

The Rosh Yeshiva and the Bitch

The first inkling that all was not well with the Rosh Yeshiva¹ came within days of his first encounter with Cindy, and things had been moving ever more briskly downhill since. When I saw him waiting for me at the airport gate, however, sporting a shiner of a black eye and a swollen, freshly broken nose, I realized things must have plunged beyond the event horizon. He briefed me on the official version of his story as we walked to his car. He'd been mugged on the way home from Yeshiva when he stopped at an all-night grocery to pick up some fruit and vegetables. It was a good story so far as it went, covering as it did, most of the bases, but lacked even a soupcon of credibility once you saw the ragged claw-marks on his chest. (I was treated to a comprehensive, private viewing in the airport's short-term parking lot.)

Reb Chainik Malkes, Dean and Rosh Yeshiva of the Torah Ohr Academy on the outskirts of Baltimore, called me early in the morning as I was preparing for class, requesting the honor of my company, forthwith. In the car on the way to the airport Masha/Moshe warned me not to get into trouble or do anything controversial; meetings in Baltimore invariably get out of hand.

"You know," he said. "You haven't been monitoring traffic on the JBDSM website lately, rabbi, but there've been some unusual postings." I must have grunted in non-committal fashion, signifying my preoccupation, because Masha/Moshe brought me back to earth sharply with the mention of Chainik's nemesis, *Barhochi*.

"What did *Barhochi* write?" I asked.

"Not quite sure," answered Masha/Moshe, somewhat embarrassed. "It's in heavy-duty Aramaic. You know what it's like when someone tries writing Aramaic in English. Here, I copied it out for you to look at. The best I can make out of it is something to do with boats and docking and time and counting saints. I've been doing a little research in the hope I could work it out before you caught wind of it. But I give up."

He handed me a sheet of notepaper with *Barhochi's* cryptic note on it. I frowned as I read it, translating as I went along. "Well," I asked. "What did you come up with?"

"Let's see," answered Masha/Moshe with relish. "There was, 'When the saints go marching in I want to be in their number.' And when that didn't quite fit in with the Aramaic, I tried 'Let all the numbered ships to the port in a storm gather.' After that I more or less gave up trying to translate. What does it say?"

¹ The Rosh Yeshiva or Dean of a Talmudic College is almost invariably a male with minimal secular education, who knows what he knows of the Babylonian Talmud only because he picked it up by osmosis while studying at an institution vastly superior to the one he now commands. The administrative skills he displays are acquired in the course of husbanding his burgeoning family. Regardless of age or personality, a Rosh Yeshiva qualifies for the post by exhibiting no significant student-management skills whatsoever.

“Come in boat number Ninety, your time is up.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Yup.”

“Wait now, just wait a minute,” said Masha/Moshe excitedly. “Ninety. Isn’t ninety the numerical equivalent of *Tzadik* - The Saint?”

“Yup.”

“What does it mean?”

“Nothing good,” I answered.

JBDSM is the online, Jewish Bondage Domination Sadism & Masochism group of individuals to whom I provide rabbinic counsel, a literary forum and a sympathetic ear.

Back in the early days, when Chainik first joined the group of what he called ‘holy-kinksters’ he made himself known to me solely by his Internet alias, *Barskeeler*. In fact, he was one of the first members to sign-on, but we corresponded for several years before actually meeting face to face. Secrecy and paranoia were much more prevalent in those days. Who dared come out and admit to another *Frummie*² they are hardwired with perversions and kinks in the flex all the way down to the baseboard? His written posts to the Yahoo discussion group were full of ribald, self-deprecating humor, inclined toward the Talmudic in-joke. In real life he is not noted for literary flamboyance, but rather for his quiet competence as a Maimonides scholar. Online, it’s as though Maimonides has taken the bucket seat in a topless roadster, while Chainik, the driver, whoops it up at the wheel with Jimmy Hendrix blasting a couple of bars of Klezmer riff-raff. I’d originally pictured him as a Jewish Falstaff: a little aged, a little broken, a little decrepit and somewhat drunken. I was mistaken, of course. When I met Chainik in person I found him completely unlike the bawdy image I’d formed from years of online correspondence - not an uncommon occurrence. Like most Orthodox BDSMers, he has compartmentalized his life to the point of schizophrenia.

Chainik discovered somewhat late in life that he is an uppercase Dominant, not in itself a tragedy; many of us have found truth a late ripening fruit, a winter crop, as it were. For Chainik according to Chainik, though, the only problem is his wife, whom he has given the

² Frummie [*fřūm*] confuses ignorance with innocence, and guile with ingenuity. Frummies are nurtured to believe that Jewish suffering is a ticket to ride, and all of the world a gentile fairground; that this world is but a vestibule to the world-to-come, which is said to resemble a mystical Epcot Center where Leviathan and the Behemoth, instead of Mickey and Minnie Mouse, welcome those with entry tickets. A little overwhelmed with its own piety and uniqueness, the Frum world doesn’t acknowledge the existence of authenticity in other forms, and, like the Hezbollah, has no sense of humor at all.

epithet “*Arba Mrs.*”, (a pun at once so esoteric and Lomdish³ as to be virtually untranslatable). “She’s domineering,”⁴ explained Chainik as though that clarified everything. But then, quoting Chainik in one of his more crepuscular moments, “Who is it whose problems cannot be attributed, in the end, to the wife?”

To hear him describe the moment, you’d think his dominance was an accidental discovery, but I am ever the skeptic at announcements of accidental discoveries. Complete and utter surprises aren’t as believable or common as fiction would have us believe, are they? To quote Chainik again: We know more than we know.

I suspect we get and give ourselves clues to our truths from childhood onwards, the real problem being, we deceive ourselves so well we actually believe our own lies. The Rosh Yeshiva tells his story with so much panache, however, I hesitate to contradict or interrupt him in full flood. Storytelling is his spiritual medium. Having watched his bungling efforts to instruct and enlighten students using old-fashioned pedagogy, is it any wonder I urge him to abandon the Dean’s lectern and honors to a less talented individual and go make his living telling stories? Alas, the ancient and noble Jewish calling of Maggid has fallen into disrepute; it is no longer an acceptable career choice.

“It was my clash of burning bushes,” he says. “My own, personal Revelation at Cyanide. There I was, sitting in my study when the cleaning woman who was dusting around, removed a cup and saucer from the table in front of me. When I looked at her she trembled, and the cup and saucer began rattling. She was mesmerized. It was amazing, like a hare riveted by the gaze of the stoat. I found her terror in my presence and the sound of the rattling crockery more seductive and erotic than anything I’d encountered before. She continued, trapped in my gaze with her knees knocking together, until, not knowing what else to do, I looked down at the Talmud in front of me, and the poor woman fled.”

Thus began a journey of sometimes tentative, sometimes bold and occasionally reckless trial and error. Over the telephone, in Emails and in postings online, mixing contrition and grandiosity, awe and braggadocio, he regaled us with his explorations and exploits. One woman he had looked at had fallen to her knees at his feet after wetting herself in her pants, he claimed. Heady stuff, for an all-American rabbi born in Trenton, New Jersey, weaned on 60’s sitcoms and primed to the gills with Litvak⁵ pilpul in the Yeshiva at Lakewood NJ.

When he joined, Chainik was newly overcome with remorse at having cheated on his wife for the first time. “There is no doubt in my mind,” he wrote in that first posting to JBDSM, “that in the terror and thrill of BDSM are the last remnants and vestiges of my *Yiras*

³ *Lomdish* – Highbrow. Named after R. Menachem Nochum Nachman Nechemia Nochamol Lomda, a late-medieval grammarian and poet whose book of puns and biblical pyrotechnics known as ‘*Cuntrace V’Dickduckim*’ enlivened many a debate in the ghetto.

⁴ What distinguishes domineering from dominant distinguishes bossy from governing.

⁵ *Litvak* [miş-nā-géd] Lithuanian Jew. Litvaks study Talmud text as a classical discipline, while Hasidim take a largely post-modernist approach. Hassidim say every Litvak has a crucifix in his heart, but they are most probably wrong. (Only those with hearts have them, according to Chainik, and he should know, he says.)

*Shomayim*⁶. The more I learn about my passion for worship and the desire to surrender, the more embarrassed I am to be peddling this ersatz, Frummie and Yeshivish version. You know how we sanitize, deodorize, homogenize and squash enthusiasm and excitement into this mealy-mouthed pap called *Mussar* – Ethics I feed my students every day? It has to stop."

Interestingly, not a week after Chainik logged onto JBDSM for the first time, using the pseudonym, *Barskeeler*, another newcomer joined the group, a singularly taciturn individual calling himself *Barhochi*. It was obvious from the outset that he was an FFB⁷ with an FTT⁸ attitude. In addition to the attitude, he appeared to have an impressive understanding of Jewish attitudes and lore, an encyclopedic knowledge of Talmud and the Codes and an apparently bottomless fund of apt stories. Needless to say we were intrigued to know his real name, but *Barhochi* never dropped so much as a single clue to his identity. All we knew was that he had it in for Chainik. At first I, in my self appointed role as champion of the kosher-kinksters, thought him too judgmental and attempted to engage him in debate. But *Barhochi* was not interested in debate with anyone. He reserved his comments to acerbic observations on *Barskeeler's* progress. The first time Chainik waxed poetic about his conversion to BDSM, *Barhochi* responded with a cautionary tale.

"A group of young scholars once came to their Rosh Yeshiva with news that a certain young man, an alumnus of their institution had turned apostate and gone out to bad company. 'What a pity, oy, what a pity,' sighed the sage. 'He's spent so many years studying in my yeshiva it will have spoiled his ability to enjoy the fleshpots and decadence with any real abandon. What a waste of pleasure. He should have gone out much earlier.' The Rosh Yeshiva continued to mourn for the student's loss of 'both worlds.'" *Barhochi* warned Chainik that a similar fate awaited him; "Imagine," he wrote with his uncanny perspicacity, "Imagine it was the Rosh Yeshiva himself who turned apostate, what a dumb move that would be."

Chainik wrote back indignantly, promising to prove him wrong, but *Barhochi* would not be provoked or drawn into debate. He quoted his Talmud, told his story, made his point, voiced his opinion and left it at that. It was very frustrating and, after a number of years passed, remained a mystery.

Chainik, to give him credit, did indeed try and prove the prophet of doom wrong. We even discussed Chainik's dream to incorporate and synthesize the insights gained discovering his BDSM qualities into a coherent religious program. He told me once over the phone, "For the first time in my career as a Rosh Yeshiva, now, I understand terror, slavery and service, now I see why the Hebrew word for service and slavery are identical. These days when I talk about God my students sit up and listen. When I talk about worship, their ears prick up and when I speak of passion, they don't squirm. What have I learned? Submission is the ultimate freedom, and when I take someone's power as a gift, and dominate them to the point where their will is annihilated, I am giving freedom and receiving freedom." (Early

⁶ *Yiras Shomayim* – Fear of Heaven. Not to be confused with fear of punishment, disclosure or the wife.

⁷ FFB - Frum from birth.

⁸ FTT – Frummer than thou.

on in our acquaintance I realized that talking in a perpetual hyperbole is comely nowhere but in Rosh Yeshivish.)

We often spoke of the paradox of practicing Orthodox or any type of Judaism, knowing that worship is a worthless, abstract concept so long as your blood is not involved. "If it don't got glands, it don't got nothing," Chainik said often. "Knowing God exists with your mind, even feeling it in your heart, is not comparable to the hot, rolling, turgid sensation of God in the Groin. We don't teach that any more," he said wistfully, "because no one taught us."

He talked of writing a learned treatise about the deep, dark, human desire for enslavement, and when I pointed out that there already exist a plethora of such books in most pornography marketplaces, he dismissed my objection with a wave of his hand, "Pfui, Fecchh! English books. Who's talking about English? I'm talking about writing in Hebrew, in Rashi script, for Yeshiva students like myself."

His plans come to nothing. His books don't get written, classes are never taught. Convinced he understands himself, R. Chainik Malkes has succumbed to the oldest delusion of all, there is a way around the truth, a shortcut or an easier path.

"What have you to teach your students so long as you yourself are living a lie?" I asked ever more urgently as the years pass. "What use are the insights you've acquired if you insist on practicing them without context? What value are you to the Jewish people if your real creed is applied outside of it?"

Even after one of his former students, a young rabbi working in South America, joined JBDSM and wrote, making fun of the faculty at his alma-mater, deriding the inapplicability of his classical Jewish education to his kinks, and lamenting the fact that none of his teachers had been honest about sexuality, even then, Chainik flinched at coming, even marginally, out of his closet.

And then Chainik encountered Cindy Clavter at a meeting of the yeshiva's development committee.

She's the accountant in charge of the fundraising drive. They met in the library at the yeshiva; four philanthropist families and faculty, the advertising manager, and the accountant, to plan their newest campaign. She dismissed the ad-man on the spot, refusing to work with him, and acted in general, not so much like a primadonna, as US Secretary of State.

"She acts like a total, one hundred percent bitch," said the Rosh Yeshiva, gleefully describing their original encounter, adding, "You wouldn't believe the vulcanized *Sugyos*⁹ on that woman."

⁹ *Sugyo* – A scholarly amble through a section or passage of the Talmud. It is not uncommon for a Sugyo in a yeshiva's curriculum to require a month of full-time study.

“Then, after firing the man, she flashes this glittering smile all round the room, and by way of explanation, says in that oh-so-proper, Princeton accent of hers ‘I seem to have acquired a reputation for being tough, I can't imagine why. Should expecting professionals to produce on time, on budget, and as specified be considered tough?’

“‘So, this isn't actually an apology, I take it?’ I said. Everyone laughed, but, strangely, she just blushed and would not meet my gaze.

“The meeting ended eventually and I put the incident out of mind until the following morning when she called me at the office saying there was something she wanted to bring up. I asked her what it was, and she said, ‘I was perturbed by the remark you made about me yesterday. You know you say cutting and hurtful things.’

“‘Oh?’ I said.

“‘Yes’, she said.

“I let the silence between us on the phone grow. For some reason I was feeling mulish and obstinate, perhaps it's because she said that thing about me being hurtful, but you know how I get, I do say hurtful things. Anyway, I decided not to break the silence. She blinked first, and, d'you know what, she surprised me completely, 'cos I thought she was going to go off like a box of fireworks and melt down in a controlled, ivy-league resentment at me.

“‘Can I come to your office and talk to you?’

“Now if you were to ask me what prompted my next comment, I wouldn't be able to tell you. I'm hardly ever pedantic in that way, such things don't really bother me. But I said in my most headmasterly voice, ‘The question isn't *can* you, but *may* you?’ Again, there was a long
silence.

“Her voice had a brittle, mock- flippant quality when she replied. ‘May I?’

“‘Yes, you may,’ I said, and we made an appointment. I think I fell for her right there and then.”

Chainik can rattle off dialogue from memory like this, so accurately and so fast you'd swear he was reading off some mnemonic version of the newsreader's teleprompter. But I have met her, and she is the worst thing could ever have happened to him. Everything about her says tight. Her hair's cut short, pageboy style, all close to her head, silky and shiny black. Her clothes match the hair, shiny, and black; severe and businesslike. Her body is short and compact, but her mind is a constricted, dark place, an abyss. And she is driven by a single compulsion; to excoriate him.

He swats her down like a fly every time she raises her ego, and she succumbs to the force of his personality like a mosquito to a flamethrower. Her submission fills him with a charge of endorphins heavier than the light brigade. In talking about her he sounds like a happy bunch of drunks who've crashed into a distillery and have found plenty to do until the

police arrive.

“When she arrived at my office we chatted about this and that for 20 minutes. I could see she was only pretending to be comfortable; the way she kept her briefcase balanced on her knees told me she was lying. I said, ‘Miss Clavter, why don’t you put your briefcase down?’

“She shrugged, and tossed her hair, looked at me in that prim way, and said ‘No. I won’t.’

“The way she said, ‘No, I won’t,’ I just knew she was bluffing, and this is the clincher; she had no idea she was bluffing.

“I gave her a look. *The look.*

“She looked back at me and said, ‘I know what you’re doing, and you have no right to do it. You make fun of me in your supercilious way and think you are special. But you’re merely arrogant.’

“She’s right, you know, I am arrogant.”

“Chainik, Chainik,” I interrupted him. “Stop with the euphoric recall already, and start looking at what’s happening.”

But Chainik, then as now, is incapable of seeing what Cindy does. She has the fascinating ability to make him feel terrible about himself while providing him a tremendous burst of sexual and psychic energy. She’s irresistible and venomous to him. Their interactions give him a huge thrill. But for every surge of power she provides him, she takes a measure of his self-esteem. She demeans him against his will, even as she obeys his every command against her will.

But Chainik in the grips of a storytelling urge is an elemental force, well beyond my ability to check him.

“With her eyes she beseeched, and implored me,” he continued, unabashedly describing his humiliation of her. “Oy, what a *gevalt* feeling, I’m telling you. You know how I live for these moments; it was pure gold. It gets them that way, you know, these submissive souls. And they have no idea, no idea whatsoever, how to cope with it. Anyway, I met her eyes with the most scornful look I could put on. Anyone looked at me like that I’d thump him. Know what I’m saying?”

“And she whispered. ‘I’m sorry, I apologize’. Bingo! I had her by the short and curlies. Total capitulation. I don’t have to tell you all this, of course, you know how it is. It’s obvious her greatest secret’s her dream of being humiliated. Almost everything she’s done in her life is done to cover up this one fact. Not surprising, really. I don’t blame her. I’d be trying to hide it too, even from myself.”

Try as I might, I could never penetrate or dispel his elaborate fiction. He taught me one of my own deepest lessons. Only the truth is freeing. All illusion, however orderly and

elaborate, fosters the inevitability of its own dissolution. There's no point pretending you accept yourself if you still have to lie about the uncomfortable bits.

"As it turns out," Chainik insisted on one occasion, "I've discovered that the grungier the humiliation I subject her to, the more profound her sense of being stripped of ego, the greater the relief she ultimately feels. I am so in love with her I think I want to throw everything away. She says I'm not in love. She calls it 'in lust,' tells me I'm a bit of a creep.

"Chainik," I said, "you have a marvelous way with words, and I'm half convinced by the rhetoric. But do you really think you are a creep?"

He blushed, and avoided my gaze.

Then came the sidling conversations, discussions wherein I would try my best to address and adjust Chainik's new perceptions of himself as a villain, a creep, an oppressor, a perpetrator and offender. Futilely, I tried reminding him of his unashamed delight and unabashed innocence during our early acquaintance. "You don't understand," was his rote response. Terminal uniqueness is the only way to describe his condition. Watching Chainik's early joyous discovery sour and curdle into a clotted mess of cyclical gorging and hangovers has been acutely painful for me. But observing the decline in his performance as the dean of a prestigious yeshiva has been horrifying. His functioning during the last High Holidays was so erratic as to draw the attention and concern of the local rabbinate.

"Throw your stuff in the back seat," he said, as we got into his dark station wagon. I did just that. The back seat was already covered a foot deep in stuff. My coat, suitcase and laptop went onto the pile and I made myself comfortable in readiness for today's version of the 'whole story'.

As we drove out of the airport onto the beltway I asked him how got the black eye?

"Well," he answered, "the excuse was a meeting in her office. You know, it was the first time Cindy and I had actual sex." He hesitated before continuing.

"And?" I prompted attempting to break the silence.

"I'm trying to find a way to say this that doesn't sound quite as bad as it is," he said.

"You're worried about how it sounds?" I laughed out loud. "Take a peep in the mirror, Chainik. You look as though you got mugged in a brothel or tried to rape a combine harvester or something! What is it that's going to sound so bad it needs censoring before you tell me about it?"

I knew what it was, though. It was Chainik working overtime to deny how destructive his relationship with Cindy was to his soul.

"It's nothing really," he began. "I pushed her harder than usual. Then I cornered her in the room. Then she tried to knee me in the privates, but I could feel her leg begin to move,

and I twisted, and I slapped her. I smacked her on the face, a real smack, hard on the side. She tried to smack me back, but I pinned her wrists”

“So then what happened?” I asked.

“What do you think happened?” He said, pretending to concentrate on driving. He negotiated traffic for a while without adding any details to the sketch he’d painted. I waited patiently for more minutiae.

“But I didn’t call and ask you to come because of me and Cindy,” said the Rosh Yeshiva. “I didn’t care and I still don’t care how the world sees it, you don’t understand.”

There was silence in the car for a while.

Once more I attempted to bring a sense of reality to the conversation, but he interrupted me unceremoniously.

“I said this is not about Cindy. I’m embarrassed to come out with it plainly, but I guess I just have to. It’s about Sarah.”

“Sarah, your wife, Sarah? *Arba Mrs?*” I asked with incredulity. You’ve never called her by name since the first day we met.”

“Sarah.” He muttered again, continuing, “You know how her father is the big-shot rabbi, well, she’s had a good education hasn’t she; she knows the law. So, to cut a long story short, she went to the Beis Din¹⁰ and made a formal complaint saying I’ve been depriving her of sexual relations for some time, demanding they do something to enforce her conjugal rights.

“When did all this happen?”

“She called me to Beis Din after the High Holidays. I sort of claimed to be impotent, you know?”

“Oy, Chainik, Chainik, impotent. You my friend, impotent, you, how could you lie like that with a straight face?” I asked, attempting to keep the playfulness in our conversation. “You are Chainik, the Magnus Opium!”

“But I can’t do it, I’m not capable,” he blurted. “I’m totally impotent with her, I can’t sustain an erection. I’ve tried now for three months. We’ve both tried... And it gets worse. Sarah knows everything, everything, everything. And guess what.” added Chainik gritting his teeth and groaning. “She joined JBDSM the same week I did, she’s *Barhochi*, she is the one, the ONE. And all this time she’s been following my checkered career with interest... She’s known all this time, everything I’ve done and written about. What a stupid fool I am. I’ve never been so found out in my life. It was Sarah who asked for you to come today.”

¹⁰ Beis Din – Jewish court of law, presided over by magistrates with Dickensian pomp and Kafkaesque wit.

My jaw must have dropped visibly, because, after glancing at me he said with a smile, “You can close your mouth now, *rebbelle*, your tonsils are hangin’ out.”

Perhaps it was seeing me so shocked that did it, but for a short while Chainik the *bon vivant* returned, and he cheered up immensely. Who knows, maybe it was just that Cindy had flown to the back of his mind. I wasn’t complaining. Chainik is good company when he’s around. He rolled down the windows of the car and began singing in that beautiful tenor of his. What a golden voice! After he’d given me a stirring rendition of the Kol Nidre service, the car was quiet.

“Gimme the worst,” I said.

He gave me the worst, and half an hour later I found myself sitting with the assembled Beis Din of the Maryland state area. Their august personages would not appreciate my mentioning them by name in this book. Suffice it to say, if *gravitas* could pave roads, Maryland would be all blacktop. But honors go to Sarah who carries herself with the air of a duchess, and who insisted on being present throughout the erudite discussions.

“We are given to understand that this is an area of your expertise, Rabbi Schreiber. Would you please explain to the Beis Din, what is the meaning of Fetish?”

“A fetish is a ritual or object without which a sex act cannot take place,” I replied. The court burst into an excited babble of voices as the assembled rabbis attempted to integrate this knowledge into their worldview. The noise died down and I continued, “And if you will recall the Talmudic dictum, ‘not all fingers are the same,’ well,” I added with a flourish, “nor are all gloves the same.” The chief rabbi judiciously suppressed a fleeting smirk, and someone sniggered.

“Can one person become a fetish to another person?” I was asked next.

Clever woman, Sarah, you see. She’d allowed Chainik to plead impotence as an excuse for ignoring her physical needs up until the moment he had sex with Cindy. But once he admitted being capable of sex with someone, with anyone, his impotence pretext disappeared. He was not sick or too weak, he was merely in the situation of any man withholding conjugal rights from his wife. Once or twice he was asked whether in his defense he was claiming she had become disgusting to him, sexually. He shook his head sadly. She had the law firmly on her side of the bed. I watched Chainik sitting through the questions and answers, like a man in post-op he was observing events as though they were happening to someone else.

The court found Chainik had broken the law and was declared *Mored B’Isho*, a Rebel Against His Wife. She was entitled to claim damages *per-diem* from his estate as well as other redress, but her heart was not in it. There was talk of further discussion about fetish and sexual response, but I could tell it was distasteful to the rabbis, and soon the court proceedings wound themselves up. Sarah stood and walked over to a shell-shocked Chainik. “Come on, Tzadik’l,” she said, not unkindly. “You look as though you need a bit

of care and tenderness.” She’d watched his deterioration from normalcy into ruin. She’d seen what his affair with Cindy was doing. I was never quite sure whether it was genuine love, the inertial adhesive keeping old couples together, or the desire to remain a Rosh Yeshiva’s wife that moved her to act as she did, but her intervention was timely and would have been effective if Chainik had not rejected it.

“I’m sorry, Sarah,” he said outside the rabbinate. “I’ll move my personal stuff out of the house tonight. We can’t go on like this.”

Thus began Chainik’s foray into the world of gay bachelordom. It was not a pretty sight. I’d like to say Chainik got help, but Cindy was no help. He resigned from the yeshiva and refused to entertain the possibility of continuing with his career.

“Finally, I’ll get those books written,” he announced cheerfully. But there was always something happening to interfere. Now it was his son’s Bar Mitzvah, now his daughter’s wedding. He entered into his healing-via-geographic-relocation phase. First he moved to St Louis MO, then Richmond VA, then Scottsdale AZ. The fix didn’t take. He went on what he called the “Lecher Circus,” a lecture circuit of Synagogues, JCCs and Jewish radio shows. Not much of a living, it was not a pretty sight. It was painful to watch a man with so many gifts wasting so many of them. But the process of divorcing takes time, and divorce is a time of wild behavior and craziness for many people. Chainik has an especially wild side. All true intellectuals have it. It’s what makes possible the thinking of new thoughts, I suppose. But his progress from stage to stage on the road from renown to obscurity did not seem wild, merely reckless. He’s man of big appetites, but his palette was jaded and his tastes increasingly peculiar. He’d come into town for a lecture and blow through our lives like a gale. I could no longer keep up with him.

“I will not die with half my desires fulfilled,” he must have said a thousand times. I said nothing. We, his friends and admirers, remained grateful, every moment of the day, that Cindy was no longer part of Chainik’s life. But having to observe Chainik actualizing all the chaos in his soul, without intervening to stop him hurt himself, was not easy. Chainik, for all he tries to come across as narrowly focused, is a complicated man, profligate with wasted genius. He’s brilliant, verbose and larger than life. Needless to say, he cut a broad and ruinous swathe through many lonely, loving and eager hearts, that year.

Shulamis, my wife, often prevailed on him to come and eat with us, particularly for Sabbath meals, but his behavior at the table was loud and erratic. He was a little risqué to have around the children, but Shulamis insisted we keep on inviting him.

“Don’t let him disconnect from you or the group, not for one minute,” she cautioned. “He’s not safe out there alone. He may display a desire to act out like crazy, but he needs you and his other friends even more. Make sure he doesn’t burn all his bridges. Have patience and faith, act like a rabbi for goodness sake!”