

Tales of Rav Tsair

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“No one who ever encountered in America the striking figure of Dr. Chaim Tchernowitz, the great scholar of the Talmud and formerly the Chief Rabbi of Odessa, a man of Jovian port and large, free mind, would be inclined to conclude that there was but a single season of the heart available to a Jew of Odessa.”¹ Lionel Trilling wrote this by way of critical rejoinder to Isaac Babel’s portrayals of his Odessa townsmen as forever burdened “with spectacles on their noses and autumn in their hearts.” The name of Chaim Tchernowitz is on a street in Jerusalem, under his pen name of “Rav Tsair” (the Young Rabbi). He was my mother’s father. Trilling met him through his “closest friend at college,”² Henry M. Rosenthal, who had married Rav Tsair’s daughter.

What was my grandfather about? I don’t know if he had a “Jovian port.” Trilling might have had the wrong deity in mind there. Rav Tsair was a polemicist—in Hebrew, and in several European languages — for Jewish political independence; he was a scholar of the Oral Law who made a case for its emergence in early Biblical times and traced its historical evolution into the medieval period; he had a wide-ranging comparative grasp of legal systems and of jurisprudence itself; he studied in several German universities and held a German doctorate in Judaica; he founded a Hebrew language monthly, *Bitzaron*; he was a friend of Albert Einstein and also of men like Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Ahad Ha-Am who were part of the Hebraist literary renaissance; his wide-ranging work is still studied in rabbinical seminaries. An Israeli philosopher I knew called him, “the greatest Talmudist of the twentieth century.” There are others who contend for that title, and I am not fit to rank any of them. All I can tell is what he was to me.

The Bible is not an abstract religious text. The human beings whose stories make it up are inseparable from its meaning.

Rav Tsair was how I knew that the stories in *Genesis* are possible. They are possible because he was *actual*. To draw an analogy with another field, we know that the philosophic life is possible because Plato made sure we knew

that Socrates was actual. In our time, when it is not easy to tell the noble from the base, we still love philosophy, because we know that behind it stands someone who was *deservedly* loved, for whom the more noble course was also the more reasonable.

Rav Tsair set himself to face the edge of Jewish existence. In that, he seemed to me like a figure from *Genesis* brought down into the present world. On the one side, the Orthodox were doing what they did, for all their numberless reasons, but chiefly because The Tradition backed them. On the other side, the world was pressing in for the kill. With both those realities in view, he fully occupied his role within The Tradition, but he did what he could, protectively, to enlarge its borders. It was a case of intelligent love in motion.

He was made of the stuff of stories. Once long ago, when my older sister and I were seated on the wine-colored rug at his feet, musing with him over the vagaries of memory, and why it is that certain moments get stored while so many others vanish, he put his long, Michelangelesque forefinger close to my small face and said, “You vil remember this moment *all your life* — — *all your life* you vil remember it!” He did not merely consider the question of memory’s nature and how it selects. He moved in to change the memory fabric of my life, without asking whether he had the right to do so. Like a patriarch on the original sands, he knew his responsibility: to make stories happen, after the pattern of the Great Author.

When I knew him, he was retired, having long been Professor of Talmud at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, to which post he’d been invited in 1923. But most of the tales about him go back to other shores. My father’s diary records this one from Russia.

A local, improvised Jewish defense league had captured a pogromchik, a fomenter of pogroms, was holding him in a nearby forest, and had sent to the Rabbi for a ruling on what to do with him. As he approached the young killer, Rav Tsair was seized with an overwhelming desire to strike him. But he knew that, if he so much as raised his hand, the captive was a dead man. He had to struggle physically to get control of himself, until finally he was able to say, “Let him go.” He was not a pacifist by any means, but certainly had a wider view of the political context in which Jews lived than this little band of vigilantes did. That jus-

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tice could be had from the Tsarist courts was a delusion entertained by no one. Although I only learned this story in recent years, I would have sensed in my grandfather a man to whom the power of life and death was familiar, but *not seductive*. Rather, it was instrumental, to be used where it could do the most good. In later years, it would be a satisfaction to him that a nephew by marriage was a General in Israel. Evidently, he knew that no such condition could obtain in that Russian forest.

As a boy he'd had a dream in which he met the messiah, riding on a white horse. "When will you come?" he asked. "When you are good," the messiah replied. Such dreams were considered auspicious. He did not bask in it, but he did figure out how to put the messiah's admonition to work. At the seminary he founded in Odessa, youth of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, like Bialik, Yosef Klausner, and Yehezkiel Kaufmann, came to study. Atypically, his seminary also offered the Gymnasium (high school) preparation that would enable young Jews, barred from higher education in Russia, to gain admission to European universities, where they could become doctors, lawyers—whatever they pleased and were qualified to be. This was real rescue—from the forest, the pogrom, and its more terrible successors.

Sometimes, God helped. Once, a pogrom raged in one of the towns where he lived. He went down into the dangerous streets, where he was soon stopped by what my mother called "hooligans" (pronounced in the Russian way, hoo-lee-gans).

"Where are you going, Jew?" the hooligans said.

"I am going to see the Governor," Rav Tsair replied.

"What for?" they sneered.

"To stop the pogrom."

"Well," they smirked, "we are going to shoot you!"

"Go right ahead." And he opened his long coat wide, from both lapels.

Instinctively, they shrank back. He passed on through their midst. They fired after him. At the mansion, he was ushered in, where he found the Governor seated in his usual chair behind his imposing desk. "Here." My grandfather stretched out his long, athletic arm, put a purse on the desk and looked into the eyes of the official. "For your *favorite* charity. Now, stop the pogrom."

In the Jewish quarter of the town that night, the news spread of what he had done, and that there were bullet holes in his coat. It was reckoned a miracle, the Jewish kind of miracle, which does not require the suspension of any law of nature. I have asked myself what it took to be able to do what he did with the lynch mob. It seems to me that one has to be *entirely* ready to die. Otherwise, if one is of two minds or it's merely a bluff, it can't work.

Is this a case of faith? It is the case of a man wholly absorbed in his place and time, being present just where he has to be. Here the line between faith in the unseen worlds and solid conviction about who one is, oneself,

seems not worth trying to draw. It would be, in the worst sense, an academic exercise. His self-certainty did not seem the end result of a process of development. I never felt my grandfather could be the subject of a *Bildungsroman*. From boyhood on, he always seemed fully realized. Things happened to him. He happened to his surroundings. Undoubtedly, he learned much in the course of his life. He never had to learn who he was. In this, to my mind, he much resembled the earliest partners to the covenant, the ones whose "faith counted for righteousness"—a faith scarcely distinguishable from the actions to which it gave rise.

There was at least one Isaac Babel moment of which I was told. He had been called to the Thieves Quarter of Odessa, there to officiate at an important wedding. After the ceremony, he discovered that his gold watch and chain were missing from their accustomed place in his vest pocket. The father of the groom made him give it back to the Rabbi.

He did not idealize his people. They did not shock him, but he only interfered when he had to. For instance: the widow of a well-known writer was having trouble getting her late husband's publisher to release some money owed her husband. Rav Tsair called in the publisher and laid out her situation. The fellow listened and then said reassuringly, "We will work something out, Rabbi, don't worry. We will settle."

Rav Tsair roared, twice, "You will SETTLE?"

The publisher paid up, in full.

Although his hypothesis as to the Oral Law's origin⁵ was argued with socio-political, historical, Talmudic, and German higher-critical resources, his devotion to Jewry was utterly concrete. One time, he was traveling by train through Holland, accompanied by my future mother, then a young girl. When the train halted in the station, he stepped outside their compartment to take some fresh air and a short stroll. My mother must have lost track of the time because, when the train began to move, she realized with a start that he was not with her. She sat there, helpless and alone in the compartment, tears streaming down her face, thinking, I will have to tell them that I have lost Papa! After a long interval, suddenly there he was, covered with perspiration.

"Papa, what happened?" my mother cried. "Where did you go?"

He explained that he had been strolling up and down the platform when a reed-thin little man appeared, bent double under an enormous bundle of goods, crying repeatedly in singsong Yiddish, "Jews to the rescue!" Rav Tsair stepped forward to ask what he needed. The little man promptly dumped his towering burden of personal possessions onto my grandfather's back, turned to go down the platform the way he came, and called over his shoulder, "Hurry! Top speed! Quick quick! The last car goes

straight to America!" At that time, my grandfather was in midlife, and not in the best of health. The exertion could have been disastrous. Despite all that, hearing the generic cry for rescue, he plunged down the whole length of the platform, deposited the deluded little man in his "America-bound" last car, and then worked his way back through the cars, without asking himself whether, in that case, such a burden might reasonably have been refused.

Though he crossed the Atlantic to take up his post at J.I.R. on a first-class ticket, he would go down to Steerage every day to contribute a tenth man for the *minyán*. It was not a concession or a condescension. They were his people. He did not care on what upper deck they were, or in what pit.

He was a modernizer—as with many Jews, it was perhaps first of all a means of rescue—but he was not "modern" in any current, psychological sense. When I was first in Jerusalem, I asked my aunt, Miriam Granott, how it came about that two of my uncles, Gershon and Emmanuel, had passed their boyhoods in Ottoman and British Palestine. This is what she told me. An itinerant Zionist had been passing through Odessa and stopped overnight, as was the custom, at the Rabbi's house. My grandfather asked him, "After you leave Odessa, where are you going?" The Zionist named another town. "And then?" asked my grandfather. He named a third town. "And after that?" he was asked. A fourth town. "And finally," my grandfather persisted, "At the end, where do you go?"

"To Palestine, of course."

"Excellent. Take my sons!" Now Gershon and Emmanuel together scarcely came up to my grandfather's waist in those days, but no protestations on the part of the traveling Zionist availed.

Amazed and horrified, I asked my aunt, "Why didn't grandma object?"

My aunt Miriam, as cultivated and accomplished in a worldly sense as anyone I ever knew, shook her head and replied, as if it were too obvious to need saying, "She was a very religious woman." So apparently was he, though the Orthodox establishment did not always see it that way.

On the same visit to Jerusalem, I went to meet Rav Tsair's niece, Yemima Avidar-Tchernovitz, and her husband, Josef Avidar. Josef Avidar was a retired General. He had been deputy chief of the General Staff of the Haganah and deputy chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces. He had lost one hand in a military accident. When he was out in the world, he wore a black glove that covered an artificial hand. At home, in the informal Israeli style, he wore short sleeves that showed his two bare arms, one of which ended above the wrist. He had been Israeli ambassador to Argentina, so he was sent there to negotiate a settlement when that government protested the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann from the

streets of Buenos Aires, to stand trial in Jerusalem for, among other charges, five counts of "Crimes Against the Jewish People." Yemima had won the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement and was well known in Israel as a writer of children's books. The Avidars mentioned to me that Rav Tsair had written them a letter in Hebrew many years before, on the occasion of their marriage. I asked if they still had the letter, and if I could hear it. Yemima went and got it. She read it aloud, freely translating from what she said was a classical Hebrew. There was one other guest, as I recall, a young American woman. As Yemima read, the words simply encircled and *filled* the living room of that spacious and sunny apartment, overlooking West Jerusalem. The words held tenderness and humor. They were absolutely authoritative. They *performed* a benediction. "That's a *letter!*" said the American girl. It wasn't merely literary, however. You couldn't write it, or imitate it, unless you actually *were* that communication.

As a young girl, Yemima had been invited to accompany Rav Tsair and Albert Einstein on a vacation trip. She declined to go, thinking, why waste her vacation on a boring trip with two middle-aged intellectuals? This mistake she alluded to with a smile, shaking her head at the follies of her youth. Anyway, she mistook Einstein, who was far from stuffy. For one thing, in his younger days he loved to sail. One day, on one of the lakes of Berlin, Einstein and Rav Tsair went sailing. As they drifted under the blue skies, my grandfather asked, "Do you think we will ever understand it all?" After a silence, Einstein said, "The surfaces we may get to know somewhat better, but the real depth of things—*that* we will never know!"

The defense of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Würzburg did not conform to the usual protocol. Instead, his Professor of Judaica invited him to sit down over a cup of tea and pass the afternoon together in genial discussion of the topics he had covered. Later, Rav Tsair was asked how it went. He recalled, "I told him as much as his higher-critical head could understand."

Rav Tsair's personal authority did not extend to the details of his practical life. For instance, he was renting a room at a boarding house in Germany where he walked out of the house one morning. He passed between the two open sides of a trellised garden gate as was his wont, but found that suddenly he could not take another step. It was as if an invisible force were stopping him in his tracks. He pressed against it with all his might, but to no avail. At that moment, his landlady happened to put her head out the door, and called, "Herr Professor, close your umbrella!"

When one has thoroughly filled out one's assignment in life, a certain freedom ensues. One tends to overspill one's borders. Things happened to him that were the stuff of tall tales, but he was not a legendary character. He was real. He simply attracted adventures of his own size.

One time in Florida he passed by a wharf and noticed that a fishing contest was in progress. Ever curious, he paused to see how such a thing was carried on, when the contest's organizers, mistaking his intent, waved him forward and pressed a fishing rod into his hands. Rather than explain, he held on to it patiently, until suddenly the rod came alive and began to jerk him violently toward the edge of the wharf. Bystanders noticed the danger and grabbed him from behind, while he continued to hold the line against mounting resistance. At last an enormous fish was landed. He was declared the winner and photographed holding it high. While he stood there bemused, the men plied him with the sorts of questions by which veteran fishermen hone their craft. How he had held the rod? When he had turned it? and so forth.

Although he was archetypal, he was also as unique as a fingerprint. So it was a surprise when, walking down 139th Street toward his apartment building on Riverside Drive, he saw — walking *up* 139th Street — himself, as in a mirror. It was his double! My grandmother wasn't sure which one was hers, and she was frightened. The two men stopped to talk. The other man was a Russian. After a short conversation in Russian, they ascertained that, apart from their identical appearance, they had little else in common. So they shook hands and parted amicably.

In his youth, before he met my grandmother, he'd had a first love, a Hasidic girl. Once she came to bring *his* father, a formidable patriarch, a message from *her* father. Seeing my future grandfather, then a handsome young man, she became confused and delivered the message in a high-pitched voice. Noticing that something was afoot, my great-grandfather mimicked her in falsetto after she'd gone. For a young man of my grandfather's lineage, to marry a Hasidic girl was as likely as for a Capulet to marry

a Montague. In their whole lives the boy and girl had one stolen hour. In the silent night, they walked around the lake, side by side, not touching, not even holding hands.

He escaped medical definition. When he was in Berlin, he underwent surgery for intestinal cancer. The surgeon saw my mother's stricken face after the operation and said kindly to her, "Don't cry, Fraülein. He can live yet another week!" A few years later, Rav Tsair decided to pay a call on his surgeon. The doctor looked up from his desk in a puzzled way, made a hasty check of his files, and asked, "*Leben-Sei noch?*" Are you still alive? He checked his records again. "You owe me five marks." "It will be a pleasure to pay you," beamed my grandfather, taking out his wallet.

Dates are not a specialty of the family, but it was later—by more than forty years—that he lay in his apartment, on a bed facing the Hudson River, really dying this time. My mother had been attending him and heard the death rattle. "Papa," she cried. "Come back!" So he came back, and they had a day out of time together, in which they spoke of many things never talked of before, of life and love and how people really are. He spoke also of the little Hasidic girl. In the great weave of time, he knew how to take up the threads of his life and not lose a one. •

FOOTNOTES:

1. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p. 131.
2. Trilling, *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews*, edited by Diana Trilling (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 11, n. He and my father graduated from Columbia University in the class of 1925.
3. Most fully expounded in Chaim Tchernowitz, *Toledot Ha-Halakah, or History of the Halakah: The Transmission and Development of the Oral Law from its Inception to the Completion of the Talmud*, 4 vols. (New York: Toledot Ha-Halakah Publication Committee, 1935-50).