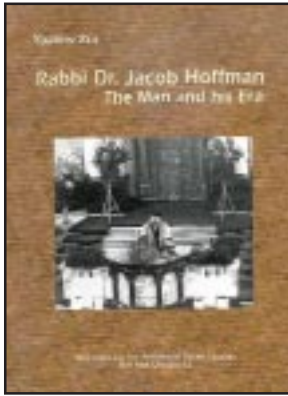


Rabbi Dr. Jacob Hoffman

The Man and his Era

By Yaakov Zur



The Institute for Advanced Torah Studies Bar-Ilan University
Jerusalem, Israel, 1999

318 pages (Hebrew)

141 pages (English)

Written in Hebrew with the major themes translated into English

Reviewed by Simcha Krauss

We are enjoined, *Vehayu einecha ro'ot et morecha*¹ (Your eyes shall see your teachers). The command to see one's teachers does not exhaust itself in physical sight alone. To properly observe this command, one must see, understand and then learn from one's *rebbe*.

We are therefore indebted to Dr. Yaakov Zur, professor of contemporary Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University, for writing this biography of Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Hoffman. In this excellent work, Rav Hoffman's ideology, struggles and unique rabbinic style are all woven together. Zur takes us along with Rav Hoffman in his odyssey over three continents and enables us to

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peek into the rabbi's inner life.²

Biographies, however, are not developed in a vacuum. They emerge out of the confrontation between the actors and their milieu. Hence, good biographies present us with a picture of the actor and his environment and how they interacted and influenced each other. This book is about Rav Hoffman as well as his era.

Who was Rav Hoffman?

Born in Papa, Hungary, in 1881, Rav Hoffman studied in traditional Hungarian yeshivot and was ordained by, among others, Rav Simcha Bunem Sofer, who headed the yeshiva in Pressburg (Bratislava) founded by the Chasam Sofer. In Pressburg, where the phrase *chadash asur min haTorah* (the new is forbidden by the Torah) originated as a contra-modernist slogan, the pursuit of secular studies was discouraged. Yet, Rav Hoffman, always an original thinker, exhibited his individualism at an early age. As a yeshiva student, he did not participate in the institution of "days," the practice whereby students were hosted for daily meals by different *baalei batim*. He studied privately and received his matriculation diploma, which enabled him to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Vienna. His doctoral dissertation, on a fascinating topic, was entitled "Halachic Elements in the Koran." He expressed his independence in other ways as well. While still in Pressburg, he joined the Zionist movement even though most yeshivot, including the Pressburg yeshiva, were anti-Zionist. In 1904, when Theodore Herzl died, Rav Hoffman delivered a public eulogy. This fiercely rugged individualism would mark Rav Hoffman's entire rabbinic career.

Rav Hoffman's life spanned a period in which the Jewish community experienced cataclysmic changes. The *Shoah* and the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael* were the most obvious. Yet

beginning with the Emancipation, the Jewish community in Europe was buffeted by beliefs and ideologies that questioned the very foundation of the traditional Jewish world. The pre-*Shoah* Jewish community was given a wide array of choices—many of which involved the rejection of religious observance and traditional values. The breakdown of the ghetto walls threatened the spiritual safety of the past insular society. Socialism, Bundism, and an increasingly aggressive secularism questioned the behavioral norms and values of traditional Judaism. Zionism, in all its manifestations, challenged the passivity of the Jewish community. Finally, as society became more open, schools and universities challenged the educational foundations of the Jewish community.

The points of conflict that were the "live" issues within Orthodoxy at that time have yet to be resolved. We have yet to come to terms with our relationship to contemporary culture, political Zionism, and the heterodox movements.

As we will see, in the early years of his rabbinate, Rav Hoffman was concerned with these issues as well. After ascending to the chief rabbinate of Radauti (in 1912), Rav Hoffman began reaching out to the secular and even anti-religious communities. As Zur writes, a group of Hashomer Hatzair (a Zionist youth organization) students were accused by the authorities of subversive activities. Rav Hoffman left no stone unturned in order to help the students. His defense of "even" the non-religious left a lasting impression on all who knew him.

The acid test of Rav Hoffman's tenacity and independence came in 1923 when he was invited to serve as rabbi of the Jewish community (Judische Gemeinde) in Frankfurt am Main. There he succeeded the late Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel (the teacher of

Franz Rosenzweig) in the position previously held by the illustrious Rabbi Marcus Horovitz, the *talmid muvhak* of Rav Eriel Hildesheimer. In this position, Rav Hoffman presided over a *kehillah* with a vast array of community services including *kashrut*, *mikvaot*, etc. Additionally, he served as the *av beit din* of the community and *rosh yeshivah* of the Hoffmansche Yeshiva.

Rav Hoffman's *kehillah* existed alongside another Orthodox community of Frankfurt am Main, Adas Yeshurun, founded by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. During Rav Hoffman's tenure, Rabbi Shlomo Breuer, the son-in-law of Rabbi Hirsch, served as the rabbi of Adas Yeshurun.

The very existence of two *kehillot* side by side, each with its own system of *kashrut*, for example, can lead to rivalry and conflict. In this particular case, however, there was another element that institutionalized the conflict—the issue of *Austritt* (secession).³ When, some 50-60 years earlier, Rav

This fiercely rugged individualism would mark Rav Hoffman's entire rabbinic career.

Hirsch began rejuvenating Orthodoxy in Germany, he believed that success would only come by starting anew. That meant seceding from the larger Jewish community—which included Reform Jews—and creating a totally independent community. This independent community, Rabbi Hirsch insisted, should represent pure and authentic Orthodoxy and be recognized by the government for doing so. To Rabbi Hirsch, any Orthodox community that belonged to an umbrella organization with heterodox groups had no right to represent authentic Torah Judaism. This caused a rift within German Orthodoxy, for while many within the Orthodox community aligned themselves with Rabbi Hirsch's philosophy, many others did not.

Rabbi Hoffman's *kehillah*, in particular, did not separate itself from the general community, and therefore, in the eyes of those in Adas Yeshurun, did not represent authentic Orthodoxy.

Members of the Adas Yeshurun community constantly attempted to delegitimize Rav Hoffman. Zur writes how they often referred to Rav Hoffman as “Dr.” and refused to use the title rabbi. In 1931, Rabbi Yonah Horovitz, the successor to Rav Shlomo Breuer in Adas Yeshurun announced—without any warning or previous discussion with Rav Hoffman—that the *eruv* under Rav Hoffman's supervision was invalid. Rav Hoffman's response was two-fold. He pointed to the previous halachic decisors who approved the *eruv* and along with his *beit din*, he declared that the *eruv*, which was originally established by Rabbi Nobel, was valid *ab initio*. Realizing that the *eruv* issue was but another attempt to delegitimize his model of Orthodoxy, Rav Hoffman, in a moving sermon, articulated his rationale for not seceding from the larger community:

*We who represent traditional Judaism have no right to demand from the individual all or nothing. ... We have... to [accept] with gladness every meaningful Jewish act. ... every tendency to Jewishness. ... Neither do we have a right to turn to a Jew and state, 'You have no part in our community'.... Every Jew who recognizes one God is part of our community. Every Jew who seeks any affiliation to Judaism will be accepted with joy.*⁴

Rav Hoffman's lifelong espousal of the philosophy of Jewish peoplehood also explains his deep involvement with the Zionist and Religious Zionist movements (Mizrachi), which were not popular with German Orthodoxy. In fact, Rav Hoffman's predecessor, Rav Nobel, though an ardent Zionist, was quite low-key about his Zionist activities. Rav Hoffman, however, publicly immersed himself in Zionist activity. So much so, that when the Mizrachi movement marked an important anniversary, they chose Rav Hoffman to deliver the keynote address. Moreover, he provided the

movement with ideological direction. When Dr. Benno Jacob, a noted Bible scholar and leader of Reform Jewry, published an article questioning the religious significance of settling in Israel and arguing that the leadership of the *yishuv* was not interested in restoring religious life in *Eretz Yisrael*, Rav Hoffman responded:

The life of religion in Eretz Yisrael will not be formed by Zionist leaders. It will be formed by throngs of Jews settling there. The enrichment of Jewish values will occur when a society of Jews will entrench themselves and be rooted with their emotions and thoughts on the holy land of Eretz Yisrael. ... To involve one's self in the settlement of the land of Israel is a religious obligation.

As Rav Hoffman became more active in the Mizrachi movement, he took on leadership positions. Repeating his theme of *Klal Yisrael*, Rav Hoffman elucidated the Mizrachi stance. When Rav Avigdor Amiel, the chief rabbi of Antwerp and a leader in the Mizrachi movement, asserted that the differences between Agudah and Mizrachi were not ideological and that Mizrachi's joining the World Zionist Organization was “an empty formality,” Rav Hoffman responded:

Our joining the Zionist movement is to us more than a formality. It is an inseparable part of Mizrachi ideology to strengthen the idea of Klal Yisrael.

And there is no difference whether the issue is one within the local Jewish community or whether it affects World Jewry. It is not sufficient to propagate an ideology in our own homogenous circles. We believe that it is our duty to be active in various organizations for our goals and to bring out into the public domain the religious cultural values that were created.

As Zur points out, this statement encapsulates Rav Hoffman's ideology: a strong belief in Zionism and a fervent commitment to remain part of the larger Jewish community.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, it took time for the Jewish community to understand the implications of this transfer of power. There were many, among them lead-

ers of the Orthodox Jewish community, who believed that “this too shall pass.” (With hindsight, we call this optimism naiveté.) Indeed, some of them wrote letters to Hitler explaining that religious Jews were not Communists or Marxists, and that they shared some of the core values of the German people.⁵

In 1935, Rabbi Hoffman sensed the impending disaster. While he did not want to cause people to panic, he could not allow his community to be lulled into slumber either. Thus, in his public statements, he was forced to juggle between these poles. Soon, however, it dawned on the German Jewish community that the situation was rapidly deteriorating. With the passing of the Nuremberg laws in 1935, the complacency of the Jewish leadership was shattered.

During this terribly difficult period, Rav Hoffman took on a greater leadership role. Despite the disapproval of the Agudah and the separatists (those who advocated secession), Rav Hoffman was chosen to be the sole representative of Orthodox Jewry in the nine-person ruling body of the Reichvertretung Der Juden in Deutschland (the supreme representative body of German Jewry in its dealings with the Nazi regime). He became involved in *hatzalah* work (acquiring certificates for his yeshivah students to go to Palestine) and spoke in cities throughout Germany to help raise the morale of the Jewish community. Despite a taxing schedule, he managed to publish a major study, *Rambam as Master of Halachah*.

In the spring of 1937, Rav Hoffman’s tenure in Frankfurt am Main came to an abrupt end. Without warning, the Gestapo ordered Rav Hoffman expelled from Germany on a trumped-up charge that he had engaged in activities that were bound to upset the civil order. None of the efforts to overturn this decision were successful. On March 27, he was deported to Vienna.

In 1938, Rav Hoffman came to the United States on a mission on behalf

of German Jewry. When the Nazi government came to power, one of its first measures was to prohibit *shechitah*. Inevitably, the price of imported kosher meat skyrocketed. Upon his arrival in the United States, Rav Hoffman hoped to raise funds to provide German Jewish institutions, including hospitals, old-age homes and yeshivot, with kosher meat.

Shortly after arriving in New York, Rav Hoffman became the rabbi of Congregation Ohab Zedek on Manhattan’s West Side. Although the *shul* was in an area inhabited by many Hungarian Jewish families, Rav Hoffman did not adjust easily. Already in his late fifties, he had to face a new country and language. Furthermore, the “empire” over which he had presided in Frankfurt could not be


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recreated. While in Frankfurt, members of the *kehillah* naturally deferred to the chief rabbi, in the United States, congregants had an entirely different relationship with their rabbi.

In spite of all these difficulties, Rav Hoffman threw himself into his new role. He helped found Manhattan Day School; he became active in *hatzalah* work; he took on new leadership roles in the Zionist and Mizrachi movements.

With the end of World War II, Rav Hoffman turned to mobilizing American Jewry in the struggle to establish *Medinat Yisrael*. In 1954,

he realized his dream of *aliyah*. He died in 1956, after serving as a Jewish leader *par excellence* for over 40 years. Tikvat Yaakov, a Bnei Akiva yeshivah in Israel, is named for him.

By writing this book, Professor Zur has done a great service for the Orthodox world. Rav Hoffman is an exemplary role model for the Orthodox rabbinate which has much to learn from his courage and independence.⁶ 

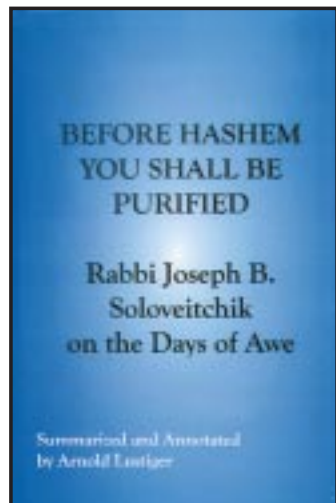
Notes

1. Isaiah 30:20.
2. I want to thank Mr. Benjamin Hoffman, the son of Rav Yaakov Hoffman, for his help in clarifying some of the chronological data.
3. A fuller exposition of the debate about *Austritt* is beyond the scope of this essay. The book under review, in particular chapters 3-4, provide a good general background of the issue. For further reading, one may consult Judith Bleich, “Rabbinic Responses to Non-Observance in the Modern Era,” in *Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew*, edited by Jacob J. Schacter (Montvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), 37-115 and *Ibid.*, “Between East and West: Modernity and Traditionalism in the Writings of Rabbi Yehiel Yaacov Weinberg,” *Engaging Modernity*, edited by Moshe Sokol (Montvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997). Both are part of the Orthodox Forum series of Yeshiva University. Also see Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jechiel Jacob Weinberg 1884-1966* (London, Portland, Oregon: the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999).
4. All of the quotes of Rav Hoffman are from the book under review, p. 40. All translations from the Hebrew are mine.
5. For the full text of the letter, see Shapiro, *Between The Yeshiva World*, 225-233.
6. As this review was prepared for publication, I learned of the recent passing of Mrs. Eva Hoffman Meyer, the daughter of Rav Yaakov Hoffman. May these lines be a tribute to her memory.

Before Hashem You Shall be Purified:

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe

By Arnold Lustiger



Ohr Publishing
Edison, NJ, 1998
161 pages

Reviewed by Shlomo H. Pick

Both the scholar and the layman welcome the appearance of any newly published work on the teachings of the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Whether presenting explications of Talmudic texts or enlightening difficult areas of Jewish philosophy, these works alleviate the relative scarcity of volumes on the Rav's Torah in all areas. One of the newest of these publications is Dr. Arnold Lustiger's edition of the Rav's *drashot* on penitence, which were delivered between 1973 and 1980.¹

The volume commences with Rosh Hashanah and the commandment of the *shofar*. On Rosh Hashanah, the *shofar* demands of the Jew *hirhur*

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teshuvah (the "awakening" of repentance), and the Rav offers a personal experience to bring his ideas on this subject alive. [In this review, quotes from Dr. Lustiger are indicated by quotation marks, while direct quotes from the Rav are in italics].

On the seventh day of Pesach, 5727 [1967], I awoke from a fitful sleep. A thunderstorm was raging outside, and the wind and rain blew angrily through the window of my room. Half awake, I quickly jumped to my feet and closed the window. I then thought to myself that my wife was sleeping downstairs in the sun room next to the parlor, and I remembered that the window was left open there as well. She could catch pneumonia, which in her weakened physical condition would be devastating.

I ran downstairs, rushed into her room, and slammed the window shut. I then turned around to see whether she had awoken from the storm or if she was still sleeping. I found the room empty, the couch where she slept neatly covered.

In reality she had passed away the previous month. The most tragic and frightening experience was the shock that I encountered in that half second when I turned from the window to find the room empty. I was certain that a few hours earlier I had been speaking with her, and that at about 10 o'clock she had said good night and retired to her room. I could not understand why the room was empty. I thought to myself, "I just spoke with her. I just said good night to her. Where is she?" (8-10).

"Every Jew is obligated to sustain similar emotions on Rosh Hashanah. The required response to the *shofar*, which the Rambam refers to as awakening from sleep, is the abrupt, tragic realization that the false assumptions upon which we build our lives have come crashing before our eyes. We are jolted with the sudden awareness of the grievous extent to which our actions have alienated us from God. Amidst the panic of this experience, we have neither the intellectual nor the emotional fortitude to adequately

express remorse, resolve, confession, or even prayer. We find ourselves alone, bereft of our illusions, terrified and paralyzed before God."

Later on in the book, Lustiger presents the Rav's thoughts on the approach of Yom Kippur and the lack of passion in contemporary Orthodox life.

Contemporary Orthodoxy is well grounded intellectually. In spite of this, however, its followers lack passion and enthusiasm. This deficiency is especially evident on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur...

How can a Jew pray on Yom Kippur and not feel the greatness, the fire and holiness of this day? How can I possibly impart such an experience? Perhaps one can begin to awaken the ecstatic feeling by discussing the customs and laws which we observe on Yom Kippur. From within the allegedly dry confines of Jewish law, there is an awesome, warm, enormous world—there is a definite transition from Halakhah to service of Hashem. Perhaps through such a discussion, the audience will be awakened to the religious mood that a Jew must find himself in on Yom Kippur.

...I remember how difficult it was to go to sleep on Erev Yom Kippur. The shohet (ritual slaughterer) used to come at the break of dawn to provide chickens for the kaparos ritual, and later the people would give charity. The wallets of Jews were open twice a year, Erev Yom Kippur and Purim—but especially on Erev Yom Kippur. Minhah, vidui, the final meal before the fast [seudah hamafsek], my grandfather's preparations—all made Erev Yom Kippur a special entity, not only halakhic, but emotional and religious as well.

Erev Yom Kippur constitutes the herald that the Ribono Shel Olam is coming, that "lifnei Hashem tit'haru"—"before Hashem you shall be purified" (60-61).

The Jew's yearning to encounter God is so intense, that he simply cannot wait until the onset of the holiday to achieve purity, but begins to reach out for purity through the commandment of honoring Yom Kippur on erev

Yom Kippur.

The final chapter discusses the *Avodat Yom haKippurim* (description of the Yom Kippur Temple service) in the *Mussaf* service. The Rav noted that the description of the *Avodah* culminates in the majestic *piyut, Mareh Kohen*, which describes the luminous appearance of the *Kohen Gadol* after successfully completing the *Avodah*:

Why the happiness in reciting Mar'eh Kohen? Why was it sung with such a happy tune? The answer is that the Kohen Gadol reflected the radiance of the Shekhinah. Through witnessing the radiant appearance of the Kohen Gadol, there could be no doubt about Hashem's acceptance of Klal Yisrael's prayers.

During the *Avodah*, the Jew had been transported to a different, beautiful world of the Temple service, experiencing the pleasure and delight in the awareness of God's proximity and the heralding of Israel's atonement.

Suddenly the liturgist and the reader of the piyyut are rudely awakened from a dream. They cry, "This is no longer the reality in which we live. It existed once, yes, but is no more." One finds himself alone on a stormy night, dark, lost, and he cries out, "All this occurred while the Temple was in existence; fortunate the eye which saw all these things."

Fortunate the eye—but not our eyes.

Yom Kippur has been transformed into Tisha B'Av with the recitation of *kinot* (lamentations). Why? The Rav quoted the Jerusalem Talmud (*Yoma* 4b): "Every generation in which the Temple is not built is as if it was destroyed by that same generation." The function of mourning immediately after the recitation of the *Avodah* is in recognition of our sins that have extended the Temple's state of destruction. On Yom Kippur, one must experience the reality that the Temple no longer exists—with the hope that this would spur one to complete penitence.

As more of Rabbi Soloveitchik's works are published, it is clear that Dr.

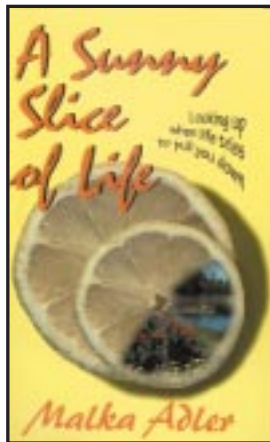
Lustiger will occupy a distinguished place among those who disseminate the Rav's works. Our fervent prayer is that all of the Rav's *shi'urim* be published soon in order to quench the thirst of thousands of Jews who long to study his teachings. **JA**

Notes

1. In this work the Rav is mentioned in third person, while direct quotations of the Rav are indented and italicized. Moreover, the book is arranged topically and not chronologically. Hence, different aspects of the various sermons have been combined to fully develop any given topic.

A Sunny Slice of Life

by Malka Adler



Targum/Feldheim
Southfield, Michigan, 2001
292 pages

Reviewed by Chana Greenblatt

Why was I laughing out loud, smiling, and wiping away tears? Because I just finished reading a most delightful collection of autobiographical essays and stories entitled *A Sunny Slice of Life*.

Written by Malka Adler, a writer living in Jerusalem, the book is replete with amusing essays and stories, beginning with the author's childhood

Mrs. Greenblatt is a retired librarian currently living in Jerusalem.

memories and continuing on into "great-grandmotherhood."

In one of Adler's most humorous essays, she recalls her first date with a penny-pinching young man. At the ice cream parlor, Adler ordered a 25¢ banana split whereupon her date turned "hepatitis yellow, tinged with gangrene green." Adler proceeded to watch with horror as her suitor began counting out the coins in his pocket. "After a lengthy interval, he whispered his order. The waiter, a patient soul, leaned over to catch the almost inaudible words, 'a double timber float.'" Despite her familiarity with the latest ice cream treats, Adler could recall no such flavor. To her chagrin, the waiter promptly returned with "a modest glass of cold water, upon which floated two wooden toothpicks."

Growing up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in the '40s, Adler used to come home from school, do the laundry and cook for Shabbat while her parents worked. One Thursday afternoon, after she had hung the laundry on the homemade "dryer" (a metal frame with heavy cords stretched across it) a "lone sock...in search of adventure parachuted into the...soup." What should she do? She fished out the belligerent sock and said nothing. At the Friday night meal, when asked why the soup was especially delicious, Adler mumbled something about a secret ingredient.

The Adlers' *aliyah* adventures rival any. Arriving at the Jerusalem airport with four children and 17 suitcases, they eagerly anticipated moving into their new home. When the "home" came into view, Adler writes, "It wasn't quite a home...it was a huge excavation with...some rudimentary wooden foundations...and two Arab workers wandering about with a pail of sand each." As a new *olah* myself, I can easily identify with Adler.

For a while, Adler provided "free entertainment" with her mispronunciations and malapropisms. Her grocery lists, "a guaranteed source of amusement for the children," contained gems such as a spray to exterminate

gemalim (camels) instead of *nemalim* (ants); a ripe bunch of *avanim* (stones) instead of *anavim* (grapes) and a box of kosher *melech* (a king) instead of *melach* (salt). Once she wanted to buy *kasif* (silver carp), but ended up requesting *keseif* (money). Glancing at the “well-dressed American lady requesting charity,” the fish vendor asked somewhat incredulously, “You need money, *gveret?*” “Well doesn’t everyone?” replied Adler. Another time, she requested three *pitriot* (mushrooms) from a saleslady “because of the inclement weather.” Sensing the saleswoman’s confusion, Adler explained that she was an *olah chadashah* (new immigrant) and really meant to say three *itriot* (noodles). The confusion was only compounded until a smile of comprehension passed over the saleswoman’s face: “You mean *mitriot* (umbrellas)!”

A techno-phobic, Adler consistently shies away from dealing with technical matters. At work, when the Scotch Tape dispenser needed refilling, she would loan it to an unsuspecting coworker and disappear. When she had to confront the computer, everything that could go wrong—did. Most of her efforts “resulted in a very large, very visible message blazoned across my computer screen...YOU HAVE PERFORMED AN ILLEGAL OPERATION.”

Adler’s essays touch upon some serious subjects as well. We accompany her as she visits with her dying friend. We are with the author as she battles melanoma and marvel at her strength and unwavering faith in *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. We join Adler and her neighbor Yona, in their frantic rush to the hospital to save a child’s life.

No matter what the topic, our author is a perpetual optimist and manages to find the bright side. Her sparkling sense of humor enchants the reader. Her unwavering faith in the *Ribbono Shel Olam* inspires each of us to attain a higher level and appreciate the important things in life. Invite Malka Adler into your life. You’ll be glad that you did. **JA**