



SHIMON PERES

*“Look, we have existed for four thousand years—
two thousand years in diaspora, in exile.”*

—VISHNYEVA, BELARUS, 1930—

COFFEE DRIBBLED from his lip as he took a sip from the cup. He wiped it away with his fingertips and returned the cup to the saucer on the table. He cast a glance across the table. “I had a dream last night.”

Michael Katznelson was a rabbi. The man seated across from him was Zvi Meltzer, his cantor.

“Oh?” Meltzer said. “Was it an enjoyable dream?”

Katznelson gave a faint shake of his head. “No, it was not.”

“I find they rarely are.” Meltzer took a sip from his cup. “Even when they aren’t particularly troubling, they’re almost never. . . enjoyable.”

Katznelson looked away. Meltzer waited a moment, then prompted him. “So, are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“About the dream.”

Katznelson thought a moment longer, took another sip of coffee,

then began. “Everyone in the village was surrounded by soldiers. The soldiers were firing weapons at them. Bullets everywhere. People falling over dead. Then we were in the building.”

Meltzer frowned. “The building?”

“Yes. The synagogue. The ones who didn’t die from the bullets ran in there to be safe.”

“Who was there?”

“You. Me. Everyone. As many as could fit. All packed inside. The building was full. And they just kept firing their guns with bullets coming through the walls.” Katznelson looked over at Meltzer. “Then I smelled smoke.”

“Smoke?”

“Yes. I went to the window and looked out. There were dead bodies everywhere. Lying in the street and on the grass. The entire village—all of them—were killed. And then smoke billowed up before me. Flames rose up in front of the window and I knew. . .” His voice trailed away and a troubled look came over him.

“Knew what?” Meltzer prompted with a hint of urgency. “What did you know?”

“That they were burning the building and we had no way out.”

Meltzer had a puzzled expression. “Then what happened?”

Katznelson lifted his cup to take another sip. “I woke up.”

They sat in silence, both men sipping coffee, lost in thought. Finally Meltzer spoke. “Well.” He had a wan smile. “I’m sure that was a relief.”

“It was an important dream,” Katznelson replied in an unamused tone.

“You mean like a message?”

“I mean like I was seeing the future.”

Meltzer frowned again. “But who would do such a thing? We have all experienced acts of violence, but what you dreamed—who would do something like that? So organized. So intentional.”

Katznelson reached to a chair behind him and picked up a newspaper. He pointed to a picture on the page as he handed the paper to Meltzer. “This is the face I saw in my dream.”

Meltzer glanced at a picture of Adolf Hitler on the page.

“All night long,” Katznelson continued, “standing among the men with the guns.” He gestured to the paper Meltzer now held. “That is the face I saw.”

Meltzer checked the date at the top of the page and his eyes brightened. “This is yesterday’s paper.”

Katznelson nodded. “So?”

“So, you read the paper last night before you went to sleep?”

“I always read the paper before I go to sleep.”

“I know, and that’s what I’m saying. You read the paper, you fell asleep.” He tapped the picture with his finger. “His face showed up in your dreams.” Meltzer glanced down at the image of Hitler. “Ugly guy. No wonder you had bad dreams.”

“It’s more than that,” Katznelson sighed.

“More than what?”

“More than just seeing the picture, going to sleep, and dreaming about it.”

“What more?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking. Remembering.”

“Thinking and remembering what? You aren’t making much sense right now, Michael.”

“The words of Joel keep coming to my mind.”

“Joel. The prophet?”

“Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”

“And you dreamed a dream last night.”

“It was more than a dream. It was like a word. A word to my spirit.”

Just then, the door opened and a young boy entered. Katznelson looked up and smiled. “Shimon. Finished with school already?”

“It’s almost four, Rebbe,” Shimon replied. He came to a stop near the table and Meltzer slipped his arm around the boy’s waist. Meltzer gave him a squeeze. “How is my grandson?”

“I am well.”

“You had a good day?”

“Of course he had a good day,” Katznelson said. “All the Perskis are smart. They do well in school.”

At seven years old, Shimon wore woolen trousers, a shirt buttoned to the collar, and a woolen jacket. Atop his head was a black hat, and long curls of hair hung in twisted strands from beneath it.

Meltzer tousled young Shimon’s hair. “You should be rested after a day with your friends. Now the real education begins. Come.” Meltzer stood and glanced over at Katznelson. “We can continue our discussion tomorrow.”

“Certainly,” Katznelson replied. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Meltzer lived only a few blocks away and when they reached the house he took a seat at the end of the dining table. Shimon sat to one side. Before them, the table was covered with stacks of books and papers. The books were mostly about the *Tanakh*—the Commandments—and the *Talmud*, the Mosaic law. The papers contained more recent works, primarily the ideas of learned rabbis from the region and recent articles by proponents of an idea known as Zionism—the notion that Jews should return to their native homeland in Palestine.

As they sat at the table, however, Meltzer opened a book on Russian literature, a topic almost as close to his heart as Mosaic law. The book was entitled *The Cossacks*. He handed it to Shimon. “I want you to read from this today.”

Shimon glanced at the cover. “Wasn’t Tolstoy a Christian?”

“But not at the time he wrote that.”

“But he was not a Jew.”

“No.”

Shimon began slowly, “Why do I have to read the works of a man who was a pagan, who later became a Christian but never was a Jew?”

“Life is complex,” Meltzer answered in a professorial tone. “It is not as simple as ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The Talmud makes this plain. Have you not been paying attention?”

“Yes, sir. I understand that, but—”

“I know what you are thinking. If we are committed to being a Jew

always, why should we care what a non-Jew thinks or says? But even our own traditions point to the complexity of life. The text of *Torah* seems straightforward, but there are always nuances presented by the facts—which is evident from the Scripture itself. And to this very day there are competing ideas among scholars about those nuanced facts.”

“But Tolstoy is not Jewish and this is a novel. Not the Talmud.”

“Nothing is one-sided,” Meltzer explained. “Whatever the issue, if you only see one side of it, then you haven’t studied it enough. Tolstoy has much to offer.” He gestured impatiently. “Read.”



Shimon Perski was born on August 2, 1923, in Vishnyeva, a small village with pleasant wooden homes and unpaved streets, nestled beneath a birch forest along the banks of the Olshanksy River. At the time of Shimon’s birth, the town was part of the Republic of Poland—known as the Second Polish Republic—a state created in 1918 following the end of World War I. The Republic lasted until September 1939, when Poland was attacked and overrun by the German army, an act that marked the beginning of World War II.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, European Jews were locked in a debate over the question of assimilation—whether Jews should shrug off their distinctive traditions and practices, rid themselves of their “Jewishness,” and simply become European. Or devote all of their strength and will to preserving their ancient beliefs, culture, and lifestyle. In the case of Vishnyeva Jews, the question was whether to become Polish, or Russian, in every way—even to the point of adopting Christian practices and a Christian lifestyle.

For some, assimilation seemed the only way to prevent persecution—Jews had been subjected to centuries of discrimination, hatred, and violence. In Vishnyeva, they’d witnessed a return of the destructive and deadly anti-Semitic pogroms of old.

Others saw assimilation as the intellectually more authentic approach, a natural progression in the development of Jews from an

unenlightened sect to one fully embracing Western thought. After all, they and their ancestors had lived in Europe as long as anyone. Why shouldn't they simply see themselves as European?

But not everyone agreed with either of these opinions. Some recoiled from European culture altogether and sought with increasing vigilance to maintain Jewish life in its strictest form. For the *Haredi*—the most authentically Jewish of the Orthodox—the purpose of man was to serve his Maker. That service was achieved by keeping the commandments and observing the old ways—the beliefs, traditions, and practices of ancient Judaism. For them, lifestyle and obedience, culture and faith, tradition and religion were one. Together, they provided the means of fulfilling the obligation of service to God. And it was into that life, that system of thought, that Zvi Meltzer brought his grandson Shimon.

The tradition of the Haredi, though, was nothing new to Shimon's family. In fact, it ran rather deep into their ancestry. His grandparents on both sides grew up in the town of Volozhin, which was twenty kilometers away. Volozhin was home to a famous yeshiva, a Talmudic school, operated by Chaim Nachman Bialik. The school was founded by Chaim Volozhiner, of whom Shimon's paternal grandfather, Zalman Perski was a descendant. As a young man, Zalman studied at the yeshiva, too.

Yet in spite of that, Shimon's father, Yitzhak Perski, and his mother, Sara Meltzer, were not practicing Jews. Yitzhak was a timber merchant and a dealer in commodities of various types, a business he conducted through warehouses he maintained alongside the railroad in a neighboring village. With an acumen for business, he was quite successful and, for the time and place in which he lived, also quite wealthy. The Perskis lived a comfortable life. Shimon and his brother, Gershon—whom they called Gigi—experienced no lack.

As a young boy, Shimon attended a Tarbut school—a secular, Hebrew language school that flourished among Jewish communities in the time between the two World Wars. Classes were taught in

Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish. The law required the school to teach Polish. Gigi attended the same school.

At home Shimon learned Russian. His mother loved Russian novels, often reading while she went about her daily routine. And there always was a stack of books on the table beside her bed. As soon as he was able to read, she began supplying young Shimon with novels, too.

The stories he read ignited Shimon's imagination and set him to dreaming, at first of worlds that used to be, and then of things that had not yet come to pass. Gradually, those dreams grew beyond mere imagination to the question of "Why not?" Why not a world where Jews could live without fear? Why not a world where machines took us beyond the sky to stars? Why not a life spent exploring the reaches of one's mind and bringing to this world the wonder one found there? It was a perspective that remained with him throughout his life, marking him forever as an optimist but leaving him with the moniker of "Shimon the Dreamer."