



A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by Daneel Schaechter

If Not Higher

Seven o'clock in the morning on a beautiful late September day in *Eretz Yisrael*. Near silence in the streets of the holy Old City of Jerusalem, as a group of recently arrived Orayta students drowsily and almost unwillingly crawl out of bed. It is no day other than the first day of *Rosh Hashanah*, and it feels as if just yesterday we stepped off of the plane in *Ben Gurion* Airport.



But it was nearly two weeks ago. It is unbelievable how much an enthusiastic group of twenty-one Americans and a single Brit is eager to learn about its deep connection to Judaism, Israel, and G-d. Two mere weeks. The intense learning, the thought-provoking discussions, the hikes, the evening trips to *Ben Yehuda*, all have brought these twenty-two guys together, forming immense bonds in such a short period of time.

Coming from a New York public school with no prior Orthodox background, I have certainly been motivated to think and work outside of my comfort zone, making the experience even more special for me. And I know I am not the only one. Even the Jewish day school kids have had to grapple with concepts that they thought they knew well - such as what G-d is, or what certain *mitzvos* mean when investigated more closely.

Seven-thirty in the morning. All of the Orayta guys, along with the *Rebbeim* and several Isralight Fellows, embark upon a journey in *tefillah*. It was one of the most lively and intense five hours of my life. All of the voices: the tenors, the basses, those capable of harmonizing, the tone-deaf, and every one in between, combined to form a certain *yachad*, a unity, a beautiful unique atmosphere that seemed so fitting for our first *Rosh Hashanah* in Israel.

During the festive lunch, I was asked to share a personal anecdote or story. So I selected "If Not Higher" (*Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekherm*), a short story by I.L. Peretz, which has always carried a special meaning for me, especially around *Rosh Hashanah*.

Early every Friday morning, at the time of the *Slichos*, the Rabbi of Nemirov would vanish.

He was nowhere to be seen - neither in the synagogue, nor in the two study houses, nor at a *minyán*. And he was certainly not at home.

Where could the rabbi be? Where should he be? In heaven, no doubt. A Rabbi has plenty of business to take care of just before the Days of Awe. Jews, God bless them, need livelihood, peace, health, and good matches. They want to be pious and good, but our sins are so great; and Satan watches the whole earth from one end to the other. What he sees, he reports; he denounces, informs. Who can help us if not the rabbi!

That's what the people thought.

But once a *Litvak* came, and he laughed. You know the *Litvaks*. They think little of the holy books, but stuff themselves with *Talmud* and law. So this *Litvak* points to a passage in the *Gemara*, which states that even Moses our Teacher did not ascend to heaven during his lifetime, but remained suspended two and a half feet below. Go argue with a *Litvak*!

So where could the Rabbi be?

"That's not my business," said the *Litvak*, shrugging. Yet all the while - what a *Litvak* can do! - he was scheming to find out.

That same night, right after the evening prayers, the *Litvak* stole into the Rabbi's room, slid under the Rabbi's bed, and waited. He would watch all night, discover where the Rabbi vanishes to, and what he does during the *Slichos*.

Someone else might have gotten drowsy and fallen asleep, but a *Litvak* is never at a loss; he recites a whole tractate of *Talmud* by heart.

At dawn he heard the call to prayers.

The Rabbi has already been awake for a long time. The *Litvak* heard him groaning for a whole hour.

Whoever has heard the Rabbi of Nemirov groan, knows how much sorrow for all Israel, how much suffering, lies in each groan. A man's heart might break, hearing it. But a *Litvak* is made of iron; he listens and remains where he is. The Rabbi - long life to him! - lies on the bed, and the *Litvak* under the bed.

Then the *Litvak* hears the beds in the house begin to creak; he hears people jumping out of their beds; mumbling a few Jewish words, pouring water on their fingernails, banging doors. Everyone has left. It is again quiet and dark; a bit of light from the moon shines through the shutters.

(Afterward, the *Litvak* admitted that when he found himself alone with the Rabbi, a great fear took hold of him. Goose pimples spread across his skin, and the roots of his sidelocks pricked him like needles. A trifle: to be alone

with the Rabbi at the time of the *Slichos*! But a *Litvak* is stubborn. So he quivered like a fish in water, and remained where he was.)

Finally the Rabbi - long life to him! - arises. First, he does what befits a Jew. Then he goes to the clothes closet and takes out a bundle of peasant clothes: linen trousers, high boots, a coat, a big felt hat, and a long, wide leather belt studded with brass nails. The Rabbi gets dressed. From his coat pocket dangles the end of a heavy peasant rope.

The Rabbi goes out, and the *Litvak* follows him.

On the way the Rabbi stops in the kitchen, bends down, takes an ax from the bed, puts it into his belt, and leaves the house. The *Litvak* trembles but continues to follow.

The hushed dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark streets. Every once in a while a cry rises from a *minyan* reciting the *Slichos*, or from a sickbed. The Rabbi hugs the sides of the streets, keeping to the shade of the houses. He glides from house to house, and the *Litvak* after him. The *Litvak* hears the sound of his heartbeats mingling with the sound of the Rabbi's heavy steps. But he keeps on going and follows the Rabbi to the outskirts of town.

A small wood stands just outside the town.

The Rabbi - long life to him! - enters the wood. He takes thirty or forty steps and stops by a small tree. The *Litvak*, overcome with amazement, watches the Rabbi take the ax out of his belt, and strike the tree. He hears the tree creak and fall. The Rabbi chops the tree into logs, and the logs into sticks. Then he makes a bundle of the wood and ties it with the rope in his pocket. He puts the bundle of wood on his back, shoves the ax back into his belt, and returns to the town.

He stops at a back street besides a small, broken-down shack and knocks at the window.

"Who is there?" asks a frightened voice. The *Litvak* recognizes it as the voice of a sick Jewish woman.

"I" answers the Rabbi in the accent of a peasant.

"Who is I?"

Again the Rabbi answers in Russian. "Vassil."

"Who is Vassil, and what do you want?"

"I have wood to sell, very cheap." And not waiting for the woman's reply, he goes into the house.

The *Litvak* steals in after him. In the gray light of early morning he sees a poor room with broken, miserable furnishings. A sick woman, wrapped in rags, lies on the bed. She complains bitterly, "Buy? How can I buy? Where will a poor

widow get money?"

"I'll lend it to you," answers the supposed Vassil. "It's only six cents."

"And how will I ever pay you back?" asks the poor woman, groaning.

"Foolish one," says the Rabbi reproachfully. "See, you are a poor, sick Jew, and I am ready to trust you with a little wood. I am sure you'll pay. While you, you have such a great and mighty God and you don't trust him for six cents."

"And who will kindle the fire?" asks the widow? "Have I the strength to get up? My son is at work."

"I'll kindle the fire," answers the Rabbi.

As the Rabbi puts the wood into the oven he recited, in a groan, the first portion of the *Slichos*. As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he recited, a bit more joyously, the second portion of the *Slichos*. When the fire was set, he recited the third portion, and then shut the stove.

The *Litvak* who saw all this became a disciple of the Rabbi.

And ever after, when another disciple tells how the Rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the *Slichos*, the *Litvak* does not laugh. He only adds quietly, "If not higher."

Gut Shabbes! L'shana tova tikoseyvu! And Gmar chasimah tova!

Daneel graduated from Hunter College High School in New York. He played on the Varsity Basketball team, was the Captain of the Cycling