

Rebbe and Talmid

Allen Auster

“Nu, Audie. What do *you* think of that *teretz*?”

Startled, Nachum Adelman looked at Rabbi Israel Semel’s warm, good-humored face. He was fingering a few strands of red-black beard. A hint of a smile played around his eyes and mouth.

He’d called Nachum by his nickname. He’d never done that before. No Rebbe—no teacher of any stripe—had ever done that.

With barely a moment’s pause, more for effect than consideration, Nachum said, “Well, Izzy, now that you ask, I don’t think it’s such a good *teretz*. I——” but he got no further.

Rabbi Semel turned dark red. The class was still.

“Out.” Rabbi Semel’s arm jerked up, finger pointing to the door.

Nachum left and stood in the hall. He’d never seen Rabbi Semel angry before, and he was a little shaken. He really liked him, and he knew that he was one of his favorite, and best, students. So why had he done it?

Why had he done it?—who was he kidding? He’d done it because it was irresistible. This was something they’d be talking about all day, maybe all week. Sure, he’d be punished for it. The school would punish him, his parents would punish him. But he could handle that.

What was harder to handle was Rabbi Semel’s reaction. And not just the anger. He’d seen a flicker of hurt, even betrayal, and he felt ashamed. He’d betrayed Rabbi Semel’s warmth toward him. He’d gone too far. And not for the first or second time.

What impelled him to keep doing stuff like this? Why would he go right past the limits? Why didn’t he have the normal fear everybody else had? For the first time, it felt a little scary to him, rather than a source of pride. He had the sudden uncomfortable thought that maybe he didn’t know what the limits were. He had a vague presentiment that, not knowing or caring what the limits were, a person could push too far ... right past the edge of normal life ...

He thought of Terry Langdon, the pale dishwasher with lank blond hair who’d worked for a while at his uncle’s restaurant. Nachum had helped out there over the summer and gotten to know him. He loved to talk about Melville and Willa Cather (not that Nachum had known who she was) and to recite poetry, incongruously, in the midst of clanging pots and clinking glasses, of Jewish waiters, Chinese cooks, a Norwegian cold-salad man, Puerto Rican busboys and Mexican dishwashers all yelling, kibitzing, sometimes cursing at each other.

“Gaunt the shadow on your green, Shenandoah! The cut is on the crown, Lo, John Brown.” Nachum could picture him reciting while sliding a rack of glasses through the flaps of the dishwasher. Terry had taught literature at a college in Oklahoma, been married and had a family. How had he ended up here?

“IZZY!?! Do I hear right?” Shimshy had come out of the classroom, skinny, pointy (nothing but a series of sharp angles), frenetic, with a big adam’s apple. He was presumably headed for the bathroom. “Ears, do you betray Shimshy, or does Audie say Izzy? Oh yeah, oh yeah,” alternately nodding and shaking his frizzy head, “I do believe, Audie do say Izzy. He do indeed.”

“Hey, he started it.” Nachum smiled deprecatingly.

“The question is not who starts it. The question is, Do Audie wish to be bounced right out of yeshivah? This is an open question, indeed it is,” and Shimshy headed to the bathroom.

Nachum was happy to see him go. His heart wasn’t in the bantering.

When Rabbi Semel finally came out, he said nothing for a long while, just looked intently at Nachum.

Finally he said, “Nu?”

Nachum looked at him, then shrugged his shoulders, palms up.

“OK. So I want you to think about this. And then I want you to write me two pages on what occurred to you as you thought about it. Give it to me tomorrow.

“Now go in, but don’t *chazer* with Nossi. I’ll put Nossi somewhere else, you *chazer* by yourself today.”

It was getting dark as Israel Semel walked home after his afternoon learning seder. He pulled his collar up against the chill Ocean Parkway winds, but the thin raincoat afforded little protection. It was time to get out the winter coat. It was coming apart, but he would have to squeeze another winter’s use out of it.

He couldn’t get that boy, Nachum, out of his mind.