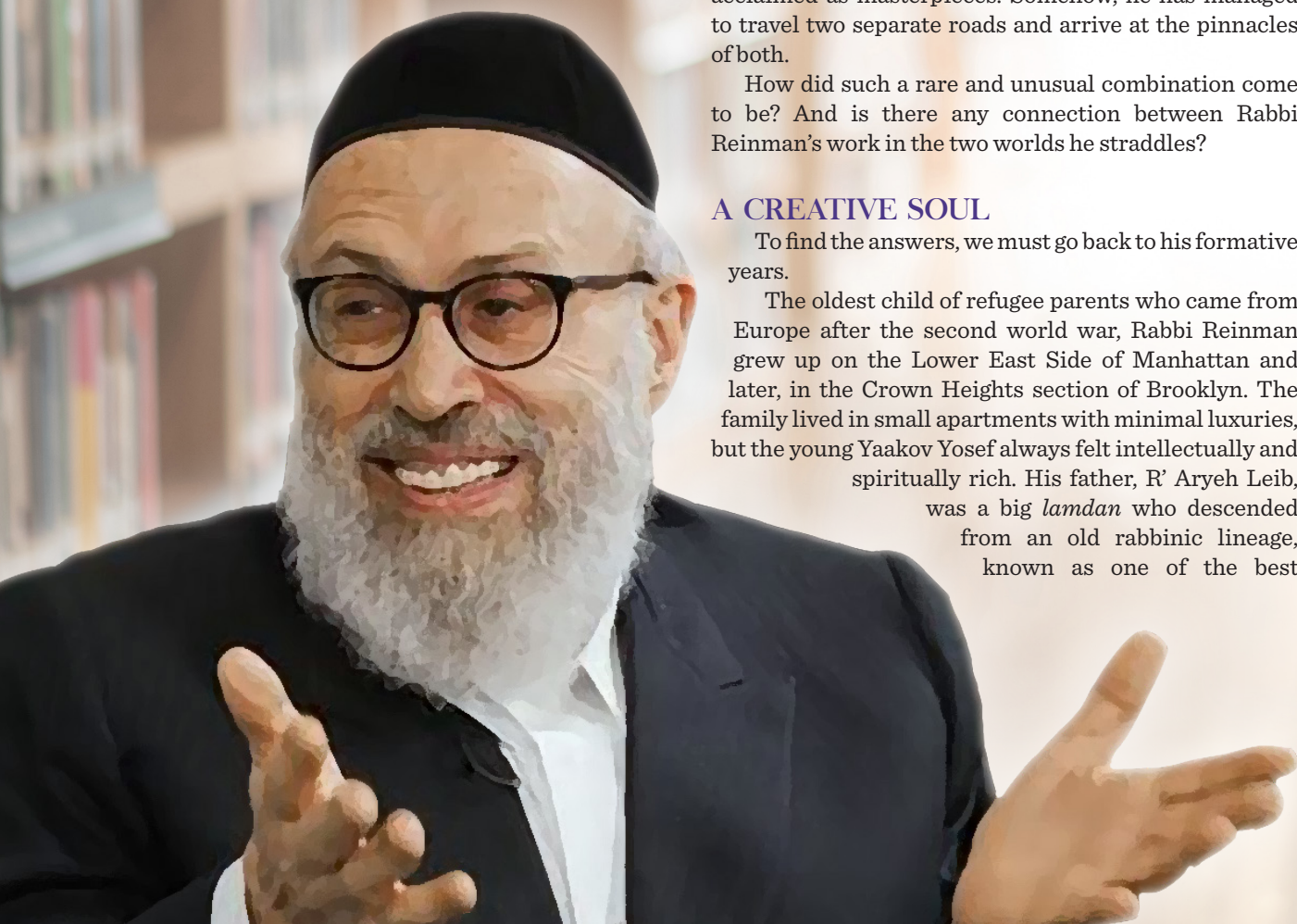
How did such a rare and unusual combination come to be? And is there any connection between Rabbi Reinman's work in the two worlds he straddles?

## A CREATIVE SOUL

To find the answers, we must go back to his formative years.

The oldest child of refugee parents who came from Europe after the second world war, Rabbi Reinman grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and later, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. The family lived in small apartments with minimal luxuries, but the young Yaakov Yosef always felt intellectually and spiritually rich. His father, R' Aryeh Leib,

was a big *lamdan* who descended from an old rabbinic lineage, known as one of the best





*talmidim* of the Lublin yeshivah. He learned and wrote *chiddushim* all the time, leaving a deep impression on his young son. His mother, Yenta, was an eighth-generation descendant of the Ba'al Shem Tov. She introduced him to classical music and the world of literature.

As a young boy, Yaakov Yosef aspired to become an architect. Not that he had any idea what that entailed; he just had a natural urge to be creative. At Yeshiva Chassan Sofer on the Lower East Side, he hungrily absorbed all knowledge he was offered, with great interest. At home, he was a voracious reader of fiction, especially books that expanded his knowledge of history and geography.

In the sixth grade, the teacher introduced the class to literature. He put a chair on his desk, clambered up, and recited Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." The class was captivated. The teacher also taught literary analysis and creative writing. He would take off points for *fine writing*, which meant weighing down the prose with large words when smaller words would do just as well. For the first time, Yaakov Yosef began to write prose and poetry and to appreciate the writer's craft. Nonetheless, it did not occur to him to aspire to become a fiction writer. It was not a career path for a *frum* boy as there was no Orthodox literary market at the time.

## RAV SHURKIN'S SHIUR

At age 14, Yaakov Yosef transferred to Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin and joined the *shiur* of the legendary Rav Yaakov Moshe Shurkin. Most of the *bachurim* in Chaim Berlin were going to college to become accountants, programmers, and the like. These

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option did not particularly appeal to Yaakov Yosef; he considered them just ways to make money. Still, he had no firm plans for the trajectory of his life.

Rav Shurkin's *shiur*, however, was a life-changing experience. Although the *shiur* was attended by many *bachurim* who were in their third year of *beis medrash*, Rav Shurkin never mention *Rishonim* or *Acharonim* other than *Rashi* and *Tosafos*. Instead of burdening the *bachurim* with more information, he delved into the ideas, the principles, and the concepts, and he demanded the participation of the *bachurim*. If there was a

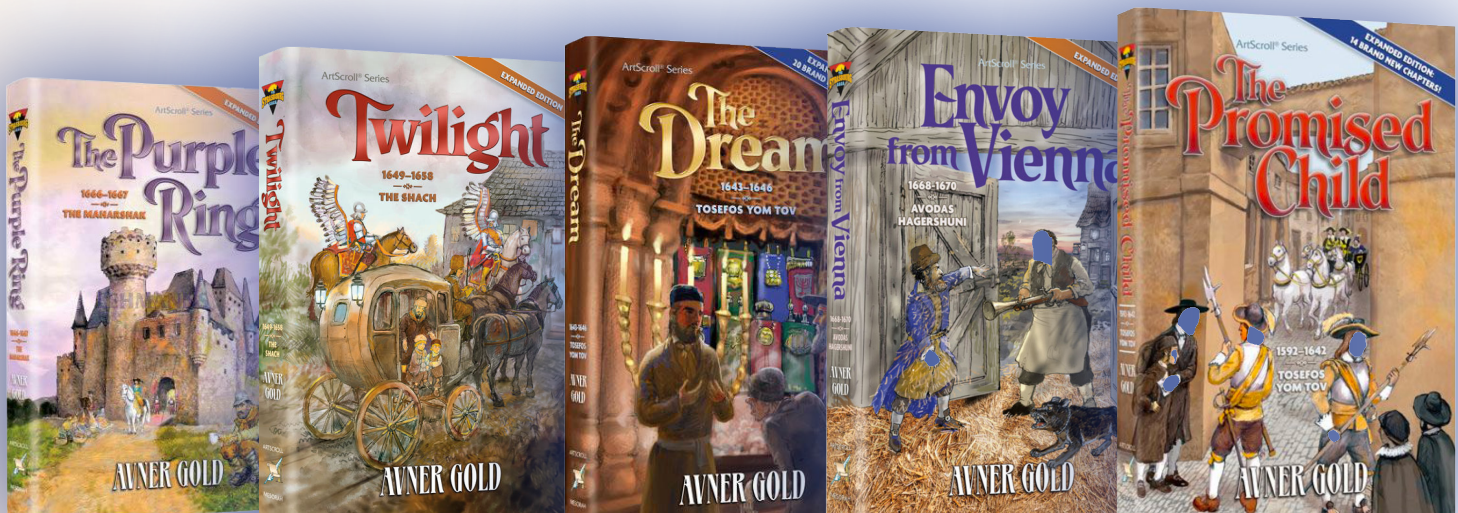
*machlokes* between *Rashi* and *Tosafos*, he would say, "What are the *sevaros* (concepts)? Tell me a *chakirah* (present the contrasting concepts)!" It was pure *lomdus*, and it was dazzling. Yaakov Yosef immediately knew he had found his passion—he wanted to explore the Torah in the light of pure *lomdus*.

Yaakov Yosef would have stayed in the *shiur* for another year or two, but Rav Shurkin passed away that summer. A few months later, Yaakov Yosef joined a small *chaburah* organized by Rav Michel Shurkin, R' Yaakov Moshe's son. They would meet for six to eight hours over Shabbos in a neighborhood shul, and under R' Michel's guidance, they delved into what they had learned that week.

## THE PATH OF TORAH

After two years in R' Michel's *chaburah*, Yaakov Yosef went to Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, where he formed a close personal relationship with Rav Shneur Kotler.

Over the years, he had studied and written about many *sugyos* that deal with *shtaros*, including the status of all sorts of legal documents in the light of *lomdus*. He decided to concentrate full-time on writing a *sefer* on that topic. At the time, he had no idea how overwhelming this undertaking would be. But it was sink or swim, and he swam. After two and a half years, the *sefer* was complete. He called it *Shufra*







*Dishtara.*

He traveled to Eretz Yisrael to get a *haskamah* from Rav Shach, who also had a love for *shtaros*. He brought along a letter of introduction from R' Shneur. Rav Shach told him that he was no longer giving *haskamos*, but because of R' Shneur's letter, he had no choice. Yaakov Yosef left the manuscript with him, and six weeks later, he received an incredible *haskamah*. Rav Shach had written that the *sefer* should become a *sefer shimushi*, a standard text, especially in the higher yeshivos, and indeed, his *brachah* was fulfilled—*Shufra Dishtara* has become one of the most important works in this field. He also received beautiful *haskamos* from Rav Moshe Feinstein, the Minchas Yitzchak, and R' Shneur Kotler.

The publication of the *sefer* caused a sensation, especially because at that time, before the proliferation of computers and desktop publishing, not many new *sefarim* were being

but he wanted only stories. Rabbi Reinman assumed he could get stories from a certain source, but as the deadline for the mailing drew near, the stories had still not materialized. Concerned

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published. Yeshivos all over the world brought the *sefer* into their libraries, and *maggidei shiur* used it to prepare their *shiurim*. R' Shneur took personal pride in the accomplishment, and during the days of his final illness, he kept a copy on his nightstand at all times.

At last, Yaakov Yosef had discovered what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to write at least four more *Shufras* covering some of the most difficult *sugyos* in *Shas* that were learnt regularly in the cycles of the yeshivah system, as well as other *sefarim* on various topics. But with a growing family, he needed to give some attention to making a living.

He began by translating and publishing the first part of the classic *Menoras Hamaor Anthology*. In the '80s, yeshivos and *tzedakah* organizations would often send potential donors small softcover books as part of their fundraising campaigns. Rabbi Reinman translated and printed other parts of the *Menoras Hamaor* and sold them to institutions.

that the deadline would not be met, Rabbi Schenkolewski called Rabbi Reinman and asked if he could write the stories himself. In desperation, he agreed to do it.

He decided to write a small work of fiction. With only a germ of an idea in his mind, he locked himself in a room and sat down to write the story. It was a story of R' Mendel, the rabbi in the fictional Polish town of Pulichev, whose young son was kidnapped. The climax of the story is a debate in the city of Krakow between a cardinal and a representative of the Jewish community. The expulsion of the Jews hinged on the result of that debate, and R' Mendel was invited to represent the Jewish point of view.

Rabbi Reinman let the story flow from his imagination; there was no



**A SAGA IS BORN**

Eventually, Rabbi Schenkolewski of Bais Kaila High School commissioned him to prepare a book for a mailing campaign,





outline, no time for research. He made up the names and places. All he knew was that Pulichev was in Eastern Galicia and Krakow was in Western Galicia. He had no idea in which century the story was taking place. He just knew was that his characters traveled by horse and buggy and they had no electricity in their homes.

Five intense days after he began, the story was done. It was a short book, fewer than 100 pages, a good size for a mailer. Rabbi Reinman saw it as a throwaway; Bais Kaila would send it out and make some money, and then it would be forgotten.

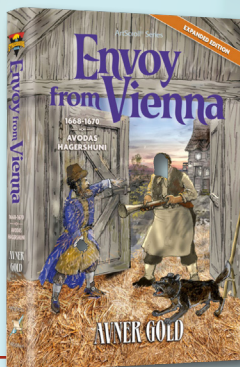
The book needed an author's name on the cover. Rabbi Reinman did not want to use his own name because he thought people would not respect his *sefer* if they saw him as a fiction writer, and in any case, what was the point of using his own name if the book was only a throwaway? So he had to come up with a pseudonym. He liked the name Avner, and as for a surname, his neighbor's aunt was named Gold. Why not Avner Gold?

But then a surprising thing happened. Rabbi Schenkolewski told him that people loved the story and were asking for a sequel. Rabbi Reinman agreed to write it, but first he had to determine when the story had taken place. The clue was the debate. In the story, the Jews of Krakow had invited R' Mendel of Pulichev to represent them in the debate, but why would they do such a thing? Krakow was a major Jewish community. Their *rabbanim* were towering Torah titans. Why would they reach out to R' Mendel?

Rabbi Reinman needed to find a gap somewhere, an interregnum when the rabbinate was vacant. After some research, he found just such a vacancy between the *petirah* of the Bach in 1640 and the appointment in 1643, after a long search, of the Tosafos Yom Tov.

This was the spot when the story could have happened.

He had landed in a century extremely rich in Jewish and world history, and the sequels—all 11 of them—would draw on his considerable knowledge of history and geography which was augmented by painstaking preparation and research. The third and fourth books are set during the



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years of Tach V'Tat (1648-1649), the time of the Cossack uprising under the Ukrainian murderer Bogdan Chmielnicki. The fifth and sixth books are set during the time of Shabsai Tzvi, the false Mashiach. The seventh is set during the expulsion from Vienna, and the eighth is set during the Marrano period, at the time of the greatest *auto de fé* in history. Sabbateanism and the Marranos reverberate through the rest of the books.

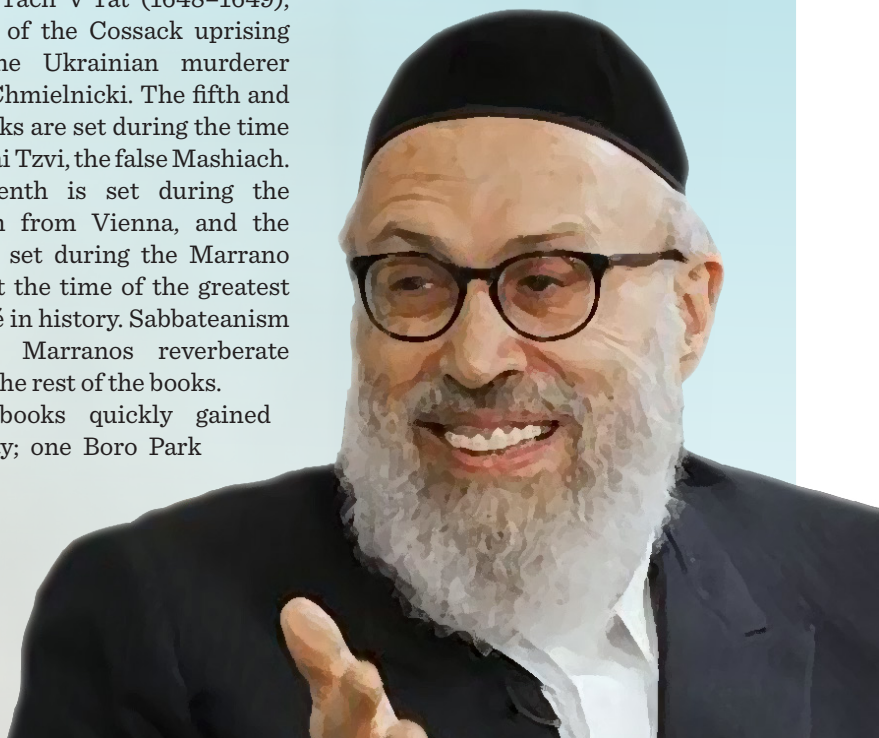
The books quickly gained popularity; one Boro Park

bookseller said that, "I don't think there is anyone in this generation who has not read these books." (The accompanying picture shows two young fans from Los Angeles paying their favorite author a visit.) The first eight books were published over 35 years ago, each the centerpiece of a Bais Kaila mailing. Over the last 14 years, Rabbi Reinman has added four new books to the Strasbourg Saga, as the series is called, and rewritten and expanded the old books.

### FRIENDSHIP WITH RAV MATISYAHU

In 1998, Rabbi Reinman made a *sefer* with his brother Yisrael to learn Chumash with *Rashi* for several hours every Friday afternoon. R' Matisyahu Salomon, who had recently become the *mashgiach* of BMG, would speak on Chumash every Motza'ei Shabbos in his home, and Rabbi Reinman and his brother began to attend.

After several weeks, Rabbi Reinman asked R' Matisyahu if they could make a *sefer* for 20 minutes every Wednesday morning, during which he would tell R' Matisyahu his *chiddushim* on Chumash. R' Matisyahu agreed, and their friendship began.







WITH RAV MATISYAHU SALOMON AT A SIYUM IN RABBI REINMAN'S HOME ON MASECHES ARACHIN, WHICH THEY LEARNED TOGETHER

After a few months, R' Matisyahu suggested they expand their sessions to an hour.

"Which day?" Rabbi Reinman wanted to know.

"Every day," R' Matisyahu replied.

In 1999, they traveled together to Russia for the Vaad L'Hatzolas Nidchei Yisroel and learned together on the plane as they flew from city to city. They remained *chavrusas* for 20 years.

Rabbi Reinman also wrote two books for R' Matisyahu, adapted from his speeches—*With Hearts Full of Faith* and *With Hearts Full of Love*.

In 2008, Rabbi Reinman published his *Sefer Abir Yosef*, insights on Chumash and the Yamim Tovim, in which he quotes R' Matisyahu several times.

Taking what he gained from his *chavrusashaf*t with R' Matisyahu a step further, over the last Chumash cycle, Rabbi Reinman gave weekly Chumash talks on TorahAnytime and YouTube to a loyal listenership of hundreds from the United States to Europe to Eretz Yisrael.

And so, the friendship and its fruits live on.

## THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Six years ago, Rabbi Reinman published *Shufra Dishibuda*, a massive work on a very difficult subject, and as this magazine is going to print, his *Shufra Dibreira* is coming off the presses in Eretz Yisrael. Rabbi Reinman's most recent book in English is *A Guide to the Guide*, a chapter-by-chapter summary of the Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim* in modern, readable English. A number of other *sefarim* and books are in various stages of preparation.

As it turns out, the two paths Rabbi Reinman followed simultaneously complemented each other. Because his primary work and passion is his works on Torah, he brings the perspective of the *beis medrash* to his historical fiction novels. Not only are they entertaining, electrifying, and informative, they are also full of Jewish values, *hashkafah*, vignettes of *gedolim* of the past, and *divrei Torah*. For this reason, they are

equally beloved by young readers and parents and educators. Quite a few schools study *The Marrano Prince* in their English literature classes. Today, an entire generation is being educated by the books in and out of the classroom.

What does the future hold for Rabbi Reinman? He is currently working on *Shufra Dichezkesa* and a chapter-by-chapter commentary on the Shach's *Sefer Tekafa Kohen*. He is also working on a book called *Existence and Memory* which addresses fundamental questions of *emunah*, an area that he considers weak in today's times. He also wants to complete a book he wrote in 1995 for a Scranton yeshiva mailing. The book is called *Destiny: The Story of the Jewish People and the Western World*, and it covers the period from Avraham Avinu until the beginning of the period of the second Beis Hamikdash. He would like to continue until modern times.

When asked about Avner Gold and the Strasbourg Saga, he shrugs. Originally, he had planned to continue the Saga until the present day for a total of 25 or 30 novels, but he has his hands full with so many important projects that he doesn't see that as feasible. On the other hand, there is a great thirst for more of the Saga, as evidenced by the hundreds of emails pleading with him to continue; clearly, our youth need reading materials on this level. Rabbi Reinman has reached a compromise: instead of writing more novels, he will consider writing a series of short stories that will bring the Saga up to the present. And so, his readers wait with anticipation.

In the meantime, thousands of readers—*talmidei chachamim* and laymen, adults and children—continue to learn, grow, and be entertained by the works of Rabbi Reinman. ●