

ONE

“OY!” HANNAH EISIN barely caught herself after tripping on the uneven sidewalk. She dusted off her dropped briefcase, a gift from her parents for her twenty-fifth birthday, and sighed with relief that the leather was unmarred. One shoe wasn’t so fortunate; its heel was barely hanging on. She looked at her watch and fought back tears. Terrified of being late, she’d skipped lunch and made it to within blocks of Isaac Elchanan Spektor University with time to spare. And now this.

What possessed me to wear stilettos instead of my usual pumps?

She gingerly tried walking on the damaged shoe, but it refused to support her. Increasingly frantic, she tore away its heel and kept going. She hobbled only a few steps before recognizing the absurdity of her situation. She sat at a bus stop, and knew she had no time. Should she give up and go home? But she had worked too hard for this assignment. And the ruined shoe wasn’t that uncomfortable. Taking off its mate, she wiggled the heel until it loosened. Then she wedged it between the bench’s seat and back, yanked hard, and let out her breath in satisfaction when the shoe, sans heel, remained in her hand. She deposited the severed heel in her briefcase with the other one, put her shoe back on and reached her destination without incident.

Still a few minutes early, Hannah opened her compact and surveyed her face in its small mirror to make sure her lipstick hadn’t smeared. Satisfied, she tucked an errant blond curl back under her hat. As she took in the imposing edifice, anxiety clutched her stomach and squeezed. But she gathered her courage, crossed Eastern Parkway, then hurried up the wide front steps. *Thank Heaven no one is in the foyer.* She’d chosen this time—1:30—because all the *ravs* and students would be in Talmud class. After passing the men’s room—of course there was no ladies’ room—she arrived at the office of Rabbi Nathan Mandel, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Rabbinitics.

Normally a male colleague at her newspaper would do this kind of interview. But Hannah had schemed to land this plum task because she actually knew Rabbi Mandel. Of course, she’d neglected to mention that the two of them hadn’t seen each other since grade school. Yet she had never forgotten him. She’d worried about how he’d managed when his father’s book was attacked so viciously in the Orthodox press and had enjoyed

great satisfaction when he'd joined Spektor's faculty. She hadn't realized until recently that she owed Nathan Mandel a debt of gratitude. Everyone at the Torah Academy knew she'd worked hard for the Akiva Award, yet it was given to some boy whose scholarship didn't compare to hers.

Because the school's reputation would suffer if a girl were acclaimed its best student.

Filled with fury, she'd almost turned her back on Nathan after the graduation ceremony. But he'd astonished her by explaining that he had refused the award, insisting that she deserved it, not him, and that what they'd done to her wasn't right. That day became sealed in her memory. Because of his accolade, which warmed her still, she came to realize that she didn't need some award to validate her work.

Now she was going to see him again, but he didn't know he was going to see *her*. He'd be expecting a man. Miriam, the *Daily Freiheit's* office manager, couldn't hide her amusement as she related how excited Mandel was that the esteemed H. M. Covey, who writes those fascinating stories about Israel's new immigrants, wanted to interview him.

Will Nathan be pleased to see me or not? Will he even recognize me?

Her heart was pounding. She hurriedly rechecked her appearance, then took a deep calming breath and knocked.

When Nathan opened the door, his eyebrows rose, and he stared at her, openmouthed. Hannah swiftly walked in and closed the door so no one would see her in the hall. It had been twelve years, but she still recognized the dark-haired adolescent she'd once had a crush on. Not a bad-looking man now, either, especially with his short, neatly trimmed beard. And not a smoker, since there was no ashtray on his desk.

"Have you forgotten me, Nathan?" She grinned to ease his bewilderment.

He quickly recovered. "Not at all, Hannah. I remember the first time I saw you, at the Torah Academy. When our teacher asked if anyone knew what was happening in Spain, you raised your hand and talked about the Civil War, the fascists fighting the republicans. We were all riveted, including the teacher."

"That's right. I spoke until the bell rang." *He still remembers that.* It was flattering but also unsettling.

“You were so articulate. You made history real,” he said. “I’m not surprised you became a journalist. You always did write the best essays.” He took off his glasses and looked at her intensely.

As their eyes met, Hannah felt a jolt of exhilaration.

“It’s good to see you again.” Nathan glanced at her left hand as he polished his glasses. “But your last name didn’t used to be Covey.”

A frisson of fear tightened her stomach. “No, I’m not married. Nor have I been.” She kept her voice calm; this was not the time to dwell on how many men considered single women fair game. “My father was the war correspondent Michael Covey, killed in the bombing of Guernica when I was eight. He’s the reason I became a journalist, to honor his legacy.”

Then her chin began to quiver. Her father had showered her with unconditional love, and she missed him still. She needed to compose herself.

“You have my sympathy,” Nathan murmured. “My mother died when I was two, and my father never remarried. So we’re both orphans.”

“I’m very sorry about your mother, but now I’m not actually an orphan. My mother remarried, and Samuel Eisin adopted me. But I use Covey as my byline.” She sighed in resignation. “Even with a master’s in journalism from Columbia, I doubt the Freiheit would have hired me if I weren’t Michael Covey’s daughter.” *And if editor in chief Moe Novick hadn’t belonged to the same Communist circle as Mama before the war.*

He nodded. “I like your scarf. It’s a good color for you.”

“Thank you.” She suddenly felt self-conscious. She’d carefully chosen her outfit, a tailored navy suit and light blue button-down shirt, to reinforce her professionalism. At the last moment, she’d added a blue patterned scarf that brought out the color of her eyes.

She turned toward the door. “To keep anyone from seeing a woman in your office, can we go someplace outside Spektor?”

“Of course.” He jumped up, grabbed his coat, and followed her out. “A café a few blocks from here is usually empty around now.”

Hannah, who lived less than a mile away, knew it well. Haredi Jews didn't think it was kosher enough, so nobody there was likely to object to Rav Mandel and a woman having coffee together. And she could order lunch when they were finished.

Nathan sat quietly while she opened her notebook and took up a pencil, then said, "I've never been interviewed before. I assume you ask me questions and I answer them?"

"Why don't you tell me how you came to be Spektor's first, and youngest, professor of rabbinics?" Hannah liked her subjects to stray into other interesting topics, so she gave them a long leash. "Of course I've done some research on you, and if there's more I want to know, I can prompt you. So why not just start at the beginning?"

He gave her a cheeky grin that revealed his nervousness and amused her. "Well, I was born at Brooklyn Memorial in 1929."

She smiled back. "Somehow I doubt you could tell me much about your birth. How about starting with your decision to attend Spektor and how that led to your current position?"

"It wasn't an actual decision to attend Spektor as much as just knowing that's where I'd go." His voice was clear and resonant. "As far as I can remember, my father would praise their Talmud professors, especially Rav Gershenson. And with a reputation for secular excellence as well, Spektor was at the top of my list."

"You sound like their promotional brochure," she gently scolded. "I know how smart you are. I went to school with you. You could have had your pick of Ivy League universities."

"But I wanted to be a rabbi."

"Like a pulpit rabbi, in a congregation?" She'd assumed that with his father's scholarly background, Nathan would also want to teach.

"I'd always intended to get smicha from Spektor, but as the horrific news of what happened in Europe filtered out, I realized how important it was for us not to lose American Jews as well."

Hannah didn't want to be sidetracked. "I'd like to hear about how your career path changed, what made you decide to teach at Spektor."

Nathan hesitated. "My first year was awful, particularly with Rav Klein. I'd rather you not write about it."

“Just tell me and then we can decide together how much should go into my article,” she urged him. “I won’t write anything unless you approve it.”

He closed his eyes, and Hannah prepared herself for the tricky part—keeping him talking until it all came out.

“I was in my last year at Spektor and in the most advanced Talmud class, always taught by Rav Gershenson. But this was just after the war, and in a coup, Spektor brought over one of the greatest surviving European scholars, Rav Avram Klein.”

“That was around when your father’s book was published,” she said. “It was, and still is, a marvelous work. I reread it to prepare for this interview.”

Nathan beamed. “Thanks. Others weren’t so complimentary.” Then he sobered. “That book caused me no end of tsuris with Rav Klein. Like other Orthodox Talmudists, he believes the Vilna Shas Talmud is the definitive depository of the Oral Law. Never mind that it was compiled and printed less than a hundred years ago. For him the very idea that its text is inaccurate, that there are different versions of Talmudic works, altered either intentionally or through scribal errors, is sacrilege.” Nathan’s expression darkened. “Rav Klein declared that anyone who taught this way was a heretic.”

“That’s putting it diplomatically. I know Yiddish well enough to read his newspaper articles.” Hannah put distaste into her voice. “It must have been difficult for you to study with a man who attacked your father so publicly.”

“You can’t imagine.” Nathan spat out the words. “The only reason Rav Klein could write those vicious articles is that he used me to explain my father’s methods.” His voice changed to mimic a whining old man. “Please, Mandel. I don’t understand what your father means here. Please. Could you explain it to me?”

She felt a rush of sympathy for him. “But you had to help him—you needed his approval to be ordained.”

“I never dreamed Rav Klein would sucker me into betraying my own father.” His next words were like stone. “I almost hated him.”

Hannah noticed his past tense. “And now?”

“I accept that Rav Klein was desperate to save remnants of the yeshiva world he saw being destroyed around him. My father understood this and forgave his cruel words.” Nathan then sighed. “Rav Klein eventually apologized for how he’d wronged me,

and now I tolerate him. After all, he did give me smicha, even though on the oral exam, I used my father's methods."

"What?" Hannah couldn't contain her excitement. "You rebelled and used text criticism on your rabbinic ordination exams? That was brave of you."

"My first and only rebellion." He gave her a wan smile. "By the way, until this moment, the only people who know are the dean at Spektor, Rav Klein, Rav Gershenson, Benny Stockser, and my father."

"Benjamin Stockser? The son of Reb Stockser who stopped being a Hasid and refused to succeed his father as rebbe?" Nathan's story had just gotten even more interesting.

His expression became guarded. "Yes, except that he's still a Hasid. We've been best friends since we were fifteen."

She waved her hand in dismissal. "You haven't finished telling me how you ended up teaching at Spektor."

"My father's book didn't just make trouble for me. It got so bad where he taught, the yeshiva he founded, no less, that he accepted a professorship at the Conservative Seminary." He shrugged. "Actually, he was offered one in Spektor's rabbinics department, but Rav Klein made them withdraw the offer."

"Let me guess," she said. "That's the position you now hold." He nodded. "Rav Klein could hardly protest Spektor hiring me when he himself had just given me smicha."

"But he knew what you'd be teaching."

"He said he could keep an eye on me at Spektor."

"So you gave up becoming a pulpit rabbi?"

"It was a prestigious offer, and I realized that what I really wanted to do was teach Talmud and continue to study it." He leaned forward, and his eyes lit with enthusiasm. "Yes, we Jews revere the Torah, despite its focus on priests, purity, and Temple sacrifices. But it is Talmud that informs and rebuilds Judaism after the Temple's destruction. The most important—critical even—aspects of modern Jewish life come out of Talmud. The existence of synagogues, our liturgy, and the blessings we say, how we keep Shabbos and other holidays, how we observe kashrus—all of these are based in

Talmud, not the Torah.” His voice rose with fervor. “Without Talmud, Judaism would be a very different religion, if it even still existed at all.”

She felt herself fill with awe. “You love Talmud.”

He blushed. “I do.”

“So you must enjoy teaching a subject you love.”

“I enjoy teaching students who want to learn . . .” He no longer sounded so enthusiastic.

“But . . . ?” Hannah hesitated to encourage him to continue.

“Many of my students despise my methods. They agree with Rav Klein that text criticism is a threat to the Talmud’s sanctity. They come to class to attack me rather than learn from me.”

She nodded. “At the beginning it must have been hard that you were pretty much the same age as your students.”

“Yes. Some had been my classmates the year before.”

“You could have used a miracle like young ben Azariah whose hair suddenly turned gray when he became head of the ancient academy in Israel,” she said. “Everyone respected him then.”

“The rare students who get excited about my methods make it all worthwhile . . .”

“Nathan’s eyes widened in surprise. “You know Talmud.” It was an accusation, not a question

“I know a little Talmud,” she admitted. Of course he’s shocked. Women aren’t supposed to study Talmud. Still, she persevered. “Speaking of Talmud, I’d appreciate you teaching me something about what exactly you do so I can explain it to our readers. Something less detailed than your father’s book, and maybe a few examples of how you used textual criticism in your smicha exam.”

Nathan cleared his throat. “Talmud isn’t something I can teach anyone in an hour.”

Well, he hadn’t said no, and he loved teaching Talmud. Hannah made a sudden bold decision. “I know that,” she replied in Hebrew. “I’ve wanted to study Talmud ever since I discovered it was so important. I read the Mishnah and learned Aramaic, but I still needed help—except nobody would teach me, not even my stepbrother. He said

even a father is forbidden to teach his daughter Talmud, which only made me more determined.” She stopped abruptly, petrified that she’d come on too strong.

Nathan was speechless for almost a minute. Then he switched to Hebrew to ask her, “How did you learn to speak Hebrew so well?”

They continued in Hebrew as Hannah replied, “To make a long story short, I spent four summers in Israel between 1949 and 1952 with my aunt Elizabeth, my real father’s sister. She’s a nurse, and I helped her care for the refugees. I still frequent the cafés and clubs that Israelis patronize.”

Not that she dated anyone she met there. To her chagrin, the Israeli men were no different from college boys. They only wanted to get into her pants. And insisted a married woman shouldn’t work outside the home. Almost as bad, they all smoked like chimneys.

Nathan interrupted her reverie by gushing, “So that’s where your wonderful Israel stories in the Freiheit come from.”

“I still have more they haven’t published yet.”

“How did your aunt end up in Israel? Where did you live? What was it like there?” He couldn’t seem to contain his excitement. “Tell me everything.”

“Nathan, I’m here to interview you, not vice versa.”

When his face fell, she chose to be open with him. She’d wanted to study Talmud ever since grade school, when the boys went off to Talmud classes while the girls remained behind to learn Psalms and the Prophets. She’d asked her teacher about Talmud, but he’d brusquely replied that it was a complicated legal work that girls couldn’t study. Which only left her more eager to discover what was in this forbidden text that men didn’t want women to know.

This could be her opportunity. “If you teach me Talmud, I’ll tell you all about my time in Israel.”

Nathan just stared at her, apparently taken aback by her audacity.

As Hannah waited anxiously, church bells began to chime.

“I’m sorry, but I have to teach at three.” He stood and put on his coat. “We can continue later. How about same place, same time on Thursday?”

She barely managed a nod before he raced out. The waitress asked if she wanted anything more, but her appetite was gone.

Appalled at how she'd scared him off, Hannah berated herself as she waited for the check. What if he canceled their next meeting? What if he asked Moe for a different interviewer? After working so hard to overcome society's disapproval of working women, she'd be back where she started, copyediting the male reporters' stories and writing about Hadassah and Sisterhood luncheons.

Her heart grew heavy with sadness. Now she'd never get to study Talmud. And she'd never see Nathan again, either.

That evening Nathan's mind was a whirl. He'd been astonished at Hannah Eisin appearing out of the blue in his office, but he wasn't surprised she wanted to study Talmud. After all, it was a more prestigious subject than Torah. While he tried to think of a diplomatic way to refuse, the memory of her reciting Kaddish for her father, despite their teacher telling the class that girls didn't say it, came to him unbidden. It still rankled him that Hannah hadn't received the Akiva Award at graduation, though she'd earned it.

It made sense that so many rejections and prohibitions had whetted her appetite to learn the secret text men spent years studying. But what could he do? It was against Jewish Law to teach a woman Talmud.

The next night self-doubt assailed him as he recalled the first time he saw her. He'd tried not to stare like the other students, but he'd never seen a blond Jewish girl before. They were only in fourth grade, but he was struck by how pretty she was. And now she was a remarkably beautiful woman.

So, why not teach her Talmud? Wouldn't it be refreshing to have an eager beginning student for a change? Exciting even, after teaching the same texts for years at Spektor? Those ancient rabbis who said women were too light-headed to study Torah didn't know any modern educated women like Hannah. Suddenly animated, he jumped out of bed and strode around his room. And look how prepared she was; she knew Hebrew and Aramaic, had already studied Mishnah. Hadn't there always been exceptional women who were scholars, some in Talmudic times and others later, like Rashi's daughters?

Then his shoulders sagged as his enthusiasm dissolved. He couldn't get around the tenet that women were forbidden to study Talmud.

Though he kept reminding himself of this, by the third night Nathan knew he could no more refuse to teach such a serious student than he could stop breathing. And he had to admit that it would be a pleasure to spend several hours a week with such a good-looking woman. No, he wouldn't disappoint Hannah—or himself. After all, Pesach was coming soon. He could teach her from Tractate Pesachim, where the Talmudic sages discuss the Seder's many rituals. Surely today's rabbis would permit a woman to study the part of Talmud she needed to know to fulfill the mitzvos of Pesach properly.

Then why not teach her some Talmud? It's not like I'll be opening a Talmud school for women. Besides, it will only be for a little while. He chortled to himself. After all, I've already rebelled against Orthodoxy's increasing strictness once. And it went very well.

Three days later, heart in her throat, Hannah walked into the café half an hour early. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until, seeing Nathan sitting at the back table, she let it out in relief.

As soon as she slid into the booth, he dispensed with preliminaries. "If I were to teach you Talmud, it would have to be somewhere private," he said in Hebrew. "And we couldn't tell anybody, not even our families or best friends. If anyone at Spektor found out, I could lose my job." He smiled weakly. "Then I'd have to take a pulpit."

To make sure she understood clearly, Hannah quietly restated what he'd said in English. When he nodded, she remained outwardly calm, but inside she exulted.

He gave her several days to memorize a Mishnah in Tractate Pesachim that focused on the Seder. "This particular section isn't difficult," he said with assurance. "You'll be familiar with its subject. We have a month until the festival begins, so it will be preparation for both of us."

Then, launching into the interview, he supplied her with a few simple ways he'd emended the text in his smicha exam. Once she understood them, she questioned him about his life outside Spektor. He enjoyed baseball (shared Dodger season tickets with a friend), the theater (especially Broadway musicals), and dancing (patronized dance halls at least twice a month). She didn't ask why he wasn't married. He still lived with his father at the same address in Williamsburg, which he gave her. Before parting, they

settled on Tuesday and Thursday study sessions, when his father taught evenings at the JCC. Finally, they exchanged phone numbers.

The night before their first class, Hannah tossed and turned but couldn't sleep. Her heart beat wildly as her emotions swung between excitement and apprehension. She couldn't believe she was finally going to fulfill her longtime desire to study Talmud, the text that saved Judaism after Rome destroyed the Second Temple—and with a top scholar. But lurking in her mind's attic was the fear that made her break into a cold sweat, the dread that had kept her from dating since college—that of being trapped in a room with a man intent on taking advantage of her. Again.

Nathan was also filled with trepidation. He wasn't concerned about being discovered teaching Talmud to a woman as much as he was afraid she wouldn't be the excellent student he'd anticipated. Then it would be a million times worse than ending a dating relationship. An ex could date other men, but Hannah wouldn't find another teacher. He hated to be just another man slamming the door in her face, not when she wanted to do this so badly.

Plus, there was the conundrum of his father wanting to meet H. M. Covey. As soon as Nathan mentioned the interview, Abba (Hebrew for father) begged him to arrange a time when the reporter could tell both of them about Israel. Nathan couldn't bear depriving Abba, devoted to the new Jewish state, of the pleasure. Yet he didn't want Hannah to feel pressured that this was a quid pro quo for his teaching her.

Tuesday evening, Hannah stood in front of Nathan's building, battling the terror of being alone with him. Her stomach was in a knot, but she forced her legs to climb up the stoop. At the threshold, she shrank back, paralyzed by the potential unspeakable consequences of being sequestered with a stranger. Nathan seemed to be a mensch, but that frat boy—she hated his name—had as well. Until he lured her up to his room, locked the door, and . . . she couldn't bear the memory of what he'd done to her.

Before she could bring herself to push the buzzer, Nathan opened the door.

Once inside the apartment, Hannah recognized immediately that two long-term bachelors lived there. Not that it was dirty or untidy, but except for the occasional

bright-colored book spine, everything was a faded gray, navy, or brown. There were no decorative throw pillows on the French-style couch and chairs, which Hannah assumed had been picked out by Nathan's long-deceased mother. The only art in addition to a map of Israel were pictures of Franklin Roosevelt and various Zionist heroes. Bookshelves filled every available space, but they held no photos or other personal memorabilia. No vases, silver serving pieces, or any of the typical tchotchkes overflowing in most homes. Not even the Mandels' Judaica was on display, and surely they owned at least a set of Shabbos candlesticks and Kiddush cups.

Thankfully, she didn't see any ashtrays.

The sadness of that bleak living room took the edge off her fear, and the aroma of coffee further allayed her anxiety. She was also reassured by the yarmulke on Nathan's head. She took a deep breath and followed him into the dining room to start their session. "Ooh, fresh coffee," she said, observing the pot and cups on the table. "How thoughtful of you." Still, she sat in the chair closest to the front door.

Taught that it was immodest for a woman to take her gloves off in front of a man she didn't know well, Hannah pulled hers off under the table while Nathan poured out two cups of coffee. He then added the same amount of milk and sugar to hers that he'd seen her use at the café.

"Just the way I like it," she said, pleased yet disconcerted that he had noticed and remembered such a detail. When he took his seat catty-corner to her, she realized she'd still have to move fast to beat him to the door should he try to detain her. Unable to rid her mind of that scenario, she fumbled to find the Mishnah that began the tenth chapter of Tractate Pesachim.

Nathan wasn't surprised she was nervous. He was too. But he was prepared. "Rashi says that a teacher should always begin with a joke, that students learn better when they're laughing."

She swallowed hard. "Okay. Let's hear it."

"The Long Island Rail Road train was moving even slower than usual when it suddenly stopped. When it didn't start up in a minute, an impatient passenger asked the conductor what happened. 'There's a large tortoise on the tracks,' came the reply. 'But we stopped for a tortoise ten minutes ago,' the passenger protested. 'I know, but we caught up with it again.'" Nathan flashed Hannah a grin.

She burst out laughing and felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

Hannah positioned her finger on the spot in her book that he was pointing at in his. First she read in Hebrew, then translated it into English. “On the eve of Pesach, from before the Evening Sacrifice, a person does not eat until nightfall. Even the poorest in Israel does not eat unless he reclines. And they give him no less than four cups of wine, even if from charity.”

Nathan clarified this, although he doubted she needed any explanation. “So we are discussing the first night of Pesach, when a celebratory banquet, not yet called a Seder, is held.” He pointed to where the discussion began. “We’ll start with the Gemara’s debate about reclining and the four cups of wine.”

Hannah had expected to arrive with questions about the Mishnah. “There are many things we eat that night.” It was an effort to avoid saying *Seder*. “Does the Mishnah mean we recline with the first food we eat or with a particular ritual item?”

He smiled, both pleased and relieved. She had anticipated what the Sages would discuss. He helped her translate the Gemara that followed, which was trickier than Mishnah because it was in Aramaic and written in a shorthand style that left out many words and all the punctuation.

Satisfaction competed with mounting tension as Hannah sensed Nathan’s physical proximity. She focused on the former feeling and strove to decipher the first two sentences. “The Rabbis stated: one reclines while eating matzah. Not while eating *maror*” (the bitter herb).

“Correct. Now let’s see how the Tosafos, commentary written by Rashi’s disciples, explain this.” Nathan pointed her to Rashi’s grandson Rashbam’s interpretation.

Hannah felt proud when she came up with a short explanation he approved. “Rashbam says that when eating matzah, you recline in the manner of free men because the matzah celebrates our freedom,” she said. “But you don’t recline with the bitter herbs because they recall our slavery.” *That makes sense.*

Heartened, she continued with the Gemara’s next sentence, which was merely a one-word question. “Wine?” She squinted questioningly at Nathan.

“Now we’re on the Mishnah’s third sentence, where the Sages ask about reclining while drinking the four cups,” he replied. “I warn you, this debate gets tricky.”

Hannah read one line and saw that it was indeed tricky. In the Gemara Rav Nachman first says that wine requires reclining, then immediately after, Rav Nachman says that wine does not require reclining. “Whoever edited the Talmud certainly didn’t care about consistency.”

“It is those inconsistencies, and how the Gemara attempts to resolve them, that make Talmud study so interesting,” Nathan replied. “Look how it anticipated your confusion.”

Sure enough, the Gemara recognized that the conflicting statements also puzzled others. It declared that there was no dispute; Rav Nachman’s two statements did not disagree. One referred to the first two cups and the other to the last two cups. But when Hannah read the next sentence, she saw the contradiction was not so easily resolved.

The problem, she learned, was that it is still unclear which two cups Rav Nachman thought required reclining. She had to chuckle at how there were again two divergent opinions. One explained that the first two cups require reclining, because it is then that freedom begins. In other words, since reclining is a sign of freedom, one should recline when discussing the Exodus from Egypt. By contrast, the last two cups do not require reclining, because by that time the discussion is finished.

She looked up at Nathan, who was grinning. “What’s so funny?”

“We’ve come to our first variant text. Rashbam’s says ‘It is then that we are discussing our freedom’s beginning’ instead of ‘It is then that freedom begins.’”

Hannah considered the variant text and felt the thrill of comprehension. “The time between the first two cups and the last two cups is when the Haggadah tells the Exodus story of the Hebrew slaves leaving Egypt,” she said. “So when we’ve finished it, the people have already become free.”

“Excellent.” Nathan, admiring how understanding made her face light up, didn’t want to dampen her enthusiasm. He was excited as well, but it was late. “However, we’ll have to stop here. I must warn you, though, that the matter isn’t resolved yet.”

Elated that she’d actually studied and understood some Talmud, thankful that Nathan had behaved like a gentleman, and now frustrated that their session had ended so soon, she couldn’t wait for two days to pass.

The following morning Hannah went to the *Freiheit's* office to turn in her previous day's work and pick up new assignments. She tried to arrive before the linotype machine began operating, when the newsroom would be only moderately noisy rather than deafening. But there was no way to avoid the cigarette smoke air that, even early in the day with the wall-mounted fans whirling, clouded the room. Her eyes stung as she wove her way through the tables and desks to her in-box, deftly dodging the copyboys racing around the room.

"Copy," yelled a reporter as he dropped his finished story in the out-box. Immediately a copyboy rushed over to take it to any of the editors who were also shouting "Copy" to indicate they needed more work.

Hannah was lucky that she could do most of her work at home, thus avoiding the cacophony and acrid air. Every day Moe left her at least one article circled from the morning paper that he wanted translated from Yiddish into English for the weekend edition. There were also articles that others had translated earlier waiting for her to edit. In addition, Moe had an arrangement with El Al crews to bring over the latest Israeli newspapers. It was her enjoyable task to find interesting stories to translate.

But her most important and pleasurable assignment was finalizing her lengthy interviews with people she'd met in Israel, primarily refugees from Arab countries and Europe. These were published every other week, in both their Yiddish and English versions. She was sorting through her in-box when Moe interrupted her with the latest Israeli newspaper.

"How'd your interview with Rabbi Mandel go?" He peered at her through his wire-rimmed glasses. "Learn anything interesting?"

"He actually used text criticism in his smicha exam, which I'll explain in the article." She grinned as she added, "And he goes out dancing several times a month."

An hour later she stuck her head in Moe's open door. "There's an exciting article in *Haaretz*, but I'm not sure we should print it."

He waved her in. "Let's see it."

She pointed to a photograph of a line of youngsters, all on crutches. "It's about a new children's rehabilitation center for polio patients. But toward the end, it says that the center will have to start serving children with other disabilities once the new polio

vaccine is available in Israel.” She was so excited she couldn’t stand still. “It reports that Salk’s field trials, on nearly two million subjects, have proved it’s safe and effective.”

Moe’s eyes opened wide. “But . . . but,” he stammered. “There hasn’t been any announcement about a successful polio vaccine.”

“Not yet.” After a moment to think, she asked. “Dr. Salk is Jewish. Couldn’t he be in contact with Israeli colleagues?”

“It makes sense.” Moe nodded slowly. “Even so, I don’t think we should print anything until it’s official. But I’ll nose around and see what I can find out. I have my contacts too.”

By Thursday evening, Hannah had finished two drafts of her interview with Nathan, one in English and the other in Yiddish. When she knocked on Nathan’s door, she was less afraid of being alone with him than before, but still sat closest to the door.

As they reviewed their previous learning, she told him, “I prefer Rashbam’s text, which implies that since we recline because that is how free men eat, we should recline as we hear how we became free,” she began. “But why not continue reclining after the story is told?”

“Wonderful. You anticipated the Gemara again.”

Elated, she read, “Others explain it this way: the last two cups require reclining, for it is then that there is freedom. The first two cups do not require reclining because it is then that we are reciting: “We were slaves.” Confused, she squinted at Nathan. “That makes sense too, but we don’t follow either opinion today. We recline the entire time.” “Just one more sentence,” he urged her.

“Now that it was stated this, but it also was stated that, both these and those require reclining,” she concluded. “I see. In other words we have two valid opinions, one saying we recline with the first two cups and the other that we recline with the last two cups. So we follow both and recline for all four cups.” She looked up at Nathan, hopeful that he’d approve.

“Precisely.” He sighed with pleasure, and relief, at how well their learning was going. The Rabbis who called women light-headed as an excuse not to teach them obviously hadn’t encountered any like Hannah. “Though the Sages usually rule leniently

when *derabanan* is uncertain, here, where it deals with wine at Pesach, a lenient ruling would eliminate reclining for any of the four cups, effectively nullifying the mitzvah.”

“What do you mean ‘derabanan’?” She’d never heard the word.

Nathan hesitated as he considered how to best reply to a question whose answer yeshiva students learned when they started Mishnah. After just a week of teaching, it was evident that Hannah was a fine pupil, with a quicker mind than some of his current students. She also had a different mind, because she asked questions he’d never heard before, questions no yeshiva student would even think to ask. He gazed at her beautiful face, which no longer looked triumphant, but ashamed and disheartened.

“It’s brave of you to ask when you don’t know something,” he praised her. “Too many students are afraid to show ignorance, but how else can we learn? I don’t want you to ever be afraid to ask me questions. Okay?”

She nodded and grinned. “So what does *derabanan* mean?”

He chuckled. “It’s complicated.” The smile she gave him in return made her look so lovely it almost took his breath away. This was going to be challenging in ways he hadn’t anticipated. “I think explaining it will be how we’ll resume next week. But in addition, we’ll be looking at the Gemara’s discussion of whether a woman reclines in the presence of her husband. You should find it interesting.”

Interesting? That was a word Hannah’s parents used to describe something they disliked but didn’t want to disparage openly.