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**Tel Aviv University**

**The Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities**

**Department of Literature – Yiddish Literature Track**

**The Conflict between Religion and Secularism in the Life and  
Writings of Chaim Grade**

**M.A Thesis submitted by**

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**Prepared under the Guidance of**

**Dr. Hannah Pollin-Galay**

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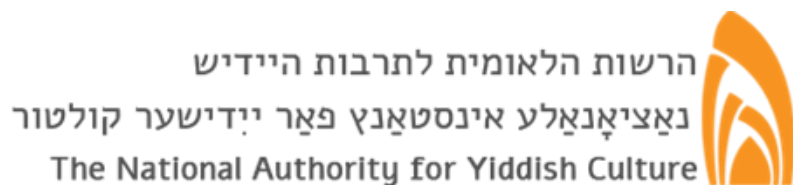
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## Acknowledgments

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I want to extend a special thank you to my dear friend and *chavruta* Yossi Newfield. Yossi introduced me to the writings of Chaim Grade, and over the years, we spent countless hours discussing all matters related to Chaim Grade. Our discussions helped clarify and crystallize many of the ideas presented in this thesis. I benefited greatly from Yossi's keen observations and penetrating analyses.

Finally, I would like to thank the National Authority for Yiddish Culture and the Jona Goldrich Institute for Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture for their generous grants that made this project possible.



## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I analyze the theme of the conflict between religion and secularism in the life and writings of Chaim Grade (1910-1982). In particular, I explore three core conflicts in Grade's life: 1) the conflict between aesthetics and Judaism, 2) the conflict between Jewish ethics (Mussar) and human psychology, and 3) the conflict between Jewish piety (Halakha) and humanistic values.

In the introduction, I introduce the topic and scope of this thesis. In the first chapter, I explore Chaim Grade's formative aesthetic experiences as a Yeshiva student that set the stage for the lifelong conflict he experienced between Orthodox Judaism and his artistic sensibilities. In the second chapter, I analyze Chaim Grade's encounter with the Mussar movement as a disciple of the Novaredok Mussar Yeshiva. Novaredok's extreme ethical philosophy and the ascetic lifestyle it demanded had a crushing effect on Grade and led him to conclude that Mussar is incompatible with human psychology. In the third chapter, I discuss Chaim Grade's relationship with R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (1878-1953), also known as the Chazon Ish. This relationship was one of the most profound experiences of Grade's life. Grade's encounter with the Chazon Ish, where he witnessed first-hand the tension between the Chazon Ish's humanism and dogmatism, highlights the conflict between Jewish piety and humanistic values. In the last chapter, I explore the shift in Chaim Grade's worldview from a religious-ethical ideology to an existential-humanistic *weltanschauung*.

In the concluding section of the thesis, I discuss the nature of Chaim Grade's ambivalent relationship toward Orthodox Judaism throughout his life. Paradoxically, despite Grade's departure from Orthodoxy, he remained a Yeshiva student in mentality and temperament in many respects. It is the nature of these unresolved tensions that this study seeks to illuminate.

## A Note to the Reader

This thesis and research project consists of several components:

- 1) The thesis itself, entitled “The Conflict between Religion and Secularism in the Life and Writings of Chaim Grade.”
- 2) A supplement to the thesis entitled “Chaim Grade: Confessions of a Tormented Writer.” This supplement appears at the end of the thesis document and contains transcriptions and translations of letters from Chaim Grade. I cite this document throughout the thesis as “Confessions” and provide the relevant letter numbers.
- 3) A companion volume entitled “A Reader and Appendices” containing original archival documents relevant to the topics covered in my thesis. I cite this document throughout the thesis as “The Reader” and provide the relevant page numbers. (The page numbers correspond to the number sequence of the digital file, not the numbers of each individual document contained therein).

My research on Chaim Grade entailed much more than producing the thesis document itself. In addition to writing my study, I have researched thousands of original documents on Chaim Grade. In particular, I have tracked down many documents pertaining to the key themes I address in the thesis, including all the extant versions of the novel *Tzemach Atlas*; numerous unpublished manuscripts on the Mussar movement and Novaredok; the Chazon Ish; Grade’s writings on the topic of the Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar) in Yiddish literature; Grade’s conflicts with Orthodox Judaism, and other topics. In addition, I have examined thousands of personal letters from Chaim Grade.

During my research, I have examined numerous archival collections in Israel, the United States, and Canada in search of material on Chaim Grade. These archival collections provided much valuable information. However, the central repository of relevant information, namely, the personal archive of Chaim Grade himself, remained inaccessible until very recently.

In 2013, YIVO and the National Library of Israel jointly acquired the estate of Chaim Grade.<sup>1</sup> A significant development and breakthrough occurred in recent months when in the Summer of 2022, after almost a decade of painstaking cataloging and processing, the papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade were finally digitized and posted online. The Papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, YIVO RG 1952, are accessible online at <https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/resources/556>. The processing and

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<sup>1</sup> “The YIVO Institute and the National Library of Israel Jointly Acquire the Estate of the Late Yiddish Writer, Chaim Grade,” <https://www.yivo.org/The-YIVO-Institute-and-the-National-Library-of-Israel-Jointly-Acquire-the-Estate-of-the-Late-Yiddish-Writer-Chaim-Grade>.

digitization of Grade's archive made it possible to discover many manuscripts that shed new light on the topics I explore in my thesis.

The "Reader and Resources" primarily contains unpublished literary manuscripts, essays, correspondence, and links to audio recordings of lectures delivered by Chaim Grade. I carefully selected the documents presented in this reader from over ten thousand archival pages and tens of hours of audio and video recordings that I collected and studied as part of my ongoing research project on the life and writings of Chaim Grade.

Above and beyond the contribution of the present study to the scholarly literature on the biography and writings of Chaim Grade, the "Reader and Appendices" I am presenting along with this thesis is an invaluable resource and treasure trove of primary source material on Chaim Grade.

An electronic version of the reader is accessible here: <https://tinyurl.com/4pp7r777>. You can also view and download the document by scanning the QR code below.



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**A Reader and Appendices**  
**Prepared as a Companion to the Thesis:**  
**The Conflict between Religion and Secularism**  
**in the Life and Writings of Chaim Grade**

Submitted by  
Yehudah DovBer Zirkind

November 2022

Supported by the Jona Goldrich Institute for Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture, Tel Aviv University and the National Authority for Yiddish Culture



הרשות הלאומית לתרבות היידיש  
נאַציאָנאַלע אינסטיטוט פֿאַר ייִדישער קולטור  
The National Authority for Yiddish Culture



**אוניברסיטת תל אביב**  
**TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY**

אוניברסיטת תל אביב  
הפקולטה למדעי הרוח נ"ש לסטר וסאלי אנטין  
החוג לספרות - מסלול ספרות יידיש

**מקראה וחוברת מקורות - מוגש כחומר נלווה לתיזה**  
**בין קודש לחול: הקונפליקט בין דת וחילון בחייו ויצירותיו של**  
**הסופר חיים גראדע**

על ידי  
יהודה דוב זירקינד

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תמונת המבטן ללשון, ספרות ותרבות יידיש ק"ש וזמן גולדריץ, אוניברסיטת תל אביב  
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## A Note Regarding Transliteration

When transliterating words from Hebrew into the Roman alphabet, I follow the convention generally used in translating words from modern Hebrew into English. For example, I write Beit Midrash rather than Besmedresh. Likewise, any word in Yiddish that is also a Hebrew word or a common name follows this rule. Thus, I write Chaim Grade, Chazon Ish, Talmidei Chachamim, and Moshe Chorosh; not Khayim Grade, Khazon Ish, Talmidey Khakhomim, and Moshe Khorosh.

The rationale governing my choice of orthography is accessibility. I prefer a transliteration that feels more natural and intuitive to the general reader rather than sticking to a strict academic standard, such as YIVO's rules for the romanization of Yiddish words, which is the province of Yiddish academics but might feel awkward to the general reader.

Thus, as a general rule, I have avoided rendering the ך and ם consonants as "kh" as this might feel awkward to readers unfamiliar with YIVO's conventions. The exceptions to this rule are words in Yiddish with no Hebrew equivalent (e.g., the word *nakht*) and direct quotations and citations from other sources. For example, I write "Tzemach Atlas." Nevertheless, when quoting from Curt Leviant's translation of the novel *The Yeshiva*, I have retained his spelling of "Tsemakh Atlas" without modification. Likewise, when referencing the papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, YIVO RG 1952, I use the citation information provided by YIVO without changes.





## Introduction

The Yiddish poet, novelist, and short-story writer Chaim Grade (1910-1982) is widely regarded as one of the preeminent Yiddish writers of the post-Holocaust period.<sup>2</sup> His works are particularly noteworthy for his portrayal of Lithuanian

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<sup>2</sup> Several biographical articles have appeared on Chaim Grade, see Zaynvl Diamant, "Chaim Grade," *Leksikon Fun Der Nayer Yidisher Literatur (Biographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Literature)*, Vol. 2 (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1958), 335-38, and the English translation posted online at <https://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2015/09/chaim-grade.html>; Justin Daniel Cammy, "Grade, Chaim," in *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sorrel Kerbel (New York; London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 380-83; Cammy, "Grade, Chaim," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Grade\\_Chaim](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Grade_Chaim); Joanna Lisek, "Chaim Grade," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Joseph Sherman, vol. 333 (Farmington Hill, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 74-82; Israel Ch. Biletzky and Joanna Lisek, "Grade, Chaim," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 8 (Macmillan Reference, 2007), 24-25; Inna Hecker Grade, "Chaim Grade: The Challenge of God," *Judaica Book News* 9, no. 2 (1979): 15-18; Hecker Grade, "Chaim Grade: A Portrait of the Man," *Ibid.*, 19-22; Hecker Grade, "Chaim Grade: Reminiscences," *Midstream*, October 1986: 35-37. See also, Yechiel Szeintuch, "The Literary and Intellectual Biography of Chaim Grade: An Overview on His Poetry and Prose," [https://www.academia.edu/28655505/The\\_Literary\\_and\\_Intellectual\\_Biography\\_of\\_Chaim\\_Grade\\_an\\_Overview\\_on\\_his\\_Poetry\\_and\\_Prose](https://www.academia.edu/28655505/The_Literary_and_Intellectual_Biography_of_Chaim_Grade_an_Overview_on_his_Poetry_and_Prose); Szeintuch, "Chaim Grade, the Fourth Classic Yiddish Author?!", [https://www.academia.edu/28654074/Chaim\\_Grade\\_the\\_Fourth\\_Classic\\_Yiddish\\_Author](https://www.academia.edu/28654074/Chaim_Grade_the_Fourth_Classic_Yiddish_Author). Reprinted in Hebrew as Szeintuch, "Chaim Grade: ha-klasikon ha-Revi'i bi-sifrut Yiddish?" *Yeda-Am* 77-78 (5777): 41-59.

Jan Schwarz has written several studies on Chaim Grade, see *Imagining Lives: Autobiographical Fiction of Yiddish Writers* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); "'Better a Jew Without a Beard Than a Beard Without a Jew': Confrontation and Elegy in the Novels of Chaim Grade," in *The Multiple Voices of Modern Yiddish Literature*, ed. Shlomo Berger (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel Institute, 2007), 30-55; "Prose of the Askenazi World: Chaim Grade and Yitskhok Bashevis (I. B. Singer)," in *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 210-37.

Several doctoral dissertations and MA theses have been written on Chaim Grade. The most thorough study to date is Chanah Stohrer, "Existence and Its Reflection in Prose Works of Chaim Grade," PhD diss., (Bar-Ilan University, 1999) [Hebrew]; reprinted with appendices as Stohrer, *Existence and Its Reflection in Prose Works of Chaim Grade (Jerusalem: The Dov Sadan Publishing Project, 2020)*. See also "The Yeshiva World of Eastern Europe as Seen through the Prose Works of Chaim Grade," Thesis rabbinic, (Hebrew Union College, 1990); Shay A. Pilnik, "A Literary Monument for the Vanished World of Lithuanian Jewry: The Work of the Yiddish Writer Chaim Grade," MA thesis, (McGill University, 2005); Blake Jordan, "'Dead Blossoms' Land, Language and Memory in Chaim Grade's Reconstruction of Jewish Vilna," MA thesis, (Sonoma State University, 2011); Lea Pelka, "Vilna in Two Novels 'Der Mames Shabosim' and 'Der Shulhoif' by Chaim Grade," MA thesis, (Bar-Ilan University, 1998) [Yiddish].

In addition, there are scores of articles on Chaim Grade and reviews of his works, especially in Yiddish and Hebrew, but they are too numerous to list here.

Jewry and especially the world of Lithuanian *Yeshivot*. Although Grade left the strict religious world of his upbringing for a secular literary career, he could not sever his bond with the *yeshiva* world and maintained an ambivalent relationship toward traditional Judaism until his death.

The main focus of the present study is an analysis of Chaim Grade's conflicts and complex relationship with traditional (Orthodox) Judaism.<sup>3</sup> This study will focus on the life and writings of Chaim Grade as a test case of the broader phenomena of conflict between religion and secularism and religious deconversion.

The research question I will explore in this thesis is: what is the nature of Chaim Grade's core conflicts with traditional Judaism?

The purpose of this study is threefold:

- 1) To analyze the conflicts Chaim Grade experienced in his youth that ultimately led to his defection from Orthodox Judaism.
- 2) To analyze Chaim Grade's ambivalent attitude toward traditional Judaism after his break with Orthodoxy.
- 3) To analyze how Grade's conflicts with Judaism affected his portrayal of traditional Judaism in his literary works.

### **Chaim Grade's Conflicts with Orthodox Judaism**

In this thesis, I will explore three core conflicts in Grade's life: 1) the conflict between aesthetics and Judaism 2) the conflict between Jewish ethics (Mussar) and human psychology 3) the conflict between Jewish piety and humanistic values. These tensions are central themes that Grade explores in his writings in general and specifically in the novel *Tzemach Atlas*.

I will briefly summarize the crux of these three conflicts.

- 1) The conflict between aesthetics vs. Judaism.

Traditional Judaism is centered on religious devotion, the study of Torah, and Halakhic observance. Orthodox Judaism, over the centuries, has generally appreciated aesthetics only as a means to an end, rather than promoting art as an independent value in and of itself. Traditional Jews engage in artistic activities to beautify the sacred, such as building beautiful synagogues, writing beautiful Torah

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<sup>3</sup> Note: for the purpose of this study, I refer to traditional Judaism and Orthodox Judaism interchangeably. Whether or not they are indeed synonymous is a topic worthy of a separate discussion.

scrolls, writing religious poetry, etc. Despite some notable exceptions, Orthodox Jews have usually downplayed the value of art for art's sake. In Ultra-Orthodox circles, Secular art is generally dismissed as frivolous at best and sacrilegious at worst.

Chaim Grade, who was artistically gifted and possessed a highly cultivated aesthetic sensibility, experienced a clash between what he perceived as a lack of aesthetic appreciation within traditional Judaism and his passion for art. Grade's aesthetic sensibilities alienated him from traditional Judaism. He also felt that he could not reconcile his vocation as a literary artist with the demands of Orthodox Judaism.

## 2) The conflict between Jewish ethics and human psychology.

The world of Mussar (Jewish ethics) focuses on moral character development. It is a religious philosophy that is focused primarily on the individual. It maintains the belief that God created humans and revealed the Torah to achieve moral perfection. Mussar thus seeks to eradicate vice and cultivate virtue. One of its core objectives is to eliminate narcissistic indulgence and promote altruistic kindness. Accordingly, it demanded very high ethical standards from its adherents and prescribed a lifestyle of extreme austerity and asceticism. Chaim Grade maintained that the Mussar ethos, especially in its radical Novaredok formulation, is incompatible with human nature and psychology. Consequently, Grade rejected the ideological foundation of Mussar that attaining moral perfection is the *raison d'être* of human existence.

## 3) The conflict between Jewish piety and humanistic values.

One of the salient themes in Grade's oeuvre is the lifestyle of religious Jews centered on religious piety and Halakhic observance. Grade had mixed feelings about Jewish piety. On the one hand, he maintained an attitude of reverence toward pious Jews, scholars, and saints. On the other hand, Grade felt that extreme religious piety often breeds an elitist, fanatical, and intolerant attitude. This intolerance conflicts with humanistic values of tolerance, sensitivity, and compassion, which were vital to Grade. In addition, the life of fervent Jewish piety tends to focus exclusively on the religious dimension of life, thereby excluding all "secular" pursuits and humanistic endeavors devoid of religious significance from its purview. This exclusive religious orientation clashed with Grade's humanistic interests and values.

Grade's internal conflicts eventually catalyzed a profound personal transformation. His former religious identity and philosophical worldview were dismantled and replaced by a secular outlook. Yet, despite his religious

deconversion, core elements of his former religious identity continued to exert an enormous influence throughout his life.

The primary text I will analyze in this thesis is Chaim Grade's *magnum opus*, the novel *Tzemach Atlas* also known as *The Yeshiva*.<sup>4</sup> I will supplement my analysis of the novel with an examination of numerous other primary sources, including letters, essays, and lectures that shed light on Grade's conflicts with orthodox Judaism.

*Tzemach Atlas* explores Grade's *conceptual conflicts* through the lens of *personal encounters* and experiences. I will thus analyze Grade's conflicts with Orthodox Judaism through an exploration of the narrative arc of the novel. The first three chapters in this thesis correspond to the three conflicts outlined above. Each *conceptual conflict* correlates to another *personal encounter* in Grade's life. The conflict between aesthetics vs. Judaism corresponds to Grade's aesthetic encounter in Valkenik. The conflict between Jewish ethics and human psychology corresponds to Grade's encounter with Mussar and Novaredok, and the conflict between Jewish piety and humanistic values corresponds to Grade's encounter with the Chazon Ish.

### **Chaim Grade, Religious Deconversion, and the OTD Phenomenon**

I will examine the novel, describing the trajectory of Chaikl Vilner's (Chaim Grade's literary alter-ego) life, from his initiation into Yeshiva life until his ultimate defection from Orthodoxy, as a fictionalized OTD memoir. OTD is an acronym for "Off the Derech" (literally: off the path) and refers to defectors from Orthodox Judaism. The genre of OTD memoirs and even television shows portraying the lives of defectors from Orthodox Judaism has become widely popular in recent years, generating much-heated discussion and debate.<sup>5</sup> The proliferation of OTD

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed list of the different manuscript and print versions of *Tzemach Atlas*, see "The Reader," 388-94. The novel was later republished in two volumes as *Tzemach Atlas: Di Yeshive* (New York: Shulzinger Brothers, 1967-1968) and was subsequently translated by Curt Leviant into English and published in two volumes as *The Yeshiva* (Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1976-1977).

<sup>5</sup> For a partial list of OTD Memoirs, see "List of OTD Memoirs," <https://sites.google.com/site/challengingsinai/resources/reading-list/otd-memoirs>. On the phenomenon of OTD memoirs, see Benjamin Koslowe, "The Appeal of 'Off the Derech' Memoirs," *The Commentator: The Independent Student Newspaper of Yeshiva University*, <https://yucommentator.org/2019/03/appeal-off-derech-memoirs>; Dainy Bernstein, "From Scandal to Emotional Vulnerability: The Trajectory of OTD Memoirs and Fiction," <https://dainybernstein.wordpress.com/2020/10/30/from-scandal-to-emotional-vulnerability-the-trajectory-of-otd-memoirs-and-fiction/>; Tova Ross, "How Ex-Frum Memoirs Became New York Publishing's Hottest New Trend," *Tablet Magazine*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140110093312/http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/158130/ex-frum-memoirs/2>.

memoirs has concurrently seen the emergence of a spate of scholarly studies analyzing various aspects of the OTD phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I will discuss Grade's experience of leaving Orthodox Judaism within the context of the recent OTD experience and literary genre. My reading of *Tzemach Atlas* as a literary precursor to the OTD genre will highlight the differences between how Chaim Grade narrates his exit from Orthodoxy and how this story is told today.

The story of Chaim Grade's defection from Orthodoxy highlights the conflicts and complications that often plague exiters from Orthodox Judaism. Chaim Grade's rupture with traditional Judaism left a deep fissure that did not fully heal. Consequently, Grade's life and art were shaped by the Sturm und Drang of unresolved conflicts.

The objectives of this study are twofold 1) to contribute to the scholarly literature on Chaim Grade 2) to contribute to the academic discourse on the OTD phenomenon and religious deconversion.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang, *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020); Lynn Davidman, *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Schneur Zalman Newfield, *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020); Patricia R Attia, "Runaway Youth from Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Homes: A Qualitative Study," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008); Jessica January Behr, "Coming and Going: Movements in-and-out of Orthodox Judaism" (dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018); Nancy Pauline Steinberg, "Lived Experiences of Young Adult Orthodox Jews Who Have Chosen Attrition from Orthodoxy" (dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2021).

For a very astute analysis of the portrayal of the OTD experience in popular media and the common myths and misconceptions associated with it, see Naomi Seidman, "My Scandalous Rejection of Unorthodox," *Jewish Review of Books* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 42-44, and her podcast series "Heretic in the House," <https://www.hartman.org.il/program/heretic-in-the-house/>.

<sup>7</sup> See Daniel Enstedt, ed., *Handbook of Leaving Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

## Chapter One – A Portrait of Chaim Grade as a Young Artist

Chaikl Vilner (Chaim Grade's literary stand-in) is one of the central characters in the novel *Tzemach Atlas*.<sup>8</sup> The events described in the narrative take place approximately during 1923-1933. This period coincides with the decade commencing with Chaim Grade's *bar mitzvah* and his induction into the Yeshiva world until his break with Orthodox Judaism.

The novel describes two major religious influences on Grade's life during his formative years: the world of the Novaredok Mussar Yeshiva and the personality of R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (1878–1953), also known as the Chazon Ish, one of the preeminent leaders of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry in the twentieth century, and personal mentor to Chaim Grade. The novel concludes with the Chazon Ish's departure to the Land of Israel in July 1933, a milestone that, in retrospect, would signal Chaim Grade's break with Orthodoxy.

The Novel *Tzemach Atlas* centers on three central characters, Tzemach Atlas, Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, also known as the Machaze Avraham (based on the personality of the Chazon Ish), and Chaikl Vilner. A careful analysis of the novel demonstrates that it contains two sub-plots revolving around the trajectories of Tzemach Atlas and Chaikl Vilner, respectively.

Both protagonists experience significant changes that alter the course of their development, and the Machaze Avraham influences them in significant ways. Tzemach Atlas begins his career in Nareve as a Musernik and ends up in Lomzhe as a businessman. In contrast, Chaikl is inducted into Yeshiva life and leaves it for the secular world. The Machaze Avraham, on the other hand (despite his geographical move to the Land of Israel), does not undergo any significant change.<sup>9</sup> He remains stationary like the sun, and Tzemach Atlas and Chaikl Vilner orbit around him. The Machaze Avraham is the great spiritual luminary who illuminates the life of the other characters. His spiritual strength and stability function as a steady anchor and counterpoint to the tumultuous psychic upheavals that characterize the personalities of Tzemach Atlas and Chaikl Vilner.

This insight is crucial to unraveling the novel's double helix. On one level, *Tzemach Atlas* is a novel exploring the worldview of Novaredok. On another level, *Tzemach*

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<sup>8</sup> To avoid confusion between the name of the character and the title of the novel, I refer to the title of the novel as *Tzemach Atlas* with italics and the character Tzemach Atlas without italics.

<sup>9</sup> See Stohrer, "Existence and Its Reflection in Prose Works of Chaim Grade," 1999, 148-49. Hereafter whenever I cite Stohrer, I refer to the 1999 version of her study.

*Atlas* is a *bildungsroman* about Chaim Grade's coming-of-age transition from the Yeshiva world to secular life.

Although *Tzemach Atlas* is a work of fiction, the narrative about the formative experiences that shaped Chaikl Vilner's identity is based on actual events in the life of Chaim Grade, at least in its broad outlines.<sup>10</sup> Hence, it combines autobiographical elements with fictional embellishments. Despite engaging in poetic license and literary flourishes, Chaim Grade, by and large, remains faithful to his own experience. Through my analysis, I will attempt to uncover the psychological truths about Chaim Grade's character as portrayed in the novel through the prism of Chaikl Vilner.

### **Introducing the Character of Chaikl Vilner**

The character of Chaikl Vilner is introduced in *Tzemach Atlas* as follows:

Chaikl, the son of Reb Shlomo-Motte the Hebrew teacher, was a short, heavysset lad who grew wide rather than tall, like a strong, sturdy shrub. But he had yearning eyes, and a dream constantly hovered over his full, pale face like a warm mist. Until he was fifteen he studied listlessly in Vilna's Rameiles Yeshiva. Among the delicate, refined scholars he stood out as a burly youth, but on Butchers Street, where he had grown up, the butchers and porters considered him a bench warmer.<sup>11</sup>

This introductory paragraph highlights the tensions in Chaikl's appearance and character. Multiple tensions in Chaikl's nature coexist at the very outset. On the one hand, he is a burly youth; on the other hand, he is a dreamer. His rugged masculinity is tempered by emotional sensitivity. This ambiguity is compounded by his liminal status. Where does Chaikl belong? Does his personality reflect the nature of a refined Yeshiva student or that of a rugged street ruffian?<sup>12</sup>

As the novel progresses, these tensions will be compounded as Chaikl shuttles back and forth between Yatkever Gas (Butchers' Street) and the Beit Midrash for many years until he figures out where he truly belongs. Eventually, he chooses the secular street over the Kloyz (synagogue).

Yatkaver Gas (Butchers' Street), where Grade grew up in Vilna, assumes great symbolic significance throughout the novel. Chaikl embodies the qualities that one

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<sup>10</sup> I will provide corroborating evidence from external sources when relevant. For now, see Susanne Klingenstein and Yehudah DovBer Zirkind, "Chaim Grade: Facts of a Life," *In Geveb*, December 2021, <https://ingeveb.org/pedagogy/chaim-grade-facts-of-a-life>.

<sup>11</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 119. All quotes from the novel are taken from Curt Leviant's translation of *The Yeshiva*, unless indicated otherwise. Throughout this thesis, I also quote passages from "The Newspaper Typescript." The given page numbers correspond to the pdf pagination of the file. All translations from the newspaper typescript are mine. For more information about "The Newspaper Typescript," see "The Reader," 390.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 131.

might associate with animals and butchers. He is physically strong, impetuous, hot-headed, and occasionally even violent.<sup>13</sup> His physical constitution nearly resembles that of a street gangster. His aggressive and combative nature is expressed verbally in his angry outbursts filled with chutzpa and sharp retorts. Grade portrays the character of Chaikl as someone keen for a verbal spat or physical altercation. In addition, Chaikl's hot-blooded temperament is marked by strong sexual lusts and passions. Hardly the character suitable for a Yeshiva student!

In contrast, Chaikl's other distinguishing feature is his yearning and dreamy eyes. His dreamy eyes foreshadow and symbolize his aesthetic-poetic sensibilities and artistic talents that will develop over time.

These characteristics, namely his hot-blooded temperament, creative imagination and aesthetic-poetic sensibilities, which appear to be strong in equal measure, set him on a collision course with the Yeshiva world and Orthodoxy. In particular, his double awakening, his burgeoning sexuality, and his budding artistic talents will challenge him throughout his Yeshiva years and ultimately alienate him from the Yeshiva.

### **Chaikl's Sexual Awakening**

One of the ubiquitous struggles confronting Chaikl during his Yeshiva years is his burgeoning sexuality and romantic interests. Chaikl, as a religious youth, deems his sexual fantasies to be associated with the *Yetzer Hara* (evil inclination).<sup>14</sup> Equating the innate sexual drive with sin is a source of major religious conflict for religious people who face the challenge of dealing with natural urges that are stigmatized as sinful.

Indeed, Chaikl's arrival to Valkenik (also known as Valkininkai or Olkeniki) to study in Yeshiva coincides with a twin aesthetic and sexual awakening. Grade describes Chaikl's initial sexual encounter with Leitshe:

Leitshe, the younger sister, wasn't at all scared of men. She didn't even hesitate to appear with half-naked arms in the presence of the yeshiva students... Terribly bored and longing to tease someone just for the fun of it, Leitshe cast her eye upon the sixteen-year-old Chaikl Vilner.

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<sup>13</sup> See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 125.

<sup>14</sup> See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), especially chap. 6. Note that in rabbinic literature and among Orthodox Jews the *Yetzer Hara* is commonly associated with sexual desires. Note also that the title of the Hebrew translation of the novel *Tzemach Atlas* vol. 2 is *Milchemet Ha-yetzer* (The War Against the *Yetzer Hara*).



That ox isn't as gentle and pious as he pretends to be, and he likes girls, the young cook thought, swaying her hips each time Chaikl entered. He looked at her dreamy-eyed, and grunted as if warning her to stay away—which made the game more attractive to her.

Once she stepped on his foot. Chaiki blushed, jumped up, and ran off in the middle of the meal. He stayed away for a day, as though he'd declared a self-imposed fast. Afterwards, he sat in the dining room with such a stern expression that Leitshe was afraid to start anything with him.<sup>15</sup>

At first, Chaikl struggles to fight his sexual instincts and keep his desires at bay, but eventually, they get the better of him. Chaikl is profoundly embarrassed by his carnal desires and erotic fantasies, the fire that is threatening to consume his body and soul. His shame and guilt are especially pronounced in the presence of his revered and saintly teacher, the Machaze Avraham, as will be discussed in chapter three.

Chaikl's sexual escapades described throughout the novel and his being busy "having a good time with the girls"<sup>16</sup> was profoundly at odds with his duties as a Yeshiva student and Orthodox Jew. His sexual experience and other factors led him to conclude that Orthodox Judaism was incompatible with his nature.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, in the contest between the two poles of Chaikl's identity, the hot-blooded youth from Yatkever Gas overpowered the other side of his personality, namely, the sedentary and sedate Yeshiva student.

### **Chaikl's Aesthetic-Poetic Awakenings**

Soon after Chaikl arrives in Valkenik, he is struck by the breathtaking beauty and splendor of the local synagogue.<sup>18</sup>

When Chaikl Vilner arrived in the town on Friday afternoon, he entered the shul for the Evening Service and was immediately captivated by its majesty.<sup>19</sup> ... it imbedded itself in Chaikl's soul and beamed into his mind. A secret legend spun in his imagination...<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 183-84.

<sup>16</sup> See Morton A. Reichek, "A Writer in Search of an Audience: Profile of Chaim Grade," *Present Tense* 5, no. 4 (1978): 42, "At 22, Grade left the yeshiva...Today he comments 'I never was a really good yeshiva bocher [boy], because I was interested in girls, in love affairs' ...'All the time I had to fight whether I would remain a synagogue man and a *ben Torah* [religious scholar] while I was busy arguing about socialism, communism, nationalism, Zionism, and having a good time with the girls.'"

<sup>17</sup> See "The Newspaper Typescript," 1129.

<sup>18</sup> For a description of the synagogue in Valkenik, see Shlomo Farber, ed., *Ha-Yarah Bi-Lehavot [Olkeniki in Flames: A Memorial Book]* (Tel Aviv: Vaad Yotse Olkenik ve-ha-sevivah, 1962), 68-84. Accessible online at: <https://archive.org/details/nybc301869>, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/valkininkai/valkininkai.html>. For more information about the synagogue in Valkenik and to view additional photos, see: <https://www.radzima.org/eng/object-photo/synagoge-8658.html>.

<sup>19</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 181.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

One morning after prayers, when all the pupils had gone to eat breakfast, he remained in the beth medresh, next to a window of the eastern wall, gazing out at the closed Cold Shul on the hill opposite. In his imagination he saw the Holy Ark and the carved lions that supported the Torah crown with their paws. Above the Holy Ark, Mount Sinai smoked. Beneath the balcony an eagle fluttered, holding in its claws a lulav and an esrog while the royal crown rested on its head. Chaikl turned and saw fat black crows perching on the low roofs of the little houses. They flew down to the snow, burrowing and searching for food in the refuse, and returned to the roofs. Then Chaiki remembered that he still hadn't eaten breakfast.<sup>21</sup>

The preceding paragraphs describing Chaikl's aesthetic reverie demonstrate both Chaikl's vivid imagination and artistic sensibilities. Not only does he have an exquisite appreciation of the beauty he physically beholds with his eyes, but he is also gifted with the ability to conjure images in his mind's eye. Indeed, Grade's writings are studded with stunning visual images. The vivid imagery and use of beautiful visual similes and metaphors are a hallmark of Grade's literary artistry.<sup>22</sup>

Chaikl's aesthetic sensibilities develop and mature throughout the novel. At first, Grade is enthralled by the beauty of the synagogue. However, Chaikl soon realizes that his aesthetic appreciation is not limited to sacred art. The nexus of Eros and aesthetics will pose a unique religious challenge to him.

I previously noted Chaikl's aesthetic experience of the Valkenik synagogue upon his arrival. A similar incident occurs toward the end of the first winter semester when Chaikl meets Slava Stupel (Tzemach Atlas's wife) for the first time.

At the entrance of the beth medresh stood a young woman. She had on a full black fur coat with a semicircular white collar and her hands were in a muff. A round, flat fur cap fluttered like a bird over her blond hair. Covered with snowflakes, her shiny fur coat glistened with a wet, bluish sheen. Her hair, eyebrows, and nose were covered with the tiny star-shaped flakes.

"May I see the rosh yeshiva, Tsemakh Atlas?" the woman asked Chaikl. "Tell him his wife is waiting outside for him." Chaikl Vilner thought he was dreaming. He had scarcely stammered, "He's teaching the younger students now," when the woman smiled, revealing two rows of white teeth behind her freshly painted lips.

"Are you one of my husband's pupils too?" Chaikl nodded and went into the side room...<sup>23</sup>

The writer draws the reader into Chaikl's aesthetic-erotic reverie. Grade's depiction of Slava is so vivid it provides the reader with a palpable sense of Slava's sensual beauty.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>22</sup> See Yudel Mark, "Chaim Grade's Tzemach Atlas," *Di Goldene Keyt* 60 (1967): 249-50; Ibid., 66 (1969): 226-27.

<sup>23</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 249.

A dual aesthetic revelation characterizes Chaikl's first semester in Valkenik. At the beginning of the semester, it is the sacred beauty of the synagogue that enchants him. However, towards the end of the semester, the sensual beauty of Slava Stupel mesmerizes him. This juxtaposition and tension between the sacred and the sensual, sets the stage for the conflict that would rage in Chaikl's soul. This double encounter with beauty functions as a literary device whereby Chaikl's aesthetic experiences frames and bookends the first part of the novel describing Chaikl's adventures during his first winter semester in Valkenik.

### **The Evil Inclination Disguised as a Holy Ark: The Nexus between the Erotic, the Aesthetic, and the Sacred**

Chaikl's aesthetic proclivities pose a unique set of religious challenges and conflicts. In the novel, Tzemach Atlas warns the Machaze Avraham about Chaikl: "a singular danger lies in wait for him—the feeling for beauty. With his poetic fantasy, he beautifully embellishes what he likes, or persuades himself that he likes, until he becomes intoxicated and seduced by it."<sup>24</sup>

Grade describes the unique challenge confronting Chaikl in his infatuation with Tsharne, R. Hirshe Gordon's daughter.

The rest of the week Chaikl saw in his imagination the reddish tint of the girl's hair blending with the flaming gold light of the candles in the tall candelabra... until she seemed to become Shulamith of the Song of Songs.... in his imagination the red-flowered blue shawl on her shoulders became the Holy Ark's curtain. He decorated her with carved deer and lions until in his eyes she became the Holy Ark in the locked Cold Shul. Tsharne had also woven herself into the chant he used for Talmud study. Chaikl saw that he couldn't get rid of her. He would have to talk to the head of the yeshiva, Reb Tsemakh Atlas, and ask him how he could subdue the yetzer ha-ra which had disguised itself as a Holy Ark.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike Chaikl's earlier encounter with Leitshe, which awakened Chaikl's prosaic "weekday *Yetzer Hara*," expressed in the form of raw sexual lust, Tsharne ignited Chaikl's poetic "Sabbath *Yetzer Hara*" manifest in his aestheticism and sacred eroticism.

Chaikl shrouds his sexual passions in a sublime veil of spiritual mystique. He realizes that the *Yetzer Hara* can be disguised as a holy ark in his imagination. Chaikl wonders, "How could he compare Reb Hirshe Gordon's daughter with the heroine of the Song of Songs, which is the Holy of Holies, a love song between the People of Israel and the Holy One Blessed Be He?"<sup>26</sup> But that's precisely the point. The erotic energy of the Song of Songs can be allegorized and sublimated into a sacred vision because the aesthetic experience can fuse the erotic and the spiritual

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<sup>24</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 386. See also "The Newspaper Typescript," 882.

<sup>25</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 195-96.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 195. See "The Newspaper Typescript," 498.

dimensions into one unified experience. Furthermore, art as an aesthetic experience does not distinguish between sacred art, erotic art, and even idolatrous or sacrilegious art.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the artist risks blurring the lines between the holy and the profane.

The *Yetzer Hara* disguised as a holy ark is more pernicious than the naked, sinful *Yetzer Hara* that does not masquerade in sacred garb. When Chaikl is consumed by his erotic-aesthetic-sacred fantasy, he goes to see the director of the Novaredok Mussar Yeshiva in Valkenik, Tzemach Atlas, to consult with him about how to tackle the evil inclination which had disguised itself in a Holy Ark.<sup>28</sup> When Chaikl spoke to Tzemach, “A bright smile lit up Tsemakh’s face for a moment. He liked the image about the yetzer ha-ra that had masqueraded as a Holy Ark. He had noticed that the Vilner often spoke in fine metaphors.”<sup>29</sup>

Chaikl Vilner’s epiphany of the unique danger confronting him as an artist, namely, that he is susceptible to the delusion of sublimating his base instincts into an aesthetic-poetic fantasy, is an insightful meta-reflection on the nature of his artistic personality. It exhibits a keen awareness of the personal pitfalls and occupational hazards that an artist faces.

This formative experience of the young Chaikl Vilner will become even more pronounced in the poetry of the mature writer Chaim Grade who, as an artist, could not limit himself to sacred art and explored in great detail the aesthetic elements of nature<sup>30</sup> eroticism<sup>31</sup> and even idolatrous/pagan art.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Another Jewish writer who explores the tensions between art and Judaism in great depth is Chaim Potok (1929-2002). See his novels *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Fawcett, 1972) and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 196.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the cycle of poems “Der Kholem fun Shteyn,” (The Rock’s Dream) describing sites of natural beauty in America such as the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls in Chaim Grade, *Der Mentsh Fun Fayer*, (The Man of Fire) (New York: CYCO, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the cycle of poems “Farverte Libshaft,” (Forbidden Love) in *Der Mentsh Fun Fayer*.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Grade’s unpublished poem, “Farfirt Bin Ikh Fun Zind, Fun Sheynkayt Un Fun Stires,” Box 40, Folder 456, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/174732](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/174732), where he compares the idolatrous Temple of Osiris and the Temple of Buddha with the Jewish Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

## The Tension Between Art and Traditional Judaism

Traditional Jews do not conventionally value art as a worthy endeavor in its own right but as a means of enhancing the sacred<sup>33</sup> such as beautifying a mitzvah<sup>34</sup> or heightening one's love and awe of God by contemplating His wondrous works in nature.<sup>35</sup> Engaging in art for art's sake is regarded as frivolous at best and blasphemous at worst.

The following statement in the Mishna, Tractate Avot 3:7, is widely cited (rightly or wrongly) as a defining statement of the attitude of Judaism toward the aesthetic experience, "Rabbi Jacob said: if one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, 'how fine is this tree!' [or] 'how fine is this newly plowed field!' scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty."<sup>36</sup> This Mishnaic statement drew the ire of Maskilim and other critics of Judaism throughout the ages.<sup>37</sup> Chaikl has a similar reaction to the Mishna: "No matter how this statement was interpreted or glossed over, he still couldn't understand how a Talmudic sage could have said it."<sup>38</sup>

Chaim Grade dramatizes the tension between his enchantment with beauty and the cavalier disregard of aesthetics on the part of his rabbinic mentors. In a chapter describing Chaikl walking in the forest with his mentor, the Machaze Avraham,<sup>39</sup> Grade juxtaposes Chaikl's bewitchment with the beauty of the Valkenik forest versus his rebbe's total mental absorption in the laws of *Seder Zeraim* (Order of Plants) in the Mishna, which discusses the laws about plants in Israel.<sup>40</sup> The disparity between teacher and student underscores their different orientations to life. Chaikl, the aesthete, luxuriates in the sensual experience, while the Machaze Avraham, the halakhist, studies the Halakhic intricacies governing plant life.

The Machaze Avraham is so intensely focused on the plants in the far-off Land of Israel that he fails to take notice of the flora and fauna standing right there in front of his very eyes.<sup>41</sup> This irony is deeply discomfiting for Chaikl, who senses a lack of

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<sup>33</sup> On the Jewish attitude to art, see Cecil Roth et al., "Art," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 491-521.

<sup>34</sup> See "Hidur Mitzva," in *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8 (Jerusalem: Yad Harav Herzog, 2000), 271-84.

<sup>35</sup> See Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah 2:2*.

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org.il/Pirkei\\_Avot.3.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Pirkei_Avot.3.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>37</sup> See Dan Almagor, "'Ma No'eh Ilan Ze': Al Ha-Yachas Le-Tave Be-Yetzirato Ha-Mukdemet Shel Berdichevsky," *Yediot Acharonot*, February 2, 1979, <https://benyehuda.org/read/17953>.

<sup>38</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol 2., 117.

<sup>39</sup> See *Ibid.*, 18-24, 115-117.

<sup>40</sup> See *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.*, 18-19.

appreciation for aesthetics on the part of the Machaze Avraham, the great halakhist who favors legalism over aesthetics. Flora and fauna are only relevant to him in terms of their functional-legal categories.

Similarly, Tzemach Atlas, the Musernik, can only appreciate aesthetics as an illustration of ethical ideals. Grade contrasts the reactions of Chaikl and Tzemach to the beautiful wood carvings in the Valkenik synagogue:

Chaikl stood in the front of the shul looking up at the narrow windows and the high ceiling. At the top of the Holy Ark little carved lions held the Ten Commandments with their front paws. Seeing the tiny flaming tongues in the lions' open mouths and the childlike curiosity in their eyes, Chaikl imagined he'd studied in cheder with them as a child. From the high windows, strands of light illuminated the eagles painted on the ceiling and seemed to bring them to life. The winged creatures, with crowns on their heads, held lulavs and esrogs in their claws. A sunbeam landed on a hammered copper tray, and in the depths of the metal a memorial candle was set ablaze. The pillars around the pulpit rose up to the sky. The steps descending from the anteroom into the synagogue led his imagination deeper into covert subterranean caves. The open staircase in the shul, which spiraled like a screw up to the innermost balcony, transported him to a blue infinity, where bronze hanging lamps and silver candelabra sparkled like stars. What a palace! What a secret, otherworldly palace amid a dense wood that had existed since Creation!

Compare Chaikl's rhapsody with Tzemach's consternation. When Chaikl tells Tzemach, "I came into the shul to look at the carvings. The man who carved the lions, eagles, deer, and leopards is a great artist," Tzemach responds:

A Talmudic sage said: "Be as strong as a leopard, as light as an eagle, as fleet as a deer, and as brave as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, because of this remark these beasts are drawn on shul walls. But I'm surprised at your going into such ecstasy over a carver just because he whittled a lion and a deer! Was he a man of good character? If not, then none of the artist's wizardry is of any value.<sup>43</sup>

In his remarks, Tzemach epitomizes the tension between ethics and aesthetics prevalent in Orthodox circles until today. For Tzemach, the wood carvings are a pretty illustration intended to convey an ethical message. The aesthetic depiction is justified only insofar as it inspires the congregants to heed the Mishna's ethical-religious message. Otherwise, it is frivolous and futile. This attitude is most jarring to Chaikl, who appreciates art for art's sake. Chaikl feels the Jewish tradition cannot encompass a crucial component of his identity and self-expression.

### **The Nexus between Literature and Biography**

One of the critical questions that a literary autobiography such as *Tzemach Atlas* raises is the nexus between literature, confessional testimony, and autobiography. Until now, I explored the development of Chaikl Vilner as a young artist as depicted

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<sup>42</sup> *Mishna, Avot* 5:20.

<sup>43</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 363.

in his fictional writings. Comparing external documentary evidence with his literary depictions will allow us to evaluate more accurately the interplay between literature and biography in the life and writings of Chaim Grade.

Soon after Chaim Grade emigrated to the United States, he became acquainted with Mr. Abraham Bornstein (1914-1992). Bornstein was the proprietor of the Boston Book and Art Shop, which published and distributed art books. Eventually, this relationship blossomed into an extraordinary friendship, and Bornstein became one of Grade's most loyal friends and patrons.

Over the years, Grade wrote numerous letters to Bornstein. These letters are currently held in the archives of the National Library of Israel.<sup>44</sup> Grade's letters and literary works complement and shed light on each other.

These letters reveal Grade's remarkable fascination – if not downright obsession – with the visual arts. Thus, it is no surprise that the conflict between aesthetics and Judaism features prominently as a recurring theme throughout these letters. For example, in a letter dated January 4, 1958, Grade writes, "I am still struggling between art, which is pleasure, and Judaism, which is duty."<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, this tension between religion and art was not only deeply personal; it also led to bitterness and resentment toward the rabbinical establishment for alienating the creative and artistic souls in their midst. Grade expresses his contempt in the following letter:

... I could not refuse [the request] of my friend, a rabbi, and last night I attended his son's wedding in the new hotel "Americana"... where rabbis have already infiltrated. You had to see how tens of Torah scholars surrounded me and discussed my new story, "The Rebbetzin." On the one hand, it was very charming; on the other hand, my conviction regarding the primitive understanding of rabbis in artistic matters was reinforced. [This stands] in contrast to priests, particularly Catholic Priests, who are required to possess a certain degree of cultural appreciation and sophistication [of art, including] painting and sculpture because Biblically-themed images adorn their churches. True, our tradition forbade iconography, but the written word was never prohibited. Nevertheless, scholarly Jews never saw in any narrative plot anything other than the moral of the story. ...They speak precisely like the Bolsheviks in Russia, for whom art is propaganda.<sup>46</sup>

In this letter Grade laments the fact that for Orthodox Jews, literature is not appreciated for its aesthetic value but only for its moral-religious message.

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<sup>44</sup> National Library of Israel, archival collections ARC. 4\* 1503 03. For more information about these letters, see "Confessions."

<sup>45</sup> See "Confessions," letter #4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., letter #7.

In another letter, Grade's tone is even harsher:

The fact that our *frum* [religiously observant] world never had, and still doesn't have, any aesthetic need and appreciation has led to the phenomenon of young people with artistic souls who distanced themselves from their religious environment but retained a longing in their hearts for their origins, which did not understand them. It even caused other Jewish artists to become anti-Semites. Non-Jews had to become the patrons of Mark Antokolsky, the painter Levitan and others like them...<sup>47</sup>

Grade's remarks about others also pertain to him, albeit perhaps to a lesser degree. Grade understands the alienation of Jewish artists from Judaism because he experienced it himself.

### **Chaim Grade's as a Jewish Artist**

Chaim Grade's artistic personality alienated him from a Torah-observant lifestyle. As an artist, Chaikl could not confine himself to the "four cubits of the law" as art transcends the strictures of Jewish law and the confines of one specific religious or cultural mode of expression. Just as art is universal, so too the heart of the artist is drawn to the universal experience.

Paradoxically, however, the artistic sensibilities that alienated Chaim Grade from Torah Judaism enabled him to employ his literary talents to portray traditional Judaism. If the artist within him beckoned him to step outside the tradition to experience the beauty of the world, the Jew within him summoned him to deploy his artistic talents in the service of his people and the Jewish Tradition.

In a poignant letter, Chaim Grade writes, "May his [the Chazon Ish's] merit protect me for weaving a *parochet* for the Torah even though I have stopped studying the Torah itself."<sup>48</sup> In *this* regard, Grade is not much different from a *parochet* weaver, a religious artisan who employs their artistic talents in the service of the sacred. In his literary portrayals paying homage to traditional Judaism and Torah scholars, Grade follows in the very tradition he criticizes of being an artist who is a *kli kodesh* (religious functionary) rather than an artist *lishma* (an artist for the sake of art itself).<sup>49</sup>

Paradoxically, the medium that caused him to rebel against tradition in his youth also became the means of effecting a (partial) reconciliation with tradition in his later years. Grade understood that although he left the world of Torah as a literary artist, he could do something that a Torah scholar preoccupied with textual study

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., letter #12.

<sup>48</sup> See "Confessions," letter #32.

<sup>49</sup> See Ibid., letter #27.



could not, namely, to construct a literary edifice paying tribute to the Torah and its scholars.

To be sure, Grade's portrayals of the Orthodox world are not always flattering. As a true artist, he had to portray both light and shadow. As I will argue in chapter 4, Grade's art reflects his oscillation between the sacred and the profane. This tug of war between worlds compelled him to alternate between rebelling against Orthodoxy and engaging in profane and even pagan art and "atoning" for his aesthetic sins by engaging in sacred art.<sup>50</sup>

Chaim Grade sought to rehabilitate the image of the Torah scholar in Yiddish literature.<sup>51</sup> He wanted to rectify the skewed image of the Torah scholar as a fanatic or parasite as depicted by the Maskilim and their successors. Although he knew that the artist in him would prevent him from returning to the Beit Midrash, he decided to forego the path taken by other Yiddish writers who courted universal acclaim and instead chose to devote much of his literary career to weaving a colorful *parochet* for the Holy Ark of his youth.

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<sup>50</sup> See "Confessions," letters #6 and 11.

<sup>51</sup> See "The Reader," 941-1077.

## Chapter Two – Chaim Grade’s Quarrels with Mussar

In his youth, Chaim Grade studied in various Yeshivot belonging to the Novaredok network of Mussar schools. As Grade states in a lecture delivered in honor of his friend Zalman Urievitsh:

In my youth, I studied in a Yeshiva of *Muserniks*, where the main focus was not studying Talmud, but ascetic piety, morality, and the ethical duties between Man and his fellow. I wrote about this<sup>52</sup> when I was still in my hometown as soon as I became a writer. In Europe and America, after the war, I returned to this theme in a poem,<sup>53</sup> an essay,<sup>54</sup> and an eight-hundred-page novel.<sup>55</sup> I have also acquired here [the works of] all the essential philosophers, from Aristotle to contemporary thinkers who have written about morality. The topic of ethics has always been my passion, and I have concerned myself much less with questions about aesthetics, although it is said that the opposite holds true among artists.<sup>56</sup>

The ethical philosophy of Novaredok left an indelible impression on Chaim Grade. The main objective of this chapter is to analyze Chaim Grade’s quarrels with Novaredok.

### A Brief Introduction to the Mussar Movement and Novaredok

Novaredok was a sub-branch of the Mussar movement established by Rabbi Israel Lipkin from Salant, also known as Rabbi Israel Salanter (1809-1883).<sup>57</sup> He believed that it was imperative to mold ethical Torah personalities who, in addition

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<sup>52</sup> The narrative poem *Musernikes*.

<sup>53</sup> "Talmide-khakhomim in der lite."

<sup>54</sup> "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner."

<sup>55</sup> The novel *Tzemach Atlas*.

<sup>56</sup> Chaim Grade, "Zalman Urievitsh," Box 52, Folder 826, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1177737](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1177737).

<sup>57</sup> For studies on the life of Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement, see Immanuel Etkes, "Lipkin, Yisra'el Ben Ze'ev Volf," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lipkin\\_Yisrael\\_ben\\_Zeev\\_Volf](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lipkin_Yisrael_ben_Zeev_Volf); Yehudah Mirsky, "Musar Movement," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Musar\\_Movement](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Musar_Movement); Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia; Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1993); Menahem G. Glenn, *Israel Salanter, Religious-Ethical Thinker: The Story of a Religious-Ethical Current in Nineteenth Century Judaism* (Brooklyn, NY: Yashar Books, 2005); Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter, Text, Structure, Idea: The Ethics and Theology of an Early Psychologist of the Unconscious* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982); Ira F. Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* (New York: Aviv Press, 2006); Stone, "Mussar Ethics and Other Nineteenth-Century Jewish Ethical Theories," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane (Oxford and New York, 2013), 118-33; Dov Katz, *Tenuat Ha-Musar*, 5 vols. (Jerusalem, 2016); Dov Katz, *Pulmus Ha-Musar* (Jerusalem, 1972); Benjamin Brown, *Lithuanian Musar Movement: Personalities and Ideas* (Kefar Ha-Noar Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2014) [Hebrew].

to mastering Talmudic texts and the legal codes, would work on ethical character development. Rabbi Israel had several disciples who established Yeshivot in the spirit of Mussar. The most radical form of Mussar ideology was formulated by R. Yosef-Yoizl Hurwitz (1847–1919),<sup>58</sup> a student of R. Israel Salanter. R. Hurwitz established a yeshiva based on the principles of Mussar in 1896 in the town of Novaredok (Novegrudok). In addition, R. Hurwitz and his disciples established numerous branches of the yeshiva in many different locations. Eventually, these Yeshivot, known by the collective name “Yeshivat Beit Yosef Novaredok,” became one of the largest and most successful networks of Yeshivot in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.<sup>59</sup>

Mussar emphasizes the need for ethical conduct in both the interpersonal and intrapersonal realms. In addition to raising ethical standards in interpersonal relationships, the champions of Mussar focused on implementing a high code of personal ethics. They maintained that one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions should be guided by the light of virtue and not the shadow of vice. The vices the Mussar practitioners sought to eliminate are succinctly summarized in the maxim found in the Ethics of the Fathers: “Envy, lust, and honor put a man out of the world.”<sup>60</sup>

Rabbi Hurwitz was particularly radical in his vision of the ultimate ethical personality.<sup>61</sup> He believed that the mother of all vice is self-interest. One’s ulterior

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<sup>58</sup> For studies on the life of R. Yosef-Yoizl Hurwitz and the philosophy of Novaredok, see Yosef-Yoizl Hurwitz, *Some Gems from the Mind of the Alter of Novardok: With an Introductory Essay, “The World of Novardok,”* ed. Chaim Shapiro and Avrohom Zelik Shafronsky (New York: Avrohom Zelik Shafronsky Torah Award Fund, 1979); Shlomo Weintraub, *The Alter of Novardok: The Life of Yosef Yoizl Horowitz and His Worldwide Impact*, trans. Esther Ilana Rabi (Rahway, N.J.: Mesorah Publications, 2020); Meir Levin, *Novarodok: A Movement That Lived in Struggle and Its Unique Approach to the Problem of Man* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996); Hillel Goldberg, *The Fire Within: Illuminating the Generations*, vol. 2 (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1992); Ben-Zion Gold, *The Life of Jews in Poland before the Holocaust: A Memoir* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), chap. 14; Devorah Ushpizay, “The Educational Theory of Rabbi Yoseph Yoziel Horowitz (‘Sage of Novhardok’) Based on His Book, ‘Madregat Haadam,’” MA thesis, (Bar Ilan University, 1989) [Hebrew].

<sup>59</sup> On the history of the Novaredok Yeshiva, see Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky, *The Golden Age of the Lithuanian Yeshivot in Eastern Europe* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2014) [Hebrew], 24-25, 66-67, 85-86, and *passim*; this book was translated into English and published as *The Golden Age of the Lithuanian Yeshivas*, trans. Nahum Schnitzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022); David E. Fishman, “Musar and Modernity: The Case of Novaredok,” *Modern Judaism* 8, no. 1 (1988): 41-64; Fishman, “The Musar Movement in Interwar Poland,” in *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, ed. Israel Gutman and Ezra Mendelsohn (Hanover: Published for Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1989), 247-71.

<sup>60</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 4:21. Translation by Dr. Joshua Kulp, <https://tinyurl.com/2j7jk8e2>.

<sup>61</sup> Grade notes in a lecture that the Novaredokers were the most extreme and poetic branch of the Mussarnikers. He compares them to Diogenes and the Cynics. Other branches of the Mussar movement were milder compared to them. See Chaim Grade, “Muser, Musernikes Un Litvishe

motives and self-serving agendas are the root cause of moral and religious corruption.<sup>62</sup> Rabbi Hurwitz pointed out that “even the good deed can carry within it the secret germ of self-interest that utterly spoils its own goodness.”<sup>63</sup> Novaredok thus placed an extreme emphasis on eradicating one’s *negiot* (personal biases) that often stand in the way of attaining moral virtue.<sup>64</sup>

Rabbi Hurwitz’s pedagogical approach emphasized extreme self-discipline, asceticism, and self-denial. The Yeshivot he and his students established differed from conventional Ultra-Orthodox and even other Mussar Yeshivot. Whereas other Yeshivot fostered a more optimistic approach, Novaredok cultivated a more pessimistic and gloomy spirit. Other Yeshivot sought to shape religious personalities constructively through encouragement and positive reinforcement, whereas Novaredok’s sought to eradicate moral flaws and human vice through harsh disciplinary measures.

Novaredok thus became (in)famous for its intense regimen of moral training. Their objective was שבירת המדות, which literally means to break and destroy one’s character traits. Novaredok believed that positive moral character-building could only occur by demolishing one’s vainglorious ego and eradicating moral corruption. Their regimen was known as עבודת הפרטים and consisted of various פעולות (actions) or פרטים (specific exercises) that Novaredokers engaged in to boost their moral fitness.<sup>65</sup> Just as physical exercises are designed to strengthen particular muscle groups, these exercises were devised to overcome harmful vices and strengthen one’s moral core. Students were, for example, expected to give away their personal belongings to their fellow students to cultivate the virtue of benevolence and altruistic kindness while simultaneously eradicating the vices of greed and avarice.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps the most infamous example of radical Novaredok techniques is the following. In their quest to fortify their spiritual courage and combat social

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Yeshives,” recording of a lecture delivered at Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies on March 19, 1980, [https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL\\_MUSIC\\_AL000242682/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL000242682/NLI). Listen to Side B at the 34:25 timestamp.

<sup>62</sup> See Yosef-Yoizl Hurwitz, *Sefer Madreigat Ha-Adam* (Jerusalem: Machon Nishmat Chaim, 2008), “Madreigat ha-adam be-tekufat ha-olam.”

<sup>63</sup> Chaim Feinberg, *Leaping Souls: Rabbi Menachem Mendel and the Spirit of Kotzk* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 1993), 5. Although this reference is about the Kotzker Rebbe, it faithfully conveys the attitude of Novaredok as well. See “The Reader,” 485-93.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> See Chaim Grade, “Muser, Musernikes Un Litvishe Yeshives,” Box 53, Folder 862, p. 18. The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1177774](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1177774).

<sup>66</sup> See “The Reader,” 483-85.

shame,<sup>67</sup> Novaredoker students would deliberately engage in bizarre behavior that would deliberately provoke scorn and mockery. This activity was known as a *Peulo/prat* (exercise) in *Amitzut* (boldness). For example, Novaredokers would go into a pharmacy and ask for a hammer and nails or walk into a shop and start praying with loud screams and wild gesticulations.<sup>68</sup> Like the “systematic desensitization” technique used in behavioral therapies, the intentional act of bringing mockery upon themselves was paradoxically intended to bolster their religious determination and defiance by inoculating themselves against public censure.

Lucy Dawidowicz summarizes the approach of Mussar and Novaradok as follows:

In a fanatical form of asceticism... the Mussar rabbis believed that the evil urge, men’s instinctual passions, vanity, and lust above all, had to be totally repressed, for they were corrupting, leading men astray from sanctity and service to God. And the Mussar Yeshiva instructed its students not so much in self-discipline as in self-denial. Mussar turned traditional teachings of moderation and self-control into a doctrine of abstention and moral self-flagellation. At Novogradok (Novaredok)... spiritual wrestling became the core of the curriculum. Lust and vanity, the id and the ego, the intrinsic elements of the sinful human personality, had to be extirpated. Only through renunciation and self-abasement could the yetzer hara be mastered and subdued.”<sup>69</sup>

While the preceding paragraphs provide only a rudimentary outline of the ideas and practices of the Mussar sect of Novaredok, I believe it sufficiently demonstrates its radical spirit.

### **Chaim Grade’s Writings on Novaredok**

Chaim Grade’s first published piece of work on Novaredok is his long narrative poem entitled *Musernikes*.<sup>70</sup> He continued exploring this topic after the Holocaust in his poem, “Talmidei Chachamim in der Lite.”<sup>71</sup> Grade’s first and most famous exploration of Novaredok in prose is his philosophical essay/novella<sup>72</sup> “Mayn krig

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<sup>67</sup> Novaredok believed that social shame, i.e. avoiding situations where people will feel ashamed by what others think of them can impede moral/religious behavior. For example, when a Jew is ashamed to perform religious duties in the presence of people who would mock them.

<sup>68</sup> See “The Reader,” 483.

<sup>69</sup> Transcribed excerpt of a lecture by Lucy Davidowicz delivered on February 15, 1976, B'nai B'rith (Award), 1976, Cassette 29, Papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1183485](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1183485). Listen at the 4:14-5:22 timestamp. See also Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time*, 127-28.

<sup>70</sup> *Musernikes* first appeared in *Zambikher*, ed. Y. Opatoshu and H. Leivick, vol. 3 (New York: Astoria Press, 1938), 222-74. It was subsequently published in a separate volume as Chaim Grade, *Musernikes: Poeme* (Vilna: Yidisher pen klub, 1939) and reprinted as “Musernikes,” in Chaim Grade, *Doyres: Lider Un Poemes* (New York: Yidisher Kultur Farband, 1945), 77-130.

<sup>71</sup> See “The Reader,” 568-656.

<sup>72</sup> Note that Grade himself refers to this work as a philosophical essay, see Chaim Grade, “Zalman Urievitsh.”

mit hersh raseyner.”<sup>73</sup> The English translation of this essay, entitled “My Quarrel with Hersh Raseyner,”<sup>74</sup> received wide critical acclaim and is probably still his most famous work. Two years after “Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner” appeared, Grade published a short story entitled “A yom kipur nakht.” (A Yom Kippur Night).<sup>75</sup> Grade appended a note to the story stating that it was the first installment of a novella entitled “*Der navaredker sheyvet*” (*The Novaredok Tribe*). This story formed the original kernel of Grade’s novel *Tzemach Atlas*.

In this chapter, I will focus mainly on the characters of Moshe Chorosh and Chaikl Vilner. The character of Moshe Chorosh, like Hersh Raseyner (aka Rabbi Gershon Liebman), is based on a historical figure named Moshe Chorosh.<sup>76</sup> Newly discovered material in Grade’s archive sheds light on the importance of this character in developing Grade’s literary writings on Novaredok.<sup>77</sup>

According to Grade, Chorosh was the best teacher of Greek and Latin in Vilna.<sup>78</sup> Chorosh, like Grade, also studied at a Novaredok Yeshiva, but whereas Grade

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<sup>73</sup> Chaim Grade, “Mayn Krig Mit Hersh Raseyner,” *Yidisher Kempfer* 32, no. 923 (1951): 33-44. For an unpublished manuscripts of this story, see “The Reader,” 313-87.

<sup>74</sup> The original translation by Milton Himmelfarb appeared as Chaim Grade, “My War with Hersh Raseyner: A Story,” *Commentary Magazine* 15 (1953): 428-41. It was subsequently republished as “My Quarrel with Hersh Raseyner,” in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 579-606. The first complete English translation of “My Quarrel with Hersh Raseyner” by Herbert H. Paper appeared in 1982. In 2020 another complete translation was published as *My Quarrel with Hersh Raseyner: Translated and with an Introductory Essay by Ruth R. Wisse* (Mosaic Magazine, 2020). A bilingual Yiddish-English version of this story was recently published as *My Quarrel With Hersh Raseyner*, trans. Ruth R. Wisse (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2022).

<sup>75</sup> See “The Reader,” 7-9, 99-307.

<sup>76</sup> In addition to Grade’s mentions of Chorosh, I found several notebooks written by an M. Chorosh in Greek and Latin. Although I am not positive that this is the M. Chorosh that Grade refers to, given the highly unlikely possibility that there were multiple people by the name of M. Chorosh who were proficient in Greek and Latin, I believe that there is a high level of probability that this is the M. Chorosh that Grade refers to. See Moshe Chorosh, “Notebooks by M. Kharash about Tacitus and the Jews (In Polish, Latin, German, Greek), Notecards Containing Newspaper Excerpts on Various Topics,” Notes and research, undated, Folder: 4059, Records of the YIVO - Vilna Aspirantur, RG 1.3, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/167974](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/167974).

<sup>77</sup> Several studies on Grade deal with the character of Moshe Chorosh. See Shay A. Pilnik, “A Literary Monument for the Vanished World of Lithuanian Jewry: The Work of the Yiddish Writer Chaim Grade,” 82; Chanah Stohrer, “Existence and Its Reflection in Prose Works of Chaim Grade,” 164-71.

<sup>78</sup> This detail and the following information are based on Chaim Grade, “Di Yeshive in Der Yidisher Literatur,” Recording of a lecture delivered at Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies on October 29, 1981, [https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL\\_MUSIC\\_AL000242678/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL000242678/NLI). Listen to Side A at the 39:18 timestamp; Chaim Grade, “The Reader,” 309; “Der Novaredker Sheyvet,” Box 16, Folder 159, pp. 27, 31, 45-48, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952,

studied in the branch of the Novaredok Yeshiva of Bialystok, Moshe Chorosh learned in the branch of the Novaredok Yeshiva of Mezeritch.<sup>79</sup> Chorosh was older than Grade, and they met in Vilna after Chorosh had already graduated from university.

According to Grade, Chorosh was the inspiration behind *Musernikes*.<sup>80</sup> Grade recounts that although by the time they met, Chorosh was already a teacher of Greek and Latin, the only topic he wanted to discuss with Grade was Novaredok. Chorosh's personality and the conversations about Novaredok that Grade held with him provided much fodder for Grade's portrayal of Novaredok. Evidently, Grade took the character of Chorosh and fictionally transported him back in time as a kindred heretic and Chavruta in the Novaredok yeshiva.

Moshe Chorosh appears in various guises and iterations across literary Grade's works about Novaredok.<sup>81</sup> The literary character of Moshe Chorosh functions as an older brother and kindred spirit to Chaikl Vilner. His role as a friend and mentor to Chaim Vilner is pivotal. As a seasoned disciple of Novaredok, Chorosh has a more sophisticated insight into the inner workings of Novaredok compared to Chaikl, his junior. Chorosh enlightens Chaikl and opens his eyes to the true nature of Novaredok. Chaikl's niggling doubts are intensified and sharpened by Chorosh's relentless condemnation of Novaredok, which in turn provides the necessary justification for Chaikl to leave Novaredok. As a literary device, Chorosh functions as the mouthpiece for Chaim Grade's own critical voice and rejection of Novaredok expressed via proxy.

### **The Character of Moshe Lieber in *Musernikes***

The first appearance of the character of Moshe Chorosh is in *Musernikes*. Grade introduces the character of Moshe Lieber in the chapter of *Musernikes* entitled, די מוסר'ניקעס גייען, "The Musernikes Are Going,"<sup>82</sup> which describes the Muserniks walking from the Beit Midrash to the dining room. As the young men are seated at the dining room table, they "all turn their heads around. The *apikores* (heretic) Moshe Lieber enters the kitchen. He sits at the edge of Chaim Vilner's seat and buries his face in his plate."<sup>83</sup> There is a mutual attraction between Moshe Lieber

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YIVO Institute for Jewish Research,  
[https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/175129](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/175129).

<sup>79</sup> "The Reader," 77-78.

<sup>80</sup> Grade, "Di Yeshive in Der Yidisher Literatur."

<sup>81</sup> He appears as Moshe Lieber in Chaim Grade's *Musernikes*; as Moshe Homler in an unpublished manuscript outlining his debates against Novardol Novaredok (YIVO RG 1952, folder 157); as Moshe Chorosh Lohoysker in "A Yom Kippur Nakht,"; and as Moshe Chayit Lohoysker in *Tzemach Atlas*.

<sup>82</sup> Chaim Grade, *Musernikes: Poeme* (Vilna: Yidisher pen klub, 1939), 39-40.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

and Chaim Vilner as fellow travelers and outcasts. Chaim, the junior member of this dynamic duo, is still young and innocent. When the Musernik R. Aba sees them conversing together, he sticks his face between the two to prevent the heretic Moshe from contaminating Chaim's mind with heretical views.

In a subsequent chapter entitled אין גיהנום אויף א קייט "In Hell on a Chain."<sup>84</sup> Moshe Lieber lampoons and deconstructs Novaredok. Moshe explains to Chaim the hypocrisy that exists within Novaredok:

"they claim that they are oblivious to public opinion, but in truth, they cannot stand when someone insults them... Since they cannot find favor in people's eyes, they are consumed with the hate afflicting those who haven't been successful... They spit on the world, yet the smallest trifle hurts them... they are so obsessed with cleansing themselves from every ulterior motive that they are full of suspicion and see the ugly specter of selfishness everywhere. They are so thoroughly engaged in self-denial that all they can do is think about themselves."<sup>85</sup>

Moshe becomes so enraged with the Muserniks that he expresses his wish to murder them and flay their skins. This exasperates Chaim, and he asks Moshe, "if you hate them so much, how come you don't leave." After much prodding, Moshe reveals the real reason why he doesn't leave. Despite his envy of the carefree lives of his secular counterparts, he cannot join them. In fact, he harbors a deep resentment toward them. Moshe points to a poet who walks around arrogantly with long locks of hair and comments to Chaim:

"Do you see him? He's a poet and free-thinker. He dreams of performing heroic deeds... yet his finest deeds are motivated by competition and jealousy... no person on earth can perform a selfless act without the slightest trace of self-interest... I see the black coals beneath every flame; when someone wrestles for truth with clenched fists, I also see the quest for honor... when one fights passionately for a particular cause, he also turns around to see whether his friends take notice."<sup>86</sup>

Moshe confesses that the venom of Novaredok poisoned him. He cannot rid himself of the scourge of finding fault with everyone and everything. He finally admits, "who is keeping me here?" "the gruesome Mussar melody," which follows him wherever he goes.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 54-67.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 67.



## The Doctrine of *Negia* (Personal-Bias)

The negative influence of Novaredok on Moshe, which prevents him from transitioning into secular life, is particularly acute in the realm of *negia* (personal bias). One of the core doctrines of Novaredok is the quest for unadulterated virtue untainted by the vice of self-interest. Accordingly, a *Musernik* must endeavor to eradicate the slightest trace of personal bias in performing virtuous acts.

Grade cleverly refers to this doctrine as *די תורה פֿון נגיעה*<sup>88</sup> (the doctrine of *negia*) and *די נגע צרעת פֿון נגיעה*<sup>89</sup> (the affliction of *negia*).<sup>90</sup> This appellation ironically captures both the Novaredok view that *negia* is a scourge like *Tzara'at* (scale disease or leprosy) – a disease that causes severe impurity according to Torah law – while simultaneously mocking and subverting it by comparing Novaredok's obsession with *negia* to an itch. An itch may be caused by a serious health condition, but it can also be a self-inflicted affliction. One can create or exacerbate an itch by scratching oneself. The more one scratches, the greater the itch, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle. Grade quotes the remarks of the Machaze Avraham that the greater the obsession with eradicating *negia*, the greater the harm one ends up inflicting upon themselves by “scratching a pestilence into himself.”<sup>91</sup>

Moshe turns Novaredok's approach on its head. While Novaredok looks out for the slightest taint of self-interest to transcend it, Moshe Lieber believes that self-serving behavior is all there is. In his view, it is impossible to act out of pure altruism. Yet, despite Moshe's insistence that Mussar is not a viable approach, he cannot extricate himself from it.

Moshe Lieber is a tragic heretic who no longer believes it is possible to get rid of one's *negiot*; nevertheless, his training in Novaredok provided him with a hypersensitive radar to detect even the slightest traces of self-interest that taint even the noblest of deeds. He is so disgusted by the prevalence of selfish behavior disguised in noble garb that he cannot adjust to secular life.

The preoccupation with Novaredok's cardinal principle of *negia* extends to Grade's later works on Novaredok, most notably the novel *Tzemach Atlas*. Throughout the novel, Grade employs Novaredok's psychological technique of *בירור המדות* (the psychological analysis of human behavior to discover hidden ulterior motives) to deconstruct Novaredok itself. Grade achieves this by showing at every turn in the novel how the actions of Tzemach Atlas and his cohorts are motivated by self-gain

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<sup>88</sup> See, for example, “The Reader,” 56.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, 91.

<sup>90</sup> Note the learned pun on the verse in Leviticus 13:59 *זאת תורת נגע צרעת*.

<sup>91</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 365.

despite their pious pretensions.<sup>92</sup> Grade thus masterfully wields the most potent weapon in Novaredok's arsenal, the surgical scalpel of psychological dissection it uses to excise *negia*, and turns it on its head to perform a post-mortem on Novaredok itself.

Moreover, I believe that Grade wants to show that the very moral quest of Noavardok to free oneself of personal biases is paradoxically rooted in *negia* itself. This is epitomized in Grade's characterization of Tzemach Atlas. Through his psychoanalytical deconstruction and demasking of Tzemach's character, Grade reveals that Tzemach's moral quest is less about pure ideological conviction and more about egotistical ambition and a holier-than-thou attitude. Tzemach's quest for moral perfection is motivated by his desire to become a moral superhero, which is essentially a sublimated form of narcissism. This is a far cry from the purported altruism that he preaches.

An illustration of Grade's deconstruction of Novaredok is his description of a fiery speech that Tzemach Atlas delivers about Mussar to the Machaze Avraham:

"If man were naturally drawn to a higher life of spirituality, the Talmud and its commentaries would suffice. But matter, man's body, drags everyone down, even the noblest ben Torah. A Torah scholar can be an evil genius and pilpulize a dispensation for his every desire. But when these wormish lusts assail man, only one solution remains: cast off all clothes, stand naked—study Mussar. Only by looking deeply into oneself can one know if the intent is pure, or if it's self-interest hurling quotations from the Talmud and its commentaries and shrieking: Yes, it's permitted! Yes, you can do it! The *yetzer ha-ra* can put on a pure blue tallis whose fringes and fine gold collar are woven through with the holy words of the Talmudic sages. But in those piety-glazed eyes the swinish calculation of self-interest still burns. And the more ecstatically he prays, the more hypocritical he is—that pious demon garbed in the defective tallis of self-interest."

Reb Avraham-Shaye laughed delightedly. "The *yetzer ha-ra* can also put on a tallis woven from a Navaredker sermon and moralistic talk." <sup>93</sup>

The Machaze Avraham's half-joking comment, in which he disarms Tzemach's harangue in good humor, is used less charitably by Grade to undercut Novaredok with devastating efficiency. In effect, through the mouthpiece of the Machaze Avraham, Grade imparts a message to the reader that Tzemach's fire-and-brimstone approach to eradicating *negia* is itself rooted in the *negia* of self-righteousness. Tzemach himself is the pious fraud he accuses others of being.

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<sup>92</sup> See, for example, *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 283. The limited scope of this chapter doesn't allow me to offer a comprehensive analysis of Grade's use of a "hermeneutics of *negia*" as a prominent literary device in the novel to deconstruct Novaredok.

<sup>93</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 398.

## The Return of Moshe Chorosh

After his first appearance in Grade's poem *Musernikes*, Grade returns to the character of Moshe Chorosh in the first literary kernels of what would later become the novel *Tzemach Atlas*.<sup>94</sup> In fact, Moshe Choresch is the "missing link" that connects Grade's pre-war poetry on Novaredok and his post-war prose on this theme.

The dialogue between Moshe Lieber and Chaim Vilner in *Musernikes* anticipates a series of dialogues about Novaredok that will feature prominently in Chaim Grade's post-holocaust works. The most famous of these debates/dialogues is "Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner." Several years after Grade published "Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner" he published his short story "A Yom Kippur Night," which centers on the character of Moshe Chorosh.<sup>95</sup> This story – where Grade elaborates in prose Chorosh's critique of Novaredok that initially appeared in poetic form – essentially picks up from where Grade left off in *Musernikes*.

The juxtaposition of "Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner" and "A Yom Kippur Night" form a dialectic (in typical Grade fashion).<sup>96</sup> Hersh Raseyner is the ultimate champion of Novaredok, whereas Moshe Chorosh is its fiercest critic. In Grade's trial of Novaredok, Hersh plays the role of the defense attorney and advocate of Novaredok, whereas Moshe plays the chief prosecutor and opponent. Both voices exist within Grade and are amplified by his interlocutors. On the one hand, Hersh Raseyner reawakens the voice of the Novaredok ethical conscience that lies dormant within Chaim Grade. On the other hand, Chorosh presents Grade's own critical views of Novaredok.

The culmination of Grade's critique of Novaredok appears in *Tzemach Atlas*. Grade changes his literary tactics; instead of mounting an abstract philosophical rebuttal of Novaredok, he repudiates Novaredok through psychological deconstruction. The story "A Yom Kippur Night" is a bridge between "Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner" where Grade presents philosophical arguments, and the novel *Tzemach Atlas* where he brings Novaredok to life with vivid psychological realism.

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<sup>94</sup> See "The Reader," 6-307.

<sup>95</sup> "Mayn Krig Mit Hersh Raseyner" originally appeared in *Der Yiddisher Kempfer* on September 28, 1951 and "A Yom Kippur Nakht" originally appeared in *Der Yiddisher Kempfer* on September 11 and 18, 1953. "Der Novaredker sheyvet" in "The Reader" 10-93 for earlier drafts of "the Moshe Chorosh dialogues." One of these manuscripts notes several dates from April 17 until December 10, 1952. This further highlights the chronological proximity of both works.

<sup>96</sup> See chapter 4.

## **A Yom Kippur Night**

The story “A Yom Kippur Night” belongs to the genre of Grade’s semi-autobiographical, semi-fictionalized accounts of the time he studied in Novaredok. It recounts a discussion that Chaim Grade conducted with Moshe Chorosh on the night of Yom Kippur. The date is highly significant. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement and confession. In the story, Moshe Chorosh violates the sanctity of Yom Kippur and subverts it. Instead of confessing his sins, he “confesses” the sins of Novaredok. Yom Kippur is also the Day of Judgement, but instead of Novaredok putting Chorosh on trial, the roles are reversed, and Chorosh puts Novaredok on the defendant’s bench. The charges that Chorosh levels against Novaredok appear to play a decisive role in Chaikl’s decision to leave Novaredok.

The story begins with Chaikl Vilner in a liminal state wavering between Orthodoxy and secularism. In previous years Chaikl went to the Novaredok Yeshiva in Bialystok to spend the High Holy Days in the atmosphere of the Yeshiva. The year this story takes place, however, Chaikl postpones his trip until the day before Yom Kippur, when he finally decides to join his friends in Bialystok due to his mother’s prodding.

The night before the eve of Yom Kippur, he dreams of the tree next to his dormitory in Bialystok, where he usually stays during his visits. The tree is a powerful metaphor reflecting Grade’s internal state. The tree symbolizes in Chaikl’s mind the Novaredok struggle to purge one’s passions and desires. Grade compares the process of a tree shedding its leaves during autumn to his battle to rid himself of his physical passions and youthful vigor. The tree summons Chaikl back to Novaredok to continue to wrestle with himself and put up a good fight.

Chaikl’s arrival in Bialystok is characterized by ambivalence and liminality. Instead of meeting his usual friends, he meets his friend Moshe Chorosh whom the Yeshiva students ostracize on account of his heresy. Chaikl is considered guilty by association, and the students shun him as well. Chorosh and Chaikl arrive in the Novaredok Beit Midrash in time for the Yom Kippur services and sit closest to the exit. Their physical position of liminality mirrors their existential predicament of straddling the fence between Novaredok and the secular world.

After completing the Yom Kippur night service, Chaikl accompanies Chorosh to the latter’s lodging quarters. Chorosh violates the sanctity of Yom Kippur by switching on an electric lamp. He subsequently delivers a long tirade listing his grievances and accusations against Novaredok. Chaikl tries to defend Novaredok, but Chorosh pummels him with a relentless critique of Novaredok’s philosophy.

## The Doctrine of Self-Denial

Chorosh rails against the harsh asceticism and self-denial demanded by Mussar. Although he delivers a long discourse, his point is quite simple: the essence of all the teachings of Mussar is the renunciation of worldly pleasures. Grade calls this “די תורה פֿון אָפּזאָגן זיך” “The Torah (doctrine) of self-denial.”<sup>97</sup>

In his discourse, Chorosh provides an overview of Mussar literature. For example, he summarizes the gist of the classic Mussar text *The Duties of the Heart* by Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda:

The Ten Gates, as the author calls them, that lead men to God are considered holy by the Muserniks, almost as holy as the Ten Commandments. And this is what *The Duties of the Heart* asserts: ‘Brother, kinsman mine, first of all renounce everything that is forbidden. Your neighbor’s wife, for instance, should revolt you like insects and worms. As you would not eat mice, so should you have no desire to touch another woman. Thereafter, renounce those things which are permitted by law. If it is not necessary for the maintenance of your life, renounce it, brother, kinsman mine. And finally, brother, kinsman mine, accustom yourself to fasting at least once a week.’<sup>98</sup>

Chorosh continues to quote other Mussar texts stating that God created humans to resist physical temptation and thereby attain eternal spiritual bliss. Mussar literature highlights the stark dichotomy between *Olam Haza* and *Olam Haba*, this world, and the World to Come.

According to Mussar, the human sojourn in this world is a necessary evil. The purpose of life is not to partake of the physical pleasures that life has to offer but to resist them. Mussar presents an ultimatum: a person must choose between this world and the next world! One must choose between enjoying sensual pleasures in the here-and-now or spiritual bliss in the hereafter.

In his indictment, Chorosh highlights Mussar texts that emphasize the corruption of the flesh in Christian-like terms.<sup>99</sup> This strain of Mussar cultivates an attitude of shame, guilt, and sinfulness associated with the body and physical pleasures.

Whenever Chaikl tries to play devil’s advocate and offer a more charitable or benign interpretation of Novaredok, Chorosh rebuts Chaikl’s defense and criticizes it in the harshest terms possible. Chaikl, on his end, tries to counteract Chorosh’s bleak picture by presenting alternative views in Jewish thought, such as Hasidism,

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<sup>97</sup> “The Reader,” 287.

<sup>98</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 338-339. The quote from *The Duties of the Heart* is a synopsis of Bahya ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, “Ninth Treatise: On Abstinence,” Section 5, <https://tinyurl.com/2p89rjs9>.

<sup>99</sup> On the influence of Christian asceticism on Medieval Jewish pietists, see Susan Weissman, *Final Judgement and the Dead in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020).

which emphasizes joy and exaltation rather than melancholy and mortification of the flesh. However, Chorosh disagrees and maintains that the “doctrine of renunciation and self-denial” is not only an extreme view but characteristic of normative Judaism as a whole.

The role Chorosh plays in this story is that of the wounded Musernik, who lashes out against Novaredok for all the pain it inflicted on him. His view might be highly skewed, and one can question whether he is a reliable narrator who faithfully conveys the essence of Mussar. Nevertheless, Chorosh serves as a perfect character for Grade’s purposes. Grade seeks to highlight how Mussar cripples people and stifles their creative potential.

In a moment of poignant candor, Chorosh confesses to Chaikl that he is tormented by sexual frustration:

“Sexual lust is driving me crazy.”

“Get married,” Chaikl said.

“It won’t help!” Lohoysker sounded delighted to be punishing himself. “If I were to take a wife and not have holy matters in mind during marital relations—if copulation wasn’t performed with holiness and purity like an ecstatic Silent Devotion and my sole intent was physical pleasure—then my seed would be a rotten seed, and my future child would have the blood of a bastard flowing in his veins. Violating Yom Kippur doesn’t frighten me; being an atheist doesn’t frighten me; I revile everything that’s sacred. I’m an instigator, a blasphemer, a Jeroboam who sins and corrupts others—but I’m afraid to get married. The dybbuks of all the Muserniks of generations past have come into me, shouting their eternal shout: ‘It’s forbidden! It’s forbidden!’ That’s why I hate the Navaredkers so . . .”<sup>100</sup>

The spirit of Mussar wounded Chorosh so profoundly that he cannot rid himself of his guilty conscience, although he no longer believes that he is committing any sin! No matter how much he tries, he can never learn to enjoy life without feeling guilty. Chorosh confesses that the only pleasure he can experience is the perverse and guilty pleasure of sinning (not the pleasure of engaging in an enjoyable activity in and of itself). Chorosh thus becomes the poster child who personifies the Novaredok aphorism, “once someone studied in Novaredok, he will never be able to enjoy physical pleasures.”<sup>101</sup>

Chana Stohrer points out<sup>102</sup> that Chorosh represents the figure of the rebellious *Talush*.<sup>103</sup> The literary figure of the *Talush* rose to prominence during the 1880s

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<sup>100</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 208-209.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>102</sup> Chana Stohrer, “Existence and Its Reflection,” 164.

<sup>103</sup> Many books and articles have been written on the *tlushim* genre. See, for example, Nurit Govrin, *Alienation and Regeneration*, trans. John Glucker (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1989); Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-moadam: li-deyoknah shel ha-republikah ha-sifrutit ha-Ivrit bi-techilat ha-meah ha-esrim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987); Yitzchak Bacon, *Ha-tzair ha-boded be-siporet ha-ivrit (1899-*

in Hebrew and Yiddish literature. It describes Jewish intellectuals who grew up in a religious environment but subsequently lost their faith and became secular. However, they cannot find their place in secular society due to the gap between their religious upbringing and nouveau-secular status. Furthermore, these characters are deeply torn and conflicted, for although they no longer believe, they cannot completely sever themselves from their roots. As the title implies, the *Talush* is an uprooted figure for whom uprootedness is an existential predicament. The rupture they experience leaves a deep crater and existential void in its wake, and they walk around feeling the phantom pains of amputated limbs.

Chorosh epitomizes the tragic figure of the *Talush* who, despite his heresy, cannot free himself from the shackles of Novaredok on a psychological and social level. Psychologically, he cannot rid himself of the punitive Novaredok superego; socially, no matter how much he wants to transition from religion to lead a secular lifestyle, he will never succeed in fitting in with secular society. The mentality of the Yeshiva has left an indelible imprint that he cannot erase.

The character of Moshe Chorosh and his struggles is part of a more extensive gallery of Novaredok characters that Grade portrays. They comprise a cohort of frustrated and thwarted characters who suffer personal defeat rather than triumph in the battles they wage against themselves. These characters develop a variety of psychological pathologies ranging from self-sabotage and suicidal tendencies to eccentric and anti-social behavior. They are deeply frustrated characters who suffer from excessive guilt and self-loathing that result in nervous breakdowns. The most extreme and grotesque portrayal of these characters is in the novel *Tzemach Atlas*, where Grade illustrates the harmful influence of Novaredok through the evolving trajectory of Tzemach Atlas and his students.<sup>104</sup>

These frustrated Muserniks experience failure on two fronts. They are defeated both by their inability to satisfy their superego's aspirations and their id's desires. These characters are consumed by their unfulfilled carnal desires, yet they cannot indulge these desires because they are paralyzed by guilt and self-loathing for having these desires in the first place.

Chorosh's influence on Chaikl is profound. His living example provides a powerful cautionary tale for Chaikl of what can happen to Chaikl himself. Chorosh warns Chaikl that when the venom of Novaredok permeates his psyche, it will poison him.

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1908) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1978); Gershon Shaked, *Le-lo motza: al Y.C. Brenner, M.Y. Berdichevsky, G. Shofman, ve-U.N. Gnessin* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1973). Alan L. Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>104</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 215 ff.

Like Chorosh, he too will feel torn between the forbidden pleasures of this world (since all pleasures are forbidden when not enjoyed for the sake of Heaven, as explained above) and the ascetic discipline outlined in the book *Duties of the Heart*.<sup>105</sup>

### **Chaim Grade's Conflicts with Mussar**

Moshe Chorosh's views are essentially Grade's views. The idea that the ethos of Mussar is a "Torah of self-denial" lies at the core of Grade's conflicts with Halakha and Mussar.

Moshe Chorosh hammers this point home for Chaikl by telling him that:

"The *Code of Law* and the Mussar books emphasize the same thing. In essence, nothing is permitted if there's no holy intent in it. Every pleasure is a slice of something forbidden, a piece of pork fat. You're still faring well so far. You come to Nareva for just a few weeks and then run back home. You told me last year that in Vilna you live on a street lined with butcher shops. Looking at your face one can tell that you live on a fleshy, this-worldly street and that the fleshy, this-worldly street lives in you. But sooner or later the Torah of Navaredok will settle into your bones and your life. And then the Musernik in you will close the kosher butcher shops and only the nonkosher ones will be inside you. You'll enjoy only what's forbidden, because nothing is permissible. And then, like me, you won't enjoy anything but sinning. . .<sup>106</sup>

To fully appreciate Chorosh's statement, it is necessary to flesh out this point in greater detail.

There are two general approaches to Jewish observance: a liberal approach vs. a rigid approach.<sup>107</sup> According to the more moderate view, there is a separation between religion and life. There is a neutral "secular" ground that is not subject to the hegemony of religion. If one keeps all religious laws, one can enjoy life like a secular person. For example, as long as one doesn't eat non-kosher meat, there is no sin in enjoying the consumption of kosher meat. Thus, according to this view, Jewish piety does not require the renunciation of the physical world and its pleasures. Religion is a crucial component of life but does not encompass the totality of life.

However, the more stringent and ascetic approach creates a strict dichotomy between the religious and secular realms. All life is governed by a set of religious prescriptions and proscriptions. Even actions that are not expressly forbidden,

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<sup>105</sup> See *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>106</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 209. See also "The Newspaper Typescript," 1308.

<sup>107</sup> See "The Reader" 287-89, 791-92. Grade explores these two approaches in his story "Leybe Leyzer's Hoyf," in his book *Di Kloyz un Di Gas* (translated as *Rabbis and Wives*). The protagonist Rabbi Yoel Weintraub represents the lenient approach, whereas Heskiah Teitelbaum represents the stringent approach.



such as the consumption of kosher meat, must be carried out with a religious purpose, i.e., that one is eating this food to be healthy and serve God.<sup>108</sup> There is no neutral zone that the Code of Jewish law does not govern. For the devout Jew, religion is not *one dimension* of life but the *totality* of life.

Grade writes that he conducted an ongoing debate with the Chazon Ish about this issue.<sup>109</sup> The Chazon Ish maintained that either one “must or cannot do something,” whereas Grade claimed that there are things that “one may do” without it necessarily being an obligation or prohibition. Grade writes “that the folk (the average Jew) is incapable of living such a lifestyle. Nevertheless, one can only be in awe of people like the Chazon Ish, who was a Man of God and all of his deeds were permeated with religious piety.”<sup>110</sup>

Grade apparently interpreted the religion-only approach in light of Novaradok’s extreme asceticism. Grade blames Mussar for cultivating an attitude of disgust toward life and its pleasures. Consequently, Grade portrays Mussar in very dark and gloomy colors as a life-depleting and life-denying discipline.<sup>111</sup> Grade seems to equate the Mussar impulse with a puritanical attitude that requires one to retreat from the world and adopt a lifestyle of abstinence and austerity. Novaradok maintained that the Torah and the world are incompatible.<sup>112</sup> The extreme position of Novaradok seems to have created the perception in Grade’s mind that the physical world, in all its vibrancy and sprawling vitality, is anathema to religion.

Based on Grade’s writings, I surmise that his encounter with Novaredok and the Chazon Ish exposed him to a highly ascetic form of religion that he did not experience in his childhood. I cautiously propose that the more radical form of religion that Grade encountered as a Yeshiva student created in his mind a strict bifurcation and presented him with an ultimatum that forced him to choose between a religious and secular lifestyle.

Initially, Chaikl tries diligently to conform to the religious demands of the Novaredok and the Chazon Ish, but as he matures, he realizes that his zest for life and life-affirming attitude prevents him from committing to an observant lifestyle. Indeed, the first book of poems Chaim Grade wrote after leaving Novaredok is entitled *Yo (Yes)*. The title encapsulates Grade’s defiance of Novaredok. He rebels against their philosophy of abstinence and renunciation. Instead of complying with

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<sup>108</sup> See Rabbi Yosef Caro, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*, no. 231.

<sup>109</sup> See “The Reader,” 791:

דער חזון איש זאָגט צו מיר ווען איך בין אַלט 15 יאָר. דו ווייסט דאָך אַז ביי אונדז איז ניטאָ קיין זאָכן וואָס מען מעג.  
אָדער מען מוז אָדער מען טאָר ניט; and folder 923, p. 10. See also “The Reader,” 768-69.

<sup>110</sup> YIVO RG 1952, folder 828, p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. C.N. Bialik’s famous poem “Ha-matmid.”

<sup>112</sup> See *Musernikes*, 15.

Novaredok's demand to say no to the world, Grade defiantly proclaims yes to the world and life.

### **The Ark is Falling – Chaim Grade's Fallout with Novaredok**

I will conclude my analysis of Grade's relationship to Novaredok by discussing Grade's break with Novaredok as described in *Musernikes*. It vividly portrays Grade's struggle to break free from the constraints of the Novaredok "Torah of self-denial."

The dramatic climax of Chaim Grade's epic poem *Musernikes* is a chapter entitled דער ארון קודש פֿאַלט, "The Holy Ark is Falling."<sup>113</sup> In the opening nature scene, Chaim Grade artistically interlaces the subjective, inner psychological conflict raging within Chaim Vilner's soul with a dramatic portrayal of the external events occurring in nature.

The drooping trees in silence bowed their  
curly crowns.  
Accepting autumn, as a congregation sanctifies the  
Name.  
A slender sapling groaned, began to moan.  
The trees, awakened, turned on him:  
Be still, you'll grow accustomed to it soon,  
We all long since have learned the same . . .  
Chaim Vilner stood and listened in a frozen still-  
ness.<sup>114</sup>

The opening lines of this chapter describe the transition between summer and fall, reflecting Chaim Vilner's liminal and transitory state. Autumn is about to begin, and the trees stand in a subdued posture, ready to accept their fate. The trees are a metaphor for the historical Jewish experience of martyrdom. The sanctification of God's name (Kiddush Hashem), especially by living a life according to the standards of Novaredok, requires great sacrifice. The dialogue between the grown trees and young sapling resembles a dialogue in Novaredok where the elder students tell the young initiates who are anxious about their loss of vigor and vitality, "don't worry, this is the way it is for all of us, you'll get used to it."

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 68-74. There are two English translations of this chapter, see Chaim Grade, "The Holy Ark Falls (from Musernikes)," Translated by Andrew Firestone, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Novogrudok/nov185.html#Page185> and Grade, "The Holy Ark Is Falling," Translated by Kadya Molodowsky. *Jewish Frontier* 15, no. 4 (April 1948): 19-21.

<sup>114</sup> Grade, "The Holy Ark Is Falling," Translated by Kadya Molodowsky. *Jewish Frontier* 15, no. 4 (April 1948): 19. Note: all the translated excerpts from *Musernikes* in this chapter are quoted from Kadya Molodowsky's translation with slight modifications.

Chaim Vilner stands at a crossroads in frozen stillness, contemplating his fate. As he experiences the transition between day and night, Shabbat and the weekday, the Beit Midrash and the world outside, he witnesses the last hums of the summer bee mingle with the first autumnal winds. The reverie of summer is abruptly interrupted as autumn winds herald the fall. "The autumn wind wafted a litany/Sobbing through the leaves, quietly devout."<sup>115</sup> The gaiety of summer turns gloomy as "the trees began to quiver/Tossing their heads, like *musernikes* at prayer/A secret, distant outcry."<sup>116</sup> The carefree joys of summer are replaced with the heartrending sobs of Mussar.

Chaim Vilner is stricken with remorse for the time he wasted in the summer enchanted by nature. The sun sets, and the chants of Mussar stir his conscience and cast an irresistible nocturnal spell. "The Vilner ran to the *Beit Midrash* as one burnt/ out by flame/ speeding to save a last loft remaining . . ."<sup>117</sup> As he ran through winding paths and twisted back alleys, he "swiftly touched his own face—/Cold. The Cheeks sagging, harsh twitching round/the lips—/Broken-spirited, he went toward the chapel."<sup>118</sup>

The poet then describes the Rosh Yeshiva's sermon. The Rosh Yeshiva exhorts the students to repent and peppers his speech with quotes from various verses and prayers. One of the hallmark features of these sermons is the chanting of verses by the preacher, which are then shouted back to him responsively in a resounding echo. Thus, the Rosh Yeshiva preaches: "Teachers and masters, let us now pray once again:/'Pure heart create in us, O Lord.' A hundred-headed tossing echo answered: 'Pure heart create in us, O Lord.'"<sup>119</sup>

Between the responsive chants, the preacher stirs the congregation to the depths of repentance with his moral exhortations. The Rosh Yeshiva elaborates on one of Novaredok's key teachings, "In a single hour the truth one may attain/To keep it, needs a whole life's pain."<sup>120</sup> Chaim Vilner stands at the entrance, away from the rest of the crowd, but understands these words as a veiled critique aimed directly at him in his distant corner. The Rosh Yeshiva's words pierce his soul, and he internalizes the message that the way of Novaredok is a lifelong struggle, "And like a house before collapsing, he sighed and/wailed."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. In Yiddish: the *Kloyz*.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Chaim is overcome with a heavy feeling. The burden of Novaredok is too heavy to bear. Chaim Vilner senses the impending collapse of Novaredok under its own weight. Novaredok may inspire the sanctification of God's name through death and self-denial, but it cannot sustain a path of sanctification that embraces life.

The Rosh Yeshiva continues his sermon and reiterates the core philosophy of Novaredok, that life is a constant struggle to overcome one's own nature and inborn instincts of self-interest. "This is the heaviest curse that man sustains/If his ancient nature he cannot cast away."<sup>122</sup>

The worst fate that can befall a person is the inability to overcome one's natural instincts. In a climactic frenzy, the Rosh Yeshiva concluded his sermon with a heart-rending cry, "Our Father, our king, annul the evil decree" of being a prisoner of instinct.

In response to this hysterical outcry, "Chaim Vilner shook in every limb/Like a tree, unwilling to yield to autumn its last;/leaves . . ." <sup>123</sup> He stands on the threshold of the Beit Midrash, symbolizing a transitional and liminal space, positioned both inside and outside. He is caught in a bind between the ethical imperative of Novaredok and his aesthetic appreciation of nature. Ultimately, he cannot accept a path of sanctity that demands the renunciation of life and yield to the demands of R. Aba who seeks to place him in a moral straitjacket that will bind him forever. The call to *martyrdom for the sake of faith* can paradoxically have the opposite effect of *killing faith itself* in the hearts of those beating with the pulse of life.

Suddenly, amidst the screams, he hears a deafening crash. The Holy Ark is creaking and starting to collapse. Desperately, the students support the ark and attempt to prevent it from tumbling down.

The motif of the Holy Ark falling can be interpreted as the poet's own internal vision of the Jewish tradition in a state of peril on the brink of destruction.<sup>124</sup> According to this interpretation, the Holy Ark (a metonym for the Jewish tradition) is in danger of collapsing under its own weight. This might refer to the poet's subjective vision of *his* Holy Ark (his adherence to traditional Judaism) imploding (as exteriorized in a vision of a Holy Ark collapsing in a synagogue). Alternatively, it may refer to the powers of destruction, secularization, and assimilation spelling doom for traditional Judaism in general. Either way, it expresses the poet's sense that he is sailing on a moribund and doomed ship.

The narrator concludes the poem with this striking vision:

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Some have interpreted these stanzas as the poet's premonition of the impending Holocaust.

Chaim Vilner lay beside the chapel door,  
 Writhing, desiring to be a rung in 'rescue's ladder—  
 To save!—And could not break across the  
 threshold;  
 To voice a cry—his tongue cold frozen in his throat—  
 Behold! the chapel bodily broke loose beneath  
 The Holy Ark rose higher, locked in many hands.  
 Chaim Vilner gripped the floor with fists and teeth  
 The walls spun by him dizzily—  
 Roaring away, like doomed Titans in tumbrils to the  
 guillotine  
 Far off, their thunder still came distantly:  
 Our Father, our King—Thy Holy Spirit do not from  
 us retire.  
 The muted thunder ever backward rolled  
 And Khayim Vilner stayed—wounded in his trench,  
 Blind in nocturnal forest at a burnt-out pyre.<sup>125</sup>

In the end, Chaim Vilner cannot rescue the holy ark and his faith. The Ark and its supporters vanish into oblivion “like doomed Titans in tumbrils to the guillotine.” The call to martyrdom turns out to be an act of self-destruction. The Holy Ark is something people can die for, but not something that one can live for.

Chaim Vilner is left wounded in the dark. The disappearance of the ark left a gaping hole in its wake. The fire of his religious ardor is extinguished and only ashes remain from the “burnt-out pyre.” Having lost his faith, he feels bereft and bewildered, but he has no choice but to forge a new path in the “nocturnal forest” of his soul.

It is interesting to note that the *Zamelbikher* version of this poem contains a postscript not included in the later 1939 printing.

In this poignant postscript, the poet writes that the character “Chaim Vilner is no longer present. The light of the erstwhile Musernik Chaim Vilner had been extinguished. Only I, (i.e. Chaim Grade), the one who survived the horrors of the nightmare, remained alone in the night. “I – who found myself in the sacred horror/Wrote this down on a scroll.”<sup>126</sup>

These words, printed in 1938, sound eerily prescient of the horrors about to unfold in the Holocaust. But regardless of their premonitory nature, their direct meaning is about the loss of faith.

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>126</sup> Chaim Grade, “Musernikes,” in *Zamlbikher*, ed. Y. Opatoshu and H. Leivick, vol. 3 (New York: Astoria Press, 1938), 274.

The tone of the poem's end expresses Chaim Grade's relationship with Novaredok at its breaking point. His life as a Musernik has come to an end. But memories of this nightmare and sacred horror still haunt him, and he feels compelled to write his memories on a scroll.

Indeed, as I elaborate in chapter four, all of Grade's writing on Novaredok is colored by the trauma he experienced there. This trauma undoubtedly influenced Grade's decision to leave Orthodox Judaism. However, the negative impact that Novaredok had on Grade was tempered by the positive effect that the Chazon Ish had on him, as I will explore in the next chapter.

### Chapter Three – Chaim Grade’s Relationship with the Chazon Ish

In this chapter, I will explore Chaim Grade’s relationship with Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelits, also known as the Chazon Ish (1878–1953).<sup>127</sup> Chaim Grade memorialized and immortalized the Chazon Ish in *Tzemach Atlas* and numerous other writings.<sup>128</sup> Their relationship had an enduring effect on Chaim Grade even after he parted ways with the Chazon Ish.

The following remarks from Chaim Grade’s lecture notes speak volumes:

No person in my entire life made such an impression on me like the Chazon Ish. No Gaon, no Rosh Yeshiva, not Talmid Chacham. Not R. Chaim Ozer,<sup>129</sup> not even the Chafetz Chaim.<sup>130</sup> Neither religious nor secular.

I feel like I am a young boy compared to him, although I am now almost twice the age of how old I<sup>131</sup> was when I first met him. I take walks with him and quarrel with him. I still think highly of myself for the fact that I spent seven years in his company. I still feel proud of my *yichus* (reputation) in the Yeshiva in Bialystok, among the vacationing scholars in Valkenik, and

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<sup>127</sup> The definitive critical biography of the Chazon Ish is the book by Benjamin Brown, *The Hazon Ish: Halakhist, Believer and Leader of the Haredi Revolution* (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 2011), [Hebrew]. See also Brown, “Karelits, Avraham Yeshayahu.” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Karelits\\_Avraham\\_Yeshayahu](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Karelits_Avraham_Yeshayahu); Mordechai Hacoen and David Derovan, “Karelitz, Avraham Yeshayahu,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 11 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 805-6; Marek Čejka and Roman Kořan, “The Vision of a Man: Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz - Chazon Ish,” in *Rabbis of Our Time: Authorities of Judaism in the Religious and Political Ferment of Modern Times* (London: Routledge, 2015), 94-98; Lawrence Kaplan, “The Hazon Ish: Haredi Critic of Traditional Orthodoxy,” in *The Uses of Tradition*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 145-73. There are numerous additional biographies of the Chazon Ish written with a more hagiographical bent, see

Shimon Finkelman, *The Chazon Ish: The Life and Ideals of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1989); Kalman Kahane, “Abraham Isaiah Karelitz (Hazon Ish),” in *Men of the Spirit*, ed. Leo Jung (New York: Kymson Publishing Company, 1964), 149-69; Kalman Kahana, *Ha-Ish va-ḥazono* (Tel Aviv, 1964); Aharon Sorski, *Ha-Ḥazon Ish be-dorotav* (Bene Berak, 1984); Shlomo Cohen et al., *Pe’er ha-dor*, 5 vols. (Bene Berak, 1966-1974); Z Chaim Emanuel Kolitz, *Ha-chozeh mi-lita: perakim be-chayei ha-chazon ish* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1990); Zvi Yavrov, *Sefer Ma’aseh Ish: Toldot Chayav ve-Hanhagotav Shel Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz*, vol. 6 vols. (Bene Berak: Zvi Yavrov, 1999-2004).

<sup>128</sup> See “The Reader,” 568-717, 743-940.

<sup>129</sup> Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (1863-1940), a religious scholar and community leader in Vilna.

<sup>130</sup> Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), a prominent halakhic authority and Orthodox Jewish leader.

<sup>131</sup> Should be: he. Grade corrected this when he delivered the paper.

householders in Vilna synagogues, that I am a student of the Chazon Ish, although my Bialystok Beit Midrash, Vilna synagogues and Valkenik forests are alive only in my mind.<sup>132</sup>

As I will argue below, one of the major factors responsible for Grade's inability to completely break away from Orthodox Judaism, even after he ceased being religiously observant, was the Chazon Ish's lasting impact on him. The "road not taken" by Chaim Grade to follow in the path of his rebbe as a Torah-observant Jew caused him much guilt and psychological unrest. Grade was conflicted between his feelings of awe and admiration for his rebbe and his need to rebel against him. Grade's veneration of his rebbe and his need to atone for his rebellion against him spurred Grade's creative talents to eulogize the Chazon Ish and erect a glorious literary monument in his honor.<sup>133</sup>

### **Biographical Information about the Chazon Ish**

Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelits was born in 1878 in Kosowa, Lithuania.<sup>134</sup> He received his primary religious education from his father and private tutors.<sup>135</sup> R. Karelits married Bashe Bei in 1906.<sup>136</sup> They moved to Vilna in 1920<sup>137</sup> and emigrated to the Land of Israel in 1933. Rabbi Karelitz was supported by a textile shop managed by his wife, effectively allowing him to devote all his time to Torah study.<sup>138</sup>

Rabbi Karelits published many books containing his insights on the Talmud and Jewish legal texts. These books were published anonymously bearing the title *Chazon Ish*, translated in English as "The Vision of a Man." The title contains a veiled reference to his name, as the word איש (Ish) in Hebrew forms the acronym א'בר'הם יש'עיהו, Avraham Yeshayahu thereby alluding to his name. As is customary among great rabbinic figures, the title of his book became his moniker.

In his earlier years, the Chazon Ish led a fiercely private life and shunned the limelight. The fact that he held no official rabbinic post meant that he was not required to do the bidding of any institutionalized entity other than heed the dictates of his religious conscience. In addition to his scholarship, the Chazon Ish was revered for his saintliness and piety. His exemplary benevolent character

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<sup>132</sup> My translation from Chaim Grade "Der Khazon Ish," undated, Box 37, Folder 827, p. 1, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1177739](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1177739).

<sup>133</sup> See "Confessions," letter #32.

<sup>134</sup> Benjamin Brown, "Karelits, Avraham Yeshayahu." In *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Karelits\\_Avraham\\_Yeshayahu](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Karelits_Avraham_Yeshayahu).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.; Brown, *The Hazon Ish*, 20.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 30. In the novel *The Yeshiva*, Grade refers to her as Rebbetzin Yudes.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



matched his religious piety, and he exhibited great kindness and compassion towards others.

The Chazon Ish was a conservative religious thinker who maintained hardline Ultra-Orthodox views. In various situations, when he felt his involvement was necessary, the Chazon Ish became a champion of Halakhic conservatism and ideological purity. This tension between the Chazon Ish's zealous streak and his gentle demeanor will be discussed later in detail.

Despite his innate humility and shyness, during the last decade or so of his life, the Chazon Ish emerged from relative obscurity to become one of the most prominent leaders of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry in Israel after the Holocaust. His reputation was established on the merits of his saintliness and scholarship rather than by dint of any official position.

As Mordechai Hacohen and David Derovan point out:

Karelitz was an example of a personality, holding no official position, who nevertheless became a recognized worldwide authority on all matters relating to Jewish law and life. He did not head any yeshivah, yet he was teacher and guide to thousands of students. He was not a communal leader, yet he exerted an enormous influence on the life and institutions of religious Jewry. He did not publish many responsa, but became the supreme authority on halakhah.<sup>139</sup>

By the time of his death in 1953, the Chazon Ish was considered the “Gadol Hador” (the leading Charedi authority of his generation) and is widely regarded as one of the greatest rabbinic figures of the twentieth century. The name of the Chazon Ish is uttered in awe and reverence in the Orthodox Jewish world until today.

### **Timeline of the Relationship between the Chazon Ish and Chaim Grade**

Chaim Grade first met the Chazon Ish in Valkenik in 1925 or 1926 when he was studying in the Valkenik branch of the Novaredok Yeshiva.<sup>140</sup> At some point, the

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<sup>139</sup> Hacohen and Derovan, “Karelitz, Avraham Yeshayahu.”

<sup>140</sup> For more information and documentation for the following details, see Klingenstein and Zirkind, “Chaim Grade: Facts of a Life.”

For some additional articles on Chaim Grade's relationship with the Chazon Ish, see Julio Ben Shmuel (a pseudonym for Yechiel Szeintuch), “Chaim Grade Un Der Chazon Ish,” <http://congressforjewishculture.org/2012/06/chaim-grade-chazon-ish/>; Grade Mechele, “Der Frayer Musernik, Shrayber Un Poet Chaim Grade,” *Der Veker* 1, no. 6 (2016): 67-87, <http://www.kaveshtiebel.com/download/file.php?id=28343>. See also Shlomo Cohen et al, *Pe'er Ha-Dor*, vol. 1, 294.

See also Inna Hecker Grade's reflections on the relationship between Chaim Grade and the Chazon Ish in “Chaim Grade: A Portrait of the Man,” 20-21; Hecker Grade “Unpublished Introduction to Rabbis and Wives,” *Di kloyz un di gas: dertseylungen*, undated, Box 35, Folder 270, pp. 14-24, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research,

Chazon Ish notified Chaim Grade of his desire that they study together.<sup>141</sup> Chaim Grade also moved in with the Chazon Ish and stayed in his vacation home in Valkenik, where he vacationed with his sister and her children.

At one point, apparently in the fall of 1926, Grade interrupted his studies at the Novaredok Yeshiva in Valkenik and moved back to Vilna, where he spent a lot of time with the Chazon Ish. The Chazon Ish taught a Talmud class to several students in the Poplaver Kloyz. Chaim Grade was one of his students.<sup>142</sup>

At this point, it is important to dispel a common misconception that I have read and heard on various occasions that Chaim Grade was an *Iluy* (a Talmudic prodigy) and therefore the Chazon Ish took him under his wing in the manner of a master taking on an apprentice.<sup>143</sup> This claim is inaccurate. Although the Chazon Ish recognized Grade's intellectual and artistic abilities, Grade confesses that he was not a great Talmud student and preferred other pastimes to studying Talmud.<sup>144</sup> Grade dispels the mistaken notion that he was a serious student with a self-deprecating quip that, contrary to what people think, "איך האָב ביי אים ניט געלערנט, "ויבן יאָר, איך האָב אים זיבן יאָר ניט געלאָזט לערנען "I did not study with him for seven years. [Rather] I did not let him study for seven years."<sup>145</sup> In his notebooks, Grade writes that he struggled to keep up with other students, but he believes that the Chazon Ish maintained a relationship with him to draw him close to Torah.<sup>146</sup>

Chaim Grade would spend a lot of time with the Chazon Ish in Vilna and on vacation in the forests of Valkenik, Niemetchin, and other locations. Grade would accompany the Chazon Ish on walks and assist him with various errands. He would also visit the Chazon Ish frequently on Friday nights when they would converse

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[https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/175240](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/175240); Hecker Grade, Hecker Grade, "Chaim Grade - Biographical Information, Undated," Box 117, Folder 2851, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1183027](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1183027).

<sup>141</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1., 333. Cf. YIVO RG 1952, folder 828, p. 11.

<sup>142</sup> See "The Reader," 798.

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, Allan Nadler, "WHOPPERS A former student remembers a seminar with Chaim Grade-and how it changed his life" Tablet Magazine, June 2, 2010, "this prophetic poet, a former Talmudic prodigy destined himself to be a great rabbi, but who chose instead the life of a secular poet." See also Justin Daniel Cammy, "Lecture on Chaim Grade and Young Vilna," <https://archive.org/download/nybc-online-course-lecture-series-14/Lecture2.mp4>, at the 22:05 timestamp, "he appreciated the fact that the Chazon ish recognized him as an *iluy*, as a genius and encourages him along in his studies."

<sup>144</sup> See "The Reader," 678, 789.

<sup>145</sup> Grade's lecture on the Chazon Ish delivered on March 18, 1980 and March 20, 1980, quoting what the Chazon Ish told him:

ניט דו לערנסט אַליין, ניט דו לאָזט מיר לערנען

<sup>146</sup> See YIVO RG 1952, folder 828.

about various topics relating to Torah, rabbis and Rabbinic folklore.<sup>147</sup> The Chazon Ish bemoaned the fact that Chaim Grade drew him into conversations on Shabbat evening and other occasions, thereby tearing them both away from learning.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, these conversations, focusing on the spirit of rabbinic lore and Jewish piety rather than the strict letter of the law, would have a lasting effect on Chaim Grade. In these conversations, the Chazon Ish imbued Chaim Grade with a love, appreciation, and reverence for Torah and its scholars that would remain with Chaim Grade even after he no longer felt that he could remain part of the Torah world.<sup>149</sup>

During much of this time, Chaim Grade did not study in the framework of a Yeshiva. Evidently, from the very outset, he did not adjust well to Yeshiva life, and the studious and ascetic lifestyle of a Yeshiva student did not fit his temperament. Indeed, Grade's father, who understood his son's character, insisted that his son study a trade rather than go to Yeshiva.<sup>150</sup> In the end, Grade's mother Vella, the breadwinner, insisted that her son study in Yeshiva. Apparently, she had hoped that he would become a Torah scholar. As it turns out, her hopes were dashed. Instead of becoming a Torah scholar, Grade abandoned Orthodoxy altogether.

After leaving the Yeshiva, Chaim Grade lived alone in Vilna with his mother. When he was not in the company of the Chazon Ish, he spent a lot of time reading secular Yiddish literature and lived somewhat of a double life.

Chaim Grade's personal and religious predicament concerned the Chazon Ish, who tried unsuccessfully to persuade Grade to attend one of the mainstream Lithuanian Yeshivot in Mir or Radin.<sup>151</sup> Instead, one year<sup>152</sup> Grade decided to extend his annual High Holy Days visit to the Novaredok Yeshiva Beit Yosef in Bialystok, and he stayed there for an unknown length of time. Grade realized that the Yeshiva of Novaredok was unsuitable for him, so he returned to Vilna. It became increasingly apparent that Grade was gradually drifting away from Yeshiva life and Orthodoxy and became more interested in his literary pursuits.<sup>153</sup> Grade began to publish his

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<sup>147</sup> Grade encapsulates the essence of the Chazon Ish's talks about the sanctity of Rabbinic sages in his poem "Talmidei Chachamim in der lite." See "The Reader," 886.

<sup>148</sup> See "The Newspaper Typescript," 1649. Listen also to Grade's lecture on the Chazon Ish delivered on March 20, 1980, side A at the 12:00 timestamp.

<sup>149</sup> I am indebted to my friend Yossi Newfield for highlighting this point.

<sup>150</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 194.

<sup>151</sup> See Shlomo Cohen et al. *Pe'er Hador*, vol. 1, p. 295.

<sup>152</sup> 1929/5690.

<sup>153</sup> See "The Newspaper Typescript," 1641 that after he returned from Yeshiva he conducted the seder just for the sake of his mother.

poetry. His first poems were published in 1932.<sup>154</sup> Chaim Grade later joined the group Yung Vilna where he shined as a secular Yiddish poet.<sup>155</sup>

On July 1, 1933, the Chazon Ish left Vilna to emigrate to the Land of Israel.<sup>156</sup> Chaim Grade dramatically portrays the scene of his rebbe's departure to the Holy Land at the conclusion of *Tzemach Atlas*. In retrospect, the last time Chaim Grade saw the Chazon Ish as he boarded the train en route to the Land of Israel also symbolically marks the parting of the ways between teacher and student and Grade's defection from Orthodox Judaism. In reality, however, the facts are more nuanced. Even after the Chazon Ish left for Israel, Chaim Grade maintained a sporadic correspondence with the Chazon Ish. He even raised the possibility of joining his teacher in the Holy Land.<sup>157</sup> However, this plan never came to fruition.

Many years after their initial correspondence discontinued and after the Holocaust, the Chazon Ish sent a letter to Chaim Grade in Paris to reestablish contact, but the letter was returned to sender.<sup>158</sup> Subsequently, there appears to have been no formal contact between the Chazon Ish and Chaim Grade. Nevertheless, Chaim Grade's youthful friend R. Shlomo Cohen attests that the Chazon Ish did express concern about Chaim Grade even during the last years of his life.<sup>159</sup>

On his end, Grade was hesitant to reestablish his relationship with the Chazon Ish. According to David E. Fishman, Chaim Grade didn't want to confront his rebbe, the Chazon Ish, face to face. Fishman relates that Grade told him:

I would have had to visit him in Bnei Brak, and I know that seeing me as a secular person would have caused him great pain. I didn't want to do that. And if I had visited him, he would have asked me to do *teshuvah*. I loved him so much, that perhaps I would have

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<sup>154</sup> See Diamant, "Chaim Grade."

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> See Benjamin Brown, *The Hazon Ish: Halakhist, Believer and Leader of the Haredi Revolution*, 59-61.

<sup>157</sup> Chaim Grade, "Letters from Chaim Grade to the Chazon Ish," <https://forum.otzar.org/viewtopic.php?f=7&t=5310&p=43671>; David Asaf, "Ha-Sofer Chaim Grade Kotev La-Chazon Ish," [https://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2011/08/blog-post\\_22.html](https://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2011/08/blog-post_22.html); for a transcription of Grade's letters to the Chazon Ish dated about joining his teacher in Israel, see "The Reader," 658-64.

<sup>158</sup> See the letter from Shlomo Cohen to Chaim Grade dated 20 Cheshvan 5715/November 16, 1954, "Letters from Shlomo Cohen to Chaim Grade, 1954-1955, 1962," Box 69, Folder 1242, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1178499](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1178499). The text of the letter from the Chazon Ish to Chaim Grade was published in Avraham Yeshayahu Karelits, *Kovetz Igrot Maran Ha-Chazon Ish*, vol. 1 (Bene Berak: S. Greiniman, 1990) letter no. 128, p. 136. See also "The Reader," 665-77.

<sup>159</sup> Letter from Shlomo Cohen to Chaim Grade dated 24 Elul, 5714/September 22, 1954.

done *teshuvah*, and stayed with him in Bnei Brak. But I didn't want to become that person.<sup>160</sup>

Although Chaim Grade did not reestablish a connection with the Chazon Ish, their relationship had a lifelong impact on Grade, as will be explored below. Even towards the end of his life, Grade was still trying to come to reconcile himself with the Chazon Ish.

### **Between Angels and Mortals: Chaim Grade's portrayal of the Chazon Ish**

In Chaim Grade's novel *Tzemach Atlas*, the character based on the personality of the Chazon Ish is called the Machaze Avraham, translated in English as "The Vision of Abraham," or simply R. Avraham-Shaye Kosover.<sup>161</sup> The moniker Machaze Avraham is a clever wordplay that incorporates both Rabbi Karelits' first name Avraham, and alludes to his title "Chazon Ish" in a slightly altered form. Thus, Grade's provides his literary character with a fictitious name that contains a transparent reference to the historical personality upon whom the character is based.

The relationship between the Machaze Avraham and Chaikl Vilner portrayed in *Tzemach Atlas* is based on Chaim Grade's memories of his relationship with the Chazon Ish. Although some aspects of the plot are fictionalized, my extensive research demonstrates that Grade attempted to describe the general character of the Chazon Ish and the nature of their relationship accurately.<sup>162</sup>

Chaim Grade introduces the character of the Machaze Avraham in the novel with pious reverence. His saintliness suffuses the opening scene as he arrives in the forest of Valkenick. Nature itself is in sync with the guest's arrival. "The new greenery piously swayed along with the old shrubs and trees as though it too knew of the visitor's prominence."<sup>163</sup> The town's residents also experience spiritual ennoblement as "news of the visitor transformed the midweek mood into one of Sabbath holiness."

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<sup>160</sup> David E. Fishman, "Chaim Grade: Portrait of the Artist as a Bareheaded Rosh Yeshiva," *Jewish Review of Books* 13, no. 3 (2022): 34. Similar remarks were made by Fishman in his lecture "Grade and the World of the Yeshiva," <https://archive.org/details/nybc-online-course-lecture-series-14> (listen to the lecture here <https://archive.org/download/nybc-online-course-lecture-series-14/Lecture3.mov>, at the 20:00 timestamp).

<sup>161</sup> As mentioned above, the Chazon Ish was born in Kosowa.

<sup>162</sup> This is demonstrated by the overall coherence between external documentation and Grade's reminiscences about the Chazon Ish with the narrative contained in the novel. For more documentation, see "The Reader," 744-831.

<sup>163</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 319.

Grade portrayal of the Machaze Avraham is peppered with hagiographical flourishes.

Consider the following anecdote:

“Reb Yisroel the tailor, the old yeshiva patron, came from Smargon. He said that when he had lived in Smargon and was already a father, Reb Avraham-Shaye was a young pupil at the local *beth medresh*. Nobody noticed anything special about him. He was a gentle boy, extremely diligent in his studies. Day and night he stood by his prayer stand, his back to the congregation, studying. Then one morning after prayers a recluse in the Smargon *beth medresh* heard loud crying. The recluse looked around and discovered Avraham-Shaye in tears, praying before the open Holy Ark. No one else was in the *beth medresh* at the time, and the recluse sat in a corner between the stove and the western wall. Avraham-Shaye didn’t see him and prayed, “Master of the Universe, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things from your Torah. I promise to study Torah all my life, just for the sake of study. Solely for the sake of study. Only for the sake of Torah. I am but a stranger on the earth; hide not your commandments from me.” The eavesdropper quickly slipped out of the *beth medresh* lest the young scholar see him and feel embarrassed or frightened.”<sup>164</sup>

The chapter containing this quote consists of an exposition of the character of the Machaza Avraham. Grade highlights that the Chazon Ish devoted his entire life to the study of *Torah Lishma*.<sup>165</sup> If one did not know that this above quote appears in a novel written by a secular Yiddish writer, one would be forgiven for assuming that it appears in a work of Orthodox Jewish hagiography.<sup>166</sup> This constitutes a “poetics of piety” that Grade deliberately employs in his literary tribute to the Chazon Ish as a paragon of Jewish piety.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>165</sup> The concept of *Torah Lishma* carries with it an entire history of interpretation. See Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Study of Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Work of Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV Publishing House, 1989). Colloquially *Torah Lishma* indicates a dedication to the study of Torah as an end in itself and a fulfillment of a supreme religious obligation, rather than as a means to an end such as to achieve fame, obtain a profession, or receive remuneration.

<sup>166</sup> In fact, a censored version of Grade’s novel containing the chapters about the Machaze Avraham has been published by Charedi Jews in Israel entitled *Machaze Avraham*. This version is available for [download](https://forum.otzar.org/download/file.php?id=57836&sid=474dooddc46ed4016660odcb6f29b7d4) online at: <https://forum.otzar.org/download/file.php?id=57836&sid=474dooddc46ed4016660odcb6f29b7d4>, a reformatted version of the same file is available for download online at: <https://tinyurl.com/3r77w4bu>. In the introduction, the publisher justifies the publication of the work – albeit in highly censored version to expunge the pages that offend Charedi sensibilities – with the rationale that although the author Chaim Grade was a secular Jew nevertheless there is much that pious Charedi Jews can learn about the Chazon Ish’s piety and exemplary behavior. Had Grade described the Chazon Ish in an unflattering light, a Charedi Jew would not be eager to read it. For Grade’s remarks about Charedim reading the chapters in *Tzemach Atlas* describing the Chazon Ish, see “The Reader,” 1007-10.

This reverential attitude, although tempered and punctuated at times with elements of criticism, appears throughout the novel. To be sure, unlike hagiographical works that describe saints as nearly perfect people who don't possess any shortcomings, Grade's portrayal of the Chazon Ish is a more nuanced portrait containing warts and blemishes. Nevertheless, Chaim Grade depicts the Machaze Avraham with an aura of holiness. For example, when the Machaze Avraham went to visit Chaikl when he was ill, Chaikl's "eyes [were] fixed on the door as during childhood Seders when the door was opened for Elijah the Prophet."<sup>167</sup> Grade consistently refers to the Chazon Ish as a Tzadik and holy Jew and even calls him an angel<sup>168</sup> and a איש אלוקים "Man of God."<sup>169</sup> Chaim Grade viewed the Chazon Ish not only as a great contemporary Jewish sage but as a personification of the Jewish saints of old.

### First Encounters

The preceding "pious exposition" sets the stage for Chaikl's first encounter with the Machaze Avraham. After R. Avraham-Shaye arrives in Valkenik, he informs Reb Menachem Mendl Segal that he will visit the Yeshiva. Shortly thereafter, he makes his way to the Yeshiva. However, Chaikl was apprehensive:

As soon as someone in the beth medresh announced that Reb Avraham-Shaye was on Synagogue Street, Chaikl Vilner slipped out into the anteroom. Since he and his father had moved into the Vorobeys' apartment, he spent more time at home than in the yeshiva—all because of the landlady's daughter—and he had fallen behind in his studies of the Tractate Kiddushin, which everyone was studying this semester. Hence he didn't want to be present when the students pilpulized with the guest—they might notice how far behind he had fallen. From the anteroom he went into the side room and looked through the window at Reb Avraham-Shaye making his way along the deserted street.<sup>170</sup>

Chaikl is embarrassed about his sexual peccadilloes with Kreyndl Vorobey and is afraid to be present during the Machaze Avraham's visit because his Talmudic knowledge is not up to par. Therefore, instead of meeting the Machaze Avraham with the rest of the students in the study hall, Chaikl decides to go outside, where he meets the Machaze Avraham for the first time. After their initial greeting, Chaikl preemptively tells the Machaze Avraham that he is behind in his studies, thereby eliminating any expectations that R. Avraham-Shaye might have of him. But R.

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<sup>167</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 380.

<sup>168</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 346; see also Grade's poem "Elegye oyfn Chazon-Ish," in *Oyf Mayn Veg Tsu Dir; Bedarki Eilaikh* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Publishing House, 1969), 42. Inna Hecker Grade writes that "Chaim Grade always referred to Hazon Ish as "der Malah," "the angel," because of his extraordinary genius, his moral perfection, his spiritual powers." See Hecker Grade "Unpublished Introduction to Rabbis and Wives," 19.

<sup>169</sup> See, for example, *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 393.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

Avraham-Shaye is duly impressed with Chaikl's wit, even if he lacks in Talmudic erudition.<sup>171</sup> This impression is reinforced in future meetings.

A fateful and decisive moment in the relationship between Chaikl and the Machaze Avraham occurs when he tells Chaikl, "It is my wish that we study together."<sup>172</sup>

Grade expresses Chaikl's reaction to the Machaze Avraham's proposal:

Chaikl always remembered imagining that the entire world had stood still at that moment, completely transfixed. Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover's words entered his heart and remained there always, like a lake that forever mirrors the surrounding shores.

A deep blue sky, astonished at its own primordial blueness, stretched over Chaikl's head. The green meadow, surrounded by tall pines aglow with the dark red fire of sunset, reminded him of Friday night in the Cold Shul, when all the hanging lamps were lit....<sup>173</sup>

Chaikl did not emerge from his trance until he was out of the forest and among the houses in town. "Instead of saying he would teach me," Chaikl mumbled to himself, "the rabbi said, 'It is my wish that we study together.' He and I together?"<sup>174</sup>

This lyrical passage reaching the heights of a poetic rhapsody is extremely powerful. The manner in which Chaim Grade describes Chaikl's reaction to the Machaze Avraham's wish reflects, in my view, Chaim Grade's feelings many years later regarding the fortuitous moment that cemented their relationship. Notwithstanding Grade's subsequent departure from Orthodox life, the Chazon Ish's request left such an indelible impression on him that more than two decades later, he waxes poetically about it.

### **Between Sanctity and Sinfulness**

The sanctity of the Chazon Ish also reminds Chaim Grade of his sinfulness compared to his rebbe. For Chaikl, the juxtaposition of piety and eros are akin to the flip sides of a coin; due to their binary nature, they create a mental proximity. He can't think about one without the other.

This tension between the sacred and erotic is present from the beginning of their relationship:

Chaikl hid his face in his hands and thought of Reb Avraham-Shaye, who had enchanted him with his simple words and warm smile. But no matter how fervently he shut his eyes and clung ecstatically to pious thoughts, the hot eyes of the landlady's daughter blazed through him, and he knew that this had torn him away from Torah and Mussar.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> See *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 335.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 372, Cf. YIVO RG 1952, folder 828, p. 11.

<sup>173</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 372.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 373

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.



In Chaikl's mind, the Machaze Avraham is associated with purity and holiness, thus, when thinking about him, Chaikl tries to conjure up holy thoughts, but this attempt only backfires. This dichotomy between sanctity and sexuality is further heightened when Chaikl goes swimming together with the Machaze Avraham:

Chaikl moved away. Something strange was happening to him. He couldn't comprehend it while it was occurring, nor afterwards, when he was ashamed to discuss it with anyone: He didn't want to see the rabbi naked. He chided himself that it was a wild, foolish notion, for he went to the bathhouse with his father. Even the yeshiva students went swimming with their principals. Still, he absolutely could not persuade himself to raise his eyes and look at the naked Reb Avraham-Shaye.

Chaikl undressed as far away as possible, then quickly jumped into the water, where he dived and swam back and forth, using the breast stroke. But he took great pains not to swim near the place where the rabbi stood up to his neck in the river, splashing the water with his hands.<sup>176</sup>

This remarkable scene is evocative of the episode of the Burning Bush in the Book of Exodus<sup>177</sup> where God orders Moses to remove his shoes because he is standing on sacred ground.

On the one hand, Chaikl's reaction demonstrates his enormous reverence for his mentor. Chaikl feels that his teacher is holy, and therefore he does not want to witness his nakedness. Chaikl equates the sighting of R. Avraham-Shaye's private body parts with violating the sacred.

On the other hand, the unease that seeing his teacher's naked body would cause him highlights Chaikl's sexual shame. To cite another biblical analogy, after Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge planted in the Garden of Eden, they covered themselves with fig leaves because they realized they were naked.<sup>178</sup> They lost their sexual purity and innocence. So too, Chaikl lost his sexual innocence and experienced a strong conflict between his sexuality and religious piety.

This conflict would only intensify as time went on, ultimately alienating him from Orthodox Judaism.

At twenty Chaikl still had childish lips, dreamy eyes, and a pale, round, moonlike face. But his body and the way he moved and walked reminded one of a strong-shouldered young porter, solid as lead. Although he studied diligently and tried to acquire the traits of a yeshiva scholar, the merry stories of the boys and girls of Butchers Street confounded his nights and days. Exhausted by forbidden desires, he went about in a gloomy stupor, feverish with lust even when he stood over the Talmud. The rabbi sensed his pupil's hidden urges and toiled with him at Torah to save him from temptations; but Chaikl was also reading secular books, which stoked his imagination even more. Occasionally he cast

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 20.

<sup>177</sup> *Exodus* 3:5.

<sup>178</sup> *Genesis* 3:7.

himself into his studies, and the rabbi radiated joy. But then, gradually, the forbidden books and his passion for girls would get the upper hand again.<sup>179</sup>

Indeed, Chaikl's relationships with women would cause Chaikl great embarrassment and shame and would be a source of constant guilt for him. Chaikl's budding sexual desires and his attempts to ward them off is a feature that accompanies Chaikl from his arrival in the Valkenik Yeshiva until he leaves the Yeshiva world. During this period, he has a string of love affairs and sexual encounters. Chaikl is concerned that his inappropriate behavior would diminish his status in his teacher's eyes. But beyond the embarrassment Chaikl feels as a result of his teacher's rebuke, Chaikl feels even greater internal shame due to the heightened sense of sinfulness he felt in the presence of his saintly mentor.

### **On the Nature of Greatness**

The difference in stature between teacher and student causes Chaikl to reflect on the nature of human greatness. He wonders whether greatness can be attained by human effort or is innate and predetermined.

In one of their first meetings, Chaikl shares his musings on life with the Machaze Avraham:

Our rosh yeshiva doesn't talk about philosophy at all, but he speaks constantly about man and his flaws. He feels that the world is composed of a minority of great people and a majority of little people. But I don't agree with this. Of course there are exalted human beings, but I don't at all agree with the notion that the world is composed of great and little people, like trees in the forest."

"Your rosh yeshiva is right, and not you." Reb Avraham-Shaye smiled from behind his mustache. "People are not only divided up like trees in the forest, they're also sorted out into large and small sizes like galoshes."

Chaikl didn't like the comparison between people and galoshes.<sup>180</sup>

Although initially Chaikl resists the analogy between people and galoshes, the more he observes his teacher's greatness, the more he realizes the truth of his rebbe's statement. Chaikl realizes that the Machaze Avraham belongs to a completely different spiritual league.

During his summer vacation the rabbi also prays at dawn like an angel, Chaikl thought. Summer or winter, day or night, makes no difference to him. He doesn't even sense any great difference between a Sabbath and a weekday. How did he get into this state? Certainly not by striving for it. He was *born* an angel. He rose in the middle of the night; it was winter and a gloomy rain was falling. Another person in his position would feel neglected and forgotten by the whole world. But he felt that he was with his Creator, who awaited his

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 346.

awakening. And around him there was as much tranquility as if the Messianic Sabbath had already begun.<sup>181</sup>

Chaikl's realization that his mentor was "*born an angel*" proves his teacher's assertion that people are "sorted out into large and small sizes like galoshes." This profound insight forces Chaikl to reflect on his spiritual stature and station in life. If R. Avraham-Shaye was born a saint, Chaikl Vilner was not. If Chaikl's psychological disposition is innate rather than acquired, any attempt to emulate his master's piety is futile. Therefore, regardless of how holy his rebbe is, he cannot be a real role model for Chaikl.

Likewise, Chaikl realizes that Tzemach Atlas cannot reach the spiritual heights of the Machaze Avraham not because he doesn't try hard enough but because he was not born that way. In this regard, Tzemach Atlas is much similar in temperament and stature to Chaikl Vilner, whereas the Machaze Avraham is in a totally different league.

Ultimately, both Tzemach Atlas and the Machaze Avraham cannot be true role models for Chaikl. The Machaze Avraham is too holy and thus unrelatable. Tzemach, on the other hand, is too relatable; he experiences many of the same struggles as Chaikl. Chaikl cannot emulate the Machaze Avraham, and he does not want to follow in the footsteps of Tzemach Atlas. Chaikl thus has no real mentor to guide him in life, and he must forge his own path.

Chaikl's encounter with the Machaze Avraham's innate greatness further reinforces his view, *contra* Mussar, that the laws of psychological determinism rather than freedom of choice govern human destiny.

### **The Tensions between Chaim Grade and the Chazon ish**

Despite Chaim Grade's enormous respect for the Chazon Ish, he occasionally criticizes his rebbe in *Tzemach Atlas*. In the following section, I will highlight several personal and ideological differences between mentor and mentee.

One of the foremost tensions that would later cause a rift between the two is the non-attendance of the Mechaze Avraham at Chaikl's father's funeral.<sup>182</sup> Grade describes Chaikl's profound pain:

The scholars and well-to-do pious congregants did not come to the funeral, as Vova Barbitoler had correctly predicted. He himself walked behind the coffin all the way. But Chaikl was so stunned by grief, shame, and anger that Reb Avraham-Shaye had not come

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 192.

<sup>182</sup> R. Shlomo Mordechai Grade died on 25, Elul 5687/September 22, 1927. See Grade's Notebooks, 1941-1943, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 12, p. 47, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/174476](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/174476).

to the funeral, he wasn't aware what was happening around him. In the cemetery's purification chamber—where the corpse lay in a white shroud like a snow-covered oak—when Vella wailed to her son, “Say good-bye to your father,” anger at his teacher constricted Chaikl's heart with pain, and he clenched his teeth in silence.

He realized that Reb Avraham-Shaye had not come to the funeral because his father had been a maskil. I'll never forgive him for this! Chaikl thought. Nevertheless, when he returned to his studies at the end of the seven days of mourning, he said nothing to the rabbi just because it hurt him so deeply. He sensed that the humiliation had seeped into his bones and had become calcified there. He had often thought that the hotheaded and belligerent Reb Tsemakh Atlas was in reality much less strict and demanding than Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, who studied Torah for its own sake—entirely for its own sake.<sup>183</sup>

This event had a profound personal effect on Grade and drove a wedge between master and disciple. He realized that although his teacher was supremely kind and compassionate, there were limits to his tolerance.

Chaim Grade reflects on the tension in his teacher's personality in this powerful passage:

חייל האט שוין לאנג באוואונדערט דעם רבין, וואָס להלכה וועט ער פֿאַרמשפּטן אַ גאַנצע וועלט איבער אַ קוצו של יוד, אָבער למעשה האָט ער רחמנות אַפֿילו אויף אַזעלכע וואָס האָבן עוֹבֵר געווען אויף עריות, אויף די גרויסע עבירות מן התורה, בלויז לגבי מיין טאַטן, דעם משכיל איז ער געווען אַזוי שטרענג, אַז ער איז אַפֿילו ניט געקומען צו דער לוויה, ווייל מיין טאַטע איז געווען אַ משכיל, און אויך לגבי וואָווע באַרביטאַלער איז ער געווען האַרט, ווייל דער טאַבאַק-סוחר האָט געמאַכט פֿון זיין תּאוּוה אַ תּורה, אַ שיטה אין לעבן...

For a long time, Chaikl marveled at his rebbe who in principle is capable of convicting an entire world for transgressing even one iota [of the law], yet in practice has compassion even for those who engage in forbidden sexual liaisons, the most severe transgressions in the Torah. [The reason] he was so strict with my father that he did even come to his funeral was because my father was *Maskil*. He was also harsh toward Vove Barbitoler, because the tobacco merchant converted his passions into an ideology, a philosophy of life...<sup>184</sup>

By temperament, the Chazon Ish was incredibly compassionate and sensitive; however, he was a hardliner in matters of ideology, even bordering on fanaticism in Grade's eyes.

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<sup>183</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 184.

In a lecture delivered on March 19, 1980, Grade remarked that in his portrayal of the Chazon Ish he avoided highlighting the sharp edges that would depict him as being too extreme, ascetic and fanatical. See Chaim Grade, “Muser, Musernikes Un Litvishe Yeshives,” Recording of lecture delivered at Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies on March 19, 1980, [https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL\\_MUSIC\\_AL000242682/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL000242682/NLI). Listen to Side A at the 43:45 timestamp.

<sup>184</sup> Quote from “the newspaper typescript,” 1273 (missing in the book version of *Tzemach Atlas*). See also Grade, “Outline of the Novel ‘Reb Tsemakh Atlas - The Yeshiva,’” 13.

The tension in the Chazon Ish's personality is portrayed in several places in the novel. In addition to not attending R. Shlomo-Motte's funeral, the Machaze Avraham also did not attend Vove Barbitoler's funeral. Grade describes the conversation that ensues between Chaikl and the Machaze Avraham the following day.

The next morning when Chaikl came for his lesson, the rabbi asked, "What are you, a professional mourner? It takes time from Torah learning...a ben Torah must not go to the funeral of a man who humiliated the Torah."

"Of course, according to your outlook, Vova Barbitoler didn't behave the way he should have," Chaikl replied quickly and angrily. "But if you had watched while a man was lowered into his grave and covered with earth, you wouldn't ask if he followed the Code of Law and had enough faith in Torah scholars."

Chaikl immediately regretted his remarks. He saw the rabbi's myopic eyes assiduously scanning the page with its minute Rashi script. With his little Talmud Reb Avraham-Shaye sought to cover his face, which was twitching with barely restrained tears. He hunched over as if afraid of the pupil who had reproached him for forgetting compassion on account of his zealousness for the law.<sup>185</sup>

The tension between the Chazon Ish's compassion vs. his zealousness is a recurring theme throughout Grade's writings on the Chazon Ish. As evident from the novel, Grade's resentment towards the Chazon Ish for not attending his father's funeral strained their relationship and lingered on for many years afterward.

Nevertheless, Grade sought to temper his harsh feelings against his rebbe by looking at the bigger picture. In the final analysis, Grade felt that the Chazon Ish's compassion and empathy outweighed his ideological rigidity and intolerance.<sup>186</sup>

In fact, Grade fought over the legacy of the Chazon Ish. When Grade's erstwhile colleague and fellow student of the Chazon Ish, Rabbi Shlomo Cohen published a biography/hagiography on the Chazon Ish entitled "*Pe'er Hador*" (The Splendor

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<sup>185</sup> The *Yeshiva*, Vol. 2, 186. This is based on actual events. However, the story did not occur with Vove Barbitoler but with a renowned Vilna figure. Grade mentions this incident in his notebooks. See YIVO RG 1952, folder 828, p. 2, and folder 829, pp. 5-6. Grade also recounts the incident of the Chazon Ish's non-attendance at the funerals in a lecture about the Chazon Ish delivered on March 20, 1980. listen to side B, at the 27:05 timestamp. This is one of many examples that demonstrates that many of the details mentioned in the novel *Tzemach Atlas* are based on actual events, albeit fictionalized.

<sup>186</sup> Grade expresses this point in his notebook and lectures. See also YIVO RG 1952, folder 827, pp. 12-13; folder 828, p. 11; folder 813, p. 17. This tension is also illustrated in the novel. See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 156 regarding Chaikl's feelings about how the Machaze Avraham's attitude toward Ronye who was attracted to *Tzemach Atlas* "He felt that the rabbi's compassion for the woman was greater than his anger with her for desiring a man not her husband."

of the Generation), Chaim Grade was outraged.<sup>187</sup> He felt that Cohen presented a false portrait of his rebbe as a zealous fanatic and “guardian of the faith” who vigorously fought against his ideological opponents. On the other hand, Grade’s own vision of his rebbe was that of a benevolent sage and saint. Although the Chazon Ish was an ideological hard-liner, Grade felt that this aspect of his rebbe did not capture his essential nature, which was primarily *chesed* (benevolence) and not *gevura* (severity).

This tension of stringency vs. leniency, especially in relation to the Halakha is one of the salient motifs of Grade’s fiction.<sup>188</sup> Grade explores the dialectical tension between leniency and stringency in matters of Halakha and its relationship to the psychological traits of sensitivity vs. harshness. As in the case of the Chazon ish, Grade felt that a rigid approach in Halakhic matters could often inflict harm on others. In Grade’s eyes, the severity of the law clashed with humanistic values of compassion and tolerance. The perception that Halakha and its practitioners can be harsh and unforgiving was another factor that alienated Grade from Orthodox Judaism.

### **The Parting of the Ways**

Grade describes the final phase of Chaikl’s relationship with the Machaze Avraham before the latter’s emigration to Israel as emotionally fraught and tense.<sup>189</sup> The Chazon Ish was deeply aggrieved that Chaim was drifting away from Orthodoxy, and he even summoned his mother, Vella, to inform her about her son’s impending departure from traditional Judaism.<sup>190</sup> After Vella’s meeting with the Machaze Avraham, Chaikl meets his rebbe to vindicate himself. He explains to the Machaze Avraham that:

“I wanted you to know that I am not the cow who kicks the milk pail and spills the milk because a rage or a passion sweeps over me, as you told my mother. I’m not one of those rebellious slaves who doesn’t want to bear the yoke of Torah and mitzvas because he is happy when his burden is light. I have a different outlook on life.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> See “The Reader,” 769. Letter to Yehudah Even Shmuel dated 2 Iyar 5727/May 12, 1967, in “The Reader,” 701-5.

<sup>188</sup> Grade explores this tension in the novel *The Yeshiva* between the characters of Tzemach Atlas vs. the Machaze Avraham (the former representing stringency and the latter leniency). It is the core conflict explored in Grade’s novel *The Aguna* (Reb Levi Hurvitz represents stringency, and Reb David Zelter represents leniency). See Grade’s introduction to *Di Aguna* and his letter to Rabbi Gershon Weiner, both of which appear in “The Reader,” 1030-37. Grade also explores this conflict in his unpublished novel *Der Beys Harav* and other writings.

<sup>189</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 371-380, 389-393.

<sup>190</sup> See *Ibid.*, 375-377. The Chazon Ish’s meeting with Vella Grade is also described in his poems, see Chaim Grade, *Oyf Mayn Veg Tsu Dir*, 44-46.

<sup>191</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 379.

The perception that people reject the Orthodox lifestyle primarily because they cannot control their passions is a common trope that persists until today. Grade thus feels the need to correct this misconception and justify his rebellion against Orthodoxy as ideologically driven rather than motivated by sheer lust.

In the wake of their growing rift, Chaikl experiences mixed emotions. On the one hand, Chaikl feels relieved that once his teacher leaves for Israel, he will be free to become secular.<sup>192</sup> On the other hand, Chaikl feels guilty for betraying his rebbe.

The climactic scene in the novel describes Chaikl's leave-taking from his rebbe as he boards the train in Vilna en route to the Land of Israel. The actual farewell between Chaikl and the Machaze Avraham is charged with emotional restraint:

Through his tears Chaikl saw the rabbi and Reb Tsemakh Atlas bidding each other farewell...  
"Go to your teacher," Chaikl's mother whispered, pushing him ahead of her....

"Thank you, rabbi." The fruit peddler wept before Reb Avraham-Shaye, who stood among the bundles in the dark, narrow corridor "You've done more for my son than a flesh-and-blood father. Forgive him for having caused you anguish. I pray to the Eternal One that my son will never forget what you taught him."

A heavyhearted silence enfolded Reb Avraham-Shaye. He shook hands with Chaikl, hesitated for a moment over whether to say something, then sighed softly. "At a time like this, it's hard to talk."<sup>193</sup>

The subdued farewell between teacher and student betrays the gushing emotions raging just beneath the surface. The Mechaze Avraham is at a loss for words to express his feelings toward his student at this moment. One can only imagine his deep sense of sorrow and foreboding, contemplating what the future holds for his beloved student Chaikl.

Whereas the Machaze Avraham's reaction is muted, Chaikl's reaction is laden with pathos.

The platform was now overrun with people waiting for another train. Reb Tsemakh Atlas and Chaikl Vilner still stood beside each other in the crowd; they were like an older brother with a younger one. They stood like two trees at the roadside on the edge of a town, while on the horizon a dense forest sways and rustles. But the two trees are always sad and pensive because the man who lived near them and watched over them has gone off into the wide world and will return no more, return no more. Reb Tsemakh Atlas and Chaikl Vilner realized that many other trials awaited them in life, but both had a feeling that all their struggles would be illuminated by the radiance of the man of God—Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, the author of *The Vision of Avraham*.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> See *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 374-375; "The Newspaper Typescript," 1640; Grade, "Chaim Grade Reads from His Work and Is Interviewed by Abraham Tabachnick Part 1," at the 47:23 timestamp.

<sup>193</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 392.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

The significance of the novel's last sentence and grand finale is enormous. Grade rewrote the ending of the story several times. These revisions underscore the vital role the Machaze Avraham plays in Chaikl Vilner's life.<sup>195</sup> In the final published version of the novel Grade deliberately chose to end the novel with the name of his mentor. Indeed, the novel commences with the words "Tzemach Atlas" and concludes with the words "Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, the author of *The Vision of Avraham*," thus juxtaposing and bookending the two ideological opponents. The polarity between these two main protagonists fuels the dynamic tension of the narrative. The interaction between these two characters is like the interplay between light and shadow.<sup>196</sup> If at the beginning one might think that the main hero is Tzemach Atlas, in the end Grade makes it abundantly clear that his personal hero is his rebbe, the Chazon ish. At the end of the novel, Tzemach is no longer Chaikl's mentor; they are more like brothers standing on an equal footing. Both of their statures equally pale in comparison to the presence of the Chazon Ish's incomparable greatness.

When Chaim Grade wrote his literary reenactment of his leave-taking from his rebbe he knew then what he did not know at the time of his rebbe's departure, namely, that he would never see his teacher again and that their paths would diverge. However, although they part ways, Chaim Grade cannot sever his bonds with his rebbe. In reality, Chaikl Vilner's youthful notion that upon his rebbe's departure to Israel, he would be able to sever their bonds is naïve and ill-founded. The greatest proof of this is that more than three decades later, Chaim Grade still cannot let go of his rebbe. Despite his rejection of his rebbe's teachings, he insists on being illuminated by his radiance. The last scene of the novel is pregnant with ambiguity. It symbolizes the to-and-fro dance of rupture and reconciliation that is reenacted in perpetuity through the medium of literature.

The very personal nature of the relationship between Chaim Grade and the Chazon Ish seems to have complicated Grade's ability to leave Orthodox Judaism completely behind. Whatever guilt Grade felt for abandoning religion must have been exacerbated by his feelings of guilt and betrayal toward the Chazon Ish. In various letters Grade hints at the contributing role that guilt played in his literary tributes to the Chazon Ish.<sup>197</sup> On some level, Grade's literary tribute to the Chazon Ish is an act of atonement and restitution for all the pain he caused his rebbe.

These sentiments are expressed in Chaim Grade's poignant poem on the Chazon Ish, "Amud Ha-eish" (Pillar of Fire):

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<sup>195</sup> See "The Reader," 395-401.

<sup>196</sup> See below chapter 4.

<sup>197</sup> See "Confessions," letters #27, 29-33.



עמוד האש! פֿאַרויסגייער אין מידבר פֿון מיין בלאַנקען!  
ווייל איך האָב זיך מיט גאַר מיין כשרון און געמייט פֿאַרשאַנקען  
צו אויסזינגען דאָס ליד פֿון אַרעמען און פֿרומען ציבור—  
דערלייז מיך פֿון דעם מידבר אין מיין האַרץ און פֿון זיין פֿיבער.  
כאַטש איך האָב ניט דער תורה אָפּגעגעבן מינע כוחות  
האָב איך פֿאַרריכט מיט גינגאַלד איר צעריסענעם פרוכת.  
איז העלף מיר אין דעם זכות וואָס איך בין דער מחיה־מתים  
פֿון דינע מיטדאַוונער אין די צעפֿאַלענע טליתים.<sup>198</sup>

In this powerful stanza, Chaim Grade appeals to the Chazon Ish, his spiritual guide, whom he compares to the Pillar of Fire that guided the Israelites during their sojourn in the desert:

Pillar of Fire! Forerunner in the desert of my wanderings!  
Because I devoted all my talents and dedicated my energies  
to sing the song of the poor and pious community—  
redeem me from the desert in my heart and its fever.  
Although I did not devote my energies to the Torah  
I repaired with fine gold its torn and tattered *parochet*.  
So, help me in the merit that I am the resurrector<sup>199</sup> of your fellow congregants  
[who worshipped alongside you] in their decrepit prayer shawls.

In these lines, Chaim Grade seeks to reconcile himself with the Chazon Ish and redeem their relationship. Although Grade did not follow in the footsteps of his teacher, he believes that he rendered his rebbe and the Orthodox community a service by singing their praises.

The Chazon Ish imbued Chaim Grade with an appreciation for Torah and the Torah world. The lasting effect of the Chazon Ish is noticeable in Grade's appreciation of the rabbinic world, even though he had profound criticisms of the Orthodox world and felt that he had to leave it behind.

Although he abandoned religious observance, Grade retained a love and reference for traditional Judaism. The traditional Lithuanian Jewish sensibilities of awe and reverence for Torah scholars remained deeply ingrained in Grade's psyche. It was this pious sensibility that Grade sought to convey in his portrayal of the Chazon Ish. Inna Hecker Grade sums it up best when she describes the novel *Tzemach Atlas* as "a cemetery [sic] with a magnificent mausoleum for the Hazon Ish."<sup>200</sup>

<sup>198</sup> "The Reader," 919.

<sup>199</sup> i.e. the literary rehabilitator.

<sup>200</sup> Hecker Grade, "Chaim Grade - Biographical Information, Undated," 103, 193.

## Chapter Four – Chaim Grade as a Liminal Jewish Writer

### Part 1 – Chaim Grade’s *Weltanschauung*

In the previous chapters, I explored the personal and existential conflicts that Chaim Grade experienced with traditional Judaism. Grade realized that the Jewish religious view of humanity and the religious duties expected of him as taught by his spiritual mentors were incompatible with his nature and psychological disposition. Consequently, Grade felt he could only achieve self-actualization by breaking with Orthodox Judaism.

In addition to Grade’s psychological conflicts, his encounters with himself and the world around him give rise to philosophical tensions. Grade’s experience of himself generated a paradigm shift in his understanding of human nature and the world at large. In the novel *Tzemach Atlas*, Chaikl Vilner articulates a coherent philosophical approach in opposition to his religious upbringing, as I will explicate below.

A crucial aspect of Chaikl Vilner’s identity, in addition to his artistic and poetic talents, is his philosophical disposition. Chaikl, the “young philosopher,”<sup>201</sup> follows in his father’s footsteps. But while his father, the maskil R. Shlomo-Motte remained a traditional-religious maskil, Chaikl’s philosophizing borders on the heretical.

Chaikl’s aesthetic orientation to life shapes his philosophy of life. This occurs when he encounters the beauty of the Valkenik forest. While Valkenik is geographically close to Vilna, topographically, it is worlds apart. Chaikl’s Vilna is a densely populated urban center characterized by squalor and cramped quarters. In contrast, the Valkenik forest revealed to him a natural oasis and an aesthetic paradise far removed from the grim and grime of city life. Not only does the forest set Chaikl’s imagination on fire, but it also causes him to view the universe in a new light. Chaikl’s aesthetic experience of nature sparks unorthodox theological reflections.

Chaikl shares his philosophical ruminations with the Machaze Avraham:

I’ve never been in this forest before and didn’t realize how beautiful it is. As I was walking I thought: Imagine, I might never have set foot in the Valkenik woods and never discovered how beautiful they are. Dense forests and inaccessible mountains covered with ice and snow exist in the world. People say there are stars that can’t even be seen with a telescope. We don’t know

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<sup>201</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 345.

how many or what they look like. How can we say that everything was created expressly for man, for him to use and see the wonders of the Creator, if man knows nothing about the billions of stars, the ice-covered mountain peaks, and the dense forests? Then Maimonides was right when he said that the world wasn't created for man but was ordained by the Creator in His wisdom.<sup>202</sup> The Ultimate Wisdom created everything for the sake of its own existence."<sup>203</sup>

Chaikl's aesthetic appreciation of the forest sensitizes him to the vastness of nature, thereby challenging the rabbinic worldview concerning humanity's central role in the scheme of existence. At this stage, a philosophical seed begins germinating in Chaikl's mind. This nebulous idea will take time to crystallize, and its full logical implications will only become clear to him as he matures. Unbeknownst to Chaikl, this minor breach will, in due time, develop into a full-scale fault line that will shake his faith to the core.

Chaikl will realize the full implication of this idea during a meeting between Novaredok mentors and students to dissect the character flaws of each student (בירור המדות in Novaredok parlance). This unique Novaredok institution is called a *va'ad* (literally a committee). Grade reenacts a *va'ad* session to great literary effect by subverting it. Instead of Chaikl being the "defendant" who is put on trial, it is the philosophy of Novaredok itself that Chaikl puts on trial.

In one of these *va'ad* meetings, Chaikl and Moshe Chayit Lohoysker) express their heretical views. Chaikl states that:

"Man is not the crown of creation, and the world was not created for him. Man is even more profound and interesting if we look at him as a part of creation and not as its ultimate purpose. He is just a little room in that great structure of creation, and we must get to know the entire structure. That's why we should realize that the little room precedes the objects placed in it. That is, the very fact of man's creation and his habits precede his direction in life. Hearing birds singing makes a man feel better, because birdsong reminds him that last night's bad dreams and the new day's worries are not eternal. Even if he doesn't think of it, man senses that creation didn't begin with him and won't end with him. He knows that birds generally have a shorter life span and are more vulnerable, but nevertheless they sing. This perception gladdens mortal man's heart. He shouldn't regard himself as the center of all existence and should understand that he can't know himself if he doesn't know the world around him."

With these sharp words, Chaikl undermines the foundation of Novaredok's theological-philosophical worldview that the purpose of the creation of humanity and the giving of the Torah is that humans should attain moral perfection.

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<sup>202</sup> See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, section 3, chapter 13. Trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 452-53.

<sup>203</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 345.

This view is emphatically reinforced and articulated in even more radical terms by Moshe Chayit Lohoysker:

“Chaikl Vilner is right. Man himself precedes his path in life. That holds true for the individual as well as for the multitude. When an individual dies, God, who is nothing more than his character traits and feelings, dies with him. When a people perishes, its folk character, its way of life, and its vicissitudes in history go with it. There is no truth outside of man. Man decides whether things are true or false. The same truth doesn’t pertain to every person—my truth is different from yours, as Vilner correctly said ...”

Chaikl sprang up. “I didn’t say that! ”Because you don’t have the guts to say what’s on your mind—but that’s what you meant,” Lohoysker said, laughing”...<sup>204</sup>

As discussed in chapter two, Chorosh’s role is to clarify and sharpen Chaikl’s views by spelling out the full logical implications of his emerging doubts. Chaikl’s intuitive insight that “the very fact of man’s creation and his habits precede his direction in life” is interpreted by Moshe as an articulation of a full-blown atheist/secular existentialist worldview.

Chayit essentially paraphrases the views of the French Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his “first principle of existentialism” that “existence precedes essence. Sartre writes that:

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence—a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man, or, as Heidegger put it, the human reality. What do we mean here by “existence precedes essence”? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing more than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.”<sup>205</sup>

The Existentialist philosophy articulated by Chaikl and amplified by Moshe flatly contradicts the foundational premise of Mussar. More than other streams in Jewish thought, Mussar espouses what can be termed an “anthropocentric theology.” Whereas other groups (such as Hasidism) focus more on cultivating a direct relationship with God, ritual observance, and communal worship, Mussar is

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

hyper-focused on the individual.<sup>206</sup> A fundamental tenet of Mussar expressed by R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707-1746) in his *Mesilat Yesharim* (*The Path of the Just*), a foundational Mussar text familiar to every Musernik, is that “the foundation of piety and the root of perfect service [of God] is for a man to clarify and come to realize as truth what is his obligation in his world and to what he needs to direct his gaze and his aspiration in all that he toils all the days of his life.”<sup>207</sup> Individual human obligation and the pursuit of personal perfection is the foundation of Mussar’s entire enterprise.

According to Novaredok, the entire purpose of existence according to the Torah is to attain *sheleimut ha-adam* (human perfection) through the attainment of virtue and the cultivation of a perfect moral character.<sup>208</sup> In contradistinction, the existential-humanistic worldview asserts that existence precedes essence. In other words, human existence precedes any ideology and purpose. Humans create their own meaning; they were not created in order to accomplish any preordained goal. Thus, human existence is inherently valuable as an end in itself and doesn’t require extrinsic justification by fulfilling a higher ideological, religious, or ethical purpose.

As a result of his religious conflicts, Chaim Grade’s philosophy of life undergoes a radical Copernican shift from a religious-ethical worldview to an existential-humanistic approach. Grade’s secular existential-humanistic *weltanschauung* is diametrically opposed to the religious-ethical worldview that formed the basis of his former religious identity.

### **Between Psychological Determinism and Moral Freedom**

Another cornerstone of Chaikl’s philosophy is his view of human nature. Unlike the religious-ethical approach that stresses the importance of freedom of choice, Chaikl believes in psychological determinism. He believes that just as the existence of nature as a whole is subject to fixed physical laws, likewise, human existence is subject to fixed psychological laws.

Chaikl expresses his views to the Machaze Avraham thus:

Torah scholars always talk about: opposites, about good and evil, truth and falsehood, beautiful and disgusting. By so doing they think they’re making good, true, and beautiful all one concept and bad, false, and disgusting the other concept, on the other side of the fence. Actually the world is full of things—like the stars and the grass—that are neither good

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<sup>206</sup> See “The Reader,” 473.

<sup>207</sup> R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato, *Mesilat Yesharim* 1, Trans. Rabbi Yosef Sebag, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mesilat\\_Yesharim.1.1?ven=Path\\_of\\_the\\_Just.\\_Trans.\\_Rabbi\\_Yosef\\_Sebag&vhe=Shechem\\_Messilat\\_Yesharim&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mesilat_Yesharim.1.1?ven=Path_of_the_Just._Trans._Rabbi_Yosef_Sebag&vhe=Shechem_Messilat_Yesharim&lang=bi).

<sup>208</sup> See “The Reader,” 481-82.

nor bad. not true or false, not smart or foolish. They live their own lives and astonish us with their eternal laws, to which they are always subjected.

Even the concepts of good and evil can be looked at from another point of view than that of the Torah scholars. Torah scholars control everyone to see if his deeds are in accord with the law and his feelings with the Mussar books—but they are blind and callous toward people themselves. There is also the way of the poet and philosopher, which doesn't judge man, an approach that teaches until we understand that bad traits and habits can't be pulled out like rotten teeth like thorns from a garden. Heredity affects man from within and environment from without. And by showing the entire chain of cause and effect that dominates man, the poets and philosophers redeem man from the darkness within him. They fulfill the mitzva of redemption of captives by helping man to better understand himself and indeed, to become better ..."<sup>209</sup>

Chaikl's musings echo Spinoza's deterministic approach to nature and the human condition.<sup>210</sup> This naturalistic understanding of human psychology is totally at odds with the Torah and Mussar view of human nature. Essentially Chaim Grade champions the view of psychological determinism over the Judaic view that maintains that humans were endowed with moral freedom. He, therefore, concludes that Novaredok's philosophy is wrong. Human psychology and behavior cannot be reduced to a moral calculus and cannot be overruled by an ethical decision-making process.

Grade's approach to Novaredok is paradoxical. On the one hand, he is drawn to the heroic ambition of the Musernikes to attain ethical perfection, what he terms בקשת השלימות (the quest for perfection).<sup>211</sup> On the other hand, he believes that this goal is beyond reach and an exercise in futility. As a result, the preoccupation with perfection inevitably leads to compulsive perfectionism and a debilitating sense of inadequacy that is self-defeating. The *Musernik's* ambition to become a moral superhero will inevitably backfire.<sup>212</sup> Instead of becoming a Hercules, the thwarted *Musernik* will suffer the tragic fate of a doomed Sisyphus. According to Grade, the discrepancy between the intended goals of Novaredok versus its practical results could not be more contradictory. Novaredok believed that a person could transcend the ego and successfully achieve mastery over the instincts; Grade believed that the path of Novaredok does not lead to self-transformation but to self-destruction.

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<sup>209</sup> The Yeshiva, vol. 2, 378.

<sup>210</sup> See Johan Dahlbeck, *Education and Free Will: Spinoza, Causal Determinism and Moral Formation* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>211</sup> See "The Reader" 565.

<sup>212</sup> See *Ibid.*, 498.

The character of Tzemach Atlas is the best illustration of this point. The central theme of the novel is the question of psychological determinism vs. freedom of choice. As Grade writes in his own words:

די מוסרניקעס האָבן געגלייבט אז דער מענטש איז פֿון זיין געבוירנטאג שלעכט, ווי אין פסוק שטייט, נאָר ער האָט די בחירה חפשית אויסצוקלייבן דעם גוטן וועג. דער סך-הכול פֿון אַלץ וואָס איך האָב אויף דער טעמע געשריבן קען מען פֿארמולירן קורץ: צי איז טאַקע דער מענטש באמת פֿריי צו באַשטימען זיין וועג אין לעבן. דאָס איז אַן אַלטער פֿילאָזאָפֿישער פראָבלעם. אָבער איך באַווייז עס אין לעבעדיקע געשטאַלטן פון צמח אַטלאַס און זיין סביבה, וואָס ראַנגלען זיך צו זיין שטאַרקער פֿון זייערע ליידנשאַפֿטן און גיין אין גוטן וועג.

The *Musernikes* believed that a person is born evil, as stated in scripture,<sup>213</sup> but he has the freedom of choice to choose the path of goodness. The bottom line of everything I have written on this theme can be succinctly summarized as follows: is a person indeed free to determine their way in life? This is an old philosophical problem. But I portray it in the living characters of Tzemach Atlas and his environment, who wrestle with themselves to be stronger than their passions and follow the path of righteousness.<sup>214</sup>

Indeed, the entire novel *Tzemach Atlas* refutes Tzemach's credo that people possess the freedom of choice to "live according to what they understand to be right."<sup>215</sup> The unfolding plot of the novel demonstrates that in situations of conflict between one's ethical convictions vs. their innate psychological nature, psychology wins out. Tzemach cannot extricate himself from the constant battle between his id and superego because his psychic apparatus and conflicts are more potent than his moral convictions.

Grade affirms his view that human nature is governed by psychological determinism against the Novaradok notion of the power of moral freedom by deconstructing Tzemach's character and demonstrating how his trajectory is propelled by the laws of psychological determinism rather than freedom of choice.

Evidently, Grade's views regarding psychological determinism strongly influenced his decision to leave Novaredok and Yeshiva life. Grade apparently felt that his own psychological constitution was fundamentally at odds with the religious lifestyle demanded of him. Instead of trying in vain, like Tzemach Atlas, to combat his nature, he realized that he had no choice but to accept and validate his innate psychological disposition, even at the cost of rejecting the Orthodox lifestyle. Grade sums this up in his own words: ווייל איך האָב געהאַלטן דער מענטש איז איך בין אַוועק,

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<sup>213</sup> See *Genesis* 8:21.

<sup>214</sup> Chaim Grade, "Address from Chaim Grade to the Grade Book Committee, Dated May 30, 1967," *Tsemakh atlas: di yeshive*, 1967, Box 31, Folder 241, p. 3, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/175211](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/175211).

<sup>215</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 1, 30.

ניט פריי “I left Novaredok because I maintained that a person is not free [to change their nature].”<sup>216</sup>

Grade’s repudiation of Novaredok and Orthodoxy entailed a complete shift in his outlook on life. Grade sums up this point in one powerful sentence:

דער תוך פון יידישקייט איז גאָט, ניט דער מענטש, איז וויבאלד ביי מיר איז גאָט מער ניט דער תוך פֿון מיין לעבן, האָב איך ניט וואָס צו טאָן אין ישיבה. בין איך אַוועק זוכן דעם מענטש אין דער וועלט.

“The essence of Judaism is God, not man. Since God is no longer the core of my life, I don’t belong in Yeshiva. So I left to search for man in the world.”<sup>217</sup>

## Part 2 – Chaim Grade’s Ambivalent Relationship toward Traditional Judaism

In the final part of this study, I will discuss Chaim Grade’s ambivalent attitude toward traditional Judaism and how this influenced his portrayals of Orthodoxy in his literary works.

Several studies focus on Grade’s work as a “literary monument for a vanished world”<sup>218</sup> and analyze *Tzemach Atlas* within the context of Holocaust/Yizkor studies and literary depictions of Eastern-European Jewish life. Based on the preceding analysis of *Tzemach Atlas* and Grade’s other literary writings, I maintain that in addition to commemoration and memorialization, Grade’s literary works should also be viewed as a personal exploration of his unresolved religious conflicts.

Reading *Tzemach Atlas* as a coming-of-age memoir or *bildungsroman*, yields a portrait of an artist as a young man who struggles to form his identity amidst competing worldviews and lifestyles.<sup>219</sup> Chaikl Vilner finally decides to break with Orthodox Judaism. In this regard, the autobiographical element of the novel can be compared to the contemporary genre of OTD memoirs, describing the experiences of exiters from Orthodox Judaism. But in addition to recounting the process leading up to Grade’s defection, I also believe that the novel sheds light on Grade’s attitude towards Orthodox Judaism post-defection.

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<sup>216</sup> See Grade, “Muser, musernikes un litvishn yeshives,” YIVO RG 1952, folder 862, p. 19. See also “The Reader,” 565.

<sup>217</sup> Chaim Grade’s Notebooks Containing Various Titles of Prose, undated, Box 49, Folder 758, p. 30, The Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/174554](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/174554). It is unclear whether Grade is writing about himself or just stating a general idea; either way, I believe this sentiment accurately reflects Grade’s own views.

<sup>218</sup> See footnote #2.

<sup>219</sup> See Stohrer, “Existence and Its Reflection,” 178.



Several scholars point out the nature of the dialectical approach that characterizes Grade's writings.<sup>220</sup> As Susan Slotnick points out, "Conflict is at the center of Grade's writing... It is a tribute to Grade's internal consistency that passages of reconciliation... are overshadowed by the central tensions, ever unresolved, that are the dynamic essence of Grade's best works."<sup>221</sup> Grade is very effective in describing conflict but not in effecting reconciliation. He masterfully portrays both sides of the dialectic, the thesis and antithesis, but provides no compelling synthesis.

Chaim Grade's dialectical approach is not merely a literary device but a reflection of the inner conflict that raged within him. Grade's defection from Orthodoxy did not resolve his conflicts, and he continued to struggle with an ambivalent relation toward Judaism for the rest of his life.

I believe that Chaim Grade's ambivalent approach toward Orthodox Judaism in general and his religious mentors, in particular, is expressed in his polarized depiction of the two great protagonists in the novel, namely, Tzemach Atlas and the Machaze Avraham.

There is a profound difference between Chaim Grade's attitude toward Tzemach Atlas and the Machaze Avraham. While Grade occasionally criticizes the Chazon Ish, he does lampoon him by turning him into a caricature. The Chazon Ish is too great a figure in Grade's eyes to skewer and satirize. On the other hand, Tzemach Atlas and his cohorts are suitable candidates for Grade's sarcastic and satirical purposes.

The interplay between Tzemach Atlas and the Machaze Avraham yields a literary effect that can be compared to projecting alternating sequences of dazzling lights and dark shadows onto a screen to create a maximum contrasting effect. The striking contrast between light and shadow authentically captures how the author, Chaim Grade, feels about the characters he's portraying.

Tzemach Atlas and the Machaze Avraham are antithetical characters whose relationship to each other is like the relationship between darkness and light. Whereas Tzemach Atlas breaks off his engagement Devorele Namiot due to his lust and pride, the Machaze Avraham refuses to break off an engagement with a much older woman and endures tremendous matrimonial challenges not to offend his wife. Whereas Tzemach Atlas is tortured by religious doubt, the Machaze Avraham is an exemplar of true faith. Tzemach Atlas and his cohorts, the so-called

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<sup>220</sup> See *Ibid.*, 89-92; Susan Ann Slotnick, "Chaim Grade's Central Concern," *The Jewish Book Annual* 37 (1979-1980): 106-15.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

practitioners of Novaredok ethics, are infested with vice, ulterior motives, and self-righteous arrogance. In contrast, the Machaze Avraham, despite his shortcomings, shines as a paragon of moral virtue and humility. Tzemach Atlas's grandiose ambitions to become a moral superhero result in abject failure, whereas the Machaze Avraham's profound humility and utter lack of pretense make him a revered moral and religious hero.

One of the exquisite ironies of the novel is that the only character who comes close to personifying the religious ideal and ethical perfection that Novaredok demands is their staunchest critic, the Machaze Avraham. In the end, their roles are completely reversed. Tzemach Atlas, who is supposed to be a moral visionary and guide to others, lacks clarity of vision and cannot guide himself (let alone others) on how to extricate himself from the morass of his psychological conflicts. Paradoxically, it is the opponent of Mussar, the Machaze Avraham, who has the clarity of vision to illuminate the path of others. Paradoxically, the person who comes closest to attaining the Novaredok ideal of the perfect person, the אדם השלם, is their chief ideological opponent, the Chazon Ish himself.

A sensitive reader will sense the sarcasm and satire with which Grade portrays Tzemach Atlas and his students. To use a crude analogy, Tzemach becomes a "punching bag" onto whom Grade can release his feelings of anger and contempt toward Novaredok. On the other hand, Grade's overall portrayal of the Chazon Ish is marked by reverence and awe bordering on adulation. Grade's literary lampoon of Tzemach Atlas is inverted in his paean to the Chazon Ish's piety. As Ruth R. Wisse insightfully remarks regarding Grade's writings on the Chazon Ish, "here piety has quite replaced artistic independence as the moving impulse of narration."<sup>222</sup>

Based on the above, I suggest that the highly polarized description of Tzemach Atlas vs. the Machaze Avraham not only conveys what Grade felt specifically regarding Novaredok vs. the Chazon Ish but also captures the intensity of Grade's love-hate relationship toward traditional Judaism in general.

In my opinion, Grade's portrayal is not that of a detached observer who is capable of producing a neutral and balanced report. On the contrary, as a passionate participant, Grade is a deeply engaged and biased reporter who expresses his mixed feelings and divided opinions about traditional Judaism with great pathos. Grade paints a complex portrait containing the beauty and blemishes, light and shadow, and the virtues and vices of traditional Jewish life. In this manner, he strongly deviates from the *Maskilim* whose polemical and satirical writings contain an indictment of traditional Judaism. He also deviates from neo-Chassidic writers

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<sup>222</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, "In Praise of Chaim Grade," *Commentary* 63, no. 4 (April 1977): 73.

who romanticized and idealized the lives of Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Grade thus differs from many writers who engage in either one-sided vilification or valorization of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

Grade's relentless internal battles with himself ("מיינע ראנגעלישן מיט זיך אליין")<sup>223</sup> fueled the creative energy for his writings. His literary works give artistic form to his inner turmoil. Thus his art imitates life. The theme of dialectical tension that characterizes his writing reflects his inability to achieve resolution and synthesis in real life.

This tension also captures Grade's liminal position vis-à-vis traditional Judaism. Victor Turner defines the state of liminality as "ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification."<sup>224</sup> Although Grade left the strict religious world of his upbringing for a secular literary career, he was unable to completely sever his bonds with the *yeshiva* world he had abandoned.<sup>225</sup> As the Machaze Avraham predicted to Vove Barbitoler, "even if Chaikl leaves the Torah, the Torah will remain with him and in him."<sup>226</sup>

To be sure, once Grade left Orthodoxy he never became a ba'al *Teshuva* (a returnee to Orthodox Judaism).<sup>227</sup> Nevertheless, his most intimate correspondence reveals that he remained a deeply torn and conflicted person.

Chaim Grade's trajectory matches the profile of what Shnuer Zalman Newfield terms "the trapped exiter."<sup>228</sup> Newfield developed a typology of exiters, which he divides into three basic categories: 1) the trapped exiter 2) the hybrid exiter 3) and the disconnected exiter.<sup>229</sup> He explains that trapped exiters:

... appear to be and believe themselves for the most part to be functioning members of secular society, albeit facing some challenges. On closer analysis, however, they are unable to substantially replace the goals and means of their community, despite having exited. Rather, they feel they are stuck, living in a no-man's-land, as it were, uncomfortable and constantly struggling with the alternative goals and means that they find in the outside world.<sup>230</sup>

Religious deconversion often precipitates a deep existential void and identity crisis. Defectors from religion must find a new sense of purpose and direction to fill the vacuum of meaning generated by the loss of faith. Sometimes the religious

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<sup>223</sup> See "Confessions," letter # 22.

<sup>224</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 232.

<sup>225</sup> See "Confessions," letters # 16-23.

<sup>226</sup> *The Yeshiva*, vol. 2, 49.

<sup>227</sup> See "Confessions," letter # 11.

<sup>228</sup> Schneur Zalman Newfield, *Degrees of Separation*, 12-13.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

exiter cannot fully recover from the loss of meaning that resulted from their religious disaffection. This situation is exacerbated when the defector cannot forge a new sense of identity to replace their former religious identity. In such instances, the existential void generated by the rupture from religion continues to gnaw away at them, often resulting in the “trapped exiter” syndrome. Like those who suffer from complicated grief, the trapped or “complicated” exiter cannot overcome their loss of faith and completely dissolve the ties with their former religious identity.

Grade fits this description of the “trapped exiters” who define themselves as secular, but their rupture is complicated. Their defection is accompanied by feelings of guilt and nostalgia towards their former identity as a result and thus cannot make a clean break with their past.

In this regard, Grade is different from other secular Jewish writers who were raised within Orthodoxy but left it behind and transitioned more smoothly into a secular identity, or managed to create a viable synthesis to bridge the gap between worlds. These individuals would fit the category of Newfield’s “hybrid exiters” who he defines as those who “adopt new goals and means while simultaneously incorporating a limited amount of their former community’s means and/or goals into their new lives.”<sup>231</sup>

Unlike the luminaries of the secular Jewish national renaissance such as Achad Ha’am, Chaim Nachman Bialik, and Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, who attempted to provide ideological alternatives to their former religious convictions in the form of Zionism and various nationalistic and secular ideologies, Grade was not an ideologue who articulated an alternative version of Jewish national existence. Grade speaks poignantly of his inability to formulate a new secular “Ani Ma’amin” (ideological credo) to replace his lost faith. He writes, “my mind and heart have not been illuminated by an idea, an artistic vision of what our national life should look like going forward.”<sup>232</sup> The existential question plaguing an earlier generation of defectors from Orthodoxy, powerfully captured by Mordecai Zev Feierberg in the title of his short story “וּלְאֵל (Wither),<sup>233</sup>” constituted a vexing problem that Grade was incapable of solving. Unable to articulate a vision for a Jewish national future, Grade revisited the ruins of the collective Jewish past and devoted his literary creativity to elegize the vanished religious world of his youth.

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> See Chaim Grade, “Di problemen fun der haynttsaytiker yidisher literatur,” Box 53, Folder 887, pp. 6-7. Papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1177799](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1177799).

<sup>233</sup> See M.Z. Feierberg, *Whither? & other stories*, translated from the Hebrew and with an introduction by Hillel Halkin (New Milford, Ct: Toby Press, 2004).

Apparently, Grade could not synthesize the contradictory aspects of his Jewish identity pre- and post-rupture into an integrated and holistic gestalt. The incongruity between the religious and secular was too profound to be bridged. The fissure remained an open wound. Grade can therefore be situated among the ranks of the *tlushim*, uprooted and dislocated intellectuals tormented by the unbridgeable chasm between the religious and secular aspects of their identity that continues to plague them throughout their lives.

Chaim Grade's own experience is marked by profound rupture and discontinuity. He experienced a double rupture 1) his break with religion and 2) the destruction of his native Vilna and the civilization of Eastern European Jewry during the Holocaust. These twin ruptures compounded Grade's existential experience of alienation and dislocation.<sup>234</sup>

I would like to suggest that the Holocaust also spurred Grade to intensify his engagement with his religious past. Paradoxically, the irreparable rupture of the Holocaust provided the necessary conditions to make Grade's attachment to traditional Judaism both safe and necessary. It was safe because the devastation of the Holocaust was so brutal that Grade could never return to his native religious homestead, and it became necessary because, as a survivor, he felt the need to erect a literary monument to a vanished world.<sup>235</sup>

It seems that Grade felt anxious about his religious past. Once he broke with Orthodoxy, he tried to maintain a safe distance from it. He would only engage with it when he felt secure enough in his identity that the boundaries between his past religious identity and current secular identity wouldn't be blurred. However, the anxiety of the past influencing the present is the most significant indicator that the lines separating the two are porous and malleable.

Moreover, it would seem that the trauma of Grade's dual rupture was largely responsible for Grade's paradoxical relationship to traditional Judaism. On the one hand, the experience of rupture – and the fissure in his identity that it created in its wake – was so strong it unwittingly caused him to fixate on the very thing he wanted to leave behind and forget. On the other hand, the rupture caused him to experience his relationship to Judaism as essentially a thing of the past. The Holocaust compounded Grade's sense that, at least for him, the traditional Judaism he was raised in was buried in the ashes of Vilna and Auschwitz.

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<sup>234</sup> For more insight about the ruptures in Grade's life, watch the interview between David E. Fishman and Lyudmila Sholokhova, "Chaim Grade's Journey: From Vilnius to New York and Back Again," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_tVpzkCnFY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_tVpzkCnFY).

<sup>235</sup> See "Confessions," letter #20.

Thus, to a large degree, his engagement with traditional Judaism was a holdover from the past; a way of connecting to his גירסא דינקורתא (literally: knowledge acquired in childhood. Figuratively: the religious upbringing he received in his youth).<sup>236</sup> This relationship to traditional Judaism can be termed “the performance of Yizkor Judaism” (i.e., performing Jewish rituals as a way of commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and the vanished world of Eastern-European piety). In Grade’s case, this act of commemoration didn’t only memorialize the collective pre-Holocaust Jewish past, but also connected Grade to his own religious past.

Based on the preceding analysis, I would like to argue that one of the significant aspects of Grade’s writings is his attempt to come to terms with his religious past. Grade’s literary activity was essential to maintaining a vital link to his severed past. Unable to assuage the phantom pains of his break with tradition, Grade felt compelled to replace his former religious commitment with an artistic commitment to recreating a world that had been physically destroyed but was still very much spiritually alive within him. By erecting a literary monument to a lost Jewish world, Grade simultaneously exhumed the remains and resurrected back to life the angels and demons of his lost religious past that continued to inspire and haunt him in the present.

The foregoing analysis is also instructive for the current discourse regarding religious deconversion. One of the dominant myths shaping the production and consumption of OTD narratives is a secular fantasy of personal liberation and emancipation. This modern-day Exodus myth feeds off a prevailing secular notion that views the *kulturkampf* between religion and secularism as a war between oppression and liberation. According to this myth, the religious exiter invariably achieves personal redemption by escaping the shackles of religious bondage to bask in the light of secular freedom. As Naomi Seidman writes regarding the portrayal of the OTD experience in the 2020 Netflix hit series *Unorthodox*, it fashions a “narrative frame that translates (Hasidic) treason into (secular) bravery, (family) abandonment into (individual) empowerment, the mess of human relationships into an epic tale of universal appeal.”<sup>237</sup>

Freedom is one of the core values of Western humanism, especially Americans who regard “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” as “unalienable rights” that are “endowed by their Creator,” and sacred values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. Consequently, the fight for liberty these exiters pursue is perceived as a noble – if not sacred – cause.

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<sup>236</sup> I’m indebted to my friend Yossi Newfield for clarifying this point.

<sup>237</sup> Seidman, “My Scandalous Rejection of *Unorthodox*.”

Many narratives in the current crop of OTD memoirs are deliberately crafted and designed to promote this secular Exodus myth. This is the cultural myth and fantasy that many of the promoters of OTD memoirs want to purvey to an eager audience. This highly biased and selective perspective on religious defection often misrepresents the experience of many religious exiters themselves who, rather than living happily ever after, are often riddled with conflict. The heroic tale of brave escape often obscures the harrowing journey of religious defection.

Far from achieving liberation and emancipation, Grade experienced a profound rupture that plagued him for the rest of his life. Rather than being “a liberated exitor” Grade remained “a trapped exitor” for the rest of his life. Instead of narrating a naïve fairy-tale fantasy of bondage and freedom, Grade highlights the tug-of-war between worlds that characterized his own experience.

### **Chaim Grade’s Life and Art: Between Parochial Commitments and Cosmopolitan Aspirations**

Chaim Grade was deeply torn between his parochial Jewish commitments and cosmopolitan aspirations. His life and art were a battleground where he waged war between his Jewish roots and universal wings. Chaim Grade had to balance his need for artistic independence with his commitment to commemorate the decimated world of Vilna/Lithuanian Jewry. In numerous letters, Grade distinguishes between his poetry, which encompasses the entire range of human experience, and his prose, which depicts the parochial Jewish world of Lithuanian Jewry.

Here is an example of one such powerful letter that Chaim Grade wrote to Abe Bornstein that speaks for itself:

It was only until the age of twenty that I found myself in a rabbinic environment; for the next 40 years I have lived a thoroughly secular life. As a result of being cast between two world wars and due to my exile in Russia, Poland, Paris and America, I have witnessed and experienced more than the shared experience of entire generations of writers; with a passion bordering on madness, I don’t stop buying and reading world literature in all genres, including music and painting; I’ve always had a deep interest in social questions, an even greater interest in metaphysics, and psychological problems; the erotic complexes were the bane of my life – and notwithstanding all this I still cannot tear myself away from Jews and Judaism even in one novel, in one story.

In poetry, I am universal; in prose [I am] thoroughly Jewish-traditional to the extent that a particular vulgar element in the Jewish literature denies that I am a bona fide prose writer. At best, I am regarded by them as a local Vilna writer... I am not a religious writer – who knows whether I’m religious at all – rather, I am a traditional writer of a people and lifestyle that no one knows better than I. But this alienates me from the world and its readers in all languages, besides Jews of your generation – Avraham – in Yiddish, and a larger group – the traditional

Jews of all sectors – in Israel... The writer within me is an old-time Jew, and the human within me wants to be thoroughly at home with the world of today.<sup>238</sup>

Grade's oscillation between traditionalism and secularism and between parochialism and universalism is reflected in the dialectical relationship in his art between his poetry and prose. As a poet Chaim Grade was cosmopolitan; as a novelist, he remained a citizen of Vilna. In the end, Grade's secular humanism and universal interests did not assuage his Jewish identity crisis. At most, he indulged in temporary flights of cosmopolitan escapism. However, he was too deeply rooted in his Jewish identity to flee from it permanently.

Chaim Grade's strong parochialism was partly based on the conviction that he was spared by divine providence to memorialize and immortalize Lithuanian Jewry.<sup>239</sup> This burden was not borne lightly, and Grade felt he had to wage war with himself and suppress his cosmopolitan appetites to remain faithful to his people and life's mission at the expense of international popularity and greater critical acclaim. Ultimately, Chaim Grade's enduring literary legacy is his niche and parochial writings about Lithuanian religious life. Despite Grade's departure from Orthodoxy, in many ways, he remained both in mentality and temperament a former Yeshiva student. It is the nature of these unresolved tensions that this study seeks to illuminate.

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<sup>238</sup> See "Confessions," letter #19.

<sup>239</sup> See *Ibid.*, letter #20.



## Addendum

### Chaim Grade: Confessions of a Tormented Writer

The Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade (1910-1982) was a deeply conflicted and lonely figure. Having left the strict religious world of his upbringing for a secular literary career, he could never completely sever his ties with Orthodox Judaism. Thus, he remained a liminal figure who straddled both religious and secular worlds and harbored an intense love-hate relationship with traditional Judaism until his death.

This addendum will present a selection of Chaim Grade's hitherto unpublished letters to his friend Abraham Bornstein. These letters are held in the archives of the National Library of Israel.<sup>240</sup> This collection contains approximately 330 letters. The first letter is dated January 3, 1949 and the last is dated January 14, 1982. These letters cover almost the entire American period of Chaim Grade's life, from his emigration to the United States in 1948 until his death in April 1982.

Abraham Bornstein was the proprietor of the Boston Book and Art Shop, which distributed and published art books. In addition, he was a patron of the arts and artists, most notably Chaim Grade himself.<sup>241</sup> The initial acquaintance of Grade with Bornstein seemed to be related to the former's interest in art books. Many of these letters include detailed requests and discussions about art books. While the relationship between them may have begun as a business relationship, eventually, it turned into an extraordinary friendship. Chaim Grade regarded Abraham Bornstein as one of his closest confidants and frequently shared some of his most intimate thoughts and feelings with him. Consequently, this collection of letters is a veritable treasure trove that reveals many interesting facts about Chaim Grade's life, both as a person and as an artist.

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<sup>240</sup> National Library of Israel, Abraham Bornstein Archive, ARC. 4\* 1503, series 03. This series contains 59 folders. The first 36 folders contain the letters ranging from 1949-1982. More information about the archive is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4embybc5> and <https://tinyurl.com/yc28724m>. This archival collection contains only Grade's letters. Photocopies of these letters and additional material related to Chaim Grade are held in the Abraham Bornstein Papers, P-937 at the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS, Boston, Mass. <https://jewishheritagecenter.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/resources/149>. Bornstein's letters to and about Chaim Grade are held in YIVO collection RG 566, folders 27 and 28, and the Estate of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, YIVO collection RG 1952, folders 1199, 2314, 2453, 2459, 2467, 2489.

<sup>241</sup> For more information, see <http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=1471085>.

In this section, I will present letters related to Grade's relationship with Judaism and the Yeshiva world in Yiddish transcription<sup>242</sup> and English translation.<sup>243</sup>

These letters amply demonstrate Chaim Grade's agony as a *talush*, an uprooted and dislocated writer who occupies a liminal space between religion and secularity. I chose letters that eloquently and poignantly attest to this persistent psychological tug of war between the pull of secular humanism and the push of traditional Judaism. The letters presented here only contain a small representative sample of the entire cache of letters, but what they reveal is illuminating.

I have divided the letters into four categories: 1) the conflict between traditional Judaism and aesthetics, 2) reflections on Judaism and religion, 3) confessions of a writer torn between the yeshiva and the secular world, 4) Chaim Grade's relationship with the Chazon Ish. Each section will contain several introductory paragraphs providing relevant background and contextual information. Following the introductory remarks, I will present excerpts of the letters themselves. Aside from offering several remarks and annotations, I will let the letters speak for themselves. A certain degree of overlap between the various sections is inevitable.

### **Part 1 - The Conflict between Traditional Judaism and Aesthetics**

Abraham Bornstein was the proprietor of Boston Art and Book shop. Consequently, many letters in the collection include detailed discussions about artists and works of art. These letters also outline Grade's numerous requests from Bornstein to supply him with books as gifts or for purchase. Above all, these letters reveal Grade's remarkable fascination – if not downright obsession –with the visual arts; indeed, based on the letters, it is possible to characterize Chaim Grade as a connoisseur of the visual arts.<sup>244</sup> In addition, they provide a glimpse into his intellectual, literary, and reading interests.

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<sup>242</sup> Note: I transcribed the letters as closely as possible to the way they appear in the original. I have not attempted to standardize the transcription according to the YIVO standard of Yiddish orthography which Grade himself did not completely follow. Grade's own orthography is inconsistent especially regarding the use of diacritical marks, hence the inconsistencies in the transcription. While I tried to replicate the letters as closely as possible, I did not endeavor to offer an exact transcription.

<sup>243</sup> Note: on several occasions I did not translate the complete original Yiddish text presented herein. The translation is a loose and approximate translation. I tried to maintain a balance between a literal and colloquial translation. The words contained in parenthesis all appear in the original letters. Whenever I added words of explanation, connection, or elaboration I included them in square brackets. All words contained in square brackets are my additions. The words that are underlined appear this way in the original letters.

<sup>244</sup> In fact, in one letter Grade relates that although the yeshiva did not allow him to pursue a career as a painter, when he was a child he did engage in sketching and drawing.

The conflict between aesthetic appreciation and traditional Jewish values is a recurring theme throughout these letters. Judging from their tone, it seems that Chaim Grade perceived this to be at the very heart of his struggle with traditional Judaism and expresses his deep resentment and disdain against traditional Jewish society and its scholars for alienating the creative and artistic souls in their midst.<sup>245</sup>

### Letter #1

ניו-יאָרק, 9 מערץ, 1951

מיין טייערער אברהם באָרנשטיין,

איך האָב באַקומען די ביכער און אויך דאָס בוך פון ראָדען. איך דאַנק אייך זייער שטארק פאר די ביכער און בפרט פֿאַר די בילדער פון ראדענס סקולפטארן. סאיז אפילו שווער צו פארבינדן די געשיכטע פון חסידות מיט די נאקעטע קערפערס פון ראדען; אָבער סאיז גוט אָפצורוען פון יידישער פרומקייט ביי דער גויישער רואיקער שענקייט. סאיז אבער ניט גוט צו בלייבן ביי דאָס לעצטע, ווייל אפילו פון דער רואיקער שענקייט שלאָגט מיט גויישער הנאה און שיכרות...

New York, March 9, 1951

My Dear Abraham Bornstein,

I received the book and also the book about Rodin.<sup>246</sup> I thank you immensely for the books, particularly the pictures of Rodin's sculptures. It is difficult to find a connection between the history of Hasidism and the nude bodies of Rodin, but it is good to take a break from Jewish piety with Gentile serene beauty. But it is not good to remain with the latter because even the serene beauty smacks of Gentile pleasure and intoxication...

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<sup>245</sup> Note the following from Inna Hecker Grade, "Chaim Grade: The Challenge of God," *Judaica Book News* 9, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1979): 18:

But we do know that the young Chaikl Vilner of *The Yeshiva* suffers because his stern, saintly Rabbi Avraham-Shaya fails to understand his artistic nature. The great rabbi is utterly incapable of understanding that by being a poet and artist Chaikl Vilner/Chaim Grade will creatively serve God and man.

<sup>246</sup> Auguste Rodin.

## Letter #2

ניו-יאָרק, 26 יוני, 1955

מיין האַרציקער אברהם,

איצט וויל איך דיר שרייבן אַ פּאַר ווערטער וואָס זאָלן פאַר דיר אויפקלערן פאַרוואָס  
און פאַרווען איך ליג אזוי אין די קונסט=ביכער.

מיין טייערער אייב,

דו קענסט האָבן דעם איינדרוק אַז איך בין א בעל=תאווה אויף ביכער, אויף קונסט=ביכער אַזוי  
גוט ווי ספרים. אויב יאָ, איז עס אויך ניט די ערגסטע שוואַכקייט. אָבער איך האַלט  
פונדעסטוועגן אַז אויך די תאווה צו ספרים דאַרף האָבן מאָס. ווען דו האָסט מיר באַגלייט צום  
באַן, ביסטו שוין געווען אומגעדולדיק, איך האָב עס געפילט, הגם דו ביסט געווען איידל עס ניט  
אַרויסצואווייזן.

מיר האָבן געהאַט אַנגעפאַנגען א שמועס וועגן ארץ ישראל און ניט פאַרענדיקט. איך האָב דיר  
געזאָגט, אַז דאָרט וואָלט איך געווען א געראַטעוועטער און געמיינט האָב איך, אַז דאָרט וואָלט  
איך ניט באַדאַרפט זוכן אינספּיראַציע, זי וואָלט מיך געזוכט. כאָטש דו לייענסט ניט אַלץ וואָס  
איך שרייב, האָסטו גענוג געלייענט פון מיינע זאַכן צו זען, אַז איך לעב אין דער פּאַעזיע ווי אין  
דער פּראָזע מיט דער פארגאַנגענהייט, אין דער אמת איז עס קעגן מיין נאַטור, אין דער נאַטור  
בין איך אַ מענטש פון היינט. אָבער די סיבות פון מייין לעבן שרייבעריש אין דער  
פאַרגאַנגענהייט זיינען צוויי. ערשטנס, ווייל איך בין צו שפּעט געקומען קיין אמעריקע און צו  
שטאַרק געווען פאַרוואַרצלט אין דער אַלטער היים און קולטור, איך זאָל דאָ קענען אָנהויבן  
אויפּסניי. צווייטנס לעב איך אין א סביבה וואָס האָט ניט באַשאַפן אַן אייגנאַרטיק  
אינטערעסאַנט אמעריקאַניש יידיש לעבן, וואָס זאָל ווערט זיין פאַר מיר צו באַשרייבן,  
באזונדערס ווען מען דערוואַרט פון מיר דווקא אלט=יידישקייט צו וועלכע די אַמעריקאַנער יידן  
פון מייין סביבה האָבן אַ נאַסטאַלגיע=באַציאונט.

אָבער לעבן מיטן זכרון איז שווער, און וואָס א חודש מער פארשטיי איך אַלץ טיפּער די  
טראגעדיע פון די היגע יידישע שרייבער וועלכע דאַרפן שעפן אַלץ פון זיך, ניט פון זייער אַרום.  
זוך איך די אינספּיראַציע אין ספרים. אָבער סאיז מיר פון דעם טרויעריק. לאָמיר זאָגן- חסידים.  
אויב אין מיר איז רייף געוואָרן דער געדאַנק צו באַשרייבן חסידים, וואָלט איך באַדאַרפט לעבן  
צווישן זיי. זיינען זיי אָבער ניטאָ, מיינע חסידים, און פון די ספרים קען מען אַרויסלייענען  
טעאָריעס, ניט קיין לעבעדיקע מענטשן אָט אזוי ווי זיי האָבן געלעבט זייערע טעאָריעס. אַפילו  
ווען מען שרייבט אַ היסטארישן ראָמאַן, נעמט מען לעבעדיקע מענטשן און מען שטופט זיי  
אַריין אין אַ ראָם פון פאַר צוויי טויזנט יאָר, פונט אזוי ווי די מאַלער האָבן זייערע עוואַנגעלישע  
געשטאַלטן אַנגעטאָן זייערע ווענעציאַנישע קליידער און אַוועקגעשטעלט אין הינטערגרונט  
זייערע קלויסטערס. און אַז א ייד ווי איך וויל באַשרייבן פרויען, וואָלט איך זיי באַדאַרפט זוכן  
אין יידישע געסלעך, זיך צו הערן ווי זיי ליבן זיך, קריגן זיך. איך האָב אבער ניט מער קיין יידישע  
געסלעך. זוך איך זיי ביי לאַטרעק, און נאָכדעם דאַרף מען זיך, פארשטייט זיך, היטן ניט

אַריבערצוברענגען זיינע פראַנצויזישע ווייבער אין דער יידישער ווילנער סביבה, אָבער די  
אַנרעגונג מוז איך זוכן אין זכרון, אין דער קונסט-ניט אין לעבן.

פונדעסטוועגן היט איך זיך ניט צו ווערן קיין פאפירענער שרייבער, און דערלאָז אויך ניט איך  
זאָל אויפגעפרעסן ווערן פון דער נטיה צו ביכער. נאר איך דאַנק דיר זייער וואָס איך האָב אין  
דיר געפונען אַ חבר מיט אזויפיל פאַרשטענדעניש סיי פאַר מיר אלס קינסטלער און סיי פאַר  
מיר פערזענלעך.

דיין איבערגעגעבענער

חיים גראַדע

New York, June 26, 1955

...My Dear Abe,

You might have the impression that I am a glutton for books, for art books just as much as (holy) books. If yes, it is not the worst weakness. But I nevertheless maintain that the desire for books must also have a limit. When you escorted me to the train, you were already impatient. I felt it, although you were too polite to show it.

We began a conversation about Israel which we didn't finish. I told you that in Israel I would be rescued, and I thought that there I would not have to seek inspiration, as it would seek me out. Although you don't read everything I write, you read enough of my pieces to see that I live in the past in poetry and prose. The truth is that this goes against my nature, since by nature, I am a person that lives in the present. But the reason why I write about the past is twofold. First, because I arrived in America too late and was too deeply rooted in the culture of the Old Country, to start here anew; and second, because I live in an environment that has not created a unique, interesting Jewish life that would be worth writing about. Particularly when they expect me [to describe] old-Judaism, for which the American Jews of my milieu have nostalgic feelings.

But living from memory is difficult, and every month that passes by, I gain a deeper understanding of the tragedy of contemporary Jewish writers who need to draw everything from themselves, not their surroundings. [Therefore] I search for inspiration in books.

But this is depressing. Let's say, for example, Chasidim. If I would seriously consider describing Chasidim, I would need to live among them. My Chasidim,

however, don't exist, and in books, all you can read about are theories, not how living people lived out these theories. Even when writing historical fiction, we take living people and push them back in time two thousand years, just like the painters who dressed up their evangelical figures in Venetian clothing and placed their own contemporary churches in the background.

When a Jew like me would like to describe women, I would need to search for them in Jewish streets and listen to how they love and fight. But I don't have any Jewish streets, so I search Lautrec's<sup>247</sup> works. Afterward, we need to ensure not to import his French women into the Jewish community of Vilna, but I need to get ideas from memory and art, not life.

Nevertheless, I guard against becoming a "paper" writer and don't allow myself to be consumed by the pull of books. But I thank you very much for allowing me to find in you a friend with so much understanding for me as an artist and person...

### Letter #3

ניו-יאָרק, 11 אקטאבער, 1957

מיין טייערער אייב,

יום=כיפור בין איך א גאנצן מעת=לעת געווען ביי מיין פריינט, אַ רב אין ברוקלין. איך גלייב, אז עס וועט דיר זיין אינטערעסאנט ווען איך וועל דיר דערציילן, וואָס איך האָב דאָרט געטראַכט און צוגעזען, געפאָרן אַ היץ בין איך, ווייל איך האָב ניט געוואָלט בלייבן אליין און טראָגן דעם ווילנער יום=כיפור אין זיך...

איצט וועל איך דיר עפעס דערציילן אין שייכות מיט מיין כאַראַקטער און קונסט=ביכער. ניט מיין, אַז איך וויל וואָס מער אריינכאפן. נאָך דיין אַוועקפאָר בין איך עטלעכע טעג געזעסן און כסדר געבלעטערט די קונסט=ביכער. נאָכדעם האָב איך זיך אַ כאַפּ געטאָן צו די ספרים. דער תהום צווישן זיי איז גרויס, נאָר איך האָב זיך ליב צו וויגן איבערן אַפּגרונט פון עטיק און עסטעטיק...

מאָרגן האָב איך אַן אינטערעסאַנטן אַרויסטריט. אַ טוער פון אַ ברענטש איז איינגעפאָלן: גענוג רעדעס. מאַרגן וועל איך ריידין וועגן די צוקונפדיקע פיר וואָך=סדרות, בראשית, נח, לך=לך און וירא. פאַרוואָס עפעס וועגן יידישע דיכטער יאָ און וועגן די דיכטער פון חומש ניט? אין דער געשיכטע פון דער מענטשהייט איז נאך ניטא קיין גרעסערע ווערק סיי ליטעראַריש, סיי פילאָזאָפּיש=בילדעריש און סיי קולטור=היסטאָריש. איך וועל ריידין וועגן איין פונקט אין יעדער סדרה...

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<sup>247</sup> Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

New York, October 11, 1957

...I spent the entire Yom Kippur with my friend, a rabbi from Brooklyn. I believe that you would be interested to hear what I thought and saw when I was there. I traveled there because I did not want to be alone and carry the Vilna Yom Kippur within me...

Now I will tell you something about my character and art books. Do not think that I want to grab as much as I can. After your departure, I spent several days perusing the art books. Afterward, I reached out for the *sefarim* [holy books]. The chasm between them is great; however, I like to swing over the abyss of ethics and aesthetics...

#### Letter #4

אין באָן: סיראַקיווז=ראָטשעסטער, 4 יאַנואַר, 1958

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...ווען דו וועסט צייט האָבן אַ וויילע, לערן די צוויי תלמודישע טראַקטן "סנהדרין" און "עבודה זרה", וואָס זיינען געדרוקט אין זעלבן באַנד וואָס די פרקי=אבות. אין ביידע דערמאָנטע טראַקטן וועסטו זען דעם גייסט פון דער יידישער אַלטער טראַדיציע און אויך דיין אייגענעם גייסט. אַ גאַנצן לעבן גייען מיר אָדער פון זיך אַליין אָדער צו זיך אַליין. איך גיי נאָך פון זיך; דו גייסט שוין צו זיך, און ביסט שוין דאָכט זיך דערגאַנגען צו דיין טאַטנס חומשים. אפשר וועלן מיר זיך טרעפן אינמיטן וועג? איך ראַנגל זיך נאָך אַלץ מיט דער קונסט וואָס איז גענוס און יידישקייט וואָס איז פליכט. דאָך דערפריי מיך מיט איינעם פון די נייע מייסטערס, איך זאָל זיך קענען אפרוען פון די צלמים. איך ביינק נאָך לאַנדשאפטן און שטיל לעבנס פון די פראַנצויזישע מייסטערס...

On the train: Syracuse-Rochester, January 4, 1958

...When you have time, study the Talmudic tractates *Sanhedrin* and *Avoda Zara*, which are printed in the same volume as the *Pirkei Avot*. In both tractates, you'll see the spirit of the old Jewish tradition and also your own spirit. Our entire life, we either go away from ourselves or go toward ourselves. You are already going toward yourself, and apparently, you've reached out for your father's *Chumashim* [Pentateuch]. Perhaps we should meet midway? I am still struggling between art, which is enjoyment, and Judaism, which is duty. At least gladden me with one of the new masters, so I can take a respite from [looking at] the crosses. I yearn for the landscapes and quiet lives of the French Masters....

## Letter #5

ניו-יאָרק, 1 יולי, 1959

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...דיין בריוו פון דענעמארק איז געווען זייער אינטערעסאַנט. דו שרייבסט דאָרט, אז מיר ביידע אַנטציקן זיך מיט קונסט און דו פילסט זיך שולדיק קעגן דיין יידישן מקור. איך וואָלט זיך ניט געפילט שולדיק ווען די קונסט באַרואיקט מיר. ליידער האָט סיי ניט מיין רבנישע דערציאונג און סיי ניט די געצנדינערישע קונסט געגעבן מיר דעם גלייכגעוויכט, איך זאָל ניט זיין אַ געפאנגענער פון ליבע, ליידנשאפט, נאַסטאַליגע און שגעון וואָס צערייסן מיר. אָבער לאַמיר עס איצט לאָזן. ס'איז אַן אומגליק אַז מען פילט זיך יינגער ווי מען איז...

New York, July 1, 1959

...Your letter from Denmark was very interesting. You write that we are both captivated by art, and you feel guilty about your Jewish roots and identity. I wouldn't feel guilty if the art would calm me. Alas, neither my rabbinic upbringing nor idolatrous art provides me with the equilibrium not to be a hostage of love, passion, nostalgia, and madness, which tear me asunder. But let's leave it for now. It's a tragedy that we feel younger than we really are...

## Letter #6

ניו-יאָרק, 22 אויגוסט, 1959

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...דערווייל שיק איך דיר זייער אַן אינטערעסאַנטע ליד, לויט מיין מיינונג, וועגן אַ פרוי וואָס איז אויסגעהאַקט אין שטיין און זי חלומט וועגן אַ באַרג וואָס קומט צו איר שלאָפן.... דווקא ווייל איך שרייב אזויפיל וועגן תלמידי-חכמים, איז דאָס ליד נאָך אינטערעסאַנטער, ווייל זי ווייזט מיינע טרייפּענע בלוטן.

New York, August 22, 1959

...In the meantime, I'm sending you a very interesting poem, in my opinion, about a woman chiseled in stone who dreams about a mountain that comes to sleep with her... Precisely because I write so much about *Talmidei Chachamim* [Torah scholars], the poem is all the more interesting because it shows my *treyfe* blood.

## Letter #7

ניו-יאָרק, 11 פעברואַר, 1965

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...איך האָב ניט געקענט אַפּזאָגן איינעם א פריינט אַ רב, און בין נעכטן אַוונט געווען אויף דער חתונה פון זיין זון אין נייעם האָטעל "אַמעריקאַנאַ" ... וואו רבנים פארקריכן שוין. האסטו



באדארפט זען ווי צענדלינגער תלמידי-חכמים האָבן מיך ארומגערינגלט און דיסקוטירט מיט מיר וועגן מיין נייע דערציילונג "די רביצין". פון איין זייט איז עס זייער חנעוודיק. אָבער פון דער צווייטער זייט האָב איך זיך ווידער איבערגעצייגט ווי פרימיטיוו רבנים זיינען אין זייערע קונסט-השגות, להיפוך צו גלחים, באזונדערס קאטוילישע, וועלכע דאַרפן האָבן אַ געוויסע קולטור-דערפארונג אויך אין מאָלעריי און סקולפטור ווייל דער תנ"ך אין בילדער באַצירט זייערע קלויסטער. אמת, ביי אונדז איז עס געווען פאַרווערט, אָבער דאָס געשריבענע וואָרט איז דאָך ניט געווען פאַרווערט. דאָך האָבן יידן לערנער קיינמאָל ניט געזען אין א סיפור המעשה עפעס אַנדערש ווי די מאָראַל פון דער מעשה, און אויב אַ שילדערונג דאַרף עס שטימען מיטן פאַקט, אַ געצייכנטער פאַרטערעט דארף שטימען מיטן מאָדעל. ווען עס האַנדלט זיך וועגן א ישיבה, אדער א רב, פארלאנגען זיי פון דיר דו זאָלסט זען בלויז דאָס גוטע. דער ליובאוויטשער רבי האָט איינמאָל גערעדט וועגן דעם מיט מיר אַ גאנצע נאכט. זיי ריידן פונקט ווי די באַלשעוויקעס אין רוסלאנד פאר וועמען קונסט איז פראַפּאָגאַנדע.

New York, February 11, 1965

... I could not refuse [the request] of my friend, a rabbi, and last night I attended his son's wedding in the new hotel "Americana"... where rabbis have already infiltrated. You had to see how tens of Torah scholars surrounded me and discussed my new story, "The Rebbetzin." On the one hand, it was very charming; on the other hand, my conviction regarding the primitive understanding of rabbis in artistic matters was reinforced. [This stands] in contrast to priests, particularly Catholic Priests, who are required to possess a certain degree of cultural appreciation and sophistication [of art including] painting and sculpture because Biblically-themed images adorn their churches. True, our tradition forbade iconography, but the written word was never prohibited. Nevertheless, scholarly Jews never saw in any narrative plot anything other than the moral of the story. A description must conform to the facts; a sketched portrait must match the model. [However,] when it comes to a yeshiva or a rabbi they demand from you only to see the good. The Lubavitcher Rebbe once spoke with me about this for an entire night. They speak exactly like the Bolsheviks in Russia, for whom art is propaganda.

### Letter #8

סוואן-לעיק, 20 יולי, 1965

מיין טייערער אברהם!

...איך בין מיט דיר מסכים אַז מיינע זייטיקע אינטערעסן קענען מיר שטערן אין מיין שרייבן. זיי שטערן נאָך מער ווי דו מיינסט. 90 פראָצענט פון מיין ביבליאָטעק איז אפילו שעדלעך פאַר א פּאַעט. איך שטעל מיך ניט פאַר, אַז מען קען זיין אַן עכטער יידישער דיכטער ניט לערנענדיק תנך. אָבער ביבל=קריטיק איז זיכער ניט וויכטיק פאַר אַ שעפּפּערישן מענטשן. דאָך האָב איך צו

דעם אַ געוואַלטליקן נייגער. א סך לומדישע ספרים זיינען מיר בפירוש ניט נייטיק, נאָר איך וויל  
ניט פאַרגעסן מיין יוגנט...

אַבער די קונסט=ביכער זיינען באמת אַן אינספּיראַציע. אין מיר ראַנגלען זיך שטענדיק דער  
הונגער נאָך קונסט און דער דאָרשט נאָך הייליקייט, וואָס זיינען כמעט קיינמאָל ניט דאָס  
זעלבע, ביז עס קומט צו אַ רעמבראַנדט און אַ וואַן=גאַג, וואָס זיינען הייליקע קינסטלער. כאַטש  
איך ווייק זיך אין ביבל=קריטיק, ווייס איך ניט קיין געניאַלערן קאַמענטאַטאָר פון תנך ווי  
רעמבראַנדט...

Swan Lake, July 20, 1965

...However, the art books are truly an inspiration. There is a constant struggle  
within me between the hunger for art and the thirst for holiness, which are almost  
never identical, until we get to a Rembrandt and Van-Gogh who are holy artists.  
Although I immerse myself in bible-criticism, I don't know of a more inspired  
commentator of the *Tanach* than Rembrandt...

### Letter #9

ניו-יאָרק, 9 יאַנואַר, 1969

מיין טייערער אברהם,

מיט אַ צוויי טעג צוריק האָב איך דיר אַרויסגעשיקט דריי ביכער.

1: די דרשות פון הרב הגאון סאלאווייטשיק. ביים לייענען די דרשות האָב איך געטראַכט, אַז  
וויפל פּאָעזיע פאַרלירט ניט ביים איבערזעצן פון איין שפראַך אויף אַ צווייטער שפראַך,  
פאַרלירן אַזעלכע דרשות נאך מער, ווען פון אַ תורה שבעל פה ווערן זיי אַ תורה שבכתב. ביים  
ריידן העלפט דאָ צו דער טראַדיציאָנעלער דורותדיקער ניגון, די פּערזענלעכקייט פון דרשן, זיין  
דריי מיטן גראַבן פינגער, דער עולם וואָס הערט זיך מיט דרך-ארץ, מיט פרומקייט און נייגער,  
ביז אויך דו - ווער דו זאָלסט ניט זיין - ווערסט אינגעוועבט אין עולם. דאָס אַלץ ווערט ביים  
אויפּשרייבן די דרשות און נאָכדעם ביים לייענען זיי ביחידות-פאַרלאָרן.

2: איך האָב דיר געשיקט אַ בוך "תוך יידישקייט" פון דאָקטאָר סיימאָן...

3: דער דריטער בוך איז פון ענלעכן כאַראַקטער פון אַ. גאלאמב... גאָלאָמב האָט נאָך "א מעלה".  
ער איז דער טיפּישער ישיבה-בחור, דער טיפּישער אַנטי-קינסטלערישער מענטש, וויפל ער זאָל  
ניט לערנען און ריידן וועגן ליטעראַטור...

New York, January 9, 1969

Two days ago, I sent you three books...

...The third book - of a similar character [as the previous book] - is from A. Golomb<sup>248</sup>... Golomb has another "virtue." He is the typical yeshiva-bochur [student], the typical anti-artistic person, regardless of how much he studies and talks about literature...

### Letter #10

ניו-יאָרק, 14 יאָנואַר, 1969

מיין טייערער אברהם,

... אונדזער קונסט האָט זיך אָנגעהויבן פון פּאָלק און איז דאָרט געבליבן. די תלמידי חכמים האָבן גאָרניט אָדער כמעט ווי גאָרניט פאַרשטאַנען אין קונסט און ניט געהאַט צו דעם קיין באדערפעניש. אונדזערע קינסטלער און די קונסט אין אַלע אירע פאַרמען זיינען געקומען פון פּאָלק. נאָך אין מיין צייט האָבן שיינע יידן פאַראַכט דעם המון וואָס שטופט זיך הערן אַ חזן. וועגן די מערכה פון מאַלעריי ביי יידן - ווייסטו. די געשיכטע פון יידישן טעאַטער איז קודם כל די געשיכטע פון חברשאַפט צווישן אונטערוועלט און אַקטיאָרן, וואָס האָבן געשטאַמט, על פי רוב, פון אונטערוועלט. מיט דער ליטעראַטור איז עס צוגעגאַנגען פיל בעסער, אָבער די הויפט-שעפער פון דער יידישער ליטעראַטור זיינען געווען און געבליבן פּאָלקסמענטשן. אפילו ווען זיי אַליין זיינען עס ניט געווען - ווי מענדעלע און פּרץ - איז זייער שטרעבונג געווען צו אַ פּאָלקס-ליטעראַטור....

New York, January 14, 1969

...Our art originated from the folk and stayed there. The Torah sages had little or no appreciation of art and no need for it. Our artists, and art in all its forms, emanated from the folk. Still, in my days, respectable Jews despised the masses who pushed and shoved to listen to a cantor. The situation regarding Jews and painting - you already know. The history of the Jewish theater is, first and foremost, the history of camaraderie and partnership between the underworld and actors, who, in most instances, stemmed from the underworld. Literature fared much better, but the main creators of Yiddish literature were and remained folk people. Even when they were not - like Mendele and Peretz - they strove to [create a] folk literature.

### Letter #11

מייפילד, 16 סעפטעמבער, 1977

מיין טייערער אברהם,

היינט איז ערב שבת שובה, שנת תשל"ח, ניט קיין צייט פאַר אַזאַ ליד ווי עגיפטאַלאַגע. דאָך שיק איך דיר פונקט היינט אַפּ דאָס ליד איבער עטלעכע סיבות.

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<sup>248</sup> Abraham Golomb.

1) ניט צו דארפן גלייך שרייבן וועגן שמועס נעכטן אויף דער נאכט, וואָס ווען דו האָסט מיר געקלונגען, האָט ער זיך אָנגעהויבן מיט גוטסקייט, חכמה און יידישקייט; און ווען איך האָב דיר צוריק געקלונגען, האָט זיך דער שמועס געענדיקט מיט פונקט דאָס פאַרקערטע.

2) דו זאָלסט ווידער א מאָל זען, אַז קיין בוך וואָס איך האָב פון דיר געקראָגן איז ניט אַוועק אין ניוועץ. אמת, בלויז פון ביכער שרייבט מען ניט קיין לידער. איך האָב יאָרן לאַנג אַרומגעבלאָנדזעט איבער מוזעאומס. נאָר ביכער פרישן אָפּ וואָס דו איבערלעבסט און לייענסט.

3) דו זאָלסט זען אַז אויך אין קען זיין אַ פּאָעט אַ מאַדערניסט.

4) דו זאָלסט וויסן דעם אמת, אַז איך בין נאָך ניט קיין בעל-תשובה, אַ פרומער ייד. אין אָט דעם ליד איז אַזויפיל טרייפקייט וויפל ס'קען זיין דווקא אין האַרץ פון א בן-תורה.

זאָלסט חלילה וחלילה עס ניט ווייזן דיין חסיד. "איז דאָס דער זעלבער מחבר וואָס האָט אָנגעשריבן אַ קדיש?" - וועט ער אויסשרייען און אויסשפייען.

יא, איך האָב דאָס ליד אָנגעשריבן נאָכדעם ווי איך האָב אָנגעשריבן דאָס ליד "אַ קדיש", וואו ס'איז דאָ אַזאַ פּערז, למשל:

איך האָב צום מיקדש אַין מיין האַרץ געווענדט די אויגן.  
און זוך, צי ס'איז נאָך אויל אין מיין נר=תמיד דאָ.  
און אויף דעם כישוף=ליכט וואָס האָט מיך פאַלש געצויגן-  
הוי אַ יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא.

האָב אַ גוט יאָר אינאיינעם מיט דיין ריקל.  
דיין חיים

Mayfield, September 16, 1977

...Today is Erev Shabbat Shuva<sup>249</sup> 5738, not the appropriate time for a poem like "Egyptology."<sup>250</sup> Nevertheless, I am sending it to you precisely today for several reasons...

You should know the truth that I am not yet a *ba'al teshuva* [a penitent], a *frum* [religiously observant] Jew. This poem contains so much *treyf* content, as much unkosher content as is possible to be contained *davka* [specifically] in the heart of a *ben-Torah*.

<sup>249</sup> The Sabbath during the Ten Days of Repentance (the Sabbath preceding Yom Kippur).

<sup>250</sup> Published in *Di Goldene Keyt*, no. 99 (1979): 6-7.

You should *chalila* and *chalila* [God forbid; under no circumstances] show it to your Chasid. "Is this the same writer who wrote the poem 'A Kaddish'?"<sup>251</sup> – he'll scream and spit.

Yes, I wrote this poem [Egyptology], after I wrote the poem "A Kaddish", which contains, for example, the following stanza:

To the sanctuary in my heart, I turned my eyes.

And looked whether oil still remains in my Eternal Light.

And for the light of witchcraft which deceitfully bewitched me,

Oh, a Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba. [Glorified and sanctified be God's great name].

### Letter #12

ניו-יאָרק, 25 פעברואַר, 1981

מיין טייערער אברהם,

איך שיק דיר אַ ליד ערשט נעכטן אָנגעשריבן. אָבער זו מוזט עס לייענען אַליין, אָן דער הילף פון אונדזער ליבן ליובאַוויטשער, וואָס וועט עס באַטראַכטן ווי ניבול-פה (פּאַרנאָגראַפֿיע) און אפשר אויך גאַט=לעסטערונג, כאָטש דאָס איז אַ טיף=מענטשלעך ליד. דאָס וואָס די פרומע וועלט אונדזערע האָט קיין מאָל ניט געהאַט און האָט אויך איצט ניט קיין שום עסטעטישע באַדערפעניש און פּאַרשטענדעניש, האָט דערפֿירט צו דעם אַז יונגעלייט מיט קינסטלערישע נשמות האָבן זיך דערווייטערט פון אָט דער פרומער סביבה, זיינען אָבער געבליבן מיט אַ בענקשאַפט אין האַרצן צו זייער אָפּשטאַם, וואָס האָט זיי ניט פּאַרשטאַנען. אַנדערע יידישע קינסטלער האָט עס אפילו געמאכט פאַר אַנטיסעמיטן. ניט=יידן האָבן באַדאַרפט ווערן די פּאַטראָנען פון אַ מאַרק אַנטאַקאָלסקי, פון מאַלער לעוויטאַן און זייער גלייכן...

New York, February 25, 1981

I am hereby sending you a poem I just wrote yesterday. But you must read it by yourself without the help of our beloved Lubavitcher [friend], who will consider it obscene (pornographic) and perhaps even blasphemous, even though it is a deeply humane poem. The fact that our *frum* [religiously observant] world never had, and still doesn't have, any aesthetic need and appreciation has led to the phenomenon of young people with artistic souls who distanced themselves from their religious environment but retained a longing in their hearts for their ancestry, who did not understand them. It even caused other Jewish artists to become anti-Semites.

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<sup>251</sup> Published in *Di Goldene Keyt*, no. 97 (1978): 34.

Non-Jews had to become the patrons of Mark Antokolsky,<sup>252</sup> the painter Levitan<sup>253</sup> and others like them...

## Part 2 - Reflections on Judaism and Religion

This section contains Chaim Grade's letters discussing his attitudes toward Judaism, religious observance, and Jewish identity. After he left Jewish observance, he never fully returned to it. Nevertheless, the letters reveal that Grade did occasionally and selectively observe certain rituals (such as occasional prayer with a *Talit* and *Teffilin*, Yom Kippur synagogue attendance and eating *Shmura Matza* on Pesach). It appears that nostalgia played a significant role in this. In the last decades of Grade's life, he maintained contact with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and his emissaries, who encouraged Grade to strengthen his connection to traditional Judaism and religious observance.<sup>254</sup> However, to the extent that these efforts possibly intensified Grade's engagement with tradition, it was highly sporadic and erratic. Grade never returned to the Orthodox fold or any other institutionalized religious framework.

On a theological level, Chaim Grade expresses doubt and ambivalence (for example, he questions divine providence, Jewish chosenness etc). However, despite living a secular lifestyle, he never declares himself a dyed-in-the-wool atheist or agnostic. On the contrary, he regularly refers to God and, at times, demonstrates deep traditional-religious sentiments. These letters reveal that Grade was continually tormented by perpetual doubt and ambivalence toward religion and the Jewish tradition.

### Letter #13

סוואן-לעיק, 27 אויגוסט, 1965

מיינ טייערער אברהם,

...צוריקקומענדיק צו דיין זייער אינטערעסאנטן בריוו: פרינציפיעל און פילאזאפיש=טעאָרעטיש  
ביסטו גערעכט, אז אויב יידישקייט וויל עקזעסטרירן אויך אויף ווייטער ווי אַן אידייע, מוז זי זיך  
אַזוי רעפּאַרמירן זי זאָל שטימען מיט די רעזולטאַטן פון דער היינטיקער וויסנשאַפט. ס'איז  
אַבער אויך אמת וואָס די פרומע זאָגן, אַז די טויזנט=יאָריקע דערפאַרונג האָט אונדז געלערנט,

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<sup>252</sup> The sculptor Mark Matveyevich Antokolsky. For more information, see Herman Rosenthal, "Antokolski, Mark Matveyevich," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1609-antokolski-mark-matveyevich>.

<sup>253</sup> The painter Isaac Ilyich Levitan. For more information, see J. G. Lipman and Herman Rosenthal, "Levitan, Isaac (Isaac Ilyich)," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9865-levitan-isaac-isaac-ilyich>.

<sup>254</sup> See Dovid Zaklikowski, *Dear Rebbe: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson Corresponds with a Singer, a Writer, a Sculptor & a Holocaust Survivor*, Revised Ed (Brooklyn, NY: Hasidic Archives, 2021), 245-313.

אַז די יידן האָבן געקענט איינהאַלטן זיין דויער, ווייל זיי האָבן פארעקשנט געלעבט אין זייער גייסטיקע געטאַ=פרייהייט פון די אַלטע פאַרמען און גלייבונגען. דער גאַט פון שפינאַזע און איינשטיין ווייס ניט פון קיין מצוות און אפילו ניט פון נאציאָנאַלער אָנגעהעריקייט. איינשטיין איז געבליבן א ייד, ווייל ער איז געווען צו נאַבל און שטאַלץ, ער זאָל זיך וועלן דערווייטערן פון אַ גערודפט פאַלק. נאָר איך זאָרג ניט פאר דעם אַז גאַט זאָל האָבן א יידיש פאַלק. זאָל ער פאַר דעם אַליין זאָרגן. ניט איך און ניט דו האָבן געקענט פאַרהיטן אַז די לעבעדיקע יידן זאָלן ניט אומקומען. איך וויל דיר בעסער דערציילן אַ פאַקט:

אין אַ יום=כיפור מיט א פאַר יאָר צוריק האָב איך געדאַוונט ביי מיין רב אין ברוקלין. צווישן אַנדערע האָבן דאָרט געדאַוונט עטלעכע יונגעלייט אויסערגעוויינטלעך פרום. לויט זייער שאַקלען זיך, לויט זייער ניגון און דעם אופן ווי זיי טראָגן די היט, האָב איך דערקענט אין וועלכע ישיבה אין פוילן זיי האָבן געלערנט... זיי אַלע זיינען גרויסע וויסנשאפטלער אין דער אַטאַם=קאמיסיע. ארבעטן אין וואַשינגטאָן. הגם איך האָב מיט זיי ניט דיסקוטירט, ווייס איך אויף זיכער, אַז זיי קענען בשום אופן ניט טעאָרעטיש סינטעטיזירן זייער קענטעניש אין דער מאָדערנער וויסנשאַפט מיט דער אַלטער יידישער טעאָלאָגיע און געוויס ניט מצוות מעשיות, מיט אָפּהיטן אזוי שטרענג און פעדאַנטיש יעדן מנהג פון גלויבן און אָבערגלויבן לויטן שולחן=ערוך. וואָס זיי זאָלן מיר ניט ענטפערן, ווייס איך דעם אמתן ענטפער, אַז זיי זוכן עס גארניט צו סינטעטיזירן. אין די אייבערשטע רוימען איז זיי קאַלט. פאַר זייער טאַג=טעגליך לעבן דארפן זיי שבתים און יום=טובים, וואָס זאָל זיי דערוואַרעמען מיט דערמאַנונגען פון זייער יוגנט, וואָס זאָל זיי געבן אַ געמיטלעכקייט און זיי איינוויגן אין אַ ניט=פארגעסענעם ניגון. ביי זיי איז עס ניט איבער דעם היפּאָקריטישן גאַטלאָזן שטייגער, אַז יעדער בירגער מוז געהערן צו א טשורש אָדער אַ סינאגאָגע. אויב ער וויל ניט פאַררעכ[נ]ט ווערן פאַר אַ קאַמוניסט.

קיין שום וויסנשאַפטלערע אַנטדעקונט וועט קיינמאַל ניט באַפרייען דעם מענטשן פון זיין בענקשאַפט נאָך רעליגיעזע אינטימיטעט, וואָס דריקט זיך דווקא אויס אין טראַדיציאָנעלע פאַרמען....

ביי אַן אנדער געלעגנהייט וועל איך דיר שרייבן אַדער אויפקלערן מינדליך "מיינע אַ טעאָריע" אַז אין דעם יידישן גרויסן נאַציאָנאַל=עטישן געדאַנק איז פאַרגעקומען אַן איבערבאַך מיטן אריינטריט פון קבלה געדאַנק און חסידישע פּאָפּולאַריזאַציע, וואָס האָט דערוואַרעמט דאָס פאַלק, אים אויך פאַרבונדן און דערהויבן, אָבער אים ניט פארטיפט און אויך שיטרהאַלטן? זיין פאַרשריפט. דאָס רעדט אין מיר דער מתנגד.

זיי געזונט, גריס הארציק ריקלען,

דיין חיים

Swan Lake, August 27, 1965

Returning to your very interesting letter: as a matter of principle and philosophically-theoretically speaking, you are correct that if Judaism wants to exist in the future as an idea, it must reform itself and conform to the conclusions of modern science. However, it is also true what religious Jews claim, namely, that the experience of millennia has taught us that Jews were able to persevere because

they stubbornly live in the spiritual ghetto-freedom from old forms and beliefs.<sup>255</sup> The God of Spinoza and Einstein doesn't know of any *mitzvot* [commandments] or even nationalistic loyalties. Einstein remained a Jew, because he was too noble and proud to distance himself from an oppressed people. But I am not concerned that God should have a Jewish nation. Let Him worry about it Himself. Neither I nor you could prevent the annihilation of the Jews who were once alive.

I would rather like to relate the following anecdote:

Several years ago, on Yom Kippur I prayed with my rabbi in Brooklyn. Among the congregants, there were several young men who were extraordinarily pious. Based on the way they swayed, their tune, and how they wore their hats, I could determine the yeshiva they attended in Poland... They are all great scientists working at the Atomic Energy Commission in Washington. Although I did not converse with them, I am sure that there is no way they can synthesize their knowledge of modern science with old Jewish theology, and certainly not with the practical commandments, [namely], the scrupulous and pedantic observance of every custom, based on belief or superstition, according to the Shulchan Aruch.

Whatever they might answer me, I know the true answer: they are not interested in reconciling the two. [Life] in the upper spheres leaves them cold. [In order to cope with] their daily routines, they need Sabbaths and festivals to warm them with memories of their youth, provide a spirit of *Gemütlichkeit*, and cradle them in an unforgettable melody. Their [attendance at synagogue] is not due to the hypocritical, godless convention that every citizen must belong to a church or synagogue if they don't want to be considered a communist.

No scientific discovery will free Man of his longing for religious intimacy, which is expressed exclusively in traditional forms...

#### Letter #14

ניו-יאָרק, 29 יוני, 1980

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...איך געדענק, אַז איך האָב דיר צוגעזאגט צו שרייבן וועגן וויזיט ביי מיר פון די צוויי חסידישע יונגעלייט, וואָס איינע פון זיי איז אוועק אויף פרעמדע דרכים, און דער צווייטער ראַנגלט זיך מיט זיך אַליין נַיט אַוועקצוגיין. אָט דער צווייטער, אַ זיידענער יונגערמאַן, וואָס האָט מיט פינף יאָר צוריק מיר געבראַכט תפילין און געוואָלט מחזיר למוטב זיין אויך איננאן – ער איז איצט געקומען צו מיר מיט אַ געבעט: ראַטעוועט!

איך האָב געמיינט אַז ער צווייפלט, אָבער ער האָט גערעדט ווי צמח אַטלאַס. "איך גלייב אין דער עטיק פון דער תורה. נאָר איך בין ווייט ניט זיכער, אַז ס'איז דאָ אַ גאָט וואָס האָט די תורה

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<sup>255</sup> The meaning of this sentence is unclear to me.



געגעבן. "לסוף האָט ער אַרויסגעפלאַצט, אַז ער איז שוין אַוועק פון דער תורה ווייטער ווי איך מײן... "דערצייל מיר ניט ווי ווייט איר זײט אַוועק!" האָב איך אים געענטפערט. איך האָב אים געהייסן לײענען די ישיבה, וועט ער זען אַז אויך אַזעלכע בעלי-מוסר ווי צמח אַטלאַס האָבן געצווייפלט.

אַבער דער ענטפער וואָס צמח אַטלאַס האָט ניט געקענט געפֿינען, ווייל ער האָט געלעבט פֿאַרן חורבן, קען איך אים, דעם חסידישן יונגמאַן, יאָ געבן, ווייל מיר אַלע לעבן שוין נאָכן חורבן, וואָס האָט אונדז געגעבן דעם ענטפער. אַז ווער עס קען אפילו ניט לעבן צוליב זיך ווי אַ ייד, מוז איצט קענען לעבן צוליב דעם יידישן פֿאָלק ווי אַ ייד. גראָד אַ סאָוועטישער ייד, מיט אַ קריסטלעכער פרוי און ניט געמלטע צוויי זין, האָט מיר געזאָגט: "איך גלייב ניט אין גאָט. איך גלייב אָבער אין יידישן גאָט." ער האָט געמיינט צו זאָגן, אַז ער גלייבט אין יידישן גורל, און אפילו ווען עס ווערט אונדז מיאוס דאָס לעבן ווי יחידים, דאַרפן מיר קענען לעבן פֿאַר און צוליב אונדזער כלל, ווי מײן אַרעמע פֿאַרצווייפלטע מאַמע האָט געלעבט צוליב מיר.

אַזוי ווי ער האָט מיך געפרעגט וועגן אונטערשייד צווישן שפּינאַזעס פּאַנטעאַזים און דעם אלטן ליובאַוויטשער רבין, האָב איך אים געענטפערט אויף זײן פּרעגן און אויסגעפירט, אַז ניט אין געפֿינען די באַרירונגס-פּונקטן צווישן דעם ראַציאָנאַליסט שפּינאַזע און דעם גרויסן חסידישן מיסטיקער ליגט די ישועה. זײן פּערזענלעכע ישועה, האָב איך געזאָגט דעם יונגערמאַן - ליגט אין דעם וואָס ער וועט ניט רואינירן דאָס טראַדיציאָנעלע צוזאַמענלעבן פון זײן משפּחה, ניט טרייבן אין קבר זײנע פרומע עלטערן און ניט פֿאַראַרעמען דאָס יידישע פֿאָלק מיט נאָך איינעם וואָס האָט זיך פון אונדז אָפּגעריסן. ער האָט מיר געענטפערט: "אויסער אייך ווייס בלויז דער רבי פון מײן מצב און איך מוז אים שרייבן, וואָס איר האָט מיר געענטפערט."<sup>256</sup>

New York, June 29, 1980

... I remember that I promised you that I would write about the two Chasidic gentlemen who came to visit me. One of them left for foreign paths [i.e. left the Chasidic community], and the second one is struggling not to leave. The latter, a

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<sup>256</sup> See Richard F. Shepard, "The World of Chaim Grade," *Moment* 5, no. 8 (1980): 45 who relates the following words from an interview with Chaim Grade:

"A half-dozen years ago, I met a young rabbi who made it his business to convince me to return to Torah. He gave me t'fillin—I have always had my tallis—and every time I go away I take them with me, even if I don't use them. Some time later, this young man called me. What do you want, I asked him. Do you want to make me a *baal tshuva*?

" 'No,' he answered. 'I want you to make me a *baal tshuva*.'

"He visited me and told me that the Torah was good but that he no longer believed that there is a God. I asked him if he had read my book, *The Yeshiva*, about Zemach Atlas, a young rabbi who had lost his faith. I asked him how, if he no longer believed, he could continue to live such a life as he did, in Orthodoxy.

"I said that before the Holocaust, this problem was a personal crisis, but not a problem for the Jews. Now, however, the problem is not to judge whether there is a God or whether there is no God. It's a question of Jewish survival. I am sure that there is a Jewish God. After that, you can deal with all philosophical, intellectual and theological problems. But what is important for the Jewish people is that there is a Jewish God.

fine young man, who brought me Tefillin and also tried to influence Inna to become a penitent - came to me with a plea: Save me!

I thought he was having doubts, but he spoke like Tzemach Atlas, "I believe in the ethics of the Torah, but I'm not sure that there is a God who gave the Torah." Eventually, he admitted in exasperation that he had already moved away from the Torah further than I thought... "Don't tell me how far you went astray," I told him. I instructed him to read *The Yeshiva*, where he'll see that even *Ba'alei Mussar* [people seeking ethical mastery] had doubts.

However, the answer that Tzemach Atlas couldn't find because he lived before the Holocaust, I can share with this Chasidic young man because we already live after the Holocaust, which gave us the answer. [Namely,] even a person who cannot live for himself as a Jew, must be able to live now as a Jew for the sake of the Jewish people. In fact, a Soviet Jew who was married to a Christian woman and had two uncircumcised sons told me, "I don't believe in God. But I believe in the Jewish God." He meant that he believes in Jewish destiny, and even when this way of life is detestable to us as individuals, we need to live for the sake of the *klal* [collective], like my poor, despondent mother who lived for my sake.

Since he asked me about the difference between Spinoza's philosophy and the philosophy of the first Chabad rebbe,<sup>257</sup> I answered his questions and concluded that the solution does not lie in finding the points of contact between the rationalist Spinoza and the great Chasidic mystic. His personal salvation, I told the young man, consists of him not ruining his family's traditional way of life, not chasing his pious parents into their graves, and not impoverishing the Jewish nation with another person who uprooted himself from our midst. He answered, "besides you, only the rebbe knows my predicament, and I must write to him what you answered me."

### **3 - Confessions of a Writer Torn between the Yeshiva and the Secular World**

One of the great ironies of Chaim Grade's life and art is that the writer who left the yeshiva to pursue a secular literary career would become the person most closely identified with the literary memorialization and recreation of the yeshiva world he abandoned.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1813).

<sup>258</sup> See Morton A. Reichek, "A Writer in Search of an Audience: Profile of Chaim Grade," *Present Tense* 5, no. 4 (1978), 42:

At 22, Grade left the yeshiva...Today he comments "I never was a really good yeshiva *bocher* [boy], because I was interested in girls, in love affairs." He recalls: "So terrible! And then the books. All the time I was already reading secular literature in Yiddish and Hebrew. And then I have the big

As a *talush* (uprooted figure), Grade was deeply torn between the yeshiva world he could not escape from and a cosmopolitan cultural life he deeply craved but was unable to satisfy fully.

In his letters, Chaim Grade speaks candidly and poignantly of his inability to shed his identity as a yeshiva student decades after leaving that world. In discussing his role as a writer, he distinguishes between his poetry which encompasses the entire range of human experience, and his prose which depicts the parochial Jewish world of Lithuanian Jewry. These letters, some of the most powerful in the entire collection, vividly describe the agony and torment of someone caught between two worlds.

### Letter #15

ניו-יאָרק, מוצאי שמחת-תורה, תשכ"ה (תשכ"ו?)

מיין טייערער אברהם,

איך געדענק ווען ס'איז אַרויס מיין ערשט לידער=ביכל "יאָ" איז געווען פסח צום סדר. מען האָט פאַר מיר דעמאָלט אין ווילנע איינגעאַרדנט אַן אָונט. איבער אָט די ביידע סיבות, און אויך ווייל איך בין נאָך געווען רעוואָלוציאָנער=יונג, האָב איך מחלל געווען יום=טוב. זינט דעמאָלט איז מיין שטראָף, אַז איך האָב ניט קיין יום=טוב און שבת. ווי אַ מענטש נעמט זיך, אַזוי העלפט אים גאָט...

New York, Motzei Simchas Torah 5725<sup>259</sup>

I remember that my first book of poetry *Yo* [*Yes*]<sup>260</sup> came out around the time of the Passover Seder. An evening [gathering] was arranged for me on that occasion. Because of these two reasons, and because I was still a revolutionary youth, I desecrated the festival [did not observe the laws of Passover]. Since then, I have been punished that no days are festivals or Sabbath any longer. According to how a person conducts himself, so does God help him...<sup>261</sup>

### Letter #16

היינט איז דער פראָבלעם מיט וועלכן איך מאַטער זיך - גייסטיקער גלותים. דערצו העלפט אויך ניט ארץ=ישראל. מען קען דאָרט זיין - און מען איז! - העברעאישע שקצים. גייסטיקער גלותים וואָס מאַטערט מיך, דאָס מיינט: לעבן אין אַ פּרעמדער קולטור. ווער צווינגט מיך? אָט

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mouth to say what I think. So how can you be a good yeshiva *bocher* when you say everything that you think with such *chutzpa* as I did it?"

<sup>259</sup> The accurate date appears to be 5726, corresponding to October 1965.

<sup>260</sup> יאָ (*Yo*), 1936, Box 1, Folder 1, Papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/174465](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/174465).

<sup>261</sup> The meaning of this statement can be inferred from the continuation of the letter where Grade describes both his and Abraham Bornstein's extremely hectic schedule, which seems to indicate that he has no time to relax from work and properly enjoy a Sabbath or festival.

דאָס וואָס איך בין אַוועק פון בית=מדרש אין דער וועלט צווינגט מיך צו וועלן דערקענען די וועלט אין אירע בעסטע קולטור=אויסדרוקן. אָבער דאָס אומגליק איז וואָס איך האָב קיינמאָל ניט געקענט. און אפשר אויך ניט געוואָלט - זיך גרינטלעך אָפּרייסן פון ישיבה. בין איך געבליבן - און מיט מיר א סך פון מיין דור - הענגען צווישן צוויי ברעגן. אַזוי ווי די יידישע רעליגיע איז אויך אַ נאַציאָנאַלער קענצייכן, איז אַן עכטן יידן צו לעבן אין אַ פֿרעמדער קולטור א סך שווער[ער] ווי, לאָמיר זאָגן, אַ פראנצויז צו לעבן אין דער ענגלישער קולטור, ווייל די זעלבע קריסטליכע ציוויליזאַציע פאַראייניקט זיי און איז שטארקער ווי די אונטערשיידן צווישן זיי. דו האָסט עס אמאָל געזאגט בילדלעך. "ביי מיין טאַטן זיינען געווען פינף אַלטע חומשים און זיי זיינען קיינמאָל ניט אַרויס פון מאָדע. היינט גייט יעדן טאָג ארויס א בוך אויף אַ געוויסער טעמע, וואָס פאַרשטופט אלע פריערדיקע אויף דער זעלבער טעמע." דיין חיים

New York, January 13, 1967

The problem that currently wears me down is spiritual exile. The Land of Israel does not help in this regard. [Living in Israel] one can be – and there are! – Hebraic Gentiles. The spiritual exile that torments me entails living in a foreign culture. Who is coercing me? The fact that I left the *Beit Midrash* for the wider world forced me to want to know the world and its best cultural expressions. But the tragedy is that I was never able, and perhaps didn't want to, completely tear myself away from the yeshiva. Thus, I and many others of my generation remain dangling between two boundaries. Since the Jewish religion is also a national identity marker, it is a lot more difficult for an authentic Jew to live in a foreign culture than, say, for a Frenchman to live in the English culture because the same Christian civilization unites them and is stronger than the differences that divide them. You once expressed it in a picturesque manner. "My father had five old *Chumashim* [the Pentateuch] and they never went out of fashion. Today, another book comes out every day on a specific theme, which displaces all previous books on the same theme."

### Letter #17

מייפילד, זונטאָג, ערב יום=כיפור, תשל"ז (תשל"ו?) - 1975

מיין טייערער אברהם,

נאך אונדזער היינטיקן שמועס, וויל איך דיר עפעס שרייבן וועגן יום=כפור.

איך האָב היינט געדאַוונט אין טלית און תפילין. אָבער צי איך וועל יום=כיפור גיין אין דער שטעטלשער קאַנסערוואַטיווער שול, ווייס איך ניט. ניט זייער געענדערטער סידור און געקירצטע יידישקייט שטערט מיך, נאָר זייער מענטאַליטעט. און אפילו צווישן אַרטאָדאָקסישע יידן קען איך ניט אַריבערטראָגן די וואַכעדיקייט, וואָס טרעט אַריין גלייך נאָך כל=נדר.

אין 1962 איז פונקט ווי היינט יום=כיפור אויסגעפאלן מאַנטאָג. איך בין דעמאָלט געווען אין ישראל צום ערשטן מאָל. פרייטאָג בין איך געווען אין בני=ברק, אויפן קבר פון מיין רבין, דעם חזון=איש, און יום=כיפור-אין ירושלים, וואו איך האָב געבלאָנדזשעט איבער די שולן און נאָכדעם עס באַשריבן אין פּאָעמען.

איך האָב זיך דעמאָלט באַקאַנט גענטער מיט שזר, מיט רבי יהודה אבן שמואל, מיט אלוף משנה (גענעראַל) זאב. זיי זיינען שוין היינט ניטאָ. דאָס האַרץ גייט מיר אויס פון בענקשאַפט נאָך זיי. איך בענק אויך נאָך יענע פון בני=ברק און ירושלים, וואָס האָבן זיך מיט מיר געקריגט, ווייל זיי זיינען געווען גאַנץ אין זייער אמונה.

און איך בענק נאָך מער נאָך דעם חיים גראַדע פון 1962, ווייל ער איז געווען גליקלעך, וואָס ער געפינט זיך אין ירושלים, און האָט כוח צו גיין אַרויף און אַראָפּ דורך באַרגיקע געסעלעך, ארויף און אַראָפּ אין די קלויזן. איך געדענק ווי איך בין אַריין אין אַ קלויז פון תימנער יידן און בין געוואָרן פארגליווערט, ווייל זיי האָבן געוויינט פונקט ווי די יידן פון ווילנער גאונס קלויז. ווי גליקלעך איך בין עס דעמאָלט געווען!

און אַט דאָס איז דאָך דאָס טרויעריקסטע אין מענטשן, וואָס ערשט שפעטער דערוויסט ער זיך ווי גליקלעך ער איז געווען אַ מאָל.

האַט ביידע, דו און ריקל, אַ געזונט און גליקלעך יאָר.

דיין חיים

Mayfield, Erev Yom Kippur, 5737<sup>262</sup> - 1975

In connection with our conversation, I want to write to you something about Yom Kippur.

I prayed today with a *tallit* and *tefillin*. But whether I'll attend Yom Kippur services at the local Conservative Synagogue, I don't know. The altered prayer book and abridged Judaism doesn't bother me, only their mentality. Even among Orthodox Jews, I cannot tolerate the "weekdayness" [mundane attitude] which seeps in immediately after Kol Nidrei.

In 1962 Yom Kippur fell on a Monday, just like today. I visited Israel for the first time. On Friday, I was in Bnei Brak where I visited the gravesite of my rebbe, the Chazon Ish.<sup>263</sup> On Yom Kippur, I was in Jerusalem, where I stumbled across synagogues and later described this experience in poems.<sup>264</sup>

During that time, I became more acquainted with Shazar, Rabbi Yehuda Even Shmuel [Kaufman], with Colonel Ze'ev. They are no longer around today. My heart

<sup>262</sup> The accurate date is 5736 corresponding to 1975.

<sup>263</sup> See "The Reader," 832, 873-884, 901-2, 925, 939-40, 681-683.

<sup>264</sup> See the poems in Grade, *Oif Mein Weg Tzu Dir*.

is consumed with longing for them. I also miss those people from Bnei Brak and Jerusalem who quarreled with me, because they remained steadfast in their faith.

I yearn even more for the Chaim Grade of 1962, because he was fortunate to be in Jerusalem and have the strength to go up and down mountainous streets, up and down in the *kloyzn* [small, intimate synagogues]. I remember how I entered a *kloyz* of Yemenite Jews and froze because they cried exactly like the Jews from the Vilna street *kloyz*. How fortunate was I then!

And this is the saddest aspect in [the lives of] people, that only in retrospect does one realize how fortunate one once was.

May you and Rikl both have a healthy and happy year.

Yours,

Chaim

### Letter #18

ניו-יאָרק, 12 יאָנואַר, 1979

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...זינט איך האָב געשריבן דעם בית=הרב זיינען שוין אַוועק אַ סך יאָרן, און איך קען זיך אַליין גוט דערזען לייענענדיק דעם מאַטעריאַל. אַ פּחד פּאַלט אויף מיר, ווייל איך זע איין, אַז איך בין נאָך ביז איצט ניט אַוועק פּון ישיבה. די פּראָבלעמען וואָס אינטרעסירן מיר, די מילחמות וואָס איך פיר, מיין ליבע און שנאה, מיינע גוטע און שלעכטע העלדן, וואָס איך לויב און וואָס איך טאַדל - אַלץ איז פּון אַ היינטיקן ישיבה=בחור, ניט פּון אַ געוועזענעם. פאַר דיין יונגן ליובאוויטשער רבין, פאַר מיינע חברים אין ברוקלין און אין בני=ברק - פאַר זיי בין איך שוין ניט קיין בן תורה, ווייל זייער איינציקע מאָס איז, צו לייג איך תּפּילין יעדן טאָג. אַבער פאַר מיר פּערזענלעך אין פּערעספּעקטיוו, ווי אויך פאַר די באַשניטענע אָדער אומבאַשניטענע גויים פּון ניו-יאָרקער טייַמס, וואָס זייער מאָס איז ניט צו איך לייג תּפּילין - בין איך אַן אַרטאָדאָקסישער ייד מיט אַ טלית איבערן קאָפּ, אַ טעאַלאַג אין מיין יעדן בלוט=טראָפּן, אַ מוסרניק אין מיין יעדן אויסברוך פּון כּעס. היינט צו וואָס דאַרף מיר דער יודענראַט פּון טייַמס? און טאַקע אזוי. אין מיינע ווערק בין איך דאָך נאָך ניט ארויס פּון בית מדרש.

דיין חיים

New York, January 12, 1979

...Many years have passed since I wrote the *Beys Harav*,<sup>265</sup> I can see myself very well while reading the material. A shudder goes through me, because I realize that

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<sup>265</sup> The novel *Beys Harav* was serialized in *Der Forverts* from November 11, 1973, until May 30, 1976. Earlier versions appeared as *Dos Alte Hoyz* (serialized in the *Tog-Morgn Zhurnal* 1965-1966) and *Zin and Tekhter* (serialized in the *Tog-Morgn Zhurnal* 1968-1971). Chaim Grade considered

I have not left the yeshiva even now. The problems that interest me, the battles I wage, my loves and hates, my good and bad protagonists, what I praise and criticize – all of it is from [the perspective of] a current yeshiva boy, not a former one. To your young Lubavitcher rabbi, and my friends in Brooklyn and Bnei Brak, I am no longer a *Ben Torah*, because their only yardstick is whether I lay *tefilin* every day. But from my perspective, as well as in the eyes of the circumcised or uncircumcised Gentiles<sup>266</sup> from the New York Times who don't judge me based on whether I lay *Tefilin* – I remain an Orthodox Jew with a *Talit* wrapped over his head, a theologian in every drop of blood, and a *Musernik* in my every angry outburst. So why do the Judenrat of the Times need me?<sup>267</sup> And indeed! In my work, I have not, after all, left the *Beit Midrash*.”

### Letter #19

ניו-יאָרק, 5 מערץ, 1973

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...אין דיין בריוו האָסטו געשריבן וועגן דער מאָווריטאַנישער קונסט און איר אויסוויקונג אויף אייראָפּע. אויך די אַראַבישע פּילאָזאָפּיע פון יענער צייט האָא זייער באַוויקט די יידישע און קריסטלעכע מיטלאַלטערלעכע פּילאָזאָפּיע. די יידן האָבן געזען אַ גוואַלטיקן תּהום צווישן דער אַנגענומענער אַריסטאָטעלישער פּילאָזאָפּיע אין דער אַראַבישער אויסטייטשונג און יידישע תּורה. דער גרעסטער פּאַרשטייער וואָס האָט געפרואווט גייסטיק 'פּאַרברידערן' די צוויי שטרעמונגען איז געווען דער רמב"ם. דער גרעסטער פּאַרשטייער אין יענער צייט, וואָס האָט געשטעלט די יידישע אמונה און דאָס יידישע פּאַלק אויף אַזויפיל העכער פון יעדער אנדער רעליגיע און פּאַלק, אז ער האָט באַטראַכט פּאַר דעם גרעסטן אומזין צו פּרואוון צופאַסן די יידישע אמונה מיט דער אַנגענומענער פּילאָזאָפּיע – איז געווען יהודה הלוי. דער רמב"ם האָט זיך געשטעלט פּאַר זיין אויפגאַבע צו באווייזן, אַז די יידישע תּורה שטימט מיט אַריסטאָטעלן. דער כּוזרי פון יהודה הלוי האָט זיך געשטעלט פּאַר אַן אויפגאַבע צו באווייזן, אַז אין דעם באַשטייט די גרויסקייט פון דער תּורה וואָס זי שטימט ניט מיט קיין שום פּילאָזאָפּיע, ווייל די יידישע אמונה איז געבויט אויף התגלות, אַנטפּלעקונג, "ריוועליישן", בעת די פּילאָזאָפּיע איז באַגרינדעט אויפן אַרעמען מענטשלעכן שכל. יהודה הלוי האָט געהאַלטן, אַז נבואה און דער נביא איז עפעס וואָס געהערט ניט צום געוויינלעכן מענטשלעכן מין, נאָר איז אַ באַזונדער געטלעכע "קאַטעגאָריע", ווי דאָס זיינען שטיינער, פּלאַנצן, באַשעפענישן און דער מין מענטש אין פּאַרגלייך פון איינעם צום אַנדערן. דאָס איז דער הויפט-אַקצענט אין די אריינפירן און אין דער איבערזעצונג פון רבי יהודה אבן שמואל – די הייליקייט פון נבואה מיט וואָס ס'איז

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this as one of his great works on par with or even surpassing *Tzemach Atlas* but tragically he did not live to complete this work.

<sup>266</sup> "Circumcised Gentiles" is a derogatory way of referring to the assimilated Jews of the New York Times, which Grade regards as "Gentilized Jews."

<sup>267</sup> This may be an insult and accusation against the treasonous deeds (in his opinion) of the Jews who work at the New York Times who do the Gentiles' bidding just like some members of the Judenrat were accused of doing during WWII.

אויסדערוויילט בלויז דאָס יידישע פּאָלק - דאָס אויסדערוויילטע פּאָלק אין אויסדערוויילטן לאַנד ארץ-ישראל, פאר וועלכן ס'האָבן צווישן זיך שוין בלוטיק געקעמפט הבל און קין, יצחק און ישמעאל, יעקב און עשו... וואָס מער איך לייען דעם כוזרי, אַלץ מער ווער איך אויפגערעגט - ביז צום אַרונטערשפּרינגען פון בעט! - פון אַט דער נאַאיוויטעט, פון דער ניט פאַרגעבלעכער איינריידעניש פון אויסדערוויילטקייט; דאָס פאַרוואַנדלען יעדע לעגענדע אין אַ היסטאָרישע אַרגומענטאציע - ווי קען אַ מאַדערנער מענטש אויף דעם איינשטימען!

נאָר אין דער זעלבער צייט גייט אַרויס מיין האַרץ פון קנאה צו אַט דער עקזאַלטאַציע - ניט זעלבסצופרידנקייט - פון אַ ייד אַ מיטלאַטערלעכער דיכטער, וואָס איז אַזוי באַגליקט מיט זיין גורל פון אַ געהאַסטן, דערנידעריקטן און פאַרפּאָלגטן יידן, אַז קיינער אויף דער וועלט איז ניט גליקלעכער פון אים! און קיין יידישער שרייבער איז ניט - און דאָרף ניט! - אים אַזוי מקנא זיין ווי איך, ווייל איך לעב דאך אויך אין זעלבן פאַרכיטופטן קרייז, ווייל איך קען זיך דאָך ניט אַרויסרייסן פון ישיבה, פון בית-הרב און פון חזון-איש - אפילו איך זאָל זיך אויסטאַן פון דער הויט! בלויז ביז 20 יאָר האָב איך זיך געפונען אין דער רבנישער סביבה; 40 יאָר האָב איך געלעבט אַ דורכאויס וועלטלעך לעבן. ווייל איך בין אַריינגעפאַלן צווישן צוויי וועלט-מלחמות און איבער מיינ גלות אין רוסלאַנד, פוילן, פאַריז, אַמעריקע - האָב איך זיך אָנגעזען און דורכגעלעבט מער ווי אַמאָל גאַנצע דורות שרייבער, מיט אַ ליידישאַפט ביז שגעון הער איך ניט אויף צו קויפן און לייענען וועלטלעכע ליטעראַטור פון אַלע זשאַנרען, אַריינגערעכנט איבער מוזיק און מאַלעריי; איך האָב פון שטענדיק געהאַט אַ טיפן אינטערעס אין סאַציאַלע פּראָגן, אין מעטאַפיזיק נאָך מער, אין פּסיכאָלאָגישע פּראַבלעמען; די עראַטישע קאָמפלעקסן זיינען געווען דער שוידער פון מיינ לעבן - און דאָך קען איך זיך ניט אַרויסרייסן פון יידן און יידישקייט אפילו אין איין ראַמאַן, אין איין דערציילונג. אין די לידער בין איך אוניווערסאַל; אין דער פּראָזע - דורכאויס יידיש-טראַדיציאָנאַל ביז צו אַזאַ מדרגה, אַז אַ געוויסע גראַפּיונגערישע חברה אין דער יידישער ליטעראַטור לייקנט בכלל אַז איך בין אַ פּראָזאַאיקער. אין בעסטן פּאַל בין איך פאַר זיי א ווילנער לאַקאַלער שרייבער. און דער אמת איז טאַקע: ניט איין פאַרגוואַישטער ייד האָט גענומען לייענען מיינע זאַכן אין ענגליש און איז געבליבן אַנטוישט. אַזאַ מזל וועט אויך האָבן "די עגונה", אויב ס'וועט אַרויס, ווייל קיין יידישער און העבראישער שרייבער קען ניט אַזוי גרינטלעך ווי איך דאָס טראַדיציאָנעלע יידישקייט, וואָס איז אין דער אמתן אומבאַקאַנט אפילו וועלטלעכע יידן. זיי רייסן אויף די אויגן פון פארוואונדערונג ווען זיי דערוויסן זיך, אַז ס'עקזיסטירן גאָר אַזעלכע פּראַבלעמען אין ישראל. איך בין ניט קיין רעליגיעזער שרייבער/ווער ווייס צי איך בין בכלל רעליגיעז! / איך בין אַ טראַדיציאָנעלער שרייבער פון אַ פּאָלק און לעבנס-שטייגער, וואָס קיינער קען ניט בעסער פאַר מיר. אָבער דאָס פּרעמד מיך אַפּ פון דער וועלט און אירע לייענער אין אַלע שפּראַכן, אויסער יידן פון דיין דור, אברהם, אין יידיש, און אַ גרעסערער עולם - די טראַדיציאָנעלע יידן פון אַלע עדות - אין ישראל.

כדי איך זאָל ניט ליידן פון דעם, וואָלט איך באַדאַרפט האָבן יענע התרוממות הנפש, יענע אַנטציקונג מיט יידן און יידישקייט פון אַ יהודה הלוי! דער שרייבער אין מיר איז דורכאויס אַ פאַרצייטיקער ייד און דער מענטש אין מיר וויל זיין דורכאויס היינטוועלטיק. דאָס איז פשוט פאַר מיר אַן אומגליק, אַ קאַמף וועלכן איך קען ניט געווינען. מער קען איך ניט שרייבן. און דו ווילסט דאָך ניט, אַז איך זאָל פון אַנשטרענגונג קריגן אַ נייע האַרץ-אַטאַקע. שיק מיר אַ פּאַטאַסטאַט פון דעם בריוו 'אַ זיראַקס', וועל איך עס אַפּשיקן רבי יהודה אבן שמואל.

מיט איבערגעגעבענקייט, דיין



New York, March 5, 1973

...In your letter, you wrote about Moorish art and its influence on Europe. The Arabic philosophy of that time strongly influenced Jewish and Christian medieval philosophy. The Jews saw a major rift between the widespread Aristotelian philosophy in its Arabic interpretation and the Jewish Torah. The leading figure who tried to spiritually “unite” these two streams was the Rambam. The leading figure of that era who placed the Jewish Faith and Jewish Nation above and beyond any other religion and faith and considered it senseless to try to reconcile the Jewish faith with the prevailing philosophy – was Yehudah Halevi. The Rambam sought to demonstrate how the Torah is compatible with Aristotle. The Kuzari of Yehudah Halevi sought to demonstrate that the Torah's greatness is characterized by its incompatibility with any philosophy because the Jewish Faith is based on revelation, whereas philosophy is founded upon the impoverished human intellect. Yehudah Halevi maintained that prophecy and the prophet do not belong to the conventional human species but belong to a separate divine category, comparable to the separation between rocks, plants, living creatures, and the human species. This is the main emphasis in the introduction and translation of Rabbi Yehuda Even Shmuel – the holiness of prophecy with which only the Jewish Nation was chosen: the chosen nation in the chosen Land of Israel, for which bloody battles were waged by Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau...

The more I read the Kuzari, the angrier I get – to the extent of jumping up out of bed! – from the naiveté, from the unforgivable delusion of chosenness, the conversion of every legend into a historical argument – how can a modern person assent to this!

At the same time, however, my heart burns with envy on account of the exaltation – not self-contentment – of a medieval Jewish poet, who is so happy with his lot of being a despised, downtrodden, and oppressed Jew, that no one in the world is more fortunate than him! And no Jewish writer is – or needs to be! – so envious of him as I, because I also inhabit the same enchanted circle, because I cannot uproot myself from the yeshiva, from the *Beys Harav* [rabbinical court] and from the Chazon Ish – even if I were to shed my skin!

I grew up in a rabbinic environment until the age of twenty; for the following forty years I have lived a thoroughly secular life. As a result of experiencing two world wars and due to my exile in Russia, Poland, Paris and America, I have witnessed and experienced more than the combined experience of entire generations of writers; with a passion bordering on madness I don't stop buying and reading

world literature in all genres, including music and painting; I've always had a deep interest in social questions, an even greater interest in metaphysics, and psychological problems; the erotic complexes were the bane of my life – and notwithstanding all this I still cannot tear myself away from Jews and Judaism even in one novel, in one story.

In the poems, I am universal; in prose [I am] thoroughly Jewish-traditional<sup>268</sup> to the extent that a particular vulgar element in the Jewish literature even denies that I am a *bona fide* prose writer. At best, I am regarded by them as a local Vilna writer. Indeed, the truth is that more than one Gentilized Jew started reading my works in English and was disappointed. The same 'luck' will befall *The Agunah*, if it is released, because no Yiddish or Hebrew writer knows as thoroughly as I traditional Judaism, which is unfamiliar even to secular Jews. They open their eyes wide in wonder when they learn that such problems still exist in Israel. I am not a religious writer, who knows whether I'm religious at all, I am a traditional writer of a people and lifestyle that no one knows better than I do. But this alienates me from the world and its readers in all languages, besides Jews of your generation – Avraham – in Yiddish, and a larger group – the traditional Jews of all sectors – in Israel.

In order not to suffer on account of this, I would need the exaltedness and enchantment with Jews and Judaism of a Yehudah Halevi! The writer within me is a thoroughly old-time Jew, and the human within me wants to be thoroughly at home with today's world. This is a personal tragedy, a battle I cannot win. More than this, I cannot write. You won't want me to get another heart attack from exertion. Send me a photocopy of this letter, a Xerox. And I'll send it to Rabbi Yehudah Even Shmuel.

With devotion,

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<sup>268</sup> Similar statements were made by Grade in the interview that was published as "A Conversation with Chaim Grade" in Harold U. Ribalow, *The Tie That Binds: Conversations with Jewish Writers* (San Diego; New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1980): 55-56:

RIBALOW: [...]Tell me, are there other differences between your poetry and your prose?

GRADE: Of course. A deeper difference is that I have a special complex, something I myself cannot explain. I am a generally "human" or "humane" writer in poetry. I write of love, and even more about nature. I have whole books about nature. Naturally, too, I have written lyrical, menschlich, poems. And, more than anything else, about the Churban, the Holocaust. Also, on my mother, a great deal about my mother, the Churban, the yeshiva, and on themes relating to man. In prose, I confess, I cannot get out of the synagogue courtyard. Not that I don't desire to.

RIBALOW: You can't escape?

GRADE: I cannot, although I have written a few "worldly" things.

RIBALOW: You are saying that you are parochial in your novels and universal in your poetry?

GRADE: Yes.

Yours

Chaim

### Letter #20

מייפילד, 8 אויגוסט, 1977

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...ערגער איז וואָס ביים האָרעווען אויפן בית=הרב (אַן אַנדערשמאַל וועל איך דיר אויסשרייבן דעם פראָצעס פון דער אַרבעט) דאַרף איך כסדר אָפּיאָגן פון זיך ווי אַן איינגעגעסענע פליג דעם געדאַנק: " פאַר וועמען האָרעוועסטו? נאָך ליגן ביי דיר 250 ביכער, צמח אַטלאַס, צווייטער טייל. 400 ביכער די קלויז און די גאַס, און 500 ביכער דער שטומער מנין."

אַבער איך הער זיך ניט צו צו די רייד פון מיין יצר=הרע. איך פיל אַז איך בין שולדיק דאָס בוך, דער בית=הרב, דעם כלל=ישראל און דיר מיט ריקלען. ס'איז מיר שטענדיק מאָדנע: איך האָב דאָך אַזוי ווייניק אמונה- און דאָך גלייב איך באמונה שלמה, אַז די השגחה האָט מיך געראַטעוועט און לאָזט מיך לעבן, כדי צו פאַראייביקן דעם גרויסן דור וואָס איך האָב געקענט.

דיין חיים

Mayfield, August 8, 1977

...It is even worse that when toiling over *Beys Harav* (and at another time I'll write you about the process of this work), I must constantly chase away from myself, like a stubborn fly, the thought: *for whom are you toiling?*...

But I do not listen to the words of my *Yetzer Hara*. I feel I owe this book, the *Beys Harav*, to the Jewish people, and you and Rikl. It's constantly strange to me. I have so little faith, and yet I believe with complete faith that Providence saved me and allowed me to live to immortalize the great generation I knew.

### Letter #21

ניו-יאָרק, 22 סעפטעמבער, 1978

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...וואָס עלטער איך ווער און וואָס מער איך פאַרטיף זיך אין מיין אייגן פאַרגאַנגען לעבן, ווי דאָס קומט צום אויסדרוק אין מיינע לידער זינט 40 יאָר - אַלץ מער זע איך איין, אַז מען קען ניט זיין קיין גרויסער פּאַעט, אויב מען איז ניט קיין גרויסער מענטש. און אַ גרויסער מענטש מיינט - אַן עכטער מענטש ביז צום קלענסטן בלוט=טראָפּן. אַזאַ איינער וואָס האָט טיפע געפילן און איז זיי טריי ביז צום אומקום. דאָס מאַכט דעם דיכטער אויף אַן אמת גרויס. און די שענסטע בילדער, פאַרגלייכונגען, גראַמען און שפראַך=מייסטערשאַפט, אפילו די מוזיק פון ליד - דאָס אַלץ זיינען בלויז צוגאַבן.

אַבער פונקט איך ווייס דאָס אויף זיכער, ווייס איך ניט אַן אַנדער זאָך און האָב אויף דעם קיין ענטפער ניט, וויפל איך זאָל זיך ניט פייניקן:

ס'איז ניטאָ קיין איין מענטשלעכע טעמע וועגן וועלכע איך האָב ניט געשריבן אין מיינע לידער. אויסער פון מיינע עראָטישע געפילן צו אַ מאַן, ווייל איך האָב זיי ניט. אַבער ווען איך קום צו שרייבן פראָזע, מוז איך אַלע מיינע באַטראַכטונגען און איבערלעבונגען אָנטאָן אין טראַדיציאָנעלע פאָרמען און אַלט=יידישן שטייגער=לעבן. איך וואָלט געקענט ברענגען צענדלינגער ביישפילן ווי אַזוי גאַנץ וועלטלעכע איבערלעבונגען און דערפאַרונגען ווילן ביי מיר ניט געבוירן ווערן אין זייער וועלטלעכער, אַלעמען=פאַרשטענדלעכער פאַרעם, ביז זיי קאָכן זיך ניט איבער און נעמען אַן אַ יידישע צורה. אַ פריינד פון דעטראַיט האָט זיך עפנטלעך אָפגעשוואָרן, אַז אַלע צוזאַמענשטויסן פון צמח אַטלאַס אין לאַמזשע און די אנדערע שטעטלעך, האָט גראַדע איבערגעשריבן פון זיינע דערפאַרונגען אין דעטראַיט און שיקאָגאָ...

דער רעדאַקטאָר פון פאַרווערטס, וועבער, האָט איבערגעלייענט ביידע טיילן צמח אַטלאַס, זיך זייער שטאַרק אַנטציקט, אַבער מיר געמאַכט אַ העכסט-אינטערעסאַנטע באַמערקונג:

"מיר פאַרשטייען דאָך דאָס כינעזישע לעבן, אויב ס'איז גוט געשילדערט. און איר זייט אַ זייער גוטער שילדערער. פונדעסטוועגן ווייס איך, אַז אַ סך לייענער פון פאַרווערטס פאַרשטייען אייך ניט, און אפילו מיר, שמעון וועבער, זיינען אַ סך פלעצער געווען אויסטערליש פּרעמד, הגם זייער אינטערעסאַנט. דאָס איז צוליב דער יידישער פילאָזאָפיע וואָס איר ברענגט אַרויס אַזוי טיף און גרינטלעך ווי קיינער ניט פאַר אייך. און אַט די וועלטלעכע יידן, אייערע לייענער אין יידיש - און געוויס אין ענגליש - ווייסן זייער ווייניק אַדער אין גאַנצן ניט פון אַזאַ טיפן יידישן אינהאַלט - דעריבער זיינען אפילו כינעזער לעת-עתה פאַר זיי פאַרשטענדלעכער ווי איר. כדי איר זאָלט דערגיין - האָט וועבער אויסגעפירט - דאָרף עס נעמען אַ סך צייט. איר מוזט זיך אויסלערנען - וואַרטן!"

September 22, 1978

...I don't have an answer for the following conundrum, no matter how much I torment myself:

There is no human theme that I haven't written about in my poems except for my erotic feelings for a man because I don't have them. However, when I come to write prose, I am compelled to convert all my observations and experiences into traditional forms and the old Jewish way of life. I can cite tens of examples of how thoroughly secular phenomena refuse to take root within me in their universal, commonly-experienced form until they are transformed and receive a Jewish form. A friend from Detroit openly swore that "all the scuffles of Tzemach Atlas in Lomze and the other towns, Grade wrote based on his experiences in Detroit and Chicago..."

The editor of the Forverts, Weber, read both volumes of *Tzemach Atlas* and was deeply captivated by them but made a most-interesting remark:

“We understand Chinese life if it is depicted well. And you can portray things very well. Nevertheless, I know that many readers of the *Forverts* don't understand you, and even for me, Shimon Weber, many places [passages] were strangely unfamiliar, despite being very interesting. This is because of the Jewish philosophy which you explicate so deeply and thoroughly like no one before you. The secular Jews who constitute your readership in Yiddish – and certainly in English – know very little, or nothing at all, about such deep Jewish content – therefore, even the Chinese are, in the meantime, more understandable to them than [the life you describe in] your writings. For you to reach these people,” – Weber concluded – “it will take a long time. You must learn – patience!”

### Letter #22

ניו-יאָרק, 4 יוני, 1979

טייערער אברהם,

איך ווייס ניט פון וואָס פריער אָנהייבן דיר שרייבן נאָך אַזאַ לענגערן איבעררייס. איך שרייב לעצטנס ניט אפילו די סאַמע נויטיקסטע בריוו, אַזוי פאַרנומען בין איך, און דערנאָך בין איך דערדריקט פון מיינע מחשבות, פון מיינע ראַנגעלישן מיט זיך אַליין. אויסער מיינע מלחמות מיט זיך עס זאָל מיך ניט אַרן מיינ געקרענקטע אייגנליבע, פיר איך נאָך אַ האַפענונגסלאָזע מלחמה זיך אַרויסצורייסן פון מיינ טראַדיציאָנעלע וועלט, וואָס האַלט מיך אַזוי געפאַנגען, אַז צייטנווייז פיל איך זיך ווי איך וואָלט געלעגן אַ געבונדענער און מיינ שונא שטייט מיט זיין קני אויף מיינ האַלדז. אַט דאָס בילד האָס איך, דאַכט זיך, געלייענט יינגלווייז אין אַ דיזראַעלי-ראַמאַן וועגן פאַלשן משיח דוד אַלאַי. קאַרגע פינף יאַרצענדלינג ווי איך האָב פאַרמאַכט די גמרא – און קען זיך נאָך אַלץ פון איר ניט אַפרייסן. איך בין דורכגעפאַרן אַ וועלט – און נעכטיק נאָך אַלץ אויפן ווילנער שולהויף. אַ סך מאָל באַשליס איך: גענוג! אויך איך האָב געלעבט אין פאַריז; מיינע אַלע יאַרן אין יונג=ווילנע האָב איך זיך געקאַכט אין סאַציאַלע פראַבלעמען; איך האָב זיך אַפגעגעבן – און גיב זיך נאָך אַלץ אַפ – מיט מאַלעריי און מוזיק; ווייניק האָבן ווי איך אזוי פיל געליטן פון די פראַבלעמען וועגן מאַן און פרוי – איז פאַרוואָס זאָל איך ניט שרייבן אַזאַ וועלטלעכן ראַמאַן? אַט שרייב איך איצט אַזאַ ראַמאַן.

וועגן וועלטלעכע מענטשן פון נאָכן חורבן, און מיינע וועלטלעכע מענטשן, זאָגט מען זיינען גענוג לעבעדיקע פערזאָנען. נאָר טיף אין האַרצן בלייבט מיר זייער אומעטיק פון אַט די וועלטלעכע מענטשן און זייערע פראַבלעמען. אפילו די שפראַך וואָס זיי ריידן ווערט וואַכעדיק, אַלטעגלעך. עס איז ניטאָ קיין איין פראַבלעם וואָס איך קען אַנטדעקן וועגן וועלכן מען האָט שוין ניט געשריבן פאַר מיר. און אויב איך קען אַזאַ פראַבלעם יאָ אַנטדעקן – לאַמיר זאָגן, צי קען זיין אַ פאַלקס=לעבן פון וועלטלעכער יידישקייט – איז עס נאָך מער באַגרענעצט ווי דער פראַבלעם פון אונטערוואַרפן זיך אדער קעמפן מיט דער טראַדיציע. דער צינישער און וואולגאַרער פאַלסיפיקאַטאָר באַשעוויס ווייס, אַז פאַר די גויים און גוישע יידן איז פיקאַנט בלויז איין יידישע טעמע: עקזאַטישער סעקס.

דאָס הייסט, דער בעל=עבירה זאָל זיין אַ ייד מיט אַ באַרד און טלית-קטן. ווייל זינדיקע גויים קענען דאָך די הענרי מילערס ווייזן בעסער פון אים. אָבער אונדזער פאַלקסלעבן איז געווען

אייגנארטיק, ניט עקזאטיש, און אינאיינעם מיט דעם אלמענטשלעכן איז שטענדיק מיטגעגאנגען דאָס ספעציפיש יידישע. ווי זשע קען מען ווייזן ייִדן מיט בלויז מענטשלעכע פראַבלעמען? די יידישע זיינען תמיד מיטגעגאנגען מיט די רייזן-מענטשלעכע פראַבלעמען. און א ראָמאַן וואָס טיילט זיי אָפּ איז אַ פּלאַכער אָדער אַ פּאַלשער ראָמאַן, אויף יעדן פּאַל - פאַר מיר אַן אומאינטערעסאַנטער ראָמאַן. טרייב איך פון זיך דעם יצר=הרע פון זוכן פּאַפּולאַריטעט און מוז זיך באַגנוגענען מיט לייענער וואָס לעבן אויף - נאָסטאַלגיע!

דיין חיים

New York, June 4, 1979

I don't know what to start writing to you about after such a long break. Lately, I don't write even the most essential letters, so busy am I, and after all that, I'm pressured by my thoughts and inner struggles. Besides the wars I wage with myself that my sick self-love shouldn't bother me, I'm also conducting a hopeless battle to uproot myself from my traditional world, which holds me in hostage to such an extent that occasionally I feel like someone bound in ropes, with my enemy standing with his knee on my neck. This image I read – it seems to me – as a boy in a Disraeli novel about the false messiah David Alroy.<sup>269</sup>

Approximately five decades ago, I closed the Gemara – but I still cannot tear myself from it. I traversed the world – and still lodge in the Vilna synagogue courtyard. Many times, I decided: enough!<sup>270</sup> I also lived in Paris; during all my years in Yung-Vilna I was deeply concerned with social problems; I've devoted myself – and still devote myself – to painting and music; few have suffered so much as I from the

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<sup>269</sup> Grade is referring to Benjamin Disraeli's 1833 novel *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*.

<sup>270</sup> Similarly in Ribalow, "A Conversation with Chaim Grade," 59-60, Grade states:

I'll tell you another thing. As I studied in a yeshiva until I was in my twenties, I've got certain kinds of books. I'm not a formal scholar... but I do study and have studied. So I collect books. And I say to the books, "Wait awhile; I've already looked into your pages." Then, for the time being, I occupy myself with worldly books, perhaps because I want to tear myself away from the world of the bais medrash-and I can't. So I become exhausted from the effort. Finally, I see that I won't become a worldly man. I won't get away from the grip of the bais medrash, and I tried in vain. I'm too deeply rooted in the bais medrash. For twenty years, I learned there and for forty years I've been out of it. These twenty years-these accursed twenty years-don't let me break free. So I return to the ancient books and I ask myself, Why did I go away? Where did I go? I ask these questions and return to the Jewish book shelves. Then, again, I turn to the goyish side. But then I'm back to the Jewish shelves. See... here's Graetz's history ... and Dubnow's history ... and the religious Jewish history by Yawitz, in Hebrew. Ahah here's Raphael Mahler's Marxist version of Jewish history, in four-five volumes. And, see, here's Dinur's modern history, full of good material. I read them till I "overeat," till I'm overtired and then go back to the worldly shelves of books. And once in a while, I turn to an old love of thirty years-Spinoza. He couldn't get away from the Jews either.

problems between man and woman – so why shouldn't I write a secular novel? Indeed, I am currently writing such a novel<sup>271</sup> about secular people living during the aftermath of the Holocaust. I am told that the secular people I describe are sufficiently alive [i.e. realistically portrayed and brought to life]. But deep in my heart, I feel deeply depressed by these worldly people and their problems. Even the language they speak becomes banal and mundane. There isn't one problem that I could *reveal* that people didn't write about before me. And if I could explore such a problem – let's say, whether there can be a folklife based on secular Judaism – it is even more limited than the problem of submitting oneself to tradition vs. fighting against it. The cynical and vulgar counterfeiter, Bashevis Singer knows that for the Gentiles, only one Jewish theme is piquant: exotic sex. This means that the sinner should be a Jew with a beard and a *Talit Katan* [four-cornered fringed garment], because the Henry Millers [of the world] can depict sinful Gentiles better than him. But our folklife was unique, not exotic, and the universal human [aspect] was always accompanied by the particular Jewish [aspect]. How can we depict Jews who only need to deal with human problems? [Conversely,] the Jewish [problems] always existed alongside the purely human problems. A novel that divides them is a flat or false novel; at any rate – such a novel is uninteresting to me. Consequently, I chase away the *Yetzer Hara* [sinful urge] of seeking popularity and must satisfy myself with readers who live for nostalgia!

### Letter #23

ניו-יאָרק, 14 מיי, 1980

מיין טייערער אברהם,

... שוין 50 יאָר ווי בין אַוועק פון ישיבה און באַלד 40 יאָר פון ווילנע. איך האָב דורכגעוואַנדערט רוסלאַנד ביז די גרענעצן פון אַפּגאַניסטאַן און איראַן. נאָכדעם האָב איך דורכגעוואַנדערט צוויי דריטל וועלט. פונדעסטוועגן לעב איך נאָך אַלץ אין ישיבה און קען זיך ניט אַפּרייסן פון ווילנער שולדהויף. און ווען איך וויל זיך יאָ אַפּרייסן פון מיינע הייליקטימער און שרייבן ווי אַנדערע, קומט אַזאַ

Marilyn Finkler Memorial Award

און דערמאָנט מיך און וואָרנט מיך, אַז איך זאָל זיך ניט אַפּרייסן פון מיין מקור."

May 14, 1980

... Fifty years have already passed since I left the Yeshiva and nearly forty years since I departed from Vilna. I wandered across Russia until the borders of Afghanistan and Iran. Afterward, I wandered across two-thirds of the globe.

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<sup>271</sup> Grade is referring to the novel "*Fun Unter der Erd*" which was serialized in *Der Forverts* from March 25, 1979 until June 27, 1982.

Nevertheless, I still live in the Yeshiva and I cannot tear myself away from the Vilna Courtyard. And when I do want to uproot myself from my holy sanctums and write like others, a Marilyn Finkler Memorial Award<sup>272</sup> comes along and warns me not to cut myself off from my source."

#### 4 - Chaim Grade's Relationship with the Chazon Ish

Chaim Grade considered Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelits, also known as the Chazon Ish (1878–1953), as his rebbe and an ideal religious role model and saintly figure. His regard for the Chazon Ish was so great that Grade remarked in a lecture<sup>273</sup> that if one did not know that he was leading a secular lifestyle, one could easily mistake him for an ardent follower akin to a zealous Chasid praising his rebbe in glowing terms! It is remarkable that despite his secular pursuits and critical questioning, his reverence for the Chazon Ish remained intact. This reverential attitude permeates his numerous writings and is poignantly expressed in his letters, as demonstrated below.

#### Letter #24

ניו-יאָרק-מאָנטאַוויק, 3 יולי, 1961

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...איך האָב נאָר=וואָס געהערט, אַז העמניגוועי האָט זיך דערשאָסן, אין עלטער פון 62 יאָר, ווייל ער האָט געליטן פון אַ הויכן בלוט=דרוק. דאָס קען אויך טאָן אַ ייד, אבער כאַראַקטעריסטיש איז עס פאַר אַ גוי, וואָס איז אין גרונט - א געצנדינער. פון דער אַנדער זייט טראַכט איך, אַז גערעכט איז געווען יענער סטאַאיִקער, וואָס מאָנטעין ציטירט אים, אַז מיר קענען וועגן קיינעם ניט זאָגן, אַז ער האָט געלעבט גליגלעך, ביז מיר ווייסן] ניט ווי ער איז געשטאַרבן. שטעל זיך פאַר וויפל טויזנטער שרייבער עס האָבן מקנא געווען אַזאַ העמניגוועי. איך האָב געקענט בלויז איין מענטשן וואָס האָט געלעבט און איז נפטר געוואָרן גליקלעך און דאָס איז מיין רבי, דער חזון-איש. ווייל ער איז געווען אַ בעל-אמונה און בעל-בטחון. איך שיק דיר וועגן אים אַ געדרוקטער פאַעמע און אויך דעם מאָנוסקריפט. מאָלדאָוו האָט מיר געשריבן אַז ס'איז די פאַעמע פון יאָר.

דיין חבר - חיים

New York, Montauk, July 3, 1961

...I just heard that Hemingway shot himself at the age of 62 because he suffered from high blood pressure. This [action] can also be carried out by a Jew, but characteristically it is the manner of a Gentile who is, in essence, an idolater. On the other hand, I think that the Stoic whom Montaigne quotes is correct, namely,

<sup>272</sup> For more information, see <http://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/cjn2-30239/page-8>

<sup>273</sup> Dated March 20, 1980. The lecture can be accessed online here: [http://primo.nli.org.il/primo\\_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=NLI&docId=NNL\\_MUSI\\_C\\_AL000242688](http://primo.nli.org.il/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=NLI&docId=NNL_MUSI_C_AL000242688).



that we can never say about someone that they lived a good life until we know how they died. Imagine how many writers were envious of Hemingway. I knew only one person who lived and died happily, and that is my rebbe, the Chazon Ish, because he was a man of faith and trust.<sup>274</sup> I'm sending you a published poem about him, as well as the manuscript. Moldov wrote to me that this is the poem of the year.<sup>275</sup>

### Letter #25

ניו-יאָרק, 20 דעצעמבער, 1961

מיין טייערער אייב,

...אלע מענטשן וואס איך האב געשילדערט אין מיינע ראמאנען, חוץ דער חזון איש, אלע מיינע העלדן בין איך אליין, אריינגערעכנט די פרויען, די קעץ און אפילו די ביימער...

New York, December 20, 1961

...All the people I described in my novels, with the exception of the Chazon Ish, all my heroes are myself, including the women, the cats, and even the trees....

### Letter #26

ניו-יאָרק, 16 מערץ, 1962

מיין טייערער אברהם,

נאָר וואָס האָבן מיך אָפּגערוּפּן מאיר שטיקער און טאבאטשניק, אַז זיי זיצן און לייענען אינאיינעם מיינע לידער, און אז די בעסטע פּאָעמע איז "דער זקן פון רעמבראַנד" ווי אויך דאָס ליד וועגן טולוז=לאָטרעק און אַז מען וואָלט ניט געגלייבט אַז דער מחבר פון "חזון-איש" איז אויך דער מחבר פון אָט די דערמאָנטע לידער...

New York, March 16, 1962

.... Just now Meir Shtiker and Avraham Tabatchnick called me to tell me that they are sitting together and reading my poems, and that the best poem is "The Elder of Rembrandt" as well as the poem about Toulouse-Lautrec. And [they also told me that] no one would have believed that the author of the "Chazon Ish" is also the author of the aforementioned poems...

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<sup>274</sup> See Reichek, "A Writer in Search of an Audience," 43:

I asked Grade why he writes with such affection about a life he no longer shares. "I know these people and these are the people I love," He responded. "They live a genuine life. I envy [observant Orthodox Jews] because I know how deep they feel. I envy anybody who can be happy. After all, who is rich? The man who is happy with what he has, especially if what he has is small."

<sup>275</sup> Grade is referring to the poem "Amud ha-Eish" [The Pillar of Fire] published in Grade, *Oif Mein Weg Tzu Dir*, 44-51.

## Letter #27

ניו-יאָרק, ראש חודש שבט, תשכ"ז; 12 יאנואר 1967

מיין טייערער אברהם,

דו בעסטסט מיר די גאַנצע צייט איך זאָל דיר שרייבן אַ בריוו ניט וועגן "ביזנעס". מיר איז שווער זיך קאַנצענטרירן. פארגעס ניט, אַז אויסער זיין קראַנק, לייענען, שרייבן און זיין דער פאַרקויפער פון מיין בוך - בין איך אויך מיין ווייבס ניאַנקע, און ניט אומזיסט רופט זי מיך צייטנווייז "באבע, חיים"... דאָך וועל איך זיך א ביסל קאַנצענטרירן און דיר שרייבן עפעס אין שייכות מיט מיין צווייטן טייל "צמח אַטלאַס". ווי דו ווייסט פון ערשטן טייל, און אויך פון מיינע אַנדערע דערציילונגען, אַ שטייגער "די עגונה", קען איך שאַפן אַ שפאַנענדיקע געשיכטע. גלייב מיר, איך וואָלט אויך געקענט באַשרייבן אַזעלכע עראַטישע סצענעס, ניט ערגער פון באַשעוויס=זינגער. אָבער באַשעוויס=זינגער האָט זיך געשטעלט פאַר אַ ציל צו פאַרוויילן דעם גראַבן געשמאַק פון אמעריקאנער לייענער, צו אַנקאַרמען אים מיט יידישן אָבערגלויבן, ניט גלויבן, כדי צו זיין דערפאַלגרייך. ער איז ניט מיין מוסטער. נאָר אין מיין צווייטן טייל "צמח אַטלאַס" רייס איך אפילו איבער טיילווייז מיט יענע שרייבער וואָס זיינען יאָ מיין מוסטער. איך גיב אפ צענדלינגער זייטן צו שילדערן דעם מחזה=אברהם און זיינע שמועסן מיט חייקלען ביים גיין זיך באַדן, ביינאַכט פאַרן לייגן זיך שלאָפן און ביי אַנדערע אזעלכע געוויינלעכע סצענעס. איינער האָט מיר געהאַט געזאָגט, דאַכט זיך, יודל מאַרק, אז די אַטמאָספער פון גאַנצן בוך בייט זיך פון דער מינוט ווי דער מחזה=אברהם דערשיינט. אפילו דער טאָג ווערט לויטערער. און אַט אין דעם ראָם פון גאַלדענעם קאַרען=?שניט?, פאַרפלייצט מיט בלוי און זומער=ליכט, באַווייז איך דעם מתנגדישן גאון אין זיין פאַרטיפטער עבודה - ניט קיין בעל=נס, ניט קיין זאָגער פון בליציקע געדאַנקען, נאָר גרינטלעך און רעאַליסטיש. ניט פאַרגייסטיקט ווי פּרץ; ניט טעאַטראַל ווי אַנסקי; ניט ראָמאַנטיש=גלאַזירט ווי שלום אש; ניט ברוטאַל און האַלב שונדיסטיש, ווי זינגער דער עלטערער, נאָר גראַווירט און עכט. אין דעם שילדערן דעם תלמיד-חכם ווי ער איז בין איך דער ערשטער און לעצטער אין דער יידישער ליטעראַטור. וואָס איך וויל באַווייזן מער ווי אלץ איז מיין אַהבת התורה, דער חזון=איש פלעגט מיך שטענדיק פּרעגן: "חיים, פון וואַנען קומט צו דיר אזויפיל ליבשאַפט און דרך=ארץ פאַר תורה?" אַט דאָס וויל איך באַווייזן און דערביי בלייבן דער אביעקטיווער שילדערער. און פאַר דעם צוועק איז מיר כדאי, אַז דער צווייטער טייל זאָל זיך אפילו לייענען מיט ווייניקער שפאַנונג, איך זאָל אפילו זיין נודנע פאַרן יינגלשן לייענער וואָס דאַרף א סיפור=המעשה.

זיי געזונט. מיט ליבשאַפט, דיין חיים

New York, Rosh Chodesh Shvat 5727, January 12, 1967

You always ask me to write you a letter unrelated to business. It is difficult for me to concentrate... Nevertheless. I will focus a little and write you something regarding my second volume of *Tzemach Atlas*. As you know from the first volume and from my other stories like *The Aguna*, I can weave a suspenseful tale. Believe me, I would also be able to depict erotic scenes, no worse than Bashevis Singer. However, Bashevis Singer sought to please the coarse appetites of American readers or to feed them with Jewish superstition, not [genuine] belief, in order to

be successful. He is not my exemplar. But in my second volume, I sometimes depart even from those writers whom I model myself after. I devote tens of pages to describe the Machaze Avraham<sup>276</sup> and his conversations with Chaikl while they go to bathe, at night before going to bed, and other mundane situations.

Once someone told me, I think it was Yudl Mark, that the atmosphere of the entire book changes from the minute the Machaze Avraham appears. Even the day becomes brighter. And in this realm of the golden[...?]<sup>277</sup> soaked in blue and summer light, I show the Mitnagdic Gaon (genius) deeply immersed in his work; not a miracle worker, not a raconteur of dazzling thoughts, but [I portray him] thoroughly and realistically. Not spiritualized like Peretz; not theatrically like An-Sky; not romantically glazed like Sholem Asch; not brutal and half *shund*-like [trashy, scandalous] like the elder Singer; but authentically etched.

In portraying the Talmid Chacham authentically, I am the first and last in the Yiddish literature. More than anything else, I want to portray my Ahavat ha-Torah [love of Torah]. The Chazon Ish constantly asked me: "Chaim, from where do you have so much love and respect for Torah?" I want to be the objective illustrator of this phenomenon. For this purpose, I deem it appropriate that the second volume should be less suspenseful, even if it is tiresome for a juvenile reader who needs a[n exciting] plot.

### Letter #28

17 מיי, 1967

מיין טייערער אברהם,

אָן אנדערש מאָל וועל איך דיר שרייבן אָדער דערציילן אויספירלעכער וועגן ספר איבערן  
חזון=איש, וואָס האָט אַרויסגערופן שאַרפע פראטעסטן.

דיין חיים

May 17, 1967

... Another time I will write you or relate to you in greater detail about the book on the Chazon Ish which evoked harsh protests.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> The literary character who is based on the Chazon Ish.

<sup>277</sup> I was unable to decipher this word in the manuscript.

<sup>278</sup> Grade is referring to Shlomo Cohen, ed. *Pe'er Hador: perakim mi-mesachet chayav ve-yetzirato shel gaon doreinu Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, baa'l Chzon ish*, vol. 1, (Bnei Brak: Netzach, 1966). In a lecture that Grade delivered on March 20, 1980, he sharply criticized this book for portraying the Chazon Ish only as a lover of Torah and a religious zealot who couldn't tolerate anyone with more moderate views than him, while overlooking the aspects that endeared him to

## Letter #29

ניו-יאָרק, 18 מיי, 1969,

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...דער פסיכאָלאָג אַלפרעד אַדלער האָט געזאָגט "אַ מענטש ווייס מער וויפל ער פאַרשטייט" ס'איז דאָך מערקווירדיק ווי ערשט אין שפיגל פון מיינע העלדן דערקען איך זין אַליין. די גאַס וואו איך האָב זיך געהאָדעוועט איז געווען פארפלייצט אויך פון וועלטישע מענטשן, ניט בלויז בני-תורה. שוין באַלד פערציק יאָר ווי איך בין אַוועק פון ישיבה און ווייניק שרייבער האָבן זיך אַזויפיל אויסגעוואַלגערט איבער דער גאַנצער וועלט ווי איך. דערפאַר פעלן ניט אין מיינע לידער פון אַלע מעגלעכע טעמען. אָבער ווען עס קומט צו פראָזע, קען איך אַרויספירן מיינע דערפאַרונגען מיט דער וועלט און מענטשן נאָר דורך ליטווישע רבנישע געשטאַלטן. איך האָב שוין ניט איינמאָל גענומען מענטשן פון דעטראַיט און שיקאַגאָ און זיי אַריינגעזעצט אין ווילנע. שרייבער פון ניו-יאָרק האָב איך אָנגעטאַן אַ באַרד און אים געלאָזט ווערן אַ קליינשטעטלשן רב. דעם שרייבערס קסאַנטיפע האָב איך אָנגעטאַן אַ שייטל פון אַ רביצין. אַזוי האָב איך טאַקע געטאַן אין דער דערציילונג "די רביצין". אַז איך האָב געוואַלט זידלען שיקאַגער יידן, האָט זיי אַריינגעזאָגט אין טאַטן אריין - צמח אַטלאַס אין זיין לאַמזשער מעל-געשעפט. איצט אז איך וויל פאַרקערפערן זיך אַליין און אויך אַ פעסעמיסטישן פילאַלאָף, פאַרקנעט איך עס אין געשטאַלט פון אַ רב אַ הויקער. פאַרוואָס טו איך עס? איך ווייס ניט, איך גלייב אַז דאָס איז די השפעה פון מיין רבין. ער האָט אין מיין יוגנט אַזוי טיף אין מיר אַריינגעהויכט און אַריינגעזונקען די ליבשאַפט צו תורה און די וועלט פון תלמידי-חכמים, אַז איך קען זיך אויסדריקן נאָר אין די צירופים און געשטאַלטן פון דורך מיר באַשאַפענע ישיבה-לייט, ווען איך טראַכט זיי אינגאַנצן אויס. איך לייד פון דעם זייער שטאַרק, ווייל מיין וועלט זעט אויס אַ באַגרענעצטע און איך פאַרשליס דורך דעם זיך אַליין די טיר צו פרעמדע שפראַכן. מיט ליבשאַפט, דיין חיים

New York, May 18, 1969

The psychologist Alfred Adler said, "Man knows much more than he understands." Remarkably, I can recognize myself only in the mirror image of my heroes. The street where I grew up was full of worldly (secular) people, not just *Bnei Torah*. I left the Yeshiva nearly forty years ago, and few writers have crisscrossed the globe like me. Therefore, my poems address all possible themes. However, when it comes to prose, I can express my experiences with the world and people only through [the prism of] Lithuanian Rabbinical figures.

I took people from Detroit and Chicago more than once and transplanted them into Vilna. I dressed up a New York writer with a beard and morphed him into a small-town rabbi. I dressed up the writer's Xanthippe in a wig of a *rebbetzin*. I actually did this in the story "The Rebbetzin." When I wanted to criticize Chicago Jews, I rebuked them harshly [through the depiction] – of Tzemach Atlas in his Lomzhe

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the folk, namely his love of Israel and the love of humanity. The lecture can be accessed online here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1HIder36sRb3zoq9siUJIXLEyru1y-U>.

flour shop. When I want to characterize myself as a pessimistic philosopher, I incorporate these elements in the personality of a hunchbacked rabbi. Why do I do it? I don't know. I believe that this is due to the influence of my rebbe. In my youth, he glorified and instilled in me the love of Torah and Torah sages to such a great extent that I can express aspects of myself only through the gallery of Yeshiva scholars I invent in my imagination. I suffer significantly as a result. My world [i.e. literary horizons] is regarded as very narrow, thereby shutting the door to [translation in] other languages.

### Letter #30

ניו-יאָרק, 31 אקטאבער, 1969,

מיין טייערער אברהם,

...אין דיין בריוו שרייבסטו וועגן דער וועלט פון מיינע העלדן וועלכע איך שילדער געטריי אין מיינע ווערק. אָבער איך מוז דיר וועגן דעם זאָגן וואָס איך האב געזאָגט צו פרופ' ליבערמאַן: איך האָב שוין ניט איינמאָל געפראווט פון מיינע העלדן אַנטלויפן, ווייל גויים און אויך פאַרגוואישטע יידן פאַרשטייען גאַרניט פון דער וועלט וואָס איך שילדער. אָבער איך קען פון מיינע העלדן ניט אַנטלויפן. נאָך מער: איך האָב ניט קיין טיפן אינטערעס אין די דורכאויס וועלטלעכע מענטשן, ווייל זיי האָבן ניט קיין טיפן געמיט, אָדער איך קען ניט זייער טיפערן געמיט. דאָס איז "די נקמה" וואָס דער חזון-איש נעמט אָן מיר, וואָס ער האָט אין מיר אַריינגעשעפטשעט, איז מיר געבליבן מער פון אַלץ וואָס איך האָב נאָכדעם אין דער וועלט געזען און געלעבט....

New York, October 31, 1969

You write in your letter about the world of my heroes, which I faithfully depict in my works. However, I must tell you what I once told Professor Lieberman<sup>279</sup> about this: this is not the first time I'm trying to run away from my heroes because Gentiles and Gentilized-Jews don't understand anything about the world I depict. But I cannot run away from my heroes. Furthermore, I don't have any deep interest in thoroughly secular people, either because they lack depth of spirit or because I don't appreciate their depth. This is the "revenge" that the Chazon Ish is taking on me. That which he told me stuck with me more than everything else that I later saw and experienced in the world...<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Professor Saul Lieberman (1898-1983) from the Jewish Theological Seminary. See also Saul Lieberman, "Chaim Grade: A Testimony", translated by Allan Nadler in *Jewish Review of Books*, volume 8, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 44-46.

<sup>280</sup> In a telling interview, Chaim Grade confessed that until the Chazon Ish left Vilna for Israel he did not leave traditional Judaism. The interview can be accessed online here: [https://archive.org/details/ChaimGradeReadsFromHisWorkAndIsInterviewedByAbrahamTabachnickPart1\\_636](https://archive.org/details/ChaimGradeReadsFromHisWorkAndIsInterviewedByAbrahamTabachnickPart1_636).

**Note: the following excerpts are from the letters of Chaim Grade to Dr. Yehuda Even Shmuel Kaufman<sup>281</sup>**

**Letter #31**

18 מיי, ראש חודש סיון, תשכ"ט

...דאס געזאלצענע וואסער פון אלע ימען קענען ניט ארויסשווענקען וואס דער חזון-איש האט אין מיר אריינגעשעפעט. ער האט מיך ניט אפגעהאלטן פון קיין עבירה, ער האט מיך ניט געקענט אויסהיילן פון קיין תאוה, נאר ער האט מיך אנגעטרונקען מיט זיין אהבת התורה...

May 18, 1969

The salty waters from all oceans cannot rinse out that which the Chazon Ish murmured into my ear. He did not prevent me from any sin, nor was he able to cure me of my desires, but he imbued me with Ahavat ha-Torah, the love of Torah.

**Letter #32**

27 סעפטעמבער 1967

א סך מאל דערמאן אין זיך מיינע אייגענע שורות אין מיין פאעמע 'עמוד האש' וועגן חזון איש: אז זיין זכות זאל מיר באשטיין פאר דעם וואס איך האב אויסגעוועבט דעם פרוכת איבער דער תורה, כאטש די תורה גופא האב איך אויפגעהערט לערנען. א סך קאפיטלען פון צווייטן באנד זיינען וועגן מחזה אברהם. און דארט קומט גארניט פאר, אויסער וואס דער תלמיד גייט נאך זיין רבין. אין אנפאנג פון א ראמאן, אפשיטה אז ס'איז שוין א צווייטער טייל, מוז "פארקומען." אויב ניט, שטעלט איר אויס אייער ווערט אויף לאנגווייל און דורכפאל. און איך וויל דאך יא זיין א דערפאלג! אלא אויף מיין באדינגונגען. מיין רבי האט פון מיר א סך געליטן, נאר חוץ וואס ער האט געהאלטן פון מיין גלייכן קאפ, האט ער אויך באוואונדערט מיין אהבת התורה, אפילו ווען איך האב געהאלטן אין איין פארברעכן קעגן דער תורה, אין אנדענק פון דעם, לאז איך זיך ניט פירן פון ראמאניסט חיים גראדע, נאר פון בן תורה חייקל ווילנער.

September 27, 1967

Many times, I am reminded of my own words in my poem "The Pillar of Fire"<sup>282</sup> about the Chazon Ish that his merit should protect me for weaving a *parochet*<sup>283</sup> for the Torah even though I have stopped studying the Torah itself... My rebbe

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<sup>281</sup> From the Genazim Archives Collection #421, papers of Dr. Yehuda Even Shmuel (Kaufman). Photocopies of these letters are also held in Chaim Grade's archive. Even Shmuel (Kaufman), Yehuda, 1960-1974, Box 93, Folder 2327, Papers of Chaim Grade and Inna Hecker Grade, RG 1952, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/1182397](https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/7/archival_objects/1182397).

<sup>282</sup> See Chaim Grade's poem "Amud ha-Aish" in *Bedarki Eilaikh*, 46.

<sup>283</sup> the *parochet* is the curtain that covers the Torah Ark containing the Torah scrolls in the synagogue.

suffered a lot on account of me, but besides his regard for my common sense and clarity of thought, he was also impressed with my love for Torah, even when I was violating the Torah. In tribute to this, I don't allow myself to be swayed by the novelist Chaim Grade, only by ben the Torah Chaikl Vilner.

### **Letter #33**

ד' תשרי תשל"ה 20 ספטעמבער 1974

איך רייד און קריג זיך און בעט זיך איבער מיט מיין רבין, דעם חזון איש...

כאטש זינט איך האב זיך מיט אים געזעגנט איידער ער איז אוועקגעפארן קיין א"י זיינען שוין אריבער עטלעכע און פערציק יאר...

September 20, 1974

I continue to converse, argue, and try to reconcile myself with my rebbe, the Chazon Ish, even though we took leave from each other more than forty years ago before he emigrated to Israel.

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**פרק רביעי – השקפת עולמו ויחסו האמביוולנטי של חיים גראדה כלפי היהדות המסורתית**

בפרק הרביעי, אבחן את השקפת עולמו של חיים גראדה. כתוצאה מן הקונפליקטים שלו עם הדת, עוברת פילוסופיית החיים של חיים גראדה מעבר קופרניקאי קיצוני מהשקפת עולם דתית-מוסרית לגישה הומניסטית-אקזיסטנציאלית.

לסיום, אדון בטבעה של מערכת יחסיו האמביוולנטית של חיים גראדה עם היהדות האורתודוקסית לאחר עריקתו. לגראדה הייתה מערכת קשרים דו-משמעית וקרועה ביותר כלפי היהדות האורתודוקסית שאפשר לתארה כמערכת קשרים של אהבה-שנאה. הוא היה דמות קצה שבפנימיותו נשאר מסוכסך ביחס לעברו הדתי מבלי שהצליח להשיג איזה שהוא מיזוג אמיתי בין זהותו היהודית לפני ואחרי הקרע שלו עם האורתודוקסיה.

באופן פרדוקסלי, על אף שאיפותיו של גראדה להתפרסם כסופר יידיש חילוני, מורשתו הספרותית הבולטת ביותר היא תיאורו את החיים הדתיים הליטאיים. על אף נטישתו של גראדה את האורתודוקסיה, מבחינות רבות הוא נותר תלמיד ישיבה, הן במנטליות שלו הן במזגו. מחקר זה שואף להאיר את טבעם של מתחים לא פתורים אלה.

אחד הנושאים הבולטים ביצירתו של גראדה הוא סגנון החיים של יהודים דתיים הסובב סביב אדיקות דתית ושמירת ההלכה. גראדה חש שאדיקות דתית קיצונית מטפחת גישה פנטית וחסרת סובלנות. חוסר סובלנות זה מתנגש עם ערכים הומניסטיים של סובלנות וחמלה, ערכים שהיו חיוניים עבור גראדה. יתר על כן, חיים של אדיקות יהודית נוטים להתמקד באופן בלעדי בממד הדתי של החיים, ובכך להדיר מהם את כל הפעילויות ה"חילוניות" והמאמצים ההומניסטיים שהם חסרי מטרה דתית. מגמה דתית בלעדית זו סתרה במפורש את תחומי העניין ההומניסטיים ואת השקפת העולם של גראדה.

### **חלוקת הפרקים**

#### **פרק ראשון – דיוקנו של חיים גראדה כאומן צעיר**

בפרק הראשון, אנתח את אישיותו של חייקל ווילנער הצעיר כפי המתואר ברומן **צמח אטלס**. כניסתו של חייקל לעולם המחויבות הדתית התרחשה במקביל להתעוררותו המינית ונביטת רגישויותיו האסתטיות. בסופו של מסע ארוך ומייגע, מכיר חייקל בכך שליבו נמשך יותר לעולם החול מאשר לחיים של תורה, והוא בוחר בנתיב של אומן ספרותי חילוני. המתח שבין רגישויותיו האומנותיות לבין מחויבותו היהודית ממשיך להציק לו למשך כל חייו.

#### **פרק שני – הוויכוחים של גראדה עם תנועת המוסר**

בפרק השני, אבחן את העימות של חיים גראדה עם פלג תנועת המוסר של נובהרדוק שרדף אותו והשאיר חותם בל יימחה בנשמתו למשך שארית חייו. אציג סקירה היסטורית של נובהרדוק, אדון בפילוסופיה המוסרית הקיצונית שלו, ואנתח את תיאורו הספרותי של חיים גראדה את המנטליות והפילוסופיה של נובהרדוק. פרק זה גם יתייחס לבוז המובהק של גראדה לנובהרדוק ולדחייתו את הפילוסופיה המוסרית שלו.

#### **פרק שלישי – מערכת היחסים של חיים גראדה עם החזון איש**

בפרק השלישי, אבחן את מערכת היחסים של חיים גראדה עם החזון איש. החזון איש נוכח באופן בולט בכתביו של גראדה כאחד מגיבוריו העיקריים. אציג את ההשפעה שהייתה לחזון איש על חיים גראדה לאורך כל חייו, ואדון באופן שבו מערכת יחסים זו תרמה לעמדתו המסוכסכת והאמביוולנטית כלפי עברו האורתודוקסי.

הקונפליקטים המהותיים של חיים גראדה עם הדת. מתחים אלה הם נושאים מרכזיים שגראדה בוחן בכתביו בכלל וברומן צמח אטלס בפרט.

אסכם בקצרה את מהותם של שלושה קונפליקטים אלה.

### 1) הקונפליקט בין אסתטיקה לבין יהדות.

יהדות מסורתית מבוססת על דבקות דתית, לימוד תורה ושמירת ההלכה. במידה והיהדות מעריכה אסתטיקה, היא נתפסת כאמצעי להשגת מטרה ולא כמטרה בפני עצמה. יהודים מסורתיים עוסקים בפעילויות אומנותיות כדי לייפות את הקודש, כגון בניית בתי כנסת נאים, כתיבת ספרי תורה מהודרים, כתיבת שירה דתית וכדומה. היהדות האורתודוקסית אינה מעריכה אומנות כערך בפני עצמו. אומנות חילונית זוכה ליחס של ביטול כחסרת ערך במקרה הטוב וכחילול הקודש במקרה הרע.

חיים גראדה, שניחן בכישרונות אומנותיים והיה בעל רגישות אסתטית מפותחת ביותר, חווה התנגשות בין מה שהוא הבין כחוסר הערכה אסתטית בתוך היהדות המסורתית לבין תשוקתו האישית לאומנות. הרגישויות האסתטיות של גראדה הביאו אותו לידי תחושת ניכור כלפי היהדות המסורתית. כפי הנראה הוא חש שאינו יכול להיות נאמן לעצמו כאומן בעודו נשאר מחויב ליהדות האורתודוקסית. פרט לכך שהרגיש מודר ודחוי בגלל העדר אישור והערכה רבניים לכישוריו האומנותיים, גראדה גם נשבה בקסמה של הספרות היהודית החילונית, ובסופו של דבר נמשך אל מסלולה.

### 2) הקונפליקט בין מוסר יהודי לבין פסיכולוגיה אנושית.

עולם המוסר (אתיקה יהודית) בכלל, ותנועת המוסר מיסודם של הרב ישראל ליפקין מסלנט ותלמידיו בפרט, מתמקד בהתפתחות האישיות המוסרית. מדובר בפילוסופיה דתית המושרשת באמונה שאלוקים ברא את בני האדם במטרה המפורשת של שכלול אישיותם המוסרית. מטרת המוסר היא להעביר את האישיות מהתמכרות נרקיסיסטית להתעלות אלטרואיסטית. בהתאם לכך, היא דרשה סטנדרטים מוסריים גבוהים מאוד מאנשיה. חיים גראדה טען שאתוס המוסר, במיוחד על פי נוסחת נובהרדוק, אינו עולה בקנה אחד עם המציאות (המכוערת) של הטבע האנושי. במקום לחוש תחושת אשמה מוחצת וחוסר התאמה מובהק בגלל אי יכולתו לממש סטנדרטים מוסריים בלתי אפשריים, דוחה גראדה את אידאולוגיית המוסר שהשגת שלמות מוסרית היא תכלית הקיום האנושי. לחלופין, הוא אימץ עמדה אקזיסטנציאלית החוגגת את החיים ומאשרת את הקיום האנושי על כל מגבלותיו.

### 3) הקונפליקט בין אדיקות יהודית לבין ערכים הומניסטיים.

האירועים המתוארים ברומן מתרחשים בערך בין השנים 1923–1933. תקופה זו מקבילה לעשור שהתחיל בבר המצווה של גראדה וכניסתו לעולם הישיבות עד לקרע בינו לבין היהדות האורתודוקסית. הרומן מתאר במיוחד שני מקורות השפעה דתיים עיקריים על חייו של גראדה בשנותיו המעצבות, דהיינו עולם ישיבות המוסר של נובהרדוק שבהן למד גראדה, ואישיותו של הרב אברהם ישעיהו קרליץ (1878–1953), הידוע גם כחזון איש, אחד המנהיגים הבולטים ביותר של היהדות החרדית במאה העשרים והמורה הרוחני של חיים גראדה בפרק חייו בישיבה. הרומן מסתיים עם נסיעתו של החזון איש לארץ ישראל ביולי 1933, אבן דרך שבמבט לאחור תסמן את הנתק של חיים גראדה מן האורתודוקסיה.

אפשר לראות אם כן את המסלול המתאר את כניסתו של חייקל ווילנער לחיי הישיבה ועריקתו ממנה כממואר בלבוש סיפורת של **יציאה בשאלה**. הכינוי **יציאה בשאלה** או תופעת ה**דתל"שים** (דתיים לשעבר) מתייחס לעריקים מן היהדות האורתודוקסית. סוגת הממוארים של יוצאים בשאלה ואף סדרות טלוויזיה המתארות את תהליך עזיבת היהדות האורתודוקסית נעשו פופולריות מאוד בשנים האחרונות ועוררו דיונים וויכוחים סוערים. ריבוי ממוארים של יוצאים בשאלה מלווה במקביל בהופעת שטף של מחקרים המנתחים היבטים שונות של תופעת היציאה בשאלה.

ישנם סופרים יהודים רבים שלמדו בישיבה ועזבו לאחר מכן את העולם הדתי. על כן, חוויית היציאה בשאלה אינה ייחודית לחיים גראדה. אולם סופרים בולטים אחרים הצליחו להשתחרר מעברם הדתי. לעומת זאת, כפי שאני מדגים במחקר זה, הקרע של חיים גראדה עם המסורת היה מורכב, והוא מעולם לא הצליח להתנתק באופן מוחלט מן האורתודוקסיה של נעוריו. הנתק הטראומטי שלו מן האורתודוקסיה הותיר בנפשו סדק עמוק שלא התרפא באופן מלא. כתוצאה מכך, חייו ואומנותו של גראדה מאופיינים ב"סער ופרץ" של קונפליקטים לא פתורים. על כן סיפורו של חיים גראדה משמש כמקרה בוחן מרתק לגבי האופן שבו קונפליקטים דתיים מעצבים את חייהם של בני אדם הן לפני הן אחרי הנתק מקהילות המאמינים המקוריות שלהם.

מחקר זה יציע תרומה כפולה: תרומה למחקר על חיים גראדה וספרות היידיש במאה העשרים ותרומה לספרות החקר בנושא איבוד האמונה.

### **הקונפליקטים של חיים גראדה עם הדת**

בתזה זו אחקור שלושה קונפליקטים מהותיים בחייו של גראדה: (1) הקונפליקט בין אסתטיקה ליהדות (2) הקונפליקט בין מוסר יהודי לפסיכולוגיה אנושית (3) הקונפליקט בין אדיקות יהודית לערכים הומניסטיים. בחרתי בקונפליקטים אלה כי אני מאמין שהם מייצגים כמה מן

## תקציר

הסופר והמשורר היידי חיים גראדה (1910–1982) נחשב בעיני רבים כאחד מסופרי היידיש הדגולים של התקופה שלאחר השואה. יצירותיו ראויות לציון במיוחד בזכות תיאורו את יהדות ליטא בכלל ואת עולם הישיבות בפרט. על אף שגראדה עזב את העולם הדתי האדוק שבו גדל לטובת קריירה ספרותית חילונית, לא עלה בידו לנתק באופן מלא את קשריו עם עולם הישיבות שנטש, והוא קיים מערכת יחסים אמביוולנטית כלפי היהדות המסורתית עד סוף חייו.

הנושא העיקרי של המחקר הנוכחי הוא ניתוח הקונפליקטים של חיים גראדה עם הדת ומערכת קשריו המורכבת עם היהדות המסורתית. תזה זו תתמקד באופן ספציפי בחייו ובכתביו של חיים גראדה כמקרה בוחן של התופעה הרחבה יותר של התיאור הספרותי של קונפליקט דתי.

שאלת המחקר שתזה זו תבחן היא: מה אופי הקונפליקטים של חיים גראדה עם הדת, וכיצד הוא השפיע על מערכת יחסיו עם היהדות האורתודוקסית?

מטרת המחקר היא משולשת:

- 1) לנתח את הקונפליקטים שחווה חיים גראדה בנעוריו שבסופו של דבר הובילו לעריקתו מן היהדות המסורתית.
- 2) לנתח את יחסו האמביוולנטי של חיים גראדה כלפי היהדות המסורתית לאחר הנתק שלו עם האורתודוקסיה.
- 3) לנתח כיצד הנקודות המוזכרות לעיל השפיעו על תיאורו של גראדה את היהדות המסורתית ביצירותיו הספרותיות.

## הרומן צמח אטלס

לצורך מחקר זה, אתמקד ביצירת המופת שלו, הרומן **צמח אטלס**, (חלק ראשון: **צמח אטלס** [תל אביב: עם עובד, תשכ"ח], חלק שני: **מלחמת היצר** [תל אביב: עם עובד, 1970]), כמו גם מכתביו, מסות והרצאות המבהירים את הקונפליקטים שלו ביחס לדת.

ההתמקדות העיקרית של הרומן **צמח אטלס** היא בחייו ותלאותיו של הדמות הראשית צמח אטלס ובעולם המוסר של נובהרדוק. בתוך הרומן מוטמעת עלילת משנה העוסקת באישיותו של חייקל ווילנער (בן דמותו הספרותי של חיים גראדה). מבחינות רבות, אפשר לראות את היצירה כרומן חניכה ואוטוביוגרפיה בלבד סיפורת העוקבים אחר גיבוש זהותו של גראדה כפי המתואר באמצעות דמותו של חייקל ווילנער.

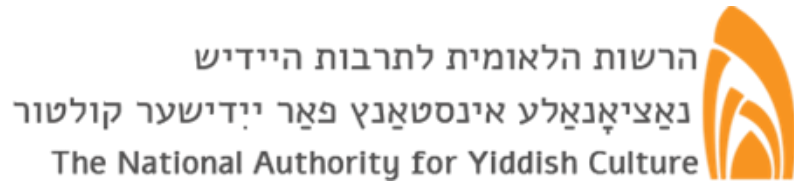


## תודות

ראשית, ברצוני להודות ולהביע את הערכתי והוקרתי העמוקה למנחת התזה שלי ד"ר חנה פולין-גלאי על הדרכתה ועידודה לאורך כל פרויקט מחקר זה. ההערות החדות והקולעות, המשוב המועיל, שפע העידוד והמקצועיות האקדמית שזכיתי לקבל ממנה סייעו לי במידה רבה מאוד לאורך כל תהליך המחקר והכתיבה.

ברצוני גם להביע את תודתי המיוחדת לחברי היקר יוסף ניופילד על שערך לי היכרות עם כתביו של חיים גראדה. במשך השנים, בלינו שעות אין ספור בדיונים וניתוחים של יצירותיו של חיים גראדה. הפקתי תועלת רבה מן התובנות החריפות וההערות הנבונות של יוסי לגבי הרעיונות המובאים בתזה זו.

לסיום, ברצוני להודות לרשות הלאומית לתרבות היידיש ולמכון ללשון, ספרות ותרבות היידיש על שם יונה גולדריץ', אוניברסיטת תל אביב עבור המענקים הנדיבים שלהם לתמיכה בפרויקט מחקר זה.





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אוניברסיטת תל אביב  
הפקולטה למדעי הרוח ע"ש לסטר וסאלי אנטין  
החוג לספרות - מסלול ספרות יידיש

## **בין קודש לחול: הקונפליקט בין דת וחילון בחייו ויצירותיו של הסופר חיים גראדע**

חיבור זה מוגש כעבודת גמר לקראת התואר

"מוסמך אוניברסיטה" – M.A.

באוניברסיטת תל אביב

על ידי

יהודה דוב זירקינד

העבודה הוכנה בהדרכת

ד"ר חנה פולין-גלאי

נובמבר 2022