

From his quiet study in Lakewood, NJ, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman's golden pen has rocked the global Jewish community several times. His historical fiction series, written under the pseudonym of Avner Gold, created a new genre of Judaic literature, while his writings on the intricacies and fine points of Talmudic law have become staples in yeshivah libraries. And then there was "the book that got banned," which consumed the Jewish media long after its publication. Mispachacha's Yisroel Besser welcomed him for a candid and thought-provoking conversation about this lamdan-cum-writer's fascinating journey

DUAL IDENTITY, SINGULAR MISSION

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman's Golden Pen

by Yisroel Besser

The Man When we were young, he made it impossible to sleep. The stories were so vivid, the writing so compelling, and the plots so intricate. The names ... who can forget Zbignew, Mizlatavski, Kalman Kalb, or Elisha Ringel? In his books, we saw the sparkling blue waters of the Vistula and felt the sun on the backs of our necks as we sat high on the hilltop overlooking peaceful Pultchew. We felt the heady excitement mounting as the name of Shabbetai Zvi spread, were torn by the steadfast refusal of the *rabbanim* to accept him, and identified with the bewildered lack of identity of the Anusim.

We grew older. His books became more than mere stories, and were read with a new appreciation for the nuances and subtleties that abound and the keen interest in the details, which he painted with the brush of a master historian.

Will there ever be a writer like Avner Gold? For my children's sake, I hope so. We grew still older. We went off to yeshivah. The shelves carried the sefer, a comprehensive and intricate work on the *sigvos* of "shitas" (legal documents). *Shifra U'Shira* is a classic. Its unique and gifted author? Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman.

Then, there's *the* book, the one that saw his career take a sharp, unexpected turn and was the subject of a *rabbinic* ban. *One People, Two Worlds* was an exchange of e-mails between Rabbi Reinman and a Reform cleric, a chance for him to clarify and illuminate our basic *kashkafos*. The book spawned many things, some of them good, some bad, and some ugly. The writer who invested his very livelihood in elucidating the concepts within it, bringing his trademark creativity and brilliance to the task, was maligned by some, encouraged by others.

Rabbi Reinman has given us many gifts over the last few decades. In recent months, he has produced a new Avner Gold series, and at the very same time, had authored a brilliant and penetrating sefer on Chinnah, titled *Ahiv Yosef*.

Who is the man behind these paradoxes, he who can thrill seasoned scholars and dreamy children alike? Are they, in fact, paradoxes?

History: There is a maxim that "a sefer without an introduction is like a body without a soul." Let us in delve into the *halekumih* (the introduction) of this new work, *Ahiv Yosef*. There Rabbi Reinman "bares his soul," tells us who he is, where he comes from, and discusses the reaction to the other book as he recalls that period.

The *rabbanus* of the Galician town of Narev was occupied by the longest uninterrupted dynastic chain in history, according to some accounts. From the years immediately following *Tach v'Far* (The Chmelnicki Massacres of 1648-9) up until the World War II, it was passed from father to son, some three hundred years in all. The last Rav, Rav Chaim Reinman, son of Rav Shlomo Narev, never made it out of Europe. His son, Rav Avich Leib, arrived alone on American shores. He was a man whose only true home was within

the four *amot* of halachah, a familiar figure in the seforim stores of the East Side. Customers at his seforim store knew that if he was involved in a discussion of a *sigva* — and he usually was — then they would have to wait to be served.

His wife, who grew up in Russia, was a remarkable woman in her own right. "She, like my father, was a big *in yutcheke*, a descendant of great Rebbe's, including the Baal Shem Tov, the Bendichever, the Baal HaTanya, and the Toldos Yaakov Yosef [for whom Rabbi Reinman is named]."

It was home filled with Torah learning and a love of learning.

"Did you have a secular education, any formal training?" I wonder.

"My mother had gone to school in Kiev; she was educated. It was she who introduced me to Dosigoevsky and Tolstoy,

Sinclair Lewis and Hemingway. I devoured them when I was young."

Young Yaakov Yosef's writing ability was evident quite early on. In high school, he handed in a report about the automobile industry. The teacher gave him an A-plus, but insisted that the report was plagiarized. It wasn't. Later on, he was recognized as a National Merit Scholar and inundated with scholarship offers, but he knew that wasn't what he wanted.

He was privileged to have role models. "Rav Brayman Paler, who was a *mugel* *shur* in the Mattersdorfer yeshivah at the time, was a friend of my father's and he drew me close. But the *rebbe* who really did it for me was Rav Yaakov Moshe Shurkin. I was in his *shur* in Chaim Berlin, only fifteen years old, but he gave us such a *geshmack* in learning. I once said something in *shur*

and suddenly he looked at me. 'Landani! he pronounced.

I knew then what I wanted to be." Rabbi Reimann became close to Rav Hinner, zt"l, who recognized his talent enough to change him with the sacred mandate of transcribing his *shmirin*. From Chaim Berlin he went on to Lakewood, where he became a *talmid* of Rav Shneur Kotler. He got married while in Lakewood and settled there, a member of the prestigious *Kodeshim chaburah*.

When did he first decide to publish? "It was after several years of learning *Sefer Kodeshim* in depth and Reb Shneur asked us to rejoin the yeshiva for one *sefer Kodeshim* teaches you discipline, and I found the experience of learning the conventional, *yeshivish* *mesuchos* to be different after being immersed in *Kodeshim*. I was learning the *sigvos* of *shmaros* and I found that wellsprings were opening in front of me. It was only natural to commit the thoughts to paper, to organize them that way." Eight years later, he wrote the *Shifra D'Shmaros*.

The *sefer* was well received, and it seemed likely that someone with the obvious talent of Rabbi Reimann would pursue a career in *chinnuch* or *rabbanans*.



Rabbi Reimann with the Harlemer Rebbe.



Presenting a manuscript of Avur Yosef to Rav Chaim Kamenisty.



Father and son Rav Avnei Lab with Rav Yankov Yosef.

"How did you get into writing?"

He smiles. "Parvatesh. It came time to make a decision, and I just couldn't see myself going into *chinnuch*. I need freedom to pursue those avanos, *mesuchos* or *sigvos* that interest me."

"As an initial project, I translated segments of the *Mevoros Hakkodesh* into English and sold them to institutions to use in mailings. In time, the idea picked up and I had an income from developing and editing Torah literature for mailings. There was this one project for Rabbi Schenkolsky of Bais Kaali that involved someone else writing the stories, which I would then edit. It came down to the deadline and the product was simply not up to par. We were desperate. I had a commitment to Rabbi Schenkolsky to provide him with a quality book to distribute."



Emvy from Yermay and The Marzano Prince, while replete with espionage, treachery, and psychology, are authentic pictures of the realities of life for the Anusim. The Inquisition officially ended in the nineteenth century, and there were copious notes of every simple conversation, interrogation, confession, and torture session that had taken place since its establishment available for historians. Rabbi Reimann created fortune scenes based on the pictures painted by these historians, such as Cecil Roth.

"My *eishes chapril*, who taught in the school, approached him and told him 'if you asked my husband to write stories, he would probably do a very good job.'"

Rabbi Reimann looked himself into a room for five days and created *The Promised Child*. Bais Kaali had their book and Kail Yisrael had Avner Gold.

Why that pseudonym? Just because. "I didn't think that anything would come of it at the time. It was just something to put down on the title page, and I didn't give it much thought. I liked the name Avner. My wife said Gold."

Rabbi Reimann realized two things: one, that the hunger for this type of literature was strong. The other was that, if he was going to give the people what they wanted, he would have to spend much more time on researching the places, dates, and background for his stories. He rewrote *The Promised Child*, ensuring that the minutest details were authentic and believable.

In it, he refers to a vacant rabbinic post in Krakow. "Now that could only have been in about 1640, between the Bach and Taz, when there was no Rav in Krakow for three years. I jumped into that window and worked with that as a starting point. Once we had the time, we needed the place."

The Pulitzer that he created was really Nardol, the town where 300 years of his ancestors served in the rabbinic, down to its location in the idyllic valley near the Vistula. Perhaps that's why this fictional little town struck such a chord with readers. It was his Nardol, the village of his *zideles*, a place that he saw ever so clearly in his mind's eye.

to divert the stream's current actually occurred in Nardol.

The Inquisitor which focuses on the messianic fervor gripping the Jewish world during the era of Shabbetai Tzvi, took Rabbi Reimann's writing to the next level, graduating from historical fiction to a powerful treatment of the era and its struggles, set to the story of fictional characters. A prominent scholar commented that he had read most historical accounts of the period of and immediately following Shabbetai Tzvi, and never found any as compelling and insightful as this one. The reader gets swept up into the messianic fervor and rejoices along with the battered Jews of the European continent at this welcome news. One can feel the collective heartbeat of world Jewry quickening in anticipation and then slowing down in the hearthwarming final chapters.

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The truth about those difficult eras, such as the Inquisition years and *Tzch v'Tal*, was hardly known within the Torah community. Yeshivah boys were virtually clueless about the events of those years and their significance.

The new Avner Gold series aims to confront many of the other complex issues in our history. A future story is set in Amsterdam, against the backdrop of the Chacham Tzvi's flight from persecution.

In other works, he plans to focus — from the sidelights — on the dispute between the great Rav Yaakov Emden and the Rav Yonasan Eshitz. Eventually, he will arrive at the turbulent era of the Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gann, all the while blending his trademark suspense, creativity, and ingenuity with historical perspective.

Why the long hiatus? "It was just about finding the balance to do this. There were other projects, and I needed to readjust my priorities."

Before we close the topic of Avner Gold, I cannot resist one more question. Which book does Rabbi Reimann consider his own personal favorite in the series? "The *Marzano Prince*. I love the intrigue, complexity and nuance."

career, one that he can now look back at from the safe perch of time and experience. There are many questions. Why, who, when?

But first, the what. About fourteen years ago, Rabbi Reimann authored a comprehensive history work called *Destiny*, revisiting the events and places of the Tanach and literally making them come alive. It was originally sent as a mailing by the Scranton Yeshiva, and the response was overwhelming. He also received much feedback from secular Jews and even non-Jews expressing their appreciation for clarifying and illuminating the long period of the Tanach for them. Rabbi Reimann began to consider adapting the book for the wider readership beyond the Torah community, and he sent out query letters to literary agents.

One of them, Richard Curtis, expressed an interest and the two made contact. The agent signed off his first e-mail with "Shabbat Shalom," and Rabbi Reimann realized that he was a Jew. Though the publishers rejected the manuscript, Rabbi Reimann and the agent developed a warm relationship, corresponding regularly by e-mail. Curtis was astounded to learn that the Orthodox Jews do not despise their Reform and Conservative brethren, that we simply consider them misguided. *Imbokus sh'vishhu*, but we regard them as Jews and love them as such.

Curtis had an idea. "It's important for the world beyond to learn that Orthodox Jews are not just narrow-minded, medieval haters, locked in their 'worldview,'" he told Rabbi Reimann. "Perhaps you should write a book exchanging correspondence with someone from the Reform world, a Reform rabbi, in which you would define the Orthodox perspective."

Rabbi Reimann wrote a long response, in which he explained that he would much prefer to have this exchange with Curtis, because they had already established a relationship and rapport.

"No," Curtis argued, "the world is not interested in an exchange between a rabbi and a literary agent. They want an exchange between an Orthodox rabbi and a Reform rabbi."

Rabbi Reimann knew that he could not comment to this type of project without guidance. He consulted his mentor and *chavrusa*, the Lakewood Maggid, Rav Matityahu Salomon. "Considering how many Yiddim we are losing every single day because they have never heard a word of truth, it is clear that we are living in a time of crisis. Emergency situations call for desperate measures."

So Rabbi Reimann agreed to the proposal, basing his participation on the



Photos: Ackerman A. Photography

“Once I spoke up during Rav Yaakov Moshe Shurkin's *shmir* in Chaim Berlin. Suddenly he looked at me. 'Landani!' he pronounced. I knew then what I wanted to be.”

opinion that Rav Elyashiv had expressed to Anachin leaders when asked about debating representatives of the Reform movement. The Rav had set down three conditions for engaging in dialogue with a Reform rabbi. 1) It could only be done by a "private citizen," not an official rabbi, Rosh Yeshiva, or representative of an institution. Rabbi Reimann met that criterion. 2) It had to be carried out in a neutral venue, not in their synagogues or temples. Cyberspace is neutral. 3) That he had to be assured of victory. Because of the high caliber of *rabbanim* helping him, Rabbi Reimann was convinced that he would prevail, and indeed, that seems to be the consensus of readers and reviewers.

The "shidduch" was made between Rabbi Reimann and his counterpart, a leading Reform rabbi named Ananuel Hirsch. Rabbi Reimann prepared himself accordingly.

The Masagrich advised him to turn to the "generals in the war," those who could better equip him with the tools necessary to present the Orthodox viewpoint. Rabbi Reimann met with Rav Noach Weinberg of Ash HaTorah and Dr. Shalom Streibnik of Anachin.

For twenty months, Rabbi Reimann immersed himself in the world of *hashkefah*. The two men engaged in a forceful, fascinating e-mail exchange. Rabbi Reimann countering each question with an answer, each misinformed claim with an unambiguous rejoinder. "You know, it was a scary period. Each letter he sent was a missile, each volley a fresh attack, and I had to be constantly on guard. Sure, I had great advisors, but ultimately, I was responsible. That's where my mind was." The e-mail correspondence was completed. The book went to print.

The attacks started

"Did you ever anticipate that there would be resistance to the book?" I ask.

"Yes, I knew there would be some opposition, but not the heat that we faced. I was focused on the task at hand, on faithfully communicating our truth. I was busy."

It wasn't long before there were signs on walls and full-page announcements in the charedi newspapers denouncing the book and the message it sent.

It was a difficult time for this soft-spoken man.

In retrospect, Rabbi Reimann looks at that difficult time in his life and reflects that it brought out the best in some people. "There were individuals that I had no contact with, old friends and acquaintances, who picked up the phone and called me, telling me, 'We know that you're going through a rough time, *chazak v'aminiz*.'"

The Moetzes Gedolei Torah issued a proclamation against the book, seeing it as a dangerous violation of the prohibition against granting any sort of validity to the Reform rabbinat. It was too late to "stop the presses," but the schoolbook book tour was cancelled. The secular Jewish media had a field day with the story, decriing the lack of freedom of speech in the charedi world. The *gedolim* had an unlikely defender.

In powerful opinion pieces in the *Jewish Week* (later republished word for word in the *Jewish Observer*) the ban was defended by... Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reimann—the very author of the banned book. In eloquent words, he expressed his gratitude to our farseeing and visionary *gedolim*; they are a difficult job, an unpopular job, but they are protecting the authenticity of our *mesorah*.

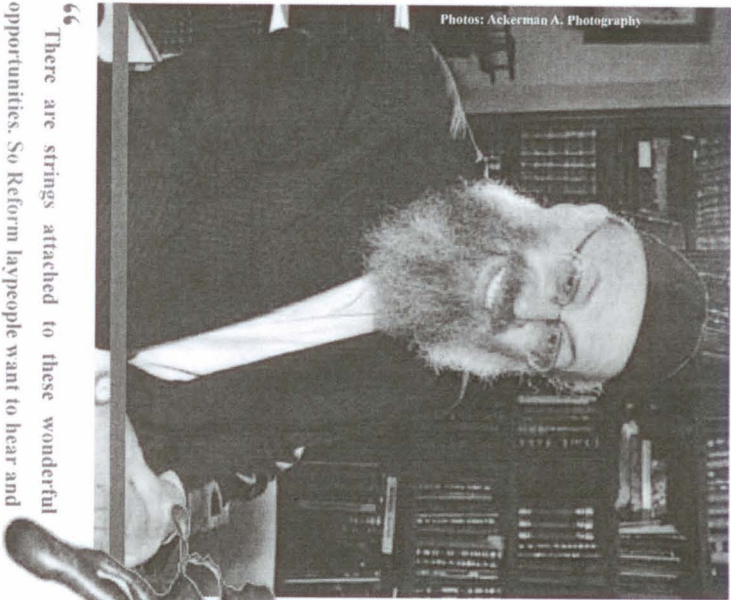
Among his comments in that piece: "But why did I withdraw from the tour? And even more important, why was this opportunity for an Orthodox rabbi to meet non-Orthodox people such a rare phenomenon?"

"Amittel Hirsch offers us the answer: 'The Jewish world needs you,' he calls out to the Orthodox, 'to bring your love of Torah, discipline, commitment, knowledge, and passion to the Jewish world.... The enemy is not Reform Judaism. The enemy is apathy, assimilation, and ignorance. We should see ourselves as allies in our common struggle to sustain and ensure Jewish continuity.'"

"You see? There are strings attached to these wonderful opportunities. So Reform laypeople want to hear and learn from Orthodox rabbis? Fine, but only if those Orthodox rabbis acknowledge Reform rabbis as allies. It is like a parent using the children as pawns in a marital struggle. If the Orthodox rabbi stands on the stage side by side with a Reform rabbi, then he can speak to the people. Otherwise, no visitation."

And the father states: "The declaration of the Council of Sages simply reaffirmed

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what we already knew—that the distinctions had failed to register with all those people eager to portray the book in a light that suited them better. Under these circumstances, the tour would just compound the error.

"What could I say? They were right. And so, I withdrew. Unfortunately, the media ridiculed the Council of Sages as beady-eyed apologetics issuing *fatwas* against me and my family and bans of excommunication against anyone who dared pick up the book. This was all nonsense. The members of the Council are wise, intelligent, highly principled people, most of whom I have known for years...."

It was, obviously, a great *kiddush Hashem*. Today, we live in a world where bans and *issurim* have become a double-edged sword, capable of building and destroying. Was the ban done right? Does Rabbi Reimann still feel resentment towards the investigators?

"I am humbled by the *gedolim* and grateful for the way they dealt with it. But

going to be printing a signed letter against me. He suspected that I was not aware of it and advised me to be prepared. His concern for a fellow Jew he was about to attack was touching."

It is humbling to listen to a victim of a ban who can speak so graciously about those responsible. Rabbi Reimann is proof that there is a proper way.

"Then there were some who acted disgracefully, crossing the line into dishonorable opposition, and they are *'asid Hein es haEzra'*, destined to stand in judgment."

What was the result of the ban? The book was pretty much forbidden in the Torah world, and taken off the shelves of your local *Yeshiva* outlet, but it got lots of notice in the world beyond. So was it a good thing? "There were definitely a lot of good things in there. For the first time, many

thousands of people in the secular world understood that our approach to their ideology is not fear, it's rejection. We love them as people, embrace them and respect them, but we reject them ideologically."

Is it still in circulation? "Yes, and I still get letters and e-mails from people who have read it and have questions and issues. They usually express surprise at what they have learned about the Orthodox community."

Today What of Amittel Hirsch? Do he and Rabbi Reimann still have a relationship?

"Absolutely. We are still in regular contact. Soon after the book came out, he resigned as head of ARZA, whose function is to buffer Orthodox dominion over the Rabbanut in Israel, and took a job as a pulpit rabbi in Manhattan. He had lost his hate, a prerequisite to his first job. He often sends me his *drashos*."

"I told him, 'Amittel, why are they coming? Do you think hundreds of Jewish *meszuzot* are filling the temple to hear about gun control or health care? They want to hear truth, their souls are thirsty. Talk about real things.' And he does. He speaks about faith in the Almighty, about Torah study, about loyalty to the Jewish people, and love for the Land of Israel."

One day, they were speaking on the phone and Rabbi Reimann was clearly in a good mood. Hirsch picked up on it and asked him why. Rabbi Reimann explained that he had just resolved a contradiction between two Raai's in *Masechet Avot*, regarding consecrating the leg of an animal. "Tell me how?"

"For real?"

The two men arranged an appointment and they met in Manhattan's Park East synagogue. Rabbi Reimann came with two



With writer Yisroel Besser, in Mitzpah's American offices



Rabbi Reimann and Rav Matityahu Salomon, who learn *be'Avruvusa* celebrating at a joint *siyum* on *Masechet Avot*

Gemaras and Ramhams and they sat down to learn the *siyum*.

There, under the impressive stained glass windows and high ceilings, they sat, two Yiddish seeking truth. Rabbi Reimann explained the bases of the *siyum* and then took Hirsch on a journey into the intricacies of the Releham.

"He is a very bright fellow and he held on, enjoying every moment."

Then, when Rabbi Reimann told him the worst he smiled.

"It's fantastic, Yosef, but really, do you believe that you could get closer to God from studying this? Does it make you a better Jew? It's just intellectual."

Rabbi Reimann grows passionate just repeating his answer: "Amittel, I said, 'I believe that every other mitzvah and good deed is a way of fulfilling His will, but when we learn His Torah, we are connected to Him, to His essence. It's the purpose of everything, regardless of the subject matter. The Torah's value is not measured by the moral ethical lessons that it teaches us...'"

"How did the whole experience, writing the book and the resulting ban change your life?" I ask. Rabbi Reimann laughs. "Well, my beard turned gray.... Seriously, it opened up a new world to me, I correspond regularly with so many unaffiliated Jews who are so thirsty to hear the truth. I've worked to put them in contact with *kniv* professionals in their area and some of them have already moved to *shomer-Shabbos* communities."

"Everything is from Shamyim. The book was good, the ban was good.... It was all good."

When we started our conversation, the sun had been making its ascent. Now, several hours later, it's begun its downward spiral. It has been a true pleasure, conversing with him.

For myself and, I imagine, many other writers that aspire to develop both as individuals and professionals, he is a role model. Clearly, his identity is that of *ahavat chazakam* and nothing else, and it is obvious from the passion with which he speaks of his *sefarim* and *chavrusas* that they are his life's work.

Yet, he has not denied the talents that Heaven vested in him, using them to support his family and enrich our world. He has taken his dynamic obligations seriously and enlightened us with his sefotim.

And one more thing: He has not forgotten that small town in Western Galicia, the one with the stately castle and beautiful garden that is so much a part of who he is, and through his creativity and spirit, he has eternalized it in the imagination and hearts of children and adults forevermore.... ■